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The Floating Island of Madness

By Jason Kirby

Above us curved the pale, hot bowl of cloudless sky; below us stretched the rolling, tawny wastes of the great Arabian Desert; and away to the east, close to the dipping horizon, scudded the tiny speck we were following. We had been following it since dawn and it was now close to sunset. Where was it leading us? Should we go on or turn back? How much longer would our gas and oil hold out? And just where were we? I turned and saw my questions reflected in the eyes of my companions, Paul Foulet of the French Sureté and Douglas Brice of Scotland Yard.

Far above the Arabian Desert three Secret Service men find an aerial island whose inhabitants are—madmen.

"Too fast!" shouted Brice above the roar of our motors. I nodded. His gesture explained his meaning. The plane ahead had suddenly taken on a terrific, unbelievable speed. All day it had traveled normally, maintaining, but not increasing, the distance between us. But in the last fifteen minutes it had leaped into space. Fifteen minutes before it had been two miles in the lead; now it was barely visible. A tiny, vanishing speck. What could account for this burst of superhuman speed? Who was in that plane? *What* was in that plane?

I glanced at Foulet. He shrugged non-committally, waving a courteous hand toward Brice. I understood; I agreed with him. This was Brice's party, and the decision was up to him. Foulet and I just happened to be along; it was partly design and partly coincidence.

Two days before I had been in Constantinople. I was disheartened and utterly disgusted. All the way from the home office of the United States Secret Service in Washington I had trailed my

man, only to lose him. On steamships, by railway, airplane and motor we had traveled—always with my quarry just one tantalizing jump ahead of me—and in Constantinople I had lost him. And it was a ruse a child should have seen through. I could have beaten my head against a wall.

And then, suddenly, I had run into Foulet. Not ten days before I had talked to him in his office in Paris. I had told him a little of my errand, for I was working on the hunch that this man I was after concerned not only the United States, but France and the Continent as well. And what Foulet told me served only to strengthen my conviction. So, meeting him in Constantinople was a thin ray of light in my disgusted darkness. At least I could explode to a kindred spirit.

"Lost your man!" was his greeting. And it wasn't a question; it was a statement.

"How did you know?" I growled. My humiliation was too fresh to stand kidding.

"Constantinople," said Foulet amiably. "You always lose them in Constantinople. I've lost three here."

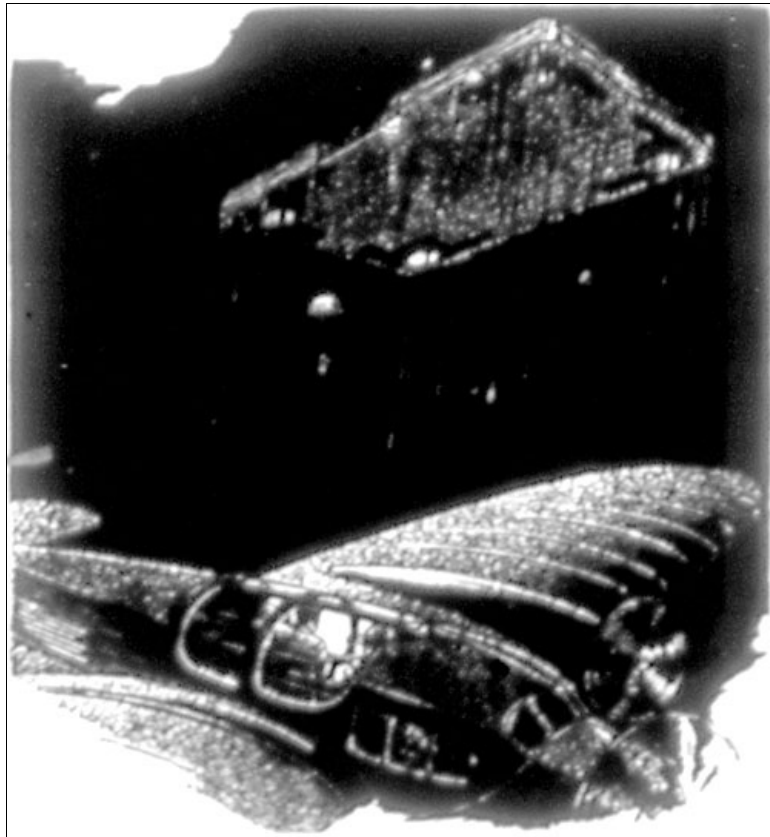
"Three?" I said, "Like mine!"

"Exactly," he nodded. Then he lowered his voice. "Come to my hotel. We can talk there."

"Now," he continued fifteen minutes later as we settled ourselves in his room, "you were very circumspect in Paris. You told me little—just a hint here and there. But it was enough. You—the United States—have joined our ranks—"

"You mean—"

"I mean that for a year we, the various secret service organizations of the Continent—and that includes, of course, Scotland Yard—have been after—Well, to be frank, we don't know what we're after. But we do know this. There is a power—there is someone, somewhere, who is trying to conquer the world."



A white speck took shape beneath the rising Island.

"Are you serious?" I glanced at him but the tight lines of his set mouth convinced me. "I beg your pardon," I murmured. "Go ahead."

"I don't blame you for thinking it was a jest," he said imperturbably, "But, to prove I know what I'm talking about, let me tell you what this man has done whom you have been pursuing. He has done one of two things. Either he has proved himself a dangerous revolutionary or he has engineered the failure of a bank or chain of banks—"

"We can't prove it," I interrupted.

"No," said Foulet, "Neither can we. Neither can Scotland Yard—or the secret services of Belgium or Germany or Italy or Spain. But there you are—"

"You mean that in all these countries—?"

"I mean that for a year—probably longer—these countries have been and are being steadily, and systematically, undermined. The morale of the people is being weakened; their faith in their government is being betrayed—and someone is behind it. Someone who can think faster and plan

more carefully than we—someone whose agents we always lose in Constantinople! I'll wager you lost your man from a roof-top."

I nodded, my disgust at my own stupidity returning in full force. "There was a lower roof and a maze of crisscross alleys," I muttered. "He got away."

"Was there an airplane anywhere around?" asked Foulet.

I glanced at him in surprise. What good would an airplane have been on a roof-top ten feet wide by twelve feet long? Then I remembered. "There was an airplane," I said, "but it was a long way off, and I could scarcely see it; but the air was very still and I heard the motor."

Foulet nodded, "And if you had had a pair of glasses," he said gently, "You would have seen that the airplane had a glider attached to it. There is always an airplane—and a glider—when we lose our men from the roofs of Constantinople."

"But that must be coincidence!" I insisted. "Why, I was on that roof right on the fellow's heels—and the airplane was at least five miles away!"

Foulet shrugged, "Coincidence—possibly," he said, "but it is our only clue."

"Of course," I murmured thoughtfully, "you have never been able to follow—"

Foulet smiled, "Can you imagine where that airplane would be by the time we climbed down off our roofs and got to a flying field and started in pursuit?"

We descended for dinner. Foulet's story had restored my self-confidence somewhat—but I was still sore. Of course Foulet connecting my vanishing man with that disappearing airplane was absurd—but where had the man gone? Was my supposition that he had jumped to a lower roof, climbed a wall and run through the maze of alleyways in half a minute in any way less absurd?

We were halfway through dinner when Brice appeared. Brice was one of the best men in Scotland Yard and I had known him many years. So, evidently, had Foulet, for his eyes flickered faintly with pleased surprise at the sight of him. Brice came directly to our table. He was bursting with victorious joy. I could feel it somehow, although his face, carefully schooled to betray no emotion, was placid and casual.

All through the remainder of the meal I could feel the vibrations of his excitement. But it was only at the very end that he confided anything—and his confidence only served to make the excitement and sense of impending thrill greater.

Just as he was rising to leave he shoved a tiny strip of paper across the table to me with a sidelong glance at Foulet. "Another roof-top," I read scrawled in pencil. "If you like, meet me at the flying field before dawn." If I liked! I shoved the paper across to Foulet who read it and carelessly twisted it into a spill to light his cigar. But his hand shook ever so slightly.

Needless to say we went to the flying field shortly after midnight. Bruce was there, pacing up and down restlessly. Near him was a huge tri-motored biplane, its motor humming in readiness.

"I've put a man on the trail in my place," Brice told us briefly. "Somebody else is going to lose the scent on a roof-top—and I'm going to watch."

We settled to our wait. To me it seemed absurdly hopeless. The flying field was on a slight rise. Below us spread the dark shadow that was Constantinople. There was no moon to give it form and substance—it was just a lake of deeper darkness, a spreading mass of silent roof-tops and minarets. How did Brice expect to see his quarry escape? Suppose he fled during the night? And even with daylight—

The first streaks of dawn found us still waiting, our ears strained for the hum of an airplane motor. But hardly had the golden rim of the sun appeared over the horizon when it came. It came from the east—straight out of the golden glory of the sun. Nearer and nearer it came; an airplane—alone.

"It hasn't got the glider," muttered Foulet and his tone was tinged with disappointment. But hardly had he spoken when, from one of the myriad roof-tops below us, rose a swift streak of shadow. So fast it flew, with such unbelievable speed, that to our eyes it was little more than a blur; but—

"The glider!" Brice gasped. "My God! How did he do it?" We stared, silent with amazement. The airplane, that only a second before had flown alone, now was towing a glider—a glider that had arisen, as if by magic, from the housetops!

Another instant and we had piled into the cockpit of the tri-motored plane and were off on our pursuit. That pursuit that led us on and on till, as the sun sank behind us, we found ourselves

above the illimitable, tawny wastes of the great Arabian Desert.

And now—what? All day long, as I have said, the plane we were pursuing had maintained, but never increased, the distance between us. Each hour had brought us renewed hope that the next hour would bring capture—or at least some definite clue, some shred of information. But the plane, still towing its glider, had gone on and on, steadily, imperturbably. And we dared not open fire and attempt to bring it down for fear of destroying our one meager chance of following it to its destination.

And now it had vanished. Suddenly, unaccountably it had taken on that terrific burst of speed which I have described. In ten minutes it had become a speck on the far horizon—in another instant it was gone. We were alone. Night was falling. If we turned back our gas might bring us to safety. If we went on—what?

I turned to my companions. Foulet still maintained his non-committal attitude, but Brice was deeply disappointed and worried. His ruddy English face was knotted in a scowl and his blue eyes were dark. Quickly he jerked his head back. We understood. Of course, turning back was the only thing to do; to go on was absurd. Our quarry had totally disappeared. But it was heart-breaking. Once again we had been fooled and outwitted. Our disappointment filled that tiny cockpit like a tangible mist. Brice threw over the stick with a gesture of disgust. In response our right wing lifted a bit, seemed to shake itself, then settled—and the plane continued on its course. Brice's eyes flickered with surprise. He shoved the stick back, threw it over again, but toward the opposite side. Obediently our left wing lifted as if to bank, a shudder passed through it, it dropped, the plane leveled, and went on.

Foulet leaned forward, his eyes were gleaming, his face flushed and eager. "Climb!" he yelled above the roar of the motors. "Up!" Brice nodded—but it was no use. That plane was like a live thing; nothing we could do would swerve it from its course. We stared at one another. Were we mad? Were we under a hypnotic spell? But our minds were clear, and the idea of hypnosis was absurd, for we had tried to turn back. It was the machine that refused to obey.

Again Foulet leaned forward. "Drop!" he shouted. Brice nodded, but the plane refused to respond. On and on, straight as a die, it sped.

"Try slowing the motor," I yelled into Brice's ear and both Foulet and I leaned forward to watch results.

The motors slowed. Gradually the roaring, pounding hum lessened, and our speed continued! The whine of the wind in the wires abated not one whit! The speedometer on our instrument board climbed!

Brice turned. His face, in the deepening dusk, was a blur of pasty white. His hands hung at his sides. The motors purred, pulsed, were silent. The plane, unaided, unguided, flew alone!

We sat hushed and unbelieving in that terrible, deathlike silence. Our ears, attuned all day to the deafening roar of the motors, felt as if they would burst in the sudden, agonizing stillness. There was not a sound save the whine of the wind in the wires as the plane sped on. Above us curved the illimitable arch of darkening sky. Below us lay the empty stretch of blank desert.

We didn't speak. I know that I, for one, could not bring my voice to break that ominous stillness. Silently we sat there, watching, waiting.... The quick darkness of the desert fell like a velvet curtain. The stars burst forth as if lit by an invisible hand. Foulet stirred, leaned forward, gasped. My eyes followed his gaze. Before our plane spread a path of light, dull, ruddily glowing, like the ghost of live embers. It cut the darkness of the night like a flaming finger—and along it we sped as if on an invisible track!

"The speed of that other plane," muttered Brice, breaking that utter silence, "This was it!"

Foulet and I nodded. Well could I imagine that we were travelling at that same terrific, impossible speed. And we were helpless—helpless in the clutch of—what? What power lay behind this band of light that drew us irresistibly toward it?

The ruddy pathway brightened. The light grew stronger. Our speed increased. The whine of the wires was tuned almost past human hearing. The plane trembled like a live thing in the grip of inhuman forces. A great glowing eye suddenly burst from the rim of the horizon—the source of the light! Instinctively I closed my eyes. What power might that eye possess? The same thought must have struck Brice and Foulet for they ducked to the floor of the cockpit, pulling me with them.

"Take care!" Brice muttered, "It might blind us."

We sat huddled in that cockpit for what seemed an eternity, though it couldn't have been more

than two minutes. The glare increased. It threw into sharp, uncanny relief every tiny detail of the cockpit and of our faces. The light was as powerful as a searchlight, but not so blinding. It had a rosy, diffused quality that the searchlight lacks.

In that eternity of tense waiting I tried to collect my thoughts. I told myself that I must keep steady, that I must keep my mind clear. I struggled to get a grip on myself; the light, the steady flying without power, the boundless, horrible silence had shaken me. But there was more to come. I knew it. We all knew it. And it was not physical strength that would pull us through—it was wits. We must hold steady. Thank God we all had years of training—war experience, peace experience, countless life-and-death adventures—behind us. It would all count now. It would all help us to keep our brains clear and cool. Wits, I thought again, only our wits would stand between us and—what?

The ground wheels of the plane struck something solid; rolled; stopped! The light snapped off. The sudden blackness, falling like a blanket of thick fur, choked me. In that first dazed, gasping instant I was conscious of only one thing. The plane was no longer in motion. But we had not dropped; of that I was sure. We were still, as we had been, close to two thousand feet above the earth!

Then came the sound of running feet and a confused blur of voices. The door of the cockpit was thrown open. A man leaned in, his hand on the jamb.

"Inspector Brice," he said quietly. "Monsieur Foulet. Lieutenant Ainslee. We are glad to welcome you." His words were courteous, but something in his tone sent a tingling chill down my spine. It was cold, as soulless as the clink of metal. It was dull, without life or inflection. But there was something else—something I could not name.

I was nearest the door and scrambled out first. To my surprise it was not dark. We were enveloped by a radiance, rosy as the broad ray had been, but fainter, like the afterglow of a sunset. By this light I could make out, vaguely, our surroundings. We seemed to be on a plateau; a great flat space probably an acre in extent, surrounded by a six-foot wall. Behind us there was a wide gateway through which our airplane had just come and across which workmen were dropping bars made of some material like cement. Before us, dotting this acre or so of plateau, were small, domed structures made of the same cement-like material. In the center of the plateau rose a larger domed building with a segment of its roof open to the stars and through this opening I could see the shadowy suggestion of a great lamp. There was the source of that powerful magnetic ray!

Foulet and Brice scrambled out and stood beside me. They said never a word, but I knew that every sense was alert.

"If you will follow me," that same cold, expressionless voice murmured. I turned to look at the man. He was not bad looking, clean shaven, well tailored. He swung his eyes to meet my gaze and as he did so that same chill fled along my spine. His eyes—what was the matter with them? They were dark—brown or black—and as shiny as shoe buttons. But there was no gleam of expression in them. Their shine was the glitter of polished glass.

Without a word we followed him across the small cleared space where our airplane stood, past a row of the small, domed structures to a low door cut in the white wall of the great central building. At the doorway he turned.

"I am taking you to the Master," he said; then, over his shoulder he added. "There is no means of escape—we are two thousand feet above the earth!" And he laughed—a quick, short cackle of crazy laughter. I felt the breath catch in my throat and the short hairs prickle at my neck. Foulet gripped my arm. Through my coat I could feel the chill of his fingers, but his grasp steadied me.

We walked on, following our guide. Down a narrow passageway, through a low arched door into a small room, evidently an ante-chamber to a larger room beyond. Without a word our guide left us, passing through another door which he closed after him.

Brice and Foulet and I exchanged looks, but we were silent. It might be we were watched. It might be that the very walls had ears. We could trust nothing.

Our guide returned. "The Master," he said and flung open a wide door.

We found ourselves in a large room filled with paraphernalia of all sorts: wires, lights, laboratory tables cluttered with test tubes and apparatus—and in the midst of this ordered chaos stood a man, his gleaming eyes watching us fixedly.

At first I was conscious of nothing but his eyes. Large, coal black and shiny with that peculiar, expressionless gloss I had noted in the eyes of our guide. Later I realized that he was of slight build, meticulously neat, with a tiny black waxed mustache and a carefully trimmed Van Dyke beard.

"Welcome to my floating island," he said gravely, never swerving those shiny eyes for an instant. "We have hoped long for your coming." He paused, noiselessly rubbing his hands, and watching us. We stared back, fascinated by that glossy, fixed gaze. "There is much to tell you," he went on, "and to ask you." He permitted himself a slow smile that spread his lips but failed to reach his eyes. "During your stay here," he continued, "which I hope will be both long and profitable, you will become my slaves and will know me as Master. But before you come under my domination you may know my name."

For the first time he moved his eyes. His glance swept the room as if to assure himself we were alone. He stepped, as swiftly and softly as a cat, over to the door through which we had entered, opened it, spoke to our guide who was waiting in the ante-room, closed it and returned. He faced us, his lips smiling and his eyes as blank as polished agate.

"My name," he said softly, "is Algernon—Frederick—Fraser!" He paused and watched us. Behind me I felt Foulet start; I heard Brice's quickly suppressed gasp. My own throat closed on words that might have been fatal. Algernon Frederick Fraser! Was it possible? Could it be?

Five years before Fraser had suddenly burst on the world of science. He had made some amazing discoveries regarding the power of light; discoveries that would reorganize the living conditions of the world. For a week or two the papers were filled with the man's amazing genius; then no more was heard of him. Had he died? What was the story?

Two years passed and even the name of Fraser was forgotten. Then suddenly it burst forth again in the headlines of the world. Fraser had disappeared! Fraser had vanished! But not as a brilliant genius of science; he had gone as an escaped lunatic! After his amazing burst of fame his mind snapped. Somehow the story had been kept out of the press.

Fraser was incarcerated in a quiet, very private asylum, and that was all. All—until he escaped. When that happened the story couldn't be hushed any longer. The press was informed, the people were warned. He became known as the Mad Menace. The police and secret service organizations of the world searched for him. His name became a byword. Where had he gone? What would he do? What was his scheme? For he was still the astounding scientific genius. That portion of his mind was untouched. At the time of his escape the physicians in charge of the case assured the press that Fraser's scientific mind was every bit as sound as ever.

And that was all. Aside from his god Science he was a maniac—inhuman, cruel, unreasoning. What would such a man do loosed in the world? What might he not do? Was it possible that it was this man who stood before us now with his eyes fastened upon us so intently and his lips spread in that little, empty smile? Suddenly I knew! Those eyes! Those eyes were the shiny, vacuous, soulless eyes of a madman!

"I see," he said softly, "that you have heard of me. But it is three years since your world has seen me—yes?" He laughed—a low laugh that seemed to freeze the air around him. "They call me mad." His smile faded, his eyes bored through us like steel needles. "I am not mad! No madman could do what I have done in three years!" For the first time an expression flickered in his eyes—a crafty gleam of vanity that flared instantaneously. "Would you like to see?" He leaned toward us. We bowed, but it was Brice who spoke.

"Very much, Doctor Fraser—"

"Don't call me that!" The man whirled like a tiger ready to spring. "Don't call me that! I am Master here! Call me Master! Say it." His voice rose to a shriek. "Say it—Master!"

I clamped my teeth against the bloodless horror of that maniacal voice. It chilled my veins. Again I felt the hair rise on my scalp. Brice bowed quietly; and his eyes, serene and blue, met Fraser's fairly.

"Of course, Master." His low English voice soothed the bristling silence. "I am sure I speak for Monsieur Foulet and Lieutenant Ainslee when I say that we would be most deeply interested in your achievements."

Fraser was placated. He relaxed. He softly rubbed his hands while a smug, crafty smile flitted across his lips. "You will follow me," he murmured.

He led the way back through the ante-room and down the passageway till we stood again under the stars, and again I was struck by the strange light, warm and faint and rosy like a sunset afterglow. As if he read my thought Fraser turned to me.

"I will show you first the source of this rosy light; that, I believe, will explain a great deal." He led the way down one of the narrow pathways between the low, domed houses—if they could be called houses, for they were little larger than kennels. At the six-foot wall that surrounded this plateau he paused. "Would you like to look over the wall?" he asked.

For the space of a breath we hesitated. Was this a trap? Through my mind flashed the words of the man who had guided us to Fraser. "You are two thousand feet above the earth," he had said. Was that true? And if it were, might not Fraser push us over the wall? But instantly logic came to my rescue. Fraser had brought us here, and he could have brought us for but one thing: to question us. Would he be apt to do us harm before those questions were asked? And besides, would Fraser's brilliantly subtle mind stoop so low as to destroy enemies by pushing them over a wall?

"Thank you," we murmured simultaneously. "This whole achievement is of tremendous interest to us," Foulet added.

Fraser chuckled. "It will be of greater interest—later," he said, and his blank, glittering eyes rested on first one of us, then another with a cold, satisfied gleam. Then he lifted his hand and opened a square door in the wall about the size of a port-hole. To my surprise the little door swung back as lightly as a feather and made scarcely a sound as it slammed against the wall itself. Again Fraser answered my unspoken thought.

"It has only substance," he said with his vain smirk. "No weight whatever. This entire platform together with its huts is lighter than air. If I should tear loose this little door it would float out of my hands instantly and go straight up to the stars. The substance—I have called it Fleotite—is not only lighter than air but lighter than ether."

"But we are not floating," said Brice; "we are stationary. Is the lightness of your Fleotite counteracted by the weight of the men and machines?"

Fraser shook his head. "Not entirely," he said. "But first look through this little window. Then I will explain."

Eagerly we pressed forward. Our danger was almost forgotten in our interest. This was amazing—stupendous! Together, shoulder to shoulder, we gazed through the aperture. We were suspended in space! Above us shone the blue-black Arabian night, and beneath us—far, far beneath—lay the sands of the desert looking rosy and warm in that same dull red glare of light that, to a fainter degree, gave us the effect of afterglow. But we were not floating; we were anchored as securely as a ship riding in a calm harbor.

We turned back to Fraser, amazed, awed, bursting with questions. Madman he might be, but he had wrought a miracle.

"I will explain," he said and his eyes gleamed with pride. "Of course you know of my tremendous discoveries connected with the power of light. At any rate, five years ago, the scientific world on earth thought they were tremendous. In reality that was nothing to my amazing strides in the past three years. There is nothing that cannot be done with light! Nothing!" For the first time Fraser's eyes became alive. They were illumined. His whole body seemed to radiate light and fire and genius. We listened, fascinated.

"Take, for instance," he continued eagerly, "that ray with which I drew you and your plane to me. That ray is the pure power of magnetism. At full strength it will draw anything to it instantly. Fortunately the power can be regulated: I can switch a lever in my laboratory and draw things to me, via the ray, at any speed I wish—one hundred, two hundred, a thousand miles an hour."

"How far can you throw the ray?" asked Foulet, and I knew he was thinking of that glider that rose from the roof-tops of Constantinople. Fraser also knew he was thinking of that.

"I did not draw the glider," he said quietly. "The airplane I sent did that. My airplanes carry batteries of this ray. In the beginning I found gliders to be more practical for my purposes than airplanes. For one thing they were silent. My only problem was that of getting them off the ground. Once they were in the air I could manage everything. It was this problem that inspired this discovery and perfection of the ray. But, you asked how far I can throw the ray? This main lamp, that I operate myself from here, is effective at two hundred miles. At one hundred miles it enjoys its full power."

"And you can draw anything to you," asked Brice, "within the radius of the magnetic ray?"

"Anything in the air," answered Fraser. "But of course I must use caution. Great caution. If I drew planes to me indiscriminately I would draw attention to myself; my secret and my location here would leak out. No. That must not be. So the only planes I bring are my own—and yours." He paused and his black eyes, again glassy, swept over us. "It is a compliment I pay you," he said

finally. "You have become too troublesome. You know too much. Sooner or later the time would come when you would combine your forces. That would be a nuisance. So I decided to bring you here."

"Suppose," asked Foulet curiously, "we hadn't fallen into your trap? Suppose we had turned back before reaching the point where your ray is effective?"

Fraser shook his head and that smug, offensive smile appeared again. "You were trapped from the beginning, though you didn't know it," he said. "The plane you were following was equipped with batteries of the ray which, while not as powerful as the lamp I have here, were still powerful enough to hold you to the course we choose you to run. But enough of the ray," he added impatiently. "There are one or two other things I want to explain and then—" he paused and the pause, somehow, was alive with menace. What was he going to do after he had finished treating us as honored guests? For the third time he answered my unspoken question. His eyes narrowed till they were black, glittering slits. His voice, as he leaned toward us, was no more than a hissing whisper.

"**S**laves!" he said, and his lips twisted. "How will you like to be slaves of Mad Algy Fraser?" He laughed—a chuckle that started in his throat and rose and rose till it seemed to shatter my eardrums. I felt my teeth grinding together and my nails bit my palms in my effort to control my nerves against the strain of that maniacal glee. Suddenly he sobered. His laugh died instantly like a radio that had been snapped off. "Listen and I will tell you. I will tell you everything because it is necessary for you to know so that you may work for me intelligently and you will remember better and be of greater use to me if I tell you now while you are yet—sane!"

"Sane!" The exclamation sprang from the three of us simultaneously. I felt a cold chill start between my shoulder blades. For an instant my breath choked in my throat. My heart paused—and then raced. What did he mean? What was he going to do to us? What scheme had he evolved in his crazed brain?

"I have perfected a serum"—his tone was professional, cold; he might have been talking to a class in a lecture room—"a serum that robs the patient of every vestige of human emotion—and therefore sanity. All his intellect, his memories, however, remain, to serve him in carrying out my orders. He loses all his will to live and resist, and becomes nothing but an automaton, whose complete mental equipment is at my command."

There was silence. His glassy black eyes, blank and soulless, swept over us. His mouth curled in that smug, complacent smile. He had us with our shoulders to the floor. He knew it—and he knew we knew it. There was no possible way we could escape. We were two thousand feet above the earth. Our plane wouldn't get a quarter of a mile before the magnetic ray would bring it back. Parachute? Even supposing we could get parachutes where would we go? Drop two thousand feet into the middle of the Arabian Desert?

My brain raced. Never before had I been in such a tight place. And soon—if Fraser had his way—I wouldn't even have a mind to think with! I felt choked, stifled. Was there no way out? It seemed to me that a blanket—a soft, terrible blanket of uncontrollable circumstance—was being folded around me, robbing me of the use of my limbs, paralyzing me, numbing me. And out of this terrible helplessness came again Fraser's voice.

"I have told you enough," he said suavely, "so that you may have a faint idea of my power. I will send you now to Doctor Semple who will administer the serum and place you under the 'nourishment ray.' This is another of my discoveries," he added casually. "It is a ray which allows the patient to absorb, through the shell of the skin, sufficient nourishment, both solid and liquid, to last for twenty-four hours."

Five minutes later we stood in a small room that might have been the office of an up-to-date physician anywhere in the world. Across the polished top of a mahogany desk Dr. Semple stared at us, his eyes, like the eyes of our guide and Fraser, polished and expressionless. But now we understood. Those eyes were expressionless because there was nothing to give them expression. I tried to force my mind to comprehend the almost incomprehensible. We were among men who were not men! We were fast in the power of human beings who possessed no trace of humanity, who had become nothing but scientific Robots even though they still had bodies of flesh and blood! It was unbelievable! My hands grew cold and my brain hot at the thought. Yet, gazing into the bright, enamelled eyes of Dr. Semple, I knew it was true.

Carefully, scientifically, we were prepared for our injections. And with every mechanical move of the doctor my mind seemed to take on fresh speed as it raced toward some solution to our terrible problem. My eyes flew around the tiny office searching for some means of escape. Doctor Semple turned to prepare the syringe. Behind his back Brice gestured frantically. Somehow I understood. In my pocket was a flask—a flask I had filled with drinking water in Constantinople.

Bewildered, I handed it over to him.

The doctor turned, swabbed a patch of iodine on our arms, reached for the syringe. As he leaned over, Foulet thrust forward a foot. The doctor tripped, sprawled full length on the floor. Foulet and I quickly stooped to pick him up, standing between him and Brice—shielding his eyes so that he could not see. We fumbled to give Brice time. We apologized and soothed. Out of the tail of my eye I could see Brice working like lightning—emptying out the syringe of that villainous liquid, filling it with clear water.

It was done! We raised the doctor to his feet; gave his clothes a final brush. But as we stood back I know my hands were trembling and I had to clamp my teeth to keep them from chattering. Were we out of danger yet? Would the doctor discover our ruse? And, if we got out of his office without receiving the terrible injection, could we successfully fool Fraser and his "slaves" into believing we were mad? Fool them until we got a chance to escape? Could we simulate that glassy stare? Were we sufficiently good actors to get away with it? The questions pounded and raced through my brain in that instant when Doctor Semple turned again to his desk and picked up the syringe.

But the miracle happened! Mechanically he gave us the injection—never suspecting that it was not the devilish liquid he had put in, but only clear water! Then he stepped back and watched us. Cold chills raced up and down my spine. What were we supposed to do now? What was the action of the serum? Did it act at once or slowly? Was it supposed to make us sick? Did it send us to sleep? How could we simulate symptoms when we had no idea what these symptoms were supposed to be? But the cold voice of the doctor cut sharply across my agonized questions.

"You will lie down here," he said, opening a door into a room whose trails were lined with bunks, like an opium den. "In half an hour I will come for you. By that time—" His lips spread in that same travesty of a smile Fraser had employed.

We filed into the room and the door closed behind us. Obediently we lay down on the narrow bunks. We dared not speak. We scarcely dared glance at each other. We must act, at all times, as if we were observed. Might not Fraser have a ray that could penetrate walls? Might he not, even now, know that we had outwitted the doctor and had not received the fatal injection? And what then? Suppose Fraser himself superintended another injection? I pulled my thoughts back from the terrible supposition. One thing at a time. So far all had gone well. I lay down on the bunk and closed my eyes.

Half an hour later we heard the door open. Now, I, thought, when I look up, I am supposed to be mad! I struggled to make my mind a blank. I tried to force into my eyes that peculiar, brilliant, shiny, vacant expression I had noticed. Would I succeed?

I raised my eyes. The doctor was standing before us. With a gesture he bade Foulet go to him. I watched beneath lowered lids. Thank God he had called Foulet first. Foulet had dabbled in the psychology of insanity. Foulet would know how to act, and I would ape him. Coldly, mechanically Doctor Semple ran him through a few tests. I watched with bated breath. The doctor nodded. Foulet had passed!

It was my turn. I did exactly as Foulet had done—and succeeded! I had to turn away swiftly so that the doctor wouldn't see the gleam of triumph in my supposedly mad eyes.

He motioned to Brice. But just as Brice stepped forward the door opened and Fraser came into the room. For an instant everything reeled. We were gone! But even in that terrible instant of despair I remembered to keep my eyes blank. No trace of expression must appear or we were lost. I stretched my lips in that travesty of a smile I had seen the others use. Fraser stared at us, one after the other. He nodded.

"It is well," he said slowly and distinctly as if he were talking to small children. "Your names will still be as they were." We stared at him blankly and again he nodded. "You have forgotten your names—ah! Yours," he pointed to me, "was Ainslee, and it still is. And you are Monsieur Foulet. But Brice—" he paused. My heart hung in my breast, suspended there with terror. What was the matter with Brice? What did Fraser suspect—or know? He turned to the doctor. "You will give Inspector Brice another injection," he said. "The Inspector has a strong mind, and a clever one. A normal injection would not be enough."

It seemed to me that my blood froze. In that terrible instant it ran, like tingling ice, through my veins. Brice! The brainiest man in Scotland Yard! For Fraser was right. Brice had more brains than Foulet and I together. And in another half hour Brice would be no better than an idiot! For I didn't fool myself. Even Brice couldn't outwit Doctor Semple twice.

"You will follow me," said Fraser, turning to Foulet and me. "I will put you under the nourishment ray while Doctor Semple attends to Brice." Obediently, with slightly shuffling, gait and vacant

eyes we followed him into an adjoining room, leaving Brice behind. I didn't even trust myself to glance at him as we left. But my heart was in my boots. When would we see him again? And what would he be?

The room we entered was dark, but instantly Fraser switched on a mellow, orange-colored light, that flooded the room with a deep, warm glow.

"Strip yourselves and sit down," he said, pointing to deep lounging chairs that filled the room. "You will do nothing. Relax and allow the light to bathe you. In half an hour I will come back with instructions."

We obeyed, I imitating blindly every vague, mechanical movement of Foulet's. We settled ourselves in the comfortable chairs and Fraser left us. He had told us to relax—but to do anything else would have been impossible. The light soothed us, eased us; gave us, somehow, a penetrating sensation of peace and complete comfort. It flowed around us, warming us, lulling us to a delicious dreamy state that was neither waking nor sleeping. It wiped out danger; it wiped out Time; nothing existed but this warm and relaxing sense of utter satisfaction and peace.

Through this mist of contentment came Fraser's voice, "That is all!" The light faded gradually, and as gradually we came to ourselves. "You will dress," directed Fraser in the same clear, clipped manner, "and you will come to me in my laboratory."

Fifteen minutes later we stood before him, vacant-eyed and solemn. Fraser fastened his black, polished eyes upon us. "You will tell me," he said distinctly, "all you know."

We were silent. How could we tell him all we knew when we were supposed to have forgotten everything? Was this a trap? Or did our inside secret service information come under the general head of Science? But before these questions had actually formed in my mind I remembered that several times Fraser had answered my questions before they were asked. Might he be a mind reader? Best to take no chances! I made my conscious mind as blank as possible and gazed back at him. At my side Foulet made a vague and uncertain noise in his throat.

"Your countries are afraid of me?" Fraser leaned forward, that smug, vain smile curling his lips. "Your countries know there is a power abroad stronger than they? They feel that between the twin horns of economic pressure and the red menace they will be tossed to destruction?"

"Destruction?" repeated Foulet with all the vacant inflection of idiocy.

"Tossed?" I asked imitating Foulet. But instantly I wondered if we were taking the right tack for Fraser's eyes grew red with fury.

"Answer me!" he raged. "Tell me that your countries know that soon I shall be master of the world! Tell me they are afraid of me! Tell me that in the last three years I have slowly gained control of commerce, of gold! Tell me that they know I hold the economic systems of the world in the hollow of my hand! Tell me that not a government on earth but knows it is hanging on the brink of disaster! And I—I put it there! My agents spread the propaganda of ruin! My agents crashed your Wall Street and broke your banks! I! I! I! Mad Algy Fraser!" He stopped, gasping for breath. His face was scarlet. His eyes glowed like red coals. Suddenly he burst into a cascade of maniacal laughter, high, insane, terrible.

It took all my control to keep my eyes blank, my face devoid of expression. Out of the tail of my eye I saw Foulet smiling, a vague, idiotic smile of sympathy with Fraser's glee. But suddenly the glee died—as suddenly as if a button had snapped off the current. He leaned forward, his black eyes devouring our faces.

"They are afraid of me?" It was a whisper, sharply eager. "The world knows I am Master?"

"Master," repeated Foulet. It wasn't quite a question, yet neither was it sufficiently definite as an answer to arouse Fraser's suspicions. To my relief it satisfied him. The congested blood drained out of his face. His eyes lost their glare. He turned and for several minutes tramped up and down the laboratory lost in thought. At last he came back to us.

"I have changed my mind," he muttered. "Come with me."

Without a word we followed him, out through the door and down the passageway. Out of the building he led us. The air was stirring with the first breath of dawn and along the horizon glowed a band of pure gold where the sun would soon rise. When he had walked some thirty yards from the laboratory Fraser paused. With his toe he touched a spring in the platform. A trap door instantly yawned at our feet. I suppressed a start just in time, but through my body shot a thrill of fear. My muscles tensed. My heart raced. What now? Where could a trap door, two thousand feet above the earth lead? Was he going to shove us into space because we refused to answer his questions?

"Go down," Fraser ordered.

For the space of a breath we hesitated. To disobey meant certain and instant death at the hands of this soulless maniac. But to obey—to drop through this trap-door—also meant death. I took a step forward. Could we overpower him? But what if we did? There were others here beside Fraser. How many others I had no idea, but surely enough to make things impossible for Foulet and me. Yet we dared not even hesitate. To hesitate implied thinking—and a man robbed of his brain cannot think! There was no way out. Together Foulet and I stepped to the brink of the yawning hole....

For an instant we were almost blinded by a glare of rosy light that seemed to burst upon us from the earth so far below. Here was the source of that strange afterglow! Away beneath us, evidently on the sands of the Arabian desert, glowed four red eyes sending forth the rosy rays that converged at the center of the floating platform. Instantly I comprehended Fraser's scheme. The Fleotite he had invented, and of which the platform and buildings were made, was lighter than air. It followed, therefore, that if it were not anchored in some way it would instantly rise. So Fraser had anchored it with four of his magnetic rays! He had told us that he could regulate the pulling power of the ray, so what he had obviously done was to calculate to a nicety the lift of the Fleotite against the magnetism of the rays.

But instantaneously with this thought came another. Fraser was urging us into the glow of the magnetic ray! If once our bodies came entirely within the ray we would be yanked from the platform and dashed to death—sucked to destruction on the sands below.

In my ear I heard Fraser's fiendish chuckle. "The instinct of fear still holds, eh? My serum can destroy your conscious mind—but not your native fear? Cowards! Fools! But I am not going to push you off. Look!" With his foot he pressed another lever which, while it did not shut off any of the light, seemed to deflect the ray. "Fools!" he said again scornfully. "Go down!"

Then it was I saw where he was sending us! Thirty feet below the platform there swung a small cabin, attached by cables and reached by a swinging steel ladder. As I looked a door in the roof slid back. "Climb down!" ordered Fraser again. There was nothing to do but obey. Accustomed as I was to flying, inured as I had become to great heights, my head reeled and my hands grew icy as I swung myself through that trap door and felt for a footing on the swinging ladder. Suppose Fraser turned the ray back on us as we climbed down? Suppose he cut the ladder? But instantly my good sense told me he would do neither. If he had meant to kill us he could have done it easier than this. No, somewhere in his mad head, he had a reason for sending us down to this swinging cabin.

Five minutes later Foulet and I stared at each other in the cramped confines of our prison. The tiny door in the roof, through which we had dropped, was closed. The steel ladder had been pulled up. We were alone. Alone? Were there no eyes that watched us still, or ears that listened to what we might say? Foulet evidently shared my sense of espionage, for, without even a glance at me, he lay down on the hard floor of our bare little cabin and, to all intents and purposes, fell asleep.

For a few minutes I stood staring at him, then followed his example. As I relaxed I realized I was tremendously weary. The cumulative exhaustion of the past thirty-six hours seemed to crowd upon me with a smothering sense of physical oppression. I looked at my watch and wound it. Five o'clock. Through the narrow slits near the roof of our swinging cell I could see the changing light of dawn, melting in with the rosy glow from the magnetic rays. My eyelids drooped heavily....

When I awoke Foulet was standing near me, his arms folded across his chest, scowling thoughtfully. He nodded as he saw my open eyes, but when I started to speak he shook his head sharply. With his gesture there flooded back to me the feeling that we were watched—even through the walls of our aerial prison and the floor of the platform above us.

I sat up and, clasping my knees with my hands, leaned against the wall. There must be a way out of this for us! All my life I had worked on the theory that if you thought hard enough there was a way out of any difficulty. But this seemed so hopeless! No matter how hard we thought the mad mind of Fraser would always be one jump ahead of us! And maybe we didn't dare even think! If Fraser were able to read minds—as I was nearly sure he was—then hadn't we better keep our minds blank even down here? But an instant's thought showed me the flaw in my logic. Fraser could, without much doubt, read minds—when those minds were close to him. If he could read minds at a distance then he wouldn't need to ask us for information.

But why had he put us here? I burrowed around for the answer. Had he guessed we had

outwitted Doctor Semple and not taken the mad serum after all, and was this punishment? No, if Fraser had guessed that he would simply have given us more serum, as he had Brice. Brice! Where was poor Brice now? Was he an idiot, with blank face and shiny, soulless eyes? My mind shuddered away from the thought, taking refuge in my first question: Why were we here? What was Fraser going to do with us?

We lost all track of time. In spite of my winding it my watch stopped and the hours slipped by uncounted. Night came, and another dawn and another night. Twice our roof was lifted and our tiny swinging cell filled with the orange light of the nourishment ray. But we saw no one nor did anyone speak to us. The third day passed in the same isolated silence. Occasionally Foulet or I would utter a monosyllable; the sound of our voices was comforting and the single words would convey little to a listener.

But as the hours of the third night slowly passed the atmosphere in our tiny swinging cell grew tense. Something was going to happen. I could feel it and I knew by Foulet's eyes that he felt it too. The air was tight, electrical. Standing on tiptoe, I glued my eyes to the narrow slit which was our only ventilation. But I could see nothing. The brilliant rosy glow blinded me. I couldn't even see the huge platform floating above our heads.

Then, suddenly, our roof slid back. The magnetic ray was deflected. Above us, in the opening of the trap-door, leered the bright, mad eyes of Fraser.

"Good evening," he said mockingly. "How do you feel?" We smiled hesitantly. Something in his voice made me feel he was addressing us as sane men and not idiots. But why? Weren't we supposed to be idiots when he put us down there?

"You ought to feel all right," Fraser went on critically. "The first dose of that serum lasts only three days. It's cumulative," he added with his professional air. "In the beginning an injection every three days. Then once a week and so on. There's a man who has been with me for three years who needs treatment only once every three months. Well, are you ready to talk?"

So that was it! He had put us down here till the supposed effects of that serum had worn off; and now we were to talk; tell him everything his agents had been risking their lives to find out! We were to sell out our countries to him; betray all the secrets we had sworn by eternity to keep! If we did as he demanded both France and the United States would be at his mercy—and he had no mercy! He was not a man; he was a cruel, power-loving, scientific machine. I clamped my teeth. Never would I talk! I had sworn to protect my country's secrets with my life—and my vow would be kept!

"You will talk?" Fraser asked again, his voice suddenly suave and beseeching. "For those who talk there are—rewards."

"Let down the ladder," said Foulet, in a quiet, conversational tone. "It will be easier to discuss this—"

Fraser's eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. He smiled craftily. "The ladder will be let down—when you talk."

"And if," suggested Foulet, "we don't wish to talk?"

Fraser's lips stretched in a wider grin. His white teeth gleamed. His shiny black eyes glittered. In that warm, rosy light he looked like a demon from hell. He held out his hand. In it shone a long, slender instrument.

"This knife," he said softly, "will cut the steel cables that connect you to this platform—as if they were cheese! You will talk?" Beside me I heard Foulet gasp. Swiftly my imagination conjured up the picture of our fate. Our determined refusal to divulge the secrets of our respective countries; the severing, one by one, of the four cables holding us to the platform; the listing of our swinging cell; the tipping, the last, terrible plunge two thousand feet. But it would be swift. The power of the magnetic ray would give us no time to think—to suffer. It would be a merciful end....

"Let us up," bargained Foulet. "We will talk." Fraser laughed.

"None of that," he said slyly. "You talk from there and if your information doesn't dove-tail with what I already know—" he flourished the steel knife suggestively.

We were caught! No amount of bluff would save us now. Fraser demanded that truth, facts, actual information—and he wouldn't be fooled by anything spurious. Foulet's shoulder touched mine as we peered up through the roof of our cell at our mad captor. We spoke together:

"There is nothing to say."

The assured smile left Fraser's lips. His eyes glittered red. His whole mad face was contorted

with fury. A volley of oaths poured through his twisted mouth. With a gesture of insane rage he pulled the nearest cable to him and slashed it with the knife!

Our cell tilted. Foulet and I were thrown in a heap on the floor. We sprang up to face Fraser again through the roof. His mad eyes glared down at us, soul-chilling, maniacal.

"Talk!" he snarled. "Talk—or I'll slice another!" He drew the second cable to him, holding it in readiness.

I clenched my teeth. Beside me I could see the muscles of Foulet's jaw working. Talk? Never!

"Talk!" screamed Fraser. "Talk!" Our silence and our white faces were his only answer. There was a gleam of the knife in the rosy light. Our cell lurched, quivered, then caught. Would it hold with only two cables? It was hanging on its side. We were standing on what had been the wall. Through the opening in the roof we could see nothing but rosy light and distant stars. How strong were the cables? Could they hold against the pull of the magnetic ray? We could feel the pull now; feel the strain on the cables above us. If Fraser cut the third one—

"Talk!" his voice came, hoarse with fury. "Talk now! You can't see me," he went on; "but I'm pulling the third cable toward me. I'm raising the knife. Will you talk?"

Standing on that quaking wall Foulet and I stared at each other. How long would it be? One second? Half a minute? Thank God it would be quick! This was the worst now. This eternity of waiting.... "I'm cutting it!" yelled Fraser—and with his words the cell lurched, swung, whirled like a spinning top. Foulet and I were tossed around like dried peas in a pod.

Suddenly the thing steadied. Two steel hooks were clamped on the edge of the opening in what had been the roof, and Brice stared at us through the aperture!

"Quick!" he gasped. "There's not a second to lose. Don't stare! Quick, I say. I've got the ladder here. It's steel and it'll hold. Climb up."

Dumbly we obeyed. Our heads were whirling, our bodies bruised and mashed by the shaking up. Blindly, dizzily we climbed up the ladder, scrambled out on the platform. Solid footing again! As Brice loosed the ladder and pulled it up, there was a snap. The last cable had gone! The cell shot down to earth with a speed that must have reduced it to a powder. Foulet and I stared after it, dazed, unbelieving. Brice's whisper hissed in our ears.

"Listen carefully," he gripped our shoulders. "I'm not mad. They shot the stuff into me, but I found an antidote in Semple's office and used it right away. Now listen to me! Our plane is over there," he pointed across the platform. "It's all ready to take off. They think they're sending me off on an errand for them at dawn. It's ready for a long trip. Go there; get in; and if any one questions you tell them it's orders. They won't, though. No one gives orders here but Fraser." Brice nodded toward a dark heap beside the trap-door.

"You killed him?" asked Foulet.

"Stunned him," said Brice. "He may come to at any moment and if he does—"

"Suppose we bind him and take him in the plane?" I suggested.

Brice shook his head. "Leave him here. It's safer. Now go. Get in the plane and take off—"

"And not wait for you?" I gasped, "You're crazy—"

"I'll be there. You can pick me up later. There's no time to explain—but you'll know. Take off; then circle around and come back. But watch out!" He gave us both a shove toward the plane, the dim shadow of which we could see across the platform.

We took a step toward it, and then turned back. How could we go without Brice? But he had vanished. And in the shadow of the trap door Fraser groaned.

We waited no longer. To hesitate was to court death. Deliberately, as if we were acting under orders, we walked toward the plane. As Brice had said, it was in readiness. Evidently he was to have started at once. We climbed in, our hearts in our throats. A mechanic stepped forward. The propeller roared. But, above the roar of the propeller we heard a yell of fury—and Fraser, dazed and reeling, came stumbling across the platform toward us!

Foulet took the controls. The plane taxied across the platform, swooped into space. But it was not till it had risen and steadied that I realized the complete idiocy of our forlorn hope of escape. What fools we were! And Brice—Brice must, in truth, be mad! How could we get away? How could we ever escape the terrific power of the magnetic ray? That ray that Fraser worked himself from his laboratory—the ray that had drawn us first across the desert to this floating island of madness! It would be a matter of seconds before Fraser would reach it and turn it on us. There

was no escape—none!

In despair I looked back at the platform. To eyes ignorant of its horror it would have been an amazing and gorgeous sight. The crimson lamps of the magnetic ray bloomed like huge desert flowers on the sand two thousand feet below us; the rays flamed up with the glory of an Italian sunset and, poised in space like a dark butterfly, floated the huge platform bathed in its rosy light. It was beautiful. It was unbelievable. It was horrible. I gazed, fascinated. When would Fraser reach the lamp? When would he turn it on? I stared at the dark shadow that I knew was the laboratory building. My eyes strained through the growing distance. When would the glow come? That glow that meant our death!

Suddenly I gasped. The light had gone! The great lamps down on the desert floor were out! Darkness, swift, comforting, wrapped us in velvet folds.

"Brice!" I yelled. "Brice has cut off the lamps—he's released the platform. God! Look—Foulet!" My voice tore through my throat; my eyes burned with sudden, blinding emotion. In the soft darkness of the starry night I could see the platform waver, topple, rise! It rose straight up, tilting and swaying in the light breeze. What was it Fraser had said? If it was released it would go straight to the stars! It was on its way!

But Brice! Where was Brice? Was he on that terrible rising island? I strained my eyes through the darkness. Already Foulet had banked the plane—we were circling; turning back. A tiny white speck took shape beneath the rising island. A parachute! Brice was safe!

Ten minutes later we slid along the hard desert sand and came to a stop. Brice came running over toward us. Foulet and I climbed out of the plane to meet him. Silently we gripped hands. It was a solemn moment. Beside us reared the great plane that would take us back to safety—back to the familiar life we knew and loved. Around us stretched the trackless wastes of the Great Arabian Desert—and above, somewhere between us and the stars, soared the floating island of madness.

"They believed I was mad," said Brice as we climbed back into the plane. "I watched Fraser. I spied on the men. There were about thirty up there, and finally I saw where they regulated those lamps. The rest was easy—all except the minute when I found Fraser kneeling beside that trap-door slicing the cables. For a second I thought it was all up."

"You got us just in time," I muttered. But you can't be grateful with an Englishman. They won't stand for it.

"Oh, bosh," Brice murmured, as the plane swung its nose toward that far distance that was home. "Well, it's all over—but it's a story that can never be told. The fate of Mad Fraser will have to remain a mystery—for no one would believe us if we told them!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FLOATING ISLAND OF MADNESS ***

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