Agatha Christie®

Hercule Poirot's Silent Night

THE NEW HERCULE POIROT MYSTERY

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Contents

PROLOGUE

New Year's Eve 1931

My experiment was not working. I laid down my pen and considered tearing the sheet of paper into strips. In the end, I crushed it into a jagged ball, aimed it at the fire that was blazing in the grate, and missed.

Hercule Poirot, sitting across the room from me, looked up from the book he was reading. 'Your endeavour displeases you, *mon ami*?'

'Dismal failure.'

'Try placing an unmarked page in front of you. Immediately, your mind will produce better ideas.' His green eyes darted to and fro between the neat pile of paper on the corner of his desk and the crumpled ball of my failed project, which stood out prominently against the backdrop of his otherwise pristine London drawing room.

I knew what he was thinking: on my way to get more paper, I would surely take the opportunity to rectify the disorder that was entirely of my creation. Hercule Poirot is not a man who can tolerate anything in his immediate

vicinity being in the wrong place for more than . . . how long? If I did nothing, would it be seconds or minutes before he asked me to tidy up the mess I had made?

Determined not to tarnish my record as an exemplary guest, I moved quickly. My second attempt landed the offending object in the fire where it belonged. I returned to my armchair without availing myself of a clean sheet of paper. 'You do not wish to try again?' said Poirot. 'You are giving up on your—what did you call it?—your "top hole" idea?'

'Some ideas are appealing only until one tries to make them a reality,' I said. My mistake had been to try to turn mine into after-dinner entertainment, when it was clear to me now that any species of fun was the very last thing it should be.

'Perhaps you could tell me what you had in mind, if it is no longer to be the great surprise—?'

'It was nothing, really.' I was too embarrassed to discuss it. 'I shall prepare a crossword puzzle instead.'

'Such secrecy.' Shaking his head, Poirot leaned back in his chair. 'Always, when I think about secrets, I shall remember the words of Miss Verity Hunt in her bright red evening gown. Do you recall them, Catchpool?'

'Unfortunately, yes.' I considered Miss Hunt's supposedly sage advice to be quite the most ludicrous bilge I had ever heard.

Predictably, Poirot repeated the irritating axiom, perhaps in the hope of provoking me: '"Whatever you most wish to keep hidden, steel yourself for the ordeal ahead and then

tell it to the whole world. At once, you will be free." This is, I think, great wisdom.'

'It's codswallop,' I said. 'You will be free only from the secrecy—which you chose in the first place because you preferred it to all the things you *won't* be free of for very long if you reveal all: endless interference and pestering from every quarter, no doubt. And that is if you are not breaking the law. In the case of a criminal—let us say, a murderer—you would hardly be free from the hangman, would you, if you announced that you were the guilty party?'

Poirot nodded. 'I too am considering the case of a murderer.'

Neither of us spoke the name of the one who was still very much in our minds.

'It is true,' he said. 'Once the crimes were committed, subterfuge became necessary in order to evade justice. But I wonder . . . Without the determination to keep the terrible secret at all costs there would have been no motive to commit any murders at all.'

'Say that again, Poirot.' I thought I must have misheard.

'It is obvious: if the killer had not decided that it was worth committing two murders in order to keep the secret hidden—'

'That is quite wrong,' I interrupted, unable to contain my protest. His mistaken pronouncement was as intolerable to me as my paper ball on the floor had been to him. 'The motive for the murders was not a fear of other people finding out. That wasn't it at all.'

'What fit of delusion is this? Of course that was the reason!'

'No, it was not.'

Poirot looked alarmed. 'I do not understand your meaning, *mon ami*. Do you not recall hearing with your own ears when the killer confirmed—?'

'As clearly as you do.' It was little more than a week ago that Poirot had removed all need for further deception on the part of the murderer by revealing the full facts of the case himself, in his inimitable fashion. His deductions had been correct in every detail, and yet . . . how fascinating and frustrating that he was so wrong about the *why* of it all—and that his mistake should only now become apparent, eight days later.

I searched his face for signs that he was amusing himself by testing me, and found none; he meant every word of it. How extraordinary.

I fell silent for a while, assuming he must be right and I wrong. Traditionally, that was the way we did it. Could this be an unprecedented deviation from that general principle? The more I tossed the question around, the more certain I was: the Norfolk murders that Poirot had just solved so brilliantly were not committed in order to keep the killer's secret. To believe this was to misunderstand, profoundly, what had taken place at St Walstan's Hospital and at Frellingsloe House between 8 September and Christmas.

I hurried to Poirot's desk and took four sheets from the top of the stack of clean paper. I have written, so far, an

account of every case that Poirot has solved with my (infinitely flawed but always devoted) help. I had not yet started on my retelling of the Norfolk murders, however. Until this moment, it had felt too soon to do so.

There were still a few hours before dinner. I would not normally embark upon something so important at the very end of a departing year but I was unwilling to wait a second longer. Silently, I said to myself, 'Let the wise reader be the judge of whether or not secrecy was the motive.' Then I picked up my pen, and went all the way back to the beginning . . .

19 DECEMBER 1931

CHAPTER 1

An Unwelcome Visitor

Poirot and I were debating the relative merits of turkey and duck, and which should feature in our Christmas luncheon, when there came a knock at the door of his Whitehaven Mansions drawing room. 'Enter!' he said.

I was grateful for the pause. It would give me time to consider whether I had done all I could and might now reasonably concede defeat. I had been making the case for turkey, but the truth was that I preferred duck. A strong belief in the importance of tradition had compelled me to argue against my own personal taste. Since Poirot was the one who would be hosting our Christmas festivities, he should probably be allowed to have his way—this was the conclusion I reached as George, Poirot's valet, leaned somewhat awkwardly into the room.

'I apologize for the interruption, sir, but a lady is here to see you. She has no appointment but says it is a matter of the utmost importance. She believes it cannot wait, not even until tomorrow.'

'I can leave—' I said, half out of my chair.

'No, no, Catchpool. Stay. I am not inclined to receive an unexpected visitor this afternoon. I have noticed that, since the American stock market unpleasantness, most people are unable to measure accurately the urgency of their predicament.'

We at Scotland Yard had noticed the same thing, I told him.

'They come to my door insisting that they must have the help of Hercule Poirot. *Eh bien*, I listen patiently, and usually there is nothing more than an easily resolvable misunderstanding—a trivial altercation with a business associate or something of that nature. Nothing to confound or delight the little grey cells.'

'Yes. Trifles are magnified and viewed as disasters,' I said, thinking of the woman who had barged into my office two weeks earlier, demanding that I investigate the 'robbery' of her spectacles. She telephoned the next day to tell me that the unknown miscreant had replaced them in the pocket of her gardening coat; in other words, she had deposited them there herself and forgotten all about it. 'Please consider the matter closed,' she had said briskly, unaware that this had been my resolution from the moment I first laid eyes upon her.

I felt satisfaction swell in my chest as it did each time I reminded myself that I was a mere two days into a two-week holiday from my job at Scotland Yard.

'What shall I tell Mrs Surtees?' George asked Poirot. 'That is the name of your visitor: Enid Surtees.'

As he repeated the name, I found myself wishing I were

elsewhere. Something inside my chest had tightened. *Enid Surtees*. How extraordinary: I had no idea who she was, but I was absolutely certain that I wanted George to give her her marching orders. Had I heard mention of her somewhere? A feeling of dread had come upon me. It was warm in Poirot's drawing room as it always was, yet the back of my neck was suddenly cold, as if something had breathed a chill over me.

I stayed in my chair. Nothing, after all, had happened. One thing was beyond doubt: I did not know a woman by the name of Enid Surtees.

'Show her in, Georges,' said Poirot. Once the valet had left the room, he said, 'It was your evident reluctance that decided the matter in her favour, Catchpool. She is known to you, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'No.'

'Ah. Now I am curious. Your face tells a different story. Well, we shall soon see. Perhaps you have broken another young woman's heart.' He chuckled.

'I have broken no women's hearts, ever.'

'*Mais ce n'est pas vrai*. What about Fee Spring? She—'

'Some women break their own hearts quite . . . unilaterally,' I said. 'If heart-breaking is an active pursuit, I can assure you that I have never deliberately engaged in it.'

'Ah. That is what you think, is it, my friend?'

'A few amiable chats with a waitress—nothing more, and unavoidable if one wishes to be served coffee in her establishment—and she takes it upon herself, without any encouragement, to—'

My summation for the defence was interrupted by a knock from George. The door opened and a woman walked in, wrapped in a navy blue woollen hat, coat and scarf. Efficiently, she began to divest herself of all three. George scooped them up from the arm of the sofa and retreated, closing the drawing-room door behind him.

My mouth must have dropped open. I could not help making an undignified noise that no letters of the alphabet can adequately convey.

Poirot rose to his feet and extended a hand, which was promptly shaken by the infuriating wretch of an intruder. (Did I know her? Oh, I knew her, all right!)

'Good afternoon, Madame Surtees.'

She was tall and bony, with gold-coloured hair, a square, pale face and piercingly bright blue eyes. She looked, to quote her own favoured refrain line, 'not a day older than sixty—because I have always avoided the sun, you see, Edward. You should think about doing the same, or your face and neck will be as leathery as your father's by the time you are forty.' In fact she was much closer to seventy than sixty. She would celebrate her seventieth birthday in March the following year.

Her name was not Enid Surtees.

'Hello, Mother,' I said.

'*Pardon?*' said Poirot. '*La mère?*' He turned from me to her. 'You are—?'

'My name is Cynthia Catchpool, Monsieur Poirot. I am Edward's mother, for my sins. I'm afraid I had to resort to dishonesty in order to secure an audience with you. Enid Surtees is an acquaintance of mine.'

Of course. That was where I had heard the name before. It was recited to me amid a flurry of others as part of Mother's lobbying for me to spend Christmas with her and a collection of complete strangers in a tiny village in Norfolk that 'really does feel as if it's beyond the end of the world, Edward. It's so charming.'

As far as I could see, there was no 'beyond' once one had reached the end of the world. It sounded appalling. Lately I had noticed that I was growing ever more reluctant to leave London. Life and vitality seemed to stop, or at least to struggle for breath, when one strayed too far outside that great city.

And life contained no greater struggle, for me at least, than time spent in the company of my mother. I was already trapped in the cast-iron tradition of joining her for a summer holiday in Great Yarmouth each summer. Nothing would induce me to add a winter ordeal to my filial burden. I knew that if I indulged her once, Mother would expect it to happen every year without fail. I had not spent a Christmas Day with either of my parents since I was eighteen years old and I had no wish to start now.

My first firm 'No, thank you' had apparently gone unheard. Eagerly, Mother had continued with her campaign, speaking loudly over my attempts to draw my dissent to her attention. She had listed the people who would be there, in Munby-on-Sea—Enid Surtees was one of them—and hooted about what a marvellous Christmas we would all spend together, playing games I had never heard of before ('Much more mischievous and provocative than anything

I could invent, I'm sure!') in what had to be the most beautiful mansion in England: 'Truly stunning. A jewel! A work of art, one might say. Frellingsloe House, known as Frelly to its friends—and soon you'll be one of them, Edward! Its position is at the very farthest tip of the Norfolk coast, on the edge of a rather dramatic cliff. There's a path that leads directly from the back door to steps that take you down to a little beach. Perfect for you! I know how you love to plunge yourself into icy cold water. Oh, and the views from the house are splendid. You can see all the way to . . . whichever country is over there, across the sea.' She had waved in a random direction. Then her face had contorted. 'This might be your last chance to see Frelly, darling.'

'Seeing a house I didn't know existed until a moment ago is not a particular ambition of mine,' I had told her.

'It's awfully sad,' Mother went on. 'Poor old Frelly is doomed, I'm afraid—though only because everybody is giving up far too easily. The coastal disintegration in that part of Norfolk is simply atrocious. It has something to do with the clay of the cliff. I can't think why no one has made it their mission to replace the faulty clay with a better kind. There must be some somewhere. It is surely not past the wit of man to find it and bring it to Munby. They all need to stop shilly-shallying and jolly well *do* something, or else poor Frelly will soon tumble into the water and be washed away. I would sort it out myself, except . . . well, it's hardly my place. Besides, I don't know the first thing about clay. And it's so hard to know how to raise the matter

for a proper discussion when no one in the family ever mentions it. They're all thinking about it, though, every minute of the day. Dread of the approaching tragedy hovers over everything. The experts have said Frelly has three to four years left at most.'

Nothing she said had sounded remotely enticing—not the ill-fated house that was about to be swallowed up by the waves, nor the atmosphere of looming disaster that, according to Mother, pervaded the endangered building's every crevice and cubbyhole. Assuming I would find her dramatic descriptions as irresistible as she herself did (she contrived not to notice that I had my own mind and tastes and was not merely a younger, male replica of her), she went on to list every delectable, gruesome detail that she could think of in connection with Frellingsloe House and its inhabitants: one member of the family was dying of a rare kind of cancer; two sisters lived in the house who hated each other; their parents would never forgive the parents of their husbands (I did not ask why. Too many generations of too many clans seemed to be involved. One would have needed to be a genealogist to keep up.) And the local doctor, who had taken a room at Frellingsloe House, was probably in love with the matriarch of the family, 'or at least, he is evidently not in love with the woman to whom he is engaged to be married. It's very peculiar, Edward.' Meanwhile, the matriarch, whose name I could not recall (perhaps she was Enid Surtees) was 'definitely up to something' with the house's other lodger, a young curate.

Mother had also muttered something about a financial predicament, the cause of which was mysterious, she had implied—though it perhaps explained the presence in the house of two paying lodgers.

Listening in horror to the details of the venal-sounding muddle that she hoped to inflict upon me for the entirety of the Christmas holiday, I had quickly hatched a scheme to fend her off. I invented a prior arrangement that I hoped would act as an obstacle of immovable solidity: I had been invited to spend Christmas with Poirot, I told her. Furthermore, I had accepted. It was all arranged. (This became true soon afterwards, once I had dropped a hint or two.)

'If you will permit me to say, Madame Catchpool . . .' The hard edge in Poirot's voice brought me back to our present predicament. 'Many people would object to a visitor who gains entry under false pretences. I am one such person.'

'And for that I commend you.' Mother beamed her approval at him. 'I too would object most strongly.' She sat herself down in the chair nearest to the fire. 'I much prefer to tell the truth wherever possible, but . . . well, I know you understand how complicated life can be, Monsieur Poirot. You of all people! I've read every word Edward has written about your exploits together, so I know you're not above bending the truth if it furthers your cause. If I had given my real name, my son would have urged you to shoo me away. I'm sure you are unaware, but I have been asking to meet you for years. Edward has given me all manner of excuses as to why it cannot happen. He likes to keep

everything separate. I imagine he thinks that you might find me a little . . . *de trop*, as you and your French compatriots would say.'

'I am not French, madame. I am—'

'Shall we arrange for your man to bring us some tea?' Mother rattled on. She turned and looked expectantly at the closed drawing-room door. 'And perhaps a little bite of something delicious? And then we can get down to business—for we must soon be on our way.'

'On our way where?' I said. 'What business?'

'Christmas. You can stamp your foot all you like, Edward, but there is nothing to be done about it: you and Monsieur Poirot will not, I am afraid, be able to spend Christmas together here in this . . . room.' She looked up at the ceiling, then over at the window. I wondered if she was comparing the size of Poirot's living quarters with the larger and grander Frellingsloe House, or perhaps with her own home: the vast, damp farmhouse in Kent where I spent my childhood, whose wooden beams might as well have been prison bars.

'Never mind,' she said brightly. 'There will be plenty of other Christmases when you will both be able to do as you please—Edward likes to suit himself and I expect you do too, Monsieur Poirot. This year, however, you shall spend Christmas with me in Munby-on-Sea.'

Out of the question, I said silently and forcefully to myself. Christmas with Poirot at Whitehaven Mansions was the part of my two-week holiday to which I was most looking forward.

'Do not bother to cavil, Edward,' said Mother. 'You will both come back with me this afternoon, once we have finished our tea and cakes. Monsieur Poirot will insist upon it, once he has heard my story.'

I wondered if she expected Poirot to conjure up a selection of cakes from a desk drawer.

'*Quelle histoire*, madame? What story?'

'The one about Stanley Niven,' Mother said pointedly, as if we ought to know who this was. As far as I could remember, his had not been one of the names on the list of those participating in the Norfolk Christmas ordeal. 'It is causing great distress to everybody, and I mean to put a stop to it,' she went on. 'What was I supposed to do? Sit and stare out of my window at the endless, crashing waves, knowing that in London my son was in the company of the very man—the only man in the world, I dare say—who is sure to be able to help us?'

From this, I gathered that Mother was already installed at Frellingsloe House well in advance of Christmas, since no waves were observable from her home in Kent. I wondered if she and my father had given up spending any time at all together under the same roof. I would not, I thought, blame either of them if that were the case.

'Who is Stanley Niven?' Poirot asked. 'Of what problem is he the cause?'

'Oh, the man himself is no longer bothering anyone—though he must have done so at one time or another, or he would not have been bashed about the head with a heavy vase,' said Mother.

'Monsieur Niven was attacked?'

'More than attacked. He was murdered. Now, Mr Niven himself is not important at all. He is a complete stranger, and neither here nor there. However, by getting himself murdered where he did—in that room on that ward—he has created a substantial problem for a very good friend of mine. For her whole family, in fact.'

How typical of Mother, I reflected, to believe that a man's murder only mattered if it adversely affected her and her friends.

'Monsieur Niven was murdered in a hospital?' asked Poirot.

'Yes, a little place just outside Munby-on-Sea: St Walstan's Cottage Hospital. Where lives are supposed to be saved,' Mother added pointedly, as if Stanley Niven's unfortunate fate proved the fundamental unsoundness of the whole institution. 'As far as I can tell, the staff at St Walstan's have come up with *no* ideas that might result in the catching of the murderer, and neither have the Norfolk constabulary.' She threw up her hands. 'Both are hoping the other lot will sort it out. Munby people are peculiar, Monsieur Poirot. They don't seem motivated to *do* anything about anything. I wonder if it's living so near to the sea that makes them that way. On the coast, one is constantly reminded that one can *go no further*.' She nodded, in full agreement with herself as usual. 'What could be more dispiriting? Human life is forced to stop where the land stops.'

'Unless one has a boat,' I said. 'If you hate the coast so much, why must we go to Great Yarmouth every year?'

'Oh, *summer* on the Norfolk coast is a completely different story,' she replied briskly. 'Will you kindly accompany me to Munby, Monsieur Poirot? You and Edward? You are so desperately needed there. Stanley Niven was murdered on 8 September, and the police don't know any more now than they did on that day. It is pitiful! The case has still not been solved, more than three months later. And my friend Vivienne has been subjected to intolerable anguish, which is most unfair given that, as I say, Mr Niven is a complete stranger to her and to all of us. If only he had been murdered elsewhere . . . but he was not.' Mother sighed. 'He was killed on Ward 6 of St Walstan's Hospital, and poor Vivienne is in a quite terrible state about it.'

'Why, if this Niven chap was a stranger to her?' I asked. 'Why is your friend so distressed by his having been murdered at this particular hospital?'

'If I explain now, we shall miss our train,' said Mother. 'We need to make haste. As soon as we have had our tea—' she glanced again at the closed drawing-room door, '—we must depart. That is, if you are in agreement, Monsieur Poirot? Do, please, assure me that I can count on your help in this matter.'

CHAPTER 2

An Unplanned Trip to Norfolk

Two hours and forty-five minutes later, Poirot, Mother and I were on a train bound for Norfolk. So much for my always suiting myself. Did she really believe that about me? It was precisely what I thought about her: she always got what she wanted—even, on this occasion, maddeningly, cakes, tea and the benefit of Poirot's finest china, thanks to his ever-resourceful valet, George.

I had been sure until the very last moment that Poirot was minded to decline her request. I knew only too well the expression that his face assumed when he was preparing to say no to somebody, being so often the person to whom he said it. At a certain juncture, however, Mother had said something that had aroused his interest. I watched it happen. The light in his eyes changed. I could not work out what had made the difference.

She had been talking about Stanley Niven, the murder victim, who, according to Mother, had possessed a sunny nature and a generous and delightful temperament. At the

time of his death, he was sixty-eight years old and had a doting family and no enemies to speak of. He was the favourite patient of every doctor and every nurse at St Walstan's Cottage Hospital, always laughing and offering encouragement to others in spite of his own health troubles. His happiness was such that one could not help but feel jolly in his presence, no matter what mood one might have been in before encountering him. At sixty-eight, he was retired, but before that he had been a post office master in Cromer, where his customers and employees could not have been more devoted to him.

Mother had turned her stern gaze upon me at this point in her description of Mr Niven. 'A man like that is not supposed to get murdered, Edward: a cheerful, popular man who has worked hard his whole life and who endures poor health with great fortitude and a smile on his face. Really, you and your friends at Scotland Yard must deliver a clear message to the nation's rogues: if they insist on depriving people of their lives, they must choose more deserving candidates. Of course, taking another person's life is always wrong. You do not need to tell me that, Edward—I was the one who taught you about right and wrong, if you recall. But the fact is that not all crimes are equally heinous. What is this great nation coming to, really, when a man like Stanley Niven is not safe? Not that I care about him personally, you understand.'

'Yes, you have made that very clear,' I said. 'You care only insofar as it inconveniences your friend Vivienne.'

'Not only her,' said Mother. 'The whole family is affected.

And it goes far beyond inconvenience, Edward, so please do not be flippant. Vivienne is . . . why, in the three months since the murder, she has become a mere shell of a person. It is terrifying to observe. Of course Stanley Niven's death matters to *somebody somewhere*—I do not doubt that. I never intended to suggest otherwise. You are determined, as ever, to interpret everything I say in the most uncharitable manner possible.'

Poirot had asked her to explain the connection between the murder in the hospital and her friend's anguish: 'Why has your friend Vivienne become a shell in great distress?'

'Because if this crime is not solved before the start of the new year, then her husband might be murdered too—or at least, that is what Vivienne believes. And she herself will certainly go quite mad. Irretrievably so, I fear. Shall I explain, Monsieur Poirot? I might as well tell you a little of the story while we eat our cake.'

Poirot had not replied straight away. Instead, he had muttered to himself, 'One could not help but feel jolly in his presence.' Then he had smoothed down his moustaches with his fingers and stared fixedly at the china teapot on the small table between us. Shortly afterwards he said with a sigh, 'It appears that we must change our plans, Catchpool, and accompany your mother to Norfolk.'

Was it her reference to the jollity inspired by Stanley Niven that had made up his mind? If so, I could not see the relevance of it. No further explanations were offered—of anything, by anybody—and a flurry of preparations for travel followed. Now, as the train transported us to Norfolk,

I was still every bit as baffled as I had been in Poirot's drawing room about why Stanley Niven's unsolved murder was ruining the life of Mother's friend Vivienne and causing her to fear that her husband would be murdered too.

As a ruthless wind howled through our carriage, I clung to the one consolation that had been thrown to me: Poirot's declaration, as he had donned his hat and coat to depart for the railway station, that 'What the Norfolk constabulary has failed to achieve in three months and eleven days, I shall endeavour to bring to a close in . . . let us say, ten hours.' He smiled. 'Not counting the time that I am asleep, naturally. The murder was committed on a hospital ward? *Eh bien*, some questions asked of the nurses there, more at the police station . . . Some answers given—true ones, or lies, probably both. Then to sit quietly and let the little grey cells do their work. It might, from start to end, take me as many as fifteen hours to make sense of what has occurred. It is unlikely to take longer than that.'

To Mother he had said, 'Be in no doubt, madame: I shall solve the murder of Stanley Niven and return home in a matter of days. Catchpool and I will spend Christmas *chez Poirot*, as arranged.'

'No, no,' she had waved his words away. 'That won't do at all. You will stay until at least the day after Boxing Day.'

Now she took the opportunity to drive her message home: 'Boxing Day is the very soonest that you will be permitted to leave, Monsieur Poirot,' she said firmly. 'It is better that you know that from the outset. Oh, I have no doubt that you will make short work of solving the

crime—but, you see, your visit to Munby has *two* purposes, and solving the murder at St Walstan's Cottage Hospital is only one of them. Both are equally important.'

'Catchpool, if you would be so kind as to close the window that is open in the next carriage?' said Poirot. 'This gale does its best to blow my moustaches from my face, all the way back to Whitehaven Mansions. There is certainly a window open somewhere, and since all the ones I can see are closed . . .'

I did as he asked; he was, of course, correct.

'So Stanley Niven had undergone surgery at St Walstan's Hospital immediately before he was killed?' Poirot was asking Mother when I returned.

'Yes,' she said. 'Though don't ask me what for. All I know is that he was expected to recover. His case was quite different from Arnold's.'

'Who is Arnold?' asked Poirot.

'Vivienne's husband. They will be our hosts in Munby: Arnold and Vivienne Laurier. Frellingsloe House belongs to them.'

'Arnold is also sick?' said Poirot.

'Dying,' I guessed aloud. Mother had certainly told me that a member of the Laurier family was terminally ill.

'Yes, the poor man has very little time left,' she confirmed. 'Dr Osgood—he is Arnold's doctor and also his and Vivienne's lodger—has said that Arnold has another three to six months at most.'

Even less time than his house has left, I reflected.

'And he is soon to be moved to St Walstan's, where he

will spend the remainder of his life,' said Mother. 'On Ward 6, in fact. That is why this is such a pressing problem.'

'The last thing this Arnold fellow must want is two more houseguests,' I said. 'Two strangers.'

'Oh, Hercule Poirot is anything but a stranger in Arnold's mind. That's why the two of you are going to stay until after Boxing—'

'*Non*, madame—'

'Until the day after Boxing Day. Yes, Monsieur Poirot. That will be Arnold's special treat, you see, to replace the one that you're about to deprive him of. But this new treat will be so much better: his last Christmas at his beloved Frelly, not only with his family but with his great *hero*.' She whispered the last word with especial reverence.

'What is Frelly?' Poirot asked.

'It's a ridiculous pet name for the house—Frellingsloe House—that you and I are under no obligation to use,' I told him.

'Oh, Edward, don't be such a sourpuss,' Mother snapped.

'Madame . . . you said that I am about to deprive Monsieur Laurier of a treat. What did you mean?'

'Oh, he will not mind at all! His new treat of spending Christmas with you—'

'Enough! I do not agree to the new treat.' Poirot spoke slowly and clearly. It amused me that he thought this approach might work with Mother. 'My question was about the old treat. You tell me I am to deprive Arnold Laurier of something that is important to him, when I have no wish to deprive a dying man, and no notion of what is the

original treat he expects to receive. Please, madame, explain what you mean. Also: you will desist from telling me what I will and will not do, or I shall disembark at the next station and make my way home.'

'Goodness me, you men.' Mother shook her head. 'You carry on as if I am trying to keep you in the dark, Monsieur Poirot, when my only wish is to tell you all about it. The original treat, as you call it—the one Arnold is looking forward to with the eager anticipation of a schoolboy for a snowball fight—is the solving of Stanley Niven's murder. Solving it *himself*, I mean. That is what he proposes to do, as soon as he is admitted to St Walstan's in the new year.' The train juddered, apparently as shocked as I was by this latest twist in the story. I had assumed that Arnold Laurier was in a weak and feeble condition, as the imminently dying tend to be.

'The poor, foolish man wants to be the one to catch the killer,' said Mother. 'He will soon be "at the scene" as he keeps saying with great relish, and perfectly situated to do some sleuthing. You are his inspiration, Monsieur Poirot. He claims to be well versed in your methods and keeps telling everyone that he knows he can do it—he, Arnold Laurier, will succeed where Inspector Mackle and his men have failed. If the police haven't caught the culprit after three months of trying, then they probably never will—that is Arnold's contention. He has been your most devoted fan ever since he heard from me all about your and Edward's first case and how expertly you solved it. He is rather sweetly obsessed with you, I'm afraid. If there has ever

been even the tiniest mention of you in a newspaper, I promise you, Arnold has cut it out and glued it into his scrapbook. And since he is due to move to St Walstan's immediately after the Christmas holidays . . . well, his argument is that lying around in a hospital bed waiting to die is nowhere near as much fun as getting one's teeth into a nice, juicy murder case—'

'There is nothing nice about murder,' I said.

'Well, quite, Edward.' Mother bestowed a rare, approving look upon me before returning her attention to Poirot. 'That is why dear Vivienne is beside herself. She and Arnold have been blissfully happily married for forty years. She was in full agreement with the plan to send Arnold to St Walstan's until there was a murder there. Now, of course, the prospect fills her with horror. She's terrified that, with a killer still at large in the hospital, Arnold might be the next victim—particularly if he announces to all and sundry that his mission is to find out the truth about who killed Stanley Niven. There is nothing subtle or understated about Arnold, and he will certainly tell all the doctors, all the other patients and anyone else who will listen that he's "playing Poirot", as he calls it. He claims not to be afraid and doesn't seem to understand Vivienne's fear at all. Quite the opposite: he chortles like a child having its tummy tickled and says, "I'm dying anyway, darling," as if it's all a big joke. "What's the harm?" he says. "I might as well die happy, with my brain working on something important, in the service of justice." He has always been too enthusiastic for his own good.'

'He is a happy man, Monsieur Laurier?' Poirot asked.

'Oh, yes,' said Mother. 'Even before Stanley Niven was murdered and he had his crime-solving project to look forward to, he could always find something to be full of beans about. Even when Dr Osgood told him that his time was running out. The first thing he said was, "Ah, but what a time I have had, Robert. What a time." Robert is Dr Osgood's Christian name,' Mother added unnecessarily. 'If anyone else had adopted such a cavalier attitude to their own demise, I should have disapproved most heartily, but . . . it is somehow impossible to disapprove of Arnold. It's his enthusiasm, you see.'

Poirot looked especially alert as he asked, 'Might those who know him describe Arnold Laurier as jolly?'

'The word could have been invented to describe him,' said Mother.

'This, then, is a quality he shares—shared—with Stanley Niven?'

So I had been right: it was the mention of Niven's cheerful character that had attracted Poirot's particular interest. Now he seemed equally fascinated to learn that Arnold Laurier was also a happy and exuberant sort. Why, for pity's sake?

'You are right,' said Mother. 'That had not occurred to me. Please, do not mention this . . . temperamental similarity to Vivienne. She is already beside herself with worry about the other one.'

'The other what?' I asked.

'The other thing that Arnold and Stanley Niven have in common: Ward 6 at St Walstan's. Stanley Niven had a

private room there—the room in which he was murdered. And the very next room on the ward is the one reserved for Arnold, into which he plans to move at the beginning of January. The two are separated only by a wall,' she said, as if she believed that something more impressive or substantial ought to separate two hospital rooms. 'Of course, the hospital might agree to allocate Arnold a different room, but he will not hear of it. If he could, he would take the very room in which Mr Niven was murdered. Nothing better than being "at the scene", he would think. He also refuses to stay at home and live out the remainder of his days at Frelly, though Vivienne has begged him to reconsider. That is why your visit to Munby is so important, Monsieur Poirot. No other plan can work. Believe me, I would not have disturbed you if it were not absolutely necessary. This is the only way. Vivienne will be profoundly grateful to you if you deliver on both fronts, and so will I.'

'What are these fronts?' Poirot looked agitated. He hated not being able to understand things. 'What is it, precisely, that you wish me to deliver?'

'Have I not explained it all quite thoroughly?' said Mother. 'Task number one: spend Christmas at Frelly with poor Arnold. Nothing would give him greater joy—and you have so many more Christmases to look forward to, Monsieur Poirot. He does not. Don't spoil his very last one.'

'Mother, that is a monstrously unfair—'

'I have already told Vivienne that you have agreed to the plan,' Mother barrelled on. 'She will be busy preparing

Arnold for a wonderful surprise later today: the arrival of the most perfect Christmas guest!'

'Madame, how many times must I tell you that I cannot stay as long as—'

'And number two: solve the murder of Stanley Niven, so that the ne'er-do-well who killed him can be hauled off to the gallows—no longer a danger to Arnold or anyone else at St Walstan's. Then Vivienne will have nothing to fear. She will know that when Arnold moves into his room at the hospital, he will be safe from the killer.' Mother had it all neatly worked out. 'He must be deprived—by you, Monsieur Poirot—of the treat of solving Stanley Niven's murder. As compensation, he will get a different treat: spending his last Christmas at Frelly with you as his guest.'

'Madame—'

'Oh, and you might perhaps let him in on some of your crime-solving process. He would simply adore that—though he mustn't go anywhere near that hospital, not while the killer is still lurking. Still, as long as he is safe at home, there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't confide in him a little as you go along.' Mother smiled. 'Consult him now and then, allow him to feel helpful. Rather like you do with Edward,' she said.