

Natalie Sumner Lincoln



*The Thirteenth
Letter*

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CHAPTER I

THE EVENTS OF A NIGHT

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THE white-capped nurse dropped the curtains in place so that they completely shut out the night and equally prevented any ray of artificial light penetrating the outer darkness. Her eyes, blinded by her steadfast gaze into the whirling snow storm, were slow in adjusting themselves to the lamp lighted room and for some minutes she saw as in a blur the spare form of the physician standing by her patient's bed. Doctor Roberts turned at her approach and removed his finger from about the man's wrist. He met her glance with a negative shake of his head as he replaced his watch.

"Abbott!" he called softly, bending over the patient: "Rouse yourself and take some nourishment. You will never get your strength back if you don't eat."

Slowly, languidly Abbott's dark eyes opened and regarded the two figures by his bedside. They lingered in some curiosity on the trim figure of the trained nurse and then passed on to the physician.

"I'll eat later," he mumbled. "Leave me alone, now,"—and the heavy lids closed again over the eyes under which dark circles of pain testified to hours of suffering.

"Very well." Doctor Roberts spoke more crisply. "Miss Ward will be here to look after you. You must do what she says. I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

His remark met with no response, and picking up his bag Roberts started from the room. At the door he paused and

motioned to Miss Ward to follow him. Stopping long enough to arrange Abbott's pillow in a more comfortable position, the nurse went into the hall, only to find that Doctor Roberts was halfway down the staircase. With a doubtful look behind her, Miss Ward ran lightly down into the lower hall which, lighted only by oil lamps, was long and rambling and used as a living room. Doctor Roberts walked over to a table and put down his bag.

"I am glad that you are here, Miss Ward," he began, courteously. "I feared the storm would detain you. You have not nursed for me before?"—with an inquisitive glance at the pretty woman before him.

"No, Doctor." Miss Ward's tapering fingers pressed out a crease in her starched gown. "This is my first case since my arrival in Washington."

"Oh! You are a graduate nurse?"

"Yes. I trained in New York." Her hazel eyes met his steadily. "They told me at the hospital of the urgency of this case and I took a taxi out here."

"Quite right. Add all your expenses to your bill," directed Roberts. "Paul Abbott has ample means. He should be in a hospital."

"But his condition, doctor."

Roberts nodded. "That is out of the question," he agreed, "*now*. Had his caretaker sent for me in time I would have had Mr. Abbott moved from this God-forsaken location to the city. As it is"—he pulled himself up short—"we must do the best we can ten miles from civilization." His smile vanished as quickly as it had come. "I am no lover of the country in the dead of winter. What time did you get here?"

“An hour ago. Have you any orders, doctor?”

“You can give him a dose of this through the night”—taking out a small phial and handing it to her—“the directions are on the bottle. It is essential that Mr. Abbott have sleep; if necessary, give him this by hypodermic.” And he handed her two pellets.

“What stimulation do you wish me to use in case of sudden collapse?” Miss Ward asked as Roberts picked up his bag and walked toward the front door.

“Strychnine, twentieth of a grain,” brusquely, as the hall clock chimed ten, but his hurried exit was checked by a further question.

“Has Mr. Abbott any family to be notified in case his condition becomes dangerous?” asked Miss Ward.

“No immediate relations.” Doctor Roberts was manifestly impatient to be off. “There’s a girl—Betty Carter—but I’m not sure that the engagement isn’t broken. Good night.” The high wind drove the snow, which had drifted up on the broad veranda, in whirling gusts through the front door and half blinded Roberts as he held it partly open. With a muttered oath he dashed outside to his automobile, parked under the shelter of the *porte cochère*.

Miss Ward heard the whir of the starting motor, the grinding of weed chains and the shifting of gears before she closed the outer vestibule door. It was with a sense of reluctance that she turned back into the silent house. The storm and her surroundings oppressed her.

The old homestead, turned from a large-sized, roomy farmhouse into a hunting lodge, with its wide entrance hall converted into a living room from which ran numerous

twisting passages, was a gloomy place in winter. Through darkened doorways Miss Ward obtained a vague impression of larger rooms beyond which she judged to be library, dining room, and possibly a sunparlor.

Paul Mason Abbott, Senior, had prospered in his real estate business, and had acquired, in one of his deals, the country property, twenty miles from Washington, the National Capital, which, with a substantial fortune, he had bequeathed to his only son, Paul. The latter's career as a promising young architect had been interrupted by the World War. Paul had borne his share of the fighting, returning to his home with health shattered and a morbid desire to live alone.

He had closed his bachelor apartment in Washington in the early spring and spent the following months motoring about the country. Just before Christmas he had appeared unexpectedly at Abbott's Lodge and announced that he would reside there indefinitely. Corbin, the caretaker, had given him but a taciturn welcome, and neither he nor his wife had done more than provide Abbott with three meals a day and such heat as was absolutely necessary to warm the house.

Miriam Ward felt that even Corbin's presence, disagreeable as she had found the caretaker in her one interview with him upon her arrival, was preferable to the grotesque shadows made by the furniture as she hurried across the living room and up the staircase to her patient. Paul Abbott paid no attention to her as she moved about making her preparations for a long night's vigil.

Abbott's bedroom stretched across one wing of the house. Miss Ward was conscious of a touch of envy as she subconsciously took note of the lovely old pieces of mahogany with which the room was furnished—the highboy with its highly polished brass handles, the fine old bureau with its quaint mirror hanging above it; the antique desk in one corner and last, but not least, the carved four-post bedstead with its canopy and its long curtains. The handsome rugs on the floor deadened her footsteps as she moved about, and it was with a sense of shock that she heard the grandfather clock in the hall chime the hour of midnight. The sudden sound in the utter stillness aroused Paul Abbott as he seemed about to drop off to sleep and he lifted his head. Instantly Miss Ward was by his side, but he pushed away the glass of milk she offered him.

“Has she come?” he asked eagerly.

“She? Who?”

“Betty.”

Miss Ward shook her head. Then observing his feverish condition more closely, she hastened to say soothingly: “She will probably be here as soon as the storm lets up.”

Abbott looked at her appealingly. Thrusting his fingers inside the pocket of his pajamas he drew out a crumpled piece of paper.

“Betty wrote that she would be here to-night,” he protested. “And you must let her in—you must—”

“Surely.” Miss Ward again offered the rejected glass of milk. “Drink this,” she coaxed, and obedient to the stronger will Abbott took a few swallows and then pushed the glass away. His head slipped back upon the pillow and Miss Ward

deftly arranged the curtain of the four-poster so that it sheltered his eyes from the light of the wood fire burning on the hearth at the opposite end of the bedroom.

An hour later she was about to replenish the wood for the third time when a distant peal of a door bell caused her to drop the kindling with unexpected suddenness in the center of the hot ashes. As the sparks flew upward, she heard Abbott call out and turned toward the bed.

“It’s Betty!” he exclaimed, with a feeble wave of his hand. “Go—go—let her in.”

“I will, but don’t excite yourself,” she cautioned. “Lie down on your pillows, Mr. Abbott, and keep yourself covered,” drawing the eiderdown quilt over his shoulders as she spoke.

Another, and more imperative peal of the bell caused her to hasten across the bedroom and into the hall. She peered ahead expectantly as she went down the staircase, hoping for a glimpse of the caretaker, Corbin. Evidently the bell had not disturbed his slumbers, for she could distinguish no one approaching in the semi-darkness. Unfamiliar as she was with her surroundings it took Miss Ward several minutes to let down the night latch and turn the old-fashioned key in the lock of the vestibule door. As she swung the latter open she was pushed back and two figures stepped across the threshold, closing the door behind them. The first, a tall slender girl, her handsome fur coat covered with snow, stopped halfway to the staircase and addressed Miss Ward.

“Where is Mr. Abbott?” she demanded. “And why have you kept us waiting so long?”

“I presume the caretaker is still asleep,” replied the nurse. “Otherwise the door would have been opened more promptly. Mr. Abbott is ill in bed. Very ill,” she added, meeting the girl’s imperious glance with a steady gaze. “This is no hour for visitors for a sick man.”

“Oh, the hour!” The girl turned disdainfully away. “I must see Mr. Abbott; it is imperative. You are the nurse?” with a questioning glance at her white uniform.

“Yes, and as such in charge of the sick room,” crisply. “I cannot permit—”

“Just a moment,” broke in the girl’s companion, who, until that instant, had busied himself with closing both the vestibule and inner front door. As he stepped closer and unbuttoned his heavy overcoat Miss Ward caught a glimpse of his clerical dress. “This is Miss Elizabeth Carter, Mr. Abbott’s fiancée, and I am Dr. Nash of Washington. Miss Carter received word that Mr. Abbott is alarmingly ill—”

“With small hope for his recovery.” The words escaped Betty Carter through quivering lips, and looking closely at her, Miss Ward discovered her eyelashes wet with tears. “Don’t keep us standing here when time is so precious,” and turning she ran up the staircase, followed by the clergyman and Miss Ward.

An odd sound far down the corridor caused the nurse to hesitate before accompanying the others into the sick room, and for several seconds she stood poised outside the door, her head bent in a listening attitude. The sound, whatever it was, and Miss Ward could have sworn it was a faint whimper, was not repeated. She was thankful to turn from

the contemplation of the dark, winding corridor to the companionship of her patient and his two belated visitors.

Dr. Nash had paused by the solitary lamp, but his efforts to induce it to burn more brightly resulted in extinguishing it entirely, leaving the bedroom illuminated by the firelight only. He turned at Miss Ward's approach and addressed her in a low voice.

"Get the lamp from downstairs," he whispered. "This one is burned out."

Betty Carter, paying no attention to the others, halted by the bedside just as Miss Ward started for the door.

"I've come, Paul," Miss Ward heard her say as she darted out of the room. "I am here to keep my word. Dr. Nash is with me."

Miss Ward's mystification lent wings to her feet, but when she made the turn of the last landing of the staircase her foot slipped on some snow left on the hardwood by the clergyman's rubbers, and she went headlong to the floor. Considerably shaken by her fall, it was some moments before she could pull herself together and get to her feet. Taking up the lamp with a hand not quite steady, she walked upstairs. As she entered the bedroom she saw Betty Carter standing apparently just where she had left her and Doctor Nash closing his prayerbook.

"... I pronounce you man and wife." The solemn words rang their meaning into Miss Ward's ears as she took in the significance of the scene. "Come, Betty, we have no time to linger," and stepping forward, Doctor Nash laid his hand on the girl's arm.

With a gesture as if awakening from a dream, Betty Carter raised her head and faced Miss Ward. The nurse almost cried out as she met the full gaze of her tragic eyes.

“Surely you are not going?” she exclaimed. “Now—after —?”

“Yes.” Betty’s beauty was of an unusual type and Miss Ward’s heart gave a sympathetic throb as she came under the magnetism of her personality. “We—I will be back,” and before Miss Ward could gasp out a question, she hurried swiftly from the room, the clergyman at her heels.

Her mind in a daze, Miss Ward stood in the doorway of the bedroom holding the lighted lamp so that they might see their way to the staircase, but her half-formed intention of carrying the lamp to the head of the stairs altered when she saw that the clergyman was provided with a powerful pocket searchlight. She stood where she was until she heard the front door close with a distinct slam, then went thoughtfully into the bedroom.

Placing the lamp on a small table by the side of the bed, she drew back the curtain of the four-poster and looked down at the sick man. He lay partly on one side, his eyes closed, and one hand tightly clenching the eiderdown quilt. For one long minute Miss Ward regarded him, her senses reeling.

The man lying in the bed was not her patient.

CHAPTER II

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

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A LONG-DRAWN sigh cut the stillness. Slowly Miriam Ward raised her head and struggled to a more upright position. Her limbs felt stiff and cramped and she moved with difficulty. Without comprehension she watched a beam of light creep from underneath a window curtain and extend across the floor, its radiance widening as the sun rose higher in the heavens. The current of air from the opened window blowing indirectly upon her overcame her sense of suffocation, but her wild stare about the bedroom did not bring recollection in its train. The first thing to fix her attention was the fireplace and the darkened hearth—no heat was given out by the dead embers. Suddenly conscious of the chill atmosphere, she involuntarily grasped her dress and dragged it closer about her neck. The touch of the starched linen caused her to glance downward. She was wearing her uniform, therefore she was on duty!

Miriam Ward's dulled wits slowly adjusted themselves. She had reported for duty at the Registry; a call had come—from where? To attend whom? Roberts? No, that was the name of the physician. Ah, she had it—Paul Abbott. The chord of memory was touched at last and the events of the night crowded upon her. The man in the bed—

Stiffly Miriam scrambled to her feet and made a few halting steps to the bedside. It took all her will-power to pull aside the bed curtains and glance down. Paul Abbott lay

partly turned upon his side, his fine profile outlined against the white pillowcase, and his right hand just showing outside the eiderdown quilt.

Miriam's hand tightened its grasp on the curtain and she leaned weakly against the side of the bed; but for its support her trembling knees would have given way under her. She had been the victim of a nightmare! The midnight visit of Betty Carter and the clergyman, the substitution of a stranger for her patient—all had been a hallucination conjured up by a too vivid imagination. She had slept on duty. That, in itself, was an unpardonable offense.

Raising her arm she glanced at her wrist watch—the hands registered a quarter past eight. Then nearly nine hours had passed and she had lain asleep. A wave of color suffused her white face and she grew hot and cold by turns. Her heart was beating with suffocating rapidity as she hurried to the windows and drew aside the long, heavy curtains and pulled up the Holland shades. The storm of the night before was over and the winter sunshine brought a touch of warmth to the room and a sense of comfort.

A glance at the fireplace convinced Miriam that it would require both time and fresh kindling wood to start a fire. It could wait until she had summoned the caretaker; the room was not so cold now that she had closed the window.

Retracing her footsteps she again paused by the bed and gazed at her patient. He still lay on his side, motionless. Miriam Ward caught her breath—motionless, aye, too motionless. A certain rigidity, a waxen pallor, indistinguishable in her first glimpse of him in the darkened room, held her eyes, trained to detect the slightest

alteration in a patient's condition. Her hand sought his wrist, then his heart, then dropped limply to her side. Paul Abbott lay dead before her.

Her low cry was smothered in the bed curtain, which she pressed against her mouth, and for a moment she swayed dizzily upon her feet. Paul Abbott had died while she lay asleep within a few feet of his bed. Overwhelming remorse deadened every other feeling and held her spellbound. Fully five minutes elapsed before a sense of duty aroused her to action.

Wheeling around, Miriam staggered rather than walked to the telephone standing on Abbott's desk. She had jotted down Doctor Roberts' 'phone call the night before, but it took her several seconds to get the central at Washington, and still others passed before a man's voice told her that the physician was out making his morning rounds. At her urgent request the servant promised to locate Doctor Roberts and send him at once to Abbott's Lodge.

As Miriam replaced the receiver on its hook she was conscious of a feeling of deadly nausea and she stumbled as she walked across the room and into the hall. She must have aid. Her repeated calls brought no response. What had become of the caretaker and his wife? A noise of some one moving in the hall below caused her to run down the staircase to the lower landing.

"Here—here, this way!" she gasped, and saw vaguely outlined a woman's terrified face in front of her while the sound of a heavy tread coming down the staircase echoed in her ears. "Mr. Abbott—I—" Voice and strength failed her simultaneously, and before any one could reach her she lay

in a crumpled heap on the landing, unconscious of the loud ringing of the gong over the front door.

It was approaching noon when a timid knock at her bedroom door brought Miriam Ward into the corridor and face to face with the caretaker's wife.

"If you please, Miss, the doctor says do you feel better?" The question came in a gasp, characteristic of Martha Corbin. A gray ghost of a woman, timid to the verge of cowardice, she seldom spoke unless addressed.

"Much better," replied the trained nurse. "Where is Doctor Roberts?"

"In there," with a jerk of her thumb over her shoulder. "He wants to see ye."

"Very well." Miriam Ward closed her bedroom door with a firm hand. She had regained some hold upon her composure as her attacks of nausea ceased and the throbbing in her head lessened. Doctor Roberts had left her two hours before with the admonition to remain in bed until he saw her again, but her anxiety of mind had prevented her following his directions. She paused involuntarily outside of Paul Abbott's bedroom, then, gathering courage, she stepped inside. Doctor Roberts turned at the sound of her approach and put down the telephone instrument.

"So you are up," he said gruffly. "Well, how are you? Feeling stronger?"

"Yes; thank you, Doctor." In spite of her determined effort to keep her voice expressionless, Miriam was conscious that it was not quite steady. "I—oh, Doctor, I don't know what to say." Her pent-up emotion was gaining the upper hand. "How to tell you—"

“What?” as she paused.

“That—that—I slept on duty.”

Doctor Roberts eyed her steadily for what seemed an interminable minute. “So that was it,” he remarked dryly. “Well, what then?”

The nurse’s pallor was intensified, but her eyes did not falter in their direct gaze.

“I was asleep when Mr. Abbott died,” she admitted, her hands clenching themselves in the pockets of her uniform.

Doctor Roberts’ stare grew prolonged. “And this was your first case in Washington?” he asked, with marked emphasis.

“Yes.” Miriam Ward moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Hardly a successful début,” commented Roberts. His glance strayed beyond the nurse to a man standing in the shadow of a window curtain. “Give Miss Ward a chair, Alan.”

Somewhat startled by the presence of a third person, Miriam accepted the proffered seat with relief; she was weaker than she had at first realized.

“Miss Ward,” continued Doctor Roberts, “this is Mr. Alan Mason, of the *Washington Post*. He arrived here in time to carry you to your bedroom and then summoned me.”

Miriam glanced upward and encountered the gaze of a pair of deep blue eyes fixed upon her in concern.

“You should not have gotten up,” Alan declared, and the human sympathy in his voice brought a lump in her throat. She saw his clear-cut features, wavy dark hair, and whimsical mouth through a mist which she strove to wink away. “I’m afraid you have overdone things a bit.”

Miriam shook her head. "I could not rest in my bedroom," she said. "There must be something that I can do, Doctor Roberts; unless you distrust me too much." Her voice shook with feeling, and she paused abruptly, unable to go on.

The two men exchanged glances, then Roberts rose. "There, there!" he exclaimed, a trifle awkwardly. "Just take things quietly, Miss Ward, while Alan asks you a few questions. It is his business, you know."

"Just so." Alan Mason nodded reassuringly. "I'm a reporter and also a cousin of Paul's; in fact, his nearest relative. How did Paul seem last night—before you fell asleep?"

"He—" Her pause was infinitesimal. "He appeared much excited, even irrational, but at times his mind was perfectly clear. He took a little nourishment." She stopped and passed one hand before her eyes. Her dreams still haunted her. Could she truthfully say where imagination had dovetailed with reality? Was Betty Carter's visit, her marriage to Paul Abbott but a figment of her overcharged brain? Would her hearers think her a lunatic as well as criminally negligent if she went into details?

Doctor Roberts broke the pause. "I have looked over your chart," he stated, "and find that the last entry was made soon after midnight. You made no record of any marked change in his condition."

Miriam swallowed hard. "The collapse must have come suddenly," she said. "At what time do you think he died?"

Roberts eyed her in silence for a minute. "Come over to the bed," he directed, and not waiting for her, turned on his heel.

The long side curtains of the four-post bedstead were stretched across it, and as Miriam laid her hand on one of them to draw it aside, Alan Mason checked her.

"I found this wad of cotton under the bed," he began. "Had you any occasion last night to use chloroform?"

"No." Miriam looked at him in startled wonder. "No."

"Then," Roberts scanned her closely, "how comes it that you, a trained nurse, are unaware that you were chloroformed?"

Slowly Miriam took in the meaning of his words. "Chloroformed?" she gasped. "I?"

It was Alan Mason who answered and not Doctor Roberts. "I detected the odor of chloroform when I carried you to your bedroom," he said. "So then I came in here—found my cousin, Paul, dead—and this cotton under the bed."

Miriam stared at her companions in dumbfounded silence for a moment. "My attack of nausea—" she faltered.

"Was the result of the chloroform," declared Doctor Roberts. His voice deepened. "We also detected its odor about Paul Abbott."

"Good God!" Miriam drew back. "Was Mr. Abbott anesthetized?"

Roberts' gaze never left her face in the lengthened pause.

"In Heaven's name, why don't you answer?" Miriam looked piteously from one man to the other. "Was Mr. Abbott chloroformed?"

"No," replied Roberts. "He was stabbed in the back."

Dragging aside the curtains, Miriam gazed in horror at the bed. The bedclothes had been pulled back and Paul

Abbott lay upon his face. Under his left shoulder blade was a dark and sinister bloodstain.

CHAPTER III

COMPLICATIONS

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ALAN MASON stopped his restless pacing back and forth and looked at his watch—two o'clock. Surely, the autopsy must be over! He had waited for what appeared an interminable time for the County coroner, his assistant and Doctor Roberts to join him in the living room as they had promised. The afternoon papers would soon be off the press and distributed to the public; it would not be long before the reporters from the other local papers and even the representatives of the great news services located in the National Capital would be at Abbott's Lodge in search of the sensational. And they would find it! Alan's lips were compressed in a hard line. Only six months before he and his cousin, Paul Abbott, had been the closest of "buddies," then had come the estrangement and now death.

Paul had been a social favorite, liked by one and all, and while he had absented himself from Washington during the past year, his tragic death would come as a great shock to his many friends. And Betty Carter—what of her? Alan raised his hands to his temples and brushed his unruly hair upward until it stood on end. The action did not bring any solution of his problems, and with a groan he resumed his restless walk about the living room.

In remodeling the house, Paul Abbott, Senior, had thrown several small rooms into one, also taking down the partitions which inclosed the old-fashioned square staircase,

and made the whole into a combination of hallway and living room. He had shown excellent taste in furnishing the old house, using in most instances the mahogany which had been in the family for generations, and when necessary to purchase other pieces of furniture he had hunted in highways and byways for genuine antiques.

But Alan was in no frame of mind to appreciate rare pieces of Hepplewhite, Sheraton, and Chippendale. Tired of the monotony of his surroundings, he strolled into the dining room and walked moodily across it, intending to pour out a glass of water from a carafe on the sideboard. The room was square in shape, with two bow windows and a door leading into a sunparlor which, in summer, the elder Abbott had used as a breakfast room, as the large pantry gave access into it as well as into the regular dining room. From where he stood by the sideboard, Alan could overlook, through one of the bow windows, the garden entrance to the sunparlor. The snow had formed in high drifts, covering completely the rosebushes which, as he recollected, surrounded a plot of grass in the center of which stood an old sundial. It also was blanketed in snow.

As he gazed idly out of the window, Alan saw the door of the sunparlor swing slowly outward. The piled-up snow caused it to jam and he watched with some amusement the efforts of Corbin, the caretaker, to squeeze his portly frame through the partly open door. Once outside Corbin used his snow shovel with vigorous strokes until he had cleared the topmost step. Closing the door to the sunparlor, he leaned his shovel against it, took out his pipe, lighted it, tossed away the match, and drawing on his woolen mitts, he wiped

the snow from one of the panes of window glass. Pausing deliberately he glanced about him, and then, cupping his hands, he pressed them against the window and peered inside the sunparlor. Something furtive in the man's action claimed Alan's attention, and he drew back into the protection of the window curtain. The precaution was unnecessary. Corbin straightened up and without a glance at the dining room window, took from his pocket a small metal case. Whatever its contents it drew a smile so evil that Alan stared at the man aghast. He had not been prepossessed in the man's favor on the few occasions when visiting Paul Abbott, Senior, and his son before the war, and had wondered at Paul retaining him in his employ after his father's death.

Returning the case to his pocket, Corbin cleaned the snow from the remaining steps and commenced to shovel a path toward the kitchen. He had almost completed the distance when he paused, stared thoughtfully around him, and then walked back to the sunparlor, clambered cumbersomely up the steps to the door and again peered inside. Fully two minutes passed before he stepped down and walked along the shoveled path.

His curiosity piqued by the man's behavior, Alan waited until Corbin had disappeared from sight, then, turning on his heel, he entered the sunparlor. Evidently Paul had used the room as a lounge, for the wicker furniture, with its attractive cretonne covering, looked homelike and comfortable. Magazines, several books, and a smoking set were on the nearest table, while flower boxes on two sides of the sunparlor added a touch of the tropics, with their hothouse