

THE SCARLET LETTER
An Opera in Four Acts and Epilogue
Libretto by Patricia Herzog
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CHARACTERS

Townspeople

Chillingworth, Hester Prynne's abandoned and cuckolded husband

Beadle

Reverend Wilson, senior Minister

Governor Bellingham

Arthur Dimmesdale, minister

Hester Prynne, adulterous woman

Jailor

Pearl, daughter of Hester and Dimmesdale

Children

Bondservant

Mistress Hibbins, Governor Bellingham's sister

Witches

People in graveyard

Captain

Shipmaster

Crowd members

Rose, Pearl's daughter

Boston, Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1642 – 1649

About 30 years later

Act I, Scene I

The Prison Door

A throng of bearded men, in sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats, inter-mixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice of the prison, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.... The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the New World.... Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-pern, and such unsightly vegetation.... But on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered on a summer morning in this month of June, with its delicate gems....

The women who were now standing about the prison-door stood within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of her sex.... The bright morning sun ... shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks.... There was ... a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be.

WOMAN I (*sternly*)

Too much mercy!
Brand her with a red-hot iron!

WOMAN II (*emphatically*)

The brazen hussy!
A red-hot iron ...
Right on the forehead ...
Is what she needs!

WOMAN III (*contemptuously*)

The scarlet letter ...
What good will it do?
She'll walk the streets ...
Shameless as ever!

YOUNG WIFE (*sympathetically, holding a young child by the hand*)

The pang she must feel in her heart!

UGLY WOMAN (*speaking sternly to the Young Wife, her voice overpowering the others*')

Look to the law!
Scripture, too ...

Hester Prynne must die!

MAN (*turning to the Ugly Woman*)

Mercy, good woman!
(*addressing all the women*)
Hush, you gossips!
The lock is turning ...
Look! She is coming ...
Behold Mistress Prynne!

WOMEN (*half serious, half mocking, issue in a chorus of hushes*)

Hush, hush! Mistress Prynne!
Hush, hush! Mistress Prynne!
Hush ... hush ... hush... Etc.
(*They fall silent as the door opens*)

The door of the jail being flung open from within there appeared, in the first place like a black shadow emerging into sunshine, the grim and grisly presence of the town beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand.... Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, he laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward, until, on the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air as if by her own free will. She bore in her arms a child, a baby of some three months old....

... she took the baby on her arm, and with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had glossy dark hair, glossy and abundant ... and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, characterized by a certain state and dignity....

WOMAN II (*gesturing at the scarlet letter*)

She's good with the needle.
Knows how to shows it off ...

WOMAN IV

Strip it off!
Give her a rag of a letter instead!

BEADLE

Make way, good people! Make way!
Come along, Hester Prynne ...
Show your sin in the marketplace!

The crowd processes slowly along the dirt path, the men followed by the women and then the children, enjoying the spectacle with little or no understanding.

End of Scene

Act I Scene 2

Hester Prynne comes to a sort of scaffold, on which stands a pillory made of wood and iron. It stands nearly beneath the eaves of Boston's earliest church, and appears to be a fixture there.... Hester Prynne's ... sentence is that she should stand a certain time upon the platform, but without undergoing the gripe about the neck and confinement of the head.... Knowing well her part, she ascends a flight of wooden steps, and is thus displayed to the surrounding multitude.

The scene, in both outward and inward aspect, is not unlike that of a Madonna and child. It is further solemnized by the presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and several of his counselors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town, all of them either sitting or standing in a balcony of the meeting-house, looking down upon the platform....

Hester sustains herself as best she might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom.... She clutches the child so fiercely to her breast that it sends forth a cry.

An Indian, in his native garb, is standing on the outskirts of the crowd. By the Indian's side ... stands a white man, clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume. He is small in stature, with a furrowed visage, although he is not aged. There is a remarkable intelligence in his features.... By a seemingly careless arrangement of his heterogeneous garb, he endeavors to conceal or abate what is sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne: one of his shoulders is higher than the other. Seeing the man, Hester again presses the infant to her bosom with so convulsive a force that the poor babe utters another cry of pain.

The stranger, in turn, has his eyes bent on Hester Prynne. A writhing horror twists itself across his features. His face darkens with some powerful emotion, which, nevertheless, he so instantaneously controls by an effort of will, that, save in a single moment, his expression might have passed for calmness. Finding the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, he sees that she appears to recognize him. Slowly and calmly, he raises his finger, makes a gesture with it in the air that no one else sees, and places it on his lips.

CHILLINGWORTH (*to a townsman standing nearby*)

Good Sir, who is this woman?
Why put her to public shame?

TOWNSMAN (*addressing Chillingworth*)

Good man ...
You are a stranger to this land.

CHILLINGWORTH

A captive ...
Long held in bond.
This Indian, you see ...
Brought me here to be redeemed.

TOWNSMAN

You know not Hester Prynne.

CHILLINGWORTH

Most certainly not!

TOWNSMAN

Wife of a learned Englishman ...
Feared lost at sea.
Two years and no tidings.

CHILLINGWORTH

Ah ... I see ...
And the child?
Who might her father be?

TOWNSMAN

The woman refuses to say.
Perhaps he is here ...
Among us today.

CHILLINGWORTH (*with rather too much animation*)

Perhaps he lives yet ...
Perhaps he will come ...
Let him come ... yes!
The mystery will be solved!

TOWNSMAN

The magistrates show mercy, you see.
Her husband, they think ...
Lies at the bottom of the sea.
The magistrates spare her life.

CHILLINGWORTH (*interrupting excitedly*)

And doom her forever to show ...
The mark of shame upon her bosom!
A very wise sentence ...
To make her a living sermon.
But where is her partner in sin?
Why isn't he on the scaffold, too?
(to himself)
He will be known! ...
He will be known! ...
He will be known!

Hester Prynne is standing on the scaffold with her eyes still fixed on the stranger. A voice from the balcony calls to her.

REVEREND WILSON

Harken, Hester Prynne!
(laying a hand on the pale young minister beside him)
I have tried to persuade this godly youth ...
The minister in whom you confide the truth ...
To end your stubborn silence ...
To pry the tempter's name ...
Out of your stony lips.
(looks up at Dimmesdale then back at Hester)
He refuses!

CHILLINGWORTH (*to himself*)

He knows and will not say!

GOVERNOR BELLINGHAM

Good Master Dimmesdale,
In your hands lies this woman's soul.
Exhort her to confess!

The eyes of the crowd are now turned towards the minister, a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow; large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which is apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.

DIMMESDALE (*leaning over the balcony and looking straight into Hester's eyes*)

Hester Prynne!
Speak the name of your fellow sinner!
Do not be silent from sympathy!
Let him step down from a high place ...
And stand beside you on the scaffold.
Save him from hypocrisy!

Hester shakes her head no.

REVEREND WILSON (*exhorting in harsher tones*)

Woman ... speak his name!
Repent and the scarlet letter shall be no more!

HESTER PRYNNE (*looking straight at Dimmesdale*)

Never!
Never will I say his name!
His agony lies here with me ...
(*presses her free hand to her bosom*)
Nor will it ever be revealed ...
The letter is branded too deep for that!

CHILLINGWORTH (*standing amid the crowd, coldly and sternly*)

Speak, woman!
Give your child a father!

HESTER PRYNNE (*turning pale but remaining resolute*)

Never!
Never will I speak his name!
Never will my child know ...
She has an earthly father! ...

The crowd erupts with cries and hisses in reaction to Hester's defiance.

DIMMESDALE (*murmuring to himself, silently relieved, his hand over his heart*)

She will not speak!
Wondrous strength of a woman's heart ...
She will not speak!

REVEREND WILSON (*speaking most sternly, trying to quiet the crowd*)

Let the sinner stand ...
Let the sinner stand, I say!
For all to see ...
In misery ...
Melting away in the midday sun.
Look! Already the letter sets her ablaze!
(to the beadle)
Let the people have their fill ...
Of taunts and jeers ...
Then lock her up again ...
With her miserable infant!

The men on the balcony exit ceremoniously, one by one. The crowd remains, staring at and taunting Hester and her crying infant. Her impassive expression masks enormous suffering.

End of Scene

Act I Scene 3

The interior of a dimly lit room inside the prison. Hester Prynne is in a great state of agitation, pacing back and forth, muttering to herself indiscernibly. The baby is crying out in pain. The jailor lets Chillingworth into the room. Immediately, Hester Prynne is still and silent.

JAILOR (*enters the room with Chillingworth*)

I have brought you a doctor.

CHILLINGWORTH (*calmly, self-possessed*)

Please, good man, leave me alone with my patient.

JAILOR (*astonished at the change in Hester Prynne, hands Chillingworth a cup of water and leaves the room*)

You are a man of skill, indeed!
The woman was like possessed!

Chillingworth (*remaining calm, eyes the infant lying on a cot, opens a leather case containing vials of what appear to be medical preparations, takes a small flask from the case, prepares a mixture and offers it to Hester Prynne.*)

Here, woman!
The child is yours!
She is none of mine!

HESTER PRYNNE (*repels the offer, looks at Chillingworth with grave apprehension*)

Would you avenge yourself on a poor babe?

CHILLINGWORTH

Foolish woman!
The medicine is for good.
Were the child my own ...
I could do no better.

Hester Prynne hesitates. She is in a confused state. Chillingworth takes the writhing infant in his arms and administers the draught. The child soon becomes quiet and falls asleep. Chillingworth turns to Hester Prynne, feeling her pulse and looking into her eyes. He mixes another draught.

An Indian taught me this.
Here! Drink it!

HESTER PRYNNE *(takes the drink in her hands, looks searchingly at Chillingworth and then at her slumbering child)*

I have thought of death ...
I have wished for death ...
I would even have prayed for death ...
Had I only been worthy of prayer!
(pauses, looks Chillingworth dead in the eye)
Yet, if death be in this cup ...
I pray you think again.
(slowly raises the cup to her lips)
See! The cup is at my lips!

CHILLINGWORTH *(coldly composed)*

Drink it!
Death is not the vengeance I seek.
Better a long life of shame ... and misery!

(Chillingworth lays his forefinger on the scarlet letter. Hester Prynne reacts as if a red hot poker had been laid on her chest. Quickly, however, she regains her composure, drains the cup and lies down on the bed next to her sleeping child. Chillingworth pulls up the only chair in the room and sits beside the bed. His tone softens.)

Hester ...
I should have known ...
From the moment we were married ...
I should have seen the scarlet letter blazing.

HESTER PRYNNE

I did not love you.
I did not pretend to love you.

CHILLINGWORTH

Old as I was ...
Misshapen as I was ...
Somber as I was ...
With what folly I craved the simple bliss of marriage!

HESTER PRYNNE

I wronged you greatly!

CHILLINGWORTH

I was the first to wrong!
My decay betrayed your budding youth.
But that man, that man!
He has wronged us both!
I must know who he is!

HESTER PRYNNE

Ask me not!
Never shall I tell you!

CHILLINGWORTH

Nevertheless, I shall know!
I must and I shall!
Like vibrating strings ...
One is plucked ... both sound out.
A natural sympathy binds us.
By my shudder I shall know him!

HESTER PRYNNE

How I shudder at the thought!

CHILLINGWORTH

Fear not for his life.
Let him live ...
Cloaked in outward honor.
He is mine no less!

HESTER PRYNNE (*subtly recoiling, bringing her hand to her heart as if to keep her secret safe*)

A terrible mercy!

CHILLINGWORTH

One thing I ask ...
Betray me not!
I would live and die unknown.

HESTER PRYNNE

Why not tell all?

CHILLINGWORTH

And be seen for what I am ...
A cuckold?
Enough!
I am dishonored enough!
My good wife ...
I beg you ...
Recognize me not!
Breathe not our secret ... to him ... to anyone!
Remember ... his life is in my hands!

HESTER PRYNNE

I will keep your sad secret ...
As I have kept his.

CHILLINGWORTH (*snickering*)

And, now, Mistress Prynne ...
I leave you to your letter!
Do you wear it when you sleep?
Does it give you hellish dreams?

HESTER PRYNNE (*covering the letter, shuddering and recoiling*)

I wonder will our bond be the ruin of my soul!

CHILLINGWORTH (*still snickering*)

Not yours, my good wife ...
Not yours!

END OF ACT

Act II Scene 1

1645 (*three years later*)

On the outskirts of town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west. In this little lonesome dwelling, with some slender means that she possessed, and by the license of the magistrates, who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her, Hester established herself, with her infant child. Hester's art, the needlework so conspicuously on display in the scarlet letter, was much in demand, enabling her to provide for her infant and herself.

Hester sought not to acquire anything beyond a subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description, for herself, and a simple abundance for her child, now three years old. Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most somber hue, with only that one ornament, the scarlet letter. The child's attire, on the other hand, was distinguished by a fanciful or rather fantastic ingenuity which served to heighten the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl. Except for that small expenditure in the dress of her infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity. The world could not entirely cast Hester off, with her native energy of character and rare capacity, although it had set upon her a mark more intolerable to a woman's heart than that which branded Cain.

Hester named the infant 'Pearl' as being of great price. The child had a native grace which does not invariably co-exist with faultless beauty. Little Pearl was garbed in the richest tissues that could be procured, allowing her mother's imaginative faculty full play. So magnificent was the small figure when thus arrayed, and such was the splendor of Pearl's own proper beauty, shining through the gorgeous robes which might have extinguished a paler loveliness, that there was an absolute circle of radiance around her on the darksome cottage floor. And yet a russet gown, torn and soiled with the child's rude play made a picture of her just as perfect. Throughout all, there was a trait of passion, a certain depth of hue, which she never lost.

In Pearl, Hester could recognize her own wild, desperate, defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondence that had brooded in her heart. Now they were illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child's disposition; later in the day of earthly existence they might be prolific of the storm and whirlwind. Pearl's elfin spirit seemed at times devoid of human sympathy, and at other times full of a gusty tenderness towards her mother that was no less real for being fleeting.

...

Interior of the cottage. Three-year-old Pearl is engaged in imaginative play, creating monsters and then chasing them away. She is speaking inarticulately; all that we hear are sounds appropriate to various gestures and tones of voice. Hester is sitting at her needlework, observing Pearl. Pearl looks up at her mother and smiles, then reaches into a basket and withdraws a handful of wildflowers which she flings one by one, aiming

them at the scarlet letter on her mother's chest and jumping excitedly whenever one of the flowers hits its mark. Hester draws her hands to her chest but then resists the impulse and reaches again for her needle.

HESTER (*drops her work on her knees*)

Heavenly Father ...
What have I wrought?
Whose child is this?

PEARL

It's me, Mother ...
Little Pearl.

HESTER

Strange and elfish child!

PEARL

It's me, Mother ...
I am your little Pearl.

HESTER (*half-serious*)

You are no child of mine!

PEARL (*continuing her antics*)

Yes I am!
Yes I am!
I am your little Pearl!

HESTER

Who sent you, then?
Whence came you here?

PEARL (*in dead earnest, coming up to Hester and pressing herself to her mother's knees*)

Who sent me, Mother?
Whence came I here?

HESTER

The Heavenly Father sent you.

PEARL (*breaks free and rushes towards the door, then turns to look back at her mother*)

I have no Father in Heaven!
Who sent me, Mother?
Whence came I here?

HESTER (*shaking her head*)

Strange and elfish child!

Pearl skips off as if to play outside.

HESTER

Hush! Come back at once!
Come put on your dress!

Pearl steps back into the room so that Hester can help her get dressed. In sharp contrast to the mother's plain gray garb, she is adorned in a rich crimson tunic elaborately embroidered with gold thread—a living symbol of the scarlet letter. She is the very picture of beauty, with her bright complexion, deep glowing eyes, and an abundance of glossy, dark-brown hair. Hester picks up a pair of embroidered gloves, wraps them carefully, and they both exit the cottage.

End of Scene

Act II Scene 2

A path along the town green on one side of which is the Governor's mansion. The magnificently arrayed Pearl is skipping and running alongside her mother. She jumps into Hester's arms, then frees herself, rushing away in a playful torrent. A handful of children are playing their own somber games on the green. They see Hester and Pearl approach and stop playing.

CHILD ONE (*pointing and laughing*)

Look!
The scarlet letter!

CHILD TWO (*pointing to Pearl, laughing*)

And her little demon!

CHILD THREE

Look a her scarlet dress!

All the children laugh.

CHILD FOUR (*picking up a fistful of dirt*)

Come on!
Let's sling some mud!

CHILD FIVE (*shouting at Pearl*)

Where is your father?
Where is your father?

ALL THE CHILDREN (*taking up the taunt*)

Where is your father?
Where is your father?
Where is your father?
Where is your father?

Pearl stomps her feet and makes threatening gestures with her hands and arms. Then she rushes at the children as if charging at the enemy, scaring and scattering them in all directions.

HESTER

Come, my little Pearl.
Leave them be alone ...
To play their childish games.
Here we are ... at the Governor's door.

Hester lifts the iron hammer that hangs on the door and a bond servant answers.

Is his worshipful Governor within?

BOND SERVANT (*unable to take his eyes from the scarlet letter*)

He is with a godly minister ...
or two ... and a leech.
You may not see him.

HESTER (*undeterred*)

I will enter.
We will wait.

*Hester and Pearl are admitted into a wide, lofty entrance hall extending the full length of the house. At one end is the tower-flanked front door and at the other a bowed window, partly curtained and admitting in bands the bright sunlight behind. The hall is furnished with ponderous and elaborately carved chairs and a table, on which is a pewter tankard, and assorted family heirlooms from the Governor's ancestral home in England. The walls are lined with stern-looking portraits of Bellingham's ancestors, some in armor, some in stately ruffs and robes of peace. The window has a cushioned seat, on which is a large folio book, *The Chronicles of England*. Bellingham's own, elaborately-outfitted suit of armor hangs from one of the walls, with a brightly polished helmet and breastplate, a cuirass, a gorget and greaves, and a sword hanging beneath.*

PEARL (*looking at the armor excitedly and seeing the images distorted by a convex breastplate*)

Mother!
Look! Look!
Look at me!
Look at the scarlet letter!

HESTER (*dismayed at seeing the distorted images magnified by the armor*)

Come away, Pearl.
Come and look at the garden!

PEARL (*looking out the bowed window through a crack in the curtains into the garden*)

Oh look! Look!
A red rose!
Please may I have it?
Please, Mother! Please!

Hester hesitates and Pearl begins to stomp her feet and cry.

HESTER (*in an undertone*)

Hush! Hush!
Dear little Pearl ... do not cry.
Listen to the voices.
The men are nearby.
They are coming down the path.

With intense fascination, Pearl watches the men approaching along the garden path. Bellingham, wearing a loose gown and cap and a wide ruff, opens the bowed doors of the window and enters the room. He is followed by Mr. Wilson, an elderly pastor with a white flowing beard, then by Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. The men are surprised to see the little girl. They do not as yet see Hester, who is obscured by the dark shadow of the curtain.

BELLINGHAM

What have we here?
A bird of scarlet plumage!

WILSON

A young one ...
Made up like a richly painted bird.
What are you?
Human ... or
(*laughs*)
Or a naughty little elf?

PEARL

I am Mother's child.
My name is Pearl.

WILSON (*playfully*)

Pearl?
Ruby, rather ...
Or coral ... or rose!

Wilson looks about and sees Hester standing in the shadow of the curtain. His tone turns from playful to serious.

Ah ... now I see it ...
The selfsame child ...
Behold the unworthy mother!

BELLINGHAM

A scarlet woman!
I might have known ...
(addressing Hester)
Hester Prynne!
Why should we not take your child?
Should she not be taught ...

WILSON

And be told what to do?
Instructed in truths ...
And disciplined, too.

BELLINGHAM (*sternly*)

Hester Prynne!
In your fallen state ...
(points to the scarlet letter)
Tell me why ...
Why we should not take your child!

WILSON

Speak woman, speak!
A soul is at stake!

BELLINGHAM

Speak you, Hester Prynne.
Tell us why we should not take your child!

HESTER (*with a calm masking near hysteria*)

My only child!
I can teach little Pearl ...
(*placing her hand on her breast*)
What I have learned from this!

WILSON (*disgusted*)

A badge of shame!

HESTER

And most severe instructor!
My child will be better!
My child will be wiser!

BELLINGHAM (*turning to Wilson*)

My good Master Wilson,
Come and let us see ...
Is this a child of Christian sense?

Wilson, a grandfatherly type, sits in an armchair and tries to draw Pearl between his knees. She resists and escapes through the open window, standing on the step outside, looking like a richly plumed tropical bird.

WILSON

Who made you, child?

HESTER (*urgently*)

Speak Pearl, speak!
Tell the minister what you know ...
What you learned ...
What I taught you!

WILSON

Speak child, speak!
Who made you?

Pearl stares at Wilson but doesn't say a word.

BELLINGHAM

Speak child, speak!
Answer the minister!
Who made you?

Still staring at Wilson, Pearl puts her finger in her mouth. She takes it out, making a kind of plucking sound.

PEARL

From the wild rosebush ...
Beside the prison door ...
I was plucked by my mother!

Pearl starts to skip away down the garden stairs but her mother, reaching through the window, grabs her and stops her.

BELLINGHAM (*astonished*)

Awful! Just awful!
The child cannot say ...
She does not know who made her!
What can she know but naught?
Enough, gentlemen!
Enough, I say.
We have heard enough!

HESTER (*draws Pearl close to her, addresses Bellingham*)

God gave me this child!
He sent her here to torture me.
She is my happiness ...
She is my life!

WILSON (*relaxing his tone*)

Poor woman!
The child will be cared for ...

HESTER (*impassioned and adamant*)

By no one but me!
The child is not wild.
She is ever in her mother's care.

God gave me this child!
I will not give her up!

Turns suddenly and wildly to Dimmesdale

Speak for me!
You are my pastor!

You know my heart ...
You know my soul!

Speak for me!
I will not lose the child!

DIMMESDALE (*approaches Hester, pale, trembling, holding his hand over his heart*)

There is truth in what she says.
God gave her the child.
God made her a mother.

BELLINGHAM (*impatient*)

How so, Master Dimmesdale?
Make yourself plain!

DIMMESDALE

Whence comes this child?
From God!
Raising the child in righteousness ...
Providence sees fit to teach her.
The mother is saved from blacker sins.
Leave them, then!
Leave them as Providence intended!

WILSON

You speak well, Master Dimmesdale.
I feared she intended the child no good.

DIMMESDALE

Not so! Not so!
It was God who confided the child ...
In sacred pledge ...
To the mother's tender care!

CHILLINGWORTH (*smiling oddly at Dimmesdale*)

You speak with strange earnestness.

WILSON (*to Bellingham*)

What say you?
Has he not pleaded well?

BELLINGHAM

He has indeed!
(*looking at Hester*)
The child will be put to the test.
She will go to school and learn with all the rest.
As for you, Hester Prynne ...
No more scandal!

Dimmesdale retreats into the heavy folds of the curtain, trembling from the effort he has made. Pearl steals softly towards him, takes his hand in both her own and lays her cheek against it in tender caress.

HESTER (*to herself, unbelieving*)

Is that my Pearl?

Dimmesdale looks around, lays his hand on Pearl's head, hesitates a moment, then kisses her brow. Pearl laughs, breaking the spell of tenderness, then lightly and airily capers down the hall.

WILSON

Do her feet even touch the ground?
She is in need of no broomstick!
The child has witchcraft!

CHILLINGWORTH

Strange child!
I wonder, gentleman ...
Could we analyze her features ...
And shrewdly guess at the father?

WILSON (*mildly rebuking*)

Better to fast and pray on it.
Better leave it to Providence.

Hester and Pearl exit the front door of the Governor's mansion. As they descend the steps, a window from one of the towers is thrown open and Mistress Hibbins, the Governor's bitter-tempered sister, later executed as a witch, pokes her ugly face out into the bright sunlight.

MISTRESS HIBBINS

Hist! Hist!
A merry company tonight ...
Come, Hester Prynne!
Comely Hester Prynne!
I well-nigh promised ...
The Black Man in the forest!

HESTER (*smiling triumphantly*)

Make my excuse.
Here I stay with little Pearl.
Had they taken her away ...
I would gladly have signed ...
With my very own blood ...
The Black Man's book!

HIBBINS

We will see you there yet!

Hibbins disappears behind the shutter. Hester and Pearl exit the scene, walking back down the same path. Three witches clustered in the background look on and beckon in a whisper.

ALL WITCHES

Come! Come! Come! Come!
Come! Come! Come! Come!
Come this very night!
And bring your demon child!

PEARL

What do they want, Mother?

HESTER (*grabbing the child's hand and hastening away*)

Come, Pearl ...
Come, my child ...
Leave them to their mischief!

END OF ACT

ACT III Scene 1

The scene toggles between two locations: the adjoining apartments of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth in a richly furnished house in Boston, and the graveyard below. We see the living rooms of each apartment and the door that adjoins them. Dimmesdale's apartment is in the front. Light is streaming around the heavily draped windows. Directly below is the graveyard. The apartment is filled with books, Dimmesdale's library—parchment-bound ecclesiastical folios of every kind—and the interior walls are draped in tapestries depicting scenes from Scripture. Chillingworth's is in the back, where it is too dark to see without artificial light. His living room is arranged as a laboratory with a large flat table on which are a distilling apparatus and differently sized mortars and pestles for compounding drugs. Also on the table are wild herbs and thistles. The light on the table is on.

Chillingworth is standing in Dimmesdale's apartment, peering through a crack in the drapes. He strains to hear a conversation (off-stage, as if from a distance) in the graveyard. Dimmesdale, looking ever more sickly and pale, is seated in a chair at the far end of the room. Next to him is a side-table with some books. He sees that Chillingworth is straining to hear something but he hears nothing of it himself. Four people are standing in the graveyard, looking up at the windows in Dimmesdale's apartment.

PERSON ONE

The minister's new abode.

PERSON TWO

The strange man's, too.

PERSON THREE

A doctor, they say ...

PERSON FOUR (*interrupting*)

The Devil, they say...
His face all black and sooty ...
With poisonous plants ...
And poisonous schemes!

PERSON TWO

Thirty years ago ...
In London ...
They saw a man ...
Just like him ...
He had a different name.
A murderer, they say!

PERSON FOUR (*interrupting*)

A murderer!
May God protect the minister!

PERSON ONE

May God protect the minister!

CHILLINGWORTH (*withdrawing from the drapes, turning to Dimmesdale*)

The people in the graveyard below ...
They are glad, they say ...
Glad we are here ... together.

DIMMESDALE (*collapsed in his chair, looking at Chillingworth with sunken eyes*)

Can you really say ...
My good physician ...
I have profited from your care?

Pearl's wild laughter, heard from the graveyard below, bursts through the gloom. Dimmesdale gets up from his chair and walks slowly and weakly towards the window. Pearl is seen hopping from grave to grave. She gathers thistles from the weeds growing up around the tombstones and sticks them to her mother's breast, outlining the scarlet letter. The men look out at them.

CHILLINGWORTH

No law ...
No opinion binds her.
Look now!
She skips and dances on a poor man's grave!
Look now!
With prickly burrs she adorns her mother's breast.
What, in heaven's name, is she?

DIMMESDALE (*more to himself, though audible to Chillingworth*)

A creature of freedom ...
Beyond the law.
Whether capable of good ...
I do not know.

Dimmesdale withdraws from the window and sinks back into his chair. Chillingworth closes the window and draws the curtains in a rather abrupt fashion. The window

closing catches the attention of Hester and Pearl. Hester stands still, looking up at the window. Pearl runs to her side.

PEARL (*tugging at Hester's sleeve*)

Come away, Mother!
Come away from that Old Black Man!
He has caught the Minister!
Come away, Mother!
Or he'll catch you, too!

They leave the graveyard.

CHILLINGWORTH (*now facing Dimmesdale*)

Returning to your health ...

DIMMESDALE

For good or ill ...
For life or death ...
Speak freely, I pray you.

CHILLINGWORTH

Freely, then, and plainly will I speak.
When the soul is sick ...
The body cannot heal.
(*entreating*)
What torments you, my friend?
Tell me!

DIMMESDALE

No!
Not you!

CHILLINGWORTH

Lay open the wound in your soul!

DIMMESDALE

No!
Not to you!

CHILLINGWORTH

Give yourself to me!
Show me your broken soul ...
That I may make you well!

DIMMESDALE

Never!
Not to an earthly physician!
Would you thrust yourself before my God?
Enough! Leave me alone!

CHILLINGWORTH (*to himself, retreating to his quarters*)

What passion takes hold!
A wild thing he must have done!

The secret that lies in his breast ...
The matter that tears at his heart ...
And makes him sickly pale ...
I will know it!

I will uncover his crime ...
He will be mine!

Chillingworth retreats to his quarters. Dimmesdale collapses in his chair, his hand on his chest. Very soon he is fast asleep. Not long after, Chillingworth walks back into the room. He removes Dimmesdale's hand and in one quick gesture pulls aside the cloth covering his chest. Dimmesdale shudders but does not wake up. Stunned by what he sees (the audience does not), the repulsive Chillingworth—ugly, old and misshapen--whirls about in a Satanic frenzy, throwing his hands in the air and stamping his feet on the floor. He stops and stares at Dimmesdale with deep concentration. Dimmesdale awakes and is glad to see Chillingworth.

DIMMESDALE

I am sorry for my words ...
Sorry I sent you away ...
Please forgive me ...
My physician, my friend.
I know I am ...
In the best of hands.

CHILLINGWORTH (*with a look of deep satisfaction*)

Indeed you are!

Act III Scene 2

Midnight of the same day. A heavy fog obscures and distorts the outlines of everything. All is quiet. The streets are deserted save for Dimmesdale. He is dressed in ministerial garb as if for a ceremonial event. He walks as if in a dream to the scaffold where seven years before Hester and her baby had stood. Along the way he imagines he is standing at his pulpit, confessing his sin to the congregants assembled before him.

DIMMESDALE (*mimicking the congregation*)

‘Godly youth!’

‘Saint on earth!’

(*now in his own voice*)

What nonsense!

I ... your pastor ...

Revered and trusted ...

An utter lie!

(*accusing himself*)

Coward! Miserable sinner!

It has taken you seven long years!

(*ascending the steps of the scaffold, speaking as if to a gathering crowd*)

Come hither ...

Behold the horrid spectacle!

Atop the scaffold and facing outward, Dimmesdale shrieks at the top of his lungs, a long pealing cry, and then covers his face with his hands.

There! It is done!

The whole town will know it!

Hearing nothing, Dimmesdale uncovers his eyes and looks around. He sees Governor Bellingham at a distance, standing at one of the windows of his mansion, lamp in hand, in white night-cap and gown, looking like a ghost. In another of the windows he sees the sour-faced Mistress Hibbins, also with lamp in hand, thrusting her head out the lattice, searching the night sky for omens. First one and then the other light is extinguished. Dimmesdale is greatly relieved, but then he spies the light from another lantern approaching at a distance. As the person continues on, the lantern variously illuminates several objects—a window pane, a water pump, etc. The light draws nearer and finally Dimmesdale recognizes Reverend Wilson. Still obscured in foggy darkness, Dimmesdale is unnoticed by Wilson as he passes the scaffold. After Wilson is out of earshot, Dimmesdale continues with his imaginary musing.

In the morning, then ...

The whole town will see ...

My half-dead body ...

Frozen in place.

Suddenly, Dimmesdale bursts into a great peal of uncontrollable laughter. Then, as if in response, he hears the light, airy laughter of a child and recognizes the voice of Pearl.

Pearl! Little Pearl!
(pauses, then in suppressed tones)
Hester! Hester Prynne!
Are you there?

HESTER *(surprised)*

We are here!

DIMMESDALE

What brings you out on such a night?

HESTER

Governor Winthrop is dying.
I have taken the measure for his robe.

DIMMESDALE

Come up!
Come up once more ...
We shall all stand together!

Hester silently ascends the steps, holding Pearl by the hand. When they are on the platform, Dimmesdale feels for the child's other hand and takes it. He is pulsing with new life.

PEARL

Minister!

DIMMESDALE

What is it, child?

PEARL

Tomorrow at noon ..
Will you stand here like this ...
With mother and me?

DIMMESDALE

Nay, little Pearl.

Pearl laughs and attempts to pull away her hand but Dimmesdale holds it fast.

PEARL (*insistent*)

Will you promise ...
To take my hand ...
And mother's, too ...
At noon tomorrow?

DIMMESDALE

Nay, little Pearl.
Not then ...
Not in the light of day.

PEARL

Will you ever take my hand ...
And stand in the light of day?

DIMMESDALE

Nay, little Pearl.
On the Day of Judgment, yes ...
Before the Almighty!

Suddenly the muffled night sky is lit up by a meteor and everything -- the clouds above, the scaffold below, Dimmesdale with his hand on his heart, Hester with her scarlet letter, Pearl looking up at Dimmesdale with a naughty smile, the surrounding streets and houses -- is distinctly seen in a strange glow. Distracted, Dimmesdale lets Pearl's hand slip from his grasp. She withdraws it slowly and points to a place across the street which the audience does not as yet see. Dimmesdale clasps his hands together, looking towards the heavens. Then he looks down to where Pearl is pointing and sees, without entirely recognizing, Chillingworth looking like the devil himself.

DIMMESDALE (*horrified, to Hester*)

Who is that man, Hester?
I shiver at him!

PEARL

I know!

DIMMESDALE

Quickly, child!
Whisper it in my ear!

Dimmesdale bends down to listen and Pearl mumbles some gibberish, which the audience also hears, then laughs elfishly, making Dimmesdale angry.

Do you mock me?

PEARL (*standing her ground*)

You were not bold!
You were not true!
You would not take my hand!

CHILLINGWORTH

Master Dimmesdale ...
Can this be you?
Well, well indeed, Sir ...
At this late hour ...
How come you here?
Let me take you home.

DIMMESDALE (*fearful and suspicious*)

At this late hour ...
How come you here?

CHILLINGWORTH

I, too, was out ...
(*coldly acknowledges Hester*)
On an errand of mercy.
The Governor's doctor.

Good sir ...
Step down from there.
Let me take you home.

DIMMESDALE (*deflated, yielding*)

I will go with you.

End of Scene

Act III Scene 3

Along the shore, a wooded part of the peninsula, remote from town, where Hester and Pearl live. Hester is walking with Pearl and spies Chillingworth, basket in one arm and cane in the other hand, stooping low to the ground in quest of medicinal herbs and thistles.

HESTER *(to Pearl)*

Go along now, Pearl ...
And play ...

Pearl, barefoot, goes skipping off towards the shore.

(to Chillingworth)

I would have a word with you ...
A word that much concerns us.

CHILLINGWORTH *(looking up, surprised)*

Aha! Mistress Hester!
A word?
(sarcastic)
With an old man like me?
(pauses)
I hear such good tidings!
Just yesterday a magistrate spoke ...
A word that much concerns you.
(rudely pointing to her bosom with his cane)
Seven long years at the side ...
Of the sick and the poor and the dying ...
A veritable saint!
Should not the letter come off?
Yes! I pleaded.
Yes! I entreated.
Let the letter come off!

HESTER *(self-possessed)*

It is not for him ... or you ... to decide!

CHILLINGWORTH

Nay, then, wear it if you will!
A woman must follow her fancy.

Heather looks intently at Chillingworth, who, despite affecting a kindly expression, looks quite like the devil, with red occasionally flashing from his eyes.

What do you see?

HESTER

Something that would make me weep ...
Were there tears bitter enough!
(straining to collect herself)
Let it pass ...
(her voice lower but no less intense)
I speak of that miserable man.

CHILLINGWORTH

Dimmesdale?
What of him?

HESTER *(rising to a higher pitch)*

Your clutch is on his life!

CHILLINGWORTH

Nay!
It is not so!
He lives and breathes and creeps about the earth ...
Because of me!

HESTER

You torment his soul!

CHILLINGWORTH

So I do ...

HESTER

Fiend!
His life ... his fame ... his fair estate ...
All in your hands!
Would that he were dead!

CHILLINGWORTH

Woman!
Majestic in despair!
I pity you ...
And thrill in admiration!

HESTER

Fiend!
Did hatred so transform you?

CHILLINGWORTH

Why, Hester, it was you ...
You who spurned and scorned me!

HESTER

Forgive me!
Purge hatred from your soul!
If not for my sake ... or for his ...
Then doubly for your own!

CHILLINGWORTH (*dismissively*)

Peace, Hester ... peace!
You are no more a sinner ...
Than I am a fiend.

HESTER

There is no good for him
There is no good for me ...
The good is there for you alone ...
You have it in your power to forgive!

CHILLINGWORTH

Peace, Hester ... peace!
It is not for me to pardon.

Our lives are ruled by fate ...
By dark necessity.

Now go your way.
Deal with the minister as you may.

Waves her off and turns his back, continuing with his herb-gathering.

HESTER (*cries out*)

He shall know who you are!

Chillingworth continues his wanderings and does not respond to Hester's cry.

END OF ACT

ACT IV Scene 1

Hester and Pearl are walking slowly on a narrow footpath deep in the woods. It is a gray and somber day punctured now and again with brilliant streaks of sunlight. Pearl skips ahead and is momentarily out of view. She returns, costumed in the greenery of the forest. On her chest she has improvised a green letter A.

PEARL (*pointing to her mother's letter*)

What does it mean, Mother?

HESTER

Nothing, my child ...
Nothing at all.

PEARL

Will you make one me ...
When I grow up?

HESTER

What is this nonsense?

PEARL

Will you make one for the man ...
With his hand on his heart?

HESTER

What do I know of the minister's heart!

PEARL (*persisting*)

Will you make one for me ...
When I grow up?

HESTER

Hold your tongue!
Go and take that off!

Somewhat violently, but in the spirit of fun, Pearl tears the letter from her chest and throws it on the ground, where it completely loses its shape and blends into the surroundings. Hester sits down on a mossy knoll beside a brook, and Pearl, grinning elfishly, joins her.

PEARL (*softly persisting, genuinely distressed and perplexed*)

Mother! Mother!
What does it all mean?

HESTER

Naughty child!
Hold your tongue!

Listening to the babbling brook, they both fall silent. Then, hearing the sound of footsteps, Hester points to Dimmesdale walking along the footpath.

Go and play ...
But do not stray!

PEARL (*excited*)

Look, Mother!
The minister's hand is on his heart!

Dimmesdale is absorbed in thought and does not hear them. Pearl skips off across the brook. The sunlight follows her, leaving Hester in the forest under a dark canopy of trees and clouds. Hester rises from the mossy knoll and advances towards the footpath, from where she can see Dimmesdale clearly. Unaware of being watched, he is leaning on a stick, crudely fashioned from a branch, looking haggard and feeble, the other hand still over his heart. He has almost walked past her when she calls out.

HESTER (*faintly*)

Arthur Dimmesdale!
(*louder*)
Arthur Dimmesdale!

DIMMESDALE (*gathering himself up quickly, standing more erect, straining to see and gradually making out the still-indistinct figure of Hester obscured by deep forest shade*)

Hester!
Hester Prynne!
Is it true?
Can it be you?

HESTER

Even so, Arthur!
Such as I am after these seven years!

And you ...
Is it still you ... inside?

Dimmesdale slowly stretches forth his arm and takes Hester's hand in his, breaking the distance between them. Hand in hand, they walk back to the mossy knoll and sit down together, remaining silent for a few moments.

DIMMESDALE (*looking deeply into her eyes*)

Hester ... have you found peace?

Hester looks down at her bosom and smiles drearily, then looks up at Dimmesdale.

The people say you care ...
That you're with them ...
In illness or distress.
There is talk ... even ...
Of no longer needing ...
That letter on your dress!

HESTER (*sighs*)

And you, Arthur ...
Have you found peace?

DIMMESDALE

Never!
Not for a moment!
Nothing but despair!
What else could I hope for ...
Being what I am!

HESTER

The people worship you!

DIMMESDALE

Miserable hypocrite!
So much the worse am I ...
For their love!

HESTER

You wrong yourself!

DIMMESDALE

Nay, Hester ...
It is not so!
You wear yours openly ...
Mine lies hidden ... here!
(smites his breast with his fist)
If there were one ... just one ...
Who knew the truth ...
That much truth would save me!

HESTER

I am that one!
(lowers her voice)
There is one other ...
You have an enemy ...

DIMMESDALE *(not comprehending)*

An enemy?

HESTER

He lives with you.

DIMMESDALE

Under my roof?

HESTER *(passionately)*

Oh Arthur!
Please forgive me!
I would have saved your reputation ...
Instead I ruined your soul!

That hateful man ...
The physician ...
Who daily tends your care ...
He was my husband!

DIMMESDALE *(frowns at Hester, blackly and fiercely, then sinks down to the ground and buries his face in his hands)*

Woman! Woman!
What have you done?
The horror, the shame, the ugliness!

Day after day ...
Night after night ...
My sick and guilty heart ...
Exposed ... to him!

You did this!
You did this to me!
I will never forgive you!

HESTER (*wildly*)

You will! You will!
Oh Arthur ...
Forgive me!
Forgive us both!

With sudden and desperate tenderness she throws her arms around him, pressing his head to her bosom and the scarlet letter. Dimmesdale struggles in vain to free himself. She will not release her hold. Finally, he relents.

DIMMESDALE (*with deep sadness*)

I do forgive you, Hester.
May God forgive us both.

HESTER

Never did we violate the human heart.
We said our vows ...
Or have you forgotten?

DIMMESDALE

Hush, Hester ...
I have not forgotten.

They sit down together, hand in hand, on the grassy knoll, lingering in the obscurity of the forest shade, reluctant to part. A disturbing thought occurs to Dimmesdale.

The devil knows our secret ...
Will he not reveal our shame?

HESTER

And so expose his own?
Never!

DIMMESDALE

I cannot stand that man!

HESTER

Get away from him, then!

DIMMESDALE

Think for me, Hester!
You are strong!
Tell me what to do!

HESTER

You are free ...
Go forth!

DIMMESDALE

But where?

HESTER

Is the world so narrow?

DIMMESDALE

What can I do?

HESTER

Preach! Act! Write!
Do anything ...
But lie down and die!

DIMMESDALE

He shall find me!

HESTER

Go anywhere!
Go back to England

DIMMESDALE

You would have me venture forth ...
To face the world alone?
I am faint ... I am sick ...
I have not enough strength ...
To face the world alone.

HESTER

Not alone, Arthur.
You will not go alone!

DIMMESDALE (*looking up at Hester*)

Do I feel joy again?

HESTER

Do not look back ...
The past is gone!

She unclasps the scarlet letter from her bosom and flings it away from her. It falls by the near side of the stream, across from which Pearl is still off somewhere playing. The letter catches the sunlight and sparkles like a glittering jewel. Hester removes the cap confining her hair. Her tresses, dark, rich and abundant, fall upon her shoulders. Her sex, her youth and the richness of her beauty radiate forth. The sun bursts forth, illuminating the dark forest with a radiance to match Hester's beauty and revealing the figure of Pearl standing on the other side of the stream, looking at them. Hester and Dimmesdale are startled to see her, and also startled by her appearance. Pearl has decked herself out in the finery of the forest with wreathes of flowers and twigs.

DIMMESDALE (*softly*)

Pearl!

Pearl does not respond; she simply stands and stares.

I fear her.

HESTER (*tries to comfort him*)

The forest spirits are her friends.
She has no others.
Strange child ...
Elfin child ...

You will love her as do I ...

And help me be her guide.

DIMMESDALE

Will she be glad to know me?

HESTER

She will love you!

Hester calls to Pearl, who continues to stand away.

Pearl! Pearl!

Pearl cautiously approaches the far side of the brook.

DIMMESDALE (*sensing the child's caution*)

Will she really love me?

HESTER (*turning to Dimmesdale*)

Our little elf ...
Fitful and fantastic ...
Has strong affections.
She will love you dearly!

Pearl remains standing at the far side of the brook, bathed in sunlight, her reflection gloriously reflected in the sparkling water.

(*to Pearl*)
Come, dearest child!
Why so slow?
Leap you now ...
Over the brook!

Pearl remains where she is, looking from one to the other and then pointing with her forefinger at Hester's bosom.

Strange child!
Why do you not come?

Pearl remains standing and pointing her finger at Hester's bosom. She now with a frown on her face.

Hurry, Pearl ...
Or I shall be angry!
Naughty child ...

Leap across the brook!

Pearl remains where she is, still pointing her finger, but now also stomping her feet, gesticulating wildly and shrieking.

Now I see!
She doesn't recognize me ...
Without the scarlet letter!

DIMMESDALE (*visibly upset*)

Stop her!
I beg you ... stop her!
Stop her from carrying on!

HESTER (*sighing heavily and pointing with sadness at the letter not far from Pearl's feet*)

Pearl ... look at your feet ...
Come ... bring it here!

PEARL (*stubbornly*)

You come, Mother!

HESTER (*to Dimmesdale*)

Was there ever such a child?

Hester moves towards Pearl, picks up the letter and refastens it to her breast.

(*with great resolve*)
In a very few days we set sail for England ...
Along the way this hateful token ...
Shall be tossed aside ...
To lie ... at the bottom of the sea!

She gathers up the heavy tresses of her hair and confines them again beneath her cap.

(*to herself*)
What a dreary change this has wrought.
(*to Pearl*)
Do you know me now, child?
Will you come across the brook?

Pearl bounds across the brook and clings tightly to her mother.

PEARL

Now you are my mother!
Now I am your little Pearl!

Pearl draws her mother's face down and kisses Hester on both cheeks, then she kisses the scarlet letter, then turns to look at Dimmesdale, who has moved some paces away and looks on apprehensively.

Why does the minister stand apart?

HESTER

He waits to greet you!
He loves you so!
He loves your mother, too.

PEARL (*looking directly into Hester's eyes*)

Will he come back with us, then ...
Hand in hand ...

HESTER

Not now, my child ...
But in days to come.

PEARL

Will he always have his hand on his heart?

HESTER

Foolish child!
Come and ask the minister's blessing!

Pearl resists and Hester practically forces her to come up to Dimmesdale, who, looking embarrassed, plants a kiss on her forehead. Pearl breaks away and runs to the brook, where she stoops down and splashes water on her forehead as if to wash off the kiss.

DIMMESDALE (*shudders*)

Strange child ...
Will she really love me?

HESTER

She will love you dearly!

(urgently)
Quick now!
In just four days ...
A cruiser bound for Bristol leaves these shores.
Long have I tended the captain's crew ...
He knows me well ...
He will not tell ...
He will keep our secret!
Come!
Come away from this dark dreary place!

DIMMESDALE

Four days you say?
(to himself, deluded about his fate)
How fortunate ...
I preach in just three days ...
The people will say I served them well.
(turning again to Hester)
Four days you say?
I must hurry away
There is much for me to do!

With unaccustomed lightness Dimmesdale almost skips away. Just before he disappears from view, he looks back and sees Hester still looking at him from the place where they had stood. Pearl has become completely re-absorbed in her play.

End of Scene

Act IV Scene 2

The Market Place. A public holiday celebrating the installation of the new governor of Massachusetts. Decked out like an exotic bird with brilliant plumage, Pearl is all gaiety, flitting about excitedly and breaking into occasional shouts resembling wild and sometimes piercing music. Hester, dressed in her habitual gray, is all but invisible. Around them is an odd and colorful assortment of people: craftsmen and other ordinary inhabitants of the town; rough types, attired in deerskin, belonging to the forest settlements on the outskirts; a party of Indians in their savage finery; and, wildest of all, the sailors of the ship bound for Bristol, rough-looking desperadoes with sun-blackened faces, come ashore to witness the festivities.

In one corner of the village green is a wrestling match, in another, stick fighting (quarterstaff), and on the scaffold and pillory is a demonstration by two masters of the buckler and broadsword.

PEARL (*looking around excitedly*)

A play day for the whole world!
(*pointing with her finger*)
Look!
The blacksmith with his face scrubbed clean!
Look!
The jailor ...
Why is he smiling at me?

HESTER (*sighing under her breath*)

He remembers you as a little babe.

PEARL (*looking at the jailor, out of earshot*)

Don't smile at me ...
You ugly old man!
(*looking around with excitement and delight*)
Look! Look!
Look at their costumes and made-up faces!
(*pointing*)
Look! Look!
Here stand the Indians!
The sailors have come ashore! ...
Mother, what for?

HESTER

The people await the great procession ...
Governors magistrates ... ministers ...

PEARL (*interrupting, hardly able to contain herself*)

Will the minister greet us, too?
Will the minister take our hands in his?
Will he, Mother ...
Will he?

HESTER

Nay my child ...
Not today ...
Nor must we greet him ... today.

PEARL (*makes a disgusted face*)

In darkness he knows us ...
In daylight not!
In darkness we greet him ...
In daylight not!
He held my hand ...
He gave me a kiss!
Don't you think he misses ... me?
Today he's a stranger!
Is there anything stranger than that?

HESTER

Hush, Pearl!
Look about you!
The people come from workshops and fields ...
The children are come from school.
They celebrate ...
As if a good and golden year ...
Were at length to pass ...
Over this poor world!

Run along now, Pearl ...
Go and feast your eyes ...
Bring me back a good report!

Pearl skips off and Hester remains standing in a small vacant space--a kind of saint in a magic circle created by the moral discipline of the scarlet letter--in which, though people are elbowing each other a short distance away, none save one dares intrude. It is the captain, attired in the most outlandish dress of all.

CAPTAIN

Hester Prynne!

HESTER

Good Captain!
What news?

CAPTAIN

Good news!
A physician is coming aboard ...
One of your party, he says ...
No scurvy to fear ...
No ship's fever ...
Not on this voyage!

Their conversation is interrupted by the sound of a military band, made up of a various instruments imperfectly played but with great spirit. The procession to the meeting house, where the minister will deliver the Election Sermon, is commencing. Pearl runs back to her mother's side and stands perfectly still, transfixed by the pomp and circumstance. Following the military band and the soldiers are the statesmen, looking even more dignified and exalted by the occasion. Then Dimmesdale, with a gait and an air of unusual vitality, inspiring awe and reverence among the assembled crowd. Dimmesdale wears a look of such intense concentration that he seems not to see or hear anything. He moves past Hester, who looks at him intently, without appearing to notice her, without so much as giving her a glance.

PEARL (*looking at her mother, making a sour face*)

Mother!
Is that the same man?
The minister ...
Who kissed me by the brook?
He looks so strange!

HESTER

It is he.

PEARL (*excited*)

Should I run to him, Mother?
Will he kiss me now?

HESTER

Hush, Pearl!
The public square is no place for kisses!

PEARL (*impishly insistent, turning her disappointment into something of a joke*)

Will he kiss me now ...
In the public square?
Will he place his hand ...
(clapping her hand to her heart)
You know where?

HESTER

Quiet, child!
Hold your peace!
(the minister disappears into the meetinghouse and Hester turns Pearl in the direction of the crowd assembled outside)
Run along now ...
Run along and feast your eyes!

Pearl skips off, the people crowd around the meetinghouse in expectation, and Hester is finally alone.

He didn't see me ...
Or did he? ...
Does Arthur shrink from love?

A passing glance ...
Should have sufficed ...
To seal our bond ...
A forest pledge ...
To flee this sorry place!

An evil man thinks to sink our ship!

Can it be?
In three days' time ...
All this has come undone?

(in a pleading voice, as if speaking to Dimmesdale in the meetinghouse)

Oh Arthur ...
Did you forget ... what we said?
The future that we pledged?

Oh Arthur!
I will save you yet!

Mistress Hibbins, arrayed in great magnificence, penetrates the sanctity of Hester's solitude. The people standing nearest them are disturbed to see the two standing together.

HIBBINS (*standing close to Hester, whispering audibly in her ear, gesturing to the meetinghouse*)

Was it he you met on the forest path?

HESTER

Madam ...
I know not what you say!

HIBBINS

Fie, woman! Fie!
Trifle with me not!
Your sin glimmers in the light of day ...
The minister's glows in darkness ...

Pearl has just come back. She overhears Mistress Hibbins.

PEARL (*excited, out of breath*)

Good Mistress Hibbins ...
Have you seen the minister's sin?

HIBBINS

Soon enough, little darling ...
In the forest deep ...
You will see ...
What lies beneath ...
The minister's priestly cloak!

They say you were born of the Prince of the Air ...
Will you ride with me there ... tonight?
(*she claps her hand on her bosom and looks triumphantly at Hester*)
Hester Prynne! Ha!

Laughing loudly and shrilly enough for the whole marketplace to hear, Mistress Hibbins departs. Pearl goes flitting off again among the crowd. Hester edges closer to the packed meetinghouse, too crowded now for more to enter. Standing close beside the scaffold, she tries to catch a word of two of Dimmesdale's sermon, which can be heard in muffled tones through the walls. She listens intently to the murmur and flow of the ministers voice, although no word is distinct enough to be comprehended.

Meanwhile, little Pearl is flitting about the marketplace, making a figure so attractive and amusing that people can't help but smile at the bright bird of plumage darting to and

fro. With native audacity, she runs and looks an Indian in the face, then flits into the midst of a group of sailors. The shipmaster is so smitten that he tries to lay his hands on her and snatch a kiss, but she flits about like a hummingbird and cannot be caught. The shipmaster takes a gold chain from his hat and tosses it to her. Pearl happily picks it up and skillfully twines it around her neck and waist.

SHIPMASTER (*pointing to Hester*)

That woman over there with the letter ...
Will you give her a message?

PEARL (*sassily*)

Only if it pleases me!

SHIPMASTER

Tell her I spoke with that old ugly man
He says he's the minister's guest ...
Your mother pays only for her and you.

Pearl makes a zigzag path through the marketplace back to her mother. The sermon has just ended and the church is letting out. Throngs of people empty out into the marketplace. The people left outside gather round them, eager to learn what the minister said. For a brief moment, Hester and Pearl are left completely alone. No one either sees or hears them. .

PEARL (*gesturing to the shipmaster*)

That funny-looking man ...
Over there ...
(*brandishing her gold chain*)
See what I got!

Oh and I almost forgot ...
The shipmaster says ...
The doctor says ...
The minister is his guest.
You pay only for two.
What does he mean, Mother?

HESTER (*breaking down*)

Oh Pearl ...
We are ruined!
The minister will think there's nowhere to turn!
Mark my words, Little Pearl ...
We are ruined!

PEARL

Come away, Mother!
Come away with me now!
I made friends with an Indian ...
He will take us away with him!

HESTER

Hush, Pearl!

PEARL

Come, Mother!
Come away!
(pulls at her mother sleeve)
Come let's find the Indian!

HESTER

Stop this nonsense, child!
You know not what you say!

PEARL *(pleading)*

Oh Mother! Come away!
Come away with me now!

End of Scene

ACT IV Scene 3

The crowd outside the church, in the midst of which Hester and Pearl are standing, makes a sudden cry as the doors of the church swing open. People start pouring out and the military band strikes up again. The people in the marketplace suddenly burst forth with praises, telling each other what the minister said and interpreting its import. Moving through a broad pathway of people in the crowded street are the new and the old governor, various other dignitaries and town officials, the Reverend Wilson and lastly Dimmesdale.

CROWD MEMBER ONE

Never has man spoken so wise!

CROWD MEMBER TWO

Nor have mortal lips ever been so inspired!

CROWD MEMBER THREE

A wise and holy spirit!

The procession continues and Dimmesdale nears the point where he passes close to the crowd. The exclaiming and extolling die down to a hushed murmur when the people see how pale and frail he looks, in contrast to the color in his cheek and the lively step with which he walked before giving his sermon. The poor man's energy is entirely spent and he can barely support himself.

REVEREND WILSON (*stepping forward quickly and extending his hand*)

My dear Minister ...
Let me assist you!

With a trembling hand, Dimmesdale decidedly waves off Wilson's offer of help. He continues to stumble forward. The procession passes the scaffold, besides and beneath which Hester and Pearl are standing. Hester holds Pearl's hand tightly as Dimmesdale passes by. The military music still urges the marchers on, but here Dimmesdale stops and will not go further. Bellingham, the outgoing governor, thinking that Dimmesdale is about to topple over, advances to give assistance, but something in Dimmesdale's look of extreme concentration warns him off.

DIMMESDALE (*turning toward the scaffold and stretching out his arms*)

Hester! Come here!
Come, my little Pearl!

Pearl rushes to Dimmesdale and clasps him around the knees. Slowly and with trepidation, Hester starts advancing towards him. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere,

Chillingworth thrusts through the crowd, looking dark, disturbed and evil, and catches the minister by the arm.

CHILLINGWORTH *(to Hester)*

Madam, hold!
What is your purpose?

HESTER *(to herself)*

Ruinaton!

CHILLINGWORTH *(to Dimmesdale)*

Wave back that woman!
I shall save you yet!

DIMMESDALE

Ha! Tempter!

CHILLINGWORTH

Cast off that child!

DIMMESDALE

Too late now!
I have escaped you!

The crowd exclaims in shock. With one hand clasped around the child still holding fast to his knees, Dimmesdale reaches the other hand out to Hester.

PEARL *(standing up, holding one of the minister's hands)*

Come! Come Mother! Come!
Come and stand with us in the light of day!

CHILLINGWORTH *(to Hester)*

Begone with you woman!

PEARL (*beseeking, extending her free hand*)

Come Mother! Come!

CHILLINGWORTH (*to Hester*)

Will you not save him?

HESTER (*turning to Chillingworth, her voice rising in anger*)

Too late now
We are ruined ...
You have ruined us all!

DIMMESDALE (*soaring above the others*)

Hester Prynne!
Come here!
Hold me in your arms!
Twine your strength about me!
Wrap me in your strength!
In the name of God I do today ...
In this last moment ...
What seven years before ...

CHILLINGWORTH (*interposing himself between Hester and Dimmesdale*)

Stop!
Let me save you!

DIMMESDALE (*to Hester*)

That wretched old man ...
Would damn us all!

(*pleading*) Hester! Come!
Come help me up ...
(*points to the scaffold*)
Here ...
Where not long ago ...
I stood in darkness ...
With you and little Pearl.

Another exclamation of shocked from the crowd.

PEARL (*joining in*)

Come Mother! Come!

Hester rushes to prop up Dimmesdale who is about to fall. Slowly they ascend the steps to the scaffold, with Pearl also doing her best to help. Chillingworth, a few paces behind, follows them up. The crowd, including the dignitaries standing closest to the scaffold, falls silent.

CHILLINGWORTH (*darkly, to Dimmesdale, so that no one below the scaffold hears*)

No place on earth but here ...
Could you have loosed my hold!
No place on earth ...
But this very scaffold!

DIMMESDALE (*collapsed in Hester's arms with little Pearl still clinging to him*)

Thanks be to Him ...
For bringing me here!

(turning to look at Hester, trembling with doubt and fear, speaking so that no one but Hester hears)

Is this not better, Hester?
Than our forest dream?

HESTER (*anguished and angry*)

Better, you say? Better?
Better we all should die?
You ... and me ... and little Pearl!?
I know not!

DIMMESDALE (*to Hester*)

I ... a dying man ...
Hasten to bring shame upon myself ...
Oh Hester, I know not ...
What will become of you and little Pearl!
(loud enough so that the crowd hears)
God is merciful!

PEARL (*looking at Hester earnestly*)

Will we die, Mother?
Will we die?

The crowd is greatly moved with sympathy.

DIMMESDALE (*addressing the crowd*)

People of New England!
You have loved me ...
You have deemed me holy ...
At last ... at last ...
I stand before you ...
Now ...
At this death-hour ...
Where seven years since I should have stood!
Here ...
With this woman ...
Whose arm bears me up!

With great effort, Dimmesdale releases himself from Hester and Pearl and staggers towards the edge of the scaffold, continuing to address the crowd.

The scarlet letter is but a shadow of this!

Dimmesdale moves his hand towards his heart, as if to assume the usual position, but then, with a convulsive gesture, tears away the ministerial band from his breast. The audience does not see his chest but the crowd does and is horror-stricken. Dimmesdale looks heavenward, his faced flushed with triumph, then sinks down on the scaffold in utter exhaustion. Hester hastens to his side and props him part-way up in a manner reminiscent of a pietà. Pearl continues to stand where she was, a few steps away. Chillingworth kneels down beside Dimmesdale. The crowd assumes that the physician has come to his aid.

CHILLINGWORTH (*whispering to Dimmesdale*)

You have escaped me!
You have escaped me!

DIMMESDALE (*to Chillingworth*)

May God forgive you!

Chillingworth withdraws to a corner of the scaffold. Dimmesdale turns to Pearl, addressing her feebly with a sweet and gentle smile.

My little Pearl ...

Will you kiss me now?
You would not ... in the forest ...
But now ... will you?

Pearl goes up to Dimmesdale and kisses his lips, then steps back a few paces to where she was standing before. For a brief moment Dimmesdale looks blissful. Then he turns and looks mournfully at Hester.

Hester ... farewell!

HESTER (*bending down and whispering in Dimmesdale's ear*)

Shall we not meet again?
Shall we not spend ...
Our immortal lives together?
Surely we have been ransomed with all this woe!

With your bright dying eyes ...
Staring into eternity ...
Tell me ...
Shall we not meet again?

DIMMESDALE

Hush, Hester! Hush!
In vain do we hope to meet hereafter.
A reunion so pure and sweet is forbidden ... to us!

HESTER (*pleading*)

Would you damn us forever?
God is merciful ...
You said it yourself!

DIMMESDALE

God shows his mercy ...
He sent that man to torture me.
He led me here ...
To die in shame before the people.
Praised be his name!
His will be done!
Farewell, Hester ... Farewell.

Dimmesdale collapses in Hester's arms.

HESTER *(to herself)*

He will not be saved!

Dimmesdale dies. The crowd erupts in cries of anguish and other mournful sounds. The women are in tears. The noise dies down. All eyes are on the unholy trinity of the dead minister and Hester, with Pearl standing a few steps away. None of them has moved, except that Hester's head is now bowed low, her cap has come undone and her voluptuous tresses hang down over Dimmesdale's body. Very slowly, as if she would not be noticed, Pearl comes up to her mother and unpins the scarlet letter from her breast. She tosses it aside in a gesture recalling Hester's gesture in the forest. The letter lands at Chillingworth's feet. He immediately bends down and picks it up, staying in a crouched position in the corner of the scaffold and clutching the letter to his chest. He looks around, as if warning the people off his precious possession.

CHILLINGWORTH *(to no one in particular)*

At least I have this!
The scarlet letter will not escape me!

PEARL *(tugging gently at her mother's sleeve and speaking softly)*

Come away, Mother.

Reverend Wilson slowly ascends the steps, assisted by a two young men. They approach Hester, she startles and looks up, and with her free arm indicates that they should not advance further. Then she entwines both of her arms around Dimmesdale's body, drawing him close to her.

HESTER

Never did your name cross my lips.
Not once did I reveal the secret of your shame.

I lived in silence all these years ...
Thinking I could save you.

O cruel one!
You would not be saved!

You have damned yourself ...
You have damned us all!

WILSON (*softly*)

God is merciful!
It is for the best.

Very slowly the men continue to approach.

PEARL (*persisting gently*)

Come away, Mother.
Come away with me now.

HESTER (*to the dead Dimmesdale*)

Farewell, dearest Arthur!
We will be united yet ...
If not in eternal life ...
Then eternally in death!

Hester gradually releases the body of Dimmesdale into the arms of the young men. Slowly, Pearl leads her by the hand down the scaffold steps. Hester stares vacantly before her, allowing herself to be led. The crowd spontaneously parts, letting them pass through. Bellingham, the outgoing governor, steps forward.

BELLINGHAM (*approaching Hester carefully and speaking to her respectfully*)

Hester Prynne!
Surely you will stay ...
Here ... among us ...
Surely you will continue your good works!

The crowd seconds the Governor, showing signs of appreciation and approval. Expressions of sympathy are heard among the women.

WOMAN ONE

Poor woman!

WOMAN TWO

A lovely child!

WOMAN THREE

See how she cares for her mother!

WOMAN FOUR

Is it any wonder?
Look how her mother cares for us all!

Mistress Hibbins steps forward and addresses Pearl. Pearl ignores her and continues gently to urge her mother forward. Hester continues to stare vacantly, seemingly unaware of what is going on around her.

HIBBINS

Come away, my little darling!
Come away with me tonight!

PEARL

Come, Mother! Come.
Let us get away from here!

They pass the captain of the ship, who takes one step forward and addresses Hester.

CAPTAIN

Madam, your berth is ready.

PEARL

Mother ... come away!

Hester turns to look back at the scaffold, from where Dimmesdale's body has been removed but where Chillingworth remains, crouched in the corner, clutching and completely absorbed in the scarlet letter.

HESTER

Never!
Not with him!

PEARL

See ...
The Black Man stays ...

Come away with me, Mother ...
Come away with me now!

Pearl continues to lead Hester away, down the path. The people continue to exclaim and entreat Hester to stay.

WOMAN FIVE

Where are you going?

WOMAN SIX

Stay here with us!

CHORUS OF WOMEN

Stay!

Stay!

Don't go away!

Etc. Etc.

Hester and Pearl ignore their entreaties and continue down the path.

END OF ACT

EPILOGUE

Pearl and her daughter Rose, now seven, are standing before the tombstone that marks the graves of Hester and Dimmesdale. It is a simple slab of slate, in contrast to the more elaborately adorned tombstones around it, on which is engraved:

ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES

The somberness of the tombstone is relieved by a faintly reddish point of light.

ROSE

What does it all mean, Mother?

PEARL (*turning to Rose, impassioned*)

Oh Rose!
My red red Rose!
Be true! Be true! Be true!
Show yourself freely to the world!

ROSE

What did the people see ...
When the minister stripped off his shirt?

PEARL

Many things ... different things ...

ROSE

What did *you* see, Mother?

PEARL

I saw my father.

ROSE

What did Grandmother see?

PEARL

She saw ... LOVE.

END OF OPERA