

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

This poem is based on an event from the Battle of Balaklava fought on October 25, 1854, during the **Crimean War** (1853-1856) between Russia and England.

During the **Battle of Balaklava**, the Russians occupied the heights surrounding a valley near Balaklava, a port city on the Black Sea. Lord Fitzroy Raglan, a British general, was stationed on a nearby hill, which afforded him a panoramic view of the entire area. He saw a group of Russian soldiers removing guns from an artillery post on an adjoining hill, and issued orders to Lord James Cardigan, commander of the **Light Brigade**, to charge “the guns” being taken by the Russian forces. Lord Cardigan did not understand the orders, as the only guns he could see were those down in the valley, surrounded by enemy troops. He questioned the orders, but when Lord Raglan – not comprehending the reason for the query – repeated them, without clarifying which guns he meant, Cardigan blindly obeyed what he understood as a charge down into the valley, gallantly leading a maneuver that was clearly suicidal. The British officers stationed on top of the hilltop could only look on in horror, helpless to halt the charge down into the “**valley of death.**” The unquestioning obedience and bravery of the troops impressed the British people, and popular opinion at the time undoubtedly led Tennyson to write as he did.

Key words and phrases within the poem

League – unit of distance, about 3 1/2 miles

Brigade – a group of soldiers, comprised of two or more regiments. It was a light brigade, consisting of **cavalry** (men on horseback), not armed with heavy artillery such as cannons

charge for the guns – aim the attack at the enemy’s big guns

volleyed – burst forth

shot and shell – the discharge of guns and cannons

sabers – swords with a curved blade

sab’ring – making use of the saber

battery – two or more big guns that operate as one unit

line – the position of soldiers facing the enemy

Cossack – men from Southern Russia, organized for combat in the Czarist army

reeled – fell back, staggered

sundered – broke apart



1.

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.

2.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blunder'd:
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.

3.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

4.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

5.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

6.

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

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