



Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> December 2018



## Coventry 1 - Southend 0



“Oh dear”, thought Bert the Snowman, “They don’t look happy!” Abandoned at his post all day with nothing much to do bar out stare an inquisitive starling and be ignored by the milkman, Bert had been working upon his thesis. If the weather held, another three weeks or so should see it completed. Entitled “Why do they do it?” it was an independent observers take upon the activities of the humans who either lived upon or visited the island. Some of them were of course beyond all comprehension but nevertheless he remained particularly interested in their devotion to their religion.

There didn’t seem to be any discernible pattern to when these services took place other than that Saturdays featured rather a lot. Mid-week calls to worship weren’t completely unknown though and indeed, that very Wednesday, a rather noisy group of them had taken off into the skies and then later returned looking very pleased with themselves. But not this time. Why?

This was going to take some looking into so. So, settling back down into his ‘ever alert’ entry position, he casually lent an ear against the passenger terminal doors. At first all he could hear was the excited shouting of the islands security force. They, like him, had been at their posts all day and now they were taking the opportunity to enjoy some down time. Their singing was almost as bad as that of the female human’s and Bert winced as a few of the more subtle notes got either missed entirely or simply ran away in terror. But gradually. all of the hullabaloo died down and so Bert began to learn things.

The guards were obviously enjoying some food meaning that the two humans were now setting about preparing some for themselves. Standard operating procedures were therefore in place and that meant, ah yes, as knives and forks began to see some action, so they would start to discuss their day’s activities. Time then to concentrate ....

At first their conversation was almost in code; short, unfinished sentences that obviously spoke volumes to them but sent not even a postcard to him. “Why did he leave it so late ...”, “They were useless ...”, “If either appear again on Tuesday ...” and even more curiously “I could smell it coming ....” Bert, although very aware of the security forces particular gifts when it came to nasal activity, had never before associated it with the humans. This could mean a whole new chapter for his book or at least an extension to its appendix. Pressing his ear even closer to the door he listened on.

By ignoring comments concerning their dinner and the need to buy some several more gallons of mustard, Bert was able to gradually build up some sort of a picture of what had occurred. Things apparently had started to go wrong almost from the moment they had taken off earlier in the day ...

“Ah, but then I almost forgot about the spinach, goes lovely on toast providing you add a bit of runny curried cheese it does” said Albert as he relaxed in his seat enthusiastically providing every little detail about his post breakfast snack to ears that were wishing that Radio Old Git would give it a day. It had been broadcasting away for what seemed hours and, even worse, adverts were now beginning to appear about ‘The Chair’.

Brought for him as a Christmas gift by his hopeful offspring, our, not all venerated. tribal elder had spent the previous day putting it together. Once completed, and residing comfortable within its acres of soft leather, he

had phoned one of his daughters to tell her of his success. After listening patiently to her parents ravings for a while she had innocently enquired if he had tried adjusting its back. A subject that caught Albert completely by surprise because, although he had seen a couple of levers, he hadn't until this point paid them much attention. He did now, and the result surprised him even more as he was catapulted straight out of it and onto the floor. Nice try girls, better luck next time!

Time, it is said is, relative and ahead of us, both in terms of distance a certain lack of unfortunate family ties, was Grandad aboard one of the supporters coaches. Having left Essex at the crack of dawn they were already on final approach to the ground even though the wintery sun had not yet reached its zenith. But, surrounded by amiable companions, one of whom was promising to play his drum, he wasn't too concerned about how he was going to spend the three hours until kick off hanging about outside its grey walls. There was bound to be a programme seller somewhere and, having discovered at Oxford that clubs were now printing two varieties, one for home supporters, another for away, he was very keen to find out if Coventry's were of a similar ilk.

We though were going noisily out of our minds as the elder of the brothers Grim, totally undeterred by our exaggerated yawns and tortured cries of "Enough, enough!" was now beginning to relate page 5 of his breakfast menu. Nagging witches used to be introduced to a stool, a pole and a pond and in that order. Afterwards, if they survived, some nice people then even kindly arranged a blazing bonfire for them to warm up upon. The fate of cantankerous, irritating and extremely vocal old warlocks is not so well documented, but we were certainly considering some rather interesting ones now!

Employing the letter 'M' to indicate that a road is a motorway might once have been an obvious route to follow. Today though, the letter "R" might be better employed as it signifies roadworks and our national transport system is just littered with them. The two that we had to traverse were just as swamped and so. as speed limits jokingly referred to a maximum of 50 when even half that number was totally unachievable given the conditions that were being caused by row upon row of abandoned traffic cones, arriving at the stadium just as the gates opened was becoming more and more a realistic target. The problem being, where to park?

On previous occasions a quick visit to the spiders dinner plate and an exchange of vehicle registration number plus the input of a valid PayPal password was all that had been required. Alas though, once the news that the Thunderbirds were coming had leaked, all of the available bays had long been taken leaving TBII, although bathing in the light of a twinkling little star, without anywhere to rest. Perhaps we should have been more proactive with regard to warning them that Albert formed part of our manifest!

Enter stage right those wonderful guys in blue. Unwilling to suffer the possible consequences should we have to eject our luggage outside the stadium such that it could wander about totally unsupervised whilst we, our morale considerably lifted for a period, went off seeking a mooring spot elsewhere, they had pulled out every stop. Hints that ministerial approval was both sought and hurriedly granted are just that, but what cannot be doubted is the fact that a vacant bay, inside a carpark right next to the ground magically, appeared. Just like that!

Even so, the baggage compartment still complained. Earlier, Mike, conscious of his payloads desire to get fed and watered quickly, had selected the very first spot that he had found in which to moor TBII. His ears quickly being informed that 'It was too far to walk, from here, with these legs!'. Now, that he had parked up an ants spit away from the away turnstiles, the two appendages, one on each side of his head, were again taking a battering because now he was too close! The thought of not just one, but his entire passenger list, being shafted by a red hot poker and then loaded onto a roasting spit began to entertain his mind.

From the outside, the ground that Coventry rents off its owners (Wasps: a team that plays with oddly shaped balls) appears to be quite spacious and commodious. Seemingly almost on terms with Sunderland stadium, it towers above its surroundings casting shadows over all who those who dare to trespass within its boundaries. However once inside, its surroundings barely challenge that of other clubs whose descent from higher regions had been matched by smaller gates.

Yes it all looks rather nice, but a moon crater has more atmosphere. Taking another leaf out of Sunderland's book, they had shoved us as far as they could up in an upper tier of the stands, stuck in a corner to the far side of one of the goals. Or so we had first thought given that our tickets held a double row number (Usually an indicator that we were to be on whispering terms with the gods). However falsehoods were they because the ground had no upper tiers. Instead it was all very bungalow. Nevertheless, given the girth of the muddy track that encompassed the pitch, their aim of putting us as far away from the action as possible was still achieved.

What image does the word's 'sausage roll' summon up for you? Tasty, hot, sausage meat surrounded by crisp pastry perhaps? Well how about something limp, washed out and tasting of rubber then, then? Because that is what Coventry serve up, and for a king's ransom too! Mike took one bite and spat it out. In Germany, possibly playing the game "Let's see what we can get the foreigner to eat", a certain Swiss cook had once served up something that had had an almost similar effect. Now in guilty recollection, Mike was feeling that he had possibly overreacted back then and that perhaps the dishes inedibility had been more down to the meals source, some pig with a very indiscriminate appetite (Albert's alto ego?) , rather than how the meal had actually been prepared.

Chrissy's team selection was once again provoking comment amongst the 700+ away supporters. Yes, Kightly had scored at Oxford and yes, Robinson had provided the cross, but expecting lightening to strike twice in a climate where both of them had otherwise been such damp squabs was rather pushing things. Equally, as dependable and hardworking as John White undoubtedly is, could Turner really only play one game before requiring a rest?

Accusations, rather accurate ones too, have been slung at our team for being too 'nice'. Was our manager now making a similar mistake by giving this pair 'Just one more chance'? It very much seemed so to many people and hopes regarding us getting some sort of positive result were dying faster than any queue outside a concert hall that have just discovered that Marlene is on the bill.

On our journey up, in-between Albert regurgitating aberrant details about his feeding preferences, we had discussed our Christmas programme of fixtures and indeed also those lying in wait ahead. General agreement being made that 3, possibly 4, points gained in this game against Coventry, and the one on Tuesday at home to Gillingham, would set us very nicely for the break in fixtures caused by Doncaster's involvement in the F.A cup. But, playing with just nine men rather than usual eleven had we any real cause to hope for such rewards?

Well, given the way that we started this game, yes. With, for once, an almost totally neutral referee (Unbelievable, but true!), we were taking the game to our hosts who looked very nervous and low on confidence. Football is supposed to be a game of two halves but on this evidence 50% of ours had gone AWOL because all of the action was up in just one half of the field. Theirs!

But before you get overly excited and so start imagining that this means that their goalkeeper was demanding danger money and that his woodwork was the only thing standing between us and a cricket score, you might first like to recall how the two players, with seemingly more lives than an entire cats home, played at Oxford. Or there again, perhaps not! But, holding that awful picture in your head, double, no treble it, in terms of both embarrassment and utter disbelief. Because, impossible as it may seem, they were both now performing even worse!

Robinson cannot trap, control, head, kick, pass or do anything with the ball beyond simply allowing his defender to tamely relieve him of it. Kightly goes one better though. He cuts out the middle man entirely and just passes to the opposition straightaway. Between them, their ineptitude, incompetence and all round uselessness was costing us dear. Nearly every attack that we mounted breaking down. Something that meant that, over the entire game, their goalkeeper was only ever called into action once, and then it was only to catch a ball that was heading gently in his direction. Indeed, nervous hens have been known to quake behind magazines inside dentist waiting rooms more often than we trouble keepers nowadays; certainly over the past several matches.

Cox must be pulling his hair out in frustration. As so indeed too must many others in our team, as promising moves, brought at the price of some determination and hard work in order to get the ball, were just thrown away by the careless attitude of either / both Robinson and / or Kightly. They had to be removed from play, and preferably also our pay bill, right away!

But despite all this clear evidence that we were throwing away a golden opportunity to establish a lead in the game, our bench did nothing. And unfortunately it doesn't take even the thickest of players too long to start thinking 'Hey, they might be having a lot of the ball but what are they actually doing with it?' and so Coventry started to come into the game and as they did so, so our game just began to disintegrate. For periods against Oxford, we were a team, but now we were back to being simply kids inside a playground who were harbouring ridiculous illusions that one day they just might make it into the school team.

That said, Cox, Hendrie, White and especially Moore. did look, and indeed, the part. But where can you go with just four players? Hendrie received some criticism after the game from certain quarter's but, given that he had only Kightly providing him with any 'cover', is it any wonder that he was stretched, or out of position, at times? Elvis was in and out of the game, as so too was Yearwood who looks to be only about 70% of his way back from injury. It's taking him a long time to recover his form and, recalling last season when Timlin was on hand to hand out fatherly advice and encouragement, one does rather have to wonder about the vow of silence that many in the team all seem to have taken.

Before the game, during the game and, unless we've got a result, following the game, you rarely see them exchanging even a word or smile amongst themselves. Is there a problem in the team? Has it split into separate tribes, the will do's, can do's and "I can't give a xxxx!"s? From outside it is beginning to look that way, and, nice as Chrissy likes to be, such a situation, if it does indeed exist, cannot be allowed to continue. Its root cause, in the author's view the continued featuring of two certain liabilities upon the team sheet, has to be addressed.

Halftime, where the sole entertainment was replays, displayed upon a video screen behind our heads, of Coventry scoring soft goals was therefore not a very positive period. Few could understand why Robinson and Kightly were still on the pitch and even fewer thought that we had any real hope of ever scoring. There was though quite a sizeable majority who minds were 100% certain that we would be in even more trouble come the second period.

They were not wrong! Just as we had ruled the opening 25 or so minutes of the game, so now Coventry were running the roost and looking to lay far more than rotten eggs! From the away end, some distance away from where our defence were taking a bashing, it was impossible to say. But the media reported afterwards that Coventry's goal had been offside. Perhaps it was, perhaps it wasn't. But either way they deserved it, and any hopes that we had been harbouring about travelling home with some booty in the form of a point or three, were now totally defunct.

And still Robinson and Kightly remained on the field. Come on Chrissy, even nice guys have a teeth. Use them!

Eventually he did, but unfortunately only one of the dismal duo left the pitch, the fastest he'd moved all game. Still, it was an improvement because at least it was now ten against eleven. And Coventry, it has to be said, looked poor. At Roots Hall earlier in the season they had beaten us with quite a degree of flair and energy. Today though they looked flat and, particularly early in the game, they were sitting dicks, there for the taking. Now though they were buzzing and, urged on by the crowd that had suddenly appeared following their goal, were busy seeking a second.

We however were beginning to use our extra man to our advantage and so starting to re-establish some sort of role back in the game. We were even getting corners! Had but Chrissy made the substitutions much earlier, and included the other headless chicken in his hook as well, who knows what might have happened. But all of a sudden, hope upon the away terraces was being reborn.

Unfortunately though we had all forgotten just how dreadful we are at dead ball situations, either defending or attacking. So although, no doubt, our increased activity in and around their box might have caused some concern to home supporters, the travelling contingent should have known better! Still it was much more fun now that we were living with some degree of anticipation rather than just watching on as yet another promising move broke down because Kightly had become involved.

The signal for eight extra minutes lit extra sparklers under our team's boots and as a result Coventry's goal became almost a permanent siege area. Cox nearly, perhaps should have, equalised but his shot, his first decent chance since way before Christmas, went agonisingly wide. The evil minded law that states that the ball shall always fall to your most useless striker has been in full play now for what seems like eons. So to blame Cox for his miss would be more than a tad harsh given that his opportunities to score have, for quite a while, been even less than Rodney's. But it was nevertheless disappointing to witness.

A word that rather neatly summed up our day. Our play had been disappointing, Chrissy's team selection had been disappointing, the time taken over the substitutions had been disappointing and now, as the final whistle blew, the result too followed that sad, dismal, pattern. The transfer market opens up in a day or two and it is to be hoped (Desperately) that our manager has a shopping list already prepared. The gaping wound up front obviously needs to be bandaged but a new one has also opened up in an already filled midfield. Ironically the only area of the pitch that has been unaffected by injuries, it encompasses the positions where we are weakest. So attention has to be paid to this additional issue and, if we can bring in some people that, not only bring voices along with their ability, but also more than a thimble full of fight, then that would be a considerable bonus. If being 'professional' is also amongst their list of attributes then even the better. We are by far, too nice a team!

Bert wore a worried expression as the conversation eventually turned towards more mundane domestic matters. He was now more than fully briefed on the subject of recipes. Indeed he now knew exactly what he could do with his carrot and just how those two pieces of coal could help with that. However the fresh understanding that he had obtained regarding what actually went on at these religious festivals had been far more valuable. But still, despite all the attention that he was paying it, the burning question, the title of his paper, remained unanswered, "Why do they do it?"

Come on you Blues!!