

Anthony Blair

Captain of School

By An Old Boy

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CHAPTER I

A NEW BOY WITH PROMISE

The September sun glinted on the sea as Anthony Blair pulled the strap to open the carriage window. The train picked up speed as the line to St. Stephen's College followed the curve of the shore around the bay. Impatient for his first glimpse of his new school, he drummed his fingers on the windowframe as if to say, 'Faster, faster!' Carefully taking off his school cap, he gingerly stuck his head out of the window and craned his neck towards the engine. Just at that moment, a shower of soot and sparks covered his hands and face. A curse on these steam engines, he thought. Could nobody invent a gas-powered train, or even an electric one? As he closed the window and inspected the damage to his cuffs and neatly starched collar, he imagined himself lecturing to a rapt audience of experienced engineers about the new technical marvel he had single-handedly designed and built. Picking up his leather-bound diary, a farewell present from his mother, he turned to a page where he had already written 'Things to Invent' in a neat boyish hand. Underneath 'Automatic Translating Machine for Latin Homework' he wrote 'Electric Locomotive'.

Anthony Blair, or Anthony Charles Lynton Blair, to give the hero of our story his full name, was a boy of sunny disposition. A ready smile played around his mouth as he squinted into the mirror of the third class compartment he had occupied alone for the past hour. At fourteen he already cut a manly figure. On the platform where he changed trains, he had thanked the porter politely for carrying his trunk and tipped him half a crown. 'You are a proper young gentleman and no mistake,' the porter replied with a beam of satisfaction so transparent that Blair immediately wondered whether he had been over-generous. Perhaps a real gentleman would have given just a shilling, or even sixpence?

The Blair family was of modest origins, owing its position in society entirely to his father, who had by dint of study and application exchanged the narrow world of the counting-house for the broad vistas of the law. He was a Justice of the Peace and a man devoted to progress and good works. There were no shields, escutcheons or oil-painted portraits in the Blair household, but a tradition of useful endeavour inspired man and boy alike. It was only when the father, receiving a complaint from the curate about a boy trespassing on the church roof, detected signs of a mutinous spirit in his son that he decided to send him to complete his education in an English public school. St. Stephen's was chosen for its fidelity to the precepts of the great Dr. Arnold, and for its healthy location on the sea coast. Mr. Blair and his wife decided that their son's tendency to mischief-making would best be kept in check at an establishment remote from the temptations of our larger towns and cities.

The train stopped at a small station. The door of the compartment opened and a boy of around fifteen, wearing

a Norfolk jacket of a greenish tweed, entered and sat down opposite him with a show of studied indifference. Some boys might have hesitated before addressing the newcomer, but not our hero.

‘Hallo,’ he began, stretching out a hand. ‘My name’s Blair. Anthony Blair.’

The response was crushing. Between a fifteen-year-old and a fourteen-year-old, there is a gulf that yawns as wide as anything demarcated by the Almanac de Gotha.

‘Don’t you grin at me, you young muff,’ said the boy in the Norfolk jacket. ‘Address fifth formers only when spoken to.’ A sharp flush rose to Blair’s cheeks as he withdrew the proffered hand in disarray. But he had no wish to provoke his travelling partner, and continued to smile genially in his direction.

‘I’m sorry I don’t know all the St. Stephen’s rules yet. Anyway, you’ve spoken to me now, so I imagine I can say something in return.’

The boy took a large gold hunter from his pocket and consulted it. ‘Only another ten minutes,’ he declared. ‘The first day of term is such a waste of good shooting. The grouse are just everywhere at the moment.’

Blair nodded. The assertion was not one he would have dreamed of challenging, though his own experience of field sports was limited to an occasion some three years past, when he fired his catapult unsuccessfully at a rabbit and broke a pane of glass covering the strawberry patch. He told his mother that he had seen the rabbits break the glass during their early morning jumping practice.

For the first time, the boy looked him straight in the eye. ‘My name is Archer,’ he vouchsafed. ‘Since the last Sports Day everyone at St. Stephen’s knows who I am. What house are you in?’

‘Hardie’s,’ Blair answered, relieved that the ice had been broken.

‘Too bad for you. I’m in Salisbury’s. We’ve been Cock House for ages. We thrashed your lot at cricket and rugby last season and we intend to carry on. If it wasn’t for Salisbury’s, St. Stephen’s would be in a bad way. We bagged all three Cambridge scholarships last year.’

Blair felt unmoved by this sally. With no family tradition to draw on, he knew nothing of the different houses and did not care much where he ended up. If Hardie’s was packed with duffers, then he would do his best to redress the balance. And he might make his mark more quickly than in a house full of swells and swots.

Archer looked at him critically. ‘A word of advice, young fellow. Make sure you change the knot in your tie. Only sixth formers can use a Windsor knot. And don’t forget the rule about jacket buttons, or you’ll really be in hot water with the prefects.’

Blair’s hand rose to his tie. That was something he could easily correct, but the rule about jacket buttons was a different matter. How was he supposed to know it?

Archer was reading a magazine full of advertisements for motor cars. Blair’s gaze turned again to the window, and there beyond the lighthouse, perched upon a windswept cliff, was St. Stephen’s, his home for the next four years! The stone walls shone the colour of gold in the autumn sunlight and the Gothic turrets and spires stood proud above the green sward of the playingfields. A flag fluttered, proclaiming loyalty to King and Country and defiance to any intruder who might brave the choppy waters of the sea. Blair was still admiring the scene when the train plunged suddenly into a tunnel and he was forced to close the window to keep out a cloud of smoke and cinders.

When the train emerged from the tunnel the sun was still shining but the view had changed. The line ran past suburban gardens, and then over a narrow bridge that crossed a dirty-looking river. There were small mean-looking red brick houses, a gasometer and what appeared to be a brickworks. The train slowed down and crossed a canal where urchins were throwing stones at a stray dog. There were barges full of coal and cement, and on one of them a coarse-looking woman was pinning out some washing.

When the carriage came to a stop at Coalhaven station, Blair clasped his portmanteau and his grub-box, and waited on the platform for his trunk to emerge. There was a gaggle of other boys, some smaller, some larger than himself. He was relieved to discover that no negotiation with cabdrivers and porters would be required, for the school had sent a motor lorry and a horse-drawn omnibus to meet them.

‘Jolly good show,’ he exclaimed to Archer as they walked down the platform, but his companion broke away as they passed the cab rank. ‘I shall take a fly. It’s a deal faster, and there’s tea in ten minutes.’

When the omnibus finally reached the school, there was no sign of Archer. Most of the boys dispersed towards their familiar houses, leaving Blair face to face with an imposing red-faced figure in a black moleskin coat and silk stockings who was giving directions. ‘Excuse me, sir, can you show me the way to Hardie’s house?’ he asked.

The man grunted and pointed to an archway across the courtyard. Blair heard laughter from behind him. A ginger-haired boy of about his age tapped him on the shoulder. ‘That’s Irvine. He’s the Famulus. You don’t call the old brute sir. You call him Irvine.’

‘Well, I got that wrong, didn’t I?’ Blair replied with a broad grin. His mother had warned him not to take himself too seriously, not to show ‘side’ and to help other boys less fortunate than himself. He hoped that by taking her advice he would soon be surrounded by friends.

The boy guided him up a long flight of stairs, where he left his trunk to be unpacked by Matron Boothroyd. ‘Old Betty’ was a legend at St. Stephen’s, and had outlasted most of the teaching staff. Her empire comprised a labyrinth of backstairs passages and echoing corridors, where laundry-girls and other domestic staff kept an ear cocked for the sound of her jangling keys. Next to the sanatorium was the sitting-room where she spent her off-duty hours. Boys who knocked and followed her command ‘Enter, enter!’ would see a bottle of port and a packet of cigarettes in easy reach of the armchair where she dozed, kicking off her boots and placing her feet on a piano stool. Sometimes she would reminisce about her career as a variety artiste, besieged at the stage door of provincial music halls by a succession of ‘Champagne Charlies’. The boys knew her as something of a ‘card’ and late at night in the dormitories they would exchange whispered speculation about her past.

Blair knew none of this. The Matron glanced down a list and told him brusquely: ‘You will be sharing a study with Brown. I always try to put the little Bs together.’

There were endless staircases to negotiate and miles of corridors. There were poky little rooms and grand vestibules decorated with Gothic statuary, which seemed to serve no useful purpose. There were oil paintings and enormous fireplaces, carved oak panels and brass fittings. There were frescoes of St. George and St. Andrew, and

of mediaeval heroes such as Richard the Lionheart and Henry V. It was easy to get lost.

St. Stephen's, despite the antiquity of its foundation and the Gothic style of its architecture, was relatively recent in its construction. It would have been unrecognisable to any Old Boy who experienced the cramped and insalubrious accommodation of the early nineteenth century. After the great fire and the decision to move to a new site by the sea, many of the old traditions were swept away. Instead of small individual boarding houses named after masters, there were just three houses – Salisbury's, Hardie's and Gladstone's. The new building was a single edifice, with a series of small courtyards. At the corner of the school was the chapel, with a great clock tower affording views out to sea and over the windswept countryside.

Observe our young hero, cheerfully dragging his grub-box along a corridor and knocking on a heavy oak door. Without waiting for a summons, he opens the door and announces himself. A dark-haired figure with an intense gaze looks up from his books and motions him to take a seat. There is a moment of silence as Blair looks around the sparsely furnished room. There are two armchairs, a small gas fire, a bookshelf stacked with heavy tomes, and a food cupboard containing a jar of Dundee marmalade and a tin of oatcakes. The view from the casement window is of an internal courtyard. The desk and the floor are covered with books and papers and mugs of tea. The only decoration on the wall is an engraving of the Forth Bridge.

'Hallo. I'm Blair. You must be Brown, if I'm in the right place.' He had already divined that St. Stephen's was a place where Christian names were to be used sparingly, if at all.

There was a grunt from his new study companion.

‘Aye.’

‘Can I put my things in the cupboard?’

‘Aye.’

Without more ado, Blair opened his grub-box, lovingly packed by his mother with such delicacies as potted meat, biscuits and plum cake. His new study companion had plunged his nose into a book, and was writing furiously. He seemed much older than his years.

‘The mater’s done us proud,’ Blair said as he pushed a slice of cake across the desk. The dark-haired boy put down his pen and took the cake with his inky fingers.

‘It’s not bad.’

Blair detected a Scottish accent. ‘I’m sort of Scottish too,’ he said. ‘How ripping that we should be sharing a study. Do help yourself.’

‘You don’t sound Scottish,’ Brown replied. ‘You could be a Sassenach impostor.’ For the first time, Blair could detect the hint of a wintry smile. Perhaps he and the dour Scottish boy would be chums after all.

Blair quickly ascertained that Brown was indeed a Scot of the purest water. He inquired if he was by any chance related to our late Queen’s famous Scottish manservant. Alas, he was not. Brown had been at St. Stephen’s for only two terms, but the son of the manse was already making his mark.

‘You’re swotting early. It’s only the first day of term,’ Blair remarked.

‘I’m up for a scholarship exam in a few weeks. You won’t see much of me till it’s over,’ Brown replied.

‘Rather you than me,’ Blair confessed. ‘How much is it worth?’

‘Fifty pounds a year. That’s a lot of money in Kirkcaldy.’

Before the two fourth formers could discuss the thorny topic of money any further, there was a loud shout from along the corridor.

‘F-a-a-g!’

‘Oh, let them shout,’ said Brown.

‘Shouldn’t we go?’ asked Blair nervously, his desire to do the right thing overcoming his rebellious nature.

‘It’s Healey and Benn. We have to fag for them because they’re in the sixth. But they seem to spend most of their time fighting and throwing things at each other. Then we fags have to clean up after them.’

Blair came from a small cathedral school where fagging was unknown, but he had read enough about public school life in boys’ magazines to know what was required. At home he had learned from Mrs. Beckett the cook to make toast over a gas fire, to warm the pot when making tea, and even to wash up cups and saucers when the maid had her day off. One of his favourite hymns included a line about ‘the trivial round, the common task’ and he was determined to ‘muck in and show willing,’ as his father often instructed him.

There was a crash from the corridor and another shout.

‘F-a-a-g!’ came the voice. ‘I want you here in five seconds.’

Without hesitating, Blair made for the door. ‘You’re swotting. Why don’t I go?’ he said to Brown.

‘Good chap,’ came the reply. ‘Down the corridor, and third on the right.’

He found the door and knocked boldly. From inside the study there was another crash and the door swung open. A tall boy with a fixed stare strode past him carrying a large model aeroplane.

There was glass all over the grate and the mantelpiece

where two framed photographs had been smashed to smithereens. The remaining occupant of the study heard Blair's polite knock and scratched his head.

'Hallo, new fellow. What's your name?'

'Blair.'

'Cut along and get a broom and brush. Wedgie has flown his wretched plane into my photographs and refuses to apologise,' Healey continued. 'It was deliberate, of course. He's a complete cad.'

Blair did as he was told. 'I'll have it straight in two jiffs,' he promised the sixth former with a cheery smile. Within five minutes, he had swept up the broken glass and washed the teacups. He returned to his study thinking that fagging was not as bad as he feared, but worried that all was far from well among the senior men in Hardie's house.

Brown confirmed his suspicions. The captain of Hardie's was a distant figure known as 'Old Footer' who sat in his rooms writing essays on history and literature, and rarely visited the dormitories or the studies. In his absence, the prefects had no authority and bullying and other vices were widespread.

'I met a swell called Archer in the train. He told me Salisbury's is Cock House and wins everything. Is that true?'

Brown nodded and frowned. 'Archer isn't much of a swell. He's just a fifth former who can run fast and loves making up tall stories. But he's right about Salisbury's. They've stolen our thunder.'

The life of an English public school ebbs and flows like the tide, as all Old Boys know. For a year or two an outstanding captain of house or school can quickly stamp his moral authority on other boys by forceful example, but

when the shining figure of old Smithers leaves for Oxford or Cambridge, the rot quickly sets in. As the reader of these pages will discover, a boy whose character is shallow can do serious damage if he is promoted to a position of responsibility. There will be both triumph and disaster in our narrative, and it is well known that not all school stories have a happy ending.

‘Can’t we do anything?’ Blair asked. ‘I want Hardie’s House to be the best house in the best school in all the world!’

‘So do I,’ replied Brown. ‘But we’re only in the fourth. Everything depends on those fellows in the sixth form. At the moment they’re all fighting each other. There’s drinking and smoking and all kinds of beastliness. One day it’ll be up to us to put that right.’

The tall, saturnine Scottish boy exuded such confidence that Blair felt encouraged. At that moment if Brown had told him to pick up his rifle and march forward into a hail of machine-gun fire, he would have gladly followed orders.

At that moment the bell rang for callover. Blair followed Brown down the stairs with a crowd of other boys into the huge panelled hall known as Big School. The boys clambered over the green leather benches, hailing old friends, whooping and waving like tribesmen doing a war-dance. He was momentarily separated from Brown, and found himself squeezed among a rough crowd of boys. The only one he recognised was Archer, who had now swapped his Norfolk jacket for the same Eton collar and black jacket as his fellows. ‘Well, if it isn’t young Sooty!’ Archer jeered. ‘He’s spent the hols down a coalmine!’ Blair realised that the smuts from the train were still decorating his starched collar in conspicuous fashion. ‘Sooty! Sooty! Bring us a sack of coal!’ He realised he had unwittingly

landed among the Salisburians, who were keen to make the most of his discomfiture. They were self-confident boys with fancy waistcoats and watch-chains. Suddenly he felt very alone. 'Sooty needs a wash! Sooty needs a wash!' came the chant. Blair was new to this kind of ragging, but he was determined not to show it. Most new boys joined the school in the third form, and he was a year older, so for him there was no safety in numbers. He stared straight ahead, fighting the prickling feeling in his eyes, and wondered how long his ordeal would continue.

The big oak door at the far end of the hall was opened by the richly garbed Famulus, and in strode a phalanx of masters wearing mortar-boards and gowns. The boys stood up, then resumed their seats. One of the younger masters began reading out lists of names, and soon his own was called out.

'Blair.'

'*Adsum,*' he answered confidently.

He felt a tap on the shoulder and turned round. Behind him a large fleshy boy flicked something towards him. Blair blinked as something wet landed on his face. He raised a hand to his cheek and found it covered in black. It was an ink pellet! A red mist rose before his eyes. He rose from his bench, swung round and caught his tormentor a heavy blow on the cheek.

'You, boy, stand up!' came the stern voice of the master. 'Yes, you with the dirty collar. You will do two hundred lines by tomorrow. What is your name?'

'Blair, sir. I'm sorry, I was provoked by this boy here and lost my temper.'

From behind him came a whispered chant: 'Peach, peach, peach. Sooty's going to peach!'

His despair was total. Luckily his tormentors, having

achieved their object, lost interest in him and within a few minutes the savage tribes of boys dispersed to their separate corridors.

Dejected, he spotted a crowd of other fourth formers, and tagged along. 'Come and I'll show you the faggery,' said the small ginger-haired boy who had spoken to him earlier.

The faggery was a small day-room for the fourth formers in Hardie's. There were leather armchairs, framed prints of famous cricketers around the walls, a fireplace and a shelf full of jigsaws and chess sets. Blair hoped that after his ambush by the hated Salisburians, he would find himself among friends.

'Well done, new bug! You landed one on Fatty Soames!' came a shout as he entered. 'Well done, Sooty! Never mind about the lines.'

The nickname was not one he would have chosen for himself, but Blair knew well enough that there was no point in arguing for a better one. Schoolboys are sticklers for precedent and tradition, and a nickname, once bestowed, tends to hang around a boy's neck for life.

Blair's spirits immediately lifted. 'Come on, Sooty, we're having a rugger practice!' shouted a small fellow who led the way into the corridor. 'Let's see if you'll make the fifteen.' Blair was reluctant to confess that his experience with the spheroid ball was non-existent; at his last school he had played Association Football, a game in which his skills were well developed. But rugger was a different kettle of fish.

The game of corridor rugger involved taking a pass, evading a tackle by a gang of other boys and then taking a drop-kick at a statue of William the Conqueror which stood at the end of the corridor. The boys took it in turns

to run full tilt down the corridor, relying on momentum to get past the tacklers. Sheer weight of numbers brought most of them down in a flailing mass of limbs. When it was Blair's turn he caught the ball neatly, set off down the corridor at a steady trot and tapped the ball with his foot over the waiting tacklers. Swerving past them, he caught the bouncing ball and managed a creditable drop-kick towards the statue. As the ball spun forwards, he heard a shout from behind him: '*Cave! Cave!*'

Alas! The moment of triumph was not to be. After striking the inert stone helmet of William the Conqueror, the ball bounced sideways and into the hands of a muscular grey-bearded figure wearing a gown, mortar-board and clerical collar.

Blair stood with a look of horror on his face. After the incident in Big School, here he was again in serious trouble. What would he tell his parents if the school were to expel him after only one day?

'Thank God, it's only Flogger!' shouted one of the boys. 'Three cheers for old Flogger!'

Blair and the school chaplain 'Flogger' Williams stood facing each other. Williams had been an Oxford rugger blue and an army officer in his time, and did not believe that boys came to St. Stephen's to be mollycoddled. He believed in the virtues of robust physical activity, including boxing, running and cold baths. In his sermons he often told the boys they were footsoldiers for Christ, and should learn to use their fists if the situation demanded it. As his nickname indicated, he used the cane liberally to punish serious misdemeanours, but in Flogger's book Blair's crime was of scant importance.

'Nice dropkick, young man,' the padre said with a smile. 'Now get back in your room and keep quiet, you

young baboons.' With a stern glare he was gone. The boys retreated to the faggery in good spirits.

Blair's first day was nearly over. His confrontation with the Salisburians had not gone unnoticed, and his corridor dropkick had been a triumph. It was dangerous to be at the centre of attention, but it was fun. He sat down and wrote out his lines, feeling that St. Stephen's was not so bad after all.

After the evening snack of milk and buns, followed by prayers, the boys trooped off to their dormitories. Blair put on his pyjamas, cleaned his teeth and tried to wipe the ink off his face. The stain appeared to be indelible, but his conscience was clear and he was far from down-hearted. When the gaslight was turned out and he laid his head on his pillow, he was buoyed by the thought that he was now a St. Stephen's boy, ready to defend the honour of his house and his school against all comers.