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封面

(美) 霍桑 著 余士雄 译

红字

中
英
双
语

The Scarlet Letter

外语教学与研究出版社

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第一章 狱门

一群满脸胡子的男子，身穿深暗色的衣服，头戴灰色的尖帽，其中还混杂着一些扎了头巾或光着脑袋的妇女，聚集在一所大木屋前面。屋门是橡木做的，很厚实，上面钉满了大头铁钉。

新殖民地的创始人，不管他们原先设计的是一种什么样的人间美满、幸福的乌托邦，可都一定承认，根据他们草创时期的实际需要，应从这片处女地中划出一部分做墓地，再划出一部分做监狱的基地。按照这一常规，可以万无一失地推断，波士顿的祖先们在伊萨克·约翰逊的地段内，在他的坟墓周围划出了最早的葬地，并且几乎与此同时，还在康布尔附近一个地方建立了第一所监狱。伊萨克·约翰逊的坟墓后来成了皇家旧教堂墓地里一片坟墓的中心。的确，在这个城市建成大约十五至二十年以后，那所木造的监狱由于风吹雨打和年深日久已是痕迹斑斑了。这就给那狰狞而阴森的监狱正面更增加了一番凄凉景象。它那栋木大门上面沉重的大头铁钉长满了铁锈，看上去比美洲的任何东西都要古老。它像一切有罪的东西一样，从不知道自己有过一段青春时期。在这座阴森可怕的木屋前面，在它同街上那条车道之间，是一块草坪，上面长满了牛蒡、苕蓎、蒺藜牵牛以及诸如此类的很不雅观的植物，显而易见，它们在这片很早就开出了文明社会的黑花——监狱——的土壤中，找到了适宜生长的养料。然而，在人口的另一面，几乎就在门槛上生了根的，是一丛野玫瑰，它在这六月的天气里，缀满了宝石般晶莹的花朵。这也许可以设想，这些花朵要把自己的芳香和娇艳献给那步入牢房的囚犯，献给那跨出牢房去接受极刑的死囚，借以表示造物主的内心对他的同情和仁慈。

这一丛玫瑰由于一个奇妙的机缘，已永垂青史了。但是，它是否仅仅是那原来遮盖

它的那些参天古松和橡树倒落以后很久而从荒芜的原野中幸存下来的呢？还是有充分的证据认为是在成了圣徒的安·哈钦森走进狱门时，在她的足迹下萌生出来的呢？我们可以姑置勿论了。由于这丛玫瑰恰好就在我们现在就要从那不祥的狱门讲起的故事的开头，我几乎情不自禁地要摘下一朵来奉献给读者。我们希望，它能象征故事进程中那一路上可以找到的芬芳宜人的道德之花，或用来冲淡些这一人类的脆弱和悲哀的故事的阴暗结局。

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第二章 市场

至少在两个世纪以前的一个夏天的早晨，在监狱牢房前的草坪上，挤满了一大群波士顿市民，他们的双眼全都紧紧盯着那铁夹板的栎木大门。这些好心人那长满胡须的面孔上呈现出十分严峻的表情，这要是在任何其他居民中，或者在新英格兰后期历史中，准是预示着某个要犯行将处决，而法庭对他的判决也正是确认了群众在情绪上对他的裁判。但是，从早期清教徒的残暴性格来看，这种推断也并不总是准确的。那也可能是一个懒惰的奴仆，或者一个被父母娇惯的逆子，在鞭笞柱上遭受惩罚。还可能是一个唯信仰论者，教友派教徒或者其他异教徒要受鞭挞，并被撵出城外。再不，也许是一个无所事事的印第安人，由于喝了白人的烈酒，在街上闹事，要在鞭挞之后再赶到深山老林中去。也可能是一个女巫，就像支使那位刻薄成性的遗孀希宾斯老夫人那样要处以绞刑。无论是哪一种情况，这些旁观者的庄严举止都是毫无二致的。这正适合这种把宗教和法律几乎看做是一回事的人的身份。在他们

的性格里，二者是如此水乳交融，以至他们对公共纪律中那最温和与最严厉的条例都同样肃然起敬。犯人在断头台上，能从这样的旁观者身上得到的同情，真是微乎其微和冷若冰霜了。另一方面，在我们今天看来是一种丢脸的、可笑的刑罚，可是在当时却几乎把它当做是判处死刑那么严肃。

值得注意的一种情况是，在这夏季的早晨，当我们的故事开始的时候，人群中有几个妇女，对于将要执行的任何惩罚都表现出特别的兴趣。在这没有那么多文雅可讲的时代，没有任何不妥的想法能阻止那些身穿衬裙和蓬裙的妇女出入公共场所。只要有可能她们就会把自己那并非弱不禁风的身躯挤到那距绞刑架最近的人群中去。这些在英国老家生长的太太们和小姐们，无论在道德上和体质上都比她们以后六七代的优秀子孙更为粗野。因为在整个世系中，每一代母亲遗传给她的孩子的，即使性格不比自己软弱、娇气，可是青春却更易逝，玉容更娇嫩和易老，躯体也纤弱。现在站在狱门附近的那些妇女就离堪称女性代表的，有男子气概的伊丽莎白时代，还不到半个世纪，他们是女王的同胞，家乡的牛肉和啤酒以及一点也不精细的精神食粮，都大量地吸进了她们的机体里。因此，灿烂的朝阳照射着的都是她们宽阔的双肩和发达的胸部，以及圆圆的、红润的双颊。这些也都是在遥远的岛国长成的、而尚未在新英格兰的空气里变得苍白和瘦削。此外，这些主妇们大多数都似乎说话大胆，措词洒脱，无论就谈吐的含意，还是声音的洪亮来说，在今天都要使我们大为吃惊的。

“主妇们，”一个样子凶狠、年已半百的老妇人说，“我跟你们说句心里话，如果让我们这些成年的妇女，有着好名声的教徒来处置赫斯特·普琳这样一个坏女人，那就是为大家做了一件大好事。女友们，你们看怎么样？要是这个荡妇站在我们现在正好聚在一起的五人面前受审，她能像那些尊敬的地方法官所判决那样就了事吗？天呀，我真不敢相信！”

“据说，”另一个妇女插话，“他的教长，迪默斯德尔牧师，对这样一件丑闻发生在自己教堂的教徒身上，感到十分痛心。”

“法官们都是虔诚的绅士，但是过于慈悲。真是这样。”第三个年过半百的妇人补充说，“至少要把烙铁放在赫斯特·普琳的前额上打一个烙印才好呢。这样，我敢担保，赫斯特夫人才会有所畏惧。可是，现在却给这个下流荡妇的外衣胸口上挂个什么东西，她才不在乎呢！噫，你们看吧，她会用胸针或诸如此类的异教徒装饰品把它挡住，照样大摇大摆在大街上走来走去！”

“唉，不过，”一个手中牵着一个孩子的少妇较为温和地插嘴说，“那个标记，她要挡，就让她挡吧，可创伤总归留在心里。”

“什么标记，烙印，不管它在外衣胸口上还是在前额皮肉上，我们说它干什么？”另一个妇女叫道。她是这些自命的法官中最丑陋，最残忍的一个。“这个女人给我们大家带来了耻辱，应该把她处死，难道没有这条法律吗？有的，在《圣经》中，在法令全书中都有。让这些不按法律办事的法官们自食其果吧，他们的妻女不堕落才怪呢！”

“我的天哪，太太，”人群中一个男人喊道，“女人除了怕上绞刑架，才循规蹈矩外，就再也没有别的德行了吗？你那话未免太狠了！噓，别说了，多嘴的婆娘们！牢门锁打开了，普琳夫人这就出来了。”

狱门从里面砰的一声打开了，好像一个黑影突然窜到阳光里一样，首先出现的是一个冷酷、可怕的市镇狱吏，他身边佩着一把剑，手上拿着一根官仗。这个人物以他的面貌预兆和代表了清教徒法典全部阴森可怕的严峻，而他的职务就是根据法典对犯人执行最终的、毫不含糊的刑罚。狱吏左手挥着官仗，右手抓住一个青年妇女的

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肩膀，就这样把她拉了出来，一直走到狱门的门槛边。这个妇女一把推开了他，那动作自然，庄重，显示了她倔强的性格。然后，仿佛是按照她自己的意志步出门外。她怀中抱着一个三个月的婴孩，那孩子眨着眼，把小脸转到一边，以避开太强的阳光，因为孩子出生以来只见过地牢或狱中其他暗室里那一抹灰色的微光。

当这个青年妇女——孩子的母亲——完全出现在人群面前时，她第一个举动就是把婴儿紧紧抱在怀里。这与其说是一种母爱的冲动，倒不如说是可以因而遮住那缝在或扣在她衣服上的什么标记。然而，她马上机灵地察觉到，她抱的也是一个耻辱的标记。于是就把孩子托在一只手上，面孔羞得有如火烧一般，但还是傲慢地微笑着，不顾羞耻地环视着镇民和邻居们。她那外衣的胸口上有一个奇妙的花体A字，它是用鲜艳的红布做的，周围饰以精巧的刺绣，并用金线滚边而成。这个字母绣制得十分艺术，十分神采，并富于想象力，简直是她衣服上最时新的，恰到好处的装饰。她那衣服也十分华丽，合乎时尚，只是大大超过了殖民地节约条例所允许的限制。

这个青年妇女身体修长，姿态优美，达到了无以复加的程度。她的头发乌黑浓密，色泽光亮，与日月相映生辉。她的脸孔很美，除了由于五官端正和肤色艳丽外，还因为她的眉宇清秀，眼睛乌黑，因而给人留下了深刻的印象。按照当时大家闺秀的风采来说，她也是属于贵妇人这一类型的，其特征是庄重、高贵，而不是现在所认为的那种温柔、飘浮和无以名之的文雅。同时按照贵妇人这个词的古义来说，赫斯特·普琳也从来没有像她现在从监狱中出来时更像一个贵妇人了。那些以前认识她的人，总认为她经过这场灾难，已经形容憔悴，黯然失色了。然而，出人意料，甚至使人惊讶的是，她竟是那么美貌过人，简直把她一身的不幸和耻辱变成了她头上的一轮光圈。诚然，敏感的观众也还是能看出其中的隐痛的。她的服装确实是她在监狱里临时按照自己的爱好制作的，似乎要以其桀骜不驯和独创的特色来表现她的精

神状态和不顾一切的心情。但是，最引人注目和仿佛美化了她的，却是她胸前那个绣的十分奇巧，光彩照人的红A字。这样一来，无论男女老少，凡是熟悉她的人，此刻都觉得他们似乎是第一次和她萍水相逢。这个红A字有着符咒般的魔力，使她摆脱了人类那寻常的关系，而独自幽居在一个小天地里。

“她的针线活做的是好，这不假，”一个旁观的妇女说，“但是，在这个无耻的贱货以前，有哪个妇女想得出用这种法子来显示自己呢？喂，朋友们，这不是当面嘲笑我们神圣的法官，并且拿这些大人先生们对她的惩罚来出风头吗？”

“这样吧，”一个最铁面无情的老夫人嘟嘟囔囔地说，“要是我们能把赫斯特太太那富丽的外衣从她俊俏的双肩上剥下来，那才好呢！至于她那精心绣制的红A字，我就把我患风湿病时用过的一块破法兰绒奖给她去做，那更合适呢！”

“喂，静一静，街坊们静一静！”她们中一个最年轻的同伴说，“别让她听见了！那一针针仿佛不是刺在字上，而是刺在她心坎上。”

那个冷酷的狱吏用官仗挥了一挥。

“让路，各位，让路，劳驾！”他叫道，“闪开，我保证将普琳太太安排在男女老少都能清清楚楚看得见她那身华丽服装的地方，从现在起一直示众到午后一点为止。把邪恶的东西拉出来见见阳光，这真是公正的马萨诸塞州殖民地的幸运呀！快来，赫斯特太太，到市场里去展览你的红A字吧！”

在旁观的人群中，立即闪开了一条通道。狱吏领先，紧接着是横眉怒目的男人和脸色阴沉的女人的不整齐的队伍。赫斯特·普琳朝着指定的惩罚地点向前走去。一群爱看热闹和好奇的小学生，并不明白眼下究竟是怎么一回事。只知道因此给他们放了半天假，便跑在赫斯特的前面，掉转头来，不断地看看她的脸，看看她怀中眨着眼

睛的婴儿和她胸前那个不光彩的字母。此时此地从狱门到市场并不太远，但是，以囚犯的切身体验来看，那也许是一段相当长的路程，因为她虽然态度傲慢，但是从那些围观的人群面前经过，每走一步都要经历一番意想不到的痛苦，她的心仿佛被扔到了街上，任人糟蹋，任人践踏。然而在我们的天性中，却有一种不可思议而又豁达大度的习性，即受难者从来都不知道他当时忍受了何等剧烈的痛苦，而主要是事后痛定思痛才觉得痛苦万分。因此，赫斯特·普琳几乎是以一种泰然自若的态度经受这一折磨，来到市场西面的绞刑架前的。这个绞刑架立在靠近波士顿最早的一个教堂的屋檐下，并作为那儿的一个景物。

事实上，这个绞刑架成了刑具的一部分，它经过两三代传到我们手里，现在只不过是历史上和传统上的一个遗物，但在古时，它是作为提高公民道德的有力工具而设立的，就像德国恐怖党的绞刑架那样。简单说，那是一个颈手枷的站台，上面是刑具的构架，做得能卡住人头，并将它举起来示众。对人施加凌辱的最好办法，就是将他枷在这个木铁架上，并暴露在光天化日之下。在我看来，无论个人的过失如何，再也没有比这种违反我们共同人性的暴行，即连犯人掩脸遮羞都禁止的暴行更凶恶的了。现在要执行的这种刑罚其要害就在于此。在赫斯特·普琳的案例中，也像其他案例常有的那样，对她的判决，就是要她在绞刑架上站若干时候，但不用绞索套她的脖子，也不卡她的脑袋，只是让她俯首帖耳地示众，而这正是这种可怕的刑具的最凶暴的特点。她很明白自己的处境，就登上了木梯，站在街道上那同人肩差不多高的地方，这样在围观的人群中示众。

要是在这些清教徒中有一个罗马天主教徒，看到这个美女，看到她那浓艳的服装和独具的风采，怀中又抱着一个婴孩，此情此景定会使他想起很多著名画家所竞相描绘的圣母像来。的确，只要一对比，有些地方就会油然使他想起那怀抱着婴儿即怀抱着未来的救世主的纯洁母性的圣像。可是在这里，人类生活中那最神圣的品德，

深深地染上了罪恶的污垢。它所造成的结果是，世界因这个妇人的美反而更加黑暗，因她所生的婴儿反而更加沉沦。

人们对这种场面也并非没有一点畏惧之情，这在社会还没有腐败到对于同类者的犯罪和耻辱所进行的揭露，不是有所警惕，反而幸灾乐祸以前，这种心情总是会有。赫斯特·普琳受辱的目击者当时还没有失去他们的单纯之处。要是赫斯特·普琳被判处死刑，他们是会十分严肃地看着她死去，而不会对苛刑发出任何怨言的。但是，绝不会有后世社会的冷酷无情，只会从眼前这样的示众中来寻找笑料。当时纵使有谁存心来取笑，也会因为州长及其顾问、法官、将军和本城几个牧师这样高贵的人物赫然在场而被压住和制止。他们正坐在或站在会议厅的阳台上，朝绞刑架俯视着。他们也加入了这个围观的场面，不怕有损身份和官职的尊严或威风。这就充分表明，法律的判决具有多么重大而有效的意义。因此，观众是阴沉而严肃的。那个不幸的犯人，则在千百双无情的眼睛紧紧盯着她，集中在她胸前的重压下，以一个妇女所能有的最大力量支撑着自己。这简直是不堪忍受的。她是一个感情容易冲动和热情的人，她尽量使自己坚强起来，以对付人群中那骄横无礼地倾泻出来的种种的凌辱性的刺激和中伤。可是，在大家庄重的心情里，有着一一种更为可怕的东西，使她恨不得注视着所有那些由于幸灾乐祸而变得异常的无情的脸孔，也注视着自己这个目标。要是人群中发出一阵笑声——不论是男的、女的，还是那尖声尖气的，小孩子的，只要有他们的份，赫斯特·普琳也可用倨傲的苦笑来回答他们。但是，她在注定要忍受的这种铅也似的刑罚的重压下，她时时刻刻感到，她似乎十分需要全力大呼一声，挣脱那绞刑台，跳到地面上来，否则她马上就会发疯了。

但是，当普琳成为最显眼的目标的整个场面在她眼前消失时，或者至少那场面像是一团轮廓模糊的怪影一样在她眼前若隐若现时，有了一些遐想的空隙。她的心，特别是她的记忆异常活跃，除了西部荒凉边界上这一小城的这条崎岖不平的街道以

外，她还想起了其他许多情景；同时除了从尖顶帽的帽檐下俯视她的那些脸孔以外，她还想起了其他的脸孔。一些细枝末节，无关紧要的回忆，童年和学生时代的生活片断、游戏、小孩的口角和少女时期的小家闺秀习气，都一起涌上她的心头，并和她后来生活中的一些最严肃的事情的回忆错综复杂地交织在一起。一幕幕的图景是那么栩栩如生，似乎都含有深意，或者都像一出戏。那很可能是她精神上一种本能的反应，用变幻不定的形式来为自己减轻现实生活中所受的残酷的重压和痛苦。

就算这样吧，但绞刑架现在是众目睽睽的焦点，反映出了赫斯特·普琳从幸福的童年开始走过来的整个途程。她站在那令人难堪的高处，再次看见了那在英国本土的故乡和她父亲的老家。那是一所破旧的灰色砖房，样子显得贫困，败落不堪，但在正门之上，还悬挂着一枚半剥蚀的盾形臂章，显得这儿是古老乡绅的门第。她看见了父亲的脸孔，额头光秃秃的，长着可敬的白胡子，飘洒在伊丽莎白时代的旧式皱领上。她也看见了母亲的脸孔，在她的记忆里，那张脸孔总是洋溢着关注和操心的母爱，甚至从母亲去世以后，还常常在她这位女儿所经的道路上成了温柔规劝的警戒。赫斯特还看见了自己的脸孔，它泛着少女的美，把她那常照的灰暗的镜子映得光彩夺目。她此刻还看到另一张脸孔，那是一张已年迈力衰的脸孔，一张苍白、瘦削、学者模样的脸孔。他的双目由于在灯光下看了许多厚书而迷糊昏花了。但这一双昏花的眼睛在为了主人去窥测别人心灵的时候，却有着一种奇特的洞察力。这个书斋和修道院中的人物，赫斯特·普琳以她女性的想象力是不会想不起来的，他有点残疾，左肩比右肩高一些。其次，在记忆的画廊里，展现在她面前的，是欧洲大陆城市的错综、狭窄的街道，灰色的高楼，巨大的教堂，年代古老和建筑奇特的公共大厦。那儿本有一种新生活在等待着她，但她还是跟那个畸形的学者生活在一起。其实那种新生活就像残垣断壁上的一片青苔，也是靠陈腐的物质喂养的。最后经过

这一幕幕的场景，又回到了清教徒新建区的简陋的市场。所有的市民都聚集在那里，正颜厉色地盯着赫斯特·普琳——对，盯着她——只见她站在绞刑架上，怀中抱着一个婴儿，胸前别着一个用金线巧绣而成的红A字。

这难道是真的吗？她把婴儿紧紧地搂在胸前，使得孩子哭叫了一声。她转眼俯视着红A字，甚至用手指去摸它，借以证实孩子和羞耻是否确实存在。是，这就是她的现实，其余的东西都烟消云散了。

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第三章 认出

那个别着红A字的少妇，由于看到人群外面一个人，思想不由自主地倾注在那人身上，因而终于忘却了自己是千夫所指、众目睽睽的目标这一强烈意识。站在那里的是一个穿本地服装的印第安人。但是，红种人并不是英国殖民地的稀客，不可能在此时此刻引起赫斯特·普琳的注意，更不可能从她心目中排除任何其他心事和观念。然而，在印第安人身旁还站着一个白人，那显然是他的同伴，穿着一身半土半洋的奇怪的混合服装。

这个白人身材矮小，脸上长着皱纹，但是还不能就说他是一个上了年纪的人。他的脸上流露出一种非凡的智慧，正像一个人在精神上有了涵养，因而不能不在身体上有所反映一样，并以明显的特征显现出来。他虽然对装束怪模怪样似乎并不介意，实际上是以以此来尽力掩盖或冲淡他那奇怪的特征。可是，这个人的两肩一高一低，

对于赫斯特·普琳来说，是再清楚不过的了。在她一眼就看出了那瘦削的脸，有点畸形的身体时，又不禁紧紧把孩子往怀里一搂，但由于用力太大，可怜的婴儿又发出一声痛苦的哭叫。但是，母亲似乎没有听见。

这个陌生人走进市场以后，在赫斯特·普琳看见他之前的一段时间里，他就一直把目光倾注在她身上。他起初是随随便便看的，像一个主要习惯于向内看的人一样，外部事物对他来说，是很少有价值的，是无关紧要的，除非它们跟他心中所想的事情有关系。然而，很快他的视线就变得集中和敏锐起来。一阵不寒而栗的恐惧在他脸上一掠而过，就像一条蛇一溜而过一样，过了一会儿，又分明一圈圈地缠绕在一起。他的脸色由于激烈的感情冲动阴暗起来了。然而，他很快就用意志的力量把它克制住了，因而除了这一刹那以外，其表情可以说是平静的。过了不久，这种冲动就几乎觉察不出来了，最后恢复到了原来的状态。当这个陌生人发现赫斯特·普琳的眼睛对着他的眼睛，知道她认出了自己时，就慢慢地、沉着地伸出他的指头，做了一个手势，接着把指头放在嘴唇上，向她示意。

然后，陌生人拍了一下他身旁一个市民的肩膀，用一种有礼貌的、谦恭的态度跟他说话。

“请问，先生，”他说，“这个女人是谁？怎么站在这儿示众？”

“朋友，你一定是这儿的生客，”那个市民好奇地望着问话的人和他的蛮人伙伴回答说，“要不然，你必定听说赫斯特·普琳和她的丑行了。我可跟你说，她在虔诚的迪默斯德尔牧师教区的全体教徒中激起了公愤。”

“你说得对，”那人答道，“我是一个外乡人，一个迫不得已的流浪汉。我在海上和陆上吃够了苦头。我曾在南方被异教徒们拘禁了很久，现在又由这个印第安人带

到这里来找人赎身了。因此，请您告诉我，赫斯特·普琳——她的名字，我说得对吗——这个女人犯了什么罪？为什么要把她带上那边的绞刑台？”

“正是，朋友，”那个市民说，“你在穷乡僻壤吃够了苦头，遭了扣留，现在终于来到了我们信奉上帝的新英格兰这样一片乐土上，这儿凡是邪恶都要揭发出来，并在官、民面前受惩罚，我想，这一定会使你打心眼里感到高兴的。那边那个女人，先生，你想必知道，是一个学者的妻子。那位学者出生在英国，但长期住在阿姆斯特丹，在好些年以前，他有意渡海到马萨诸塞来，与我们共命运。为此，他先把妻子打发到这儿来，自己留下，料理一些必要的事情。啊，对，先生，这个女人住在波士顿大约快有两年了，可是那位博学的绅士普林先生却一直没有音信，于是他那年轻的妻子，便误入了歧途……”

“啊，啊哈，你的话我明白了，”这位生客苦笑着说，“像你说得这么一位有学问的人，也一定会在他的书里读到这类事的。先生，我冒昧地问一句，普琳夫人怀中抱的那个孩子的父亲是谁？这孩子我看有三四个月了。”

“说真的，朋友，这件事还是一个谜，解这个谜的丹尼尔还没有出现呢。”那个市民回答说，“赫斯特太太怎么也不肯说，法官们绞尽脑汁也没办法。也许犯罪的人正站在那儿看着这个可悲的场面，还以为谁也不认识他，可就是忘了他是逃不过上帝的眼睛的。”

“这位学者，”陌生人又笑了一笑说，“他自己应该出来解这个谜。”

“要是他还在世的话，这件事理应由他来做。”市民回答说，“先生，现在我们马萨诸塞的法官考虑到这个妇人年轻美貌，无疑是受别人强烈的引诱而失足的，况且，她的丈夫很可能已葬身海底了，所以他们一直不敢冒昧地以我们公正的法律的

极刑来惩处她。犯了这种罪，本来是要处死刑的。但是，他们心眼好，大发慈悲，最后只判赫斯特·普琳在绞刑台上站三个小时，终身在胸前戴上这个耻辱的标记。”

“真是一个明智的判决！”陌生人庄重地点头表示赞同地说，“这样，她将成为一部惩恶扬善的活教材，直到这个可耻的A字被刻在她的墓碑上为止。然而，她的同犯却逍遥法外，没能揪到绞刑架上来跟她站在一块，这真使我感到遗憾。但是，他必定会被揭发出来的！会被揭发出来的！会被揭发出来的！”

陌生人向这个爱说话的市民有礼貌地鞠了一躬，接着向他的印第安随从耳语了几句，便双双打人群中走过去了。

当这一切经过在眼前发生时，赫斯特·普琳还站在刑台上，一直注视着这个陌生人。她的目光专注极了，在这全神贯注的时刻，这个现实世界的一切其他东西似乎都销声匿迹了，只剩下他们两个人。如此的相见，也许要比现在这样跟他见面更可怕。现在是正午，烈日烤着她的脸孔，暴露着她的羞耻；胸前别着不名誉的标记，怀中抱着罪孽的婴儿；全城的人都像节日看热闹一样来看她的尊容，而这本来是只能在炉边的微光中，在家庭欢乐的角落里，在教堂里已婚妇女的面纱下，才能看到的。此情此景虽然可怕，但她倒把这成千的围观者看做了一道屏障。她这样站着，在陌生人和她之间有着这么多人遮挡，倒比面对面跟他相见，俩人单独在一起要好得多。她仿佛真是把示众当作了一个避难所，只担心掩护她的人群一旦散去。赫斯特陷入了这种沉思中，几乎没有听见背后叫她的声音，直到那人不止一次大声、严肃地叫她，连整个人群都能听得一清二楚，她这才听见了。

“赫斯特·普琳，你听我说。”那个声音叫道。

前面已经说过，正对着赫斯特·普琳站立的刑台的上方，有一个附属于会议厅的阳台

或露天走廊一类的建筑物。这就是一向在地方官中宣布公告的地方，并在那儿举行当时宣布这类公告所应有的一切仪式。州长贝林厄姆坐在那儿，亲自观看着上述的情景，他的席位周围站着四个持戟的警官，作为仪仗卫兵。他帽子上插了一支黑翎，外衣上镶有刺绣的花边，里面穿着一件黑天鹅绒紧身短上衣。这是一个上了年纪的绅士，满脸的皱纹意味着他饱经风霜。贝林厄姆是很配做这个社会的首领和代表的，因为这个社会的开拓、进步和它的发展现状，不是依赖于青年人的冲动，而是有赖于成年人的严格而适中的精力，以及老年人的沉着的明智。他们卓然有所建树，就因为他们很少幻想和空想。在这位主要长官周围的其他显要人物，也具有那一时代的尊严风度，因为当时的权力机构被公认为有着宗教机构的神圣性。他们无疑都是好人，公正而贤明。但是，在人类的大家庭中，要选出比赫斯特·普琳此刻所面对的这些正颜厉色的贤者更能坐下来判断一个犯错误的妇女的心，和解决那颗心所难以分清的善恶问题，这么同样多的贤明而有德行的人是不容易的。诚然，赫斯特似乎意识到，她如果还期望什么同情的话，那就只有到人群中那更为宽宏大量、更为温暖的心里去寻找。所以当她举目往阳台上看的时候，这个不幸的妇人不由脸色发白，全身颤抖起来了。

引起赫斯特注意的那个声音是可敬的、有名望的约翰·威尔逊发出来的。他是波士顿最年长的牧师，他跟同时代、同职业的大多数人一样，是一个大学者，又是一个善良、和蔼的人。然而，这后一品质并不如他的智能那样，得到着意的发展，实际上，对他与其说是一件自我庆幸的事，不如说是一件愧事。他站在那儿，帽子一下露出几绺花白的头发，他那习惯于书斋中阴暗光线的灰色眼睛，就像赫斯特的婴儿那样，在骄阳下闪闪地眨着。他的样子很像我们在古老传道书的卷首所看到的黑色画像一般，他和其中任何一个画像一样，没有任何权利像他现在这样公然站出来干预人间的罪恶、情欲和苦恼这类事情。

“赫斯特·普琳，”牧师说，“我已跟我这里这位年轻的兄弟争论过，你也曾得到特许听过他的布道。”威尔逊先生说着，把一只手放在一个脸色苍白的年轻人肩上。“我告诉你，我已极力劝说这位虔诚的青年，叫他来处理你的问题。现在面对着苍天，当着这些明智而正直的长官的面，在全体人民诉讼下，来论述你的罪行的邪恶。这位青年比我更了解你的本性，他能更好地决定使用什么论据来说服你，是用温柔还是用恐吓来改变你的顽固和强硬的态度，使你再也不隐瞒那引诱你走向堕落深渊的人。但是，他反对我的意见，说什么强迫一个妇女在光天化日之下，在大庭广众之中，讲出自己心灵的隐秘，是违反女性的天性的。我极力使他相信，可耻的是犯罪，而不是把罪行抖搂出来。迪默斯德尔兄弟，我再说一遍，你看怎么办？是你，还是我，来启迪这个可怜的女犯的心灵呢？”

阳台上尊严、高贵的人物之间响起了一阵议论声，接着州长贝林厄姆用一种命令的口吻，但是对准备要与之说话的青年牧师却仍带有尊重的语气，表示了大家的意见。

“迪默斯德尔牧师，启迪这个妇人心灵的责任全在你的身上了。你理应劝告她悔悟和招供，以便有个证词和结果。”

这一直截了当的要求，把整个人群的眼睛都引向了迪默斯德尔牧师先生身上。这位青年牧师在英国一所名牌大学毕业后，满怀着当代的全部学识来到了我们这个荒凉的林区。他的口才和宗教热情，已为他在这个职业上获得高位作了保证。他是一个其貌不凡的人，洁白、高尚而突出的前额，褐色而忧郁的大眼睛，除非紧紧闭住，否则便易于颤动的嘴唇，这一切既表现了他的敏感，又表现了他自我克制的强大毅力。尽管这个青年牧师有着很高的天资和学者般的造诣，但他却流露出一种神态——一种担惊受怕、畏首畏尾的神气，似乎总怕自己在人生的道路上误入歧途，不

知所措，因而只有与世隔绝，才能心情舒畅。因此，只要职务允许，他就踏上林荫小道漫步一番，以保持他的单纯和童真，在适当时思想里涌现清新之感，芬芳袭人，纯净得有如露珠一般。很多人说，他这种思想就像安琪儿的话语一样感染着他们。

这就是牧师威尔逊先生和州长当众介绍，以引起大家注目的年轻人。他们吩咐他，在众人都能够听见的情况下，去揭开这个女人内心的秘密。她的心灵虽遭污染，但仍然那么神圣。青年牧师处于难堪的地位，两颊发白，双唇战栗。

“老弟，去给这个妇人说吧，”威尔逊先生说道，“那是她心灵的重大问题，因此，正如尊敬的州长说的，也是你自己的重大问题，因为她的心灵是由你负责管的，去劝她吐露真情吧！”

青年牧师迪默斯德尔先生低着头，似乎在默默祈祷，然后向前走去。

“赫斯特·普琳，”他俯身在阳台上，向下盯着她的眼睛说，“你总听见了这位好人说的话，总明白了我苦于肩负的责任吧。如果你感到，说出来有助于你内心的安宁，尘世的处罚对拯救你更为有效的話，我告诫你，说出你的同犯人、同案人的名字来！不要对他有任何错误的怜悯和温情而缄默不语。为此，你相信我吧，赫斯特，虽然那个人会因此从高位上摔下来，站在你身旁，站到你这受辱台上来，也总比那样要好，总比一生隐藏着一颗罪恶的心要好。你的沉默，除了诱使他——不，实在是强迫他——罪上加罪以外，对他还有什么好处呢？上天赐你公开受辱，你就可以借此公开战胜你内心的邪恶和外部的悲哀。你要注意，你拒绝把这杯有益的苦酒送给他喝——他也许自己没有勇气端起这杯酒——可现在这杯酒已放到你的唇边了！”

这位青年牧师的声音里带着颤音，听来悦耳、圆润、深沉，而又支离破碎，感情鲜明极了，比话语的直接涵义更能打动大家的心，从而使听众一致产生了共鸣。就连赫斯特怀中那个可怜的婴儿也由于受了这样的影响而感动起来，把那一直发呆的目光直接投到迪默斯德尔先生身上来，并举起她的小手臂，用半喜半悲的声音嘟哝着。牧师的话是那么有力，以至听众都不能不相信赫斯特·普琳一定会说出同犯的名字来的；要不，同犯自己，无论地位高低，也会由于内在的和必然的需要而不得不登上刑台的。

赫斯特摇摇头。

“女人，你不要超过上天慈悲的限度！”牧师威尔逊先生叫道，比以前的声音更为粗鲁了，“这个小小的婴儿上天赋予他说话的声音，她都附和并支持你已听到的忠告了。你把那人的名字说出来吧！这一点，加上你的悔悟，就可以帮助你取下你胸前的红A字了。”

“不！”赫斯特·普琳回答说，她并不望着威尔逊先生，而只是窥视着青年牧师那深沉而苦恼的眼睛，“红A字刻得太深了。你取不下来。但愿我不仅能忍受自己的痛苦，也能忍受那人的痛苦！”

“说吧，女人！”从刑台附近的人群中发出另一个声音，冷酷而严厉地说，“说吧，让你的孩子有一个父亲！”

“我不说！”赫斯特·普琳答道，脸色发白，如同死人一般，但仍然对她十分熟悉的那一声音予以回答，“我的孩子必然会找到一个天父的，她将永远不会知道地上的父亲！”

“她不肯说！”迪默斯德尔先生嘟哝着说，俯身靠着阳台，把他的一只手放在自己

的心上，等待着劝告的结果。此刻他回转身来，长舒了一口气，“多么坚强、多么宽大的妇人心呀！她不肯说！”

老牧师看出这个可怜女犯的顽强的心地，早就胸有成竹地准备好了对付这种局面的办法，便向群众作了一番论述罪行的演讲，谈到了罪恶的各方面，其中特别是连续不断地提到了那个可耻的字母。他口若悬河地论述着这个标志竟长达一个多小时。那洋洋洒洒的辞藻一直在人们的脑际回旋着，以至在他们的想象中对那个字母产生了新的恐怖，似乎那个红A字的鲜红色彩就是来自地狱的火焰。赫斯特·普琳此时一直站在耻辱台上，眼里蒙了一层薄翳，神情厌倦而冷漠。那天上午，她忍受了她的天性所能忍受的一切。她生性非凡，决不以昏倒来逃避这难以忍受的痛苦，因此，只要她身体的生命机能还保持完整无缺，她的精神就能在麻木的躯壳下庇护着自己。在这种情况下，说教者的声音，尽管那么无情地震耳欲聋，但对她来说，却是无动于衷。婴儿在受折磨的后半段，号啕大哭起来，放声尖叫起来，打破了沉闷的空气。她机械地极力哄着孩子安静下来，但似乎并不同情孩子的痛苦。她被带回监狱时，态度还是那样强硬，接着便在铁夹板门里，在众目睽睽之下消失了。那些盯着她看的人群则仍在窃窃私语，说那个红A字正沿着门内那黑暗的过道射出一道黯淡的微光。

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第四章 相见

赫斯特·普琳回到监狱以后，由于精神上受到刺激，需要有人经常不断地看护，以免

她戕害自己，或者半疯半癫地加害可怜的婴儿。夜幕降临时，狱吏布雷克特感到，用训斥和判刑来制服她已无济于事了，就想起应该请个医生来看看。他想到有一个人精通基督教的医术，并熟悉野蛮人所教给他的林中草药。说真的，非常需要请个医生来看看，这不仅是为了赫斯特本人，更迫切的是为了那个婴儿。孩子吸着母亲的乳汁，似乎连带吸进了遍及母体内的一切混乱、痛苦和绝望。婴孩此刻翻来覆去地在痛苦中折腾着，这种痛苦是赫斯特·普琳在整整一天中所忍受的精神痛苦在她那小小躯体里的强烈反映。

紧跟在狱吏后面进入阴暗牢房的，是一个模样奇特的人。他在群众中出现时，曾引起那个戴红A字的妇人深切的关注。他寄宿在监狱中，并不是因为他有任何犯罪的嫌疑，而是因为地方长官没有跟印第安人的头目商量好有关他的赎身问题，在此以前，把他安排住在这里，那是最好、最适当的了。他的姓名，据称是罗杰·奇林沃思。狱吏把他引进牢房以后，不多一会儿，真是奇怪，随着这人的到来，房间里就相当安静了，因为赫斯特·普琳顿时像死一般沉寂了，只是孩子还在继续呜咽着。

“朋友，请让我单独跟病人待在一起，”医生说，“相信我，狱吏，你的屋子里一会儿就能得到安静。我向你保证，赫斯特太太今后将比你以前看到的更能服从公正的长官。”

“好哇，要是阁下能办到这件事，”狱吏布雷克特说，“我就真要说你是一个能人了！真的，这个女人像着了魔似的，我什么办法都想尽了，只差没有拿出鞭子来驱赶她身上的恶魔。”

这个陌生人以他那种职业所特有的镇静态度走进了那个房间。当监狱看守退出以后，只留下他和这个妇人面对面地待在那里的时候，他还是保持着那种态度。在人群中，这个妇女曾专心致志地注视过他，这说明他们两人之间的关系非常密切。他

首先去看的是孩子。那孩子在带轮小床上翻来覆去地叫唤，的确使人不得不推迟其他一切事情，先来抚慰她。陌生人细心检查着婴儿的身体，接着打开他那从衣服底下取出的一个小皮匣，里面有不少成药，他取出一片，放在一杯水中。

“我过去研究过炼丹术，”他说，“加上我在一个通晓各种草药药性的民族中待了一年多，使我成为了一个比许多得过学位的医生还要高明的医生。到这儿来，娘儿们！这孩子是你的——不是我——她从声音和相貌都看不出我是她父亲。因此，要用你自己的手，亲自来喂这剂药。”

赫斯特拒绝了他所提供的这副药剂，同时以忐忑不安的神情凝视着他的脸孔。

“你想要在这个无辜的孩子身上给你报仇吗？”她低声说。

“愚蠢的妇人！”医生半冷酷半安慰地说，“我何苦来伤害这个私生的、可怜的婴儿？这种药治病特灵，即使是我的孩子——对，我自己和你亲生的——我也拿不出比这更好的药了。”

赫斯特仍然踌躇不决，实际上她此时正处于不通情理的状态，于是医生抱起婴儿，自己来喂。不久便看出了药的疗效，证实了他的话不假。小病人不哼哼了，也渐渐不抽搐了，不多一会儿，她就跟一般小孩解除了病痛以后一样，进入了梦乡，酣睡了。于是奇林沃思再把注意力转向母亲，以冷静而仔细的检查给她诊脉，察看她的眼睛。这一看，不由得使她的心脏收缩、颤抖起来了，因为那是多么熟悉，却又是多么奇特和冷酷的目光呀！最后他感到诊断清楚了，于是又配了一剂药。

“我在那穷乡僻壤的地方学到了许多秘方，这就是其中的一种，是一个印第安人教我的。这是他向我学习帕拉色尔萨斯那类古典医学时对我的酬谢。你把它喝了吧！它的抚慰作用可能不及一颗无罪的良心。那是我不能给你的。但是，它能镇定你那

膨胀、波动的情绪，就像把油向汹涌的海浪中倾倒一样。”

医生把杯子递给赫斯特，她迟疑不决、神情严肃地望着他的脸孔，最后终于接了过去。那眼色并不是出于恐惧，而是对这样做充满着疑问。她又望着熟睡的孩子。

“我想到过死，”她说，“我希望过死，如果像我这样的人还配祈祷什么的话，那还不如祈求一死。但是，要是杯子里有毒药，那就在你眼看着我喝下之前，求你再想一想。瞧！杯子就到我的嘴边了。”

“你就喝吧。”他仍然冷漠沉着地回答，“赫斯特·普琳，你对我的了解就这么少吗？我的目的就这么一文不值吗？即使我蓄意报仇，那就是让你活着——给你药吃，治好你身体上一切的伤害——更能达到我的目的。这样一来，这个奇耻大辱的标记，不就仍然可以在你胸前闪闪发光吗？”他说着，把长长的食指在A字上点了一下，那个字就立刻像烧红了一般，刺进了她的胸膛。医生看到她不由自主的神色，冷笑了一下。“因此，你就在大家的眼前——在你曾叫他丈夫的那个人的眼前——在那边那个孩子的眼前，活下去，听凭你的厄运的摆布吧。为使你能活下去，把这剂药喝了吧。”

赫斯特·普琳再也不用劝告，再也不用迟疑，就把那剂药一饮而尽了，并在这位能人的吩咐下，坐到了孩子睡的小床上。医生则把室内仅有的一把椅子搬过来，坐在她的身边。她不寒而栗起来，因为她感到，刚才医生是出于人性原则或者也许可以说文雅的残酷，这才驱使他尽力而为，来解除她肉体上的痛苦的，下一步他就该以深受赫斯特大害之人的身份来对付她了。

“赫斯特，”他说，“我不问你为什么和如何堕入这个深渊的，或者倒不如说，你是为什么和如何登上我所看到的耻辱台上去的。这个缘由不用深究。这是我的愚蠢

和你的脆弱造成的。我是一个爱思索的人，是各大图书馆的一条书蛀，一个已经衰老的人。我已把我最好的年华用在渴求知识的迷梦上了，你和你这样的美与我何干呢！我生来畸形，我怎么能够欺骗自己，以为智力上的才华能在一个少女的心灵中把我生理上的缺陷掩盖掉呢！大家都说我贤明。如果贤人对自己切身的事总是贤明的话，那么我早就该预见到这一切了。我早就该预见到，当我走出阴暗的大森林，来到这基督徒的殖民地，第一眼见到的，就是你赫斯特·普琳作为一尊耻辱的立像站在大庭广众的面前。我甚至从我们结为一对新婚夫妇一块走下那古老教堂的台阶时，就该看到那个红A字的罪恶之火在我们人生道路上的尽头，发出熊熊的火光！”

“你要知道，”赫斯特说——她虽然闷闷不乐，可她终于忍受不了对她那个蒙羞受辱的标志所飞来的最后的冷冷一击——“你要知道，我坦白对你说，我对你没有任何感情，也没有任何做作。”

“对，”他说，“这是我的愚蠢！我已说过了。但是，直到我一生中那一阶段为止，我算是白活了。这个世界是太令人扫兴了！我的心是一个足以容纳很多客人的大旅馆，但是我孤独、凄凉，没有家庭温暖，我渴望有一个温暖的家庭！这似乎不是那么荒唐的梦想吧——我虽然老了，生性阴郁，身体残废，可是这普天之下的简朴幸福，全人类都可获得，我也总该能得到吧。因此，赫斯特，我把你引进我的心坎，引入我内心的最深处，以便由于你的来临而带来温暖，也用这温暖来温暖你自己！”

“我太伤害你了。”她低声说。

“我们互相伤害，”他回答说，“是我首先伤害了你，把你那含苞欲放的青春跟我这老朽结成了错误的、不合自然规律的关系，从而葬送了你的青春。因此，我作为一个不是没有思想，不是空谈哲理的人，我决不寻机报复你，也决不想方设法加害

于你。你和我之间，用天平来称，是十分平衡的。但是，赫斯特，那害了我们俩的人却没事，他是谁呢？”

“别问我，”赫斯特·普琳坚定地望着他的脸孔回答说，“这一点你决不会知道的。”

“你说‘决不’，”他带着阴沉而自信的冷笑回答说，“‘决不会知道他’。赫斯特，你相信我吧，无论是外部世界，还是思想深处看不见的领域，很少有什么东西能瞒过那种一丝不苟和锲而不舍的人，他定能解开这个谜的。你可以把你的秘密在那些爱打听的人群面前掩盖起来。你也可以对牧师和州官们隐瞒，就像今天他们试图从你心中挖出你的同犯的姓名，让他跟你一块站在刑台上，而你居然不动声色一样。但是，至于我，我采用的调查办法跟他们不同。我将像我在书中探求真理一样，像我用炼金术求得黄金一样，必定可以找到这个人。有一种共感可以使我意识到他。我将看到他发抖。我也将突然地、无意识地颤抖起来。他早晚要落到我手里！”

满脸皱纹的学者两眼密切地注视着赫斯特·普琳，使她不禁把双手交叉，紧紧按在胸口上，仿佛害怕他马上就看出她心中的秘密。

“你不说出他的名字，他仍旧隐瞒不过我。”学者继续说着，显出一种很有把握的神气，似乎命运之神跟他相通似的。“他衣服上没有像你那样戴着刺绣的红A字，但我可以在他的心上看到这个字。你不用为他担惊受怕！你也不要以为我会对上天如何惩罚他的办法背道而驰，我也不会为了我个人的损失去告发他，使他绳之以法。你也不要胡思乱想，我会谋害他的性命，不，不会的。要是如我所推断，他是一个有名望的人的话，我也不会毁坏他的名声。让他活下去吧！要是他能够办到的话，就让他荣誉的外衣下藏身吧！但他仍旧掌握在我的手心里！”

“你的行动好像很慈悲，”赫斯特惶惑和惊恐地说，“但是，你的话说明你是一个可怕的人！”

“你曾是我的妻子，我吩咐你做一件事，”学者继续说，“你已给情夫保守秘密了。你同样也要给我保守秘密！这个地方没有人认识我。你不要跟任何人吐露我曾是你的丈夫。我将在此地，在地球上这个穷乡僻壤的地方住下来。这是因为我在别处流浪，形单影孤，人世茫茫，而在这儿却有一个女人、一个男人、一个孩子，他们和我之间有着极为密切的关系。至于是爱还是恨，是正确还是错误，那就别去管它了。赫斯特·普琳，你和你的东西都是属于我的。我的家就是你的家，也是他的家。只是不要把我吐露出去！”

“你为什么要这样呢？”赫斯特问道，她不知道是什么缘故使她害怕这个秘密的约定，“你为什么不公开宣布自己的身份，立即把我遗弃呢？”

“那也许是因为——”他回答说，“我不愿蒙受一个不忠实的妻子给她丈夫带来的耻辱。也许还有其他原因。但这就足以说明，我的用意是要在此地默默地了此一生。因此，你要让人家都以为你的丈夫已经去世，永远不会有他的音信了。你不要在言语、行迹和表情上表露出你认识我！尤其不要向你心中的那个人泄露这一秘密。在这件事上，你千万不要使我失望！他的名誉，他的地位，他的生命，全掌握在我的手里！你当心吧！”

“我一定保守你的秘密，跟保守他的一样。”赫斯特说。

“你对此起誓！”他说。

于是她发誓。

“现在，赫斯特·普琳太太，”老罗杰·奇林沃思——人们此后就一直这样称呼他——说，“我不干涉你，你自个儿带着你的孩子和红A字吧！怎么样，赫斯特。是判决你连睡觉也都要戴这个标记吗？你不怕做噩梦吗？”

“你为什么要这样对我冷笑呢？”赫斯特苦恼地看着他的眼色说，“你是不是像经常出没在我们周围森林里的黑鬼一样呢？你诱使我订立了一个密约，是不是表明我的灵魂毁灭了呢？”

“不是你的灵魂，”他又笑了笑地回答，“不，不是你的灵魂！”

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第五章 赫斯特的针线活

赫斯特的监禁期限已告结束。狱门打开了，她来到普照一切的阳光之下。阳光对于她那病态的不健康的心灵来说，似乎除了要照亮她胸前的红A字就没有别的目的了。这是她第一次没有人押解着走出狱门。她现在的心境和以前在路上、在刑台上当众受辱、为众人所指责的场面相比，也许要感到更为痛苦。那时，她被一种反常的神经紧张和顽强不屈的性格支撑着，从而使她得以将那种景况转变为惨淡的胜利。况且，那是一个个别的孤立的事件，一生中只有那么一次，因此，她可以不惜代价，鼓起足够多年平静生活使用的精力来对付它。正是那宣判赫斯特有罪的法律——一个面目森严的巨人，它的铁腕既能支持人，也能毁灭人——支撑她通过了那可怕的奇耻大辱的折磨。但现在她没有人押解，自己走出了狱门，开始了日常的生活。她

必须用自己生就的本能来支撑着过下去，否则就要往下沉沦。她再也不能寄希望于未来，以帮助她熬过目前的痛苦。明天有明天的痛苦，后天有后天的痛苦，大后天也一样，每天都有每天的痛苦，而且大都一样，难以形容，必须忍受。在未来漫长的岁月里，她仍然要挑起同样的担子，奋力向前，一直担着，决不能放下，因为她那耻辱柱上积聚的痛苦经年累月与日俱增。长此下去，她将失去个性，成为说教者和道学家们所指斥的那种典型。他们会把这一典型作为妇女脆弱和堕落的生动而具体的例证。这样他们就可以教育那些年轻而单纯的人们了，让他们来看看这个胸前闪耀着红A字的赫斯特，这个本是良家女儿的妇女，这个婴儿（她日后也要成为一个妇人的）的母亲，这个一度是清白的人，这个罪恶的形象、化身和活生生的现实。她至死都必须戴着那个丑恶的东西。那个东西将成为她坟墓上唯一的墓碑。

可是说来也怪，这个妇人面前天宽地阔——判决她的法令条文并没有把她限制在清教徒的这个穷乡僻壤的新拓居地，她尽可以自由自在地回到她的出生地或欧洲的其他地方去，从此隐姓埋名，以一种新的面貌出现，完全像一个异域他乡的人一样，另外那黑压压的、深不可测的森林的路口也向她敞开着，她的野性正好和当地人一脉相通，而当地人的生活习惯又正好跟判她刑的法律相反——可是说来也怪，她却偏偏把这个唯一将她判成耻辱典型的地方叫作家乡。不过，有一种宿命，一种不可抗拒、不可抑制的情感，它有着左右命运的力量，几乎总是强迫人们留恋那曾给他们生活的某些重大而显著的事件留下斑斑色彩的地方，并像鬼一样经常在那儿出没。这种情感越深，留恋的色彩也越浓。赫斯特的罪恶，她的耻辱正好成了扎在这片土壤中的根子。它好像一次新生似的，同化作用比第一次出生时更为强大，以至对于任何别的旅行者、漫游者来说是格格不入的这一片森林地带，却成了赫斯特·普琳的虽是荒凉然而一生长住的家园。世界各地——即使是田园生活的英国农村，那个她度过了幸福的童年和纯洁的少女时代的地方，就像很久以前脱下的外衣一样，

现在仍由母亲保管着——一切其他情景跟这儿比较起来，对她来说都是陌生的。那将赫斯特困住在这儿的链条是铁环制的，虽然擦伤了她的心灵深处，但是水远不会折断。

可能还另有原因——无疑是这样，虽然她自己都瞒着自己，但每当这个秘密像大蛇出洞一样从她的内心里窜出来时，她的脸色就苍白起来——这也许是另一种感情使她坚守在这个曾给她以致命打击的环境里和小路上。那儿住着一个人，那儿有一个人的脚步在走着。她认准自己跟这个人结成了佳偶。但他们在这个世界上并没能得到承认。他俩将一块儿被带到最后的审判台上去，把审判台作为他们举行婚礼的圣坛，以求得来生共享无限的幸福。灵魂的诱惑者一再把这种观念塞进赫斯特的冥想之中，嘲笑她那激越的，不顾一切的欢快，然后又极力把这种观念从她的思想中驱赶出来。她几乎不敢正视这种观念，于是连忙把它封锁起来。她强迫自己相信的东西，即她最后得以继续在新英格兰居住的动机，一半是出于实情，一半是出于欺骗自己。她对自己说，这儿是她犯罪的地方，这儿也应是她受到人间处罚的地方。因此，她每天忍辱负重地过着，也许最终将洗清她的灵魂，在她失去贞洁之后，再造出另一个贞洁来，并且由于殉道的结果，这个贞洁将更圣洁。

因此，赫斯特·普琳决不逃避。那时在市郊，在半岛的边上，但并不挨着其他的住宅，有一间小茅屋。那是早期的移民建立的，后被弃置不用了，原因是此地太贫瘠，不宜于耕作，同时又由于这儿比较偏远，不便于参加那些标志当时侨民习惯的社交活动。茅屋建在海滨上，朝西穿过海洋盆地，可以望见林木森森的山陵。一丛灌木林孤零零地长在半岛上，并不能全部挡住茅屋，看来倒似乎表示这儿有个目标巴不得它挡住，或者至少应该把它挡住。在这间冷冷清清的小屋里，赫斯特带着一些微薄的资产，在仍然监管着她的地方官的允许下，带着孩子安下了家。一种怀疑的神秘的阴影也随着跟到了这个地方。孩子们年龄太小，不明白这个妇人何以被摈

弃在人类的慈悲之外，于是悄悄地走近前去，看她在小屋窗前做针线活，看她在门口站着，看她在菜园子里劳动，看她沿着通往城里的路上走着，可是一看到她胸前的红A字，就带着一种奇怪的、像怕接触传染病一样的恐惧心理跑开了。

赫斯特虽然处境孤独，在这个世界上没有一个敢于站出来帮助她的朋友，但是并没有受到贫困的威胁。她有一门手艺，即使是在这个较少发展余地的地方，也足以供养她那成长中的婴儿和她自己。这手艺就是做针线活，在那时和现在一样，它几乎是妇女们力所能及的唯一手艺。她胸前佩戴的、巧绣的A字，就是她那精致而又富于想象力的技巧的标本。她这种技巧，宫廷的贵妇们也乐于利用。那就是用来给她们的金丝织品再增添几分别出心裁的更为富丽、更为高雅的装饰。诚然，这里清教徒的服装一般都是黑色的、式样简朴的，往往不需要她那双巧手所做出的娟秀的产品。可是，当时的风尚却对于这一类物品的制作要求得很精细，这当然不会不影响到我们严格的祖先，他们曾经抛弃了许多看来似乎是难以去掉的风尚。那时公开的典礼，诸如受圣职、新官上任以及新政府组成时向人民摆威风等，都是政策上的大事，必须庄重，合乎礼仪，森严，但是故作豪华。这样深深的皱领、精制的镶边和华丽的刺绣手套，就对大权在握的人物显示官威显得十分需要了。这些东西有地位、有钱的人容易得到，而对平民阶层来说，却为节约法令所禁止，不准他们使用这些东西和其他类似的奢侈品。葬礼的服饰也如此。无论是死者的寿衣，还是送葬者致哀的黑丧服和白麻衣上各种各样的象征图案，总是经常特别需要赫斯特·普琳所能提供的劳动。婴儿的服装——当时婴儿都穿阔气的童装——也是给她提供出卖劳力和获得报酬的机会。

赫斯特的手工制品逐渐地，但不是很慢地成了时髦服饰。也许是出于对一个命运如此悲惨的妇女的怜悯，或者是出于病态的好奇心，本来是一件普通的或者并无价值的东西却得到了不应有的高价；也许那时也跟现在一样，由于某种莫名其妙的原

因，别人得不到的东西，有些人却可以充分得到，要么还可能是由于赫斯特能真正填补那个非她莫属的空缺。然而不管怎样，确定无疑的是，无论赫斯特愿意干多少时间，她都可以立即受到公平合理的雇用。人们也许是出于虚荣心，宁可生活得苦些，也要穿上她用罪恶的双手所做成的服装，去参加豪华和庄严的典礼。她的飞针走线出现在州长的皱领上，军人佩戴的肩带上，以及牧师的衣帽镶边上。她的女红装饰着婴儿的小帽，还被封闭在死者的棺木中发霉、腐烂。但是，有一例外，就是新娘遮羞面纱，从未见过有谁求她刺绣过。这种例外说明社会上对她的罪行始终紧锁眉头，不肯宽容。

赫斯特除了维持生计之外，别无他求。她自奉极其简朴、刻苦，对孩子也只略为宽裕一些。她自己穿的衣服，质料是最粗糙的，颜色是暗淡的。衣服之上只有一个装饰——那注定了要佩戴的红A字。然而，另一方面，孩子的衣服却很奇异，它的确可以增加这个女孩身上早就萌发的轻盈妩媚之处，但其中也似乎含有深刻的意义。关于这一点，我们下面再详细说。赫斯特除了给婴儿装饰而需要一点花费以外，她把全部余钱都用于慈善事业，以赈济不幸者。其实这些人并不比她更悲惨，他们还常常侮辱她这个赈济者。赫斯特本有很多时间可用来发挥她更大的艺术才能，但她却主要用于给穷人制作粗布衣服。这也许是因为这种工作含有忏悔的意思，她才把那么多时间用来干这种粗活，实际上这是牺牲了她的乐趣。赫斯特的性格丰富多彩，外貌妖娆和富有东方人的特色。她很爱美，这除了在她那精巧的针线制品上有所表现以外，她自己的全部生活中，就再也找不到施展才能的地方了。妇女们往往能从精巧的针线活中得到异性所不能理解的乐趣。对赫斯特·普琳来说，这还可能是她的一种表现生活热情的方式，因而也是她在这方面的一种安慰。然而，赫斯特也像对待其他欢乐一样，把这看做是罪恶而抛弃了。这种对无关紧要的事情也要受到她病态的良心的谴责，那就恐怕不是真正的、坚定的忏悔，而是内心有着某种疑虑

的东西，某种根深蒂固的错误在潜伏着。

赫斯特·普琳就是以这种态度，在这个世界上扮演着一个角色。虽然在她身上打了一个烙印，对于一个女性来说，这比打在额上的烙印还要难以忍受，但她有着生就的坚强性格和罕见的才能，所以那个烙印不可能完全把她逐出世人之外。然而，在她与社会的一切交往中，却又没有一件东西能使她感到自己似乎是属于这个社会的。跟她接触的那些人的每一个手势、每一句话，甚至连沉默都意味着，并往往表示出，她被人们排斥在外。她是那么孤单，似乎是生活在另一个世界里，或者是以不同于世人的官能和感觉跟一般人打交道。她与道德绝缘了，但道德却又近在身旁，这就好似一个鬼魂回到熟悉的家中，而家人却看不到，摸不着一样。她再不能与家人共享欢乐，同分忧愁了，或者即使她能表达出被禁锢的感情，也只能唤起家人的恐怖和可怕的厌恶心情。事实上，这种情绪，加上最为难受的轻蔑，似乎就是她在世人心目中唯一的命运了。那时并不是一个文明的时代。她的处境虽然她很清楚，并且丝毫不敢有所忘怀，但是，由于人们粗暴地触及她的痛处，因而她的处境也就像一阵阵新的剧痛，常常鲜明地浮现在她的眼前。

我们已经说过的那些穷人，她施舍的那些对象，就常常辱骂她这个向他们伸出救济之手的人。同样地，赫斯特因职业关系而进出其门的贵妇，也惯常把一些苦水洒入她的心田。这些贵妇人有时是用不露声色的恶意中伤的办法，专门从一些日常小事中编造出一些居心险恶的、毒汁四溅的事儿来折腾她；有时则用一些粗言恶语来伤害这个遭难者那没有设防的心胸，就好像对一个已经溃瘍的伤口给予凶狠的一击一样。赫斯特受过长期的、很好的磨炼。她对这类攻击从无反应，只不过在苍白的面颊上情不自禁地泛起一阵红晕，接着就慢慢地消失在她内心深处了。她是一个能忍耐的人——一个真正的殉道者，但她不为敌人祈祷，因为尽管她有宽恕人的意愿，却又唯恐祝福的话语硬会歪曲成一种咒语。

清教徒法庭那永恒不变的判决，真是机关算尽，给她造成痛苦，一直无时无刻、无孔不入地使她感到无休无止的隐痛。有时牧师们在街上停下来劝导她。也常引来一大群人，带着冷笑、皱着眉头，围观着这个可怜而有罪的女人。当她走进教堂，指望去分享天父安息日的微笑，也常常会不幸地发现，她成了讲道的课题。赫斯特还渐渐地怕起孩子们来了，因为他们从父母那儿得到一种模糊的印象，都觉得这个忧伤的妇女有些可怕，这样她就常常只有带着那个唯一的婴儿，形单影只地、默默地打从街道上穿过。孩子们先是让她过去，然后就远远地跟在她后面尖叫着。他们的叫喊，在那小小的心灵里本无明确的用意，是无意中说出来的，但在她听来就觉得可怕极了。这似乎说明，她的丑闻已广为扩散了，天地万物都知道了。即使是树叶也在为这件丑事而窃窃私语——夏季的微风在为它而嘀嘀咕咕——冬天凛冽的寒风在为此而放声高谈阔论，也不可能有比这使她感到更为深沉的痛苦了。新来的人的注视，是她感受到的另一种特殊的痛苦。每当陌生人好奇地望着那个红A字的时候——没有一个人不会这么做的——就会重新刺痛赫斯特的心灵。因此，她几乎总要情不自禁地用手盖住这个标记，但又总是克制住了。可是，熟人熟眼也同样叫她有苦可吃。那些熟悉的冷淡的目光简直令人忍受不了。简单说来，赫斯特·普琳从开始到末了，总是感到有人盯着她那标记，因而也就总是十分痛苦。那个地方是决不会麻木起来的，相反，随着每天经受的痛苦而变得更加敏感起来。

但是，赫斯特有时许多天一次，或者好几个月一次感到有一双眼睛——一双人类的眼睛——望着这个耻辱的烙印，却又似乎使她得到了暂时的安慰。她的痛苦也好像已减去了一半。可是顷刻之间，这种痛苦又折回来了，而且比以前更为沉重。因为在这短暂的间隔里，她又重新犯罪了。是她单独一个人犯罪的吗？

赫斯特的想象力已经受到了一些影响，如果她的道德和理智的素养较为脆弱的话，那么她那冷漠而孤独的生活的痛苦还会使她受到更大的影响。赫斯特在这个表面上

与她有联系的小天地里，迈着孤独的步骤走来走去，她不时意识到——即使全是幻觉，也仍然十分顽强，无法抗拒——感觉到或幻觉到那个红A字正在赋予她一种新的意义。她不敢相信，又不能不相信。红A字已使她感知了别人心中隐藏的罪恶。这样的感应使她十分惊恐。这是怎么回事呢？恶魔对于这样一个挣扎着的、还只是他半个牺牲品的妇女，总是巴不得让她相信，外表的贞洁只不过是一种欺骗，如果到处都抖露真情，那么红A字除了别在赫斯特·普琳的胸前以外，也要别在许多人的胸前了。难道她必须把这些暗示——这些又含糊，又清楚不过的暗示——当做真理接受吗？在她一生悲惨的经历中，再没有比这种感觉更可怕、更令人讨厌的了。这种感觉又往往不恭不敬、不合时宜地十分活跃起来，使她感到迷惑和震惊。有时当赫斯特从一位尊敬的牧师或一位行政长官这类虔诚和正义的典范身旁走过时，她胸前这一红色的丑行标记就会发生感应地跳动起来。当时，在那虔敬的古代，敬仰这类典型人物就像敬仰一个与天使有交往的凡人一样。“又有什么灾祸要降临了？”赫斯特自言自语地说。她勉强睁开眼来，在她视野内，除了这种人间圣徒的形象以外，就再没有别人了！当她遇见一位正颜厉色的夫人时，也会有一种姐妹的情谊不由自主地涌上心头。那位夫人，大家众口一词地说她一生冷若冰霜。夫人胸中那化不开的冰块和赫斯特·普琳胸前的奇耻大辱，这两者之间有什么共同之点呢？也许又一次有如电击一般告诫她：“看呀，赫斯特，这儿是你的一个同伴！”于是她抬起头来，发现一个少女的双眼望着她胸前的红A字，只见她羞羞怯怯，侧目斜视，迅速闪开了，双颊上呈现出微微的、冷漠的红晕，似乎她的纯洁由于这短暂的一瞥而有所玷污了。恶魔啊，你的护符就是那个致命的标志，你就不愿在无论老的或少的身上留下一点东西，让这个可怜的罪犯来尊敬吗？——这样丧尽信义，从来都是罪恶中的一种最悲惨的结局。那也正好证明，这个由于本身的脆弱和人间残酷的法律而成了可怜的牺牲品的妇女还没有完全堕落，她还在极力相信，和她同辈的人并不像她那样罪孽深重。

在那闭塞的古代，庸夫俗子们往往对他们感兴趣的想象中的事物涂上一层怪诞的恐怖色彩。关于这个红A字他们就编有一个故事，我们可以很容易地把它发展为一篇惊险的传奇。他们断言，这个标志不仅是人间染缸里染出来的红布，而且和地狱之火一样通红，不论赫斯特·普琳在夜间什么时候走出户外，都能看见红光闪烁。我们必须加以说明，这个红A字烙在赫斯特的胸前是那么深刻，因而传说中的东西，也许要比我们现在对此所产生的怀疑包含着更多的真理。

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第六章 珠儿

我们几乎还没有说到这个婴孩。这个小家伙，是由上天不可思议的意志而生下来的一个天真烂漫的小生命，是从旺盛的罪恶情欲中开放出来的一朵可爱的、永不凋零的花朵。这个悲惨的妇女眼看着孩子的成长，眼看着她那日益动人的美貌，眼看着那小脸蛋上闪耀出聪明伶俐的光辉，她感到多么奇妙啊！珠儿！——赫斯特这样叫她。这并不是形容她的容貌而取的一个名字，因为两相比较，孩子并没有珍珠那种安谧、洁白，也没有珍珠那种不动声色的珠光宝气。但是，赫斯特管她的孩子叫“珠儿”，是因为珍珠价值高贵，是她付出一切代价换来的，是她这位母亲唯一的宝贝！是啊，多么奇怪啊！人们用红A字来标志这个妇女所犯的罪孽，而这个A字竟具有那么灵验、那么灾难性的效果，以至于除了跟她一样犯罪的人以外，就没有一个人同情她。上帝赐给了赫斯特一个可爱的孩子，以此作为世人惩罚她的罪孽的直接后果，于是她那丢人现眼的胸怀就成了婴儿栖身之所，婴儿则为母亲传宗接代

担负起了永恒的纽带作用，并最后要成为天国中有福的灵魂！这些念头对于赫斯特来说是忧虑多于希望。赫斯特知道她有罪，因此她不相信会有什么好结果。她日复一日提心吊胆地望着孩子性格的发展，总是害怕出现什么阴暗、粗野的怪癖，走上她那样犯罪的道路。

的确，这孩子没有生理上的缺陷。凭她那完美的体形，活泼的性格，跃跃欲试的、灵巧的四肢，就足以在伊甸乐园出生，足以留在那里，在人类始祖被逐出乐园以后，作为天使的玩伴。这孩子天生秀丽，但也并非完美无缺。然而，她的服装不管怎样简朴，却总给人一种印象，似乎就只有她穿最合身。问题是小珠儿从来就不穿土里土气的衣服。她的母亲有一种病态心理——这点后面将会更清楚地看到——总是搜购最贵重的料子，充分发挥她的想象，来安排和装饰孩子在人前穿着的衣服。这个小儿被如此打扮，真是动人极了，这也是她独有的美的特色，而由于穿着一身可使平庸的美黯然失色的华丽服装，因此在那黑黝黝的村舍地面上，珠儿的倩影的周围就像是出现了一轮纯洁的光环。她就是穿一件简朴的衣服，因为顽皮而扯破或弄脏，仍然美妙如画。珠儿的容貌充满了无限的魅力。她身上集中了许多孩子的优点，下自农家婴儿野花般的美，上至小公主略呈修饰的美，通通包罗无遗。然而，在这一切的美中，还有一股热情和一股颇为浓郁的色彩是她永远都不会丢失的。如果这孩子稍经变化，变得冷淡一些或是苍白一些，那么就不再是她了，就不再是珠儿了！

这种外表的千变万化意味着，并且再清楚不过地表明她精神生活的丰富多彩。她的秉性既有深度，又有广度，但是却和她所出生的这个世界格格不入——要不然就是赫斯特的重重忧虑把她弄拧了。这孩子生来就不愿遵守清规戒律。她的出生就是对法律的一大挑战。结果也许是她长得艳丽俊俏，但就是不修边幅，或者说独具一格，其中的变化和排列的特点是难以或不可能捉摸到的。当珠儿从精神世界吸取她

的灵魂，从物质世界吸取她的具体声誉的关键时刻，赫斯特只有靠回忆自己的往事，才能说明这个孩子的性格，其实那也是极其含糊、最不完全的说明。母亲那充满激情的心境是一种媒介，通过它可以把精神生活的光辉传给尚未出生的婴儿。然而，原本是洁白无瑕的光线，现在却染上了媒介物质的深红和金黄的斑点，火红的光泽，漆黑的影子以及闪动的光斑。首先，赫斯特在那个时代的精神上的斗争性已深深地在珠儿身上扎下了根。她能在孩子的身上看出自己那种放荡不羁、不顾一切、富于反抗的心情和轻浮的脾气，甚至还有几抹像笼罩在她心中的那种阴郁和沮丧的云层。这些特点现在已由小孩性情中初露的曙光照耀得一清二楚了。问题是在以后，在社会上崭露头角以后，就可能要遇到各种各样的风暴了。

家规在那个年代要比现在远为严厉。皱皱眉头，就被严加斥责，根据《圣经》的规定施以鞭打，这些刑罚不仅用来惩戒实际的冒犯行为，而且用作培养和促进儿童美德的有力手段。尽管如此，赫斯特·普琳，这个独生女的孤独母亲，却不太会对孩子操之过严。相反，她鉴于自己的失足和不幸，很早就探求一种既温和而又严厉的办法，以免这个由她看管的婴儿有朝一日堕入伤风败俗的深渊。但是这个工作超出了她的能力范围。嬉笑怒骂，赫斯特都试过了，证明这两种管教办法都没能取得预期的效果，最后只好站在一旁，听凭孩子任性了。肉体上的强迫或制止，当然只能奏效于一时，至于其他任何训诫的办法，无论是晓之以理，还是动之以情，小珠儿是心领神会，还是不理不睬，那就要看她一时的高兴了。当珠儿还是一个婴孩的时候，母亲就熟知孩子具有一种特别的脸色。一旦出现这样的脸色，就是再坚持，再诱导，或是再解说，也是枉然。这一脸色显得如此机灵，而又如此不可理解，如此倔强，而有时又如此凶狠，但过后又会兴高采烈起来。每逢遇到这种情况，不能不问一问，珠儿究竟是不是一个凡夫俗子的孩子。她似乎像一个轻飘飘的妖精，在茅屋地面上做了一会儿奇特的游戏以后，就带着讥笑飞奔而去了。每当孩子那双任

性、明亮和深黑的眼睛里露出那种眼神的时候，就不由使她产生一种奇异渺茫而又不可捉摸的感觉，似乎她正在空中翱翔，会像一道微光一样消失，从何地而来到何地而去，都无从得悉。赫斯特一看到这种神色，就赶紧朝孩子跑去，像追一个必然会逃走的小精灵一般，紧紧地把她抱住搂在怀里，热烈地吻着她。这与其说是出于炽热的母爱，倒不如说是为了证实珠儿乃是肉眼凡胎，并非完全虚幻。当珠儿被抓住时，她的笑虽然充满了欢乐和悦耳的声音，但母亲却比以前更加忧虑了。

在赫斯特和她唯一的宝贝之间，常常发生这种令人迷惑不解的气氛，使她感到很伤心，而这个宝贝又是她花了那么高的代价得来的，是她全部身心的寄托。想到这些，她有时就不免大哭起来。那么，母亲的哭会给珠儿一种什么样的影响呢？这在事前并不知道。也许孩子会皱起眉头，握起小拳，绷起小脸，显得又厉害又冷漠不满的样子。她也许会转脸为笑，笑声比以前更大，就像是一个对人间痛苦无牵无挂的小东西一样。她可能——但这种时候很少——悲痛欲绝，饮泣失声，哭诉她对母亲的爱，似乎急欲捣碎寸心，以证明她有一颗良心。赫斯特很难相信这种一阵风似的温情，因为它来去都太突然了。母亲沉思着所有这些事情，感到自己像一个装神弄鬼的人，但由于在施行法术的过程中，不合乎规矩，因而没能得到那种可以控制这位神秘的新神的咒语。赫斯特唯一真正的安慰是在孩子安详入睡的时候。这时，赫斯特确信珠儿已经睡着了，因而得以安享几个小时的恬静、感伤而又痛快的幸福了。然后，小珠儿又该醒来了，也许又要睁开眼睑，闪出倔强的目光来了。

多么快呀——真是快得出奇！——珠儿已从她母亲那常见的笑容下，那婆婆妈妈的话语声中，长大到与社会接触的年龄了！赫斯特要是能够听到珠儿那清脆的、鸟儿鸣啭般的声音跟其他孩子的喧嚷声打成一片，要是在一群嬉戏的孩子的各种叫唤声中能辨出、听出她那宝贝的声音，她该感到多么幸福啊！然而，这是绝不可能的。珠儿一生下来就被摈弃在儿童世界之外。她是一个邪恶的小鬼，罪恶的象征和产

儿，她没有权利跟受过洗礼的婴儿在一起。天性是一种奇特的东西。这孩子就似乎有这么一种天性，懂得该受孤独；懂得自己只有画地为牢的命运。简言之，跟其他孩子相比，她所处的地位完全与众不同。打赫斯特从监狱中释放起，大家就从来没有见过她不带着孩子在身边的。赫斯特每次到镇上去，珠儿也总是跟她在一起。珠儿先是一个抱在怀里的婴儿；后来是一个成了母亲的小跟班的小女孩，一只手拉着母亲的食指，每当赫斯特走一步，她就得跑三四步。珠儿常常看着殖民地的孩子们在路旁草地上或者在各家门前，按照清教徒的教养所能允许的范围，相互做着清教徒那种可怕的游戏；他们偶尔也到教堂里玩。那些孩子有时假装鞭打教友派的教徒；有时假装跟印第安人打仗，割下对方带发的头皮做战利品；有时则装神弄鬼互相恐吓。面对此情此景，珠儿只是看着，目不转睛地注视着，但她决不想跟他们相识。如果那些孩子跟她说话，她也不置一词。如果他们有时向她围拢过来，她就大发脾气，神色可怖，捡起石子向他们扔去，嘴里尖声尖气地乱喊乱叫，使得母亲听了都发抖，因为这种声音很像女巫念念有词的诅咒声。

事实是，这伙小清教徒乃是世界上心地最狭窄的一群兔崽子，他们模模糊糊感到这母女俩是异乡人，是神秘人物，与众不同，因而打心眼里藐视她们，并且不时地用恶言恶语辱骂她们。珠儿感到非常伤心，就以最能刺伤孩子心田的敌对话语来报复他们。这种爆发性的猛烈情绪，对于她的母亲来说，具有某种价值，甚至是一种安慰，因为情绪里至少含有一种可以理解的认真意味，而不是那种常使她为难的孩子气的任性。然而，使她吃惊的是，她在这儿又一次分明看到了自己身上那罪恶的阴影。珠儿这种敌意，这种情绪，是她根据专有权从赫斯特内心里继承过来的。母女一起站在一个与世隔绝的圈子里。在孩子的天性中，似乎保全了那些在她出生以前曾经扰乱过赫斯特·普琳的不安的因素，但是这些因素后来已为母性温柔的影响而开始减低了。

在家里，在她母亲那竹篱茅舍的周围，珠儿并不需要一个宽宽阔阔，形形色色的交游圈子。生命的魅力从珠儿那永不衰竭的创造精神里生发出来，然后再传递给千事万物，就像一个火炬一样，无论在什么地方都可以点燃起火焰。一些最不相干的东西——一根手杖，几件破衣，一朵鲜花，都是珠儿巫术的道具。不用作任何外形上的改变，就可以同她内心舞台上的戏剧在精神实质上合拍。她的童音能够模仿各种虚构的角色说话，无论老少都行。那迎风呻吟而又哀鸣的阴沉、庄重的老松树，用不着什么改变，它可以把它视作清教徒长老的形象，而园子里那最不雅观的杂草在她看来则是这些长老的子孙。对于这些杂草，珠儿总是毫不怜惜地乱打乱砍和连根拔除。奇妙的是，珠儿以她的智慧想象出来的那些形形色色的东西，虽然没有什么连贯性，却总是活蹦乱跳，处于一种异常活跃的状态——一会儿下沉，就像是来势迅猛的生命热潮下落一样——一会儿又继之以另一堆同样狂暴的浪花。这跟北极光的变幻莫测简直如出一辙。然而，仅就幻想的能力和成长中的心灵的活跃性而论，珠儿并不比其他有突出才能的孩子高出多少。只是珠儿没有人间的玩伴，她主要是置身在自己所创造出来的假想的人群之中。特别奇怪的是，珠儿竟对自己费尽心思创造出来的人物怀着敌对的感情。她从来没有创造一个朋友，而似乎总是播种龙牙，生出全副武装的敌军，以便她冲过去跟他们战斗。看到孩子这么年幼，便能深刻认识到这个冷酷的世界，从而极力磨炼自己的筋骨，以便在必将发生的战斗中取胜，这是多么令人难以言状的悲哀啊，而对于一个内心明明知道这种原因的母亲来说，又是多么深深感到痛苦啊！

赫斯特·普琳凝视着珠儿，常将她手中的活计掉落在自己的膝盖上，痛苦地叫出声来。她本想掩盖这种痛苦，但又禁不住叫了起来，这叫声既像说话，又像呻吟：“在天之父啊！——如果你仍是我的在天之父——那么我带到世上来的这个小生命将会成为什么呢？”珠儿无意中听到这种叫声，或者是通过某条微妙的渠道感

到这种痛苦的悸动，就把她那活泼、美丽的小脸转向母亲，机灵鬼似的笑了一笑，接着又继续玩开了。

这孩子举止上有一个特点还有待讲一讲。她有生以来注目的第一件东西是什么呢？——并不是母亲的笑容，就像其他孩子那样，那小嘴总仿佛对母亲的笑报以似是而非的微笑，事后回想起来，是那么令人捉摸不定，那么令人叨唠，那不是真正的笑。一点也不是！第一个成为珠儿注目的目标似乎是——要我们说出来吗？——赫斯特胸前的红A字！一天，她的母亲俯身在摇篮上时，婴儿的眼睛就一直被红A字周围的金线刺绣的闪光吸引住了；她举起小手，抓住它，笑了起来，这笑声一点也不含糊，而是含着坚信的神情笑着，那脸孔令人看起来她就像是一个大得多的孩子。这时，赫斯特·普琳喘着气，一把抓住这个致命的标志，本能地把它往旁一拽，珠儿的小手那么灵巧的一摸，使她感到的痛苦是多么大啊。再有，母亲苦恼的样子，对小珠儿来说却似乎只是闹着玩儿，她望着母亲的双眼，竟笑了起来！从那时起，除非孩子睡着了，赫斯特就从来没有感到片刻的安宁，片刻的对女儿平静的乐趣。诚然，珠儿有时一连几周对红A字连看也不看一眼，但是有时却突然像死神袭击一般，冷不防地望那么一眼，并且总是带着特别的微笑和奇怪的表情。

有一次，当赫斯特也像一般母亲所喜欢做的那样，想在孩子的眼睛里看看自己影像的时候，那种奇特而又淘气的神色又出现在孩子的两眼里了。于是猛下里——一个处境孤独的妇女，由于心烦意乱，往往容易被那些莫名其妙的幻觉搅得迷迷糊糊——她感到在珠儿眼睛中那面小黑镜子里所看到的并不是她自己的缩影，而是另一张脸孔。那是一张魔鬼似的脸孔，充满了恶意的笑，同时还有一张她所熟悉的脸孔，虽然很少笑容，可也决无恶意。那似乎是一个恶鬼缠住了孩子，此刻它正好面带讥笑往外窥视呢。后来赫斯特还多次为这同一幻觉所困，只是已不那么鲜明了。

在珠儿长大能到处跑了以后，一个夏天的下午，为了自得其乐，她采摘了几把野花，一一扔到了母亲的胸前。每当她击中红A字的时候，就像一个小精灵一样欢呼雀跃起来。赫斯特第一个动作就是交叉着双手捂住胸部。但是，也许是出于自尊，或者出于顺从，甚至是出于只有用这种难言的痛苦才能更好地苦修之情，她抑制了冲动，笔直地坐着，脸色苍白得如同死人一般，悲伤地望着小珠儿那双滴溜乱转的眼睛。她一个劲儿把花扔过来，几乎每次都击中了那个标记，使得母亲的胸部布满了伤痕。这种伤痕在这个世界里根本找不到医治的良药，另一个世界里也不知道能否找到。珠儿最后把花扔完了，这才静静地站着，凝视着赫斯特，从她那双神秘莫测的黑眼窝里，出现一张恶鬼似的小小的笑脸向外窥视着——或者说，不论它是否在窥视，但珠儿的母亲就是那么想象的。

“孩子，你是什么人啊？”

“哦，我是你的小珠儿！”孩子回答说。

但是，珠儿边说边笑，又开始跳来跳去。真是一个小淘气，打着古怪滑稽的手势，她下一个异想天开的行动也许就是要飞到烟囱上去了吧。

“你是我的孩子，真的吗？”赫斯特问道。

她这样发问并非完全无的放矢，当时是有几分真诚在内的。因为珠儿是那样聪明，这就使得母亲半信半疑，她是否已经知道了她的身世的秘密，是否现在就该把自己的真情吐露出来。

“是的，我是小珠儿！”孩子重复说，继续扮着鬼脸。

“你不是我的孩子！你不是我的珠儿！”母亲半开玩笑地说，因为在她极端痛苦的

时候，就常常出现这种情况，仿佛有一股开玩笑的冲动涌上心头、“那你就告诉我吧，你是什么人，是谁派你到这儿来的？”

“告诉我，妈妈！”孩子认真地说，走到赫斯特身边，紧靠着她的膝盖，“你告诉我好吗？”

“你是天父派来的！”赫斯特·普琳回答说。

但是，她说时，一犹豫，就被孩子敏锐的眼睛看出来。不知珠儿仅仅是出于任性，还是由于恶鬼的怂恿，她竟竖起小食指摸了摸那个红A字。

“不是他派我来的！”孩子自信地叫道，“我没有天父！”

“嘘，珠儿，别喊！你不该这么说！”母亲压住叹息声回答说，“是他派我们大家来到这个世界上的。连我，你的母亲也是他派来的，何况你呢！要不然，你这个奇怪的、淘气的孩子是从哪里来的呢？”

“告诉我！告诉我！”珠儿反复说，她不再那么严肃了，而是笑着，在地板上跳着，“你一定要告诉我！”

但是，赫斯特不能解开这个疑团，因为她自己也满怀郁闷，疑雾重重。她怀着半笑半怕的心情回忆起镇上邻居们的谈话。他们到处找不到孩子的父亲，但由于看到孩子某些奇怪的特征，便认为可怜的珠儿是恶魔的女儿。像这种情形，自从旧天主教时代以来，在世上时有所见。孩子由于母亲作孽，那他也定会跟着兴风作浪。马丁·路德就是由于他的宗教仇敌的诽谤，而被认为是恶魔的儿子。所以在新英格兰清教徒中，珠儿也并非就是这种不祥之物所生的唯一的孩子。

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第七章 州长的大厅

一天，赫斯特·普琳带着一双州长贝林厄姆吩咐她镶边、刺绣的手套来到他的官邸。这是州长要在国家大典时戴的，虽然这位前任长官在普选时，从最高位置上往下降了一两级，但仍在殖民地的长官中保留着一个又体面又有影响的地位。

赫斯特除了送交这副刺绣手套以外，还有一个重要得多的原因促使她要在此时此刻去见一位在殖民地事务中掌握大权和非常活跃的人物。她耳闻，有些头面人物在宗教和政治上抱有更为严厉的主张，图谋剥夺她的孩子。这些人们假定，珠儿既然已如上所述是恶魔出身，那他们就不无理由认为，从基督教拯救母亲的灵魂出发，这就需要他们把这样一个绊脚石从母亲的路径上搬开。另一方面，如果这个孩子真能在道德和宗教上得到发展，并有着最后得救的各种因素，那么把她转交给一个比赫斯特·普琳更贤明、更合适的监护人抚养，那就定能使这些有利的条件得到发展而前程似锦了。在提出这种主张的人中，州长贝林厄姆据说是最积极的一个。这说来奇怪，实则也很荒唐，这类事情要是在后来，把它交给一个权限不高于市镇行政管理委员会的成员去办也就行了，而在当时却是一个非公开讨论不可的问题，并且双方都有显要的国务活动家参加。不管怎样，在那个古朴的时代，甚至比赫斯特及其孩子的幸福更无公众利害关系、更无足轻重的事，也都要跟议员的审议和一州的法令奇怪地纠集在一起。那个时代离我们的故事早也早不了多少时候，曾为了一头猪的所有权而发生过争执，不仅引起过殖民地议会里激烈的、厉害的论争，而且导致了议会本身重大的改组。

因此，赫斯特·普琳忧心忡忡，但也充分意识到自己的权利，她似乎感到，一方是公众，一方是一个有着上几天的同情作为后盾的孤独的妇人，这两者之间也并非不势均力敌，她就是怀着这种心情，从那孤零零的茅屋里走了出来。同她一块儿出来的自然还有小珠儿。珠儿现已长大，到了能够在她妈身边轻快地跑来跑去的年龄，并能从早到晚不停地活动、能走比她以前长得多的路程。虽然如此，她还是往往出于任性，多于必要，仍叫妈妈抱着，但又立即争着下地，在草径上蹦蹦跳跳，跑在赫斯特的前面，虽然难免多次跌跌碰碰，可也不致受伤。我们曾经讲过珠儿有一种娇艳而绚丽的美，这种美富有深沉而鲜明的色泽。她容光焕发，两眼炯炯有神，又深又亮，头发油光水滑，呈深褐色，再过几年就要近乎黑色了。她好像有一团火烧遍全身，她似乎就是在打得十分火热的时刻不期而来的一个产儿。母亲在设计珠儿的服装时，总是充分发挥偏爱华丽的想象，因而给孩子特别剪裁了一件深红色的天鹅绒上衣，并用金线刺绣了丰富多彩的花纹。这样绚丽多彩的服装，要是和一个伶仃弱女的面颊相配，那就必然使她黯然失色，可是和珠儿的美相配，那就令人赞叹不已了，使她成了一颗最为光彩夺目的明珠，闪闪发亮。

然而，正是这一件上衣，并且实际上正是孩子的整个外观，令人不由自主地、情不自禁地想起了赫斯特·普琳命中注定地要在胸前佩戴的那标记。这个孩子就是另一种形式的红A字，一个有生命的红A字！至于这位母亲——似乎这个红色的耻辱已深深烙入了她的脑海里，致使她的一切念头都以红A字的形式表现出来——她为了精心设计这个相似的外观，真是不惜花费时日，运用她病态的独创性，这才制作出了这样一个介乎二者之间的东西，即既有她所钟爱的对象的影子，又是她犯罪和痛苦的象征。实际上珠儿是两者兼而有之，正是由于这种合二而一，赫斯特才得以匠心独具，使人一看到珠儿的外观，就想起了那个红A字。

当母女俩徒步走到城镇附近时，清教徒的孩子们正在做游戏——或者说那些肤色有

点黝黑的小淘气们正在闹腾——这一来便都抬起头来看，并且一本正经地互相议论起来：

“瞧，真是那个戴红A字的妇女，旁边还的的确确跟着一个红A字的化身呢！来，咱们拿泥巴扔她们吧！”

然而，珠儿是一个倔强的孩子，她皱着眉，然后就猛下里向那股敌人冲去，把他们全赶跑了。在珠儿凶猛地追赶他们时，她就好似一个小瘟神——一个猩红热神，或是一个羽毛未丰的专司审判的小天使——她的使命就是惩罚新生一代的罪恶。她大声地又叫又喊，也无疑要使那些逃跑的孩子心惊胆战。珠儿取得胜利后，安静地回到母亲身边，望着母亲的脸孔笑着。

母女俩没有再遇到什么阻碍，就来到了州长贝林厄姆的家门前。这是一所大木屋，它的建筑式样，在旧城的街道上，至今仍有它的标本。木屋现已长满苔藓，破败腐烂。在那些暗淡的房间里，经历过多少悲欢离合的往事，有些记忆犹新，有些已经淡忘，一想到这些，就不免心酸起来。然而，当时死神尚未光顾这座人间住宅，这里外表上还保留着往昔的清新，从向阳窗户上还反映出人间的欢乐。这所房子的外观确实是非常赏心悦目的。墙壁用一种掺有玻璃碎片的灰泥抹过。因此，当阳光斜照在屋子前面时，就宛如在它上面撒了两把钻石一般，闪闪发光。这光辉与阿拉丁神殿倒是珠联璧合，而与严肃的清教徒统治者的官邸却格格不入。木屋还饰画了奇异而神秘的人物、图案，很符合古雅的风尚。这是在新抹灰泥时描绘的，现已干硬结实，堪为后人赞赏了。

珠儿望着这所房子那美妙动人的样子，开始蹦跳起来，硬要她母亲把照射在它上面的阳光整片地剥下来，好给她玩。

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“不，我的小珠儿！”她的母亲说，“你必须自己采集你所要的阳光。我没有阳光给你！”

她们走近门边。门呈拱形，两边各有一个窄塔或凸标，两面都是花格窗，并备有一个木制百叶窗，必要时可以关闭。赫斯特·普琳举起挂在门口的敲门锤敲了一下，州长的一个家奴来开门了。他本是一个自由的英国人，但现在却成了一个契约七年的奴仆。在这个时期内，他是主人的一项财产，可以像一头牛或一把折椅那样作为商品来买卖，那奴仆身穿一件蓝色外衣，这是那个时期和很久以前，英国古老世袭府第里的奴仆常穿的一种服装。

“尊敬的贝林厄姆州长在家吗？”赫斯特问。

“在，当然在，”仆人回答说，张开着双眼，望着红A字，因为他是新到这儿的，以前从没见过。“对，州长大人在家。但有一两个牧师在他那儿，同时还有一个医生。你此刻可能见不了他阁下了。”

“不过，我还是要进去，”赫斯特·普琳回答说。仆人也许看到她这种坚决的神气和她胸前闪耀的标志，以为她是这儿的一个大贵妇，便不加拦阻了。

这样一来，母亲和小珠儿就被接纳进入了大厅。贝林厄姆州长是根据他故乡要人们的公馆设计自己的新住宅的，并考虑到建筑材料的性质、气候的变化和社会生活方式的不同而作了许多更改。这儿是一个宽阔而高得适度的大厅，从房屋这一头延伸到另一头，形成一个往来的要冲，能直接或间接跟其他房间相通。这个宽阔大厅的一头是靠两个塔楼上的窗户射进光来照亮的。两塔在入口处的两边各有一个壁龛。大厅的另一头，虽然用窗帘挡住了一部分，但是从弓形厅窗中照射进来的光线把它照得更为明亮了。这种厅窗我们在古书中读到过，并且设有一个很深的带靠垫的坐

席。上面放着一部对开的巨册，可能是《英国编年史》或其他诸如此类有重大价值的文献。这正如我们今天在客厅中央桌上散放着一些烫金的书籍一样，好让不速之客翻阅。大厅的家具中有几把沉重的椅子。椅背精雕细刻了一些栎木花纹。另外还有一张同一样式的桌子。这一切都是伊丽莎白时代或者更早一些时候的东西，是从州长老家搬到这儿来的祖传遗物。桌子上放着一个大白镏啤酒杯——这是古代英国好客风尚的标志，至今未被人们遗忘——要是赫斯特或者珠儿窥视一下杯底，她们也许还可以看到刚喝过啤酒留下的泡沫。

墙上挂着一排画像，是贝林厄姆世系的祖先。有些胸前披着铠甲，有些穿戴着保安官堂皇的皱领礼服，全是一副端庄、严肃的神态。古老画像总是这么样的，与其说他们是已故的杰出人物的画像，倒不如说是一些幽灵，并且总是以严厉、偏狭的批评眼光注视着活人的工作和娱乐。

大约在大厅栎木护墙板的中央，挂着一套铠甲，它不像画像那样是祖传的遗物，而是现代的东西，因为它是贝林厄姆州长来到新英格兰的那一年，由一个伦敦的铠甲巧匠制造的。计有头盔一件，胸甲一件，护喉甲一件，胫甲两件，臂铠一对和挂在其下的宝剑一把。这一切，特别是头盔和胸甲擦得雪亮，发出白光，把地板上的每个地方都照得雪亮。这整副光亮的盔甲不是无谓的炫耀，而是州长在许多庄严的检阅中和练兵场上穿戴过的，并且在皮戈德战争中还穿着这身铠甲率领过一个团身先士卒，大显身手。贝林厄姆州长虽然是律师出身，喜欢谈论培根、科克、诺伊和达芬奇，并且把他们引为自己的同行，但这个殖民地的许多当务之急，却不仅使他成了一位政治家和统治者，又使他成了一位军人。

小珠儿对闪闪发亮的盔甲非常感兴趣，她像观看金碧辉煌的正门一样，花了好一会儿时间来端详那擦得像镜子一般的胸铠。

“妈妈，”她叫道，“我看见你在这里呢。你瞧，你瞧！”

赫斯特为了哄孩子，也瞧着，但由于那面凸面镜的特殊作用，红A字被夸大了，比原物大了好几倍，大到成了她身上最为突出的东西。她似乎隐藏在红A字后面了。珠儿还指着头盔上映出的同一图形，又调皮又机灵地对母亲笑着，这是她那小脸蛋上常有的表情。珠儿顽皮、欢乐的神态也同样反映在那面镜子里，看起来又宽大又显眼，连赫斯特·普琳都感到，那似乎不可能是自己孩子的影子，而是一个极力想学珠儿模样的小淘气。

“珠儿，快走吧，”赫斯特说，拉着珠儿走开，“过来，看看这个美丽的花园。这儿的花要比森林里的美。”

珠儿听话地跑到大厅那头的凸肚窗前，朝着花园围墙里那条绿荫路望着。那里绿草如茵，修剪得很短，边上胡乱栽了一些未成行的灌木丛。但是，看来，业主已因为大西洋边上这块坚硬的土壤和激烈的生存竞争而对保持英国故土那装饰园艺的风尚不抱希望了。包心菜长势一般，南瓜藤倒是扎根较远，爬过藤藤蔓蔓的空地，把它的一个硕果直挂在大厅窗户的下方，似乎告诉州长，这个黄金果是新英格兰土地献给他的一件富丽的装饰品。可是，这儿还有一些玫瑰花和许多苹果树，这大概是牧师布莱克斯汤先生繁衍的树木。布莱克斯汤是这个半岛上第一个移民——一个半神话式的人物。他据我们早期史册上记载，是一个骑在牛背上到处奔波的人物。

珠儿看着玫瑰花丛，便哭着非要一朵红玫瑰花不可，不然就不肯罢休。

“嘘，孩子，别闹！”母亲认真地说，“亲爱的小珠儿，别嚷了，我听到花园里有声音，州长来了，还有客人和他在一起。”

果真，在花园的林荫路上，已有几个人正朝屋子走来。珠儿完全不理睬母亲叫她安

静的用意，又惊叫一声，然后才安静下来，但这绝不是出于听话，而是因为那几个新到的人物勾起了她禀性中的敏捷、多变的好奇心。

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第八章 小精灵和牧师

州长贝林厄姆身穿宽大的外衣，头戴便帽——长者家居时都爱这么穿着——走在最前面，他似乎在夸耀他的庄园，滔滔不绝地谈着他的改善计划。他那灰色的胡须下面，戴着一个詹姆斯王朝时期的古式精制宽边皱领，使得他的脑袋很像是施洗者的约翰那托在大盘子里的首级。他的容貌给人的印象是僵硬、严厉，以及由于年届暮秋、饱经风霜而形容憔悴。这跟他惨淡经营身边那些行乐于世的设施对比起来，显得很失调。但是，如果说我们严肃的祖先——虽然他们惯常爱说或认为人生只不过是一个苦难和竞争的过程，虽然为了履行义务而乐于牺牲生命和财产——在良心上愿意放弃他们手心中的舒适，甚至奢侈的设施，那就错了。这样的教义，就以尊敬的牧师威尔逊来说，也从没讲过。现在他那雪白的胡须飞飘在贝林厄姆州长的肩后，而这位白胡须的长者却认为，梨树和桃树尚可在新英格兰移植，那么紫葡萄也可设法在向阳的花园围墙上欣欣向荣。这位老牧师由英国教会丰富的乳汁哺育长大，对一切美好、舒适的东西有着长期养成的、正统的嗜好。可是，在布道坛上或是在对赫斯特·普琳这类罪孽的公开谴责上，他却显得十分严厉，而在私人交往上又显得和蔼仁慈，这就使他比他的任何同事都能赢得了人们更为热忱的爱戴。

在州长和威尔逊先生后面还有两位客人。一位是阿瑟·迪默斯德尔牧师。读者当然记

得，他曾参加过赫斯特·普琳当众受辱的场面。另一位是紧紧跟随着他的罗杰·奇林沃思老人，一个医道非常高明的人，他在这个市镇定居已有两三年了。据说，这位学者既是年轻牧师的朋友，又是他的医生。这个青年近来因为过于埋头牧师的工作奋不顾身，致使健康受到了严重的损害。

州长走在客人的前面，登上一两步台阶，推开大厅的窗扇，发现小珠儿近在身旁。窗帘的影子落在赫斯特·普琳的身上，挡住了她的一部分身体。

“这是什么呀？”贝林厄姆州长望着眼前身着红服的小人儿吃惊地说，“我得承认，自从我当年崇尚虚荣的日子起，我就从来没有见过这样的打扮！那是在詹姆斯老王的时代，我对于被允许参加宫廷的化妆舞会，总是感到无上的荣幸。那时每逢假日常有一群这样的小鬼来到，我们管他们叫‘掌宴官’的孩子。但是，这样一个客人怎么到我的客厅里来了呢？”

“对，真是！”威尔逊老先生叫道，“这是怎么样的一只红羽小鸟呀？我想起来了，在阳光透过富丽的彩绘窗户，把金黄和深红的影像映在地板上时，我看见的就是这样的人影。但那是在故国。小家伙，告诉我，你是谁，你妈何苦把你打扮成这种怪模怪样？你是基督徒的孩子吗？你知道教义问答吗？你也许是一个小鬼或小妖吧？这些东西，我们以为，早跟罗马天主教的其他遗物一块儿留在可爱的老英格兰了。”

“我是母亲的孩子！”这个着红服的小美人回答说，“我的名字叫珠儿！”

“珠儿？——更确切地说是红宝珠！或者说是红珊瑚，至少从你身上的颜色来看，是红玫瑰！”老牧师回答道，把他的手伸出来，试图抚摸珠儿的脸颊，但没摸着。“你的母亲在哪儿？啊，我明白了！”他补充说，转向贝林厄姆州长低声说

道：“这就是我们一同商量过的那个孩子，看，那个不幸的妇人赫斯特·普琳，她的母亲，走过来了！”

“你这样看？”州长叫道，“不，我们可以断定，这样一个孩子的母亲必定是一个着猩红衣服的女人，一个巴比伦淫妇的好典型。她来得正是时候，我们这就来查问这件事吧。”

贝林厄姆州长走过窗前，来到大厅，三个客人随后跟着。

“赫斯特·普琳，”州长说着，以他固有的正颜厉色注视着那个佩戴红A字的女人，“近来有许多涉及你的问题。重要之点已经认真讨论过，那就是我们这些掌权的、有影响的人，把那边那样一个孩子的纯洁心灵交给一个在这人世陷阱中跌了跤的人去指导，推卸我们良心上的责任，是否合适？你说吧，孩子的母亲！珠儿不用你带了，让她穿着朴素，严加管教，教给她天上和人间的真理，你想想看，这是不是为了你那小宝贝的今世和永生的幸福呢？在这方面，你能为孩子做些什么呢？”

“我能教给我的小珠儿我从这个方面学到的东西！”赫斯特·普琳把手指按在红色标志上面回答说。

“贱妇，这就是你耻辱的标志！”威严的州长回答道，“正是因为那个字母所表示的污点，才使我们把你的孩子转手给他人照管。”

“然而，”母亲虽然脸色发白，但是镇静地说，“这个标志已经教训了我，并且每天给我教训，此刻还在教训我，它虽然对我一无用处，但我的孩子却可以因而更聪明、更好。”

“我们会审慎判断的，”贝林厄姆说，“我们会研究该怎么办的。威尔逊先生，我

求你考试一下这个珠儿——姑且这样叫吧——看她是否具备了她这个年纪的儿童所应有的基督教教养。”老牧师坐到扶手椅里，费了一番心思，想把珠儿拉到他的双膝中来。但是，这个孩子除了母亲之外，从不习惯于别人摸摸亲亲，于是从开着的窗户中跳了出去，站在上面一层台阶之上，就像一只羽毛华美的热带野鸟一样，眼看就要展翅高飞了。威尔逊先生对她这一突如其来的举动大为惊异——因为他是祖父一辈的人物，而且总是最受孩子们欢迎的人——可是还是打算考她一考。珠儿，”他很庄严地说，“你必须注意听从教导，以便到适当的时候，可以在胸前戴一颗高价的珠子，我的孩子，你能告诉我，你是谁造出来的吗？”

现在珠儿知道得很清楚，她是谁造出来的，因为赫斯特·普琳这个良家妇女，在她跟孩子谈过天父以后，立即开始教给孩子各种道理，因为人类精神不论如何幼稚，都非常关心吸收这些道理。因此，珠儿出生三年来的生活知识是非常丰富的，能够对《新英格兰祈祷书》或《威斯敏斯特教义问答手册》第一部分的考试对答如流，虽然她连这两部家喻户晓的著作中的哪一部是个什么样子都不清楚。但是，一切孩子都多多少少有股牛劲，而小珠儿比他们还要多十倍。此刻正是在最不投机的当儿，她牛劲十足，要么缄口不言，要么被逼得语多乖误。珠儿把手指放在嘴唇上以后，多次不礼貌地拒绝回答善良的威尔逊先生提出的问题，最后宣称，她根本不是造出来的，而是由她母亲从狱门旁边那丛野玫瑰上摘下来的。

珠儿所以有这种想法，可能是由于她站在窗门之外，离州长家的红玫瑰不远；还可能是由于她回想起了上这儿来时正好路过监狱门前的玫瑰丛。

老罗杰·奇林沃思面带笑容，在青年牧师的耳边小声地说了几句。赫斯特·普琳望着这个能人，即使她当时命运的吉凶未卜，但一看到他那容貌的变化也不免大吃一惊。自从她熟悉奇林沃思以来，他现在变得丑陋多了，阴沉的脸色似乎越发灰暗了，体

形也更畸形了。赫斯特望了一下他的双眼，立即把全副注意力放在当前正在发展的事情上。

“真是可怕！”州长叫道，慢慢从珠儿的回答所引起的惊讶状态中恢复过来，“这是个三岁的孩子啊，竟说不出是谁把她造出来的！毫无疑问，她对灵魂，对她现在的邪恶和将来的命运，也同样是一无所知！我想，先生们不用再问了。”

赫斯特抱住珠儿，使劲地把她拉到自己怀中，她几乎是以一种凶狠的表情看着那个老清教徒长官。她孤零零活在这个世界上，被这个世界抛在一边，只有这个宝贝才使她的心有了活力，她感到自己有不可剥夺的权利来对抗这个世道，并准备誓死保卫这种权利。

“这个孩子是上帝赐给我的！”赫斯特叫道，“她是上帝由于你们夺去了我的一切而给我的补偿。她是我的幸福！但也是我的痛苦！珠儿让我在这儿活着！珠儿也惩罚我！你们没有看见，她就是红A字，只是她能为我所爱，同时她还具有百万倍的力量来补偿我的罪孽。你们不要夺走她！否则我只有去死！”

“可怜的女人，”那个为人并非善良的老牧师说，“孩子肯定会照管好的！会比你照管好得多的。”

“上帝让我抚养，”赫斯特·普琳重复说，提高了她的嗓门，几乎尖叫起来，“我决不放弃！”说到这里她突然冲动起来，转向青年牧师迪默斯德尔先生。直到此刻为止，她似乎从没有这样看他一眼，“你帮助我说呀！”她叫道，“你是我的教区牧师，对我的灵魂负责，比这些人都更了解我。我决不能失去孩子！你为我说话呀！你知道——因为你比这些人有同情心——你知道我心里想的是什么，一个母亲的权利是什么，当那个母亲只有孩子和红A字的时候，她对这种权利的要求是多么强烈

啊！请你注意这一点！我决不能失去孩子，请你注意这一点！”

赫斯特·普琳这一失去控制、一反常态的呼号，表明她的处境已使她近于疯狂的地步，青年牧师为此立即走上前去，脸色苍白，将手放在心胸上，这是他特有的神经质一到焦虑不安时的习惯。他现在看起来比赫斯特示众时我们对他所作的描绘还要忧郁和憔悴。也许是因为身体不佳，也许还有别的什么原因，总之他那双大而又黑的眼睛饱含了无限的痛苦和深沉的忧郁。“她说的有道理，”青年牧师开始说道，声音悦耳、颤抖，但是坚强有力，以至大厅发出回响，空心盔甲也跟着共鸣起来——“赫斯特说的有道理，她所以感情激动也有道理。上帝给了她这个孩子，也给了她关于这个孩子在性情和需求方面的本能知识——这两方面看来都十分奇特，别人是根本不可能有的。此外，在这母女俩相依为命的关系中，不是有着一种可敬畏的神圣的品质么？”

“对！迪默斯德尔先生，那又怎么样呢？”州长打断他的话说，“我请求你把话讲清楚一点！”

“甚至应当这样说，”牧师继续说道，“因为，如果我们不是这样看，那么，我们岂不是说，在天之父，众生的造物主在轻易地认可一桩罪行，而对邪恶的淫欲和神圣的母爱之间的区别也不加考虑吗？这个由于父亲的罪过和母亲的耻辱所生下来的孩子，是经上帝之手送来，以多种方式感化她母亲的心灵的，而母亲现在又是那么热切，精神那么痛苦地恳求得到抚养孩子的权利。这意味着祈求幸福——祈求她一生唯一的幸福！无疑，也正如这位母亲自己告诉我们的，意味着一种报应，一种在许多意想不到的时刻将要感受到的痛苦，一种在悲喜交集时的剧痛。她不是把这种思想在那个可怜的孩子的服装上表现了出来，并且表现得那么强烈，使我们一看见它，就想起铭刻在她胸前的那个红色标记吗？”

“讲得太好了！”虔诚的威尔逊先生叫道，“我还担心这个女人除了把她的孩子培养成一个江湖骗子，就没有别的好想法了呢。”

“哦，不会那样，不会那样，”迪默斯德尔继续说，“请相信我，她已认识到，上帝为了这孩子的生存所创造的神圣的奇迹。她也可能感觉到——我认为，道理正在于此——上帝这个恩赐高于其他一切，是要使她的心保持活力，使她不致跌入更加黑暗的罪恶深渊，而撒旦却一直在寻机要把她拖下去呢。因此，让这个可怜的、有罪的女人有一个纯洁的婴儿，有一个能给她无穷乐趣或无限痛苦的孩子，对她来说是有益的，所以最好交给她照管，由她培养，把孩子培养成为一个正直的人，每时每刻都给她提醒她的失足，而且告诫她，有如造物主的神圣保证，如果她能把孩子带到天国去，孩子也将把她母亲带往那儿。这样一来，有罪的母亲就比有罪的父亲幸福。为了赫斯特·普琳，同时也为了这个可怜的孩子，让我们随她们听天由命，把她们安排在一块儿吧。”

“我的朋友，你说得怪诚挚的。”老罗杰·奇林沃思对他微笑着说。

“你老弟的话中有深刻的含意，”牧师威尔逊补充说，“尊敬的贝林厄姆先生，你说呢？他不是为这个可怜的妇女辩解得很好吗？”

“他的确讲得不错，”州长答道，“这么说来，我们只能让事情维持现状了，至少在这个妇人不再发生丑闻以前应该这样。然而，必须有人照管，由你或迪默斯德尔经手给孩子举行应有的、定期的教义问答考试。此外，在适当的时候，教区教长必须注意让她去上学和做礼拜。”

青年牧师不再说话了，并从这几个人跟前后退了几步，然后再站定，此时他的脸孔被窗帘的大折皱挡住了一部分，而那被太阳投射在地板上的身影，却由于他的热烈

申辩还在颤动着。珠儿，这个野性和浮躁的小鬼，悄悄地走向他，双手握住他的一只手，把自己的脸颊贴在它上面。这种爱抚是如此温柔，而且一点儿也不显得唐突，致使在旁看着的母亲自问道：“那是我的珠儿吗？”然而，她知道，孩子心里蕴藏着一种爱慕之情，虽然在大多情况下表现为激情，并且在她一生中不大可能再一次像现在这样柔情缱绻。这位牧师，除了久望得到这个妇人的关怀以外，再没有比孩子这些喜爱的表示使他感到更加甜美的了。这是一种精神本能的自发的反映，因而似乎向我们表明，真有某种值得爱的东西。这位牧师向周围张望了一下，把他的手放在孩子的头上，迟疑了一会儿，然后吻了吻她的前额。小珠儿这种罕见的心情并没有持续多久。她笑着，跳跳蹦蹦地走下大厅，显得那么轻巧，致使老威尔逊先生产生了一个疑问，她的脚尖是否着了地。

“我可要讲明，这个小女孩有妖术，”他对迪默斯德尔先生说，“而且她不要老妖婆的扫把，就能飞！”

“真是一个奇怪的孩子！”老奇林沃思说，“在她的身上很容易看出母亲的影子来。先生们，你们想想看，要是分析一下那孩子的本性，以她的长相和模样，细心地推测一下她的父亲是谁，这难道超出了一个哲学家探索的范围吗？”

“不，在这样一个问题上，按照世俗哲学的线索办，是有罪的，”威尔逊先生说，“对这样的问题，以斋戒和祈祷为宜。也许更为合适的做法是，让这个谜保持现在这个样子，除非上天亲自来把它揭开。因此，每一个善良的基督教男子汉都有资格来对这个被遗弃的可怜的孤儿表示作为一个父亲的慈爱。”

事情就这样美满地结束了，赫斯特·普琳领着珠儿离开这所官邸。当她们走下台阶时，正好有一个房间的格窗打开了，于是州长贝林厄姆那个秉性厉害的妹妹希宾斯夫人探出身来，在阳光下抛头露面了。也正是她在几年以后被当做女巫而判处了死

刑。

“喂，喂！”希宾斯太太说，她的凶相似乎给这所又欢快又有生气的官邸投上了一层阴影，“今晚你愿意跟我们一块儿去吗？林子里来了一帮欢乐的伙伴。我基本上答应了恶魔，美丽的赫斯特·普琳也要来的。”

“请你跟他说原谅我吧！”赫斯特回答说，面带胜利的微笑，“我要留在家中照看我的小珠儿。如果他们把她从我手里夺走，那我也许愿意跟你到林子里去，并在恶魔的本子上签上我的名字，而且用我自己的血来签呢！”

“我们会很快把你拉到那儿去的！”巫婆把头缩回去，皱着眉头说。

然而，这儿——如果我们假定，希宾斯太太和赫斯特·普琳这次交谈真有其事，而非寓言的话——正好形象地阐明了青年牧师反对把一个堕落的母亲同她那因意志薄弱结下的苦果两下生割开来的论据。甚至可以这样说，正是这个孩子很早就把母亲从撒旦的罗网里拯救了出来。

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第九章 医生

在罗杰·奇林沃思的名字底下，读者当然会记得，还隐藏着另一个他决心不再让人叫了的名字。前面说过，在那些目睹赫斯特·普琳忍辱示众的人群中站着一个老人，他仆仆风尘，疲惫不堪，刚从险恶的穷乡僻壤中脱身出来，原希望在赫斯特身上得到

家庭的温暖和乐趣，可现在却看到她在众目睽睽之中当做罪恶的典型示众。她的主妇的尊严在所有人的脚下备遭践踏了。她的丑闻在闹市地区纷纷谈开了。要是这些消息传到了她的亲属那儿，那么对于他们，以及对于她那些清白无瑕时期的同伴，就都只有因她的名誉扫地而蒙受其辱，其程度自不会不严格依照他们以往关系的密切程度和神圣程度而各有不同。那么为什么一个跟这位堕落的妇女在所有的人中关系最为亲密、最为神圣的人，要在他可以自由抉择的时候走上前来，对这份无可贪恋的财产申明自己的权利呢？他决定不到耻辱台上去，站在她的旁边受众人耻笑。除了赫斯特·普琳以外，他不为人知，他握有使赫斯特沉默不语的钥匙，他宁愿从人类的名册中勾去自己的名字。就他以前的关系和利害而言，他也宁愿从生活中销声匿迹，一如谣言早就盛传的，他已葬身海底了。这一用心一旦确定，新的兴趣立即萌发，新的目的也油然而生。说实在的，如果不是罪恶的话，也不能算是光明的，但很有吸引力，足以使他的才能得以纵横驰骋。

他为了实现这一目的，决定以罗杰·奇林沃思的化名在这座清教徒的城市里定居下来。他有着非凡的学问和才能，除此以外，并不需要别的东西作为引荐。奇林沃思由于早年努力钻研，精通医学，于是就以一个医师的身份出现，并以此受到热诚的欢迎。熟练的内科医生在殖民地是罕见的。他们似乎很少有那种带着其他移民横渡大西洋的宗教热忱。这种人在研究人体组织中，也许把他们更高尚、更微妙的才能物化了，也许在那错综复杂的奇妙的人体结构中，亦即在那牵涉到足以包含整个生命的艺术中，对客观存在不抱宗教观念了。然而不管怎样，波士顿这个美好的城市，凡是与医道有关的事，从此都掌握在一个上了年纪的副主祭兼药剂师的手里了。这位老人的虔诚和神圣的举止，就是他叫人信赖的最好证明，这要比任何形式的证书都更为有用。这位唯一的外科医生却只偶尔行行那崇高的医术，而惯常挥动剃刀。罗杰·奇林沃思对这样一个行当，真是如获至宝，他很快就熟悉了庞杂而丰富

的古代医道。其中每一种药，都含有许多来自远方的、各种难得的成分，都是煞费苦心炼成的，它的疗效似乎跟灵丹妙药一般。此外，他在做印第安人的俘虏期间，又得到了许多有关当地草药的知识。奇林沃思公开告诉他的病人，这些简单的药物，是大自然对于未开化的民族的恩赐，他对这些药非常相信，就像对几个世纪以来，经过许多有学问的医师精心制作的欧洲药品一样。

这位饱学的陌生人，就其宗教生活的外表来说，也至少是一个典范。他到来不久，便选择了牧师迪默斯德尔先生为自己的精神指导。这位青年牧师那种俨然是学者的名声至今仍在牛津大学盛传不衰。他的热情的崇拜者无异把他看做上天派来的使徒，只要他有着一般人的寿命，生活和工作下去，他必定会像早期的神父取得初创基督教的业绩一样，为现今仍然软弱无力的新英格兰教会干一番大事业。然而，大约就在这个时期，他的身体开始明显地衰弱了。根据那些最熟悉他生活习惯的人的解释，那位青年牧师所以两颊苍白，乃是因为他过分努力钻研、埋头教区职务的缘故。特别是他还常常斋戒和守夜，说是以免这尘世的混浊阻塞和遮蔽他心灵的亮光。有些人宣称，要是迪默斯德尔真的死去，就足以说明，这个世界再也不值得他的双脚来践踏了。另一方面，那位牧师也以他自己特有的谦虚表示了他的看法，他说如果上帝认为把他召回合适的话，这就是因为他不配在世间执行这一最卑微的使命。尽管关于他衰弱的原因，说法各有不同，但是他衰弱的事实却是没有问题的。他形容憔悴，声音虽然依旧洪亮、悦耳，但其中含有某种意志消沉的苗头。人们常常看到，他一遇到一点风吹草动或突如其来的事故，就会把一只手捂在胸前，脸色先是变红，然后就是发白。这正是他痛苦的象征。在罗杰·奇林沃思来到这个城市时，这位青年牧师的景况就是如此，他的前景很是危急，眼看曙光就要完全过早地熄灭了。

奇林沃思第一次出现在示众场上时，很少有人能说出他是从哪儿来的，既像是从天

上降下来的，又像是从地下钻出来的，这样就使他有了一种神秘的色彩。这种色彩很容易越传越神。他现在以一个技术高明的人著称了。人们常常看到他采集药草和野花，从林子里掘树根折枝丫。他看来就像这样一种人：他非常洞悉隐藏的宝贝，而在常人看来却并无价值。人们也常常听过他谈及凯纳尔姆·迪格比爵士和其他人物——他们的科学成就被人们推崇备至，几乎到了不可思议的地步——他说他跟他们通过信或同过事。奇林沃思在学术界这样有地位，为什么还到这儿来呢？他的活动范围本应在大城市里，他能在这荒凉的地方找到什么呢？为了回答这个问题，流行过一种传说，这种传说虽说荒唐，倒也被某些有识之士所接受，认为是上天创造了一个大奇迹，把一位杰出的医学博士从德国大学空运到了迪默斯德尔的书房门口。诚然，那些较为明智的人也懂得上天要达到它的目的，并不需要采取那种奇迹一般干预的舞台效果，他们倾向于认为，罗杰·奇林沃思的及时来到，其中确有神助。

这种看法由于这位医师对青年牧师不断表示极大的兴趣而得到了证实。奇林沃思以一个教区居民的身份依附于牧师，并以他生就的冷眼旁观的敏感性去努力赢得友谊和信任。他对牧师的健康状况表示极大的不安，急于求得医治的良方。如果及早着手治疗，也似乎未尝没有希望取得良好的疗效。迪默斯德尔先生教区内的长老、执事、慈母般的老妇和年轻美貌的少女，都一致劝他，应该一试这位医生自告奋勇提供的医术。迪默斯德尔先生婉言谢绝了这些好意。

“我不需要服药。”他说。

然而，当着一周接一周地过去，青年牧师的面颊日益苍白和消瘦，声音也比以前更为颤抖的时候——当他把手压在胸前已不是一个偶然的动作，而成了一个习惯的时候，他怎么能这么说呢？他厌倦工作了吗？他希望死吗？波士顿那些年长的牧师和他教区内的那些执事都庄严地向迪默斯德尔先生提过这些问题。用他们自己的话来

讲，他们是在“开导他”，告诉他说如果拒绝上天那样明显的救助便是有罪。青年牧师默默地听着，最后答应跟医生商量商量。

“如果那是上帝的旨意，”牧师迪默斯德尔先生为了履行他的诺言，去向罗杰·奇林沃思老人求教时说，“那我就希望，我的辛劳、我的悲伤、我的罪孽、我的痛苦，都马上和我同归于尽，其中凡属尘世的东西就埋在我的坟墓里，精神的东西就跟我一块儿带人我那永恒的天国，而不必有劳你在我身上一试你的医术。”

“哦，”罗杰·奇林沃思镇静地回答说，不论这种镇静是装作的，还是自然而然的，反正他的一切举动都带有这个特点，“一个青年牧师是容易这么说的。年轻人，根子扎的不深，很容易轻生！在世间跟上帝走在一块儿的圣人们，都巴不得离世而去，跟上帝一块儿走在新耶路撒冷的金光大道上。”

“不，”青年牧师回答说，把一只手放在胸前，额上掠过一阵痛苦的红晕，“如果我配在那里走的话，我在世上再辛苦也就更加心满意足了。”

“好人总是把自己说得太卑微。”医生说。

神秘的罗杰·奇林沃思老人就这样成了牧师迪默斯德尔先生的医学顾问。医生感兴趣的，不仅是疾病，而主要是想研究病人的性格和品质，因此，这两个年龄相差如此悬殊的人，在一块儿的时间逐渐多起来了。为了牧师的健康，以及为了便于医生采集和调制草药，他们常常在海边或林中作漫长的步行，俩人的话语总是和海浪的拍击声以及林间的风涛声交织在一起。他们还常到彼此的书房和休息室去串门儿。牧师在跟这位学者相处中，感到有一种魔力，认识到这位学者的知识修养并非一般的渊博，同时他还思想开阔、奔放，而为他的同行所罕见。的确，当他发现医生身上有这种特质时，即使不是震惊，那也不免要吃一惊了。迪默斯德尔先生是一个真正

的牧师，一个真正笃信宗教的人。他有着虔诚的、奔放的感情，并养成了一种心力，能强使自己按照宗教信条的轨道奋力前进，随着时间的推移步步深入。无论在什么状态的社会里，他都不会是一个被称作自由思考的人。他感到周围有信仰的力量支撑他，对于他的心地平静来说总是很必要的，尽管这种信仰把他禁锢在它的铁栅栏内。然而，当他一反习惯的看法，而以另一种智力去观察宇宙时，虽然快乐中不免带有几分畏惧，但又的确有时感到有所欣慰。这好似打开了一扇窗户，让更新鲜的空气吹入沉闷、窒息的书房里，而平日他就在那儿的灯光下或在那被遮遮挡挡的日光下，以及在那些书本散发出来的不论是感官上嗅到的，还是精神上感到的霉味下，消耗着自己的生命。但是，此刻空气又太新鲜、太清凉了，呼吸久了也会感到不舒服。于是，牧师又和伴随着他的医生回到了他们教会所认为正常的范围里。

罗杰·奇林沃思就是这样仔细地考察着他的病人，既在日常生活中观察他惯常的思想行径，又在其他道德领域内观察他的表现，看看有什么新奇的东西从他性格表面上引出新的现象。他认为给一个人治好病，似乎很有必要了解这个人。无论在哪儿，一个人只要有感情和才智，身体上的疾病便会带有这种感情和才智的特色。就阿瑟·迪默斯德尔来说，他的思想和想象力是那么活跃，感觉是那么敏锐，身体上虚弱的根子大概也就在这儿了。因此，罗杰·奇林沃思努力深入病人的内心，研究他的德行，窥探他的往事，细心触摸，探查每一件东西；就像一个探宝者在漆黑的大山洞中探索珍宝一样。一个探察者只要有机会和可能去进行这样一种探查工作，并善于穷根究底，那就很少有秘密能逃过他的耳目了。所以一个内心藏有秘密的人总是特别避免跟医生接近。假如一位医生既有天生的明智，又有某种无以名状，姑且称之为直觉的东西；假如他没有害人的利己主义，也没有令人不快的突出性格；假如他生来就有一种力量，能使他的心和病人的心一脉相通，使这位病人无意中吐露出他自以为只有他才思考的东西；假如他能冷静接受这样透露出来的心声，并且不是总

用无声的同感表示同意，而只用沉默，或者是含糊的叹息，说上一两句话，以表示他对此都已了解而已，又假如在知己者的条件上，再加上名医这样的便利身份，那么，病人的心灵早晚会被溶解，随着暗淡而明净的河川往前流去，把它的一切秘密都带到光天化日之下来。

罗杰·奇林沃思有着以上列举的全部或大部分特点。然而，随着时间往前流逝，正如我们说过的，一种亲密无间的关系在两颗有教养的心灵中增长起来了。这两颗心灵会合的领域是如此广阔，简直可以囊括人类思想和研究的全部领域。他们讨论道德和宗教，公共事务和个人性格的各个方面的问题。看来，一些属于双方个人的事情，他们也谈得很多。但是，医生设想的那些必然存在的秘密，却没有从牧师的内心中流露出来，传到他这个同伴的耳朵里。医生实际上已在怀疑，迪默斯德尔先生甚至连他身体上疾病的性质都根本没有向他讲过。这真是一种不可思议的秘密！

过了一段时间以后，迪默斯德尔先生的朋友们在罗杰·奇林沃思的暗示下，作了一个安排，让他们两人同住在一个房间里。这样一来，牧师生活上的潮汐每一次涨落，就都可以收入他那位热心肠的、晨昏相伴的医生的眼底了。当这个非常切合需要的目的达到时，全镇人都大为高兴。这件事被认为对于青年牧师的康乐来说，是一项最好的措施。的确，除此以外，就只有像自认为有权那么办的人所主张的那样，让他从许多精神上崇拜他的妙龄姑娘中选择一个作为他的恩爱妻子。然而，这后一步，当前是有可能说服阿瑟·迪默斯德尔来采取的。他拒绝这方面的一切建议，似乎僧侣的独身生活是他的教规条款之一。因此，正如迪默斯德尔先生所心甘情愿选择的那样，他命定了要在别人的餐桌上去吃那难以下咽的一份，要在别人炉旁暖身，否则就只好一生忍饥挨饿，这么看来，这个贤明的、有经验的、仁慈的老医生，对于这位青年牧师来说，倒真兼有父母的慈爱和教民的敬爱了，倒真算人类中唯一可以跟他朝夕共处的人了。

两位朋友的新居是定在一个上流社会的虔诚寡妇的家里。她住的房子几乎占据了后来修建的一座古香古色的皇家教堂的整个场地。房子一旁有块坟地，原来是伊萨克·约翰逊的家园，因而很易于唤起庄严的回忆，适于他们两人一为牧师、一为医生的职业。善良的寡妇对迪默斯德尔先生慈母般地关怀，给他分配了一套朝阳的房间，并装有厚厚的窗帘，必要时可在中午遮阴。四壁挂着据说是戈贝林织机制的挂毯，其上绣了关于大卫、芭什芭和预言家纳森的《圣经》故事。画上的颜色虽然没有褪尽，但是却使画中那个美女几乎变得像那个宣告大祸的预言家那样面目严峻了。现在那位脸色苍白的牧师在那儿整理他的藏书，其中有很多羊皮纸装订的早期基督教著作家的对开本书籍和犹太教法学专家的著作，以及僧侣的学术论著。对于这类著述的作者，新教的神学家们即使百般诬蔑诋毁，同时又不得不常常加以利用。屋子的另一头，罗杰·奇林沃思老人也在整理他的书房和实验室，以现代科学家的眼光看来，其完备程度，连勉强过得去也说不上，只有一个蒸馏器和一些配制药物和化学药品的器皿。这些东西，凡是有经验的炼丹家都知道怎么用法。这两位学者由于有了这样宽敞的住宅，因而可以各得其所，安顿下来，还能亲密无间地互相往来、互相关心地观看对方的工作。

我们已经说过，阿瑟·迪默斯德尔牧师那些最有见识的朋友们都非常入情入理地认为，这一切都是上帝的安排，目的就是为了恢复青年牧师的健康——这正是很多人在大庭广众之中，在家庭里和在私下里的祈求。但是，现在必须说一下，社会中另一部分人近来却开始对迪默斯德尔和神秘的老人之间的关系采取了自己的看法。没有受过教育的人试图以自己的眼光去看，当然非常容易上当受骗。然而，正如常见的那样，当他们凭着自己那热心肠的直觉，一旦形成一种判断时，那么由此得出的结论就常常既深刻，而又正确，以至于具有非凡的真理性。不过，在我们所谈到的这种情况下，人们对罗杰·奇林沃思所抱的偏见，却没有经得起严加驳斥的事实和论

据可以证明这种看法的正确。诚然，这儿有一个上了年纪的手工业艺人，他是大约三十年前托马斯·奥弗伯里爵士被谋杀时期的伦敦市人。他证实，他见到这位医生跟有名的术士福尔曼医生在一起过，当时他用的是别的名字，但现在已经记不清了。这个术士跟奥弗伯里案件有牵连。还有两三个人指出，这个技艺高明的人，在被印第安人俘虏时，曾参加过蛮人术士的符咒活动而加深了他的医术造诣。这些术士，人所共知，是有能耐的巫师，往往能用他们的妖术收到似乎是奇迹般的疗效。大部分人——其中有很多是头脑清醒、观察切合实际的人，他们在其他事情上的意见往往都很有价值——断言，罗杰·奇林沃思住到这个城里以后，特别是跟迪默斯德尔住到一块儿以后，他的样子发生了很大的变化。起先，他的表情冷静而好沉思，一副学者的模样。现在他的脸色却有些难看和邪恶了，这是他们以前没有见到过的，而如今是越看他，越觉得明显了。根据粗俗的见解，实验室中的火是地狱中带来的，是由地狱的燃料点燃的。因此，他的面容可以想见是被烟熏黑的。

总而言之，盛传着一种说法，认为阿瑟·迪默斯德尔牧师像基督世界各个时期里许多特别圣洁的人物一样，他是既被撒旦，又被撒旦的使徒伪装成的罗杰·奇林沃思老人缠住了身。这个魔鬼的代理人得到了神的许可，于是很快钻进了牧师内心隐秘之处，来暗害他的心灵。坦率地说，没有一个明眼人会怀疑，胜利将属于哪一方。人们抱着坚定的信念，盼望牧师带着终将胜利的荣光，从这场争斗中凯旋而归。然而，他也许必须经历一番九死一生的大苦斗，才能从中取胜，而一想到这点，又不免令人忧心忡忡的了。

哎呀！从不幸的牧师那眼睛深处透露出来的阴沉和恐惧的目光来看，这场斗争很是痛苦，胜利根本没有什么把握。

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第十章 医生和他的病人

罗杰·奇林沃思老人生平禀性沉着、和善，虽然缺乏热情，但从他处世的各个方面看来，始终是一个纯朴、正直的人。他开始按自己的设想，以一个审判官的严格而公正的态度进行调查研究。他原只希望求得真理，甚至所探讨的问题也似乎只不过是几何学课题中的虚线和图形，而不是人世的感情以及他自己的创伤。但是，随着调查的进展，一种可怕的诱惑力，一种虽然冷静，但是狂热的需要紧紧抓住了这位老人，到了不达目的誓不罢休的地步。他现在已深入到了牧师的心坎里，就像一个勘探黄金的矿工，或者说，像一个正在挖掘坟墓的教堂司事，总想找到那埋藏在死者胸前的宝石，然而除了腐烂的尸体什么也找不到。如果他真是找黄金和宝石，那可要为自己的灵魂叹惜了！

有时从医生的两眼中闪出一道蓝蓝的、不祥的光线来，仿佛是炉火的反光，又仿佛是班扬笔下那山边可怖的门道中所射出来并闪动在香客脸上的一道鬼火的微光。这个心怀鬼胎的矿工所正在挖掘的那片土地，也许真有值得他深挖的迹象。

“这个人，”他在这样一个时刻自言自语地说，“人们虽然认为他很纯洁——他看来也全然超尘脱俗——但是，他的父亲或母亲却遗传给他了一种强烈的兽性。让我们顺着这条矿脉挖掘得更深一点吧！”

这样，医生对牧师的奥妙的内心世界经过长期的探查，终于发掘出许多珍贵的东西，其所表现的形式有为人谋福、热爱众生、纯洁的情操、天生的虔诚等等高尚的志趣，这些又由于他善于思考和学习而日益巩固，以及由天启而光华灼灼——可

是所有这一切无价之宝，对于这位人心的探索者说来却似乎与垃圾无异——他于是沮丧地拨转马头，开始向着另一方面探索起来了。他蹑手蹑脚、东张西望，有如一个小偷偷溜进一个半睡、或者也许是一个全醒的人的寝室里，企图偷取那人如同保护眼珠一般地保护着的珍宝。尽管他谨小慎微，但地板还是不时地嘎嘎作响，衣服也发出沙沙的响声。当他来到不能再近的地方时，他的影子就投射到那个被窃者的身上了。迪默斯德尔先生神经非常敏感，常常有一种心灵直觉感，他现在隐约感到，有一种对他的安宁有害的东西已经渗入到他跟医生的关系中来了。但是，罗杰·奇林沃思老人的感觉也几乎是直觉的；当牧师把吃惊的眼睛投向他时，医生却安然坐在那里，俨然是他的一位善良、关心、同情而又从不害人的朋友。

然而，如果迪默斯德尔先生不是由于心病所造成的病态而使他怀疑整个人类的话，那他也许早已把这个人的品格看得更为透彻了。但是由于他把谁都不当做朋友，因而当敌人真正出现时，他也就无法辨认了。这样一来，迪默斯德尔仍旧和老医生保持亲密无间的来往，每天在书房里接待他，或者到实验室里去观看他怎样把草药制成灵药，以此作为消遣。

一天牧师一手支着前额，将胳膊肘靠在朝坟地打开的窗户的窗台上，同罗杰·奇林沃思攀谈起来，这时老人正在察看着一捆不雅观的植物。

“我的好大夫，这些药草是从哪儿采来的？”牧师斜视着那些植物问，因为他近来无论对人或对物很少正视，这已成为他的一种怪癖了，“叶子这样暗，这样软？”

“就在附近的那片坟地里，”医生一面继续干活，一面回答说，“这种植物我还是第一次看见。我发现它们长在一个坟墓上。那墓既没有墓碑，也没有别的纪念物，只有这些丑恶的杂草在纪念死者。这些杂草从死者的心田里长出来，也许代表着某种骇人听闻的秘密，现在同那个人埋葬在一块了，这要是在他生前坦白出来就更好

了。”

“也许，” 迪默斯德尔先生说，“他倒是热望这样做，但是没能做到。”

“那是为什么？” 医生反问道，“为什么没能做到？既然自然界的万物都那么热切要求坦白罪行，以至于这些黑草都从死者的心中长了出来，不就是为了昭示那没有说出的罪行吗？”

“先生，这不过是你的一种幻想，” 牧师回答说，“如果我预料得不错的话，只要没有神的慈悲，就没有任何力量能够揭开埋藏在人们心底的秘密，无论是用言语，用典型，还是用榜样，都不能做到这点。内心既然为了保守这种秘密而宁愿犯罪，那就必然要继续保守秘密，直到有一天一切隐秘大白于天下的时候为止。我还没有这样读过或解释过《圣经》，以为人类思想和行为必须这样宣泄于众，才算是一种报应。这实在是一种浅薄的见解。不然，除非我大错而特错，这种昭明的办法，无非只是为了让一切有识之士得到智能上的满足，他们倒是乐于驻足以待，等着那么一天的到来，来看看人生的黑暗问题到底如何水落石出。要圆满地解决这个问题，就必须懂得人们的心情。此外，我预料，在末日到来的时候，那些保守这种如你所说的可悲的 secrets 的内心，将会不是勉强地，而是非常愉快地要把那些秘密倾吐出来。”

“那为什么不在此时此地就把秘密吐露出来呢？” 罗杰·奇林沃思对在他旁边的牧师悄悄地看了一眼，问道，“为什么罪人们不愿早一些得到这难以言状的安慰呢？”

“他们大都是这么做的，” 牧师使劲地抓住自己的胸口说，似乎为一种心跳不已的痛苦所折磨，“有许许多多可怜的心灵，不仅在临终的床上，而且在生命旺盛和名望高的时期，都曾向我吐露过内心的秘密。哦，每每在他们这样倾吐之后，我看到

那些有罪的徒众们是多么心情舒坦啊！正好像一个人被自己的浊气长期窒息以后，最后呼吸到了自由空气一般。否则又能怎么样呢？比如说，为什么一个可悲的人，犯了杀人罪，他宁可把死尸埋藏在心里，而不立即把它抛出来，让世人来处理呢？”

“至今还有人这样隐瞒他们的秘密。”那个沉着的医生说。

“的确有这样的人，”迪默斯德尔先生回答说，“但是，不必说出更明确的理由来了，他仍保持沉默可能出于他们的天性。也许——我们能不能这样认为——他们虽然有罪，但仍然有为上帝争光和为人类谋福的热情，这才不敢在众人面前袒露自己的污点和隐私；因为从此以后，他们就做不成好事了；再好的善行也挽回不了过去的罪恶。因此，他们有着难以言状的痛苦。他们在同伴之中周旋，看上去好像刚下的白雪一样纯洁，而内心却充满罪恶的斑斑污迹，根本无法摆脱得了。”

“这些人是在欺骗他们自己，”罗杰·奇林沃思说，语气略比平常加重，食指轻轻地做了一个手势，“他们害怕接受理应属于他们的耻辱。他们对于人类的爱，对于敬奉上帝的热忱，这些神圣的举动，既有可能又未必都有可能跟恶魔共存于他们的心中，这样就使他们的罪恶为这些恶魔打开了方便之门，而恶魔们也必然要在他们的内心中繁衍丑类了。但是，如果这些人立意赞美上帝，那就叫他们不要向上天举起自己不洁净的双手！如果他们愿为自己的同胞服务，那就让他们在强使自己忏悔自责的过程中，显示良心的力量，袒露良心的真相！哦！聪明、虔诚的朋友，你是否要我相信，一个虚假的表示——能胜过为上帝争光或为人类谋福——能比上帝的真理更好吗？相信我吧，这样的人是在欺骗他们自己！”

“可能是这样，”青年牧师漠不关心地说，似乎不想讨论这个他认为并不相干的、不合时宜的问题。的确，不论任何话题，只要刺激了他那过敏的、神经质的脾性，

他就能随时回避开来。“但是，现在我倒要问问我那高明的医生，他那样好心关怀我这虚弱的身体，是否真正认为对我有益呢？”

罗杰·奇林沃思还没来得及回答，就在这时候他们听到由附近墓地那边传来了一个孩子的清脆爽朗的笑声。牧师本能地从打开的窗户中——因为是夏天——向外望去，他看见赫斯特·普琳和小珠儿正在沿着穿过围墙的小道走着。珠儿像黎明一样可爱，但她此刻的心情既任性又欢快，每逢这种时候，她就似乎要远远地躲开人的抚慰，不爱跟人接触。她此刻便是这样，毫无礼貌地由这一个坟墓跳到那一个坟墓，最后一直跳到了一个故世的大人物——也许是伊萨克·约翰逊——那宽阔、平坦，刻有盾徽的墓石上，并开始在那儿跳起舞来。母亲又是命令又是恳求，要她有礼貌一些，她这才停了下来，去采摘那长在墓旁一棵高大牛蒡上的带刺的果实。她摘下一把果实，然后在母亲胸前的红A字上沿着边线插上，由于牛蒡有刺，也就牢牢地粘在母亲胸前。赫斯特并没把它们摘掉。罗杰·奇林沃思此刻走近窗前，冷酷地朝下面笑了一笑。

“在孩子的天性中，没有掺杂任何法律观念，任何对权力的崇敬，任何对人世法令或舆论的顾忌，无论其正确与否。”奇林沃思既是对自己，也是对他那一位同伴这么说，“不久前有一天，我还看到她在牲口饮水槽旁用水溅泼州长。她究竟是什么东西？难道是一个坏透了的小鬼吗？她有爱惜别人的感情吗？她有一星半点人的道义吗？”

“她除了破坏法律的自由以外，什么也没有，”迪默斯德尔先生从容回答说，似乎他内心正在捉摸这个问题，“她能不能成为好人，我就知道了。”

孩子可能碰巧听见他们的谈话，于是抬起头来向窗口望去，报以伶俐而淘气的一笑，既欢快又机灵，接着将一个带刺的牛蒡果向着牧师迪默斯德尔先生扔去。敏感

的牧师，被这一小小的飞弹吓得神经质地往后退缩了一步。小珠儿看见牧师那种神情，不禁欢欣若狂，拍起小手来了。赫斯特·普琳也有意无意地往上瞧着。于是，老少四人相对默然，直到珠儿大笑起来，叫道：“妈，走吧！走呀，要不然，那边那个老黑鬼会来逮你的！他已经抓住牧师了。妈，走吧，要不然，他会来逮你的！但是他逮不了小珠儿！”

就这样，珠儿拉着母亲走开，跳着、蹦着，在死者的坟堆上活蹦乱跳起来，好像她跟那逝去了的一代了无关系，也不承认自己跟他们同宗同族。她似乎是由新的材料最新制造出来的，因而必须允许她按自己的生活方式生活，有自己的法律，而不把她的怪癖看做是她的罪过。

“那边走着的那个女人，”罗杰·奇林沃思停了一会儿以后继续说，“不管她有什么罪过，她完全没有你认为难以忍受的那种隐瞒罪过的奥秘。你是否认为赫斯特·普琳胸前戴上了那个红A字，会减少一点痛苦呢？”

“我的确是这么认为的，”牧师答道，“然而，我不能代她作答。她脸上的痛苦神色，我可不想看到。不过我还是认为，对于赫斯特这样可怜苦命的女人来说，与其把痛苦憋在心里，倒不如痛痛快快说出来，这样肯定要好一些。”

谈话又中止了一会儿，医生重新开始检验和整理他采集来的草药。

“你刚才问过我，”他终于说道，“对你的健康的意见是吗？”

“问过，”牧师回答说，“并很想知道。不管是死是活，请你坦率说吧。”

“那我就坦率地说了，”医生回答道，仍忙于整理他的草药，但还在密切注视着迪默斯德尔先生，“病症很怪，但本身并不那么严重，不像外表看来那样，至少据我

观察到的症候来说，是这样。先生，我每天在看你，观察你的脸色。现在几个月过去了，我认为你是一个有大病的人，但还没有病到一个受过教育的、细心观察的医生无望治好的程度。可是，我不知道怎么说好，这病我似乎知道，但又不知道。”

“博学的先生，你这是在打谜语。”脸色苍白的牧师说，眼睛向窗外那边望着。

“那我就更为直截了当地说吧，”医生继续说道，“先生，如果需要请求宽恕的话，那我就恳求你宽恕我这必须直截了当说的话。我作为你的朋友，作为一个受上帝之命对你的生活和你的身体健康负责的人，让我问你，你这病的一切症状都已和盘托出，给我详细讲了吗？”

“你怎么能对这点发生怀疑呢？”牧师问道，“把医生请来，而又讳疾忌医，那简直是儿戏。”

“那么，你是说，我一切都知道了吗？”罗杰·奇林沃思以热切、凝聚的慧眼盯着牧师的脸孔，从容不迫地说，“就算是这样吧！但是，还不够！医生往往只知道明摆在外表的、肉体上的病痛，但那不过是求医诊治的半个疾病。肉体上的病痛，我们虽然把它看做是整个疾病全部的表现，但又毕竟只可能是精神上某种毛病的征兆。好先生，要是我的话对你有点冒犯的话，那就再一次请你谅解。先生，你是我所熟悉的一切人中，肉体和精神可以说是紧密结合、相互渗透和水乳交融的一个人，对你来说，肉体只不过是精神的躯壳罢了。”

“那样，我就不用再求医了，”牧师说道，有点急速地从椅子上站起身来，“我认为你不是医治灵魂的。”

“这样说来，是有一种疾病，”罗杰·奇林沃思没有注意到他的话被打断，站了起来，以他矮小、黝黑、畸形的身体，面对着形容憔悴、面颊苍白的牧师，照旧继续

说，“一种精神上的疾病，如果可以这么说的话，一种精神上的痛处，直接在你的躯体上有了相应的反映。因此，你能叫你的医生治你身体上的病吗？除非你先把心灵上的创伤或痛苦告诉他，不然怎么可能这样治呢？”

“不，不能告诉你——不能告诉一个人世的医生！”迪默斯德尔先生激动地叫道，把他那双圆睁睁的、炯炯有神的眼睛，带着某种凶狠的情绪望着罗杰·奇林沃思老人。“不能告诉你！但是，如果是心病的话，那我就要委身于一个专治心病的医生来治了。只要他乐意，他能治好我，也能杀死我。让他凭着他的公正和明智，看怎么好，就怎么办吧。然而，你是什么人，竟来干预这件事？你胆敢插手到受难者和他的上帝中间来吗？”

青年牧师做了一个狂乱的手势，冲到屋外去了。

“走到了这一步倒也好，”罗杰·奇林沃思自言自语地说，目送着牧师，严肃地笑着，“这对我毫无损失。我们不久又会成为朋友的。但是，现在看来，这个人感情用事，急躁得忘乎所以！他既然有这一方面的感情冲动，那也就有另一方面的感情冲动！这个虔诚的牧师感情这样热烈，以前肯定有过越轨的事情！”

事实证明，这两个伙伴在以前那样的关系上、那样的程度上，重新建立起亲密的友谊并不困难。青年牧师在几个小时独处以后，就感到自己是神经错乱，乱发脾气了，因为从医生的话里找不到一星半点的借口和托辞。他对自己那样粗暴地对待那位善良的老人着实感到吃惊。老人只是尽他的职责，才提出忠告，而且牧师自己也曾特意表示要寻求这种忠告。于是，牧师带着懊悔的心情，毫不迟疑地去向医生深表歉意，并恳求医生继续关心他，纵使不能使他恢复健康，也完全可能延长他虚弱的生命。罗杰·奇林沃思欣然同意继续给牧师作医疗护理工作，想方设法、诚心诚意地给他治病。但医生在看完病，离开病人房间时，嘴角上总是露出神秘莫测的、迷

惑不解的笑容。医生这种表情在迪默斯德尔面前是看不见的，但当跨出门槛就一目了然了。

“少见的病症！”他咕噜着，“我必须深入观察。心灵和肉体之间常有奇怪的交感作用！光就研究医术来说，我也必须对这件事寻根究底！”

就在这以后不久，有一件事情发生了，一天中午牧师竟完全不知不觉地坐在椅子上，深深地进入梦乡了，面前的桌子上摊开一本黑体排印的大书。这本书必定是催眠派作品中的力作。而牧师的沉沉入睡却更为奇怪，因为他是这么一种人，睡意一般来说，是不浓的，时睡时醒的，就像那枝头跳跃的小鸟一样，稍一受惊就会吓跑。然而，他的灵魂现在却是这样异乎寻常地远离尘世，进入梦境了，以至于罗杰·奇林沃思老人进入室内时，尽管并不怎么特别小心防止惊扰别人，他还是一动不动地坐在椅子上。医生直接走到病人面前，把手放在他胸口上，并将法衣往旁一撩。那正是他常常捂着，连医生也不让看的地方。

这时，迪默斯德尔先生的确颤抖了一下，并微微地动了一动。

医生停了一会儿以后，转身走了。

然而，他那样子看起来多野啊，又是惊异，又是欢快，又是可怕！那简直可以说是欣喜若狂了，其程度光是眼睛和面容都不足以表现，因此他整个丑陋的身子都来帮忙了，不禁手舞足蹈起来，用这种过分的动作来放肆地表现他那喜悦的心情。如果真有人在罗杰·奇林沃思老人这个狂喜的时刻看见他，那就不必多问：当一个可贵的人的灵魂进不了天堂而落入地狱时，撒旦这个恶魔会有什么表现。

但是，医生的狂喜跟撒旦的狂喜有所不同，因为医生的狂喜中还包含有惊异的特点呢！

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第十一章 内心

经过上述那一事件以后，牧师和医生之间的交往，虽然表面上看来依然如故，但实际上跟以前是另一性质了。现在罗杰·奇林沃思的思绪面前摆着一条十分平坦的道路，这的确不是他以前预计要走的道路。尽管他显得平静、温和、不动声色。可是，我们担心，在这个不幸的老人的内心里，他那个一向潜伏着的而现在蠢蠢欲动的深藏的恶意，会使他想出一个比世上任何人报复敌人都要更为深思熟虑的复仇计划。这就是他把自己装扮成一个可以信赖的朋友，让人把一切恐惧、悔恨、痛苦、无益的后悔、追悔莫及的罪恶思想，向他吐露无遗。那一切对世上隐而不露的内疚，世人伟大的心胸本是可以怜悯和宽恕的，现在却要向他，向这个无怜悯之心的人，向他这个无恻隐之心的人吐露！那一切隐藏的珍宝都将要错给这么一个人，而对他来说是再也没有别的什么东西能如此适当地偿付那笔复仇的冤债了！

牧师那存有戒心的和敏感的保留态度妨碍了这一计划的实施。然而，罗杰·奇林沃思对这一事态简直根本没有什么不满，因为这是上天要复仇者和受难者都为其所用，在似乎最应惩罚的地方，却意外地给予宽恕，以此来取代医生那毒辣的手段。然而，他几乎可以说，已得到一个启示了。无论这个启示是来自天上，还是来自别的什么地方，对他要达到的目的来说，都是无关紧要的。由于这一启示之助，在他以后和迪默斯德尔先生的一切关系中，不仅后者的外表，而且内心深处，都似乎袒露在他的眼前，这样他对于牧师内心的一切活动，就都能看到并了如指掌了。从此以

后，他在可怜的牧师的内心世界里，就不仅是一个旁观者，而且是一个主宰者了。他可以任意摆布牧师。他想引起牧师阵阵剧痛吗？受难者总是如坐针毡。这只需知道控制机器的发条就行，这一点医师十分清楚！他想以突如其来的恐怖惊吓牧师吗？他只需把魔术师的魔棍一挥，就有一个可怕的魔鬼腾空而起——成千上万个魔鬼相继而出——以形形色色的死鬼形式，或更加面目可憎的恶鬼形式，一齐聚集在牧师的周围，用手直指着他的胸膛！

这一切都做得出神入化，牧师虽然经常模糊地感到，有某种恶势力在窥视他，但他根本不知道这种势力的真实性质。的确，他现在正以怀疑、恐惧的目光——有时甚至是恐怖和怨恨的目光——注视着老医生那畸形的身躯。医生的姿势，他的步态，他的灰白的胡须，他的轻微的、根本无关紧要的一举一动，他的衣服的样式，在牧师看来，都是可憎的。这就确凿无疑地表明，牧师心中的反感，比他口头愿意承认的更大。

由于迪默斯德尔对这种怀疑和厌恶找不到根据，就认为有一种疾病的病毒在感染他的整个身心，而没有把所有的预感归于其他原因。他责备自己不应对罗杰·奇林沃思抱有恶感，忽略应该从中引出的教训，并极力把这种恶感连根铲除。然而，他又做不到这一点，便作为一个原则性的问题，继续跟老人保持已成习惯的社交来往。这样就又经常为老人提供了机会来完成自己的目的——这个老人是一个可怜而又可悲的人，比他的受害者还要可悲——完成这个复仇者全力以赴的目的。

牧师迪默斯德尔先生，就是这样一方面忍受身体有病的痛苦和内心痛苦的摧残和折磨，以及听任他的死敌的暗算，一方面却在神职上取得了辉煌的美誉。

他赢得这种声誉，大部分原因确是由于他的忧伤。而他的天赋，他的道德感，他的经验和表达情绪的能力，都由于他日常生活的创伤和痛苦，反而异常地活跃起来。

他的名声虽然还只在上升阶段，但已使那些庄重见著，甚至其中有几位杰出的牧师同事相形见绌了。他们之中有些神学者在取得跟圣职有关的深奥学问上所花的时间比迪默斯德尔先生的岁数都要长。因此，他们造诣的扎实和可贵都远比这位年轻的同事要强。

还有一些神父，他们比他更坚强，他们的理解力也敏锐得多，坚实得多，有如钢铁和花岗石一般，并且恰当地溶进了教义的成分，这样就使他们成为另一类非常高尚、非常灵验和断然不同的牧师。也还有一些真正圣洁的神父，他们的才能由于刻苦攻读和深思熟虑而出神入化，加上他们跟天界灵犀相通，而超凡入圣了。这些神圣的人物虽然依旧穿着入世的服装，但他们的纯洁生活已几乎把他们引入天界了。他们所缺乏的东西，只是那样一种礼物，即在五旬节飞落在上帝所选的门徒们头上的火舌。这种火舌，其意义似乎并不是指用外语和其他陌生语言说话的能力，而是指用本族语对全体同胞说话的能力。这些神父在别的方面很像使徒，就是缺乏职务上这一最后的和最难得的天赐的明证——火舌。他们希图通过日常用语和形象这类最卑微的媒介去表现最高的真理，如果他们梦想这么做的话，那也只是徒劳而已。他们的声音从他们一贯居住的高处传下来后，便变得很远很远和模糊不清了。

就迪默斯德尔先生许多品格特征而论，他不是不可能属于后一种人。如果他不是为罪恶或痛苦的重担所压倒，注定要在它下面挣扎的话，他也许已经爬到了信仰和神圣的高峰之巅。这种重担把他压到了最低层，而他本是一个有着天赋才能的人，他的话音，安琪儿本来都会来聆听和回答！但是，也就是这一重担使得他对人类有罪的兄弟抱有深切的同情心，因此他的心和他们的心一起跳动，痛他们之所痛，并以滔滔不绝的感伤而又动人心弦的话语，把自己痛苦的心的跳动传给众人的千千万万颗心。他的话总是富有说服力，但有时也听来可怕！人们不知道如此感动他们的力量的由来。他们认为，青年牧师是一个神圣的奇迹般的人物。他们认为，他是替上

帝传达智慧、指责和恩爱的喉舌。在他们眼里，他踏过的土地也是神圣的。他所主管的教区的处女在他周围就脸色发白，成了感情的牺牲品，充满了宗教情绪，使得她们都认为那完全是宗教信仰的关系，因而公然把这种感情珍藏在她们洁白的心胸中，以此作为最合意的祭品。迪默斯德尔先生教区中一些上了年纪的会众，看到他身体那么虚弱，而他们自己虽然衰老，但还硬朗，就相信他将先他们升天，于是嘱咐他们的子女要把他们的老骨头埋在那位青年牧师的圣墓旁边。也许就在这时，可怜的迪默斯德尔先生也一直在想着他的坟墓，他们心自问，坟上是不是会长草，因为埋在那儿的是一个该诅咒的人啊！

大家对他尊敬，反倒折磨着他，这种痛苦真是难以想象啊！他的真诚的冲动是崇尚真理，是把一切东西都看做是阴影，既全无分量，又无价值，因为其中没有作为生命的神圣的内核。那么，他是什么呢？——是一种实体——还是所有阴影中最暗淡的阴影？他希望从他的布道坛上大声疾呼，告诉人们他是一个什么样的人。“我呀，就是你们看到的那个穿着牧师黑衣的人；我呀，就是那个登上圣坛，把苍白的脸朝向上天，为你们，跟至高无上的上帝通气的人；我呀，就是那个在生活中你们看做有着伊诺的圣洁的人；我呀，就是你们认为一路上一步一个脚印，留下微光，引领着香客们进入极乐境界的人；我呀，就是那个给你们的孩子施洗礼的人；我呀，就是那个给你们临终的朋友念永别祷文，当他们离开这个世界时轻轻说一声“阿门”的人；我呀，就是那个受到你们那样尊敬和信任的牧师，然而却是彻头彻尾的一个堕落者和撒谎者！”

迪默斯德尔先生不止一次走上布道坛，决心非说出上面的话就不走下台阶。他不止一次地清嗓子，作很长的、颤抖的深呼吸，这样当他再次吐气时，他心中那邪恶的隐秘也许就可以倾吐出来了。不止一次——不，不止一百次——他真是说了！说了！然而，那是怎么说的呢？他告诉听众，他坏透了，是最可耻者中的可耻者，是

罪犯中的罪犯，是一个恶棍，一个想象不到的坏蛋。他还说，他那可悲的身体，由于全能的上帝的勃然大怒，而在他们的眼前萎缩了，奇怪的只是他们没能看见这种情景而已！还能有比这更直率的话吗？人们会不会由于一齐冲动，而从座位上站立起来，把他从他所玷污的讲坛上拖下来呢？然而，没有！他们听完后，反而更尊敬他了。他们很少猜测，在他自我谴责的话语中，潜伏着致命的含义。“好一个虔诚的青年！”他们彼此之间议论说：“人间的圣人！哎呀，如果他在自己洁白的灵魂上都能看到这样的罪孽，那么，他在你我的灵魂上又将看到什么可怕的东西呢！”牧师知道得很清楚——他是一个多么滑头而又要忏悔的伪君子啊——他那含糊其辞的忏悔，人们会是一种什么看法。他用公布内疚的办法来极力自欺，但这只是又添了一层罪孽和明知故犯的羞愧，一息也不能解除他自欺欺人的痛苦。他确实讲出了真情，可是却把它变成了一个十足的谎言。但是，就他的性格的素质来看，他比任何人都爱好真理，厌恶谎言。因此，在万事万物中，他最厌恶的是他自己，他太可悲了！

青年牧师内心的苦恼驱使他更加按照罗马天主教会古老、腐朽的信仰去修行，而不是遵循他在其出生和备受教养的教会的那种更好的教义去办。在迪默斯德尔先生上了锁的秘密壁橱里放着一条血淋淋的鞭子。这个新教徒兼清教徒的牧师常常用它来鞭打自己的双肩；他一边鞭打，一边苦笑着，并且由于这苦笑而越发无情地鞭打自己。迪默斯德尔先生有着一种跟其他许多虔诚的清教徒一样的绝食习惯，可是他跟他们不一样，并非是为了净化身体，使它成为天启的更好媒介，而是作为一种严厉的赎罪的苦行，一直绝食到双膝战栗为止。他还同时接连不断地守夜，有时完全在黑暗中，有时点着一盏如豆的小灯，有时则在挑到最强的灯光下对着镜子看自己的脸孔。他就是这样经常以此作为反省的象征，用它来折磨自己，然而这也并不能净化自己。在牧师守夜的这些漫漫长夜中，他的脑子常常昏昏沉沉，各种幻影都仿佛

在眼前掠过。有时在暗室中那模模糊糊的地方，由于它们自己发出的微光而看来影影绰绰，有时由于在他身旁，在镜子里，就看来明显一些了。一会儿是一群魔影，龇牙咧嘴地嘲笑着那脸色苍白的牧师，并招呼他随它们而去；一会儿又是一群光彩夺目的安琪儿，沉重地往上飞着，就像有满腹忧愁似的，但当他们越往上飞时，就显得越来越轻盈了。此刻又来了他青年时代的亡友和他那像圣人似地颧眉蹙额、胡须斑白的父亲，以及那转脸而过的母亲。母亲的幽灵——一个母亲瘦弱的幻影——我想，她可能要给她的儿子以怜悯的一瞥吧！瞧，在这间被虚幻的思想搞得如此阴森可怕的暗室里，又只见赫斯特·普琳领着一个满身红衣的小珠儿一闪而过。孩子用她的食指先指着母亲胸前的红A字，然后又指着牧师的胸口。

这些幻影一个也没能完全把他迷惑住。他任何时候都能以他意志的力量，透过那些虚无缥缈的事物看出其实质，并且相信那些东西在本质上并非实物，不像那边那张雕花栎木桌子或者那本方方正正皮面铜扣的大部头精装神学著作那样。但是，尽管如此，从某种意义上说，它们又是那可怜的牧师现在与之打交道的最真实、最实在的东西。他这种虚伪的生活，真是苦不堪言，因为这种生活把我们周围现实中的精髓和实质都一扫而光了，而按照上天的旨意，这些又恰恰是精神上的乐趣和滋养品。对于这样一个虚伪的人来说，整个世界都是假的——难以捉摸的——一到手里就又化为乌有了。就他现在这种虚伪的表现来看，他已成了一个影子，或者名存实亡了。迪默斯德尔先生还继续存在在这个世界上，唯有的实情，就是他那内心深处的痛苦，以及这种痛苦在外表上不加掩饰的流露。如果他一旦有能耐笑起来，并露出一副欢乐的脸孔，那么世上也就没有这样一个人了！

在我们隐约有所暗示，而没有展开描写的那么一个阴森的夜晚，牧师忽然从椅子里一下站了起来。一种新的念头占有了他。这可能使他得到了片刻的宁静。他好像去做公共礼拜那样，细心穿戴起来；并以完全同样的态度悄悄地走下楼梯，打开了

门，往外走去。

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第十二章 牧师的夜出

迪默斯德尔先生似乎是在睡梦中行走一样，也许实际上是在一种梦游症的影响之下，来到了很久以前赫斯特·普琳露丑示众的地方。这个绞刑台或称断头台，七年来由于风吹日晒斑驳变黑了，又由于从那时起有许多犯人登上刑台，而被踏坏了，但现在仍旧保留在会议厅的阳台下面。牧师步上了台阶。

这是五月初的一个阴沉沉的夜晚。一大片单调的云幕，从天顶到地平线，笼罩了整个浩瀚的天空。如果当年那批目睹赫斯特·普琳受罚示众的人群此刻能召集拢来的话，那他们在这黑魑魑的午夜，就既看不清刑台上的人脸，也看不见人体的轮廓了。现在全城的人都睡了。牧师不会有被人发现的危险。所以如果他愿意的话，满可以站在这儿，一直站到第二天早上东方发白，而不会有任何危险，只是黑夜的寒气有些袭人，会加重他的风湿性关节炎，会由于黏膜炎、咳嗽而阻塞喉咙，因而使准备次日来听他祷告和布道的听众失望罢了。此刻除了曾经看见他在密室里挥动那根血淋淋的鞭子的永不眠的上帝以外，决没有一个人能看见他。那么，他为什么到这儿来呢？是否只是受了忏悔的嘲弄呢？的确是嘲弄，但是他的灵魂不是常在嘲弄中跟自己开玩笑么！这种嘲弄，天使为之脸红和哭泣，而魔鬼却为之高兴，大加嘲笑！他是被忏悔的冲动驱赶到这儿来了。正是那个忏悔到处盯着他不动，而它的孪生姐妹和密友就是胆怯。因此一旦另一个冲动把他赶到坦白的边缘时，胆怯就总是

用颤抖的手将他往后拽。可怜而又可悲的人啊！像他这样意志薄弱，又怎么能够负担起罪恶的重担呢？罪恶是给铁石心肠的人背负的。他们有两种选择，或者是逆来顺受，或者是如果压迫得太重，就拼命使出凶猛、蛮横的力气来，立即把它扔掉！像他这种心肠软弱而精神又最敏感的人，这两件事都做不到，可他却一个劲儿在做，做了这件又做那一件，结果把罪及上苍和徒劳懊悔这两种痛苦缠绕在一起，成了一个解不开的死结。

迪默斯德尔先生就这样一直站在绞刑台上，做着这种徒劳赎罪的表示，内心里恐惧极了，似乎宇宙万物都在凝视着他那裸露的胸脯上——心脏正上方的一个红色的标志。的确，在那个地方是有过，而且长期有着毒齿咬过的肉体上的痛苦。他已失去了任何意志的力量或克制自己的能力，他大声地叫着。这一声叫喊响彻了夜空，从这一幢房子传到那一幢房子，又从背后的山上送来了回声，这就仿佛有一群魔鬼发觉其中有这么大的痛苦和恐怖，便把它制成一种带声音的玩物，来回地掷来掷去。

“这回完了！”牧师用双手蒙着脸喃喃地说，“全城的人都将惊醒过来，赶到这里，发现我在这儿！”

但是，并非如此。这种叫声，也许对他受惊的耳朵来说，远比实际的响声要大。城里的人并没有被惊醒，或者即使是惊醒了，那些睡眠惺松的人还误以为那是梦中的什么可怕的东西或者母夜叉的叫声，因为那个时期母夜叉总是跟恶魔一块儿掠空而过，所以在这些新区或孤村野店里常常可以听到它们的声音。牧师由于没有听见什么动静，便睁开眼睛四面窥视着。他在不远的另一条街道上，在州长贝林厄姆官邸卧室中的一个窗户里，看见了那位老长官的身影，手中掌着一盏灯，头戴白睡帽，身穿一件盖住全身的白色大长袍。他看来好似一个无缘无故从坟墓中召唤出来的鬼魂一样。这一声叫喊很明显是惊动了。此外，在这同一所房子的另一个窗户里，

出现了州长的妹妹希宾斯老夫人，她也掌着一盏灯，即使这么远，也能从灯光中看出她内心的表情和不满的脸色。她从格子窗里探出头来，焦急不安地往上看着。毫无疑问，这个老女巫听见了迪默斯德尔先生的叫喊。在她看来，这叫声连同它的回声和反响都是恶魔和女妖的喧嚷。大家知道，她常跟他们一同在森林中游逛。

这个老太婆发觉州长贝林厄姆的灯光，便立即把自己的灯熄灭了，接着自己也消失了。她可能已升上云端。牧师再也看不到她的活动了。州长向黑暗中警惕地观察了一番以后——然而，在黑暗中，除了看到一块磨石，就再也看不远了——便从窗口退了回来。

牧师比较平静了一些。然而，随即映入他的眼睑的，是一线微光，起先在远处，现在正向街头接近。这一线微光照出这儿有一个柱子，那儿有一道花园篱笆；并且就在这儿，还有一个栎木拱门，门上有一个铁门环和一根作门阶用的粗木头。牧师迪默斯德尔先生一面注视着这一切详情细节，一面又从他此刻听到的脚步声的确信，他的末日正在向他悄悄逼近；那提灯的亮光再过一会儿就要照到他的身上了，他长期保守的秘密也就要大白于天下了。当提灯的亮光更为接近时，他在亮光下看见了他的牧师同事，他的同行长辈和深受尊敬的朋友——牧师威尔逊先生。根据迪默斯德尔先生推测，他刚刚在某个逝世者的床前做完了祷告。果然如此。这位慈善的老牧师正是刚从州长温思罗普寿终的寝室里来到这儿，后者就是在那会儿离开人世升天了。此刻慈善的威尔逊牧师就像是古代的圣人一样，身上环绕着一轮灿烂的光圈，使他在这阴暗的罪恶之夜里光彩夺目，似乎去世的州长留给了他一个光荣的继承权，又似乎当他仰望着胜利的香客进入天国的大门时，承受了天国那遥远的光辉。总而言之，这位牧师现在正提着灯，一路照着他往家里走去！这一个提灯发出的微光使迪默斯德尔先生产生了上述的奇想，不禁使他微笑起来，不，几乎是为此而放声大笑了，他真纳闷，自己是否疯了。

当牧师威尔逊先生一只手把他的黑色宽袖长法衣紧紧裹住身子，一只手在胸前提着提灯走过绞刑台时，青年牧师几乎再也憋不住气不说话了。

“威尔逊神父，晚上好！请你上我这儿来，咱们好好畅谈一下吧。”

我的天哪！迪默斯德尔先生真的这么说了吗？他有一刹那间真认为这些话是出自他的口里。但实际上只是想象中的话罢了。威尔逊神父继续缓慢地走着，一次也没有转过头来对那个罪恶的绞刑台望一眼。当明灭的灯光完全消失了以后，牧师不禁感到一阵昏厥，并如梦初醒地发现那最后几分钟是一个多么可怕的令人望而生畏的转折点，尽管他现在极力勉强地穷开心，以此来排解自己。

不久以后，这类可怕的古怪念头又一次潜入了他那幻觉里。他感到他的四肢由于不习惯于夜间的寒气而变得僵硬起来了，他怀疑他能否走下绞刑台的台阶。破晓以后，人们将发现他在这里。那时左邻右舍都将纷纷起床。起得最早的一个人，将在蒙蒙亮中来到这儿，发现一个高高的、模糊不清的人影站在耻辱台上，于是他会由于惊慌和好奇而半疯半癫地挨家挨户去敲门，把所有的人叫来看一看那已死的罪人的鬼魂——他一定会那样认为的。微明中的喧嚷声将会像长了翅膀似的，由这一家飞往那一家。接着，曙光越来越强，父老们都将穿着法兰绒衣服赶紧起床，年老的主妇们则根本来不及去换睡衣。那些讲究礼仪的人们，以前从未见过他们有一丝头发错乱，此刻却将像鬼一样凌乱不堪地跑到大庭广众之中来。老州长贝林厄姆将歪戴着詹姆斯王的皱领，表情冷酷地跑来；希宾斯夫人裙子上将沾着林中的一些嫩枝跑来，她由于夜间飞行，一会儿也没有合眼，脾气显得比以前更坏了；慈善的威尔逊神父也将在死者床前费了半夜时间之后跑来，他很不高兴这样早就扰乱他做那光荣圣徒的美梦。跑到这儿来的还将有迪默斯德尔先生教区的长老们和执事们以及崇拜牧师的少女们。她们各在自己洁白的胸前为他安了一个神龛，此刻由于匆忙和紊

乱都来不及用围巾遮掩一下了。一句话，所有的人都将跌跌撞撞地跨出家门赶来，以心惊胆战的神色环顾着绞刑台。那边那个额上映着一片红色的东方曙光的人，他们认得出来是谁吗？除了阿瑟·迪默斯德尔牧师以外，还会是谁呢？他现在冻得半死，满脸羞愧，正站在赫斯特·普琳以前站过的那个地方！

牧师被这离奇恐怖的图景弄得晕头转向，突然放声大笑起来，连他自己也感到大吃一惊。这笑声过后，立即有一阵轻松、愉快的孩子的笑声和它相呼应，他心中一怔——但他不知道这是由于极度的痛苦，还是由于极度的高兴——听出了这是小珠儿的声音。

“珠儿！小珠儿！”停了一会儿他叫道，然后，压低声音说，“赫斯特！赫斯特·普琳，是你在那儿吗？”

“是，是赫斯特·普琳！”她用一种惊异的语调说。随后牧师听到了她从人行道走过来的脚步声，“是我和我的小珠儿。”

“赫斯特，你这是从哪儿来？”牧师问，“你到这儿来干什么？”

“我刚才一直守在一个死者的床边，”赫斯特·普琳回答，“守在温思罗普州长寿终的床边，我是在给他量尺寸做寿衣，现在我正要回家去。”

“赫斯特，你和小珠儿上这儿来，”牧师迪默斯德尔说，“你们两人以前在这儿呆过，但我没有和你们在一起。再到这儿来一次吧，让我们三个人站在一块儿！”

赫斯特默默走上台阶，一只手拉着小珠儿，站在绞刑台上。牧师摸索着找到孩子的另一只手，也把她拉着。就在牧师拉着手的这一刹那，仿佛有一股跟他自己的生命不同的新生命的喧嚣的激流一涌而上，它像一股春潮注入他的心胸，输送到他所有

的血管里，似乎这个母亲和孩子把她们那充满活力的暖流注入了他半麻木的身躯。他们三个人组成了一条循环的电路。

“牧师！”小珠儿低声地说。

“孩子，你要说什么？”迪默斯德尔问。

“你愿意跟母亲和我明天中午站在这里吗？”珠儿询问道。

“不，不行，我的小珠儿。”牧师答道，因为他此刻虽然有了新的力量，但长期为之苦恼的害怕公开暴露的思想又回到了他的脑海里。他一想到目前这种会合——虽然有一种奇怪的喜悦心情——就不寒而栗起来。“不行，我的孩子。改日我一定跟你母亲和你站在一起，但不是明天。”

珠儿笑了，试图挣脱她的小手，但牧师握得很紧。

“孩子，再拉一会儿！”他说。

“但你得答应，”珠儿问，“明天中午拉着我的手和我妈的手，好吗？”

“那不行，珠儿！”牧师说，“改天吧。”

“改到什么时候？”孩子执意问。

“大审判日，”牧师低声说——也真奇怪，他分明认识到自己是一个传播真理的职业传教士，却不得不这样回答孩子。“那时，就在那儿，在审判席前，你母亲和我都必须站在一起。但是这个世界的阳光是再也照不到我们的会见了！”

珠儿又笑了。

然而，迪默斯德尔先生还没有把话说完，就有一道又远又宽的亮光划过整个黑沉沉的夜空。这无疑是一颗流星飞过。守夜人常可看见这样的流星燃烧起来，并在浩瀚的大气层里化为灰烬。它的亮光非常强大，可以把天空和大地之间的浓密的云层照得通明透亮。广大的穹隆一片光明，就像一盏巨灯的圆罩一般。它也可以照出街道上熟悉的情景，就像白昼一样清晰可辨。但那不平常的亮光也常常给熟悉的物体蒙上一层可怖的色彩。那些有着突出吊楼和古怪三角屋顶的木屋；那些周围长满早生杂草的门阶和门槛；那些新翻的黑土园地；那些痕迹尚存，并且在市场内的两边长了青草的车道；所有这一切都被照得一清二楚，但又赋予了它们一种奇特的色彩，使得这个世界上的万事万物别有一番寓意，而和以前并不一样。牧师就站在那儿，一只手放在胸口上。旁边还有赫斯特·普琳，她的胸前闪耀着那个绣花的红A字。再就是小珠儿，她本身就是一个象征，是联结他们两人的纽带。他们就那样站在那如同白昼一般的奇异、庄严的光辉里，似乎那是揭露一切秘密的神光，是使一切相依为命的人团聚的曙光。

小珠儿的眼里含有一种魔力。当她仰望牧师时，脸上总是露出顽皮的微笑，表情常常显得那么淘气。她把小手从迪默斯德尔先生的手中缩回来，指点着街道那边。但是，牧师却把自己的双手交叉在胸前，两眼朝天空望着。

当年把一切流星的出现和其他与日月升落的规律有所逾越的自然现象解释为超自然力量的种种启示，这是司空见惯的事。比如，在午夜的天空见到一支发光的矛，一把带火的剑，一张弓或一个箭套，那就预示着要跟印第安人作战。众所周知，如果出现一阵红光，那就预示着必遭一场瘟疫。我们说不准，新英格兰从移民初期起，到革命年代为止，那时所发生的任何重大事件，无论是好事还是坏事，居民们是否对这类自然现象的壮观场面都事先有什么预感。这类现象，看过的人往往还很多。然而，它的可信性，更多的是建立在对个别目击者的信任上。这些目击者看待那些

奇观本来都是带着有色的、夸大的和曲解的眼光，又经过一番捉摸，而编造得更为圆满了。国家的命运必须靠天空中这种令人敬畏的象形文字来启示，这的确是一种崇高的想法。纸卷是那么大，给上帝在上面书写一个民族的命运，恐怕不会认为太大了吧。这种信念很得我们祖先的赞赏，因为这表示他们初期的共和国是受到上天亲切而严密的保护的。但是，在这宽大的纪录纸上，某个人发现了只针对他个人的天启，我们将怎么看呢？在这种情况下，只能认为这是他精神状态高度错乱的表现，因为他当时由于长期、激烈和隐秘的痛苦而陷入了病态的自我忏悔，并把他的以自我为中心的思想扩展到了整个的自然界，直到把苍天只当做一张适于为他书写个人历史和命运的白纸！

因此，当牧师仰望长空，看到那儿有一个巨大的字母——A字——一笔一画出现在暗红的光线中时，我们只能归于这是他自己的眼睛和心灵的病态了。这并不是说，流星没有在那个时刻出现，透过云层发出或明或暗的光辉，而是说，不像他的犯罪心情所想象的那样，至少没有那么明显，因为另一个罪犯也可能把它看成另一个样子。

此刻迪默斯德尔先生的心理状态的特点就有些异常。他一直仰望着天空，但是他完全意识到，小珠儿正用手指着站在离绞刑台不远的罗杰·奇林沃思老人。牧师似乎以一眼就看出了那个奇特的A字的同样目光，一眼就认出了医生。流星的光芒照得医生的脸孔以及其他一切东西的色彩焕然一新。这或许是由于他此时不像其他时候那样小心翼翼地掩盖自己对受害者的恶意。的确，如果流星燃亮天空，照彻大地，可怕地警告赫斯特·普琳和牧师审判日即将到来，那么，他们就会把罗杰·奇林沃思看做是头号恶魔了。现在他正喜怒交加地站那儿，要求他应得的权利。医生的表情是那么鲜明，或者说牧师对这种表情的感觉是那么强烈，以至在流星陨落，街道和万事万物似乎都化为乌有了以后，医生的表情似乎仍然浮现在黑暗里。

“赫斯特，那个人是谁？”迪默斯德尔十分恐惧，喘着气说，“我一看到他，就发抖！你认识这个人吗？赫斯特，我恨他！”

赫斯特想起了她的誓言，一言不发。

“我告诉你，见着他，我就忐忑不安！”牧师再次咕哝着说，“他是谁？他是谁？你一点儿也不能帮助我吗？我对这个人有一种无名的恐惧！”

“牧师，”小珠儿说，“我能告诉你，他是谁！”

“那就快说吧，孩子，”牧师边说边把他的耳朵凑近珠儿的小嘴，“快，你尽量低声说吧。”

珠儿在他的耳里咕噜着什么，听来确实像大人说的话，但又只是孩子们在一起逗乐时所说的那种莫名其妙的话。无论怎么说，即使其中包含有任何有关罗杰·奇林沃思老人的秘闻，但对于博学的牧师来说，也还是听不懂，只是徒然增加他内心的疑惑而已。这个淘气的孩子于是大笑起来。

“你是在骗我吧？”牧师问。

“你不敢——你不诚实，”孩子回答说，“你不肯答应我明天中午拉着我的手和我妈的手！”

“尊敬的先生，”医生接上话答道，他此刻已走近绞刑台下，“虔诚的迪默斯德尔先生！这能是你吗？喔喔，真是！我们都是读书人，头脑埋在书堆里，是需要人严密照料的。我们都是在醒的时候做梦，在做梦的时候走路。来，我亲爱的朋友，我求你，让我领你回家吧。”

“你怎么知道我在这里？” 牧师害怕地问。

“确实，” 罗杰·奇林沃思回答，“这件事，我一点儿也不知道，我晚上大部分时间消磨在尊敬的温思罗普州长床边，尽我的拙技减轻他的痛苦。他已上更美满的世界去了，我也就往回家的路上走，恰好这时天空中出现了那道奇光。尊敬的先生，我恳求你，跟我走吧，要不然，你明天就很难执行你安息日的职务了。哎呀，看啦，那些书本，把人的脑子都搞乱了！好先生，你该少看点儿书，玩一玩，要不然这种梦游症会加重的。”

“我跟你回家。” 迪默斯德尔先生说。

他像一个人从噩梦中惊醒一样，浑身乏力，神色沮丧，屈从于医生，让他领走了。

然而，第二天是安息日，青年牧师又去布道了。这次布道被认为是他从来未曾有过的、内容最丰富、最有说服力、最充满天赋的一次。据说，许多人都由于他那次讲道的效果而皈依了真理，并立誓此后要永远对迪默斯德尔先生感恩。但是，当他走下布道坛的台阶时却遇到了胡须斑白的教堂司事，他手中拿着一只黑手套，牧师一眼就认出了这是自己的手套。

“这件东西，” 司事说，“是今天早晨在那个对作恶者示众的绞刑台上拾到的。我认为，这是恶魔有意把它放在那里的，有心跟您开一个下流的玩笑。但是，的确，恶魔从来就是，并且总是有眼无珠和愚昧无知的。一只纯洁的手是不用戴手套的。”

“谢谢你，好朋友，” 牧师严肃地说，但心里不禁吃了一惊。他的记忆力是那么混乱，几乎把昨晚的事都看做是一场梦幻了，“对，好像是我的，真的！”

“既然恶魔认为偷走那手套是得当的，那么，您今后就不用戴手套了，”老司事冷冷地笑着说，“但是，您听说昨晚出现的怪事没有？据说天空出现了一个大红字——一个红A字。这个字我们认为是代表Angel（天使）。因为我们的好州长温思罗普昨晚升天做天使了，所以无疑要出个告示！”

“没有，”牧师回答，“我没有听到过。”

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第十三章 赫斯特的另一面

赫斯特·普琳在上次跟迪默斯德尔先生奇异会见中，看到牧师消瘦成那个样子，不禁大吃一惊。他的神经似乎完全错乱了。他的精力降到了比小孩还不如的地步。他看来已是无可奈何地一蹶不振了，尽管他的智力还保持着原有的能量，或者说兴许还平添了一分只有生病才可能有的那股病态劲儿。赫斯特·普琳知道一切局外人所不知道的许多情况，因而很容易推断出来，迪默斯德尔除了良心正常活动以外，还有一种可怕的局面要他去应付，并影响着他的健康和安宁。赫斯特·普琳知道这个可怜的、堕落的人的过去，在他胆颤心惊地向她——这个被遗弃的妇女——求助，以抵抗他本能地发觉的敌人时，她整个心灵都感动了。并且认为，他有权利得到最大的帮助。赫斯特在长期与世隔绝中，已不习惯于用自己身外的任何标准来衡量她的是非观念，她感到——或者似乎感到——她对牧师负有责任，此外对其他任何人，就是对全世界，她都没有责任了。把她同世上其他人联结在一起的纽带——无论是花线、丝线、金线或别的什么材料制成的纽带——都断了。但这儿却有着一个不论是

他或她都折不断的共同犯罪的铁环。这个铁环也跟其他一切连环扣一样，把它与其有关的一切义务都联结在一块儿了。

赫斯特·普琳此刻的境遇跟我们早先看到她示众时的情形不很相同。几年过去了，珠儿现在七岁了，她母亲胸前佩戴的那个红A字的奇异的花边依旧闪闪发光，但对镇民来说，已是司空见惯了。正如一个人虽然在社会上处于突出的地位，但同时却并不妨碍公众的利益和方便因而容易受到尊重一样，赫斯特·普琳最后也终于受到普遍的尊重了。人类本性中有一个值得赞扬的方面，那就是除了与个人利益发生冲突的地方以外，爱总是比恨来得快。只要不对原有的敌意继续增加新的刺激，恨甚至可以逐渐地、悄悄地转变成为爱。赫斯特·普琳就是这样，她既没有刺激人的地方，也没有令人厌恶的地方。她与世无争，毫无怨尤地忍受着人世的虐待。她不企求世人来补偿她所受的痛苦，也不希求世人的同情。此外，在她隔绝人世，忍辱负重的那些岁月中，她那一尘不染的纯洁的生活，也受到了世人的盛赞。在世人眼里，她现在再没有什么可丢失的东西，她不希望得到什么，也似乎不愿得到什么，这个可怜的彷徨者唯一真正关心的就是为善，以便由此返回正道。

还有一点有目共睹的，那就是赫斯特除了呼吸大家都有的空气和以她的双手辛勤劳动换来小珠儿和自己每日的食用以外，从不分享丝毫人世的特权，可是无论何时只要有人需要帮助，她就立即有求必应，把自己当做人类的同胞姐妹。谁也没有她那样慷慨地把自己本来就不多的东西满足每一个贫困者的需求；即使狠心的贫民对她经常送上门，或对她那双能做皇袍的手为他缝制衣服，报以嘲笑，她还是乐于相助。当城里发生瘟疫的时候，谁都没有赫斯特那种自我献身精神。的确，任何时候只要有灾难，不论是全体的，还是个人的，这个被社会遗弃的人总是赶去帮助。她不是作为一个客人而是作为一个正式的同屋人，进入遭难的家庭；房中阴郁的气氛似乎就是她认为有责任进去帮助自己同胞的媒介。在那儿，那刺绣的红A字，总是发

出神秘的微光，令人感到舒适。红A字在别的地方是罪恶的标志，但在这儿却是病室的一支小蜡烛。在病人垂危的时候，红A字还可超越时间界限，把它的微光照射到来世。当现世之光迅速暗淡，来世之光尚未到来之前，红A字能告诉病人，脚往哪儿迈。在这样危急的情况下，赫斯特的性情显得温和而淳厚，成了人类温柔的源泉，总是有求必应，取之不竭。她那带着耻辱标记的胸部，对于需要者来说，无异是一个柔软的枕头。她自命是一个慈善姐妹会的会员，或者毋宁说，是经过世人严肃的手这么任命的，尽管世人和她自己谁也没有料想到会有这么一个结果。红A字就是她助人的象征。她能这样助人——而且力量又是这样大，同情心又是这样强——以至许多人都不按原来的词义来解释红A字了。他们说，A字表示Able（有才能的）；赫斯特虽是一个妇女，但力量可大了。

只有这种黑暗的房间才能容纳她。当阳光再现时，她就不在那儿了。她的影子消失在门槛之外。这个助人为乐的自家人离开了，绝不回头看一下她曾如此热心为之服务的人们是否有任何发自内心的感激。她在街上遇见他们时，也从不抬起头来接受他们的致意。如果他们一定要走上前来跟她说话，她就把手指着红A字，走了过去。这也许是傲慢，但又是那样近乎谦卑，因而大家心里都只有谦卑这一品质所产生的柔和的感受。群情是不饶人的，当把一般的公正作为一种权利而对它要求过分时，那容易遭到拒绝；但是，如果采用暴君们所喜爱的方式，完全听凭他们的宽大为怀，那倒常可得到比公正还多的报偿。现在由于社会上把赫斯特·普琳的举止解释为这种性质的要求，所以人们都有意对这个过去的牺牲者报以比她所企求赐予的或比她所应得的更为仁慈的脸色。

那些社会的统治者、明智的和博学的人士，在认识赫斯特的优良品质上比一般人要晚一些。他们和一般人共有的偏见，被一种推理的铁栅栏禁锢住了，现在要冲破它就困难多了。然而，他们那敌对、僵硬的皱纹也在一天天舒展开来，到了适当的时

候，就可能表现出近乎仁慈的心肠了。那些有地位的人就是这样，这是因为他们位高职尊，有责任保护公共道德的缘故。可是在私下里，他们早已完全原谅了赫斯特·普琳的失足了。非但如此，他们还开始不再把红A字看作是罪恶的标记——她为此忍受了长期凄凉的苦行，而看做是她后来很多善行的标记。“你们见过那个戴刺绣标记的妇女吗？”他们往往这样对陌生人说，“那是我们的赫斯特——我们镇上自己的赫斯特——她对穷人那么乐善好施，对病人那么热心帮助，对苦恼人那么善于安慰！”诚然，人类性格中有个爱说别人隐私的癖好，这往往驱使他们把过去那些多年见不得阳光的丑事悄悄抖搂出来。然而，事实总归是事实，在那些爱飞短流长的人的眼里，红A字却具有修女胸前那个十字架一般的效力。这种效力赋予它的佩戴者一种神圣的不可侵犯性，使她能够安全渡过一切艰难险阻。她即使落在盗贼手中，这个标志也会使她平安无事。据说，并且有很多人信以为真，曾有一个印第安人用弓箭射过这标志，射中了，但是箭头落地，对她丝毫无害。

这个标志——或者毋宁说它所象征的社会地位——对赫斯特·普琳心灵的影响是很大的、特别的。她性格上一切轻盈、雅致的簇叶，已被火热的烙印烤得枯萎了，并早已脱落了，只剩下光秃秃的粗枝，也许使人看了反感，如果她有朋友和伴侣的话，那定会对这模样感到厌恶了。就连她身上的美也经历了同样的变化。这可能一方面是由于她有意穿着朴素，一方面是由于她的举止缺乏感情。她那茂密、华美的头发或者被剪掉，或者完全用帽子遮住，不让一丝金发暴露在阳光之下，这也是一个令人遗憾的变化。这是一部分原因。但更多的是由于别的什么原因，那就是赫斯特的脸上已不再有可资爱神回味的东西；她的体态虽然端正稳重，如同雕像一般，但已没有可供情爱之神做那紧紧拥抱的美梦的余地了；她的胸部也不再有爱慕之神安息之枕了。有些品质，她已经没有了，而保持这些品质正是她作为一个女性所必不可少的。可是，在一个妇女遭受和经历了一种特别严酷的生涯以后，她那女性的性格

和风貌就往往会有这样的命运和这样严峻的发展。如果她还完全柔情缱绻的话，那早就夭折了。如果她想幸存下去的话，要么是毁掉柔情，要么是让它深深钻入心中，再也不让它表露出来——这两者在表面上反正都是一样的。后者也许是最符合实际的一种看法。她曾经是一个妇女，现在虽不像妇女那样了，但只要变形的魔法加以点化，她在任何时候都会再度成为一个妇女。下面我们就会看到赫斯特·普琳是不是会在以后经历这么一番点化，经历这么一番变化。

赫斯特给人的印象是大理石般的冷漠，这大部分归于她的生活在很大程度上已由热情、温情转向沉思默念这一现状。赫斯特孑然一身地立足在世界上——孑然一身地在社会上无依无靠，只和由她指导和保护的小珠儿相依为命——她孑然一身地、毫无希望地挽回她的地位，即使她并未完全摈弃这种希望，但她已把那些与世联系的支离破碎的链条都扔掉了。人世的法律在她心里已不成其为法律了。那是人类才智刚刚解放的年代，比以往很多世以来都更为活跃，范围也更为宽广了。武人们推翻了贵族和帝王，比这更勇敢的人们推翻并重新整理了——不是在实际上，而是在理论范围以内，这是他们的最实际的立足点——古代偏见的整个体系，并与许多古代的道义联系在一起。赫斯特·普琳吸取了这一精神。她采取了自由思考的态度，这在当时大西洋彼岸是司空见惯的，但我们祖先要是知道了，那就会把它看做比红A字所打上烙印的罪恶还要致命的罪恶。在海滨那所赫斯特冷落的茅屋里，那种不敢进入新英格兰其他住宅的思想已经光顾她了。这个无形的客人，如果能清清楚楚看见它敲门的话，那对它的接待者来说，就会感到和恶魔一样危险了。

奇怪的是，最大胆思考的人们，常常能以最冷静的态度去适应社会的外部规律。这种思想能满足他们的需要，而无需变成有血有肉的行动。赫斯特看来就是这样。然而，要不是小珠儿从灵界来到她的身边，情况就可能大不一样了。她可能与安妮·哈钦森并驾齐驱，作为一个宗教教派的女奠基人，从历史上流传下来。她还可能在某

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那个时候成为一个女预言家。她还会并可能因为企图破坏清教徒制度的基础，而由当时严厉的清教徒法庭判处死刑。但是，由于她把心放在孩子的教育上，因而这个母亲的思想热情才有了宣泄之所。而上帝则以那个小女孩为代表，将女性的幼芽和蓓蕾交给赫斯特负责，并由她在重重困难中加以抚育和培养。万事万物跟她作对。这个世界一直对她抱有敌意。孩子性格乖张，这说明孩子生错了人家——她是她母亲非法的感情冲动的产物——因而常常迫使赫斯特痛苦地扪心自问，这个可怜的小人儿的出生到底是好还是坏。

实际上，她心中常常出现有关整个妇女的那同样不得其解的问题。即使是最幸福的妇女，是不是就值得生存呢？至于她个人的生存，她早已断然持否定的态度，并已解决而不予考虑了。像男人一样爱好思索，虽然可使女人安静，却使她忧虑。她也许看出了摆在她面前的任务是如此渺茫无望。第一步是必须破坏整个社会体系，而重新加以改建。另外，男人的本性或者那本性长期遗传下来的习惯，现在业已成了类似天经地义的东西，也必须加以根本改造，然后妇女才能够得到公平的、适当的地位。最后，其他一切困难即使都解决了，妇女也还是不能坐享这些初步改革的成果，除非她们自己来一个脱胎换骨的变化，其中连她那最真实的生命所赖以生存的微妙的精髓，也都要升华殆尽。一个女性不论怎么绞尽脑汁也不能解决这些问题。如果说赫斯特碰巧最先想到了解决的办法，那么这些问题早就不存在了。因此，赫斯特·普琳由于她的心失去了有规律的、健康的跳动，便只有在黑暗的心灵的迷宫中茫无头绪地徘徊。有时遇着不可逾越的悬崖峭壁而绕行，有时碰到万丈深渊而折回。她的周围全是荒凉、恐怖的景象，没有一个归宿和安乐的地方。有时，有一种可怕的疑虑占有了她的心灵，是否最好把珠儿立即送上天去，她自己走向“永恒的判官”所指定的那个未来的世界里去？

红A字到此还没有完成它的职责。

然而，自从她在牧师迪默斯德尔先生守夜那天晚上跟他会面以后，给她提出了一个新的思考题，并促使她去达到一个目的，为此值得她全力以赴，不惜任何牺牲。她亲眼看到牧师在极端痛苦之下奋力挣扎的痛苦，或者更准确地说，他已挣扎得筋疲力尽了。她看到，迪默斯德尔即使没有全疯，也已到了要疯的边缘。毫无疑问，无论悔恨的暗刺刺得他多么痛苦，但有一种更为致命的毒液已经由那只替他治病的手注射到他身上了。一个秘密的敌人伪装成朋友和帮助者一直跟在他身旁，利用这种机会，搞乱了他本性中那些纤细的活力。赫斯特不禁扪心自问，她自己是不是在诚挚、勇敢和忠实这几方面本来就有缺陷，因而使牧师陷入了一种凶多吉少的境地。她唯一认为正当的是，她看出除了默认罗杰·奇林沃思的伪装计划以外，就没有别的法子可以援救他免于遭受比她更严重的毁灭。就在这一念头之下，她做出了自己的抉择，现在看来，她当时所选择的也许是两者之中比较坏的一种。她决定尽可能弥补她的错误。她因多年艰难严峻生活的磨炼而变得坚强起来，不再像当年那个晚上在牢房里跟罗杰·奇林沃思谈话时那样穷于应付。那时她因犯罪而抬不起头来，因受辱而半疯半癫。她从那时起攀登到了一个更高的顶点。另一方面，这个老人为了报复，也不惜同她平起平坐，或屈尊俯就。

赫斯特·普琳最后决定去见她以前的丈夫，尽她的力量来营救显然被他抓住不放牺牲品。

时机不久就找到了。一天下午，她带着珠儿在半岛的一个幽静的地方散步，就在这时她看见那个老医生一只手臂挎着篮子，一只手拿着手杖，俯身在地，寻找药草。

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第十四章 赫斯特和医生

赫斯特吩咐小珠儿到海边去拾贝壳和缠结海草玩，等着她跟那边一个采药老人谈一会儿话以后再回来。于是孩子像小鸟一般飞去了。她光着两只洁白的小脚，沿着湿漉漉的海边，啪嗒啪嗒地走着。珠儿东跑跑西跳跳，最后在一处停了下来，好奇地窥视着退潮时留下来的一个水潭，把它当做镜子照着自己的脸孔。水潭之中有一个小女孩的影像，一头黑黝黝的闪闪发光的卷发，两眼里含着淘气的微笑，向外望着珠儿。珠儿没有其他玩伴，就抬手邀她一同赛跑。但是，那个影中女孩也同样抬手，似乎在说：“这儿更好玩！你上水潭里来吧！”珠儿于是一脚踏进去，有半腿那么深，只见自己两只洁白的脚踩在水底下，同时，在更深的地方，有几丝闪动的微笑在晃动的水中来回漾动。

与此同时，珠儿的母亲走到医生跟前同他攀谈起来。

“我要跟你说一句话，”她说，“一句跟我们关系重大的话。”

“哎呀！是赫斯特夫人有话要对我这个罗杰·奇林沃思老头说吗？”他从弯腰的姿势中直起身来，“十分欢迎！唷，太太，我从各个方面听到有关你的好消息！赫斯特太太，就在昨晚，一个长官，一个明智而神圣的人物谈论到你的事，并低声对我说，议会中讨论了你的问题。讨论的问题是，去掉你胸前那个红A字是不是有碍公共的利益。赫斯特，我以生命担保，我恳求过尊敬的长官立即把它去掉！”

“现在撤去这个标志已不取决于长官们的高兴不高兴了，”赫斯特镇静地回答道，“如果我有资格去掉它，它自会掉落的，或者转变成不同意义的东西。”

“好吧，如果它对你更合适，那就戴着吧，”医生回答说，“关于妇女身上的装

饰，必须遵从她自己的爱好。这个字母绣得很华丽，戴在你胸上看来也很华丽！”

整个谈话过程中，赫斯特一直注视着老人，看到他在这过去的七年中所发生的变化，既震惊又惶恐。这并不主要是因为他变老了，虽然年龄增长的痕迹历历可见，但他是经得住老的，并似乎保持了矍铄的精力和警觉。然而，她记得最清楚的是他以往那种有知识、有学问的人所具有的平静、安详的样子，现在都已消失殆尽了，继之而起的是一种急切探求，近乎残忍而又小心提防的神情。用微笑来掩饰这种表情，似乎是他的愿望和意图。但这种微笑出卖了他，滑稽地在他脸上时隐时现，因而使旁观者更能看清他的阴险，时不时地还有一线红光从他的眼中冒出来；似乎老人的心灵着了火，胸内一直冒着黑烟，直到偶尔由于一阵热情勃发，才吐出一股倏忽即逝的火焰。但他赶紧把这股火焰压住，极力装作没事一般。

总而言之，罗杰·奇林沃思老人是一个凡人能够把自己变成魔鬼的惊人的证明。只要他愿意，他就可以在适当的时候承担起魔鬼的职务。这个不幸的人由于七年来一直专心致志于分析那颗充满痛苦的心，以便从中取乐，并且给他所分析到的和幸灾乐祸地观察到的他人那些痛苦上再火上加油，这才把自己变成了现在这个样子。

红A字在赫斯特·普琳的胸前像火一般燃烧着。这又是一次堕落，其责任有一部分要归因于她。

“你在我脸上看到什么啦？”医生问，“有什么东西值得你那么认真地看？”

“如果还有什么辛酸的眼泪的话，我看到了一种使我痛哭的东西，”她回答说，“但是随它去吧！我要谈的是那个悲惨的人。”

“他怎么样？”罗杰·奇林沃思叫道，似乎很喜欢这个话题，很高兴有机会跟唯一的知己讨论它，“赫斯特夫人，说老实话，我的思想此刻正忙着想这位先生呢，你就

直率地说吧，我乐意回答。”

“上次我们一块儿谈话，”赫斯特说，“到现在已七年了，当时是你执意强求我对你我以前的关系严守秘密。因为那个人的生命和声誉都在你手里，所以我除了根据你的命令保持沉默外，别无选择。然而，我这样约束自己，是顾虑重重的，因为我已抛弃了对其他人的一切义务，只剩下了对他的一项义务；并且老有什么东西悄悄对我说，我由于保证遵守你的命令而背弃了那一义务。打那天以后，谁也没有像你那样跟他接近。他走一步你跟一步，无论是睡觉和行动，你都和他形影不离。你在搜索他的思想，你在挖他的心，你在使他内心痛苦！你掌握了他的生命，你使他一天天活活地死去，可他还不知道是你在害他。我要是容许你这么做，那我就确实是欺骗了那唯一的一个我尚能对他忠实的人！”

“你还有什么选择呢？”罗杰·奇林沃思问，“只要我的指头指着那个人，就可以把他从讲道坛上扔到地牢里，或者再从地牢里扔到绞刑台上！”

“这样更好！”赫斯特·普琳说。

“我对这个人干了什么坏事吗？”罗杰·奇林沃思又一次问道，“赫斯特·普琳，我告诉你，我对这个可怜的牧师的医护，就是用帝王们历来给医生的最高奖赏也买不到！要不是我的帮助，他在和你犯罪以后的头两年内，早在痛苦中一命呜呼了。赫斯特，这是因为他的精神缺乏像你那种坚韧不拔的毅力，足以承受你的红A字那样的重压。哦，我能够揭露一个很大的秘密！但是，算了！凡是医术上能够做到的，我都为他尽力了。他现在还能在地球上活着和爬动，都得归功于我！”

“他不如马上死去更好！”赫斯特·普琳说。

“对，妇道人家，你说得不错！”罗杰·奇林沃思老人叫道，让他心中的烈火在赫斯

特的眼前冒了出来，“他不如马上死去更好！从没有人忍受过他这种痛苦。而且一切的一切都是在他的死敌眼前忍受！他已经意识到我了。他感到有一种势力像祸根一样老缠绕着他。他由某种灵感——造物主从没有造过一个像他那样敏感的人——得知有一只并非友谊的手在拨弄他的心弦，他还知道，有一双眼睛在奇怪地注视着他，并且仅仅是为了寻找罪孽，而且果然把它找到了。但是，他不知道，那双眼睛和那只手都是我的！他具有他这一职业的人所共有的迷信观念，总以为自己已被送给了恶魔，要遭受种种折磨，诸如可怕的噩梦啦，绝望的想法啦，悔恨的痛苦啦和对赦罪的绝望啦等等；并认为这是死后等待他的东西的先兆。其实，那是我常在他身边的影子——也就是那个被他极为卑鄙地伤害了的人的最密切的近亲——我活着只是为了施放最可怕的复仇的烈药！对，的确——他没有错——一个恶魔就在他身边！一个从前有着人心的凡人，现在却变成了一个专门折磨他的恶魔！”

这个不幸的医生当他说出这些话时，带着恐怖的神色，举起了他的双手，仿佛他看见了一个可怕的为他所不认识的影子取代了他自己在镜子里的影子。这是一瞬间的事——有时几年中才有一次——此时一个人的精神面貌可以忠实地展现在他的心底里。很可能，他从没有像现在这样看自己。

“你没有把他折磨够吗？”赫斯特注视着老人的表情说，“他还没有偿还完你的债吗？”

“没有，没有！他只不过在增加债务而已！”医生回答说。当他继续说下去时，态度已不那么凶狠了，而是逐渐变得阴沉起来。“赫斯特，你记得九年前的我吗？即使那时也是我生命的秋天，而且还不是初秋。但是，我的整个生活是在认真、好学、沉思、平静的岁月中度过的。这些岁月我都忠实地用在增长我的学识上，也忠实地用在增进人类的幸福上，虽然后一目的只不过是同前一目的的不谋而合。没有

一个人的生活比我更平和、更清白的了。也很少有人的生活像我这样得到这么多的好处。你还记得我吗？虽然你可能认为我冷酷，但我不是一个为他人着想，很少为自己考虑的人吗？一个和善、忠实、公正的人吗？一个情感即使并不热烈却是坚贞的人吗？我难道不完全是这样吗？”

“完全是这样，而且还不止这些呢。” 赫斯特说。

“我现在怎么样？” 他望着赫斯特的脸孔追问道，一任自己内心的整个邪恶通通表现在自己的脸上。“我告诉过你，我是一个什么样的人！是一个恶魔！可是，是谁把我弄成这样的呢？”

“是我！” 赫斯特发抖地叫道，“是我，一点儿也不逊于他。你为什么不向我报仇？”

“我已让你戴红A字了，” 罗杰·奇林沃思回答说，“如果这个东西还不能为我报仇，那我就没有别的法子了！”

他用手指点着红A字，笑了笑。

“它已为你报仇了。” 赫斯特·普琳回答说。

“我也是这样认为，” 医生说，“至于那个人，你现在希望我怎么办？”

“我一定要揭发这个秘密，” 赫斯特坚定地回答，“他总有一天会看出你的真面目。后果如何，我不得而知。但是，我是他的祸根，是我毁灭了他，我欠他的这笔信任的宿债，最后得由我来偿还。至于他的名望，他在人世的地位，甚至他的生命，所有这些是存是毁，就全操在你手里了。红A字已把我锻炼得明白了真理，虽然那是火红的烙铁烙在我心灵里的真理，我也并不觉得他再过这种可怕的空虚的生活

有什么好处，因而需要我屈身乞求你的慈悲。你对他，爱怎么办就怎么办吧。其实这对他对我对你都没有什么好处。对小珠儿也没有什么好处。这儿并没有一条道路能够引导我们走出这个黑洞洞的迷宫。”

“妇道人家呀，我几乎要可怜你了，”罗杰·奇林沃思说着，禁不住发出一阵赞叹声，因为在赫斯特所表现的绝望中，有一种近乎崇高的品质。“你有一种伟大的素质。如果你能早一些得到比你我之间更美好的爱情，也许那件丑事就不会发生了。我惋惜你的好品质由于你的任性而糟蹋掉了。”

“我也可怜你，”赫斯特·普琳回答说，“因为恨而使一个贤明、正直的人变成了一个恶魔。你愿意清洗它，重新变为一个人吗？即使不是为了他，也是为了你自己。你饶了他，让那有惩罚权力的神灵再去惩罚他吧。我刚说过，那对他，对你或对我都没有好处，我们都一块儿在阴暗的罪恶的迷宫里徘徊，我们每走一步，都要被我们在自己道路上所造的罪孽所绊倒。其实也并非都如此。这可能对你，对你一个人有好处，因为你深受伤害，你有宽恕之权。你愿意放弃这仅有的特权吗？你愿意舍弃这无法估价的利益吗？”

“不要说了，赫斯特，不要说了！”老人阴郁而严肃地回答道，“上天并没有允许我去宽恕人。我没有如你说的那种权力。我早就忘了的老信仰又回到了我的身边，它会解释我们的所作所为和我们所受的一切痛苦。由于你第一步走歪了道，种下了祸根，此后一切就都必然是灰溜溜的了。你们过去伤害了我，我不怪罪，说怪罪，那只是一种象征性的假象。我也并不像恶魔，只不过是履行了魔鬼的职务。这是我们的命运。让那朵黑花尽情地开放吧。现在你走你的路，随你的意去跟那个人打交道吧。”

他挥挥手，又去采药了。

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第十五章 赫斯特和珠儿

就这样，罗杰·奇林沃思——一个畸形的老人，他的脸孔时常浮现在人们的记忆里，久久不能忘怀——向赫斯特·普琳告辞了，弯着腰往前走去。他到处采药草、挖草根，把它放进挎在手上的篮子里。当他为了采药匍匐而行时，那灰白的胡子几乎碰着了地面。赫斯特在他的身后凝视了一会儿，怀着一种大半是古怪的好奇心望着，看看早春的嫩草是不是在他的脚下踩坏了，以及当他穿过那一片喜人的翠绿时，是不是会现出一行枯黄的弯弯曲曲的足迹。她纳闷，那是什么样的药草，使老人这么用心去采集。大地是否由于同情他的眼睛，立起坏心而在他手指下突然生出一种从未有过的毒草来迎合他的心意？或者为了满足他的需要，一切有益的草木是否经他一触摸，就会变成有害的、带毒的东西？灿烂地普照一切的阳光，是不是真正照在他身上了呢？或者无论他往哪儿走，是不是都似乎有一圈不祥的阴影跟随着他那畸形的身躯？他现在要到哪儿去呢？他会不会突然钻入地下，只留下一块贫瘠、荒芜的土地，等到适当时候，就可以看到那致命的颠茄、山朱萼、天仙子或别的什么有毒的植物，在宜于生长的气候下，一股脑儿厌恶地丛生出来？或者他会不会生出蝙蝠的翅膀，向着天空高高飞腾，飞得越高就越显得丑恶？

“无论这是不是罪过，”赫斯特·普琳仍然望着他的背影含恨地说，“我恨这个人！”

赫斯特很不满意自己这种情感，但她又不能克服它或削弱它。她虽然试图这么做，

但又想起了远方故土上那些久已逝去了的岁月。那时这个人常在黄昏时分从僻静的书房中走出来，在炉火的火光中和婚后她的微笑中坐下享一享家庭之乐。他说需要用这种微笑来温暖自己，以便驱除他那学者心中长时间独自钻研书本的凉意。这样的情景在过去不能不算是幸福的，但是现在赫斯特通过她后来那一段凄凉的生活看出，这种情景对她来说却是最不光彩的回忆了。她奇怪，怎么会出现这样的情景！她奇怪，她怎么会愿意跟他结婚！赫斯特认为，她最应后悔的罪过是她接受了并且回握了他那不冷不热的握手，还容忍了自己唇边上和眼角上的微笑同他的微笑混合和溶化在一起。那时赫斯特还不怎么懂事，罗杰·奇林沃思就极力说服她，使她感到生活在他身边是幸福的，奇林沃思所犯的这一罪过，看来比别人后来对她所犯的任何罪过都要更为卑劣。

“是的，我恨他！”赫斯特比以前更悲痛地重复说，“他欺骗了我！他对我的过错比我对他的过错更大更重！”

让那些得到了女子同意结婚的男人们忐忑不安吧，除非他们与此同时还得到了女性心中最高尚的感情。否则，当某种比他们更有吸引力的接触唤起她的全部感情时，他们就会像罗杰·奇林沃思一样，遭到可悲的命运，即使他们把平静的满足、幸福的大理石雕像当做温暖的现实来欺骗她，也要遭到谴责。但是，赫斯特早就应该改正这种不公正的态度了。这是什么意思呢？难道在红A字折磨下长长的七年，还没有使她受够痛苦的打击，还不足以使她幡然悔悟吗？

赫斯特站着凝视罗杰·奇林沃思老人弯曲的身影时那一瞬间的思绪，在她的心上投下了一道暗光，从而暴露了她许多自己都不承认的想法。

罗杰·奇林沃思走了，她把孩子叫回来。

“珠儿！小珠儿！你在哪里？”

兴致勃勃的珠儿，当她的母亲跟采药老人谈话时，正玩得很高兴。如上所述，起先她是想入非非地同水潭中自己的倒影逗着玩，招手让它出来。但由于影子谢绝出来，她就自己另找路子，打算进入那个不可捉摸的天地。然而，很快珠儿就发现，她或者那倒影总有一个是假的，于是就转向别的更好玩的地方去了。她用白桦树皮做了很多小船，装上螺壳，然后送往大海，上面的冒险货物比任何一个新英格兰商人的都要多。但是，大部分船只在离岸不远的地方就沉没了。她抓住了一只活鲑鱼的尾巴，捕捉了几只海星，还把一只水母放在烈日下晒化了。接着，珠儿抓起那潮水边上的白沫，对着微风掷去，于是白沫变成朵朵大雪花，她赶紧飞跑向前，想在那雪花没有落地之前就把它抓住。就在这时，这个顽皮的孩子看到一群海鸟沿着岸边觅取食物和拍打翅膀，就又拾满一围裙小卵石，由这一块岩石溜到那一块岩石，爬到那些小海鸟的身后，非常机敏地连连用石子打它们。有一只白肚小灰鸟被一个石子击中，带着负伤的翅膀飞走了。于是那个调皮的孩子叹了口气，放弃了这一游戏，因为她伤害了一只像海风一样任意吹拂、像珠儿自己一样任性的小动物，而使她感到悲伤。

珠儿最后的玩兴是采集各种海草，给自己编了一条围巾或者一件披风和一个头饰，就这样把自己装扮成一个小美人鱼的样子。她继承了母亲设计帐帘和服装的才能。作为美人鱼装束最后的点缀，珠儿采来一些大叶藻，并尽力仿做了一个她所熟悉的母亲胸前的那种装饰，将它装点在自己的胸前。那是一个字母——一个A字——但不是红色的，而是嫩绿色的！孩子把下颊低垂在胸前，怪有兴趣地凝视着这一设计，似乎她来到这人世唯一的目的，就是要弄清楚它秘而不宣的含意。

“我不知道，母亲会不会问我，这是什么意思？”珠儿想道。

正好这时她听到母亲的声音，于是她就像一只小海鸟那样轻盈地飞到赫斯特·普琳的面前，跳呀、笑呀的，用手指着她胸前的装饰。

“我的小珠儿，”赫斯特沉默了一会儿之后说，“这个绿字，在你这孩子的胸上没有意思。我的孩子，你知道，你的母亲命中注定要戴的这个字母是什么意思吗？”

“知道，母亲，”孩子说，“这是一个大A字。你在识字课本上教过我了。”

赫斯特目不转睛地注视着孩子的脸孔。虽然在珠儿那双黝黑的眼睛里，有着她经常看到的那种奇异的表情，但她不能确信，珠儿是否真正懂得了这个标志的含义。她怀着一种病态的心愿，想要探明这一点。

“孩子，你知道吗？你母亲为什么要戴这个字母？”

“我当然知道！”珠儿伶俐地望着母亲的脸孔回答说，“这跟牧师把手放在他的胸前是同样的原因！”

“那是什么原因？”赫斯特对孩子荒唐无稽的看法半带微笑地问道，但一转念，脸色就变白了，“这个字母除跟我的心相连以外，跟别人的心有什么关系吗？”

“不知道。母亲，我知道的，全告诉你了，”珠儿说，比她平常说话更为严肃，“去问问你刚才跟他谈话的那位老人吧！也许他能告诉你。但是，亲爱的妈妈，说句老实话，红A字到底是什么意思呢？你为什么要把它戴在你胸前？牧师又为什么把他的手放在胸上？”

珠儿双手握着母亲的一只手，以她不受拘束的、任性的性格中所罕见的诚挚心情望着母亲的双眼。赫斯特心头一动，孩子可能真是想以她幼稚的信任来寻求亲近，并且尽她的所能和尽她的智力所知来建立一种相互的同情。这显示出了珠儿不同寻常

的一面。直到这时，母亲尽管以慈爱的心肠热爱着孩子，但一面也告诫自己不要希望那飘拂无定的四月的微风会有什么好报，因为这种微风只是轻飘飘地消磨时光，它生就一阵阵不可理解的热情，并在心境最好的时候使性子，而当你把它抱到怀里时，就常常是凉多暖少了。它为了弥补自己不端的行为，往往会出于模模糊糊的目的，用一种令人疑虑的柔情蜜意来吻你的脸颊，并轻轻地抚摸你的头发，然后又飘荡去了，只在你的心中留下一种梦也似的欢乐。而且这还只是母亲对孩子本性的一种评价。要是别人，也许就只能看到不好的东西，并把这些东西涂成一团漆黑。但是，此刻赫斯特心中有一个牢固的看法，珠儿明显的早熟和敏感可能已经到了这样的年龄，就是她可以成为一个朋友了，并能尽量分担母亲的忧愁而对母女俩任何一方都不会不以诚相待了。在珠儿那小小的混混沌沌的性格中，可以看到出现了——并从一开始就可能有了——很多坚定的原则，其中包括无畏的勇气，不受约束的意志，可以训练成为自尊心的坚强的自信和对于经过考察即可发现其中谬误的许许多多事物所采取的轻蔑态度。她也有情感，虽然直到这时还是辛辣的、不受人欢迎的，就像未成熟的果子中那最生涩的味道一般。赫斯特想，有了这些优良的品质，这个淘气的孩子如果还长不成一个高尚的妇女的话，那她从自己那儿继承的弊病也就的确太大了。

珠儿死死抱住红A字这个谜不放。这一癖好看来是她与生俱来的本性。打从她一懂事起，就开始琢磨这件事，把它作为一项特定的使命。赫斯特常常想，上天赋予这个孩子这一鲜明的癖好，必有一个善恶报应的意图。但是，直到此时她还从没有想到要问一问，同这个意图相连的，是否还有一个乐善好施的用意。要是不把小珠儿看做一个人间的孩子，而看做一个神灵的使者，对她以诚相待和予以信任的话，那么她能否承担起这样的使命，即减轻那郁积在母亲心头的悲哀并将它埋入坟墓以及帮助母亲去克服那一度疯狂，就连现在也还没有平息或休眠而只是禁锢在那和坟墓一

般的心中的激情呢？

这些就是翻腾在赫斯特心头的思想，印象非常鲜明，就好像真有人在她耳边这么说一样。珠儿这时一直在母亲身旁，双手拉着母亲的手，脸朝上望着母亲，一而再，再而三地提出下面这些寻根问底的问题。

“妈妈，这个字母是什么意思？你为什么要戴它？牧师为什么要把手放在胸口上？”

“我怎么说呢？”赫斯特暗自寻思道，“不！如果这是取得孩子同情的代价，我是付不起的。”

她于是大声说。

“傻珠儿，”她说，“这是一些什么问题呀？世界上有许多东西，孩子是不应该问的。牧师的心，我怎么知道？至于红A字，我戴它是因为它的金线好看。”

在以往的整个七年中，赫斯特·普琳从没有对她胸前的标志说过假话。那可能是因为有有一个严厉的、却是守护的神灵在监护的缘故，现在这个守护神把她抛弃了，因为神灵认识到，不管对她的心如何严格看守，仍然是有新的邪恶钻进来，或者说旧的邪恶就根本没有驱逐出去。至于小珠儿，她那热切的神色也就很快从脸上消失了。

但是，孩子并不甘心放下这件事情。当母亲和她一路回家时，当她们吃饭时，以及当赫斯特让她上床睡觉时，她都要问两三次，甚至在她眼看就要睡着了的时候，也要问一次，仰头望着，一双黑眼睛闪出淘气的神色。

“妈妈，”她说，“红A字是什么意思？”

第二天早上，孩子醒来第一个表示，就是突然从枕头上抬起头来问另一个问题。她这个问题跟盘问红A字令人不解地纠缠在一起。

“妈妈！妈妈！牧师为什么把手放在胸口上？”

“住嘴，淘气的孩子！”母亲以她过去从未有过的粗暴回答说，“别缠着我，要不然，我就把你关进暗室！”

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第十六章 林中漫步

赫斯特·普琳不顾现在会遭受什么样的痛苦或将来会有什么样的后果，她一直立意要把那个假心假意跟迪默斯德尔先生密切往来的人的真实身份告诉他。她知道，牧师习惯于沿着半岛海岸或者在邻近乡村的小山上作沉思默想的散步，可是几天来她始终没能找到一个跟他说话的机会。其实，如果赫斯特到他的书房里去拜访他，这对牧师圣洁的好名誉是并不会引起什么流言蜚语，也不会有什么危害的，因为在此以前就有许多悔罪的人到他那里去忏悔，其罪行也许跟红A字所表示的同样深重。然而，一方面由于赫斯特害怕罗杰·奇林沃思老人秘密或公开的干涉；一方面由于她多心，对别人万万想不到的地方也怀疑；还有一方面是由于牧师和她两个人促膝谈心需要一个宽阔的天地，以呼吸新鲜空气，就是由于这种种原因，她不想在任何狭小的密室里而想在野外跟他相会。

最后，由于赫斯特到一个病人家去帮忙，牧师迪默斯德尔先生也曾被邀请到那儿去

做过祷告，她这才得知牧师已于前天到他那些印第安人的信徒中去拜访使徒埃利奥特了。他可能在明天下午某个时候回来。因此，第二天赫斯特准时带着珠儿——不管有她在时如何不便，可她总是母亲出门时必带的跟班——出发了。

母女俩从半岛到大陆上所走的那条路，只是一条人行小径。小径向前蜿蜒，通向神秘的原始森林。森林把小路夹得紧紧的，使它显得又窄又黑，两旁浓荫如盖，只在上空隐隐约约露出一线天空，这对赫斯特的心境来说，就仿佛是她多年来所徘徊的道德原野一般。这天天气寒冷而阴沉。头顶上是一片浩渺的灰云，然而有微风轻拂，因此忽隐忽现的阳光时不时地独自在小径上闪现。这种一掠而过的欢快情景，总是出现在林中尽头更远的地方。当母女俩走近时，那欢闹的阳光——在这阴沉为主的日子和情景中，至多也是有气无力的欢闹——就缩回去了。她们满以为阳光照射的地方是明朗的，可哪知更沉闷了。

“妈妈，”小珠儿说，“阳光不爱你，因为它怕你胸上的东西，所以跑开了，藏起来了。瞧，你瞧，它又在远处玩着呢，你站在这儿，让我跑过去，把它抓住。我大不了是个孩子，它不会躲开我的，因为我胸前什么东西也没有戴！”

“我的孩子，我希望你永远什么也不要戴。”

“妈妈，为什么不戴呢？”珠儿刚要跑，又停下来问，“等我长成大人以后，不是自然而然要戴吗？”

“孩子，快跑，”她的母亲回答说，“抓住阳光！它马上就要跑掉了。”

珠儿飞快跑去，赫斯特微笑地望着。她真抓住了阳光，站在阳光之中笑着，全身被灿烂的阳光照射得闪闪发亮，并由于她活蹦乱跳而光彩夺目。阳光对这个孤独的孩子流连忘返，仿佛喜欢这么一个同伴似的，一直到她母亲快要走近，也几乎步入了

这个迷人的圈子，这才离去。

“阳光眼看就要离去了。” 珠儿摇着头说。

“瞧！” 赫斯特笑着说，“只要我一伸手，就能抓住一些。”

当她试图着这样做的时候，太阳消失得无影无踪了。或者说，从珠儿脸上那光亮的神色来看，她母亲也许会认为，是孩子把阳光吸到肚里去了，而当她们进入更阴暗的树荫中时，又会再吐出来，射出一线光明照亮着她的道路。再也没有一种东西能如此深深地打动母亲的心，使她意识到珠儿天性中竟有一股像这种永不衰竭的精神力量一样的、崭新的、并非来自遗传的生命力。珠儿没有悲伤的毛病，这一点，近来几乎所有的孩子，都要从他们祖先的病痛中连同淋巴腺结核一块儿继承过来。这或许也是一种疾病，但它是一种桀骜不驯的力量的反映。赫斯特在生珠儿以前，就曾用这种力量抵抗过痛苦。这是一种令人莫名其妙的魅力，使孩子的性格闪耀出一种坚强的、金属般的光泽。她需要——一些人一生都需要——有一种忧伤感，以便能深深打动她的心，从而赋予她以人性和同情心。但是，对于珠儿来说，这点还来日方长呢。

“来吧，我的孩子！” 赫斯特说着，从珠儿仍站在有阳光的那个地方打量着她，“我们在树林里坐一会儿，休息休息。”

“我不累，妈妈，” 小女孩回答，“要是你给我讲个故事，那我就坐下来。”

“讲个故事，孩子！” 赫斯特说，“讲什么呢？”

“噢，讲那个黑鬼的故事吧，” 珠儿扯着母亲的衣服回答说，半认真半淘气地望着母亲的脸孔，“他是怎么出没在这片森林里的，身边又是怎么带着那么一本名册的

——一本又大又沉，用铁夹装订的名册，这个丑恶的黑鬼是怎么把他的名册和铁笔交给他在林中所遇到的任何一个人的，这些人又是怎么用自己的鲜血写自己的名字的？然后，这个黑鬼又是怎么在他们的胸前打上记号的！妈妈，你遇到过这个黑鬼吗？”

“珠儿，是谁告诉你这个故事的？”她母亲问，因为她认识到这是当时流行的一种迷信。

“这是昨晚你去看护的那个炉边的老妇人讲的。”孩子说，“她讲呀讲，还以为我睡着了呢。她说有成千上万的人在那儿遇见过黑鬼，并在他的名册上签过名，让他们在他们身上打过记号。那个脾气挺坏的妇人希宾斯老夫人就是其中一个。妈妈，那老妇人说，这个红A字就是那个黑鬼打在你身上的标志。她还说，当你午夜在这黑暗的森林里遇到那黑鬼时，红A字就是一团红色的火焰闪闪发光。妈妈，这是真的吗？你晚上去见他吗？”

“你什么时候醒来，发觉你妈出去了呢？”赫斯特问。

“我记不起来了，”孩子说，“要是你怕留我在小屋里，你就带我一块儿去吧。我非常高兴去！但是，妈妈，你现在就得告诉我！有这样一个黑鬼吗？你见过他吗？那是他打的标记吗？”

“要是我告诉了你，你能让我安静吗？”她问。

“能，如果你全告诉我的话，”珠儿回答说。

“我生平有一次遇到过这个黑鬼！”她的母亲说，“这个红A字就是他打的标志！”

她们就这样边谈边走进森林深处，以躲过林中小路上那偶尔过往的行人的耳目。现

在母女俩在一片茂密的地衣上坐了下来。这儿，在上一个世纪的某一个时期曾有过一颗巨大的松树，它的根和干为浓树荫所遮蔽，树顶高耸云天。她们坐的地方是一处幽谷，两边各有一个逐渐升高的覆盖了落叶的斜坡，中间有一条小河流过，河底沉积着落叶。树木长在陡峭的幽谷上面，不时掉下一些树枝来，堵住流水，使一些地方成了漩涡和黑潭。有几段水流得较快、较欢的地方，则成了一条溪流，里面有卵石，有褐色和闪光的沙子。沿着河流的流向举目望去，在森林内不远的地方，能够看到河水的反光，但是小河在树干和矮树丛的扑朔迷离的交织之下，很快就消失得无影无踪了，只见处处是长满灰色地衣的巨石。看来所有这些巨树和花岗岩巨石有意要让这条小河的河道变得神秘莫测，因为它们也可能害怕那喋喋不休的小河会讲出它所发源的老林的隐情，或者是把它的秘密反映在水潭中那平坦的水面上。的确，当小河偷偷向前流去时，又继续发出潺潺的响声，这声音柔和、平静、从容，但是郁郁寡欢，好像一个没有尝过逗笑滋味就度过了婴儿期的小孩的声音。他不知道怎样在悲伤的熟人和阴暗的事物中取得欢乐。

“小河啊！愚蠢、讨厌的小河啊！”珠儿听了一会儿小河的声音以后叫道，“你为什么这么悲伤？打起精神来，不要成天叹息和嘟哝。”

但是，小河在林中度过的短短的一生，有过严峻的经历，不能不加以叙述，似乎除此以外，就没有别的可说了。珠儿也好似这条小河，她的生命的激流也是从同样神秘的泉源中涌出来的，并流过了同样充满阴郁的环境。但是，珠儿又不像这条小河，她一路上总是跳呀，乐呀，轻松愉快地说着孩子气的话。

“妈妈，这条悲伤的小河在说什么呀？”她问。

“如果你有悲哀，小河就会跟你诉说的。”她的母亲回答说，“也正如小河跟我诉说我的悲哀一样。但是珠儿，你听，我此刻听见小路上有脚步声，听见有人拨开树

枝的声音。我要你自己玩儿去，让我跟那边走来的人谈谈话。”

“是那个黑鬼吗？”珠儿问。

“孩子，你愿意去玩吗？”她的母亲重复说，“但不要在林子里走远，迷了路，注意我一叫你，你就来。”

“是，妈妈，”珠儿回答说，“不过，如果他是那个黑鬼，你愿不愿让我等一会儿，看看他腋下挟着的那本大名册呢。”

“去，傻孩子！”母亲不耐烦地说，“他不是什么黑鬼。你现在就可以透过树丛看到他。那是牧师。”

“正是他，”孩子说，“妈妈，他还把手放在胸口上呢。这是不是因为牧师在名册上签名时，黑鬼在那个地方打上了标志？但是，妈妈，他为什么不跟你一样，把它别在胸外呢？”

“孩子，你现在玩去吧，等一会儿你再怎么缠我都行。”赫斯特·普琳嚷道，“只是不要走远迷了路，就在你能听到流水声的地方玩。”

孩子顺着小河的方向边走边唱，以便尽量给小河那忧郁的声音掺进一些轻快的调子。但是，小河并不觉得舒心可意，仍然诉说着这阴暗森林里那已经发生的伤心而又神秘的莫名其妙的隐私，或是对那将要发生的事情预作一番悲叹。珠儿也是这样，她那短短一生就充满了阴影，但她决意跟这条爱发牢骚的小河断绝一切交往。因此，她就去采摘紫罗兰、木本银莲花和一些长在高岩缝隙里的红耧斗菜。

当这个淘气的孩子离开时，赫斯特·普琳向那穿过森林的小道往前迈了一两步，但是仍然留在树林的浓荫下面。她望着牧师十分孤单地一路走来，拄着一根他在路边折

下的树枝。他形容憔悴，身子虚弱，流露出一种无精打采的沮丧神情。这种神情，不论在移民新区漫步时，或是在他认为容易引人注目的任何地方时，从来都没有这样明显地流露过。可是在这儿，在这完全与世隔绝的森林中，这种神情却令人遗憾地暴露无遗了，因为森林本身在精神上就是一个很大的压力。他的步伐无精打采，似乎没有再往前走一步的理由；如果说他还有所喜爱的话，那就是乐于躺在最近的一棵树底下，并永远懒洋洋地躺在那儿。树叶也许会落满他一身，而且无论是死是活，泥土都将慢慢地在他身上堆积起来，形成一个小丘。人固有一死，不管是愿不愿意，都是如此。

在赫斯特的眼里，牧师迪默斯德尔先生除了小珠儿说过的把手放在胸口上以外，看不出一点儿确实明显痛苦的迹象。

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第十七章 牧师和他的教民

牧师慢吞吞地走着，但在赫斯特·普琳尚未叫出声来，以引起他的注意之前，他已几乎走过去了。最后赫斯特还是喊了出来。

“阿瑟·迪默斯德尔！”赫斯特喊道，声音开始时软弱无力，后来大一点，然而有些沙哑，“阿瑟·迪默斯德尔！”

“谁呀？”牧师回答说。

他连忙振作精神，挺直身子，就好像一个人在不顾别人看到他有什么心事而被猛然一惊那样。牧师慌忙寻声望去，模糊中他看见树底下有一个人影，穿着一身十分暗淡的衣服，这同多云的天空和浓密的树叶致使午间显得阴沉的那种暗淡的光线很少区别，因而他也就说不清那是一个女人还是一个影子了。那也许是在他的人生旅途中有一个什么鬼怪从他的思想深处钻出来，来骚扰他吧。

牧师走近一步，发现了那个红A字。

“赫斯特！赫斯特·普琳！”他说，“是你？你还活着？”

“还活着！”她回答说，“七年来一直过着这样的生活！你，阿瑟·迪默斯德尔，你也活着？”

他们这样互相询问彼此究竟是否活着，甚至怀疑自己，是不足为奇的。他们在这黑魑魑的森林里如此奇异地相遇，就像是前生有缘的两个幽灵在阴间第一次相遇一样。但是，此刻由于互不了解，又不习惯于跟游魂野鬼打交道，因此都互相害怕，打着冷颤地站在那里。两个都是鬼，但这一个却怕那一个！他们也同样互相害怕，因为这个关键时刻唤醒了他们的意识，勾起了彼此的心事和往事，而这除了如此紧迫的时刻以外，在现实生活中是从不会有的。心灵往往可以在这转瞬即逝的时间的镜子里照见自己的容貌。阿瑟·迪默斯德尔此时很害怕。他胆颤心惊地，慢悠悠而又不得已地伸出他那冰凉得像是僵化了的手，触摸着赫斯特·普琳冰凉的手。他们的手虽是冰凉的，但是扫除了这次会面时那最沉闷的气氛。他们此刻至少都感到他俩是同一世界的人。

他们一言不发——谁也不出来引路，但是不约而同地——悄悄走到赫斯特刚才待过的树荫下，坐在她和珠儿原先坐过的一堆地衣上。他俩开始找话说，起先只是一些

任何两个熟人在一起所能说的寒暄话，诸如阴沉的天气呀，即将来临的暴风雨呀，其次是询问各人的身体状况。他们就这样说呀说，但都不放开胆子，而是一步一步地接触他们内心深处所蕴蓄的问题。他们被命运和环境隔离了这么久，需要谈一些无关紧要的话，然后再来打开谈话的闸门，让他们那些真实的思想从中奔流出来。

过了一会儿，牧师紧紧盯着赫斯特·普琳的眼睛。

“赫斯特，”他说，“你得到平静了吗？”

她低头望着自己的胸部凄然地微微一笑。

“你呢？”她问。

“没有，只不过是绝望！”他回答说，“像我这样的人，像我这样过活，我还能有什么希望呢？如果我是一个无神论者，一个没有良心的人，一个本性粗野、残暴的恶棍，也许早就得到平静了。不，我决不应该丢掉平静！但是，就目前我的心境来说，无论我原有的良好品质如何，上帝赐予我的全部最好的天赋都成了折磨我的精神因素。赫斯特，我是最可悲的了！”

“人们尊敬你，”赫斯特说，“是你为他们做了好事！这一点不能给你安慰吗？”

“赫斯特，这使我更痛苦——只有更痛苦！”牧师苦笑地回答说，“至于说我似乎做了善事，我是不相信的，那肯定是欺骗。像我这样一个灵魂毁灭了的人还能在拯救别人的灵魂上起什么作用吗？或者说，一个污染了的灵魂还能使别人的灵魂净化吗？至于人们对我的尊敬，我但愿它变为轻蔑和憎恨！我必须站在我的布道坛上，接受那么多望着我脸孔的眼睛，似乎天国之光就是从那儿发出来的一样！我还必须看着我那渴求真理的教区会众，而他们倾听我的话，就像倾听五旬节火舌在说话一

样——然后，我再看看自己的内心，看看他们所崇拜的偶像的丑恶真相，赫斯特，你能认为，这是一种安慰吗？我在内心痛苦和烦恼的时候，曾为我的表里不一而暗自发笑！撒旦也对此感到可笑！”

“你在这一点上委屈了你自己，”赫斯特温和地说，“你都做过深沉而痛切的忏悔了。你的罪过早就随着岁月的流逝而被抛在脑后了。事实上你现在的生活在人们的眼里还是那么神圣。你用善行来证实和证明你的忏悔会一点没有现实意义吗？它为什么不能给你带来平静呢？”

“不能，赫斯特，不能！”牧师回答说，“其中没有实质性的东西！那只是冷酷和麻木，这对我能有何用！说到苦行，我是受够了！说到忏悔，根本谈不上！否则，我早就脱掉那身假充神圣的外衣了，早就在审判席上在世人面前现眼了。赫斯特，你在胸前公然戴着红A字是多么幸福啊！我的红A字却只能在暗中点燃！你哪里知道，在受了七年自我欺骗的折磨以后，能够面对面看到你这个真正了解我的人的那双眼睛，这是一个多大的安慰呀。如果我有一个朋友——或者是我的一个死敌——当我由于别人的称赞而感厌倦的时候，我能每天跟他倾诉，使他知道我是罪人中最坏的罪人，那么我想，我的灵魂也许可以因此而得到拯救。即使就这么一点真实也能拯救我啊！但是，现在一切都是谎言！一切都是空虚！一切都是死亡！”

赫斯特·普琳望着他的脸，支支吾吾说不出话来。但是，牧师却把他长期压抑在心头的感情激动地吐露出来了。他的这番话在这儿倒给了她一个机会，使她可以趁此把要说的话给他听了。她打消重重顾虑，说话了。

“你所希求的这样的朋友就在这儿，”她说，“你可以跟她哭诉你的罪孽，这就是我，你的同犯人。”她又犹豫了一下，经过一番斗争，才把话说出来，“你也早就有那样一个敌人了，他跟你同住在一个屋子里！”

牧师一下站了起来，喘着气，抓住自己的胸口，似乎他要把心从胸中掏出来一样。

“唉！你说什么呀？”牧师叫道，“一个敌人！而且是我同屋的！你这话什么意思？”

赫斯特·普琳此刻充分认识到，她对这个不幸的人深受的损害负有责任，不该让他听任一个居心叵测的人摆布了这么多年，确实哪怕摆布一时一刻也不能容许。跟戴着假面具的敌人接近，就足以搅乱像阿瑟·迪默斯德尔这样神经过敏的人那非常敏感的心地。有一个时期，赫斯特很少想到这一点，这或者是由于她自己受苦受难而悲观厌世的缘故，所以她就让牧师去忍受她以为比较容易忍受的厄运了。但是，自从牧师那次夜出以后，近来赫斯特对他的种种同情又柔情缱绻和生意盎然了。她现在能更准确地看出他的心思。他深信罗杰·奇林沃思的频繁出现——那污染牧师周围空气的秘密毒药和他作为一个医生对牧师身体和精神上的病症有权过问——这些有害的机会都被他转而用来实现自己狠毒的目的了。那就是利用这些手段使受害者的内心经常处于受刺激的状态，其目的不是通过苦口的良药来治病，而是在瓦解和败坏他的精神生命。结果，他在人世便不能不精神错乱，此后便永远同“善”与“真”绝缘了，这样的疯狂也许就是人世间典型的疯狂吧。

这就是她给这个自己曾经一度——不，我们为什么不这样说——现在仍然十分爱着的人带来的毁灭。赫斯特感到，正如她已经告诉罗杰·奇林沃思的，牺牲牧师的名声，甚至于死，也许都比她现在所面临的抉择好得多。她此刻宁可高高兴兴地躺在森林中的落叶里，在这儿，在阿瑟·迪默斯德尔的脚下死去，也不愿去供认那一失足即成千古恨的错误。

“噢，阿瑟，”她叫道，“原谅我吧！在其他一切事情上我都是极力做到诚实的！讲真话是一种美德，这是我在一切困境中能够牢牢把握和已牢牢把握了的。只有在

你的利益、你的生命和你的名誉成了问题时除外。这样我才同意了欺骗。即使死亡就在身旁威胁着我，说谎也总是不好的。你不明白我要说的话吗？那个老人，那个医生，人们管他叫罗杰·奇林沃思的，他是我的丈夫！”

牧师十分激动地看了她一眼，这种激动变化不定，跟他那更高尚、更纯洁、更温柔的品质相互揉合在一起，它事实上是恶魔所要求的那一部分感情，并企图通过这一部分感情去赢得另一部分感情。赫斯特从来没有看见过比现在这样更愤怒、更厉害的皱眉蹙额。这是一种心情阴暗的反映，只持续了一会儿。他的性格已为痛苦折磨得够脆弱了，即使还有一点精力，也经不起一分一秒的折腾。他倒在地上，双手掩着脸孔。

“我早就该知道的，”他咕哝着，“我早已知道了！我第一次见着他，我的心就不由得紧缩了。此后我每次见着他都是如此，这不是已把那秘密告诉了我吗？我怎么会不了解呢？噢，赫斯特·普琳，你很少知道这件事是多么可怕！多么可耻！多么下流！多么令人发指的丑恶呀！一颗有病的、有罪的心，这么暴露在一个幸灾乐祸地望着它的人的眼前！女人啊女人，你对这一点是有责任的！我不能原谅你！”

“请你原谅我！”赫斯特叫道，扑倒在他身边的落叶上，“让上帝惩罚我！你原谅我吧！”

她以突如其来的、不顾一切的柔情，伸出双臂拥抱着牧师，把他的头压在她的胸上，也顾不得他的面颊正贴在红A字上。他想挣脱开来，但也白费了一番力气。赫斯特不肯放开他，不然他又会声色俱厉地望着她的脸孔了。世人曾对她侧目而视——曾对这个孤单的妇女侧目而视已经七年了——她都忍受过来了，从没有转开过她那双坚定、悲伤的眼睛。就是上天也对她侧目而视，她也没有因此而死去。可是这个苍白、虚弱、有罪和悲痛的人的侧目而视，却使赫斯特忍受不了，活不下去了！

“你还能原谅我吗？”她一而再，再而三地重复说，“你不生气了吧？你能原谅我吧？”

“我一定原谅你，赫斯特，”牧师终于以十分悲伤但没有怒气的，深沉的语气回答道，“我现在完全原谅你。愿上帝原谅我俩！我们不是世界上最坏的罪人。可有一个比被玷污了的牧师更坏，这个老人的报复比我的罪重多了，他恶毒地侵犯了神圣的人心。赫斯特，你和我都从来没有这么做过！”

“从来没有，从来没有！”她低声地说，“我们所做的事本身就有神圣不可侵犯的意义。我们是这么认为的！我们彼此都这么说过！你忘了吗？”

“嘘，赫斯特！”阿瑟·迪默斯德尔说着，从地上站起来，“没有，我没有忘记！”

他们又肩并肩，手握手地坐下，坐在一棵横倒的长满青苔的树干上。人生从没有给他们带来一个比这更黯然销魂的时刻，这是他们偷偷地走了那么久的、老是黑暗的道路的终点。但是，它包含了一种魅力，使他们流连忘返，总想再待一会儿，再待一会儿，临了还是想再待一会儿。他们周围是一片葱郁的森林，一阵疾风吹过，嘎嘎作响。大树枝在他们的头顶上沉重地摇动着。此时有一棵庄严的古木在对另一棵悲哀地叹着气，似乎是在诉说树底下坐着的那对人儿的悲惨故事，或者不得不预告那即将来临的灾祸。

他们还在恋恋不舍。回到镇上去的林中小道是多么可怕啊，赫斯特·普琳又得重新挑起那副耻辱的重担了，牧师又要戴上那好名声的假面具了！因此，他们又逗留了一会儿。从来就没有任何金光像这一片黑暗森林的阴暗如此可贵的。这儿只有他的眼睛才能看到，红A字无需在这个堕落妇女的心胸里燃烧！这儿只有她的眼睛才能看到，这个对上帝、对人如此虚伪的阿瑟·迪默斯德尔可以有片刻的诚实！

牧师突然一转念，跳了起来。

“赫斯特，”他叫道，“又有一种新的恐怖了！罗杰·奇林沃思知道你的用意是要揭露他的真面目，那么他会继续保守我们之间的秘密吗？他现在的报复打算是什么？”

“他的本性中有一种奇怪的保密习惯，”赫斯特回答道，“这种习惯决定他爱采用隐秘的复仇手段，而对他的影响越来越深了。我认为他不可能泄露秘密。他无疑会寻求其他方法来达到他恶毒的用心。”

“我！我怎能跟这个死敌共呼吸，一同生活下去呢？”阿瑟·迪默斯德尔大叫道，内心紧缩起来，神经质地把手压在心上，这已成了他不由自主的举动。“赫斯特，你为我想想！你很强，帮我作一个决断吧！”

“你再也不要跟这个人住在一块儿了，”赫斯特缓慢而坚决地说，“你的心再也不能让他的毒眼虎视眈眈地望着！”

“这真是比死还要难受得多啊！”牧师回答说，“但怎么避开他呢？我还有别的办法吗？你刚才告诉我他的真相时，我气得躺倒在这些枯树叶上，难道我还要躺在那上面吗？我必得躺在那儿马上死去吗？”

“哎呀，是什么大灾大难落在你头上啦！”赫斯特热泪盈眶地说道，“你就是由于脆弱去死吗？没有旁的原因了吧？”

“上帝的审判正落在我头上，”受到良心谴责的牧师说，“那威力是太大了，我不能跟它抗争！”

“上天会发慈悲的，”赫斯特回答说，“只要有力量来接受它。”

“请你作我坚强的后盾！”他回答说，“告诉我怎么做吧。”

“那么，世界就是那样狭窄吗？”赫斯特·普琳大叫道。她那深沉的双眼盯着牧师的眼睛，本能地对牧师那松垮、压抑到几乎不能支撑的精神发挥出一种磁石般的力量。“难道宇宙就在这个城镇的范围以内吗？它不久以前不过是一个遍地落叶的荒野，孤寂得像我们现在周围这个地方一样，这条林中小道通向哪里？你会说向后通到镇上！对，但是也可向前延伸呀！越往里走越深，等你深入那荒芜的地方以后，你每走一步都会使人更看不清你，直到离此几英里，满地都是黄叶，就压根没有白种人的足迹，你在那儿就自由了！就是这么一段简短的旅程，可以使你脱离那个使你最遭罪的世界，而把你带进一个你也许仍有幸福的世界！难道这整个无边无际的森林的树荫还不够遮住你的心，不让罗杰·奇林沃思看见吗？”

“可以，赫斯特，但只能是在落叶下面呀！”牧师苦笑地回答说。

“那还有海上宽广的道路呀！”赫斯特继续说，“是大海把你带到这儿来的。如果你愿意的话，它还可以把你带回去。在我们的故国，无论在偏僻的乡村或大城市伦敦——或者在德国，在法国，在欢乐的意大利，你都可以跳出他们的权限和掌心！所有那些铁石心肠的人们和他们的舆论对你有什么关系呢？他们把你那些好的方面束缚得太久了！”

“不能这样！”牧师回答说，他听着好像叫他去实现一场梦境一样，“我无法去。像我这样悲惨和罪孽深重的人，我除了在上帝安排给我的范围内了此残生以外，就别无他想了。我虽然失去了灵魂，但我还要为别人的灵魂尽我的努力！我虽然是一个不忠实的卫兵，但我还不敢擅离职守，尽管当我凄凉的守卫行将告终时，得到的实际报酬肯定是死亡和耻辱。”

“七年痛苦的重负把你给压垮了，”赫斯特答道，一心一意要用自己的力量来鼓励他，“但你要全部把它抛掉！这样，当你沿着林中小径走去时，它就不会拖累你的脚步了。如果你愿意渡海而去，你也不要把它带上船去。让那失误和毁灭留在它发生的地方吧。不要再去管它了！一切重新开始！这一次试验失败，就让你丢失了一切机会吗？绝不是这样！未来还充满着试验和成功。有的是幸福可以去享受！有的是好事可以去做！把你那虚假的生活换成真实的生活吧。如果你的灵魂召唤你去担任这样一个使命，你就去做红种人的导师和使徒吧。或者——这更适合你的性格——到文明世界那最明智、最著名的人物中去做一个学者和哲人。讲道！写作！行动！做什么都行，只是不要躺倒和死去！改掉阿瑟·迪默斯德尔这个名字吧，另外取一个高尚的名字，这样就没有恐惧和耻辱了。你为什么还要像从前那样在那些痛苦中踟蹰不前呢？那些痛苦已把你的生命啃得差不多了！它们削弱了你的意志和行动的力量，使你连悔改也无力了！起来吧，远走高飞吧！”

“噢，赫斯特！”阿瑟·迪默斯德尔叫道，在他的两眼里，有一道由她的热情所激起的一时高兴的光辉闪烁了一下，但随即又消失了，“你这是叫一个双膝发抖的人去赛跑呀！我只有死在这儿！我已没有力量和勇气独自一人到那广阔、奇异、艰难的世界里去冒险了！”

这是一颗破碎的心在绝望中的最后挣扎。他已没有力气去掌握那似乎伸手可得的较好的命运了。

他把这句话重复了一遍。

“孤身一人啊，赫斯特！”

“又不是你一个人去！”她深沉地低声回答道。

接着，一切都明白了。

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第十八章 阳光普照

阿瑟·迪默斯德尔用满怀希望和喜悦的神情凝视着赫斯特的脸孔，但是其中也夹杂着恐惧，一种对赫斯特如此大胆的恐惧，因为她说出了他隐约有所暗示，但是不敢说的话。

然而，赫斯特·普琳生性勇敢、泼辣，加上她长期以来不仅与社会隔绝，而且为社会所放逐，因而养成了一种与牧师迥然不同的自由思索的习惯，她在道德的原野上无拘无束地驰骋。这原野跟原始森林一样，无边无际，错综复杂，扑朔迷离。现在他们就在这片黑压压的森林中，进行着决定他们命运的交谈。她的才智和她的心就像是在荒凉不毛的地方安下了家一样。她在这儿如同土著印第安人在自己的林子里一样，自由自在地来来往往。几年来她都是以这种与世隔绝的观点来看待人世的制度，来看待牧师们或立法者们所建树的一切东西；她对待这一切，就像印第安人对待牧师的丝带、法官的长袍，以及刑台、绞架、家庭或教堂差不多，几乎不怀多大敬意。她的命运和运气的趋势注定要成为一个自由人。这个红A字就是她进入其他妇女所不敢踏进的领域的护照。耻辱，绝望，孤独！这些都成了她的老师——严厉而粗野的老师——并且正是这些老师使她坚强了起来，但也教了她很多错误的东西。

至于牧师就另当别论了，他从来没有过那种跨越公认法律范围的阅历；虽然也有过

那么一次，但他是非常诚惶诚恐地才侵犯了其中最神圣的一条法律。然而，这也只是感情犯罪，不是原则犯罪，更不是有意犯罪。自从那一不幸的时刻以后，他就一直以病态的热情和谨小慎微的态度监视着自己的每一种情绪的起伏和每一个念头的来去。至于行动就不用管了，因为那是容易加以支配的。那时的牧师处于社会组织机构的首脑地位，因而他也就更受这种制度的规章、原则甚至偏见的束缚了。作为一个牧师，他的等级地位不可避免地使他受到重重限制。可是作为一个曾经犯过罪的人，由于伤口尚未愈合的痛苦，迫使他的良心经常保持着警惕和敏于痛定思痛，这样一来也许他在德行方面就该比他根本没有犯罪以前更为可靠了。

这样我们似乎可以明了，对于赫斯特·普琳来说，整个七年的放逐和耻辱生活，只不过是这一时刻的准备。但是，阿瑟·迪默斯德尔呢？这样一个人如果再一次堕落，那还有什么辩护理由可以提出来减轻他的罪孽呢？没有了，除非这样说对他有所帮助，即：他被长期剧烈的痛苦折腾倒了；他的心由于悔恨的折磨而阴沉和糊涂了；他的良心在他究竟是作为一个公开的罪犯而逃走，或者作为一个伪君子而留下这两者之间难以保持平静了；逃避死亡和耻辱的威胁是人之常情；仇敌的阴谋深不可测；最后，这个可怜的清教徒在那条沉闷、荒凉的道路上已经弄得萎靡不振、疾病缠身、痛苦难言，如今似乎出现了一线人类恩爱和同情的闪光，一种新的生活，一种真正的生活，来替代他此刻正在赎偿的沉重的厄运了。在这里，还应该把这样一种严酷无情的真理说出来，那就是在人世间，人的灵魂一旦有了罪恶的裂痕，就永远也不可能修复了。灵魂也许可以守卫和保护，这样敌人就没有力量再度闯入城堡了。但即使这样，敌人在以后的进攻中，也许会另觅途径，不从他以前取胜的地方入手了。然而，断墙依然存在，它的附近就有敌人偷偷踏进来的脚印，他们也许真能再一次夺取那不可忘怀的胜利。

思想斗争就是有，也无需去絮说了。还是讲一讲牧师决定逃走，而且不是单人匹马

的事儿吧。

“如果在过去的整个七年中，”他想到，“我能回想起有一刻的安宁或一线的希望，为了上天诚挚的慈悲心肠，我也许还能忍受下去。但是，现在——自从我在劫难逃以来——我何不抓住对死刑未决犯在处决前所给予的安慰品呢？或者像赫斯特所劝我的，如果这是能通向更美好的生活途径，我一定要抓住它，决不放弃更美满的前程！没有她跟我做伴，我是再也活不下去了。她的支持多么有力啊！她的安慰多么温存啊！啊，上帝，我不敢抬眼望你，您还能饶恕我吧！”

“你就去吧。”当牧师同赫斯特的视线相遇时，她镇静地说。

一旦作出决定，便有一道奇异的欢乐的闪光把耀眼的光辉投射在他那苦闷的心胸上。这对一个刚摆脱自我作茧的人来说，是一种振奋力量，无异在一个尚未开发、尚未基督教化、尚无法律的境界里呼吸到一阵空旷、自由的空气。他的精神似乎为之一振，比他一直可怜巴巴地趴在地上时，能够更近地看见天空的景色了。但由于他宗教禀赋深刻，因而在情绪上必不可免地带有虔诚的色彩。

“我是不是又确实感到高兴了？”他对自己纳闷地叫道，“我还以为欢乐的幼苗在我身上枯萎了呢！啊，赫斯特你真是我的好天使！我原来似乎已把自己的身子——那多病、罪孽玷污以及由于悲伤而受到损害的身子——抛在这林中的落叶上了，可再站起来时却焕然一新了，有了新的力量去赞美慈悲的上帝！这已经是更美好的生活了！为什么我们没有早发现呢？”

“我们不要往后看，”赫斯特·普琳回答说，“过去的事让它过去吧！我们现在为什么还要留恋它呢？看！我要把连着这个标志的一切东西全扯掉，好像它从来没有过一样！”

她说着就解开扣着红A字的扣子，把它从胸前取下来，扔在远处的枯叶里。这个神秘的符号落在小河这边的岸上，如果往前再扔远一些，就要掉在水里了，那时小河除了照旧诉说着那晦涩难懂的故事以外，又要载着另一种哀怨向前流动了。但是，这个刺绣的A字落在那里却像一颗遗失的珠宝闪闪发光，不知有哪个倒霉的过路人会将它拾起来，并且从此以后会被那罪恶的怪影、心脏的衰弱和飞来的横祸所不断地折磨了。

标志丢掉了，赫斯特深深地长叹了一口气，在这一长叹中，耻辱和苦恼如释重负一般从她精神上解脱了。哦，真是轻松愉快！在她感受到自由以前，她还不曾知道它有多重呢！她在另一次冲动下，又取下了约束她头发的那顶合乎规格的帽子，让头发披到了双肩上。那头发黝黑而浓密，蓬松之中光影互见，给她的姿色平添了一种温柔的魅力。一种似乎是发自一个女性的内心的喜悦、温存的微笑，在她的嘴边浮现，从她的两眼里涌出。她那长久以来苍白的面颊，现在红光焕发了。她的女性的特点、她的青春以及她的全部丰富多彩的美，都从人们所谓一去不复返的过去返回来了，并且跟她少女的希望和前所未有的幸福，在此时此刻的魔术圈里汇合在一起了。天地的阴暗似乎只不过是他们两个凡人的心情的反映，此刻随着他们的悲哀一块儿消失了。突然之间，好像天颜顿开，阳光普照，一股强光射入阴暗的森林，使每一片绿叶都喜气洋洋，使所有的落地黄叶都焕发金光，使千年古木的灰色树干也闪闪发光。那些一向造成阴影的东西，此刻也光彩照人了。小河的流水也可借助它那欢乐的闪光远远流进森林的神秘中心，从而染上一种欢快的神秘色彩。

这就是大自然——那原始的、未开发的林中大自然，从未被人类的法律征服过，也未被更高的真理阐明过——对这两个人的幸福的一片同情心！爱情，无论是新产生的，还是从死一样的沉睡中唤醒的，总要创造出一种光明来，以使心中充满光辉，并洋溢到外部的世界里来。即使森林里仍是一片阴暗，但在赫斯特眼里却是明亮

的，在阿瑟·迪默斯德尔眼里也是明亮的。

赫斯特望着他，又感到了另一阵欢乐。

“你得认识一下珠儿！”她说，“我们的小珠儿！你已见过她了——对，我知道这点——但是，你现在得用另外的眼光来看她。她是一个怪孩子我不怎么理解她！但是，你将跟我一样非常疼爱她，并将告诉我怎样对待她。”

“你以为孩子会高兴认识我吗？”牧师有些担心地问，“我早就怕孩子们了，因为他们总不信任我，不愿跟我接近。我连小珠儿也怕！”

“唉，真可怜！”母亲回答说，“但是，她将非常爱你，你也会非常爱她。她就离这儿不远，我来叫她——珠儿！珠儿！”

“我看见孩子了，”牧师说，“她就在那边，站在一道阳光里，在小河那边，离这儿不远。你以为孩子会爱我吗？”

赫斯特微微一笑，又叫了几声珠儿。她果真如牧师所说，并不太远，举目可见，正在一道从交叉的树枝间射下的阳光中，好似一个穿着灿烂服装的幻影。光线来回晃动，她的身影也就随着阳光的时来时去而时明时暗，一会儿像一个真孩子，一会儿又像一个孩子的幽灵。她听见母亲的喊声后，便穿过林子慢慢走近前来。

在母亲跟牧师谈话的时候，珠儿并没有感到时间过得腻味。阴暗的大森林——它对于带着人世的罪恶和烦恼来到它的腹地的人们总是显得很严峻——很懂得怎样做这个孤独的幼儿的朋友。它虽然阴暗，但是最和蔼可亲地欢迎她，并把蔓虎刺端给她吃。这是去秋生长而在今春才成熟的果子，此刻正红得像掉在枯叶上的血滴一般。珠儿一个劲儿采集着，很喜欢这种野香野味。原野里的小动物，也不怎么避开珠儿

了。真有一只母鹁鸪带着十只小鹁鸪，挑衅地向前跑来，但很快就退缩了，咯咯地对小鹁鸪叫着，让它们不要害怕。一只野鸽独自栖息在一根矮树枝上，让珠儿在它下面走来，发出一声像是致意，又像是惊恐的声音。一只松鼠从它作为住家的树顶上，也不知是愤怒还是高兴，吱吱地叫着——因为松鼠是一种易怒的、滑稽的动物，很难把这两种情感区分开来——老那么对这个孩子叫着，并在孩子的头上扔下一个坚果。这是去年的果实，被松鼠的锐齿啃过。一只狐狸被珠儿踏在落叶上的轻盈的脚步声惊醒了，好奇地望着珠儿，好像拿不定主意，是偷偷跑掉好呢，还是重新在原地小睡。据说有一只狼——但在这儿，故事确实是陷入了荒唐无稽的境地——走了过来，闻闻珠儿衣服的气味，并伸出它那野性的头，让珠儿用手拍着。然而，实际上似乎是，慈母般的森林和它所养育的这些野生动物，在这个人类孩子的身上完全认出了近似的野性。

珠儿在这儿，比在镇上街边草坪上或者母亲的茅屋里更加温和。花儿似乎知道这点，在珠儿经过时一个个偷偷地说：“戴上我吧，美丽的孩子，戴上我吧！”珠儿为了使它们高兴，便采集了一些紫罗兰、银莲花、耧斗菜和一些垂挂在她眼前的古木上的青枝绿桠。珠儿用这些花木来装饰她的头发和她的腰部，使她成为一个小美女、小仙女，或者其他跟古木有密切关系的仙人。当珠儿听到母亲的声音时，她正在这么装饰着自己，于是慢慢走了过来。她慢吞吞地走着，因为她看见那位牧师了。

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第十九章 溪边的小女孩

“你会非常爱她的，”赫斯特·普琳跟牧师坐在那里望着小珠儿时，重复说，“你不觉得她很美吗？你看她用这些简简单单的花儿打扮自己多有才能呀！即使她能在林中找到珍珠、钻石和红宝石这类东西也不能使她更美了！她是多好的一个孩子呀！但是，我知道，她长着跟谁一样的眉毛！”

“赫斯特，你可知道，”阿瑟·迪默斯德尔不安地笑着说，“经常在你身边跳跳蹦蹦的那个可爱的孩子，老使我感到担惊受怕，我总觉得——哦，赫斯特，那是一种什么样的想法，而且那样的担心是多么的可怕——我的容貌有一部分反映在她的脸上，而且是那么明显，外人一瞧就看出来了！不过她大部分还是像你！”

“不，不！不是大部分！”那个做母亲的甜甜一笑地回答，“等不多久，你就不用害怕追究她是谁的孩子了。她的头发上插着那些野花，看起来真是美得出奇呀！她似乎是我们留在老英格兰故土上的一个仙女，现在盛装出来迎接我们了。”

他们坐在那儿望着珠儿慢慢走来，这种感情是他们两人从来没有过的。显然在她身上有一根联结他们的纽带。过去七年，她一直是作为一个活的象形文字呈现在世人面前，那字母包含着他们暗暗企图隐藏的秘密，如果有一个预言家或魔术师能够读懂这个火红字母的话，便可看出一切都写在这个符号上了——一切都昭然若揭了！珠儿就是他们生命的合一体。不管他们过去的罪恶怎样，当他们同时看到自己那有形的结晶和他們在那结晶体上所反映的内心思想时，他们怎能怀疑自己在世的生活和未来的命运已结下了不解之缘，并永远相依为命呢？当孩子向前走来时，这些想法——也许还有他们不承认的或无法解释的其他想法——使他们对孩子投去了一线敬畏的目光。

“你去跟她说话时，不要让她看出有任何异样的地方——别太热情，也别太急切，”赫斯特低声地说，“我们的小珠儿有时是一个忽喜忽悲、古怪有趣的小精

灵。特别是当她不十分理解原因和理由时，她很少能接受别人对她的情感。但是，这孩子有强烈的感情！她爱我，她也将爱你！”

“你很难想到，” 牧师从旁看了赫斯特·普琳一眼说，“我内心是多么害怕这次相会而又渴望这次相会呀。但是，我已经告诉你，事实上孩子们都不乐意跟我亲近。他们不愿爬上我的膝盖上来，也不愿在我耳边说孩子气的话，对我的笑脸也没有反应，而是站得远远的，用奇怪的眼光看着我。就连小小的婴孩，当我抱起他们时，也要嚎哭一番。可是，珠儿却在她还不太长的一生中已有两次对我表示亲近。第一次你是很清楚的！另一次是你领她到那正颜厉色的老州长家里。”

“你那时还非常大胆地为她和我辩护了呢！” 母亲回答说，“我一直记得，小珠儿也会记得的。你不用害怕。她起先可能感到奇怪和认生，但一会儿就会爱你了。”

这时珠儿到了小溪边，站在对岸，默默地望着赫斯特和牧师，他们仍然一块儿坐在长了苔藓的树干上，等待着她。小溪刚好在她停下的地方积水成池，池面光洁，平静，反照出珠儿小身躯的倩影，她戴着花儿和簇叶环，美丽如画，光彩夺目，而且比真人更标致，更脱俗。跟真正的珠儿非常相像的这个水中倒影也似乎把自己一些暗淡的，不可捉摸的品性传给了珠儿。很怪，珠儿站在那儿，透过影影绰绰的森林，一动不动地望着他们，此时有一缕阳光就像受了同情心的驱使，照射在她身上，使她全身显得更美了。接着在溪流的下游，站着另一个小孩——另一个同样的小孩——也沐浴在一缕金色的阳光中。赫斯特隐约、不安地感到同珠儿疏远了，似乎孩子是形单影只地在林中闲逛走丢了，越出了她和母亲共同居住的地方，找不到归路了。

这个印象又对又不对。孩子和母亲是疏远了，但那是赫斯特的过错，不是珠儿的过错。自从珠儿离开母亲去游玩以后，另一个亲人进入了母亲的感情圈内，这一来她

们之间的关系就改观了，以至这个漫游归来的珠儿找不到原来习惯的位置，而几乎不知道自己该往哪儿摆了。

“我有一个奇怪的幻觉，”敏感的牧师说，“这条小河似乎是两个世界的分界线，你再也见不到你的珠儿了。她会不会是我们童年时代的传说所说的那种小精灵，不让她跨过那奔流的小溪？请你快点叫她，她这样逗留不动使我的每根神经都抖动。”

“好孩子，过来，”赫斯特伸出双臂鼓励地说，“你走得太慢了。你先前什么时候这么慢过呢？这儿是我的一位朋友，他也一定会是你的朋友的。今后你将得到比你妈单独一人所能给你的双倍的爱。跳过小溪，到我们这儿来吧。你能像小鹿一样跳的。”

珠儿对这些甜蜜的话语，一点儿反应也没有，仍留在小溪那边。她用她那双明亮、任性的眼睛一会儿盯着母亲，一会儿盯着牧师，一会儿又用同样的目光将他们两个人尽收眼底，似乎是在给自己侦察和解释他们两个人的关系。阿瑟·迪默斯德尔感到孩子两眼在盯着他，便不由自主地又将自己的手悄悄地按在心上——这一举动已习惯成自然了。珠儿最后伸出她的手，用小食指公然指点着母亲的胸部。在下面一平如镜的小溪里，有一个戴着花环的、欢乐的小珠儿的倒影，也在用她的小食指这样指点着。

“你这个怪孩子，为什么不到我这儿来？”赫斯特大叫起来。

珠儿仍用食指指点着，并皱起眉头。由于这是从稚气的、几乎是婴儿一样的面孔上出现的表情，给人的印象就更深了。当母亲仍在招呼她，脸上露出欢快的、不同寻常的微笑时，这个孩子还跺着脚，神情和姿态越发蛮横了。小溪中也有一个美得出

奇的倒影，皱着眉，用手指指点点，并且同样蛮横，这就把小珠儿的面貌衬托得更加突出了。

“珠儿，快来，要不然我就生你的气了！”赫斯特·普琳叫道。她虽然平时习惯了这个淘气的孩子的此类举止，可是现在还是自然而然地切盼她的举动能更体面些。“淘气的孩子，跳过小溪，上这儿来！不然，我就要到你那边儿去了！”

但是，小珠儿素来对她母亲的威吓一点儿也不在乎，就跟她不受母亲的恳求而软化一样，现在却勃然大怒了，暴跳如雷地指指点点，把小身子都气得东扭西歪了。随着这一阵撒野，又是一阵刺耳的尖叫，使森林四周都发出了回声。因此，她虽然一个人发着没来由的孩子脾气，但背后却似乎有许多人在同情她、鼓励她。小溪中又一次出现了珠儿那模糊不清的、发怒的倒影，她仍旧戴着花冠花环，但是撒野地指指划划，跺着脚，并且在这之间，她一直是把小食指指着赫斯特的胸部！

“我知道孩子闹什么脾气，”赫斯特低声对牧师说，尽管她极力隐藏自己的痛苦和烦恼，但脸色还是变白了。“孩子们对平日看惯了的事物，即使有一点儿轻微的改变，都不愿意。珠儿这么闹，就是由于没有见到她在我胸前老看到的那个东西！”

“我求你，”牧师回答说，“如果你有什么法子能让孩子安静下来，你就立即把法子拿出来！除了像希宾斯夫人那样的老巫婆的暴怒以外，”他笑一笑，补充说，“我不知道还有什么东西能比一个孩子这样生气，更叫我不愿看的了。珠儿的年幼美貌，正如满脸皱纹的巫婆一样，都有一种超然的力量。要是你爱我，你就让她安静下来吧！”

赫斯特再一次把脸转向珠儿，脸颊绯红，有意无意瞟了牧师一眼，然后深深叹了一口气，可是甚至在她还没有来得及说话以前，那绯红就又变成惨白了。

“珠儿，”她悲哀地说，“往你脚下看。那儿——在你前面——在小溪这边！”

孩子把她的眼睛转向所指的地方：红A字就在那儿，紧挨着溪边，只见那金色的刺绣反映在水中。“拿到这儿来。”赫斯特说。

“你过来拾起它吧。”珠儿回答说。

“有过这样的孩子吗！”赫斯特转向身旁的牧师说，“哦，我有许多关于她的话要对你说。但是，确确实实，她对于这个可恨的标志的态度是对的。我还必须再忍受一会儿痛苦——也就是几天——忍受到我们离开这个地区的时候为止，那时我们再回过头来看看这个地方，那就像是做了一场梦。森林藏不住它，我将亲手把它扔到海里去，让大海永远吞没它！”

赫斯特边说边走到溪边，把红A字拾起来，再扣到自己的胸前。仅在片刻之前，赫斯特还满怀希望地说，要把它扔到大海里去，可是当她又如此这般从命运女神的手中取回这个致命的符号时，她又感到在劫难逃了。赫斯特多想把它扔到那宽广无垠的太空中去啊——她多想呼吸一个时辰的自由空气啊——但是现在这个悲惨的红A字又在老地方闪现了。因此这个红A字无论是不是象征在劫难逃，但一种邪恶的行为总归带有命定的性质。赫斯特第二步是把自己一绺绺浓密的头发挽起来，藏在帽子里面。那个可恶的红A字就仿佛是一个置人于死地的符咒，她的美，她那女性的温柔和风采，却因而像落日一样隐没了。一道灰色的阴影似乎落在她身上了。

赫斯特的心里经历了这一番阴暗的变化以后，把手伸向了珠儿。

“孩子，你现在还认识你妈吗？”她带着责备的口吻问，但语调柔和，“既然她又把那羞耻的标志戴在身上，既然她又悲伤了，你愿跳过小溪来认你妈吗？”

“好，现在我愿意！”孩子回答说，跳过小溪，双手抱着赫斯特，“现在你的确是我的母亲！我是你的小珠儿！”

珠儿以不寻常的温情拉低母亲的头，吻着她的额部和双颊。但是，随即——珠儿像往常一样情不自禁地要在她好不容易给人的一点儿安慰中插入一种叫人锥心的东西——她又用她的嘴去吻红A字了！

“这就不好了！”赫斯特说，“你刚对我表示了一点儿爱，又来嘲弄我了！”

“牧师为什么坐在那儿？”珠儿问。

“他在那儿等着迎接你，”母亲回答道，“你来，求牧师为你祝福吧。小珠儿，他爱你，也爱你的妈妈。你不爱他吗？过来，他渴望着看到你呢！”

“他爱我们吗？”珠儿非常乖巧地仰头望着母亲的脸问，“他会和我们手拉手，三人一块儿回到镇上去吗？”

“现在不行啊，可爱的孩子，”赫斯特回答说，“但日后他会手挽手地跟我们一块儿走的。我们会有自己的家和自己的炉火。你将会坐在他的膝盖上；他也将教会给你许多东西，并深深地爱你。你会爱他的，难道不是吗？”

“他还老是把手捂着他的心吗？”珠儿问道。

“傻孩子，这是什么话！”她的母亲大叫道，“过来，求他祝福吧！”

但是，不论是出于每个被宠爱的孩子对危险的劲敌的本能的妒忌，还是出于她反复无常的古怪本性，珠儿反正对牧师不表示好感。于是母亲只有使劲把她拉到牧师的跟前，但她还是畏缩不前，做着怪相表示她的不满。珠儿从小就会做奇特的怪相，

并能把她那善变的面貌变成各种不同的怪相，其中每一个怪相，都包含有一种花样翻新的调皮捣蛋在里面。牧师——痛苦地发着窘，但希望有一个接吻能产生像符咒一般的奇效，从而使他得到孩子的好感——于是俯身向前，在她额上吻了一下。这一来反使珠儿挣脱开了母亲，跑到小溪旁边，趴在小溪上面，擦洗她的前额，一直到把那不受欢迎的一吻完全洗掉，让它消失在那悄悄逝去的长长的溪水之中，这才罢休。然后，远远地站在那儿，默默地望着赫斯特和牧师。这时他们正在商谈，并针对他们的新境况和即将实现的目的，诸如此类的事作了安排。

现在这一命运攸关的见面结束了。只有幽谷孤独地留在黑压压的老树丛中。老树好像长着无数的舌头，久久地低声诉说着这儿发生的事情，并且是凡人不知道的事情。忧郁的小溪在它那小小的心田里本来就装满了神秘，现在又要加上这一个故事了，而且仍将继续窃窃私语下去，语调也不会比以往多年稍微高兴一点儿。

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第二十章 困惑不解的牧师

牧师比赫斯特·普琳和小珠儿先离开，他回头一瞧，多半是希望看看母女俩那渐渐消失在昏暗森林中的只有一点影影绰绰的身影或轮廓。生活中这么大的变化，他简直不敢立即信以为真。但是，那明明是赫斯特，她穿着一身灰色的衣服，仍旧站在那段多年以前被一阵疾风刮倒的树干旁边。自从那时以来，树干上长满了青苔，于是这两个命中注定要毁灭的人，便背负着人世最沉重的担子，可以一块儿坐在上面，以求得一时的休息和慰藉了。珠儿也从溪边轻盈地跳过来了——既然那个闯入的第

三者已经走了——她又可以依偎在母亲身边那个老地方了。这就可见牧师并没有白日作梦！

这种模糊不清、表里不一的印象，使牧师异常焦急不安，他为了从心中摆脱这种印象，便来回想和仔细盘算赫斯特和他自己所曾经商量过的逃离计划。他们断定，有众多人口和城市的故国要比新英格兰或全美洲这荒无人烟的地方更能提供合适的隐蔽处或隐居地，而现在这里却只有印第安人的棚屋或稀稀拉拉散布在沿海的为数不多的欧洲人移居地可供选择。这里且不说牧师的健康很不适合于忍受艰苦的森林生活，而就他的天赋、他的教养和他的全部发展来说，也只有在文明社会和优美的环境中才能保证他适得其所。程度越高，他越能如鱼得水。当时碰巧港口有一只船，于是促进了这一选择。这是那时常见的一种可疑的巡航艇，虽不是海洋中十足的不法户，但也是极端不负责地游弋在海面上。这艘船最近从拉丁美洲大陆来到这儿，三天以内开往布里斯托尔。赫斯特·普琳——作为一个自愿加入的女慈善会的会员，她的职务使她得以认识船长和全体船员——能够保证在出乎意料的情况下秘密搞到两张大人和一张小孩的船票。

牧师十分关切地询问过赫斯特预定开船的精确时间。可能是从当天算起的第四天。“那真是太幸运了！”他当时暗自说道。牧师迪默斯德尔先生此刻为什么认为这么幸运呢，我们原想不说，然而我们一点也不想隐瞒读者——那是因为从当天算起的第三天，牧师就要做“庆祝选举会的布道”了。这样一个盛举对于一个新英格兰牧师的一生来说，是一件光荣的事，他再也碰不上比这更合适的方式和时机来结束他的牧师生涯了。“至少他们说到我时，”这个模范人物想道，“不会说我扔掉公务不干，也不会说我没有把公务干好！”像这个可怜的牧师如此深刻，严厉的反省，竟是如此悲惨地失望，也真是太可悲了！我们已经讲过并且还会讲到他一些坏事。但是，根据我们理解，没有一个人像他那么窝囊，也没有一种微妙的病症是那

么细微，那么顽固，以至老早就侵入到他的骨子里去了。没有一个人能在要多长就多长的时期内，对自己是一副脸孔，对公众又是一副脸孔，而最后对哪一副是真脸孔竟一点儿也不糊涂。

迪默斯德尔先生跟赫斯特见面回来，情绪十分激动，使他有了不同寻常的体力，催促着他快步赶回城里。林中小径看来比他外出时所记得的更荒凉、更崎岖不平、更人迹罕至了。但是，他跳过了一个一个坑坑洼洼的地方，穿过了那牵扯不开的丛林，爬斜坡，跳入谷地。总而言之，以他自己都感到吃惊的、不知疲倦的活力克服了一切困难。他不能不回忆起，不过两天以前，在这同一个地方跋涉，他是如何的虚弱，如何不断地停下来喘气。当他走近镇上时，得到的印象是，呈现在他眼前的一系列熟悉的事物都变了，似乎他离开它们不是昨天，也不是一两天，而是很多天，甚至好几年。诚然，每一条街道都依然如故，就像他所记得的那样，房屋都各具特色，大多是三角顶，并且他记忆中该有风标的地方，也都有一个。虽然如此，他还是心不由己地感到了这种变化。他对遇见的熟人，对这个小镇上他所熟悉的一切生活方式，也都有同样的感觉。他们此刻并没有变得更老或者更年轻，老人的胡子也没有更白，昨天还在爬的婴孩今天也并没有站起来走路；总之不可能说他们的样子跟他最近离别时还看过一眼的人们有什么不同。可是，牧师那极为深刻的感觉却似乎告诉他，他们都变了。当他在教堂的墙下走过时，最为深刻地感受到这同一印象。大厦的外观是那么陌生，而又那么熟悉，以至迪默斯德尔先生内心里在二者之间都摇摆不定了；或者他不过是一向在梦中见过，或者他只是现在才梦见。这种种现象，并不说明外部有什么变化，而只是熟悉这种情景的观察者觉得发生了突然的、重大的变化，以至时隔一天，在他看来就仿佛是过了许多年。这种变化是牧师的意志，赫斯特的意志，以及他们之间的命运所造成的。城镇还是先前的那一个，但从森林中归来的牧师却不是原来的了。他可以同跟他打招呼的朋友们说：“我不

是你们认为的那个人了。我把他留在了那边的森林里，让他隐居在秘密的山谷中，那多青苔的树干旁边，忧郁的小溪附近！去吧，去找你们的牧师吧，去看看他那枯槁的身躯，瘦削的面颊，苍白、阴沉、愁纹满布的前额是不是像一件穿旧了的衣服一样扔在那里了？他的朋友无疑仍会坚持着对他说：“你就是那个人！”但是错了的是他们，而不是他。

在迪默斯德尔到家之前，他的灵魂又给了他一些旁的证据，说明他在思想、感情方面发生了一次革命。的确，牧师内心王国的改朝换代和道德标准的改弦更张，正足以说明那位不幸而又惊恐的牧师此时此刻正受到一阵阵心潮的冲击。他每走一步，都身不由己地想去干一件奇怪、粗野而又邪恶的事情，以及其他什么事情，此时他的感觉是既非自愿但又是有意，既是不由自主，但又是出于更深的内心，而不是出于一时的心血来潮去干的了。例如，他在遇到教会中一位执事时就是这样。这位善良的老人年高德劭，性格正直、古朴，又在教堂中有地位，因而常以父辈的慈爱和长者的权限跟牧师说话，并且满怀着对牧师的职务和个人权利两者所应有的那种深深的、近于崇拜的敬意。以一个社会地位较低、才干较差，对较高者来说，年高有识而又加之以应有的敬仰、尊崇他人，如此和谐一致，这是从来没有的一个范例。可是，此刻在牧师迪默斯德尔和这位卓越的、头发灰白的执事谈话的两三分钟内，牧师却只有极力控制自己，以免说出一些涌现在自己心头的亵渎圣餐的看法来。他浑身发抖，脸色灰白，唯恐失言说出这些可怕的话来，又唯恐连同意都没有完全表示过，就为自己赞成这种渎神的话而辩护。然而，牧师即使心怀这种恐惧，但一想到这个神圣的、可敬的老执事会一旦由于得悉了他的不虔诚而吓得目瞪口呆时，又忍不住笑起来了。

还有跟这同一性质的另一件事。牧师迪默斯德尔先生沿街匆匆忙忙走过时，遇到了本教堂一位最年长的女教徒，一位最虔诚的、最典型的老妇人。她孤苦伶仃地孀居

着，心中充满了对故世多年的丈夫、孩子和朋友的回忆，就像一块坟地充满了许多墓碑一般。这一切本是一种十分沉重的悲伤，但对她那颗虔诚的老年人的心灵来说，却反而几乎成了一件神圣的乐事，因为她三十多年来不断地受到了宗教的安慰和《圣经》真理的熏陶。自从这位善良的老妇人属于迪默斯德尔管辖以来，她在人世间的~~主要安慰~~——这除非也是天国的安慰，否则便根本不能说是安慰——就是偶然遇上或者有意会见牧师时，从他那令人喜悦的嘴唇中说出一些温暖、动听、带有天国气息的福音真理，然后再送到她那迟钝的，但乐于倾听的耳朵里去，从而使她的精神为之一振。但是，这次迪默斯德尔先生直到把嘴唇凑到老妇人的耳旁，就硬是像受到了灵魂的大敌控制一样，怎么也想不起一句《圣经》的经文来，也想不起别的什么话来。他所想起的只有否定人类灵魂不朽的一个简洁有力而在他当时看来是无可反驳的论据来。这要是灌输进了这位上了年纪的老妇人心中，那就会像剧烈的毒药一样，立即置她于死地。牧师实际上低声说了什么，他后来怎么也想不起来。也许他的话语幸好语无伦次，并未对这位善良寡妇的理解产生任何特别的影响，或者上天按照自己的旨意作了解释。确实在牧师转脸回顾时，看到了老妇人脸上流露出了神圣的感激和狂喜的表情，就像是天国的光辉照射在她那满是皱纹的苍白的脸上。

再就是第三个例子。牧师离开那位老教徒以后，又遇见了他们之中最年轻的一位教徒。她是最近皈依教门的一个少女——并且是迪默斯德尔牧师在那次夜出以后的一个安息日亲临布道时皈依的——这位少女愿意放弃人世暂时的欢乐，去换取天国的希望，因为当她周围的生活变成一片黑暗的时候，那希望会变得更加光明起来，使茫茫的黑暗最后染上一层金光。她好似伊甸乐园里盛开着一朵百合花，美丽而纯洁。牧师很了解，这位少女把他供奉在她那圣洁无瑕的内心里，并在他的肖像周围挂上了她心中雪白的帘幕，这就赋予虔诚以爱情的温暖，赋予爱情以虔诚的纯洁。

撒旦那天下午千真万确是把这个可怜的少女从她母亲身边领走，抛到了这个有着强烈诱惑力的，或者毋宁说是不可救药的、危险的人的面前上来。当这个少女走近时，魔王低声对牧师说，要他变小隐形，把一株毒芽栽在她那柔软的胸前，这样就一定可以开出黑花来，并且到时候可以结出黑果来。牧师深深感到他有力量支配这个如此信任他的处女的心灵，只要邪恶地看她一眼，就可以使她清白的心田全部荒芜，只需说一句话，就可使她的心田完全向反面发展。因此，他在经过了比以往更为激烈的斗争以后，便撩起他的日内瓦法衣挡住了自己的脸，匆匆忙忙往前走去，装作没有看见的样子，让这位年轻的女教徒对他的粗鲁爱怎么理解就怎么理解。她，这个可怜的人儿呀！于是搜索枯肠——这就像她的口袋或针线袋一样，装了各种无关紧要的小东西——设想出成千种错误来责备自己，并在第二天早晨干家务的时候，眼睛都哭肿了。

在牧师还没有来得及庆幸他战胜这最近一次诱惑以前，又感到了另一种更为可笑的而且几乎是同样可怕的冲动。那就是——我们说起来都觉得难为情——牧师想在路上突然停下来，准备对正在那儿玩耍的一群刚开始说话的清教徒小孩教一些非常不堪入耳的脏话。他克制住了自己，因为这种荒唐的念头跟他的牧师装束太不相称了，就在这时他遇到了一个酒醉的水兵——一个从拉丁美洲大陆来的船员。可怜的迪默斯德尔先生勇敢地克制了所有其他一切邪念以后，现在他起码可以跟这位满身焦油味的粗汉握一握手，听听这类放荡的水手满嘴下流的笑话和一连串绝妙、圆滑、扎实、令人高兴而又无法无天的瞎话，以便从中寻求开心！这后一道难关他也安然度过了，这并不是因为他有什么更好的信条，其中部分原因是他有天生的好风尚，更多的是他有一成不变的遵守牧师礼仪的习惯。

“是什么东西这样缠绕和诱惑我啊？”牧师最后在街上停下来，用手敲打着前额，自言自语地叫道，“难道我疯了吗？或者我完全被交给了恶魔？难道我跟它在森林

里订过契约，用我的血在上面签过字吗？难道它现在提出要我去完成它那颗最卑鄙的心所想象出来的每一桩恶行，以此来实现它的契约吗？

在牧师迪默斯德尔先生想着心思和用手敲打着自己前额的时候，据说希宾斯老夫人这个有名的巫婆正好从旁而过。她盛装出现，头戴一顶高头饰，身穿一件富丽的天鹅绒外衣，颈套一个有名的黄浆浆制的皱领，这是她一位特别要好的朋友安·特纳还没有因为托马斯·奥弗伯里爵士谋杀案而被绞死之前，告诉她这个秘密的。无论这个巫婆是否看出了牧师的心思，她反正完全停了下来，阴险地盯着他的脸孔，狡猾地笑着，并且——尽管她一向很少跟牧师们说话——开始跟他说起话来了。

“这么看来，尊敬的先生，你已到森林里游览过了，”巫婆点着高头饰对他说道，“我求你，下一次只要给我打个招呼，我就乐于跟你同行。不消多说，我的美言会大大有助于任何一个生客，可以使他从你所见过的那边的当权者那儿得到盛情的接待！”

“太太，说实在的，”牧师严肃敬了一个礼，这是贵妇的地位所要求的，也是他的好教养必然要这么做的，“以我的良心和人格担保，我完全不懂你这话的用意！我不是到森林里去找那个当权者，以后任何时候我也不打算到那儿去找他，以求得这种人物的欢心。我唯一的目的是去问候我那位虔诚的朋友，使徒埃利奥特，为他在异教世界里赢得许多宝贵的灵魂而一同欢庆一番！”

“哈哈！”老巫婆仍然向牧师点着头，呵呵大笑地说，“好，好，我们在大白天只好这样说！你真像一个老手，竟能装成没事人一样！但是等到夜里，我们在森林中会另有话和你说的！”

希宾斯摆出老年人那种庄重的态度走过去了，但是时不时回过头来，对着牧师微

笑，好像想要探明他们之间究竟有一种什么样的神秘亲切关系一样。

“如果我已把自己出卖给了恶魔，” 牧师想道，“如果人们说得对，那么这个戴黄浆皱领，穿天鹅绒外套的老巫婆就是把那个恶魔选做她的王子和主子了！”

不幸的牧师呀！他所订的那个密约跟这点多么相像啊！他为幸福的梦幻所诱惑，经过一番认真的选择，竟一反常态，心甘情愿去干他自知是死有余辜的勾当。这一勾当就像传染病毒一样，非常迅速地扩散到了整个神经系统。它使一切圣洁的念头僵化了，同时又使一切形形色色的坏念头蠢蠢欲动了。轻蔑，怨恨，无端的狠毒，无故的邪念，对一切善良和神圣的事物妄加奚落，这一切都活跃起来了，甚至在使他感到害怕的时候，也使他觉得有诱惑力。他跟希宾斯老夫人不期而遇的那番话，如果真有其事，那就只能说明他跟恶人和魔鬼世界一脉相通，有交情了。

这时牧师来到了他那位于坟地边上的住所，他赶紧上楼，躲到他的书房里去了。牧师很高兴已躲进了这个避难所，这样他刚才在街上行走时所不断涌现的那些稀奇古怪的邪念中的任何一个邪念就都不可能抢先把他暴露给世人了。他走进自己那间住惯了的房间，看了看身边的书籍、窗户、壁炉和墙壁上舒适的挂毯，可是心里仍然怀着那从森林幽谷来到城里，直至家里一路上所萦绕在他脑际的那些奇怪的感觉。他在这儿读书、写字；他在这儿斋戒、守夜，结果是弄得半死不活；他在这儿努力祈祷；他在这儿忍受着千辛万苦！这儿有丰富的古希伯来文的《圣经》，其中有摩西和各种大小预言家对他说的话，并全部贯穿着上帝的声音。桌上有一篇未完成的讲道稿，旁边放着一支蘸过墨水的钢笔，稿中有一句中断了，那是因为两天前他的文思突然枯竭了的缘故。他知道那就是他，这个身材瘦削，面颊苍白的牧师做了这些事，忍受了这些痛苦，为“选举讲道”写了那么长的稿子。但他似乎是一个远远站着的旁观者，以轻蔑、怜悯而又半带羡慕的奇特心情看着这个旧我。旧我消失

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了。从林中返回的是另外一个人——一个更聪明的人，了解了许多隐情，这是单纯的旧我绝不可能做到的。可了解那些隐情经历了一个多么辛酸的过程啊！

当牧师沉浸在这些思绪之中的时候，有人来敲书房的门，他便说：“进来！”——他已有几分想到，可能是一个恶鬼。果然如此。进来的人是罗杰·奇林沃思老人。牧师站了起来，脸色发白，一言不发，一只手放在希伯来文《圣经》上，一只手放在胸脯上。

“欢迎你回来了，尊敬的先生！”医生说，“你见到那位虔诚的人埃利奥特使徒了，他好吗？亲爱的先生，我看，你脸色发白，似乎是穿过荒野的旅途使你太劳累了吧，要不要我帮助你恢复精力，好作你的‘选举讲道’呢？”

“不，我看不必了，”牧师迪默斯德尔先生答道，“我的旅行，我看到那位使徒和我呼吸到的新鲜空气，这一切都对我长期待在书房里的身体大有益处。我的好大夫，你的药物虽好，而且又是你用友好的手调制的，但我想，我不再需要它了。”

在这一段时间里，罗杰·奇林沃思一直以一个医生对待病人的那种严肃和关注的态度望着牧师。但是，尽管医生的外表如此，牧师还是几乎深信这个老人已经知道了或者至少已经确实猜疑到了他跟赫斯特·普琳此次的会面。在牧师看来，这时医生已经知道自己不再是他可靠的朋友，而是他最毒辣的敌人了。既然事已如此，自然就有一部分要流露出来。可是很奇怪，在用话把事情说明之前，却常常要经过很长的一段时间，并且双方都要胸有成竹，选择时机，避开某些话题，话到嘴边又可以安然缩回去。所以牧师并不担心罗杰·奇林沃思会用明白的话触及他们相互对峙的实际情形。可是医生还是用他阴险的手法可怕地一步一步逼近这一秘密。

“今晚你再试一下我的拙技不是更好吗？”他说，“的确，亲爱的先生，我们一定

极力使你健壮起来和有精力去做‘选举讲道’。人们都希望你大有作为，因为他们担心来年他们的牧师可能要走了。”

“对，到另一个世界去。”牧师以一种虔诚的顺从态度回答道，“但愿上天保佑那是一个更好的世界，因为我实际上不太想再跟我的教民在一起渡过来年那飞逝而过的时光了。可是，至于你的药，善良的先生，就我这样的体格来说，已经用不着了。”

“我听到你这么说很高兴，”医生回答说，“你服我的药那么久了，未见起过作用，现在也许开始生效了。我能取得这种疗效，真是三生有幸，无愧于新英格兰人的一片感激之情了！”

“朋友，你无微不至地关心我，我衷心感谢你，”牧师迪默斯德尔先生庄严地笑着说，“谢谢你，我只有用祈祷来报答你的善行了。”

“一个好人的祈祷是贵重如金的报偿！”罗杰·奇林沃思老人离开时回答道，“对，那等于是新耶路撒冷通用的金币，上面还有上帝造币厂的印记呢！”

牧师独自一人留在家，他唤来家仆拿饭食摆在面前，接着狼吞虎咽地吃了起来。然后，他把写好多页的“选举讲道”扔进火里，又重新写，此时他的思想感情奔放极了，以至于他以为自己有了什么灵感。唯一使他纳闷的是，上帝竟会看中他这样一支滥竽来演奏这宏伟、庄严的神谕的音乐。然而，不管这一神秘是自行被揭晓或者永远得不到揭晓，他都一直以急如星火和欢欣若狂的心情在赶着自己的工作。这一夜就像一匹天马一样飞驰而过，他骑在上面一直向前飞奔。早晨来到了，一抹红光透进了窗帘。最后太阳升起来了，把它的金光投射到书房里，并且射到牧师那昏昏沉沉的眼睛里。他仍旧坐在那里，手里拿着笔，后面还有大片大片的篇幅等着他

去写。

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第二十一章 新英格兰的节日

在新州长从人民手里接受他的公职的那天早上，赫斯特·普琳和小珠儿很早就来到了市场上。市场里已经挤满了做手艺的人和这个城镇里的其他平民百姓，人数相当的多。其中也有很多粗汉，从他们身穿的鹿皮衣服看来，显然是这个殖民地小首府周围森林中的某些村落的居民。

在这一节日中，也像在七年来其他所有的节日里一样，赫斯特穿着一身灰色的粗布衣服。衣服的颜色同衣服式样上某些说不清、道不明的特点差不多，使她这个人不起眼，不突出。然而，红A字又把她从这种暗淡无光中拉回来，使她在这个字母所表示的道德意义下面原形毕露了。她的脸孔，市民早已熟悉，已经看惯了，有如大理石一般安谧。它像一个假面具，或者毋宁说更像一个死人的面容那样冷若冰霜。我们所以作这种可悲的比拟，是由于赫斯特实际上等于死了一般，无权取得任何同情，她虽然还似乎混在这个世界上，但已经离开了人世。

这一天，她也许会有一种前所未见的表情，诚然，现在并未有足可觉察出来的迹象。除非有一个超自然的天才观察家，才可以首先看出她的心事，然后找出她在面容和风度上相应的表现。这样一位精神观察家也许能看出，赫斯特多年以来一直把众目睽睽作为一种必不可少的东西，作为一种赎罪的行为，作为一种对严厉的宗教

所必须忍受的刑罚，现在她可以最后一次却是自觉自愿来忍受这一睇一视了，为的是可以把那长久以来压抑在心头的痛苦变成为一种胜利。“请你们最后看一眼红A字和它的佩戴者吧！”——这个人们心目中的牺牲品和终生的奴隶可能这样对他们说，“过不多久，你们就管不着她了！几小时以后，神秘的大海就会把你们叫她戴在胸前的那个火红的标记永远淹没和埋葬掉！”如果我们设想一下，赫斯特在快要摆脱那跟她的生存紧紧拴在一起的痛苦而赢得自由的此时此刻，心中不免产生一种惆怅之情，这也不能不说是人性中的一种矛盾。她几乎在整个成年时期饱尝了苦艾的滋味，难道她现在还不可能心甘情愿屏住气息去喝最后一杯苦汁吗？今后端到她唇边的人生之酒，必然是盛在雕花金杯里的醇厚、芬芳、可口的美酒。要不像她这种饮惯苦酒的人，也就跟饮过烈性兴奋剂之后一样，仍然不免疲惫不堪，萎靡不振。

珠儿被打扮得轻盈娇美。谁也猜想不到，这样一个伶俐、活泼的小鬼竟是一个灰不溜秋的“幽灵”所生；或者谁也猜想不到为孩子设计这身服装所必备的巧妙劲儿，同赫斯特给自己裁制那身简朴、但在表现其与众不同的特点上也许更为困难的衣服，竟是出自一人之手。这身衣服对小珠儿是那么适合，似乎就是她的性格的流露，或必然发展和外在表现，它跟她是那么密不可分，就像花花绿绿的色彩不能从蝴蝶翅膀上分开或者瑰丽的光彩不能从一朵鲜花的花瓣上分开一样。这些东西是这样，孩子也是这样，她的衣服跟她的性格完全水乳交融在一起。然而，在这多事的一天里，在她的心中，却别有一种不安和兴奋的情绪，就像一个挂在胸前的钻石，随着胸部不断的悸动而发出各种各样的闪光。孩子们对于跟自己有关系的人的激动，总有一种同感，特别是家中出现什么困难或面临变革时，常有此感。因而，珠儿作为她母亲不平静的胸口上的一颗珠宝，就以她雀跃的情绪，把谁也不能在赫斯特那大理石般冷静的眉宇间看出来的情绪反映出来了。

珠儿兴高采烈，与其说在她母亲身边走着，不如说像小鸟一样飞来飞去。她不断撒野而含糊地听着，有时又尖声地唱着。当她们来到市场上时，珠儿见到那儿熙熙攘攘，十分热闹的情形，更是安静不下来，因为那儿平常像乡村聚会所前面的一个广阔、冷落的草地，而不像一个市镇的商业中心。

“啊唷，妈妈，这怎么啦？”她叫道，“为什么今天大家都不工作啦？今天全世界都放假啦？你看，那儿那个铁匠，他现在洗完了煤烟熏黑的脸孔，穿上了安息日的衣服，好像只要有一个好心人教他寻欢作乐，他就会高兴得不得了！那儿是布雷克特师傅，老监狱看守，他在向我点头和微笑哩。他为什么这么做，妈妈？”

“我的孩子，因为他还记得你是一个婴孩时的情形。”母亲回答道。

“就算这样吧，可这个又黑又丑的怪眼老头也不该对我点头微笑呀！”珠儿说，“要是他乐意，他可以对你点头，因为你穿灰衣，戴红A字。不过，你瞧，妈妈，多少生人的脸孔啊，当中还有印第安人和水手呢！他们都到市场上来干什么呀？”

“他们等着瞧队列通过呢，”赫斯特说，“因为州长和执事们都要排着队走过，还有牧师以及所有的大人物和善良的人物，并且配有乐队和部队在他们前面开路。”

“牧师也会在里面吗？”珠儿问，“他会把他的双手伸给我吗？就像你那次把我从溪边领到他跟前那样。”

“他会在里面的，孩子。”母亲回答说，“不过，他今天不会跟你打招呼；你也万万不要跟他打招呼。”

“他真是一个怪人，一个可怜的人！”孩子似乎自言自语地说，“他就爱在黑夜里

叫我们到他跟前去，拉着你的手和我的手，就像那晚我们和他站在那边的绞刑台上一样。他还在森林里，在那只有老树能听见，一线苍天能看见的森林里，和你坐在一堆苔藓上说话！当时他还吻了我的前额，这吻连小溪也难以洗掉！可是，在这儿，在大白天，在大家面前，他却不认我们，我们也不能认他！他真是一个怪人，一个可怜的人，老把手捂在胸口上！”

“珠儿，别作声！这些事你还不懂，”她母亲说，“你现在不要去想牧师的事了，看看你的周围吧。你看今天每一个人的脸上多么喜气洋洋。儿童从学校里跑来，成年人从工场和田野里出来，都是为了来欢度这个节日。因为今天有一个新人要来统治他们了，所以——自从第一个国家诞生以来，人类就有了这个习惯——他们都来欢度一番，好像这个可怜古老的世界终究有了一个黄金般的好年头一样！”

正如赫斯特所说，人们异常欢快，脸上容光焕发，清教徒们把他们认为懦弱的人类可以享受的全部欢乐和公共喜庆都压缩到了一年中这个快乐的节日里——过去如此，此后两个世纪的大部分时间也还是如此。因而，他们极力驱散日常生活中的乌云，在这只有一天的节日里，几乎没有了其他大多数居民在这个普遍受苦、受难的时代里的那种沉重的神情。

灰色和黑色无疑是当年人们的心情和风俗的特征，但也许我们把它夸大了。此刻波士顿市场上的市民们就生来不是继承清教徒那阴郁的情绪的。他们本来是英国人，他们的长辈生活在伊丽莎白时代欢乐富饶的环境中。那个时代的英国生活，从整体来看，就如世人所耳闻目睹的那样，又庄重，又高贵，又欢乐。如果新英格兰的移民们遵循他们自己的传统风尚的话，就要用大篝火、大宴会、大庆典、大游行来庆祝一切公共的重大事件了。在举行庄严的典礼中，把引人高兴的娱乐和庄严的气氛结合在一起，以及在全体国民节日里所穿的大礼服上，再加上一种好像是光怪陆

离，灿烂夺目的刺绣，那也并非是不可行的事情。所以在庆祝殖民地政治年度开始的这一天，那庆祝的方式中就有这类意图的影子。在我们的祖先为执事们每年就职典礼所建立的风俗习惯中，也可以找到那种记忆中的往昔壮观情景的模糊反映，以及找到那种他们在庄严、古老的伦敦所见过的——我们不说国王的加冕，只说市长的就任——褪尽了颜色的和种种淡漠了的东西的再现。共和国的祖先和缔造者——政治家、牧师和军人——认为外表的尊严和雄伟是当年的一种本分，按照古风来说，那被看做是公众或社会名流的正当的仪表。所有的官员都在人民的眼前列队向前行进，以此来为新建政府的简单机构显示必要的威严。

这时，人民即使不是受到鼓励，但也是得到了允许，可以放松恪守各种艰苦勤劳的生活准则，这在任何其他时候，都好像是和宗教同样重要的东西。这儿的确没有伊丽莎白时代或詹姆斯时代的英国那种很容易找到的大众娱乐设施，即没有戏剧方面的粗俗表演，没有弹奏竖琴、演唱传奇民歌的行吟诗人，没有为猴子跳舞伴奏的乐师，没有模仿妖术变戏法的魔术师，没有给群众说笑逗乐的小丑，这种说笑也许有几百年的历史了，但由于这种笑料植根极广，所以至今仍很感人。所有这样几种滑稽幽默表演的职业人员，不仅受到苛刻法律的严格限制，而且受到支持这种法律的人们的普遍感情的限制。然而，人民伟大而正直的脸孔依然在微笑——虽然可能是严峻的，但也是爽朗的。这些殖民地居民曾在英国农村集市和乡村草地上看到过和参加过的一些户外运动，在这儿也并不缺乏。人们认为，这类运动对于培养勇敢和大丈夫气概很有必要，所以至今依然活跃在这块新的土地上，市场上到处都可以看到康沃尔和德文郡的不同方式的角力比赛。在一个角落里还出现了一场铁头木棍的友谊比赛。而最为引人入胜的是，本书曾经特别提到过的那个绞刑台上，正有两个剑师用盾牌和宽剑在开始表演。但是，非常令人扫兴，这后一种表演由于镇上一个小官的干预而中断了，他不允许法律的尊严由于这样擅自占用一个神圣不可侵犯的

地方而受到损害。

从整体来说，他们当时还处在缺乏娱乐生活的第一阶段，他们是懂得及时行乐的祖先的后代，他们在欢度节日这一点上，比起他们的子孙来，甚至比起相隔很远的我们来，都是值得称道的，这样说也许并非过分。他们的直接后裔，即早期移民的第二代，都带上了清教徒教义最黑暗的阴影，民族的面貌也因此蒙上了一层黑垢，以至以后连年累月也无法清洗干净，我们现在还得重新再来学习那已忘记了的行乐的艺术。

市场上所呈现的人类生活图景，虽然一般的色彩是英国移民的那种暗灰色、褐色或黑色，但毕竟因有异彩而显得生气勃勃。一群印第安人身穿野蛮人的盛装，即刺绣得稀奇古怪的鹿皮袍子，佩着贝壳珠带，插着羽毛，带着弓箭和石矛——远远地站在一旁，脸色甚至比清教徒还要更加呆板、冷酷。这些纹身的野蛮人虽然粗野，但还不是此情此景中最粗野的人。这个称号最好不过加在某些水手身上，即从拉丁美洲大陆开来的船只上的一部分船员身上，他们现在都上岸来看选举日的热闹了。那是一些形容粗野的亡命徒，脸孔晒得黝黑，留着大胡子，身穿宽短裤，腰间系着腰带，常用一个粗金片扣住，并且老是别着一把长刀，有时则挂着一柄剑。他们的棕叶宽边帽子底下，露出闪闪发光的眼睛，即使在脾气好和快乐的时候，也露出一副野兽般的凶相。他们毫无畏惧或肆无忌惮地违反人人都必须遵守的行动准则。他们竟然在市镇官员的眼皮下面抽烟，而镇民要是这样办，那就每吸一口便得罚一先令了。他们还任意从随身携带的小酒瓶里大口大口地喝葡萄酒或烈性酒，并随意塞给张着口围观的群众。这显然是那个时代的道德不完善的反映。虽然我们认为那个时代是多么严厉，但是放纵以航海为业的阶层，不仅听任他们在岸上胡作非为，而且听任他们在海上铤而走险。当时的水手几乎可以指控为现在的海盗。比如说，就是这条船只上的船员，毋庸置疑，虽然不是航海同业中最坏的典型，但是我们也可以

说，他们确是犯了劫掠西班牙商船的罪行，这要是以我们现在的法庭来审判，那就全要处以绞刑。

但是，在古代，海洋兴风作浪，波涛汹涌，白浪滔天，不受任何约束，或者只听凭暴风骤雨的摆布，压根儿不受人类法律的约束。那些出没在海面上的海盗也许想到放弃他们的职业，并且如果愿意的话，可以立地成为陆上的一个正直、虔诚的人。所以即使在他完全过着冒险生涯的时候，跟他做做交易，或者偶尔交往一下，也不能认为是不体面的事。因此，那些穿着黑大氅，系着上浆宽领带和带着尖顶帽的清教徒长老们，总是对那些快快乐乐的水手们的吵吵嚷嚷和粗鲁行为莞尔而笑。并且当医生罗杰·奇林沃思老人这个有名望的公民被大家看到跟那条可疑的船只的船长秘密而亲切地边谈边走进市场时，谁也不会惊异和指责。

这位船长是一个最最显眼和最最风流的人物，就衣着来说，无论走到哪里，都引人注目。他的衣服上挂着许多绶带，帽子上有一道金边，还绕着一条金链，顶上插着一支羽毛。他身边佩着一柄剑，额上有一块剑伤，从他梳理的头发来看，与其说是要把它遮住，倒不如说是要让它露出来。一个大陆上的人要是穿这种衣服，露这种脸相，并且还因而显得那样轻松活泼，就没有不受到执事的严厉审问的，还可能要处以罚金或监禁，或者戴上脚镣手铐示众呢。然而，由于他是一位船长，所以就把这一切看做是属于他性格上的东西，就像闪亮的鱼鳞属于鱼身上的东西一样。

那开往布里斯托尔的海船的船长跟医生分手后，便在市场里闲游逛荡起来，一直碰巧走近了赫斯特·普琳站着的地方。看来船长认出了她，就毫不踌躇地跟她谈起话来。情况常常这样，无论赫斯特站在哪里，在她周围就会有一小块空地——好似一种魔法圈——留出来，虽然人们在近旁挤得水泄不通，也不敢或不愿闯进去。这是红A字画地为牢，把它命定的佩戴者禁锢起来，以此作为加强精神孤立的一种形式。

出现这种情况部分原因是她的自我克制，部分原因是她的同胞本能的回避，虽然已不再是那么冷酷无情了。这样的事，如果说在以前从来没有什么好处的话，现在倒可使赫斯特和水手一块儿谈话，而不怕有人偷听了。现在赫斯特·普琳在公众中的名声大变，就连本镇在严守节操上最为著名的主妇，也不敢作这样的交谈，否则飞短流长一定不会比赫斯特少了。

“夫人，那好，” 船长说，“我一定吩咐乘务员在你所预订的铺位以外，再多准备一个！这次航行既不怕患坏血病也不怕患船热病了！一来船上有一个外科医生，二来又来了另一位医生，我们唯一怕的就是缺药剂或药丸。但是，这也不要紧，船上还有许多药物，这是我跟一艘西班牙船交换来的。”

“你说什么？” 赫斯特问道，她的表情分外惊奇，“你还有别的乘客？”

“怎么，你还不知道？” 船长叫道，“有一位此地的医生——他自己说他叫奇林沃思——想跟你一块儿过过我们船舱里的生活。啊，啊，你一定是知道了，他告诉我说，他是你们的同伴，是你说的那位先生的亲密的朋友——他现在正受着那帮严酷的老清教徒统治者的迫害！”

“的确，他们彼此很了解，” 赫斯特虽然内心十分忐忑不安，但仍以一种镇静的态度回答说，“他们长期住在一块儿。”

船长和赫斯特的谈话就到此为止。但是，就在那一刹那间，她看见那个奇林沃思老头儿正站在市场最远的一个角落里，对她微笑着。那微笑通过宽阔、嘈杂的广场，穿过人群的各种谈吐、笑语，以及各种思想、感情和兴趣，传送过来一种神秘而可怕的含义。

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第二十二章 行进的队伍

在赫斯特·普琳还没能集中思想，对这种新出现的惊人事态考虑怎么办以前，只听见军乐声从一条邻街传了过来。这说明执事们和市民们的队列在朝着会议厅的路上行进。牧师迪默斯德尔先生将按照早已建立而且此后一直遵循的习惯在这儿作选举布道。

先头队列不久就出现了，它步伐缓慢而庄严地拐过街角，穿过市场。首先走过来的是乐队。其中有各种各样的乐器，虽然彼此也许并不完全协调，演奏技巧也不怎么高明，却达到了使铜鼓、号角有板有眼地对着群众吹吹打打的重大目的，从而使得眼前经历的生活情景染上了更加崇高、更加雄壮的气氛，小珠儿先是拍着手，但一会儿便失去了她整个早上一直兴高采烈的、不得安宁的激动劲儿。她默默地定睛望着，看上去就像一只漂浮的海鸟，要乘这高涨、激荡的声音，冲向高空一般。但是，由于看到乐队后面的荣誉卫队的军人们那件件武器和亮甲上闪烁的阳光，她又回到了先前的心境。这一支军队并非由雇佣兵组成，他们仍旧保留了团结一致的关系，把古老而光荣的声望从过去一直传到现在。队伍中有许多绅士，他们基于尚武精神，谋求建立一种跟圣堂武士团协会那样的军事学院，以便在那儿学习科学，以至于通过和平演习来学习实战本领。从这帮人个个傲慢的举止上，可以看出那时对军人的高度尊重。他们中的一些人在低地国家和欧战的其他战场上，的确赢得了军人的光荣称号和声誉。此外，他们整个的装束——身穿雪亮的铠甲，闪光的高顶头盔上插着摇晃的羽毛——也有着一种现代检阅所不能匹比的雄伟气魄。

然而，更值得那些爱思考的观察家注目的，是那紧跟在武装荣誉卫队后面的高职文官。就连他们的外表举止所表现出来的威严神气也使那些武人的傲视阔步不显得荒唐，也相形见绌了。当年我们称作“才华”的东西远远不像现在这样受到重视，但是对那些使人格坚定和尊贵的重大因素却比现在要重视得多。人们根据儿子世袭的权利有资格受人尊敬，但是在他们的后代身上，即使还完全有这种权利，不过份量也就轻了，到了选举和评论公职人员的时候，这权利就更是微乎其微了。这可能向好的方面转化，也可能向坏的方面转化，但也许在一定程度上两者兼而有之。在那古老的年代。那些荒芜海滨上的英国移民，虽然早把国王、贵族和一切可敬畏的人物抛在了脑后。但他们身上那种尊敬他人的本能和需要却仍很强烈，因此他们以这种尊敬之情来看待老年人的白发和尊严的寿眉，来看待经过长期考验的正直，来看待扎实的智慧 and 带着悲哀色彩的阅历，来看待那种可使思想永恒并受到人们普遍敬重的严肃而有分量的天资。因此，这些元老——布雷兹特里特、恩迪科特、贝林厄姆及其同僚们早就由选民们选举出来掌权了，他们看来虽然并不出类拔萃，但是他们所以出人头地，与其说是他们的聪明才干，倒不如说是他们的沉着稳重。他们有着坚韧不拔的精神和自信心，能在困难或危急存亡之秋，像一道阻挡惊涛骇浪的崖壁那样，为了国家的安危挺身而出。这种性格特点在那些殖民地官吏的方脸上和魁梧的身躯上也反映出来了。就天赋的威仪来说，把这些实行民主的先驱者吸收进贵族院或者当国王枢密院的顾问，看来也是无愧于祖国的。

在这些官员后面，接踵而来的便是那年轻而杰出的牧师，人们都希望从他的嘴里听到纪念日的讲道。在那个时代，他的职业远比政治生活更能发挥他的智能，因为——姑且勿论高尚的动机——担任牧师这个职业几乎受到公众顶礼膜拜的尊敬，它具有很大的诱惑力，足以把最有雄心的人吸引到这个职务上来。就连政治权力，也在有成就的牧师的掌握之中，像英克里斯·马瑟就是这样。

根据此时此刻看到迪默斯德尔的人们的观察，自从他踏上新英格兰的海岸以来，从来没有看见他的步态和神色在这次行进的队伍中表现得那么充沛有力。他根本不像平时那样步履维艰了；他的身子不弓了；手也不倒霉似地放在胸口上了。但是，如果对牧师正视一下，那就可以看出他的力量似乎不是来自肉体，而可能来自精神，来自神助，也可能是由于那只有在诚挚而长期思索的炉火中才能提炼出来的烈性强心剂所产生的兴奋作用。或者说，他那敏锐的气质，也许，多半是由于受到了又高又尖的音乐的激励，当时那音乐响彻云霄，也就使他随着腾空而起的声波振奋起来了。然而，迪默斯德尔的神情是那么心不在焉，就连他是否听到了音乐，也是一个问题。他的肉体以不寻常的气力向前移动着。但是，他的心思用在哪里呢？他的心灵的纵深处正在不寻常地活动着，忙于整理一连串即将从中倾吐出来的庄严的思想。因此他对于周围的东西，什么也没有看到，什么也没有听到，什么也不知道。但是，精神的因素却振作了虚弱的身体，一点儿也不费劲地带着它往前走，使它变成了跟精神一样的东西。不过那已成病态而具有非凡智能的人，虽然偶尔也会拥有这种强大的活力，并将积聚了多时的生命力注入其中，可是再过一些日子就又会毫无生气了。

赫斯特·普琳目不转睛地望着牧师，感到有一种凄凉的气氛笼罩着自己。但是，她不知道这是怎么回事和从哪里来的。她只感到牧师离她很远，完全不可企及。她心想他们必定会交换会心的一眼的。她想到阴暗的森林和林中孤独的小幽谷，想到爱情和苦恼，想到那根长满了青苔的树干，他们当时就手挽手坐在那儿悲伤而热情地谈着话，跟小溪忧郁的低语交织在一起。那时他们彼此的了解是多么深刻呀！他现在是那个人吗？她简直不认识他了！他似乎沉浸在悠扬的音乐声中，随着官员和长老们的队伍，得意洋洋地走过。他在人世的地位是不可接近的，他那冷漠无情的思想如今在她看来更是远隔天边了！赫斯特的精神消沉下去了，感到一切都是一场迷

梦，并且分明像她所梦见的那样，牧师和她之间并无实际的联系。因此女性气质那样重的赫斯特简直不能原谅他，尤其是在他们那行将到来的“命运”的沉重的脚步声已充耳可闻，并且愈来愈近的时候，更不可原谅！因为他竟能完全从他们共同的世界中抽出身来，而她却仍在暗中摸索，伸出她冰凉的手，但就是找不着他。

不仅珠儿看在眼里，并和她母亲的感情相呼应，而且她自己也感到牧师远在天边和不可捉摸。当行进的队伍走过时，孩子不安起来，跳上跳下，活像一只要展翅高飞的鸟儿一般。直到整个队伍走过时，珠儿这才抬起头来望着赫斯特的脸孔。

“妈妈，”她说，“那个人就是在溪边吻我的牧师吗？”

“别说了，我可爱的小珠儿！”她母亲低声说，“我们不要总在市场上说我们林中的事了。”

“我不能断定就是他。他叫人看起来是那么陌生，”孩子继续说，“要不，我会跑到他跟前去，让他当着大家的面吻我，就像他在阴暗的老林中那样。妈妈，牧师会怎么说呢？他会不会手拍胸脯，对我紧皱眉头，叫我走开呢？”

“珠儿，他会说什么呢？”赫斯特回答说，“他只有说，此刻不是吻你的时候，而且在市场上也不便接吻。傻孩子，幸好你没有去跟他说！”

还有一个妇人也对迪默斯德尔抱着同样的看法，那人的怪癖——或者我们应称之为精神错乱——促使她去干很少有什么市民愿冒险去干的事，促使她在公众场合跟那个带红A字的人谈话。那人就是希宾斯太太。她的穿着非常豪华，脖子上围了一个三层的皱领，身穿一件绣花的胸衣和一件富丽的天鹅绒外衣，手执一支金头拐杖，现在也出来观看游行队伍了。这个年高的妇人所以出名，就因为她是那时一直盛行的一切妖术中的一个主角（这使她后来付出了生命的代价），因此人群纷纷给她让出

一条道，生怕碰着她的衣服，好像那豪华衣服的褶子里带有瘟疫一般。人们看到她跟赫斯特·普琳——虽然现在人们对后者大有好感——站在一起，那由希宾斯太太引起的恐惧又加重了一倍，并使人们纷纷避开那两个妇人在市场上所站立的地方。

“看，哪一个凡人能够想象得到啊！”老妇人悄悄地对赫斯特低声说，“那个神圣的人呀！人们都确认他是人间的圣人，我必须说，他也确实像啦！看到他在队列中走过的人们，谁能料想得到，从他走出书房——我敢担保，他口中还念着希伯来文《圣经》的经文呢——去到森林中散步，这段时间多么短呀！啊哈，赫斯特，我们可知道那是怎么回事！但是，确确实实，的的确确，我很难相信，他现在就是那个人。我当时看到许多曾跟我跳着同样节拍舞蹈的教徒走在乐队后面，其间有那么一个了不起的人是个提琴师，还可能有一个印第安巫师或者一个拉普兰术士跟我们手拉着手呢！这对一个认识了世界的女人来说，不过是一件小事。但是，这个牧师呀！赫斯特，你能否断定就是在林中小径上跟你会面的那个人吗！”

“夫人，我不懂你说的什么，”赫斯特·普琳回答说，感到希宾斯太太精神上有毛病。然而，她听到希宾斯夫人那样自信地断言，她跟那么多人（其中也有她自己）和恶魔有个人联系，又不胜震惊和畏惧起来了。“像牧师迪默斯德尔先生这样一个博学和虔诚的圣职人员，我不能妄加评论！”

“呸，你这个女人，去你的吧！”老妇人晃着她的手指头点着赫斯特叫道，“你认为我到森林里去过那么多次数，还不能判断有谁到过那里吗？即使他们头发里没有留下一片跳舞时戴的野花环的叶子，我也是能够判断出来的！赫斯特，我认识你，因为我当时见过这个标志。我们大家都可以在阳光下看到它。它在黑夜里就像一团火那样闪闪发光。你公开戴着它，因此在这一点上是没有问题的。但是，这位牧师呀，让我对着你的耳朵告诉你吧！当恶魔看见他的一个签了字、盖了章的仆人不

承认契约时，就像现在的牧师迪默斯德尔先生那样，他自有办法让这个标志在光天化日之下，暴露在世人面前！哈，赫斯特·普琳！那个牧师常把手捂在胸口上，他想隐藏什么呢！”

“我的好希宾斯太太，那是什么？”小珠儿急切地问，“你看见过没有？”

“那没关系，小宝宝！”希宾斯夫人向珠儿深深地鞠了一个躬回答说，“你自己迟早会见到的。孩子，人们都说你是‘空中之王’的后代！等哪一个晴朗的晚上。你跟我骑马去看你的父亲好吗？到时，你就会明白牧师为什么要把手放在胸口上了！”

这个鬼样的老妇人笑着走开了，她笑得那样尖声尖气，连整个市场都能听见。

这时，会议厅已做过开场的祈祷，可以听到牧师迪默斯德尔先生开始讲话的声音了。赫斯特情不自禁地走近那地方。这个神圣的大厦过于拥挤，再也容不下一个旁听者了赫斯特就在绞刑台的近旁找了一个位置。这个地方紧挨大厦，整个讲道都能传到她的耳朵里。牧师那特别的声音虽然听来模糊，但是仍然起伏有致，时而低沉，时而奔放。

牧师的发音器官本身就是一种可贵的天禀，即使听者不懂传道者所说的话，光凭他的语调和节奏，也要使人感动得一摇三叹。它像任何其他音乐一样，以扣人心弦的声调——对于不论在哪儿受过教育的人都是如此——传送出热情和哀怒，高亢和柔和之情。尽管这种声音被教堂的几道墙壁挡住而听不真切，但是赫斯特·普琳还是聚精会神地听着，产生十分亲切的共鸣，以至于觉得这个布道，把那些听不清的话全部除去以外，对她来说仍具有一种一以贯之的意义。如果那些话能听得更清楚，也许不过是更粗俗的谈吐罢了，从而有害它的精神实质。现在她听到这种低沉的声

音，就像风声停下来休息一般，然后又随着风儿高高飞扬，越来越悦耳，越来越有力，一直到它的音量似乎使她完全陶醉在令人肃然起敬和庄严宏伟的气氛中，这才罢休。然而，这种声音虽然有时变得很雄伟，但其中始终包含着哀怨的基本特质。那忽高忽低的痛苦的倾诉——你不妨设想那就是受苦受难的人类的低语或尖叫——触动着每个人内心的情感。在孤寂中，有时所能听到的，或者隐约地听到的，就只有这种深沉的哀婉声。但是，即使在牧师的声音逐渐变得高昂而庄严的时候，在它滔滔不绝地涌现出来的时候，在它达到极广、极强的时候，在它响彻了教堂，以至于穿过那牢固的墙壁，扩散到户外的时候，如果听者用心聆听，还是可以听出其中痛苦的叫喊。这是怎么一回事呢？这是一个满怀悲哀或者罪恶的心灵的哀怨，每时每刻以各种腔调，并且决非徒然地对人类伟大的心胸道出自己无论是罪恶还是痛苦的秘密，从而祈求同情或原谅。现在使得牧师具有那恰如其分的力量的，便是这种深沉而持续不断的低音。

赫斯特在这段时间里，就像一座雕像一样站在绞刑台的台脚底下。即使不是牧师的声音使她站在那儿，那个地方也对她有一种不可抗拒的吸引力，因为她正是在那儿开始了她最初的耻辱生涯。她内心有一种感觉——虽然太模糊了，不能形成一种思想，但是却沉重地压在她的心头——她整个的生活轨道，无论是以前还是以后，都跟这个地方联系在一起，这儿就仿佛是把她的整个生活统一起来的一个中心点。

小珠儿这时离开了母亲的身旁，在市场里到处随意游玩。她以稀奇古怪闪闪发亮的目光，使得那些阴郁的群众欢快起来，这就好像是一只羽毛闪亮的鸟儿飞来飞去，在叶丛的微明中半隐半现，把灰黑灰黑的整棵簇叶树木都照亮了一样。她行踪不定，总是突如其来，没有规律。这说明她的心情兴奋极了，今天用脚尖跳着舞步，更是双倍地不知疲倦，因为她的心情正好同母亲不安的心情一齐起伏，波动不定。珠儿无论在什么时候只要一看见可以引起她那十分敏感而又漫无目的的好奇心的事

物，就要按她的愿望跑去，那真可说，抓取他人或他物就像是自己的财物一般，一点儿也不约束自己，向人致以谢意。那些清教徒们虽然望着珠儿笑着，但一看到她那小小身躯上所流露和迸发出来的不可言传的美丽和古怪的魅力时，没有一个不想说，这孩子是精灵的后代。珠儿跑着，盯住一个野蛮的印第安人看着，这使他感到她的性格比他还要野。接着，珠儿以她天生的大胆，但又特有的节制，向一群水手跑去。这些水手好像陆地上的印第安人一样，是海上脸孔黝黑的野人。他们惊异和赞赏地凝视着珠儿，似乎她是由一片浪花变成的一个小姑娘，并天生了一颗夜晚在船头下面闪着海光的心。

有一个以航海为业的人——其实就是赫斯特·普琳说过的那个船主——为珠儿的模样所深深吸引，总想用双手把她抱起来吻一下。但由于发现珠儿像飞在空中的一只蜂鸟，根本逮不着她，便把自己帽子上绕着的一条金链取下来，扔给了她。珠儿马上以十分巧妙的手法把它缠在自己的脖子上和腰间。那金链一旦在那儿出现，就成了珠儿不可分割的一部分，很难想象珠儿可以没有它。

“你的母亲就是那个戴红A字的妇女吧？”那海员说，“你能帮我给他捎个信吗？”

“要是那消息能让我高兴，我愿意。”珠儿回答说。

“那你就告诉她，”海员接下去说，“我再次跟那位脸黑背驼的老大夫说了，他答应带他的朋友，也就是你妈认识的那位先生跟他一同乘船去。所以你妈不必为他操心，只管她自己和你好了。你能告诉她这件事吗？你这个妖孩儿。”

“希宾斯夫人说我父亲是‘空中之王’！”珠儿淘气地笑着叫道，“要是你叫我那个坏名字，我就向他告你，叫他祭起一阵暴风雨，把你的船打翻！”

珠儿在市场里绕行了一个“之”字形之后，回到了母亲身边，并把船长所说的话告

诉了她。赫斯特一想到那在劫难逃的厄运之神的阴险、狰狞的脸孔时，她那刚强、镇静和坚韧不拔的精神立刻消失殆尽了。这副狰狞的面孔现在竟然出现在牧师和她就要逃脱那悲惨的迷宫的时候，并冷酷无情地讪笑着，挡在他们的路中间。

赫斯特由于船长带来的口信使她陷入一种可怕的困惑之中，内心本来就烦闷不堪，现在又要遭受另一番磨难了。原来从附近乡村来了很多人，这些人常听人说到红A字，并由于种种失实和夸大的谣传，使他们感到很可怕，但又从未亲眼看见过这个字，现在这些人在看够了其他各种娱乐以后，便莽撞和粗鲁地跑过来，拥挤在赫斯特·普琳的周围。然而，这些人虽然肆无忌惮，也只是在几码以外的地方围成一圈，不敢更为接近。他们就那样远远站着，被那个神秘的标志所产生的令人深恶痛绝的离心力固定在那儿。一大帮水兵看到这些拥挤的人群，也想知道红A字是怎么回事，于是把他们那风吹日晒的、一脸凶相的脸孔伸到这个圈子里来了。甚至那些印第安人也受了白种人冷淡阴暗的好奇心的影响，而悄悄地穿过人群，用他们蛇一般的黑眼睛紧紧盯着赫斯特的胸部，他们也许认为这个佩戴灿烂绣花标志的人必定是移民中的一位地位很高的人物。最后是本市市民——他们本已看厌了这个东西，但由于看到别人的反应，产生了同感，兴致也就慢慢恢复过来了——懒懒散散地闲逛到这个地方来，以其冷漠而熟悉的眼光看着赫斯特胸前那个司空见惯的耻辱的标志。这也许比其他人更使赫斯特痛苦。赫斯特看见并认出了那一群主妇们熟悉的脸孔。七年前，她们曾等着看她从牢门中走出来。其中只有一个不在。她就是那个最年轻的、唯一富有同情心的妇女，她的葬衣就是赫斯特后来做的。在赫斯特即将抛弃这个火红的A字的最后一刻，它竟奇怪地成了更为引人注目和令人兴奋的中心，这真比她第一天佩戴这个标志以来的任何时候都要更加刺痛她的心胸。

当赫斯特站在这个耻辱的魔圈里的时候——那阴险残酷的判决似乎把她永远钉在那儿——那令人钦佩的传道士却正从神圣的布道坛上向下望着听众，而他们最内在的

精神也为他所深深吸引住了。这里一个是教堂里的神圣牧师，一个是市场上戴着红A字的妇女，谁的想法竟会不虔诚到那种地步，会认为他们两人的身上却有着一个同样灼热的烙印呢！

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第二十三章 新出现的红A字

那雄辩的声音就像汹涌的海浪一样使得听众的心潮随之澎湃，最后终于停息了。瞬息之间一片沉寂，就像神谕宣示之后那样肃静。接着是喃喃的低语声和半压抑的喧哗声，此时听众似乎解除了那把他们送到另一个精神世界里去的高超符咒而逐渐苏醒过来了，但是仍然深深怀着敬畏和惊异的心情。又过了一会儿，人群开始从教堂的几个大门中蜂拥而出。讲道到此结束了。他们需要吸收一种更适合于他们重过粗俗和尘世生活的空气，而不是牧师那种化成了火热言词和充满芬芳馥郁思想的气氛。

人们一来到户外，那种狂喜劲儿一下子就变成了一片营营的谈话声。街道上和市场上到处充满了对牧师的赞扬声。听众一直赞叹不已，人人都以能把那言外之意尽情倾吐为快。大家一致的看法是，从来也没有一个人像牧师今天讲得那样富有极其明智、极其崇高、极其神圣的气派；也从来没有一个凡人像他那样明白晓畅地说出那番鼓舞人心的话来。不难看出，这些话的力量似乎是发自上天，降落到他身上，支配着他，不断地使他从面前的讲稿中升华起来，并使他像听众一样充满了奇异的思想。他那天的讲题是神和人类社会的关系，并特别讲到了他们在那荒凉的地方所开

拓的新英格兰。当牧师的宣讲快要结束的时候，忽然有一种类似预言的灵感涌上了他的心头，迫使他一吐为快，就像古以色列当年那些预言家的感受一样。不同的只是，犹太预言家们宣告的是他们国家的天罚和毁灭，而青年牧师的使命则是预言上帝那新结集起来的人民的高尚而光荣的命运。但是，在整个讲道过程中却贯穿了一种深沉而悲凉的低调，这就不能不解释为一个马上就要离世而去的人的自然的悔恨了。是的，这儿的教民是如此热爱牧师，牧师也是如此热爱他们，因此在他预感到自己行将夭折并在他们涕泪声中死去时，也就不能不唏嘘叹息一番而归天了！牧师不久人世的这种想法最后一次加强了他讲道的效果。这就仿佛是一个天使在飞向九天的过程中，飞临人们头顶之上摇了几摇它那光辉灿烂的翅膀——既有阴影，也有光辉——并对人们吐露出几声黄金一般宝贵的真情实话。

这样，牧师迪默斯德尔先生便进入了他一生中空前绝后、最为光明、最为得意的新时期，这正如大多数人在他们各自不同的领域中所经历的那样，虽然他们要到以后很久才能认识到这一点。牧师此刻站在最得意的高位上。在新英格兰早期，牧师这种职业本身就是一个崇高的垫脚石，一个牧师只有凭着天赋的智慧、丰富的知识、压倒一切的雄辩的才能和洁白无瑕的神圣的名声，才能获得这种高位。这就是牧师此时此刻所处的地位，当时他正作完“选举布道”，将头靠在布道坛的垫子上。与此同时，赫斯特·普琳站在绞刑台边，红A字仍在她胸前火样地燃烧着。

现在又可以听到从教堂门口传来乐队悦耳的奏乐声和武装卫队整齐而沉重的脚步声了。队伍由此走向市政厅，要在那儿举行一个隆重的宴会，以结束这一天的典礼。因此，尊敬和威严的父老们的队伍又一次穿过宽阔的人行道出现在人们眼前了。当州长、执事们、年高德重的贤达、神圣的牧师以及所有当时的知名人士来到观众之中时，人们便恭恭敬敬闪在两边让出一条道来。当这些人物全部出现在市场上时，又受到了一阵表示敬意的欢呼声。这种欢呼声——虽然是出自当时人们对统治者的

幼稚的忠诚，但无疑增加了分外的力量和声势——使人感到一种不可抑制的迸发出来的热情，而这又是由牧师高度雄辩的口才在听众内心激发起来的，现在那雄辩的声音仍然回响在他们的耳际。每一个人都感受到这种声音的冲击，同时从邻人那儿受到了感染。这种冲击在教堂里已经难以抑制，现在到了户外便响彻云霄了。这儿人多众广，他们感情兴奋和激动到了极点，足以产生比那狂风的呼啸，霹雳的雷鸣或大海的咆哮更为使人震撼的声音；现在就连这许多强而有力的声音也会由于这遍及一切的冲击而凝聚成为一个巨大的声浪，以及由于这遍及一切的冲击而使许多心变为一颗巨大的心。在新英格兰的土地上，从来也没有过这样的呼喊声啊！在新英格兰的土地上，从来也没有过一个人像这个青年牧师那样受到他人世间教友这样大的尊敬啊！

牧师此时的情况怎么样呢？他头顶周围有没有一轮光芒四射的光圈的影子呢？像他这样被神灵所灵化，被崇拜者所神化的人，他的步伐在行进的队伍中是否也真的踏在世间的尘土上呢？

当军人和文官的队伍往前行进时，所有人的眼睛都一齐转向牧师随着人群走动的地方。只有当人群中这一部分人和那一部分人都分别看到了牧师之后，叫喊声才逐渐沉静下来，从而变为一种低语声。牧师在这一片欢欣鼓舞的气氛中，脸色是多么虚弱和苍白！他的精力——或者毋宁说是那支持他、一直让他讲完神圣的福音的灵感，因为福音本身就从上天带来了自己的力量——由于那样忠实地履行自己的职责而消耗殆尽了。人们刚才在他面颊上见到的满面红光也消失了，这就像是一团火焰在余烬中绝望地熄灭了一样。他那死人般的脸色，简直不像一个活人的脸孔；他无精打采地在路上蹒跚着，简直不像一个活人，但又总是在蹒跚着，没有倒下。

他的一个牧师同事——可敬的约翰·威尔逊——看到牧师的精力和神智衰竭到那种地

步，便立即前去搀扶他。牧师颤抖着，但是坚决拒绝了老人伸来的手臂。他仍然向前走着，如果那动作可以那么认为的话，但实际是一步三晃，就像一个婴儿看到了他母亲伸出手来引他向前走时一样摇晃吃力。牧师最后几步虽然几乎失去了知觉，但他还是对着那记忆犹新的、日晒雨淋的绞刑台走过来了，很久以前，在那逝去的悲惨的岁月里，赫斯特·普琳就是在这儿受辱示众。赫斯特当时就是手抱小珠儿站在这儿，并且胸前戴着红A字！牧师在这儿站住了。尽管乐队仍在奏着庄严欢乐的进行曲，鼓舞着队伍前进。音乐召唤着他往前走——前去参加宴会——但他却在这儿站着不动了。

贝林厄姆在最后几分钟一直以焦急的眼光望着青年牧师。他此刻离开了他在队伍中的位置，走上前去帮助牧师，因为从迪默斯德尔的气色看来，不去搀扶，他就必然要倒下了。但是，牧师表情上有一种什么东西使州长望而却步，尽管州长并不是一个轻易听从心灵相互隐晦暗示的人。与此同时人群又畏惧又诧异地望着。在他们看来，牧师这种身体上的昏厥只不过是他的精神力量的另一种表现。像青年牧师这样一个人，如此神圣，在众人眼前升天，渐暗渐明，终于消失在天国的光辉之中，这对他来说也算不得是高不可攀的奇迹！

牧师转向绞刑台，伸出他的双臂。

“赫斯特，”他叫道，“到这儿来！我的小珠儿，来吧！”

他脸色可怕地望着她们，但是其中又包含着某种温柔而又异常得意的神色。孩子以她特有的像小鸟一般的动作，飞也似的跑到牧师跟前，紧紧地抱住他的双膝。赫斯特·普琳——则慢慢地走着，似乎是迫于不可避免的命运，并且违反她的最坚强的意志——也走过来了，但在她还没有走到他身边以前就停住了。就在这一瞬间，奇林沃思老人挤进人群——也许他看来十分阴暗、惶惑而又邪恶，就像是从阴曹地府里

钻出来的一般——紧紧抓住他的牺牲者，不许他去做自己想要做的事！无论如何，老人是冲上前去，抓住了牧师的胳膊。

“疯子，且慢！你要干什么？”他低声说，“叫那个女人回去吧！放开这个孩子吧！一切就都没事了！不要玷污你的名誉，让耻辱毁了自己！我还能救你！你难道要让你的神圣的职业声名狼藉吗？”

“哈哈，骗子！我看，你来得太晚了！”牧师回答道，又害怕又坚决地对视着他的眼睛，“你的权力今非昔比了！我靠着上帝的帮助，就要逃出你的掌心了！”

他再次把手伸向那个戴着红A字的女人。

“赫斯特·普琳，”他以沁人心脾的热诚叫道，“让我借上帝的名义说话，上帝是如此森严可怕，而又如此慈悲为怀，正是他给了我恩惠，现在就让我在这最后的时刻，为了我深重的罪行和极度的痛苦，去做我七年以前忍痛未能做的事吧。现在你上这儿来，把你的力量给我吧！是的，赫斯特，你的力量。但是，得让它由上帝所赐给我的意志来指引！对此，这个可悲而又邪恶的老人却全力加以反对——以他自己和恶魔的全力加以反对！过来，赫斯特，过来！把我扶到绞刑台那边去！”

人群一片混乱。那些紧挨在牧师身旁站着的有地位、有身份的人，都对眼前所见大为惊异和困惑不解——不仅接受不了那明摆着的解释，也不愿去想一想别的什么解释——以至于一个个都成了一言不发、一动不动的旁观者，只等着上天来裁判。他们眼睁睁看着牧师靠在赫斯特的肩膀上，由赫斯特用手臂托着来到了绞刑台前，登上了台阶，与此同时，那个在罪恶中降生的孩子的小手则仍紧紧握在牧师的手中。罗杰·奇林沃思老人，作为与这出罪恶和悲哀的戏剧有密切关系的人也跟在他们的后面，他们都是这出悲剧中的演员，因而他也很有资格在最后一幕出场。

“哪怕你找遍全球，”他略带威胁地对牧师说，“除了这个绞刑台以外，你再也找不到一个藏身之地了——无论你跑到天涯海角，你也逃脱不了我的手心！”

“感谢指引我上这儿来的上帝！”牧师回答说。

他仍旧哆嗦着，转向赫斯特，眼里虽然带着疑虑和焦急的表情，但是嘴唇上却分明流露出了淡淡的微笑。

“这不是比我们在森林里所梦想的还要好吗？”他低声说。

“我不知道！我不知道！”赫斯特慌忙地回答，“更好吗？对。这样我们两个可以双双一死为快，小珠儿也可以跟我们一块儿同归于尽！”

“至于你和珠儿，那就照上帝的旨意去做吧，”牧师说，“上帝是慈悲的！让我现在去履行上帝明明摆在我眼前的意愿吧。赫斯特，我是一个垂死的人了，那就让我赶快肩负起我的耻辱吧！”

牧师迪默斯德尔先生一面由赫斯特·普琳搀扶着，一面仍旧握着小珠儿的一只手，把脸转向高贵而尊严的统治者；转向与他同事的神圣的牧师们；转向人民群众，当他们得知有件深刻的人生大事——即使这种事件罪深孽重，那也充满了痛苦和懊悔——要向他们吐露时，他们的心胸大为震惊，他们饱含同情的眼泪。太阳刚过子午线，那照射在牧师身上的阳光，使他的形体显得分外分明，就像离开整个地球站立着一般，在上帝的正义法庭上，申诉自己的罪行。

“新英格兰的人们！”他叫道，那声音高昂、庄严、雄伟——但总是带着颤抖，有时还有从悔恨和悲伤的无底深渊中迸发出来的尖叫声——回旋在他们的耳际，“你们，爱戴过我！你们，奉我神圣！可你们现在所看到的我，竟是人世的一个罪人！”

我终于——终于站到七年前便应该站的地方来了。跟这个女人站在这里了，现在正是她以那比我爬到这里来的绵薄力量大一些的力量，在这可怕的时刻支撑着我，使我不至于扑面摔倒在地。看啦，请看看赫斯特所戴的那个红A字！你们不是一看到它就毛骨悚然吗？无论她走到哪里——无论她背着这个不幸的重担走到哪里想找个地方休息——红A字都会在她周围发出一道可怕的、令人厌恶的惨淡的微光。但是，在你们中间还站着一个人，你们对他的罪恶和耻辱的烙印却不在乎！”

说到这儿，牧师似乎要把他其余的秘密隐而不宣了。但是，他极力战胜那正在左右着他的身体上的虚弱——尤其是心情上的脆弱。于是抛开一切帮助，情绪昂扬地向前迈了一步，站在这个妇女和孩子的前面。

“这个烙印就在他身上！”牧师以一种勇猛的力量继续说，他决意要把全部东西和盘托出，“上帝的眼睛看着它！天使们总是指着它！恶魔也知道得很清楚，看到它就恼怒，不断地用那火热的手戳着它！但他狡猾地瞒过了大家，以一种哀痛和悲伤的精神面貌在你们中间出现。他哀痛，是因为在这个罪孽的世界里，他是多么纯洁！他悲伤，是因为他失去了他神圣的亲属！现在，在这临死的时刻，他就站在你们面前！他要你们再看看赫斯特的红A字！他要告诉你们，那个红A字虽然神秘恐怖，但也只是他刻在自己胸前的东西的一个影子，甚至他自己这个红色的耻辱标志也不过是他内心烙印的一个象征！站在这里的任何人有谁会怀疑上帝对一个罪人的惩罚呢？看吧！看看这个可怕的罪证吧！”

他以一种痉挛的举动扯去了自己那条牧师的宽领带。于是那东西一下就露了出来！但是，去描写那显露出来的东西却未免不恭。刹那间，人们目瞪口呆，一齐把视线集中在这个可怕的奇迹上，而牧师却依旧站着，脸上显出一阵胜利的喜悦，就像一个人在最痛苦的关键时刻赢得了胜利一样。然后便倒在绞刑台上。赫斯特将他扶起

一些，把他的头靠在自己的胸脯上。奇林沃思老人则跪在他身边，脸色苍白、呆滞，看来也只有奄奄一息了。

“你已逃脱我的掌心了！”他再三说，“你已逃脱我的掌心了！”

“愿上帝宽恕你！”牧师说，“你也犯了大罪。”

牧师把他垂危的双眼从老人身上移开，凝视着那个妇人和孩子。

“我的小珠儿，”牧师软弱无力地说，脸上露出甜蜜、温柔的微笑，宛如一个正要沉沉入睡的人一样。不，他现在即已卸下了重负，那看起来就几乎像是跟孩子逗着玩儿一般了，“亲爱的小珠儿，你现在愿意吻我一下吗？你在那边森林里不愿意，但是现在愿意不？”

珠儿吻着牧师的嘴唇。她的魅力消逝了。这个野孩子在这一大幕悲剧中扮演了一个角色。现在这幕悲剧把她全部的同情心都展示出来了，当她的眼泪滴在他父亲的脸颊上时，那点点滴滴的泪珠儿便是她的誓言，她发誓要在人间的酸甜苦辣中长大成人，并且要永远与世无争，只是在世间做一个普通的妇女。珠儿对于她母亲来说，作为一个痛苦的使者的使命也全部完成了。

“赫斯特，”牧师说，“永别了。”

“我们不是还要相见吗？”赫斯特低下头，把脸紧挨着他的脸低声说，“我们不是还要在一块儿度过我们的永生吗？的确，我们彼此都吃够了苦头，并以此赎了罪！你就用这双明亮的垂危的眼睛遥望来生吧！然后，告诉我，你看见了什么？”

“别作声，赫斯特，别作声！”牧师颤抖而庄严地说，“我们破坏了法律！——这种罪在这儿揭露出来是多么可怕啊！——你就独自把它记在心里吧。我害怕！我害

怕！既然我们忘了上帝——既然我们没有尊重彼此的灵魂，那就很可能会这样——此后别想在来世的永恒和纯洁的重聚中相见了。上帝什么都知道，上帝从来以慈悲为怀！上帝特别是通过我的痛苦证明了他的慈悲。他使我的胸前受到这火烧火燎一样的痛苦！他派遣那个阴险可怕的老人来使这一痛苦经常保持着炽热！他把我带到这儿来，在众目睽睽下接受这个又是胜利又是耻辱的死亡！如果这些痛苦缺少了一个，我就要永远毁灭了！赞美上帝的英名吧！遵从上帝的旨意吧！永别了！”

牧师说完这最后一句话，就断气了。一直保持沉默的人群，此时突然发出一阵奇怪而又深沉的声音，这声音包含着敬畏，也包含着惊讶，一时还难以用言词表达出来，它只是像一种窃窃的私语声，随着死者的灵魂沉沉地滚滚而去。

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第二十四章 终结

过了很多天以后，人们由于有了充裕的时间来琢磨上述情景的看法，因此对于在绞刑台上所目击的事情，其说也就不一了。

大多数旁观者证实，在那不幸的牧师的胸前看到了一个红A字——跟赫斯特·普琳佩戴的完全一样——烙印在肌肉里。至于来源，则众说纷纭，可以肯定地说全属推测。有的人断言，在赫斯特·普琳第一次戴上她那个耻辱的标记时，牧师迪默斯德尔先生就开始了他的苦行，用可怕的酷刑来折磨自己——后来又用了许多不足取的办法继续往下干。另一些人则坚决主张，这个烙印是罗杰·奇林沃思老人这个很有灵验

的巫师一手造成的，是通过巫术和毒药的作用，经过很长一段时间以后才有的产物。还有一些人——他们最能理解牧师的特殊感情，以及牧师用精神来支配肉体的惊人作用——悄悄说出他们的看法，认为这个可怕的记号是牧师出于悔恨，用牙齿不断从内心向外咬啮的结果，最后才形成了这个红A字，以此表达上天可怕的惩罚。对于这些推测，读者不妨从中选择。我们反正把我们对这桩怪事所能得悉的看法都摆出来了。我们很高兴，现在这个标记已经完成了它的使命，可以抹掉它深深刻在我们脑海中的痕迹了，因为它长久盘桓脑际已经明显地令人非常不快了。

然而，说也奇怪，有一些人明明是这一事件的全过程的目击者，并自称他们的眼睛一刻也没有离开过牧师，却否认他的胸脯上有什么标志，而且洁净得就像是一个新生的婴儿一样。据他们所说，牧师临终的话，不仅没有承认，而且甚至没有一点意思意味着他与赫斯特·普琳所以长期佩戴红A字的罪行有任何关系。据那些可敬的目击者声称，牧师由于意识到自己快要死了——也由于意识到群众把他捧进了圣徒和天使的行列——所以就想死在那个堕落的妇人的怀里，以此向世人表示最优秀的、正直的人物也都是那么毫无价值。他竭力为人类精神的向善耗尽了生命，并以他怎样死亡的方式作为一个寓言，使他的崇拜者们记住一个重要而可悲的教训，即从“无限纯洁的上帝”看来，我们都是同样的罪人。这对人们的教训就是：我们中的最神圣的人物也不过比他们的同胞略高一筹，只是能比较清楚地看出上帝对我们的慈悲，以及比较彻底地否定那看来奋发有为的尘世功名的幻梦。对于这样一个重大的真理问题我们可以姑置勿论，但是我们不能不把人们对迪默斯德尔先生的这种看法只当做是一种愚忠，一个人的朋友——特别是牧师的朋友——如果抱着这种愚忠，那么当证据有如中午的太阳照在红A字上那样明显，并确定那人是一个虚伪的、满身罪恶的人世动物时，他还往往会对他的人格维护备至。

我们写本书的主要根据是一部古代的手稿，而这部手稿又是根据一些人的口述写成

的，其中有的人还认识赫斯特·普琳，其他的人也都听过当时的目击者的叙述，因而对以上各章中的描述均可信以为真。从不幸的牧师的悲惨经历中我们可以得出许多教训来，现在我们只把它归结为一句话：“必须诚实！必须诚实！必须诚实！开诚布公地把你那即使不是最坏的东西，但可由此推知出最坏的东西的蛛丝马迹向世人和盘端出来！”

几乎紧接着迪默斯德尔先生死后，再也没有一件事情比那个名叫罗杰·奇林沃思的老人的外貌和举止变化得那么大的了。他的体力和精力——他的一切生命力和智力——似乎一下就垮下来了，并且垮得那么厉害，以至可以明显地看出他枯槁了，萎缩了，他几乎要从人们的眼中消失了，就像一棵连根拔起的野草即将在太阳中干枯一般。这个不幸的人曾把策划和系统地履行复仇计划作为他的生活准则，现在当他在在这方面取得了完全的胜利和结果以后，这一罪恶的准则就再也没有支撑的物质基础了。简而言之，既然在人世再也没有了恶魔的工作要他去做，那么这个没有人性的人就只有到他的主子那儿去找他能做的工作和领取他应分的报酬了。但是，对所有这些影子似的人物，只要是我们的亲朋近友——不论是罗杰·奇林沃思，还是他的同伴——我们都乐于慈悲为怀。爱和憎在本质上是否为同一的东西，这是一个值得注意和探讨的奇怪的问题。两者发展到顶点的时候，就会关系极为密切，心心相印，并互为依靠，这一方向另一方求得自己感情和精神生活上的需要。一旦一方没有了热烈的爱或者没有了强烈的恨，那么另一方就会由于失去了这些而孤单和凄凉。因此，从哲学上看，这两种情感基本上是相同的东西，只是一种出现在天国的光辉中，另一种出现在黯淡的光线里。所以在那个冥冥的世界里，老医生和牧师尽管俩人都是牺牲者——有可能突然发现他们在人间所积蓄的怨恨变成了黄金一般宝贵的爱。

现在且放下这种议论不说，而让我们告诉读者另一件事情。这就是罗杰·奇林沃思老

人去世时（年内死的），留下了一个处理生前财产的遗嘱，并指定贝林厄姆州长和牧师威尔逊先生为遗嘱的执行人，在这个遗嘱中，他把自己在这儿和在英国两地的一笔数目非常可观的财产遗赠给了赫斯特·普琳的女儿小珠儿。

因此，珠儿——这个小精灵——到此时有人还坚持认为她是魔王的后代——成了美洲当时最富有的一个女继承人。这种情况或许要在公众的评价上发生一个非常重大的变化，如果母女俩都留在这儿，那么小珠儿到达婚龄时期，她那野性的血液中就很可能跟他们中最虔诚的清教徒的血统融合在一起了。但是，在医生死后不久，那个佩戴红A字的人不见了，珠儿也跟她一块儿走了。多年来虽然时不时地有些含糊不清的消息从海路上传来——就像是一块不成形的浮木碎片，上面写着一个名字的首字母，被海水冲上岸来一般——但是，关于她俩非常确切可靠的消息却从未得到过。红A字的故事逐渐变成一个传奇了，但仍很有魅力。那不幸的牧师死在那儿的断头台还是阴森可怕，赫斯特住过的海滨茅屋也是如此。就在那后一个地方附近，一天下午有几个小孩在那儿玩耍，他们看见了一个穿着灰外衣的高个女人来到茅屋门前。这些年来，茅屋从来没有开过门。现在，要不就是她打开了锁，要不就是朽木锈铁被她的手一推就推开了，再不就是她像鬼影一样从那些遮遮掩掩的地方溜进去——不管怎么说吧，反正她进到茅屋里去了。

赫斯特在门槛上停住了——转过半个身子来——也许是因为她想到孤单单一个人并经历了那么大的沧桑，再走进先前那个紧张生活过的家中来，总是觉得比以前更可怕更凄凉。但是她也就只是犹豫了那一会儿，可她胸前的红A字却足以展示在人们眼前了。

赫斯特·普琳回来了，又捡起她那久已抛弃的耻辱了！但是，小珠儿在哪里呢？如果她还活着的话，那必然是在风华正茂的少女时期。谁也不知道——也从未能完整确

知——这个小精灵是不是夭折，走进处女墓了；或者说她那丰富多彩的野性子是不是温顺了，有所克制了，能享受一个妇人那种温文尔雅的幸福了。但是，在赫斯特的余生中，却有一些迹象表明，那个佩戴红A字的隐居者成为了一个远客所热爱和关怀的人。常有信来，上面盖了许多盾徽印戳，只不过那不是英国所常见的纹章。茅屋里有舒适和奢侈的东西。这些东西赫斯特从来都不想用，只有富人才能买得起，也只有关怀她的人才能为她想得到。还有一些小东西，小装饰品，漂亮的永志不忘的纪念品，这些东西肯定是巧手在一颗好心激动时所制成的。有一次，有人见到赫斯特在刺绣一件婴儿的外套，它是那样豪华富丽，不论哪一个孩子穿了出现在我们这个朴素的社会里，都会引起一阵群情的激动。

最后，当时传闻认为——一个世纪以后的检察官皮尤进行的调查也认为——他的一个继任者更坚定地认为——珠儿不仅活着，而且结了婚，很幸福，很关心她的母亲，要是能把她悲伤、孤独的母亲接到她身边，那就是她最大的乐事了。

但是，对于赫斯特·普琳来说，在这儿，在新英格兰要比在珠儿安家的异乡生活得更为踏实。她在这儿犯罪，她在这儿受苦，她还要在这儿忏悔。因此，她回来了，并重新戴上——完全是出于自愿，因为就是在那铁面无情时期的最严酷的执事也不会强迫她这么做——重新戴上了我们曾经讲过的那么一个悲惨的故事中的标志。从此以后，那个标志就再也没有离开过她的胸前。但是，随着赫斯特生涯中那含辛茹苦、富有思想、自我献身的岁月的流逝，红A字已不再是受人奚落、令人痛恨的烙印了，而是成了使人为之遗憾，望而生畏，以至肃然起敬的东西了，并且由于赫斯特·普琳没有私心，从不计较个人的利益和安乐，所以人们都愿意向她倾诉自己的痛苦和困惑，并把她看做一个饱经患难的人而向她求教。特别是妇女们——在她们接二连三遭受感情上的伤害、蹂躏、污辱，误入歧途或错用情感等痛苦时——或者因为不受重视，无人追求而使那颗郁郁不乐的心受到沉闷的压抑时——经常来到赫斯特

的茅屋里，请求她解答她们为什么那么不幸和有什么法子解救。赫斯特尽其所能安慰她们和劝解她们。她还向她们保证，她坚信有朝一日会更加光明，那时这个世界也一定会因而辉煌成熟，于是在那天堂般的时代，一个新的真理必将出现，从而将整个男女之间的关系建立在更加牢靠的彼此幸福的基础上。赫斯特早年就妄想过，她可能是一个命定的女预言家，但是经过很长一段时间以后，她认识到这是不可能的，因为任何一种神圣和神秘的真理的使命，决不会交给一个沾满罪恶并且由于耻辱直不起腰来或者甚至终生背负着痛苦的女人去做。诚然，启示未来的天使和使徒定是一位妇女，但那准是一位崇高、纯洁和漂亮的妇女，她很贤明，但这不是郁郁寡欢陶冶而成，而是非尘世的欢乐陶冶而成。她用那足以成功地达到这一目的的人生最真实的实验来显示神圣的爱如何使我们幸福！

赫斯特·普琳一面这么说，一面垂下忧伤的两眼望着这个红A字。又过了很多很多年以后，出现了一个新坟墓，它就在那个下陷了的旧墓附近，也就是在后来那建起国王礼拜堂旁边的坟地上。新墓离下陷的旧墓不远，中间隔着一块空地，仿佛两个长眠者的骨骸无权合葬在一块儿似的。可是两个坟墓共用一块墓石。

它周围有许多刻着盾徽纹章的墓碑。而在这个简陋的石板上——好奇的调查者仍可能看得出来，但可能要被它的含义所难住——也有一个刻着类似盾徽的东西。上面有一个题铭，一个司宗谱纹章的官员的题词，可以作为我们现在就要结束的这部传说的警句和简要的概括。这部传说是那样阴郁，只有靠着比阴影还要暗淡的那一点永不熄灭的红光才不单调，这就是：

“黑地上的红A字。”

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Chapter I The Prison-Door

A THRONG of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed 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 recognized 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 church-yard 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-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized 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 fair 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 symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found

along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

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Chapter 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 noted 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 character, 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 and 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 amongst whom religion and law were almost identical, and in whose character both were so thoroughly interfused, that the mildest and the 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 a 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 grisly 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 acquainted only with the gray 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 splendor 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 lady-like, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, 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 something 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 inclosing her in a sphere by herself.

"She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain," remarked one of the 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 Madam 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!"

"O, 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, Madam 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 gray 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, gray houses, the huge cathedrals, and the public edifices, ancient in date and quaint in architecture, of a Continental city; where a new life had awaited her, still in connection 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!

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Chapter 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 dwelt in Amsterdam, whence, some good time ago, 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 favor, 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.

"Madam 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 behooves 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 honor. 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, and 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 be 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 gray 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 oversoftness, 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 behooves 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 clergyman, 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 fervor 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 trode in the shadowy bypaths, 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, in whose charge hers is. Exhort her to confess the truth!"

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

"Hester Prynne," said he, leaning over the balcony, and looking down stedfastly into her eyes, "thou hearest what this good man says, and seest the accountability under which I labor. 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 recognized. "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 and 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 his 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 wailings and screams; she strove to hush it, mechanically, but seemed scarcely to sympathize 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.

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Chapter 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 drunk 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, marvelling 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 certain 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 recognize 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 any thing. 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 forefinger on the scarlet letter, which forthwith seemed to scorch into Hester's breast, as if it had 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 philosophized 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 hands 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 honor, 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 outskirts 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 dishonor 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. Recognize me not, by word, by sign, by look! Breathe not the secret, above all, to the man thou wottest 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!"

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Chapter 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 stern features, but with vigor 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 honorable 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 birthplace, 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 color 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, unrecognized 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 and 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 saintlike, 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 license 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 laboring 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 needlework. 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 characterized 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 labor as

Hester Prynne could supply. Baby-linen — for babies then wore robes of state — afforded still another possibility of toil and emolument.

By degrees, nor 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 aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. The exception indicated the ever relentless vigor 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 stedfast 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 mortal 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 succor 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; 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 street 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 utterance 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 into 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 rumor 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 imaginations, 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 rumor than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit.

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Chapter 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 dishonored bosom, to connect her parent forever 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 for 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 vigor, 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 coexist 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 splendor of Pearl's own proper beauty, shining through the gorgeous robes which might have extinguished a paler loveliness, that there was an absolute circle of radiance around her, on the darksome cottage-floor. And yet a russet gown, torn and soiled with the child's rude play, made a picture of her just as perfect.

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 lonely 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 labor thrown away to insist, persuade or plead. It was a look so intelligent, yet so 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, unsympathizing 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 a 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 fashion 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, snatching 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 her 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 subtile 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 babyhand. Again, as if her mother's agonized 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, elfish 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 not, her mother so imagined it — from the unsearchable abyss of her black eyes.

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

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

But, while she said it, Pearl laughed and began to dance up and down, with the humorsome 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 mothers' 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.

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Chapter 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 honorable 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 selectmen 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 set 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 with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread. So much strength of coloring, 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 play — or 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 elder 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 befitted 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, with 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-servants; 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 blue coat, which was 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 newcomer in the country, he had never before seen. "Yea, his honorable 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 cushioned 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 characterized 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 armorer 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 training field, and had glittered, moreover, at the head of a regiment in the Pequod 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 humoring 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 upward, 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 farther 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 notion of obedience, but because the quick and mobile curiosity of her disposition was excited by the appearance of those new personages.

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Chapter VIII The Elf-Child and the Minister

GOVERNOR BELLINGHAM, in a loose gown and easy cap — such as elderly gentlemen loved to indue 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 gray 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 naturalized 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 labors 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 favor 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 elves 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 armchair, 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 grandfather sort of personage, and usually a vast favorite 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 Catechism, 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 fantasy 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 million-fold 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 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 reëchoed, 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 thereby say that the Heavenly Father, the Creator of all flesh, hath lightly recognized 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, as 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!"

"O, not so! — not so!" continued Mr. Dimmesdale. "She recognizes, 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 fall, — but yet to teach her, as it were by the Creator's sacred pledge,

that, if she bring the child to heaven, the child also will bring its parent 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 weighty import in what my young brother hath spoken," added the Reverend 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 analyze that child's nature, and, from its make and mould, to give a shrewd guess at the father?"

"Nay; it would be sinful, in such a question, to follow the clew 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 tonight? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh 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.

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Chapter 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 dishonor; which would not fail to be distributed in strict accordance and proportion with the intimacy and sacredness of their previous relationship. Then why — since the choice was with himself — should the individual, whose connection 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 rumor 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 subtile faculties of such men were materialized, 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 favor, 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 labor 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 rumor 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 favorable 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 labors? 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 labors, 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 seashore, or in the forest; mingling various talk 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 recognized 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 upon 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 scrutinized 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 every thing with a cautious touch, like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern. Few secrets can escape an investigator, who has opportunity and license 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 disagreeably 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 recognized 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 authorized 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 unsavory 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 grave-yard, 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 colors 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 parchment-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 truths 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 Doctor 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 enchanter, 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 Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, like many other personages of especial 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 depths of the poor minister's eyes, the battle was a sore one, and the victory any thing but secure!

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Chapter 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 hill-side, 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 farther 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, sympathizing, 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 graveyard, 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 straightforth 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 grave-yard 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 fantasy 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 with a 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 them 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, O, what a relief have I witnessed in those sinful brethren! even as in one who at last draws free air, after 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 fellow-men, let them do it by making manifest the power and reality of conscience, in

constraining them to penitential self-abasement! Wouldst 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's 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 inclosure. 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 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 Reverend 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 all 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 ago," 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 this be, unless you first lay open to him the wound or trouble in your soul?"

"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 reëstablish 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 amplest 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, at noonday, 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!

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Chapter 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, uprose a grisly phantom — uprose a thousand phantoms — in many shapes, of death, or more awful shame, all flocking roundabout 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 etherealized, 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;

symbolizing, 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 their 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 clergyman'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 gayety, 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.

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Chapter 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 hour 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 of early May. An unvaried pall of cloud muffled the whole expanse of sky from zenith to horizon. If the same multitude which had stood as eyewitnesses 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 gray 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 nightair 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 tomorrow'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 nightcap 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 clamor of the fiends and night-hags, with whom she was well known to make excursions into 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 farther 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, he 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 personages 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 were 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's 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 by, in their hurry and confusion, they would scantily 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 recognized 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 sidewalk, 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, tomorrow 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 tomorrow!"

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, tomorrow 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 midday, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects

by an unaccustomed light. The wooden houses, with their jutting stories 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 splendor, 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 this nature. Not seldom, it had been seen by multitudes. Oftener, however, its credibility rested on the faith of some lonely eyewitness, who beheld the wonder through the colored, magnifying, and distorting 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 expansive for Providence to write a people's doom upon. The belief was a favorite 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 characterized 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 pointing 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 features, 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 elfish 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, tomorrow noontide!"

"Worthy Sir," said 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 strange 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-whimseys will grow upon you!"

"I will go home with you," said Mr. Dimmesdale.

With a chill despondency, like one awaking, 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 gray-bearded sexton met him, holding up a black glove, which the minister recognized as his own.

"It was found," said the sexton, "this morning, on the scaffold, where evildoers 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."

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Chapter 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 human kind — 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 favor. With nothing now to lose, in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish, of gaining any thing, 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 labor 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-creatures. 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 hard 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 sympathize — 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 favored 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 framework of reasoning, that made it a far tougher labor 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, but 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 any thing 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 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 of 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 of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized 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 of 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. Every thing 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 woman 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 a 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 medicines withal.

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Chapter XIV Hester and the Physician

HESTER bade little Pearl run down to the margin of the water, and play with the shells and tangled seaweed, 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, and 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 common weal, yonder scarlet letter might be taken off your bosom. On my life, Hester, I made my entreaty to the worshipful magistrate that it might be done forthwith!"

"It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this 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 gayly 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 vigor 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 an 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 analyzed 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. O, 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 heart-strings, 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 recognize, 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 have 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 thy 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 wellnigh 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 thou reject that priceless benefit?"

"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.

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Chapter 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 an 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 she still 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 fire-light 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 emotions 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 snail-shells, 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 horseshoe 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 snow-flakes 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 seabirds, 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 it 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 begone 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 coloring. 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 be 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 — a 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 flavors 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 recognizing 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 inquiry, 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!"

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Chapter 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 in a sick-chamber, whither the Reverend 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 footpath. 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 farther extremity of some long vista through the forest. The sportive sunlight — feebly 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 splendor, 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 vigor 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 humanize 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 weary, 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?"

"O, 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 every body 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, recognizing 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 underbrush, 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.

"O, brook! O, 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 crevices 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 way-side. He looked haggard and feeble, and betrayed a nerveless despondency in his air, which had never so remarkably characterized 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 farther, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of any thing, 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.

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Chapter 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 higher, 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 acquaintance 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 a while, 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 coarse 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 idolize? 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 recognizes 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 be 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 authorized 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 lain down on the forest-leaves, and died there, at Arthur Dimmesdale's feet.

"O 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? O 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 blacker 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 inclosed 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 realize 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 dishonor, 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 any thing, 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!"

"O 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!

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Chapter 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; criticizing 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 broken 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, I 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, unchristianized, 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! O 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 farther flight it would have fallen into the water, and have given 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 deathlike 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 the 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 splendor 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 flavor. 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 a 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 recognized a kindred wildness 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 flowers 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!

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Chapter XIX The Child at the Brook-Side

"THOU wilt 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 — O 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 seldom tolerant 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 stedfastly 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 which 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 at the 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. "O, 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 forever!"

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, dear 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 favor 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.

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Chapter 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 questionable 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 honorable 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, nor 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 underbrush, climbed the ascent, plunged into the hollow, and overcame, in short, all the difficulties of the track, with an unwearable 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, nor 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 weathercock 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 grave-stones. 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 churchmember, 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 blackguard, 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 favor 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 recognize a secret intimacy of connection.

"Have I then sold myself," thought the minister, "to the fiend

whom, if men say true, this yellow-starched and velveteed 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 stupefied 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 be 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."

"Yea, 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!

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Chapter 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 seer might have conceived, that, after sustaining the gaze of the multitude through seven 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 life-long 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 forever the symbol which ye have caused 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 flavored? 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 contrive 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 throbbings 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 ledst me to him from the brook-side?"

"He will be there, child," answered her mother. "But he will not greet thee today; nor must thou greet him."

"What a strange, sad man is he!" said the child, as if speaking partly to herself. "In the dark night-time, 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 every body's face today. The children have come from their schools, and the grown people from their workshops and their fields, on purpose to be happy. For, today, 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 splendor, a colorless 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 hundreds of years old, but still effective, by their appeals to the very broadest sources of mirthful sympathy. All such professors of the several branches of jocularities would have been sternly repressed, not only by the rigid discipline of law, but by the general sentiment which gives 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 differing 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 favorably, 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 forgotten art of gayety.

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 deer-skin 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 humors 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 aquavitde from pocket-flasks, which they freely tendered to the gaping crowd around them. It remarkably characterized the incomplete morality of the age, rigid as we call it, that a license 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 unfavorable

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 clamor 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 recognize, 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.

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Chapter 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 honorable 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 were strong in him — bestowed it on the white hair and venerable brow of age; on long-tried integrity; on solid wisdom and sad-colored experience; on endowments of that grave and weighty order, which gives 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 angelic 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 heavenward, 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 stedfastly 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 market-place 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 — or 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 connection 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 intentness, 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 today was doubly indefatigable in its tip-toe dance, because it was played upon and vibrated with her mother's disquietude. Whenever Pearl saw any thing 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 her 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 market-place, the child returned to her mother, and communicated what the mariner had said. Hester's strong, calm, stedfastly 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 roundabout, who had often heard of the scarlet letter, and to whom it had been made terrific by a hundred false or exaggerated rumors, 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 self-same 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 market-place! What imagination would have been irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both!

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Chapter 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 as 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 splendor — 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 recognized 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 of 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 clangor 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 was 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 market-place, 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 the 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 honored 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 etherealized by spirit as he was, and so apotheosized 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 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 deathlike hue; it was hardly a man with life in him, that tottered on his path so nervelessly, 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 — onward 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 dishonor! 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 judgment 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 roundabout 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 child.

"It was on him!" he continued, with a kind of fierceness; so determined was he to speak out the 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 centred 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 for ever 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! — the sin here so 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.

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Chapter 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 connection, 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 of revenge; and when, by its completest triumph and 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 unhumanized 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 object. 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 tost 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, all 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 sombre-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 recognized 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 tombstone 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 might 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"