

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

by Agatha Christie · Language: EN

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Overview

The Mysterious Affair at Styles is Agatha Christie's first published novel, introducing the world to the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot and his friend and chronicler Captain Arthur Hastings. Set in the English countryside during World War I, the story begins when Hastings, recovering from a war wound, visits his old friend John Cavendish at Styles Court, the family estate of John's wealthy stepmother, Emily Inglethorp. The household is tense, with Mrs. Inglethorp recently remarrying a much younger man, Alfred Inglethorp, whom the family distrusts. When Mrs. Inglethorp is found dying in her locked room after a night of agitation, Poirot, who is living in the nearby village, is called upon to investigate. What follows is a classic locked-room mystery involving poison, hidden wills, and a web of family secrets.

The novel establishes many of the conventions that would define the golden age of detective fiction: a closed circle of suspects, a brilliant but eccentric detective, and a solution that hinges on psychological insight and meticulous attention to detail. Poirot's method—using his 'little grey cells'—is on full display as he untangles alibis, motives, and a cleverly disguised crime. The story arc moves from the initial shock of the murder through a series of red herrings and false accusations, culminating in a courtroom revelation that exposes the true culprit. The book matters not only as the debut of one of literature's most enduring detectives but also as a masterclass in plotting, showing how Christie could construct a puzzle that is both fair to the reader and surprising in its resolution. It remains a foundational text for anyone interested in the evolution of the mystery genre.

Key Takeaways

- Pay close attention to small details, as Christie plants clues that seem insignificant but are crucial to solving the mystery.
- The 'locked room' scenario is a classic mystery trope, but the solution here relies on misdirection about the method of poisoning and the timing of the crime.
- Poirot's 'little grey cells' emphasize that logical deduction and psychological insight are more important than physical evidence alone.
- The identity of the murderer is a shock, but the clues are all present in the text, rewarding careful readers who revisit the story.
- The novel introduces the dynamic between Poirot and Hastings, which would become a beloved partnership in many later books.

- Christie's use of a family estate with hidden tensions shows how domestic settings can be fertile ground for crime fiction.
- The courtroom scene at the end demonstrates the importance of public accusation and the role of justice in the mystery genre.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: I Go to Styles

Captain Arthur Hastings, recovering from a war wound, is invited by his old friend John Cavendish to stay at Styles Court, the family estate in Essex. Hastings reflects on his recent experiences and his desire for a quiet rest. Upon arrival, he meets the household: John's stepmother, Emily Inglethorp, her new husband Alfred, John's wife Mary, and others. Hastings observes the strained atmosphere, particularly the family's disapproval of Alfred. He also learns that the famous detective Hercule Poirot is living in the nearby village, having been a refugee from Belgium. The chapter sets the stage for the murder by establishing the setting and the key characters.

Chapter 2: The 16th and 17th of July

Hastings becomes aware of tensions within the household. Emily Inglethorp confides in him about her concerns regarding Alfred's behavior and the family's hostility. On the 16th, there is a heated argument between Emily and Alfred, which Hastings overhears. The next day, Emily announces that she has changed her will, leaving her fortune to her husband, which shocks the family. Meanwhile, Poirot is introduced more fully, and Hastings reconnects with him. The chapter ends with Emily appearing agitated and retiring early, setting the stage for the crisis to come.

Chapter 3: The Night of the Tragedy

In the middle of the night, Hastings is awakened by the sound of a cry and the breaking of glass. He rushes to Emily's room and finds her in a state of collapse, with the family gathering. Dr. Bauerstein, a guest, is called, and he suspects poisoning. Emily, before dying, utters the cryptic words 'the stuff' and mentions 'Alfred' but is unable to clarify. The doctor confirms that she has been poisoned with strychnine, but the source is unknown. The police are summoned, and Poirot is asked to assist. The chapter ends with the household in shock and the beginning of the investigation.

Chapter 4: Poirot Investigates

Poirot takes charge of the investigation, despite the presence of Inspector Japp. He interviews the household members, learning about the tensions and the recent will change. He discovers that Emily had a habit of locking her door and that a coffee cup and a broken coffee pot are found in her room. Poirot notices a piece of a will and a burnt fragment of paper. He also learns

that Alfred had been seen near the village at the time of the murder, but he has an alibi. Poirot's attention is drawn to the possibility of a second person involved, and he begins to piece together the timeline.

Chapter 5: It Is Not the Will

The will is discovered, but it is not the one Emily had recently made; it is an older version that leaves the fortune to her stepsons. This complicates the case, as it suggests that the murderer might have been someone who wanted to prevent the new will from taking effect. Poirot interviews the family members, including John and Mary Cavendish, and learns about their financial troubles. He also questions the servants, who report hearing Emily arguing with someone on the night of the murder. Poirot begins to suspect that the crime is more complex than it appears.

Chapter 6: The Inquest

An inquest is held, and the coroner's jury returns a verdict of murder against Alfred Inglethorp, based on the evidence of his quarrel with Emily and his suspicious behavior. However, Poirot is not convinced, and he privately tells Hastings that he believes Alfred is innocent. Poirot notices that the evidence against Alfred is too convenient, as if someone is trying to frame him. He also discovers that a local chemist sold strychnine to a man who gave a false name, and that the purchase was made on the day before the murder. Poirot's investigation takes a new turn as he considers the possibility of a conspiracy.

Chapter 7: Poirot Pays His Debts

Poirot reveals to Hastings that he has been working on the case in secret. He explains that the key to the mystery lies in the timing of the poison's administration and the use of a coffee cup. He also reveals that he has found a clue in the form of a piece of a will that was burned in the fireplace. Poirot stages a confrontation with the family, accusing Alfred of the murder, but it is a ruse to draw out the real culprit. The chapter ends with Poirot confident that he knows the truth, but he keeps the details to himself.

Chapter 8: Fresh Suspicions

The case takes a new turn when it is revealed that Dr. Bauerstein, a toxicology expert, had a romantic interest in Mary Cavendish and had been seen near the house on the night of the murder. Suspicion shifts to him, and he is arrested. However, Poirot is not satisfied, and he continues to investigate. He discovers that a mysterious woman had been seen visiting Alfred in the village, and that Alfred had been receiving letters from her. Poirot also learns that Emily had a secret past that might be relevant. The chapter builds tension as the list of suspects grows.

Chapter 9: The Last Link

Poirot gathers all the suspects in the library and reveals the solution. He explains that the murder was committed by two people: Alfred Inglethorp and his cousin Evelyn Howard, who had

been posing as a hostile family friend. They had planned the murder to inherit Emily's fortune. The strychnine was administered in a coffee cup, and the broken coffee pot was a red herring. Poirot also reveals that the new will had been destroyed and replaced with the old one. The evidence is presented, and the couple is arrested. The chapter ends with the truth being revealed and justice served.

Chapter 10: The Trial

The trial of Alfred and Evelyn takes place, and Poirot testifies, explaining the intricate details of the crime. The defense tries to discredit Poirot, but his evidence is compelling. The jury finds them guilty, and they are sentenced to death. The chapter also resolves the personal storylines: John and Mary Cavendish reconcile, and Hastings reflects on the events. Poirot and Hastings say their goodbyes, with Poirot planning to return to Belgium. The novel ends with Hastings expressing his admiration for Poirot's genius.

Themes

- Deception and disguise
- Justice and truth
- The power of observation
- Family secrets
- The nature of evil

Notable Quotes

- "It is the brain, the little grey cells, that are the key to the mystery." — Poirot explains his method to Hastings early in the investigation, emphasizing the importance of mental deduction over physical clues.
- "The truth is never pure and rarely simple." — Poirot reflects on the complexity of the case, hinting that appearances are deceptive.
- "I am not a dog to fetch and carry. I am a detective." — Poirot responds to a request that he considers beneath his dignity, showing his pride in his profession.
- "The impossible is always possible." — Poirot comments on the seemingly impossible circumstances of the murder, suggesting that the solution lies in an unexpected direction.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Mysterious Affair at Styles about?

The Mysterious Affair at Styles is Agatha Christie's first detective novel, introducing Hercule Poirot. It follows the murder of Emily Inglethorp, a wealthy woman poisoned in her locked room.

at Styles Court. Poirot investigates the family and household, uncovering secrets, false alibis, and a clever plot. The novel establishes the classic whodunit structure and Poirot's method of logical deduction.

Is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* worth reading?

Yes, it is essential reading for mystery fans. As Christie's debut, it showcases her plotting genius and introduces the iconic Poirot. The puzzle is clever and fair, with clues hidden in plain sight. While some prose feels dated, the story remains engaging and historically significant. It's a quick, satisfying read that rewards careful attention.

How does *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* end?

Spoiler: Poirot reveals that Alfred Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard, his cousin, conspired to murder Emily. They used strychnine in her coffee, staged a fake quarrel, and created a false alibi. The new will was destroyed, and the old one left to the stepsons. Both are arrested, tried, and convicted. The novel ends with the family reconciled and Poirot praised.

Who should read *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*?

Anyone who enjoys classic detective fiction, especially fans of Agatha Christie and Hercule Poirot. It's also a great starting point for readers new to the genre, as it's short, engaging, and showcases the elements that define a good whodunit. Readers who appreciate clever puzzles and character-driven mysteries will find it rewarding.

How long does it take to read *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*?

The book is about 200 pages, and at an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 4 to 5 hours. Most readers can finish it in a few sittings. It's a quick, engaging read that can be completed in an afternoon or over a weekend.