Current Comment

The Centennial Anniversary of a Famous Accident
American medicine is still too young to be expected to claim many triumphs of scientific discovery for itself; nevertheless, in the earlier history of the progress of our profession in this country the novel researches on digestion in man, of the “backwoods physiologist” and army surgeon at Mackinac, Dr. William Beaumont, stand supreme. It was one hundred years ago this summer that the great opportunity came to this modest practitioner, whom Sir William Osler designated the pioneer physiologist of the United States and the first to make a contribution of enduring value. In 1822, just ten years after he was granted a license to practice “physic and surgery,” destiny let fall, in the words of Beaumont’s biographer, “the opportunity which he recognized, grasped and improved with a zeal and an unselfishness not excelled in the annals of medical science.” Through the outcome of the accident to the Canadian lad Alexis St. Martin whereby he was left with a permanent fistulous opening in his stomach, it became possible for Dr. Beaumont, his physician and friend, to start a series of direct observations on the nature and functions of the gastric juice and the phenomena of gastric digestion. Of these investigations Vaughan has remarked that Beaumont made such an exact study of the physical and chemical natures of the gastric juice that, with the exception of the discovery of pepsin, the closest research of modern times has added little to the work done by him. And Myer has pointed out in his admirable biographic study of Beaumont that a comparison of the latter’s deductions with those of the most recent workers on the physiology of digestion shows that he anticipated some of their best results, notably the researches of Pawlow on the work of the digestive glands, Cannon on the mechanics of digestion, and others. Thus the accident of a century ago remains as an illustration of how research of the foremost type can be conducted under the most discouraging conditions. The prime requisite for success, when the opportunity comes, is a “prepared mind.”

The Marvels of Abrams and Yergin
A few months ago THE JOURNAL published some articles regarding the marvels of Albert Abrams of San Francisco. Dr. Abrams, it will be remembered, has evolved a system of abdominal percussion practiced in connection with his electrical apparatus, the “Oscilloclast,” and from which he derives the “Electronic Reactions of Abrams.” A piece of paper on which has been placed a drop of blood from an individual Abrams may never have seen, and who may be on the other side of the world, is connected with the “Oscilloclast”; at the same time, a healthy individual (the “subject”) is also connected with the “Oscilloclast” and his abdomen is percussed. Dr. Abrams claims to be able, by means of various areas of resonance and dulness he finds in the “subject” when undergoing this test, to determine whether the individual whose drop of blood is being “tested” is suffering from syphilis, carcinoma or tuberculosis and, if so suffering, where the diseased area is located. Nor is this all. So skilful has Dr. Abrams become in the percussion business that he can substitute for the drop of blood, the autograph of an individual, living or dead, and subject it to his tests and declare whether or not the individual is or was a sufferer from syphilis, etc. He has, for instance, subjected the autograph of Samuel Pepys to his “electronic reactions” and found that this famous diarist suffered from congenital syphilis; he has found the same for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and also for Edgar Allan Poe and, for the latter, adds that he also gets the “reaction of dipsomania.”

The autograph (dated Feb. 7, 1775) of that stern old moralist Dr. Samuel Johnson, gave the “reaction” for acquired syphilis and tuberculosis! In the Propaganda Department of this issue of THE JOURNAL an article appears dealing with an individual, one Yergin, who propounds a theory and a practice that bids fair to rank well with the “electronic reactions of Abrams.” Yergin arranges the chemical elements according to their atomic weights and then adapts this arrangement to the keyboard of a piano. Of course there is a chart (copyright) which elaborates this matter in detail. Yergin declares that, when such an arrangement has been made on a piano “perfectly tuned,” striking the keys “representing two or more elements” as they are known to be combined in the chemical field will produce the same effect on human beings as “would have been produced had the same compound been given in material chemical form.” We commend Yergin’s theories to the attention of Mr. Upton Sinclair; they should furnish material for at least one good magazine article. The subject may even seem worthy of study by Sir James Barr. In any event, it is all very interesting hot-weather reading—when one does not want to think.