

JOHN MERRICK

John Merrick was born in Leicester, England, in 1862. He was originally named Joseph Carey Merrick. Before his second birthday he began to develop tumours on his face. His condition quickly worsened as bulbous, cauliflower-like growths grew from his head and body. His right hand and forearm became like a useless club. His appearance was so hideous that many who saw him did not think he was human. He was abandoned by his mother.

John Merrick was called the “Elephant Man,” because of a tusk like growth on his face. His story has been the subject of at least two movies, a play, and countless books and papers. One promoter who displayed him in a freak show “explained” that his mother had been trampled by an elephant while she was pregnant with John. This, he said, explained her son’s hideous deformities.

Medical science has long sought a more probable explanation. One early belief was that he suffered from elephantiasis. This is a disorder of the lymphatic system that causes parts of the body to grow to grotesque proportions. Later someone suggested that he may have suffered from an extremely severe case of neurofibromatosis. This is a nervous system disorder that causes nerve cells to grow out of control, creating large, misshapen tumours.

In 1979, a much more rare disease was identified as causing overgrowth of bone and other tissue. This disorder, named Proteus Syndrome, is extremely rare. Medical science knows of less than 100 cases. A study of Merrick’s remains at the Royal London Hospital seems to back this diagnosis.

John Merrick, however, in spite of his hideous appearance, was not an animal. He was a human being created in the image of God. The course of events that revealed his humanity has profound theological implications.

During John’s early life he was exploited as a “freak” and his “owner,” Mr. Bytes, charged admission for the privilege of seeing him. In 1884, however, he was discovered by a famous and accomplished physician named Frederick Treves. When John was beaten without mercy by the drunken Mr. Bytes, Dr. Treves had him taken to a London hospital. Though “incurables” were not to be admitted, Merrick was allowed to stay until a suitable home could be found.

It was assumed that the Elephant Man was an imbecile incapable of learning. One night, however, the doctors heard him reciting the 23rd Psalm. They discovered that John Merrick was an intelligent and sensitive man. Having established his humanity, another appeal was made to the Hospital Committee to allow him to stay. The request was again denied. He was, however, permitted to stay in two nearby rooms while appeals were made for contributions.

At this point the story is told that something revolutionary happened in John Merrick’s life. A surprise visitor came to see him. She was Mrs. Kendal, the famous actress who was the toast of the West End stage. She was also considered one of London’s leading society hostesses. When she met Merrick she gave to him a copy of the Shakespearean love story, Romeo and Juliet. When John would read the words of Romeo, she would quote the response from Juliet. They continued in this way until the passage was completed.

In the magic of that moment, the beautiful Mrs. Kendal said to John Merrick: “You’re not the Elephant Man at all, you are Romeo.” And then she leaned over and kissed him. Then she presented him with a framed photograph of herself and invited him to come and see her perform at the theatre.

The beautiful Mrs. Kendal was a married woman. John Merrick had no illusions that they would ever become husband and wife. Yet, the simple act of her kindness had a transforming affect upon his life. To the day of his death, he would say to Dr. Treves: “Do not worry about me, my friend, every day is filled with happiness, for I know that I am loved.”

This is, as you know, the very genius of the Christian Gospel. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. It does not matter how sinful and ugly we are. We are loved. The proof of this love is not a kiss, but a cross (1 John 3:16.)