

# Children Cry for



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## The Mystery of Rutledge Hall

CHAPTER XX.

A short slim man in black was standing by the fire, with his back turned to it; and although his face was perfectly impassive, a sudden gleam of surprise flashed into his dark keen eyes at sight of the beautiful pale woman in her rich soft dress who entered the room and closed the door after her.

"Mr. Hopgood?" she said interrogatively, glancing for a moment at the card in her hand.

"At your service, madam," was the reply, accompanied by a low bow, and a quick keen glance which made Sidney feel as if the stranger saw into the innermost depths of her heart and the secret recesses of her thoughts.

There was a brief silence. Sidney advanced slowly and stood by the table, resting one white hand upon it, her eyes downcast, her breath coming quickly and unevenly. This stranger was here at her request and by her wish; but now that he was here she was almost frightened at her own daring.

The man looked at her gravely with his keen eyes, taking in all the beauty of her face, the richness of her dress, the ease with which she wore her costly attire, the jewels on her white hands, the plain gold band of her wedding-ring. Nothing escaped those keen eyes—nothing—not even the quickened rise and fall of the closely-fitting bodice and the nervous trembling of the tender sensitive lips.

"You desire my attendance, madam," he said respectfully, at length.

"Yes—that is, I wrote to Scotland Yard for a—"

"For a detective of experience in whom you could place implicit trust," he concluded, his lips parting a little, almost as if he were going to smile at the simplicity of the wording of her note; "and I have been sent in answer to your wishes, madam, and shall be happy to serve you to the best of my ability."

"Thank you," Sidney answered shyly; then, mastering her nervousness by a strong effort, she sat down and motioned him to take a seat.

He declined, with a bow, and retained his position by the fire.

"Of course you understand that what I say to you is in strictest confidence?" she began, earnestly.

He bowed.

"And that it is a very serious and important matter."

Another bow, and another slight parting of the lips, as if he had an inclination to smile, which he immediately repressed.

"It is, in fact," Sidney continued, her manner gaining earnestness as she went on, "a matter of life and death!"

Again there was a slight movement

you tell me all you can, madam? My time and your own too, I dare say, are not without their value; and, if you wish the members of your household to remain ignorant of my business here, it will be necessary to make my visits as short-as possible."

"Yes," she said nervously. "I think it will be wiser not to come here again. I will meet you somewhere, if it is necessary that you should see me."

"One moment," he interposed suddenly. "Are you a widow?"

She drew back slightly.

"No, certainly not," she said hastily. "Why do you ask?"

"Your note desired that whoever was sent should ask for Mrs. Daunt. But pray proceed," he added, breaking off and leaning forward again, with his old appearance of attention.

"I think it is very likely that there will be no need for me to go into particulars," Sidney faltered rather nervously, rising her beautiful eyes to his with a pathetic look of entreaty. "You will know as much about it as I do myself—perhaps more—when I recall the matter to your memory; you have not forgotten."

She paused a moment; her lips were so dry and parched that speech was almost a difficulty just then.

"You have not forgotten," she went on more firmly. "The—the—murder which took place here nearly two years ago?"

"The murder, madam?" he echoed, the interest deepening, although some surprise mingled with it at the unexpected word.

"Yes—a gentleman—Mr. Rutledge of Rutledge Hall—her voice had sunk almost to a whisper—"who was found in his library shot dead."

"Such matters are not unusual with us, madam," he said, calmly. "I suppose not," she answered, looking at him with something like curiosity mingled with awe.

"On the contrary, they are of daily occurrence," he pursued. "Will you allow me to ask one question, madam?"

"Certainly. What is it?" she said, with a flash of terror in her beautiful eyes.

"The letter received, desiring my attendance, was signed 'Sidney Daunt,'" he said, taking out a little note-book and glancing at it. "May I ask who the writer was?"

"I was the writer."

But the name is a man's name," he said quietly.

"It is mine nevertheless," she rejoined, with some haughtiness. "I am Sidney Daunt."

He made a slight bow, and there was another short pause.

"There is one thing I wish to ask you," she said nervously. "I should like the object of your visits here to remain a perfect secret; I do not wish any member of my household to suspect who you are, or the reason for your visits here—that is, if you are obliged to repeat this one."

"You need be under no apprehension on that score," he said gravely. "I need scarcely say that we are used to secrecy."

Another slight pause.

"It is a very painful matter," Sidney began, her lips quivering a little; "and I cannot give you many particulars. Personally I—I know no more of the matter than anybody can know, except that I am assured of the innocence of one person whom others think guilty."

The man looked at her more attentively now.

"May I ask how you possess that assurance?" he said.

"By my knowledge of the character of the accused," she replied. "I know that it is impossible that he should have committed the crime of which he is thought to be guilty."

"I am afraid that very often very unlikely persons turn out to be guilty, madam," he remarked, with more interest than he had yet shown; and, drawing up a chair, he set down, and leaning forward, said gravely: "Will



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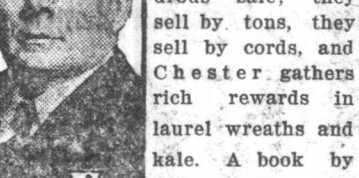
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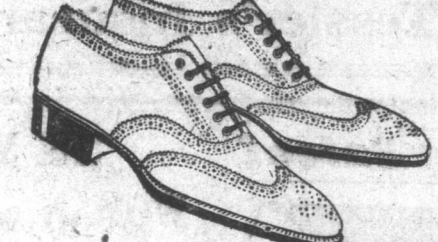
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