

Braunwald

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Braunwald

STANLEY MASON

It was early March; beset by a gnawing end-of-winter weariness, we had decided to take a brief holiday in Braunwald. As we moved up the Linth Valley we looked out on villages that have something dark and tenacious about them, as though the last outriders of the Satanic mills had reached up here into the proximity of shining peaks. Factories dominate almost every village, and one is aware of a mountain people adapting bravely to an industrial age.

All the greater is the contrast for those who alight from the train at the last village and take the funicular that leads up to the heights of Braunwald. For they gradually become aware of the unique situation of this resort: it faces south and catches the sun, and it is wreathed in peace and pure air because no motor road scales the steep cliffs on which it perches.

When we stepped on to our hotel balcony, we were greeted by a huge Alpine brotherhood incandescing in the sunlight. The Ortstock, which commands Braunwald, is no mountain giant, but with its black bands of rock and its blue-green icefalls it is still imposing enough. And opposite, over the valley, the higher peaks rise, culminating in the huge shoulders of the snow-crowned Tödi. Standing there to contemplate their distant sublimity, one

◀ **Im Skigelände der Sonnenterrasse von Braunwald (1300–1900 m), Kanton Glarus. Rechts aus dem Wolkenmeer ansteigend die markanten Felsbänder des Ortstockes. Links am Horizont die Kuppe des Tödi**

Les champs de ski de Braunwald, canton de Glaris, se situent entre 1300 et 1900 m. Au centre de la photo: les parois rocheuses du Ortstock émergent de la mer de brouillard. A gauche, la silhouette imposante du Tödi

Regione di Braunwald, canton Glarona (1300–1900 m), propizia allo sport sciatorio. A destra, s'alzano dal mare di nebbia i poderosi cordoni rocciosi dell'Ortstock

In the skiing region of sunny Braunwald (4,250 ft.–6,250 ft.), Canton of Glarus. Right, rising up from the sea of fog are the striking banded rock formations of the Ortstock. Photo Stanley Mason

seemed carried outwards on imaginary wings, transported on to some dizzy rock spur or shimmering crest, alone among white gardens hanging in the sky.

The Braunwald scene is one of snowy slopes scattered sparsely with innumerable chalets and streaked with woods. Paths run far and wide through an ever-changing landscape. Transport facilities ease the upward way for the weary townsman, perhaps the jolliest of them being the funicular sledge. This is a big sledge seating perhaps thirty people, that is pulled up the slope by a cable. The slope is not a steady one, and in fact the ride resembles a slow switchback, but this only adds to the interest and variety of the trip; and as for the occasional bumps when the quaint vehicle dips into snow depressions, an old lady next to me vowed that they helped her to digest her lunch!

Another skyward conveyance is a chair-lift that deposits one on the high shoulder of the Gumen, just below the impressive rock towers of the Eggstock. Here we sat on a rock outcrop, with bilberry plants just beginning to thrust through the crust of snow at our feet, to bask in a sun of reverberating warmth and intensity and

to watch the skiers performing their more or less graceful antics below us. The spell of this eyrie was most potent when the thick mists crept up along the valley and engulfed one chalet after another in a chill, crepuscular embrace. The lift was then a passport to the unbelievable land of the sun. There, against the sky icicles dripped in the warm euphoric brilliance, the air was clear as crystal, and a grizzled old gent in front of the restaurant had even taken off his shirt. While below, a huge lake, masses of fog filled the valley, creeping around the contours of the rocks like some viscous liquid, swallowing and regurgitating the pines: the grey rolling expanses of the cloud country beneath which the valley folk were buried in a glaucous sepulchre of cold. No doubt it is ignoble to gloat when one sits throned in the clear glory of the mountain world and thinks of one's fellow-creatures imprisoned ignominiously in the choking vapours below; yet it would be difficult, looking down on this spectacle of nature, sensing the warm hands of the sun on one's skin and breathing in the immense purity of the Alpine scene, not to feel something very close to exaltation.

Today Braunwald is building new lifts and extending the facilities it offers the skier. Yet in spite of its modernization, which has extended to the funicular and to the bright new lounges of its main hotels, there is still something unhurried and old-world about it. One of its denizens who pleased us best was a local, almost blackened by the sun and with eyes as unabashed as those of a mountain goat, who would come yodelling and whooping down the slopes on his skis with a huge horned sledge at his back. We were surprised one day as we stood by his wooden house to see him swooping down on us like a skiing banshee. He made no attempt to brake and was catapulted up a heap of snow before the house so that he finished up hanging by his finger-tips from the roof guttering and howling with glee. When he came down, he apologized for the fact that there had not been enough snow this winter, so that he was unable to land on the roof as was his wont. These minor attractions aside, however, what made our holiday an idyll was primarily the weather. Those who have never experienced it cannot possibly imagine the glory of a spring sun on an Alpine landscape. The warmth goes to the very roots of human wellbeing. The radiance takes the winter-weary organism by surprise. The summer sky can never be as deep blue as against dazzling white summits, the air never as pure as when it shimmers over the unsullied, sublimating snow. Leafless trees here take on a quite unsuspected beauty, picked out with the grey of lichen and the improbable green of moss, shapes of life that rise with a decorative rhythm from white flame at their roots to a wide blue many-fingered jubilation overhead. In the afternoons the snow grows soft and ductile, the icicles weep with pure joy; in the evenings the small ridges of snow set into icy plumes and crests, the pink light drains upwards and finally glows on far peaks before it dies into a deep indigo pierced with a perpetual population of stars. The nights are deep and silent, and the next morning an albescent light recreates a world which, if it had not been granted us ready-made, only a poet or an inspired child could ever have hoped to imagine.