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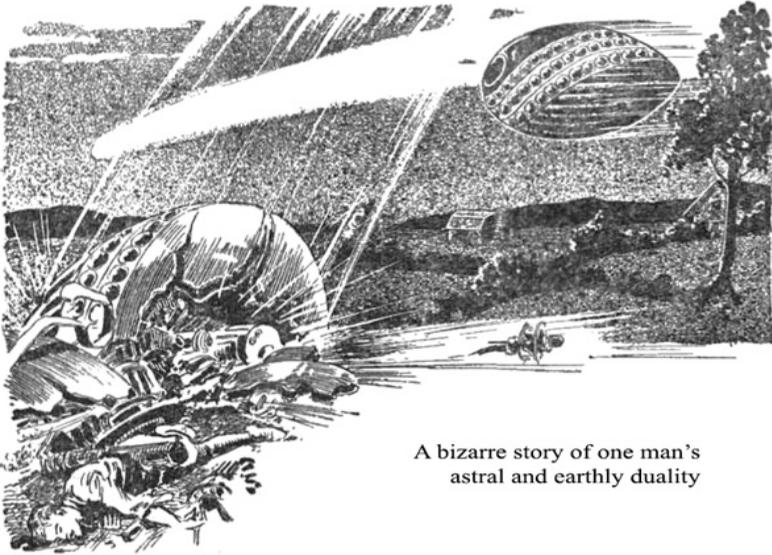
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A bizarre story of one man's
astral and earthly duality

Who Is Charles Avison?

By EDISON TESLA MARSHALL

NO one knew what was going on behind the high board fence at the Avison place, which was difficult to climb. Besides, Avison's stolid neighbors were reluctant to show so much curiosity.

But a few boys lived in the neighborhood who were not troubled by such a sense of decorum. The tallest of them boosted another of the "gang" until a pair of round eyes gazed between the pickets. However, the report that the spy made to the other boys—and later to his parents—was certainly far from enlightening.

He had seen the big house, of course, with its trim lawns and walks. And also he had seen another building that had been erected since the fence. It was built much like a garage, but didn't quite look like a garage either. Protruding out of it was the queerest thing—almost like a huge egg of blue steel, with slabs of heavy glass, and many encircling bands of iron.

It was some time after this that another boy, returning in the late dusk from his milk-delivery, had a story to tell that no one had ever quite believed. As he talked his face flushed and his eyes widened. He said something almost spherical in shape, dark except for lighted windows, had rolled up into the air above the fence, straight up unwaveringly, and had *kept on going!*

The boy had watched it till the haze of evening shut it from his sight, until it had vanished among the early stars.

“You imagined it, my son,” said his father. But his mother noticed that her husband was perplexed.

“No, I didn’t! I saw it as plain as I see you.”

“Well,” concluded the father, “we’ll probably know what it was in the morning. But, dear,” he added, turning to his wife, “that Avison is quite a scientist. The delivery-boy wandered into the wrong door at the Avison place one day, and he told me he went into the uncanniest-looking room he was ever in. A laboratory of some kind it was, with big machines of porcelain and steel and copper.”

“And you know he wrote some sort of a scientific article just when he got out of college,” supplemented his wife. “It caused quite a sensation among the scientists.”

“That’s right. It was about gravity, wasn’t it? Let’s see; that was four years ago. I had almost forgotten. He’s a smart young chap all right.”

“But why doesn’t he go into business?” the woman protested. “He’s been engaged for almost a year now to that Cole girl, you know, and if something should happen to him—”

“Oh, well, he’s probably pretty careful. And you’re sure you didn’t imagine it, son, or dream it?”

“I’m sure, sir!” replied the boy.

Nor had he dreamed or imagined it. And had Charles Avison wished he could have surprised even more the scientific world. But he wished to wait.

It was true he had been engaged to Agnes Cole for twelve months. In truth, she was mightily afraid of an accident to the young scientist. Even Avison had confessed to the danger in this latest experiment of his.

The afternoon before the Vulcan ascended, Avison had spent with Agnes. They had had a long talk, in which he told her much of his plan, but

little of the danger. But there was a chance, he said, that he would not be at hand to marry her on the June day selected.

She had tried to dissuade him.

“I must go,” he said. “You can’t imagine how much it means. But I’m sure nothing will happen. Oh, I’ll come back all right! My trial flight was a wonderful success.”

His great, dark eyes glowed at the thought of it.

“Goodby, dearest!”

They had kissed and she had cried.

Then from the porch of her home she had seen the strange, dark bubble of a thing float away into the skies.

A FEW nights later the farmers, thirty miles from Avison’s home, might have observed a few spots of light hovering in the air over the wide field of a deserted farm. They might have discerned the light-spots dart back and forth, then down, then up a way, and then descend to earth. But it is not recorded that any man was awake to see.

Charles Avison unscrewed the round door of the Vulcan and crept out. Instantly the light died from its windows. At first he could not stand, but staggered twice and fell in a heap under the curved side of the machine. He lay a little while, then flashed his light about and into the door of a great, deserted barn, in front of which his machine had alighted.

He climbed to his feet and steadied himself. After a little while he thrust his shoulder against the dark sphere and rolled it as silently as a great snowball into the high doorway. Then he glanced at his watch.

“Not far from morning,” he said.

He walked unsteadily toward the road.

Avison congratulated himself on his nearness to home. A few hours before, when he had awakened from unconsciousness, he had been over water. He had risen from the bottom of the sphere, where he had fallen, with swimming head and drumming ears, and, getting his bearings, had guided the machine toward home. His light was failing when he was still thirty miles away, however, so he had thought it safer to descend.

His experiment had been a success!

Then he began to wonder what had occurred in that brief period of unconsciousness. And was it so brief? His watch had said 3.40 just before he had fainted and 4.35 just after he had awakened. But had it been one hour or twenty-five? His ears still rang; he walked drunkenly.

He sat down in a fence-corner to await daylight. He saw the stars—his companions, he called them—begin to dim as a wide ribbon of grayish blue showed above the eastern horizon. He saw this ribbon widen still more, and soon he could detect the lines of his hands. At his feet were flowers, wet with dew.

Avison lighted a cigar, but he could hardly see the smoke in the bluish dawn. But before the fire in it became too warm for his fingers it was daylight.

He arose and looked about. He knew the place—he had driven along the road many times in his car. He knew the great barn where he had housed the Vulcan, the long line of straggly telephone-poles, the spinelike row of poplars beside the creek.

Just thirty miles to home and Agnes! He would start to walk to the nearest railway station. Some friend in a car would probably pick him up.

But somehow—Avison did not know how or what or why—something, everything did not seem natural. He could not be mistaken in the place; the trees, the farms, the houses, even the fence-posts were familiar. But that queer, haunting feeling of unfamiliarity remained; he could not shake it off. It must be that he had not yet completely recovered from his fainting.

He started along the road. He laughed when he saw a deep rut that had once broken a spring of his car. Here was the muddy spot where a tiny creek seeped across the highway. Here was the bridge, with its familiar hole where Octavius, his favorite horse, always shied.

The ringing in his ears had gone now; he walked perfectly straight. His head no longer swam. But the feeling of alienation was as marked as ever.

Avison became a little frightened, even though he knew the road perfectly. He tested his knowledge. Soon he would arrive at the crossroads, where the lane turned off toward the old Fair Grounds. Yes! He came to the place just where he thought it would be.

But why was it that everything was the same and yet different? He knew even the ruts of the road and the crack in the telephone post where the lightning had once struck. He knew the quiet fields of grain, the pretty farm-

homes, the horses in the fields. Yet he felt—he knew it now—that something was terribly different.

He saw the farmers on their way to the dairy barns. He heard the windmills creaking, and the call of the hired men as they hitched their teams to the farming implements. The world about him was commonplace and ordinary, just as always on a late spring morning in the country. But he could not shake off the illusive feeling.

He tried to; he tried to think of other things. He whistled and smoked again, but found it useless.

He heard an automobile behind him—the commonplace *honk!* of the horn and the *chug* of the engine! A touring car, bearing only a driver, came up to him. The car stopped as Avison waved his arm.

“Can you give me a lift?” the scientist called.

“Sure.”

Avison took a seat beside the driver, and looked at him searchingly.

“You’re Johnston, aren’t you?” he asked as the car started.

“Yes, but I don’t remember you,” the other man said.

“My name is Avison—Charles Avison.”

Johnston looked at him quickly.

“Are you Charles Avison?” he asked. “I have heard of you many times.”

He stretched out a gauntleted hand and found his companion’s thin, long-fingered one.

“We can’t be far from Smithford, can we?” Avison asked.

Smithford was a little town but a few miles from his home.

“About fifteen miles,” replied the driver. “And what are you doing along this road at this hour, may I ask?”

“Taking a morning walk,” replied Avison.

THE road was becoming more familiar. He knew many of the names that he saw on the mail-boxes. He knew the dog that barked from the gateway of a farmhouse—a dog that had always barked at him. But yet he was perplexed and bewildered by the lingering sensation of unfamiliarity.

After ten miles the automobile slowed.

“I have to turn here,” said Johnston. “Which way are you going?”

“Straight on, I guess; and thank you.”

Avison hopped out of the slowly moving car, and started again down the dusty road. He began to wonder why Johnston had not recognized him; they had passed each other several times. Avison put his hands to his face. He felt several days' growth of hair.

Of course, that was the reason. He needed a shave very badly on the day of his ascent, and in the five days at least that he was in the air a black growth had covered his cheeks and chin. And his face felt thinner; the bones protruded.

Soon he passed a farmhouse—one where he had often stopped for a meal while quail hunting. So he entered the gate; he was hungry for a warm breakfast again. He knew the dog that came to meet him, and patted its furry head. The old woman at the doorway did not recognize him.

He told her what he wanted, and she led him to the kitchen. He washed in a basin at the back and looked at himself in the glass.

No wonder the others had not known him! His face was much thinner; great, dark bags hung beneath his eyes.

Who would have thought that the days in the air could have been such a physical strain? His white, hollow cheeks and wide, black eyes, in contrast to the black hair, shocked him. No wonder he remained unknown to Johnston and the woman.

During the meal he asked but one question, and it was a peculiar one.

“What's the date?” he asked.

The old woman looked up quickly.

“Twenty-fourth,” she replied.

Avison had gone up on the sixteenth. He had been two days unconscious!

And still the brooding strangeness perplexed and bewildered him.

Again he was out on the road. He picked up another ride soon, and when he came to Smithford, he took off the grease-stained clothes he had worn on the air journey. He laughed at himself in the suit he had just bought. In bad

need of a hair-cut and shave, and in different clothes, he wondered if Agnes would know him.

The small town was at the end of his walk. He could take the train from there to his home. He walked about the town. Although he was well known there and many people looked at him interestedly, none came up to speak to him. He laughed to himself over the fact that even an old friend did not know him.

The train—the slow old train in which he had so often ridden—pulled in an hour later. By now it was noon; the Avison place was scarcely a half-hour's ride away. He remembered the worn-out plush on the seat of the cars, the conductor who punched his ticket. But always something was not quite the same.

“The trip has affected my mind,” he said at last.

He could almost scream at the harassment of it all. He could not analyze or place his finger on the difference, but it was there, it was everywhere! The change of circumstance brooded about him and haunted him and made him grip his hands. His eyes widened at the thought of it.

Was he asleep? Or hurt?

Or dead?—*Dead!* Anything was possible to him now.

What if he *were* dead?

Then he laughed at himself for being a fool. The laugh was hysterical; the train newsie eyed him suspiciously. He pinched himself on the arm, and the hurt was real. But something had changed him, or changed the world in which he lived.

The train stopped at last at Avison's own town, at the outskirts of which stood his own house. Agnes lived here, too. Half-frightened, Avison wondered whether Agnes would know him.

“But it would be good sport if she didn't!”

So he dropped into a second-hand store and traded his trim cap for an old, battered hat. This he pulled down over his eyes, and started down the quiet street. Some boys stared at him as he passed, but no one spoke in recognition. A dog that he knew slunk away from him.

Even the town was different!

Yes! The stores and the people and the fountains and the sparrows in the streets and the signs were all the same in every physical particular. But there

had been change, and Avison swore at himself.

AT a street-corner he saw a group of men talking quietly. Although they glanced at him, they did not speak to him. And yet he knew every one of them!

As he passed he heard his name mentioned. He paused a minute as if to stare across the street.

“I knew it would happen some time,” old Felix Barnes was saying. “I’ve told him so a hundred times. But he would go on making experiments. It’s a good thing his mother isn’t alive. It would about kill her.”

“And they say Agnes Cole is just prostrated,” said another of the group.

Agnes Cole! Avison listened more attentively.

“The funeral procession ought to start soon,” said another.

A ghastly feeling of sickness rose in Avison. He clenched his hands.

“How did it happen, anyway? Does anybody know?” asked a youth. “I just got back to town, and this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

From under his arm Barnes drew a folded newspaper, which he opened slowly.

“Here’s the account—as much as any one knows,” he explained. “Avison went up on the sixteenth for a four-day trip, according to Miss Cole. He had some scheme for beating gravity, mind you. Think of that—beating gravity!”

“Poor fellow!” murmured the youth.

“Well, they found his machine wrecked to pieces just outside of town yesterday. Every bone in his body was broken. I heard the crash myself when the machine fell.”

Panic-stricken, Avison turned away. He pinched himself again. His eyes were wide, he knew. His scalp twitched. At a newsstand he bought a paper, and feverishly read of his own death.

The machine, said the account, was broken to pieces. The name plate, on which appeared the word

Vulcan

had been found, however.

Wildly Avison grasped at every possibility that came to his mind. Coincidence, of course. But what a devilish one! Some aviator had been killed, so badly crushed that even his own family had mistaken his identity. Avison must hurry out to his home and tell his family that he lived. He must tell Agnes, too.

But *was* he alive?

He cursed himself as a fool for letting the question come to his mind. But what did he know of the region and state of death? His eyes widened even more at the thought of it.

But it couldn't be that—it couldn't! He pricked his chest with a pin. Then he pricked his hand till he brought blood.

He came in sight of the old church where he had gone to Sunday school as a boy, and where his father had gone before him. The old ivy-grown church, with its sleepy belfry and its quiet lawn. Out in front were many carriages and automobiles. The sound of singing came up to him—a funeral dirge.

Avison hung back. He was afraid to go on to that church.

What if the body in the coffin should be his?

He cursed himself again, and slowly went on. But he *must* see the dead man before the coffin was closed! He began to walk swiftly.

He climbed the steps and entered the church doors. It was filled with his own friends. The sexton looked at him, but did not recognize him. Timidly he sat down, just beside an acquaintance. The man was weeping quietly.

The service was nearing its close when Avison entered. Almost at once the white-haired old parson said that those who wished might look again at the body.

The people stood up, the young scientist with them. Agnes in black, her face tear-stained, was in front. Near her stood his sister, weeping. He dared not approach them. There was his uncle—all of his cousins. Slowly and wearily the train of people began to walk past the long coffin of black. Avison followed them.

“What if it is?” he whispered. “What if it is?”

He gripped himself and resolved to keep his control. He came slowly up.

And the pall-bearers saw a young man at the end of the line—one who looked familiar, and yet whom they thought they did not know; one who needed a shave and wore a ridiculous suit of clothes—clench his hands until the nails nearly tore the flesh, and go white as the flowers banked about the coffin.

Avison rushed to the open air. Then he pressed his hands to his lips to suppress a scream.

“It is I!” he moaned. *“It is my own body!”*

And winding away out of the town, the funeral procession had started for the graveyard.

CONSIDERING everything, Avison kept his self-control well. He resolved that he would not go insane. That there had been some monstrous coincidence. That the smooth face in the coffin was not his own. But this reflection was the only thing that preserved his sanity.

That day passed, and that night, and still the young man did not sleep. He had secured a room in the hotel, and he tried to forget, in the smoke of many strong cigars. That a ghost could smoke cigars! In the morning he slept a little.

That day his beard was longer than ever, and this, together with the thinness of his face, disguised him perfectly. At ten he caught a train for a near-by city. There he could think it out, away from Agnes and his mourning relatives, to whom he felt a deadly fear of identifying himself.

In the city he secured a hotel room, and again tried to think. He was baffled, bewildered, afraid. The strangeness of everything remained, but not in such a marked degree as in his home town.

“A coincidence,” he kept repeating. “It *must* be! It can’t be anything else!”

After a few days he began to think of his science again. What if he *were* taken for dead? He himself knew now that he was alive and well. He ate heartily at the hotel grill; he saw an occasional movie.

But yet he could not go back to the Avison place nor to Agnes—at least until the memory of the familiar face in the coffin had faded from the minds of those at home. He shut it out of his own mind.

Then he thought of his machine out in the great deserted barn. They had found the wreck of the dead man's machine, and machines do not have ghosts. He felt more himself every day. Finally he remembered that an observatory in connection with a great university was situated just outside the city. So one day he had his beard and mustache trimmed, put on a large pair of dark glasses, and went out to talk to the head of the astronomy department.

"I am Vunden, of Heidelberg," he told Gray, the old astronomer, "and I would like a position. The money part of it is of no importance to me."

This did not surprise Gray. He knew many men on the faculty who worked only for the love of it. He questioned the young man, whose knowledge of the stars he found amazing. So Gray procured "Vunden" a position on a low salary, and Avison went to work again at his old love. It was only for a little while, he thought, until he could straighten out things a little better in his mind. The work might make him forget; at least it would end the monotony of idleness.

But it came about that he was not long at the observatory. A few weeks after he obtained his position there came an eclipse of the sun. That noon, as Avison stared into the eye-piece of the telescope, he saw for an instant at the edge of the dark rim of the moon a new planet. The significance of it struck Avison squarely between the eyes.

He sat back, staring into space for a few seconds, then started up with raised arms. Gray, the old astronomer, found him laughing and crying hysterically.

"What's the matter, Vunden?" he demanded.

"Matter? Matter! Great Heavens!" began Avison excitedly. Then he calmed himself. "I have made the greatest discovery in the scientific world. I have made two of them, in fact! But this one is the greatest in the history of astronomy! Look through the telescope!"

"What is it?" questioned Gray as he adjusted the glass.

"Look!" Avison rasped.

Gray glanced a moment at the tiny orb. The moon hid it as he watched.

"A new planet!" The old man was staggered. "Why has it never been seen before?"

His face flamed.

“I can tell you why! It is in perpetual eclipse by the sun just opposite from us. The once or twice a year it is not eclipsed, probably on account of the eclipse of the earth’s course around the sun, it is too near the sun to be seen. Don’t you understand? Don’t you?”

“But why—”

“Oh. I will tell you everything, soon. But first tell me this: Along the twentieth of May was there a kind of meteoric disturbance—a comet?”

“How came you not to notice that? A meteor swept very near the earth. But tell me—”

“No. Let me go. I won’t explain now. I can’t. But I will write to you in a day or so.”

Then as he hurried out: “To think that I should find out the truth at last!”

IT was only a day or so later that Vunden disappeared as if from the face of the earth. But a mimeograph copy of a strange letter came to every great scientist in the nation. And one letter, the original, came to one recipient who was not a scientist at all. Agnes Cole.

It made many a gray-haired astronomer shake his head unbelievably. But Agnes understood. The communication read:

**To Agnes and to the Scientific Men of the
World:**

I do not expect you to believe what I have written here, but I only ask that you investigate and you will then learn that what I say is true. And I, Charles David Avison, of There, not of Here—but an equal in mind, ability, and genius of the Charles David Avison who died for science, Here, of whom you already know—I swear to you that it is the truth.

If you do not believe, it is no matter. For even now I feel that perhaps I am doing wrong to add to the knowledge of the world wherein I do not belong.

Understand first that there are two earth worlds. In order that you may not confuse them, I will call the one in which I now am Here. The other is There.

Both were thrown off from the sun as spiral nebula at the same instant. Here went one direction, and There the other. Both being of the same size, gravity overcame the centrifugal force at exactly the same distance in space from the sun.

The two cooled the same time, of course, their oceans formed coincidentally, and the first germs of life appeared upon There at the identical instant that they appeared Here.

I have already told you enough to enable you to understand what occurred. There is no fate or chance in life—everything is cause and effect, cause and effect.

So as life developed There, its exact counterpart developed Here. For every caveman There, one was Here—his exact counterpart in appearance. Everything that he did or thought or felt, the caveman Here did or thought or felt at the same time. And so it was through the ages.

When I, Charles David Avison, was born There, Charles David Avison was born Here. When he began to love, I began to love. When he made that greatest discovery of all ages—the S waves which, conducted through a certain substance, will render it immune to the attraction of gravity, I made it There. Together we built spherical machines, and at the same second christened them the Vulcan.

I will not tell here of my discovery, but will leave it for some one else to make. One who belongs on this Here of yours. Your world has had its Avison; my world still awaits the

benefits accruing from the discoveries of its own Avison.

On the same day we each made trial flights, I There on that far-away counterpart world, and he Here. A few months later, on the sixteenth of May, we left our worlds. He left Here and I left There, and each of us floated away toward the stars.

Each of us had air for many days and food enough. But then for the first time something happened There that did not happen Here. For the first time the dualism was broken.

A meteor came near There when one did not come Here. My Vulcan was attracted to it by gravity, and before I could throw the S waves into the metal covering to render us immune, I was sweeping after it at a terrific pace, faster than our finite minds can conceive. I became unconscious then. Why, I do not know.

And I see now what happened. The meteor carried me across that infinite expanse to a point where the gravity of this world began to grip me. I began to fall.

I remember now that when I wakened the sea was below me. I remember that I threw on the S waves just in time, and floated down to safety.

I do not know how the other Charles Avison of Here fell to his death. I know that his machine was as good as mine, for the laws of cause and effect ordered it so. I can only attribute his fall to some influence on this meteor, this monstrous disturber out of space. The meteor probably never struck the earth. It might now be buried deep in the cold surface of the moon.

I have no place in this world of yours; I am a stranger here. In fact, I have no place anywhere now, for my counterpart is dead. If I stay here the old dualism will be broken still more, and our two worlds would soon become most different places. It is broken, anyway, now. For there is a man's body beneath the grass of Here, that is not There.

When you get this I will have boarded my Vulcan and will have started out into that strange, wonderful maze of worlds.

Perhaps I will go home—or perhaps to a new world. Perhaps I will not get anywhere. But I do not care. I would die out there among the stars, or perhaps on their unknown surfaces, the greatest voyager that the worlds have ever known.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Who Is Charles Avison?* by Edison Marshall]