



Sir Felix Semon

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Sir Felix Semon.

By E. SCHMIEGÉLOW.

By the death of Sir Felix Semon, on the 1st of March, England lost one of her most prominent laryngologists, who although born and bred in Germany had from his youth lived and worked in England, where he was naturalized and knighted and became one of the most distinguished members of the British School of Laryngology. As the founder also of the «Internationales Zentralblatt für Laryngologie» and as the author of many important laryngological works, he had the greatest influence upon the development of Laryngology towards the end of the last and the beginning of the present century.

Felix Semon was born in Danzig on December the 8th 1849, he studied in Heidelberg, Berlin, Vienna, Paris and London, took his degree in 1872 and came to London 1874, where he at first worked in the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat, and in 1882 he was the first Laryngologist in England to be appointed in charge of the Throat Department of a large general Hospital (St. Thomas Hospital).

In 1884 he was the first—and for 18 years the only—pure laryngologist to be elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians.

The position of laryngology was outside Germany and Austria most insignificant until Semon took up arms on its behalf, and I advise all modern laryngologists to read Semon's interesting description of the conditions of Laryngology in England as published in his paper: «Die Stellung der Laryngologie in Groß-

britannien», Vol. I of Internationales Zentralblatt für Laryngologie (1885).

It was Semon's great merit that all his life he fought for the scientific development of Laryngology and its public recognition of equality with the other medical specialities.

He solved this problem in two ways, firstly by publishing a series of excellent papers on the subject of laryngological pathology, papers which clearly proved the importance of laryngological researches to general medicine. Secondly by founding the «Internationales Zentralblatt für Laryngologie, Rhinologie und verwandte Wissenschaften» and hereby centralising the widely scattered laryngological literature in a cooperative review in which all vital interests of the speciality could be discussed from every point of view.

Among Semon's many scientific works, I look upon his studies on the neuroses of the larynx as the most important. It was also this chapter of laryngeal pathology which he himself embraced with the greatest interest, mainly because the diseases of laryngeal nerves are of vital importance for medical science as a whole, so that specialists of diseases of the brain, neurologists and internal physicians, have to take into consideration the symptoms of the larynx as these symptoms in many cases are decisive with regard to the diagnosis of a number of individually completely different diseases in the most remote parts of the organism.

Semon also felt a special attraction towards the study of the pathology of the laryngeal neuroses, as all knowledge on this subject was towards the end of the nineteenth century most indefinite. Every thing was uncertain and contradictory both with regard to clinical, anatomical and physiological observations on this subject, and the main impression was—as Semon writes in September 1896¹—a general confusion of opinions, which he says would probably take many years, «ehe sich aus diesem Wirrwarr von neuem ein stattlicher, nach einheitlichem Plan an-

¹ On this date Semon delivered the manuscript of his excellent work on «Die Nervenkrankheiten des Kehlkopfes und der Luftröhre» in Paul Heymanns Handbuch der Laryngologie Bd. I, 1898.

gelegter, harmonisch gegliederter Bau erheben wird, über dessen schließliche Erscheinung sich heute kaum mehr als Vermutungen aufstellen läßt».

By a series of careful clinical observations fundamentally supported by postmortal examinations he proved what is now known as *Semon's law*¹ according to which there is a tendency of the abductor fibres of the recurrent laryngeal nerve to become affected sooner than the adductor fibres, or even exclusively, in cases of undoubted central or peripheral injury or disease of the roots or trunks of the pneumogastric spinal accessory, or recurrent nerves (1881).

Amongst other works I would draw attention to his experimental investigations on the phonetic centre in cerebrum which he published together with Horsley in 1890 (Royal Society of London, Vol. 181).

He furthermore created the clinical picture of pneumococcal throat affections and wrote a valuable paper on mechanical impairment of the functions of the crico-arytaenoid articulation with some remarks on perichondritis of the laryngeal cartilages (Medical Times and Gazette, Vol. II, 1880).

Semon has through a series of papers greatly influenced the modern pathology of laryngeal cancer, especially with regard to cancer of the vocal cords and he must also be credited the honour of having been the first to call attention to one of the central symptoms of cancer of the vocal cords, namely the impaired mobility of the diseased cord (British Medical Journal, Vol. I, p. 1240).

In a long series of articles published in *Zentralblatt für Laryngologie* 1888, occasioned by the illness and death of emperor Friedrich III, the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of cancer of the larynx were thoroughly analysed by Semon and he was one of the most eager champions for excision of cancer of the vocal cords by means of thyrotomy.

Semon had, as mentioned above, founded the *Zentralblatt für Laryngologie* in 1884 and edited this monthly review with an

¹ Hendrik Burger: Die Frage der Postikuslähmung. Volkmanns Sammlung klinischer Vorträge, Neue Folge, Innere Medizin, 1890—1894, Nr. 20.

energy and ability which called for the greatest admiration of his powers. Although always intensely busy both as head of a department and as a teacher in the Medical School at St. Thomas Hospital, and in spite of his extensive private practise, there was not a single laryngological question of any importance which he did not find time to treat in clever and allembreing articles in the *Zentralblatt*, especially when he had to fight for the position of Laryngology as an equal of the other medical specialities.

He was a fighting man, always ready to take up arms for truth and justice. Both in speech and in writing he was always formally correct, clear and convincing. His retorts could be sharp but never offensive, except when his antagonists attacked him with unproven postulates. If he heard anything said which he knew to be inaccurate, and which he thought ought to be controverted, he never hesitated to contradict.

It was a question of honour to Semon that the *Zentralblatt* should be a carefully compiled organ of reference of all laryngological literature to be found spread all over the medical literature of the world. And he was therefore not content with passively receiving the monthly reports sent by his collaborators according to their choice, but he kept sharp control and at the end of every year his collaborators received the famous «Speisezetteln» in which Semon called attention to articles which ought to have been reported but had been omitted, either through forgetfulness or of malice propense. What a tremendous energy lay behind this continual control of the editor-in-chief and what a burning interest for the honour of the *Zentralblatt* that it should be made as perfect as possible. The result of all his energy has also been, that under his editorship the «Internationales *Zentralblatt*» has been of the greatest help to literary workers of all nations.

In 1893 he was the prime-mover in the foundation of the Laryngological Society of London, of which for three years he was president.

When he retired in 1909, a large sum of money collected him by his friends in the profession and in lay circles was placed in his hands for the furtherance of Laryngology, particularly of British Laryngology.

Semon was knighted in 1897, was made C. V. O. in 1903 and K. C. V. O. in 1905. Since 1901 he was physician extraordinary to the late King Edward.

In 1909 Semon withdrew from the editorship of the *Zentralblatt*, which passed into other hands. He gave up his practice and retired to his beautiful country house Rignalls near great Missenden, Bucks. His health had been failing for many months when he died at Rignalls on the 1st of March after a few days illness, quite unexpectedly, as he had been in London a week before his death.

Semon was a man of great intellectual power, gifted with extraordinary energy. He never spared himself but always carried through with untiring zeal those tasks which he had undertaken.

Semon was my personal friend for nearly 40 years, and I wish to express the deep gratitude of myself and many other confrères who have had the good fortune to be his personal friends and collaborators, for what he has been to us as friend, as editor, and as man of science.
