

Nathaniel Hawthorne's
THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

Adapted By
David John Preece

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WGA Registered
c. 1997

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DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS

DIXEY -	A man in his 40s.
COLLINS -	A man in his early 20s.
COLONEL PYNCHION -	A man in his late 40s/early 50s.
MATTHEW MAULE -	A man in his 50s.
HEPZIBAH PYNCHION -	A woman in her 50s.
HOLGRAVE -	A man in his early 20s.
UNCLE VENNER -	A man in his 60s.
PHOEBE PYNCHION -	A young woman in her late teens/early 20s.
JUDGE JAFFREY PYNCHION -	A man in his late 50s.
CLIFFORD PYNCHION -	A man in his late 40s.
GERVAYSE PYNCHION -	A man in his early 50s.
ALICE PYNCHION -	A woman in her late teens/early 20s.
WILLIAM MATTHEW MAULE -	A man in his early 20s.
UNCLE JAFFREY PYNCHION -	A man in his late 40s.
WOMAN CUSTOMER -	A woman in her late 40s/early 50s.
HOUSEWIFE -	A woman in her late 40s/early 50s.

General

The Set: Black stage with minimal scenery and a skeleton of the house. Scene shifts should be done rapidly to keep the suspense and tension as high as possible. A haunting portrait of Colonel Pyncheon remains a central scenic element throughout.

ACT 1

PROLOGUE

Darkness. A harpsichord is heard, sweet at first, then becoming strident and discordant. Whispers, voices from the past, begin to rise above the music, soon becoming shouts.

VOICE ONE

Satan is in our midst.

VOICE TWO

There's evil among us.

VOICE THREE

It was witchcraft!

VOICE FOUR

It was Matthew Maule!

VOICE FIVE

He has made a pact with the devil!

ALL VOICES

Maule has made a pact with the devil . . . I see him
. . . I see the devil next to him . . . Maule is
bewitching me . . . Stop him!

MAULE

I am innocent . . . I AM INNOCENT!

VOICE SIX

Having committed the crime of witchcraft, Matthew Maule is from this church, with blessing of heaven, hereby excommunicated and is sentenced to be hanged from the neck until dead.

MAULE

Pyncheon! Hear me! God . . . God will give you
blood to drink.

(The abrupt sound of a trapdoor and the sharp sound of Maule's neck snapping are heard. After a moment of silence, the sounds of an approaching storm begin to rise.)

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

TIME - 1840S. EARLY WINTER.
MORNING.

PLACE - COASTAL NEW ENGLAND TOWN.
PYNCHION STREET IN FRONT OF THE OLD
PYNCHION MANSION, ALSO KNOWN AS THE
HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES.

(The lights go up to reveal the gloomy exterior of the House of the Seven Gables. A light dimly illuminates the House's dark interior, where a haunting portrait of Colonel Pyncheon fixes the audience with a relentless gaze. DIXEY, a blacksmith, and COLLINS, his young apprentice, push a wooden cart, filled with scrap iron, to their work. They stop for a moment to take a break.)

COLLINS

Think we'll have a break in the weather?

DIXEY

Storm's been brewin' a long time. It don't look to be clearin' soon.

COLLINS

Dixey, in the time I've lived here, I've never seen anyone 'round this house. Whose is it?

DIXEY

It's Pyncheon House, built two hundred years ago or more. Most of us 'ere 'bouts call it the House of the Seven Gables.

(The WOMAN CUSTOMER, on her way to the market stops and looks at the house. She eavesdrops on the conversation between Dixey and Collins.)

COLLINS

Does anyone still live there?

DIXEY

The Pyncheon family does . . . what's left of 'em.

COLLINS

It's a strange house . . .

WOMAN CUSTOMER

Strange, indeed, and it's haunted by ghosts.

COLLINS

Ghosts!

WOMAN CUSTOMER

They say that the house was built on an unquiet grave. I believe it.

DIXEY

You see, it wasn't the first house built on the site. In fact, Pyncheon Street was once known as Maule Lane . . . named after Matthew Maule, an 'umble and 'ard workin' farmer.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

There was once a natural spring of soft and pleasant water, right about where Hepzibah Pyncheon's overgrown garden is now. That's why Maule built his house here.

DIXEY

The water's no good any more. It hasn't been for a long time. After Maule's death, it grew hard and brackish.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

It produces intestinal mischief and fever in those who quench their thirst there.

COLLINS

What happened to Maule?

DIXEY

Bein' an eccentric and solitary man, Maule fell under suspicion of witchcraft and was put to death.

COLLINS

Witchcraft?!

WOMAN CUSTOMER

Clergymen, judges, statesmen . . . the wisest, calmest, holiest persons of their day . . . they stood in the inner circle round the gallows, loudly applauding his execution.

(beat)

Colonel Pyncheon was one of them.

DIXEY

The Colonel was an influential town leader and one of Maule's accusers.

(more)

DIXEY (cont'd)

Right quick, he snatched up 'is neighbor's land, evicted Maule's family, and leveled their home. In it's place, he intended to build a family mansion.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

Wanting only the best workmen to build his house, he hired Thomas Maule . . . the son of the dead man, to design and build it. Being that times were hard, Thomas Maule took the job.

DIXEY

From the very moment, work began on the house, Maule's ghost came to haunt its chambers.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

It's said that the terror and ugliness of Maule's punishment still darken the house walls and infect its inhabitants.

DIXEY

When the mansion was completed, the Colonel 'ad an open house for all the prominent townspeople. On the day of the event, the guests gathered but the Colonel was not there to greet 'em.

(beat)

They found 'im slumped behind 'is desk . . . dead . . . with an unnatural distortion in 'is stare and blood on 'is mouth and clothes.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

There were many rumors about his sudden and mysterious death. Some claimed there were marks of fingers on his throat and the print of a bloody hand on his clothes. Others say there was not a mark upon him, save for a river of blood which flowed from his mouth.

(beat)

Though of course, Maule has no descendants left in this community or anywhere else that I know about.

DIXEY

For generations, there have been mysterious deaths and strange happenings in this house.

DIXEY

(continuing)

Thirty years ago, a young man, a Pyncheon, was tried and convicted of murdering his bachelor uncle and sent to prison for life.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

You know . . . I heard from reliable sources that he's coming home soon.

DIXEY

Comin' home?! I thought he was dead and long buried.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

No, not dead, though he may wish he were! His family isn't so proud anymore. They're sunk in poverty, from what I've heard, except for the Judge, of course.

DIXEY

Now look at that. A cent shop! Who would have thought it?

WOMAN CUSTOMER

Hepzibah Pyncheon, that old maid, settin' up a cent shop!

(In the cent shop, a faint light goes up on HEPZIBAH PYNCHION as she hides in the shadows, listening to the two men.)

COLLINS

D'you think she'll make it go? I don't call it a very good stand. There's another shop just 'round the corner.

DIXEY

Make it go?! Not a bit of it!

WOMAN CUSTOMER

Why, her face alone'd frighten anyone. She scowls dreadfully, reason or none, out of pure ugliness of temper!

DIXEY

Besides that, this business o' keepin' cent shops is overdone. I know it, t' my cost. My wife kept a cent shop for three months, and lost everythin'.

WOMAN CUSTOMER

The old maid will probably go broke.

(The Woman Customer walks away.)

DIXEY

Prob'ly.

(Hepzibah comes out of the shadows and watches Dixey and Collins as they continue on their way to work.)

HEPZIBAH

(To herself.)

Broke?! No . . . I have no choice but to earn my keep . . . or starve.

(She opens a golden locket from her neck and looks at it.)

My memories of you have been the food and drink that have kept my heart alive.

(Looks around at the shabby surroundings of the cent shop.)

What am I thinking? How could I . . . utterly unpracticed in the world . . .

(Takes a small number of coins from her purse and lays them on the table. Slowly, she counts the money and begins to cry quietly.)

Heaven help me!

(HOLGRAVE stands outside the door and watches her for a moment. He comes into the shop.)

HOLGRAVE

Good morning, Miss Pyncheon.

(Startled, she stands, wipes her tears and tries to regain her composure.)

HEPZIBAH

Mr. Holgrave. I . . .

HOLGRAVE

Forgive me . . . I didn't mean to scare you.

HEPZIBAH

You didn't.

(beat)

Now, what is it you want?

HOLGRAVE

I just wanted to offer my best wishes . . . and to see if you needed any help.

HEPZIBAH

That's kind of you. I . . . I

(Breaks down.)

Mr. Holgrave. I can't go through with it! I wish I was dead. The world is cold and hard . . . I have no hope to compete in it!

HOLGRAVE

Miss Hepzibah, these feelings will not trouble you when you are in the midst of your business.

(more)

HOLGRAVE (cont'd)

They are unavoidable at the moment, standing, as you do, at the end of your long seclusion.

(beat)

You people the world with ugly images. But you'll soon find them to be as unreal as the giants and ogres of a child's storybook. The fears of life lose their substance the instant one faces them.

HEPZIBAH

I was raised a lady . . .

HOLGRAVE

Let the past go! You're the better without it.

(beat)

May I speak frankly, Miss Pyncheon . . . are we not friends?

HEPZIBAH

We are.

HOLGRAVE

Look upon this as one of the fortunate days of your life. It ends an era and begins another. From now on, you'll at least have a sense of healthy and natural effort of lending your strength . . . be it great or small . . . to the united struggle of mankind. This is success . . . all the success that anybody meets with.

HEPZIBAH

It's natural enough you should have ideas like these. You're a man . . . a young gentleman . . . brought up with a view to seeking your fortune. I was born a lady, and have always lived like one . . . no matter the narrowness of means.

HOLGRAVE

I wasn't born a gentleman . . . neither have I lived like one.

(Beat)

My dear friend, these names of gentleman and lady had a meaning, in a past world, and conferred privileges on those entitled to bear them. In the present . . . and still more in the future . . . they infer not privilege, but restriction.

HEPZIBAH

I shall never understand these ideas, these new ways . . . neither do I wish to.

HOLGRAVE

I'll stop then, and leave you to decide whether it is not better to be true to yourself than to live a life of pretense.

(beat)

Do you really think that any lady of your family's ever done a more heroic thing, since the day this house was built, than you are doing today?

(beat)

Never . . . and if the Pyncheons had always acted so nobly, I doubt whether the old wizard Maule's curse would have had much weight with Providence against them.

HEPZIBAH

If Maule's ghost, or a descendant of his, could see me behind this counter today, he would call it the fulfillment of his worst wishes.

(beat)

In any case, I thank you for your kindness, Mr. Holgrave, and will do my best to be a good shopkeeper.

HOLGRAVE

I know you will.

(beat)

Let me have the pleasure of being your first customer. I'm going to take a walk to the beach before work and I would like to buy a few biscuits for my breakfast.

(Reaches into his pocket for some money.)

What is the price of half a dozen?

(When he tries to give her money, she refuses it.)

HEPZIBAH

No. Put your money away.

HOLGRAVE

But . . .

HEPZIBAH

No. Let me be a lady a moment longer.

(She walks to the counter and with a manner of antique stateliness, she puts the biscuits into his hand.)

HEPZIBAH

(continuing)

A Pyncheon must never, especially under her forefather's roof, receive money for a morsel of bread . . . especially from a friend.

HOLGRAVE

Thank you.

(Hepzibah watches as Holgrave leaves the shop. She shudders when she notices JUDGE JEFFREY PYNCHON staring at the shop. The lights fade as a couple of townspeople come into the shop to look over its wares and satisfy their curiosity about Hepzibah. Haunting Harpsichord music is heard in the background.)