

THE DEVIL IN HIM

BY

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Introduction to “The Devil in Him.”

I wrote this story specially for this collection. The idea started the day after the England/Portugal quarter-final in Euro 2004. I was talking on the phone to Victoria Catton, who runs LATICZONE, the Oldham Athletic Study Centre, to discuss a possible author visit. Naturally we started talking about the match and Sol Campbell’s last-minute disallowed goal which would have given England victory, although we agreed they would hardly have deserved it.

“What can you do when the referee is possessed by the devil?” Victoria said, and added “There, there’s a story for you.”

I thought about it and realised that there was. So, Victoria, here it is. Selling your soul to the devil is a story that’s fascinated writers far, far greater than me, for hundreds of years, probably thousands - Goethe, Marlowe, many more. Dr Faustus has a lot to answer for. Poor Norbert. It’s all Faust’s fault. He should blame him, not me.

THE DEVIL IN HIM

For Victoria Catton

When Norbert Nosworthy was a little boy he used to dream of being a striker deadly in the penalty box, sending screamers into the net from thirty yards, powering bullet headers into the bottom corner with the goalkeeper helpless. Or a midfielder, subtle, creative, seeing options nobody else could, pouring searching forty-yard passes straight to feet. Or a central defender dominating the pitch, stifling attacks before they start. Or a goalkeeper lithe and tall, commanding his penalty area, clawing crosses out of the air, diving to turn away rasping low shots or cheeky lobs.

Sadly, Norbert was none of these because he was useless at football. So he became a referee instead.

Now some referees are brilliant. With a single glare they cow the unruliest player. They spot the sneakiest, craftiest fouls. They see a dive before the player decides to do it. In fact they read players' thoughts. The players know this, so there's no funny business on the pitch. Other referees cool the hottest tempers with a smile and a joke, so players know they understand them and respect them for it. If such a referee gives a red card, the player doesn't argue because he knows it's fair.

Norbert wasn't one of these either. In fact, he was worse as a referee than he was as a player. But while a lot of people want to play, not many want to referee, so Norbert found himself wanted, even though it was only for the Clappertown and district Sunday League. Sunday mornings might be disasters, but still he kept on refereeing.

What qualities did he bring? He was short-sighted, couldn't run very fast, and was too timid to give yellow cards, let alone red ones. No wonder they called him "Norbert Nocard's."

This Sunday morning was like all the rest. The Goat and Compasses versus Snodworth's Dustbin and Septic Tank Manufacturers Ltd Social Club. Twenty minutes were gone. The ball was being kicked around in midfield and so were most of the players. The five supporters on the touchline mournfully chanted, "Come on you Go-oats." The Snodworth's supporter kept quiet. A huge Goats defender hoisted the ball high in the air. It rose twenty metres and started its descent. The Goats' little weasel-faced striker was sitting in the goal area tying his bootlaces while Snodworth's goalkeeper leant against the post talking to his girlfriend. The ball dropped on top of the striker's head and bounced twice into the net. The goalkeeper

said, "Watch what you're doing. I'm talking." "Sorry, mate," said the striker. "I should think so," said the goalkeeper, fished the ball out of the net and rolled it to where the free kick for offside would be given.

Norbert blew his whistle. The goalkeeper took the free kick and turned back to his girlfriend. Norbert blew his whistle again and pointed to the centre spot. "Goal," he said. There was a shocked silence.

Then the Goat's players started laughing hysterically and rolling helpless on the ground. The entire Snodworth's team surrounded Norbert and a huge defender built like a brick guardhouse with a bristly chin grabbed him by the throat. "I'll kill you," he roared.

"If you let me go I'll give you a penalty in a minute," Norbert croaked. "Only don't tell the other lot."

"You'd better," said the defender.

Two minutes later, as the Goats still clung to each other helpless with mirth, a Snodworth's forward tripped over his own feet in the penalty area. Norbert immediately blew up and pointed to the spot.

The Goats stopped laughing. "You're off your head, ref," said their goalkeeper. "There was no-one near him."

"You didn't have a daft goal allowed," said the Snodworth's captain.

"If the ref allowed it then it was a goal," said the Goats' captain. "But that was no penalty."

"He allowed it as well," said the Snodworth's captain.

"Oh did he?" said the Goat's captain. "Yes he did," said the Snodworth captain. "We'll see about that," said the Goat's captain. The two teams squared up to each other. But before anyone threw the first punch the weasel-faced striker pointed to Norbert and said, "He's havin' a laugh."

Now united in their fury, they all turned towards him. Norbert quaked in his shoes. "We'll report you to the League," said the Goats. "So will we," said Snodworth's. Both teams advanced threateningly. "Match abandoned," Norbert gulped and started running.

Norbert had never been able to run very fast before but he could today. He tore over to the dressing rooms and locked himself in the toilets. Both teams clattered in. "We know where you are," they shouted. "Come on out, Norbert."

"Break the door down," someone yelled.

Deafening blows rained down on the door. It bulged inwards and the hinges looked about to burst. Norbert curled up into a little ball in the corner. But the door stayed firm. "By heck, this is a strong door," said someone. "I think I've broken my shoulder." The blows became weaker and further apart. Soon they stopped altogether. "It's a miracle," Norbert

breathed. “Ah, let him stay there,” said a voice. “We might come back for him later.” Norbert heard showers running, then there was quiet. They’d all gone home. Even so, he waited, just in case they did come back, one hour, two hours, three, four. Dusk came. Five hours. It was now dark. At last he plucked up courage and tiptoed out into the empty dressing rooms.

But they weren’t empty. A small figure, not much bigger than a six-year old child, stood there. “Good evening, Norbert,” it said. “I’ve been waiting for you. Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“What for?” said Norbert.

“Not letting them break the door down,” said the little man.

“What are you talking about?” said Norbert. “It was too strong for them, that’s all.”

“What, that flimsy thing?” The little man went up to the door and kicked it. His feet were very small and dainty and he seemed to be wearing shiny high-heeled boots. Though he only gave the door a slight tap it burst open with a creak and a groan. “See?” he said. “If it hadn’t been for me you’d have been lynched.”

Norbert didn’t ask how he did it.

“So,” said the little man. “Now I’ve delivered you from a terrible fate, I think you should give me something in return.”

“Such as what?” said Norbert.

“I’ll think of something,” said the little man. “Don’t worry, it won’t be money and it won’t hurt. Deal?”

“Deal,” said Norbert.

“Good. Shake hands on it,” said the little man.

His hand, like his feet, was very small and felt rough, like an elephant’s hide. Also it was incredibly hot, like a tongue of fire shooting up Norbert’s arm, and its grip was vice-like. The little man grinned, showing two rows of sharp teeth, and skipped from side to side with a sort of glee. His tiny feet beat a tattoo on the dressing room floor.

“Who are you?” said Norbert.

“You can call me Mr Beelibub,” said the little man.

“Is that your real name?” Norbert asked.

“Near enough,” said Mr Beelibub. “Anyway, I’ve taken a fancy to you and I’d like to help you. You’re not really a very good referee, are you?”

“What’s wrong with my refereeing?” said Norbert indignantly.

Mr Beelibub ignored the question. “What’s your dearest wish?” he asked.

Norbert sighed wistfully. “To referee in the Premiership, the Cup Final, Champions League, European Championship, the World Cup.”

“But wouldn’t you want to be a *good* referee first?”

“If I could do all that then I must be good,” said Norbert.

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,” said Mr Beelibub. “How would it be if I made it so that you did all these things and then, when you come to retirement age, I tell you what you must give me in return?”

“I wish I could referee for ever,” said Norbert.

“We’ll see about that when the time comes,” said Mr Beelibub.

Norbert calculated there were twenty-one whole years before the FA said he had to retire. Well, he mustn’t be greedy. So once again he said, “Deal,” and once again Mr Beelibub’s hot little hand sent fire up his arm. “How can you manage all this?” Norbert said when his arm had cooled down. “Are you from FIFA?”

“Oh, much bigger than FIFA,” said Mr Beelibub. “It’s time for me to go now. You’ll hear more very soon. Goodbye.”

He walked out of the dressing rooms and Norbert followed him through the empty car park. His little high-heeled boots twinkled in the orange glow of the streetlamps and for a second or two Norbert thought they looked almost like cloven hooves. But it must be an optical illusion, just like the tail with a barbed sting which swished to and fro behind him.

* * * *

For the next few days as he got ready to referee Thugbury Over-60s Reserves versus Wobberley Wanderers, Norbert wondered about his strange experience. He had just decided that it was all a dream when a letter arrived from the Referees’ Union. *Dear Mr Nosworthy*, it said. *We have received several reports of your remarkable refereeing and have unanimously decided that you should be co-opted on to the Premiership Referees’ Panel without delay. We would be very grateful if you would report to Old Trafford this coming Saturday. Alternative arrangements have been made for Thugbury Over-60s Reserves versus Wobberley Wanderers. Yours sincerely, Arthur Crudley (Secretary, Referees’ Union). PS Do not forget to bring your refereeing kit.*

Norbert was deliriously happy. His qualities had been recognised at last and it was all down to Mr Beelibub. Next Saturday he travelled up to Old Trafford. “Fourth official, that’s what I’ll be,” he thought as he sat on the train. “That’s good enough to start with.” But when he got to Old Trafford and looked at the programme, he read: *Referee N Nosworthy*

(Clappertown). The fourth official, he knew for a fact, had refereed the Champions League Final last year.

The moment he stepped out on the Old Trafford turf, Norbert felt a surge of power as if he could do anything a human being was capable of. It filled him with a sort of electricity, he quivered with the sheer strength of will that was in him and he felt nine feet tall. Mr Beelibub's influence must be even greater than he thought. He called the captains to him and they tossed up. The winning captain said, "We'll choose that end." "No," said Norbert. "They will. You'll go where I tell you." "All right, ref," said the captain.

Norbert had a marvellous time. He sent off seven players and awarded the visitors three penalties at the Stretford End. Every time he gave a red card, players said things like, "Of course, ref," and, "Anything you say, ref," and, "Now see where I've been going wrong. Thank you for guiding on me the true path, ref." The crowd, all 67,000 of them, were wonderful. They clapped every offside, every goal allowed, every goal disallowed - and there were several of each - and every card he gave. "Edgar, don't you find it refreshing that at last we have a referee who applies the laws of the game with such fairness tempered with severity?" said one supporter in his red replica shirt. "Indeed I have to agree with you, Gerald," replied his companion, who wore a light blue replica. "Never before have I had the pleasure of seeing a match official so far beyond criticism and so utterly admirable." Then they exchanged shirts in a spirit of mutual respect and friendship.

When the match was over and Norbert had accepted the congratulations of the two managers and their chairmen it was time to go home. He sat in the train looking out of the window in a happy daze, saying over and over again, "Oh, thank you, Mr Beelibub, thank you, thank you, *thank* you. No more Norbert Nocard's ever again."

From that week on, for twenty-one years, Norbert's career continued in a long upward curve. Within three seasons he had sent off every player in the Premiership at least four times. He disallowed good goals and allowed others which were at least ten yards offside and each time people said how clear-sighted he must be to spot things nobody else could. He refereed Cup Finals, Internationals, Champions League matches. In all that time he never gave less than twenty-three yellow cards and four red cards in a game. He won every referees' award in the world, was Sports Personality of the Year six times and for seventeen years was question master on "A Question of Sport." In the tenth year he was knighted for services to refereeing. Five years afterwards he was given a peerage and he got a real

buzz when he saw *Referee: Lord Nosworthy of Clappertown* in the match programme. In his last Champions League final he sent off every player except the two goalkeepers and people talked about the penalty shoot-out for years afterwards. By the end of the twenty-one years Norbert was the most famous figure in the whole of football, indeed of the world itself, and several countries had begged him to be their next president. In all that time he neither saw nor heard from Mr Beelibub, not even to be told what it was he wanted in return.

The last match before his retirement had arrived. The World Cup Final itself. Transylvania versus Brazitina. The elite of Europe versus the cream of South America. The match of the century. Within three minutes Transylvania had scored. Norbert decided that the forward was only eight yards offside so the goal could stand. Not one player, not one spectator in the 100,000 crowd, not one person among the eight billion television viewers, disagreed. Then the Transylvanian goalkeeper unfortunately collided with his own goalpost and Norbert sent him off for a professional foul while he was still unconscious. After Brazitina had scored from the penalty the whole crowd rose to its feet and sang, "Norbert, we love you, Norbert, we do."

Although Norbert gave twenty-five minutes of stoppage time and three periods of extra-time, even this most wonderful of matches had to come to an end. After the 9-9 draw came penalties, which Brazitina eventually won with their thirty-seventh spot-kick. Norbert walked sadly off the pitch after his nine laps of honour, shook hands with every single one of the admiring players and trailed off to the referee's dressing room. And there stood Mr Beelibub.

"Well, Norbert," he said. "The final whistle has blown for you at last."

"Yes," said Norbert. "And thank you for granting me such an illustrious career. But when we first met, you said I must give you something in return. Anything, Mr Beelibub, anything within my power."

"Don't worry, Norbert. You've given it to me already." Before Norbert could ask what it was, Mr Beelibub continued: "I expect you think this compulsory retiring age for referees is silly."

"Yes, I do," said Norbert. "I could go on for years."

"I feel very well disposed to you, Norbert," said Mr Beelibub. "Especially now you have given me what I wanted all along. I seem to remember there was something else you wished for when we first met."

"Yes," said Norbert. "I wished that I could go on refereeing for ever."

“And so you shall, my friend,” said Mr Beelibub. “So you shall. Follow me.”

Norbert didn't know how it happened, but suddenly the referee's dressing room had disappeared and he was following Mr Beelibub along a wide corridor. Sometimes the corridor seemed to descend sharply, the walls and ceiling closing in as if to squash him, becoming darker and hotter with, far-off at first but closer and closer, ghastly shrieks, horror-struck howls. Then it levelled out and led, broad and smooth, towards a wonderful, luminous glow and Norbert heard superb melodies, beautiful harmonies sung by soft voices.

Suddenly the passage ended and Norbert stood in a vast stadium, far greater than any he had ever seen. Towering stands surrounded the pitch. To his right, they were pure, brilliant, glowing white: to his left, they were brown with rust, dank, dripping, gloomy beyond imagining. They filled up with spectators. In the white stand were beautiful, noble creatures, some with hints of folded wings on their backs and the same sweet music of the corridors grew louder as more took their seats. The other stands, meanwhile, were filled with vile creatures, sharp-toothed, scaly, with barbed tails and cloven hooves. They hissed and shrieked and Norbert was sure he heard screams of agony and terror from far below. One end of the pitch was the most perfect, level, springy greensward he had ever trodden, the other was grassless, rutted, with great cracks from which smoke emerged.

“This will be your greatest game, in fact the greatest ever played,” said Mr Beelibub. “It is my reward to you. It expresses my gratitude to you. It will grant your greatest wish. See, the players are coming on to the pitch.”

Two teams walked out of the players' tunnel. One wore the same lustrous white of half the spectators, who, Norbert thought, must all be dressed in replica shirts. The others wore a flaming, shifting mixture of red and black which seemed to writhe about them like snakes in flames. The crowd's roar was deafening: a mixture of a wonderful choir and hideous cacophony.

“You mean I've got to referee this lot?” Norbert gulped.

“You've taken every task in your stride so far,” said Mr Beelibub. “Why should this be different? Virtue United versus Evil Rovers. The ultimate football match.”

There was no toss: before Norbert could take the coin out of his pocket the teams had retired to attack the others' end and he knew he would never move them. Within two seconds the Evil centre-back had viciously fouled the Virtuous striker. Norbert blew his whistle and signalled the free

kick. The Evil player emitted an appalling snarl and flicked his barbed tail menacingly. Norbert changed his mind and gave the free kick the other way. The Virtuous striker looked down on him with profound pity, placed his cool hands on his head and said in a wonderfully deep, mellifluous voice, “I forgive you. Bless you, my son.” As he walked away, Norbert distinctly felt his face brushed by feathers from an invisible wing.

The first half consisted entirely of such events. Norbert was scared out of his wits one minute, filled with wretched guilt the next. Virtue United played sublime flowing football such as he had never seen before. Evil Rovers checked them with a cynicism beyond belief. Unsurprisingly, there was no score at half time. During the interval Mr Beelibub came into the referee’s dressing room and said, “Enjoying yourself, Norbert? It’s the experience of a lifetime, isn’t it?”

When Norbert came back out he saw that, somehow, not only had the teams changed ends but the stands and even the pitch had as well. The second half was the same as the first: terror, guilt, terror, guilt succeeding each other until his mind was reeling out of control. “I can’t stand any more of this,” he muttered and checked his watch. One minute of ordinary time left. “There’ll be no time added on, that’s for sure.”

But then he saw Mr Beelibub on the touchline holding an electronic board. “What does he think he’s doing?” said Norbert. “That’s for the match officials to decide.”

Mr Beelibub held the board up. There was no number on it, instead Norbert saw in blinding light a letter **E**. He looked at his watch again. There were no hands, no figures, just a blank face.

Then he realised. E stood for *ETERNITY*. What had Mr Beelibub said to him at half time? “It will grant your greatest wish.” And what had been his greatest wish when his last World Cup was over? “I wish I could go on refereeing for ever.”

Well, Mr Beelibub had granted that wish. He *was* going to referee for ever...and ever...and ever...and EVER. And at last he knew what it was that Mr Beelibub had wanted in return and that he had freely given.

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