



THE SCARLET LETTER: PART I

CAST

WOMAN 1	<i>Respectable Woman</i>
WOMAN 2	<i>Respectable Woman</i>
WOMAN 3	<i>Respectable Woman</i>
WOMAN 4	<i>Respectable Woman</i>
MAN 1	<i>Respectable Man</i>
MAN 2	<i>Respectable Man</i>
BEADLE	<i>Church Officer</i>
M. HIBBINS	<i>Old Crone</i>
HESTER	<i>Fallen Woman</i>
WILSON	<i>Colony Minister</i>
DIMMESDALE	<i>Local Minister</i>
CHILLINGWORTH	<i>Stranger</i>
BRACKET	<i>Jailer</i>

NARRATOR: If you happened to pass by the old prison house in the city of Boston,

you would see that its oaken door hangs off its hinges, and its metalwork is now covered in rust. Yet on one side of the portal grows a wild rosebush, once offering consolation to those poor souls who were confined behind this barred door—or walked out of it again to their doom. Perhaps this rosebush symbolizes the sweet, moral blossom that can be found in the otherwise dark tale of human frailty and sorrow that has been associated with this prison house for generations.

On a summer's morning in the early seventeenth century, the grassy plot before this same jail was occupied by a large number of the inhabitants of Boston—all with their eyes fastened on the iron-clamped, oaken door of the prison. It was the type of crowd that gathered in anticipation of a public whipping or an execution. But today it was the women who were taking a peculiar interest in what was about to ensue.

WOMAN 1: Goodwives, I'll tell you a piece of my mind! It would behoove our township if we mature women could handle the punishment of sinners like this Hester Prynne. What think you?

WOMAN 2: I know if the hussy stood up for judgment before us women, she would not come off as easily as she has today!

WOMAN 1: Of course not! The magistrates have gone easy on her, I say.

WOMAN 3: *(kindly)* People say that Reverend Dimmesdale, our godly pastor, takes it grievously to heart that such a scandal should happen in his congregation.

WOMAN 1: The magistrates are all God-fearing gentlemen. But I feel they have been over merciful in this case. All they did was place a bit of fabric on her bodice.

WOMAN 2: Her bodice? Ha! They should have taken a hot poker and branded her on her forehead!

WOMAN 4: The naughty baggage! Why would she care about a bit of cloth on her bodice? She could just cover it up with a brooch and walk around the streets as bold as ever.

WOMAN 2: Just like none of this ever happened!

WOMAN 3: (*tenderly*) She may cover the mark, but the pain will always be in her heart.

WOMAN 4: What do marks and brands matter to her? This woman has brought shame upon us all! The truth is, she ought to die. Is there no law to condemn her?

WOMAN 2: Of course! Holy Scripture and the statute book of our colony.

WOMAN 1: If they don't punish this woman to the full extent of the law, what do the magistrates expect to happen to their own wives and daughters? What will keep other women from going astray?

NARRATOR: A man, who stood nearby listening to the gossips, furrowed his brow.

MAN 1: (*shocked*) Mercy, goodwife! Is there no virtue in woman—save what springs from a fear of the gallows?

WOMAN 1: (*grumbling*) Death is a good antidote for sin among any of God's creatures.

NARRATOR: From out of nowhere, an old crone appeared in the crowd. It was Mistress Hibbins, the sister to the governor. The people pulled away from her as if touched by evil.

MISTRESS HIBBINS: (*cackling*) Death would be the easy way for her! This suffering and shame will bring her closer to the darkness...which will be most beneficial for some of us.

MAN 1: Hush now, all you gossips! Here comes Mistress Prynne herself!

NARRATOR: The door of the jail was flung open, and the grim and grisly presence of the town beadle emerged, with his sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand. With his other hand, the beadle drew a young woman forward into the light. It was Hester Prynne. At the threshold of the prison, she shook off his hand and then stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will. (*murmuring in the crowd*)

WOMAN 1: There is the child!

NARRATOR: Hester bore in her arms a baby of some three months old. The child blinked its eyes from the light of day. Until now it had only been acquainted with the gray twilight of a dungeon. (*wail of a child*)

WOMAN 2: There is the mark!

NARRATOR: Elaborately embroidered upon Hester's bosom was a letter "A" in fine red cloth with gold thread. Now in the

light of day it was Hester's impulse to clasp her child tightly to her bosom—not because of motherly affection, but to hide the token of shame that was fastened onto her dress. In a moment she realized that one token of shame would poorly serve to hide another, so she lowered her child, and with a haughty smile and an unabashed gaze looked around at her townspeople and neighbors.

WOMAN 3: There doesn't seem to be a bit of shame about her!

NARRATOR: Never before had Hester Prynne seemed more ladylike than as she issued from the prison. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam. Those who had known her before had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud. Instead they were startled to perceive how her beauty shone out and made a halo of her misfortune and ignominy. The scarlet letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom, had the effect of a spell, taking Hester out of the ordinary realm of humanity and enclosing her in a sphere by herself.

WOMAN 3: One thing is sure—she has good skill with a needle.

WOMAN 2: Ha! Apparently that is not the harlot's only skill!

WOMAN 1: What a brazen hussy! The letter was meant for punishment, but she has pridefully embroidered it! She has practically decorated it!

WOMAN 2: We should strip her rich gown off her dainty shoulders, along with that

curiously-stitched letter! I'll give her an old rag from a sickbed to make herself a more fitting letter!

WOMAN 3: Shhh! Do not let her hear you. I know that she felt every stitch of that embroidered letter in her heart.

BEADLE: Make way, good people! Make way in the king's name! In due time, Mistress Prynne shall be placed where man, woman, and child may have a good view of her shameful apparel. A blessing on the righteous colony of Massachusetts, where dark sin is dragged into the sunshine and exposed for all to see! Come, Mistress Hester! Show your scarlet letter in the marketplace!

NARRATOR: A lane opened through the crowd. Preceded by the beadle and attended by a procession of stern-browed men, scowling women, and curious schoolboys, Hester Prynne set forth toward the place appointed for her punishment—the town pillory in the marketplace, where offenders were whipped, placed in the stocks, and sometimes executed. *(murmuring from the crowd)*

It was no great distance from the prison door to the market place, yet it was a journey of some length for Hester. Every footstep of those who thronged to see her humiliation caused her agony, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to trample upon. Yet she sustained herself as best a woman might under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes. At moments she felt as if she would shriek with the full power of her lungs and throw herself down upon the ground—or else go mad at once.

But, finally, the market place and the

pillory scaffolding were reached. Hester and her child ascended the stairs for all the crowd to behold—like the Madonna, Mary and her child.

BEADLE: Mistress Hester Prynne is sentenced to wear the emblem upon her bosom for all her life. Today she shall stand on this scaffold of the pillory for all to see her shame until the sun is high in the sky. Then she shall spend one more night in yonder prison. So is her punishment.

NARRATOR: Hester's child cried out, and she moved to comfort it. (*wailing child*) As Hester lifted her eyes from her child, at the back of the crowd, she noticed a strange, yet familiar, man. When she beheld him, she convulsed with such force that her poor child cried out in pain. (*wail of a child*)

The man's hair was graying and one shoulder of his thin frame was higher than the other. His clothing was an odd mixture of civilized and savage heathen dress. As the stranger bent his eyes on Hester, a writhing horror twisted across his features like a gliding snake. His face darkened with some powerful emotion, which he instantaneously controlled by an effort of his will. He had noted that Hester had recognized him, so he slowly and calmly raised his thin finger and laid it upon his lips. Then the man touched the shoulder of a townsman who stood nearby.

CHILLINGWORTH: I pray you, good sir, I am a stranger here. Who is this woman and why is she publicly shamed?

MAN 2: You must indeed be a stranger in this region, friend, if you have not heard of Hester Prynne and her evil doings. She has

raised a great scandal! She has brought shame on Reverend Dimmesdale's church.

CHILLINGWORTH: Truly, I am a stranger. I have been a wanderer and met with grievous mishaps by sea and land. I have long been among the heathen savages to the south of here. Would you please tell me more of Hester Prynne?

MAN 1: After your sojourn in the wilderness, it will gladden your heart to know you are in godly New England, a land where iniquity is searched out and punished in the sight of rulers and people.

MAN 2: Yonder woman was the wife of a certain learned man, who was English by birth, but who had long dwelt in Amsterdam. Some time ago he decided to cross over and cast in his lot with us folks of Massachusetts. To this purpose he sent his wife across the sea before him, remaining behind himself to look after some necessary affairs.

MAN 1: For two years that woman has been a dweller here in Boston, but no tidings have come of her husband. His young wife has been left to her own misguidance it would seem.

CHILLINGWORTH: If this man you speak of was so learned, he should have known that his wife would be up to some mischief without him. And who is the father of yonder baby that Mistress Prynne holds in her arms? It is some three or four months old, I would judge.

MAN 1: In truth, friend, that matter remains a riddle. The one who shall expound it has yet to speak.

MAN 2: Mistress Hester refuses to speak his name. The magistrates have tried to convince her to name the father, but it has all been in vain.

MAN 1: The guilty one stands looking on at this sad spectacle. He is unknown of man and forgets that God sees him for what he really is.

CHILLINGWORTH: The woman's husband, this learned man, should come himself and look into the mystery.

MAN 1: That would behoove him—if he still be alive.

MAN 2: It is likely that her husband may be at the bottom of the sea, so they have not been bold enough to put her to the full extremity of the law.

MAN 1: The penalty for her crime is death. But in their great mercy and tenderness of heart, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand as you see on the platform of the pillory. Then for the remainder of her natural life she will wear the mark of shame upon her bosom.

CHILLINGWORTH: A wise sentence! Thus, she will be a living sermon against sin—until the ignominious letter is engraved upon her tombstone! It irks me, nevertheless, that the partner of her iniquity should not stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known. (*aside*) Yes, he will be known.

NARRATOR: The odd man bowed to the gentlemen and took his leave. As he passed through the crowd, the man moved near the scaffold—never taking his eyes from Hester.

Hester stared back at him with such a fixed gaze that she scarcely heard a voice behind her.

WILSON: Hearken to me, Hester Prynne!

NARRATOR: Hester turned her face toward the voice. Directly over the platform upon which she stood was a balcony extending from the church meetinghouse. Seated there was Reverend Wilson, the eldest clergyman of Boston, Governor Bellingham, and Reverend Master Dimmesdale, a young clergyman. Reverend Wilson stood tall with gray eyes and a border of grizzled locks beneath his skull cap.

WILSON: Hester Prynne, I have sought to persuade young Reverend Dimmesdale here that he should deal with you concerning the vileness and blackness of your sin! But he opposes me and says that it would be wrong to force a woman to lay open her heart's secrets in broad daylight. Reverend Dimmesdale, must it be you or I that shall deal with this poor sinner's soul?

NARRATOR: The crowd looked anxiously at Reverend Dimmesdale, who continued to hesitate. Although still young, his eloquence and religious fervor had given him high esteem among the people.

WILSON: Speak to the woman, my brother! Exhort her to confess the truth!

NARRATOR: Dimmesdale began to move forward—bending his head in a silent prayer. He turned his brown, melancholy eyes toward Hester Prynne.

DIMMESDALE: Hester Prynne, you hear what this good man says, and you see the accountability that I have to you and all my congregation. For the peace of your soul I charge you to speak out the name of your fellow sinner.

NARRATOR: The crowd waited in breathless anticipation.

DIMMESDALE: Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for this man! Believe me, Hester, even if he were to step down from some high place and stand there beside you on this pedestal of shame, it would be better for him than to hide a guilty heart throughout his life.

NARRATOR: Hester stood perfectly still—silent. Even her child did not make a sound.

WILSON: Defy us not, Hester Prynne! Pity for your plight has kept this sentence light. Push us not!

DIMMESDALE: What can your silence do for him? Heaven has granted you the earthly shame that will cleanse you from your sin. Although you have sorrow without, you have triumph over the evil within. Do not deny the same bitter, but wholesome cup that is presented to your lips to this man, who may have not the courage to grasp it for himself.

NARRATOR: Every member of the crowd was moved by Dimmesdale's speech—even Hester Prynne's baby was affected by it. The babe turned its head toward him and held up its little arms with a pleased murmur. (*giggling of a child*) All the people were sure that Hester Prynne would speak out the guilty man's name.

WILSON: Will you speak?

NARRATOR: Hester shook her head.

WILSON: Woman, do not push your limits beyond Heaven's mercy! Your child there encourages you to speak as well. Speak out the name! This confession, and your repentance, may take the scarlet letter off your breast!

HESTER: Never! It is too deeply branded. You cannot take it off. I will endure *his* agony as well as mine.

NARRATOR: The strange man from the crowd suddenly cried out.

CHILLINGWORTH: Speak, woman! Speak and give your child a father!

NARRATOR: Hester stared at the man wildly.

HESTER: I will not speak! And my child must seek a heavenly Father, for she will never know an earthly one!

NARRATOR: Mistress Hibbins looked from Hester to the man in the crowd. She noticed the strange looks between them. She smiled and seemed to address the air around her.

MISTRESS HIBBINS: (*to herself*) What is this? There is a darkness here—between these two. I can see it. Perhaps they will strengthen our ranks at our dark meetings in the deep-forest night!

NARRATOR: Reverend Dimmesdale leaned back over the balcony with his hand on his heart.

DIMMESDALE: Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart! She will not speak!

NARRATOR: Reverend Wilson began a long discourse on sin and used the scarlet letter as a symbol of the flames of the infernal pit. Yet Hester would not speak the name. She kept her place on the scaffold with glazed eyes and weary indifference. The crowd grew restless and disheartened. They returned home, still sure that the perpetrator was somewhere close among them.

Finally, Hester was led back to her prison cell. Some who followed behind and peeped into the dark hallway after her said that the scarlet letter threw off a lurid gleam in the darkness.

Imprisoned within her cell once again, Hester's child began to wail. (*wail of a child*) Hester laid it in its trundle-bed, ignored its cries, and beat her fists against the floor—beginning to sob and wail herself.

HESTER: (*weeping and wailing*)

NARRATOR: Her cries roused Master Brackett, the jailer.

BRACKET: Mistress Hester! What is the meaning of these hysterics? If you do not stop, I shall be forced to call a doctor.

NARRATOR: But Hester did not stop her thrashing about, and Master Brackett began to fear she would do harm to herself or to the child. He ran out at once to find help and soon returned with a visitor.

BRACKET: Look! I have returned! This good doctor has agreed to come. His name

is Roger Chillingworth. Would you allow him to help you and your child?

NARRATOR: When Hester glanced up to behold the man's face, her weeping stopped. It was the stranger from the crowd. He smiled at her startled expression.

HESTER: I will not let him. I cannot. I pray you, be gone!

NARRATOR: Chillingworth turned kindly to the jailer.

CHILLINGWORTH: Prithee, friend. Leave me alone with my patients. Trust me, good jailer, I will calm the woman and her child. You shall have peace in your jailhouse. I promise you that Mistress Prynne shall hereafter listen to authority.

BRACKET: Truthfully, she has been like one possessed. You will be a man of skill indeed if you are able to calm her. If not, I will have to drive Satan out of her with stripes from my whip!

NARRATOR: The jailer left Dr. Chillingworth alone with Hester. She did not take her eyes from the strange man.

CHILLINGWORTH: First, I shall attend to the child.

NARRATOR: Chillingworth made his way first to stare down at the child as it lay in its crib. As Hester watched him breathlessly, he examined the child and unclasped a leather bag from under his clothes. From it he poured a powdery substance into a cup of water.

CHILLINGWORTH: You know, for the past year I have traveled among the savages who taught me the kindly properties of herbs. Before that I studied the ancient art of alchemy. These two combined have made me a better physician than many that claim a medical degree.

NARRATOR: He held up the cup.

CHILLINGWORTH: Here, woman! The child is yours. She is not of mine. Neither will she recognize my voice. Therefore, administer this draught with your own hand.

NARRATOR: Hester did not reach out for the cup.

HESTER: Would you avenge yourself on my innocent child?

CHILLINGWORTH: Foolish woman! I would not harm this misbegotten and miserable babe. The medicine is potent for good. Were it my child—mine as well as yours—I could do no better for it.

NARRATOR: Hester still hesitated.

CHILLINGWORTH: I shall do it then.

NARRATOR: Chillingworth took up the child and administered the medicine to it himself. After a few moments the child's moans subsided into sleep. He set the child down in her crib and then turned to Hester.

CHILLINGWORTH: Now I shall examine you.

NARRATOR: He approached Hester, who stayed still—alert. He felt her pulse and

looked into her eyes. His gaze made Hester's heart shrink and shudder. It was so familiar, but so strange and cold. He chuckled to himself and began to mix a second draught.

CHILLINGWORTH: I have learned many new secrets in the wilderness, and here is one of them.

NARRATOR: He held the drink out to Hester.

CHILLINGWORTH: Drink it! It may be less soothing than a sinless conscience. I cannot give you one of those. But it will calm the swell and heaving of your passion.

NARRATOR: Hester took the cup and stared at her child.

HESTER: I have thought of death. I have even wished for it. I would have even prayed for it—if it were fit for one such as I to pray for anything. Yet if death be in this cup, I ask you to think again before I drink. See! It is even at my lips.

CHILLINGWORTH: Drink then. Do you know me so little, Hester? Even if I concocted a scheme of vengeance, how could I do better than what you already suffer?

NARRATOR: He laid his long forefinger on the scarlet letter, which seemed to scorch into Hester's breast as if it had been red-hot.

CHILLINGWORTH: I would let you live so that this burning shame might still blaze upon your bosom. Therefore, live! And bear your doom with you! Your doom will be in the eyes of men and women—and in the

eyes of yonder child. So that you may live, take of this draught.

NARRATOR: Hester drained the cup.

CHILLINGWORTH: Hester, I do not ask why or how you came to this disgrace. The reason is not far to seek. It was my folly and your weakness. I am a man of thought, a bookworm of great libraries—a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge. What right did I have to link myself to youth and beauty like your own? From my birth hour I was misshapen. How could I delude myself into thinking I was wise? From the moment we descended the church steps as man and wife, I should have seen that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path.

HESTER: You know I was frank with you. I felt no love for you, and I feigned none.

CHILLINGWORTH: True. That was my folly. I have said it. But up to that time in my life, I had lived in vain. The world had been so cheerless! My heart was a lonely and chilly habitation without a household fire. I drew you into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and tried to warm myself by the warmth you made there.

HESTER: I have greatly wronged you.

CHILLINGWORTH: We have wronged each other. Mine was the first wrong. It was when I tricked your budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay. Therefore, I seek no vengeance, and I plot no evils against you. Between you and me, the scale hangs fairly balanced. But, Hester,

the man lives who has wronged us both! Who is he?

HESTER: That you shall never know!

NARRATOR: Chillingworth smiled wickedly.

CHILLINGWORTH: Never, you say? Never know him! Believe me, Hester, there are few things in the outward world or in the invisible sphere of thought that can be hidden from the man who devotes himself to the solution of a mystery. You may cover up your secret from the prying eyes of the townspeople. You may conceal it from the ministers and magistrates. But not from me. I shall seek this man as I have sought truth in books—as I have sought gold in alchemy! I shall see him tremble! Sooner or later, he will be mine!

NARRATOR: The man's eyes glowed so intensely that Hester clasped her hands over her heart, fearing that he should read the secret there at once.

CHILLINGWORTH: He bears no letter of infamy sewed onto his garment as you do, but I shall read it on his heart. Yet fear not for him! Do not think I will interfere with Heaven's own method of retribution. I will not betray his identity and lose him to the grip of human law. No, that would be my own loss! Neither will I contrive against his life. Let him live! Let him hide himself! He shall be mine!

HESTER: (*frightened*) Your acts are like mercy, but your words show me that you are a terror—a demon!

CHILLINGWORTH: Listen. You, who were once my wife, I command one thing of you. As you keep the identity of your lover a secret, likewise keep mine. Breathe not to any human soul that you once called me husband. Whether by love or hate, right or wrong, your life, the life of your child, and the life of your love belong to me. So betray me not, Hester Prynne!

HESTER: Why do you desire power over our lives? Why not announce yourself openly and cast me off at once?

CHILLINGWORTH: Maybe because I do not want to encounter the dishonor that comes to the husband of a faithless wife. Maybe it is for other reasons. It is my intention to live and die unknown. Therefore, let your husband be to the world as one already dead.

HESTER: (*slowly*) I will keep your secret—as I have kept his.

CHILLINGWORTH: Good. Now recognize me not by word, by sign, or by look! Do not breathe my secret to even your lover. If you should fail me in this, beware! His fame, his position, his life will all be in *my* hands. Swear it!

NARRATOR: Hester swore it, and Chillingworth smiled a crooked grin.

HESTER: (*frightened*) Why do you smile so? Are you like the devil, the Black Man that haunts the forests around us? Have you tricked me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?

CHILLINGWORTH: Not *your* soul. No, not yours. Now I leave you alone—with your infant—and your scarlet letter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is the punishment of Hester Prynne merciful or cruel? Explain.
2. Based on this first episode, how does *The Scarlet Letter* portray the Puritans and their society?
3. The Puritans intended to create a perfect society in the new world of America. Judging by what you have seen so far, did they succeed? Explain.
4. What seems strange or demented about Roger Chillingworth?
5. Why do you think Hester is protecting the identity of the father of her child?
6. The Boston townspeople are labelling Hester as weak. Does she seem weak to you? Explain.
7. What does the Scarlet Letter symbolize? Explain.
8. Hester bears two symbols of her sin and shame. What are they? Explain.