

them called his servant and asked him who the dead man was.

"Sir," answered the boy, "it is an old friend of yours. He was killed very suddenly to-night. While he was drunk, there came a thief whom men call Death, and slew him. This Death is a terrible enemy; he kills all the people in this country. It is needful, master, to beware of such an enemy as this. My mother taught me that we ought always to be ready to meet him."

"The boy speaks truth," said his master. "There is a large village, about a mile from here, where Death has slain this year every man, woman and child; and I think that must be his dwelling place. It is so dangerous to meet him? I swear that I will seek him out. Come, my friends, let us swear to each other that we will find this false traitor, Death, and slay him. He who slays others shall himself be slain before it is night."

Then these three rioters swore with horrible oaths that Death should die. They went out towards the village, and as they were getting over a stile about half a mile on their way, they met a poor old man, who greeted them respectfully. One of the young men answered him roughly, and asked him why he went on living when he was so old. The old man looked him in the face and said:

"Because I cannot find in city or village a young man who will exchange his youth for my age. Nor could I, if I walked as far as to India. So I have to live on, in my age, as long as God wills. For Death will not take my life. I am like a restless captive, trying to be free. I knock on the ground with my staff, and cry to the earth to let me into my grave. I would gladly give all that I have for my shroud. But, sirs, it is not courteous of you to speak roughly to an old man who has not harmed you. Your Bible teaches you to be respectful to old people. I advise you to treat them as you would like to be treated yourself if you live to be old. Now, God be with you; I must go on my way."

"No," said the young man, "not so fast. You spoke just now of that traitor, Death, who slays our friends. I believe you are a spy of his, and in league with him to slay us young people. Tell us where he is, you false thief, or you shall pay dearly for it."

"Well, sirs, answered the aged man, "if you want to find Death, turn up that crooked path; I left him in the wood, under an oak tree, and there he will stay. He will not hide himself for fear of you. God save you, and make you better men."

Then the young man ran fast to the tree which the old man had pointed out, and there they found lying a great heap of golden florins, nearly eight bushels, they thought. Then they thought no more of seeking for Death, but sat down by the precious horde of bright coins. The worst of the three planned what they should do, and the others agreed

to his plan. The gold was to be carried to their houses, but it would not do to take it into the town in broad daylight, for men would see them and think they were thieves, and have them hanged. So they drew lots to see who should go back to the town and bring them food and wine, that they might watch by the treasure until it was dark, and then carry it away.

The lot fell to the youngest, so he set off on his errand, and left the other two to guard the gold. As soon as he was gone, they began to plot how they could do away with him, and have the money all to themselves. They agreed that when he had come back, and was sitting down, one of them should begin to wrestle with him, as if in play, and then the other should kill him with a dagger.

Meanwhile the third man, on his way to the town, had been thinking of the florins, and how happy and merry he would be if he could have them for himself alone. And at last "the fiend, our enemy," put it into his head to buy poison, and with it slay his two companions. When he came to the town, he went to an apothecary, and asked him for some poison. He said he wanted to kill rats, and also a polecat that had been stealing his hens. The apothecary gave him a very strong and violent poison in a box. Then the wretched man ran to a friend in the next street, and borrowed three large bottles. Into two of these he put poisoned wine, but the third he filled with the wine he intended to drink himself. Then he went back to his companions.

Why need we make a long story of it? Just as the two men in the wood had planned, they slew the other. And when it was done, one of them said, "Let us sit down and drink, and make merry, and bury his body afterwards." And he took the bottle of poisoned wine, and drank, and gave it to his comrade to drink also. And so they both died!*

This is our last lesson on Chaucer, the first great English poet. Before we leave him, let us consider in what ways he is so great.

Milton speaks of him as a teller of stories. That is how we have looked at him, and we have seen that he is, indeed, one of the best of story tellers.

* This story, in its essentials, must be very old, as it is found in the ancient literature of India. Chaucer's version is based on the Italian forms of the story. A closely-related story is Kipling's "King Ankus," in the "Second Jungle Book." It is interesting to let the children compare the two stories.