

THE BROTHERS AND THE WHITE HAND

Once, a long time ago, there lived three Brothers, Osber, Pieder, and Berzifal. 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 orphans. Now times were good for them and, being young men with energy and imagination, they had created a thriving 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 doomed and too ready to give up. Their terrifying encounter with wolves years before had opened his mind and now, as the most handsome of three wealthy bachelors, there was often a smile on his face.

The eldest was Osber. As a boy he had been the bravest, always confident that things would be alright 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 consulted Berzifal and Pieder for advice.

One night in December, the Brothers were walking home through the frozen town, their feet crunching on the icy, snow crusted ground. It was dark, but the light from candles in nearby houses was just enough for them to see where they were going as they laughed and teased each other about the pretty girls they had met that evening.

Suddenly, they heard movement and a shout 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 kicking him roughly.

Osber rushed towards the melee immediately and, after a quick glance around for more trouble, Pieder and Berzifal followed. Osber shouted and the ruffians ran off, leaving their victim lying on the icy snow gasping in pain.

While Pieder kept watch his Brothers knelt by the luckless lad and checked him for broken bones and blood. Happily there were none and a minute later he was back on his feet, though dazed and unsteady.

“Can we help you home to your family young man?” asked Osber. “My name is Gorvan and I have no family. Just a room I can ill afford.” 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 faint and was poorly dressed for such a bitter night. They took him home with them and gave him hot food and a bed for the night.

The next morning Gorvan seemed more cheerful. As it was Sunday the Brothers did not go to work at their cargo business but stayed at home and talked to their new friend. He was easy to like, quick witted and amusing, but as they learned more of his life they began to feel a stronger bond with him. He too was an orphan from the country, but

lacking friends he was, he admitted, forced to beg to afford the small room in a house where he lodged.

They invited him to stay for lunch as well and it was late afternoon when they finally offered to escort him home. Gorvan seemed touched by their friendship and the group set off to a poorer part of town.

As they neared Gorvan's lodgings the houses became smaller and shabbier, and the streets became narrower. When they arrived outside his front door he seemed embarrassed and said goodbye to them without opening the door. The Brothers waved as they left and when they turned a corner Pieder said "Poor lad. So ashamed of his home that he would not let us see its condition."

The next day they went to work as usual but each was thinking the same thought and at lunchtime Berzifal turned to the others and said "Surely we can find a job for him in our business?" to which Osber replied "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 boatyard while Berzifal stayed at the sales office. They had agreed to meet later by the church at sunset and go to Gorvan's house from there.

And so, as the weak winter sun was setting, they met by Saint Gergil's and set off through the quiet, frozen streets. It began to snow, with tiny flakes falling like powder through the still air. When they were about half a mile away from their destination Osber said "I know a shorter way; follow me."

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

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

"Keep alert Brothers, for there may still be danger" said Berzifal as he stepped forward to examine the body. It took him a few moments to light a small candle to see better in the near darkness. There was little need to check for signs of life because snow covered everything, including the nose and mouth, but still Berzifal slid his hand inside the corpse's coat to see if there was any heat remaining. There was none and when he pulled out his hand there was blood on it.

"Who is it?" asked Pieder. Berzifal blew snow off the pale grey face and was shocked to find that it was Gorvan's. "It is young Gorvan!" he gasped. Then he added "This is the scene of a terrible crime. Osber, you run for the constabulary 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 departed Pieder asked "Why did you send Osber back that way? If my sense of direction is correct, surely it is quicker to carry on down here." Berzifal explained "I did not want him to spread footprints further in this snow. We must

investigate. Do you remember when we were boys on the farm you used to track animals for a game? I want you to track the murderer.”

Pieder’s confusion cleared but then he looked down and said “But there are no tracks. 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. Besides, he is cold and has been lying here perhaps for hours already.”

Berzifal handed the candle to Pieder then took off his cloak and swirled it in the air. The light snow flew in all directions but when it settled again footprints could be seen clearly in the harder snow below. Pieder crouched down at once and began peering closely. “A man, a heavy man perhaps with a limp. And look, a woman. See the small foot and narrow heel. I can see no prints of 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 uneven footprints.” Pieder agreed with this deduction and continued his tracking, wafting away more powdery snow with his hat. “There are two sets of tracks. One leading this way and one leading on. Ah, the foot prints are lighter that way. You were right. Let’s see how far we can follow.”

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

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

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

At this Osber flared up saying “Now listen to me constable, 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, fists as large as melons, and his neck was so thick it was hard to say that he had a neck at all.

“What did you say?” he growled menacingly. At that moment Berzifal stepped forward saying quickly “Captain, please forgive my brother. We are shocked and upset 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 began to calm the Captain. Introductions were made. The Captain’s name was Horace and he seemed to recognize the names of the Brothers. Berzifal explained all that had happened so far but just as he was explaining that Pieder could not follow the footprints on the busy street Pieder rushed back and said “I’ve got something. One of the tracks passes through a small splash of something that smells like molasses. If we had a dog with a good nose perhaps *he* could follow where I cannot.”

This news gave Captain Horace a new interest. “We have such a dog” he said, and instructed his constable to run and fetch it. The constable began to trot off but Horace shouted “Move!” so loudly that the poor man immediately picked up his heels and sprinted away, despite the slippery 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 investigate?” The Captain agreed and they set off. At first nobody answered the door but eventually an old woman opened it a crack 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 Golvans. Horace insisted on searching the house, much to the old lady’s annoyance, but this only confirmed that she was telling the truth. Nobody but the old woman lived there.

The Brothers were baffled but wondered if perhaps Gorvan’s embarrassment at his poverty 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 constables to take charge of the body. The chase then began. The dog did indeed have a good nose and easily followed the trail of molasses. It yelped and tugged at its lead, taking them right through the town and towards the river. To their astonishment the Brothers found themselves following the dog to a jetty by the river near their own boatyard.

All was silent and dark except for the frustrated dog, padding up and down the slippery jetty, unable to follow the scent further.

“They’ve gone on by boat” suggested Pieder. Osber ran to the house of their boatyard caretaker and knocked loudly on the door several times until it opened. “Oh, it’s you Master Osber” said their friend and employee. “Yes, Artur” answered Osber. “I’m sorry for disturbing you but we are chasing murderers and need your help immediately.”

Without waiting for an answer he carried on. “Did you see anyone leave by boat from this jetty 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, to give chase. It is the fastest on this river and large enough to carry us all.” Horace nodded and Berzifal continued. “Artur, run and fetch our two strongest boatmen here immediately for a journey up river. Bring bows and arrows. I will fetch pigeons and paper.” Artur bustled off.

Homing pigeons had helped to make the Brothers wealthy, taking messages up and down the river, so they had many of them. Berzifal swiftly 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 cage to take on the journey.

In less than half an hour they were underway. The water was low and slow, nothing like the torrent that the spring thaw would bring. The wind was light but favourable and the crew put on as much sail as they could. Captain Horace and his constable crouched low for shelter.

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 their quarry and not notice.

The crew were skilled and the Cutter took the best lines as the broad river curved back and forth. The Brothers were sure they must be gaining on the fugitives. Nevertheless, they sailed for hours through the night without seeing anything ahead.

As the crew worked the Brothers discussed the mysterious Gorvan. Berzifal said "I do not understand why he led us to believe he lived in that house when he did not. Either he was too poor to afford such lodgings 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 wit? Nobody living in poor shelter 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, 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 rascal" burst out Osber. "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 ingratiate himself with us and succeeded. 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 dupe who confronted him and now is fleeing, not from us, but from confederates of his. Confederates who even now may be hunting them too."

Pieder asked "Do you think they have caught them already?" Berzifal answered "Perhaps, but perhaps not. Pieder, go aft 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 stared back, hunting for signs of pursuers. Then, suddenly, he called out "Yes, there's a boat behind us, a long way back. They are rowing I think, so there must be many of them."

Berzifal clenched his fists in anger and said "Of course! They have followed us, perhaps spying on us since the start of this chase." He hurriedly 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 faster vessel and within a few minutes they were within hailing distance of the other boat while Pieder reported that the rowing boat was still far behind them.

The occupants of the small boat ahead seemed agitated. Berzifal told Captain Horace to stand in the bows with his cloak off and a storm lantern shining on his uniform. Within a few moments the boat ahead slowed and the occupants stood up and began waving. The Brothers’ conjectures seemed confirmed. Murderers would not be happy to see a policeman.

They pulled alongside and took on two new passengers. They were a young man and a young woman, both cold and frightened. Osber recognized the man. He was Harbold, the son of one of their best customers, recently returned from studying overseas. The girl he introduced as his sister, Maryaine.

Berzifal told his crew to press on at full speed to the loading station, towing the smaller boat behind. Then they listened to the story Harbold and Maryaine told. Gorvan was indeed a trickster and in league with a young woman. Gorvan had befriended them but then began talking of great wealth that could be theirs if they would only help him. In what way they never discovered because they became suspicious of him. 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 swindle. When he left the room for a moment they revealed their suspicions to her.

She called Gorvan back and ordered him to kill Harbold and Maryaine immediately! A fight ensued in which Harbold had stabbed Gorvan in the chest and the girl had left, screaming foul oaths at them and promising revenge. “Vermin! 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 rumour. This is a serious matter indeed for it is said that they are a ruthless 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 and warehouse of their loading station appeared ahead and they steered towards it. The rowers behind still held back, though they must have seen that their quarry now had allies.

Reaching the wharf they tied the Cutter up and climbed ladders to the main platform above before hurrying around the warehouse that ran alongside it to get out of sight of their pursuers. There they were met by four more of the Brothers’ employees. They had been roused from their beds by Berzifal’s first pigeon and were armed with bows on the instructions with his second.

Berzifal addressed them. “Men, we pay you to work in our business, not to risk your lives for us. In the boat that approaches is a gang of cut-throats. 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 hurried conversation began about what to do.

Down stream, out on the river, Mervana stood near the stern of her craft as her men toiled at the oars. By her side sat her four toughest men, her 'executioners.' They were the source of her power, held loyal to her by greed and fear they in turn kept the rest of her gang in line.

Her pale face was set hard and her fury had not subsided. Those fools had killed her beloved, handsome Gorvan and now she would kill them, painfully if possible. If others died too that was no concern of hers and perhaps would work in her favour.

The oaf 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 be steered 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 warehouse. There was movement in there too. Clearly they were warming themselves 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, steep, and muddy but it did not matter because she could use the wharf, which still had plenty of room for her craft. She gave instructions and the oarsmen steered towards the wharf, making almost no sound.

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

Suddenly there was a slight sound from above, the creaking of a door, the sound of heavy stomping footsteps and a "Huuuuugh!" from someone making a huge effort. A moment later there was a loud crash and the boat shuddered beneath her feet, then everything changed.

Above them, Horace teetered on the edge of the platform. Carrying the anvil 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 ounce of his strength. He was overjoyed to see it land perfectly and punch cleanly through the bottom of the boat. Immediately there was the sound of rushing water and confusion below. One or two of the oarsmen tried to paddle their boat towards the wharf but Osber and others rushed forward with oars and poles to push the boat away while Pieder and Berzifal drew bows. Osber shouted "Give yourselves up. We have archers and a firm footing. Swim to us and we will help you. Sink in your boat and you will freeze in this winter water in minutes."

Mervana felt water around her ankles and it was so cold it hurt. The boat was tipping now and even her executioners were struggling to stay upright. 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 diving and jumping into the water to swim the short distance to the wharf. Some intended to fight while others just intended to live and perhaps fight later.

“Captain Horace” called out Pieder, cheerfully, “You are stronger than you look – and that’s saying something!” Horace replied with a smile “Thank you sir. To be truthful, I’ve never been one for brains but muscle and bone – aye!”

Meanwhile Mervana, alone in the sinking boat, drifted slowly downstream, shocked by this sudden reversal.

Osber moved along the wharf then beside the river as far as he could, calling to her to save herself, but she just cursed back at him. There was no path by the river and it was hard to follow. When the moon slid 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 freezing water. Even those that had intended to fight were too cold to do more than huddle, shiver, and beg for shelter and warmth.

They were given shelter, but only when their hands and feet had been securely bound.

The next day the Brothers took their captives and their new friends back down the river to the town, where the gang members were imprisoned for trial. It was found that all the main members of the White Hand gang had been captured except their leader. Although a search was made for the mysterious woman who had led them no trace of her was found. It was also learned the Gorvan was somewhat older than he had appeared, being small and soft bristled. He and the woman were lovers and had led the White Hand together until his death.

That Christmas the Brothers were unusually grateful for their happy life and were visited several times by Harbold and his sister. Daylight revealed that Maryaine was a lovely young woman and it was Pieder who seemed to notice this most. On Christmas Eve he was spied by his brothers kissing her under the mistletoe and by the next Spring they were married.

After the wedding ceremony, when friends and family had toasted the newlyweds and they had kissed yet again, Osber whispered to Berzifal “Who would have thought that Pieder would be the first of us to find his true love?” Berzifal whispered back, “Yes, and out of such a dark business. Don’t worry Osber, our time will come. We are young and anything can happen.”

He paused, smiled, then raised his glass and said, “A long and happy life to all of us!”

THE END