

Champions 381

Chapter 381: A Yellow Card Part 2

Zidane did not know what Twain had specifically instructed Wood, but it soon became clear to him.

Wood knocked Zidane out along with the ball he was dribbling with a vicious side tackle.

The referee's whistle and the hissing in Bernabéu sounded at the same time.

A yellow card!

Zidane slowly stood up from the ground and moved his ankle. Everything was fine.

Then he looked up at the person who had shoved him. This was the first time he had taken a serious look at the opponent, the Nottingham Forest's number 13, who had tangled with him for more than twenty minutes.

The "hit man" tightly pursed his lips as he stood in front of the referee and watched him record the foul in the small booklet with his head lowered. He did not apologize for the foul. He just had a blank expression on his face.

Beckham ran over to check on Zidane and found him staring at Wood.

"Be careful, Zizou." He cautioned, "I've heard a lot of stuff about this kid."

Zidane looked back at Beckham and nodded.

"I think they're trying to provoke you, Zizou." Roberto Carlos said in half-jest as he ran up for the free kick.

Zidane chuckled a little.

※※※

When he saw that George Wood was penalized with a yellow card because he had tackled Zidane, David Kerslake turned his head to look at Twain.

Twain looked back at him and shrugged. "He has to learn more techniques to control his fouls. That tackle just now was too aggressive. It looked like he had caused a lot of harm, but actually..." He paused for a moment before he continued. "If he's going to get penalized, he also has to reap the equivalent benefits of getting that card. Now Wood has a yellow card, but he didn't hurt Zidane."

"Now I'm just worried about one thing, Tony. Wood has two options right in front of him. Will he choose to defend against Zidane at all costs and then get sent off after getting a second yellow card? Or will he be constrained in his defense against Zidane and let the defensive line in front of our center backs thin out?"

"That... you have to ask him."

※※※

Just as Kerslake had said, even though there was no expression on his face, George Wood was confronted with a dilemma.

He knew that he would be sent off if he received two yellow cards in the same game. And now that he had one, it would not be easy to defend against Zidane. He could not guarantee that he would be able to defend against Zidane in the remaining sixty minutes without risking another a yellow card.

Regardless of whether or not he could defend against Zidane, it was extremely difficult not to risk a card in this high-intensity defense. George Wood was not Franco Baresi or Roberto Sensini. He could not play effectively and civilly during defense.

To counteract Zidane, he had to pay the price to make up the disparity between him and Zidane.

But now, getting a yellow card too early made him face a difficult situation.

If he did not want to accumulate another yellow card, he had to ease up on defense. The likelihood of getting a second yellow card would be greater if he did not let up.

He didn't know what to do.

He did not want to be sent off. He wanted to stay on the field to compete with number 5. Twain wanted him to defend against Zidane. But if he was sent off by a red card in the end, then he would have failed in his mission. He did not want to be a loser.

This was Wood's dilemma and Zidane's chance. Accustomed to all kinds of circumstances and various types of opponents, how could Zidane not know Wood's situation now?

He knew clearly. This was something he could fully make use of.

And he was not the only one who could take advantage.

After Roberto Carlos sent out the free kick, Real Madrid visibly shifted their offensive focus to Wood's side.

Perhaps he might not get another card if he just defended Zidane alone. But when he had to face the entire team's offense and could not even fend for himself, when he was dizzy and lightheaded from the attacks from everywhere, who could guarantee that he would not be impulsive, or react a little faster or slower, and then receive another yellow card?

Just as he strove to block Carlos' pass, he watched the football bounce out and fall to Zidane's feet. George Wood went all out to charge up, only to see the other party nimbly pass the football to Guti next to him.

Albertini came up to defend, but Guti passed the football back to Zidane again.

The French midfielder remained in his position. He did not rush to send out the ball as if he wanted to trick Wood into a foul.

But this time, Wood did not do as he wished and impulsively tackle him. Instead, he stuck close and constantly badgered Zidane for the ball from behind until the referee whistled.

It was a foul, but there was no card.

※※※

“He should have done this earlier,” Twain muttered to himself. He did not understand why Wood liked to tackle the ball. Was it because it looked aggressive?

※※※

This time, Real Madrid’s free kick was unsuccessful.

Wood strenuously propped up the defense, but he had not crumbled yet.

The game seemed to be in a stalemate. In the face of the Forest team’s tight defensive formation, Luxemburgo seemed to be out of ideas other than relying on the superstar footballers on the field.

The Real Madrid manager did not do anything except stand on the sidelines and occasionally wave his hands anxiously. Moreover, the Real Madrid players on the field might not even listen to the words he shouted. He had gradually lost control of the team. His desire to defeat Nottingham Forest at his home ground was just the final struggle of a dying man.

As shown on the field, Real Madrid did not perform as a whole during this period. They were completely reliant on those star players’ occasional flashes of brilliance. A nice way of saying it would be that those players had the ability to decide the game on their own. To put it bluntly, they were unable to cooperate with each other and fought alone.

If the superstars were not in condition for various reasons, then the game would be lost. And when those superstars lacked the desire for victory and had an inexplicable sense of superiority, they were likely to give up the game at the earliest point if the team was in trouble.

Fortunately for today’s game with regards to Real Madrid’s star players, although they were behind in the score, they were still dominant in the game. This gave them the motivation to win the game instead of raising their hands in surrender.

The supporters of Real Madrid were looking forward to Raúl, Zidane, Ronaldo, Beckham, or Roberto Carlos... Any one of them to stand up to save the day. They believed that their team was still the most powerful in the world because they had some of the most powerful players in the world. As long as one player stepped up, he could turn the tide in the game.

The Forest team finally managed an offense and obtained a corner kick after their tireless efforts. The two tall center backs went up to prepare to scramble for the position. In the end, Viduka ferried the ball to Anelka, who stopped the ball and shot a volley amidst the booing of the entire stadium. This time, Casillas positioned himself accurately and judged correctly in advance. He sealed off the French striker’s shot angle and easily grabbed the ball.

Real Madrid immediately launched a counterattack after that. Casillas threw the ball to Zidane.

The Frenchman elegantly stopped the ball and turned. He dribbled the ball and charged into the Forest team’s penalty area in one go.

Piqué and Pepe turned to run back to their own penalty area after they saw Casillas take down the ball. They put in all their efforts and ran what was their personal fastest time.

They had to do that because there was only one fullback in the rear, Chimbonda, a goalkeeper, Edwin van der Sar, and a defensive midfielder, George Wood.

The first defender to meet Zidane was George Wood.

Wood did not directly face him, but slowly retreated on the side while he waited for his teammates to fall back.

However, Zidane would not give him the chance. He sped up!

The distance between the two men rapidly shortened.

Ten meters.

Wood quickly glanced behind him, which was still largely empty.

Five meters.

The Real Madrid players were pressing ahead quickly. Wood was not able to recognize them one by one in such a situation, but he saw four figures in white jerseys with one sweeping glance.

The enemies were pressing at the border.

Three meters.

Wood had to turn his gaze back. Zidane was already close at hand. He swept above the football with his left foot and did not touch it. It was immediately followed by his right foot sweeping towards the ball.

Wood did not know whether he was faking or playing for real this time. He quickly made a choice in his mind and decided to gamble that it was real this time.

Two meters.

As Zidane's right foot drew across the ball, Wood shifted his balance. He was deceived!

One meter.

Zidane's left foot kicked the football away from Wood's side. Then he lightly leaped, and both of his feet went over Wood.

Such skill!

Wood still had a chance to stop this breakthrough if he extended his hand to hold the Frenchman's jersey or quickly tripped him from behind.

However, if he did all of those, it would mean a foul this time. And judging from the vast expanse behind him, he was bound to get a card!

Wood must make a choice in a flash, whether his right hand or his right foot should move, or whether to stop the attack at the expense of being sent off.

Wood hesitated. At that time, Zidane bypassed and easily overtook him.

Bernabéu burst into deafening cheers, and the sound stirred Wood. He suddenly turned and gave chase to the white figure.

He wanted to make up for his mistake and could not let Real Madrid go into battle with this offense, no matter what price he had to pay!

When he was about two meters away from Zidane, Wood was ready to tackle the ball. He was ready to leave the field as soon as he struck with his foot.

He was going to tackle from the back!

As if he had eyes at the back of his head, Zidane suddenly jabbed the ball to the right at that moment Wood tackled. Then he jumped up as Wood's legs slid under his body.

The football was sent to Raúl's feet. He was in the penalty area and swung his leg to shoot!

Lying on the ground, Wood saw the scene while he was under Zidane. Edwin van der Sar did everything he could to save the goal, but he did not even manage to touch the ball. The ball hit the far end of the goalpost and shot into the goal.

Music was broadcasted at the Bernabéu stadium, followed by a roar. "And the goalscorer is Raúl González!!"

Chapter 382: Multiple Choices Part 1

"And the scorer is Raúl González!!"

Dressed in the number 7 white jersey, Spain's golden boy spread open his arms and ran to the side of the field. His right hand pounded twice on the Real Madrid crest on his chest and then made a "V" sign.

Zidane, who had assisted, ran to him happily.

In the stands behind those superstars, the white-clad crowd surged.

The loser, George Wood, stood on the field in a daze as he watched the celebrating Real Madrid players. He had more reason to be miserable than anyone because he could have stopped the goal at the cost of being sent off.

Albertini ran up from behind and ruffled Wood's hair without saying anything.

Twain sat in the technical area. When he saw Zidane easily circumvent Wood, he had already expected this; he did not even get up.

Why had he not thought that they were safe with a score of 1:0? Because he knew how hard it was to prevent Real Madrid from getting a goal in Bernabéu. They had to widen their lead. But the advantage was gone before they could.

The television broadcast once again gave him a five-second close-up. Tony Twain remained expressionless.

Kerslake looked upset beside him.

※※※

After Real Madrid equalized the score, the situation continued to be in their favor. Nottingham Forest had no choice but to retreat entirely and completely abandon the attack. By doing that, they were able to resist the last-minute onslaught from Real Madrid in the first half.

When the referee blew the whistle at the end of the first half, the fans at Bernabéu stadium were full of hope for the second half. And the Nottingham Forest fans looked anxiously at the players with their heads bowed.

What kind of impact would the equalizer have on the morale of the team?

※※※

Twain looked at the players when he went back to the locker room. Everyone seized the moment to rest. He closed the door. He then went to the tactical board and wiped it clean.

“As I recall, I said that our defense would be full-on pressing before the game.” Twain re-drew the Real Madrid lineup, “But I didn’t see that. Did anybody see it?”

The players looked at each other. It looked like the chief was angry again.

“More often than not, what I saw was...” Twain drew eleven circles in the Forest team’s half of the field. “This kind of defense!” He slashed across the eleven circles with force.

“Eleven players pulled back into their own half of the field, waiting for the opponent to attack.”

“We only led by a goal and you just withdrew, hoping to hold on! Who told you to do that? Me?”

The group of players lowered their heads.

“What does high pressing mean? Are you guys from the youth team? Do you need me to explain?” After Twain vented his dissatisfaction, his tone slightly softened. “In the second half, we are going to fully press on, starting from the front line. First line, second line, third line, fourth line!” Twain began to draw straight lines from the front field, one by one up to their own backfield.

“I don’t want to see everyone turn and run back after conceding a goal. If the ball gets intercepted in the front field, counterattack on the spot. We’ll send as many players as we can spare. We don’t need a draw. You have to understand, this is not whether we can advance from the qualifier. Even if we lose to Real Madrid, we can still qualify! It’s a game related to our honor! We lost to them on our home ground. Do you want to lose to them again here?”

Twain gnashed his teeth and glared grimly at his players.

※※※

“Tony, just now, you were a little... We haven’t lost yet.” At the beginning of the second half, Kerslake spoke to twain.

“The score wasn’t the real reason I was angry. That was just an excuse.” Twain watched the field as he explained. “What made me unhappy was that the players’ performance went against our pre-match

deployment. I allow the players to play according to their styles on the field. But if they play incorrectly, I will criticize them. It's that simple."

"In that case, Wood..."

During the halftime interval, Twain did not specifically say anything to Wood, nor did he ask Wood to stay behind in the locker room to talk alone when they headed out to the field. He did not praise or criticize him. He seemed to completely ignore his defensive performance with Zidane, including the concession of the goal.

Kerslake felt that this was not Twain's style because it was well known that Twain favored Wood.

"There was nothing to say. He showed great effort, but there was a gap in his ability. And some things can't be offset by putting in effort on the field."

Kerslake was even more puzzled, "And you don't even want to console him? He's been very quiet, even quieter than usual. I think losing that ball was a big blow to him."

Twain smiled a little. "He's not a three-year-old kid who needs me to console him all the time. I think this is good. His career has been too smooth-sailing. It's good to encounter some setbacks every so often."

But Twain did not state the most important reason: he did not know what to do. Wood already had a yellow card. For a defensive core of the team, it was equivalent to having a bomb that could explode at any time. It was a hidden danger.

However, Twain was still hesitating on whether to replace him.

Replacing him was tantamount to removing the blockade in front of the defensive line which could let Real Madrid's attack quickly reach dangerous heights.

If he did not replace him, once Wood had a second yellow card the defensive line would lose an important barrier and the Forest team would have one less player on the field, which was a more serious situation.

Based on a simple analysis, Twain should choose substitution because it would minimize the loss. But matters on the football field were not so simple and easily analyzed. Firstly, Wood might not necessarily receive a second yellow card; Secondly, if he were to replace Wood at the start of the second half, would it have an adverse impact on Wood? After all, this was practically the same as negating a player's performance in front of everyone.

All those were uncertainties. Making judgments based on indeterminate factors and acting on uncertainties could produce uncertain consequences.

This collective of chaotic uncertainties made Twain hesitate.

He stopped talking and stared at the field solemnly.

※※※

Twain's dressing-down in the locker room during the halftime interval was very effective. There was a massive change in the Forest team's performance in the second half as compared to the first half. The players strengthened their interceptions in the front field. They did an excellent job of counter robbing the ball on the spot after losing it. Real Madrid suddenly could not adjust.

This was what Twain wanted to see. The Real Madrid players had to put in more effort to deal with the Forest team's frenzied attacks rather than thinking about how to coordinate beautifully and score.

Real Madrid had always been afraid of that kind of forced interception. They overly emphasized the beautiful possession of the ball and offense, but did not have a player who had the ability to beautifully defend the airspace and against offense. The only Makelele was also abandoned by them. And now Real Madrid paid the price by ending up empty-handed for two consecutive seasons. Without any surprises, they would continue to be empty-handed this season.

The rise of the Nottingham Forest was inseparable from the fact that they had an excellent defensive midfielder, George Wood. When Wood was in stable condition, the rest of the Forest team could set their mind at ease and attack boldly. They did not have to worry about getting caught up in their opponent's pressing because Wood could intercept better than the opponents. They were not afraid to lose the ball.

Real Madrid currently did not have the ability to do that.

What about Gravesen?

The Dane was not worth a mention in Twain's eyes. At Everton, Gravesen could still shine. He basically went backward in coming to Real Madrid. In fact, it was a very interesting phenomenon. Many players, who had outstanding performances in the other teams, suddenly became average and did not stand out after arriving at Real Madrid.

For example, Gravesen was the core of the midfield and was able to organize offense at Everton. There was also the Uruguayan defensive midfielder, Pablo Garcia, who had transferred to Real Madrid this summer. When he was at Osasuna, he had the most yellow cards and was the "dirtiest" defensive midfielder in La Liga last season. Known as "The Butcher," he suddenly lost his direction at Real Madrid. Similarly, Baptista, the core of Sevilla, was one of the most striking players in La Liga. His performance at Real Madrid had simply crashed to the ground.

As a defensive midfielder, whether it was defensive positioning, pre-judgment, running or defensive skills, Makelele far surpassed Gravesen. Twain even believed that Gravesen in Real Madrid was not as good as the Forest team's George Wood.

He suddenly appeared to change from an all-round midfielder who could organize the offense and pass the ball accurately to a clod who only knew how to tackle the ball and commit fouls.

Chapter 383: Multiple Choices Part 2

So far, Gravesen had not caused any trouble for the Forest team's offense in this game.

Of course, Gravesen's lack of action also had to do with the Forest team's insufficient offense for the first half.

It was different now. The Forest team's high pressing gave Real Madrid a headache. The star players' mistakes gradually began to increase. The consequence of frequent loss of the ball was that the Forest team got more offensive opportunities. Real Madrid's tattered defensive line was going to face a real test!

Anelka was one of the most active players in the Forest team's offensive lineup. After he had scored a goal, he wanted to score more. The perfect ending would be a hat-trick from him, and then for Nottingham Forest to beat Real Madrid. It would be a complete revenge on both personal and team levels.

Albertini passed the football to Ribéry, who then dribbled it for two steps before realizing that Real Madrid's defense was not so easy to break through. He passed the ball to Anelka.

Whenever the Frenchman received the ball, the Bernabéu stadium would ring out with a deafening hiss.

Nevertheless, Anelka was not affected at all. He was not afraid of that. Instead, he used the hissing as his motivation. The more the opponent's fans booed, the more energetic he became.

Twain understood Anelka's frame of mind, so he let Anelka start the game as an attacking core.

The player who came to defend Anelka this time was an opponent he had encountered many times previously in the Premier League: Gravesen.

He deftly skirted past the clumsy Dane. Slower by half a beat, Gravesen had to reach out and pull him down.

It was a free kick in the front field.

Albertini, who took the free kick, did not directly shoot to the goal. Instead, he passed the ball to Ashley Young on the flank.

Roberto Carlos cut across in front of Ashley Young. The youthful Young did not retreat but competed with the star footballer in speed on the flank. The final result was no win and no loss. He did not break through the Brazilian fullback, but he also compelled a corner kick. Carlos kicked the ball out of the end line with a quick tackle.

"The Forest team was on the offensive. They were repeatedly awarded the positioning balls in Real Madrid's backfield. For the visiting Nottingham Forest team at Bernabéu, the positioning of the ball is their chance. I don't think Manager Twain will be content to draw in this match with Real Madrid. He's not that kind of person."

The British commentator from ESPN remarked on that. He was right.

Bale kicked the ball out and Piqué headed the ball in the crowd. But his shot to the goal was saved by Casillas.

As a player from the Barcelona youth team, Piqué would have a special motivation in playing against Real Madrid.

When he saw Casillas hold the ball, Piqué and Pepe immediately turned and ran back. This was how the ball was lost in the first half. They did not want a repeat.

The more experienced Albertini actively chose to get close to Casillas, who had the ball and was looking around. Intentionally or not, he hung around by his side.

As expected, Casillas noticed Albertini move. He clamped the ball and waved helplessly with his other hand. Albertini faced toward him and slowly withdrew from the penalty area. He did not take any further action, so the referee could not say anything. However, he could delay Casillas' kickoff to buy some time for his teammates falling back to defend.

That was very effective. Casillas gave up his intention of throwing the ball by hand for a fast attack. He waited for everyone to move ahead before he kicked the ball hard towards the front field.

Real Madrid's front field players were not good at fighting for headers, so long balls were not really suitable for Real Madrid's offense. Just as expected, Pepe headed the ball back as he returned to his position to defend.

Real Madrid's offense still needed to be closer to the ground. The aerial contest was not their strength. Or since the departure of Fernando Morientes, the aerial zone in the opponents' penalty area was not an area they could make use of.

The football was passed to Zidane's feet.

In the first round of competition between the two teams, Beckham was the most active player and was voted the best in the game after the match. Beckham petered out in today's game. Instead, Zidane suddenly broke out, which many people had not expected before the game.

Everyone thought Zidane was old and in a slump alongside Real Madrid's downturn. Since his exit from the French national team, it could be seen that Zidane was actually tired of football.

He had almost obtained all the honors that a professional player could have. What motivation could he have to continue playing? Now the team was so messy within and the locker room was factional. If playing had become so tiresome, it was better not to play.

But if someone looked down on him, that person must pay the price.

As he watched Zidane confidently dribble on the field, Twain suddenly recalled the legendary French number 10's curtain-call performance during the World Cup in Germany.

From the first game, people had talked about Zidane's curtain call. Which game would be his farewell game? They did not expect him to do his curtain call all the way to the final. The World Cup final became the stage for his farewell performance. It was truly a magnificent stage.

When Zidane took the ball, the Bernabéu stadium broke out into huge cheers. The Real Madrid fans revered everything artistic. Zidane was the artistic master on the field. The welcome he received here was no less than the team's headliner, Raúl González.

The player who was welcomed by the enemy was naturally a bigger enemy. George Wood's eyes blazed when he looked at Zidane now. He could not forget the loss of that ball. He thought it was the

consequence of his hesitation and wanted to make up for that misstep. How was he going to make up for it? He was not going to hesitate anymore!

The referee's whistle sounded. Zidane sat on the ground, while George Wood stood beside him. It was a foul.

When he heard the whistle, Twain was nervous. He was afraid that the referee was going to give a yellow card to the hot-headed boy. They would be finished.

The cheers at Bernabéu instantly turned to boos. They put pressure on the referee in hopes that the referee would show a yellow card.

The referee did not do anything. He stood at the spot where the foul was committed and raised his hand to motion for a Real Madrid player to take the free kick. He did not say anything to Wood.

Wood went back to his defensive position with a sullen expression. But Twain could not sit on it any longer.

He called Mikel Arteta from the substitutes' bench. "Mikel, go do your warm up!"

Kerslake glanced up at him.

Chapter 384: White Handkerchiefs Part 1

When Salgado smashed Ribéry's dribbling ball out of the sidelines, the assistant referee beside the ball did not indicate that this was Nottingham Forest's throw-in. Instead, he raised both flags in his hands over his head.

That was to indicate that there was a request for substitution on the sidelines.

The fourth official stood on the sidelines and held up the electronic signboard: Nottingham Forest had asked for a substitution. Number 13 would be brought off and number 14 would come on.

Seeing the substitution, the ESPN English commentator was astonished. He rarely saw Manager Tony Twain replace George Wood in a game, not to mention so early in this game, at the 67th minute.

If bringing on Arteta was to strengthen their offense, then was it not better to replace the older Albertini? Why did he want to bring off the young and energetic George Wood, who could run and rob?

It could certainly be due to his yellow card. However, it was quite shocking for a while that Twain was able to make up his mind to replace Wood.

Indeed, even George Wood was taken aback. He stood on the field and looked at the sign held by the fourth official. That red number really indicated that 13 was to be brought off.

He had seldom had the experience of being replaced during a game. Since he had started playing on the Forest First Team, he had rarely felt like this. He was a little dumbfounded, but soon he became angry.

He, George Wood has been replaced ahead of time!

He could not continue to fight it out with Zidane on the field!

He had lost the contest with Zidane.

He did not care who his opponent was or what effect he would have on the football world if he successfully defended against him. He only knew one thing, which was that Twain had instructed him to mark Zidane. Replacing him early must be because he was dissatisfied with his work. It meant that he had failed.

The scene at the El Madrigal stadium from a year ago seemed to re-emerge in front of his eyes; the failed game, the opponent's look of indifference, and the home fans in the stands all mocking him.

"George?" When Albertini saw that Wood did not move, he called to him from the back.

Wood bowed his head and walked off the field. He walked quickly, and soon he was at the sidelines. However, due to his bad mood, he did not even high-five Arteta. He just lowered his head and walked past his Spanish teammate.

Mikel Arteta did not mind. He could not wait to get on the field.

Kerslake knew Wood was not happy when he saw his expression as he came off the field. Consequently, he wanted to go up to him to give him a few words of praise. However, when he extended his hand, Wood paid him no mind and walked straight back to the substitutes' bench. There he sat down and ignored everyone else.

Kerslake shrugged helplessly.

Twain focused his eyes on the field from the moment the assistant referee signaled for the substitution. When Wood came off and passed by him, he did not even give him a glance.

Thanks to the developed television technology, this scene was fully captured and faithfully presented in front of countless television viewers.

"George Wood is very dissatisfied with this early replacement. He ignored everyone and just sat back on the substitutes' bench. Tony Twain did not seem to explain his decision to him."

Kerslake approached Twain. "Hey, Tony."

"Leave him alone and let him calm down for a while." Twain knew why Kerslake had come to find him. "Just pretend you didn't see that, David. Come on, let's think about how we should play for the rest of the game."

Kerslake sighed. "You brought Arteta on in order to strengthen our offense. Anyone can see that. What else is there to analyze there? But, if you're taking George out, who are you going to send to defend against Zidane?"

"Demetrio."

"Him? What about Guti?"

Twain gave a quick smile, "Luxemburgo's biggest mistake in this game was letting Guti and Zidane start at the same time. They're too similar in their characteristics and positions. Most of the balls will reach Zidane's feet. So, what is Guti to do? He can only watch the show from the side." He palmed his hands

together. "Guti almost contributes nothing in defense and gets relegated to the side in the offense. It's equivalent to Real Madrid only having ten players to compete with us. Guti plays like a fountain; he only attacks in spurts. His condition is unstable, and in today's game... I don't think he can play well."

"So, you feel reassured enough to give Demetrio free rein to defend against Zidane?"

"Yes. They're long-time rivals. He knows what to do. We don't need to worry. We have now played for..." Twain lifted his wrist to look at his watch, "seventy minutes in the game. We still have twenty minutes to win this game. I've already instructed Arteta to bring this message to the players on the field. For the next twenty minutes, we're attacking!"

※※※

Wood sat on the substitutes' bench and watched the field in complete silence. His teammates did not dare to speak to him. Everyone could see that he was in a bad mood. It was written over all his face. It was best to leave him, or else one might suffer his wrath if the wrong thing was said.

He saw Albertini, who wore the team captain's armband, run to defend against Zidane, while his replacement, Arteta, was in charge of organizing the offense. The Forest team kicked off their final attack.

Before Arteta came on the field, the Forest team's offensive tactic was slightly one-dimensional. It relied largely on the two flanks, which could easily be blocked off by the experienced Real Madrid. Furthermore, there were two defensive players placed in the midfield and their offensive strength was not enough. When more players were required for the offense, there were often not enough attacking players to pose a greater threat to Real Madrid's goal.

Now, after bringing on Arteta, who was being better at organizing offense, Albertini returned to be in charge of defense. The three Forest midfielders were now responsible for offense and the team's attacks picked up.

In addition, Arteta's presence gave the Forest team more opportunities in the middle. When Real Madrid found themselves unable to consistently block the two flanks, their lousy defensive line would scramble.

Twain had always believed that since Makelele had left Real Madrid, the team's formations had moved to two extremes: a world-class offensive lineup and an amateur defense.

Always impatient and rash, Helguera employed amateur moves in his defense.

And on their flanks were the two fullbacks, Salgado and Roberto Carlos, who were heavy on offense and light on defense.

The still too young and tender Sergio Ramos was the center back.

If they did not have "Saint Iker," Real Madrid might have hovered around the relegation zone every year these past few seasons.

Twain decided to seize that point and put it to use. No matter how ferocious a goalkeeper was, he would still have moments when he was powerful and too far away to help without the support of his

rear defensive line. Therefore, he wanted to completely disrupt Real Madrid's defensive line so that he could seize the chance once the loopholes emerged and attack.

Arteta made Nottingham Forest's offense more varied and prolific, which confused Real Madrid's defense.

Soon, Twain's substitution made an impact. While Real Madrid's defensive attention was still on the flanks, Arteta and Albertini coordinated in the middle with a long shot to the goal, forcing Casillas to make a wonderful save.

Whilst lamenting this attack, Twain stole a glance at Wood. The kid was still staring at the field with an inscrutable expression.

※※※

As game time elapsed, the dissatisfied buzzing for the home team increased.

Twain liked that phenomenon. At Bernabéu, the home team was booed the most, not the visiting team. It could be either because Real Madrid could not win the game, or because they were ahead but were not playing well. The Real Madrid players often felt at a loss.

Perhaps Real Madrid was a team that faced more pressure playing at home than away.

The score was still 1:1. If they tied at home with the team that they had beaten in the first round, they would face even greater boos. The Real Madrid players were getting impatient and their movements were becoming bigger, especially Guti's.

When Arteta pulled his jersey and obstructed him from dribbling the ball during defense, he turned around and confronted his Spanish countryman.

Fortunately, Albertini appeared in time between the two men and separated them. Otherwise, they might have started on each other.

The referee came up and gave a stern verbal warning to the two players who had clashed, hoping they would calm down. But that was a bit difficult for the Real Madrid players who were being jeered at.

Three minutes later, Salgado tackled Franck Ribéry to the ground and received a yellow card.

Twain turned to look at the Real Madrid manager. That Brazilian still stood on the sidelines, immaculately dressed. But his anxious expression was laid bare on his face. He was anxious and at a loss.

He had no idea how his team should play.

Attacking would please the Real Madrid fans and club president. But offensive football was not merely the sum of the attacking players. Guti had hardly served any function since he'd started in the game. His continued presence on the field had become a destabilizing factor. Furthermore, now that the Forest team's offensive had suddenly increased, Real Madrid's defensive line was in a constant state of emergency. He was afraid that their defense would collapse if it was not strengthened.

Should he play defense? The current score was a draw and had already drawn jeers from the Bernabéu fans. If he brought on Pablo Garcia to strengthen the defense, would the jeering come to him in a flood?

If they want to win the game, they had to win it beautifully. It was worse to win the game with “ugly” defensive counterattacks than to lose by playing beautiful football.

Luxemburgo really did not understand the Spanish mindset. The team’s current situation was terrible. They urgently needed a victory to inspire their morale. As long as it was a victory, even if it was obtained through the defense, it should be encouraged and supported. Why were they still demanding to play beautiful football when Real Madrid was at their historic low?

He did not understand and could not accept it. It did not correspond to his idea of football.

What was the manager’s role here? Instead of coaching, leading, and directing the team to win the game, he was here to please the spectators and bigwigs in the platform.

But I’m a damn manager, not a circus clown!

Chapter 385: White Handkerchiefs Part 2

Luxemburgo suddenly frowned, then turned to walk towards the substitutes’ bench and said to Pablo Garcia, “Go warm up.”

Garcia was a little surprised, but he quickly noticed the manager’s look of anger. He hurriedly rose from his seat, threw off his jacket, and ran out.

The hissing in Bernabéu grew even louder when they saw the defensive midfielder warming up. Real Madrid’s hard-to-please fans had reason to make disgruntled noises. With the team still tied with their opponents, their manager was not going to bring on an attacking player to fight for a goal. Instead, he was going to bring on a defensive midfielder to strengthen the defense!

They could not tolerate that type of cowardly behavior.

They certainly saw that Real Madrid’s defensive line required urgent assistance, and furthermore, they were constantly in a state of emergency. However, they thought that as long as the offense was strengthened, that level of urgency was nothing at all. Real Madrid’s football philosophy was that if their opponents scored nine goals, they would score ten in return! They did not compete based on which team would concede fewer goals, they would compete on which team had scored more goals!

Twain understood that concept and became more aware when he heard the louder hiss. But he liked to compete with that kind of team because a team that placed less emphasis on defense made things easier for the opponents. What trouble had this Real Madrid team caused Nottingham Forest up until now?

As long as the football crossed the center circle, the Real Madrid players in the front field like Ronaldo, Zidane, and Guti would stop running and stand in the front to watch. The Forest players could almost pass through the midfield to directly enter Real Madrid’s thirty-meter zone without any hindrance. Then, they could do whatever they wanted.

In the minds of those megastars, defense was left to the defenders. They just had to wait in the front field and take a second to determine the outcome of the game.

Ronaldo, for example, was always praised as a superstar who disappeared for eighty-nine minutes and then used one minute to determine the outcome of the game.

However, Twain did not like that kind of player. As he was the manager, he had to look at the problem from the manager's point of view. If he had such an arrogant idler on the field, then he might as well have only ten players on the team for eighty-nine minutes of the game. He did not need the ability to determine the game in one minute. If it was not even certain if Ronaldo could score, then what was the use?

If the entire team played as a whole, then they could have the opportunity to determine the outcome of the game within ninety minutes instead of counting on the individual star player's condition to decide that illusory minute.

If there was such a big shot on his team who dared to ask Twain such nonsense as "Have you ever seen a pianist run laps?" when the entire team was asked to run laps to build stamina, then Twain would sell him without caring how much loss it would cost the team's finance. If he could not sell him, he would toss that player into the reserves. And if the club sided with the player, then he would leave. He was not the kind of man who would tolerate a player publicly confronting his authority.

Therefore, he had once worried that Anelka would disrupt the atmosphere of the locker room and the balance within the team. Thankfully, after an in-depth conversation with Anelka, he found that the Frenchman's attitude was not bad.

※※※

When Pablo Garcia returned to the technical area to be briefed by Luxemburgo, the Forest team launched an attack.

After Anelka's shot was struck out by Casillas, Viduka's rebound shot was thwarted by Carlos and bounced out of the end line.

A corner kick was awarded.

Watching the noble Real Madrid being pressed on by the English provincial team, Bernabéu's boos resounded through the night sky.

Twain looked up at the people in the stands and savored the feeling. This is fantastic, they're not jeering at us!

That type of hissing was obviously not the maximum loudness that the Bernabéu fans could produce. When they saw the fourth official raise the signboard on the sidelines to signal that Real Madrid's number 14 player, Guti, was to be brought off and replaced with the defensive midfielder Pablo Garcia, that hissing sound made many Nottingham Forest fans cover their ears.

What was that behavior for? In the eyes of the Real Madrid fans, under such unfavorable circumstances, for the team not to win by attacking and instead to be satisfied with a draw, was a blatant betrayal of Real Madrid's century-old tradition!

It was absolutely intolerable.

The camera especially gave Luxemburgo a close-up shot of his calm face and then turned to the platform to give the club president, Florentino, another close-up of his expressionless face.

Luxemburgo had done something that went against all the Real Madrid fans' wishes.

He knew that the probability of winning under such circumstances was already not great. It was sensible to first ensure they did not continue to lose possession of the ball, and then consider attacking. But the Real Madrid fans did not see it that way.

The referee motioned for Guti to leave the field. Guti did not look happy and dillydallied to leave the field.

Pablo Garcia stood on the sidelines with an awkward expression and waited for Guti to slowly walk off the field. He did not know whether the fans' boos were meant for him, but on the surface, it looked like he bore a lot of the pressure from the boos.

His head was bowed. He had never imagined such a scene when he had joined Real Madrid, a century-old powerhouse club.

Real Madrid's substitution took one minute, which helped the Forest waste game time.

When Pablo Garcia was on the field, he took over Guti's position and naturally took over Guti's responsibility. However, what was Guti's responsibility in the defense of corner kicks? He simply stood the edge of the penalty area for show.

Garcia could not do that. He was a defensive player, so he squeezed into the crowd.

Gareth Bale raised his arms to indicate that he was going to do kick the ball.

It was crowded in front of Real Madrid's goal area. The football volleyed into the air and suddenly everything became chaotic.

Who struck the ball? Who was blocking whom?

No one could see clearly at that moment.

Twain raised his head and stared. Then he saw a raised arm in the crowd, followed by two and then three arms!

Clad in a red jersey, Pepe came out of the crowd and spread his arms wide. He roared and charged towards the corner flag! All the Nottingham Forest players came charging behind him.

"Nottingham Forest scores! 2:1! They are beating Real Madrid in their away game!!!"

Twain punched the ground.

It had finally happened. The moment when the so-called "Galácticos" was sunk. The deformed team was yanked off of their pedestal and "the era of superstars" was coming into an end.

Looking up again, he saw countless white handkerchiefs flapping across the stands. It was a traditional way for Spanish fans to express their dissatisfaction.

As he looked at the white handkerchiefs fluttering in the sky, he suddenly thought of the white banners billowing in a funeral procession.

It really fits with the occasion.

Chapter 386: Wood at Bernabéu? Part 1

They had just made a substitution and the team lost possession of the ball. The media and fans would certainly not miss this opportunity to attack Luxemburgo. In their view, Luxemburgo's substitution was a cowardly act for which he was being punished.

However, Luxemburgo could not think of that. At the moment, standing in the Bernabéu stadium filled with jeers, he was already thinking of another matter.

Real Madrid, once again overtaken, seemed to have lost their motivation to continue playing due to this substitution. They thought they played poorly in this game and that the manager was incompetent. The players on the field could not do anything.

Real Madrid had lost all will to fight.

After their lead, Nottingham Forest played without restrictions for the first time.

Twain looked at this "most successful team of the twentieth century" with their white jerseys moving like the walking dead on the field. They had no fighting spirit, no motivation, and no will to fight to the end. He shook his head and murmured, "It's really such a pity. It's pathetic and sad..."

The Real Madrid crest on the outer wall of Santiago Bernabéu Stadium had lost its former colors. The entire huge white building was surrounded by bellows of "F**k off, Luxemburgo." People did not care about the outcome of the game. They were more concerned with what would happen after the game.

The competition had ended early.

※※※

Twain sat back in the technical area and crossed his legs to watch the show. He was not watching the game. He was watching the historical moment happening in Bernabéu.

Twain believed that Florentino Pérez and his policy of superstars, as well as this star-studded but malformed Real Madrid, had left an indelible mark on the world history of professional football. They were an extreme case of the conclusion between business and football. This representative failure also implied that commercialized football must have a limit. After all, football still had its own characteristics which could not be changed or tarnished. Those characteristics could not be replaced by money, no matter how much.

"To think that I have accidentally become a revolutionary..." Twain muttered. He suddenly felt like laughing. He wanted to laugh loudly and without restraint.

What could be more fulfilling than being able to change history personally?

Kerslake realized that Twain had been muttering to himself, but could not hear clearly. “What are you talking about, Tony?”

“Oh, nothing, David. Nothing...” Twain looked at his watch. Just as he raised his head, he saw the fourth official standing on the sideline with the electronic bulletin board in his hands. “Get ready to celebrate our victory. It’s a foregone conclusion that we’ve qualified!”

After that, he stood up and walked toward the sideline to wait for the celebration on the field.

Behind him, the other Forest players, as well as the coaches from the coaching team, had also stood up one after another. They were ready to dash onto the field.

The jeering in Bernabéu was not for them. Twain suddenly looked at Luxemburgo, who stood at the sidelines, with some sympathy. It really was not easy being the Real Madrid manager.

At the end of the game, the referee finally blew the whistle, which was almost lost in the sound of the boos. Albertini, the Forest player nearest to the referee, raised his fist. Then the players on the sidelines reacted and swarmed in.

Twain was not as anxious as they were. Rather, he slowly walked in with his head held high, as if he were touring his own territory.

The Real Madrid players quickly headed towards the players’ corridor with their heads down. Whether it was targeted at the team or manager, the buzz over the Bernabéu stadium made them uncomfortable.

Their two consecutive defeats in a week were both suffered at home. It was as if it were suddenly the end of the world. Once so proud, the insufferably arrogant Real Madrid superstars had to lower their heads in front of the rejoicing English bumpkins.

There were few people in the world who could conquer Bernabéu, and Twain was now one of them.

Everything that happened on this night would be brought up countless times in the future, not because Nottingham Forest had defeated Real Madrid, but because “the age of superstars” was over.

※※※

At the post-match press conference, Luxemburgo calmly accepted the failure. He thought that it was no surprise that they had lost since his team’s performance was not as good as Nottingham Forest’s. Nottingham Forest had performed very well, and he congratulated them.

Then Twain said to the reporters with a smile, “Does anyone remember what I said at the press conference after the first round of the group stage match between the Forest team and Real Madrid?”

Everyone looked at each other. No one could remember what had happened a few months ago.

“It seems everyone has a short-term memory. I said, ‘The next time we go to Bernabéu, I’ll give everyone a surprise.’ A lot of people laughed. I think most people thought that I was just a sore loser. Does anyone think that I was a sore loser now?”

This time, no one laughed except Twain himself.

※※※

When Nottingham Forest flew back to England on the morning flight the next day, Twain bought a fresh-off-the-press morning paper at the airport in Madrid. Initially, he had no intention of buying a newspaper here. He had no interest in the Spanish newspapers because he could not read Spanish. But the photograph on the front page of the newspaper caught his eye.

It was a photograph of last night's competition at Bernabéu. Luxemburgo stood expressionless on the sidelines with his arms across his chest. To his side, the big screen on the far side of the grandstand prominently displayed 1:2.

As he scrutinized the photograph beside the newsstand, the team's Spanish player, Mikel Arteta, came over and looked at the newspaper. He then said to Twain in English, "Luxemburgo resigned."

Hearing this, Twain turned to look at Arteta and then bought the newspaper with money from his pocket.

Luxemburgo's dismissal happened more than ten days ahead of the time that he had remembered. But he was no longer surprised by things that did not correspond with his memory.

This was what he had expected.

He only cared about one thing. He found Arteta and handed him the newspaper. "Was the Brazilian dismissed by the executive committee or did he voluntarily resign?"

Arteta read it again and said to Twain, "He resigned on his own, chief."

The extremely vexed Brazilian manager, who had swung between insisting on his football ideals and pleasing the Real Madrid fans, had finally done something he wanted to do.

After he thanked Arteta, Twain turned and rolled up the newspaper he had just bought to throw it into the bin.

In many other papers, the Spaniards hurled abuse at Luxemburgo. They thought that he had left a stain on Real Madrid's glorious century-old tradition and caused the noble Real Madrid to become defiled. His departure was to be expected.

Over the course of the next few days, there would certainly be more gossip, such as Ronaldo secretly speaking to Florentino, hoping for a transfer.

However, Twain did not concern himself with such things. He had used to be bothered by what he heard, but now he had nothing to gain from concerning himself with such things.

※※※

Unlike the previous match in El Madrigal, Twain did not look for George Wood to speak alone on the flight back to England. He also ignored Wood's reticence.

He intended to leave Wood alone for a few days to let him understand some things on his own. It was better than advising Wood on every matter.

However, after he had brought off Wood, his and Wood's behaviors made the English media speculate anew. So, from the next day after the team's return to Nottingham, a rumor about discord between George Wood and Tony Twain began to circulate on the press.

"Rumor" was an apt description because there was no certainty that it was true, but there was no denial that it was true. It gave everyone who saw it a message: We're not going to say anything specific, but you can figure it out.

—George Wood was unhappy about being substituted early and confronted Twain in the locker room.

—Wood may be sold for his disagreement with Twain, who cannot tolerate anyone undermining his authority.

—The Spanish Real Madrid club is very interested in Wood, said Wood's agent in an interview with our papers.

And so on.

A year ago, Twain would have laughed in the face of such rumors. But now, he could not. Why?

Because George Wood had a restive agent.

Billy Woot had been Wood's agent for less than a year and had mainly been busy with his endorsements for commercial brands. At present, he had already successfully signed three brand endorsement contracts for Wood. He seemed to be more interested in Wood's commercial value.

However, Twain was not at ease with an agent who actively approached Wood and won his trust. Perhaps it was due to his prejudice. He always thought that one day, Woot would seize all the opportunities he could grasp to take Wood away from his side.

He could not sit and wait. He must act.

He decided to call Wood's agent to confirm the veracity of those reports in the newspapers and to suss out the agent's thinking.

Chapter 387: Wood at Bernabéu? Part 2

"Hi!" Just based on his voice, Woot seemed to be in a good mood.

"Mr. Woot." Twain's mood was not as good, and he felt worse especially after hearing such an upbeat voice.

"Ah, Mr. Tony Twain. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Twain could make out other voices in the background. He listened carefully and asked, "Well, Mr. Woot, you're not in England now, are you?"

"That's right, I'm in Spain. More accurately speaking, I'm on the beach in Barcelona, Spain. It's the start of the rainy season in England now, and I hate that kind of weather."

Twain cleared his throat and decided to cut to the chase. "Mr. Woox, I read in the papers that you recently accepted an interview with The Sun?"

"Yes, a phone interview."

"Well, the thing is, I would like to know your thoughts, Mr. Woox," Twain said.

"It sounds like you want me to explain that interview. I didn't lie. After your game with Real Madrid ended, I accidentally bumped into the Real Madrid president, Mr. Florentino Perez."

Twain sneered. That "accidentally" was questionable.

"He is very interested in George. Everyone is criticizing Real Madrid for their lack of a good defensive midfielder. After seeing George's success in England, he communicated his idea to me. He wanted to know if George would like to join Real Madrid."

Twain did not interrupt. He just listened quietly to the story.

"I didn't answer him yes or no. I just told him that I would convey his message. It's that simple."

Wood had been somewhat quiet during training recently. Twain suddenly wondered if it were somehow related to this. If Woox had told the truth... If Real Madrid wanted Wood, would he be able to hold them back? He was worried that Wood would let his imagination run wild after that substitution. He suddenly regretted it. Would it be better if he had looked for Wood to have a chat sooner? A lot of misunderstandings were caused by poor communication.

"In that case, did you convey Florentino's intentions to him?"

"Not yet."

When Twain heard that, he did not know what to say. Was this how an agent should act?

He rolled his eyes. "So are you going to tell him?"

"Well, of course. But I know what you're thinking, Mr. Twain. You're worried about George leaving the Forest team, aren't you?"

Twain just gave a grunt. He did not answer.

Woox laughed on the other end of the line. "Mr. Twain, if you want to know whether Wood will leave the Forest team, why not call him directly? Do you need me to give you his cell phone number?"

"No, thank you. I have it!"

Twain abruptly hung up the phone. That's right, why should I call this annoying agent first? He had used to talk directly to Wood. How had he made a habit of contacting the agent first?

Shaking his head, Twain dialed Wood's cell phone number.

※※※

Wood, who came home at noon to accompany his mother for lunch, received a call from Twain. He glanced at his mother sitting opposite him and then got up to walk out of the restaurant.

“George! How have you been lately?” Twain started making small talk immediately.

“What’s the matter, chief?”

Twain had a bad feeling when he heard Wood’s chilly tone.

“Um, it’s this... I heard a rumor that Real Madrid was interested in you. Did your agent, Woot, tell you?”

“No, he didn’t.”

It seems Woot didn’t lie, Twain thought.

“Well, if...I mean if hypothetically if Real Madrid really had interest in you, would you like to go?”

Wood kept quiet on the other end for a while. “The Real Madrid that we just defeated?”

“Yes, that Real Madrid. Do you want to go?”

Wood looked over to his mother eating in the restaurant and then shook his head, “I don’t want to.”

Twain should have been happy, but he cocked his head. “Is it because of your mother?”

Wood wordlessly agreed.

“Let’s put the matter of your mother aside. Do you want to go?”

His answer was still the same. “No, I don’t want to go.”

“Oh. Can you tell me why?”

“No particular reason. I’m just not interested.”

This kid, does he not even have a professional player’s awareness?

But Twain felt relieved.

He intended to clearly explain the substitution to Wood. Who knew if he would still have any ideas in his head? Communication was key.

“Um, George. There’s still one more thing... During the game with Real Madrid, you were replaced... Oh, yes, what do you think of Zidane?”

Wood frowned. He was reluctant to recall that night’s failure. However, the scenes from that game would unconsciously emerge in front of his eyes and come to his mind over the past few days, lingering. Although the Forest team eventually won that game, Wood personally felt that he had failed.

“He’s very powerful.”

“He was selected by the UEFA as the best player in fifty years, surpassing a number of predecessors in history. Of course, he’s powerful. Do you want to beat him?”

“Yes.” He did not hesitate this time.

“But I’ll tell you the truth; you’re not likely to beat him now.”

Wood's reaction to that remark was silence. Twain did not know if Wood was displeased with it, but he had to say it for the sake of Wood's future development.

"Do you sometimes feel that you're not motivated? Besides your mother, do you ever long for anything else? The media are all upset that you're not on Eriksson's national team, but you don't care about that. You train and compete every week... Do you have any other desires for football that you want to pursue?"

Wood remained silent. He did not know what to say.

"To become a champion? Victory? Glory? Don't many players want that? If you can't answer, it doesn't matter. If you're not sure what you want, let me give you one first. Use Zidane as your target and redouble your efforts."

"Beat him or surpass him one day. Both work, it's all up to you. Well, that's it. What do you think?"

Wood thought about it, and then said, "Not bad."

※※※

Back in the restaurant for his lunch, Wood was greeted by his mother's inquiring gaze.

"The agent called," said Wood. "He said that the Real Madrid club was interested in me and asked if I would go."

"Real Madrid? Is that the team you just defeated in Spain?"

Wood Nodded.

"Going means a transfer to Spain?"

Wood nodded again.

Sophia thought for a moment and asked, "Did you say yes?"

This time, Wood shook his head. "No."

"Is it because of me, George?"

Looking at his mother's gentle smile, Wood continued to shake his head. "No, mom. I like this team and I want to stay here."

Chapter 388: A Meeting Off the Field Part 1

Although Twain had sworn in his column that George Wood would not go anywhere except Nottingham Forest, the media did not buy it. They inevitably thought that as the manager, Twain must have been concealing the truth. The speculation about Wood and Real Madrid continued, but Twain no longer refuted anything. He had said what was needed to be said. It was unnecessary to entangle endlessly with the media on such matters.

Just a week later, a piece of news came from Madrid that shocked the international football circle and made many clubs applaud with approval: Mr. Florentino Pérez, the president of Real Madrid, announced his resignation as the president. His resignation was the direct result of losing three consecutive games after their loss to Barcelona at home. After the Bernabéu fans booed off Luxemburgo, they targeted the boos and aimed their middle fingers at the club president.

Florentino believed that he must take responsibility for the decline of Real Madrid, and the only way was to resign.

The stepping down of that major figure in real-estate was three months ahead of Tang En's knowledge. He knew that he and his team had added fuel to the fire with regards to Florentino's fall from his position. If he had not transmigrated here and coached Nottingham Forest, then matters might have progressed to the end of next February as scheduled. Florentino would have announced his resignation after being unable to bear the heavy burden any longer.

The manager had just left, and now the president had also resigned. Real Madrid's situation seemed beyond hope. But maybe it was best to be hopeless.

Without destruction, there could be no construction.

The dismissal of Florentino indirectly helped the Forest team shake off the transfer rumors about Wood.

That was because the British tabloids had previously asserted that the Real Madrid person who was most interested in Wood was the club president, which increased the credibility and authenticity of their news.

Now that the most interested person had gone, then Real Madrid's interest in Wood naturally vanished following Florentino's resignation. Some people still speculated on the matter, but nobody paid attention because everyone felt that it was uninteresting.

With a stable environment restored, Nottingham Forest performed outstandingly in the following match.

The home ground game with Real Madrid gave the Forest team great confidence. They believed that there was no team in the world that could prevent their progress. Of course, that was also due to Twain's "psychological instruction."

In the next two rounds of the league tournament, Nottingham Forest, with their morale running high, respectively defeated Liverpool at home and Blackburn Rovers at an away game. They maintained pressure on Chelsea, the league's top team.

Then, on December 8th, during the final round of the Champions League group stage competition, Nottingham Forest easily beat the group's bottom-ranked Lille at home and advanced to the top sixteen together with Real Madrid. They were ranked second in the group due to fewer goals.

That match was rated as a "great victory" by the Nottingham media after the game. It was not because the opponent was very strong and that the victory was hard won. It was because Nottingham Forest successfully broke into the next round, proving that their rise was not a blip. They had the ability to prove themselves on a bigger stage.

Twain no longer had interest in such a victory. He was not like the Nottingham people who missed the former glory days. For him, that kind of victory was only a step on a long road. If he was ecstatic because of that achievement, then he should not expect to have any great achievements.

My Nottingham Forest team is not merely for people who miss the past. I want to create an era that is on par with the former Forest dynasty!

※※※

The league tournament continued. When Chelsea's continued lead was no longer news and there was no more news from Tony Twain, a surprising turn of events came from Manchester United Football Club, which had not been doing well lately. It was one thing after another for the Manchester United team, which had recently been eliminated in the Champions League group stage.

It was more than half a month later than the timing that Tang En remembered. This must be because his arrival changed a number of things in this world; some subtle, some significant, some well-known, and some unknown.

On December 8th, Manchester United Football Club officially announced that the "Red Devils" team captain, Roy Keane, had already terminated his contract with the club and left.

This news shocked many people and the fallout spread to all of the British Isles, including Scotland, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. No one had expected Keane's sudden departure. Just this morning, he had still shown up at Manchester United's training base in Carrington to train with the team. Prior to that, Manchester United's boss, Sir Alex Ferguson, had claimed that Keane's health was close to complete recovery. Some of the media reported that the 34-year-old Irishman had already renewed his contract with the club. All indications showed that Keane would retire in Manchester United and forever be part of Manchester United.

And then, at noon on that day, Roy Keane and Ferguson had returned to the manager's office at the end of the training. The two men closed the door for a private discussion. No one knew what they had talked about except that on the same afternoon, the news appeared on Manchester United's official website.

Twain learned the news online in his office. After he confirmed the news three times in a row, the first thing he did was to pull out the telephone number of Michael Kennedy, Keane's agent, from the drawer and call him to discuss bringing Keane onto the team.

He was unwilling to let go of the chance to get the world-class midfielder for free.

As the team's medical unit had said, the recovery of Albertini had not been ideal. He was still some ways away from his condition from before the injury. He could not keep up with the intensity of the team's competition on multiple fronts. Twain believed it was necessary to add a midfielder during the winter break. He also had to take into account that George Wood had started to steadily receive penalty cards in this new season.

Roy Keane, having just terminated his contract with Manchester United, was undoubtedly the best candidate.

"Mr. Twain?" Kennedy was a little surprised to receive Twain's call. "Roy expected teams to be in touch with him, but he didn't expect it to be so soon. You're the first one, Mr. Twain."

“The first one. So, is there any discount?” Twain laughed.

Kennedy laughed too. “You’ll have to ask Roy about that, Mr. Twain.”

He did not have to wait long. Ten minutes later, Twain received a call from Kennedy. Kennedy told Twain over the phone that the meeting was set for tomorrow afternoon at a restaurant in Nottingham. He specifically reminded him that it was an “extremely private” meeting.

Twain understood his meaning. Was this advantage of being first?

Twain had been excited about it for a long time. He was filled with a sense of accomplishment whenever he thought that Roy Keane was about to become an important player on his team.

Watching famous players who had once stormed the international football world serve in his team one by one, he truly had a sense of being in a real-life FM.

Chapter 389: A Meeting Off the Field Part 2

Twain’s excitement did not last long. When he met up with Roy Keane himself, he poured cold water on his excitement.

“Mr. Twain, I know why you called my agent.” Seated in a booth in a regular Irish pub, the former Manchester United team captain spoke to Twain. “But I’m really sorry, I have to turn down your offer.”

Twain stared blankly for a moment. Is this Irishman so straightforward in rejecting people?

He pondered for a moment and could only simply ask, “Why?”

Next to them, the agent, Michael Kennedy, answered the question on Keane’s behalf. “Because Roy is not going to be an opponent of Manchester United in the Premier League.”

Based on what Tang En knew, after Roy Keane had left Manchester United and become a free player, he went to the Scottish Premiership team, Celtic, in the winter transfer season. He had joined the team that he had supported and favored since his youth. This was the reason. Since he had refused his invitation from that point of view, it really made it impossible for Tang En to continue to sell the idea.

He recalled Keane’s course after his departure from Manchester United: the Scottish Premiership team, Celtic, and then... He seemed to go on to become the manager of Sunderland. At the time of his transmigration, the man was still struggling hard to lead “The Black Cats,” which was ranked second from the bottom in the EFL Championship, toward the English Premier League.

No one believed that the Irishman could succeed, and neither did Twain before he had transmigrated. But now he believed it because he had personally experienced such incredible things.

He looked at Keane. A season ago, they had competed as rivals. He had not expected to be able to sit like this and have a chat outside of their uniforms.

Because of his arrival, he did not know whether Keane would become the manager of Sunderland in the future. He did not even know if Keane would become a Celtic player after rejecting Nottingham Forest.

“Roy... Do you have any plans for the future?” asked Twain after a moment of silence.

“Plans? Do you mean if I’ll join a club or...?”

“A little further down the road. What do you want to do when you hang up your boots?”

Keane thought about it. “Become a manager. In my career, there were two managers who so deeply impressed me that I hope to become successful like them in the future.”

The Irishman did not say who the two men were, but Twain knew clearly that one of them was the late Nottingham Forest manager, Brian Clough. He had brought Keane from his hometown to the English Premier League and groomed him to become a star footballer. The other man was Alex Ferguson, who took him from Blackburn Rovers to Manchester United and made him a world-class star player.

“I think we have something in common.” Twain decided to worm his way into being friends with Keane. Even though Keane had refused him, it did not mean that he would not change his mind later. “Well, in my coaching career, Brian Clough influenced me the most. After I achieved some small success when I first started leading the Forest team, Clough wanted to see me. I thought it was to commend or acknowledge me. I did not expect to play a completely unmemorable supporting role that afternoon.”

Speaking of which, Twain suddenly laughed. “Roy, we really have a connection.”

Keane raised his eyebrows.

“On the way back to Nottingham, I was unhappy about my cold reception. Then Walker, who was with me, told me a little story and I suddenly felt better. Do you know who was in that story? It was you, Roy.”

Keane was a little surprised.

“He told me that after you had a good debut performance, you ran into Clough the next day on the training ground. He asked for your name, and then you helped him clean his shoes.”

When he heard that, Keane also smiled. “Yes, that did happen. I didn’t think they’d remember.” He became quiet and seemed to be lost in the recollection of his past. That youthful-looking guy had already become a thirty-four-year-old “old chap.” Those twelve years had gone by in the blink of an eye.

“Roy, I don’t know which club you’re going to choose, but I hope you can accept my goodwill.”

Keane snapped out of his recollection and looked up at Twain.

“There are still twenty-three days before the start of the winter transfer period. Before you decide your next stop, you’re welcome to train with my team to maintain your stamina and stay in shape.”

When they heard Twain’s words, even Michael Kennedy was surprised.

“It’s just normal training. You don’t have to participate in my team’s training. You can train alone with your own program. The Nottingham Forest Football Club will provide you with all the facilities. You can use the players’ locker room, cafeteria, gym, treatment room... You can do anything except to play on behalf of the Forest team and participate in the team training. You can even wear your Manchester United jersey.”

The corner of Keane's mouth twitched when he heard the last remark, and then he immediately became calm again.

Michael Kennedy looked at Keane.

Keane looked down and asked, "What's in it for you, Mr. Twain?"

Twain spread his hands and shrugged. "Why do people have to ask, 'what's in it for me?' when they're doing something? Isn't it just nice to be able to help others? Anyway, the Forest team's training base has so much space. It won't be overcrowded if one more person is there to train. Of course, if you really want me to give you a reason, I think you'll be more familiar with the Nottingham Forest Football Club than with the other teams."

"Even if I was familiar with the club, that was twelve years ago," Keane mumbled.

Twain had thought that Keane would disagree. He was prepared to show a regretful expression on his face. But he heard him add, "Okay, before I find the right club, I'll train there. I'm already here, anyway. Michael?"

Kennedy nodded. "Mr. Twain, I think your invitation is very timely. I'm also very grateful for your warm generosity."

Twain chuckled. "It's nothing. But I'm actually quite narrow-minded, eccentric, stubborn and spiteful. At least that's what the media says."

The other two men laughed too.

Twain patted his stomach and said, "Shall we have dinner?"

The subsided laughter started again.

Kennedy went to look for the waiter for the menu, while Keane leaned forward on the table to look at Twain. "Mr. Twain, I'm very interested in the story you didn't finish just now. You said Walker told you my story when you were feeling down. So, what happened next?"

"Later..." Twain pretended to think back, and then said, "Later, Walker told me that the chap who had polished Clough's shoes became a world-class midfielder and captain of the Irish national team. And much later... I think I'm doing pretty well now!"

The two men laughed at the same time.

To know humility, and not lose one's confidence. The two men, who were three years apart in age, did indeed have that in common.

Chapter 390: Hello Roy Part 1

When a new morning's training was about to begin, the players and other staff members came streaming into the training base through the gate. Ian MacDonald smiled as he greeted everyone.

The people flowing through the gate lessened, and the training was about to begin inside.

It was at that time that MacDonald saw a figure emerged at the gate. He was surprised because he knew the person.

“Roy? Roy Keane?” The face was very familiar, but he still did not dare to believe.

The man, who was looking inside the gate, heard someone call his name and turned his head. When he saw Ian MacDonald, he was a bit stunned as well.

He was familiar with the face. It was just a little older than he had remembered.

“It is you, Roy!” MacDonald was delighted and bewildered. “Why are you here? Aren’t you... Um...” He was going to say, “Aren’t you at Manchester United?” But he immediately recalled that Keane had already canceled his contract with the Manchester United Club.

“You’re... Mr. Macdonald?”

MacDonald smiled happily. “I didn’t think you’d remember me, Roy.”

“I thought you no longer worked here.”

“I’m retiring at the end of this season.”

Suddenly, the two men were quiet for a moment. They did not know what to say. Finally, MacDonald pointed to the gate and asked, “Roy, who are you looking for?”

Keane shook his head, “No one, I’m here for the training.”

Upon hearing this, MacDonald’s mouth fell open in disbelief.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m just here to train, not to sign on with Nottingham Forest. Mr. Twain invited me here to train so that I can stay fit and maintain my condition.”

MacDonald nodded in understanding, “Please wait for a moment. I’ll inform him.” MacDonald walked into the guardhouse and dialed Twain’s number to tell him that Keane had arrived.

In less than five minutes, Twain strode out. When he saw Keane standing at the gate, he waved to him happily. “Come in. Be careful though; the media, wherever they’re hiding, are going to think that you’re joining Forest!”

Keane said goodbye to MacDonald and walked in.

“Generally, my team practices twice a day. I thought you would only come this afternoon.”

“Well, I’m used to it.”

“Come on, let’s go straight to the locker room. I’ll assign you a locker. I’m sure the boys will be shocked to see you! I haven’t told anyone that you’re coming here to train.” Twain winked at Keane, his expression like a child looking forward to a successful prank.

※※※

The locker room was very lively. The Forest players casually chatted as they changed into their training clothes. Everyone was present.

At that point, they suddenly heard their manager's loud voice outside the door. "Hey, guys! Let me introduce you to a new... teammate!"

Just as he spoke, the door was pushed open.

Twain stood at the door and looked at the crowd as they turned. He was satisfied that his yell had attracted everyone's attention. Next, he took a step aside and waved towards the outside of the door at the same time.

A man then appeared at the door, and everyone in the locker room was stunned when they saw him.

With everyone stunned into silence, Twain was satisfied. He smiled.

Amidst the silence, Keane raised his hand and said hello to them. "Hey."

"Ke... Keane?" said Wes Morgan. He still could not believe that the man standing in front of him was Manchester United's captain and their opponent, Roy Keane.

"Chief, what's going on here?" Ribéry turned to look at the grinning Twain. "Why is... is the captain of Manchester United here..."

Twain cleared his throat. "Don't you watch the news, Franck? Roy just dissolved his contract with Manchester United."

"So, you signed him?" Someone asked.

Twain shook his head, "No. Before Roy finds a new club, I've asked him to come here and train to keep fit and maintain his condition."

"A new club? Why can't it be us?"

"Because... Roy doesn't want to become Manchester United's opponent in the English Premier League." Twain stole a glance at Roy who stood beside him, expressionless.

"Ah, that's a shame! I was looking forward to becoming teammates with Keane..."

"I got excited for nothing!"

Keane looked at the grumbling men. They were his competitors not long ago. At that time, he had never thought that he would be in his opponent's locker room like this. Life was truly marvelous, and he felt wonderful.

"All right, guys, you should get out there." Twain clapped his hands and the players who had changed their clothes went out.

Twain brought Keane to a locker without a name tag. "You can use this one for now."

Keane Nodded.

"Does it feel a little awkward?"

Keane glanced at Twain. "No."

"Okay, that's good. I'll go out first."

※※※

During training, there would always be a player who would cast his gaze in interest over at the other side of the field. Roy Keane was conducting systematic training by himself over there. He did not train with the team but practiced alone.

Twain handed the team training over to his assistant manager, David Kerslake. He then walked towards Keane.

“Do you need me to get a coach over, Roy?”

Keane declined Twain’s kindness. “No need, I’m training according to Manchester United’s training program. Your coaches have their own programs. It’s not the same.”

“You still remember those?”

Keane Nodded.

“I forgot that you want to a coach. Of course, you pay attention to the team training. Well, if you need any help, call me.” After that, Twain turned and walked Back.

After a while, Twain signaled for the team to stop training so that they could conduct small group matches. The twenty-three players on the First Team were divided into three teams. Each team consisted of eight players who would compete in one half of the field. The losers had to do push-ups as a forfeit and the winners continued to stay on the field until another team defeated them. Each game was limited to ten minutes. Whichever team scored the first goal would win. If no one scored in the ten minutes, the winner would be determined through penalty kicks.