

CEYLON - Excerpt from

Marvels: The Life of Clarence Bicknell - Botanist, Archaeologist, Artist

By Valerie Lester

From CHAPTER 16

SPLENDOURS AND LOSSES

Clarence had long yearned to see true tropical vegetation, and was planning to spend five weeks in Ceylon, but first he made a quick trip to England in November 1907. A year had passed since Ada's stroke and he wished to check on her recovery. Also, he hoped to meet with Sir David Prain, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, who might be invaluable in providing names of botanists in Ceylon.ⁱ Unfortunately, and while still at Ada's house he himself was felled by a severe attack of lumbago which immobilized him, so the list of botanists failed to materialize.

Once back in Italy he and Luigi set off for Ceylon – for convenience, I shall use the word Ceylon, the common usage in Clarence's day – on 18 December 1907, but, and irritatingly, no diary survives from this time. All that exists is a couple of short descriptions in letters to Burnat. But where Clarence is wanting, Reginald Farrer is forthcoming. Farrer (1880–1920), then a 27-year-old world traveller and plant collector, also visited the island in early 1908,ⁱⁱ and his book, *In Old Ceylon*, was published later that year. Thus Clarence's first view of Ceylon from the sea would have been the same as Farrer's, who begins his book with these lines: 'Hull down, hull down, lies Lanka, sleeping island of the saints . . . Faint breezes of perfume hover and linger round the ship as she dreams her way cross the surface of a flawless opal sea . . . Everything heralds the approach of fairyland.'

Farrer softens up his reader; then comes the dagger: 'Colombo is a modern ugly mushroom, a convenience, an invention of modern ugly races that were ravaging in blue woad when Asoka ruled the East . . . Flat, flat is the land here, and the town that squatters along its shore – flat as an old stale story that was never interesting . . . big hotels upon its frontage extend their uncompromising European facades. Within them there is a perpetual twilight, and meek puss-faced Cinhalese take perpetually

the drink orders of prosperous planters and white-whiskered old fat gentlemen in sun-hats lined with green.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Clarence is kinder. On 11 January, he wrote to Burnat that a week had already passed in a paradise of vegetation. He did mention that Colombo was hot, but found the heat could be mitigated by going out early in the morning and again in the evening. He and Luigi made several excursions from the city, some by car, some on foot, and some on Ceylon’s admirable train system.

The two men had enjoyed a splendid, calm voyage via the Suez Canal, with a stop at Aden, about which Clarence wrote: ‘Aden interested me a great deal and I saw more than 78 species of flowers on the promontory, but not the famous *Adenia*.’^{iv} Like everyone arriving in Ceylon, he was immediately struck by the magnificence and omnipresence of palm trees, commenting to Burnat that the *Cocos nucifera* everywhere were truly superb. Clarence’s ‘everywhere’ is borne out in a 1907 handbook of Ceylon by J.C. Willis which states that Ceylon’s coconut palms were thought to produce 800,000,000 nuts annually.^v Willis was the director of the Royal Botanic Garden at Peradeniya from 1896 to 1912.

After a week spent in Colombo and along the east coast of the island, Clarence and Luigi took the train to Kandy. In the first part of the journey, they travelled past paddy-fields, banana groves, palm forests and acres of waterlilies and lotus before beginning the climb up terraced hills, followed by ridge after ridge into the hill country. At last, the train entered a narrow gorge before it reached the final pass, and then, after all the uphill chugging and puffing, it ran merrily down into Kandy.

From the station, Clarence and Luigi ascended a steep 100 feet to the town, where they had their first view of its lake and the famous Queen’s Hotel nestled on its shore. He expressed his delight to Burnat: ‘How wonderful it is to see *Convolvulus* and *Thunbergia* everywhere, and an infinity of plants that I know only in our greenhouses, and then ferns and *Nymphaea* [water lilies] . . . After a week we hope to climb the Pic d’Adam, visit the high, cold [hill station] Newera Ellya [Nuwara Eliya] and after that the ruins of ancient cities.’^{vi}



The Pic d'Adam, or Sri Pada, is an astonishing 2,243-metre cone, the fourth highest mountain in Ceylon. It is famous for a rock formation referred to as the sacred footprint, claimed by Buddhists to be that of the Buddha, by Hindus as Shiva's, and by Muslims and Christians as Adam's. However, the Pic d'Adam is not as high as Pidurutalagala or Mount Pedro (2,524 metres), the highest mountain in Ceylon, which means Sidney Bicknell climbed higher in Ceylon than Clarence by 281 metres, a fact that would have pleased him mightily. This is assuming that Clarence fulfilled his plan, and it is hard to imagine that he did not.

Reginald Farrer visited the Tooth Relic, the holiest of holies, said to be the Buddha's canine tooth, housed in the magnificent temple at Dalada Maligawa, just outside Kandy. Clarence may well have done so too if he had been interested enough to tear himself away from the glories of the Peradeniya garden to visit the temple. Clarence was much affected by Buddhism, although not to the extent Farrer was. He read about it – books on Buddhism were found in his library – but Farrer converted and remained a Buddhist for the rest of his life.

The distance between Kandy and the Peradeniya garden is 5.3 kilometres, a journey that Farrer made by rickshaw. Clarence and Luigi probably walked the short distance because it was cool in Kandy, and they would think nothing of such a stroll. Francis Ramaley, an American professor visiting Peradeniya in 1908, stated that the climate was such that the botanist could live there in comfort and work regularly as it was not extreme in either rainfall or temperature.^{vii} Just imagine the vegetation and creatures Clarence and Luigi would have seen as they strolled along close to Ceylon's greatest river, the Mahaweli Ganga, which on reaching Peradeniya loops around to surround the garden: brilliant butterflies, elephants being washed in the river, and perhaps a crocodile or two.

The Peradeniya Garden is vast, and fulfilled Clarence's dreams of tropical vegetation: acres of towering bamboos, palms and yet more palms, banyans, spices, cataracts of allamandass and bignonias flowing down from the tallest trees, and wisteria winding their way



up. The scientist in Clarence appreciated the research facilities and the experimental station and its leaf insect breeding programme.^{viii} The director (and author), J.C. Willis, made every facility available to visiting men of science, including the herbarium with its competent curators and the library of botanical books and periodicals. Clarence had hoped to meet Willis, but was unable to do so, because he was away. Clarence would, however, have made use of his handbook on Ceylon.

Clarence and Luigi took another glorious train ride through the mountains from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya. There they met John Ferguson, a long-time Ceylon resident and editor of the *Ceylon Observer* for many years, a man instrumental in the development of the railway system and deeply committed to the politics and agriculture of the country, and thus a mine of information. Ferguson and Clarence struck up a strong friendship and were still corresponding three years later. Clarence's letter of 23 August 1911 throws some light on his visit to Nuwara Eliya. 'I often think of your place in the mountains, ferns &c. . . . your offer is very tempting as an exchange of houses for the winter, but I fear it is not possible . . . I suspect that NE [Nuwara Eliya] would be rather too civilized for me, rather too exclusively English & proper and that I could only be a black sheep there, but it is an enchanting place . . . Please give my regards to your wife and tell her that the necklace was just what I wanted and gave great pleasure to my man's wife – my man, if you remember, who figured as Mrs Bicknell in the Ceylon newspapers & ships' lists of passengers!'^{ix}



Ceylon is known for its gems, especially rubies and sapphires – Farrer goes on for pages about them – and Mrs Ferguson would have helped Clarence pick out a truly gorgeous necklace. He owed it to Mercede for having taken her husband away for ten weeks.

On 9 February 1908, Clarence and Luigi boarded the steamship *Zieten* and sailed home in second class with a motley company of Swiss, French, Italian, Japanese, Germans, Dutch, Americans and English returning from business or missions in Japan, China and India. By 20 February they had reached Port Said, from where Clarence wrote to Burnat: 'Up until now we have had a magnificent sea, absolutely tranquil, beautiful sunsets, and nights illuminated by a superb moon. Everything has gone well.

We were totally enchanted by Ceylon. How many times I thought of you when I was admiring the great ferns, the *Rhododendron arboretum* with its great bouquets of flowers, or the superb *Gloriosa* in the hedges.’^x

Finally he writes, with a palpable sigh of relief, ‘Well, I shall be very happy to be back home and to recommence my tranquil life after all this travelling, the trains, the hotels, &c.’

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ⁱ See G. Avery, ‘Kew & Clarence Bicknell’ for an account of the botanical specimens, publications and correspondence of Clarence held by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, which includes a letter from him to Prain.

ⁱⁱ Basil Morgan, ‘Farrer, Reginald John (1880–1920)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004 (online edition, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Reginald Farrer, *In Old Ceylon*. London, E. Arnold, 1908, p. 1.

^{iv} C.B. to Burnat, 1908-01-11.

^v J.C. Willis, *Ceylon: A Handbook for the Resident and the Traveller*. Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Company, 1907, p. 48.

^{vi} C.B. to Burnat, 1908-01-11.

^{vii} Professor Francis Ramaley, University of Colorado. ‘The Botanical Gardens of Ceylon.’ *Popular Science Monthly*, September 1908, p. 203.

^{viii} C.B. to the Baroness von Taübe. ND. Probably 1909, the year in which they began corresponding.

^{ix} C.B. to John Ferguson, 1911-08-23. ICS 86, Ferguson Papers. Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.

^x C.B. to Burnat, 1908-02-20.