

THE HUMAN SPHINX

By Ellis Parker Butler

ILLUSTRATIONS BY F.E. WATSON

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Simon Judd, amateur detective, and William Dart, an undertaker, visit John Drane, an eccentric man of wealth, at the Drane place. Suddenly John Drane is murdered, and Dr. Blessington, after examining the body, makes the astounding revelation to Amy Drane that her "uncle" is a woman and not a man.

All the servants in the household are sick, it is noted, and it is found that Drane never discharged a servant for ill health. Dick Brennan, detective, arrives at the house and makes thorough investigations. Simon Judd tells him the story of the actual John Drane with whom he (Judd) was acquainted in Riverbank. Judd proposes to Brennan that he "go partners" with Brennan in the solution of the crime. Brennan accepts, then Judd declares that Amy is not John Drane's niece or any relative of Drane. Mrs. Vincent, housekeeper, tells Brennan that Drane picked his servants from among the chronic patients at the hospital. Dr. Blessington is asked if he had ever noticed any special change in Drane. Dr. Blessington has but little information to give. The talk veers to Drane's employment of chronic invalids, and suddenly Judd astonishes the doctor by asking when "Drane murdered the first of those hired hands of his?"

More servants are questioned, but are unable to give much information, being intoxicated. Judd then propounds the belief that the undertaker is the husband of Drane. He also tells Brennan: "You've been thinking perhaps Dart murdered Drane. You're wrong."

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"Because, back my cats! I was thinkin' the same thing, Richard," Simon Judd explained. "But it ain't so. I don't take no stock in that notion. That little old shrimp wouldn't murder nobody. In the first place he ain't got the gall to do it and in the second place I ain't never heard of an undertaker murderin' anybody. Did you ever?"

"No," Brennan agreed, "I don't remember of a single case where an undertaker did a murder."

"Sort of unprofessional, I guess," Simon Judd said. "Sort of like buildin' up trade in an unethical way. It ain't done, as the feller says. Are you goin' to telephone him to come here, or are we goin' to his undertakin' shop?"

"I think he'll be coming here," Brennan said. "Dr. Blessington has probably asked him to take care of the funeral."

"You'd better telephone," Simon Judd advised. "That Dart feller ain't comin' here to take charge of no funeral."

"Why not?"

"Because he don't want to be worried with it," Simon Judd explained. "He don't want a funeral on his mind whilst he's got to think what he's going to do and say about bein' married to John Drane. He's got a lot of thinkin' to do, Richard, that undertaker has. There's a terrible lot of questions in his mind right now. He's got to decide whether he's goin' to admit he knew John Drane was a woman or not; he's got to decide whether he's goin' to admit he's John Drane's husband or not; he's got to decide when to say they were married, and why he never told. He's a busy man right now, Richard, you bet your boots! And he don't want to take no time off to have to think of no funeral preparations."

"I'll call him up and tell him to come here," Brennan said, and he went into the hall and did so. "He will be here immediately," he said when he returned to Simon Judd. "You meet him and keep him down here; I'm going up and see if the officers have found anything new."

The undertaker drove his own car at times and he arrived in it before long, and Simon Judd met him on the veranda. The fat lowan was standing at the head of the steps as the smaller man mounted and he pushed his hat back on his head and put his hands in his pockets, jingling his coins and keys.

"Brennan wanted to see me," the undertaker said, pulling off the gloves he wore when driving.

"So did I Abner," Simon Judd said, grinning at the little man. "I been wantin' to have a good old talk with you ever since we shook hands last night. Been a long time since we seen each other, ain't it?"

The little undertaker showed no surprise, he attempted no evasions. He was not even annoyed by Simon Judd's words; his only expression was of worry and weariness combined. He went to a chair and seated himself and motioned Simon Judd to sit near him. He fumbled at his beard, not knowing exactly what to say. Simon Judd spoke first.

"I told Brennan you didn't kill her," he said. "I told him you wasn't the sort to do such a thing, Abner."

The information did not seem to

cheer the undertaker much; perhaps he did not rightly hear what Simon Judd had said.

"Sime," he said, "I knew you knew me last night. I was scared last night, Sime."

"Yeh? Thought I'd got track of somethin' out home, huh? Why, you poor old feller!"

"When you said you were going to be a detective," the undertaker explained. "Yes, I thought sure you had got on the track of something. You had, hadn't you Sime?"

"Not a thing!" Simon Judd said. "I come East just like I said, to study up how detectives do down here. I didn't suspicion a thing, Abner, not until I saw you. And then I only wondered why you had come down here and changed your name. And at that, Abner, I didn't think anything but what I heard back home when you did disappear — that you was bankrupt and had skipped out."

"I was bankrupt," the undertaker said. "I did skip out. Sime, I never made a decent living at undertaking the whole time I was in Riverbank. It wore on me — wore on my mind. And Ella wasn't a patient wife; she was a nagger, Sime — an awful nagger."

"Always sayin' she wished she was a man, I bet you!" Simon Judd said. "That kind of woman does wear a man down, Abner, black my cats if she don't! Well, she had her wish."

"She was a terrible woman, Sime!" the little undertaker said, shaking his head. "I don't know that there ever was another such woman except where you read about them in books. Sime, I wish you were on my side of this business; I wish I had you or somebody to be a friend to me right now. I don't know anybody in this town — not anybody. I'm alone. I'm the most friendless man in the world. She wouldn't let me know anybody — she was jealous — jealous and afraid. I'm all alone, Sime, and I'm scared. I can't think right; my head don't seem to work right today."

"What have you got to be afraid of?" Simon Judd asked. "What have you done to be afraid of, Abner?"

"Nothing! Nothing!" the little man said tremulously. "As God is my witness, Sime, I never did a thing but keep my mouth shut. They can't hang me for that, can they? But — thirty-two years of keeping my mouth shut! What do you think I ought to do, Sime?"

"Why, if I was you, Abner," Simon Judd said, "I'd tell this Brennan the whole story, straight and clean. I sure would. Tell you the honest truth, Abner, I'd get it off my chest and out of my soul just as quick as ever I could."

"I don't know — I don't know!" the little man mourned, but Brennan came down then and out upon the veranda, and Simon Judd spoke to him, half turning in his chair.

"Come on over here, Richard," he said. "Dart wants to tell you all about it. He knows purty near the whole thing, up to the murder anyway. Go ahead now, Abner — tell him how it was."

The little man pulled at his beard, frowning at his feet.

"But, now, hold on a 'minute!" Simon Judd said suddenly. "We ought to let this Amy girl hear this, accordin' to my notion. Seems like she has a right to know, ain't it so, Abner?"

"Yes; she'll know it anyway," the little man said, and Simon Judd went into the house to send Norbert to find the girl. She came presently, Robert Carter with her, and Simon Judd told her why she had been sent for. She and young Carter seated themselves and the girl looked anxiously from face to face. But the undertaker did not speak.

"Amy," Simon Judd said, when the silence had lasted a few moments, "I'm goin' to start this off, because what I know I know. John Drane and me was boys together, born close to the same time, away back in 1853. John was born in '53 and Emily, his sister, dead upstairs there, was born the next year, 1854. That's all the Dranes there was; there wasn't no Daniel Drane — he's fairy story. Who you are I don't know, but maybe Abner here can tell us that."

"Anyhow, Amy, we three — me and John Drane and his sister Emily grew up together out there in Riverbank. John never did get married and in 1883 he went west and we lost track of him — I did anyway. What did he do outwest, Abner?"

"He got into copper and silver," Abner said. "He made a million."

"He made a million between 1883 and 1892," Simon Judd said. "But his sister Ella stayed right there in Riverbank and in 1884 she married a man that came to town and started in the undertaker business. His name was Abner Dart, wasn't it, Abner?"

"Yes, I married her. June 6, 1884," Abner Dart said.

"And after awhile she got to be a naggy wife," Simon Judd said. "She bore down pretty hard on Abner and

quincied his spirit till he was no more than a worm. About eight years of that, until 1892, and then John Drane came home to visit her and see the old town. Hey, Abner?"

"He came home sick," Abner said; "and he came when Ella was sick. We carried him up to the house on a stretcher and put him in the bed, and Ella got out of her bed and went and sat in a chair by his bed and they talked, just the two of them. He had had a hard time in the west there, and sometimes he went for days without food, prospecting the hills with a man named Jarling, his partner. Then they found copper, and it was when they were both pretty well played out; it was a question whether they would either of them last until they could reach civilization. So they drew up a couple of papers — if either of them died all the other had was to go to the one left alive. John told Ella that as he lay there dying, and then he died."

"That night," said Simon Judd. "Yes, he died that night," Abner Dart said. "So Ella went back to her bed and sent for me, and she told me what to do. You remember old Doc Worley, Sime? Always drunk. He was drunk when we sent for him, and we got him drunker, and he signed a death certificate and ended up that spree with the tremors. The rest was easy enough. You were at the funeral, Sime. You never guessed it was John we were burying when we said it was Ella."

"No, it fooled me easy enough," Simon Judd said. "Typhoid was what Ella had had and they had cut off her hair and none of us had seen her since she was took sick. I thought how bad she looked, but that was all."

"So we had 'John' get well," Abner

Dart said. "We had 'him' sick for a couple of weeks and then we had 'him' get well enough to walk around with a cane, and presently he was well enough to leave town."

"I went to the station with him myself — hauled him in one of my rigs," Simon Judd said. "We talked about when we were kids. I was fooled, black my cats!"

"She went to Chicago, Ella did," Abner continued, "and after awhile, when she had gathered up the loose ends of John's affairs, she came down to New York and got settled here and I failed in business the way we had arranged and came to Westcote and she gave me money to start in again. For a month or two we pretended to be strangers to each other; then we 'got acquainted' and I was the only close friend she had, and she was the only close friend I had. She began speculating in Wall Street and did well — she was a wonderful woman that way. But all the while she was worried. That old partner of John's, Jarling, kept her worried all the time. She could never find him — a word of him now and then and then he was lost. It might be five years or ten years between times and then she would hear he was alive and then no more news of him for another long stretch."

"And if Jarling knew the real John was dead he could claim a million or so, hey?" Simon Judd asked.

"That's what worried her," Abner Dart said. "She got so she thought more of money than of her life. And then —"

He stopped and hid his face in his hand.

"She poisoned the first one," Simon Judd supplied.

(Continued Next Week)

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