ANTHONY JOHN

BY

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ANTHONY JOHN

CHAPTER I

Anthony John Strong'nth'arm—to distinguish him from his father, whose Christian names were John Anthony—was born in a mean street of Millsborough some forty-five years before the date when this story should of rights begin. For the first half-minute of his existence he lay upon the outstretched hand of Mrs. Plumberry and neither moved nor breathed. The very young doctor, nervous by reason of this being his first maternity case since his setting up in practice for himself, and divided between his duty to the child or to the mother, had unconsciously decided on the latter. Instinctively he knew that children in the poorer quarters of Millsborough were plentiful and generally not wanted. The mother, a high-cheeked, thin-lipped woman, lay with closed eyes, her long hands clawing convulsively at the bed-clothes. The doctor was bending over her, fumbling with his hypodermic syringe.

Suddenly from behind him he heard the sound of two resounding slaps, the second being followed by a howl that, feeble though it was, contained a decided note of indignation. The doctor turned his head. The child was kicking vigorously.

"Do you always do that?" asked the young doctor. He had been glad when he had been told that Mrs. Plumberry was to be the midwife, having heard good repute of her as a woman of experience.

“It starts them,” explained Mrs. Plumberry. “I suppose they don’t like it and want to say so; and before they can yell out they find they’ve got to draw some air into their lungs.”

She was a stout motherly soul, the wife of a small farmer on the outskirts of the town, and only took cases during the winter. At other times, as she would explain, there were the pigs and the poultry to occupy her mind. She was fond of animals of all kinds.

“It’s the fighting instinct,” suggested the young doctor. “Curious how quickly it shows itself.”

“When it’s there,” commented Mrs. Plumberry, proceeding with her work.

“Isn’t it always there?” demanded the young doctor.

“Not always,” answered Mrs. Plumberry. “Some of them will just lie down and let the others trample them to death. Four out of one litter of eleven I lost last March. There they were when I came in the morning. Seemed to have taken no interest in themselves. Had just let the others push them away.”

The child, now comfortable on Mrs. Plumberry’s ample arm, was playing with clenched fists, breathing peacefully. The doctor looked at him, relieved.

“Seems to have made a fair start, anyhow,” thought the doctor.

Mrs. Plumberry with thumb and forefinger raised an eyelid and let it fall again. The baby answered with a vicious kick.

“He’s come to stop all right,” was Mrs. Plumberry’s prophecy. “Hope he’ll like it. Will it be safe for me to put him to the mother, say in about half an hour?”

The woman with closed eyes upon the bed must have heard, for she tried to raise her arms. The doctor bent over her once more.

“I think so,” he answered. “Use your own discretion. I’ll look back in an hour or so.”

The doctor was struggling into his great coat. He glanced from the worn creature on the bed to the poverty-stricken room, and then through the window to the filthy street beyond.

“I wonder sometimes,” he growled, “why the women don’t strike—chuck the whole thing. What can be the good of it from their point of view?”

The idea had more than once occurred to Mrs. Plumberry herself, so that she was not as shocked as perhaps she should have been.

“Oh, some of them get on,” she answered philosophically. “Each woman thinks it will be her brat who will climb upon the backs of the others and that that’s all the others are wanted for.”

“Maybe,” agreed the young doctor. He closed the door softly behind him.

Mrs. Plumberry waited till the woman on the bed opened her large eyes, then she put the child into her arms.

"Get all you can in case it don't last long," was Mrs. Plumberry's advice to him as she arranged the bed-clothes. The child gave a grunt of acquiescence and settled himself to his work.

"I prayed it might be a boy," whispered the woman. "He'll be able to help in the workshop."

"It never does any harm," agreed Mrs. Plumberry. "Sometimes you get answered. And if you don't, there's always the feeling that you've done your best. Don't let him exhaust you. It don't do to leave it to their conscience."

The woman drew the child tighter to her pallid bosom.

"I want him to be strong," she whispered. "It's a hard world for the weak."

Never a child in all Mrs. Plumberry's experience had been more difficult to wean. Had he merely had his mother to contend with it is difficult to say how the matter might have ended. But Mrs. Plumberry took an interest in her cases that was more than mercenary, keeping an eye on them till she was satisfied that her help was no longer needed. He put up a good fight, as Mrs. Plumberry herself admitted; but having at last grasped the fact that he was up against something stronger than himself, it was characteristic of him, as the future was to show, that he gave way quite suddenly, and transferred without any further fuss his energy to the bottle. Also it was characteristic of him that, knowing himself defeated, he bore no ill-will to his conqueror.

“You’re a good loser,” commented Mrs. Plumberry, as the child, accepting without protest the India rubber teat she had just put into his mouth, looked up into her face and smiled. “Perhaps you’ll be a good winner. They generally go together.” She bent down and gave him a kiss, which for Mrs. Plumberry was an unusual display of emotion. He had a knack of making his way with people, especially people who could be useful to him.

It seemed a freak of Nature that, born of a narrow-chested father and a flat-breasted, small-hipped mother, he should be so strong and healthy. He never cried when he couldn’t get his own way—and he wanted his own way in all things and wanted it quickly—but would howl at the top of his voice. In the day-time it was possible to appease him swiftly; and then he would gurgle and laugh and put out his little hands to pat any cheek that might be near. But at night-time it was not so easy to keep pace with him. His father would mutter sleepy curses. How could he do his day’s work if he was to be kept awake night after night? The others had merely whimpered. A man could sleep through it.

“The others” had been two girls. The first one had died when three years old, and the second had lived only a few months.

“It’s because he’s strong,” explained the mother. “It does his lungs good.”

“And what about my weak heart?” the man grumbled. “You don’t think about me. It’s all him now.”

The woman did not answer. She knew it to be the truth.

He was a good man, hard-working, sober and kind in his fretful, complaining way. Her people and she herself, had thought she had done well when she had married him. She had been in service, looked down upon by her girl acquaintances who were earning their living in factories and shops; and he had been almost a gentleman, though it was difficult to remember that now. The Strong'nth'arms had once been prosperous yeomen and had hunted with the gentry. Rumour had it that scattered members of the family were even now doing well in the colonies, and both husband and wife still cherished the hope that some far-flung relation would providentially die and leave them a fortune. Otherwise the future promised little more than an everlasting struggle against starvation. He had started as a mechanical engineer in his own workshop. There were plenty of jobs for such in Millsborough, but John Strong'nth'arm seemed to be one of those born unfortunates doomed always to choose instinctively the wrong turning. An inventor of a kind. Some of his ideas had prospered—other people.

"If only I had my rights. If only I'd had justice done me. If only I hadn't been cheated and robbed!"

Little Anthony John, as he grew to understanding, became familiar with such phrases, repeated in a shrill, weak voice that generally ended in a cough, with clenched hands raised in futile appeal to Somebody his father seemed to be seeing through the roof of the dark, untidy workshop, where the place for everything seemed to be on the floor, and where

his father seemed always to be looking for things he couldn't find.

A childish, kindly man! Assured of a satisfactory income, a woman might have found him lovable, have been indulgent to his helplessness. But the poor have no use for weakness. They cannot afford it. The child instinctively knew that his mother despised this dreamy-eyed, loose-lipped man always full of fear; but though it was to his mother that he looked to answer his questions and supply his wants, it was his father he first learnt to love. The littered workshop with its glowing furnace became his nursery. Judging from his eyes, it amused him when his father, having laid aside a tool, was quite unable the next minute to remember where he had put it. The child would watch him for a time while he cursed and spluttered, and then, jumping down from his perch, would quietly hand it to him. The man came to rely upon him for help.

"You didn't notice, by any chance, where I put a little brass wheel yesterday—about so big?" would be the question. John, the man, would go on with his job; and a minute later Anthony, the child, would return with the lost wheel. Once the man had been out all the afternoon. On entering the workshop in the evening he stood and stared. The bench had been cleared and swept; and neatly arranged upon it were laid out all his tools. He was still staring at them when he heard the door softly opened and a little, grinning face was peering round the jar. The man burst into tears, and then, ashamed of himself, searched in vain for a handkerchief. The child slipped a piece of clean waste into his hand and laughed.

For years the child did not know that the world was not all sordid streets and reeking slums. There was a place called the Market Square where men shouted and swore and women scolded and haggled, and calves bellowed and pigs squealed. And farther still away a space of trampled grass and sooty shrubs surrounded by chimneys belching smoke. But sometimes, on days when in the morning his father had cursed fate more than usual, had raised clenched hands towards the roof of the workshop more often than wont, his mother would disappear for many hours, returning with good things tied up in a brown-paper parcel. And in the evening Somebody who dwelt far away would be praised and blessed.

The child was puzzled who this Somebody could be. He wondered if it might be the Party the other side of the workshop roof to whom his father made appeal for right and justice. But that could hardly be, for the Dweller beyond the workshop roof was apparently stone-deaf; while his mother never came back empty handed.

One evening there drew nearer the sound of singing and a tambourine. Little Anthony opened the workshop door and peered out. Some half a dozen men and women were gathered round the curb, and one was talking.

She spoke of a gentleman named God. He lived far off and very high up. And all good things came from Him. There was more of it: about the power and the glory of Him, and how everybody ought to be afraid of Him and love Him. But little Anthony remembered he had left the door of the

workshop open and so hurried back. They moved on a little later. The child heard them singing as they passed.

> “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
> Praise Him all creatures here below.”

The rest of the verse was drowned by the tambourine.

So it was to God that his mother made these frequent excursions, returning always laden with good things. Had she not explained to him, as an excuse for not taking him with her, that it was a long way off and up ever so high? Next year, perhaps, when his legs were sturdier. He did not tell her of his discovery. Mrs. Plumberry divided children into two classes: the children who talked and never listened and the children who listened and kept their thoughts to themselves. But one day, when his mother took her only bonnet from its wrappings and was putting it on in front of the fly-blown glass, he plucked at her sleeve. She turned. He had rolled down his stockings, displaying a pair of sturdy legs. It was one of his characteristics, even as a child, that he never wasted words. “Feel ’em,” was all he said.

His mother remembered. It happened to be a fine day, so far as one could judge beneath the smoke of Millsborough. She sent him to change into his best clothes, while she finished her own preparations, and together they set forth. She wondered at his evident excitement. It was beyond what she had expected.

It was certainly a long way; but the child seemed not to notice it. They left the din and smoke of Millsborough behind them. They climbed by slow degrees to a wonderful

country. The child longed to take it in his arms, it was so beautiful. The woman talked at intervals, but the child did not hear her. At the journey’s end the gate stood open and they passed in.

And suddenly they came across him, walking in the garden. His mother was greatly flustered. She was full of apologies, stammering and repeating herself. She snatched little Anthony’s cap off his head, and all the while she kept on curtseying, sinking almost to her knees. He was a very old gentleman dressed in gaiters and a Norfolk jacket. He wore side whiskers and a big moustache and walked with the aid of a stick. He patted Anthony on the head and gave him a shilling. He called Mrs. Strong’nth’arm “Nelly”; and hoped her husband would soon get work. And then remarking that she knew her way, he lifted his tweed cap and disappeared.

The child waited in a large clean room. Ladies in white caps fluttered in and out, and one brought him milk and wonderful things to eat; and later his mother returned with a larger parcel than usual and they left the place behind them. It was not until they were beyond the gates that the child broke his silence, and then he looked round carefully before speaking.

“He didn’t look so very glorious,” he said.

“Who didn’t?” demanded his mother.

“God.”

His mother dropped her bundle. Fortunately it was on a soft place.

“What maggot has the child got into his head?” she ejaculated. “What do you mean by ‘God’?”

“Him,” persisted Anthony. “Isn’t it from him that we get all these good things?” He pointed to the parcel.

His mother picked it up. “Who’s been talking to you?” she asked.

“I overheard her,” explained the child. “She said it was from God that we got all our good things. Ain’t it?”

His mother took him by the hand and they trudged on. She did not answer for a time.

“That wasn’t God,” she told him at last. “That was Sir William Coomber. I used to be in service there.”

She lapsed into silence again. The bundle seemed heavy.

“Of course it is God that gives it us in a manner of speaking,” she explained. “He puts it into Sir William’s heart to be kind and generous.”

The child thought a while.

“But they’re his things, ain’t they?” he asked. “The other one’s. Sir William’s?”

“Yes; but God gave them to him.”

It seemed a roundabout business.

“Why doesn’t God give us things?” he demanded. “Don’t He like us?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” answered the woman. “Don’t ask so many questions.”

It was longer, the way home. He offered no protest at being sent to bed early. He dreamed he was wandering to and fro in a vast place, looking for God. Over and over again he thought he saw Him in the distance, but every time he got near to Him it turned out to be Sir William Coomber, who patted him on the head and gave him a shilling.

CHAPTER II

There was an aunt and uncle. Mr. Joseph Newt, of Moor End Lane, Millsborough, was Mrs. Strong'nth'arm's only surviving brother. He was married to a woman older than himself. She had been a barmaid, but after her marriage had "got religion," as they say up North.

They were not much to boast of. Mr. Newt was a dog-fancier; and according to his own account an atheist, whether from conviction or mere love of sport his friends had never been able to decide. Earnest young ministers of all denominations generally commenced their career in Millsborough by attempting his conversion, much encouraged during the earlier stages of the contest by Mr. Newt's predisposition in all matters towards what he called a "waiting game." The "knock-out" blow had not yet been delivered. His wife had long since abandoned him to Satan. The only thing, as far as she could see, was to let him enjoy as much peace and comfort in this world as circumstances would permit. In Anthony John's eyes the inevitable doom awaiting him gave to his uncle an interest and importance that Mr. Newt's somewhat insignificant personality might otherwise have failed to inspire. The child had heard about hell. A most unpleasant place where wicked people went to when they died. But his uncle, with his twinkling eyes and his merry laugh, was not his idea of a bad man.

"Is uncle very, very wicked?" he once demanded of his aunt.

“No; he’s not wicked,” replied his aunt, assuming a judicial tone. “Better than nine men out of ten that I’ve ever come across.”

“Then why has he got to go to hell?”

“He needn’t, if he didn’t want to,” replied his aunt. “That’s the awful thing about it. If he’d only believe, he could be saved.”

“Believe what?” inquired Anthony John.

“Oh, I haven’t got time to go into all that now,” replied his aunt. She was having trouble with the kitchen stove. “Believe what he’s told.”

“Who told him?”

“Everybody,” explained his aunt. “I’ve told him myself till I’m sick and tired of it. Don’t ask so many questions. You’re getting as bad as he is.”

It worried him, the thought of his uncle going to hell. Why couldn’t he believe this thing, whatever it was, that everybody else believed?

It was an evening or two later. His aunt had gone to chapel. His uncle was smoking his pipe beside the kitchen fire, old Simon, the bob-tailed sheep-dog, looking up at him with adoring eyes. It seemed just the opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk.

He insinuated his hand into his uncle’s grimy paw.

“Why don’t you believe?” he asked.

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