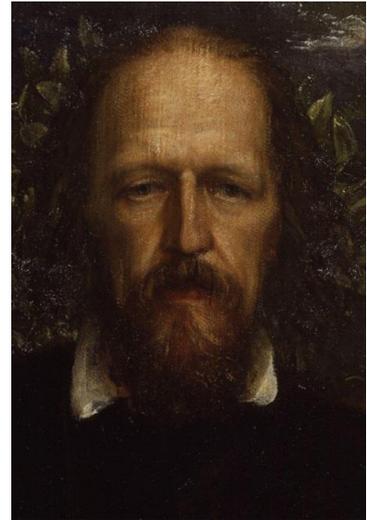


Today's poem comes from the most famous Victorian poet, ALFRED TENNYSON (pronounced 'Tennis - on'). The poem is 'THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE'. It is about one of the greatest disasters in British military history.

The disaster happened in 1854, during the CRIMEAN (pronounced 'Crime - ee - un') WAR between the French and British on one side, and the Russians on the other - one of the endless wars in far-off places that Britain tended to get itself involved in during QUEEN VICTORIA'S reign, as the British Empire got bigger and more powerful. The disaster resulted from a light cavalry force (which means soldiers riding on horses without carrying too much equipment) called the 'Light Brigade' being ordered to charge down a mile-long valley towards some Russian forces which were well-equipped with



loads of cannons (big powerful guns that would fire cannon balls). The result was pretty obvious: as soon as the Light Brigade started moving down the valley, the Russians opened fire on them. About 670 soldiers took part in the charge. By the time they got to the Russian position, 110 soldiers had been killed, and about 160 had been wounded. So as soon as the surviving soldiers got to the Russian position, they were outnumbered, and had to pretty clear turn back and retreat back up the valley as quickly as they could. A French general watching the charge said '*C'est magnifique mais ce n'est pas la guerre*' - 'It is magnificent, but it is not war'.



So how did such a suicidally stupid order come to be issued? A lot of people wanted to know the answer to that question once the news of the disaster got back to Britain. But as usual, the people who were to blame refused to accept that they were to blame. The leader of the British Army in Crimea was LORD RAGLAN, and he issued the order to the British cavalry 'Advance to the front and prevent the enemy taking away its guns'. The order was carried from Raglan to the general in charge of the British cavalry, the EARL OF LUCAN (pronounced 'Loo - kan') by a soldier called LOUIS NOLAN. Lucan asked Nolan 'What

enemy? What guns?' Nolan waved in the direction of the valley and said, 'There is your enemy. There are your guns.'

In fact, Raglan meant for Lucan's cavalry forces to go in a completely different direction, towards another Russian force which he could see was packing up its guns and getting ready to move away. Lucan then summoned the general in charge of the light brigade, the EARL OF CARDIGAN, and said to him, 'We have our orders. Assemble your men and charge that Russian position.' Cardigan thought the order was insane but didn't question it, but instead set the light brigade up to charge down the valley, with him (very bravely under the circumstances) leading the charge. Nolan joined the brigade as he wanted to be part of the charge. When the light brigade started moving, Nolan suddenly broke out of the brigade and rode across the front of it - and was instantly hit and killed by a Russian shell. Cardigan thought that Nolan was trying to lead the charge, and take the glory of doing that away from Cardigan. But it might be that Nolan had realised that a mistake had been made and the light brigade was going in completely the wrong direction. But the Russian shell prevented him from saying this, and the charge continued.

Here is a clip from a very good film about the charge of the Light Brigade which shows you exactly what happened:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h4e8llcfQQ>

When the news got back to Britain of the disaster, Alfred Tennyson read about the charge in The Times newspaper and apparently wrote the following poem in only a few minutes:

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

I

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.
"Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said.
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

II

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldiers knew
 Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die,
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

III

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
 Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
 Rode the six hundred.

IV

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
 All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke
 Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not
 Not the six hundred.

V

Cannon to the right of them,
Cannon to the left of them,
Cannon behind them
 Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell.
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
 Left of the six hundred.

VI

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
 All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
 Noble six hundred!

To be honest, the poem runs out of steam halfway through - but the first three verses are really, really memorable and to be able to come up with just those three verses in a few minutes shows what an amazing poet Tennyson was.