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Romberg's Sign

Moritz Heinrich Romberg of Berlin published his classic *Lehrbuch* in sections between 1840-6; Sieveking translated the "Manual" into English in 1853. The description of that most misspelled of all eponyms lies in his description of *tabes dorsalis*.¹

"Early in the disease we find the sense of touch and muscular sense diminished, while the sensibility of the skin is unaltered in reference to temperature and painful impressions. The feet feel numbed in standing, walking or lying down, and the patient has the sensation as if they were covered in fur; the resistance of the ground is not felt . . . The gait begins to be insecure . . . he puts down his feet with greater force . . . The individual keeps his eyes on his feet to prevent his movements from becoming still more unsteady. If he is ordered to close his eyes while in the erect posture, he at once commences to totter and swing from side to side; the insecurity of his gait also exhibits itself more in the dark. It is now ten years since I pointed out this pathognomonic sign, and it is a symptom which I have not observed in other paralyses, nor in uncomplicated amaurosis . . . in no case have I found it wanting."

Romberg gives a fulsome account of the muscular weakness, urinary frequency, retention and incon-

tinence, and the constricting pains that

"encircle the trunk like a hoop, and not infrequently renders breathing laborious . . . troublesome in sleep, causing them suddenly to start up and scream. Others complain of a heavy weight pressing upon the rectum and bladder, others again of colic and gastric pains; the majority suffer from pain shooting through the legs, and a sense of pricking, itching, burning, or cold in the skin of the lower as well as the upper extremities;"

The whole clinical spectrum is described, the natural history extending over several—as many as ten to fifteen—years. The wasting (*tabes*) of the cord and roots is related, but "as yet we possess no microscopic investigation of the atrophied portion."

Romberg also gives a brief but unmistakable description of the pupils to be described 16 years later by Douglas Moray Cooper Lamb Argyll Robertson. Curious how students add an undropped 'h' in one and insert a non-existent hyphen in the other.

JMS PEARCE

1 Romberg MH. *A Manual of the nervous diseases of man*, Vol 2, (EH Sieveking trans) London. Sydenham Society, 1853:395-401.