



The True History of the Elephant Man

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‘The Great Freak of Nature – Half-a-Man and Half-an-Elephant’

When the Elephant Man appeared as if from nowhere in a shop premises in the Whitechapel Road in London towards the end of November 1884, he was still in the early days of his career as a professional freak. His real name, as his birth certificate bears witness, was Joseph Carey Merrick, and his manager at that time was Mr Tom Norman, a showman who specialized in the display of freaks and novelties. The shop hired for his exhibition was then numbered 123 Whitechapel Road. The building survives today as one in a terraced row of early nineteenth-century shops, though it has since been renumbered as 259. The adjoining premises to its east side carried until recently the pawnbroker’s emblem of three iron balls high up on the wall. To the west side lay the shop of Mr Michael Geary, fruiterer and greengrocer.

Directly across the road from the row of shops, on the other side of the wide thoroughfare, stands the imposing entrance to the London Hospital. The present front in fact dates from improvements made in 1891. In the 1880s the hospital displayed a long and imposing classical façade, set well back behind railings and with porters’ lodges at the main gates. The whole effect was designed to inspire confidence in the capabilities of medical science as well as a measure of appropriate awe among the inhabitants of the district. It was the outward and visible sign of authoritarian benevolence and charity in an area that had for many decades experienced an intimate connection with deprivation and poverty: one in which successive waves of penniless immigrants settled alongside the original communities of London’s poor; those who, in the definition of the great Victorian pioneer in social investigation, Henry Mayhew, ‘Will work, cannot work and will not work.’

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In such a district therefore Joseph Merrick arrived to fall under Tom Norman's care, it being hoped that the Elephant Man's impact on London would be profitable for them both. Outside the premises, across the shop front, leaving only the doorway clear, the showman hung a large canvas sheet painted with the startling image of a man half-way through the process of turning into an elephant and announcing that the same was to be seen within for the entrance price of twopence. If the artistry was rough, and the colours garish to sophisticated taste, the poster evidently had the sensational effect intended. A young surgeon from the London Hospital, Mr Frederick Treves, who visited the freakshow, could recall the poster in every vivid detail when he came to write about it some forty years later:

This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare. It was the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast. This fact – that it was still human – was the most repellent attribute of the creature. There was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the misshapened or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathing insinuation of a man being changed into an animal. Some palm trees in the background of the picture suggested a jungle and might have led the imaginative to assume that it was in this wild that the perverted object had roamed.

Whatever it was which could possibly be causing poor Merrick to take on an approximation to an elephant, in displaying him as a freak Mr Norman was working in an ancient tradition the roots of which lay far back in the history of fairgrounds and circuses in England. London in particular had been noted for its insatiable appetite for monsters since at least the days of Elizabeth I. As Henry Morley stated in his *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair*, it was not merely the common throng who sought out a formidable diet of signs and wonders and supported popular fashions in the grotesque. Everyone in society, up to the level of its crowned head, 'shared in the tastes . . . for men who could dance without legs,

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dwarfs, giants, hermaphrodites, or scaly boys’. He goes on to comment, writing his book in the late 1850s:

The taste still lingers among uncultivated people in the highest and lowest ranks of life, but in the reign of William and Mary, or Queen Anne, it was almost universal. Bartholomew Fair, with all the prodigies exhibited therein, was not as it now would be, an annual display of things hardly to be seen out of a fair, but was, as far as Monsters went, only a yearly concentration into one spot of the entertainments that at other times were scattered over town and country.

Bartholomew Fair was officially opened each year on 23 August, the eve of Saint Bartholomew, and continued for two weeks. While the revels lasted, many poor tradesmen in the Smithfield area were glad to hire out a part of their premises for the display of some prodigy of nature. Prime sites were those shops or workrooms close to taverns, such as the premises where a ‘changeling child’ might be viewed,

next door to the *Black Raven* in West Smithfield . . . being a living Skeleton, taken by a *Venetian Galley*, from a *Turkish Vessel* in the *Archipelago*. This is a Fairy Child, supposed to be born of *Hungarian* Parents, but chang’d in the Nursing, Aged Nine Years and more; not exceeding a foot and a half high. The Legs, Thighs and Arms are so very small, that they scarce exceed the bigness of a Man’s Thumb, and the face no bigger than the Palm of one’s hand.

On another occasion, ‘next door to the *Golden Hart* in *West-Smithfield*’, there was to be seen ‘the Admirable Work of Nature, a Woman having Three Breasts; and each of them affording Milk at one time, or differently, according as they are made use of’.

Advancing sharply up the social scale, the West End of London featured its permanent exhibition halls available for hire to showmen. When, in 1826, the bookseller and radical pamphleteer William Hone interviewed Claude Amboise Seurat, the ‘Anatomic Vivant; or Living Skeleton!’ for the edification of readers of his periodical *The Every-day Book*, he visited him at Pall Mall in a room known as the Chinese Saloon. When Barnum brought

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General Tom Thumb to London in 1844, the curiosity aroused was so phenomenal that he was able to engage the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. These remarkable premises were built in 1812 by William Bullock to show his own vast and miscellaneous collection of curiosities, the nucleus for which he gathered together during his earlier years as a silversmith in Liverpool when he bought rarities from sailors arriving at the port from exotic quarters of the globe.

The Egyptian Hall started life with cultural and educational pretensions, containing 'upwards of Fifteen Thousand Natural and Foreign Curiosities, Antiquities and Productions of the Fine Arts'. While these aspirations were never quite lost sight of, the lease passed into the hands of others and the Egyptian Hall became the recognized showplace for every nine-days' wonder expected to excite lively interest. Matters reached such a pitch that *Punch*, in 1847, suggested the existence of an epidemic of a new disease termed 'Deformito-mania' and published a cartoon satirizing the placards decorating the Egyptian Hall's façade.

It is a long walk from the West End to Whitechapel; but appropriately enough the route from Smithfield may be retraced back along Cheapside, through the City of London and eventually along the Whitechapel Road – appropriately, since this was the main route into London from East Anglia and the Eastern Counties. It was the route taken by the drovers who once walked herds of cattle for sale at Smithfield market to keep the metropolis supplied with fresh meat. The Whitechapel Road is still part of the main thoroughfare into the City of London for traffic from the east, and its exceptional width is a legacy of its origins as a droving road. It is this width, in turn, that has made it a natural location for the street market traders' stalls that continue to do business there, if they no longer do so in the colourful profusion which must have set the scene during the late nineteenth century.

There was another young surgeon who stumbled across the Elephant Man in his original London exhibition even before Frederick Treves. John Bland-Sutton, from the Middlesex Hospital, was in later years to become a consulting surgeon to the Middlesex Hospital, President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and a baronet, besides making a long-term study of the phenomenon of Siamese twins. In 1884 he had only just attained his fellowship of

the Royal College of Surgeons. As he recorded in his collection of autobiographical reminiscences, *The Story of a Surgeon*, he was in the habit of wandering out through the East End of London as far as the Mile End Road to satisfy a mixture of professional interest and idle curiosity:

... especially on Saturday nights, to see dwarfs, giants, fat-women, and monstrosities at the freak shows. There was a freak-museum at a public-house – The Bell and Mackerel, near the London Hospital. It was on one of these visits in 1884 I saw ‘on show’ opposite the London Hospital a repulsive human being known as the Elephant Man. The poor fellow, John [*sic*] Merrick – was deformed in body, face, head and limbs. His skin, thick and pendulous, hung in folds and resembled the hide of an elephant – hence his show-name.

In another autobiography, *A Labrador Doctor*, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, whose early medical training was gained at the London Hospital, made the suggestion that it was some medical students from the hospital who first went to view the Elephant Man in the exhibition shop, then returned to describe him to their surgeon-lecturer in anatomy, Frederick Treves. In his memoirs, the showman himself, Mr Tom Norman, remembered how

... there were, every week-day morning and afternoon until about 3 p.m., a number of students with white coats and no hats passing in and out of the London Hospital opposite for the purpose of what I then presumed, for to obtain refreshments, fresh air, etc. After a few had, out of curiosity, visited the exhibition, the wonderful sight of Meyrick [*sic*] soon spread among them, and no doubt that was the reason of Sir Frederick’s visit ...

It was in fact Frederick Treves’s house surgeon who first told him about the Elephant Man. Dr Reginald Tuckett was then twenty-four years old and employed by the hospital in the most junior of its appointments. He had begun his medical studies as an articled pupil to his brother-in-law, a doctor in the Welsh border country. To qualify for admission to the Medical Register, however, he came to the London Hospital to complete his training. It was

now a little more than a year since he qualified, and he was employed by the hospital as house physician, house surgeon and resident accoucheur. The burden of his responsibilities did not, even so, prevent his being enticed across the road by the showman's poster. The graphic account of the exhibit he carried back to the hospital was compelling enough to prompt Treves into making his own pilgrimage to the north side of the Whitechapel Road to view the Elephant Man for himself.

When he arrived outside the shop, Treves says, it was to find the exhibition temporarily closed. Questioning a small boy who was hanging about on the pavement, he learnt where the showman might be found and persuaded the lad to seek him out where he was refreshing himself in one of the local taverns. The showman proved unhesitating when it came to striking a bargain: he would open the exhibition for a private viewing on condition that a special entrance fee of one shilling was paid. The scene was set for Frederick Treves's first encounter with Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man.

The classic account of that meeting is contained in the title piece to *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*. It is reproduced in its full text as the third appendix of the present book (pages 181–200). Within a well-told anecdote, Treves presents a series of vivid images; it is a powerful and unforgettable literary achievement. It may be that it rests a little heavily on melodrama, yet it remains as highly readable as when it was written and fully deserves to be read. On the other hand, it raises incidental questions about the relationship between objective truth and the validity of literary creation and is not to be regarded uncritically in that respect.

Treves was certainly not starting out to write fiction when, towards the end of his life, he finally set down the tale of the Elephant Man for inclusion in what was to be his last published work. The essay, however, is marked by a strong romanticizing tendency. There are obvious errors: the London Hospital does not, for instance, stand in the Mile End Road as he states in the opening sentence. There are numerous indications of a memory becoming overlaid over the years with small embellishing details that add colour and effect to the story-telling. Above all there is the curious fact that in the one and only place where Treves gives Joseph

Merrick a Christian name he calls him John. The detail seems doubly curious in that a whole segment of Treves’s life and career came to be intertwined with the destiny of Joseph Merrick, and as matters turned out it was hardly a superficial relationship.

Might it have been that the facial distortions that were a part of Merrick’s condition, and which made comprehensible speech extremely difficult for him, meant that Treves misheard? Did Treves hear ‘Joseph’ as ‘John’ during an early conversation and ever afterwards think of him as and call him ‘John’? Yet others heard and recorded his name correctly, and to put down the error to a simple lapse of memory on Treves’s part is an unconvincing explanation. From the very beginning of their relationship, Treves was writing of Merrick as ‘John’ in his technical papers. Did Merrick himself prefer the name? Evidently not, for he called himself Joseph and signed himself Joseph in the two examples of his handwriting that survive. Whatever the reason for the misnomer applied to Merrick, it has had one long-term consequence: almost every reference to the Elephant Man subsequently printed has repeated the error because the authors could not believe that someone of Treves’s standing might be wrong on such a basic detail.

There is also the question of the identity of the shop where Tom Norman set up his exhibition. It was, says Treves, ‘a vacant greengrocer’s which was to let’. He goes on to sketch in a number of scenic props:

The shop was empty and grey with dust. Some old tins and a few shrivelled potatoes occupied a shelf and some vague vegetable refuse the window.

Tom Norman was stung into writing an emphatic letter to the showman’s paper the *World’s Fair* when he first heard about Treves’s essay, among the details he wished to correct being the fact that Merrick ‘was not exhibited in an empty greengrocer’s shop’.

That shop was next door to the one in which he was exhibited and kept by a man named Geary, an Irishman, in the Whitechapel Road. The shop on the other side of the one we were showing was . . . a pawnbroker’s. The premises used for the exhibition of Meyrick [*sic*] had for several years previously

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been a waxworks museum, owned by a man named Cotton. I came to London and rented it from him, and removed Meyrick thereto . . .

According to the *London Directory* for 1886, prepared in 1885, the greengrocer's opposite to the London Hospital was indeed kept by a Mr Michael Geary. It appears that he took possession of his shop towards the end of 1884, for the directory prepared in that year lists the occupier as a Mr William Parry. And next door but one to the greengrocer's there was, sure enough, the pawnbroker's. The shop premises at 123 Whitechapel Road, now 259, sandwiched between the pawnshop and the fruiterer's, is recorded in the directories as a glass warehouse belonging to Albert and Eli Shepherd. In view of Tom Norman's precise statement and the corroborative evidence from the directories, it seems it was the front portion of this shop that was sub-let to Mr Cotton for use as a waxworks museum. A waxworks museum certainly flourished opposite to the London Hospital, for in September 1888, in the midst of the Whitechapel murders committed by 'Jack the Ripper', a correspondent called John Law was writing in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

There is at present almost opposite the London Hospital a ghastly display of the unfortunate woman murdered . . . An old man exhibits these things, and while he points them out you will be tightly wedged in between a number of boys and girls, while a smell of death rises into your nostrils, and you feel as if your throat was filled up with fungus.

It was therefore not the greengrocer's door but the one to No. 123 Whitechapel Road that Tom Norman in due course unlocked and opened. Nevertheless we may continue, for the moment, to take Frederick Treves's account at face value. It was difficult for the visitor, ushered into the dark interior, to pick out anything at first, for the light from the window was obstructed by the large canvas sheet bearing its message to the passers-by in the street. The atmosphere was decidedly cold and damp and there was a faint but peculiarly unpleasant odour hanging in the air. The main part of the shop was bare and disused, but towards the back a cord had

been suspended across the room from one side to the other, and from this there hung down what might have been a large red tablecloth to form an improvised screen.

As soon as they were in the shop Tom Norman went across to the screen and drew it aside. There in the half-light beyond sat the figure of the Elephant Man, seemingly remarkably small in contrast to the impression of something gigantic created by the poster. He was hunched up on a stool and held a brown blanket drawn well up about himself to cover his head and shoulders. The movement of the curtain did not seem to disturb him, for he continued to sit motionless and to stare at the blue flame of a gas burner arranged to heat a large brick balanced on a tripod before him. This was the only source of heat and light in the room. The very stillness of the almost diminutive figure awoke in Treves the feeling, as he said, that here was the very ‘embodiment of loneliness’.

At this moment, Treves states, the showman suddenly called out a sharp instruction to the figure: ‘Stand up!’ speaking ‘harshly’, ‘as if to a dog’. The description implies a brutal insensitivity on the part of the Elephant Man’s keeper, as might be expected from someone who was dealing with a creature supposedly half-human, half-beast – a kind of urban Caliban. And then, as if reluctantly, the Elephant Man stirred and rose awkwardly to his feet, letting the blanket slip to the ground as he turned to face his exclusive audience. As the covering fell the source of the peculiar odour that hung in the air inside the shop became apparent, for the sickening stench evidently had its origins in the startling condition of the subject’s body and intensified at once.

Treves’s medical career had from its beginning been associated with the London Hospital. He had arrived as a medical student in 1871, become assistant surgeon in 1879 and been appointed full surgeon in this very year of 1884. Although he was still only thirty-one, his experience of the appalling range of physical horrors and injuries likely to be admitted into a foundation that existed to minister to the ills of an area containing some of the worst slums of Europe must have been considerable. It would be reasonable to expect him to be shock-proof, his nose used to such smells as gangrene, his eyes accustomed to the terrible facial injuries that could result from a fight with broken bottles in any London pub

on a Saturday night. From what he says it is nevertheless clear that he was shaken by his first glimpse of Joseph Merrick; perhaps also taken unawares by his revulsion at the sickening stench given off by Merrick's body. He summed up his initial reaction in a memorable phrase: that Merrick seemed to him 'the most disgusting specimen of humanity'. 'At no time,' wrote Treves, 'had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed.'

As Treves stared, the Elephant Man began to turn slowly about so that his visitor might view him from all angles. The movement re-awakened the surgeon's clinical instincts and he noticed how the unfortunate creature showed signs of having at some time in life suffered a disease of the left hip; it had left him lame so that he needed to lean on a stick. With the return of a habit of scientific detachment, Treves began to make precise observations. Where he had been expecting to see a figure both monstrous and large, the Elephant Man was of quite a slight build, perhaps only a little over five foot two inches in height. The upper part of his body was unclothed to the waist, the lower half was clad in a pair of threadbare trousers that seemed to have 'once belonged to some fat gentleman's dress suit'. The feet were also naked, and his lameness became obvious as he stood there, his body slightly tilted to the left, his back twisted and bent.

More than anything else, it was the head that created such an amazing impression. It did indeed seem huge beyond Treves's most imaginative expectations: a misshapen mass of bony lumps and cauliflower-like growths of skin. It had the circumference of a man's waist, and the forehead was disfigured by bosses of bony material that bulged forward in great mounds, giving it an appearance something resembling a cottage loaf laid on its side. The greater mound pressed down upon the right eyebrow so that the eye on that side of the face was almost hidden.

The lower half of the face was itself compressed and distorted by a swelling of the right cheek, where a pink mass of flesh protruded from the mouth, forcing back the lips into inverted folds. Here was evidently the origin of the 'trunk' the poster artist had so graphically portrayed, if with a certain artistic licence to enhance its resemblance to an elephant's anatomy. There were other bony

masses present on the top and side of the skull, but in these areas it was the skin that dominated, the flesh being raised up into heavy cauliflower-textured growths which hung down at the sides and back of the head.

Merrick’s body itself was in no way spared. Masses of similar pendulous growths of skin hung down from the chest and back. Elsewhere it looked as though the skin was covered with fine warts. The right arm was enormous in size and virtually shapeless, the right hand being ‘large and clumsy – a fin or paddle rather than a hand . . . The thumb had the appearance of a radish, while the fingers might have been thick tuberous roots.’ It was impossible to imagine such a limb being of much use to its owner. By contrast the left arm and hand looked completely normal, even delicate and feminine in their refinement. The feet, so far as Treves could make out, were as shapeless and deformed as the gross right arm.

The showman seemed to Treves to be unable or unwilling to pass on more than the most rudimentary information about his charge: that he was English born, that he was twenty-one years old and that his name, Treves claimed he told him, was John Merrick. For his own part, Treves felt a frustrating bafflement at the malformations he found himself observing. He was quite unable to account for the condition, to pin on it any label of medical diagnosis or recall ever having come across anything remotely like it in professional experience or theoretical training.

Treves was at the age of thirty-one already a figure to be reckoned with in the medical world. In 1881 he had been invited by the Royal College of Surgeons to give the Erasmus Wilson Lectures, a series of six lecture-demonstrations on specimens from the college’s museum to be delivered before an audience consisting of some of the most distinguished surgeons in the country. He added to this honour the winning of the college’s Jacksonian Prize in 1883 for an original essay on intestinal surgery. In the same year he published *Surgical Applied Anatomy*, a textbook that lost no time in establishing itself as both a standard reference work and a medical best-seller. If he was disconcerted by his bewilderment before the sorely afflicted frame of Joseph Merrick, he must have been stimulated by the challenge it presented to his diagnostic abilities and to his natural instincts as a scientific investigator.

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The explanation offered by Mr Norman to account for his protégé's deformities at least had the virtue of simplicity. All this came about, he explained, as the consequence of an unfortunate accident. While the Elephant Man's mother was carrying him during the last few months of her pregnancy, she was knocked over and badly frightened by an elephant from a travelling menagerie. The shock sustained conveyed itself to the unborn child with the result they saw before them. (Dr Bland-Sutton also remembered this story in connection with his visit to the freakshow.) As will be seen, Merrick himself clung to it, finding it to contain a powerful degree of comfort. The extreme rarity of his sensational disorder was no doubt to be accounted for by the scarcity of runaway elephants in rural England.

Frederick Treves's interest in the case was quite naturally not concerned with exploring it as medical folk-belief. Ignoring the vagaries of superstition, his instincts were to seek to establish scientific fact and, if appropriate, to write up an account of these apparently undescribed abnormalities for publication. His mind was quite made up that he would like to take Merrick back across the road so that he might examine him in detail at leisure in his room in the London Hospital's Medical College. Tom Norman again proved ready to agree, perceiving some publicity value in the idea. But at this point, wrote Treves, 'I became at once conscious of a difficulty.'

Considerable problems were invariably to be encountered in transporting this startling being from place to place. The problem remained even when the distance concerned was no more than the few hundred yards to the door of the Medical College, which lay along Turner Street, on the south-west side of the London Hospital's main complex of buildings. For the Elephant Man to appear on the streets without concealment was to invite the instant assembling of a crowd. In the open, out of his refuge, Merrick's footsteps were invariably dogged by ever-increasing excitement and clamour, his progress hampered by eager, curious, shocked or frankly incredulous bystanders. The Elephant Man's journeyings abroad were, it seemed, in the habit of degenerating into public disturbances.

There was a solution to hand – at least, a partial solution – and this, said Treves, took the form of a special set of outdoor clothes the

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Elephant Man possessed that concealed him from head to toe. The whole outfit consisted of three garments. First there came a pair of huge bag-like slippers in which the feet and lower legs could be encased. Then there was the voluminous black cloak, and this practically touched the ground when draped about its owner's shoulders. Treves could only remember having seen such a garment once before, and then it had been at a theatre, when it was 'wrapped about the figure of a Venetian bravo'. He found it difficult to imagine how the Elephant Man came by such a garment, yet the most extraordinary item of clothing remained the hat. It was shaped somewhat like a conventional peaked cap, and was also black in colour. Its dimensions, however, were vast, since it needed to be large enough to fit the Elephant Man's head. From the edge of the wide peak a brownish flannel pelmet hung down to conceal the face, but in this a horizontal slit was cut so Merrick could see where he was walking.

The sight of the Elephant Man limping slowly along in his outdoor clothing – a slight, bent figure leaning heavily on a stick and engulfed in a huge black cloak, the whole ensemble topped off by the great head in its 'pillar-box' hat – could, Treves remarked, have been only a degree or so less alarming than the appearance of the man unclothed. It was decided in the end that Merrick would wear outdoor garments for his visit to the Medical School, but that Treves would hire a cab to carry him from door to door and return him afterwards in the same way.

There remained only the need to ensure the smooth reception of the Elephant Man at the college. So that he might identify himself to the porter and avoid embarrassing delays or misunderstandings, Treves handed Merrick his visiting card. With this gesture the first meeting was over between Frederick Treves, a young surgeon whose ever more ambitious career was opening before him, and Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, a humble freak whose hopes for the future were altogether more modest in character.