

Vance suddenly scurried across the room and threw himself at the man



MURDER IS THE MAIN THING

By WAYLAND RICE

On his first private detective job, former Army Intelligence Man Vance gives a big hand to the police in a crime case!

THE girl was about twenty, undeniably pretty, and had the proper figure for yellow slacks. She stood in the doorway smiling at Alan Vance.

"So you're the detective," she said. "I thought they wore derby hats and big shoes. Come in, Mr. Vance."

Vance grinned at her. "I'm no regulation detective, Miss Blair. Susan Blair, I think your father said. In fact, I'm

hardly a detective at all. This is my first case."

"Then I wish you all the success there is." Susan Blair grew serious. "My father's life may be in danger. He hasn't told me so, but I feel it. They were bound to meet head-on some day—he and Mr. Carleton. But Dad was going to hire a regular army to protect him,"

"He did." Vance looked around the big living room to which he had been

escorted. "I'm it. You see, until three weeks ago I was in the Service. Military Intelligence. That doesn't make me a private detective, but it helps. At any rate, your father seems to have faith in me. Where is he?"

"At the plant with Jeff. That's Jeff Sloan, our head chemist. He's responsible for all the trouble—darn him and his new method of making plastics."

"Suppose you tell me the details fast," Vance said. "I've got to get down to the factory. Your father may need protection sooner than he thinks, and I certainly wouldn't want anything to happen to him before I even got started."

"There's not much to tell," Susan said. "Dad and Bob Carleton were partners years ago. They had a violent quarrel, broke up, and each started his own business. They've been rivals ever since, always trying to beat one another. Dad won out, I'd say. Jeff Sloan's new system will force Mr. Carleton out of business. Mr. Carleton has been trying to buy the method, or force Jeff to share it with him."

"And Sloan?" Vance picked up his hat.

"Jeff Sloan is a nice little old man. He has worked for Dad for years and is loyal to him. He refused to sell or be intimidated."

"I'll see you later then."

His job was going to be rather a pleasant one, he thought. If Susan was to be with her father most of the time, which he hoped she would be. It wouldn't be hard work to watch her.

VANCE drove his rather seedy coupe toward the factory, about a mile away. It was six-thirty on Sunday night, so the factory would be deserted. Perhaps it would be a good time to get the full details from George Blair. If this Bob Carleton was menacing him, there should be ways to make Carleton behave.

There were lights in a many-windowed room on the first floor of the plant. Vance parked his coupe outside the gate, found it open, and walked toward the office door. This also was ajar, and he went inside.

The office was dark. He called Blair's name loudly, but there was no answer.

The lights from what he assumed must be the chemical laboratory acted as a beacon. He approached the door, rapped sharply upon it, and coughed a couple of times. The acrid odor of chemicals seeping from beneath the door was strong.

Something moved, then from inside the laboratory came a dismal groan. Vance shoved the door wide—and his eyes widened in horror at what he saw. A short, wiry-looking, gray-haired man on the floor had been beaten until his features were hardly more than a bloody mask. This, of course, would be Jeff Sloan.

But something even worse met Vance's staring eyes—another man who also lay on the floor. Around him were big pieces of thick, broken glass. And acid. Powerful, fuming acid that already was eating into the man's flesh. But still the detective could recognize him—George Blair. And there could be no question but that he was dead.

Alan Vance's first case seemed to be finished before it began.

He picked up the chemist and carried him over to a worn leather divan. He found water, forced some between the gray-haired man's lips, then went to see if by any possibility anything could be done for Blair.

There was not. Blair had died in a bath of fuming nitric acid. At least that's what the young detective read on what was left of the label on the broken five-gallon carboy.

Jeff Sloan was able to talk after a few minutes. Vance wiped blood off him and made him more comfortable.

"I'm Vance, the detective Blair hired," he explained.

Sloan grimaced, and the facial movement seemed to pain him, for he groaned.

"You got here a little late, didn't you?" he asked. "Mr. Carleton beat you to it."

"He did—this?" Vance swept his hand across the room.

"Yes," Sloan said weakly. "He thought I'd come to the laboratory alone—I'd told him I would. But I brought Mr. Blair along because I wanted him to know just what happened. . . . Give me some more water."

Vance gave him water, then the chemist went on:

"They started fighting right away. I tried to interfere, and Mr. Carleton hit me—I was almost killed. After he knocked me down things were a bit vague for a little while. I must have become unconscious, too, because when I woke up, Mr. Blair was on the floor, groaning. Mr. Carleton was cut up some, too, because Mr. Blair put up a good fight."

"And the acid?" Vance said grimly.

"That came later," Sloan said slowly. His voice rose, half-frenziedly. "Mr. Carleton ordered me to forget this! Said I'd get the same treatment if I didn't. I yelled that I wouldn't, so he kicked me and beat me! Then he picked up that big carboy of acid and smashed it near Mr. Blair's head. He ran over and hit me again—and that's all I remember."

"All right," Vance said. "You're okay. Phone the cops. I'm going after Carleton before he makes a get-away."

"Wait!" Jeff Sloan raised one hand in pleading. "Don't do anything foolish. Mr. Carleton is crazy mad. I think he's going to Mr. Blair's house to search for the papers outlining my method of making plastics. I imagine he thinks I'm dead too, so he'll think he's safe for a while."

"Susan!" Alan Vance shouted. "She's at the house where that crazy man is headed! Get the police, Sloan!"

Vance raced out of the building, across the open area in front of the gate, and piled into his car. He urged the shaky-motored coupe towards Blair's home with all the speed possible, but it was pitch-dark when he got there. His mind was filled with apprehension as he rushed up the porch steps. The front door was partly open and he barged in.

Only darkness and silence greeted him. He listened keenly, and finally heard something—a muffled cry and a sudden pounding. It was Susan's voice! Coming from the library.

Instantly he darted through the doorway. Something missed his head by a fraction of an inch, landed on his shoulder, and sent him down on one knee. The agony that swept along his arm was something like the pain he had felt when that land mine in Italy had gone off and filled his body with enough metal to invalid him out of the Service.

INSTINCTIVELY, automatically, he threw up an arm to protect himself against another blow. His hand encountered a man's arm and he grasped the sleeve hard. He gave it a yank. There was a ripping sound as the man backed, jerking away from him. Vance fell on his face, but his fingers still clutched the man's sleeve that he had ripped away.

It took him a minute or two to regain his wits, then he scrambled to his feet, located the light switch and turned it on. The room was empty. He ran into the hall. The front door was wide open.

Then the pounding came again. He whirled around as he located the sound now, and streaked for a closet door. Turning the key, he flung the door open,

and Susan came out, her eyes flashing angrily.

“What happened?” Vance asked her swiftly.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I heard a noise in the library and I thought Dad must have returned and passed you on the way. I went in, and was just reaching for the light when someone grabbed me. I was simply rushed across the room and thrown into the closet. Mr. Vance—Dad! Is he all right?”

Vance told her then, as gently as possible. She took the news bravely, and told him the name of a friend to telephone, one who would look out for things.

Vance went back to the factory. The police were there and a bulky man who said he was Lieutenant Dary was just leaving for Carleton’s house.

Vance showed him his brand new credentials and was allowed to go along. Dary listened to Vance’s story, while the private detective’s coupe rattled toward an avenue.

“Well, don’t feel badly about it,” Lieutenant Dary advised. “What happened in that laboratory wasn’t your fault. Looks like Carleton got so burned up over things going haywire for him that he lost his sense of reasoning. . . . You say he was at Blair’s house. Why?”

“To get Jeff Sloan’s method of making plastics, I suppose,” Vance said. “It was locked in the safe. He—if it was Carleton who was there — didn’t get it. Blair’s daughter looked to see, showed the formula to me, then relocked the safe.”

Dary shrugged. “It’s pretty clear-cut. That chemist of Blair’s was half-killed. Blair himself must have put up a good scrap. His knuckles were all bruised. I expect we’ll find Carleton messed up. I hope so.”

“Carleton has a partner,” Vance said thoughtfully. “Man named Don Meeker.

Maybe he knows something, or is even in on it! Don’t you think we should look him up?”

“Sure,” Dary agreed. “After we find Carleton.”

They stopped in front of Carleton’s house. Dary slid his gun in and out of the holster a couple of times to be sure it would come free easily, then rang the bell. There was no answer. He kicked the door without result, and finally kicked in a window. Dary was a man of direct methods.

They clambered through the window after it had been raised. The house was empty, but there were lights upstairs towards which they moved cautiously.

Entering a bedroom, they looked around. On the bed was a man’s coat with a sleeve ripped off. Vance took the missing sleeve from his pocket and showed it to Dary.

“So it was Carleton in the Blair house,” he said. “And he came back here after he attacked me. He knew a coat without a sleeve would attract too much attention, so I suppose he took another coat from his wardrobe.”

“And a comb, brush, shaving equipment and a few other things from other places,” Dary observed dryly. “Looks to me as if he had a hide-away all picked out. . . . Well, no use staying here. He won’t be back. Let’s go see what Meeker, his partner, knows.”

Meeker, a middle-aged, corpulent, and aggressive man, knew nothing. At least he claimed that. He was horrified at the news, almost refused to believe it.

“It’s all Blair’s fault!” he declared accusingly. “The idiot fought Carleton like a maniac. If Carleton hadn’t killed him, he’d have been killed. They hated one another like poison. A couple of hot-headed fools.”

“But Carleton tried to make Jeff Sloan,

the chemist, turn over his new plastics method to him," Vance reminded Meeker. "Blair was defending his own property."

"His own property!" Meeker's lips curled. "Listen! Jeff used to work for us, and while he was employed by us, paid by us, he started work on this new system. Then Blair got him. Jeff finished his work in Blair's labs. Naturally Carleton believes—I do, too!—that Jeff did some of that work while in our pay. We were entitled to share in whatever profits the process would bring."

Vance shrugged. "That's a side issue now. Murder is the main thing. Carleton killed Blair—horribly."

"And if Carleton contacts you," Lieutenant Dary warned, "tell us about it or we'll lock you up. Remember that. Come on, Vance—we'll learn nothing here."

THEY left Meeker grumbling to himself. Vance stopped after turning the next corner.

"Just on a hunch," he said, "I'm going to watch Meeker. I don't like or trust that man. If anyone knows where Carleton went, Meeker does—and if Carleton contacts anyone, it's bound to be Meeker."

"Good idea," Dary said. "Ordinarily, I'd assign one of my own men, but I know a little about you, Vance. Read your war record which was submitted to back up your application for a private detective's license. You should be on the force, but maybe there's more money in a private job."

"Not like this one," Vance said, with a wry grin. "My client was murdered before I got on the case. I wasn't even handed a retainer, but just the same I feel it's my job to help track down his killer."

"The publicity won't hurt," the detective-lieutenant said. "I'll see you get it if you collar Carleton. Watch it now—

that man killed once and he'll kill again. The second murder doesn't count much."

"I'll be ready for him," Vance assured grimly. "Odd though, how a man with Carleton's money and position would resort to murder. I'd say, even without ever having seen the man, that he killed out of hatred. Spur of the moment stuff, but there happens to be a well-based motive which is bound to send him to the chair. If I discover anything, I'll give you a ring."

"Okay," Dary said. "I'm going to eat. That chemist phoned in just as I was going out to dinner and I like my meals promptly on the dot. Habit of mine. Go ahead, Vance. I'll find a taxi."

Vance glanced at his watch. It was nine—exactly two and a half hours since the murder. A great deal had happened in a small space of time and he had an idea the next few hours would be just as eventful.

In the first place, Meeker had seemed evasive. He had showed surprise at the news of Blair's murder, but not quite enough. When a man learns his business partner of many years has become a murderer, he should at least betray some anxiety. But Meeker had been more determined to excuse Carleton's crime than condemn him, although he had not seemed to doubt his guilt.

Vance took up a position across the street from Meeker's home, where he could watch the front of the house and the garage at the rear. Meeker, he believed, would come out soon or not at all.

Vance didn't have to wait long. The lights in the house remained on, and the garage was dark, but Meeker's car rolled out of it, minus headlight beams. He left it in the drive, walked to the sidewalk and looked around. Then he got back into the car and started away.

Vance knew that in normal times he couldn't hope to follow this sleek-looking

sedan in his coupe, but with war speed limits in effect, he could. For Meeker wouldn't dare break those limits. This was no time for him to get arrested, or even stopped and questioned.

Vance followed him for almost an hour, across town first, then along the speedway uptown, onto a winding black macadam road, and finally well into the country. It was difficult going, but Vance didn't use his lights and stayed as far behind as possible.

Meeker's car topped a grade after a time. When Vance reached it, he tramped on the brake. Meeker's car had disappeared. Vance rolled the coupe off the road behind some trees and started down the other side of the hill afoot.

He saw Meeker's sedan then. It was parked well off the road. Further along, he made out Meeker's form moving through the night like some deformed Santa Claus. There was a big pack on the man's back and he was bent double under its weight.

Vance cut through the fields, keeping low, and was at the edge of a clearing around what seemed to be an abandoned farm when Meeker passed within twenty yards of him. Meeker was heading in the direction of the old red barn at the rear of the house.

When he entered it, Vance wished he had a gun. For Carleton was bound to fight like a tiger. He had to. Capture meant death.

As Vance started toward the barn, he was compelled to drop flat and pray the darkness would conceal him, for Meeker wasn't inside more than a minute or two. He was walking erect when he emerged, for he had left the heavy sack inside. He was moving fast too, as if he wanted to get away from the place as speedily as possible.

Vance watched him, wondering just what this was all about. He saw Meeker

stop at the R.F.D. mail-box post beside the road, lean against the box and light a cigarette. The man seemed to be watching for someone.

Vance moved on toward the barn. As he neared it, he saw that the door was off one hinge and couldn't be closed easily. That made entering the barn simple—but dangerous if Carleton lurked there. Vance crept inside and pressed himself against the wall, listening, trying to penetrate the darkness.

HE SAW the bulk of the heavy sack where Meeker must have dropped it. Vance opened the sack. In it were cans of food, several bottles of whisky and a fairly generous wad of currency.

Vance didn't touch the contents. He left the sack where it was and drew back into the darkest part of the barn. When Carleton showed up to claim these supplies, he meant to collar him. He would get Meeker later.

Vance was glowing slightly with what he considered justified pride. On his first case he seemed to be doing all right, after all. He had guessed that Carleton would have telephoned Meeker as promptly as possible, and he was sure that when Lieutenant Dary broke the news that Meeker had known it all the time.

Vance also had kept in mind that a man running from the police needs cash, food and help. And the young detective had struck oil when he had guessed that Meeker would provide these.

Suddenly Vance heard footsteps approaching. He crouched and got set. The footsteps paused outside the barn. Vance crawled forward a couple of feet, and was ready to pounce when he heard a slithering sound directly above him.

He looked up, but was too late to avoid the mass of dry hay that was descending on him in a cloud. It was heavy stuff, too,

for it sent him sprawling. He choked and cursed as he tried to battle his way out of it, swearing at himself for being an idiot. Carleton must have been hiding in the loft, and Vance hadn't given the man a chance to descend and get the supplies.

The next moment he had a new worry, when he distinctly smelled smoke. It came to him in a flash. Carleton had thrown the hay on him and set it afire!

Vance battled savagely, throwing the hay in every direction, but there was so much of it that struggling with it took time. When he finally cleared it away, the whole interior of the barn was a mass of flame! Tossing that hay about had made the blaze spread, for the hay was burning fiercely.

There was not a second to lose. Vance didn't even dare breathe. The heat was already terrific and the fire was lapping at his ankles. He threw up his coat collar, bent his head, and plunged straight into the mass of flame before the door.

Where the exit should have been, Vance encountered solid wood. The door had been shut somehow. He found the edge of it, pried it open a bit and managed to get his lungs full of comparatively fresh air. Strengthened by this, he braced himself and pulled, again and again. Finally he got the door open far enough so he could wedge himself through.

As he cleared the barn, the first thing he saw was a man running wildly down the lane. Vance promptly went after him. But after that struggle with the hay and the barn door he was already winded—which he soon realized when the man kept gaining on him. Vance stopped short.

"I'm going to shoot!" he yelled.

The running man slowed, stopped, and raised both hands. Vance approached slowly, getting back his wind, because he knew the instant the man saw that he was unarmed, he would run for it again. He did

just that, but Vance was ready this time. In a matter of a hundred feet he tackled the fleeing man and brought him down.

It was Meeker. Vance sighed, disappointed because he had not caught Carleton. He hoisted Meeker to his feet.

"All right," he said. "Which way did Carleton go?"

"I didn't see him," Meeker shuddered. "Were you—in—there?" He pointed at the flames which had been meant to be Vance's funeral pyre.

"I was," Vance said grimly. "And you're going to talk before I haul you off to jail."

Meeker's shoulders sagged. "I only tried to help Carleton. I was certain he only acted in self-defense. In fact, he told me he had . . . Yes, he telephoned me before you arrived. He needed help, and I was willing to give it to him. He told me to come to this barn, put the stuff inside, stand guard at the road for fifteen minutes, then come back to the barn. He would have taken the stuff by then, he said, and I'd find a note giving me further instructions."

"You didn't see him come out?" Vance asked.

"No, but he could have got out through a small door at the rear. Just as I got to the barn the second time I heard a commotion, and the next thing I knew the fire started inside. . I got away as fast as I could."

Vance rubbed his chin slowly.

"Meeker," he said, "I'm not going to drag you to Headquarters. In the first place, I'm a private cop. I'll tell Dary what happened, of course, but the rest is up to him. Maybe, if Carleton contacts you again and you tell me about it, I can forget the whole business."

Meeker nodded. "All right. Frankly, I'm fed up with Carleton. He must have known you were in that barn and deliberately tried to kill you. Maybe he has

gone crazy. I could forgive what he did to Blair, because they were such deadly enemies, but not what he tried to do to you. Thanks for the break. If he does contact me again, I'll let you know."

VANCE gave him several telephone numbers to call in that event. They parted at the spot where Meeker's car was parked. Vance returned to his own coupe and sat thoughtfully behind the wheel, trying to straighten out several angles in his mind.

Meeker, he mused, had approached the barn two or three minutes before the hay came down. He could have slipped around to the rear, entered through the small door and climbed to the hayloft. It seemed odd to Vance that he hadn't heard him if this had been the case, but it was at least possible.

Also, Meeker seemed suddenly too agreeable. That made Vance decide to check Meeker's whereabouts when Blair was murdered. There was just a chance that he was involved, too, and that even old Jeff Sloan didn't know it.

Finally Vance drove away, and back to Blair's factory, but he learned nothing there. Carleton's plant was only half a mile to the west and he decided to look it over. Carleton might even be taking temporary refuge there. The place was as deserted as Blair's. Neither factory was large, and no watchmen were employed.

Vance broke into the Carleton factory when he reached it. Carleton wasn't in much of a position to raise any objections. He headed for the office, turned on the light on Carleton's big desk and sat down behind it. The desk drawers were locked, so he went for some tools and opened them.

Methodically he went through the papers, hoping against hope that he would find some clue as to where Carleton could

have gone. There was nothing much except a bulky leather pocket case holding a sheaf of papers neatly bound together. He read them, but they didn't mean a great deal—mostly chemical symbols. He had studied chemistry in school, but couldn't tell the meaning of the symbols now.

He phoned Meeker then, but Meeker had nothing to report, claiming he had camped beside the phone waiting for Carleton to call.

"I'm afraid he may be really insane," Meeker said worriedly. "A dangerous man who should be picked up."

"You're not so wrong there," Vance told him. "Incidentally, had your own laboratories been working on the new plastics method which Sloan developed for Blair?"

"Naturally," Meeker admitted. "We were doing everything possible to beat him. If we didn't, he'd have the edge on us when reconversion started. We'd never catch up."

"And the same thing would have happened if you and Carleton found the method?" Vance suggested. "That is, Blair would have been practically ruined?"

"That's right. It's the reason Carleton was so sore about the whole thing."

"And now that Blair is dead and Carleton as good as dead," Vance said smoothly, "you will take over the business?"

"Of course," Meeker replied. "Say—what on earth are you driving at?"

"Nothing," Vance told him shortly. "I'm only interested in finding Carleton. Look—did he maintain another home somewhere? Was there any special place he might have gone to in order to escape the pressure of business?"

"I don't know," Meeker said. "He used to go away sometimes—literally disappear—but I don't know where."

"Did he like fishing or hunting?"

Vance asked. "Does he keep shotguns, rifles or fishing tackle around his house?"

"He did like hunting," Meeker admitted. "He does own guns. Has quite a fancy for them, so I suppose some of those trips of his were hunting trips. Don't ask me where. He never told me."

"All right," Vance sighed. "Remember to call me if he contacts you. I'll be at Blair's house for the next hour or so."

Vance hung up, wandered into the chemical laboratories and took some books from the library there. He sat down at Carleton's desk again and studied them, trying to force his mind back to college days. The reference books helped, but plastics were a new subject and he was beyond his depth.

He needed some scratch paper, so opened a drawer and prowled through it. Carleton's checkbook had been shoved far back and had escaped his attention before. He studied it now. Some of the checks were rather steep, but the articles they paid for were noted down. However, there was one for twenty-five thousand dollars, dated the day before, which bore no notation of any kind. It was made out to a Jeremiah Callix.

FINALLY, Vance put everything away except the papers with all those symbols written on them. These went into his own pocket.

He left the Carleton factory and drove to Blair's house. Susan was taking her tragedy bravely. Old Jeff Sloan was there, his head bandaged, his face covered with pieces of adhesive and his right hand bound up.

"I must have broke the bones," he said, with a slight smile. "I remember hitting Mr. Carleton as hard as I could. There's no trace of him, is there?"

"None." Vance shrugged. "But he'll turn up. The police have sent out an eight-

state alarm for him. . . . Sloan, you worked for Carleton at one time. Do you know of any place he might have gone to hide? Like a hunting lodge, for instance?"

Jeff Sloan shook his head. "He never confided in me. I was glad to get out of his plant and work for Blair. I hope they find Mr. Carleton and hang him. He must have thought I was dead too. Not his fault I wasn't."

"Um—yes," Vance said. "If you had been killed, there'd have been no one to accuse Carleton. Lucky, too, that Blair thought to lock the formula for your new method in his safe. Carleton came here to get it, you know."

"Susan told me." Sloan nodded. "That's like him, but the formula is safe. I made Susan show it to me."

Vance turned to Susan. "Would you mind letting me look at it again, please? We have to cover everything in a case of this kind."

Susan went to the wall safe and Vance followed her, and as he stood directly behind the girl he wished he had met her under other circumstances.

She opened the safe and removed the formula. Vance took it, flipped the pages over and then, as he turned around, the papers slipped from his fingers. He bent, picked them up and went over to where Jeff Sloan sat.

"Is this the formula you made?" He thrust the papers at the chemist. "Look at it and be sure."

Sloan studied the documents carefully, then handed it back.

"That's it. No question about it, Mr. Vance. Susan can go into production as soon as materials are available."

Vance sat down.

"Well," he said, "it's mostly up to the police now. Only a well-knit organization can catch Carleton. I'll help, in my own little way. First of all, I'll see that his bank

accounts are frozen so he can't draw on them, wherever he is. Then I'll start checking for a likely refuge to which he might have gone. Maybe notify doctors and hospitals. Carleton may be hurt rather badly. Mr. Blair was a big man, and strong. He must have inflicted a lot of punishment on Carleton. Lieutenant Dary told me that Blair's fists were bruised a great deal."

"They fought like maniacs!" Sloan declared. "I think maybe Mr. Blair would have killed Mr. Carleton if he could. They hated one another so."

Vance didn't comment on that. Susan's eyes shot sparks, but she said nothing. Vance arose finally.

"Got to get some sleep," he said. "Busy day tomorrow. The banks first, to see that Carleton's accounts are tied up. If he issued any checks recently, whoever has them will be stuck for a while."

Jeff Sloan arose too.

"Will you give me a lift home, Mr. Vance? I'm about done in. This has been a ghastly night. . . . Oh, Susan! What Mr. Vance just said reminds me of something. Didn't Mr. Carleton give your father a check recently? As the final payment on what he owed him since they parted?"

"I banked it yesterday," Susan said.

Vance smiled at her. "I hope you don't need the money, Miss Blair. That check won't clear Carleton's bank until after his account is unfrozen. But then it won't be for long. When Carleton is captured, his check will be good. Even if he is dead—and the body is discovered—you can get a court order for the money. If either he or his corpse isn't found, it may take a long time. Good night. I'll look in again tomorrow."

Sloan lived a good three miles away, across town, so there was plenty of time for Vance to ask him questions.

"This Meeker, Carleton's partner," he began. "As an ex-employee of theirs, you must know him. What's he like?"

"Well," Sloan answered slowly, "I never liked him. Doesn't look trustworthy to me. Most of the time though, he was on the road, leaving the handling of the plant to Carleton."

"I think Meeker is holding out," Vance said. "Remember, I asked you if you knew of any place which Carleton used to visit and might select for a hide-away? You knew of none, but suppose Meeker has such a place."

Jeff Sloan gave a little cry.

"That's it! Meeker has a hunting lodge in the Catskills! Carleton knew about it. He used it several times and talked about what a good spot it was in which to rest."

Vance took the next corner.

"I thought so," he said. "I'm picking up Lieutenant Dary first, then we'll get Meeker; and all of us will go to his lodge. You've told us where we can find Carleton."

LEUTENANT DARY was home, but ready to go with them when Vance explained what he knew. They drove to Meeker's house and Dary clinked handcuffs significantly when they confronted Carleton's partner.

"One phony play and I'll slap these on," he warned. "What's the idea of holding out on us? You knew darned well Carleton might have gone to your lodge."

Meeker pursed his lips and looked amazed. "I never once thought of that. Perhaps you're right. It's worth the chance and the trip, at any rate."

Dary grimaced. "He is telling us that." He winked at Vance.

They traveled in a police car, but it was daylight before they reached the foothills and Meeker sleepily pointed the way

to his lodge. It was a moderate-sized place, and secluded.

They left the car and approached carefully. Dary had his gun ready.

Nothing happened. They sent Jeff Sloan to watch the back. Dary tried the front door, found it locked, and used some skeleton keys on the simple lock. He flung the door wide, and fervently muttered something under his breath.

Robert Carleton seemed to have taken the easy way out. His body was dangling from a rope tied to one of the open rafters. An overturned chair lay just beneath his feet. Vance felt of the body. It was cold.

“And that’s that,” Dary said. “We might have expected something like this. . . . Meeker, if you’d told us about this place before, we might have saved him.”

“For what?” Meeker demanded belligerently. “The electric chair? I’m glad he did this, and I don’t care who knows it!”

Jeff Sloan came in, and turned away quickly when he saw the corpse. Vance pulled some curtains back, admitting more light. Then he looked at Lieutenant Dary.

“This may seem rather irrelevant,” he said slowly, “but you mentioned something about being punctual in your eating habits. Just what time do you go to dinner, Lieutenant?”

Dary blinked a few times. “Well, if you must know, at seven. Usually I’m on the dot.”

“But last night you were called to Blair’s factory just as you were going out to eat. It was close to seven o’clock. . . . Sloan, when I left to go to Blair’s house, it was six-thirty. Why did you wait half an hour before calling the police?”

Jeff shrugged. “I fainted, I guess. I remember going toward the phone. Then I looked at poor Blair’s body and the room started to swim. I took a terrific beating.”

“Yes,” Vance said. “I know. Blair was plenty sore and let you have it good.”

“I beg pardon?” Jeff Sloan stared.

“I said Blair discovered you’d sold your new method to Carleton and called you on it. Because Blair had bought it too. You were paid twice for the same thing. Carleton gave you a check made out to Jeremiah Callix so there would be no connection, but you haven’t cashed the check yet. When I told you I was going to see that Carleton’s accounts were frozen, you remembered that Meeker owned this cabin. You knew darned well where it was because you got Carleton here, dead or alive, and hung him up there.

“I think Carleton and Blair got together somehow, and it slipped out that both had your new method. You killed Carleton first. Then Blair accosted you. There was a fight. Blair, not Carleton, was the man who beat you up. You managed to get in a lucky punch that floored Blair, though, and then you dumped the acid on him.”

“Now wait!” Lieutenant Dary protested. “You’ve got to back this up, Vance. It’s an accusation of murder!”

“I should say so,” Sloan said stalwartly. “I think this man is being a trifle ridiculous.”

“Look,” Vance said. “I had Susan open the wall safe and take out the formula for your new method which you had sold to Blair. You didn’t know it, but I’d already found Carleton’s copy. I switched them, and you identified Carleton’s copy as Blair’s. That much I can prove—the existence of two copies. It’s the motive for murder, Sloan. You’re smart, ready to take advantage of circumstances as they happen. You planned it well, even to beating me to Blair’s house where you let me pull the sleeve off one of Carleton’s coats.”

“Then you went to Carleton’s house and set the stage there. You made Meeker, here, believe it was Carleton who called him, and then you staged that scene at the red barn to throw more suspicion on the missing Carleton as the murderer of George Blair. But when you heard what I said about his assets being frozen, you wanted his body found so you could collect on that check.

“But principally it was your neglect to call the police promptly after I told you to that made me suspicious of you. Now the

two copies of the same formula convict you . . . No—no! Don’t do it!”

Vance suddenly scurried across the room and threw himself at Jeff Sloan. Both went over with the chair Sloan had occupied. Vance pinned the chemist’s right hand to the floor, opened his fingers and removed a white capsule.

“Good gosh!” Vance said. “You can’t cheat justice that way.”

“No,” Lieutenant Dary added, “it ain’t legal!”