

THE FLOATING ISLAND OF MADNESS
by Jason Kirby

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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!"

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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."

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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!