

TOWN WAIT FOR SPURS SLIP-UP

A CLOUD of anxiety hangs over Luton today. Its centre is dense over Kenilworth Road with its edges wisping out to the villages around the town.

For every Luton fan must wait until 9.10 tonight to know if their team are relegated. If Spurs, at home to Leeds, pick up just one point they stay up — and Luton dive back into Division Two.

There's not a soul from Kenilworth Road going to White Hart Lane tonight. They can't stand the tension.

Manager Harry Haslam has shrugged off the budget and bought himself a huge stock of cigarettes to see him through tonight's reserve game against Brighton.

"I can't go," he said. "Spurs win every time I go there."

Even his 15-year-old son Keith, a Luton fanatic, is staying at home. "I'm like dad," he said. "I seem to be lucky for Spurs. I'm going to stay at home and shout for Leeds."

And Luton coach Roy McCrohan is taking his wife for a car ride. He doesn't even want to hear progress reports over the Luton loudspeakers.

The terrible thing about it is that we should never have been in this nail-biting position. Luton could have pulled clear from the bottom against this mediocre opposition weeks ago.

Evidence

Pulling a sad face over his beer, Luton skipper Alan West told me: "I am so disappointed for the fans. They have been marvellous to us. Please thank them from myself and all the lads."

"If we go down I am sorry. But we will be straight back. On the evidence of the second half of this season I believe we are good enough to stay up. We should certainly be good enough to win the Second Division."

"I'll be rooting for Leeds tonight — from Kenilworth Road. They'll be playing a bit, I can tell you. There's a great competition for places in the European Cup Final team. They all want to do well."

Unfortunately nerves played a big part in Luton's draw against City on Saturday, being jittery at best.

Great tears appeared in the usual, calm curtain of Luton's defence. Bad passes squirted from midfield. There were mis-hit shots from the fraught, untidy penalty area.

Mr Haslam summed up: "We were playing the wrong team on the wrong pitch on the wrong day."

By which he meant that the skills of Manchester City were just right for the bumpy pitch

on a day Luton were desperate to succeed.

They so nearly chucked it away.

City soon settled and Tueart scored on a quick break after Jimmy Ryan had lost control in midfield.

Shot

And four minutes later they almost had another when Barber touched a fierce shot from the effervescent Daniels on to his bar.

The longer the game went on the less Luton looked like scoring. But the fans would have none of it. They roared with expectancy everytime Luton got the ball.

In the 68th minute Mr Haslam sacrificed a defender — Steve Litt — for Andy King, who has scored 18 goals for the reserves this season, and Luton began to fight again.

Litt had done a good job in defence, and it was tactics that brought him off. In fact there was an exchange of words between the Luton manager and director Mr Jim Richardson after the match about the incident.

But the manager's point was proved when, two minutes later, Alston had a good-looking header disallowed for apparently fouling the goalkeeper.

But in a further two minutes Luton were level. Jimmy Ryan hit the ball from the right into the goalmouth, and with both King and Alston going in, Corrigan took his eye off the ball, and it went straight into the net.

The roar that went up must

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Barber, John Ryan, Buckley, Anderson, Faulkner, Litt, Jim Ryan, Husband, Alston, West, Aston. Sub: King.

MANCHESTER CITY: Corrigan, Hammond, Donachie, Doyle, Booth, Oakes, Hartford, Bell, Marsh, Daniels, Tueart. Sub: Keegan.

REFEREE: Mr D. Wallace (Crewe).

TUEART (Manchester City) in 13 minutes.

JIM RYAN (Luton) in 72 minutes

ATTENDANCE: 20,768

have halted the shoppers in the town centre.

Afterwards Alston said: "The first goal was a good one. I never touched the goalie. There was nothing wrong with it."

And King, who played his first League match, commented cheekily on the goal: "I could have got a touch to it, but I thought I'd let Jimmy have it."

What did he think about the First Division? "It was so fast it's not true. Donachie went past me once and I didn't even see him."

There'll be lots of rubbing of rabbits' feet, walking round ladders and touching wood in Luton today.

See you at White Hart Lane tonight.

■ Martin Chivers, the forgotten man of football, is standing by for a dramatic recall to save Spurs from the Second Division.

Manager Terry Neill is ready to gamble by plunging the bearded Chivers back into the side against European Cup finalists Leeds United.

Also standing by is the ex-Burnley star Ralph Coates as centre-half Osgood and skipper Perryman both needed stitches after defeat at Arsenal.



■ Jimmy Ryan forces in Luton's vital equaliser against Manchester City



■ Adrian Alston clumbs high to nod the ball in. But the goal is disallowed for pushing