

Johnny Swanson: The Letter

Johnny Swanson has 'borrowed' three shillings (equal to £30 today) from his mother's savings jar in order to reply to an advert, offering "the Secret of Instant Height". He returns home to see two letters waiting on the mat.

TOO SHORT?
Do you wish you were taller?
For the
**SECRET OF
INSTANT HEIGHT**

**SEND A POSTAL ORDER FOR 2s 6d
AND 1 STAMPED ADDRESSED ENVELOPE
TO BOX 23, THE STAMBLETON ECHO,
6 CANAL STREET, STRIBLETON, WARWICKSHIRE**

That night, Johnny got home first. There were two letters on the doormat, one addressed to him in his own handwriting, the other an official-looking brown envelope, with his mother's full name, 'Mrs Winifred May Swanson', typed boldly across it. As Johnny picked them up, he heard his mother coming. He just had time to stuff his own envelope into his pocket before she reached the front door.

"What have you got there?" she asked.

"It's a letter. For you," he said. "It looks important."

Johnny was desperate to get away to read his own letter, but he stayed and watched while Winnie opened hers. She was still wearing her hat and coat, standing by the dim oil lamp in the kitchen. If you'd been looking through the window, you might have thought she was Johnny's sister. Like him she was short and slight. From a distance it was hard to believe that she was thirty. But close up, her puffy hands, raw with housework, and the worry-lines on her brow told a different story. The wrinkles grew more pronounced than usual as she took a single typed sheet out of the envelope. Then she flopped down into a chair.

"What is it, Mum?" asked Johnny, still grasping the letter in his pocket. "Is it bad news?"

He could see that she was trying to compose herself, to reassure him that there was nothing to be concerned about. Then she looked him straight in the eye. “Johnny,” she said, “I think you’re old enough to know. It’s from the landlord. The rent’s going up after Christmas. We’re going to have to find an extra three shillings a week.”

“But that’s more than I make from the paper round in a fortnight,” said Johnny.

“Oh darling, I wouldn’t ask you to pay it. I’ll just have to try to find an extra job.” She started mumbling to herself: “But there’s not much work around. Maybe I could take in some washing. But how would I pay for the soap, and the fuel to heat the water?”

Johnny couldn’t help it. His eyes went to the Peace Mug on the high shelf.

“No,” said his mother. “We’re not touching the Christmas money. I’d sooner go without breakfast than use that. Anyway, it would only last a few weeks. It’s staying up there. I’m not even going to count it till December.”

Johnny was half relieved that his mother was unlikely to find out he had taken money from the mug, and half ashamed at what he had done. But at least he had his own letter, almost throbbing in his pocket, begging him to open it. At least Box 23 had replied. The money from the Peace Mug hadn’t been wasted.

Winnie pulled herself up from the chair, took off her hat and started slowly unbuttoning her coat. Johnny knew he should find some words of comfort, or come up with an idea for raising money, but he couldn’t wait to open his letter.

“I’m just going to the lav,” he said, striding out to the yard, where a tiny, damp shed housed the lavatory. It was getting dark, and he could only just make out the writing on the envelope. He tore it open. Inside was a piece of paper that looked as if it had been ripped from a notebook. It was folded into four, with *The Secret of Instant Height is ...* written in heavy black ink on the outside. Now Johnny was scared. What would it be? Would he have to take medicine, or mix some chemicals? Where would he get them from? How would he pay for them? He couldn’t bear to open the note. But he had to know the secret. He had to find out how to grow taller. Maybe then he would be able to do jobs that brought in more money. Then he could help his mother with the rent. The lavatory seat didn’t have a cover, but he sat down without lowering his shorts and looked again. *The Secret of Instant Height is ...* He unfolded the paper. There were just four words written inside: *Stand on a box.*

He couldn’t believe it. That was all it said. He had been tricked. He could feel the blood pumping round his ears as he blushed with shame. Two shillings and sixpence had been wasted – plus the cost of the envelopes and the stamps. He had stolen his mother’s money, and thrown it away just when she needed it most.

Name: Class: Date:

1 How would Johnny have been feeling when he saw the two letters waiting on the doormat?
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2 When he hears his mother coming, how do those feelings change? How do you know?
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3 Johnny is desperate to get away to open his own letter, but the writer has him stay while his mother opens hers. Why does she do that, do you think?
.....
.....

4 What news does Johnny’s mother receive in the letter?
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5 What is the significance of the extra money she says they are going to have to find?
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6 When his mother wonders aloud how she would pay for the soap and fuel if she took in other people’s washing, Johnny’s eyes immediately go to the savings jug. What does his mother think he means by this?
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7 When she says she is “*not even going to count it till December*”, Johnny has mixed feelings. Explain how he feels, using the model below.
On the one hand, Johnny
.....
On the other hand, he
.....

8 What excuse does Johnny use to leave the room?
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9 When he opens the envelope, what clue is there that the reply may not be what he is expecting?
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10 Explain how you felt when you read the four-word response to Johnny’s application and his reaction to it. You can refer back to earlier episodes in the story in your answer.
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