

THE MYSTERY MAN

A Thrilling Tale of Play and Adventure at Claycroft School : : Told by T. C. Bridges

CHAPTER 1

The New Broom

"I'm the new broom," said Dr. Colston, and, though his voice was stern, there was a merry twinkle in his keen grey eyes. "I'm going to sweep clean. Just bear that in mind, all you boys, and it will save a heap of trouble."

He paused and looked round the big school-room and the hundreds of eyes all fixed upon him.

"There! That's all for the present," he added. "Clear out, the lot of you, and have half an hour's breather before supper."

With a thunder of feet on bare boards the hundred and twenty boys of Claycroft School hurried out into the quadrangle. Among them was a fair-haired boy of about fourteen. He was tall for his age, had a good pair of shoulders, and a resolute look in his blue eyes. But he did not seem to know any of the others, and was looking about as if he were not quite sure where to go or what to do.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he turned quickly, to find himself face to face with the Head.

"You're Netley, aren't you?" asked Dr. Colston.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. You are like your father. When did you arrive?"

"About five, sir."

"Know any of the other boys?"

"Not yet, sir."

"You will soon," said the Doctor, with a smile. "I will see you in the morning, and give you a short examination to find what form you will be in. Now go ahead and make friends. You'll find plenty."

"Thank you, sir," replied Jack Netley, and followed the rest.

"Hi, you new chap, what's your name?"

The speaker was a big, thick-cheeked, heavily-built boy, at least a year older than Jack. He wore a fancy waistcoat, patent leather boots and a high collar. His cap was on the back of his head.

"Netley," Jack answered.

"What's yours?"

"What's mine, you brat? Don't you know it's cheek for a new kid to ask a three-termer his name?"

"Sorry. I didn't," Jack answered easily.

"You jolly well know now," returned the other, scowling.

"What was Coaly talking to you about?"

"Coaly? You mean Dr. Colston! Oh, nothing particular."

The other reddened.

"Look here! Don't you try to be funny. What was Coaly saying to you?"

Jack was getting rather bored with this catechism.

"If you want to know, he told me he would examine me in the morning to see what form I'd be in."

"He said more than that. He said something about your father."

Jack stared.

"If you were listening, you know as much as I do," he answered scornfully, and turned away.

The big fellow seized him by the arm.

"You cheeky young—" he began furiously.

That was as far as he had got when Jack closed and back-heeled him, and down he went on the gravel with a bump that must have jarred every tooth in his head.

There was a peal of delighted laughter.

"And wasn't I waiting for it?" chuckled the owner of the laugh, a slim youth with the reddest of red hair and a pair of the merriest blue eyes. "Get up with ye, Manny, and let Netley do it again."

But the big fellow's tumble had cooled him considerably. He got up slowly, and went off muttering threats of vengeance.

"Good for you, Netley," said the red-haired boy. "'Tis the very best way ye could have begun at Claycroft. I'm thinking the first thing the New Broom will sweep up will be trash like Mark Mansford."

"He seems rather a rotter," said Jack.

"He's worse. It's a cad he is," answered the Irish boy, and now he was not smiling. "And there's more than one of the same kidney."

"But there are lots of—of others," ventured Jack.

"Heaps—praise the pigs! Your name's Netley, isn't it? Mine's Brough. Paddy they call me. Come along! I'll show ye round."

"That's very decent of you," said Jack gratefully.

"Deed, then, I owe it ye for the way ye sat on Mansford. I had trouble with him myself, last term, when I was a new kid."

"Have you only been here one term?"

"Long enough to know my way about," laughed Paddy. "Here's where you and me live."

"What a jolly old house!" said Jack, looking up at the walls of mellow red brick and tall twisted chimneys.

"Claycroft's an old school, Netley," explained Paddy. "And a real fine old place till that last head, Phillimore, let it down."

"I know," said Jack.

"How d'ye know?" enquired Paddy.

"My father told me. He—he knows Dr. Colston."

"And what's he think of him?"

"He vows he's a topper."

"Sure, he looks it," agreed Paddy. "Here's our dormitory," he continued. "At least, it's mine, and I'm thinking you'll be in the same. C's its letter. Ah, here's your bed, with your name over it. Next mine, too, bedad."

"That's luck for me," said Jack, very pleased. "Is Mansford here?"

"He is not. He's next door, in D. He'll not touch you now, Netley, for ye've put the wind up him. All the same—Brough turned suddenly serious—"I'd keep me eye lifting. He'll be waiting his chance to take it out of ye, and he'll do it just when you're not watching."

A noisy bell cut Paddy short.

"There's supper. Come along into Hall," he said.

And Jack followed down the broad bare staircase, through a long, flagged passage, into a fine old hall with a vaulted roof beamed with black rafters.

Scores of boys were pouring in and taking their seats on the oak benches around long tables, where bread-and-butter was heaped on great white-and-blue platters.

Paddy showed Jack where to sit, and the two shared a pot of jam and talked hard.

"Are you a dry bob or a wet bob?" asked Paddy presently.

"I'm fond of cricket, but I like boats better than anything," was Jack's answer.

"Good! I'll take ye for a row tomorrow."

Neither of them noticed that Mark Mansford, who sat a little way off on the other side of the table, was listening to them.

CHAPTER 2

The Genial Stranger

CLAYCROFT stands on a hill just above the River Strane and only two miles from the big estuary where it curves through the great Whitewater marshes into the North Sea. Each dormitory has its own boat, a good safe tub, and there are, of course, racing craft besides.

The first day of the summer term was a half, and the minute dinner was over Jack and Paddy made off to the landing. Jack was feeling particularly cheerful, for he had been placed in the same form as Paddy, the Lower Fourth, and he liked Paddy and Paddy's pals immensely. They had christened him "Nettles," and that was the name he was to be known by for all of his schooldays.

"'Tis a grand day. We'll pull right down, and I'll show ye the sea," said Paddy, as he hurried ahead into the boat-house.

Then he stopped short.

"Why, where's the boat?" Jack heard him cry.

A peal of jeering laughter answered him.

"Sucks for you, Redhead!" came Mansford's voice, and there he was outside, lying at full length in the stern of C dormitory boat, with his chum, a pasty-faced youth named Harney, at the oars.

"You've no right to our boat, Mansford!" cried Paddy hotly.

"I've got it anyhow," sneered Mansford. "Pull on, Harney."

The boat moved off. Paddy was raging, but Jack put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Shut up, Paddy! Don't you

"That chap got ahead of you?" he continued, with a smile which lit up his face very pleasantly.

"Yes, sir," said Jack simply.

"Can't you get another boat?"

"No, sir. We are not supposed to take boats belonging to other dormitories."

"But that fellow has, and you want to get square. Well, now, suppose I lend you a boat?"

Jack stared. Paddy spoke quickly:

"It would be mighty kind."

"Well, I will. Come along."

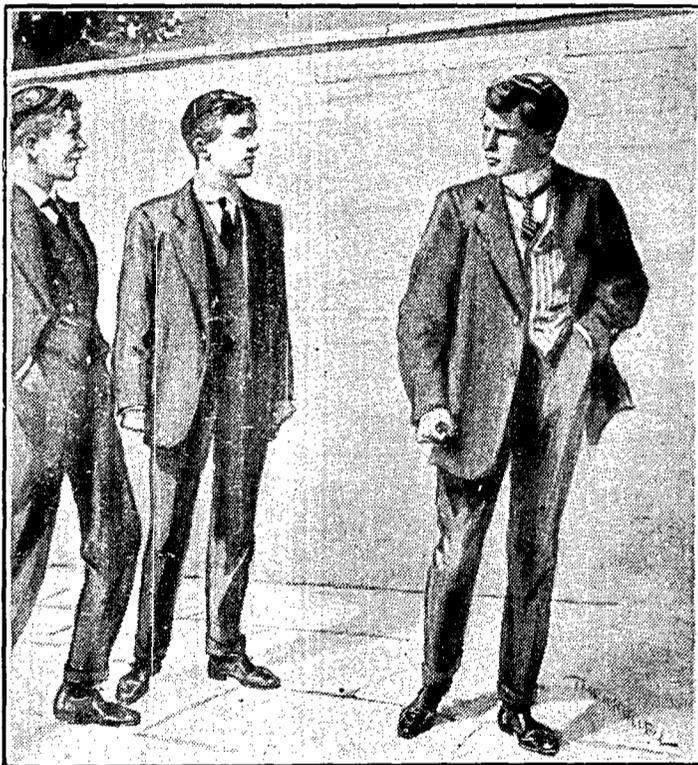
He marched off at a great pace upstream. Less than half a mile above the school the path cut through a belt of heavy trees, and to the right, on the slope, Jack saw a small, very ancient-looking house with a thatched roof and a quaint black-and-white front.

Paddy pulled up short.

"Is it you that have taken Gidley Grange, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Why not? Oh, you're thinking of the ghost! Bless you, I'm not afraid of ghosts!"

He went forward, and they followed. In the little dock inside the old boat-house lay a brand new and beautifully built boat. The varnish was still unscratched, and there was not a stain to be seen on the neat green cushions.



He went off muttering threats of vengeance

see that's just what he's after—getting a rise out of you?"

"It's rotten!" growled Paddy. "He doesn't really want the boat. He's only done it to score off us."

"Of course he has! Let him go. We'll have a walk."

He dragged Paddy away, and they started down the bank. Mansford kept on jeering at them, but Jack paid no attention at all, and would not let Paddy do so either.

"Rather a sell, eh?"

The big, deep voice came from behind them, and both turned quickly, to find themselves face to face with a curious-looking person.

A great, gaunt man he was, dressed in an ancient suit of tweeds, and wearing big hobnailed boots, thick worsted stockings, and a battered old felt hat. But it was his face which fascinated the boys. It was brown as an Indian's. Indeed, his skin was almost the colour of old mahogany, but his eyes were as blue as Jack's.

Right across his forehead, from one side to the other, ran a long, white scar. His hair was snow-white, and there were deep wrinkles under his eyes, yet for all that he did not look old.

But in spite of his quaint appearance and old clothes, both the boys knew instinctively that he was very much a gentleman.

"There you are. Go ahead!" said the stranger, in his curt way. "If anyone asks, say Captain Gunn lent you the boat. When you've done with her, put her back where you found her. Have a good time."

He nodded, and was gone before the boys could even thank him.

CHAPTER 3

Among the Mud-banks

PADDY stopped pulling, and let the boat drift.

"And what do ye think of it, Jack?" he asked.

Jack looked round at the endless maze of mud-banks which were known as the Whitewater Flats.

The higher parts were covered with thick green samphire and other salt-water growth. Here and there were patches of dull-green reeds. But all the lower part of the banks, now baring as the ebb tide flowed off them, were smooth grey silt which sloped steeply to lanes of muddy water, twisting in and out in miles of narrow channels.

Sandpipers and other small sea birds flitted from bank to bank, and their low, twittering cries were the only sounds that broke the stillness of the quiet afternoon.

"It's the sort of place that would grow on you," said Jack slowly.

"You've got it, Jack," answered Paddy quickly. "It does grow on you. It simply fascinates me."

"You'd want to know your way about," said Jack. "I should think it would be jolly easy to get lost."

"You're right. There's scores of miles of these channels. And the mud! They say there's no bottom to it in most places."

"Looks a bit sticky," allowed Jack. He stiffened suddenly.

"What was that?"

"A gull, I expect."

"Rats! That wasn't a gull. It was someone shouting. Listen! There it is again."

"Bedad, ye are right!" Paddy always got very Irish when he became excited. "It's meself can hear it now."

"Help! Help, I say!" The voice, thin with distance, came pealing across the flats.

"All right. Hold on! We're coming!" shouted Jack.

"He's over that way," said Jack, pointing to the south. "Here, give me the sculls. I'll pull."

"Then I'll steer," said Paddy. "It's this creek that we'll have to go up. What's happened to the fellow, I wonder?"

"Stuck in the mud, I expect," replied Jack, driving in the blades and sending the boat up the creek at a great pace.

It was one of the smaller side channels, and the tide being about half ebb, the banks were a good six feet above the water, so, even when standing up, the boys could not see over them. Like all these side creeks, it wound in and out like a snake.

"Sing out again," said Jack.

"Where are you?" shouted Paddy.

"Here!" came the distant answer. "Hurry!"

"Where the mischief is he?" growled Jack. "Seems to come from the west now."

"'Tis the way this old creek winds. Steady, Jack; 'tis getting narrower."

Jack slackened a little.

"Hurry!" came the shout again.

Jack tugged till the sculls bent. The boat went foaming along. She drove into rather wider water, then, with a slight squashing sound, ran smack on a hidden mud-bank and stuck fast.

With an impatient exclamation Jack sprang to his feet, drove the oar down, and pushed. The blade sank so deep into the mud that he very nearly went overboard on top of it.

It took the combined efforts of them both to lug the oar out of the glue-like stuff.

"We've done it now," said Paddy in dismay. "How'll we ever get to him now?"

"We'll have to get out and shove," said Jack.

"Get out, is it? If ye do ye'll never get in again. Sure, this mud would swallow ten of ye."

Jack felt that Paddy was right. There was a splash of oars.

"Hurray! there's another boat," cried Paddy.

Sure enough, a moment later a second boat appeared in the larger channel just beyond. On its bow was a big C, and in it sat Mark Mansford and Harney.

Mark burst into a loud laugh.

"Ha, ha!" he roared. "I thought we'd fool them. Stuck in the mud like two pigs in a pound. Watch their faces, Harney. Don't they look savage?"

Suddenly he stopped laughing.

"This'll give you a lesson, you two brats," he said viciously. "Here you'll jolly well stay till the tide rises, and that won't be for another eight hours." He turned to his companion. "Pull on, Harney. We'll get back to tea."

Harney set to pulling. Mansford waved his hand in derision.

"By-bye," he called. "Pleasant dreams. You can think of the jolly row you'll get in when you come back in the middle of the night."

TO BE CONTINUED