

## The Wheel by G.M.Brown

ON Saturday night in the fishermen's pub there's always plenty of noise and smoke. By nine o'clock you can hardly see the bottles at the far end of the bar for reek, and you have to shout to make yourself heard by the man at your elbow. There's darts and arguments and dominoes and stories going on all round, and the erratic jingling commerce of silver and glass across the bar.

At five past nine, as always, Robert appeared at the door. He said in his coarse throaty voice, 'Have any o' you men seen Walls?'

At once there was silence. The dart thrower held his hand. The drinkers paused in the act of lifting their pints. Old Tom the barman's hand froze on the lever. The whole pub was turned to stone for about one second.

'No,' said old Tom, 'he hasn't betn here tonight.'

Robert turned and shambled out through the door.

Immediately the pub resumed its normal life. The dart flew at the board. The pints rose and fell. Money and glasses rang on the counter. The farmers sitting round the table laughed and pressed their knees. Everything went on as before, with perhaps a little more abandon, now that Robert had taken the gorgon's head away.

Robert followed the same ritual every Saturday night. His first visit was to the pub. His next call was to the Salvation Army ring at the pierhead.

The band and songsters were rendering 'Count your Blessings' when Robert arrived. He walked slowly over the cobbles and stood behind Miriam, a girl with big grey eyes and golden hair.

'Has Walls been here tonight?' he whispered to her.

Miriam, still singing, shook her head and smiled gently at Robert. One by one the girl Salvationists shook their heads at him. 'No,' whispered Miriam through the brazen clamour, 'not tonight. But some day soon we'll all be seeing him.'

Robert looked closely at the three men there, as if the face of Walls might be concealed under one of those black brims and blood-and-fire badges, behind one of those shining joyous instruments; for hadn't Walls once joined the Army in a fit of repentance after a drunken spree, and learned to play the cornet before he lapsed again. . . ? But none of those faces belonged to the lost one. Robert turned away slowly.

He walked up the street to a narrow two-storey house. There the holy rag-time was no longer audible. He opened the outer door and climbed slowly upstairs. At the top of the house he tapped at a door with a printed notice on it: H. Leask, Dressmaker.

'Come in, Robert,' cried a deep voice from inside. Robert tip-toed in and sat down beside the fern.

A huge red-faced woman was seated at a sewing-machine, working on a dress for a young girl, half-finished, covered with alternate roses and swallows. All the time the woman spoke to Robert she went on working.

'What's new in the town tonight?' she said.

'There's nothing new at all,' said Robert, 'except that Harold the shepherd was disgraceful drunk in the pub, and the Army's given Miriam a new red band for her bonnet.'

'Fancy that,' said the woman.

There was a long difficult silence. Then Robert said, slowly and hesitatingly, 'I'm thinking o' turning owre the tattie patch in the morning...and I wanted to tell Walls...so he could order a load o' dung. . . but he hasna been home. . .and I was wondering. . .' His words trailed off into silence.

'You was wondering what?' said the woman patiently.

'I was wondering. . . the way he's always coming back and fore here . . . maybe . . . if he was, you ken . . . up here beside you ?' She looked at Robert with her black eyes and said, 'No, Robert, I'm sorry to say he hasna been up here at all tonight, or any other night this while back.'

'O well, then I'll be going,' said Robert,

getting to his feet.

She stopped work, listening to his clumsy feet going down the stair. She put her hand across her eyes and bent her head over the cloud of cotton, over the crumpled wings and crumpled petals. Her face was blank and streaming.

After that, Robert walked up the hill between the fields, to a stone house that looked out over the islands and the burning hills. He walked slowly now, as if he was afraid of something.

Even before he reached the door, as he stood lurching and hesitant on the gravel, it was opened by a neat little man with a beard and a grey polo-neck jersey. 'You'll be wanting to know about Walls,' said the man.

'Yes, captain,' said Robert timidly. 'Maybe you can tell me, for I mind him saying he might be coming to you for a reference, if he decides to go to the whaling next year.'

'I'll tell you,' said the man, 'the same as I've told you every Saturday night for the last two years.'

'No,' said Robert, 'don't tell me that.'

'I will tell you,' said the man, 'for it's the truth, and the sooner you realize it the better.'

'No,' said Robert, 'never mind, I'll go home.'

The old sailor seized him by the arm. 'Listen,' he said, in a loud angry voice. 'Walls is cold and in his grave. Didn't I see him laid out in the mortuary? Didn't I take the head of his coffin when we carried him to the kirkyard? Didn't I put a stone up for him, with his name and his years carved on it?'

Robert shook himself free. He gave the little man one terrified look. Then he turned between the new daffodils and the fuchsia bush on to the road. His feet shuffled and knocked into each other in his haste to be gone. 'You better behave yourself,' yelled the old sailor after him. 'You better not come annoying folk every Saturday night, asking after a dead man! There's places for fools like you! Now I'm warning you!'

At home in the little stone house at the edge of the pier, Robert laid the table for two, as he always did, and put on the kettle to boil. He opened

a drawer in the dresser and thumbed through a pile of letters and cuttings. At last he found the scrap of newspaper he was looking for. He put on his steel spectacles, and sitting down in the straw-back chair beside the fire read the print on it:

'Last Saturday night a sad discovery was made, when the body of a local sailor William Walls was found at low tide among the rocks under his own pier. Mr Walls, who was fifty years of age, was of a jovial disposition, and will be much missed by his many friends in the locality. The news came as a particular shock to Mr Walls' cronies with whom he had spent a happy evening only a matter of hours before the tragic discovery was made. For some years he sailed in the Swallow Line under Captain Stevens, a distinguished son of the islands. Mr Walls was a bachelor, and lived at the South End with his friend Mr Robert Jansen, with whom sympathy is expressed at this time. The funeral, which was well attended, took place to the local cemetery on Tuesday afternoon, and was conducted by Lieutenant Rogers of the Salvation Army, with which sect the deceased had been connected at one period in his career.

Robert carefully replaced the cutting in the drawer. He put a spoon of sugar and a spurt of milk into each cup. He took two eggs out of the box and broke them into the pan; then, after a moment's hesitation, he broke a third egg into the pan. 'Walls is always hungry for his supper on a Saturday night, after the drink,' he murmured. 'What a man for eggs!'