

The Scarlet Letter

Nathaniel Hawthorne

 TIMELESS CLASSICS



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On the Scaffold

It was a summer morning in the year 1642. In the small town of Boston, an angry crowd was gathering in front of a wooden building. Its oak door was studded with iron spikes. The building was a prison.

The people in the crowd were Puritans, people who followed a strict religious code. The men had beards and wore dark clothes and tall gray hats. The women wore white caps or cloaks with hoods. Everyone's eyes were glued to the door. They were waiting to see the prisoner, Hester Prynne.

One woman in the crowd said, "The Reverend Dimmesdale is very upset that such a scandal has come upon his church."

"The judges have shown too much mercy," said another woman. "We women would not have been so easy. At the very least, they should have

put the brand of a hot iron on her forehead. As it is, she can easily cover up the mark. And then she can walk the streets as brave as ever.”

Yet another woman added in an angry voice, “Why do we talk of marks and brands? This woman has brought shame upon us all. Surely she ought to die!”

“Mercy on us!” said a man in the crowd. “Those are the hardest words yet. Hush now! The lock is turning in the prison door. Here comes Mistress Prynne herself.”

Stepping out into the bright morning sunshine was an official of the court. He was leading a tall young woman. As she came through the door, Hester Prynne shook free of his hand. Walking proudly, she carried a three-month-old baby in her arms. She looked around at the faces in the crowd. When she saw her neighbors, she smiled and blushed. On the front of Hester Prynne’s gown, in fine red cloth, was the letter A. It was surrounded by fancy designs in gold thread. Hester was skilled at needlework. She had done the embroidery on the gown herself.

Those who knew Hester were amazed at how her beauty shone out. It was not what they



had expected at a time like this. They thought she would have looked sad, as if under a dark cloud. Instead, her dark hair, deep black eyes, and beautiful features seemed to express a wild and free spirit. But the sight that drew all eyes was that scarlet letter. It had the effect of setting Hester aside from all other people.

“The hussy!” said a woman. “She uses her skill with the needle to laugh in our faces. Why, she’s figured out a way to take pride in what was meant to be punishment.”

“We should strip her gown from her

shoulders,” cried another woman.

“I’ll give a piece of my old red flannel to make a more fitting letter,” said a third, sour-faced woman.

The grim court official was trying to lead Hester toward the marketplace. He made a motion with his staff. “Make way, good people! Make way, in the King’s name!” he cried. “Open a passage! I promise you that every man, woman, and child will get a good look at Mistress Prynne’s mark of sin.”

A lane was opened through the crowd. “Come along with me, Mistress Hester. Show your scarlet letter in the marketplace!” said the court official. Following behind him, Hester set forth toward the place set for her punishment.

The distance from the prison door to the marketplace was not very great. But for Hester the walk seemed to take a very long time. Schoolboys ran in front, staring up into her face. People on both sides of her shouted words such as, “Shameless woman!” Every step of the way was torture for Hester. Yet she passed through this part of her punishment with outward calm. Finally she reached the

marketplace.

A scaffold had been set up at the western end of the marketplace. It stood beneath the eaves of Boston's oldest church. Hester approached the scaffold and climbed a flight of wooden steps. There she stood for everyone to see. For a moment Hester felt like crying out and throwing herself from the scaffold. Yet in the next moment the crowd of people before her seemed to disappear. Instead, she saw the people and places she had known in her childhood.

In her mind Hester saw again the village in Old England where she was born. She saw her home—the small, poor house of gray stone, now falling apart. She saw her father's face with the white beard that flowed over his collar. Her mother's face wore her typical look of love and concern. And she saw her own face, glowing with girlish beauty, in the mirror in which she had so often looked.

There was another face in her memory—thin, pale, and intelligent. This was the face of an older man whose left shoulder was higher than his right. The man's eyes were dim from studying so many books by lamplight. Hester

remembered that a new life, in connection with this strange man, had seemed to await her.

Then these shifting scenes faded. Once again Hester gazed at the marketplace. As she stood there, she wondered if all of this could really be happening to her. She held the child so tightly that it cried out in pain. She looked down at the scarlet letter and touched it. Yes! The baby and the shame were real. All else had disappeared.

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A Familiar Face

As Hester stood holding her child on the scaffold, she wished that she could be somewhere else. To keep her mind off her suffering, she looked out over the crowd. On its outer edge, two men caught her eye—an Indian and the white man standing beside him. The white man was dressed in a strange combination of English and Indian clothes.

Hester stared at the strange white man's face. He had an intelligent expression, as though he had spent many years studying books. Then Hester noticed that one of his shoulders rose higher than the other. Suddenly she realized that she knew this man. Her eyes met his across the crowd. But as soon as the man saw that Hester recognized him, he put his finger to his lips.

Then the man touched the shoulder of a

townsman standing next to him. “Sir, who is that woman?” he asked. “Why is she set up to public shame?”

The townsman said, “Friend, you must be a stranger in this region. Or else you would have heard of Mistress Hester Prynne and her evil ways. She has raised a great scandal in Master Dimmesdale’s church.”

“I am indeed a stranger in these parts. I have met with misfortune on sea and on land,” said the stranger. “For a long time I was held captive by the Indians south of here. This Indian with me brought me here to arrange for my ransom. Will you tell me of Hester Prynne’s—am I saying her name correctly?—of this woman’s crimes, what has brought her to this scaffold?”

“Truly, I will tell you, friend,” said the townsman. “How glad your heart must be to find yourself here in Boston—where sin is punished. This woman was the wife of an English gentleman. He had decided to come over and join us in Massachusetts. He sent his wife here before him, staying behind to look after some business. But sir, would you believe it . . . In the two years she has been here, no word has come

of her husband! And the young wife, being left all alone. . . .”

“Aha! I see,” said the stranger with a bitter smile. “A wise husband might have known what would happen. So who is the baby’s father?”

“In truth, friend, that remains a mystery,” answered the townsman. “Mistress Prynne refuses to name him.”

“The husband should come himself to look into this mystery,” said the stranger with a smile.

“He should, indeed—if he is still alive,” said the townsman. “Most likely, he is at the bottom of the sea. That is why our good judges have not sentenced her to death. They have ordered that she stand on the scaffold for three hours. Also, she must wear the scarlet letter for the rest of her life.”

“A wise sentence,” said the stranger, bowing his head. “Something bothers me, however. Surely her partner in sin should, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. Surely he will be known!—he will be known!—he will be known!”

The stranger bowed politely to the townsman. Then he and the Indian made their way through