

Seeing the dead man in the chair, the ex-convict came to a dead stop, threw back his head and laughed ghoulishly



SPECIAL NIGHT FOR MURDER

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

Private Detective Ben Porter is visited by the suspect in an odd case of homicide that has not yet been committed!

WALTER WAYNE looked around Ben Porter's pleasant quarters, and smiled.

"I thought," he said, "that private detectives had dirty offices with elevated tracks right outside the windows, and that neighbors pounded on the walls all the time to stop the racket which also appears to be part of a private detective's way of life."

Ben Porter laughed. "There are a few like that, sir. Some who even keep their offices in their hats, but the good ones—well, they do business in a place like this."

He waved a hand at the office. It was done in modern, was air-conditioned, equipped with filing cabinets, a large safe, a yellow couch which was as clean as the New York soot-laden atmosphere allows

anything to be clean. There were good portraits on the walls—not masterpieces by any stretch of the imagination, but sound, intelligent stuff to lend color. Deep yellow drapes framed the windows, and the rug was thick and rich.

“Perhaps that’s why I selected you,” Walter Wayne said. “Because of the address. It means you must be a good detective. Only success would enable you to run an office like this.”

Ben Porter surveyed the man shrewdly. He didn’t know whether he liked the fellow or not, despite the compliments. Wayne was about fifty. A strong looking, sturdily built individual with clear eyes, an intelligent forehead, and an impressive manner. That he had money was evident by the cigar he smoked, the hat he wore jauntily, and the topcoat and suit which were strictly Fifth Avenue. He wore an American Legion pin.

“Suppose we get down to business, Mr. Wayne,” Porter said. “My rates, for ordinary cases—”

“I’m not interested in rates for ordinary stuff,” Wayne interrupted. “You may charge me anything you like, commensurate with the work you do. What I want from you is simple enough, but I thought expert advice would be helpful and safer. I want you to prove that it was physically impossible for me to murder a man.”

Porter’s gray eyes flicked the slightest in interest.

“Did you murder anyone, Mr. Wayne?” he asked smoothly.

“No, of course I didn’t.” Wayne laughed. “Yet a man is going to die and I shall be blamed for it. Because he is on the verge of doing me a grave amount of trouble, I hate him intensely and every suspicion will point directly at me.”

PORTER leaned back comfortably, wondering if he was dealing with a crank. “I’d like more details before I accept a case of this kind,” he said.

“And you are entitled to them. I am a broker. Some of my methods may not have been exactly—well—honest, I suppose you might say. But I’ve managed to get away with it, to build up a pleasant fortune, and I’d hate to have anything happen to it. Stanley Lasher intends to break me, if not install me in a prison cell.”

“Lasher is the man who is going to die?” Porter asked. “How do you know?”

“A week ago I was at his home when a letter was delivered by hand. Lasher took it. He read the thing and chuckled, and let me look at it. The note—I can’t remember the exact words—stated that tonight Stanley Lasher would die.”

“He didn’t take it seriously?”

“Not at all. He flung it into a desk drawer: Now, it may be as phony as he accepted it. I don’t know. But if anything happens to him, I want to be in the clear. Call it a hunch if you like, but I believe Lasher is going to die.”

“I think it’s a matter for the police,” Porter said. “The best way to protect yourself is to stop the murderer.”

“Ah”—Wayne gave a crooked smile—“but I should like it very much if Lasher were killed. I have absolutely no interest in saving him. If he does not wish to ask police protection, that is his choice. All I want is to be protected from even remote suspicion. I’m willing to pay heavily.”

“Suppose you tell me why you dislike Lasher so much.”

“Of course. It is no secret. Lasher used to be a district attorney. Probably the toughest, most ruthless prosecutor the courts ever knew. He was absolutely without the slightest hint of mercy. His tirades to juries are famous. A man like that couldn’t last. He wasn’t even renominated

because he stepped on too many toes, as you might suspect.

“That was about fifteen years ago. Since then he has practised law. A corporation I founded is slipping. Lasher claims I took too much money out of it. Whether I did or not, doesn’t concern you. I could handle any other attorney, but not Lasher. He can do me irreparable harm and I should very much enjoy reading his obituary.”

“The fee,” Porter said cozily, “will be five thousand dollars, if I prove you could not have possibly murdered Lasher. I handle things my own way. You take orders without questioning them. I must have permission to try and save Lasher, to call in the police and do anything I see fit.”

Wayne seemed worried. “Couldn’t we handle it in a more quiet fashion? Do the thing in a simple way so that when Lasher is found dead, the police can come for me and I’ll be prepared with an alibi which cannot be broken. Remember, that I, and not Lasher, shall be paying your fee.”

Porter rubbed his chin. Everything told him not to accept such a job. Here was a man who knew a deadly enemy was to be killed, who wanted him killed, but also required an alibi. Porter was wondering if Wayne could have laid a trap which would snap only when he was protected.

“When did you see Lasher last?” he asked.

“One week ago.”

“Will you place yourself in my charge as of right now?”

“I intended to demand just such a stipulation.”

Porter reached for the phone. “Then the first thing to do is determine that Lasher is alive at this moment. You haven’t been near his house since last week?”

“I got back to town two hours ago. I was taking it easy in Florida. In a small inland town where I was seen ten times a

day. You can check on that.”

Porter looked up Lasher’s number and dialed it. A man answered and he asked for Lasher.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lasher can’t be disturbed. Who is calling, please?”

“It doesn’t make any difference,” Porter said. “All I want to know is whether or not Mr. Lasher is alive at this moment. Will you go see?”

“Alive? What do you mean? What’s this all about?”

“Just go and look in on him,” Porter urged. “It’s important, and you will know the explanation for it all later on.”

“We-ell, okay, I’ll look. He’s in the library. See here, if this is a joke—”

“I assure you there is nothing funny about it,” Porter vowed. Something in his voice must have been convincing because the man on the phone went away for a couple of minutes.

“He’s alive all right,” he reported. “He just threw a book at me for opening the library door. And he told me to get the heck out of the house and stay out until after midnight.”

“Will anyone else be at home?”

“No—all the servants were given the night off too. It’s some kind of a special night, I guess. He either wants to be alone or he has a date to meet someone and doesn’t want anybody to know about it.”

“Who are you, by the way?” Porter queried.

“Hugh Sinclair. Mr. Lasher is my guardian. Now you’ve got to tell me who you are and what this means!”

BEN PORTER hung up quietly. He looked across his desk at Wayne.

“Well, he’s alive at this moment. But I warn you, Mr. Wayne, should Lasher die of some trick, some trap which could have been set days ago, then I promise nothing. I’ll even try to prove you are the

murderer—and my fee still holds.”

Wayne offered his hand.

“I hoped you’d say that. I want you to feel positive I couldn’t have killed him. Perhaps it’s just a lot of nonsense anyway. I base my hunch only upon this anonymous letter which Lasher brushed off. I imagine a man with his disposition gets plenty of them. Now, just what do we do?”

Porter thought a moment. “Make a visit to the police and explain things. To prove that you are trying to protect yourself and put your suspicions on record. Then we’ll go somewhere. A spot where there are a lot of people, many of whom must know you. We’ll stay among them until dawn, if necessary. I’ll back up your alibi, but someone else has to back me up. Otherwise it won’t hold water.”

Wayne agreed. Porter drove him to Police Headquarters where they talked to Lieutenant Ferguson, a calm, considerate man with an excellent record. He listened to the whole thing.

“I don’t blame you, Mr. Wayne,” he said. “People shouldn’t take anonymous threats lightly. I’ll run over and see Lasher. Whether he likes it or not I’ll throw a guard around his place. Every precaution will be taken, and see that your own skirts are clean.”

Porter then took Wayne to dinner at a fancy hotel room which was crowded. Every time Wayne saw someone he knew, Porter made him go over to the table for a short chat. At ten o’clock they went to a busy night club. Porter tipped the headwaiter fifty dollars and insisted on a table where they would be as prominent as the floor show.

“We’ll stay right here until the place closes,” he told Wayne. “I’d like to see anyone break this alibi.”

Wayne rubbed his hands. “Ah, so would I. Everything is perfect.”

Shortly before one in the morning, a

waiter came over and bent close to Porter. There was an urgent phone call. He had half a premonition of what the news would be. Only Lieutenant Ferguson knew he was at this night club. Wayne too, realized what it meant and he slowly put down his half-consumed glass of champagne.

Porter was gone three minutes. When he returned he looked grim.

“Well, it’s happened,” he said. “Ferguson went to Lasher’s house to warn him and Lasher told him to go away. Fergy threw a four-man cordon around the estate. They rounded up one suspect whom I’ll tell you about later. Twenty minutes ago that young man I talked to on the phone, returned home. He looked in on Lasher and found him dead. Poisoned!”

“Oh, my!” Wayne’s voice was a croak. “Porter, I feel sorry for the old boy. I’m out of a mess, but just the same I wish it hadn’t happened.”

“You may be out of one mess,” Porter warned, “but you’re in another up to your chin. Ferguson will probe and question for days. He’s Scotch and has a tenacity that will surprise you. He believes nothing and nobody without positive proof. We’re leaving. He wants us at Lasher’s house.”

Wayne signaled for the check. “I’m ready,” he said. “The fool—Lasher, I mean. Why didn’t he take heed of that warning? It wasn’t directed at me, but it scared me.”

Porter established the exact time of their leaving with enough witnesses to satisfy a dozen Lieutenant Fergusons. He drove to Long Island, where Lasher had his estate and knew that not even by the sheerest imagination could Wayne be tied up with the kill. Unless it had been a trap. Poison suggested such a thing. Porter wouldn’t feel confident until he knew every fact.

Ferguson had left word with the patrolman on guard and Porter was quickly admitted. Ferguson met them in the

hallway. He was a ruddy-faced, bland sort of man with grizzly hair combed to cover a bald spot. He had shrewd eyes; those of a man who is always suspicious, and rarely satisfied with things.

“Lasher asked for this,” he said. “He wouldn’t even unlock the door and let me in. Porter, you’re smart. I’ve always admired your work. Therefore, I’m not saying a word as to what I think happened. I want you to look around and reach your own conclusions. If they jibe with mine, we’re both smart. Mr. Wayne, you are to stay right here.”

Ferguson nodded in the direction of a patrolman and there wasn’t much question but that Wayne would stay where he was. Porter followed the detective-lieutenant down the corridor to the library. The door was closed. Ferguson opened it and stepped aside. Porter walked in.

HE WAS accustomed to death and not affected by it. His mind was calm and wide open. Lasher had been a mean-looking individual with a long, slim nose and a narrow face to go with it. He must have been around sixty.

He sat behind a small, ornamental desk. There was a bottle of brandy on the desk, a glass in front of the dead man, and another glass about two feet away, near the edge of the desk and directly in front of an empty chair.

Porter went over and sniffed of the two glasses. He got only the odor of brandy. He arranged a floor lamp so it would shine through the amber fluid in both glasses and the bottle. Then he bent down and studied their contents.

“The glass in front of Lasher shows a slight precipitate,” he told Ferguson. “The other glass does not and neither does the contents of the bottle. Which probably means that the guest slipped the poison into Lasher’s glass.”

“Uh-huh,” Ferguson said. “What else?”

“Lasher expected his visitor, of course, and for some reason wanted his identity kept secret. He sent the servants out and made his ward go away. Lasher wanted to be alone. Apparently he was in no fear of his guest. There isn’t a sign of any struggle. I don’t know who the murdering guest was, but I know who he could not have been.”

“Wayne,” Ferguson nodded. “Don’t worry—I thought of that too. What I looked for was some kind of a trick that Wayne could have put to work earlier. But it wasn’t a trick. We have evidence that there was a second person here. That he drank with Lasher. The guest’s glass is almost empty. He wasn’t afraid to drink. Lasher took no more than a couple of sips.”

“Did you find the threatening letter?” Porter asked.

“Not yet. We haven’t really looked. I wanted you to see this and have the room photographed and printed before I messed things up. I guess you earned your fee. You couldn’t get me to pinch Wayne. The only thing against him is the fact that his hunch worked out.”

“And you have nothing else? Not a single thing?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. The boys I posted here tonight saw nobody enter or leave, but a killer sometimes has unjustifiable luck. Maybe he got past them. However, one of the boys planted at the front of the house saw a man he knew. Fellow named Otto Hahn who got out of prison ten days ago, and whom Lasher sent up. Hahn seemed to be casing the place, but he didn’t go in. I’ve got an alarm out for him.”

“What about Hugh Sinclair, Lasher’s ward?”

“Alibied as strongly as Wayne. Or almost, anyway. He went to a movie house. A neighborhood place where he is known. He came out after Lasher was dead. At

least the M.E. claims the man was dead an hour before Sinclair found him.”

“It’s not hard to slip out of a movie theatre,” Porter said. “Well, this is your headache, Lieutenant. Mine is all over. I’d better reassure Wayne. He is my client and expects something for his money.”

“Tell him to stick around,” Ferguson said. “If he wants to look the room over, that’s okay provided you’re with him every second.”

Porter went back to the living room. The patrolman withdrew and Porter sat down beside Wayne.

“Well, it’s been done,” he said. “Neatly too. There is just one suspect. A hot one, but I never have much faith in the obvious and this man is almost too obvious.”

“I’m not going to be arrested?” Wayne asked.

“There’d be cuffs around your wrists by now if Ferguson suspected you. No—you’re quite free, though he wants you to stay around a little while. Maybe to identify that note, if Lasher didn’t destroy it.”

“But what—how did it happen?” Wayne asked.

“Lasher had a visitor. Someone he trusted because he brought out a bottle of mighty rare old brandy. You couldn’t buy that kind today for a thousand dollars a bottle. He gave it to his guest in a unique glass, all studded with little bulges and bumps. The visitor found an opportunity to put something deadly into Lasher’s drink. The stuff was only in the glass Lasher drank from. He must have died within a space of two or three seconds. The visitor then walked out, entirely unseen by the four men Ferguson had posted around the house.”

Wayne shuddered. “Pretty grim, isn’t it?”

“Murder usually is,” Porter commented wryly. “My work is done, Mr. Wayne. You

hired me to provide an alibi and I did. Ferguson backs me up.”

“And so do I,” Wayne said. “I’m very grateful. I want to pay you now. I was so certain of your abilities that I provided myself with sufficient cash.”

He took out a wallet, counted out ten five hundred dollar bills and laid them in Porter’s hand.

“A lot of money for a simple job,” he commented, “but it had to be done by an expert, and I can afford it.”

Porter smiled. “If you were honest, you’d say you had this cash to wave in front of me if I hesitated at taking the job. Very well, you have my thanks. I fulfilled our contract successfully?”

“Quite. Porter, whom do you think killed him?”

PORTER folded the money, raised a hip and slid the bills into his pants pocket.

“You did,” he said, “though how you accomplished it is beyond me.”

Wayne laughed. “Some joke, eh? Don’t make those cracks when Ferguson is around.”

“No, I mean it,” Porter insisted. “You did kill him, somehow. Ferguson thinks so too, but there isn’t a thing anybody can do about it. You are cleared—free to go soon and there should never be any trouble about this again. Not unless you slipped somewhere.”

Wayne seemed annoyed. “I resent your attitude, Mr. Porter. I paid enough to get respect.”

Porter arose. “Why do you suppose I named such a fancy fee? Five thousand for a night’s easy work. I wanted to find out if you’d pay any such outrageous figure, and you never batted an eyelash. Because the way you saw things, it was worth five thousand. When you handed over the money, I felt certain you’d killed Lasher.

Though, as I have said, I don't know how you did it."

Porter walked out, closing the door behind him. He no longer wondered whether or not he liked Wayne.

Two detectives arrived with a prisoner in tow. A gray-haired, wizen-faced little man who had that characteristic sullen expression which too many years in prison develops. He looked like a mongrel who had been kicked too often.

Ferguson came out of the library.

"Oh, so they finally picked you up," he said to the little man. "Bring him in here, boys. Let him see the results of his work."

"Otto Hahn?" Porter whispered.

"Who else?" Ferguson shrugged. "I'm trying the old psychology on him. He hasn't the faintest idea why he was picked up—unless he bumped Lasher. I want to see his face when he spots the body."

Hahn was pushed into the room. He came to a dead stop, staring at the seated corpse. Then he threw back his head and laughed. It was the most ghoulish thing Porter had heard or witnessed in years. Hahn kept on laughing until Ferguson shook him violently.

Hahn wiped his eyes. "So he's dead, is he? I'm shedding tears of happiness because I wanted to kill him and couldn't work up nerve enough. If he'd been decent, I'd have got no more than a year. But he bored into me. He made me out a first-class crook and I got the limit. I'm glad he's dead! I wish I'd killed him. There'd have been a lot of satisfaction in that."

Ferguson questioned him at length. Then he ordered his arrest. Otto Hahn admitted casing the house, admitted he had ideas of murder. He reiterated that all he'd thought of in prison was revenge.

Porter stepped up to him.

"Otto," he said, "how come you picked this particular night to look around the house? Was there any reason for it?"

"You bet there was," Hahn said arrogantly. "Lasher called me up this morning and told me I wouldn't be free for long. That he had something else up his sleeve. Said I could come see him if I wanted to."

Ferguson whistled. "And you told him you would? You were the man he expected?"

"Oh, no," Porter interrupted. "Would Lasher have offered this man, whom he hated, brandy that you couldn't buy for ten dollars a shot? Otto, why did he hate you so much?"

"No reason except that he was so mean he even hated himself. I'm no specially selected lily. He hated everybody he prosecuted. That's why he did such a good job of it."

"I think Otto has got something there," Porter said. "Where is Sinclair, Lasher's ward?"

Ferguson had Otto taken away, under arrest. He sat down on the arm of a chair. Neither man paid the slightest attention to the macabre scene almost at their elbows.

"How do you stand on this, Porter?" Ferguson said. "I know you're a square dick but after all, you were working for Wayne."

"As of a couple of minutes ago I was paid off and quit. My contract called only for providing my client with an alibi and that I did—thoroughly. Now I'm on my own, and I find I can't help but think that Wayne killed Lasher."

"Um," Ferguson grunted. "We think alike. Just the same, we've got to consider all other angles, because if Wayne is the guilty man, he's going free. I know the alibi you cooked up for him will stand."

"No one could break it down," Porter said.

He walked over to the further wall. It was adorned with several old photographs showing two men in 1918 army uniforms.

One of the men was Lasher. In those days he hadn't appeared so severe, and the way he had one arm around the other man's shoulder, indicated they were bosom companions.

THERE were four more photos of the same two men. Porter shrugged, thinking that had no meaning as far as the murder was concerned. The fingerprint men bustled in then and went to work. Two men from the morgue, with their familiar wicker basket, lounged around, waiting until the corpse was no longer needed.

"Fergy," Porter said, "you were going to tell me about Sinclair, Lasher's ward. Somehow I got the idea he's important in this."

"You're a mind reader," Ferguson answered. "Sinclair is upstairs, under guard. It seems that Lasher, many years ago, sent the boy's father to the electric chair. Wife murder. Then Lasher took the boy in and all but adopted him. The kid gets Lasher's estate, with the exception of some big charitable bequests."

"Lasher—did that?" Porter frowned. "I figured him for a mean old skinflint who didn't know the meaning of mercy and charity."

"He was mean as sin on the outside," Ferguson said, "but underneath he was a pretty nice guy. A few years ago he donated one million bucks for a new hospital. Or a new wing anyway, I don't remember which. It's the Blystone wing. The name comes back."

"Why Blystone? If he donated it, why didn't he use his own name?"

"You got me there," Ferguson said. "Want to talk with young Sinclair? He's badly broken up."

Sinclair was about twenty-two, a handsome boy with wavy hair and the build of a football player. His quarters were those of a rich man's son. Nothing was lacking.

Porter thought it still odd that a man with Lasher's reputation for meanness had taken in a boy whom he had orphaned.

Sinclair was perfectly willing to talk. In fact, it seemed he wanted to, and Porter was an excellent audience. Sinclair retold his alibi. It was none too firm. He admitted majoring in chemistry at school, which added to the suspicion, for Porter knew the lethal drug had been no ordinary poison to kill so fast and surely. As for motive, Sinclair's was good.

It seemed that Lasher had told Sinclair the full truth about his parents long ago. And, according to the boy, Lasher had what was almost a dual personality. He would curse and throw things and carry on like a maddened bull. Then he could be as kind as anyone. Generous, tolerant and good.

"It was I who phoned you late this afternoon," Porter explained. "You remember—about seeing if Lasher was alive?"

"Oh—oh, yes. I wondered about that. I told Ferguson, but he didn't seem much surprised."

"I told him, too, so he wasn't." Porter was staring at more photographs of Lasher and his buddy. They were all over the house. He pointed to the photo. "Who is the man with Lasher?"

Sinclair glanced at the picture. "Just an old friend. They were in World War One together, and he saved Mr. Lasher's life. Carried him out of a shell-hole smack in No-Man's Land. Dangerous stuff in those days, they tell me."

"Bet on it," Porter assured him. "I imagine Mr. Lasher did a lot for this pal of his."

"No—and nothing ever made him any sorrier. You see, Blystone was killed in action two days later. Mr. Lasher never forgot."

"Blystone?" Porter said quickly. "Lasher named a hospital wing after him,

didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. People just didn't understand Mr. Lasher. They only went by his gruffness. Really, he was a decent man. Look what he did for me. Or do you know the story?"

"I know. And you happen to be his heir, which provides a neat reason why you must be suspected."

Sinclair got white around the mouth, but he restrained himself.

"I thought of it, naturally," he admitted. "Along with the fact that Lasher just about killed my father, I have plenty of reason to have hated him. But I didn't. I never knew my father. Lasher was my whole family. It wasn't his fault that my father killed my mother and then died in the electric chair."

"Keep your chin up," Porter said. "Now suppose we try to understand why Lasher wanted everyone out of the house tonight. Can you think of any reason?"

"No, sir. But whenever he tried to hide something kind he was doing, he always wanted to be by himself. He flew into fake tantrums which I understood. Tonight, it seemed, he was self-conscious. He cursed me out when I looked in on him, but he never meant it. I think he was trying to hide something."

"I wonder what?" Porter mused. "Did you ever get to see inside the big safe in the library?"

"No, sir. He never permitted it. He didn't keep much there. He always said keeping money and valuables around just makes criminals. He was secretive about the contents of the safe."

"There is so little in it, I wondered," Porter said. "He must have a beautiful wine cellar from the type of brandy he served his guests."

"Brandy?" Sinclair muttered. "But he never drank. He doesn't keep a drop in the house. That's odd. No one told me the poison had been put in brandy."

PORTER thanked the young man and walked downstairs swiftly. The body had been removed. Ferguson was seated behind the desk, eyeing the brandy bottle and the two glasses glumly.

"No prints, no nothing," he muttered. "I'm stumped, Porter."

"There are a few things," Porter said. "I haven't any explanations, but they are interesting. Lasher named the hospital wing after the man who appears in so many photos with him. The man named Blystone who saved Lasher's life during World War One. It seems, beneath his harsh exterior, Lasher was a sentimental sort, but determined nobody would ever learn it. How old would you say Wayne was?"

"About Lasher's age. Why?"

"I was just wondering. One of the photos indicated Lasher and Blystone were in Company B of the Hundred and Seventy-fifth Infantry. Stationed in France. Now the brandy is imported from France, too. Very old—even mellowed in Nineteen-seventeen. If you notice, Fergy, there isn't any sign of a United States tax stamp on it. Which means it could have been bought in France. In fact, the chances are it was. I'm going to make a phone call."

"I'm going to have another talk with Sinclair," Ferguson said.

Porter hesitated at the foot of the staircase, turned, and went into the living room. Wayne was still there, running over the pages of a book he had taken from a table.

"I think we'll be finished in another few minutes," Porter said cheerfully. "Then we can go home. Ferguson says it will be all right."

"Good," Wayne approved delightedly. "I'm fed up with hanging around here. And I'd like to argue a point you made. About me being the killer."

"Okay. Fergy and I are going upstairs for a little while. He seems to be sure it's

that ex-convict, and I guess he has a case that may hold, too.”

Upstairs, from the privacy of a den, Porter phoned several American Legion officials before he got the right answer. One official advised him to contact Colonel Blake who knew all about the friendship between Lasher and Blystone. Porter made the call, and was lucky enough to contact Colonel Blake at once.

“Of course I remember,” Blake said. “They enlisted the same day, met one another during their physical examinations and went to camp together. They were promoted at the same time, went to O.C.S. together and overseas on the same ship. Damon and Pythias stuff, but as real and honest as anything you ever saw.”

“Blystone was killed in action, wasn’t he?” Porter asked.

“Yes. Lasher stopped one, and Blystone went out after him. Brought him back, too. Shortly afterward, while Lasher was in the hospital, Blystone got his. I remember how everyone was afraid to tell Lasher. They had great plans, those two men. And they also had a weird agreement that if one got it, the other would drink to his death on the anniversary.”

“That does it!” Porter cried. “Thank you. And, Colonel, there was another man in that regiment. By the name of Walter Wayne. Am I right?”

“Wayne? Yes—oh, yes, a second lieutenant.”

Porter shouted for Ferguson and led him down the stairs at a fast pace. Then he slowed up and pondered a moment or two.

“Fergy,” he asked, “did you find that threatening letter yet?”

“No, but I haven’t checked through the desk thoroughly. I intend to do so now.”

“Good,” Porter said. “Call me when you find it. And I don’t think it will take you long.”

Porter entered the living room. Wayne

arose, picked up his topcoat and put it on. He drew out the gloves from his pocket and reached for his hat.

“Wayne,” Porter said, “you knew Lasher much better than you let on. You served in the same regiment with him during the first war. Is that correct?”

“Why, yes. I didn’t think it necessary to relate our past history, but if it has any bearing on this mess, I’ll gladly tell you. Lasher was a captain, my commanding officer. That is how our friendship began. But what in the world has that to do with his murder?”

“Perhaps nothing,” Porter said. “Let’s go see if Fergy located that threatening letter yet. You really need it to back up your story. Then we can all go home.”

Ferguson had the letter. It was written in block letters, crude and impossible to identify. Porter picked up the note, slanted it toward the floor lamp and grunted.

“There’s a black smudge on it, Fergy,” the private detective said. “Better check for prints. You never can tell. And while we’re all nice and cozy, maybe I’ll tell you just what happened in here tonight.”

FERGUSON rotated half a turn in the swivel chair behind the desk.

“I’m listening,” he said.

Porter sat down on the corner of the desk.

“Lasher,” he said, “was a sentimentalist, as I told you before. His greatest friend was killed in battle. The friend who saved Lasher’s life. In his memory Lasher donated a million dollar hospital wing; but did so anonymously. Every charitable act he performed was done with the stipulation that his part not be known. He hated being thought of as a softy, because he was the softest type.

“He and Blystone bought a bottle of brandy in Paris one leave. They agreed that if one died, the survivor was to pour two

drinks, toast the dead man and drink both glasses. Lasher kept the bottle and the two glasses in that big safe which was open tonight. It is hardly ever opened, but tonight he had to get out the bottle and glasses.

“So Lasher put everybody out of the house. It was a special night. He wanted to be alone. He thought people might laugh at his giving in to such a sentimental thing as drinking to the memory of a friend long dead. Lasher filled both glasses. He drank the one poured for Blystone first. Then he drank his own—and died. Because that glass had been coated with a poison some time ago.”

“Wayne?” Ferguson asked with a wary eye on the man.

“Certainly Wayne,” Porter said. “He knew all about Lasher’s promise to drink once a year from one certain bottle, and out of certain glasses reserved for the occasion. Somehow he managed to poison one of the glasses. Perhaps days ago—but he did it. Then he made certain he could not be suspected. He arranged for Otto Hahn to be around so you’d probably blame him. The threatening note was something Lasher never saw. It was put in the desk drawer a few minutes ago by Wayne.”

Wayne gave a sullen sort of smile. “And I thought you were a good detective. Where is your proof, Porter?”

“In the first place,” Porter said, “you knew about Lasher’s annual drink of brandy. The only time he ever drank. You

were soldiering with him when the pact was made. You alone knew Lasher would die tonight. The note wasn’t in the desk prior to a short time ago. It was in your pocket. Shall I tell you just what you did?”

“I’d be greatly interested.” Wayne had a fine film of perspiration between his eyes.

“You were watched when we first arrived, so there was no chance to get the note into Lasher’s desk. But when Ferguson and I went upstairs, you were unguarded and you took advantage of the fact. You put on gloves first, because you wanted no prints on the note. You let yourself into this room, opened the desk drawer, took the note out of your pocket and put it inside. But you didn’t see how fingerprint powder covered darn near everything in this room. Some of it got on your gloved finger ends and was smeared on the note. There will be smears on your gloves.”

“How silly,” Wayne said. “Have a look at my gloves if you wish. . . .”

He dug a hand into his pocket, but he didn’t extract gloves. There was a small automatic in his fist. Lieutenant Ferguson shot him with his police service pistol. It had been in his hand from the first moment Porter had accused Wayne directly.

“Trouble with these guys,” Ferguson said, as he knelt beside Wayne, “is they get too smart. When I noticed the smudge on the note, I became suspicious too. Well, he won’t die now, though I doubt he’ll live a normal life span.”