

**GERALD
EVERSLEY'S
FRIENDSHIP**

A STUDY IN REAL LIFE

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EPILOGUE

TO
D. M. A.

**GERALD EVERSLEY'S
FRIENDSHIP**

CHAPTER I

THE NEW BOYS

It was a day in September 186-. It was between five and six o'clock in the afternoon. The railway station of St. Anselm's seemed to be asleep save for the movement of four people, or, more strictly, of two pairs of people, who were pacing up and down at opposite ends of the platform, apparently awaiting the arrival of the same train to take them to London. Each pair consisted of a gentleman and a boy. It was evident that the two pairs were not acquainted one with the other. Once, but only once, in their patient promenade they approached and passed each other; and in so doing each of the two boys eyed the other with the curiously distant inquisitiveness of English schoolboys who have not met before, but who are dimly conscious that, as members of the same great institution, they have entered, or are about to enter, into a mysterious relation; and, as soon as they had got out of earshot, each of them, turning at the same moment almost half round, whispered to his father, 'I'm sure that fellow is a new boy; I wonder whose house he's in.' It was one of the many questions that are asked in life more for the sake of putting them than in the hope that they will be answered. But there would have been no disposition to answer it, if answer had been possible; for just then a train drew up at the opposite platform, and out of it poured a number of boys, of all sorts and ages, clamouring for porters, clamouring for luggage, greeting one another, chaffing one another, rushing out of the station to secure cabs or other conveyances, rushing back to recover articles which they had left in the racks or under the seats of the carriages, turning the quiet of the little

station into such a Babel or Bedlam as can be caused by no human beings but English public school boys in the last half-hour of freedom before the ringing of the bell which marks the fatal time when they must be all in their boarding houses—the end of the holidays, the beginning of a new term.

At last the train, looking desolate when it had discharged its freight of youthful humanity, moved on; the platform on which the boys of St. Anselm's had alighted was deserted once more, and the two fathers and their sons, who had watched the scene with unmistakable amusement and interest, resumed their walk on the other side of the station. The pairs were strangely different in appearance. One of the gentlemen was tall and strongly built; his face was sunburnt; he possessed the indescribable athletic, unliterary air of an English country gentleman. He walked with a rapid step, spoke in hearty, cheery tones, appeared to be in good humour with himself and with the world, and it was difficult, in looking at him, to mistake the characteristics of easy temper, ample fortune, and high breeding. The boy at his side, lithe and stalwart, whose bright complexion and soft blue eyes were passports to favour, even without the radiant smile that played now and again, like a wandering sunbeam, on his mobile features, was a type of generous, healthy English boyhood. No being, perchance, is so distinct, none so beautiful or attractive, as a noble English boy. He is open-hearted, open-handed; there is not a cloud upon his brow; he looks the world in the face; for him all life is, as it were, sunshine without rain. Such a boy was Harry Venniker. He was like his father, yet with a delicate grace that was not altogether his father's. He was now nearly fourteen years of age, and he seemed a little older than his years. The boy at the other end of the platform, who was nearly of the same age, though he looked younger, was

thin and pale; he wore spectacles, and stooped a little in his walk, and there was a certain nervous anxiety, not unmixed with a fine intelligence, in his demeanour whenever he met the gaze of any man or woman, even of one of the porters in the station, directed towards himself. His father was a country clergyman (like so many another) with a small income and a large family—an income growing unfortunately smaller and a family growing, shall it be said fortunately? larger—who, though he had come down a little in the world, as he would at times rather sorrowfully confess, had set his heart upon giving his eldest son—the only child of the first Mrs. Eversley—a good education; and, finding him clever, much above the average of boys in his own rural experience, had been so far encouraged by his success in winning a scholarship and by the generosity of a wealthy friend, a near relative of the first Mrs. Eversley, who had offered to undertake all responsibility for his educational expenses, that he had resolved, not without many painful misgivings, to send him to school at St. Anselm's. There was an aspect of bygone gentility about Mr. Eversley; he looked like a man who had seen better days, though nobody could tell or guess how long it was since he had seen them. The memory of those days was somehow written upon his face; and yet, if the truth must be told, a casual observer would have been more likely to notice that his coat was a little threadbare at the elbow, and his clerical hat a little soiled about the brim, than that his personal appearance was not unworthy of a better garb.

Different, however, as the fathers were and the sons, the conversation at the two ends of the platform was not entirely dissimilar. 'Train's due, Harry,' said Lord Venniker, taking his watch out of his pocket and looking at it with just sufficient attention to forget in half a minute what the time was when he

looked. ‘Here she comes. Now here’s a *5l.* note for you, and when you want more, you must write for it; don’t spend it all, you young rogue, at the tuckshops. Go straight back to Brandiston’s as soon as I’m off and make yourself happy.’ Then, after a brief pause, ‘You’ve not got to earn your living, you know, so you need not work your eyes out; I’d much rather you got into the eleven; but do your duty like a Christian; don’t swear, don’t cheat, don’t ...’ and Lord Venniker’s speech, one of the longest he had made in his life, was cut short by the train. He had barely time to add, as a summary of moral wisdom, ‘Whatever you do, don’t do anything unworthy of a gentleman—and a Venniker.’

At the same time, but at the other end of the platform, Mr. Eversley was saying in a low voice, ‘My dear Gerald, before the train, which is to part us for so long, comes in—she is signalled now—let me say this last word to you. You are going to an expensive school, more expensive, I am afraid, than it is right for me to afford; but I have longed to give you a good education—for your dear mother’s sake, and your own, Gerald—and when I have done that, you must make your own way in the world. Work hard then; remember that Satan finds some mischief for idle hands. You have been brought up in the faith of Christ as your Redeemer and your Master; be true to Him, pray to Him every morning and night, and, whatever you do, don’t forget what is expected of you as a Christian gentleman, and always ask yourself what He would wish you to do, if He were present.’

The train drew up. Lord Venniker stepped into a first class, Mr. Eversley into a third class, compartment; a few hurried last words—the world-old effort to say in half a minute all that might have been said, and ought, it seems, to have been said, in the past half-hour—and there was a whistling, a waving of hands, a tear

rising in the eyes that would disown it if they could, and the parting was over. Who is there among us that has ever waved 'Farewell' and has not felt as though it were 'Farewell for ever'?

Harry Venniker stood gazing after the train until it wound its way along the curve some three or four hundred yards from the station, and he could see nothing of it but the smoke-wreath fading away into thin air; then he turned quickly upon his heel, and as he turned almost ran into the other boy, who was making his way with slow steps towards the exit from the station.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'I'm awfully sorry. I'm always doing that kind of thing.' Then he looked at the straw hat and broad white collar which are the infallible marks of a boy at St. Anselm's, and added, 'I say, are you a new boy? So am I. Was that your governor? Whose house are you in? There's no cab; those chaps have taken them all; we may as well walk up to the school together, eh? There's time, isn't there?'

Gerald Eversley made no attempt to answer the questions which came leaping from his companion's lips, but contented himself with saying that he was a new boy, he had only once been at St. Anselm's before, and then with walking quietly at his side. In his heart he could not help wondering how any boy, being new to public school life, could feel so much at his ease.

Both boys, it is needless now to say, were taking the fateful step—more fateful perhaps than any other that is taken in life—of entering a great public school. Their parents had brought them earlier in the day to be introduced to the master in whose house they were to be placed, and after the introduction they had been permitted to see the last of their parents at the station. They had

never met before; they did not know each other's names; it was only by such a chance as has been described that they came to be walking together. Who can tell at any moment of his life that for him there may not be some one coming from a distant home, drawn onwards by divine guiding, some one whose name he has not heard, and yet whose destiny is indissolubly linked to his own?

For two or three minutes they walked in silence; but it was not in Harry Venniker's nature to be silent for long, and he soon began to interrogate his companion with the good-natured, but almost brutal, frankness which is exclusively characteristic of schoolboys.

'I say,' was his first remark, 'what's your name, though?'

'Gerald Simeon Eversley,' was the reply, delivered in a low tone, and with something not altogether unlike a choking of the throat.

It was not, perhaps, a remarkable name; but Mr. Eversley had called his son 'Simeon' after the great Evangelical leader whose funeral at King's College in Cambridge he had himself, as a young man, attended.

'Oh! Eversley, is it?' The name did not appear to awaken any reminiscences in Harry Venniker's mind.

'Whose house are you in?'

'Mr. Brandiston's.'

'Brandiston's! Bless my soul! why, so am I,' said Venniker; but there was something in his tone which seemed to imply that the pale, spectacled boy to whom he spoke was not quite the kind of boy whom he had expected to find in Mr. Brandiston's house, the most popular and fashionable house at St. Anselm's. 'They say

he's not a bad sort, old Brandiston, but awfully strict. However, I don't mind that so long as he's just. I know a lot of fellows there, some of them were at my preparatory school; it's cock house at cricket; it has got five of the eleven in it, and one of them is the captain—Stanley, you know. But, I say, what school have you been at? Were you in the eleven there? What was your top score?' But here he paused, as if a gentle voice had reminded him that the boy at his side was not quite likely to have achieved reputation as a cricketer, and he repeated his first question quickly, 'What school?'

Gerald Eversley was fain to confess that he had never been to school before—in fact, had never left his home; and he felt that the confession somehow lowered him in his companion's eyes, and would lower him in the eyes of all his schoolfellows at St. Anselm's. It certainly seemed to make a breach at the moment between his companion and himself; they walked nearly fifty yards without speaking. But again Harry Venniker's spirits were too buoyant to make prolonged silence natural or possible. His conversation took an air of superiority—that unconscious, unintentional superiority which is the prerogative of greater knowledge or wider experience. He felt somehow as if he had spent half his life at St. Anselm's, and, being long familiar with its practices and observances, were called upon to initiate a young novice into the secret of them. He began to realise in himself a sense of patronage, a duty of protection, to the boy who was walking at his side. Just because Gerald was so 'green' (as schoolboys phrase it), and wholly unversed in the ways of the world, it was his office to give him a helping hand. A boy of duller or coarser temperament than Harry Venniker, even if he had abstained from teasing or harassing such a creature, would have

left him severely alone. But Harry Venniker was full of manly, generous impulses; he was conscious of strength, but not less conscious of the obligation to use it beneficently; and while he would not himself have submitted to any bullying, he would have felt it a shame to let another weaker boy be bullied without coming to his rescue.

He resumed the conversation in a more sympathetic tone, turning it to those subjects which seem to be eternally interesting to males of thirteen years of age who are entering upon school life—a boy's sisters' names, his pocket-money, the sport he has had at home, and the means of satisfying a master's requirements with the smallest possible expenditure of personal trouble. But he discovered—and the discovery was a great surprise to him—that these subjects, so natural among schoolboys, were nearly all painful or difficult to Gerald Eversley.

Boys have been always strangely sensitive about their female relations. They have often felt, or affected to feel, a shame of their sisters—though, heaven knows the sisters had generally far more cause to be ashamed of their brothers than their brothers of them—and it has been a point of honour to conceal their names and their very existence. Boys have been known to deny that they had sisters, though at the time they were receiving letters and presents from them. It is said that a boy once carried his dislike of the female sex to the point of denying that he had ever had a mother. Gerald Eversley was not experienced in the ways of school life; but when he was asked for his sisters' names, he found a difficulty in admitting that he had eight sisters possessing an accumulated total of nineteen Christian names; and Harry Venniker, who had only one sister, and had not conceived the possibility of anybody having as many as eight, grew conscious, after hearing some half-dozen of

the names, that his question was rather an awkward one, and he did not press for a complete answer to it.

He was not much more successful in introducing the subject of sport. To most British schoolboys, of the upper classes at all events, sport is a subject of fascinating and absorbing interest. Not to be a sportsman is in their eyes not to be an English gentleman. There is a story that a clever schoolmaster, who was conscientiously opposed to vivisection, offered a prize to any boy who should come back to school after the summer holidays without having killed any living creature; and the prize was not claimed, probably not because there was no boy in the school who had not handled either a gun or a rod in the holidays, but because there was not a boy bold enough to admit in the presence of his schoolfellows that he had spent the holidays in so unsportsmanlike a manner. But the 12th of August and the 1st of September were only common days to Gerald Eversley; they enjoyed no mystical significance in his eyes. Mr. Eversley, his father, was not a sportsman; he had neither the means nor the taste for 'killing' (as he would himself have said) 'God's dumb creatures.' To say the truth, it is probable that he felt, like Sir Thomas More, a secret astonishment at finding that so many sober, responsible, Christian gentlemen experienced a pleasure or exhibited a pride in the magnitude of their slaughter. So it was that Gerald Eversley had never thought of handling a gun. A gunshot was apt to send a tremor through his body. It happened once that, as he was walking with a book of poetry in his hand in the covert immediately adjoining a part of his father's glebeland, he came upon a number of pheasants that the keepers who were out with a shooting party had left—bedraggled, bleeding, some of them hardly yet dead—to be picked up in the evening when the day's sport was finished. The sight was so painful that he turned

away from it as if it sickened him, and the tears came into his eyes, and he wondered if any satisfaction derived from killing these beautiful creatures could be greater than his in being innocent of their blood. It was not much use, then, to talk to Gerald Eversley about sport; the subject was unwelcome to him, and Harry Venniker instinctively dropped it.

His growing conviction that his companion was a 'rum 'un' was not diminished when it appeared that Gerald had not come to school with any thought of waging war against the masters, or with any animosity towards them as the natural enemies of boyhood; that he was not looking forward to any 'larks;' that he did not understand what a 'beak' or a 'crib' was; that he hoped to be left alone to study by himself; that he cared more to know where the library was than where the cricket-field was; and that he shrank at heart from contact with a company of strangers, not the less because those strangers were public school boys. But his astonishment reached its height when at the mention of pocket-money and of the ways of spending it on a large scale—Harry Venniker having a 5*l.* note in his pocket and being empowered to write home for more as soon as he wanted it—his companion, who had been sent to school with only half a sovereign (though he did not confess the amount), and that a sum which his father had given him with the solemn air of one who is making a sacrifice that it would be impossible to repeat, stammered and faltered, and at last broke into tears. He had lived a solitary, sheltered life until then; he was quite unworldly; he had never known what it was to receive gold as a present; and it was more than he could bear to listen to a boy of his own age talking about 'fivers,' not at all boastfully, but in the most natural manner possible, as if they were matters of

almost everyday experience. He did his best to check his tears, but they would come.

Harry Venniker looked at him with a mingled sentiment of surprise and commiseration. He had an awkward consciousness (to express his own thought) that he had 'put his foot into it,' and that, if he had chosen his topics of conversation with more delicacy or discretion, this 'scene'—disagreeable as 'scenes' always are to boys—would not have occurred. For the moment it was difficult to avoid a feeling of contempt for this strange, emotional creature. Boys have a horror of tears; they think them fit only for women or for Frenchmen; they regard them as essentially un-English. But Harry Venniker's heart was touched to sympathy; he realised the fact of sorrow, and tacitly blamed himself for being, although unwittingly, the cause of it. He wanted, if he could, to make amends, though he hardly knew how, and so, after hesitating for a moment, he put out his hand and said hastily, 'I say, never mind; don't blubber. You'll want a little more pluck, I can tell you, if you're to get on among fellows; but I'll be your friend; I'll stick up for you—I swear I will; I'll be your friend, whatever happens.'

By this time they were ascending the short, steep road which leads to the crest of St. Anselm's hill. Harry Venniker had not long finished speaking when they came in sight of Mr. Brandiston's house—it juts out a little into the road just beyond the chapel—and without another word they walked to the door of it and entered, passing through a group of boys who were clustered by the entrance, and who stared at them with the supercilious curiosity of older and superior beings at the sight of a new boy.

'I say,' cried Harry Venniker, who had been holding a brief but earnest consultation with the butler, 'you fellow, Eversley; we're

in a room together, No. 13; come along, let's have a look at it.' And so saying, he hurried the butler and Gerald up two flights of stairs and along a narrow, tortuous passage, actually known in the language of the house as the 'corkscrew,' to a room which bore the external signs of being intended for the conjoint but exclusive occupation of two boys. The walls were bare; for its former occupants, whether they had left the school or had only migrated to some better room in the house, had bequeathed to their successors no traces of decorations except the nails which had supported their pictures and now remained without any apparent use, like ghosts of an ancient and departed glory; but it contained two beds, which it was the fashion to fold up during the day and let down at night, two chairs, two tables deeply scarred with the names of several generations of boys who had occupied the room, two bookcases, two washstands and basins—in a word, all the conventional phenomena of a dual existence. The butler—a venerable character in the house—stood quietly by while the two boys surveyed the scantily furnished apartment, the virgin soil, as it were, which they were destined to cultivate; then he claimed the privilege of long experience by giving vent to the hope that they would 'chum along all right together,' and left them alone, telling them they must come down to the hall when the bell rang for prayers.

While they were unpacking their boxes, which were, it must be admitted, widely different in character and contents, Harry Venniker received a good many visits from old friends who had known him at home or at school, who greeted him and were greeted by him with much cordiality, passed some merry jokes with him at the expense of two or three of the masters and of their houses, which were declared to be in all respects vastly inferior to Mr. Brandiston's, so that the boys professed themselves unable to

imagine how ‘any decent chap’ could go into such ‘holes,’ and informed him in a congratulatory spirit that Stanley had been heard to express the intention of conferring upon him the singular honour of choosing him as one of his fags. Nobody asked for Gerald Eversley, or addressed any word to him, though to one of the boys who came into the room Harry Venniker introduced him as ‘an old friend of mine,’ using a form of speech not unnatural to schoolboys to whom a day is a long time, and a ceremony or practice which came into use a year ago is as if it had existed since the Creation. The business of unpacking boxes, interrupted as it was by numerous sallies of Harry Venniker to the window or the door, for the purpose of taking observations or renewing acquaintances, filled a considerable time. Then there was the further business of adorning the walls with pictures and trophies. Poor Gerald endured a fresh mortification at finding that he was expected to have brought certain decorative ornaments with him, and that he had not brought them. But Harry with great good nature did his best to set him at ease. He produced from the bottom of one of his boxes a number of engravings, all of a sporting kind, exhibiting with rare uniformity the triumphs of human skill over wild boars, elks, tigers, bears, and lions, to say nothing of the various species of British game, an enormous stag’s head—a ‘royal’ he called it, but Gerald had no idea what he meant—the trophy of his father’s prowess in sport, a clock, a hand-screen, two cabinet photographs of his father and mother, and the picture of a beautiful girl whom he explained a little apologetically to be his sister Ethel, a year younger than himself, ‘a real good sort, you know, for a girl; it was she who gave me this knife just as I was starting. Now we’re beginning to look a little shipshape,’ he continued; but just then the bell rang, and the two boys went downstairs with all the others for prayers in the hall.

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