

Donna Bettina di Casanova

A correspondent writes:

Many English and Italian friends will be grieved to hear of the death at Milan, after a painful illness lasting for ten months, of Donna Bettina della Valle, only daughter of the late Federico Marchese di Casanova, of San Remigio, near Pallanza. With great personal charm she combined high intelligence and sound sense; and while she devoted her unusual practical ability to the best interests of her father's countrymen she was in character and sympathies essentially British. Through her mother, the most beautiful of the three daughters of Mr. Peter Browne (of the Sligo family), sometime British Minister at Copenhagen, whose wife was aunt of the late Lord Radstock, she had many close connexions with England. Her father was a younger son of the Neapolitan Duca di Ventignano. He took an active part in the Risorgimento, and was condemned to death under Ferdinando II. (Bomba), but escaped in disguise to serve in three campaigns. Later on he was engaged in repressing brigandage as Governor of Benevento, and he was intimate with many prominent statesmen and soldiers, such as Ricasoli and Massimo d'Azeglio, the Cadornas (of Pallanza), Minghetti of Milan, and the veteran educationalist Luzzatti. A brother, Don Alfonso della Valle, was the founder of an "Istituto Casanova" in Naples for the training of destitute street boys. A more distant relation was the liberal Archbishop of Capua, Cardinal Capececelatro.

Donna Bettina was born at San Remigio in 1865; though brilliantly vivacious, active, and even daring she was attracted at a very early age by charitable projects. Before she came of age she won her parents' consent to the establishment of a small private orphanage for young girls. To avoid complications with the local clergy these were selected mainly from the Protestants of the Waldensian villages, which still exist in remote parts of Piedmont. She was her first matron, but a teacher recognized by the education authority was provided; and before long a "Villetta Amena" was built close by, where 12 to 14 girls were maintained and educated under the young foundress's constant

supervision. The experiment was unusual in Italy in the last century, and it attracted favourable attention, not only locally. Before it was finally given up in 1924 for other work, many children had been well trained, mostly for domestic work, but some for quite important secretarial or educational posts. A pleasant feature of the scheme was the annual *villeggiatura* at such places as Cesenatico, to which other poor girls from Pallanza were invited. In spite of the ceaseless care expended on the orphanage, Donna Bettina was no recluse; her hospitality was known to all sorts of visitors to Pallanza, and she took a leading part in adventurous driving tours in Central Italy.

When Italy entered the War, the "Villetta Amena" soon became a convalescent home, the remaining orphans being transferred to her Villino S. Remigio. Beginning with Red Cross work at Pallanza, Donna Bettina became the most energetic organizer of patriotic propaganda in North Italy, especially in Milan, where various exhibitions, *e. g.* of Italian toys, War photographs, & c., were arranged by her. She undertook by request of, and with the support of, the British Embassy at Rome, the establishment of an "Istituto Italo-Britannico" which issued War pamphlets and postcards, managed entertainments and reading-rooms for the soldiers of the Allies, and opened a large canteen at the transit station of Musocco near Milan. Among her fellow-workers were the ex Premier Boselli, the Belgian Socialist Van der Velde, and the wounded soldier-journalist who is now *Il Duce*. In Milan she was chosen with the Prefect of Milan and one other to control the War Relief Funds collected in Lombardy, whether in money or in kind. In 1919 she received, though not a British subject, the rank of Dame of the British Empire.

By this time her special efforts for the aid and support of refugee children from the seat of war in North-East Italy had attracted so much attention that she was invited by the Duchess of Aosta to take a prominent place in the "Opera Nazionale di Assistenza all'Italia Redenta" for the women and children of the Alto Adige; and to this most extensive and arduous work the rest of her life was devoted. It included the establishment of *crèches* and kindergartens, night schools for teachers, sewing schools and mothers' meetings ambulance classes, ladies' working-parties, & c., in nearly every town and village, and involved not only incessant travelling over the whole province, but frequent journeys to headquarters at Rome. In September, 1928, she was organizing, in the Trentino alone, an addition of "600 night schools for

adults, 230 more day schools, and 140 infant schools”, with classes of all kinds for social work. Eventually, though well content to act as chief of staff to the Duchess of Aosta, she received an official position with a friend from Florence, as “Ispettrice Generale”; and next after the Duchess she was decorated in 1928 with the gold medal of the Ministry of Public Instruction. But though the interest and the satisfaction were great, the strain was greater, and her strength was failing. “I must hasten to get my task done, lest time should fail me at the end. Thank God I am very strong; but I know that any moment my call may come, and I have so many things to set going. I have now a certain hearing and influence”. The call came soon and suddenly; and the most devoted care could not wish to delay the end. But the noble influence of her labours will long endure, while she rests, in the mortuary chapel, beautiful as that at Rimini, on the point between Pallanza and Intra. “Vattene in pace, alma beata e bella”.

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