

## The Infant of Prague

William J. Hunter

We'd just finished the Pledge of Allegiance when Sister started in: "I want to tell you children about something that happened this morning, something that made me very angry."

She didn't have to say the angry part. Nobody reaches the age of eleven without knowing angry when he hears it. And when an eleven-year-old hears angry they know who the angry is at — me, for instance. So, when Sister Konrada raised her voice, she also flipped the old guilt switch in my eleven-year-old head: "Damn, what did I do now?"

Sister was going on again. "When I came in here this morning, I set about straightening up as I always do and when I got to the back of the room, I brushed slightly against that table back there and heard something fall. I turned and saw the head from the statue of the Infant of Prague sitting on the table. You know what this means. Some child in this classroom must have knocked over that statue and broken it. Broken the head off Jesus. And what's worse is that that child did not even have the honesty to admit what they did. They were so sneaky that they just put that head back on and left it there thinking they would never get caught. Well they were wrong!"

Oh good, I thought, it's not me. I didn't do that. But somebody is really going to catch Hell. Who's squirming? Well, everybody looks a little scared, is anybody 'fessing' up? No? C'mon, you know you'll only make it worse — take your lumps and let's get on with this. Who did it? Why isn't anyone speaking up?

Now she's walking up and down the aisles. "Was it you David Kapostasy? Did you do that when you were cleaning erasers last night? Well, DID you?"

"No, S'tr. I don't think so, S'tr."

"You don't THINK so? What do you mean you don't THINK so? Speak up young man, did you or did you not break the head off the Infant of Prague?"

"I don't think I did, S'tr, I mean I don't remember doing that. If I did that, I would remember it. And I don't."

I don't get it. Why doesn't he just say no? He didn't do it. If he did, he'd say so. Why is he being such a weasel? Like he says — if he did it, he'd remember.

Oh no, she is coming down my row. "How about you, Tommy Coffman?"

"No, S'tr, I didn't do it. I wasn't even in school all last week — I couldn't have done it."

"And who said it was done last week? Who knows how long Our Lord has sat there waiting for His head to fall off? You think on it, boy, that statue could

have been broken weeks ago and sat there like that. And some child has been walking around this school and going to mass with that on their conscience."

Oh, damn. Weeks ago. Can I remember weeks ago? I had eraser duty week before last. I could have done it. But I don't remember, so it isn't me.

Damn. She's one seat away from me. Why am I sweating? "Jimmy Bartish, did you knock that statue? Did you knock the head off the beautiful Infant of Prague? Speak up, boy, did you decapitate Our Lord?"

Tears are pouring down Jimmy's cheeks. I never saw him cry before. Poor kid. Well, at least it's over. He can 'fess up, take his punishment and we can all get on with things.

"I don't know S'tr, I don't know, I don't know."

Jimmy got up and ran from the classroom, sobbing like a baby and cringing like some bad puppy. Jeez, he doesn't KNOW. Maybe I don't know, either. I was here. I could have done it. And if I did, I'd've put the head back on and hoped no one would notice. That's like me. Whoa, wait a minute, I see it now. There I am, wiping the table and my hip bumps it. That statue is rocking back and forth. I reach for it, but instead of catching it, my hand knocks it and it topples over. Oh, God, no, there is Jesus' head rolling across the table. My heart is burning, my eyes are burning; I am going to burn. There I am, picking it up. Picking up the head of Jesus, straightening the statue, putting the head back on. It looks O.K. Just brush those loose bits away. Now spit on the neck to make it stick a little. There it is, good as new. No one will know. I see it all, I smell the chalk, I feel the relief. But I am not *remembering*, am I? I see it as if it's happening, but I'm not remembering. At least I don't THINK this is remembering. I mean, I didn't do it so I don't remember it. But why am I seeing it? Why is it so clear? Did I do it? I don't know. Oh, God, I don't know either.

My turn. "And you, Billy Hunter, I suppose you don't know either. None of you know, is that it? You are all going to pretend your innocence as if anyone could forget having done such a dreadful thing. Speak up, Billy, are you saying you don't know if you took the head off Our Lord?"

"No, S'tr, I know."

"Jimmy Bartish did it."