

a candle she managed to grope and pick her way up step by step. Then she paused. The staircase had abruptly ended on the level of the study, now cut off from it by the new partition. She was in a stifling enclosure, formed by the walls, scarcely eighteen inches wide. It was made narrower by a singular excrescence on the old wall, which seemed to have been a bricked closet, now half destroyed and in ruins. She turned to descend, when a strange sound from Uncle Sylvester's room struck her ear. It was the sound of tapping on the floor close to the partition, within a foot of where she was standing. At the same moment there was a decided movement of the plank of the flooring beneath the partition: it began to slide slowly, and then was gradually withdrawn into the room. With prompt presence of mind, she instantly extinguished her candle and drew herself breathlessly against the partition.

When the plank was entirely withdrawn, a ray of light slipped through the opening, revealing the bare rafters of the floor, and a hand and arm inserted under the partition, groping as if towards the bricked closet. As the fingers of the exploring hand were widely extended, Marie had no difficulty in recognising on one of them a peculiar signet ring which Uncle Sylvester wore. A swift impulse seized her. To the audacious