

Valerie Lester, Clarence Bicknell's biographer, transcribed in December 2015 the parts of Margaret's letters to Mrs. Fanshawe Walker that are of interest to us. The letters were deep in the files of the Bicknell family collection at Marcus's house, where Valerie has been staying over Christmas. The transcripts help to shed light on life in the Casa Fontanalba and up in the mountains seeking out the botany and the archaeology.



The photo, right, shows Luigi Pollini, Clarence Bicknell and the writer of these letters Margaret Berry on the terrace of the Casa Fontanalba, probably a few years later than these diary excerpts.

MARGARET BERRY'S LETTERS TO MRS. FANSHAWE-WALKER¹ - EXCERPTS

In Marcus's collection. CL 516.

Aug. 30 (probably summer of 1901?). According to Margaret Berry, Ampeglio, the Museum Gardener, had come up from Bordighera to the Casa Fontanalba, Clarence summer base, and was helping him "to dig in the various caves and places where Uncle C.² thinks it most likely to come upon bones or flint instruments or any remains or signs of the prehistoric folk who drew on the rocks. . . The Uncle is keen and interested as ever in flowers and rocks. They are a perpetual enjoyment to him in one way or another.

"August 15. Val Casterino. Presso Signora Lanzi vedova Bosio, Tenda.

We all went to bed at 9 o'clock Uncle Clarence and Edward³ being ashamed to go sooner- but for at least ¼ hour they had been sitting with their watches in their hands longing for the hour to come. What slaves to custom! Why not go to bed when you are sleepy? This morning at 6 we all got up and at 6.30 Uncle C, Edward, Madalena, and Libera went up a hill, a short walk, returning for lunch at 11.30. I am lazy so stay at home to keep house with Luigi. I breakfasted about 7 and since then have been lying outside on my long chair wrapped up in a rug and with all my warm winter clothes on, enjoying the delicious fresh air, which is invigorating in itself. The Uncle is very well and fat and sunburnt and distinctly "good" as you call it. He seems thoroughly happy here, and enjoys every minute of the days, always "so busy there is not a minute to spare" and "no time to read."

¹ Mrs Fanshawe Walker was a pillar of the new British society in Bordighera but it is not clear when she settled there. The foundation of the Anglican church in Bordighera dates back to 1863 thanks to the first British guests who resided here from October to May, some settling permanently. The first faithful gathered in prayer at the "Hotel d'Angleterre", today known as Villa Eugenia, located in Via Vittorio Emanuele 218. With the rapid rise of the British population, the bishop of Gibraltar appointed a pastor for the city of Bordighera, Reverend Henry Sidebottom. When the Hotel d'Angleterre also became too small, the community of believers was hosted by Mrs. Walker Fanshawe in her private chapel in the park of Villa Rosa. In 1873, Mrs. Fanshawe donated a portion of its park to build a real church. There was of course a fundraiser to which Charles Henry Lowe also contributed and the church was called "All Saints Church". [2] Eventually the British population had a true place of worship, which also became a centre for social life, where every Thursday afternoon the pastor received for tea the most active members of the city. The small church was enlarged in 1883 and in 1890, when two aisles, a new sacristy and a room for the organ were added. In September 1878 Clarence Bicknell, aged thirty six, settled in Bordighera as chaplain to the Anglican Church. He subsequently purchased the Villa Rosa from Mrs Fanshawe Walker (probably in about 1880; it was his home till his death in 1918.

² The Uncle, or uncle C is Clarence Bicknell. Margaret Berry née Serecold was the wife of Clarence's nephew Edward Berry, son of Clarence's sister Ada.

³ Edward or E is Edward Berry, the writer's husband.

"Rob [*Margaret's dog*] is very happy here and is much interested in and rather afraid of 6 rabbits which are loose about the house and yard and which are to be killed shortly to feast Mr and Mrs Pellegrino's daughter and son-in-law and family⁴ who are arriving on Friday, tomorrow.

"The utter peacefulness of this is perfect. No rings at the bell. No babies. Come or coming to arrange for! No doctors to interview. No tramps to feed. And no C. Clark's to wrestle with about servant. Nothing to do but to eat. Sleep. Vegetate. Read, write, work as one's fancy prompts or wander about in the grass and the rocks or by the rushing river side, and think of all the other people whom one would love to have up here to see all the delights of the mountains.

"You will be glad to hear that the smell in the WC is not so bad as it was and that it has been cleaned and whitewashed and is really respectable outwardly. What it is inwardly I do not know. Perhaps "ravening wolves."!! I am going to make minute enquiries about the cleaning out of the horrible pit, but perhaps as you say it is best to leave it while we are here and not rake up horrors of smells in the effort to clean it out.

"Last night at about 11.30 or midnight, a party of men went down, singing sort of solemn choruses as they walked, very pretty and well sung in parts, making a charming effect . . . Their voices were true and deep. , ,

"No sign of lack of food here as yet. Far too much to eat at every meal."

"Aug. 23. Casterino. Now I must tell you a little of our life up here. The Uncle and E. usually breakfast on coffee and large wedges of hot toast and butter at 6.30-7. I about ¾ hour later on tea and similar toast and butter. This enables me to let E. get up and go away out of our rather small room before I begin my toilette, and also allows me to indulge my natural laziness by staying in bed for ½ hour longer, a remarkably satisfactory arrangement. The Uncles continues to think me lazy and ignorant and a "fine lady" into the bargain, and despises me accordingly. But I am bearing up nevertheless, and continue to darn socks, and make the beds and pick gooseberries for dinner in the most approved domestic style, as if it was the form of occupation I specially delighted in. The Uncle and E. go for long walks about every other day, and short walks on the off days. Sometimes I go too, but they are rather too much for me, so I shall continue my lazy ways and not try many more. Yesterday we all: Uncle C, E., Luigi⁵, Maddalena, Libera, Celestino (L's brother who is staying here for a week) and I went up to Lago Verde and on to the rocks beyond, where I saw the wonderful drawings and sat by and watched the squeezes and rubbings being taken . . . Quite the finest scenery I have seen yet is in Val Masca at the head of this valley and at right angles to it, where the mountains tower above one, and the torrent roars beneath, while the gorge narrows and heightens till one realizes one's littleness amid all that grandeur and ruggedness, and one wonders at the centuries that have passed and left their traces only in glacier slides and wrecks of trees brought down by avalanches. It is a wonderful sight certain, and when one turned a corner, out of the darkness and gloom of the rugged valley, to see the distant peaks of the French mountains with the glory of the sunset behind them, and felt the glow of the red and yellow rays rays one one's face, it was like the opening of the gates of Paradise after the long dark valley was past.

"Then the flowers and ferns that grow by the wayside are so lovely and varied, and one can hardly get along for the many times one has to stop to pick and examine some new treasure and all the time with the roar of the torrent in one's ears, and the whistling of the wind in the fir trees above, there seems to much to occupy one's mind and thoughts that it is hard to tear oneself away to the tame valley in which we live, and return to dinner!! Now enough of this drivel.

"Val Casterino, Sept 3rd.

⁴ Clarence rented a house from the Pellegrinos before he built the Casa Fontanalba.

⁵ Luigi Pollini, Clarence's helper and friend.

"I have seen no signs of starvation as yet tho' I am constantly being told that we are on the verge of it. However, some kind providence always seems to step in and supply the special want; either a sporting shepherd brings in a chamois (very tough and nasty!! But that is beside the mark) when we have no other meat left, or a neighbour "lends " us some bread, we ours runs short—or Madalena makes us the most delicious fine white bread made with Yeatman's assistance to rise!!

"We eat many funghi, wild raspberries, wild green gooseberries and wild spinach, and the Uncle keeps on telling me to collect and take him bundles of caraway seeds for the winter, but as I do not have more than "etto" of these things in a year, I do not think it's worth while bothering. I would much rather bring home lots of ferns and plants for the precious "property" for that is occupying many of my spare moments now, and I am planning a new path from your end of the house to meet the gradual easily graded one from the west end of the house up to the pergola. . .

"We have been for an enormous excursion today, and I am sleepy so forgive a driveling letter, as my faculties are hardly in good working order. We started at 6.20, I on a large and stalwart mule, astride as my custom is, and went up to Monte Santa Maria whence a lovely view is usually to be seen . . . We went over what seemed to me miles of Uncle C.s red inscribed rocks and very marvelous and interesting they are . . . We lunched up at the top at 10.30 and did not get home till 5.20 so I was almost faint with hunger. E had to give me whiskey at 3 to keep me going, but 4 ½ hours on a mule's back and 3 ½ on foot over very rough ground, not to mention being out in this very strong air for the whole day, are calculated to take it out of one. Since dinner I have recovered and feel almost myself again except for stiff legs and very shakey knees, so it shows it was only want of food.

Sept. 5th. Val Casterino

"The Uncle and E. have again gone up to their beloved rocks for the days and will return, I suppose, as usual, about 5 o'clock, famished and thirsty and very hot and sticky, but nevertheless triumphant with their day's work. Each new rubbing always seems to me remarkably like the last, but I do not dare say so, for this is such intense pride and satisfaction in the "new" ones that I cannot betray my ignorance and want of perception in thinking them all alike. Once you have seen a plough and oxen's heads and horns and a weapon and a plan of a " property" and a skin, you have seen it all, and the differences are only to ring the changes in size and shape of these. However, they are as happy as happy can be over it, and Rog enjoys these long days on the rocks as much as they do, for he cheerfully and diligently hunts marmots all day long but needless to say, never catches one. Still he is never discouraged but pursues the little animals for hours up and down and round and round that vast desert of rocks and grass. , ,

"Last night for the first time since we have been here, we had to dine indoors in the dark and dismal sitting room, for it was too wet and cold outside, but we are indeed lucky to have had three weeks of such splendid weather. . .

"I am still contentedly lazy, and have not written so much as one article for that haunting and terrifying "Journal." Edward begs me not to think about it all, but to enjoy my idleness with a clear conscience, but I feel as if I ought to do some kind of work, and merely assimilating impressions is not enough.

Portrait of Margaret Berry, right

