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The Great Battle Of Roncesvalles

Sir George W. Cox

In the morning the king arose and gathered to him his host to go away to keep the feast of Saint Michael at Aachen, and to meet Marsilius there.

And Ogier the Dane made he captain of the vanguard of his army which should go with him. Then said the king to Ganelon, "Whom shall I make captain of the rear-guard which I leave behind?" Ganelon answered, "Roland; for there is none like him in all the host." So Charles made Roland captain of the rear-guard. With Roland there remained behind, Oliver, his dear comrade, and the twelve peers, and Turpin the archbishop, who for love of Roland would fain go with him, and twenty thousand proven warriors. Then said the king to his nephew, "Good Roland, behold, the half of my army have I given thee in charge. See thou keep them safely." Roland answered, "Fear nothing. I shall render good account of them,"

So they took leave of one another, and the king and his host marched forward till they reached the borders of Spain. And ever as the king thought upon his nephew whom he left behind, his heart grew heavy with an ill foreboding. So they came into Gascoigny and saw their own lands again. But Charles would not be comforted, for being come into France he would sit with his face wrapped in his mantle, and he often spake to Duke Naymes, saying he feared that Ganelon had wrought some treason.

Now Marsilius had sent in haste to all his emirs and his barons to assemble a mighty army, and in three days he gathered four hundred thousand men to Roncesvalles, and there lay in wait for the rearguard of King Charles.

Now when the rear-guard had toiled up the rocky pass and climbed the mountain ridge, way-wearied, they looked down on Roncesvalles, whither their journey lay. And behold! all the valley bristled with spears, and the valley sides were overspread with them, for multitude like blades of grass upon a pasture; and the murmur of the pagan host rose to them on the mountain as the murmur of a sea. Then when they saw that Ganelon had played them false, Oliver spake to Roland, "What shall we now do because of this treason? For this is a greater multitude of pagans than has ever been gathered together in the world before. And they will certainly give us battle." Roland answered, "God grant it; for sweet it is to do our duty for our king. This will we do: when we have rested we, will go forward." Then said Oliver, "We are but a handful. These are in number as the

sands of the sea. Be wise; take now your horn, good comrade, and sound it; peradventure Charles may hear, and come back with his host to succor us." But Roland answered, "The greater the number the more glory. God forbid I should sound my horn and bring Charles back with his barons, and lose my good name, and bring disgrace upon us all. Fear not the numbers of the host; I promise you they shall repent of coming here; they are as good as dead already in my mind." Three times Oliver urged him to sound his horn, but Roland would not, for he said, "God and His angels are on our side." Yet again Oliver pleaded, for he had mounted up into a pine tree and seen more of the multitude that came against them; far as the eye could see they reached; and he prayed Roland to come and see also. But he would not; "Time enough," he said, "to know their numbers when we come to count the slain. We will make ready for battle."

Then Archbishop Turpin gathered the band of warriors about him, and said, "It is a right good thing to die for king and faith; and verily this day we all shall do it. But have no fear of death. For we shall meet to-night in Paradise, and wear the martyr's crown. Kneel now, confess your sins, and pray God's mercy." Then the Franks kneeled on the ground while the archbishop shrived them clean and blessed them in the name of God. And after that he bade them rise, and, for penance, go scourge the pagans.

Roland ranged his trusty warriors and went to and fro among them riding upon his battle-horse Veillantif; by his side his good sword Durendal. Small need had he to exhort them in extremity; there was not a man but loved him unto death and cheerfully would follow where he led. He looked upon the pagan host, and his countenance waxed fierce and terrible; he looked upon his band, and his face was mild and gentle. He said, "Good comrades, lords, and barons, let no man grudge his life to-day; but only see he sells it dear. A score of pagans is a poor price for one of us. I have promised to render good account of you. I have no fear. The battlefield will tell, if we cannot." Then he gave the word, "Go forward!" and with his golden spurs pricked Veillantif. So, foremost, he led the rear-guard down the mountain-side, down through the pass of Siza into the Valley of Death called Roncesvalles. Close following came Oliver, Archbishop Turpin, and the valiant Twelve; the guard pressing forward with the shout "Montjoy!" and bearing the snow-white banner of their king aloft.

Marvellous and fierce was the battle. That was a good spear Roland bare; for it crashed through fifteen pagan bodies, through brass and hide and bone, before the trusty ash brake in its hand, or ever he was fain to draw Durendal from his sheath. The Twelve did wondrously; nay, every man of the twenty thousand fought with lionlike courage; neither counted any man his life dear to him. Archbishop Turpin, resting for a moment to get fresh breath, cried out, "Thank God to see the rear-guard fight to-day!" then spurred in again among them. Roland saw Oliver still fighting with the truncheon of his spear and said,

"Comrade, draw thy sword," but he answered, "Not while a handful of the stump remains. Weapons are precious to-day."

For hours they fought, and not a Frank gave way. Wheresoever a man planted his foot, he kept the ground or died. The guard hewed down the pagans by crowds, till the earth was heaped with full two hundred thousand heathen dead. Of those kings which banded together by oath to fight him, Roland gave good account, for he laid them all dead about him in a ring. But many thousands of the Franks were slain, and of the Twelve there now remained but two.

Marsilius looked upon his shattered host and saw them fall back in panic, for they were dismayed because of the Franks. But Marsilius heard the sound of trumpets from the mountain top and a glad man was he; for twenty strong battalions of Saracens were come to his help, and these poured down the valley-side. Seeing this, the rest of the pagans took heart again, and they all massed about the remnant of the guard, and shut them in on every hand. Nevertheless Roland and his fast lessening band were not dismayed. So marvellously they fought, so many thousand pagans hurled they down, making grim jests the while as though they played at war for sport, that their enemies were in mortal fear and doubted greatly if numbers would suffice to overwhelm these men, for it misgave them whether God's angels were not come down to the battle. But the brave rear-guard dwindled away, and Roland scarce dared turn his eyes to see the handful that remained.

Then Roland spake to Oliver, "Comrade, I will sound my horn, if peradventure Charles may hear and come to us." But Oliver was angry, and answered, "It is now too late. Hadst thou but heeded me in time, much weeping might have been spared the women of France, Charles should not have lost his guard, nor France her valiant Roland." "Talk not of what might have been," said Archbishop Turpin, "but blow thy horn. Charles cannot come in time to save our lives, but he will certainly come and avenge them."

Then Roland put the horn to his mouth and blew a great blast. Far up the valley went the sound and smote against the mountain tops; these flapped it on from ridge to ridge for thirty leagues. Charles heard it in his hall, and said, "Listen! what is that? Surely our men do fight to-day." But Ganelon answered the king: "What folly is this! It is only the sighing of the wind among the trees."

Weary with battle Roland took the horn again and winded it with all his strength. So long and mighty was the blast, the veins stood out upon his forehead in great cords; he blew on till with the strain his brain-pan brake asunder at the temples. Charles heard it in his palace and cried, "Hark! I hear Roland's horn. He is in battle or he would not sound it." Ganelon answered, "Too proud is he to sound it in battle. My lord the king groweth old and childish in his fears. What if it be Roland's horn? He hunteth perchance in the woods."



In sore pain and heaviness Roland lifted the horn to his mouth and feebly winded it again. Charles heard it in his palace, and started from his seat; the salt tears gathered in his eyes and dropped upon his snowy beard; and he said, "O Roland, my brave captain, too long have I delayed! Thou art in evil need. I know it by the wailing of the horn!' Quick, now, to arms! Make ready, every man! For straightway we will go and help him." Then he thrust Ganelon away, and said to his servants, "Take this man, and bind him fast with chains; keep him in ward till I return in peace and know if he have wrought us treason." So they bound Ganelon and flung him into a dungeon; and Charles the Great and his host set out with all speed.

Fierce with the cruel throbbing of his brain, and well nigh blinded, Roland fought on, and with his good sword Durendal slew the pagan prince Faldrun and three and twenty redoubtable champions.

The little company that was left of the brave rear-guard cut down great masses of the pagans, and reaped among them as the reapers reap at harvest time; but one by one the reapers fell ere yet the harvest could be gathered in. Yet where each Frank lay, beside him there lay for a sheaf his pile of slain, so any man might see how dear he had sold his life. Marganices, the pagan king, espied where Oliver was fighting seven abreast, and spurred his horse and rode and smote him through the back a mortal wound. But Oliver turned and swung his sword Hautclere, and before he could triumph clove him through the helmet to his teeth. Yet even when the pains of death gat hold on Oliver so that his eyes grew dim and he knew no man, he never ceased striking out on every side with his sword and calling "Montjoy!" Then Roland hasted to his help, and cutting the pagans down for a wide space about, came to his old companion to lift him from his horse. But Oliver struck him a blow that brake the helm to shivers on his throbbing head.

Nevertheless Roland for all his pain took him tenderly down and spake with much gentleness, saying, "Dear comrade, I fear me thou art in an evil case." Oliver said, "Thy voice is like Roland's voice; but I cannot see thee." Roland answered, "It is I, thy comrade." Then he said "Forgive me, that I smote thee. It is so dark I cannot see thy face; give me thy hand; God bless thee, Roland; God bless Charles, and France!" So saying he fell upon his face and died.

A heavy-hearted man was Roland; little recked he for his life since Oliver his

good comrade was parted from him. Then he turned and looked for the famous rear-guard of King Charles the Great.

Only two men were left beside himself.

Turpin the archbishop, Count Gaulter, and Roland set themselves together with the fixed intent to sell their lives as dearly as they might; and when the pagans ran upon them in a multitude with shouts and cries, Roland slew twenty, Count Gaulter six, and Turpin five. Then the pagans drew back and gathered together all the remnant of their army, forty thousand horsemen and a thousand footmen with spears and javelins, and charged upon the three. Count Gaulter fell at the first shock. The archbishop's horse was killed, and he being brought to earth, lay there a-dying, with four wounds in his forehead, and four in his breast. Yet gat Roland never a wound in all that fight, albeit the pain in his temples was very sore.

Then Roland took the horn and sought to wind it yet again. Very feeble was the sound, yet Charles heard it away beyond the mountains, where he marched fast to help his guard. And the king said, "Good barons, great is Roland's distress; I know it by the sighing of the horn. Spare neither spur nor steed for Roland's sake." Then he commanded to sound all the clarions long and loud; and the mountains tossed the sound from peak to peak, so that it was plainly heard down in the Valley of Roncesvalles.

The pagans heard the clarions ringing behind the mountains, and they said, "These are the clarions of Charles the Great. Behold Charles cometh upon us with his host, and we shall have to fight the battle again if we remain. Let us rise up and depart quickly. There is but one man more to slay." Then four hundred of the bravest rode at Roland; and he, spurring his weary horse against them, strove still to shout "Montjoy!" but could not, for voice failed him. And when he was come within spear-cast, every pagan flung a spear at him, for they feared to go nigh him, and said, "There is none born of woman can slay this man." Stricken with twenty spears, the faithful steed, Veillantif, dropped down dead. Roland fell under him, his armor pierced everywhere with spear-points, yet not so much as a scratch upon his body. Stunned with the fall he lay there in a swoon. The pagans came and looked on him, and gave him up for dead. Then they left him and made all speed to flee before Charles should come.

Roland lifted his eyes and beheld the pagans filing up the mountain passes; and he was left alone among the dead. In great pain he drew his limbs from underneath his horse, and gat upon his feet, but scarce could stand for the anguish of his brain beating against his temples. He dragged himself about the valley, and looked upon his dead friends and comrades, and Roland said, "Charles will see that the guard has done its duty." He came to where Oliver lay, and lifted the body tenderly in his arms, saying, "Dear comrade, thou wast ever

a good and gentle friend to me; better warrior brake never a spear, nor wielded sword; wise wert thou of counsel, and I repent me that once only I hearkened not to thy voice. God rest thy soul! A sweeter friend and truer comrade no man ever had than thou." Then Roland heard a feeble voice, and turned and was ware of Archbishop Turpin. Upon the ground he lay a-dying, a piteous sight to see; howbeit, he raised his trembling hands and blessed the brave dead about him in the dear name of God.

And when Turpin beheld Roland, his eyes were satisfied. He said, "Dear Roland, thank God the field is thine and mine. We have fought a good fight." Then joined he his hands as though he fain would pray, and Roland, seeing the archbishop like to faint for the sharpness of his distress, took and dragged himself to a running stream that he espied pass through the valley; and he dipped up water in his horn to bring to him, but could not, for he fell upon the bank and swooned. And when he came to himself, and crawled to where the archbishop lay, he found him with his hands still clasped, but having neither thirst nor any pain, for he was at rest. A lonesome man in the Valley of Death, Roland wept for the last of his friends.

And Roland, when he found death coming on him, took his sword Durendal in one hand, and his horn in the other, and crawled away about a bowshot to a green hillock whereupon four diverse marble steps were built beneath the trees.

Then he took Durendal into his hands, and prayed that it might not fall into the power of his enemies. He said, "O Durendal, how keen of edge, how bright of blade thou art! God sent thee by his angel to King Charles, to be his captain's sword. Charles girt thee at my side. How many countries thou hast conquered for him in my hands! O Durendal, though it grieves me sore, I had rather break thee than that pagan hands should wield thee against France." Then he besought that God would now eke out his strength to break the sword; and lifting it in his hands he smote mightily upon the topmost marble step. The gray stone chipped and splintered, but the good blade brake not, neither was its edge turned. He smote the second step, which was of sardonyx; the blade bit it, and leaped back, but blunted not, nor brake. The third step was of gray adamant; he smote it with all his might; the adamant powdered where he struck, but the sword brake not, nor lost its edge. And when he could no more lift the sword, his heart smote him that he had tried to break the holy blade; and he said, "O Durendal, I am to blame; the angels gave thee; they will keep thee safe for Charles and France!"

Then Roland lay down and set his face toward Spain and toward his enemies, that men should plainly see he fell a conqueror. Beneath him he put the sword and horn; then having made his peace with God, he lay a-thinking. He thought of his master Charles. He thought of France and his home that was so dear. He

thought of his dear maid, Hilda, who would weep and cry for him. Then lifted he his weary hands to Heaven and closed his eyes in death.

Gloom fell; the mists went up, and there was only death and silence in the valley. The low red sun was setting in the west.

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