But first I must give a resumé of what most of the papers term "The very noble discourse of Signora Sciamanna," and which was listened to (unlike some others) with profound attention from beginning to end, which attention warmed gradually into enthusiasm, and ended amongst the most excited and deafening applause.

Signora Sciamanna dwelt first on the importance of good nursing from the point of view of the poor in hospital, explaining what illness meant to them so often—where the patient was the bread-winner—and a long absence entailed, perhaps, the sale of most of their furniture to provide food for the wife and children. She continued to explain that the improvement of nursing was contemplated by many, and even attempted by several schools, but that so far they had not reached the root of the matter. They had not succeeded "in collecting a nucleus of sufficiently educated and (above all) absolutely moral girls who desired to devote themselves to others, embracing the profession of nursing not only for its pecuniary advantages, but also as an apostleship."

She then went on to describe the English system of hospital nursing, commencing with the matron, "who is a real General, visiting every ward daily, and inspecting minutest details; whose word is absolute law." She describes the nurses "in their charming uniform, with neatly arranged hair under their snowy caps"; their quietness of voice and manner (this always strikes Italians), and especially their rubber-lined shoes. She dwelt on their dignity, and their patience with troublesome patients, whom they invariably control, consoling themselves "by the humorous sense of the absurdity of being grumbled at by the person whose lives they are trying to save." The fact that patients from the lowest slums of London never use a profane word in the wards she noted as a marvellous proof of the civilising and educational powers of our hospitals.

She next described a picture which had greatly struck her in a London gallery. "It was a moving picture; in the centre was the crucified figure of Christ, below him a throng of people—men, women, old and young—of every rank and position, each and all going on their way absorbed in their own occupations, with no glance at the suffering Form above them. One only turned a compassionate gaze on the torn flesh, and that figure represented a nurse! I was profoundly struck that a man should have embodied the conception that compassion was ideally the prerogative of the nurse."

"Here it is all too different," she continued to explain. "No one would bring forward pity as the pervading element in our infirmière." The nuns, it is true, are largely endowed with it, and Signora Sciamanna spoke a few words on their unselfish devotion, their disinterestedness; but added that, with few exceptions, they do not nurse in the real sense of the word, since their rules forbid them to assist men or gynecological cases, which, she humorously remarked, resulted in the human body consisting for them, in the majority of cases, "of only head and arms, and legs below the knees." (Great applause.) She also touched on the reproach too often made by the doctors in our hospitals, that the nuns, in their zeal to secure safety for the soul, imperil that of the body, alarming without necessity (sometimes with fatal results) patients whom they consider in need of the last sacraments.

She then returned to the infirmière, and explained that the cause of the difficulty in finding the right type of women lay mainly in "the length of the hours of service—twelve hours consecutively—the companionship of low-class women, the smallness of the salary, the absence of any lodging or board, and their subjection to the authority of a male surveillant." Is it to be wondered at that nursing is considered the last resource of those unsuccessful in household service, instead of representing work which Signora Sciamanna declared should be "parallel to, and an integral part of, that of the doctors"?

She continued to say that in the Clinics the conditions given to the nurses—called Signorine there—were somewhat better, as they were fed and housed, and very fairly paid; also they were dependent on no male Sorvegliante. But still much remained to be improved. There was practically no instruction (except that given by Signora Celli in the medical clinique). Their orario also exacted twelve consecutive hours' work, and the cubicles they slept in permitted the sounds made in one to disturb the sleep of those in others, as there was no division between the night and day nurses. Their food was brought in from a restaurant, and was often only "remains," cold and unappetising, whilst they had no refectory, but ate in a room off the ward-corridor whilst they were on duty, and liable to be rung for at any moment. (What wonder is it if frequently the patients ring again and again in vain?)

Signora Sciamanna quoted several instances of the ignorance of these "signorine," whom she stated were nevertheless "la crême de la crême" of our hospital nurses.*

One signorina told her that the temperature of the douche she was giving was 1,000 degs. C. On Signora Sciamanna exclaiming, she reduced it to 50 degs., and on her remarking that was still excessive she suggested it might be 10 degs! No one had told her what the temperature should be; she guessed, as they all did, what was "warm," and what "hot," by feeling the water.

Signora Sciamanna found another signorina in charge of a recently operated patient, and on inquiring what had been the operation, found that

*Miss Baxter's and my pupils are not called "hospital nurses"; they are outsiders, living in their own homes, who worked as professionals in the wards, but always under our protection and instruction, and are termed volontare, "infermièra ospedaliere" being a title no one yet aspires to.

M. A. T.

previous page next page