

***THE CRUISE OF THE  
BREADWINNER***

**H. E. Bates**

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**A**S SHE WENT DOWN THE ESTUARY ON THE YELLOW tide between wintry stretches of salt-white marshland, *The Breadwinner* had the look of a discarded and battered toy. She was one of those small lugsail fishing boats that in peace-time lie up the mud reaches of southern rivers, going out on one tide and back on the next, indistinguishable from hundreds of her kind. Her deck-house, not much larger than a dog-kennel and once painted butchers' blue, was now daubed with broad veins of war-grey put on with a whitewash brush, and her sail had been furled untidily to the mast like a copper umbrella. On all her grey fabric they were the only touches of colour except the white lettering of her name. Aft she carried a Lewis gun that had never been fired in the twenty years between the wars, and that had now

something of the appearance of a patent frying-pan. She looked very old and very slow. Yet in ten minutes she had cleared the estuary and the long sandy point beyond and was well to seaward, heading due east up the Channel, rolling slightly on the light westward cross-wind of the early day.

Gregson stood at the wheel in the thirty-eight inches of space that separated it from the hatchway. He could just squeeze himself in. The curve of his belly caught the spokes of the wheel where they met the hub. In the course of months this friction would rub a neat oblong hole in the three layers of his jerseys, going finally down to the seam of his shirt. When this happened Gregson would turn the three jerseys round and wear them back to front. He had once been a man of six feet three, but now he had the slight downward curve of a man who is constantly about to stoop to pick something up but sees only the eighteen-stone mass of his own flesh hiding whatever it was he was trying to find below. Sometimes when he held the wheel in one hand and turned his massive grey head first skyward, to look at the weather, and then downward, to bawl at the crew of two below, he was so enormous and he held the wheel so casually that it might have been a watch.

All day he bawled blasting conversation into the hatch below.

“Gittin’ that tea ready, Snowy?”

“Yeh!” The boy’s voice from below was drawled out, and sometimes, when surprised, squeaky because it had not fully broken.

“Well then, git it ready!”

“Yeh!”

“Yeh what? What did I tell you?”

“I dunno.”

“You dunno eh? Well, I’ll bleedin’ make you know. Ain’t I allus told you call the skipper mister? Ain’t that what I told ye? Ain’t it?”

“Yeh.”

“Yeh what?”

“Yeh, mister——”

“It don’t matter now! Too late! Git that tea!”

If there was ever a smile on the face of Gregson as he yelled all this, the boy, down below, warming the enamel teapot on the stove of a galley three feet by four, never saw it. It appeared to him always as if Gregson were a man of unappeasable frenzy.

“How’s that injun going, Jimmy?”

Gregson never succeeded in getting an answer to that question first time. It was Jimmy’s excuse that the noise of the

eighteen-horse auxiliary drowned even what Gregson could say.

“Jimmy!”

“Hullo.”

Jimmy came and stood at the foot of the gangway, dark and pessimistic, looking up, mouth awry, as if the left side of his face were paralytic with pain. He was a man given to violent depressions and upliftings of temper for no reason at all. “Hullo?” he said again. The word had in it the slow challenge of a man full of all sorts of unknown and incalculable trouble. It was partly inspired by habitual dislike of everything aboard and about and belonging to *The Breadwinner*. It was partly the voice of a man weary of the nuisances of a lousy small boat that should have been on the scrap-heap, with a rotten engine in need of a re-bore that was for ever breaking down. It was an exceedingly long-suffering voice, and the fact that Gregson never noticed it, or seemed to ignore it if he did, made it more long-suffering still. But it was also partly the voice of a man whose larger pleasure in life is the pleasure of grievance. It was inversely happy among the miseries of *The Breadwinner*. At home Jimmy had a wife and three small children, and it was he who would fire the Lewis gun if ever it were fired.

“I said how’s that injun?”

“I told you last time. And the time afore that. And the time afore that.”

“Don’t tell me it ain’t no good, because I know different.”

“It ain’t so much it ain’t no good. What I keep tellin’ on yer is we oughta git two engines. Not one. We oughta git two fourteen-horse engines, instead of one eighteen-horse, so’s if one goes, we got a spare.”

“And supposin’ both go?”

“It ain’t likely.”

“No, it ain’t likely. And it ain’t likely I’ll git the money either. Where’s the money coming from?”

“Git the Government to pay it! They got plenty. They throw it about enough, don’t they? Git them to pay it. We’re on government work, ain’t we?”

There were times when Gregson pushed his belly tight against the wheel and held it savagely there and did not answer, and he did it most often when Jimmy talked about the Government. Gregson did not care for the Government. The Government was some huge, anonymous, thwarting, stingy, stinking body empowered to frustrate the lives of ordinary men. Gregson felt for it a more positive enmity than he felt for any

living person, enemy or friend. “Don’t talk about no bloody government to me.”

“Well, don’t say I ain’t told yer. One o’ these fine days we’ll get out there, forty miles from nowhere, and she’ll go dead on you. And then what?”

“And then what?” Gregson roared. “What the bleedin’ hell d’ye think wind and sail is for?”

Gregson stuck his belly harder than ever against the wheel, holding on with both hands, and was silent, looking at the day. Behind him he could see now the coast of England becoming slowly more coloured in the blue-orange light of morning, with low clean stretches of deserted sand marked as far as he could see with what looked like the rusty stitchery of steel defences, and farther east the sun rising dark red over the terraced and almost all empty white and crimson houses that lay under the line of hills. It was from these hills, becoming still further eastward cliffs that came down to the sea like the carved edges of creamy glaciers, that Gregson saw the first patrol of the day.

“Snowy!”

“Yeh?”

“Planes!”

The boy Snowy came bouncing on deck like a blonde and excited rabbit surprised

out of a hole, carrying a teacup in one hand and blinking friendly blue eyes against the strong sea-light. He looked no more than seventeen, his white-yellow hair blown forward by the wind in one thick swathe over his face as he turned to gaze at the land.

“Bunch o’ Spits, ain’t they, Snowy?” Gregson said.

“Hurricanes.”

Gregson did not speak. The boy knew everything; there was no arguing with the boy. Gregson believed that if an entirely new and undocumented plane had come out of the Arctic the boy would have given it a name. The boy knew everything that flew, and a lot, Gregson thought, that had not yet begun to fly. He named them while they were still gnats on the horizon. He could name them at twenty thousand feet, and sometimes by mere sound, not seeing them at all. Without him Gregson would have been utterly lost; *The Breadwinner* could never have done a single patrol.

“Looks like a nice day, anyway,” Gregson said, as if that at least were something he could understand.

The boy stood watching the squadron of Hurricanes resolve itself out of the east. It came straight over the cliffs, in two flights line astern, with straight and fine precision,

quite slow, wings shining in the sun, as if each aircraft were tied by an invisible string to the other, and then turned westward to follow the line of shore. The noise of engines was never loud enough to drown the noise of *The Breadwinner's* single auxiliary, but it was loud and beautiful enough to bring the engineer-gunner on deck.

"Hurricanes," Gregson said, before the boy could open his mouth.

"Steady, steady. They might be Spits," Jimmy said.

"Ah, Spits your old woman," Gregson said. "Use your eyes."

"One missing," the boy said. "Man short."

"Hell, that they is too," Gregson said. "I never twigged it. Snowy ain't half got a pair, of eyes, ain't he?"

"Just as well," Jimmy said.

Gregson turned to look hard at the engineer, but Jimmy had even in that moment disappeared down the hatchway. On deck the boy followed the course of the Hurricanes over against the thin line of shore with eyes that were lightly fixed in a dream. He was lost in the wonder of contemplation, even when Gregson spoke again.

"Tea ready yit?"

“Just made,” the boy said.

“Ah, that’s me old beauty. That’s a boy. Bring us a cup up, Snowy. I got a throat like a star-fish.”

The boy was already going below.

“And you better stop on deck then and do your look-out. Looks like a flying day, don’t it?”

The boy said yes, it was a flying day all right, and went down into the galley below and then came back, after a moment or two, with the tea. The cup was a double-size moustache cup that Gregson took and held in one hand like an egg. He began to drink where he stood, plunging his face into the cup and then holding cup and face pressed close together with the palm of his hand. As Gregson drank the boy went forward and stood in the place where he stood on every patrol, in the bows, leaning forward and slightly over the boat’s side, like a light figurehead. He went there every morning irritated by the slightest recurrent grievance against Gregson. Long ago, soon after the war had begun, when he had first become boy on *The Breadwinner*, Gregson had promised him a pair of binoculars. Once a week, ever since, the boy had asked Gregson about the glasses, but there was never any sign of them. It appeared

to the boy as if Gregson forgot all about them, not deliberately but sometimes out of sheer ineptitude. And then sometimes it seemed as if he forgot them purely by reason of belonging to the larger, more preoccupied, more adult world. Then sometimes he found himself slightly afraid of Gregson; but it was a fear purely of size, of the enormity and noisiness of Gregson's flesh. It never matched the enormity of his disappointment at Gregson's constantly unfulfilled promise about the binoculars. To have had the binoculars would have been the most exciting thing on earth: a greater thing than the sea-rescue of a pilot, the wreck of a plane, or even the firing of the Lewis gun. He had longed for all these things to happen on all the patrols of *The Breadwinner* with a bright and narrow desire that kept him awake at night and brought him down to the jetty in the mornings running and with bits of his breakfast still in his hands. But the realization of them would have been nothing beside the sight of Gregson coming down the street between the black fish warehouses carrying a brown leather case over his oilskins.

As he took up his place in the bows he could feel the wind light and smooth on his face as it came out of the west. It had in it