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DOPPELGANGER

By

LYN VENABLE

Old German legends tell us of weird "twins" that travel with some of us wherever we go.

WILL Hazlitt guided his ancient jalopy along the muddy ruts of a sinuous hill road better suited to mules than the mechanical contrivances of man. One thought only burned through his mind, "Get the doc, get the doc to Marcy in time . . ."

Dimly through the dark he saw the doc's house ahead. But no yellow square of light turned away the night, no smoke issued from the cold chimney, no footstep answered his frantic pounding at the silent door. In the mud

hands. Panic threw his thoughts into turmoil, and out of the depths of his despair came a name.

Effie! O' daft Effie was what they called her now, but she had brought him into the world, and Marcy too. Now she was old, incredibly old, and they said she never left her tiny cabin on the hill, not since the doc came. Will glanced back at the dark and empty windows of the doc's house. Effie was his only hope.

The rotting boards of her ca-

Your editor once knew a man in Chicago who told him of a weird thing that happened to him and a friend of his. It seemed the friend had seen and talked to him in the street the previous day, and on the second day, remarked on the coincidence of meeting him by accident again so soon. There was one catch—the man your editor knew had not been in the city the previous day! Was this incident once again an example of the weird phenomenon of the "doppelganger" of ancient superstition; the identical "double" who sometimes appears to complicate our lives?

were the tracks of the doc's car. The doc was out. And there was no telling when he'd be back.

Will sat down numbly on the sagging front steps and buried his face in his hands. He thought of Marcy back home in the cabin, and the brave, pain-tightened smile she'd given him as he left.

"Hurry, Will," she'd whispered.

A tight and terrible ache tore at his throat as he looked helplessly down at his big, rough

bin, from which the last speck of paint had long since flaked away, sagged dizzily, and filthy rags hung in the cracked windows. For a moment Will feared that Effie was gone, but a dim light flickered from within and a dragging footstep responded to his knocks and shouts. The splintered door swung back a few inches on protesting hinges.

"Effie! I'm Will Hazlitt. My wife—she needs help quick, and

the doc's away. I—we need you!"

A voice as dry and sere as blowing leaves in the autumn came from behind the door. "Hah! Need me, do ye? When the young doc came to the hills, folks decided they didn't need ol' Effie anymore. She wasn't good enough for 'em. So Effie stays here in her cabin an' don't go out for nobody. Go away, Mister."

Will, in desperation, pushed against the door. "Effie, listen, you brought me into this world, and I remember my mother saying you were gentle and kind as an angel. You wouldn't let Marcy and her baby die because of want of help."

The old voice was softer now. "No, Will Hazlitt. I—I don't reckon I could."

But new doubts tortured Will during the ride to his cabin, as time after time Effie pulled a pint bottle from her old carpet bag and drank deeply. He'd forgotten; folks had talked about that too, but he'd forgotten. But there was no one else to turn to, no one else but this ancient crone with the dirt encrusted beneath her broken fingernails and the sour smell to her stringy hair.

He saw Marcy's eyes widen in horror as he led Effie through the door. He tried to make his voice reassuring. "The doc was away darling, so I—I brought Effie here to help you."

"Oh, Will . . ."

"No time for talk now," inter-

rupted Effie. "Will Hazlitt, you find somethin' out in the barn to keep you busy—for a long time."

WILL sat on the floor in the barn with his back against a bale of hay and waited. He listened to the silence, broken only by the occasional soft neighing of a horse, or the thump of a hoof against the straw-covered floor. He waited while the moon rose high in the sky and he waited while it descended again toward the horizon.

In the cold grayness of the dawn there was the sound of the barn door scraping open, and blinking against the light, Will saw the humped figure of Effie in the doorway. She stood there silently, and something about the stark tenseness of her body frightened him. When his eyes became enough accustomed to the light so that he could see into hers, he was certain. Something was wrong, and wrong in a way that showed in the old woman's eyes not as sorrow or defeat or even fear, but as a brittle, sparkling terror.

Will leaped to his feet. "Effie, what is it? Is Marcy . . .?"

"She's all right, Will Hazlitt," the old voice trembled, "she's wore out, poor little thing, for it was a long time a' bornin'. But she's sleepin' sound now, and she'll be all right."

Will slumped with relief. It must be the baby then, but at least Marcy, his Marcy, was all

right. He tried to make himself ask, "Well, then . . . ?"

"They—they're all right too but . . ." her voice trailed off as though she were withholding something.

"They? You mean twins?"

"Alike as two peas in a pod they are, the one I delivered and . . . the other one."

Then Effie sprang toward him and placed her gnarled and dried up hands against his chest as though in supplication. He felt her foul old breath in his face as the words babbled up out of her.

"Will Hazlitt, listen to old Effie. I'm old and my mind has grown misty like the fog that hangs over the valley in winter, and too much gin runs strong in my veins too. Them that says I'm daft may be right, but Will, when you brought me here tonight, an' I seen the poor little thing needin' me so bad, I came as sober an' sane as you. After a while the fog'll come back, but now my head's as clear as yours, and listen to me Will, I only delivered one baby. Delivered it and wrapped it and put it in the cradle you made with your own hands, and then I stepped into the kitchen for a moment, and when I came back there was two of 'em there. Two of 'em asleep in that cradle alike as two peas in a pod. Call me daft, Will, but I'm tellin' you this because I have to, because," her voice sank to a terrified whisper, "because what it is, that

other one, an' where it came from I don't know and don't dare speculate."

"I want to see them," said Will carefully, stunned because he could not set aside the ravings of an old woman folks called daft, a crazy old woman he had seen sucking heavily at the gin bottle a few hours before. Will was a simple man and he understood simple things, the green things growing in the spring, and the miracle of a wet and leggy colt nuzzling its mother, and the warm rain on his upturned face. And in his time the world had come to the hills, the automobile and the radio and the wisdom of doctor and teacher and clergyman, but somewhere in him lurked half-forgotten memories of the old beliefs too. His great-grandmother sitting with the firelight casting grotesque shadows on her face, telling the old tales, of changelings who took human form at birth and . . . "Come on Effie, hurry!" Fairly dragging the old woman after him, he ran up the path toward the cabin.

WILL stood over the cradle, looking down at the two tiny, pink faces. Pride and joy swelled within him in great waves, and then crashed on the rocks of uncertainty and fear.

"They're so alike Effie, you're certain . . . ?" One look into her eyes told him there was no need to complete the question. "How

can we tell, Effie? Which one? Which one is the—the other one?"

"The old ones said that a doppelganger has no soul, and casts no reflection in a glass. Here's a glass, Will." She held it out to him, and the trembling of her hands made the stained and cracked mirror cast shimmering shadows upon the wall.

There was only one reflection. Will looked at the cradle, at the two tiny forms in the blanket, and back at the mirror, down . . . and back. Down . . . and back. It was like the new pictures he'd heard about, where there were two pictures on a screen, but when you looked through glasses you only saw one.

With a sudden cry of pain and fury, Will flung the offending mirror against the wall where it shat-

tered with a high thin tinkling. His eyes met Effie's and they exchanged a long, long look. Then they did what they had to do, silently, without exchanging a word. Once, on the bed, Marcy cried out in her sleep. And then there was only one tiny figure in the cradle, and old Effie slunk out of the door with a strange, shapeless lump concealed in the dirty folds of her shawl.

Will drew a chair close to the cradle. Marcy was resting quietly again, she would never know. In the cradle, a little pink hand flailed the air, and the tiny eyes opened. Will smiled happily and touched the minute fingers. It was all right now. This was his, his flesh and blood. Already the other one was but a memory, and he was beginning to forget.

The End