

THE SONG OF ROLAND

translated with an introduction by

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- 1 THE king, our emperor Charlemagne
Has been for seven years in Spain
And conquered it right to the sea.
Not a castle, wall or city
Is left standing, except one
And that is Saragossa town,
Up a mountain. The misbelieving
Marsilie holds it, the pagan king.
A bad end comes to those who follow,
Like him, Mahomet and Apollo.
- 2 In Saragossa, king Marsilie
Is in a shady orchard. He
Lies upon blue marble and
Has twenty thousand men at hand.
He calls his dukes and counts and says:
'My lords, are we not in distress?
The emperor from that sweet France
Has led our country such a dance.
My army can't stand up to his,
No matter how courageous ours is.
You are supposed to give advice:
Can you say which way safety lies?'
No single pagan responds
Except Blancandrins from Val-Fonde.
- 3 Blancandrins is the wisest man
The pagans have, and no one can
Outdo him in counsel or in fight.
He says: 'No occasion for fright!
Charles is vain, you have only to send
Your submission and say you are his friend.
Give him bears and dogs and lions,
Seven hundred camels, a thousand falcons,
Four hundred mules with silver and gold

And fifty waggons with all they'll hold:
Then tell him it's time he went away.
Enough fighting, tell him; he'd as well
Go back now to Aix-la-Chapelle.
You will follow him, say, at Michaelmas
And become a Christian without fuss
And admit that all the honour is his:
If he wants, he can have hostages
—Ten or twenty thousand should reassure him
We would send our sons, if that would fool him.
They may be killed, but I'll send mine.
Better that they should have a rough time
Than that we should be dishonoured and beg
At the end of our days for a bit of bread.'

4 Blancandrins says: 'By my right hand
And by my beard, you would see the land
Rid of the French in no time at all.
The Franks would go back to France, the small
Men to their villages, Charles himself
Would soon be home in Aix-la-Chapelle.
At Michaelmas, there'd be a great do,
The day would arrive—and end too—
Without there being a sign of us.
The king of course would be furious;
He would have off the hostages' heads.
Better that they should be dead
Than that we should lose the whole of Spain
And never be our own masters again.'
'He may be right,' the pagans say.

5 Marsilie's council is at an end.
He calls ten of his special friends
And biggest rascals: first, Clarin,
Estamarin and Eudropin,
Priam, and Guarlan with the beard,
Then five more who are not less feared

—Machiner, and his uncle Maheu,
Jouner, Malbien, no one knew
And Blancandrins. He gives them orders:
'You, barons, will go to Cordres;
Charles is now besieging it.
Take olive branches. Have the wit
To look like men who come in peace.
A touch of deference would please.
Reach an agreement and I'll give
You gold and silver as long as I live
And fiefs, if you like, and land.'
The pagans say: 'We understand.'

6 King Marsilie's council is done;
He tells his barons to be gone.
'Carry branches of olive, make
Charles think that for his God's sake
He ought to have mercy on me.
Tell him that next month he'll see
A thousand of us with him, come
To take the law of Christendom
And I will swear to be his man.
If he wants to have hostages, he can.'
'That should work,' says Blancandrins.

7 Marsilie sends for ten white mules,
A present from the king of Santule.
They have silver saddles on their backs;
The messengers mount and hit the track.
Each of them carries an olive branch.
They are going to Charles, who rules France.
He must believe them. He hasn't a chance.

8 The emperor is happy now.
The walls of Cordres are all down;
His catapults have smashed the towers;
His knights have helped themselves to spoil,

Gold, silver and expensive arms.
Not a pagan left the city,
All dead or gone over to Christianity.
The emperor is in an orchard,
Roland and Oliver with him, assorted
Barons, Samson the duke, Anseis
Who is so full of his own fleas,
Geoffrey of Anjou who carries the king's
Flag and—together in everything—
Gerin and Gerer, with many more.
There are fifteen thousand of them all told;
Sweet France has no better knights.
All around they sit on white
Silken carpets. They all amuse
Themselves as they like; the old men choose
Chess, while the young men play with swords.
Under a pine and beside a thorn
A throne of gold has been erected.
There sits the king with his respected
Snowy beard and trailing hair
Who rules all France and has the air,
With his strong frame and haughty looks
Of being who he is. The crooks
Who come from Marsilie dismount
And give a plausible account
Of who they are. They begin the meeting
With well-designed and loving greetings.

- 9 Blancandrins is the first to speak:
'God save the king!' he says, 'I mean
The God whom all of us should adore.
Marsilie wanted to know more
About the law which brings salvation;
And now sends presents from our nation:
Bears and lions, greyhounds on the leash,
Seven hundred camels, the best in all the east,
A thousand falcons, and four hundred mules

Loaded with gold and silver, waggons too,
A train of fifty of them. Enough to pay
Your soldiers and see them happy on their way.
For you have been here long enough. To go
To France and Aix must have attractions now.
~~My king is anxious now to follow you.'~~
The emperor stretches up his hands to God
And bows his head. He is lost in thought.

- 10 The emperor keeps his head down.
He is not quick to use his mouth.
His custom is to speak at leisure;
He looks up to make known his pleasure.
He says to the messengers: 'Well said:
But king Marsilie is not my friend,
How can I trust a word he says?'
The Saracens answer: 'Hostages!
Ten, fifteen, twenty if you will;
I will risk my son being killed
And there'll be better born than he.
Then when you're back in your palace you'll see
At Michaelmas—Michael de periculo—
The emperor will have followed you.
In the baths God made you at Aix
He will be baptised for Christ's sake.'
Charles replies: 'He could still be saved.'
- 11 It's a fine evening, with a clear sky.
Charles has the ten mules led away.
Then, for the messengers, a tent
Is set in an orchard. Ten sergeants
Fix them up with all they need.
The emperor is up at first light;
Hears mass and mattins, then goes straight
To council under a pine tree.
He calls the barons of France, for he
Wants to know what they approve
And without that he will not move.

12 There the king sits under his pine-tree
And calls all his nobility:
Ogier, duke, Turpin, archbishop,
Young Henry and ancient Richard,
The count of Gascony, Acelin,
Tibbald of Rheims with Milon his cousin
And Gerer and Gerin. Then here they are,
The famous Roland and Oliver,
One is brave and the other wise:
And more than a thousand Franks besides:
Ganelon, who betrayed his friends.
This counsel came to a bad end.

13 'My lords,' the king begins, 'You see:
I've heard from that king Marsilie.
He wants to give me a great mass
Of his belongings, such creatures as
Bears and lions and hunting dogs,
Seven hundred camels and a thousand hawks,
Four hundred mules, with all the Arab
Gold the animals can carry,
And more loaded in fifty carts.
So far so good. The other part
Of his message is, that I should go
Back to France, to Aix and so
Give him the chance to follow me
And embrace Christianity
—To be baptised and hold the marches.
How can I know where his heart is?'
The French say: 'We can be on our guard.'

14 The emperor has had his say.
Roland's thoughts turn the other way.
He jumps to his feet to contradict:
'You will regret it quickly
If you believe Marsilie again.
Seven years we have been in Spain:

Why have I conquered all these cities
For you, Noplès and Commiblès?
Taken Valerne and the land of Pine,
Balaguer, Tuele and Sezille?
Marsilie was a traitor then:
He sent you fifteen pagan men,
Each of them with an olive twig
And a pack of lies that were just as big
As those he is offering to you now,
And you let your Frenchmen tell you how
You should behave, and they talked like fools.
Although you knew the pagans were cruel—
You sent them two counts, Basilie
And Basan and, by Haltilie
They had their heads off. How can you not
Carry the war on, after that?
Lay siege to Saragossa if
It takes you all the rest of your life.
Basan and Basilie were our friends:
And now, by God, they should be avenged.'

15 The emperor doesn't look up.
He strokes his beard and then he tugs
His moustache, and says nothing
To all his nephew's blustering.
The French keep quiet, all except
Ganelon—and up he gets
There, in front of the emperor:
'What is all this clatter for?
Why should you believe anyone,
Me or another, unless there is some
Advantage in it for the king?
If Marsilie means anything
When he says he will be your man
And do homage to you for Spain,
Becoming a Christian into the bargain,
Is that something we ought to argue?

Anyone who, because of pride,
Wants to set such an offer aside
Cannot care how we die. Such impudence,
To set aside all common prudence!

16 After that Naimès comes, the court
Has no better vassal than this lord.
He says to the king: 'Now you have heard
What Ganelon said; they were sensible words.
The matter should be debated no more.
King Marsilie has lost the war;
You have taken his castles, your catapults
Have left enormous holes in his walls;
His cities have been set alight,
His men are left without much fight.
When he sends and asks for mercy,
With hostages as guarantee,
You ought to grant it; there is no more
Reason to continue this war.'
The French say: 'So it is;
He has spoken well, Duke Naimès.'

17 'My lords, barons, who shall go
To see what king Marsilie's up to?'
Duke Naimès says: 'You can send me.
Your glove and stick are all I need.'
The king replies: 'You were not asked.
By my beard and my moustache
You shall not go so far away;
I might need your advice one day.
Go and sit down.' The duke obeys.

18 'My lords, barons, whom shall we send
To see that wily Saracen
Who still holds Saragossa town?'
Then Roland answers: 'I'll go down!'
'You won't!' exclaims count Oliver,

'With your arrogance and quick temper
You'll pick a quarrel before you start.
I should be better in that part.
If the king wishes, I will go.'
Charles says: 'Shut up, the pair of you!
Neither goes. Let it be clear
I will send none of the twelve peers.
God help anyone who proposes
That.' The French looked down their noses.

19 Turpin interrupts from the ranks.
'Why do you reproach your Franks?'
He said to the king. 'They have been here,
With pain and effort, for seven years.
Give me the stick and glove, I'll go
And I'll soon see what sort of man
He is, this Spanish Saracen.'
The emperor shouts: 'Go and sit down
On your white silk and hold your tongue.
I don't want to hear another sound!'

20 'You Frankish knights,' says the emperor
And rather pointedly ignores
The archbishop: 'Propose somebody
Who comes from my own territory
And who can go to Marsilie.'
Roland says: 'Ganelon, my step-father!'
The French say: 'There is none we would rather
Propose. He is the wisest man.'
But did that upset Ganelon?
He threw his marten-skins back from
His throat in fury. He has on
A tunic of white silk. His eyes
Are grey, his looks are full of pride;
He is well-built and elegant:
The French have found the man they want.
He says to Roland: 'Are you mad,

With all this talk of your step-father?
You hope you will get rid of me
By sending me to Marsilie;
If I come back there will be sparks:
You'll get a battering, and the marks
Will still be with you in old age.'
Roland replies: 'Oh, you can rage;
They all know threats are nothing to me.
Brains are needed for an embassy;
The king would prefer me, probably.'

- 21 Ganelon answers: 'You have the face
To say you will go in my place?
You are not my man nor I your lord.
Charles is the one who gives the orders!
Saragossa? Marsilie?
I will go, but you watch me:
I'll find a way of paying you off.'
At that, Roland began to laugh.

- 22 When Ganelon sees Roland laughing
It is as if he faced disaster;
He feels a burning anger, which
Almost drives him out of his wits.
He says to the count: 'This is your doing;
I have the mission, you hope to ruin
Me by it. I hate you. But you are just,
Emperor; I will go, since I must.'

- 23 'Saragossa, then! I know that men
Who go there don't come back again.
My wife's your sister, don't forget,
I have a son, a fine well-set
Young lad, Baldwin. To him I leave
All my honours and my fiefs.
Look after him, for it is certain
I shan't set eyes on him again.'

Charles replies: 'Your heart's too tender.
Go and fix up the surrender.'

- 24 The king says: 'Ganelon, be quick,
Here, take from me my glove and stick.
You heard, the French have chosen you.'
Ganelon says: 'It was Roland's doing!
I'll have no love for him after this,
Nor for Oliver, that friend of his,
Nor for the twelve peers, they're too fond of him.
Before you I defy the lot of them!
The king says: 'You speak bitterly.
But you'll go, you have orders from me.'
'I'll go, but it's without guarantee,
Like Basan and his brother Basilie.'

- 25 The emperor held out his glove
But Ganelon was slow to move
And when he should have taken it,
It fell. The French say: 'What is this?
What does it mean? Loss, probably.'
Ganelon says: 'You will hear from me.'

- 26 'Sir,' says Ganelon, 'Give me your blessing.
Since I must go, no point in messing.'
The king says: 'Now, in Jesus' name
And in my name, go!' And at the same
Time he makes the sign of the cross,
Absolves him, and sends him off,
Handing him, before he goes,
The stick and a diplomatic note.

- 27 Ganelon goes back to his tent
And puts together his equipment,
Taking the best of everything:
Golden spurs, and soon he is buckling
His sword Margleis. He mounts upon

His favourite charger, Tachebrun.
Guenemer holds the stirrup;
There is weeping among the troop
Of knights. They all say: 'Ah, my lord,
You have been so long at the king's court!
You are known to be a noble vassal.
The man who condemned you to this shall
Not get off scot-free, although
The king himself would have it so.
Count Roland should not have picked on you,
You're from too good a family!'
Then they say: 'Would you like company?
We'll come.' Ganelon replies:
'Oh, God, no. If one of us dies,
That is enough. You'll go back to France.
Speak to my wife if you have a chance
And to my old friend Pinabel
And of course to my son Baldwin as well
—He is your leader, from today.'
And with these words he rode away.

28 Under the olives rides Ganelon,
Following the messengers of the Saracens;
Blancandrins drops behind to be
With Ganelon and very wily
Their conversation is. Blancandrins
Says: 'He is a remarkable man,
Your Charles: Calabria conquered, Pouille!
England, the other side of the sea
Forced to pay up Peter's pence.
If I may say so without offence,
I wonder why he bothers with us.'
Ganelon answers: 'That's how it is.
Nobody like him. He's marvellous.'

29 Blancandrins says: 'I like the Franks
But their counts and dukes deserve no thanks

24

From Charles for the advice they give!
What a life they make him live!
Ganelon answers: 'They're all right,
Except for Roland, who acts in spite.
One morning, when the king and a few
Of us were there in the shade, his nephew
Came along with his armour on
—Just back with spoil from Carcassonne.
He had a red apple in his hand:
'Here you are, uncle,' said Roland and
'If you take a fancy to anyone's crown
Just tell me, I will bring it round.'
His pride is like that, and every day
He puts his life at risk. I say
There'll be peace when he is put out of the way.'

30 Blancandrins says: 'Yes, Roland, he
Wants to make everyone cry for mercy,
No one else has rights of any sort.
Who does he count on for support?'
Ganelon answers: 'It's the French,
They love him. They've got no sense.
Of course, he gives them silver and gold,
Horses, everything. I'm told
Even the emperor takes what he can.
He wants to conquer the east, that man.'

31 As they ride on, Ganelon
And Blancandrins, they agree on
~~A compact: Roland must be killed.~~ ✓
They ride on tracks and paths until
They come to Saragossa town.
Under a yew-tree they dismount.
Under the shadow of a pine
Is a throne, enveloped in fine
Silk of Alexandrian grain:
On it is the king of Spain.

25