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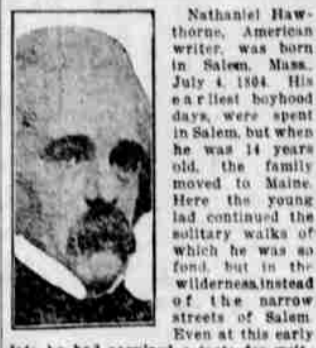
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THE SCARLET LETTER

By **NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**
Condensed by George S. Barton
Winchester, Mass.



Nathaniel Hawthorne, American writer, was born in Salem, Mass., July 4, 1804. His earliest boyhood days were spent in Salem, but when he was 14 years old, the family moved to Maine. Here the young lad continued the solitary walks of which he was so fond, but in the wilderness, instead of the narrow streets of Salem. Even at this early date he had acquired a taste for writing and carried a little blank book in which he jotted down his notes. After a year in Maine, Hawthorne returned to Salem to prepare for college. He amused himself by publishing a manuscript periodical, and at times speculated upon the profession he would follow in the future. For some years Hawthorne lived in Concord, Mass., in the old Manse, and wrote "Mosses from an Old Manse," "Twice Told Tales" and "Grandfather's Chair." He joined the Brook Farm colony at West Roxbury, but found that the conditions there suited neither his taste nor his temperament, and he remained but one year. While serving as a surveyor of customs at Salem he found among some old papers a large letter "A" embroidered on red cloth, and speculating upon the origin and history of the letter, his imagination was so stirred, that upon his retirement from office he wrote "The Scarlet Letter."

Some other stories of Hawthorne are "The Blithedale Romance," "The Wonder Book," "The Snow Image," "Septimus Felton" and "The Dolliver Romance" were left unfinished at the author's death. He died at Plymouth, N. H., on the 19th of May, 1864, and five days later was buried at Sleepy Hollow, a beautiful cemetery at Concord where he used to walk under the pines when living at the old Manse. Over his grave is a simple stone, inscribed with the single word, "Hawthorne."

ONE summer morning over two centuries ago the grass plot before the jail in Prison Lane was occupied by many of the inhabitants of Boston. The door opened and the town beadle appeared followed by a young woman carrying a baby about three months old. On the breast of her gown, in red cloth, appeared the letter A, and it was that scarlet letter which drew all eyes toward her.

The place appointed for her punishment was not far from the prison door, and in spite of the agony of her heart, Hester Prynne passed with almost a serene deportment to the scaffold where the pillory was set up, and under the weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes the unhappy prisoner sustained herself as best a woman might.

A small, intelligent appearing man, on the outskirts of the crowd attracted Hester's attention, and he in his turn eyed her till, seeing that she seemed to recognize him, he laid his finger on his lips.

Then, speaking to a townsman he said, "I pray you, good sir, who is this woman, and wherefore is she set up to public shame?"

"You must needs be a stranger, friend," said the townsman, "else you would have heard of Mistress Hester Prynne. She hath raised a scandal in godly Master Dimmesdale's church. The penalty thereof is death, but the magistracy in their mercy, have doomed her to stand a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and for the remainder of her life to wear a mark of shame in her bosom."

"A wise sentence!" remarked the stranger. "It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not at least stand by her side. But he will be known—he will be known!"

Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale, a young minister of high native gifts, who had already wide eminence in his profession, was urged to exhort Hester to repentance and confession. Addressing her, he advised that she name her fellow sinner even if he had to step from a high position to stand beside her, for it was better so than to hide a guilty heart through life.

Hester shook her head, keeping her place upon the pedestal of shame with an air of weary indifference.

That night her child writhed in convulsions, and a physician, Mr. Roger Chillingworth, none other than the stranger Hester had noticed in the crowd, was called. Having eased the baby's pain he turned and said: "Hester, I ask not wherefore thou hast fallen into the pit. It was my folly and thy weakness. What had I—a man of thought—to do with youth and beauty like thine? I might have known that in my long absence this would happen."

"I have greatly wronged thee," murmured Hester.

"We have wronged each other," he answered. "But I shall seek this man whose name thou wilt not reveal, and sooner or later he must be mine. I shall contrive nothing against his life. Let him live. One thing, thou that wast my wife, I ask. Thou hast kept his name secret. Keep likewise, mine. Let thy husband be to the world as one already dead, and breathe not the secret, above all to the man thou wottest of." "I will keep thy secret as I have his."

Freed from prison Hester did not flee, but established herself in a small cottage just outside the town, incurring no risk of want for she possessed the art of needlework which provided food for herself and child. She had named the little one "Pearl," as being of great price, and little Pearl grew up a lovely child. People wished to take her away and the matter was discussed in the mother's presence by Governor Bellingham and his guests—Rev. John Wilson, Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale, and Dr. Chillingworth.

"God gave me the child!" cried Hester, and turning to the young clergyman, Mr. Dimmesdale, she exclaimed, "Speak thou for me. Thou wast my pastor. 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! I will not loose the child! Look to it!"

"There is truth in what she says," began the minister. "There is a quality of awful sacredness between this mother and this child. It is good for this poor sinful woman that she hath an infant confided to her care—to be trained by her to righteousness. Let us leave them as providence hath seen fit to place them!"

"You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness," said Roger Chillingworth, smiling at him.

"He hath adduced such arguments that we will leave the matter as it stands," said the governor. The affair being so satisfactorily concluded, Hester and Pearl departed.

Rev. Mr. Dimmesdale's health failing he consulted Dr. Chillingworth. Taking him as a patient, the doctor decided to know the man's inmost nature before trying to heal him. Arrangements were made for the two men to lodge together so that he might be constantly under the doctor's observation.

As Doctor Chillingworth proceeded with his investigation, begun as he imagined with the integrity of a judge desirous only of truth, a terrible fascination seized him and insisted that he do its bidding. He now dug into the poor clergyman's heart, like a miner seeking gold; and Mr. Dimmesdale grew to look at him with an unaccountable horror.

Often Mr. Dimmesdale tried to speak the truth of his past from the pulpit but had cheated himself by confessing his sinfulness in general terms. Once, indulging in the mockery of repentance, he mounted the scaffold where Hester had stood. There was no danger of discovery for everyone was asleep. Even so he was surprised by Hester and Pearl, returning from a death bed in the town, and presently by Roger Chillingworth.

"Who is that man?" gasped Mr. Dimmesdale, in terror. "I shiver at him, Hester. Canst thou do nothing for me? I have a nameless horror of the man."

Remembering her promise, Hester was silent.

"Worthy sir," said the doctor, advancing to the platform, "pious Master Dimmesdale! Can this be you? Come, good sir, I pray you, let me lead you home! You should study less, or these night-whimsies will grow upon you."

Hester now resolved to do what she could for the victim whom she saw in her former husband's grip. One day she met the old doctor in the woods seeking herbs and implored him to be merciful, saying that she must now reveal the secret of their former relationship no matter what befell.

A week later Hester awaited the clergyman in the forest and told him about Roger Chillingworth and their relationship, bidding him hope for a new life beyond the sea in some rural village.

"Thou shalt not go alone," she whispered.

Arthur Dimmesdale attained the proudest eminence a New England clergyman could reach. He had preached the election sermon on the holiday celebrating the election of a new governor.

Hester had taken berths to England, and on the holiday the shipmaster informed her that Roger Chillingworth had booked passage on the same vessel; saying nothing, she turned and stood by the pillory with Pearl.

The minister, surrounded by leading townsmen, halted at the scaffold and galling Hester and Pearl to him mounted the scaffold steps. Telling Hester he was a dying man and must hasten to assume his shame, he turned to the market-place and spoke with a voice that all could hear.

"People of New England! At last, at last I stand where seven years since I should have stood. 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 ye have not shuddered."

With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial gown from his breast. It was revealed! Then sinking down on the scaffold he died, his head resting on Hester's bosom.

Afterwards, conflicting accounts arose about the scene on the scaffold. Many testified to seeing a scarlet letter on the minister's bosom, while others denied it, saying that Dimmesdale's confession implied no part of Hester's guilt.

Roger Chillingworth died, bequeathing his property to Pearl. Hester and Pearl lived in England for years, then Pearl marrying. Hester returned alone to the little dwelling by the forest.

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