

another shiver. "Wait for the colonel. Only tell Miss Mordaunt I am feeling lonely, and wish that she would join me."

The servant withdraws to do her bidding, and she still crouches by the fire, in her black dress, shivering.

The door opens, and Miss Mordaunt appears.

"It is very late, Isabella. What can have come to Philip?"

"I'm sure I can't say, Mrs. Mordaunt—that is, of course, Philip is his own master—but still, what do you think?"

"How can I tell?" rather fractionally; "it is what I asked you."

Miss Mordaunt, rebuked, retires in silence to the farther end of the drawing-room, while Irene sits by the fire and fears—she knows not what.

Eight o'clock strikes—half-past eight—a quarter to nine—and they are still alone.

"What can have happened?" exclaims Irene, suddenly, as she springs up from her position, and turns a burning face toward her companion.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt, what can have? But you quite alarm me. Hadn't we better—but, doubtless, you know best."

"Hush!" says Irene, in a voice of authority, as she stands upright to listen.

There is a noise as of many voices, each trying to hush down the other, in the hall.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFUSED voices, some earnest and some quavering, but all low, except one, whose inquiries culminate in a little shriek which makes Irene's blood turn cold to hear. She has advanced to the drawing-room door, and stands there, grasping the handle and shuddering with fear; half grieving at the coming shadow, but too frightened to go out and meet it, face to face. What are those feet which seem unable to tread otherwise than heavily, yet are accompanied by others stepping upon tiptoe, whose owners keep on whispering caution as they go?

Why is the hall of Fen Court so full of strange sounds and presences? *what* is it they have brought home so helplessly among them? She knows: the instinct of affection has told her the truth, but she is not yet able to receive it, and stands there listening, with the life-blood frozen in her veins, waiting till the visitation of God shall descend upon her head.

There is no such agony in this world as sus-

pense. When we know for certain that death or treachery, or separation, has come between us and those whom we hold dearest, the pain may be acute, but still the worst is before us; we can measure it and our own strength, and every day we find the difference between the two grow less, until, with a thankful heart, we can acknowledge that, even though it embitter the remainder of our career, it is not unbearable.

But to be kept in suspense; to be kept behind the black veil that reserve, or cruelty, or want of thought, may raise between us and our fellow-creatures; to fluctuate between hope and doubt and despair until our outraged affection sickens and dies of repeated disappointments; this is the most terrible trial the human heart is capable of enduring, compared to which physical torture in its worst shape would appear trifling. And yet at times we inflict it on each other. But I think Heaven will hold the murderer, who strikes down his victim in a fit of rage, as innocent beside the man or woman who, having gained supremacy over another heart, kills it by inches with slow, drawn-out suspense. The nature of the poisoner, who deals out death by infinitesimal grains of powder, is angelic by comparison.

Irene's deepest feelings are not here concerned, but she is torturing herself cruelly by standing at the drawing-room door. She is in the condition of the criminal condemned by martial law, who, his last moment having arrived, awaits with bandaged eyes and almost pulseless heart the volley that is to put him out of his misery. At last she is roused by the sound of Isabella sniffing behind her handkerchief.

"Oh! my dear Mrs. Mordaunt. I really feel quite frightened; do you think it is possible any thing can have happened? I don't want to alarm you, of course; but still—and Philip not having come home, you see—"

She can stand it no longer then, but with an effort dashes open the door and walks out blindly into the passage. The way is barricaded by Phoebe, who has evidently been set to keep guard, and whose eyes, red with crying, and wild with fear, are wandering incessantly from the hall to the drawing-room, and the drawing-room to the hall.

"Oh! my dear lady," she exclaims, as soon as she catches sight of her mistress. "Pray go back again; they don't want you there just now."

"Where? What do you mean? Tell me at once," says Irene, in a tone of authority.

"Oh, it's nothing, my dear lady; indeed, it's