

THE BOY WHO HOOKED THE SUN

by Gene Wolfe

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On the eighth day a boy cast his line into the sea. The Sun of the eighth day was just rising, making a road of gold that ran from its own broad, blank face all the way to the wild coastline of Atlantis, where the boy sat upon a jutting emerald; the Sun was much younger then and not nearly so wise to the ways of men as it is now. It took the bait.

The boy jerked his pole to set the hook, and grinned, and spat into the sea while he let the line run out. He was not such a boy as you or I have ever seen, for there was a touch of emerald in his hair, and there were flakes of sun-gold in his eyes. His skin was sun-browned, and his fingernails were small and short and a little dirty; so he was just such a boy as lives down the street from us both. Years ago the boy's father had sailed away to trade the shining stones of Atlantis for the wine and ram skins of the wild barbarians of Hellas, leaving the boy and his mother very poor.

All day the Sun thrashed and rolled and leaped about. Sometimes it sounded, plunging all the Earth into night, and sometimes it leaped high into the sky, throwing up sprays of stars. Sometimes it feigned to be dead, and sometimes it tried to wrap his line around the moon to break it. And the boy let it tire itself, sometimes reeling in and sometimes letting out more line; but through it all he kept a tight grip on the pole.

The richest man in the village, the money-lender, who owned the house where the boy and his mother lived, came to him, saying, "You must cut your line, boy, and let the Sun go. When it runs out, it brings winter and withers all the blossoms in my orchard. When you reel it in, it brings droughty August to dry all the canals that water my bar-ley fields. Cut your line!"

But the boy only laughed at him and pelted him with the shining stones of Atlantis, and at last the richest man in the village went away.

Then the strongest man in the vil-lage, ths smith, who could meet the charge of a wild ox and wrestle it to the ground, came to the boy, saying, "Cut your line, boy, or I'll break your neck."

But the boy only laughed at him and pelted him with the shining stones of Atlantis, and when the strongest man in the village seized him by the neck, he seized the strongest man in return and threw him into the sea, for the power of the Sun had run down the boy's line and entered into him.

Then the cleverest man in the vil-lage, the mayor, who could charm a rabbit into his kitchen — and many a terrified rabbit, and many a pheasant and partridge too, had fluttered and trembled there, when the door shut be-hind it and it saw the

knives — came to the boy saying, “Cut your line, my boy, and come with me! Henceforth, you and I are to rule in Atlantis. I’ve been conferring with the mayors of all the other villages; we have decided to form an empire, and you — none other! — are to be our king.”

But the boy only laughed at him and pelted him with the shining stones of Atlantis, saying, “Oh, really? A king. Who is to be emperor?” And after the cleverest man in the village had talked a great deal more, he went away.

Then the magic woman from the hills, the sorceress, who knew every future save her own, came to the boy, saying, “Little boy, you must cut your line. Sabaath sweats and trembles in his shrine and will no longer accept my offerings; the feet of Sith, called by the ignorant Kronos, son of Uranus, have broken; and the magic bird Tchataka has flown. The stars riot in the heavens, so that at one moment humankind is to rule them all, and at the next is to perish. Cut your line!”

But the boy only laughed at her and pelted her with the shining stones of Atlantis, with agates and alexandrites, moonstones and onyxes, rubies, sardonyxes, and sapphires; and at last the magic woman from the hills went away muttering.

Then the most foolish man in the village, the idiot, who sang songs without words to the brooks and boasted of bedding the white birch on the hill, came to the boy and tried to say how frightened he was to see the Sun fighting his line in the sky, though he could not find the words.

But the boy only smiled and let him touch the pole and feel the strength of the Sun, and after a time he too went away.

And at last the boy’s mother came, saying, “Remember all the fine stories I have told you through the years? Never have I told you the finest one of all. Come to the little house the richest man in the village has given back to us. Put on your crown and tell your general to stand guard; take up the magic feather of the bird Tchataka, who opens its mouth to the sky and drinks wisdom with the dew. Then we shall dip the feather in the blood of a wild ox and write that story on white birch bark, you and I.”

The boy asked, “What is that story, Mother?”

And his mother answered, “It is called ‘The Boy Who Hooked the Sun’. Now cut your line and promise me you will never fish for the Sun again, so long as we both shall live.”

Aha, thought the boy, as he got out his little knife. / love my mother, who is more beautiful than the white birch tree on the hill and always kind. But do not all the souls wear away at last as they circle on the Wheel? Then the time must come when I live and she does not; and when that time comes, surely I will bait my hook

again with the shining stones of Uranus, and we shall rule the stars. Or not.

And so it is that the Sun swims far from Earth sometimes, thinking of its sore mouth; and we have winter. But now, when the days are very short and we see the boy's line stretched across the sky and powdered with hoarfrost, the Sun recalls Earth and her clever and foolish men and kind and magical women, and then it returns to us.

Or perhaps it is only — as some say — that it remembers the taste of the bait.