

TWO GIRLS--MISSING

Ronald Oliphant

Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <u>TWO GIRLS--MISSING</u> | 1 |
| <u>Ronald Oliphant</u> | 2 |

TWO GIRLS--MISSING

Ronald Oliphant

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

The waiter looked scared stiff as he came out of the kitchen, toting his greasy tray loaded with dishes. He passed the table where I sat waiting for Shirley Smith, and I could see that his hands were shaking. His face had an ashen tinge, and big beads of sweat were standing out on his low forehead under the wiry brush of dirty-blond hair.

I hailed him as he went by "What's the matter, Rudolph?" I always call those muddy-blond waiters "Rudolph."

"Nothing," he answered, in a voice that trembled. "Nothing at all!"

"What you looking so scared about, then?"

"Me!" he exclaimed. "I'm not scared, sir!" And he hurried along.

I knew he was lying, but there was no use arguing with him. I made up my mind to see what was going on in that kitchen, behind the swinging door with the oval glass panel in it.

While I was waiting for Shirley Smith to arrive, I might as well satisfy my curiosity.

This Shirley Smith was one of half a dozen female operatives—girl detectives, to you—whom I called in to help me from time to time. I pick different types for different cases.

Tonight's particular job called for Shirley's type—small, active, with a lean, wiry body, and a flat little face that was only saved from being downright homely by a pair of nice gray eyes. And she hadn't much idea of dressing herself; generally wore black or gray, without much style, and her hats were worse than terrible.

But she was smart—and game; a girl with the instincts of a real detective, and a whole lot of brains. I'd rather have her working with me on a case like this than half a dozen wooden-headed dolls.

I waited a moment, till Rudolph's back was turned. Then I got up and tiptoed toward the door leading to the kitchen, pushed it open, and stepped through.

Right away, I saw what Rudolph had been so scared about. For the fat Italian and his wife who ran this little spaghetti-and-red-ink joint were standing with their backs against the wall, with their eyes popping out of their heads, while a thick-necked man with curly black hair was pointing a revolver at a young woman who was tied in a chair, with her arms behind her back, and her mouth gagged.

Thick-neck was questioning the girl, and she could only answer yes or no by nodding her head, or vice versa. And—to make a long story short—the girl was Shirley Smith.

She caught my eye the minute I came in, but I didn't have to give her any high sign. She went right on acting. I stayed at the door, taking in the conversation, just to find out what things were all about.

You see, this little roadhouse had advertised for a girl to act as hostess—say hello to the patrons when they came in—and sing, and play the piano during meals, and maybe dance with those that wanted to dance to phonograph records.

Which was all right—except for the fact that, during the past month, two girls had taken the hostess' job at this particular spot and had never been seen or heard of again. So I was here to investigate.

"Look here, kid," Thick-neck was saying to Shirley, "gimme this straight: is that guy sitting alone at a table a dick?"

Shirley shrugged her shoulders and made a queer sound in her throat.

"You don't know him. huh?"

Shirley shook her head.

"And you ain't a dick yourself?"

Again Shirley signified a negative.

The big man tapped the gun in his hand and leered at her knowingly. "I can't talk to you this way. I'm going to ungag you, kid, so you can answer me. But if you try any screamin' for help, this gat's got a silencer, and it'll blow

TWO GIRLS--MISSING

you to hell before you can chirp!"

Shirley's gray eyes widened. But I knew she wasn't scared. She was just acting—and making a good job of it. I don't think Thick-neck tumbled that she was kidding him.

He went over to her, unfastened the gag and took it out of her mouth. "I'll just make sure you ain't packin' a hide out on me!" he said, and his stubby fingers began to explore the neckline of her dress.

I took a step forward. My fist was clenched, and I had my eye on a point right behind his ear. One good wallop on that spot would drop him like a steer in a slaughterhouse.

But Shirley had squirmed away from his groping fingers, and she was turned halfway around. A harsh exclamation broke from her. Then—

The sharp bark of a weapon broke the silence. Looking down, I saw smoke coming from a small gun in Shirley's right hand, which was still tied with the left one, behind her back. She must have been hiding the gun in her sleeve, and slipped it out while he was questioning her. And now, she'd let him have it—

He went down onto his knees, cursing and clawing at his right shoulder. He was hurt, but not too bad.

I grabbed up the gat he'd dropped, shoved it into my pocket, and then cut Shirley loose.

"You little fool!" I whispered in her ear. "What'd you shoot him for? Everybody'll be wise to us!"

Shirley's gray eyes twinkled at me, with malice in them. "Wait and see!"

The door behind me swung open. I could feel the draft it created. I whirled about. The waiter whom I'd called Rudolph was standing there. His soggy face still wore its gray pallor his upstanding blond hair looked like a dirty brush; his forehead was still beaded with sweat.

"Who...who fired that shot?" he demanded, in an unsteady voice. "The patrons...they must not be thrown into panic. The boss told me—"

The proprietor of the restaurant, whose name was Scalisi, now spoke. "Yes, I told you not to let the customers be frightened—to act as if there was no trouble back here in the kitchen."

"I tried to—" Rudolph began.

"Go back and tell them there is nothing wrong!" the proprietor ordered; "that a light bulb got broken."

Rudolph nodded, and passed through the swinging doors again.

I poked Thick-neck with the toe of my shoe. "Who's this rough little playmate?"

"That," Scalisi said, "is my brother. He thought this young woman was acting suspiciously—that she was not really a singer seeking employment, but—"

He stopped and gulped words down in his throat. A guilty flush overspread his sallow-skinned face. His eyes took on the sullen look of a man who has said too much

I caught the thick-necked man by his coat collar and dragged him to his feet. He was bleeding.

"What," I asked, "did you do with the other two girls—Kay Kelly and Vera Lane? The ones who came here to work as hostesses during the past month, and then disappeared?"

I watched his face as I spoke. It was twisted with pain. He was moaning quietly, and didn't look as if he had an ounce of fight in him—which is where I made my mistake.

For, instead of answering, he suddenly lashed out at me with his right foot, and his uninjured left hand plunged into his coat and came out with another gun, snatched from an under-arm holster.

A stabbing pain tortured my shins, as his kick landed. Then I felt a flame of burning powder scorch my face, as he fired at pointblank range.

Something crashed against my forehead. I felt as if the roof of the building had caved in on my head—and I went out cold, like a frozen fish!

Next thing I knew, I was lying on a bed somewhere. I soon figured out where, from the smells of cooking coming from below. I was in a bedroom of the spaghetti joint.

Someone had bandaged up the wound in my head, which was throbbing painfully—like a couple of mules were inside there, trying to kick their way out.

I tried to get up, but had to drop back to the pillows again. I rested there a while longer: did a bit of thinking. What had become of Shirley? What was the idea behind the rough stuff in the kitchen? I had to find out!

I thought of those other girls—Kay Kelly and Vera Lane—who had come to this place to take a hostess' job, and then disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed them. And I felt afraid for Shirley!

I tried once more to get up. It worked: the pounding in my head wasn't so bad, this time. I managed to keep on

TWO GIRLS—MISSING

my feet and move around the room. At the door, I glued my ear against the panel and listened. But I could hear nothing.

Cautiously, I pulled the door open. No one was outside. I tiptoed to the head of the stairs and looked down. There was no one in sight. Below me was sort of a foyer, with a door leading outside. I descended, reached the lower floor and entered the dining room.

It was deserted—no customers, no waiters empty. The kitchen was the same way: no one was there.

It all didn't make sense to me—and I grabbed a bottle of red wine and poured a tumbler to clear my head and dull the throbbing from the ugly groove along my forehead made by Thick-neck's gun. If that shot had been a little lower, at a different angle— Just the same, it was bad enough.

Finally, I went outside; I had to figure this thing out some way. The night air revived me more than the wine.

From where I was standing, I could see the big Barton mansion high up on the hilltop—a sprawling, ugly mass of stone—and I noticed that there was a light in one of the windows.

I recalled that it was the home of the eccentric old recluse Paul Barton, retired lumber-man and cattle king of the Northwest, about whom many strange tales were told.

Old-timers in the detective business remember the Barton kidnaping case—almost as famous as the Charlie Ross snatch—about forty years ago. That was this old Barton's grand-daughter, and she was never found, in spite of all sorts of reward offers.

Barton was now past ninety and almost helpless—blind, palsied, and very deaf—and he was taken care of by a housekeeper.

It must have been a strange household, and I wondered how much happiness his wealth had brought the old man—

In the midst of my thinking, I caught a glint of light on the hillside, as if someone were groping his way along with the aid of a flash. It looked as if there was a trail or pathway of some sort, leading to the top, besides the regular road which the cars took.

I'd left my car in the parking lot in back of the restaurant, and I thought it'd be a good idea to drive to the top of the hill, then go on foot to the end of the path, so as to be waiting for the person or persons who were climbing it.

I started around the restaurant and made for the car. I unlocked it and got in behind the wheel. Then I stepped on the starter and fed her the gas. But nothing happened. I got out and looked around.

A puddle on the ground under the car told the story. Somebody'd punched a hole in my gas tank.

I didn't waste any time cussing. Instead, I started to look around for the trail leading up the hill. I got my flashlight out of the car, found the path, and began to follow it.

It was narrow and twisting, and stony underfoot, like a dry watercourse. Halfway up, I gave my ankle a wrench as I stepped on a slippery rock. After that, I went more cautiously.

Finally, I reached the top and came out in a cleared space, beyond which stood a fence of steel posts and heavy wire netting, decorated at the top with barbed wire.

There was a gateway in the fence, and beyond, a garden—neglected and overgrown with weeds and tall grass.

I peered through the wire and made out a form moving along the garden path. The house was beyond, a black mass, so I couldn't see clearly if there were one person or more, and the flash had been put out.

Then I heard a sound, like that of a garage door sliding open, and I saw a square of light. The bulky figure of a man moved into the lighted space. Across his shoulder, he was carrying someone: the slim form of a woman in a dark dress.

I couldn't see her features, but there was something familiar about the limp figure—and then, as the light caught her face for a moment, I was sure.

It was Shirley Smith!

The light was switched off. I heard the door of the garage close again. It was one of those doors that come down from the top. Like a stage curtain.

I got busy right away. It wasn't hard to climb to the top of the fence without cutting my hands too badly on the barbed wire, and drop down on the other side. It wasn't easy, either, but I made it. I was in the grounds surrounding the Barton mansion.

Everything was in darkness save for the window I had already noticed. I moved around to the front door—a

TWO GIRLS—MISSING

heavy iron gateway, grilled and forbidding. If there was any skulduggery going on inside, there wouldn't be much use trying to get in that way, I decided.

Then I noticed that there was a stone balcony outside the second floor window at which the light showed, and that if I could climb to the roof of the portico over the front entrance, I could easily leap the gap to the balcony.

It wasn't a hard climb—not as bad as scaling the fence—and I made it without mishap.

Then I was crouching on the balcony, peering over the window sill through parted curtains into about the strangest room I'd ever seen.

Have you ever been at an auction sale of some rich man's household effects and furnishings, when they have everything on exhibition for the customers to look over beforehand?

Well, it was like that—a room full of fine furnishings, oil paintings hanging on every inch of wall space, the floor covered with Oriental rugs and littered with statuary, cabinets of teak and mahogany and sandalwood, and inlaid tables and lamps.

In the middle of this collection was an old man lying on a couch. No doubt it was Paul Barton. He had a white beard and a mop of bushy white hair. His eyes were blank, filmed over. They looked like the eyes of a statue. His hands shook with palsy.

A woman was standing beside him—a short, heavy-built woman, not young, with coarse blond hair and hard blue eyes. She was talking to the old man, and she had to raise her voice so loud, to overcome his deafness, that I could hear what she said.

"Hassan the Wise One has brought Mary back," she was telling him.

The old man's lips moved, but I couldn't hear what he said.

A moment later, the door opened and a man came in, leading a woman by the hand.

This man was dressed like a Hindu. He was black-bearded and dark-skinned, with a white turban on his head. The girl was robed in a long white garment that reached to her ankles. Her hair was hanging loose, but it hardly reached the nape of her neck. Her eyes were wide open and staring, with pupils abnormally dilated, so that at first I didn't recognize her.

Then a queer sense of horror gripped me, as I realized that this was Shirley Smith— under the influence of some drug or hypnotic treatment!

I had to get inside that house of mystery! I tried the window. It was locked.

Shirley was now kneeling beside Paul Barton's couch. He was passing his hands over her face, as if trying to recognize her features by sense of touch. And then he was holding her hands, stroking them, as she knelt there with that blank stare in her eyes, that made me go all cold inside.

There was another window opening onto the stone balcony, and it was in darkness. I went to it, tried it, but found it locked. I had a glass-cutter on my pocketknife. I got it out and went to work on a semicircular section of the window around the catch.

After a few minutes, I was able to lift this piece out. Then I slipped my hand through the opening, unfastened the catch, and raised the window.

Precious time had been wasted. I crawled inside and turned on my flashlight. I found myself in a bedroom that was quite as littered and untidy as the other room. I picked my way through the mass of furniture and got into the passageway.

A low murmur of voices showed me the location of the room I wanted. There was a narrow slit of light where the door had been left open a crack. I stood for a moment, listening.

The cracked voice of old Paul Barton was speaking, crooning in a low, gentle tone: "My granddaughter! Mary, my little granddaughter! At last I've found you! Hassan has brought you to me. Hassan shall be rewarded!"

I pushed the door open a little and stepped inside.

Shirley was still on her knees beside the couch, and Barton was passing his veined hands caressingly across her forehead, stroking her hair, all the while murmuring endearing expressions.

It seemed to me that the old lumberman was harboring some hallucination. Being blind and palsied like he was, he'd probably been fed up with some tall tale about Shirley being his kidnaped granddaughter, and this Hassan being some sort of miracle man. So he'd believed it.

I heard the blond woman say: "Here's the check for Hassan the Wise One. Sign it!"

I saw her pick up a flat writing board and place it in front of the old man, and then thrust a pen into his palsied

TWO GIRLS—MISSING

hand. Then she guided his fingers to the spot where he should begin writing.

I was surprised that he could even sign his name. It took him a long time, but finally he finished. The job was probably a shaky scrawl, but no doubt his bank accepted it as his signature.

I began to understand things a little—or thought I did. Some sort of extortion plot was being worked on the helpless old man by this hardfaced housekeeper and the Hindu.

The blond woman spoke again. "All right. We can get rid of her, now. She's coming out of it. She'll know too much!"

Shirley's danger drove me to action. I rushed forward just as the Hindu seized her under the arms, dragged her to her feet and half carried her to a metal door, which had been hidden by a curtain.

The blond woman saw me and screamed a warning to the Hindu. He pushed Shirley through the door, then whirled and faced me. His hand whipped down to the sash about his waist and came up spitting lead and flame from an automatic he had hidden there.

I dared not shoot, for fear of hitting Shirley. I had no way of telling how thin that metal door was. I dodged, dropped to my knees, and hurled my gun straight at the Hindu's head.

It caught him on the bridge of the nose, drawing a gush of blood. For a moment, he was blinded.

That moment of hesitation gave me all the chance I wanted. I leaped in on him, clutching for the gun. I seized his wrist and twisted it. He fought back, furiously, savagely. His fist crashed into my face. I felt my features being battered into pulp, but I hung on. I could take a lot of punishment when a game little kid like Shirley Smith was in danger.

All the time, I was holding on to the gun with one hand and hammering his body with short, savage punches with the other. I felt my right fist sink into his soft midriff again and again; heard him grunt, as the blows tore into his vitals. I had to hurt him—badly, and soon.

I noticed that he was weakening. His blows were losing steam. Finally, I put everything I had into one terrific punch—right under his heart.

It was a finisher. He went limp, sank to the floor and lay there, glassy-eyed and gasping.

I stepped over him and tugged open the door through which he had pushed Shirley. To my horror, I saw that it wasn't the entrance to a closet, as I'd thought, but that it opened into a shaft lined with steel—like a dumbwaiter shaft.

And there, clinging to the edge of the shaft, was Shirley Smith, her face white with strain, her eyes big with terror.

I guessed that the shock of being pushed into the shaft had brought her out of the stupor into which the Hindu's drugs or hypnotic influence had plunged her. She looked more sane and normal than when she had been kneeling beside old Barton.

I reached down, caught her by the arms and drew her up to safety.

Later, I learned that this shaft led to an electric furnace, which would have consumed her as completely as if she'd been placed in a crematorium. A fiendish device installed there by the housekeeper and her accomplice, without Barton's knowledge.

This kid Shirley was all steel and courage. I'd expected she'd be limp, worn out with her exertions; but she wasn't. The minute I set her on her feet, she picked up the automatic which the Hindu had dropped and flew like a wild cat at the blond housekeeper, pointing the gat at her and screaming: "Don't leave this room!"

It was only then I noticed that the woman had been edging cautiously toward the door, as if bent on making her escape. I marveled at Shirley's nerve and quick observation, in spite of the ordeal through which she'd just passed.

She took command of the situation. "Your Hindu's stirring," she told me. "Better tie him up!"

I dropped on one knee beside the man I'd knocked out, and then I noticed that his turban had been partly torn off, revealing his hair—which wasn't black, like his whiskers. And on closer inspection, the whiskers proved to be phony—stuck on with spirit gum. I plucked out a handful of them, and removed the turban, and then I saw that the Hindu was really the waiter Rudolph.

At once, the devilish plot on which I'd stumbled became clear to my mind, Rudolph was in collusion with Barton's housekeeper. The two of them kept the old man fed up on the idea that his kidnapped granddaughter was still alive, and they brought in young women from time to time, to palm off on him as the missing girl. But the old

TWO GIRLS--MISSING

man hadn't been satisfied until they palmed off Shirley on him, to collect the huge reward.

Barton—blind, senile, and with a memory that recalled only long—past events—swallowed the story and paid the ransom money over after Shirley's appearance. The earlier victims were destroyed in the furnace, from which Shirley had narrowly escaped.

Later, I searched the furnace and discovered some bits of scorched hair that had escaped destruction, and some ashes. The police department's crime lab completed the case for me by identifying the ashes as human remains, and the hair was found to match combings found in the Kelly girl's bedroom.

All of which evidence finally sent the housekeeper and Rudolph to the hot seat.

So Shirley and I had done a good night's work.

One thing that puzzled us was where Thick—neck and two Scalisis—man and wife—who ran the spaghetti joint, fitted into the picture. They didn't seem to have any part in the murder and extortion plot. But they'd acted suspicious of us,

So we nosed around their restaurant, and soon came up with the answer. The three of them had been engaged in doing a little dope—peddling on the side, and they'd taken me and Shirley for a pair of F.B.I. operatives.

THE END.