

Wilfred Grenfell



'Kick it to me!' Wilfred yelled to his older brother.

Alfie dribbled the ball down the side of the football pitch, dodged the boy who was marking him, sighted his brother to his left and kicked the ball in his direction. Wilfred, being smaller and faster, ran with it between two members of the team they were playing, squared up to the net, and kicked for all he was worth.

'Goal!' several dozen boys screamed together. Even the supporters of the other team had to admit, it was a good one. After all, Wilfred was only ten years old.

'I want to be a footballer when I grow up,' he told his father.

Mr Grenfell smiled. 'That would be a turn-up for the books,' he said. 'We've had ministers in the family; we've had teachers in the family, but we've not yet had a footballer.'

'But I don't need to be a minister or a teacher, do I?' Wilfred asked, horrified at

the thought. 'I mean, I can still be a Grenfell and do something else, can't I?'

'Of course you can,' laughed his father. 'But it would be good if we could see you putting effort into your schoolwork. Remember, footballers need to count their goals.'

Wilfred was not stupid, nor was he lazy. His problem was purely and simply that he couldn't sit still. Had his teachers allowed him to move about in the class he might well have done better in his young days at school. But, in 1875, when Wilfred scored his best goal so far, school desks were in straight lines, and boys were expected to have straight backs and silent tongues in the classroom.

'What are you doing, Wilfred?' his teacher asked one day, when he noticed that his pupil was more interested in something on the floor than in what he was being taught.

'I'm sorry, Sir,' the boy said. 'I was watching an earwig.'

'Perhaps you would like to come and tell the class about earwigs then.'

Wilfred was on his feet in an instant.

'The common earwig is between half and three-quarters of an inch long, and brown. It's the most common member of the *Dermaptera* family and its Latin name is *Forficula auricularia*. Although earwigs like dark places, there is no real evidence that they enter the human ear other than by chance.'

Had the teacher not been new to the class he would have been less surprised. All Wilfred's friends knew that he could talk all morning about insects.

Alfie, who was very clever with his hands, made wooden cases in which Wilfred could display the insects he collected. Each specimen was caught carefully in order not to damage it. But, sadly, each insect that reached his beautifully arranged collection was well and truly dead.

'What do we have here?' asked Mr Grenfell, looking at a set of butterflies. 'I know this one. Isn't it a tortoiseshell?'

'That's right. It's *Aglais urticae*. The tortoiseshell butterfly is common all summer in England; then it hibernates from October until April, depending on the weather.'

'And the others in your collection?'

'The next one is the Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*, which arrives here from the Mediterranean in late Spring. Red Admirals eat nettles. We often see them on the buddleia bush in the garden.'

'I suppose that's why buddleia is nicknamed the butterfly bush,' Alfie said.

'Got it in one,' laughed Wilfred.

'I think we should forget the insect collection for an afternoon and plan our next sail,' suggested Alfie, who then began singing an old sea shanty about a drunken sailor.

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'Somehow I don't think it would be a good idea to be drunk and a sailor,' laughed his brother. 'If you were sailing a boat as small as our one, you'd probably end up very wet indeed, maybe even very drowned!'

'Let's have a look at the map.'

Mr Grenfell watched his two growing-up sons. Why was it, he wondered, that Wilfred could discuss insects in great detail - and in Latin - when he had very little interest in his school subjects. And how was it that he could spend ages studying maps with a view to planning sails during the holidays when he wasn't interested in his geography lessons?

'I may be a headmaster,' the man thought, 'but I don't think I understand my younger son very well at all.'

'What a cough you have,' Wilfred's teacher said. 'You should see the school matron.'

It was 1881. The boy was 16 years old and a pupil at Marlborough School in Wiltshire.

'Take this,' Matron said, giving him a spoonful of foul-tasting brown liquid. 'A few doses of this will soon sort you out.'

'Or kill me,' thought Wilfred. 'It's Disgusting with a capital D!'

But the medicine did not cure the cough, which grew worse and worse.

'Here's Wilfred coming,' his friends said, before he came into sight. 'I'd know that cough anywhere.'

Taking their doctor's advice, Wilfred's parents sent him off to stay with his aunt in the South of France.

'The warm air there will do him the world of good,' said the doctor. 'A term away from school won't cause any problems, I'm sure.'

Mr Grenfell wasn't quite so sure. He just shook his head when he thought of Wilfred's school marks, and the regular 'Could try harder' and 'Could do better' that was written in his exercise books.

'I'm having a wonderful time,' Wilfred wrote home to Alfie. 'Aunt's friend has two teenage daughters and they're so interested in nature study. Yesterday we collected frogs from the wild and brought them into the miniature ponds in the garden. Mind you, we've had to put nets over the ponds to keep the frogs in. And there are butterflies here that I've never seen in England. How many different butterflies do you think there are? I'll bring some specimens back with me... if I can ever tear myself away from here to come home.'

But come home he did, not best pleased to be back at school.

'What are you going to do with your life?' Mr Grenfell asked his son when he was eighteen years old.

'I've decided to be a doctor,' he said. 'That's what I'm going to do.'

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'A doctor? We've never had a Doctor Grenfell in the family,' his father replied. 'Do you know how much studying that involves?'

Wilfred found training to be a doctor very hard work indeed. His head was fairly buzzing with medical information as he walked along a London street in 1885. Suddenly he heard the sound of singing, and he followed it into a huge tent.

'Who's he?' the young man wondered. Then he remembered hearing about a famous American preacher called D.L. Moody and that he was in town.

During the meeting a man prayed a very long prayer. Wilfred was becoming so bored that he was about to leave when he was amazed by Mr Moody, who interrupted the prayer, saying, 'Let us sing a hymn while our brother finishes his prayer.'

Wilfred stayed! By the time he left that meeting he had come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour. As he walked home, Wilfred decided to try to be the kind of doctor Jesus Christ would want him to be.

Not too long afterwards, Wilfred was in the middle of a bunch of noisy young boys. He shook his head and smiled. His minister had asked him if he wanted to be a Sunday school teacher. 'Yes, I'd love to!' he'd exclaimed. Now he was finding out that teaching noisy young lads wasn't as easy as he had thought.

'Sit down and listen,' he told his class, over and over again.

But they seemed quite unable to sit still.

'What are they like?' Wilfred said to himself, after one particularly noisy class and the answer came into his mind right away. 'They're exactly the same as I was. What they need is to get rid of some energy before they'll sit and listen.'

That was how the East End Boys' Club was born. Not only did they have games together at their weekly meetings, they also went sailing with Wilfred and Alfie, and had a marvellous time. They learned that it was good to train their bodies to serve the Lord as well as training their minds and souls.

No sooner was Wilfred back in London than he realised how much he missed the sea.

'I really don't like big cities,' he thought. 'In fact, I'm not at my happiest on dry land at all. But I don't suppose there are many medical practices at sea!'

Not long afterwards there was a surprise in store for Dr Wilfred Grenfell.

'I think I know of a job that would suit you very well' said Dr Treves. 'I'm a member of the National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. We're looking for a doctor to help with the work. We're presently equipping a medical ship and we need a doctor on board to serve the deep sea fishermen in the North Sea.'

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Wilfred's pulse raced as his heart beat fast with excitement.

'It won't be easy,' added Dr Treves. 'Deep sea fishermen can be a rough lot of men.'

Easy or difficult, this was the job for Dr Wilfred Grenfell. He took the train to Yarmouth where the *Thomas Gray* was being fitted out as a medical ship. It looked grand tied up to the quay, but it seemed smaller and frailer a few months later when, in 1888, after a stormy sea voyage across the Atlantic, the crew first sighted the fishing fleet.

'Hoist the blue banner,' the captain shouted. 'That'll let them know we're here.'

Before long Wilfred's first patients were being helped to transfer from trawlers that had drawn alongside.

There were horrible burns from fires on the wooden ships, broken bones held together with makeshift splints, rotten teeth to be extracted, injuries from drunken falls and brawls, as well as all sorts of illnesses.

Once men's medical needs were seen to, they were offered books to read, a brief rest and a change of clothes.

They also heard about the Lord Jesus Christ and how he could save their souls for heaven. Life at sea was rough and tough, and the *Thomas Gray* was a welcome addition to the fleet.

For three years Wilfred worked among the fishermen. On shore he went round churches telling people about the work of the National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen.

'I could almost feel the wind whistling through my hair,' one lady said, after hearing him speak.

'And I began to feel sea-sick,' her friend laughed. 'I've never heard anyone tell such vivid stories. We really must give some money to help with Dr Grenfell's work.'

In 1892, after hearing about the fishermen who spent all year round off the coast of Newfoundland, Wilfred felt the Lord was leading him there. As they sailed towards St John's, a strange light lit the sky.

'It looks like the whole town's on fire,' one of the sailors said. And it was. Reaching harbour as quickly as they could, they set out to help in the devastation. Wilfred had plenty of burns patients that day.

'We needed you, Doctor,' the governor of the colony said, by way of thanks.

And that's just what Wilfred felt. There were plenty of doctors in England. He was needed here.

From St John's, in Newfoundland, Wilfred headed north among the difficult currents, icebergs, fjords and cliffs of Labrador. In one settlement after another he found people in need of his help.

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'We've never had a doctor here,' he was told, and he could see that himself from badly set bones, wounds that wouldn't heal, and young people old beyond their years.

He knew they'd never had a minister either, so as he worked as a doctor, he also chatted to people about the Lord.

During the years that followed Wilfred worked among the fishermen and visited settlements. But, in 1899, he decided that Labrador was where he should be rather than among the fishermen. In the summers Wilfred sailed up and down the wild coastline. Winters were spent travelling by dog sled. Once, in April 1908, when he was on his way through thick ice to reach a boy who was ill, he and his dogs were trapped on ice that broke off and floated out to sea! Three of his dogs lost their lives that day in order that Wilfred and his other dogs could be saved.

'That was six months ago,' Wilfred concluded, having told a group of Christians back in England about his adventure. 'God was very good to me that day.'

God was also good to him on the voyage back to Labrador, for that was when he met Anne MacClanahan, who became his wife. He spent much of that voyage telling her what his hopes and dreams were for Labrador.

Years later Wilfred and his wife revisited those dreams.

'Just think of it,' he said, smiling. 'It's

1927, and the International Grenfell Mission has helped to build six hospitals, five schools, nine nursing stations and an orphanage.'

'And it has allowed women to sell the crafts they make over the long winter months. Some of their lovely work is on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean now,' Anne smiled.

'Most important of all,' Wilfred added, 'men, women, boys and girls have heard about Jesus, and many have put their faith in him.'

Anne smiled. 'There are people in this cold, wild place who feel as though they've walked along the warm sandy shores of the Sea of Galilee, for I've never heard a storyteller like you. Of course, that's also why the Mission has been able to do so much. When you tell people in Britain or America about the hardships in Labrador and Newfoundland, they feel so chilled and hungry and ill that they're willing to open their hearts and their wallets to give money for the work to go on.'

The work did go on, even after Wilfred Grenfell died in 1940, two years after his wife.



Fact File: Discovery

John Cabot, in the ship *Matthew*, first sighted the lands of Labrador and Newfoundland on June 24th 1497. In the year 1583 Sir Humphrey Gilbert reached the harbour of St. John's with letters from Queen Elizabeth I authorising him to take possession of Newfoundland.



Keynote: Wilfred Grenfell wasn't that great a scholar. He would rather kick a football around than sit still in class. Earwigs were more interesting than algebra. But he knew a lot about the natural world and showed himself to be intelligent as well as hard working. Sometimes we can feel that we aren't as successful as we could be. Perhaps we wish we were smarter or that we knew more facts? God has given us all different abilities. Some people are smart and organised, some are good at looking after others. Wilfred was good with practical, hands-on things. We should thank God for our abilities. We shouldn't covet the talents that other people have. Instead, we should work hard at developing those talents God has given us.



Think: When Wilfred was asked what he was going to do with his life he said that he was going to be a doctor. His father reminded him that he would have to do a lot of study - and Wilfred wasn't well known for being a good student. However, he did his best although it was hard at first. For years God had been preparing him for mission work at sea and in inhospitable regions. Think about what God is preparing you for - right at this moment. You may go on to study at college or university, you may take up a trade or learn a skill. You may even have a hobby or favourite pastime that God is planning to use in the future to bring others to trust in his Son, Jesus Christ.



Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for gifts and talents. Thank you that you are planning my future and that I am safe with you, whatever happens. Help me to use my time, strengths, body and mind - everything about me - to honour you. Amen.