

## Clarence Bicknell and *Cypripedium calceolus*

By Graham Avery<sup>1</sup>

The British botanist Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) often visited the Valle di Pesio, 120 km north of his home in Bordighera, to botanise and to escape from the summer heat, and it was there that he found *Cypripedium calceolus* for the first time in 1899. This rare plant (*Lady's Slipper Orchid* in English, *Scarpetta di Venere* in Italian, *Sabot de Vénus* in French) is the largest European orchid. It grows in woodlands on calcareous soils, and is legally protected in many countries.



*Cypripedium calceolus*

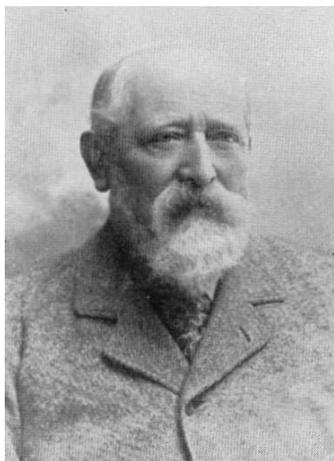
The river Pesio flows down from the Ligurian Alps, whose highest peak is Punta Marguareis (2651m.). The main settlements in its upper valley are San Bartolomeo di Pesio (575m.) and Certosa di Pesio (859m.) originally a monastery, then a spa for hydrotherapy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and now again the home of a religious order.

In 1885 Clarence met the Swiss botanist Emile Burnat (1828-192) with whom he formed a lifelong friendship, and they exchanged letters and visits with regularly. Burnat had already visited the Valle di Pesio in 1872, staying for three months at Certosa with his daughter Marianne who was recovering from illness. His exploration of the local mountains inspired him to study the flora of the Maritime Alps, and this led to his monumental *Flore des Alpes Maritimes*, published in Geneva in six volumes from 1892 to 1917, and a posthumous volume published in 1931. For botanical purposes Burnat included the Ligurian Alps in the Maritime Alps, but they are now generally considered as a separate group, divided from the Maritime Alps by the Col de Tende.

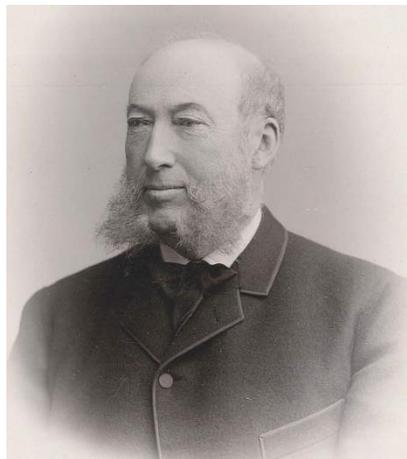
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<sup>1</sup> The author, who is Vice-Chairman of the Clarence Bicknell Association, has pursued research for many years into Clarence's activity as a botanist, and has published a number of articles on the subject at <https://www.clarencebicknell.com/en/downloads>. He wishes to thank M. Pierre Boillat and M. Nicolas Fumeaux of the *Conservatoire et Jardin botaniques de la Ville de Genève* (CJBG) for their assistance with his research for this article. Documents in this article are published with the kind permission of CJBG.

Today the contribution of the two botanists to the study of the local flora is commemorated by the ‘Stazione Botanica Alpina E. Burnat / C. Bicknell’ in the Parco Naturale del Marguareis.



Clarence Bicknell



Emile Burnat

Clarence addressed a number of letters to Burnat from S. Bartolomeo in July-August 1888, June-August 1890, and July-September 1899.

In 1888 Burnat joined him briefly in S. Bartolomeo before going on to botanise in Val Casterino and Val Fontanalba, where later Clarence discovered the prehistoric rock engravings. Interestingly, Clarence commented to Burnat in 1897 that the Val Casterino was ‘less rich botanically than the Val Pesio’.

In 1890 during a stay in S. Bartolomeo Clarence discovered *Ranunculus lacerus*, which he reported in an article published in the following year in the *Journal of Botany*. This – the only article that Clarence contributed to a British botanical journal – was entitled ‘*Ranunculus Lacerus* Bell.’ (Bell. is the standard abbreviation for Carlo Bellardi, the botanist who first published the plant in 1791). Clarence wrote:

This last summer, Mons. Emile Burnat, of Vevey, Switzerland, who has been working at the Flora of the Maritime Alps for about twenty years ... jokingly said to me, when I told him that I was going to the Val Pesio, near Cuneo, for a few months : ‘You must look for *Ranunculus lacerus* Bell., a supposed hybrid between *R. pyrenaus* L. and *R. aconitifolius* L.’ I did not know anything about this plant, but I had not been settled at the village inn of S. Bartolomeo more than ten days, when ... at about 4500

ft. I saw two plants of a *Ranunculus* which I had never found before, and which I at once imagined might be the rarity in question. A week later ... I found five or six other specimens, and when I gave these to M. Burnat he at once pronounced them to be the true *R. lacerus* of Bellardi.

In 1899 during a stay in S. Bartolomeo Clarence discovered *Cypripedium calceolus*, and reported it in letters to Burnat which express his joy in finding the plant, and his pride in contributing a new species to Burnat's flora of the Maritime Alps. On 6 July 1899 he wrote:

J'ai trouvé – oui, j'ai trouvé – aujourd'hui une plante que je n'ai jamais vue hors de l'herbier – une plante à laquelle j'ai pensé toute ma vie – et je craignais de mourir sans l'avoir vue. Je crois que vous ne l'avez pas des A. Mar. ou au moins vous ne l'avez pas trouvée. Peut-être je me trompe, je me trompe si souvent, mais je crois que vous m'avez dit dans le temps que l'on ne savait pas où le trouver. Vous me le direz. Nous nous promenions, Luigi et moi, et tout d'un coup j'ai vu en fruit, les fleurs flétries, cette plante, mais je l'ai reconnu immédiatement, et j'ai eu un moment - plusieurs moments de tremblement, je me tournais à droite et à gauche, ne voulant plus regarder, et me disant « peut-être c'est une rêve ». Je fais toujours comme ça quand je vois pour la 1<sup>ère</sup> fois une plante rare ou non vue. Puis après nous allions plus loin, et nous en trouvions davantage, et avec des superbes fleurs. C'est ... mais non, je ne dois pas vous le dire aujourd'hui, parceque vous savez que les grandes joies comme les grands douleurs quelquefois font beaucoup de mal, trop d'émotions... Donc, dites-moi premièrement si vous désirez aucune Orchidée des Alpes Mar.

(Today I've found – yes, I've found – a plant that I have never seen outside the herbarium – a plant which I've thought about all my life – and I feared I would die without seeing it. I think you don't have it in your 'Alpes Maritimes' or at least you haven't found it. Maybe I'm mistaken, I often make mistakes, but I think you once told me that no-one knew where to find it. Anyhow, you will tell me. We were walking, Luigi and I, and suddenly I saw this plant in fruit, with wilted flowers. I recognised it immediately, and I had a moment – several moments – of trembling, turning to right and left, not wanting to look, saying to myself “perhaps it's a dream”. That's what I always do when I see for the first time a plant which is rare, or which I haven't seen before. Then we went on, and we saw more of them, with splendid flowers. It's ... but no, I mustn't tell you today, for you know that great joy, like great pain, can hurt a lot, with too much emotion. So, tell me first of all if you want an Orchid for your 'Alpes Maritimes')

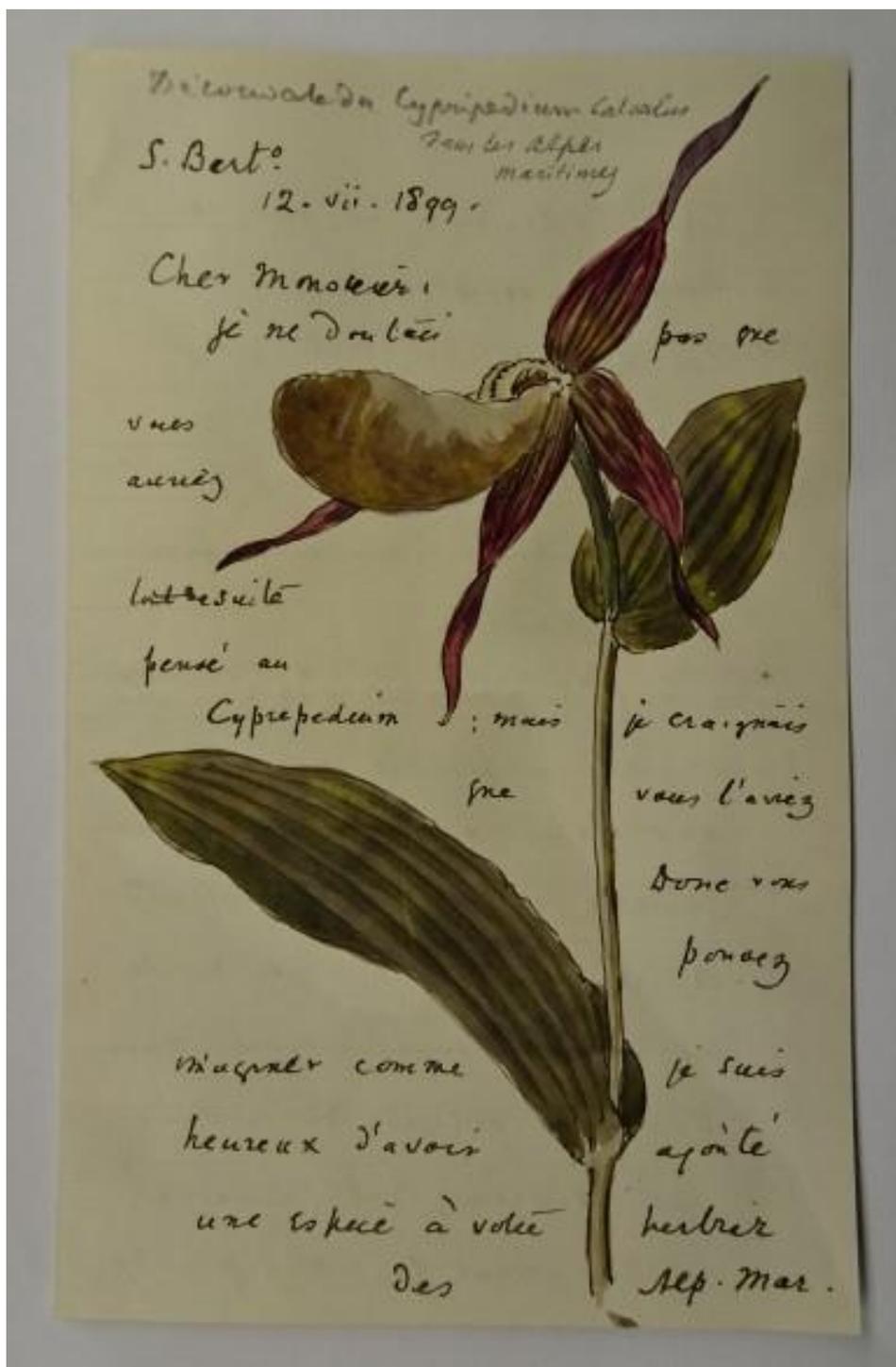
In his reply to Clarence, which has not survived, Burnat apparently confirmed that the plant was *Cypripedium calceolus*. Clarence wrote to him on 12 July 1899:

Je ne doutais pas que vous auriez tout de suite pensé au *Cypripedium calceolus*, mais je craignais que vous l'aviez. Donc vous pouvez imaginer comme je suis heureux d'avoir ajouté une espèce à votre flore des Alp. Mar. C'est dans les bois au pied des Rocce Brusseis, au-dessus le Val Valanga dei Frati que je l'ai trouvé, et il y en a beaucoup là. Merci de votre chère réponse qui m'a fait grand plaisir.

(I was sure you would think straight away of *Cypripedium calceolus*, but I was afraid you already had it. So you can imagine how happy I am to have added a species to

your flora of the Maritime Alps. It was in the woods at the foot of the Rocce Brusseis, above the Val Valanga dei Frati, that I found it, and there are lots of them there. Thanks for your kind reply, which gave me much pleasure)

Clarence embellished the first page of this letter with a splendid water-colour of the plant:



He also sent to Burnat a dried specimen of the plant, now in the Herbarium Burnat in Geneva.

In 1900 Clarence wrote to Burnat from Bordighera on 23 February, to say that he had recently been invited to S. Bartolomeo by Gastaldi, inn-keeper of the *Donna Bianca*:

C'est charmant en hiver, et très intéressant à voir le grand travail de ces pauvres paysans qui grimpent les montagnes au clair de la pleine lune, et le matin descendent en glissant à pied avec une grande quantité de foin de poids de 300 kilo derrière eux, ils viennent l'un après l'autre, paraît un train, et on me dit que quand le sentier dans la neige est en bon ordre on descend du haut de Rocce Camouss au Valon de Cravaira en 20 minutes quoique il faut 4 heures pour y monter. Tant de mouvement dans la vallée, tout le monde occupé avec des traîneaux ecc, très amusant. Voici une petite photographie pour vous, près du pont couvert de la Chartreuse, et voici le lieu précis X [*sketch of mountains*] ou croit le *Cypripedium* au-dessus (et dans) le petit triangle boisé au pied des rochers Brisseis au-dessus le Val Valanga dei Frati.

(It's charming in winter, and very interesting to see the labour of the poor peasants who climb the mountains in the light of the full moon, and in the morning slide down on foot with a huge amount of hay behind them weighing 300 kilos. They come down one after the other, like a train, and I'm told that when the path in the snow is in good order they come down from the Rocce Camouss to the Valon de Cravaira in 20 minutes, although it takes a good hour to go up. So much activity in the valley, everyone busy with sledges and so on, very amusing. Here's a little photo for you, taken near the covered bridge at Certosa, and here is the exact spot [*sketch of the mountains*] where *Cypripedium* grows, below and in the small wooded triangle at the foot of the Brusseis rocks, above the Val Valanga dei Frati)

Here is Clarence's sketch of the mountains, with the find-spot marked X:



It was not until 31 July 1912 that Burnat himself found *Cypripedium calceolus*, in Val Valanga dei Frati where Clarence had found it in 1899<sup>2</sup>. A specimen collected on that date is in the Herbarium Burnat. Later, *Cypripedium calceolus* was thought to be extinct in the Valle di Pesio, but in 1992 it was rediscovered, thanks to Clarence's letter to Burnat describing where he found it in 1899<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The film *Il sentiero delle orchidee - Emile Burnat in Valle Pesio* includes a scene in which Burnat laments that he has never found *Cypripedium calceolus*, 'a flower found only by Bicknell, about which I dream'. See more about the film at [https://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads\\_news/burnat\\_the\\_film\\_avery\\_2018.pdf](https://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/burnat_the_film_avery_2018.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See *Contributi alla conoscenza della flora del Massiccio del Marguareis* by B. Gallino, I. Ostellino & D. Re in *Rivista Piemontese di Storia Naturale* 14, 1993, pages 43-50.