

A Lad of Mettle

(Thomas McEwen, in 'Sunday Magazine'.)

It was a wet, stormy afternoon in January when Johnny first appeared upon the scene. Mr. Coleman, the senior partner, was leaving the office early, and before facing the wind and rain he stood for a few minutes in the hall, buttoning up his mackintosh. The commissionaire was off duty for some reason or other, and as Mr. Coleman pulled open the swinging door and prepared to go out, a dripping little fellow in a coarse, threadbare tweed suit, and with a telegraph badge on his arm, darted in.

'Take care, you young rascal,' cried the senior partner, letting the door swing to as he stood aside to avoid a collision. 'Don't charge into an office as though you were on the football field and were kicking the ball between the goal posts. Ah! let me see these wires,' he went on, stretching out his hand for the thin brown envelopes.

'Can't!' said the youngster concisely,



A DRIPPING LITTLE FELLOW DARTED IN.

making for the door of the manager's office.

'Stop!' cried Mr. Coleman, laying a detaining hand upon the boy's shoulder. 'Why can't you?'

'Cause it's not allowed.'

'Not allowed. What do you mean, my lad?'

'I'm not allowed to give telegrams to strangers.'

'Strangers! Of course not; but I'm the master here. I'm Mr. Coleman.'

'Perhaps; but I don't know you; never saw you before. Shan't give 'em to you.'

The situation was amusing; Mr. Coleman smiled. At that moment a pretty, fair-haired girl, one of the firm's typists, came out of the manager's room. The boy called to her:

'Say, miss, who is this man here? He wants to take my telegrams.'

The girl blushed.

'It is Mr. Coleman,' she said.

'There now,' said the senior partner. 'You hear what the lady says. You can safely hand them over to me.'

'Are you quite sure it's O.K., miss? Is he the right man?'

'Oh, yes; I'm quite sure; it's all right,' she assured him.

'Very well, there you are,' said the boy, handing the telegrams over. 'But I'll just go in and tell Mr. Bunting I've given them to you.' And he flashed into the manager's room.

Mr. Coleman went back to his own room leisurely, opening and reading the telegrams as he went.

Next morning, when going through the letters, he said to Bunting:

'I suppose you heard about the boy refusing to give me the wires yesterday?'

'Yes, sir, I did,' replied the manager.

'I like that boy,' said Mr. Coleman. 'See if you can engage him for the office.'

'Very well, sir; I'll see to it.'

Johnny Burke was not easily persuaded to transfer his valuable services from Her Majesty Queen Victoria to Messrs. Coleman and Parker, commoners and manufacturers of linen goods. However, the offer of an extra three shillings weekly convinced him that the change was worth making, and in due course he entered the employment of the firm. He began at the lowest rung of the ladder, and for some months was employed in running errands, copying letters, and making yourself generally useful.

The position was a trying and difficult one to fill, since he was at the beck and call of every member of the large office staff, from the manager down to the youngest typist; but Johnny was equal to it.

He was a very glutton for work; he positively revelled in it, and Mr. Bunting very soon found that if he wanted a message taken to any of the staff, whether in the office or in the works, Johnny's nimble brain could take it in and his ready tongue repeat it with the clearness and accuracy of a phonograph.

On the Christmas Eve following Johnny's appointment, Mr. Bunting sent for him. The boy entered the manager's room quaking inwardly, and wondering if he had at last unwittingly done something for which he was to be reprimanded.

'I have been speaking to Mr. Coleman about you, Burke,' said the manager, 'and have reported to him the progress you have made since you entered the employment of the firm. Although you may have been unaware of it, Mr. Coleman has had his eye upon you'--(Johnny, remembering sundry mental notes he had made during the past few months, smiled internally, though to the manager's eye he was a Sphinx in miniature) 'and I may say we are both well satisfied with the way you have done your work. From January 1st your salary will be raised five shillings a week, and you will be placed in charge of the stamps and petty cash.'

Johnny was speechless, but his heart leapt to his throat, and in his mind's eye he saw the dear, careworn face of his widowed mother lighting up with joy as he told her this wonderful piece of news.

'We have every confidence,' continued Mr. Bunting, 'that you will fully justify the trust we intend to place in you; and now I have only to give you this little Christmas-box with the compliments of the season.'

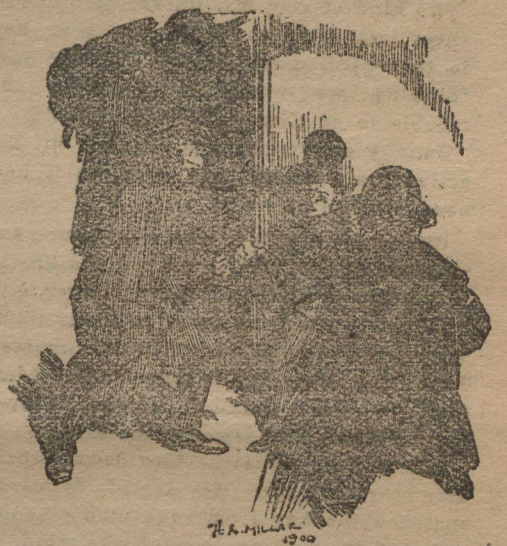
He handed Johnny a sealed envelope, laid a kindly hand on his shoulder, and pushed him gently out of the room.

It was characteristic of the boy that he took the envelope home and handed it to his mother unopened. Between them with eager fingers they tore the flap and found inside two beautiful crisp new Bank of Scotland pound notes.

There was not a family in all the great city of Glasgow that had a happier Christmas that year than Johnny Burke and his widowed mother in their little room and kitchen house in Charlotte street, Calton.

Coleman and Parker's factory was situated in what is called the Port Dundas district of Glasgow. Between the works and the counting house lay the Forth and Clyde canal. The general office ran the whole length of the counting house building on the ground floor, and its fourteen windows all looked out on the works across the canal. A couple of high bridges spanning the water were the means of communication between works and office.

Johnny Burke was an important man when on December 31 Mr. Bunting handed



WITH A SAVAGE OATH THE MAN STRUCK THE LAD FULL IN THE TEMPLE.

him the key of the drawer of the safe in which were kept stamps and petty cash.

When business was resumed after the New Year holidays, Nellie Stewart, the pretty typist who had certified to Mr. Coleman's identity nearly a year ago, made a discovery, which she lost no time in imparting to the rest of the staff. It was this: Johnny was wearing cuffs! It is true they were of celluloid; but after wearing them a week, Johnny used to make them as good as new with soap and water and the brush he used for his hands every morning after he had put on the fire and swept up the kitchen for his mother, so that she might have nothing to do but rise and take her breakfast in comfort.

When he had gone out into the dark streets to trudge manfully the three miles from Charlotte street to Port Dundas, she would pause in her work of 'redding up' to lift the little brush, and with shining eyes press her lips to its hard bristles for the sake of the brave boy who was at once husband and child to her widowed heart.

This was something that neither Nellie nor any of the other clerks ever discovered.

Johnny was keenly conscious of his responsibility, but it by no means overwhelmed him. His cuffs were the visible expression of his attitude of mind. He was now a full-fledged clerk, doing a