

171

Roland realizes that his sight has failed.

He got to his feet, gathers his strength as best he can.

All the colour has drained from his face.

2300 He sees one of the slabs of stone before him.

He strikes it ten times, in sorrow and frustration:

Steel grates on stone, but it neither cracks nor splinters.

'Alas,' said the count, 'Blessed Mary, help me!

Alas, fair Durendal, this is a dark day for you!

2305 Since I am dying, I have no further need of you.

With you I have won so many battles in the field

And have conquered so many vast lands,

That Charles of the snowy white beard now holds.

No man who flees before another should own you!

2310 A very fine knight has wielded you for a long time.

There will never be another like him in blessed France.'

172

Roland struck a blow on the slab of sardonyx.

Steel grates on stone, but it neither breaks nor cracks.

When he saw that he was unable to destroy it,

2315 He begins to lament privately for his sword:

'Alas, Durendal! How bright and shiny you are!

You gleam and shine so brightly in the sunlight!

When Charles was in the valleys of the Maurienne,

God in heaven sent him an angel as a messenger

2320 To tell him to give you to a count and captain.

So the noble and great king girded me with it.

With this sword I conquered for him Anjou and Brittany,

And with it I conquered for him Poitou and Maine,

And with it I conquered for him Normandy the free.

2325 With it I conquered Provence and Aquitaine

And Lombardy and the whole region of Romagna.

With it I conquered for him Bavaria and all of Flanders,
And Burgundy and the whole of Apulia,
Constantinople, where he received an oath of homage,
2330 And Saxony where he can do exactly as he pleases.
With it I conquered for him Scotland and Ireland
And England, while he stayed at home.
With it I have conquered so many lands and countries
Over which white-bearded Charles continues to rule.
2335 I feel anguish and sorrow for this sword.
I would rather die than leave it among pagans.
God, Our Father, save France from this humiliation!’

173

Roland struck down on a piece of dark rock,
With greater force than I can possibly describe.
2340 Sword grates on stone, but it neither shatters nor breaks,
It rebounds back up, rather, silhouetted against the sky.
When the count sees that he cannot destroy it,
He laments his sword softly to himself:
‘Alas, Durendal! How fair and holy you are!
2345 There are many relics in your golden pommel:
One of Saint Peter’s teeth and a drop of Saint Basil’s blood,
A lock of hair from my lord Saint Denis,
As well as a piece of Blessed Mary’s clothing.
It is not right that pagans should own you:
2350 By rights you should be served by Christians.
No man capable of cowardice should have you!
I shall have conquered with you many vast lands,
Which Charles with his hoary beard now rules.
As a result, the emperor is might and powerful!’

174

2355 Roland realizes that death has him in its grasp,

First his head, then moving down towards his heart.

He ran over to the shade of a pine tree,

Where he lay face down on the green grass,

Placing underneath him his sword and oliphant.

2360 He turned his head so it was facing the pagans.

He has done this because he fervently wants

Charles and all his retinue to be able to say

That the noble count died a conquering hero.

Over and over he proclaimed his mea culpa,

2365 And in penance offered up his glove to God. AOI

175

Roland realizes that he has no time left.

He is lying atop a steep hill facing Spain.

With one hand he has been beating his breast:

‘Almighty God, to you I proclaim my mea culpa:

2370 On account of my sins, both great and small,

All those that I have committed since the day I was born

To this very day, as I lie here mortally wounded!’

He has held out his right-hand glove to God:

Angels descend from heaven to meet him. AOI

176

2375 Count Roland lay down in the shade of a pine.

He has turned his face towards Spain.

He began to reminisce about various things:

About the many lands he had valiantly conquered,

About France the fair, and about his kinsmen,

2380 About Charlemagne, his lord, who raised him.

He cannot help but weep and sigh,

But he does not wish to neglect his own salvation.

He proclaims his mea culpa, begs God’s mercy:

‘Father most true, who never let us down,

2385 You raised Saint Lazarus from the dead,
And you kept Daniel safe in the lion's den,
I beg you, safeguard my soul from all the perils
Caused by the sins I have committed in my life!
He offered up his right-hand glove to God;
2390 The angel Gabriel took it from his hand.
Roland let his head fall over his arm,
With his hands together, he went to meet his Maker.
God sent down His angel Cherubin to him,
And Saint Michael of the Peril,
2395 The angel Gabriel himself came to join them;
They carried the count's soul off to heaven.

The Song of Roland and Other Poems of Charlemagne, ed. and tr. Simon Gaunt and Karen Pratt
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