

Atonement

The train puffed like a gasping miner and trundled into Treherbert Station. Hordes of men in red and white clambered on into the third class compartments checking that they had their match tickets in their pockets and their train tickets for the return from Cardiff. England was the team to beat and today was the big day for the Triple Crown and the Grand Slam. In their glistening white kit they resembled angels of death and seemed to be much bigger than the Welsh players who looked like pictures on cigarette cards. The English players were mainly drawn from Public School privilege and were the aristocracy of the five nations which were involved in this great tournament. The Welsh players were drawn from two strata of Welsh society. The 'backs' were middle class professionals; teachers and doctors and other university graduates, whereas the forwards were miners and steelworkers; the latter often still wearing the coal dust from the Friday shift which, so it was believed, would give them extra strength for the fight. On that day, Ireland, Scotland and French scalps were 'in the bag'. The Championship all depended on today's showdown at Cardiff Arms Park; the Rugby Union cathedral.

On our arrival at Queen Street Station we disgorged into the Cardiff streets, a flood of Welsh 'hwyl' surging down St. Mary's Street to the ground. As the tide gathered pace I found that I had to run alongside my father to keep up with him. We entered the ground like the river Taff in flood, and raced through the clicking turnstiles into the tunnel under the stand. To my horror I discovered that I was running alongside a complete stranger who was definitely not my father. In a panic I ascended the next stairway into the ground itself only to be faced with sixty thousand fans singing 'Calon Lan'. "Are you lost boyo?" asked a kindly man in a red scarf and dai-cap. "I can't find my father" I replied. At which point he lifted me on high and passed me to his neighbour as if in an extended line-out. "Lost boy for the Enclosure" they shouted as I travelled on high to my destination like a sack of coal. Miracle of miracles, there in the Enclosure was my father! "What happened to you"? he grinned – fully aware of the traditional procedure for recovering lost boys.

One of the best known stories in the New Testament is told by St. Luke. (chapter 15 verse 11 onwards.) The younger son can't wait for his inheritance, which would be his in the fullness of time. He wanted independence and adventure so he asked for his share of the property and left home for a distant country. He squandered his wealth in reckless living. Life took a turn for the worse so he decided to return home where he was welcomed by his father's open arms. The older brother complained bitterly and accused his father of favouritism. The 'punch-line' of the story is particularly poignant for me personally; 'This son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is now found.'

I know what it feels like to be lost and then found because 'I was there' on that great day when Wales won the Triple Crown and the Championship of the Five Nations! The score in that International Match has been forgotten in the mist of time. The Salvation experience has remained forever in my memory.

The Match was a religious experience apart from the panic of being lost and the joy of being found. Sixty thousand 'Instant Christians' singing 'Bread of Heaven'; the jubilation expressed in roars of appreciation at the skill of Doctor Bleddyn Williams or Haydn Tanner; even the lament at a missed penalty or anger at a disallowed try: these things were inspiring! Is God Welsh I asked myself?
