

GRINDELWALD IN WINTER, 1887

BY SIR CHARLES SHERRINGTON, O.M., F.R.S.

My old friend—perhaps in view of my own formidable seniority I ought to correct that to my younger friend—the Editor, invites me, with his characteristically youthful confidence, to set down for these pages a reminiscence of Grindelwald in winter dating back now more than sixty years. His wish is a command, although I cannot help the misgiving that what he is good enough to find of some interest is really in itself too trivial for this JOURNAL. As the Christmas vacation of 1887 drew near and London seemed at its foggiest, a surgical colleague ¹ with whom I was in almost daily contact, told me that he and a brother were thinking of going to Switzerland for New Year, and asked ‘Would I join them?’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘although it seems an odd time of year to choose. What place do you propose?’ ‘Grindelwald,’ he said. ‘They get a spell of settled weather following Christmas; that is what I hear, but we cannot find anyone who has tried it.’ ‘Of course Grindelwald will be smothered in snow, but I shall love to come.’

Four days before Christmas, the morning train for Dover found us, a trio, waiting for it on the platform, and waiting as inconspicuously as we could. We had tweed caps with ear-flaps, tweed tunics and knickerbockers, thick woollen stockings and heavy black boots bearing viciously projecting nails. These accoutrements were the more unwelcomely conspicuous because the morning was in fact mild and bright in London, a so-to-say premature harbinger of next year’s Spring. As we steamed through Kent the gardens were green and almost gay with blossom. We sped across France, meeting no trace of snow. Basle, still no snow. At Lucerne we got the lake-steamer for Interlaken and found some dozen passengers other than ourselves. They were clearly all of them *commis-voyageurs*, and in the catering line. Our boat stopped everywhere and our travelling companions changed all the way. We got our meal on board, and we thought it a good one. The lake shore was fringed with ice and there was some snow on the roads, and sleighs had replaced wheels. Landing at Interlaken we took two sleighs and began to climb the valley-road to Grindelwald. The lake had been blinded in mist, and so was our valley-road. At one place where the road narrowed there hung from overhanging rock the largest icicles I had ever seen—strange and beautiful things, some of them perhaps twelve, or more, feet long. Of the mountain peaks above us, the fog let us see nothing of Jungfrau, and of Wetterhorn and Eiger—not a visible trace.

On the roadway the snow deepened rapidly. A couple of sleighs met us on their way down. Then almost suddenly as we ascended further,

¹ Henry Clutton, then an Assistant Surgeon at St. Thomas’ Hospital, London; his brother’s name was Ralph—*Editor*.

the mist thinned and in a matter of minutes we entered sunshine. Wetterhorn and Eiger looked down on us in brilliant beauty, Jungfrau seemed a monument of purity.

A little later, as the light was beginning to fade, we drew up, with a cheerful jangling of bells, at the old Bear Inn. There, expecting us, were its proprietors of that time—the family Boss—represented by Miss Boss and Emil and another brother—was it John? Miss Boss we found a capable manager and good business woman as well as host. Two great St. Bernard dogs leaving the log-fire in the hall barked at us and returned to the log-fire. Our rooms awaited us. Bare pine-wood floors, and windows looking out on Wetterhorn. Recent snow clothed the whole landscape. Its spirit seized us at once, and before dusk actually set in we were choosing staves from a collection near the doorway and *luges* from a number left there. It seemed a pity to go indoors, but a bell soon summoned us to supper. We sat down twelve all told at a long pine-wood table, and joined the inn's other guests, all but one of them as English as ourselves. Our doyen, so to say, was Captain Abney, the distinguished photographer. His pockets bulged with lenses and he seemed never tired of trying them out. With him were his daughter and her husband. Then there were Professor Gamgee of Manchester who was an invalid and had had a nervous breakdown, a senior medical student from Barts., and a young Swiss baron, somewhat of a toper. The family Boss usually joined us for supper, occupying one end of the long table; they spoke English easily, and Emil knew London. Emil, we were given to understand, was in the summer time a good mountain guide.

By the time we had finished supper an incredible sky of stars had appeared, and we went outside to look at it. Abney set about actually photographing it, with fantastically prolonged exposures—but he was not well satisfied with his results. We all turned in early, quite ready to do so.

The morning broke gloriously and we soon were out of doors enjoying it. The air felt like a chosen tonic—under an almost cloudless sky—but valley-ward the white mist again hung there. I had walked the road in summer and remembered well how hot and breathless in many places I had found it, though then free of fog. If what I find now is a fair sample of winter Grindelwald, I thought, winter is the right season to come here.

No one else joined our party, though the old inn was not a quarter full. A brand-new relatively huge *annexe* nearby stood closed and empty. How did we put in our time? We were out-of-doors through the whole day, even when it occasionally snowed. There was usually a little fresh snow at some time each night. We had brought skates, and a small piece of ice lay alongside of the inn but was too rough for enjoyable skating; we flooded it several times without improving it. As for skis, they were at that date practically unknown to us and to Switzerland. I fancy tradition tells now they first won their way into Grindelwald from Norway, but at what date I cannot say. In

Grindelwald I remember being told in 1889 that skis would not answer because Grindelwald snow was not suitable for them—and I accepted that as a reliable dictum from those who possibly knew. In 1887 we had but that cradle-shaped hobby-horse on runners, the *luge*, not fully developed at that time. A small one-man sled shod with iron. A number of these, with a cord attached in front of each, waited patiently at the inn entrance for use by anyone. What pleasure we got from them! We would toil up some snow-track half the morning to get the furious fun of a glide down in less than a twentieth of the time into the village again. The exhilaration thus engendered in us, hardworked fog-beridden Londoners, went to the head. I, for one, found it an irresistible excitement. One afternoon, however, it gave me a not undeserved scare. Gliding at full-speed down an ice-bound track on the side of the Faulhorn, on reaching the village street, finding it empty and a garden gate open just opposite through which the track plunged further, the temptation was too great for my weak mind. Instead of stopping, I dashed across and through the gate and found myself descending a still steeper track through an orchard down toward the Lower Glacier. About 150 yards ahead I saw descending the same way a figure. I shouted. Whoever it was had but to step aside into the looser snow—but some of the village would do this only at the very latest moment. I repeated the warning cry, *Achtung!* again and again. Still no trace of the expected response. An impact; I saw a momentary soaring of two legs over my head, followed by an ominous dull thud on the frozen track behind. I pulled aside into the soft snow and saw the fallen man lying face upward on the icy path. I expected tragedy and I had found it. I ran to be of what service I could. The man I had knocked down still lay motionless on his back and made no attempt to rise. On my stooping and addressing him he slowly opened his eyes. Then he said, amicably but indistinctly, 'Good evening.' I felt him all over. No, not even a scratch. He was contentedly drunk. I helped him up and saw him on his way and left him finally at his cottage gate.

Christmas was a great event in Grindelwald. The Bear Inn provided a Christmas tree which was almost a whole tree, and we all helped to load it with seasonable gifts. Villagers from Grindelwald began to come in on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and dancing commenced at once to the accompaniment of a cottage piano and a harp. It then went on continuously, not merely until midnight but until the *evening* of next day, Christmas Day. The whole festival culminated in the distribution of presents from the lordly tree itself, accompanied by intermittent supper from a well-laden table hard by. Then, by twos and threes and fours the company, well wrapt up and chattering noisily, began to disperse homeward. Then it was that a conspirator entered the scene. He laid a wager that he could make the village guests disgorge their treasured gifts even before they could get them home. We watched his plot, and truly ludicrous its results were. Most of the company in order to reach home had to pass the village

church and its churchyard. There with a chalked face, and, beyond that, folded head to foot in a shroudlike sheet, the practical joker hid himself behind the churchyard wall and abided his best opportunity. He waited until the festive homeward throng was at its densest—groups spread right across the road. Then, with an unearthly howl, he showed himself above the churchyard wall, and waved his arms as if a soul in torment. The effect was instantaneous. The whole roadway seemed to answer with one cry. Old and young dropped their parcels and fled terror-stricken. Then our graceless wag climbed over the wall and, picking up a number of the dropped belongings, unsheeted himself and walked back to the Bear Inn to claim his wager.

More snow fell. By Emil's advice, our little party devoted a day to the Faulhorn—a day as it proved of cloudless sunshine. The snow was more than knee-deep in many places, even where we kept to the path. We lingered at the top, because of the view, it was so lovely; as the late afternoon light began to take on sunset tints we watched and stayed to let them grow. Two lakes were in almost full view below us. A scene of indescribable colour developed—the sheet of one lake became violet and that of the other flame-like orange. We could have lingered longer but Emil urged us to start down. As we descended we grew careless of the path and near the village found ourselves wading through untrodden snow deep enough to bury standing hurdles and low gates. However we had but to descend, for all descents led to the village road. Looking back I can remember those sunset lakes still. I remember feeling how little possible it was for the painter to attempt such scenery, and then I recalled some of J. M. Turner's, recently exhibited in Bond Street, lent by Ruskin. They had in my young judgment alone seemed adequate—they were the work of Turner's last years when he revisited Switzerland—the Shakespeare of landscape-painting he seemed to me then, and does so still.

We never took the huge St. Bernard dogs with us on our excursions. I asked why and was told they were intended as watch-dogs for the Inn. Before that was explained to me, I had an experience. One morning getting downstairs earlier than the rest of us, I had gone out for a short walk from the inn-entrance and called the dogs to come with me. They came briskly enough, barking as I thought with the enjoyment. They would rush up the low embankment of cleared snow either side and charge down upon me. They did this more and more frequently and fiercely. Suddenly I appreciated that I was mistaken in supposing this was play on their part. They were hunting and they were hunting in a couple. I had not brought even a stick with me—besides they were as big as calves. I turned, as nonchalantly as I could, in my tracks and talking to them, I hoped, more authoritatively, set my steps back toward the inn, but this did not appease them at all. The inn was out of sight behind a bend of the road. As I made my way I was relieved to hear a voice and the cracking of a heavy whip. The dogs heard too. Emil appeared hastening toward me: 'The dogs can be troublesome' was all he remarked, and we returned together.

The weather remained superb. There was in the courtyard in front of the inn a telescope mounted on a tripod. On turning it toward the mountains one could see *gemsen* on the rock ledges. Emil and a friend from the village went after them once during our stay, but explained that it was the close season. 'However,' he added, 'I am a member of Parliament for this district, and if I start before daybreak no one will say anything! He could not, he said, take one of us with him. He had his gun and we heard some shots during the day, but seemingly he brought no game back.

Our sixteen days sped far too fast. The weather remained settled until it was time, to our regret, to go down to Interlaken and start homeward. Interlaken itself was still draped patchily in white mist. Our little trip had told us that at some height above the lake the days can be bright and clear and bracing while the lake itself is mist-covered, and lacks sun. On the strength of this experience I spent Christmas and New Year at the Bear again two years later, but the party I found there was much larger, and more cosmopolitan, including some Americans and French; the annexe, however, was still closed. There were still no skis.

It is now sixty years since I was last at Grindelwald, and it is difficult for me even to imagine the changes in the place. Many more hotels I suppose; I hear of a grotto of green transparent ice in the Lower Glacier, and there is a train running up from Interlaken, and crowds of young people with skis. Ah, that I were young still.

As already said, the expressed wishes of Professor Graham Brown I have long regarded as commands. If I now venture, for this once, to flout his Editorial blue-pencil it is because I feel the following incident regarding him too characteristic to be left unrecorded. It should be common property of his friends. My present Editor and myself found ourselves in Zürich some years ago. It was springtime and we went into the fine booksellers there to look round at anything new. Not guessing who my companion was, an attentive attendant drew to our notice a recently published map of a new ascent of Mont Blanc, displaying Graham Brown's conquest of it by a new route. A few days later, from Berne we went on to Nyon-en-Suisse, to call on American friends then living there. Their villa had a strip of lakeside, and our transatlantic hostess took us to it to do the honours of the view across the Lake. There was a fine glimpse of Mont Blanc which she pointed out. 'The highest mountain in all Europe,' she said, 'Had he seen it before?' She added 'There are some who actually climb up it.' 'Even from the wrong side,' I said. 'Poor people,' she exclaimed. But Graham Brown never gave himself away; he did not even smile.