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BY JOHN RHODE

Author of
"DR. PRIESTLEY INVESTIGATES,"
"DEATH SITS ON THE BOARD,"
etc.

Mr. Wedgwood was puzzled. It was odd, he thought, as he looked from his bedroom window, that someone should leave a large closed car in the middle of his front yard, but what confused him even more was the shimmering brilliance it seemed to assume as the sun rose higher. Suddenly the unpleasant truth burst upon him with a shock. It was not a car at all. It was a hearse!

Jimmy Waghorn first followed the grisly trail from the abandoned hearse to the "thing" in the tar boiler, and as luck would have it, on that same day Inspector Hanslet finally stumbled on a really substantial clue to the Patton jewel robbery. But only after Dr. Priestley made his seemingly enigmatic suggestion did it occur to either one that the two crimes could possibly be related.

An exciting book! John Rhode with his usual ingenuity and scrupulous care has worked two apparently diverse crimes into a fascinating pattern of mystery and intrigue.

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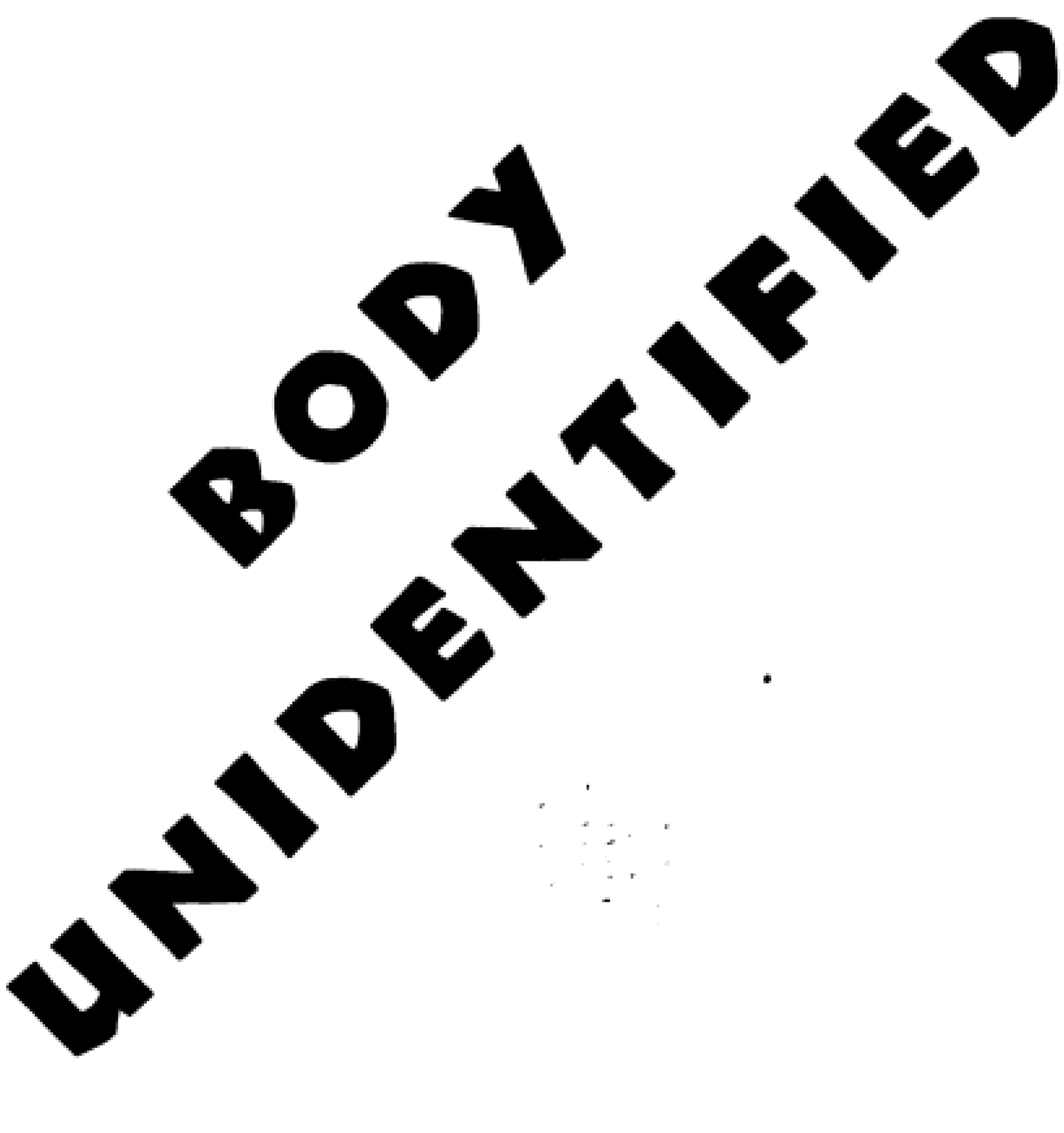
Street, Cecil John Charles

A Dr. Priestley Detective Story

BY

JOHN RHODE



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Bequest
O. F. Butler
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The people who pass these silly laws never stop to think of the expense involved in enforcing them or trying to enforce them. However, it isn't for me to complain, I suppose. But I must say that it comes as a positive relief sometimes when a real crime is reported to us. One feels that one's labour isn't altogether wasted."

"But two major cases at once must be a bit overwhelming," Oldland suggested.

"I don't mind as long as I have somebody that I can depend upon to help me," Hanslet replied. "And I'm bound to confess that things have been a lot easier since young Jimmy Waghorn has been with me. He's got his head screwed on straight and I can trust him to look after a job while I'm otherwise engaged."

"This is the first time that he has been entrusted with the entire responsibility for what Oldland has called a major case, is it not?" Dr. Priestley remarked.

"That's right, professor," Hanslet replied. "Of course, if the other matter hadn't cropped up at the same time I should have taken on the Fallowchurch business myself with Jimmy to help me. But as I've told you, I'd scarcely put down the telephone on Thursday when the chief sent for me. And when I got to his room I found that Sir Stanislaus Wherwell had rung up, and I had to listen to the yarn about the diamonds. The chief told me that I had better take on that business myself and send Jimmy down to Fallowchurch."

"Inspector Waghorn has proved worthy of your trust, I gather," Dr. Priestley remarked.

"Oh, he's done very well, professor," Hanslet replied with a touch of condescension. "But then, you see, the matter turned out to be not so puzzling as it seemed at first sight. It was a perfectly clear case of murder, with robbery as the motive. And there's no doubt whatever as to the identity of

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the murderer. Jimmy has a full description both of him and of his car. It can only be a matter of a day or two before he runs him to earth. He's busy on the job now, and that's why he couldn't accept your invitation to come here with me to-night."

"I fully appreciate the reason for the inspector's inability to accept my invitation," said Dr. Priestley. "I am very glad that the case upon which you are yourself engaged did not hinder you from coming."

Hanslet laughed. "Oh, I've got a breathing space for a moment," he replied. "I'm waiting for news from the Continent. In some ways my case is not unlike Jimmy's, though it concerns a robbery and not a murder. I know who stole the Wherwell diamonds—the name is spelt Wherwell, but pronounced Hurrel, by the way—just as Jimmy knows who murdered Alfred Pantony. And in my case, as in his, I'm bound to catch my man before very long."

"You know the origin of the Wherwell diamonds, I suppose?" Oldland asked.

"I heard Sir Stanislaus tell the story, but I didn't quite follow the details," Hanslet replied. "From what I can make out, they were brought back from Russia by his great-great-grandfather, about a hundred and thirty years ago."

Oldland nodded. "That's right," he said. "I've heard my father talk about them often enough. He knew the Wherwell family in the old days."

"Under what circumstances were the diamonds brought back from Russia?" Dr. Priestley asked.

"Well, the story as I've heard my father tell it is this," Oldland replied. "This man's great-great-grandfather was Sir James Wherwell. He had interests in Eastern Europe and married a Polish woman, just before the Third Partition of 1795. King Stanislaus of Poland stood godfather to their

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eldest son, who was naturally named after his royal sponsor. The Christian name Stanislaus has remained in the family ever since.

"Sir James and his wife appear to have been born intriguers, though I don't suppose that anything definite is known of their activities. Anyhow, after the Partition, they managed to insinuate themselves into the good graces of Prince Alexander. And, at about the same time, Sir James seems to have been entrusted with a sort of semi-diplomatic mission by the British Government. They were certainly in St. Petersburg on the night of the Emperor Paul's assassination in 1801, and it has been whispered that they had had a hand in the preliminaries of that affair. Anyhow, some months later they returned to England, and Lady Wherwell was seen wearing a set of diamonds which was pronounced to be the finest in Europe. Where she got them from remains something of a mystery. Sir Stanislaus did not enlighten you on that point, I suppose, superintendent?"

"He said that they had been presented to his family by one of the Emperors of Russia," Hanslet replied.

"Is it not an established fact that the Emperor Paul was insane for some years before his death?" Dr. Priestley remarked dryly.

Oldland laughed. "I dare say that, as usual, you've hit the nail on the head, Priestley," he said. "But I fancy that if Paul had given Lady Wherwell the diamonds in a moment of infatuation, Alexander I would have managed to get them back again somehow after his father's death. However, I don't suppose the superintendent is very much interested in that ancient history. He is more anxious to know where they are now."

"They're on the Continent somewhere, there's no doubt bout that," said Hanslet confidently. "And as things are,

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the thief will find it quite impossible to dispose of them openly. The police all over Europe have been warned, and at his first attempt to do so, he will be arrested immediately. And he would only realize a fraction of their value if he tried to get rid of them surreptitiously."

Dr. Priestley shook his head slightly. It was obvious that he was not interested in the diamonds or their possible fate. The technique of the crime and the mentality of its perpetrator were, to him, far more congenial subjects.

"I gather that in each of the major cases upon which you and Inspector Waghorn respectively are engaged the situation is similar," he said. "You have satisfied yourselves as to the identity of the criminals, and you confidentially expect their early apprehension. But are you in a position to prove a conclusive case against either of them?"

Hanslet laughed. "I know how difficult you are to convince, professor," he replied. "But in both these cases the evidence is conclusive. We don't see how any jury could fail to return a verdict of Guilty in both cases. Well, if you don't mind, professor, I'll be getting back to the Yard. I'm expecting to hear any moment that my man has been arrested."

The superintendent left the room and there was silence for some moments after his departure. Then Dr. Priestley turned to Oldland, who was pouring himself out a second whisky and soda. "What made you employ the term 'major cases' just now?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Oldland replied in some surprise. "It's a suitable term by which to describe a murder, and a theft of a very valuable set of diamonds, isn't it?"

Dr. Priestley shook his head. "It might appear so to the policeman, but not to the criminologist," he said. "To the latter, the importance of the case is not determined by the seriousness of the crime. His interest lies in the skill displayed

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Part One

Jimmy's Case

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THE GREEN BEAR AT FALLOWCHURCH IS A FINE OLD TIMBERED building, with a wide, open space for a "pull in" in front of it. Fallowchurch is a fair-sized village standing a few miles off the direct road from London to Folkestone.

Mr. Sidney Wedgwood, the manager of the Green Bear, was a man of regular habits. He and Mrs. Wedgwood had been tenants of the house for fifteen years, and during the whole of that period their daily routine had never varied. This routine began with Mr. Wedgwood invariably awakening shortly before sunrise and ended with his retirement to bed directly after supper between eleven o'clock and half-past.

When Mr. Wedgwood opened his eyes on Thursday, August 20th, a faint light filled the bedroom occupied by himself and Mrs. Wedgwood. He felt for the watch which he always placed under his pillow at night, found it and held it so that the most favourable light from the window fell upon its hands. These pointed to exactly half-past five.

It was not often that Mr. Wedgwood actually got out of bed before six o'clock. He would lie there very quietly so as not to disturb Mrs. Wedgwood, and concentrate on the details of his business. The brewer's order, for instance, always took a lot of consideration. Especially in summer, when the beer was apt to go off if it stood too long. One had to make a pretty close estimate of one's requirements. It would never

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do to order too little, and so run the risk of being short at the end of the week. On the other hand, ordering too much meant that the stuff remained in the cellar longer than was advisable. It was upon problems like these that Mr. Wedgwood's not very rapid thoughts ruminated during his first waking minutes.

But on this particular morning, no sooner was Mr. Wedgwood awake than he resolved upon physical rather than mental activities. At the back of the Green Bear was an extensive kitchen garden which Mr. Wedgwood cultivated with care and success. He had at this time a magnificent crop of runner beans, and on the previous day one of his customers had asked him to sell him half a bushel of these. Mr. Wedgwood had agreed to do so, and every one knew that runner beans were best picked in the early morning. Here was the very opportunity, before the regular routine of the house began at six o'clock.

So Mr. Wedgwood slipped carefully out of bed, being careful not to disturb his sleeping wife. He tip-toed on his bare feet to the window, drew the curtains aside and looked out. He was greeted by a fine still morning which gave promise of a hot day later on.

Having surveyed the heavens, Mr. Wedgwood's gaze fell to earth. The window at which he stood was set in the front of the house and looked out over the open gravel space between it and the road. And in the centre of this space stood what Mr. Wedgwood took at first to be a large closed car.

Well, there was nothing surprising about that. It sometimes happened that people left their cars for the night in front of the Green Bear, instead of seeking the hospitality of Quain's Garage, a little farther down the road, especially if they arrived in the village late at night, for Mr. Quain was very deaf and once in bed was impossible to arouse.

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But just as Mr. Wedgwood was about to turn away from the window, the eastern horizon began to glow with a pinkish light. Instantly the car seemed to appropriate to itself an undue share of this light, and to shimmer all over with unexpected brilliance.

The phenomenon was sufficiently marked to attract Mr. Wedgwood's attention. Once again he glanced at the car, to discover with surprise that its sides were panelled with glass. And then, with an unpleasant shock, the truth burst upon him. It was not a car at all. It was a motor hearse.

Now, Mr. Wedgwood, like many another stalwart publican, was profoundly superstitious. If he came upon a ladder bridging the pavement he would step into the roadway rather than walk under it. Not many years before, he had pulled the kitchen range to pieces in search of a death-watch beetle, which he believed to be concealed behind it. And if any of his customers, eating their bread and cheese in the bar at dinner-time, happened to spill a particle of salt upon the floor, he immediately produced a dust-pan and brush and swept it up.

So that now, staring wide-eyed at the hearse, he experienced a sensation of profound discomfort. He had no idea what misfortune the ominous machine might portend. But if it were unlucky to see a magpie first thing in the morning it must certainly be trebly so to see a hearse. With a shudder he turned away from the window and drew the curtains to hide the evil vision from his eyes.

But as he sat down to pull on his socks, his forebodings gave place to a righteous anger. People had no business to leave hearses on other people's property like that. Likely enough the chap who had been driving it was asleep somewhere inside it. As Mr. Wedgwood pulled on his trousers, he decided that he'd go and wake him and give him a piece of

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