

# Young Doctors Come to See the Elephant Man

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*We do not see things the way they are.*

*We see things the way we are.*

—DAVID PILBEAM, PALEOANTHROPOLOGIST<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

As part of an eight-week, second-year medical student elective in literature and medicine entitled “Doctor Stories/Patient Stories: The Doctor-Patient Relationship,” one session focuses on the experience of disability from the perspective of patients and physicians. We read poetry, essays, and short stories about a range of disabilities, including multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, stroke, paraplegia, blindness, deafness, and mental retardation. This year, as an optional supplement to these readings, I suggest we read a play, *The Elephant Man*, by Bernard Pomerance,<sup>2</sup> because of its evocative portrayal of the relationship between patient and doctor. Of ten students enrolled in the class, six agree to participate in three successive evening sessions. Most of the students have heard the phrase *Elephant Man* used as a linguistic shorthand, in the words of one student, for “someone really ugly.”<sup>3</sup> One student mentions that the Elephant Man was someone who lived a hundred years ago and had a terribly disfiguring medical condition. Another student comments he has seen the David Lynch movie,<sup>4</sup> but didn’t like it much because it was “black and white.” We decide to meet the following week.

## The “True Story” of the Elephant Man

At our first session, I briefly review with the students pertinent known historical facts regarding the Elephant Man. As source materials, I bring the Michael Howell and Peter Ford biography<sup>5</sup>, anthropologist Ashley Montagu’s revised third edition of *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*,<sup>6</sup> and a 1986 article by Tibbles and Cohen published in the *British Medical Journal* regarding diagnosis. We establish

that the so-called Elephant Man was indeed an actual person, Joseph Carey Merrick, who was born in 1862 in Leicester, England, and died in 1890 in London. Probably of normal appearance at birth, he was afflicted with what is now believed to be Proteus syndrome, a progressively disfiguring condition that causes severe dermatologic and skeletal abnormalities, including “macrocephaly; thickened skin and subcutaneous tissues, . . . plantar hyperplasia, lipomas, and unspecified subcutaneous masses; hypertrophy of long bones; and overgrowth of the skull.”<sup>7</sup>

Joseph was the eldest of three children born to a working-class family. His father owned and operated a haberdashery shop. When he was eleven, Joseph’s mother died of bronchial pneumonia, and his father subsequently remarried. Joseph left school at twelve and found employment as a cigar roller. When he became too disabled for this occupation, he hawked his father’s haberdashery in the streets. He was mistreated by his stepmother and sometimes beaten. At age fifteen, he ran away from home, but was taken in by an uncle. Unable to support himself, Joseph voluntarily signed himself into the Leicester Union Workhouse. Here he remained for several years. Eventually, at age twenty-two, he contacted a well-known music hall impresario, Mr. Sam Torr, and offered himself for public exhibition as a freak. Torr entered into a contractual relationship with Joseph, forming a syndication of managers who were responsible for the young man’s exhibition in various parts of the country, including London.

The surgeon Frederick Treves, whose distinguished career would eventually include becoming a nationally recognized authority on appendectomy, a widely published author, and personal physician to King Edward VII,<sup>8</sup> first entered Merrick’s life in 1884. Discovering Merrick at a London side show, he published the first of a series of articles on the Elephant Man in the *British Medical Journal* and presented his case before the Pathological Society of London. Treves then returned Merrick to the streets, where he spent the next two years in exhibition, first in London, then later, when such displays became less acceptable to English authorities, in Brussels. However, official attitudes being no more tolerant in this country, his exhibitor abandoned Merrick, after first stealing his rather sizeable nest egg of fifty pounds. Merrick somehow made his way back to London, where he was able to contact Treves, who installed him in a room of the London Hospital. Although the London, as it was known, was not intended to maintain “incurable” patients, an appeal by the hospital director, F. C. Carr-Gomm, led to a flood of charitable donations that enabled Merrick to remain in this facility for the rest of his short life.

At first assumed to be an imbecile because of his appearance and related speech defects, Merrick was quickly discovered to have normal intelligence. He occupied his time at the London Hospital indulging his passion for reading, building cardboard structures in imitation of the great cathedral St. Phillips, which he could see from his window, and entertaining his “guests,” who included many representatives of London’s high society. Treves also spent time with Merrick on an almost daily basis. Merrick died in his sleep at the age of twenty-seven. It is believed that the cause of death was compression of his spinal vertebrae due to the dislocation of his ever-enlarging head.

## We See Things the Way We Are

In this first exposure to Merrick, it is apparent that the medical students have come to *see*, to *view* Merrick. Not a modern version of the sideshow crowds who came to “gape and yawp” (3), they come more in the spirit of the medical men attending Treves’s presentation of Merrick at the London Pathological Society. Their clinical gaze devours the pictures of Merrick’s skeleton and other photographic evidence provided in our reference texts. There is some eager debate as to whether, as was originally posited, Merrick suffered from neurofibromatosis or, as is currently the widely accepted view, he was a victim of the more serious and rarer condition Proteus syndrome. This is familiar but intriguing territory, and such discussion makes these students feel like real doctors.

Thus, when at last we begin our reading of *Pomerance*, the students approach the play with a point of view clearly in place. Confronted with Merrick’s monstrosity, they seek refuge in the clinical role of physician. And our reading does not progress far enough to seriously challenge this haven of safety. Having spent much of our time laying down “the facts,” we have time only to read a few pages. We conclude at the end of the scene “The English Public Will Pay . . .,” which succinctly defines the physician Treves’s goals for his patient Merrick: “Normality as far as is possible” (21). This aim strikes our makeshift cast as a rather humane objective, and in response to my clarifying query, they echo Treves’s own words: “What’s wrong with that?”

Their reading of these early scenes reflects the students’ identification with Treves and their desire to see the physician in a healing, restorative role. Not unlike Treves himself, they have entered medicine to alleviate suffering, to assist and even “rescue” unfortunates. For these students, Treves appears as an ideal role model: he is already financially successful; he has a satisfying home life; and he appears destined for significant professional acclaim. Yet he is also a benevolent physician who donates time to the poor. Thus Treves seems a safe choice through which to understand the unfolding events of the play.

This expectation of Treves as hero and savior colors the students’ initial responses. For example, they read *Pomerance*’s sly introductory quote—“*Anyone playing the part of Merrick should be advised to consult a physician about the problems of sustaining any unnatural or twisted position*” (ix)—as straightforward orthopedic advice that places the physician in the position of authoritative expert. Similarly, students justify Treves’s decision to return Merrick to continued exhibition after his appearance at the Pathological Society (7) on the grounds that the social responsibility of physicians has significant limits. “The physician can’t be expected to fix everything,” warn these budding doctors, well aware that managed care may scarcely allow them to fix anything.

In sum, the students view Treves much as, a bit later in the play, he views himself: “curious, compassionate, concerned about the world” (40). They note his enlightened view of Merrick’s disability, which eschews superstitious explanations of his condition (for example, exposure to elephants in utero), and avoids person-blame models (Merrick is not responsible for his deformity) (17). Further, when Nurse Sandwich reacts in horror to Merrick’s appearance, Treves appears resolutely focused on doing whatever it takes to help his new charge (18). Treves is someone who saves

Merrick from degrading exhibition in freak shows and carnivals, who wants only to “help” Merrick. Aren’t doctors supposed to help their patients?

Interestingly, in this introductory reading, little attention is paid to Merrick at all. Merrick, while deserving of our pity, is certainly “other,” not-doctor, and perhaps not-quite-human. At best, he is the patient in need of help, indeed the patient explicitly crying out for help (15). Exploited and victimized by almost everyone he encounters, suffering greatly, Merrick simply does not have the resources to effectively intervene in his own life. He is someone clearly in need of rescuing, a patient who desperately requires the benevolent intervention of a dedicated physician.

## We See the World according to *Pomerance*<sup>9</sup>

In our second session, we complete the reading of the play. Since medical students are not stupid, they quickly realize that, at least according to *Pomerance*, they have “seen” the situation all wrong. In a dramatic shift from their initial expectations, they now perceive Treves as the villain. Instead of materializing as the grateful patient, Merrick reprises the role of victim, but the source of his victimization has changed. Merrick’s real oppressor is no longer the showman Ross, who at least has a certain blunt honesty about him, but Treves, whose apparent mercy is really a much more severe cruelty, and who, it turns out, is the worst exploiter of all. The students have discovered the irony in *Pomerance*’s introductory quote, and take pleasure in identifying Treves as someone familiar with *himself* assuming twisted and unnatural positions. Treves has become that worst of all creatures, a *bad doctor*.

What do the students see as Treves’s sins? In case we are in any danger of missing the point, *Pomerance* helpfully outlines the physician’s wrongdoings with great explicitness. All at once focused on the dream sequence and the Pinheads’ chorus about Empire (59–62, 10, 68), the students learn to see Treves as a colonizer, not of continents but of his patient Merrick. Treves dutifully carries the white man’s burden to the world of disability, and requires, with condescending benevolence, that its foremost citizen ape the clothing, customs, and attitudes of his betters. Treves’s relationship with Merrick is perceived as controlling, demeaning, and patronizing, that of colonizer to colonized. Students are quick to point out that Treves, for all his elevated language about Merrick’s intelligence and sensibilities, seems incapable of seeing him as other than a naïf, a child, or even a woman, but always less than a true man, much as white Europeans perceived native Africans or Indians. We begin to think of Treves as “dangerous” precisely because he is an English “gentleman and a good man” (60). Like the British colonizers, he is afflicted with arrogant self-satisfaction, repressed sexuality, and unquestioning confidence in the rightness of his methods and motives. He is, in short, a man incapable of empathy, least of all for Merrick. In fact, Treves is best thought of as a kind of Jack the Ripper (57) who has eviscerated and raped Merrick by totally depriving him of his identity.

Merrick, on the other hand, undergoes no similarly profound metamorphosis. Although he shows some superficial signs of being the grateful patient (“Thank you, sir!” [24]), Merrick continues as primarily victim. If anything, he is judged to

be even more profoundly victimized in this new reading. Students recall that the Elephant Man as sideshow freak still retained some autonomy and decision-making about his life, did have a legal contract, and in fact earned a tidy sum. Under the guise of friendship, Treves's exhibition of Merrick to curious scientists and high-society patrons makes him seem little more than a trained pet, and has reduced him to a state of utter dependency. Tragically, Merrick himself seems to succumb to the pathetic illusion that he has become a normal man, when he refuses to return with Ross to the freak-show circuit. "I am a man like others," he proclaims (53), and we are shocked by the facility with which Merrick has traded his identity for an empty mirror.

Merrick as illusion, as emptiness, becomes the theme of this phase of our interpretation. Everything about his life at Bedstead Square strikes us as fake and illusory. The presents he receives from his aristocratic visitors, the silver-headed walking canes, rings, and personal photographs, are simply cruel "props" (39) used to sustain the delusion. We evaluate these "friendships" as counterfeit, stage-managed interactions to assuage the sensibilities of the guests, who have defined civility as being able to view Merrick without fainting. Mrs. Kendal literally is coached by Treves to act out a scripted relationship (29), while the formulaic motions of the other society figures clearly convey their wish only to see their own generosity and large-heartedness reflected in Merrick's gratitude. Merrick's identity has been erased by society's need to make him their mirror ("Who Does He Remind You Of?" [39-40]). And Merrick merits our contempt for having acceded so completely to this desire for conformity. As Treves scornfully puts it, "He is excited to do anything everyone is doing if he thinks everyone is doing it" (64). This is a Merrick we can pity, but hardly admire.

Appropriately, we have become aware of Pomerance's emphasis on the "tyranny of the normal" (9), with Treves cast in the role of tyrant and normalcy the weapon he implacably wields over his most loyal subject, Merrick. We note the ironic observations in the text that the more closely Merrick mimics normalcy, the closer he moves toward death (41, 64). And, in fact, it is normality that ultimately kills him through the intervention of the Pinheads, who place him in a "normal" sleeping position. Merrick, erased and obliterated, ends up the ultimate victim of Treves's misplaced desire to make a "normal" man of him. By the end of the play, whatever might have existed of Merrick's humanity has disappeared, and his death is simply the imposition of the final colonial privilege.

Insights fly fast and furious. But it's time to go home. The students decide to return for one more discussion.

### We See More Complex Truths

Despite our cleverness during session two, students come back to the third session troubled. They have thought more about the play, found pieces that don't fit, and seen hints of more complex truths. Pomerance's neat, categorical world of oppressor and oppressed doesn't always add up.

The prod to their dissatisfaction has been the play's preface, which we did not read in our first two sessions. There Pomerance says somewhat vaguely, as though he himself were not sure of the significance, "I believe the building of the church model constitutes *some kind* of central metaphor" (v; my emphasis). We examine the play again, studying all mention of cardboard construction in search of hidden meaning. Then one student locates a statement that, as she excitedly expresses it, "might be what the play is really about!" In the scene titled ironically "He Does It with Just One Hand," referring to his model making, Merrick describes how he first found the courage to begin construction of the cardboard cathedral by realizing that St. Phillips itself was only "an imitation of grace . . . flying up from the mud" (39). Perhaps, the student ventures, this line can help us reinterpret both Merrick and Treves.

Suppose, we wonder, there are no real villains or victims in this play. Suppose there are only questionable heroes, their feet stuck in the mud of cultural blinders, bigotry, and misguided values on the one hand and mind-boggling deformity, societal prejudice, and romantic fairy tales on the other, both struggling to "imitate grace" in their attitudes and actions. Viewed from this perspective, Treves is not simply the benevolent savior or the exploitive oppressor, but a complex, struggling man, besieged variously by ambition and compassion. Merrick is not only a grateful patient or oppressed victim, but also a complex, struggling man, pitiful at times, profound at others.

Our cardboard version of Treves crafted under Pomerance's politically correct tutelage begins to assume greater complexity. As we think more deeply about the physician, we realize that one aspect of the play we conveniently overlooked in our earlier discussion is the fact that Treves's biggest critic is Treves himself. He is no mere caricature of an unreflective oppressor. Before our very eyes, he changes and evolves, developing doubts he assumes himself incapable of entertaining, feeling empathy even as he accuses himself of the impossibility of experiencing this emotion. Toward the end, Treves is "sorry" for his plan urging Merrick toward normalcy (64) and has acquired a disconcerting facility to "see things others don't" (65). He experiences despair and, in a striking role reversal with his patient, ultimately is the one who must beg for help (66).

What has happened to Treves? In fact, he has been profoundly altered by his encounter with the person of Joseph Merrick. We see that the vector of effect in the doctor-patient relationship has not been unidirectional, as we had assumed, Merrick as grateful patient or oppressed victim passively receiving either the benevolent or exploitive ministrations of his physician, but rather bidirectional. In this new understanding, Treves is as influenced by Merrick as Merrick is by Treves. As Montagu and Howell and Ford assert, we begin to acknowledge that the relationship between Treves and Merrick is a complex and multifaceted one. Certainly it contains elements of exploitation and condescension, but it also contains elements of compassion, caring, and commitment.

And what of Merrick? Can he too be understood as an "imitation of grace flying up from the mud"? Merrick, we realize, is no passive victim. Instead, partly through

Treves's agency, over the course of the play Merrick progressively finds his voice, a highly symbolic development for someone initially described as "an imbecile [who] just makes sounds" (11). Further, this reclaimed voice is one that continues to advance and strengthen as the play progresses. Sometimes Merrick uses his voice to claim the mantle of normalcy, as when he tells Ross, "I am like others." At these times, Merrick demands recognition of the similarities he shares with conventional society. Elsewhere, however, his voice challenges Treves's emphasis on rules and conformity. In one witty exchange, he bests his teacher by demonstrating the emptiness of Treves's rule-governed "mercy" (57).

### We May Never See "Things as They Are"

It is growing late. We realize we are reaching a stopping point, if not a conclusion. It is time to go home and turn our attention to other obligations, other priorities, other mysteries. We look at the last scene, "Final Report to Investors," and Frederick Treves's last remark: "I did think of one small thing" (71). The hospital director Carr-Gomm is attempting to bring closure to the "official version" of the Elephant Man's story, and he smugly tells Treves it is too late to add anything else. Yet the play invites speculation as to what Treves might have wanted to include. One student suggests that the surgeon intended to say, "It is all a lie. We never really knew Joseph Merrick." The rest of us, however, are not so despairing. We feel we have glimpsed Merrick in many guises, and we wonder if Treves did not also feel he knew Merrick, at least a little.

Perhaps, someone else offers, Treves might have said, "At last I *saw* Merrick," not in the sense of an exhibit, but as a human being. We are still not satisfied. While the initial proposition struck the group as too pessimistic, this one seems slightly oversimplified. We find ourselves doubting whether we can ever truly "see" another. And with Merrick, there is so little to go on. We look at each other in bewilderment. Perhaps Treves really had nothing to add.

Then, another student softly suggests that Treves might have wanted to add the words "I loved him." It is the student role-playing Treves who feels compelled to propose this possibility. As Treves, he asserts that although he may not have understood Merrick completely and at times may have belittled and diminished him, he did have feelings of love for him. Something about this suggestion moves us, and we start thumbing through the play again. There is little direct textual evidence to support this interpretation, but *The Elephant Man* certainly has some important things to say about love. In an exchange with Mrs. Kendal (32–33), Merrick slices through Romeo's narcissistic romanticism (foreshadowing Treves's later self-label of narcissist), in the process showing us someone who, despite the harsh blows life has dealt him, is capable of other-centered love. Later, Merrick demonstrates this love through the trustworthy gaze he bestows on the naked Mrs. Kendal (49). In the subsequent argument between Treves and Merrick about permissible conditions under which to contemplate a woman's nude body, Merrick, so often the "viewed," the recipient of the stares

and cruelties of others, implies that unless the physician's clinical gaze, so routinely directed toward vulnerable, suffering patients, is suffused with love, it becomes unbearable (57).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps in the ultimate summing up of the Elephant Man, Treves has seen the importance of gazing on patients with love as well as scientific detachment. Perhaps he has learned that, in fact, he has no choice.

In these final moments, we find ourselves contemplating an open-ended interpretive model that brings us little resolution, and many possibilities. It encourages us to see Treves and Merrick both as flawed, imperfect human beings, two people in mutual and shifting relationship to each other. We have come to see the Elephant Man as only one of many roles Joseph Merrick played, recognizing that he was also dreamer, dandy, and visionary; and that in his story he was ultimately both like and unlike other men. We have come to see that Frederick Treves also played multiple roles, those of scientist, physician, politician, friend, and that all of these roles had importance to him and helped define him. Perhaps most important, we have come to see something about ourselves, for we realize that gazing upon Merrick—and upon Treves—requires appreciation for their complexities and subtleties, humility for all we will never know about them, and above all compassion for the suffering and struggles both men inevitably endured. In our encounter with *The Elephant Man*, we too find ourselves struggling to "imitate grace flying up from the mud."

### NOTES

1. Pilbeam, David, 1980, "Major Trends in Human Evolution." *Current Argument on Early Man*. Ed. Lars-König Königsson. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980: 261–285.
2. Page numbers in parentheses refer to Pomerance 1979.
3. Graham and Oehlschlaeger 1992, ch. 9.
4. Sparks 1980.
5. Howell and Ford 1980.
6. Montagu 1996.
7. Tibbles and Cohen 1986.
8. Trombley 1989.
9. Graham and Oehlschlaeger 1992, ch. 5.
10. Foucault 1975.

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## PART II