

## THE CANADA LANCET.

A Monthly Journal of Medical and Surgical Science, Criticism and News.

*Communications solicited on all Medical and Scientific subjects, and also Reports of Cases occurring in practice. Address, DR. J. L. DAVISON, 12 Charles St., Toronto.*

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### A LITTLE LEARNING, ETC.

The writing of popular articles on medical and surgical subjects seems to be on the increase of late, particularly in American circles. A late issue of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* contains a paper by Drs. B. Farquhar Curtis and Wm. T. Bull, on "the Treatment of Cancers and other tumors."

And the custom seems to exist among respectable and even leading practitioners, especially perhaps those who have sanatoria or private hospitals of their own, of having printed for private circulation among not only their professional brethren but their patients, papers which they have read perhaps at medical or surgical society meetings. The writer was presented recently by a lady acquaintance with two such papers, printed in pamphlet form, after having been read at the Nashville meeting of the Medical and Surgical Association, and given her by one of the leading New England gynecologists, who has a well-known private hospital near Boston. She had been a patient in his institution, had been operated upon for fibroids, and though a maiden lady, and by no means old, displayed the utmost freedom in discussing her own case and others under circumstances and in company that could by no stretch of imagination be called professional. Just why she should have been allowed to be an onlooker at other operations in the hospital, or why she should have been given these purely professional

disquisitions by her surgeon, and been taught her almost literally *intro-spective* mental habits, are difficult questions to answer. The truth is probably that the *Harper's Magazine* people were animated by the same spirit, more refined certainly, but identical in genesis if not in degree, with that which prompts the "penny dreadful" to print harrowing accounts of accidents, murders, and executions. The plea that it is a means of educating the public in subjects of which they are woefully and harmfully ignorant, is scarcely worth advancing. A little knowledge is, in medical matters, a pre-eminently dangerous thing, and even with the educated class that read such periodicals as *Harper's Magazine*, the inevitable result would seem to be the formation of false ideas on medical subjects, such as may work mischief to their entertainer in some future time of illness, by causing him to set up his own opinions against the more intelligent judgment of his medical adviser, or even to fall into the Charybdis of the man who, being his own doctor, has a particular kind of a fool for a patient. It is not mere desire that the public should be kept in ignorance that prompts these remarks, for ignorance provides dupes for quacks; but a natural aversion to seeing harm done to the laity and the profession depreciated in the minds of the public by having the *arcana* of medicine and surgery displayed to the gaze of those who must misunderstand them unless initiated by an arduous course of scientific study. The knowledge of preventive medicine, and of the misapplied hygienic precautions, is well taught, the more widely the better, but any attempt to explain in a popular way the principles of diagnosis, or pathology, or treatment must be in the nature of things only quasi-scientific, and end in the formation of erroneous conceptions. As to the medical men who write such articles, if they were modest enough to withhold their names, one could refrain from ugly suspicions as to their deepest motive. Probably the code of ethics varies in different communities of physicians, all the more probably because it is in large part unwritten and to be observed rather in the spirit than in the letter, but we beg leave to deprecate as unworthy any willingness to parade one's self in a professional way in any non-professional journal.