An excerpt from

Son of Charlemagne

by Barbara Willard

1: Family Journey, A.D. 781

Dusk was coming down as the head of the long train of men and horses and baggage mules reached the summit of the pass. A strong wind blew up there, whistling across the roof of Europe, whirling the sudden snow into blinding spirals that powdered the thick fur cloaks and hoods of the travelers, lay upon their shoulders, and whitened even their eyelashes. The King's fair beard sparkled where the snowy particles had frozen diamond-hard.

Everyone had dismounted long ago. The horses had to be cajoled along the narrow slippery tracks that were barely tracks at all. Only the mules went blithely; many had had their packs removed because the bulk was too great, and these were being manhandled over this worst section of the mountain journey. There was a great deal of shouting and swearing and praying among the men. But the end of the journey was in sight. Soon they would be dropping down into the plain of Lombardy. The last part of the route would be child's play. By the time the return journey was made flowers would have replaced the snow.

Carl found it difficult to walk, the snow was so deep here at the head of the pass. He would have liked to catch hold of his father's cloak to help himself along, but he was ashamed to appear so babyish. He glanced back over his shoulder, his breath making a thick misty cloud about his head, and saw that his sister Bertha was being carried by Anghilbert; they were laughing and talking together and Bertha's cheeks, whipped by the cold air, shone like apples. Behind them strode the tall Duke Eric, the King's close friend, with Carloman held high against his shoulder. Carl waved to his brother, and young Carloman waved back. There was no sign of Rhotrud, the elder sister. She was probably much farther back, helping their mother with Lewis, the youngest child, who was only three years old. Pepin would be there too; he was the eldest of all, half brother to the rest, but he never managed very well on journeys of this kind.

Just before the summit was reached the King looked back to Carl, who was panting a bit as he plowed along. The tall, striding man paused and held out his hand.

"We'll do better if we give one another a hand, my son," he said, smiling over his frosty beard. "This is enough to tax the strongest of us."

Carl said nothing, but he glanced up gratefully at his father, then clasped his hand in its great fur mitt.

"We shall soon be in shelter," the King said. "Below that great mound of stones the ground drops away and we shall be out of the wind. We will camp there for the night."

Still breathless, young Carl only nodded. He looked toward the pile of stones that reared up out of the snowy twilight, standing harsh and black against the purple sky.

"Look the other way as you pass," his father told Carl. "This is where men once worshiped Jupiter, the pagan god of the ancient Romans. That mound of stones is a place of prayer and sacrifice. One day we will come here in fair weather and scatter the stones and we will raise the Cross in its place."

As they skirted the mighty pile, the King drew Carl within the shelter of his blue cloak, holding its folds against his cheek, as though he would protect his son against an evil which might still linger in that desolate place.

Soon, as the King had promised, they came to shelter. A score of men were there already, knowing the camping ground of old. They were preparing a resting place and they had fires

burning. In the increasing dusk the flames leaped comfortingly against the snow. The cold wind, the threatening stone mound, the sinister crags of the mountain's head were left behind. Gradually the whole party assembled. More and more fires sprang into life and the air hummed with the cheerful sound of men busy about making themselves secure against the night. Soon the smell of roasting meat added to the feeling of rest and relaxation.

Against the convenient shelter of rocks six or seven feet high, a tent of skins had been pitched for the King's wife and children; he himself would sleep outside, rolled in his cloak by the fire, a soldier among soldiers. Carl, who had been dodging about among the men and amusing himself with the idea that he, too, was one of them, went at last to find his mother and his brothers and sisters.

"We thought you were lost," his mother said as he strode in and stamped his feet boldly, scattering the snow, so that Rhotrud shrieked and drew aside her skirts. "Come into the warm, my darling. We shall soon have our supper."

It was snug in the tent, with skins on the snowy floor and a brazier by the door. Bertha stood warming her feet and chattering.

"Anghilbert told me a story as we came up the mountain."

"He was lucky to have breath enough—since he was carrying you!" Carl taunted, and ducked as she kicked off one of the warm slippers she had just pulled on and sent it sailing toward his head.

"About a princess in a tower," Bertha went on, "and how she was rescued by her bold lover. Anghilbert is a wonderful storyteller, Mother."

"We'll ask him for another tale presently," their mother said.

She was busy with the two little boys. She had piled up rugs of fur to make a bed for them. Lewis, the baby, was already asleep. Carloman was protesting against being bundled in beside him, but his mother was firm. On the far side of the tent, the half brother, Pepin, sat and watched the rest. He laughed at Carloman's antics, encouraging him in his disobedience. The child threw off the covers and rushed to Pepin. Rhotrud was after him in a flash. She dragged him back. Her patience was fast going. At last she cried out angrily and slapped Carloman, so that he shouted in fury. Lewis woke and began to cry. Bertha ran to the baby and began to croon over him extravagantly. Carl taunted Carloman for minding what Rhotrud did, and Pepin joined in. Rhotrud, her temper still high, began to cry in her turn.

The din brought the King to the tent.

"Be silent!" he said, standing tall and stern in the opening.

And they were silent, even Lewis, the baby.

"Are these my children?" the King demanded. "Or a pack of wolves?"

Their mother laughed and held out her hand to the King. His sternness left him as he went toward her.

"Hildegarde," he said, shaking his fist at her, "have you no care that your sons and daughters behave like wild animals?"

"You bring them to forage in the snow," she told him, still laughing. "They are certain to grow a little like the creatures who live in these wild places. If you prefer a tame and docile family you must leave us all behind in the palace at Aachen. I daresay we should behave ourselves better there."

"No," he said, his arm firm about her shoulders, "I shall always take my pack with me and accept the consequences. Snapping and snarling are better than separation."

"Be thankful you have a wife who is not too dainty to tramp over the mountains with you, my dear," Hildegarde said. She took his hand and held it for a moment against her cheek.

"I am thankful," he assured her seriously. "I praise God seven times a day for my Hildegarde."

At that moment the servants came in with food and wine. The family gathered round thankfully, for the cold air and the long day's journey had given them sharp appetites. Lewis sank off to sleep again, and the King took Carloman on his lap and fed him the choicest bits of meat. The other children looked a little resentful at this favoritism, but their mother watched with a soft and contented expression. This was one of the moments she most enjoyed, when her husband forgot all the cares of his kingdom and settled down with his growing family as easily as any peasant. Charles, King of the Franks, was a great warrior, a great ruler, a great scholar, a great Christian; but it was by his simplicity that Hildegarde his wife knew him to be a great man.

King Charles of the Franks was on his way to Rome. This was no military expedition, such as he had conducted for many years throughout Europe, where man was at last emerging from the dreadful night of the Dark Ages. When the Roman Empire collapsed, much of Europe slipped back into savagery and paganism. Christianity had seemed almost on the point of extinction. But in the lonely and often threatened monasteries, the monks diligently working kept a little flame of faith and learning burning steadily. Gradually the darkness lifted. And Charles of the Franks was the champion who had arisen to reawaken and restore the Church, and order in civil things, and the precious knowledge of books and the things of the mind. They had called his grandfather Charles the Hammer because of his strength and indomitable power. He it was who had founded the new line of Christian kings of whom the Frankish King Charles was the greatest yet. The greatest man, some said, who had ever ruled an earthly kingdom.

Charles of the Franks, successor and soon superior of his powerful grandfather, had thrust his way about Europe subduing race after savage race, converting them to Christianity and making them his vassals. Yearly his kingdom grew wider and more powerful, stretching from the Pyrenees toward the Baltic shore, reaching out to the Breton frontiers and the Netherlands or Frisia, and over the great Alps into Lombardy. The Saxons, under their leader Witikind, had fought the most fiercely against King Charles. They were not yet subdued, but they were quiet; and Witikind had fled into Scandinavia. So, in a period of apparent peace, the King was on his way to visit the good and noble Pope Hadrian in Rome.

King Charles had more than one reason for this journey. Ostensibly he wished to visit those lands of Lombardy which had come under his rule only a few years previously. He wished to present his sons to the Pope. But most of all he intended the visit to be a preparation for the future—a future whose ultimate aim was so great and grand he had barely dared to put it into thoughts, let alone words.

"Save me, O Lord, from my own arrogance!" was a prayer the King spoke often and often. Then he would add: "But strengthen me in arrogance for Thy sake!"

Although there was still a Roman Emperor, his throne was no longer in Rome but in Constantinople. He was a minor under the control of his mother, the Empress Irene. In his secret heart, Charles dreamed of a new Roman Empire, one based and rooted firmly in the Christian faith, as the old Empire had been founded on paganism. By appearing in Rome now, with his counselors and his warriors and his sons, he meant to lay such foundations as must inevitably work not only for his own good but for the good of Christian Europe. To do so he must make a personal sacrifice which so far he had confided to no one.

The night which had settled over the encampment in the mountains was clear and cold. The wind had dropped and the stars were now so thickly sprinkled it was difficult to see a pin's space between them. Circling the sleeping men were the fires carefully tended by the guards, a protection against wolves and bears, and perhaps some would say against those evil spirits which might still linger on the mountain side. The King looked over his encampment and felt some satisfaction that the journey had gone well so far. He would never allow himself to be beaten by the difficulties of travel at a time when only the roughest routes led over the foothills and the passes of the mighty Alps. Some losses were inevitable. Three horses had plunged over a precipice on the fourth day; two days after that a suddenly displaced boulder had caused the death of two men. Otherwise everything had been smooth enough, a compliment to the organization of a hardened campaigner who could rely utterly on his followers.

The King smiled as he thought of those followers, soldiers and servants, friends and statesmen and scholars, who went with him unquestioning, that his administration might be maintained even though he were away from home for months. And with them went Queen Hildegarde, cheerful and loving and unflurried by hardship, caring as splendidly for the children as if she were safe in some city palace.

The thought of his wife led the King to consider his sons. He began to pace quietly in the snow, trying to assure himself that what he was about to do was the right thing, praying that he might not be making a mistake in so laying his plans that this happy family must be broken and scattered. How would he soothe the grief of Hildegarde when she knew his intention? Would she ever forgive him for thinking so much of the future that he was prepared to sacrifice the contentment of the present?

Drawing his cloak tighter about him, the King sighed. He moved toward the tent where his family lay sleeping. For a moment he felt he must enter and awaken his wife, and so end his loneliness. But he hesitated to burden her before he needed to. So he passed on, with his problem and his decision still heavy about him.

The sound of the King's footsteps in the crunching snow roused Carl. He, too, rolled himself tighter in his cloak. Wanting to emulate his father in all things, he had scorned the soft bed of furs and settled himself down by the fire. But the ground felt cold and hard and it was difficult to sleep deeply.

Carl pulled back a corner of the tent flap very gently and saw his father's tall figure pass, sharp against the starry sky. The boy rose, shivered a little as the cold air struck him, and stepped outside.

The guard standing a pace or two away turned his head at once. He grinned when he saw Carl, but barred his way none the less.

"You will have me in trouble, young sir. Where are you going at this hour?"

"Let me pass, Wolfred," Carl said, pushing aside the spear. "I cannot sleep. I am going to my father."

"Then tell the King I would have stopped you if I could."

"I'll tell him," Carl promised.

When Carl reached his father, the King had paused by a fireside. He was holding his hands out to the glow, and the guard had retired a few paces that his master might be alone.

"I can't sleep either," Carl said, rubbing his hands in his turn.

"Stay with me a little then. What keeps you awake? You have no worries, at your age."

"Are you worried, Father?" Carl asked, surprised, for he could not imagine that his father ever had doubts of anything at all. "Is it because of the difficult journey? Will it be worse tomorrow?"

The King shook his head. He took Carl's hand and held it firmly. "When we come to Rome you will know that I am naming you my heir. One day you will rule over all my lands. I want you to remember that I trust you to continue the work I have begun."

Carl frowned. "But, Father. . ."

"I know what you are going to say. You are not the eldest. There is Pepin. Pepin, whose mother was my first wife. Pepin, whose name—" He broke off and sighed deeply. "What is it the men call the King's eldest son, Carl?"

"They call him Gobbo. We all do, Father!"

"You do not know what it means?"

Carl hesitated. He knew but did not want to admit the fact. He knew too there was a certain amount of contempt for his half brother among the court and army. And he was a difficult boy. Hildegarde always took pains to treat him gently as if he were her own, but he remained aloof. He was the most handsome of the whole handsome family, save for one thing.

"Gobbo means hunchback," the King said. His voice was bitter. "The men picked the word up in Italy, when we fought the Lombards the year you were born. When I heard my son called Gobbo I knew he must not succeed me. No King must be mocked. Besides—"

He paused, and Carl peered into his face, waiting.

"Besides—what, Father?"

"Remember this, Carl—it is a warning. I fear that Gobbo is not entirely to be trusted."

As his father spoke, Carl remembered that Gobbo was indeed inclined to spiteful tricks. He knew, though, that this was because he was often left out and thrust aside. Carl realized that if Gobbo had to fight back to make up for his misfortune, it was because of the unkindness of those who should, rather, have helped him. He flushed in the dark to realize that he himself had often enough pushed the elder boy out of the way, and taken advantage of running faster, fighting harder, never feeling tired or sickly.

Carl had heard the King called stern and implacable, but no man had ever questioned his wisdom. Now his face in the starlight was so full of pain that Carl could hardly bear to look at it. Vaguely he knew that what his father intended doing would always seem cruel, and that the King himself knew this but would act according to his own honest certainty of what was right for the future of his kingdom and thus for Europe and all Christendom.

"You are young," his father said, as though he read the boy's thoughts. "But you must try with all your might to understand. He is my son and will always be dear to me, as all my children are. But I have made my decision and I will abide by it. You are my heir."

"Does he know?" Carl asked.

"No. You will not speak of it to him or to anyone. Get back to sleep now. I will see the guards changed and then I shall sleep, too. God be with you, child."

"And with you, Father."

Carl went back through the snow to the tent and crept inside. The brazier was glowing and in its light he saw his brother Gobbo leaning on one elbow. The rosy light painted his shadow hugely on the wall of the tent.

"I saw you with him out there," Gobbo said, in a sharp low voice. "You sneak after him, trying to win favors."

"Leave me alone, Gobbo," Carl replied. He used the nickname without thinking. Immediately the word was out he bit his lip and flushed. "Can’t you sleep?" he asked gently, anxious to make up in some way for his half brother’s misfortune.

"I am too tired, Carl. It was heavy going over the pass." He shivered. "I keep thinking how those men were killed—and the horses.. ."

Carl drew near and slipped in under the skins beside the elder boy, wanting to comfort him, drawing the furs up until they tickled his chin.

"If we huddle together we’ll soon be warm. We’ll soon sleep. It’s so starry outside it’s like day. Wolfred was on guard, but now they’re changing. Wolfrith, his twin brother, will take his place. Do you wish," Carl asked, "that we were twins?"

"Should I be like you—or you like me?"

There seemed no easy reply to that. Carl closed his eyes and settled down. Much later he awoke once more. The brazier had been tended by the guard. Its glow showed Carl the sleeping heaps that were his mother and his sisters and brothers. It showed him, too, the unsleeping Gobbo, his eyes wide open and brimful of tears; he was biting his knuckles as though his sorrow and loneliness were too much for him to bear.