

Ghost Story

by **Judy Crow**

A Tale inspired by Berwick Archives

If you choose to walk the Berwick Ramparts in the evening, after dark, when the mist rolls in from the cold sea and you can hear the shush, shush, shush of the waves on the shore below, you may find yourself with an unusual companion on your walk. Here you are, coming up the steps beside the Lion House and there, where the footpath divides, the hairs on your neck may rise, the air feel even chillier and your dog become ferocious, straining on his leash as he growls or barks towards some unseen apparition. Maybe the clouds will part and for a few minutes the mist rolls back and the small, slight, figure of a woman can be seen. Startled by her sudden appearance you expect her to say 'good evening' but she says nothing. Your dog is whimpering now, behaving as he does when thunder frightens him and he tries to pull you away. You pass within six feet of the ethereal figure, hurrying to get past. She doesn't look at you, indeed you are even not sure she has a face. Once past her you breathe then glance back for another look. But there is nothing, only an empty space in the returning mist, no sign of any human presence.

Maybe you have encountered the restless spirit of Lizzie White in her nightly wanderings along the Ramparts where she froze to death in 1871 and is still seeking decent Christian burial. If her spirit could speak Lizzie might tell you her story and you might just think, there, but for the grace of God, go I.

Lizzie White My Testimony

I am Lizzie White. I was born near the river around 1820, daughter to a fisherman and a herring girl. I was a bonnie lass, it was said, tidy and virtuous too. I followed me mam to the herring barrels. At seventeen I married Archie Wright, a mariner. Strong and handsome he was, and five years older than me. When he was home and sober Archie was a loving husband and father and by twenty-one I was mother to three bairns. The trouble was when Billy was ashore he wasn't often sober. After each payday he drank more and there was less to feed the bairns. When he was drunk we argued and his fists flew and the children hid. One November the boat went out but Billy never returned. The crew claimed he slipped overboard, drunk, was caught up in the net and drowned. We never found his body.

I was left with three hungry bairns and nothing else. I took in washing as well as gutting fish but one day my knife slipped and I slashed my hand. Fish blood and entrails poisoned it. It festered and never healed properly. The hand became weak and useless. I couldn't work and it pained me so. I took to drinking a cup of gin at night to help me sleep. One cup became two and there was no money to pay for it. The landlord at the Ship Inn offered a bottle and a few pence in return for favours and for a few months all was well until his wife found out and raised a stink. Soon we had nothing, no work, no food, and no roof. I went to the Workhouse. They took the bairns in but because of the gin they often turned me away. Nine of the last thirteen years I've spent, in and out of there or prison.

'What choices did I have? What would you have done?' I asked the magistrate once. 'Give up the gin,' says he. But that became harder and harder. In the end selling my favours became a way of life. Berwick is full of soldiers, sailors and fishermen. But they were not kind, it was rough and brutal, up against a wall in some dark wynd, on a filthy stable floor or some cold glory-hole in the bottom of the ramparts, all for a jug of gin and a crust of bread. Leading a brutal life I became brutal in turn, loud,

drunk and violent. I was often arrested for vagrancy or a breach of the peace. A stretch in the cells was a respite from the bitter east wind that blows in from the sea over Berwick. Evening after evening I loitered outside the pubs and shops, hoping to turn a trick or two in return for the promise of gin.

That last night two young lads said they required my services. They bought the gin and said we should go to the ruins below the ramparts. It was snowing and my feet were so cold I could barely walk. They dragged me, one under each arm and my shoes fell away. My bonnet blew off and my shawl too. It was a bitter night, with a cruel wind that went through my bones. I shook and shivered and the men leered and said they would soon warm me up. Up the steps they pulled me, past the Lion House, then down past the gunpowder store and into a dark tunnel under the ramparts. I was fearful. One lad pinned me to the wall with his arm and the other began to beat me with his fist. They poured gin over my face and down my throat. Then they took me, vicious and cruel, one after the other until I passed out. They pulled up their britches and ran. They left me to freeze on the cold stone floor.

I had been a burden on the town, people said, when they were forced to give me a pauper's burial. There was no mercy for someone such as me, a notorious drunk and prostitute. The minister refused to say the prayers of Christian burial and walked away. No Mercy. No *'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'* Just the freezing cold earth and a sneer.

One of the lads was caught and tried for manslaughter but they let him off. Not enough evidence it was said.

So now I walk the Ramparts, restless, night after freezing night, looking for the prayers of the merciful. Would you pray for me?