

The Fight

RUSKIN BOND

This story takes place in Rajpur (rāj'pūr) in northwestern India near the border of Pakistan. Look at a map and see if you can locate the setting of the story. Rivalry between different states is common in India. The two boys in the story consider themselves enemies because they come from different regions. Like many quarrels, this one has nothing to do with the two boys personally. Read to discover how these two, born as enemies, find a way to share and become friends.

Ranji¹ had been less than a month in Rajpur when he discovered the pool in the forest. It was the height of summer, and his school had not yet opened; and, having as yet made no friends in this semi-hill-station,² he wandered about a good deal by himself into the hills and forests that stretched away interminably on all sides of the town. It was hot, very hot, at that time of the year, and Ranji walked about in his vest and shorts, his brown feet white with the chalky dust that flew up from the ground. The earth was parched, the grass brown, the trees listless, hardly stirring, waiting for a cool wind or a refreshing shower of rain.

It was on such a day—a hot, tired day—that Ranji found the pool in the forest. The water had a gentle translucency, and you could see the smooth round pebbles at the bottom of the pool. A small stream emerged from a cluster of rocks to feed the pool. During the monsoon,³ this stream would be a gushing torrent, cascading down from the hills, but during the summer it was barely a trickle. The rocks, however, held

the water in the pool, and it did not dry up like the pools in the plains.

When Ranji saw the pool, he did not hesitate to get into it. He had often gone swimming, alone or with friends, when he had lived with his parents in a thirsty town in the middle of the Rajputana⁴ desert. There, he had known only sticky, muddy pools, where buffaloes wallowed and women washed clothes. He had never seen a pool like this—so clean and cold and inviting. He threw off all his clothes, as he had done when he went swimming in the plains, and leapt into the water. His limbs were supple, free of any fat, and his dark body glistened in patches of sunlit water.

The next day he came again to quench his body in the cool waters of the forest pool. He was there for almost an hour, sliding in and out of the limpid green water, or lying stretched out on the smooth yellow rocks in the shade of broad-leaved *sal* trees. It was while he lay thus, naked on a rock, that he noticed another boy standing a little distance away, staring at him in a rather hostile manner. The other boy was a little older

than Ranji, taller, thick-set with a broad nose and thick, red lips. He had only just noticed Ranji, and he stood at the edge of the pool, wearing a pair of bathing shorts, waiting for Ranji to explain himself.

When Ranji did not say anything, the other called out, "What are you doing here, Mister?"

Ranji, who was prepared to be friendly, was taken aback at the hostility of the other's tone.

"I am swimming," he replied. "Why don't you join me?"

"I always swim alone," said the other. "This is my pool, I did not invite you here. And why are you not wearing any clothes?"

"It is not your business if I do not wear clothes. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

"You skinny fellow, put on your clothes."

"Fat fool, take yours off."

This was too much for the stranger to tolerate. He strode up to Ranji, who still sat on the rock and, planting his broad feet firmly on the sand, said (as though this would settle the matter once and for all), "Don't you know I am a Punjabi?"⁵ I do not take replies from villagers like you!"

"So you like to fight with villagers?" said Ranji. "Well, I am not a villager: I am a Rajput!"⁶

"I am a Punjabi!"

"I am a Rajput!"

They had reached an impasse. One had said he was a Punjabi, the other had proclaimed himself a Rajput. There was little else that could be said.

"You understand that I am a Punjabi?" said the stranger, feeling that perhaps this information had not penetrated Ranji's head.

"I have heard you say it three times," replied Ranji.

"Then why are you not running away?"

"I am waiting for *you* to run away!"

"I will have to beat you," said the stranger, assuming a violent attitude, showing Ranji the palm of his hand.

"I am waiting to see you do it," said Ranji.

"You will see me do it," said the other boy.

Ranji waited. The other boy made a strange, hissing sound. They stared each other in the eye for almost a minute. Then the Punjabi boy slapped Ranji across the face with all the force he could muster. Ranji staggered, feeling quite dizzy. There were thick red finger-marks on his cheek.

"There you are!" exclaimed his assailant.

"Will you be off now?"

For answer, Ranji swung his arm up and pushed a hard, bony fist into the other's face.

And then they were at each other's throats, swaying on the rock, tumbling on to the sand, rolling over and over, their legs and arms locked

in a desperate, violent struggle. Gasping and cursing, clawing and slapping, they rolled right into the shallows of the pool.

Even in the water the fight continued as, spluttering and covered with mud, they groped for each other's heads and throats. But after five minutes of frenzied, unscientific struggle, neither boy had emerged victorious. Their bodies heaving with exhaustion, they stood back from each other, making tremendous efforts to speak.

"Now—now do you realize—I am a Punjabi?" gasped the stranger.

"Do you know I am a Rajput?" said Ranji with difficulty.

They gave a moment's consideration to each other's answers, and in that moment of silence there was only their heavy breathing and the rapid beating of their hearts.

"Then you will not leave the pool?" said the Punjabi boy.

"I will not leave it," said Ranji.

"Then we shall have to continue the fight," said the other.

"All right," said Ranji.

But neither boy moved, neither took the initiative.

Then the Punjabi boy had an inspiration.

"We will continue the fight tomorrow," he said. "If you dare to come here again tomorrow, we will continue this fight, and I will not show you mercy as I have done today."

"I will come tomorrow," said Ranji. "I will be ready for you."

They turned from each other then, and going to their respective rocks put on their clothes, and left the forest by different routes.

When Ranji got home, he found it difficult to explain his cuts and bruises that showed on his face, legs and arms. It was difficult to conceal the fact that he had been in an unusually violent fight, and his mother insisted on his staying at home for the rest of the day. That evening,

though, he slipped out of the house and went to the bazaar,⁷ where he found comfort and solace in a bottle of vividly coloured lemonade and a banana-leaf full of hot, sweet *jalebis*.⁸ He had just finished the lemonade when he saw his adversary coming down the road. His first impulse was to turn away and look elsewhere; his second to throw the lemonade bottle at his enemy; but he did neither of these things. Instead, he stood his ground and scowled at his passing adversary. And the Punjabi boy said nothing either but scowled back with equal ferocity.

The next day was as hot as the previous one. Ranji felt weak and lazy and not at all eager for a fight. His body was stiff and sore after the previous day's encounter. But he could not refuse the challenge. Not to turn up at the pool would be an acknowledgement of defeat. From the way he felt just then, he knew he would be beaten in another fight; but he could not acquiesce in his own defeat; he must defy his enemy to the last, or outwit him, for only then could he gain his respect. If he surrendered now, he would be beaten for all time; but to fight and be beaten today left him free to fight and be beaten again. As long as he fought, he had a right to the pool in the forest.

He was half hoping that the Punjabi boy would have forgotten the challenge; but these hopes were dashed when he saw his opponent sitting, stripped to the waist, on a rock on the other side of the pool. The Punjabi boy was rubbing oil on his body, massaging it into his broad thighs. He saw Ranji beneath the *sal* trees, and called a challenge across the waters of the pool.

"Come over on this side, and fight!" he shouted.

But Ranji was not going to submit to any conditions laid down by his opponent.

"Come *this* side and fight!" he shouted back with equal vigour.

"Swim across, and fight me here!" called the other. "Or perhaps you cannot swim the length of this pool?"

But Ranji could have swum the length of the pool a dozen times without tiring, and here he would show the Punjabi boy his superiority. So, slipping out of his vest and shorts, he dived straight into the water, cutting through it like a knife, and surfacing with hardly a splash. The Punjabi boy's mouth hung open in amazement.

"You can dive!" he exclaimed.

"It is easy," said Ranji, treading water, waiting for a further challenge. "Can't you dive?"

"No," said the other. "I jump straight in. But if you will tell me how, I will make a dive."

"It is easy," said Ranji. "Stand on the rock, stretch your arms out and allow your head to displace your feet."

The Punjabi boy stood up, stiff and straight, stretched out his arms, and threw himself into the water. He landed flat on his belly, with a crash that sent the birds screaming out of the trees.

Ranji dissolved into laughter.

"Are you trying to empty the pool?" he asked, as the Punjabi boy came to the surface, spouting water like a small whale.

"Wasn't it good?" asked the boy, evidently proud of his feat.

"Not very good," said Ranji. "You should have more practice. See, I will do it again."

And pulling himself up on a rock, he executed another perfect dive. The other boy waited for him to come up, but, swimming under water, Ranji circled him and came upon him from behind.

"How did you do that?" asked the astonished youth.

"Can't you swim under water?" asked Ranji.

"No, but I will try it."

The Punjabi boy made a tremendous effort to plunge to the bottom of the pool; and indeed, he thought he had gone right down, though his bottom, like a duck's, remained above the surface.

Ranji, however, did not discourage him.

"It was not bad," he said. "But you need a lot of practice."

"Will you teach me?" asked his enemy.

"If you like, I will teach you."

"You must teach me. If you do not teach me, I will beat you. Will you come here every day and teach me?"

"If you like," said Ranji. They had pulled themselves out of the water, and were sitting side by side on a smooth grey rock.

"My name is Suraj,"⁹ said the Punjabi boy. "What is yours?"

"It is Ranji."

"I am strong, am I not?" said Suraj, bending his arm so that a ball of muscle stood up stretching the white of his flesh.

"You are strong," said Ranji. "You are a real *pahelwan*."¹⁰

"One day I will be the world's champion wrestler," said Suraj, slapping his thighs, which shook with the impact of his hand. He looked critically at Ranji's hard, thin body. "You are quite strong yourself," he conceded. "But you are too bony. I know, you people do not eat enough. You must come and have your food with me. I drink one seer¹¹ of milk every day. We have got our own cow! Be my friend, and I will make you a *pahelwan* like me! I know—if you teach me to dive and swim under water, I will make you a *pahelwan*! That is fair, isn't it?"

"That is fair!" said Ranji, though he doubted if he was getting the better of the exchange.

Suraj put his arm around the younger boy, and said, "We are friends now, yes?"

They looked at each other with honest, unflinching eyes, and in that moment love and understanding were born.

"We are friends," said Ranji.

The birds had settled again in their branches, and the pool was quiet and limpid in the shade of the *sal* trees.

"It is our pool," said Suraj. "Nobody else can come here without our permission. Who would dare?"

"Who would dare?" said Ranji, smiling with the knowledge that he had won the day.

“The Fight”

Assignment Sheet

Directions: Put a complete heading at the top of your paper.
Be sure to **ASE** each of the following questions.

How do we answer questions?

We ASE them!

Answer – Restate the question and provide a simple but direct answer.
Get right to the point!

Support – Support your answer with a direct quote from the text (TBS).
The text states: “ ”

Explain – Connect the TBS to your simple answer and explain your position.
In this quote, ...

Reading Check (TBS) Questions:

1. Why does Ranji spend most of his time alone?
 2. When the two boys meet, who tries first to intimidate the other?
 3. What is the result of their fight?
 4. What does Ranji agree to teach the other boy?
 5. What does the Punjabi boy promise?
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