

# THE HUMAN SPHINX

By Ellis Parker Butler

ILLUSTRATIONS BY F.E. WATSON

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Simon Judd, amateur detective, and William Dart, an undertaker, are visiting John Drane, eccentric man of wealth, at the Drane place. Suddenly the household is shocked to find that John Drane has been murdered. The dead man is first seen by Josie, the maid, then by Amy Drane and Simon Judd. The latter faints.

Police officers call and investigations begin. Dr. Blessington is called, and after seeing the murdered John Drane, makes the astounding revelation to Amy that her "uncle" is not a man but a woman.

Dr. Blessington discounts the theory of suicide, saying that Drane was definitely murdered. Dr. Blessington comments on the fact that all the servants in the household of Drane are sick, and that Drane has never discharged a servant for ill health. Dick Brennan, the detective, arrived to investigate the case.

Brennan questions the persons in the house, asking Amy if anyone had any reason to kill her "uncle". Amy says no one had any reason to kill her uncle. After further questioning, she is asked about Dart. Meanwhile Judd has told the story of his acquaintance with the actual John Drane in Riverbank.

Simon Judd proposes to Brennan that he help in the solution of the case, serving as Brennan's partner. Brennan accepts the proposal immediately. Judd confides that Amy "ain't" what she says she is.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"What do you mean by that?" Brennan asked. "You mean she's crooked?"

"Oh, black my cats, no!" Simon Judd exclaimed. "If I know folks she's the straightest sort there is—and the nicest, too. She ain't this late John Drane's niece, nor yet his grand-niece—that's what I mean. You hear her say off that rigamarole about John Drane's brother Daniel going to California in '78, and marryin' a Mary O'Ryan, and havin' a son Thomas that was this Amy's pa? And about this Thomas Drane marryin' some Ameria Gartner that come to be this Amy girl's ma? Well, black my cats, it's all true except none of it! There wasn't no brother Daniel. No, sir! I take my oath to that. I knowed that Drane family as well as I know myself, and there wasn't no Daniel in it. That's all lies."

"Are you sure of that?" Brennan asked.

"Why listen!" said Simon Judd. "This girl got the story from John Drane. John Drane told her this Daniel Drane went West in '78. In '78 John Drane was twenty-five years old and him and me had been chums since we was born—never a day we didn't see each other. I was at their house more than I was at my own. I knowed them from A to Z. And there wasn't any Daniel Drane, I tell you. There was just two kids in the family—John and this sister of his named Ella, and I knew them both all the time."

"He made up this story to tell the girl," said Brennan.

"Because he was a woman," said Simon Judd, "and hadn't no children to love and cherish. He was 'she,' mind you, Brennan. And when she—this John Drane, whoever she was—got along oldish she had to have some child to love. So, if I ain't an old fool and guessin' wrong, she picked out some orphan child somewhere and told a lot of lies. Just to have a kid to come back here and love her when she got too old and feeble to fuss with this Wall Street stuff and so on."

"This may be mighty important if it is true," Brennan said. "It might account for the murder—some connection of the child, her father perhaps, wanting money. Something along that line."

"It's true," Simon Judd insisted. "Why, look here, you! This old woman, this John Drane, made it all up. Take the names—Mary O'Ryan was a girl we both knew out there in Riverbank when we were all kids. She died out there only last year. And Daniel!—she had a brother Daniel, this Mary did. And 'Ameria Gartner' that was said to be Amy's ma—she was another kid we both knew in Riverbank when we were kids together. She's alive yet, out there, and she had a brother Thomas—that gave the notion of a Thomas Drane. You go out to Riverbank and you'll find that's all the solemn truth; you go out to California and I bet you don't find any trace of a Daniel Drane, or a Mary O'Ryan his wife, or a Thomas Drane, or of—"

"Hush!" Brennan said. "The girl is coming."

Amy returned with the notebook for which Simon Judd had sent her and almost immediately Mrs. Vincent came out, leaning on the arm of Bob Carter. She had been resting on her bed, being in great pain, and had been obliged to put on a dress before she could answer Brennan's summons. The poor woman seemed to be in a very bad state indeed, but she did her best to answer Brennan's questions, and her answers were full and quite circumstantial.

She was a widow, she said, and been employed by the supposed John Drane for five years. He had personally engaged her as housekeeper at an employment agency in the city where she had registered, and his offer had been a great relief to her because it had been hard to find a position on account of her poor health. He probably would not have taken her, she said, except that the house had been two months without a mistress, the former housekeeper having died. The wages were all she could have expected.

She said, furthermore, that she was a widow and the antecedents she gave were such that Brennan could easily look up. Mr. Drane had always left the household expenses to her. On the first of each month—about the seventh, to be exact—

he had given her a check for the estimated expenses; if the expenses ran higher he gave her extra money. If they ran less he made the check less. He was always very particular in checking the bills with her but they had never had any quarrels; he was fair that way.

She had never had, she said, the slightest idea that "John Drane" was a female. He was peculiar in some ways but no more so than other people. She considered him a finicky old bachelor—his shaving twice a day, for instance, which she now saw was in order that the lack of beard might not be noticed, had seemed to her one exemplification of his "old-maidishness."

Very few people came to the house, Mrs. Vincent said, although the young folk began to come after Amy's arrival, and Mr. Drane liked that. He encouraged it, telling Mrs. Vincent to do all she could to make the place pleasant for them. Mr. Dart, the undertaker, had been the most frequent visitor, often coming to play cards and staying the night. The blue room had been used by him so often that the servants usually called it "Mr. Dart's room."

Personally she did not like Mr. Dart much; he was apt to be "uppish" when Mr. Drane was not present. By "uppish" she meant "bossy," she explained, for he acted as if he thought he had a right to order the servants around, which he hadn't. He never acted so when Mr. Drane was around, of course. Mr. Drane always had a way with him and knew how to keep people in their places.

The servants, Mrs. Vincent thought, were all decent and reliable. She had personally looked into the references of all of them when they were engaged.

"Mr. Drane," she said, "got them from the hospital."

"You mean he took the hospital employees away from the hospital?" Brennan asked her.

"Oh, no indeed!" Mrs. Vincent exclaimed as if afraid Brennan might think ill of John Drane. "It was quite the other way, sir. Mr. Drane took a great interest in the hospital, you see; he helped build it and all. That was one of the few places he ever went at night—to the meetings of the hospital board. The hospital, you see, sir, can't keep chronic patients but so long—a couple of weeks, maybe—and then out they must go, and where to go very few of them know. So Mr.

Drane took them. That is why they are all so sickly, one way and another. It was easy work for them here, almost no family, and Mr. Drane always wanted them to rest when ill. The hospital would let him know when there was a case that could work but was incurable, as you might say. Ah, sir, so many of them never did get well!"

"Died, you mean?" Brennan asked.

"Yes, sir. Dr. Blessington can tell you," the housekeeper said. "There's no house in the town where he comes oftener. Nor where that man Dart comes oftener, the more pity it is!"

"The undertaker Dart?"

"That same," Mrs. Vincent said. "And if I may say so, sir, I think it was for that reason he made up to Mr. Drane so persistently. It's not a nice thing to think, and I'm ashamed to think it, but there have been a great many funerals from this house, and no expense ever spared." Mrs. Vincent wiped her eyes. "Just when you get to like a person it was another funeral, it seemed. Like Norbert, the poor fellow! I've a great fondness for him, even if he is black, for he is a good man, Norbert it. He's not long to live."

"Great heavens, what a house!" Brennan exclaimed.

"Yes, there were times when I felt it was lugubrious," said Mrs. Vincent, shaking her head. "It was not always cheerful, knowing that all those under me would almost

surely die and make place for those that would die in their turn."

Brennan glanced at Simon Judd. The fat man was listening with his eyes closed but he was not asleep, he was rubbing his plump hands back and forth across his enormous pouch slowly.

"I think that will be all, Mrs. Vincent," Brennan said. "Send me Norbert next, will you?"

When Mrs. Vincent had gone Brennan sat a few moments tapping the veranda floor with his toe and frowning. He turned to Amy suddenly.

"This isn't pleasant for you," he said, "and there is no need of your listening to all this. It is only what you know already, I imagine. If there is anything else you'd like to do you need not stay."

Bob Carter took her by the arm. "He's right," he said. "Suppose we go and sit in the summer house a while. We've enough to talk over ourselves, Amy," and the girl arose and went with him.

"What do you make of all this, partner?" Brennan asked Simon Judd. "It's queer all through, don't you think? It sounds to me as if this John Drane woman was crazy—slightly touched in the head, anyway. An alienist could give it a name, I suppose. When a woman masquerades as a man all her life, and gathers around her a lot of chronic invalids and nothing much else, and makes an undertaker her best friend and chum, she's crazy. Or what do you think about it?"



Mrs. Vincent Is Led in For Questioning

"Well, I don't know as she's been masqueradin' as a man all her life, Richard," Simon Judd said deliberately. "I wouldn't go so far as to say 'all her life,' not yet, anyway."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Brennan said. "A long time."

"I don't know as I'd say 'a long time,' not yet," Simon Judd insisted. "For all I know, mister, she may have started in half an hour before I came here. The whole bunch of these folks may be lyin' to me, far as I know. I don't know what they may be tryin' to cook up on us. There's one thing I would like to know."

His opportunity to learn it came promptly, for Dr. Blessington drove up to the veranda at that moment, his other affairs having received attention. Brennan, who knew him fairly well, asked him to sit a while.

"I guess you're the very man I want to ask a couple of questions of," Simon Judd said. "This Mrs. Vincent lady says you've been coming here purty regular right along, and you look like you had a couple of eyes in your head. About this John Drane—is there any time you noticed any special change in him?"

(Continued Next Week.)

The maid had been surreptitiously using the bath tub of her employer, an elderly bishop. He was a bachelor, very fastidious about his toilet, and desired the exclusive use of his tub.

He reprimanded the maid with much indignation.

"What distresses me most, Mary, is that you have done this behind my back."

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