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Open and Shut

by C. S. Montanye

"IF he gets a chance," "Slim" Gordon told Anstey, "he'll cross you sure. I know that baby. He's fast on his feet."

Anstey threw away his cigarette.

"He won't get smart with me," he promised. "By the way, what cut will I ask?"

Gordon, tall, lean and cadaverous, grinned.

"Hit him for a fifty-fifty split and see how much you get. Let me know. I'm interested."

Toward seven o'clock Anstey knocked on the door of Professor Morgan's room in the Forty-sixth Street hotel.

"Slim gave me the office on you," Morgan began, after he closed the door and cleared a place on the end of the bed. "Gordon says you're O.K. You know what the proposition is. If you come in with me on it, how much of a slice do you want?"

"Fifty percent."

Morgan lighted a cigarette. He nodded. Like

Anstey, he was young, well-groomed, attractive. Only the set of his mouth and a certain hardness to his expression gave a hint of a life that had not been entirely a bed of roses.

"That stands with me. Here's the continuity in a few words. Tomorrow night I'm putting on a magic show for the Hildreth kids. You're my assistant. While I'm working in the ballroom you'll dust off the safe in the bedroom upstairs. It's open and shut. You can't miss."

"What kind of a box is it?" Anstey asked.

"Circular wall safe. I found out through the boyfriend of a maid who used to work there. I'll sketch a floor plan later. It's a cinch."

"How do I get my tools in?"

"You carry them in a bag. Nobody'll stop you. I said you were to be my assistant. You could bring in a ten-ton truck and it would be part of the act. Wait'll I get paper and pencil. I'll draw up the

layout.”

ANSTEY followed Morgan out of the taxi and up the brownstone steps of the private house on East Seventy-third Street. He held a black leather satchel in one hand. He thought briefly of the Baumes while the Hildreth butler admitted them. Anstey’s lips tightened. It would be a second offense if he were picked up. But he wasn’t going to be. The job, as Morgan told him, was open and shut.

A stage had been erected at one end of the small ballroom. Morgan went to work setting up his apparatus. It had been delivered that afternoon—cages of rabbits, white mice, mirror-lined cabinets. He supervised their placing while Anstey gave him a hand.

It was nine o’clock when the show began. Anstey picked up his bag and let himself out of a rear door. He knew the floor plan by heart.

Straight through to the servants’ stairs, then up two flights. No one stopped or questioned him. Apparently the servants were in the ballroom, watching Morgan’s feats of legerdemain.

Anstey walked along a broad, deeply carpeted corridor. He stepped into a large, well-appointed bedchamber. A boudoir connected with it. Two shaded lamps gave a mellow glow. Anstey shut and locked the door, surveyed the room quickly.

He lifted a framed French print that hung to the left of a sprawling bureau. It had concealed the round face of a wall safe. From his bag Anstey took a No. 6 electric drill, a cake of kitchen soap, and a pair of rubber gloves. He plugged the long cord of the drill in a base socket and went to work.

He drilled a hole above the safe’s central knob. The soap filled in the crack around the door. With an eyedropper he carefully dripped nitro into the hole. Then he made the double connection with the detonator wires, held a rug snatched up from the floor over the safe and touched off the charge. The explosion was dull and muffled. He dropped the rug, opened the twisted door and lifted out an ebony jewel box.

He carried the box to the bed, opened it and stared at its glittering contents.

A VOICE came from the other side of the room.

“I really wouldn’t take that away,” it said. “Mother is particularly fond of her necklace and rings. If I were you I’d put it back.”

With a smothered exclamation Anstey wheeled around. A pretty girl with bright-red hair stood in the entrance to the boudoir. She wore a white evening gown. He noticed the curve of her neck, the level regard of her intensely blue eyes, how the light caught and reflected the coppery snare of her hair.

She came farther into the room.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? Put that box back in the safe and—get out! If you’re not gone in two minutes I’ll telephone the police.”

Anstey drew a breath. “You’re telling me I can lam without a pinch?”

The girl dropped her hand significantly to a telephone on a table. Anstey shoved the ebony box hastily into the wall safe. He watched her narrowly while he unlocked the bedroom door. She stood motionless, her hand still on the telephone.

Without a word he slipped into the corridor and hurried to the stairs.

A week later Slim Gordon hailed him from the curb fronting the Winter Garden.

“You never told me how you made out with the professor.” He laughed under his breath. “What does that mean—he pull a fast one?”

Anstey shook his head.

“No business. The Hildreth family won a decision on points that night.”

Gordon looked at his wristwatch.

“The reason I asked,” he said, “is on account of the way Morgan’s been in the big sugar lately. He and his new wife sailed last night for a London booking. She’s the wren he chased around with so long. Say, isn’t it funny the way guys fall for these redheads? They must be smart or something.” He laughed again. “What do you think?”