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BRAINS IN THE FEET

By H. E. BATES

FOOTBALLERS, said Bernard Shaw, think with their feet. I have also been told, and have been rather flattered by it, that I think with the pores of my skin. This would be as good a reason as any other for my thinking that football is the most beautiful game in the world if it were not that about twenty million people in this country apparently think the same.

Whenever I go to Wembley I get the momentary recurrence of a strange impression. It is that in spite of all the intensity of my Englishness I am English no longer. I am back in the arenas, a citizen of Verona, a Roman, or a Legionnaire sitting on the terraces of that beautiful theatre at Orange, about to watch a gladiatorial display. The coloured banners are flying against the thin winter sky, the pink seeds of thousands of faces are budding and flowering into quivering sections of red or scarlet or blue or tartan petals. Then a slow whisperted roar rises and the excited petals begin to be scattered in air. The gladiators march slowly up from their shadowy tunnel into the light of afternoon and the pores of my skin start dancing, ready to do my thinking for me.

I think we sometimes forget, or take for granted, the unique beauty of this game. It is the only ball game in the world played with the feet. In its simplicity it makes a mockery of all the complicated paraphernalia of golf or even the sly and contradictory subtleties of cricket. All other variations of it, Rugby, Australian or American, have removed from it the handicap that makes it unique, and thus are bastard. This game alone is true football, played within those narrow restrictions that, like the unities in the theatre, are the terror and test of the artist.

I do not say that Little Puddlemund Wanderers or the team from the local biscuit works thinks of it like this or even remotely begins to play it like this. I am talking now of the game as played by England last Wednesday, when gallant Wales, who had arrived with the traditional fire of Nonconformist dragonry about them, were on occasion made to look not much more effective than a string of boys of brave and rather bewildered earnestness from the local chapel.

They were by no means the first travellers at Wembley to be given a lesson of composed and icy beauty by an England team. But as if this were not enough they also had a special lesson in advanced techniques from Jack Froggatt, back through injury at his old place at outside left, and Tom Finney. I will not say that, with that amazing two-footed walking-dribble of his, Finney went through the match with composed contempt. But sometimes it looked like that, and when he aboofly wrapped the entire Welsh defence in a mesmeric parcel and made the third and finest goal of the match, marvelously leaded in by Froggatt, I felt I could hear the walls of tabernacles falling from as far away as, shall we say, Torquandy.

Plebeian Poetry

There is one thing I miss at Wembley. It is the air of fading and sporty pubbery that hangs about the purloined of such older grounds as Tottenham. In that faded and fascinating piece of London the pubs are still the true temples of the game. I have seen Americans there, sitting at bare wooden tables with plates of boiled beef and carrots and black-handled ale-house cutlery, wrapped in astonishing dreams. They have suddenly become aware that they are back in Dickensian London. An Arizona character is sunk, half-asleep in seedy greatcoat, in the corner by the bar. He is idling, and has been waiting for the last fifty years, for a game to begin. The walls are hung with mous-fachioed pictures of his memories. Greens and boiled potatoes and pink congealing slices of meat in watery gravy come clattering down in batches of five or six plates at a time on a wobbling and ancient service lift, and the voice of a fleshy barmaid goes warm and wheedling up the tube:

"Save half a dozen roast muttuns for me reglers, willyer Fred?"

Odd that there has never been, as far as I know, a book of any consequence about this game: its beauty, its enormous fascination for every kind and colour of man across the face of the earth, its touch of pageanted, gladiatorial rivalry, its science, its social significance (on second thoughts no! for heaven's sake), its pubbery, its reglers, above all the touch of plebeian poetry about its names.

That air of something medieval about Tottenham Hotspur: that bit of fine feather about Leyton Orient, and what used to be all the proud sturdiness of the Midlands in Leicester Fosse until Leicester went all civic and changed it, alas, to City. Then the rolling rhythms of Wolverhampton Wanderers and Plymouth Argyle and Accrington Stanley and West Bromwich Albion and Aston Villa and Preston North End—coloured, superb, dashing names. Then something of the air of pulchre about the nicknames—the Blades, the Canaries, the Gunners, the Pensilvers, the Cobblers—and then the Classic touch of Pegasus and Pompey.

Odd that no writer has felt inspired about it all. Odd that all the poetry has been poured on cricket, while this intelligent and lovely game, even more the expression of us has been left to itself by literature. Perhaps it is enough after all, that it is just another one of those things we gave to the world.