

The Doppel-Ganger

By H. Pease

So this was the old home—the cradle of his race!

Percy Osbaldistone of Osbaldistone Tower gazed curiously about him in what had formerly been the library, and espied a capacious Queen Anne chair by the fireside which looked inviting.

Having ensconced himself therein he put up his feet against the mantelpiece, lit a long cigar, and drew in the smoke slowly and meditatively.

The old housekeeper and her pretty niece had given him a good supper, and he himself, foreseeing empty cellars, had brought with him an ample freight, so now at the long last he had arrived in harbour.

After all his vicissitudes and being for years the black sheep of the ancient family, that he should come into possession of Osbaldistone Tower and Manor touched his vein of humour. He laughed grimly, rubbed one hand upon the other, and looked contemptuously up at the portrait of an ancestor who seemed to be scowling at the last representative of his race. It was true that there was not much of the old family estate left, and what was left was mortgaged, but still it was good for a few thousands, and the family lawyer had to find them or go. The heir of the Osbaldistones continued his reflections. He didn't 'give a damn' for his ancestors, for what had they done save bring him into the world—a doubtful blessing?

'*Après moi le Déluge,*' murmured he to himself with a cynical smile, as he ensconced himself deeper in the recesses of his armchair and drank deep from the glass by his side. His hand shook badly, and he spilled some drops of whisky and soda upon his trousers.

'Damn!' cried he in annoyance. Then to himself *sotto voce*, 'Now that I've got back to this old quiet place I'll soon have my rotten nerves right again.'

Looking up after wiping his trousers he suddenly perceived to his great astonishment, for he had heard no sound of entrance, a fellow seated in the chair opposite which nestled under the Spanish leather screen that kept off the draught from the door behind.

'Who the devil are you?' inquired the Lord of the Manor angrily, 'and what d' ye want?'

'I am an Osbaldistone like yourself,' replied the stranger suavely; 'we ate the last of the ancient house that bears upon its chevron the spear and spurs (mulletts), so when I heard of your good fortune I thought it but polite to call and gratulate you on your succession.'

Percy Osbaldistone looked across upon his unwelcome visitor with narrowed eyes. The room was dark in its old oak panelling; there was but the one lamp on the table behind him, and it was by the light of the fire that he had to scrutinise the newcomer. So far as he could see the fellow was not unlike himself: he seemed have the high-ridged nose of the family, which had become almost a birthmark in course of years. Yet the sardonic hardness of chin and jaw was very different to his own flabbiness; and as he watched his opposite Osbaldistone felt hatred surge up within his soul.

He had heard of men having their 'double.' Perhaps this was his own. He shivered at the thought.

Then he recollected that a branch of the family had long years ago migrated to Virginia. Possibly the fellow was one of their descendants.

'Are you from America?' he inquired. Then he went on in haste, not waiting for reply, 'For myself, I've only just arrived here. The only servants are an ancient housekeeper and her little

niece, and I can't do with visitors—you'll understand me. Take a whisky and soda and then go,' and the speaker ended with a snarl and suggestive stretch of leg and boot.

'You are not very hospitable,' replied his opposite, suavely as before, 'but it matters little, nor do I require a whisky and soda. I simply called in for a "crack," as you say up here, and to congratulate you on succeeding.'

'A crack!' echoed his host surlily. 'What about?'

'Oh, about our family and yourself,' returned the other caressingly. 'I am something of a genealogist, love family histories and dote on skeletons in the cupboard. As a matter of fact, ours is a singularly dull chronicle: except that the head of the family was an unsuccessful rebel in the "15," we never travelled beyond our Anglo-Saxon fatherdom—deep drinking, gambling, hard riding—and the *droit de Seigneur*'—here the speaker paused a moment—'this little niece, for example?' he hinted delicately.

'How the devil has the fellow guessed that?' thought Osbaldistone, white with anger and touched by secret fear,

'Get out!' he cried hoarsely, and felt if his revolver lay handy in his pocket, ready for use needful.

His guest, however, took no notice of the command. Indeed, he went on more coolly than before. 'I mention it,' said he, 'because there was an ugly story about in British East Africa when you were farming out in the wilds beyond Simba, of the rape of a native girl, who was eventually turned out of doors at night and never reached her home again. Hyæna or lion? Which d' ye think?'

Osbaldistone's hand dropped feebly back from his revolver. His face was ashen-coloured. Good God! Who was this visitor? The episode of this black girl was the one thing he had never been able to forget. Shrinking back into his chair, he gazed as a rabbit may gaze upon the approaching python.

'Damn the fellow!' He plucked forth his revolver with quivering fingers, levelled it at his guest, and pulled upon the trigger. The bullet sang across the room, passed through armchair and screen into the wainscot beyond.

The smoke cleared; Osbaldistone could still see the unmoved and mocking eye of his enemy that filled him with a nameless horror. He lifted his pistol to take a better aim, then—on a strange misgiving—turned the barrel round upon himself. 'You fool!' muttered the strange visitor sardonically, and as he spake he vanished as silently as he had come.