

The Deaf Elder: My colleague says that the Emperor has promised succor within fifteen days. For myself, I would add that we can live for a month.

The Palsied Elder: Then there is hope?

The Blind Elder: There is hope while we can hold the river-gate.

The Most Reverend Elder: Surely, the river-gate is not in danger?

The Most Venerable Elder: It is the most strongly fortified of all our positions. The men who guard it are veterans of the ancient war. The captain of the gate is wily and valiant and trusty. Twelve times already he has repulsed the Gnogues with fearful slaughter.

The Most Reverend Elder: Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!

The Young Plump Elder: I visited the post last night. I found the captain steadfast on his spear, grim, fierce, and vigilant.

The Blind Elder: Besides, the gate is safe against surprise. So strong runs the river that no naked man could swim across, much less a man in armor. There is no landing place; our walls run sheer and smooth into the tide. There is no cover on the other bank; and our towers command it with easy archery. There is only the frail single span of the bridge, so narrow that two men cannot pass, so slight that a single blow with an axe would send it crashing into the tide.

(The Dumb Elder gesticulates.)

The Deaf Elder: My colleague says that if we only had food we could endure for ever.

The Most Reverend Elder *(piously)*: His mercy endureth for ever. Did He not rain food from heaven upon our forefathers in the days of the great migration?

The Fool: Let us read fifteen or twenty cantos of the great epic of Glingue, the sacred bard! *(No one notices him.)*

The Blind Elder: We must hold out. There is no alternative. We know the character of the foe. If we are conquered, he will put every living thing to the sword; he will burn every building with fire; he will efface the City of Blabre from the memory of man.

The Palsied Elder: The Gnogues are cruel and remorseless; they spare no soul alive, save for an hour's delight in rape or torture; they eat human flesh.

The Most Reverend Elder: The Lord is mighty and merciful, compassionate towards His servants, strong to save. *(The Most Reverend Elder is really as frightened as the rest, or more so; he says the brave words in a toneless, mechanical way, from habit even more than from the wish to keep up his religious character.)*

The Prophet: Woe unto Blabre! Woe to the wicked city! *(No one notices him.)*

The Most Venerable Elder: I think that we should proclaim a message of confidence to the citizens.

The Young Plump Elder: At the worst, it is only one more lie.

The Blind Elder: Does any one dissent? *(Silence.)*

The Most Venerable Elder: Let the Herald speak to the citizens!

The Herald *(bows to the Most Venerable Elder, turns to his window, blows a rousing blast upon his trumpet, and proclaims)*: Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! Rejoice, we conquer! The Fa-

thers of the City are still sitting in earnest deliberation for your welfare; but in order to calm your anxiety, they bid it be made known that the city is in no danger. It has victoriously repulsed every assault of the enemy; it is provisioned for a ten years' siege; the Emperor has promised that an army of four million veteran troops shall arrive to our succour not later than to-morrow at sunset; the enemy is reported to be utterly disheartened at the failure of his campaign; his men, ill-fed, ill-led, ill-disciplined, are already in open mutiny; civil strife is on the point of breaking out in their capital; their king is reported slain by his men. *(Cheers from without punctuate every sentence. The Herald turns to the Most Venerable Elder, and addresses him.)* Is that sufficient? My invention flags.

The Most Venerable Elder: It will serve. Perorate.

The Herald *(turns, after the usual bow, to window)*: Joy! Triumph! Victory! Blabre has overthrown her savage foes. Once more has civilization repulsed the heathen hordes. Rejoice, we conquer!

(Cheers without. Within, the elders are still sunk in the same awful, hopeless apathy as at first.)

The Blind Elder: We lost eleven hundred of our best troops in yesterday's sally.

The Palsied Elder: That is nearly one-fifth of our whole army.

The Deaf Elder: I do not understand how the Gnogues resist our valor. Their armor is rude and inferior; their weapons are but the unwieldy pike and the short scramasax; while we have lance, sword, bow, and arquebus, with the new cannon.

The Palsied Elder: Their hosts are innumerable, and their valour desperate.

(The Dumb Elder gesticulates.)

The Deaf Elder: My colleague calls it treason to the city to say so.

The Palsied Elder: It is true, nevertheless.

(All bow their heads sorrowfully.)

The Young Plump Elder: It is doubtful whether they are men or beasts. They are of hue blotchy, greenish-black, with the head like an ape's.

The Deaf Elder: Their king is a devil, whom they worship.

The Most Venerable Elder: No man has seen him.

The Young Plump Elder: Do not speak of him. Even his own men dare not speak of him. It is a hidden horror. It is forbidden.

(The Dumb Elder gesticulates.)

The Deaf Elder: My colleague says that he is known for no coward. You all know his exploits in the Sixteen Years' War. But he begs of you all not to speak of this.

The Most Reverend Elder: I agree. It is evil even to think of him. It is almost to invoke. Such things stifle the soul with fear.

The Most Venerable Elder: Is there ever a moment when we do not think of him? Is not he the unknown Terror that abides in our hearts, the waking nightmare that obsesses us?

The Blind Elder: It is reported that he is a dragon of their marshes.

The Palsied Elder: Others say that he is but a black stone, carven like a Satan. Their wizards have conjured it to the