

THE SONG
OF ROLAND

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THE SONG OF ROLAND

*Translated, with an
Introduction, by W. S. Merwin*

*Notes, Glossary, and
Select Bibliography by
M. A. Clermont-Ferrand*

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS



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CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

INTRODUCTION BY W. S. MERWIN

Dedication

The Song of Roland

AFTERWORD

NOTES

GLOSSARY OF NAMES

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Some time near the end of July, Charles (Charles the King, Charles the Emperor, Charles the Great, Charlemagne) turned his army north toward the Pyrenees and France. The year was 778. He was thirty-six years old and he was not used to failure, but even the royal chronicler would have difficulty in trying to describe his ambitious summer campaign in Spain as though it had been a success.

It had not been hastily conceived. Suleiman, the Moorish governor of Barcelona, had visited Charles in the spring of 777 to urge him to cross the Pyrenees, and the request, and Charles' response to it, were both influenced by dynastic and religious promptings which had their own histories of their own.

Suleiman was a member of the Abassid dynasty, descended from an uncle of Mohammed. Earlier in the century the Abassids had overthrown the reigning Umayyad dynasty and assassinated every member of it except one, Abdur Rahman, who had escaped to Spain and established himself there as the Emir. Suleiman's hatred of Rahman was understandable, and it had already led him to seek and to obtain the protection of his Christian neighbor, King Pepin of France, Charles' father.

There were other reasons why Charles would have been sympathetic to Suleiman. He was himself a member of a young dynasty, a matter of subtle importance in a world governed to a great degree by tradition. And then, Abdur Rahman, as the last representative of the Umayyads, stood for the family which, half a century before, had commanded the great Moorish invasion of France. At that time the apparently invincible Umayyads had forced the way as far north as Tours before Charles' grandfather, Charles Martel, turned them back. It was the Umayyads whom Charles' father, Pepin, had fought and at last driven from France.

But doubtless none of these considerations would have impelled Charles to cross the Pyrenees if it had not been for a more powerful and obvious motive: his own ambition. In the first nine years of his reign he had conquered Aquitaine, beaten the Saxons and the Lombards and become the official guardian of Christendom, whose boundaries he had extended to the north and east. An expedition into Spain would give him a chance to unify the different parts of his realm in a common effort, and incidentally to conquer the as yet unsubjected Basque provinces. Suleiman probably stressed the apparent fact that Rahman was a menace to Charles' southern frontier, and very possibly he would have told the French king that if he were to attack Rahman now he could not help succeeding, that the Abassids themselves were raising an army of Berbers to send against the Umayyad, and that the people of Spain were on the point of rebellion. The exact details of the embassy and the terms of the agreement that was reached are not known. But by Easter 778 Charles was in Poitou with an immense army recruited from every part of his kingdom: it included Goths, contingents from Septimania and Provence, Austrasians, Neustrians, Lombards, Burgundians, and Bavarians. After Easter he crossed the western end of the Pyrenees, through the Basque country, at the head of half his army. He sent the other half around the eastern end of the mountains. The two were to meet before Saragossa.

Just what happened that summer was carefully obscured in the accounts and will never be known. Certainly there were no great triumphs. The Christian natives of Spain did not hasten to overthrow the tolerant Moorish rule and welcome the Franks; on the contrary, the Christians of the kingdom of Asturias preferred their own independence to the presence of a foreign army however dear to the Pope. It is also possible that they were in league with Rahman. At any rate, they resisted the Franks. The Christian city of Pampelona refused entrance to Charles and had to be stormed; it was the only city in the entire campaign which was actually taken. The native rebellion against Rahman never amounted to much, and Suleiman himself had a falling out with his Moorish allies on the African continent. When the Frankish army assembled before Saragossa the city defied it, despite Suleiman's diplomatic efforts; it is not known how hard Charles tried to take it, but he had no siege machinery, and he failed. By some time in July he had received the formal surrender of a few cities—a gesture which may have owed as much to his alliance with Suleiman as it did to his own army—and he had gained some hostages, and little else. There is no way of knowing just why he abandoned the campaign so early in the summer. It is possible that he saw nothing to be gained by staying in the circumstances, and was simply cutting his losses. Supplies may have run dangerously low. It is conceivable that the campaign had turned out far worse than the accounts would lead us to suppose, and that the army was in fact retreating. Even if that were so it cannot have been a rushed or disorderly retreat: in August the army stopped at Pampelona long enough to raze the walls of the city to punish the inhabitants for their resistance, and no doubt to weaken the Spanish side of the frontier. It has been suggested (by Fawtier) that Charles had not been in a hurry, for some reason, he would have paused long enough to celebrate the important feast of the Dormition of the Virgin on August 15. At any event he did not do so, but pushed on into the Pyrenees.

What happened next is one of the great riddles.

In the earliest history of Charles' expedition, the one included in a chronicle known as the *Annales Royales*, there is no reference to any military action whatever in the Pyrenees. A later writers on the subject have agreed that the author had something of importance to be silent about. Of such importance, in fact, that his immediate successors evidently felt that mere silence would not serve to conceal it, and set about explaining it. The original *Annales* were rewritten and expanded roughly a quarter of a century after they were first compiled. It was long thought that the rewriting was done by Charlemagne's biographer Einhard, and though it is now certain that the changes are not his, the second edition of the chronicle is still referred to as the *Annales dites d'Einhard*. In this work there is a brief and contradictory account of something which happened on the way back from Spain. The Basques, it says here, from positions at the tops of the mountains, attacked the rear guard and put the whole army in disorder; the Franks were caught at a disadvantage and did badly; most of the commanders of the different sections of the army were killed, and the enemy, helped by the nature of the terrain, managed to carry off the baggage and escape. There is a reference, too, to the bitterness of Charles' grief.

Then there is Einhard's own account. In the first place he is more ingenious than his predecessors at making it sound as though the Spanish campaign had been a success; then, having built up the picture, he sets against it the Pyrenean ambush on the way back as a relatively minor mishap. It was the treacherous Gascons, he says; they waited until the army

was spread out in a long line in the gorges, and then they rushed down and threw the baggage train and the rear guard into confusion. There was a battle in the valley and the Franks were thrown back. The Gascons killed their opponents, the rear guard, to a man, seized the baggage, and scattered under cover of night. Their flight was made easier by their light armor and the nature of the terrain. And then Einhard says, "In this battle Egginhard the royal seneschal, Anselm the Count of the Palace, and Hruodland, the Warden of the Breton Marches, were killed, with very many others." It is one of the only two glimpses in history of the knight whose name would come to evoke one of the richest bodies of legend in the Middle Ages, and one of its greatest poems. The other is a coin, worn, but still displaying on one side the name *Carlus*, and on the reverse, *Rodlan*.

One final mention of the battle, by the chroniclers, is of interest. While the army was making its way back from Spain, Charlemagne's wife, in France, gave birth to a son, Louis, who would be his heir. Sixty years after the battle Louis' own biographer, a writer known as The Astronome, in speaking of it said that the names of those who fell in that action were so well known that there was no need to repeat them.

Of all the battles of the period, this one probably has excited most curiosity, and almost nothing about it is definitely known. It is not mere historical interest in the sources of the Roland story which still draws the speculation of scholars to what scanty evidence has come down to our times. In this case the theories of how the legend developed from the event are even more than usually dependent upon a notion of what the event was: a bitter but militarily unimportant misfortune, on the one hand, or one of the critical defeats of Charlemagne's reign, on the other.

Bedier, one of the great students of medieval literature in modern times and the editor of the Oxford text of *La Chanson de Roland*, propounded the theory of the development of the legend which was generally accepted for years. The battle, he believed, was a minor event which had been remembered in the area near the battlefield and had become a local legend. From those beginnings it had been retold and developed in monasteries and pilgrim sanctuaries along the route leading to Santiago de Compostella, in Spain; the route crossed the Pyrenees at Roncevaux—the Roncesvalles associated with the Roland story. Bedier, incidentally, was convinced that a number of the French *chansons de geste* developed in more or less the same way and may have been written by monks, or at least in collaboration with monks. With reference to the *Roland*, in particular, he cites the fact that the pass at Roncevaux was commended for admiration (complete with a monumental cross said to be Carolingian and other relics claiming descent from Roland and the battle) by the monks at Roncevaux in the twelfth century; he points out that one variant of the Roland legend contained in a twelfth-century guide written for the benefit of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostella.

Bedier's theory was published just before World War I. It was subjected to criticism in the following decades by a number of scholars; one of the most interesting countertheories was put forward by Fawtier (*La Chanson de Roland*) in 1933. Fawtier analyzes the chronicler's references to the battle and bases his conclusions, in great part, on the weaknesses in the accounts. The chroniclers, he insists, cannot have it both ways. Was it merely a massacre of the rear guard, or did it in fact involve the whole army and "throw it into disorder"? He poses some other interesting questions. Why, for instance, should the baggage train have been

at the rear of the march, when it was usual to have it in the middle, especially in mountainous country? Why should so many of the leaders of the different sections of the army have been in the rear guard (of course the legend itself, with its story of the Ganelon-Roland dispute, answers this one, but the legend in its final form came much later and a great part of it was concerned with the peculiar drama of this very situation). How many of these details, and how much of the picture of the lightning raid from the mountaintops may have been attempted to minimize and explain away a terrible defeat which had happened while Charles himself was in command?

In Fawtier's view, the battle, whether it took place at Roncevaux or elsewhere, was one of the great disasters of Charlemagne's career. The army, hurrying into the Pyrenees, was caught in a classical ambush: the van was blocked, the rear was then attacked, and the Franks had to fight their way forward, section by section, suffering losses so appalling that Charles never really managed to reassemble the survivors on the other side of the mountains, and instead set about hastily reorganizing the strong points in Aquitaine as though he expected further troubles from Spain. In fact the magnitude of the defeat was one of the things about the action which caught the popular imagination and contributed to the growth of the legend around the heroic figure of the doomed commander of the rear guard, Hruodland, Rodland, Roland.

The legend may have grown in the region around Roncevaux, but it was elaborated in other parts of the kingdom too. By the late eleventh century, when the poem was written, it was possible for the poet to display, without fear of correction, an ignorance of the geography of Spain and, for that matter, of southern France, which indicates not only that he himself came from somewhere far from that part of the world, but also that the story and its heroes had long been familiar in places remote from the original battlefield. An audience at Roncevaux might just have been able to go along with the poet's assumption that Córdoba was near the hill city of Saragossa, which in turn was on the sea; it is unlikely that, even in the Middle Ages when simple experience was so meek an authority, they would have heard without murmur that Narbonne and Bordeaux both lay on the same road north from Roncevaux. Furthermore, this shows a total ignorance of the Santiago pilgrim route and its monasteries—an interesting fact in view of the theory that the poem was composed in one of those places on that route.

In Fawtier's opinion the story of the defeat was carried across France by its veterans, and in various localities, as it took on the character of legend through repetition, it was cast, whole or in part, into the form of ballads. It is true that none of these survive, but then very little of the popular literature of the time has survived. The monks had nothing to do with the composition of *La Chanson de Roland* itself (although two other, later variants of the legend were composed by clerics). On the contrary, it was the legend, and perhaps the poem itself, which prompted the ecclesiastics at Roncevaux to exploit the pass as a pilgrim attraction—an enterprise which may have contributed to the poem's preservation.

There has been considerable controversy as to just when *La Chanson de Roland* was written. It must have been some time in the latter half of the eleventh century, but it is not possible to be much more definite than that. The poem apparently was already well known in 1095 when, at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II made use of it in his appeal to the chivalry of France to follow in the steps of Charlemagne and send an army against Islam. Many of the

crusaders who responded to Urban's summons, and many who came later, must have been following an image of themselves which derived, at least in part, from the legendary last battle of the now transfigured Hruodland.

The poem, in its original form, has not survived. Modern knowledge of it is confined to several different versions, whose separate relations to the original are not plain. There is, for instance, a twelfth-century German translation by a Bavarian priest named Konrad. There is a Norse translation of the thirteenth century. There is a version in Franco-Italian, in the library of San Marco in Venice, which ends differently from the others. And there are three versions in French. One of them, known as *Recension O*, or the Oxford version, has survived in a single copy, Digby Mss 23, at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. It is supposed that it was a *jongleur's* copy of the poem. It is the oldest of all the versions, the most beautiful, and must have been much the closest to the original. Bedier's famous edition of the poem (the one I have used in making my translation) is based on the Oxford version, which Bedier compares at all points with the others.

Two other medieval retellings of the Roland legend are extant. One of them, the so-called *Pseudo-Turpin*, comes from Book IV of the twelfth-century *Guide to the Pilgrims of Santiago de Compostella*, to which I have already referred. It is in Latin prose and purports to have been written by the Archbishop Turpin himself. This worthy, as here presented, was with Charlemagne when Roland was attacked, and he had a vision in which he saw the soul of King Marsiliun being carried off by demons and the soul of Roland by angels. The narrative is clumsy, ill written, and encumbered with theological baggage. The other variant off the story is the *Carmen de prodicione Guenonis*, is also in Latin prose, but is shorter and more vigorous; it is possible that it is a translation of a lost French poem. A great deal of attention is paid to the character and actions of Ganelon. These two accounts, and the six surviving descendants of the *Chanson* itself, were compared by Gaston Paris, who concluded that the author of the *Pseudo-Turpin* knew the *Chanson* but that the author of the *Chanson* did not know the *Pseudo-Turpin* variant; that there was no evidence of any relationship between the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the *Carmen*; that there was no way of establishing any relationship between the *Carmen* and the *Chanson*.

No decision about the spelling of characters and places could have satisfied everyone, and between the two extremes of modernizing and Anglicizing everything, on the one hand, or of keeping to the medieval versions in every case, on the other, I have not even been consistent. It would have struck me as affected and pointlessly archaic to have insisted on the original versions of names which have become familiar in modern English—Roland, Charles, Ganelon, Reims, Bordeaux. The work, after all, is a translation to begin with. But with names which, in my judgment, had not acquired such familiarity, I have either followed one of the original versions (sometimes there are several: Marsile, Marsilies, Marsilie, Marsiliun, Naimu, Naimon, Neimes, Naines) or Bedier's standardized modern French version (Blancandri, Balaquer, Thierry, Seurin), depending on which seemed preferable in the circumstances.

The *Chanson de Roland*, as it has survived in the Oxford version, consists of just under 4000 lines, arranged in *laissez*, or groups of lines all ending on the same assonance. The metric pattern is based on a ten-syllable line with a clear strong beat. There are several drawbacks to trying to reproduce anything of the kind in English. For one thing, the assonance pattern in English is far more meager than are the Romance languages in the number of similar

assonances which can be found for any given word ending. There have been translations of *La Chanson de Roland* which have aimed at producing assonance patterns like those in the original, but the results have been gnarled, impacted, and stunted, as the original certainly not. It would also have been possible—and this too has been done—to translate the poem into a ten-syllable line more or less resembling that of the original. The trouble is that the associations of the ten-syllable line in English are not at all what they are in French. It would have been very difficult not to invoke the tradition of iambic pentameter in English literature, a gallery of connotations which would not only have been irrelevant to the poem but which also could not help disguising it. This is quite apart from my own strong disposition against even reading another transposition of *La Chanson de Roland*, or most anything else, into a sort of blankish verse.

I am not questioning the splendor of the verse in the Oxford version, the magnificence of the noise it makes. It would be boorish of me to do so after the pleasure they have given me. But the qualities of the poem which finally claim me are all related to a certain limpidity not only in the language and the story but in the imagination behind them, to a clarity at once simple and formal, excited and cool, to characteristics which I find myself trying to describe in terms of light and water. These qualities obviously could not be reproduced in any translation but I wanted to suggest them, and it seemed to me that I should try to do it in prose.

—

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I

Charles the King, our great emperor, has stayed seven whole years in Spain and has conquered the haughty country as far as the sea. Not a single castle resists him any longer, not one wall has yet to be broken nor one city taken, except Saragossa, which is on a mountain and is held by King Marsiliun, who does not love God. Marsiliun serves Mahommed and prays to Appolin. But he cannot prevent harm from overtaking him.

II

King Marsiliun, in Saragossa, has gone out into the shade of an orchard. He reclines on a bench of blue marble. There are more than twenty thousand men around him. He summons his dukes and his counts: "Lords, hear this, regarding the scourge which has come upon us. The emperor Charles has come to this country from sweet France to destroy us. I have no host with which to offer him battle, nor such an army as could crush his. Give me counsel, my men of wisdom, to save me from death and shame!"

None of the pagans says a word in reply, except Blancandrin, from the Castle of Val-Fonde

III

Blancandrin was one of the wisest of the pagans. He was well endowed with the kind of courage which befits a knight, and he had shrewdness and judgment to bring to the aid of his lord. And he said to the King: "Do not give way to alarm! Send promises of faithful service and great friendship to Charles, the proud, the haughty. Send him bears and lions and dogs, seven hundred camels and a thousand new-molted falcons, four hundred mules weighed down with gold and silver, fifty wagons for him to range in a wagon train. He will be able to pay his mercenaries well. Tell him that he has made war long enough in this country, that he would do well to return to Aix, in France. Tell him that you will meet him there with Michaelmas and bow to the law of the Christians and become his vassal, in all honor and good faith. If he demands hostages send him ten or twenty to gain his confidence. Let us send the sons of our own wives. I will send my own son, even at the risk of his life. It is far better that our children should lose their heads than that we should forfeit our honor and possessions, or be reduced to begging."

IV

Blancandrin said: "I will swear by this right hand, by this beard which the wind flutters across my breast, that you will see the French army break camp at once. The Franks will go back into France, to their country. When each man has returned to the place which is dearest to

him, at Michaelmas Charles will hold high court in his chapel at Aix. The day will arrive, the allotted time will run out, and Charles will receive no word from us, no tidings. The King is proud, and he has a hard heart. He will command them to take our hostages and strike off their heads. It is far better that they should lose their heads than that we should forfeit serene lovely Spain or endure suffering or distress!”

The pagans say: “Perhaps he is right.”

V

King Marsiliun has brought his council to an end. He summons Clarin of Balaguer, Estamarin and his friend Eudropin, and Priamun and Guarlan the Bearded, and Machiner and his uncle Maheu, and Jouner, and Malbien from across the sea, and Blancandrin, to speak in his name. He calls to one side ten of the wildest and most treacherous. “My lords, barons, you will go to Charlemagne. He is laying siege to the city of Cordres. You will approach him carrying olive branches in your hands to signify peace and humility. If you are cunning enough to arrange an agreement for me, I will give you as much gold and silver as you could wish for, and as much land, and as many possessions.”

The pagans answer: “We are more than satisfied!”

VI

King Marsiliun has brought his council to an end. He says to his men: “Go, my lords. You will carry olive branches in your hands. In my name you will speak to King Charlemagne asking him to have mercy on me in the name of his God. Tell him that he will not see the end of this first month before I have joined him with a thousand of my followers, and that I shall bow to the law of the Christians and become his vassal in all friendship and good faith. If he demands hostages he may have them.”

Blancandrin says: “It will be to your advantage.”

VII

Marsiliun commands his servants to lead out ten white mules which had been given to him by the King of Suatilie. The bits are made of gold, and the saddles are overlaid with silver. The messengers mount, bearing olive branches in their hands. They have come to Charlemagne who has France for his domain. They will deceive him to some extent; it cannot be helped.

VIII

The Emperor has become light-hearted and gay. He has taken Cordres and smashed its walls, and with his catapults he has battered down its towers. His knights have seized great quantities of plunder: gold and silver and rich garments. There is not a pagan left in the city; every one of them was either killed or became a Christian. The Emperor is in a broad

orchard, and with him are Roland and Oliver, the Duke Sansun, and the proud Anseis, and Gefrey of Anjou, the King's standard-bearer. Gerin and Gerer are with them also, and many others. There are fifteen thousand from sweet France. The knights are seated on white silken carpets. The clever and the elderly are amusing themselves at backgammon and chess; the quick-blooded young men are fencing. Under a pine tree near an eglantine they have set a throne of pure gold, and there sits the King who rules sweet France. His beard is white and his hair is in full flower. His body is noble and his bearing is princely. If a man were to come looking for him, there would be no need to point him out. The messengers dismount and greet him, making protestations of friendship and good will.

IX

Blancandrin speaks before any of the others, and he says to the King: "Hail in the name of the glorious God whom we should adore! This is the message which the worthy King Marsiliun sends to you. He has inquired deeply into the law of salvation. He wishes to shower you with gifts chosen from among his own possessions: bears and lions, leashed boarhounds, seven hundred camels and a thousand falcons lately mewed, four hundred mules weighed down with gold and silver, fifty wagons to range in a wagon train, every one of them groaning with gold coin. You will be able to pay your mercenaries well. You have been in this country long enough. It would be better if you went back to Aix, in France. My lord promises that he will join you there."

The Emperor lifts up his hands to God, then he bows his head and begins to ponder.

X

The Emperor sits with head bowed. He was never hasty of speech. It is his custom to speak only in his own good time. When he raises his head his face is filled with pride. He says to the messengers: "You have spoken well. But King Marsiliun has proved that he is my enemy. What should make me put any confidence in this message which you bring?"

"Hostages," says the Saracen. "You may have ten, or fifteen, or twenty. I will send one of my own sons, even at the risk of his life, and I am certain that you will be given others who are yet better born than he. When you are in your royal palace, my lord promises that he will join you at the high feast of Saint Michael of Peril. And there, in the baths which were made for you by God himself, he will become a Christian."

Charles answers: "He may yet be saved."

XI

The evening was fair, the sun shone brightly. Charles commands his servants to stable the ten mules. He orders them to pitch a tent in the broad orchard, and he lodges the ten messengers there, sending twelve sergeants to wait upon them. There they have stayed through the night, until the coming of the bright day. The Emperor rises in the morning, hears mass and matins, and then goes under a pine and calls his barons together to council. He

wants whatever he does to be in keeping with the advice of his Franks.

XII

The Emperor goes under a pine and calls his barons to council: Duke Oger and Archbishop Turpin, Richard the Elder and his nephew Henry, and Acelin the brave Count of Gascon, Tedbalt of Reims and his cousin Milun. Gerer and Gerin came too, and with them Roland, and the good, the noble Oliver. There were more than a thousand Franks, come from France. And Ganelon came—the author of the betrayal. Then the council began which led to disaster.

XIII

Charles, the Emperor, speaks: “My lords, barons, King Marsiliun has sent his messengers to me. He wishes to present me with a splendid gift out of his own possessions: bears and lion-boarhounds which can be led on the leash, seven hundred camels and a thousand falcons from the mews, four hundred mules weighed down with gold from Arabia, and more than fifty wagons besides. But he asks me to return to France. He says he will join me at Aix in my palace, and will submit to our most holy law and become a Christian, and hold his lands under me as my vassal. But I cannot tell what he has in his heart.”

The French say: “We must be on our guard.”

XIV

The Emperor has ended his speech. Count Roland is not in favor of the proposal. He gets to his feet at once and comes forward to argue against it. He says to the King: “If you believe King Marsiliun you will live to regret it. Here we have been for seven whole years in Spain, and we have conquered Noples and Commibles for you, and Valterne and the country of Pine, and Balasgued and Tuele and Sezilie. And King Marsiliun has already betrayed us. He sent fifteen of his pagans, each carrying an olive branch, and they all said these same words to you. And you did as your Franks suggested—they must have been lightheaded when they advised you. You sent two of your counts to the pagan, one of them was Basan and the other Basilie. He cut off their heads there in the mountains below Haltilie. Carry on with the war as you began it. Take the host which you have assembled and attack Saragossa and lay siege to the city. Let the struggle continue for the rest of your life, if necessary, but avenge those whom this villain murdered.”

XV

The Emperor sits with his head bowed and strokes his beard and smooths his mustache. He neither agrees nor disagrees with his nephew; he does not answer him. None of the Franks says a word, except Ganelon. He gets to his feet and comes before Charles. He begins his speech in a haughty manner, saying:

“You will live to regret it if you lend your ear to some good-for-nothing, myself or another who does not have your best interests at heart. When King Marsiliun sends to tell you that he is willing to clasp hands and become your vassal, when he offers to rule all of Spain through your gift and says that he will submit to our law, then whoever tells you that we should reject his offer, Sire, does not much care what kind of death we may die. It is not right that the promptings of arrogance should prevail. Let us ignore the fools and cleave to the wise!”

XVI

After this Naimés comes forward. There is not better vassal in the court. And he says to the King:

“You have heard Ganelon’s answer. There is wisdom in what he says, if it is properly understood. King Marsiliun is beaten. You have taken all his castles, your catapults have smashed his walls, you have burned his cities and routed his followers. When he begs you to have mercy on him it would be a sin if you were to go on. Since he offers to give you hostages as security, this great war should not go any further.”

The French say: “The Duke has spoken well.”

XVII

“My lords, barons, who shall we send to King Marsiliun in Saragossa?”

The Duke of Naimés answers: “I will go, if you will send me. Give me the glove and the staff.”

The King answers: “You are a wise man. And by this beard and by this mustache of mine you will not get so far from me so quickly. Go and sit down, since no one sent for you!”

XVIII

“My lords, barons, whom can we send to the Saracen who rules Saragossa?”

Roland answers: “Certainly I can go.”

“Indeed you shall not go,” Count Oliver says. “Your temper is rough and haughty. I am afraid you would start a quarrel. If the King wishes, I can certainly go.”

The King replies: “Be still, both of you. Neither you nor he will move a step. By this white beard, I will curse any man who names one of the twelve peers!”

The French are silenced. They say nothing.

XIX

Turpin of Reims rises, comes from his rank, and says to the King:

“Let your Franks rest for a little while. You have been in this country for seven years and they have endured hardship and suffering. Give me the staff and glove, Sire, and I will go to the Saracen of Spain. I would be glad to see what he looks like.”

The Emperor answers him in anger: "Go and sit down on that white carpet, and do not speak again unless I ask you!"

XX

"French knights," the Emperor Charles says, "Choose me a baron from my own country to carry my message to Marsiliun."

Roland says: "You could send my stepfather, Ganelon."

The French say: "Indeed, he could do it. If you do not send him you will not find anyone better."

And Count Ganelon is distraught. He throws off the great sable mantle from around his neck, and stands up in his silk shirt. His eyes are gray and his face is haughty; a noble carriage, a broad chest. He is so handsome that all the peers stare at him. He says to Roland:

"You great fool! What set you raving? I am your own stepfather, as everyone knows, and yet you single me out to be sent to Marsiliun. If God permits me to come back from there you will see to it that misfortune follows you for the rest of your life."

Roland answers: "Pride and foolishness! Everyone knows how little I care for threats. But since the messenger ought to be a man of sense, if the King will let me I will go in your place."

XXI

Ganelon answers: "You will do nothing of the kind! You are not my vassal nor am I your lord. It is Charles who commands me to perform this service, and I will go to Saragossa, to Marsiliun. But before this anger of mine is appeased I shall have played a trick of my own."

And at these words Roland laughs.

XXII

At the sight of Roland laughing, Ganelon is convulsed with rage. Beside himself with fury he says to the Count:

"Do not think I have any love for you. You have settled this undeserved choice on me. Just before the Emperor, here I am before you. I wish to do your bidding."

XXIII

"I know that I am the one who must go to Saragossa, and whoever goes there will not come back. But above all remember that my wife is your sister, and that by her I have a son named Baldwin. No one is more handsome than he. He will make an excellent knight. Leave my lands and fiefs to him. Take good care of him. I shall not see him with these eyes again."

Charles answers: "You are too tender-hearted. I have given the command. You must go."

The King says to Ganelon: "Come here before me and receive the staff and the glove. You have heard the Franks choose you."

Ganelon says: "Sire, it was Roland's doing. I will lose no love on him as long as I live, nor on Oliver either, for being his comrade. And here, Sire, before your eyes I defy the twelve peers because of the great love they bear him."

The King says: "Your anger exceeds all moderation. Now go, since I have given the command."

"I will go, and with no better prospect of safety than Basilie had, or his brother Basan."

XXV

The King holds out his right glove to Ganelon, but the Count is intent upon wishing that he were somewhere else, and when he puts out his hand to take it, it falls to the ground.

The French say: "Oh God, what can that mean? This embassage will bring disaster upon us."

"Lords," Ganelon says, "You may expect news!"

XXVI

"Sire," Ganelon says, "Give me your leave to depart. Since I must go, there is no use delaying."

"Go," the King says, "In Jesus' name and mine."

With his right hand he absolves the Count and makes the sign of the cross. Then he gives him the staff and the letter.

XXVII

Count Ganelon goes to his tent and begins his preparations, putting on his richest equipment, fastening gold spurs to his feet and girding his sword Murglies to his side. Then while his uncle Guinemer holds the stirrup, he mounts Tachebrun, his charger. There you would have seen many knights weeping, saying to him:

"We are grieved that this has befallen you! You have been in the King's court for a long time, and all have spoken of you as a noble vassal. Charlemagne himself cannot save or protect the man who chose you to go to Marsiliun. Count Roland should never have thought of suggesting you, who are descended from so exalted a lineage."

Then they say: "Sire, take us with you."

Ganelon answers: "No, in the name of God! It is better that I should die alone than that so many excellent knights should perish too. When you return to sweet France, my lords, greet my wife for me, and Pinabel my friend and comrade, and my son Baldewin, whom you know. Give him your allegiance and serve him faithfully."

He spurs into the path and sets out on his way.

Ganelon rides under a tall olive tree, and there he joins the Saracen messenger. Blancandrin reins in beside him, and the two converse with great cunning.

Blancandrin says: "Charles is a wonderful man. He has conquered Puille and the whole of Calabria, and crossed the salt sea into England, where he exacted tribute for Saint Peter. What does he want from us, here in our country?"

Ganelon answers: "Such is his nature. There was never a man to equal him."

XXIX

Blancandrin says: "The Franks are noble and admirable. But these dukes and counts bring great harm upon their lord, counseling him as they do. They waste his resources and they mislead him and others."

Ganelon answers: "That is true of no one, to my knowledge, except Roland, who will suffer shame for it one day. Yesterday morning when the Emperor was sitting in the shade, his nephew came up to him, wearing a mailed tunic, bringing him booty from Carcassonne. He held out a red apple in his hand.

"'Take it, fair Sire,' Roland said to his uncle. 'I present you with the crowns of all kings.'

"His arrogance should be his undoing, for there is never a day when he does not risk death. If someone were to kill him we could live in peace."

XXX

Blancandrin says: "Roland is utterly evil. He wants to make all nations bow down to him. He wants to leave no country unchallenged. What people does he expect to help him in all this?"

Ganelon answers: "The French. They have such love for him that they would not willingly fail him in anything. He lavishes gold and silver on them, and mules, and war horses, and silks, and armor. Even the Emperor lets him have his way, for Roland will conquer countries for him from here to the Orient."

XXXI

They ride along together and in the end Ganelon and Blancandrin swear to each other that they will try to find some means of bringing about the death of Roland. They ride on down the roads and paths until they come to Saragossa and dismount under a yew tree. There, in the shadow of a pine, is a throne covered with Alexandrian silk. On it sits the King who rules over all of Spain. Around him are assembled twenty thousand Saracens, in absolute silence waiting to hear the news.

Ganelon and Blancandrin arrive.

XXXII

Blancandrin, leading Count Ganelon by the fist, comes before Marsiliun and says to the King:

“Salutations in the name of Mahomet and in the name of Apollin, whose holy laws we keep. We have delivered your message to Charlemagne. He raised both his hands to heaven and gave praise to his God, and made us no other answer. Here he sends you one of his noblest barons, a great man of France, from whom you will hear whether or not you will have peace.”

Marsiliun answers: “Let him speak. We will listen.”

XXXIII

Ganelon had laid his plans with care. Now he begins to speak, and he does it artfully, for he is skilled in the ways of eloquence. He says to the King:

“Salutations in the name of God, the Glorious, to whom we owe adoration. Here is the message which the worthy Charlemagne sends you. Receive the holy Christian faith and he will give you half of Spain as your fief. Refuse, and you will be taken by force and bound and transported to the city of Aix, where sentence will be pronounced upon your life and you will die a vile and shameful death.”

King Marsiliun is filled with dread. He seizes a gold-fletched javelin and raises it, and nothing but the hand of one of his courtiers prevents him from hurling it.

XXXIV

King Marsiliun has turned pale. He brandishes the shaft of his javelin. At this sight Ganelon grasps his sword and draws it two finger lengths out of the sheath, and says to it:

“Oh fair bright blade which I have worn in the King’s court all these years! The Emperor of France will never hear it said that I died alone in a strange country without your having made them pay some of their best blood.”

The pagans say: “Let us not come to blows.”

XXXV

The best of the Saracens have at last prevailed on Marsiliun to seat himself again on the throne. The Caliph says:

“You discredit us, offering to strike the Frank. You should lend him your attention, and listen.”

“Sire,” Ganelon says, “I have no choice but to suffer all this. But if I am allowed to speak, not all the gold that God made, nor all the riches of this country, will dissuade me from delivering the message which Charles, the mighty King, sends through me to his mortal enemy.”

He is wearing a cloak of sable covered with Alexandrian silk. He flings it aside; Blancandrin catches it. But he keeps his sword, his right hand grasping the gold hilt.

The pagans say: “Here indeed is a noble baron!”

Ganelon approaches the King and says to him:

“You are wrong to be angry, for Charles, who rules France, sends to tell you that if you will receive the law of the Christians he will give you half of Spain in fief. The other half will go to his nephew Roland: you will certainly have an arrogant partner! If you reject this offer Charles will advance on Saragossa and besiege you here, and you will be taken by force, bound, and without further ceremony brought to the city of Aix. You will have neither palfrey nor war horse, mule nor she-mule to ride on the way there. You will be thrown on a wretched beast of burden, and when you arrive you will be sentenced and your head will be struck off. Our Emperor sends you this letter.”

In his right hand he holds it out to the pagan.

XXXVII

Marsiliun, pale with anger, breaks the seal, flings the wax aside, looks at the letter and sees what is written there:

“Charles, who has France for his domain, bids me remember his grief and anger when I cut off the heads of Basan and his brother Basilie, in the mountains of Haltilie. Now if I wish to purchase my life I must send him my uncle the Caliph. Otherwise I need never hope for his favor.”

Then Marsiliun’s son speaks. He says to the King:

“Everything which Ganelon has uttered is foolishness. He has gone too far. He should not be allowed to live any longer. Give him to me. I will do justice upon him.”

When Ganelon hears this he sets his back against the trunk of a pine tree and brandishes his sword.

XXXVIII

Marsiliun withdraws into the orchard, taking with him the best of his vassals. Gray-haired Blancandrin goes with him, and Jurfaret, the King’s son and heir, and Marsiliun’s uncle the Caliph and his followers.

Blancandrin says: “Call the Frenchman here. He swore to me that he would help us.”

The King says: “Go yourself and bring him.”

Blancandrin takes Ganelon by the hand and leads him from the dais into the orchard, to the King. There they plot the unpardonable betrayal.

XXXIX

“Fair sir, Ganelon,” Marsiliun says to him, “in the heat of my anger I behaved somewhat rashly toward you, threatening to strike you as I did. I swear to you by these sable skins whose gold mountings are worth more than five hundred pounds, that before tomorrow night you will have been given a handsome compensation.”

Ganelon answers: "I shall not refuse it. May God be pleased to reward you for it."

XL

Marsiliun says: "Ganelon, the truth is that I should be happy to take you into my favor. Now tell me about Charlemagne. He is very old. He has outworn his time. To my certain knowledge he has been alive for over two hundred years. He has taken his body to so many countries, he has received so many blows on his shield, he has reduced so many rich kings to beggary—will he never grow tired of making war?"

Ganelon answers: "Charles is not as you suppose. Everyone who sees him and comes to know him agrees that the Emperor is a great man. It would be impossible for me to exaggerate his glory and his virtues, or to praise them too highly. His courage is beyond description. And God has kindled such nobility in him that he would rather die than fail his barons."

XLI

The pagan says, "I am filled with amazement, and I have good reason. Charlemagne is old and his beard is gray and his hair is white. To my certain knowledge he has been alive for two hundred years and more. He has dragged his body to so many lands, he has taken so many blows from lances and from spears, and he has reduced so many kings to begging—when will he be tired of making war?"

"Never," says Ganelon, "as long as his nephew is alive. There is not another vassal to compare with him under the hood of heaven. And his companion Oliver, too, is an excellent knight. And the twelve peers, whom Charles holds in such tender esteem, and twenty thousand knights with them, make up his vanguard. Charles is safe. He is not afraid of any man alive."

XLII

The Saracen says: "I am filled with astonishment at Charlemagne, with his gray and white locks. He has been alive, to my certain knowledge, for two hundred years and more. He has traveled through so many countries, conquering them, and he has taken so many blows from good sharp spears, and he has killed so many kings and overthrown them on the field—will he never grow tired of making war?"

"Never," Ganelon says, "as long as Roland is alive. There is not another vassal to compare with him from here to the Orient. And worthy Oliver, his companion, is another excellent knight. And the twelve peers, who are so precious to Charles, and twenty thousand knights with them, make up his vanguard. Charles is safe. He fears no man alive."

XLIII

“Fair sir, Ganelon,” King Marsiliun says, “never will you see an army more splendid than mine. I can assemble four hundred thousand knights. Do I dare give battle to Charles and the French?”

Ganelon answers, “Do nothing of the kind, for the moment. You will lose great numbers of your pagans. Turn from folly and cleave to wisdom: out of your wealth present the Emperor with so rich a gift that all the French marvel at it. If you send him twenty hostages the King will return to sweet France. He will leave his rear guard behind. Unless I am wrong Count Roland his nephew will be there, and brave courtly Oliver, and if I can find someone who will listen to what I have to say, both of them will be killed. Charles will behold the downfall of his great pride, and he will have no heart for making war against you any more.”

XLIV

“Fair sir, Ganelon, how can I kill Roland?”

Ganelon answers: “I can tell you that, without any doubt. The King will proceed to the main pass through the mountains, at Sizer, leaving his rear guard behind him, with his nephew Count Roland, and Oliver, in whom Roland places such trust. There will be twenty thousand Franks in their company. Send a hundred thousand of your pagans against them and engage them in a first battle. The French host will be battered and shaken, and I must tell you now that your own men will suffer great losses. But send the same number against them a second time and give them battle. Whether in the first onslaught or the second, Roland is sure to be killed, and you will have achieved a noble and knightly deed, and will be free of worry for as long as you live.”

XLV

“If anyone could bring about the death of Roland, Charles would have lost his own body and right arm. There would be no more of these awe-inspiring armies. Charles would never again assemble these great hosts, and France, the land of our sires, would be left in peace.”

When Marsiliun hears this he kisses Ganelon on the neck, and then turns to where his treasures are kept.

XLVI

Marsiliun says: “Whatever we say, all our agreements are worthless unless you will swear to me to betray Roland.”

Ganelon answers: “I will do as you wish.” On the holy relics in his sword Murglies he swears to betray Roland, and so his treachery is sealed.

XLVII

There is an ivory throne there. Marsiliun sends for a book containing the laws of Mahom

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