

THE BROTHERS AND THE WOLVES

Once, a long time ago, there lived three Brothers, Osber, Pieder, and Berzifal. They lived with their Father on a farm far from any city. Times were hard and often they did not have enough to eat.

Osber was the oldest. He was tall and strong, with a happy smile always on his face. Osber knew that things would be alright in the end.

Pieder was the middle Brother. He was also tall, but thin and often sad. Pieder knew things would turn bad in the end. Through most of their lives Pieder had been right. Their dear Mother had died while the boys were still young.

Berzifal was the youngest and smallest. He did not know what he believed their fate would be, but worried about all manner of things that might happen.

One winter was colder than any they could remember and as the farm became colder their food dwindled away. Sometimes all they had to eat was a wrinkled carrot each and some weak soup. "Careful with those carrots!" their Father said, "They are all we have now."

This was not quite true, for they also had Griselda, their faithful donkey, but they could not think of eating her.

One morning they awoke to find their father packing their few belongings into sacks. "Get ready for a journey boys. We are going to the city to seek our fortunes - or at least to save ourselves from starving."

Soon they were ready and, with Griselda to carry the biggest sacks, they trudged through the mud away from their farm to seek salvation.

Their way would lead them through hills and forests and take several days. They knew there were dangers to be faced, for in those days there were still bears and wolves in the forests.

The first night they stopped and made a small shelter with wood and some old leather they had brought with them. It was not enough to be warm but it made them feel better, and with the hope of a new life in the city their spirits were high.

Osber chatted about how he had heard there was a street in the city that was paved with gold. His father smiled to himself but let the boy be happy. "Perhaps things will be better in the city, *if we get there*" said Pieder, still expecting the worst. "Have you ever been to the city Father?" asked young Berzifal.

"I lived there once" replied his Father. "It was where I met your dear Mother. Those were happy times." Their Father told them to sleep as best they could, while he watched over them.

The next day they were on the move early and soon joined the main road to the city, though there were no other travellers to be seen. The road was just a few feet wide and mostly mud, but it was reassuring to see it so clear and easy to follow. Father showed

them the way ahead on a rough map he had brought. The brave party stepped out with increasing hope.

But by early afternoon things were not looking so bright. The road led through a deep, dark forest and overhead the sky was darkening with an approaching storm.

“Stay close to me now boys, for there are bears and wolves in these woods.” said their Father. The boys moved closer to him and peered into the trees. “We are safe on the road” said Osber, “I’m sure of it.” His Brother Pieder replied “We will die before we reach the other side of this dark forest. I’m sure I can hear something moving. It must be a bear.” Berzifal just looked all around him, wondering what would happen next and keeping close to the others.

Overhead the sky grew darker and rain began to fall heavily. There were rumbles of distant thunder. Griselda was nervous and skittered in fright.

Just then there was a crashing of branches to one side. Pieder had been right. There was a bear. A hungry bear. An angry bear. It ran right for them as their father leapt forward with his staff. Osber, too, gripped his stick and stood firm, while the others quaked in fear behind.

The bear was on them in a second, and with a mighty blow it knocked their Father to the ground. “Run!” shouted their Father, and it was the last thing he ever said. Before even brave Osber could act their Father was dead and the bear tasted his blood. Griselda bolted along the road and the boys followed her.

That night the boys shed many tears for their Father and for themselves. They could not sleep. They were now orphans, alone in the world, and alone in the deep, dark forest. Pieder felt he had been right all along.

In the morning they talked about what to do next. Should they go back to the farm or continue towards the city? Pieder said “If we go back we will starve on the farm, or perhaps be killed by the bear before we get there.” Osber said “Yes, we must go onward. I have looked at Father’s map and there is a shorter way to the city. It means leaving the road but I’m sure we can do it.” The boys argued but Osber was the oldest and so brave the others felt they had to follow him.

Leaving the road they set off down what seemed a narrow path, though it was hard to be sure. Their way lay through more forest, then over a line of hills, before they rejoined the road. The path seemed easy, and this way would save them many miles of walking.

At midday they sat and rested on a fallen tree trunk, eating the last of their wrinkled carrots without speaking. Through one of the rare breaks in the trees they could see the hills ahead and Osber was more confident than ever that this was the right thing to do.

Their path grew steeper and by mid afternoon they had reached the top of the hills, though still they could see little because of the thick forest. Once again the skies began to darken with approaching rain, but instead of rain it was snow that fell, softly and silently. They trudged down the hill with heads bowed, watching their feet to avoid sliding or tripping on the tangled roots, now partly hidden by snow. Even the sure-footed Griselda stumbled at times.

“We will never escape from this forest” declared Pieder, feeling colder than ever. Berzifal noticed that Griselda seemed increasingly nervous. Had she smelt some new danger they could not see? He peered into the shadows, straining to see something, but saw nothing.

Then, a few minutes later, he did see something moving deep in the trees. He could not make it out but soon realised there was movement in several places. Wolves! “There are wolves in the woods. I think they are following us.” whispered Berzifal to his Brothers. “We’re done for” said Pieder. “Don’t worry.” said Osber, “Just stay close together.”

Just then they looked ahead and saw, blocking their path, a huge wolf sitting in front of them. Its eyes were silver discs with black centres. Its long fur was black in places but almost white in others. Its tongue hung out and saliva trailed down from one side of the eager diner’s mouth. Berzifal was terrified but Osber stepped forward with his stick and waved it at the wolf.

In truth the wolf did not want to fight. Wolves prefer to chase their prey and make them tired before risking attack. However, these wolves were also hungry and did not want to give up this tasty food, or show weakness. More wolves appeared out of the dark shadows and growled at the terrified Brothers. Osber tried to hit one with his stick and the wolves pounced.

Griselda ran off the narrow path and into the forest and after a few seconds the boys ran after her, even Osber. There had been many more wolves than he expected and one had bitten his leg, which was bleeding horribly, leaving red spatters in the fresh white snow. The wolves gave chase as wolves do. Their prey could not escape them, especially with a fresh trail of blood to follow.

The boys and the donkey stumbled through the dark forest, branches whipping their faces and roots snagging their feet. Occasionally the wolves would get close to keep them running.

Berzifal felt his chest heaving and burning, while his legs were tired beyond endurance. The others felt the same. Berzifal saw ahead of him an old pine tree with branches he thought he could climb, so he leapt upon it and began climbing, shouting to the others to do the same.

Pieder was next to climb and then Osber. As soon as the wolves saw what was happening they raced forward to stop them but, happily, the boys were just quick enough. They clung to their tree panting for breath while the wolves panted below them, with their tongues hanging out, drooling at the sight of so much food just above their heads.

“Where’s Griselda?” gasped Berzifal. “The wolves must have killed her” said Pieder, “And now they are going to wait down there until we fall from this tree.”

There was nothing they could do so they sat on branches, clinging tightly to the tree while the wolves sat below, staring at them. The snow continued to fall, then night. Osber was feeling sick and weak from his wound and the others had to nudge him from time to time to keep him awake. It was very cold.

Osber began to cry for the first time since he was a baby. He said “My Brothers, I have led you to this. I failed to save Father and then I took you on this path. I am to blame. I am sorry. Please forgive me before we die.” Pieder started to cry too. Berzifal said “Nobody could have saved father. Do not blame yourself. But, if there is anything else to forgive, then I forgive you. Besides, we are not dead yet and many things could happen that we cannot imagine.”

All through the night they waited. They could not see the wolves, but occasionally they could hear movement down below. In the grey light of early morning they saw that the wolves had disappeared. “They’ve gone. Let’s carry on” said Osber. Pieder replied “The wolves could be hiding, waiting for us to come down.” Berzifal realised that both Brothers could be right but said “Whatever we do we need to know where to run to. We are lost. I am the lightest and will climb this tree. Perhaps I can see where we are.”

Without waiting for an answer he began climbing. Pieder thought “He will not be able to see anything. We are going to die here in this tree or be caught by the wolves.”

Berzifal climbed and climbed. The tree was old and tall and eventually Berzifal found he was above most other trees and could look around. Snow laden branches hindered his view, but as he looked he saw an amazing sight. Within half a mile was a broad river, and tied to a small jetty on their side of the river was a boat so large it had two masts. He could see no people, however.

If they could get there they might be saved! But what about the wolves? Carefully, he climbed down the tree to where his Brothers waited and told them the news. “A river!” exclaimed Osber, “But there was nothing on the map.” Berzifal replied “It is only a rough map and perhaps does not show things that are not near the road.”

“But what about the wolves hiding below?” asked Pieder. “There are no wolves” said Osber, but then he seemed to think of something new and said “But I was wrong before. Perhaps there are.”

Berzifal thought for a moment then said “We must find out if the wolves are there without letting them eat us all. I will go down alone and run to that tree over there and climb it. Perhaps if the wolves are hiding they will try to catch me. Perhaps they will wait in the hope of getting us all. When I have climbed up safely you, Osber, will come across and join me. Then you, Pieder. That way, only one of us will be at risk at one time.” Pieder said “But it will take us days to get to the boat this way. It’s hopeless.”

Berzifal replied “If we can find out that the wolves have gone we can stop climbing, but if the wolves are still there then at least we are alive and can try something else. We are not dead yet and anything can happen.” The others could think of nothing better.

Berzifal climbed down the tree, past his Brothers, and as soon as he reached the ground he began running to the next tree. He reached it and climbed. There was no sound or sign of the wolves. Osber went next, and then Pieder, both safely. Berzifal picked the next tree to run for and set off again.

In the woods, hidden in shadows, the wolves watched this curious performance. They *did* want to catch all three boys together, but as their prey progressed slowly from tree to tree the wolves began to realise that they would have to catch them one at a time. The boy with the limp looked the easiest catch.

Osber's leg was hurting from the running and he was beginning to think the wolves had given up. "The wolves have gone. Let's just walk to the river." he said to his Brothers.

"Not yet" replied Berzifal, "I agree it looks like there are no wolves but strange things happen. Perhaps they wish to catch us all at once. Perhaps they are thinking, even now, about whether they should just catch us one at a time instead." Osber and Pieder said nothing, and all the boys looked for their next tree.

As before, Berzifal ran first, reaching the next tree safely. Now it was Osber's turn. He took a deep breath, dropped to the ground, and starting running as fast as he could.

Almost immediately he heard a warning shout from Pieder but he was determined to reach the next tree and sure he could. As he ran he saw movement around him in the trees. The wolves! There were more of them than ever. By the time he was half way to the next tree they had caught him. One gripped his leg and he fell. Osber rolled over to fight them but was pinned down by sharp teeth and heavy bodies. The pack's leader stood with his front paws on Osber's chest and his teeth just inches from Osber's face. The wolf seemed to be smiling down at him.

Berzifal shouted and began to climb down his tree but just then there was a sound he had not expected to hear. The hee haw of a donkey. Griselda! The wolves turned their heads. The leader of the pack looked up and at that moment an arrow struck him in the eye and killed him instantly. *Zzzzzup!* Another arrow followed and another, *zzzzup, zzzzzup*, then the shouting of men. The wolves hunched, then turned and ran for the safety of the darkest parts of the forest. Later they would howl for their fallen leader, then argue over who should replace him.

Five men ran towards Osber. The eldest explained "We found this donkey last night and heard the wolves. We guessed what had happened. What luck we found you just in time." "Not so lucky" replied Osber, "For our Father has been killed by a bear and we are all alone in the world."

Their rescuers said they were on a trip by river to the city and offered to take them along. The boys accepted this offer gratefully, saying that if they could ever repay the men then they would.

Years later they were able to repay their rescuers handsomely. Though they knew nobody in the city when they arrived, Berzifal pointed out that both their Father and Mother had once lived in the city, so perhaps they had relatives or friends there. After three days of searching, with the help of their boatman friends, they found someone who recognised the name of their Mother, and by the next day they had friends and a roof over their heads.

They began a business shipping farm produce down the river to the city and Berzifal in particular proved to be a wise businessman, often seeing possibilities that others had not seen. Soon, all three were wealthy and had families of their own.

One Christmas Eve, as they sat together in Berzifal's large house, looking out at snow falling onto the kitchen garden, their thoughts returned to their terrifying ordeal all those years ago. As their children played noisily in the next room, Osber said "Berzifal, you know that we owe you our lives as well as our livelihoods. After our dear Father was killed, I led us into even greater danger without a thought for what might happen."

His Brother Pieder added, “Aye, Osber, you were sure we would be safe, but if it had been left to me then we would have given up before we started, and starved on that farm. Only Berzifal saw more in the future. He was the one who climbed that tree and discovered we had a chance to live. He was the one who tricked the wolves. Now he is the one whose wisdom has made us wealthy.”

Berzifal hardly knew what to say. “We did it together. Until that night I did not know what I believed, but as the wolves waited I began to see that not knowing, yet not being afraid to act, is my way.”

He paused, smiled, then raised his glass and said “Happy Christmas to all of us!”

THE END