

The Haunted Policeman

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story

Dorothy L. Sayers
1939

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THE HUNTERS & GATHERERS

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NOTE

This is one of the final Lord Peter Wimsey stories, first published in *Detection Medley*, edited by John Rhode (Hutchinson & Co. Ltd.), in 1939.

THE HAUNTED POLICEMAN

A Lord Peter Wimsey Story

‘Good God!’ said his lordship. ‘Did I do that?’

‘All the evidence points that way,’ replied his wife.

‘Then I can only say that I never knew so convincing a body of evidence produce such an inadequate result.’

The nurse appeared to take this reflection personally. She said in a tone of rebuke:

‘He’s a *beautiful* boy.’

‘H’m,’ said Peter. He adjusted his eyeglass more carefully. ‘Well, you’re the expert witness. Hand him over.’

The nurse did so, with a dubious air. She was relieved to see that this disconcerting parent handled the child competently; as, in a man who was an experienced uncle, was not, after all, so very surprising. Lord Peter sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed.

‘Do you feel it’s up to standard?’ he inquired with some anxiety. ‘Of course, *your* workmanship’s always sound—but you never know with these collaborate efforts.’

‘I think it’ll do,’ said Harriet, drowsily.

‘Good.’ He turned abruptly to the nurse. ‘All right; we’ll keep it. Take it and put it away and tell ‘em to invoice it to me. It’s a very interesting addition to you, Harriet; but it would have been a hell of a rotten substitute.’ His voice wavered a little, for the last twenty-four hours had been trying ones, and he had had the fright of his life.

The doctor, who had been doing something in the other room, entered in time to catch the last words.

‘There was never any likelihood of that, you goop,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘Now, you’ve seen all there is to be seen, and you’d better

run away and play.’ He led his charge firmly to the door. ‘Go to bed,’ he advised him in kindly accents; ‘you look all in.’

‘I’m all right,’ said Peter. ‘I haven’t been doing anything. And look here—’ He stabbed a belligerent finger in the direction of the adjoining room. ‘Tell those nurses of yours, if I want to pick my son up, I’ll pick him up. If his mother wants to kiss him, she can damn well kiss him. I’ll have none of your infernal hygiene in *my* house.’

‘Very well,’ said the doctor, ‘just as you like. Anything for a quiet life. I rather believe in a few healthy germs myself. Builds up resistance. No, thanks, I won’t have a drink. I’ve got to go on to another one, and an alcoholic breath impairs confidence.’

‘Another one?’ said Peter, aghast.

‘One of my hospital mothers. You’re not the only fish in the sea by a long chalk. One born every minute.’

‘God! what a hell of a world.’ They passed down the great curved stair. In the hall a sleepy footman clung, yawning, to his post of duty.

‘All right, William,’ said Peter. ‘Buzz off now; I’ll lock up.’ He let the doctor out. ‘Good-night—and thanks very much, old man. I’m sorry I swore at you.’

‘They mostly do,’ replied the doctor philosophically. ‘Well, bung-ho, Flim. I’ll look in again later, just to earn my fee, but I shan’t be wanted. You’ve married into a good tough family, and I congratulate you.’

The car, spluttering and protesting a little after its long wait in the cold, drove off, leaving Peter alone on the doorstep. Now that it was all over and he could go to bed, he felt extraordinarily wakeful. He would have liked to go to a party. He leaned back against the wrought-iron railings and lit a cigarette, staring vaguely into the lamp-lit dusk of the square. It was thus that he saw the policeman.

The blue-uniformed figure came up from the direction of South Audley Street. He too was smoking and he walked, not with the firm

tramp of a constable on his beat, but with the hesitating step of a man who has lost his bearings. When he came in sight, he had pushed back his helmet and was rubbing his head in a puzzled manner. Official habit made him look sharply at the bare-headed gentleman in evening dress, abandoned on a doorstep at three in the morning, but since the gentleman appeared to be sober and bore no signs of being about to commit a felony, he averted his gaze and prepared to pass on.

‘Morning, officer,’ said the gentleman, as he came abreast with him.

‘Morning, sir,’ said the policeman.

‘You’re off duty early,’ pursued Peter, who wanted somebody to talk to. ‘Come in and have a drink.’

This offer re-awakened all the official suspicion.

‘Not just now, sir, thank you,’ replied the policeman guardedly.

‘Yes, now. That’s the point.’ Peter tossed away his cigarette-end. It described a fiery arc in the air and shot out a little train of sparks as it struck the pavement. ‘I’ve got a son.’

‘Oh, ah!’ said the policeman, relieved by this innocent confidence. ‘Your first, eh?’

‘And last, if I know anything about it.’

‘That’s what my brother says, every time,’ said the policeman. ‘Never no more, he says. He’s got eleven. Well, sir, good luck to it. I see how you’re situated, and thank you kindly, but after what the sergeant said I dunno as I better. Though if I was to die this moment, not a drop ’as passed me lips since me supper beer.’

Peter put his head on one side and considered this.

‘The sergeant said you were drunk?’

‘He did, sir.’

‘And you were not?’

‘No, sir. I saw everything just the same as I told him, though what’s

become of it now is more than I can say. But drunk I was not, sir, no more than you are yourself.’

‘Then,’ said Peter, ‘as Mr Joseph Surface remarked to Lady Teazle, what is troubling you is the consciousness of your own innocence. He insinuated that you had looked on the wine when it was red—you’d better come in and make it so. You’ll feel better.’

The policeman hesitated.

‘Well, sir, I dunno. Fact is, I’ve had a bit of a shock.’

‘So’ve I,’ said Peter. ‘Come in for God’s sake and keep me company.’

‘Well, sir—’ said the policeman again. He mounted the steps slowly.

The logs in the hall chimney were glowing a deep red through their ashes. Peter raked them apart, so that the young flame shot up between them. ‘Sit down,’ he said; ‘I’ll be back in a moment.’

The policeman sat down, removed his helmet, and stared about him, trying to remember who occupied the big house at the corner of the square. The engraved coat of arms upon the great silver bowl on the chimney-piece told him nothing, even though it was repeated in colour upon the backs of two tapestried chairs: three white mice skipping upon a black ground. Peter, returning quietly from the shadows beneath the stair, caught him as he traced the outlines with a thick finger.

‘A student of heraldry?’ he said. ‘Seventeenth-century work and not very graceful. You’re new to this beat, aren’t you? My name’s Wimsey.’

He put down a tray on the table.

‘If you’d rather have beer or whisky, say so. These bottles are only a concession to my mood.’

The policeman eyed the long necks and bulging silver-wrapped corks with curiosity. ‘Champagne?’ he said. ‘Never tasted it, sir. But I’d like to try the stuff.’

‘You’ll find it thin,’ said Peter, ‘but if you drink enough of it, you’ll tell me the story of your life.’ The cork popped and the wine frothed out into the wide glasses.

‘Well!’ said the policeman. ‘Here’s to your good lady, sir, and the new young gentleman. Long life and all the best. A bit in the nature of cider, ain’t it, sir?’

‘Just a trifle. Give me your opinion after the third glass, if you can put up with it so long. And thanks for your good wishes. You a married man?’

‘Not yet, sir. Hoping to be when I get promotion. If only the sergeant—but that’s neither here nor there. You been married long, sir, if I may ask.’

‘Just over a year.’

‘Ah! and do you find it comfortable, sir?’

Peter laughed.

‘I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours wondering why, when I’d had the blazing luck to get on to a perfectly good thing, I should be fool enough to risk the whole show on a damned silly experiment.’

The policeman nodded sympathetically.

‘I see what you mean, sir. Seems to me, life’s like that. If you don’t take risks, you get nowhere. If you do, things may go wrong, and then where are you? And ’alf the time, when things happen, they happen first, before you can even think about ’em.’

‘Quite right,’ said Peter, and filled the glasses again. He found the policeman soothing. True to his class and training, he turned naturally in moments of emotion to the company of the common man. Indeed, when the recent domestic crisis had threatened to destroy his nerve, he had headed for the butler’s pantry with the swift instinct of the homing pigeon. There, they had treated him with great humanity, and allowed him to clean the silver.

With a mind oddly clarified by champagne and lack of sleep, he watched the constable's reaction to Pol Roger 1926. The first glass had produced a philosophy of life; the second produced a name—Alfred Burt—and a further hint of some mysterious grievance against the station sergeant; the third glass, as prophesied, produced the story.

'You were right, sir' (said the policeman) 'when you spotted I was new to the beat. I only come on it at the beginning of the week, and that accounts for me not being acquainted with you, sir, nor with most of the residents about here. Jessop, now, he knows everybody and so did Pinker—but he's been took off to another division. You'd remember Pinker—big chap, make two o' me, with a sandy moustache. Yes, I thought you would.'

'Well, sir, as I was saying, me knowing the district in a general way, but not, so to speak, like the palm o' me 'and, might account for me making a bit of a fool of myself, but it don't account for me seeing what I did see. See it I did, and not drunk nor nothing like it. And as for making a mistake in the number, well, that might happen to anybody. All the same, sir, 13 was the number I see, plain as the nose on your face.'

'You can't put it stronger than that,' said Peter, whose nose was of a kind difficult to overlook.

'You know Merriman's End, sir?'

'I think I do. Isn't it a long cul-de-sac running somewhere at the back of South Audley Street, with a row of houses on one side and a high wall on the other?'

'That's right, sir. Tall, narrow houses they are, all alike, with deep porches and pillars to them.'

'Yes. Like an escape from the worst square in Pimlico. Horrible. Fortunately, I believe the street was never finished, or we should have had another row of the monstrosities on the opposite side. This house is pure eighteenth century. How does it strike you?'

P.C. Burt contemplated the wide hall—the Adam fireplace and panelling with their graceful shallow mouldings, the pedimented doorways, the high round-headed window lighting hall and gallery, the noble proportions of the stair. He sought for a phrase.

‘It’s a gentleman’s house,’ he pronounced at length. ‘Room to breathe, if you see what I mean. Seems like you couldn’t act vulgar in it.’ He shook his head. ‘Mind you, I wouldn’t call it cosy. It ain’t the place I’d choose to sit down to a kipper in me shirt-sleeves. But it’s got class. I never thought about it before, but now you mention it I see what’s wrong with them other houses in Merriman’s End. They’re sort of squeezed-like. I been into more’n one o’ them tonight, and that’s what they are; they’re squeezed. But I was going to tell you about that.’

‘Just upon midnight it was’ (pursued the policeman) ‘when I turns into Merriman’s End in the ordinary course of my dooties. I’d got pretty near down toward the far end, when I see a fellow lurking about in a suspicious way under the wall. There’s back gates there, you know, sir, leading into some gardens, and this chap was hanging about inside one of the gateways. A rough-looking fellow, in a baggy old coat—might a’ been a tramp off the Embankment. I turned my light on him—that street’s not very well lit, and it’s a dark night—but I couldn’t see much of his face, because he had on a ragged old hat and a big scarf round his neck. I thought he was up to no good, and I was just about to ask him what he was doing there, when I hear a most awful yell come out o’ one o’ them houses opposite. Ghastly it was, sir. “Help!” it said. “Murder! help!”, fit to freeze your marrow.’

‘Man’s voice or woman’s?’

‘Man’s, sir. I think. More of a roaring kind of yell, if you take my meaning. I says, “Hullo! What’s up there? Which house is it?” The chap says nothing, but he points, and him and me runs across together. Just as we gets to the house, there’s a noise like as if someone was being strangled just inside, and a thump, as it might be something falling against the door.’

‘Good God!’ said Peter.

‘I gives a shout and rings the bell. “Hoy!” I says. “What’s up here?” and then I knocked on the door. There’s no answer, so I rings and knocks again. Then the chap who was with me, he pushed open the letter-flap and squints through it.’

‘Was there a light in the house?’

‘It was all dark, sir, except the fanlight over the door. That was lit up bright, and when I looks up, I see the number of the house—number 13, painted plain as you like on the transom. Well, this chap peers in, and all of a sudden he gives a kind of gurgle and falls back. “Here!” I says, “what’s amiss? Let me have a look.” So I puts me eye to the flap and I looks in.’

P.C. Burt paused and drew a long breath. Peter cut the wire of the second bottle.

‘Now, sir,’ said the policeman, ‘believe me or believe me not, I was as sober at that moment as I am now. I can tell you everything I see in that house, same as if it was wrote up there on that wall. Not as it was a great lot, because the flap wasn’t all that wide but by squinnying a bit, I could make shift to see right across the hall and a piece on both sides and part way up the stairs. And here’s what I see, and you take notice of every word, on account of what come after.’

He took another gulp of the Pol Roger to loosen his tongue and continued:

‘There was the floor of the hall. I could see that very plain. All black and white squares it was, like marble, and it stretched back a good long way. About half-way along, on the left, was the staircase, with a red carpet, and the figure of a white naked woman at the foot, carrying a big pot of blue and yellow flowers. In the wall next the stairs there was an open door, and a room all lit up. I could just see the end of a table, with a lot of glass and silver on it. Between that door and the front door there was a big black cabinet, shiny, with gold figures painted on it, like them things they had at the Exhibition. Right at the back of the hall there was a place like a conservatory, but I couldn’t

see what was in it, only it looked very gay. There was a door on the right, and that was open, too. A very pretty drawing-room, by what I could see of it, with pale blue paper and pictures on the walls. There were pictures in the hall, too, and a table on the right with a copper bowl, like as it might be for visitors' cards to be put in. Now, I see all that, sir, and I put it to you, if it hadn't a' been there, how could I describe so plain?'

'I have known people describe what wasn't there,' said Peter thoughtfully, 'but it was seldom anything of that kind. Rats, cats and snakes I have heard of, and occasionally naked female figures; but delirious lacquer cabinets and hall-tables are new to me.'

'As you say, sir,' agreed the policeman, 'and I see you believe me so far. But here's something else, what you mayn't find so easy. There was a man laying in that hall, sir, as sure as I sit here and he was dead. He was a big man and clean-shaven, and he wore evening dress. Somebody had stuck a knife into his throat. I could see the handle of it—it looked like a carving knife, and the blood had run out, all shiny, over the marble squares.'

The policeman looked at Peter, passed his handkerchief over his forehead, and finished the fourth glass of champagne.

'His head was up against the end of the hall table,' he went on, 'and his feet must have been up against the door, but I couldn't see anything quite close to me, because of the bottom of the letter-box. You understand, sir, I was looking through the wire cage of the box, and there was something inside—letters, I suppose that cut off my view downwards. But I see all the rest—in front and a bit of both sides; and it must have been regularly burnt in upon me brain, as they say, for I don't suppose I was looking more than a quarter of a minute or so. Then all the lights went out at once, same as if somebody has turned off the main switch. So I looks round, and I don't mind telling you I felt a bit queer. And *when* I looks round, lo and behold! my bloke in the muffler had hopped it.'

'The devil he had,' said Peter.

‘Hopped it,’ repeated the policeman, ‘and there I was. And just there, sir, is where I made my big mistake, for I thought he couldn’t a’ got far, and I started off up the street after him. But I couldn’t see him, and I couldn’t see nobody. All the houses was dark, and it come over me what a sight of funny things may go on, and nobody take a mite o’ notice. The way I’d shouted and banged on the door, you’d a’ thought it’d a’ brought out every soul in the street, not to mention that awful yelling. But there—you may have noticed it yourself, sir. A man may leave his ground-floor windows open, or have his chimney a’ fire, and you may make noise enough to wake the dead, trying to draw his attention, and nobody give no heed. He’s fast asleep, and the neighbours say, “Blast that row, but, it’s no business of mine,” and stick their ’eads under the bedclothes.’

‘Yes,’ said Peter. ‘London’s like that.’

‘That’s right, sir. A village is different. You can’t pick up a pin there without somebody coming up to ask where you got it from—but London keeps itself to itself.... Well, something’ll have to be done, I thinks to myself, and I blows me whistle. They heard that all right. Windows started to go up all along the street. That’s London, too.’

Peter nodded. ‘London will sleep through the last trump. Puddley-in-the-Rut and Doddering-in-the-Dumps will look down their noses and put on virtuous airs. But God, who is never surprised, will say to his angel, “Whistle up ’em, Michael, whistle ’em up; East and West will rise from the dead at the sound of the policeman’s whistle”.’

‘Quite so, sir,’ said P.C. Burt; and wondered for the first time whether there might not be something in this champagne stuff after all. He waited for a moment and then resumed:

‘Well, it so happened that just when I sounded my whistle, Withers—that’s the man on the other beat—was in Audley Square, coming to meet me. You know, sir we has times for meeting one another, arranged different-like every night; and twelve o’clock in the square was our rendy-voos tonight. So up he comes in, you might say, no

time at all, and finds me there, with everyone a' hollering at me from the windows to know what was up. Well, naturally, I didn't want the whole bunch of 'em running out into the street and our man getting away in the crowd, so I just tells 'em there's nothing, only a bit of an accident farther along. And then I see Withers and glad enough I was. We stands there at the top o' the street, and I tells him there's a dead man laying in the hall at Number 13, and it looks to me like murder. "Number 13," he says, "you can't mean Number 13. There ain't no Number 13 in Merriman's End, you fathead; it's all even numbers." And so it is, sir, for the houses on the other side were never built, so there's no odd numbers at all barrin' Number 1, as is the big house on the corner.

'Well, that give me a bit of a jolt. I wasn't so much put out at not having remembered about the numbers, for as I tell you, I never was on the beat before this week. No; but I knew I'd seen that there number writ up plain as pie on the fanlight, and I didn't see how I could have been mistaken. But when Withers heard the rest of the story, he thought maybe I'd misread it for Number 12. It couldn't be 18, for there's only sixteen houses in the road; nor it couldn't be 16 neither, for I knew it wasn't the end house. But we thought it might be 12 or 10; so away we goes to look.

'We didn't have no difficulty about getting in at Number 12. There was a very pleasant old gentleman came down in his dressing-gown, asking what the disturbance was, and could he be of use. I apologised for disturbing him, and said I was afraid there'd been an accident in one of the houses, and had he heard anything. Of course, the minute he opened the door I could see it wasn't Number 12 we wanted; there was only a little hall with polished boards, and the walls plain panelled—all very bare and neat—and no black cabinet nor naked woman nor nothing. The old gentleman said, yes, his son had heard somebody shouting and knocking a few minutes earlier. He'd got up and put his head out of the window, but couldn't see nothing, but they both thought from the sound it was Number 14 forgotten his latch-key again. So we thanked him very much and went onto Number 14.

‘We had a bit of a job to get Number 14 downstairs. A fiery sort of gentleman he was, something in the military way, I thought, but he turned out to be a retired Indian Civil Servant. A dark gentleman, with a big voice, and his servant was dark, too—some sort of a nigger. The gentleman wanted to know what the blazes all this row was about, why a decent citizen wasn’t allowed to get his proper sleep. He supposed that young fool at Number 12 was drunk again. Withers had to speak a bit sharp to him; but at last the nigger came down and let us in. Well, we had to apologise once more. The hall was not a bit like—the staircase was on the wrong side, for one thing, and though there was a statue at the foot of it, it was some kind of a heathen idol with a lot of heads and arms, and the walls were covered with all sorts of brass stuff and native goods you know the kind of thing. There was a black-and-white linoleum on the floor, and that was about all there was to it. The servant had a soft sort of way with him I didn’t half like. He said he slept at the back and had heard nothing till his master rang for him. Then the gentleman came to the top of the stairs and shouted out it was no use disturbing him; the noise came from Number 12 as usual, and if that young man didn’t stop his blanky Bohemian goings-on, he’d have the law on his father. I asked if he’d seen anything, and he said, no, he hadn’t. Of course, sir, me and that other chap was inside the porch, and you can’t see anything what goes on inside those porches from the other houses, because they’re filled in at the sides with coloured glass—all the lot of them.’

Lord Peter Wimsey looked at the policeman and then looked at the bottle, as though estimating the alcoholic content of each. With deliberation, he filled both glasses again.

‘Well, sir,’ said P.C. Burt after refreshing himself, ‘by this time Withers was looking at me in rather an old-fashioned manner. However, he said nothing, and we went back to Number 10, where there was two maiden ladies and a hall full of stuffed birds and wallpaper like a florists’ catalogue. The one who slept in the front was deaf as a post, and the one who slept at the back hadn’t heard nothing. But we got hold of their maids, and the cook said she’d heard the voice calling “Help!”’

and thought it was in Number 12, and she'd hid her head in the pillow and said her prayers. The housemaid was a sensible girl. She'd looked out when she heard me knocking. She couldn't see anything at first, owing to us being in the porch, but she thought something must be going on, so, not wishing to catch cold, she went back to put on her bedroom slippers. When she got back to the window, she was just in time to see a man running up the road. He went very quick and very silent, as if he had goloshes on, and she could see the ends of his muffler flying out behind him. She saw him run out of the street and turn to the right, and then she heard me coming along after him. Unfortunately her eye being on the man, she didn't notice which porch I came out of. Well, that showed I wasn't inventing the whole story at any rate, because there was my bloke in the muffler. The girl didn't recognise him at all, but that wasn't surprising, because she'd only just entered the old ladies' service. Besides, it wasn't likely the man had anything to do with it, because he was outside with me when the yelling started. My belief is, he was the sort as doesn't care to have his pockets examined too close, and the minute my back was turned he thought he'd be better and more comfortable elsewhere.'

'Now there ain't no need' (continued the policeman) 'for me to trouble you, sir, with all them houses what we went into. We made inquiries at the whole lot, from Number 2 to Number 16, and there wasn't one of them had a hall in any ways comformable to what that chap and I saw through the letter-box. Nor there wasn't a soul in 'em could give us any help more than what we'd had already. You see, sir, though it took me a bit o' time telling, it all went very quick. There was the yells; they didn't last beyond a few seconds or so, and before they was finished, we was across the road and inside the porch. Then there was me shouting and knocking; but I hadn't been long at that afore the chap with me looks through the box. Then I has my look inside, for fifteen seconds it might be, and while I'm doing that, my chap's away up the street. Then I runs after him, and then I blows me whistle. The whole thing might take a minute or a minute and a half, maybe. Not more.

‘Well, sir; by the time we’d been into every house in Merriman’s End, I was feeling a bit queer again. I can tell you, and Withers, he was looking queerer. He says to me, “Burt,” he says, “is this your idea of a joke? Because if so, the ’Olborn Empire’s where you ought to be, not the police force.” So I tells him over again, most solemn, what I seen —“and,” I says, “if only we could lay hands on that chap in the muffler, he could tell you he seen it, too. And what’s more,” I says, “do you think I’d risk me job, playing a silly trick like that?” He says, “Well, it beats me,” he says, “If I didn’t know you was a sober kind of chap, I’d say you was seein’ things.” “Things?” I says to him, “I see that there corpse a-layin’ there with the knife in his neck, and that was enough for me. ’Orrible, he looked, and the blood all over the floor.” “Well,” he says, “maybe he wasn’t dead after all, and they’ve cleared him out of the way.” “And cleared the house away, too, I suppose,” I said to him. So Withers says, in an odd sort o’ voice, “You’re sure about the house? You wasn’t letting your imagination run away with you over naked females and such?” That was a nice thing to say. I said. “No, I wasn’t. There’s been some monkey business going on in this street and I’m going to get to the bottom of it, if we has to comb-out London for that chap in the muffler.” “Yes,” says Withers, nasty-like, “it’s a pity he cleared off so sudden.” “Well,” I says, “you can’t say I imagined *him*, anyhow, because that there girl saw him, and a mercy she did,” I said, “or you’d be saying next I ought to be in Colney Hatch.” “Well,” he says, “I dunno what you think you’re going to do about it. You better ring up the station and ask for instructions.”

‘Which I did. And Sergeant Jones, he come down himself, and he listens attentive-like to what we both has to say. And then he walks along the street, slow-like, from end to end. And then he comes back and says to me, “Now, Burt,” he says, “just you describe that hall to me again, careful.” Which I does, same as I described it to your, sir. And he says, “You’re sure there was the room on the left of the stairs with the glass and silver on the table; and the room on the right with the pictures in it?” And I says, “Yes, Sergeant, I’m quite sure of that.”

And Withers says, “Ah!” in a kind of got-you-now voice, if you take my meaning. And the sergeant says, “Now, Burt,” he says, “pull yourself together and take a look at these here houses. Don’t you see they’re all single-fronted? There ain’t one on ’em has rooms *both* sides o’ the front hall. Look at the windows, you fool,” he says.’

Lord Peter poured out the last of the champagne.

‘I don’t mind telling you, sir’ (went on the policeman) ‘that I was fair knocked silly to think of me never noticing that! Withers had noticed it all right, and that’s what made him think I was drunk or barmy. But I stuck to what I’d seen. I said, there must be two of them houses knocked into one, somewhere, but that didn’t work, because we’d been into all of them, and there wasn’t no such thing—not without there was one o’ them concealed doors like you read about in crook stories. “Well, anyhow,” I says to the sergeant, “the yells was real all right, because other people heard ’em. Just you ask, and they’ll tell you.” So the sergeant says, “Well, Burt, I’ll give you every chance.” So he knocks up Number 12 again—not wishing to annoy Number 14 any more than he was already—and this time the son comes down. An agreeable gentleman he was, too; not a bit put out. He says, Oh, yes, he’d heard the yells and his father’d heard them too. “Number 14,” he says, “that’s where the trouble is. A very odd bloke, is Number 14, and I shouldn’t be surprised if he beats that unfortunate servant of his. The Englishman abroad, you know! The outposts of Empire and all that kind of thing. They’re rough and ready—and then the curry in them parts is bad for the liver.” So I was inquiring at Number 14 again; but the sergeant, he loses patience, and says, “You know quite well,” he says, “it ain’t Number 14, and in my opinion, Burt, you’re either dotty or drunk. You best go home straight away,” he says, “and sober up, and I’ll see you again when you can give a better account of yourself.” So I argues a bit, but it ain’t no use, and away he goes, and Withers goes back to his beat. And I walks up and down a bit till Jessop comes to take over, and then I comes away, and that’s when I sees you, sir.

‘But I ain’t drunk, sir—at least, I wasn’t then, though there do seem to

be a kind of a swimming in me head at this moment. Maybe that stuff's stronger than it tastes. But I wasn't drunk then, and I'm pretty sure I'm not dotty. I'm haunted, sir, that's what it is—haunted. It might be there was someone killed in one of them houses many years ago, and that's what I see tonight. Perhaps they changed the numbering of the street on account of it—I've heard tell of such things—and when the same night comes round the house goes back to what it was before. But there I am, with a black mark against me, and it ain't a fair trick for no ghost to go getting a plain man into trouble. And I'm sure, sir, you'll agree with me.'

The policeman's narrative had lasted some time, and the hands of the grandfather clock stood at a quarter to five. Peter Wimsey gazed benevolently at his companion, for whom he was beginning to feel a positive affection. He was, if anything, slightly more drunk than the policeman, for he had missed tea and had no appetite for his dinner; but the wine had not clouded his wits; it had only increased excitability and postponed sleep. He said:

'When you looked through the letter-box, could you see any part of the ceiling, or the lights?'

'No, sir; on account, you see, of the flap. I could see right and left and straight forward; but not upwards, and none of the near part of the floor.'

'When you looked at the house from outside, there was no light except through the fanlight. But when you looked through the flap, all the rooms were lit, right and left and at the back?'

'That's so, sir.'

'Are there back doors to the houses?'

'Yes, sir. Coming out of Merriman's End, you turn to the right, and there's an opening a little way along which takes you to the back doors.'

'You seem to have a very distinct visual memory. I wonder if your

other kinds of memory are as good. Can you tell me, for instance, whether any of the houses you went into had any particular smell? Especially 10, 12 and 14?’

‘Smell, sir?’ The policeman closed his eyes to stimulate recollection. ‘Why, yes, sir. Number 10, where the two ladies live, that had a sort of an old-fashioned smell. I can’t put me tongue to it. Not lavender—but something as ladies keeps in bowls and such—rose-leaves and what not. Pot-pourri, that’s the stuff. Pot-pourri. And Number 12—well, no there was nothing particular there, except I remember thinking they must keep pretty good servants, though we didn’t see anybody except the family. All that floor and panelling was polished beautiful—you could see your face in it. Beeswax and turpentine, I says to meself. And elbow-grease. What you’d call a clean house with a good, clean smell. But Number 14—that was different. I didn’t like the smell of that. Stuffy, like as if the nigger had been burning some o’ that there incense to his idols, maybe. I never could abide niggers.’

‘Ah!’ said Peter. ‘What you say is very suggestive.’ He placed his finger-tips together and shot his last question over them:

‘Ever been inside the National Gallery?’

‘No, sir,’ said the policeman, astonished. ‘I can’t say as I ever was.’

‘That’s London again,’ said Peter. ‘We’re the last people in the world to know anything of our great metropolitan institutions. Now, what is the best way to tackle this bunch of toughs, I wonder? It’s a little early for a call. Still, there’s nothing like doing one’s good deed before breakfast, and the sooner you’re set right with the sergeant, the better. Let me see. Yes—I think that may do it. Costume pieces are not as a rule in my line, but my routine has been so much upset already, one way and another, that an irregularity more or less will hardly matter. Wait there for me while I have a bath and change. I may be a little time; but it would hardly be decent to get there before six.’

The bath had been an attractive thought, but was perhaps ill-advised, for a curious languor stole over him with the touch of the hot water.

The champagne was losing its effervescence. It was with an effort that he dragged himself out and re-awakened himself with a cold shower. The matter of dress required a little thought. A pair of grey flannel trousers was easily found, and though they were rather too well creased for the part he meant to play, he thought that with luck they would probably pass unnoticed. The shirt was a difficulty. His collection of shirts was a notable one, but they were mostly of an inconspicuous and gentlemanly sort. He hesitated for some time over a white shirt with an open sports collar, but decided at length upon a blue one, bought as an experiment and held to be not quite successful. A red tie, if he had possessed such a thing, would have been convincing. After some consideration, he remembered that he had seen his wife in a rather wide Liberty tie, whose prevailing colour was orange. That, he felt, would do if he could find it. On her it had looked rather well; on him, it would be completely abominable. He went through into the next room; it was queer to find it empty. A peculiar sensation came over him. Here *he* was, rifling his wife's drawers, and there *she* was, spirited out of reach at the top of the house with a couple of nurses and an entirely new baby, which might turn into goodness knew what. He sat down before the glass and stared at himself. He felt as though he ought to have changed somehow in the night; but he only looked unshaven and, he thought, a trifle intoxicated. Both were quite good things to look at the moment, though hardly suitable for the father of a family. He pulled out all the drawers in the dressing table; they emitted vaguely familiar smells of face-powder and handkerchief-sachet. He tried the big built-in wardrobe: frocks, costumes and trays full of underwear, which made him feel sentimental. At last he struck a promising vein of gloves and stockings. The next tray held ties, the orange of the desired Liberty creation gleaming in a friendly way among them. He put it on, and observed with pleasure that the effect was Bohemian beyond description. He wandered out again, leaving all the drawers open behind him as though a burglar had passed through the room. An ancient tweed jacket of his own, of a very countrified pattern, suitable

only for fishing in Scotland, was next unearthed, together with a pair of brown canvas shoes. He secured his trousers by a belt, searched for and found an old soft-brimmed felt hat of no recognisable colour, and, after removing a few trout-flies from the hat-band and tucking his shirt-sleeves well up inside the coat-sleeve, decided that he would do. As an afterthought, he returned to his wife's room and selected a wide woollen scarf in a shade of greenish blue. Thus equipped, he came downstairs again, to find P.C. Burt fast asleep, with his mouth open and snoring.

Peter was hurt. Here he was, sacrificing himself in the interests of this stupid policeman, and the man hadn't the common decency to appreciate it. However, there was no point in waking him yet. He yawned horribly and sat down.

It was the footman who wakened the sleepers at half-past six. If he was surprised to see his master, very strangely attired, slumbering in the hall in company with a large policeman, he was too well-trained to admit the fact even to himself. He merely removed the tray. The faint chink of glass roused Peter, who slept like a cat at all times.

'Hullo, William,' he said. 'Have I overslept myself? What's the time?'

'Five and twenty to seven, my lord.'

'Just about right' He remembered that the footman slept on the top floor. 'All quiet on the Western Front, William?'

'Not altogether quiet, my lord.' William permitted himself a slight smile. 'The young master was lively about five. But all is satisfactory, I gather from Nurse Jenkyn.'

'Nurse Jenkyn? Is that the young one? Don't let yourself be run away with, William. I say, just give P.C. Burt a light prod in the ribs, would you? He and I have business together.'

In Merriman's End, the activities of the morning were beginning. The milkman came jingling out of the cul-de-sac; lights were twinkling in

upper rooms; hands were withdrawing curtains; in front of Number 10, the house maid, was already scrubbing the steps. Peter posted his policeman at the top of the street.

‘I don’t want to make my first appearance with official accompaniment,’ he said. ‘Come along when I beckon. What by the way is the name of the agreeable gentleman in Number 12? I think he may be of some assistance to us.’

‘Mr O’Halloran, sir.’

The policeman looked at Peter expectantly. He seemed to have abandoned all initiative and to place implicit confidence in this hospitable and eccentric gentleman. Peter slouched down the street with his hands in his trousers pocket and his shabby hat pulled rakishly over his eyes. At Number 12 he paused and examined the windows. Those on the ground floor were open; the house was awake. He marched up the steps, took a brief glance through the flap of the letter-box, and rang the bell. A maid in a neat blue dress and white cap and apron opened the door.

‘Good morning,’ said Peter, slightly raising the shabby hat; ‘is Mr O’Halloran in?’ He gave the *r* a soft continental roll. ‘Not the old gentleman. I mean young Mr O’Halloran?’

‘He’s in,’ said the maid, doubtfully, ‘but he isn’t up yet.’

‘Oh!’ said Peter. ‘Well it is a little early for a visit. But I desire to see him urgently. I am—there is a little trouble where I live. Could you entreat him—would you be so kind? I have walked all the way,’ he added, pathetically, and with perfect truth.

‘Have you, sir?’ said the maid. She added kindly, ‘You do look tired, sir, and that’s a fact.’

‘It is nothing,’ said Peter. ‘It is only that I forgot to have any dinner. But if I can see Mr O’Halloran it will be all right.’

‘You’d better come in, sir,’ said the maid. ‘I’ll see if I can wake him.’ She conducted the exhausted stranger in and offered him a chair.

‘What name shall I say, sir?’

‘Petrovinsky,’ said his lordship, hardily. As he had rather expected, neither the unusual name nor the unusual clothes of this unusually early visitor seemed to cause very much surprise. The maid left him in the tidy little panelled hall and went upstairs without so much as a glance at the umbrella-stand.

Left to himself, Peter sat still, noticing that the hall was remarkably bare of furniture, and was lit by a single electric pendant almost immediately inside the front door. The letter-box was the usual wire cage the bottom of which had been carefully lined with brown paper. From the back of the house came a smell of frying bacon.

Presently there was the sound of somebody running downstairs. A young man appeared in a dressing-gown. He called out as he came: ‘Is that you, Stefan? Your name came up as Mr Whisky. Has Marfa run away again, or—What the hell? Who the devil are you, sir?’

‘Wimsey,’ said Peter, mildly, ‘not Whisky; Wimsey the policeman’s friend. I just looked in to congratulate you on a mastery of the art of false perspective which I thought had perished with van Hoogstraten, or at least with Grace and Lambelet.’

‘Oh!’ said the young man. He had a pleasant countenance, with humorous eyes and ears pointed like a faun’s. He laughed a little ruefully. ‘I suppose my beautiful murder is out. It was too good to last. Those bobbies! I hope to God they gave Number 14 a bad night. May I ask how you come to be involved in the matter?’

‘I,’ said Peter, ‘am the kind of person in whom distressed constables confide—I cannot imagine why. And when I had the picture of that sturdy blue-clad figure, led so persuasively by a Bohemian stranger and invited to peer through a hole, I was irresistibly transported in mind to the National Gallery. Many a time have I squinted sideways through those holes into the little black box, and admired that Dutch interior of many vistas painted so convincingly on the four flat sides of the box. How right you were to preserve your eloquent silence!’

Your Irish tongue would have given you away. The servants, I gather, were purposely kept out of sight.’

‘Tell me,’ said Mr O’Halloran, seating himself sideways upon the hall table, ‘do you know by heart the occupation of every resident in this quarter of London? I do not paint under my own name.’

‘No,’ said Peter. ‘Like the good Dr Watson, the constable could observe, though he could not reason from his observation; it was the smell of turpentine that betrayed you. I gather that at the time of his first call the apparatus was not very far off.’

‘It was folded together and lying under the stairs,’ replied the painter. ‘It has since been removed to the studio. My father had only just had time to get it out of the way and hitch down the “13” from the fanlight before the police reinforcements arrived. He had not even time to put back this table I am sitting on; a brief search would have discovered it in the dining room. My father is a remarkable sportsman; I cannot too highly recommend the presence of mind he displayed while I was hareing around the houses and leaving him to hold the fort. It would have been so simple and so unenterprising to explain; but my father, being an Irishman, enjoys treading on the coat-tails of authority.’

‘I should like to meet your father. The only thing I do not thoroughly understand is the reason of this elaborate plot. Were you by any chance executing a burglary round the corner, and keeping the police in play while you did it?’

‘I never thought of that,’ said the young man, with regret in his voice. ‘No. The bobby was not the predestined victim. He happened to be present at a full-dress rehearsal, and the joke was too good to be lost. The fact is, my uncle is Sir Lucius Preston, the R.A.’

‘Ah!’ said Peter, ‘the light begins to break.’

‘My own style of draughtsmanship,’ pursued Mr O’Halloran, ‘is modern. My uncle has on several occasions informed me that I draw like that only because I do not know how to draw. The idea was that he should be invited to dinner tomorrow and regaled with a story of

the mysterious “Number 13”, said to appear from time to time in this street and to be haunted by strange noises. Having thus detained him till close upon midnight, I should have set out to see him to the top of the street. As we went along, the cries would have broken out. I should have led him back—’

‘Nothing,’ said Peter, ‘could be clearer. After the preliminary shock, he would have been forced to confess that your draughtsmanship was a triumph of academic accuracy.’

‘I hope,’ said Mr O’Halloran, ‘the performance may still go forward as originally intended.’ He looked with some anxiety at Peter, who replied:

‘I hope so, indeed. I also hope that your uncle’s heart is a strong one. But may I, in the meantime, signal to my unfortunate policeman and relieve his mind? He is in danger of losing his promotion, through a suspicion that he was drunk on duty.’

‘Good God!’ said Mr O’Halloran. ‘No—I don’t want that to happen. Fetch him in.’

The difficulty was to make P.C. Burt recognise in the daylight what he had seen by night through the letter-flap. Of the framework of painted canvas, with its forms and figures oddly foreshortened and distorted, he could make little. Only when the thing was set up and lighted in the curtained studio was he at length reluctantly convinced.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said. ‘It’s like Maskelyne and Devant. I wish the sergeant could a’ seen it.’

‘Lure him down here tomorrow night,’ said Mr O’Halloran. ‘Let him come as my uncle’s bodyguard. You—’ he turned to Peter—‘you seem to have a way with policemen. Can’t you inveigle the fellow along? Your impersonation of starving and disconsolate Bloomsbury is fully as convincing as mine. How about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Peter. ‘The costume gives me pain. Besides, is it kind to a p.b. policeman? I give you the R.A., but when it comes to the

guardians of the law—Damn it all! I'm a family man, and I must have *some* sense of responsibility.'

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[End of The Haunted Policeman, by Dorothy L. Sayers]