

## The Montgomery Estate Affair

When paparazzo Parker McCoy sneaks into the old Montgomery estate to catch Mrs. Montgomery in the act of infidelity, he discovers a much more wretched and horrifying secret, instead.

Parker's camera hung around his neck as he contemplated the hedge fence before him. After walking around the border of the Montgomery estate, this was looking to be the easiest point of entry. He pulled on a pair of gloves, gripped the brambles, and began the climb.

His dismount was clumsy. He dropped onto the hard dirt on the other side of the hedge, but he kept his Kodak safe from breaking. He brushed the dust off his brown suit, raised the camera to his face, and with a loud "paf" from the flash, he took a photograph of the estate.

The old house loomed at the top of the desolate hill. At this hour, it looked like a shadow against the backdrop of the twilight sky.

Parker walked up to the house, his loafers slipping in the mud as he avoided the gravel path. The lawn was not neatly kept. Dead weeds and bushes littered the gardens as though they had been abandoned many years ago.

He crouched behind a dried-out rosebush beneath a side window and pulled out his tape recorder.

"It has long been rumoured," he said softly into the recorder, "That Mrs. Isabelle Montgomery is participating in an illicit affair behind her husband's back. Whenever Mr. James

Montgomery leaves town— as he has done this weekend— strange noises can be reported coming from the house. Nobody has been spotted coming or going, and indeed Mrs. Montgomery herself has not been seen in weeks... but today I intend to find out *exactly* what has been going on.”

Parker slipped the tape recorder into his pocket. He stood straight, peering into the darkness of the window he had crouched beside. He jostled it lightly and felt it give. It only took a few tweaks of his prybar to pop the wooden frame up and slide the window open.

He heaved himself up and inside.

His feet hit the carpeted floor and a small cloud of dust puffed up around his ankles. He muffled his cough in the sleeve of his coat before he produced his flashlight to survey the room.

All of the furniture was shrouded in white sheets. The lights were dimmed throughout the house. Parker held his breath as he paced through the eerily quiet halls. Was this how Mrs. Montgomery kept the house when her husband was away?

He heard a slight sound above his head, like the scrape of a chair on the hardwood floor. Mrs. Montgomery must be home.

*Perfect.* If she had company, he could catch her in the act! He pulled out his tape recorder and spoke quietly into it.

"The house is empty on the bottom floor," he murmured as he paced quietly through the sitting room and into the parlour. Again, the furniture was all covered. The Montgomery family must not be fans of entertaining.

Parker stiffened when he heard footsteps approaching. He frantically searched for a place to conceal himself, rushing into the next room as quietly as he could. He eventually slid beneath the table in the dining room and hid just beneath the dusty white tablecloth.

He heard the creaking of floorboards in the room with him as whoever it was walked closer and closer to the table. His heart thudded hard in his throat. The footsteps approached the table until whoever it was would be close enough for him to touch.

The sound stopped.

He waited.

He gingerly lifted the edge of the tablecloth, daring to sneak a peek at the feet of the person who nearly caught him.

Parker froze. Even though he could have sworn that someone had come in and that they were *so close*... but he couldn't see a damn thing. No one was there.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. A trick of the senses, that's all it was. He sheepishly crawled out from underneath the table.

A noise echoed through the house, making him perk up with excitement— it was the sound of a woman's voice. He couldn't detect exactly what was being said, but it was unmistakable. He crept through the dining room to the stairs to the upper floor. He pulled out his recorder, daring to snap a photo of the empty stairwell.

"I heard a noise coming from upstairs," he said quietly into his recorder, "And I believe it to be a woman's voice." He paused when he heard the noise again. "It sounds like moaning! I think I've caught her." He stopped the recorder.

Parker ignored the creeping sense of dread he felt as he slowly climbed the steps. The stairs creaked underfoot and he swallowed his anxiety about being heard— being caught wasn't important, what was important was the photos he would take and the exposé of Mrs. Montgomery's illegitimate lover. He smiled to himself, thinking about the gravy train that would put him on.

He reached the top landing and paused to snap a photo. He bit down on a shriek when he heard a *crash* behind him.

Parker whirled and snapped a photo, only to stop mid-turn. A vase had fallen and broken on the floor. He poked the table and noticed it was wobbly. That explained it, he supposed.

Someone surely would have heard that, so he decided to act quickly. He walked through the hallway, peering into empty room after empty room.

At the end of the hallway, he came to the master bedroom.

He heard a creaking sound from within, the sound of shoes dragging on wooden floors. Someone was in there, it was absolutely certain. He held his breath as he readied his camera and peered inside.

He caught a glimpse of the rumpled sheets on the king-sized bed. There were men's clothes draped over the armchair. He started his tape recorder as soon as he heard the moving of fabric— someone was *absolutely* in there.

Parker burst into the room and snapped a photo. "Mrs. Montgomery, you are—"

He stopped dead.

The room was empty.

He lowered his camera sheepishly and hit the stop button on his recorder. There was nobody in the house, after all. The sounds he had heard must have been the house settling.. or maybe the wind. Nothing more. He sighed, snapping a few photos of the bed and the pile of men's clothing for good measure. What a useless expedition.

Parker picked up the tie on the pile of clothes. This absolutely belonged to Mr. Montgomery.. it was rather distinctive with its pattern of black roses and leaves, he had worn it before for business press conferences. He tossed the tie aside, feeling disappointed.

There was a loud creak as a door swung open downstairs. He heard loud footsteps and the sound of a man's voice humming. *Dammit.* Mr. Montgomery had come home.

Parker knew he was trapped on the upper floor, so he only thought of one logical course of action- he threw his camera and tape recorder into his bag, pried open the upstairs window, and dropped himself down into the dead bushes below.

He sprinted home as fast as his feet could carry him, his heart hammering in his chest.

That house was strange, to say the least.

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Parker whistled to himself as he developed the photographs he had taken at the Montgomery estate. He pinned the photos to the drying line as the developing solution took hold and took a moment to sit with the newspaper.

He had scarcely opened it when he heard the phone ring in the other room. He exited the darkroom and walked into his home office.

"Hello, this is Parker McCoy."

*"Parker, buddy, how are ya?"*

"Fine, I'm working. Do you need something, Allen?"

Allen's huff was cut with static. *"I was just callin' to tell you not to bother with that Montgomery affair stuff— a much juicier story just broke."*

"Oh?"

*"Just check the papers— Mr. Montgomery has been arrested!"*

Parker swallowed hard. "Arrested? What for?"

*"His wife is missing, and it's looking awful suspicious. Lotta pointing fingers, evidence coming up n' all. Just check out today's news, it's on page six!"*

Parker hung up the telephone back up on its hook. He jogged back into the darkroom to grab the newspaper.

In the dim red light, he flipped the paper open to page six. Immediately, he was flashed with a picture of Mr. Montgomery being led away from his estate by two police officers. He looked as though he was on his way to a business meeting with not a shred of anxiety in his facial expression. Parker recognized the tie that he wore as the one he had handled in his bedroom.

His wife was missing.

Parker shuddered. It was lucky he got out of there in time. Maybe the photos and audio he took would be useful, after all.

He took his recorder from his bag, rewound to the beginning of the tape, and pressed play as he moved to investigate his photos.

He heard his own voice played back to him.. but something was very, very wrong.

*"I heard a noise coming from upstairs, and I believe it to be a woman's voice,"* said his voice from the tape recorder.

At that point, when he remembered hearing a soft moan in real life, the tape recorder shrieked on his table, horrible like metal tearing apart. Parker stared at it aghast as it continued.

*"It sounds like moaning! I think I've caught her."*

The tape continued to play. The next thing he heard was his own voice again— “*Mrs. Montgomery, you are—*”

And then it immediately cut to static. The rest of the tape was nothing but static. Parker frowned in frustration. He could have sworn he had hit the stop button once he was sure nobody was there, but it seems the device had continued to record on its own. He heard the rustling of fabric... and he heard a very, very soft whisper. It didn't *sound* like his own voice. He leaned in to get a better listen to the voice in the static.

He jumped back when it shrieked again— it didn't sound like a mechanical shriek like earlier. It sounded like a *woman* shrieking in terror. He slammed his hand on the stop button.

That whole place was strange, he reasoned. Maybe it screwed with his recorder. He straightened up to contemplate the pictures that he developed.

Looking at them only made his upset stomach feel even worse... strange shapes seemed to appear in nearly every photograph. The photo of the broken vase had a black smear that crossed from one side of the picture to the other... it had sunken features, twisted as though in agony. He went along the line of photos, feeling sicker and sicker as he caught glimpses of

shadows and strange things that seemed to just hover out of view in the darkness.

The worst picture was the last one— the one of the master bedroom. He had taken a photo of the pile of clothes... and he could scarcely believe what he was looking at. His hands trembled as he took the photo carefully down from the drying line, rubbing at his eyes to ensure that what he was seeing was real.

It was a photograph of Mrs. Montgomery, standing next to the armchair with her fingers lightly touching it. She held herself in a sombre and regal manner. Her expression was melancholy. She was dressed in a nightgown that seemed to engulf her petite frame, ambiguous in shape and volume, consuming her and leaving only her hands and face visible...

... the only spot of detail in her outfit was Mr. Montgomery's tie wrapped around her pale, bruised neck.