

Arnold Bennett *Clayhanger* [1910] – An extract (Book 1, Chapter 5)

The Bastille was on the top of a hill about a couple of miles long, and the journey thither was much lengthened by the desire of the family to avoid the main road. They were all intensely ashamed; Darius was ashamed to tears, and did not know why; even his little sister wept and had to be carried, not because she was shoeless and had had nothing to eat, but because she was going to the Ba-ba-bastille; she had no notion what the place was. It proved to be the largest building that Darius had ever seen; and indeed it was the largest in the district; they stood against its steep sides like flies against a kennel. Then there was rattling of key-bunches, and the rasping voices of sour officials, who did not inquire if they would like a meal after their stroll. And they were put into a cellar and stripped and washed and dressed in other people's clothes, and then separated, amid tears. And Darius was pitched into a large crowd of other boys, all clothed like himself. He now understood the reason for shame; it was because he could have no distinctive clothes of his own, because he had somehow lost his identity. All the boys had a sullen, furtive glance, and when they spoke it was in whispers.

In the low room where the boys were assembled there fell a silence, and Darius heard someone whisper that the celebrated boy who had run away and been caught would be flogged before supper. Down the long room ran a long table. Someone brought in three candles in tin candlesticks and set them near the end of this table. Then somebody else brought in a pickled birch-rod, dripping with the salt water from which it had been taken, and also a small square table. Then came some officials, and a clergyman, and then, surpassing the rest in majesty, the governor of the Bastille, a terrible man. The governor made a speech about the crime of running away from the Bastille, and when he had spoken for a fair time, the clergyman talked in the same sense; and then a captured tiger, dressed like a boy, with darting fierce eyes, was dragged in by two men, and laid face down on the square table, and four boys were commanded to step forward and hold tightly the four members of this tiger. And, his clothes having previously been removed as far as his waist, his breeches were next pulled down his legs. Then the rod was raised and it descended swishing, and blood began to flow; but far more startling than the blood were the shrill screams of the tiger; they were so loud and deafening that the spectators could safely converse under their shelter. The boys in charge of the victim had to cling hard and grind their teeth in the effort to keep him prone. As the blows succeeded each other, Darius became more and more ashamed. The physical spectacle did not sicken nor horrify him, for he was a man of wide experience; but he had never before seen flogging by lawful authority. Flogging in the workshop was different, a private if sanguinary affair between free human beings. This ritualistic and cold-blooded torture was infinitely more appalling in its humiliation. The screaming grew feebler, then ceased; then the blows ceased, and the unconscious infant (cured of being a tiger) was carried away leaving a trail of red drops along the floor.

After this, supper was prepared on the long table, and the clergyman called down upon it the blessing of God, and enjoined the boys to be thankful, and departed

in company with the governor. Darius, who had not tasted all day, could not eat. The flogging had not nauseated him, but the bread and the skilly revolted his pampered tastes. Never had he, with all his experience, seen nor smelt anything so foully disgusting. When supper was completed, a minor official interceded with the Almighty in various ways for ten minutes, and at last the boys were marched upstairs to bed. They all slept in one room. The night also could be set down in words, but must not be, lest the setting-down should be disastrous...

Darius knew that he was ruined; he knew that he was a workhouse boy for evermore, and that the bright freedom of sixteen hours a day in a cellar was lost to him for evermore. He was now a prisoner, branded, hopeless. He would never be able to withstand the influences that had closed around him and upon him. He supposed that he should become desperate, become a tiger, and then...