

The curse, that kept giving.

The bald, stern-faced referee blew the final whistle. It announced for one team despair and for the victors a hard-won triumph. All twenty-two players slumped to the grass, still crisp in places with frost; un-kissed by the fickle sun, barely peeking over the treeline.

The wooden stand reverberated with the stamp of nailed boots. The left-hand side drummed in rhythmic validation of their team; those on the right, thumped downhearted, just to keep the cold at bay.

An ethereal chant sliced across the bowed players; still steaming from the contest.

'Hark now hear the Nascot sing, the Tavern run away and we will fight forever more because of Boxing Day.'

As the Watford Observer reported so succinctly on the following Friday:

*The nineteen-fifty-five Watford District Football League Cup-final was won by the Nascot Arms who beat the Escourt Tavern, five-four in a thriller. Traditionally contested right after Christmas the event was held for the first time at the Borough's new Woodside Stadium; a fitting venue for this pulsating final. The Nascot Arms will have their name etched onto the cup for the fifth consecutive season. A true feat!*

Under the caption was a photo of the partying winners holding their cherished prize aloft.

Whilst all this frivolity was occurring, less than half a mile up the road, a more sombre event was about to take place. A funeral hearse with two jet-black horses stood outside the main entrance to the Metropolitan Asylum Board's hospital at Leavesden. The carriage driver kept glancing towards the entrance and the horses reflected his feelings with low whinnies and shakes of their long faces that shivered ruffles through their adorning mournful plumes.

Two ravens walked down the steps to the motor car purring behind. A rector, as plump as the bowler hat, he wore, held out an arm and assisted a tall woman, veiled in full widows' weeds into her seat; before waddling around to take his own.

The cortege glided down the hill towards the cemetery, tucked well out of view behind the asylum. As they turned left at the cross roads, a charabanc full of raucous hooligans raced past. Some were hanging out of the windows spraying beer. A bottle slipped from a hand and smashed on the tarmacadam.

The tall woman vehemently crossed herself; then uttered something under her breath.

'Till the day I die.' Was what the rector thought he heard.

'Are you all right my dear?'

She put up a gloved hand to her mouth nodded, then coughed politely.

Simon Calder, cub reporter was peeved. His editor had stiffed him with reporting on the local football, 'because' the sports editor was on holiday in the Caribbean. Lucky so and so. On Boxing Day of all days. Well at least he'd get a pint in at the Escourt Tavern before the match. Perhaps some local flavour with some choice inappropriate quotes from the supporters.

According to the guys in the office, 'this grudge-scrap was much worse than Watford v Luton; Nascot v Escourt, blooming heck, consider yourself lucky to report that gig.'

Well, here he was, pint of IPA in hand; earwigging the punters all bedecked in the pub's, king logo and green colours. He couldn't whip out his reporter's pad; that would give his game away. So, he slipped his phone from the back pocket of his jeans and set it to record.

'We've certainly got the hex on them.'

'Tell me! They haven't won since nineteen-fifty-five.'

'That's all down to Joe, the landlord. Well, this retired rector, used to drink here. Brown and mild. Liked a sup or three. So, one night, when right in his cups, he spun Joe this incredible story...'

'Get on with it then.'

'Alright I need to keep me tonsils lubricated. Allegedly, after winning in fifty-five, the Nascot team passed a funeral cortege on their way back to town. Instead of stopping to doff caps and show reverence, the coach they were on; proper party bus from all accounts, sped past. Totally dissed them off. Well, this Lady who's husband was being buried got all uppity. She was some bigwig psychic from London. Bit of a spiritualist – it's all Mystic Meg if you ask me. Shut up; I am getting on with it. She apparently, in a fit of pique, put a curse on the Nascot team saying that they would never win another cup until the day she died. Joe hated all at the Nascot, malevolently promoting the Black Lady rumour. Eventually his gift became as respectable a legend as the Parish Church's Figtree.'

Blimey, that was over fifty years ago. Do you think she's popped her clogs yet? Nah, no probs. We are well beating them today.

Simon's match-report was printed the following week.

*A dour affair at Woodside, contested in heavy mist, where the almost indiscernible players hacked as many lumps out of each other as the pitch had indents from shotputs and javelins. The Escourt Tavern beat the Nascot Arms by two goals to nil; an extension of the hoodoo that has haunted the losers since nineteen-fifty-five. A match best resigned to the boneyard of local football.*

Over the next months, Simon, between assignments, investigated the origins of the story he'd eavesdropped. A trail of researched breadcrumbs led him to Leavesden's East Lane

cemetery, where so many of the asylum's inmates had been interred. He'd been given a good steer by Martin the founder of Leavesden Hospital History Association. Despite being sidetracked by Jack the Ripper allegations, too juicy not to follow, Simon thought he'd chased down and possibly identified the 'Black Lady'.

The choked cemetery barely clung to this world. The history buffs had a ground-penetrating radar survey planned before an archaeological excavation. Good luck with that.

Oh well he'd have to wait for this scoop.

A single raven cawed through the gloom. He turned to look. Surely not? A black clad figure, stood tall in the liminal lee of the brambles.

Simon blinked and the raven had flown.