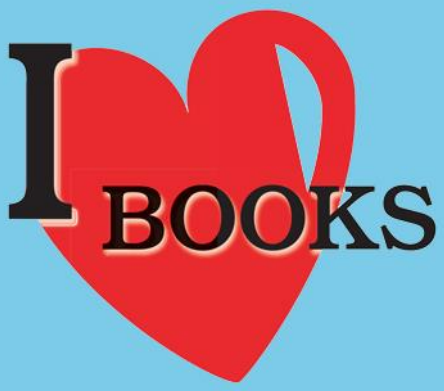


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Opening extract from

The Beautiful Game

Written by

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Alan Gibbons

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

With illustrations by
Chris Chalik

Barrington Stoke

To all who fought so long and so hard for justice for the Hillsborough families. You'll never walk alone.

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Chapter 1
The Big One

It was the big one. Manchester United v Liverpool at Old Trafford. Lennie was on his way there with Dad and Grandad – part of a crowd of singing, cheering Liverpool fans. Lennie should have been confident. The Reds were 2–0 up from the first leg. Only he wasn't. He was so tense he was almost shaking.

"Nervous?" Dad said.

"A bit," Lennie admitted.

Dad burst out laughing. Grandad slapped Lennie on the back and gave him a playful shove.

"A bit?" Grandad said. "Look at him! The boy can hardly breathe."

Lennie grinned. They were only teasing, but it was true. He was really stressed. It was bad when they lost, but to lose to Man U was the worst.

"We ripped them to bits at Anfield, didn't we?" Lennie said, to remind himself.

"Yeah, the Reds played them off the park," Dad agreed. "All we need is a draw tonight and we're into the next round. This could be our year."

Lennie nodded. In his head he replayed Daniel Sturridge's penalty and Roberto Firmino's goal late in the game. The memory made him smile.

"We're not going to give two goals away, are we?" he said.

Dad turned and patted his back. "No chance, son."

They walked across the big open space in front of United's stadium.

"The Theatre of Dreams," Dad said.

Grandad snorted. "Tonight, we'll give them nightmares."

Then Grandad pointed out the statue of Bobby Charlton, Denis Law and George Best.

"United's Holy Trinity," he told Lennie. "Their team today isn't a patch on the one they had back in the 1960s."

"Ancient history, Grandad," Lennie said with a grin, but he still asked, "Did you see them play at Anfield?"


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Grandad shook his head. “I didn’t go when I was your age.”

“How come you didn’t go?” Lennie asked. It seemed strange – Grandad was football crazy.

Grandad shrugged. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you some other time.”

They squashed through the turnstiles with all the thousands of other fans and made their way to their seats. The ground was nearly full, over 70,000 people. Lennie’s tummy turned over. They couldn’t lose. They just couldn’t.

The whistle blew and then Lingard nearly scored for Man U with a header inside the box.

Lennie looked over at his dad.

“That was a bit too close,” Dad said.

“Nice clean save by Mignolet,” Grandad said.

There were chances for both sides then Nathaniel Clyne brought down Anthony 'Golden Boy' Martial in the area.

Lennie had his hands over his mouth.

"Oh no, we've let them back in it," he groaned.

"Steady," Grandad told him. "They haven't scored it yet."

But Martial made no mistake with the penalty.

United 1 Liverpool 0.

2–1 to Liverpool on aggregate.

Dad's face had turned serious.

"Game on," he said, and he clapped his hands. "Come on you Reds."

Now United were back in the tie, Old Trafford was bouncing with noise and energy.

"If they get another, we're in dead trouble," Lennie said.

This time, neither Dad nor Grandad said anything. They were feeling the pressure just as much as Lennie. There were grim faces all around. Not long after, Sturridge hit the bar. The Liverpool fans were all up out of their seats.

So close.

Just before half time, Coutinho picked up the ball and cut in from the left.

"Go on," Lennie said.

He went past his man.

"Go on, *go on*," Lennie urged.

Coutinho kept pressing forward, then he squeezed the ball past United's keeper, David de Gea. The net bulged. Lennie's heart pounded with joy.

"*Goal!*"

Now the three of them were punching the air and dancing. Lennie couldn't stop laughing – Grandad could move for an old guy!

3–1 to Liverpool on aggregate.

After that, it wasn't long before the half time whistle blew. The faces of the United fans were like stone. Their team was on its way out of Europe.

"United have got too much to do," Dad said. "I think we've won it."

But Grandad said, "We need one more goal to be sure."

Lennie listened to them then something caught his eye.

"Look," he said, eyes gleaming. "Flares!"

Red smoke was rising into the evening sky.

Red for Liverpool, not United.

United huffed and puffed in the second half. They got more and more desperate, but Liverpool held tight and did their job. They defended well. It was still 1–1.

"It's in the bag," Dad said.

That's when Grandad pointed. "What's going on over there?" he asked.

Lennie turned to see a big group of stewards running over to a section of fans.

"Fighting," Dad said. "Idiots."