



## The Eccentric

From: *At the Summer Camp*, Chapter 17

By: Janusz Korczak, *Collected Writings*

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At least once during the season, something terrible had to happen.

Two years ago, the boys threw pinecones at a lawyer from Lublin as he passed by the camp in his carriage. He was about to write to the newspaper, claiming that the boys were attacking people, but in the end, he forgave them.

Last year, three boys went to bathe in the stream, got into a boat, and set sail, and the miller had to drag the boat back to shore.

But this year, news arrived at the camp that the boys had thrown stones at an eccentric Jew who was passing along the path, and that so much blood streamed from the poor man's head that a woman from the village took pity on him, washed his wounds, and gave him milk for the road.

Five boys were suspected of the act.

“How did it happen?”

*“Well, a Jew was walking along the path, through the camp's forest, with a sack on his back and torn shoes in his hand. He walked slowly and spoke to himself. The boys noticed him and started laughing, and then—he stuck out his tongue at them. Someone threw a pinecone into his shoe, and since there was a hole in it, the pinecone fell right through. Someone else asked what he was carrying in the sack on his back.”*

*“‘This sack contains ten times ten thousand rubles,’ was his reply.”*

*“Then one of the boys asked him to give him a single ruble if he was so rich.”*

“And then?”

*“Nothing. The Jew walked on quietly, and they went back to playing.”*

Meanwhile, a woman arrived, panting, from the workers' housing on the farm—to testify.

*“Two buckets of blood? Who comes up with such nonsense?”* She had given him milk because she knew him—he always wandered around the area. She had told him to go to the camp, maybe he would get some meat too, but he refused and said that the boys were robbers. And indeed, he had said ‘robbers’ about the boys, as if they had thrown stones at him.

They really had thrown them, apparently, because he had a scratch on his neck. But after all, everyone knows—boys will be boys.

She herself had only two, and she couldn't manage them, so imagine handling an entire group. Young and foolish. *Don't punish them too harshly, gentlemen. They'll grow up and come to their senses on their own.*

So yes, they had thrown stones and scratched his neck.

“So here is a weak and sick man, walking peacefully down the road. He is alone, and you are a hundred and fifty. He is ill, and you are healthy. He is hungry, and you are full. He is sad, and you are amused. And because he is lonely, sick, hungry, and sad—you throw stones at him? Is this camp a den of robbers? No, it cannot be! And yet, you insist on telling the truth!”

And then, three things happened at once:





One boy burst into tears.  
The second announced that he would tell everything, even if it meant being sent back to Warsaw because of it.  
And the camp bell rang, calling them to dinner.

For the first time, we walked onto the veranda without singing, heads bowed, and sat at the tables in silence.

For the first time, the "bread kisses" were distributed not according to the usual order, but at random. The boys exchanged glances, and no one reminded the instructor that the "kisses" were being handed out outside the usual turn.

Immediately after the meal, the guilty ones presented themselves.

"We will tell the truth."

Yes, they had thrown pinecones, but not at the eccentric himself—at the sack on his back.

They had thrown them, and the sack had been the target: *Who could hit it?*

They had done something bad, something foolish, and they were ready to accept their punishment.

*"Alright, the four of you. Go to the hall now and think for yourselves what punishment you deserve."*

Then, the fifth boy stepped forward.

*"Sir, I want to go to the hall as well."*

*"Why?"* the instructor asked in surprise.

*"Because I threw too."*

*"Why didn't you confess earlier?"*

*"I thought they would send us back to Warsaw because of it."*

*"They probably thought the same, and yet they confessed. Now it is too late."*

The sentence that the four boys imposed upon themselves was:

*"We will sit in confinement for three hours, and until the end of the season, we will not be allowed to play ball, checkers, or dominoes."*

The punishment was very harsh. Would the entire group agree to it?

We know that children often throw sticks and even stones at dogs, cats, and horses. We know how they laugh and taunt drunkards and eccentrics.

They had behaved badly—but because they had not known better.

Now they knew.

And something like this would never happen again.

The group decided—by a vote of twenty-six to five—to release them from the severe punishment they had imposed upon themselves.

At dinner, things were still quieter than usual.

But the saddest of all was the fifth boy, who had abandoned his friends in their moment of danger and had only confessed when he knew the punishment would no longer be too painful.

