

High Doh

by Alan Edward

Rattenbury-Swinge sent for me precisely five seconds after I'd arrived. The usual. Welcome to the staff, fine team, great traditions. I looked out of the window, tried not to drum my fingers. R-S was a worried man. Seventeenth Century endowments didn't keep a show like that running with twelve per cent inflation; he'd had to take in his first consignment of paying pupils last year. *Les nouveaux riches*; how he must have hated it. I'd taken a look at the place, hedged my bets, then taken a look at the kids, and accepted. He was lucky; in the ordinary way I wouldn't have touched it, not with the proverbial, not at that salary.

Subtly, his tone altered. My gaze flicked back from the mock Gothic; he had my attention again.

"Our duties, Hudson, are many, going in a number of respects beyond what would be expected of a mere teacher, an instructor. We are guides, 'Preceptors, nursemaids. I believe I have explained the main part of your duties to you. However..."

He got up, then sat down again. I could see a small muscle under his left eye tighten, quiver. Now he was nervous, jumpy.

"The difficulty arises principally with your form, the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds whose time in a choir school is naturally coming to an end and who we expect to be going to Public Schools next year. You see, Hudson, the school has certain standards. Old-fashioned, perhaps, but still..."

The phone rang; he dealt with it, then rose and paced a little. I waited, silent.

"In effect, Hudson, it is a question of what boys of that age will or will not be expected to do every night, or nearly every night – if you follow me – and of whether this is indeed something they should be encouraged to do *themselves*, or whether, in contradistinction, a member of staff should perform this office *for* them. I incline personally to the latter view. Therefore, the admittedly somewhat repetitious duty which I would like you to undertake with respect to your form – "

The door was knocked and Matron came in; some conversation about laundry followed. I didn't listen. Soon she was dismissed; she left.

"Now, where was I? Anyhow, I believe I've made myself clear. If

you think the job perhaps too menial one could – er – ask Matron, perhaps. Are there any questions?”

Oh yes, there were questions. But *I* wouldn't be asking them.

“Good. Just before they go to sleep is best. Shouldn't take you too long. Twelve to twenty – er – strokes each should do it.”

Now, *there* I could have asked how he knew. But I simply rose, murmured dutifully, *Thank you, Headmaster*. End of conversation.

This is one duty I would begin right away. Tonight. I called in young Chris Teale, Head Chorister, incidentally the sort of thirteen-year-old whose looks grab you in the guts, turn your knees and stomach to water. Ten minutes, give or take, we chatted of this and that; then I stopped, cleared my throat, surprising myself; I was as nervous as King Rat had been.

“Now, just about the – the last thing at night. You know, what I believe my predecessor's last evening – er – duty was.”

The boy shook his head. “Oh, I couldn't say, sir. We've all just come up from the form below, you know.”

Of course. God. Now *I'd* have to explain. I did, but it wasn't easy, not with those stunning blue eyes on me, wide and puzzled until he understood. Then, to my relief, the eyes lit, and a gorgeous smile just about sent me sideways.

“Oh, *now* I see! For a moment I thought you were talking about extra singing lessons! Gosh, sir, it's going to be super being in the top year, what with extra football, and now this! What time shall I have them ready?”

“Just after they get undressed for bed, about nine. How many of you are there?”

“Twelve.” He caught my expression, grinned. “There are good parallel bars in the gym, sir. Fine exercise for the wrists!”

I entered into the thing. “Or I'll play you a game of squash,” I quipped back, “even better!”

“Several!” said the kid.

Bedtime came a century later. Nine o'clock I went into the dorm, heart thumping like the 6:15 from Paddington. I couldn't but ask myself would they all want it, but no problem. All were ready, on their beds, all with pajama bottoms off. I began at the end bed. No difficulty here, a hard little pencil, a quick dozen, *aaah!* He tightens and jerks on the bed, a little dampness, then *thank you, sir, goodnight*. Problem one, a few others not quite so ready, but a little movement of the deft Hudson

fingers here and there and ... end of *that* problem. Each kid took it differently, no two the same. Some absolutely silent, eyes closed, the only sign that your task was over a little tightening of the muscles, mouth opens silently, a little *ooh!* perhaps. Others more vocal, *ah-ah-ah-ing* all the way through, then shouting out at the end. One or two simply quivering a little, but others bouncing up and down, small behinds thumping on the bed, then finally just about taking off, body jack-knifing, knees snapping up at some risk to yours truly, if he wasn't careful. Chris, who saw fit to lie in my lap – and I wasn't complaining – was one of the bouncers, and noisier than them all. Problem two, a little stickiness here and there, partially solved by Chris making them take off their pj's altogether, setting the example himself.

End of the first week, Chris came to see me. A simple request; could he have his afterwards, away from the others. My room, to be exact. He'd enjoy it more, he said. I understood; a Head Chorister's precious dignity.

“Okay, I'll take you back with me when I've finished with the others. Still better than singing lessons, eh?”

He grinned. “Well, you *do* make me sing, don't you – every night. Hadn't you noticed?”

Rattenbury-Swinge sent for me the same day. His tone warm to begin with. Congratulations on settling in so well, duties all performed to his satisfaction. He coughed again, changing key. Except...

“Simply that little duty I referred to last of all. There I'm *not* so happy, Hudson.”

Christ – where were you, in the wardrobe?

“I really think,” I said, “that I have done my –”

He held up his hand. “There I'm afraid I can't agree. I do look around very carefully at morning chapel and, as I said, we do have our standards, Hudson.”

Now he *had* lost me.

“On reflection, I have decided it is probably *not* appropriate to ask you to brush the boys' hair at night, and I have therefore asked Matron to perform this duty instead. Yes, Hudson?”

“I didn't speak,” I said after a moment.

Just as well.

“One other thing. Christopher Teale is waiting to see you. About extra singing lessons, he said; I'm glad he's taking an interest. That will be all, Hudson.”