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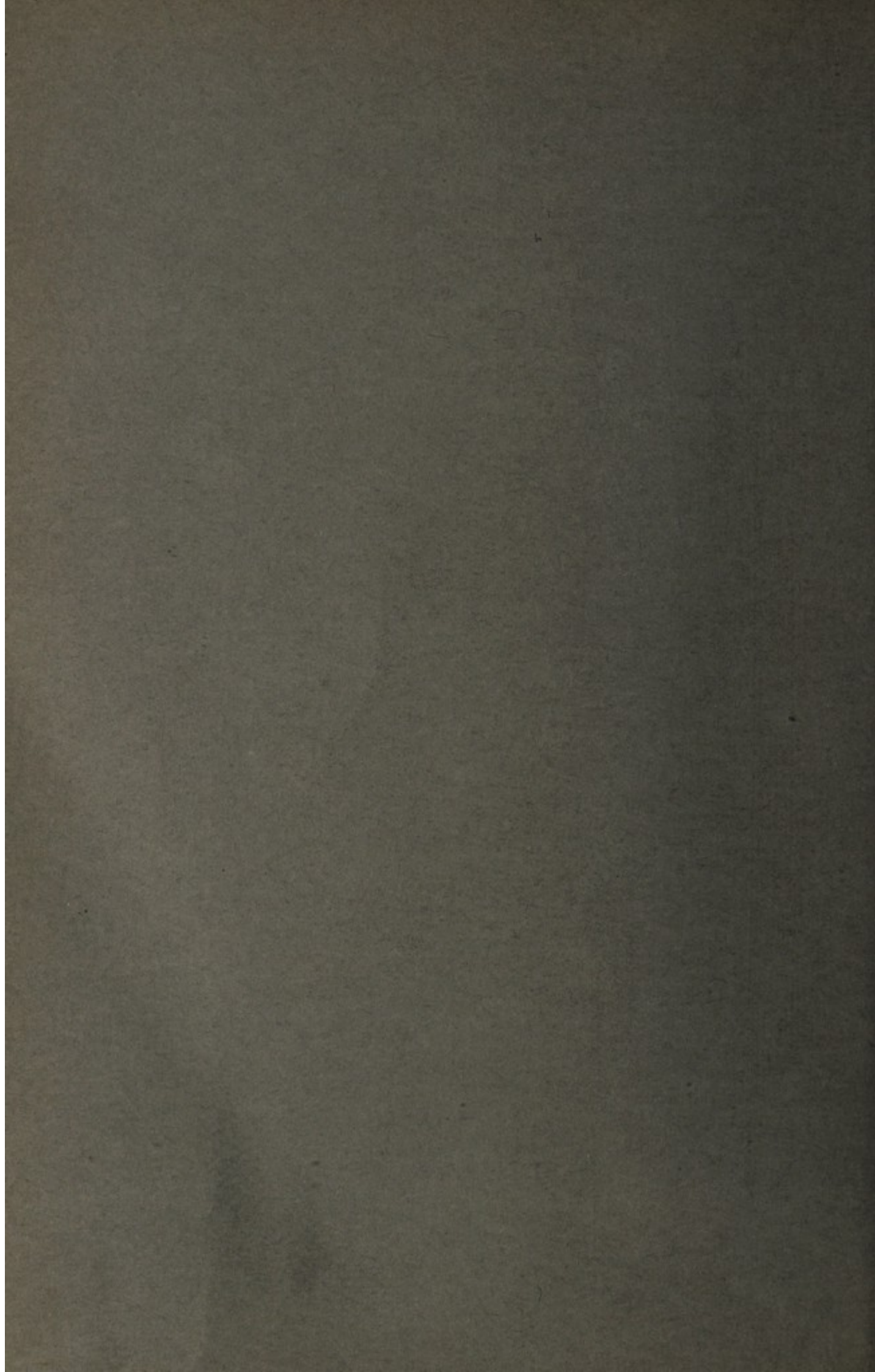
# A Visit with Professor Davide Giordano at Venice

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# A Visit with Professor Davide Giordano at Venice\*

By MAX THOREK, M.D., Chicago, Illinois

Surgeon-in-Chief, The American Hospital.

I HAD made up my mind that, during my last visit to Europe, in August this year, I would not visit hospitals and doctors, or bother about anything pertaining to medicine. I was tired and needed a rest. After nearly a quarter of a century of arduous labor in the surgical harness one *does* need a rest.

We arrived in Venice on a beautiful August morning. True to my resolve, I jumped into a gondola and was off for Lido to loaf on the sands of the Adriatic shore, to meditate, to reminisce and to think. I adhered to my resolution for the first few days. However, one morning, arising at six and ready to don pyjamas for a stroll on the shore, an admonishing voice somewhere in my subconscious spheres obtruded itself with, "What! You here within fifteen minutes of the great Giordano's workshop, missing the work of his nimble fingers, forgetting his stimulus, his inspirations, and you not even visiting him? Shame on you!"

What a silly urge, I argued with my invisible ego, I am here to rest and not to visit clinics or medical celebrities. However, the urge spoke persistently again and again, more emphatically, more temptingly, and let me confess that less than a quarter of an hour passed before that very same urge of my subconscious self got a hammer-lock and half Nelson on me, and a few moments later I rudely yanked Philip, my son, out of a peaceful slumber and we were soon on the steamer on our way to the

Ospedale Civile in Venice, all resolutions being cast to the four winds.

This hospital, built in the Thirteenth Century, opened, in those distant days, so a tablet informs us, to four charity patients, and now houses about 1,500 to 2,000 patients! What a thrill as I ascended the old stairway! My heart was palpitating before I reached the sixth floor, where Giordano's operating suite is located, not due so much to the brisk ascent of the stairway as to the thought of being face to face with the great master in a few moments.

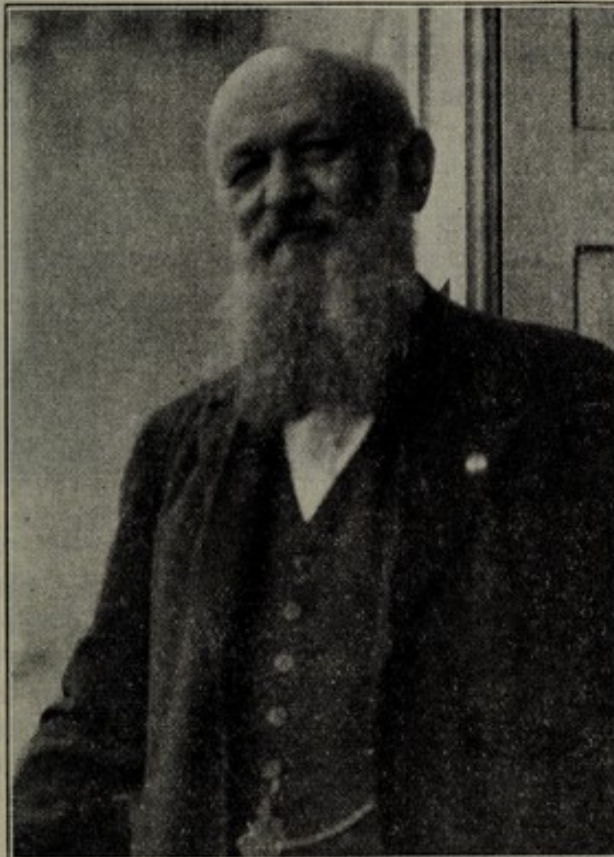
We arrived in the operating room promptly at seven o'clock. There he was before us, as usual, stalwart, radiant, with a benign smile upon his patriarchal face as he ejaculated, "Thorek! You here? I am delighted to see you." For the moment nothing else was said. The sisters slipped gowns on both Philip and me and we approached the operating table.

## Brilliant Technic

Giordano was performing a gastroenterostomy. The stomach had just been de-

livered, an *ulcus duodeni* located, and with a, "We shall do a posterior gastro-jejuno-ostomy" he proceeded.

I was amazed! One suture was used in the entire operation and that of catgut alone! He approximated the serosa of the stomach to the jejunal serosa; returned the same stitch to the starting point, grasping in it the serosa and muscularis. A stoma was now made in both stomach and jejunum. Next, returning, with the same stitch, he united all the divided structures of the



Prof. Davide Giordano

\*Read at the meeting of the Staff of the American Hospital, Chicago, October 25, 1927.





Prof. Giordano at Work

stomach and jejunum posteriorly and anteriorly. With a return suture, with the same ligature he again united serosa-muscularis to serosa-muscularis, and finally serosa to serosa. Here you have the whole operation in a nutshell and, again I say, it was done *with one suture of catgut!*

I wondered. I pondered, "Is he not afraid that the catgut will give way? Is he not somewhat belittling the dangers of a one-suture technic?" But when I asked him about this, later, he whispered to me, "It is a simple operation; it is fine, it gives no trouble." The beginner—even the advanced surgeon—would hesitate before doing what Giordano is doing, but *he* is Giordano—Giordano the scientist, Giordano the master! *Experientia docet!*

A few minutes later the next patient was brought in. This was a case of resection of the sigmoid for carcinoma. The operation was accomplished just as simply, just as elegantly as the preceding one, and also with one suture. This was an end to end anastomosis. The carcinoma was a large one and complicated by suppurative perisigmoiditis.

This was followed by two cholecystectomies. While doing the second one he



(Courtesy of Dr. Ligorio)  
Type of Uniforms Worn by the Sisters at the  
Ospedale Civile, Venice

turned to me and said, "Do you drain your cholecystectomies?" I answered in the affirmative. "Good," said he; "there has been, recently, a tendency to close the abdomen after cholecystectomy. This is not fair to the patient. It cannot be foreseen when a slight leakage of some infectious material may cost the patient's life."

The next patient to be wheeled in was a woman in whose case the differential diagnosis rested between chronic appendicitis and some pathologic condition about the right ureter. Giordano explored the ureter through a lumbar incision, and then, through the same incision, opened the parietal peritoneum, delivered the cecum, removed the appendix and explored the adjacent viscera. This piece of surgery



A View of One of the Surgical Wards at the  
Ospedale Civile, Venice

cannot be described. Its brilliance must be seen to be appreciated.

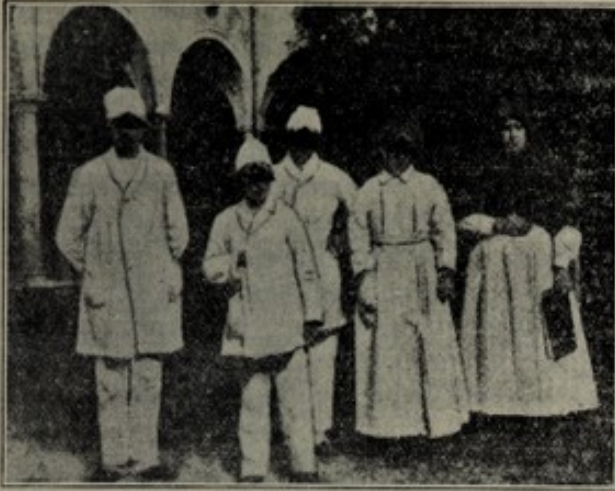
And so it went all the morning, and a number of other mornings on which I broke my resolution and traveled to the shrine of this great master to see, ponder and learn.

#### Operating-Room Arrangements

Our savant is aided by his first assistant. No nurses are seen in the operating room. Sisters are in attendance. A physician whose sole function is the threading of the needles and supplying the proper suture material during the progress of the operation, is stationed to the right of the operator. The instruments are handled by the first assistant. Ether anesthesia, by the drop method, is the rule.

Giordano does all the operating himself, from the primary incision to the tying of the last knot. His wound sutures—peritoneum, muscle, fascia, etc.—are all inter-





(Courtesy of Dr. Ligorio)

Attire of Patients at Ospedale Civile, Venice

rupted. No continuous suture was seen by me during my recent visit. Occasionally he will permit his first assistant to perform an operation, and he does it well. Some mornings demonstrations to students were given. Surgical diagnoses were made; differential diagnoses dwelt upon. Not a dull moment while we were there. A versatile fountain of information awaits one who visits him.

Giordano has not changed much since I saw him four years ago. He is beloved and revered by all who know him. He is typically Latin in temperament. When something displeases him in the operating room he sometimes displays anger in no indefinite terms. Silence and tension reign during these moments. One could hear a pin drop. The uninitiated would think the world was coming to an end, but his assistants are not awestricken and not in the least perturbed. They smile, for they know his roars are the benignant admonitions of a fatherly, yet keenly sensitive master who has the interest of his patients at heart and the welfare of his assistants uppermost in his mind. It is simply a question of rigid discipline.

Giordano wears rubber boots in the operating room and his gloves are of a thickness that is used in our country by pathologists. His tactile sense must be, and evidently is, a marvel of precision and finest delicacy, for it is only the highly trained who could palpate and differentiate structures through those thick gloves, as he does, with such obvious facility. He wears no eye-glasses during the most delicate manipulations.

Perhaps you will be interested to know something about the man and his accom-

plishments, so permit me to digress here for a moment and give you just a partial glimpse into his *curriculum vitae*.

### Giordano Himself

Professor Giordano was born on March 22, 1864, at Courmayeur, the son of a school principal. His father is still living and enjoys the very best of health.

Young Giordano graduated at the University of Turin, and then became a beloved pupil of Professor Novaro, who was considered the greatest Italian surgeon of his time, in the antiseptic era. He also received preliminary training under the dean of Italian scientists, the eminent parasitologist, Professor Eduardo Perroncito, under whom he has done research work on septicemia, tetanus, etc., and completed his studies, with a thesis on acute osteomyelitis, for his doctor's degree, in 1887.

After having been director of the Hospital de Torre Pellice, in Bologna, he was recalled by his master, Professor Novaro, to direct his laboratory of clinical surgery at the University of Bologna. In that capacity he distinguished himself to the highest degree.

At that time a competitive examination was announced for the chief surgeons of the Civil Hospital of Venice (1894). It is well known that this examination is one of the severest tests for that position. Among



Prof. Davide Giordano and the Author at the Ospedale Civile, Venice



thirteen contestants he won first place. Here we find Giordano in his glory. In the hospital which, up to this time, had been used only for the purpose of taking care of patients, the tireless Giordano created, in 1896, an intensive course of training for young surgeons and inaugurated post-graduate courses for older aspirants to surgical accomplishment. His ambition to diffuse knowledge to younger men finds no bounds. His enthusiasm has no limit.

In passing, let me cite the expression of an eminent American surgeon, during the time of the meeting of the Society of Clinical Surgery, who says that Giordano reminded him most strongly of George Owen, the famous English surgeon, who was born in Worcester, England, in the Fifteenth Century, was physician to Henry's Queen, and is credited with having done a cesarean section on Jane Seymour, mother of Edward VI. Later he became the president of the College of Physicians. I took pains to look up the resemblance between George Owen and Davide Giordano. It is striking, but Giordano towers over Owen in accomplishments and marvelous versatility.

#### Professional Contributions

To tell you here of the numerous publications of Professor Giordano would be futile. The list would fill a respectable sized volume. But let me give you just some highlights on this remarkable man's diversified labors. He published a book of "Lectures to the Younger Surgeons;" this was followed by a textbook on "The History of Surgery of Italian Surgeons," soon to be followed by a volume of "Surgery on the Kidney," and the "Results of Scientific Conferences Among the Medical Officers of the War."

Giordano is not a man with a "one track mind." Among the variegated subjects we

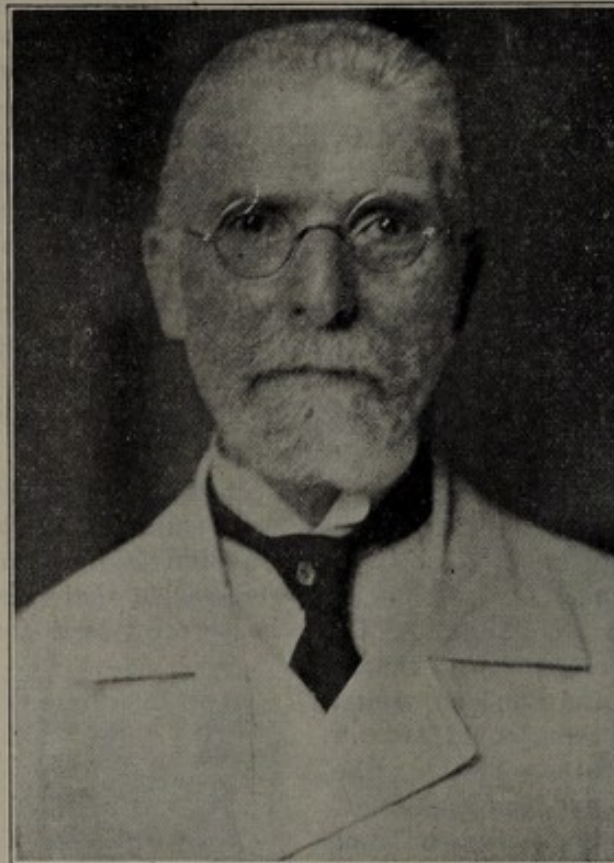
find him perfecting an operation for removal of the hypophysis by the glabello-nasal route; perfecting a method of arthrectomy of the hip joint (known by his name); the abdominal removal of the rectum; the perfecting of a nephropexy operation; removing the appendix and gall-bladder through a lumbar incision; a variegated number of technical essays dealing with the surgical treatment of nephritis and colitis; a new method of suspension of the spleen; and other labors too numerous to mention. I counted about 200 contributions to medical literature.

#### Extraprofessional Labors

During those stressful years of the World War he was made consultant of the Ospedale Civile, Venice, and chief of the auxiliary service at the front; and when the troubled days of 1920 found Italy on the brink of ruin and menaced by radicalism with probable utter destruction, we find Giordano, the valiant fighter, in the midst of political conflicts, with the result that he became mayor of the beautiful city of Venice and carried on that work for four years. It is not

a small job even for a big man to carry the civic burden of a large city, with its ramifying duties and responsibilities. He did it and did not neglect, at the same time, his professional duties, not missing a single day in operative work in the hospital and administrative labor at the City Hall. In 1924 he became Senator of the Kingdom. This position he still retains.

On my visit during August I found him the same dynamo as of old, directing the surgical destinies of his large hospital and doing justice to his duties as Royal Commissioner of the University of Higher Sciences and Economics, as well as functioning as a very active President of the Commission of the Museum of Natural His-



Doctor Eduardo Ligorio, Medical Director of the Ospedale Civile, Venice



tory. Besides this, he is a member of an inexhaustible number of medical, surgical and historical societies. Last year he was President of the International Congress of Surgery, held at Rome. Our own country was also represented on that occasion.

Other countries, notably Roumania, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Czecho-Slovakia, and others, recognize his genius and shower him with honors in the form of distinctions and decorations of various sorts.

I envy him, as you would. The life he leads is ideal. He lives in a palace, one side of which overlooks the Grand Canal, while the other leads into a beautiful tropical garden. In that garden he cultivates divers tropical fruits and belabors the soil with his own nimble hands. At tea, to which my family and I were honored by being invited, we were entertained by him and his charming wife, an esthetic, cultured lady of utmost refinement, and his accomplished daughters. Among those present was the distinguished Professor Eduardo Perroncito, who discovered the *Ankylostoma duodenale*. He is the master of parasitology of Italy and a most delightful gentleman.

After tea we visited the library of Professor Giordano, where we were privileged to delight in rare volumes of medieval medicine and surgery. We reveled in modern and semimodern tomes, all labelled, classified and placed in proper position by our great host.

I observed that while one roams through this atmosphere of art, culture and refinement one must never say that he admires some special thing, for a moment later he will be the embarrassed but proud possessor of the object of his admiration. I happened to express delight in a volume of surgery written by an author of the Fifteenth Century (*Chirurgia Magna*, Lanfranci, 1480), and in a flash Giordano autographed it and insisted that I accept this rare book.

And so it went, day after day, one delight after another. My resolutions were broken, to be sure, but I benefited greatly, and so will you if you make a pilgrimage to Italy and find Giordano in Venice. It is wise to pay homage at this font of learning and shrine of profound surgical wisdom.

You will find, at the Ospedale Civile, Professor Ligorio, the superintendent of that great institution, a courteous and learned gentleman, conversant with every phase of medical and surgical administration of hospitals, and the author of a recent volume on this subject.

When Giordano bade me goodbye, and while his warm and masculine handclasp lingered in mine, his countenance beamed with that characteristic smile of his as he softly said in perfect English, "Come again soon, and remember me to my friends in America. I wish them all well."

I was moved. I could only reply in his own sentiment, "We also wish you well, and may you continue as you are *ad multos annos*."

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