A GRAPHIC GIANT 35c

Swords for Charlemagne

(Swords of Anjou)

MARIO PEI

complete and unabridged

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MARIO PEI

GRAPHIC BOOKS

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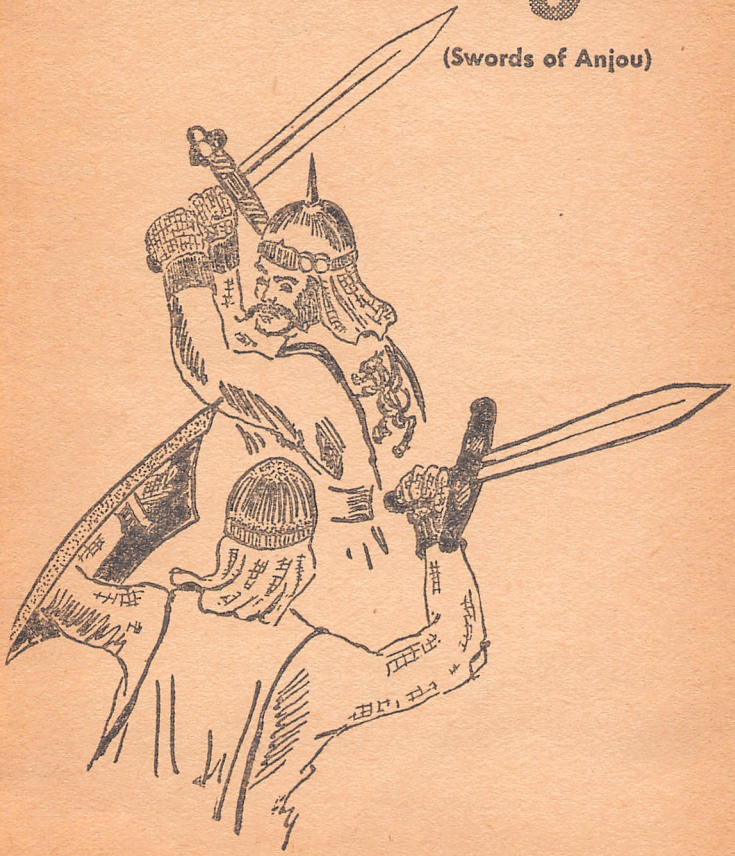
(Swords of Anjou)



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Complete and Unabridged

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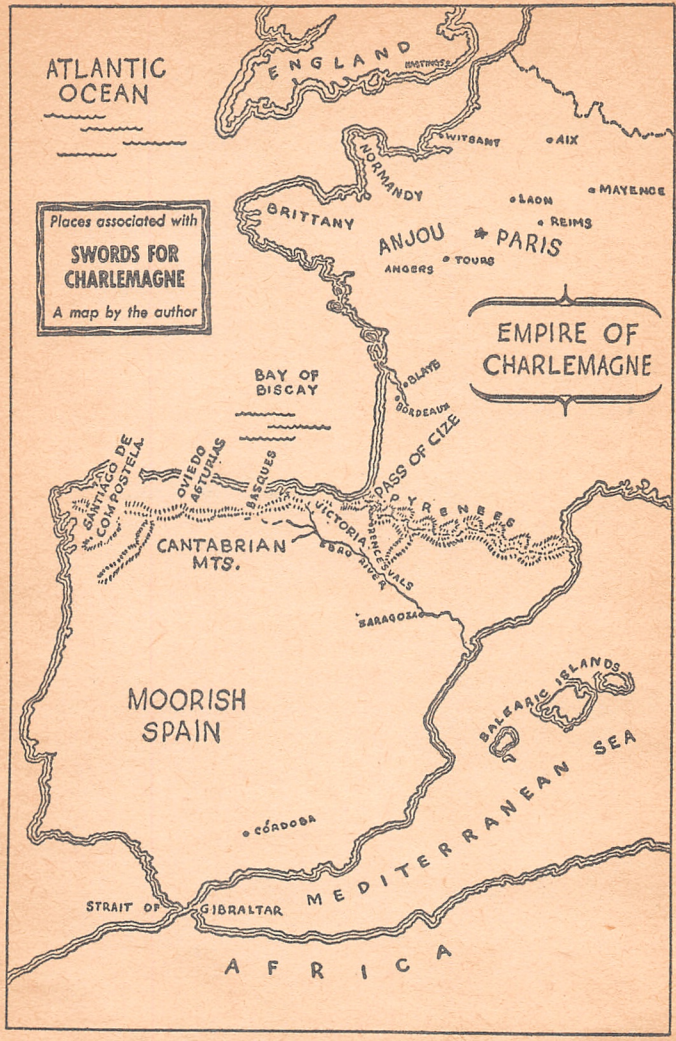
SWORDS FOR CHARLEMAGNE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AFRICA

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

ABOUT the year of Our Lord 1075, when the first rumblings of the Crusades were beginning to stir across an uneasy western Europe, an old abbot of Normandy composed an epic poem designed to inflame the spirit of the entire French nation, clergy, nobility and peasantry alike, against the Saracens who held Christ's Sepulcher.

The *Song of Roland* took the medieval world by storm. Not only did it serve as a propaganda motif for the Crusades, a battle-hymn of fighting Christendom; it also marked the beginning of a new literary era. It became a sort of monster best-seller. Everywhere it was transcribed, copied, translated, recited, sung. From France it spread like wildfire to Spain, Italy, Germany, England, Scandinavia, in almost literal translations or widely diverging versions. It was the original prototype of the historical novel as we know it today.

In *Swords of Anjou,* I have traced from the beginning the events described in the *Song of Roland* and carried them on to a happy conclusion, with the admixture of a love element that is absent from the fiercely military *Roland.* Unlike most current historical novels, this work is based not on recorded history, but on the partly fictional history outlined in the old French *chansons de geste,* where the chronological background is distorted to suit the fancy and purposes of the authors.

At the end of the book will be found a more extended discussion of the background, both literary and historical.

PREAMBLE

Our ancient lord and leader Charlemagne
In seven years had conquered all of Spain.
From sea to sea he won that haughty land.
His catapults no castle could withstand.
Before his onset yielded every town
Save Zaragoza, whence Marsile looked down
Upon a land, ravaged and torn by war,
That hated Christ, and Allah did adore.
Mohammed's aid he sought, to vent his hate,
But no wise could escape impending fate.

Chanson de Roland, 1-9

THE COUNCIL OF KING MARSILE

MARSILE, COMMANDER OF THE WESTERN FAITHFUL AND Emir of Zaragoza, sat in state on a throne of blue marble in the cool garden of his palace. Before him stood his most trusted leaders and advisors, viziers and emirs, alqadis and almaçors.

The occasion for the gathering was a serious one, and well they all knew it. For seven full years had Charlemagne of France been in Spain, advancing, recoiling, conquering, pillaging, destroying, breaking down bit by bit the mightly Moslem empire that had been built half a century before on the ruins of the Spanish Visigothic Kingdom. One by one the Saracen cities and strongholds had fallen before his great host, until Zaragoza alone remained, perched on its high mountaintop like an eagle in its eyrie. And now, according to the most recent reports from spies and informers, the Franks, flushed with their last victory at Córdoba, were about to advance in force once more, this time on Zaragoza, filled with relentless determination to put an end to the war and win all of Spain to the Christian faith.

Marsile looked thoughtfully over and past his brilliantly turbaned leaders: Grand Vizier Blancandrin, of the white beard and cunning mind; Falfaron, misshapen brother of the Emir, attended by his giant son Aelroth; Corsablis, a Berber and a king in his own right; Malprime of Brigal, most treacherous fighter in the Spanish March; Balaguer, clear-faced, proud and of noble bearing; the black Almaçor of Moriana; the two renegade Christians, Turgis of Tortelosa and Escremiz of Valterna; handsome Margarit of Seville, so fair of face that no woman could resist him; Chernuble of Monegrillo, the strongest man in Spain, who could lift a greater weight than four mules could pull; and many others.

Marsile's brows were knit, his keen black eyes preoccupied. The emirs and almaçors stood attentively in silence, waiting for his words, while the breeze from the mountains rustled softly through the leaves of the pleasure-garden.

Finally he spoke. "My lords, you know why I have summoned you here. The history of the past seven years is well known to you. We had set up our Caliphate, which extended from the western ocean to the Pyrenees. The Visigoths had been driven by our fathers beyond the Cantabrian mountains, where they harmed us not. Their forays and incursions preoccupied us little. Our rule was benevolent and kind. Even the Christian infidels who had chosen to remain within our realms were well-treated and satisfied. Then it occurred to Alfonso, King of the Asturias" (here Marsile spat) "to summon to his aid Charlemagne of France. At first this proved advantageous to us, since half the Visigothic barons refused to accept the alliance and revolted against their king. Under the rebel banners of the king's nephew Bernaldo they soon were fighting against their liege lord. Profiting by their division, we were at length able to cross the Cantabrians and bring the border warfare into the Christian north. But soon the picture changed. Charles and his mighty Frankish army crossed the Pyrenees, and we were powerless to halt them. They came into our province of Navarre. We dispatched an army to meet them, and it was cut to pieces. Since then we have suffered one defeat after another. Our walls have been smashed, our cities violated, our people massacred. Córdoba, jewel of the south, has fallen. Two years ago we issued a call for help to our brother Baligant, Caliph of Baghdad and Commander of all the Faithful. No aid or answer was ever received. Now the great Charlemagne is about to advance upon our own city of Zaragoza. I have no host to prove him in battle, no strength to oppose his. Ye who are wise and true, counsel me now. Can we ward

off this impending doom? Save me, my lords, from death and from disgrace!"

A hush fell over the variegated multitude. Some looked at each other in dismay. From their luxurious castles and palaces in the central plain, the doom had somehow seemed not quite so inevitable. Yet they all well knew what the military situation was, after the fall of Córdoba.

One voice alone arose in response to the Emir's, after a respectful interval of silence. It was that of Blancandrin of the Castle of Val Fonda, the Emir's Vizier and the wisest and most experienced of the Saracen leaders—a bold fighter, too, schooled in the trickery and treachery of border warfare. Stepping forth from the ranks of his peers, he bowed low to the Emir and replied, "My lord, do not be dismayed. There is one way out—a simple one. Send a messenger to Charles, who is so proud and haughty. Offer him your homage, your faithful service, and your friendship. Send him gifts—chained lions and bears and hounds, camels and hunting hawks, silver and gold, even four hundred mules laden with treasure, with which he may pay off his soldiery. Remind him that he has tarried in Spain far too long a time, and request that he hie himself home, to his capital of Aix in France. There you will follow him at the feast that the infidels call Saint Michael's, and there you will receive and hold the Christian faith for yourself and all your followers, the while you do him homage and swear fealty to him. Certainly he will demand hostages as proof of your good faith. You will send him ten or a score, to bind our loyal oath, even our sons, the first-born of our wives. Even were he to be slain, I shall surely send mine. Better by far they lose their heads than we lose our honor and possessions and be reduced to beg."

An awed silence had fallen over the Saracen assemblage while the Vizier spoke. Now there were angry murmurs, rising to shouts.

"Never, by the Prophet! Never shall we forswear Islam

for the faith of the infidel dogs! Rather shall we fight to the last drop of blood!"

Blancandrin held up his hand, and the clamor was stilled. In a calm, firm voice he continued: "By my right hand, and by this beard that you see swaying in the wind, I swear to you that you will see the host of the Franks vanish from our land like the morning mists. They, too, are tired of fighting and campaigning. They will be glad enough to retire as victors to their own land of France. When they are gone, each to his own domain, Charles will be in his chapel at Aix, and hold high festival for Saint Michael. The appointed day will come and go, but he will have no word or news from us. The Emperor is fierce and proud and cruel. He will have our hostages beheaded. Better they lose their heads than we lose this clear and lovely land of Spain, or suffer the pangs of dissolution. Nay, what else will he do? Nothing! His feudal army will have melted away like the snow in the Pyrenean gorges when the hot summer sun shines upon it. Never again will he be able to gather together such a host as he has with him now. Spain and we shall be saved!"

This time there was no angry murmur from the throng, rather a hum of approbation. The wisdom of Blancandrin's suggestion was self-evident. Once dissolved, a feudal army such as Charlemagne's was not to be reassembled in a day, or a year!

Marsile rose and embraced Blancandrin. "My faithful Vizier," he said solemnly, "once again you have proved your wisdom. Yours is the right course. You shall yourself head the embassy to Charlemagne. With you will go Claron of Balaguer, Estramarin and his peer Eudropin, Priamon and Garlan of the beard, Machiner and his uncle Mahee, Jouner and Malbien from overseas."

The men summoned stepped forth and bowed low. "My lords," said Marsile, resuming his seat, "you will go to Charlemagne where he sits in fallen Córdoba. You will

ride on snow-white mules, the gifts of the King of Cilicia, bridled with gold and saddled with silver. In your hands you will bear green olive branches, which symbolize peace and humility. If by your cunning you contrive to set me free from the peril that bests me, you will have your fill of gold and silver, of lands and fiefs. Bid Charlemagne the King in the name of his God to show me his mercy. This moon will not have passed away before he will see me following him to Aix, with one thousand of my faithful. There I will receive the Christian law, and swear him love and fealty. If he wants hostages, he shall have them."

The council was over. Marsile was about to rise from his throne and dismiss his nobles when a loud commotion arose at the entrance of the garden. Confused shouts were heard. A palace guard came running up through the throng of dignitaries to prostrate himself before Marsile.

"A raiding party from the north has arrived, Commander of the Faithful!" he announced. "They bring with them prisoners—men and women of high rank!"

A wave of the Emir's hand sufficed to bid the raiders enter and the council stay. Murmurs of excited curiosity arose from the assembled noblemen as the group of captors and captives passed through their midst. The men of the *razzia,* hawk-faced bearded Berbers from Corsablis' African provinces, prodded on the reluctant prisoners, three men and two women, whose garb revealed them to be high-born Christians from the Visigothic north.

"Behold, Commander of the Faithful!" proudly spoke the leader of the raiders, salaaming low to Marsile, "our party has fulfilled the mission assigned. High up in the Navarrese mountains we stormed by surprise the infidel stronghold of Castro Viejo. Fifty men of the dog Bernaldo held it. They were all put to the sword. But these"—and he waved his arm in a semicircle to include the captives—"these we brought back with us, having learned who they are from one of the retainers, whom we put to the torture.

Blasco Meléndez, commander of the castle; Suero Velázquez, his cousin and second in command; Ferrante, count of Sécola, one of Bernaldo's right-hand men; the countess María, his wife; and"—here the Berber paused dramatically for an instant—"Doña Elvira Díaz, twin sister of the dog Bernaldo!"

A great hum of amazement and frenzied joy ran through the Moslem throng. Here, indeed, was human booty worthy of the name! The first big Saracen success in years of weary fighting against the dauntless northern Visigoths and the stalwart Franks from beyond the Pyrenees!

The five captives stood before the Emir, unbending and uncomprehending, their heads held high. All had their arms tightly bound. The three men, still attired in armor, bore wounds. One peered defiantly at Marsile with his single eye, the other heavily bandaged; the second was still losing blood through a rent in the side of his chain-mail coat; the third, wounded in the thigh, barely managed to hold himself erect on one leg. They were gray-bearded and proud-faced.

But it was the two women who drew the curious attention and interested comments of Marsile's court, particularly the younger of the two. Tall, blonde, lissome, haughty and fair of countenance, she met the Emir's eye with an unflinching gaze in which there was neither fear nor humility. She had undergone rough treatment at the hands of the Berbers. Her flaxen hair lay in disorder on her shoulders, which were bare, her bodice having been rent down to her white breast. The hem of her once white gown, likewise rent, trailed in the dust behind her.

Marsile stared curiosly at the most important of his captives, whose blue eyes looked back into his with a stare in which there was no cringing, no humility, no fear, only pride and hatred. Marsile was the first to drop his eyes, down to the bare white shoulders and full, heaving bosom of the Visigothic maiden. A faint, slightly cruel smile

played about the Emir's bearded lips. His voluptuous Moorish blood pounded in his ears. What keener pleasure, he reflected, than to hold in his harem, in his arms, the proud and lovely twin sister of his bitterest foe?

His thoughts were about to turn into action. Blancandrin, of the white beard and cunning wit, perceived this and leaned over swiftly to whisper into the ear of his sovereign.

"Allah himself has favored us, sire. With these captives as our hostages, we can bend Bernaldo to our will. We can turn the Visigothic barons from enemies into allies. Bid your followers, my lord, treat the captives well. Bernaldo will hear of this, and will himself come seeking your mercy and your favor."

Marsile looked up at his Grand Vizier. "I had thought of something different, my faithful Blancandrin. But perhaps you are right. We need desperately to reduce the number of our foes and increase that of our friends."

The Vizier waited respectfully until his lord had finished speaking, then continued: "Place the men in the guest apartment of the tower, my lord, and bid your physician tend their wounds. The women you can turn over to the eunuchs of your harem. But stay—perhaps it would be best to entrust Doña Elvira to the care of your own daughter. They are of an age. The Princess Esclarmonde speaks the tongue of the infidels. She will win the confidence of Bernaldo's sister, and make easier the working out of our plans. By the time I return from my mission, you should have heard from Bernaldo. Send him no message. Let him approach you, in homage and humility. Bad news travels fast, and the fall of Castro Viejo will soon reach his ear."

Marsile nodded. A curt order voiced by the Grand Vizier to the Berber raiders caused them quickly to wheel about the three male captives and march them away, somewhat more gently than they had ushered them in.

Marsile clapped his hands twice. A black eunuch appeared as if from nowhere, bowed low, hearkened to the Emir's orders, and beckoned the two women to follow him, the countess María in tears at the thought that she would not see her husband again, Doña Elvira proud, uncompromising and unbending to the last, despite what seemed to be the fate that awaited her.

As the eunuch and his charges entered within the palace walls, a lithe figure, lightly attired in harem garb, but with a shrouded face, bounded up gracefully from the latticed window where she had followed the scene in the garden. All that Doña Elvira could see of her countenance were two flashing black eyes.

"Welcome to my father's palace, noblewomen from the north!" She spoke in a soft, languorous voice well befitting the slight Arabic accent that marked her Spanish tongue. "Ye are guests here, not prisoners." A word in Arabic to the eunuch, and the captives' bonds were severed. "I am Esclarmonde, daughter of Marsile, Commander of the Faithful and lord of Zaragoza, whom may the Prophet keep and protect. Come with me. I shall show you to your quarters."

In wonder and amazement at this unexpected outcome, the two Visigothic ladies, suddenly transformed from maltreated captives to exalted guests, complied in silence.

THREE STRANGE KNIGHTS

"Ho! gentle knight, in heaven's name, don't strike,
For you are armed, while I possess no might;
Armored you are, with good sword by your side,
While I am naked, in my tunic white!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 738-741

ON A DUSTY ROAD THAT SKIRTED THE BATTERED NORTHern walls of Córdoba, two young knights in white hauberks were riding slowly, hunting falcons on their wrists. Their helmets were unlaced and, like their shields, hanging from their saddles. Their embroidered white tunics revealed them to be members of the same household, and the resemblance of their features indicated an even closer kinship. Both were handsome, lean of limb, dark-haired and deeply tanned, and neither appeared past his thirtieth year; but one bore on his countenance an air of maturity, arising from thought and experience rather than from years, that the other seemed to lack. They conversed as they rode at a leisurely pace into the brilliant morning sun.

"It was to be expected, Huelin, that fowling would be poor in these parts," said the one who seemed to be the older of the two. "A siege such as that endured by Córdoba would cause all creatures to fly away that could."

"I knew even as we argued that you were right, Thierry, my brother," replied the other, "yet these plains and vineyards and clumps of oak trees remind me so much of our own Angevin country that I had not the heart to resist their call. At any rate, better to be out here riding in the

morning air than within the city carousing, like so many of our friends and comrades."

" 'Tis always the same, Huelin," said the other, again using the affectionate diminutive form of his brother's name. "Our Franks are dauntless in heroism while they battle, wanton and cruel in victory. They endured hardships and dangers without number during the long days of the siege, while our catapults were battering down the walls of the Saracens. When the hour came to strike, they were magnificent in their daring."

The younger man interrupted excitedly. "Do you remember, brother, how our liege lord Roland led us in that final assault against the enemy towers? The Saracens were fighting like devils out of hell, but he, a hundred ells ahead of the rest of us, shouted 'Monjoie!' and laid about him with his mighty Durendal, and was the first to plant the oriflamme on the walls. When the pagans rallied and rushed us back to the very edge of the battlements, he, in turn, rallied us with the sound of his great horn. Was there ever such a hero?"

Thierry smiled at his brother's enthusiasm. "Never before, brother Huon, and probably not again in a thousand years. But to come back to our Franks. Once the city was taken, did you see how they raged through the streets, putting every infidel to the sword, sparing neither old men, women nor children? There is not a Saracen left alive in the city now, unless he be converted to the Faith."

"Is that not as it should be, brother?" queried the other innocently.

The elder brother ignored his question. "Then, after the butchery, they gave themselves up to pillage and plunder. Never have I seen such stores of silver and gold and precious garments as have fallen on this occasion to the lot of our soldiery. Córdoba is indeed the richest of all the cities we have taken in these seven years. You would think that now our soldiers would be on their knees in the re-con-

secrated churches of the city, devoutly thanking the Heavenly Father for their victory and the unexpected wealth that has fallen into their hands. Instead, they make merry all day and all night, drinking, brawling, fighting over the loot, hunting down the women of the Saracens in the inmost recesses of the palaces and houses."

"You must bear with them, Thierry. The campaign has been long and wearisome. To you and a few others it is a sacred duty. You and Oliver and Anseis have taken a vow to throw the Saracens from Spain, back across the straits into Africa. But to many of our men, summoned by virtue of their feudal oath, these seven long years have proved a mighty hardship. They have been away from their wives, their children, their parents, their friends, fighting on foreign soil, where even the Christian Visigoths and Basques turn against us. What recompense for them but to return to sweet France laden with booty, wherewith to cheer their wives after the long separation? Many murmur even now that the campaign has lasted too long, that it is time to return home before we all grow old and die in Spain."

"None speak like that in Count Roland's following, I trow!" replied the older man, shielding his eyes from the sun. "It is only among the vassals of his stepfather Ganelon that one hears such remarks. But what is that cloud of dust down the road before us?"

"I see nothing, brother."

"There, there, by that large clump of trees half a league away! Better we lace our helms and draw our swords, Huon! Parties of escaping Saracens still roam the countryside!"

The cloud of dust approached them rapidly. By the time the brothers were helmeted, its cause had become visible. A man, attired in Frankish garb, but wearing no armor, rode desperately ahead. Close behind him, in hot pursuit, came three knights, fully armored and with low-

ered visors, brandishing swords. One strange detail of their attire struck Thierry's attention. Over their gleaming coats of mail were no tunics bearing the insignia of household or rank.

"Follow me, Huelin!" shouted Thierry, spurring his horse toward the oncoming riders. "What strange thing is this? Franks pursuing a Frank!"

The pursued man saw them coming, and turned his roan horse abruptly at a right angle from the road into a field. Behind him, gradually converging in their thundering pursuit, came the two brothers from the left and the three strange riders from the right. Displaying rare horsemanship, the unarmed man spurred on swiftly, recklessly, toward a thick grove of oak trees. His pursuers came quickly behind, the brothers now no more than a hundred yards from the three mysterious horsemen.

"What ho, comrades!" shouted Thierry. "Why do you pursue a fellow Frank?"

The pursued man had gained the shelter of the oak grove with a full two hundred ells advantage, and was quickly lost to view among the trees. The leader of the three pursuers suddenly wheeled his mount in the direction of Thierry and Huon, followed at a distance by his two companions. Silently, grimly, with brandished swords, they came at the two brothers.

"Halt!" shouted Thierry when they were yet a few yards away. "We are Franks! Who are you?"

Still no answer. Instead, the leader came straight at Huon. His upraised straight sword described a semicircle and came down, aimed at the younger brother's head.

Huon's shield still dangled from his saddle, and his hunting falcon still sat perched on his left wrist. But his right sword-arm was ready, and the assailant's weapon glanced harmlessly from his warding blade. As the strange knight wheeled his horse around to renew the attack, Huon, thoroughly aroused, sped toward him. The other

sought once more to cut him down with his weapon. Huon did not parry the blow this time. He ducked low in his saddle, so that the whirling blade cut the empty air an inch above his helmet. At the same time, his outthrust point caught the attacker squarely in his middle. The links of chain mail burst asunder, and the broad straight blade bit deep into the flesh beneath. The unknown knight gasped and coughed as he slumped from his saddle. His horse galloped on, and the rider, with his foot caught in the stirrup, trailed along in the dust for a good hundred yards before the mount came to a halt.

Huon wheeled about, with dripping sword. Thierry was defending himself desperately against the other two unknown knights, who rushed and hacked at him from both sides. As Huon sped to his rescue, one of the assailants brought down his sword with a vicious swing upon Thierry's head. The blow glanced from the stout helmet, but the sword's point, continuing its downward course, imbedded itself deeply in the neck of Thierry's steed. The animal gave a shrill neigh of pain and reared, pawing at the air with his front hoofs and throwing his rider from the saddle. For an instant Thierry lay sprawling in the dust, and both knights came at him with shrill cries of "Strike! Slay!" Before they could reach Thierry where he lay, they were met and engaged by Huon, whose savage thrust unseated one of the riders. The other suddenly reined in his horse and wheeled about.

"Stay, varlet, and have it out with me!" shouted Huon. The other's flight was not swift enough to save him. Huon's sword point caught him in the back, beneath the nape of the neck. The knight toppled from his horse, rolled over twice, and was still.

Thierry and the unhorsed knight had both picked themselves up and were circling each other with the swords they had recovered from the ground. Huon spurred up to his brother's aid.

"Hold!" cried the last opponent, suddenly lowering his sword. "I yield!"

Thierry advanced slowly upon him. "Who are you?" he shouted. "Lift your visor!" The strange knight stood motionless. Then, with a swift leap, he swung his blade at Thierry's head.

The young Angevin was only partly caught off guard. Schooled in the trickery of Moorish fighting, he had half expected treachery. As he sank to one knee, avoiding the sweep of the sword, his own blade was thrust deep into his opponent's body.

"Saint Mary!" gasped the knight as he sank slowly to the ground. Thierry was quick to rush up to him and cut the laces of his helmet. His poniard was held at the other's throat.

"Quick, before you die! Who are you? Whom were you pursuing?" he asked fiercely.

The other looked up at him with glazing eyes. "We are ——" A gush of blood came to his lips, mingled with an incomprehensible gurgling.

Thierry rose and faced Huon, who had dismounted. "The others! Let us look at the others!" he cried out.

As Huon ran up the field to the spot where his second victim lay motionless on the grass, Thierry unlaced the helmet of the one who had seemed to be the leader of the trio. A sightless stare met his gaze.

Huon returned, shaking his head. "Dead!"

"Do you recognize any of them, brother?" inquired Thierry with anxiety.

"Their countenances are not altogether strange to me. I have seen them before. But who can tell who they are, from among a host of a hundred thousand?"

"Aye!" said Thierry. "I, too, seem to recall their faces!"

"They are knights, not retainers. That much seems clear," continued Huon. "But they were not bent upon a deed of vassalage. The man they were pursuing was surely

a Frank, not a pagan. And even had it been otherwise, why did they turn on us? Unlike theirs, our arms are plain enough to be seen and read."

Thierry slowly unlaced his helmet. "Brother," he said slowly, "there is more to this than meets the eye. These knights were bent upon some deed of treachery. Nor is this the end of the matter. They are surely Franks, not pagans."

"Indeed," replied Huon. "The few words they spoke were in our tongue."

"Aye, and the last one to die called upon Saint Mary as he fell. Whatever their sins, we cannot leave Christians unburied where they lie. Nor can we conceal this adventure from our liege lord Roland and our Emperor."

Huon stared at his brother with incredulous apprehension. "Brother, do you recall the Emperor's command against duels and slayings among the members of the host? And the dire penalties for those who contravene that command? Do you want to swing from a gallows?"

"Nay, brother," replied Thierry with quiet assurance in his voice. "But the circumstances were such we could not do otherwise but defend ourselves."

"And who is there to prove it, Thierry? We, who are alive, or these men, who are dead? Or perhaps our hunting hawks?"

"Brother," answered Thierry with a tone of finality, "it is the truth. If anyone wants to prove otherwise, and we be put to the test, will not the Lord of Truth and Justice be on our side? But if we leave these bodies here to rot, or to be picked by the buzzards and the carrion crows, we shall indeed have failed in our Christian duty. Consider our oath of knighthood, the homage and truth we owe Roland and Charlemagne!"

"Mayhap you are right, brother," Huon sighed resignedly. "What say you that we do?"

"Your horse is unscathed. Ride you to the north gate

of the city, where the guard is stationed. Bid them send here a dozen men with shields or stretchers. Meanwhile, I wait here, and keep watch over these poor bodies. When you return, we shall seek out the Emperor in Córdoba, and recount to him these happenings, in truth and without guile. The One Who suffered on the Cross will not fail us. He knows our hearts are pure!"

Huon shrugged as he turned to his mount. "Be it as you will, brother! Together we have fought, together we shall suffer! I will not tarry long."

As Huon rode away in the clear sunlight toward the city walls, the bright sun glinting from his helmet, Thierry sat down on a rock and rested his chin in his hand. Behind him lay the field of victory and death. Before him was the fair city of Córdoba, loveliest of the Spanish realm, still white and gleaming in the sun despite the ravages of the siege and plunder. In his thoughtful brown eyes was a vision—nay, but who shall say of what?

2

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

"No quarter shall be given in this fight!
And I pray God, the King of Paradise,
That He reveal before our mortal eyes
Who is forsworn, and who defends the right!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 1649-1652

CHARLES THE GREAT, ANOINTED RULER OF THE FRANKS and Germans, overlord of the Alemanni, Bavarians and Thuringians, King of Gascony and Aquitania, Lombardy, Calabria and the Saxon March, sat in state in a great, cool orchard, half a mile outside the half-demolished walls of fallen Córdoba. A week before, Charles had ordered the final assault, after the Frankish catapults had wrecked both town and towers. The Saracen defenders, overwhelmed by superior might and armament, had fought on desperately, contesting each street and alleyway and house and palace long after the northern invaders had planted the cross of Christ and the oriflamme of France on the battlements. But it had availed them nothing.

The city still rang with the clang of arms and the shouts of the soldiery, but in this orchard, which served Charlemagne as a court, all was quiet and peaceful. A number of the king's peers stood about him conversing. Several of the older and wiser knights sat on white carpets, passing an idle hour at the gaming boards. A few lusty young bachelors fenced.

Beneath a pine tree, embowered in eglantine, stood a field stool, fashioned of gold throughout. Here sat the monarch who held half the known world in his grasp, a

golden wine cup in his hand. His beard was white, his head completely gray, his body large and stoutly knit, yet graceful, his countenance noble and proud. Should one seek him, there would be no need to point him out.

The tranquillity of the scene was suddenly broken by excited shouts. Two young knights, clad in white hauberks that bore the coat of arms of Anjou, strode through the throng toward the throne. Behind them, at some distance, came a strange procession—three large shields, each borne by four men-at-arms, and on each of which lay a still figure in armor.

"What means this, Sir Naimon?" asked the Emperor of the majestic, white-bearded nobleman who stood at his elbow.

"Sire, I know not," replied the one thus addressed. "But we shall soon find out. I see the two sons of our old comrade-at-arms, Geoffroy of Anjou. They seem disturbed."

The two youthful knights had come to a halt before the Emperor's throne. They had discarded their helms, and their uncovered faces bore a grim look. They saluted the Emperor and stood respectfully in silence.

"Welcome, Sir Thierry, and you, Sir Huon!" Charles addressed them courteously. "What brings you here, loyal vassals of my nephew Roland?"

The shield-bearers had come up. Silently, they laid down their ominous-looking burdens on the green grass before the throne. Each shield bore the motionless form of a Frankish knight, attired in simple armor, but without any of the marks that would reveal their household.

"Sire," spoke the more mature of the two youths, "ours is in truth a strange story. Two hours ago or less, we were riding in the vicinity of the city's northern walls, with our hunting falcons. As we approached the northern gate, we saw a cloud of dust rising on the road before us. Since it is known that large bands of Saracens have escaped

from the city and are lurking in the nearby vineyards, we drew our swords and waited. Soon we perceived a man, attired in Frankish garb, but wearing no armor, who rode furiously down the road toward us. Behind him, in hot pursuit, came three knights with drawn swords. When he saw us, the pursued man swerved from the road and took off across the fields. We spurred after him, wishing to know what reasons three of our Franks might have to seek the life of another Frank. His pursuers, instead of continuing the chase, turned upon us and attacked us most fiercely. We called upon them to halt and reveal themselves. They paid no heed, but sought instead to strike us down. We did but defend ourselves. Blow for blow, we struck back at them. My brother Huon pierced one of them through the breast with his sharp sword, then came to my aid where I sought to fend off the blows of the others. One of them was cut down by Huon, the other I ran through. We were unhurt, by God's mercy. We lifted their helms as they lay on the ground, but failed to recognize their faces. They are Franks, not Saracens, and our law forbids us to leave Christians unburied. So we sought out the men-at-arms at the northern gate, and had them carried here on shields. Who are they? Why were they seeking to slay a fellow Frank? Why did they turn on us? We do not know. The Emperor's commands against fighting among the members of our host are well-known. We slew in self-defense."

Charles had been listening attentively as Thierry spoke, a deep frown gathering on his brow. It was difficult indeed to keep his followers from slaying one another in private quarrels, instead of reserving their efforts for the common foe! The members of the court had gathered curiously around. One suddenly cried out: "I know these men!"

"Indeed, Sir Pinabel?" said the King. "And who may they be?"

"Sire," replied the knight thus addressed, "they are

three young knights from the retinue of my liege lord Count Ganelon—Seguin of Senlis, Theobald of Avranches, and Jehan of Tours!"

Then, straightening up, he turned to the Emperor with a frown. "Wherefore were they slain? My lord Ganelon will be sore angry when he learns they have been done to death!"

An excited buzz arose from the audience. Here, then, the long-standing rivalry between the great retinues of mighty Count Ganelon, the Emperor's brother-in-law, and Roland, the Emperor's nephew, was about to crash into open warfare!

Pinabel rose from the corpses and strode up to the two young knights. A tall, powerful, fierce-visaged man, he wore no armor, but seemed none the less menacing on that account.

"You have slain three fellow Christians!" he shouted, planting himself squarely before them with his hands on his hips and his back half turned to Charlemagne. "Self-defense indeed! You have murdered them! And who bade you do it? Your good liege lord, Count Roland?"

"My lord of Sorence," replied Thierry quietly but haughtily, "the story is as I have told it to the Emperor. We had no intention of slaying anyone, Huon and I. I swear it upon my Faith, and the body of Saint Denis!"

"My lord Charlemagne!" Pinabel turned angrily to the Emperor. "This scoundrel lies! He lies by his throat! Justice, my lord! Three of your bravest followers lie dead before your eyes, slain not by the Saracen foe, but by the treacherous felony of two fellow Franks! Their blood cries out to Heaven for vengeance!"

"Restrain yourself, Sir Pinabel!" said Duke Naimon in a quiet but severe tone. "Remember you are in the presence of the Emperor!"

"I remember it well!" exclaimed the other wrathfully. "It is precisely because we are in the presence of the Em-

peror that I speak as I do instead of breaking the backs of these two young upstarts across my knee, as they deserve!"

It was Charlemagne who spoke. "Sir Thierry, and you, Sir Huon! Have you any witnesses of the truth of what you say?"

"Indeed, sire, we have not!" replied Thierry. "There was not, to our knowledge, another living soul within a league when these events took place!"

"Then it is your word against the silence of these dead men?"

Thierry bowed his head.

From among the bystanders, one had pushed himself forward, until now he stood beside the youths, facing the Emperor. A strange figure was he. Tall and athletic, ruddy-faced and gray of hair, he wore a bishop's cassock with a sword girt around its middle, and his legs and feet, which protruded from beneath the clerical garb, were encased in armor. Despite the incongruous appearance of his costume, there was an air of majesty about him that was not at all at variance with the fierce glint of his blue eyes. Men had stood respectfully aside to let him pass. Now the Emperor himself acknowledged his presence with a courteous nod of the head.

"It is good to see you here, Sir Archbishop. These young nephews of yours have gotten themselves into a truly sorry pass. You have heard their story, and the claim of our lord of Sorence. What say you, my lord Turpin?"

The prelate bowed. "My lord Charlemagne," he said in a clear, loud voice, "where there are no witnesses to a deed of blood, our Frankish law prescribes the course to be followed. If there be an accuser, let him stand forth and proclaim his willingness to support his accusation with his sword. The accused, in turn, must be given a chance to defend themselves in single combat."

"In truth, Sir Turpin, you speak wisdom," replied the

Emperor. "Sir Pinabel, do you make a formal accusation?"

The nobleman drew himself up to his full height. "I, Pinabel of Sorence, accuse Thierry of Anjou and his brother Huon of having willfully and treacherously murdered three of my comrades of the following of my lord Count Ganelon! If they deny the accusation, behold my gage of defiance!" He held out his glove. "So help me God, I will make them confess by the throat that all I have said is true!"

"What say you, Sir Thierry and Sir Huon?" queried Charlemagne, turning a grim, frowning countenance to the two youths.

Thierry hesitated for an instant. Turpin addressed him impatiently.

"What are you about, fair nephew? You know that what this man has said is a lie and an invention! Offer your gage! The right is on your side! So sure of it am I that if you be overcome, and God permit that I return to my bishopric of Reims, I will so beat Saint Peter who lies there that I will make all the gold fall from his coffin!"

"Sire," said Thierry, recovering his voice, "behold my gage, whereby I pledge to you that the words spoken by Sir Pinabel are a lie, and that I will make him confess by the throat that we slew his comrades only in self-defense, without thought or intention of treachery!"

Charlemagne's face had the appearance of a storm cloud. "I need not remind you," he addressed both parties, "that our Frankish law also calls for the delivering of hostages by both sides. Who will be your hostages, Sir Thierry?"

"Sire," replied the knight, "we have no hostages to offer save our own selves. We have here no relative or cousin whom we would dare ask or offer."

"Indeed, sir nephew, you have me!" exclaimed Turpin. "I will enter the contest for love of you! And if you are

vanquished, and God consents to such a wrong, then may disgrace fall upon Charlemagne, the king of Saint Denis, if he does not hang me before eventide, along with my eighty clerics!"

"Sir Archbishop!" said Charles, with the faint ghost of a smile on his frowning features, "You are wrong, by the Almighty! May it not please God, Who was placed on the Cross, that I do you any harm so long as I am alive! And you, Sir Pinabel, who are your hostages?"

"Sire, behold Sir Rainfroi and Sir Henri. One is my uncle, the other my cousin!"

"I accept them!" said Charles of the haughty visage. "On condition that if you are defeated, I shall have them quartered by horses!"

Rainfroi turned pale. "My lord, we cannot enter thus!"

"And how then?" queried the Emperor.

"In God's name, sire, take from us our lands, but not our lives!"

"So be it!" said the Emperor. "But by the One Who died on the Cross, if my lord Pinabel is overcome, you will not hold an ell of all your domains! The contest will take place tomorrow at dawn. Sir Pinabel will fight first Sir Thierry, by the laws of chivalry. If he overcomes him, he will fight Sir Huon. And may God reveal on which side is the justice and the truth!"

"No need of a combat to determine that, fair sire!" exclaimed a deep, resounding voice from the edge of the crowd. "I am an eyewitness."

"Count Ganelon! Ganelon is here! Make room!" exclaimed several voices at once. A path opened as if by magic in the throng, and a man strode through into the royal presence. He was a striking, imposing figure. Middle-aged and handsome of features, unusually tall and broad-chested, with gray-blue eyes and a full black beard, he did not need armor to lend prestige to his presence, nor, indeed, did he wear any. In his brocaded silk tunic and

hose, with nothing but a dagger at his leather belt, he nevertheless looked more the soldier than many of the knights standing before the throne.

"Welcome, Count Ganelon!" said the Emperor. "You have doubtless heard of the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of three of your vassals."

Ganelon interrupted him even as he bowed low.

"There is no mystery, sire. I was the unarmed horseman whom those traitors were pursuing!" He pointed at the lifeless forms lying on the shields.

A murmur of deep amazement ran through the crowd. Ganelon continued.

"Last night, at wine, these three good vassals of mine inquired of me whether I would not go hawking with them. They reminded me that we had not falconed since last year, and that other members of the host had expressed the thought that there might be good hunting in these parts. Nothing loath, I agreed. I was somewhat surprised this morning to see them in armor when we met, but they said stray Saracens might still be lurking in the outskirts of the city. They wore no tunics over their mail, and this should have aroused my suspicions. But I trusted them fully, like the good vassals they had always seemed to be. As we rode along the lonely road, Seguin of Senlis began to speak to me of certain fiefs his father had held before him, and which he had lost to his cousin Raoul by judgment of my feudal court full seven years ago, shortly before we came into Spain. I told him the matter had quite slipped my mind. 'But it has not slipped mine, my lord Ganelon!' he replied fiercely. 'If my mother and I are impoverished, we owe it altogether to you and your injustice!' With that, he and the others drew their swords and came at me. I was unarmed, as I am now. There was nothing to do but sink my spurs into the flanks of my good Tachebrun and try to escape them. They pursued me. These two knights, whom I had never seen before, sud-

denly appeared on the road before us. Not knowing but they might be accomplices, I turned into the woods to escape them. From behind the shelter of the trees, I heard the clash of swords, and turned back to see what was happening. I saw my disloyal vassals engaged in bitter combat with the two unknown knights. Not knowing who might win, and being in no position to bear aid to my rescuers, I rode on through the woods, and was lost, until I came upon a party of our Franks. They brought me here."

Charlemagne and the others had listened in intent silence while Ganelon told his tale. Pinabel, crestfallen, kept his eyes riveted upon his lord. Thierry and Huon gazed with mixed feelings at the man whom they had rescued, and who was in turn rescuing them.

"My young lords," said Ganelon, turning now to them, "I know you belong to the retinue of my stepson Count Roland, between whom and me men say there is not excessive love. Be that as it may, to you I am beholden for my life. You are my friends, and if ever you are in need of aught from Count Ganelon, you have but to ask."

"Sir Ganelon," replied Thierry courteously, "we are glad we were of service to you. We knew not who you were, but we knew treason was afoot, and we hate treason!"

He glanced at his brother Huon for confirmation as he spoke, but saw on his face only a look of mild disgust.

"Where is my good vassal Sir Pinabel?" inquired Ganelon. "I would have him make his peace with you."

But Pinabel had disappeared. While they looked for him in vain, another, louder commotion arose on the outskirts of the throng. A man-at-arms came running up to Charlemagne.

"Sire!" he exclaimed, breathing hard. "A Moslem embassy from Zaragoza has arrived at the gates of the city! They bear olive branches and gifts. Their leader craves an audience with you!"

3

BLANCANDRIN'S MESSAGE

Green olive-branches bore they in their hands;
So came to Charles, who rules all Frankish lands,
Yet cannot root out treason from his bands!
Chanson de Roland, 93-95

THIS TIME, THE RESPONSE OF THE AUDIENCE CAME IN the form of a mighty, audible gasp. Rivalry between two households, internecine killings, plots, attempts at murder —these had grown commonplace in the vast feudal host that had accompanied Charlemagne on his Spanish mission. But an embassy from the Saracen enemy, considering the military situation, could have only one significance —peace. And peace was close to the heart of every member of the host. They had dreamed of it and lived with its vision in their eyes during the long days of the campaign. They had hoped for it and despaired of it. Peace meant returning to their homes and fiefs and manors in sweet France while they were still alive, seeing again parents who had grown old, children who had grown up, wives who had grown weary. Could it finally be? Yet they knew also the relentless bitterness of the campaign, the fanaticism of their own and the Saracen leaders, the vow taken by the Emperor in his chapel at Aix to exterminate paganism out of Spain and restore the entire peninsula throughout its length and breadth to the true Church and the true Faith. If the Saracen embassy was bent on a peace mission, how could these facts be reconciled with it?

The ten Saracen envoys, bearded, turbaned, swarthy of

face and richly attired in Eastern silks, strode proudly through the Christian throng, in the wake of the commander of the Emperor's bodyguard, looking neither to the right nor to the left, seemingly indifferent to the murmurings that arose on their path, or to the occasional shaking of a fist or brandishing of a sword in their direction. Each was an emir in his own right. Why need they pay heed to the yapping of these infidel dogs?

They came to a halt before the field stool of the great Emperor of Christendom, and salaamed low. The Emperor replied with a nod and a curt wave of the hand.

"Speak, Saracens! What brings you here?"

Blancandrin, whose white beard rivaled in length and majesty the Emperor's own, stepped forward and salaamed a second time. His Frankish speech was thick with a guttural Arabic accent, but his voice came loud and clear, so that it could be heard and understood by all the hundreds who had gathered round.

"May Allah preserve you safe, the All-glorious to whom we are bound to pray, noble Emperor of Firanjiland! Marsile, Commander of the Faithful of the West and ruler of Zaragoza, bids me say to you this message: much has he sought to find salvation's way, and it has been made clear to him, by an angel sent from on high, that the faith of Christ is superior to that of Mohammed."

Here the wily Grand Vizier paused long and dramatically, while his words sank into the ears of his Christian audience, and brought forth a mighty hum of astonishment.

"My lord Marsile would make fitting presents out of his wealth to you, right Emperor: lions, bears, greyhounds, leashed on chains, hunting falcons, camels and dromedaries and Arabian horses. Four hundred mules will bear the treasure of gold and silver he will send you. You will need fifty carts to carry away the golden besants of proved assay, wherewith you may pay off your soldiery in full."

There came another well-timed pause, designed to inflame the greed of those who saw in the campaign mainly an opportunity to enrich themselves. Then Blancandrin continued:

"Now he bids me tell you that you have tarried in this land too long. Hie you back to your own sweet land of France, return to your palace at Aix, and he will follow you there, before the moon is full again, and receive from you the law of the Christians."

A shout of frenzied joy burst forth from the Christian knights and men-at-arms. The war was over!

The Emperor was prompt to still the clamor with both his hands upraised. Then he lowered his head, rested his chin in the palm of his hand, and remained silent a while. Never hasty in speech or action, he wanted to reflect. When he looked up again, his brow was clouded and his countenance frowning.

"You bear good tidings, Saracen," he spoke to Blancandrin. "But tell me this. King Marsile has ever been my foe. These words that you have borne from him to me, in what measure of faith am I to hold them?"

The Saracen envoy bowed again. "My lord Marsile will send you hostages, ten or fifteen or twenty, as many as you will, of the noblest and best of our families. Though he be slain, a son of mine shall be among them. You will hold them as sure pledges of my sovereign's good faith as you withdraw from Spain. When you return to your seignorial palace at Aix, at the great feast of Saint Michael, whom the Christians call 'of Peril,' there will my lord follow you, even to the baths that your God has fashioned for you in that spot. There he will receive Christianity from your hands."

Charlemagne looked Blancandrin straight in the eye, as if to search out the truth in the Saracen's soul. The Vizier's beady black eyes met his unflinchingly.

"Mayhap your King may still save his soul!" said the

Emperor softly, almost musingly. Then, as if awaking from a dream, he spoke with his customary decision.

"The day is nearly done, Sir Saracen. Behold the sun sinking bright and clear behind the walls of the city. You shall have our answer tomorrow, after we have consulted with our Frankish barons. Meanwhile, you and your companions are our guests. Your mounts will be stabled in our stalls, and you shall rest in that great pavilion at the end of the orchard. Our sergeants and men-at-arms will serve you. Rest you well until the dawn, when we shall speak again!"

The audience was at an end. The Moslems bowed low again, and were led away. Charlemagne arose from his field stool and retired into his great red pavilion. Left on the field, in the rapidly gathering dusk, were the multitudes of milling knights and barons and men-at-arms, all talking excitedly at once, waving their hands and gesticulating wildly. But it was a spirit of exultation in which they discussed and argued. Victory in full, the conversion of Saracen Spain, spoils and besants galore wherewith to console their long-forlorn wives on their return to sweet France!

Count Ganelon, who had stood in silence by the side of Thierry and Huon while the Moslem envoys were being received, now turned once more to his rescuers.

"Again, young sirs, I voice my gratitude. Again I assure you that if there is aught in which I can serve you, you will find me ever ready. If, as seems likely, we soon return to France, remember that vassalage to Count Roland in times of peace may not prove so advantageous as it has been while we were in the field. I can use stout hearts and trusty blades, even in France!"

"Sir Ganelon," replied Thierry with knightly courtesy, "we are indeed beholden to you for your offer. But——"

He was about to add that his and his brother's oath of fealty and homage to Roland the Captain was something

they deemed sacred and indissoluble. But the words never issued from his lips, for Count Ganelon interrupted him suddenly.

"I see your liege lord approaching, with Oliver in his train. Therefore I leave you, young sirs. You will doubtless recount to him how you saved his beloved stepfather's life. Whether he will love you more or less after he hears your story I cannot tell you. Fare you well!"

He mingled with the crowd, and was soon lost to view. The two noblemen who were approaching the spot where the brothers stood were striking in appearance. Both were clad in silken tunics and hose, embroidered with gold, and covered with great marten furs, for the swiftly advancing Spanish night was cold. Both were young, perhaps Thierry's seniors by six or seven years. One was blond, clear-eyed, gentle and intelligent of features, graceful of body, though not too tall. The other stood a full half foot above his companion. He had a powerful build, with great muscles that rippled beneath his silken garments. His thick hair and beard were light brown in color, and in his brown eyes shone such a light as is granted only to great leaders of men. His face was massive, his jaw hard-set and almost brutal, but his refined, delicate nose and lips softened the contour of his visage and gave him an air of exuberant youth and light-hearted buoyancy of spirit. This was the mighty Roland, nephew of the Emperor, whose sister Bertha had married Roland's father, Gambert, Count of Brittany, and then, when the Count had fallen twelve years before in the war against the heathen Saxons, had married Count Ganelon. His companion was Count Oliver, to whose sister Aude, fairest adornment of the French court, Roland had been betrothed since before the Spanish war had begun.

"Hail, Sir Thierry, and you, Sir Huon!" exclaimed the Count of Brittany. "I hear you have this day covered yourselves with glory. My good stepfather Ganelon, it

seems, is indebted to you for his life. You are noble vassals indeed! Not only do you guard and defend me, but even my remote kinsmen!"

Thierry listened for a trace of irony in Count Roland's voice, but none was there.

"You have behaved as true knights, in accord with your oath of knighthood, fighting wrong and treachery wherever you find it. I am proud of you and grateful to you, in my mother's name and mine!"

He had placed his hand familiarly on the shoulder of each of the brothers in turn as he spoke. Thierry looked up into his eyes, and all the love and admiration he had ever felt for his beloved leader welled up in his heart. It was small wonder that men fought and died for Roland, that every young knight in France sought to join the ranks of his followers and serve under his banners! A man who lived by his ideals, impetuous, bold, faithful, unswerving, the incarnation of knighthood itself! "The true knight," he was wont to say, "defends the weak and overthrows arrogance and pride. His life is at the service of his God, his Emperor and his country. He hates trickery and guile, injustice and oppression, and opposes them from whatever quarter they may come." These were knightly ideals, thought Thierry, that were often preached, but far more seldom practised. But Roland had never been known to deviate from them, or to fail to inspire his followers with them. And besides, was he not Christendom's doughtiest fighting man? What Saracen host had ever been able to withstand the charge of his good steed Veillantif, the swing of his keen sword Durendal, the blast of his mighty horn Oliphant? Count Ganelon's unjust hatred of him, born of family intrigue and battlefield envy, was well known to the host; yet here was Roland, sincerely rejoicing that his enemy and kinsman had been saved from death by the prowess of Roland's own followers!

Huon's thoughts ran along somewhat different lines,

even as he received the congratulations of his Captain. What a pity, he thought, that they, of all men, should have been instrumental in saving Roland's rival from death at the hands of his own mistreated followers! Poor Seguin, and Theobald, and Jehan, who had sought to right a wrong by taking justice into their own hands, and had suffered death in consequence! How much better it might have been for all concerned had he and Thierry not interfered!

It was Oliver who put an end to the words of Roland and the reflections of the younger men. "Brother Roland, the hour is late. The council meets at dawn tomorrow, and the decisions will be grave indeed. Bid these youths retire to their tent, and let us, brother, retire to ours."

"You speak words of wisdom, brother Oliver. Not in vain do men call you Oliver the Wise. We need clear heads for tomorrow's thinking. Rest you well, fair sirs!"

As Roland and Oliver turned in the direction of their pavilion, it seemed to Huon that he saw a vision, one in which Roland's dauntless courage and Oliver's cool wisdom clashed. He shook his head and took his brother's arm. Together, in silence, they marched off to their tent, wondering what decision the morning would bring to the council of the Frankish leaders, faced with war to the bitter end, or peace on terms suggested by a foe whose treachery and deceit were only too well known.

4

THE COUNCIL OF THE FRANKS

"Finish what you've begun! Such be your boast!
To Zaragoza lead your mighty host!
Fight on till Spain is yours, from coast to coast!
Chanson de Roland, 210-212

AS THE MORNING SUN ROSE OVER THE EASTERN HILLS, flooding white Córdoba with brilliant light, the Frankish camp began to stir, horses to neigh, men to call to one another.

But the Emperor and the members of his feudal council were already up. While it was still dark, they had wended their way to the great white pavilion that served as a chapel. There they had heard Mass and Matins, with Archbishop Turpin officiating.

Now, as the knights and men-at-arms began going about their daily tasks, the Emperor proceeded to his field-stool throne, which had been set in the shade of a great pine tree, outside his scarlet royal pavilion. A row of guards was posted in a great circle around the council place, so that no outsiders might disturb the deliberations. Within this outer circle, ranged in rows that faced the King, sat the great counts and barons of his realm, the men in whose hands lay the power of peace and war. Archbishop Turpin was there, clad in his strange mixture of armor and ecclesiastic robes, and Ogier, Duke of Denmark, Richard the Old and his brother Henri, proud Count Acelin from Bordeaux, Tedbalt of Reims and his cousin Milon, Gerier

and his brother Gerin, Engelier of Gascony, Duke Sanson, richest of the Emperor's followers, Anseis and Berenger and Guyon of Saintonge. Among the rest sat Roland, Count of the Breton Marches, and brave and gentle Oliver. Nearly a thousand noble barons were there, Franks out of France, Bavarians and Alemannians from Germany, Normans and Bretons and Flemings and Frisians, Lorrainers and Burgundians and Danes. Among them sat Ganelon, the handsome and proud brother-in-law of the Emperor. Duke Naimon, Charlemagne's own privy councilor, stood by the Emperor's side. The council began.

"My lords barons," said Emperor Charles, "King Marsile of Zaragoza has sent me envoys. Out of his wealth he wants to give me great treasures, greyhounds and bears and lions and hawks and camels, four hundred mules laden with Arabian gold. But he demands that I withdraw into France. He will follow me to Aix, where is my palace. There he will receive the law of our salvation, become a Christian, and hold his marches from me. But I know not what purpose is in his heart."

After the events of the night before, the report of which had spread far and wide through the host, this was scarcely news. The council waited expectantly for further word from their lord, but none came. Charlemagne's fierce blue eyes roved over the sea of bearded faces inquiringly.

None spoke for a long time. Only Turpin rose at length. "My lord Charlemagne," he said, "methinks it beseems us to act with the greatest caution!"

This brought a wave of approving nods. "Yes, caution!" exclaimed several of the leaders.

"More than caution, my lord Emperor!" rang out a powerful, clear voice, in the direction of which all eyes immediately turned. It was Count Roland. Fully attired in armor, over which was a white tunic that bore the rampant red lion of his household, he stood up tall and fierce and proud from among his seated peers. His head

was uncovered, and the fresh morning breeze caught his long brown locks and caused them to flutter about his iron-clad shoulders. His brown eyes, fixed upon the Emperor, flashed fiercely as he addressed himself to the entire audience.

"My lords, it would be an evil hour indeed if you were to believe or trust Marsile! During these seven long years that we have been in Spain, you have seen me fight relentlessly against the Saracen infidels. During that span, my lord Emperor, I conquered for you Nabal and Conimbria, Tudela and Seville. At no time did King Marsile reveal himself to be aught but a black traitor. Three years ago he sent you fifteen of his pagans, bearing in hand green olive branches, even as these envoys of last night. They spoke to you the selfsame words of submission. Then, too, you summoned a council of your Franks. They praised your words, that were foolish indeed. Two of your counts you sent to the pagan King, two valiant knights of Langres; one was Basan, the other Basil. Marsile took their heads, on the hill by Altilla, then renewed the war! Shame upon anyone who would accept the word of a Saracen! I say to you, barons of France, fight on! Finish the war that you have undertaken! Lead your mighty host on to Zaragoza, as you had planned! Lay siege to it for the rest of your days, if need be, but wreak vengeance for your comrades whom the felon slew in felony and guile!"

Count Roland's booming voice grew still, and he sat down, amid his silent and bewildered listeners. Charlemagne's head was bowed low. He clasped his chin, and his fingers tugged at his long white beard. How to answer his nephew? The incident related by Roland was true in every detail. What justification, if any, there might have been for Marsile's action was unknown. One captive had reported that the two jaunty Frankish envoys had insulted the Emir's dignity and goaded him beyond endurance; another, that Marsile had claimed that Charlemagne's in-

vasion of Spain without a formal defiance was an act of treachery, and that all Franks who fell into his hands could therefore be treated as outlaws. It was all conjecture, but the heads of the two envoys, hurled into the French camp from a catapult, were no conjecture.

The council sat in stunned silence. After these bitter words of mighty Count Roland, no man among them dared lift his voice. None, that is, save one. It was Ganelon, Charles' brother-in-law and Roland's stepfather, who sprang to his feet and approached the Emperor's golden throne. Right haughtily he addressed his sovereign, in a clear, loud voice that rang as far as the outlying circle of men-at-arms.

"My lord Charlemagne, believe no one, my word or theirs, save insofar as it is to your advantage! Marsile sends word that he will do homage to you by finger and by thumb, that he will become your loyal vassal, that throughout all Spain your writ alone shall run. He pledges that he will receive our Christian law. He offers gifts and hostages. What more can we demand? What more can we expect? He who advises that we spurn this plea cares not what death we die. Must there be no end to this bloodshed? We have seen thousands of our friends and comrades die. The castles and manors of France, the huts and the hovels, ring with complaints and dirges for the fallen. There is no household, high or low, but has suffered bereavement. Shall this go on forever? To fight on when the foe offers to yield and pleads for mercy is a counsel of wanton cruelty and pride. It is not right that it should prevail, when we can gain all we set out to gain, and more, and have our lives besides! Your Franks are weary, sire! They've fought enough! They long for their homes and loved ones! If they learn that you have spurned Marsile's peace plea, they will revolt! What man cares to go on fighting and shedding his blood when the foe offers peace, full submission, and boundless riches? Let us leave

the fools, and be one with the wise!"

Count Ganelon had finished his speech. Now he saluted, turned on his heel, and marched back to his place, casting a look of derision at his stepson as he did so. From where he sat, Roland's hand clasped the hilt of his sword until the knuckles were white, but he spoke no word, nor made any other gesture.

It was now the turn of Duke Naimon, the Emperor's trusted councilor, to address the assemblage.

"Right Emperor!" He spoke in low, deliberate tones. "You have heard the answer that has been returned by Count Ganelon. There is wisdom in his words, but let it be well heard and understood. King Marsile is overcome in war. You have taken from him all his castles but one. You have overturned all his ramparts with your catapults, you have vanquished his armies and burned his cities. Now he pleads for your mercy. It were unchristian to spurn him who seeks your pity, when he wishes to submit and accept our Christian law. Those who would continue to war upon him under these circumstances are sinning against our faith and principles. Since he would secure his good faith with hostages, this great war should now come to an end!"

There had been silence during the speeches of Roland and Ganelon, but now the assemblage could contain itself no longer. Shouts of "Well said, the Duke!" arose from every side. Only a small group of noblemen in the immediate vicinity of Count Roland grimly held their peace.

The Emperor allowed the storm of approbation to run itself out. Finally he held up his hands for silence.

"My lords barons, your will is clear. It shall be even as you decree!"

Again there was a frenzied shouting, this time mingled with overtones of exultation. Charles raised his hands again.

"My lords, another decision must come from you.

Whom shall we send as our envoy to King Marsile in his capital of Zaragoza?"

A cold hush fell over the cheering multitude. It was one thing to vote for peace. It was another to risk the fate of Basan and Basil. Undoubtedly, Marsile was sincere this time. But what if by chance he were not? There was not a man among those present who was unwilling to die in the field, facing the Saracen foe. But to die a shameful death, by beheading or hanging, in a Saracen city, amid the jeers of a Saracen multitude—that was another matter!

And so there was silence; a long, uneasy silence. No man was willing to volunteer, or to appoint another to the task. Then spoke Duke Naimon of the long gray beard: "My lord, I will go there for love of you. Give me the glove and the wand!"

Charles shook his head. "Nay, Duke. You are wise. I need you by my side to counsel me. By my white beard and mustache, you will not go this year so far away from me! Go sit you down among your peers! No one has summoned you!"

Then he looked up again at the expectant multitude. "My lords barons, whom shall we send to the Saracen who defends Zaragoza?"

This time it was Count Roland who stood up. He spoke simple words: "I might very well go!"

"Surely, you will not!" exclaimed Oliver, springing to his side. "Your disposition is far too fiery and proud. You would be certain to inflame Marsile's wrath! But if the Emperor permits, I shall go in your place!"

Charlemagne's reply was moody and tart: "Be silent, both of you! Neither you nor he shall set foot in Zaragoza! By this my beard, that you have seen grow white, it would be a disaster to us if either of you were lost!"

Again silence fell over the assemblage, a deep, restless silence. Then Archbishop Turpin of Reims rose from

where he sat among the nobles. "Right Emperor," he said, "leave your Franks in peace. For seven years you have lingered in this land, and they have endured much pain and hardship. Grant me, sire, the glove and the wand. I will seek out the Spanish Saracen, for I believe I understand his thoughts. Also, I want to cast my eyes upon him."

The Emperor's reply was angry, almost brutal. "Go sit down on yonder silken mat, and speak no more, unless I command you!"

Then turning to the assemblage, he voiced again his weary request: "Frankish barons, choose me a baron from out of my marches who will carry my answer back to Marsile!"

Roland stood up again. "There's Ganelon, my stepfather," he said simply, but in a firm tone.

A hum of approbation rose from the ranks. "Of course!" "He can manage wisely!" "He has the proper spirit for an undertaking of this sort!" "Let him go!" "There is none who is wiser, or better fitted for the task."

But Count Ganelon sprank to his feet in fury, flinging from his neck the marten pelts. He stood erect, clad in his silken garments, a proud figure of a man. His iron-gray eyes flashed, and his finely built body quivered with anger. All looked at him in astonishment, as a rapid stream of words issued from his mouth, directed not at Charles, but at his stepson.

"So, fool, you would order me about! All men know well I am your stepfather! You, of all men, decree that I should go to Marsile's court! I accept! But remember! If God grant that I ever come back alive, I will declare upon you such a blood feud as will endure so long as life will last you!"

Roland had remained standing. Fortunately, half the feudal assemblage intervened between the two men, or

they would surely have clashed. The count of Brittany paled, then flushed. At last he replied in a husky voice, "You are full of pride and madness to speak as you do! All men know I fear no threats! But surely," and here his voice took on a note of bitter irony, "surely a wise man must bear the message! If the Emperor wills it, I am ready and willing to do it in your stead!"

Ganelon's reply was quick and cutting. "You will not go for me! You are not my man, nor am I your lord! Charlemagne commands that I do his decree and go to Marsile in Zaragoza. There I will work a little foolishness, just to let free this mighty wrath of mine!"

Roland's only reply was a loud, long laugh. Ganelon seemed about to burst with rage at this, and fling himself across the seated ranks at his stepson, who had for the nonce, and quite without intention, turned into his tormentor. Several of the barons sprang to their feet to restrain him forcibly. But Ganelon did not move. Instead, he spoke once more, this time more calmly: "Roland, I love you not at all! You have borne me a false judgment! You shall pay for it!"

It was Charlemagne's turn to intervene. "Surely, Count Ganelon, you are letting yourself be carried away by your anger! Count Roland meant no harm! He merely spoke what was in the minds of all of us. It was you who first proposed that we accept Marsile's offer. You are a man of prudence and wisdom. You will know how to approach the Saracen, and how to report his answers and disposition back to us! You have heard the council approve Count Roland's choice!"

Ganelon's voice was a sneer of defiant pride. "Right Emperor, you see me before you! I will accomplish your word, just as you bid! It is plain that I must go to Zaragoza. It is equally plain that those who go there often do not return. I have taken your sister's hand in marriage. From her I have a son, Baldwin. There is no handsomer

boy, and men say he shows the knightly strain. To him I leave my honors and my fiefs. Take care of him for me, for I will never see him again, nor will he see me!"

"Come, Count Ganelon!" replied Charles, a faint tinge of irony in his voice. "You have too tender a heart, too pessimistic an outlook! When I command, it is time to start! Come before me, Ganelon, and receive the glove and the wand! You have heard the choice of the Frankish barons!"

"Sire," replied Ganelon, "All this is Roland's scheming! I will not love him so long as I live, nor Oliver, who is his right-hand companion, nor the twelve peers of his band, who love him so much! I defy them all, sire, here in your presence and that of all your barons!"

The Emperor's patience was taxed. "You are overwroth, Count Ganelon! Now certainly you'll go, since I command it!"

"Yes, sire, I go, but I have no warrant! Basil had none, or his brother Basan!"

The Emperor held out his right-hand glove to Ganelon, who strode forward to take it. But he was so blinded by his rage that as he reached for it he let it fall to the ground.

A murmur of consternation arose from the Frankish barons. This was an evil omen indeed! "God! What may that mean? Disaster will surely arise from this embassy!" many said.

Ganelon turned to them in withering scorn. "My lords, you will hear news of it soon enough!" he exclaimed; then, turning to the Emperor: "Now, sire, grant me leave to go! Since I must fare forth to Zaragoza, there is no need to linger! But grant me one boon before I leave! Give me as companions those two young knights, out of the retinue of my lord Roland, who saved my life yesterday. With them at my side, I shall feel safer!"

"Your request is granted, Ganelon," replied Charlemagne. "By the power of suzerainty vested in me, I decree

that Count Roland release to you his two vassals, Thierry of Anjou and his brother Huon. May their presence give you courage and comfort on your mission! Now, Ganelon, come with me into the pavilion. While my scribes prepare the brief I am sending to Marsile, the Archbishop will shrive and absolve you, in Jesus' name and mine! You will start out tomorrow at dawn with the Saracen envoys!"

As the council broke up, there were many loud sighs, many visible shakings of heads. To the more superstitious of the Franks, the fall of an ambassador's glove was a portent of dire things to come. To those more practically inclined, the disposition shown by Ganelon toward his mission was an advance indication of failure. All deplored the turn things had taken. Many voiced the opinion that it would have been better to accept the offers of Naimon, Turpin, even Roland and Oliver, than to have the embassy entrusted to one who showed so little stomach for it.

Only Roland was carefree and gay. "If the mission fail," he confided to Oliver, "so much the better! We can then properly finish the task we have begun!"

Little did he know that Ganelon's mission was to succeed, far beyond Ganelon's wildest expectations!

5

HUON'S GABS

"Make your gab, *Sir Huon!" said one who was well-fed.*
"That certainly I will!" came from the table's head.
"Let the king take his daughter, who knoweth not man's tread,
And place us in his chamber, in wide and spacious bed!"
Pèlerinage de Charlemagne, 484-487

IT WAS ALMOST DARK, AND COUNT GANELON HAD BEEN busy for hours making preparations for his fateful journey to Zarazoga. He had gone into the tent of the Saracen envoys, and made the further acquaintance of their leader, whom he had found, somewhat to his surprise, to be an almost human being, courteous, affable, and quite willing to converse in the tongue of the Franks. Next he had sought out Thierry and Huon who, as young knights and vassals of Count Roland, had not participated in the council, and had informed them of his request for their company and of Charlemagne's command. Thierry had not seemed over-pleased at being the object of a feudal loan, but had replied with his wonted courtliness that he would do his best to guard Ganelon as he would guard his own liege lord, for the duration of the journey. Huon, on the other hand, had been filled with joy. The prospect of beholding an unravaged Saracen city, and the greatest and most famous of them all, appealed to his adventurous

spirit. He had warmly thanked Count Ganelon for his choice.

Now Ganelon was back in his own hostelry, selecting his garments and gear for the road and the mission that lay beyond. He took of the very best: his finest and strongest coat of mail armor, his gaudiest tunic adorned with the emblem of his house, his spurs of fine gold. To his side he fastened Murglais, his sword of tempered Toledan steel, then unfastened it again and laid it aside so it would be ready for the early morning start. He gave orders that his charger Tachebrun should be saddled and ready for him at dawn.

When he issued from his tent, he met a crowd of his vassals and retainers, who had gathered there, first among them his uncle Guinemer. All had sorrow on their faces, and many were weeping. "Alas!" some of them exclaimed, "you are unlucky indeed, lord! So many years you have been at the Emperor's court! People say you are a noble vassal! Who, then, judged that you should fare to Marsile?"

"He who decreed this journey for you will never be held dear!" shouted others. "You will never be protected or defended by Charlemagne!" said Guinemer, shaking his head. "He was powerless to guard Basil and Basan!"

Another knight approached and kissed Ganelon's hand. "Count Roland should never have decreed this fate for you!" he exclaimed. "He should have remembered your noble lineage, and his own kinship to you!" "Lord, take us along with you!" shouted many.

Ganelon was moved. "Not so, my lords!" he replied, with a faint trembling in his voice. "May it not please God that I drag so many good and valiant knights down with me! Better I bleed and die alone, if bleed and die I must! Rather hearken to me, my lords. Soon you shall be speeding back to sweet France. If I do not return with you, greet my gentle wife on my behalf, and all the good friends

and kinsmen we left behind when we fared to this accursed land of Spain, and particularly my son Baldwin, whom you well know. Accord him his rights, help him in his need, and hold him as your liege lord! But if I do come back, then stand ready to help me gain revenge upon those who would have seen me die!"

"We pledge it! We pledge it to you, lord Ganelon!" shouted the knights as with one voice.

Ganelon bowed his head in silent recognition of their fealty. Then he abruptly turned and re-entered his tent, quickly enough to conceal the tears that welled from his steel-gray eyes.

Not too far away, in another tent, one could hear the sounds of revelry and carousing. This was the hostelry of the brothers from Anjou, and the uproar proceeded from the throats of their many friends and comrades from Count Roland's following who had come to bid them godspeed on the morrow's journey.

Around a long, low wooden table, illuminated by torches set in sconces along the sides of the pavilion, sat the knights. A few were in armor, but most of them in doublets and tunics and hose. Their faces were flushed with wine and excitement. On the table stood goblets and ewers, filled with the rich sparkling vintages of southern Spain, also platters and trenchers and stout knives. What remained of a great roast boar lay on a huge platter in the center of the table, flanked by many minor platters bearing minor viands. Oranges, grapes, pomegranates, peaches lay scattered about on the wine-stained boards. It was a feast, a celebration for which the departure of the Angevin brothers for the court of Zaragoza offered only the immediate pretext. What they were really celebrating, somewhat prematurely perhaps, was the end of the long war and the forthcoming return to France the Sweet. The joys of reunion, loving embraces, boasting, storytelling, the dis-

playing of rich Spanish spoils before astounded French eyes were being tasted in advance.

"And so," concluded one young knight with flaming red hair and fierce blue Celtic eyes, "I shall say to her: 'Behold! You have waited seven years, true! But what of the years to come, when our old age and our children will be cheered on the long winter nights by the sight of this little coffer, filled with Arabian gold coins? Was it not worth waiting for?' "

Another knight replied to the rhetorical question. "And she will open wide her big blue eyes, clasp her hands, and say: 'Aye, my lord, indeed it was! Start tomorrow, if you will, on another seven-year mission, if only at its end you bring me a like reward!' "

Loud laughter greeted this sally. Another knight clamored for the attention of the audience.

"What I will enjoy best," he cried, "will be the look on my father's face when he begins his interminable accounts of the Saxon campaign and starts telling the family and retainers, for the ten-thousandth time, how he slew four heathen Saxons with a single sweep of his sword in Frisia. Then I will interrupt him and say: 'Ah, sire, but I outdid you at the siege of Córdoba! There, with a single thrust of my lance, I impaled six Saracens, one behind the other, like thrushes on a spit!' "

" 'Tis well to speak of past exploits," said a man somewhat older than the rest, with graying temples and long, drooping mustache. "But I sometimes deplore the passing of some of our ancient Frankish customs. No one makes *gabs* any more nowadays, as we used to do on the Frisian campaign, and as our fathers and grandfathers did before us. I myself, within my own memory, recall some splendid *gabs*—one, I may speak in confidence, friends, made by the Emperor himself, at the time we were fighting in Thuringia. He boasted at wine one night that on the mor-

row he would sally forth alone and challenge the Thuringian chief and four of his nobles to fight him, and would defeat and slay them all; that he would then enter the Thuringian camp, wearing on his head the Thuringian king's crown, and claim and receive the homage of the entire Thuringian army. We all thought it but an idle *gab,* uttered to while away the time. Yet you have all heard how on the morrow the Emperor kept his pledge, slew the five Thuringians, entered the enemy's camp unscathed, and did not leave it till he had won the oath of fealty of the entire enemy host!"

"I have heard only one good *gab,* in this campaign," spoke up another knight, "The one made by our liege lord Count Roland, when he held out an apple to Charlemagne and pledged him that as he offered him the apple, so would he offer him the keys of nine Saracen cities. He made that *gab* four years ago. Last week, with the fall of Córdoba, the *gab* was completed, and the pledge kept!"

"And what of the *gabs* said to have been made by the Emperor and his peers when they stopped at the court of King Hugo the Strong of Constantinople, on their way back from the Holy Sepulcher?" asked one.

"Aye!" said another, laughing. "But those are legends and myths! The Emperor and his peers would be the first to deny them! The Archbishop Turpin is a mighty man and a clever horseman. But who will believe that he juggled four apples while riding a swiftly running steed, which he had mounted after vaulting over two other galloping horses?"

"Or that Guillaume d'Orange caused a great gold and silver ball to crash right through the wall of King Hugo's palace?" queried another.

"Or that Ogier of Denmark snapped the main pillar of King Hugo's palace?" asked a third.

"Why do we not make some *gabs,* here and now?" shouted one of the youngest knights, who seemed more

than the others under the influence of wine.

"Yes, but let them be true *gabs,* not mere idle boasts!" rejoined the older knight. "I, René of Navarre, shall make mine first! Then do the rest of you follow, one by one. I pledge that if the war breaks out again, and we are led against the city of Zaragoza, I will seek out Aelroth, the Saracen giant. Big as he is, I will begin to cut him down to proper size, starting at the bottom. First I will cut off his feet at the ankles; then his legs at the knees; next his thighs at the hip joints; last of all, I will cut off his ugly head!"

There was a scattering of applause. A pleased smile overspread Sir René's features. But the knight of the flaming red hair cast a fly in his ointment.

"Aye, Sir René, but you said: 'If the war is renewed'! There is little chance of that. Yours was a safe *gab* to make!"

The face of the Navarrese knight flushed. "Well, Sir François! And what may your *gab* be?" he asked in a nettled voice.

"Nay, take no offense, Sir René! 'Tis but a jest! I, too, will make a safe one, but one that I may keep! When King Marsile comes to our lord Charlemagne, at Aix, and yields to him, accepting from him the Christian rite, I shall demand for myself the mission of supervising the disbanding of the Saracen King's harem. As a good Christian, he can keep only one wife! I will look after the rest, and do a right knightly piece of work!"

The laughter was general. Sir René now turned to the two hosts, who sat side by side at the head of the table.

"And you, Sir Thierry, you hie yourself to Zaragoza tomorrow! You will have occasion to perform real exploits there! Tell us now, what is your *gab*?"

Thierry pushed aside his brimming wine cup, which he had hardly touched all evening.

"My lords," he said, facing the assemblage, "I know not

whether this that I am about to make be a true *gab* or not. On my journey to Zaragoza, I propose to guard Count Ganelon with my life; to hold high the name and renown of Christendom among the infidels; to show them, by my example, that ours is the better way to salvation; to uphold justice and truth, and fight treachery and guile; to defend the weak and oppose the arrogant. 'Tis not a very good *gab,* I avow, but one that I shall keep!"

Many nodded their heads; others smiled discreetly.

" 'Tis no *gab* at all!" muttered Sir René to his neighbor. "Rather a restatement, with variations, of the oath of knighthood! The stout and lusty spirit of our Frankish ancestors is quite dead in some of their descendants, I fear me!"

The young knight in his cups was eyeing speculatively another young knight, also in his cups.

"And you, Sir Huon! What say you? Will you not make your *gab*?"

Huon rose to his feet, somewhat unsteadily. In his hand he held his wine goblet, but in such a way that some of the golden liquid spilled from time to time onto the table.

"Yes, my loyal friends, I have a *gab* to make! Tomorrow we hie us hence to Zaragoza, where the Saracen Marsile holds sway. While I am there, in the company of my brother and my lord Ganelon, I shall do three things, and if I return to this camp with any one of them undone, I grant you leave to laugh at me!"

Some were laughing already. Thierry tugged at his brother's tunic and begged him to sit down. Huon shook himself free.

"First, my lords, I shall pull the Emir's beard!"

A mighty guffaw of laughter welled up from those wine-parched Frankish throats. "Indeed!" shouted some. "And will you return to tell us the tale? Will you bring back some hairs of the Emir's beard in proof of what you say?"

Huon paid them no heed, but lurched across the table till his fist rested on it, then raised his voice above the din.

"Second, I will slay the Emir's best knight!"

Again a roar of laughter came from the audience. Again there was a plea and a tug from Thierry. Huon waved him away, almost thrusting the empty wine cup in his face.

"Third, I will kiss the Emir's daughter Esclarmonde, of whom many of you have heard wondrous tales, but whom none of us has ever seen!"

"Sooner or later, I knew he would finish up with women!" muttered the aging knight. "Just like his father Geoffroy before him!"

The merriment was general. Huon, leaning his weight against the table, held up both hands for silence.

"I have made my *gab,* fair sirs, but there is more. If fair Esclarmonde of the gazelle eyes, whose face no man has seen, ever turns Christian, so that it will not be a mortal sin to lie with her, then I will lie with her one hundred times in a single night!"

Some of the knights were leaning over backwards on their benches, shaking with great bursts of laughter. Here, indeed, was a *gab,* in the good old Frankish style! A *gab* worthy of Charlemagne and his twelve peers, in the days when they had ridden forth on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and tarried in Constantinople on the way back!

The flap of the tent opened on this scene of wild and jovial merriment. A man-at-arms announced: "My lord Count Oliver!"

Oliver entered, and the laughter grew still. As the leader's chosen companion cast his gentle, thoughtful eyes about the scene, each knight's face grew serious.

"My lord Thierry and you, Sir Huon, I would have a word with you both," said Oliver in his clear but soothing voice. "The rest of you, fair sirs, drink on!"

Thierry tried to steady his brother toward the entrance

of the tent, but proved quite unequal to the task. Huon suddenly sat on the hard-packed floor.

"Leave him there, Thierry, and come you outside," directed Oliver. Thierry left his brother where he sat, the empty goblet still clutched in his hand, and followed the Count.

"Thierry," said Oliver when they were out of earshot of the tent. "The mission you go on tomorrow is a hard and dangerous one."

"That I know, my lord Oliver."

"I speak to you in secret, as I would to a brother," Oliver went on. "You go as companions to Sir Ganelon, having been appointed by the Emperor. But you and your brother will at all times remember where your feudal oath lies!"

"Indeed we will, Sir Oliver!"

"Thierry, I am not alone in suspecting Count Ganelon of treasonable intentions. You have heard how he defied Count Roland and all of Roland's friends in the feudal council. He spoke of a little foolishness he planned to do in Zaragoza to give vent to his ire. Your foremost mission is to guard and defend him, like the loyal knights you are. Your second duty is to watch him, see what he does, with whom he speaks, what words he says. On your return, he reports to Charlemagne. You will report not to Charlemagne, nor even to Roland, who does not believe that treachery exists, but to me!"

"I understand fully, my lord Oliver!" replied Thierry. "You may trust me to the full. If we return (I do not say 'when'), we report to you!"

Oliver smiled. "You are loyal and true vassals, of proven vassalage. But you, Thierry, are also wise. Huon is—shall we say, a little foolhardy? It is on you personally that I rely. Go now back to your comrades, and bid them disperse to their tents. They have days of leisure before them, but for you and your brother there is a long, hard

ride in store tomorrow. Fare you well, my lord Thierry!"

As Oliver strode away in the darkness, Thierry turned back toward the pavilion, whence the sound of revelry had burst forth anew. This double mission was more than an idle *gab*. Would he prove equal to it?

6

THE TREASON IS PLANNED

The Moor and Ganelon rode side by side;
Each promised by his pledges to abide
Until together they crushed Roland's pride.
Chanson de Roland, 402-404

THE ROAD FROM CORDOBA TO ZARAGOZA WAS LONG, dusty and hot, and the ambassadorial party had already been on it six weary days. Tempers were frayed and nerves were jangled at the peak of the day, when the Spanish sun shone hottest, but at such times the riders repaired under the welcome shade of a pine grove or an olive orchard, and there passed the warmest hours, until it was time to start again, with the descending sun on their backs.

It was a small caravan that slowly wound its way across the great southern plain and up into the foothills of the east. Part of the escort of fifty mounted men-at-arms rode ahead, ever on the lookout for marauding parties of Saracens, Visigoths, or Frankish deserters. Next came the turbaned Moslem envoys, followed at some distance by the three Christian knights. The pack mules bearing the baggage came next, and other mounted men-at-arms brought up the rear. Often they came upon villages and hamlets, some Christian, others Moslem, some prosperous and untouched and gleaming white in their setting of vineyards and olive trees, others blackened and gutted by war. In one they found fresh corpses strewn in the streets —men, women, children, and a few renegades in Christian

armor, lying helter-skelter along the gutters and athwart the doorways. Everywhere the inhabitants fled at their approach, sometimes to come back later, timidly, skulkingly, like dogs that have been kicked.

The sights were common enough to those who beheld them. Seven long years of warfare had left marks upon the souls of the fighters as well as upon the countryside.

The halt of the sixth day was over, and they had left the coolness of an olive grove less than an hour before. From where they rode, the Frankish knights could see the ten Moorish envoys, cantering ahead of them, silent, slouching on their mounts, with their great woolen cloaks drawn tight about them, as if to shut out the sun's rays.

Thierry rode on Ganelon's right, Huon on his left. They, too, were quiet and immersed in thought. It was Ganelon who finally broke the silence.

"Young lords, tomorrow, God willing, we arrive in Zaragoza. What awaits us there, no man can tell. Perchance we shall succeed in our mission, perchance fail. Whether we return to our lord Charlemagne in Córdoba no one knows."

He paused, and looked in turn at the brothers, whose inquiring faces were turned in his direction.

"You wonder perhaps why I requested your company on my allotted journey, when I have so many brave vassals and kinsmen of my own. I will tell you. Since the day you slew my traitors and rescued me from death, I have been querying why it is that your lord Roland has such absolute dominion over those who follow him. I have more vassals than he, and braver ones." Huon shook his head at this, but Ganelon pretended not to notice. "But whereas he can count on the unswerving loyalty and devotion of every man in his following, I am never sure which among my followers is friend and which is foe. Three times has my life been in danger within the year just past, and each time at the hands of my own vassals. Each

time the blow came from a quarter whence I least expected it. Why does nothing ever befall Count Roland?"

Thierry smiled, perhaps a little knowingly. "My lord Ganelon, I know not how you act with your vassals, nor is it any concern of mine. But this I can tell you of Count Roland. He is not only a mighty warrior and a mighty leader, inspiring men with his deeds and courage. He is also a friend, a brother, a father to each of his followers. He commands no man to attempt that which he is unwilling to perform himself. Once, when a knight of his following came to him bewailing his mother's poverty, Roland took out of the store of booty reserved to him from the capture of Conimbria an even half, and gave it to him, saying, 'Comrade, we are brothers. Your mother is my mother.' Another time, at the siege of Nabal, one of our younger knights, whose first exploit it was, turned tail and fled before the Saracens. Count Roland stood before him in his flight. Another would have run the coward through. Roland spoke these simple words: 'Young sir, if I go forward into the fray, will you advance behind me and guard my back, so that no Saracen may creep upon me unaware?' The knight was shamed. He returned to the battle and fought by Roland's side all afternoon. Later he died of his wounds, but not before he had related his story to those of us who tended his dying moments. Is it wonder, my lord Ganelon, that we love Roland so?"

"Indeed it is not, Sir Thierry!" Ganelon answered. "But tell me. If we return to France, think you to continue to serve Count Roland?"

"Where under the vault of heaven would we find a nobler lord to serve, my lord Ganelon?"

"Were you to forswear allegiance to Count Roland and join my retinue, I would increase your fiefs and your possessions, to an extent you would not dream. I need men who are brave and loyal, even as I know you are."

Thierry eyed Ganelon with a level, piercing glance. "If

we return to France," he said slowly, measuring his words, "we return to a land that is at peace, and where to each belongs his own. Why need you such men as you describe?"

Ganelon met his glance squarely. "If we return to France, France will be in a turmoil within a year, Sir Thierry," he replied, staring him straight in the face. "Think you there is room in France for both the houses of Ganelon and Roland? Men like you, who know every ell of Roland's country, every trick of Roland's fighting, every man of Roland's following, would be priceless in my camp."

It was Huon who broke into the two-sided conversation. "And what of my lord the Emperor?"

Ganelon smiled a somewhat grim smile. "My lord Charlemagne is old. Soon will he give way to his son Louis, who is not made of the same stern stuff as his father. Louis will need a counselor, one who will act for him even as Pepin the Short acted for Childeric in the last days of the Merovingian line." Ganelon paused meaningly. It was well known how Pepin the Short, mayor of the royal palace, had put away the last Merovingian and usurped the royal power for the Carolingian dynasty of which Charlemagne was a member. "When he selects that counselor, who shall it be—Roland or Ganelon?"

Huon would have made an impetuous reply, but Thierry stilled him with a look.

"And so, my lord Ganelon, you would enlist our services for the forthcoming struggle between yourself and our lord Roland for the throne of France?"

Ganelon laughed without mirth. "You put it too bluntly, young sir! Let us rather say that I would enlist your services, and am willing to reward them well. Your fief of Anjou borders on Poitou and the Maine. Were those two regions added to your holdings, would you not be among the richest barons in France?"

Thierry was about to make reply when he noticed that

one of the Saracens who rode ahead of them had stopped, allowing his companions to go on and the Frankish knights to catch up with him. Seated on his white, gaily caparisoned mule, Blancandrin the Vizier had turned in his saddle, and was regarding them curiously with his sharp black eyes, the rest of his face shrouded in his cloak.

"We shall continue our talk on our return journey, when we are alone—if there is a return journey!" whispered Ganelon as they came within earshot of the Moor. "Meanwhile, reflect and ponder well!"

They now pulled up abreast of the Vizier. "Lord Ganelon," said the latter, with a courteous nod, "I would have a word with you alone. Will you direct your companions to ride on, while we linger behind?"

"No need to bid, Sir Saracen!" said Thierry, spurring his horse. "Come, brother!"

As the two young knights spurred on ahead, leaving a choking cloud of dust behind them on the road, Blancandrin fell in at Ganelon's side.

For an instant or two they rode in silence, eyeing each other. They had already conversed much on the way, gaining an insight into each other's character and thoughts. But ever there had been others present as they spoke, Blancandrin's fellow Moors, who might understand the tongue of the Franks, or Ganelon's companions, who assuredly did. Now for the first time since the beginning of the journey they rode alone.

"Sir Ganelon," said the Vizier, using the Frankish tongue, but with his curious eastern imagery, "I would fain speak to you of your lord Charlemagne, whom may Allah protect and entertain."

"Indeed, Sir Blancandrin, you could speak of no nobler sovereign!" replied Ganelon, somewhat boastfully.

"Charlemagne is a marvelous man!" continued the Vizier. "We of Spain had followed his fortunes long before he came into our land. We heard how he had con-

quered Apulia and Calabria in far-off Italy, after subduing the savage Longbeards. They say, too, that he crossed the bitter sea into England, and restored its tithes to the Pope of Rome. Then he came to our land of Spain, which before his coming was tranquil and prosperous. What seeks he now of us in our country?"

Ganelon evaded the question skillfully. "My lord Charlemagne has such tremendous courage no man can ever withstand him!" he replied with high pride.

Blancandrin seemed not to hear him. "The Franks are a great and noble race. Yet you and the rest of your counts and dukes do a great disservice to your lord when you give him further counsel to war. You but harry and confound yourselves and others."

Ganelon felt stung to the quick. "Indeed, Sir Saracen!" he replied tartly. "You are misinformed! There is no man such as you describe, save Roland alone. But he will yet discover that his course is wrong!"

"Indeed, Sir Ganelon!" echoed the Vizier, seemingly surprised. "Of course all of us have heard of Roland's exploits, to our sorrow. But tell me more of him!"

Ganelon sneered. "I will tell you a story from which you may understand his character. Once, when Charlemagne was sitting in the shade, his nephew arrived, clad in brown armor. He had been pillaging in the vicinity of Carcassonne. In his hand he held a round red apple. 'Behold, fair sire!' said Roland, bowing to his uncle. 'I bear you here of all earth's kings the crowns, and of all Saracen cities the keys!' His cruel pride must shortly confound him. Each day he steps closer to death. Were he to be slain, we would all have peace!"

Blancandrin smiled a cunning smile. "Roland is truly a cruel man, who would bring every man to bondage, convert whole populations by force, and challenge the peace of every land! But with what people does he propose to take such a task in hand?"

Ganelon's reply was flat, direct and dejected. "With the people of the Franks. They love him so much that he will never lack followers. He has showered gold and silver upon his band, chargers, mules, garments and silken carpets. All that the Emperor holds, he owes to Roland's prowess. If Roland lives on, there will be no limits to Charlemagne's conquests. Not only your fair land of Spain, but all the lands of the East will succumb to his hosts. On the other hand, such is the spirit of the Franks that if Roland were to die the entire war movement would collapse!"

"A strange thing," remarked Blancandrin wonderingly, "is this Frankish race of yours, that depends altogether upon one man! We have no hatred toward you. We would only desire to be let alone, in peace, to pursue our arts and our own road to salvation. And one man stands in the way! And because of that one man, thousands must die, on your side as on mine!"

"Is it not a pity?" Ganelon agreed. "Six days ago, at the council, I urged that the war cease, that we accept your king's offer and hie us back to our own homes and loved ones. And he? He insisted that we should fight on, to the very last hour of our lives if need be, to wreak vengeance for something that occurred so long ago that its memory has almost been forgotten!"

"Sir Ganelon!" said the Vizier with decision. "It seems we are of a mind. We want this senseless fighting to cease, you and I! You tell me there is only one way—to do away with Count Roland, so that the war may cease, and having ceased may not be started up anew. Shall we not then discuss how this may be accomplished?"

Ganelon made no reply .A shadow passed over his face, perhaps from a wisp of cloud that for an instant hid the sun, perhaps from a fleeting thought that for an instant crossed his mind. He waved his hand before his face, as if to brush it away, then looked up inquiringly at the Sara-

cen, who, regarding him closely, was prompt to press his advantage.

"My lord Marsile is quick to anger, as you perchance have heard. But he is also generous to a fault with those who serve him well. It is his wish, as it is yours and mine, that this war come to an end. If you can but show him the way, boundless treasure will be yours—far, far more than has fallen to the lot of Count Roland in the course of these seven weary years of fighting. You need not expose yourself, or lose favor with your lord Charlemagne, in whose best interests you will indeed be acting. But show us the way to dispose of Roland, and we shall act as you direct. With the treasure we shall give you, you will buy fiefs and lands, and become the richest by far of France's barons. With Roland out of the way, you will have no rivals. When Charlemagne dies—who knows? You may yourself be elected Emperor of your land! What say you, Count Ganelon?"

The Count waved a deprecating hand. "I have little use for wealth, fiefs or honors. What your king chooses to do is his own business. But"—here his steel-gray eyes glittered with an unholy light—"but I do have a score to settle with Roland and his entire following, his good friend Oliver and his dozen so-called peers! Pledge me, Sir Saracen, that you will not harm my liege lord Charlemagne, and I will show you the way to destroy Roland and his band!"

The Saracen smiled knowingly and nodded. They pulled their mounts closer together, and their voices fell to a whisper that could not be heard above the clatter of the horses' hoofs by any but themselves.

Ahead of them on the road, out of earshot, cantered Thierry and Huon, suspicious, but still unaware of the sinister deed of treachery that was being plotted against the man to whom they had sworn fealty.

7

ARRIVAL IN ZARAGOZA

"And when he came to the mountains of Spain where dwelt a few Christians who had escaped from the sword of the Moors, with the great fear and terror they had of the Emperor, they weepingly begged God's mercy that He should defend them from him, for they did not expect to go on living."
Primera Crónica General

GANELON AND THE TWO BROTHERS FROM ANJOU HAD come to their journey's end. As they dismounted before the gates of the Emir's dazzling white palace in Zaragoza their senses were still benumbed by the many wondrous sights their eyes had beheld. First there had been the great treeless plain below the city, where Moorish horsemen had come galloping toward them by the hundreds, flinging their lances into the air and catching them again as they fell, shouting their strange Arabic battle cries and sweeping to the right and to the left of them to encircle their little group. Then, the brief parley between Blancandrin and the leader of the Saracen cavalry, the resumption of the march toward the city that gleamed and nestled on the mountaintop above, the tortuous path that wound endlessly up the steep mountainside, dotted at every step with archers' posts and fierce parties of Berber swordsmen. Then, ensconced beneath lofty, massive, untouched battlements, the huge oaken city gates that had opened wide to receive them. Next had come the procession along the broad, tree-lined avenues of the Saracen capital, where

every house was a white jewel in an emerald setting, and scowling, bearded, hawk-like faces stared malevolently at them from beneath turbans of all hues, conspicuous among them the green of those who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Their escort of fifty men-at-arms had been whisked away from them, but Blancandrin had given them solemn assurance that their Frankish soldiers were being led off to a hostelry in the Christian quarter, there to rest until the envoys should be ready to start back.

Now they were in the spacious courtyard of the Emir's palace, surrounded by the black bodyguards of the Emir, with their red turbans, naked shining torsos, baggy blue trousers, pointed shoes and huge scimitars. In the center of the court, from the top of a high pole, fluttered the green crescent standard of Islam, that hated banner that they had so often torn down from enemy bastions and replaced with the oriflamme of France. Before them were the vaulted palace gates, inscribed with graceful, flowing characters the hidden meaning of which they could not fathom.

Blancandrin, who had remained very close to them as they had passed through the city, approached them once more.

"My lords," he said, pressing his fingers to his heart, lips and forehead, "you are about to enter into the presence of my King Marsile, whom may the Prophet ever guard and protect. He is Commander of all the Western Faithful and Emir of this fair city. My lord is quick of temper and ready to wrath. Your knightly courtliness I know well. I need not repeat to you that it beseems you act and speak with caution."

Thierry, who watched the Moor closely, thought he detected a flicker of intelligence passing from his black eyes to Ganelon's gray ones. But it was only a shadow. The Count assented with a curt nod.

" 'Tis well, Sir Saracen!" he said. "Lead us into the presence of your King!"

Through spacious marble halls lined with latticed windows whence the sun streamed softly, rich divans, graceful Moorish taborets and small sparkling fountains they proceeded, black bodyguards marching before and behind them, the Saracen envoys at their side. Then from the last huge room they passed into the great pleasure-garden of the palace, alive with tall, leafy trees and a vast Moslem multitude. Here by the hundreds stood the emirs and the almaçors, the alqadis and the sheiks of Marsile's court, attired in gaudy silken robes and jeweled turbans, scimitars at their belts and fierce hatred for the infidel invaders in their hearts. Straight through the whispering Moslem assemblage Blancandrin led them, up to the blue marble throne covered with Alexandrian silks where sat Marsile, the highborn leader of Spanish Islam.

Thierry regarded the proud posture of the Moslem ruler, his haughty yet delicate aquiline features, his piercing black eyes fixed upon the three Frankish envoys, and wondered where he had seen a man more born to rule, save for his own Emperor of the Franks. But little time was left for reflection. Blancandrin, motioning the two young men to halt a few paces from the throne, took Count Ganelon by the hand and led him before the King, to whom he bowed low.

"May you be saved and protected by Mohammed, sire, whose holy writ we hold sacred!" he said in Arabic, a tongue of which Thierry had acquired a smattering in the course of his campaigning. "We delivered your message to Charlemagne, who raised both his hands against the sun, praising his God. But he gave us no direct reply. Instead, he sends you here his noblest born baron, the greatest and richest that has come out of Firanjiland. From him you will hear whether there is to be peace or war."

Marsile turned his piercing eyes on Ganelon, who re-

turned his gaze boldly and with head high. "Let him speak!" said the King slowly, using the Frankish tongue with difficulty. "We will hear him!"

Ganelon did not speak at once. For a time he seemed to reflect upon the words he was to use. When at last he began, it was in firm, clear, incisive tones that covered the guile in his thought; for while some of his words were true, others were the product of his own conspiracy with Blancandrin.

"May God the All-glorious, to Whom we are bound to pray, preserve you safe, Lord Marsile!" he began. "Noble Charlemagne bids me say this message to you: you must receive the holy Christian Faith. He, in turn, will grant you in fee one half of all the lands of Spain, while you will yield up to him the other half. If you refuse to accord this tribute, you will be taken by force and bound in iron chains, and thus brought before his throne at Aix. There you will be judged, condemned and slain. There you will die in misery and shame!"

It was fortunate perhaps for the envoy that few of the Moslems understood the Frankish tongue. But King Marsile understood it. His eyes flamed, and he blanched with rage. Leaping up from his throne, he snatched a dart with golden feathers that lay beside him and made to strike the envoy. Blancandrin was quick to restrain his hand. But Ganelon stood firm, and put his hand upon the hilt of his sword, of which he drew two inches from the scabbard. Thierry and Huon, setting hands to their own blades, heard him murmur: "Murglais, you are clear and fair and brave! We shall so behave before this strange King that the Emperor of France will never say I died alone in their foreign land until these chiefs had essayed your temper!"

There was unutterable confusion in the Saracen assemblage. Some shouted insults, shook their fists or drew their scimitars. Others interposed, and begged the King to restrain his anger and listen to the rest of the envoy's mes-

sage. Blancandrin gently urged the Emir back to his throne. "You harm our cause," he said to him, "when you would wreak your vengeance on this Frank. Rather you should listen to hear him speak!"

"Sire," said Ganelon with firmness, "I am ready to suffer whatever fate God holds in store for me. But for all the gold that God made, for all the wealth that is in this land of yours, so long as I be free, I shall not refrain from telling you what Charles, the mighty Emperor of France, has bidden me inform his mortal enemy!"

Ganelon wore a cloak of sable over his armor and silken tunic. Now he threw it from his shoulders and stood forth, proud and unafraid, before the Moslem King and his tumultuous assembly. His hand was still on the golden pommel of his sword. Thierry, guarding his back with Huon, had for a fleeting instant a feeling of regret that he was already pledged to Roland. "He is a right noble baron!" he whispered to his brother, who nodded assent.

The clamor subsided somewhat, as Blancandrin whispered into his lord's ear. But Ganelon stepped forward once more and again addressed the King, in loud, clear tones:

"Wherefore this rage and fear, sire? You are bidden by Charlemagne, Emperor of the Franks, to hold the Christians' true belief. He will render half of Spain to you as your fief. The other half will be held by his nephew Roland. You will have a proud partner in him, indeed!" He paused, to let his words sink in. Marsile must know that his major adversary was not Charlemagne, but Roland. Then he resumed:

"If you refuse to cede this tribute to my lord, he will come to besiege you in your city of Zaragoza. You will be taken by force, bound hand and foot, and transported to his fair city of Aix. You will have neither palfrey nor steed, jennet nor mule, on which to ride; instead, you will be flung on a vile beast of burden, like a sack of wheat. In

Aix, you will be tried and judged, and you will lose your head. Our emperor sends you this brief!"

Holding the document in his right hand, he tendered it to the Moslem leader. Marsile, still quivering with anger, snatched the brief from his hand, broke the seal, cast aside the wax, looked, and saw what was written. Then he laughed bitterly and addressed his Moslem assemblage:

"Hearken, my lords, to the message Charlemagne sends me! The Emperor of the Franks commands that I hold in mind his bitter grief and ire over Basan and his brother Basil, whose heads were forfeited on the heights by Altilla. If I wish to save my life, I must send him my uncle the Caliph and twenty highborn hostages besides. Else he will declare himself my mortal foe and wage relentless war upon me!"

One of Marsile's nobles cried out from where he stood: "My lord, this wight speaks folly! He is so wrong it is not just he should continue to live! Leave him to me! I will do justice!"

Ganelon could not understand the words, but the thought in the Moslem's mind was unmistakable. His grasp tightened on the hilt of Murglais as Thierry and Huon, standing at his shoulders, half drew their blades.

But Blancandrin intervened again. He whispered low into Marsile's ear. "My lord, fear not the Frankish envoy! He has pledged to me his faith in our service!"

The Saracen King looked up in surprise. "Indeed, Sir Blancandrin? A man who speaks and acts as he, seems hardly the type to betray his liege lord!"

"He thinketh not he is betraying him, sire! There is another, Roland, on whom he would wreak his private vengeance. What matters it to us, provided we rid Spain of these infidels?"

Marsile nodded assent.

"My lord," continued Blancandrin, "summon here first the Visigothic princess, that we may impress these Franks

with our victory over the Christians of the north. Next dismiss your emirs, save only the members of your privy council. Dismiss also the two young Franks, who are not of Ganelon's own retinue, and whom I trust not. When we have Ganelon alone in our midst, he will speak to us at ease!"

The King clapped his hands twice and gave whispered instructions to the eunuch who appeared. Next he turned to the Frankish envoys.

"My lords," he said to them with a smile that showed his flashing white teeth, "this matter must be discussed by our council. Meanwhile, I would present to you one of my captives, who is your fellow Christian. You have heard perchance of Bernaldo del Carpio, Count of the court of King Alfonso of the Asturias?"

The question was at best a rhetorical one. Years had passed since Alfonso had sent his ambassadors to Aix to pledge fealty to Charlemagne of France, and request his aid against the Moors, but word of Bernaldo's rebellion against his king had reached the Frankish hosts even as they were undertaking the difficult passage across the Pyrenees. Then, when they had descended into the Spanish plain, they had had the unwelcome surprise of finding arrayed against them not only the Moslem might of Marsile, but also the guerrilla bands of Christian Visigoths and Basques led by the rebel baron of the castle of Carpio. During seven long years of warfare, Bernaldo, with his raids and forays, conducted against Frank and Saracen alike, had been a thorn in the side of both contending parties.

"The lady you are about to see," continued Marsile, seemingly enjoying the envoys' surprise, "is Doña Elvira Díaz, twin sister of the Count Bernaldo. She and other highborn Spanish Christians were taken by my armies in a pitched battle fought in the Navarrese mountains, in which the power of the Visigoths of Spain was broken."

He was deliberately exaggerating a skirmishing success into a major victory, but how were the Franks to know he lied? Their feelings at the news were mixed. The elimination of the Visigothic rebels from the strange three-cornered fight that had developed out of Alfonso's invitation and Charlemagne's invasion was to be welcomed, since now the loyal armies of Alfonso could join their Frankish allies instead of having to be scattered over northern Spain. On the other hand, Bernaldo and his followers, though rebels and foes, were nevertheless fellow Christians, and their destruction at Saracen hands was to be deplored.

Out of the palace, through the entrance to the women's quarters, there now issued slowly a small procession—three paunchy black eunuchs with scimitars at their belts, then a pliant, graceful, but heavily veiled Moslem figure. She wore the heavy silken trousers and pointed, upturned red slippers of the customary harem garb, with the great red belt around the middle, the silken white bodice, and the sleeveless black jacket that left her shapely brown arms bare. The veil of Egyptian silk that covered her from the base of her nose to her breast effectively concealed her features, save for the vivid sparkle of her flashing black eyes, soft like a gazelle's, inquisitive like a cat's, haughty like an eagle's. Another veil was wrapped about her forehead, but not so heavily as to conceal her glossy tresses, black as a raven's plumage. The three Franks regarded her as if fascinated, but the gaze of two of them quickly strayed to the tall, lithesome figure that followed her.

The palace seamstresses and wardrobe keepers had well repaired the damage done to Doña Elvira's costume by her Berber captors. She now stepped forward into the brilliant sunlight of the garden attired in the graceful garb of a Spanish noblewoman, the long, tight-fitting, flowing white robe with high neck and ample sleeves, the belt clasped below the waist, with its two loose ends dangling

in front, the high, mitre-like headdress fastened by a strap beneath the chin. Her pure, proud profile, clear blue eyes and golden hair that fell behind her in braids proclaimed her to be the scion of a noble Visigothic family. Her footsteps were light and agile, yet majestic. The loveliness of her tall, willowy form was well outlined by the tight-fitting bodice that clearly revealed the soft curve of her breasts, the slenderness of her waist, the lithe fullness of her hips. Ganelon and Thierry both inwardly held their breath as they contemplated her. Huon continued to be fascinated by the veiled Moorish form of her companion.

"Behold, my lords!" said Marsile, smiling as the strange procession came to a halt before his throne. "Doña Elvira Díaz, sister of Bernaldo del Carpio and my captive! She is in the keeping of my daughter Esclarmonde. As you see, we Saracens do not always cut off the heads of our captives!"

Ganelon, Thierry and Huon all bowed low to the newcomers, who stood regarding them, Esclarmonde curiously, Elvira coldly. "Have I the King's permission to address Doña Elvira?" inquired Ganelon.

"Indeed you have, my lord," replied Marsile.

"Lady," Ganelon addressed Elvira anxiously, almost fiercely, "what unkind fate has brought you here, in the power of these Moslems?"

"No unkinder than if I had fallen prey to your own Frankish host, my lord of France!" replied Elvira in a voice whose musicality was marred by deliberate hostility, but to the tones of which Thierry nevertheless thrilled. "At least the Moors of Spain respect their women captives, which is more than can be said of your drunken Frankish soldiery!"

She spoke in the Romance tongue of Visigothic Spain, not sufficiently unlike the tongue of France to be misunderstood. Thierry, in silence, drank in her beauty while she spoke. Never, he thought, had he beheld such loveli-

ness. Feminine contacts had been few during these years of bitter warfare, and Elvira reminded him of the fair ladies of his own France as he remembered them from the days before the great feudal army had set forth on its liberating mission. But none of the fair ladies in his memory could vie with this proud sunflower of Spain that now stood before his avid eyes.

"My lady, speak not thus!" Ganelon's words seemed singularly remote as they fell on Thierry's ears. "We are of a faith, you and I! Compare us not to the heathen infidels!"

"I compare you to your own disadvantage, Sir Knight of France!" replied Elvira. "When my brother Bernaldo retook the town of Rencesvals after the passage of your host, I rode with him. With my own eyes I saw what you had done to the Christian inhabitants—the men slaughtered, the women violated, the houses burned, the children hung up on trees to serve as targets for your archers, the priest suspended by his thumbs and tortured to death! Speak to me not of Frankish chivalry and honor! A thousand times rather would I fare in the midst of our Spanish Moslems, who at least do not pretend to be Christians!"

The Visigothic maiden's lovely eyes burned proudly with relentless hatred. Her fists were clenched at her sides, and her bosom heaved rapidly beneath the tight bodice. God, thought Thierry, staring hard at her, where had he ever seen such beauty, such spirit, such stately pride?

Ganelon's eyes, on the other hand, dropped before the maiden's. He well remembered the episode at Rencesvals, for it had been his own band of retainers who had been quartered there. The matter had been hushed up and had never reached the ear of Charlemagne. Now the ashes of pillaged Rencesvals rose to condemn him, in the person of a woman whose loveliness aroused his fiercest passions!

"My lord Marsile!" Elvira turned to the Emir, who had sat silently enjoying the scene. "Need I tarry longer here,

with these savage enemies of my people, these wolves in human form, whom I and every Spanish Christian detest? You have been kind to me beyond my expectations, lord Marsile. During the weeks I have been here in your palace I would have grown to love your daughter like a sister, had she but been a Christian. Must you begin to torture me now? Must I endure the presence and the words of these Franks, whom I abhor with all my soul? If it be your plan to deliver me into their hands, return me rather to the Berber raiders who captured me in Castro Viejo! At least I know what to expect of them!"

"Nay, nay, child! Do not disturb yourself!" chided Marsile. "I but wanted the envoys of my enemy Charlemagne to see you. Else they would not have believed that we, too, can gain battles! Return now to your quarters with our daughter!"

Elvira bowed to Marsile, cast one last lingering look of scorn and defiance at the envoys, and turned to go. The eunuchs preceded her. Thierry followed her hungrily with infatuated eyes, and a pounding of the breast that had not been there before. Ganelon, too, stared at her retreating figure with narrowing eyes in which burned a strange flame.

Esclarmonde kissed her father's hand and turned to follow her ward. As she turned, her eyes caught in full those of Huon, fastened intently upon her pantherlike figure. Insofar as one can tell from the eyes alone, it seemed to Huon that she smiled gleefully at him.

8

On his sword's relics did he swear his shame;
An outcast and a traitor he became.
Chanson de Roland, 607-608

AS THE PROCESSION DISAPPEARED BEHIND THE DOOR OF the women's quarters, followed by the eager eyes of the three Frankish knights, Marsile rose from his throne and addressed his Moorish assemblage.

"My lords," he said, "the council is at an end for today. We must deliberate further with our privy advisors and with the head of the Frankish embassy."

Slowly the Moslem nobles disbanded, some murmuring beneath their breath as they left the pleasure-garden. The envoys soon found themselves alone with Marsile, Blancandrin, and half a dozen of the oldest and wisest Saracen leaders.

"My lord Ganelon," said Marsile then, "I would have a word with you in private. Think you you can dispense with the presence of your two companions? See, we are unarmed."

He cast his javelin from him. Ganelon eyed Blancandrin, who nodded. "Sir Thierry and Sir Huon," he said, turning to the brothers, "you have heard the King's words. It may be unsafe for me to relinquish the protection of your stout swords, but service to our lord Charlemagne demands it."

Thierry and Huon bowed in acquiescence. "My lord

Ganelon, be it even as you say!" said Thierry, casting a sidelong glance at his brother. The Emir clapped his hands, and one of his bodyguard appeared. He led the brothers back into the hall of the palace whence they had issued into the garden.

Once they had disappeared, Marsile turned once more to Ganelon, who now stood at ease, leaning against a tree, with his new-found friend Blancandrin by his side.

"Fair sir Ganelon," said the King, smiling as he relaxed on the silken cushions of his throne, "a short while back, I treated you with discourtesy, when I made as if to strike. Kings do not apologize for their actions, but they make amends. Will you not accept from me these sable skins? They are worth more than five hundred pounds in gold. The gift shall be ready for you before you depart."

Ganelon replied with a low bow. "Indeed, I shall not refuse your gift, fair sire! May God reward you for it, and be pleased to show you His mercy!"

"Ganelon," continued the King, his finger tips drumming lightly on the armrest of his throne, "if I must tell you the truth, I think I shall like you very well. I have long wished to hear someone speak to me of Charlemagne, someone who knows him well. He is very old, I have heard. His time is nearly spent. Some say he has lived two hundred years. He has led his armies through many a land, and has given and received many stout blows. He has brought many proud kings down to beggary. Tell me now, when will he draw back from warfare, and seek the arts of peace?"

Ganelon laughed. "You are indeed misinformed, sire! Charlemagne is not at all as you describe him. There is no man who knows him well but will proclaim that he is the hardiest and best of Christendom's fighters. I might praise him to you from here until doomsday, yet much would remain untold of his excellence and honor. And who can properly describe his valor? God has so illumined him

with His grace that it would be better to die than leave his service!"

The pagan smiled. "You make me marvel greatly, Sir Ganelon, at Charlemagne, who is by all accounts old and hoary. I tell you, they say he has lived two hundred years or more. He has travelled far and wide, and borne so many stout blows from sword and lance. He must be weary. When will he cease from warfare?"

"Never!" Ganelon replied with assurance. "Never, so long as his nephew lives! There is no vassal like Roland under the broad dome of heaven. He, and his companion, Oliver, and his twelve peers, whom Charlemagne holds so precious, and the twenty thousand valiant men in their following, these are the real backbone of Charles' army. While they live, Charles is secure, and needs fear no man!"

"I still marvel at your words, Sir Ganelon!" replied the Moslem King. "A man who is so old and hoary, and who has spent his entire life in warfare, cannot wish to fight forever! What can we do to hasten his resolve to withdraw from our land?"

"Nothing at all," replied Ganelon simply, "so long as Roland and Oliver and their band live!"

"Must I remind you, fair Sir Ganelon," smiled the Emir, with flashing white teeth, "that even in my weakened state, after the defeats I have endured at Charlemagne's hands, I can still summon up a host of four hundred thousand men, wherewith to do battle with your Emperor?"

"I should not counsel it, sire!" replied Ganelon earnestly. "You would suffer great loss of your Saracens, and be defeated into the bargain! Follow the advice of wise men rather than that of fools! Offer the Emperor such a wealth of treasure as to dazzle and amaze every man of the Franks. For twenty hostages that you may now send him, the Emperor will return to France the Sweet. He will

leave only a rear guard behind him, his nephew Count Roland, and courteous Oliver, and the twelve peers and their retinue. If you will believe and trust me, these men are dead! Then Charlemagne, beholding the downfall of his great pride, will no more have taste for battle!"

"And how will this be accomplished?" queried Marsile eagerly, while the other Saracens listened intently.

"I will soon make that clear!" answered Ganelon. "The Emperor will cross back into France by the great pass of Cize. He will set a guard behind him in the rear. His nephew will be there, Count Roland the rich, also trusty Oliver, and their twenty thousand knights and retainers. Lead against them a full hundred thousand of your men, attack them unawares, thin down their ranks with your first assault. I do not say but of your own men there will also be a slaughter. Then lead up the rest of your host, and deliver battle again, with all speed, before Charles can return. Fight those twenty thousand until not one of them remains alive! In that fashion, you will be freed forever of Roland and his war party! You will have done a right noble deed, and for the rest of your life you will never know war again! Once he discovers that Roland is dead, Charlemagne will lose all his taste for battle, for Roland is to Charlemagne as a right arm. Tear it from his body, and he will not fight again, but will withdraw in grief and sorrow to his own land of France, and leave you in repose!"

There was unmistakable sincerity and conviction in the Frankish baron's voice. Marsile, without hesitating, rose from his throne and went to embrace him.

"Why need we speak further, fair Sir Ganelon?" he said as he kissed him on the neck. "Give me but one further assurance! Swear to me by your own Christian faith that you will deliver Roland into my hands!"

Ganelon regarded him strangely. This reference to his

own Christian faith came at the wrong moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Be it even as you say!" he exclaimed, and drew his sword Murglais from its scabbard.

"By the holy relics that are hidden within the golden hilt of this my sword," he said, holding the weapon point down by the blade with his left hand, and laying his right upon the hilt, "by the cross of Christ that is fashioned into the hilt, blade and crosspiece of every Christian sword, I swear to you the death of Roland and all his band!"

The Saracen King smiled grimly. "Now, Sir Ganelon," he said, "I will swear an oath to you!"

Upon the seat of his throne he bade them plant a great book, strangely inscribed with Arabic characters across its red morocco cover. "By this our book of Allah's law, by the sacred Al-Quran of the Prophet, I swear to you that if I find Roland in the rear guard, I shall give battle to him and all his band until each and every one of them be slain!"

"So be it, as you command!" replied Ganelon, thrusting his sword back into its sheath.

Blancandrin and the other Moors now gathered around them, smiling and chattering. Blancandrin was the first to embrace and kiss the Count on both cheeks. From his hand he removed a great gold ring, set with a ruby of pigeonblood hue. "Take this from me, Sir Ganelon!" he exclaimed as he placed it on the Count's finger. "The ruby is from the treasure house of a mighty Indian ruler, and is worth fabulous sums. But in addition, it has the property of safeguarding its possessor against all wounds inflicted by sword, lance, or arrow. You will need it in the days to come!"

The black Almaçor of Moriana next approached Ganelon. With a laugh that revealed both rows of his shining white teeth, he held out to him his scimitar in its jewel-encrusted scabbard. "Take now this precious blade, Sir Ganelon!" he said. "There is none better fashioned out of

steel by the artisans of Toledo and Damascus. But it is precious in more ways than one. Within its hollow golden hilt are jewels—diamonds and emeralds and rubies and sapphires, over a hundred of them, worth a king's ransom! I offer it to you in love and friendship. But give us your aid against Roland, so that we may find him in the rear guard when we strike!"

"It will indeed be done!" replied the Count, as he embraced and kissed the blackamoor.

Climborin offered Ganelon his jewel-studded helm. Estramariz gave him two brooches of amethysts and hyacinths mounted in gold, a gift, he said, for Ganelon's lady, and such as the Emperor in all his glory had never seen.

While the Count continued to receive the gifts that were showered upon him, Marsile summoned his treasurer Malduist. "Is the tribute for Charlemagne being made ready?" he inquired.

"Aye, sire!" replied the treasurer. "Silver and gold are being laden on seven hundred camels, even as you directed. The hostages, too, are ready; twenty young men, of our noblest and highest-born, who have willingly volunteered for the fate they know awaits them."

"And I must join them!" said the white-bearded Caliph to his nephew Marsile. "For love of you, my lord Marsile, and to save our fair city of Zaragoza and our proud land of Spain, I shall gladly do it!"

"Nay, not so!" replied the Count. "Remain here with your lord Marsile! I shall report you dead to my lord Charlemagne, and he will be satisfied with the remaining hostages. Rather, my lord Marsile, grant me another hostage, one that I would fain lead back with me to the Frankish host in proof of your good faith!"

"And who may that be?" inquired Marsile, overjoyed at the thought that he need not sacrifice his uncle.

"Your captive, the fair lady Elvira. With her in my train, Charlemagne will quickly forget the absence of the

Caliph. Nay, he will bless you for having placed in his hands the means whereby to bring Bernaldo del Carpio into subjection to his liege lord Alfonso of the Asturias!"

Marsile was thoughtful. There were obvious advantages to the proposal. Charlemagne could never doubt his good faith if he were to substitute for the hostage required another of such vast diplomatic value. But by the same token, he would lose his chance to negotiate with the Visigothic rebels and bring the Christian north under his sway.

It was Blancandrin, as usual, who decided the issue for him. "Accept, my lord!" he said to him in Arabic. "The present peril is far greater than the future gains! Your uncle's life is well worth sparing! Even if we do not bring Bernaldo to our side, what matters it? The Visigothic barons will continue to fight their King, and we, once the Frankish menace is removed from our land, can overrun the north and conquer both!"

Marsile nodded and turned to Ganelon. " 'Tis well, fair sir! Your request is granted! Doña Elvira shall accompany you in your train! But see you guard her well and deliver her up safely to your Emperor. I will add a thousand of my horsemen to your escort, to guard you as far as the Duero, lest her brother take it into his head to rescue her."

Ganelon bowed low, and his bow hid a glitter of fierce, lustful joy that flashed from his steely eyes. The proud, lovely Spanish maiden would form part of his booty for the deed of treachery he had just done! He would well know how to approach her on the return journey to Córdoba. Complete, utter vengeance over his foes, untold wealth from the Saracen treasuries, and the satisfaction of a wild passion such as he had not felt stirring within his breast in the ten years he had been wedded to the Emperor's widowed sister! There was indeed enough to make his journey to Zaragoza well worth while, to compensate him for the risks and dangers he had run, to salve his jaded conscience for the black treason he had committed! The

latter, as he had told himself so many times since his first talk with Blancandrin, was no treason at all, since it was not directed against the Emperor. Ever a gambler, he had gambled and won, and now his star was in the ascendant! His joy was as that of a ravening wolf who has suddenly come upon a flock of sheep deserted by shepherd and dog.

Marsile's arm, encircling his shoulder in friendly fashion, roused him from his instant of triumphant reverie. "Tonight, and for three days to come, we feast together, Ganelon, you and I, before you start on your journey back to your Emperor! You are both wise and bold, Lord Ganelon! Now, by the law that you hold most sacred, do not let your heart grow cold in our behalf! In addition to the tribute for your Emperor, ten mules are being laden with the finest Arabian gold for you. Each year, so long as we both live, you will receive a like gift from me. Take now these keys. They are the keys to the city of Zaragoza. Offer them on my behalf to Charlemagne, along with the great tribute and the hostages. Tell him I will follow him to his capital city of Aix before the moon grows full again. Then get me Roland placed in the rear guard. I'll give him a battle that will be his last!"

Ganelon raised his face and made suitable reply. They all sat down in the shade of the trees and conversed at length, while black slaves poured out goblets of sweet snow-cooled sherbet to slake their thirst. They had sat thus for some time, when there came from within the women's quarter of the palace a mighty outcry, accompanied by the clash of swords and the sound of swiftly running feet.

9

HOW HUON KEPT HIS GABS

To keep his vow, he kissed her lovely face;
She quivered and grew faint in his embrace.
"It hurts you so?" said one from where he sat.
The maid replied, "I'll take my fill of that!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 5685-5688

WHEN THE EMIR'S BLACK BODYGUARD HAD LED THE ANGEvin brothers back into the palace, he had conducted them through a maze of palatial chambers and vaulted corridors into a vast hall, lined with cushioned divans, the marble floors of which were partly covered with rich Moroccan rugs. There he indicated to them by gestures that they were to recline on the divans and wait. Thierry tried to address him in his halting Arabic, but the Negro, opening wide his mouth, showed him that his tongue had been removed. Thierry then recalled having heard that the Emir's bodyguard was composed of mutes, and held his peace.

It was cool and comfortable in the reception hall. The gentle daylight streamed in through latticed windows that opened into a leafy garden, and made even richer and more bizarre the designs of the thick rugs on the floor. The gurgling of unseen fountains came in from somewhere, the garden perhaps, and lulled the senses. The couches on which the two young knights reclined were deep and luxurious, and invited one to slumber. Thierry unbuckled his sword from his side and laid it beside him. The black bodyguard stood in a far corner of the room,

his arms folded, regarding them, but there was nothing menacing in his attitude.

"I am weary, brother," said Thierry to Huon. "Will you lie awake while I doze off?"

"Rest, brother!" said Huon simply. "I will watch!"

To make assurance doubly sure, he rose and began pacing slowly up and down before the couch where Thierry rested, his footsteps smothered by the soft depth of the rugs.

Soon another black bodyguard came to the vaulted door of the room and beckoned to his fellow, who joined him. There was a brief interchange of mysterious signs made with the hands, then both disappeared through the doorway.

Huon, left alone with his sleeping brother, was restless. Time was passing. What was happening to Lord Ganelon, whom they had pledged to guard with their lives? True, the Emir had seemed to lose his fierce wrath after that first attempt to strike with his javelin, and the Count himself had ordered them away. But could not such a temper return if the conversation went astray? Who was there now to guard the Count's back?

The rooms through which they had come had all seemed empty and deserted. The bodyguard was gone. Perhaps he could slip back to the door of the great pleasure-garden, whence he could watch unseen what unfolded in the Emir's council. Yes, but leave Thierry there alone and asleep, at the mercy of the blackamoors?

At least, thought Huon, he would step out into the small garden, and explore a little further this great, mysterious palace that held so many fighting men and such fair ladies. Ah, yes, the fair ladies! There was Doña Elvira, the haughty, arrogant Spanish beauty, so noble and lovely, but oh, so cold and hostile! She loved not the Franks, and perhaps had no good reason to love them. At any rate, what did she matter? An enemy to both sides, and an

ingrate, filled with recriminations against those who had come to free her land from the Saracen yoke and restore it as part of Christendom! But her companion, the lithe Moorish maiden, graceful and agile as a leopard, with her round brown arms and roguish, laughing eyes! She must be a rare beauty indeed, if one could only look behind that bothersome veil! No doubt, she was Esclarmonde, the Emir's daughter, concerning whom so many legends circulated in the Frankish camps. Some said she was not Marsile's daughter at all, but his favorite wife; others said his concubine. But an old Spanish woman from Oviedo, in whose house he had been quartered, and who claimed to have once been a slave in Marsile's palace before she was sold to a lesser nobleman and later liberated by the advancing Franks, had assured him that Esclarmonde was truly the daughter of the Emir's favorite wife Bramimonde, a Christian war captive converted to Islam, who had died in giving her birth; that the King had brought her up as the apple of his eye, in a fashion which at times gave scandal to the Moorish court, since she was occasionally permitted to appear in public, heavily veiled, of course; that she was by far the loveliest of all the Moorish damsels in Spain and North Africa; that many almaçors and emirs had sued for her hand, but that she had always insisted on viewing them, without their knowledge, through the latticed windows of the palace, and had refused them, one and all; and that her father, in a manner which both Moors and Christians found deplorable, had invariably supported her in her rejections.

This, mused Huon, was the lady he had vowed to kiss when he made his *gab* some nights before under the influence of too much wine and the taunts of his fellow knights! Now he had met her, and she had laughed at him with her pretty eyes. But there was little chance of keeping the *gab,* or even of seeing her again, with all those scimitars in the

offing! In fact, he would be fortunate to get out of Zaragoza with his head on his shoulders.

A whispered, hissing noise drew his attention. It came from one of the latticed windows. He gazed, and straightened up in surprise. There, as he lived, stood the Moorish maiden, beckoning to him with her finger and at the same time signaling for silence.

Swiftly Huon strode across the room. His sword clanked once against his spurs, but Thierry did not awaken.

"Sir Frank!" came her whispered voice as he approached the window, and Huon thought it more lovely than the gurgle of the fountains outside. "Sir Frank! Approach quickly! I would have a word with you!"

Huon did more than approach. He leaped to the window, caught the maiden's hand, and kissed it. Esclarmonde quickly withdrew it with a little shocked gasp at this crude infidel behavior, and drew back into the garden. Holding his sword with one hand to keep it from clanking, Huon used the other to vault over the low sill into the garden.

"Sir Frank, I pray you!" exclaimed the maiden, making as if to flee like a frightened gazelle the while she held up both hands to repel him. "Will you not listen to me?"

"Indeed I will, lady!" replied Huon, stopping short, but gazing hungrily at her slender figure. "Speak!"

"I crave your help on behalf of your fellow Christian and my friend, Doña Elvira Díaz!"

Huon's smile was almost a leer. "How can I help her? She is one of those mad Visigoths who resent our coming to their help. But you, fair lady, I could indeed help!"

He advanced upon her once more. "Nay, listen!" exclaimed the girl, drawing back. "You must listen to me! There is a plot afoot to send her as a hostage to your Emperor! You must help her escape!"

"And draw down the Emperor's wrath upon my head?"

laughed Huon. "Nay, lady, that I will not do, not even for those lovely eyes that I see shining at me from above your Moorish veil!"

Esclarmonde stamped her foot. "Are you Christians all fools?" she asked petulantly. "Is there no wisdom, no decency among any of you? Doña Elvira must not go as a hostage to Charlemagne! He will use her to force her brother to yield to him, and Bernaldo will never yield! Then your Emperor will have her beheaded, and I will lose my honor and my friend, for I have pledged to protect her!"

"As to your friend, I know not! As to your honor," here Huon played upon the double meaning of the word, "it would please me greatly to help you lose it!"

He strode forward once more, for his wild Frankish blood was up. Reckless of the consequences, he would keep at least one part of his *gab!*

Esclarmonde turned to flee. Huon was quick to seize her by the sash around her slim waist. Quickly he drew her into his strong arms, thrilling the while at the soft pliancy of her lithe body.

"I scream for the bodyguard!" whispered the girl, struggling fiercely in his embrace. "You will lose your head!"

"Scream if you must! I have pledged, lady, that I shall kiss you! And kiss you I shall, though my head be forfeit! But in order that I may kiss you, your veil must yield!"

"Nay, not the veil!" Esclarmonde's voice came in a whispered shout in which there was something akin to the terror of a Christian maiden on being told that she must stand nude before a lustful male. She redoubled her efforts, beating with both fists against the knight's mail-coated breast. He but laughed and drew her closer. Then his hand seized the silken veil and wrenched it from her face. The wildly struggling form suddenly grew limp and still, and Huon gazed down into a face lovely beyond his dreams.

"Cheeks like the wild rose, lips like the pomegranate, eyes like stars in the blue-black night sky!" he said slowly, drinking in the beauty of his captive with eyes in which appreciation, desire and impishness mingled. "So this is the famed Princess Esclarmonde, daughter of the Saracen who rules Zaragoza! This is the beauty beyond compare that is spoken of in the encampments! It is no exaggeration, lady! You are truly fairest of the fair!"

Esclarmonde, strangely enough, no longer struggled. She nestled. Now that she had been subjected to the greatest outrage, saving one, that it was possible for a Moslem maid to suffer, she seemed to rest easily in those powerful, mail-coated arms that held her in a vise and bruised the tender flesh of her slim waist.

He pressed her closer. His lips approached the maiden's. "This is but a *gab,* fair Esclarmonde!" he whispered to her with burning eyes that somehow belied the words and seemed to sear her soul. "I have pledged that I would kiss you! I but keep my pledge!"

His lips were hot and ardent, hers soft and yielding. They met in a fierce, passionate kiss that lasted long, while the maiden let her long black lashes veil the languorous brilliancy of her eyes.

When she reopened them, they held a ray of gentle mockery. "This is what the houris must endure in Allah's paradise, when they are seized by the faithful who have given up their lives in defense of the faith!" she whispered. "Perhaps the houris enjoy it, too!"

Then, suddenly, her eyes opened wide in terror and her voice came out for the first time in a shrill scream. "Beware, Frank! There, behind you!"

The instinct of self-preservation, more powerful even than the urge of sex, caused Huon to fling from him his beautiful conquest and whirl around. It was barely time. Stealthy, crouching like twin panthers, the Emir's two bodyguards were swiftly closing in upon him from behind,

on silent, naked feet, with drawn and upraised scimitars. Huon was quick to draw his own blade, and with it caught the first deadly swing directed at his unprotected head. But the mutes were good swordsmen. Uttering strange, inarticulate cries with their wide-open, tongueless mouths, they attacked him again, from the right and the left. Huon planted himself before a tree, and with wide sweeps of his long, stout blade kept them at bay. From the corner of his eye as he fought he saw Esclarmonde crouch for an instant in the bushes where she had been hurled, then rise and run swiftly into the palace.

The girl's loud scream, the clash of swords, the guttural animal noises of the mutes had awakened the palace. There was the sound of running feet on the walks of the garden and from within the marble halls. Thierry, suddenly roused from his slumber, seized his sword out of its scabbard, which he left where it lay on the cushions, and sprang into the garden. One of mutes, caught by surprise by his sudden rush, was not prompt to parry his swing and went down, his head nearly severed from his body. The other, with the odds suddenly reversed, was run through at once by the brothers' twin blades.

"Come, Huon, out of here!" shouted Thierry, thoroughly aroused to the danger of which he did not know the cause. "Back into the palace!"

They vaulted back into the quiet room of the divans just as a pack of bodyguards, led by a eunuch, hove into sight around a bend in the garden walk. With fierce shouts and grunting noises, the aroused pursuers came after the two knights.

"Out the way we came!" shouted Thierry to his brother above the din of the chase. "Back to the Emir's garden and Lord Ganelon! Saint Mary grant we still find him alive!"

He was sure as he ran that Ganelon had once again inflamed Marsile's anger and provoked the attack. Huon

could have set him right, but there was no time. Down the great marble halls and corridors they ran, their spurs clanking on the glistening floors, with the sounds of the pursuit barely two chambers behind. How they found their way back to the great central garden that served Marsile as an assembly court they never knew, but find it they did. They burst upon the party seated in the cool shade of the trees with cups of rose-scented sherbet by their elbows, with what seemed to be an entire division of black bodyguards at their heels.

Ganelon, Marsile, Blancandrin and the others sprang to their feet. As the knights turned to face their pursuers, a eunuch ran up to Marsile and panted a few words into his ear. The Saracen Emir turned red and white with rage, and barked a curt order to his men, who ranged themselves in a semicircle and closed in on the knights where they stood. Ganelon, uncomprehending, started to come to the aid of his two followers. Blancandrin restrained him with a hand on his sword-arm and a few quick words of explanation, which made the Count shrug his shoulders and rest his hands on his sheathed sword before him.

It was Marsile himself who stepped beyond the semicircle of his warriors and advanced upon the two brothers.

"Franks!" he exclaimed. "You have violated the laws of Moslem hospitality, and brought insult and dishonor upon this house! Yield now, and submit to your fate!"

Thierry, still unaware of his brother's guilt, made hot reply. "You lie by the teeth, Saracen!" he cried. "We were attacked in our sleep! Stand back, or I run you through like the infidel dog you are!"

Marsile was unarmed, save for the jeweled dagger in his belt. But this last insult was too much for him. Drawing the dagger, he rushed upon Thierry, shouting, "You die, dog!"

But Huon stood closer to him. Disdaining to use his sword upon a man armed only with a dagger, the younger

brother reached out with his powerful left hand as the Emir rushed past him, and caught him by his flowing black beard, halting him in his tracks, then swinging him around to face him and striking him on his turbaned head with the hilt of his sword.

Marsile dropped like a plummet to the ground, and a great tumult arose. Not only the black bodyguards, but all the Moorish chieftains save Blancandrin rushed into the fray. Their backs to a great tree, the brothers described wide arcs with their swords that kept the atackers at bay.

Ganelon's voice was heard above the din. "Yield now, scoundrelly followers of the culvert Roland! Would you have our mission fail?"

Thierry, standing over the prostrate body of Marsile and beating back half a dozen swinging scimitars, was cut to the quick by the Count's words and the insult to his leader.

"Culvert yourself, Sir Ganelon!" he shouted back. "Are you then in league with the Saracens?"

Ganelon shouted something else, but Thierry was too busy defending himself to hear his words.

Huon, who had been warding off as many of the blackamoors as could conveniently draw near him, suddenly saw his opponents fall back to make way for a tall, powerful Saracen, clad in mail and wearing a pointed war helmet.

"Fight with me, Christian dog!" shouted the newcomer. "I am Ibrahim al Mansour, the Emir's best warrior! With your blood I shall wipe out the stain you have brought upon this house!"

Despite his deadly peril. Huon felt surging within him a fierce, uncontrollable joy, the blood lust of the born fighter.

"Lay on, Sir Saracen!" he called back. "I have already fulfilled two of my three *gabs!* If you are indeed the Emir's best warrior, I would fain keep the third!"

Sword and scimitar clashed, as the rest of the pack

drew off beyond fighting range and watched. Ibrahim al Monsour was indeed a fighter. As swift thrust and swing were met by lightninglike parries, sparks flew from the scintillating blades of the two opponents. Huon, master of the Emperor's fencing school, felt that he had almost met his match when the Saracen blade whistled twice within an inch of his exposed head. But he was cool and resourceful. Within the first two minutes, he had judged his opponent's strength and weakness. The al Mansour's lunges were a trifle too spirited, and carried him too far forward.

Huon watched for his opportunity on the next lunge. When it came, instead of parrying, he leaped aside. The Saracen blade imbedded itself deep in the tree trunk, at the same time that Huon's sword circled and fell on the al Mansour's neck, severing the jugular vein.

But Huon's triumph was short-lived. Even as he drew back the bloody blade, sudden forms dropped down from the branches of the tree upon his back and that of Thierry, bearing them to the ground. There was a rush of the encircling bodyguards, two of whose number had silently climbed the great tree trunk from the back while the duel was in progress. In a trice the two Angevin brothers found themselves disarmed, and bound hand and foot.

Marsile, who had recovered his senses from the great hilt blow, kicked them as they lay.

"Dogs!" he shouted at them. "You die on the morrow of Lord Ganelon's departure! For the disgrace you have brought upon our house, you die not by the sword, nor even by the gallows! We shall make a public display of you before all our loyal populace of Zaragoza! You shall be impaled on sharp stakes in the main square, at high noon!"

Still stunned by his fall, Huon lay motionless. But Thierry looked up defiantly into the King's face.

"Saracen, I still say you lie! We were attacked by your bodyguard as we slept!"

It was the voice of Ganelon, a voice half irate, half ironical, that answered him.

"Indeed, noble followers of my even nobler stepson! Was it in your sleep that you tore the veil from the face of the Princess Esclarmonde? Did you think it was a dream? Or perchance you were sleepwalking, and knew not what you were doing!"

Thierry stared wide-eyed at his brother Huon, who lay trussed up on the grass beside him, having finally reopened his eyes. "Brother!" he gasped, "is this true? Did you do this deed?"

Huon nodded gravely, though somewhat wearily. "In truth I did, brother!" he conceded. "It was something stronger than I!"

But Count Ganelon left them no time for recriminations. "Good and loyal vassals!" he snarled. "You have heard the judgment of King Marsile! My lord Charlemagne shall be apprised of your unknightly action and its consequences—after they shall have occurred. He will doubtless approve. For me, I can only say that I regret your rash deed, which almost caused my mission to fail. I shall know better in the future than to take with me mad lordlings of Count Roland's retinue—if there be a Count Roland by the time I am finished with what I have in mind. One boon I shall beseech of the noble King Marsile on your behalf—that he send a priest out of the Christian quarter to shrive you on the day you pay the penalty for your deed of rashness. Fare you well!"

Thierry would have made reply, but the Count turned on his heel and walked away quickly. At a curt command from Marsile, the bound brothers were picked up by blackamoors of the bodyguard and unceremoniously carted off.

Thierry tried to speak to his brother as they were being

carried, but one of his bearers struck him hard in the mouth, drawing blood.

They went into the palace, then down, down, down along what seemed to be endless flights of stairs, lighted with pine torches. The atmosphere grew dank and foul. There was a halt, a brief confabulation, the clanking of locks and keys. Then Thierry felt himself dropped on a bed of straw, whence there was a scurrying of tiny, loathsome creatures. His bonds were quickly cut with a knife that also gashed his wrist, but not deeply. He received another blow and a kick where he lay. Then a door clanged shut, and there was the grinding of a key in the lock.

"Huon!" shouted Thierry, rising slowly to his feet and striving to accustom his eyes to the darkness. "Brother! Where are you?"

There was no answer. He rushed to the door, through whose grating filtered a dim, distant light, and looked into a low-vaulted corridor, barely visible from where he stood clutching the bars of the grating. Far down, a smoky torch set in a wall socket cast an uncertain glow over the corridor's emptiness. From somewhere far away came another clang of an iron door, the shrieking of another lock, followed by the tramp of dying footsteps.

Thierry shook the bars wildly. "Huon!" he shouted again and again. "Brother! Can you hear me?"

There was no reply, save the distant, mocking echo of his own voice.

10

KING MARSILE'S DUNGEON-KEEP

"My heart was conquered by your stolen kiss!
It spoke of fiery love, unending bliss!
If you submit, and take command of me,
I shall contrive it that you be set free!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 5851-5854

THE CELL INTO WHICH HUON HAD BEEN THROWN WAS in all respects similar to Thierry's, but at a considerable distance and around a turn of the ill-smelling corridor, so that communication between the two brothers was effectively precluded. At all events, Huon was in no position to call out or to hear Thierry's voice. The fall he had sustained when his attacker fell on his back from the tree had badly stunned him, and he had again lost his senses while he was being transported into the dungeon. How long he lay on his pallet of foul straw he never knew, for in the deep underground recesses of Marsile's palace there was neither day nor night. When he finally came to his senses again his head was throbbing violently. He opened his eyes and thought at first he had gone blind. Then, little by little, he began to accustom himself to his surroundings and to recollect what had happened. The feeble glimmer of light from the grating of the door finally impinged itself upon his consciousness. He tried to rise and walk in that direction, but it was several minutes before his head stopped whirling sufficiently to enable him to assume an upright position. He felt himself all over. He was badly bruised in several spots, and his neck ached badly, but

no bones were broken. Limping over to the grating, he looked out. The corridor was completely deserted. At one end, a resin torch burned dimly. Half a dozen other cells along his line of vision seemed empty.

Huon called out softly, "Thierry! Brother!" There was no answer. He called louder and louder, finally at the top of his voice. Still no answer.

"God!" he said to himself, stumbling wearily back to his pallet and sitting down. "I wonder what they have done with him!"

He rested his tired head between his hands and wept. "Oh, if I only had Roland's horn to summon Thierry! He would hear that, no matter where in this accursed palace he might be!"

All sorts of melancholy thoughts crowded his brain. Why had he acted thus? Why had he given way to his youthful exuberance? The keeping of his drunken *gabs* had cost not only his own career and life, but Thierry's as well, his brother's, whom he loved and admired above all men, save perchance the Emperor and his liege lord Roland.

But Esclarmonde's lips had tasted so sweet! In spite of the dire consequences of his rash deed, now staring him in the face, he could not quite refrain from yielding to the pleasurable thrill that attended the thought of her—that supple, pliant body, so soft and yet so agile, so struggling, then so yielding; that piquant, lovely face, turned up to his to receive his fierce kiss; those mocking eyes that rivaled the stars of the Spanish night; those warm, luscious, savory lips that tasted of peaches and violets; those—

But Saint Mary! Was that all he had to think about in this pass in which he found himself? Better think of the sharp stake and the agonies he would suffer, the jeers of the cruel Moslem throng, the double anguish of seeing Thierry perish with him! No Roland, or Oliver, or Charlemagne to be their warrant this time! They could not if

they would, and perhaps they would not if they could. To be chosen for an all-important mission, and to fail so miserably, for the sake of a *gab!* To bring disgrace and ridicule upon the Frankish name! To allow Roland and his following to become the laughingstock of Ganelon's partisans!

Ah, yes! What about Ganelon? What strange pact had he made with the Saracens? What had he meant by his mysterious words "if there be a Roland after I am finished with what I have in mind"?

But all this was idle. The war was decidedly over so far as he and Thierry were concerned. It were best, perhaps, to turn his thoughts to more spiritual things, and begin to make his peace with his Creator, Whom he would soon behold, and Who would ask him a strict accounting of his life's actions!

"Domine, mea culpa!" he began, striking his breast thrice. And it was in this edifying state of mind and spirit that Esclarmonde found him when she tiptoed to the door of his cell, having first settled with her father's chief jailer by means of a mixture of gold pieces and obscure threats.

"Sir Knight!" she whispered into the cell where she could barely descry his form as he sat with bowed head and joined hands.

Huon had been praying earnestly to Christ's Blessed Mother, and the first thought that occurred to him was that the Virgin Herself had come down from Heaven to answer his prayers. He quickly sprang to the grating and was undeceived.

"Oh, it is you once more!" he exclaimed, as he recognized the eyes behind the restored veil. There must have been a note of annoyance in his voice, for the maiden was piqued.

"Indeed, Sir Knight!" she replied tartly. "And whom else might you be expecting, pray?"

Huon was in no mood to discuss sacred theology with

a Saracen, even a supremely attractive one like Esclarmonde. So he ignored the question.

"Lady," he replied in a somewhat gentler tone, "I was merely wondering who might be coming to visit me. There is no day or night in this place, and for all I know you might have been the executioner coming to tell me that the third day had dawned!"

"I have good news for you, Frank!" replied the mollified damsel. "Know that your execution has had a week's postponement. Ten days hence will be the last day before Ramadan, and my lord and father has decreed that your death and your brother's would give the populace greater pleasure on that great feast day."

"In truth!" exclaimed Huon, with an involuntary thrill of joy at the news, which he did his best to conceal from the maiden. "And my brother! What of my brother? What have they done with him?"

"Fear not for him. He is safe in a cell around the corridor's bend, not two hundred feet from you. But, Huon——"

"You know my name?" asked the knight in surprise.

"I have made it my business to learn it, as you see," she replied coyly. "Huon, I have still better news for you, if you will but listen!"

"Are you going to contrive my freedom and my brother's?" he asked, with a somewhat bitter laugh.

"Yes, Huon, I am!" the girl replied, at the same time that her hands closed over his as they clutched the grating, and her jewel-like eyes looked up into his.

Huon was tempted, but this was no time for trifling. He pulled his hands away.

"Lady, this is hardly the occasion for joking!" he reminded her.

She drew herself up proudly. "Who told you I was joking?" she inquired. "Look at me, Huon!"

With a swift motion, she drew aside her veil. Huon

looked down again into that lovely face, those cheeks like the wild rose, those lips like the pomegranate, that pouted and trembled slightly. But above all, he looked into her glorious eyes. There was no mockery in them now, only an intense, fierce longing that he had difficulty in misunderstanding.

"Huon, sweet lover!" The maiden's accents fell upon very astonished ears. "I must call you that! Today you kissed me, and your sweet breath has filled my heart! I love you so that I can not endure it! If you will do my will, I shall see to it that you are set free!"

Huon's eyes narrowed with fear and suspicion as she spoke. When he made reply, his voice was cold as the wind that sweeps in from the Atlantic on the coast of France in the dead of winter. He had been praying to Saint Mary to obtain forgiveness of his sins. This was a vision sent by the Adversary to tempt him, just as the Adversary had tempted many a holy hermit and monk, many a brave Christian knight before him. He had heard all about it in the Lives of Saints that were read from the pulpit every Sunday back in France.

"Lady, let all that be! You are a Saracen! I cannot love you! I kissed you, 'tis truth, but I did it only to keep my *gab,* which I had pledged to my comrades! Were I to remain forever imprisoned in this place, were I to die a thousand deaths, still I would have nothing to do with you! *Vade retro, Satanas!*"

He stood back from the door, and crossed himself. The maiden straightened up suddenly, as if she had received a whiplash across her face. Slowly she drew her veil back over her countenance.

"So you refuse, Sir Frank?" Her voice was as cutting as his.

"Indeed I do, so help me Saint Mary and all the Saints and Blessed Martyrs!" he replied firmly.

"By the beard of the Prophet!" said the girl slowly. "You will pay for this!"

She clapped her hands. The chief jailer came limping from around the corner where he had been loitering. He was an old, dirty, unkempt, bearded Moslem, who had lost one eye and all but the use of one leg, but he wore the green turban of the *hadji*. He salaamed three times as he approached his sovereign's daughter.

"Hadji!" She spoke in Arabic, but slowly and very distinctly, so that even Huon, with his sketchy knowledge of the language, might understand. "You see this Frank?"

"Aye, Jewel of Zaragoza!" replied the jailer, blinking with his single eye.

"I forbid you, under penalty of losing the eye that remains to you, to give him anything to eat for the next three days! I have spoken!"

"At your pleasure, Rose of Dawn!" replied the old man, salaaming once more.

Esclarmonde walked quickly away, without another glance at Huon. The jailer limped after her. They rounded the corner and disappeared. Huon was left once more to his prayers.

They lasted a long time. A glow of righteousness pervaded the young knight. This time he had resisted temptation. The devil was defeated. He would appear before the throne of God absolved of his sins by reason of his heroic refusal!

Sleepiness overcame him at last. Still whispering Our Fathers and Hail Marys, he lay down on his pallet and slept.

When he finally awoke, he felt refreshed. His head had cleared. His bruises felt better. He strode to the door and looked outside. The passage of time was measured by the fact that the torch at the end of the corridor had burned down, and had been replaced by a fresh one. His foot

struck a hard object on the floor. He reached down and groped. It was an earthenware pitcher, filled with water. He raised it to his lips and drank long and deep, then set it down and groped again. There was nothing else. He was hungry.

It was a hunger that was to grow and grow and grow in the course of the long, weary hours to come. Never before had Huon known what it was to suffer the pangs of hunger. For a time, he strove to uplift himself with prayer and meditation. This was interfered with, however, by a mixture of two disturbing chains of thought, one having to do with a pliant shape and a lovely upturned face with rosy cheeks, inviting lips, and eyes like the stars of a Spanish night, the other characterized by assorted viands —wild boar's heads, chickens roasted on the spit, oranges and pomegranates, great round loaves of fragrant wheaten bread, beakers of golden, sparkling Spanish wine. As time wore on without end, the second line of thought gained gradual predominance. The water pitcher, which he drained thirstily, was always mysteriously refilled as he slept. But soon even his sleep became fitful and disturbed, troubled by inviting visions of laden platters and brimming wine ewers and banquet tables groaning with food. Once it seemed to him that he sat at the table of the *gab,* back in Charlemagne's camp, in his own pavilion, surrounded by his comrades; but his hands and feet were tied, and the knight of the red hair was taunting him with a great steaming slice of roasted meat, which he placed near his mouth, then drew back when Huon reached for it with his teeth, while the others, including Thierry, laughed in high merriment. Another time it was Esclarmonde, veil-less and very scantly attired, who held a roasted pheasant leg to his lips, then laughingly pulled it back. He seemed to reach for both pheasant and girl, but both somehow eluded him. He would wake up from these dreams with a cold sweat pouring from his brow and gnawing pains in the pit of

his stomach. At such times he would rush to the door and drink great draughts of water from the pitcher, which was always full.

He felt himself growing weak. At times he tried to pray, at other times to think of Thierry, of Charlemagne, of Ganelon, of Roland, of Oliver, of Esclarmonde, even of the fate awaiting him on the last day before Ramadan, whenever that might be. But the images he conjured up in his mind would not stay. In their place, there always rose up steaming meat platters, piles of luscious fruit, gurgling wine casks.

Like all men in solitary confinement, Huon found himself occasionally speaking out loud.

"Alas!" he said one time on awaking from one of the customary visions, "it is a dream! There is no bread! I see that I shall die of starvation, long before the day of the Mohammedan feast! Perhaps it's better thus! Still, which is the greater torment, one hour on the stake, or a thousand hours of this lingering death? So help me God, even under pain of burning forever in hell, I would accept Esclarmonde's offer now if she were to make it again!"

An unexpected voice answered his. "Indeed, Sir Knight? You have really thought it over? If you will promise me that you will do my will in all ways, I will feed you a-plenty!"

Huon looked up dejectedly. "You are just another dream!" he said to the face at the grating. "Go away, and leave me in peace!"

"I am no dream, Huon, as you would readily find out if you cared to try!" replied the damsel. "Do you really mean what you just said? Have I your promise?"

Huon did not bother to rise from where he lay. "You have my pledge!" he replied, simply and wearily. "But if you expect anything from me, fair Esclarmonde, you must first feed me. I am too weak to do you justice!"

Esclarmonde clapped her hands in glee. "Now you are

speaking wisdom, Sir Huon!" she exclaimed. "You are being reasonable! I shall prove to you that I am reasonable, too! My friend Elvira has told me much about your Christian faith. For love of you, Huon, I shall embrace it!"

Huon was weak, but at these words he sat bolt upright on his straw. "Esclarmonde!" he shouted, and in his voice there was relief mingled with disgust. "Why did you not speak sooner? Look at what I have endured!"

"You did not give me a chance to speak!" Esclarmonde hung her head prettily. "Besides, you Franks are a hard-headed lot. It was necessary to extract from you an unconditional promise, so that you would know who is master, and who must obey! But no more of this! We must bring back your strength! *Hadji!*"

The old dirty Moslem was a welcome sight, for in his hands he bore a tray with a platter of steaming broth and a loaf of bread.

"You must eat slowly and sparingly at first, my love!" said Esclarmonde solicitously, as the key grated in the lock and the cell door swung open.

Huon was too seasoned a campaigner not to know this was so. He had seen starving men brought in by scouting parties, and the precautions that were taken in feeding them after a prolonged fast.

Esclarmonde sat on the pallet beside him and fed him sops of bread soaked in broth. Once or twice he kissed her fingers. After a time he felt strong enough to take her in his arms, but when he made to remove her veil she brushed aside his hand gently.

"Nay, my love, not here! The *hadji* might see us!"

Huon sat back with a long sigh.

"Tomorrow you will be strong enough to travel. How long do you think you have been without food?"

"At least a week!" he ventured.

She laughed. "Three whole days and nights! Today is the day originally appointed for your execution."

"Is my lord Ganelon gone?" he asked.

"No, he is tarrying one more day, to feast with my father and the emirs. He leaves tomorrow, but we leave before him!"

"We? You and I and Thierry?" There was renewed anxiety in Huon's voice.

"And the lady Elvira," added Esclarmonde.

Huon's tone betrayed his displeasure. "And why the lady Elvira?"

"Because, my love, she must be saved from being taken back as a hostage to your Emperor. She must instead be restored to her brother Bernaldo. I have made my pledge to her, and you have given yours to me!"

"Does Thierry know about this? How has he been faring?"

"You shall find out for yourself. Come with me!"

It was strange, thought Huon, how quickly strength came back when you ate, and had your mind at rest. The damsel led him by the hand out of the cell, down the corridor, where the *hadji* bowed low to them as they passed him, around the bend, and to another cell. Thierry's anxious face peered from behind the grating.

"Brother!" exclaimed Huon. "Are you well?"

They kissed through the grating. "Have they been feeding you, Thierry?" queried Huon anxiously.

Thierry looked at him in surprise. "Indeed they have, brother!" he replied. "I have had my fill of meat and bread and fruit, but not a drop of wine. But why do you ask? Do I look starved to you?"

Esclarmonde interrupted them impatiently. "Time is a-wasting, Sir Thierry! Your brother and I have reached an understanding. Tonight you still must sleep in your separate cells. At dawn, I come and free you. You will don Saracen armor. The lady Elvira and I will also be disguised as Saracen knights. I have a signet ring that will unlock all gates."

"The lady Elvira?" Thierry was pleased, but perplexed. "What is this plot of yours, lady?"

"Huon will explain all to you tomorrow as we ride. Now he must return to his cell. The guard will soon make the rounds."

Huon and Thierry embraced again through the grating. Esclarmonde led Huon back to his cell.

"I must lock you in, Sir Knight!" she said archly, her eyes smiling, as she gently pushed him through the door.

Huon caught her by the wrist and pulled her to him. "Beware! The *hadji!*" she whispered.

But the *hadji* had discreetly remained around the bend. The Saracen veil was quickly lifted, and their lips met.

"Sir Huon, you hug like a bear!" Esclarmonde struggled in vain to free herself. "Also, you have a mighty growth of beard on your face! But it will be of service tomorrow!"

She gently pushed herself loose. As the *hadji* rounded the corner, the door clanked shut and the key grated in the lock.

"Tomorrow, *Hadji,*" she said as he salaamed, "you must be blind in both eyes and deaf in both ears. The bag of gold and jewels will be waiting for you at the southern gate while we leave by the northern. When you reach the outposts of the Visigoths, hand them this Spanish ring and ask them to lead you to their lord Bernaldo. He will see that you reach Morocco safely."

"At your command, Rose of Dawn!" bowed the jailer.

Huon's blood pounded fast in his ears as he sat down again on his pallet and reached out his hand for the rest of the bread and broth. It was more than the food that made his heart pound.

11

ESCAPE FROM ZARAGOZA

On a steed of great endurance,
From the sands of Araby,
Loyal like a true Castilian,
Like an Andalusian free,
Like an Aragonese haughty,
And with Catalonian glee.
El Conde de Saldaña
(by Alvaro Cubillo de Aragón)

FOR THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS THE LITTLE PARTY of four sped on, higher and higher up into the bleak Navarrese mountains whose ridge pointed in the direction where lay the rebel forces of Bernaldo del Carpio and safety.

Escape from the dungeons and the gates of Zaragoza had been amazingly easy, with Marsile's signet ring unlocking every door. The two slight figures in the garb of Saracen knights, riding easily astride their Arabian chargers, went unnoticed, and the Angevin brothers, well disguised as Moslem warriors, had only the preoccupation of keeping their peace, lest their accent betray them.

The small parties of Saracen cavalry they encountered in the earlier stages of their northward flight respectfully waved them on at the sight of the signet ring, as had the jailkeepers and palace guards and the armored sentries at the city's gates. The fugitives ate and slept fitfully, by turns, wherever the shelter of a grove of trees might be found, with one of the brothers always standing guard.

But there was, seemingly, no pursuit. Once they reached the broad belt of no man's land that lay astride the upper course of the Ebro, they felt more at ease, for their goal was almost at hand. But now, in this wild, desolate country beyond which lay the Visigothic strongholds, there was mortal danger from marauding parties of deserters, both Christian and Moorish, not to speak of the deadlier peril of Basque *guerrilleros,* with their great longbows and swift, silent arrows.

On the third afternoon of their flight, they rode slowly and circumspectly, reining in their horses every half mile or so to descry what might lie ahead. The rays of the sun cast lengthening shadows upon the stony, arid north Spanish plateau as they resumed their cautious progress toward a tree-covered hillock in the distance, that seemed to promise shelter, but could also conceal a menace to their safety. Their course lay through a rocky gully into which they advanced in single file.

It was then that Huon, riding in advance of the rest, saw a hut with smoke rising thinly from its chimney. Hidden away in the long, narrow valley whose sides went up almost vertically in rock, with hardy junipers making foothold in the ledges and in the crevices, the hut seemed a sure place for the imminent night, the cranny safe even from the eyes of Saracens. Straightway the four turned their horses toward what seemed at last to be rest and an unbroken sleep, as well as an opportunity to discard their Saracen armor for the Christian garb they had brought hidden in their saddlebags.

A solitary Basque shepherd lived in the hut. They saw him dart like a hare from the house and run to the shelter of a heap of boulders, clutching his bow and quiver.

"Leave him to me!" said Elvira, dismounting quickly. "He thinks we are Moslems."

The others saw her advance toward the shepherd's hiding place, holding her hands high and calling out softly

to him in his own strange tongue. Soon he issued from the rocks and came out to meet her. A brief exchange of words took place, which the brothers could not hear. Its upshot was that the Basque bowed low and kissed Elvira's hand in token of obeisance to the sister of Spain's Christian leader.

Once his fears were dispelled, he proved, like all of his race, to be extremely hospitable, and put his poor *choza* and all it contained at the disposal of the wayfarers. The mountain brook that ran past the hut supplied pure, fresh water wherewith to wash; a lamb roasted on the spit, a large black loaf, and a small barrel of poor wine afforded food and drink; the wretched straw pallet in the *choza* gave the girls a bed, while Huon and Thierry slept on the grass outside, and the shepherd kept watch.

As evening fell and the moon began to rise in the east, catching the boulders along the sides of the ravine and throwing their ghostly shadows helter-skelter over the pass, the brothers and the girls met again outside the hut, refreshed and regarbed. The only portion of their Saracen armor that the men retained were the curved scimitars that replaced their good Frankish straight swords, left behind in the Emir's garden. For the rest, they were attired once more in Christian chain mail, bereft of the distinctive outer tunics that marked them as Franks. Elvira of the golden tresses was resplendent once more in her lovely Spanish costume, and Esclarmonde in harem garb, veil and all.

Huon and Esclarmonde exchanged a quick look in which there was mutual admiration, and something more. Thierry's greeting to Elvira was a courtly bow, to which she responded with a cool nod. They had exchanged few words in the three days just past, and those words of perfunctory and necessary nature. True, Elvira had often felt, as she rode ahead of the others or rested in the shade of a tree, that the young Frank's eyes were fixed intently

upon her armor-clad figure, but as often as she turned she had found his eyes averted.

Now at last there was leisure and time to talk. "Ladies," said Thierry, "it is best that we stay here for the night, and resume our journey at dawn. Tomorrow's noonday sun should see us in Vitoria, where you will be safe."

"And you, Sir Thierry, and your brother?" quickly asked Esclarmonde.

"We shall throw ourselves upon the mercy of the lord Bernaldo, whose sister we are restoring unharmed, and pray that he send us back to our liege lord Roland and our Emperor," replied Thierry.

"And I will accompany you, will I not, Huon?" asked Esclarmonde.

"Fair sister Esclarmonde!" interrupted Elvira. "You speak foolishness! Let the Franks go back to their Emperor! You tarry with me, at my brother's court, where we shall make a good and true Christian of you!"

"Are we Franks not Christians, too?" murmured Thierry, a trifle ironically.

"No Spaniard would judge it from your actions, Sir Thierry!" replied Elvira with heat. Then, as if correcting herself, she added hastily, "Misjudge not what I say. I do not speak of you, or your brother, who have behaved as honorable knights. It is your Frankish comrades I mean."

"Perhaps, lady," said Thierry, smiling a little wearily, "if you knew us better, you would find that many, even most of us, are honorable knights. Do not judge, pray, an entire nation by the conduct of a few. Consider, too, that we came into Spain at the invitation of your King, to defend you from the Moors!"

"Our King was wrong, Sir Knight! We needed no defense from the Moors, whom we of Spain have always fought successfully by ourselves! He was doubly wrong when he acted without consulting his barons! In so doing, he violated his royal oath, and is no longer King!"

The debate threatened to turn into a quarrel. Huon glanced at Esclarmonde, received her quick nod of understanding, and intervened.

"With your permission, Doña Elvira, and yours, brother, I have a few words that I would like to speak to my lady Esclarmonde concerning her conversion. Have we your leave to retire to yonder knoll?"

"By all means, Huelin," said Thierry, with relief in his voice. "Pray instruct her well in our Christian faith!"

Huon held out his hand to the maiden, who willingly placed hers in his. Together, as Thierry and Elvira watched, they walked away slowly, their long shadows dancing before them.

Thierry turned again to Doña Elvira, and caught her eyes fastened on him with an interest that surpassed mere curiosity. She blushed slightly, smiled, and started away toward the hut.

"Lady Elvira," said Thierry frankly, "shall we sit a while on yonder bench, and continue our conversation in a more peaceful spirit?"

Elvira halted her steps, then turned to face him. "I am willing, Sir Thierry," she replied, a trifle too graciously.

Whey they were seated, Thierry looked into her face. The moon, now fully risen, cast a white glow that enhanced the loveliness of her proud profile.

"My lady," he began, "it matters little what you think of us Franks, for whether you love us or hate us, we shall conquer all of Spain and turn it once more into a Christian land. But I would have you know why our Emperor came here. It was not for lust of war and conquest, nor yet because he wanted Moorish spoils. Our Emperor is rich, and his possessions stretch from the land of the Danes to the heel of Italy, and from the country of the western Franks, whence I hail, to the plains beyond the River Elbe, where the Germans end and the heathen Slavs begin. He came in response to an appeal made to him by a fellow-Christian

king, who wanted defense for the little land that remained to him of his ancestral heritage. We of France, like you of Spain, have known the Moslem raid, the terror of the Moorish invasion, the charge of the Saracen cavalry that sweeps all before it. In the days of our grandparents the Moors of Africa overran your fair land of Spain. They crossed the Pyrenees into France. They ravaged and plundered the French countryside as far north as Tours, slaughtering the inhabitants, crucifying the priests, leading off the nuns and girls in chains to their harems, desecrating the churches. The glorious ancestor of our Emperor, Charles the Hammer, stopped them in time, and at great cost of Frankish lives, else they would have come on to Paris and Rome, and led the Pope himself off into captivity!"

"But, Sir Thierry," Elvira interrupted him, "what has all this to do with Spain today, and with your Emperor's unwarranted invasion of our country?"

He looked at her in surprise, and saw that she was regarding him curiously, half impressed, half amused at his vehemence.

"Merely this, lady," he replied. "We Franks had to perform the task that you Visigoths failed to accomplish. It was your Christian duty to halt the infidel invader at your southern shores, to preclude his entrance into the realms of Christendom. In this you failed most miserably, thanks to the many traitors in your midst, who welcomed the Moors with open arms. Your Visigoths left our flank exposed, so that we almost succumbed. You withdrew to your little northern strip, beyond the shelter of the Cantabrian mountains we are approaching, and thought you had done your duty to the cross of Christ if you but kept the Moslems from submerging you altogether! It was we who had to fight Christ's battle and save Christ's lands! And now, when we come into your country to drive the infidels back across the straits from whence they come, you

turn on us! What must the One Who died on the Cross, or His Blessed Mother, or His saints and His angels, think of the Goths who could not defend their soil, but turned on those who would defend it for them?"

Thierry spoke heatedly, with the zeal of one convinced of the justice of his cause. But the lady Elvira's voice was cutting like the wind that comes down from Spain's Guadarrama Range in winter, the wind that proverb says does not extinguish a candle, but kills a man. "Your talk is folly, Sir Frank! We need no strangers to defend our soil! If you Franks had not come, the Moors would now be in the sea! But even if we had to live with the Moors, we would prefer their overlordship to yours!"

Thierry looked at her in silence. Her words filled his heart with bitterness, and an aching void—the latter for the many gallant comrades he had seen falling at his side during the seven long years of the struggle to wrest Spain from Moslem hands, the bitterness for the arrogance and utter lack of gratitude that this fair but haughty daughter of the Visigoths showed for their sacrifice. He, who had never struck a woman, felt tempted to strike this one, who preferred the company of Moors to that of fellow Christians.

By a mighty effort he contained his wrath. "And how is that, lady?" he asked with outward coldness.

She leaned forward until her face almost touched his. There was fierce, uncontrolled fanaticism in her eyes.

"They are Spaniards like ourselves, but you are strangers! They were invaders once. Now they are born to this soil, even as we are! We know them, and they know us! We fight them, we deal with them, we trade with them. We permit them to live in our towns, and they permit us to live in theirs. There is mutual respect and understanding between us and them, born of this common Spanish earth. But you Franks, with your wild notions of chivalry and conquest, your lust to pillage and plunder, your mad

intolerance of all that is not Frankish! You think you are the lords of the earth, God's anointed defenders of the Faith! You are not! We Visigoths are! We shall settle with the Moslems in our own time, in our own way! But right now, we want you and your Emperor out of Spain!"

She was supremely beautiful in her implacable, stubborn wrath, thought Thierry as he gazed at her with a mixture of emotions surging up in his breast. Her body, tautened forward in the transport of her speech, held the purity of line of certain carved images he had seen in the great cathedrals of France. Her face, so close to his, was like that of the statue of the Virgin Mary in Angers, majestically lovely. Her delicate parted lips, her golden hair, her flashing blue eyes, the perfume of her breath were maddening. Thierry suddenly seized her in his arms and kissed her, repeatedly.

She neither stirred nor replied, but rested quietly in his arms, as if patiently waiting until he should finish. Finish he did, for it was like kissing a statue, the statue of the Virgin in the cathedral of Angers.

He released her as abruptly as he had seized her. "Your pardon, my lady! It was the moon! I was mad!"

"Nay, Sir Thierry!" she replied with a mere touch of scorn, not even deigning to draw back from him. "You were not mad. You were behaving like a Frank! But think no more of it. Rather, since we must still pass time together, let us pass it agreeably, if it please you. Tell me about your land of France, your home, the ladies of your court!"

Thierry drew back from her. As he regained his senses and his composure, he marveled how he could have wished to kiss this statue of ice.

" 'Tis well, lady, I shall tell you!"

And while the brook whispered softly by their side and the moon played upon them, he began a lengthy account of Laon and Paris and Reims and Aix, the green French

countryside, the castles and the cathedrals, the court of Charlemagne and the fair ladies of France, who were not statues of ice, foremost among them lovely Aude, sister of Oliver and Roland's affianced, whose grace and beauty were such that all men paused and gazed after her when she passed.

12

THE PARLEY

"Scoundrel," said he, "the curse of God on you!
Your rightful lord you would deceive anew!
Of false deception you've no longer need.
I thought I would chastise you and your breed.
But now you are not worth a single sou!"
Couronnement de Louis, 126-133

THIERRY SPOKE OF THE MAGNIFICENCE OF THE EMperor's palace at Aix, the loveliness of the gardens, the throne room's huge tapestries that had been over fifty years in the weaving, and had employed the time and loving efforts of over a hundred ladies of the French court.

"And on the tapestry at the other end of the chamber," he said, "appears the figure of Julius Caesar, the Roman Emperor, twice as large as life, seated on a throne and dispensing justice to his subjects. The Emperor wears a laurel wreath upon his head, and——"

Elvira suddenly held up her hand, checking him in midsentence.

"My lord Thierry," she said with a faint smile, as he gazed at her in surprise, "all this is very well. We of Spain know of weaving, too. Let the tapestries be, and speak to me of yourself."

"Nay, lady," said Thierry, half wondering, half abashed. "What is there to tell of me? I am but one of many hundreds of Frankish knights in the host of my Lord Charlemagne!"

Elvira smiled again, this time archly. "You have re-

vealed nothing of yourself and your brother, save that you come from Anjou, a province of which I know but the name, and that you are in the following of the great Count Roland, of whom I know more than the name, since his exploits run through the mouths of both Moors and Christians. But the reports are so different that he is to us almost a legendary character. How come you to be in his train?"

Thierry had lost his reserve at the mention of his leader's name. His clear brown eyes lighted up with the fire of a devotee, which was not lost upon Elvira. Neither was the movement of pride with which he drew himself erect.

"You love him, do you not?" she urged, almost in a whisper.

"That indeed I do!" came back the proud answer. "My Lady, you ask me of myself, of my brother, of our leader Roland. I shall answer you!"

Thierry's eyes wandered off to the dark shadows cast by the boulders as he began to speak. Somewhat hesitant at first, his voice grew firm as Anjou and his boyhood passed again before his eyes.

His father and Huon's, Count Geoffroy, had been lord of the city and region of Angers. He held these fiefs from Charlemagne's father, Pepin, whom he had served well in the wars against the Longobards of Italy. Geoffroy's gentle wife, Countess Matilda, died giving birth to Huon, and since Thierry was but five at the time, his memory of her was very faint. But the boys' father did his best, between wars and campaigns, to bring them up to be true Christians and loyal vassals. Never having known a mother's care, Huon grew up a little wild, but in his veins ran the same noble Frankish blood that their father had inherited from his freeborn ancestors. Often, when they were children at play, Thierry had to curb and restrain his impetuous younger brother. He remembered how one day, while

out hunting, Huon, then a lad of nine, rushed past him into a thicket in pursuit of a wounded wild boar, from whose tusks Thierry had to save him with his spear. Then, a few minutes later, while Thierry stood over the boar's body reproving Huon for his rashness, the boar's mate suddenly attacked him from behind, and he would have perished had not Huon leaped before him and impaled the sow upon his own hunting spear as she sprang.

Among his early recollections were the frequent visits to their castle of the old Count of Brittany, Roland's father, who was their own father's dearest friend. He was almost always attended by his stalwart son. But Roland was fully seven years Thierry's senior, and at the time of the hunt had already won his spurs and gone on to the royal court. As children, Thierry and Huon liked and admired him for his strength and prowess, which he displayed on many occasions before their eyes. Yet with them he was always gentle and kind, like an elder brother.

Thierry was fifteen, and Huon ten, when their father went away on the Aquitanian campaign with his lord Charlemagne, who had just ascended the throne together with his brother Carloman. The lads were left alone in the castle with the older retainers, and as the days went by and no news came to them from their father they wondered how the fortunes of war and his own might be faring.

Then one day there came to the castle a great party of lords and knights. Geoffroy's old major-domo, Gerbert, to whose care their father had entrusted the boys, told them with fear in his eyes that this was King Carloman, and that he had in his train Count Arneis of Orleans, a distant cousin of theirs, whom they had never seen. Their father had at times spoken of him in their presence, but always with loathing, as of a man who had devoted his life not to the pursuits of knighthood or the service of God and King, but to building up his own wealth and power.

Now the sight of this relative was vouchsafed them. Tall, still young, and of evil mien, he strode through the castle as though he were its owner. There was no love or kindness in his manner as he summoned the boys into his presence and announced to them that their father was dead, slain in warfare against the Aquitanians.

King Carloman sat by his side in the great hall of the castle, and around them sat the many knights of Carloman's following, drinking and carousing, cuffing and cursing the servants and retainers.

"What shall be done with you, young cockerels?" asked the King, as the boys stood in fear and sorrow before him and Arneis. "You, Thierry, are the heir of Count Geoffroy's fiefs. Think you you can take the oath of homage to your kings, at your tender age?"

Thierry's eyes strayed to the face of his cousin Arneis as the King spoke. It was a hard, cruel face, and on it was a look of such evil intent that Thierry could not mistake it.

He swallowed back his bitter tears, and replied that he would do his best to serve his two sovereigns faithfully and well. Then Arneis turned to his lord with a leer. "My Lord Carloman," he said, "my young cousin Thierry is but a boy. What knows he of knightly duties? Were you to knight him, he would die of fright. Grant me, if it please you, the care of him and his brother for the next three years. I will administer their estates, and at the end of that time, if Thierry grows up into a loyal and brave vassal and a worthy heir of his father Geoffroy, I shall return them to him with joy, and even add to his lands and possessions."

Thierry stood speechless, but Huon spoke up. "Nay, sire!" he said boldly. "My brother is of age for knighting! He is full sixteen, or will be by next Candlemas. Receive his oath of homage, bestow upon him our father's fiefs, and let him serve you and Charlemagne in honor and in love!"

Carloman laughed. "The fledgling speaks well, Arneis! What say you?"

Thierry had been observing his cousin's face, and saw the look of malevolence that passed over it as his brother spoke. He knew then and there that if they were ever placed in his keeping they would not have long to live.

But by the time he turned to face his sovereign, Arneis was all smiles. "By all means, sire!" he said. "Let the lad take his oath of homage to you in the chapel in the morning. If he does it well, let him be invested and knighted. If not, I am always ready to take care of my young kinsmen and their fiefs."

When the two boys went to bed in their cold chamber that night, they had no idea what the ceremony of investiture might be, never having had occasion to witness it. They decided to seek out their good old major-domo Gerbert and seek counsel from him. But when they tried to go forth from their chamber, they found two of Arneis' retainers stationed at the door, with orders to let no one leave or enter. They spent the entire night awake, in turn weeping for their father and praying that they might be delivered from Arneis.

In the chapel, where they were led in the morning, they found assembled all of Carloman's followers, laughing and joking among themselves at the idea that a lad of fifteen, who had never left his father's castle, could take the feudal oath. After Mass, during which the two boys prayed as they had never prayed before or since, Thierry was led to Carloman's seat. Everyone gazed upon him as the King spoke in a loud, stern voice.

"Thierry of Anjou, if I bestow upon you, in Charlemagne's name and mine, the fiefs that were held by your father Geoffroy, will you solemnly swear to fulfill all the duties of a loyal vassal?"

"That indeed I will do, my lord Carloman!" Thierry replied firmly.

"Then advance, Thierry, place your hands in mine, and recite the feudal oath in full!"

Thierry advanced to the King's seat, knelt before him and placed his hand in his sovereign's, but speak he could not, for he did not know the oath. The lords and knights behind him tittered.

Carloman frowned. "Come, come, lad!" he said with impatience.

"My lord Carloman!" Thierry exclaimed. "I do not know the oath!"

At this a great burst of laughter went up, led by Arneis. But Thierry continued, though trembling with inward fear: "But this do I swear to you, my Lord: if you grant me the fiefs that were my father's, I shall serve you and your brother Charlemagne in honor and in love, to the very last gasp of my breath and the very last drop of blood in my veins!"

Carloman seemed to relent. He even smiled as Thierry gazed up into his eyes with mute pleading. But the laughter among his followers continued. Arneis walked up to them. "You see, my lord!" he said. "My young cousin is still uninstructed in the ways of chivalry. He needs a guardian. Grant me the task, and in three years I shall lead him back into your presence, fully prepared to take up the duties of his station."

The King hesitated for an instant, then nodded. "You are right, my lord Arneis!" he said, as Thierry's heart sank within him.

There was a commotion at the door of the chapel. A tall, powerful man, fully attired in chain mail, but with his head uncovered, strode in and advanced to the place where Thierry still knelt before the King. A great surge of joy came over Thierry as he recognized Roland of Brittany, whom he had not seen for five years, though he knew he had been with his father in Charlemagne's army in Aquitaine. Now he was here!

It was little, impetuous Huon, not Thierry, who broke the silence. Leaping from his seat, he ran to throw himself at Roland's knees, and clasped them. "Count Roland!" he cried before the astonished multitude. "Save us!"

There was grim, ominous silence in the assembled company. Thierry, rising from his knees before the King, took his brother by the hand, and raised him to his own feet, so that both stood facing Roland.

"Yes, Count Roland of Brittany!" he said firmly, looking straight into the eyes of the man whose father had been their father's dearest friend. "Save us from Arneis, who wishes to gain control over us and our father's fiefs! If we are entrusted to him, he will kill us to take possession of our lands!"

Roland did not seem surprised. He gently rested his hand on Thierry's shoulder, then turned to face Carloman. "My lord," he said, "I have ridden here from your brother's armies in Aquitaine at the request of the father of these lads. As he lay dying he asked me to bring them the news of his death, and to protect his orphans from those who might wish to harm them, and in particular from their cousin Arneis. I am here to do his bidding!"

Carloman never had a chance to reply. Arneis, with a shout of rage, drew his sword, there in the chapel and before his King, in defiance of the laws of God and man. Roland made no move to draw his own blade. He strode forward, brushed Arneis' sword-arm aside, seized him by the nape of the neck with his left hand and struck him a terrific blow in the face with his right. As Roland released his grip, Arneis dropped almost gently to the floor of the chapel, with his neck-bone snapped in two.

Roland stood over his dead body and addressed him. "Thief and scoundrel! Why did you want to deceive your liege lord? Why did you want to take their possessions from these two unhappy orphans? I wanted to punish you

a little, but I see that you are dead! May God forgive you, if He can!"

Then he turned to Carloman. "My lord," he said in a loud, ringing voice, "this is the way we deal with traitors and cheats in the army of your brother Charlemagne! You saw Arneis bare his blade and attack me. If there is one in this chapel who says I was wrong to defend myself, let him step forth!"

No one stepped forth, or even voiced a whisper.

"My lord Carloman," Roland went on, "the elder of these lads is the rightful heir of my father's good friend Count Geoffroy of Anjou. Grant me a week to instruct him, and he will be ready to take the oath of homage and assume his father's duties!"

"It is granted, my lord Roland!" said the King in an awed voice.

Thierry's eyes, averted from Elvira as he spoke, had been fixed upon the dark gulch between two steep lines of cliffs that led away from the *choza* and up into the mountains to the north. Now he brought them back to the face of the Visigothic maiden.

"That, my Lady," he said, "is the end of the story of my early years. In a week, in accordance with Roland's promise, I was knighted and had taken the oath. Since that time, I have been riding in Roland's following, where my brother joined me five years later."

Elvira had been listening in spellbound silence, never removing her eyes from the knight's face as he spoke. Now, as he finished his tale, she impulsively rested her hand on his.

"I begin to see and understand!" she said softly. "You owe your Count Roland a great deal, you and your brother!"

"Our very lives, I am convinced, my Lady!" replied Thierry, with deep sincerity.

"And in your Emperor you also have a sovereign whom you can love and respect!" continued Elvira musingly, as though she had not heard him.

"Charlemagne?" exclaimed Thierry proudly. "The noblest and best and wisest of rulers! The boldest and mightiest and fiercest of warriors! The richest and most powerful and generous of lords! There is no man in his hosts but would gladly lay down his life in his service!"

"How fortunate are your Franks!" Elvira's voice was filled with envy and regret. "Would that we Goths could say the same of the man who holds our throne!"

"Your King Alfonso of the Asturias?" queried Thierry. "But what is your quarrel with him? He fought bravely against the Moors that sought to overwhelm you. It was only in the direst of extremities that he called upon his friend Charlemagne for aid! And for that the barons of your brother's faction rebelled against him! For having summoned to his help a fellow Christian against the infidels you profess to admire and cherish!"

Elvira laughed. "It is clear, my lord Thierry, that you know little of what happens in our country! Our Asturian mountains are poor. News of what goes on there does not come readily to the ears of the Franks in their great and fertile land! You do not know the true story of my brother Bernaldo and our uncle Alfonso!"

"What else is there to know?" asked Thierry.

"I know not why I should tell you, my lord Frank, but tell you I will. It is common enough property among our Visigoths, and I marvel that the account has never reached the ears of your Franks. Your ignorance only proves how unconcerned you are with the affairs of the people you claim you wish to save! Listen well, Thierry, for my story is short, but bitter!"

Thierry composed himself to listen, his curiosity fully aroused. Often he had wondered what there might be, over and beyond stiff-necked pride, to inspire the Visi-

gothic rebels to fight so fanatically against their fellow Christians from France.

Elvira drew back from him and half closed her eyes.

"My brother Bernaldo and I are two unfortunates, the children of a still more unfortunate pair," she began in a low voice. "Our father was the Conde Sancho Díaz of Saldaña, a minor lordling of Alfonso's court. Our mother was Doña Ximena, sister of King Alfonso. Their love, though honorable, seemed doomed from the very start, owing to the difference in their stations; yet it overcame all obstacles, and they were wed. Their marriage was a secret one, as was our birth. But the secret could not be kept. The King, incensed at what had happened, shut up his sister in a nunnery, where she died, and imprisoned our father in the castle of Luna, after first having him blinded. But us he took under his care. We grew up at the royal court, not knowing who our parents were. We were eighteen before some kind people took it upon themselves to enlighten us. We then went before the King our uncle, and besought him on our knees to restore our father to us. He bade us wait, for he was engaged in fighting the Moors. If Bernaldo proved himself a brave knight, he said, he would reward him with our father's freedom. For one year Bernaldo fought under the King's banner, thrice saving Alfonso's life in battle, thrice asking him for our father as a boon. But Alfonso kept putting him off with promises. Finally, there came a day when this kindly monarch, who would give Spain to the Franks, condescended to give back our father to me and my brother. He bade us ride out on the road beyond Oviedo, where a party of knights would lead our father to us. We rode out, and soon encountered the party. In their midst was a knight in armor, his visor drawn, his head bowed. I sprang from my horse and ran to kiss his hand, as did Bernaldo. The hand we kissed was icy, like the grave. When we attempted to embrace him, he toppled from his horse. He

was but a corpse, having died in prison while my brother and I begged for his freedom. Alfonso, monster of cruelty that he was, had put off Bernaldo with promises until he had learned of our father's death. Then he kept his word!

"As we returned weeping to Oviedo, bearing our father's body with us, we were met by a party of Visigothic barons, who announced to us that Alfonso, out of a clear sky and without consulting his feudal council, had summoned Charlemagne to his aid against the Moors, promising him the overlordship of our free land. Do you wonder, Frank, that we raced through the Asturian countryside, raising the standard of revolt against a king who could deal in such fashion with his own kin, even while he generously granted to the Frankish Emperor our ancestral lands that were not his to grant?"

It was the knight's turn to lay his hand on hers. "I have heard, my lady Elvira," he said. "I have heard, and I wonder no longer at your attitude. But why do you and your brother think such evil of us Franks? We came here not to hold down upon you an unjust ruler, but to free you forever from the infidels who beset you!"

Elvira quickly disengaged her hand from his. "We need no freeing, Sir Thierry!" she replied. "Until you came, we were well on the way to freeing ourselves. What freedom may we expect from those who come in the guise of allies to King Alfonso? Why do you Franks not cross the Pyrenees once more, and leave us to deal in our own way with both the Moors and our unworthy sovereign?"

Thierry shook his head. "Nay, Lady! That were impossible! Our Emperor has sworn a solemn oath not to quit Spain until the last Saracen is hurled back across the sea, or converted! Rather, why do you not join us in this holy task? Why do you not lay aside personal hatreds and private vengeances, in the name of Christ and His Cross, until the task be accomplished?"

"Good cannot come out of evil, Sir Thierry!" answered Elvira with decision. "We of Spain can never again accept the rulership of a king who is forsworn! Even less can we accept the overlordship of one whom he has summoned to his aid! It was not to fight the Moors that our Alfonso called your Charlemagne! It was to strengthen his own throne, shaking under his iniquities!"

Thierry slowly shook his head again. "Be that as it may, my Lady, our present course is clear. We are here to drive the Moors and their false faith from your land. Here we shall remain until that holy work is done, which may be sooner than you think!"

He would have spoken on, for he had much to say. But her eyes told him that her hatred knew neither bounds nor reason. There was no convincing this implacable stone image!

There was a silence that endured, while Frank and Visigoth looked into each other's eyes, both determined, both unyielding.

13

THE DISCOVERY

"For sole embrace, a kiss upon the brow;
My lord and master, pray respect the vow
That I have made to God, in which I said
That I would not submit to you unwed!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 6915-6918

HUON AND ESCLARMONDE, HAVING STROLLED OFF IN the moonlight to the nearby knoll, had discoursed at length of the differences and similarities of their respective faiths. Now they were lying quietly on the grass.

"What are your thoughts, my Huon?" inquired Esclarmonde at length, as she lay with her hands clasped behind her head, one knee drawn up, and her eyes staring dreamily at the full moon. She had pulled down her veil, so that it lay across her bare throat and left her pretty face exposed.

Huon kept his eyes averted from her. Now that they were alone, there seemed to be within him a peculiar, unwonted feeling of timidity, all strangely mingled with a great yearning. Perhaps it was the memory of their first meeting in Marsile's garden, or of the days and nights he had spent in Marsile's dungeon.

"I am wondering," he replied truthfully.

"Wondering about what?" she persisted.

"About the life you led before you knew me."

Esclarmonde threw back her head and laughed a tinkling, silvery, full-throated laugh that displayed to the

full the graceful line of her neck and made the cups of her breasts vibrate beneath the harem jacket.

"It was a very simple life, my love. I dwelt in the women's quarters of my father's palace, surrounded by my servants and eunuchs. I ate and slept and laughed and played among the fountains. Sometimes I eavesdropped on my father's councils from the discreet privacy of my windows, for I am curious to know what goes on. Besides, I learned those arts which the Moslem law permits women to learn—strange tongues, such as that of our Christian foes, the playing of the lute, the art of singing—"

"Singing?" asked Huon incredulously.

"Yes, singing. Do not your women sing?"

"Only hymns in churches, and lullabies to their infants. What manner of chants do you sing?"

"Shall I give you a sample, my lord? Would that I had my lute for accompaniment! But that had to be left behind, along with many other things I miss. Listen!"

In a low-pitched, gentle voice, she intoned a soft Arabic melody that Huon found strangely beautiful. It had a constantly recurring refrain.

"And what may this be?" he inquired when she had finished.

"It is the song of yearning of a Moslem maiden in Africa for her lover, who has gone away to the north to fight the Christians. There is also his reply, from beyond the seas."

"And what do they say?" asked Huon curiously.

"She says: 'My lord, since you have departed from my side I have known neither peace nor rest. By day I long for you, by night I dream of you. I gaze up at the friendly moon that saw so many of our fond embraces, and wish that your strong brown arms were here, encircling my slender waist and crushing me to your lithe, manly body. Oh, lord of my life, oh, light of my day, know you what it means to love, and be alone?' "

"And what does he reply?" asked Huon, his interest more and more aroused.

"He replies: 'Fair flower of the fairest oasis of Marrakesh, bright, gleaming jewel of my crown, since I departed from your side I have thought constantly of you, of your lovely, willowy body, graceful like the gazelle's, of your soft eyes, languorous as the evening, of your lips, redder than the ruby and sweeter than the pomegranate. My blood is aflame with yearning for you. My hands long for the feel of your velvety breasts, your rounded hips, your shapely thighs. My body strains for the gentle caress of your smooth hand. Oh, lady of my life, oh, light of my day, know you what it means to love, and be alone?' "

Her dreamily melodious voice grew still. Huon, whose ears were accustomed to the fierce war chants of the Franks and the solemn, austere tones of the church hymns, sat spellbound.

"What strange words!" he said at last. "And what peculiar sentiments! We of France do not know such music, or such thoughts. Pray, sing me more!"

While Esclarmonde intoned another Arab love lyric, he reclined back on the grass and half closed his eyes to listen. This was a new world to him, a fairy world of grace and pleasure and beauty and enchantment, to which he was a stranger.

Suddenly he shook himself. "Enough, Esclarmonde! These songs are sinful! They are the invention of the devil, whereby he works his will upon your people!"

Esclarmonde obediently grew silent. "Yes, my lord Huon! Maybe you are right! Let us rather speak of our future, in your own fair land of France!"

"First you must be converted, Esclarmonde. It will take long and arduous instruction to turn you from your Saracen ways. But I love you, and for love of you will undertake the task."

"Yes, Huon!" Esclarmonde repeated submissively. "It

shall be even as you say, my lord! I shall become converted to your faith, no matter how long it may take. Then we shall be wed, according to your rites, and I shall live with you in your gloomy French castle till I am old and wrinkled and ugly. But before that occurs, I shall bear you many children, and they and their children shall surround us in our old age and make us happy!"

But Huon, reclining on his side and sucking at a straw, was staring at her with avid eyes. His heart was strangely disturbed. How fair she was, this rose from the Emir's pleasure-garden! Fairer than any of the ladies he had beheld in the palaces of France and in the court at Aix! Or perhaps it was simply that now, having grown to knight's estate, he was mature for love. At any rate, Esclarmonde's loveliness troubled him, and filled him with a fierce longing, a desire for possession such as he had not experienced before. He could not rid himself of the throbbing rhythm of the Moorish love lyric, and its translated words wove a magic spell through his brain.

The maiden turned her beautiful eyes from the moon and into his. "Does not the prospect please you, my lord Huon?" she asked fetchingly.

His hand strayed from the straw between his lips to her bare, round, brown arm, which his fingers caressed for an instant. The velvety touch of that soft Saracen flesh was maddening. Suddenly his hand gripped her arm in a vise of iron.

"Huon, my love!" she whispered as he drew her to him. There was no fear, nor even expostulation, in her dreamy voice, only languorous voluptuousness. Once again he felt the throb of exultation that had swept over him in the Emir's garden. Esclarmonde's lightly clad form was soft and supremely yielding. Her eyes gazed invitingly into his, her lips were parted to receive his.

His kisses were wild, passionate. Each of them made the maiden quiver. Each time she kissed him back with-

out restraint. It was only when his hand strayed from her arm to caress the soft, smooth curve of her neck and throat and breast, then descended still lower, that the girl demurred.

"Huon, my lord!" she whispered softly as she gently but vainly strove to push him back. "Huon, my beloved! Think where we are, and what you do!"

Without listening, Huon kissed her lips again and again. "Esclarmonde!" he breathed fiercely. "I love you! I want you! Now!"

Esclarmonde ceased struggling, but the mockery that he had seen before came into her eyes again, and gave him pause. Poised over her supple form, with his hot breath playing on her cheek, he halted for an instant, half inquiringly, half angrily.

"My lord!" she whispered again with the soft caress of the Mediterranean south wind in her voice. "Remember! I am still a Saracen! It were a mortal sin to touch me! You yourself have said so!"

Huon waved the objection aside impatiently.

"What matters it? You will soon be a Christian! And Saracen or Christian, you are a woman—my woman!"

It was the old story of the brutal directness of the Frank pitted against the clever cunning of the Saracen—the great, heavy, straight sword against the curved, slender, keen-cutting scimitar.

But Esclarmonde, still soft and unresisting in his arms, spoke again. "Even if I were already a Christian, it is one of the deadliest sins in the eyes of your God for a man and a woman who are not wed to give full vent to their passion for each other! You would not have me burn with you in your Christian hell forever, would you, my lord Huon?"

The knight was incensed at these tactics. He did not loose his grip, but asked her impatiently, "Where have you learned this nonsense?"

"It is no nonsense, Sir Huon! It is so written in your

sacred books, which are so like and yet so unlike our Al-Quran. The lady Elvira has taught me."

Huon's impatience exploded. "The Lady Elvira! Always the lady Elvira! Who is she to instruct you? Why have we brought her here with us?"

"She is good, and pious, and loyal, my love. Were it not for her, and her teachings before you came, I would not have deigned you with a glance, since I would have regarded you as a heathen infidel. She comes with us because we must restore her to her brother Bernaldo and keep her from falling into the hands of your Emperor."

"And what terrible things would happen if she were to fall into the hands of Charlemagne, pray? He is a noble king, and the best of rulers!"

"He would have her head cut off along with the rest of the hostages as soon as he learns of my father's trickery."

Huon was not so far gone with passionate frenzy as not to prick up his ears at these words.

"What trickery, my love?"

"That which he planned with your leader Ganelon, as you doubtless recall."

Huon did not recall. "Nay, tell me more!" he urged.

"Your leader must have told you how he planned to gain my father's aid so that Charlemagne would leave Spain, and the evil man who wants the war to go on forever be slain."

"Roland?"

"Yes, that was the name I heard. Once he were out of the way, your leader said, there would be no more war between your people and mine."

Huon did not know whether the sudden, terrible anxiety he felt showed in his voice. "And how was this to be accomplished?" he asked, holding Esclarmonde tight in a grip no longer born of desire.

"From my latticed window, whence I listen to the

council of the Emirs, I could not overhear all that was said. But it doubtless went in accordance with the plans you and your leader had made with Blancandrin. We were to give treasure and hostages, on condition that your host removed to France. Roland would be appointed by your leader to the rear guard, with a small detachment. My father would fall upon him with all the forces at his disposal, and destroy him and his fellow war-partisans before your Emperor could return. Then there would ensue long years of peace between your land and mine. But why need I tell you of all this? Everything went in accordance with your plans. Your leader is giving my father's reply to your Emperor even now, as we lie here!"

"As we lie here!" Huon's echoing voice was filled with fury. With blazing eyes, he cast the Saracen maiden from him for the second time in less than a week, sprang to his feet, and started running toward the hut.

"Huon, my lord!" Esclarmonde cried after him in a hurt voice. "Have I said aught to offend you? Come back to me, my love!"

Thierry and Elvira were seated on the bench beside the hut in tense silence, staring uncompromisingly at and past each other.

"Thierry!" Huon's loud voice suddenly burst in upon them. "Thierry! There's treason afoot! Ganelon plots the death of Count Roland!"

Bewildered, Thierry leaped up to face his brother. Esclarmonde, her veil flying behind her, came running up behind Huon.

Huon knew that the enormity of the treason had to be related quickly. Quickly, stumbling over his words, he did it, not sure of what he said. Thierry's decision was swift.

"Brother, there is no time to be lost! Do you go on with the damsels to Bernaldo's court, relate the tale, and sue for his help against Moslem treachery, in the name of our

common Christianity! I ride to warn Roland and the Emperor! Heaven grant they believe me! We start at once!"

They saddled their horses with all speed. But before they could mount, they saw their host running down the steep hillside. Breathless, he addressed the lady Elvira in his incomprehensible tongue.

"My lords!" she addressed the brothers in her turn. "A large troop of Saracen cavalry is approaching this valley!"

14

THE CASTLE OF BERNALDO DEL CARPIO

"Did the mighty King of France
Conquer Spain, by any chance?
Does he want to rule these lands?
Not while we have arms and hands!"
Ballad of Bernardo del Carpio

AS THEY FLED UP THE NARROW VALLEY, RIDING ALL four abreast, they heard the first guttural cries of the Saracen pursuers, the thunder of their horses' hoofs, the twang of the Basque shepherd's longbow as he strove to deter them from pursuit by drawing their attention to himself. But the pursuers were undeterred. A few of their number paused to dispatch the Basque, the others came on, shouting Moorish war cries.

"They are calling upon me by name, Huon!" gasped Esclarmonde as they galloped swiftly along the ever-narrowing gorge. "They are not just a raiding party, but pursuers sent after us from Zaragoza!"

"What will happen if they take you, Esclarmonde?" asked Huon anxiously.

"The Moslem woman who flees with an infidel dies strangled by a silken scarf, be her rank high or low!" replied the maiden simply.

"Brother!" shouted Huon to Thierry above the clatter of the horses' hoofs. "Brother, we must halt and make a stand here, you and I, in the narrowest part of the gorge!"

"And our message to Roland and Charlemagne?" Thierry flung back over his shoulder.

"We must rely on Esclarmonde and Elvira to bear it. Once we get out into the plain beyond, the Saracens will be able to surround us as they overtake us. All four of us will perish. But here, you and I can hold them back while the damsels escape!"

"Be it even as you say, brother!" Thierry, convinced, reined in his mount. The others did likewise. He turned to Elvira.

"Elvira!" he used her name for the first time without the customary prefix. "Take Esclarmonde with you, and flee to your brother! Tell him your story. Beg him, in the name of our common God, to send warning to Charlemagne of Ganelon's treason!"

Elvira regarded him curiously. "So even among the Franks there can be treason!" she exclaimed. " 'Tis well, Sir Thierry. You have done your best by me. I shall do my best by you!"

"My love, I shall not leave you here to die alone!" cried Esclarmonde to Huon. But Elvira had already seized her bridle.

"Come, Esclarmonde! Either two die, or four! You know your lord's wish! A Christian maiden obeys!"

While the beat of their horses' hoofs died away in the distance, that of the pursuers came nearer. Thierry looked about him. The spot they had chosen to make their stand was the most strategically situated they could have picked. Here the narrow road ran between two great cliffs, with barely thirty yards between the two walls of rock. The heights could not be scaled at this point. If they succeeded in holding their ground, their pursuers, attempting to encircle them or speed after the girls, would have to retrace their steps a quarter of a league. The ravine was dark where they stood, but a stray moonbeam cast a faint light on the road whence the Saracens must come.

Come they did, but no longer at a gallop. The brothers saw them advance up the ravine slowly, skulkingly, one of

their number in the lead, the rest, about twenty in number, strung out behind, in single file. This was Basque country, and the Basques were redoubtable for their ambuscades.

Thierry called out to them in Arabic when they were still a hundred yards away. "Halt, pagan dogs! If you come on, you die!"

The Saracen in the van reined in his mount and cupped his hands to make reply. "Infidels, yield! You cannot escape! Return to us the princess Esclarmonde unharmed, and you die mercifully by hanging!"

Thierry laughed loud and long. He was not at all averse to parleying, for every minute gained put a greater distance between the damsels and the pursuers.

"And if we resist, Saracen?" he shouted back.

"Resist, and we will nevertheless take you alive and carry you back to Zaragoza, where you will die a thousand deaths before Allah's mercy stills your hearts forever!"

It was Huon's turn to bait the Saracen, who still came on slowly, at a pace.

"Stand where you are! We have bows! Advance another step, and we loose the arrows!"

This was not true, and Thierry looked reproachfully at his brother, who shrugged his shoulders. But it gave the Saracens pause. From where they stood, they could not see their quarry, while they themselves were exposed in the moonlight, with no tree or shrub behind which to take cover.

The Saracen leader barked an order to his men, half of whom wheeled their horses and galloped away down the road along which they had come. They were going to scale the heights where they were passable, thought Thierry, and come upon them from behind. But all this would take time, and time was what was needed. After he and his brother were slain, the Saracens would discover that Esclarmonde and Elvira were not with them and resume the

chase, but by then the damsels would have such a start as to give them an excellent chance of reaching safety.

The Moslem commander dismounted and advanced toward them on foot, holding both his empty hands high in the air. "I would speak to the princess Esclarmonde!" he shouted. "Let me address her!"

"Stand back, Saracen, or you die!" cried Huon.

The Saracen was brave. He came on. "Your laws of chivalry forbid you to slay an unarmed man!" he replied. "I must have a word with the princess, and bear her her father's message, even if I die!"

Huon was in a quandary. There were no bows, there were no arrows. There were only their Moorish scimitars, those long, curved, keen blades, so light in weight, so strange in use, to which they of the great, straight, heavy swords were unaccustomed.

"Back, Saracen, back!" he shouted frenziedly.

The Moor still came on, his arms held high, until he stood within twenty paces of them, and they could see his aquiline features beneath the pointed Moorish war helmet, his short black beard and hawk nose and fierce black eyes that peered into the darkness ahead of him.

"They have no bows!" he shouted suddenly, and turned to flee. "On, my men, and at the infidels!"

The laws of chivalry were what they were. Huon, filled with hot fury, pressed his spurs into his horse's flanks, rode out swiftly after the fleeing man, and cut him down with a sweep of his scimitar. He wondered at the ease with which the razorlike Toledan blade sliced through helmet and skull beneath.

But there was no time for wonderment. The Moor's companions, all ten or a dozen of them, came swiftly riding up the ravine, shouting "Allah!" and swinging their scimitars. Thierry dashed out in support of his brother.

They met the Moslem charge head on. Such was the narrowness of the defile that no more than three men

could ride abreast, so that the Saracens' superior numbers availed them little.

Horses reared and neighed wildly as they met. Scimitars described great semicircles in the moonlight as they swung. Two of the Saracens went down, but Thierry and Huon were both unhorsed in the press. They rose again amid screaming horses and shouting men, Thierry with a burning, throbbing pain in his left shoulder, Huon with a gash across the left cheek from which the blood spurted. The mounted Saracens pressed in upon them, hacking and cutting.

From down the road came a great shout, "Santiago de Compostela! *Santiago y Bernaldo!*" mingled with the thunder of many hoofs. The Moslems hesitated, wavered, turned to flee, so that Huon, whose bloodlust was thoroughly aroused, ran one through from back to front.

Then the thundering charge was upon them. The Saracens were dispersed, submerged, cut down, and seen no more. Before the two wounded and weary brothers, in a semicircle, stood a large group of mounted men, clad in Christian armor, whose conical helmets and tunics embroidered with Spanish arms proclaimed them to be Visigothic warriors of the party of Bernaldo.

Thierry's first feelings were of unmixed joy and relief. So Doña Elvira and Esclarmonde had already reached Bernaldo and sent a party to their rescue! But a look at the faces of the rescuers showed them to be grim and hostile. They were for the most part handsome, bearded men, many of them fair of hair and blue of eyes, not unlike the Franks themselves, whose racial origin they shared. But their still drawn swords and the air of fierce, uncompromising hostility with which they regarded their fellow Christians whom they had rescued from the Moors were not reassuring. Neither were their words.

"Franks! Do you yield?" cried one of them in Spanish Romance. "Or must we slay you as we did the Saracens?"

Thierry threw down his bloody scimitar, and signaled to Huon to follow his example.

"We yield ourselves to you, Spaniards!" he replied simply. "We cast ourselves upon your Christian mercy, and beseech that you lead us to your lord Count Bernaldo!"

"That request were easy to grant!" exclaimed their captor, seemingly mollified by their prompt submission. "He is not far from here. But first let us tend to your wounds."

Several of the Spaniards dismounted and came forward. Their rough ministrations helped soothe the flesh wounds in Thierry's shoulder and the gash in Huon's left cheek, while a draught of wine from a leathern flask gave the brothers new life.

"Has the lady Elvira reached her brother?" Thierry asked anxiously of the Spanish leader.

The Visigoth looked at him incredulously. "The lady Elvira? You have news of the lady Elvira?"

"She was with us but half an hour ago," replied Thierry. "Together we had made our escape from Zaragoza. My brother and I halted the Saracens in the pass to give her a chance to make her way to Count Bernaldo."

"If what you say is true—" exclaimed the Visigoth. Then, interrupting himself, he called out a quick order to his men. Half of them leaped on their horses and galloped off down the road, in the direction taken by the damsels, half an hour before.

Huon and Thierry were conducted to their horses, made to mount, and led off, with the Spanish commander at their side and a stout guard of Visigothic warriors ahead and behind.

"We go to Bernaldo," said the leader as they rode. "He will want news of his sister—if indeed you speak the truth, Sir Frank!"

There was doubt and suspicion in his voice. Thierry held his peace.

A few hours' ride through the mountains saw them in Vitoria, the small town high up in the Basque country which Bernaldo's forces had retaken from the Franks over a year ago and made the radiating center of their forays against both Franks and Saracens. The town's castle, toward which the riders headed, still bore the traces of siege and countersiege. Over its battlements fluttered the yellow ensign of Bernaldo, with the single red tower in its center.

Through dim, torchlit halls and corridors the two Frankish captives and their captors made their way, until they stood in the vast, vaulted bedchamber where Bernaldo slept. But Bernaldo, informed of their coming, was up and waiting, half-clad, pacing impatiently up and down the chamber. When they entered, he turned quickly to face them.

"Ah, here you are at last!" he exclaimed, striding toward them in his bare feet.

Thierry and Huon stood blinking in the taper light, regarding the famed Spanish guerrilla leader whose daring exploits had become legendary in the Frankish host. He was a man of tall stature, quick of movements, flaxen-haired and flaxen-bearded, with clear, haughty blue eyes that had in them the look of courage, determination and sincerity. Thierry marveled at his youth, then remembered that he was the twin brother of the lady who had caused his heart to throb more violently. Feature by feature, he recognized Elvira in the man who stood before him.

But Bernaldo was in no mood for reverie. "Franks!" he cried out impatiently. "They say you were with my sister! Speak! What has befallen her?"

As Thierry opened his mouth to reply, Bernaldo's eye lighted upon the wounds of his captives. His knightly instincts came to the fore.

"Your pardon, sirs! You are both wounded! Pray, sit on yonder benches, and accept a cup of wine! You must think ill of our Spanish hospitality!" He turned to a table

laden with flagons and goblets, poured out two brimming cups, and advanced toward the brothers with one in each hand.

It was Thierry's turn to be impatient. "My lord Bernaldo!" he inquired, waving away the proffered goblet. "Pray tell me! The lady Elvira has not yet been brought in by any of your scouting parties?"

The Visigoth looked at him in astonishment. "Upon my faith, no! Else would I be questioning you?"

"My lord Bernaldo," said Thierry earnestly, "before we do or say aught else, I pray you, send out parties of your riders! Bid them scour the countryside between here and the spot where we were taken, until they find the lady Elvira!"

"And the Moslem damsel in her company!" interjected Huon.

Bernaldo stared at them with a long look in which hope, fear, despair and suspicion were commingled. "Be it as you say, Sir Frank!" he replied. Turning to one of the captains who had brought in the youths, he gave orders. The captain bowed and issued from the chamber.

"Now, then, sirs!" said Bernaldo, turning again to the brothers. "Sit on yonder bench, drink your wine, and tell me your story! And remember, I am in no mood for lies where my sister is concerned!"

"Nor am I, my lord Bernaldo!" replied Thierry. And he plunged into his account of his mission, the court of Zaragoza, where he had first beheld Elvira, their miraculous escape from the city, the recent flight of the damsels under cover of his own and Huon's stand. "So sure was I that they had reached you," he concluded, "that when we were rescued by your men I half expected to see her in their midst!"

He bowed his head wearily, striving to conceal the bitterness in his heart in the wine cup at his elbow.

Bernaldo, who had been scrutinizing his face as he

spoke, stood up, strode over to Thierry, and placed a hand on his unhurt shoulder.

"Sir Frank," he said simply. "I am inclined to believe you. You seem a knight without guile or treachery. If your story be true, I have little doubt that my men will find my sister—and your Saracen princess," he added, turning to Huon. "The country where your recent fight occurred is well within the territory held by my forces. Saracens come to it but seldom, and at great risk to themselves."

Thierry looked up into his eyes. "Aye, but half the Saracen party made off down the road—to encircle us, as we thought. Perhaps they pursued the damsels instead."

The leader of their rescuers spoke up. "Nay, we met a party of a dozen or so Saracens shortly before we came upon you. Not one of them escaped."

Thierry and Huon breathed a great sigh.

"And now, my lord Bernaldo," said Thierry with decision, "we have a great boon to ask of you. Whether you release us to perform the mission ourselves, or send an embassy of your own men, keeping us here as hostages, it matters little. But our honor requires that we find some means of informing our Emperor and our liege lord Count Roland of Ganelon's black deed of treachery. Else will Marsile and his Moors cut down Roland where he stands in the rear guard, to which the traitor Ganelon has appointed him."

Bernaldo bowed his head. For what seemed an interminable time, he thought in silence. In the background, his captains whispered excitedly among themselves. Thierry and Huon awaited anxiously.

"My lords!" Bernaldo spoke at last without raising his head. "How much of my story do you know?"

Thierry shook his head. "Only what is common knowledge, my lord Bernaldo. It is known that when your king Alfonso the Chaste of the Asturias invited our Emperor

to come into Spain and help drive out the Saracens, you and others of the Visigothic barons rebelled, thinking this meant subjection of your land to Frankish domination."

"And was it not so, Sir Frank?" inquired the Count.

"Nay, my lord. The Emperor Charles came into Spain to perform a Christian duty, not to add lands to the vast realms he already holds. Our mission is to regain Spain for Christendom, not to enslave it. I, and many of my fellow knights, have taken a solemn vow not to depart from Spain alive until it is once more Christian, from Oviedo to Tarifa and from Lisbon to Barcelona. What better proof could you have of our Emperor's intentions than his acceptance of Marsile's proposal, had it been made in good faith? Let Marsile and his Saracens receive Christianity, and our Emperor returns to his chapel at Aix, and disturbs the peace of Christian Spain no more!"

There was more than sincerity in Thierry's voice. There was a touch of that fanaticism which in a few centuries would bind together embattled Christendom in the great cry of the Crusades, "God wills it!"

Bernaldo raised his head. "Frank, would that your Emperor had made his meaning clear when he first came into Spain! Much Christian blood might have been saved that was shed instead! Since Ataulfo first established our Visigothic kingdom of Spain, since Saint Hermenegildo and Saint Leandro converted our heathen ancestors, we Visigoths have held this proud land to be our own. True, King Rodrigo lost it at the bloody battle of La Janda. But that was because he was betrayed by his vassal Count Julián. He it was who gave free passage to the Moors across the straits, because his daughter La Cava had been shamefully seduced by the King. One man gave way to the demon of lust, one woman lost her honor, and an entire nation had to be submerged in blood and treachery! We lost Córdoba and Seville, Toledo and Zaragoza, but we fought on! From the last northern strip of land left to us, from our

new capital of Oviedo, from the shrine of Compostela and the battlefield of Covadonga, we fought back at the Moors who had overrun our country. Slowly, inch by inch, we were reconquering it. Were it to take us not a hundred, but a thousand years, we shall reconquer it!"

Bernaldo's voice had risen fiercely as he spoke. In his words was concentrated all the haughty grandeur of Spain, all the stiff-necked pride of a heroic nation that seeks no quarter and gives none. He had risen from his seat, and strode back and forth in his bare feet, gesticulating as he spoke. His captains listened to his words with approving nods and subdued whispers, the brothers in awed silence.

The Count went on, casting a wild look at his prisoner-guests: "Then there came to us a king, Alfonso, surnamed the Chaste because his Frankish queen refuses to sleep with him and spends her time at your court of France, intriguing against her lord and his nation. We know not whether it was her intrigues or his vacillation that caused him to call upon your Emperor. But call upon him he did, without consulting his barons, as his royal oath bound him to do. Is it any wonder we rebelled? What seek the Franks in this our land, so sorely tried, so proud in defeat, so certain of eventual victory? An easy conquest, at the expense of Moors and Christians, busy fighting each other? We want you out! But if your Emperor withdraws of his own accord, we have no more quarrel with him. Let him go in peace to fight his Saxon rebels, and leave us in peace to fight our Moors! As for your internal intrigues, your Rolands and Ganelons, we care nothing! Let Ganelon betray Roland, so that Marsile may destroy them both! What business is it of ours?"

Bernaldo's voice had grown thick with fury as he recounted the story of his country's wrongs. He pounded the table with his fist so that all the goblets and ewers rattled.

"I tell you, Frank, Alfonso must go, and so must his

ally Charlemagne! Rather would I deal with Marsile than with them!"

The Spanish captains no longer whispered. They shouted their approval of their leader's words.

Thierry jumped to his feet and held up his hands for silence. "My lord Bernaldo, and you, *fijosdalgo* of Spain, hearken to my words! My lord Charlemagne has consented to leave your land! Even now he is withdrawing across the Pyrenees, never to return! But you, Count Bernaldo, and you, barons of the Visigoths, will remain here! You will remain here to face the full fury of Marsile and his Moors, drunk with victory and power after they shall have slain our leader Roland! You will have no Franks to help you, or draw the blows of Marsile to themselves! How long do you think you can hold out after we are gone? What will happen then to this fair land of Spain, with your Visigoths torn between contending factions, and the Saracens holding undisputed sway over the country south of the Cantabrians? Were it not better for you to join Roland where he stands with his Frankish rear guard, help him cut to pieces Marsile's attacking forces, then speed him on his way across the great mountains? With your forces and his, you can destroy the Moors and save Spain! Let him succumb to Ganelon's treachery and Marsile's might, and you succumb next! Bethink it well, my lords of Spain!"

Bernaldo stood perplexed at this fiery eloquence of his Frankish prisoner. He turned from the brothers and strode to where his captains were clustered in a knot. There was a long whispered confabulation among them, while Thierry and Huon waited.

When Bernaldo returned, his face was set. "My lords of the Franks," he said, "you ride at once, with an escort, to warn your Emperor and Roland! I follow at dawn, with what men I can muster. Pray, my lords, that my sister may be found, and that you and I arrive in time!"

15

REAR GUARD ASSIGNMENT

"If I should fail you, God confuse my hand!
I'll keep the twenty thousand of my band.
Go through the pass without regret or fear!
No living man can harm you while I'm here!"
Chanson de Roland, 788-791

DAWN BROKE OVER THE FRANKISH ENCAMPMENT AS Count Ganelon rode in, alone, having dismissed his Saracen escort at the crossing of the Ebro and his fifty Frankish men-at-arms at the outermost sentry line. The camp was pitched in the vicinity of the remnants of the city of Gelna, midway between Córdoba and Zaragoza, a city taken and destroyed by Count Roland in the war's earlier years, and condemned to lie in ruins for centuries to come.

After the departure of his envoys, Charlemagne had lost no time. He had put his great host in motion in a northeasterly direction. If the embassy turned out well, he would strike a more northerly course, and return to France by way of the Basque country; if badly, a turn to the east, and Zaragoza would lie in his path.

It was consequently an encampment far to the north of the one he had left behind that Ganelon approached in the dark hours before the dawn. There was some slight uneasiness in the Count's mind, and a great sense of yawning regret. The uneasiness was due to the strange escape of his erstwhile companions, which had been discovered and announced shortly before his own departure from Zaragoza. Marsile had assured him that his forces, deployed through

the countryside between the city and the Duero, would intercept the fugitives if they should chance to turn in the direction of the Frankish host, while swift cavalry detachments sent out in pursuit had already reported them heading northward, toward the Visigothic country. There was therefore very little chance that Thierry and Huon would again show their faces while Charlemagne lingered on the Spanish side of the pass of Cize.

What really ate at the Count's heart was the escape of Elvira along with the captives. The Spanish maiden was a delectable dish that he had reserved for his own palate. Far from presenting her to Charlemagne as a hostage, it had been his intention to entrust her, along with the Moslem gifts he had received, to his faithful uncle Guinemer, and have her whisked off secretly, ahead of the army's passage, to one of his more remote castles in France, one which his good wife Bertha never visited. There he would enjoy to the full both his Saracen and his Visigothic treasures. The breaking of that proud Spanish spirit would be a long and pleasurable task.

But the lady Elvira, along with the Emir's daughter and his own two recreant knights, had chosen to disappear instead into the mountain fastnesses to the north, and was now probably on the way to her brother Bernaldo. No matter. Once his major enterprise was out of the way, he would return to Spain and seek out, with Marsile's aid, the woman who had stirred his heart and senses as they had not been stirred since his very early years.

Marsile's anger against his daughter Esclarmonde, Ganelon recalled with some amusement, had been something awesome to behold. By the Koran and the Prophet, he had disowned the fruit of his loins who had brought down disgrace upon his house by fleeing with infidels. Then, in private, Marsile had wept bitter tears. Ganelon shrugged as he came to the entrance of the camp. What did these petty human problems matter to him—Thierry,

Huon, Esclarmonde, Marsile, even Elvira, when vengeance and ambition were at stake?

Early as was Ganelon's arrival, the Emperor's rising had been earlier. Fresh from Mass and morning prayer, Charles was already seated on his throne, before his great pavilion. About him stood Roland, Oliver, Duke Naimon, and many others of the Frankish leaders.

"Welcome back, Sir Ganelon!" cried the Emperor, as his envoy was ushered into his presence and bowed before him. "What news do you bring from the city of the Saracens?"

Ganelon stood facing him, his handsome head proudly erect. A hundred eyes were fixed anxiously upon him, a hundred ears listened for his words. It was a moment of triumph, and he savored it to the full.

"May God keep and save you, sire!" the Count began in a loud, clear voice. "I bring you here the keys of Zaragoza, along with abundant tribute and twenty highborn hostages! See that you guard them well, for they are our guarantee against possible Moslem treachery. Proud King Marsile bids you forgive the absence of the Caliph his uncle. In my own presence he refused to be bound by his sovereign's decision. He, and scores of other Moslem nobles, with countless men-at-arms, swore they would die rather than forswear their false Prophet and become Christians. They took their departure by force out of Zaragoza and sailed down the Ebro in skiffs and chalands, hoping to reach the sea and the African coast. Marsile and his faithful pursued them, taking me and my two companions in their train. There was a fierce running battle along the swift course of the river. With my own eyes I saw the Caliph's skiff overturn, and all on board drown. But, alas! the skiff on which Sir Thierry and Sir Huon had taken passage was also overturned in the scrimmage. We saw them carried away by the current, weighted down by their armor, sinking, rising again, strug-

gling in the water, then sinking finally to rise no more. We were too far away to bear them aid. Two such valiant knights, Count Roland, I have never known, and shall never know again. I shall mourn them long, even as you will. When we return to France, I shall have a chapel built in their memory!"

Ganelon had half turned around to address Roland as he spoke. There was warm pity, and sympathy, and friendliness in his voice. Count Roland bowed his head and made no reply. His lips moved silently in prayer, as did his companion Oliver's. When they raised their heads again, there was a glint of tears in their eyes.

Count Ganelon had turned once more to Charlemagne. "Were the Caliph alive, sire, I would have brought him here. But he is dead, and will not be seen again. As for Marsile, he gives you his assurance that before a month has passed he will follow you to France, to your own Empire, and accept the Faith you hold dear and the Laws by which you live. He will join his hands and do you homage. He will hold the kingdom of Spain as a fief from you!"

A loud hum of approbation arose from the Frankish chieftains. "Well done, Ganelon!" "Well spoken, Count!" many of them cried.

Charles rose and held up his hands to heaven.

"God be praised!" he exclaimed loudly, "Count Ganelon, you have done your work faithfully and well! You shall be richly rewarded!"

The Count bowed. "I have enough reward, sire!" he replied simply. Only God and he knew in what fashion he was speaking the truth.

Within an hour, all was confusion in the camp. A thousand trumpets blared as the Franks dismounted their tents and pavilions and began to load their sumpter beasts for the long journey back to their own land. Roland's ensign,

placed high on a cliff against the sky, gave the signal for the departure.

But some days later the Emperor, riding his great white charger in the van, with Duke Naimon by his side, was not happy. Seven long years he had tarried in Spain, taking castles and overthrowing cities. Now his war was over. Victory, complete and absolute, had crowned his efforts. He had kept his vow. Yet a strange foreboding of evil clutched at his heart. It was almost as though he could see the great pagan host, armed with keen scimitars and sharp lances, attired in iron-plated sarks and pointed Moorish war helmets, that cantered on through the great valleys that lay beyond the mist-veiled peaks to the north, a mighty army of four hundred thousand, ready and poised to snatch the fruits of victory from his grasp and bring doom to his land and household.

"What ails you, my lord?" asked Duke Naimon solicitously, cantering at the Emperor's side. "Your face, that should be wreathed in smiles, is lined with sorrow!"

The Emperor shook his head. "I do not know, my lord Duke!" he replied in a subdued voice. "Last night, as I slept, I had two strange dreams, one more fearful than the other. In the first, it seemed to me that I stood in the great pass of Cize, the one we see rising before us in the distance. I held my great ashen spear in both my hands. A figure suddenly rose up beside me, seized the spear from my grasp, while I was powerless to stop him, broke it in two, and flung the pieces into the sky. His face was veiled, but his general appearance was like that of one I know."

"Who?" asked Naimon with evident curiosity.

"Count Ganelon!" replied Charlemagne.

"How strange!" murmured the Duke.

"Then, when I had fallen asleep again, I had another vision. This time it seemed to me I stood in my palace at Aix. A fierce wild boar suddenly leaped at me and seized

my right arm between his teeth. Out of the forest came bounding a leopard to attack me at the same time. But as I despaired of my safety, a greyhound dashed from the hall, leaping in the air at my call. First he caught the right ear of the boar, and forced him to loose his grip; next he engaged the leopard in furious combat. I heard many voices talking of a great battle, but then a cloud of mist descended over my vision, and I no longer saw where the victory lay. What think you, Sir Naimon? What mean these dreams?"

"Sire," replied the Duke, "dreams are but fleeting visions, sent perchance by God for our guidance, perchance by the Adversary for our deception. 'Tis better to fix our attention upon realities. And the reality now is that you must appoint the order of the host as it will cross the great pass of Cize!"

"You are right, my lord Naimon!" said the Emperor. "When we make halt for the noonday meal, we shall summon our barons and take counsel with them how this difficult passage may best be negotiated."

An hour later, the Emperor addressed his council, amid the din of a host on the march.

"My lords barons," he said to his nobles, "you see before you the pass of Cize, through which we came seven years ago, when this campaign first began. You know well how wild and perilous are those narrow defiles, with their high precipices and rushing torrents. Those who go in the van will have to guard against the savage Basques who inhabit those mountains. Theirs will be a dangerous assignment. But there is one even more dangerous. If the Moslems are inclined to treachery, those who guard the rear of the army will have to bear the full brunt of their assault. I myself, with Duke Naimon and Ogier of Denmark, shall lead the van. Whom shall we appoint to command the rear guard?"

Before anyone else could speak, Count Ganelon had

risen to his feet. "Sire," he replied, loudly and emphatically, "there's my good stepson Count Roland! You have no better vassal, no baron whose valor is so rare! With him guarding our rear, we shall be safe from all harm!"

The Emperor looked at him quickly. In his eye was suspicion and malevolence. He made as if to rise from his throne and speak, then recalled his kingly duty and the feudal custom, and sank back into his seat. But in his face were hatred and distrust.

Count Roland had sprung to his feet. His handsome face was proud and joyful as he addressed Ganelon with knightly courtesy.

"Sir goodfather, I must hold you dear! You have awarded the command of the rear guard to me, and I accept! I swear to you that the Emperor of France will lose not a charger or a palfrey, not a jennet or a mule, not a sumpter horse or a donkey, unless it be first paid for in Saracen blood!"

Then turning to Charlemagne he continued: "Right Emperor, grant me the bow you hold in your hand! It will not fall, I pledge you!"

Ganelon winced at this chance reminder of his own failure to hold the ambassador's glove when he had started on his journey to Zaragoza, but there was no guile in Roland's heart or voice. He held out his hand to receive the bow.

The Emperor made no move to give it. His head was bowed low, his eyes fixed upon the ground, his hand tugged at his great white beard. Some thought they saw teardrops fall from his eyes.

Naimon was quick to recall his sovereign to his duty. "My lord!" he whispered. "You have heard Ganelon's judgment and Roland's acceptance! No man will ever take the rear guard from him now! It is his post of honor. Give him the bow, sire, and find him worthy men to assist him!"

Charles raised his head. Now all could see the tears in

his eyes. But right manfully he held out the symbol of command, and right joyfully Roland grasped it.

"Fair sir nephew!" said the Emperor slowly. "Know this in truth. I shall leave half my men under your command. Retain them; they will be your safeguard!"

Count Roland drew back haughtily, as if he had been slapped across the face. Then he laughed, a loud, long merry laugh, while all men wondered.

"I will not have them!" he exclaimed. "May God confound me, if I fail in this deed! I shall retain the twenty thousand good valiant Franks of my own following, and no more! Go through the pass in all security, my lord, and fear no man so long as I am alive!"

Bowing himself from the royal presence, Roland strode quickly to his horse and mounted. One long, loud blast of his great horn, and men began scurrying from all directions to his side. Several of the barons rose from the council and joined him.

"Behold, sire!" Roland called out from afar. "Here are the men who will guard your rear—twenty thousand good Franks and true, of the best our sweet land of France has given birth to! My comrade Oliver! Gerin and the proud Count Gerier! Oton and Berenger! Fierce Anseis and the noble Duke Sanson! Old Girart of Roussillon and rich Engelier of Gascony! Come, all my brave peers! Come, all my knights and retainers! All who hold your fiefs from me, come to my side!"

Archbishop Turpin strode up to the Emperor, his sword clanking, his cassock fluttering about his legs, his blue eyes blazing. "Grant me permission to join him, sire!" he pleaded. "Now that my nephews are dead, I would be where the peril is greatest!"

"I'm with you, too!" cried Count Gualtier. "I'm Roland's man, I must not fail him now!"

One thousand knights and barons, nineteen thousand men-at-arms had soon taken their stand around Roland.

"My Lord Emperor!" shouted their leader. "I go, to guard the entrance to all the crags and ravines through which your army must pass! Have no fear! You will not lose a single man!"

Another great blast of the Oliphant gave the signal. The appointed rear guard took up a deep, powerful Frankish war chant as they began to march through the host and away toward the peaks that loomed in the distance. In the refrain were the words "Roland!" and "Monjoie!"

16

RETREAT FROM SPAIN

Beneath the mountain peaks the armies tramp,
In shadowy ravines the horses champ.
To homes in far-off France they're on the march.
All throats remembrance and emotion parch.
Sweet lands of France before the army lie;
To loved ones far away their steps they hie.
Chanson de Roland, 814-822

THE VANGUARD OF THE GREAT HOST WAS NOW WELL within the mountain passes of the Pyrenees. Everywhere about them giant peaks reared their bald, sun-bleached, melancholy heads, while the valleys far below, where swift black mountain torrents rushed, were wrapped in everlasting shadows. On all sides scouting parties scaled the heights, ever watchful for the marauding parties of Basques whose speedy arrows could bring winged, silent death; but none had so far been discovered. The clangor of tramping men and beating hoofs echoed and re-echoed across the chasms from cliff to cliff, until it spread beyond the mountains and into the fair land of Gascony that lay on the other side. Many of the host wept with emotion at the thought that they would soon see again their wives and sweethearts, their kinsmen and possessions.

But Charlemagne neither wept nor smiled as he rode his great white horse through the defiles, with Naimon by his side. They went in silence, unmindful of the clamor around them, their eyes fixed upon the ever-changing grandeur of the peaks that loomed above and before them.

Behind them, at some distance, rode several of the noblest barons, Ganelon among them.

In Charlemagne's heart were bitter sorrow and anxiety. He had left his nephew behind, in a strange land, exposed to deadly peril. Would he see him again? The tramping hoofs, regular as a death rattle, seemed to answer: "No! No! No! No!"

The captain of a scouting party galloped up and saluted.

"Right Emperor," he announced, "as we rode through the mountains to the west of here, we came upon two damsels, who were lost. One was attired in Christian, the other in Saracen garb. They seemed wellborn, and spoke to us right courteously: 'We pray you, Frank, lead us to your lord Roland. We bear a message for him.' I explained to them that Count Roland is very far away, in the rear guard. 'Then lead us to your Emperor Charles,' said the Saracen maiden. 'Our message is for his ears as well.' Since you were so near, I have brought them here."

Charlemagne seemed absent-minded and uninterested. "We return to France, captain," he said. "Bid them go back to their homes, as we go back to ours. We have no time for women."

Duke Naimon interrupted him. "Nay, sire, perhaps it were well to listen to what they have to say. From whom did they say the message was, captain?"

"From Sir Thierry of Anjou and his brother Huon."

Charlemagne and Naimon looked at each other in surprise. "These be dead men!" said the Emperor. "Dead men send no messages, save perchance in dreams. Bid the damsels go their way!"

Naimon interposed again. "Nay, sire, let us hear them. It will be easy enough to bid them begone if their talk is foolishness."

The Emperor shrugged his shoulders. "Be it as you will, Duke!" And to the captain: "Bring on your damsels!"

As the officer rode away to fetch them, Charles re-

marked: "As if we did not have enough troubles on our minds, we must have women with tales of dead men!"

The captain soon was back, with two fair ladies in his train, riding Arabian chargers, one, sitting sideways in the saddle, in the somewhat crumpled garb of a noble Spanish lady, the other in Saracen attire, but without a veil, riding astride.

Such was their appearance that all the barons riding behind Charlemagne reined in their mounts and watched with wonder, curiosity and admiration. But one among them watched with terror and dismay.

Elvira slipped gracefully from her saddle, advanced toward the Emperor, and bowed. He acknowledged her greeting with a curt nod of the head. "Speak, lady!" he said.

"Emperor of the Franks," she addressed him in the strange, yet comprehensible tongue of the northern Spaniards. "I am Elvira Díaz, sister of Bernaldo del Carpio. My companion, whom you see, is Esclarmonde, daughter of Marsile, Saracen king of Zaragoza."

The amazement and incredulity of Duke Naimon showed in his face. The Emperor was noncommittal, but seemingly unimpressed.

"Indeed, fair ladies! And what may you be doing here, so far away from your cities and your men? Know you not that it is dangerous for noble maidens such as you to wander amid these crags and ravines?"

It was Esclarmonde who spoke now, in her soft Arabic-tinged Spanish. Urging her horse to the Emperor's side, she addressed him.

"My lord Emperor, we have come here having fled from Zaragoza, from my father's palace, in the company of two of your knights, Sir Thierry of Anjou and his brother Huon. They died protecting our flight from my father's pursuers." Her voice broke a little, and the gleam

of a tear appeared in her eye, but she went on bravely. "But first they instructed us to bring a message to you, or to Count Roland. You are betrayed, my lord Charlemagne, betrayed by my father Marsile, betrayed by your envoy Count Ganelon, who plotted together to assault Count Roland and his rear guard. This I vouch for, for I heard it with my own ears and saw it with my own eyes!"

"We were to bear the message to my brother Bernaldo, and have him relay it to you, if such had been his will," interjected Doña Elvira. "But our horses strayed, and we found ourselves in the path of your army. So we decided to deliver it to you in person. You are warned, my lord Charlemagne!"

Charlemagne seemed startled. He cast a sidelong glance at Duke Naimon, who sat his horse in silence. "What think you, Sir Naimon?"

The Duke tugged his beard and eyed the two damsels in turn, with a look of unbelief on his face.

"I fear you were right, my lord! Two madwomen perchance!"

"Still—" exclaimed the Emperor. Then, turning round, he called out: "Count Ganelon!"

The Count rode up. Out of earshot, he had been unable to hear the words that had been spoken. But his nimble wits were at work. He had regained his composure, and formed his plan.

"My lord Ganelon," asked the Emperor, "have you seen these ladies before?"

Ganelon looked first at the Emperor, with a puzzled expression, then turned to scrutinize the faces of the maidens. Doña Elvira gave him a look of recognition, which he seemed not to notice. Esclarmonde stared at him with frank hatred in her eyes.

"Never before, my lord!" replied Ganelon, turning back to Charles.

"That," exclaimed Esclarmonde with fire in her voice, "is a lie! You may not recognize me because I was veiled; but surely you recognize the lady Elvira!"

"And who may the lady Elvira be?" inquired the Count with seeming innocence.

Elvira herself answered him. "Spoken and acted like a true Frank, Count Ganelon! Will you also pretend you never knew Sir Thierry and Sir Huon?"

"Alas, lady!" replied Ganelon, with an expression of deep sorrow in his face, "I knew them well! Braver and more loyal knights will never ride by my side! Did you also know them, damsel? Were you perchance affianced to one of them?"

Elvira's lip curled with contempt. "And what did you do with them, Sir Ganelon? Where did you leave them, unguarded and unprotected, to be done to death by the Saracens?"

The Count turned to the Emperor. "My lord," he said, "I do not understand whereof these damsels speak. I have told you how with my own eyes I saw the two brave knights drown in the waters of the Ebro."

"Have you witnesses of their death, Sir Ganelon?" asked Elvira triumphantly.

Ganelon looked at her strangely. "Assuredly! Ask any of the twenty Moslem hostages who returned with me. Some of them were on the skiffs with us when we pursued the Caliph. My fifty men-at-arms were billeted in the Christian quarter of Zaragoza at the time, and remained there throughout the turmoil that almost cost Marsile his throne. But they heard the news."

He had well taken care to corroborate his story in advance, and was glad of it now. But even he wondered mightily how these two fair birds had come to alight here on Charlemagne's path as he returned to France. And where were Thierry and Huon?

His unspoken question was answered almost at once. Esclarmonde turned impetuously to the Emperor. "My lord Charlemagne!" she besought him with joined hands. "Pray believe us! Thierry and Huon were not drowned! They fled with us from Zaragoza! They now lie dead in the mountains of Navarre, having given their lives that we might come here to warn you of impending danger to your nephew Roland!"

Ganelon shrugged his shoulders even as he inwardly drew a sigh of relief. "My lord, have I your permission to withdraw?" he said. "Or need I remain here to bicker with these madwomen? I know not who they are, or why they claim to know me!"

"How well we know you, Count Ganelon, for the traitor that you are!" cried Esclarmonde. "With my own ears I have heard you plot with my father to destroy Roland! With my own eyes I have seen you abandon your companions to the mercy of my people! You are a traitor and a felon perjurer, Sir Ganelon!"

The Count laughed easily in reply. "I had heard, my lord, that many of the people of the Spanish countryside have gone stark mad with the horrors of war, but upon my faith, I had not seen any in that sorry plight! Unhappy wenches! May I now retire, sire?"

Charlemagne waved his hand. Ganelon spurred his steed back to where his peers waited, filled with curiosity at what was going on. Naimon saw him shake his head as if with pity and wave his hands as he recounted his strange experience.

"My lord Emperor," said the Duke, "what shall we do with these poor demented damsels? We cannot turn them loose, in their condition, in the midst of the host."

"Nay," said Charles. "Place them in our train, and let them accompany us back to France. Perchance the ladies of our court at Aix may nurse them back to reason. Or,

failing that, the powerful relics of Turpin's cathedral will effect a miracle. We can then send them back under escort to a land that will be at peace."

Esclarmonde was mad with fury, and tugged at the reins of her mount as though she were indeed bereft of reason, causing the horse to rear and neigh.

But Elvira stood her ground calmly and proudly, with head erect, holding the reins of her mount, a veritable picture of Visigothic hauteur.

"You see, Esclarmonde!" she said to her furious companion. "It is even as I have told you! Franks are Franks! They will not be saved, being too foolish! We have kept the promise we made to Sir Thierry and Sir Huon, and can do no more, as the Emperor will not believe us. Let us depart hence, and go seek my brother!"

She turned to her mount, but Duke Naimon made a quick gesture to the captain who had brought them.

"Nay, ladies!" said the officer, seizing the bridles of their horses. "Now that you are here, you must tarry with us a while longer. It is the Emperor's will. Have no fear! You will be treated with all the respect due your station and condition, and you will see our fair land of France, sweetest of all the countries God has made!"

Esclarmonde stormed and fumed in her native Arabic as she was led away. Stately Elvira turned to the Emperor and called out quietly, "When disaster strikes your host, my lord, say not you were not warned!"

17

THE GATHERING OF THE HOSTS

Marsile has scoured the country far and wide
And gathered all his Moslems by his side,
Emirs and sheiks, sheriffs and almaçors,
And veterans from Islam's holy wars.
Four hundred thousand gather in one day
While Zaragoza's drums pound for the fray.
Out of the town they ride, o'er hill and dale,
The forces of the Christians to assail.
Across Cerdaña's valley they advance
Until they see the gonfalons of France.

Chanson de Roland, 848-857

BERNALDO HAD PLACED AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE TWO brothers a small escort of Visigothic warriors and a trio of Basque guides, who knew their own mountainous country as Turpin knew his Office. With these, the journey from Vitoria to the foothills of the Pyrenees was made in little more than a night and day. The valley of Cerdaña lay before them as the second dawn broke. Beyond they could see rising through the distant mist, on the eastern horizon, the mighty peaks of the great pass of Cize, which the Emperor should now be approaching. They breathed more easily, now that they were in sight of their goal. They would reach the pass before the Emperor, and issue their warning.

One thing they had not reckoned with—Charlemagne's swift march from Córdoba back in the direction of Zaragoza and the Pyrenees, while they were on their mission

with Count Ganelon—a march that placed the Frankish host at the rocky portals of Cize even as they regarded them in the distance. At that very moment, the Emperor's vanguard was beginning to wend its way through those mountain barriers, while Roland and Oliver, with their twenty thousand good Franks and true, waited below till the army should have passed through in safety.

"Behold, brother!" cried Thierry in triumph, as the majestic vista unfolded before their eyes from the summit of the hillock they had ascended. "There lies our goal! Riding leisurely, we can reach it by nightfall, and wait till the Emperor comes up!"

"True, brother," replied Huon, shading his eyes. "But tell me, what is that vast movement we see down in the valley beneath us?"

Thierry, whose eyes had been fastened upon the far-off mountain peaks, looked downward in the direction where his brother's finger pointed.

"Saint Mary!" he exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this?"

From the great valley of Cerdaña, half concealed among the hillocks, the rays of the mounting sun reflected a mighty gleaming of arms and armor, hauberks and helmets, sword blades and spear points, together with a riot of color, green and red and blue pennants that waved, tiny in the distance, but seemingly without number, and green standards that revealed only too well whose host it was!

Now, to confirm their worst fears, there rose from below the distant throb of drums, the tight-skinned Moslem war tabors. The army stretched to right and left, as far as the eye could encompass—a gigantic Saracen host on the march! Concealed till now in the deep lateral valleys that flanked the Frankish line of march, the Moslems were at length throwing caution to the winds as they prepared to attack!

"Ride, brother, ride!" shouted Thierry. "On to Cize!

Perchance we are still in time to give warning!"

The little party swung their horses about and wheeled down the opposite side of the hillock, trusting to luck that they had not been seen. Around hills and down obscure valleys they sped, running a course parallel to that of the Moorish army, never more than a few leagues away from that great host, ever in the direction of the mountains and the pass of Cize.

The sun was high in the heavens when they finally reached the outermost Frankish post. They were first challenged, then joyfully recognized and embraced by their comrade of the fiery red hair.

"Count Ganelon reported you dead!" he exclaimed. "How did you escape from the waters of the Ebro?"

"There is no time, friend! Lead us at once to Count Oliver!"

Oliver was found not too far distant, sitting his steed on a knoll from whence he was anxiously scanning the plain before him. The sun's rays, reflected from arms and armor many leagues away, were beginning to trouble him. His worst suspicions were far inferior to the stark reality.

His joyful surprise at seeing the brothers alive was quickly transmuted into deadly apprehension when they summarized their adventures. Always a man of prompt and wise decisions, he took but a minute to determine upon a course of action.

"You, Sir Huon, take a fresh mount and speed on to the pass. Charlemagne and the host must be half way across by now. Seek out the Emperor, tell him your story, and bid him come back with every man he has! You, Sir Thierry, come with me! We go to warn Roland!"

The brothers embraced quickly and parted. Little did they know what sorrows would befall them before they would see each other again!

As he galloped down from the hill by Oliver's side,

Thierry could not refrain from inquiring: "Sir Oliver, what will you tell Count Roland?"

"Thierry," replied Oliver, "I know my brother Roland well, better than any other man alive. If I can but prevail on him to sound his horn, Charlemagne will turn the host around at once and come to our rescue!"

"And if not?" asked Thierry wonderingly.

"If not, we must wait till Huon catches up with the Emperor. That will take many precious hours. Meanwhile, we stave off the Saracens with what forces we have."

"What forces have we, my lord Oliver?"

Oliver looked at him half pityingly, half sardonically. "The twenty thousand men of our own following. That was all our leader would accept when his stepfather appointed him to lead the rear guard."

"My lord Oliver, we can never do battle with the Saracens on those terms! Marsile has gathered hundreds of thousands of men! It were better to gather our men and flee through the pass!"

"Flee?" Oliver laughed. "Have you ever heard Roland use that word? Induce him to flee, if you can. I know better than to try!"

The rest of their brief ride was attended by a gloomy, despondent silence. When they drew up before the tent that served as headquarters for the rear guard, Roland himself came forth to meet them.

For the third time Thierry had to endure a welcome kneaded of joy and surprise. For the third time he cut the welcome short, and told his tale in as few words as possible.

Roland's face lost its cheery smile and turned grim as he listened to the story of his stepfather's deceit. He interrupted Thierry brusquely: "My lord Thierry, Count Ganelon is my stepfather! I will not listen to tales that dishonor him!"

Oliver interrupted him in turn. "Then listen to me, Roland! Whatever be the cause, I have seen with my own eyes the host that Marsile has gathered against us! A few moments ago, as I looked in the direction of Spain, I saw countless hauberks and helmets glistening in the sun. The entire might of pagandom is arrayed against us!"

Roland laughed easily, his handsome head thrown back so that his brown hair swept about his shoulders. "God grant that you be right, comrade!" he cried. "This is where our vassalage will be properly displayed! Here we were left, and here we must take our stand for the Emperor! What says the feudal oath, brother? *For one's liege lord must one endure both bitter cold and burning heat, and offer up at need his hair and skin, his flesh and blood!* Let the pagans come on! We shall meet them here in such fashion that no one will ever sing evil songs about us!"

Knights and men-at-arms were running up at the sound of Roland's booming voice, wondering what the news might be. The sight of their lost comrade Thierry aroused mightily both their joy and their curiosity. But more serious business was afoot.

"My lords!" shouted Roland, drawing his sword. "We shall have battle! Arm yourselves!"

A forest of swords waved in the air in reply. "Pagans are wrong! Christians are right indeed! Shame take him that flees! Lead, Count Roland! Not one of us will fail you!"

But Oliver shook his head. "Frankish barons, do not deceive yourselves! I have seen the pagan hosts advancing. They easily number one hundred thousand! We are hopelessly outmanned!"

Then turning to Roland, he besought him with all the earnestness, all the fervor he could muster: "Comrade Roland, I pray you, sound your horn! It is our only hope! The Emperor will hear you in the pass! He will turn the army round, and come to our aid!"

Roland looked at him pityingly, almost contemptuously. "Brother Oliver, this is strange counsel, coming from you! We would be considered fools and cowards! Our renown in France would perish! Never will I allow my kinsmen to bear such disgrace, or our fair land of France to fall into such evil fame! We will fight, friends! I'll lay about me with Durendal, till its blade is drowned in blood to the hilt! The Saracens will never reach the pass! I pledge you their death, one and all!"

The fire in his brown eyes was like a deathless star. Firmly planted on his feet, with his bared blade uplifted, his head thrown back, his hair blowing in the wind, he looked like the veritable battle god of his Frankish ancestors before they had achieved Christianity. "Roland and Monjoie!" shouted the barons and men-at-arms, their number swelling every instant.

Oliver looked about him in despair. He saw only stern faces, lusting for battle. But he would make one last desperate attempt to bring Roland and his followers to their senses. Raising both hands for silence, he shouted above the din of arms: "Comrades, listen! I have seen the Saracens of Zaragoza! The mountains and the valleys, the plains and the wastes are covered with them! They have mustered every man in pagandom! We are but few in number! Comrade Roland, sound your Oliphant! It will bring Charles back at once, with all his host! We need the Emperor's army to win!"

"Never, by God!" shouted Roland in reply. "Never shall it be said that I took my horn in hand for fear of Saracens! I will not have my clan disgraced! Never, please God, His angels and His saints, shall Frankish valor fail through me! I'd rather die a thousand deaths! Strike on, my men! The Emperor loves us because we know how to fight, not because we know how to run! These men of Spain are doomed!"

"Roland and Monjoie!" went up the cry from the Frankish barons, not once but thrice.

Oliver shrugged his shoulders and smiled a grim, dejected smile. "Look, Roland, look down the valley before you! Do you see the flashing armor of that mighty host? They are near, but Charlemagne is far away! Who fights this battle will never fight another!"

"Don't speak such outrage, Oliver!" replied Roland. "Woe upon the heart that turns coward in the breast! We shall stand here firmly installed! The blows shall come from us!"

Oliver bowed his head. He knew better. Roland placed his hand familiarly on his shoulder. "Now speak no more, comrade! The Emperor, who left us to guard the pass, set apart twenty thousand men because he knew there is not a coward among them. When the battle begins, strike with your lance as I will strike with Durendal, this good sword that was given me by Charles! If I die, whoever has it after me will be able to say that it belonged to a right noble vassal!"

Then, turning to his men, he called out: "My lord Turpin!"

The Archbishop came forward. He had removed his cassock, and stood fully clothed in armor, as much the warrior as the best of them.

"My lord Turpin!" repeated the Count. "I pray you in God's name, shrive and bless us before the battle is joined!"

The Franks knelt as one man. "Call out your sins!" cried the Archbishop. As a jumbled medley of assorted sins, vices and wrongdoings, great and small, poured from the lips of the kneeling multitude, the Archbishop made the sign of the cross over them and pronounced the Latin words of absolution: *"Ego te absolvo a peccatibus tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti!"*

Then, when the shriving was done, he addressed them briefly. "My lords barons, Charlemagne left us here for this! He is our king and for him we must be ready to die. Help sustain Christianity with your lives! You shall have battle, as you well see, for the Saracens are now upon us. Pray for God's grace, and repent your sins! You are absolved, and though you die, you will live on as holy martyrs, and win thrones in Paradise! For your penance, I bid you strike stout blows!"

Again he made the sign of the cross, as did all the knights and barons and men-at-arms. Then, at a signal from Roland, they rose, and began to dispose themselves in battle array.

Oliver, rising from his knees, suddenly remembered Thierry, who had stood by his side all the while.

"Sir Thierry," he said to him, "you have heard Roland's decision. There is little more we can do. You must be weary after your long ride. But for you, I have one more mission. Take your little band of Spanish Visigoths and Basques, who know this country better than we do. Take also a hundred of your own Angevins. Lead them up into those crags that loom behind us, and guard our rear, so the Saracens may not encircle us. No matter how the battle goes, do not come down, for if ever the enemy gains a foothold on those cliffs, we are completely lost!"

Thierry bowed. "I will do as you command, Sir Oliver, though I would rather fight by your side!"

Oliver's eyes met Thierry's, and in those of the Count the younger man could see all the untold sorrow and bitterness that filled the heart of Roland's companion.

"Who fights this battle fights no other!" repeated the Count whom men called the wise. "Sir Thierry, fare you well, and may God keep you safe!"

18

THE BATTLE

"They come! They come! The foes! A host of spears,
And in their midst are flags of red and green
And all the rainbow's hues! Sparkling and clear
From sarks and jewelled helms the sun's rays gleam
Into our eyes! How many are their spears?
And who could count them? Equal to the tears
Ladies of France shall shed for France's peers!"
Altabiskarco Cantua (Basque Epic of Rencesvals)

THE CRAG ON WHICH THIERRY HAD TAKEN HIS STAND guarded the valley at the very spot where it attained its narrowest point before funneling off into the winding mountain pass that cut the Pyrenean barrier and joined Spain to France. It was therefore ideally suited for defense, if any of the Saracens should conceive the idea of avoiding a frontal attack and attempting an encircling movement.

By the same token, it was a perfectly situated post from which to watch the forthcoming battle, which would take place in the valley below. Ensconced between two high rocks that formed a royal theater seat for the great stage set before him, Thierry arranged his men to the best advantage, then disposed himself to become a highly interested spectator of the continent-shaking drama about to be enacted before his eyes.

Where the great valley of Cerdaña broadened out into the northern Spanish plain, he beheld the vast advancing host of the Saracens—a veritable sea of pointed helmets,

turbans, burnooses and kaftans of every color, flashing scimitars and sharp-pointed lances, at the end of which floated gaudy pennants of white and blue and red and green and yellow. The sun shone bright, and was thrown back from the polished gear of the Saracens. Thierry marveled at the fact that this mighty host, which he estimated at one hundred thousand, consisted entirely of mounted men. No foot soldiers were to be seen. Had he been able to pierce with his eyes the hills that barred vision from the nearby parallel valleys, he would have despaired even more of the outcome of the struggle, for there, in serried, slow-moving columns, were the footmen and the archers of the Moorish host, whose numbers far surpassed those of the cavalry.

Arrayed before the mounted Moorish masses, and barring their way to the pass behind them, stood the long, thin Christian line of armored knights and helmeted footmen, the former mounted, and ready to meet the charge of the Saracen cavalry with their own; the latter prepared to run in behind the horses and stab with their great savage pikes and short side arms.

As Thierry watched, the ominous pounding of the Moorish drums arose from Marsile's host. The low throb of the tabors was quickly followed by the sounding of hundreds of clear-voiced Saracen clarions. Thierry had heard these sounds before. Together, they spelled the signal for the assault.

As the Saracen horsemen speeded up their pace to a canter, then to a gallop, the Christian line surged forward to meet them. The space between the two armies narrowed, while great clouds of dust arose. Then the hosts came together, and all was confusion, the clash of swords on shields and armor, the wild neighing of horses, the twang of Moslem cavalry bows, the shouting of fierce war cries.

Down below, a few minutes earlier, Count Roland,

sitting his great charger at the center of his battle line, had addressed his comrade Oliver: "Sir companion, perchance you and Thierry were right. Perchance Ganelon sold us out to the Moslems. But Marsile has bargained for us cheap. He must yet pay our price at the sword's point!"

Then, without waiting to hear Oliver's reply, he loosed the bridle on the neck of good Veillantif and galloped before the Frankish line, brandishing his mighty spear so that its point, with its white gonfalon, was turned to the blue sky, its golden fringe fluttering down to his hand. Noble his bearing, his face clear and smiling, he shouted to the knights, "My lords barons, go slowly, holding your pace! The Saracens have come to seek martyrdom! Today we shall have such noble and fair reward as was never won by any Frankish king!"

"Monjoie!" shouted the barons with one voice, brandishing their lances in return.

As Roland returned to his place in the battle line, Oliver addressed him in a low tone. "I have no reply to make to what you said to me before, Roland. You would not deign to sound your horn, and you will have no aid from Charlemagne. He and his men do not know, and they are not to blame for the fate that will befall us! So canter on, Roland, with what prowess you may!"

Then he, too, brandished his lance. "Roland and Monjoie!" he shouted. With that, the entire line moved forward to meet the advancing, swirling hordes now barely two hundred yards away.

Several of the Saracen leaders rode in the van of their troops. Among them was the giant Aelroth, Marsile's nephew, who shouted insults at the Franks as he rode: "Felons of France, today you fight with us! You are betrayed! The King who left you in this post is mad! Today France loses her honor, and Charlemagne the right arm from his body!"

Roland heard him and singled him out as the lines closed. Furious with rage, he spurred his steed toward the giant Saracen, his lance in rest. Aelroth saw him coming and raised his round shield to protect himself, but to no avail. The Count's ashen lance, wielded with all the force of which Roland was capable, broke through shield and hauberk, ribs and breastbone and spine. Unhorsed, the dead giant was brandished in the air on the point of the lance, like a huge, grotesque puppet. As his weight splintered the wood of the lance in two, so that Aelroth fell to the ground to be trampled by the horses' hoofs, Roland flung away the handle of his death-dealing weapon and drew his sword.

"Avaunt, culvert!" he cried out in a terrible voice. "Charles is no madman! He did right well, when he left us in this post! The face of France shall not be lost! Strike on, Franks! Ours is the first blow! We are right, and these gluttons are wrong!"

Meanwhile, the battle had turned into a series of individual combats. Falfaron, the King's misshapen brother, seeing his son dead, galloped to strike Roland in his turn. But he was met on the way by Oliver, whose lance impaled him as Roland's had impaled Aelroth. "Monjoie!" shouted the Franks, encouraged by these initial successes.

Turpin had picked out his opponent—Corsablis, Emir of the African Berbers. He saw him urging on his men and spurred his way toward him, swinging his great Frankish broadsword. Corsablis saw him coming, and went to meet him with upraised scimitar. The keen Saracen blade sliced through the Archbishop's shield down to his arm, but Turpin's aim was truer. Corsablis' turbaned head rolled in the dust as the prelate swung his mighty weapon. The Berber's steed raced on, bearing a headless rider who soon toppled from his mount. Turpin, galloping on to where the press was thickest, turned in his saddle and addressed the head where it lay: "Scoundrel pagan, you've met your

end! So be it always with the enemies of Christ!"

Then, turning to the oncoming barons, he waved them on with his bloody blade. "Strike on, the Franks! This field is ours, to God be the glory!"

As the press thickened, horses and men went down. The superior numbers of the Saracens, not finding proper deployment in the narrow valley, were of no avail against the heavier armament of the Franks, whose leaders raged about the field, striking down foes by the dozen. Malprime of Brigal, Turgis of Tortelosa, the black almaçor of Moriana, Escremiz of Valterna, handsome Margarit of Seville, all went down beneath the mighty blows of the Frankish barons. Cantering through the crush, like twin war gods, were Roland and Oliver, ever in the van of the fighting, urging on men who needed no urging, shouting to each other across the field.

Oliver had not yet drawn his sword, though his lance was broken in two. But the truncheon still served him as a weapon, to unhorse the riders of the enemy.

"Comrade, what are you doing?" shouted Roland, noticing this. "In such a fight there's little use for wood! Iron and steel are what you need! Where is your good sword, that mighty Hauteclere that I once knew, with gold and crystal in its hilt?"

"I could not draw it, brother! I had no time!" replied Oliver. But as he said this, he hurled his truncheon in the face of a Saracen and drew his sword, with which he went on to strike a mighty blow at his dazed opponent, slicing him down the middle.

"Now I know you, brother!" called out Roland. "That is the kind of blow for which the Emperor loves us!"

The Saracens could not long stand this kind of fighting. Panic began to seize them as the Franks, led by their terrible champions, pressed on. From the crag where he stood, Thierry began to see the first signs of the break in the Moslem ranks, and his heart leaped up within him.

The riders on the outskirt of the melee first turned tail and fled down the valley. Soon the rout was general. Only the dead and grievously wounded held their ground. A great roar of "Victory! Roland and Monjoie!" reached Thierry's ears.

"Incredible!" murmured the Visigothic captain at his left. "Outnumbered five to one, your leader has nevertheless won the field! Never have I beheld such a battle! But your men, too, have suffered losses!"

It was true. The Franks left in possession of the field were no more than half their former number. The remainder lay strewn about the valley, intermingled with great piles of Saracen dead.

Thierry could not restrain a mighty thrill of pride at the Visigoth's admiration for the prowess of his comrades.

"Yes, captain! Our men are very brave!" he boasted. "There are no better vassals under the vault of heaven! And our leader Roland is the noblest hero God ever made! With such a man to lead us, we cannot but win, and win, and win, no matter what forces the Saracens send out against us!"

The Visigoth looked at him strangely. "Are you sure, Sir Thierry?"

"Yes, I am sure!"

"Santiago de Compostela grant that you be right! Look down into those side valleys, my lord Thierry!"

Thierry's glance shifted from the battlefield, where the Franks could be seen gathering their wounded. His eyes followed the pointing finger of the Visigoth, and his heart froze.

Along the two side valleys, where they debouched into the main valley of Cerdaña, came two mighty hosts, with gleaming helmets and waving pennants, embossed shields and embroidered sarks—horsemen and footmen, archers and skirmishers, ranged in twenty great divisions, all the embattled might of Spanish heathendom, led by King

Marsile and his uncle the Caliph.

"God!" Thierry's voice froze into a whisper. "They will never be able to withstand these new hosts! Where is my brother Huon? Why does he not bring back the Emperor?"

Then, turning fiercely to the Visigoth, he shouted: "Where is Bernaldo, who promised to lead all the men he could muster to Roland's aid?"

The Captain shrugged. "I know not, Sir Thierry!" he replied. "If he said he was coming, then surely he is!"

They both looked far, to north and south, for signs of the Visigothic host. There were none. All they could see was Moslems, marching on inexorably, interminably, up the valleys, toward the spot where their first host had been routed and the long, thin line of Franks was re-forming its ranks for the new assault.

19

ROLAND SOUNDS HIS HORN

Count Roland's giant frame with pain is racked
The very temples of his brain are cracked.
Yet on his horn he sounds a mighty blast
That reaches Charlemagne's great host at last.
Chanson de Roland, 1785-1788

THE OLD FRENCH CHRONICLES RELATE THAT ON THE DAY of the great battle, while the sun shone clear and bright in Spain upon a battlefield of heroism and treason, a mighty storm arose in France, overspreading the entire country from Saint Michael of Peril to Sens, and from Besançon to the harbor of Guitsand, a storm made of tempest and furious winds and black thunder, of rain and hail such as no man had ever seen, with lightning bolts that fell on every hand, and quakings of the earth that cracked and rent many a wall. At full midday, say the chronicles, the darkness was so deep that there was no light in the land, save as the lightning split the sky. The terror of the people was something rare to behold, and many said, "This is the Day of Judgment, the end of time, and the beginning of eternity!"

But there was no truth in that. Rather, say the chroniclers, it was the great day of mourning for the death of Roland. The heavens loosed their sorrow for the bereavement that was about to strike Christendom in the person of its mightiest champion.

Be the truth of this as it may, in Spain, where the sun shone clear, the Franks quickly perceived that their battle

was not over. As the new Saracen hosts appeared in the distance, Roland turned to Oliver and spoke.

"Brother, my stepfather has indeed sworn to achieve our death! His treason is clear! It will be up to the Emperor to avenge us. For ourselves, the fight we have just fought is as nothing compared to the one that is to come! And half our men lie dead or wounded! What shall we do, brother?"

"I spoke my mind to you hours ago, brother Roland!" replied Oliver simply. "I have nothing to add! There is yet time to sound your horn!"

"Nay, Oliver! Shall we let it be said of us that we grew afraid? I'll strike again with Durendal, and you, comrade, with Hauteclere, these two good swords that we have held in so many lands, and with which we have brought to an end so many battles!"

Oliver shrugged. "Look at your Franks, Roland! They know what is in store for them!"

The surviving barons and men-at-arms, aware of the new enemy forces moving up against them, had relinquished the useless task of picking up the wounded. Some of them stared down the valley at the advancing Saracen hosts, with a grim and hopeless look in their eyes. Others had clustered around Turpin, who was addressing them.

"My lords barons, do not go thinking evil thoughts! For God I pray you not to flee, but to stand ground, lest songs of derision be sung about our valor! Far better we die fighting! It seems certain that our end is at hand, and that we live no more beyond this day. But of one thing I want to assure you: Holy Paradise stands open before you! You shall have seats there by the side of the Blessed Innocents, and you shall behold the face of God! So courage, my lords! Death is but the portal to a better and more enduring life!"

A few still murmured, but by far the greater number raised their swords on high. "Roland and Monjoie!"

echoed again through the valley, down to the oncoming Saracen host, and up to Thierry where he stood with sinking heart.

A line of Saracen horsemen, in advance of the main host, was already deploying to attack the Franks. Its commander, Abisme, was the brother of the black Almaçor of Moriana, who had fallen in the first encounter, pierced to death by Duke Sanson's lance. He had heard of his brother's death, and was anxious to avenge it. For some reason, he believed it was Turpin, the *imam* of the Christians, who had struck the fatal blow. Cantering ahead of his men on his coal-black charger, he began to taunt the Franks and call upon Turpin to come out and do battle with him.

"See, *Imam* of the Franks!" he cried. "I am here to avenge my brother, whom you slew by treachery! Ride forth, and I will nail you to a cross higher than your false God's!"

The Archbishop listened with astonishment. "This Saracen looks like a great heretic to me!" he murmured to Oliver. "It is best that I go forth to slay him! I never loved his kind!"

With that, the prelate sallied forth, mounted on his great charger Whitecloud, which he had taken from a king he had slain in Denmark. The animal's name was due to his white color, topped off by a great yellow mane—a noble beast indeed. Planting his spurs in the horse's flanks, Turpin charged the black Saracen, who came on boldly to meet him. Abisme's lance point glanced from Turpin's stout shield of Vienne steel, but the Archbishop's weapon, striking fairly in the center of the Moor's gem-encrusted round target, pierced it through and struck deep into the pagan's body. "You are not now worth a cent!" was the fierce prelate's taunt as he shook the body from his lance.

"The crozier's safe in the Archbishop's keeping!" ex-

claimed Roland as the line swept ahead to encounter the foe.

But the Franks were weary from their earlier affray. Emir Climborin, one of Marsile's court, struck Engelier of Gascony a mighty blow that laid the baron low. Dismay struck the Franks as they saw one of their doughtiest champions fall.

"Oliver!" shouted Roland. "Engelier is dead!"

"God grant that I may avenge him!" called back the Count, spurring into the fray. Bloody Hauteclere swung once, and Climborin fell. Two of his followers sought to avenge him, but they were no match for the gentle Count. Roland, watching him, remarked to the Archbishop: "My comrade is angry! Such are the blows for which Charles holds us dear!"

The noble Duke Sanson, saved by a misunderstanding from the wrath of the Almaçor's brother, was nevertheless shortly to succumb to Saracen blows. Anseis soon followed. But the greatest loss to the Franks came from a mighty pagan fighter, Grandoine, son of the Moslem king of Cappadocia, who had come from the East to serve under Marsile's banners. Single-handed, he slew Gerin and his companion Gerier, Berenger, Guyon of Saintonge, and two other Frankish barons besides. Stricken with fear, the Franks in that sector were turning to flee when Roland sped up on Veiliantif.

"Alas, Roland! We are undone!" cried some.

"Follow me!" shouted back the Count of Brittany, advancing upon the Cappadocian. The latter had never seen Roland before. But now, when he saw the Count bearing down upon him, he knew him well. His courage left him, and he sought refuge in flight. Roland was too quick for him. Durendal swept down upon Grandoine's head, cleaving helmet and skull in two, then descending, with the mighty force of the blow, down to the prince's middle.

It was the Saracens' turn to become panic-stricken.

With the fall of their mighty champion, their valor was gone. For the second time, from his lofty perch, Thierry saw the pagan hosts draw back in confusion, turn tail, then flee desperately down the valley.

No one pursued them, for less than one hundred of the Franks remained alive and on their feet. Grim, blood-bespattered and weary, those hundred men remained in possession of the field, surrounded by piles of shattered and bleeding corpses and mangled and moaning wounded.

Count Roland, bloody and tired, looked about him, and shuddered at the havoc he saw. From his eagle's eyrie, Thierry looked down, and shuddered too, for now that the pagan cavalry had been routed, the footmen came on, slowly, grimly, inexorably. In a matter of minutes they would close in upon the survivors of two furious onslaughts. The Visigothic captain shook his head. "A splendid battle, but in vain!" he remarked. "Your comrades are doomed, Sir Thierry! Where, where is my lord Bernaldo?"

Oliver rode up to Roland where he sat astride his charger, close to the body of the Cappadocian prince he had slain. The remainder of the Franks, too, came closer, as if seeking shelter and protection from their overbold leader.

"Oliver!" called Roland, and for the first time since the beginning of the battle there was anguish in his voice. "Brother! Do you see how our men lie in heaps? We may well weep for our sweet France! Long will she be desolate for lack of these brave barons! Oh, if the Emperor were here! What can we do, Oliver? How can we get news of our plight to him?"

Oliver had dismounted and plucked a handful of grass, with which he wiped his sword. He did not look up into his comrade's face as he made reply. "I do not know. Rather I'd die than shame should come of this encounter!"

Roland winced at this reminder of his own words. Then, manfully, he went on: "I'll sound my horn! Charles will hear it in the pass! I pledge you, brother, our Franks will return!"

Count Oliver's gentle eyes now looked full into Roland's, and in them was gathered all the bitterness of a lost cause, all the sorrow of one who sees himself bereft of everything he holds dear.

"That, Roland," he said slowly, scanning his syllables, "would be a great disgrace! It would cast everlasting reproach on every member of your line, a reproach that would endure so long as any of them lives! When I implored you, comrade, you were wrathful. Now, if you blow your horn, you'll have no praise from me!"

"Comrade, why are you so wroth with me?" queried the Count of Brittany.

At this, Oliver's wrath exploded. "Roland, this was your deed of bravery! Vassalage without sense is sheer folly! Prudence is worth more than foolhardy pride! Our Frankish barons lie dead before your eyes, all because of your stubbornness! We have performed our last service for Charlemagne, you and I! Had you listened to me, the Frankish host would be by our side! Then we would indeed have won this battle! Marsile would be dead or taken! In an evil hour, Roland, did we see your foolish pride! Charles will in vain seek your aid in days to come! You must die here, and France be steeped in shame! Here perishes our loyal company! Before nightfall, you and I shall part in sorrow and in death!"

Roland listened to him in amazement. Never had anyone addressed him in this fashion. "Nay, brother!" he exclaimed, striving to place his arm about Oliver's shoulder. "By our loyal oath of comradeship, by the ties of marriage that will soon bind us——"

Oliver shook off his arm. "By my beard, Roland!" he cried. "If by some miracle I manage to see again my gentle

sister Aude, I swear she will never clasp you in her arms and call you husband!"

Turpin had come up to them. His voice held tones of reproach as he addressed them both. "Sir Oliver, and you, Sir Roland, both of you! I pray you, do not bicker at this time! It will not help us to sound the horn now; but none the less, it may still be better so. The Emperor will at least come to avenge us. These Saracens must not escape! Our Franks will dismount and find us here dead and mutilated. They will at least bear us away on biers and litters. They will mourn for us with pity and grief, and give us decent Christian burial. The wolves and swine and dogs won't gnaw our bones!"

Roland and Oliver bowed their heads in shame. "Lord Archbishop, you have spoken rightly!" said the Count of Brittany.

He took the Oliphant, and set it to his mouth, grasping it firmly. With sorrow and pangs of pain, he blew the great horn, once, twice, thrice, until blood ran from his mouth and the very temples of his brain cracked.

The mighty blasts rose through the clear air, far and wide, scaling the peaks, bursting through the ravines, their echoes mounting across the mountain walls for many leagues, to the spot where Charlemagne stood in the pass, on the very threshold of his fair land of Gascony.

Thierry, thrilling to the sound, was cheered. But the Visigoth at his side shook his head. "Do not deceive yourself, Sir Frank! The Moslems are near, but your Emperor is far away! It will be hours before he returns! Oh, my lord Bernaldo, Bernaldo del Carpio, where are you? Why do you not come up to save these Christian Franks from their own folly, and prove the valor of our Visigothic strain?"

20

CHARLEMAGNE'S RIDE

Through mountain pass and gorge they ride
That they may be by Roland's side
Before the savage battle ends
And death embraces all their friends.
And as they spur, to God they pray
That there be time to save the day.
To what avail, since brave Roland
No more shall see his native land?
Chanson de Roland, 1834-1841

THE EMPEROR CANTERED SLOWLY ALONG THE NARROW mountain road that was beginning to broaden as it sloped gently downward on the Gascon side of the great divide. The rushing torrents now ran north instead of south, and the very air in the pass seemed to speak of France the Sweet to those who had been away for seven long years.

Beside Charles rode Duke Naimon, behind him a dozen of his counts, Ganelon among them. The Count was moody and silent. He took little part in the gay conversation of his peers as they rode.

Since early dawn, when they had started on their journey through the pass, an ominous sense of apprehension and fear had been clutching at his heart. The appearance of Elvira and Esclarmonde had enhanced it, and his success at warding off the mortal danger presented by the maidens had brought him but little and passing relief.

The folly of his plans now weighed upon him far more than remorse for his own treachery. Even granting that

everything went well, that Marsile's hosts succeeded in destroying Roland and his band before Charlemagne could return to their rescue, the finger of doubt would inevitably be pointed at him. The warning words of the mad maidens would be recalled once disaster struck at the Frankish rear guard. Charlemagne was known to have no mercy on those who betrayed him or his cause. He, Ganelon, riding in the Emperor's train, far away from his own retainers, would stand no chance. Yet if he departed now from the Emperor's side and rode back to the midst of his men, he would arouse further suspicion. The maidens might perhaps be recalled, and tell their story more convincingly a second time.

Thus it was that the Count's soul was filled with black foreboding as he cantered behind his Emperor. Thus it was that when Roland's first blast came across the precipices and ravines, striking the ears of all the members of the Frankish host and causing them to stand still in their tracks, it smote the soul and heart of Ganelon like a tocsin ringing the first peal of alarm for his own deadly peril.

The sound of that mighty horn filled the sparkling afternoon air with its shrill, crystal-clear voice, and all in the Emperor's party reined in their horses.

"What was that?" said Naimon, listening intently.

Charlemagne looked at him with a strange expression on his grim countenance. "Methinks our men are doing battle!"

A voice spoke up behind him. "In any mouth but yours, my lord Charlemagne, that were a lie!"

It was Count Ganelon. He, too, looked grim.

Before Charlemagne could make answer, there was a second blast, long, powerful, insistent.

"I hear Roland's horn!" exclaimed the Emperor. "He would never sound it if he were not fighting!"

Ganelon laughed, but there was no mirth or merriment in his laughter. "How little you know him! That is no

battle! You are old and gray and wise, yet you speak like a child! Don't you know Roland's great pride? It is a marvel Heaven tolerates it! He goes sounding his horn all day for a horse, but he would never sound it to seek help from enemies. Who would have the daring to attack him in the open? Ride on, my lord! Why do we tarry here? France is still very far away!"

A third, loud blast interrupted him, plaintive in its urgency, filled with overtones of despair. Charles and all the men of his host listened intently.

"That horn has a mighty strain!" exclaimed the Emperor.

Naimon made reply. "Who sounds that horn is in great distress! There is battle being done! Roland is betrayed by one who still seeks to deceive you! Equip yourself, sire, cry out your old refrain, and rush to the aid of that noble band you left behind! You have heard enough how Roland calls for help!"

Before Charlemagne could open his mouth to reply, there came the thunder of hoofs on the highway behind them. Four knights galloped up furiously, and as furiously reined in their horses. Three were officers of the Emperor's guard. The fourth was one whom neither Charles nor Ganelon thought ever to see again.

"Sir Huon!" cried the Emperor, as the fourth knight dismounted and ran to his side.

"Sir Huon!" echoed the Count, with a thundercloud on his face and grim despair in his heart.

"Sire!" shouted Huon. "You are betrayed! Roland is being attacked on the other side of the pass by Marsile's entire host! Ride to his rescue, sire! There is not a moment to lose! But first, arrest that scoundrel! He, with Marsile, has plotted the destruction of Roland and your entire rear guard!"

Ganelon sought to draw his sword. He was quickly over-

powered and disarmed by his own companions. His hands were bound behind him with leather thongs.

"Besgon!" called out Charlemagne. The chief of his household cooks came running up from behind.

"Besgon!" shouted the Emperor. "Guard me this man for the felon traitor he is! He has betrayed my house and my faith!"

As the Count was being led away on foot by Besgon and his fellow cooks, the Emperor turned to Naimon.

"Have the alarm sounded throughout the host!" he cried. "We turn around and go back to Spain, at once!"

The army, thrown into confusion by Huon's mad ride along its line of march, and far more so by the triple blast of Roland's great horn, was ready for the order. As the battle trumpets sounded far and wide along the passes, each knight dismounted to don his armor and dress himself for war. Hauberks, helmets and swords were fastened on. Painted shields were fixed to stout left arms. Lances, with their scarlet, blue and white gonfalons, were raised heavenwards.

Charlemagne and his staff, galloping madly back toward the rear of the host, now suddenly turned into the van, spurred their horses with haste and fury.

Huon rode silently by the side of the Emperor and Naimon. "Think you, Sir Huon, we shall reach Roland where he fights while there is yet time?" queried the Emperor, turning his fierce face to the young knight so that his long white beard streamed behind him.

"My lord Emperor, that verily I do not know," replied the knight. "I spoke only to my lord Oliver, who sent me riding on to you. Many long hours have I been riding through the defiles before I could reach you. But this I know: I caught a glimpse of the Saracen host as it marched to attack Roland. There were numberless thousands in that host. They were like a great pack of fierce hunting dogs, set for the kill!"

Charles and his staff galloped on, retracing their steps past their own men, through those gloomy mountain defiles along which they had come at a pace in the morning. Behind them thundered the cavalry of the Franks, the footmen left far behind to follow as they might. The afternoon sun's stray rays, peering down through the cliffs, were reflected from hauberks and helmets and blazoned shields.

Huon, glancing sideways at the Emperor, saw his face bathed in tears, tears of regret and sorrow, of anxiety and anguish. The same question that troubled the Emperor troubled every baron and knight and man-at-arms of his vast following. Would they reach Spain in time? Would Roland be alive to meet them?

The thunder of the hoofs, echoed and re-echoed from peak and cliff, drowned out their bitter thoughts. The fearsome, shadowy ravines, covered with mountain pines, through which dark torrents rushed swiftly, added to their feeling of ominous awe. The war trumpets blew wildly in the van and in the rear of the thundering host, as if to answer the voice of the Oliphant, that had now grown still. In mad fury and dismay they rode, each man voicing a silent prayer to the God of hosts, that He might grant safety and life to Roland and his band until they should stand shoulder to shoulder with them on the field of battle. But the rattle of the horses' hoofs seemed like a swift death knell that replied, "To what avail? You have tarried too long! You are not in time!"

Tears rolled down the cheeks of Charlemagne and many of his barons as they spurred and strained in haste, making no attempt to contain their wrath that they were not at the side of Roland as he fought off the Spanish Saracens. "If he is dead, I will not stay alive!" Huon heard Charlemagne mutter as he bent low over the neck of his steed, his great white beard flowing back past his shoulders.

"Huon! Naimon!" shouted the Emperor. "Tell me, in Heaven's name! Are we still in time?"

Huon, riding furiously, raised his right hand heavenward. "God grant it, sire!" he shouted back.

But the wise old Duke merely shook his head. "We cannot save Roland, sire! We can but avenge him!"

21

THE DEATH OF ROLAND

"Good Durendal, of what avail to me?
Since I must die, it's time to set you free!"
Chanson de Roland, 2304-2305

COUNT ROLAND DROPPED HIS ARM AND HORN TO HIS SIDE. Wearily, with eyes whose vision was unclear, he looked about him. The barren hillsides, the knolls and the lowlands were covered with dead and dying men, Franks and Saracens lying in a confused jumble of bleeding limbs, scattered turbans, dented helmets and shields, splintered swords and lances, in pools of blood that quietly widened as they received tiny rivulets from the broken bodies above them.

His eyes brimmed with tears. Unmindful of his few living companions, who clustered about him as if for protection, he communed aloud with the dead.

"Lords barons, may God show you His mercy! May He open Paradise to all your brave souls, and permit them to lie amid holy flowers! I have never seen braver vassals than you, who lie here before me! You served me so long a time, and together we won so many lands for Charlemagne! But the Emperor reared you for an evil fate! Land of France, you are indeed made desolate today! Barons of France, I have seen you die for me, and I could bear you no aid, no comfort! May the God Who never yet has lied be your warrant! Brother Oliver, we must not fail each other now! If I am not slain, sorrow will slay me!"

Turpin broke into Roland's soliloquy. "My lord Roland, behold yet another pagan host advancing upon us! This is our last stand! Let us die like knights! Men who bear arms and sit on noble chargers must be brave, and proud, and strong in battle! Else they are not worth four pence, and had better become monks in monasteries and spend their time praying for the sins of others! To battle, Roland!"

The sixty Franks left in the ranks knew there was no quarter. They stood like wounded lions at bay. Upon them advanced a column of Moslem footmen, led by King Marsile in person. Sitting on his great Arabian charger, Marsile rode proudly ahead of his men. From his great green turban floated a silken scarf that waved in the wind behind him. His handsome body encased in Toledan armor, his round shield bright with encrusted rubies and emeralds, his lance flying a gaudy red pennant, he galloped ahead and taunted the Franks.

"Yield, infidels! Acknowledge the true God, and you may yet save your lives! All of you, that is, save one! Your champion, Roland, must die on this field!"

Bevon, lord of Beaune and Dijon, was closest to him, and rode out bravely to meet him. But his battle-weary body was no match for the Emir. The King's lance pierced him through as they met, and threw him dead from his horse. Ivoire, Ivon and Girart de Roussillon attempted to avenge their comrade. One after the other, they fell under the Moslem's scimitar.

Roland, engaged by a dozen footmen, freed himself with great slashing blows of Durendal and rode to meet Marsile.

"The Lord God confound you!" he shouted, furious with anger. "You have slain four of my companions! Now, before we part, you'll learn the name of this my sword!"

Marsile tried to parry the blow with his sword-arm. He saved his head, but his arm was cut off above the wrist.

Then the swirling footmen separated the fighters.

Marsile galloped from the field, holding his bleeding stump high in the air. His footmen, dismayed at their leader's defeat, broke and ran. Once again the few surviving Franks remained masters of the field.

But not for long. From the right advanced another horde, led by Marsile's uncle the Caliph, a horde of black warriors from Ethiopia, broad-lipped and flat-nosed. Half naked, they ran forward with short jabbing spears and throwing javelins, yapping like hounds as they came.

"This is the end!" shouted Roland to his comrades. "We have little longer to live! Let's sell ourselves dear, my barons! Strike with your swords, and contest each inch of life, so that when Charlemagne comes into this field he will see such a slaughter of Saracens that for each man of ours fifteen of theirs lie dead! He will at least bless us!"

The coal-black Africans were upon them, their teeth gleaming white. The Caliph, on a sorrel horse, saw Oliver engaged by his footmen, laying about him with his sword. He rode upon him from behind. His razor-keen lance point went through the gentle Count's hauberk, through his body, and out in front of his breast.

The Saracen laughed as the lance splintered in his hand. "You've borne a mighty blow!" he cried to Oliver. "Charles the Great should not have left you at the pass! On you alone I have avenged all my men!"

Oliver knew that he was striken to death. Still he managed to turn round. Brown Hauteclere rose high, then descended swiftly on the Caliph's head. The pointed steel helmet of the Saracen split like a ripe fruit, and the blade sank down to the Caliph's teeth.

"A curse upon you, pagan!" said Oliver. "You will never again say that Charles was wrong! Nor will you ever boast that you slew me!"

At their leader's fall, the Ethiopians sullenly drew back, and began, from a safe distance, to hurl their javelins. But

they could do little damage against Frankish armor.

A mortal weakness overcame Oliver. His eyes grew dim. "Roland!" he cried. "Comrade! Come to my side! I am dying!"

Roland, looking upon his face, saw it bloodless and discolored. He saw the lance point jutting out from Oliver's breast, and the blood trickling down the front and back of Oliver's coat of mail.

"God!" exclaimed the Count of Brittany in anguish. "Companion, your hour has struck! Oh, that I should live to see you die!"

Oliver, quickly bleeding to death, heard Roland's voice, but did not recognize it. Confusedly, he saw a mounted form approaching. Thinking it was a Saracen, he feebly lifted his sword and struck. The faint blow glanced harmlessly from Roland's helmet.

"Brother! Comrade!" cried the Count of Brittany. "Did you mean to strike me? This is Roland, who has ever held you dear! You never voiced a defiance at me!"

Oliver's reply was a whisper. "Now I hear you speak! I did not see you, as God is my witness! Have I wounded you? Forgive me!"

"I am not hurt!" replied Roland, helping his comrade to dismount. "Of course I forgive you, brother!"

Oliver, still encircled by his companion's arm, sank to the grass. As Roland held his head and unlaced his helmet, the gentle Count joined his hands. His bloodstained lips whispered a last prayer to God, a last blessing upon Charlemagne, France, and his companion Roland. Then his head sank back on Roland's arm. The sorrowful parting he had predicted had come to pass.

"Alas, comrade!" cried Roland. "We have been together so many years, and nothing ever came between us! Now that I see you dead, life weighs heavy upon me!"

A javelin, striking harmlessly on his back, recalled him to reality. The yapping Ethiopians had at length succeeded

in encircling the few remaining Franks, whom they did not yet dare to attack. Five men still stood their ground, the Archbishop among them. The Ethiopians began to close in. It was the end.

But suddenly a diversion came from an unexpected quarter. Fierce shouts of "Roland and Monjoie!" "Anjou!" "Santiago de Compostela!" rang out from the hills above. Swords flashing and lances in rest, a swift line of horsemen came galloping down from the crags to attack the encirclers.

Thierry had watched from above the fortunes of the battle until he could watch no longer. When he saw Oliver fall, he felt released from his promise.

"Let's go, my men!" he shouted to his followers. "Roland is about to be overcome! We can at least die with him!"

The Ethiopian ranks were thick, and the black fighters did not lack courage. The cavalry charge of the rescuers was met by a storm of javelins, then by the savage thrust of the jabbing spears. For a time it seemed that Thierry's mixed squadron of Angevins and Visigoths could not break through. Then Roland, Turpin and their three companions attacked from within. The black circle parted, and the two columns joined forces, but only to find themselves encircled again.

Re-enforced by once-defeated Saracens who had rallied, the Ethiopians began to press in once more, hurling their javelins which more often found their mark in the unprotected horses than in their armored riders. Turpin, unhorsed, fought on foot, with four javelins protruding from his body. Three-fourths of the Angevins and Visigoths were down.

Roland, wounded in several places and with bleeding temples from his mighty horn blasts, placed his Oliphant once more to his lips. It was a feeble blast that issued from the great horn, but the echo that it aroused was mighty.

From within the pass came the loud, fierce sound of hundreds of Frankish war trumpets.

"Charlemagne is at hand!" shouted the Franks with renewed vigor.

"Charlemagne is at hand!" shouted the Saracens in dismay. But their leaders rallied them for one last onset. Once more the tide of battle swirled and swept about the survivors. Veillantif, struck in thirty places, went down beneath his master. Roland, springing to his feet, received a salvo of javelins, most of which rebounded harmlessly from his mail coat. Thierry, miraculously unharmed, found himself the center of a mass of straining fighters.

Another terrible blast, more ominous, closer, came from the mouth of the darkening pass. The Franks were at hand!

This time the assailants did not tarry. They broke and fled, swift as hunting dogs, down the valley, leaving behind them a trail of bent spears and broken bodies.

The survivors looked about them. A dozen Angevins and Visigoths remained, by the side of Thierry. Turpin, with four grievous body wounds, had collapsed. Roland stood grim and victorious, supporting himself on bloody Durendal. But he himself had lost much blood. The wounds he had borne were relatively light, but from the broken veins in his temples the blood flowed freely.

There was no thought of pursuing the fleeing Ethiopians and Saracens, who had already disappeared in the gathering twilight. The only care was for the wounded and the dead.

Gently, with the aid of a Visigoth, Thierry unlaced the battered helmet of his prelate uncle, removed his hauberk, and cut through his undertunic. The javelin wounds were mortal, that could be seen at a glance. Without attempting to remove the javelin points, Thierry staunched the oozing blood with pieces torn from his own tunic, and tried to bandage the wounds in elementary fashion.

Roland, with unsteady gait, marched up to where the Archbishop lay on the green grass.

"Pray, grant me leave, my lord Archbishop!" he said. "Our comrades, whom we held so dear! They are dead now! We cannot let them lie. I'll seek them and bring them here, so that you may bless them!"

The Archbishop's voice was but a whisper. "Go, Roland, and come back! This field is ours, God be praised!"

With the help of the survivors, Roland sought out his chosen comrades where they lay on the field of death—Gerin and his companion Gerier, Berenger, Oton, Anseis, Duke Sanson the rich, old Girart of Roussillon and the others. One by one they were brought in to the Archbishop, who blessed them with sobs in his faltering voice. "My lords, may God the Glorious receive your brave souls, and allow them to repose in Paradise, by His own side!"

Oliver was found and brought in, cradled in Roland's arms. As Turpin raised his weak hand to bless the corpse, the great captain broke into sobs. "Comrade!" he cried. "Oliver! Brother! There was never a better knight than you to confound the arrogant and uphold the right, to lead the brave and give sage counsel to your friends! Had I listened to you, brother, you would be alive now! I, I have killed you, with my foolish pride!"

With these words he sank to the ground. When he recovered consciousness, a few seconds later, Turpin was no more. His noble white head cradled in his nephew's arms, the warrior Archbishop had gone to rest.

Roland stumbled to his feet and aided Thierry to compose the Archbishop's arms across his breast.

"I commend you to the Glorious One of Heaven, Sir Turpin!" he whispered. "No man has ever served Him so well! Never since the Apostles was there such a churchman to uphold the laws of our salvation and the hearts of brave men! The doors of Paradise lie open to you!"

He turned away, stumbling. "Sir Roland, where are you going?" cried Thierry, looking up from his dead uncle.

"Pray let me be, Sir Thierry!" called back the Count. "I go to commune with my Maker!"

In one hand he held the Oliphant, in the other Durendal, with which he supported himself as he plodded his weary course across the field, to an open space between two trees.

Here, out of sight of the others, he let himself fall to the ground. He knew death was near, slow death, from the bursting of his temples, not the quick death that is dealt by a wound.

As he lay on the grass with his eyes closed, he did not perceive a Saracen who quietly crept up to him. He was all unaware of him, until the foeman laid his hand on Durendal. Then he slowly opened his eyes. "You are not one of our men, that I know!" he said, "or you would not dream of taking my sword!" His left hand, that held the Oliphant, rose and crashed down on the marauder's head, breaking helmet, skull and bones, along with the crystal, gold and ivory of the mighty horn.

With what little strength he had left, Roland rose wearily to his feet. "My horn will never be used again by any man!" he murmured to himself. "Now let me save Durendal!"

Before him was a great brown boulder. Ten times, with all the strength remaining to him, Roland struck the good sword on the rock. The steel cried out, but did not break.

"Help me, Saint Mary!" groaned the Count. "Good Durendal, I need you no more! My pride is spent! Do you remember how many good battles we have fought together, you and I? You must not pass on to any coward! You have been the sword of too good a vassal!"

Again and again he strove to break the sword, by might and main, but to no avail.

"Ah, Durendal, you are fair and white! How well you

reflect the rays of the sun! It was Charlemagne who girded you on me, and with you I conquered for him so many strange lands! I'd rather die than have you fall into pagan hands! You are beautiful and holy. Your hilt contains the most precious relics. It is not right that pagans should hold you! God the Father, don't bring that disgrace on France!"

But now his strength suddenly left him. He dropped to his knees, and fell face forward on the grass. His sword lay beneath him as he fell, and his face was turned toward Spain and the enemy.

With failing hand, he beat his breast. *"Mea culpa!"* he called out. "God, by Thy virtue, cleanse me of my sins, both great and small, which I have committed from the hour I was born until this day, when my life ends here!"

Swift visions appeared before his clouding eyes, his many campaigns, the sweet land of France, which he would see no more, his lovely betrothed, whose beloved countenance was so like another he had recently seen stilled in death, his friends and comrades, his lord Charlemagne. With a mighty effort of the will, he shook them from his consciousness.

"Heavenly Father, Who hast never lied, save my soul from all the perils of death, and forgive all the sins I committed during life!"

With the last remnant of his strength, he plucked from his belt his right-hand glove, and held it out to his Maker, in the last, supreme gesture of feudal homage.

As sight and life departed from him, it seemed to him that by his side stood the two great Archangels of the Faith for which he had given his life, Saint Gabriel and Saint Michel of Peril, folding their great white wings over his slowly stiffening form as they prepared to bear his soul to Paradise.

22

THE PURSUIT

"Sire, the battle must be won!
Pursue the foe ere day is done!
If we ride on with might and main
We'll overtake the men of Spain!
And we'll convert this deadly bout
Into a mighty Moslem rout!
In France's name we'll win the day!
Onward and away!"

Chanson de Roland, 2423-2428

THE FIRST ECHELONS OF CHARLEMAGNE'S CAVALRY RODE up to the spot where the dozen survivors stood on the lonely battlefield just as the sun's lower rim touched the summit of the western hills. There was still plenty of light to reveal to the eyes of the newcomers the awesome scene of death and devastation presented by the valley of Cerdaña and the foothills leading to the pass. In inextricable confusion, Frankish and Saracen bodies covered every ell of ground, every path and passage, every hillock and hollow. A few, still alive, filled the air with their moans of pain. The majority, trampled underfoot after they had fallen, lay in the stillness of death.

The Emperor was among the very first to reach Thierry and his companions where they sat on the rocks, nursing their wounds. Huon, leaping from his horse, caught his brother in his arms and kissed him repeatedly. "Thierry! Brother!" he exclaimed over and over again. "I had not

thought to find you yet alive! Saint Mary, thank you!"

But the Emperor, sitting astride his great white charger, contemplated the scene with a wide-eyed, glassy stare in which were concentrated all the horrors and sorrows of bereavement.

Aloud, in a terrible voice, he cried out: "Roland! Fair nephew, where are you? Where is the Archbishop, and Count Oliver? Where is Gerin, and his comrade Gerier? What has become of the Gascon Engelier, Duke Sanson, and proud Anseis? Where is old Girart of Roussillon? Where are the dozen peers I held so dear? I left them behind me in this spot! Where are they?"

His wild eyes fell on Thierry, who had just freed himself from Huon's embrace. "Where are they?" he repeated fiercely.

Thierry walked slowly up to the Emperor and saluted. "They cannot answer you, sire!" he replied. "They are dead! But they have left you possession of this field!"

Charlemagne lowered his head, till his great white beard swept his horse's mane. Great tears flowed from his eyes. "God!" he whispered. "What despair that I was not here when the battle began!"

Others of the Emperor's army had come up. The field, deserted a short while ago, now teemed again with armed men. Many had friends and relatives in the ranks of Roland's followers. These dismounted and began searching among the bodies. For the most part, their quest was vain. But here and there, one would hear an outcry of sorrow, a shout of dismay, as a dear body was found. The battlefield rang with lamentations, as the living wept over the dead.

It was Naimon who put a sudden end to this scene of grief. "My lord!" he exclaimed to the Emperor, who sat his horse weeping and tugging at his beard. "Look before you, a league or two away! See where those great clouds

of dust rise from the plain! Those are the Saracens, fleeing from your wrath! Pursue them, sire! Let us ride on, and wreak vengeance for this grief!"

Charlemagne raised his head slowly, as if he had not heard the Duke. "Alas!" he said. "They are so far away! They have taken from me the flower of France! Still, my lord Duke, you are right! Sir Thierry and Sir Huon, take a thousand men and guard me this field, the hills and the valleys! Leave the dead just as they are! Let not a beast of prey or a human being approach! I forbid that anyone touch them till we come back!"

Thierry saluted again. "Right Emperor, it shall be even as you say!" he replied.

"Sir Naimon, sound the trumpets again!" commanded Charles, who had suddenly regained his customary decision. His eyes, recently bathed in tears, now sparkled with a fierce, unholy light. His jaw was set. He drew his sword Joyeuse and raised it high.

"On to the pursuit, my men!" he shouted to those around him. "Let not a Saracen escape, of those who have done this deed!"

The weeping barons vaulted back into their saddles at the sound of the trumpets. "On to vengeance! Charlemagne and Monjoie!" they shouted, as the Emperor pricked his spurs into his charger's flanks.

Then Thierry and Huon saw sweeping past them the embattled might of France. Squadron after squadron, issuing from the pass, skirted the battlefield at a gallop and thundered on into the gathering gloom, after the great leader of Christendom. Like avenging angels rode the Frankish horsemen, thousands upon thousands, in serried ranks, pressing on to the west in the direction where the dust clouds, still visible despite the approach of night, revealed the presence of the fleeing enemy. As more and more divisions poured forth from the mouth of the pass and deployed in battle formation, breaking into a canter,

then into a gallop, Thierry turned to Huon with a grim smile.

"The Saracens will never escape!" he cried. "Charlemagne will pursue them through the night and into the day! He will trap them against the banks of the Ebro and slaughter them all!"

But Huon was in no mood for rejoicing. "Alas, brother!" he replied. "Had Roland but sounded his horn earlier, he and his peers would be alive now to join in this chase! His triple blast reached Charlemagne at the same instant I did, and I had been spurring and straining for many hours to reach him!"

"And the traitor Ganelon?" inquired Thierry anxiously.

"With my own eyes I saw him seized, bound, and entrusted to the cooks of Charlemagne's household!" replied Huon. "I know not why the Emperor did not put him to death at once!"

"He is a nobleman, brother, and must be tried by a council of his peers!" Thierry reminded him. "Our Frankish law does not permit the Emperor to take justice into his own hands. You know that well!"

"I would feel easier if I knew him dead!" replied Huon. "If he escapes, the real slayer of Roland and our comrades goes unpunished!"

"Fear not, brother!" said Thierry, placing his arm about Huon's shoulder. "Our Franks will never let him go! You will see him die in misery and shame, like the felon traitor that he is!"

It was fully an hour before the last mounted divisions of the great Frankish host had rolled by. By this time it was pitch-dark, and Thierry and Huon began setting about their allotted task of posting sentries throughout the battlefield to guard the bodies of their fallen comrades. By the fitful glare of resin torches, they moved with their men about the field, picking up the few wounded they could find and handing them over to the care of the priests and

army physicians who had by this time come up.

It was from one of the priests, whom he was assisting in the work of shriving a dying Frankish knight, that Thierry learned more of the events that had transpired, the coming of the two maidens, one a Moslem, the other a Visigoth, to Charlemagne as he rode toward France, their words of warning, which had gone unheeded, but were remembered later.

"And what was done with the maidens?" asked Thierry quickly, with such eagerness in his voice that the priest looked up from his work of laying to rest the Frank who had just died.

"Wherefore such anxiety, my son?" he inquired curiously. "Know you these maidens, perchance?"

Thierry nodded, but made no reply.

"The Emperor decreed they should accompany the host back into France, where the relics of the cathedral of Reims might perhaps heal their minds," continued the priest. "They are with the camp followers, the scullions and the cooks, since the rest of the host turned back to Spain."

Thierry's eyes narrowed. "And what of my lord Ganelon?" he inquired.

The priest shook his head. "Of him I know nothing, save that some say he was seized by order of the Emperor. But I know not why."

Thierry excused himself as soon as he was able and went to seek Huon.

"Brother," he said when he had him alone, "our princesses, yours and mine, did not fare to Bernaldo del Carpio, either before or after we had seen him. Instead, they somehow fell in with Charlemagne's host in the pass. They tried to give warning to our lord, but were disbelieved and deemed mad. Now they are with the camp followers of the army."

"As is also my lord Ganelon!" exclaimed Huon. "But

he is a captive, bound in chains, and can do no further harm!"

"He has no guard beyond the cooks and scullions of the Emperor," said Thierry. "What of his kinsmen and retainers? Did they ride past us with the Emperor's host, his uncle Guinemer and his friend Pinabel and the others? Or did they linger behind, in the pass?"

"Verily, brother, that I do not know!" replied Huon. "I rode here by the Emperor's side. I know not who followed us and who tarried behind! Perhaps we should ride at once through the pass, and see if all is safe!"

"Nay, that we cannot do, brother!" replied Thierry firmly. "The Emperor left us here to guard this field, and here we must stay till he returns!"

"Is there not someone we can send?" asked Huon anxiously.

Thierry shook his head. Then his face lighted up. "That there is!" he cried. "The captain of the Visigothic guard, who joined me in the last fight! He is under no orders from Charlemagne, and will be glad to seek out the sister of his leader!"

Sir Gonzalo Ramírez de Logroño, *fijodalgo* of Visigothic Spain, was soon found, informed, and entrusted with his mission, which he eagerly accepted.

"I can give you horses, but can spare you no men, Captain," Thierry explained.

The Captain raised his head proudly. "Three of my Visigoths still live!" he replied. "We, and we alone, suffice to guard the lady Elvira!"

As the clattering hoofs of the Visigoths died away in the direction of the pass, the brothers looked at each other in doubt.

"Heaven grant, Huelin, that this goes well!" exclaimed Thierry. "The lady Elvira has won my heart!"

"And Esclarmonde mine!" replied Huon simply.

23

THE FIELD OF THE DEAD

"My nephew fair, when I return to France
Reproachful eyes will meet my every glance.
Strange men will come to me from far-off lands
And ask upon what foreign, doleful strands
I left my best and doughtiest capitain.
I shall reply that you lie dead in Spain!
My kingdom I shall hold with bitter grief.
May life for me be mercifully brief!"

Chanson de Roland, 2909-2915

CHARLES THE GREAT AND HIS VICTORIOUS ARMY, TURNING back from the Ebro, where the last remnants of Saracen resistance had been crushed, were slowly cantering back to the field of death at Rencesvals, below the pass of Cize.

The fleeing fragments of Marsile's great host, trapped between the oncoming Franks, bent on vengeance, and the swift-flowing water of the great stream, had indeed been cut to pieces, as Thierry had prophesied. Many of them had preferred the swirling current to the vengeful swords and lances of the pursuers. A few had been able to escape on skiffs, Marsile among them. The grievously wounded Saracen Emir had succeeded in reaching his city of Zaragoza, which had immediately gone into a state of all-out defense.

But for the majority of the Saracen host there was no escape. Cornered against the banks of the dark, eddying Ebro at the most tumultuous point in its course, the more courageous among them made a determined last stand,

calling on Allah and the Prophet to give them victory or the joys of the Moslem paradise. Time and again they had tried to stab and hack their way through the encircling Christian cavalry, but to no avail. Pressed closer and closer to the river's banks, they died by the hundreds and thousands as the relentless Franks charged them again and again. A few survivors leaped into the stream to drown. Others threw down their arms and offered to surrender, but there was no quarter from the merciless relatives and friends of the men who had died in Roland's rear guard. "It was an evil day when you saw Roland!" was the ruthless cry of the slaughterers.

The way to Zaragoza lay open and undefended, but Charlemagne had a sacred duty to perform before he completed his conquest of Saracen Spain. Riding with Duke Naimon by his side, the Emperor approached once more the fateful valley of Cerdaña, where his heart lay buried. Clad in his white, blue-bordered hauberk, with his helmet studded with gold and gems still laced on his head, wearing at his side his mighty sword Joyeuse, in whose golden hilt lay the point of the lance with which Our Lord was wounded on the Cross, Charles the conqueror was nevertheless a dejected and broken man, whom Duke Naimon regarded from time to time with solicitude and pity in his eyes.

"Naimon," said the Emperor, as if waking from sleep, "last night, after we had destroyed the Saracens, I had another dream. I had cried myself to sleep, like a little child. The fate of Roland, Oliver and the twelve peers weighed heavy on my heart, and I wept and prayed, prayed and wept, until God's angel mercifully closed my eyes. But then it seemed to me that Saint Gabriel came down from Heaven and showed me a vision, the vision of a great battle I would yet have to fight. I looked up toward the sky, and saw thunderclouds and winds and blowing gales, hurri-

canes and marvelous tempests, lightning and flames that fell upon our people and burned their spear shafts and melted their bucklers and crushed in their steel helmets and their hauberks. Then came a great troop of bears, leopards, dragons, serpents, griffins and devils to feed upon our knights. And they were sore afraid, and cried out to me for help, but I could not move to their rescue. A great fierce lion then came out of a forest and attacked me. I struck him back and seized him, and we struggled with all our might and main."

The Emperor paused. "And then?" queried the Duke.

"Then—nothing! I could not discern who won. But I had another vision. It seemed to me I was in my palace at Aix, and held a great bear by a chain. Then out of the forest came thirty other bears, and each spoke like a man. And they said to me: 'Sire, give him back to us! It is not right that he remain with you! He is of our kin, and we must lend him aid!' Then a beautiful hunting dog came leaping down the stairway of the palace, sprang at the bears, and seized the largest one among them. A terrific fight ensued on the green grass before my eyes. But before its issue was decided, I awoke."

The Emperor paused again. "What think you, Sir Naimon? What may be the meaning of these dreams?"

"For the first one, sire, I know not," replied the Duke. "For the second, it bethinks me it may portend that you will encounter difficulties when you bring the felon Ganelon to trial. Could he not be the bear you held in chains, and the thirty bears his kinsmen, who will defend him?"

Charlemagne regarded Naimon fiercely, his eyes blazing with wrath. "They would not dare!" he exclaimed. "What feudal council would refuse to do justice? Nay, the case against Ganelon is too clear! His treachery shines forth like the light of yonder sun!"

"It must still be proven by divine judgment, my lord, if Ganelon finds a champion!"

The Emperor shook his head. They rode on in silence, till they came to the vast battlefield at the mouth of the pass. Here Thierry and Huon ran out to meet them.

"My lord Emperor," said Thierry, "all is as you commanded it should be. The bodies lie undisturbed. Only the wounded have been gathered."

Charles dismounted and gave his reins to Thierry. "My lords," he said to his followers in a low voice, "pray restrain your steps. I would go ahead alone to seek my nephew. I was at Aix last Christmastide, and my valiant knights were boasting in my presence. Then I heard Roland speak and say that he would not die in any foreign land until he had surpassed all his peers and all his men in valor, that he would die with his face turned toward the foe, and end his gallant days like a conqueror. Pray, let me seek him out alone!"

While the others respectfully held back, Charlemagne climbed a knoll and looked far and wide upon the field of death, where the very grass and flowers had turned scarlet with the blood of men. With tears in his eyes, he slowly walked forward, to a spot between two trees, where a brown boulder bore the mark of mighty sword blows. There lay Roland, lying on the green grass where he had fallen, Durendal beneath him, his face turned toward Spain and the foe.

Charlemagne's heart was full to overflowing. He went to pick up his nephew's body in his arms, but his head and legs gave way. He fell in a faint across Roland's prone form. Naimon, Thierry and Huon promptly ran to him, picked him up, and carried him beneath a tree, where they propped him up in a sitting position.

Charles soon re-opened his eyes, and they fell on Roland's body. This time his eyes were dry and burning as he opened his lips to address the corpse.

"Roland, my friend, may God have mercy upon you! Never was there such a knight as you! Now my honor is

turned into decline! May God lay you down amid the flowers of Heaven, Roland! It was an evil hour when I led you into Spain! There will be no day, from the present until I die, when I will not sorrow for you! How my strength will decline now! There will be no one to sustain my honor!"

Wild-eyed, he looked about him and tore at his hair and beard. Those around him wept silently. Theirs, too, was the loss.

"Roland," continued the Emperor in a dull, lifeless voice, "I will hie me back to France, to my palace at Aix. There strange men will come to me and ask: 'Where is Count Roland, that mighty captain?' And I will have to tell them that he lies dead in Spain! Then the Saxons, and the Huns, and the Longobards, and the Apulians and Sicilians will rise up in revolt against me! And I shall have no one to lead my armies and defend my realms, for you are dead! France is stricken to the heart! Why cannot God grant that before I set foot again within the pass of Cize my soul be freed from my body, and go to join you and your comrades in your glory, while my flesh is heaped with yours?"

In the midst of their pity and sympathy, Thierry and Huon marveled at the Emperor's grief. The blow was a terrific one, but why should Charlemagne speak as though his life and empire were ended? Other leaders would be found from among the Frankish ranks, men like themselves, who would continue to bear the oriflamme against the foe, and guard the Empire's marches with their lives, if need be. Could it be, thought the brothers, that there was some grain of truth in the subdued and whispered rumors of the Frankish court that Roland was not the nephew, but the son of Charlemagne, born of an incestuous relation with the Countess Bertha, Charlemagne's own sister? The whisperers even said that the Count of Brittany, on learning of the outrage, had in despair hurled

himself upon the Saxon spears to seek in death solace for his dishonor, and that Charlemagne, realizing the enormity of his crime, had vowed to atone for it through the rest of his days by devoting his life to the defense of Christendom. But this was no doubt vain and idle slander, spread perhaps by Count Ganelon to bring discredit upon his stepson, even at the cost of besmirching the fair name of Bertha, who had become his own wife.

It was Duke Naimon who broke in upon the Emperor's sorrow.

"Sire," he said, "you must put an end to this grief! Bid them seek our men throughout the field! Let them be borne to a common burying place!"

The Emperor nodded silently, for he could speak no more. Naimon gave the order, and speedily the men of the host began gathering the corpses and bringing them before the priests, who pronounced final absolution upon them, swinging their censers filled with heavily perfumed frankincense and myrrh.

With all military honors the bodies were then interred together, in a vast common grave, over which the cross of Christ was planted, together with the oriflamme of France.

But Roland, Oliver and Turpin were set aside at the Emperor's command. Their bodies were opened, the hearts removed, wound in silken veils, and set in white marble coffers. Then the bodies, washed in spices and wine, were wrapped in deer hides, covered with palls, and set on three great wagons, to be borne back to their native land for burial.

These sad duties took up most of the day. The sun was beginning to descend upon the battlefield when from the pass came riding four strange knights clad in Visigothic armor. They made straight for the spot where Thierry and Huon stood, supervising the loading of the heroes' bodies on the wagons.

"Sir Thierry and Sir Huon!" cried Captain Gonzalo

Ramírez, as he dismounted from his weary horse. "I bear you evil tidings! A band of unknown men fell upon your Emperor's cooks and scullions during the night, slew several of them, and made off with Count Ganelon! The lady Elvira and her Moorish companion have also disappeared!"

Thierry and Huon stood looking at each other with sinking hearts. Then, without speaking, they rushed off with one accord and sought out Charlemagne in his pavilion.

"Ganelon the traitor has escaped, right Emperor!" shouted Thierry at his sovereign, without even saluting. "He has taken with him the two mad maidens, who are in truth Doña Elvira Díaz and Esclarmonde, daughter of King Marsile! Grant us a boon, sire! Permit us to go in search of them, and bring them back!"

Charles looked up stunned. "Ganelon has escaped?" he cried. "Nay, it cannot be! It must not be! Young sirs, take as many men as you wish! Ride all day and all night, if need be! Fight like devils out of hell! But bring the traitor back to me! Alive!"

24

GANELON'S ESCAPE

His noble beard and whiskers then they shaved,
And four stout blows each with his fist they gave.
They beat him well with cudgels and with staves.
And on his neck they placed an iron chain
To hold him like a beast for Charlemagne.
Chanson de Roland, 1823-1827

BESGON, CHARLEMAGNE'S MASTER COOK, AND HIS FELLOW cooks and scullions had not been gentle with Count Ganelon, who had been entrusted to their care. Roland's stepfather was as generally unpopular throughout the rank and file of the Frankish host as Roland was loved. His arrogance and ruthlessness, so different in quality from those of his stepson, had often made themselves felt upon the lowly and the humble.

Hence, when it became known that he had been arrested by order of Charlemagne on a charge of treason directed against the army's hero, the men of the kitchen came up, muttering and shaking their fists at the captive. Justice would be done by the feudal council; but in the meantime, there was nothing in the Frankish law to prevent a man seriously charged with such a grievous crime as treason from receiving a little preliminary punishment. The kitchen knaves gathered around the stake to which Ganelon had been bound. Some carried cudgels in their hands.

"Behold, my lords!" said Besgon, ironically addressing his compeers. "I present to you the lord Ganelon of the

court of our lord Charlemagne! The Emperor says he has betrayed Captain Roland and the men of the rear guard! Is it right that he should continue to wear the badges of a baron?"

"Nay!" shouted the knaves. "Strip from him his beard and mustache!"

Besgon advanced upon the captive with a sharp razor. Ganelon watched him with eyes that blazed with impotent fury.

"You will pay for this, knave!" he hissed.

Besgon threw back his head and laughed. He was a big, rough, pot-bellied man, with tousled hair and a great white apron across his stomach.

"Come, Count! It is not right that a felon traitor wear a baron's beard!" he exclaimed. "That honor is reserved for the heroes of our host!"

With a few deft touches of the razor, he stripped the Count of his facial adornments, while the cooks and scullions laughed uproariously. Then, turning to his men, he exclaimed: "Behold! The noble Count is now like unto us! If any of you bear him a grudge, this is the time to satisfy it!"

He clasped an iron chain about Ganelon's neck. "Safe like a bear in chains!" he cried. "Thus you will linger till our lord returns!"

Cooks and scullions swarmed up to the prisoner. "This for the blow you struck me when you sat at meat with the Emperor, and I spilled a platter in your lap!" cried one, striking Ganelon a hard blow across the face with his open palm.

"This for the time you rode me down with your horse, when I was not fast enough to get out of your way!" shouted one with a crippled foot, swinging a cudgel and bringing it down on the Count's back.

"This for my lord Count Roland, whom you betrayed!" yelled a third, advancing upon Ganelon with a staff.

"Stop, knaves!" A feminine voice, but loud, clear and commanding, halted the scullions in their work of retribution.

It was a lady whom none of them had ever seen before, but her presence, dress and attitude proclaimed her to be of the nobility. Reminded of their inferior social status, the cooks cringed and gave way.

"You were commanded to guard this man, not to torture him!" exclaimed the lady Elvira with flashing eyes. "My lord Charlemagne shall hear of this! Hie you back to your pots, before I have you driven off!"

The kitchen knaves, reluctant to give up their sport, looked at one another in doubt.

"Shall I summon the captain of the guard to be obeyed?" said the noblewoman, advancing upon Besgon.

Then the fellows noticed that at some distance away the captain to whom the maidens had been entrusted sat his horse, with the Saracen maiden at his side, regarding the scene with some amusement. Loath at first to intervene, he had nevertheless yielded to Elvira's protests and granted her permission to put an end to the beating. With upraised hand, he now signaled the cooks and scullions to disperse, and let Ganelon be. Besgon and his comrades went off slowly, muttering to themselves and occasionally turning to shake their fists at Ganelon.

"Thank you, my lady!" said the Count with evident sincerity. "I owe you my life, perhaps. Those scoundrels would have slain me with blows, and I have no defense."

"How much defense had Count Roland, whom you betrayed?" said the lady with scorn. At the same time, she approached the chained man, and lifting the hem of her skirt, wiped from his face the blood left by the first blow.

"Thank you again, my lady!" repeated the Count. "Roland had his sword by his side, and twenty thousand men to guard him! I am disarmed, bound, and in chains!"

He eyed her earnestly, almost hopefully.

"In truth, Sir Ganelon," said Elvira. "I owe you no courtesy! But I have been raised in a court where we behead barons who have committed treason. We do not turn them over to the rabble to be jeered at and struck!"

"Treason!" cried the Count. "Do you, too, believe that it was treason to want to bring this war to an end, and leave you of Spain in peace?"

Elvira's proud face reflected her uncertainty, and she made no reply. Despite his desperate plight, Ganelon had for an instant a fleeting smile of triumph on his face.

"Your brother has fought hard and long to get the Franks out of Spain, my lady Elvira," continued Ganelon earnestly, "yet he could not accomplish it! Why not? Because there was one man, Roland, who swore he would conquer the land and bring it under his heel! Was it treason, my lady, to want to dispose of that man, so that we would all have peace?"

Elvira was visibly impressed. Ganelon hastened to press his advantage. "I have no hope of life, my lady Elvira! Charlemagne will come back and destroy me. But there is one boon I would ask of you before I die, if you will but grant it!"

"Speak, Sir Frank!" replied Elvira, staring into the Count's steel-gray eyes as if fascinated.

"Back in France I have a loving wife, Bertha, also a young son, Baldwin, who I hope will some day inherit my fiefs. But they must be warned, or Charlemagne will wreak his vengeance on them as well. News must be brought to them of my plight, so they may flee that vengeance!"

"My lord," replied Elvira, "I would not know my way about in France. Besides, I am myself a captive here, though free to come and go."

"Nay, I was not asking that!" broke in the Count, speaking rapidly, for the captain of the guard, who had hitherto remained conversing with Esclarmonde, was casting impatient eyes in their direction. "Somewhere along

this pass are my kinsmen and retainers, if they have not all ridden away behind Charlemagne. There is my uncle Guinemer, my friend Pinabel. Have them sought out if you are able, my lady! Inform them of my plight, and bid them ride to my castle to give warning to my wife and son!"

The captain and Esclarmonde had been cantering up, and were now almost within earshot.

"I beseech you, in the name of the peace I have tried to restore to your land, in the name of our common faith! I am ready to die! But save them, save them!"

Elvira turned away without a word. The captain held her stirrup for her to mount. "What said the felon traitor to you, my lady?" he inquired curiously. Esclarmonde, too, looked at her inquisitively.

"Nay, nothing!" Elvira lied. "He thanked me for saving him from the fists and cudgels of the cooks."

" 'Twere better for him perhaps had you not interfered, lady!" said the captain sternly. "He will die a far more miserable death when Charlemagne gets him back to Aix!"

That night, lying with Esclarmonde in the tent that the Frankish captain had placed at their disposal, Elvira could not sleep. The impassioned plea of Ganelon rang in her ears. Was it indeed treason that the Count had committed? Did not his interests coincide with her brother Bernaldo's? Should his dying request not be granted? A man who had sought peace, his last thoughts were not of himself, but of his dear ones, whom the terrible Emperor of the Franks would pursue with his vengeance. Should not the innocent wife and son of Ganelon be warned, and given a chance to seek safety in flight?

Elvira's eyes filled with tears as she remembered the once noble Count, now chained to a stake like a bear, with his cheeks and chin shaved, awaiting his disgraceful doom, yet unmindful of himself.

Quietly, she rose from her bed of straw. Without wak-

ing Esclarmonde, she donned her outer garments by the fitful light of the taper that burned in the tent, then stole forth. The sentries were far away. She thought for an instant of seeking her horse, but it was unsaddled. Silently, she strode off into the night, up the mountain path, in the direction of Spain, avoiding the Frankish sentries as she went.

Once she had placed some distance between herself and the tent, she strode along more freely. Here and there along the pass, bivouac fires burned. The few Frankish soldiers who had remained behind slept peacefully, for the Gascon side of the great divide was fairly safe country. A few sentries she met took her for a camp follower and paid her no heed. One strove to detain her, but she freed herself from his drunken embrace by yielding up a ring and a kiss. Others directed her. Yes, the bivouac of the followers of Count Ganelon lay ahead, near the middle of the pass.

She reached it as dawn was breaking. A sentry of whom she inquired for Count Pinabel shook his head. "He rode back into Spain with Charlemagne," he replied.

"And Guinemer?"

"Count Guinemer is here. Behold, he is at this very instant issuing forth from yonder tent!"

Ganelon's uncle received her courteously. He was a gray-bearded man past his middle years, and his steel-gray eyes held the same glint as Ganelon's. News of the Count's arrest had not reached him, and he listened to Elvira's account with growing astonishment and apprehension.

"You must ride to warn his wife and son!" cried Elvira as she came to the end of her story.

The Count stroked his beard and eyed her craftily. "Nay, lady!" he said slowly. "That were foolishness! Charlemagne would never harm the Countess Bertha! She is his own sister, and Baldwin is his nephew!"

"Then why did Count Ganelon send me here to you

with this message?" asked Elvira in round-eyed astonishment.

" 'Twas for a different reason, I am sure!" exclaimed the Count. Then, rising from his seat, he strode to the entrance of the tent.

"Raymond! Henri! Etienne!" he cried out. "Guard me this woman well, till I return! The rest of you, on your horses! We go to rescue our lord Ganelon!"

Elvira's eyes blazed with fury as she realized how she had been tricked. She rushed to the door. A man-at-arms barred her way with his spear.

"Nay, lady! Back! You have heard Count Guinemer's orders!"

Elvira flung herself on the Count's bed, sobbing. She understood now how cunningly the Count Ganelon had contrived to trick her into regaining for him his freedom.

25

THE RESCUE OF ELVIRA

"So help me God, if you should lie with me,
Disgraced and sorely punished you will be!"
And he replied: "No matter what you do
Or what you say, I'll wreak my will on you!"
Huon de Bordeaux, 6763-6766

ALL DAY ELVIRA RAGED AND FUMED IN GUINEMER'S tent, guarded by the three retainers to whom she had been entrusted. Night descended again upon the pass, and she lay and tossed on Guinemer's bed, but could not sleep.

Not until the sun was rising again in the sky did Count Guinemer and his men come back. Ganelon was with them, a grim-eyed, smooth-shaven Ganelon, who had discarded the last remnants of baronial courtesy and was frankly the outlaw. Elvira heard them exchange fragments of conversation as they dismounted and walked slowly toward the tent, pausing frequently as they talked.

"Are you quite sure no one recognized you, uncle?"

"No one, nephew, since we waited for the night to strike. We left most of the kitchen knaves wallowing in pools of blood. The others ran so fast they could never see what struck them."

" 'Twill learn them to respect their betters! Now, uncle, I must away, to Marsile's court! Charlemagne's vengeance will never find me there!"

"Are you sure Marsile still lives, Ganelon? Charles led his full host against him!"

"Aye, but when he discovers Roland's body, Charles

will stop and mourn, and mourning he will ride back to France and never again show his face in Spain!"

"And what is your will with the damsel, fair nephew? She did you a good turn, and you should requite her well—to the best of your ability, which far surpasses mine!"

The two men laughed. A sinister laugh, thought Elvira as she listened intently.

"She goes with me, uncle. Between her and my lord Marsile's treasures, I shall have enough to repay me for my castles in France, and my good wife Bertha, whom I shall never see again, now that I have slain her beloved son Roland! God, how I have hated that woman!"

"And your son Baldwin?" asked Guinemer.

"Take care of him for me, uncle. Charlemagne will never harm him. See that he grows to man's estate, and becomes a bold baron, like his father. It is best he should not see me again!"

There was but a fleeting note of regret in the Count's voice. Then he laughed again, his bold, full-throated laugh.

"Now let us see our little Spanish bird!" he said, and lifted the flap of the tent.

Elvira had risen to meet him. She stood quiet and erect before him as he entered, her eyes fixed upon his countenance.

He bowed to her with exaggerated courtliness. "My lady Elvira!" he exclaimed.

"My lord Ganelon!" she replied, without a nod.

"I am more indebted to you than I can say, my lady!" went on the Count. "You yourself brought warning of my plight to my retainers, so that they might save me!"

"Such was not my intention, my lord!" replied Elvira coldly. "I but wanted them to carry to your wife and son in France a warning which it seems they did not need!"

"Sometimes events circumvent our intentions, and go far beyond them!" said the Count. "You were well-intentioned in my behalf, and that is all that counts!"

"No, my lord!" Elvira's voice was cutting. "I achieved results contrary to those I had intended! I meant to see your kinsfolk warned, and yourself punished!"

"Let us not quibble, my lady!" said the Count impatiently. "You have my undying gratitude for what you did, and I propose to display it!"

"And how, pray, Sir Ganelon?"

The Count strode forward. He seized Elvira's two wrists in his iron hands and looked down into her face with his glittering steel-gray eyes. There was neither doubt nor timidity in his attitude.

"By bearing you off with me where I am going, Elvira! By placing at your disposal the rest of my days, or at least as many of them as my interest in you will continue!"

Elvira looked up into his eyes fearlessly. "Your days are numbered, Sir Ganelon! You have a price to pay to your Emperor before you can requite what you choose to call your debt to me!"

Ganelon laughed. Despite the deep evil of the man, there was something powerfully magnetic about him, and Elvira felt it in spite of herself. His shaven cheeks and chin gave him a youthful appearance that reminded her of Thierry. Ah, Thierry! That handsome, courteous Frankish knight who had given up his life for her! She thought of him as she had seen him last, prepared to make a death stand that would allow her to escape. He had been the soul of courage and sincerity. Yes, he had been right! All Franks were not alike!

Ganelon's voice brought her back to her senses.

"That is as it may be, my lady Elvira! But in the meantime, we ride off to Marsile's court, you and I! There we will be safe from Charlemagne's pursuit, at least for a time! There you will be mine!"

"Yours!" Elvira's voice was filled with scorn and loathing. "I would die sooner than be yours!"

"You will not die, and you will be mine!" Ganelon's

face came close to hers, so that she could feel his hot breath on her lips. "I will it!"

Fascinated by that hypnotic stare, Elvira felt herself drawn into his powerful arms. His fiery lips met hers.

Then she suddenly found her strength. With a mighty effort, she pushed him from her.

"My lord Ganelon! Think you you can take a maiden of the Visigoths against her will?" she cried. "We die before we yield!"

Her hand flashed into the bosom of her bodice, and came out with a small, triangular dagger, which she pointed at her own heart.

"Our faith tells us it is a deadly sin to take our lives, Sir Ganelon! But it is an even deadlier sin to yield our honor!"

Ganelon's arm shot out with the swiftness of an arrow. He seized her wrist in a grip of iron, then twisted it till she let the dagger go in pain.

"We shall see to that, Elvira! I want you, and I shall take you!"

From his tunic he whipped out a leather thong, the same one with which he had been bound to the stake by Charlemagne's cooks. Quickly he twisted Elvira's wrists behind her, then tied them together till the thong bit into her flesh.

"Now, lady," he said slowly and menacingly, "we shall see who wins this dispute! I propose to have you and keep you at Marsile's court until I grow tired of you! When that comes to pass"—he laughed—"I shall return your dagger!"

He picked up the little weapon from the floor of the tent, where it had fallen, and thrust it into his tunic. Then he stepped forth, and began calling out orders to his men.

Guinemer approached. "You go alone, nephew?" he inquired.

"Alone—save for the lady who accompanies me!" Ganelon replied.

Guinemer shook his head. "Beware, Ganelon!" he said. "Women are a hindrance when one seeks escape! You would be better off with half a dozen men-at-arms!"

"I need no advice!" replied the Count curtly.

They marched off together, and soon were back with two mounts and a pack horse. Ganelon strode into the tent, picked up Elvira in his arms, and deposited her on a horse, bound as she was. Then, with a rope, he fastened her securely to the saddle, so she would not fall. Not a word did he speak, nor did Elvira.

"Farewell, uncle!" he called out to Guinemer. "I am off to Zaragoza once more—with treasure this time!"

"God speed you, nephew!" replied the older man. "If you find your charge too burdensome on the way, drop it! Better alone and alive than accompanied and dead!"

Ganelon vaulted on his horse, took the two bridles in his hand, and was off.

Behind him rode his captive, bound and fastened to her saddle. Bitter thoughts ran through her mind. Less than a month ago, she had found herself in a similar situation with the Berbers who had taken Castro Viejo. She had expected then the fate that awaited her now. The Blessed Virgin, on whom she had called earnestly then, had miraculously saved her. Would the Mother of God save her again now? Her lips moved in silent prayer.

Oh, if the Virgin would but send someone to her rescue—her brave brother Bernaldo, or a bold knight like Thierry of Anjou!

A tear ran down her cheek at the thought of the good knight from France, who now lay dead on the road between the cliffs where she had seen him last. He, too, had longed for her, but how differently from Ganelon! She remembered how she had repulsed him on the bench by the shepherd's hut, and a pang of regret shot through her breast. He had never known—

Known what? Suddenly bewildered, Elvira shook the

thought from her mind. She looked about, and began to take cognizance of her surroundings.

Carefully skirting other bivouacs, where the sight of a knight in torn and dirty tunic, leading a woman prisoner and a pack horse, might arouse wonderment, the Count was boldly striking off the beaten path and up into the mountains. He seemed to know his way, and rode grimly, silently ahead.

For hours they continued to ride, with only a brief pause for a noonday meal, when the Count untied her hands, but kept her under constant watch while they ate. Then again a long and weary ride along mountain paths bordering on steep precipices, until the sun was about to set, and they came to a broad, level, grassy spot between two cliffs.

Here the Count finally spoke. "My lady, we are now safe from pursuit. We can stop here for the night, and proceed toward Zaragoza tomorrow."

He released her from her saddle, taking her in his arms. Weary and faint, she neither struggled nor spoke.

"Why need we wait till we arrive in Zaragoza?" he breathed into her ear. "You will be mine—tonight!"

Elvira averted her face from his. She did not wish to meet the hypnotic stare of those steely eyes that burned with unholy passion.

He laid her on the grass, still bound. "Wait here, fair Elvira," he whispered huskily, "while I go to make all ready for our nuptials!"

Bitter, silent tears rolled down the cheeks of the proud Visigothic maiden. The Blessed Mother of Christ would not hearken to her prayer! She must succumb to this devil incarnate!

Ganelon came and went, making busy, hasty preparations. He turned the horses loose to graze, having first unloaded the pack horse. A great saddle blanket and a cushion were among the objects removed. These he spread

beside Elvira, then lifted her bodily from the grass and placed her on the blanket, resting her head on the cushion. Elvira's headdress had fallen off, and her golden hair lay about her shoulders. The Count caressed her burning cheek softly, with avid hand.

"How fair and lovely you are, Elvira!" he breathed into her ear. "What joy it will be to lie beside you, take you in my arms, and make you mine! I have dreamt of this moment since the day I laid eyes upon you in Marsile's garden! Now the moment has come!"

Elvira felt faint and sick, but the touch of his hot hand on her smooth body aroused her.

"Sir Ganelon!" she cried, with all the energy that remained to her. "I pray you, in the name of your mother and your wife, in the name of Mary the Immaculate, who watches you from Heaven, desist from this foul deed! What you wish to do is not only unworthy of a knight! It is unworthy of a human being! Have mercy upon me, as you will wish for mercy when you face your Maker."

There was no mercy in the Count's gray eyes, only fierce, uncontrollable passion and desire. His hands strayed lower, and began to undo the lacings of her bodice, while his face came closer and closer to hers.

"Elvira! I want you! I must have you! That is all that really matters! Yield to me, Elvira, and you will enjoy the transports of a love such as you have never imagined! Forget everything, save that you are mine!"

Her eyes opened for an instant to look up into the darkening sky, where a few bright stars gleamed, then closed again. A wave of faintness and nausea overcame her.

"Blessed Mother of Christ, send me death!" she whispered.

"Nay, she sends you love!" exclaimed the Count. His iron fingers were nervously, lasciviously tearing at her bodice now. Soon he would have her form exposed, and gaze

upon that proud beauty in all its naked loveliness!

"Count Ganelon, stand where you are! Do not move, or you are a dead man!" shouted a loud, clear voice.

The Count, bruskly aroused from his paradise of lust, looked up from his half-conscious victim. Directly behind him, with raised sword, stood Thierry. Three paces further back, with drawn longbows aimed at his heart, were three Basque *guerrilleros*. Huon and four Visigoths advanced upon him from another direction.

Without his sword, which he had laid aside, Ganelon was trapped. Boldly, like a wild beast at bay, he sought to rise and hurl himself upon Thierry. A blow on the head from the flat of the knight's blade sent him reeling to the ground once more. There, as he lay stunned, he was quickly seized and bound.

Thierry was quick to cover Doña Elvira's nakedness with the saddle blanket on which she lay. With his dagger he slashed the thong that bound her bleeding wrists. Then she slowly opened her eyes and gazed up into those of the Frankish knight, solicitous, anxious, loving.

"Thierry!" she exclaimed. "Has the Virgin answered my prayer? Am I dead, and do I behold you in Heaven?"

Thierry raised her head gently on his arm. The blanket fell back, exposing Elvira's white breast. Thierry tried to readjust the blanket, but as he did so, a pair of white arms clasped his neck and drew his head down.

"You kissed me once, my Thierry!" she breathed, looking with rapture into his eyes. "You kissed me once, and I did not kiss you back! Try again, Thierry!"

Huon, the Basques and the Visigoths were very busy trussing up the prostrate form of Ganelon. They did not see the embrace that marked the end of the conflict between Frank and Visigoth. Or perhaps they did not choose to see.

26

THE FINDING OF BERNALDO

"What sad tidings shall I bear
To the ones who loved you dearly?
Ever prompt to do and dare,
Ever ready to speak clearly,
Generous with friend and foe,
Riding at your army's head!
Rather to my death I'd go
Than to see you lying dead!"

Romance de los Siete
Infantes de Lara

NUMEROUS AND LENGTHY WERE THE EXPLANATIONS exchanged between the lovers as they began their journey back to the host of Charlemagne the following morning, Basque *guerrilleros* ahead and behind them, Huon by their side, Ganelon in their train, securely bound and carefully guarded by the Visigothic escort.

At no time, Elvira learned, had she been in real danger since leaving Guinemer's camp. The Basque guerrilla fighters, posted on the mountaintops, had descried them when they started out, kept them constantly in view as they rode, and guided their pursuers to the spot where Ganelon had pitched his fateful camp. In fact, they had had to be restrained from putting their arrows through the Count's heart ever since the noonday halt. Charlemagne's command that Ganelon be brought back alive to stand trial for his treason was responsible for the delay of the rescuers in attacking the felon Count until they could be

reasonably sure that he could not die fighting, even if he would.

There was news of Esclarmonde, too, relayed by an enthusiastic Huon. She had not given the alarm on first noticing Elvira's absence from her side, thinking her friend had gone off to seek Bernaldo. Later she had become anxious, and had confided in the captain of the guard, who had at once organized a searching party out of the very few men-at-arms under his command. It was precisely because of this absence of fighting men from the camp that Guinemer had had such an easy time, as soon as night had fallen, in raiding the camp and carrying off the prisoner. Esclarmonde, riding by the captain's side in search of Elvira, had been away when this happened, and had not been seen by the Visigoths who rode up shortly after the slaughter of the kitchen knaves. But Huon and Thierry, on reaching the camp later, had found her, weeping and tearing her hair over the occurrences. They had with difficulty persuaded her not to accompany them in their further search for Elvira and Ganelon, and she had stayed behind. A brief visit to Guinemer's encampment had revealed the disappearance of Ganelon's uncle and all his retainers, who had left for parts unknown. But a Basque *guerrillero,* bounding down from the mountaintops, had informed his Visigothic allies of the road taken by Ganelon and his prisoner. From that point on, the trailing had been easy, and the only question had been how to take the Count alive.

Ganelon now rode in silent fury, securely bound on his horse, looking like the trapped wild beast that he was, eyeing with despair his erstwhile victim and the two knights from Roland's retinue whose fate had become so strangely intertwined with his own. But neither Elvira nor the brothers deigned him with a glance. The lesser crime was swallowed up by the greater, and he henceforth belonged to Charlemagne alone.

The party had been riding through the mountains for some hours in the direction of the pass and Charlemagne's army, when there arose a commotion among the Basques who preceded them on foot. One of their number, they were told, had caught a smoke signal from a distant peak, a signal used only on occasions of deepest distress or disaster. Should they disregard it and proceed on their way?

While they sat their horses discussing the matter, two swift Basque runners, carrying longbows, caught up with them. They sought out Elvira and addressed her at length in their mysterious tongue, gesticulating wildly. The consternation painted on their faces was soon reflected in that of the maiden, who turned pale and would have fallen from her horse had not Thierry encircled her waist.

"Nay, what is it, Elvira, my beloved?" he inquired anxiously.

"Thierry, if this news be true, it is the end of all!" she replied in a subdued voice that was filled with anguish. "My brother Bernaldo, riding to the rescue of your Roland with the forces he was able to muster in Vitoria, has been intercepted by a vastly superior Moslem force. He fights in the valleys to the north, completely encircled by Saracens. For him, say the scouts, there is no escape. He may be dead by now, with all his men!"

"Elvira, this cannot be!" exclaimed Thierry. "With my own eyes I have seen the entire Saracen army, broken by its combat with Roland, fleeing in panic toward the Ebro and Zaragoza, with our Frankish host in hot pursuit! Marsile had mustered every man he had for the assault. There can be no more Saracen armies!"

The Basques watched him, uncomprehending. Then they resumed their jabbering in their own tongue, punctuating it with copious gestures.

Elvira turned to him again. "The scouts say," she went on, "that this is not an army of Spanish Moors, but a mighty Moslem host from overseas, which has sailed up

the Ebro as far as Zaragoza in a fleet of great sea galleys, disembarked, and moved on to face your Emperor. Bernaldo, moving east to bear aid to your leader, ran squarely into them and engaged them, like the brave baron he is, with his handful of men. But now they have him surrounded and at bay! Thierry, I must go to his side!"

Thierry shook his head. "Nay, if things are as you say, of what avail for you to join him? You will only die by his side!"

Elvira drew herself up proudly. "Is this all the counsel you can give me?" she cried. "My brother was marching to save your leader and his Frankish rear guard! Will not your Emperor march to save him?" Her voice again sounded scornful. "For yourself, do what you will! As for me, my place is by my brother's side!"

She wheeled her horse. "Come, my Visigoths!" she cried to the four men who guarded Ganelon. "Leave the Franks to settle their own differences! We ride to Bernaldo!"

She set spurs to her horse. Thierry turned to Huon.

"Brother, the Frankish outposts are near! Do you, with the Basque guides, take Ganelon back to the Emperor! Warn him of the coming of this new Moslem host! Bid him ride to the rescue of those who would have rescued Roland! I go with Elvira!"

He, too, wheeled his horse and galloped off after the Spanish maiden and her escort. Left alone with his prisoner and the Basques, Huon took hold of the Count's bridle.

"Come, Count Ganelon!" he said to the wildly glaring prisoner. "I am enough to guard you! On to Charlemagne!"

And leaving behind the bewildered Basques, whose language he could not understand, he rode swiftly down the mountain slope in the direction of the Frankish camp.

It did not take Thierry long to overtake the five Visi-

goths. Speaking no word, he spurred his horse to Elvira's side. She looked up at him, and her face flushed with pleasure, but no word was spoken. Behind them, grim and silent, came Count Gonzalo and his three followers.

Guided by the Basque scouts who appeared from time to time on the peaks above them, they rode for hours through the silent, desolate mountain passes. The anguish in Elvira's heart was depicted on her face, and Thierry respected her feelings and held his peace, though bitter thoughts coursed through his mind.

So the great war was not over! The destruction of Marsile's host, which he had in part witnessed, was but the prelude to a greater struggle between the forces of Christendom and those of Islam! Who were these Moslem newcomers, arriving in Spain from overseas, in great war galleys, to challenge the power of his Emperor once more?

He did not know that mighty Baligant, Emir of Baghdad and Overlord of all the Faithful of Islam, having received two years before the call for help from his brother in the West, hard pressed by Charlemagne, had gathered great forces through all his realms and led them by sea, across the Mediterranean, to Spain and up the River Ebro to the city of Zaragoza, which he had found in panic, preparing for a siege from Charlemagne's triumphant forces. One brief interview he had had with dying Marsile, whose severed wrist, festering with gangrene, was quickly infecting his whole body. Then he had ordered his vast hosts to issue from their ships, prepare for war, and advance toward the pass of Cize, where Charlemagne still lay encamped.

"Brother," he had assured Marsile, "I shall avenge you! For your right hand you shall be paid back Charlemagne's head! The Frankish host shall never see France again! But we shall complete the exploit that our forefathers began! I shall not rest until I sit in Charlemagne's palace at Aix, beyond the Pyrenees, and bring all the lands

of the Christians under subjection to the sacred laws of the Prophet!"

His armies, numbering hundreds of thousands and swelled by the refugees from Marsile's rout, were soon in rapid motion. Striking northward from Zaragoza, they began their advance toward the pass of the Pyrenees and the host of Charlemagne.

It was not this vast army itself, but a flying column of swift Arabian horsemen, sent out on land as soon as the ships had touched Spanish soil, and reaching the north long in advance of their leader, that Bernaldo had encountered as he rode eastward from Vitoria to bear aid to Roland. The first engagement had not been decisive, but Bernaldo's Visigoths had been effectively blocked from performing their appointed mission. Then, when Bernaldo had again attempted to cut his way through, he had found himself facing the entire variegated host of Baligant, now deployed between him and Charlemagne. Outnumbered a hundred to one, the Visigoths had quickly been encircled. While Charlemagne, a few leagues to the east, was burying his dead of Rencesvals, another tragedy, similar to the one that had cost Roland his life, was being enacted in the mountains of Navarre.

It was nightfall before the six riders, constantly guided and directed by the Basques, came to the valley where Bernaldo had made his stand. The battle was over, and the Moslem hosts were gone, having sped on to the east to attack Charlemagne. Only flights of ravens and vultures, lazily flapping their wings, hovered over the battlefield, where skulking wolves prowled among the slain. The Visigoths of Bernaldo's following had fought well. Each of them lay surrounded by corpses of men in strange Eastern garb. Across the valley the battle had raged, and the concentric rings of the fallen gave evidence of the stages of the battle, as the surrounded Visigoths had drawn into ever smaller circles around a central knoll, over which the

yellow pennant of Bernaldo still dangled from a broken staff.

They found the Spanish Count lying still in death, his helmet dented by a hundred blows, his glazed blue eyes turned upward to the sky, his broken sword still in his hand. Around him was a circle of Saracens and Visigoths, communing in the silent partnership of death.

Elvira dismounted from her horse and walked slowly to the spot where her brother lay. Softly she wept, as she knelt beside him, gazed upon his bloodless features, and gently closed his staring eyes.

Thierry and his companions stood behind her, in reverent silence.

"Brother Bernaldo!" said Elvira softly. "You lie here, as I so often saw you lie in the garden of our uncle Alfonso, when we were children and you were tired from playing! Do you remember, Bernaldo, how we grew up together? I gave you all the love I could not give our father and our mother, whom we did not know. Then later, when we learned our story, we sought our father together, you and I. Do you remember how we found him, Bernaldo? He was still and cold in death, even as you are now! We vowed vengeance. Together we rallied the Visigothic barons to our cause. Together we defended our soil against both Moors and Franks. Side by side we fought for our country's freedom! Now I find you lying here, and my heart is filled with sorrow! No more will you ride through the Asturian countryside, rousing our people to arms! No more will you uphold the cross of Christ against the Saracens! No more will your clarion voice be heard, urging our barons on to battle! You lie dead, Count Bernaldo of the Castle of Carpio! You lie dead by Saracen hands, those same hands that have slain by treachery another noble baron from France, whom you never met! You wanted to meet him in battle, Bernaldo! Now you will meet him in God's Paradise, where you and he will

be brothers and friends! I see it clearly now, my brother, even as you must! There is only one foe, one enemy against whom we must all fight! He is the enemy of Christ, the Moslem invader who has swept over our land and planted the crescent where the cross used to be! I pledge you, my brother, that I will continue the fight against him until he be driven from our land of Spain forever! We were mistaken, you and I, not to accept the hand of friendship proffered us by our fellow Christians. We shall not repeat that blunder, my Bernaldo! Frank or Visigoth, what does it matter, so long as our Faith triumphs?"

She stood up, dry-eyed now, and held out her right hand to Thierry, who grasped it in his.

"I pledge you, brother!" she repeated. "With the help of this Frank and his Christian Emperor, I shall lead our people to victory and drive the Saracen from Spain!"

Her voice broke into sobs. Thierry took her in his arms and gently smoothed her brow, as the Visigoths and Basques, making the sign of the cross, went about the sorrowful task of giving the Count's body Christian burial.

27

THE COMING OF BALIGANT

Across Cerdaña's level plain they sweep
To swirling Ebro's waters, black and deep.
Their steel bites hard into the fleeing foe
As like avenging, flaming angels go
The serried, lance-tipped ranks of Charlemagne
That canter on across the Spanish plain.
Before the night obscures the setting sun
Christendom's mightiest battle will be won!
Chanson de Roland, 3625-3632

THE FRANKISH CAMP IN THE VALLEY OF CERDANA, TO which Thierry and Elvira came, was already in the midst of great preparations for the renewed battle of Spain. Huon's message, confirmed by scouting parties, had fully revealed to Charlemagne that what faced him was not a group of stragglers and refugees from the earlier slaughter, but a huge, fresh new army of unbelievers from overseas, set for a life-and-death struggle, on the issue of which would hang possession not merely of Spain, but of Western Europe.

Strangely, this news and point of view had gotten about among the members of the host. Gone from their midst was the old boastful strain of the past seven years. Replacing it now was a grim, prayerful spirit, worthy of men who perceive the issue clearly. With the coming of Baligant and his hordes from the East, this was no longer a form of border warfare, holding the promise of rich spoils and high renown, nor even a crusading expedition into a

far, strange land that had to be won back to the Faith. It was a battle in defense of their own Frankish homeland and their entire Christian civilization, a battle which happened to be staged on foreign soil, but whose consequences, if it went wrong, would be felt as far as Paris and Aix and Rome. The men of the Frankish host recalled the fearful stories of the great Moorish invasion, half a century before, which had ended with the bloody battle of Tours. They foresaw its repetition if they failed to hold the line in Spain now.

Charlemagne, mounted on his great white charger Tencendur, with his mighty sword Joyeuse at his side, was supervising the alignment of his troops when Thierry rode up to him to report for the second time the recapture of Ganelon, already announced by Huon.

The Emperor smiled a grim, fierce smile at this reminder that the traitor was again in his power. Turning to Jozeran of Provence, he made exultant inquiry about the guarding of the felon, and received proper assurance. Then he uttered brief words of praise to the man who had been instrumental in bringing him back.

"Sir Thierry, you and your brother have behaved as true knights and barons. In such vassals as you should a ruler have full confidence. Not to trust you were surely want of sense! We want you both by our side in the battle that is shaping, along with our own Duke Naimon and Count Antelme of Cologne! You will help us to avenge the death of your liege lord Roland upon these men of Araby!"

Flushing with pride and pleasure, Thierry saluted and spurred away to fetch Huon and put the damsels in a safe place.

Elvira received him with quiet but exultant pride when he returned to her side. "Thierry, my beloved!" she said, taking her scarf and tying it to the hilt of his sword, "when you fight by your Emperor's side, remember you are fight-

ing for me and Spain as well as for France! Avenge my brother, Thierry, and free forever our land!"

Thierry reached over from his saddle, took her in his arms, and kissed her. "Beloved," he replied, "I pledge you that the blows I will strike today will be inspired by the thought of you! Your name will be on my lips throughout the battle!"

Huon, taking leave of a tearful Esclarmonde, urged her to recall her one-time courage. "Be brave, beloved, as you were when you rescued me from the dungeons of your father's palace!"

"I am not the same woman, my lord Huon, that I was then!" sobbed the maiden. "Love of you has filled my heart, and robbed me of all courage! If you die, Huon, I will enter one of your Christian nunneries and end my days there!"

"Christian maidens do not weep for their heroes, beloved! They pray for them! Do even as the lady Elvira does, and I will come back to you!"

But as he rode away with Thierry, his ears rang with Esclarmonde's sobs and invocations, in which God and Allah, the Prophet and the Blessed Mother of Christ, were hopelessly intermingled.

Behind the two Frankish knights rode the four Visigothic warriors. "Countess Elvira has bidden us ride in your train, Sir Thierry," said Captain Gonzalo Ramírez, "and guard you from all harm. We, too, wish to avenge our dead leader!"

The host of Charlemagne, arranged in ten columns, was beginning its advance up the valley, in the direction of the Moslem forces. Two columns of fifteen thousand Franks led the way, followed by twenty thousand men of Bavaria, under the command of Ogier of Denmark. Then came the Alemannian divisions, the Bretons, the Normans, the Poitevins and Auvergnats, the Flemings and Frisians, the Lorrainers and Burgundians. The tenth and last division,

made up of Franks out of northern France, under Charlemagne's own command, was the largest. It was this division that bore the oriflamme of France, that golden standard of the city of Rome which the pope had sent to Charlemagne in grateful recognition for his services to Christendom.

The host did not have to proceed far. Down from the hills at the other end of the valley another mighty army was advancing to meet them, led by Baligant of Baghdad and his son Malprime. Here, under the green crescent standard of Islam, were gathered men of varied races and distant lands—Arabs from Arabia and Mesopotamia, Berbers and Nubians from North Africa, Negroes and Ethiopians from the hot lands of the Equator, Slavs, Sorbians, Borussians and Lechs from the countries to the east of Charlemagne's realms, Armenians, Turks, Persians and Scythians, Huns and Avars and Bithynians from Asia, Wallachians, Bulgars and renegade Greeks from the Balkans, a tremendous host, which had been two years in the raising, but with which the Commander of All the Faithful hoped to bring to a quick and victorious end the conquest of that European, Christian West which, though whittled down, had been too long a thorn in the side of the expanding world power of Islam.

Fierce fighters all, they were now being harangued by their leaders in a variety of tongues: "Doomed is the Empire of the Franks! Doomed are the lands of the West! Doomed is the faith of the false Prophet Christ! The world belongs to us true believers, men of Islam! Unseat Charlemagne, and the rich lands of France and Germany and Italy are yours, the fair women of the north, the great spoils of the churches and cathedrals where the God of the Christians is worshiped! Humble the arrogance of the Franks! Strike for the faith! Strike for Islam!"

Moslem tabors and Christian trumpets mingled their adverse calls long in advance of the clash of the armies,

spelling the sounds of the battle to be. Across the great plain moved the hosts, nearer and nearer each other, shining helmets and hauberks and shields, burnished spears and swords and scimitars, embroidered sarks and flowing kaftans, gaudy turbans and scarves and pennants, the crescent of Islam and the oriflamme of France.

Then, with great cries of *"Allah il Allah!"* and "Charlemagne and Monjoie!" the first columns of the two armies came together, hand to hand. Lances splintered as their points bit deep into bodies whose armor could not protect them, swords and scimitars rose and fell and rose again, dripping blood. Horses neighed, reared, and fell over on their riders. Footmen ran in to stab with pike and sword. Archers loosed their deadly flight of arrows.

Thierry and Huon, riding by the Emperor's side, remained on the outskirts of the press. From a little knoll Charlemagne directed the movements of his troops, with swift riders bearing his orders to various parts of the vast battlefield, as the fortunes of war swung back and forth.

It was, strangely enough, wise old Duke Naimon who first found it impossible to contain himself when an eddying current of fighting men swirled beneath their eyes. At its center was brave Malprime, son of the Emir, who with splintered lance continued to drive back the opposing Franks, shouting encouragement to his men.

"That pagan must be disposed of!" exclaimed Charlemagne, watching the fight. Before he could appoint one of his staff to undertake the task, Naimon shouted back, "Leave him to me!" and galloped off full tilt to strike the Saracen.

Malprime, caught off guard and with a broken lance, was no match for the Duke. Naimon's lance, crashing through the upper margin of his shield, tore his hauberk apart and sank into his body, until the yellow pennant, stained red, stood out a full foot behind the young Saracen's back.

As Malprime fell, one of his comrades, riding to his rescue, struck the Duke a mighty blow with his scimitar. Naimon's helmet broke with the force of the blow, and one of his ears was sliced off clean. He would have fallen, but saved himself by grasping with both hands the neck of his charger. The pagan swung his horse around and rode back to finish him, but before he could reach his side Charlemagne, thundering down from the knoll, transfixed him with his lance.

The Duke fell from his horse and rolled over twice on the ground, stunned and bleeding. Charlemagne, dismounting, ran to his aid. It was fortunate for him that Thierry and Huon, with their Visigothic bodyguard, spurred down to form a circle of steel about him, for the Saracens were pressing on.

"Duke!" shouted the Emperor, taking Naimon in his arms. "Come, recover your senses! The scoundrel who wounded you is dead! I put my lance through his carcass! Wake up, and ride with me to victory!"

Naimon opened his eyes.

"I believe you, sire!" he said, somewhat unsteadily. "Yes, I will ride with you again!"

A new Frankish charge swept that portion of the field bare of Moslems, and the Duke's horse was led up for him to mount.

"Thank you, Sir Thierry!" exclaimed the Emperor as he climbed back on his own charger. "This field will yet be ours!"

A messenger came riding up. "Right Emperor!" he cried. "Bear aid to your first column! The leader of the pagans fights there! He has already slain Count Guineman, Geboin, Lodrant, and Richard the Old, lord of the Normans! Our men are fleeing!"

"Come, my lords! Follow me!" shouted Charles, raising his great sword Joyeuse high in the air. He spurred his horse and galloped away in the direction of the threatened

first column, where Ogier of Denmark was vainly striving to rally his broken ranks.

"Behold, right Emperor, how they are slaying your Franks!" shouted the brave Danish leader. "Your crown is lost if you do not avenge this slaughter!"

Charlemagne did not answer. "Follow me, Franks, in the name of God!" he shouted, and plunged into the fray.

A mighty figure rose up to meet him. Clad in a silken tunic, over which was armor of steel and gold from Damascus, wearing a great green turban in the center of which blazed an egg-shaped ruby, brandishing in his hand a scimitar already bloodied by Frankish blood, the great Emir of Baghdad had at last found his arch-enemy. A man of tall stature and finely shaped limbs, with proud, fierce visage and a beard as long and white as Charlemagne's own, the Commander of All the Faithful was an imposing adversary as he barred Charlemagne's path. They met with such force that the girths of both their horses were broken, and the saddles slipped downward. But both were nimble enough. Leaping to their feet, they circled each other, seeking an opening.

As if by common consent, the men in both their followings withdrew to a respectful distance, forming two great semicircles that almost met, while the battle raged on beyond. However the fortunes of the armies might go, this was the decisive engagement, and both Franks and Moslems seemed to realize it. Here and there, on the fringes of the great circle, individual combats raged. But for the most part, those within range of vision stopped and gazed, spellbound, but ready to spring again into the fray once the issue was decided.

Charlemagne advanced upon his foe, with sword uplifted. Baligant, circling about him, shouted some words in Arabic, which he repeated twice. "What does he say, Thierry?" asked Charles, without halting in his advance or removing his eyes from the Emir.

Thierry shouted back: "He says: 'Charles, repent! You have slain my son, but I am willing to forgive you! Become my man, and come serving me to the Orient!' "

"Tell him this, Thierry," replied the Emperor. "I can give no peace or love to an unbeliever. Become a Christian, serve and believe in the one true God, and I will become your ally!"

Baligant heard these words, stumblingly translated, and laughed. "Then it is war to the death!" he said.

Swiftly he advanced to meet Charlemagne, avoided the great swing of Joyeuse, then struck the Emperor on his brown steel helmet with his scimitar. The helm, broken and rent above the Emperor's forehead, allowed the keen blade to come down through the thick white hair to the flesh beneath, so that the bone lay bare in the wound.

The Franks, with sinking hearts, saw their Emperor totter and nearly fall. A great shout of triumph arose from the Moslems.

"Charlemagne!" cried out Naimon in tones of thunder. "What are you about? Is it thus you uphold France and Christendom?"

These words seemed to rouse the Emperor. He recovered, raised his shield to ward off the Emir's *coup de grâce,* then, raising again his mighty sword, struck one terrific blow at his triumphant enemy. Down through the turban and the jewels crashed the mighty blade of Joyeuse, into the Emir's skull and face, down to his white beard. As he fell, Charles cried again his terrible war cry, "Monjoie!"

"Victory!" shouted the Franks, hurling themselves once more upon the Saracens. "Charlemagne and Monjoie!"

The Moslems, dumbfounded by the fall of their great leader whom they had thought invincible and victorious, at first hesitated and wavered as the fighting was resumed. Some of the more cowardly among them, panic-stricken, turned to flee.

"Baligant is dead! The Commander of the Faithful is slain!" was the mournful cry that quickly spread through the Saracen ranks, stemming the ardor of the brave, magnifying the fears of the timid.

"Baligant is dead! Charles is victorious!" was the shout of exultation that ran through the Frankish divisions, from the recently mangled first to the distant ninth of Burgundy and Lorraine, engaged in fierce hand-to-hand combat with Baligant's black troops at the further end of the battlefield.

As the motley host from the East began to waver, their leaders vainly tried to rally them, riding up and down the line, striking laggards with the flat of their scimitars, running through those who turned to flee.

"Baligant is dead! The Emir is slain!" shouted Slav and Hun and Turk and Persian, each in his own tongue, in a rising chant that was like a mighty dirge for the fallen leader of Islam.

"Vengeance for Roland! On to Zaragoza!" was the victorious cry of the Franks as they everywhere pressed forward with renewed vigor.

Thierry, leading a resaddled Tencendur up to where the Emperor stood, still dazed and bleeding, bade him mount. "You must show yourself, sire! Let all your men, and all the men of the enemy, see where victory lies! Huon, hold the oriflamme on high! Charlemagne and Monjoie!"

The sight of their victorious Emperor, unhelmeted and wounded though he was, was like a copious draught of wine to his troops. From all corners of the vast battlefield the refrain was taken up, doubled and increased a hundredfold: "Our Emperor has won! Baligant is dead! Charlemagne and Monjoie!"

Confused and panic-stricken, the Moslems began to break their ranks and flee. In vain now their leaders tried to turn the tide. Soon it was a mighty torrent of running, terror-stricken men that swept up the valley of Cerdaña and back in the direction of the Ebro and Zaragoza.

Everywhere the inexorable Franks pressed hard upon their tracks.

"Tonight we sleep in Zaragoza!" said Thierry grimly to his brother, as they led the victorious but wounded Emperor back to the knoll from whence they had started.

"Nay, not so fast, brother!" replied Huon. "The city's defenses are well-nigh impregnable. The walls are such as you and I have occasion to remember! These fugitives, as many as will escape, joining the garrison, can hold the town for a long and weary siege! Unless, that is, a certain plan that revolves in the back of my mind can be made to work!"

"And what may that be, brother?" asked Thierry curiously.

"Esclarmonde! She is a Saracen princess and Marsile's daughter! Were she to address her father and her people, we might yet obtain a prompt surrender of the Saracen stronghold!"

"It will require all your powers of persuasion and mine, brother!" replied Thierry. "The Emperor is incensed! He may prefer to exterminate the infidels, even at great loss to himself! Meanwhile, behold! There will not be many fugitives to reach the shelter of Zaragoza's walls!"

The tenth division of Charlemagne's army, which had been held in reserve throughout the fray, was now deploying into action. Composed exclusively of northern Franks, mounted on swift chargers, it had been held in readiness for final eventualities, to stem a Frankish rout or to pursue a fleeing enemy. Now, in serried ranks, with visors drawn and thirsty lances in rest, it swept past in perfect order in front of the knoll where their Emperor lay wounded. Fresh, grim, eager to take up the pursuit and inflict the last ounce of punishment on the panic-stricken Moslems, the Frankish knights stormed past, saluting with their lances Charlemagne and the oriflamme as they went, greeting their comrades of the other fighting

divisions, who parted, scurrying in either direction, to let them through.

Thierry, Huon and Duke Naimon, sitting their horses on the edge of the knoll, received the thunderous salute of the mounted columns in lieu of the stricken Emperor, raising their swords on high.

"We go to avenge Roland, Sir Thierry!" shouted a knight from Charlemagne's own personal following, recognizing the lone survivors of the great Count's ill-starred retinue.

The cry was taken up by those who followed. "In Roland's name, Thierry!" "We strike for Roland!"

"Roland has never died!" breathed Thierry to his brother in an awe-stricken whisper. "He lives on, in the soul of France! He will live forever!"

28

AUDE THE FAIR GOES TO HER REST

"This thought is strange to me!
Almighty God, Who holds the world in fee,
With Roland dead, grant welcome death to me!"
Chanson de Roland, 3717-3719

IT WAS NOT SO DIFFICULT TO CONVINCE CHARLEMAGNE as Thierry had anticipated. Lying on his bed of pain in his great red pavilion, the Emperor was prompt to agree to a scheme which promised the saving of countless Frankish lives and complete termination of a war already won.

Heralds, blowing their trumpets before the gates of embattled Zaragoza, invited Marsile to issue forth and parley with his daughter Esclarmonde. They were informed that Marsile had died two days earlier of the wound inflicted by Roland. The elders of the city, Blancandrin among them, and the military commanders of the beleaguered Saracens, were then bidden come out and sit around a council table with the leaders of the Franks. This they agreed to, since their spirit was broken by the events of the last fateful week.

It was Esclarmonde in person, still bathed in tears over her father's death, who presented to them the Emperor's final terms—Zaragoza, with all its treasures, to be yielded up to the Franks; all Saracens who wished to retain their Moslem faith, including the survivors of Baligant's army, to be granted safe conduct to the Mediterranean coast and North Africa; all who wished to remain in their homes to become converted to Christianity.

Discussion of the terms was short, for Charlemagne demanded an answer within twenty-four hours. But a longer period was not needed. There was no Saracen so blinded by fanaticism that he could not perceive the hopelessness of further resistance, with Charlemagne's great host encircling the city, and all hope of succor from overseas gone.

The exodus of the Moslem refugees began the following morning, and was completed by nightfall. Nearly half the Saracen population of the city chose to leave the homes where they were born and return to their ancestral land of North Africa, in the company of Baligant's defeated forces. Weeping and homeless, streams of men, women and children issued forth from the city's gates to begin their weary hegira to the coast. Their wails rent the air as they looked back upon white-walled Zaragoza and waved farewell to its frowning battlements, over which floated the oriflamme of France.

Then the occupation of the city began. At the Emperor's orders, one thousand Franks roamed through the city streets, seeking out the Moslem mosques and tearing them down with iron malls and axes, so that no trace of the Prophet and his false religion might remain. Down toppled the graceful minarets from which the muezzin's voice was stilled forever. Down crashed the flowing inscriptions from the Koran that graced the entrances and interiors of the temples. No houses of worship remained standing in Zaragoza save the poor, disguised churches of the Christian quarter, tolerated by the Moors through their long occupation, and now raised to the dignity of cathedrals and basilicas.

Into their baptistries, filled with priests and bishops armed with blessed water, were led all the Saracens of Zaragoza who had elected to remain, in endless shifts that lasted through a night and a day. Each was questioned, then baptized. A few who had thought to escape both exile and conversion were ferreted out. These were hanged,

burned or slaughtered without mercy. Fully one hundred thousand of Zaragoza's Saracen population were redeemed and turned into followers of Christ.

When the second day dawned, not a single Saracen remained in Zaragoza—none, that is, save one, Esclarmonde, daughter of the Emir Marsile. It had been Huon's wish and her own that her conversion and christening take place together with her people's, but Charlemagne had refused, giving no very good reason for his refusal.

"Nay, Sir Huon!" said the mighty Emperor, sitting propped up in his bed, his white head heavily bandaged. "You must restrain your impatience! The lady Esclarmonde is no ordinary Saracen! We cannot throw her into the baptistry with the rabble! Rather will she accompany us to Aix, as our exalted prisoner and guest. There she will be converted with proper ceremony!"

"But, my lord!" expostulated Huon. "I wish to wed her!"

"Whether she will have you after she is a Christian is her own affair, Sir Huon!" replied the Emperor, stroking his beard reflectively. "One thing is certain. You cannot wed a Saracen! Have patience therefore, and begone about your duties!"

Elvira, too, sought a boon which was refused her. "My lord Emperor," she addressed Charlemagne, "I would be set free to go back to my own land of northern Spain, where is my brother's castle and his barons!"

"Nay, lady!" the Emperor replied. "I must first make peace between you and your uncle Alfonso, else trouble will brew up again in Spain after I am gone. I would not impose my will upon you. Pray, accept my invitation to travel with us to our court at Aix, there to behold the wonders of my palace and meet the fair ladies of my French court! If you agree, I shall set apart to escort you one to whom I have reason to believe you are not altogether indifferent—the lord Thierry of Anjou!"

Thierry, who had escorted Elvira into the Emperor's chamber and stood by her side, pressed her hand.

"I, too, pray you, beloved!" he urged her. "There is no urgent matter now in Spain claiming your presence. The Moslems are gone, and the Franks will soon follow them. Come with me to my own sweet land of France!"

Stately Elvira flushed slightly and bent her knee to the Emperor.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, right Emperor," she said, "and I accept."

A few days later, when Charlemagne had recovered sufficiently, the great host put itself in motion once more. A strong garrison was left in Zaragoza, other smaller garrisons along the way. Then the victorious army embarked once more upon the crossing of the fateful pass of Cize. No rear guard was left behind this time, and none was needed.

Few of the Franks there were who could restrain their tears as they passed the battlefield of Rencesvals, quiet and green and peaceful now, with its great war cemetery where their comrades of Roland's command slept their last long sleep, guarded by the cross of Christ.

On through the pass they proceeded at a leisurely pace, revisiting those precipices and gorges and ravines where they had listened to the Oliphant's last call to battle, those towering cliffs that had re-echoed to the thunder of their hoofs as they rode to the rescue of one who was already doomed.

Then, with the roads opening out on the Gascon side of the divide, they found themselves in their native land of France, this time to stay. Before them stretched the golden wheat fields and the green vineyards and olive groves of Gascony, the tranquil streams and hillsides of a land at peace, dotted with cross-crowned churches and noble castles, from which a joyful, grateful population issued forth in droves to welcome them back.

Rejoicing, the army passed Arbonne and marched on to Bordeaux, the ancient and noble city of the Gallo-Romans, where stood the hallowed church of Saint Seurin. Here, above the high altar, they enshrined the broken Oliphant, that all the pilgrims who would henceforth fare from France to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in far-off Spain might know of Roland's valor.

But the three embalmed bodies they had brought in their train were carried on past the great waters of Gironde, to the city of Blaye, for Charles had vowed to inter them in his own land of Aquitaine. The great cathedral of Saint Romain was chosen to receive the Emperor's nephew, his noble companion Oliver, and the Archbishop who was both wise and bold. In great white marble coffers they were laid to rest in a subterranean chapel, below the choir. The Emperor entrusted them to God and His holy names, while all the army wept.

The triumphal journey was resumed, through Poitiers and Tours, Orleans and Paris, Reims and Laon. Each day, as the feudal army disbanded and the men of the host went off to their long-deserted homes, the following of Charlemagne grew smaller. But as each baron left the host with his retainers, he was sternly reminded that a rendezvous still awaited him in Aix—the date, the feast of Saint Sylvester; the occasion, the coming trial of Ganelon.

On and on, into the foothills of the Vosges and the first German-speaking lands, cantered the Emperor's party. Now it was the German and Bavarian and Alemannian barons who began to leave his retinue to speed on north and east and south to their beloved castles and firesides, while Spanish-born Elvira and Esclarmonde, riding in the Emperor's train, regarded wide-eyed the marvels of Charlemagne's vast empire, the magnificence of the churches where they halted for worship, the severe luxuriousness of the baronial castles where they slept.

Came the day when their wondering eyes fell upon the mighty capital of the Empire, the waters of the miraculous baths, the lofty, marble-vaulted palace of the Emperor, swarming with gaily attired ladies and handsome knights in bright embroidered tunics.

Here they dismounted on the terrace, while trumpets blared, and proceeded joyfully into the great hall of the palace, blazing with light and festooned with banners, from whose walls hung trophies of the chase and war, stags' antlers and horns of the German wild ox, keen-cutting swords and giant battle-axes.

Knights and ladies and men-at-arms pressed about to welcome their lord and renew their homage to him. The Emperor smiled triumphantly as he strode into the hall of his palace, followed by his nobles, with Elvira and Esclarmonde in his train. It was his hour of victory. He had kept his vow, and freed Spain from the Saracen yoke. Forgotten in this hour were the seven long years of savage warfare, the wreckage of Saracen cities, the crash of embattled hosts, the cries of the dying. Forgotten, too, were the men who slept in the flower-covered field of Rencesvals, the heroes who lay in their sepulcher in the cathedral of Blaye. The Emperor was back, with victory in his grasp!

But he was not long allowed to forget the grief and sorrow that attend warfare. While Elvira and Esclarmonde watched the glittering scene in dazzled wonderment, there stepped forth from the cheering throng of noblemen and noblewomen a lady of extreme beauty. She was clad in white, with a blue mantle about her shoulders, a golden belt at her waist, a high conical headdress on her golden head, fastened by silken straps beneath her chin. She was tall, willowy and fair. Huon and Thierry, who had not seen her for seven years, found it difficult to recognize in this lovely woman, whose clear blue eyes reflected the interminable grief of one cruelly bereaved, the gay and

carefree Countess Aude whom they had left behind when they marched off to the Spanish war in Roland's and Oliver's train.

"Who is she?" whispered Esclarmonde to Huon, as the lady stepped forward in the Emperor's path.

"She is Aude, sister of Oliver and the betrothed of our Count Roland!" Huon whispered back. "What may she be seeking of the Emperor now? He cannot bring back the men she loved!"

The Countess had halted before Charlemagne, who had paused in his turn. At sight of her, all the joy of triumph seemed to desert him, leaving but endless sorrow on his battle-scarred face.

"My lord Emperor!" said the Countess, bending the knee to Charlemagne and bowing her head.

He was quick to raise her to her feet. Holding her at arm's length, he looked into her eyes, while tears came brimming into his own. Then he kissed her on the brow.

"Aude!" he whispered audibly, while the court grew still as death. "Aude, my own dear sister, sister of my sorrow! Why have you sought me out?"

"My lord Emperor!" replied the lady, looking deep into Charlemagne's tear-filled eyes. "I come to ask you news of my brother Oliver, who some say is dead! I ask you news of Captain Roland, who some say you left to die in Spain! He had sworn to me he would take me for his mate! Is it true, great Emperor? Are they dead?"

Charlemagne bowed his head. The tears rolled from his eyes, falling upon his great white beard, at which he tugged and tore with his hand. She waited expectantly, with anxiety and despair in her beautiful eyes.

"Dear friend Aude!" finally replied the Emperor, raising his eyes to meet hers. "It is indeed true! You speak of two dead men! They fell in Spain, fighting boldly, like the noble barons they were! They lie buried in the cathedral of Blaye!"

"Had you not pledged to protect and defend them, Charlemagne?" asked Aude in a soft, lifeless voice.

"I could neither guard them nor defend them, my sister! I could but avenge them!"

The Countess bowed her head. Her arms fell to her side. There was not a tear in her clear blue eyes, so like those of gentle Count Oliver. The court watched the scene in dazed, awe-struck silence.

"Thank you, my lord!" said Aude simply, and turned to go.

"Wait!" cried the Emperor, holding her back. "I know what you have lost, for your loss is mine! I know what your sorrow is, for I have endured it, too! I cannot bring them back to life, Aude, but I can make amends! For the man who pledged to wed you, I will give you a greater one in exchange! You will wed my own son Louis, who will shortly hold my Empire! You will rule by his side, Aude!"

The lady winced as if struck, then turned to face him, straightening up to her full stature. On her lovely countenance was the same implacable determination that Thierry had seen on Roland's when the Count's last battle was beginning. Charlemagne lowered his eyes once more under her stare.

"That thought is strange to me!" said the Countess slowly, in a voice that held anguish and resentment, heartbreak and despair.

Then, while Thierry marveled, she used strange words, the selfsame ones he had heard from Roland's lips. "Never, please God, His angels and His saints! Never be it said that when Roland is dead I live on!"

Her face turned deathly white. She took one step forward, then crumpled in a heap at the feet of the Emperor.

He was quick to leap forward and raise her in his arms. Thinking she had but swooned, he called loudly upon the ladies of the court to bear aid.

But all their efforts could not revive lovely Aude. Her fair head, from which the headdress had fallen, still drooped and leaned on Charlemagne's shoulder, showering him with the golden halo of her hair.

The court was in a turmoil. It was fully an hour before Charlemagne's physicians were convinced that the Countess was dead.

Then, instead of the triumphal celebration that had been planned for the Emperor's return, there was weeping and lamentation that spread through the vast halls of the imperial palace and out to the city beyond. Knights and ladies, barons and men-at-arms, scullions and serving-women, all wept and prayed for Aude, whom they had known and loved, fairest of France's flowers, gentlest of mistresses, ever ready to bear aid and consolation to the lowly and stricken.

But all their tears, all of Charlemagne's renewed sorrow, could not bring back to life the gentle Countess. She was borne from the palace to a nearby nunnery, where her body rested in state until it should be time to inter her. Four of the noblest Countesses of France kept the death watch through the night. By their side, at their own request, and by the Emperor's consent, Elvira, Countess of Spain, and Esclarmonde, Moslem daughter of a Saracen Emir, watched and prayed.

29

THE HOUR OF DECISION

Of men of honor let this tale be told:
For one's liege lord to suffer heat and cold
And loss of flesh and blood, one must be bold!
Chanson de Roland, 1117-1119

IT WAS IN THE CHAPEL OF THE PALACE, AT BREAK OF dawn, that a lady in waiting came to inform Elvira that a messenger had just arrived from Spain and requested an immediate audience with her.

The audience was long. It lasted almost until the hour set for the funeral Mass. When Elvira returned to the chapel, Esclarmonde noted that her face was white and drawn and the sparkle of her blue eyes dulled, or rather replaced by a cold, steely gleam. But she asked no questions, nor was any information volunteered.

On their way back from the interment in the great church of St. Agnes, Elvira's eyes sought those of Thierry, who walked slowly with Huon a few paces behind the maidens. She found them solicitously fastened upon her. Her smile was wan as she beckoned him to approach.

"Beloved," she said, "I must have a word with you in private. Will you join me in an hour by the fountain in the Emperor's garden?"

There was something dull and lifeless, yet ominous in her tone, Thierry thought, something that reminded him of the Lord Oliver's weary words when the great battle of Rencesvals was about to begin. What could this portend?

The beautiful gardens of Charlemagne's imposing palace, carefully landscaped by gardeners brought from Byzantium, had at their very center a great circular fountain, where the cool waters bubbled and spouted from a hundred wrought-iron jets, cascading into a pool that was transparent to its very bottom, and in which thousands of fishes played. Around it, in a great circle, were marble statues of saints and heroes, and beneath each statue was a marble seat.

To one of these Elvira led her wondering lover. For a few instants they sat silently, listening to the gurgle of the rushing waters, the song of the thrushes, the rustling of the trees in the faint autumn breeze. Elvira's eyes were downcast, fixed upon the carpet of soft brown leaves that covered the walk. Thierry's eyes rested caressingly on his beloved's delicate profile. At no time had she seemed lovelier to him. A stray ray of sunshine played upon her white cheek, and the gentle east wind toyed with a little curl of her blond hair that had somehow escaped from beneath the fastenings of her headdress. Her parted lips seemed to call for a kiss.

His bold arms encircled the slender waist and gently drew her to him, while with his free hand he raised her chin so that she was forced to look into his eyes.

"Beloved!" he whispered. "Once, when I sat beside you thus outside the shepherd's hut as we fled from Zaragoza, I thought you were like the image of our Blessed Lady in my own cathedral of Angers. You were beautiful beyond description, my Elvira, but cold, icy, like the lovely marble statue. I have never since thought of you that way, until today. Tell me you are my own warm, loving, adored Visigothic maiden!"

His lips rested gently upon hers, and Elvira's parted in reply. But the veil of sadness that filmed her blue eyes would not be dispelled, though the light of love glistened beneath.

"I can understand, my own!" continued Thierry. "I can well understand the sorrow that fills your heart. You did not know the lady Aude as I did, else your sorrow would be even greater. She was the feminine counterpart of our gentle Count Oliver, our bold and gallant leader from whose mouth there never issued an unkind word, whose pure heart was never sullied by an ungenerous thought. He and she were like you and Bernaldo, my love. Yes, the scenes you have witnessed in this palace since your arrival must indeed remind you of your own brave brother. How I would have loved him, Elvira, had I known him better! Only once in life, and once in death, did I meet him. But what a noble baron he was! How heroically he responded to my plea for aid to our own knights, who he thought were his foes! A true *fijodalgo* of Spain, and a true Christian!"

Elvira had allowed him to speak on and on, reclining listlessly in his arms, with her eyes looking through and beyond him at the branches that swayed in the breeze. Now she suddenly seemed to shake herself free from the music of his voice and the spell of his brown eyes.

"Yes, Thierry," she interrupted him. "Bernaldo was a *fijodalgo* of Spain. And I, too, am a daughter of Spain!"

There was an emphasis in her voice that startled Thierry. He waited for her to continue, but she remained silent, her eyes burning into his own.

"Of that there is no doubt, my own," he smiled in acquiescence. "You are the best that Christian Spain has ever brought forth!"

"There is more than that, Thierry!" Elvira's voice was cold and tired and determined. "I am Spain's daughter, and to the land that gave me life I owe devotion and fealty!"

Thierry looked at her in amazement. "There is no longer war between Frank and Visigoth, Elvira," he reminded her. "We are friends and allies, and ever shall be!"

"Thierry, listen to me!" Elvira's voice became hurried and somewhat breathless. "This morning there came to me a messenger from Spain. He was from my uncle Alfonso. His words were strange, yet as he spoke I realized that he spoke the truth, and that my uncle is right. Thierry, Alfonso wishes to abdicate the crown of the Asturias and retire to a monastery, while I ascend the throne. He says that I, and I alone, as Bernaldo's sister, can reunite the warring factions of the Visigoths, and restore peace to our much troubled land."

Thierry sat speechless, as the full implications of Elvira's statement sank into his heart and brain. When he finally spoke, his own voice was tired and distant.

"You mean, beloved, that you must leave me?"

Elvira nodded once, and let her head hang low.

"You mean," continued Thierry, "that all our dreams of love and happiness must be dispelled? That I shall never lead you to my own city of Angers, wed you before the great altar, under the benign eye of our gracious Lady, install you as the mistress of my heart and possessions in my ancestral castle?"

Elvira raised her head, and in her eyes Thierry read all the message of sorrow and anguish and despair that welled up from her heart.

"It is even so, my own!" she replied quietly.

Thierry sprang to his feet and stood towering over her. "Elvira, this cannot be!" he said slowly, but in a voice that rose gradually to a shout. "We have pledged our troth! You are mine! Spain does not need you as I do! Your uncle Alfonso is responsible for the rift that arose among your barons! Let him heal it! Why should he call upon you to remedy the havoc he has wrought with his vacillating policies? Why should you heed his call, when your heart is here in France?"

"Thierry!" Elvira's tone was low and subdued, but it cut into his impassioned plea as a sharp axe cuts into a

sapling. "You do not understand. It is not a matter of my uncle Alfonso or his past policies. It is a matter of the present and future of my country. The barons of my brother's faction will never submit to a sovereign who in their opinion has violated his oath. Without Bernaldo's leadership or mine, they will turn to other leaders, and fight on until the house and kingdom of Alfonso are destroyed. Nor will Alfonso readily yield to barons whom he considers rebels, upstarts and violators of their feudal oath. I am the only person who can reconcile the two factions. In me, my brother's followers will see the beloved sister of the *caudillo* behind whom they rode and fought for the freedom of their land. In me, my uncle's followers will see the continuator of Alfonso's line, the legitimate sovereign to whom they can swear fealty and homage. If I return to Spain, there is peace. If I refuse, there is war—bitter, unending war between Christian and Christian. Do you want to see that happen, Thierry? You, who have pleaded for the cause of united Christendom, for the union of Frank and Visigoth against the infidel, do you want to see this slaughter of Christians by Christians go on forever?"

Thierry stood speechless. It was his turn to bow his head. Elvira went on relentlessly. "You yourself have told me of the arguments you used to convince my brother that he should go to the aid of your Roland. Had Bernaldo rejected your pleas, he would be alive today. His life was sacrificed to the cause of Christian unity. Now, Thierry, we are asked to make the sacrifice!"

Thierry sank down again to the bench by her side. He had no words or arguments. His heart was filled with a great bitterness, and with it was infinite longing for the happiness he had so recently believed within his grasp.

"Beloved!" Elvira's voice roused him from his stupor, as her hand closed firmly upon his. "Perhaps there is a way to reconcile my duty and our love!"

Thierry looked up at her uncomprehendingly. This time he saw an earnest, eager face thrust forward toward his own, blue eyes in which the gleam of hope sparkled.

"What way is there, my love?" he inquired dully.

"Come to Spain with me, beloved!" pleaded Elvira. "Sit at my side on the throne of the Asturias as my consort! The Visigothic barons will accept you, for they know how you avenged Bernaldo's death and rescued Bernaldo's sister from dishonor. Forget Angers and Aix, and come with me!"

Her voice was like a siren song. Thierry shook himself free of its spell. "And forswear Charlemagne's service?" he inquired coldly. "Abandon my duty to my liege lord and sovereign? Renounce my feudal oath?"

"Perhaps Charlemagne will release you from your oath!" There was hope and trust in Elvira's voice. "You have served him long and well! His war is over. He has no further need of you."

Thierry laughed a short, bitter laugh. "Elvira, I know not how it goes among your Visigoths. But among us Franks, one does not renounce a feudal oath, nor does one request to be released from it. To the Emperor we owe our fiefs and all our possessions. To him we owe our services, our swords and our lives. I was brought up in the school of Roland, my own. These were the words he taught us, and they are engraved in my heart in letters of fire: *'For one's liege lord one must suffer both great heat and great cold; for him one must offer up his flesh and his blood!'* There is no turning one's back upon one's duty, Elvira. When the Emperor calls, we come!"

Elvira's eyes had again turned dull and lifeless. "Then you refuse my offer to come with me and reign over the Asturias?"

"Elvira, I must! The Emperor needs every brave heart, every stout sword that he can muster, now that Roland and Oliver and the twelve peers are dead. I cannot desert

him! Already there is talk of an expedition that is to go to the land of Epirus to bring relief to the Christian king who is harassed by the Moslems. Could you be proud of me, Elvira, if at this juncture I presented myself to Charlemagne and said to him: 'Sire, I know you are about to embark on a long and dangerous campaign, but I want to be relieved of my duty and my oath. I want to go to pacified Spain, there to live out my days in peace and comfort, with a Spanish queen by my side, while you and the rest of my comrades go off to fight the Moslems of Epirus!'? What would you think of me in years to come, my Elvira? Would you respect a consort who allowed you to perform your sacred duty to your people while he was remiss in his own obligations?"

Two tears, large as pearls, rolled down Elvira's cheeks, then splashed onto her bodice. Her peaked headdress, held almost horizontal by her bowed head, kept Thierry at arm's length and prevented him from kissing the eyes from which the tears flowed.

"I had feared you would take this attitude, my Thierry!" she whispered sadly at length. "In fact, knowing you as I do, I do not know why or how I even allowed myself to hope you might answer differently. You must do your duty as you see it, even as I do mine!"

Her voice was choked by sobs, but she valiantly repressed them, dried her eyes, then continued:

"Thierry, there will be long days and even longer nights for me in my uncle's palace in Oviedo—days when I shall sit in my robes of state upon the throne, pretending to listen to my couriers and statesmen while I think of you; nights when I shall toss about sleeplessly in bed, wondering where and how you are, what perils and vicissitudes may beset you. Believe me, Thierry, I shall never love or desire any man but you. We of the Visigothic strain give our hearts but once. You have won mine in the face of all

opposition, my own and that of events. I wanted to hate you, and you made me love you. I wanted to despise you, and you made me respect you. I wanted to turn away from you, and you made me turn to you as to the only man on earth. Think not you will be forgotten. When you lie in camp in the mountains of Epirus, be sure there is always a heart that beats with yours. When you strike stout blows for Christendom by your Emperor's side, remember there is one everlastingly praying for your safety and victory, one whose heart and love and devotion are forever yours!"

Thierry replied softly. "My lady Elvira! Yes, I must learn to call you that again, now that you are about to become a queen! My lady Elvira, when you are in your royal palace at Oviedo, and all of Christian Spain does homage at your feet, remember always that there is one who would, if he could, do you far greater homage, one who would kiss not merely your foot or hand, but your bright and luscious lips, your lovely eyes, your silken cheeks, your hair of gold, one who would take you in his arms, crush you to his breast, and make you completely and forever his own! Remember, fair lady, when you kneel in your royal chapel, that there is one who would kneel by your side, and in the presence of God and all His saints and angels pledge everlasting love and devotion and fealty to you! When you stroll in your ancestral gardens in the cool of the evening, Elvira, you will feel my presence by your side, and the winds that blow across the mountains will bring to you the ghost of a voice that says: 'I love you! I adore you! I am yours!' While there is a heart yet left in me to beat, that heart will beat for you. And after it is stilled, if by any chance it is removed from its earthly tegument, as were the hearts of our noble Oliver and Roland, upon it will be found inscribed the name of Elvira, Queen of the Asturias, Elvira, Flower of the Pyrenees, Elvira, Treasure of Oviedo!"

The voice that spoke was soft and loving, yet firm and masculine. In it were no tears, no hints of recrimination or regret.

Elvira looked up at him. Her eyes were dry now, though her cheeks were streaked with tears. In them was a great, supernatural light. The eyes that looked into hers were filled with infinite longing and infinite strength.

"God will give us courage, beloved!" she said. "The One Who suffered and died on His Cross for the redemption of all mankind will infuse into us some of His own deathless resignation, so that we may be able to bear ours. He did His duty! Shall we fail in ours?"

Their lips met in one long kiss. The lady Elvira's tall, conical headdress, knocked askew by Thierry's strong embrace, fell behind her shoulders, and her golden hair, caught by the wind, played freely about her cheeks. But of this they were both unaware. For the moment, everything was forgotten, Spain and Charlemagne, regal duty and feudal obligation. Love, and only love reigned supreme. Upon it the marble saints of the Christian Church and the heroes of the Carolingian line looked down in calm benignity.

30

PINABEL'S PLEDGE

Says Pinabel: "Your safety leave to me!
No Frank shall your dismemberment decree!
If any dare to vote your shame and death,
My sword's keen point shall rob him of his breath!"

Chanson de Roland, 3788-3791

IT WAS A GRIM, DEEP, DARK DUNGEON TO WHICH THE LORD Ganelon had been consigned—the grimmest, deepest and darkest in the Emperor's palace. Yet, by reason of the feudal code, one right could not be denied him, the right to meet with and consult his friends and relatives.

Thirty of these, alerted and gathered together by Guinemer as soon as the news of Ganelon's recapture came to his ears, had ridden day and night until they came to Aix, no more than a fortnight after the Emperor's triumphal return. Now they came trooping to the palace, clamoring for admission to their imprisoned leader and kinsman. Charlemagne's order was as curt as it was brusk: "Let them see him!"

So it was that the thirty noble barons of Ganelon's following were admitted to his low, dank, foul-smelling cell by Basbrun, provost of the Emperor and dispenser of his justice, a heavily bearded, evil-featured man whose scowling face and squinting eyes struck terror into the hearts of all of the Emperor's enemies who chanced to fall into the Emperor's hands.

When the gloom of the cell was relieved by torches

thrust into sconces by Basbrun's minions, the full picture of Ganelon's disgrace was revealed to his kinsmen. The noble baron, once brother-in-law of Charlemagne, sat on a filthy straw pallet, his hands and feet manacled in long chains that were fastened to iron rings set deep in the stone walls. His face was again heavily bearded, but the beard was scraggly and unkempt, as was his matted hair. Like a savage beast's, his eyes peered forth wildly from beneath his wrinkled brows, dazzled by the unwonted light. His clothes were in tatters.

A chorus of loud wails arose from his followers as they beheld this vision. "Alas, unlucky nephew!" cried Guinemer. "To what unspeakably low estate you have been brought! Who has had the effrontery to visit these indignities upon you?"

"Alas, good uncle!" echoed Ganelon, his voice still strong and vibrant despite his sufferings. "Who indeed but our good liege lord Charlemagne?"

"He should not treat you thus!" shouted Ganelon's distant cousin Pinabel. "A noble baron is not to be handled like a lout caught poaching on the king's estates, whatever the crimes he be accused of!"

"Hush, Pinabel!" said Guinemer, raising a reproachful finger. "One speaks not lightly of the Emperor's justice! Let us rather set our wits to work to see how it may be tempered. But first—" he turned haughtily to the provost, who had remained standing by the iron door, shifting his feet and jangling his keys. "Fellow, begone! What barons have to speak of is not for varlets' ears!"

Basbrun smiled an evil smile, but made no move. "Noble Count Guinemer," he replied, a trace of sarcasm in his voice, "it were sometimes well to speak to varlets such as I in more gracious tones. The Emperor has commanded me to permit you to see your kinsman. Beyond that, I have no orders."

Pinabel leaped at him and struck him a great blow

across the face with his gauntleted fist, knocking him off his feet. "Take this for your orders!" he bade him.

But Guinemer was quick to repair Pinabel's blunder. "Nay, nay, my man!" he exclaimed, helping Basbrun to his feet. "Take no offense. We know you but do your duty. Here, take this purse, and see that in the future our kinsman is better dealt with!"

Basbrun accepted the purse with its clinking silver coins, weighed it in his hand, thrust it into his belt, then bowed to Guinemer, as much to acknowledge the bounty as to conceal the vengeful gleam in his eye.

"I thank you, my lord, I thank you! And since such is your wish, I take my presence hence. I shall await your pleasure out of earshot, in the corridor outside."

They heard his slow footsteps as he tramped away. They did not hear him creeping back stealthily, on tiptoe, to the adjoining cell, where he opened a tiny wicket that permitted him to see and hear all that went on.

Ganelon motioned to his kinsmen. "Pray, be seated, my lords! Often have I welcomed you to my castle and board, when times were better. Now all I can offer you is a seat on a foul prison floor!"

The thirty men sat down, one by one, in the cramped space at their disposal, some drawing their cloaks around them, others fashioning them into cushions to ward off the hard coldness of the stone pavement.

"My lords," said Ganelon when all were seated, "I thank you for your friendship and solicitude. I thank you, above all, for bringing me a ray of comfort in this sorry cell where I have spent the last two weeks and am destined to spend, it seems, the rest of my living days, which will not be overlong. But it seems to me you have wasted your time a-journeying here. If you think you can move Charlemagne from his purpose, you may as well hope to turn this hard stone into bread!"

Guinemer held up his hand. "Fair nephew, we are here

to save you if it is humanly possible. To do this we will leave no stone unturned, no path untrod. Your disgrace is our disgrace, your sufferings are our sufferings, your death would be the death of us all!"

Ganelon was genuinely touched by this demonstration of family loyalty. "My uncle," he replied, a trace of a tear appearing in his bleary eyes, "and you, my lords, know that I am grateful to you for your devotion. But know also that I am prepared to die as I have lived. Roland, his friends and peers visited insult and injury upon me. Upon them I am well avenged. As for Charlemagne, to him I once swore fealty. I did not break my oath. If he chooses to break his, and punish a loyal vassal for an act that was not directed against him, that is his business. Let him face, if he can, the verdict of his own conscience!"

Pinabel interrupted him somewhat bruskly. "Cousin Ganelon, I cannot agree with you. The Emperor wishes to visit outrage not upon your person alone, but upon our entire clan. This the line of Mayence will not tolerate!"

Ganelon looked at him inquiringly. "And how do you propose to stop him?" he asked wearily.

"Cousin, as we rode here we formulated a plan whereby to rescue you from death and retrieve the honor of our lineage. When the appointed day for your trial comes, think you you can face the assembled barons of the court and plead your own case, as you have just pleaded it to us?"

"Yes," replied Ganelon, "but——"

"Then, when your speech is done, I will rise, and these our good kinsmen with me. We shall judge that you are in the right, and your accusers in the wrong. If any wish to test the issue, here is my good sword Albaine. I pledge it in your defense, even to the last drop of my blood!"

Pinabel rose to his full, massive height and held up his great sword by the blade, so that the hilt stood up like a

cross. As Ganelon watched him in wonderment, the other barons arose and held out their swords.

"But my lords!" Ganelon said slowly, his eyes circling the group of grim-faced warriors who were pledging their lives in his defense. "Do you realize what this means? If one rises to oppose you, and you are defeated, your own lives and fiefs are forfeit, along with mine!"

"We know that, Ganelon, and we are ready to lose them! We stand or fall with you, for the honor of the house of Mayence!"

Ganelon tottered to his feet, and with clanking chains went to embrace his cousin Pinabel. Tears of sincere emotion now coursed down his bearded cheeks.

"Thank you, my cousin! Thank you, my lords!" was all that he was able to say.

Guinemer laid his hand on Ganelon's shoulder. "Nay, nephew, have no more fear! Pinabel is the best swordsman in France! Who will want to oppose him? Your life and honor are assured! The Emperor shall accept you again in the circle of his most honored barons, whether he wills it or not!"

The interview was at an end. They left Ganelon sobbing softly upon his pallet of straw and clanked out of the cell, which was locked behind them by a jailer. Guinemer looked about in the corridor for Basbrun, to remind him that more purses would come his way in exchange for good treatment to the prisoner. But Basbrun was nowhere to be seen. He had stolen away ahead of them, and was on his way to make his report to Charlemagne.

The great Emperor reclined on the silken couch in his bedchamber, with only Duke Naimon and two trusty servants by his bedside. A chill contracted while out hunting in the forests to the east two days before kept him confined to his rooms.

Now, with Basbrun gone and Basbrun's report ringing

in his ears, Charlemagne stroked his great white beard thoughtfully. His brows were deeply furrowed, and in his eyes glowed a fierce, feverish light that did not come from the chill.

"What say you now, Sir Naimon?" he asked of his trusted counsellor.

"Sire," replied the Duke, "this was to be expected. You will recall that even as we rode back to Rencesvals I pointed out to you——"

"Yes, yes!" Charlemagne waved his words aside with an impatient gesture. "You have told me a hundred times that this might happen! But what remedy do you advise? Shall I throw these kinsmen of Ganelon into my dungeons, and dispose of all their traitorous line at once?"

Naimon shook his head gravely. "Sire," he said, "that were more than dangerous. It would be unheard-of. Our Frankish law is most clear on this point. So are all our customs and traditions. If a man of baronial rank be accused of a grievous crime, he must be brought to trial before his peers. If there arise in his defense a champion who is willing to stake his life on behalf of the accused man, and if suitable pledges offer themselves, then must the accused produce a champion and pledges of his own. On the outcome of the battle hangs the issue of the charge. God Himself is the judge!"

"It is well that you remind me of that, Sir Naimon!" said the Emperor fiercely. "I had been on the point of pitting my own feeble human judgment against that of my Maker. Indeed, I had thought of violating all our laws and customs in my desire to gain vengeance on the felon traitor who robbed me of my nephew Roland, my own good right arm!"

"Your Majesty, both divine and human considerations oppose that course. Think well. If you arrest the barons who have come here to defend their kinsman Ganelon, every lord and baron and knight in your realms will learn

of it. Who then will in the future trust the sovereign who breaks his royal vows? Who will march in your train and fight by your side? Indeed, the breaking of your oath to support and uphold our Frankish law will lead others to plot to break theirs, and your very throne will totter. Remember, my lord, what happened to the rulers of the faithless Merovingian line!"

Charlemagne bowed his head. "You are right, my lord Naimon! Consider my rash words unspoken. But tell me, what then shall be our course? Ganelon must be punished! Ganelon must die!" His voice rose almost to a shout.

The Duke raised both his hands and his eyes to heaven. "If it please God, my lord Charlemagne! If it please God!" he said simply.

There was fierce rebellion in Charlemagne's voice as he brought his fist crashing down on the small table by his couch so that all the cups on it rattled.

"It must please God, Naimon! Treachery such as that of Ganelon cannot go unrequited! One does not bring about the destruction of the very flower of Christendom to escape one's just deserts and be restored to rank and power! What must we do?"

Naimon looked his sovereign straight in the eye. "There is but one course to follow, right Emperor! You must find a champion for your cause, one who will defeat and slay Pinabel so that justice may be done!"

"And whence will come this champion, Duke? Who is there among our noble barons whom we can ask to risk his life and kinsmen and possessions so that justice may triumph?"

The two men were so engrossed in their discussion that they had not noticed the lifting of the curtain at the open door of the chamber, or the appearance in the doorway of the Emperor's chamberlain. Behind him stood a tall, lissome feminine figure, attired in the flowing, high-bodiced robes of a lady of the court.

It was Naimon who first caught sight of the newcomers. "My lord, the lady Elvira of the Asturias," he informed the Emperor.

"Come in, my child, come in!" bade Charlemagne, sinking back on his couch with a sigh and a weary smile. "Discussion of your problems may at least temporarily relieve us of ours."

Elvira advanced to the Emperor's bedside, bent her knee, and kissed the hand he held out to her.

"Your Majesty," she said simply, "I come to inquire whether the preparations for my journey back to Spain are completed."

"They were, my daughter," replied the Emperor. "But from reports that have reached me this morning from our western provinces, it appears you may have to postpone your journey yet a while."

Naimon, who watched Elvira's face closely, found it difficult to judge whether the expression in her clear eyes was one of disappointment or relief.

"The route we had planned for you along the western coast of our realm seemed clear till yesterday," Charlemagne went on, "but now we are informed that bands of Scandinavian pirates from the North have been sighted in the vicinity of the river estuaries. It is not the first time that these pagan Vikings have struck at our coastal cities, and even had the daring to advance up our great rivers in their swift, shallow skiffs. The danger is too great, my daughter. Your uncle would never forgive us if you were to fall a prey to the raiders while under our protection. We shall therefore return you to Spain by way of an inland route, far from danger. But the new stages must be gotten ready for your arrival, and it will be at least another month before the messengers reach them and the preparations are completed."

The sigh that escaped Elvira's breast could have been

one of sorrow. She bowed her graceful head and bent her knee once more to the Emperor.

"Child," said Charlemagne as if an afterthought had struck him, "did you overhear what Duke Naimon and I were discussing when you arrived?"

"Forgive me, your Majesty," replied Elvira simply. "I could not help but hear it from where I stood."

"Nay, it is by now a very open secret. The man who betrayed our cause and tried to wrong you may escape his punishment after all. What would your Visigoths do under such circumstances?"

"We would find a champion to uphold the right," said Elvira.

"But if your champion were defeated?"

"He would not be defeated!" Elvira's straightforward tone carried absolute conviction. "He could not be, for God would be on his side!"

Naimon smiled at Charlemagne. "You see, sire, what faith there is among our Visigothic allies. They trust the One Who never lied!"

"You have taught me a lesson in faith, my Elvira!" said Charlemagne. "Go now, child, and while away the time as best you may till the new preparations for your journey are done!"

Elvira bowed again, turned and left the chamber.

"And now, Naimon," said Charlemagne to his councillor, "to our business! Enumerate to me the barons who will attend the trial, and let us from among them determine the ones who are most likely to accept the championing of our cause and to defeat Sir Pinabel of Sorence in single combat!"

31

THE TRIAL OF GANELON

He who betrays another may not boast!
Chanson de Roland, 3974

FOUR MORE WEEKS HAD PASSED, AND SNOW LAY ON THE fair city of Aix and in the grounds of the Emperor's palace. It was the feast of Saint Sylvester, the day appointed by Charlemagne for the trial of Ganelon.

From far and wide, Charlemagne's loyal vassals had fared to the capital of the Empire, in accordance with his commands. Bavarians, Saxons, Alemannians, Frisians, Lorrainers, Burgundians, Poitevins, Normans, Bretons and Franks, the wisest among the barons and those most versed in knowledge of the feudal law, had thronged to the trial. Many, if not most of them, had been on the Spanish expedition, and were personally acquainted with the facts in the case. The issue, most of them agreed in advance, was not one of fact, but of legal interpretation.

Ganelon awaited his trial in iron chains. The indignities he had suffered at the hands of Besgon and his kitchen scullions were as nothing compared to those which had attended his return to the capital, and he bore the traces of his sufferings on his face, as he was led out to a stake in the great square that faced the palace and tied to it with deer-hide thongs. Many a blow had he borne from cudgels and whips and fists, from jailkeepers and house servants. But now, as he came into the presence of his peers, there was about him a trace of his old jauntiness and arrogance, an air of assured self-confidence that

neither chains nor cudgels could dispel. The daring plan conceived by Guinemer and Pinabel and his thirty kinsmen was about to hatch.

It was a perilous scheme, fraught with deadly risk to all its participants, if it failed. But if successful, it would ensure Ganelon's life, liberation, and restoration to honor and dignity. Despite the complaints he had once voiced concerning the loyalty of his followers, the Count had finally discovered that some of them were loyal, even unto death.

Charlemagne sat on his great outdoor throne, covered with sable and marten skins, for the day was cold. His countenance was fierce, frowning and uncompromising. As the barons from his realms took their appointed places and waited expectantly, he scanned their faces grimly.

"Lords barons!" began the Emperor, in a voice that was low, but nevertheless carried to the outermost ranks of the seated assemblage. "Judge for me what may be the right in the case of Ganelon! He was with me in Spain, as a member of my host. There he stole from me twenty thousand of my Franks, and my nephew Roland, whom you will never see again, and Oliver, the courteous and brave, and their twelve peers! I charge that he betrayed them for lust of treasure. He received immense wealth from Marsile, which all in the army saw. For gold he sold his comrades-in-arms to the Moors!"

Charlemagne ceased speaking, and a murmur ran through the gathering. Would Ganelon agree?

Duke Naimon, in charge of the proceedings, now spoke. "Ganelon, have you aught to say in reply to the Emperor's charge?"

All eyes were fixed upon the accused. Deny the facts he could not, but what had been his motive?

Tied to his stake, and bearing upon his person the traces of the treatment to which he had been subjected, Ganelon was nevertheless an imposing figure, tall, handsome and

baronlike. He gazed around him with a clear eye, that embraced his prosecutor and judges, his enemies and his numerous kinsmen and friends. Then he spoke forth in a loud, clear voice that carried as far as the palace.

"Sire, may I be a felon if I conceal aught from you! Roland repeatedly cheated me of my share of the spoils while we were campaigning, and for this I had good reason to hate him. But I concede no treason whatsoever on my part!"

A great murmur arose from the assembled barons. This was in truth a strange defense!

Above the hum, Ganelon shouted again. "For the love of God, listen to me, barons! My lords, I was in the host by the Emperor's side, and I served him with faith and love. Roland his nephew conceived an insane hatred of me. He decreed for me death and disgrace by sending me to the court of King Marsile. I went there as an envoy, and protected myself by my cunning. At the same time, I hurled my defiance at Roland, Oliver, and all their companions, in the presence of all the barons of the host. Charles heard my words, and so did all of you who were there! Mine was an act of private vengeance! It was intended to strike only at Roland and his following, and that it did! They were destroyed. Was any other portion of the host placed in jeopardy? Did my lord Charlemagne suffer from my action? Did he not, in consequence of my planning, win his campaign, destroy the forces of Marsile, and make himself master of Spain? I swear to you, barons, mine was no act of treason!"

The amazement of the council was such that all remained in stunned silence, as Ganelon ceased speaking. Then the silence was broken. One of Ganelon's followers rose from his seat and addressed the audience. It was Pinabel of Sorence Castle, doughtiest among the knights of the great eastern house of Mayence.

"My lords barons!" He spoke in a quiet, but deter-

mined and ominous voice. "I wish to support the statement of my lord Ganelon, and judge him not guilty of the crime of treason. He is a brave and loyal baron! But if there be anyone among you who disagrees, and wishes to test the issue with me, I am at his disposal!"

The hum that arose from the audience was loud enough to be a shout. This was a straight invitation to trial by combat. The implications were clear. If a champion stood forth to uphold Charlemagne, he would fight Pinabel until one of them was slain or vanquished. But being vanquished in the field meant that the defeated champion would be hanged, for having upheld the wrong cause. The same fate would await all who gave themselves up as the champion's pledges. It was not surprising that the members of the council hesitated.

Whispered confabulations began, while Charlemagne awaited frowningly, Ganelon hopefully, Pinabel confidently. In vain Charlemagne peered from one to another of his barons, scanning the faces of those in whom he and Naimon had reposed the greatest trust. The stakes were too high. To lose one's life for one's liege lord in battle, that was well enough. But to risk in addition the lives of friends and kinsmen, and even more those fiefs and possessions which were dearer than life itself!

Tall, heavy, muscular, filled with trust in his own prowess, the Lord of Sorence stood leaning easily upon his sword, scanning the assemblage as if seeking contradiction.

"Nay!" whispered one of the barons to the others. "It were well to let this matter stand! Why do we not ask the Emperor to become reconciled with Ganelon? He will serve him with love and faith hereafter, as he has done in the past, now that Roland no longer stands between them!"

"No amount of gold can bring back Roland to us!" exclaimed another. "Why do combat over something that is past and gone?"

"There is much truth in Ganelon's words!" said a third. "We lost Roland, but we won the war!"

It was Gerbuin, Count of Auvergne, who finally arose and addressed the Emperor, voicing the common thought of all his peers. "My lord," he said, "we beg of you that you cry quits with Count Ganelon, who will serve you hereafter in love and truth! Let him live, sire, like the right noble baron that he is! Roland is dead, and we shall never see him again. His death brought you victory!"

Charlemagne half rose from his throne. His face was livid with wrath, and upon it was a look of horror, dismay and loathing. Naimon could not hold him back this time. "You are felon traitors, all of you!" the Emperor shouted in tones of thunder, as the assemblage stood aghast at this breach of feudal etiquette.

From the baronial ranks rose the figure of one recently elevated to the higher dignity, a quiet, dignified, but resolute figure. "One of Roland's following!" shouted many. "One of the very few survivors of that fearful slaughter! Lord Thierry of Anjou! Now let us listen to what he may say!"

Gently, with serious countenance, Thierry bowed to the Emperor.

"Fair lord and King!" he addressed Charlemagne. "If I have waited until now to speak, it is only because I wished my seniors to speak first. But now they have spoken!"

He glanced about him at the assemblage of his peers with clear, serene countenance, as though inquiring whether there was yet one older than he who wished to speak. Many of his peers dropped their eyes before his.

He turned once again to Charlemagne. "Lord and sire, do not be dismayed! You know that I have served you long and in many ways, as my ancestors before me served yours. I have triple reason to uphold you in this cause. One of my motives is personal, and of that I shall not speak. Another is that I was with Roland in his retinue,

and want to see him avenged; but that also is of no consequence in this court. But I sustain, sire, that no matter what private grievance Sir Ganelon might have had against my lord Roland, the latter should have been safeguarded by the fact that he was in your service. Ganelon's betrayal of Roland to the Saracens was therefore an act of treason to you. I judge that Ganelon, since the hour he plotted against Roland, is a felon, and toward you a perjured traitor! Therefore I judge that he be slain, like the traitor he is! But if he has a friend or kinsman who would dispute my claim, with this my sword, which I have borne by my side in your service, I will guarantee my judgment!"

Thierry, having spoken, sat down. It was now the turn of Roland's friends to whisper excitedly among themselves. "Well spoken, Anjou!" "Well said, Thierry!"

Pinabel's eyes blazed with ill-contained fury. He strode forward to the Emperor's throne. Tall, strong, a redoubtable fighter, it was known that he who bore his blows had not long to live.

Half contemptuously he addressed Charlemagne: "Sire, this case is now yours! Command, therefore, that an end be made of this noise! I see Thierry, who has made his judgment! I call it false, and will contest it! He and I began a combat once that was never finished! Now we shall conclude it!" Plucking his deer-hide gauntlet from his right hand, he thrust it into the hand of the Emperor.

Charlemagne looked once more like a man to whom life holds forth a promise. "Where are your pledges, Sir Pinabel?" he asked in a loud and hostile voice.

Pinabel indicated with a wave of the hand Ganelon's thirty kinsmen, who sat together. "These will answer for me, sire!" he replied, as they all nodded assent.

"And yours, Sir Thierry?" asked Charles, turning loving eyes on his young champion.

"My lord Charlemagne," replied Thierry, "on a former occasion, when it seemed I was to fight with Sir Pinabel, I

offered my brother Huon. Our Archbishop uncle came forward then, and acted as our pledge. He is no longer here, as you well know. Therefore I can only offer you my brother."

"'Tis well, Sir Thierry!" said the monarch. "I accept him! Give me your glove, Thierry, and make ready for combat!"

The council slowly dissolved, in high excitement, and preparations began to transform the great square into a field of battle.

These took the rest of the morning and lasted far into the afternoon. Thierry and Pinabel, meanwhile, went about making their peace with their Maker. After a special Mass which they attended, confession and absolution were conferred upon them, and both made large offerings of their wealth to the abbeys and monasteries of their respective lands.

Before he returned to the field, Thierry went to take leave of his beloved Elvira.

"You will win, my Thierry!" said the maiden confidently, as she again tied her scarf about the hilt of his sword. "God and the right are on your side! I will remain in the chapel, and pray for you. Come there with me now. It will be the last time we kneel and pray together, for tomorrow I leave for Spain."

Marveling at her assurance and faith, Thierry obediently started to follow her into the chapel.

But Esclarmonde demanded it as her right to witness the encounter. "I, too, have my love and life at stake!" she complained bitterly. "In accordance with your barbarous Frankish customs, Sir Thierry, if you are vanquished, Huon will hang! If that happens, I will go back to Africa, and raise such an army of Saracens as will wipe out all your Frankish Empire, your Emperor, and the traitors in your midst, to whom you grant such privileges, instead of

strangling them outright with silken cords, as you should!"

"Hush, Esclarmonde!" said Huon sternly. "Remember that henceforth you are one of us! Accept our customs as they are!"

But she clung to his neck and wept.

" 'Tis fortunate, brother," Huon said to Thierry, "that you are fighting today instead of me! I would be unmanned!"

"I, too, could be unmanned, brother!" replied Thierry with a sigh as he took Elvira's arm to enter the chapel. "But there is work to be done!"

"Farewell, my love!" whispered Elvira, dry-eyed, when Thierry rose to his feet from the cold stone floor where they had been kneeling side by side. "Go to your duty, and do not fear! My prayers will be about you like a mighty coat of mail!"

In the great square before the palace, a large space had been cleared, with four benches marking the limits. Behind these, barons, knights, men-at-arms, ladies of the court and burghers of the city, scullions and servants and beggars milled and thronged in expectation of the encounter.

The champions were led forth, mounted on their chargers. Both were in full battle array, with strong white hauberks encasing their bodies, helmets with drawn visors on their heads, quartered shields hanging from their necks, swords girt at their sides, and trenchant lances in their right hands. Shouts of encouragement arose from both sides, and the Emperor's men-at-arms had some difficulty in quelling the incipient brawls that arose in various spots among the crowd.

Charlemagne, seated on his throne, surrounded by his barons, watched intently as Duke Ogier of Denmark spoke out from memory the rules and regulations governing trial by combat. Then the two champions were led to opposite

ends of the field and turned toward each other. Ogier gave the signal, and the trumpets sounded.

Across the field raced Thierry and Pinabel, mounted on their swift chargers, with loose reins and lances in rest. The shock of their meeting was tremendous. The watching thousands saw their lances splintering as they shattered the shields and almost rent the hauberks from their bodies. The girths of both horses parted, and the saddles slipped, causing both knights to fall to the ground.

Neither was hurt. Nimbly they rose to their feet and drew their swords. Circling, they came at each other. When they met, there was an exchange of blows that made the audience quiver and gasp. But the steel helmets seemed to be endowed with miraculous strength.

"God!" said Charlemagne. "Let the right triumph!"

"Allah!" whispered Esclarmonde; then, correcting herself: "God of the Christians! Give victory to Thierry!"

The combatants, though unwounded, were breathing hard. "Thierry!" said Pinabel, pausing. "I pray you, yield! I will become your vassal and give you all my wealth, but make the Emperor be reconciled with Ganelon!"

"That counsel is not for me!" replied Thierry, circling for an opening. "But if you leave this battle and allow justice to be done to Ganelon, I shall regain for you the Emperor's favor!"

"Never, please God!" said Pinabel. "Ganelon is my kinsman, and I must save him!"

"Then fight on, Sir Pinabel!" exclaimed Thierry grimly. "Ganelon must die!"

The battle was resumed more fiercely than before. Each man knew now there was no quarter. Sparks flashed into the darkening air as sword and helmet met. Five thousand spectators held their breath.

Suddenly Pinabel feinted with his point, drawing Thierry off guard. Then, with an opening vouchsafed him, he brought down his blade upon Thierry's head with a blow

mightier than the rest. The impact of the heavy sword cleaved Thierry's helmet into two halves, that fell from his face, while the sword's point, glancing downward, cut a deep gash in the Angevin's right cheek. The clear blood spurted and ran, and Thierry, half blinded, staggered back.

A groan went up from Thierry's supporters, a shout of triumph from Ganelon's. A single Moslem cry of "Allah!" echoed above the throng.

Thierry did not hear them. What he heard instead, distinctly as if they had been spoken into his ear, were the soft words: "I shall pray for you, beloved! God and the right are on your side!"

Half blinded and spattered with blood, Thierry nevertheless stood facing his opponent, who pressed in for the kill, stabbing and hacking. Thierry's eye fell on the blood-drenched scarf wrapped about the hilt of his sword.

Pinabel made a deadly lunge, but his foot slipped, and his sword's point glanced off his opponent's hauberk. Before he could recover his balance, Thierry's sword came up, then descended swiftly. "For Elvira!" he cried. "For Roland and Oliver and the twelve peers! For Count Bernaldo of Spain!"

The blow caught Pinabel fairly on his helmet, splintered it down to the nosepiece, scattered the brains from the broken skull. As mighty Pinabel fell to the ground, Thierry raised his bloody sword in triumph, then fell and lay swooning across his dead opponent.

A mighty cry rose from the audience. "God has spoken! Ganelon is wrong!"

But Charlemagne, throwing his royal dignity to the winds, rushed down from his throne onto the blood-stained snow. Lovingly he bent over Thierry, picked him up in his arms and kissed him. With his great marten skins he wiped the blood from his face, then turned to Naimon and called for other bandages. Ogier, Huon and others of the barons were quick to bring a stretcher on which the

victorious champion was laid and carried to the palace, with Esclarmonde running by his side and staunching his blood with the folds of her cloak.

The Emperor strode beside the litter, on the other side. "How, how can I ever reward him?" Esclarmonde heard him mutter to himself.

"My lord Charlemagne, I can tell you how to reward him!" the Saracen maiden exclaimed breathlessly, looking straight into the great Emperor's face with her gazelle eyes. Charlemagne paused. So did Esclarmonde. The litter was borne on past them up the steps and into the palace.

"How mean you that, child?" queried Charlemagne. "Is there a boon the lord Thierry craves?"

"There is indeed, right Emperor! But he will never ask you for it. If he is to have it, you must grant it of your own accord!"

Charlemagne fingered his beard. "Child," he said thoughtfully, "I must attend now to the business of Ganelon. Do you go into the palace and help tend the lord Thierry's wounds. Come to my chambers at eventide. I would hear from you of my champion's heart's desires."

Esclarmonde gave him a bow that still resembled a Moorish salaam, turned, and ran without another word into the palace. Charlemagne turned back to the field of battle. There was grim work yet to be done.

Naimon, Ogier and the other barons of the realm met him as he came. Charlemagne's recently benign countenance had lost all of its benevolence. The scowl upon his brow was that of the God of Justice of the Ancient Testament.

"Judgment must now be passed, sire!" exclaimed Naimon.

"Judgment must now be passed!" echoed Charlemagne, a note of relentless exaltation in his voice.

The Emperor ordered the field cleared quickly, and his barons brought back into session. His face was proud and

grim. "Now tell me, my lords barons!" he addressed them with a triumphant glare. "What shall be done with Ganelon's thirty kinsmen, who gave themselves up as pledges for him?"

This time there was no hesitation on the part of the council. "Not one of them shall live!" was the unanimous decision.

Charlemagne addressed his provost. "Basbrun, you will take the thirty pledges and hang them all on trees, in the forest! By this white beard of mine, if one escapes, you are doomed!"

"Nay, sire! I am here to obey your orders!" replied the official, signaling his men to lead forth the captives.

Charlemagne turned once more to his barons. "And Ganelon?" he asked fiercely.

The council, lately so inclined to leniency, was merciless now that Pinabel was dead and the judgment of God clearly revealed.

"Let him be drawn by four stallions, who will strain all his sinews until each of his limbs is torn from his body!" was the implacable judgment of the feudal court.

EPILOGUE

And in the morning came the groom and bride;
They walked on to the abbey, side by side;
Baptismal fonts were ready when she came;
They left unchanged the beauty of her name:
As Esclarmonde the world recalls her fame.

Huon de Bordeaux, 8718-8722

IN THE HALF-GLOOM OF THE EMPEROR'S VAST BEDCHAMber, fitfully illuminated by table lamps and braziers, but more by the great log fire that roared in the huge fireplace, the daughter of King Marsile seemed a small and fragile figure indeed as she advanced behind the chamberlain. She bowed low to Charlemagne, Naimon and Duke Ogier.

"Approach, my child!" said the Emperor, with a smile playing on his stern features. "Today you said you knew of a boon craved by the lord Thierry of Anjou, one which it would be in my power to grant."

"That indeed I do, right Emperor!" replied the Saracen maiden nervously. "I am willing to reveal it to you, but on one condition."

Charles turned to his two noblemen and laughed. "Conditions are now being laid upon the mighty monarch of Christendom by wisps of Moslem girls as yet unconverted! 'Tis well, child, speak! I am in a mood even for your conditions!"

"You must never let him or those near and dear to him know that I revealed it to you!" blurted out Esclarmonde with decision.

"That were easy to grant, child!"

Esclarmonde suddenly flung herself at Charlemagne's feet and embraced them. Somewhat startled, the Emperor bent down and raised her to a sitting position before him. The Saracen maiden's face was bathed in tears, and her lovely eyes gazed up piteously into his.

"Nay, what is this, child?" exclaimed the Emperor. "Surely the lord Thierry's affairs cannot be at such a sorry pass as to warrant these tears!"

"My lord!" replied Esclarmonde, sobbing. "They are indeed! You, and you alone can heal them, and restore the sunshine of happiness to two noble hearts!"

"What nonsense is this, Esclarmonde?" said the Emperor. But the kindly tone of his voice belied his words, and he gently patted the maiden's head, as though she had been one of his favorite hunting hounds.

"My lord, I will tell you all!" sobbed Esclarmonde. "It all began on the day after your return to Aix. The lady Elvira and I were in the chapel, praying over the body of the fair Lady Aude. A messenger arrived from Spain and asked to speak to Elvira."

The Emperor nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes, I know that! He came from her uncle Alfonso, who wanted her to go back to the Asturias and reign in his place. What is there so tragic about that?"

"When my friend Elvira came back to the chapel, my lord, she was white and haggard. For the first time since we had known each other she did not confide in me. Later, she asked Lord Thierry to meet her in your gardens."

A light began to break over Charlemagne's face. He glanced at his two courtiers, and saw that they were smiling. His own half-smile turned into a frown, and the faces of Naimon and Ogier resumed their wonted seriousness.

"Then what happened?" he urged Esclarmonde.

"My lord Charlemagne, I knew that my friends were in deep trouble. I spoke to my lord Huon, but he is a Frank. 'If they need our advice or help, they will ask for it!' he said. But that, my lord, was not enough for me. People sometimes need help even when they don't ask for it. And how can their friends help them if they don't know their problems?"

Esclarmonde paused, while her pretty face reddened. Charlemagne looked at her inquiringly. "And so, what did you do?" he asked.

"I knew where they were meeting. I arrived there first, and concealed myself well behind one of your great statues. Soon they arrived and began to talk."

Charlemagne's face was a study in surprise. "You eaves-

dropped upon them, Esclarmonde?" he asked sternly. "Don't you know how wrong that is? People's affairs are their own!"

"Yes, my lord, that is what Huon said. But we of the Saracen strain are not that way. We hold that a friend in need must be helped, even against his will. I knew that something was wrong, and I wanted so to help them!"

It was Naimon who interrupted. "Perchance, sire," he said, "there is some merit to the Saracen point of view. Witness our own brave Roland. He would be alive today if a true friend, his comrade Oliver perhaps, had transgressed his orders and acted on his own initiative."

"That, my lord Naimon," said Charlemagne sternly, "is not a safe basis from which to reason. Our code of honor is what it is, and that it must remain. But let us be tolerant of the code of others. Proceed, my child."

"My lord," continued Esclarmonde, weeping, "there is little more to tell. The lady Elvira informed Thierry of her uncle's invitation, which she said she must accept for the sake of her people. She asked Thierry to join her as her consort. Thierry replied that never, so long as he lived, would he leave your service, or request you to release him from his feudal oath. Neither would give way, and they agreed to part, they, who love each other with a love that equals that which I bear Huon! My lord Charlemagne, I have been among your Franks for months, but there are still things that are mysterious and incomprehensible to me. What is this duty to accept an unwanted crown, when there are dozens who would risk their lives to gain it? What is this feudal obligation to remain with one's liege lord, even though one's heart break, even though love and happiness beckon in another direction? I do not know. Perhaps I shall never know. But this I do know, my lord Charlemagne. It is within your power, you who are the greatest and mightiest monarch in the world, to make my friends happy and restore them to each other's arms!"

Esclarmonde grew silent, save for an occasional sob. Her beautiful upturned eyes gazed with mute pleading into Charlemagne's.

The Emperor stroked his beard thoughtfully. "This is a question difficult to solve," he said finally. "There is no doubt that it is best for the lady Elvira to return to the Asturias and accept the throne her uncle offers her. Nor is there doubt that the lord Thierry must feel himself bound by his feudal oath to remain by my side and serve me faithfully and well, as indeed he has already done. But perhaps there is a way. After all, Thierry of Anjou went far beyond his feudal obligation today, when he championed my cause and did battle for me on the field. Shall a vassal be more generous than his liege lord? Shall the mightiest monarch in Christendom allow a great favor done him to go unrequited? What say you, my lords?"

He glanced up at Naimon and Ogier, and on their faces surprised the same smile he had surprised before. Both nodded.

"Go, my child," said Charlemagne, patting Esclarmonde's hand. "Go back to your friends. Tell the lady Elvira her journey must again be postponed, until after the lord Thierry's wounds are healed. Should she object, remind her that she pledged to act as a sponsor for the rite of your christening, and that, it seems, must be delayed, since your knowledge of our Christian customs is still far from perfect."

"And what shall I tell the lord Thierry?" inquired Esclarmonde hopefully.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing—as yet!" was Charlemagne's reply. But Esclarmonde's crestfallen face lighted up again with hope when she looked up into the Emperor's kindly eyes, from which all trace of fierceness had vanished, and where only tenderness remained.

* * *

Another two weeks had passed, and the memory of Ganelon's dire punishment and the tragic end of his kinsmen was beginning to be erased from the minds of those who had witnessed the events.

Thierry had sufficiently recovered from the wound inflicted upon him by Pinabel to walk about the Emperor's gardens, supported by Elvira's arm. But on his face was the shadow of a melancholy that would not heal. Elvira, too, bore upon her countenance the pallor of sadness. Esclarmonde and Huon walked at their side, and for some strange reason made no attempt to repress their joyful buoyancy, jesting and laughing while the others kept their bitter silence.

Huon's left cheek bore the scar of the blow he had received from the Saracens in the mountain path where they had protected the flight of their damsels. Now he chose to direct an ill-timed jest about it at his brother.

"Now, brother," he exclaimed, "we are both marked; you on the right cheek, I on the left. There is no help for it but to let our beards grow out!"

Thierry, immersed in his thoughts, had barely heard him. But Esclarmonde chose to reply. "Nay!" she cried. "I like you better smooth-shaven, my Huon! I still recall how your beard scratched after three days in my father's dungeon!"

"Beloved, we were but knights then. We are barons now, and entitled to the honor of the chin!" Huon reminded her.

The discussion was interrupted by a page, who bade them come into the Emperor's presence.

In the throne room they gazed about them in surprise. A veritable host of bishops, abbots and prelates were gathered there, out of France, Germany and Bavaria.

"My lords," said Charlemagne when the presentations were over, "this is the highborn Saracen lady on whose account you have been summoned here—Esclarmonde,

daughter of King Marsile of Zaragoza, upon whose soul may God have mercy, if he died repentant. She has come to us of her own free will, asking to become a Christian. Her first instruction in our Faith came from the Lady Elvira of Spain, who was a captive in Marsile's hands. Since then, she has been further instructed by our chaplain and the holy nuns of our convent, and I verily believe she is now ready to become a Christian, by love and by faith. Wherefore baptize her, that God may have her soul!"

Esclarmonde turned a beaming face to Huon. "And then, my love, we shall be wed!" she exclaimed. "Allah be praised!"

"Shh!" cautioned Huon. "Do not let these lords of the Church hear you use the name of your false god! Else they will refuse to christen you!"

Esclarmonde hung her pretty head in shame. "There is no God but God!" she replied piously, using the Moslem phrasing with Christian words.

Elvira nudged her. "Listen to the lords bishops, Esclarmonde!" she bade her in a severe tone.

"My lord Charlemagne," said the new Archbishop of Reims, a prelate with flowing locks and a devout demeanor, quite at variance with that of his fighting predecessor, "the rite demands sponsors, dames of estate and long inheritance. Who will sponsor the Saracen princess?"

"I will, my lord Archbishop!" replied Elvira, stepping forward. "My descent goes back to Ataulfo, first Visigothic King of Spain, and I am niece to King Alfonso of the Asturias. My noble aunt, Alfonso's queen, will sponsor her with me!"

The Archbishop gravely inclined his head. "Then the ceremony may be held tomorrow morning, at High Mass!" he said.

It was Huon's turn to step forward. "My lord Archbishop," he bowed, "and you, my lord Charlemagne! I would request as a special boon that the christening of the

lady Esclarmonde be followed by a wedding ceremony. I would wed her, as soon as she becomes a Christian!"

Charlemagne frowned. "My lord Huon," he said sternly, "I would remind you that the lady Esclarmonde is my ward, being the daughter of a king whom I conquered in battle. You have not taken the trouble to seek our consent!"

Huon was crestfallen, but not for long. His brother Thierry spoke up for him, though in a somewhat lifeless voice: "As head of the baronial house of Anjou, my lord Emperor, I ask the hand of your ward Esclarmonde for my younger brother Huon."

Charlemagne relented, and his frowning face unfroze in a wide smile. "It is granted, my lord Thierry! Provided, that is," he added archly, "the damsel is willing to accept your brother."

Huon looked pleadingly at Esclarmonde. She hung back, coquettishly, keeping her laughing eyes modestly fixed on the ground.

"Come, come, Esclarmonde!" said the monarch. "Do you accept?"

The maiden blushed, looked up so that all could see the laughter in her eyes, and whispered, "That indeed I do!"

Huon silently squeezed her hand, and received a squeeze in return. "My lord Archbishop," said Huon, turning to the prelate, "is there aught in the canons of Holy Mother Church to prevent my lady Esclarmonde from retaining her name when she is baptized?"

"Nothing at all, Sir Huon!" smiled the Archbishop.

"I have known and loved you as Esclarmonde! I wish you to continue to be my Esclarmonde forever!" whispered Huon to his lovely Saracen.

"My lord Huon," Charlemagne gravely interrupted their exchange of loving glances, "soon I shall depart on an expedition to Epirus, whither I am summoned by King Vivien, who is hard pressed by the Moslems."

Huon bowed his head, striving to conceal his bitterness. This meant being torn from the arms of his bride-to-be before they could truly taste the joys of wedlock. But his feudal duty was clear. *"For one's liege lord must one—"* The words uttered by Roland at the pass of Cize rang in Huon's mind as he raised his head.

"But for you, my lord," continued Charlemagne, seemingly unaware of Huon's disappointment, "I have other duties, away from my own side. This, understand," he went on with the ghost of a twinkle in his eye, "was a grave decision for me, because I shall need brave and loyal vassals where I go!"

Huon and Esclarmonde stood wondering. Charlemagne paused, as if to enjoy their suspense. Then he went on. "In Zaragoza we have left a strong garrison. But the land is new, and needs those who know it well to rule it. The population, so recently converted to our Faith, needs one who is thoroughly acquainted with its former false beliefs to lead it in its new creeds and customs. None will be better suited for that task than the daughter of the former Emir, herself a Christian convert, herself guided in her new faith by a husband who has been steeped in it all his life. My lord Huon, you, with your bride, will proceed to Zaragoza within a month, and become regent of our new Spanish March, a territory that we will hold under our protection until it shall be safe to turn it over to the Spaniards themselves!"

Esclarmonde looked up at Huon in radiant happiness. "My love!" she cried. "How we will lead my people, you and I, in their new ways of devotion to Christ's cross!"

Oblivious of her surroundings, she suddenly cast her arms about Huon's neck. The knight, visibly embarrassed at this display of Saracen emotion before all the lords of the court and the Church, tried gently to free himself from her embrace, but Esclarmonde clung to him. Charlemagne's laughter was the signal for all others present to

laugh—all, that is, but Elvira and Thierry.

"You shall not lack affection in your new post, methinks, my lord Huon!" said the Emperor. "Nay, try not to disengage the damsel! She has won you fairly, and is entitled to your kiss!"

Slowly, Charlemagne turned his eyes to Thierry and Elvira. The baron from Anjou and the future queen of the Asturias stood side by side, their hands almost touching. The monarch scanned their faces. In both he read the same message—deep, overweening sadness, the sadness of voluntary renunciation of all that their hearts yearned for, made more poignant by the spectacle of the happiness of others.

"And you, Sir Thierry," asked the monarch softly, "have you no boon to ask of us? We are highly beholden to you, as you well know, and would want to acquit ourselves of our indebtedness."

"Yes, my lord Charlemagne!" replied Thierry, drawing himself up to his full height and squaring his shoulders. In his voice there was no trembling, no emotion, yet it sounded curiously distant, as though its owner's thoughts were elsewhere. "I would crave of you the boon to be assigned to the escort of my lady Elvira as far as the Spanish border, before I return here to join your retinue for the Epirote campaign."

"It is granted, my lord!" said Charlemagne quickly. His piercing eyes fastened on Elvira. "And you, my lady of the Asturias, you know your journey begins tomorrow, after the rite of your friend's christening. You go back to your ancestral court, to receive the throne from your uncle Alfonso. You will rule over the Visigoths of Spain, my lady Elvira. May your reign be ever wise and just, and attended by the love and loyalty of your subjects! May peace be with you always! May the path over the Pyrenees ever henceforth be an open highway over which Christian Frank and Christian Visigoth shall journey in love and

friendship to each other's lands! Our pilgrims would fain resume their pious travels to the shrine of your great Santiago at Compostela, and yours must be equally anxious to tread once more across our lands the lengthy road to Rome, where Christ's Apostle dwells. Promise me, my lady, that you will ever protect and keep open those pilgrim routes, and I, on my part, pledge you the same!"

"I promise, my lord Charlemagne!" replied Elvira simply, looking straight into Charlemagne's eyes. But her voice, too, was distant and lifeless.

"Elvira," continued the Emperor, "during your stay with us, in our camps and in our palaces, we have learned to love you well. We would send you back to Spain with our royal gift. Is there aught in this land of France that pleases you? If there is, take it! It is yours!"

"My lord Charlemagne!" replied Elvira in a voice that now was firm and clear and ringing. "I have already taken the very best that France has to offer. I bear back with me to my land of Spain a true, loyal Frankish heart. It is encased within my own bosom, lord Charlemagne, where it is firmly entwined with mine. From thence it will never depart so long as my own heart beats. I ask for nothing more!"

A hush fell over the audience at these strange words. What could the lady from Spain mean? Many had surmised that there might be tenderness between Charlemagne's exalted guest and the baron who always attended her, but few suspected the gravity of the situation. After all, it was customary for the ladies of Charlemagne's court to be escorted by noble knights.

Charlemagne looked at Elvira strangely. "And if, my lady," he said slowly, "I were to add to this heart that you take back to Spain a strong and vigorous body, one that has but lately been risked on our behalf, would you accept the gift?"

Elvira stood speechless. Thierry, whose head had been

bowed, looked up quickly and sharply at his sovereign.

It was Charlemagne himself who had to break the silence that ensued.

"My lady Elvira!" He spoke in gentle, soft tones. "I have asked you a question. Courtesy demands an answer, even from so fair a lady as you!"

Still there was silence.

"Elvira," Charles resumed slowly, "your Visigoths are proud and haughty, as well they have reason to be. In their mistaken belief that we came to their land to conquer, they fought bravely against our armies, until one appeared among them to convince them that our motives were pure. Then, and only then, did they do battle by our side, and help us by the sacrifice of their noblest barons to rid Spain of Moslem rule. How would your Spanish barons feel, my lady, if that same man who won their Bernaldo to our cause now came back to them, by your side, not to rule them in my name, not to oppress them, but to prove to them once again that Frank and Visigoth, under Christ, are one? Would they accept him?"

This time Elvira did not hesitate to reply. "My lord Charlemagne!" she said in a clear, resounding voice that made the bishops and abbots wonder. "I can reply for my Visigothic barons! They know the man you speak of, and know him well! They know how bravely he has fought for me, the sister of their dead leader! They know how his sincere eloquence won Bernaldo to the side of your Roland! They have fought by his side! They love him, and fear him not! Let him but swear to abide by our ancient Visigothic code of the Fuero Juzgo, and they will accept him as they accept me! Are you answered?"

"I am indeed, my lady!" said Charlemagne, nodding gravely.

But Thierry, standing by Elvira's side, had clutched her hand in a grip of iron as she spoke. On his handsome visage was a fierce, dark scowl. Only the rules of knightly

courtesy prevented him from interrupting her as she spoke. Now his voice rang out.

"Right Emperor, this cannot be! I am bound to you by our feudal oath of fealty and honor! I must remain in your following, ride and bleed by your side while there is blood in me to shed! I cannot leave your service!"

Charlemagne smiled and held up his hand, halting the flow of angry words. "You need not, my lord Thierry! But know that there are many ways of serving one's liege lord. When I go on to Epirus to fight the Moslems there, I shall want to know that my back is well guarded, that on the other side of the Pyrenees lies a land that is friendly, and bound to me by ties of blood and honor and mutual trust. I shall want to know that this land is watched over by brave and noble men, led by a woman who has all reason to love us, and by a consort in whose prowess, ability and loyalty I have absolute trust. Thierry of Anjou, by virtue of the feudal oath that binds you to me, I enjoin upon you the military duty of riding to Spain as the consort of Asturias' queen, there to lead the Visigothic barons who are now our loyal allies! Keep faithful watch over the land, my Thierry, for it is the key to France and Christendom! Beyond the mountain of Tarik lies Africa, and the Moslems there may well conceive the plan of crossing the straits once more, and by striking at Spain, strike at the very heart of our Faith and Empire! It is your mission, Thierry of Anjou, to guard against and repel any such attempted invasion, with the help of your Queen's Visigothic barons and the collaboration of your own brave brother Huon. When your Emperor commands you, Thierry, you must go!"

The frown on Thierry's face had been gradually dispelled as he listened to his sovereign's words. Now, as Charlemagne ceased speaking his brown eyes were alight with radiant joy.

"My lord Emperor!" He spoke quietly, but his voice

carried to the farthest corners of the crowded throne room. "By virtue of my feudal oath, I hear your command, and must obey! Right Emperor, upon the hilt of this my blade that has so lately been unsheathed to enforce your justice," Thierry drew his sword from its scabbard, held it point down in his left hand, and extended his right over the jeweled hilt, "by the cross of Christ that is shaped in this sword, this I do swear to you: I shall proceed to Spain as you command, and there, with the help of my Queen's Christian subjects, I shall guard your back while you do battle with the Saracens of Epirus. I repeat to you, my sovereign, the words spoken by our hero Roland when you set him to guard the pass of Cize. Have no fear, Charlemagne! No one shall strike at your fair realms of France from beyond the Pyrenees while there is strength left in my arm or blood in my veins! He died to keep that oath, and so will I, if need be!"

Without changing his posture, he turned to Elvira. "To you, fair Queen of the Asturias," his voice grew soft and gentle as he caressed her with his eyes, "to you I have already sworn the love and fealty that a man pledges to a woman. Now I swear to you that as your consort I shall faithfully abide by your Visigothic laws, assist you to dispense justice to your barons and people, aid you to restore peace, freedom and prosperity to our land of Spain, for which so many of our brave Frankish knights have shed their blood!"

The sublime expression of happiness in Elvira's face was his only answer. Swiftly, he thrust the sword back into its sheath. Then, in the presence of Emperor, nobles and prelates, Thierry took Elvira in his arms and kissed her proud brow.

"And now, my sons and daughters," said the Emperor, after an instant of silence, "you may go! Tomorrow, at High Mass, I shall witness Esclarmonde's christening and your double rite of matrimony. May God ever be with

you, and keep you in health, wealth, happiness, and obedience to His holy Laws so long as you will live!"

The audience was at an end. Elvira and Esclarmonde were dazed as they stepped from the Emperor's presence into the antechamber, where fair ladies of France, who had grown to love them, crowded in upon them and whisked them away to satisfy their curiosity.

Huon looked at Thierry. "So, brother!" he said. "Our adventure is over! You have your lady, and I have mine! You are a prince consort, and I a regent! Working together, hand in hand, we shall rebuild war-torn Spain, and make her a powerful ally of our Frankish Empire, to which our hearts will ever belong!"

Thierry was barely recovered from his long and strenuous emotions, yet he smiled a sly smile. "Yes, brother," he said, "but your task is far more difficult than mine!"

"How mean you that, Thierry?" asked Huon in astonishment. "Surely your duties as prince consort will be more weighty than mine!"

"I spoke not of affairs of state, brother," laughed Thierry, "but rather of a certain pledge you once made, and must now keep! I, at least, made no such pledge!"

"I do not understand you, brother!" exclaimed Huon, more and more perplexed. "What pledge?"

"Do you remember the night of your *gab,* my little Huelin?" said Thierry, putting his arm affectionately about his brother's shoulder. "You made three *gabs,* and kept them, by the miraculous help of all the Saints in Heaven! But you also made a certain other *gab* concerning the lady Esclarmonde, should she ever become a Christian! I do not ask to see you keep it! But think you you can, Huelin?"

Remembrance broke on Huon's face with a great, sheepish grin.

"Aye! I remember now, brother! I was in my cups then.

Now that I am sober, all I can say to you is: I shall do my best, my very best, my Frankish best!"

"That," said Thierry laughing, "is all that can be required of any noble vassal!"

Together, laughing, arm in arm, they strode from the Emperor's palace into the grounds outside, where the fresh, clean snow of January lay on the streets of Charlemagne's good city of Aix.

CI FALT LA GESTE

HISTORICAL NOTE

IN ITS MOST AUTHORITATIVE VERSION, THE *Song of Roland* seems to have been composed in the second half of the eleventh century by Turoldus, a Norman abbot, whose purpose it probably was to arouse enthusiasm for the freeing of the Holy Land from the Saracens, a process that was then barely beginning.

The abbot wanted to depict the infidel Moslems as the enemies of Christendom, make them living, breathing, characters who would inspire a hatred born of fear in the masses destined to march to the conquest of Christ's Sepulcher.

The Holy Land was far away, and its Saracen occupants remote and unknown. But there were other Moslems closer at hand, the Moors of Spain, who three centuries before had overrun the Iberian peninsula and stormed at the very heart of France. They had been routed in the bloody battle of Tours in 732 A.D. by Charles Martel, leader of the Franks who had been the ancestors of the eleventh-century Frenchmen. Half a century later, the mightiest of France's emperors, Charlemagne, had led an expedition into Spain with the half-avowed purpose of hurling the Moors back across the Strait of Gibraltar into Africa. His campaign was indecisive, but around it legends had sprung up—one, in particular, about the last stand made by Charlemagne's nephew Roland in the Pyrenean passes, protecting the army's retreat. The treachery of Roland's own stepfather Ganelon had been the cause of Roland's death, for which the Emperor had exacted a terrible vengeance.

So when Turoldus composed his masterpiece of propaganda against the Moslem world, he laid his locale in Spain and brought back to life the heroes, heroines and villains of three centuries before. In a 4000-line poem

packed with grim episodes and dramatic action that was, is, and ever will be a jewel of epic literature, he glorified Charlemagne and Roland as they probably never expected to be glorified in their lifetime.

Prior to the appearance of the *Chanson de Roland* there had been a great drought in the European literary field. Lives of saints, of indifferent merit, had constituted the chief article of consumption between the fifth and the eleventh century. The *Chanson de Roland* was superlatively fiction—adventure, romance, swashbuckling, suspense, the portrayal of human passions largely divorced from superhuman strivings for the world to come, yet containing an undercurrent of spirituality and martyrdom in direct relation with the lofty Christian tradition of the previous centuries. After the Great Penance of the early Middle Ages, this type of writing was like a Bacchanalian feast, and the world was ripe for it. The popularity of the *Chanson de Roland* is attested by its numerous translations and modified versions, which continued to hold the center of Europe's literary stage for endless decades.

Almost at once came the imitators. For three centuries France was flooded with epic poems stemming directly or remotely from the *Roland*. The *chansons de geste,* or tales of doughty deeds, became the universal fare of king, knight, cleric, retainer, artisan, merchant and serf. In some of these imitations the original heroes became the villains and vice-versa. The repercussions of this giant output came down through the ages. As late as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Tasso and Ariosto in Italy, Cervantes in Spain, Shakespeare in England, based part of their works upon some theme, character or incident described by the original eleventh-century author or one of his imitators.

The vogue gradually died down, though present-day European puppet shows still feature Roland and Charlemagne as their principal characters. New forms of writing

were created and evolved, new tastes came to the fore. But the historical novel as a type of literature is there to tell us that the passion of the reading public for the tale of action and daring has never really died.

It seemed to me that it was time for the original prototype of the historical novel to be brought forth from the grave where it has lain, stirring and groaning, for the past five centuries, and reintroduced to the adventure-hungry public of today. But how to go about it?

There were two devices that were employed with extraordinary success by the imitators of the *Roland* throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the combination of the original plot with elements taken from later works, and the creation of a new epic whose central character is one of the secondary personages of the original poem.

The *Chanson de Roland* gave rise to numerous later best-sellers in which each one of Roland's twelve chosen comrades became in turn the central character. Unaccountably overlooked by the medieval imitators, however, was one character of the *Roland,* Thierry of Anjou, who appears as Charlemagne's champion at the trial of the traitor Ganelon and defeats in single combat the traitor's champion, Pinabel of Sorence. *Swords of Anjou* (titled *Swords for Charlemagne* in this edition) fictionally reconstructs, with the medieval technique, his life and doings, his aspirations and their fulfillment.

The plot of the *Roland,* with its breathless suspense and intensely dramatic incidents of treachery and heroism, has been used in full, but to it have been added elements borrowed from many other medieval works. Woven into this tale are not only the gory episodes of the original *Chanson* but also the humorous touches of the *Pélerinage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem,* the romantic love intrigues of the *Huon de Bordeaux,* the feudal background of the *Couronnement de Louis,* the semi-historical exploits re-

lated in the ancient Spanish ballads of Bernaldo del Carpio, Roland's mythical rival in the struggle to free Spain from the Moors.

It must be stressed that *Swords of Anjou* is a "historical" novel only in a literary sense, for its background is based not on recorded history, but on the largely fictional history outlined by the imaginative writers of the *chansons de geste*. They did not shrink from distorting chronology and historical events to suit their own purposes, nor did they hesitate to present their own eleventh- and twelfth-century customs and armaments as characteristic of the earlier period they purported to describe. I, in turn, have not hesitated to follow them in their anachronisms and inaccuracies. For modern times, this is a distinct innovation, but it is fully in keeping with the literary practice of the period being depicted. Far more important than chronological exactness or precision of historical detail, it seemed to me, was the recapturing of the authentic spirit of the Middle Ages through the use of the themes and incidents of the *chansons de geste,* as well as the actual wording of the characters' utterances, with the deep insight they give into the psychological processes of the medieval mind.

These characters think, speak and act not as twentieth-century Americans, but as eleventh-century Europeans. Their thoughts, words and deeds have not been brought down to date, though it would have been relatively easy to do so. This may at first surprise the modern reader, brought up on a fare of carefully modernized historical characters; but it is not too difficult to become accustomed to the workings of the medieval mind, because in final analysis human experience is universal, and even history, real or fictional, has a strange way of repeating itself.

From the standpoint of the present-day reader who reads fiction for pure enjoyment, the merit of this tale lies in the swiftness of the action and the directness of the

plot, its thrilling episodes of bloodshed and violent, unbridled passions, its authentic picturization of the customs of the Middle Ages and the spirit that inspired them. There is little in the way of involved description or psychological introspection, but the characters are made to live through the instrumentality of their own words and actions, in accordance with the practice of the best medieval writers.

What of the real historical background of the *Chanson de Roland,* which forms the backbone of our story?

Egginhard, Charlemagne's contemporary, historian and friend, speaks briefly in his chronicles of the great emperor's indecisive Spanish campaign, undertaken, as we learn from other sources, at the request not of King Alfonso of the Asturias, but of some Saracen chieftains who had grown tired of their overlord. The Frankish army, Egginhard relates, came into Spain in 778 and endeavored to seize part of the country from the Moors, taking in the course of the campaign the city of Pamplona (but neither Córdoba nor Zaragoza). Then Charlemagne, fearful of a rebellion that had broken out among the Saxons at the opposite end of his realms, decided to withdraw across the Pyrenees. The retreat was carried out in good order, but the army's rear guard was set upon by the Christian Basques, who were perhaps incensed at the treatment they had received at the hands of their Frankish fellow-Christians.

The "battle" of Rencesvals (modern Roncevaux) was no battle at all; it was a slaughter, for the lightly accoutered Basques, from the heights of the cliffs, rained down huge rocks upon the heavily armored Franks in the pass beneath. The rear guard was utterly destroyed, and among the fallen Egginhard mentions "Count Roland, Prefect of the Breton March"—an important leader, as indicated by the mention of his name, but apparently not related to the

Emperor. Charlemagne turned back upon hearing of the massacre, but on arriving at the scene found that the Basques, having plundered the baggage-train, had fled into their mountain fastnesses. Nothing was left for him to do but bury the fallen and return to France.

Numerous scholars have advanced the theory that the destruction of Charlemagne's rear guard was almost immediately commemorated in a series of popular, unwritten songs and dirges, which continued to be recited and embellished through the centuries that followed, until Turoldus, three hundred years later, wove them into a single deathless epic, in much the same fashion as Homer is said to have pieced together the *Iliad* out of earlier brief epic fragments dealing with the fall of Troy. This view is borne out by a mention made by the Anglo-Norman poet Wace, in his *Roman de Rou,* of the singing of the *Chanson de Roland* by William the Conqueror's bard, Taillefer, at the beginning of the battle of Hastings in 1066. Since the date most commonly assigned to Turoldus' composition is about 1075, and since his version of the *Roland* is over four thousand lines long, it is hardly likely that it is identical with the one sung at Hastings. It was probably a shorter, pithier piece that supplied inspiration to William's men as they joined battle with Harold's Saxons.

At any rate, Turoldus' version of the Roland story, as it comes down to us in the late eleventh-century Oxford manuscript, relates a tale vastly different from Egginhard's sober account, and it is this picturesque, heroic, historically inaccurate but highly stirring and imaginative recital that I have chosen to follow. In it we find Marsile, Oliver, Turpin, Ganelon, Pinabel, Aude, Thierry of Anjou. In it appears the story of Blancandrin's false mission, of Ganelon's black treachery, of the death of Roland and Oliver, of Charlemagne's victorious entry into Zaragoza, of the feudal council that ended in the terrible punishment of the traitor.

Esclarmonde and Huon come from a later Old French tale, the *Huon de Bordeaux,* in which the hero undertakes the threefold mission of plucking a hair from the Emir's beard, killing the Emir's best knight, and kissing the Emir's daughter, by whom he is later rescued from the Emir's dungeon. But Huon's *gab* is supplied by the fanciful *Pélerinage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem,* while the *Couoronnement de Louis* furnishes the grim episode of the man who tried to rob an orphan heir of his fiefs and was punished for his attempted crime.

Bernaldo del Carpio is an epic figure of Old Spanish literature. After an initial translation of the French epic of Roland, the Spanish popular writers seemingly decided that the hero of the war for the liberation of Spain should be a native, not a foreigner, and evolved in their anonymous ballads the story of Bernaldo, who rebelled against his cruel uncle Alfonso, allied himself with Marsile, and defeated the Franks at Rencesvals, slaying Roland in single combat. The Basques, too, contributed their own version, the *Altabiskarco Cantua,* historically far more accurate than any of the others, but suspected of having been composed in modern times and palmed off as a hoax upon the epic-loving public of the Romantic period.

This leaves Elvira to be accounted for. She is my own creation, and has no counterpart or precedent in the ancient literatures of Spain and France. But Thierry, the champion of Charlemagne, was in my mind deserving of a prize who would in turn be worthy of him and reward his idealistic courage in facing the traitor's champion Pinabel. He is worthy, too, of his own *chanson de geste,* conceived and executed in the medieval fashion, like the ones that celebrated in turn the lives and deeds of Oliver and Turpin, Anseis and Girart of Roussillon, Gascon Engelier and Ogier the Dane. The *chanson* of the brothers from Anjou is merely the latest link in a chain that stretches across the centuries from the days of Turoldus to our

own. To the extent that it reveals the finest spirit and loftiest ideals of the medieval world, its unbounded, even fanatical religious zeal, its unwavering sense of loyalty and devotion to a cause and a set of existing institutions, it is offered as a literary and historical contribution to a period and a genre, in the hope that it may arouse a better understanding of those so-called "Dark Ages", of which a brilliant French literary critic has said that they shed a "dazzling light" upon the course of our western civilization.

—M. P.

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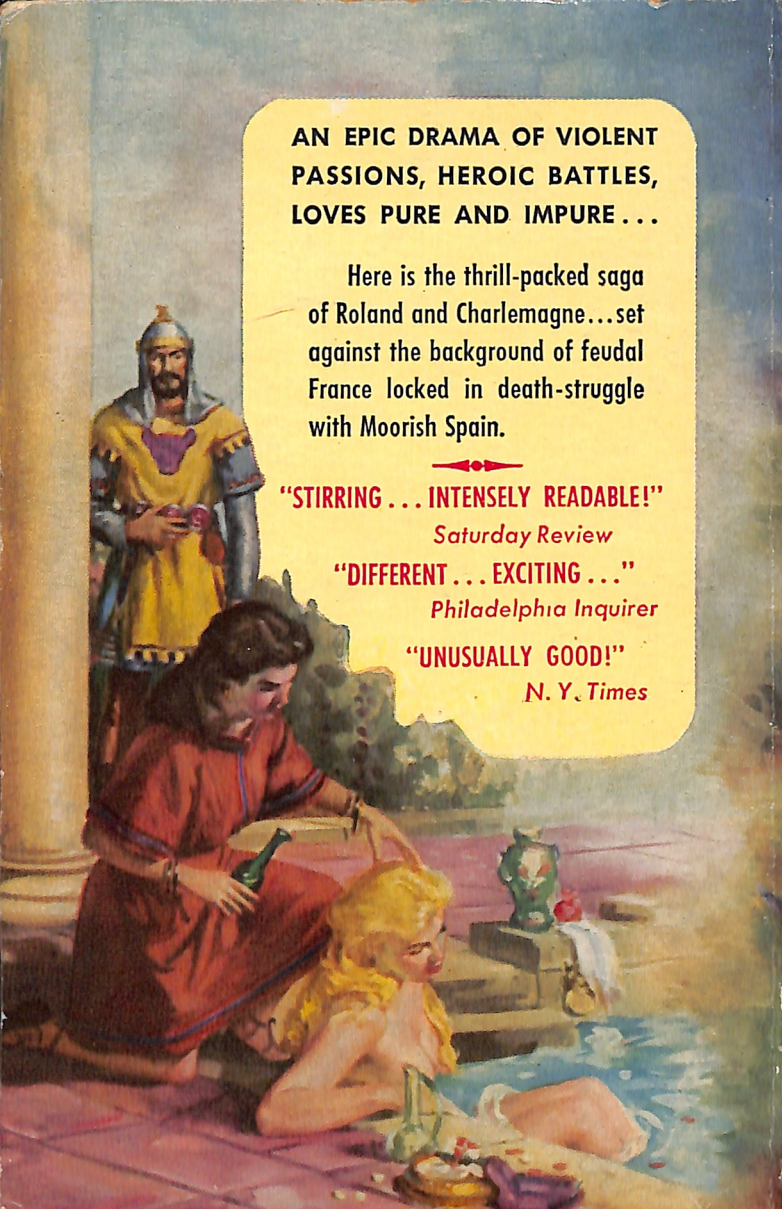

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