The Song of Roland

More than a thousand years have passed since Charlemagne was the ruler of Europe. At court in Aachen, a messenger was admitted bringing dire news from Spain, held by Marsilio, who had fortified his capital of Saragossa and defied Charlemagne before.

‘Speak, messenger’, the king demanded. ‘What news do you bring from Spain?’

‘Eigoland has arrived, my lord. King Marsilio sent for him and the king of North Africa has arrived with his army. They are attacking the borders of your land and plundering our towns.’

The court fell silent and none of the usual background chatter was heard. Many of Charlemagne’s most loyal knights had assembled. One of these was Roland, his nephew, who was known for his skill in combat but also his anger and brash attitude. ‘This cannot stand,’ he shouted. ‘We must go to Spain and punish the invaders.’

Charlemagne looked at Roland and sighed. ‘You are not the king, my nephew. You would do well to control your words.’ Turning back to the messenger he proclaimed: ‘The Franks shall ride and secure the borders. Bring word to the local lords that the army will be gathered and fly to their help.’ With that, the king stood and gestured to his knights to join him to plan for the campaign.

‘You better sharpen your sword, Durnendart, Roland,’ Oliver had moved silently next to the young knight. ‘And I will have to come and fight by your side. My sister would never forgive me if I let you die so closely after your wedding.’ Roland laughed ‘Durendart is always ready and but do not fear. I will bring Olifant, my horn. The king himself gifted it to me for our wedding and should I ever be in need, I will blow it so hard that the enemy will tremble and fall to the ground. Eigoland and Marsilio will die for their arrogance and I intend to carry their heads on my standard.’

‘Slow, my friend. Nobody doubts your skill or enthusiasm but be warned. We ride to battle and carelessness can be deadly on the battlefield.’ Roland laughed again and moved towards the gathering group of knights, but Oliver stood for a moment longer and looked at the young man. He was impressively build, tall and strong, but it was not his physical prowess Oliver feared most. He would have to be careful and protect Roland from himself.

Roland looked up to the walls of the small fortress Eigoland had occupied. For weeks the Franks had tried to engage the king in open battle and yet he had evaded them. He had
crossed rivers and mountains, but each time Charlemagne's men had found ways to defeat these obstacles and had driven Eigoland before them. Now, they had finally surrounded him in a small, walled town and the Franks were preparing for the last push. The gates had already been broken down and it was time to storm the keep. Roland was smiling. Over the last weeks, he and Oliver had fought side by side and their enemies had tried to avoid the deadly duo. Durendart had drunk deeply from the life blood of his foes and Roland had seen fear in their eyes when they heard the sound of Olifant. ‘Give the signal,’ Charlemagne was dressed in his finest amour, sitting on his horse. He would not enter the city himself but had given the command to Turpin, the formidable Archbishop. Roland lifted Olifant and let the sound carry across the plains and thousands of Franks started to move in battle formation. With his sword in hand, Roland galloped to the front line.

The fighting at the gates had been the hardest, the Moorish warriors fighting for their lives as they knew that there would be no mercy for them, not with Charlemagne. To a man, they were killed and now Roland stormed with Oliver on his side into the main hall of the keep, but Eigoland was gone. During the last attack, he had been able to escape with a few of his men. Roland swore. ‘The coward let his men bleed so he could escape.’ Eigoland’s power was broken and unbeknownst to Charlemagne’s men, he returned to Africa and was never seen again this side of the sea.

**King Marsilio**

‘Eigoland has fled across the sea, my king.’ Blancandrin delivered what he knew to be bad news. Marsilo sat slumped on this throne. ‘How do you wish to proceed?’ Marsilio looked up. ‘You are my advisor, advise me! Charlemagne will come here next. How can we withstand him where Eigoland fell?’ ‘We have to try for peace.’ Blancandrin answered. ‘Peace? How can there be peace after I killed his messengers and send him their heads?’ Indeed, Charlemagne had sent messages weeks ago but with Eigoland on his side the king had reacted as impulsively as Blancandin had expected him to, although he agreed that this was now a deeply regrettable move. ‘We have to try to beguile them with riches and hold out for time. I have sent word to the Emir of Babylon who has promised men. We only have to hold out until he arrives. Offer gifts, offer riches. Even Charlemagne will not be able to look beyond them and if he does, there will be men in his company who can be bought and if we do, we fall into their backs and make them suffer.’ Marsilio
looked skeptical. Charlemagne was known to be pious and not interested in riches, but, he conceded, it was worth a try. And if Baligant of Babylon was coming, this could be the ploy he needed to buy time. ‘Do it,’ he told his advisor. ‘And take some royal hostages as well. This will make Charlemagne relent more easily and there are enough of them anyway.’

The same night, Blancandrin himself rode out to the camp of Charlemagne’s knights not far from the city. With him, he took riches from Marsilo’s treasury and royal hostages to offer to the king of the Franks.

When Blancandrin arrived he was guided to the tent of the King of the Franks, where he fell to the floor and buried his face in the dirt to show his subservience. ‘Stand up,’ Charlemagne told the messenger. ‘I am not god. Men should only bury their face in front of our maker. What news does Marsilo send?’

‘My king sends gifts and hostages’ the advisor answered and gestured towards his men, who brought up chests of gold, silver and jewels. Charlemagne’s face did not change, but Blancandrin could see the greed in some of the knights faces, particularly Ganelon, who was well known to love the sight of gold. ‘Marsilo sends this message my lord: there was once peace between our kingdoms. Eigoland is gone. It was he who forced our hands, he who attacked your lands. We offer riches and hostages in exchange for peace. What we have offered here is only a fraction of what we will deliver if you spare my country and citizens.’ ‘You will have your answer tomorrow,’ Charlemagne responded. ‘Leave us now. You will be shown quarters for the night.’

When the delegation had left, Charlemagne and his men discussed the situation. ‘Do not trust the treasonous snake.’ Roland had sat quietly throughout the conversation with Blancandrin, but now everyone could see the anger on his face. ‘He killed your messengers and needs to be taught a lesson. Give me your army and I will raise his city to the ground.’ Oliver agreed with Roland and so did the knight Walther and Archbishop Turpin but all of them were concerned about the loss of life such an attack would cost. News had also arrived from the East that the Saxons had started a revolt and Charlemagne and his army would be needed to deal with them and soon. A prolonged siege might endanger his empire. Ganelon looked at Roland and shook his head ‘Roland is quick to anger but might want to use his head. My king, Marsilo offers gold beyond the riches he has already produced. If it is peace he wants, we should give him peace. His country is pacified and we do not have to worry about him for years. This is not about a
youngling’s pride and glory. Listen to reason!’ Roland could not believe what he was hearing and was ready to pull his sword had not Oliver stopped him. ‘Ganelon, you coward. If you want his gold so much, you should be the messenger to go to Marsilo and negotiate.’ Ganelon’s blood drained from his face, for he knew what happened to the last messengers. ‘So it is settled,’ Charlemagne said. ‘Ganelon will travel to Saragossa and will negotiate peace with Marsilo. Meanwhile the army will move back to deal with the Saxons. Roland, Oliver, Turpin and Walther, you will lead a small rear force and you will cover our return, in case Marsilo betrays us.’ All bowed in agreement, but Ganelon swore revenge under his breath.

**At Saragossa**

At Saragossa, Ganelon was welcomed with the honours befitting a king. Marsilo and Blancardin hoped that the pomp and ceremony would impress Charlemagne’s knight and in the best case they might be able to turn him to their side.

‘Do you see these riches?’ asked Marsilo. ‘All who serve me find whatever they desire.’

‘I don’t think I understand,’ Ganelon answered carefully.

‘Ah…,’ Marsilio said. ‘Let me give you an example. The most precious and valuable of all things I would give to the person who…’ Marsilo stopped taking abruptly, lifting a huge Emerald, letting the sun play on its many facets.

‘Who…’ Ganelon asked.

No answer came as the king moved further into his palace and took a beautiful sword from the walls, pulling it from its scabbard. ‘Look at this sword,’ he said. ‘Gold from Arabia, stones from India and the best steel that blacksmiths can work. A sword without flaws, a weapon worthy of a king.’

‘A beautiful piece,’ Ganelon agreed, reaching out to touch it, but Marsilo withdrew the sword and put it back. ‘It is not for sale of course and will only be given to the man who…’ and again he stopped talking as he moved on. He could see the greed in Ganelon’s eyes and knew that his plan was working. A horse was being led towards them. It was a sleek Andalusian, a prime specimen and Ganelon, who loved horses, was clearly taken by the beast. ‘This is one of the most magnificent horses I have ever seen,’ he said speechlessly. ‘It could be yours if…’ Marsilo answered. ‘If what…?’ Ganelon looked at the king. ‘If you are my friend’ The king had said these words quietly but now the two men looked at each other and Marsilo knew the moment of truth had come. He also knew that much depended on the next seconds and his life might depend on
Ganelon’s answer. ‘Your friend?’ The Frankish knight questioned. ‘And what does it mean to be your friend?’ ‘I think you know!’ Marsilo held out his hand. Ganelon hesitated. He thought about his oaths, but he also remembered Roland’s harsh words and the fact that Charlemagne, his king, had accepted that he might ride out to die without a second of hesitation. He looked up and took the hand. ‘Roland is the right hand of the Frankish king. Kill him and you will be left in peace. He will lead the rear. Ambush him and you will break the might of the Franks.’

Roncevall

Roland and his knights had decided to camp in the valley of Roncevall. Roland did not trust Ganelon and had bid farewell to his uncle, who had taken the bulk of the army towards home. As they started to set up the tents, Lord Walther, who had taken a group of scouts back through the valley could be seen galloping towards them. ‘Take down the tents.’ He shouted. ‘Marsilo and his army have arrived. To arms.’ Oliver moved next to Roland and proclaimed for all to hear that this was Ganelon’s deed and the group swore to bring the traitor to justice.

‘How large is this army?’ Roland asked Walther, who had jumped off his horse and was running towards the group of knights. ‘Countless. He has thousands or warriors. Marsilo must have emptied his whole city and taken every able man to pursue us. Blow your horn, Roland, so that Charlemagne will return.’ But Roland shook his head. ‘Only in dire need will I blow Olifant. The valley is narrow here and we will be able to hold them’. The knights sank to their knees to pray for victory and set out to organise the line of Frankish warriors.

Marsilo’s army had arrived and the king gave orders to attack. His men outnumbered the Franks by at least 10 to 1 and he had offered riches to anyone who brought him Roland’s head. On his signal, his soldiers stormed towards the Frankish line. In the front was his nephew Adalrot on his white horse, the pride and joy of the king and his chosen successor. He set out to fight Roland himself and bring his uncle the trophy he so desired. ‘Do you see the ravens?’ He shouted towards Roland. ‘They will feast on your flesh tonight.’ Roland drew Durendart and stepped aside just as Adalrot was going to hit him with his sword, killing the white horse underneath the young man. Adalrot fell, but jumped to his feet quickly facing Roland, who parried the next attack with his shield and buried his sword deeply in Adalrot’s head.
The battle raged around them and Oliver and Roland fought like men possessed side by side. Despite the overpowering force, they were able to hold their ground and Marsilo’s general, Margaris, returned to his king, having been wounded by Oliver’s spear, bringing the dire news of Adalrot’s death. Marsilo raged at the news and sent Margaris with a force of men around the mountain to fall into Roland’s back. ‘There will be no escape for Roland. We will keep attacking until every last Frank is dead.’

Wave after wave of fresh fighters hit the Frankish lines and many died. There was no rest for the men around Roland. Having held the exit to the valley for hours, Margaris’s force had managed to ride around the mountain and had fallen into their backs, forcing them to defend two sides at once. ‘This will be the end of us,’ Oliver shouted at Roland. ‘Blow your horn and call for the king. Let us hope that he will make it in time’. Roland looked at his friend and lifted Olifant. He blow the horn with all his might and for a moment the fighting stopped. ‘We will die heroes,’ Roland told Oliver, smiling, as he stormed towards the enemy once more for he had spotted Marsilio himself, who had entered the battle. With a few large steps he was on him and the two man exchanged heavy blows. Despite his fatigue, Roland pressed Marsilio and the king screamed as Durendart cut his right hand from his arm. Bleeding and injured he managed to fall back behind his men and escape Roland’s wrath. ‘This was the hand that corrupted Ganleon and swore false oath’ Roland shouted as he picked up the hand and threw it after the king. ‘Now face me to receive your just payment!’ The king had no intention of remaining, however, and left the battlefield to his generals.

As Roland returned to his line he saw Walther fall, pierced by several spears. He had been pressed hard from a new wave of enemies, who had been able to cut his force off from the main Frankish body and surround them. Oliver had also lost his men and stood alone against several men. Margaris, the general lifted a spear and drove it into Oliver’s back, just before Roland cut off his head. Blowing Olifant again, Roland jumped to help his friend and the enemy soldiers ran at the sight of him.

Roland helped Oliver leave the battlefield, but his friend knew that he was mortally wounded and asked to rest beneath the trees. Roland returned to the battle to support Turpin, but the archbishop, who had fought to valiantly, was unable to get to him as there were too many enemies in between. In his desperation, he blew he horn again and Olifant send its sound through the valley and beyond. The familiar sound wakened Oliver’s spirits and he staggered towards the fighting. Slashing at any man close to him he was suddenly
pulled to the side by Roland, whom he had nearly hit with his sword. ‘What have I done,’ lamented Oliver. ‘Death is clouding my eyes. Tell my sister that I have died standing on my feet.’ And so he breathed his last and fell from his horse. ‘Revenge! Revenge for Oliver!’ Roland’s voice could be heard all over the battlefield, were only a few Franks were now trying to survive in small groups. Soon he was pushed by several foes at once and hit hard by a spear he fell to his knees. Once more he lifted Olifant to his lips and blew it so hard that his veins threatened to burst. And this time, the call was answered. From the north he could hear Frankish horns that proclaimed that Charlemagne was on his way and close. ‘He is coming,’ Turpin said as he helped Roland stand. The two men were all that was left and they looked around seeing their friends lie around them, surrounded by hundreds of Moorish warriors. But Turpin was wounded and the battle had taken its toll. The mighty man fell where he stood. ‘Rest in peace,’ Roland said. He was staggering now and he knew that the spear that had hit him had injured him mortally. Slowly, he rested against a lager boulder, when an enemy soldier crept closer to ram a dagger in his heart. Roland opened his eyes in the last second and smashed Olifant over the mans head, killing him instantly. ‘That was your last deed, my loyal friend,’ he said as the horn lay in shards on the floor. ‘And you, my friend, shall also not fall into the enemy’s hands.’ Roland lifted Durendart and tried to smash it on the stone, but the blade bounced back unharmed. ‘I thank you for your loyalty, but this is the first time you disobey.’ Again he hit the stone and again the sworded has unharmed. One last time he drove the blade towards the stone and drove it so deep that he was unable to pull it out. With that he sank to his knees and died.

**Revenge**

Although Charlemagne had been far from the valley of Roncevall, he had heard Olifant’s sound and turned his army with haste. Now that he had arrived, he looked at the scene in horror. Dead bodies littered the floor and the greatest of his knights had been felled and killed. Roland had been found, as had Oliver and Turpin and there was much anguish in the Frankish camp as the men had been revered as heroes. Charlemagne knew that this was Ganelon’s deed and ordered his army to ride towards Saragossa to take revenge.

At the Ebro river he was confronted by Baligant of Babylon, whose army had arrived and for two days the battle raged, before Charlemagne drove Baligant into the river and killed him and Marsilo both. Ganleon was taken captive and Marsilo’s wife, Bamimonde was
taken prisoner. After a short rest, Charlemagne returned to Aachen where Bamimonde converted to Christianity and took the name Julianna. Ganelon was brought in front of a court of barons and argued that he had taken legitimate revenge for Roland’s actions. The barons decided that combat should determine the outcome and since Ganelon was too weak himself, his friend Pinabel fought in his stead. He was faced by Gottfried of Anjou, a friend of Roland’s and Oliver’s. Pinabel was a strong fighter, but Gottfried was driven by anger and lust for revenge and quickly defeated his opponent. Ganelon accepted his fate and it was decided that he would be tied to four horses and torn apart. The sentence was carried out the same day and the remnants of Ganelon’s body were left for the birds and dogs. Roland’s wife and Oliver’s sister, Auda, died shortly after from despair at her loss. The story of Roland and his stand in Roncevall, however, became a famous legend across the continent and Roland himself a symbol of bravery and freedom.