

THE BROTHERS AND THE WHITE HAND

Once, a long time ago, there lived three Brothers, Osber [say it as “oz - ber”], Pieder [say it as “pee - ay - der”], and Berzifal [say it as “ber - zi - fal”]. They lived in a town by a wide river. They had arrived there as boys after a dangerous journey in which their father had been killed by a bear, leaving them with no parents. Now times were good for them and, being young men with energy and imagination, they had created a successful business taking goods up and down the river in boats. They already had a small fortune.

The youngest of the Brothers was Berzifal, but in a crisis it was often he to whom the others turned for advice because he so often saw possibilities that others had not seen.

Pieder was the middle Brother. When he was younger he had often been certain they were going to fail or be killed and he had been too quick to give up. Being chased by wolves years before had opened his mind and now, as the most good looking of three rich young men without wives, there was often a smile on his face.

The oldest was Osber. As a boy he had been the bravest, always confident that things would be fine in the end. The wolves had taught him to remember that there are other possibilities. Now, though he was still as brave as ever, he also took more care and often asked Berzifal and Pieder for advice.

One night in December, the Brothers were walking home through the cold town, their feet making noises on the snow and ice that covered the ground. It was dark, but the light from houses was just enough for them to see where they were going as they laughed and joked about the pretty girls they had met that evening.

Suddenly, they heard movement and a yell of alarm from behind. Turning they saw some people in a fight. It seemed that someone had fallen to the ground and the others were hitting him roughly.

Osber ran towards the fight immediately and, after a quick look around for more trouble, Pieder and Berzifal followed. Osber shouted and the thugs ran off, leaving their victim lying on the snow in pain.

While Pieder kept watch his Brothers knelt by the unlucky young man and checked him for broken bones and blood. They were happy to find that there were none and a minute later he was back on his feet, though confused and looking as if he might fall over again.

“Can we help you home to your family young man?” asked Osber. “My name is Gorvan [say it as “gor - van”] and I have no family. Just a room I cannot easily pay for.” came the reply. “Then you shall come home with us until tomorrow” said Osber.

The others agreed with this plan. The young man seemed about to fall over and his clothes were too thin for such a cold night. They took him home with them and gave him hot food and a bed for the night.

The next morning Gorvan seemed more happy. As it was Sunday the Brothers did not go to work at their boat business but stayed at home and talked to their new friend. He

was easy to like, quick thinking and funny, but as they learned more of his life they began to feel more like friends with him. He too had no parents and came from the country, but because he had no friends he was, he admitted, forced to beg to afford the small room in a house where he lived.

They invited him to stay for lunch as well and it was late afternoon when they finally offered to take him home. Gorvan seemed happy that they wanted to be friends and the group set off to a poor part of town.

As they got near Gorvan's house the houses became smaller and dirty, and the streets became narrow. When they arrived outside his front door he seemed unhappy and said goodbye to them without opening the door. The Brothers waved as they left and when they turned a corner Pieder said "Poor boy. So unhappy about his poor home that he would not let us see what it was like inside."

The next day they went to work as usual but each was thinking the same thought and at lunch time Berzifal turned to the others and said "Surely we can find a job for him in our business?" to which Osber said "Yes, let's go over this evening" without even asking if it was Gorvan that Berzifal had been thinking of.

That afternoon Osber and Pieder went to their boat yard while Berzifal stayed at the sales office. They had agreed to meet later by the church when the sun was going down and go to Gorvan's house from there.

And so, as the weak winter sun was setting, they met by Saint Gergil's [say it as "ger - gil"] and set off through the quiet, freezing cold streets. It began to snow, with tiny pieces falling like powder through the still air. When they were about half a mile away from where they were going Osber said "I know a short cut; follow me."

With Osber leading the way they set off down a side street, and then a narrow path, and within a short while Pieder and Berzifal were quite lost. Eventually, Osber too started to seem a bit lost. "Nearly there" said he, "I hope."

As they came around the corner of yet another narrow alley Pieder stopped and pointed to a pile of dirty snow. "Look!" They looked and it was not dirty snow at all but a human body, covered with the light, new snow, quiet and still.

"Be careful Brothers, for there may still be danger" said Berzifal as he went forward to look at the body. It took him a few moments to light a small candle to see better. There was little need to check for signs of life because snow covered everything, including the nose and mouth, but still Berzifal put his hand inside the dead body's coat to see if there was any heat left. There was none and when he pulled out his hand there was blood on it.

"Who is it?" asked Pieder. Berzifal pushed snow off the pale grey face and was very surprised to find that it was Gorvan's. "It is young Gorvan!" he said. Then he added "This is the scene of a terrible crime. Osber, you run for the police while Pieder and I stand guard." Osber began to move but Berzifal held him back and said "No, not that way. Go back the way we came."

When Osber had gone Pieder asked "Why did you send Osber back that way? If my sense of direction is correct, surely it is easier to carry on down here." Berzifal

explained “I did not want him to spread foot marks further in this snow. We must look for clues. Do you remember when we were boys on the farm you used to track animals for a game? I want you to track the killer.”

Pieder’s confusion cleared but then he looked down and said “But there are no marks. This snow has covered everything.” Berzifal, his mind racing as so often, explained “This snow started falling only a short while ago, after Gorvan fell here. Anyway, he is cold and has been lying here perhaps for hours already.”

Berzifal handed the candle to Pieder then took off his jacket and waved it in the air. The light new snow flew in all directions but when it settled again foot prints could be seen clearly in the old snow below. Pieder got down at once and began looking closely. “A man, a heavy man perhaps with a hurt leg. And look, a woman. See the small foot and narrow heels. I can see no marks by Gorvan. How can that be?”

Berzifal answered him saying “Perhaps Gorvan was already dead or dying and the man carried him. That might explain his weight and different foot marks.” Pieder agreed with this thinking and continued looking, moving away more light snow with his hat. “There are two sets of foot marks. One leading this way and one leading on. Ah, the foot marks are lighter that way. You were right. Let’s see how far we can follow.”

They continued on down the alley and then came out into a slightly wider street where they could see Gorvan’s house but after a few yards Pieder stood up and said “It’s no use. There are too many foot marks here. I can’t continue.”

“Keep looking while I return to Gorvan” said Berzifal.

Almost half an hour later Osber returned with two policemen, one of whom was an enormous man who seemed to be in a bad mood. His first words were “These robbers! They’ll be the death of this town.” He asked if the Brothers had seen anyone who might have committed the murder and when they said that they had not he said “Well, then there’s nothing we can do. It’s been a useless journey on a cold night.”

At this Osber got cross and said “Now listen to me, this poor boy was a friend of ours and you have a duty to perform!” The enormous law man seemed to grow even larger and now Osber noticed that he had arms as wide as the mast of a sea-going ship, hands as large as spades, and his neck was so thick it was hard to say that he had a neck at all.

“What did you say?” he said angrily. At that moment Berzifal came forward saying quickly “Captain, please don’t be cross with my brother. We are surprised and unhappy at what has happened but I’m sure you know your business. Perhaps now you want to ask us some more questions so that you can clear this up quickly and properly?”

This made the Captain happier. They gave their names. The Captain’s name was Horace [say it as “hoh - race”] and he seemed to recognize the names of the Brothers. Berzifal explained all that had happened so far but just as he was saying that Pieder could not follow the foot marks on the busy street Pieder came back and said “I’ve got something. One of the foot marks is through a small spill of something that smells like molasses [sticky sweet stuff; say it as “mow - lass - ez”. If we had a dog with a good nose perhaps *he* could follow where I can’t.”

This news gave Captain Horace a new interest. "We have such a dog" he said, and told his helper to run and get it. The policeman began to jog off but Horace shouted "Move!" so loudly that the poor man immediately and ran away at top speed, despite the ice on the ground.

Berzifal spoke to the Captain again saying "We know that he was not killed here. He lives just around that corner so perhaps he was killed there. Shall we go and look?" The Captain agreed and they set off. At first nobody answered the door but eventually an old woman opened it a little and asked who it was that wanted to speak to her so much that they had taken her away from her small fire.

Captain Horace introduced himself and Osber explained that they were friends of Gorvan. "Who?" asked the woman. She said she had never heard of anyone by that name and certainly did not let a room to any Gorvans. Horace looked in the house, which made the old lady cross, but this only showed that she was telling the truth. Nobody but the old woman lived there.

The Brothers did not understand but wondered if perhaps Gorvan's unhappiness at being so poor had led him to hide the fact that he had no home at all. Berzifal seemed the most puzzled. "Something is not right and we must keep all possibilities in mind" he said.

Moments later the dog arrived and other policemen to take charge of the body. The chase then began. The dog did indeed have a good nose and easily followed the smell of molasses. It made barking noises and pulled at its lead, taking them right through the town and towards the river. To their surprise the Brothers found themselves following the dog to a place by the river for getting into boats. It was near their own boat yard.

All was quiet and dark except for the dog, walking up and down by the water, unable to follow the smell further.

"They've gone on by boat" suggested Pieder. Osber ran to the house of the man who looked after their boat yard and knocked on the door several times until it opened. "Oh, it's you Master Osber" said their friend and employee. "Yes, Artur" [say it as "are - tur"] answered Osber. "I'm sorry for getting you up but we are looking for killers and need your help right now."

Without waiting for an answer he carried on. "Did you see anyone leave by boat from here today? We are looking for a man and a woman. Have you seen them?" Artur immediately said "Yes! Not two hours ago they bought a small craft and set off alone. They went up the river."

Berzifal, hearing this, began to give instructions. He had a plan. "Captain. We would like to offer you use of one of our boats, the Cutter [say it as "cut - er"]. It is the fastest on this river and large enough to carry us all." Horace agreed and Berzifal continued. "Artur, run and get our two best sailors here immediately for a journey up river. Bring bows and arrows. I will get pigeons [birds that can carry letters; say it as "pij - ins"] and paper." Artur went off.

Homing pigeons had helped to make the Brothers rich, taking messages up and down the river, so they had many of them. Berzifal quickly wrote a note and sent it on the leg

of one pigeon to their up-river loading station. He also put two more pigeons in a small wooden box to take on the journey.

In less than half an hour they were off. The water was low and slow, nothing like the fast moving water that would come in spring when the snow melted. The wind was light but blowing in the right way and the crew put on as much sail as they could. Captain Horace and his helper sat low to keep warm.

By now the snow had stopped falling and the sky had cleared of cloud. A bright moon shone down. As Pieder pointed out, this was a good thing because without it they might pass the killers and not notice.

The crew were good at sailing and the Cutter took the best lines as the broad river bent to left and right. The Brothers were sure they must be catching up with the killers. Nevertheless, they sailed for hours through the night without seeing anything ahead.

As the crew worked the Brothers talked about Gorvan. Berzifal said "I do not understand why he made us believe he lived in that house when he did not. Either he was too poor to afford to live there or ... or perhaps he was too rich! Yes, all this time I have been thinking that he was poor but do you remember his energy and funny talk? Nobody living without a house and with little food in this weather would have such energy. And his skin and muscles - too healthy."

Pieder added, "So he was not telling us the truth! What else did he lie about?" Osber suddenly remembered "Yesterday, when I was briefly alone with Gorvan, he mentioned how sorry he was that we had lost our mother and father when travelling to this town. I thought he had heard the story from one of you and made a mistake about our mother, but now I'm not so sure." Pieder and Berzifal confirmed that they had not told their story to Gorvan and then Berzifal said "Aye [say it as "I"], and at other times he always maintained that he knew nothing of us until we met him. Perhaps he knew much more than he let on."

"The cheat" said Osber suddenly. "He knew all about us before we met. Perhaps our meeting was no accident but a clever trick." Berzifal was quick to understand more "You are right Brother. He was out to trick us into being friends with him and it worked until now. I do not know what his plan was but I imagine it was our money he was after. Perhaps ... perhaps this was not murder at all but self defence! Perhaps it was some other person he was trying to trick who had an argument with him and now is running, not from us, but from his gang. A gang who now may be looking for them too."

Pieder asked "Do you think they have caught them already?" Berzifal answered "Perhaps, but perhaps not. Pieder, go to the back of our boat and look back. Be careful not to be seen doing so by anyone who might be behind us."

Pieder did as he was asked and for several minutes he looked back for signs of another boat behind them. Then, suddenly, he called out "Yes, there's a boat behind us, a long way back. They are rowing [using oars; say it as "ro - ing"] I think, so there must be many of them."

Berzifal was angry and said "Of course! They have followed us, perhaps watching us since the start of this chase." He quickly wrote two more notes and sent them on their way by pigeon, one up river to the loading station and the other back to the town.

One of the crew called out "We will reach the loading station in a mile, but still no sign of a boat ahead." Then, almost immediately, he added "No! I see something. A small boat under sail." The Cutter was indeed a much quicker boat and within a few minutes they were close enough to call out to the other boat while Pieder said that the rowing boat was still far behind them.

The people in the small boat ahead seemed excited and unhappy. Berzifal told Captain Horace to stand at the front of their boat with his over coat off and a light shining on his police uniform. Within a few moments the boat ahead slowed and those in it stood up and began waving. The Brothers' thinking was right. Murderers would not be happy to see a policeman.

They pulled alongside to let the two people get on the Cutter. They were a young man and a young woman, both cold and frightened. Osber recognized the man. He was Harbold [say it as "har - boled"], the son of one of their best customers, recently returned from studying a long way away. The girl he introduced as his sister, Maryaine [say it as "marry - anc"].

Berzifal told his crew to press on at full speed to the loading station, pulling the smaller boat behind. Then they listened to the story Harbold and Maryaine told. Gorvan was indeed a cheat and working with a young woman. Gorvan had made friends with them but then began talking about lots of money they could have if they would only help him. In what way they never discovered because they began to think he was a cheat. When they met him that night it was in a poor part of town with this other woman present, apparently another person he was trying to trick. When he left the room for a moment they told her what they thought.

She called Gorvan back and ordered him to kill Harbold and Maryaine immediately! A fight started in which Harbold had killed Gorvan and the girl had left, shouting at them and saying she would get them back. "Rats! You killed my Gorvan. The White Hand will kill you tonight!"

"The White Hand?" asked Osber. "The White Hand" repeated Horace. "I thought them just a story. This is a serious matter indeed for it is said that they are a gang of murderers. If the White Hand is in that boat behind then we are all in danger."

"They tried to trick us and might have murdered us were it not for Harbold and Maryaine" said Osber. "Yes," added Berzifal, "but we have faced danger before my Brothers. Let us go on to our loading station and prepare."

Just a short while later the familiar wharf [a place for boats; say it as "war - f"] and store house of their loading station appeared ahead and they went towards it. The other boat behind still held back, though they must have seen that their enemy now had friends.

Reaching the wharf they tied the Cutter up and went up ladders to the main platform above before going around the warehouse that ran by it to get out of sight of their enemy. There they were met by four more of the Brothers' employees. They had got

out of their beds because of Berzifal's first pigeon and were armed with bows on the instructions with his second.

Berzifal talked to them. "Men, we pay you to work in our business, not to risk your lives for us. In the boat that is coming is a gang of killers. We could run from them but I have a plan to finish things here. If you will stay and help then say so now." A quick conversation began about what to do.

Down the river, out on the water, Mervana [say it as "mer - var - ner"] stood near the back of her boat as her men pulled on the oars. By her side sat her four toughest men, her 'executioners.' [killers] They were the source of her power, worked for her for money and because they were frightened. They in turn kept the rest of her gang in line.

Her pale face was set hard and she was still angry. Those idiots had killed her good looking Gorvan and now she would kill them, and hurt them if possible. If others died too that was no concern of hers and perhaps would work in her favour.

The stupid Horace had done well this time, using a dog, but he had only made things easier for her.

She had kept well back so as not to be seen and now ordered that the boat go well out into the river so that she could study this wharf and its buildings to plan her attack.

She saw light coming from only one building, set back from the water and the store house. There was movement in there too. Clearly they were making themselves warm after their cold journey and had not seen the danger following them. It was just as she had planned.

At this point the banks of the river were high but it did not matter because she could use the wharf, which still had plenty of room for her craft. She gave instructions and her boat went towards the wharf, making almost no sound.

With just half a length to go the rowers began to pull in their oars. Almost the only sound was water falling from their oars.

Suddenly there was a slight sound from above, the noise of a door opening, the sound of heavy foot steps and a "Huuuuugh!" from someone making a huge effort. A moment later there was a loud crash and the boat moved under her feet, then everything changed.

Above them, Horace was on the edge of the platform. Carrying the anvil [a heavy thing; say it as "an - vill"] from the workshop had not been too difficult for him but throwing it out far enough to land inside the boat below had taken every bit of his strength. He was very happy to see it land perfectly and go right through the bottom of the boat. Immediately there was the sound of moving water and confusion below. One or two of the oarsmen tried to row their boat towards the wharf but Osber and others came forward with oars to push the boat away while Pieder and Berzifal drew bows. Osber shouted "Give up. We have bows and a firm place to stand. Get in the water and come to us and we will help you. Go down in your boat and you will die in this cold water in minutes."

Mervana felt water over her feet and it was so cold it hurt. The boat was tipping now and even her executioners were falling over. She quickly made up her mind and ordered an attack. "Get them. Get across that water and kill them all. These are rich men and we will take what is theirs."

Having received the same instructions from both sides all the men in her gang began jumping into the water to swim the short distance to the wharf. Some wanted to fight while others just wanted to live and perhaps fight later.

"Captain Horace" called out Pieder, happily, "You are stronger than you look - and that's saying something!" Horace said with a smile "Thank you sir. To be honest, I've never been clever, but I am strong!"

Meanwhile Mervana, alone in her boat as it went down into the water, went slowly down the river, surprised by what had happened.

Osber moved along the wharf then beside the river as far as he could, calling to her to save herself, but she just yelled back at him. There was no path by the river and it was hard to follow. When the moon went behind a cloud Osber lost sight of her and was forced to turn back.

At the wharf her gang were slowly being allowed out of the very cold water. Even those that had wanted to fight were too cold to do more than ask for help.

They were given help, but only when their hands and feet had been tied up.

The next day the Brothers took their prisoners and their new friends back down the river to the town, where the gang members were put in prison for trial. It was found that all the main members of the White Hand gang had been taken except their leader. Although a search was made for the woman who had led them no sign of her was found. It was also learned the Gorvan was somewhat older than he had appeared, being small with soft skin. He and the woman were in love and had led the White Hand together until his death.

That Christmas the Brothers were especially grateful for their happy life and were visited several times by Harbold and his sister. Maryaine was a lovely young woman and it was Pieder who seemed to notice this most. On Christmas Eve he was seen by his brothers kissing her under the mistletoe [leaves picked at Christmas; say it as "miss - ull - tow"] and by the next Spring they were married.

After the wedding, when friends and family had said good things to Pieder and Maryaine and they had kissed yet again, Osber said quietly to Berzifal "Who would have thought that Pieder would be the first of us to find his true love?" Berzifal said, "Yes, and out of such a dark business. Don't worry Osber, our time will come. We are young and anything can happen."

He then raised his glass and said, "A long and happy life to all of us!"

THE END

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