THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT STYLES

HERCULE POIROT MYSTERIES

The Mysterious Affair at Styles
The Murder on the Links
Poirot Investigates
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT STYLES

HERCULE POIROT · BOOK 1

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CONTENTS

I Go to Styles 1

The Night of the Tragedy 5

About the Author 7

CHAPTER I

I GO TO STYLES

The intense heat of mid-July lay heavy over the Essex countryside as my train slowed to a halt at the quiet country platform of Styles St. Mary. Invalided home from the front and weary of sterile hospital corridors, I had eagerly accepted my old acquaintance John Cavendish's invitation to spend a month recovering at his family's estate.

"You will find things remarkably quiet down here, Hastings," John remarked as his motor-car turned through the wrought-iron gates and wound up the avenue of ancient elms. "A bit too quiet, perhaps, since my stepmother remarried. Alfred Inglethorp has rather upset the household equilibrium."

"Surely the marriage brought her happiness?" I ventured, observing the shadowed gables of the Tudor manor rising against the darkening sky.

John gave a short, bitter laugh and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "It brought a stranger with a velvet jacket, a black beard, and an uncanny talent for persuading an elderly woman to alter her financial affairs. Between ourselves, old fellow, the entire family is walking on eggshells."

*

Dinner that evening was a study in polite hostility. Beneath the crystal chandeliers of the oak-paneled dining room, six pairs of eyes watched the head of the table with thinly veiled suspicion. Before retiring for the night, I found a folded slip of heavy cream stationery tucked beneath the blotter on my writing desk, written in a sharp, hurried hand:

> "Do not trust anyone inside this house after midnight. If anything should happen to me before Tuesday, see that the sealed envelope in my dressing-case is handed directly to the solicitor—and keep it out of Alfred's reach."

I turned the unsigned note over twice beneath the bedside lamp. Outside my window, the wind stirred through the yew trees along the terrace, carrying the distant chime of the village clock striking twelve.

Morning sunlight did little to dispel the unease hanging over Styles Court. When I descended to the breakfast room shortly after eight, I found Mary Cavendish already seated near the tall casement windows, looking pale and composed behind a silver coffee urn. Beside her plate lay a freshly opened telegram, its corners creased as though she had folded and unfolded it several times.

"You are up early, Captain Hastings," she said, offering a cool, measured smile. "I hope the country air helped you sleep? Styles can be rather noisy at night—old timber settling, and the wind off the marsh."

"I slept tolerably well," I replied, taking the chair opposite hers. "Though I admit the house feels remarkably quiet this morning. Is Mrs. Inglethorp already about?"

"Emily never leaves her rooms before ten," a deep voice interjected from the doorway. Alfred Inglethorp stepped across the threshold, impeccably dressed in a dark morning coat, stroking his thick black beard with slow deliberation. "My dear wife requires complete rest.

The excitement of managing an estate of this size is far too taxing for a woman of her generous temperament."

Mary's fingers tightened around her spoon, though her expression never wavered. Before she could reply, the parlor maid entered with the morning post and placed a pale blue envelope beside Mr. Inglethorp's trencher. He glanced at the postmark, excused himself with an oily bow, and withdrew toward the library.

*

Later that afternoon, eager to escape the stifling tension within the manor walls, I walked down the lane into the village of Styles St. Mary. Outside the modest post office, I collided quite unexpectedly with a diminutive gentleman sporting a magnificent pair of waxed mustaches and an egg-shaped head tilted slightly to one side.

"Mon ami! Hastings!" he exclaimed, seizing both of my hands with theatrical warmth. "What a stroke of fortune! It is indeed my old comrade from Belgium."

"Poirot!" I cried in genuine delight. "What on earth brings you to this remote corner of Essex?"

"The kindness of your English hospitality," Hercule Poirot replied, neatly brushing an invisible speck of dust from his lapel. "Mrs. Inglethorp has generously sponsored several of my displaced countrymen here at Leastways Cottage. A woman of great charity—and, if my eyes do not deceive me, a woman surrounded by grave domestic discord. Come, walk with me a little way. Your countenance tells me you have already sensed the storm gathering over Styles."

As we strolled beneath the shade of the hedgerows, I recounted the strange events of the previous evening—John Cavendish's guarded warnings, Alfred Inglethorp's overbearing manner, and the unsigned slip of paper I had discovered beneath my desk blotter. Poirot listened in silence, his bright green eyes narrowing with intense concentration.

"An unsigned warning," he murmured softly. "And this morning, before leaving the village, a dispatch passed through the telegraph

office addressed to Mr. Inglethorp from London. Only three words, Hastings, yet full of significance:"

> ARRIVING TONIGHT STOP MATTER URGENT STOP DESTROY ALL PAPERS IMMEDIATELY.

Poirot stopped beside the stone gatepost and tapped his cane sharply against the gravel. "Remember this well, my friend. When money and fear occupy the same house, tragedy is seldom far behind."

CHAPTER II

THE NIGHT OF THE TRAGEDY

Three days passed without overt incident, yet the atmosphere at Styles Court grew heavier with every hour. On the evening of Tuesday, the seventeenth of July, a violent summer thunderstorm rolled in from the coast, rattling the leaded window-panes and plunging the upper corridors into deep shadow.

After dinner, Mrs. Inglethorp retired early to her boudoir, carrying her small leather dispatch-case beneath her arm. I noticed that she paused at the foot of the grand staircase to speak in low, urgent tones with her solicitor, Mr. Wells, who had arrived from London on the six o'clock train.

"I wish the new will witnessed tonight, Mr. Wells," she said clearly enough for those of us standing near the hearth to hear. "There must be no ambiguity whatsoever once the clock strikes midnight."

At half-past two in the morning, I was awakened from a restless sleep by a sharp, frantic knocking upon my bedroom door. I threw on my dressing-gown and opened it to find John Cavendish standing in the dim corridor, holding a flickering brass candlestick. His face was ashen.

"Come quickly, Hastings," he whispered hoarsely. "Something is terribly wrong with my stepmother. Her bell has been ringing furiously, and both doors to her room are bolted from the inside!"

Within minutes, the entire household had gathered outside the heavy oak door of Mrs. Inglethorp's chamber. Repeated calls went unanswered, save for a faint, agonizing groan from within. With a single decisive heave, John and I threw our shoulders against the lock. The bolt gave way with a splintering crash.

*

Inside, the room was lit only by a dying fire in the grate. Mrs. Inglethorp lay convulsed across the counterpane, her features drawn in unmistakable agony. On the bedside table stood an overturned porcelain coffee cup and a small, unlabelled glass phial that smelled faintly of bitter almonds and burnt herbs.

Dr. Bauerstein, a London toxicologist staying nearby who had been summoned through the storm, knelt beside the bed for barely sixty seconds before rising with a grim expression. He lifted a torn scrap of parchment from the hearthrug and held it toward the candlelight:

> "To be administered only in extreme emergency—five grains dissolved in warm liquid. Keep locked away from the household staff."

"It is too late," the physician said quietly, drawing the sheet over the still figure. "Mrs. Inglethorp is dead. And unless I am gravely mistaken, gentlemen, this was no natural seizure—it was strychnine."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agatha Christie (1890–1976) was an English writer renowned worldwide for her sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections, particularly those revolving around fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Born in Torquay, Devon, she worked in a hospital dispensary during the First World War, acquiring the detailed knowledge of poisons that shaped her debut novel, The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920).

Translated into more than one hundred languages and selling over two billion copies globally, her works remain foundational benchmarks of modern mystery fiction.

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Production colophon

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