

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S



The Mysterious Affair at Styles

Doug Goheen

Adapted from the novel by Agatha Christie

BIG DOG PUBLISHING

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The Mysterious Affair at Styles

MYSTERY. This play is adapted from Agatha Christie's first published novel and features the debut of one of Christie's most famous characters, the cunning Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. At an isolated country manor in WWI England, Emily Cavendish, the aging matriarch of Styles Court, is found dead of strychnine poisoning. Chief suspects include Emily's much younger newlywed husband, her two stepsons, and her daughter-in-law. Arthur Hastings, a guest at the manor, enlists the help of his friend, the eccentric detective Hercule Poirot, to investigate the murder. Chock full of red herrings, clues, and plot twists, this ingenious detective story will keep audiences guessing until the very end.

Performance time: Approximately 90-120 minutes.



Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

About the Story

Agatha Christie was born in southwest England to a wealthy upper-class family. Christie was schooled at home and was an avid reader from a young age enjoying books by Edith Nesbit and Lewis Carroll and, later, mystery novels by Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) was Christie's first published novel and features the famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, who became one of Christie's most famous characters and appeared in 33 of her novels and 54 short stories. Two other recurring characters are introduced in the novel for the first time as well: Chief Inspector Japp and Arthur Hastings. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Poirot appears as a former Belgian police officer who is a refugee in Britain after Germany's invasion of Belgium. His character is thought to be inspired by the Belgian refugees Christie encountered in Torquay. Known for his magnificent mustache and astute attention to detail, Poirot was always popular with readers. Despite this, Christie wrote in her diary that she found Poirot to be an "insufferable" character and an "egocentric creep" and preferred the character of Miss Marple. When Christie killed off Poirot in her 1975 novel *Curtain*, Poirot was given an obituary in "The New York Times." The author of 66 detective novels and 15 short story collections, Christie is best known for her bestselling novel *And Then There Were None* and her play *The Mousetrap*.

Characters

(6 M, 5 F)

HERCULE POIROT: Famous Belgian detective who is living in England as a war refugee and is an old friend of Captain Arthur Hastings; male.

EMILY INGLETHORP: Wealthy, elderly benefactress and proprietress at Styles Court; female.

ALFRED INGLETHORP: Emily Inglethorp's much younger husband of three months who had served as her private secretary and is thought to be a gold-digger and distant cousin of Evelyn Howard; wears striking clothing, pince-nez spectacles, and a black goatee; male.

JOHN CAVENDISH: Emily Inglethorp's elder stepson, a country squire and former barrister who lives at Styles Court; male.

MARY CAVENDISH: John's attractive wife who regularly works on the land around Styles; speaks with a slight foreign accent; female.

ARTHUR HASTINGS: A WWI captain on sick leave from the Western Front who is convalescing at Styles and is an old friend of John Cavendish and Hercule Poirot; male.

LAWRENCE CAVENDISH: Emily Inglethorp's younger stepson and John's younger brother; studied medicine but gave it up to become an aspiring poet; male.

EVELYN HOWARD: Emily Inglethorp's longtime companion and friend; slightly manly in appearance and mannerisms; has a clipped speaking style; female.

DORCAS: Head maid at Styles Court; female.

CYNTHIA MURDOCH: Orphaned daughter of an old school friend of Emily Inglethorp's who works at the hospital in a nearby village; female.

DR. BAUERSTEIN: A London toxicologist who specializes in poisons and is recovering from a nervous breakdown in the nearby village of Styles St. Mary; male.

Setting

1917, England. Styles Court, a country estate, outside the village of Styles St. Mary.

Set

Drawing room at Styles Court. French doors lead to the unseen dining room off SR. At SL, stairs and a landing lead to the balcony and the bedrooms. The upstage wall contains two open archways, each of which leads to an entrance into the drawing room. The USR arch leads to the kitchen. The USL arch leads to a front hallway, which leads to other rooms in the estate. A fireplace is present USC between the two archways. There is a sofa flanked on either end by small matching tables. There are several wing chairs, a sofa table, and a secretary downstage of the dining room French doors. The second level includes a balcony with a guardrail extending the length of the three visible bedrooms. Cynthia Murdoch's room is located far SR. Mrs. Inglethorp's room is CS. Alfred's room is far SL. Two open archways at either end of the balcony lead to additional unseen rooms. The archway SR leads to Lawrence's and Arthur's rooms. The archway at SL leads to John's and Mary's rooms. A small portion of the exterior façade of the estate might be represented by a partial cutaway stone wall. Two stone garden benches are placed far DSL and DSR with matching potted cypress trees.

NOTE: During two scenes of the play, action occurs *inside* the upstairs bedrooms of Cynthia, Mrs. Inglethorp, and Alfred. Though not necessary, it would be most helpful to have at minimum the interior of the center room (Mrs. Inglethorp's) capable of being at least partially seen. The action does not

need to be crystal clear and may benefit from an indistinct quality. For this reason, a scrim or partial scrim is recommended for the center bedroom.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I

Scene 1: Thursday, July 5, 1917, early afternoon.

Scene 2: Tuesday, July 17, late afternoon. The following morning, 5 a.m.

Scene 3: Wednesday, July 18, later the same morning.

Scene 4: Monday afternoon, July 23.

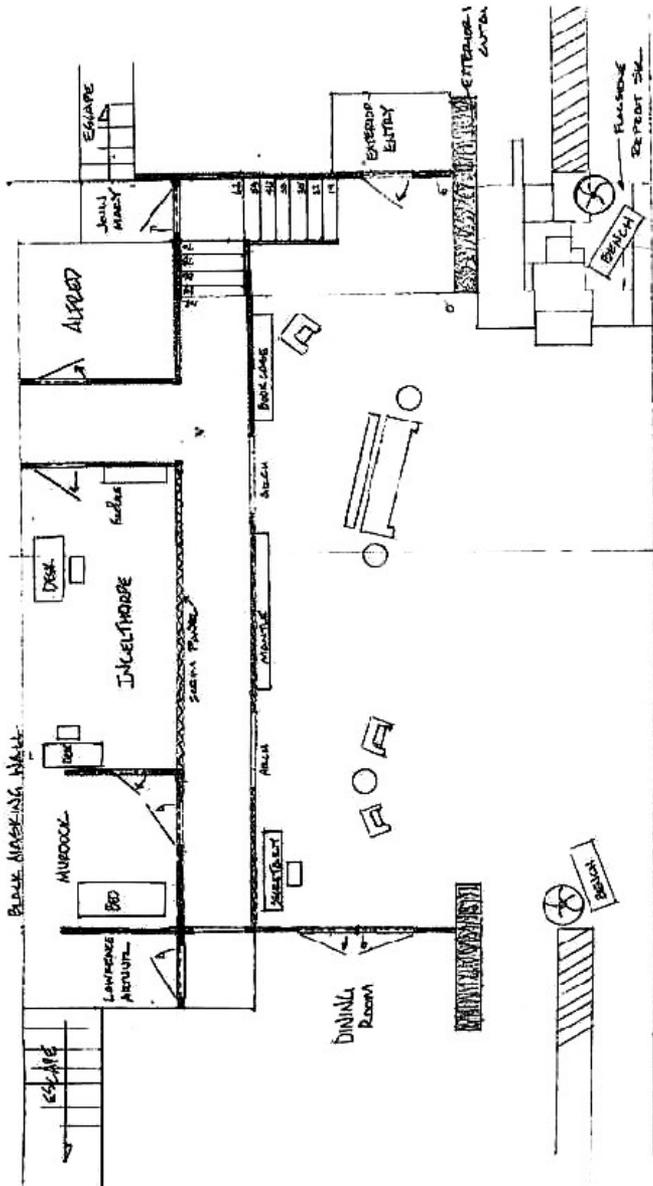
Intermission

ACT II

Scene 1: Two months later.

Scene 2: Several days later.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles



Props

Vase of peonies
Small ornamental cypress tree in a large pot
Pruning shears
Suitcase, for Arthur
Gardening gloves, for Evelyn
Hospital smock with green armlets, for Mary
Gardening gloves, for Mary
Tea service
White hospital apron and cap, for Cynthia
Serving tray
Suitcase, for Evelyn
Coffee service
Hand fan
Purple dispatch case
Candlestick with pink candle
Nightclothes for cast
Pry bar
Hammer
Brandy glass
2 Keys
Watch, for Arthur
Gloves, for Poirot
Small inspection bag
Envelope
Small pair of forceps
Tiny fragment of dark green fabric
Small cardboard box
Small notebook
Pen
Charred fragment
Letter
Bucket
Suitcase, for Alfred
Book of poetry
Empty flask
Brown bottle of water
Small box
Small vial
3 Thin strips of paper

Sound Effects

Clock striking five

Doorbell

**“Our criminal is very intelligent, Monsieur,
but we must be more intelligent.
We must be so intelligent
that he does not suspect us
of being intelligent at all.”**

—Poirot

ACT I

Scene I

(AT RISE: *The drawing room of Styles Court, early afternoon. Thursday, July 5, 1917. Inside, Dorcas is tending to a vase of peonies. Outside DSL, Evelyn Howard is pruning a small ornamental cypress tree in a large earthenware pot. John Cavendish enters, escorting Captain Arthur Hastings from DSR, in front of the manor. Arthur is carrying a suitcase.*)

JOHN: *(To Arthur.)* Mother will be delighted to see you again after all these years.

ARTHUR: And you're certain she won't mind my barging in?

JOHN: I've told you Mother is a great benefactress. I visited with her a couple of days ago about your coming. As I knew she would be, she's very pleased to offer you respite at Styles during your leave. Anything for the war effort, you know.

ARTHUR: She keeps busy then? She's well?

JOHN: Oh, yes. I suppose you know that she's married again?

EVELYN: *(Having heard the men approach.)* And a rotten little bugger he is, too. Making life jolly difficult for us all, he is.

JOHN: And a gracious good afternoon to you as well, Evie.

EVELYN: *(To Arthur.)* A soldier, are you, then? From the Great War?

JOHN: Captain Arthur Hastings is an old friend home from the Front. Used to spend some time here as a boy.

ARTHUR: *(To Evelyn.)* John rescued me from a rather depressing convalescent home, I'm afraid.

JOHN: *(To Evelyn.)* He's consented to stay with us at Styles during his sick leave. *(Introducing.)* Arthur, Miss Evelyn Howard—Mother's longtime companion, great sport, jack of all trades, you see.

ARTHUR: *(Extending his hand, which Evelyn does not take.)*

Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Howard.

EVELYN: Weeds grow like house afire. Can't keep even with 'em. Shall press you in. Better be careful, then.

ARTHUR: I'm sure I shall be only too delighted to make myself useful. Not completely an invalid, you know.

EVELYN: No, no. But don't say it. Wish you hadn't later.

JOHN: You're a cynic, Evie. Where's tea today? Inside or out?

EVELYN: In. Warming up too quickly to be supping tea out.

JOHN: Come on, then. You've done enough gardening for the day. "The laborer is worthy of his hire," you know. Come in and be refreshed.

EVELYN: Well, I'm inclined to agree with you. Be in, then, in a moment.

JOHN: All right, then.

(Arthur and John exit DSL. Watching Arthur and John exit, Evelyn removes her gardening gloves. She then picks up her pruning shears, clips one final branch, and exits SL. Arthur and John enter the house USL. Arthur deposits his suitcase on the staircase landing.)

ARTHUR: Styles is such a glorious old place. It's just as I remembered. It hasn't changed a whit.

JOHN: Mother's not one inclined to change things up. *(Sees Dorcas.)* Oh, Dorcas, I'd like you to meet Captain Arthur Hastings, an old friend. He'll be spending some time with us here while on convalescent leave.

DORCAS: *(To Arthur, curtsying.)* How do you do, sir?

ARTHUR: Very well, thank you.

DORCAS: And may I say, Captain, it's a pleasure to have you at Styles. Very proud of you all, you know. It's a horrible thing, it is. Don't know why they call it a "great" war at all.

JOHN: Dorcas, might we get some tea?

DORCAS: Oh, of course, Mr. Cavendish, just preparing it now.

(Dorcas exits into the kitchen SR.)

JOHN: You see about not changing things up? I remember Dorcas chasing me through the fields when I was just a boy. *(Crossing to sit, followed by Arthur.)* But you're right about Styles. It's a fine property. It'll be mine someday. Should be mine now by rights, if Father had only made a decent will. Then I wouldn't be so hard up as I am now.

ARTHUR: Hard up, are you, then?

JOHN: My dear Hastings, I don't mind telling you that I'm at my wit's end for money.

ARTHUR: But I thought your practice was rather sufficient?

JOHN: I gave up being a barrister some years ago...settled into the more congenial life of a country squire. After I wed Mary, we settled here for want of funds, planning on acquiring a home of our own in due time. But it's been two years now, and Mother has certainly shown no sign of loosening the purse strings.

ARTHUR: Couldn't your brother help you?

JOHN: Lawrence? I thought you knew. Despite his qualifications as a doctor, he relinquished the profession of medicine some years ago. He continues to live at Styles and pursue literary ambitions.

ARTHUR: A poet, then? Something to be said for following his heart.

JOHN: Hardly. He's gone through every penny he ever had publishing rotten verses in fancy bindings. No, we're an impecunious lot. Mother's been awfully good to us, though, I must say. That is, up to now.

ARTHUR: This fellow, your stepfather, now—

JOHN: Please. He's no father of mine, step or otherwise. Alfred...Alfred Inglethorp. Turned up from nowhere on the pretext of being a second cousin or something of Evie's, though she's never seemed particularly keen to acknowledge the relationship. The fellow's an absolute outsider. Anyone can see that. But Mother cottoned to him

at once...took him on as secretary. You know how she's always running a hundred societies.

ARTHUR: Yes.

JOHN: Well, of course, the war has turned the hundreds into thousands. No doubt the fellow has been 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 20 years younger than she! It's simply barefaced fortune-hunting. But there you are. She's her own mistress, and she's gone and married him.

ARTHUR: It must be a difficult situation for you all.

JOHN: Difficult? It's damnable! The resentment I felt when Father married Emily after my real mother died! And now, the same situation, though much worse, with her taking up with this Inglethorp fellow.

[END OF FREEVIEW]