



The Manchester Man

Isabella Varley Banks

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Jabez Clegg, the Manchester man, floats into this historical novel in 1799, carried downstream by the River Irk in flood. Jabez's rise to commercial success mirrors the rise of the city at the heart of the industrial revolution. Mrs George Linnaeus Banks (nee Isabella Varley) weaves a web of historical fact and fiction in a fast-paced story built around the rivalry between the Jabez and his nemesis Laurence Aspinall, and the fate of Augusta Ashton, who is loved by both but loves only one. An entertaining fictional journey through the early 19th century history of the city of Manchester, the book also has serious points to make about women's choices and domestic violence. (Summary by Phil Benson)

The Manchester Man Details

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Author : Isabella Varley Banks

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Lesley Arrowsmith says

The first thing I should say is that the author is not George Linnaeus Banks - it's MRS. George Linnaeus Banks (in those days the woman's identity was entirely hidden behind the man's name).

I grew up in Manchester, knowing vaguely that this book existed, and thinking that one day I would get round to it.

Well, when I finally did read it, it was a lot of fun, and shed some light on Manchester's early industrial history. Interestingly, the self-made man of the title isn't in the cotton industry - he starts out making umbrellas.

At the end of the copy I read were a series of notes on the text, where I found that most of the incidents that I had thought were too far-fetched to be true were actually based on real incidents, and those incidents had often happened to members of the author's own family, like the fearsome lady who runs a posh girls' school and has a tendency to hit the girls with her heavy fan. The descriptions of Peterloo were vivid, too.

It was a shame, though, that every time the hero came within reach of personal happiness, it was snatched away from him, often by his chief rival throughout the story. I suppose the author was making a moral point - but couldn't he have triumphed just once?

Johanne says

I really enjoyed this on two levels - one as an exemplar of a Victorian novel; complete with slightly moralistic tone, a (male) hero who is poor and humble but rises to success, cliff hangers & brutish husbands and everything else I'd want from a slightly OTT novel. Secondly the information about Manchester's development from small town to Cottonopolis via Peterloo, floods & the sinking of the Emma.

bup says

OK, so this is not a great book. But it is charming in its badness. Our author tells us how we feel about each character, and our hero is so wonderfully good he's boring as all get out.

I guess it's a good slice of Manchester life around the turn of the 18th to 19th century, but our writer is such a clumsy observer of human character, and the period she's writing about is before she was born/when she was a little girl, so I'm not even sure of that.

spoiler

We also learn that marrying somebody you don't really love, because they love you and you're doing it out of pity, is a great thing to do, and besides, fate rewards you by killing your wife and the husband of the man you passionately love. So marry somebody who's solid and you don't feel passionate about.

end spoiler

OK, if I've sold you on this little bit of mediocrity, and you have a car trip coming up or something, the librivox version is worth getting. The narrator has, or uses, a Liverpudlian accent so well you think he's

channeling John Lennon at times.

Christian Schwoerke says

This novel is a tale of two men born in 1799, one an orphan raised by a poor working family and the other a child of wealth. The orphan was saved, plucked from a flood's raging waters, and he has upon a special fate, affirmed at his christening, when the irascible, self-made parson Joshua Brookes imposes on him the name Jabez—a Biblical reference that recapitulates his birth, sets his place amongst peers, and promises a future of success, if he but remains true and good. This novel is an English Horatio Alger story, serving both to entertain and instruct. As such, it is not high art, but it is eminently readable.

The boy Jabez Clegg does remain true and good, and the several instances when he shows his rectitude afford him favors from benefactors that allow him to further ascend, accomplishment after accomplishment, rung after rung. He earns himself the chance to attend school—a rare feat for someone of his class at this time, as most children were expected to work, even as early as six—wins further plaudits, is apprenticed and shows aptitude and industry, and is given more opportunities to rise in society. It's a rag-to-riches life for Jabez Clegg, he is only thwarted in attaining one thing, his true love Augusta Ashton, daughter to the rich merchant who apprentices then eventually makes a partner of Jabez in his business.

It is over Augusta that the orphan and the rich boy Laurence Aspinall clash, though Jabez remains honorable and humble in his dealings with the gentleman, out of both his instinctual goodness and social decorum, which dictates one's proper behavior with respect to social status. Throughout Jabez's life, at nearly every milestone in his development, there are encounters with Aspinall, many in which Jabez is injured, and one—to Aspinall's shame—where he owes Jabez his life. When a young man, the rakish Aspinall served in the Manchester Yeomanry, a martial cavalry that served Manchester in lieu of a police force. In 1819, when the antagonisms between workers and masters came to a head in the bloodshed of Peterloo, this same yeomanry was at the back of much of that carnage and mayhem, with many of the officers riding drunken and roughshod over workers and innocent citizens alike. Jabez is severely gashed by Aspinall's wild sword when saving the life of Mr. Chadwick, a rich merchant and brother-in-law to Jabez's mentor Mr. Ashton.

Despite this and other negative signs, Augusta is nevertheless smitten with the dashing form of Aspinall, and over the course of several years—including an episode of arrested elopement—she is able to win from her parents permission to marry Aspinall. And during this period, Jabez remains silent about his love for Augusta, having not yet attained a sufficient station to merit serious consideration as a suitor. During the decade when Augusta and Aspinall are married, Jabez continues to ascend, entering into a business relation with Chadwick and Ashton, marrying Chadwick's daughter who adores him, and becoming a father twice over. As Augusta and Aspinall's marriage spirals badly downward to its nadir, Jabez loses his wife and children in a freak accident. Shortly after, Aspinall kills himself to avoid disgrace and further degradation when his creditors swarm him. The way is paved for Jabez to fulfill his destiny, and within six months—with abiding patience, decorum, and faith in providence—Jabez and Augusta are united.

This novel is Dickensian in the breadth of characters involved, and there are several subplots, but they serve only to illuminate the principals' virtues and vices, providing occasions for Jabez to shine and Aspinall to show himself tainted, an idle, reckless, ne'er do well. The breadth also serves to enrich the background of the story and make burgeoning Manchester a real presence and not merely a backdrop. Characterization is just sufficient to delineate, but not enough to distract readers from the novel's purpose, which is didactic and morally elevating—to show not only Jabez' dynamic ascent, but also how that ascent was a combination of

moral virtues: unflagging faith, industry, and pluck.

Samantha Watson says

A really fun story, very much of its time. I really enjoyed building an image of historical Manchester and the characters that may have inhabited it. Joshua Brooks is surely a hero, popping off to buy humbugs while he conducts a funeral service.

Hilary says

A curiosity, but a page turner. Written in the 1870s, it has an authentic voice. Here's another heroic Manchester cotton lord, this time with his story told from babyhood (he is plucked from the flooded river by poor but honest Manchester working folk and brought up as a foundling). Please don't expect another John Thornton - this protagonist is a bit of a prig, and the way he gets the girl is fraught with awkward questions. This novel is a weird mixture - a sort of picaresque, episodic narrative, but with a definite story arc. On the way, there are some extraordinary contrasts - this is part Sunday School Prize, part fearless expose of the effects of easy riches (clogs to clogs in three generations), with vivid, non-judgmental set pieces of domestic abuse and rioting in the streets - including Peterloo. It's not perfect, but I read it straight through, bowled along by a huge energy and storytelling verve - even as I was protesting inwardly at some of the bizarre contrivances to make sure that the good triumphed and the bad got their comeuppance. Wonderful atmosphere, and authentic Manchester historical background of the first half of the 19th c. (some characters actually existed). North and South lovers - give it a go!

Shelagh Smethurst says

A terrific half a book

Unfortunately only half the book is here what happened to the rest of it? We need part two of this wonderful tale.

Kyriakos Sorokkou says

"I'm reading a book by a Victorian author"

"By whom?"

"Guess"

"Charles Dickens?" "No"

"Wilkie Collins?" "No"

"Robert Louis Stevenson?" "No"

"Oscar Wilde?" "No"

"Thomas Hardy?" "No"

"Anthony Trollope?" "No. It's by a woman."

"Emily Brontë?" "No"

"Charlotte Brontë?" "No"

"Elizabeth Gaskell" "No"

"George Eliot?" "No"

"By whom then?!"

"By Mrs George Linnæus Banks."

"Who??"

"Mrs Isabella Banks née Varley."

"Never heard of her."

"Of course you never heard of her. Her identity was hidden behind her husband's name, as it was, and is a custom for married women. An underrated book, by an underrated, relatively unknown authoress. On goodreads, *The Manchester Man*, her most well known novel has 50 ratings, 10 of which are reviews. Only one of her other 10 works here on goodreads has a rating, only 1. Yes, it is an underrated Victorian novel set not in the Victorian era but in the preceding era, the Regency / Georgian era(s)."

Time

1799-1832 Five years before Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne and the beginning of Victorian times, but it takes place in the first half of the industrial revolution.

Title

Jabez Clegg an orphan boy ascends the stairs of prosperity from poverty to wealth from apprentice to master, and from being an unnamed nobody to be named *The Manchester Man*.

Story

A historical novel that takes place in the first 3 decades of 1800's in Manchester. Along with the fictional bits it has (Jabez's story), it also blends fiction with facts (Peterloo Massacre in Manchester 1819).

It also has a love triangle but nothing like the usual YA love triangles. Jabez loves Augusta his benefactor's daughter but she prefers the rich and beautiful yet cunning and sinister Laurence Aspinall, over the kind self-sacrificing yet plain looking Jabez Clegg. Finally she manages to marry Laurence but soon he's transformed into a jealous beast.

I won't tell you how this book ends but I highly recommend it to everyone. Not just a novel but also a social critique, a moral story set in the beginnings of the industrial revolution, an almost heart rending story. If you love Victorian novels and you want a break from Dickens and the Brontës read this book and you will like it, if not love it. ??? stars

Pete daPixie says

I really enjoyed this. Although a work of fiction, it contains very many twists and turns in the narrative that are based on historical facts and events. As the setting is predominantly placed in the city centre of Manchester, I was engrossed. The tale of Jabez Clegg, a foundling adopted at the turn of the eighteenth century, who from humble circumstances, rises to commercial wealth, set in the decades that saw Manchester rise in the same way.

The author, Mrs Banks, had her story published in 1876, and through the use of many primary sources, could include and accurately describe such events as the Peterloo massacre of 1819, and also bring actual characters into her yarn.

True enough that the writing contains a high degree of nineteenth century morality, nevertheless, the historical detail brings fact and fiction to an almost indistinguishable point. I became fascinated by 'The Manchester Man', set in streets and places I know so well, transporting me back in time some two hundred years.

Liz Smith says

Thank you for recommendation, Amy! Very nice being able to place the location- and extra nice that I knew the outside Manchester site in Whaley Bridge too. However, Jabez Clegg was just too good/lucky to be true. Still, why is this book not more well-known? Beautiful snapshot in time of real history.

Snorki says

Read a free electronic copy, which was spoilt somewhat by being riddled with errors, but it was an interesting book. It features Jabez Clegg - living in Manchester, I was aware of the Jabez Clegg pub but hadn't realised he was a character in this novel - and tells the story of his life in Manchester's cotton industry.

Steven Heywood says

I'd picked this book up by chance and read it on a whim and I'm glad I did. In many ways the main narrative takes second place to the finely-detailed and nicely-depicted scene-setting.

A nodding acquaintance with Lancashire dialect is useful but by no means essential. :)

Stuart says

A wonderful rags to riches story! Based in the awesome setting that is Manchester.

Gillian says

I really liked this but it may have been because I had just moved to Manchester & I could go & look at places mentioned.

Thomas Mangnall says

A very interesting book as much for the story about one mans experience moving through the class system of industrial revolution Manchester as for the interest in the actual historical events that feature very prominently, which shaped the modern city of Manchester that we see today.
