

## THE ISLAND

All I could think about was that I was slowly dying a horrible death. I had signed on for the “Marathon des Sables”, a six day endurance race of 243 km across the Sahara in southern Morocco. On the fourth day a vicious sand storm struck. I could scarcely see anything. But driven by a foolish competitiveness, I wrapped a towel around my face and stumbled on, hoping to keep my position. It would have been better if I had stopped and waited for the storm to abate.

The storm had been so fierce I was eventually forced to halt and take shelter behind some rocks. When the storm subsided, I found I must have gone off course. There was no sign of the race course or of any other competitor. Night soon came on; it was cold. I half buried myself in the sand beside the rock to try and keep warm.

The next day was far, far worse. The temperature was soon rising to 40° Celsius and I had less than a litre of water. I knew dehydration was the greatest danger and that without any liquid, death would inevitably follow. I tried to limit myself to the minimum number of sips of water that I could. By the end of the day I was certainly delirious. I do not remember how I spent that night and as the second day dawned, I was sure that it must be my last.

I struggled on. By mid morning every drop of water had gone. By noon I could barely move and was convinced that I would be dead by nightfall.

Then I noticed something shimmering in the sunlight. Surely that was an oasis about half a kilometre away to my right! Why had I not noticed it before?

I crawled across the sand towards it. As I crawled it seemed to me in my confused state that the oasis had moved slightly nearer – but that was absurd.

“Bonjour, Monsieur!” a voice greeted me in perfect French, a language I understand and speak well.

“You look near to death,” he said. “Come, let me help you.”

But I was too weak to answer him and simply collapsed right there in front of him. I do not know what he did; but when I regained consciousness, I was feeling much better and my rescuer, who introduced himself as Yusuf, was making sweet mint tea. It was very refreshing.

As we spoke I observed that an oasis is a sort of opposite of an island.

“What do you mean?” asked Yusuf.

“Well,” I said, “an island is land surrounded by water, but an oasis is water surrounded by land.”

“I see,” said Yusuf. “But does an island have to be surrounded by *water*? Didn’t your Lemuel Gulliver meet a rather different sort of island on his third voyage?”

“You mean Laputa, the island that floated in the air?” I said.

“Exactly!” said Yusuf.

“But,” I protested. “Gulliver was a fictitious character. Laputa is a fictitious island – the product of Swift’s imagination.”

“May be, may be,” said Yusuf. “But even if Laputa was fictitious, where did Swift get the idea from? Do you think there are no islands that can float in the air?”

I just laughed and began talking about the holidays I had spent in Morocco before.

Yusuf prepared an excellent meal that evening. We talked till late and I was feeling very much better. But as I drifted off I had, for a moment, a troubling thought. Shouldn't there be at least one camel around? How had Yusuf got to the oasis? I had seen no animals or any form of transport. Could it be he lived there alone? But I was so tired I was soon asleep.

When I woke next morning, I was pleased to see Yusuf had tea ready and was setting about breakfast. I felt a slight breeze on my face. It was refreshing and I wondered at it.

“I hope this breeze doesn't turn into a sand storm,” I said. “I don't want to face another one again.”

“No fear of that,” said Yusuf. “We're over water at the moment.”

“What?” I said; and as I looked around, I could see no sand, other than that in the oasis. Where was the desert? All around me was the blue sky and just the faintest hint of wispy cloud drifting by.

“What's happened!” I exclaimed.

Yusuf was amused at my puzzlement. “Yesterday,” he said, “you said that an island was the opposite of an oasis. That amused me. You see, my friend, this oasis *is* an island! It is a floating island. When I saw you crawling towards me, I realized you were very badly dehydrated and I moved the island very slowly towards you across the sand to shorten the distance.”

“You mean we're no longer in the Sahara – we're now floating above water!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, indeed,” he replied, “and quite a long way above it too. But come on! Have some tea and break your fast.”

I did as he said. But I was very curious. As we were having breakfast, I asked him more.

“You mean to say that we are floating in the air. I suppose you'll be telling me that it's ‘magnetic levitation’ like Gulliver's Laputa.”

“Not really,” said Yusuf. “Swift had only a vague notion what magnetic levitation might mean. But of course Laputa had to be levitated somehow above the earth. No, my friend, this is far more sophisticated. It's secrets are known only to my brotherhood of Sufis. Suffice it to say that the island does rise from the land by levitation. It can float by using natural thermals and surfing along air currents; but we also know how to use eddies in the space-time continuum and thus also surf, so to speak, along streams of space-time. This has to be done with great care.”

“I see,” I replied, not really seeing at all. I had only vague notions about relativity, the space-time continuum and so forth. But I was in too weakened a state to worry overmuch. I was just glad I was still alive.

After breakfast I stood up and looked around.

“You know,” I said, “this island looks a lot bigger than the oasis seemed to me yesterday. I thought there was only the water well, some palm trees and your tent dwelling. Now there’s seems to me much more. Isn’t that a lake of some sort over there?”

“Yes,” replied Yusuf, “the island is much larger when you’re on it than it is from the outside. Outwardly, as you observed, it appears as only a small oasis around a water well; but when you are on it you see it as it really is.”

“Larger inside than it is out,” I said, half to myself, “like the TARDIS, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Yusuf, “I have heard of your Dr Who and his time and dimension in space. From what I understand, that is only a shadow of how things really are. But,” he added, “why not take a walk around the island? It will do you good – but be careful not to get too close to the edge – at least, not until I have landed the island.”

“Yes,” I said, “I should like that and I shall be careful. I do not begin to know what is going on, but I’ll keep away from the edge.”

I spent the rest of the morning walking about the island. Though not of course a perfect circle, one could consider it to be roughly circular and, I would estimate, about twenty kilometres in diameter. There was indeed a small lake towards the centre and a gentle hill next to it. From the top of the hill one could see over most of the island.

I was aware in the late morning that it seemed to have come down and settled in sea. I walked towards the shore to see if it had and as I got closer it became clear that this was so; but I had no idea where we might be.

When I got back to Yusuf I found him at his midday prayers. When he had finished, I asked him where we had landed.

“We’re just southwest of the Canaries,” he said. “It’s pleasantly warm here. The breeze from the sea keeps it from getting too hot. I thought rest and sea-air would do you good after your ordeal in the desert.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I think you may be right.

We spent a restful two days there. I even did some swimming on the second day. I was certainly feeling very much better.

“It’s very nice here,” I said to Yusuf at the end of the second day. “But I think I ought to be getting back to Morocco. People will surely be worried about me.”

“Yes, they will,” agreed Yusuf, “and I think you are recovered now. But it would be wise to have a check up in case, for example, your kidneys suffered any damage when you were dehydrated in the desert.”

So I was not too surprised the next morning when I woke up and found we had landed just outside Casablanca. After breakfast, Yusuf arranged a taxi to take me to the Ibn-Rochd University Hospital. I thanked him for rescuing me and looking after me.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I hope all goes well for you.”

I soon arrived at the hospital. It caused quite a stir when it was realized who I was. Why was I not showing any signs of dehydration? How had I managed to reach Casablanca from way down in southern Morocco?

When I explained what had happened to me, I was met with incredulity. It was thought that the heat must have affected me and that I was imagining as real the hallucinations I must have suffered with little water under the hot Saharan sun.

The hospital insisted on keeping me in for observations over a few days. I was thoroughly checked. Thankfully, my kidneys were quite unaffected; Yusuf had found me in time and looked after me well. The doctors were disappointed that I did not, in their words, “regain my memory.” But they decided I was fit and well, apart from my strange delusion of Yusuf and his flying island.

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