The Mysterious Affair at Styles

Agatha Christie

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The Mysterious Affair at Styles

HarperCollins e-books

To my mother

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About Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English and another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Mrs Christie is the author of eighty crime novels and short story collections, nineteen plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of World War I (during which she served in the Voluntary Aid Detachments). In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian investigator who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. After having been rejected by a number of houses, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, now averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by William Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship that lasted for fifty years and produced over seventy books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's works to be dramatised—as *Alibi*—and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play, opened in 1952 and runs to this day at St Martin's Theatre in the West End; it is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of her books have been published: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared in 1976, followed by *An Autobiography* and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*; *Problem at Pollensa Bay*; and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by Charles Osborne, Mrs Christie's biographer.

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The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

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Five Little Pigs

The Hollow

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Miss Marple Mysteries

The Murder at the Vicarage

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A Murder Is Announced

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A Pocket Full of Rye

4.50 from Paddington

The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side

A Caribbean Mystery

At Bertram's Hotel

Nemesis

Sleeping Murder

Miss Marple's Final Cases

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By the Pricking of My Thumbs

Postern of Fate

Published as Mary Westmacott

Giant's Bread

Unfinished Portrait

Absent in the Spring

The Rose and the Yew Tree

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Memoirs

An Autobiography

Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays

Witness for the Prosecution and Selected Plays

* novelised by Charles Osborne

Chapter 1

I Go to Styles

The intense interest aroused in the public by what was known at the time as ‘The Styles Case’ has now somewhat subsided. Nevertheless, in view of the world-wide notoriety which attended it, I have been asked, both by my friend Poirot and the family themselves, to write an account of the whole story. This, we trust, will effectually silence the sensational rumours which still persist.

I will therefore briefly set down the circumstances which led to my being connected with the affair.

I had been invalided home from the Front; and, after spending some months in a rather depressing Convalescent Home, was given a month’s sick leave. Having no near relations or friends, I was trying to make up my mind what to do, when I ran across John Cavendish. I had seen very little of him for some years. Indeed, I had never known him particularly well. He was a good fifteen years my senior, for one thing, though he hardly looked his forty-five years. As a boy, though, I had often stayed at Styles, his mother’s place in Essex.

We had a good yarn about old times, and it ended in his inviting me down to Styles to spend my leave there.

‘The mater will be delighted to see you again—after all those years,’ he added.

‘Your mother keeps well?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yes. I suppose you know that she has married again?’

I am afraid I showed my surprise rather plainly. Mrs Cavendish, who had married John’s father when he was a widower with two sons, had been a handsome woman of middle-age as I remembered her. She certainly could

not be a day less than seventy now. I recalled her as an energetic, autocratic personality, somewhat inclined to charitable and social notoriety, with a fondness for opening bazaars and playing the Lady Bountiful. She was a most generous woman, and possessed a considerable fortune of her own.

Their country-place, Styles Court, had been purchased by Mr Cavendish early in their married life. He had been completely under his wife's ascendancy, so much so that, on dying, he left the place to her for her lifetime, as well as the larger part of his income; an arrangement that was distinctly unfair to his two sons. Their stepmother, however, had always been most generous to them; indeed, they were so young at the time of their father's remarriage that they always thought of her as their own mother.

Lawrence, the younger, had been a delicate youth. He had qualified as a doctor but early relinquished the profession of medicine, and lived at home while pursuing literary ambitions; though his verses never had any marked success.

John practised for some time as a barrister, but had finally settled down to the more congenial life of a country squire. He had married two years ago, and had taken his wife to live at Styles, though I entertained a shrewd suspicion that he would have preferred his mother to increase his allowance, which would have enabled him to have a home of his own. Mrs Cavendish, however, was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings.

John noticed my surprise at the news of his mother's remarriage and smiled rather ruefully.

'Rotten little bounder too!' he said savagely. 'I can tell you, Hastings, it's making life jolly difficult for us. As for Evie—you remember Evie?'

'No.'

'Oh, I suppose she was after your time. She's the mater's factotum, companion, Jack of all trades! A great sport—old Evie! Not precisely young and beautiful, but as game as they make them.'

‘You were going to say –’

‘Oh, this fellow! He turned up from nowhere, on the pretext of being a second cousin or something of Evie’s, though she didn’t seem particularly keen to acknowledge the relationship. The fellow is an absolute outsider, anyone can see that. He’s got a great black beard, and wears patent leather boots in all weathers! But the mater cottoned to him at once, took him on as secretary—you know how she’s always running a hundred societies?’

I nodded.

‘Well, of course, the war has turned the hundreds into thousands. No doubt the fellow was very useful to her. But you could have knocked us all down with a feather when, three months ago, she suddenly announced that she and Alfred were engaged! The fellow must be at least twenty years younger than she is! It’s simply bare-faced fortune hunting; but there you are—she is her own mistress, and she’s married him.’

‘It must be a difficult situation for you all.’

‘Difficult! It’s damnable!’

Thus it came about that, three days later, I descended from the train at Styles St Mary, an absurd little station, with no apparent reason for existence, perched up in the midst of green fields and country lanes. John Cavendish was waiting on the platform, and piloted me out to the car.

‘Got a drop or two of petrol still, you see,’ he remarked. ‘Mainly owing to the mater’s activities.’

The village of Styles St Mary was situated about two miles from the little station, and Styles Court lay a mile the other side of it. It was a still, warm day in early July. As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world. As we turned in at the lodge gates, John said:

‘I’m afraid you’ll find it very quiet down here, Hastings.’

‘My dear fellow, that’s just what I want.’

‘Oh, it’s pleasant enough if you want to lead the idle life. I drill with the volunteers twice a week, and lend a hand at the farms. My wife works regularly “on the land”. She is up at five every morning to milk, and keeps at it steadily until lunch-time. It’s a jolly good life taking it all round—if it weren’t for that fellow Alfred Inglethorp!’ He checked the car suddenly, and glanced at his watch. ‘I wonder if we’ve time to pick up Cynthia. No, she’ll have started from the hospital by now.’

‘Cynthia! That’s not your wife?’

‘No, Cynthia is a protégée of my mother’s, the daughter of an old schoolfellow of hers, who married a rascally solicitor. He came a cropper, and the girl was left an orphan and penniless. My mother came to the rescue, and Cynthia has been with us nearly two years now. She works in the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster, seven miles away.’

As he spoke the last words, we drew up in front of the fine old house. A lady in a stout tweed skirt, who was bending over a flower bed, straightened herself at our approach.

‘Hullo, Evie, here’s our wounded hero! Mr Hastings—Miss Howard.’

Miss Howard shook hands with a hearty, almost painful, grip. I had an impression of very blue eyes in a sunburnt face. She was a pleasant-looking woman of about forty, with a deep voice, almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match—these last encased in good thick boots. Her conversation, I soon found, was couched in the telegraphic style.

‘Weeds grow like house afire. Can’t keep even with ’em. Shall press you in. Better be careful!’

‘I’m sure I shall be only too delighted to make myself useful,’ I responded.

‘Don’t say it. Never does. Wish you hadn’t later.’

‘You’re a cynic, Evie,’ said John, laughing. ‘Where’s tea today—inside or out?’

‘Out. Too fine a day to be cooped up in the house.’

‘Come on then, you’ve done enough gardening for today. “The labourer is worthy of his hire,” you know. Come and be refreshed.’

‘Well,’ said Miss Howard, drawing off her gardening gloves, ‘I’m inclined to agree with you.’

She led the way round the house to where tea was spread under the shade of a large sycamore.

A figure rose from one of the basket chairs, and came a few steps to meet us.

‘My wife, Hastings,’ said John.

I shall never forget my first sight of Mary Cavendish. Her tall, slender form, outlined against the bright light; the vivid sense of slumbering fire that seemed to find expression only in those wonderful tawny eyes of hers, remarkable eyes, different from any other woman’s that I have ever known; the intense power of stillness she possessed, which nevertheless conveyed the impression of a wild untamed spirit in an exquisitely civilized body—all these things are burnt into my memory. I shall never forget them.

She greeted me with a few words of pleasant welcome in a low clear voice, and I sank into a basket chair feeling distinctly glad that I had accepted John’s invitation. Mrs Cavendish gave me some tea, and her few quiet remarks heightened my first impression of her as a thoroughly fascinating woman. An appreciative listener is always stimulating, and I described, in a humorous manner, certain incidents of my Convalescent Home, in a way which, I flatter myself, greatly amused my hostess. John, of course, good fellow though he is, could hardly be called a brilliant conversationalist.

At that moment a well remembered voice floated through the open french window near at hand:

‘Then you’ll write to the Princess after tea, Alfred? I’ll write to Lady Tadminster for the second day, myself. Or shall we wait until we hear from the Princess? In case of a refusal, Lady Tadminster might open it the first day, and Mrs Crosbie the second. Then there’s the Duchess—about the school fête.’

There was the murmur of a man’s voice, and then Mrs Inglethorp’s rose in reply:

‘Yes, certainly. After tea will do quite well. You are so thoughtful, Alfred dear.’

The french window swung open a little wider, and a handsome white-haired old lady, with a somewhat masterful cast of features, stepped out of it on to the lawn. A man followed her, a suggestion of deference in his manner.

Mrs Inglethorp greeted me with effusion.

‘Why, if it isn’t too delightful to see you again, Mr Hastings, after all these years. Alfred, darling, Mr Hastings—my husband.’

I looked with some curiosity at ‘Alfred darling’. He certainly struck a rather alien note. I did not wonder at John objecting to his beard. It was one of the longest and blackest I have ever seen. He wore gold-rimmed pince-nez, and had a curious impassivity of feature. It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life. His voice was rather deep and unctuous. He placed a wooden hand in mine and said:

‘This is a pleasure, Mr Hastings.’ Then, turning to his wife: ‘Emily dearest, I think that cushion is a little damp.’

She beamed fondly at him, as he substituted another with every demonstration of the tenderest care. Strange infatuation of an otherwise sensible woman!

With the presence of Mr Inglethorp, a sense of constraint and veiled hostility seemed to settle down upon the company. Miss Howard, in particular, took no pains to conceal her feelings. Mrs Inglethorp, however, seemed to notice nothing unusual. Her volubility, which I remembered of old, had lost nothing in the intervening years, and she poured out a steady flood of conversation, mainly on the subject of the forthcoming bazaar which she was organizing and which was to take place shortly. Occasionally she referred to her husband over a question of days or dates. His watchful and attentive manner never varied. From the very first I took a firm and rooted dislike to him, and I flatter myself that my first judgements are usually fairly shrewd.

Presently Mrs Inglethorp turned to give some instructions about letters to Evelyn Howard, and her husband addressed me in his painstaking voice:

'Is soldiering your regular profession, Mr Hastings?'

'No, before the war I was in Lloyd's.'

'And you will return there after it is over?'

'Perhaps. Either that or a fresh start altogether.'

Mary Cavendish leant forward.

'What would you really choose as a profession, if you could just consult your inclination?'

'Well, that depends.'

'No secret hobby?' she asked. 'Tell me—you're drawn to something? Everyone is—usually something absurd.'

'You'll laugh at me.'

She smiled.

'Perhaps.'

‘Well, I’ve always had a secret hankering to be a detective!’

‘The real thing—Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?’

‘Oh, Sherlock Holmes by all means. But really, seriously, I am awfully drawn to it. I came across a man in Belgium once, a very famous detective, and he quite inflamed me. He was a marvellous little fellow. He used to say that all good detective work was a mere matter of method. My system is based on his—though of course I have progressed rather further. He was a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever.’

‘Like a good detective story myself,’ remarked Miss Howard. ‘Lots of nonsense written, though. Criminal discovered in last chapter. Every one dumbfounded. Real crime—you’d know at once.’

‘There have been a great number of undiscovered crimes,’ I argued.

‘Don’t mean the police, but the people that are right in it. The family. You couldn’t really hoodwink them. They’d know.’

‘Then,’ I said, much amused, ‘you think that if you were mixed up in a crime, say a murder, you’d be able to spot the murderer right off ?’

‘Of course I should. Mightn’t be able to prove it to a pack of lawyers. But I’m certain I’d know. I’d feel it in my finger-tips if he came near me.’

‘It might be a “she”,’ I suggested.

‘Might. But murder’s a violent crime. Associate it more with a man.’

‘Not in a case of poisoning.’ Mrs Cavendish’s clear voice startled me. ‘Dr Bauerstein was saying yesterday that, owing to the general ignorance of the more uncommon poisons among the medical profession, there were probably countless cases of poisoning quite unsuspected.’

‘Why, Mary, what a gruesome conversation!’ cried Mrs Inglethorp. ‘It makes me feel as if a goose were walking over my grave. Oh, there’s Cynthia!’

A young girl in VAD uniform ran lightly across the lawn.

‘Why, Cynthia, you are late today. This is Mr Hastings—Miss Murdoch.’

Cynthia Murdoch was a fresh-looking young creature, full of life and vigour. She tossed off her little VAD cap, and I admired the great loose waves of her auburn hair, and the smallness and whiteness of the hand she held out to claim her tea. With dark eyes and eyelashes she would have been a beauty.

She flung herself down on the ground beside John, and as I handed her a plate of sandwiches she smiled up at me.

‘Sit down here on the grass, do. It’s ever so much nicer.’

I dropped down obediently.

‘You work at Tadminster, don’t you, Miss Murdoch?’

She nodded.

‘For my sins.’

‘Do they bully you, then?’ I asked, smiling.

‘I should like to see them!’ cried Cynthia with dignity.

‘I have got a cousin who is nursing,’ I remarked. ‘And she is terrified of “Sisters”.’

‘I don’t wonder. Sisters *are*, you know, Mr Hastings. They simp-ly *are*! You’ve no idea! But I’m not a nurse, thank heaven, I work in the dispensary.’

‘How many people do you poison?’ I asked, smiling.

Cynthia smiled too.

‘Oh, hundreds!’ she said.

‘Cynthia,’ called Mrs Inglethorp, ‘do you think you could write a few notes for me?’

‘Certainly, Aunt Emily.’

She jumped up promptly, and something in her manner reminded me that her position was a dependent one, and that Mrs Inglethorp, kind as she might be in the main, did not allow her to forget it.

My hostess turned to me.

‘John will show you your room. Supper is at half-past seven. We have given up late dinner for some time now. Lady Tadminster, our Member’s wife—she was the late Lord Abbotsbury’s daughter—does the same. She agrees with me that one must set an example of economy. We are quite a war household; nothing is wasted here—every scrap of waste paper, even, is saved and sent away in sacks.’

I expressed my appreciation, and John took me into the house and up the broad staircase, which forked right and left half-way to different wings of the building. My room was in the left wing, and looked out over the park.

John left me, and a few minutes later I saw him from my window walking slowly across the grass arm in arm with Cynthia Murdoch. I heard Mrs Inglethorp call ‘Cynthia’ impatiently, and the girl started and ran back to the house. At the same moment, a man stepped out from the shadow of a tree and walked slowly in the same direction. He looked about forty, very dark with a melancholy clean-shaven face. Some violent emotion seemed to be mastering him. He looked up at my window as he passed, and I recognized him, though he had changed much in the fifteen years that had elapsed since we last met. It was John’s younger brother, Lawrence Cavendish. I wondered what it was that had brought that singular expression to his face.

Then I dismissed him from my mind, and returned to the contemplation of my own affairs.

The evening passed pleasantly enough; and I dreamed that night of that enigmatical woman, Mary Cavendish.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, and I was full of the anticipation of a delightful visit.

I did not see Mrs Cavendish until lunch-time, when she volunteered to take me for a walk, and we spent a charming afternoon roaming in the woods, returning to the house about five.

As we entered the large hall, John beckoned us both into the smoking-room. I saw at once by his face that something disturbing had occurred. We followed him in, and he shut the door after us.

'Look here, Mary, there's the deuce of a mess. Evie's had a row with Alfred Inglethorp, and she's off.'

'Evie? Off ?'

John nodded gloomily.

'Yes; you see she went to the mater, and—oh, here's Evie herself.'

Miss Howard entered. Her lips were set grimly together, and she carried a small suit-case. She looked excited and determined, and slightly on the defensive.

'At any rate,' she burst out, 'I've spoken my mind!'

'My dear Evelyn,' cried Mrs Cavendish, 'this can't be true!'

Miss Howard nodded grimly.

'True enough! Afraid I said some things to Emily she won't forget or forgive in a hurry. Don't mind if they've only sunk in a bit. Probably water off a duck's back, though. I said right out: "You're an old woman, Emily, and there's no fool like an old fool. The man's twenty years younger than you, and don't you fool yourself as to what he married you for. Money! Well, don't let him have too much of it. Farmer Raikes has got a very pretty

young wife. Just ask your Alfred how much time he spends over there." She was very angry. Natural! I went on: "I'm going to warn you, whether you like it or not. That man would as soon murder you in your bed as look at you. He's a bad lot. You can say what you like to me, but remember what I've told you. He's a bad lot!"'

'What did she say?'

Miss Howard made an extremely expressive grimace.

'"Darling Alfred"—"dearest Alfred"—"wicked calumnies"—"wicked lies"—"wicked woman"—to accuse her "dear husband"! The sooner I left her house the better. So I'm off.'

'But not now?'

'This minute!'

For a moment we sat and stared at her. Finally John Cavendish, finding his persuasions of no avail, went off to look up the trains. His wife followed him, murmuring something about persuading Mrs Inglethorp to think better of it.

As she left the room, Miss Howard's face changed. She leant towards me eagerly.

'Mr Hastings, you're honest. I can trust you?'

I was a little startled. She laid her hand on my arm, and sank her voice to a whisper.

'Look after her, Mr Hastings. My poor Emily. They're a lot of sharks—all of them. Oh, I know what I'm talking about. There isn't one of them that's not hard up and trying to get money out of her. I've protected her as much as I could. Now I'm out of the way, they'll impose upon her.'

'Of course, Miss Howard,' I said, 'I'll do everything I can, but I'm sure you're excited and overwrought.'

She interrupted me by slowly shaking her forefinger.

‘Young man, trust me. I’ve lived in the world rather longer than you have. All I ask you is to keep your eyes open. You’ll see what I mean.’

The throb of the motor came through the open window, and Miss Howard rose and moved to the door. John’s voice sounded outside. With her hand on the handle, she turned her head over her shoulder, and beckoned to me.

‘Above all, Mr Hastings, watch that devil—her husband!’

There was no time for more. Miss Howard was swallowed up in an eager chorus of protests and goodbyes. The Inglethorps did not appear.

As the motor drove away, Mrs Cavendish suddenly detached herself from the group, and moved across the drive to the lawn to meet a tall bearded man who had been evidently making for the house. The colour rose in her cheeks as she held out her hand to him.

‘Who is that?’ I asked sharply, for instinctively I distrusted the man.

‘That’s Dr Bauerstein,’ said John shortly.

‘And who is Dr Bauerstein?’

‘He’s staying in the village doing a rest cure, after a bad nervous breakdown. He’s a London specialist; a very clever man—one of the greatest living experts on poisons, I believe.’

‘And he’s a great friend of Mary’s,’ put in Cynthia, the irrepressible.

John Cavendish frowned and changed the subject.

‘Come for a stroll, Hastings. This has been a most rotten business. She always had a rough tongue, but there is no stauncher friend in England than Evelyn Howard.’

He took the path through the plantation, and we walked down to the village through the woods which bordered one side of the estate.

As we passed through one of the gates on our way home again, a pretty young woman of gipsy type coming in the opposite direction bowed and smiled.

'That's a pretty girl,' I remarked appreciatively.

John's face hardened.

'That is Mrs Raikes.'

'The one that Miss Howard –'

'Exactly,' said John, with rather unnecessary abruptness.

I thought of the white-haired old lady in the big house, and that vivid wicked little face that had just smiled into ours, and a vague chill of foreboding crept over me. I brushed it aside.

'Styles is really a glorious old place,' I said to John.

He nodded rather gloomily.

'Yes, it's a fine property. It'll be mine some day—should be mine now by rights, if my father had only made a decent will. And then I shouldn't be so damned hard up as I am now.'

'Hard up, are you?'

'My dear Hastings, I don't mind telling you that I'm at my wits' end for money.'

'Couldn't your brother help you?'

'Lawrence? He's gone through every penny he ever had, publishing rotten verses in fancy bindings. No, we're an impecunious lot. My mother's

always been awfully good to us, I must say. That is, up to now. Since her marriage, of course –' He broke off, frowning.

For the first time I felt that, with Evelyn Howard, something indefinable had gone from the atmosphere. Her presence had spelt security. Now that security was removed—and the air seemed rife with suspicion. The sinister face of Dr Bauerstein recurred to me unpleasantly. A vague suspicion of everyone and everything filled my mind. Just for a moment I had a premonition of approaching evil.