Godfather Death

A poor man had twelve children and had to work day and night just to give them bread. When the thirteenth came into the world, he did not know how to help himself in his distress, ran out onto the great highway, and wanted to ask the first person he met to be godfather. The first one he met was the dear Lord, who already knew what was on his heart, and said to him, "Poor man, you move me to pity. I will stand sponsor for your child, will care for it and make it happy on earth." The man said, "Who are you?" "I am the dear Lord." "Then I do not want you for a godfather," said the man, "you give to the rich and let the poor starve." The man said this because he did not know how wisely God distributes wealth and poverty. So he turned away from the Lord and went on. Then the Devil came up to him and said, "What are you looking for? If you want me to be your child's godfather, I will give it gold in abundance and all the pleasures of the world besides." The man asked, "Who are you?" "I am the Devil." "Then I do not want you for a godfather," said the man, "you deceive and seduce people." He went on, then Death came striding up to him on his fleshless legs and said, "Take me for a godfather." The man asked, "Who are you?" "I am Death, who makes all men equal." Then the man said, "You are the right one, you fetch the rich as well as the poor without distinction, you shall be my sponsor." Death answered, "I will make your child rich and famous, for whoever has me for a friend cannot fail." The man said, "Next Sunday is the christening, then present yourself at the right time." Death appeared as he had promised, and stood godfather quite properly.

When the boy had come of age, his godfather came to him one day and told him to come along. He led him out into the forest, showed him an herb that grew there, and said, "Now you shall receive your christening gift. I will make you a famous physician. Whenever you are called to a sick person, I will appear to you every time: if I stand at the head of the sick person, you can boldly say that you mean to make him well again, and if you then give him some of that herb, he will recover; but if I stand at the feet of the sick person, he is mine, and you must say that all help is in vain and no physician in the world can save him. But beware that you do not use the herb against my will, or it may go badly for you."

It was not long before the youth was the most famous physician in the whole world. "He has only to look at the sick person and he already knows how things stand, whether he will recover or whether he must die," so it was said of him, and far and wide people came, fetched him to the sick, and gave him so much gold that he soon became a rich man. Now it happened that the king fell ill: the physician was

summoned and was to say whether recovery was possible. But when he stepped up to the bed, Death stood at the feet of the sick man, and there no herb would grow for him any more. "If only I could outwit Death for once," thought the physician, "he will certainly take it ill, but since I am his godson, he will probably turn a blind eye: I will risk it." So he took hold of the sick man and laid him the other way round, so that Death came to be standing at his head. Then he gave him some of the herb, and the king recovered and became well again. But Death came to the physician, made an evil and dark face, threatened him with his finger, and said, "You have led me astray: this time I will overlook it, because you are my godson, but if you dare to do that again, it will cost you your neck, and I will take you away myself."

Soon after, the king's daughter fell into a grave illness. She was his only child; he wept day and night until his eyes went blind, and had it proclaimed that whoever rescued her from death should become her husband and inherit the crown. The physician, when he came to the sick girl's bed, saw Death at her feet. He ought to have remembered his godfather's warning, but the great beauty of the king's daughter and the good fortune of becoming her husband so deluded him that he cast all thoughts to the winds. He did not see that Death was casting angry glances at him, raising his hand and threatening with his withered fist; he lifted up the sick girl and laid her head where her feet had been. Then he gave her the herb, and at once her cheeks flushed red, and life stirred anew.

Death, when he saw himself cheated of his property for the second time, strode up to the physician with long steps and said, "It is all over with you, and now it is your turn," seized him with his ice-cold hand so hard that he could not resist, and led him into an underground cavern. There he saw how thousands upon thousands of lights burned in endless rows, some large, others half-large, others small. Every moment some went out, and others flared up again, so that the little flames seemed to leap back and forth in constant change. "Do you see," said Death, "those are the life-lights of men. The large ones belong to children, the half-large ones to married people in their best years, the small ones to old men. Yet children and young people too often have only a little light." "Show me my life-light," said the physician, thinking it was still quite large. Death pointed to a little stub that was just about to go out and said, "Do you see, there it is." "Ah, dear godfather," said the frightened physician, "light a new one for me, do it for love of me, so that I may enjoy my life, become king and husband of the beautiful king's daughter." "I cannot," answered Death, "first one must go out before a new one is lit." "Then set the old one on a new one that will burn on at once when that one is at an end," begged the physician. Death pretended as if he wanted to fulfil his wish, fetched a fresh large light: but because he wanted to take revenge, he deliberately made a

mistake when transferring it, and the little stub toppled over and went out. At once the physician sank to the ground, and had now himself fallen into the hands of Death.