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The Messengers

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There lived once upon a time in the island of Terceira a youth whose name was Vladmiro. He had come from Flanders, a cavalier of the order of St. John. He was betrothed to a fair maid of the island.

One morning he was hunting in the forest of cedars when he suddenly saw Death standing before him. He fell upon his knees and sent up a fervent prayer to the Holy Virgin.

Then he said to Death: "O Death, why is it that you have come in search of me so soon? I am young, rich, happy. I am betrothed to a maid who loves me. Life looks very bright and fair."

Death stepped back a pace.

"Your prayer to the Holy Mother has saved you," he said. "I had indeed come in search of you. You were about to die from an accident with your hunting arms. See, I have already retreated a pace. I have decided not to take you with me this time."

Vladmiro returned a prayer of thanksgiving. Then he said:

"O Death, I am going to make a request of you. Please do not come up to me so suddenly again. It gives me a fright. Next time you come for me will you please be so kind as to send messengers in advance to give me a little warning?"

"Yes, young cavalier," responded Death. "I will gladly do what you ask. I give you my promise that next time I will send my messengers ahead of me to warn you that I am approaching."

With these words Death withdrew and went on alone through the forest of cedars.

The spring of that very year the young cavalier married the fair maid who loved him. Life was full of joy. Many children were born to the worthy couple. Riches and honors came, too. The years sped by as if they flew on wings.

At last a half century had passed. Vladmiro held his grandchildren upon his knees and told them the story of the day he met Death in the forest of cedars.

"We are glad that Death passed on and left you," said the children.

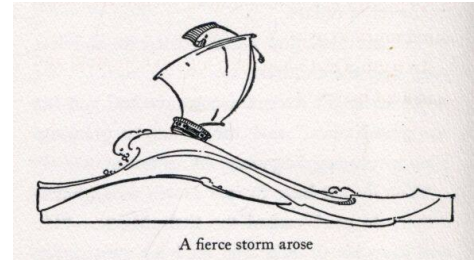
"If he hadn't we could not have had you for our grandfather," said the namesake grandson Vladmiro, snuggling closer in his arms.

"You do not have to fear Death now, grandfather, do you?" asked the little Maria. "He will keep his promise and send his messengers, don't you think so?"

"Yes, Death is a good Christian and will keep his word," replied the aged cavalier.

The next morning he set sail for the island of Fayal where there were other grandchildren to visit in the home of his married daughter, Francisca.

On the voyage a fierce storm arose. The small boat was buffeted about by the gales. Suddenly Vladmiro was startled to see Death standing beside him just as in the forest years ago when he had been young.



"Why have you come to-day?" he cried in alarm. "Why is it that you have not kept your word? You gave me your promise that you would send your messengers, next time you came, to warn me of your approach."

"I have kept my word," said Death. "I have sent my messengers."

"Where are they?" asked the old man in amazement.

Death pointed to Vladmiro's snowy hair.

"I have sent my messengers in your white locks, your failing eyesight and hearing, the wrinkles on your cheeks. Can it be that you have failed to recognize them?"

Vladmiro bowed his head in silence and without a murmur went with Death.

In truth, Death had been a good Christian and had kept his word.

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