

Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, undated, with transcript, with transcript

Letter from Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. HOTEL BIXIO Castelvetrano, May 12, 1901. My dear Alec:

Your second cable from Atlantic City was at least more satisfactory than the first. But I am very much disappointed that you cannot sail until the 28, that is much later than I want to wait. But I do want you to have the sea voyage. Besides wouldn't it be of great advantage perhaps for you to see Chester? I will wait your letter before deciding what I will do, I want to be with you, yet am not certain that my presence in Washington would not be more a hindrance than help at this time, the fag end of your winter's work when you are busy gathering the threads, only please my own dear take some sort of care of yourself and don't throw away the life and health so dear to me. You gave it to me you know, again and again I think to myself that if I had the least conception beforehand what Sicily was historically, geologically, geographically and in temperature I never would have come without you to enjoy it and explain it. I think it is without exception the most altogether interesting place I have ever visited. In beauty it is without superior. It has nothing so awe inspiring as Norway. Etna has not the perfect lines or imposing height of Fuji Yama, but it has great rock-like mountains that recall Norway and Etna is no unworthy sister of Fuji. Generally its mountains are like those of the Hawaiian Mountain seen from the sea, but there are wide stretches of fertile plains and beautiful rolling hill country among which rise barren precipitous crags crowded with picturesque fortified towns. We go by rail through limestone cuttings as perpendicular as walls and drive zigzag up the sides of 2 volcanic mountains. There are great mountains with stratified lines all awry, others of volcanic masses. Here the sea has receded, there it has encroached, all this of geographic and geologic interest. Then for historic wonder and examination there are the stupendous Greek ruins of Syracuse, Grigente, Selinous and Segesta, the Norman Saracen churches

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with their glorious mosaics. Ethnologically, too, there are the people who vary in color and type from fair-haired, blue-eyed big Normans to small swarthy Arabs. While the temperature we have so far found such as even you would have enjoyed. A soft haze tempers the glare of even the brightest day, while gray ones are most common, we have had only one hot day. This hotel closes for the season tomorrow, but it seems to me if people had any idea of the mildness of this climate they would stay on at least until June.

I began this letter in the train from Castelvetro to Castelammare. There we found Mr. and Madame Binetti waiting for us, they having left Palermo at five A. M. We drove through magnificent country up-hill for two hours and then transferred to donkeys — Mamma and all and went on upward for another half hour to a Greek temple standing alone on the high mountain side. It is perfect except for the roof and the interior in which archeologists say never was finished for destruction at the hand of their enemies overtook the builders before their temple was finished. It is wonderfully impressive standing there in its solitude with no human habitation for miles. Alone among the grand mountains, a grand work of ancient man amid the grand works of God to whose honor it was built. Over against it, ever nearer the sky, crowning an almost inaccessible mountain, lay the ancient city of Segesta whose men built it centuries before Christ. We went up there on donkeys again, passing the ruined walls where bulls were grazing among the crumbling stones, in among the shapeless masses of stone here and there bearing still traces of hammers and chisels, which once were the houses of men and women, upward to the highest point. There we had a magnificent view over the mountainous country all around, the fertile orange groves in the valleys, wheat and oat fields above and higher yet bare crags. Some are still covered by inhabited towns, for Sicily has not long enough possessed a civilized government to make the people feel secure in undefensible villages. Way in the distance we saw a white slab marking the place where Garibaldi and his thousand on their march from the sea to Palermo met the troops of the last King of the Two Sicilies and defeated them. Just below us was the most almost perfectly preserved Theatre of those men of centuries before Christ. Cut in the hillside just above the place where the mountain rises

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so precipitously as to require no city wall, it was built up high on either side, but left open in front so that for background to the stage the spectators had the glorious view over valley and mountain. It is said that it could seat between thirty and forty thousand people, but this seems to me doubtful.

We reached our beautiful rooms here in the Villa Lgrea at nine, tired but not too tired. We had been gone two nights having been first to Castelvetro the station for Silenus. Silenus has no perfectly preserved temple or theatres like other places, but no other place in Europe Baodecker says has such grand ruins. History telleth not what wrought their destruction, but I do not see how anyone who ever saw them can doubt for a moment the truth of Marion Crawford's words "No earthly hands bent on blotting out the glory of Selinus, could have done such work, neither the crowbar and lever of the Carthaginian, nor the giant powder of the modern engineer. Nature herself did the deed." What the writer says further I should think might be more or less imaginative, still it is so fine that I quote it. "In the morning the seven temples of Selinus were standing whole and perfect against the pale and dazzling sky; at noonday the air grew sultry and full of a yellow glare, the sea lay still as liquid lead and the sleeping beast in the field woke suddenly in terror of something far below that could be felt rather than heard, an hour and more went by, and then the long low sound that is like no other came up from the depths of the world, and the broad land heaved like the tidal swell of the ocean, once, twice, and thrice, and was still, and a great cloud of white dust hung where the seven temples had stood. As they fell, so they lie and will lie for all time, a very image of the abomination of desolation."

The reason why it seems that an earthquake rather than the fury of Hannibal's soldiers should have wrought this ruin is the way the great stones lie, all collapsed together, not spread about on the plain. To quote Crawford again, "At first sight the confusion looks so terrific that the whole seems as if it might have fallen from the sky to the world," — "as if Zeus might have hurled a city at mankind, to fall on Sicily in a wild wreck of senseless stone. Blocks that and Cyclopean lie like jackstraws one upon another, sections of

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columns 28 feet round are tossed together upon the ground like leaves from a basket, and fragments of cornice 15 feet long lie across them or stand 5 half upright, or lean against the enormous steps. No words can explain to the mind the involuntary shock which the senses feel at the first sight of it all" — but "As one reaches the highest fragment — the plan of the whole begins to stand out from the confusion; the columns have all fallen in ranks, and in the same direction, and from the height one may count the round drums of stone which once composed each erect pillar. There is method in the ruin, and a sort of natural order in the destruction." It is really a most wonderful sight to climb up on the highest fragment and looking down see all these columns lying like prostrate giants side by side. The blocks of which they were composed separating tends to increase their resemblance to gigantic human figures. How I wish you could have seen it all. Won't you come here with me sometime? I want you to see it for I am sure it would interest you. And we would be able to do it comfortably for every year things are improving here. Here in Palermo is this magnificent new hotel like one of the Florida palaces, and the owner not satisfied with his work is going to pull it to pieces, add another story and build on a ball and concert room. The in Syracuse and Taormina he is going to build others equally magnificent. This Florio must be a remarkable man. The son of a man who laid the foundation of the family fortunes, he and his brother own all the steamer lines along the Italian coast, and the bank here. He is doing all he can to push Sicily. Did I tell you that all the workmen were Sicilians, all the furniture made here. He is generous, and has to wife the most beautiful woman in Sicily and it begins to be whispered that Sicily should be an independent republic under English protection with Florio as dictator.

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Won't you please write a note to Mr. Binitti thanking him and his family for their great kindness to your wife and family. It is the only way that you can return some of their courtesy, for they are autograph collectors and want yours very much. We brought letters of introduction to them from the Director General of the Mutual Life Ins. Co. from Italy, and they have simply exhausted themselves in kindness. To be sure we all think Gertrude's

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charms have more to do with it all now than one letter, but they began most handsomely and naturally one does not like to have all the obligation on one side. They have bought my cart and harness for me and are shipping it and one or two other things at their own expense "because the work was done by their workmen and does not cost them anything"! The cart cost thirty, and the harness forty dollars, which I do not think very extravagant, do you? It can be used by the girls around the place and we really need two wheeled cart for the ponies. I have not bought very much of anything, I would not have spent so much money on my clothes in Paris but that I wanted to do you credit in London. If you had decided earlier not to go to London I certainly would not have come to Sicily, but being here I could not turn right around without especial reason. But I do feel very unhappy about you and wish that I could be with you. But how can I take care of you in Washington? I had hoped that you could leave early in May. Why are you in Atlantic City? I suppose you went with your father, I am glad that you had the change.

I have not had a letter from you for a long time. I wish you were with me. I am afraid of Mr. Tyler, he continues writing to Daisy and there is no one else in Washington. He is a fine fellow 7 I doubt not, but I don't want him to have our Daisy, and he will take her if he possibly can, and the danger lies in this that she knows nobody else. I wish she could be thrown more with other men. Do you know any to invite to Baddeck?

Lovingly ever yours, Mabel.