

New Year Blues – Day 5

Four legs. Brown hair. Two more legs.

A man. On a horse.

'You seen Locksley?', said the man on the horse to Hardy gruffly.

Hardy was so transfixed by the fact that there was a man, on a horse, there, in that forest, right in front of him, and that he was half covered in leaves, trying to scramble out of a ditch carrying a football, that he said nothing.

'Come on Hardy!', came Robin's cheery voice from back in the clearing where the match was waiting for the ball to be returned. Hardy looked up to see Robin trotting over to where he was.

Robin didn't seem at all surprised to see the stranger.

'Ah, Guy! How good to see you again! I wondered how long you could stay away! Fancy a game?'

'The Sheriff wants to see you', said Sir Guy menacingly.

'Oh, the Sheriff...y'know I'd almost forgotten about him.... Well he'll just have to wait I'm afraid...'

'Wait? Wait? Too late Locksley, hah! A little surprise for you'

A second man, also on horseback, appeared through the undergrowth, his sneering mouth surrounded by a little grey beard, his face contorted into a permanent contemptuous half-grin. Several other men, mostly dressed in long black cloaks and with masks across their faces, lined up either side of the Sheriff.

'My dear Sheriff, to what do we owe this singular honour?' teased Robin, apparently unconcerned by the troop of fearsome-looking guards. *'how about a little challenge – my men against yours, first goal wins!'*

'And for the loser?', sneered the Sheriff,

'Oh, the usual, I suppose', continued Robin, *'you take us to the castle, lock us up, Marian helps us get out, we come back here, and the whole merry game starts all over again!'*

'Don't mess with me Locksley, or you'll live to regret it. But very well, the first goal wins'.

Robin cackled with delight and returned with Hardy to the far end where Freddy and his team were gathered. He passed on the news to his men whilst Freddy and the other Lancaster Road players got ready for the sudden change of plan. Robin then called all the players together for a team talk, as the opposition eleven started to line up in front of them, the Sheriff leading from the back, between the goalposts.

'Are you sure this is wise, Master...?' said Much as Robin opened his mouth to speak.

'Ah, my dear friend,' started Robin, *'you worry too much as usual! Have you seen these guys play? They beat us two-one in the match, now they'll help us do away with the Sheriff, Gisbourne, and his bunch of croneys. Speed! Speed is what we need! Look at them with their heavy armour and boots! Just run at the, run round them, and don't worry about that ugly mug in goal. He'll try anything to stop you, but all we need is one goal. Now, team huddle!'*

The combined teams of Lancaster Road and the Merry men linked arms as Robin made his final tactical speech, ending up with,

'All for one, and one for all!'

They all threw their arms up in the air and went to their agreed positions. The team now consisted of Little John in goal, a back four of Hardy, Jaz, Alan and Wil Scarlett, with Wil, Freddy, Clara, and Robin in midfield, leaving Alex and Much up front. The opposition occasionally responded to the Sheriff's screamed instructions, but mostly just clunked around in one big group, lacking any organisation, motivation, or even education in the basic laws of football. Several times the Sheriff could be seen literally jumping up and down on his goal-line, tearing his hair out in frustration as one of his players either picked the ball up, passed it to the opposition, or ignored it completely. The result was a foregone conclusion.

The goal came after about five minutes of the game, when Robin and Wil put together a flowing move down the right, the ball was held up close to the Sheriff's goal with no defenders in sight, and Robin beckoned to Hardy to sprint up the middle and smash the ball past Nottingham Forest's hapless Sheriff. Hardy was immediately engulfed by his team-mates and went on an elaborate victory celebration.

The opposition just trudged off, back to their horses. The Sheriff looked a beaten man, but still managed a desperate cry of *'We're not beaten yet, Locksley, we'll be back'*.

'Ah, yadda, yadda, yadda...!' laughed Robin, high-fiving his old and new team-mates.

'We must be going too', said Freddy, *'thanks for the game, and good luck for the rest of the season!'*

And with that, they were gone, back down the hill to home, leaving the Merry men and their beautiful forest.

'Two games in one day, can't be bad, can it?' said Wil when they got back home.

'Yes, things are looking up, aren't they, although I wish Michael was here', Freddy replied with a yawn.

That night, Freddy lay in bed thinking of the weeks that had passed. Three games, two wins, one loss. Not bad. Good team. Good friends. Champions League tickets. Hmmm... He was drifting slowly towards that wonderful time between being awake and being asleep, when your mind drifts from one thing to another, when you can hardly keep your eyes open...

Maybe it was the surreal nature of the match they had just played; maybe it was because he was floating towards the land of Nod, or maybe it was because of Beckham's exotic move west. Whatever

the reason, his mind drifted far away to an imagined universe and started to experience one of its most vivid dreams - ever.
