*The Scarlet Letter* – ch. 5 – “Hester at Her Needle”

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| Original Text | Paraphrase |
| Hester Prynne’s term of confinement was now at an end. Her prison-door was thrown open, and she came forth into the sunshine, which, falling on all alike, seemed, to her sick and morbid heart, as if meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast. Perhaps there was a more real torture in her first unattended footsteps from the threshold of the prison, than even in the procession and spectacle that have been described, where she was made the common infamy, at which all mankind was summoned to point its finger. Then, she was supported by an unnatural tension of the nerves, and by all the combative energy of her character, which enabled her to convert the scene into a kind of lurid triumph. It was, moreover, a separate and insulated event, to occur but once in her lifetime, and to meet which, therefore, reckless of economy, she might call up the vital strength that would have sufficed for many quiet years. The very law that condemned her—a giant of stern features, but with vigor to support, as well as to annihilate, in his iron arm—had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy. But now, with this unattended walk from her prison-door, began the daily custom; and she must either sustain and carry it forward by the ordinary resources of her nature, or sink beneath it. She could no longer borrow from the future to help her through the present grief. To-morrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next; each its own trial, and yet the very same that was now so unutterably grievous to be borne. The days of the far-off future would toil onward, still with the same burden for her to take up, and bear along with her, but never to fling down; for the accumulating days, and added years, would pile up their misery upon the heap of shame. Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast,—at her, the child of honorable parents,—at her, the mother of a babe, that would hereafter be a woman,—at her, who had once been innocent,—as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument. | Hester’s prison term came to an end and she was released; however, her freedom does not bring her emotional freedom. Rather than bringing cheer, the sun, to Hester, seems to shine only to draw attention to her scarlet letter. In fact, living her daily life after prison could be thought to be even more difficult than the day she stood on the scaffold (as described in the first four chapters). That day was difficult, but she could mentally and emotionally prepare herself to get through a difficult but temporary trial. When humans know they must endure a difficult moment, they can draw upon their stored up strength and forge ahead to the other side. However, Hester’s life on the other side of prison has no visible end; one day of misery would lead to another and another and another. Each day she would be the town’s symbol of shame and sin, an outcast that they would mock and ostracize. Ministers would preach about sin and use Hester as their example. Hester is a human being—the child of a good family, the mother of a baby, a once-pure and innocent girl herself—but the people only view her as a sinner. This is her burden to bear—her life to live—with no end in sight. |
| It may seem marvellous, that, with the world before her,—kept by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of the Puritan settlement, so remote and so obscure,—free to return to her birthplace, or to any other European land, and there hide her character and identity under a new exterior, as completely as if emerging into another state of being,—and having also the passes of the dark, inscrutable forest open to her, where the wildness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her,—it may seem marvellous, that this woman should still call that place her home, where, and where only, she must needs be the type of shame. But there is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghost-like, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it. Her sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil. It was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne’s wild and dreary, but life-long home. All other scenes of earth—even that village of rural England, where happy infancy and stainless maidenhood seemed yet to be in her mother’s keeping, like garments put off long ago—were foreign to her, in comparison. The chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but could never be broken. | Given the circumstances above, we may not understand why Hester would choose to stay in Boston. After all, nothing is forcing her to stay there. She could go back to England or any other place and start a new life where she wouldn’t be judged as the sinful woman. But, Boston is the place where her “defining moment”—however dark—occurred, so she feels tied to that place, like it’s a major part of her identity, so to leave would be like trying to deny herself or being false to the truth. Her old self—before her sin—was in the past; she could not return to it. She could no longer be that Hester of the past. |
| It might be, too,—doubtless it was so, although she hid the secret from herself, and grew pale whenever it struggled out of her heart, like a serpent from its hole,—it might be that another feeling kept her within the scene and pathway that had been so fatal. There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that, unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar, for a joint futurity of endless retribution. Over and over again, the tempter of souls had thrust this idea upon Hester’s contemplation, and laughed at the passionate and desperate joy with which she seized, and then strove to cast it from her. She barely looked the idea in the face, and hastened to bar it in its dungeon. What she compelled herself to believe—what, finally, she reasoned upon, as her motive for continuing a resident of New England—was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here, she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment; and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom. | Another reason she stays is because she wants to remain close to the father of the child; she even imagines that they can somehow be together one day, even if not until they get to Heaven. She tries not to think about this and believes that this type of thinking is a temptation placed in her mind by the devil. So she tries to ignore those kinds of thoughts and tells herself that she stays in Boston because that is where her sin took place, so that is where her punishment should be. She tells herself she needs to endure the punishment to become a better, purer person. |
| Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee. On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of the peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage. It had been built by an earlier settler, and abandoned because the soil about it was too sterile for cultivation, while its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity which already marked the habits of the emigrants. It stood on the shore, looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, towards the west. A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula, did not so much conceal the cottage from view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed. In this little, lonesome dwelling, with some slender means that she possessed, and by the license of the magistrates, who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her, Hester established herself, with her infant child. A mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot. Children, too young to comprehend wherefore this woman should be shut out from the sphere of human charities, would creep nigh enough to behold her plying her needle at the cottage-window, or standing in the doorway, or laboring in her little garden, or coming forth along the pathway that led townward; and, discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off with a strange, contagious fear. | So, Hester stays in Boston and moves into an abandoned cottage on the edge of town. The cottage was abandoned because the soil around it would not grow anything. Although still within the settlement, the cottage was not near anyone else’s house. It was on the shore and faced the west, where the hills were covered in the forest trees. Some scraggly trees also grew around Hester’s house, not blocking the house from view but suggesting that whoever lived there should be concealed. The house was sort of like a haunted or mystical place in that young people would sneak up to get a view of Hester, and once they saw her scarlet letter, they would run away full of fear. |
| Lonely as was Hester’s situation, and without a friend on earth who dared to show himself, she, however, incurred no risk of want. She possessed an art that sufficed, even in a land that afforded comparatively little scope for its exercise, to supply food for her thriving infant and herself. It was the art—then, as now, almost the only one within a woman’s grasp—of needlework. She bore on her breast, in the curiously embroidered letter, a specimen of her delicate and imaginative skill, of which the dames of a court might gladly have availed themselves, to add the richer and more spiritual adornment of human ingenuity to their fabrics of silk and gold. Here, indeed, in the sable simplicity that generally characterized the Puritanic modes of dress, there might be an infrequent call for the finer productions of her handiwork. Yet the taste of the age, demanding whatever was elaborate in compositions of this kind, did not fail to extend its influence over our stern progenitors, who had cast behind them so many fashions which it might seem harder to dispense with. Public ceremonies, such as ordinations, the installation of magistrates, and all that could give majesty to the forms in which a new government manifested itself to the people, were, as a matter of policy, marked by a stately and well-conducted ceremonial, and a sombre, but yet a studied magnificence. Deep ruffs, painfully wrought bands, and gorgeously embroidered gloves, were all deemed necessary to the official state of men assuming the reins of power; and were readily allowed to individuals dignified by rank or wealth, even while sumptuary laws forbade these and similar extravagances to the plebeian order. In the array of funerals, too,—whether for the apparel of the dead body, or to typify, by manifold emblematic devices of sable cloth and snowy lawn, the sorrow of the survivors,—there was a frequent and characteristic demand for such labor as Hester Prynne could supply. Baby-linen—for babies then wore robes of state—afforded still another possibility of toil and emolument. | Even though Hester, having no friends, was lonely, she was not poor. She was a seamstress, one of the only occupations available to women of her day (and of Hawthorne’s). Hester was an excellent seamstress, as shown by the beautiful scarlet letter which she herself had sewn. Even though the Puritans did not typically approve of elaborate embroidery for their daily dress, there were occasions—public ceremonies, funerals, baby christenings—for which fancier items were sought after. Also, important people (the wealthy, people in power) could wear the fancier clothing to represent their importance (even though common people were forbidden to wear such things). Note: Hawthorne is pointing out their hypocrisy. |
| By degrees, nor very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion. Whether from commiseration for a woman of so miserable a destiny; or from the morbid curiosity that gives a fictitious value even to common or worthless things; or by whatever other intangible circumstance was then, as now, sufficient to bestow, on some persons, what others might seek in vain; or because Hester really filled a gap which must otherwise have remained vacant; it is certain that she had ready and fairly requited employment for as many hours as she saw fit to occupy with her needle. Vanity, it may be, chose to mortify itself, by putting on, for ceremonials of pomp and state, the garments that had been wrought by her sinful hands. Her needlework was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby’s little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead. But it is not recorded that, in a single instance, her skill was called in aid to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride. The exception indicated the ever-relentless rigor with which society frowned upon her sin. | Hester, in her role as a seamstress, kept very busy. Her needlework was worn by everyone: the governor, military men, the ministers, babies. However, one occasion for which Hester was never asked to sew was weddings. No bride would want to wear something on their wedding day that would remind others of the sinful woman. |
| Hester sought not to acquire anything beyond a subsistence, of the plainest and most ascetic description, for herself, and a simple abundance for her child. Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue; with only that one ornament,—the scarlet letter,—which it was her doom to wear. The child’s attire, on the other hand, was distinguished by a fanciful, or, we might rather say, a fantastic ingenuity, which served, indeed, to heighten the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl, but which appeared to have also a deeper meaning. We may speak further of it hereafter. Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them. Much of the time, which she might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she employed in making coarse garments for the poor. It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation, and that she offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment, in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork. She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic,—a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon. Women derive a pleasure, incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin. This morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened, it is to be feared, no genuine and steadfast penitence, but something doubtful, something that might be deeply wrong, beneath. | Even though Hester earned a good living to support herself and her child, she did not seek to live luxuriously. She wore simple and plain clothes (the letter being the only fancy part), but her baby was dress in a style similar to that of the scarlet letter. Except for the small extravagance of dressing her child in a fanciful manner, Hester gave all of her extra money to help the poor, even though they often treated her poorly in return. She was able to express herself in her art (sewing) and found the activity very enjoyable. She told herself that her work was part of her punishment and any pleasure she might feel from her handiwork was sin, even though down deep she may not have actually felt it was sinful. |
| In this manner, Hester Prynne came to have a part to perform in the world. With her native energy of character, and rare capacity, it could not entirely cast her off, although it had set a mark upon her, more intolerable to a woman’s heart than that which branded the brow of Cain. In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those with whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of humankind. She stood apart from moral interests, yet close beside them, like a ghost that revisits the familiar fireside, and can no longer make itself seen or felt; no more smile with the household joy, nor mourn with the kindred sorrow; or, should it succeed in manifesting its forbidden sympathy, awakening only terror and horrible repugnance. These emotions, in fact, and its bitterest scorn besides, seemed to be the sole portion that she retained in the universal heart. It was not an age of delicacy; and her position, although she understood it well, and was in little danger of forgetting it, was often brought before her vivid self-perception, like a new anguish, by the rudest touch upon the tenderest spot. The poor, as we have already said, whom she sought out to be the objects of her bounty, often reviled the hand that was stretched forth to succor them. Dames of elevated rank, likewise, whose doors she entered in the way of her occupation, were accustomed to distil drops of bitterness into her heart; sometimes through that alchemy of quiet malice, by which women can concoct a subtle poison from ordinary trifles; and sometimes, also, by a coarser expression, that fell upon the sufferer’s defenceless breast like a rough blow upon an ulcerated wound. Hester had schooled herself long and well; she never responded to these attacks, save by a flush of crimson that rose irrepressibly over her pale cheek, and again subsided into the depths of her bosom. She was patient,—a martyr, indeed,—but she forbore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse. | Like Cain (in the Bible), she was banished from society—an outcast, but unlike him, she remained a part of the Puritan community in which she had some role (a seamstress). Still, the Puritans were very mean to her, never letting her forget her outcast state. The poor, even while Hester was providing for them, would insult her. The upper class class looked down upon her when Hester would come to their homes to deliver some sewing. No matter what others did, Hester never responded—except her face might grow red—or tried to defend herself. But, she also never prayed for her follow townspeople, afraid her words might transform from blessings to curses. |
| Continually, and in a thousand other ways, did she feel the innumerable throbs of anguish that had been so cunningly contrived for her by the undying, the ever-active sentence of the Puritan tribunal. Clergymen paused in the street to address words of exhortation, that brought a crowd, with its mingled grin and frown, around the poor, sinful woman. If she entered a church, trusting to share the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse. She grew to have a dread of children; for they had imbibed from their parents a vague idea of something horrible in this dreary woman, gliding silently through the town, with never any companion but one only child. Therefore, first allowing her to pass, they pursued her at a distance with shrill cries, and the utterance of a word that had no distinct purport to their own minds, but was none the less terrible to her, as proceeding from lips that babbled it unconsciously. It seemed to argue so wide a diffusion of her shame, that all nature knew of it; it could have caused her no deeper pang, had the leaves of the trees whispered the dark story among themselves,—had the summer breeze murmured about it,—had the wintry blast shrieked it aloud! Another peculiar torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter,—and none ever failed to do so,—they branded it afresh into Hester’s soul; so that, oftentimes, she could scarcely refrain, yet always did refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand. But then, again, an accustomed eye had likewise its own anguish to inflict. Its cool stare of familiarity was intolerable. From first to last, in short, Hester Prynne had always this dreadful agony in feeling a human eye upon the token; the spot never grew callous; it seemed, on the contrary, to grow more sensitive with daily torture. | There were many other ways that Hester suffered at the hands of the townspeople. Preachers would stop her in the street and begin to preach a sermon, using Hester as an example and drawing a crowd to listen. If she went to church, likewise, she found herself to be a subject of the sermon. Hester even grew fearful of children because they had picked up their parents’ prejudices and would chase her while yelling insults at her (even when the children didn’t even understand the real meaning of the words they were speaking). It seemed that she could not escape her shame, as if the very trees and wind were spreading the rumor. When strangers saw the letter and looked at it curiously, Hester felt her shame again as if for the first time. She was tempted to cover it with her hand, yet she never did. Everyone was always staring at the letter, yet day after day, their stares never grew less painful to Hester. |
| But sometimes, once in many days, or perchance in many months, she felt an eye—a human eye—upon the ignominious brand, that seemed to give a momentary relief, as if half of her agony were shared. The next instant, back it all rushed again, with still a deeper throb of pain; for, in that brief interval, she had sinned anew. Had Hester sinned alone? | Every now and then, Hester would feel someone looking at the letter and she would feel relief, as if that person sympathized with her. Maybe she wasn’t the only one who had sinned such. But then Hester would feel even worse because to feel relief or to suspect someone else of a similar sin was in itself a new sin. |
| Her imagination was somewhat affected, and, had she been of a softer moral and intellectual fibre, would have been still more so, by the strange and solitary anguish of her life. Walking to and fro, with those lonely footsteps, in the little world with which she was outwardly connected, it now and then appeared to Hester,—if altogether fancy, it was nevertheless too potent to be resisted,—she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe, yet could not help believing, that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was terror-stricken by the revelations that were thus made. What were they? Could they be other than the insidious whispers of the bad angel, who would fain have persuaded the struggling woman, as yet only half his victim, that the outward guise of purity was but a lie, and that, if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s? Or, must she receive those intimations—so obscure, yet so distinct—as truth? In all her miserable experience, there was nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense. It perplexed, as well as shocked her, by the irreverent inopportuneness of the occasions that brought it into vivid action. Sometimes the red infamy upon her breast would give a sympathetic throb, as she passed near a venerable minister or magistrate, the model of piety and justice, to whom that age of antique reverence looked up, as to a mortal man in fellowship with angels. “What evil thing is at hand?” would Hester say to herself. Lifting her reluctant eyes, there would be nothing human within the scope of view, save the form of this earthly saint! Again, a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself, as she met the sanctified frown of some matron, who, according to the rumor of all tongues, had kept cold snow within her bosom throughout life. That unsunned snow in the matron’s bosom, and the burning shame on Hester Prynne’s,—what had the two in common? Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her warning,—“Behold, Hester, here is a companion!”—and, looking up, she would detect the eyes of a young maiden glancing at the scarlet letter, shyly and aside, and quickly averted with a faint, chill crimson in her cheeks; as if her purity were somewhat sullied by that momentary glance. O Fiend, whose talisman was that fatal symbol, wouldst thou leave nothing, whether in youth or age, for this poor sinner to revere?—such loss of faith is ever one of the saddest results of sin. Be it accepted as a proof that all was not corrupt in this poor victim of her own frailty, and man’s hard law, that Hester Prynne yet struggled to believe that no fellow-mortal was guilty like herself. | In fact, Hester imagined that she could actually sense when someone nearby was guilty of some hidden sin. She would feel her letter pulse; she would feel the connection between herself and some nearby person, yet when she would look up, the only person nearby would be some outwardly pure person—a minister or magistrate, a pure woman or young maiden. She wondered if anyone was truly pure and good. She attributed these imaginations to the devil, who was trying to get her to lose faith in any goodness or purity in her fellow man or woman. The loss of faith in goodness would be the saddest result of Hester’s fall, but the fact that Hester struggled to believe that others could be as guilty as herself indicates that she held on to her faith in goodness in spite of everything. |
| The vulgar, who, in those dreary old times, were always contributing a grotesque horror to what interested their imaginations, had a story about the scarlet letter which we might readily work up into a terrific legend. They averred, that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth, tinged in an earthly dye-pot, but was red-hot with infernal fire, and could be seen glowing all alight, whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time. And we must needs say, it seared Hester’s bosom so deeply, that perhaps there was more truth in the rumor than our modern incredulity may be inclined to admit. | People back then tended to create all sorts of crazy stories to make things seem even more grotesque or creepy. People had a story that Hester’s letter wasn’t red only because it was made from red fabric but that it was red because it glowed with the fires of Hell so it would glow at night time. Although this story may seem far-fetched to the modern reader, Hester did feel like the letter burned like fire, so maybe there’s more truth to the story that we like to admit. |