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Have you ever wondered what your life would be like if you were different? Well, Joseph Carey Merrick (1862-1890) suffered from what may have been neurofibromatosis (a condition that causes tumors to form in the brain, spinal cord, and nerves). Because of his deformities, he was dreadfully mistreated and his condition impacted his right side more than his left. Although he had horrific treatment, Joseph maintained his dignity and grace until the end of his life.

Joseph was born in 1862 and appeared to be a healthy baby but, as he grew older, something strange happened. His skin became lumpy and grayish and his parents thought it was because his mother was knocked over by an elephant while she was expecting Joseph. But at the time, no one could diagnose his condition.

He lived a somewhat regular life. One noticeable deformity was a bony lump on his forehead. Besides that, Joseph's body continued to produce even more deformities. But he put those issues behind him and attended school and became very close to his mother. At the age of 11, Joseph's mother was diagnosed with bronchial pneumonia which cannot be cured. When his mother died, it changed his life dramatically because he lost the person closest to him.

In Victorian England, children could work at an early age. When Joseph was 12, he started working "the life of a laborer." During this time, his father had remarried one year after his mother's death. For a few years, Joseph could roll up cigars to earn a living but there came a time where his right hand could no longer handle the work. He tried to help his father at the age of 17, but he would beat him for not bringing home enough money.

People were afraid of Joseph because he was different. His condition started to affect his speech. He tried everything. Joseph left home to join a circus with other humans who suffered the same conditions he had and thought that this is how he could earn a living.

All Joseph wanted was to live a normal life, but he knew that would never happen. Poor Joseph had died when he was 27 on April 11th, 1890 because his head got too big for his own body and it suffocated him. Before his death, he enjoyed the rest of his life by writing letters and ending them with a poem by Isaac Watts:

**'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.**

Footnotes:

- 1) Carole D. Bos, J.D., The Elephant Man: A study of Human Dignity,
<https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/The-Elephant-Man-A-Study-in-Human-Dignity-0>, Oct/07/2013,
May/31/2016, <https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/The-Elephant-Man-A-Study-in-Human-Dignity-0>

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/An-Amazing-Legend>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/An-Amazing-Legend>

Media Stream



The Elephant Man

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