*The Scarlet Letter* Chapter Summaries

**Chapter 1- The Prison Door -** One of the first buildings constructed by the settlers of Boston was the prison. Despite being cleared of all brush, a wild rosebush grows at the threshold of the prison door. It is thought the rosebush symbolizes morality and can relieve human frailty and sorrow.

**Chapter 2- The Market Place -** One summer morning 200 years ago, every person in town is paying close attention to the prison door because a local woman is being held within the prison. The women are particularly interested in the fate of Hester Prynne. The prison door opens and Hester is led out. She is holding an infant. A red letter “A” has been sewn on her gown. She is then escorted to a scaffold where she must stand on a platform as a part of her punishment. Everyone in the town watches her, including her father. Hester is ashamed as she looks out at the sea of faces.

**Chapter 3- The Recognition -** From the platform, Hester sees a Native American and another man enter the market place. The man asks who Hester is and what she has done. The man learns Hester committed adultery and will not name the father of her baby. She is being punished in the hopes she will reveal the name of her lover. Both Reverend Dimmesdale and Reverend Wilson try to get the information from Hester, but she refuses.

**Chapter 4- The Interview -** After being returned to the prison, Hester is being watched by the guards so that she does not harm herself or her child. Hester becomes emotional and upset, alarming the guards further. Another man, Roger Chillingworth, offers to calm Hester. He is given time alone with Hester because he claims to be a physician. He gives Hester and the baby calming draughts. It is revealed that Roger is Hester’s husband. He is not angry; he pities her. He knew she never loved him, but he married her anyway. Roger says they have both been wronged and asks the name of the man who is responsible. He says he will get revenge for both of them. Hester refuses to name her lover. Roger makes her promise never to reveal his identity to anyone in town.

**Chapter 5- Hester at Her Needle -** Hester is released from prison but must still wear the scarlet letter until she reveals her lover’s identity. Her burden and shame grows every day because she is singled out as a sinner in the Puritan community. However, she is free to return to Europe, but she chooses to remain in the community. Hester and her daughter move into a thatched cottage on the outskirts of town. Hester is without friends, but her needlework is in demand for christening gowns, and fancy dresses. Hester dresses very plainly, but dresses her daughter in the finest clothes. Hester is not welcomed at the church and is tormented by the local children. She is isolated from everyone in the community and is not welcome to attend church services.

**Chapter 6- Pearl -** Hester decides to name her daughter Pearl because she paid a great price for her treasured daughter. She initially feared Pearl would be plagued by unhappiness because of Hester’s experiences while carrying her. Pearl is a happy and playful child, but she sometimes has fits of emotion. Hester is confused by these episodes. Pearl is also shunned by the local children because of Hester’s reputation. She often experiences fits of rage when around other children. Her only real playmate is Hester, so she creates imaginary playmates. Despite being completely innocent, Pearl is punished in the same severe manner as her mother.

**Chapter 7- The Governor’s Hall -** Hester delivers a pair of embroidered gloves to Governor Bellingham’s mansion for his wife. She brings Pearl with her because she has heard that the elders may want to take Pearl away from her. She wants them to see that Pearl is a happy and healthy child. Children try to throw mud at them as they walk into town, but Pearl’s temper scares them away Pearl is fascinated by the splendor of the mansion. She begins to cry because she wants a red rose, and Hester tries to calm her. Hester does not want the Governor to think Pearl is possessed by evil spirits. Pearl starts screaming, but stops once she sees the Governor.

**Chapter 8- The Elf-Child and the Minister -** The Governor is accompanied by Mr. Wilson, Roger Chillingworth, and Reverend Dimmesdale. They tell Hester they are concerned that she is not a proper role model for her daughter. They believe Pearl may be better off being raised by another family. Mr. Wilson asks Pearl who made her, and Pearl replies she had been plucked from the rose bush that grows by the prison door. The men are horrified. Hester begs to keep her child and asks her former minister, Dimmesdale, to help. He convinces the other men to allow Hester to keep Pearl, but Dimmesdale will teach catechism to Pearl.

**Chapter 9- The Leech -** Hester’s husband, now using the identity of Roger Chillingworth, becomes a prominent physician in the community. He also becomes active in religious life. Dimmesdale’s health begins to fail, and Chillingworth offers to treat him. He becomes close to Dimmesdale and the two men move in together. Chillingworth conducts experiments in his laboratory, which concerns the community. Some believe he is involved in the black arts. People begin to believe Dimmesdale is either haunted by Satan or is under the influence of Satan’s emissary, Chillingworth.

**Chapter 10- The Leech and His Patient -** Chillingworth continues to investigate Dimmesdale, but he is unaware of Chillingworth’s agenda. He trusts Chillingworth is his friend. Dimmesdale alludes to a personal secret, but does not reveal his secret, despite Chillingworth’s prompting. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Hester and Pearl. After the Prynnes walk away, the men discuss Hester and the belief evil can manifest itself as a sickness. Chillingworth decides to pursue this conversation in the future.

**Chapter 11- The Interior of a Heart -** The relationship between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale changes after their last conversation. Chillingworth now knows how to focus his revenge. Dimmesdale senses something evil is watching over him, but he does not suspect it is his trusted confidante. Dimmesdale is tortured by his secret and the image of Pearl pointing at Hester’s scarlet letter, and then pointing at him.

**Chapter 12- The Minister’s Vigil -** Dimmesdale walks to the scaffold where Hester once stood. He shrieks, but no one takes notice. Hester and Pearl encounter Dimmesdale, and he asks them to stand on the platform with him. Pearl asks him to stand with them on the platform tomorrow at noon. He says he will stand with them on Judgment Day. Dimmesdale sees a streak of light in the sky shaped like the letter “A”. Chillingworth is watching and offers to walk Dimmesdale home.

**Chapter 13- Another View of Hester -** Over the years, Hester becomes more accepted by the community. She also becomes a sought after seamstress by the privileged in the community and is known for her generosity to the poor. In fact, many in the community now say the scarlet “A” now means able. Because of her isolation, Hester is free to her own thoughts. This causes her to sometimes doubt her decision to raise Pearl rather than send her to heaven. She also contemplates suicide sometimes. She recognizes that Dimmesdale is tortured by his guilt. She decides to meet with Chillingworth to talk to him about ending his revenge scheme.

**Chapter 14- Hester and the Physician -** Hester approaches Chillingworth to talk about Dimmesdale. She notices his appearance has changed; he now has a sinister appearance. She accuses him of causing Dimmesdale to suffer a daily living death. Hester tells him she must reveal his identity before he destroys Dimmesdale. She begs him to forgive both of them and says his hatred has turned him into a fiend. Chillingworth refuses to stop seeking revenge.

**Chapter 15- Hester and Pearl -** Hester declares her hatred for Chillingworth and regrets marrying him. Pearl fashions an “A” out of seaweed while playing and shows it to her mother. Hester is disturbed by this, but realizes that Pearl is not trying to hurt her. She asks Hester why she wears the scarlet letter and why the minister keeps his hand over his heart. Hester evades the questions, but Pearl brings them back up the next day. Hester threatens to punish her.

**Chapter 16- A Forest Walk -** Hester walks with Pearl in the woods with the intention of revealing Chillingworth’s identity to Dimmesdale. She knows that he often walks by himself in the woods, and plans to meet him when he is by himself. Though Pearl is bathed in sunlight, it leaves as soon as Hester approaches. Pearl asks Hester if she has ever met the evil spirit in the woods. Hester tells her she has, and the evil spirit gave her the scarlet letter. Hester meets Dimmesdale in the woods.

**Chapter 17- The Pastor and His Parishioner -** Dimmesdale tells Hester she is lucky she can openly address her sin by wearing the scarlet letter. He is being tortured by his sin. Hester tells Dimmesdale that Chillingworth is his enemy and her former husband. He forgives Hester for keeping the secret for 7 years. Hester advises Dimmesdale to return to Europe, but he refuses to leave. He is afraid to be alone, but Hester says she will go with him.

**Chapter 18- A Flood of Sunshine -** Hester removes the scarlet letter, throws it into the woods, and feels all her burdens melt away. She and Dimmesdale decide to start a new life together someplace new. They will raise Pearl together.

**Chapter 19- The Child at the Brookside -** Dimmesdale worries that Pearl will not respond to him, but Hester tells him Pearl will grow to love him. Pearl approaches Hester and Dimmesdale, but she refuses to cross the brook to join them. She points to where Hester used to wear the scarlet letter. Hester tells Pearl to pick up the scarlet letter and bring it to her. Pearl tells Hester to pick it up and feels a sense of doom once she picks up the letter. Pearl then crosses the brook. Dimmesdale kisses Pearl on the forehead, and she immediately washes her face in the brook.

**Chapter 20- The Minister in the Maze -** Dimmesdale leaves first so that no one will see him with Hester and Pearl. Before he leaves, they devise a plan to leave for Europe in 3 days with Hester and Pearl on a ship. As he returns to town, Dimmesdale is welcomed home by Chillingworth. He tells Chillingworth he will no longer require his medical services. He also tells Chillingworth he is now free to live on his own, and he does not need to live with him anymore.

**Chapter 21- The New England Holiday -** Hester and Pearl join the rest of the town for Election Day festivities. Pearl asks if Dimmesdale will talk to them like he did the other day at the brook. Hester tells her he will not be able to speak with them today, and she should not try to get his attention. Hester sees Chillingworth talking with the commander of the ship they plan to sail on back to Europe. Hester begins to worry that Chillingworth will stand in the way of their pending happiness.

**Chapter 22- The Procession -** The procession begins. After the officials file into the square, Dimmesdale delivers what is to be his final sermon before he leaves with Hester and Pearl. Hester watches Dimmesdale intently, but Pearl is more interested with the people in the crowd. Pearl delivers a message from the ship’s commander to her mother. He says he spoke to Chillingworth, who told him that he plans to personally escort Dimmesdale to the ship. Hester worries that they may never escape.

**Chapter 23- The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter -** Dimmesdale ends his speech and the procession heads to the market place. The procession is interrupted by a horrifying shout. All eyes are on Dimmesdale, who appears to be ill. He asks Hester and Pearl to stand with him on the scaffold. Chillingworth tries to stop Dimmesdale, but he holds hands with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. Revealing a mark on his chest, Dimmesdale reveals he is Pearl’s father and Hester’s secret lover. He then collapses and dies in Hester’s arms.

**Chapter 24- Conclusion -** Several days later, some spectators claim they saw a scarlet letter on Dimmesdale’s chest. Chillingworth turns into a shriveled, unhappy shell of a man after he cannot focus his energy on revenge. He dies that year and leaves a substantial estate solely to Pearl. Pearl is now the richest heiress in the New World. She and Hester disappear. Years later, Hester Prynne returns to Boston without Pearl, who appears to be living in England. Hester becomes a trusted woman in the community until she dies after living a long life. She is buried near and shares a gravestone with Arthur Dimmesdale.

*The Scarlet Letter* Detailed Summary of Chapter 23

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!"