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The Elephant Man,
amplified from an account published in
the British Medical Journal

In November, 1886, a letter appeared in The Times from Mr Carr Gomm, chairman of the London Hospital, drawing attention to
the sad case of Joseph Merrick. The letter attracted the notice of
the charitable public, and through their very generous subscriptions
the Hospital authorities were enabled to admit Merrick as a perma-
nent inmate.

JOSEPH MERRICK is the subject of a very terrible congenital
deformity, of so extreme a degree that he cannot venture into the
streets, nor indeed into the garden of the Hospital. He cannot
travel in any public conveyance nor mix with his fellow men. But
for the kindness of his now numerous friends he would be cut off
from all the common enjoyment of life.

Merrick is now about 27 years of age and was born of respectable
parents in Leicester. Neither his father nor mother nor any of his
relatives were in any way deformed. When quite a child his appear-
ance was not sufficiently marked to attract any special attention,
but by the time he had reached adult life the deformity of the face
and limbs had attained to so extreme a degree that the unfortunate
man was unable to follow any employment and physically pre-
vented from learning any trade. His mother died when he was
young, and his father, having married again, practically cast him
off. There was nothing for him to do but to exhibit himself as a
deformity in a penny show. Some features in the conformation of
his head and limbs suggested the title of 'The Elephant Man', and
as such Merrick was exhibited. He was dragged about from town
to town and from fair to fair, and lived a life that was little better
than a dismal slavery.

He was not treated with actual unkindness, but lived a life of
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almost solitary confinement, broken only when he appeared before a gaping and terrified audience as a hideous example of deformity.

Early in 1886 Mr Treves, one of the surgeons of the London Hospital, saw him as he was being exhibited in a room off the Whitechapel Road. The poor fellow was then crouching behind an old curtain endeavouring to warm himself over a brick which was heated by a gas jet. As soon as a sufficient number of pennies had been collected by the manager at the door, poor Merrick appeared in front of the curtain and exhibited himself in all his deformity. Merrick had a share in the proceeds of the exhibition, and by the exercise of great economy he had amassed nearly £50. The police, however, began to interfere and the exhibition was prohibited as against public decency. Unable to earn his livelihood by exhibiting himself any longer in England, he was persuaded to go over to Belgium, where he was taken in hand by an Austrian who acted as his manager. In Belgium, however, the exhibition was very soon prohibited by the police, and the miserable man and his manager were hunted from place to place. As soon as the Austrian saw that the exhibition was pretty well played out, he decamped with poor Merrick’s very hardly saved capital of £50 and left him alone and absolutely destitute in a foreign country. Fortunately, however, he had something to pawn, by which he raised sufficient money to pay his passage back to England, for he felt that the only friend he had in the world was Mr Treves, of the London Hospital. He, therefore, though with much difficulty, made his way to London. At every station and landing place the curious crowd so thronged and dogged his steps that it was not an easy matter for him to get about. Indeed, at the quay great objections were raised to his being taken on board the steamer. When he reached the Hospital he had only the clothes in which he stood. For some time Merrick occupied a little ward in the attic, while every attempt was made to find him a permanent resting place. He had the greatest horror of the workhouse, and there seemed little to recommend the frequent suggestion that he should be placed in a blind asylum. The Royal Hospital for Incurables and the British Home for Incurables both declined to take him even if sufficient funds were forthcoming to pay for his maintenance for life. The subscription that was the result of Mr Carr Gomm’s letter enabled the Hospital authorities
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to accept Merrick as a permanent resident. A room was built for him on the ground floor in a remote wing of the Institution. This room was comfortably furnished as a bedroom and sitting room, and to it was added a bathroom, for to Merrick a bath is not merely a luxury but, from the nature of his affliction, a daily necessity.

In this small room the elephant man spends his life, surrounded by innumerable tokens of the kindness of his friends. One of the first ladies to visit him, and certainly the first lady he had ever shaken hands with, was Mrs Maturin of Dublin. Mrs Kendal has been one of his kindest friends. She has supplied him with books, with pictures, with a musical box, and with numerous ornaments for his room, and had him taught basket-making as an amusement. He also owes to Mrs Kendal a very especial treat - a carefully planned and carefully disguised visit to a theatre.

Lady Knightley, in the summer of 1887, very kindly arranged a holiday for him, and with a little ingenuity Merrick found himself smuggled into a quiet cottage, in a remote part of the country far from the haunts of men, where he was made exceedingly happy.

The Hon. Mrs Gerald Wellesley became a frequent visitor, and gave him also a handsome musical box. Lady Dorothy Nevill presented him with a silver watch of which he is very properly proud. Among his other kind friends may be mentioned the Hon. Mrs Jeune, to whom he indirectly owes his country holiday.

The great event in Merrick's life was a visit from T.R.H. the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duke of Cambridge, in 1887. The Princess was exceedingly gracious, and not only did she give Merrick some flowers (most piously preserved), but she also sent him her photograph with her autograph attached. At the following Christmas Merrick was delighted to receive from Her Royal Highness three Christmas cards, with a kind message in the Princess' hand-writing on the back of each. Of the royal visit, of the portrait of the Princess, and of her Christmas cards, Merrick is never weary of talking.

The following abstract of the Medical Aspects of the case is obtained from Mr Treves' account published in the Pathological Society's Transactions, Vol. xxxvi, p. 494.

The elephant man is short, and lame through old disease of the
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left hip-joint. The deformity concerns the integuments and the bones. The subcutaneous tissue is greatly increased in amount in certain regions, with the result that the integument is raised prominently above the surrounding skin. This tissue is very loose, so that it can be raised from the deeper parts in great folds. In the right pectoral region, at the posterior aspect of the right axilla, and over the back, the affected skin forms heavy and remarkable pendulous flaps.

The skin is also subject to papillomatous growths, represented in some parts, as in the right clavicular region, by a mere roughening of the integument. Over the right side of the chest, the front of the abdomen, the back of the neck, and the right popliteal space, the growth is small; on the other hand great masses of papillomata cover the back and the gluteal region. The eyelids, the ears, the entire left arm, nearly the whole of the front of the abdomen, the right and the left thigh, the left leg and the back of the right leg, are free from disease.

The deformities of the osseous system are yet more remarkable. The cranial bones are deformed and overgrown, so that the circumference of the patient's head equals that of his waist. This deformity is better shown by the engravings than by any verbal description. Bony exostoses spring from the frontal bone, the posterior part of the parietals, and the occipital. Irregular elevations lie between these bosses, and all these deformities are very unsymmetrical. The right superior maxillary bone is greatly and irregularly enlarged. The right side of the hard palate and the right upper teeth occupy a lower level than the corresponding parts of the left side. The nose is turned to the left and the lips are very prominent. The mouth cannot be shut.

All the bones of the right upper extremity, excepting the clavicle and scapula, and the bones of both feet, are enormously hypertrophied, without exostoses.

The patient prefers to sleep in a sitting posture with the head resting upon the knees.

The deformity is in no way allied to elephantiasis.

The following is added by Merrick himself.
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'I should like to say a few words of thanks to all those that came forward with help and sympathy after my case was made known by Mr Carr Gomm in the public press. I have much to thank Mr Carr Gomm for, in letting me stay here, till something definite was done concerning me, as the London Hospital is not a place where patients are kept permanently, although the Committee have made arrangements for me to do so. I must also greatly thank the Hon. Mrs Wellesley, Mrs Kendal, and Lady Dorothy Nevill who have been very kind to me, and lastly my kind doctor, Mr Trevs, whose visits I greatly prize, as many more in the hospital do, besides me. He is both friend and doctor to me. I have a nice bright room, made cheerful with flowers, books, and pictures. I am very comfortable, and I may say as happy as my condition will allow me to be.

"'Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God;
Could I create myself anew
I would not fail in pleasing you.

"If I could reach from pole to pole
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul;
The mind's the standard of the man."