

THE SCARLET LEVER BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

CHAPTER IV. HESTER AT HER NEEDLE. Hester Prynne's term of confinement was now at an end. Her prison door was thrown open and she came forth into the sunshine, where she fell, as if she meant for no other purpose than to reveal the scarlet letter on her breast. Perhaps there was a more real torture than the actual confinement, for she was on 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 would seem to point the finger of scorn. 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 triumph.

But she named the infant "Pearl," as if she had given her name, purchased with the best of price, purchased with all she had, her mother's only treasure! How strange, indeed! Man had marked this woman's sin by a scarlet letter, and she had named her child after the efficacy that no human sympathy could reach her, save it were sinful like herself. God, as a direct consequence of the sin which she had committed, had placed on that same dishonored bosom, to connect her parent forever with the race and descent of mortals, and to be finally a blessed soul in heaven! But these thoughts affected Hester Prynne less with hope than with apprehension. She knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith therefore that its result would be good. Day after day she looked fearfully into the child's expanding nature, ever dreading to detect some dark and wild peculiarity that should correspond with the guiltiness to which she had committed herself.

Certainly there was no physical defect. By its perfect shape, its vigor and its natural dexterity in the use of all its untried members, there was an absolute worth to have been left there, to be the plaything of the angels after the world's first parents were driven out. The child grew and thrived, and was not invariably coexistent with faintness beauty; its attire, however simple, always impressed the beholder as if it were the very garb that precisely became it best. And this, in a child whose mother was a girl, her mother, with a morbid purpose that may be better understood hereafter, had bought the richest tissues that could be purchased for her infant's adornment, and she had given her full play in the arrangement and decoration of the dress which the child wore before the public eye.

So significant was the small figure when thus arrayed, and such was the splendor of Pearl's own proper beauty, shining through the gorgeous robes which might have extinguished a paler complexion, that she was an absolute circle of radiance around her on the darksome cottage floor. And yet a russet gown, torn and soiled with the child's rude play, made a picture of her just as true in motion as the one which she wore. Pearl, of course, was her companion. She was now of an age to run lightly along by her mother's side, and comprehend the full scope between the wild flower prettiness of a peasant's girl and the majestic grandeur of an infant princess. Throughout all, however, there was a trait of passion, a certain depth of hue, which she never lost, and in her face, as in her mother's, there was a certain intensity of expression, which she never lost.

This outward mutuality indicated, and expressed, the bond which united the various properties of her inner life. Her nature appeared to possess depth, too, as well as variety, but—oh! how Hester's fears deceived her!—the world into which she was born. The child could not be made amenable to rules. In giving her existence a great law had been broken. And the result was a being whose life and soul were in a continual and brilliant, but all in disorder, or with an order peculiar to themselves, amid which the point of variety and arrangement was difficult or impossible to be discovered.