

The Boy Fisherman

Persian Folk Story

Once upon a time there was a poor village boy who had several younger brothers and sisters. His father had died and his mother did nothing but housework. Everyday this boy would go fishing at the sea-shore and fish so his family could eat.

The child was very clever and smart but he had no opportunity to play, instead he spent the entire day at the shore so he could catch as many fish as possible. There were always other children at the shore who would be playing but he always picked a corner far away. He would toss his small fishing net and sit motionless waiting for the fish to come. Everyday he thought "If there are a lot of fish today, tomorrow I can relax". But there were always few fish and never a tomorrow. After all he was a child with a mother and six younger brothers and sisters. A family of eight can eat a lot. The only joy that the boy had was that his mother and the other children considered him the man of the family. And with that came responsibilities.

One day Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi and his riding party had come to the sea for an excursion. After resting at his sea-side castle a while he got bored. He mounted his horse and began to ride alone along the shore.

The weather was nice and the sea calm. The people along the sea-shore were going about their own business. Kids were playing in groups large and small. Fishermen were coming from and going to the sea. Groups were bathing in the ocean or resting beneath the sun or in the shade. Men and women of the village were working at the edge of their gardens and land. The Sultan was watching this when he arrived at the secluded place where the boy was sitting far from the other people. It was obvious that he was paying attention to nothing besides his work.

The approaching horse made no sound on the sand. The Sultan came close to the boy and stopped. He looked at him for a while and saw that the boy was entertaining himself by quietly reciting a poem by Baba Taher:

"I have a heart like a bird with a broken wing
Like a ship on the sea-shore
Everyone says, 'Taher, play your tar'"

Sultan Mahmud realized that the boy was sad. He was moved and desired to encourage him. He dismounted his horse, went closer and asked, "My dear boy, what are you doing in this secluded corner?"

The boy turned his head and saw Mahmud with his clothes and horse and knew that, whoever he was, he was one of the kingdom's leaders. He said hello and answered, "I am fishing, like always. I am not able to play like those other kids, I am different than them!"

By uttering these words the boy had divulged all of his sadness. That he was different than the other children. That he always had to work so he couldn't play.

Mahmud said, "Very well, but playing doesn't cost anything, and one can always play alone."

The boy said, "But I must feed seven people, my mother and six children that are younger than me. You see my father drowned in the sea."

Mahmud said, "I understand. Very well, so how many fish do you catch every day?"

The child said, "One day less, one day more. The amount gets caught that allows us to have the strength to eat and not die. We do not want to beg and be troublesome to others."

Mahmud said, "Bravo! You are such a fine man!" Then, he thought he would find an excuse to help him. He asked, "Are you prepared to do something? Today I will help you fish and however much we catch, we will share with each other."

The child, who had grown tired of being alone and saw the Emir as kind, agreed in order to have some companionship. "I am ready, but with the condition that whatever gets caught, we split justly. You do not get a share more than mine."

Mahmud said, "I agree. You get two shares, I will take one."

The boy said, "No. Not like that. Giving so generously without purpose is not right. I never take anything from someone without a reason. Half are yours, half are mine."

The Sultan was pleased with the boy's great nature and agreed. He tied his horse to a boulder and said, "Fine, any fish that are already in the net are yours. We must take the net and start fresh."

They pulled in the modest net and there were no fish. The Sultan said, "Very well, but there are few fish here. There are more fish in that spot over there where it is a bit deeper." The Sultan took the net from the boy and threw it further and more to the middle of the water, gave the net to the boy and said, "Sit in the same place." Then he himself sat and spoke a bit while waiting for the fish. He asked the boy about his life and asked him to recite the poems and the tales that he knew. The Sultan then told several amusing stories and he was happy that the sad boy was at least entertained.

After a while the Sultan said, "Very well, now we shall draw in the net and see how many fish it has."

They drew in the net and it was filled with fish. The boy was very happy and said, "Oh my! Hundreds, Thousands! So many! I have never caught so many fish until now! It was always two, four, or maybe nothing at all! In my opinion you are a very lucky person!"

The Sultan said, "No my dear. It actually has nothing to do with luck. We threw the net to the middle of the sea where there are more fish."

The boy said, "Fine, now we must divide our shares. One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me. I shall never want more."

The Sultan said, "No, not like that. Today I was not prepared to fish, I was out for a stroll. Also, the net is yours, not mine and you had picked the spot yourself. All the fish from today are yours, whatever we do tomorrow; all of it will be for me. Is this a problem?"

The boy said, "Very well, but take two or three fish for yourself."

"No. We shouldn't confuse things." said the Sultan.

The boy said, "Agreed. These fish will be enough for my family for a number of days. So tomorrow we will be partners again right?"

The Sultan replied, "Yes we will. I am going now. We will meet at the same spot tomorrow. Goodbye until then!"

The Sultan returned home. The boy fisherman informed the town fishmonger and they came and took the fish. The fishmonger said, "You did very well today!" The boy answered, "Yes, today I partnered with a very good man. It is said that better work is done by working together. But today all the fish are mine. In exchange, tomorrow I will not have any. Tomorrow everything belongs to my partner."

The next morning at the same time the Sultan came to his sea-side castle and sent his jester by saying, "Go to that place on the beach and say to the little poor boy who is fishing there, 'Your partner from yesterday is waiting' and bring him with you."

The Sultan's jester went and gave the boy the Sultan's message. The boy was at first frightened but when he realized it was from Sultan Mahmud he thought to himself, "We have nothing for someone to take, and yesterday he wasn't a bad partner at all." So he collected his net, and he went with the Sultan's jester until they arrived at the castle of the Sultan.

The boy had thought that they had agreed to catch fish, like the day before. But the Sultan said, "Yesterday we were partners and today we will be again. Today we will not catch fish. Yesterday I helped you with your work and today you will help me with mine. This is not a problem is it?"

The boy said, "No. We agreed to work together today but yesterday your good fortune really helped me. I am afraid that my bad luck will not have a good effect on your work."

The Sultan said, "No my dear, luck has no meaning. There is a difference in the work and thoughts of people. If I had been fishing with small net like you were, nothing would have come of it. You also, if you had some other job, you would do it. Look, these are my friends. Isn't this one, like you, black skinned? Look at this one; ten years ago he was a war captive, now he is an army commander. My father was a slave of one of the emirs. Whatever befalls upon a man, he can advance to the best of his talent, thought, and hard work. In this world all work is the same and everyone has their job. In any case, we agreed that today we would work together but we have more essential and indispensable work than catching fish."

The boy said, "Fine, now what must I do?"

The Sultan said, "Nothing, you must sit here in our assembly and in every matter that comes up, we will consult with one another and then rule on it."

The boy said, "OK, today I am consulted on everything. This is what we are agreeing to."

Those that were present laughed when the boy said this and one of those close to the Sultan said quietly, "But he doesn't have the necessary skills and our work is very serious. Let him not give us any trouble."

The Sultan replied, "He will be no trouble. I have given my word."

For that day everything that was put forth for consideration was solved with the boy's help and consultation. There was a lot of matters that came up. One of the cases was that the Sultan wanted to build a big mosque and a large area of land was for sale but in the corner of the land an old woman had a house and she was not ready to sell her house for any price. The old woman had come and wanted to get a decision. The Sultan consulted with the boy about what must be done.

The boy said, "If the intention is to do good then it is not possible to force the old woman to sell her house. You must build the mosque in another place or you must have the old woman cooperate and name the mosque after her. In the same way that we are partners, is this alright"

The Sultan said, "If the old woman is satisfied it's not a problem." The old woman said, "By God, it's the same wish that I had." And the issue was ratified which made the boy happy.

Then they brought news that the Emir of Khorassan had rebelled, formed an army, was claiming leadership and wanted to attack the realm of the Qaznin. The Sultan said, "Now, come and let's fix it." He asked the boy, "What do you say must be done?"

The boy said, "You have a great job, but it is also a lot of trouble! In my opinion, if we make peace, it would be better."

The Sultan said, "A hard problem. It's not such a simple issue. It's a good time for peace when a party's word is true and there is little greed. When

someone says, "Everything is mine" it is not possible to make peace. You see, if I were to have taken two more fish than my share would you have been happy?"

The boy said, "Yes."

"How about if I wanted to take all the fish?" asked the Sultan.

"No. That would not be right." said the boy.

The Sultan said, "This is the same thing. We must stand up to them." (*When a weak minded person comes forth with force and stubbornness, one must stand up to them.*)

The boy said, "You know better than I do, but isn't it possible to give Khorassan to him so that we can relax? In the same way that we were going to split up our fish."

The Sultan said, "It is not possible. Because he was the Emir of Khorassan and this was his lot, that he would be Emir of Khorassan. But he was not content with this. Now he wants to attack us and he does not even own Khorassan! Now his imagination is satisfied with Khorassan his greed is becoming greater! And, if we give him Khorassan, tomorrow someone will want Balkh, someone else will want Tabrestan. Then, if we have given up most of our places we will have given away our power and authority and riots will occur and the people will toil and be troubled. Then what will Sultan Mahmud do?"

"Meaning, what will the two of us do?" said the boy.

The participants all laughed.

The boy said, "No. Truly I see that this is a complicated problem and I am not wise enough. Maybe it is better that we capture him and hang him!"

The Sultan said, "Don't go so fast! It is not that easy and he is not here in our assembly with his hands tied. You see, he is but one person that wants Khorassan and other things, and if he were alone he would not be thinking of attacking us, therefore he must have an army that is helping him and he has become proud. But those that are helping him do not want Khorassan and it is possible that they have seen in this emir that they would want to follow

him. First we must see what virtue he has that makes them want to follow him; it could be justice, smoothness with words, kindness, or wisdom, or something entirely different. We must recognize this virtue and first increase it in ourselves. Then we must stop him and if he surrenders and repents, then we must forgive him. But if he fights, we must conquer him. All of this needs thought, learning, equipment, and the cooperation of others."

"Now, where do we start?"

The boy said, "I believe you, forgiveness has its own place just like force. Unlike fishing, your work is very difficult, and I do not have any experience. If I were alone I would not know anything about what to do. It is good that I have a partner!"

The Sultan and the Ministers smiled and the emirs also agreed that the child was very bright and just.

The Sultan issued the necessary orders and then they completed the rest of their work. At sunset the boy said, "My time is up. I never work past sunset and now my mother and the children are waiting for me."

The Sultan said, "Very well, yesterday and today we were partners but the result of the work was very different and today we worked much more than yesterday and you can take as much money as your heart desires from the treasury! How much do you want?"

The boy said, "I do not want anything, our agreement was that one day would be mine one day would be yours and the result of today's work, whatever it is, belongs to you. Yesterday you did not agree to even two fish. I will also not agree to anything. It would confuse things!"

The Sultan said, "No, nothing will get mixed up. Yesterday we worked for two hours but today much more; therefore in order to not confuse things you must agree to a larger portion. Whatever you want."

The boy said, "Since it is like this, I will accept a fishing net and I imagine that I will catch twice as many fish. That way, tomorrow I will play!"

So that's what they did. Then the boy said, "Very well, the day after tomorrow I go back to work. If you want to partner, come."

The Sultan said, "You see how much work we have. If you want, you can come here every day and we can be partners."

The boy said, "My heart is with the sea"

The Sultan said, "Very well, but whenever you want work, we are here."

The boy said, "Thank you. If my net is full like it was yesterday then I will no longer have any need. I am very happy to have visited you but I love my work. By your kindness I now know how to catch more fish."

The boy said goodbye and took the net home. He was happy.

Translation by Larry Klein