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SIR FELIX SEMON, K.C.V.O., F.R.C.P.

WITH the passing of Felix Semon, Laryngology has lost a man of light and leading. It will probably be considered no injustice to anyone, living or dead, if we venture the statement that he did more for the advancement of our specialty than any other. It is not intended to imply that he had no rivals in certain departments. Thus there are and have been as great clinicians, but, all in all, he possessed qualities which made him an outstanding personality.

His early history is well known to all of us. Of foreign birth and nationality, he came to this country many years ago and remained a loyal subject of the Empire ever afterwards—a loyalty which was much resented by the compatriots of his earlier days.

The scientific work with which his name is most widely associated concerns two very important conditions—laryngeal paralysis and malignant disease. Those who are old enough to have followed the question of recurrent paralysis from the beginning of his investigations will remember how literally may be taken the statement that he produced order where previously chaos had reigned. It used to be a veritable trial to the spirit to read of the causes of immobile vocal cords, even as presented by the best authors, because it never appeared clearly why these things were so. Then came Semon, not with a working hypothesis only, but with careful objective demonstration, and light relieved our darkness. In order definitely to establish his position, much further labour was required, including animal experiments which he conducted in co-operation with the late Sir Victor Horsley, and a great deal of, in some cases, rather captious criticism had to be encountered and disproved. Eventually, however, what we now know as “Semon’s law” stood upon an absolutely sound foundation.

His other great achievement was with regard to malignant disease of the larynx, and the revival of the operation of thyrotomy for early cases. The latter was, we believe, actually due to the late Sir Henry Butlin, but possibly owing to the exigencies of other interests, he did not take so prominent a part in letting its advantages be known. When Semon set his mind to studying laryngeal carcinoma, he again accomplished an epoch-making work in revolutionising text-book descriptions of the malady. Moreover, he enabled the fell disease to be recognised on its earliest incidence and at a time when immediate thyrotomy was still capable of effecting a cure. His

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published cases and results have shown how successful he was in this respect.

In addition to his work on innervation and cancer, Semon published many observations on other subjects. Thus to him we owe a description of the throat symptoms liable to occur during the menopause, of mechanical interferences with the movements of the crico-arytenoid articulation, the value of rest of the voice in phthisis laryngea, and the clinical features of pneumococcal throat affections. It should also be mentioned that in 1883 he had noted and called attention to the similarity of symptoms between Myxœdema as described by Ord, and "Cachexia Strumipriva"—an observation upon which the successful treatment of the former, as now practised, largely depends. The same acumen was also shown in the paper which he wrote with a view of showing the clinical identity of the various forms of phlegmonous inflammation affecting the throat and neck.

In addition to purely scientific work, Semon devoted much time and energy to consolidating the position of the young specialty which he had espoused. That Laryngology was important, those within it always knew. The difficulty, at least in this country and to some extent elsewhere, was to obtain general acceptance of this fact. By founding the "Laryngological Society of London" as well as *The International Centralblatt für Laryngologie*, which he edited for many years, and by insisting upon the proper recognition of the specialty at all times, he was able to bring pressure to bear which has resulted in the status we now enjoy. Perhaps it may occur to the reader that if not he, then another would have arisen to do it. It may be so, but Semon had very remarkable gifts quite apart from his scientific attainments, and it was the good fortune of Laryngology to have such a man fighting its battles.

Semon was of the type of men of whom it may be said that they would have excelled in whatever path of life they had chosen. He was enthusiastic and at the same time logical, fiery but also just, according to his lights: in a way he was sentimental, but he refused to let sentiment govern his actions; finally, he was not only a man of wide general knowledge, but he had equally wide general interests. Thus he combined within himself qualities which we rarely find united in one individual, and it resulted that he was peculiarly well fitted to take a leading place.

To all who knew him well, his lovable nature was apparent. His success came suddenly and rapidly, but he was never spoiled by it in any way. Indeed, one of his many charms was that in spite of the brilliant career he had made for himself in the world, he had retained much of that beautiful simplicity which we more often

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encounter in the young than in those who have forced their way to prominence. His sense of humour was always strong, and many will remember what a wonderful gift he had as a raconteur. His tact, too, was very perfect, so that neither by anecdote nor in any other way did he offend. Yet if he heard anything said which he knew to be inaccurate, and which he thought ought to be controverted, he never hesitated to contradict. Somehow—and we must ascribe it chiefly to tact—he was generally able to assert himself when necessary without hurting the feelings of others.

He was a man of extraordinary energy and never spared himself, so that when he undertook a task he invariably pursued the matter in hand with tireless zeal. For years he held hospital appointments, at first as Physician to the London Throat Hospital, and later as Physician to the Throat Department of St Thomas' Hospital. Then, as his practice increased, he gave up first one and then the other.

Most men would have found their lives very fully filled by doing less than he had done. Not so with Semon, for he made time for many other accomplishments and occupations. Thus he was an excellent and enthusiastic musician, and his many friends will remember what pleasure they derived from musical evenings at his hospitable home and how they were privileged to hear Lady Semon—once beloved by London audiences as Miss Redeker—sing while her husband accompanied her. Semon was also an all-round sportsman of no mean order. A keen shot, an ardent salmon fisher, a fearless and accomplished rider, he used to enjoy to the full such leisure as he permitted himself. If he worked hard, he played hard and spared himself in neither case. Just as he was able to take part in almost any form of out-door recreation, he could hold his own in in-door pastimes and excelled in most card games.

He was thus a man of many interests, and partly no doubt on this account, mixed with people of all kinds, many of whom became his personal friends. Thus he wielded an influence beyond that which he could have attained on purely professional lines.

When he retired from practice in 1910, his many friends collected funds to establish a Lectureship in his name at London University, and at the same time entertained him and Lady Semon at dinner. The gathering was a most striking one, and well illustrated the catholicity of his friendships. Prominent politicians, great lawyers, men and women of different lands well known in the worlds of music, art and literature, united with his own profession to do him honour. Soon after this he and his wife spent a happy year in touring round the world—meeting many old friends in foreign lands. After coming home they went to live at their beautiful home—Rignalls, near Great Missenden—where on Tuesday, 1st March 1921, Semon breathed

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his last. To many who were permitted to enjoy the Semons' hospitality, happy memories will occur, not only of lovely and artistic surroundings, but of a charming abode in which it was quite evident that domestic happiness reigned supreme.

Semon was the recipient of many honours. Knighted in 1897, he was made C.V.O. in 1903, and K.C.V.O. in 1905. He was Physician Extraordinary to the late King; Knight of the Order of the Prussian Crown, 2nd class, and Red Eagle, 3rd class; Commander of the Order of Isabella la Catolica; Grand Officer Order of Medgidie and Grand Cordon of Star of Zanzibar. In addition he was an honorary and corresponding member of a large number of laryngological and medical societies throughout the world.

We have endeavoured, shortly, to do justice to the life of a great laryngologist, who was also one of the most lovable of men. Those of us who were his friends grieve for him deeply; but if our grief is hard to bear what must be the feelings of Lady Semon and her sons. A deeply loved and loving husband and a devoted father has gone from them, and no words of heartfelt sympathy we can utter will avail to make their burden less heavy. They will at least have the consolation of realising that many share their sorrow, and of remembering the splendid career of him who has passed over.

P. M'BRIDE.