

## The Nursing System of Italian Hospitals.

By Miss L. L. Dock.

If one were to search for the most historically important and interesting nursing service in the world, one would find it in Italy; and if one were then commissioned to modernise this system in accordance with the requirements of science and hygiene, and with an eye also to the economic basis, one would be confronted with one of the most puzzling and complicated problems imaginable.

The nursing system seen in Italy to-day dates from the third century of the Christian era, and in the general organisation of hospital work the division of labour and the plan of day and night duty is undoubtedly much the same as in the early centuries when the various religious nursing orders were first established. Glimpses into the early history of the care of the sick are wonderfully interesting.

Lanciani says that compassion and charity according to our ideas were absent from the Roman character in Pagan times; that many temples of a propitiatory character were built—one to the Goddess of Fever, one to the Evil Eye, &c. &c.—but that hospitals, even in the most rudimentary form, were not known until the third century.

Yet, he says, a temple to Æsculapius was established on an island in the Tiber in the four hundred and fifty-ninth year of the city, and that the sick were brought there and received in their dreams the instructions as to their cure, and that the priests of the temple then carried out the supernatural prescriptions. This being the case, and if their friends were kind enough to carry them there, it seems as if some rudimentary form of nursing must also have been practised. On this same island, by the way, there stands a hospital to this day—San Giovanni di Calabita.

The early Christians from the first made the care of the sick one of their chief works, and took them into their own houses. Certain great ladies of Rome who became converted were very active in such work, and showed conspicuous ability in organisation, notably Lucina and Fabiola, the latter of whom is said to have founded the first hospital—meaning, very probably, that she brought order and system into the voluntary service.

It would be very fascinating to wander into all the by-paths of history, but would lead too far for the scope of this sketch.

With the founding of the monasteries came the large hospitals as we see them to-day, and anyone who wishes to learn something of the history of the many nursing orders will find a mine of information in the *third* volume of "Handbook to Christian and Ecclesiastical Rome," by M. A. R. Tucker and

Hope Malleon. This third volume deals with monasticism under the Church of Rome. Whatever one's modern ideas may be, it is impossible not to feel deep respect and admiration for the hospital record of these mediæval orders.

Many of the famous "religious" who are now canonised were really social reformers of vast ability and courage. Catherine of Siena was the Florence Nightingale of the Middle Ages, and performed marvels of hard and heroic nursing, to say nothing of her political activity. Francis of Assisi revolutionised the whole question of the treatment of lepers, which, as Knox Little in his "Life of St. Francis" says, "was one of the great social difficulties of the time. . . . The leper lost all his rights . . . he had no occupation . . . he had no civil rights, even in making a will or handing on his property . . . his acts were void in law. . . . To suffer from this disease was absolute degradation. . . . It is evident that the wisdom of the time, medical and social, was entirely at fault in view of this tremendous and increasing social evil. . . . St. Francis saw how important it was for mankind that the leper question should be dealt with thoroughly.

"Men of all ranks entered the Franciscan order . . . men of culture, of considerable means, and of noble birth. No matter who they were, he insisted on their dwelling in the leper hospitals and attending to the sufferers. It followed that something like improvement in the condition of the towns was begun, and something like a proper treatment of the disease. From this followed in course of time the complete annihilation of the scourge in Europe, which . . . was really the work of St. Francis." ("Life of St. Francis of Assisi," by Knox Little.)

The influence of such personalities and many other noble characters, such as San Bernardino and St. Vincent de Paul, perpetuated in art, legend, and history as they are, and made concrete in these huge old hospitals, built in ancient cloisters and churches, cannot but surround the nursing orders with a certain halo, and give them a great hold on the minds and sentiments of people in general.

Thus the Church retains to this day almost entire control in hospital management in Italy.

Now, then, it is impossible not to see that modern conditions demand new reforms and a new revolution, even as the earlier ones demanded them in their day.

The religious orders have not kept up with the discoveries of science and the advance of hygiene, and they are entirely out of touch with modern industrialism and the onward movement of self-supporting women workers.

The mediæval conception of hospital work is a lovely one, founded on compassion and offering an opportunity for voluntary service, but it is not

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