

**Charles Shaw, under the pen name of 'An Old Potter', *When I was a Child* [1903] – An extract.**

### A Case of Discipline

There was one "case of discipline" while I was at the Bastille to which I must refer. It was a conspicuous case, and therefore had "to be made an example of." So ran the official cant. Discipline was administered with unfailing regularity every day. Hardly a boy escaped some form of it, and it was usually a merciless form. It seemed to be a standing regulation that this treatment was as necessary for the soul as skilly was for the body. No distinction was made, the same cuts and slashes and cuffs were aimed at the mobile and sensitive boy as were aimed at the sluggish and dull boy. The one boy would writhe and sob, and the other maintained a stolid silence. The case I am now going to refer to was that of a boy of lively temperament and unflagging energy. His activity was always bringing him into trouble. The theory formed by the officials seemed to be that his activity was essentially vicious, and so, instead of trying to guide it into wise and useful developments, it must be sternly repressed. Such a policy goaded the lad. He became defiant and reckless. Punish him they might, but he could not be repressed. One day, after being unusually provoked and punished, he scaled the workhouse wall, and bolted. Soon a hue and cry was raised, searchers were sent out, and after a few hours the lad was captured and brought back. This incident made an awful flutter in our little dove-cote. All were sorry for the lad, for he had made no enemies among us.

All sorts of punishment were imagined as likely to be inflicted, but the boys who had been longest in the workhouse said he would be flogged in the presence of the other boys with a pickled birch rod — that is a rod which has been kept soaking in salt water. After the usual skilly supper that night we were all told to remain in the room. None were to go out on any account. The long table was cleared, and a smaller square table was brought in and placed in the middle of the room. The knowing ones whispered that the flogging would take place on this table, and this news made us all curious, eager, yet fearful. Several persons came in whom we did not usually see. Then the governor came in. To us poor lads he was the incarnation of every dread power which a mortal could possess. He was to us the Bastille in its most repulsive embodiment. Personally, he may have been an amiable man, I don't know. He never gave one look or touch which led me to feel he was a man. He was only "the governor," and as such, in those days, when the New Poor Laws meant making a workhouse a dread and a horror to be avoided, he was perhaps only acting the part he felt to be due to his office. His functions, and any outward compassion, were as wide asunder as the poles. He may have had compassion. He may have been inwardly tortured by the necessity for outward callousness. May Heaven forgive me if I do him any wrong, but word or act of kindness from him I never heard or saw towards myself or anyone else. Now, however, the governor was in the room, and his presence seemed to fill it with an awful shadow. We were duly informed by him what was to take place, the bad qualities of the runaway were ponderously and slowly described, and we were exhorted in menacing tones to take warning by his "awful

example." This homily was enough of itself to make us shiver, and shiver most of us did with fear of those present and fear of the sight we were about to witness. When the solemn harangue was finished, the poor boy was pushed into the room like a sheep for the slaughter. He had a wild, eager look. His eyes flashed, and searched the room and all present with rapid glances. His body was stripped down to his waist, and in the yellow and sickly candlelight of the room his heart could be seen beating rapidly against his poor thin ribs. To punish such a boy as that, half nourished, and trembling with fear, was a monstrous cruelty. However, discipline was sacred, and could do no wrong in a Bastille sixty years ago. The boy was lifted upon the table, and four of the biggest boys were called out to hold each a leg or an arm. The boy was laid flat on the table, his breeches well pushed down, so as to give as much play as possible for the birch rod.

The lad struggled and screamed. Swish went the pickled birch on his back, administered by the schoolmaster, who was too flinty to show any emotion. Thin red stripes were seen across the poor lad's back after the first stroke. They then increased in number and thickness as blow after blow fell on his back. Then there were seen tiny red tricklings following the course of the stripes, and ultimately his back was a red inflamed surface, contrasting strongly with the skin on his sides. How long the flogging went on I cannot say, but screaming became less and less piercing, and at last the boy was taken out, giving vent only to heavy sobs at intervals. If he was conscious, I should think only partially so. The common rumour was that he would have his back washed with salt water. Of this I don't know. I do know there had been cruelty enough. A living horror, hateful in every aspect, had been put before the eyes of the boys present. To see a poor lad with red rivulets running down his back and sides, as I see it all again even yet, among strangers, with the governor's awful presence, with the schoolmaster's fiercely gleaming eyes, away from father, mother and home; — all this when our late gracious Queen was a young queen. The spirit of the New Poor Law and of the Corn Laws was present in that torture-room that night. Lord Brougham, not many years before this, had said that "charity is an interference with a healing process of nature, which acts by increasing the rate of mortality, and thereby raising wages." Political Economy was then on the side of harshness. This was the time of Ricardo's "iron law." Flog on then, my governor and schoolmaster. No "Guardians" will protest against your cruelty to that writhing waif, and there is "no chiel among ye takin' notes," as in a later day, to bring down the judgment of the public conscience upon your heads. So far from this, perhaps the said "Guardians of the Poor," will "note with satisfaction," at their next meeting, that "you have quite properly maintained the discipline of the house." House ? That should be the shrine of a home. Was there a more ghastly mockery than that to be seen that night on that table with its bleeding waif? Such was the Bastille sixty years ago. Such was one scene in Chell, and if you drop the "C" in the word it only remains more truly descriptive of the place where such "discipline" could take place. How that poor little wretch got on that night I never knew. He did not come to his usual bed in our room. Perhaps he was thrust into some "black hole," or lonely room, to add to his sufferings. His "guardian angel" and himself would have a sorry night that night.

Probably the governor and schoolmaster, and those other "Guardians," would all sleep in peace. The former "had done their duty," and the latter slept in the assurance they would do so.

What tragedies and mockeries get mixed up under our stars. Governor, schoolmaster, the Guardians and the poor waif have probably slept for many years. Let us hope that sleeping so long with the clods of the valley, and in combination with divine influence, they will come forth to a sweeter life. We went that night to our beds scared, and wild with fear and excitement. The long, dark room became a veritable purgatory, with red flames of memory mingling with the red blood we had seen flowing down the boy's back. There was little sleep in our room for some boys, all their pulses were alive with fear and terror. The night bore on slowly and wearily. The broken whispers told of restlessness and sleeplessness. But the morning came, and the skilly, and the room where we had witnessed the bleeding back of the boy. The boy didn't come, however. Where he was none of us knew. I never saw him again, for in a few days came the joyful news that my father had got a situation. I left the place with a delight no words could express, and I have only once since permitted myself to see the place where I first felt the degradation of existence, and saw the infamies which were associated with such guardianship. The New Poor Law was wise enough, economically considered, but there could have been the economy without the brutality and harshness and humiliation pressed into the souls of old and young. Any system which makes young boys ashamed of their existence must be somewhat devilish in its evil ingenuity, and that was what Bastille "discipline" did for me.