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The Scarlet Letter

NATHANIEL
HAWTHORNE



Saddleback's *Illustrated Classics*



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Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American romance writer, was born in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1804. He was educated at Bowdoin College in Maine and was the most distinguished craftsman of the New England school of letters. He led a quiet life, removed from the activities of his times, in a restless solitude. Because of his passionless upbringing, he had a strong pride and sense of alienation from the world in which he lived.

At age forty-five he wrote a story which had long been stored in his mind—*The Scarlet Letter*. At last he found success. Written with intense gloom and great indifference, Hawthorne's restlessness can easily be felt throughout the novel.

Even though Hawthorne's concern is always with what is ethical, only rarely does his imagination join with creative passion. More frequently you will find just a hint of emotion.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter



Arthur
Dimmesdale



Roger
Chillingworth



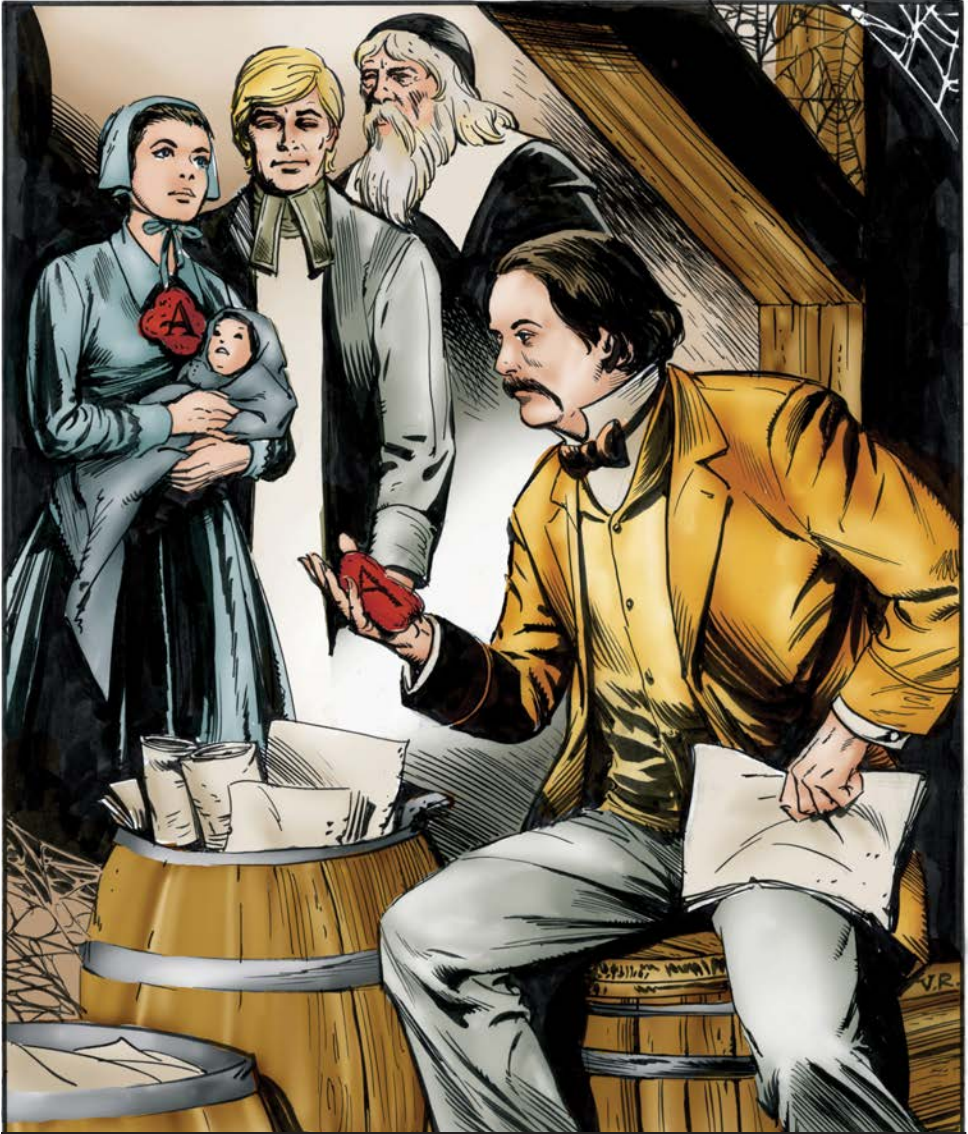
Hester Prynne



Pearl



Governor Bellingham



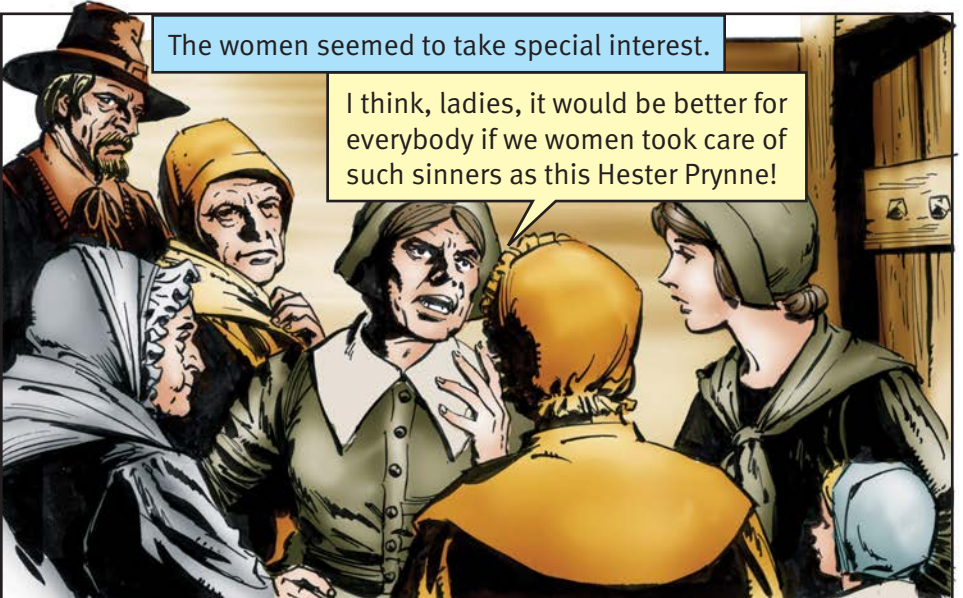
One quiet, rainy day I made a discovery—a small package wrapped in old paper. The object that most caught my attention was a bit of fine red cloth decorated with gold. It was the capital letter A. I happened to place it on my chest. I felt burning heat—as if it were not red cloth, but red-hot iron. I trembled and let it fall to the floor. I examined the papers to find the story that lay behind this strange letter.

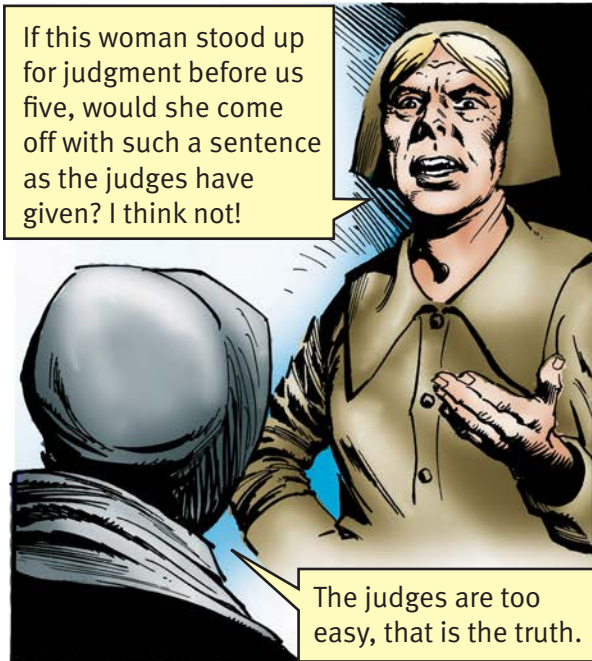
On a summer morning in 1642, most of the people of the town of Boston, Massachusetts, were gathered before the jail. It was an angry Puritan crowd. Their eyes were glued to the strong, oaken prison door.



The women seemed to take special interest.

I think, ladies, it would be better for everybody if we women took care of such sinners as this Hester Prynne!





The door was flung open. Like a black shadow, the town crier appeared.



He led a young woman toward the door.



The hussy! She uses her skill with the needle to laugh in our faces!



We should strip her gown off her shoulders.



I'll give her a piece of my old red flannel to make a more fitting letter. She wears the scarlet letter of a sinner as if it were an honor instead of a curse.

Make way, good people, in the name of the King.



Open a passage, and Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman, and child may have a sight of her mark of sin!



Come along, Mistress Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the marketplace!



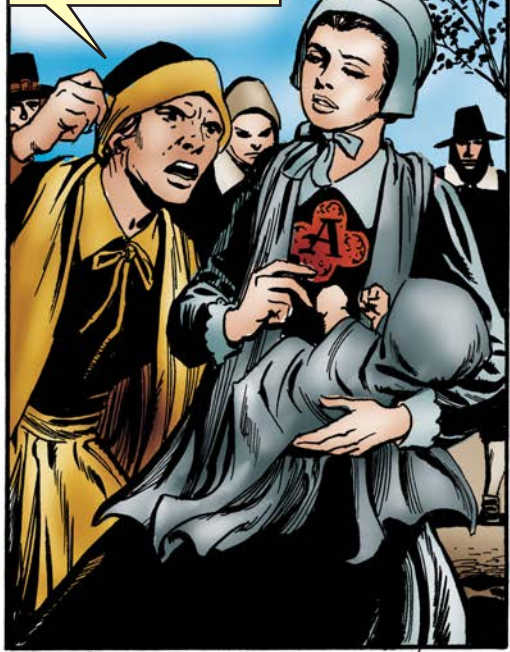
A lane was opened through the crowd, and Hester Prynne walked towards the place set for her punishment.



Schoolboys ran in front, staring up into her face.



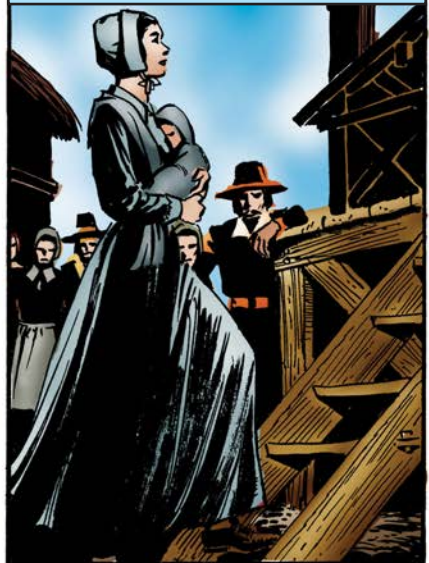
Shameless woman!



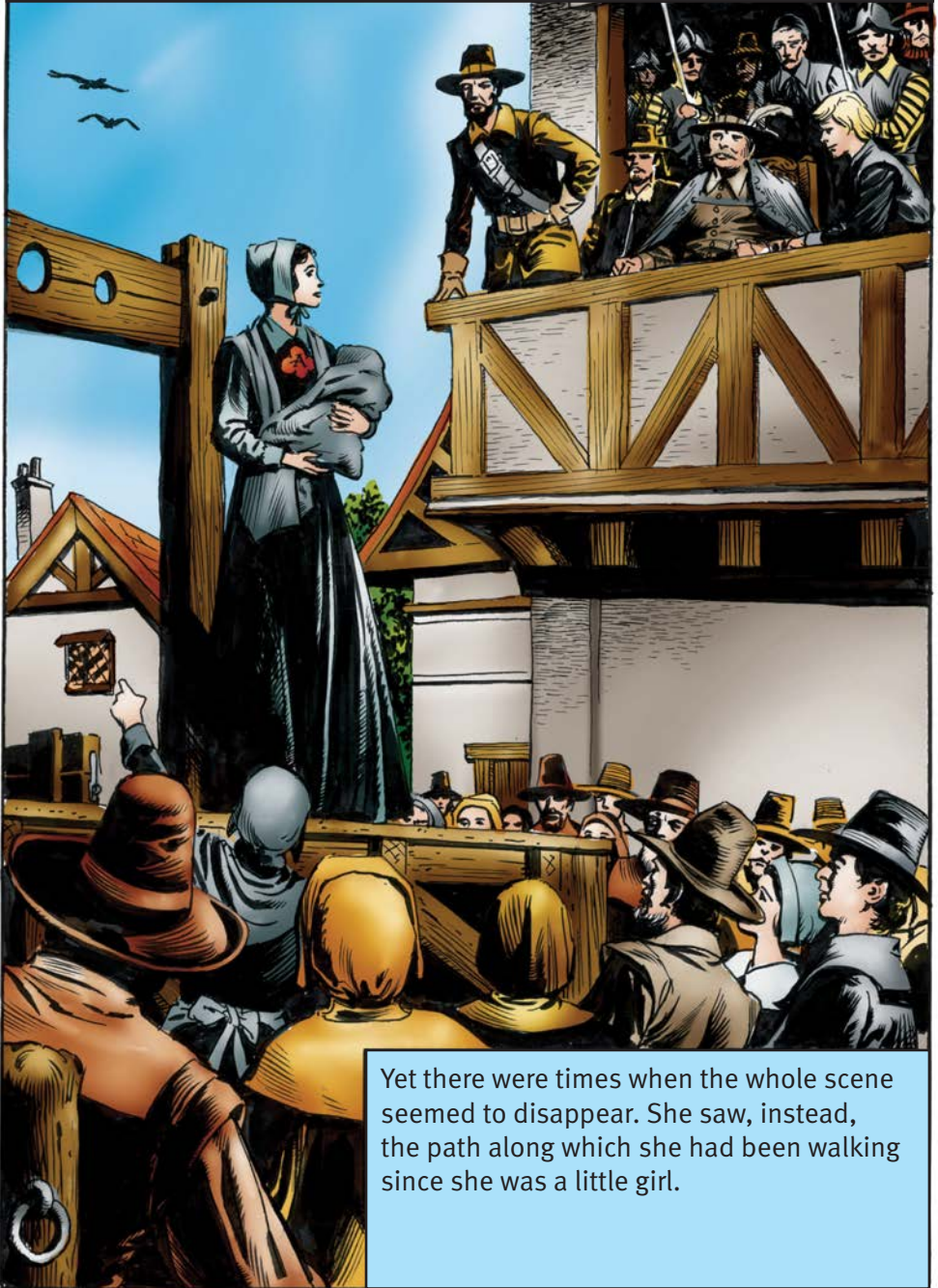
Though every step was torture, she passed through this part of her punishment with outward calm and reached the marketplace.



Knowing what to do, she climbed a flight of wooden steps.



There she stood for everyone to see. She felt at times as if she must cry out, and throw herself from the scaffold, or else go mad.



Yet there were times when the whole scene seemed to disappear. She saw, instead, the path along which she had been walking since she was a little girl.

In her mind she saw again the village in which she was born in Old England, and her home: an old, poor house of gray stone, now falling apart.



She saw her father's face. . . .

Her mother's too, with its look of love. . . .

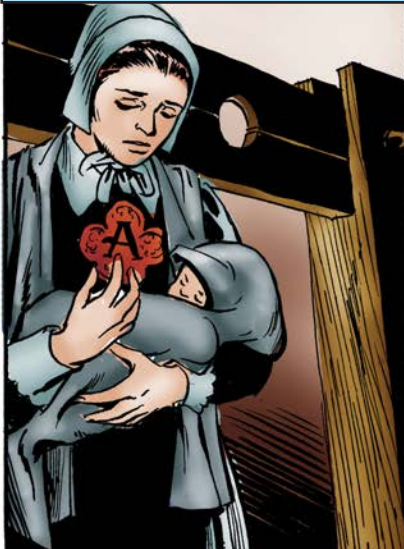
She saw her own face in the mirror in which she had so often looked.



There was another face in her memory—thin and intelligent. He was an older man with his left shoulder higher than his right—a new life seemed to wait for her.



Now she stood here. Could it be true? She held the child until it cried. She looked down at the scarlet letter and touched it. Yes! The baby and the shame were real. All else had disappeared.



To help her forget, she looked over the crowd. On its outer edge, two men caught her eye: an Indian, and beside him a white man dressed in a strange mixture of civilized and savage clothes.



At the sight of the white man, Hester drew back. Her eyes met his across the crowd. He raised his finger and put it to his lips.



Sir, who is this woman? Why, is she set up to public shame?

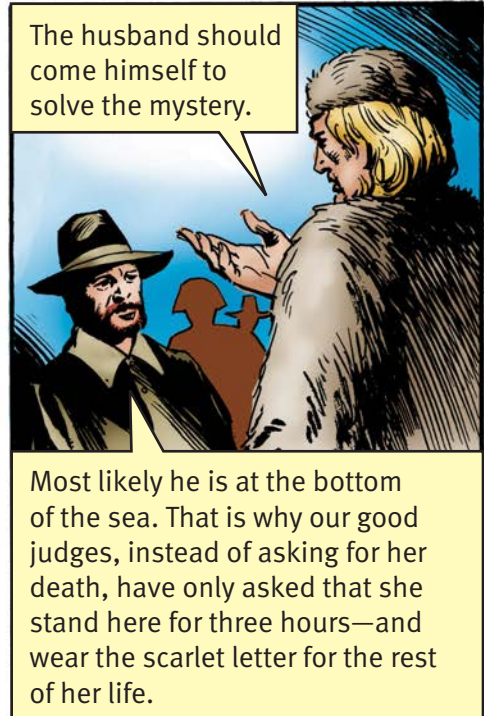
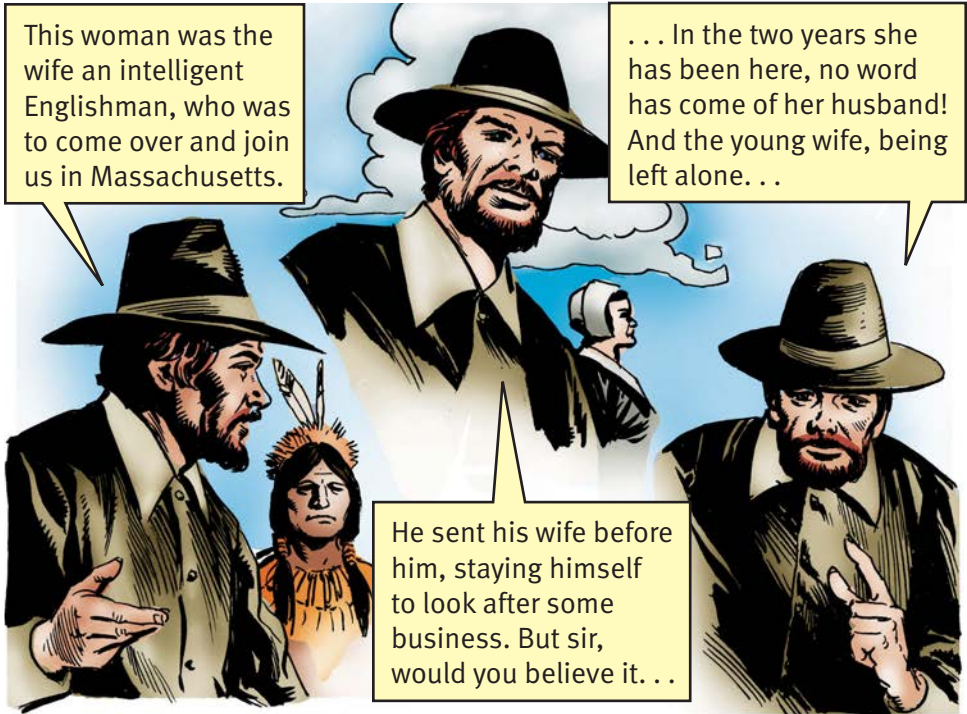


Friend, you must be a stranger not to have heard of Mistress Prynne. She has raised a great scandal in Master Dimmesdale's church.

I am a stranger. I have met with sad adventures by sea and land, and have been held captive by the Indians. Will you tell me of this woman's crimes?



Truly, I will, friend. And you must be glad to find yourself here, where sin is searched out and punished!



Hester was awakened from her thoughts by a voice.



It was the voice of John Wilson, the oldest clergyman of Boston.

I have asked my young friend, your pastor, the goodly Mr. Dimmesdale, to deal with you, here before all the people—to get you to tell the name of the man who led you into this sin. He is against it, but I asked him once again!



This appeal drew all the eyes to the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale. Though very intelligent and a fine speaker, he was nervous and shy and liked to avoid attention. He now stepped forward.

Hester Prynne, if you feel it to be for your soul's peace, I charge you to speak out the name of your fellow sinner and fellow sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity for him; for believe me, Hester . . .

