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The Scarlet Letter
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE
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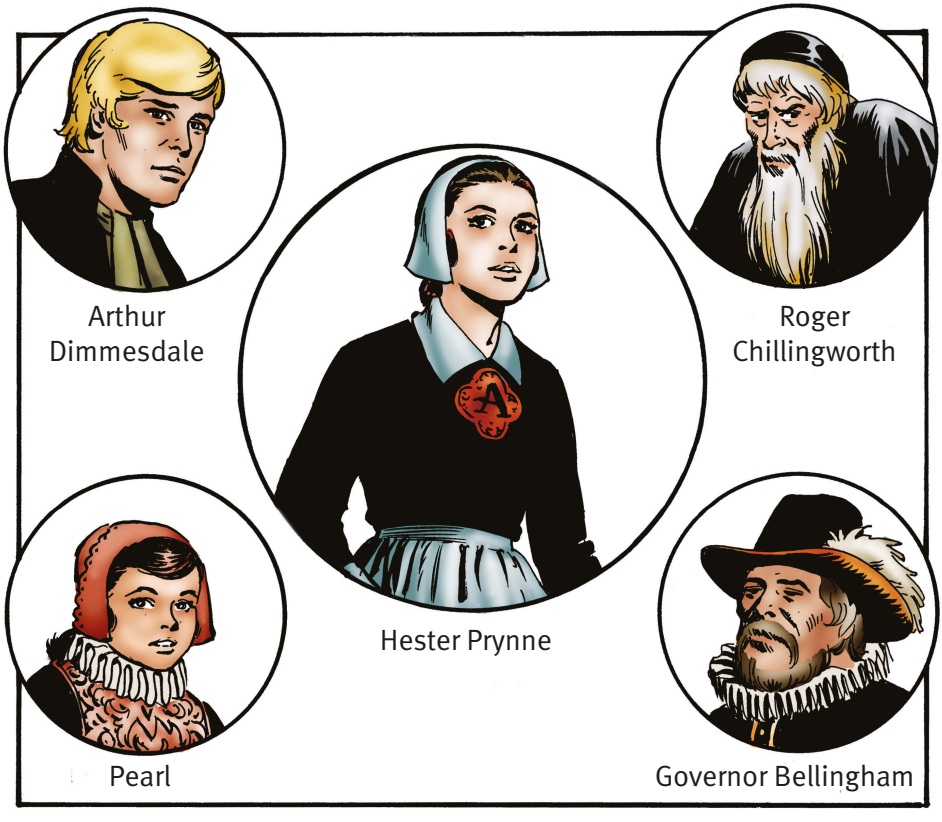
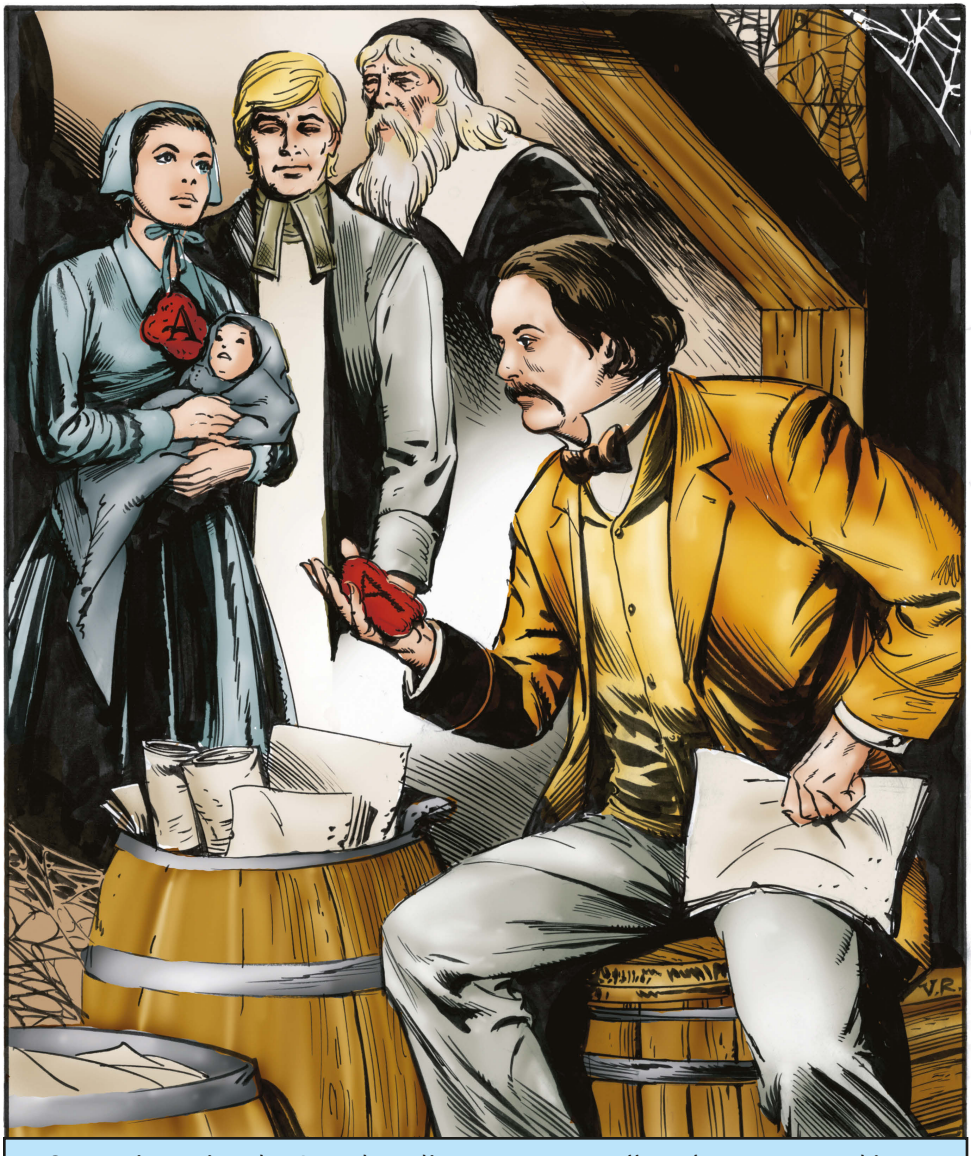
Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Scarlet Letter

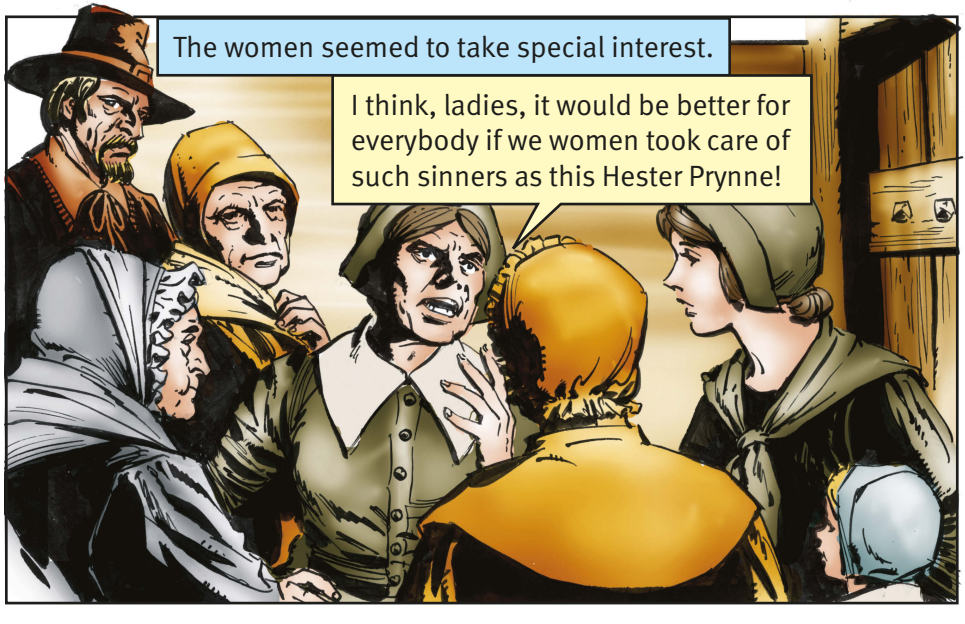




One quiet, rainy day I made a discovery—a small package wrapped in old paper. The object that most caught my attention was a bit of fine red cloth decorated with gold. It was the capital letter A. I happened to place it on my chest. I felt burning heat—as if it were not red cloth, but red-hot iron. I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

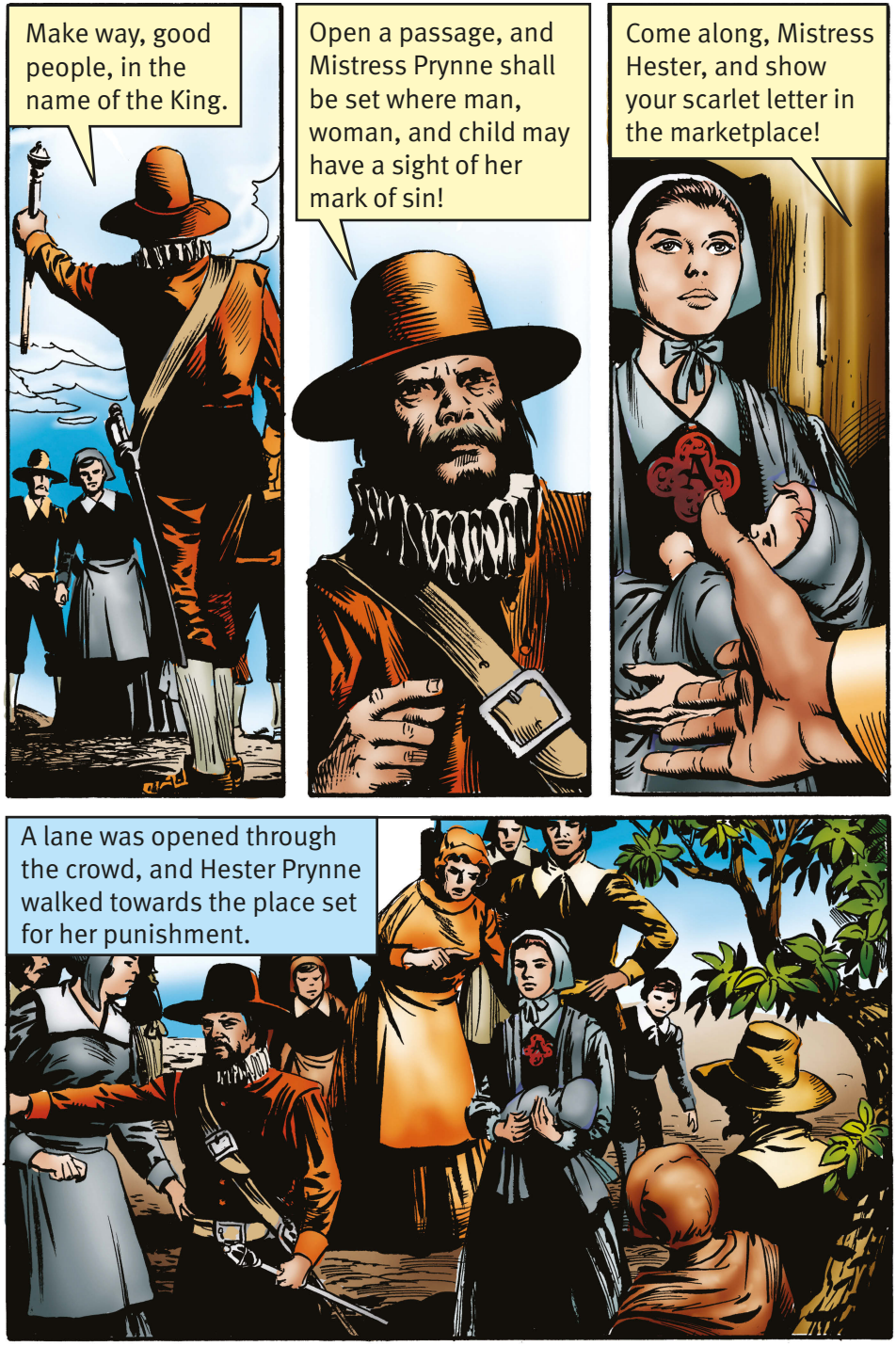
On a summer morning in 1642, most of the people of the town of Boston, Massachusetts, were gathered before the jail. It was an angry Puritan crowd. Their eyes were glued to the strong, oaken prison door.






If this woman stood up for judgment before us five, would she come off with such a sentence as the judges have given? I think not!
The judges are too easy, that is the truth.
At least, they should have marked her forehead with a hot iron!
Why do we talk of marks?
She has brought shame upon us all and ought to die!
Be quiet, women! The door is opening!


The door was flung open. Like a black shadow, the town crier appeared.
He led a young woman toward the door.
That woman! 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.



The Scarlet Letter

The Scarlet Letter takes place in 17th century Puritan New England. Read along with this touching tale of Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl as they struggle to survive as outcasts. Only one person, Arthur Dimmesdale, the Reverend, knows Hester's true story, but he is kept away for fear of what the community will think of him. Find out how Hester turns hardship into the ability to help the very people who scorned her.

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