

The Man Who Wasn't Himself

by Alexander Blade, 1915-1946

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An absolutely sure way to implicate another man in a murder is to commit it with his own body! And Jaques Perdeau knew such a way!

Illustration:

Jacques Perdeau gloated over the unconscious Mortain
before he turned to his machine

IN his laboratory that night Jacques Perdeau had to congratulate himself on his cunning. The scheme was clever. It was worthy of Perdeau, the dark, dapper, wax-moustached little scientist.

In addition to this, it was exquisitely ironic. For it would eliminate the man who stood between Jacques Perdeau and the hour in which he could safely announce his discovery. It would eliminate Mortain.

The thought of the bestial, beetle-browed thug brought a smile. For Perdeau was visualizing the stark, bewildered fear that would grip Mortain's drink-fogged senses when the gendarmes came to arrest the thick-witted swine for murder. A murder he never would have committed—in actuality.

It would be a murder committed only by Mortain's body—

Perdeau lit a cigarette and seated himself at his laboratory desk. In a moment he was busy pouring over a thick ledger of charts and findings from the important experiment. On the front of the ledger which the dapper little scientist paged was scrawled, *Final Investigations in Personality Transference*.

The experiments had been completed for over a month now. Completed and definitely proven. Now they were ready for scientific investigation by the Academy in open hearing. Fame, wealth, and great honor waited for Perdeau the moment his findings were submitted to the Academy. And all these would already have been Perdeau's a month ago, except for the fact that Mortain had entered the scene then.

It had been an evening during the final week of Perdeau's experiments. Mortain was in the library of the dapper scientist's apartment when Perdeau returned from his laboratory.

"Good evening, *mon ami!*" Mortain sat in an easy chair, a bottle of Perdeau's best whisky and a carton of his expensive cigarettes at his elbow. His face was hidden in the half-darkness—for there was only one light in the room—but the hulking bulk of his great body and the rasping harshness of his voice identified him instantly.

Perdeau fought for control, and with a hand that trembled more than slightly, found the wall switch and flooded the room with light. It was a moment before his vocal cords would act to the bidding of his terror-numbered mind.

"Mortain!" he choked at last. "*Mon dieu!* What are you doing here? How—that is," he faltered. "Have you come from Hell?"

Huge, ape-like, with a face that was at once foul and ugly, Mortain rose, grinning mockingly from the easy chair.

"I have come a long way, friend Perdeau, a very long way. I have searched a year to find you. Remember, I swore I would find you some day?"

Perdeau said nothing, his mouth suddenly too dry to speak.

"You thought me dead, eh, Perdeau?" Mortain continued. "You thought me dead on the Island of the Devil."

Perdeau gazed at him with the fascination of a rabbit for a coiling snake.

"But I did not die," Mortain said. "I lived; even after my release from that living hell of a prison, even as I served out an equal number of years as a *libré*, half-starving in the native filth. I lived on—knowing that someday I would find you."

Perdeau spoke at last, his voice a croak.

"What, what is it you seek from me, Mortain?"

Mortain smiled, relishing the other's fear.

"I am not certain as yet. I could kill you. Perhaps I shall. Certainly I should. But another idea had been in my mind. You have wealth and luxury. To one who has lived in hell as I have for those years, wealth and luxury are very tempting."

Perdeau sighed half audibly, the tight lines at the corners of his mouth relaxing somewhat.

"If it is money you want, I will give you plenty of it. But you must promise to go far away."

And then Mortain laughed; deep, bellowing, bullish. His voice was as harsh as the scraping of a saw on stone.

"If I promise to go far away," he mocked. "If I promise to go far away!"

Perdeau again grew pale.

"You cannot stay here!"

Mortain turned back to the bottle of Perdeau's finest whisky. He lifted it to his lips, scorning a tumbler, and drank deeply. He put it down, smacking his lips in satisfaction. He wiped his sleeve across his thick wet lips.

"I'm staying here," he declared. "I'm staying here as long as it pleases me."

Perdeau edged back to a wall desk, and suddenly his hand darted into a drawer of the desk, jerking forth an automatic pistol which he trained instantly on Mortain.

"You are not staying," Perdeau said softly. "You are an intruder; for all anyone would know, a thief. I can kill you now. Your record on Devil's Island would bear out my story."

Mortain grinned twistedly.

"You think I am completely thick-witted, eh? You think I would come here without protecting myself from a threat such as this?"

"You are a fool," Perdeau's hand was steady on the automatic. "You are a fool and I am going to kill you."

Mortain's words came fast.

"A moment, consider! I have left papers with a certain priest. Papers that tell everything about you, about your past. I have left word that those papers be opened should anything happen to me. The priest knows that I have come here. If you want to feel the guillotine snicking off your stupid skull—" he left his sentence dangling meaningfully, pig eyes gleaming as he saw fear returning to Perdeau's face.

"Do you think I believe that?" Perdeau said. But he lowered the gun slightly.

"You can hardly afford *not* to believe it," Mortain sneered.

Perdeau slipped the automatic into his pocket. The gesture signified his acceptance of defeat.

Mortain smiled.

"You are being sensible. Now, let us get down to practical matters. I will need clothes to replace these rags of mine, and money, and—" Mortain went on, listing his needs, and his demands. His pig eyes shone with delight as he savored the discomfort of the man who was to be his unwilling host.

And Perdeau had been forced to comply. Blackmail though it was, he couldn't risk the chance of his unwholesome past coming to light. Not now...

REMEMBERING those weeks in which he'd been forced to shelter the hulking Mortain, Perdeau was able to smile now as he flicked past another page in

his thick laboratory ledger. For tonight, this very evening, was going to be the turning point. Tonight he would have his revenge against the undesirable Mortain. Tonight he would eliminate Mortain's unhealthy knowledge, and Mortain, for good.

For in these past five weeks—weeks in which he'd silently endured the gloating heel of Mortain—Perdeau had carefully made plans. He'd watched Mortain almost constantly, shadowing him on his visits to the cafés, where the hulking creature invariably got riotously drunk and squandered the funds squeezed from Perdeau.

And on two occasions Perdeau had followed Mortain to a certain church. There the thick-witted blackmailer conversed for short periods with an old priest. This was obviously the priest to whom Mortain had given the sealed, damning documents about Perdeau. Perdeau carefully noted the address of this church and learned the name of the old priest. Both factors would be necessary—as would Mortain's heavy drinking—in the completion of the dapper little scientist's plans.

And finally, when his scheme was perfected, Perdeau had waited for the opportune moment to put it into effect. The moment which presented itself most opportunely this very evening. Jacques Perdeau smiled and closed his ledger, thinking of Mortain's drunken entrance to the apartment less than three hours ago...

MORTAIN was very drunk. His eyes were red and puffed and he swayed from side to side as he stood there in the door when Perdeau opened it for him.

"My fine frien' I have come for more money!" Mortain bellowed. "I mus' return to the café, where a wench awaits me!" He laughed drunkenly. Perdeau noted carefully that this was the highest point of intoxication at which he'd ever seen Mortain, and realized that another bottle of brandy would befog the ape-like blackmailer utterly, resulting finally in senseless slumber.

Perdeau found a bottle.

"Stay a moment," he told Mortain, "and have a drink with me."

Mortain slouched heavily down on a divan. He blinked at the moustached little Perdeau owlshly.

"*Voilà!*" he toasted, taking the full tumbler of brandy handed to him. "Even though you killed three helpless women in your wretched past, Perdeau, you are not a bad fellow at times. Drink with me, Perdeau!"

Perdeau smiled, knowing that no one was within earshot of the drunkard's babbling reference to his past.

"You drink first, Mortain," he invited silkily, "while I go to get another glass."

Mortain drank, deeply, gluttonously, while the liquor spilled out the sides of his glass and trickled down his unshaven chin and onto the expensively-tailored suit Perdeau's money had purchased.

When Perdeau returned to the room with a small glass for himself he smiled. Mortain was snoring drunkenly, stretched out on the divan. The bottle showed Perdeau that his blackmailer had finished off a few more in the few moments he'd been out of the room. It was sooner than Perdeau had hoped for. But so much the better. Past experience in watching Mortain had enabled the scientist to judge that the hulking lout would be unconscious for fully ten hours now.

Somehow, Perdeau managed to lift Mortain from the divan. And somehow he managed to carry him down the rear stairs of the apartment and into the alley.

And unobserved, he finally managed to bring the body of Mortain to the laboratory...

NOW Perdeau moved across the laboratory. In the far corner was a casket-like affair beneath a series of webbed lights and wires.

Mortain, snoring drunkenly and still deeply under the influence of the brandy, lay inertly in that wired casket.

Perdeau stood over the thick-featured blackmailer for a moment, grinning in gnome-like triumph. Then he picked up the headpiece apparatus lying beside the front of the casket. The plate of the headpiece was attached to wires which led to the battery of lights above the body of Mortain. Perdeau carefully placed the headpiece on his own brow, and producing a similar headpiece fastened it over the thick skull of Mortain.

Unsmiling now, Perdeau turned to a control lever at the side of the casket and threw the switch full on. Wires hummed, and the lights above the casket flickered ghostily in the semi-darkness of the little laboratory. Perdeau's expression was changing. Slowly at first, then more rapidly. He seemed to reel, almost drunkenly.

Mortain's snoring was diminishing. Perdeau's eyes were closing. Suddenly the snoring was issuing from Perdeau's lips!

Perdeau slumped senseless to the floor.

The wires continued to hum. The lights flickered only intermittently now. But something was happening to the figure in the casket. It was rising, slowly, surely!

The body of Mortain sat upright in the casket, eyes slowly opening. Looking over the side of the casket, Mortain's body perceived Perdeau's inert form slumped along the side. Mortain's mouth grinned ghoulishly.

The switch had been accomplished. Jacques Perdeau now inhabited the body of Mortain. The drink-fogged mind of Mortain snored onward in the body of the dapper Jacques Perdeau lying senselessly on the floor.⁽¹⁾

Perdeau—in Mortain's body—reached out and switched off the lever. The wires stopped humming and the lights ceased flickering. Perdeau removed the headplate from his new body, climbing from the casket as he did so.

There was a mirror in another corner of the laboratory, and Perdeau stepped around his own body and walked clumsily over to it. He looked into the glass for an instant, involuntary shivers running down his spine as he gazed at the reflection that was now Jacques Perdeau.

Mortain's ugly features suddenly twisted in a smirk as Perdeau laughed.

"You are certainly an ugly fellow in your new garb, Jacques," Perdeau told the mirror. And then he laughed again, and in his clumsy body moved to the door of the laboratory. For a moment he paused there, before switching off the lights, looking at his own body still lying drunkenly on the floor.

"Patience," Perdeau smirked. "I shall be back in you before long."

HE shut the laboratory door behind him, then, and locking it securely he made his way into the street.

Twenty minutes later Perdeau, now growing accustomed to his new body, entered a pawnshop.

"I want a gun," he told the silk-capped little proprietor who shuffled toward him. His voice, he was pleased to note, was just as Mortain's had been, rasping and harsh.

Perdeau made a point of standing beneath the brightest lights in the pawnshop while he inspected the revolvers the dealer brought to him. He wanted the little proprietor to have every chance in the world of identifying him. He had to smile at this thought. As though anyone might forget the face and voice of Mortain!

Ten minutes later, Perdeau emerged from the pawnshop with a gun in his pocket. He turned his steps immediately toward the church to which he had trailed Mortain on those two occasions. It was not a long walk before he reached it.

"Father," Perdeau said at the door to the rectory, "I have come to get back those papers I entrusted to your care."

The priest, the same he had seen talking to Mortain, seemed surprised. Shaking his gray head he said kindly:

"Certainly, my son. Though I must say you have made some odd requests from me during the past weeks. You may have your papers. Wait, please."

Perdeau waited while the priest disappeared into the rectory. After a moment he returned. In his hand was a sheaf of dirty, sealed envelopes. Perdeau focused Mortain's eyes suspiciously on the priest.

"These have not been tampered with?" he demanded.

The priest registered injured kindness.

"Certainly not," he said. "I know no more of what is in them, than at the very moment you gave them to me. Whatever secrets they may contain are still inviolate."

"I had to make sure," Perdeau said, giving the priest one of Mortain's twisted apologetic smiles. "They are of much value."

IN an alley five minutes later, Perdeau tore open the dirty envelopes. There were four of them. His face, as he read the contents, tightened with rage. Mortain hadn't been lying. In these papers he hadn't left a thing about the unwholesome aspects of Perdeau's past untold. It was a crude, damning record of the past crimes of Jacques Perdeau, painstakingly compiled. The papers even told of Mortain's minor part in the crimes, and of the misdirected sentence imposed on Mortain after he had been convicted of Perdeau's major part in them.

"These," Perdeau muttered, "would have made interesting reading for the police." He fished into Mortain's pockets and found matches. Seconds later the last fragments of the papers curled in flame at his feet.

Perdeau ground the ashes of the papers into the alley mud and stepped out into the streets once more. Now he was grinning broadly. With the evidence gone he was much safer. He could even go back to the laboratory right now and resume his own body. Then he could safely slay Mortain.

But no. That was too simple, and not in line with the cunning incredibly ironic scheme he had worked out. Perdeau touched the gun in his pocket and grinned.

He had figured out the logical person to kill. A person who could be slain unobserved. That would give Perdeau time to get back to the laboratory after the murder—and after planting evidences of Mortain's person about the scene of the crime—and resume his own body. Perdeau intended also to be identified by

someone as he was leaving the scene of the murder. Then, in the morning, the police would appear looking for the culprit Mortain.

There was a little cobbler who worked late in his shop every night. Perdeau had watched him for two weeks now, while perfecting his plan. The cobbler's wife stayed with him in the back of the small shop. It would be simple, beautifully simple.

Perdeau was now less than a few blocks from the cobbler's place. And nearing the outskirts of the city café section, on the way to the shop, Perdeau reeled a little. The alcohol in Mortain's body—It drew attention from those who sat drinking at the sidewalk tables. Perdeau grinned. Everything helped. Even these people might recall having seen Mortain within a few blocks of the cobbler's shop.

Perdeau paid no attention to the feminine voice squealing behind him. No attention, that is, until the cry was repeated less than two feet from his ear and a pair of fat arms encircled him playfully from behind. "*Chéri! Chéri!*"

Then a grotesquely painted face was leering close to his, and the tawdry slattern who'd embraced him was speaking.

"*Chéri*, you have come back! What kept you so long, my loved one?"

Perdeau felt a wave of nausea engulfing him as she planted a cognac-reeking kiss on his lips. While he struggled to free himself from her fat, python-like arms he realized that this must be the wench Mortain had mentioned before falling drunkenly asleep in his apartment. This, then, must be the café at which Mortain had been drinking.

Perdeau managed at last to free himself from the embrace. Holding the slattern at arm's length, he managed to catch his breath. This was bad. Mortain's tastes were not those of Perdeau, even though Perdeau happened to be inhabiting his body at the moment.

Then, in spite of the revulsion he felt toward the painted creature, Perdeau had to smile. For this was luck. This was perfect. He could drink with the trollop for perhaps an hour. And during his drinking he could show the wench the gun he carried, boast of what he planned to do to the cobbler, and thus create a first rate witness for Mortain's murder trial.

GRINNING, Perdeau led the red-mouthed slattern to a seat at one of the sidewalk tables. Sitting down, he called loudly for brandy. Then, as he talked rapidly to the wench, Perdeau pretended to indulge in heavy drinking. But he only pretended, for he would need a clear head this evening. On every chance he got, Perdeau managed to get rid of his brandy by the simple expedient of spilling it inconspicuously on the sidewalk. Now and then he tipped far back in his chair and laughed uproariously, attracting attention from the others at adjoining tables.

Perdeau talked loudly, wildly. But occasionally he would lower his voice to a whisper as he covertly displayed the gun he carried and boasted of the extra money for brandy he would soon obtain.

And as the hour drew to an end, Perdeau had another idea. An idea that would even further insure Mortain's meeting with the guillotine. He rose, pushing his chair over with a clatter.

"I mus' go!" he announced loudly, drunkenly.

"No, no, *Chéri!*" the slattern shrilled, rising to detain him.

"I have other women to see, pig," Perdeau snarled. "Other women much prettier than you!" He made his voice purposely loud. It was with satisfaction that he heard the sniggers from the tables near to them.

The slattern's red face grew lobster red, then death white in swift rage. She stood there, spluttering searching for words.

"Other and prettier women, pig!" Perdeau repeated loudly. Then he wheeled, staggering away from the cafe and down the street. Behind him he could hear the shrill cries of rage and indignation from the red-mouthed trollop. It was perfect. There was now a woman scorned to confront Mortain at his trial.

THE streets were darker and less clearly lighted as Perdeau moved on to the little cobbler's shop. They were also, he noted with satisfaction, almost completely deserted.

At length he turned down a narrow little side-street and found himself in front of the tiny shop he sought. A glance through the window showed Perdeau that the bent, white-haired little cobbler was hard at work in the front of his store. His wife was probably in the back. Perdeau stepped around to the door and pushed against it. It was locked. Perdeau pounded on the window pane and the old man looked up from his work.

The old cobbler came around to the door and opened it, peering out at Perdeau.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he asked.

Perdeau shoved roughly past him and into the shop. He had brought forth his revolver, and now he waved it at the frightened old fellow.

"You can give me all your money," he rasped, "and quickly!"

The old man's face was a white mask of terror.

"I have nothing," he quavered, "nothing at all. I swear I have nothing. Please!"

Perdeau heard someone stirring in the back of the shop. The old man's wife would be bustling out in a moment. He stepped under the clear bald illumination of the central light in the store.

"Then you can take this, as a present, from me!" he snarled.

His revolver barked four times in the silence. The old man rose on his toes, clutching at his chest, then pitched forward dead.

THE old woman entered from the rear of the store in time to see her husband topple to the floor. She screamed in terror, gazing in stark horror at Perdeau, and Mortain's features. Then she was babbling in frenzied grief, sobbing wildly and trying to roll her husband over on his back. Perdeau laughed wildly.

"There, old woman. When you meet him in the hereafter, tell him not to hold out on people—especially Mortain!" She would recall that name later, even though it scarcely registered now,

Perdeau knew. For perhaps twenty seconds longer, Perdeau remained under the bald illumination of the single lamp light, then he turned and dashed out of the shop and into the narrow street.

Now to the laboratory.

Perdeau knew, even as he took to the darkened alleys as he sought his way back to the laboratory, that he couldn't have carried out the scheme with more

cunning perfection. And he smiled savagely, thinking of Mortain's bewilderment when morning would come.

His own story would be simple, convincing. Yes, he had known Mortain. Had known the poor fellow long ago. That was why he had given him clothing and shelter these past weeks. Mortain had been seeking work of some kind. Until he got it Perdeau was taking pity on him. No one would question the story of a reputable scientist. No one would think to take Mortain's word against his own—now that those damning papers were destroyed.

In the darkness of the alley, Perdeau heard the first sound of chase. A police siren wailed far in the distance, somewhere in the vicinity of the cobbler's shop. The noose of evidence was rapidly closing around Mortain's thick neck.

Perdeau smiled and hastened onward. It was so clever, so ironic. He quickened his pace still further. There might not be a great deal of time in which to make the change back to his own body. Ten minutes later he arrived in front of the old loft building in which he had his laboratory.

Perdeau stopped suddenly. Something was wrong here. A crowd was gathered in front of the building!

Cars were pulled up in front of the laboratory doors; the black cars of the police!

Perdeau was at the fringe of the crowd, and now he stood beside an old man. Perdeau grabbed the old man suddenly by the arm.

"What is this?" he demanded. "What has happened here, old fellow?"

"It is in the laboratory," the old man said.

Perdeau gritted his teeth in anger at the old fellow's stupidity.

"Go on, what happened?" He shook the old man's arm roughly.

"The scientist, Jacques Perdeau," the old man said, "was found by a watchman locked inside the laboratory. Perdeau's frantic pounding on the doors attracted the watchman. When the watchman opened the door he found Perdeau frothing at the mouth and gibbering madly. The man was utterly insane!"

PERDEAU listened as the old man rambled on. Listened while cold fingers of terror squeezed in on his heart.

"Perdeau was screaming wildly that he was not Perdeau," the old fellow said, shaking his head in pity. "He insisted that he was someone else, and that Perdeau had stolen his body! It was terrible, monsieur. Mad, you understand? Utterly imbecilic. He grabbed a gun from the watchman, then, and before he could be stopped, Jacques Perdeau turned the gun on himself and blew his brains out!" The old man made a face of horror. "They just called the police to take the body away." He sighed. "It is a pity, these men of genius work too hard. I have heard of it before. There was a—"

But Jacques Perdeau had wheeled sickly away from the old man. He staggered drunkenly, dazedly away from the glare of the street-lights. He stood there near an alley, a safe distance from the crowd in front of the laboratory doors, his hands pressed tremblingly to his face.

Mortain was dead, had killed himself—in the body of Jacques Perdeau!(2)

The wailing sirens in the distance suddenly seemed clearer, closer. The sirens of the police—who searched for one Mortain, cobbler killer. Perdeau wanted to scream. He was trapped. Trapped in Mortain's body!

Wildly Perdeau looked right and left. Flight—that was all there was left. A futile flight, for from the evidence he had left they would track him down in a few scant hours. The guillotine...

Perdeau's eyes were filled with the hunted madness of an animal. In Mortain's ape-like body he turned and lurched off down the darkened alley. The sirens grew louder, nearer...



⁽¹⁾ Whatever means Perdeau used to transfer the mind of Mortain to his own skull, and his own mind to that of Mortain (possibly a molecular transference of matter after breaking it down into energy and reassembling it), the alcoholic content of Mortain's brain, which was also transferred, caused the body of Perdeau to succumb to an apparent drunkenness, even though no alcohol was present in the body. And similarly, although Mortain's body was saturated with the poison, Perdeau's mind was not, and though he might experience some effects after the blood began to circulate, he would not become drunk.—Ed.

⁽²⁾ This was the one little thing Perdeau forgot: the alcohol-sodden mind of Mortain was soon cleared of its poisons by the bloodstream of Perdeau's body, and instead of sleeping for ten hours of drunkenness, he recovered in a short time, and awoke to find himself in another body. His low-type mind, faced with this incredible fact, could not accept it, and cracked under the strain. He went mad, and in the horror of madness, shot himself dead.—Ed.