

...and the boy lost his faith in God!

He was six. He lived in a village surrounded by a forest. His father sold firewood to provide for the family. He would be starting school the next year. It was a sweltering July. All of his friends had gone away with their families for the summer. He was the only child left, with his father and stepmother.

He had lost his mother the year before when she was hit by a lorry. They had brought her to the house, injured. Three days later, his father told him that she was with God.

He was a strong boy... He was ready to start a war with God to rescue his mother – and he did not care how big God might be! If they ever met, he was going to shout right into God's face that He had no right to make orphans of children who love their mothers as much as he loved his mother. That was what he was going to do, come what may. And if God did not give him his mother back, he was going to go right up to Him and kick Him as hard as he could.

He was very good at kicking. Five or six months before, the neighbour's son had made fun of him because he was short, and he had given him such a good kick that the boy could not sit down for a week. He was going to do the same thing to God; he just had to find Him...

He left the house at about midday. His stepmother's friends were coming round to read each other's tea leaves. She did not like him being in the house while she and her friends were telling each other's fortunes. He hated these women who kept coming over; none of them had been friends with his real mother.

He set off towards the forest. He really missed his mother. Maybe he would bump into God in the forest. Of course, ever since the

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day of the funeral, the neighbours had been telling him that God lived in the sky, but somehow this had never seemed particularly plausible to him. Of course, there was nothing stopping God from flying in the sky now and again, but how could it be possible for Him to spend all His time there? Even planes, after a certain length of time in the air, have to land, after all.

As he was walking, he looked at the pinecones at his feet. He would give the big ones a kick and watch how far they went.

Suddenly, a gunshot. He knew very well what they sounded like because his father would often go hunting. The sound of an animal screaming immediately after the shot made his blood run cold. He looked up towards the sky to where the noise had come from, and he saw something round like a ball falling to the earth. At first, he could not work out what it was. It struck the ground about thirty feet in front of him.

He ran up to it as fast as he could; it was a bird. His father had told him that these large birds were called "eagles". The poor thing was clearly injured. The bullet must have entered just under its right wing because there was a lot of blood there.

His eyes met the eagle's. It was not dead yet, but it could not have long left to live; fighting to keep its eyes open, it looked up at him with a desperate glance that seemed to be saying, "Help me!" He was surprised. What should he do? If only his mother had still been there... He could have asked her for help.

His father was not really the sort of person to reach out to those in need. If he had been, he would not have gone out shooting little birds and snow-white bunny rabbits, would he? His step-mother came to mind. She was not a warm-hearted person either. Was she going to leave her friends and her precious tea leaves just to tend to a wounded eagle? And if he told anyone else, he knew

they would come, but would they not just shoot the eagle again then cook it and eat it?

He suddenly felt calmer after thinking about all that and looked at the bird again. It was having difficulty breathing.

Suddenly, the sound of a dog barking sent a shiver down his spine. It must belong to whoever shot the bird and must be looking for it. It would be here any minute; it was inevitable; that is what they had trained the dog for. And what would happen when the dog did get here? It would either kill the bird immediately, or else keep it from getting away and bark for its owner to come. He immediately stood in front of the eagle that was lying motionless on the ground and got ready to fight with the dog.

He had been right... The dog found them in a couple of minutes. It had burst out from between the trees, sniffing the ground. He recognised the dog immediately. It belonged to the cobbler from town. He had taken his mother's shoes to that shop many times. Every time he went, he would give the dog a sugar lump. And this huge hunting dog absolutely adored sugar lumps.

The dog recognised the boy immediately, too. As the dog was running straight towards him, he opened his arms as wide as he could, waited and gave the dog a huge hug.

"Look!" said the boy, kissing the dog, "This eagle is my friend. Don't you dare touch it! Go straight back to your master and tell him you couldn't find the eagle! If you'll do that for me, I promise you I'll bring you two sugar lumps everyday! Everyday!"

Just like every hunting dog, this dog was very intelligent. And he showed how much he liked this idea by barking and wagging his tail. Then he took a glance at the wounded eagle, turned round and ran off.