

Background

The Mysterious Affair at Styles is a detective novel by Agatha Christie. It was written in the middle of World War I, in 1916. This was Christie's first published novel, introducing Hercule Poirot, Inspector (later, Chief Inspector) Japp, and Arthur Hastings. Poirot, a Belgian refugee of the Great War, is settling in England near the home of Emily Inglethorp, who helped him to his new life. His friend Hastings arrives as a guest at her home. When the woman is killed, Poirot uses his detective skills to solve the mystery.

1. Every one was assembled in the dining-room. Under the circumstances, we were naturally not a cheerful party. The reaction after a shock is always trying, and I think we were all suffering from it. Decorum and good breeding naturally enjoined that our **demeanour** should be much as usual, yet I could not help wondering if this self-control were really a matter of great difficulty. There were no red eyes, no signs of secretly indulged grief. I felt that I was right in my opinion that Dorcas was the person most affected by the personal side of the tragedy.
2. I passed over Alfred Inglethorp, who acted the bereaved widower in a manner that I felt to be disgusting in its hypocrisy. Did he know that we suspected him, I wondered. Surely he could not be unaware of the fact, conceal it as we would. Did he feel some secret stirring of fear, or was he confident that his crime would go unpunished? Surely the suspicion in the atmosphere must warn him that he was already a marked man.
3. But did every one suspect him? What about Mrs. Cavendish? I watched her as she sat at the head of the table, graceful, composed, enigmatic. In her soft grey frock, with white ruffles at the wrists falling over her slender hands, she looked very beautiful. When she chose, however, her face could be sphinx-like in its **inscrutability**. She was very silent, hardly opening her lips, and yet in some queer way I felt that the great strength of her personality was dominating us all.
4. And little Cynthia? Did she suspect? She looked very tired and ill, I thought. The heaviness and languor of her manner were very **marked**. I asked her if she were feeling ill, and she answered frankly: "Yes, I've got the most beastly headache."
5. "Have another cup of coffee, mademoiselle?" said Poirot solicitously. "It will revive you. It is unparalleled for the mal de tete." He jumped up and took her cup.
6. "No sugar," said Cynthia, watching him, as he picked up the sugar-tongs.
7. "No sugar? You abandon it in the war-time, eh?"
8. "No, I never take it in coffee."
9. "Sacre!" murmured Poirot to himself, as he brought back the replenished cup.
10. Only I heard him, and glancing up curiously at the little man I saw that his face was working with suppressed

excitement, and his eyes were as green as a cat's. He had heard or seen something that had affected him strongly--but what was it? I do not usually label myself as dense, but I must confess that nothing out of the ordinary had attracted my attention.

11. In another moment, the door opened and Dorcas appeared. "Mr. Wells to see you, sir," she said to John.
12. I remembered the name as being that of the lawyer to whom Mrs. Inglethorp had written the night before.
13. John rose immediately. "Show him into my study." Then he turned to us. "My mother's lawyer," he explained. And in a lower voice: "He is also Coroner--you understand. Perhaps you would like to come with me?"
14. We **acquiesced** and followed him out of the room. John strode on ahead and I took the opportunity of whispering to Poirot: "There will be an inquest then?"
15. Poirot nodded absently. He seemed absorbed in thought; so much so that my curiosity was aroused.
16. "What is it? You are not attending to what I say."
17. "It is true, my friend. I am much worried."
18. "Why?"
19. "Because Mademoiselle Cynthia does not take sugar in her coffee."
20. "What? You cannot be serious?"
21. "But I am most serious. Ah, there is something there that I do not understand. My instinct was right."
22. "What instinct?"
23. "The instinct that led me to insist on examining those coffee-cups. Chut! no more now!"
24. We followed John into his study, and he closed the door behind us.
25. Mr. Wells was a pleasant man of middle-age, with keen eyes, and the typical lawyer's mouth. John introduced us both, and explained the reason of our presence.
26. "You will understand, Wells," he added, "that this is all strictly private. We are still hoping that there will turn out to be no need for investigation of any kind."
27. "Quite so, quite so," said Mr. Wells soothingly. "I wish we could have spared you the pain and publicity of an inquest, but of course it's quite unavoidable in the absence of a doctor's certificate."