

# A POLISHED VILLAIN.

BY E. WARDEN.

## CHAPTER XI.

WHEN I had dried my tears and sat down in my favorite arm-chair to consider my grievances against Sarah, I wondered what had made her take such a strong dislike to me as she seemed to feel. It was true that her manners were not very pleasant or amiable to anybody, but there was a malignity in the way she looked at me, and a spiteful coldness in her tongue if she only asked me if I would have any more coals, as if she thought it was a great deal more than I deserved to have a fire at all. But she had never been so rude and harsh before as she was on this night, and I began to think that the reason for all her unkindness was her annoyance at the great consideration shown to me, for I was, after all, only a new-comer, while she, who had been in the family for years, was left in her own upper story and was not asked to sit for her portion. It seemed a very silly feeling in a woman so old and sensible as Sarah was supposed to be, and who was certainly very well off for a servant, to show such a mean jealousy of a governess, who is also supposed to be a lady, even in those cases when everybody knows that she is not one. That is why, as her work is generally so much harder and so much more unpleasant than that of a servant. Then I thought of the experiences of the other governesses I had known, and I came to the conclusion that Sarah must have lived in families where the governess was snubbed and neglected as some of my friends had been by their parents, and so she thought it a shame that I should be so much better treated than the most of my sisterhood.

"She is only a crumpled rose-leaf, after all," I thought to myself. "I am getting spoiled, and it is as well that there is some one to let me know that I am no more deserving than other people."—only more fortunate. I suppose I ought to be thankful for Sarah!

Then I thought of what Mr. Rayner had said about wearing the dazzling heart under my dress; and it was really so beautiful, and I was so grateful to him for his kindness—for it was not his fault that the gift had already brought down so much discomfort upon me—that I should have liked to do so; and two reasons prevented me. The one was that, if I had fastened it round my neck by a bit of ribbon, and it had accidentally been seen by some one—Mrs. Rayner, for instance, not to mention Sarah—I should have felt rather guilty and uncomfortable, as if I had done something to be ashamed of, that wanted excuses and explanations; and that feeling is, I think, a pretty sure thing that the other reason was that I already wore a sash round my neck, under my dress, fastened to a watch-guard; it was a little case that I had made out of the back of an old purse, and it contained the bit of paper with Mr. Rayner's apology which I had pulled off the rose that evening when I had found the basket of flowers in my "nest."

Now, if I went on stringing round my neck all the letters and gifts I received, I should some day have as many trophies about my person as a wild Indian—only I should not take the pride in displaying them that he did. So I decided to lock up my pretty sparkling heart in my desk, and to content with the less showy pendant I already wore. Sarah had seen it, of course, at least she had seen the cover, one evening when I had a cold, and she had brought me a cup of arrowroot, by Mr. Rayner's orders, while I was undressing. I had seen, by the eager way in which she fixed her great black eyes upon it, that she was trying to know what it contained, and I was mischievously glad that she could not.

Mr. Rayner had given me the pendant on Saturday. The next day, when service was over, and we were standing about in the churchyard as usual, before Mr. and Mrs. Rayner's departure gave Haidee and me the signal to go home, Mr. Laurence Reade left his party and stood looking at the gravestone, until the gradual moving on of the crowd of people who were slowly coming out of the porch brought us past him. Then, as Mr. and Mrs. Rayner stopped to speak to some one, Mr. Reade said—

"Haidee, I'll give you a penny if you can read that epitaph"—pointing to one in worn old English characters. "Miss Christie, I believe it is as much as you can do; it is more than I can."

"And we stepped on to the grass, and Haidee knelt down and slowly spelt it out aloud. Mr. Reade kept his eyes fixed on the inscription as he bent over one side of the tombstone, while I looked at it from the other, but what he said was—

"It seems such a long time since Tuesday was the day on which he had brought the marbles. I could not laugh over a tombstone before all those people, so I said gravely—

"It is just five days."

"Yes, but they have been such long days," said he, in a low voice.

"Not really," I answered. "The days are getting shorter and shorter now."

"Don't you know how long a day seems when you want to see a person, and you can't? But perhaps you see the person you like best to see every day?"

"I like to see my mother best, and she is a long way off," said I gravely.

"Ah, yes, of course! But I wasn't thinking of my family."

"Perhaps you were thinking of the pretty girls who were in your pew last Sunday?"

"The Finches—I Ethel and Katie! Oh, no, I wasn't! It is quite enough of them. They're coming again, too, to the school-treat. Don't see why they can't be contented with their own tea-fights. No; I was thinking of somebody quite different. Can't you guess?"

"He was looking at me now, and not at the inscription at all. And in the pause which followed his words I distinctly heard Mr. Rayner's bright voice saying archly—

"Laurence seems to have a great admiration for our pretty little Miss Christie; doesn't he, Mrs. Reade?"

I did not hear her answer; but it was given in a displeased tone; and a minute afterward she called her son sharply and said that they were waiting for him. But they all staid in the churchyard for some minutes after that, and then I noticed that Mr. Rayner was still talking to Mrs. Reade, and that she seemed very much pleased and interested by what he was saying. I just heard her mention "the Bramleys" and "our branch" in her answers; so I guessed that they were what Mr. Rayner called "the genealogical tree together."

It was to be a busy week in the parish. The school-treat, which had been put off this year, first on account of the sickness in the village, and then because of the wet weather, was now fixed to take place on Saturday; and the following day was to be the harvest festival. This was not a very great occasion with us, being signalled only by a special sermon, the harvest

unwinking hymns—which would no rather inappropriate this year, as the farmers were grubbing more than usual at the damage done by the late heavy rains—and bunches of corn, which those same "thankful people" rather grudgingly, in the church-windows and round the pulpit. The Misses Reade had undertaken most of the decoration of the church, as the vicar's wife had enough to do in preparing for the school-fest and accompanying sale.

The next day Haidee and I took a longer walk than usual; and when we returned, Jane met me with a mysterious air in the hall.

"Oh, Miss Christie, young Mr. Reade called while you was out, and asked to see you. He said he had a message for you. And, when I said you were out and offered to give it to you, he said he had better write it, as it was important. So he wrote a note for you; and please it wasn't my fault, but Sarah got hold of it, and she took it to Mr. Rayner. I told her it was directed to you; but she wouldn't take no notice."

I went upstairs very much annoyed by this fresh indignity offered me by that hateful Sarah, and hurt and sorry beside, for I was longing to know what the note said. As soon as I got into the dining-room, however, Mr. Rayner came up to me smiling, and put it into my hands.

"Here is a letter, Miss Christie, which has been left for you, Miss Christie. Now whom do you expect one from?"

"From nobody, Mr. Rayner," said I, blushing very much.

This was not a story, because I knew the letter could not be at all the sort of communication he implied, but would contain, probably, some formal message from Mrs. Maland.

I opened it at once to show that I did not think of it of any consequence. It only said—

"DEAR MISS CHRISTIE.—My sisters find there is so much to be done for the church that they are afraid they won't be able to do it all. Would you be so very kind as to undertake part? If you would not mind, I will ride over with the work to-morrow after luncheon, about a quarter past two."

Yours sincerely,

"LAURENCE READE."

I think I was a little disappointed in the note; but it was all the better, as I could repeat in quite a careless way what it said; and then, just as I was wondering whether I should tear it up to show that I did not care, I saw that there was something written on the inside leaf, and I put it back into the envelope as if I did not notice what I was doing, and slipped it into my pocket.

Dinner was long that day; when it was over, I went into the school-room, and drew out my letter again. The words on the inside leaf were—

"Why were you so unkind on Sunday?" I had no way of sending back an answer; I could only wait till next day at a quarter past two. But I think I could have sung through the lessons like the heroine of an opera that afternoon.

I had not thought it necessary to mention to Mr. Rayner the time at which Mr. Reade had said he should bring the work, at a quarter past two we were always in the drawing room all together. But the next day, the day of all others when it was important that I should stay and hear the explanations about the work I had to do, Mr. Rayner asked me directly after dinner, if I would mind writing some letters for her, to go by that afternoon's post. I should have sat down to write them in the drawing-room, but Mrs. Rayner said—

"You would like to be undisturbed, I know. Shall I send your coffee to your room or to the school-room?"

I said, "To my room, if you please," and went upstairs trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

It was silly of me; but I liked that half hour in the drawing-room after dinner, and reading the papers over my coffee, and Mr. Rayner's comments on the news—it was such a pleasant rest.

I had got through one stupid letter—they were not at all important—when there was a knock at the door, and Jane came in, giggling and excited.

"Oh, Miss, I've brought you a parcel, and I have made Sarah so wild!"—and she laughed delightedly. "I answered the bell, and there was Mr. Reade on his horse with this; and he said, 'Take it to the school-marm, please; it's for Miss Christie; and then he got off, and I showed him into the drawing-room. And I saw you wasn't in there, nor yet in the school-room. So when I got into the hall, thinks I, 'I'll be beforehand with old Sally this time!' when out she comes and says, 'Give that to me. I'll give it to Miss Christie.' Never mind, says I, half way up the stairs—'don't you trouble.' And she made a grab at me, but I was too quick for her, and up I run; and here it is, miss."

And she slapped the parcel down upon the table triumphantly.

"Thank you, Jane," I said quietly. "It is only some work for the church from Miss Reade."

Jane's face fell a little; and then as if struck by a fresh thought, she giggled again. I cut the string and opened the parcel to prove the truth of my words, and showed her the red flannel and the wheat-ears, which were to be sown on in letters to form a text. But in the middle was another note, and a box wrapped up in paper, both directed to "Miss Christie," and at sight of these little Jane's delight grew irrepressible again.

"I know it!" she began, and stopped herself and said, "I beg your pardon, Miss," and left the room very demurely.

But I heard another burst of merriment as she ran down stairs. Then I opened the note, it only said—

"Dear Miss Christie,—I take the liberty of sending you a few late roses from a tree in a sheltered corner where the rain can not spoil them. I hope they won't smell of cigars; I could not find a better box. I will call to fetch the text, if you will let me know when I can see you."

Yours sincerely,

"LAURENCE READE."

The roses were in a cigar-box, and as long as they lasted they never smelt of anything but tobacco; but I began to think that perfume nicer than their own.

I was so happy that evening that I was glad when Mr. Rayner asked me to accompany his violin, and I was glad that he chose operatic selections again, for in the passionate and sweet music of *Don Giovanni* and *Il Trovatore* I could give vent to my feelings. I felt that I had never appreciated the beautiful melodies so well, nor hoped so efficiently to do justice to them as I did in accompanying Mr. Rayner that night. He was so pleased with my help, that he said, "Just one more, just one more."

Just one more!—just one more, until long after Mrs. Rayner had gone to her room. I was nothing loath; I could have played till midnight. I did not say much in comment between the pieces, when Mr. Rayner asked, "How do you like that?" But I suppose it was easy to see by my face that I was enjoying the music in not very well say more about it without being disrespectful. And I must not forget that Mr. Rayner is not only much older than I, but also my employer.

And so I crept up the turret stairs with my candle and opened the door of my room.

It was quite a calm night, and I walked in very slowly; yet, as I entered, my candle went out suddenly, as if blown by a gust of wind; and I fancied I heard a slight sound as if of a human breath blowing it. I stepped forward quickly; a little startled, and tried to peer into the darkness. But it was impossible to see, for my fire had gone out, the blinds were down and the curtains drawn, and not a ray of moonlight could get in. I stood for a few moments, still frightened, in the middle of the room, and then cautiously made my way in the direction of the mantelpiece, where I kept my match-box. I made a slight noise as I passed my fingers over the different articles there, and just at the moment that I knocked over a china ornament which fell to the fireplace, above the noise it made as it broke to pieces in the grate I heard a sound behind the screen which stood be-

tween the bed and the door, and turning quickly, I was in time to see a figure come swiftly around it and disappear through the still open door. I could distinguish nothing; nevertheless, suppressing my inclination to scream, I rushed to the door and caught in the air at the figure I could no longer see; but I felt nothing.

Then I crept back into my room, shaking from head to foot, and hardly daring to

at the Alders, when he finished playing "Voi che sapete."

"And how do you like that?" asked Mr. Rayner as usual, only that this time he puffed down his violin, and drawing a chair close to his music-stool, ran his fingers over the keys of the piano, repeating the melody.

"Do you know the words?" "Voi che sapete che cos'è amore," he sang softly. "Do you know what that means?"

"Yes," said I, rather proud of showing off my slight knowledge of Italian. "You know that it means love, don't you?"

I drew my music-stool a little back, and listened while he sang it softly through. I had never known a love-song touch me like that before. I could almost have cried out in answer, as I sat my head turned away, listening, almost holding my breath lest I should lose a sound. When he had finished, he turned round; I did not move or speak, and he jumped up, walked to the shutters, unbarred them, and threw open the window.

"I am suffocating. Oh, for a Venetian balcony!" said he. "Come here, little woman!"

I rose and obeyed. He threw a woollen antimacassar round my head and shoulders and drew me to the window.

"Look up there, child, at the moon through the tree-tops. Wouldn't you like to be in Venice, listening by moonlight to those sweet songs in the very native land of the love they sing about?"

"I don't want to be anywhere but here, Mr. Rayner," said I, smiling up at the moon very happily.

"Why?"

But I could not tell Mr. Rayner why. I would give the whole world to be there at this moment with the woman I love. I could make her understand that.

I was struck by the passionate tenderness in his voice, and suddenly made up my mind to be very bold.

"Then why don't you take her there, Mr. Rayner?" I said, earnestly.

As I spoke, smiling at him and speaking as gently as I could, though I felt terribly frightened at my own boldness, his eyes seemed to grow darker, and his old face lighted up in an extraordinary way. I saw my words had made an impression, so I went on eagerly, pressing nervously the hand with which he was holding mine, for I was still afraid lest my audacity should offend him.

"Mr. Rayner, forgive me for speaking about this; but you spoke first, didn't you? I have so often wondered why you didn't take her away. It seems so hard that you, who want sympathy so much—you know you have often told me so—should have to live, as you say, a shut-up life, on account of the apathy of the woman to whom you are bound."

He seemed to drink in my words as if they contained an elixir; I could feel by his hand that he was actually trembling; and I grew more assured myself.

"Now, if you were to take her away, although you might have a difficulty at first in persuading her to go, and force her, with the kind force you know how to use, to go among fresh faces and fresh people, I believe she would come back to life again, and see how much better you are than other husbands, and love you just as much as ever. Oh, she couldn't help it; you are so kind and good!"

Then my heart sank, for I saw I had gone too far. As I spoke, from passionate eagerness, he looked surprised, puzzled, and then his face clouded over with cold from that chilled me with fear and shame. I drew my hand out of his quickly, and stepped back into the room. He followed and took my hand again, and, when I looked up, murmuring clumsy and incoherent apologies, his face was as composed and kind as usual; but I thought he looked rather sad.

"Never mind, little one; you have not offended me by speaking your mind out; don't be afraid. But you don't know, you cannot guess—how should a child like you guess—how many or how deep a man's cares may be while he is obliged to bear a brave front to the world. I think you would be sorry for me if you knew them."

"I am sorry even without knowing them," I said softly.

He bent down over me and looked into my eyes for a few moments. Then he raised his head, and laughed lightly.

"You are afraid. Great gray eyes ought to be passionate, and yours are as cold as a lake on a still day. I believe you are an Undine! You have no soul."

"Oh, Mr. Rayner," I said mournfully, and I turned slowly to the piano to put away the music.

"Never mind; I will do that," said he, in his usual tone. "I have kept you long enough. Good night, Undine."

I was almost afraid he would again want to kiss me, and, after offending him once, I should not have dared to refuse. So I shook hands as hastily as I could, took my candle, and ran up stairs. I was very angry with myself for having been cold and unsympathetic—I had not meant to be so at all.

But the fact was I had been thinking the whole evening of Mr. Laurence Reade.

## CHAPTER IX.

I SLACKENED my pace when I got to the top of the first flight of stairs, and walked softly through the corridor where the nursery was, for fear of waking Mona; and as I went slowly along, the passage leading to the turret-stairs I began to think of what Mr. Rayner had called me, and wondered what he meant by saying I had no soul.

"It wasn't because I am not sorry for him, for he must have seen that I am," thought I. I suppose I don't show my sympathy in the right way; but I could not very well say more about it without being disrespectful. And I must not forget that Mr. Rayner is not only much older than I, but also my employer.

And so I crept up the turret stairs with my candle and opened the door of my room.

It was quite a calm night, and I walked in very slowly; yet, as I entered, my candle went out suddenly, as if blown by a gust of wind; and I fancied I heard a slight sound as if of a human breath blowing it. I stepped forward quickly; a little startled, and tried to peer into the darkness. But it was impossible to see, for my fire had gone out, the blinds were down and the curtains drawn, and not a ray of moonlight could get in. I stood for a few moments, still frightened, in the middle of the room, and then cautiously made my way in the direction of the mantelpiece, where I kept my match-box. I made a slight noise as I passed my fingers over the different articles there, and just at the moment that I knocked over a china ornament which fell to the fireplace, above the noise it made as it broke to pieces in the grate I heard a sound behind the screen which stood be-

tween the bed and the door, and turning quickly, I was in time to see a figure come swiftly around it and disappear through the still open door. I could distinguish nothing; nevertheless, suppressing my inclination to scream, I rushed to the door and caught in the air at the figure I could no longer see; but I felt nothing.

Then I crept back into my room, shaking from head to foot, and hardly daring to

move in this direction or that, for fear of encountering another dark figure. I closed the door behind me, sick with fear lest I should be shutting myself in with more unwelcome visitors; and, starting at the slight creaking that a board made here and there under my own feet, I again searched the mantelpiece for the match-box. My hands trembled so that it was a long time before I could be sure that it was not there; and then I turned and felt my way to the table; and, after moving most of the things on it, I at last satisfied myself that it was not there either. Then I groped my way to one of the windows—I had not thought of that before—I drew the curtains and pulled up the blind. The moon gave only a faint light, being obscured every other minute by the driving clouds; and it only served to make shadows in the room, which were more fearful to me, in my nervous state, than darkness itself. I had one more search for the matches, but could not find them even now.

It was out of the question to undress by such weird moonlight, fancying dim shapes in every corner, and noises behind me whichever way I turned; so I determined to conquer my fears and go down stairs with my candle and get a light below.

There were sure to be some matches in the kitchen, and I reflected that enough moonlight would come in over or through the shutters to let me see my way without making a noise.

So I groped my way down the back staircase, which I had never used before, got safely to the bottom, turned to my left, and felt for a door. The first opened into a big black cupboard where I felt beyond, which I shut again quickly; the second was locked, but the key was in the door, and I softly turned it. This was indeed the kitchen; but the moment I found this out, and gave a sigh of relief, I heard on the floor a sound which I knew too well to be the rush of myriads of black beetles, and as I would rather have faced a dozen dim human figures than have felt under my foot the "scrunch" of one black beetle, I had to shut that door too as quickly as I could.

The only thing left for me was to feel my way back to the staircase, go down the passage at the other side of it, which led past Mr. Rayner's study, and so into the hall, where I knew the exact position of the match-box which stood on the hall table.

My only fear now was that I might meet Mr. Rayner, in the event of his not having left the house yet to go to his room. If I met him, I should have to account for my presence wandering about the house at this time of night, and I felt that I was still too much discomposed by the fright I had received for his sharp eyes not to notice my pale and my quaking hands; and then I should have to tell him what I had seen, and there would be a search and an explanation, and I should get some one into trouble. For my fears had gone beyond thinking that it was Sarah or one of the other servants who—perhaps willing to give me a fright, perhaps only all but caught in the untimely enjoyment of one of my easy chairs—amused to escape detection, had blown out my candle, hoping to slip into in the dark unheeded.

However, I got safely back to the bottom of the staircase without seeing or hearing anything, and I was creeping along the passage when I caught the first faint sound of voices. I stopped, then went on softly, and the sounds became plainer, and I found that they proceeded from Mr. Rayner's study, the door of which I had to pass. I discovered by the thin ray of light it let out upon the passage that this door was ajar, at the same moment that I recognized Sarah's voice. She was speaking in a low sultry tone, and as I drew nearer, I was arrested half against my will by words which seemed to apply to myself—"Against the stupid baby-face of a child hardly out of the nursery herself. Governess indeed!"

"Is that all you have to say?" said Mr. Rayner, very low, but in the coldest, most cutting tone.

"That's—that's all I have to say," said Sarah, with a choking sound in her voice, and I was evidently unhappy; I almost pitied her.

"Then the matter is easily settled. You can go."

"I can go! I go! Do you know what you're saying! Do you think you could replace me as easily as you can such as her?" said she, forgetting all respect due to her master, as her voice, still low, trembled with rage.

"That is my affair. You wished me to choose between the services of an underpaid governess and those of an overpaid servant. I have chosen."

"Overpaid! My services overpaid! My services can't be overpaid!" she hissed out.

"As long as you jollied discretion to your other admitted qualities, I paid you according to that estimate. Now that you let yourself be swayed beyond all bounds of prudence by trifling feelings of jealousy and spite like a foolish girl, your value runs down to that level. You are no longer a girl, Sarah, and your position is changed in many ways since then, in most for the better. If you cannot accept the changes quietly, you had better go."

"And you would let me go—for a new-comer?" said the woman passionately.

"I cannot think of sending away any member of my household for the caprice of any other member of it, however valuable a servant she may have been."

"My work has been—may have been! My work is not over yet, and if I don't work for you, I'll work against you," she broke out in a fury. "I'll—"

"Not so fast, not so fast," said he slowly. "You will find that up-hill work when you have to deal with me, Sarah Goebel."

He spoke in the hard tone I had heard him use once or twice before—a tone which always made me shudder. Then his voice changed suddenly to a genial, almost caressing tone.

"Now do you think you will be able to get on without me as well as I can without you?"

There was a pause. Then I heard Sarah burst into sobs and low passionate cries for pity, for forgiveness.

"Why are you so hard? How can you have the heart to talk like that about my services, as if I was too old for anything but money-bargains? That child, that Christie girl, that you put before me, will never serve you like I've done."

"The services of a governess are not the same as those of a servant. That is enough about Miss Christie, Sarah."

"Enough and welcome about the little flirt—a creature that keeps diamonds from one man in her desk, and wears around her neck a letter from another which she kisses on the sly! Oh, I've seen her, the little—"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Rayner, sharply. "And what if she does? It is no business of mine."

"I heard him rise hastily from his chair and walk across the room," said I dead paled and a hare. Trembling and panting, I found my way to the hall table, took out of the box there half a dozen matches, and crept guiltily, carefully up stairs, and had listened, as I called to the spot, to what a dishonorable thing I had done.

If he had come to the door, thrown it

open, and seen me cowering with parted lips against the wall with a few feet of it, Sarah would have triumphed in the justice of her hatred of a girl who could be guilty of such meanness! And how Mr. Rayner's own opinion of me would have sunk! He would have seen how wrong he was in considering the overpaid governess less superior to the devoted servant.

I tried with shame and remorse as I spun the thread of my fate, shut myself in my room, and lit my candle. I did not feel like a frightened mouse. But I was ever to learn the lesson in the last adventure had swept away all remembrance of the previous one. When at last I began to think collectedly of what I had heard, I felt no longer any doubt. From what Sarah had said about the nature and extent of her services, that she was in reality the responsible guardian of Mrs. Rayner, and that when she spoke of working against her master it was not her way, she meant to publish far and wide what she had so long and so carefully kept secret—the fact that she had a wild towering on the verge of insanity. I did not wonder now so much as I had before at the depth of her jealousy of me. I saw how deep the woman's passions were, and how deep her devotion to her master, and I began to understand that it was hard for her to see so many little acts of consideration showered on a new-comer which she, although her service had been so much longer and more painful, could not get from her position except. And I got up from the chair I had sat down on, trying to forgive her, yet hoping she would go away all the same.

As I rose, I caught sight of my desk, which I suddenly saw had been moved. I might have done that myself in my search for the matches; but it flashed through my mind that Sarah had told Mr. Rayner that I had tampered with any desk. But I was locked, and the keys were always in my pocket. However, I opened it, and looked into the top compartment, where I kept Mr. Rayner's presents. There it was in its case, looking just as usual. Then I opened the lower compartment, with the intention of reading through just once more, before I went to bed, those two notes that I had had from Mr. Reade, one on that day and one on the day before, about the church work. And the last one, the one that had come with the cigar box on that day, was not there! A suspicion flashed through my mind which made my breath come fast—Sarah had taken it!

It was Sarah then whom I had surprised in my room that evening! She had managed by some means to open my desk, seen the pendant, and, having made a grievance against me of the fact that I had received letters from a gentleman, had taken the letter out and probably shown it to Mr. Rayner on some pretense of having "picked it up," to prove to him by the direction in a handwriting which he knew that I was carrying on a clandestine correspondence with Mr. Laurence Reade. And I remembered that she had already taken the first note to Mr. Rayner. Well, if she had read both the notes—for they were lying together in my desk—she must have seen that they were of a very innocent kind; but how was Mr. Rayner, who had not read them, to know this? I was annoyed and disgusted beyond measure; I could have forgiven her anything, even her meanness in playing spy while I looked at the note which I wore round my neck, but stealing my precious letter. I shed some tears at the loss of it, wondering whether she would ever take the trouble to restore it, polluted as it would be by having been read by her unkind eyes.

Then I went to bed, very tired and very unhappy; and at last I fell asleep with my hands clasping the note that Sarah could not get at, which I wore in the case around my neck.

Perhaps the excitement and agitation of the evening had caused my sleep to be lighter than usual. At any rate, I was awakened by a very slight noise indeed, so slight that I thought it must have been the work of my nervous fancy, and my sleepy eyes were closing again, when I suddenly became conscious that there was a light in the room not that of the rising sun.

Fully awake now, and cold all over with this new fright, I saw by the flickering on the ceiling that the light must come from a candle behind the screen; I saw that it was being carried forward into the room, and then I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. My fingers were still clinging to the little case, but they were not clammy with horror; what it was Sarah! What was she going to do now? To put back my letter? I did not dare to look.

I lay there listening so intently that I could hear, or fancy I hear, each soft step taken by the intruder. Then they stopped; and from the effect of the flickering light through my closed eyelids I guessed that the candle was being raised to throw its light on my face. Still I had self-command enough to be quite still and to imitate the long-drawn breathing of a sleeping person. But then my heart seemed to stand still, for I felt the light coming nearer, and I heard the faint sound of moving figure growing plainer, until the light was flashed within a foot of my face. I could not help moved then. I was half paralyzed. Then I noticed a faint sickly smell that I did not know, and a hand was laid very softly upon my bedclothes.

Still I did not move. I had formed a sort of plan in those leady two minutes, which seemed like two hours, when the light was coming nearer and nearer to my face. The hand crept softly up, and slipped under the bedclothes close to my chin, till it touched my fingers clutching the little leather case. I tried to disengage them, but my clasp of my treasury was like grinding death. Then the hand was softly withdrawn. I heard the drawing of a cork, I felt the faint smell more strongly, and a handkerchief wet with sours sickening, suffocating stuff was thrown lightly over my face.

Then I started up with a shout as loud and piercing as my lungs could give, tore the handkerchief from my face, and confronted Sarah, who drew back, her dark face livid with anger, but without uttering a sound. In her hand she held a little bottle. I tried with a spring to dash it from her grasp; but she was too quick for me, and, with a step back against the screen, she held it out of my reach. Then the screen fell down with a loud crash. My attention was distracted from the combat to it for one moment, and in that moment she made another spring at my neck. But then there was a sound outside which had as many terrors for her as her own voice had for me. It was Mr. Rayner, calling sharply and sternly—

"Sarah, come out here!"

She started; then her face grew sullen and she stood like a rock before me. Again Mr. Rayner called.

"Sarah, do you