

THE SCARLET LETTER

Libretto in Four Acts and Nine Scenes

by

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(based on the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne)

ACT I

Scene I: Boston, the late 17th century. The market-place at noon. A prison, a church and a scaffold nearby with a pillory. A throng of bearded men in sad colored garments and grey, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods and others bare-headed, is assembled in front of the prison. Five *Women* stand in a knot, speaking.

- 1st Woman:* Goodwives,
I'll tell ye a piece of my mind!
It would be greatly for the public behoof,
if we women had the handling of such sinners
as this Hester Prynne.
What think ye, gossips?
- 2nd Woman:* If the hussy stood up before us for judgment
she wouldn't come off so well!
- Several:* Marry, I trow not!
- 3rd Woman:* And she a married woman!
- 5th Woman:* Yea, but left alone.
- Several:* Well, well!
Indeed!
- 4th Woman:* Silence, foolish girl!
Solitude is no excuse for sin!
- Several:* Certainly not!
- 5th Woman:* But where is Master Prynne?
Why has he not come to join his wife?
- 1st Woman:* He probably knew her black soul!
- 2nd Woman:* And good riddance for him, too!
- Several:* That's a truth!

- 4th Woman:* They should have put a hot iron brand
on Hester Prynne's forehead.
- 1st Woman:* Madam Hester would have winced at that,
I warrant me.
- 3rd Woman:* Little will she care
what they put upon the bodice of her gown!
Why, look you, she may cover it up
and walk the streets as brave as ever!
- 5th Woman:* Ah, but even so,
the pang of it will be always on her heart.
- 2nd Woman:* Why do we talk of marks and brands?
This woman has brought shame upon us all
and ought to die!
- Several:* That's a truth!
She ought to die!
- Man's Voice:* Hush now, gossips!
Here she comes, Mistress Hester Prynne herself.

(The door of the prison is flung open. The *Town-Beadle* appears, his right hand resting upon the shoulder of *Hester* whom he draws thus forward. On the threshold of the prison-door, she repels him by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character and steps into the open air, as if by her own free will. She carries a baby of some three months old in her arms. She bears in the breast of her gown the letter «A» elaborately embroidered in gold on a red background).

- 4th Woman:* Look now.
The brazen hussy!
- 2nd Woman:* ... with her gaudy emblem!
- 3rd Woman:* She has good skill at her needle, that's certain!
- Several:* The haughty baggage!
- Town-Beadle:* Make way, good people,
make way, in the King's name!

(A lane is opened through the crowd of spectators. *Hester*, preceded by the *Town-Beadle*, passes to the scaffold which stands nearly beneath the eaves of the church. She mounts the scaffold and is placed in the pillory).

- 1st Woman:* It were well if we stripped Madam Hester's rich gown
off her dainty shoulders!
- Several:* The brazen hussy!
- 5th Woman:* Oh, peace, neighbors, peace!
Do not let her hear you!

(Slowly, *Hester's* gaze fixes on *Roger Chillingworth* who has appeared

at the edge of the crowd; he has been watching *Hester* for some time in silence. He slowly and calmly raises his finger, makes a gesture with it in the air, and lays it on his lips.

Directly over the platform of the pillory stands a kind of balcony appended to the church. Here, to witness the scene, sits Governor *Bellingham* with four sergeants about his chair bearing halbers as a guard of honor. Other eminent men, distinguished by dignity of mien. Also present: *John Wilson*, the eldest clergyman of Boston, and the Reverend Mr. *Arthur Dimmesdale*, a young clergyman).

Wilson: Hearken unto me,
 Hester Prynne!

(*Hester* turns her eyes to the balcony, pale and trembling).

Hester Prynne,
I have sought to persuade my young brother here
(*lays his hand on Dimmesdale's shoulder*)
that he should deal with you,
here in the face of Heaven
and in hearing of all people,
insomuch that you should no longer hide
the name of him who tempted you
to this grievous fall.
(*turning to Dimmesdale*)
What say you to it, once again,
Brother Dimmesdale?
Must it be thou,
or I,
that shall deal with this poor sinner's soul?

Bellingham: Good Master Dimmesdale,
 the responsibility of this woman's soul
 lies greatly with you.

(The crowd's attention is drawn to *Dimmesdale*).

Wilson: Speak to the woman,
 my brother.
 Exhort her to confess the truth!

(*Dimmesdale* bends his head in silent prayer and comes forward).

Dimmesdale: Hester Prynne,
 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.

What can thy silence do except it tempt him,
yea, compel him,
to add hypocrisy to sin?

Heaven hath granted thee an open shame.

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!

(*Hester shakes her head.*)

Wilson: Woman,
transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!
Speak out the name!

Chillingworth: (*speaking anonymously from the crowd*)
Speak, woman!
Speak
and give your child a father!

Hester: (*turning pale, recognizing the voice*)
I will not speak!
My child must seek a heavenly Father;
she shall never know an earthly one!

Dimmesdale: She will not speak!
(*drawing back from the balcony, with his hand upon
his heart*)
Wondrous strength of a woman's heart!
She will not speak!

(The dignitaries rise, rather sharply, and take their leave. The crowd stands looking silently at *Hester* and then, finding little more of interest, gradually begins to disperse. Lights fade.)

Scene II: In the prison. Enter a Jailer leading *Roger Chillingworth*. *Hester*, in a cell, becomes deadly silent and presses against the wall. The baby lies on the bed, crying. *Chillingworth* enters the cell and gives his first attention to the child. He examines the infant carefully, and then proceeds to unclasp a leathern case, which he takes from beneath his dress. It appears to contain medical preparations, one of which he mingles with a cup of water.

Chillingworth: My old studies in alchemy
and my sojourn,
for above a year past,
among a people well-versed in the kindly properties of
herbs,
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.
Administer this draught,
therefore,
with thine own hand.

(*Hester* repels the offered medicine).

Hester: Wouldst thou avenge thyself
on the innocent babe?

Chillingworth: Foolish woman!
The medicine is potent for good;
and were it my child,
yea, mine own, as well as thine,
I could do not better for it.

(*Hester* hesitates so *Chillingworth*, himself, takes the child and administers the draught. She falls into a deep slumber. He then turns his attention to *Hester*, feels her pulse and looks into her eyes. Finally, he proceeds to mingle another draught).

Chillingworth: Drink this!
It may be less soothing than a sinless conscience;
that I cannot give thee.

Hester: (*taking the cup and glancing at the slumbering child*)
I have thought of death,
have wished for it,
have even prayed for it.
Yet, if death be in this cup,
I bid thee think again
ere I drink it.

Chillingworth: Dost thou know me so little,
Hester Prynne?
Are my purposes wont to be so shallow?
(*lays his forefinger on the scarlet letter and smiles*)
Live,

and bear thy doom with thee.
Drink.

(*Hester* drains the cup. *Chillingworth* motions her to sit on the bed where the child is sleeping, takes the only chair in the cell, draws it up and takes his seat beside her).

Hester,
I ask not how thou hast ascended
to the pedestal of infamy on which I found thee.
The reason is not far to seek.
I, a man of thought,
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?
From the moment 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!

Hester: Thou knowest...
thou knowest that I was frank with thee.
I felt no love,
nor feigned any.

Chillingworth: True.
It was my folly!
But 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!
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.

Hester: I have greatly wronged thee.

Chillingworth: We have wronged each other.
Between thee and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced.
Therefore, I seek no vengeance.

But, Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both!
Who is he?

Hester: Ask me not!
That thou shalt never know!

Chillingworth: Never know?
Believe me, Hester,
I shall seek this man
as I have sought truth in books,
as I have sought gold in alchemy.
Sooner or later,
he must needs be mine!
Yet fear not for him!
Let him live!
Let him hide himself in outward honor,
if he may!
Not the less he shall be mine!

Hester: Thy acts are like mercy
but thy words interpret thee as a terror!

Chillingworth: One thing more.
Breathe not,
to any human soul,
that thou didst ever call me husband...
...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!

Hester: I will keep thy secret
as I have his.

Chillingworth: Swear it!

Hester: (*hesitating*)
I swear it!

Chillingworth: And now, Mistress Prynne, I leave thee alone,
alone with thine infant
and the scarlet letter!
Tomorrow thou shalt be released.
(*turns to leave... hesitates at the door*)
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?

Hester: Why dost thou smile so at me?
Art thou like the Black Man
that haunts the forest about us?
Hast thou enticed me into a bond
that will prove the ruin of my soul?

Chillingworth: Not thy soul.
No, not thine!

(Lights fade as *Chillingworth* leaves).

CURTAIN

End of Act I

ACT II

Scene I: The interior of *Hester's* modest dwelling at the edge of the forest. She is alone, sewing on a pair of elaborate gloves; she sews in silence. Slowly her hands drop to her lap and she gazes before her. Then she breaks and sobs as though she has seen some kind of truth there, in the silence, which she cannot face. Her tears pass and she bends to her sewing once again. From outside the window rises the voice of *Pearl*, improvising a child's tune, as children do.

Pearl: Rock-a-bye, Rock-a-bye, little Pearl..
Little Pearl, little Pearl..
Tra-la, La-la..
There, there! Kill the Black Man!
The dirty old Black Man!
There, there!
Little Pearl, little Pearl,
Rock-a-bye, Rock-a..
There, there!
Dirty old Black Man!
Kill, kill the Black Man!
Kill, kill..

Hester: O Father in Heaven,
if thou art still my Father,
what is this being
which I have brought into the world!

(*Hester* sobs and then quiets. *Pearl*, meanwhile, goes on with her childish chant).

Hester: The days of the far-off future
toil onward,
piling their misery
upon this heap of shame.
Seven years...
seven years of eyes that look,
fingers that point
and hearts that close and condemn.
Seven years...
To flee,
to hide,
to lose myself into distance and time.
Why not?
Why not draw about a mantle
fresher and green
and cast off this barren shroud
emblazoned with the symbol of my shame...
My joy...
O Father in Heaven,
Thou who teachest of love,
what is this wound that never closes
and binds me to a place of pain?
I know:
your lesson is cruel!
Will it purge my soul?

(The door slowly opens and *Mistress Hibbins*, the local witch, peers in).

Mrs Hibbins: Hist, hist!
Wilt thou go with us tonight?
There will be a merry company in the forest;
and I well nigh promised the Black Man
that comely *Hester Prynne* should make one.

Hester: Make my excuses to him, so please you!
I must tarry at home
and keep watch over my little *Pearl*.
They threaten to take her from me.

Mrs Hibbins: Aha!
We shall have thee there anon!
(*withdraws with a laugh*)

(*Hester* returns to her sewing. Silence).

Hester: « Rock-a-bye, Rock-a-bye, little Pearl... »
 No, they shall not take her from me!
 They shall not take the one mote of light
 which brightens this dreary maze!
 They must not!
(She weeps once again).
 No, no!
 not my little Pearl,
 not my only treasure.
 No, no!
 The Black Man attends my soul;
 if they take her,
 I will go into the forest
 and sign my name in his book...
(rises)
 ...with my own blood!
(She laughs hysterically).
 Yea, yea,
 with my own blood!
*(She then stops suddenly and falls to her knees, her
 face buried in her hands).*
 Father in Heaven,
 protect me from the bitterness of my own heart.
 Leave me not alone on the path
 which leads back to my own despair!

(Hester remains there, silent, for a brief time. Pearl begins her chant again. Hester listens, rises with decision and goes to the window).

Come, child, we must go into the village.
 Hasten, my treasure.

(Lights fade).

Scene II: The Governor's Hall. A garden is visible through a large bow-window. Sunlight. In one corner, a shining coat of armor is suspended. *Hester*, accompanied by *Pearl*, is shown in by a servant. *Pearl* dances around, looking at her reflection in the mirrors and in the sparkling suit of armor. *Hester* goes to the bow-window and looks out. *Pearl* rushes over noisily.

Hester: Hush, child, hush!
 I hear voices in the garden.
 The Governor is coming.

(Governor *Bellingham* enters followed by *John Wilson*, *Arthur Dimmesdale* and *Roger Chillingworth*. As the door of the bow-window is opened, *Hester* is partly hidden in the shadow of the curtains. *Pearl*, instead, has stopped directly before the door).

Bellingham: What have we here?
How gat such a little guest into my hall?

Wilson: Ay, indeed!
What little bird of scarlet plumage may this be?
Art thou a Christian child — ha?
Dost know thy catechism?
(*He tries, unsuccessfully, to pat Pearl on the cheek*).
But where is thy mother?
(*He then catches sight of Hester and turns and whispers to Bellingham*).

Bellingham: Sayest thou so?
She comes at a good time.
(*turns and addresses Hester with a stern countenance*).
Speak thou, *Hester Prynne*!
Were it not 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?

Hester: (*laying her finger on the scarlet letter*)
I can teach my little *Pearl*
what I have learned from this!

Bellingham: Woman, it is thy badge of shame!

Hester: Even so, 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.

Bellingham: We will judge warily,
and look well what we are about to do.
Good Master *Wilson*, I pray you,
examine this *Pearl*
and see if she hath had such Christian nurture
as befits a child of her age.

(*John Wilson* sits in an arm-chair and makes an effort to draw *Pearl* betwixt his knees. But *Pearl* escapes through the open window and stands on the upper step).

Wilson: Canst thou tell,
my child,
who made thee?

(*Pearl* places her finger in her mouth and refuses to speak).

Answer me,
my child.

(General silence. *Chillingworth*, smiling, whispers something to *Dimmesdale*. *Hester* watches *Chillingworth*).

Bellingham: This is dreadful!
Here is a child of seven years
and she cannot even tell who made her!
Methinks, gentlemen,
we need inquire no further.

Hester: (*catching hold of Pearl and drawing her forcibly into her arms*)

Ye shall not take her!
God gave me the child!
He gave her to me 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!
Ye shall not take her!
I will die first!

Wilson: My poor woman,
the child shall be well cared for,
far better than thou canst do it.

Hester: (*almost shrieking*)
God gave her into my keeping!
I will not give her up!
(*turning suddenly to Dimmesdale*)
Speak thou for me!
I will not lose the child!
Speak for me!
Thou was my pastor and knowest what is in my heart;
thou knowest what are a mother's rights

and how much 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!

Dimmesdale: (*coming forward, holding his hand over his heart*)

There is truth in what she says

and in the feeling which inspires her!

This child was meant for a blessing,
for the one blessing of her mother's life!

It was meant, doubtless, for a retribution, too;
a torture;

a pang;

and ever-recurring agony

in the midst of a troubled joy!

If she bring the child to heaven,
the child also will bring its parent there.

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.

Chillingworth: You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness.

Wilson: And there is a weighty import in what my young brother
hath spoken.

What say you, worshipful Master Bellingham?

Hath he not pleaded well for the poor woman?

Bellingham: Indeed he hath.

We will leave the matter as it now stands;

so long, at least,

as there shall be no further scandal in this woman.

(*Dimmesdale*, on ceasing to speak, withdraws a few steps and stands with his face partially concealed in the folds of the window-curtains. *Pearl* steals towards him and taking his hand, lays her cheek against it. *Dimmesdale* looks around, lays his hand on *Pearl's* head, hesitates and then kisses her brow. *Pearl*, changing impulsively, laughs and goes capering down the hall. *Hester* grasps her, bows to the present, and leaves. Lights fade as the men move towards the door).

CURTAIN

End of Act II

ACT III

Scene 1: In the study-laboratory of *Chillingworth*. A distilling machine and all the various utensils of alchemy and science. An open window looks out over the graveyard. *Chillingworth* is examining a bundle of unsightly plants. *Dimmesdale* leans with his elbow on the sill of the open window, his forehead in his hand.

Dimmesdale: Where, my kind doctor, did you gather those herbs with such a dark, flabby leaf?

Chillingworth: Even in the graveyard here at hand.
They are new to me.
I found them growing on a grave,
which bore no tombstone,
save these ugly weeds.
It may be they grew out of some hideous,
heart-held secret
which the dead man had done better to confess
during his lifetime.

Dimmesdale: Perchance he earnestly desired it,
but could not.

Chillingworth: And wherefore?
Wherefore not?
Why should not a guilty man
avail himself of the precious solace
of confession?

Dimmesdale: It may be that he is kept silent
by the very constitution of his nature.
Or, guilty as he may be,
that he shrinks from displaying himself
black and filthy
because, thereafter, no further good can be achieved by
him.

Chillingworth: (*with more emphasis than usual and making a slight
gesture with his forefinger*)

Wouldst thou have me to believe,
O wise and pious friend,
that a false show can be better
than God's own truth?

Trust me, such men deceive themselves!

Dimmesdale: (*indifferently*)

It may be so.

But now I would ask 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 *Chillingworth* can answer, the laughter of *Pearl* proceeds from the adjacent burial-ground. *Dimmesdale*, being at the open window, sees *Hester* and *Pearl* passing by. *Chillingworth* draws to the window to watch them).

Pearl: 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!

Hester: Hush, child, hush!

Chillingworth: What, in Heaven's name, is that child?
 Is the imp altogether evil?
 Hath she affections?

Hath she any discoverable principle of being?

Dimmesdale: (*as though speaking to himself*)
 None,
 save the freedom of a broken law.
 Whether capable of good,
 I know not.

Chillingworth: (*after a pause*)
 Is Hester Prynne the less miserable,
 think you,
 for that scarlet letter on her breast?

Dimmesdale: I do verily believe it.
 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 is another pause. *Chillingworth* returns to his table and begins again to examine and arrange the plants he has gathered).

Chillingworth: You inquired of my judgment
 as touching your health.

Dimmesdale: I did and would gladly learn it.
 Speak frankly, I pray you,
 be it for life or death.

Chillingworth: Free, then, and plainly,
 the disorder is a strange one.

Looking daily at you, my good Sir,
and watching the tokens of your aspect,
now for months gone by,
I would deem you a man sore sick.
But...

I know not what to say...
the disease is what I seem to know,
yet know it not.

Dimmesdale: (glancing aside out of the window)

You speak in riddles, learned Sir.

Chillingworth: Then to speak more plainly.

Let me ask, as your friend,
hath all the operation of this disorder
been fairly laid open
and recounted to me?

Dimmesdale: How can you question it?

Sure, it were child's play to call in a physician
and then hide the sore!

Chillingworth: (fixing his eyes intently on Dimmesdale)

You would tell me that I know all?

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.

Dimmesdale: (rising somewhat hastily from his chair)

Then I need ask no further.

You deal not,

I take it,

in medicine for the soul!

Chillingworth: (standing and confronting Dimmesdale)

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?

Dimmesdale: (turning his eyes fiercely on Chillingworth)

No!

Not to thee!

Not to an earthly physician!

Not to thee!

No!

Who art thou that meddlest in this matter?
That dares to thrust himself
between the sufferer and his God?

(*Dimmesdale*, with a frantic gesture, rushes out of the room).
(Lights fade).

Scene II: Same as Act I, Scene I. An obscure night, the dark gray of midnight. As the church clock rings, *Dimmesdale* enters, walking as in a dream. He approaches the scaffold and mounts the stairs. While standing on the scaffold he is overcome with a great horror of mind. Without any effort of his will, or power to restrain himself, he shrieks aloud.

Dimmesdale: (covering his face with his hands)
It is done!
The whole town will awake,
and hurry forth,
and find me here!

(He uncovers his eyes and looks about him. He grows calmer. *John Wilson* approaches carrying a small lantern. *Dimmesdale* seems on the verge of speaking, controls the impulse, and shrinks back. *Wilson* sees nothing and he and the light disappear. Suddenly, carried away by grotesque horror and to his own infinite alarm, *Dimmesdale* bursts into a great peal of laughter. It is immediately responded to by a light, airy, childish laugh which he recognizes at once as that of *Pearl*).

Pearl!
Little Pearl!
(suppressing his voice)
Hester!
Hester Prynne!
Are you there?

Hester: (in a tone of surprise)
Yes, it is Hester Prynne.
It is I and my little Pearl.

Dimmesdale: Come up hither,
thou and little Pearl.
Ye have both been here before,
but I was not with you.
Come up hither once again,
and we will stand all three together!

(*Hester*, holding *Pearl* by the hand, ascends the steps and stands on the platform. *Dimmesdale* takes *Pearl's* other hand).

Pearl: Minister!

Dimmesdale: What wouldst thou say, child?

Pearl: Wilt thou stand here with mother and me,
tomorrow noontide?

Dimmesdale: Nay, not so, my little *Pearl*.

Not so, my child.

I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother and thee,
one other day,

but not tomorrow.

(*Pearl* laughs and attempts to pull away her hand. *Dimmesdale* holds it fast).

A moment longer, my child!

Pearl: But wilt thou promise
to take my hand and mother's hand,
tomorrow noontide?

Dimmesdale: Not then, *Pearl*,
but another time.

Pearl: And what other time?

Dimmesdale: At the great judgment day.
But the daylight of this world
shall not see our meeting.

(*Pearl* laughs again. The moon, until now hidden by clouds, emerges and lights the market-place. *Dimmesdale*, his hand over his heart, and *Hester* with little *Pearl* can be seen on the scaffold. *Pearl* withdraws her hand from *Dimmesdale* and points across the square towards *Chillingworth* who stands at no great distance from the scaffold. *Dimmesdale* clasps both of his hands over his breast and casts his eyes upward. The moon is covered once again by clouds and darkness returns).

Dimmesdale: (*terrified*)

Who is that man, *Hester*?

I shudder at him!

Dost thou know the man?

I hate him, *Hester*!

(*Hester* is silent).

I tell thee, my soul shivers at him!

Who is he?

Who is he?

Canst thou do nothing for me?

I have a nameless horror of the man!

Pearl: Minister, I can tell thee who he is!

Dimmesdale: Quickly then, my child!

Quickly!

Tell me quickly!

As low as thou canst whisper!

(*Pearl* mutters some gibberish into his ear and then laughs aloud).

Dost thou mock me now?

Pearl: Thou wast not bold!

Thou was not true!

Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand,

and mother's hand,

tomorrow noontide!

Chillingworth: (from the foot of the platform)

Worthy Sir.

Pious Master Dimmesdale, can this be you?

Well, well, indeed!

We men of study,

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!

Dimmesdale: How knewest thou that I was here?

Chillingworth: Verily, and in good faith,

I knew nothing of the matter.

But come with me, Reverend Sir,

I beseech you,

else you will be poorly able to do Sabbath duty tomorrow.

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 whimses will grow upon you.

Dimmesdale: I will go home with you.

(*Dimmesdale* yields himself to *Chillingworth* and is led away. Lights fade).

CURTAIN

End of Act III

ACT IV

Scene I: A retired and lonely spot. *Chillingworth*, with a basket on one arm and a staff in the other hand, stoops along the ground in quest of roots and herbs. *Hester* enters, at some distance away, with *Pearl*. She signals to *Pearl* to go away and play and then approaches *Chillingworth*.

Hester: I would speak a word with you,
a word that concerns us much.

Chillingworth: (*raising from his stooped position*)
Aha! and is it Mistress Hester
that has a word for old Roger Chillingworth?
With all my heart!

(*Hester* stops and looks at *Chillingworth* more closely).

What see you in my face
that you look at it so earnestly?

Hester: Something that would make me weep,
if there were any tears bitter enough for it.
But let it pass!

It is of yonder miserable man that I would speak.

Chillingworth: And what of him?
Speak freely, Mistress Hester,
and I will make answer.

Hester: Since we last spake together,
now seven years ago,
no man is so near to him as you.
You tread behind his every footstep;
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.
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!

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

Hester: It had been better so!

Chillingworth: Yea, woman, thou sayest truly!

Hester: Hast thou not tortured him enough?
Has he not paid thee all?

Chillingworth: No! No! He has but increased the debt!

(subsiding 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.

Dost thou remember me, Hester?

Was I not a man thoughtful for others,

kind, true, just, and of constant, if not warm, affections?

Was I not all this?

Hester: All this, and more.

Chillingworth: And what am I now?

A fiend!

Who made me so?

Hester: It was myself!

Chillingworth: I have left thee to the scarlet letter,

If that have not avenged me,

I can do no more!

Hester: It has avenged thee!

Chillingworth: I judged no less.

And now, what wouldst thou with me
touching this man?

Hester: I must reveal the secret.

He must discern thee in thy true character.

What may be the result, I know not.

I shall not stoop to implore thy mercy.

Chillingworth: Peace, Hester, peace!

I cannot forgive.

Thy first step awry didst plant the germ of evil;
since that moment it has all been a dark necessity.

It is our fate.

Let the black flower blossom as it may!

Now go thy way,

and deal as thou wilt with yonder man.

(Chillingworth waves his hand and takes leave of Hester, stooping along the earth gathering herbs. Lights fade.)

Scene II: In a deep wood. *Hester* and *Pearl* are seated in a little dell, arched over with high trees. A small stream flows at their feet.

Pearl rises and moves gayly about.

Hester: Go now, child, but do not stray far.

(*Pearl* leaves singing and danging. *Dimmesdale* appears on the foot-path in the distance. *Hester* makes a step or two towards the foot-path but remains under the deep shadow of the trees. *Dimmesdale* advances along the path, entirely alone, leaning on a staff which he has cut by the wayside. He has almost passed the place where *Hester* stands before she can gather enough voice to attract his attention).

Hester: (faintly)
Arthur Dimmesdale!
(louder, but hoarsely)
Arthur Dimmesdale!

Dimmesdale: Who speaks?

(*Dimmesdale* stands more erect quickly. He looks towards *Hester* but does not, at first, recognize her until, stepping nigher, he discovers the scarlet letter).

Dimmesdale: Hester! Hester Prynne!
Is it thou?
Art thou in life?

Hester: Even so!
And thou, Arthur Dimmesdale,
dost thou yet live?

(*Dimmesdale* slowly puts forth his hand and touches *Hester's* hand. They move back into the shadow of the wood and sit in the dell by the stream).

Dimmesdale: Hester, hast thou found peace?

Hester: (looking down upon her bosom)
Hast thou?

Dimmesdale: None!
Nothing but despair!
What else could I look for,
being what I am and leading such a life as mine?

Hester: (gently)
You wrong yourself.
You have deeply and sorely repented.
Is there no reality in the penitence
thus sealed and witnessed by good works?

Dimmesdale: No, Hester, no!
 There is no substance in it!
 Of penance, I have had enough!
 Of penitence, there has been none!
 Had I one friend —
 or were it my worst enemy —
 to whom I could be known as the vilest of all sinners,
 methinks my soul might keep itself alive thereby.

Hester: (*hesitating*)
 Such a friend thou hast in me.
 (*again hesitating*)

Dimmesdale: (*starting to his feet, gasping for breath and clutching at his heart*)
 Thou hast long had such an enemy,
 and dwellest with him under the same roof!

Ha! What sayest thou!
 An enemy!
 And under my own roof!
 What mean you?

Hester: O, Arthur, forgive me!
 That old man, the physician,
 he whom they call Roger Chillingworth,
 he was my husband!

Dimmesdale: (*at first paralyzed, then sinking to the ground he buries his face in his hands*).

O Hester Prynne,
 thou little, little knowest the horror of this thing!
 Woman, woman...
 I cannot forgive thee!

Hester: (*flinging herself down beside him*)
 Thou shalt forgive me!
 Let God punish!
 Thou shalt forgive!

(*Hester, with sudden and desperate tenderness, throws her arms around Dimmesdale and presses his head against her bosom. He strives in vain to release himself.*)

Wilt thou yet forgive me!
 Wilt thou not frown?
 Wilt thou forgive?

Dimmesdale: (*at length, out of an abyss of sadness, but not anger*)
 I do forgive you, Hester.
 I freely forgive you now.

May God forgive us both!
 We are not the worst sinners in the world.
 That old man's revenge
 has been blacker than our sin.
 He has violated, in cold blood,
 the sanctity of a human heart.
 Thou and I, Hester, never did so!

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

Dimmesdale: (*rising from the ground*)
 Hush, Hester!
 No, I have not forgotten!

(They sit down again, side by side and hand clasped in hand, on the trunk of a fallen tree. They are silent. Suddenly *Dimmesdale* starts, pressing his hand nervously over his heart).

Dimmesdale: And I!
 How am I to live longer,
 breathing the same air with this deadly enemy?
 Think for me, Hester!
 Thou art strong.
 Resolve for me!

Hester: Thou must dwell no longer with this man.
 Thy heart must be no longer under his evil eye!

Dimmesdale: What choice remains to me?
 Must I sink down here and die at once?

Hester: (*weeping*)
 Alas, what ruin has befallen thee!
 Wilt thou die for very weakness?
 There is no other cause!

Dimmesdale: The judgment of God is upon me!
 It is too mighty for me to struggle with!

Hester: Is the world, then, so narrow?
 There is the broad pathway of the sea!
 It brought thee hither.
 If thou so choose, it will bear thee back again.

Dimmesdale: It cannot be!
 I am powerless to go!

Hester: Thou art crushed under this seven years' weight of misery.
 The future is yet full of trial and success.

- Begin all anew!
Up, and away!
- Dimmesdale:* O Hester!
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!
Alone, Hester!
- Hester:* *(in a deep whisper)*
Thou shalt not go alone!
- Dimmesdale:* *(after some silence)*
O Thou to whom I dare not lift my eyes,
wilt thou yet pardon me!
- Hester:* *(calmly)*
Thou wilt go!
There is a ship newly-arrived in the harbor.
I will arrange our passage.
The past is gone!
Let us not look back!

(Hester undoes the clasp that fastens the scarlet letter and taking it from her bosom, throws it some distance away. She then heaves a long sigh. Finally, she takes off the formal cap that confines her hair, which falls upon her shoulders, dark and rich).

- Hester:* Thou must know Pearl!
Our little Pearl!
I will call her!
Pearl! Pearl!

(Pearl appears in the distance and approaches slowly).

- Dost thou not think her beautiful?
I know whose brow she has!
- Dimmesdale:* She is mostly thine.
- Hester:* No, no! Not mostly.

(They watch as Pearl approaches).

- Dimmesdale:* Thou canst not think how my heart dreads this meeting,
and yearns for it!
- Hester:* Fear nothing!
She may be shy at first,
but will soon learn to love thee!

(By this time, *Pearl* has reached the margin of the brook and stands on the farther side, gazing silently at *Hester* and *Dimmesdale*).

Hester: *(stretching out both arms)*
Come, dearest child!
How slow thou art!
Here is a friend of mine,
who must be thy friend also.
Leap across the brook, and come to us.
Thou canst leap like a young deer!

(*Pearl* remains on the other side of the brook. She fixes her eyes from one to the other. *Dimmesdale*, involuntarily, places his hand over his heart. At length, *Pearl* points to her mother's breast).

Thou strange child,
why dost thou not come to me?

(*Pearl*, still pointing, frowns and stamps her foot with a yet more imperious look and gesture).

Hasten, *Pearl*, or I shall be angry with thee!
Leap across the brook, naughty child, and run hither!

(*Pearl* suddenly bursts into a fit of passion, gesticulating violently. She accompanies this wild outbreak with piercing shrieks, all the time pointing at *Hester's* bosom).

(whispering to Dimmesdale)
I see what ails the child.
(turning towards Pearl)
Pearl, look down at thy feet!
There! — before thee! — by the brook!

(*Pearl* looks and sees the scarlet letter).

Bring it hither!

(*Pearl* looks up at *Hester* and then at the letter and remains still).

Was ever such a child!

(*Hester* advances, takes up the scarlet letter and fastens it again to her bosom. She then gathers up the heavy tresses of her hair and confines them beneath her cap. She extends her hand to *Pearl*).

Dost thou know thy mother now, child?
Wilt thou come across the brook and own thy mother
now that she has her shame upon her,
now that she is sad?

(*Pearl* bounds across the brook and clasps *Hester* in her arms, drawing down her head and kissing her brow and both cheeks. Then she puts up her mouth and kisses the scarlet letter, too. *Hester* remonstrates and takes *Pearl* by the hand. *Pearl* hangs back and manifests her reluctance by a series of odd grimaces. *Dimmesdale*, painfully embarrassed, bends forward and impresses a kiss on her brow. Whereupon, *Pearl* breaks away from her mother, runs to the brook, stoops over it and bathes her forehead vigorously until the unwelcome kiss is quite washed off. She then remains apart, silently watching *Hester* and *Dimmesdale*. *Dimmesdale* rises, looks hesitantly at *Pearl*, then turns and continues his way slowly up the forest path. *Pearl*, now that the «intruder» has left returns to her mother's side. Lights fade).

Scene III: The market-place, as in Act I, Scene I. A small crowd stands packed about the entrance of the church, its attention directed towards the interior. *Hester* stands slightly apart, at the foot of the pillory. *Pearl* stands nearby. There is a party of Indians standing about and a group of mariners gamble and drink in one corner of the square. The 1st *Woman* enters and greets the 2nd *Woman* who approaches the square from another part.

1st *Woman:* Good-day, Mistress Dudley.

2nd *Woman:* 'Tis indeed a good day, neighbor.

1st *Woman:* Hast thou seen the procession?

2nd *Woman:* The goodly part.

1st *Woman:* Surely, our good Reverend *Dimmesdale* bears the mark of genius.

2nd *Woman:* Some say he will be our next Governor.

(The 3rd and 4th *Women* enter, conversing. They approach).

4th *Woman:* What say ye, gossips?

3rd *Woman:* Have ye also found no place in the meeting-house?

1st *Woman:* Even so.

2nd *Woman:* Some must work while others play.

3rd *Woman:* That's a truth!

4th *Woman:* Come, goodwives. Let us see if we can listen in on yonder divine man.

(The four *Women* approach the crowd at the church door. During this conversation, *Chillingworth* enters the square in close and familiar talk with the Commander. *Pearl* quits her mother's side and plays of her own will about the market-place, finally running into the center of the group of mariners, who grow noisier and more boistrous at the games).

- 4th Woman:* (turning from the crowd at the church door)
Noisy barbarians!
- 3rd Woman:* Servants of the Devill
- 1st Woman:* With their spirits and smoke!
- 3rd Woman:* An insult!
- 4th Woman:* A disgrace!
- 1st Woman:* Gambling in the public square!
- 2nd Woman:* Yea, but they are mariners...
- Several:* And so...
- 2nd Woman:* The sea knows no human law.
- 3rd Woman:* That's a truth!

(One of the mariners catches sight of *Hester* and, motioning to his comrades, approaches with curiosity and caution. A circle thus forms about her — the mariners are joined first by the Indians and then by some of the townfolk. Whispering).

- 4th Woman:* Look now! The buccaneers have found our Mistress Hester.
- 2nd Woman:* A rich treasure!
- 3rd Woman:* A rare delight, indeed!
- Several:* Ha, ha, ha!
- 1st Woman:* Let us draw near to share their pleasure.
(The *Women* join the circle).
- 2nd Woman:* Surely, they must think her odd, indeed.
- 3rd Woman:* A witch!
- 4th Woman:* Or a princess!
- Several:* Ha, ha!
A witchly princess!
Ha, ha, ha!
- 1st Woman:* Foolish ones!
Are not the very clothes you wear
the product of her skill?
- 2nd Woman:* Her soul is damned,
but her needle is saved.
- 3rd Woman:* Worth the price, I vow!
- 1st Woman:* Hark now, the Election Sermon has ended.

(The church service comes to an end and the crowd begins to issue forth. The circle around *Hester* dissolves as *Mistress Hibbins*, leaving the crowd, approaches).

- Mrs Hibbins:* Now what mortal imagination could conceive it!
Yonder divine man, that saint on earth!
Truly, forsooth,

I find it hard to believe him the same man.
 What is it that the minister seeks to hide,
 with his hand always over his heart?
 Ha, Hester Prynne!

(*Hester*, paling, turns aside. *Mistress Hibbins* then turns and makes *Pearl* a profound reverence).

Wilt thou ride with me some fine night, my child?
 Then thou shalt know why the minister keeps his hand
 over his heart!

(*laughs shrilly and departs*)

(The 5th *Woman* comes from the church and approaches the *Women*).

5th *Woman*: Surely we are blessed with such a divine man in our midst!

2nd *Woman*: How went it, neighbor?

5th *Woman*: A saint!

4th *Woman*: A good man, to be sure.

Several: Tell! Tell!

5th *Woman*: Never has human tongue uttered words of such glory!

1st *Woman*: Hush now, gossips. He comes.

(A train of venerable and majestic fathers moves through the broad pathway of the people. All eyes are turned towards *Dimmesdale*. He looks feeble and pale and totters nervously).

4th *Woman*: How pale he looks!

5th *Woman*: How pure!

3rd *Woman*: Yea, surely we are blessed!

1st *Woman*: But he is greatly weakened!

2nd *Woman*: I warrant his legs are too feeble for such a weighty spirit!

5th *Woman*: Speak not lightly of this pious man!

1st *Woman*: Aye, sister, thou lackest in reverence!

3rd *Woman*: Such a death-like hue!

4th *Woman*: Look now, he totters!

(*John Wilson* steps forward hastily to offer his support but *Dimmesdale* tremulously, but decidedly, repels his arm. He arrives before the scaffold and sees *Hester* holding *Pearl* by the hand. He stops. Governor *Bellingham* leaves his place in the procession and advances to give assistance. The *Women* separate and mix in the silent crowd. *Dimmesdale* turns towards the scaffold and stretches forth his arms).

Dimmesdale: Hester, come hither!
 Come, my little Pearl!

(*Pearl* flies to him and clasps her arms about his knees. *Hester* draws slowly near but pauses before she reaches him. At this instant, *Chillingworth* thrusts himself through the crowd and catches *Dimmesdale* by the arm).

Chillingworth: (*whispering*)

Madman, hold!
All shall be well!

Dimmesdale:

Ha, tempter!
Thou art too late!
Thy power is not what it was!
With God's help, I shall escape thee now!

(*extends his hand to Hester*)

Hester Prynne, come hither and twine thy strength
about me.

This wretched and wronged old man is opposing it with
all his might!

Come, *Hester*, come!

Support me up yonder scaffold!

(*Hester* approaches, puts her arm about *Dimmesdale* for support; they approach the scaffold and ascend the steps. *Dimmesdale* takes *Pearl* by the hand. *Chillingworth* follows).

Dimmesdale: *Hester*, I am a dying man.

So let me make haste to take my shame upon me!

(*turns to the public*)

People of New England!

Ye that have loved me!

Ye that have deemed me holy!

Behold me here, the one sinner of the world!

At last! At last!

Lo, the scarlet letter which *Hester* wears!

Ye have all shuddered at it!

But there stood one in the midst of you

at whose brand of sin and infamy ye have not shuddered!

(*Dimmesdale*, seeming almost to faint but throwing off all assistance, steps passionately forward a pace).

It was on him!

The eye of God beheld it!

The Devil knew it well!

Now, at the death-hour, he stands up before you!

Stand any here that question God's judgment on a sinner?

Behold!

Behold a dreadful witness of it!

(*Dimmesdale* sinks upon the scaffold. *Hester* partly raises him and supports his head against her bosom. *Chillingworth* kneels beside him).

Chillingworth: Thou hast escaped me!

Thou hast escaped me!

Dimmesdale: May God forgive thee!

Thou, too, hast deeply sinned!

(*turning to Pearl*)

Pearl,

dear little Pearl,

wilt thou kiss me now?

(*Pearl* kisses him on the lips. The spell is broken and she weeps).

Hester, farewell!

Hester: Shall we not meet again?

Thou lookest far into eternity,
with those bright dying eyes!

Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another,
with all this woe!

Dimmesdale: Hush, Hester, hush!

Had this agony been wanting,
I had been lost forever!

God is merciful!

Praised be his name!

Farewell!

(*Dimmesdale* expires. The multitude is silent).

CURTAIN

THE END