

The Herald (*turns and bows as usual, returns to windows, and blows a blast on his trumpet*): Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! Rejoice, we conquer! Citizens of Blabre, even now a messenger asks for admission to the Council. He comes to sue humbly for peace. The Gnogues sue for peace. The King of the Gnogues is here in person with dust upon his head. He has kissed the feet of the Most Venerable, the Father of the City! Rejoice, we conquer! (*Blast on trumpet. Cheers, and a swelling murmur of satisfaction, have accompanied each phrase. He turns from the window, and bows to the Most Venerable Elder.*) Is that enough?

The Most Venerable Elder: It is enough. (*To the Sentinel.*) Admit him.

(*The Sentinel goes out.*) Let us ask at least our lives.

(*The Herald of the Gnogues enters. He is a short, thick-set, sturdy man in black chain armor. He bears on a staff the dreaded banner of the Gnogues.*)

The Herald of the Gnogues: Greetings of a soldier to brave enemies! I bear the most merciful message of my most mighty king. Your army is reduced by half; your citizens starve; you must submit to terms.

The Most Venerable Elder: Succor is promised us from the Emperor.

The Herald of the Gnogues: Where is his promise?

The Most Venerable Elder (*lifting a parchment*): This reached us fifteen days ago.

The Herald of the Gnogues: Where is his message of yesterday?

The Most Venerable Elder: We have received no message.

The Herald of the Gnogues (*pulling from his shirt a bloody parchment*): Here is his message of yesterday. (*He hands the parchment to the Fool.*)

The Fool: Ten to one this is a forgery. It is a regular Gnogue trick. (*He hands it to the Most Venerable Elder.*)

The Most Venerable Elder (*reading*): "The internal troubles of our empire prevent us from sending the aid promised you. May God defend you in your extremity."

The Prophet (*rapt as in ecstasy*): The extremity of Blabre! (*All, sunk yet deeper in apathy, heed him not. A pause. The Fool examines the message with attention.*)

The Fool: I am sure this document is a forgery. Previous letters have been written by a clerk. This is his Majesty's own holograph. It is much too genuine. (*A pause.*) If this paper be genuine, it must have been written from the capital. That is ten day's journey off. The ink on this document has been wet within the last four-and-twenty hours.

(*The Dumb Elder gesticulates.*)

The Deaf Elder: My colleague says that it is infamous to suggest that his Majesty would lend himself to forgery.

The Young Plump Elder: Let me see the document. (*A pause.*) There is something in what the Fool says. (*The paper is passed round.*)

The Most Reverend Elder: This was never written by the hand of one of our race. It is a clever imitation of the hand of the Emperor. Also, the strokes are not even enough. Also, the words "our" and "us" are spelled with small letters. It is not genuine, in my opinion.

The Deaf Elder (*examining the paper with his dumb colleague, and holding a rapid interchange of signs with him*):

My colleague and I agree that this is a forged document. The parchment is not of the quality used by our people.

The Most Venerable Elder: It is our fears that tells us it is genuine.

The Blind Elder: I am absolutely convinced of the authenticity of the document. It bears the strongest possible internal evidence of its truth. There is no doubt possible.

The Most Venerable Elder: There is no doubt possible. (*All relax once more their momentary alertness. They sink visibly into the very abyss of dejection. A pause.*)

The Herald of the Gnogues: You must submit to terms. The most mighty King of the Gnogues offers you of his clemency the right to withdraw with all the honors of war. Recognizing a gallant foe, he will not embitter defeat by humiliation. You shall leave the city with all your arms and ammunition, and with all such goods as you can carry with you. But, if you refuse these terms, then expect the direful judgments. 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. I have spoken.

The Most Venerable Elder: Does it comport with the terms of your command that you retire a while, that we may deliberate?

The Herald of the Gnogues: I shall await your pleasure. (*He goes out.*)

The Young Plump Elder (*leaping to his feet*): Who could have hoped such terms? We are saved!

The Blind Elder: Shall we believe it? May we trust him?

The Deaf Elder: We must trust him. (*The Dumb Elder gesticulates.*) My colleague says that it is madness to trust him.

The Fool: Why do we not ask an oracle of the Prophet?

The Prophet: Why do we not ask an oracle of the Fool?

The Most Reverend Elder: He is not in his sacred trance. Let us rather look for guidance to antiquity!

(*He grasps a parchment; others follow his example. A pause, while they search. The Dumb Elder gesticulates.*)

The Deaf Elder: My colleague says that he remembers dimly a passage in the third book of our sacred bard, Glingue, which may help our case.

The Most Reverend Elder: I knew it. It was that of which I was thinking. (*He turns over the parchments.*) Here it is!

The Blind Elder: Read it! Read it!

The Most Reverend Elder:
"In the extremity of Fate
The full moon shone, our master's mate.
In silver armor rode the duke
Against the heathen."

The Prophet: It is full moon to-night.

The Fool: What fumbling amid dusty folios!

The Blind Elder: No: that is not the prophecy. I remember it now. It is this:

"Look to the moon for safety! Dragon helm
Of rubies, and cuirass of silver, whelm
The tide of heathen hate. The sword and axe
Beat down the blows of pike and scramasax!"

The Deaf Elder: That is a proper prophecy! That is the true strain of our sacred Glingue!

The Fool: Only where is the duke? Where is the hero with these famous arms and accoutrements? The only part of the