

# LitScope: The Elephant Man



by

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PT3 LitNotes

NAME:

## Table of Contents

Table	Page num.
<b>Elements of the short story</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Synopsis – The Creature in The Shop</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Synopsis – The Card</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Synopsis – A Letter to The Times</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Synopsis – Merrick’s First Home</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Synopsis – An Important Visitor</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Synopsis – Outside the Hospital</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Synopsis – The Last Letter</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Character Traits / Moral Values / Messages</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Themes</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Extras’</b>	<b>10</b>

### **The editor;**



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# **Elements of the Short Story**

## **Setting**

### **Physical Setting**

- A shop-lot in London, the London Hospital, and the countryside.

### **Time**

- Early 1800s

## **The Author: Tim Vicary**

- He worked for many years as a lecturer at the Norwegian Study Centre at the university of York.
- He co-wrote several textbooks for Norwegian schools, and many graded readers for foreign learners of English, published by Oxford University Press.
- He now lives in the English countryside in the North of England.

## **Chapter 1 Synopsis – The Creature in The Shop**

One day in 1884, a doctor, whose name is Dr Frederick Treves, saw a picture in the window of a shop near the hospital he works in, the London Hospital. The picture was ugly and did not look like a man but an elephant instead. “Come in and see the Elephant Man. Two pence,” it said below the picture. Dr Treves entered the shop to see the man in the picture. The store was filthy and rotten fruits were seen lying around. The shopkeeper, Mr Simon Silcock, first refused to let the doctor visit the ugly man because he was closing shop and asked the doctor to come back tomorrow. However, the doctor was entertained when he said that he will offer more than two pence to see the man in the picture.

Silcock brought the doctor into a little room at the back of the shop. It was cold and dark, and a horrible smell was present. In the room, a disfigured man with a cloth over its head, sat on a chair very quietly. The doctor described him as a creature because of his appearance, an elephant’s face because of his dead skin. The shopkeeper then orders the man to walk. The doctor observed him, his condition and he could not walk well due to his big legs and bad back. His left hand however attracted the doctor’s interest. The left arm and hand did not look like the rest of his body, it was beautiful, it looks like a young woman’s hand. Joseph Merrick was the man’s name.

The doctor and the shopkeeper then left the dark room. Silcock spoke about Merrick. He takes Merrick, the Elephant Man, because of his appearance, around the country and says that many hundred-people come to see him. He explained that the business is difficult and sometimes, he gets a lot of money. His business is difficult because of the police, he explained. So, the shopkeeper and the Elephant Man move every week.

The doctor introduced himself to the shopkeeper and he wanted to bring Merrick to the hospital. Silcock was hesitant and said it was going to be difficult because people are afraid of him due to his appearance. Sometimes, little boys run after Merrick and hit him. The police sometimes put Silcock and Merrick in prison for scaring the public. The doctor offered the shopkeeper even more money, possibly hoping the shopkeeper to cooperate

and to bring the man to the hospital. Silcock then suggested the doctor to bring him in a cab.

## **Chapter 2 Synopsis – The Card**

The doctor visited the shop in a cab early next morning. Merrick wore a big black hat, a long coat and his face was covered with a cloth. Merrick had difficulty climbing the cab's steps, so the doctor helped him. After a few minutes, the postman arrived and asked whether the gentleman was ill. The doctor corrected him that it was a woman, possibly to save Merrick's identity. The postman and Dr Treves helped Merrick up the steps. There was a boy near the cab, they made fun of Merrick, "Come and see this, boys! A fat lady in a black coat! And look at that enormous hat!" the boy said. The boys laughed, the doctor quickly closed the door behind Merrick as soon as he entered the cab. Dr Treves thanked the postman and boarded the cab. Merrick and the doctor were on their way to the hospital.

Merrick asked who the doctor was. This was the first time the doctor officially introduced himself to Merrick. He even gave him his business card.

Upon arriving at the hospital, the doctor examined Merrick and wrote important things about him in a little book. The doctor left Merrick back at the shop in the evening that same day. The next day, the picture which first aroused the doctor's interest, was no more there.

## **Chapter 3 Synopsis – A Letter to The Times**

Merrick was last seen by Dr Treves two years ago. One day, the police brought Merrick to the London Hospital, the doctor's business card led them there. He was tired, hungry and dirty, so he was put into a quiet room.

Dr. Treves told the hospital chairman, Mr Carr Gomm about Merrick. After listening carefully, Mr Gomm wrote a letter to the editor of The Times newspaper. On December 4<sup>th</sup>, the letter was published. It gave a little insight into Merrick's life. After a week from when the letter was published, The Times readers donated over £50,000 in just a week so that Merrick can live in a hospital for all his life. Now, the hospital can afford to take care of him.

## **Chapter 4 Synopsis – Merrick's First Home**

The hospital gave Merrick two rooms at the back of the hospital. His skin got better, and he did not smell anymore. He read many books and loved talking about them. It was difficult for him sometimes, but Merrick did not feel offended or angry. One day, a new nurse came to give him some food. Upon looking at him, she screamed, dropped the food on the floor and ran out of the room. Merrick was not angry about the incident, but he felt sorry for the girl. He accepted that people usually laugh or scream after looking at him and did not make a fuss out of it.

Merrick told the doctor he was happy, and that the hospital staff were kind. However, he wanted to live in a lighthouse, or a home for blind people. He did not want people to look at him. He said he did not have money and he may not be able to live in the hospital for long.

Dr Treves then explained to him about the letter to The Times. Merrick was speechless.

## **Chapter 5 Synopsis – An Important Visitor**

The doctor did not want Merrick to live by himself. He also wanted Merrick to talk to women. One day, Dr Treves's friend, a beautiful young woman, came to visit Merrick.

Merrick was filled with emotion when the young woman first visited him. He cried for nearly five minutes.

That night, Merrick told the doctor that the woman was wonderful and that it was the first time a woman smiled at him since his mother did many years ago.

A week later, the woman brought another friend with her and they gave Merrick some books to read.

People were now reading about Merrick in the newspapers, and he was getting many visitors. Even the important people visited him, and all of them did not laugh at his appearance. He began feeling like a man instead of a creature.

One day, the Queen of England paid a visit to Merrick. Queen Alexandra gave him some books, and some red flowers during her visit. Her Majesty visited Merrick for a couple of times after that day and even gave him a Christmas Card. Merrick, two days before Christmas, then sent a letter to the Queen, to show his gratitude.

## **Chapter 6 Synopsis – Outside The Hospital**

Merrick had many friends and he was more like a child than a man. After Christmas, he went to the theatre. Mrs Kendal helped him to visit and sit in a spot in the theatre where it was difficult for people to see him but not difficult for him to watch the play. It was a children's Christmas play and he loved it very much. He remembered this play for a long time.

Merrick then wanted to visit the countryside. Despite the wish being difficult to fulfil, Merrick's new friends made it come true. He lived in a small house in the country. His lady-friend even allowed him to stay in it for the summer.

Dr Treves returned to London, and Merrick stayed there for six more weeks. Every week he would write to the doctor, and from those letters, the doctor knew he was having an enjoyable time.

He returned to London at the end of summer and his skin looked much better.

## **Chapter 7 Synopsis – The Last Letter**

In April 1890, Dr Treves found Merrick dead in bed. He was lying on his back, his heavy head off the bed. It broke his neck, he died quickly. Merrick would usually sleep on his knees, but that night, he tried to sleep on his back, like normal men.

The next day, the Chairman of The London Hospital, Mr. Gomm, wrote to the editor of The Times again. It was the second letter to The Times about Merrick since three and a half years ago.

Mr Gomm told the readers of The Times that he was going to use the balance money meant for Merrick, for the hospital. He thanked the readers for their help and for helping Merrick become happy again.

## Character Traits / Moral Values / Messages

*Dr. Frederick Treves*

- **Dedication**
  - Dr Treves is a **dedicated** doctor because he insisted to bring Mr. Joseph Merrick to the hospital for a medical examination and possibly, hope to find a remedy to Merrick's skin condition.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must perform our duties with full dedication than just doing something for the sake of someone or for money.
- **Quick-thinker**
  - Immediately "**corrects**" the postman from thinking he was Merrick, and instead, said that he was a woman. This was to possibly protect Merrick's identity.
- **Helpful**
  - Wants to **help** Merrick live a better life by fulfilling his requests, like bringing him to the theatre and to the countryside.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must be helpful to the people around us and should try to fulfil their wishes if its feasible.
- **Kind-heart**
  - He speaks to Merrick and **offers emotional support** when he needs it, like meeting Merrick everyday so that he will have someone to talk to.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must be kind to the people around us. It does not matter if you know the person or not, and a little bit of kindness goes a long way.

*Mr. Simon Silcock*

- **An Opportunist**
  - **Takes advantage** of Merrick and **uses him as a business opportunity**, like bringing him around for to be laughed at with a small charge.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must not take opportunity of someone and its a cruel and disgusting thing to do.
- **An Untidy Person**
  - **Rotten fruits can be found** around his shop. The room which housed Merrick was also smelly.
- **Dishonest**
  - He **took Merrick's money** and fled Belgium without him.

## *Mr. Joseph Merrick*

- **Understanding**
  - He **does not get angry with people** who are afraid or makes fun of him. He accepts his flaw and continues life without making a fuss out of it.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must have patience and understand why certain things happen. Merrick accepted that people were making fun of him because of his flaw and realistically, if he was to retaliate, people will laugh more to see an ugly angry man being grumpy.
- **Soft Spoken**
  - He **does not talk much**, possibly because many people do not talk to him due to his ugliness.
- **A bookworm**
  - He **reads many books** and when he was living in the hospital, his room was filled with books.
- **Emotional**
  - He gets **very emotional**, especially when he was watching a play. He got angry with a character, **hit his hand on his chair and stood up to talk to the character mid-play**. However, no one heard him.

## *Mr Carr Gomm*

- **Understanding**
  - He **accepts to help Merrick** on behalf of the hospital by writing a letter to the The Times and requesting financial help from their readers.
  - He also understands that Merrick is not ill but needs a place to stay or else he will be neglected.
- **Courageous**
  - He was **willing to accept Merrick into the hospital** and write about him publicly despite people were afraid of Merrick and that the police were going after Merrick for scaring the public.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must be courageous when doing the right thing. Public perception is not to be thought of when executing a decision, in this scenario, for the better of Merrick's life.
- **Honesty**
  - He tells The Times readers that the **leftover money meant** for Merrick will be **donated to the hospital** after Merrick's unfortunate death.
    - **Moral Values / Messages**
      - We must always practise honesty at every second of our lives. When one starts to be not honest, its a beginning to a destruction of a person's character.

## Themes

### **A person is not what you see**

- Joseph Merrick's ugly appearance scared people away and made people to believe that he would bring harm. His physical deformities had indeed made him look like an elephant, thus explained the reason behind the name: The Elephant Man. However, the doctor, Frederick Treves saw beyond the skin outside, and decided to give Merrick an opportunity of a lifetime, that is a place to stay and not being used. It was only later through the story, we found out that Merrick had a child-like character, and was like any other man, he liked reading and he was very happy when Treves' lady-friend and The Queen paid a visit to him. So, one should not judge a person from what they see, because its the inner self which matters, not the appearance.

### **The power of money to forget a man's life**

- The doctor first came across Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man, by viewing a poster of him at the storefront. It had cruel comments of Merrick and the fact that people actually paid to witness a man in such a bad state for a laugh showed the cruelty of mankind. Not only that, the very fact that the shop-owner and guardian Simon Silcock even decided to use Merrick as a business opportunity showed the disgusting nature of man in search of wealth.

## **Extras**

### **Kindness**

*a request by Faryani*

From the short story I have studied, Tim Vicary's, The Elephant Man, I have observed kindness in Dr Frederick Treves' many actions throughout the story. Dr Treves, came across an ugly picture by the window of a shop-lot close to the hospital he was working in. Despite the ugly picture, Dr Treves had the kindness to approach the man in the picture, The Elephant Man, to observe him closely. Dr Treves even offered more money to make the shop-keeper, Simon Silcock, agree to giving Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man, away for a day so that he could be brought to the hospital. The doctor also was kind enough to pursue Merrick's matter with the hospital chairman, which consequently led to the letter that was published in The Times and the funds which allowed the hospital to keep Merrick there. During Merrick's time at the hospital, Dr. Treves wanted to make Merrick feel like home, and arranged for his lady friend to visit Merrick. Despite the stigma people had of Merrick, the doctor was never ashamed of going out with Merrick or fulfilling his dreams, and this time, the doctor arranged for Merrick's visit to the theatre. It was because of Dr. Treves' kindness towards Merrick, his life changed for the better and happier, and if it was not for his accident in bed, Merrick would have led a very happy life.

### **A minor character that changed Merrick's life**

*a request by Akela*

In Tim Vicary's book, The Elephant Man, Carr Gomm played a minor character that had a positive impact to Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. Carr Gomm was the chairman of the London Hospital. When he was first introduced to the Elephant Man by the doctor, Frederick Treves, he decided to write a letter to The Times to seek financial assistance from its readers, and to be able to keep Merrick in the hospital so that he would have a better life. It was the chairman's helpfulness and quick actions which led to the funds that could be used for Merrick. However, Carr Gomm was also responsible and a man of integrity, as can be seen when he wrote another letter to The Times

informing of Merrick's unfortunate death and that the remaining money meant for him will go to the hospital.

### **About an unforgettable event in The Elephant Man**

*a request by Azrai*

In Tim Vicary's *The Elephant Man*, I found the moment when Dr Frederick Treves first came across The Elephant Man unforgettable because it was because of this very event, Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man, had an opportunity to live a better life. Dr Treves first came across a poster featuring The Elephant Man nearby the hospital he was working in. His perseverance and eagerness allowed the doctor to finally meet Merrick, despite being turned down by Merrick's captor, Simon Silcock at first. The doctor saw what many did not see in Merrick, a gentle soul behind his ugly appearance. The doctor finally arranged for Merrick to visit the hospital he was working in so that the doctor can examine Merrick closely. If it was not for the doctor's perseverance in meeting Merrick, Merrick would not have met the doctor and subsequently, Merrick would not have the opportunity to live a better life. It was because of this, I believe this event is an unforgettable one in *The Elephant Man*.

### **I disliked the ending because...**

*a request by Tanishaa Nisha*

Tim Vicary's *The Elephant Man's* ending was unexpected, and which was what made me dislike the ending. Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man, unfortunately died in the countryside when he tried to sleep like a normal man – lying flat on his back. His oversized and heavy head was far too great for his neck when he tried lying down, and it eventually gave way, resulting a quick death. Frederick Treves, the English doctor which gave Merrick a better life, fulfilled his dreams of visiting the theatre and the countryside, but it was truly upsetting Merrick only enjoyed a proper life for a brief period of time before his unfortunate death. I personally hoped Merrick to have survived that accident and would have loved to see him living a happier life than his past.

### **The character I admired most was...**

*a request by Tanishaa Nisha*

Dr Frederick Treves, an English doctor from Tim Vicary's *The Elephant Man*, is a person I admired most from the story. Firstly, if it was not for Dr. Treves' curiosity in finding out who the ugly man from the poster was, the doctor might have never met Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man, that day. The doctor also was persistent in bringing Merrick to the hospital so that the doctor could examine him better. Not only had the doctor practiced professionalism in his job, he did not stereotype Merrick as being mean and useless but he realised Merrick has a beautiful character inside which many do not see. The doctor's choice of telling Mr Carr Gomm, the hospital chairperson, about Merrick had indeed influenced the outcome of the story and it was at this very crossroads, Mr Carr Gomm's letter to the times greatly made Merrick's life a turn for the better. These are the reasons and incidents why, I greatly believe Dr. Treves is a person I admired most from the story.

### **I like this story because...**

*a request by Joo*

*The Elephant Man* by Tim Vicary really caught my attention for numerous reasons. The plot in the story closely relates to what we experience today, discrimination. Joseph Merrick, an unfortunate man whose skin condition required medical attention, was discriminated because of being ugly. Not only was he discriminated, he was also used as a source of income by the shopkeeper. The protagonist of the story, Dr Frederick Treves, eventually helps Merrick to get his skin condition treated and even fulfilled Merrick's wishes like wanting to go for a play or to holiday by the countryside. The protagonist however, should be emulated by all of us and that we may sometimes never know the hurt we are inflicting on someone because of our actions. This story provides a vivid experience of discrimination, being discriminated, and how trivial things we do make people around us better.