Our Beautiful Game

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Our Beautiful Game

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To my Lily.
Love, Mum

The game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.

The Football Association,
5th December 1921

It is our duty to inspire young girls to play a sport.

Steph Houghton MBE,
England's top scorer at the
2012 Olympics
and captain of England women's
national football team since 2014

Author's Note

I have changed names and invented places, but all the key events in this novel are based on the actual experiences of munitions workers and/or female football players during and just after the Great War. All the quotations I use from official sources, such as the Football Association, are verbatim, to stand as a true record of exactly what was said at the time. Through my central character Polly I have echoed the life of the famous footballer Lily Parr. One of eight children from a working-class Lancashire family, Lily began her professional playing career aged fourteen and went on to score over nine hundred goals for her team and country.

PART 1

Chapter One

Lowcross, Lancashire
July 1917

Polly charged across the back yard, flicked the football on to the toe of her left boot and eyed up the goal. All that stood between her and victory were three fat piglets, the washing tub and a gaggle of chicks.

She darted forward, weaved between two of the chicks, and thundered down the right-hand side of the yard. Polly was about to take a shot at goal, which was a narrow slit between two clean sheets hanging on the washing line, when out of nowhere the fattest of the piglets blocked her path. She almost lost control of the ball in a puddle of slops and slippery potato peel.

'Oh no you don't!' She slithered sideways, flicking the ball upwards in the nick of time, before skidding to the ground. Her nostrils filled with the familiar

stench of pig muck and rotting veg, but it was worth it. The ball sailed through the air. 'Goal!' She smiled as it disappeared between the sheets, then waited, expecting to hear the satisfying thud of leather on wood as it hit the back gate

But the thud never came.

Instead, Joe, the eldest of her five brothers, appeared.

'Hello, Pol. You lost something?' He smiled down at her, holding the muddy ball.

'Give it here!' said Polly, sitting up and trying not to gawp.

Joe was in his new army uniform. She'd never seen him look so smart. She couldn't remember a time when anyone in their family had ever had new clothes.

'What do you reckon?' Joe beamed as he took one hand off the ball to salute her.

'Not too shabby, I suppose.' Polly heaved herself up off the filthy ground.

Her fingers were covered in muck but she wanted to reach out and touch his jacket. It was brown, like the colour of strong tea, and so stiff it looked more as though it was made of cardboard than cloth.

Polly was twelve years old and tall for her age, especially for a girl, as people never tired of telling her. She was nearly the same height as Joe, even though he

had just turned eighteen and had shoulders as broad as a bear. Yet, all trussed up in his fancy clothes, he seemed young somehow, like a little boy. His big ears were sticking out from under his cap and his bristly chin was shaved clean. Apart from the thick soldier's belt around his middle, he looked as if he was off to church, not away to fight a war.

Polly made a swipe for the ball, waving her grimy paws at him. 'Hand it over then, unless you want to get muddy,' she said.

'Get away, Pol.' Joe marched past her, dunked the leather football in the pigs' water trough and shook it dry. 'This old beauty's coming with me.'

'What?' Polly's mouth fell open in disbelief. 'You can't take my ball to the war.'

Joe raised an eyebrow.

'All right, *your* ball,' said Polly, weakly. Joe had won it in a game of poker off a lad at the works, and she knew it. But that wasn't going to stop her. 'You're supposed to be out there fighting Jerry, not playing football,' she said.

'Ah! That's where you're wrong.' Joe leaned up against the wall and took out a smoke, with the ball wedged safely under his boot. 'Haven't you ever heard of no man's land?'

'Course I have,' said Polly. 'It's the scrap of ground that runs between the trenches. The German ones and the ones our boys are stuck in.' She'd heard enough stories about the war to know that.

'Exactly.' Joe pointed to the pigs' water trough. 'Say that over there is our lads' trench, then this here . . .' He kicked the long narrow slop feeder with his boot. 'This here is Jerry's!'

Polly laughed as the gaggle of chicks waddled merrily between the trough and the feeder. 'In that case, someone ought to tell those little beggars they're right in the middle of no man's land!'

'They wouldn't last long,' said Joe gravely. 'It's where you get yourself blown up, Pol.' She saw him swallow hard. 'That rotten little strip of land's what we're all fighting over.'

'Like a football pitch,' said Polly with a shudder.

'Reckon you might be right,' Joe agreed. 'The trenches are like goals and each team is trying to fire their shots into the other's.'

Except it's bombs and shells they're shooting, not footballs, thought Polly. But neither of them needed to hear that said out loud. Not when Joe was shipping off to the battlefield in just a few hours' time.

He had stubbed out his cigarette but was still

chewing his lip.

'I don't see what any of that's got to do with you taking *my* ball,' said Polly with a cheeky grin. Inside, she felt all shivery at the thought of Joe going away, but she was desperate to lift the mood. She and Joe had never had a serious conversation in their whole lives. It certainly didn't seem like a good moment to start.

'*My* ball!' said Joe firmly, but he was grinning now too. Although Joe was the eldest of her five brothers, Polly felt closer to him than any of the others. You could tell at a glance they were related. They had the same wild black hair, deep-set grey eyes and big, wide mouths. 'The point is this, Pol.' Joe kicked the ball lightly from one foot to the other. 'If you've heard of no man's land, then you must have heard of the Christmas football matches.'

Polly had. But she let him tell her anyway. 'It was 1914, the first year of the war,' Joe said. He always told a good story and his eyes sparkled as he spoke. 'The two sides decided to call a truce. Just for a few hours, they all stopped fighting because it was Christmas time and they probably missed home like billy-o.' Joe's voice was sing-song, as if he was telling some magical fairy tale. 'There was frost in the air and the lads on both sides sung carols between the trenches. Then someone

lobbed a ball into no man's land and they all had a bit of a kick-about . . .'

'That's as may be. You still can't have my ball,' said Polly, folding her arms, when Joe was finished. 'From what I hear, lads aren't larking around out there playing football these days. They're too busy killing each other.'

The moment the words were out, Polly wished she could stuff them back in again. She saw Joe's face turn white as the sheets on the line. She'd only meant to tease him, hoping he'd let her keep the ball. But now she'd said that awful thing about killing. And it was true – Joe wasn't going to be playing football for a very long time. He'd be too busy fighting in the endless, horrible, stupid war.

Me and my big gob, she thought. Why did she never think before she spoke? 'Keep the rotten ball, Joe.'

'Why?' He glared at her, his grey eyes dark. 'Out of pity? Cos you figure I might go out there and die?'

'No!' said Polly quickly. Her tummy flipped over and a hot blush burned her face. She couldn't let Joe see that was exactly what she had been thinking.

'There's only one way to settle this,' she said, standing tall and pushing back her shoulders. 'I'm a striker and you reckon yourself a great goalie. Let's shoot it out! Winner keeps the ball.'

'You're on.' There was a glint in Joe's eye again. He unbuttoned his smart new jacket, took off his cap and hung them on the back doorknob. 'Let's be clear, though,' he said. 'To be a goal, the ball needs to go under the washing line and if it touches the sheets on either side then it doesn't count.'

'I know!' Polly felt a flash of irritation. Why did her brothers always treat her as if she didn't understand the rules? She'd played more football in this back yard than any of them.

Joe pushed the sheets apart like curtains and stood between them, his arms outstretched.

'Wait!' cried Polly, running hither and thither, scooping up chicks and putting them in an empty bucket, as they cheeped and tumbled over each other like a swarm of angry bees. 'I don't want to squish any of this little lot with my great, clod-hopping feet!' She glanced down at the enormous pair of tatty, hand-me-down boots she had inherited from her second eldest brother, Walter. He was fifteen but Polly had nearly outgrown them already.

'Fair do,' said Joe. He wasn't really listening. His eyebrows were knitted together and he had the serious, tight-faced look he always had when he was in goal.

Good, thought Polly. If he was concentrating on winning the ball, at least he was no longer dwelling on the war and the dreadful thing she'd said.

Although she'd finished moving the chicks out of the way, there was nothing she could do about the piglets. They would just have to take their chances – or more likely she would have to take hers. She'd been tripped up by piglets more than once while playing football out here, and had the scars on her knees to prove it.

Polly hitched up her skirt and tucked it into her knickers. 'Stupid thing,' she mumbled. Boys didn't know how lucky they were. No one could take a serious shot at goal if they were wearing a skirt. Then she flattened herself against the wall of the house. It was nothing like as far as the twelve yards from goal allowed for a penalty kick in a real football match, but it was all they could manage in the small back yard.

'Best of three. Winner keeps the ball,' she said.

'Deal!' Joe agreed.

Polly glanced quickly at her feet, more to check there weren't any piglets in the way than anything else. Then she kept her eyes on the goal.

Thwack!

The ball sailed through the air, arching to the left. Joe was stretching upwards but not high enough

or fast enough to save it. The top of the ball grazed the washing line but flew underneath and smashed through the gap in the sheets, hitting the wooden gate.

'Goal!' Polly cheered.

'One-nil to the lady.' Joe gave a little a nod of respect.

'Ha!' Polly spluttered with laughter, tucking her skirt back into her knickers. 'I don't see any lady here!'

'Me neither, now you mention it!' Joe laughed too, but not unkindly. He was never one for picking on his sister or being mean just because she was big or awkward or a girl.

Polly curtsied like a queen. She was trying to put him off his mark. She could feel the blood thumping inside her ears, as she always did when there was a challenge on. She needed to win this. If Joe took the ball away to war she'd have nothing to play with. A new ball was sixpence at least. She didn't have that kind of money. She didn't have any money – and, even if she did, Mam would only nick it to pay the rent man. She was going to have to win this battered old football the hard way.

Polly pushed her hair out of her eyes, leaped over a piglet and fetched the ball back to the shooting spot. 'Where've you been this morning, anyway?' she asked. 'Mam was fit to burst when she couldn't find you.

Walter reckoned you must have slipped out last night and gone drinking with your pals.'

'I was just saying goodbye to the old haunts,' said Joe, but the tips of his ears had turned pink. He was lying about something.

'The smelly old canal and Duke's pub?' Polly sniffed. 'That can't have taken more than five minutes!'

'Are we playing football or nattering?' Joe asked. It was clear he wanted to change the subject. But then he added quietly, 'It might be the last time I see those rotten old places, Pol.'

Polly decided with a shiver that he probably had been telling the truth. She wondered what she'd do if she ever got to leave Lowcross for good. *Spit in the canal and run as fast as the wind!* she thought. But nobody was asking her to go off and fight the Germans.

The ball was barely in front of her feet before she was aiming for the goal. If she was quick, she could catch Joe off guard. Just one more shot like that first one and the ball was hers.

Thwack!

Too low, too weak, too central. Polly clutched her head. She'd rushed it.

'Ha!' cried Joe, closing his arms around the ball as he hugged it to his stomach. 'One to the gents,

I believe!'

He bounced the ball off his knee, kicked it with the edge of his heel and headed it back her way.

'One-all!' said Polly, pushing up her sleeves. There was just one shot left to decide it.

She stretched her arms up into the air, bent down and touched her toes, jogged on the spot and shook her head from side to side.

Joe sighed impatiently.

'What's the hurry? Got a war to get to?' Polly laughed. She wasn't going to rush it this time. Joe could wait. She stretched again, lifting her arms towards the tiny patch of grey sky above the yard and gulping a great big breath of smelly, soot-filled air from the factories over the way.

Then she kicked, right-footed for once. That was cunning. She'd only recently been practising that. Joe wouldn't expect it. The ball flew through the air. Joe leaned right. The ball arched left. It was good . . . surely, it was good . . .

Joe dived sideways and stretched out his great, long arms.

'No!' For a moment Polly thought he was going to reach it. But the ball grazed the top of his fingers and sailed into the goal.

'Yes!' Polly threw her arms in the air. She'd done it! She'd won! She'd beaten Joe, even though he was eighteen and a cracking goalie. The ball was hers to keep. Joe lay sprawled flat out on the floor of the yard.

'What you lying in the muck for?' Polly laughed. 'Looking for worms?'

'Blast!' said Joe, sitting up. Polly gasped. His spanking-new army shirt and trousers were all covered in mud. He looked like he'd just played two full halves for Lowcross United.

'Crikey! Now we've gone and done it.' Polly glanced towards the house.

'I just hope it was worth it,' said Joe. He stood up with a wet, squelchy sound and sighed. Polly could see it wasn't just the mud – his pride was hurt too, but she couldn't help grinning like a cat who'd got the cream.

'Oh, it was definitely worth it!' She tucked the mucky football under her arm.

'I didn't think you stood a chance or I'd never have let you challenge me,' Joe snapped. He was a decent fellow but he still didn't like being beaten by his little sister.

'Why? Because I'm younger than you?' said Polly. 'Or because I'm a girl?'

Joe said nothing. He didn't need to.

'Well, you'd better get used to it.' Polly turned her back and gently lifted the chicks from the bucket, placing them back on the ground. 'I'm growing up fast,' she told him. 'I plan to go on beating you boys from now on, no matter how big and strong and tough you think you are. Just you wait and see.'