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WHITE JADE

Continued from page 76

At length the others became silent, giving him the entire floor. "Third degree" were the words that first attracted Virginia's attention. "Few can go through it without confessing the most baffling cases — those who have stolen for the first time — women, for instance, of the better class — their nerve is cooler — secure in their position."

Virginia motioned Blecker to cease talking. She felt she must listen to what Glidden was saying. It came to her that she'd heard somewhere he was a lawyer. He cited two or three instances of how criminals were made to confess. The others listened, fascinated, hanging on his words.

Virginia recoiled into the depths of the big swing seat. Fear gripped her heart. Her body grew tense, as with wide eyes she stared into the darkness that held this alarming voice.

Preston seemed to sense her emotion. All at once he leaned toward her, put his hand over hers, and finding it icy cold he drew a cloak around her. Then a horror seized her. She felt she was being compelled to confess. Lionel Glidden was hypnotizing her. She half rose, moistening her lips to cry out.

Swiftly, silently, Blecker drew her down beside him. He took her in his arms, crushing her face against his shoulder. She knew it was a gesture of protection. It brought her to her bag into his hands.

"Hold it," she whispered, "it contains all my valuables. I—I—feel faint..." Preston released her, and quickly shoved the bag into his pocket.

SUDDENLY somebody switched on the lights. Virginia met Glidden's eyes full upon her.

"Turn off those lights!" It was Lady Maude's authoritative voice. "Lionel's burglars are so much more exciting in the dark. I almost felt the thief's fingers on my throat."

Again they were in darkness. But the moment's interruption broke the spell. The others began chatting. In a short time they broke up into little groups for bridge. Virginia, after bidding good-night to her hostess, had a chance to slip away to her room.

Preston accompanied her to the top of the stairs. He drew forth her bag from his pocket, handing it to her with a courteous bow.

"I do hope you're feeling better!" She grasped the bag, flushing consciously. "Quite! I—I think I was a bit upset by Glidden's gruesome stories—" then not wishing to prolong the conversation, she hastened away.

Virginia locked the door of her room securely. Then she slipped to the window and drew the heavy curtains. She had an uncanny sense of being spied upon. With trembling fingers she unclasped the bag, eagerly groping among its contents. She couldn't seem to find what she was seeking. Desperately, she turned the bag inside-out on the bed.

The white jade bracelet was gone. Mrs. Dunfield suddenly straightened herself as though facing an antagonist.

Her wide, incredulous eyes encountered the mute reflection in a mirror opposite. The severe white satin gave her face a withered look. Preston Blecker! The one human being she had believed to be her friend in this house — Preston had betrayed her. She dragged herself to a couch in front of the fireplace, tumbled into it — and sat staring.

VIRGINIA had arranged to leave *Clyde Manor* the following day morning. She kept to her room all day, the excuse of packing. The others had retired late and would scarcely be up before she got away. She had bidden adieu to Lady Maude the night before — with a mumbled apology about sending the cheque on her return to town.

It was a quarter to twelve when she hurried downstairs, dressed for traveling. A small sports hat was pulled low over her face. She was determined to see no one — whoever it might be. The car was waiting. She slipped toward it, almost stumbling in her eagerness to climb in and get away. The chauffeur had just started to turn the wheel, when a man stepped forward — He came to the open window where Virginia sat. It was Preston.

He looked worn and sallow as though he hadn't slept. His manner betrayed a slight nervousness; an embarrassment that sat ill upon the gallant Blecker. He began with the usual formal little speech of how he would miss her. Then he started mumbling strangely. Mrs. Dunfield caught the word "bracelet". She turned her startled eyes upon him.

"... may have heard perhaps," he stammered, his gaze shifting under her steady look. "Beryl was sure she lost it in the garden. You—you'll be as glad as the rest of us to know—the *gardener found it*—just a few feet away from the identical spot where she thought she dropped it. Rather unpleasant for— for everybody, these mislapses by careless girls like Beryl. Always a relief when the thing turns up—"

"I—I'm glad to hear it," the woman answered, though the hot blood dyed her face to the roots of her hair. She would thank Preston some other time; it would never do to betray herself before the chauffeur.

She put out her hand to say good-by. Blecker gripped it, looking deep into her eyes.

"By the way," he whispered, just as the car was turning, "everybody says you've been a wonderfully good sport about your—your bridge losses—"

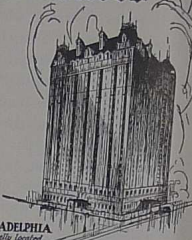
IT WAS two days after her return to town that Mrs. Dunfield received the following letter from her bank:

Dear Madam,
 The sum of four hundred dollars has been placed here to your credit, by your aunt, Mrs. Janet Harmer, of Vancouver. Would you kindly call in regard to same?

Virginia Dunfield read and re-read the letter in blank astonishment. She had no aunt in Vancouver by the name of Mrs. Janet Harmer.

Mayfair, November, 1930

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