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by Nathaniel Hawthorne

EDITOR'S NOTE

Nathaniel Hawthorne was already a man of forty-six, and a tale writer of some twenty-four years' standing, when "The Scarlet Letter" appeared. He was born at Salem, Mass., on July 4th, 1804, son of a sea-captain. He led there a shy and rather sombre life; of few artistic encouragements, yet not wholly uncongenial, his moody, intensely meditative temperament being considered. Its colours and shadows are marvelously reflected in his "Twice-Told Tales" and other short stories, the product of his first literary period. Even his college days at Bowdoin did not quite break through his acquired and inherited reserve; but beneath it all, his faculty of divining men and women was exercised with almost uncanny prescience and subtlety. "The Scarlet Letter," which explains as much of this unique imaginative art, as is to be
gathered from reading his highest single achievement, yet needs
to be ranged with his other writings, early and late, to have its
last effect. In the year that saw it published, he began "The
House of the Seven Gables," a later romance or prose-tragedy of
the Puritan-American community as he had himself known it -
defrauded of art and the joy of life, "starving for symbols" as
Emerson has it. Nathaniel Hawthorne died at Plymouth, New
Hampshire, on May 18th, 1864.

The following is the table of his romances,
stories, and other works:

Fanshawe, published anonymously, 1826; Twice-Told Tales, 1st
Series, 1837; 2nd Series, 1842; Grandfather's Chair, a history
for youth, 1845: Famous Old People (Grandfather's Chair), 1841
Liberty Tree: with the last words of Grandfather's Chair, 1842;
Biographical Stories for Children, 1842; Mosses from an Old
Manse, 1846; The Scarlet Letter, 1850; The House of the Seven
Gables, 1851: True Stories from History and Biography (the whole
History of Grandfather's Chair), 1851 A Wonder Book for Girls and
Boys, 1851; The Snow Image and other Tales, 1851: The Blithedale
Romance, 1852; Life of Franklin Pierce, 1852; Tanglewood Tales
(2nd Series of the Wonder Book), 1853; A Rill from the Town-Pump,
with remarks, by Telba, 1857; The Marble Faun; or, The Romance of
Monte Beni (4 EDITOR'S NOTE) (published in England under the
title of "Transformation"), 1860, Our Old Home, 1863; Dolliver
Romance (1st Part in "Atlantic Monthly"), 1864; in 3 Parts, 1876;
Pansie, a fragment, Hawthorne' last literary effort, 1864;

American Note-Books, 1868; English Note Books, edited by Sophia
Hawthorne, 1870; French and Italian Note Books, 1871; Septimius
Felton; or, the Elixir of Life (from the "Atlantic Monthly"),
1872; Doctor Grimshawe's Secret, with Preface and Notes by
Julian Hawthorne, 1882.

Tales of the White Hills, Legends of New England, Legends of the
Province House, 1877, contain tales which had already been
printed in book form in "Twice-Told Tales" and the "Mosses"
"Sketched and Studies," 1883.

Hawthorne's contributions to magazines were numerous, and most of
his tales appeared first in periodicals, chiefly in "The Token,"
1837-1839; "Democratic Review," 1838-1846; "Atlantic Monthly,"
1860-1872 (scenes from the Dolliver Romance, Septimius Felton,
and passages from Hawthorne's Note-Books).

Works: in 24 volumes, 1879; in 12 volumes, with introductory

Biography, etc. ; A. H. Japp (pseud. H. A. Page), Memoir of N.
Hawthorne, 1872; J. T. Field's "Yesterdays with Authors," 1873 G.
P. Lathrop, "A Study of Hawthorne," 1876; Henry James English Men
of Letters, 1879; Julian Hawthorne, "Nathaniel Hawthorne and his
CHAPTER IX. THE LEECH

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It is a little remarkable, that—though disinclined to talk

overmuch of myself and my affairs at the fireside, and to my

personal friends—an autobiographical impulse should twice in

my life have taken possession of me, in addressing the public.

The first time was three or four years since, when I favoured the

reader—inexcusably, and for no earthly reason that either the

indulgent reader or the intrusive author could imagine—with a

description of my way of life in the deep quietude of an Old

Manse. And now—because, beyond my deserts, I was happy enough
to find a listener or two on the former occasion—I again seize
the public by the button, and talk of my three years’ experience
in a Custom-House. The example of the famous "P. P. , Clerk of
this Parish," was never more faithfully followed. The truth
seems to be, however, that when he casts his leaves forth upon
the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside
his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand
him better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates. Some
authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in
such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be
addressed only and exclusively to the one heart and
mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large
on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment
of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence
by bringing him into communion with it. It is scarcely decorous,
however, to speak all, even where we speak impersonally. But, as
thoughts are frozen and utterance benumbed, unless the speaker
stand in some true relation with his audience, it may be
pardonable to imagine that a friend, a kind and apprehensive,
though not the closest friend, is listening to our talk; and
then, a native reserve being thawed by this genial consciousness,
we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us, and even of
ourselves, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil. To this
extent, and within these limits, an author, methinks, may be
autobiographical, without violating either the reader’s rights or
his own.
It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognised in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact—a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume—this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public. In accomplishing the main purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom the author happened to make one.

In my native town of Salem, at the head of what, half a century ago, in the days of old King Derby, was a bustling wharf—but which is now burdened with decayed wooden warehouses, and exhibits few or no symptoms of commercial life; except, perhaps, a bark or brig, half-way down its melancholy length, discharging hides; or, nearer at hand, a Nova Scotia schooner, pitching out her cargo of firewood—at the head, I say, of this dilapidated wharf, which the tide often overflows, and along which, at the base and in the rear of the row of buildings, the track of many languid years is seen in a border of unthrifty grass—here, with a view from its front windows adown this not very enlivening prospect, and thence across the harbour, stands a spacious edifice of brick. From the loftiest point of its roof, during
precisely three and a half hours of each forenoon, floats or
droops, in breeze or calm, the banner of the republic; but with
the thirteen stripes turned vertically, instead of horizontally,
and thus indicating that a civil, and not a military, post of
Uncle Sam's government is here established. Its front is
ornamented with a portico of half-a-dozen wooden pillars,
supporting a balcony, beneath which a flight of wide granite
steps descends towards the street. Over the entrance hovers an
enormous specimen of the American eagle, with outspread wings, a
shield before her breast, and, if I recollect aright, a bunch of
intermingled thunder-bolts and barbed arrows in each claw. With
the customary infirmity of temper that characterizes this unhappy
fowl, she appears by the fierceness of her beak and eye, and the
general truculency of her attitude, to threaten mischief to the
inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens careful of their
safety against intruding on the premises which she overshadows
with her wings. Nevertheless, vixenly as she looks, many people
are seeking at this very moment to shelter themselves under the
wing of the federal eagle; imagining, I presume, that her bosom
has all the softness and snugness of an eiderdown pillow. But
she has no great tenderness even in her best of moods, and,
sooner or later--oftener soon than late--is apt to fling off
her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a
rankling wound from her barbed arrows.

The pavement round about the above-described edifice--which we
may as well name at once as the Custom-House of the port--has
grass enough growing in its chinks to show that it has not, of late days, been worn by any multitudinous resort of business. In some months of the year, however, there often chances a forenoon when affairs move onward with a livelier tread. Such occasions might remind the elderly citizen of that period, before the last war with England, when Salem was a port by itself; not scorned, as she is now, by her own merchants and ship-owners, who permit her wharves to crumble to ruin while their ventures go to swell, needlessly and imperceptibly, the mighty flood of commerce at New York or Boston. On some such morning, when three or four vessels happen to have arrived at once usually from Africa or South America—or to be on the verge of their departure thitherward, there is a sound of frequent feet passing briskly up and down the granite steps. Here, before his own wife has greeted him, you may greet the sea-flushed ship-master, just in port, with his vessel's papers under his arm in a tarnished tin box. Here, too, comes his owner, cheerful, sombre, gracious or in the sulks, accordingly as his scheme of the now accomplished voyage has been realized in merchandise that will readily be turned to gold, or has buried him under a bulk of incommodities such as nobody will care to rid him of. Here, likewise—the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzly-bearded, careworn merchant—we have the smart young clerk, who gets the taste of traffic as a wolf-cub does of blood, and already sends adventures in his master's ships, when he had better be sailing mimic boats upon a mill-pond. Another figure in the scene is the outward-bound sailor, in quest of a protection; or the recently arrived one, pale and feeble, seeking a passport to the hospital.
Nor must we forget the captains of the rusty little schooners that bring firewood from the British provinces; a rough-looking set of tarpaulins, without the alertness of the Yankee aspect, but contributing an item of no slight importance to our decaying trade.

Cluster all these individuals together, as they sometimes were, with other miscellaneous ones to diversify the group, and, for the time being, it made the Custom-House a stirring scene. More frequently, however, on ascending the steps, you would discern -- in the entry if it were summer time, or in their appropriate rooms if wintry or inclement weathers row of venerable figures, sitting in old-fashioned chairs, which were tipped on their hind legs back against the wall. Oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together, ill voices between a speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes the occupants of alms-houses, and all other human beings who depend for subsistence on charity, on monopolized labour, or anything else but their own independent exertions. These old gentlemen--seated, like Matthew at the receipt of custom, but not very liable to be summoned thence, like him, for apostolic errands--were Custom-House officers.

Furthermore, on the left hand as you enter the front door, is a certain room or office, about fifteen feet square, and of a lofty height, with two of its arched windows commanding a view of the aforesaid dilapidated wharf, and the third looking across a
narrow lane, and along a portion of Derby Street. All three give
glimpses of the shops of grocers, block-makers, slop-sellers, and
ship-chandlers, around the doors of which are generally to be seen, laughing and gossiping, clusters of old salts, and such
other wharf-rats as haunt the Wapping of a seaport. The room itself is cobwebbed, and dingy with old paint; its floor is
strewn with grey sand, in a fashion that has elsewhere fallen into long disuse; and it is easy to conclude, from the general slovenliness of the place, that this is a sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access. In the way of furniture, there is a stove with a voluminous funnel; an old pine desk with a three-legged stool beside it; two or three wooden-bottom chairs, exceedingly decrepit and infirm; and--not to forget the library--on some shelves, a score or two of volumes of the Acts of Congress, and a bulky Digest of the Revenue laws. A tin pipe ascends through the ceiling, and forms a medium of vocal communication with other parts of be edifice. And here, some six months ago--pacing from corner to corner, or lounging on the long-legged tool, with his elbow on the desk, and his eyes wandering up and down the columns of the morning newspaper--you might have recognised, honoured reader, the same individual who welcomed you into his cheery little study, where the sunshine glimmered so pleasantly through the willow branches on the western side of the Old Manse. But now, should you go thither to seek him, you would inquire in vain for the Locofoco Surveyor. The besom of reform hath swept him out of office, and a worthier successor wears his dignity and pockets his emoluments.
This old town of Salem--my native place, though I have dwelt much away from it both in boyhood and maturer years--possesses, or did possess, a hold on my affection, the force of which I have never realized during my seasons of actual residence here. Indeed, so far as its physical aspect is concerned, with its flat, unvaried surface, covered chiefly with wooden houses, few or none of which pretend to architectural beauty--its irregularity, which is neither picturesque nor quaint, but only tame--its long and lazy street, lounging wearisomely through the whole extent of the peninsula, with Gallows Hill and New Guinea at one end, and a view of the alms-house at the other--such being the features of my native town, it would be quite as reasonable to form a sentimental attachment to a disarranged checker-board. And yet, though invariably happiest elsewhere, there is within me a feeling for Old Salem, which, in lack of a better phrase, I must be content to call affection. The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family has stuck into the soil. It is now nearly two centuries and a quarter since the original Briton, the earliest emigrant of my name, made his appearance in the wild and forest--bordered settlement which has since become a city. And here his descendants have been born and died, and have mingled their earthly substance with the soil, until no small portion of it must necessarily be akin to the mortal frame wherewith, for a little while, I walk the streets. In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust
for dust. Few of my countrymen can know what it is; nor, as
frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock, need
they consider it desirable to know.

But the sentiment has likewise its moral quality. The figure of
that first ancestor, invested by family tradition with a dim and
dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination as far back
as I can remember. It still haunts me, and induces a sort of
home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference
to the present phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger
claim to a residence here on account of this grave, bearded,
sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor—who came so early,
with his Bible and his sword, and trode the unworn street with
such a stately port, and made so large a figure, as a man of war
and peace—a stronger claim than for myself, whose name is
seldom heard and my face hardly known. He was a soldier,
legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church; he had all the
Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was
likewise a bitter persecutor; as witness the Quakers, who have
remembered him in their histories, and relate an incident of his
hard severity towards a woman of their sect, which will last
longer, it is to be feared, than any record of his better deeds,
although these were many. His son, too, inherited the
persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the
martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to
have left a stain upon him. So deep a stain, indeed, that his
dry old bones, in the Charter-street burial-ground, must still
retain it, if they have not crumbled utterly to dust I know not
whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent,
and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are
now groaning under the heavy consequences of them in another
state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their
representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes,
and pray that any curse incurred by them--as I have heard, and
as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a
long year back, would argue to exist--may be now and henceforth
removed.

Doubtless, however, either of these stern and black-browed
Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution for
his sins that, after so long a lapse of years, the old trunk of
the family tree, with so much venerable moss upon it, should have
borne, as its topmost bough, an idler like myself. No aim that I
have ever cherished would they recognise as laudable; no success
of mine--if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been
brightened by success--would they deem otherwise
than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. "What is he?"
murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A
writer of story books! What kind of business in life--what mode
of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and
generation--may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as
well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliments bandied
between my great grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time
And yet, let them scorn me as they will, strong traits of their
nature have intertwined themselves with mine.

Planted deep, in the town's earliest infancy and childhood, by these two earnest and energetic men, the race has ever since subsisted here; always, too, in respectability; never, so far as I have known, disgraced by a single unworthy member; but seldom or never, on the other hand, after the first two generations, performing any memorable deed, or so much as putting forward a claim to public notice. Gradually, they have sunk almost out of sight; as old houses, here and there about the streets, get covered half-way to the eaves by the accumulation of new soil.

From father to son, for above a hundred years, they followed the sea; a grey-headed shipmaster, in each generation, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the hereditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale which had blustered against his sire and grandsire. The boy, also in due time, passed from the forecastle to the cabin, spent a tempestuous manhood, and returned from his world-wanderings, to grow old, and die, and mingle his dust with the natal earth. This long connexion of a family with one spot, as its place of birth and burial, creates a kindred between the human being and the locality, quite independent of any charm in the scenery or moral circumstances that surround him. It is not love but instinct. The new inhabitant--who came himself from a foreign land, or whose father or grandfather came--has little claim to be called a Salemite; he has no conception of the oyster--like tenacity
with which an old settler, over whom his third century is 
creeping, clings to the spot where his successive generations 
have been embedded. It is no matter that the place is joyless 
for him; that he is weary of the old wooden houses, the mud and 
dust, the dead level of site and sentiment, the chill east wind, 
and the chilliest of social atmospheres;--all these, and 
whatever faults besides he may see or imagine, are nothing to the 
purpose. The spell survives, and just as powerfully as if the 
natal spot were an earthly paradise. So has it been in my case. 
I felt it almost as a destiny to make Salem my home; so that the 
mould of features and cast of character which had all along been 
familiar here--ever, as one representative of the race lay down 
in the grave, another assuming, as it were, his sentry-march 
along the main street--might still in my little day be seen and 
recognised in the old town. Nevertheless, this very sentiment is 
an evidence that the connexion, which has become an unhealthy 
one, should at least be severed. Human nature will not flourish, 
any more than a potato, if it be planted and re-planted, for too 
long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My 
children have had other birth-places, and, so far as their 
fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into 
accustomed earth.

On emerging from the Old Manse, it was chiefly this strange, 
indolent, unjoyous attachment for my native town that brought me 
to fill a place in Uncle Sam's brick edifice, when I might as 
well, or better, have gone somewhere else. My doom was on me, It
was not the first time, nor the second, that I had gone away—as it seemed, permanently—but yet returned, like the bad halfpenny, or as if Salem were for me the inevitable centre of the universe. So, one fine morning I ascended the flight of granite steps, with the President’s commission in my pocket, and was introduced to the corps of gentlemen who were to aid me in my weighty responsibility as chief executive officer of the Custom-House.

I doubt greatly—or, rather, I do not doubt at all—whether any public functionary of the United States, either in the civil or military line, has ever had such a patriarchal body of veterans under his orders as myself. The whereabouts of the Oldest Inhabitant was at once settled when I looked at them. For upwards of twenty years before this epoch, the independent position of the Collector had kept the Salem Custom-House out of the whirlpool of political vicissitude, which makes the tenure of office generally so fragile. A soldier—New England’s most distinguished soldier—he stood firmly on the pedestal of his gallant services; and, himself secure in the wise liberality of the successive administrations through which he had held office, he had been the safety of his subordinates in many an hour of danger and heart-quake General Miller was radically conservative; a man over whose kindly nature habit had no slight influence; attaching himself strongly to familiar faces, and with difficulty moved to change, even when change might have brought unquestionable improvement. Thus, on taking charge of my
department, I found few but aged men. They were ancient
sea-captains, for the most part, who, after being tossed on every
sea, and standing up sturdily against life's tempestuous blast,
had finally drifted into this quiet nook, where, with little to
disturb them, except the periodical terrors of a Presidential
election, they one and all acquired a new lease of existence.
Though by no means less liable than their fellow-men to age and
infirmity, they had evidently some talisman or other that kept
death at bay. Two or three of their number, as I was assured,
being gouty and rheumatic, or perhaps bed-ridden, never dreamed
of making their appearance at the Custom-House during a large
part of the year; but, after a torpid winter, would creep out
into the warm sunshine of May or June, go lazily about what they
termed duty, and, at their own leisure and convenience, betake
themselves to bed again. I must plead guilty to the charge of
abbreviating the official breath of more than one of these
venerable servants of the republic. They were allowed, on my
representation, to rest from their arduous labours, and soon
afterwards--as if their sole principle of life had been zeal
for their country's service--as I verily believe it was--withdrew
to a better world. It is a pious consolation to me
that, through my interference, a sufficient space was allowed
them for repentance of the evil and corrupt practices into
which, as a matter of course, every Custom-House officer must be
supposed to fall. Neither the front nor the back entrance of the
Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise.
The greater part of my officers were Whigs. It was well for their venerable brotherhood that the new Surveyor was not a politician, and though a faithful Democrat in principle, neither received nor held his office with any reference to political services. Had it been otherwise--had an active politician been put into this influential post, to assume the easy task of making head against a Whig Collector, whose infirmities withheld him from the personal administration of his office--hardly a man of the old corps would have drawn the breath of official life within a month after the exterminating angel had come up the Custom-House steps. According to the received code in such matters, it would have been nothing short of duty, in a politician, to bring every one of those white heads under the axe of the guillotine. It was plain enough to discern that the old fellows dreaded some such discourtesy at my hands. It pained, and at the same time amused me, to behold the terrors that attended my advent, to see a furrowed cheek, weather-beaten by half a century of storm, turn ashy pale at the glance of so harmless an individual as myself; to detect, as one or another addressed me, the tremor of a voice which, in long-past days, had been wont to bellow through a speaking-trumpet, hoarsely enough to frighten Boreas himself to silence. They knew, these excellent old persons, that, by all established rule--and, as regarded some of them, weighed by their own lack of efficiency for business--they ought to have given place to younger men, more orthodox in politics, and altogether fitter than themselves to serve our common Uncle. I knew it, too, but could never quite find in my heart to act upon the knowledge.
Much and deservedly to my own discredit, therefore, and considerably to the detriment of my official conscience, they continued, during my incumbency, to creep about the wharves, and loiter up and down the Custom-House steps. They spent a good deal of time, also, asleep in their accustomed corners, with their chairs tilted back against the walls; awaking, however, once or twice in the forenoon, to bore one another with the several thousandth repetition of old sea-stories and mouldy jokes, that had grown to be passwords and countersigns among them.

The discovery was soon made, I imagine, that the new Surveyor had no great harm in him. So, with lightsome hearts and the happy consciousness of being usefully employed--in their own behalf at least, if not for our beloved country--these good old gentlemen went through the various formalities of office. Sagaciously under their spectacles, did they peep into the holds of vessels Mighty was their fuss about little matters, and marvellous, sometimes, the obtuseness that allowed greater ones to slip between their fingers Whenever such a mischance occurred--when a waggon-load of valuable merchandise had been smuggled ashore, at noonday, perhaps, and directly beneath their unsuspicious noses--nothing could exceed the vigilance and alacrity with which they proceeded to lock, and double-lock, and secure with tape and sealing--wax, all the avenues of the delinquent vessel. Instead of a reprimand for their previous negligence, the case seemed rather to require an eulogium on
their praiseworthy caution after the mischief had happened; a
grateful recognition of the promptitude of their zeal the moment
that there was no longer any remedy.

Unless people are more than commonly disagreeable, it is my
foolish habit to contract a kindness for them. The better part
of my companion's character, if it have a better part, is that
which usually comes uppermost in my regard, and forms the type
whereby I recognise the man. As most of these old Custom-House
officers had good traits, and as my position in reference to
them, being paternal and protective, was favourable to the growth
of friendly sentiments, I soon grew to like them all. It was
pleasant in the summer forenoons--when the fervent heat, that
almost liquefied the rest of the human family, merely
communicated a genial warmth to their half torpid systems--it
was pleasant to hear them chatting in the back entry, a row of
them all tipped against the wall, as usual; while the frozen
witticisms of past generations were thawed out, and came bubbling
with laughter from their lips. Externally, the jollity of aged
men has much in common with the mirth of children; the intellect,
any more than a deep sense of humour, has little to do with the
matter; it is, with both, a gleam that plays upon the surface,
and imparts a sunny and cheery aspect alike to the green branch
and grey, mouldering trunk. In one case, however, it is real
sunshine; in the other, it more resembles the phosphorescent glow
of decaying wood.

It would be sad injustice, the reader must understand, to
represent all my excellent old friends as in their dotage. In
the first place, my coadjutors were not invariably old; there
were men among them in their strength and prime, of marked
ability and energy, and altogether superior to the sluggish and
dependent mode of life on which their evil stars had cast them.
Then, moreover, the white locks of age were sometimes found to be
the thatch of an intellectual tenement in good repair. But, as
respects the majority of my corps of veterans, there will be no
wrong done if I characterize them generally as a set of wearisome
old souls, who had gathered nothing worth preservation from their
varied experience of life. They seemed to have flung away all
the golden grain of practical wisdom, which they had enjoyed so
many opportunities of harvesting, and most carefully to have
stored their memory with the husks. They spoke with far more
interest and unction of their morning's breakfast, or
yesterday's, to-day's, or tomorrow's dinner, than of the
shipwreck of forty or fifty years ago, and all the world's
wonders which they had witnessed with their youthful eyes.

The father of the Custom-House--the patriarch, not only of this
little squad of officials, but, I am bold to say, of the
respectable body of tide-waiters all over the United
States--was a certain permanent Inspector. He might truly
be termed a legitimate son of the revenue system, dyed in
the wool, or rather born in the purple; since his sire, a
Revolutionary colonel, and formerly collector of the port,
had created an office for him, and appointed him to fill it,
at a period of the early ages which few living men
can now remember. This Inspector, when I first knew him, was a
man of fourscore years, or thereabouts, and certainly one of the
most wonderful specimens of winter-green that you would be likely
to discover in a lifetime's search. With his florid cheek, his
compact figure smartly arrayed in a bright-buttoned blue coat,
his brisk and vigorous step, and his hale and hearty aspect,
altogether he seemed--not young, indeed--but a kind of new
contrivance of Mother Nature in the shape of man, whom age and
infirmity had no business to touch. His voice and laugh, which
perpetually re-echoed through the Custom-House, had nothing of
the tremulous quaver and cackle of an old man's utterance; they
came strutting out of his lungs, like the crow of a cock, or the
blast of a clarion. Looking at him merely as an animal--and
there was very little else to look at--he was a most
satisfactory object, from the thorough healthfulness and
wholesomeness of his system, and his capacity, at that extreme
age, to enjoy all, or nearly all, the delights which he had ever
aimed at or conceived of. The careless security of his life in
the Custom-House, on a regular income, and with but slight and
infrequent apprehensions of removal, had no doubt contributed to
make time pass lightly over him. The original and more potent
causes, however, lay in the rare perfection of his animal nature,
the moderate proportion of intellect, and the very trifling
admixture of moral and spiritual ingredients; these latter
qualities, indeed, being in barely enough measure to keep the old
gentleman from walking on all-fours. He possessed no power of
thought no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities: nothing,
in short, but a few commonplace instincts,
which, aided by the cheerful temper which grew inevitably out of
his physical well-being, did duty very respectfully, and to
general acceptance, in lieu of a heart. He had been the husband
of three wives, all long since dead; the father of twenty
children, most of whom, at every age of childhood or maturity,
had likewise returned to dust. Here, one would suppose, might
have been sorrow enough to imbue the sunniest disposition through
and through with a sable tinge. Not so with our old Inspector
One brief sigh sufficed to carry off the entire burden of these
dismal reminiscences. The next moment he was as ready for sport
as any unbreeched infant: far readier than the Collector's junior
clerk, who at nineteen years was much the elder and graver man of
the two.

I used to watch and study this patriarchal personage with, I
think, livelier curiosity than any other form of humanity there
presented to my notice. He was, in truth, a rare phenomenon; so
perfect, in one point of view; so shallow, so delusive, so
impalpable such an absolute nonentity, in every other. My
conclusion was that he had no soul, no heart, no mind; nothing,
as I have already said, but instincts; and yet, withal, so
cunningly had the few materials of his character been put
together that there was no painful perception of deficiency, but,
on my part, an entire contentment with what I found in him. It
might be difficult—and it was so—to conceive how he should
exist hereafter, so earthly and sensuous did he seem; but surely
his existence here, admitting that it was to terminate with his last breath, had been not unkindly given; with no higher moral responsibilities than the beasts of the field, but with a larger scope of enjoyment than theirs, and with all their blessed immunity from the dreariness and duskiness of age.

One point in which he had vastly the advantage over his four-footed brethren was his ability to recollect the good dinners which it had made no small portion of the happiness of his life to eat. His gourmandism was a highly agreeable trait; and to hear him talk of roast meat was as appetizing as a pickle or an oyster. As he possessed no higher attribute, and neither sacrificed nor vitiated any spiritual endowment by devoting all his energies and ingenuities to subserve the delight and profit of his maw, it always pleased and satisfied me to hear him expatiate on fish, poultry, and butcher's meat, and the most eligible methods of preparing them for the table. His reminiscences of good cheer, however ancient the date of the actual banquet, seemed to bring the savour of pig or turkey under one's very nostrils. There were flavours on his palate that had lingered there not less than sixty or seventy years, and were still apparently as fresh as that of the mutton chop which he had just devoured for his breakfast. I have heard him smack his lips over dinners, every guest at which, except himself, had long been food for worms. It was marvellous to observe how the ghosts of bygone meals were continually rising up before him--not in anger or retribution, but as if grateful for his former
appreciation, and seeking to repudiate an endless series of
enjoyment. At once shadowy and sensual, a tender loin of beef, a
hind-quarter of veal, a spare-rib of pork, a particular chicken, or a
remarkably praiseworthy turkey, which had perhaps adorned his board
in the days of the elder Adams, would be remembered; while all the
subsequent experience of our race, and all the events that
brightened or darkened his individual career, had gone over him
with as little permanent effect as the passing breeze. The chief
tragic event of the old man's life, so far as I could judge, was
his mishap with a certain goose, which lived and died some twenty
or forty years ago: a goose of most promising figure, but which,
at table, proved so inveterately tough, that the carving-knife
would make no impression on its carcase, and it could only be
divided with an axe and handsaw.

But it is time to quit this sketch; on which, however, I should
be glad to dwell at considerably more length, because of all men
whom I have ever known, this individual was fittest to be a
Custom-House officer. Most persons, owing to causes which I may
not have space to hint at, suffer moral detriment from this
peculiar mode of life. The old Inspector was incapable of it;
and, were he to continue in office to the end of time, would be
just as good as he was then, and sit down to dinner with just as
good an appetite.

There is one likeness, without which my gallery of Custom-House
portraits would be strangely incomplete, but which my
comparatively few opportunities for observation enable me to
sketch only in the merest outline. It is that of the Collector,
our gallant old General, who, after his brilliant military
service, subsequently to which he had ruled over a wild Western
territory, had come hither, twenty years before, to spend the
decline of his varied and honourable life.

The brave soldier had already numbered, nearly or quite, his
three-score years and ten, and was pursuing the remainder of his
earthly march, burdened with infirmities which even the martial
music of his own spirit-stirring recollections could do little
towards lightening. The step was palsied now, that had been
foremost in the charge. It was only with the assistance of a
servant, and by leaning his hand heavily on the iron balustrade,
that he could slowly and painfully ascend the Custom-House steps,
and, with a toilsome progress across the floor, attain his
customary chair beside the fireplace. There he used to sit,
gazing with a somewhat dim serenity of aspect at the figures that
came and went, amid the rustle of papers, the administering of
oaths, the discussion of business, and the casual talk of the
office; all which sounds and circumstances seemed but
indistinctly to impress his senses, and hardly to make their way
into his inner sphere of contemplation. His countenance, in this
repose, was mild and kindly. If his notice was sought, an
expression of courtesy and interest gleamed out upon his
features, proving that there was light within him, and that it
was only the outward medium of the intellectual lamp that
obstructed the rays in their passage. The closer you penetrated
to the substance of his mind, the sounder it appeared. When no
longer called upon to speak or listen--either of which
operations cost him an evident effort--his face would briefly
subside into its former not uncheerful quietude. It was not
painful to behold this look; for, though dim, it had not the
imbecility of decaying age. The framework of his nature,
originally strong and massive, was not yet crumpled into ruin.

To observe and define his character, however, under such
disadvantages, was as difficult a task as to trace out and build
up anew, in imagination, an old fortress, like Ticonderoga, from
a view of its grey and broken ruins. Here and there, perchance,
the walls may remain almost complete; but elsewhere may be only a
shapeless mound, cumbrous with its very strength, and overgrown,
through long years of peace and neglect, with grass and alien
weeds.

Nevertheless, looking at the old warrior with affection--for,
slight as was the communication between us, my feeling towards
him, like that of all bipeds and quadrupeds who knew him, might
not improperly be termed so,--I could discern the main points
of his portrait. It was marked with the noble and heroic
qualities which showed it to be not a mere accident, but of good
right, that he had won a distinguished name. His spirit could
never, I conceive, have been characterized by an uneasy activity;
it must, at any period of his life, have required an impulse to
set him in motion; but once stirred up, with obstacles to
overcome, and an adequate object to be attained, it was not in
the man to give out or fail. The heat that had formerly pervaded
his nature, and which was not yet extinct, was never of the kind
that flashes and flickers in a blaze; but rather a deep red glow,
as of iron in a furnace. Weight, solidity, firmness--this was
the expression of his repose, even in such decay as had crept
untimely over him at the period of which I speak. But I could
imagine, even then, that, under some excitement which should go
depth into his consciousness--roused by a trumpet's real, loud
enough to awaken all of his energies that
were not dead, but only slumbering--he was yet capable of
flinging off his infirmities like a sick man's gown, dropping the
staff of age to seize a battle-sword, and starting up once more a
warrior. And, in so intense a moment his demeanour would have
still been calm. Such an exhibition, however, was but to be
pictured in fancy; not to be anticipated, nor desired. What I
saw in him--as evidently as the indestructible ramparts of Old
Ticonderoga, already cited as the most appropriate simile--was
the features of stubborn and ponderous endurance, which might
well have amounted to obstinacy in his earlier days; of
integrity, that, like most of his other endowments, lay in a
somewhat heavy mass, and was just as unmalleable or unmanageable
as a ton of iron ore; and of benevolence which, fiercely as he
led the bayonets on at Chippewa or Fort Erie, I take to be of
quite as genuine a stamp as what actuates any or all the
polemical philanthropists of the age. He had slain men with his
own hand, for aught I know--certainly, they had fallen like
blades of grass at the sweep of the scythe before the charge to
which his spirit imparted its triumphant energy--but, be that
as it might, there was never in his heart so much cruelty as
would have brushed the down off a butterfly's wing. I have not
known the man to whose innate kindliness I would more confidently
make an appeal.

Many characteristics--and those, too, which contribute not the
least forcibly to impart resemblance in a sketch--must have
vanished, or been obscured, before I met the General. All merely
graceful attributes are usually the most evanescent; nor does
nature adorn the human ruin with blossoms of new beauty, that
have their roots and proper nutriment only in the chinks and
crevices of decay, as she sows wall-flowers over the ruined
fortress of Ticonderoga. Still, even in respect of grace and
beauty, there were points well worth noting. A ray of humour,
now and then, would make its way through the veil of dim
obstruction, and glimmer pleasantly upon our faces. A trait of
native elegance, seldom seen in the masculine character after
childhood or early youth, was shown in the General's fondness for
the sight and fragrance of flowers. An old soldier might be
supposed to prize only the bloody laurel on his brow; but here
was one who seemed to have a young girl's appreciation of the
floral tribe.

There, beside the fireplace, the brave old General used to sit;
while the Surveyor--though seldom, when it could be avoided,
taking upon himself the difficult task of engaging him in
conversation--was fond of standing at a distance, and watching
his quiet and almost slumberous countenance. He seemed away from
us, although we saw him but a few yards off; remote, though we
passed close beside his chair; unattainable, though we might have
stretched forth our hands and touched his own. It might be that
he lived a more real life within his thoughts than amid the
unappropriate environment of the Collector's office. The
evolutions of the parade; the tumult of the battle; the flourish
of old heroic music, heard thirty years before--such scenes and
sounds, perhaps, were all alive before his intellectual sense.
Meanwhile, the merchants and ship-masters, the spruce clerks and
uncouth sailors, entered and departed; the bustle of
his commercial and Custom-House life kept up its little murmur
round about him; and neither with the men nor their affairs did
the General appear to sustain the most distant relation. He was
as much out of place as an old sword--now rusty, but which had
flashed once in the battle's front, and showed still a bright
gleam along its blade--would have been among the inkstands,
paper-folders, and mahogany rulers on the Deputy Collector's
desk.

There was one thing that much aided me in renewing and
re-creating the stalwart soldier of the Niagara frontier--the
man of true and simple energy. It was the recollection of those
memorable words of his--"I'll try, Sir"--spoken on the very
verge of a desperate and heroic enterprise, and breathing the
soul and spirit of New England hardihood, comprehending all perils, and encountering all. If, in our country, valour were rewarded by heraldic honour, this phrase--which it seems so easy to speak, but which only he, with such a task of danger and glory before him, has ever spoken--would be the best and fittest of all mottoes for the General's shield of arms.

It contributes greatly towards a man's moral and intellectual health to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate. The accidents of my life have often afforded me this advantage, but never with more fulness and variety than during my continuance in office. There was one man, especially, the observation of whose character gave me a new idea of talent. His gifts were emphatically those of a man of business; prompt, acute, clear-minded; with an eye that saw through all perplexities, and a faculty of arrangement that made them vanish as by the waving of an enchanter's wand. Bred up from boyhood in the Custom-House, it was his proper field of activity; and the many intricacies of business, so harassing to the interloper, presented themselves before him with the regularity of a perfectly comprehended system. In my contemplation, he stood as the ideal of his class. He was, indeed, the Custom-House in himself; or, at all events, the mainspring that kept its variously revolving wheels in motion; for, in an institution like this, where its officers are appointed to subserve their own profit and convenience, and seldom with a leading reference to their fitness for the duty to be performed, they must perforce
seek elsewhere the dexterity which is not in them. Thus, by an
inevitable necessity, as a magnet attracts steel-filings, so did
our man of business draw to himself the difficulties which
everybody met with. With an easy condescension, and kind
forbearance towards our stupidity—which, to his order of mind,
must have seemed little short of crime—would he forth-with, by
the merest touch of his finger, make the incomprehensible as
clear as daylight. The merchants valued him not less than we,
his esoteric friends. His integrity was perfect; it was a law of
nature with him, rather than a choice or a principle; nor can it
be otherwise than the main condition of an intellect so
remarkably clear and accurate as his to be honest and regular in
the administration of affairs. A stain on his conscience, as to
anything that came within the range of his vocation, would trouble
such a man very much in the same way, though to a far greater degree,
than an error in the balance of an account, or an ink-blot on the
fair page of a book of record. Here, in a word—and it is a
rare instance in my life—I had met with a person thoroughly
adapted to the situation which he held.

Such were some of the people with whom I now found myself
connected. I took it in good part, at the hands of Providence,
that I was thrown into a position so little akin to my past
habits; and set myself seriously to gather from it whatever
profit was to be had. After my fellowship of toil and
impracticable schemes with the dreamy brethren of Brook Farm;
after living for three years within the subtle influence of an
intellect like Emerson's; after those wild, free days on the
Assaboth, indulging fantastic speculations, beside our fire of
fallen boughs, with Ellery Channing; after talking with Thoreau
about pine-trees and Indian relics in his hermitage at Walden;
after growing fastidious by sympathy with the classic refinement
of Hillard's culture; after becoming imbued with poetic sentiment
at Longfellow's hearthstone—it was time, at length, that I
should exercise other faculties of my nature, and nourish myself
with food for which I had hitherto had little appetite. Even the
old Inspector was desirable, as a change of diet, to a man who
had known Alcott. I looked upon it as an evidence, in some
measure, of a system naturally well balanced, and lacking no
essential part of a thorough organization, that, with such
associates to remember, I could mingle at once with men of
altogether different qualities, and never murmur at the change.

Literature, its exertions and objects, were now of little moment
in my regard. I cared not at this period for books; they were
apart from me. Nature—except it were human nature—the
nature that is developed in earth and sky, was, in one sense,
hidden from me; and all the imaginative delight wherewith it had
been spiritualized passed away out of my mind. A gift, a
faculty, if it had not been departed, was suspended and inanimate
within me. There would have been something sad, utterly
dreary, in all this, had I not been conscious that it lay at my
own option to recall whatever was valuable in the past. It might
be true, indeed, that this was a life which could not, with
impunity, be lived too long; else, it might make me permanently
other than I had been, without transforming me into any shape
which it would be worth my while to take. But I never considered
it as other than a transitory life. There was always a prophetic
instinct, a low whisper in my ear, that within no long period,
and whenever a new change of custom should be essential to my
good, change would come.

Meanwhile, there I was, a Surveyor of the Revenue and, so far as
I have been able to understand, as good a Surveyor as need be. A
man of thought, fancy, and sensibility (had he ten times the
Surveyor's proportion of those qualities), may, at any time, be a
man of affairs, if he will only choose to give himself the
trouble. My fellow-officers, and the merchants and sea-captains
with whom my official duties brought me into any manner of
connection, viewed me in no other light, and probably knew me in
no other character. None of them, I presume, had
ever read a page of my inditing, or would have cared a fig the
more for me if they had read them all; nor would it have mended
the matter, in the least, had those same unprofitable pages been
written with a pen like that of Burns or of Chaucer, each of whom
was a Custom-House officer in his day, as well as I. It is a
good lesson--though it may often be a hard one--for a man who
has dreamed of literary fame, and of making for himself a rank
among the world's dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of
the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized and to find
how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all
that he achieves, and all he aims at. I know not that I
especially needed the lesson, either in the way of warning or
rebuff; but at any rate, I learned it thoroughly: nor, it gives
me pleasure to reflect, did the truth, as it came home to my
perception, ever cost me a pang, or require to be thrown off in a
sigh. In the way of literary talk, it is true, the Naval Officer--an
excellent fellow, who came into the office with me, and
went out only a little later--would often engage me in a
discussion about one or the other of his favourite topics,
Napoleon or Shakespeare. The Collector's junior clerk, too a
young gentleman who, it was whispered occasionally covered a
sheet of Uncle Sam's letter paper with what (at the distance of a
few yards) looked very much like poetry--used now and then to
speak to me of books, as matters with which I might possibly be
conversant. This was my all of lettered intercourse; and it was
quite sufficient for my necessities.

No longer seeking or caring that my name should
be blazoned abroad on title-pages, I smiled to think that it had
now another kind of vogue. The Custom-House marker imprinted it,
with a stencil and black paint, on pepper-bags, and baskets of
anatto, and cigar-boxes, and bales of all kinds of dutiable
merchandise, in testimony that these commodities had paid the
impost, and gone regularly through the office. Borne on such
queer vehicle of fame, a knowledge of my existence, so far as a
name conveys it, was carried where it had never been before, and,
I hope, will never go again.
But the past was not dead. Once in a great while, the thoughts
that had seemed so vital and so active, yet had been put to rest
so quietly, revived again. One of the most remarkable occasions,
when the habit of bygone days awoke in me, was that which brings
it within the law of literary propriety to offer the public the
sketch which I am now writing.

In the second storey of the Custom-House there is a large room,
in which the brick-work and naked rafters have never been covered
with panelling and plaster. The edifice--originally projected
on a scale adapted to the old commercial enterprise of the port,
and with an idea of subsequent prosperity destined never to be
realized--contains far more space than its occupants know what
to do with. This airy hall, therefore, over the Collector's
apartments, remains unfinished to this day, and, in spite of the
aged cobwebs that festoon its dusky beams, appears still to await
the labour of the carpenter and mason. At one end of the room,
in a recess, were a number of barrels piled one upon another,
containing bundles of official documents. Large quantities of
similar rubbish lay lumbering the floor. It was sorrowful to think
how many days, and weeks, and months, and years of toil had been
wasted on these musty papers, which were now only an encumbrance
on earth, and were hidden away in this forgotten corner, never
more to be glanced at by human eyes. But then, what reams of
other manuscripts--filled, not with the dulness of official
formalities, but with the thought of inventive brains and the
rich effusion of deep hearts--had gone equally to oblivion; and
that, moreover, without serving a purpose in their day, as these
heaped-up papers had, and--saddest of all--without
purchasing for their writers the comfortable livelihood which the
clerks of the Custom-House had gained by these worthless
scratchings of the pen. Yet not altogether worthless, perhaps,
as materials of local history. Here, no doubt, statistics of the
former commerce of Salem might be discovered, and memorials of
her princely merchants--old King Derby--old Billy Gray--old
Simon Forrester--and many another magnate in his day, whose
powdered head, however, was scarcely in the tomb before his
mountain pile of wealth began to dwindle. The founders of the
greater part of the families which now compose the aristocracy of
Salem might here be traced, from the petty and obscure beginnings
of their traffic, at periods generally much posterior to the
Revolution, upward to what their children look upon as
long-established rank,

Prior to the Revolution there is a dearth of records; the earlier
documents and archives of the Custom-House having, probably, been
carried off to Halifax, when all the king's officials accompanied
the British army in its flight from Boston. It has often been a
matter of regret with me; for, going back, perhaps, to the days
of the Protectorate, those papers must have contained many
references to forgotten or remembered men, and to antique
customs, which would have affected me with the same pleasure as
when I used to pick up Indian arrow-heads in the field near the
But, one idle and rainy day, it was my fortune to make a discovery of some little interest. Poking and burrowing into the heaped-up rubbish in the corner, unfolding one and another document, and reading the names of vessels that had long ago foundered at sea or rotted at the wharves, and those of merchants never heard of now on 'Change, nor very readily decipherable on their mossy tombstones; glancing at such matters with the saddened, weary, half-reluctant interest which we bestow on the corpse of dead activity--and exerting my fancy, sluggish with little use, to raise up from these dry bones an image of the old towns brighter aspect, when India was a new region, and only Salem knew the way thither--I chanced to lay my hand on a small package, carefully done up in a piece of ancient yellow parchment. This envelope had the air of an official record of some period long past, when clerks engrossed their stiff and formal chirography on more substantial materials than at present. There was something about it that quickened an instinctive curiosity, and made me undo the faded red tape that tied up the package, with the sense that a treasure would here be brought to light. Unbending the rigid folds of the parchment cover, I found it to be a commission, under the hand and seal of Governor Shirley, in favour of one Jonathan Pine, as Surveyor of His Majesty's Customs for the Port of Salem, in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. I remembered to have read (probably in Felt's "Annals") a notice of the decease of Mr. Surveyor Pue, about
fourscore years ago; and likewise, in a newspaper of recent times, an account of the digging up of his remains in the little graveyard of St. Peter's Church, during the renewal of that edifice. Nothing, if I rightly call to mind, was left of my respected predecessor, save an imperfect skeleton, and some fragments of apparel, and a wig of majestic frizzle, which, unlike the head that it once adorned, was in very satisfactory preservation. But, on examining the papers which the parchment commission served to envelop, I found more traces of Mr. Pue's mental part, and the internal operations of his head, than the frizzled wig had contained of the venerable skull itself.

They were documents, in short, not official, but of a private nature, or, at least, written in his private capacity, and apparently with his own hand. I could account for their being included in the heap of Custom-House lumber only by the fact that Mr. Pine's death had happened suddenly, and that these papers, which he probably kept in his official desk, had never come to the knowledge of his heirs, or were supposed to relate to the business of the revenue. On the transfer of the archives to Halifax, this package, proving to be of no public concern, was left behind, and had remained ever since unopened.

The ancient Surveyor--being little molested, suppose, at that early day with business pertaining to his office--seems to have devoted some of his many leisure hours to researches as a local antiquarian, and other inquisitions of a similar nature. These
supplied material for petty activity to a mind that would
otherwise have been eaten up with rust.

A portion of his facts, by-the-by, did me good service in the
preparation of the article entitled "MAIN STREET," included in
the present volume. The remainder may perhaps be applied to
purposes equally valuable hereafter, or not impossibly may be
worked up, so far as they go, into a regular history of Salem,
should my veneration for the natal soil ever impel me to so pious
a task. Meanwhile, they shall be at the command of any
gentleman, inclined and competent, to take the unprofitable
labour off my hands. As a final disposition I contemplate
depositing them with the Essex Historical Society. But the
object that most drew my attention to the mysterious package was
a certain affair of fine red cloth, much worn and faded, There
were traces about it of gold embroidery, which, however, was
greatly frayed and defaced, so that none, or very little, of the
glitter was left. It had been wrought, as was easy to perceive,
with wonderful skill of needlework; and the stitch (as I am
assured by ladies conversant with such mysteries) gives evidence
of a now forgotten art, not to be discovered even by the process
of picking out the threads. This rag of scarlet cloth--for
time, and wear, and a sacrilegious moth had reduced it to little
other than a rag--on careful examination, assumed the shape of
a letter.

It was the capital letter A. By an accurate measurement, each
limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length. 

It had been intended, there could be no doubt, as an ornamental article of dress; but how it was to be worn, or what rank, honour, and dignity, in by-past times, were signified by it, was a riddle which (so evanescent are the fashions of the world in these particulars) I saw little hope of solving. And yet it strangely interested me. My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly there was some deep meaning in it most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind.

When thus perplexed--and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive in order to take the eyes of Indians--I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me--the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word--it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat, and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.

In the absorbing contemplation of the scarlet letter, I had hitherto neglected to examine a small roll of dingy paper, around which it had been twisted. This I now opened, and had the satisfaction to find recorded by the old Surveyor's pen, a
reasonably complete explanation of the whole affair. There were several foolscap sheets, containing many particulars respecting the life and conversation of one Hester Prynne, who appeared to have been rather a noteworthy personage in the view of our ancestors. She had flourished during the period between the early days of Massachusetts and the close of the seventeenth century. Aged persons, alive in the time of Mr. Surveyor Pue, and from whose oral testimony he had made up his narrative, remembered her, in their youth, as a very old, but not decrepit woman, of a stately and solemn aspect. It had been her habit, from an almost immemorial date, to go about the country as a kind of voluntary nurse, and doing whatever miscellaneous good she might; taking upon herself, likewise, to give advice in all matters, especially those of the heart, by which means—as a person of such propensities inevitably must—she gained from many people the reverence due to an angel, but, I should imagine, was looked upon by others as an intruder and a nuisance. Prying further into the manuscript, I found the record of other doings and sufferings of this singular woman, for most of which the reader is referred to the story entitled "THE SCARLET LETTER"; and it should be borne carefully in mind that the main facts of that story are authorized and authenticated by the document of Mr. Surveyor Pue. The original papers, together with the scarlet letter itself—a most curious relic—are still in my possession, and shall be freely exhibited to whomsoever, induced by the great interest of the narrative, may desire a sight of them I must not be understood affirming that, in the dressing up of the tale, and imagining the motives
and modes of passion that influenced the characters who figure in
it, I have invariably confined myself within the limits of the
old Surveyor's half-a-dozen sheets of foolscap. On the contrary,
I have allowed myself, as to such points, nearly, or altogether,
as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own
invention. What I contend for is the authenticity of the outline.

This incident recalled my mind, in some degree, to its old track.
There seemed to be here the groundwork of a tale. It impressed
me as if the ancient Surveyor, in his garb of a hundred years
gone by, and wearing his immortal wig—which was buried with
him, but did not perish in the grave--had bet me in the
deserted chamber of the Custom-House. In his port was the
dignity of one who had borne His Majesty's commission, and who
was therefore illuminated by a ray of the splendour that shone so
dazzlingly about the throne. How unlike alas the hangdog look
of a republican official, who, as the servant of the people,
feels himself less than the least, and below the lowest of his
masters. With his own ghostly hand, the obscurely seen, but
majestic, figure had imparted to me the scarlet symbol and the
little roll of explanatory manuscript. With his own ghostly
voice he had exhorted me, on the sacred consideration of my
filial duty and reverence towards him--who might reasonably
regard himself as my official ancestor--to bring his mouldy and
moth-eaten lucubrations before the public. "Do this," said the
ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue, emphatically nodding the head that
looked so imposing within its memorable wig; "do this, and the
profit shall be all your own. You will shortly need it; for it is not in your days as it was in mine, when a man's office was a life-lease, and oftentimes an heirloom. But I charge you, in this matter of old Mistress Prynne, give to your predecessor's memory the credit which will be rightfully due" And I said to the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue--"I will".

On Hester Prynne's story, therefore, I bestowed much thought. It was the subject of my meditations for many an hour, while pacing to and fro across my room, or traversing, with a hundredfold repetition, the long extent from the front door of the Custom-House to the side entrance, and back again. Great were the weariness and annoyance of the old Inspector and the Weighers and Gaugers, whose slumbers were disturbed by the unmercifully lengthened tramp of my passing and returning footsteps. Remembering their own former habits, they used to say that the Surveyor was walking the quarter-deck. They probably fancied that my sole object--and, indeed, the sole object for which a sane man could ever put himself into voluntary motion--was to get an appetite for dinner. And, to say the truth, an appetite, sharpened by the east wind that generally blew along the passage, was the only valuable result of so much indefatigable exercise. So little adapted is the atmosphere of a Custom-house to the delicate harvest of fancy and sensibility, that, had I remained there through ten Presidencies yet to come, I doubt whether the tale of "The Scarlet Letter" would ever have been brought before the public eye. My imagination was a tarnished mirror. It would
not reflect, or only with miserable
dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it. The
characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered
malleable by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual
forge. They would take neither the glow of passion nor the
tenderness of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead
corpses, and stared me in the face with a fixed and ghastly grin
of contemptuous defiance. "What have you to do with us?" that
expression seemed to say. "The little power you might have once
possessed over the tribe of unrealities is gone. You have
bartered it for a pittance of the public gold. Go then, and earn
your wages." In short, the almost torpid creatures of my own
fancy twitted me with imbecility, and not without fair occasion.

It was not merely during the three hours and a half which Uncle
Sam claimed as his share of my daily life that this wretched
numbness held possession of me. It went with me on my sea-shore
walks and rambles into the country, whenever--which was seldom
and reluctantly--I bestirred myself to seek that invigorating
charm of Nature which used to give me such freshness and activity
of thought, the moment that I stepped across the threshold of the
Old Manse. The same torpor, as regarded the capacity for
intellectual effort, accompanied me home, and weighed upon me in
the chamber which I most absurdly termed my study. Nor did it
quit me when, late at night, I sat in the deserted parlour,
lighted only by the glimmering coal-fire and the moon, striving
to picture forth imaginary scenes, which, the next day, might
flow out on the brightening page in many-hued description.

If the imaginative faculty refused to act at such an hour, it
might well be deemed a hopeless case. Moonlight, in a familiar
room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its
figures so distinctly--making every object so minutely visible,
yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility--is a medium the
most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his
illusive guests. There is the little domestic scenery of the
well-known apartment; the chairs, with each its separate
individuality; the centre-table, sustaining a work-basket, a
volume or two, and an extinguished lamp; the sofa; the book-case;
the picture on the wall--all these details, so completely seen,
are so spiritualised by the unusual light, that they seem to lose
their actual substance, and become things of intellect. Nothing
is too small or too trifling to undergo this change, and acquire
dignity thereby. A child's shoe; the doll, seated in her little
wicker carriage; the hobby-horse--whatever, in a word, has been
used or played with during the day is now invested with a quality
of strangeness and remoteness, though still almost as vividly
present as by daylight. Thus, therefore, the floor of our
familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between
the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary
may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.
Ghosts might enter here without affrighting us. It would be too
much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to
look about us and discover a form, beloved, but gone hence, now
sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moonshine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had returned from afar, or had never once stirred from our fireside.

The somewhat dim coal fire has an essential influence in producing the effect which I would describe. It throws its unobtrusive tinge throughout the room, with a faint ruddiness upon the walls and ceiling, and a reflected gleam upon the polish of the furniture. This warmer light mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moon-beams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up. It converts them from snow-images into men and women. Glancing at the looking-glass, we behold--deep within its haunted verge--the smouldering glow of the half-extinguished anthracite, the white moon-beams on the floor, and a repetition of all the gleam and shadow of the picture, with one remove further from the actual, and nearer to the imaginative. Then, at such an hour, and with this scene before him, if a man, sitting all alone, cannot dream strange things, and make them look like truth, he need never try to write romances.

But, for myself, during the whole of my Custom-House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of firelight, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them was of one whit more avail than the twinkle of a tallow-candle. An entire class of susceptibilities, and a gift connected with them--of no great richness or value, but the best I had--was gone from me.
It is my belief, however, that had I attempted a different order of composition, my faculties would not have been found so pointless and inefficacious. I might, for instance, have contented myself with writing out the narratives of a veteran shipmaster, one of the Inspectors, whom I should be most ungrateful not to mention, since scarcely a day passed that he did not stir me to laughter and admiration by his marvelous gifts as a story-teller. Could I have preserved the picturesque force of his style, and the humourous colouring which nature taught him how to throw over his descriptions, the result, I honestly believe, would have been something new in literature. Or I might readily have found a more serious task. It was a folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt to fling myself back into another age, or to insist on creating the semblance of a world out of airy matter, when, at every moment, the impalpable beauty of my soap-bubble was broken by the rude contact of some actual circumstance. The wiser effort would have been to diffuse thought and imagination through the opaque substance of to-day, and thus to make it a bright transparency; to spiritualise the burden that began to weigh so heavily; to seek, resolutely, the true and indestructible value that lay hidden in the petty and wearisome incidents, and ordinary characters with which I was now conversant. The fault was mine. The page of life that was spread out before me seemed dull and commonplace only because I had not fathomed its deeper import. A better book than I shall ever write was there; leaf after leaf presenting itself to me,
just as it was written out by the reality of the flitting hour,
and vanishing as fast as written, only because my brain wanted
the insight, and my hand the cunning, to transcribe it. At some
future day, it may be, I shall remember a few scattered fragments
and broken paragraphs, and write them down, and find the letters
turn to gold upon the page.

These perceptions had come too late. At the Instant, I was only
conscious that what would have been a pleasure once was now a
hopeless toil. There was no occasion to make much moan about
this state of affairs. I had ceased to be a writer of tolerably
poor tales and essays, and had become a tolerably good Surveyor
of the Customs. That was all. But, nevertheless, it is anything
but agreeable to be haunted by a suspicion that one's intellect
is dwindling away, or exhaling, without your consciousness, like
ether out of a phial; so that, at every glance, you find a
smaller and less volatile residuum. Of the fact there could be
no doubt and, examining myself and others, I was led to
conclusions, in reference to the effect of public office on the
character, not very favourable to the mode of life in question.
In some other form, perhaps, I may hereafter develop these
effects. Suffice it here to say that a Custom-House officer of
long continuance can hardly be a very praiseworthy or respectable
personage, for many reasons; one of them, the tenure by which he
holds his situation, and another, the very nature of his
business, which--though, I trust, an honest one--is of such a
sort that he does not share in the united effort of mankind.
An effect—which I believe to be observable, more or less, in every individual who has occupied the position—is, that while he leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength, departs from him. He loses, in an extent proportioned to the weakness or force of his original nature, the capability of self-support. If he possesses an unusual share of native energy, or the enervating magic of place do not operate too long upon him, his forfeited powers may be redeemable. The ejected officer—fortunate in the unkindly shove that sends him forth betimes, to struggle amid a struggling world—may return to himself, and become all that he has ever been. But this seldom happens. He usually keeps his ground just long enough for his own ruin, and is then thrust out, with sinews all unstrung, to totter along the difficult footpath of life as he best may. Conscious of his own infirmity—that his tempered steel and elasticity are lost—he for ever afterwards looks wistfully about him in quest of support external to himself. His pervading and continual hope—a hallucination, which, in the face of all discouragement, and making light of impossibilities, haunts him while he lives, and, I fancy, like the convulsive throes of the cholera, torments him for a brief space after death—is, that finally, and in no long time, by some happy coincidence of circumstances, he shall be restored to office. This faith, more than anything else, steals the pith and availability out of whatever enterprise he may dream of undertaking. Why should he toil and moil, and be at so much trouble to pick himself up out of the mud, when, in a little
while hence, the strong arm of his Uncle will raise and support
him? Why should he work for his living here, or go to dig gold
in California, when he is so soon to be made happy, at monthly
intervals, with a little pile of glittering coin out of his Uncle's pocket?
It is sadly curious to observe how slight a taste of office suffices to
infect a poor fellow with this singular disease. Uncle Sam's
gold--meaning no disrespect to the worthy old gentleman--has,
in this respect, a quality of enchantment like that of the
devil's wages. Whoever touches it should look well to himself,
or he may find the bargain to go hard against him, involving, if
not his soul, yet many of its better attributes; its sturdy
force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance,
and all that gives the emphasis to manly character.

Here was a fine prospect in the distance. Not that the Surveyor
brought the lesson home to himself, or admitted that he could be
so utterly undone, either by continuance in office or ejectment.
Yet my reflections were not the most comfortable. I began to
grow melancholy and restless; continually prying into my mind, to
discover which of its poor properties were gone, and what degree
of detriment had already accrued to the remainder. I endeavoured
to calculate how much longer I could stay in the Custom-House,
and yet go forth a man. To confess the truth, it was my greatest
apprehension--as it would never be a measure of policy to turn
out so quiet an individual as myself; and it being hardly in the
nature of a public officer to resign--it was my chief trouble,
therefore, that I was likely to grow grey and decrepit in the
Surveyorship, and become much such another animal as the old Inspector. Might it not, in the tedious lapse of official life that lay before me, finally be with me as it was with this venerable friend--to make the dinner-hour the nucleus of the day, and to spend the rest of it, as an old dog spends it, asleep in the sunshine or in the shade? A dreary look-forward, this, for a man who felt it to be the best definition of happiness to live throughout the whole range of his faculties and sensibilities. But, all this while, I was giving myself very unnecessary alarm. Providence had meditated better things for me than I could possibly imagine for myself.

A remarkable event of the third year of my Surveyorship--to adopt the tone of "P. P."--was the election of General Taylor to the Presidency. It is essential, in order to a complete estimate of the advantages of official life, to view the incumbent at the in-coming of a hostile administration. His position is then one of the most singularly irksome, and, in every contingency, disagreeable, that a wretched mortal can possibly occupy; with seldom an alternative of good on either hand, although what presents itself to him as the worst event may very probably be the best. But it is a strange experience, to a man of pride and sensibility, to know that his interests are within the control of individuals who neither love nor understand him, and by whom, since one or the other must needs happen, he would rather be injured than obliged. Strange, too, for one who has kept his calmness throughout the contest, to observe the
bloodthirstiness that is developed in the hour of triumph, and to be conscious that he is himself among its objects! There are few uglier traits of human nature than this tendency--which I now witnessed in men no worse than their neighbours--to grow cruel, merely because they possessed the power of inflicting harm. If the guillotine, as applied to office-holders, were a literal fact, instead of one of the most apt of metaphors, it is my sincere belief that the active members of the victorious party were sufficiently excited to have chopped off all our heads, and have thanked Heaven for the opportunity! It appears to me--who have been a calm and curious observer, as well in victory as defeat--that this fierce and bitter spirit of malice and revenge has never distinguished the many triumphs of my own party as it now did that of the Whigs. The Democrats take the offices, as a general rule, because they need them, and because the practice of many years has made it the law of political warfare, which unless a different system be proclaimed, it was weakness and cowardice to murmur at. But the long habit of victory has made them generous. They know how to spare when they see occasion; and when they strike, the axe may be sharp indeed, but its edge is seldom poisoned with ill-will; nor is it their custom ignominiously to kick the head which they have just struck off.

In short, unpleasant as was my predicament, at best, I saw much reason to congratulate myself that I was on the losing side rather than the triumphant one. If, heretofore, I had been none of the warmest of partisans I began now, at this season of peril
and adversity, to be pretty acutely sensible with which party my
predilections lay; nor was it without something like regret and
shame that, according to a reasonable calculation of chances, I
saw my own prospect of retaining office to be better than those
of my democratic brethren. But who can see an inch into futurity
beyond his nose? My own head was the first that fell

The moment when a man's head drops off is
seldom or never, I am inclined to think, precisely the most
agreeable of his life. Nevertheless, like the greater part of
our misfortunes, even so serious a contingency brings its remedy
and consolation with it, if the sufferer will but make the best
rather than the worst, of the accident which has befallen him.
In my particular case the consolatory topics were close at hand,
and, indeed, had suggested themselves to my meditations a
considerable time before it was requisite to use them. In view
of my previous weariness of office, and vague thoughts of
resignation, my fortune somewhat resembled that of a person who
should entertain an idea of committing suicide, and although
beyond his hopes, meet with the good hap to be murdered. In the
Custom-House, as before in the Old Manse, I had spent three years—a
term long enough to rest a weary brain: long enough to break
off old intellectual habits, and make room for new ones: long
enough, and too long, to have lived in an unnatural state, doing
what was really of no advantage nor delight to any human being,
and withholding myself from toil that would, at least, have
stilled an unquiet impulse in me. Then, moreover, as regarded
his unceremonious ejectment, the late Surveyor was not altogether
ill-pleased to be recognised by the Whigs as an enemy; since his
inactivity in political affairs--his tendency to roam, at will,
in that broad and quiet field where all mankind may meet, rather
than confine himself to those narrow paths where brethren of the
same household must diverge from one another--had sometimes
made it questionable with his brother Democrats whether he was a
friend. Now, after he had won the crown of martyrdom (though with
no longer a head to wear it on), the point might be looked upon as
settled. Finally, little heroic as he was, it seemed more decorous to be
overthrown in the downfall of the party with which he had been content
to stand than to remain a forlorn survivor, when so many worthier
men were falling: and at last, after subsisting for four years on the
mercy of a hostile administration, to be compelled then to define
his position anew, and claim the yet more humiliating mercy of a
friendly one.

Meanwhile, the press had taken up my affair, and kept me for a
week or two careering through the public prints, in my
decapitated state, like Irving's Headless Horseman, ghastly and
grim, and longing to be buried, as a political dead man ought.
So much for my figurative self. The real human being all this
time, with his head safely on his shoulders, had brought himself
to the comfortable conclusion that everything was for the best;
and making an investment in ink, paper, and steel pens, had
opened his long-disused writing desk, and was again a literary
man.
Now it was that the lucubrations of my ancient predecessor, Mr. Surveyor Pue, came into play. Rusty through long idleness, some little space was requisite before my intellectual machinery could be brought to work upon the tale with an effect in any degree satisfactory. Even yet, though my thoughts were ultimately much absorbed in the task, it wears, to my eye, a stern and sombre aspect: too much ungladdened by genial sunshine; too little relieved by the tender and familiar influences which soften almost every scene of nature and real life, and undoubtedly should soften every picture of them. This uncaptivating effect is perhaps due to the period of hardly accomplished revolution, and still seething turmoil, in which the story shaped itself. It is no indication, however, of a lack of cheerfulness in the writer’s mind: for he was happier while straying through the gloom of these sunless fantasies than at any time since he had quitted the Old Manse. Some of the briefer articles, which contribute to make up the volume, have likewise been written since my involuntary withdrawal from the toils and honours of public life, and the remainder are gleaned from annuals and magazines, of such antique date, that they have gone round the circle, and come back to novelty again. Keeping up the metaphor of the political guillotine, the whole may be considered as the POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR: and the sketch which I am now bringing to a close, if too autobiographical for a modest person to publish in his lifetime, will readily be excused in a gentleman who writes from beyond the grave. Peace be with all the world My blessing on my friends My forgiveness to my enemies For I am in the realm of quiet
The life of the Custom-House lies like a dream behind me. The old Inspector—who, by-the-bye, I regret to say, was overthrown and killed by a horse some time ago, else he would certainly have lived for ever—he, and all those other venerable personages who sat with him at the receipt of custom, are but shadows in my view: white-headed and wrinkled images, which my fancy used to sport with, and has now flung aside for ever. The merchants—Pingree, Phillips, Shepard, Upton, Kimball, Bertram, Hunt—these and many other names, which had such classic familiarity for my ear six months ago,—these men of traffic, who seemed to occupy so important a position in the world—how little time has it required to disconnect me from them all, not merely in act, but recollection It is with an effort that I recall the figures and appellations of these few. Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory, a mist brooding over and around it; as if it were no portion of the real earth, but an overgrown village in cloud-land, with only imaginary inhabitants to people its wooden houses and walk its homely lanes, and the unpicturesque prolixity of its main street. Henceforth it ceases to be a reality of my life; I am a citizen of somewhere else. My good townspeople will not much regret me, for—though it has been as dear an object as any, in my literary efforts, to be of some importance in their eyes, and to win myself a pleasant memory in this abode and burial-place of so many of my forefathers—there has never
been, for me, the genial atmosphere which a literary man requires
in order to ripen the best harvest of his mind. I shall do
better amongst other faces; and these familiar ones, it need
hardly be said, will do just as well without me.

It may be, however--oh, transporting and triumphant thought
I--that the great-grandchildren of the present race may
sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days, when the
antiquary of days to come, among the sites memorable in the
town's history, shall point out the locality of THE TOWN PUMP.

THE SCARLET LETTER

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, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and
studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue
and happiness they might originally project, have invariably
recognised it among their earliest practical necessities to allot
a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion
as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule it may
safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the
first prison-house somewhere in the Vicinity of Cornhill, almost
as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on
Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which
subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres
in the old churchyard of King's Chapel. Certain it is that, some
fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was
already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age,
which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy
front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door
looked more antique than anything else in the New World. Like
all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a
youthful era. 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,
which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so
early borne the black flower of civilised society, a prison. But
on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold,
was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its
delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance
and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the
condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that
the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in
history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old
wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks
that originally overshadowed it, or whether, as there is far
authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of
the sainted Ann Hutchinson as she entered the prison-door, we
shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on
the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from
that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise
than pluck one of its flowers, and present it to the reader. It
may serve, let us hope, to symbolise some sweet moral blossom
that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close
of a tale of human frailty and sorrow

II. THE MARKET-PLACE

The grass-plot before the jail, in Prison Lane, on a certain
summer morning, not less than two centuries ago, was occupied by
a pretty large number of the inhabitants of Boston, all with
their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door.
Amongst any other population, or at a later period in the history
of New England, the grim rigidity that petrified the bearded
physiognomies of these good people would have augured some awful
business in hand. It could have betokened nothing short of the
anticipated execution of some rioted culprit, on whom the
sentence of a legal tribunal had but confirmed the verdict of
public sentiment. But, in that early severity of the Puritan
class, an inference of this kind could not so indubitably be
drawn. It might be that a sluggish bond-servant, or an undutiful
child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected at the whipping-post. It might be that an Antinomian, a Quaker, or other heterodox religionist, was to be scourged out of the town, or an idle or vagrant Indian, whom the white man’s firewater had made riotous about the streets, was to be driven with stripes into the shadow of the forest. It might be, too, that a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows. In either case, there was very much the same solemnity of demeanour on the part of the spectators, as befitted a people among whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful. Meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for, from such bystanders, at the scaffold. On the other hand, a penalty which, in our days, would infer a degree of mocking infamy and ridicule, might then be invested with almost as stern a dignity as the punishment of death itself.

It was a circumstance to be noted on the summer morning when our story begins its course, that the women, of whom there were several in the crowd, appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue. The age had not so much refinement, that any sense of impropriety restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthingale from stepping forth into the public ways, and wedging their not unsubstantial persons, if occasion were, into the throng nearest to the
scaffold at an execution. Morally, as well as materially, there
was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English
birth and breeding than in their fair descendants, separated from
them by a series of six or seven generations; for, throughout
that chain of ancestry, every successive mother had transmitted
to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty,
and a slighter physical frame, if not
character of less force and solidity than her own. 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 the sex. They
were her countrywomen: and the beef and ale of their native land,
with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into
their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on
broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy
cheeks, that had ripened in the far-off island, and had hardly
yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England.
There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among
these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle
us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its
volume of tone.

"Goodwives," said a hard-featured dame of fifty, "I'll tell ye a
piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof if
we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute,
should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester
Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for
judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, 
would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful 
magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not"

"People say," said another, "that the Reverend Master 
Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart 
that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation. "

"The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful 
overmuch--that is a truth," added a third autumnal 
matron. "At the very least, they should have put the brand of a 
hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead. Madame Hester would have 
winced at that, I warrant me. But she--the naughty baggage-- 
little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown 
Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch, or such like. 
heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever"

"Ah, but," interposed, more softly, a young wife, holding a 
child by the hand, "let her cover the mark as she will, the pang 
of it will be always in her heart. "

"What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of 
her gown or the flesh of her forehead?" cried another female, the 
ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted 
judges. "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to 
die; Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the
Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray.

"Mercy on us, goodwife" exclaimed a man in the crowd, "is there no virtue in woman, save what springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush now, gossips for the lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself."

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 gristly presence of the town-beadle, with a sword by his side, and his staff of office in his hand. This personage prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender. 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, who winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquaintance only with the grey twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome
apartment of the prison.

When the young woman--the mother of this child--stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, 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. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendour in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam; 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, after the manner of the
feminine gentility of those days; characterised by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace which is now recognised as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more ladylike, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. It may be true that, to a sensitive observer, there was some thing exquisitely painful in it. Her attire, which indeed, she had wrought for the occasion in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer--so that both men and women who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time--was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.

"She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain," remarked one of her female spectators; "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it? Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates,
and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?"

"It were well," muttered the most iron-visaged of the old dames, "if we stripped Madame Hester's rich gown off her dainty shoulders; and as for the red letter which she hath stitched so curiously, I'll bestow a rag of mine own rheumatic flannel to make a fitter one!"

"Oh, peace, neighbours--peace!" whispered their youngest companion; "do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter but she has felt it in her heart."

The grim beadle now made a gesture with his staff. "Make way, good people--make way, in the King's name!" cried he. "Open a passage; and I promise ye, Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman, and child may have a fair sight of her brave apparel from this time till an hour past meridian. A blessing on the righteous colony of the Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madame Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market-place!"

A lane was forthwith opened through the crowd of spectators. Preceded by the beadle, and attended by an irregular procession of stern-browed men and unkindly visaged women, Hester Prynne set forth towards the place appointed for her punishment. A crowd
of eager and curious schoolboys, understanding little of the matter in hand, except that it gave them a half-holiday, ran before her progress, turning their heads continually to stare into her face and at the winking baby in her arms, and at the ignominious letter on her breast. It was no great distance, in those days, from the prison door to the market-place. Measured by the prisoner's experience, however, it might be reckoned a journey of some length; for haughty as her demeanour was, she perchance underwent an agony from every footstep of those that thronged to see her, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample upon. In our nature, however, there is a provision, alike marvellous and merciful, that the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it. With almost a serene deportment, therefore, Hester Prynne passed through this portion of her ordeal, and came to a sort of scaffold, at the western extremity of the market-place. It stood nearly beneath the eaves of Boston's earliest church, and appeared to be a fixture there.

In fact, this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent, in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France. It was, in short, the platform of the pillory; and above it rose the framework of that instrument of discipline, so fashioned as
to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze. The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance of wood and iron. There can be no outrage, methinks, against our common nature--whatever be the delinquencies of the individual--no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do. In Hester Prynne's instance, however, as not unfrequently in other cases, her sentence bore that she should stand a certain time upon the platform, but without undergoing that gripe about the neck and confinement of the head, the proneness to which was the most devilish characteristic of this ugly engine. Knowing well her part, she ascended a flight of wooden steps, and was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude, at about the height of a man's shoulders above the street.

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world. Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne.
The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always
invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature,
before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead
of shuddering at it. The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace
had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern
enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence,
without a murmur at its severity, but had none of the
heartlessness of another social state, which would find only a
theme for jest in an exhibition like the present. Even had there
been a disposition to turn the matter into ridicule, it must have
been repressed and overpowered by the solemn presence of men no
less dignified than the governor, and several of his counsellors,
a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town, all of whom
sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting-house, looking down upon
the platform. When such personages could constitute a part of
the spectacle, without risking the majesty, or reverence of rank
and office, it was safely to be inferred that the infliction of a
legal sentence would have an earnest and effectual meaning.
Accordingly, the crowd was sombre and grave. The unhappy culprit
sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight
of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and
concentrated at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be
borne. Of an impulsive and passionate nature, she had fortified
herself to encounter the stings and venomous stabs of public
contumely, wreaking itself in every variety of insult; but there
was a quality so much more terrible in the solemn
mood of the popular mind, that she longed rather to behold all
those rigid countenances contorted with scornful merriment, and
herself the object. Had a roar of laughter burst from the
multitude--each man, each woman, each little shrill-voiced
child, contributing their individual parts--Hester Prynne might
have repaid them all with a bitter and disdainful smile. But,
under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure, she
felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full
power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon
the ground, or else go mad at once.

Yet there were intervals when the whole scene, in which she was
the most conspicuous object, seemed to vanish from her eyes, or,
at least, glimmered indistinctly before them, like a mass of
imperfectly shaped and spectral images. Her mind, and especially
her memory, was preternaturally active, and kept bringing up
other scenes than this roughly hewn street of a little town, on
the edge of the western wilderness: other faces than were lowering
upon her from beneath the brims of those steeple-crowned hats.
Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of
infancy and school-days, sports, childish quarrels, and the
little domestic traits of her maiden years, came swarming back
upon her, intermingled with recollections of whatever was gravest
in her subsequent life; one picture precisely as vivid as
another; as if all were of similar importance, or all alike a
play. Possibly, it was an instinctive device of her spirit to
relieve itself by the exhibition of these phantasmagoric forms,
from the cruel weight and hardness of the reality.

Be that as it might, the scaffold of the pillory was

a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track

along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy.

Standing on that miserable eminence, she saw again her native

village, in Old England, and her paternal home: a decayed house

of grey stone, with a poverty-stricken aspect, but retaining a

half obliterated shield of arms over the portal, in token of

antique gentility. She saw her father's face, with its bold

brow, and reverend white beard that flowed over the old-fashioned

Elizabethan ruff; her mother's, too, with the look of heedful and

anxious love which it always wore in her remembrance, and which,

even since her death, had so often laid the impediment of a

gentle remonstrance in her daughter's pathway. She saw her own

face, glowing with girlish beauty, and illuminating all the

interior of the dusky mirror in which she had been wont to gaze

at it. There she beheld another countenance, of a man well

stricken in years, a pale, thin, scholar-like visage, with eyes

dim and bleared by the lamp-light that had served them to pore

over many ponderous books. Yet those same bleared optics had a

strange, penetrating power, when it was their owner's purpose to

read the human soul. This figure of the study and the cloister,

as Hester Prynne's womanly fancy failed not to recall, was

slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than

the right. Next rose before her in memory's picture-gallery, the

intricate and narrow thoroughfares, the tall, grey houses, the
huge cathedrals, and the public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture, of a continental city; where new life had awaited her, still in connexion with the misshapen scholar: a new life, but feeding itself on time-worn materials, like a tuft of green moss on a crumbling wall. Lastly, in lieu of these shifting scenes, came back the rude market-place of the Puritan, settlement, with all the townspeople assembled, and levelling their stern regards at Hester Prynne--yes, at herself--who stood on the scaffold of the pillory, an infant on her arm, and the letter A, in scarlet, fantastically embroidered with gold thread, upon her bosom.

Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the shame were real. Yes these were her realities--all else had vanished!

III. THE RECOGNITION

From this intense consciousness of being the object of severe and universal observation, the wearer of the scarlet letter was at length relieved, by discerning, on the outskirts of the crowd, a figure which irresistibly took possession of her thoughts. An Indian in his native garb was standing there; but the red men were not so infrequent visitors of the English settlements that
one of them would have attracted any notice from Hester Prynne at
such a time; much less would he have excluded all other objects
and ideas from her mind. By the Indian's side, and evidently
sustaining a companionship with him, stood a white man, clad in a
strange disarray of civilized and savage costume.

He was small in stature, with a furrowed visage, which as yet
could hardly be termed aged. There was a remarkable intelligence
in his features, as of a person who had so cultivated his mental
part that it could not fail to mould the physical to itself and
become manifest by unmistakable tokens. Although, by a seemingly
careless arrangement of his heterogeneous garb, he had
endeavoured to conceal or abate the peculiarity, it was
sufficiently evident to Hester Prynne that one of this man's
shoulders rose higher than the other. Again, at the first instant of
perceiving that thin visage, and the slight deformity of the figure, she
pressed her infant to her bosom with so convulsive a force that
the poor babe uttered another cry of pain. But the mother did
not seem to hear it,

At his arrival in the market-place, and some time before she saw
him, the stranger had bent his eyes on Hester Prynne. It was
carelessly at first, like a man chiefly accustomed to look
inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and
import, unless they bear relation to something within his mind.
Very soon, however, his look became keen and penetrative. A
writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake
gliding swiftly over them, and making one little pause, with all
its wreathed intervolutions in open sight. His face darkened
with some powerful emotion, which, nevertheless, he so
instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will, that, save
at a single moment, its expression might have passed for
calmness. After a brief space, the convulsion grew almost
imperceptible, and finally subsided into the depths of his
nature. When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his
own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and
calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and
laid it on his lips.

Then touching the shoulder of a townsman who stood near to him,
he addressed him in a formal and courteous manner:

"I pray you, good Sir," said he, "who is this woman? --and
wherefore is she here set up to public shame?"

"You must needs be a stranger in this region, friend," answered
the townsman, looking curiously at the questioner and his savage
companion, "else you would surely have heard of Mistress Hester
Prynne and her evil doings. She hath raised a great scandal, I
promise you, in godly Master Dimmesdale's church."

"You say truly," replied the other; "I am a stranger, and have
been a wanderer, sorely against my will. I have met with
grievous mishaps by sea and land, and have been long held in
bonds among the heathen-folk to the southward; and am now brought
hither by this Indian to be redeemed out of my captivity. Will
it please you, therefore, to tell me of Hester Prynne's--have I
her name rightly?--of this woman's offences, and what has
brought her to yonder scaffold?"

"Truly, friend; and methinks it must gladden your heart, after
your troubles and sojourn in the wilderness," said the townsman,
"to find yourself at length in a land where iniquity is searched
out and punished in the sight of rulers and people, as here in
our godly New England. Yonder woman, Sir, you must know, was the
wife of a certain learned man, English by birth, but who had long
ago dwelt in Amsterdam, whence some good time agone he was minded
to cross over and cast in his lot with us of the Massachusetts.
To this purpose he sent his wife before him, remaining himself to
look after some necessary affairs. Marry, good Sir, in some two
years, or less, that the woman has been a dweller here in Boston,
no tidings have come of this learned gentleman, Master Prynne;
and his young wife, look you, being left to her own misguidance--"

"Ah!--aha!--I conceive you," said the stranger with a
bitter smile. "So learned a man as you speak of should have
learned this too in his books. And who, by your favour, Sir, may
be the father of yonder babe--it is some three or four months
old, I should judge--which Mistress Prynne is holding in her
arms?"
"Of a truth, friend, that matter remaineth a riddle; and the Daniel who shall expound it is yet a-wanting," answered the townsman. "Madame Hester absolutely refuseth to speak, and the magistrates have laid their heads together in vain. Peradventure the guilty one stands looking on at this sad spectacle, unknown of man, and forgetting that God sees him."

"The learned man," observed the stranger with another smile, "should come himself to look into the mystery."

"It behoves him well if he be still in life," responded the townsman. "Now, good Sir, our Massachusetts magistracy, bethinking themselves that this woman is youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall, and that, moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea, they have not been bold to put in force the extremity of our righteous law against her. The penalty thereof is death. But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom."

"A wise sentence," remarked the stranger, gravely, bowing his head. "Thus she will be a living sermon against sin,
until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone. It
irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should
not at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be
known--he will be known!--he will be known!"

He bowed courteously to the communicative townsman, and
whispering a few words to his Indian attendant, they both made
their way through the crowd.

While this passed, Hester Prynne had been standing on her
pedestal, still with a fixed gaze towards the stranger--so
fixed a gaze that, at moments of intense absorption, all other
objects in the visible world seemed to vanish, leaving only him
and her. Such an interview, perhaps, would have been more
terrible than even to meet him as she now did, with the hot
mid-day sun burning down upon her face, and lighting up its
shame; with the scarlet token of infamy on her breast; with the
sin-born infant in her arms; with a whole people, drawn forth as
to a festival, staring at the features that should have been seen
only in the quiet gleam of the fireside, in the happy shadow of a
home, or beneath a matronly veil at church. Dreadful as it was,
she was conscious of a shelter in the presence of these thousand
witnesses. It was better to stand thus, with so many betwixt him
and her, than to greet him face to face--they two alone. She
fled for refuge, as it were, to the public exposure, and dreaded
the moment when its protection should be withdrawn from her.
Involved in these thoughts, she scarcely heard a voice behind her
until it had repeated her name more than once, in
a loud and solemn tone, audible to the whole multitude.

"Hearken unto me, Hester Prynne!" said the voice.

It has already been noticed that directly over the platform on
which Hester Prynne stood was a kind of balcony, or open gallery,
appended to the meeting-house. It was the place whence
proclamations were wont to be made, amidst an assemblage of the
magistracy, with all the ceremonial that attended such public
observances in those days. Here, to witness the scene which we
are describing, sat Governor Bellingham himself with four
sergeants about his chair, bearing halberds, as a guard of
honour. He wore a dark feather in his hat, a border of
embroidery on his cloak, and a black velvet tunic beneath—a
gentleman advanced in years, with a hard experience written in
his wrinkles. He was not ill-fitted to be the head and
representative of a community which owed its origin and progress,
and its present state of development, not to the impulses of
youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood and the
sombre sagacity of age; accomplishing so much, precisely because
it imagined and hoped so little. The other eminent characters by
whom the chief ruler was surrounded were distinguished by a
dignity of mien, belonging to a period when the forms of
authority were felt to possess the sacredness of Divine
institutions. They were, doubtless, good men, just and sage.
But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy
to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who
should he less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring
woman's heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than
the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned
her face. She seemed conscious, indeed, that whatever sympathy
she might expect lay in the larger and warmer heart of the multitude;
for, as she lifted her eyes towards the balcony, the unhappy woman
grew pale, and trembled.

The voice which had called her attention was that of the
reverend and famous John Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston,
a great scholar, like most of his contemporaries in the
profession, and withal a man of kind and genial spirit. This
last attribute, however, had been less carefully developed than
his intellectual gifts, and was, in truth, rather a matter of
shame than self-congratulation with him. There he stood, with a
border of grizzled locks beneath his skull-cap, while his grey
eyes, accustomed to the shaded light of his study, were winking,
like those of Hester's infant, in the unadulterated sunshine. He
looked like the darkly engraved portraits which we see prefixed
to old volumes of sermons, and had no more right than one of
those portraits would have to step forth, as he now did, and
meddle with a question of human guilt, passion, and anguish.

"Hester Prynne," said the clergyman, "I have striven with my
young brother here, under whose preaching of the Word you have
been privileged to sit"--here Mr. Wilson laid his hand on the
shoulder of a pale young man beside him—"I have sought, I say, to persuade this godly youth, that he should deal with you, here in the face of Heaven, and before these wise and upright rulers, and in hearing of all the people, as touching the vileness and blackness of your sin. Knowing your natural temper better than I, he could the better judge what arguments to use, whether of tenderness or terror, such as might prevail over your hardness and obstinacy, insomuch that you should no longer hide the name of him who tempted you to this grievous fall. But he opposes to me— with a young man’s over-softness, albeit wise beyond his years—that it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart’s secrets in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude. Truly, as I sought to convince him, the shame lay in the commission of the sin, and not in the showing of it forth. What say you to it, once again, brother Dimmesdale? Must it be thou, or I, that shall deal with this poor sinner’s soul?"

There was a murmur among the dignified and reverend occupants of the balcony; and Governor Bellingham gave expression to its purport, speaking in an authoritative voice, although tempered with respect towards the youthful clergyman whom he addressed:

"Good Master Dimmesdale," said he, "the responsibility of this woman’s soul lies greatly with you. It behoves you; therefore, to exhort her to repentance and to confession, as a proof and consequence thereof. "
The directness of this appeal drew the eyes of the whole crowd upon the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale—young clergymen, who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest land. His eloquence and religious fervour had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession. He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow; large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self restraint. Notwithstanding his high native gifts and scholar-like attainments, there was an air about this young minister—an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look—as of a being who felt himself quite astray, and at a loss in the pathway of human existence, and could only be at ease in some seclusion of his own. Therefore, so far as his duties would permit, he trod in the shadowy by-paths, and thus kept himself simple and childlike, coming forth, when occasion was, with a freshness, and fragrance, and dewy purity of thought, which, as many people said, affected them like the speech of an angel.

Such was the young man whom the Reverend Mr. Wilson and the Governor had introduced so openly to the public notice, bidding him speak, in the hearing of all men, to that mystery of a woman's soul, so sacred even in its pollution. The trying nature of his position drove the blood from his cheek, and made his lips tremulous.
"Speak to the woman, my brother," said Mr. Wilson. "It is of moment to her soul, and, therefore, as the worshipful Governor says, momentous to thine own, ill whose charge hers is. Exhort her to confess the truth!"

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale bent his head, silent prayer, as it seemed, and then came forward.

"Hester Prynne," said he, leaning over the balcony and looking down steadfastly into her eyes, "thou hearest what this good man says, and seest the accountability under which I labour. If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him; for, believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame, yet better were it so than to hide a guilty heart through life. What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him--yea, compel him, as it were--to add hypocrisy to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him--who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself--the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!"
The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy. Even the poor baby at Hester's bosom was affected by the same influence, for it directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms with a half-pleased, half-plaintive murmur. So powerful seemed the minister's appeal that the people could not believe but that Hester Prynne would speak out the guilty name, or else that the guilty one himself in whatever high or lowly place he stood, would be drawn forth by an inward and inevitable necessity, and compelled to ascend the scaffold.

Hester shook her head.

"Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!" cried the Reverend Mr. Wilson, more harshly than before. "That little babe hath been gifted with a voice, to second and confirm the counsel which thou hast heard. Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast."

"Never," replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman. "It is
too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I
might endure his agony as well as mine!"

"Speak, woman!" said another voice, coldly and sternly,
proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold, "Speak; and give
your child a father!"

"I will not speak!" answered Hester, turning pale as death, but
responding to this voice, which she too surely recognised. "And
my child must seek a heavenly father; she shall never know an
earthly one!"

"She will not speak!" murmured Mr. Dimmesdale, who, leaning over
the balcony, with his hand upon his heart, had awaited the
result of his appeal. He now drew back with a long respiration.
"Wondrous strength arid generosity of a woman's heart! She will
not speak!"

Discerning the impracticable state of the poor culprit's mind,
the elder clergyman, who had carefully prepared himself for the
occasion, addressed to the multitude a discourse on sin, in all
its branches, but with continual reference to the ignominious letter.
So forcibly did he dwell upon this symbol, for the hour or more during
which is periods were rolling over the people's heads, that it assumed
new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its
scarlet hue from the flames of the infernal pit. Hester Prynne,
meanwhile, kept her place upon the pedestal of shame, with glazed 
eyes, and an air of weary indifference. She had borne that 
morning all that nature could endure; and as her temperament was 
not of the order that escapes from too intense suffering by a 
swoon, her spirit could only shelter itself beneath a stony crust 
of insensibility, while the faculties of animal life remained 
entire. In this state, the voice of the preacher thundered 
remorselessly, but unavailingly, upon her ears. The infant, 
during the latter portion of her ordeal, pierced the air with its 
whailings and screams; she strove to hush it mechanically, but 
seemed scarcely to sympathise with its trouble. With the same 
hard demeanour, she was led back to prison, and vanished from the 
public gaze within its iron-clamped portal. It was whispered by 
those who peered after her that the scarlet letter threw a lurid 
gleam along the dark passage-way of the interior.

IV. THE INTERVIEW

After her return to the prison, Hester Prynne was found to be in 
a state of nervous excitement, that demanded constant 
watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or 
do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe. As night 
approached, it proving impossible to quell her insubordination by 
rebuke or threats of punishment, Master Brackett, the jailer, 
thought fit to introduce a physician. He described him as a man 
of skill in all Christian modes of physical science, and likewise 
familiar with whatever the savage people could teach in respect
to medicinal herbs and roots that grew in the forest. To say the
truth, there was much need of professional assistance, not merely
for Hester herself, but still more urgently for the child--who,
drawing its sustenance from the maternal bosom, seemed to have
drank in with it all the turmoil, the anguish and despair, which
pervaded the mother's system. It now writhed in convulsions of
pain, and was a forcible type, in its little frame, of the moral
agony which Hester Prynne had borne throughout the day.

Closely following the jailer into the dismal apartment, appeared
that individual, of singular aspect whose presence in the crowd
had been of such deep interest to the wearer of the scarlet letter.
He was lodged in the prison, not as suspected of any offence, but
as the most convenient and suitable mode of disposing of him, until
the magistrates should have conferred with the Indian sagamores
respecting his ransom. His name was announced as Roger
Chillingworth. The jailer, after ushering him into the room, remained
a moment, marveling at the comparative quiet that followed his
entrance; for Hester Prynne had immediately become as still as death,
although the child continued to moan.

"Prithee, friend, leave me alone with my patient," said the
practitioner. "Trust me, good jailer, you shall briefly have
peace in your house; and, I promise you, Mistress Prynne shall
hereafter be more amenable to just authority than you may have
found her heretofore."
"Nay, if your worship can accomplish that," answered Master Brackett, "I shall own you for a man of skill, indeed! Verily, the woman hath been like a possessed one; and there lacks little that I should take in hand, to drive Satan out of her with stripes."

The stranger had entered the room with the characteristic quietude of the profession to which he announced himself as belonging. Nor did his demeanour change when the withdrawal of the prison keeper left him face to face with the woman, whose absorbed notice of him, in the crowd, had intimated so close a relation between himself and her. His first care was given to the child, whose cries, indeed, as she lay writhing on the trundle-bed, made it of peremptory necessity to postpone all other business to the task of soothing her. He examined the infant carefully, and then proceeded to unclasp a leathern case, which he took from beneath his dress. It appeared to contain medical preparations, one of which he mingled with a cup of water.

"My old studies in alchemy," observed he, "and my sojourn, for above a year past, among a people well versed in the kindly properties of simples, have made a better physician of me than many that claim the medical degree. Here, woman! The child is yours--she is none of mine--neither will she recognise my voice or aspect as a father's. Administer this draught, therefore, with thine own hand."
Hester repelled the offered medicine, at the same time gazing with strongly marked apprehension into his face.

"Wouldst thou avenge thyself on the innocent babe?" whispered she.

"Foolish woman!" responded the physician, half coldly, half soothingly. "What should ail me to harm this misbegotten and miserable babe? The medicine is potent for good, and were it my child--yea, mine own, as well as thine! I could do no better for it."

As she still hesitated, being, in fact, in no reasonable state of mind, he took the infant in his arms, and himself administered the draught. It soon proved its efficacy, and redeemed the leech's pledge. The moans of the little patient subsided; its convulsive tossings gradually ceased; and in a few moments, as is the custom of young children after relief from pain, it sank into a profound and dewy slumber. The physician, as he had a fair right to be termed, next bestowed his attention on the mother. With calm and intent scrutiny, he felt her pulse, looked into her eyes--a gaze that made her heart shrink and shudder, because so familiar, and yet so strange and cold--and, finally, satisfied with his investigation, proceeded to mingle another draught.

"I know not Lethe nor Nepenthe," remarked he; "but I have
learned many new secrets in the wilderness, and here is one of them—a recipe that an Indian taught me, in requital of some lessons of my own, that were as old as Paracelsus. Drink it! It may be less soothing than a sinless conscience. That I cannot give thee. But it will calm the swell and heaving of thy passion, like oil thrown on the waves of a tempestuous sea."

He presented the cup to Hester, who received it with a slow, earnest look into his face; not precisely a look of fear, yet full of doubt and questioning as to what his purposes might be. She looked also at her slumbering child.

"I have thought of death," said she—"have wished for it—would even have prayed for it, were it fit that such as I should pray for anything. Yet, if death be in this cup, I bid thee think again, ere thou beholdest me quaff it. See! it is even now at my lips."

"Drink, then," replied he, still with the same cold composure. "Dost thou know me so little, Hester Prynne? Are my purposes wont to be so shallow? Even if I imagine a scheme of vengeance, what could I do better for my object than to let thee live—than to give thee medicines against all harm and peril of life—so that this burning shame may still blaze upon thy bosom?" As he spoke, he laid his long fore-finger on the scarlet letter, which forthwith seemed to scorch into Hester's breast, as if it
ad been red hot. He noticed her involuntary gesture, and smiled.

"Live, therefore, and bear about thy doom with thee, in the eyes
of men and women--in the eyes of him whom thou didst call thy
husband--in the eyes of yonder child! And, that thou mayest live,
take off this draught."

Without further expostulation or delay, Hester Prynne drained
the cup, and, at the motion of the man of skill, seated herself
on the bed, where the child was sleeping; while he drew the only
chair which the room afforded, and took his own seat beside her.
She could not but tremble at these preparations; for she felt
that--having now done all that humanity, or principle, or, if
so it were, a refined cruelty, impelled him to do for the relief
of physical suffering--he was next to treat with her as the man
whom she had most deeply and irreparably injured.

"Hester," said he, "I ask not wherefore, nor how thou hast
fallen into the pit, or say, rather, thou hast ascended to the
pedestal of infamy on which I found thee. The reason is not far
to seek. It was my folly, and thy weakness. I--a man of
thought--the book-worm of great libraries--a man already in
decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of
knowledge--what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine
own? Misshapen from my birth-hour, how could I delude myself
with the idea that intellectual gifts might veil physical
deformity in a young girl's fantasy? Men call me wise. If sages
were ever wise in their own behoof, I might have foreseen all
this. I might have known that, as I came out
of the vast and dismal forest, and entered this settlement of
Christian men, the very first object to meet my eyes would be
thyself, Hester Prynne, standing up, a statue of ignominy, before
the people. Nay, from the moment when we came down the old
church-steps together, a married pair, I might have beheld the
bale-fire of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path!"

"Thou knowest," said Hester--for, depressed as she was, she
could not endure this last quiet stab at the token of her
shame--"thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love,
nor feigned any."

"True," replied he. "It was my folly! I have said it. But, up
to that epoch of my life, I had lived in vain. The world had
been so cheerless! My heart was a habitation large enough for
many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire.
I longed to kindle one! It seemed not so wild a dream--old as
I was, and sombre as I was, and misshapen as I was--that the
simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to
gather up, might yet be mine. And so, Hester, I drew thee into
my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by
the warmth which thy presence made there!"

"I have greatly wronged thee," murmured Hester.
"We have wronged each other," answered he. "Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay. Therefore, as a man who has not thought and philosophised in vain, I seek no vengeance, plot no evil against thee. Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced. But, Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both! Who is he?"

"Ask me not?" replied Hester Prynne, looking firmly into his face. "That thou shalt never know!"

"Never, sayest thou?" rejoined he, with a smile of dark and self-relying intelligence. "Never know him! Believe me, Hester, there are few things whether in the outward world, or, to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought--few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery. Thou mayest cover up thy secret from the prying multitude. Thou mayest conceal it, too, from the ministers and magistrates, even as thou didst this day, when they sought to wrench the name out of thy heart, and give thee a partner on thy pedestal. But, as for me, I come to the inquest with other senses than they possess. I shall seek this man, as I have sought truth in books: as I have sought gold in alchemy. There is a sympathy that will make me conscious of him. I shall see him tremble. I shall feel myself shudder, suddenly and unawares. Sooner or later, he must needs be mine."
The eyes of the wrinkled scholar glowed so intensely upon her,
that Hester Prynne clasped her hand over her heart, dreading lest
he should read the secret there at once.

"Thou wilt not reveal his name? Not the less he is mine,"
resumed he, with a look of confidence, as if destiny were at one
with him. "He bears no letter of infamy wrought into his
garment, as thou dost, but I shall read it on his heart. Yet
fear not for him! Think not that I shall interfere with Heaven's
own method of retribution, or, to my own loss, betray him to the
gripe of human law. Neither do thou imagine that I shall
contrive aught against his life; no, nor against his fame, if as
I judge, he be a man of fair repute. Let him live! Let him hide
himself in outward honour, if he may! Not the less he shall be
mine!"

"Thy acts are like mercy," said Hester, bewildered and appalled;
"but thy words interpret thee as a terror!"

"One thing, thou that wast my wife, I would enjoin upon thee,"
continued the scholar. "Thou hast kept the secret of thy
paramour. Keep, likewise, mine! There are none in this land
that know me. Breathe not to any human soul that thou didst ever
call me husband! Here, on this wild outskirt of the earth, I
shall pitch my tent; for, elsewhere a wanderer, and isolated
from human interests, I find here a woman, a man, a child, amongst whom and myself there exist the closest ligaments. No matter whether of love or hate: no matter whether of right or wrong! Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me. My home is where thou art and where he is. But betray me not!"

"Wherefore dost thou desire it?" inquired Hester, shrinking, she hardly knew why, from this secret bond. "Why not announce thyself openly, and cast me off at once?"

"It may be," he replied, "because I will not encounter the dishonour that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman. It may be for other reasons. Enough, it is my purpose to live and die unknown. Let, therefore, thy husband be to the world as one already dead, and of whom no tidings shall ever come. Recognise me not, by word, by sign, by look! Breathe not the secret, above all, to the man thou wittest of. Shouldst thou fail me in this, beware! His fame, his position, his life will be in my hands. Beware!"

"I will keep thy secret, as I have his," said Hester.

"Swear it!" rejoined he.

And she took the oath.
"And now, Mistress Prynne," said old Roger Chillingworth, as he was hereafter to be named, "I leave thee alone: alone with thy infant and the scarlet letter! How is it, Hester? Doth thy sentence bind thee to wear the token in thy sleep? Art thou not afraid of nightmares and hideous dreams?"

"Why dost thou smile so at me?" inquired Hester, troubled at the expression of his eyes. "Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?"

"Not thy soul," he answered, with another smile. "No, not thine!"

V. HESTER AT HER NEEDLE

Hester Prynne's term of confinement was now at an end. Her prison-door was thrown open, and she came forth into the sunshine, which, falling on all alike, seemed, to her sick and morbid heart, as if meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast. Perhaps there was a more real torture in her first unattended footsteps from the threshold of the prison than even in the procession and spectacle that have been described, where she was made the common infamy, at which
all mankind was summoned to point its finger. Then, she was
supported by an unnatural tension of the nerves, and by all the
combative energy of her character, which enabled her to convert
the scene into a kind of lurid triumph. It was, moreover, a
separate and insulated event, to occur but once in her lifetime,
and to meet which, therefore, reckless of economy, she might call
up the vital strength that would have sufficed for many quiet
years. The very law that condemned her—a giant of stem
featured but with vigour to support, as well as to annihilate, in
his iron arm—had held her up through the terrible ordeal of
her ignominy. But now, with this unattended walk from her prison
door, began the daily custom; and she must either sustain and
carry it forward by the ordinary resources of her nature, or sink
beneath it. She could no longer borrow from the future to help
her through the present grief. Tomorrow would bring its own trial
with it; so would the next day, and so would the next: each its own
trial, and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous
to be borne. The days of the far-off future would toil onward, still
with the same burden for her to take up, and bear along with her,
but never to fling down; for the accumulating days and added years
would pile up their misery upon the heap of shame. Throughout them
all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol
at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they
might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and
sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look
at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast—at her,
the child of honourable parents—at her, the mother of a babe
that would hereafter be a woman—at her, who had once been
innocent—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And
over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be
her only monument.

It may seem marvellous that, with the world before her—kept
by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of
the Puritan settlement, so remote and so obscure—free to
return to her birth-place, or to any other European land, and
there hide her character and identity under a new exterior, as
completely as if emerging into another state of being—and
having also the passes of the dark, inscrutable forest open to
her, where the wildness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people
whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned
her—it may seem marvellous that this woman should still call
that place her home, where, and where only, she must needs be the
type of shame. But there is a fatality, a feeling so
irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which
almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and
haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has
given the colour to their lifetime; and, still the more
irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it. Her sin, her
ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It
was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the
first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to
every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne's wild and
dreary, but life-long home. All other scenes of earth—even
that village of rural England, where happy infancy and stainless
maidenhood seemed yet to be in her mother's keeping, like
garments put off long ago--were foreign to her, in comparison.
The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to
her inmost soul, but could never be broken.

It might be, too--doubtless it was so, although she hid the
secret from herself, and grew pale whenever it struggled out of
her heart, like a serpent from its hole--it might be that
another feeling kept her within the scene and pathway that had
been so fatal. There dwelt, there trode, the feet of one with
whom she deemed herself connected in a union that, unrecognised
on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final
judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint
futurity of endless retribution. Over and over again, the tempter
of souls had thrust this idea upon Hester's contemplation, and
laughed at the passionate an desperate joy with which she seized,
and then strove to cast it from her. She barely looked the idea in
the face, and hastened to bar it in its dungeon. What she compelled
herself to believe--what, finally, she reasoned upon as her motive for
continuing a resident of New England--was half a truth, and half a
self-delusion. Here, she said to herself had been the scene of
her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly
punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame
would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than
that which she had lost: more saint-like, because the result of
martyrdom.
Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee. On the outskirts of the
town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close
vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched
cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned,
because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while
its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that
social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants.
It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the
forest-covered hills, towards the west. A clump of scrubby
trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, did not so much
conceal the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was
some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be,
concealed. In this little lonesome dwelling, with some slender
means that she possessed, and by the licence of the magistrates,
who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her,
Hester established herself, with her infant child. A mystic
shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot.
Children, too young to comprehend wherefore this woman should be
shut out from the sphere of human charities, would creep nigh
enough to behold her plying her needle at the cottage-window, or
standing in the doorway, or labouring in her little garden, or
coming forth along the pathway that led townward, and, discerning
the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off with a
strange contagious fear.

Lonely as was Hester’s situation, and without a friend on earth
who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of
want. She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art, then, as now, almost the only one within a woman's grasp--of needle-work. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold. Here, indeed, in the sable simplicity that generally characterised the Puritanic modes of dress, there might be an infrequent call for the finer productions of her handiwork. Yet the taste of the age, demanding whatever was elaborate in compositions of this kind, did not fail to extend its influence over our stern progenitors, who had cast behind them so many fashions which it might seem harder to dispense with.

Public ceremonies, such as ordinations, the installation of magistrates, and all that could give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people, were, as a matter of policy, marked by a stately and well-conducted ceremonial, and a sombre, but yet a studied magnificence. Deep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power, and were readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth, even while sumptuary laws forbade these and similar extravagances to the plebeian
order. In the array of funerals, too--whether for the apparel of the dead body, or to typify, by manifold emblematic devices of sable cloth and snowy lawn, the sorrow of the survivors--there was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labour as Hester Prynne could supply. Baby-linen--for babies then wore robes of state--afforded still another possibility of toil and emolument.

By degrees, not very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion. Whether from commiseration for a woman of so miserable a destiny; or from the morbid curiosity that gives a fictitious value even to common or worthless things; or by whatever other intangible circumstance was then, as now, sufficient to bestow, on some persons, what others might seek in vain; or because Hester really filled a gap which must otherwise have remained vacant; it is certain that she had ready and fairly equited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle. Vanity, it may be, chose to mortify itself, by putting on, for ceremonials of pomp and state, the garments that had been wrought by her sinful hands. Her needle-work was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby's little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. But it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. The exception indicated the ever relentless vigour with which society frowned upon her sin.
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. Her own dress was of the
coarsest materials and the most sombre hue, with only that one
ornament--the scarlet letter--which it was her doom to wear.
The child's attire, on the other hand, was distinguished by a
fanciful, or, we may rather say, a fantastic ingenuity, which
served, indeed, to heighten the airy charm that early began to
develop itself in the little girl, but which appeared to have
also a deeper meaning. We may speak further of it hereafter.
Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her
infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on
wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently
insulted the hand that fed them. Much of the time, which she
might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she
employed in making coarse garments for the poor. It is probable
that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation, and
that she offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment in devoting so
many hours to such rude handiwork. She had in her nature a rich,
voluptuous, Oriental characteristic--a taste for the gorgeously
beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her
needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life,
to exercise itself upon. Women derive a pleasure,
incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the
needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of
expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life.
Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin. This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong beneath.

In this matter, Hester Prynne came to have a part to perform in the world. With her native energy of character and rare capacity, it could not entirely cast her off, although it had set a mark upon her, more intolerable to a woman's heart than that which branded the brow of Cain. In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. She stood apart from moral interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt; no more smile with the household joy, nor mourn with the kindred sorrow; or, should it succeed in manifesting its forbidden sympathy, awakening only terror and horrible repugnance. These emotions, in fact, and its bitterest scorn besides, seemed to be the sole portion that she retained in the universal heart. It was not an age of delicacy; and her position, although she understood it well, and was in little danger of forgetting it, was often brought before her vivid self-perception, like a new anguish, by the rudest touch
upon the tenderest spot. The poor, as we have already said, whom
she sought out to be the objects of her bounty, often reviled the
hand that was stretched forth to succour them. Dames of elevated
rank, likewise, whose doors she entered in the way of her
occupation, were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into
her heart; sometimes through that alchemy of quiet malice, by
which women can concoct a subtle poison from ordinary trifles;
and sometimes, also, by a coarser expression, that fell upon the
sufferer’s defenceless breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated
wound. Hester had schooled herself long and well; and she never
responded to these attacks, save by a flush of crimson that rose
irrepressibly over her pale cheek, and again subsided into the
depths of her bosom. She was patient—a martyr, indeed but she
forebore to pray for enemies, lest, in spite of her forgiving
aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist
themselves into a curse.

Continually, and in a thousand other ways, did she feel the
innumerable throbs of anguish that had been so cunningly
contrived for her by the undying, the ever-active sentence
of the Puritan tribunal. Clergymen paused in the streets, to
address words of exhortation, that brought a crowd, with its
mingled grin and frown, around the
poor, sinful woman. If she entered a church, trusting to share
the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was often her
mishap to find herself the text of the discourse. She grew to
have a dread of children; for they had imbibed from their parents
a vague idea of something horrible in this dreary woman gliding silently through the town, with never any companion but one only child. Therefore, first allowing her to pass, they pursued her at a distance with shrill cries, and the utterances of a word that had no distinct purport to their own minds, but was none the less terrible to her, as proceeding from lips that babbled it unconsciously. It seemed to argue so wide a diffusion of her shame, that all nature knew of it; it could have caused her no deeper pang had the leaves of the trees whispered the dark story among themselves--had the summer breeze murmured about it--had the wintry blast shrieked it aloud! Another peculiar torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter and none ever failed to do so--they branded it afresh in Hester's soul; so that, oftentimes, she could scarcely refrain, yet always did refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand. But then, again, an accustomed eye had likewise its own anguish to inflict. Its cool stare of familiarity was intolerable. From first to last, in short, Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture.

But sometimes, once in many days, or perchance in many months, she felt an eye--a human eye--upon the ignominious brand, that seemed to give a momentary relief, as if half of her agony were shared. The next instant, back it all rushed again, with still a deeper throb of pain; for, in that brief interval, she
had sinned anew. (Had Hester sinned alone?)

Her imagination was somewhat affected, and, had she been of a
softer moral and intellectual fibre would have been still more
so, by the strange and solitary anguish of her life. Walking to
and fro, with those lonely footsteps, in the little world with
which she was outwardly connected, it now and then appeared to
Hester--if altogether fancy, it was nevertheless too potent to
be resisted--she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter
had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet
could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic
knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was terror-
stricken by the revelations that were thus made. What were they?
Could they be other than the insidious whispers of the bad
angel, who would fain have persuaded the struggling woman, as yet
only half his victim, that the outward guise of purity was but a
lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet
letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne's?
Or, must she receive those intimations--so obscure, yet so
distinct--as truth? In all her miserable experience, there was
nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense. It
perplexed, as well as shocked her, by the irreverent
inopportuneness of the occasions that brought it into vivid
action. Sometimes the red infamy upon her breast would give a
sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or
magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of
antique reverence looked up, as to a mortal man in fellowship
with angels. "What evil thing is at hand?" would Hester say to
herself. Lifting her reluctant eyes, there would be nothing
human within the scope of view, save the form of this earthly
saint! Again a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert
itself, as she met the sanctified frown of some matron, who,
according to the rumour of all tongues, had kept cold snow within
her bosom throughout life. That unsunned snow in the matron's
bosom, and the burning shame on Hester Prynne's--what had the
two in common? Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her
warning--"Behold Hester, here is a companion!" and, looking
up, she would detect the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the
scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted, with a
faint, chill crimson in her cheeks as if her purity were somewhat
sullied by that momentary glance. O Fiend, whose talisman was
that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth
or age, for this poor sinner to revere?--such loss of faith is
ever one of the saddest results of sin. Be it accepted as a
proof that all was not corrupt in this poor victim of her own
frailty, and man's hard law, that Hester Prynne yet struggled to
believe that no fellow-mortal was guilty like herself.

The vulgar, who, in those dreary old times, were always
contributing a grotesque horror to what interested their
imagination, had a story about the scarlet
letter which we might readily work up into a terrific legend.
They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged
in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and
could be seen glowing all alight whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time. And we must needs say it seared Hester's bosom so deeply, that perhaps there was more truth in the rumour than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit.

VI. PEARL

We have as yet hardly spoken of the infant that little creature, whose innocent life had sprung, by the inscrutable decree of Providence, a lovely and immortal flower, out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion. How strange it seemed to the sad woman, as she watched the growth, and the beauty that became every day more brilliant, and the intelligence that threw its quivering sunshine over the tiny features of this child! Her Pearl--for so had Hester called her; not as a name expressive of her aspect, which had nothing of the calm, white, unimpassioned lustre that would be indicated by the comparison. But she named the infant "Pearl," as being of great price--purchased with all she had--her mother's only treasure! How strange, indeed! Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, which had such potent and disastrous efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which man thus punished, had given her a lovely child, whose place was on that same dishonoured bosom, to connect her parent for ever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven! Yet these thoughts affected Hester Prynne less with hope
than apprehension. She knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be good. Day after day she looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she owed her being.

Certainly there was no physical defect. By its perfect shape, its vigour, and its natural dexterity in the use of all its untried limbs, the infant was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden: worthy to have been left there to be the plaything of the angels after the world's first parents were driven out. The child had a native grace which does not invariably co-exist with faultless beauty; its attire, however simple, always impressed the beholder as if it were the very garb that precisely became it best. But little Pearl was not clad in rustic weeds. Her mother, with a morbid purpose that may be better understood hereafter, had bought the richest tissues that could be procured, and allowed her imaginative faculty its full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dresses which the child wore before the public eye. So magnificent was the small figure when thus arrayed, and such was the splendour 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. Pearl's aspect was imbued
with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there were
many children, comprehending the full scope between the
wild-flower prettiness of a peasant-baby, and the
pomp, in little, of an infant princess. Throughout all, however,
there was a trait of passion, a certain depth of hue, which she
never lost; and if in any of her changes, she had grown fainter
or paler, she would have ceased to be herself--it would have
been no longer Pearl!

This outward mutability indicated, and did not more than fairly
express, the various properties of her inner life. Her nature
appeared to possess depth, too, as well as variety; but--or
else Hester's fears deceived her--it lacked reference and
adaptation to the world into which she was born. The child could
not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence a great
law had been broken; and the result was a being whose elements
were perhaps beautiful and brilliant, but all in disorder, or
with an order peculiar to themselves, amidst which the point of
variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be
discovered. Hester could only account for the child's
character--and even then most vaguely and imperfectly--by recalling
what she herself had been during that momentous period while
Pearl was imbibing her soul from the spiritual world, and her
bodily frame from its material of earth. The mother's
impassioned state had been the medium through which were
transmitted to the unborn infant the rays of its moral life; and,
however white and clear originally, they had taken the deep
stains of crimson and gold, the fiery lustre, the black shadow, 
and the untempered light of the intervening substance. Above 
all, the warfare of Hester’s spirit at that epoch was perpetuated 
in Pearl. She could recognize her wild, desperate, defiant mood, 
the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes 
of gloom and despondency that had brooded in her heart. They were 
now illuminated by the morning radiance of a young child’s 
disposition, but, later in the day of earthly existence, might be 
prolific of the storm and whirlwind.

The discipline of the family in those days was of a far more 
rigid kind than now. The frown, the harsh rebuke, the frequent 
application of the rod, enjoined by Scriptural authority, were 
used, not merely in the way of punishment for actual offences, 
but as a wholesome regimen for the growth and promotion of all 
childish virtues. Hester Prynne, nevertheless, the loving mother 
of this one child, ran little risk of erring on the side of undue 
severity. Mindful, however, of her own errors and misfortunes, 
she early sought to impose a tender but strict control over the 
infant immortality that was committed to her charge. But the 
task was beyond her skill. after testing both smiles and frowns, 
and proving that neither mode of treatment possessed any 
calculable influence, Hester was ultimately compelled to stand 
aside and permit the child to be swayed by her own impulses. 
Physical compulsion or restraint was effectual, of course, while 
it lasted. As to any other kind of discipline, whether addressed 
to her mind or heart, little Pearl might or might not be within
its reach, in accordance with the caprice that ruled the moment.
Her mother, while Pearl was yet an infant, grew acquainted with a
certain peculiar look, that warned her when it would be labour
thrown away to insist, persuade or plead.

It was a look so intelligent, yet inexplicable, perverse,
sometimes so malicious, but generally accompanied by a wild flow
of spirits, that Hester could not help questioning at such
moments whether Pearl was a human child. She seemed rather an
airy sprite, which, after playing its fantastic sports for a
little while upon the cottage floor, would flit away with a
mocking smile. Whenever that look appeared in her wild, bright,
deeply black eyes, it invested her with a strange remoteness and
intangibility: it was as if she were hovering in the air, and
might vanish, like a glimmering light that comes we know not
whence and goes we know not whither. Beholding it, Hester was
constrained to rush towards the child--to pursue the little elf
in the flight which she invariably began--to snatch her to her
bosom with a close pressure and earnest kisses--not so much
from overflowing love as to assure herself that Pearl was flesh
and blood, and not utterly delusive. But Pearl's laugh, when she
was caught, though full of merriment and music, made her mother
more doubtful than before.

Heart-smitten at this bewildering and baffling spell, that so
often came between herself and her sole treasure, whom she had
bought so dear, and who was all her world, Hester sometimes burst
into passionate tears. Then, perhaps—for there was no foreseeing how it might affect her—Pearl would frown, and clench her little fist, and harden her small features into a stern, unsympathising look of discontent. Not seldom she would laugh anew, and louder than before, like a thing incapable and unintelligent of human sorrow. Or—but this more rarely happened—she would be convulsed with rage of grief and sob out her love for her mother in broken words, and seem intent on proving that she had a heart by breaking it. Yet Hester was hardly safe in confiding herself to that gusty tenderness: it passed as suddenly as it came. Brooding over all these matters, the mother felt like one who has evoked a spirit, but, by some irregularity in the process of conjuration, has failed to win the master-word that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence. Her only real comfort was when the child lay in the placidity of sleep. Then she was sure of her, and tasted hours of quiet, sad, delicious happiness; until—perhaps with that perverse expression glimmering from beneath her opening lids—little Pearl awoke!

How soon—with what strange rapidity, indeed did Pearl arrive at an age that was capable of social intercourse beyond the mother's ever-ready smile and nonsense-words! And then what a happiness would it have been could Hester Prynne have heard her clear, bird-like voice mingling with the uproar of other childish voices, and have distinguished and unravelled her own darling's tones, amid all the entangled outcry of a group of sportive
children. But this could never be. Pearl was a born outcast of
the infantile world. An imp of evil, emblem and product of sin,
she had no right among christened infants. Nothing was more
remarkable than the instinct, as it seemed, with which the child
comprehended her loneliness: the destiny that had drawn an
inviolable circle round about her: the whole peculiarity, in
short, of her position in respect to other children. Never since
her release from prison had Hester met the public gaze without
her. In all her walks about the town, Pearl, too, was there: first
as the babe in arms, and afterwards as the little girl, small
companion of her mother, holding a forefinger with her whole
grasp, and tripping along at the rate of three or four footsteps
to one of Hester's. She saw the children of the settlement on the
grassy margin of the street, or at the domestic thresholds,
disporting themselves in such grim fashions as the Puritanic
nurture would permit! playing at going to church, perchance,
or at scourging Quakers, or taking scalps in a sham fight with the
Indians, or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft.
Pearl saw, and gazed intently, but never sought to make acquaintance.
If spoken to, she would not speak again. If the children gathered about
her, as they sometimes did, Pearl would grow positively terrible
in her puny wrath, snatchhing up stones to fling at them, with
shrill, incoherent exclamations, that made her mother tremble,
because they had so much the sound of a witch's anathemas in some
unknown tongue.

The truth was, that the little Puritans, being of the most
intolerant brood that ever lived, had got a vague idea of
something outlandish, unearthly, or at variance with ordinary
fashions, in the mother and child, and therefore scorned them in
their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their
tongues. Pearl felt the sentiment, and requited it with the
bitterest hatred that can be supposed to rankle in a childish
bosom. These outbreaks of a fierce temper had a kind of value,
and even comfort for the mother; because there was at least an
intelligible earnestness in the mood, instead of the fitful caprice
that so often thwarted her in the child's manifestations. It appalled
her, nevertheless, to discern here, again, a shadowy reflection of the
evil that had existed in herself. All this enmity and passion had Pearl
inherited, by inalienable right, out of Hester's heart. Mother
and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from
human society; and in the nature of the child seemed to be
perpetuated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester
Prynne before Pearl's birth, but had since begun to be soothed
away by the softening influences of maternity.

At home, within and around her mother's cottage, Pearl wanted not
a wide and various circle of acquaintance. The spell of life
went forth from her ever-creative spirit, and communicated itself
to a thousand objects, as a torch kindles a flame wherever it may
be applied. The unlikeliest materials—a stick, a bunch of
rags, a flower—were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and,
without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted
to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world. Her one
baby-voice served a multitude of imaginary personages, old and young, to talk withal. The pine-trees, aged, black, and solemn, and flinging groans and other melancholy utterances on the breeze, needed little transformation to figure as Puritan elders the ugliest weeds of the garden were their children, whom Pearl smote down and uprooted most unmercifully. It was wonderful, the vast variety of forms into which she threw her intellect, with no continuity, indeed, but darting up and dancing, always in a state of preternatural activity—soon sinking down, as if exhausted by so rapid and feverish a tide of life—and succeeded by other shapes of a similar wild energy. It was like nothing so much as the phantasmagoric play of the northern lights. In the mere exercise of the fancy, however, and the sportiveness of a growing mind, there might be a little more than was observable in other children of bright faculties; except as Pearl, in the dearth of human playmates, was thrown more upon the visionary throng which she created. The singularity lay in the hostile feelings with which the child regarded all these offsprings of her own heart and mind. She never created a friend, but seemed always to be sowing broadcast the dragon's teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle. It was inexpressibly sad—then what depth of sorrow to a mother, who felt in her own heart the cause—to observe, in one so young, this constant recognition of an adverse world, and so fierce a training of the energies that were to make good her cause in the contest that must ensue.
Gazing at Pearl, Hester Prynne often dropped her work upon her knees, and cried out with an agony which she would fain have hidden, but which made utterance for itself betwixt speech and a groan—"O Father in Heaven—if Thou art still my Father—what is this being which I have brought into the world?" And Pearl, overhearing the ejaculation, or aware through some more subtle channel, of those throbs of anguish, would turn her vivid and beautiful little face upon her mother, smile with sprite-like intelligence, and resume her play.

One peculiarity of the child's deportment remains yet to be told. The very first thing which she had noticed in her life, was—what?—not the mother's smile, responding to it, as other babies do, by that faint, embryo smile of the little mouth, remembered so doubtfully afterwards, and with such fond discussion whether it were indeed a smile. By no means! But that first object of which Pearl seemed to become aware was—shall we say it?—the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom! One day, as her mother stooped over the cradle, the infant's eyes had been caught by the glimmering of the gold embroidery about the letter; and putting up her little hand she grasped at it, smiling, not doubtfully, but with a decided gleam, that gave her face the look of a much older child. Then, gasping for breath, did Hester Prynne clutch the fatal token, instinctively endeavouring to tear it away, so infinite was the torture inflicted by the intelligent touch of Pearl's baby-hand. Again, as if her mother's agonised gesture were meant only to make sport
for her, did little Pearl look into her eyes, and smile. From that epoch, except when the child was asleep, Hester had never felt a moment's safety: not a moment's calm enjoyment of her. Weeks, it is true, would sometimes elapse, during which Pearl's gaze might never once be fixed upon the scarlet letter; but then, again, it would come at unawares, like the stroke of sudden death, and always with that peculiar smile and odd expression of the eyes.

Once this freakish, elvish cast came into the child's eyes while Hester was looking at her own image in them, as mothers are fond of doing; and suddenly for women in solitude, and with troubled hearts, are pestered with unaccountable delusions she fancied that she beheld, not her own miniature portrait, but another face in the small black mirror of Pearl's eye. It was a face, fiend-like, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that she had known full well, though seldom with a smile, and never with malice in them. It was as if an evil spirit possessed the child, and had just then peeped forth in mockery. Many a time afterwards had Hester been tortured, though less vividly, by the same illusion.

In the afternoon of a certain summer's day, after Pearl grew big enough to run about, she amused herself with gathering handfuls of wild flowers, and flinging them, one by one, at her mother's bosom; dancing up and down like a little elf whenever she hit the scarlet letter. Hester's first motion had been to cover her
bosom with her clasped hands. But whether from pride or
resignation, or a feeling that her penance might best be wrought
out by this unutterable pain, she resisted the impulse, and sat
erect, pale as death, looking sadly into little Pearl's wild
eyes. Still came the battery of flowers, almost invariably
hitting the mark, and covering the mother's breast with hurts for
which she could find no balm in this world, nor knew how to seek
it in another. At last, her shot being all expended, the child
stood still and gazed at Hester, with that little laughing image
of a fiend peeping out--or, whether it peeped or no, her mother
so imagined it--from the unsearchable abyss of her black eyes.

"Child, what art thou?" cried the mother.

"Oh, I am your little Pearl!" answered the child.

But while she said it, Pearl laughed, and began to dance up and
down with the humoursome gesticulation of a little imp, whose
next freak might be to fly up the chimney.

"Art thou my child, in very truth?" asked Hester.

Nor did she put the question altogether idly, but, for the
moment, with a portion of genuine earnestness; for, such was
Pearl's wonderful intelligence, that her mother half doubted
whether she were not acquainted with the secret spell of her existence, and might not now reveal herself.

"Yes; I am little Pearl!" repeated the child, continuing her antics.

"Thou art not my child! Thou art no Pearl of mine!" said the mother half playfully; for it was often the case that a sportive impulse came over her in the midst of her deepest suffering.

"Tell me, then, what thou art, and who sent thee hither?"

"Tell me, mother!" said the child, seriously, coming up to Hester, and pressing herself close to her knees. "Do thou tell me!"

"Thy Heavenly Father sent thee!" answered Hester Prynne.

But she said it with a hesitation that did not escape the acuteness of the child. Whether moved only by her ordinary freakishness, or because an evil spirit prompted her, she put up her small forefinger and touched the scarlet letter.

"He did not send me!" cried she, positively. "I have no Heavenly Father!"
"Hush, Pearl, hush! Thou must not talk so!" answered the mother. suppressing a groan. "He sent us all into the world. He sent even me, thy mother. Then, much more thee! Or, if not, thou strange and elfish child, whence didst thou come?"

"Tell me! Tell me!" repeated Pearl, no longer seriously, but laughing and capering about the floor. "It is thou that must tell me!"

But Hester could not resolve the query, using herself in a dismal labyrinth of doubt. She remembered--betwixt a smile and a shudder--the talk of the neighbouring townspeople, who, seeking vainly elsewhere for the child's paternity, and observing some of her odd attributes, had given out that poor little Pearl was a demon offspring: such as, ever since old Catholic times, had occasionally been seen on earth, through the agency of their mother's sin, and to promote some foul and wicked purpose. Luther, according to the scandal of his monkish enemies, was a brat of that hellish breed; nor was Pearl the only child to whom this inauspicious origin was assigned among the New England Puritans.

VII. THE GOVERNOR'S HALL

Hester Prynne went one day to the mansion of Governor Bellingham,
with a pair of gloves which she had fringed and embroidered to
his order, and which were to be worn on some great occasion of
state; for, though the chances of a popular election had caused
this former ruler to descend a step or two from the highest rank,
he still held an honourable and influential place among the
colonial magistracy.

Another and far more important reason than the delivery of a pair
of embroidered gloves, impelled Hester, at this time, to seek an
interview with a personage of so much power and activity in the
affairs of the settlement. It had reached her ears that there
was a design on the part of some of the leading inhabitants,
cherishing the more rigid order of principles in religion and
government, to deprive her of her child. On the supposition that
Pearl, as already hinted, was of demon origin, these good people
not unreasonably argued that a Christian interest in the mother's
soul required them to remove such a stumbling-block from her
path. If the child, on the other hand, were really capable of
moral and religious growth, and possessed the elements of
ultimate salvation, then, surely, it would enjoy all the
fairer prospect of these advantages by being transferred to wiser
and better guardianship than Hester Prynne's. Among those who
promoted the design, Governor Bellingham was said to be one of
the most busy. It may appear singular, and, indeed, not a little
ludicrous, that an affair of this kind, which in later days would
have been referred to no higher jurisdiction than that of the
select men of the town, should then have been a question publicly
discussed, and on which statesmen of eminence took sides. At
that epoch of pristine simplicity, however, matters of even
slighter public interest, and of far less intrinsic weight than
the welfare of Hester and her child, were strangely mixed up with
the deliberations of legislators and acts of state. The period
was hardly, if at all, earlier than that of our story, when a
dispute concerning the right of property in a pig not only caused
a fierce and bitter contest in the legislative body of the
colony, but resulted in an important modification of the
framework itself of the legislature.

Full of concern, therefore--but so conscious of her own right
that it seemed scarcely an unequal match between the public on
the one side, and a lonely woman, backed by the sympathies of
nature, on the other--Hester Prynne set forth from her solitary
cottage. Little Pearl, of course, was her companion. She was
now of an age to run lightly along by her mother's side, and,
constantly in motion from morn till sunset, could have
accomplished a much longer journey than that before her. Often,
nevertheless, more from caprice than necessity, she demanded to
be taken up in arms; but was soon as imperious to be let down
again, and frisked onward before Hester on the grassy pathway,
with many a harmless trip and tumble. We
have spoken of Pearl's rich and luxuriant beauty--a beauty that
shone with deep and vivid tints, a bright complexion, eyes
possessing intensity both of depth and glow, and hair already of
a deep, glossy brown, and which, in after years, would be nearly
akin to black. There was fire in her and throughout her: she seemed the unpremeditated offshoot of a passionate moment. Her mother, in contriving the child's garb, had allowed the gorgeous tendencies of her imagination their full play, arraying her in a crimson velvet tunic of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered in fantasies and flourishes of gold thread. So much strength of colouring, which must have given a wan and pallid aspect to cheeks of a fainter bloom, was admirably adapted to Pearl's beauty, and made her the very brightest little jet of flame that ever danced upon the earth.

But it was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form: the scarlet letter endowed with life! The mother herself—as if the red ignominy were so deeply scorched into her brain that all her conceptions assumed its form—had carefully wrought out the similitude, lavishing many hours of morbid ingenuity to create an analogy between the object of her affection and the emblem of her guilt and torture. But, in truth, Pearl was the one as well as the other; and only in consequence of that identity had Hester contrived so perfectly to represent the scarlet letter in her appearance.

As the two wayfarers came within the precincts of the town, the children of the Puritans looked up from their player what passed
for play with those sombre little urchins--and spoke gravely
one to another

"Behold, verily, there is the woman of the scarlet letter: and of
a truth, moreover, there is the likeness of the scarlet letter
running along by her side! Come, therefore, and let us fling mud
at them!"

But Pearl, who was a dauntless child, after frowning, stamping
her foot, and shaking her little hand with a variety of
threatening gestures, suddenly made a rush at the knot of her
enemies, and put them all to flight. She resembled, in her
fierce pursuit of them, an infant pestilence--the scarlet
fever, or some such half-fledged angel of judgment--whose
mission was to punish the sins of the rising generation. She
screamed and shouted, too, with a terrific volume of sound,
which, doubtless, caused the hearts of the fugitives to quake
within them. The victory accomplished, Pearl returned quietly to
her mother, and looked up, smiling, into her face.

Without further adventure, they reached the dwelling of Governor
Bellingham. This was a large wooden house, built in a fashion of
which there are specimens still extant in the streets of our
older towns now moss--grown, crumbling to decay, and melancholy
at heart with the many sorrowful or joyful occurrences,
remembered or forgotten, that have happened and passed away
within their dusky chambers. Then, however, there was the
freshness of the passing year on its exterior, and the
cheerfulness, gleaming forth from the sunny windows, of a human
habitation, into which death had never entered. It had, indeed,
a very cheery aspect, the walls being overspread with a kind of
stucco, in which fragments of broken
glass were plentifully intermixed; so that, when the sunshine
fell aslant-wise over the front of the edifice, it glittered and
sparkled as if diamonds had been flung against it by the double
handful. The brilliancy might have be fitted Aladdin's palace
rather than the mansion of a grave old Puritan ruler. It was
further decorated with strange and seemingly cabalistic figures
and diagrams, suitable to the quaint taste of the age which had
been drawn in the stucco, when newly laid on, and had now grown
hard and durable, for the admiration of after times.

Pearl, looking at this bright wonder of a house began to caper
and dance, and imperatively required that the whole breadth of
sunshine should be stripped off its front, and given her to play
with.

"No, my little Pearl!" said her mother; "thou must gather thine
own sunshine. I have none to give thee!"

They approached the door, which was of an arched form, and
flanked on each side by a narrow tower or projection of the
edifice, in both of which were lattice-windows, the wooden
shutters to close over them at need. Lifting the iron hammer
that hung at the portal, Hester Prynne gave a summons, which was answered by one of the Governor's bond servant—a free-born Englishman, but now a seven years' slave. During that term he was to be the property of his master, and as much a commodity of bargain and sale as an ox, or a joint-stool. The serf wore the customary garb of serving-men at that period, and long before, in the old hereditary halls of England.

"Is the worshipful Governor Bellingham within?" Inquired Hester.

"Yea, forsooth," replied the bond-servant, staring with wide-open eyes at the scarlet letter, which, being a new-comer in the country, he had never before seen. "Yea, his honourable worship is within. But he hath a godly minister or two with him, and likewise a leech. Ye may not see his worship now."

"Nevertheless, I will enter," answered Hester Prynne; and the bond-servant, perhaps judging from the decision of her air, and the glittering symbol in her bosom, that she was a great lady in the land, offered no opposition.

So the mother and little Pearl were admitted into the hall of entrance. With many variations, suggested by the nature of his building materials, diversity of climate, and a different mode of social life, Governor Bellingham had planned his new habitation after the residences of gentlemen of fair estate in his native
land. Here, then, was a wide and reasonably lofty hall, extending through the whole depth of the house, and forming a medium of general communication, more or less directly, with all the other apartments. At one extremity, this spacious room was lighted by the windows of the two towers, which formed a small recess on either side of the portal. At the other end, though partly muffled by a curtain, it was more powerfully illuminated by one of those embowed hall windows which we read of in old books, and which was provided with a deep and cushion seat. Here, on the cushion, lay a folio tome, probably of the Chronicles of England, or other such substantial literature; even as, in our own days, we scatter gilded volumes on the centre table, to be turned over by the casual guest. The furniture of the hall consisted of some ponderous chairs, the backs of which were elaborately carved with wreaths of oaken flowers; and likewise a table in the same taste, the whole being of the Elizabethan age, or perhaps earlier, and heirlooms, transferred hither from the Governor's paternal home. On the table—in token that the sentiment of old English hospitality had not been left behind—stood a large pewter tankard, at the bottom of which, had Hester or Pearl peeped into it, they might have seen the frothy remnant of a recent draught of ale.

On the wall hung a row of portraits, representing the forefathers of the Bellingham lineage, some with armour on their breasts, and others with stately ruffs and robes of peace. All were characterised by the sternness and severity which old portraits
so invariably put on, as if they were the ghosts, rather than the pictures, of departed worthies, and were gazing with harsh and intolerant criticism at the pursuits and enjoyments of living men.

At about the centre of the oaken panels that lined the hall was suspended a suit of mail, not, like the pictures, an ancestral relic, but of the most modern date; for it had been manufactured by a skilful armourer in London, the same year in which Governor Bellingham came over to New England. There was a steel head-piece, a cuirass, a gorget and greaves, with a pair of gauntlets and a sword hanging beneath; all, and especially the helmet and breastplate, so highly burnished as to glow with white radiance, and scatter an illumination everywhere about upon the floor. This bright panoply was not meant for mere idle show, but had been worn by the Governor on many a solemn muster and draining field, and had glittered, moreover, at the head of a regiment in the Pequot war. For, though bred a lawyer, and accustomed to speak of Bacon, Coke, Noye, and Finch, as his professional associates, the exigencies of this new country had transformed Governor Bellingham into a soldier, as well as a statesman and ruler.

Little Pearl, who was as greatly pleased with the gleaming armour as she had been with the glittering frontispiece of the house, spent some time looking into the polished mirror of the breastplate.
"Mother," cried she, "I see you here. Look! look!"

Hester looked by way of humouring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it. Pearl pointed upwards also, at a similar picture in the head-piece; smiling at her mother, with the elfish intelligence that was so familiar an expression on her small physiognomy. That look of naughty merriment was likewise reflected in the mirror, with so much breadth and intensity of effect, that it made Hester Prynne feel as if it could not be the image of her own child, but of an imp who was seeking to mould itself into Pearl's shape.

"Come along, Pearl," said she, drawing her away, "Come and look into this fair garden. It may be we shall see flowers there; more beautiful ones than we find in the woods."

Pearl accordingly ran to the bow-window, at the further end of the hall, and looked along the vista of a garden walk, carpeted with closely-shaven grass, and bordered with some rude and immature attempt at shrubbery. But the proprietor appeared already to have relinquished as hopeless, the effort to perpetuate on this side of the Atlantic, in a hard
soil, and amid the close struggle for subsistence, the native English taste for ornamental gardening. Cabbages grew in plain sight; and a pumpkin-vine, rooted at some distance, had run across the intervening space, and deposited one of its gigantic products directly beneath the hall window, as if to warn the Governor that this great lump of vegetable gold was as rich an ornament as New England earth would offer him. There were a few rose-bushes, however, and a number of apple-trees, probably the descendants of those planted by the Reverend Mr. Blackstone, the first settler of the peninsula; that half mythological personage who rides through our early annals, seated on the back of a bull.

Pearl, seeing the rose-bushes, began to cry for a red rose, and would not be pacified.

"Hush, child--hush!" said her mother, earnestly. "Do not cry, dear little Pearl! I hear voices in the garden. The Governor is coming, and gentlemen along with him."

In fact, adown the vista of the garden avenue, a number of persons were seen approaching towards the house. Pearl, in utter scorn of her mother’s attempt to quiet her, gave an eldritch scream, and then became silent, not from any motion of obedience, but because the quick and mobile curiosity of her disposition was excited by the appearance of those new personages.
Governor Bellingham, in a loose gown and easy cap--such as elderly gentlemen loved to endue themselves with, in their domestic privacy--walked foremost, and appeared to be showing off his estate, and expatiating on his projected improvements. The wide circumference of an elaborate ruff, beneath his grey beard, in the antiquated fashion of King James's reign, caused his head to look not a little like that of John the Baptist in a charger. The impression made by his aspect, so rigid and severe, and frost-bitten with more than autumnal age, was hardly in keeping with the appliances of worldly enjoyment wherewith he had evidently done his utmost to surround himself. But it is an error to suppose that our great forefathers--though accustomed to speak and think of human existence as a state merely of trial and warfare, and though unfeignedly prepared to sacrifice goods and life at the behest of duty--made it a matter of conscience to reject such means of comfort, or even luxury, as lay fairly within their grasp. This creed was never taught, for instance, by the venerable pastor, John Wilson, whose beard, white as a snow-drift, was seen over Governor Bellingham's shoulders, while its wearer suggested that pears and peaches might yet be naturalised in the New England climate, and that purple grapes might possibly be compelled to flourish against the sunny garden-wall. The old clergyman, nurtured at the rich bosom of the English Church, had a long established and legitimate taste for all good and comfortable things, and however stern he might show himself in
the pulpit, or in his public reproof of such transgressions as
that of Hester Prynne, still, the genial benevolence of his
private life had won him warmer affection than was accorded to
any of his professional contemporaries.

Behind the Governor and Mr. Wilson came two other guests--one,
the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, whom the reader may remember as
having taken a brief and reluctant part in the scene of Hester
Prynne's disgrace; and, in close companionship with him, old
Roger Chillingworth, a person of great skill in physic, who for
two or three years past had been settled in the town. It was
understood that this learned man was the physician as well as
friend of the young minister, whose health had severely suffered
of late by his too unreserved self-sacrifice to the labours and
duties of the pastoral relation.

The Governor, in advance of his visitors, ascended one or two
steps, and, throwing open the leaves of the great hall window,
found himself close to little Pearl. The shadow of the curtain
fell on Hester Prynne, and partially concealed her.

"What have we here?" said Governor Bellingham, looking with
surprise at the scarlet little figure before him. "I profess, I
have never seen the like since my days of vanity, in old King
James's time, when I was wont to esteem it a high favour to be
admitted to a court mask! There used to be a swarm of these
small apparitions in holiday time, and we called them children of
the Lord of Misrule. But how gat such a guest into my hall?"

"Ay, indeed!" cried good old Mr. Wilson. "What little bird of
scarlet plumage may this be? Methinks I have seen just such
figures when the sun has been shining through a richly painted
window, and tracing out the golden and crimson images across the
floor. But that was in the old land. Prithee, young one, who
art thou, and what has ailed thy mother to bedizen thee in this
strange fashion? Art thou a Christian child--ha? Dost know
thy catechism? Or art thou one of those naughty elfs or fairies
whom we thought to have left behind us, with other relics of
Papistry, in merry old England?"

"I am mother's child," answered the scarlet vision, "and my name
is Pearl!"

"Pearl?--Ruby, rather--or Coral!--or Red Rose, at the
very least, judging from thy hue!" responded the old minister,
putting forth his hand in a vain attempt to pat little Pearl on
the cheek. "But where is this mother of thine? Ah! I see," he
added; and, turning to Governor Bellingham, whispered, "This is
the selfsame child of whom we have held speech together; and
behold here the unhappy woman, Hester Prynne, her mother!"

"Sayest thou so?" cried the Governor. "Nay, we might have judged
that such a child's mother must needs be a scarlet woman, and a
worthy type of her of Babylon! But she comes at a good time, and
we will look into this matter forthwith."

Governor Bellingham stepped through the window into the hall,
followed by his three guests.

"Hester Prynne," said he, fixing his naturally stern regard on
the wearer of the scarlet letter, "there hath been much question
concerning thee of late. The point hath been weightily
discussed, whether we, that are of authority and influence, do
well discharge our consciences by trusting an immortal soul, such
as there is in yonder child, to the guidance of one who hath
stumbled and fallen amid the pitfalls of this world. Speak thou,
the child's own mother! Were it not, thinkest thou, for thy
little one's temporal and eternal welfare that she be taken out
of thy charge, and clad soberly, and disciplined strictly, and
instructed in the truths of heaven and earth? What canst thou do
for the child in this kind?"

"I can teach my little Pearl what I have learned from this!"
answered Hester Prynne, laying her finger on the red token.

"Woman, it is thy badge of shame!" replied the stern magistrate.
"It is because of the stain which that letter indicates that we
would transfer thy child to other hands. "
"Nevertheless," said the mother, calmly, though growing more
pale, "this badge hath taught me--it daily teaches me--it is
teaching me at this moment--lessons whereof my child may be
the wiser and better, albeit they can profit nothing to myself."

"We will judge warily," said Bellingham, "and look well what we
are about to do. Good Master Wilson, I pray you, examine this
Pearl--since that is her name--and see whether she hath had
such Christian nurture as befits a child of her age."

The old minister seated himself in an arm-chair and made an
effort to draw Pearl betwixt his knees. But the child,
unaccustomed to the touch or familiarity of any but her mother,
escaped through the open window, and stood on the upper step,
looking like a wild tropical bird of rich plumage, ready to take
flight into the upper air. Mr. Wilson, not a little astonished
at this outbreak--for he was a grandfatherly sort of personage,
and usually a vast favourite with children--essayed, however,
to proceed with the examination.

"Pearl," said he, with great solemnity, "thou must take heed to
instruction, that so, in due season, thou mayest wear in thy
bosom the pearl of great price. Canst thou tell me, my child,
who made thee?"
Now Pearl knew well enough who made her, for Hester Prynne, the daughter of a pious home, very soon after her talk with the child about her Heavenly Father, had begun to inform her of those truths which the human spirit, at whatever stage of immaturity, imbibes with such eager interest. Pearl, therefore—so large were the attainments of her three years’ lifetime—could have borne a fair examination in the New England Primer, or the first column of the Westminster Catechisms, although unacquainted with the outward form of either of those celebrated works. But that perversity, which all children have more or less of, and of which little Pearl had a tenfold portion, now, at the most inopportune moment, took thorough possession of her, and closed her lips, or impelled her to speak words amiss. After putting her finger in her mouth, with many ungracious refusals to answer good Mr. Wilson’s question, the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door.

This phantasy was probably suggested by the near proximity of the Governor’s red roses, as Pearl stood outside of the window, together with her recollection of the prison rose-bush, which she had passed in coming hither.

Old Roger Chillingworth, with a smile on his face, whispered something in the young clergyman’s ear. Hester Prynne looked at the man of skill, and even then, with her fate hanging in the
balance, was startled to perceive what a change had come over his features--how much uglier they were, how his dark complexion seemed to have grown duskier, and his figure more misshapen--since the days when she had familiarly known him. She met his eyes for an instant, but was immediately constrained to give all her attention to the scene now going forward.

"This is awful!" cried the Governor, slowly recovering from the astonishment into which Pearl's response had thrown him. "Here is a child of three years old, and she cannot tell who made her! Without question, she is equally in the dark as to her soul, its present depravity, and future destiny! Methinks, gentlemen, we need inquire no further."

Hester caught hold of Pearl, and drew her forcibly into her arms, confronting the old Puritan magistrate with almost a fierce expression. Alone in the world, cast off by it, and with this sole treasure to keep her heart alive, she felt that she possessed indefeasible rights against the world, and was ready to defend them to the death.

"God gave me the child!" cried she. "He gave her in requital of all things else which ye had taken from me. She is my happiness--she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me, too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved, and so endowed with a
millionfold the power of retribution for my sin? Ye shall not

take her! I will die first!"

"My poor woman," said the not unkind old minister, "the child

shall be well cared for--far better than thou canst do for it."

"God gave her into my keeping!" repeated Hester Prynne, raising

her voice almost to a shriek. "I will not give her up!" And here

by a sudden impulse, she turned to the young clergyman, Mr.

Dimmesdale, at whom, up to this moment, she had seemed hardly so

much as once to direct her eyes. "Speak thou for me!" cried she.

"Thou wast my pastor, and hadst charge of my soul, and knowest me

better than these men can. I will not lose the child! Speak for

me! Thou knowest--for thou hast sympathies which these men

lack--thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother's

rights, and how much the stronger they are when that mother has

but her child and the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will

not lose the child! Look to it!"

At this wild and singular appeal, which indicated that Hester

Prynne's situation had provoked her to little less than madness,

the young minister at once came forward, pale, and holding his

hand over his heart, as was his custom whenever his peculiarly

nervous temperament was thrown into agitation. He looked now

more careworn and emaciated than as we described him at the scene

of Hester's public ignominy; and whether it were his failing
health, or whatever the cause might be, his large dark eyes had a
world of pain in their troubled and melancholy depth.

"There is truth in what she says," began the minister, with a
voice sweet, tremulous, but powerful, insomuch that the hall
re-echoed and the hollow armour rang with it--"truth in what
Hester says, and in the feeling which inspires her! God gave her
the child, and gave her, too, an instinctive knowledge of its
nature and requirements--both seemingly so peculiar--which no
other mortal being can possess. And, moreover, is there not a
quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother
and this child?"

"Ay--how is that, good Master Dimmesdale?" interrupted the
Governor. "Make that plain, I pray you!"

"It must be even so," resumed the minister. "For, if we deem it
otherwise, do we not hereby say that the Heavenly Father, the
creator of all flesh, hath lightly recognised a deed of sin, and
made of no account the distinction between unhallowed lust and
holy love? This child of its father's guilt and its mother's
shame has come from the hand of God, to work in many ways upon
her heart, who pleads so earnestly and with such bitterness of
spirit the right to keep her. It was meant for a blessing--for
the one blessing of her life! It was meant, doubtless, the
mother herself hath told us, for a retribution, too;
a torture to be felt at many an unthought-of moment; a pang, a
sting, an ever-recurring agony, in the midst of a troubled joy!
Hath she not expressed this thought in the garb of the poor
child, so forcibly reminding us of that red symbol which sears
her bosom?"

"Well said again!" cried good Mr. Wilson. "I feared the woman
had no better thought than to make a mountebank of her child!"

"Oh, not so!--not so!" continued Mr. Dimmesdale. "She
recognises, believe me, the solemn miracle which God hath wrought
in the existence of that child. And may she feel, too--what,
methinks, is the very truth--that this boon was meant, above
all things else, to keep the mother's soul alive, and to preserve
her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have
sought to plunge her! Therefore it is good for this poor, sinful
woman, that she hath an infant immortality, a being capable of
eternal joy or sorrow, confided to her care--to be trained up
by her to righteousness, to remind her, at every moment, of her
call, but yet to teach her, as if it were by the Creator's sacred
pledge, that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also
will bring its parents thither! Herein is the sinful mother
happier than the sinful father. For Hester Prynne's sake, then,
and no less for the poor child's sake, let us leave them as
Providence hath seen fit to place them!"
"You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness," said old Roger Chillingworth, smiling at him.

"And there is a weighty import in what my young brother hath spoken," added the Rev. Mr. Wilson.

"What say you, worshipful Master Bellingham? Hath he not pleaded well for the poor woman?"

"Indeed hath he," answered the magistrate; "and hath adduced such arguments, that we will even leave the matter as it now stands; so long, at least, as there shall be no further scandal in the woman. Care must be had nevertheless, to put the child to due and stated examination in the catechism, at thy hands or Master Dimmesdale's. Moreover, at a proper season, the tithing-men must take heed that she go both to school and to meeting."

The young minister, on ceasing to speak had withdrawn a few steps from the group, and stood with his face partially concealed in the heavy folds of the window-curtain; while the shadow of his figure, which the sunlight cast upon the floor, was tremulous with the vehemence of his appeal. Pearl, that wild and flighty little elf stole softly towards him, and taking his hand in the grasp of both her own, laid her cheek against it; a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive, that her mother, who was looking on, asked herself--"Is that my Pearl?" Yet she knew
that there was love in the child's heart, although it mostly revealed itself in passion, and hardly twice in her lifetime had been softened by such gentleness as now. The minister—for, save the long-sought regards of woman, nothing is sweeter than these marks of childish preference, accorded spontaneously by a spiritual instinct, and therefore seeming to imply in us something truly worthy to be loved—the minister looked round, laid his hand on the child's head, hesitated an instant, and then kissed her brow. Little Pearl's unwonted mood of sentiment lasted no longer; she laughed, and went capering down the hall so airily, that old Mr. Wilson raised a question whether even her tiptoes touched the floor.

"The little baggage hath witchcraft in her, I profess," said he to Mr. Dimmesdale. "She needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal!"

"A strange child!" remarked old Roger Chillingworth. "It is easy to see the mother's part in her. Would it be beyond a philosopher's research, think ye, gentlemen, to analyse that child's nature, and, from it make a mould, to give a shrewd guess at the father?"

"Nay; it would be sinful, in such a question, to follow the clue of profane philosophy," said Mr. Wilson. "Better to fast and pray upon it; and still better, it may be, to leave the mystery
as we find it, unless Providence reveal it of its own accord

Thereby, every good Christian man hath a title to show a father's
kindness towards the poor, deserted babe."

The affair being so satisfactorily concluded, Hester Prynne, with
Pearl, departed from the house. As they descended the steps, it
is averred that the lattice of a chamber-window was thrown open,
and forth into the sunny day was thrust the face of Mistress
Hibbins, Governor Bellingham's bitter-tempered sister, and the
same who, a few years later, was executed as a witch.

"Hist, hist!" said she, while her ill-omened physiognomy seemed
to cast a shadow over the cheerful newness of the house. "Wilt
thou go with us to-night? There will be a merry company in the
forest; and I well-nigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester
Prynne should make one."

"Make my excuse to him, so please you!" answered Hester, with a
triumphant smile. "I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my
little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have
gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black
Man's book too, and that with mine own blood!"

"We shall have thee there anon!" said the witch-lady, frowning,
as she drew back her head.
But here—if we suppose this interview betwixt Mistress Hibbins and Hester Prynne to be authentic, and not a parable—was already an illustration of the young minister's argument against sundering the relation of a fallen mother to the offspring of her frailty. Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan's snare.

IX. THE LEECH

Under the appellation of Roger Chillingworth, the reader will remember, was hidden another name, which its former wearer had resolved should never more be spoken. It has been related, how, in the crowd that witnessed Hester Prynne's ignominious exposure, stood a man, elderly, travel-worn, who, just emerging from the perilous wilderness, beheld the woman, in whom he hoped to find embodied the warmth and cheerfulness of home, set up as a type of sin before the people. Her matronly fame was trodden under all men's feet. Infamy was babbling around her in the public market-place. For her kindred, should the tidings ever reach them, and for the companions of her unspotted life, there remained nothing but the contagion of her dishonour; which would not fail to be distributed in strict accordance arid proportion with the intimacy and sacredness of their previous relationship. Then why—since the choice was with himself—should the individual, whose connexion with the fallen woman had been the most intimate and sacred of them all, come forward to vindicate
his claim to an inheritance so little desirable? He resolved not
to be pilloried beside her on her pedestal of shame. Unknown to
all but Hester Prynne, and possessing the lock and key of her silence,
he chose to withdraw his name from the roll of mankind, and, as
regarded his former ties and interest, to vanish out of life as completely
as if he indeed lay at the bottom of the ocean, whither rumour
had long ago consigned him. This purpose once effected, new
interests would immediately spring up, and likewise a new
purpose; dark, it is true, if not guilty, but of force enough to
engage the full strength of his faculties.

In pursuance of this resolve, he took up his residence in the
Puritan town as Roger Chillingworth, without other introduction
than the learning and intelligence of which he possessed more
than a common measure. As his studies, at a previous period of
his life, had made him extensively acquainted with the medical
science of the day, it was as a physician that he presented
himself and as such was cordially received. Skilful men, of the
medical and chirurgical profession, were of rare occurrence in
the colony. They seldom, it would appear, partook of the
religious zeal that brought other emigrants across the Atlantic.
In their researches into the human frame, it may be that the
higher and more subtle faculties of such men were materialised,
and that they lost the spiritual view of existence amid the
intricacies of that wondrous mechanism, which seemed to involve
art enough to comprise all of life within itself. At all events,
the health of the good town of Boston, so far as medicine had
aught to do with it, had hitherto lain in the guardianship of an aged deacon and apothecary, whose piety and godly deportment were stronger testimonials in his favour than any that he could have produced in the shape of a diploma. The only surgeon was one who combined the occasional exercise of that noble art with the daily and habitual flourish of a razor.

To such a professional body Roger Chillingworth was a brilliant acquisition. He soon manifested his familiarity with the ponderous and imposing machinery of antique physic; in which every remedy contained a multitude of far-fetched and heterogeneous ingredients, as elaborately compounded as if the proposed result had been the Elixir of Life. In his Indian captivity, moreover, he had gained much knowledge of the properties of native herbs and roots; nor did he conceal from his patients that these simple medicines, Nature's boon to the untutored savage, had quite as large a share of his own confidence as the European Pharmacopoeia, which so many learned doctors had spent centuries in elaborating.

This learned stranger was exemplary as regarded at least the outward forms of a religious life; and early after his arrival, had chosen for his spiritual guide the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. The young divine, whose scholar-like renown still lived in Oxford, was considered by his more fervent admirers as little less than a heavenly ordained apostle, destined, should he live and labour for the ordinary term of life, to do as great deeds, for the now feeble New England Church, as the early Fathers had
achieved for the infancy of the Christian faith. About this period, however, the health of Mr. Dimmesdale had evidently begun to fail. By those best acquainted with his habits, the paleness of the young minister's cheek was accounted for by his too earnest devotion to study, his scrupulous fulfilment of parochial duty, and more than all, to the fasts and vigils of which he made a frequent practice, in order to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp. Some declared, that if Mr. Dimmesdale were really going to die, it was cause enough that the world was not worthy to be any longer trodden by his feet. He himself, on the other hand, with characteristic humility, avowed his belief that if Providence should see fit to remove him, it would be because of his own unworthiness to perform its humblest mission here on earth. With all this difference of opinion as to the cause of his decline, there could be no question of the fact. His form grew emaciated; his voice, though still rich and sweet, had a certain melancholy prophecy of decay in it; he was often observed, on any slight alarm or other sudden accident, to put his hand over his heart with first a flush and then a paleness, indicative of pain.

Such was the young clergyman's condition, and so imminent the prospect that his dawning light would be extinguished, all untimely, when Roger Chillingworth made his advent to the town. His first entry on the scene, few people could tell whence, dropping down as it were out of the sky or starting from the nether earth, had an aspect of mystery, which was easily
heightened to the miraculous. He was now known to be a man of skill; it was observed that he gathered herbs and the blossoms of wild-flowers, and dug up roots and plucked off twigs from the forest-trees like one acquainted with hidden virtues in what was valueless to common eyes. He was heard to speak of Sir Kenelm Digby and other famous men--whose scientific attainments were esteemed hardly less than supernatural--as having been his correspondents or associates. Why, with such rank in the learned world, had he come hither? What, could he, whose sphere was in great cities, be seeking in the wilderness? In answer to this query, a rumour gained ground--and however absurd, was entertained by some very sensible people--that Heaven had wrought an absolute miracle, by transporting an eminent Doctor of Physic from a German university bodily through the air and setting him down at the door of Mr. Dimmesdale's study! Individuals of wiser faith, indeed, who knew that Heaven promotes its purposes without aiming at the stage-effect of what is called miraculous interposition, were inclined to see a providential hand in Roger Chillingworth's so opportune arrival.

This idea was countenanced by the strong interest which the physician ever manifested in the young clergyman; he attached himself to him as a parishioner, and sought to win a friendly regard and confidence from his naturally reserved sensibility. He expressed great alarm at his pastor's state of health, but was anxious to attempt the cure, and, if early undertaken, seemed not
despondent of a favourable result. The elders, the deacons, the motherly dames, and the young and fair maidens of Mr. Dimmesdale's flock, were alike importunate that he should make trial of the physician's frankly offered skill. Mr. Dimmesdale gently repelled their entreaties.

"I need no medicine," said he.

But how could the young minister say so, when, with every successive Sabbath, his cheek was paler and thinner, and his voice more tremulous than before—when it had now become a constant habit, rather than a casual gesture, to press his hand over his heart? Was he weary of his labours? Did he wish to die? These questions were solemnly propounded to Mr. Dimmesdale by the elder ministers of Boston, and the deacons of his church, who, to use their own phrase, "dealt with him," on the sin of rejecting the aid which Providence so manifestly held out. He listened in silence, and finally promised to confer with the physician.

"Were it God's will," said the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, when, in fulfilment of this pledge, he requested old Roger Chillingworth's professional advice, "I could be well content that my labours, and my sorrows, and my sins, and my pains, should shortly end with me, and what is earthly of them be buried in my grave, and the spiritual go with me to my eternal state, rather than that
you should put your skill to the proof in my behalf."

"Ah," replied Roger Chillingworth, with that quietness, which, whether imposed or natural, marked all his deportment, "it is thus that a young clergyman is apt to speak. Youthful men, not having taken a deep root, give up their hold of life so easily! And saintly men, who walk with God on earth, would fain be away, to walk with him on the golden pavements of the New Jerusalem."

"Nay," rejoined the young minister, putting his hand to his heart, with a flush of pain flitting over his brow, "were I worthier to walk there, I could be better content to toil here."

"Good men ever interpret themselves too meanly," said the physician.

In this manner, the mysterious old Roger Chillingworth became the medical adviser of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. As not only the disease interested the physician, but he was strongly moved to look into the character and qualities of the patient, these two men, so different in age, came gradually to spend much time together. For the sake of the minister's health, and to enable the leech to gather plants with healing balm in them, they took long walks on the sea-shore, or in the forest; mingling various walks with the splash and murmur of the waves, and the solemn wind-anthem among the tree-tops. Often, likewise, one was the
guest of the other in his place of study and retirement. There was a fascination for the minister in the company of the man of science, in whom he recognised an intellectual cultivation of no moderate depth or scope; together with a range and freedom of ideas, that he would have vainly looked for among the members of his own profession. In truth, he was startled, if not shocked, to find this attribute in the physician. Mr. Dimmesdale was a true priest, a true religionist, with the reverential sentiment largely developed, and an order of mind that impelled itself powerfully along the track of a creed, and wore its passage continually deeper with the lapse of time. In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views; it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework. Not the less, however, though with a tremulous enjoyment, did he feel the occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse. It was as if a window were thrown open, admitting a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where his life was wasting itself away, amid lamp-light, or obstructed day-beams, and the musty fragrance, be it sensual or moral, that exhales from books. But the air was too fresh and chill to be long breathed with comfort. So the minister, and the physician with him, withdrew again within the limits of what their Church defined as orthodox.

Thus Roger Chillingworth scrutinised his patient carefully, both
as he saw him in his ordinary life, keeping an accustomed pathway
in the range of thoughts familiar to him, and as he appeared when
thrown amidst other moral scenery, the novelty of which might
call out something new to the surface of his character. He
deemed it essential, it would seem, to know the man, before
attempting to do him good. Wherever there is a heart and an
intellect, the diseases of the physical frame are tinged with the
peculiarities of these. In Arthur Dimmesdale, thought and
imagination were so active, and sensibility so intense, that the
bodily infirmity would be likely to have its groundwork there.
So Roger Chillingworth--the man of skill, the kind and friendly
physician--strove to go deep into his patient's bosom, delving
among his principles, prying into his recollections, and probing
everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a
dark cavern. Few secrets can escape an investigator, who has
opportunity and licence to undertake such a quest, and skill to
follow it up. A man burdened with a secret
should especially avoid the intimacy of his physician. If the
latter possess native sagacity, and a nameless something more let
us call it intuition; if he show no intrusive egotism, nor
disagreeable prominent characteristics of his own; if he have the
power, which must be born with him, to bring his mind into such
affinity with his patient's, that this last shall unawares have
spoken what he imagines himself only to have thought if such
revelations be received without tumult, and acknowledged not so
often by an uttered sympathy as by silence, an inarticulate
breath, and here and there a word to indicate that all is
understood; if to these qualifications of a confidant be joined
the advantages afforded by his recognised character as a physician;—then, at some inevitable moment, will the soul of the sufferer be dissolved, and flow forth in a dark but transparent stream, bringing all its mysteries into the daylight.

Roger Chillingworth possessed all, or most, of the attributes above enumerated. Nevertheless, time went on; a kind of intimacy, as we have said, grew up between these two cultivated minds, which had as wide a field as the whole sphere of human thought and study to meet upon; they discussed every topic of ethics and religion, of public affairs, and private character; they talked much, on both sides, of matters that seemed personal to themselves; and yet no secret, such as the physician fancied must exist there, ever stole out of the minister's consciousness into his companion's ear. The latter had his suspicions, indeed, that even the nature of Mr. Dimmesdale's bodily disease had never fairly been revealed to him. It was a strange reserve!

After a time, at a hint from Roger Chillingworth, the friends of Mr. Dimmesdale effected an arrangement by which the two were lodged in the same house; so that every ebb and flow of the minister's life-tide might pass under the eye of his anxious and attached physician. There was much joy throughout the town when this greatly desirable object was attained. It was held to be the best possible measure for the young clergyman's welfare; unless, indeed, as often urged by such as felt authorised to do so, he had selected some one of the many blooming damsels,
spiritually devoted to him, to become his devoted wife. This latter step, however, there was no present prospect that Arthur Dimmesdale would be prevailed upon to take; he rejected all suggestions of the kind, as if priestly celibacy were one of his articles of Church discipline. Doomed by his own choice, therefore, as Mr. Dimmesdale so evidently was, to eat his unsavoury morsel always at another's board, and endure the life-long chill which must be his lot who seeks to warm himself only at another's fireside, it truly seemed that this sagacious, experienced, benevolent old physician, with his concord of paternal and reverential love for the young pastor, was the very man, of all mankind, to be constantly within reach of his voice.

The new abode of the two friends was with a pious widow, of good social rank, who dwelt in a house covering pretty nearly the site on which the venerable structure of King's Chapel has since been built. It had the graveyard, originally Isaac Johnson's home-field, on one side, and so was well adapted to call up serious reflections, suited to their respective employments, in both minister and man of physic. The motherly care of the good widow assigned to Mr. Dimmesdale a front apartment, with a sunny exposure, and heavy window-curtains, to create a noontide shadow when desirable. The walls were hung round with tapestry, said to be from the Gobelin looms, and, at all events, representing the Scriptural story of David and Bathsheba, and Nathan the Prophet, in colours still unfaded, but which made the fair woman of the scene almost as grimly picturesque as the woe-denouncing seer.
Here the pale clergyman piled up his library, rich with parchement-bound folios of the Fathers, and the lore of Rabbis, and monkish erudition, of which the Protestant divines, even while they vilified and decried that class of writers, were yet constrained often to avail themselves. On the other side of the house, old Roger Chillingworth arranged his study and laboratory: not such as a modern man of science would reckon even tolerably complete, but provided with a distilling apparatus and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals, which the practised alchemist knew well how to turn to purpose. With such commodiousness of situation, these two learned persons sat themselves down, each in his own domain, yet familiarly passing from one apartment to the other, and bestowing a mutual and not incurious inspection into one another's business.

And the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale's best discerning friends, as we have intimated, very reasonably imagined that the hand of Providence had done all this for the purpose—besought in so many public and domestic and secret prayers—of restoring the young minister to health. But, it must now be said, another portion of the community had latterly begun to take its own view of the relation betwixt Mr. Dimmesdale and the mysterious old physician. When an uninstructed multitude attempts to see with its eyes, it is exceedingly apt to be deceived. When, however, it forms its judgment, as it usually does, on the intuitions of its great and warm heart, the conclusions thus attained are often so profound
and so unerring as to possess the character of truth

supernaturally revealed. The people, in the case of which we

speak, could justify its prejudice against Roger Chillingworth by

no fact or argument worthy of serious refutation. There was an

aged handicraftsman, it is true, who had been a citizen of London

at the period of Sir Thomas Overbury’s murder, now some thirty

years ago; he testified to having seen the physician, under

some other name, which the narrator of the story had now

forgotten, in company with Dr. Forman, the famous old conjurer,

who was implicated in the affair of Overbury. Two or three

individuals hinted that the man of skill, during his Indian

captivity, had enlarged his medical attainments by joining in the

incantations of the savage priests, who were universally

acknowledged to be powerful enchanters, often performing

seemingly miraculous cures by their skill in the black art. A

large number— and many of these were persons of such sober

sense and practical observation that their opinions would have

been valuable in other matters— affirmed that Roger

Chillingworth’s aspect had undergone a remarkable change while he

had dwelt in town, and especially since his abode with Mr.

Dimmesdale. At first, his expression had been calm, meditative,

scholar-like. Now there was something ugly and evil in his face,

which they had not previously noticed, and which grew still the

more obvious to sight the oftener they looked upon him.

According to the vulgar idea, the fire in his laboratory had been

brought from the lower regions, and was fed with infernal fuel;

and so, as might be expected, his visage was getting sooty with

the smoke.
To sum up the matter, it grew to be a widely diffused opinion that the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of special sanctity, in all ages of the Christian world, was haunted either by Satan himself or Satan's emissary, in the guise of old Roger Chillingworth. This diabolical agent had the Divine permission, for a season, to burrow into the clergyman's intimacy, and plot against his soul. No sensible man, it was confessed, could doubt on which side the victory would turn. The people looked, with an unshaken hope, to see the minister come forth out of the conflict transfigured with the glory which he would unquestionably win. Meanwhile, nevertheless, it was sad to think of the perchance mortal agony through which he must struggle towards his triumph.

Alas! to judge from the gloom and terror in the depth of the poor minister's eyes, the battle was a sore one, and the victory anything but secure.

X. THE LEECH AND HIS PATIENT

Old Roger Chillingworth, throughout life, had been calm in temperament, kindly, though not of warm affections, but ever, and in all his relations with the world, a pure and upright man. He had begun an investigation, as he imagined, with the severe and equal integrity of a judge, desirous only of truth, even as if
the question involved no more than the air-drawn lines and
figures of a geometrical problem, instead of human passions, and
wrongs inflicted on himself. But, as he proceeded, a terrible
fascination, a kind of fierce, though still calm, necessity,
seized the old man within its gripe, and never set him free again
until he had done all its bidding. He now dug into the poor
clergyman's heart, like a miner searching for gold; or, rather,
like a sexton delving into a grave, possibly in quest of a jewel
that had been buried on the dead man's bosom, but likely to find
nothing save mortality and corruption. Alas, for his own soul,
if these were what he sought!

Sometimes a light glimmered out of the physician's eyes, burning
blue and ominous, like the reflection of a furnace, or, let us
say, like one of those gleams of ghastly fire that darted from
Bunyan's awful doorway in the hillside, and quivered on the
pilgrim's face. The soil where this dark miner was working had
perchance shown indications that encouraged him.

"This man," said he, at one such moment, to himself, "pure as
they deem him--all spiritual as he seems--hath inherited a
strong animal nature from his father or his mother. Let us dig a
little further in the direction of this vein!"

Then after long search into the minister's dim interior, and
turning over many precious materials, in the shape of high
aspirations for the welfare of his race, warm love of souls, pure
sentiments, natural piety, strengthened by thought and study, and
illuminated by revelation—all of which invaluable gold was
perhaps no better than rubbish to the seeker—he would turn
back, discouraged, and begin his quest towards another point. He
groped along as stealthily, with as cautious a tread, and as wary
an outlook, as a thief entering a chamber where a man lies only
half asleep—or, it may be, broad awake—with purpose to
steal the very treasure which this man guards as the apple of his
eye. In spite of his premeditated carefulness, the floor would
now and then creak; his garments would rustle; the shadow of his
presence, in a forbidden proximity, would be thrown across his
victim. In other words, Mr. Dimmesdale, whose sensibility of
nerve often produced the effect of spiritual intuition, would
become vaguely aware that something inimical to his peace had
thrust itself into relation with him. But Old Roger
Chillingworth, too, had perceptions that were almost intuitive;
and when the minister threw his startled eyes towards him, there
the physician sat; his kind, watchful, sympathising, but never
intrusive friend.

Yet Mr. Dimmesdale would perhaps have seen this individual's
character more perfectly, if a certain morbidness, to which sick
hearts are liable, had not rendered him suspicious of all
mankind. Trusting no man as his friend, he could not recognize
his enemy when the latter actually appeared. He therefore still
kept up a familiar intercourse with him, daily receiving the old
physician in his study, or visiting the laboratory, and, for
recreation's sake, watching the processes by which weeds were
converted into drugs of potency.

One day, leaning his forehead on his hand, and his elbow on the
sill of the open window, that looked towards the grave-yard, he
talked with Roger Chillingworth, while the old man was examining
a bundle of unsightly plants.

"Where," asked he, with a look askance at them--for it was the
clergyman's peculiarity that he seldom, now-a-days, looked
straight forth at any object, whether human or inanimate, "where,
my kind doctor, did you gather those herbs, with such a dark,
flabby leaf?"

"Even in the graveyard here at hand," answered the physician,
continuing his employment. "They are new to me. I found them
growing on a grave, which bore no tombstone, no other memorial of
the dead man, save these ugly weeds, that have taken upon
themselves to keep him in remembrance. They grew out of his
heart, and typify, it may be, some hideous secret that was buried
with him, and which he had done better to confess during his
lifetime."

"Perchance," said Mr. Dimmesdale, "he earnestly desired it, but
could not."
"And wherefore?" rejoined the physician.

"Wherefore not; since all the powers of nature call so earnestly for the confession of sin, that these black weeds have sprung up out of a buried heart, to make manifest, an outspoken crime?"

"That, good sir, is but a phantasy of yours," replied the minister. "There can be, if I forbode aright, no power, short of the Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried in the human heart. The heart, making itself guilty of such secrets, must perforce hold them, until the day when all hidden things shall be revealed. Nor have I so read or interpreted Holy Writ, as to understand that the disclosure of human thoughts and deeds, then to be made, is intended as a part of the retribution. That, surely, were a shallow view of it. No; these revelations, unless I greatly err, are meant merely to promote the intellectual satisfaction of all intelligent beings, who will stand waiting, on that day, to see the dark problem of this life made plain. A knowledge of men's hearts will be needful to the completest solution of that problem. And, I conceive moreover, that the hearts holding such miserable secrets as you speak of, will yield them up, at that last day, not with reluctance, but with a joy unutterable."
"Then why not reveal it here?" asked Roger Chillingworth, glancing quietly aside at the minister. "Why should not the guilty ones sooner avail themselves of this unutterable solace?"

"They mostly do," said the clergyman, griping hard at his breast, as if afflicted with an importunate throb of pain. "Many, many a poor soul hath given its confidence to me, not only on the death-bed, but while strong in life, and fair in reputation. And ever, after such an outpouring, oh, what a relief have I witnessed in those sinful brethren! even as in one who at last draws free air, after a long stifling with his own polluted breath. How can it be otherwise? Why should a wretched man--guilty, we will say, of murder--prefer to keep the dead corpse buried in his own heart, rather than fling it forth at once, and let the universe take care of it!"

"Yet some men bury their secrets thus," observed the calm physician.

"True; there are such men," answered Mr. Dimmesdale. "But not to suggest more obvious reasons, it may be that they are kept silent by the very constitution of their nature. Or--can we not suppose it?--guilty as they may be, retaining, nevertheless, a zeal for God's glory and man's welfare, they shrink from displaying themselves black and filthy in the view of men; because, thenceforward, no good can be achieved by them; no
evil of the past be redeemed by better service. So, to their own
unutterable torment, they go about among their fellow-creatures,
looking pure as new-fallen snow, while their hearts are all
speckled and spotted with iniquity of which they cannot rid
themselves."

"These men deceive themselves," said Roger Chillingworth, with
somewhat more emphasis than usual, and making a slight gesture
with his forefinger. "They fear to take up the shame that
rightfully belongs to them. Their love for man, their zeal for
God's service--these holy impulses may or may not coexist in
their hearts with the evil inmates to which their guilt has
unbarred the door, and which must needs propagate a hellish breed
within them. But, if they seek to glorify God, let them not lift
heavenward their unclean hands! If they would serve their
fellowmen, let them do it by making manifest the power and
reality of conscience, in constraining them to penitential
self-abasement! Would thou have me to believe, O wise and
pious friend, that a false show can be better--can be more for
God's glory, or man' welfare--than God's own truth? Trust me,
such men deceive themselves!"

"It may be so," said the young clergyman, indifferently, as
waiving a discussion that he considered irrelevant or
unseasonable. He had a ready faculty, indeed, of escaping from
any topic that agitated his too sensitive and nervous
temperament.---"But, now, I would ask of my well-skilled
physician, whether, in good sooth, he deems me to have profited
by his kindly care of this weak frame of mine?"

Before Roger Chillingworth could answer, they heard the clear,
wild laughter of a young child's voice, proceeding from the
adjacent burial-ground. Looking instinctively from the open
window--for it was summer-time--the minister beheld Hester
Prynne and little Pearl passing along the footpath that traversed
the enclosure. Pearl looked as beautiful as the day, but was in
one of those moods of perverse merriment which, whenever they
occurred, seemed to remove her entirely out of the sphere of
sympathy or human contact. She now skipped irreverently from one
grave to another; until coming to the broad, flat, armorial
tombstone of a departed worthy--perhaps of Isaac Johnson
himself--she began to dance upon it. In reply to her mother's
command and entreaty that she would behave more decorously,
little Pearl paused to gather the prickly burrs from a tall burdock
which grew beside the tomb. Taking a handful of these, she
arranged them along the lines of the scarlet letter that decorated
the maternal bosom, to which the burrs, as their nature was,
tenaciously adhered. Hester did not pluck them off.

Roger Chillingworth had by this time approached the window and
smiled grimly down.

"There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for
human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition," remarked he, as much to himself as to his companion. "I saw her, the other day, bespatter the Governor himself with water at the cattle-trough in Spring Lane. What, in heaven's name, is she? Is the imp altogether evil? Hath she affections? Hath she any discoverable principle of being?"

"None, save the freedom of a broken law," answered Mr. Dimmesdale, in a quiet way, as if he had been discussing the point within himself, "Whether capable of good, I know not."

The child probably overheard their voices, for, looking up to the window with a bright, but naughty smile of mirth and intelligence, she threw one of the prickly burrs at the Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale. The sensitive clergyman shrank, with nervous dread, from the light missile. Detecting his emotion, Pearl clapped her little hands in the most extravagant ecstasy. Hester Prynne, likewise, had involuntarily looked up, and all these four persons, old and young, regarded one another in silence, till the child laughed aloud, and shouted--"Come away, mother! Come away, or yonder old black man will catch you! He hath got hold of the minister already. Come away, mother or he will catch you! But he cannot catch little Pearl!"

So she drew her mother away, skipping, dancing, and frisking fantastically among the hillocks of the dead people, like a
creature that had nothing in common with a bygone and buried
generation, nor owned herself akin to it. It was as if she had
been made afresh out of new elements, and must perforce be
permitted to live her own life, and be a law unto herself without
her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime.

"There goes a woman," resumed Roger Chillingworth, after a pause,
"who, be her demerits what they may, hath none of that mystery of
hidden sinfulness which you deem so grievous to be borne. Is
Hester Prynne the less miserable, think you, for that scarlet
letter on her breast?"

"I do verily believe it," answered the clergyman. "Nevertheless,
I cannot answer for her. There was a look of pain in her face
which I would gladly have been spared the sight of. But still,
methinks, it must needs be better for the sufferer to be free to
show his pain, as this poor woman Hester is, than to cover it up
in his heart."

There was another pause, and the physician began anew to examine
and arrange the plants which he had gathered.

"You inquired of me, a little time agone," said he, at length,
"my judgment as touching your health."
"I did," answered the clergyman, "and would gladly learn it.
Speak frankly, I pray you, be it for life or death."

"Freely then, and plainly," said the physician, still busy with
his plants, but keeping a wary eye on Mr. Dimmesdale, "the
disorder is a strange one; not so much in itself nor as outwardly
manifested,—in so far, at least as the symptoms have been laid
open to my observation. Looking daily at you, my good sir, and
watching the tokens of your aspect now for months gone by, I
should deem you a man sore sick, it may be, yet not so sick but
that an instructed and watchful physician might well hope to cure
you. But I know not what to say, the disease is what I seem to
know, yet know it not."

"You speak in riddles, learned sir," said the pale minister,
glancing aside out of the window.

"Then, to speak more plainly," continued the physician, "and I
 crave pardon, sir, should it seem to require pardon, for this
 needful plainness of my speech. Let me ask as your friend, as
 one having charge, under Providence, of your life and physical
 well being, hath all the operations of this disorder been fairly
 laid open and recounted to me?"

"How can you question it?" asked the minister. "Surely it were
child's play to call in a physician and then hide the sore!"
"You would tell me, then, that I know all?" said Roger Chillingworth, deliberately, and fixing an eye, bright with intense and concentrated intelligence, on the minister's face.

"Be it so! But again! He to whom only the outward and physical evil is laid open, knoweth, oftentimes, but half the evil which he is called upon to cure. A bodily disease, which we look upon as whole and entire within itself, may, after all, be but a symptom of some ailment in the spiritual part. Your pardon once again, good sir, if my speech give the shadow of offence. You, sir, of all men whom I have known, are he whose body is the closest conjoined, and imbued, and identified, so to speak, with the spirit whereof it is the instrument."

"Then I need ask no further," said the clergyman, somewhat hastily rising from his chair. "You deal not, I take it, in medicine for the soul!"

"Thus, a sickness," continued Roger Chillingworth, going on, in an unaltered tone, without heeding the interruption, but standing up and confronting the emaciated and white-cheeked minister, with his low, dark, and misshapen figure,—"a sickness, a sore place, if we may so call it, in your spirit hath immediately its appropriate manifestation in your bodily frame. Would you, therefore, that your physician heal the bodily evil? How may
"No, not to thee! not to an earthly physician!" cried Mr. Dimmesdale, passionately, and turning his eyes, full and bright, and with a kind of fierceness, on old Roger Chillingworth. "Not to thee! But, if it be the soul's disease, then do I commit myself to the one Physician of the soul! He, if it stand with His good pleasure, can cure, or he can kill. Let Him do with me as, in His justice and wisdom, He shall see good. But who art thou, that meddlest in this matter? that dares thrust himself between the sufferer and his God?"

With a frantic gesture he rushed out of the room.

"It is as well to have made this step," said Roger Chillingworth to himself, looking after the minister, with a grave smile.

"There is nothing lost. We shall be friends again anon. But see, now, how passion takes hold upon this man, and hurrieth him out of himself! As with one passion so with another. He hath done a wild thing ere now, this pious Master Dimmesdale, in the hot passion of his heart."

It proved not difficult to re-establish the intimacy of the two companions, on the same footing and in the same degree as heretofore. The young clergyman, after a few hours of privacy,
was sensible that the disorder of his nerves had hurried him into an unseemly outbreak of temper, which there had been nothing in the physician's words to excuse or palliate. He marvelled, indeed, at the violence with which he had thrust back the kind old man, when merely proffering the advice which it was his duty to bestow, and which the minister himself had expressly sought. With these remorseful feelings, he lost no time in making the amallest apologies, and besought his friend still to continue the care which, if not successful in restoring him to health, had, in all probability, been the means of prolonging his feeble existence to that hour. Roger Chillingworth readily assented, and went on with his medical supervision of the minister; doing his best for him, in all good faith, but always quitting the patient's apartment, at the close of the professional interview, with a mysterious and puzzled smile upon his lips. This expression was invisible in Mr. Dimmesdale's presence, but grew strongly evident as the physician crossed the threshold.

"A rare case," he muttered. "I must needs look deeper into it. A strange sympathy betwixt soul and body! Were it only for the art's sake, I must search this matter to the bottom."

It came to pass, not long after the scene above recorded, that the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, noon-day, and entirely unawares, fell into a deep, deep slumber, sitting in his chair, with a large black-letter volume open before him on the table. It must have been a work of vast ability in the
somniferous school of literature. The profound depth of the
minister's repose was the more remarkable, inasmuch as he was one
of those persons whose sleep ordinarily is as light as fitful,
and as easily scared away, as a small bird hopping on a twig. To
such an unwonted remoteness, however, had his spirit now
withdrawn into itself that he stirred not in his chair when old
Roger Chillingworth, without any extraordinary precaution, came
into the room. The physician advanced directly in front of his
patient, laid his hand upon his bosom, and thrust aside the
vestment, that hitherto had always covered it even from the
professional eye.

Then, indeed, Mr. Dimmesdale shuddered, and slightly stirred.

After a brief pause, the physician turned away.

But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and honor! With what a
ghastly rapture, as it were, too mighty to be expressed only by
the eye and features, and therefore bursting forth through the
whole ugliness of his figure, and making itself even riotously
manifest by the extravagant gestures with which he threw up his
arms towards the ceiling, and stamped his foot upon the floor!
Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his
ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports
himself when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won
into his kingdom.
But what distinguished the physician's ecstasy from Satan's was
the trait of wonder in it!

XI. THE INTERIOR OF A HEART

After the incident last described, the intercourse between the
clergyman and the physician, though externally the same, was
really of another character than it had previously been. The
intellect of Roger Chillingworth had now a sufficiently plain
path before it. It was not, indeed, precisely that which he had
laid out for himself to tread. Calm, gentle, passionless, as he
appeared, there was yet, we fear, a quiet depth of malice,
hitherto latent, but active now, in this unfortunate old man,
which led him to imagine a more intimate revenge than any mortal
had ever wreaked upon an enemy. To make himself the one trusted
friend, to whom should be confided all the fear, the remorse, the
agony, the ineffectual repentance, the backward rush of sinful
thoughts, expelled in vain! All that guilty sorrow, hidden from
the world, whose great heart would have pitied and forgiven, to
be revealed to him, the Pitiless--to him, the Unforgiving! All
that dark treasure to be lavished on the very man, to whom
nothing else could so adequately pay the debt of vengeance!

The clergyman's shy and sensitive reserve had balked this scheme
Roger Chillingworth, however, was inclined to be hardly, if at all,
less satisfied with the aspect of affairs, which Providence--using the avenger and his victim for its own purposes, and, perchance, pardoning, where it seemed most to punish--had substituted for his black devices A revelation, he could almost say, had been granted to him. It mattered little for his object, whether celestial or from what other region. By its aid, in all the subsequent relations betwixt him and Mr. Dimmesdale, not merely the external presence, but the very inmost soul of the latter, seemed to be brought out before his eyes, so that he could see and comprehend its every movement. He became, thenceforth, not a spectator only, but a chief actor in the poor minister's interior world. He could play upon him as he chose. Would he arouse him with a throb of agony? The victim was for ever on the rack; it needed only to know the spring that controlled the engine: and the physician knew it well. Would he startle him with sudden fear? As at the waving of a magician's wand, up rose a grisly phantom--up rose a thousand phantoms--in many shapes, of death, or more awful shame, all flocking round about the clergyman, and pointing with their fingers at his breast!

All this was accomplished with a subtlety so perfect, that the minister, though he had constantly a dim perception of some evil influence watching over him, could never gain a knowledge of its actual nature. True, he looked doubtfully, fearfully--even, at times, with horror and the bitterness of hatred--at the deformed figure of the old physician. His gestures, his gait,
his grizzled beard, his slightest and most indifferent acts, the
very fashion of his garments, were
odious in the clergyman's sight; a token implicitly to be relied
on of a deeper antipathy in the breast of the latter than he was
willing to acknowledge to himself. For, as it was impossible to
assign a reason for such distrust and abhorrence, so Mr.
Dimmesdale, conscious that the poison of one morbid spot was
infecting his heart's entire substance, attributed all his
presentiments to no other cause. He took himself to task for his
bad sympathies in reference to Roger Chillingworth, disregarded
the lesson that he should have drawn from them, and did his best
to root them out. Unable to accomplish this, he nevertheless, as
a matter of principle, continued his habits of social familiarity
with the old man, and thus gave him constant opportunities for
perfecting the purpose to which--poor forlorn creature that he
was, and more wretched than his victim--the avenger had devoted
himself.

While thus suffering under bodily disease, and gnawed and
tortured by some black trouble of the soul, and given over to the
machinations of his deadliest enemy, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale
had achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office. He won
it indeed, in great part, by his sorrows. His intellectual
gifts, his moral perceptions, his power of experiencing and
communicating emotion, were kept in a state of preternatural
activity by the prick and anguish of his daily life. His fame,
though still on its upward slope, already overshadowed the
soberer reputations of his fellow-clergymen, eminent as several of them were. There are scholars among them, who had spent more years in acquiring abstruse lore, connected with the divine profession, than Mr. Dimmesdale had lived; and who might well, therefore, be more profoundly versed in such solid and valuable attainments than their youthful brother. There were men, too, of a sturdier texture of mind than his, and endowed with a far greater share of shrewd, hard iron, or granite understanding; which, duly mingled with a fair proportion of doctrinal ingredient, constitutes a highly respectable, efficacious, and unamiable variety of the clerical species. There were others again, true saintly fathers, whose faculties had been elaborated by weary toil among their books, and by patient thought, and etherealised, moreover, by spiritual communications with the better world, into which their purity of life had almost introduced these holy personages, with their garments of mortality still clinging to them. All that they lacked was, the gift that descended upon the chosen disciples at Pentecost, in tongues of flame; symbolising, it would seem, not the power of speech in foreign and unknown languages, but that of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language. These fathers, otherwise so apostolic, lacked Heaven's last and rarest attestation of their office, the Tongue of Flame. They would have vainly sought--had they ever dreamed of seeking--to express the highest truths through the humblest medium of familiar words and images. Their voices came down, afar and indistinctly, from the upper heights where they habitually dwelt.
Not improbably, it was to this latter class of men that Mr. Dimmesdale, by many of his traits of character, naturally belonged.

To the high mountain peaks of faith and sanctity he would have climbed, had not the tendency been thwarted by the burden, whatever it might be, of crime or anguish, beneath which it was his doom to totter. It kept him down on a level with the lowest; him, the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered! But this very burden it was that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence. Oftenest persuasive, but sometimes terrible! The people knew not the power that moved them thus. They deemed the young clergyman a miracle of holiness. They fancied him the mouth-piece of Heaven's messages of wisdom, and rebuke, and love. In their eyes, the very ground on which he trod was sanctified. The virgins of his church grew pale around him, victims of a passion so imbued with religious sentiment, that they imagined it to be all religion, and brought it openly, in their white bosoms, as their most acceptable sacrifice before the altar. The aged members of his flock, beholding Mr. Dimmesdale's frame so feeble, while they were themselves so rugged in their infirmity, believed that he would go heavenward before them, and enjoined it upon their children that their old bones should be buried close to their young pastor's holy grave.

And all this time, perchance, when poor Mr. Dimmesdale was thinking of his grave, he questioned with himself whether the grass would ever grow on it, because an accursed thing must there be buried!
It is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him. It was his genuine impulse to adore the truth, and to reckon all things shadow-like, and utterly devoid of weight or value, that had not its divine essence as the life within their life. Then what was he?—a substance?—or the dimmest of all shadows? He longed to speak out from his own pulpit at the full height of his voice, and tell the people what he was. "I, whom you behold in these black garments of the priesthood—I, who ascend the sacred desk, and turn my pale face heavenward, taking upon myself to hold communion in your behalf with the Most High Omniscience—I, in whose daily life you discern the sanctity of Enoch—I, whose footsteps, as you suppose, leave a gleam along my earthly track, whereby the Pilgrims that shall come after me may be guided to the regions of the blest—I, who have laid the hand of baptism upon your children—I, who have breathed the parting prayer over your dying friends, to whom the Amen sounded faintly from a world which they had quitted—I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!"

More than once, Mr. Dimmesdale had gone into the pulpit, with a purpose never to come down its steps until he should have spoken words like the above. More than once he had cleared his throat, and drawn in the long, deep, and tremulous breath, which, when sent forth again, would come burdened with the black secret of his soul. More than once—nay, more than a hundred times—he
had actually spoken! Spoken! But how? He had told his hearers
that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst
of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity, and
that the only wonder was that they did not see his wretched body
shrivelled up before their eyes by the burning wrath of the
Almighty! Could there be plainer speech than this? Would not
the people start up in their seats, by a simultaneous impulse,
and tear him down out of the pulpit which he defiled? Not so,
indeed! They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more.
They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those
self-condemning words. "The godly youth!" said they among
themselves. "The saint on earth! Alas! if he discern such
sinfulness in his own white soul, what horrid spectacle would he
 behold in thine or mine!" The minister well knew--subtle, but
remorseful hypocrite that he was!--the light in which his
vague confession would be viewed. He had striven to put a cheat
upon himself by making the avowal of a guilty conscience, but had
gained only one other sin, and a self-acknowledged shame, without
the momentary relief of being self-deceived. He had spoken the
very truth, and transformed it into the veriest falsehood. And
yet, by the constitution of his nature, he loved the truth, and
loathed the lie, as few men ever did. Therefore, above all
things else, he loathed his miserable self!

His inward trouble drove him to practices more in accordance with
the old, corrupted faith of Rome than with the better light of
the church in which he had been born and bred. In Mr.
Dimmesdale's secret closet, under lock and key, there was a bloody scourge. Oftentimes, this Protestant and Puritan divine had plied it on his own shoulders, laughing bitterly at himself the while, and smiting so much the more pitilessly because of that bitter laugh. It was his custom, too, as it has been that of many other pious Puritans, to fast--not however, like them, in order to purify the body, and render it the fitter medium of celestial illumination--but rigorously, and until his knees trembled beneath him, as an act of penance. He kept vigils, likewise, night after night, sometimes in utter darkness, sometimes with a glimmering lamp, and sometimes, viewing his own face in a looking-glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it. He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify himself. In these lengthened vigils, his brain often reeled, and visions seemed to flit before him; perhaps seen doubtfully, and by a faint light of their own, in the remote dimness of the chamber, or more vividly and close beside him, within the looking-glass. Now it was a herd of diabolic shapes, that grinned and mocked at the pale minister, and beckoned him away with them; now a group of shining angels, who flew upward heavily, as sorrow-laden, but grew more ethereal as they rose. Now came the dead friends of his youth, and his white-bearded father, with a saint-like frown, and his mother turning her face away as she passed by Ghost of a mother--thinnest fantasy of a mother--methinks she might yet have thrown a pitying glance towards her son! And now, through the chamber which these spectral thoughts had made so ghastly, glided Hester Prynne leading along little Pearl, in her scarlet garb, and
pointing her forefinger, first at the scarlet letter on her bosom, and then at the clergymen's own breast.

None of these visions ever quite deluded him. At any moment, by an effort of his will, he could discern substances through their misty lack of substance, and convince himself that they were not solid in their nature, like yonder table of carved oak, or that big, square, leather-bound and brazen-clasped volume of divinity.

But, for all that, they were, in one sense, the truest and most substantial things which the poor minister now dealt with. It is the unspeakable misery of a life so false as his, that it steals the pith and substance out of whatever realities there are around us, and which were meant by Heaven to be the spirit's joy and nutriment. To the untrue man, the whole universe is false--it is impalpable--it shrinks to nothing within his grasp. And he himself in so far as he shows himself in a false light, becomes a shadow, or, indeed, ceases to exist. The only truth that continued to give Mr. Dimmesdale a real existence on this earth was the anguish in his inmost soul, and the undissembled expression of it in his aspect. Had he once found power to smile, and wear a face of gaiety, there would have been no such man!

On one of those ugly nights, which we have faintly hinted at, but forborne to picture forth, the minister started from his chair.

A new thought had struck him. There might be a moment's peace in it. Attiring himself with as much care as if it had been for
public worship, and precisely in the same manner, he stole softly
down the staircase, undid the door, and issued forth.

XII. THE MINISTER’S VIGIL

Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps
actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr.
Dimmesdale reached the spot where, now so long since, Hester
Prynne had lived through her first hours of public ignominy. The
same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the
storm or sunshine of seven long years, and foot-worn, too, with
the tread of many culprits who had since ascended it, remained
standing beneath the balcony of the meeting-house. The minister
went up the steps.

It was an obscure night in early May. An unwearied pall of cloud
muffled the whole expanse of sky from zenith to horizon. If the
same multitude which had stood as eye-witnesses while Hester
Prynne sustained her punishment could now have been summoned
forth, they would have discerned no face above the platform nor
hardly the outline of a human shape, in the dark grey of the
midnight. But the town was all asleep. There was no peril of
discovery. The minister might stand there, if it so pleased him,
until morning should redden in the east, without other risk than
that the dank and chill night air would creep into his frame, and
stiffen his joints with rheumatism, and clog his throat with catarrh
and cough; thereby defrauding the expectant audience of to-morrow's prayer and sermon. No eye could see him, save that ever-wakeful one which had seen him in his closet, wielding the bloody scourge. Why, then, had he come hither? Was it but the mockery of penitence? A mockery, indeed, but in which his soul trifled with itself! A mockery at which angels blushed and wept, while fiends rejoiced with jeering laughter! He had been driven hither by the impulse of that Remorse which dogged him everywhere, and whose own sister and closely linked companion was that Cowardice which invariably drew him back, with her tremulous gripe, just when the other impulse had hurried him to the verge of a disclosure. Poor, miserable man! what right had infirmity like his to burden itself with crime? Crime is for the iron-nerved, who have their choice either to endure it, or, if it press too hard, to exert their fierce and savage strength for a good purpose, and fling it off at once! This feeble and most sensitive of spirits could do neither, yet continually did one thing or another, which intertwined, in the same inextricable knot, the agony of heaven-defying guilt and vain repentance.

And thus, while standing on the scaffold, in this vain show of expiation, Mr. Dimmesdale was overcome with a great horror of mind, as if the universe were gazing at a scarlet token on his naked breast, right over his heart. On that spot, in very truth, there was, and there had long been, the gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain. Without any effort of his will, or power to restrain himself, he shrieked aloud: an outcry that went pealing
through the night, and was beaten back from one house to another, and reverberated from the hills in the background; as if a company of devils, detecting so much misery and terror in it, had made a plaything of the sound, and were bandying it to and fro.

"It is done!" muttered the minister, covering his face with his hands. "The whole town will awake and hurry forth, and find me here!"

But it was not so. The shriek had perhaps sounded with a far greater power, to his own startled ears, than it actually possessed. The town did not awake; or, if it did, the drowsy slumberers mistook the cry either for something frightful in a dream, or for the noise of witches, whose voices, at that period, were often heard to pass over the settlements or lonely cottages, as they rode with Satan through the air. The clergyman, therefore, hearing no symptoms of disturbance, uncovered his eyes and looked about him. At one of the chamber-windows of Governor Bellingham's mansion, which stood at some distance, on the line of another street, he beheld the appearance of the old magistrate himself with a lamp in his hand a white night-cap on his head, and a long white gown enveloping his figure. He looked like a ghost evoked unseasonably from the grave. The cry had evidently startled him. At another window of the same house, moreover appeared old Mistress Hibbins, the Governor's sister, also with a lamp, which even thus far off revealed the expression of her sour and discontented face. She thrust forth her head from the
lattice, and looked anxiously upward. Beyond the shadow of a
doubt, this venerable witch-lady had heard Mr. Dimmesdale's outcry,
and interpreted it, with its multitudinous echoes and reverberations, as
the clamour of the fiends and night-hags, with whom she was well
known to make excursions in the forest.

Detecting the gleam of Governor Bellingham's lamp, the old lady
quickly extinguished her own, and vanished. Possibly, she went
up among the clouds. The minister saw nothing further of her
motions. The magistrate, after a wary observation of the
darkness--into which, nevertheless, he could see but little
further than he might into a mill-stone--retired from the
window.

The minister grew comparatively calm. His eyes, however, were
soon greeted by a little glimmering light, which, at first a long
way off was approaching up the street. It threw a gleam of
recognition, on here a post, and there a garden fence, and here a
latticed window-pane, and there a pump, with its full trough of
water, and here again an arched door of oak, with an iron
knocker, and a rough log for the door-step. The Reverend Mr.
Dimmesdale noted all these minute particulars, even while firmly
convinced that the doom of his existence was stealing onward, in
the footsteps which he now heard; and that the gleam of the
lantern would fall upon him in a few moments more, and reveal his
long-hidden secret. As the light drew nearer, be beheld, within
its illuminated circle, his brother clergyman--or, to speak
more accurately, his professional father, as well as highly
valued friend—the Reverend Mr. Wilson, who, as Mr. Dimmesdale
now conjectured, had been praying at the bedside of some
dying man. And so he had. The good old minister came
freshly from the death-chamber of Governor Winthrop, who had
passed from earth to heaven within that very hour. And now
surrounded, like the saint-like personage of olden times, with a
radiant halo, that glorified him amid this gloomy night of sin—as
if the departed Governor had left him an inheritance of his
glory, or as if he had caught upon himself the distant shine of
the celestial city, while looking thitherward to see the
triumphant pilgrim pass within its gates—now, in short, good
Father Wilson was moving homeward, aiding his footsteps with a
lighted lantern! The glimmer of this luminary suggested the
above conceits to Mr. Dimmesdale, who smiled—nay, almost
laughed at them—and then wondered if he was going mad.

As the Reverend Mr. Wilson passed beside the scaffold, closely
muffling his Geneva cloak about him with one arm, and holding the
lantern before his breast with the other, the minister could
hardly restrain himself from speaking—

"A good evening to you, venerable Father Wilson. Come up hither,
I pray you, and pass a pleasant hour with me!"

Good Heavens! Had Mr. Dimmesdale actually spoken? For one
instant he believed that these words had passed his lips. But they were uttered only within his imagination. The venerable Father Wilson continued to step slowly onward, looking carefully at the muddy pathway before his feet, and never once turning his head towards the guilty platform. When the light of the glimmering lantern had faded quite away, the minister discovered, by the faintness which came over him, that the last few moments had been a crisis of terrible anxiety, although his mind had made an involuntary effort to relieve itself by a kind of lurid playfulness.

Shortly afterwards, the like grisly sense of the humorous again stole in among the solemn phantoms of his thought. He felt his limbs growing stiff with the unaccustomed chilliness of the night, and doubted whether he should be able to descend the steps of the scaffold. Morning would break and find him there. The neighbourhood would begin to rouse itself. The earliest riser, coming forth in the dim twilight, would perceive a vaguely-defined figure aloft on the place of shame; and half-crazed betwixt alarm and curiosity, would go knocking from door to door, summoning all the people to behold the ghost—as he needs must think it—of some defunct transgressor. A dusky tumult would flap its wings from one house to another. Then—the morning light still waxing stronger—old patriarchs would rise up in great haste, each in his flannel gown, and matronly dames, without pausing to put off their night-gear. The whole tribe of decorous personages, who had never heretofore been seen
with a single hair of their heads awry, would start into public
view with the disorder of a nightmare in their aspects. Old
Governor Bellingham would come grimly forth, with his King James'
ruff fastened askew, and Mistress Hibbins, with some twigs of the
forest clinging to her skirts, and looking sourer than ever, as
having hardly got a wink of sleep after her night ride; and good
Father Wilson too, after spending half the night at a death-bed,
and liking ill to be disturbed, thus early, out of his dreams about
the glorified saints. Hither, likewise,
would come the elders and deacons of Mr. Dimmesdale's church,
and the young virgins who so idolized their minister, and had
made a shrine for him in their white bosoms, which now,
by-the-bye, in their hurry and confusion, they would scanty have
given themselves time to cover with their kerchiefs. All people,
in a word, would come stumbling over their thresholds, and
turning up their amazed and horror-stricken visages around the
scaffold. Whom would they discern there, with the red eastern
light upon his brow? Whom, but the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale,
half-frozen to death, overwhelmed with shame, and standing where
Hester Prynne had stood!

Carried away by the grotesque horror of this picture, the
minister, unawares, and to his own infinite alarm, burst into a
great peal of laughter. It was immediately responded to by a
light, airy, childish laugh, in which, with a thrill of the heart--but
he knew not whether of exquisite pain, or pleasure as
acute--he recognised the tones of little Pearl.
"Pearl! Little Pearl!" cried he, after a moment's pause; then, suppressing his voice--"Hester! Hester Prynne! Are you there?"

"Yes; it is Hester Prynne!" she replied, in a tone of surprise; and the minister heard her footsteps approaching from the side-walk, along which she had been passing. "It is I, and my little Pearl."

"Whence come you, Hester?" asked the minister. "What sent you hither?"

"I have been watching at a death-bed," answered Hester Prynne "at Governor Winthrop's death-bed, and have taken his measure for a robe, and am now going homeward to my dwelling."

"Come up hither, Hester, thou and Little Pearl," said the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. "Ye have both been here before, but I was not with you. Come up hither once again, and we will stand all three together."

She silently ascended the steps, and stood on the platform, holding little Pearl by the hand. The minister felt for the child's other hand, and took it. The moment that he did so,
there came what seemed a tumultuous rush of new life, other life
than his own pouring like a torrent into his heart, and hurrying
through all his veins, as if the mother and the child were
communicating their vital warmth to his half-torpid system. The
three formed an electric chain.

"Minister!" whispered little Pearl.

"What wouldst thou say, child?" asked Mr. Dimmesdale.

"'Wilt thou stand here with mother and me, to-morrow noontide?"
inquired Pearl.

"Nay; not so, my little Pearl," answered the minister; for, with
the new energy of the moment, all the dread of public exposure,
that had so long been the anguish of his life, had returned upon
him; and he was already trembling at the conjunction in which--with
a strange joy, nevertheless--he now found himself--"not
so, my child. I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother and thee
one other day, but not to-morrow."

Pearl laughed, and attempted to pull away her hand. But the
minister held it fast.

"A moment longer, my child!" said he.
"But wilt thou promise," asked Pearl, "to take my hand, and mother's hand, to-morrow noontide?"

"Not then, Pearl," said the minister; "but another time."

"And what other time?" persisted the child.

"At the great judgment day," whispered the minister; and, strangely enough, the sense that he was a professional teacher of the truth impelled him to answer the child so. "Then, and there, before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I must stand together. But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!"

Pearl laughed again.

But before Mr. Dimmesdale had done speaking, a light gleamed far and wide over all the muffled sky. It was doubtless caused by one of those meteors, which the night-watcher may so often observe burning out to waste, in the vacant regions of the atmosphere. So powerful was its radiance, that it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of cloud betwixt the sky and earth. The great vault brightened, like the dome of an immense lamp. It showed the familiar scene of the street with the distinctness of
mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light. The wooden houses, with their jutting storeys and quaint gable-peaks; the doorsteps and thresholds with the early grass springing up about them; the garden-plots, black with freshly-turned earth; the wheel-track, little worn, and even in the market-place margined with green on either side—all were visible, but with a singularity of aspect that seemed to give another moral interpretation to the things of this world than they had ever borne before. And there stood the minister, with his hand over his heart; and Hester Prynne, with the embroidered letter glimmering on her bosom; and little Pearl, herself a symbol, and the connecting link between those two. They stood in the noon of that strange and solemn splendour, as if it were the light that is to reveal all secrets, and the daybreak that shall unite all who belong to one another.

There was witchcraft in little Pearl's eyes; and her face, as she glanced upward at the minister, wore that naughty smile which made its expression frequently so elvish. She withdrew her hand from Mr. Dimmesdale's, and pointed across the street. But he clasped both his hands over his breast, and cast his eyes towards the zenith.

Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source. Thus, a blazing
spear, a sword of flame, a bow, or a sheaf of arrows seen in the
midnight sky, prefigured Indian warfare. Pestilence was known to
have been foreboded by a shower of crimson light. We doubt
whether any marked event, for good or evil, ever befell New
England, from its settlement down to revolutionary times, of
which the inhabitants had not been previously warned by some
spectacle of its nature. Not seldom, it had been seen by
multitudes. Oftener, however, its credibility rested on the
faith of some lonely eye-witness, who beheld the wonder through
the coloured, magnifying, and distorted medium of his
imagination, and shaped it more distinctly in his after-thought.
It was, indeed, a majestic idea that the destiny of nations should
be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of heaven.
A scroll so wide might not be deemed too expensive for Providence
to write a people's doom upon. The belief was a favourite one
with our forefathers, as betokening that their infant
commonwealth was under a celestial guardianship of peculiar
intimacy and strictness. But what shall we say, when an
individual discovers a revelation addressed to himself alone, on
the same vast sheet of record. In such a case, it could only be
the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man,
rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret
pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature,
until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting
page for his soul's history and fate.

We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and
heart that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld
there the appearance of an immense letter--the letter A--marked
out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may
have shown itself at that point, burning duskily through a veil
of cloud, but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave
it, or, at least, with so little definiteness, that another's
guilt might have seen another symbol in it.

There was a singular circumstance that characterised Mr.
Dimmesdale's psychological state at this moment. All the time
that he gazed upward to the zenith, he was, nevertheless,
perfectly aware that little Pearl was hinting her finger towards
old Roger Chillingworth, who stood at no great distance from the
scaffold. The minister appeared to see him, with the same glance
that discerned the miraculous letter. To his feature as to all
other objects, the meteoric light imparted a new expression; or
it might well be that the physician was not careful then, as at
all other times, to hide the malevolence with which he looked
upon his victim. Certainly, if the meteor kindled up the sky,
and disclosed the earth, with an awfulness that admonished Hester
Prynne and the clergyman of the day of judgment, then might Roger
Chillingworth have passed with them for the arch-fiend, standing
there with a smile and scowl, to claim his own. So vivid was the
expression, or so intense the minister's perception of it, that
it seemed still to remain painted on the darkness after the
meteor had vanished, with an effect as if the street and all
things else were at once annihilated.
"Who is that man, Hester?" gasped Mr. Dimmesdale, overcome with terror. "I shiver at him! Dost thou know the man? I hate him, Hester!"

She remembered her oath, and was silent.

"I tell thee, my soul shivers at him!" muttered the minister again. "Who is he? Who is he? Canst thou do nothing for me? I have a nameless horror of the man!"

"Minister," said little Pearl, "I can tell thee who he is!"

"Quickly, then, child!" said the minister, bending his ear close to her lips. "Quickly, and as low as thou canst whisper."

Pearl mumbled something into his ear that sounded, indeed, like human language, but was only such gibberish as children may be heard amusing themselves with by the hour together. At all events, if it involved any secret information in regard to old Roger Chillingworth, it was in a tongue unknown to the erudite clergyman, and did but increase the bewilderment of his mind. The elvish child then laughed aloud.
"Dost thou mock me now?" said the minister.

"Thou wast not bold!--thou wast not true!" answered the child.

"Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and mother's hand, to-morrow noon-tide!"

"Worthy sir," answered the physician, who had now advanced to the foot of the platform--"pious Master Dimmesdale! can this be you? Well, well, indeed! We men of study, whose heads are in our books, have need to be straitly looked after! We dream in our waking moments, and walk in our sleep. Come, good sir, and my dear friend, I pray you let me lead you home!"

"How knewest thou that I was here?" asked the minister, fearfully.

"Verily, and in good faith," answered Roger Chillingworth, "I knew nothing of the matter. I had spent the better part of the night at the bedside of the worshipful Governor Winthrop, doing what my poor skill might to give him ease. He, going home to a better world, I, likewise, was on my way homeward, when this light shone out. Come with me, I beseech you, Reverend sir, else you will be poorly able to do Sabbath duty to-morrow. Aha! see now how they trouble the brain--these books!--these books! You should study less, good sir, and take a little pastime, or these night whimsies will grow upon you."
"I will go home with you," said Mr. Dimmesdale.

With a chill despondency, like one awakening, all nerveless, from an ugly dream, he yielded himself to the physician, and was led away.

The next day, however, being the Sabbath, he preached a discourse which was held to be the richest and most powerful, and the most replete with heavenly influences, that had ever proceeded from his lips. Souls, it is said, more souls than one, were brought to the truth by the efficacy of that sermon, and vowed within themselves to cherish a holy gratitude towards Mr. Dimmesdale throughout the long hereafter. But as he came down the pulpit steps, the grey-bearded sexton met him, holding up a black glove, which the minister recognised as his own.

"It was found," said the Sexton, "this morning on the scaffold where evil-doers are set up to public shame. Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence. But, indeed, he was blind and foolish, as he ever and always is. A pure hand needs no glove to cover it!"

"Thank you, my good friend," said the minister, gravely, but startled at heart; for so confused was his remembrance, that he
had almost brought himself to look at the events of the past
night as visionary.

"Yes, it seems to be my glove, indeed!"

"And, since Satan saw fit to steal it, your reverence must needs
handle him without gloves henceforward," remarked the old sexton,
grimly smiling. "But did your reverence hear of the portent that
was seen last night? a great red letter in the sky--the letter
A, which we interpret to stand for Angel. For, as our good
Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night, it was
doubtless held fit that there should be some notice thereof!"

"No," answered the minister; "I had not heard of it."

XIII. ANOTHER VIEW OF HESTER

In her late singular interview with Mr. Dimmesdale, Hester
Prynne was shocked at the condition to which she found the
clergyman reduced. His nerve seemed absolutely destroyed. His
moral force was abased into more than childish weakness. It
grovelled helpless on the ground, even while his intellectual
faculties retained their pristine strength, or had perhaps
acquired a morbid energy, which disease only could have given
them. With her knowledge of a train of circumstances hidden from
all others, she could readily infer that, besides the legitimate
action of his own conscience, a terrible machinery had been
brought to bear, and was still operating, on Mr. Dimmesdale's
well-being and repose. Knowing what this poor fallen man had
once been, her whole soul was moved by the shuddering terror with
which he had appealed to her--the outcast woman--for support
against his instinctively discovered enemy. She decided,
moreover, that he had a right to her utmost aid. Little
accustomed, in her long seclusion from society, to measure her
ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself,
Hester saw--or seemed to see--that there lay a responsibility
upon her in reference to the clergyman, which she owned to no
other, nor to the whole world besides. The links that united her
to the rest of humankind--links of flowers, or silk, or gold, or whatever
the material--had all been broken. Here was the iron link of
mutual crime, which neither he nor she could break. Like all
other ties, it brought along with it its obligations.

Hester Prynne did not now occupy precisely the same position in
which we beheld her during the earlier periods of her ignominy.
Years had come and gone. Pearl was now seven years old. Her
mother, with the scarlet letter on her breast, glittering in its
fantastic embroidery, had long been a familiar object to the
townspeople. As is apt to be the case when a person stands out
in any prominence before the community, and, at the same time,
interferes neither with public nor individual interests and
convenience, a species of general regard had ultimately grown up
in reference to Hester Prynne. It is to the credit of human nature that, except where its selfishness is brought into play, it loves more readily than it hates. Hatred, by a gradual and quiet process, will even be transformed to love, unless the change be impeded by a continually new irritation of the original feeling of hostility. In this matter of Hester Prynne there was neither irritation nor irksomeness. She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage; she made no claim upon it in requital for what she suffered; she did not weigh upon its sympathies. Then, also, the blameless purity of her life during all these years in which she had been set apart to infamy was reckoned largely in her favour. With nothing now to lose, in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish, of gaining anything, it could only be a genuine regard for virtue that had brought back the poor wanderer to its paths.

It was perceived, too, that while Hester never put forward even the humblest title to share in the world's privileges--further than to breathe the common air and earn daily bread for little Pearl and herself by the faithful labour of her hands--she was quick to acknowledge her sisterhood with the race of man whenever benefits were to be conferred. None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty, even though the bitter-hearted pauper threw back a gibe in requital of the food brought regularly to his door, or the garments wrought for him by the fingers that could have embroidered a monarch's robe. None so self-devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked
through the town. In all seasons of calamity, indeed, whether
general or of individuals, the outcast of society at once found
her place. She came, not as a guest, but as a rightful inmate,
into the household that was darkened by trouble, as if its gloomy
twilight were a medium in which she was entitled to hold
intercourse with her fellow-creature There glimmered the
embroidered letter, with comfort in its unearthly ray. Elsewhere
the token of sin, it was the taper of the sick chamber. It had
even thrown its gleam, in the sufferer's bard extremity, across
the verge of time. It had shown him where to set his foot, while
the light of earth was fast becoming dim, and ere the light of
futurity could reach him. In such emergencies Hester's nature
showed itself warm and rich--a well-spring of human tenderness,
unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest.
Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow
for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of
Mercy, or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so
ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to
this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such
helpfulness was found in her--so much power to do, and power to
sympathise--that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A
by its original signification. They said that it meant Abel, so
strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.

It was only the darkened house that could contain her. When
sunshine came again, she was not there. Her shadow had faded
across the threshold. The helpful inmate had departed, without
one backward glance to gather up the meed of gratitude, if any
were in the hearts of those whom she had served so zealously.
Meeting them in the street, she never raised her head to receive
their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid
her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on. This might be
pride, but was so like humility, that it produced all the
softening influence of the latter quality on the public mind.
The public is despotic in its temper; it is capable of denying
common justice when too strenuously demanded as a right; but
quite as frequently it awards more than justice, when the appeal
is made, as despots love to have it made, entirely to its
generosity. Interpreting Hester Prynne's deportment as an appeal
of this nature, society was inclined to show its former victim a more
benign countenance than she cared to be favoured with, or, perchance,
than she deserved.

The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were
longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities
than the people. The prejudices which they shared in common with
the latter were fortified in themselves by an iron frame-work of
reasoning, that made it a far tougher labour to expel them. Day
by day, nevertheless, their sour and rigid wrinkles were relaxing
into something which, in the due course of years, might grow to
be an expression of almost benevolence. Thus it was with the men
of rank, on whom their eminent position imposed the guardianship
of the public morals. Individuals in private life, meanwhile,
had quite forgiven Hester Prynne for her frailty; nay, more, they
had begun to look upon the scarlet letter as the token, not of
that one sin for which she had borne so long and dreary a
penance, but of her many good deeds since. "Do you see that
woman with the embroidered badge?" they would say to strangers.

"It is our Hester--the town's own Hester--who is so kind to
the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the
afflicted!" Then, it is true, the propensity of human nature to
tell the very worst of itself, when embodied in the person of
another, would constrain them to whisper the black scandal of
bygone years. It was none the less a fact, however, that in the
eyes of the very men who spoke thus, the scarlet letter had the
effect of the cross on a nun's bosom. It imparted to the wearer a
kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all
peril. Had she fallen among thieves, it would have kept her safe. It was
reported, and believed by many, that an Indian had drawn his
arrow against the badge, and that the missile struck it, and fell
harmless to the ground.

The effect of the symbol--or rather, of the position in respect
to society that was indicated by it--on the mind of Hester
Prynne herself was powerful and peculiar. All the light and
graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this
red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and
harsh outline, which might have been repulsive had she possessed
friends or companions to be repelled by it. Even the
attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar change. It
might be partly owing to the studied austerity of her dress, and
partly to the lack of demonstration in her manners. It was a sad
transformation, too, that her rich and luxuriant hair had either
been cut off, or was so completely hidden by a cap, that not a
shining lock of it ever once gushed into the sunshine. It was
due in part to all these causes, but still more to something
else, that there seemed to be no longer anything in Hester's face
for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester's form, though majestic
and statue like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its
embrace; nothing in Hester's bosom to make it ever again the
pillow of Affection. Some attribute had departed from her, the
permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. Such
is frequently the fate, and such the stern development, of the
feminine character and person, when the woman has encountered,
and lived through, an experience of peculiar severity. If she be
all tenderness, she will die. If she survive, the tenderness will
either be crushed out of her, or--and the outward
semblance is the same--crushed so deeply into her heart that it
can never show itself more. The latter is perhaps the truest
theory. She who has once been a woman, and ceased to be so,
might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the
magic touch to effect the transformation. We shall see whether
Hester Prynne were ever afterwards so touched and so
transfigured.

Much of the marble coldness of Hester's impression was to be
attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a
great measure, from passion and feeling to thought. Standing
alone in the world--alone, as to any dependence on society, and
with little Pearl to be guided and protected--alone, and
hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to
consider it desirable--she cast away the fragment a broken
chain. The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age
in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more
active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of
the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these
had overthrown and rearranged--not actually, but within the
sphere of theory, which was their most real abode--the whole
system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient
principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a
freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of
the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known it, would
have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatised by the
scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage, by the seashore,
thoughts visited her such as dared to enter no
other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests, that would have
been as perilous as demons to their entertainer, could they have
been seen so much as knocking at her door.

It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often
conform with the most perfect quietude to the external
regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without
investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. So it seemed
to be with Hester. Yet, had little Pearl never come to her from
the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise. Then she
might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect. She might, in one of her phases, have been a prophetess. She might, and not improbably would, have suffered death from the stern tribunals of the period, for attempting to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment. But, in the education of her child, the mother's enthusiasm thought had something to wreak itself upon. Providence, in the person of this little girl, had assigned to Hester's charge, the germ and blossom of womanhood, to be cherished and developed amid a host of difficulties. Everything was against her. The world was hostile. The child's own nature had something wrong in it which continually betokened that she had been born amiss--the effluence of her mother's lawless passion--and often impelled Hester to ask, in bitterness of heart, whether it were for ill or good that the poor little creature had been born at all.

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation, though it may keep women quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit,
which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified
before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and
suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being
obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary
reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier
change, in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has
her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never
overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are
not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to
come uppermost, they vanish. Thus Hester Prynne, whose heart had
lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clue in
the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable
precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild
and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort
nowhere. At times a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul,
whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to Heaven, and
go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide.

The scarlet letter had not done its office.
Now, however, her interview with the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale,
on the night of his vigil, had given her a new
theme of reflection, and held up to her an object that appeared
worthy of any exertion and sacrifice for its attainment. She had
witnessed the intense misery beneath which the minister
struggled, or, to speak more accurately, had ceased to struggle.
She saw that he stood on the verge of lunacy, if he had not
already stepped across it. It was impossible to doubt that,
whatever painful efficacy there might be in the secret sting of remorse, a deadlier venom had been infused into it by the hand that proffered relief. A secret enemy had been continually by his side, under the semblance of a friend and helper, and had availed himself of the opportunities thus afforded for tampering with the delicate springs of Mr. Dimmesdale’s nature. Hester could not but ask herself whether there had not originally been a defect of truth, courage, and loyalty on her own part, in allowing the minister to be thrown into position where so much evil was to be foreboded and nothing auspicious to be hoped. Her only justification lay in the fact that she had been able to discern no method of rescuing him from a blacker ruin than had overwhelmed herself except by acquiescing in Roger Chillingworth’s scheme of disguise. Under that impulse she had made her choice, and had chosen, as it now appeared, the more wretched alternative of the two. She determined to redeem her error so far as it might yet be possible. Strengthened by years of hard and solemn trial, she felt herself no longer so inadequate to cope with Roger Chillingworth as on that night, abased by sin and half-maddened by the ignominy that was still new, when they had talked together in the prison-chamber. She had climbed her way since then to a higher point. The old man, on the other hand, had brought himself nearer to her level, or, perhaps, below it, by the revenge which he had stooped for.

In fine, Hester Prynne resolved to meet her former husband, and
do what might be in her power for the rescue of the victim on
whom he had so evidently set his gripe. The occasion was not
long to seek. One afternoon, walking with Pearl in a retired
part of the peninsula, she beheld the old physician with a basket
on one arm and a staff in the other hand, stooping along the
ground in quest of roots and herbs to concoct his medicine
withal.

XIV. HESTER AND THE PHYSICIAN

Hester bade little Pearl run down to the margin of the water, and
play with the shells and tangled sea-weed, until she should have
talked awhile with yonder gatherer of herbs. So the child flew
away like a bird, and, making bare her small white feet went
pattering along the moist margin of the sea. Here and there she
came to a full stop, ad peeped curiously into a pool, left by the
retiring tide as a mirror for Pearl to see her face in. Forth
peeped at her, out of the pool, with dark, glistening curls
around her head, and an elf-smile in her eyes, the image of a
little maid whom Pearl, having no other playmate, invited to take
her hand and run a race with her. But the visionary little maid
on her part, beckoned likewise, as if to say--"This is a
better place; come thou into the pool." And Pearl, stepping in
mid-leg deep, beheld her own white feet at the bottom; while, out
of a still lower depth, came the gleam of a kind of fragmentary
smile, floating to and fro in the agitated water.
Meanwhile her mother had accosted the physician. “I would speak
a word with you,” said she—“a word that concerns us much.”

“Aha! and is it Mistress Hester that has a word for old
Roger Chillingworth?” answered he, raising himself from
his stooping posture. “With all my heart! Why, mistress, I hear
good tidings of you on all hands! No longer ago than yester-eve,
a magistrate, a wise and godly man, was discoursing of your
affairs, Mistress Hester, and whispered me that there had been
question concerning you in the council. It was debated whether
or no, with safety to the commonweal, yonder scarlet letter might
be taken off your bosom. On my life, Hester, I made my intreaty
to the worshipful magistrate that it might be done forthwith.”

“It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off the
badge,” calmly replied Hester. “Were I worthy to be quit of it,
it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into
something that should speak a different purport.”

“Nay, then, wear it, if it suit you better,” rejoined he, “A
woman must needs follow her own fancy touching the adornment of
her person. The letter is gaily embroidered, and shows right
bravely on your bosom!”

All this while Hester had been looking steadily at the old man,
and was shocked, as well as wonder-smitten, to discern what a
change had been wrought upon him within the past seven years. It
was not so much that he had grown older; for though the traces of
advancing life were visible he bore his age well, and seemed to
retain a wiry vigour and alertness. But the former aspect of an
intellectual and studious man, calm and quiet, which was what she
best remembered in him, had altogether vanished, and been
succeeded by a eager, searching, almost fierce, yet
carefully guarded look. It seemed to be his wish and purpose to
mask this expression with a smile, but the latter played him
false, and flickered over his visage so derisively that the
spectator could see his blackness all the better for it. Ever
and anon, too, there came a glare of red light out of his eyes,
as if the old man's soul were on fire and kept on smouldering
duskily within his breast, until by some casual puff of passion
it was blown into a momentary flame. This he repressed as
speedily as possible, and strove to look as if nothing of the
kind had happened.

In a word, old Roger Chillingworth was a striking evidence of
man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil, if he will
only, for a reasonable space of time, undertake a devil's office.
This unhappy person had effected such a transformation by
devoting himself for seven years to the constant analysis of a
heart full of torture, and deriving his enjoyment thence, and
adding fuel to those fiery tortures which he analysed and gloated
over.
The scarlet letter burned on Hester Prynne's bosom. Here was another ruin, the responsibility of which came partly home to her.

"What see you in my face," asked the physician, "that you look at it so earnestly?"

"Something that would make me weep, if there were any tears bitter enough for it," answered she. "But let it pass! It is of yonder miserable man that I would speak."

"And what of him?" cried Roger Chillingworth, eagerly, as if he loved the topic, and were glad of an opportunity to discuss it with the only person of whom he could make a confidant. "Not to hide the truth, Mistress Hester, my thoughts happen just now to be busy with the gentleman. So speak freely and I will make answer."

"When we last spake together," said Hester, "now seven years ago, it was your pleasure to extort a promise of secrecy as touching the former relation betwixt yourself and me. As the life and good fame of yonder man were in your hands there seemed no choice to me, save to be silent in accordance with your behest. Yet it was not without heavy misgivings that I thus bound myself, for, having cast off all duty towards other human beings, there
remained a duty towards him, and something whispered me that I
was betraying it in pledging myself to keep your counsel. Since
that day no man is so near to him as you. You tread behind his
every footstep. You are beside him, sleeping and waking. You
search his thoughts. You burrow and rankle in his heart! Your
clutch is on his life, and you cause him to die daily a living
death, and still he knows you not. In permitting this I have
surely acted a false part by the only man to whom the power was
left me to be true!"

"What choice had you?" asked Roger Chillingworth. "My finger,
pointed at this man, would have hurled him from his pulpit into a
dungeon, thence, peradventure, to the gallows!"

"It had been better so!" said Hester Prynne.

"What evil have I done the man?" asked Roger Chillingworth again.
"I tell thee, Hester Prynne, the richest fee that ever physician
earned from monarch could not have bought such care as I have
wasted on this miserable priest! But for my aid his
life would have burned away in torments within the first two
years after the perpetration of his crime and thine. For,
Hester, his spirit lacked the strength that could have borne up,
as thine has, beneath a burden like thy scarlet letter. Oh, I
could reveal a goodly secret! But enough. What art can do, I
have exhausted on him. That he now breathes and creeps about on
earth is owing all to me!"

"Better he had died at once!" said Hester Prynne.

"Yea, woman, thou sayest truly!" cried old Roger Chillingworth, letting the lurid fire of his heart blaze out before her eyes. "Better had he died at once! Never did mortal suffer what this man has suffered. And all, all, in the sight of his worst enemy! He has been conscious of me. He has felt an influence dwelling always upon him like a curse. He knew, by some spiritual sense--for the Creator never made another being so sensitive as this--he knew that no friendly hand was pulling at his heartstrings, and that an eye was looking curiously into him, which sought only evil, and found it. But he knew not that the eye and hand were mine! With the superstition common to his brotherhood, he fancied himself given over to a fiend, to be tortured with frightful dreams and desperate thoughts, the sting of remorse and despair of pardon, as a foretaste of what awaits him beyond the grave. But it was the constant shadow of my presence, the closest propinquity of the man whom he had most vilely wronged, and who had grown to exist only by this perpetual poison of the direst revenge! Yea, indeed, he did not err, there was a fiend at his elbow! A mortal man, with once a human heart, has become a fiend for his especial torment."

The unfortunate physician, while uttering these words, lifted his
hands with a look of horror, as if he had beheld some frightful shape, which he could not recognise, usurping the place of his own image in a glass. It was one of those moments—which sometimes occur only at the interval of years—when a man's moral aspect is faithfully revealed to his mind's eye. Not improbably he had never before viewed himself as he did now.

"Hast thou not tortured him enough?" said Hester, noticing the old man's look. "Has he not paid thee all?"

"No, no! He has but increased the debt!" answered the physician, and as he proceeded, his manner lost its fiercer characteristics, and subsided into gloom. "Dost thou remember me, Hester, as I was nine years ago? Even then I was in the autumn of my days, nor was it the early autumn. But all my life had been made up of earnest, studious, thoughtful, quiet years, bestowed faithfully for the increase of mine own knowledge, and faithfully, too, though this latter object was but casual to the other—faithfully for the advancement of human welfare. No life had been more peaceful and innocent than mine; few lives so rich with benefits conferred. Dost thou remember me? Was I not, though you might deem me cold, nevertheless a man thoughtful for others, craving little for himself—kind, true, just and of constant, if not warm affections? Was I not all this?"

"All this, and more," said Hester.
"And what am I now?" demanded he, looking into her face, and permitting the whole evil within him to be written on his features. "I have already told thee what I am—a fiend! Who made me so?"

"It was myself," cried Hester, shuddering. "It was I, not less than he. Why hast thou not avenged thyself on me?"

"I have left thee to the scarlet letter," replied Roger Chillingworth. "If that has not avenged me, I can do no more!"

He laid his finger on it with a smile.

"It has avenged thee," answered Hester Prynne.

"I judged no less," said the physician. "And now what wouldst thou with me touching this man?"

"I must reveal the secret," answered Hester, firmly. "He must discern thee in thy true character. What may be the result I know not. But this long debt of confidence, due from me to him, whose bane and ruin I have been, shall at length be paid. So far as concerns the overthrow or preservation of his fair fame and
his earthly state, and perchance his life, he is in my hands.
Nor do I--whom the scarlet letter has disciplined to truth,
though it be the truth of red-hot iron entering into the soul--nor
do I perceive such advantage in his living any longer a life
of ghastly emptiness, that I shall stoop to implore thy mercy.
Do with him as thou wilt! There is no good for him, no good for
me, no good for thee. There is no good for little Pearl. There
is no path to guide us out of this dismal maze."

"Woman, I could well-nigh pity thee," said Roger Chillingworth,
unable to restrain a thrill of admiration too, for there was a
quality almost majestic in the despair which she expressed.
"Thou hadst great elements. Peradventure, hadst thou met
earlier with a better love than mine, this evil had not been. I
pity thee, for the good that has been wasted in thy nature."

"And I thee," answered Hester Prynne, "for the hatred that has
transformed a wise and just man to a fiend! Wilt thou yet purge
it out of thee, and be once more human? If not for his sake,
then doubly for thine own! Forgive, and leave his further
retribution to the Power that claims it! I said, but now, that
there could be no good event for him, or thee, or me, who are
here wandering together in this gloomy maze of evil, and
stumbling at every step over the guilt wherewith we have strewn
our path. It is not so! There might be good for thee, and thee
alone, since thou hast been deeply wronged and hast it at thy
will to pardon. Wilt thou give up that only privilege? Wilt
"Peace, Hester--peace!" replied the old man, with gloomy sternness--"it is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy first step awry, thou didst plant the germ of evil; but since that moment it has all been a dark necessity. Ye that have wronged me are not sinful, save in a kind of typical illusion; neither am I fiend-like, who have snatched a fiend's office from his hands. It is our fate. Let the black flower blossom as it may! Now, go thy ways, and deal as thou wilt with yonder man."

He waved his hand, and betook himself again to his employment of gathering herbs.

XV. HESTER AND PEARL

So Roger Chillingworth--a deformed old figure with a face that haunted men's memories longer than they liked--took leave of Hester Prynne, and went stooping away along the earth. He gathered here and there a herb, or grubbed up a root and put it into the basket on his arm. His gray beard almost touched the ground as he crept onward. Hester gazed after him a little while, looking with a half fantastic curiosity to see whether the tender grass of early spring would not be blighted beneath him.
and show the wavering track of his footsteps, sere and brown,
across its cheerful verdure. She wondered what sort of herbs
they were which the old man was so sedulous to gather. Would not
the earth, quickened to an evil purpose by the sympathy of his
eye, greet him with poisonous shrubs of species hitherto unknown,
that would start up under his fingers? Or might it suffice him
that every wholesome growth should be converted into something
deleterious and malignant at his touch? Did the sun, which shone
so brightly everywhere else, really fall upon him? Or was there,
as it rather seemed, a circle of ominous shadow moving along with
his deformity whichever way he turned himself? And whither was
he now going? Would he not suddenly sink
into the earth, leaving a barren and blasted spot, where, in due
course of time, would be seen deadly nightshade, dogwood,
henbane, and whatever else of vegetable wickedness the climate
could produce, all flourishing with hideous luxuriance? Or would
he spread bat's wings and flee away, looking so much the uglier
the higher he rose towards heaven?

"Be it sin or no," said Hester Prynne, bitterly, as still she
gazed after him, "I hate the man!"

She upbraided herself for the sentiment, but could not overcome
or lessen it. Attempting to do so, she thought of those
long-past days in a distant land, when he used to emerge at
eventide from the seclusion of his study and sit down in the
firelight of their home, and in the light of her nuptial smile.
He needed to bask himself in that smile, he said, in order that
the chill of so many lonely hours among his books might be taken
off the scholar's heart. Such scenes had once appeared not
otherwise than happy, but now, as viewed through the dismal
medium of her subsequent life, they classed themselves among her
ugliest remembrances. She marvelled how such scenes could have
been! She marvelled how she could ever have been wrought upon to
marry him! She deemed in her crime most to be repented of, that
she had ever endured and reciprocated the lukewarm grasp of his
hand, and had suffered the smile of her lips and eyes to mingle
and melt into his own. And it seemed a fouler offence committed
by Roger Chillingworth than any which had since been done him,
that, in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her
to fancy herself happy by his side.

"Yes, I hate him!" repeated Hester more bitterly than before.
"He betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!"

Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along
with it the utmost passion of her heart! Else it may be their
miserable fortune, as it was Roger Chillingworth's, when some
mightier touch than their own may have awakened all her
sensibilities, to be reproached even for the calm content, the
marble image of happiness, which they will have imposed upon her
as the warm reality. But Hester ought long ago to have done with
this injustice. What did it betoken? Had seven long years,
under the torture of the scarlet letter, inflicted so much of
misery and wrought out no repentance?

The emotion of that brief space, while she stood gazing after the crooked figure of old Roger Chillingworth, threw a dark light on Hester's state of mind, revealing much that she might not otherwise have acknowledged to herself.

He being gone, she summoned back her child.

"Pearl! Little Pearl! Where are you?"

Pearl, whose activity of spirit never flagged, had been at no loss for amusement while her mother talked with the old gatherer of herbs. At first, as already told, she had flirted fancifully with her own image in a pool of water, beckoning the phantom forth, and--as it declined to venture--seeking a passage for herself into its sphere of impalpable earth and unattainable sky. Soon finding, however, that either she or the image was unreal, she turned elsewhere for better pastime. She made little boats out of birch-bark, and freighted them with snailshells, and sent out more ventures on the mighty deep than any merchant in New England; but the larger part of them foundered near the shore. She seized a live horse-shoe by the tail, and made prize of several five-fingers, and laid out a jelly-fish to melt in the warm sun. Then she took up the white foam that streaked the line of the advancing tide,
and threw it upon the breeze, scampering after it with winged footsteps to catch the great snowflakes ere they fell.

Perceiving a flock of beach-birds that fed and fluttered along the shore, the naughty child picked up her apron full of pebbles, and, creeping from rock to rock after these small sea-fowl, displayed remarkable dexterity in pelting them. One little gray bird, with a white breast, Pearl was almost sure had been hit by a pebble, and fluttered away with a broken wing. But then the elf-child sighed, and gave up her sport, because it grieved her to have done harm to a little being that was as wild as the sea-breeze, or as wild as Pearl herself.

Her final employment was to gather seaweed of various kinds, and make herself a scarf or mantle, and a head-dress, and thus assume the aspect of a little mermaid. She inherited her mother's gift for devising drapery and costume. As the last touch to her mermaid's garb, Pearl took some eel-grass and imitated, as best she could, on her own bosom the decoration with which she was so familiar on her mother's. A letter--the letter A--but freshly green instead of scarlet. The child bent her chin upon her breast, and contemplated this device with strange interest, even as if the one only thing for which she had been sent into the world was to make out its hidden import.

"I wonder if mother will ask me what it means?" thought Pearl.
Just then she heard her mother's voice, and, flitting along as lightly as one of the little sea-birds, appeared before Hester Prynne dancing, laughing, and pointing her finger to the ornament upon her bosom.

"My little Pearl," said Hester, after a moment's silence, "the green letter, and on thy childish bosom, has no purport. But dost thou know, my child, what this letter means which thy mother is doomed to wear?"

"Yes, mother," said the child. "It is the great letter A. Thou hast taught me in the horn-book."

Hester looked steadily into her little face; but though there was that singular expression which she had so often remarked in her black eyes, she could not satisfy herself whether Pearl really attached any meaning to the symbol. She felt a morbid desire to ascertain the point.

"Dost thou know, child, wherefore thy mother wears this letter?"

"Truly do I!" answered Pearl, looking brightly into her mother's face. "It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!"
"And what reason is that?" asked Hester, half smiling at the absurd incongruity of the child's observation; but on second thoughts turning pale.

"What has the letter to do with any heart save mine?"

"Nay, mother, I have told all I know," said Pearl, more seriously than she was wont to speak. "Ask yonder old man whom thou hast been talking with,--it may be he can tell. But in good earnest now, mother dear, what does this scarlet letter mean?--and why dost thou wear it on thy bosom?--and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"

She took her mother's hand in both her own, and gazed into her eyes with an earnestness that was seldom seen in her wild and capricious character. The thought occurred to Hester, that the child might really be seeking to approach her with childlike confidence, and doing what she could, and as intelligently as she knew how, to establish a meeting-point of sympathy. It showed Pearl in an unwonted aspect. Heretofore, the mother, while loving her child with the intensity of a sole affection, had schooled herself to hope for little other return than the waywardness of an April breeze, which spends its time in airy sport, and has its gusts of inexplicable passion, and is petulant in its best of moods, and chills oftener than caresses you, when you take it to your bosom; in requital of which misdemeanours it will sometimes,
of its own vague purpose, kiss your cheek with a kind of doubtful
tenderness, and play gently with your hair, and then be gone
about its other idle business, leaving a dreamy pleasure at your
heart. And this, moreover, was a mother's estimate of the
child's disposition. Any other observer might have seen few but
unamiable traits, and have given them a far darker colouring.
But now the idea came strongly into Hester's mind, that Pearl,
with her remarkable precocity and acuteness, might already have
approached the age when she could have been made a friend, and
intrusted with as much of her mother's sorrows as could be imparted,
without irreverence either to the parent or the child. In the little
chaos of Pearl's character there might be seen emerging and could
have been from the very first--the steadfast principles of an
unflinching courage--an uncontrollable will--sturdy pride,
which might be disciplined into self-respect--and a bitter
scorn of many things which, when examined, might be found to have
the taint of falsehood in them. She possessed affections, too,
though hitherto acrid and disagreeable, as are the richest
flavours of unripe fruit. With all these sterling attributes,
thought Hester, the evil which she inherited from her mother must
be great indeed, if a noble woman do not grow out of this elfish
child.

Pearl's inevitable tendency to hover about the enigma of the
scarlet letter seemed an innate quality of her being. From the
earliest epoch of her conscious life, she had entered upon this
as her appointed mission. Hester had often fancied that
Providence had a design of justice and retribution, in endowing the child with this marked propensity; but never, until now, had she bethought herself to ask, whether, linked with that design, there might not likewise be a purpose of mercy and beneficence.

If little Pearl were entertained with faith and trust, as a spirit messenger no less than an earthly child, might it not be her errand to soothe away the sorrow that lay cold in her mother's heart, and converted it into a tomb?--and to help her to overcome the passion, once so wild, and even yet neither dead nor asleep, but only imprisoned within the same tomb-like heart?

Such were some of the thoughts that now stirred in Hester's mind, with as much vivacity of impression as if they had actually been whispered into her ear. And there was little Pearl, all this while, holding her mother's hand in both her own, and turning her face upward, while she put these searching questions, once and again, and still a third time.

"What does the letter mean, mother? and why dost thou wear it? and why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"

"What shall I say?" thought Hester to herself. "No! if this be the price of the child's sympathy, I cannot pay it."

Then she spoke aloud--
"Silly Pearl," said she, "what questions are these? There are many things in this world that a child must not ask about. What know I of the minister's heart? And as for the scarlet letter, I wear it for the sake of its gold thread."

In all the seven bygone years, Hester Prynne had never before been false to the symbol on her bosom. It may be that it was the talisman of a stern and severe, but yet a guardian spirit, who now forsook her; as recognising that, in spite of his strict watch over her heart, some new evil had crept into it, or some old one had never been expelled. As for little Pearl, the earnestness soon passed out of her face.

But the child did not see fit to let the matter drop. Two or three times, as her mother and she went homeward, and as often at supper-time, and while Hester was putting her to bed, and once after she seemed to be fairly asleep, Pearl looked up, with mischief gleaming in her black eyes.

"Mother," said she, "what does the scarlet letter mean?"

And the next morning, the first indication the child gave of being awake was by popping up her head from the pillow, and making that other enquiry, which she had so unaccountably connected with her investigations about the scarlet letter--
"Mother!--Mother!--Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?"

"Hold thy tongue, naughty child!" answered her mother, with an asperity that she had never permitted to herself before. "Do not tease me; else I shall put thee into the dark closet!"

XVI. A FOREST WALK

Hester Prynne remained constant in her resolve to make known to Mr. Dimmesdale, at whatever risk of present pain or ulterior consequences, the true character of the man who had crept into his intimacy. For several days, however, she vainly sought an opportunity of addressing him in some of the meditative walks which she knew him to be in the habit of taking along the shores of the Peninsula, or on the wooded hills of the neighbouring country. There would have been no scandal, indeed, nor peril to the holy whiteness of the clergyman's good fame, had she visited him in his own study, where many a penitent, ere now, had confessed sins of perhaps as deep a dye as the one betokened by the scarlet letter. But, partly that she dreaded the secret or undisguised interference of old Roger Chillingworth, and partly that her conscious heart imparted suspicion where none could have been felt, and partly that both the minister and she would need the whole wide world to breathe in, while they talked together--for
all these reasons Hester never thought of meeting him in any
narrower privacy than beneath the open sky.

At last, while attending a sick chamber, whither the Rev. Mr.
Dimmesdale had been summoned to make a prayer, she learnt that
he had gone, the day before, to visit the Apostle Eliot, among his
Indian converts. He would probably return by a certain hour in the
afternoon of the morrow. Betimes, therefore, the next day, Hester
took little Pearl--who was necessarily the companion of all her
mother's expeditions, however inconvenient her presence--and set forth.

The road, after the two wayfarers had crossed from the Peninsula
to the mainland, was no other than a foot-path. It straggled
onward into the mystery of the primeval forest. This hemmed it
in so narrowly, and stood so black and dense on either side, and
disclosed such imperfect glimpses of the sky above, that, to
Hester's mind, it imaged not amiss the moral wilderness in which
she had so long been wandering. The day was chill and sombre.
Overhead was a gray expanse of cloud, slightly stirred, however,
by a breeze; so that a gleam of flickering sunshine might now and
then be seen at its solitary play along the path. This flitting
cheerfulness was always at the further extremity of some long
vista through the forest. The sportive sunlight--feeibly
sportive, at best, in the predominant pensiveness of the day and
scene--withdrew itself as they came nigh, and left the spots
where it had danced the drearier, because they had hoped to find
them bright.
"Mother," said little Pearl, "the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself, because it is afraid of something on your bosom. Now, see! There it is, playing a good way off. Stand you here, and let me run and catch it. I am but a child. It will not flee from me--for I wear nothing on my bosom yet!"

"Nor ever will, my child, I hope," said Hester.

"And why not, mother?" asked Pearl, stopping short, just at the beginning of her race. "Will not it come of its own accord when I am a woman grown?"

"Run away, child," answered her mother, "and catch the sunshine. It will soon be gone."

Pearl set forth at a great pace, and as Hester smiled to perceive, did actually catch the sunshine, and stood laughing in the midst of it, all brightened by its splendour, and scintillating with the vivacity excited by rapid motion. The light lingered about the lonely child, as if glad of such a playmate, until her mother had drawn almost nigh enough to step into the magic circle too.

"It will go now," said Pearl, shaking her head.
"See!" answered Hester, smiling; "now I can stretch out my hand and grasp some of it."

As she attempted to do so, the sunshine vanished; or, to judge from the bright expression that was dancing on Pearl's features, her mother could have fancied that the child had absorbed it into herself, and would give it forth again, with a gleam about her path, as they should plunge into some gloomier shade. There was no other attribute that so much impressed her with a sense of new and untransmitted vigour in Pearl's nature, as this never failing vivacity of spirits: she had not the disease of sadness, which almost all children, in these latter days, inherit, with the scrofula, from the troubles of their ancestors. Perhaps this, too, was a disease, and but the reflex of the wild energy with which Hester had fought against her sorrows before Pearl's birth. It was certainly a doubtful charm, imparting a hard, metallic lustre to the child's character. She wanted--what some people want throughout life--a grief that should deeply touch her, and thus humanise and make her capable of sympathy. But there was time enough yet for little Pearl.

"Come, my child!" said Hester, looking about her from the spot where Pearl had stood still in the sunshine--"we will sit down a little way within the wood, and rest ourselves."
"I am not aweary, mother," replied the little girl. "But you may
sit down, if you will tell me a story meanwhile."

"A story, child!" said Hester. "And about what?"

"Oh, a story about the Black Man," answered Pearl, taking hold of
her mother's gown, and looking up, half earnestly, half
mischievously, into her face.

"How he haunts this forest, and carries a book with him a big,
heavy book, with iron clasps; and how this ugly Black Man offers
his book and an iron pen to everybody that meets him here among
the trees; and they are to write their names with their own
blood; and then he sets his mark on their bosoms. Didst thou
ever meet the Black Man, mother?"

"And who told you this story, Pearl," asked her mother,
recognising a common superstition of the period.

"It was the old dame in the chimney corner, at the house where
you watched last night," said the child. "But she fancied me
asleep while she was talking of it. She said that a thousand and
a thousand people had met him here, and had written in his
book, and have his mark on them. And that ugly tempered lady,
old Mistress Hibbins, was one. And, mother, the old dame said
that this scarlet letter was the Black Man's mark on thee, and
that it glows like a red flame when thou meetest him at midnight,
here in the dark wood. Is it true, mother? And dost thou go to
meet him in the nighttime?"

"Didst thou ever awake and find thy mother gone?" asked Hester.
"Not that I remember," said the child. "If thou fearest to leave
me in our cottage, thou mightest take me along with thee. I
would very gladly go! But, mother, tell me now! Is there such a
Black Man? And didst thou ever meet him? And is this his mark?"

"Wilt thou let me be at peace, if I once tell thee?" asked her
mother.

"Yes, if thou tellest me all," answered Pearl.

"Once in my life I met the Black Man!" said her mother. This
scarlet letter is his mark!"

Thus conversing, they entered sufficiently deep into the wood to
secure themselves from the observation of any casual passenger
along the forest track. Here they sat down on a luxuriant heap
of moss; which at some epoch of the preceding century, had been a
gigantic pine, with its roots and trunk in the darksome shade,
and its head aloft in the upper atmosphere It was a little dell
where they had seated themselves, with a leaf-strewn bank rising
gently on either side, and a brook flowing through the midst,
over a bed of fallen and drowned leaves. The trees impending
over it had flung down great branches from time to time, which
choked up the current, and compelled it to form eddies and black
depths at some points; while, in its swifter and livelier passages there
appeared a channel-way of pebbles, and brown, sparkling sand. Letting the
eyes follow along the course of the stream, they could catch the
reflected light from its water, at some short distance within the
forest, but soon lost all traces of it amid the bewilderment of
tree-trunks and underbush, and here and there a huge rock covered
over with gray lichens. All these giant trees and boulders of
granite seemed intent on making a mystery of the course of this
small brook; fearing, perhaps, that, with its never-ceasing
loquacity, it should whisper tales out of the heart of the old
forest whence it flowed, or mirror its revelations on the smooth
surface of a pool. Continually, indeed, as it stole onward, the
streamlet kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but
melancholy, like the voice of a young child that was spending its
infancy without playfulness, and knew not how to be merry among
sad acquaintance and events of sombre hue.

"Oh, brook! Oh, foolish and tiresome little brook!" cried Pearl,
after listening awhile to its talk, "Why art thou so sad? Pluck
up a spirit, and do not be all the time sighing and murmuring!"

But the brook, in the course of its little lifetime among the
forest trees, had gone through so solemn an experience that it could not help talking about it, and seemed to have nothing else to say. Pearl resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a well-spring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom. But, unlike the little stream, she danced and sparkled, and prattled airily along her course.

"What does this sad little brook say, mother? inquired she.

"If thou hadst a sorrow of thine own, the brook might tell thee of it," answered her mother, "even as it is telling me of mine. But now, Pearl, I hear a footstep along the path, and the noise of one putting aside the branches. I would have thee betake thyself to play, and leave me to speak with him that comes yonder."

"Is it the Black Man?" asked Pearl.

"Wilt thou go and play, child?" repeated her mother, "But do not stray far into the wood. And take heed that thou come at my first call."

"Yes, mother," answered Pearl, "But if it be the Black Man, wilt thou not let me stay a moment, and look at him, with his big book under his arm?"
"Go, silly child!" said her mother impatiently. "It is no Black
Man! Thou canst see him now, through the trees. It is the
minister!"

"And so it is!" said the child. "And, mother, he has his hand
over his heart! Is it because, when the minister wrote his name
in the book, the Black Man set his mark in that place? But why
does he not wear it outside his bosom, as thou dost, mother?"

"Go now, child, and thou shalt tease me as thou wilt another
time," cried Hester Prynne. "But do not stray far. Keep where
thou canst hear the babble of the brook."

The child went singing away, following up the current of the
brook, and striving to mingle a more lightsome cadence with its
melancholy voice. But the little
stream would not be comforted, and still kept telling its
unintelligible secret of some very mournful mystery that had
happened--or making a prophetic lamentation about something
that was yet to happen--within the verge of the dismal forest.
So Pearl, who had enough of shadow in her own little life, chose
to break off all acquaintance with this repining brook. She set
herself, therefore, to gathering violets and wood-anemones, and
some scarlet columbines that she found growing in the crevice of
a high rock.
When her elf-child had departed, Hester Prynne made a step or two towards the track that led through the forest, but still remained under the deep shadow of the trees. She beheld the minister advancing along the path entirely alone, and leaning on a staff which he had cut by the wayside. He looked haggard and feeble, and betrayed a nerveless despondency in his air, which had never so remarkably characterised him in his walks about the settlement, nor in any other situation where he deemed himself liable to notice. Here it was woefully visible, in this intense seclusion of the forest, which of itself would have been a heavy trial to the spirits. There was a listlessness in his gait, as if he saw no reason for taking one step further, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of anything, to fling himself down at the root of the nearest tree, and lie there passive for evermore. The leaves might bestrew him, and the soil gradually accumulate and form a little hillock over his frame, no matter whether there were life in it or no. Death was too definite an object to be wished for or avoided.

To Hester's eye, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale exhibited no symptom of positive and vivacious suffering, except that, as little Pearl had remarked, he kept his hand over his heart.

XVII. THE PASTOR AND HIS PARISHIONER
Slowly as the minister walked, he had almost gone by before
Hester Prynne could gather voice enough to attract his
observation. At length she succeeded.

"Arthur Dimmesdale!" she said, faintly at first, then louder,
but hoarsely--"Arthur Dimmesdale!"

"Who speaks?" answered the minister. Gathering himself quickly
up, he stood more erect, like a man taken by surprise in a mood
to which he was reluctant to have witnesses. Throwing his eyes
anxiously in the direction of the voice, he indistinctly beheld a
form under the trees, clad in garments so sombre, and so little
relieved from the gray twilight into which the clouded sky and
the heavy foliage had darkened the noontide, that he knew not
whether it were a woman or a shadow. It may be that his pathway
through life was haunted thus by a spectre that had stolen out
from among his thoughts.

He made a step nigher, and discovered the scarlet letter.

"Hester! Hester Prynne!, said he; "is it thou? Art thou in
life?"

"Even so." she answered. "In such life as has been mine these
seven years past! And thou, Arthur Dimmesdale, dost thou yet live?"
It was no wonder that they thus questioned one another's actual and bodily existence, and even doubted of their own. So strangely did they meet in the dim wood that it was like the first encounter in the world beyond the grave of two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life, but now stood coldly shuddering in mutual dread, as not yet familiar with their state, nor wonted to the companionship of disembodied beings.

Each a ghost, and awe-stricken at the other ghost. They were awe-stricken likewise at themselves, because the crisis flung back to them their consciousness, and revealed to each heart its history and experience, as life never does, except at such breathless epochs. The soul beheld its features in the mirror of the passing moment. It was with fear, and tremulously, and, as it were, by a slow, reluctant necessity, that Arthur Dimmesdale put forth his hand, chill as death, and touched the chill hand of Hester Prynne. The grasp, cold as it was, took away what was dreariest in the interview. They now felt themselves, at least, inhabitants of the same sphere.

Without a word more spoken—neither he nor she assuming the guidance, but with an unexpressed consent—they glided back into the shadow of the woods whence Hester had emerged, and sat down on the heap of moss where she and Pearl had before been sitting. When they found voice to speak, it was at first only to utter remarks and inquiries such as any two acquaintances might have made, about the gloomy sky, the threatening storm, and,
next, the health of each. Thus they went onward, not boldly, but step
by step, into the themes that were brooding deepest in their
hearts. So long estranged by fate and circumstances, they needed
something slight and casual to run before and throw open the
doors of intercourse, so that their real thoughts might be led
across the threshold.

After awhile, the minister fixed his eyes on Hester Prynne's.

"Hester," said he, "hast thou found peace?"

She smiled drearily, looking down upon her bosom.

"Hast thou?" she asked.

"None--nothing but despair!" he answered. "What else could I
look for, being what I am, and leading such a life as mine? Were
I an atheist--a man devoid of conscience--a wretch with
course and brutal instincts--I might have found peace long ere
now. Nay, I never should have lost it. But, as matters stand
with my soul, whatever of good capacity there originally was in
me, all of God's gifts that were the choicest have become the
ministers of spiritual torment. Hester, I am most miserable!"

"The people reverence thee," said Hester. "And surely thou
workest good among them! Doth this bring thee no comfort?"

"More misery, Hester!—Only the more misery!" answered the clergyman with a bitter smile. "As concerns the good which I may appear to do, I have no faith in it. It must needs be a delusion. What can a ruined soul like mine effect towards the redemption of other souls?—or a polluted soul towards their purification? And as for the people's reverence, would that it were turned to scorn and hatred! Canst thou deem it, Hester, a consolation that I must stand up in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it!—must see my flock hungry for the truth, and listening to my words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking!—and then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolise? I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it!"

"You wrong yourself in this," said Hester gently.

"You have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace?"
"No, Hester--no!" replied the clergyman. "There is no substance in it! It is cold and dead, and can do nothing for me! Of penance, I have had enough! Of penitence, there has been none! Else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness, and have shown myself to mankind as they will see me at the judgment-seat. Happy are you, Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret! Thou little knowest what a relief it is, after the torment of a seven years' cheat, to look into an eye that recognises me for what I am! Had I one friend--or were it my worst enemy!--to whom, when sickened with the praises of all other men, I could daily betake myself, and known as the vilest of all sinners, methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby. Even thus much of truth would save me! But now, it is all falsehood!--all emptiness!--all death!"

Hester Prynne looked into his face, but hesitated to speak. Yet, uttering his long-restrained emotions so vehemently as he did, his words here offered her the very point of circumstances in which to interpose what she came to say. She conquered her fears, and spoke:

"Such a friend as thou hast even now wished for," said she, "with whom to weep over thy sin, thou hast in me, the partner of it!"

Again she hesitated, but brought out the words with an effort

"Thou hast long had such an enemy, and dwellest with him, under the same roof!"
The minister started to his feet, gasping for breath, and clutching at his heart, as if he would have torn it out of his bosom.

"Ha! What sayest thou?" cried he. "An enemy! And under mine own roof! What mean you?"

Hester Prynne was now fully sensible of the deep injury for which she was responsible to this unhappy man, in permitting him to lie for so many years, or, indeed, for a single moment, at the mercy of one whose purposes could not be other than malevolent. The very contiguity of his enemy, beneath whatever mask the latter might conceal himself, was enough to disturb the magnetic sphere of a being so sensitive as Arthur Dimmesdale. There had been a period when Hester was less alive to this consideration; or, perhaps, in the misanthropy of her own trouble, she left the minister to bear what she might picture to herself as a more tolerable doom. But of late, since the night of his vigil, all her sympathies towards him had been both softened and invigorated. She now read his heart more accurately. She doubted not that the continual presence of Roger Chillingworth--the secret poison of his malignity, infecting all the air about him--and his authorised interference, as a physician, with the minister's physical and spiritual infirmities--that these bad opportunities had been turned to a cruel
purpose. By means of them, the sufferer's conscience had been kept in an irritated state, the tendency of which was, not to cure by wholesome pain, but to disorganize and corrupt his spiritual being. Its result, on earth, could hardly fail to be insanity, and hereafter, that eternal alienation from the Good and True, of which madness is perhaps the earthly type.

Such was the ruin to which she had brought the man, once--nay, why should we not speak it?--still so passionately loved! Hester felt that the sacrifice of the clergyman's good name, and death itself, as she had already told Roger Chillingworth, would have been infinitely preferable to the alternative which she had taken upon herself to choose. And now, rather than have had this grievous wrong to confess, she would gladly have laid down on the forest leaves, and died there, at Arthur Dimmesdale's feet.

"Oh, Arthur!" cried she, "forgive me! In all things else, I have striven to be true! Truth was the one virtue which I might have held fast, and did hold fast, through all extremity; save when thy good--thy life--thy fame--were put in question! Then I consented to a deception. But a lie is never good, even though death threaten on the other side! Dost thou not see what I would say? That old man!--the physician!--he whom they call Roger Chillingworth!--he was my husband!"

The minister looked at her for an instant, with all that violence
of passion, which—intermixed in more shapes than one with his
higher, purer, softer qualities—was, in fact, the portion of
him which the devil claimed, and through which he sought to win
the rest. Never was there a blacker or a fiercer frown than
Hester now encountered. For the brief space that it lasted, it
was a dark transfiguration. But his character had been so much
enfeebled by suffering, that even its lower energies were
incapable of more than a temporary struggle. He sank down on the
ground, and buried his face in his hands.

"I might have known it," murmured he—"I did know it! Was not
the secret told me, in the natural recoil of my heart at the
first sight of him, and as often as I have seen him since? Why
did I not understand? Oh, Hester Prynne, thou little, little
knowest all the horror of this thing! And the shame!—the
indelicacy!—the horrible ugliness of this exposure of a sick
and guilty heart to the very eye that would gloat over it!
Woman, woman, thou art accountable for this!—I cannot forgive
thee!"

"Thou shalt forgive me!" cried Hester, flinging herself on the
fallen leaves beside him. "Let God punish! Thou shalt forgive!"

With sudden and desperate tenderness she threw her arms around
him, and pressed his head against her bosom, little caring though
his cheek rested on the scarlet letter. He would have released himself,
but strove in vain to do so. Hester would not set him free, lest he
should look her sternly in the face. All the world had frowned on
her--for seven long years had it frowned upon this lonely
woman--and still she bore it all, nor ever once turned away her firm,
sad eyes. Heaven, likewise, had frowned upon her, and she had
not died. But the frown of this pale, weak, sinful, and
sorrow-stricken man was what Hester could not bear, and live!

"Wilt thou yet forgive me?" she repeated, over and over again.
"Wilt thou not frown? Wilt thou forgive?"

"I do forgive you, Hester," replied the minister at length, with
a deep utterance, out of an abyss of sadness, but no anger. "I
freely forgive you now. May God forgive us both. We are not,
Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than
even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been
blackier than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the
sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so!"

"Never, never!" whispered she. "What we did had a consecration
of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other. Hast thou
forgotten it?"

"Hush, Hester!" said Arthur Dimmesdale, rising from the ground.
"No; I have not forgotten!"
They sat down again, side by side, and hand clasped in hand, on
the mossy trunk of the fallen tree. Life had never brought them
a gloomier hour; it was the point whither their pathway had so
long been tending, and darkening ever, as it stole along—and
yet it unclosed a charm that made them linger upon it, and claim
another, and another, and, after all, another
moment. The forest was obscure around them, and creaked with a
blast that was passing through it. The boughs were tossing
heavily above their heads; while one solemn old tree groaned
dolefully to another, as if telling the sad story of the pair
that sat beneath, or constrained to forbode evil to come.

And yet they lingered. How dreary looked the forest-track that
led backward to the settlement, where Hester Prynne must take up
again the burden of her ignominy and the minister the hollow
mockery of his good name! So they lingered an instant longer.
No golden light had ever been so precious as the gloom of this
dark forest. Here seen only by his eyes, the scarlet letter need
not burn into the bosom of the fallen woman! Here seen only by
her eyes, Arthur Dimmesdale, false to God and man, might be, for
one moment true!

He started at a thought that suddenly occurred to him.

"Hester!" cried he, "here is a new horror! Roger Chillingworth
knows your purpose to reveal his true character. Will he continue, then, to keep our secret? What will now be the course of his revenge?"

"There is a strange secrecy in his nature," replied Hester, thoughtfully; "and it has grown upon him by the hidden practices of his revenge. I deem it not likely that he will betray the secret. He will doubtless seek other means of satiating his dark passion."

"And I! --how am I to live longer, breathing the same air with this deadly enemy?" exclaimed Arthur Dimmesdale, shrinking within himself, and pressing his hand nervously against his heart--a gesture that had grown involuntary with him. "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!"

"Thou must dwell no longer with this man," said Hester, slowly and firmly. "Thy heart must be no longer under his evil eye!"

"It were far worse than death!" replied the minister. "But how to avoid it? What choice remains to me? Shall I lie down again on these withered leaves, where I cast myself when thou didst tell me what he was? Must I sink down there, and die at once?"
"Alas! what a ruin has befallen thee!" said Hester, with the tears gushing into her eyes. "Wilt thou die for very weakness? There is no other cause!"

"The judgment of God is on me," answered the conscience-stricken priest. "It is too mighty for me to struggle with!"

"Heaven would show mercy," rejoined Hester, "hadst thou but the strength to take advantage of it."

"Be thou strong for me!" answered he. "Advise me what to do."

"Is the world, then, so narrow?" exclaimed Hester Prynne, fixing her deep eyes on the minister's, and instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued that it could hardly hold itself erect. "Doth the universe lie within the compass of yonder town, which only a little time ago was but a leaf-strewn desert, as lonely as this around us? Whither leads yonder forest-track? Backward to the settlement, thou sayest! Yes; but, onward, too! Deeper it goes, and deeper into the wilderness, less plainly to be seen at every step; until some few miles hence the yellow leaves will show no vestige of the white man's tread. There thou art free! So brief a journey would bring thee from a world where thou hast been most wretched, to one where thou mayest still be happy! Is there not shade enough in all this boundless forest to hide thy heart from the gaze of
Roger Chillingworth?

"Yes, Hester; but only under the fallen leaves!" replied the minister, with a sad smile.

"Then there is the broad pathway of the sea!" continued Hester.

"It brought thee hither. If thou so choose, it will bear thee back again. In our native land, whether in some remote rural village, or in vast London—or, surely, in Germany, in France, in pleasant Italy—thou wouldst be beyond his power and knowledge! And what hast thou to do with all these iron men, and their opinions? They have kept thy better part in bondage too long already!"

"It cannot be!" answered the minister, listening as if he were called upon to realise a dream. "I am powerless to go. Wretched and sinful as I am, I have had no other thought than to drag on my earthly existence in the sphere where Providence hath placed me. Lost as my own soul is, I would still do what I may for other human souls! I dare not quit my post, though an unfaithful sentinel, whose sure reward is death and dishonour, when his dreary watch shall come to an end!"

"Thou art crushed under this seven years' weight of misery," replied Hester, fervently resolved to buoy him up with her own energy. "But thou shalt leave it all behind thee! It shall not
cumber thy steps, as thou treadest along the forest-path: neither
shalt thou freight the ship with it, if thou prefer to cross the sea.

Leave this wreck and ruin here where it hath happened. Meddle no
more with it! Begin all anew! Hast thou exhausted possibility
in the failure of this one trial? Not so! The future is yet
full of trial and success. There is happiness to be enjoyed!

There is good to be done! Exchange this false life of thine for
a true one. Be, if thy spirit summon thee to such a mission, the
teacher and apostle of the red men. Or, as is more thy nature,
be a scholar and a sage among the wisest and the most renowned of
the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save
to lie down and die! Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale, and
make thyself another, and a high one, such as thou canst wear
without fear or shame. Why shouldst thou tarry so much as one
other day in the torments that have so gnawed into thy life?
that have made thee feeble to will and to do? that will leave
thee powerless even to repent? Up, and away!"

"Oh, Hester!" cried Arthur Dimmesdale, in whose eyes a fitful
light, kindled by her enthusiasm, flashed up and died away, "thou
tellest of running a race to a man whose knees are tottering
beneath him! I must die here! There is not the strength or
courage left me to venture into the wide, strange, difficult
world alone!"

It was the last expression of the despondency of a broken spirit.
He lacked energy to grasp the better fortune that seemed within
his reach.

He repeated the word--"Alone, Hester!"

"Thou shall not go alone!" answered she, in a deep whisper.

Then, all was spoken!

XVIII. A FLOOD OF SUNSHINE

Arthur Dimmesdale gazed into Hester's face with a look in which hope and joy shone out, indeed, but with fear betwixt them, and a kind of horror at her boldness, who had spoken what he vaguely hinted at, but dared not speak.

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate, and shadowy as the untamed forest, amid the gloom of which they were now holding a colloquy that was to decide their fate. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or
legislators had established; criticising all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers--stern and wild ones--and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss.

The minister, on the other hand, had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws; although, in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them. But this had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose. Since that wretched epoch, he had watched with morbid zeal and minuteness, not his acts--for those it was easy to arrange--but each breath of emotion, and his every thought. At the head of the social system, as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more trammelled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in. As a man who had once sinned, but who kept his conscience all alive and painfully sensitive by the fretting of an unhealed wound, he might have been supposed safer within the line of virtue than if he had never sinned at all.

Thus we seem to see that, as regarded Hester Prynne, the whole seven years of outlaw and ignominy had been little other than a
preparation for this very hour. But Arthur Dimmesdale! Were such a man once more to fall, what plea could be urged in extenuation of his crime? None; unless it avail him somewhat that he was broker, down by long and exquisite suffering; that his mind was darkened and confused by the very remorse which harrowed it; that, between fleeing as an avowed criminal, and remaining as a hypocrite, conscience might find it hard to strike the balance; that it was human to avoid the peril of death and infamy, and the inscrutable machinations of an enemy; that, finally, to this poor pilgrim, on his dreary and desert path, faint, sick, miserable, there appeared a glimpse of human affection and sympathy, a new life, and a true one, in exchange for the heavy doom which he was now expiating. And be the stern and sad truth spoken, that the breach which guilt has once made into the human soul is never, in this mortal state, repaired. It may be watched and guarded, so that the enemy shall not force his way again into the citadel, and might even in his subsequent assaults, select some other avenue, in preference to that where he had formerly succeeded. But there is still the ruined wall, and near it the stealthy tread of the foe that would win over again his unforgotten triumph.

The struggle, if there were one, need not be described. Let it suffice that the clergyman resolved to flee, and not alone.

"If in all these past seven years," thought he, "I could recall one instant of peace or hope, 1 would yet endure, for the sake of
that earnest of Heaven's mercy. But now--since I am irrevocably doomed--wherefore should I not snatch the solace allowed to the condemned culprit before his execution? Or, if this be the path to a better life, as Hester would persuade me, I surely give up no fairer prospect by pursuing it! Neither can I any longer live without her companionship; so powerful is she to sustain--so tender to soothe! O Thou to whom I dare not lift mine eyes, wilt Thou yet pardon me?"

"Thou wilt go!" said Hester calmly, as he met her glance.

The decision once made, a glow of strange enjoyment threw its flickering brightness over the trouble of his breast. It was the exhilarating effect--upon a prisoner just escaped from the dungeon of his own heart--of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianised, lawless region His spirit rose, as it were, with a bound, and attained a nearer prospect of the sky, than throughout all the misery which had kept him grovelling on the earth. Of a deeply religious temperament, there was inevitably a tinge of the devotional in his mood.

"Do I feel joy again?" cried he, wondering at himself. "Methought the germ of it was dead in me! Oh, Hester, thou art my better angel! I seem to have flung myself--sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened--down upon these forest
leaves, and to have risen up all made anew, and with new powers
to glorify Him that hath been merciful! This is already the
better life! Why did we not find it sooner?"

"Let us not look back," answered Hester Prynne. "The past is
gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this
symbol I undo it all, and make it as if it had never been!"

So speaking, she undid the clasp that fastened the scarlet
letter, and, taking it from her bosom, threw it to a distance
among the withered leaves. The mystic token alighted on the
hither verge of the stream. With a hand’s-breadth further
flight, it would have fallen into the water, and have give, the
little brook another woe to carry onward, besides
the unintelligible tale which it still kept murmuring about. But
there lay the embroidered letter, glittering like a lost jewel,
which some ill-fated wanderer might pick up, and thenceforth be
haunted by strange phantoms of guilt, sinkings of the heart, and
unaccountable misfortune.

The stigma gone, Hester heaved a long, deep sigh, in which the
burden of shame and anguish departed from her spirit. O
exquisite relief! She had not known the weight until she felt
the freedom! By another impulse, she took off the formal cap
that confined her hair, and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark
and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and
imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. And, as if the gloom of the earth and sky had been but the effluence of these two mortal hearts, it vanished with their sorrow. All at once, as with a sudden smile of heaven, forth burst the sunshine, pouring a very flood into the obscure forest, gladdening each green leaf, transmuting the yellow fallen ones to gold, and gleaming adown the gray trunks of the solemn trees. The objects that had made a shadow hitherto, embodied the brightness now. The course of the little brook might be traced by its merry gleam afar into the wood's heart of mystery, which had become a mystery of joy.

Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits! Love, whether newly-born, or aroused from a death-like slumber, must always create a sunshine, filling the heart so full of radiance, that it overflows upon the outward world. Had the forest still kept its gloom, it would have been bright in Hester's eyes, and bright in Arthur Dimmesdale's!
Hester looked at him with a thrill of another joy.

"Thou must know Pearl!" said she. "Our little Pearl! Thou hast seen her--yes, I know it!--but thou wilt see her now with other eyes. She is a strange child! I hardly comprehend her! But thou wilt love her dearly, as I do, and wilt advise me how to deal with her!"

"Dost thou think the child will be glad to know me?" asked the minister, somewhat uneasily. "I have long shrunk from children, because they often show a distrust--a backwardness to be familiar with me. I have even been afraid of little Pearl!"

"Ah, that was sad!" answered the mother. "But she will love thee dearly, and thou her. She is not far off. I will call her. Pearl! Pearl!"

"I see the child," observed the minister. "Yonder she is, standing in a streak of sunshine, a good way off, on the other side of the brook. So thou thinkest the child will love me?"

Hester smiled, and again called to Pearl, who was visible at some distance, as the minister had described her, like a bright-apparelled vision in a sunbeam, which fell down upon her through an arch of
boughs. The ray quivered to and fro, making her figure dim or
distinct--now like a real child, now like a child's spirit--as the
splendour went and came again. She heard her mother's voice,
and approached slowly through the forest.

Pearl had not found the hour pass wearisomely while her mother
sat talking with the clergyman. The great black forest--stern
as it showed itself to those who brought the guilt and troubles
of the world into its bosom--became the playmate of the lonely
infant, as well as it knew how. Sombre as it was, it put on the
kindest of its moods to welcome her. It offered her the
partridge-berries, the growth of the preceding autumn, but
ripening only in the spring, and now red as drops of blood upon
the withered leaves. These Pearl gathered, and was pleased with
their wild flavour. The small denizens of the wilderness hardly
took pains to move out of her path. A partridge, indeed, with a
brood of ten behind her, ran forward threateningly, but soon
repented of her fierceness, and clucked to her young ones not to
be afraid. A pigeon, alone on a low branch, allowed Pearl to
come beneath, and uttered a sound as much of greeting as alarm.
A squirrel, from the lofty depths of his domestic tree, chattered
either in anger or merriment--for the squirrel is such a
choleric and humorous little personage, that it is hard to
distinguish between his moods--so he chattered at the child,
and flung down a nut upon her head. It was a last year's nut,
and already gnawed by his sharp tooth. A fox, startled from his
sleep by her light footstep on the leaves, looked inquisitively at
Pearl, as doubting whether it were better to steal off, or renew his nap on the same spot. A wolf, it is said— but here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable— came up and smelt of Pearl's robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand. The truth seems to be, however, that the mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognised a kindred wilderness in the human child.

And she was gentler here than in the grassy-margined streets of the settlement, or in her mother's cottage. The Bowers appeared to know it, and one and another whispered as she passed, "Adorn thyself with me, thou beautiful child, adorn thyself with me!"--and, to please them, Pearl gathered the violets, and anemones, and columbines, and some twigs of the freshest green, which the old trees held down before her eyes. With these she decorated her hair and her young waist, and became a nymph child, or an infant dryad, or whatever else was in closest sympathy with the antique wood. In such guise had Pearl adorned herself, when she heard her mother's voice, and came slowly back.

Slowly—for she saw the clergyman!

XIX. THE CHILD AT THE BROOKSIDE

"Thou will love her dearly," repeated Hester Prynne, as she and the minister sat watching little Pearl. "Dost thou not think her
beautiful? And see with what natural skill she has made those simple flowers adorn her! Had she gathered pearls, and diamonds, and rubies in the wood, they could not have become her better! She is a splendid child! But I know whose brow she has!"

"Dost thou know, Hester," said Arthur Dimmesdale, with an unquiet smile, "that this dear child, tripping about always at thy side, hath caused me many an alarm? Methought--oh, Hester, what a thought is that, and how terrible to dread it!--that my own features were partly repeated in her face, and so strikingly that the world might see them! But she is mostly thine!"

"No, no! Not mostly!" answered the mother, with a tender smile.

"A little longer, and thou needest not to be afraid to trace whose child she is. But how strangely beautiful she looks with those wild flowers in her hair! It is as if one of the fairies, whom we left in dear old England, had decked her out to meet us."

It was with a feeling which neither of them had ever before experienced, that they sat and watched Pearl's slow advance. In her was visible the tie that united them. She had been offered to the world, these seven past years, as the living hieroglyphic, in which was revealed the secret they so darkly sought to hide--all written in this symbol--all plainly manifest--had there been a prophet or magician skilled to read the character of flame! And Pearl was the oneness of their
being. Be the foregone evil what it might, how could they doubt that their earthly lives and future destinies were conjoined when they beheld at once the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met, and were to dwell immortally together; thoughts like these--and perhaps other thoughts, which they did not acknowledge or define--threw an awe about the child as she came onward.

"Let her see nothing strange--no passion or eagerness--in thy way of accosting her," whispered Hester. "Our Pearl is a fitful and fantastic little elf sometimes. Especially she is generally intolerant of emotion, when she does not fully comprehend the why and wherefore. But the child hath strong affections! She loves me, and will love thee!"

"Thou canst not think," said the minister, glancing aside at Hester Prynne, "how my heart dreads this interview, and yearns for it! But, in truth, as I already told thee, children are not readily won to be familiar with me. They will not climb my knee, nor prattle in my ear, nor answer to my smile, but stand apart, and eye me strangely. Even little babes, when I take them in my arms, weep bitterly. Yet Pearl, twice in her little lifetime, hath been kind to me! The first time--thou knowest it well! The last was when thou ledst her with thee to the house of yonder stern old Governor."
"And thou didst plead so bravely in her behalf and mine!"

answered the mother. "I remember it; and so shall little Pearl. Fear nothing. She may be strange and shy at first, but will soon learn to love thee!"

By this time Pearl had reached the margin of the brook, and stood on the further side, gazing silently at Hester and the clergyman, who still sat together on the mossy tree-trunk waiting to receive her. Just where she had paused, the brook chanced to form a pool so smooth and quiet that it reflected a perfect image of her little figure, with all the brilliant picturesqueness of her beauty, in its adornment of flowers and wreathed foliage, but more refined and spiritualized than the reality. This image, so nearly identical with the living Pearl, seemed to communicate somewhat of its own shadowy and intangible quality to the child herself. It was strange, the way in which Pearl stood, looking so steadfastly at them through the dim medium of the forest gloom, herself, meanwhile, all glorified with a ray of sunshine, that was attracted thitherward as by a certain sympathy. In the brook beneath stood another child--another and the same--with likewise its ray of golden light. Hester felt herself, in some indistinct and tantalizing manner, estranged from Pearl, as if the child, in her lonely ramble through the forest, had strayed out of the sphere in which she and her mother dwelt together, and was now vainly seeking to return to it.

There were both truth and error in the impression; the child and
mother were estranged, but through Hester's fault, not Pearl's.

Since the latter rambled from her side, another inmate had been
admitted within the circle of the mother's feelings, and so
modified the aspect of them all, that Pearl, the returning
wanderer, could not find her wonted place, and hardly knew where
she was.

"I have a strange fancy," observed the sensitive minister, "that
this brook is the boundary between two worlds, and that thou
canst never meet thy Pearl again. Or is she an elfish spirit,
who, as the legends of our childhood taught us, is forbidden to
cross a running stream? Pray hasten her, for this delay has
already imparted a tremor to my nerves."

"Come, dearest child!" said Hester encouragingly, and stretching
out both her arms. "How slow thou art! When hast thou been so
sluggish before now? Here is a friend of mine, who must be thy
friend also. Thou wilt have twice as much love henceforward as
thy mother alone could give thee! Leap across the brook and come
to us. Thou canst leap like a young deer!"

Pearl, without responding in any manner to these honey-sweet
expressions, remained on the other side of the brook. Now she
fixed her bright wild eyes on her mother, now on the minister,
and now included them both in the same glance, as if to detect
and explain to herself the relation which they bore to one
another. For some unaccountable reason, as Arthur Dimmesdale felt the child's eyes upon himself, his hand—with that gesture so habitual as to have become involuntary—stole over his heart.

At length, assuming a singular air of authority, Pearl stretched out her hand, with the small forefinger extended, and pointing evidently towards her mother's breast. And beneath, in the mirror of the brook, there was the flower-girdled and sunny image of little Pearl, pointing her small forefinger too.

"Thou strange child! why dost thou not come to me?" exclaimed Hester.

Pearl still pointed with her forefinger, and a frown gathered on her brow—the more impressive from the childish, the almost baby-like aspect of the features that conveyed it. As her mother still kept beckoning to her, and arraying her face in a holiday suit of unaccustomed smiles, the child stamped her foot with a yet more imperious look and gesture. In the brook, again, was the fantastic beauty of the image, with its reflected frown, its pointed finger, and imperious gesture, giving emphasis to the aspect of little Pearl.

"Hasten, Pearl, or I shall be angry with thee!" cried Hester Prynne, who, however, inured to such behaviour on the elf-child's part at other seasons, was naturally anxious for a more seemly deportment now. "Leap across the brook, naughty child, and run
hither! Else I must come to thee!"

But Pearl, not a whit startled at her mother's threats any more
than mollified by her entreaties, now suddenly burst into a fit
of passion, gesticulating violently, and throwing her small
figure into the most extravagant contortions She accompanied this
wild outbreak with piercing shrieks, which the woods reverberated
on all sides, so that, alone as she was in her childish and
unreasonable wrath, it seemed as if a hidden
multitude were lending her their sympathy and encouragement.

Seen in the brook once more was the shadowy wrath of Pearl's
image, crowned and girdled with flowers, but stamping its foot,
wildly gesticulating, and, in the midst of all, still pointing
its small forefinger at Hester's bosom.

"I see what ails the child," whispered Hester to the clergyman,
and turning pale in spite of a strong effort to conceal her
trouble and annoyance, "Children will not abide any, the
slightest, change in the accustomed aspect of things that are
daily before their eyes. Pearl misses something that she has
always seen me wear!"

"I pray you," answered the minister, "if thou hast any means of
pacifying the child, do it forthwith! Save it were the cankered
wrath of an old witch like Mistress Hibbins," added he,
attempting to smile, "I know nothing that I would not sooner
encounter than this passion in a child. In Pearl's young beauty, as in the wrinkled witch, it has a preternatural effect. Pacify her if thou lovest me!"

Hester turned again towards Pearl with a crimson blush upon her cheek, a conscious glance aside clergyman, and then a heavy sigh, while, even before she had time to speak, the blush yielded to a deadly pallor.

"Pearl," said she sadly, "look down at thy feet! There!--before thee!--on the hither side of the brook!"

The child turned her eyes to the point indicated, and there lay the scarlet letter so close upon the margin of the stream that the gold embroidery was reflected in it.

"Bring it hither!" said Hester.

"Come thou and take it up!" answered Pearl.

"Was ever such a child!" observed Hester aside to the minister. "Oh, I have much to tell thee about her! But, in very truth, she is right as regards this hateful token. I must bear its torture yet a little longer--only a few days longer--until we shall have left this region, and look back hither as to a land which we
have dreamed of. The forest cannot hide it! The mid-ocean shall take it from my hand, and swallow it up for ever!"

With these words she advanced to the margin of the brook, took up the scarlet letter, and fastened it again into her bosom. Hopefully, but a moment ago, as Hester had spoken of drowning it in the deep sea, there was a sense of inevitable doom upon her as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate. She had flung it into infinite space! she had drawn an hour's free breath! and here again was the scarlet misery glittering on the old spot! So it ever is, whether thus typified or no, that an evil deed invests itself with the character of doom. Hester next gathered up the heavy tresses of her hair and confined them beneath her cap. As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed like fading sunshine, and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her.

When the dreary change was wrought, she extended her hand to Pearl.

"Dost thou know thy mother now, child?", asked she, reproachfully, but with a subdued tone. "Wilt thou come across the brook, and own thy mother, now that she has her shame upon her--now that she is sad?"
"Yes; now I will!" answered the child, bounding across the brook, and clasping Hester in her arms "Now thou art my mother indeed! and I am thy little Pearl!"

In a mood of tenderness that was not usual with her, she drew down her mother's head, and kissed her brow and both her cheeks. But then--by a kind of necessity that always impelled this child to alloy whatever comfort she might chance to give with a throb of anguish--Pearl put up her mouth and kissed the scarlet letter, too

"That was not kind!" said Hester. "When thou hast shown me a little love, thou mockest me!"

"Why doth the minister sit yonder?" asked Pearl.

"He waits to welcome thee," replied her mother. "Come thou, and entreat his blessing! He loves thee, my little Pearl, and loves thy mother, too. Wilt thou not love him? Come he longs to greet thee!"

"Doth he love us?" said Pearl, looking up with acute intelligence into her mother's face. "Will he go back with us, hand in hand, we three together, into the town?"
"Not now, my child," answered Hester. "But in days to come he will walk hand in hand with us. We will have a home and fireside of our own; and thou shalt sit upon his knee; and he will teach thee many things, and love thee dearly. Thou wilt love him--wilt thou not?"

"And will he always keep his hand over his heart?" inquired Pearl.

"Foolish child, what a question is that!" exclaimed her mother. "Come, and ask his blessing!"

But, whether influenced by the jealousy that seems instinctive with every petted child towards a dangerous rival, or from whatever caprice of her freakish nature, Pearl would show no favour to the clergyman. It was only by an exertion of force that her mother brought her up to him, hanging back, and manifesting her reluctance by odd grimaces; of which, ever since her babyhood, she had possessed a singular variety, and could transform her mobile physiognomy into a series of different aspects, with a new mischief in them, each and all. The minister--painfully embarrassed, but hoping that a kiss might prove a talisman to admit him into the child's kindlier regards--bent forward, and impressed one on her brow. Hereupon, Pearl broke away from her mother, and, running to the brook, stooped over it,
and bathed her forehead, until the unwelcome kiss was quite washed off and diffused through a long lapse of the gliding water. She then remained apart, silently watching Hester and the clergyman; while they talked together and made such arrangements as were suggested by their new position and the purposes soon to be fulfilled.

And now this fateful interview had come to a close. The dell was to be left in solitude among its dark, old trees, which, with their multitudinous tongues, would whisper long of what had passed there, and no mortal be the wiser. And the melancholy brook would add this other tale to the mystery with which its little heart was already overburdened, and whereof it still kept up a murmuring babble, with not a whit more cheerfulness of tone than for ages heretofore.

XX. THE MINISTER IN A MAZE

As the minister departed, in advance of Hester Prynne and little Pearl, he threw a backward glance, half expecting that he should discover only some faintly traced features or outline of the mother and the child, slowly fading into the twilight of the woods. So great a vicissitude in his life could not at once be received as real. But there was Hester, clad in her gray robe, still standing beside the tree-trunk, which some blast had overthrown a long antiquity ago, and which time had ever since
been covering with moss, so that these two fated ones, with earth's heaviest burden on them, might there sit down together, and find a single hour's rest and solace. And there was Pearl, too, lightly dancing from the margin of the brook--now that the intrusive third person was gone--and taking her old place by her mother's side. So the minister had not fallen asleep and dreamed!

In order to free his mind from this indistinctness and duplicity of impression, which vexed it with a strange disquietude, he recalled and more thoroughly defined the plans which Hester and himself had sketched for their departure. It had been determined between them that the Old World, with its crowds and cities, offered them a more eligible shelter and concealment than the wilds of New England or all America, with its alternatives of an Indian wigwam, or the few settlements of Europeans scattered thinly along the sea-board. Not to speak of the clergyman's health, so inadequate to sustain the hardships of a forest life, his native gifts, his culture, and his entire development would secure him a home only in the midst of civilization and refinement; the higher the state the more delicately adapted to it the man. In furtherance of this choice, it so happened that a ship lay in the harbour; one of those unquestionable cruisers, frequent at that day, which, without being absolutely outlaws of the deep, yet roamed over its surface with a remarkable irresponsibility of character. This vessel had recently arrived from the Spanish Main, and within three days'
time would sail for Bristol. Hester Prynne--whose vocation, as a self-enlisted Sister of Charity, had brought her acquainted with the captain and crew--could take upon herself to secure the passage of two individuals and a child with all the secrecy which circumstances rendered more than desirable.

The minister had inquired of Hester, with no little interest, the precise time at which the vessel might be expected to depart. It would probably be on the fourth day from the present. "This is most fortunate!" he had then said to himself. Now, why the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale considered it so very fortunate we hesitate to reveal. Nevertheless--to hold nothing back from the reader--it was because, on the third day from the present, he was to preach the Election Sermon; and, as such an occasion formed an honourable epoch in the life of a New England Clergyman, he could not have chanced upon a more suitable mode and time of terminating his professional career. "At least, they shall say of me," thought this exemplary man, "that I leave no public duty unperformed or ill-performed!" Sad, indeed, that an introspection so profound and acute as this poor minister's should be so miserably deceived! We have had, and may still have, worse things to tell of him; but none, we apprehend, so pitiably weak; no evidence, at once so slight and irrefragable, of a subtle disease that had long since begun to eat into the real substance of his character. No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.
The excitement of Mr. Dimmesdale's feelings as he returned from his interview with Hester, lent him unaccustomed physical energy, and hurried him townward at a rapid pace. The pathway among the woods seemed wilder, more uncouth with its rude natural obstacles, and less trodden by the foot of man, than he remembered it on his outward journey. But he leaped across the plashy places, thrust himself through the clinging underbush, climbed the ascent, plunged into the hollow, and overcame, in short, all the difficulties of the track, with an unweariable activity that astonished him. He could not but recall how feebly, and with what frequent pauses for breath he had toiled over the same ground, only two days before. As he drew near the town, he took an impression of change from the series of familiar objects that presented themselves. It seemed not yesterday, not one, not two, but many days, or even years ago, since he had quitted them. There, indeed, was each former trace of the street, as he remembered it, and all the peculiarities of the houses, with the due multitude of gable-peaks, and a weather-cock at every point where his memory suggested one. Not the less, however, came this importunately obtrusive sense of change. The same was true as regarded the acquaintances whom he met, and all the well-known shapes of human life, about the little town. They looked neither older nor younger now; the beards of the aged were no whiter, nor could the creeping babe of yesterday walk on his feet to-day; it was impossible to describe in what respect they differed from the individuals on whom he had so recently bestowed
a parting glance; and yet the minister's deepest sense seemed to
inform him of their mutability. A similar impression struck him
most remarkably as he passed under the walls of his own church.
The edifice had so very strange, and yet so familiar an aspect,
that Mr. Dimmesdale's mind vibrated between two ideas; either
that he had seen it only in a dream hitherto, or that he was
merely dreaming about it now.

This phenomenon, in the various shapes which it assumed,
indicated no external change, but so sudden and important a
change in the spectator of the familiar scene, that the
intervening space of a single day had operated on his
consciousness like the lapse of years. The minister's own will,
and Hester's will, and the fate that grew between them, had
wrought this transformation. It was the same town as heretofore,
but the same minister returned not from the
forest. He might have said to the friends who greeted him--"I
am not the man for whom you take me! I left him yonder in the
forest, withdrawn into a secret dell, by a mossy tree trunk, and
near a melancholy brook! Go, seek your minister, and see if his
emaciated figure, his thin cheek, his white, heavy, pain-wrinkled
brow, be not flung down there, like a cast-off garment!" His
friends, no doubt, would still have insisted with him--"Thou
art thyself the man!" but the error would have been their own,
not his.

Before Mr. Dimmesdale reached home, his inner man gave him other
evidences of a revolution in the sphere of thought and feeling.
In truth, nothing short of a total change of dynasty and moral
code, in that interior kingdom, was adequate to account for the
impulses now communicated to the unfortunate and startled
minister. At every step he was incited to do some strange, wild,
wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once
involuntary and intentional, in spite of himself, yet growing out
of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse. For
instance, he met one of his own deacons. The good old man
addressed him with the paternal affection and patriarchal
privilege which his venerable age, his upright and holy
character, and his station in the church, entitled him to use
and, conjoined with this, the deep, almost worshipping respect,
which the minister's professional and private claims alike
demanded. Never was there a more beautiful example of how the
majesty of age and wisdom may comport with the obeisance and
respect enjoined upon it, as from a lower social rank, and
inferior order of endowment, towards a higher. Now, during a
conversation of some two or three moments between the Reverend
Mr. Dimmesdale and this excellent and hoary-bearded deacon, it
was only by the most careful self-control that the former could
refrain from uttering certain blasphemous suggestions that rose
into his mind, respecting the communion-supper. He absolutely
trembled and turned pale as ashes, lest his tongue should wag
itself in utterance of these horrible matters, and plead his own
consent for so doing, without his having fairly given it. And,
even with this terror in his heart, he could hardly avoid
laughing, to imagine how the sanctified old patriarchal deacon
would have been petrified by his minister's impiety.
Again, another incident of the same nature. Hurrying along the street, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale encountered the eldest female member of his church, a most pious and exemplary old dame, poor, widowed, lonely, and with a heart as full of reminiscences about her dead husband and children, and her dead friends of long ago, as a burial-ground is full of storied gravestones. Yet all this, which would else have been such heavy sorrow, was made almost a solemn joy to her devout old soul, by religious consolations and the truths of Scripture, wherewith she had fed herself continually for more than thirty years. And since Mr. Dimmesdale had taken her in charge, the good grandam's chief earthly comfort—which, unless it had been likewise a heavenly comfort, could have been none at all—was to meet her pastor, whether casually, or of set purpose, and be refreshed with a word of warm, fragrant, heaven-breathing Gospel truth, from his beloved lips, into her dulled, but rapturously attentive ear. But, on this occasion, up to the moment of putting his lips to the old woman's ear, Mr. Dimmesdale, as the great enemy of souls would have it, could recall no text of Scripture, nor aught else, except a brief, pithy, and, as it then appeared to him, unanswerable argument against the immortality of the human soul. The instilment thereof into her mind would probably have caused this aged sister to drop down dead, at once, as by the effect of an intensely poisonous infusion. What he really did whisper, the minister could never afterwards recollect. There was, perhaps, a
fortunate disorder in his utterance, which failed to impart any
distinct idea to the good widow's comprehension, or which
Providence interpreted after a method of its own. Assuredly, as
the minister looked back, he beheld an expression of divine
gratitude and ecstasy that seemed like the shine of the celestial
city on her face, so wrinkled and ashy pale.

Again, a third instance. After parting from the old church
member, he met the youngest sister of them all. It was a maiden
newly-won—and won by the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale's own
sermon, on the Sabbath after his vigil—to barter the
transitory pleasures of the world for the heavenly hope that was
to assume brighter substance as life grew dark around her, and
which would gild the utter gloom with final glory. She was fair
and pure as a lily that had bloomed in Paradise. The minister
knew well that he was himself enshrined within the stainless
sanctity of her heart, which hung its snowy
curtains about his image, imparting to religion the warmth of
love, and to love a religious purity. Satan, that afternoon, had
surely led the poor young girl away from her mother's side, and
thrown her into the pathway of this sorely tempted, or—shall
we not rather say?—this lost and desperate man. As she drew
nigh, the arch-fiend whispered him to condense into small
compass, and drop into her tender bosom a germ of evil that would
be sure to blossom darkly soon, and bear black fruit betimes.
Such was his sense of power over this virgin soul, trusting him
as she did, that the minister felt potent to blight all the field
of innocence with but one wicked look, and develop all its
opposite with but a word. So—with a mightier struggle than he
had yet sustained—he held his Geneva cloak before his face,
and hurried onward, making no sign of recognition, and leaving
the young sister to digest his rudeness as she might. She
ransacked her conscience—which was full of harmless little
matters, like her pocket or her work-bag—and took herself to
task, poor thing! for a thousand imaginary faults, and went
about her household duties with swollen eyelids the next morning.

Before the minister had time to celebrate his victory over this
last temptation, he was conscious of another impulse, more
ludicrous, and almost as horrible. It was—we blush to tell it—it
was to stop short in the road, and teach some very wicked
words to a knot of little Puritan children who were playing
there, and had but just begun to talk. Denying himself this
freak, as unworthy of his cloth, he met a drunken seaman, one of
the ship's crew from the Spanish Main. And here, since he had
so valiantly forborne all
other wickedness, poor Mr. Dimmesdale longed at least to shake
hands with the tarry black-guard, and recreate himself with a few
improper jests, such as dissolute sailors so abound with, and a
volley of good, round, solid, satisfactory, and heaven-defying
oaths! It was not so much a better principle, as partly his
natural good taste, and still more his buckramed habit of
clerical decorum, that carried him safely through the latter
crisis.
"What is it that haunts and tempts me thus?" cried the minister
to himself, at length, pausing in the street, and striking his
hand against his forehead.

"Am I mad? or am I given over utterly to the fiend? Did I make
a contract with him in the forest, and sign it with my blood?
And does he now summon me to its fulfilment, by suggesting the
performance of every wickedness which his most foul imagination
can conceive?"

At the moment when the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale thus communed
with himself, and struck his forehead with his hand, old Mistress
Hibbins, the reputed witch-lady, is said to have been passing by.
She made a very grand appearance, having on a high head-dress, a
rich gown of velvet, and a ruff done up with the famous yellow
starch, of which Anne Turner, her especial friend, had taught her
the secret, before this last good lady had been hanged for Sir
Thomas Overbury's murder. Whether the witch had read the
minister's thoughts or no, she came to a full stop, looked
shrewdly into his face, smiled craftily, and--though little
given to converse with clergymen--began a conversation.

"So, reverend sir, you have made a visit into the forest,"
observed the witch-lady, nodding her high head-dress at him.
"The next time I pray you to allow me only a fair warning, and I
shall be proud to bear you company. Without taking overmuch upon
myself my good word will go far towards gaining any strange
gentleman a fair reception from yonder potentate you wot of."

"I profess, madam," answered the clergyman, with a grave
obeisance, such as the lady's rank demanded, and his own good
breeding made imperative--"I profess, on my conscience and
character, that I am utterly bewildered as touching the purport
of your words! I went not into the forest to seek a potentate,
neither do I, at any future time, design a visit thither, with a
view to gaining the favour of such personage. My one sufficient
object was to greet that pious friend of mine, the Apostle Eliot,
and rejoice with him over the many precious souls he hath won
from heathendom!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled the old witch-lady, still nodding her high
head-dress at the minister. "Well, well! we must needs talk
thus in the daytime! You carry it off like an old hand! But at
midnight, and in the forest, we shall have other talk together!"

She passed on with her aged stateliness, but often turning back
her head and smiling at him, like one willing to recognise a
secret intimacy of connexion.

"Have I then sold myself," thought the minister, "to the fiend
whom, if men say true, this yellow-starched and velveted old hag
has chosen for her prince and master?"

The wretched minister! He had made a bargain very like it!
Tempted by a dream of happiness, he had yielded himself with
deliberate choice, as he had never done before, to what he knew
was deadly sin. And the infectious poison of that sin had been
thus rapidly diffused throughout his moral system. It had
stuped all blessed impulses, and awakened into vivid life the
whole brotherhood of bad ones. Scorn, bitterness, unprovoked
malignity, gratuitous desire of ill, ridicule of whatever was
good and holy, all awoke to tempt, even while they frightened
him. And his encounter with old Mistress Hibbins, if it were a
real incident, did but show its sympathy and fellowship with
wicked mortals, and the world of perverted spirits.

He had by this time reached his dwelling on the edge of the
burial ground, and, hastening up the stairs, took refuge in his
study. The minister was glad to have reached this shelter,
without first betraying himself to the world by any of those
strange and wicked eccentricities to which he had been
continually impelled while passing through the streets. He
entered the accustomed room, and looked around him on its books,
its windows, its fireplace, and the tapestried comfort of the
walls, with the same perception of strangeness that had haunted
him throughout his walk from the forest dell into the town and
thitherward. Here he had studied and written; here gone through
fast and vigil, and come forth half alive; here striven to pray;
here borne a hundred thousand agonies! There was the Bible, in
its rich old Hebrew, with Moses and the Prophets speaking to him,
and God's voice through all.

There on the table, with the inky pen beside it, was an
unfinished sermon, with a sentence broken in the midst, where his
thoughts had ceased to gush out upon the page two days before.
He knew that it was himself, the thin and white-cheeked minister,
who had done and suffered these things, and written thus far into
the Election Sermon! But he seemed to stand apart, and eye this
former self with scornful pitying, but half-envious curiosity.
That self was gone. Another man had returned out of the
forest--a wiser one--with a knowledge of hidden mysteries which the
simplicity of the former never could have reached. A bitter kind
of knowledge that!

While occupied with these reflections, a knock came at the door
of the study, and the minister said, "Come in!"--not wholly
devoid of an idea that he might behold an evil spirit. And so he
did! It was old Roger Chillingworth that entered. The minister
stood white and speechless, with one hand on the Hebrew
Scriptures, and the other spread upon his breast.

"Welcome home, reverend sir," said the physician "And how found
you that godly man, the Apostle Eliot? But methinks, dear sir,
you look pale, as if the travel through the wilderness had been
too sore for you. Will not my aid be requisite to put you in heart and strength to preach your Election Sermon?"

"Nay, I think not so," rejoined the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. "My journey, and the sight of the holy Apostle yonder, and the free air which I have breathed have done me good, after so long confinement in my study. I think to need no more of your drugs, my kind physician, good though they be, and administered by a friendly hand."

All this time Roger Chillingworth was looking at the minister with the grave and intent regard of a physician towards his patient. But, in spite of this outward show, the latter was almost convinced of the old man's knowledge, or, at least, his confident suspicion, with respect to his own interview with Hester Prynne. The physician knew then that in the minister's regard he was no longer a trusted friend, but his bitterest enemy. So much being known, it would appear natural that a part of it should he expressed. It is singular, however, how long a time often passes before words embody things; and with what security two persons, who choose to avoid a certain subject, may approach its very verge, and retire without disturbing it. Thus the minister felt no apprehension that Roger Chillingworth would touch, in express words, upon the real position which they sustained towards one another. Yet did the physician, in his dark way, creep frightfully near the secret.
"Were it not better," said he, "that you use my poor skill tonight? Verily, dear sir, we must take pains to make you strong and vigorous for this occasion of the Election discourse. The people look for great things from you, apprehending that another year may come about and find their pastor gone."

"Yes, to another world," replied the minister with pious resignation. "Heaven grant it be a better one; for, in good sooth, I hardly think to tarry with my flock through the flitting seasons of another year! But touching your medicine, kind sir, in my present frame of body I need it not."

"I joy to hear it," answered the physician. "It may be that my remedies, so long administered in vain, begin now to take due effect. Happy man were I, and well deserving of New England's gratitude, could I achieve this cure!"

"I thank you from my heart, most watchful friend," said the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale with a solemn smile. "I thank you, and can but requite your good deeds with my prayers."

"A good man's prayers are golden recompense!" rejoined old Roger Chillingworth, as he took his leave. "Yea, they are the current gold coin of the New Jerusalem, with the King's own mint mark on them!"
Left alone, the minister summoned a servant of the house, and requested food, which, being set before him, he ate with ravenous appetite. Then flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ pipe as he. However, leaving that mystery to solve itself, or go unsolved for ever, he drove his task onward with earnest haste and ecstasy.

Thus the night fled away, as if it were a winged steed, and he careering on it; morning came, and peeped, blushing, through the curtains; and at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister's bedazzled eyes. There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him!

XXI. THE NEW ENGLAND HOLIDAY

Betimes in the morning of the day on which the new Governor was to receive his office at the hands of the people, Hester Prynne and little Pearl came into the market-place. It was already thronged with the craftsmen and other plebeian inhabitants of the town, in considerable numbers, among whom, likewise, were many
rough figures, whose attire of deer-skins marked them as
belonging to some of the forest settlements, which surrounded the
little metropolis of the colony.

On this public holiday, as on all other occasions for seven years
past, Hester was clad in a garment of coarse gray cloth. Not
more by its hue than by some indescribable peculiarity in its
fashion, it had the effect of making her fade personally out of
sight and outline; while again the scarlet letter brought her
back from this twilight indistinctness, and revealed her under
the moral aspect of its own illumination. Her face, so long
familiar to the townspeople, showed the marble quietude which
they were accustomed to behold there. It was like a mask; or,
rather like the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features; owing
this dreary resemblance to the fact that Hester was actually
dead, in respect to any claim of sympathy, and had departed out of
the world with which she still seemed to mingle.

It might be, on this one day, that there was an expression unseen
before, nor, indeed, vivid enough to be detected now; unless some
preternaturally gifted observer should have first read the heart,
and have afterwards sought a corresponding development in the
countenance and mien. Such a spiritual sneer might have
conceived, that, after sustaining the gaze of the multitude
through several miserable years as a necessity, a penance, and
something which it was a stern religion to endure, she now, for
one last time more, encountered it freely and voluntarily, in
order to convert what had so long been agony into a kind of
triumph. "Look your last on the scarlet letter and its wearer!"--the
people's victim and lifelong bond-slave, as they fancied
her, might say to them. "Yet a little while, and she will be
beyond your reach! A few hours longer and the deep, mysterious
ocean will quench and hide for ever the symbol which ye have
causd to burn on her bosom!" Nor were it an inconsistency too
improbable to be assigned to human nature, should we suppose a
feeling of regret in Hester's mind, at the moment when she was
about to win her freedom from the pain which had been thus deeply
incorporated with her being. Might there not be an irresistible
desire to quaff a last, long, breathless draught of the cup of
wormwood and aloes, with which nearly all her years of womanhood
had been perpetually flavoured. The wine of life, henceforth to
be presented to her lips, must be indeed rich, delicious, and
exhilarating, in its chased and golden beaker, or else leave an
inevitable and weary languor, after the lees of bitterness wherewith
she had been drugged, as with a cordial of intensest potency.

Pearl was decked out with airy gaiety. It would have been
impossible to guess that this bright and sunny apparition owed
its existence to the shape of gloomy gray; or that a fancy, at
once so gorgeous and so delicate as must have been requisite to
conceive the child's apparel, was the same that had achieved a
task perhaps more difficult, in imparting so distinct a
peculiarity to Hester's simple robe. The dress, so proper was it
to little Pearl, seemed an effluence, or inevitable development
and outward manifestation of her character, no more to be separated from her than the many-hued brilliancy from a butterfly's wing, or the painted glory from the leaf of a bright flower. As with these, so with the child; her garb was all of one idea with her nature. On this eventful day, moreover, there was a certain singular inquietude and excitement in her mood, resembling nothing so much as the shimmer of a diamond, that sparkles and flashes with the varied throbings of the breast on which it is displayed. Children have always a sympathy in the agitations of those connected with them: always, especially, a sense of any trouble or impending revolution, of whatever kind, in domestic circumstances; and therefore Pearl, who was the gem on her mother's unquiet bosom, betrayed, by the very dance of her spirits, the emotions which none could detect in the marble passiveness of Hester's brow.

This effervescence made her flit with a bird-like movement, rather than walk by her mother's side.

She broke continually into shouts of a wild, inarticulate, and sometimes piercing music. When they reached the market-place, she became still more restless, on perceiving the stir and bustle that enlivened the spot; for it was usually more like the broad and lonesome green before a village meeting-house, than the centre of a town's business
"Why, what is this, mother?" cried she. "Wherefore have all the people left their work to-day? Is it a play-day for the whole world? See, there is the blacksmith! He has washed his sooty face, and put on his Sabbath-day clothes, and looks as if he would gladly be merry, if any kind body would only teach him how!

And there is Master Brackett, the old jailer, nodding and smiling at me. Why does he do so, mother?"

"He remembers thee a little babe, my child," answered Hester.

"He should not nod and smile at me, for all that--the black, grim, ugly-eyed old man!" said Pearl.

"He may nod at thee, if he will; for thou art clad in gray, and wearest the scarlet letter. But see, mother, how many faces of strange people, and Indians among them, and sailors! What have they all come to do, here in the market-place?"

"They wait to see the procession pass," said Hester. "For the Governor and the magistrates are to go by, and the ministers, and all the great people and good people, with the music and the soldiers marching before them."

"And will the minister be there?" asked Pearl. "And will he hold out both his hands to me, as when thou led'st me to him from the
"He will be there, child," answered her mother, "but he will not
greet thee to-day, nor must thou greet him."

"What a strange, sad man is he!" said the child, as if speaking
partly to herself. "In the dark nighttime he calls us to him,
and holds thy hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the
scaffold yonder! And in the deep forest, where only the old
trees can hear, and the strip of sky see it, he talks with thee,
sitting on a heap of moss! And he kisses my forehead, too, so
that the little brook would hardly wash it off! But, here, in
the sunny day, and among all the people, he knows us not; nor
must we know him! A strange, sad man is he, with his hand always
over his heart!"

"Be quiet, Pearl--thou understandest not these things," said
her mother. "Think not now of the minister, but look about thee,
and see how cheery is everybody's face to-day. The children have
come from their schools, and the grown people from their
workshops and their fields, on purpose to be happy, for, to-day,
a new man is beginning to rule over them; and so--as has been
the custom of mankind ever since a nation was first gathered--they
make merry and rejoice: as if a good and golden year were at
length to pass over the poor old world!"
It was as Hester said, in regard to the unwonted jollity that
brightened the faces of the people. Into this festal season of
the year—as it already was, and continued to be during the
greater part of two centuries—the Puritans compressed whatever
mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human
infirmity; thereby so far dispelling the customary cloud, that,
for the space of a single holiday, they appeared scarcely more
grave than most other communities at a period of general
affliction.

But we perhaps exaggerate the gray or sable tinge, which
undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age. The
persons now in the market-place of Boston had not been born to an
inheritance of Puritanic gloom. They were native Englishmen,
whose fathers had lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan
epoch; a time when the life of England, viewed as one great mass,
would appear to have been as stately, magnificent, and joyous, as
the world has ever witnessed. Had they followed their hereditary
taste, the New England settlers would have illustrated all events
of public importance by bonfires, banquets, pageantries, and
processions. Nor would it have been impracticable, in the
observance of majestic ceremonies, to combine mirthful recreation
with solemnity, and give, as it were, a grotesque and brilliant
embroidery to the great robe of state, which a nation, at such
festivals, puts on. There was some shadow of an attempt of this
kind in the mode of celebrating the day on which the political
year of the colony commenced. The dim reflection of a remembered
splendour, a colourless and manifold diluted repetition of what they had beheld in proud old London—we will not say at a royal coronation, but at a Lord Mayor's show—might be traced in the customs which our forefathers instituted, with reference to the annual installation of magistrates. The fathers and founders of the commonwealth—the statesman, the priest, and the soldier—seemed it a duty then to assume the outward state and majesty, which, in accordance with antique style, was looked upon as the proper garb of public and social eminence. All came forth to move in procession before the people's eye, and thus impart a needed dignity to the simple framework of a government so newly constructed.

Then, too, the people were countenanced, if not encouraged, in relaxing the severe and close application to their various modes of rugged industry, which at all other times, seemed of the same piece and material with their religion. Here, it is true, were none of the appliances which popular merriment would so readily have found in the England of Elizabeth's time, or that of James—no rude shows of a theatrical kind; no minstrel, with his harp and legendary ballad, nor gleeman with an ape dancing to his music; no juggler, with his tricks of mimic witchcraft; no Merry Andrew, to stir up the multitude with jests, perhaps a hundred years old, but still effective, by their appeals to the very broadest sources of mirthful sympathy. All such professors of the several branches of jocularity would have been sternly repressed, not only by the rigid discipline of law, but by the
general sentiment which give law its vitality. Not the less, however, the great, honest face of the people smiled--grimly, perhaps, but widely too. Nor were sports wanting, such as the colonists had witnessed, and shared in, long ago, at the country fairs and on the village-greens of England; and which it was thought well to keep alive on this new soil, for the sake of the courage and manliness that were essential in them. Wrestling matches, in the different fashions of Cornwall and Devonshire, were seen here and there about the market-place; in one corner, there was a friendly bout at quarterstaff; and--what attracted most interest of all--on the platform of the pillory, already so noted in our pages, two masters of defence were commencing an exhibition with the buckler and broadsword. But, much to the disappointment of the crowd, this latter business was broken off by the interposition of the town beadle, who had no idea of permitting the majesty of the law to be violated by such an abuse of one of its consecrated places.

It may not be too much to affirm, on the whole, (the people being then in the first stages of joyless deportment, and the offspring of sires who had known how to be merry, in their day), that they would compare favourably, in point of holiday keeping, with their descendants, even at so long an interval as ourselves. Their immediate posterity, the generation next to the early emigrants, wore the blackest shade of Puritanism, and so darkened the national visage with it, that all the subsequent years have not sufficed to clear it up. We have yet to learn again the
The picture of human life in the market-place, though its general
tint was the sad gray, brown, or black of the English emigrants,
was yet enlivened by some diversity of hue. A party of Indians—in
their savage finery of curiously embroidered deerskin
robes, wampum-belts, red and yellow ochre, and feathers, and
armed with the bow and arrow and stone-headed spear—stood
apart with countenances of inflexible gravity, beyond what even
the Puritan aspect could attain. Nor, wild as were these painted
barbarians, were they the wildest feature of the scene. This
distinction could more justly be claimed by some mariners—a
part of the crew of the vessel from the Spanish Main—who had
come ashore to see the humours of Election Day. They were
rough-looking desperadoes, with sun-blackened faces, and an
immensity of beard; their wide short trousers were confined about
the waist by belts, often clasped with a rough plate of gold, and
sustaining always a long knife, and in some instances, a sword.
From beneath their broad-brimmed hats of palm-leaf, gleamed eyes
which, even in good-nature and merriment, had a kind of animal
ferocity. They transgressed without fear or scruple, the rules
of behaviour that were binding on all others: smoking tobacco
under the beadle’s very nose, although each whiff would have cost
a townsman a shilling; and quaffing at their pleasure, draughts
of wine or aqua-vitae from pocket flasks, which they freely
tendered to the gaping crowd around them. It remarkably
characterised the incomplete morality of the age, rigid as we
call it, that a licence was allowed the seafaring class, not merely for their freaks on shore, but for far more desperate deeds on their proper element. The sailor of that day would go near to be arraigned as a pirate in our own. There could be little doubt, for instance, that this very ship's crew, though no unfavourable specimens of the nautical brotherhood, had been guilty, as we should phrase it, of depredations on the Spanish commerce, such as would have perilled all their necks in a modern court of justice.

But the sea in those old times heaved, swelled, and foamed very much at its own will, or subject only to the tempestuous wind, with hardly any attempts at regulation by human law. The buccaneer on the wave might relinquish his calling and become at once if he chose, a man of probity and piety on land; nor, even in the full career of his reckless life, was he regarded as a personage with whom it was disreputable to traffic or casually associate. Thus the Puritan elders in their black cloaks, starched bands, and steeple-crowned hats, smiled not unbenignantly at the clamour and rude deportment of these jolly seafaring men; and it excited neither surprise nor animadversion when so reputable a citizen as old Roger Chillingworth, the physician, was seen to enter the market-place in close and familiar talk with the commander of the questionable vessel.

The latter was by far the most showy and gallant figure, so far
as apparel went, anywhere to be seen among the multitude. He wore a profusion of ribbons on his garment, and gold lace on his hat, which was also encircled by a gold chain, and surmounted with a feather. There was a sword at his side and a sword-cut on his forehead, which, by the arrangement of his hair, he seemed anxious rather to display than hide. A landsman could hardly have worn this garb and shown this face, and worn and shown them both with such a galliard air, without undergoing stern question before a magistrate, and probably incurring a fine or imprisonment, or perhaps an exhibition in the stocks. As regarded the shipmaster, however, all was looked upon as pertaining to the character, as to a fish his glistening scales.

After parting from the physician, the commander of the Bristol ship strolled idly through the market-place; until happening to approach the spot where Hester Prynne was standing, he appeared to recognise, and did not hesitate to address her. As was usually the case wherever Hester stood, a small vacant area—a sort of magic circle—had formed itself about her, into which, though the people were elbowing one another at a little distance, none ventured or felt disposed to intrude. It was a forcible type of the moral solitude in which the scarlet letter enveloped its fated wearer; partly by her own reserve, and partly by the instinctive, though no longer so unkindly, withdrawal of her fellow-creatures. Now, if never before, it answered a good purpose by enabling Hester and the seaman to speak together without risk of being overheard; and so
changed was Hester Prynne’s repute before the public, that the
matron in town, most eminent for rigid morality, could not have
held such intercourse with less result of scandal than herself.

"So, mistress," said the mariner, "I must bid the steward make
ready one more berth than you bargained for! No fear of scurvy
or ship fever this voyage. What with the ship’s surgeon and this
other doctor, our only danger will be from drug or pill; more by
token, as there is a lot of apothecary’s stuff aboard, which I
 traded for with a Spanish vessel."

"What mean you?" inquired Hester, startled more than she
permitted to appear. "Have you another passenger?"

"Why, know you not," cried the shipmaster, "that this physician
here--Chillingworth he calls himself--is minded to try my
cabin-fare with you? Ay, ay, you must have known it; for he
tells me he is of your party, and a close friend to the gentleman you
spoke of--he that is in peril from these sour old Puritan rulers."

"They know each other well, indeed," replied Hester, with a mien
of calmness, though in the utmost consternation. "They have long
dwelt together."

Nothing further passed between the mariner and Hester Prynne.
But at that instant she beheld old Roger Chillingworth himself, standing in the remotest corner of the market-place and smiling on her; a smile which--across the wide and bustling square, and through all the talk and laughter, and various thoughts, moods, and interests of the crowd--conveyed secret and fearful meaning.

XXII. THE PROCESSION

Before Hester Prynne could call together her thoughts, and consider what was practicable to be done in this new and startling aspect of affairs, the sound of military music was heard approaching along a contiguous street. It denoted the advance of the procession of magistrates and citizens on its way towards the meeting-house: where, in compliance with a custom thus early established, and ever since observed, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale was to deliver an Election Sermon.

Soon the head of the procession showed itself, with a slow and stately march, turning a corner, and making its way across the market-place. First came the music. It comprised a variety of instruments, perhaps imperfectly adapted to one another, and played with no great skill; but yet attaining the great object for which the harmony of drum and clarion addresses itself to the multitude--that of imparting a higher and more heroic air to the scene of life that passes before the eye. Little Pearl at
first clapped her hands, but then lost for an instant the
restless agitation that had kept her in a continual effervescence
throughout the morning; she gazed silently, and seemed to be
borne upward like a floating sea-bird on the long heaves and swells
of sound. But she was brought back to her former mood by the shimmer
of the sunshine on the weapons and bright armour of the military
company, which followed after the music, and formed the honorary
escort of the procession. This body of soldiery—which still
sustains a corporate existence, and marches down from past ages
with an ancient and honourable fame—was composed of no
mercenary materials. Its ranks were filled with gentlemen who
felt the stirrings of martial impulse, and sought to establish a
kind of College of Arms, where, as in an association of Knights
Templars, they might learn the science, and, so far as peaceful
exercise would teach them, the practices of war. The high
estimation then placed upon the military character might be seen
in the lofty port of each individual member of the company. Some
of them, indeed, by their services in the Low Countries and on
other fields of European warfare, had fairly won their title to
assume the name and pomp of soldiership. The entire array,
moreover, clad in burnished steel, and with plumage nodding over
their bright morions, had a brilliancy of effect which no modern
display can aspire to equal.

And yet the men of civil eminence, who came immediately behind
the military escort, were better worth a thoughtful observer’s
eye. Even in outward demeanour they showed a stamp of majesty
that made the warrior's haughty stride look vulgar, if not absurd. It was an age when what we call talent had far less consideration than now, but the massive materials which produce stability and dignity of character a great deal more. The people possessed by hereditary right the quality of reverence, which, in their descendants, if it survive at all, exists in smaller proportion, and with a vastly diminished force in the selection and estimate of public men. The change may be for good or ill, and is partly, perhaps, for both. In that old day the English settler on these rude shores--having left king, nobles, and all degrees of awful rank behind, while still the faculty and necessity of reverence was strong in him--bestowed it on the white hair and venerable brow of age--on long-tried integrity--on solid wisdom and sad-coloured experience--on endowments of that grave and weighty order which gave the idea of permanence, and comes under the general definition of respectability. These primitive statesmen, therefore--Bradstreet, Endicott, Dudley, Bellingham, and their compeers--who were elevated to power by the early choice of the people, seem to have been not often brilliant, but distinguished by a ponderous sobriety, rather than activity of intellect. They had fortitude and self-reliance, and in time of difficulty or peril stood up for the welfare of the state like a line of cliffs against a tempestuous tide. The traits of character here indicated were well represented in the square cast of countenance and large physical development of the new colonial magistrates. So far as a demeanour of natural authority was concerned, the mother country need not have been ashamed to see these foremost men of an actual democracy adopted into the House
of Peers, or make the Privy Council of the Sovereign.

Next in order to the magistrates came the young and eminently distinguished divine, from whose lips the religious discourse of the anniversary was expected. His was the profession at that era in which intellectual ability displayed itself far more than in political life; for—leaving a higher motive out of the question it offered inducements powerful enough in the almost worshipping respect of the community, to win the most aspiring ambition into its service. Even political power—as in the case of Increase Mather—was within the grasp of a successful priest.

It was the observation of those who beheld him now, that never, since Mr. Dimmesdale first set his foot on the New England shore, had he exhibited such energy as was seen in the gait and air with which he kept his pace in the procession. There was no feebleness of step as at other times; his frame was not bent, nor did his hand rest ominously upon his heart. Yet, if the clergyman were rightly viewed, his strength seemed not of the body. It might be spiritual and imparted to him by angelical ministrations. It might be the exhilaration of that potent cordial which is distilled only in the furnace-glow of earnest and long-continued thought. Or perchance his sensitive temperament was invigorated by the loud and piercing music that swelled heaven-ward, and uplifted him on its ascending wave. Nevertheless, so abstracted was his look, it might be questioned
whether Mr. Dimmesdale ever heard the music. There was his body, moving onward, and with an unaccustomed force. But where was his mind? Far and deep in its own region, busying itself, with preternatural activity, to marshal a procession of stately thoughts that were soon to issue thence; and so he saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing of what was around him; but the spiritual element took up the feeble frame and carried it along, unconscious of the burden, and converting it to spirit like itself. Men of uncommon intellect, who have grown morbid, possess this occasional power of mighty effort, into which they throw the life of many days and then are lifeless for as many more.

Hester Prynne, gazing steadfastly at the clergyman, felt a dreary influence come over her, but wherefore or whence she knew not, unless that he seemed so remote from her own sphere, and utterly beyond her reach. One glance of recognition she had imagined must needs pass between them. She thought of the dim forest, with its little dell of solitude, and love, and anguish, and the mossy tree-trunk, where, sitting hand-in-hand, they had mingled their sad and passionate talk with the melancholy murmur of the brook. How deeply had they known each other then! And was this the man? She hardly knew him now! He, moving proudly past, enveloped as it were, in the rich music, with the procession of majestic and venerable fathers; he, so unattainable in his worldly position, and still more so in that far vista of his unsympathizing thoughts, through which she now beheld him! Her
spirit sank with the idea that all must have been a delusion, and that, vividly as she had dreamed it, there could be no real bond betwixt the clergyman and herself. And thus much of woman was there in Hester, that she could scarcely forgive him--least of all now, when the heavy footstep of their approaching Fate might be heard, nearer, nearer, nearer!--for being able so completely to withdraw himself from their mutual world--while she groped darkly, and stretched forth her cold hands, and found him not.

Pearl either saw and responded to her mother's feelings, or herself felt the remoteness and intangibility that had fallen around the minister. While the procession passed, the child was uneasy, fluttering up and down, like a bird on the point of taking flight. When the whole had gone by, she looked up into Hester's face--

"Mother," said she, "was that the same minister that kissed me by the brook?"

"Hold thy peace, dear little Pearl!" whispered her mother. "We must not always talk in the marketplace of what happens to us in the forest."

"I could not be sure that it was he--so strange he looked," continued the child. "Else I would have run to him, and bid him
kiss me now, before all the people, even as he did yonder among
the dark old trees. What would the minister have said, mother?
Would he have clapped his hand over his heart, and scowled on me,
and bid me begone?"

"What should he say, Pearl," answered Hester, "save that it was
no time to kiss, and that kisses are not to be given in the
market-place? Well for thee, foolish child, that thou didst not
speak to him!"

Another shade of the same sentiment, in reference to Mr.
Dimmesdale, was expressed by a person whose
eccentricities--insanity, as we should term it--led her to
do what few of the townspeople would have
ventured on--to begin a conversation with the wearer of the
scarlet letter in public. It was Mistress Hibbins, who, arrayed
in great magnificence, with a triple ruff, a brodered stomacher,
a gown of rich velvet, and a gold-headed cane, had come forth to
see the procession. As this ancient lady had the renown (which
subsequently cost her no less a price than her life) of being a
principal actor in all the works of necromancy that were
continually going forward, the crowd gave way before her, and
seemed to fear the touch of her garment, as if it carried the
plague among its gorgeous folds. Seen in conjunction with Hester
Prynne--kindly as so many now felt towards the latter--the
dread inspired by Mistress Hibbins had doubled, and caused a
general movement from that part of the market-place in which the
two women stood.

"Now, what mortal imagination could conceive it?" whispered the old lady confidentially to Hester. "Yonder divine man! That saint on earth, as the people uphold him to be, and as--I must needs say--he really looks! Who, now, that saw him pass in the procession, would think how little while it is since he went forth out of his study--chewing a Hebrew text of Scripture in his mouth, I warrant--to take an airing in the forest! Aha! we know what that means, Hester Prynne! But truly, forsooth, I find it hard to believe him the same man. Many a church member saw I, walking behind the music, that has danced in the same measure with me, when Somebody was fiddler, and, it might be, an Indian powwow or a Lapland wizard changing hands with us! That is but a trifle, when a woman knows the world. But this minister. Couldst thou surely tell, Hester, whether he was the same man that encountered thee on the forest path?"

"Madam, I know not of what you speak," answered Hester Prynne, feeling Mistress Hibbins to be of infirm mind; yet strangely startled and awe-stricken by the confidence with which she affirmed a personal connexion between so many persons (herself among them) and the Evil One. "It is not for me to talk lightly of a learned and pious minister of the Word, like the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale."
"Fie, woman--fie!" cried the old lady, shaking her finger at Hester. "Dost thou think I have been to the forest so many times, and have yet no skill to judge who else has been there? Yea, though no leaf of the wild garlands which they wore while they danced be left in their hair! I know thee, Hester, for I behold the token. We may all see it in the sunshine! and it glows like a red flame in the dark. Thou wearest it openly, so there need be no question about that. But this minister! Let me tell thee in thine ear! When the Black Man sees one of his own servants, signed and sealed, so shy of owning to the bond as is the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, he hath a way of ordering matters so that the mark shall be disclosed, in open daylight, to the eyes of all the world! What is that the minister seeks to hide, with his hand always over his heart? Ha, Hester Prynne?"

"What is it, good Mistress Hibbins?" eagerly asked little Pearl.

"Hast thou seen it?"

"No matter, darling!" responded Mistress Hibbins, making Pearl a profound reverence. "Thou thyself wilt see it, one time or another. They say, child, thou art of the lineage of the Prince of Air! Wilt thou ride with me some fine night to see thy father? Then thou shalt know wherefore the minister keeps his hand over his heart!"

Laughing so shrilly that all the market-place could hear her, the
weird old gentlewoman took her departure.

By this time the preliminary prayer had been offered in the
meeting-house, and the accents of the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale
were heard commencing his discourse. An irresistible feeling
kept Hester near the spot. As the sacred edifice was too much
thronged to admit another auditor, she took up her position close
beside the scaffold of the pillory. It was in sufficient
proximity to bring the whole sermon to her ears, in the shape of
an indistinct but varied murmur and flow of the minister's very
peculiar voice.

This vocal organ was in itself a rich endowment, insomuch that a
listener, comprehending nothing of the language in which the
preacher spoke, might still have been swayed to and fro by the
mere tone and cadence. Like all other music, it breathed passion
and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to
the human heart, wherever educated. Muffled as the sound was by
its passage through the church walls, Hester Prynne listened with
such intenseness, and sympathized so intimately, that the sermon
had throughout a meaning for her, entirely apart from its
indistinguishable words. These, perhaps, if more distinctly heard, might
have been only a grosser medium, and have clogged the spiritual sense.
Now she caught the low undertone, as of the wind sinking down to
repose itself; then ascended with it, as it rose through
progressive gradations of sweetness and power, until its volume
seemed to envelop her with an atmosphere of awe and solemn
grandeur. And yet, majestic as the voice sometimes became, there
was for ever in it an essential character of plaintiveness. A
loud or low expression of anguish—the whisper, or the shriek,
as it might be conceived, of suffering humanity, that touched a
sensibility in every bosom! At times this deep strain of pathos
was all that could be heard, and scarcely heard sighing amid a
desolate silence. But even when the minister's voice grew high
and commanding—when it gushed irrepressibly upward—when it
assumed its utmost breadth and power, so overfilling the church
as to burst its way through the solid walls, and diffuse itself
in the open air—still, if the auditor listened intently, and
for the purpose, he could detect the same cry of pain. What was
it? The complaint of a human heart, sorrow-laden, perchance
guilty, telling its secret, whether of guilt or sorrow, to the
great heart of mankind; beseeching its sympathy or forgiveness,—at
every moment,—in each accent,—and never in vain! It
was this profound and continual undertone that gave the clergyman
his most appropriate power.

During all this time, Hester stood, statue-like, at the foot of
the scaffold. If the minister's voice had not kept her there,
there would, nevertheless, have been an inevitable magnetism in
that spot, whence she dated the first hour of her life of ignominy.
There was a sense within her—too ill-defined to be made a thought,
but weighing heavily on her mind—that her whole orb of life, both
before and after, was connected with this spot, as with the one point
that gave it unity.
Little Pearl, meanwhile, had quitted her mother's side, and was playing at her own will about the market-place. She made the sombre crowd cheerful by her erratic and glistening ray, even as a bird of bright plumage illuminates a whole tree of dusky foliage by darting to and fro, half seen and half concealed amid the twilight of the clustering leaves. She had an undulating, but oftentimes a sharp and irregular movement. It indicated the restless vivacity of her spirit, which to-day was doubly indefatigable in its tip-toe dance, because it was played upon and vibrated with her mother's disquietude. Whenever Pearl saw anything to excite her ever active and wandering curiosity, she flew thitherward, and, as we might say, seized upon that man or thing as her own property, so far as she desired it, but without yielding the minutest degree of control over her motions in requital. The Puritans looked on, and, if they smiled, were none the less inclined to pronounce the child a demon offspring, from the indescribable charm of beauty and eccentricity that shone through her little figure, and sparkled with its activity. She ran and looked the wild Indian in the face, and he grew conscious of a nature wilder than his own. Thence, with native audacity, but still with a reserve as characteristic, she flew into the midst of a group of mariners, the swarthy-cheeked wild men of the ocean, as the Indians were of the land; and they gazed wonderingly and admiringly at Pearl, as if a flake of the sea-foam had taken the shape of a little maid, and were gifted with a soul of the sea-fire, that flashes beneath the prow in the
night-time.

One of these seafaring men the shipmaster, indeed, who had spoken to Hester Prynne was so smitten with Pearl's aspect, that he attempted to lay hands upon her, with purpose to snatch a kiss. Finding it as impossible to touch her as to catch a humming-bird in the air, he took from his hat the gold chain that was twisted about it, and threw it to the child. Pearl immediately twined it around her neck and waist with such happy skill, that, once seen there, it became a part of her, and it was difficult to imagine her without it.

"Thy mother is yonder woman with the scarlet letter," said the seaman, "Wilt thou carry her a message from me?"

"If the message pleases me, I will," answered Pearl.

"Then tell her," rejoined he, "that I spake again with the black-a-visaged, hump shouldered old doctor, and he engages to bring his friend, the gentleman she wots of, aboard with him. So let thy mother take no thought, save for herself and thee. Wilt thou tell her this, thou witch-baby?"

"Mistress Hibbins says my father is the Prince of the Air!" cried Pearl, with a naughty smile. "If thou callest me that ill-name,
I shall tell him of thee, and he will chase thy ship with a tempest!

Pursuing a zigzag course across the marketplace, the child returned to her mother, and communicated what the mariner had said. Hester's strong, calm steadfastly-enduring spirit almost sank, at last, on beholding this dark and grim countenance of an inevitable doom, which at the moment when a passage seemed to open for the minister and herself out of their labyrinth of misery--showed itself with an unrelenting smile, right in the midst of their path.

With her mind harassed by the terrible perplexity in which the shipmaster's intelligence involved her, she was also subjected to another trial. There were many people present from the country round about, who had often heard of the scarlet letter, and to whom it had been made terrific by a hundred false or exaggerated rumours, but who had never beheld it with their own bodily eyes. These, after exhausting other modes of amusement, now thronged about Hester Prynne with rude and boorish intrusiveness. Unscrupulous as it was, however, it could not bring them nearer than a circuit of several yards. At that distance they accordingly stood, fixed there by the centrifugal force of the repugnance which the mystic symbol inspired. The whole gang of sailors, likewise, observing the press of spectators, and learning the purport of the scarlet letter, came and thrust their sunburnt and desperado-looking faces into the ring. Even the
Indians were affected by a sort of cold shadow of the white man's
curiosity and, gliding through the crowd, fastened their
snake-like black eyes on Hester's bosom, conceiving, perhaps,
that the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must
needs be a personage of high dignity among her people. Lastly, the
inhabitants of the town (their own interest in this worn-out
subject languidly reviving itself, by sympathy with what they saw
others feel) lounged idly to the same quarter, and tormented
Hester Prynne, perhaps more than all the rest, with their cool,
well-acquainted gaze at her familiar shame. Hester saw and
recognized the selfsame faces of that group of matrons, who had
awaited her forthcoming from the prison-door seven years ago; all
save one, the youngest and only compassionate among them, whose
burial-robe she had since made. At the final hour, when she was
so soon to fling aside the burning letter, it had strangely
become the centre of more remark and excitement, and was thus
made to sear her breast more painfully, than at any time since
the first day she put it on.

While Hester stood in that magic circle of ignominy, where the
cunning cruelty of her sentence seemed to have fixed her for
ever, the admirable preacher was looking down from the sacred
pulpit upon an audience whose very inmost spirits had yielded to
his control. The sainted minister in the church! The woman of
the scarlet letter in the marketplace! What imagination would
have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching
stigma was on them both!
XXIII. THE REVELATION OF THE SCARLET LETTER

The eloquent voice, on which the souls of the listening audience had been borne aloft as on the swelling waves of the sea, at length came to a pause. There was a momentary silence, profound as what should follow the utterance of oracles. Then ensued a murmur and half-hushed tumult, as if the auditors, released from the high spell that had transported them into the region of another's mind, were returning into themselves, with all their awe and wonder still heavy on them. In a moment more the crowd began to gush forth from the doors of the church. Now that there was an end, they needed more breath, more fit to support the gross and earthly life into which they relapsed, than that atmosphere which the preacher had converted into words of flame, and had burdened with the rich fragrance of his thought.

In the open air their rapture broke into speech. The street and the market-place absolutely babbled, from side to side, with applauses of the minister. His hearers could not rest until they had told one another of what each knew better than he could tell or hear.

According to their united testimony, never had man spoken in so wise, so high, and so holy a spirit, as he that spake this day; nor had inspiration ever breathed through mortal lips more
evidently than it did through his. Its influence could be seen, as it were, descending upon him, and possessing him, and continually lifting him out of the written discourse that lay before him, and filling him with ideas that must have been as marvellous to himself as to his audience. His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him, constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained, only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord. But, throughout it all, and through the whole discourse, there had been a certain deep, sad undertone of pathos, which could not be interpreted otherwise than as the natural regret of one soon to pass away. Yes; their minister whom they so loved--and who so loved them all, that he could not depart heavenward without a sigh--had the foreboding of untimely death upon him, and would soon leave them in their tears. This idea of his transitory stay on earth gave the last emphasis to the effect which the preacher had produced; it was if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant--at once a shadow and a splendour--and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them.
Thus, there had come to the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale—as to most men, in their various spheres, though seldom recognised until they see it far behind them—an epoch of life more brilliant and full of triumph than any previous one, or than any which could hereafter be. He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts or intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days, when the professional character was of itself a lofty pedestal. Such was the position which the minister occupied, as he bowed his head forward on the cushions of the pulpit at the close of his Election Sermon. Meanwhile Hester Prynne was standing beside the scaffold of the pillory, with the scarlet letter still burning on her breast!

Now was heard again the clamour of the music, and the measured tramp of the military escort issuing from the church door. The procession was to be marshalled thence to the town hall, where a solemn banquet would complete the ceremonies of the day.

Once more, therefore, the train of venerable and majestic fathers were seen moving through a broad pathway of the people, who drew back reverently, on either side, as the Governor and magistrates, the old and wise men, the holy ministers, and all that were eminent and renowned, advanced into the midst of them. When they were fairly in the marketplace, their presence was greeted by a shout. This—though doubtless it might acquire additional
force and volume from the child-like loyalty which the age awarded to its
rulers—was felt to be an irrepressible outburst of enthusiasm
kindled in the auditors by that high strain of eloquence which
was yet reverberating in their ears. Each felt the impulse in
himself, and in the same breath, caught it from his neighbour.
Within the church, it had hardly been kept down; beneath the sky
it pealed upward to the zenith. There were human beings enough,
and enough of highly wrought and symphonious feeling to produce
that more impressive sound than the organ tones of the blast, or
the thunder, or the roar of the sea; even that mighty swell of
many voices, blended into one great voice by the universal
impulse which makes likewise one vast heart out of the many.
Never, from the soil of New England had gone up such a shout!
Never, on New England soil had stood the man so honoured by his
mortal brethren as the preacher!

How fared it with him, then? Were there not the brilliant
particles of a halo in the air about his head? So etherealised
by spirit as he was, and so apotheosised by worshipping admirers,
did his footsteps, in the procession, really tread upon the dust
of earth?

As the ranks of military men and civil fathers moved onward, all
eyes were turned towards the point where the minister was seen to
approach among them. The shout died into a murmur, as one
portion of the crowd after another obtained a glimpse of him.
How feeble and pale he looked, amid all his triumph! The
energy--or say, rather, the inspiration which had held him up, until
he should have delivered the sacred message that had brought its own
strength along with it from heaven--was withdrawn, now that it had so
faithfully performed its office. The glow, which they had just
before beheld burning on his cheek, was extinguished, like a
flame that sinks down hopelessly among the late decaying embers.
It seemed hardly the face of a man alive, with such a death-like
hue: it was hardly a man with life in him, that tottered on his
path so nervously, yet tottered, and did not fall!

One of his clerical brethren--it was the venerable John
Wilson--observing the state in which Mr. Dimmesdale was left
by the retiring wave of intellect and sensibility, stepped forward
hastily to offer his support. The minister tremulously, but
decidedly, repelled the old man's arm. He still walked onward,
if that movement could be so described, which rather resembled
the wavering effort of an infant, with its mother's arms in view,
outstretched to tempt him forward. And now, almost imperceptible
as were the latter steps of his progress, he had come opposite
the well-remembered and weather-darkened scaffold, where, long
since, with all that dreary lapse of time between, Hester Prynne
had encountered the world's ignominious stare. There stood
Hester, holding little Pearl by the hand! And there was the
scarlet letter on her breast! The minister here made a pause;
although the music still played the stately and rejoicing march
to which the procession moved. It summoned him onward--inward
to the festival!--but here he made a pause.
Bellingham, for the last few moments, had kept an anxious eye upon him. He now left his own place in the procession, and advanced to give assistance judging, from Mr. Dimmesdale's aspect that he must otherwise inevitably fall. But there was something in the latter's expression that warned back the magistrate, although a man not readily obeying the vague intimations that pass from one spirit to another. The crowd, meanwhile, looked on with awe and wonder. This earthly faintness, was, in their view, only another phase of the minister's celestial strength; nor would it have seemed a miracle too high to be wrought for one so holy, had he ascended before their eyes, waxing dimmer and brighter, and fading at last into the light of heaven!

He turned towards the scaffold, and stretched forth his arms.

"Hester," said he, "come hither! Come, my little Pearl!"

It was a ghastly look with which he regarded them; but there was something at once tender and strangely triumphant in it. The child, with the bird-like motion, which was one of her characteristics, flew to him, and clasped her arms about his knees. Hester Prynne—slowly, as if impelled by inevitable fate, and against her strongest will—likewise drew near, but paused before she reached him. At this instant old Roger
Chillingworth thrust himself through the crowd—or, perhaps, so dark, disturbed, and evil was his look, he rose up out of some nether region—to snatch back his victim from what he sought to do! Be that as it might, the old man rushed forward, and caught the minister by the arm.

"Madman, hold! what is your purpose?" whispered he.
"Wave back that woman! Cast off this child! All shall be well! Do not blacken your fame, and perish in dishonour! I can yet save you! Would you bring infamy on your sacred profession?"

"Ha, tempter! Methinks thou art too late!" answered the minister, encountering his eye, fearfully, but firmly. "Thy power is not what it was! With God's help, I shall escape thee now!"

He again extended his hand to the woman of the scarlet letter.

"Hester Prynne," cried he, with a piercing earnestness, "in the name of Him, so terrible and so merciful, who gives me grace, at this last moment, to do what—for my own heavy sin and miserable agony—I withheld myself from doing seven years ago, come hither now, and twine thy strength about me! Thy strength, Hester; but let it be guided by the will which God hath granted me! This wretched and wronged old man is opposing it with all his might!—with all his own might, and the fiend's! Come,
Hester--come! Support me up yonder scaffold."

The crowd was in a tumult. The men of rank and dignity, who stood more immediately around the clergyman, were so taken by surprise, and so perplexed as to the purport of what they saw--unable to receive the explanation which most readily presented itself, or to imagine any other--that they remained silent and inactive spectators of the judgement which Providence seemed about to work. They beheld the minister, leaning on Hester's shoulder, and supported by her arm around him, approach the scaffold, and ascend its steps; while still the little hand of the sin-born child was clasped in his. Old Roger Chillingworth followed, as one intimately connected with the drama of guilt and sorrow in which they had all been actors, and well entitled, therefore to be present at its closing scene.

"Hadst thou sought the whole earth over," said he looking darkly at the clergyman, "there was no one place so secret--no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me--save on this very scaffold!"

"Thanks be to Him who hath led me hither!" answered the minister.

Yet he trembled, and turned to Hester, with an expression of doubt and anxiety in his eyes, not the less evidently betrayed, that there was a feeble smile upon his lips.
"Is not this better," murmured he, "than what we dreamed of in the forest?"

"I know not! I know not!" she hurriedly replied "Better? Yea; so we may both die, and little Pearl die with us!"

"For thee and Pearl, be it as God shall order," said the minister; "and God is merciful! Let me now do the will which He hath made plain before my sight. For, Hester, I am a dying man. So let me make haste to take my shame upon me!"

Partly supported by Hester Prynne, and holding one hand of little Pearl's, the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale turned to the dignified and venerable rulers; to the holy ministers, who were his brethren; to the people, whose great heart was thoroughly appalled yet overflowing with tearful sympathy, as knowing that some deep life-matter—which, if full of sin, was full of anguish and repentance likewise—was now to be laid open to them. The sun, but little past its meridian, shone down upon the clergyman, and gave a distinctness to his figure, as he stood out from all the earth, to put in his plea of guilty at the bar of Eternal Justice.

"People of New England!" cried he, with a voice that rose over them, high, solemn, and majestic—yet had always a tremor
through it, and sometimes a shriek, struggling up out of a
fathomless depth of remorse and woe—"ye, that have loved me!--ye,
that have deemed me holy!—behold me here, the one
sinner of the world! At last—at last!—I stand upon the
spot where, seven years since, I should have stood, here, with
this woman, whose arm, more than the little strength wherewith I
have crept hitherward, sustains me at this dreadful moment, from
grovelling down upon my face! Lo, the scarlet letter which
Hester wears! Ye have all shuddered at it! Wherever her walk
hath been—wherever, so miserably burdened, she may have hoped
to find repose—it hath cast a lurid gleam of awe and horrible
repugnance round about her. But there stood one in the midst of
you, at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!"

It seemed, at this point, as if the minister must leave the
remainder of his secret undisclosed. But he fought back the
bodily weakness—and, still more, the faintness of heart—that
was striving for the mastery with him. He threw off all
assistance, and stepped passionately forward a pace before the
woman and the children.

"It was on him!" he continued, with a kind of
fierceness; so determined was he to speak out tile whole. "God's
eye beheld it! The angels were for ever pointing at it! (The
Devil knew it well, and fretted it continually with the touch of
his burning finger!) But he hid it cunningly from men, and walked
among you with the mien of a spirit, mournful, because so pure in
a sinful world! --and sad, because he missed his heavenly kindred! Now, at the death-hour, he stands up before you! He bids you look again at Hester's scarlet letter! He tells you, that, with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and that even this, his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart! Stand any here that question God's judgment on a sinner! Behold! Behold, a dreadful witness of it!"

With a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation. For an instant, the gaze of the horror-stricken multitude was concentrated on the ghastly miracle; while the minister stood, with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory. Then, down he sank upon the scaffold! Hester partly raised him, and supported his head against her bosom. Old Roger Chillingworth knelt down beside him, with a blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seemed to have departed,

"Thou hast escaped me!" he repeated more than once. "Thou hast escaped me!"

"May God forgive thee!" said the minister. "Thou, too, hast deeply sinned!"
He withdrew his dying eyes from the old man, and fixed them on
the woman and the child.

"My little Pearl," said he, feebly and there was a sweet and
gentle smile over his face, as of a spirit sinking into deep
repose; nay, now that the burden was removed, it seemed almost as
if he would be sportive with the child--"dear little Pearl,
 wilt thou kiss me now? Thou wouldst not, yonder, in the forest!
But now thou wilt?"

Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of
grief, in which the wild infant bore a part had developed all her
sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they
were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow,
nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it.
Towards her mother, too, Pearl's errand as a messenger of anguish
was fulfilled.

"Hester," said the clergyman, "farewell!"

"Shall we not meet again?" whispered she, bending her face down
close to his. "Shall we not spend our immortal life together?
Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another, with all this woe!
Thou lookest far into eternity, with those bright dying eyes!
Then tell me what thou seest!"
"Hush, Hester--hush!" said he, with tremulous solemnity. "The
law we broke I--the sin here awfully revealed!--let these
alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be, that,
when we forgot our God--when we violated our reverence each for
the other's soul--it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could
meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. God knows;
and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy, most of all, in my
afflictions. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast!
By sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture
always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of
triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these
agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever! Praised be His
name! His will be done! Farewell!"

That final word came forth with the minister's expiring breath.
The multitude, silent till then, broke out in a strange, deep
voice of awe and wonder, which could not as yet find utterance,
save in this murmur that rolled so heavily after the departed
spirit.

XXIV. CONCLUSION

After many days, when time sufficed for the people to arrange
their thoughts in reference to the foregoing scene, there was
more than one account of what had been witnessed on the scaffold.
Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of
the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER--the very semblance of
that worn by Hester Prynne--imprinted in the flesh. As
regarded its origin there were various explanations, all of which
must necessarily have been conjectural. Some affirmed that the
Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, on the very day when Hester Prynne
first wore her ignominious badge, had begun a course of
penance--which he afterwards, in so many futile methods, followed
out--by inflicting a hideous torture on himself. Others contended
that the stigma had not been produced until a long time
subsequent, when old Roger Chillingworth, being a potent
necromancer, had caused it to appear, through the agency of magic
and poisonous drugs. Others, again and those best able to
appreciate the minister's peculiar sensibility, and the wonderful
operation of his spirit upon the body--whispered their belief,
that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever-active
tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at
last manifesting Heaven's dreadful judgment by the visible
presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these
theories. We have thrown all the light we could acquire upon the
portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase
its deep print out of our own brain, where long meditation has
fixed it in very undesirable distinctness.

It is singular, nevertheless, that certain persons, who were
spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have
removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant's. Neither, by their report, had his dying words acknowledged, nor even remotely implied, any--the slightest--connexion on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter. According to these highly-respectable witnesses, the minister, conscious that he was dying--conscious, also, that the reverence of the multitude placed him already among saints and angels--had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness. After exhausting life in his efforts for mankind's spiritual good, he had made the manner of his death a parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike. It was to teach them, that the holiest amongst us has but attained so far above his fellows as to discern more clearly the Mercy which looks down, and repudiate more utterly the phantom of human merit, which would look aspiringly upward. Without disputing a truth so momentous, we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale's story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man's friends--and especially a clergyman's--will sometimes uphold his character, when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust.
The authority which we have chiefly followed—a manuscript of old date, drawn up from the verbal testimony of individuals, some of whom had known Hester Prynne, while others had heard the tale from contemporary witnesses fully confirms the view taken in the foregoing pages. Among many morals which press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence:—“Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!”

Nothing was more remarkable than the change which took place, almost immediately after Mr. Dimmesdale’s death, in the appearance and demeanour of the old man known as Roger Chillingworth. All his strength and energy—all his vital and intellectual force—seemed at once to desert him, insomuch that he positively withered up, shrivelled away and almost vanished from mortal sight, like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun. This unhappy man had made the very principle of his life to consist in the pursuit and systematic exercise revenge; and when, by its completest triumph consummation that evil principle was left with no further material to support it—when, in short, there was no more Devil’s work on earth for him to do, it only remained for the unhumanised mortal to betake himself whither his master would find him tasks enough, and pay him his wages duly. But, to all these shadowy beings, so long our near acquaintances—as well Roger Chillingworth as his companions we would fain be merciful. It is a curious subject of observation and inquiry, whether
hatred and love be not the same thing at bottom. Each, in its
utmost development, supposes a high degree of intimacy and
heart-knowledge; each renders one individual dependent for the
food of his affections and spiritual life upon another: each
leaves the passionate lover, or the no less passionate hater,
forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his subject.
Philosophically considered, therefore, the two passions seem
essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a
celestial radiance, and the other in a dusky and lurid glow. In
the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual
victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their
earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden
love.

Leaving this discussion apart, we have a matter of business to
communicate to the reader. At old Roger Chillingworth's decease,
(which took place within the year), and by his last will and
testament, of which Governor Bellingham and the Reverend Mr.
Wilson were executors, he bequeathed a very considerable amount
of property, both here and in England to little Pearl, the
daughter of Hester Prynne.

So Pearl—the elf child—the demon offspring, as some people
up to that epoch persisted in considering her—became the
richest heiress of her day in the New World. Not improbably this
circumstance wrought a very material change in the public
estimation; and had the mother and child remained here, little
Pearl at a marriageable period of life might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all. But, in no long time after the physician's death, the wearer of the scarlet letter disappeared, and Pearl along with her. For many years, though a vague report would now and then find its way across the sea--like a shapeless piece of driftwood tossed ashore with the initials of a name upon it--yet no tidings of them unquestionably authentic were received. The story of the scarlet letter grew into a legend. Its spell, however, was still potent, and kept the scaffold awful where the poor minister had died, and likewise the cottage by the sea-shore where Hester Prynne had dwelt. Near this latter spot, one afternoon some children were at play, when they beheld a tall woman in a gray robe approach the cottage-door. In all those years it had never once been opened; but either she unlocked it or the decaying wood and iron yielded to her hand, or she glided shadow-like through these impediments--and, at all events, went in.

On the threshold she paused--turned partly round--for perchance the idea of entering alone and all so changed, the home of so intense a former life, was more dreary and desolate than even she could bear. But her hesitation was only for an instant, though long enough to display a scarlet letter on her breast.

And Hester Prynne had returned, and taken up her long-forsaken shame! But where was little Pearl? If still alive she must now
have been in the flush and bloom of early womanhood. None
knew--nor ever learned with the fulness of perfect certainty--whether
the elf-child had gone thus untimely to a maiden grave;
or whether her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued
and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness. But through the
remainder of Hester's life there were indications that the
recluse of the scarlet letter was the object of love and interest
with some inhabitant of another land. Letters came, with
armorial seals upon them, though of bearings unknown to English
heraldry. In the cottage there were articles of comfort and
luxury such as Hester never cared to use, but which only wealth
could have purchased and affection have imagined for her. There
were trifles too, little ornaments, beautiful tokens of a
continual remembrance, that must have been wrought by delicate
fingers at the impulse of a fond heart. And once Hester was seen
embroidering a baby-garment with such a lavish richness of golden
fancy as would have raised a public tumult had any infant thus
apparelled, been shown to our sober-hued community.

In fine, the gossips of that day believed--and Mr. Surveyor
Pue, who made investigations a century later, believed--and one
of his recent successors in office, moreover, faithfully believes--that
Pearl was not only alive, but married, and happy, and
mindful of her mother; and that she would most joyfully have
entertained that sad and lonely mother at her fireside.

But there was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New
England, that in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence. She had returned, therefore, and resumed of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale. Never afterwards did it quit her bosom. But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially—in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought came to Hester's cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognised the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to
a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened
with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming
revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and
beautiful, and wise; moreover, not through dusky grief, but the
ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make
us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end.

So said Hester Prynne, and glanced her sad eyes downward at the
scarlet letter. And, after many, many years, a new grave was
delved, near an old and sunken one, in that burial-ground beside
which King's Chapel has since been built. It was near that old
and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the dust of the
two sleepers had no right to mingle. Yet one tomb-stone served
for both. All around, there were monuments carved with armorial
bearings; and on this simple slab of slate--as the curious
investigator may still discern, and perplex himself with the
purport--there appeared the semblance of an engraved
escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald's wording of which may
serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded
legend; so sombre is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing
point of light gloomier than the shadow: --

"ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES"