

New Year Blues – Day 4

A football ground...in the middle of a forest? Eh?

What a game it had turned out to be! What a location! And what opponents were *they*?

At around six-thirty on Saturday evening, Freddy and his team had made their way to the woods, ready for a start at the agreed time of seven p.m. Although intrigued by the prospect of a game in the dusk, Freddy had not really given the match a second thought, nor had they prepared specially for it.

'Maybe this is why he had us training in the dark the other day!', said Wil breezily as they got ready for the game.

The woods were not far away, and they had all gathered with their bikes outside Freddy and Wil's house. Mr Andrews gave them one last talking to before he led them up the hill, past the playing fields, to the woods beyond.

'Quite a tough game this one, lads and lasses, although they haven't done so well in the league so far. They seem to get ahead in the game then give it all away at the end. Strange lot...dressed all in green. Call themselves the Merryman. Good luck, then, let's go!'

When they arrived at the woods, it was beyond dusk, and the clearing where they were expected to play was shrouded in an eerie greyness, which was exaggerated by the trees hanging over the pitch. The pitch itself was mostly of fallen leaves and mud, but it was flat and was reasonably dry. Goals had been set up at each end by stretching a long branch between two trees, which was tied roughly with thin strips of what looked like ivy.

Wil smiled to himself. Although a bit weird, this looked like fun. He loved the bleakness of it, the smells of the forest, and the uncertainty about who they would play.

JoJo, meanwhile, was looking nervous. Thrust into the role of stand-in goalkeeper by the enforced absence of Michael, she had purchased a new pair of goalkeeping gloves which Wil was helping her to pull on.

'Did you really have to go for pink, JoJo?', he said laughing.

'Yes, my friend, I did, actually. Now, give me some practice'.

Wil and JoJo jogged down to one end of the pitch and Wil started some gentle shots at his friend.

'Come on, Weel, 'it zem 'arder!'

He smiled again before firing a shot which caught the underside of the tree-branch bar before bouncing

down through the goal. JoJo did her best by flinging out a hand to stop the ball, but slipped in the leaf mulch, fell down on her back, and got gingerly up, covered in mud and leaves. Although obviously uncomfortable, and perhaps thinking she would rather be back home with a nice cup of hot *chocolat*, she yelled back at Wil,

'Is zat ze best you can do? Pah! 'Arder, 'arder!'

Wil shook his head in disbelief and stared back proudly at her, before lashing another ball at the goal, harder, as requested.

At half way, Freddy was organising his team. Hardy and Wil would play just in front of JoJo's goal, with himself and Jaz in midfield, and Clara and Alex up front. He glanced up as the opposition strolled casually onto the pitch at the far end. Their captain sauntered over to the half way line as his team started getting organised.

Freddy thought he recognised the fresh-faced captain from somewhere. But...no... surely not.

'Hi, I'm Freddy', he said quietly, sticking out his hand in greeting.

'Pleased to meet you,' said the captain, with a charming smile, *'my name's Robin'*.

The game was full of good football. End to end stuff, with Robin and his men playing better in the first half, taking a deserved lead through their tallest player, John, but then letting the Kidz get back into it as Alex scored a great goal from out wide on the left. As Mr Andrews had predicted, the Merrymen tended to work the ball into promising positions and then give it away. Several times, their midfield pair, Alan and Much, would pass the ball up to Robin in attack, who would give a mischievous laugh before taking a shot at JoJo's goal, or passing to his strike partner Marian, who seemed only too keen to give the ball back to the Kidz. Occasionally Marian seemed not to know what side she was on. But the match was fun, despite the gathering gloom. Eventually, Clara, helped by good work from Freddy and Jaz (who had been taking Mr Andrews's carrot-eating advice very seriously) scored what turned out to be the winner, firing past the athletic Djaq in the opposition goal.

The referee looked at his watch as the second half drew to an end. Hardy, racing up from the back, was determined finally to get on the scoresheet. Halfway into the Merrymens' half, he took an enormous swipe at the ball with his right foot. He caught it just right, in the middle of his boot where the laces were. He made a great contact and expected to see the ball fly between the sticks.

The ball flew high and wide over the goal. And the trees.

'Better luck next time!' laughed Robin, clapping Hardy on the shoulder in commiseration. Hardy smiled and his momentum kept him on running past the goal line, so he continued on to where the ball had nestled in a shallow ditch. He clambered down the leaves and undergrowth on the side of the ditch to get the ball. As he scrambled back out, ball in hand, he was aware of something different about the side of the ditch he was emerging from. A bit darker. A shadow.

He lifted his eyes slowly upwards to look.

Four legs. Brown hair. Two more legs.

A man. On a horse.

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