

## The Breadwinner

by Leslie Halward.

The parents of a boy of fourteen were waiting for him to come home with his first week's wages.

The mother had laid the table and was cutting some slices of bread and butter for tea. She was a little woman with a thin face and a spare body, dressed in a blue blouse and skirt, the front of the skirt covered with a starched white apron. She looked tired and frequently sighed heavily.

The father, sprawling inelegantly in an old armchair by the fireside, legs outstretched, was little too. He had watery blue eyes and a heavy brown moustache, which he sucked occasionally.

These people were plainly poor, for the room, though clean, was meanly furnished, and the thick pieces of bread and butter were the only food on the table.

As she prepared the meal, the woman from time to time looked contemptuously at her husband. He ignored her, raising his eyebrows, humming, or tapping his teeth now and then with his finger-nails, making a pretence of being profoundly bored.

"You'll keep your hands off the money," said the woman, obviously repeating something that she had already said several times before. "I know what'll happen to it if you get hold of it. He'll give it to me. It'll pay the rent and buy us a bit of food, and not go into the till at the nearest public-house."

"You shut your mouth," said the man, quietly.

"I'll not shut my mouth!" cried the woman, in a quick burst of anger. "Why should I shut my mouth? You've been boss here for long enough. I put up with it when you were bringing money into the house, but I'll not put up with it now. You're nobody here. Understand? Nobody. I'm boss and he'll hand the money to me!"

"We'll see about that," said the man, leisurely poking the fire.

Nothing more was said for about five minutes.

Then the boy came in. He did not look older than ten or eleven years. He looked absurd in long trousers. The whites of his eyes against his black face gave him a startled expression.

His father got to his feet.

"Where's the money?" he demanded.

The boy looked from one to the other. He was afraid of his father. He licked his pale lips.

"Come on now," said the man. "Where's the money?"

"Don't give it to him," said the woman. "Don't give it to him, Billy. Give it to me."

The father advanced on the boy, his teeth showing in a snarl under his big moustache.

"Where's the money?" he almost whispered.

The boy looked him straight in the eyes.

"I lost it," he said.

"You – what?" cried his father.

"I lost it," the boy repeated.

The man began to shout and wave his hands about.

"Lost it! Lost it! What are you talking about? How could you lose it?"

"It was in a packet," said the boy, " a little envelope. I lost it."

"Where did you lose it?"

"I don't know. I must have dropped it in the street."

"Did you go back and look for it?"

The boy nodded. "I couldn't find it," he said.

The man made a noise in his throat, half grunt, half moan – the sort of noise that an animal would make.

"So you lost it, did you?" he said. He stepped back a couple of paces and took off his belt – a wide, thick belt with a heavy brass buckle. "Come here," he said.

The boy, biting his lower lip so as to keep back the tears, advanced and the man raised his arm. The woman, motionless until that moment, leaped forward and seized it. Her husband, finding strength in his blind rage, pushed her aside easily. He brought the belt down on the boy's back. He beat him unmercifully about the body and legs. The boy sank to the floor, but did not cry out.

When the man had spent himself, he put on the belt and pulled the boy to his feet.

"Now you'll get off to bed," he said.

"The lad wants some food," said the woman.

"He'll go to bed. Go and wash yourself."

Without a word the boy went into the scullery and washed his hands and face. When he had done this he went straight upstairs.

The man sat down at the table, ate some bread and butter and drank two cups of tea. The woman ate nothing. She sat opposite him, never taking her eyes from his face, looking with hatred at him. Just as before, he took no notice of her, ignored her, behaved as if she were not there at all.

When he had finished the meal he went out.

Immediately he had shut the door the woman jumped to her feet and ran upstairs to the boy's room.

He was sobbing bitterly, his face buried in the pillow. She sat on the edge of the bed and put her arms about him, pressed him close to her breast, ran her fingers through his disordered hair, whispered endearments, consoling him. He let her do this, finding comfort in her caresses, relief in his own tears.

After a while his weeping ceased. He raised his head and smiled at her, his wet eyes bright. Then he put his hand under the pillow and withdrew a small dirty envelope.

"Here's the money," he whispered.

She took the envelope and opened it and pulled out a long strip of paper with some figures on it – a ten shilling note and a sixpence.

(926 words)