

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Summary provided by CliffNotes.com

Chapter 1 - The Prison-Door

In this first chapter, Hawthorne sets the scene of the novel — Boston of the seventeenth century. It is June, and a throng of drably dressed Puritans stands before a weather-beaten wooden prison. In front of the prison stands an unsightly plot of weeds and beside it grows a wild rosebush, which seems out of place in this scene dominated by dark colors.

Chapter 2 – The Market Place

The Puritan women waiting outside the prison self-righteously and viciously discuss Hester Prynne and her sin. Hester, proud and beautiful, emerges from the prison. She wears an elaborately embroidered scarlet letter *A* — standing for "adultery" — on her breast, and she carries a three-month-old infant in her arms.

Hester is led through the unsympathetic crowd to the scaffold of the pillory. Standing alone on the scaffold as punishment for her adulterous behavior, she remembers her past life in England and on the European continent. Suddenly becoming aware of the stern faces looking up at her, Hester painfully realizes her present position of shame and punishment.

Chapter 3 – The Recognition

Hester recognizes a small, rather deformed man standing on the outskirts of the crowd and clutches Pearl fiercely to her bosom. Meanwhile, the man, a stranger to Boston, recognizes Hester and is horror-struck. Inquiring, the man learns of Hester's history, her crime (adultery), and her sentence: to stand on the scaffold for three hours and to wear the symbolic letter *A* for the rest of her life. The stranger also learns that Hester refuses to name the man with whom she had the sexual affair. This knowledge greatly upsets him, and he vows that Hester's unnamed partner "will be known! — he will be known! — he will be known!"

The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, visibly upset, pleads with Hester to name her accomplice. He tells her that she should name her partner in sin because perhaps the man doesn't have the courage to step forward even if he wants to. Yet despite Dimmesdale's passionate appeal, followed by harsher demands from the Reverend Mr. Wilson and from a stern voice in the crowd (presumably that of the deformed stranger), Hester steadfastly refuses to name the father of her child. After a long and tedious sermon by the Reverend Mr. Wilson, during which Hester tries ineffectively to quiet Pearl's crying, she is led back to prison.

Chapter 4 – The Interview

Back in her prison cell, Hester is in a state of nervous frenzy, and Pearl writhes in painful convulsions. That evening, when Roger Chillingworth enters Hester's prison cell, she fears his intentions, but he gives Pearl a draught of medicine that eases the child's pain almost immediately, and she falls asleep. After he persuades Hester to drink a sedative to calm her frayed nerves, the two sit and talk intimately and sympathetically, each of them accepting a measure of blame for Hester's adulterous affair.

Chillingworth, the injured husband, seeks no revenge against Hester, but he is determined to discover the father of Pearl. Although this unidentified man doesn't wear a scarlet *A* on his clothes as Hester does, Chillingworth vows that he will "read it on his heart." He then makes Hester promise not to reveal his identity. Hester takes an oath to keep Chillingworth's identity a secret, although she expresses the fear that her vow of silence may prove the ruin of her soul.

Chapter 5 – Hester at Her Needle

Her term of imprisonment over, Hester is now free to go anywhere in the world, yet she does not leave Boston; instead, she chooses to move into a small, seaside cottage on the outskirts of town. She supports herself and Pearl through her skill as a seamstress. Her work is in great demand for clothing worn at official ceremonies and among the fashionable women of the town — for every occasion except a wedding.

Despite the popularity of her sewing, however, Hester is a social outcast. The target of vicious abuse by the community, she endures the abuse patiently. Ironically, she begins to believe that the scarlet *A* allows her to sense sinful and immoral feelings in other people.

Chapter 6 – Pearl

During her first three years, Pearl, who is so named because she came "of great price," grows into a physically beautiful, vigorous, and graceful little girl. She is radiant in the rich and elaborate dresses that Hester sews for her. Inwardly, however, Pearl possesses a complex character. She shows an unusual depth of mind, coupled with a fiery passion that Hester is incapable of controlling either with kindness or

threats. Pearl shows a love of mischief and a disrespect for authority, which frequently reminds Hester of her own sin of passion.

Because both Hester and Pearl are excluded from society, they are constant companions. When Pearl is on walks with her mother, she occasionally finds herself surrounded by the curious children of the village. Rather than attempt to make friends with them, she pelts them with stones and violent words.

Pearl's only companion in her playtime is her imagination. Significantly, in her games of make-believe, she never creates friends; she creates only enemies — Puritans whom she pretends to destroy. But the object that most captures her imagination is the scarlet letter *A* on her mother's clothing. Hester worries that Pearl is possessed by a fiend, an impression strengthened when Pearl denies having a Heavenly Father and then laughingly demands that Hester tell her where she came from.

Chapter 7 – The Governor's Hall

Hester has heard that certain influential citizens feel Pearl should be taken from her. Alarmed, Hester sets out with Pearl for Governor Bellingham's mansion to deliver gloves that he ordered. More important, however, Hester plans to plead for the right to keep her daughter.

Pearl has been especially dressed for the occasion in an elaborate scarlet dress, embroidered with gold thread. On the way to the governor's mansion, Hester and Pearl are accosted by a group of Puritan children. When they taunt Pearl, she shows a temper as fiery as her appearance, driving the children off with her screams and threats.

Reaching the Governor's large, elaborate, stucco frame dwelling, Hester and Pearl are admitted by a bondsman. Inside a heavy oak hall, Hester and Pearl stand before Governor Bellingham's suit of armor. In its curved, polished breastplate, both Hester's scarlet *A* and Pearl are distorted. Meanwhile, as Hester contemplates her daughter's changed image, a small group of men approaches. Pearl becomes quiet out of curiosity about the men who are coming down the path.

Chapter 8 – The Elf-Child and the Minister

The group of men approaching Hester and Pearl include Governor Bellingham, the Reverend John Wilson, the Reverend Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth, who, since the story's opening, has been living in Boston as Dimmesdale's friend and personal physician.

The governor, shocked at Pearl's vain and immodest costume, challenges Hester's fitness to raise the child in a Christian way. He asks Reverend Mr. Wilson to test Pearl's knowledge of the catechism. Pearl deliberately pretends ignorance. In answer to the very first question — "Who made thee?" — Pearl replies that she was not made, but that she was "plucked . . . off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door."

Horrified, the governor and Mr. Wilson are immediately ready to take Pearl away from Hester, who protests that God gave Pearl to her and that she will not give her up. Pearl is both her happiness and her torture, and she will die before she relinquishes her. She appeals to Dimmesdale to speak for her. Dimmesdale persuades Governor Bellingham and Mr. Wilson that Hester should be allowed to keep Pearl, whom God has given to her as both a blessing and a reminder of her sin, causing Chillingworth to remark, "You speak, my friend, with a strange earnestness." Pearl, momentarily solemn, caresses Dimmesdale's hand and receives from the minister a furtive kiss on the head.

Leaving the mansion, Hester is approached by Mistress Hibbins, Governor Bellingham's sister. Hester refuses the woman's invitation to a midnight meeting of witches in the forest, saying she must take Pearl home, but she adds that, if she had lost Pearl, she would willingly have signed on with the devil.

Chapter 9 – The Leech

Since first appearing in the community, Chillingworth has been well received by the townspeople, not only because they can use his services as a physician, but also because of his special interest in their ailing clergyman, Arthur Dimmesdale. In fact, some of the Puritans even view it as a special act of Providence that a man of Chillingworth's knowledge should have been "dropped," as it were, into their community just when their beloved young minister's health seemed to be failing. And, although Dimmesdale protests that he needs no medicine and is prepared to die if it is the will of God, he agrees to put his health in Chillingworth's hands. The two men begin spending much time together and, finally, at Chillingworth's

suggestion, they move into the same house, where, although they have separate apartments, they can move back and forth freely.

Gradually, some of the townspeople, without any real evidence except for the growing appearance of evil in Chillingworth's face, begin to develop suspicions about the doctor. Rumors about his past and suggestions that he practices "the black art" with fire brought from hell gain some acceptance. Many of the townspeople also believe that, rather than being in the care of a Christian physician, Arthur Dimmesdale is in the hands of Satan or one of his agents who has been given God's permission to struggle with the minister's soul for a time. Despite the look of gloom and terror in Dimmesdale's eyes, all of them have faith that Dimmesdale's strength is certain to bring him victory over his tormentor.

Chapter 10 – The Leech and His Patient

In this and the next few chapters, Chillingworth investigates the identity of Pearl's father for the sole purpose of taking revenge. Adopting the attitude of a judge seeking truth and justice, he quickly becomes fiercely obsessed by his search into Dimmesdale's heart. He is frequently discouraged in his attempts to pry loose Dimmesdale's secret, but he always returns to his "digging" with all his intelligence and passion.

Most of Chapter 10 concerns the pulling and tugging by Chillingworth at the heart and soul of Dimmesdale. One day in Chillingworth's study, they are interrupted in their earnest discussion by Pearl and Hester's voices outside in the graveyard. They comment on Pearl's strange behavior and then return to their discussion. Watching Hester and Pearl depart, Dimmesdale agrees with Chillingworth that Hester is better off with her sin publicly displayed than she would be with it concealed.

When Chillingworth renews his probing of Dimmesdale's conscience, suggesting that he can never cure Dimmesdale as long as the minister conceals anything, the minister says that his sickness is a "sickness of the soul" and passionately cries out that he will not reveal his secret to "an earthly physician." Dimmesdale rushes from the room and Chillingworth smiles at his success.

One day, not long afterward, Chillingworth finds Dimmesdale asleep in a chair. Pulling aside the minister's vestment, he stares at the clergyman's chest. What he sees there causes "a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror," and he does a spontaneous dance of ecstasy.

Chapter 11 – The Interior of a Heart

Feeling that he is in full possession of Dimmesdale's secret, Chillingworth begins his unrelenting torture of the minister, subtly tormenting him with comments designed to trigger fear and agony. Dimmesdale does not realize Chillingworth's motives, but he nonetheless comes to fear and abhor him. As Dimmesdale's suffering becomes more painful and his body grows weaker, his popularity among the congregation grows stronger. Such mistaken adoration, however, further tortures Dimmesdale and brings him often to the point of making a public confession that he is Pearl's father. The minister's sermons are eloquent, but his vague assertions of his own sinful nature are taken by his parishioners as further evidence of his holiness.

Because Dimmesdale is incapable of confessing that he was Hester's lover and that he is Pearl's father — the one act necessary to his salvation — he substitutes self-punishment. He beats himself with a bloody whip and keeps frequent all-night vigils during which his mind is plagued by frightening visions. On one such night while he is seeking peace, Dimmesdale dresses carefully in his clerical clothes and leaves the house.

Chapter 12 – The Minister's Vigil

After leaving the house, Dimmesdale walks to the scaffold where, seven years earlier, Hester Prynne stood, wearing her sign of shame and holding Pearl. Now, in the damp, cool air of the cloudy May night, Dimmesdale mounts the steps while the town sleeps. Realizing the mockery of his being able to stand there now, safe and unseen, where he should have stood seven years ago before the townspeople, Dimmesdale is overcome by a self-hatred so terrible that it causes him to cry aloud into the night.

Hester and Pearl, who are returning from Governor Winthrop's deathbed, mount the scaffold, and the three of them stand hand-in-hand, Hester and Dimmesdale linked by Pearl. Twice, Pearl asks Dimmesdale if he will stand there with them at noon the next day; the minister says he will stand there with them on "the great judgment day." As he speaks, a strange light in the sky illuminates the scaffold and its surroundings. Looking up, Dimmesdale seems to see in the sky a dull red light in the shape of an immense letter A. At the same instant, Dimmesdale is aware that Pearl is pointing toward Roger Chillingworth who stands nearby, grimly smiling up at the

three people on the scaffold. Overcome with terror, Dimmesdale asks Hester about the true identity of Chillingworth. Remembering her promise to Chillingworth, Hester remains silent.

After the next morning's sermon, the sexton startles the minister by returning one of his gloves, which was found on the scaffold. ("Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence.") The sexton also asks about the great red letter A that appeared in the sky the past night.

Chapter 13 – Another View of Hester

Following her conversation with Dimmesdale on the scaffold, Hester is shocked by the changes in him. While he seems to have retained his intelligence, his nerve is gone. He is morally weak, and she can only conclude that "a terrible machinery had been brought to bear, and was still operating on Mr. Dimmesdale's well-being and repose." Hester decides she has an obligation to help this man.

Four years have gone by, and Hester's position in the community has changed: She has been given credit for bearing her shame with courage, and her life has been one of purity since Pearl's birth. While Dimmesdale's sermons have become more humane and praised because of his suffering, Hester's position has risen because of her charity. Her scarlet A now stands for "Able." But this has come with a price: no friends, no passion, no love or affection. Through adversity, Hester has forged a new place for herself on the edge of Puritan society. In contrast, Dimmesdale's mental balance has suffered greatly. Now she must help the man who seems to be on "the verge of lunacy." In fact, she feels it has been an error on her part not to step forward before. So she resolves to speak with her husband.

Chapter 14 – Hester and the Physician

While walking on the peninsula with Pearl, Hester sees Chillingworth and sends Pearl down to play by the seashore while she speaks with her husband. She is surprised at the changes in Chillingworth just as she was shocked by Dimmesdale's spiritual ailment and aging. Realizing Chillingworth is in the grip of the devil, she feels responsible for "another ruin." According to Hester, her promise has caused Chillingworth to do evil to the minister, but Chillingworth denies his role at first. Then he admits that, although he used to be kind, gentle, and affectionate, he now allows evil to use him. The physician believes it his fate to become a fiend. He releases Hester from her promise of silence.

Chapter 15 – Hester and Pearl

As Chillingworth leaves, Hester recognizes how evil he has become and realizes she hates him. Meanwhile, Pearl has entertained herself quite well: she played with her image in a pool, made boats of birch bark, and threw pebbles at beach-birds. Finally, she uses seaweed to make a scarf and then decorates her bosom with a green letter A. Pearl wants to know what the scarlet letter means. Hester is tempted to tell her because she has no one else in whom she can confide. But despite repeated questions by Pearl, Hester says she wears the letter for "the sake of the gold thread" — the first time she had "been false to the symbol on her bosom." Pearl is not satisfied and continues to question Hester until Hester threatens to shut Pearl in a dark closet.

Chapter 16 – A Forest Walk

For several days Hester tries unsuccessfully to intercept Dimmesdale on one of his frequent walks along the shore or through the woods. When she hears that he will be returning from a trip, she goes with Pearl into the forest, hoping to meet the minister on his return home. As she and Pearl walk along the narrow path through the dense woods, flickering gleams of sunshine break through the heavy gray clouds above them. Pearl suggests the sunshine is running away from Hester because of the A on her bosom. In contrast, Pearl, being a child without any such letter runs and "catches" a patch of light; then, as Hester approaches, the sunshine disappears.

Pearl asks Hester to tell her about the Black Man. She has heard stories about him and questions Hester about her dealings with him and whether the scarlet letter is his mark. Under Pearl's questioning, Hester confesses, "Once in my life I met the Black Man! . . . This scarlet letter is his mark!"

Having reached the depths of the forest, Hester and Pearl sit on a heap of moss beside a brook. Just then footsteps are heard on the path, and Hester sends Pearl away, but not before the girl asks whether it is the Black Man approaching and whether Dimmesdale holds his hand over his heart to cover the Black Man's sign. Before Hester can answer, Dimmesdale comes upon them. The minister looks haggard and feeble and moves listlessly as though he has no purpose or desire to live. He holds his hand over his heart.

Chapter 17 – The Pastor and His Parishioner

As Dimmesdale walks in the wilderness, returning from a visit with Apostle Eliot, he hears Hester's voice and is surprised by her presence. At first, he cannot tell whether she is a human or a ghost. In fact, they

are both ghosts of their former selves, and their chill hands and hesitant words reveal the strangeness of this meeting.

Both Hester and Dimmesdale talk with each other about the past seven years, and Dimmesdale confesses his misery and unhappiness. While Hester consoles him and mentions people's reverence for him, the minister feels his guilt and hypocrisy even more. He compares his silence with her public confession and realizes how his hidden guilt is tormenting him.

Hester, realizing how deeply her silence has permitted Dimmesdale to be tortured by her husband, seizes the moment to reveal Chillingworth's secret. This torture has led to insanity and "that eternal alienation from the Good and True, of which madness is perhaps the earthly type." Hester also realizes that she still loves Dimmesdale, and she begs his forgiveness for her silence.

The minister reacts to this revelation with anger at first, blaming her for his torture and realizing why he intuitively recoiled from Chillingworth on their first encounter. Hester, who has silently borne the disdain and scorn of the community and who has lived these seven years without human sympathy, cannot bear Dimmesdale's condemnation, and she falls beside him and cries, "Thou shalt forgive me! Let God punish! Thou shalt forgive!" She hugs him with great tenderness and feels such a compassion for his sorrow that her seven years of punishment seem to fall away.

Dimmesdale, for his part, forgives her and asks God to forgive them both. He believes that Chillingworth is the worst sinner of them all because he "violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart," unlike he and she, who "never did so." They are reluctant to leave this place in the forest because here they find a peace and harmony that they cannot feel in the Puritan community. Dimmesdale fears Chillingworth's course now that he, no doubt, knows "her purpose to reveal his true character," and he asks Hester to give him courage.

Hester's plan is for Dimmesdale to go deeper into the wilderness and live in natural freedom away from the eyes of Puritan society or to return to Europe, where he will be free of "these iron men and their opinions." But Dimmesdale feels he has not the strength to do either. While he falters, Hester encourages him, claiming that he can lead a powerful life for good and still fulfill his mission on earth. When the minister says he cannot do this alone, she tells him she will go with him.

Chapter 18 – A Flood of Sunshine

The minister takes courage from Hester's strength and resolves to leave the Puritan colony, but not alone. He reasons that if he is doomed irrevocably, why not be allowed the solace of a "condemned culprit before his execution?" Hester agrees with him and casts off the scarlet letter. She takes off her cap and lets down her full, rich, luxuriant hair. Nature reflects on her passionate action by allowing sunshine to burst forth.

Now Hester wants Dimmesdale to know Pearl. He is reluctant at first, but she assures him Pearl will love him. While the child slowly comes toward them, all of nature seems to tag along as her playmate and kindred spirit.

Chapter 19 – The Child at the Brook-Side

Hester decides the time has come for Dimmesdale to meet Pearl. Hester and Dimmesdale are joined spiritually and genetically to this child, and "in her was visible the tie that united them." While Dimmesdale confesses that he has always been afraid someone would recognize his features in Pearl, Hester simply speaks of Pearl's beauty and sees her as a "living hieroglyphic." Dimmesdale remembers Pearl being kind to him, yet he also feels ill at ease around children and is not very confident about this meeting. Hester, however, assures him that Pearl will love him and that he should be careful not to overwhelm her with emotion.

Pearl moves very slowly toward them, trying to discern her parents' relationship. Dimmesdale senses her hesitation and puts his hand once again over his heart. Seeing the scarlet letter on the ground and her mother's hair sensuously falling about her shoulders, Pearl points her finger, stamps her foot, shrieks, and "bursts into a fit of passion."

Hester's and Dimmesdale's reactions to Pearl's behavior vary. Hester realizes that Pearl recognizes the change in her (the letter is gone from her bosom and her hair is no longer hidden under a cap), and she hurries to fasten the hated badge to her dress and to draw her cap over her hair. She excuses Pearl's actions by saying children cannot abide change easily. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, begs Hester to do whatever will stop this fit and pacify Pearl. As soon as Hester changes her appearance, Pearl willingly comes to her and mockingly kisses the scarlet letter.

Pearl desires the minister to acknowledge her in public. While Hester assures her that this admission will happen in the future,

Dimmesdale kisses Pearl's forehead in an attempt to mollify her. Pearl immediately goes to the brook and washes off the kiss. There she remains apart from the adults, and the brook babbles cheerlessly on.

Chapter 20 – The Minister in a Maze

Dimmesdale leaves the forest first, almost believing what has transpired has been a dream. When he looks back, he sees Hester weighed down with sadness and Pearl dancing because he is gone. Turning over their plan in his mind, he believes that going to Europe is the better choice. He is not healthy enough to endure a life in the forest converting natives, and Europe offers more civilization and refinement. Furthermore, a vessel currently in the harbor is soon sailing for England, and Hester will discreetly secure their passage for a departure in four days. The timing of the voyage enables him to give the Election Sermon, an opportunity he can use to terminate his career "honorably."

Thus decided, Dimmesdale is a new man. He walks with great energy and sees everything differently. In fact, he sees things so differently that he almost becomes afraid for himself. Three times, he meets people of his congregation, and each time he is tempted to do something terrible. The venerable and upright deacon of his church is narrowly saved from Dimmesdale uttering blasphemy.

The eldest dame of the congregation — she who worshiped the minister — is almost treated to a sacrilegious argument against the soul's immortality. And, finally, a sweet, young virgin narrowly escapes a wicked look from her beloved minister. Finally, he barely refrains from teaching bad words to a group of children and trading curses with a sailor.

Mistress Hibbins invites Dimmesdale to the forest and tells him she admires the way he covers up his true feelings during the day. But she knows she will see him in the forest with the Black Man when midnight comes. Dimmesdale hurries home and, because he is agitated, Chillingworth offers to give him some medicine to calm him down. Dimmesdale lies to Chillingworth, telling him that though he knows his medicine is dispensed by a loving hand, he does not need it. Then he goes to his study and furiously writes his Election Sermon.

Chapter 21 – The New England Holiday

Hester and Pearl go to the marketplace to watch the procession and celebration as elected officials assume their offices. Hester thinks about leaving Boston with Dimmesdale and having a life as a woman once again. While she meditates on her future, Pearl, agitated by the crowd and celebration, dances as she waits for the procession. She alone senses Hester's excitement; to other observers, Hester appears to watch the procession passively.

Pearl continues to ask Hester precocious questions. She wants to know about the procession and asks whether the minister will acknowledge them as he did on the midnight scaffold. Hester quiets her and tells her she must not call out to Dimmesdale.

The captain of the Bristol-bound ship sees Hester and tells her that they will have company on their trip to Europe: Roger Chillingworth.

Chapter 22 – The Procession

While Hester ponders Chillingworth's smile, the Election Day procession begins. First music adds a "higher and more heroic air." Then comes a company of gentlemen soldiers, brilliantly garbed. Next are the political dignitaries, stable, dignified, and drawing a reverent reaction from the crowd. Finally comes the minister, Dimmesdale, whose intellectual prowess is mentioned by Hawthorne. He has changed, showing great energy and an air of purpose in his walk and demeanor. His strength is spiritual, and he has an abstracted air as though he hears things not of this earth.

The focus now goes to Hester and her reaction to Dimmesdale. How far away he seems and how remote from the man she met only three days ago in the forest! She realizes what a great gulf there is between them, and she can scarcely forgive him for his remoteness. Even Pearl does not recognize him because he has changed so completely.

Meanwhile, Mistress Hibbins appears and speaks with Hester and Pearl. As Pearl questions Mistress Hibbins about what the minister hides, the witch tells Hester that she knows the minister also has a hidden sin comparable to Hester's scarlet token. When pressed about how she knows this, Mistress Hibbins explains that intuitively recognizing a fellow sinner is not difficult. She leaves, having said that soon the world will know of Dimmesdale's sin.

Now Hester hears the voice of Dimmesdale giving his sermon; while she cannot hear the words, she does hear sympathy, emotion, and compassion mixed with a "low expression of anguish." He may not be telling the world of his sin, but Hester hears the sadness and despair in his tone because she is so in sympathy with his heart.

Then Pearl scampers off through the crowd in her bright red dress and sees the shipmaster, who gives her a message for her mother: Chillingworth has secured passage for himself and Dimmesdale on the ship. When Hester hears this, she glances around the crowd and sees the same faces that were at the first scaffold scene. The chapter ends with the lines "The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the marketplace!" Who would believe "that the same scorching stigma was on them both?"

Chapter 23 – The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter

At the end of Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon, the crowd emerges from the church, inspired by powerful words they have just heard from a man whom they feel is soon to die. This moment is the most brilliant and triumphant in Dimmesdale's public life. As the procession of dignitaries marches to a banquet at the town hall, the feelings of the crowd are expressed in a spontaneous shout of tribute to Dimmesdale. "Never, on New England soil, has stood the man so honored by his mortal brethren, as the preacher!" But the shout dies to a murmur as the people see Dimmesdale totter feebly and nervously in the procession. His face has taken on a deathly pallor, and he can scarcely walk. Several people attempt to help him, but the minister repels them until he comes to the scaffold where Hester stands holding Pearl by the hand. There Dimmesdale pauses.

As the minister turns to the scaffold, he calls Hester and Pearl to his side. Suddenly, Chillingworth appears and attempts to stop Dimmesdale, but the minister scorns the old physician and cries out to Hester to help him get up to the scaffold. The crowd watches in astonishment as the minister, leaning on Hester and holding Pearl's hand, ascends the scaffold steps. Chillingworth's face darkens as he realizes that nowhere else but on the scaffold can Dimmesdale escape him.

The minister tells Hester that he is dying and must acknowledge his shame. Then he turns to the crowd and cries out his guilt. He steps in front of Hester and Pearl and declares that on his breast he bears the sign of his sin. He tears the ministerial band from his breast and, for a moment, stands flushed with triumph before the horrified crowd. Then he sinks down upon the scaffold.

Hester lifts Dimmesdale's head and cradles it against her bosom. Chillingworth, meanwhile, kneels down and, in a tone of defeat, repeats, over and over, "Thou hast escaped me!" The minister asks God's forgiveness for Chillingworth's sin; then he turns to Pearl and asks for a kiss. Pearl kisses him and weeps.

Dimmesdale, obviously dying now, tells Hester farewell. She asks whether they will spend eternity together. In answer, he recalls their sin and says he fears that eternal happiness is not a state for which they can hope. The minister leaves the matter to God, whose mercy he has seen in the afflictions leading to his public confession. His dying words are "Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!"

Chapter 24 - Conclusion

Several versions circulate of what actually transpired in the marketplace. Most people say they saw a scarlet A imprinted on Dimmesdale's chest, but there is conjecture as to its origin. Some think the emblem is a hideous torture the minister inflicted on himself, others think it is the result of Chillingworth's drugs, and still others believe it was remorse gnawing its way out of Dimmesdale's conscience. Still other observers claim that the minister's death serves as a parable showing that even the most saintly of us are sinners. Hawthorne puts this latter version down to the loyalty of friends and gives it little credence. He does state that a moral lesson is to be found in the original manuscript from the Custom House. That precept is "Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"

In considering which characters follow this caveat, Hawthorne discusses their fates. Chillingworth, consumed by his revenge, shrivels up and vanishes. He leaves Pearl great wealth in his will, and she and her mother disappear, presumably to Europe. After their departure, the legend of the scarlet letter grows. Finally, one day Hester returns alone and inhabits once again the little cottage. She wears gray and reapplies the scarlet A to her bosom.

No one knows Pearl's fate, but people assume that she married well and had a family because letters with the seals of heraldry arrive for Hester and articles of comfort and luxury are found in her cottage. Hester is also seen embroidering baby garments; instead of Puritan colors, she uses most un-Puritan-like lavish and rich materials.

Finally, Hester becomes a symbol of comfort and compassion, and upon her death, she is buried in the cemetery near the prison door where she first was incarcerated. While alive, she gives hope and comfort to those who feel sorrow and pain, and, accordingly, the scarlet letter becomes a symbol of help. She becomes a prophet of

a better time where human happiness will be easier to obtain than in the rigid rules of Puritan society. When she dies, she is buried next to Dimmesdale. Their graves are slightly apart but with a single gravestone bearing the inscription: "On a field, sable, the letter A, gules."

