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Charlemagne Revenges Roland

Sir George W. Cox

Charles and his host rode hard, and drew not rein until they reached the mountain top, and looked down on the Valley of Roncesvalles. They blew the clarions, but there was no sound, neither any that answered save the ringing mountain sides. Then down through gloom and mist they rode, and saw the field; saw Roland dead, and Oliver; the archbishop and the twelve valiant peers, and every man of the twenty thousand chosen guard; saw how fiercely they had fought, how hard they died.

There was not one in all the king's host but lifted up his voice and wept for pity at the sight they saw.



But Charles the king is fallen on his face on Roland's body, with a great and exceeding bitter cry. No word lie spake, but only lay and moaned upon the dead that was so passing dear to him.

Charles was an old man when he took the babe Roland from his mother's arms. He had brought him up and nourished him, had taught him war, and watched him grow the bravest knight, the stanchest captain of his host. Right gladly would he have given Spain and the fruits of all the seven years' war to have Roland back again. Tears came, but brought no words; and God sent sleep to comfort him for his heaviness.

Then having watered and pastured their horses, the king left four good knights in Roncesvalles to guard the dead and set out in chase of the pagans.

In the Vale of Tenebrus the Franks overtook them, hard by the broad, swift river Ebro. There being hemmed in, the river in front and the fierce Franks behind, the pagans were cut to pieces; Not one escaped, save Marsilius and a little band who had taken another way and got safe to Zaragoz. Thence Marsilius sent letters to Baligant, King of Babylon, who ruled forty kingdoms, praying him to come over and help him. And Baligant gathered a mighty great army and put off to sea to come to Marsilius.

But King Charles went straightway back to Roncesvalles to bury the dead. He

summoned thither his bishops and abbots and canons to say mass for the souls of his guard and to burn incense of myrrh and antimony round about. But he would by no means lay Roland and Oliver and Turpin in the earth. Wherefore he caused their bodies to be embalmed, that he might have them ever before his eyes; and he arrayed them in stuffs of great price and laid them in three coffins of white marble, and chose out the three richest chariots that he had and placed the coffins in them, that they might go with him whithersoever he went.

Now after this Marsilius and Baligant came out to battle with King Charles before the walls of Zaragoz. But the king utterly destroyed the pagans there and slew King Baligant and King Marsilius, and brake down the gates of Zaragoz and took the city. So he conquered Spain and avenged himself for Roland and his guard.

But when King Charles would go back again to France his heart grew exceeding heavy. He said, "O Roland, my good friend, I have no more pleasure in this land which we have conquered. When I come again to Laon, to my palace, and men ask tidings, they will hear how many cities and kingdoms we have taken; but no man will rejoice. They will say, Count Roland our good captain is dead, and great sadness will fall on all the realm. O Roland, my friend, when I come again to Aachen, to my chapel, and men ask tidings, they will hear that we have won a land and lost the best captain in all France; and they will weep and mourn, and say the war has been in vain. O Roland, my friend, would God that I had died for thee!"

Now when the people of France heard how King Charles the Great returned victorious, they gathered together in great multitudes to welcome him. And when Hilda, the fair maid whom Roland loved, heard it, she arrayed herself in her richest apparel and proudly decked herself with her jewels. For she said, "I would be pleasing in the eyes of my brave true captain who comes home to wed with me. There is no gladder heart in France than mine." Then she hasted to the palace. The king's guards all drew back for fear and let her pass, for they dared not speak to her. Right proudly walked she through them, and proudly came she to the king, saying,—"Roland, the captain of the host, where is he?"

And Charles feared exceedingly and scarce could see for tears. He said, "Dear sister, sweet friend, am I God that I can bring back the dead? Roland my nephew is dead; Roland my captain and my friend is dead. Nay, take time and mourn with us all, and when thy heart is healed I will give thee Louis mine own son, who will sit after me upon the throne. Take Louis in his stead."

Hilda cried not, nor uttered sound. The color faded from her face, and straightway she fell dead at the king's feet.

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