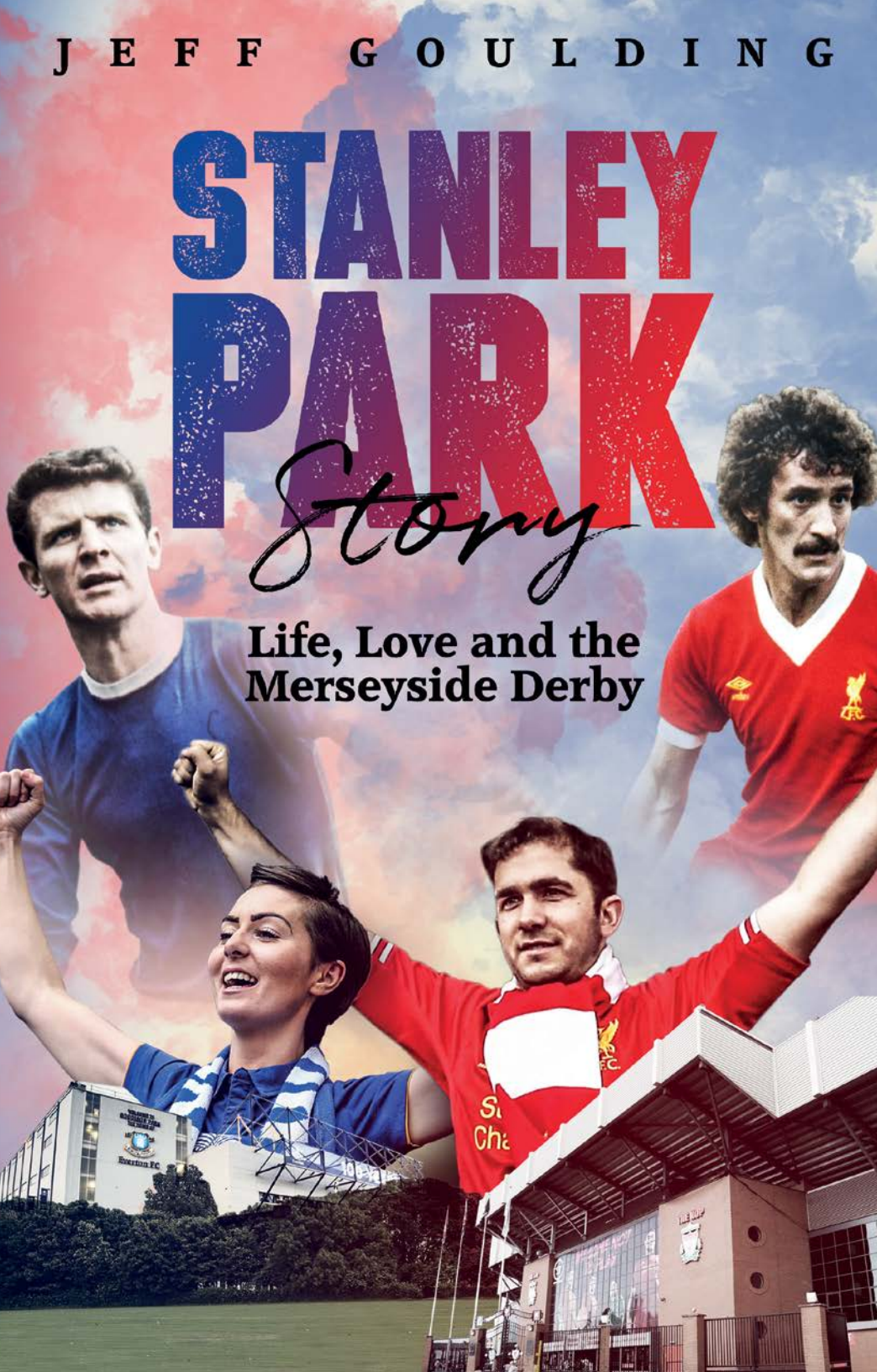
JEFF GOULDING

STANLEY PARK Story

Life, Love and the Merseyside Derby



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Chapter One

The Cressington Park Incident

I clearly remember meeting Jimmy Harrington. He saved my life that day, and probably my father's too. It was early 1962, January, and the winter frost was still heavy. The day began like any other, dragging tired bones and aching muscles into a freezing-cold coal yard, but it would end with this fella I'd never met before becoming the best mate I've ever had.

I worked on the coal with my dad, Billy. It was horrible work, but I had left school in 1955 without a qualification or a trade to my name. The old man was a driver for a firm called Martindale's, a coal merchant, and he'd always got on okay with his boss. That meant regular work for me.

The pay wasn't great, but, thankfully, I could earn a few bob more through a 'fiddle' we had going. The drivers and their lads would rely on this scheme to top up their pay, feed their kids and pay the rent.

You could never do anything more than get by on the wages we got paid back then. Clothes were handed down from oldest to youngest and often bore the scars of being repeatedly mended.

We relied on fiddles like this to make life worthwhile. In fact, our ability to cheat the system, almost any system, came in very handy as we looked to fund our love of football in the 60s and our trips across Europe throughout the 70s.

Every morning at 7.30 we'd turn up at the yard and start loading the wagon with bags of coal. They were bloody heavy. Kids today would pay good money for the sort of workout we got every day. But in the end, it was no good for my back.

The scam worked like this. We'd ensure that the wagon made it on to the scales carrying the correct load. Then, with the weights and measures fella happy, the truck would roll out of the gates and be on its way. Little would he know we'd be carrying dozens of empty sacks in the cab with us.

Once on the road and far enough from his watchful gaze, me and another lad would jump on the back and start 'cobbing' a little coal from each of the bags and filling up our empties, creating our own secret stash. We'd sell that on to trustworthy customers at a discount and pocket the proceeds for ourselves.

Yes, I know it was wrong, but we never ripped off the ordinary customers. We'd never shortchange our own, the people relying on the coal for their fires in the winter. These were people we knew could barely afford the stuff and we always made sure they got their order in full.

When it came to the rich snobs around Aigburth and Sefton Park, it was a different story, though. Often their coal cellars would be almost full when we arrived, but they'd keep ordering it anyway. 'More money than sense, that lot,' my dad would say.

On the day in question, I arrived at the yard with a terrible hangover. My dad always made sure I was on *his* wagon, an old Bedford. However, there'd usually be a different lad with us depending on who got picked for a day's work.

As I trudged into work, my only wish was that whoever joined us could keep his gob shut and put in a shift. I was in no mood to carry anyone that day. I had no idea that I was about to get way more than I'd bargained for.

I'd been to the match the night before. Liverpool had beaten Chelsea, at home, in the third round of the FA Cup. It had been a classic, at least as far as the press were concerned. For me and every other Red in the ground, it had been a nightmare.

It had started well enough. By half-time, thanks to St John, A'Court and Hunt, Liverpool were 4-1 up and looking worthy of their lead. The second half was a different story, though, and Liverpool went to pieces.

They conceded twice, and the last 15 minutes felt like an eternity in hell. The roar of relief at the end of the game had to be heard to be believed. The cup meant something back then, not like today.

For me, football is about winning. It's about days out in London, or on foreign shores bringing home the silver, and about Liverpool's streets being packed with people and colour, as a team bus laden with trophies winds its way through the throng.

Fourth place in the Premier League might make the club a bit richer, but I always say you can't parade a balance sheet around the streets in an open-top bus. Besides, it's not like supporters see any of the money.

Anyway, I was so happy we'd got through to the next round that at full time I ignored dire warnings from the wife and headed straight for the pub and an inevitable lock-in. It would amount to a declaration of war on the home front, but, as I downed the first pint, I reckoned on that being tomorrow's problem.

As I woke the next day, I quickly realised my monumental error. My head was pounding and my mouth felt as dry as Gandhi's flip-flop. I dragged myself into the bathroom and downed an Aspirin. Downstairs the wireless was blaring loudly in the kitchen. I swore Marie had turned it up on purpose, but in truth my head was so sensitive I could hear my hair growing.

Our Joe was in his high chair; he'd have been seven or eight months old then. Marie's shoulder was as cold as the frost outside. Still, she'd kindly burned me a couple of slices of toast for breakfast. I smeared some jam on them, slipped them into an empty bread bag and tucked them into my coat pocket, which was still slung across the table.

I grabbed it, leaned over and kissed my little lad on the head. I also tried valiantly to kiss the wife, but she just pulled away from

me. Realising it was a hopeless cause, I accepted my place in the doghouse and made my way to the bus stop.

Work was tough, especially with a big head like I had. It was probably safer than home that day, though, or so I thought.

The bus ride from the bottom of the road to the yard was a nightmare. I don't smoke anymore, but back then a fag on the top deck was my way of waking up in the morning. Not this time, because as I sat there the motion of the bus and the regular potholes had my stomach in knots. My face was so green a stranger sitting next to me asked if I was ok.

Looking down at the ciggie in my hand, I realised I couldn't face it anymore. I dropped it to the floor and stubbed it out with my foot.

Behind me two lads were discussing the football from the night before. Reaching up, I pulled open the window, sucked in the icy fresh air, placed my aching head against the wet glass and listened.

'I'm telling you now, Shankly will never win the FA Cup, not as long as you've got a hole in your arse,' one, presumably a Blue, was saying to the other.

'Says you. What happened the last time we played your lot in the FA Cup? What was the score then? We're even better now, under Shankly.'

I smiled, despite my hangover, and my mind drifted back to that day seven years earlier, in 1955. Liverpool had been drawn against the Blues, at Goodison Park, in the fourth round of the cup. None of us were relishing the prospect, especially as we were labouring away in the Second Division and Everton were in the big league.

Our third-round tie against Lincoln City did nothing to help matters either. The first leg was a 1-1 draw and we struggled past them in a replay at Anfield.

Still, it was a derby, albeit a cup game, and I remember the sense of anticipation and excitement around the city. I'd left school and was already working on the coal. The stick dished out in the

yard in the week running up to the match was fierce. Everton were supremely confident, and who could blame them.

For the Reds, these were the days of Don Welsh, a black and white film compared to the technicolour of Shankly's Liverpool. Shanks was like a movie star to me. When he said something would happen, I had complete faith that it would.

I've since learned that Welsh was every bit the visionary that Shanks was, but, somehow, he just didn't inspire me. Maybe it was my youthful ignorance.

While Welsh rarely got my pulse racing, he certainly had the lads up for that game in 1955. His Liverpool team would shock the Blues and the rest of football.

I remember desperately wanting a ticket, but I was working when they went on sale. So I persuaded my dad to drop me off at the stadium in work's time. He finished the round for me, with some other lad. When I got there, the queue was already halfway around the ground.

I hadn't long been with Marie but even then, she was great. I remember how she brought me a flask of tea to warm me up, and a sarnie to stave off the hunger, as I waited in line in the cold. She'd walked up and down that queue looking for me, too. I felt guilty about my late night, as I recalled that moment.

As I neared the front of the queue rumours began to circulate that they'd sold out. Panic and anger erupted among those in the queue. Thankfully the stories were unfounded, order was restored and I eventually left for home, clutching my ticket. Dad said I looked like I'd just won the pools.

When matchday finally arrived, Goodison was packed to the rafters. The official attendance was 72,000. No one inside the ground believed that for a minute. We could see people sitting on the church rooftop at the corner of the Gwladys Street Stand and there were a few on the roof of the stand itself.

Of course, there was no segregation then and there were as many Reds in the Gwladys Street Stand as there were Blues. I was one of them and the match turned out to be one of the greatest of

my life. Goals from Liddell, A'Court and two from Johnny Evans stunned Goodison.

Everton huffed and puffed, but Liverpool were having none of it. There were scenes of delirium all around the old ground every time a ball hit the net, and even the Blues couldn't argue with the result. The talk in the papers was all about how the Christians had slain the lions, such was the shock nature of the result. It was great going into work on the Monday.

Behind me on the bus, the Blue was conceding a little ground to his mate. How could he do anything else?

'Alright, I'll give you that, but that game is ancient history now. It's so long ago Lord frigging Nelson was sailing his galleon down the Mersey at kick-off. Besides, what happened to you in the next round that year?'

It was a good question. Liverpool had crashed out in the fifth round, to Huddersfield Town at Anfield. The Red was on the back foot now and his Blue mate pressed home his advantage.

'You'd have been better letting a First Division side through that day. We'd have sorted Huddersfield out, no bother. You always want your best team representing the city in the cup.'

His mate laughed. 'We did alright last night, didn't we?' he said, referring to the victory over Chelsea.

'You were lucky, weren't you. You nearly threw it away.'

Nobody could argue with that, and thankfully I didn't have to listen to anyone trying to: it was my stop.

Despite my rough start to the day, I was somehow a little early. So I stood and shared a smoke with the lads who were queuing at the gate, hoping for a day's work. The headache was lifting, and my stomach had settled enough for me to consider having a go at the toast in my pocket.

Jimmy was among the crowd of lads hoping to catch the attention of my dad when he arrived. He approached me for a light of his smoke.

'You're Billy's lad, aren't you?' he asked, stamping his feet against the icy ground, attempting to keep his circulation going.

'Yeah, that's right. I'm Tommy. How do you know?' I asked.

'Oh, one of this lot mentioned it when we saw you walking up from the bus stop. Do you think you could put a word in like?'

'Why should I do it for you and not any of these lads?' I asked.

'Desperate for the cash, kid. The wife's expecting like.'

I looked him up and down trying to work out whether he was genuine or not. I decided he was probably telling the truth, but thought I'd string him along a bit longer.

'Red or Blue?' I asked.

'You what?' He looked stunned.

I could see a little panic in his eyes. He had no idea what my colours were. I could almost hear his brain working overtime, desperately trying to compute the correct answer. In the end I saw a now-familiar expression come over his face. It was the one that said, *Fuck it, I'm going to say it and I don't give a shit what you think*. It's a quality of Jimmy's I have always admired.

'Blue,' he said, adding, 'obviously'.

'Ooh, unlucky,' I said with a big smirk on my face.

'Ah eh! You're bleeding joking, aren't you?' He clearly did give a shit. I decided I liked him and burst out laughing.

'Don't worry. I'll not hold it against you. Let's see what my old fella says.'

Jimmy was a decent lad. He could graft, too, but he never shut up. Even when lifting heavy coal sacks on to the wagon, he wouldn't pause for breath. I would catch my dad smiling and knew he liked Jimmy, too.

All that remained was the small job of explaining the fiddle to him. I was sure he would be ok, but my dad was not so trusting. He was probably right to be cautious, to be fair.

He'd had his fingers burned in the past. One of the lads he'd given a day's work to a couple of years earlier turned out to be a nephew of Martindale himself, and he'd been sent in to spy on the lads and make sure there was nothing dodgy going on.

He told me that after he had explained to the kid the way things worked the kid had threatened to go straight to his uncle. It was a

terrible mistake. The second his threat left his lips, he was dragged into the coal shed and threatened with all manner of menace by my dad and the other drivers.

They put the fear of God into him and the little snitch pissed his pants. He ran from the yard promising never to say a word to anyone. What followed was a nervy few days, but the little rat had been as good as his word.

The incident had left a lot of the drivers deeply suspicious of anyone they didn't know well. We had no reason to worry about Jimmy, though, and he was up for the scam. With a baby on the way, it had seemed like a bonus gift from the gods.

We finished loading and my dad drove the wagon on to the scales. Charlie, the weights and measures man, approached us. He did a circuit of the wagon, looking underneath and checking the wheel arch, before scribbling away on his clipboard.

He was a drab, miserable-looking fella, Charlie. His hair was plastered to his head with grease, and he wore the same black suit, white shirt and black tie every morning. The National Health Service glasses and the clipboard, permanently welded to his hand, completed the dreary ensemble.

Looking back, I feel a little sympathy for the fella: he always seemed miserable to me. My dad would be less charitable.

'Fucking divvy!' he muttered to himself as he watched Charlie go about his pitiful duties, before calling out of the window, 'Everything alright, Charl'?'

His voice, full of good cheer, belied his earlier contempt. He often wore two faces, my father. Sometimes he wore them in the middle of the same sentence.

Charlie said nothing. He never did. He just waved us on and we rode out of the gates and on to the main road, relieved to finally be on our way. We waited until we were a safe distance from the yard and Jimmy and I jumped out of the cab and climbed on to the bags on the flatbed, clutching armfuls of empty sacks.

We'd barely got ourselves into position, when my dad pulled out and started back down the road. He had seemed irritable that

morning, more so than normal, and I had noticed a half-empty bottle of Milk of Magnesia on the dashboard. He hadn't mentioned feeling unwell and I just thought he'd been on the ale the night before, like me.

'Go easy!' I shouted, but he didn't seem to hear me, and just carried on at speed.

'Christ, what's the hurry?' said Jimmy.

'Got out the wrong side of the bed,' I said. 'Let's just start filling these.'

We'd normally tie ourselves to the side of the wagon. It could get bumpy and if you weren't careful you could easily get thrown off the back and into the road. For some reason I didn't bother that morning and it nearly cost me big.

We started skimming coal from the full sacks into our empty sacks. The wagon was bouncing along the road and a few times I had to hold on to Jimmy to stop myself falling off the side.

It was getting dangerous and when we stopped at the lights, I saw my chance to speak to the old man. So I made my way towards the cab. His window was wound down and the engine was idling. I knew he could hear me.

'What's the bleeding rush?' I shouted. He didn't answer, so I repeated it.

'Do you want to get the round finished or what?' he retorted, finally.

He could be a moody bugger my old fella. He'd seen a lot and dealt with more than his share of strife, so I always cut him some slack. We lost my mum when she had me, and he'd basically brought me up by himself. He would be the first to admit he got a lot of help from others, but it hadn't been easy for him. He was just 42 in 1962, but if you saw a picture of him, you'd swear he was a much older man. His tone said there would be no reasoning with him, so we just got on with filling the sacks as he hurtled down the road. The pair of us almost went over the side a few times.

As we neared Cressington Park, in the Aigburth area of the city, the landscape around us changed. The houses there were

spectacular. There was none of the bomb damage and craters that were everyday companions where we lived.

This was where the posh people lived lifestyles we could only dream of. The entrance to the park was a tight angle and we'd normally slow down before attempting it, but there was no sign of the engine rolling back this time.

I looked at Jimmy. 'Is he going to drop his speed or what?' I asked. He just stared back at me. The panic in his eyes said it all.

Instead of slowing down, the old wagon seemed to speed up as it took the sharp turn and we lurched violently to our right, as my dad seemed to lose control altogether. I went flying in the air and landed hard on some sacks of coal. The loose rocks dug into my back and I wanted to scream out, but fearful of losing face in front of my new mate, I choked back the scream and got back to my feet.

The wagon still wasn't slowing, though, and we veered again, this time wildly to the left. Then there was an almighty crunch and a horrible scraping sound before I was thrown backwards again.

I'd have been over the side and probably dead or paralysed if Jimmy hadn't lunged at me. He grabbed the collar of my coat and yanked me back. We both landed on top of each other among the coal sacks.

The wagon had come to a stop, its engine spluttering, but somehow still going. I lay there for a second trying to catch my breath and half expecting to see my dad appear at the side, asking if we were okay. After a minute or so had passed and he still didn't appear, I got worried.

'Dad!' I shouted. There was no reply and a little bubble of panic popped in my stomach.

We both leapt to our feet, jumped down off the back and raced round to the cab. Dad was slumped there, his eyes closed and his mouth open. His face was grey. I couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

'Shite! Go fetch help, now!' I shouted.

Jimmy stood there, like a rabbit frozen in the headlights. I screamed at him, shaking him at the same time.

'He's really sick, Jim! Run up to that house, tell them to call for help, they're bound to have a telephone. Go, now!'

This time it seemed to register and he scarpered off up the path.

My dad was in the hospital for two weeks after that. Thankfully we didn't lose him that day, though that was his first coronary. Jimmy had saved me from certain injury, maybe even worse. By running and getting help, he probably helped save my dad, too.

I was forever indebted to him. There was no big emotional stuff or anything like that. That's not the way we were. There were no hugs or tears. It was all sort of unspoken, really. He knew how grateful I was, and I knew he knew. Our journey had started.