

177 Death's Messengers

In ancient times a giant was once travelling on a great highway, when suddenly an unknown man sprang up before him, and said, "Halt, not one step farther!" "What!" cried the giant, "a creature whom I can crush between my fingers, wants to block my way? Who art thou that thou darest to speak so boldly?" "I am Death," answered the other. "No one resists me, and thou also must obey my commands." But the giant refused, and began to struggle with Death. It was a long, violent battle, at last the giant got the upper hand, and struck Death down with his fist, so that he dropped by a stone. The giant went his way, and Death lay there conquered, and so weak that he could not get up again. "What will be done now," said he, "if I stay lying here in a corner? No one will die in the world, and it will get so full of people that they won't have room to stand beside each other." In the meantime a young man came along the road, who was strong and healthy, singing a song, and glancing around on every side. When he saw the half-fainting one, he went compassionately to him, raised him up, poured a strengthening draught out of his flask for him, and waited till he came round. "Dost thou know," said the stranger, whilst he was getting up, "who I am, and who it is whom thou hast helped on his legs again?" "No," answered the youth, "I do not know thee." "I am Death," said he. "I spare no one, and can make no exception with thee, but that thou mayst see that I am grateful, I promise thee that I will not fall on thee unexpectedly, but will send my messengers to thee before I come and take thee away." "Well," said the youth, "it is something gained that I shall know when thou comest, and at any rate be safe from thee for so long." Then he went on his way, and was light-hearted, and

enjoyed himself, and lived without thought. But youth and health did not last long, soon came sicknesses and sorrows, which tormented him by day, and took away his rest by night. "Die, I shall not," said he to himself, "for Death will send his messengers before that, but I do wish these wretched days of sickness were over." As soon as he felt himself well again he began once more to live merrily. Then one day some one tapped him on the shoulder. He looked round, and Death stood behind him, and said, "Follow me, the hour of thy departure from this world has come." "What," replied the man, "wilt thou break thy word? Didst thou not promise me that thou wouldst send thy messengers to me before coming thyself? I have seen none!" "Silence!" answered Death. "Have I not sent one messenger to thee after another? Did not fever come and smite thee, and shake thee, and cast thee down? Has dizziness not bewildered thy head? Has not gout twitched thee in all thy limbs? Did not thine ears sing? Did not tooth-ache bite into thy cheeks? Was it not dark before thine eyes? And besides all that, has not my own brother Sleep reminded thee every night of me? Didst thou not lie by night as if thou wert already dead? The man could make no answer; he yielded to his fate, and went away with Death.