

from *Hercule Poirot's Silent Night*

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.’