

# The Queue

JONATHAN BARROW

**B**editions

## A Note on the Text

The closely typed, much-scribbled-upon manuscript of this book, littered with wordcounts and deletions and written in a hurry in the winter of 1969–70, was found in a drawer of Jonathan Barrow’s office desk on the day after his death. Very few people have read it until now, when it appears unexpurgated and with only minor editorial corrections. All the illustrations, including the picture on the cover, are by the author.

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This morning, sugar buns for three hundred were delivered at the school. As the roundsman drove away, I heard Mr. Prente come up from his basement room. He opened the confectioner's box, counted numbers, and found three buns missing. Immediately, he rang the little hand-bell that he carries in his trouser pocket. Every boy came into the preparation room. Then Mr. Prente searched the lockers. He had difficulty with No. 19 and used a tool. A moment later there was a scream and Mr. Prente ran up the stairs: his gown had blood on it and his underpants were at his ankles. On the way up he bumped against the school hairdresser and oils, clippers, combs, knives and clips fell from the little attache case which he always carries.

This means the end for the school hairdresser. Only yesterday he had cut off a boy's ear with a clipper and the Head Master now wants to talk to him.

But our Head Master drinks. We know this because he keeps gin in a flap of his gown. Often, we hear him opening tonic bottles during hymns. Often, during a lesson, he would gurg and run to the door. But I would wedge my foot against it and have the pleasure of watching a fully grown man being sick in front of a class of nine-year-olds.

That evening, police came and took away the hairdresser. They have gone to the prison and he will serve his sentence without trial. Mr. Prente leaves tomorrow too. The bursar raided his study and found three hundred pairs of soiled boys'

underwear in a chest under his bed. And, hidden in a laundry bag, he found 12 lemonade bottles: each overflowing with boys' urine that was still warm. Next morning these bottles were put on display in the assembly hall as a warning to all other members of the staff. Then, after the hymn, each boy filed past and those responsible had to claim their urine. I refused and was thrashed by Mr. Kille before the entire school. (Judging by the wet patch, I guessed that he had an organism whilst administering the punishment. Fourteen years later, when we both shared cells at Parkhurst he admitted to me that this was correct.)

Today three more members of the staff left. Mr. Coon, Mr. Peine and Mr. Wese. They took the train to Euston and did not even have enough money for continental breakfast. Mr. Coon leant out of the window in Woodford Tunnel and had his head knocked off. Mr. Peine slipped and fell into the WC and died by drowning. And Mr. Wese fell under a taxi on the station concourse and suffered wounds so grievous that he died before reaching St. Bart's.

This tragic news was read out to us at morning assembly. One boy laughed and was immediately summoned onto the platform. The Head Master took an enormous pair of scissors from a leather sheaf and cut the boy in two. This alarmed the entire school, including staff.

Today is his funeral and I have just bought a black tie. The boy's father, an assistant meteorologist from a weather station in the Hebrides, cannot afford his fare home and has to do three days washing up in order to raise the sum. We decide to have a collection for the poor man and I raise £3-16-7 from my class alone. But, as I was putting this money in a safe place, the Head Master entered. He took away the money and cycled off to the Three Crowns. There he drank heavily and was sick under a laurel as he walked home . . .

I cannot go on like this. Since arriving here as a new boy some 8 years ago, I have learnt practically nothing and seem to spend my life between dramas, police raids, and court-room evidence. Some O-levels, which once seemed certain, are now rapidly diminishing and I am writing a letter to my father with instructions for my removal from the school.

But the Head Master has a spy-hole into my room and realizes what I am doing. That night, he follows me to the letter box on Goff Common and after I have put my letter in the box, he produces a fish-hook from his waistcoat pocket. He fixes this to a supple bamboo cane and, with incredible precision, hoists my letter into his waiting rucksack. On the way back, he collides with a florist's van but escapes unhurt. The florist, however, receives fatal injuries and dies at the roadside. My Head Master is unaware and pedals on. Then a Mr. Drace appears and kneels beside the florist holding his head until the last moment. The funeral is on Monday and geraniums, violets and snap-dragons from his own shop will decorate the grave.

At 4.30 the next morning I am woken by Mr. Marce, the Head Master's secretary. It is cold in my room but Marce insists that I remain undressed, even though the journey to his superior's study is across several ploughed fields and through two council estates where young children could easily see my dangling genitals. After much pleading, Marce lets me fashion a little loincloth out of an Old School Tie.

Together we quietly leave the house. There is a heavy frost and I feel my urine already freezing in my tubes. So I get out a little paraffin lamp from my rucksack and strap this onto my crotch. This does the trick but several pubic hairs are singed. Mr. Marce, warm in his Shetland sweater, hums my Mother's favourite hymn. As we cross a pasture, I hear pounding feet behind us and realize that we are being chased by a bull. He is

cross and snorting. I look at Mr. Marce and notice that terror has made him spend a penny in his pants. Realizing that we can never make it, I turn round and face Bull. This disagreeable animal is astonished and halts immediately. We explain our plight and as tears rolled down my cheeks I noticed that tears were also rolling down Bull's cheeks. Cautiously, fearing a hoax, I approached and put my hand on his neck. Suddenly he went down on his knees, blinked and began to weep. I held his leg and, making a blanket out of Mr. Marce's sweater, covered this sad animal. Between sobs, he explained to us that the man from the Corned Beef Factory had arrived last night and selected his carcass for the abattoir. For some time, I talked gently to Bull; telling him that it would be alright and that we could save him. But suddenly a cock crew on Mr. Stote's smallholding and I saw Bull blink, flinch and roll over. I covered him with straw as best I could and then, with Mr. Marce, walked on.

Now we are in sight of the Head Master's study. This has been specially constructed and is purposeful, set apart from other school buildings. It is a tall strange building like a lighthouse. A lift has been recently fitted and this takes passengers to the special Thrashing Chamber which is on the top floor. I see the Head Master gazing at us from an upper window. He has my letter in his hands and appears in a poor temper. We arrive at the portcullis and Mr. Marce calls up asking for us to be let in. I hear the Head Master's window opening and a moment later his penis protrudes and he begins to urinate onto me.

I cannot stand it and run away the way I came. But after a few paces, a noose drops round my neck, tightens and hauls me back. I see the Head Master operating an electric winch and the intense pain is almost unbearable. Slowly, I am hauled upwards towards the little window and, as I reach it, I see the

Head Master dart back into his room. I hang there powerless and perplexed for 12 minutes before, mercifully, pain causes me to pass out.

I woke up and saw the Head Master kneeling over me. He appeared excited and I realized that while I had been unconscious my trousers had been tampered with. The Head Master started to stroke me. After that, Mr. Marce left the room for he had to referee an away match that afternoon.

On the way back I stop at a call-box and dial 999. But the desk-sergeant on duty is in a foul mood and tells me to fuck off. In despair I telephone the Chief Constable's private number at Coss Grange. He answered himself and judging from the background noises I would say he was giving a dinner party. When he heard my voice, he put down the phone.

Next day the Head Master tried to take my life. He asked Miss Jogge, the school cook, to place a substance called *Methylene Oxide* in the Roly-Poly pudding, my portion. But, before raising the tin spoon to my lips, I detected a curious expression in the Head Master's eyes. My suspicions raised, I gave a spoonful to the mongrel who lives in a basket under the top table. She took it greedily and died four seconds later with a wail so terrible that Mr. Vizzi could not be heard to say grace. The Head Master, furious and disappointed, is now chasing me through the school kitchens. Suddenly the tail of his gown catches in a dish-washing machine and, as the propeller revolves, he is dragged into the machinery. He is in considerable discomfort and I switch off. He begins to cry and I am overcome with remorse. I take him in my arms and watched by an enormous crowd carry him gently towards his bedroom. We arrive at his bed and immediately I am overcome by an appalling stench. I pull back the sheets and find that his linen is badly fouled with numerous recent deposits of excreta. Then, to my

horror, I find between the sheets the corpse of a boy named H. R. Stort. This 14-year-old had died in the Sanatorium four months ago. Tears stream across my cheeks as I kneel beside him. I did Maths with Stort and knew him well.

At assembly next morning there is a hush as I take my place in the seventh row. An aide walks onto the rostrum and passes a megaphone to the Head Master. He raises it to his lips and calls my name.

Between two aides I am escorted towards the platform. As soon as I step onto the rostrum, the Head Master goes for me with a jack-knife and makes a grievous wound. Then he takes the megaphone again and, with hands shaking, announces to the school that I am to be given the worst punishment ever inflicted on a boy. In fact, he went on to say, he had spent the last four hours consulting International Punishment Records in order to judge the correct severity of the method.

He passes the megaphone to an aide. At a given signal Mr. Cecce, the pianist, plays a loud chord.

I hear a clatter from behind the rostrum curtain and, with another loud chord, the Head Cowman from the school farm appears. With him is an Aberdeen Angus steer. I am taken by aides to a narrow bench. My clothes are removed and placed in a large sanitary bag. I am pushed back onto a bench, manacled and lashed to rings on each side. Then the steer is led onto me and I look up and see the mighty beast's crotch just a few inches away.

Then, to increase tension, the entire school sings Hymn Number 326 Ancient and Modern. I too am forced to sing. Then the Chaplain takes the rostrum and says a few words. Finally the Head Master takes the megaphone again and, so excited he can hardly speak, tells the audience to watch carefully and let this be an example to any boy who dare . . .

Mr. Doode, the Head Cowman, comes over to the steer and gives it an extremely powerful oral enema named *Cusci*. Immediately I hear rumbles and a torrent of dung cascades onto my face. Unable to breathe, hear or see, I can do nothing save hope that the steer's bowels were not full. They were. Twenty five minutes later, the torrent still flowed, as powerful as when it began. The Head Master is jumping for joy and is doing a jig with Mr. Marce. But the pupils and masters are silent, horrified by this bestiality. The Head Master, overcome with excitement, can quite clearly be seen to spend a penny in his trousers. And down the hall, I can just see, beyond the blinding waves of excreta, hundreds of my colleagues.

At last the steer's bowels are empty. And with one final, odious fart, he snorts, stamps, and is led off the platform by Mr. Doode.

Now pandemonium breaks out. The platform is deep in dung and the masters have to hitch up their trousers. The dung around me starts to harden and the Head Master summons a workman to come at once with a pick-axe. Then I am taken, on a sort of rubber stretcher, to the playground where I am hosed by Miss Akke. After that, she takes me in her arms and, stroking me gently, walks in the direction of my dormitory.

Freeing myself from Miss Akke, I run swiftly through the corridors, dodging masters, boys, and a noose that the Head Master constantly slings at me. In moments, I have collected my few possessions and I am dialling for a taxi. Then I run to a laurel at the end of the drive and wait there till the driver arrives. Minutes later I am at the station. The 10.50 is just starting to leave and I do not have time to buy a ticket.

Five hours later, as I stumbled across the Euston concourse with one and threepence on me, dung was still stuck to my thighs.

I queue for an underground ticket. But, suddenly, there is a familiar voice behind me. It is Mr. Marce and he tries to slip one of my wrists into a handcuff. I kick him on the shin and he falls clutching himself. Then, hardly able to bear the weight, I carry this man-in-a-mac and slip him into a Left Luggage locker. Sixpence into the slot, the door is shut and all I hear are the very frequent screams for mercy from behind the steel door. He thumps and thunders but no-one will hear him. Twenty-four hours later, officials opened the door and he was taken to a mortuary.

Now I must ring my Uncle. Once over Sunday tea at Turleigh in 1958, he made me swear that I would ring him if I was ever in a crisis. After queueing for over two hours I found an empty box. But, just as I was starting to dial, I saw my Head Master pushing through the crowds and coming my way. A bull-mastiff was at his side and he looked tired and furious. I tried to hide myself but he saw me and, with a squeal of delight, ran to my box. But I held the door and he could not get in. Then, to my horror, I realized that he was trying to topple the box. There was nothing I could do.

It is a strange feeling. The box is on its side and the directories are scattered. I was badly concussed and found a deep wound, from the sharp mouthpiece, on my left thigh. The

Head Master's dog is sniffing a few inches away, beyond the plate-glass pane.

I see the Head Master with a small axe in his hand: he is now trying to break the glass and get at me. Luckily, the phone is still working and with great difficulty I manage to telephone my Uncle. He is in his bath but promises to be with me in twenty minutes.

The Head Master has now made a small hole in a pane and I see him wheeling a Gas Machine towards me. He switches on and immediately I smell the dangerous odour. Then he pushes a rubber tubing through the hole, turns up the pressure and watches closely. I feel myself unable to breathe and begin to gasp . . .

I must have been semi-unconscious as my Uncle ran onto the platform. The Head Master, unaware of his presence, continued to grunt and smirk as he knelt by the box. My Uncle, an ex-Commando, fired several shots from his pistol and the Head Master flinched and rolled himself into a ball. Blood flowed from several arteries and his tweeds were all red. Railway porters kneel beside him and cranes re-erect my box. I see stretcher men running across the concourse.

Then my Uncle leaves me, for he has business to attend to. So I am once more left alone on the concourse.

Then I feel something at my feet. I glance down and see a dachshund nosing at my ankles. She is a stray. Together, we walk to the station cafeteria and queue for 25 minutes to get tea and pies. Round her neck is a disc and it tells me that her name is Mary. Born 11.7.53. We find a table in the far corner and I put Mary on my knees. She will not take the pie but is greedy for hot tea that I cool for her in a saucer. Then a manageress appears and tries to take Mary away from me. No dogs allowed in here. Later, she gives in and passes me some wrapped-up scraps, and a collar and lead that a customer had once left.