Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Death And The Three Revellers

F. J. H. Darton

There was once in Flanders a company of young men who spent much time in drinking and rioting among the taverns, wasting their lives in gambling and dancing day and night.

Early one morning a certain three of these revellers were sitting in a tavern drinking, and making a great noise with their horrible talk. As they jested idly with one another they heard a bell tolling outside for a dead man who was about to be buried.

"Run quickly," one of them called to his servant-boy, "and ask the name of the man whose body is being carried out to burial. Take care to tell it us aright."

"I need not go, sirs," answered the boy. "I heard two hours before you came here that this man who is now dead was an old comrade of yours, slain last night as he lay in a drunken sleep. There came to him a stealthy old thief named Death, who kills many folk in this country; he pierced your comrade's heart with a spear, and went his way without a word. He has slain a thousand or more in the pestilence here. I think it would be well for you; my masters, to beware of coming into the presence of such a foe, and to be ready to meet him."

"Yes," said the keeper of the tavern, "the boy speaks truly. Death has this year slain men, women, and children, pages and peasants, throughout the whole of a great village a mile from here. I think he dwells in that place. It would be wise to be prepared before he does one any evil."

"Is it so great a danger to meet him, then?" cried one of the revellers with an oath. "I will go myself, and seek him high and low in the streets and lanes. Listen, comrades: there are three of us; let us join together and slay this false traitor Death. We will swear to be true to one another, and before night-time we will slay him who kills so many others."

The other two agreed, and the three swore to be to one another as brothers. Up they started, and went forth towards the village where Death was said by the innkeeper to live.

"Death shall die," they cried, with many a boastful oath, "if we once lay hold of him!"

They had not gone half a mile on their way when they met an old, poor-looking

man, who greeted them meekly and bade them God-speed.

"Who are you, you ragged old beggar?" cried the proudest of the rioters to him. "Why are you so well wrapped up, except for your face? Why is an old man like you allowed to live so long?"

The old man looked him in the face, and said: "I must needs keep my old age myself. I can find no man anywhere—no, not even if I walked to India—who would exchange his youth for my age. Death himself refuses to take my life; so I walk restlessly up and down the world, old and weary, tapping the ground with my staff early and late, and begging Mother Earth to take me to her again. 'Look how I am slowly vanishing,' I cry to her; 'I feel myself wasting, flesh and skin and blood and all. Receive me into the dust again, Mother Earth, for my bones are tired.' But the earth will not hear my prayer yet, and I must wander on. I beseech you, therefore, do not harm an old man, good sirs, and may the blessing of Heaven be upon you!"

"Nay, old churl," said one of the revellers, "you shall not get off so lightly. You spoke just now of the traitor Death, who slays all our friends in this district. Tell us where he is to be seen, or you shall rue it. I believe that you must be one of his friends yourself, and anxious to slay us young folk, since you talk so lovingly of him."

"Sirs," answered the old man, "if you are so eager to find Death, turn up this crooked path. In that grove yonder, upon my faith, I left him, under a tree. There he will await you. He will not hide himself from you for all your boasts. Do you see the oak? You shall find Death there. God save you and make you better men!"

Thus spoke the old stranger. They paid no more heed to him, but ran off straightway to search for Death by the oak tree. There they found, not Death himself, but a great heap of fine golden florins piled up, well-nigh eight bushels of them. No longer had they any thought about Death, but were so glad at the sight of the fair bright florins that they sat down there by the precious heap to think what should be done.

The worst of the three was the first to speak. "Listen to me, brethren. I am no fool, for all that I spend my life in folly. Fortune has given us this great treasure, so that we can live the rest of our lives in mirth and jollity. It has come to us easily, and easily we will spend it. But there is one thing which we must do to make our happiness sure: we must get the gold away from this place to my house, or else to one of yours—for, of course, the treasure is ours. But we cannot do this by day; men would say that we were thieves, and we should be hanged for stealing our own treasure. It must be done by night, as secretly and carefully as we can, and we must wait here all day. Let us therefore draw lots to see

which of us shall go to the town and bring food and drink hither as quickly as he can for the other two. The others must stay by the treasure, for we cannot leave it unguarded. Then, when night comes, we will carry it all away safely."

They agreed to this, and drew lots. The lot fell on the youngest of them, who left them at once and went towards the town.

As soon as he was gone, one of those who remained with the gold said to the other: "You know that we have sworn to be true to one another like brothers. Hear, then, how can we win profit for ourselves: our comrade is gone, and has left us here with this gold, of which there is great plenty. We are to divide it among the three of us, by our agreement. But if I can contrive that we divide it between us two alone, will not that be doing you a friendly turn?"



"How can it be?" asked the other. "He knows that the gold is with us; what could we say to him?"

"Will you keep a secret?" said his comrade. "If so, I will tell you in a few words what we must do."

"Yes," answered the other; "trust me not to betray you."

"Look you, then, there are two of us, and two are stronger than one. When he comes back and sits down, do you rise and go to him as if for a friendly wrestling bout. I will stab him in the side as you struggle in play; see that you also do the like with your dagger. Thus shall the treasure be divided between us two, dear friend, and we shall live in ease and plenty for the rest of our lives."

The two rogues agreed on this plan for getting rid of their comrade; but he, as he went on his way to the town, could not take his mind away from the bright golden florins.

"If only I could have this treasure all for myself," he thought, "no man on earth would live so merrily as I." And at last the idea of poisoning his comrades came into his head.

When he reached the town, he went without hesitating any more to an apothecary, and asked him to sell him some poison to kill the rats in his house; and there was a polecat also, he said, which ate his chickens.

"You shall have a poison," answered the apothecary, "the like of which is not to be found on earth. It is so strong that if a man does but taste a little piece of it, the size of a grain of wheat, he shall die at once; before you can walk a mile he will be dead, so strong and violent is this poison."

The man took the poison in a box and went into the next street. There he borrowed three large bottles, and into two he put the poison; the third he kept clean for his own drink, thinking that he would be working hard that night, carrying the gold all by himself to his own house. Then he filled all the bottles up with wine, and went back to his comrades.

Why should a long tale be made of it? When he came back the other two set upon him, and killed him as they had planned.

"Now let us eat and drink," said one to the other. "When we have made merry we will bury him."

With that word, he took one of the bottles; it happened to be one of those containing the poisoned wine. He drank, and gave it to his fellow; and in a little while they both fell dead beside the body of their comrade.

Thus the three revellers met Death, whom they set out to kill.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.
Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom