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The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy

Frances Trollope (1839 - 1840)

Article contributed by

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Michael Armstrong was the first industrial novel published in England. It was also the first novel to be published in installments at only one shilling per month. Frances Trollope intended that the low price would help to get her message into the greatest number of hands, to be read by people who would be so moved that they would compel Parliament to alleviate the plight of the laboring class, especially the children. Fanny wrote in the preface of her novel that she intended to “place before the eyes of Englishmen, the hideous mass of injustice and suffering to which thousands of infant labourers are subjected, who toil in our monstrous spinning-mills.”

She first got the idea to write on this subject after having read *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, An Orphan Boy* (1828). At the age of seven, Blincoe had been apprenticed into the textile industry. Like many other children, he was made to work fourteen hours a day, six days a week, often helped by the infamous “billy roller” that beat “the devil’s idleness” out of him. Fed on only porridge and black bread, Blincoe recounted how he often vied for pig slop in the sties. Fanny borrowed this scene in her book (2: 149), and Auguste Hervieu made it famous with his illustration. Judging from the outcry in an *Athenaeum* review, one may deduce that the picture did more to shock the middle class out of its complacency regarding factory conditions than anything else in the novel.

Fanny was also aware of Lord Ashley’s bill for a ten-hour work day for children which had been defeated in 1833. Lord Ashley (the Sixth Earl of Shaftesbury) gave her letters of introduction to interview some of the main reform leaders, such as John Doherty, editor of *Voice of the People* and *The Poor Man’s Advocate* (and who published Robert Blincoe’s story). He joined ranks with Richard Oastler, Joseph Raynor Stephens, and Michael Sadler. She and her son, Tom, toured the factories and slums throughout Manchester, gathering material for her novel.

Just a few years after her publication, the Factory Act of 1844 was passed, which limited children, ages eight to thirteen, to a six-and-a-half-hour shift, which could be repeated on alternate days, but then up to only ten hours.

Although traditionally most readers have credited Dickens as being the leader of social reform through the power of his pen, and certainly his novels did stimulate a lot of public sentiment, it was Fanny Trollope that really riled readers to demand legal change. One of Trollope’s biographers, Pamela Neville-Sington, said of Dickens that he was “pioneering the genre of the expansive ‘social novel’, in which a world is created against a backdrop of social themes,” but Neville-Sington perceived that Fanny wrote “novels of protest with the explicit aim of spurring her readers to action” (310). In fact, Charles Dickens had planned similarly to expose the abhorrent factory system while he was writing *Nicholas Nickleby* (in the same year in which Trollope was writing her novel) but her publication in March preempted his which was to be

published in one volume by Chapman and Hall in October 1939. Therefore, he changed his plot to address the horrors of boarding schools, and griped that she should have named her hero Nicholas Tickleby.

Michael Armstrong was provocative in another way. Susan S. Kissel, who has written considerable critical work on Fanny Trollope, has identified its prototypical paradigm for a heroine visiting the home of a factory laborer, and through her eyes, urging society to show more mercy and kindness to the unfortunate (164; a chapter by Kissel can be found in *Frances Trollope and the Novel of Social Change*). To follow this paradigm would be Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner* (1871). These novels also would spawn reform because they made real to the middle and upper classes the evils of the factory system, including the social consequences of drunkenness, poverty, and child and wife abuse.

Trollope tells the story from the point of view from Mary Brotherton, a young woman in the textile town of Lancashire, who has been left well off at the death of her father. Her wealth came from the exploitation of the very people she would come to know and champion, but before her realisation of this truth she is unaware of this;

It is difficult for persons residing at a distance, and not 'to the manner born', to conceive the extraordinary degree of ignorance in which the ladies of the great manufacturing families are brought up, as to the real condition of the people employed in the concern from whence their wealth is derived.

Her father, "[l]ike most others of his craft, was not in the habit of indulging his family by exhibiting to them the secret arcana of that hideous mystery by which the delicate forms of young children are made to mix and mingle with the machinery, from whence flows the manufacturer's wealth" (Trollope 1: 93).

The novel, however, does not begin with the heroine. Instead, it opens with the heroic actions of nine-year old Michael Armstrong, who rescues Lady Clarissa Shrimpton from a tired old cow. She insists that Sir Matthew Dowling, a ruthless factory owner and flirt, reward the pauper by taking him into the Dowling household. To impress her, he magnanimously adopts Michael, even though he cannot bear the idea of a factory boy living with his family. Once instated, Michael meets with very little kindness except from Dowling's oldest daughter Martha and her friend, the heiress Mary.

Once he finds himself no longer able to bear the sight of the boy, Sir Dowling apprentices him to Deep Valley Mills, where many unwanted children end their short lives. In an effort to find him, Mary visits the slum of Ashleigh (obviously Manchester), the residence of his dying mother. This "deplorable hole" is described as a "long, closely-packed double row of miserable dwellings, crowded to excess" and blanketed everywhere with a black pall of suffering, poverty, and disease, as if the very shadow of Satan cast itself on them:

The very vilest rags were hanging before most of the doors as demonstration that washing of garments were occasionally resorted to within. Crawling infants, half-starved cats, mangy curs, and fowls that looked as if each particular feather had been used as a scavenger's broom, shared the dust and the sunshine between them, while an odour, which seemed compounded of a multitude of villainous smells, all reeking together into one, floated over them. (1:320)

Once she learns of Michael's location, she is falsely told that the boy died, so Mary adopts Michael's crippled brother, Edward, and Michael's childhood friend, Fanny Fletcher. She raises them to become a gentleman and a lady. Five years later, Michael reappears after having escaped from Deep Valley. Sir

Dowling has died, disgraced by bankruptcy, and Michael pays for his burial. Michael marries Fanny, and Mary marries Edward. The couples live in a castle in Germany, far from the oppression of England.

Despite its fairytale ending, the novel has much to say about the wretched conditions of industry workers and about the class divide, which is broached by the love Mary not only shows to those her father has exploited, but which is powerfully and shockingly demonstrated by her marriage. The novel also subverts class restrictions by arguing that the poor, despite popular notions held to the contrary by those who were not poor, were *not* animals, and given the opportunity, could be educated enough to become gentlefolk. Likewise, Trollope undermines the infallibility of the ruling class by exposing the impoverished moral character of Sir Dowling and the hypocrisy of Lady Shrimpton. Dowling's social and economic fall is a reminder that poverty is not necessarily innate, that it can come upon any of her readers; therefore, they should show mercy to those less fortunate.

The ending is the most innovative aspect of the entire novel. Perhaps there have been other British novels that ended with cross-class marriages, and certainly there have been novels aplenty in which the fatherly teacher or guardian marries his ward, but when before or since has the female guardian (which in itself is a rarity) married the boy that she herself raised into a man? Priti Joshi was nearly correct in suggesting that the novel should have been titled *The Trials and Travels of Mary Brotherton, The Concerned Heiress, In Search of Truth* (40; Joshi's chapter can be found in *Frances Trollope and the Novel of Social Change*). However, Trollope places factory ills, as they are felt most acutely, in the limelight not through Mary's discoveries, but by Michael Armstrong's experiences. As in many of her other novels, she casts the male characters as victims to a masculine brutish, patriarchal power, the sort that created industry in the first place and forced an entire class of people to be treated as stockyard animals. Even if women were complicit by enjoying the wealth gained by such means, Trollope counted on women, like Mary, and in turn, Fanny's readers, educating themselves as to social evils and then becoming courageous enough to defy all social conventions, even gender and class constrictions, in order to decolonize the oppressed. This is exactly what happens when Mary empowers the three people within her sphere of influence to share equally in wealth and privilege. Fanny told her readers that they did not and should not allow gender to be a barrier to finding ways to assert power. Moreover, they should not avoid taking responsibility for those who truly needed their protection, especially the children of England.

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