



CHAPTER FOUR

The Encounter

After her return to prison, Hester Prynne was in a state of nervous excitement. It was impossible for her to remain calm. The infant was not feeling well either. It was crying desperately and was obviously in pain.

Master Brackett, the jailer, decided to call a physician, ¹ who was staying in the prison as a guest until the magistrates could meet with the Indians to decide his ransom. ² The physician's name was Roger Chillingworth. The jailer accompanied him to Hester's cell. When she saw the man that she had noticed in the crowd, she became as still as death.

1. **physician** [fɪ'zɪʃn] : doctor.

2. **ransom** : sum of money paid to free a prisoner.

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The physician entered the room quietly and examined the infant carefully. He then opened his leather case and took out a medicine that he mixed with water.

"Here, woman! The child is yours—she is not mine. Make the child drink from this cup."

Hester refused the medicine, and at the same time gazed at him with apprehension. "Would you avenge¹ yourself on this innocent child?" she whispered.

"Foolish woman!" responded the physician. "Why should I harm² this suffering child? The medicine is good and strong, and if it were my child, I would give it."

Hester still hesitated, so he took the infant and gave it the medicine. The child stopped crying after a while, and then fell asleep.

The physician proceeded to examine the mother, and then prepared another medicine for her.

"Drink this! It is an old Indian medicine. It will calm you but it cannot give you a sinless conscience. I have no medicine for that."

"Is there death in this cup?" Hester asked.

"Do you know me so little, Hester Prynne? If I want revenge, what better revenge than to let you live, so that your shame can always be on your bosom?" He touched the scarlet letter with his long finger.



1. **avenge** : revenge.

2. **harm** : hurt, cause suffering to.

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"Live, therefore, and support your punishment in the eyes of men and women, in the eyes of your husband, in the eyes of your child."

Hester drank the medicine and sat down on the bed where the child was sleeping. The physician sat down near the bed. Hester knew that she had deeply and irreparably injured the man who sat next to her.

"It was my folly, ¹ my weakness, to marry you," said the physician. "I was a man in decay, ² having given my best years to feed my dream of knowledge. I was born with a physical deformity. Why did I ever think that my intellectual gifts could compensate for my misshapen ³ body and my age in the eyes of a beautiful, young girl!

"From the moment when we came down the church steps together, as husband and wife, I should have known that there would be a scarlet letter at the end of our path."

"You knew that I did not love you. I never pretended to love you. I have always been frank with you," said Hester.

"True," he replied. "It was my folly. In my life, the world has been a cheerless ⁴ place. My heart was sad and lonely without a household fire. I was looking for a little happiness, a little warmth. And so, Hester, I took you into my heart."

"I have greatly wronged ⁵ you," murmured Hester.

1. **folly** : foolishness, stupidity.
2. **decay** : deterioration.
3. **misshapen** : deformed.
4. **cheerless** : without happiness.
5. **wronged** : treated in an unfair way.

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"We have wronged each other," answered the physician. "By marrying you, I created an unnatural relation between your youth and my decay. I plan no vengeance against you, Hester. Between you and me the scale hangs fairly balanced. But who is the man who has wronged us both?"

"Do not ask me! You will never know!" replied Hester vehemently.¹

"Never? Believe me, Hester, there are very few things hidden from the man who devotes himself to solving a mystery. All my life, I have searched for the truth in books. I will search for him and I will find him! Sooner or later, he must be mine!"

The eyes of the wrinkled scholar glowed so intensely upon her, that Hester put her hands over her heart, fearing that he might read her secret.

"You will not reveal his name, but he is mine. He does not wear a scarlet letter, but I will read it on his heart. He will be mine!"

Hester was terrified.

"You have kept the secret of your lover's name. Now, keep my secret! No one here knows me. Do not tell a soul that I am your husband. I will pitch² my tent here where I have ties—a woman, a man and a child. No matter whether my ties are of love or hate. You, Hester Prynne, belong to me. My home is where you are and where he is. But do not betray me!"

1. vehemently [vi:əməntli] : fiercely; in strong opposition to something.
2. pitch : set up.

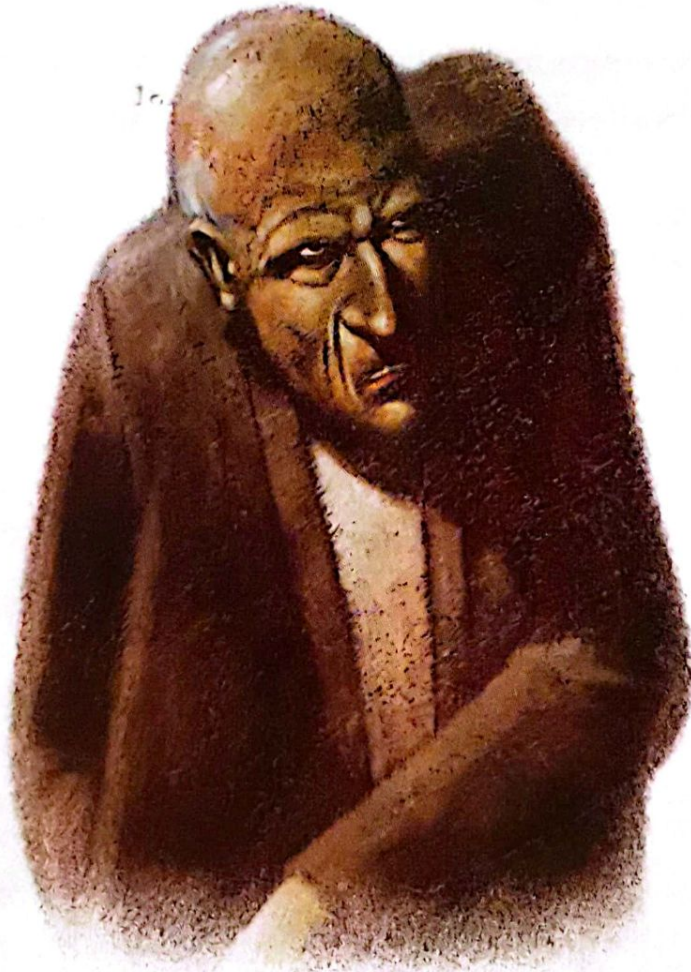
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"Why not announce yourself openly and cast me off?" ¹ Hester asked.

"It may be that I do not want the dishonour of being the husband of a faithless woman. It may be for other reasons. Let everyone think that I am dead. If you betray me, beware! His name, his position, his life will be in my hands. Beware!"

"I will keep your secret, as I have kept his," said Hester.

"Swear it!" he insisted. And she swore.



1. **cast me off** : reject, abandon me.

- 1 a. What was the physician doing in the prison?
- b. How was Hester related to Roger Chillingworth?
- c. Why was Hester afraid of the physician's medicine?
- d. Why did Chillingworth say, "Between you and me the scale hangs fairly balanced."?
- e. How did Chillingworth plan to discover Hester's lover?
- f. What secret must Hester keep?

Summary

- 2 Read the following summary and fill in the gaps choosing from the words in brackets.

In Puritan Boston, Hester Prynne is accused of ¹ *adultery* / *sin* and the leading men of the ² *Pilgrim* / *Puritan* settlement meet to decide her ³ *shame* / *punishment*. It is decided that she must stand on the ⁴ *scaffold* / *pillory* for ⁵ *one hour* / *three hours*. Then, she is condemned to ⁶ *embroider* / *wear* a scarlet "A" on the ⁷ *pocket* / *breast* of her dress all her life. The Puritan ⁸ *townspeople* / *leaders* ask her to ⁹ *reveal* / *write* the name of her ¹⁰ *lover* / *husband*, but she refuses. While she and her infant are in ¹¹ *church* / *prison*, her husband, Roger Chillingworth, who is a ¹² *physician* / *sailor*, goes to speak to her. He is determined to ¹³ *meet* / *discover* Hester's lover, although he plans no ¹⁴ *vengeance* / *punishment* against Hester. She ¹⁵ *promises* / *swears* to keep his real ¹⁶ *identity* / *plan* a secret.

- 3 Now rewrite the summary putting all the verbs in the Past Simple tense.

Themes for thought, discussion and writing

- 5** Do you think Roger Chillingworth is a reasonable, objective man? Why?/Why not?
- 6** Chillingworth says, "I will pitch my tent here where I have ties – a woman, a man and a child. No matter whether my ties are of love or hate." The human emotions of love and hate are very different – they are opposites. Yet both love and hate are intense emotions that involve the heart and mind of an individual. In this respect, they are very similar because they can create a certain pattern of action and reaction. The real "opposite" of love and hate is indifference.
- A. Name a thing or a person that:
- you love
 - you hate
 - is indifferent to you
- B. How do you react to each of these?