

# The Man Who Lived Next Door To Himself

By FRANK OWEN

I HAD NOT lived in the old house on Sheridan Square a week before I received a visit from my next-door neighbor and at once my interest was aroused. His name was Alladina Visrain and he was a full-blooded Persian from Sultanabad. Never have I met a man who was more learned and cultured than he. The Orient and the Occident had contributed their best to his knowledge. He was both a doctor of medicine and philosophy, an ardent devotee of research work of any kind.

There was nothing about his appearance that would have caused comment as he passed along the street unless one remarked on his finely molded, clear-cut features and the intense brilliance of his keen black eyes. He dressed simply, in dark clothes of American make and the quietness of his manner gave him dignity and even charm. His voice was as distinct and clear as though he had studied elocution for years, yet so softly did he speak, the words seemed but the echo of a dream.

"Since we are evidently to be neighbors for a considerable time," he said slowly, "I thought it would not be out of place for me to call and introduce myself. As a rule when a man moves to a country town all the neighbors visit him almost immediately. This is not the custom in the city. Yet how much more lonesome and cold is a great metropolis. To walk among crowds and to behold no familiar face is worse than to journey alone through the desert."

At my urgent invitation, he seated himself in a great chair by the side of the open-hearth, a companion one to mine and together we talked about a miscellany of trifling things until an unearthly hour. It was, I thought, the beginning of a friendship which was to continue for many a long day, but if I had known that evening how close that friendship was destined to be, my eyes would have bulged from their sockets in stark raving horror.

That evening was one of many which we spent together. We had much in common, we found, for we were both writers and both of us were intensely interested in unusual things.

"For years," said Alladina Visrain one evening as we sat smoking cigars before the fire in my rooms, "I have been somewhat of a student of psychology, psychoanalysis, spiritualism and the transition of souls. In our religions we are all like children. The Christian scoffs at the Yogi and the Theosophist. The Buddhist and the Mohammedan look down on people of all other religions. Is it not amusing? Every man thinks his own belief is the true religion. The South Sea Islander worshipping the moon and the stars, the Siamese refusing to kill rattlesnakes and looking with awe at sacred tigers, the natives of India bowing before sick white elephants—is not life a most interesting enigma? We imagine that we have advanced a great deal since the Stone Age, but have we actually progressed at all? Does not the recent European conflict prove that the caveman is still very much alive within us? The changes recorded have been solely in exterior things such as dress and manners. Men scoffed at Morse when he spoke of his telegraph, but it came to be and now we have the radio as well. We have learned to pick up messages from the very ether about us. Someday other things will be accomplished quite easily which are now only spoken of in theory. Science is still very much in its infancy. For more than ten years I have believed that it would be possible for two men to exchange their souls if they were in the proper key, in perfect harmony and tune with one another. That is to say, to put it more concisely, I believe that it might be possible for your soul to enter my body and my soul to enter your body and when I speak of the soul I mean all that intangible part of a person that is mental, his mind, thoughts, likes and dislikes, ideas, etc. The great Caruso used to tap a glass with a knife and then sing the same note as came from the tinkling glass. When the two notes met at exactly the same moment, the glass was shattered to atoms. You see the notes opposed each other. Now if two natures or souls were in perfect harmony, without opposition of any kind, who knows what might be accomplished if the im-

pulse of both were toward the same object."

"I am deeply interested in what you say," I told him. "It is a rather wild theory but I am sufficient of a scientist never to laugh at anything. Only fools ridicule that which they do not understand."

"I am glad to hear you speak like that," he went on, "for had your manner been otherwise I would have terminated the present conversation when I finished speaking a moment ago. However, since you are so obviously interested I will proceed to acquaint you with my theory." As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a round crystal ball about three inches in diameter. It was so clear and polished that it shone in the fire-glow like a great round diamond. "This thought-sphere came from the East," he said slowly, "and there are many legendary tales connected with it. It is said that he who possesses it can have what he desires. Whether or not there is any truth in this, I cannot say, and yet you are my friend, our personalities are in harmony and that is all I desire. If you are agreeable we will attempt right now to materialize my theory." He did not wait for me to assent. He took my acquiescence for granted. He walked over and placed the ball in the center of a small teakwood table. Then he placed two chairs beside the table so that they were directly opposite each other.

As he did so, he said, "Come, and who knows, perhaps it will be your good fortune to be a participant in one of the greatest discoveries of the age."

He seated himself at the table. "Before you sit down," he directed, "swish off the lights, for a room in darkness save for the glowing fire, is far more fitting for such an experiment as we are to attempt, than one that is brilliantly lighted."

After doing as he desired, plunging the room in semi-darkness, I sat down opposite him. "Now," he said slowly, "you must concentrate your whole mind on this experiment. Coue says that the imagination controls the will. Perhaps he is right. I never argue, but I think

the imagination and the will both react on one another. We are desirous of exchanging souls or perhaps I should say personalities for the word 'soul' at best is a rather ambiguous term suited mostly to the art of poets. You must let your gaze rest intently on the crystal ball, you must will to make the exchange, and you must let your imagination make you believe that the exchange has been effected. I will do the same thing and if we can make our desires coincide perfectly at the exact moment through the medium of the crystal ball, what we desire will assuredly come to pass. It is written that a man can have what he wishes if he wants it sufficiently enough."

**H**E CEASED speaking and we both focused our gaze intently on the crystal ball. The room was in utter silence. It was in the back of the house and so no discordant sound from the street shattered the solitude which was so intense it seemed to hang about the room in folds. And the far corners of the room seemed to be enveloped in curtains of velvet black. No object was discernible, except that queer little crystal globule which shimmered fantastically in the fire-glow, seeming to scintillate with a dozen different prismatic colors. And now as we sat staring at it, it suddenly commenced to glow with a strange blue light. All the other tones of color faded. Evidently the fire in the grate had burned low and only a bit of blue flame remained. And yet the color of the crystal ball increased steadily, the light intensified. It was almost blinding. It blurred my vision. Everything grew hazy as though I were enveloped in a fog. The silence was as cold as death. I seemed to be losing consciousness. Then steadily the crystal ball came back into focus again, my vision cleared. The blue flame had died out and again the scintillating colors returned. It was a most odd experience but odder still was the realization that I was gazing at the crystal ball from the other side of the table. It was as though I had changed my seat. With a cry of surprise, I jumped to my feet for I knew that I had not moved since I had seated myself at the table. As I rose I knocked over the table and the crystal ball crashed to the ground and was shattered into a thousand glittering pieces.

Visrain quickly switched on the lights. "What have you done?" he fairly shrieked. "Now we are engulfed in a frightful calamity. We can never again get back our own personalities."

As I looked up into his eyes, my blood turned cold for I was gazing into my

own face. The experiment had proven successful.

I scarcely know how to set down the events that followed. There is so much that I would like to write, so much I wish to record and yet it is hard to set down the things which have an important bearing on my particular case.

For a while that night Visrain and I raved about that room as though we were mad. We cursed and raved as though we had ceased to be human. Often we hear folks envying each other, expressing a desire to be in someone else's place. Now that peculiar position had been vouchsafed to me and I found little of pleasure in it. I longed to be in my own body again. The body at best is but a shell in which we live but it is the shell by which we are known, the tangible thing by which our friends recognize us. Probably the day will eventually come when men will cease to form opinions and impressions from exteriors.

After we had raved about the room for an hour or perhaps it was longer for neither of us had any thought of time, we sat down beside the open-fire again and tried to sanely reason out the strange problem with which we were confronted. We had changed bodies, I say 'we' advisedly because the real man lives inside each one of us. The smug hypocritical smile and the exaggerated burst of assumed enthusiasm are not the earmarks of a real person. Visrain's soul and personality were within my body but nevertheless he was still Visrain. After we had talked and argued and theorized for a great while, we finally decided that we would change houses voluntarily even as we had changed bodies. This would mechanically prevent people from talking and besides we would not be inconvenienced in the slightest because we could visit back and forth as often as we desired. It was thus that I found myself in the peculiar position of living next door to myself. Luckily both Visrain and I lived alone so there was no one to complicate matters. Although that is not strictly true, for Visrain had a Japanese servant named Koto who was the very acme of perfection. He seemed to anticipate his master's every want and it was a source of keen enjoyment to be waited on by him.

My nearest living relative dwelt in San Francisco, an aunt with whom I never corresponded. She was as interested in me as though I did not exist at all and as for myself, I heartily reciprocated the compliment. I was not anxious to build up a friendship with the eccentric old lady because I realized that by so doing I might be bothered with visits from her

and this I wished to avoid. At best I have but little patience and can only tolerate people with whom I have much in common.

**S**UCH A person was Vera Gray, an artist who lived in Greenwich Village and earned a splendid living drawing cover designs for the national magazines. Vera was a girl in a million, a deep thinker and at the same time more beautiful than any of the models who posed for her. She had skin like old ivory and the olive tone to her complexion, together with her wondrous taste in dress, made of her a most alluring girl. She was tall and slim and her white hands were the most graceful and expressive I have ever beheld. They made almost a symphony in loveliness. I suppose I am writing rather madly and yet I assure you I am sane enough. I have recently been examined by three alierists and while they admit that I am somewhat queer, they have unanimously stated that my mentality is far above the average. But I am getting ahead of my story. It is hard when writing a narrative of this sort to keep the sequence of events in their proper order.

Although I hated to mention Vera Gray to Visrain I knew that I had to do so for if I had disappeared entirely she would have immediately raised an alarm and publicity more than anything else we desired to avoid.

"You must call on Vera Gray," I told Visrain, "and I think it might be wise for me to accompany you. That will help to lessen the chances of your making a bad blunder. Talk very little and consult me whenever the opportunity presents itself. At this interview we must be extremely careful."

A few evenings later we visited Vera Gray. Luck was with us for there were several other persons in her apartment and one young fellow in particular, Gordon Harris, wished to do all the talking. He went into ecstasies over Vera's paintings and had something to say about every one she exhibited. Only once did she and I get an opportunity to converse together.

"I'm delighted that you came tonight," she said sincerely, "because you interest me in a rather strange way. You seem to remind me of someone I know very well yet I am positive that I have never beheld your face before until tonight. Sometime I hope you can come to tea and we can have a rather interesting chat together when none of these ceaseless talkers are present. I suppose it is rather unconventional for me to invite you when you are a total stranger to me but I feel that we have something

in common, as though we knew each other years ago." She laughed softly. "Perhaps," she said, "the Theosophists are right after all and you and I were friends more than ten thousand years ago."

I had no time to answer, for Gordon Harris came and claimed her attention and I cannot say that I was sorry, for under the circumstances, to such a speech, what was there for me to say?

As we walked home another complication arose. Visrain confessed to me that he loved her. "She is the most adorably perfect girl I have ever known," he told me. "And I am the most miserable of men. No doubt as long as my personality is in your body, I could go in and win her. But I hate deception and I wouldn't want to do anything that was unfair to you, for already, I think, I have caused you trouble enough."

But despite his words to the contrary, Visrain did make love to Vera Gray and she seemed to be far more attracted to him than she had ever been to me.

"I am never unhappy when I am with you," she told him frankly, "and no matter how trivial is the subject we discuss I am always interested. You used to bore me sometimes, but now all that is passed."

Visrain placed his arm about her. "Something stronger than life, stronger than death is drawing us together," he breathed tensely. "There is no use in either of us fighting against it. It is destiny. Allah wills that we should live united." He drew her unresisting to him. "Promise me," he said, "that you will marry me before summer comes." And in a fit of recklessness she promised.

Late that night Visrain made known his perfidy to me. In all fairness to him, I must admit that he confessed everything quite openly.

"There is no use fighting against love," he cried. "It is the most subtle poison known. Do you think I am happy? I am the most miserable man in all the world. First, I robbed you of your body. Now I have robbed you of your love. Nowhere on earth is there so vile a thief as I. But I am poisoned by love. I cannot, I will not live without Vera Gray. Yet I am unworthy of her."

He stormed and raged up and down the room like a caged beast. I said no word because I realized that none was needed. His own conscience was scourging his soul far worse than anything I could have said. I just sat as though carved of stone, watching the torment which he was suffering. His eyes glistened as though he were almost mad. He tore up and down the room as though he

wished to escape from himself. But that is not strictly true, he was unhappy because he wished to escape from myself. It was my body which had caused him all his sorrow.

Finally I rose from my chair. "I think I will go to bed," I told him simply. He made no answer and I left the room and walked back to the house next door.

In five minutes I was in bed but I could not sleep. I lay and tossed upon my pillow as though I were a victim of acute insomnia. And yet somehow although I feigned weariness I knew that I was really far from sleep. There seemed to be an ominous silence in the air, a calm such as might precede a deadly tropical storm. It seemed to me as though some dreadful calamity was imminent, but what that calamity was I had not the faintest idea. My room was as dark as the inside of a coffin. I could not distinguish a thing because of the heavy curtains which were carefully drawn across the windows. The blackness was so intense that it seemed peopled with all sorts of wild wraiths and distorted forms. I knew the hallucinations were but the imaginings of my overwrought nerves. Yet the great bulk of blackness seemed to bear down upon me as though it were a solid thing. I felt as though I were suffocating, as though I were engulfed alive in a pit of blackness. My forehead was cold with a dank sweat and my hands shook as though I were a hundred years old.

I switched on the electric lights and looked at my face or rather I should say Visrain's face, in the mirror. It was ashen gray. Hastily I dressed. I seemed impelled onward by some great hidden force. When I had finished dressing I crept cautiously down the stairs. I was careful to make no sound that would awaken Koto who slept in a little room off the lower hall. Silently I crept from the house and stole to the house next door. I unlocked the front door and entered like a thief. I had no trouble in effecting an entrance because Visrain and I carried keys to both houses. We believed it would more readily facilitate matters if we did so.

Inside I found the light in the living room still burning. I walked to the threshold and there I stopped as though frozen to ice, and well I might, for the sight which I beheld was the most awful man ever gazed upon. In the chair was my own body. Blood was trickling sluggishly from a bullet wound in the right temple. By the side of the table lay a revolver. Facing a problem which he could not solve, Visrain had blown out his brains. For one brief moment,

I gazed at the ghastly sight, then my overwrought nerves broke and I slipped to the floor unconscious.

How long I remained so I do not know for when I opened my eyes it was broad daylight. In the chair the body still sat and I imagined an eerie smile hovered over the rigid lips as though it were grinning at me. I rose to my feet. My head ached dully and I walked like a man who had been ill for ages. I could scarcely drag one foot after the other. I seated myself in a chair opposite the lifeless body and stared at it as though my very gaze could rekindle it with life again. Now my predicament was worse than ever. My body was dead, sitting grotesquely before me on a great chair. I was surprised that the expression on its face could ever be so frightful. Lost to me also was my friend. What had happened to his soul I did not know. Perhaps it also was in the room with me. I shuddered as I thought that now Visrain would try to reclaim his body.

THE days that immediately followed I can only look back upon as on a nightmare. I did not employ an undertaker to embalm the body, nor did I make any attempt to see that it was decently buried. Under the circumstances I doubt if anyone else would have done so either. Despite the ghastly, blood-clotted, repulsive face, the body was mine. And I was still alive. I could not make myself believe that my body was really dead. As the days dragged by, I found myself more and more often creeping into the house next door to gaze into that face which was turning a sickly blue. Sometimes I used to frantically shake the loathsome corpse as though it were only sleeping and that if I tried hard enough I could awaken it. It drew me to it like a magnet. Many a night I remained with the hideous thing till dawn. I think at the time I must have been slightly insane, yet as I have written, three alienists have recently examined me and they pronounce my mind to be in excellent condition. Still my actions then were not those of a sane person. I used to sit and talk to the corpse by the hour, I argued and expostulated with it. Sometimes I attempted to make it eat and drink. Once I even succeeded in pouring a bit of liquor through the set lips. A thing which gave me hope was the fact that the beard on the face continued to grow. How could the corpse be dead, I argued, and the beard still grow? I have since learned that this is a perfectly natural phenomenon, that it is quite usual for a man's hair to grow after he has ceased to live.

And now it seemed to me that my cup of despair was filled to the brim, that no further calamity could be added to it, yet the figure had still another horror in store for me. One night as I bent over the corpse I suddenly became conscious that I was not alone in the house. I had not heard a sound, nor had I caught the faintest glimpse of anyone but still I was sure that there was at least one other person in the house besides myself. At such moments it seems as though man has a supernatural sixth sense buried in his subconscious mind which warns him of approaching danger. To say I was shocked would not nearly have described my condition. I was in a panic. Fear made of me a total wreck. The very marrow froze in my bones and I felt as sick and weak as though I were a plague victim. Even in my fear I realized that I was in a most unexplainable position, unless the hidden personage should prove to be the soul of Alladina Visrain. As the thought came to me, the curtains at the end of the room parted slightly and through the opening I could see the muzzle of a revolver leveled directly at me. As I beheld it, I quickly switched off the electric lights plunging the room into absolute darkness. Then I made a wild leap for the other door, but in the darkness I tripped over the corpse with such force that

I dragged it from the chair and together we fell to the floor with a dull thud. Fear now had me absolutely in its power. I lost my reason. Instead of trying to get away I commenced wrestling with the lifeless body. And as I wrestled, there came to my already weakened nerves another severe shock. As we writhed about the floor two hands clutched at my throat and anchored there with a frightful grip. It seemed as though the dead had come to life again. Then other hands grasped my arms and legs. There seemed to be at least a half dozen bodies bending over me. In that moment my strength seemed to multiply. Dread made of me a formidable opponent. I became a machine. I flung my arms about in every direction like flails. Sometimes my fists crashed against warm flesh and I could hear the grunts of my adversaries as the blows struck home. But the hands about my throat gripped tighter. I could scarcely breathe. I struggled terribly for breath. For one bit of air I would have given all I possessed in the world. Finally someone mercifully turned on the lights and to my horror I found myself surrounded by policemen. None too gently they slipped a pair of handcuffs over my wrists but I did not care, for the one who held my throat released his grip and I could breathe again.

**N**OW I am sitting in a prison cell. I am to be tried next week for murder, the murder of my own self. They would not allow me to be released on bail, for in the eyes of the world I have taken a human life. Ever since my strange disappearance, detectives had been searching for me. It was Vera Gray who raised the alarm. Now I am writing the true story of all that has transpired. I intend to present it at my trial. What the verdict will be I cannot say, nor do I really care, for they have buried my body and Vera has gone into mourning because she believes I am dead. Even if I am acquitted, what does the future hold in store for me? I have been examined by three alienists since I have been in prison. They are unanimous in declaring me sane. Perhaps this will help my case somewhat. I also intend to see Vera. I shall recall to her countless little incidents that happened in the past that are known only to her and me. I believe in time, when my story becomes known, I will be acquitted but it may take months, and afterwards what have I to look forward to? Nothing but memories, memories of Vera which are sadly beautiful, memories of my dead body sitting upright in the house next door, which are so ghastly that they will haunt me forever. I will be just a poor broken bit of humanity, a man who once lived next door to himself and has ceased to be happy now that his neighbor is gone.

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