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Title: I'm a Stranger Here Myself

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Release date: October 1, 2008 [eBook #26741]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK I'M A STRANGER HERE MYSELF \*\*\*

***One can't be too cautious about the  
people one meets in Tangier. They're all  
weirdies of one kind or another.  
Me? Oh,***

## ***I'm A Stranger Here Myself***

**By MACK REYNOLDS**

**T**HE Place de France is the town's hub. It marks the end of Boulevard Pasteur, the main drag of the westernized part of the city, and the beginning of Rue de la Liberté, which leads down to the Grand Socco and the medina. In a three-minute walk from the Place de France you can go from an ultra-modern, California-like resort to the Baghdad of Harun al-Rashid.

It's quite a town, Tangier.

King-size sidewalk cafes occupy three of the strategic corners on the Place de France. The Cafe de Paris serves the best draft beer in town, gets all the better custom, and has three shoeshine boys attached to the establishment. You can sit of a sunny morning and read the Paris edition of the New York *Herald Tribune* while getting your shoes done up like mirrors for thirty Moroccan francs which comes to about five cents at current exchange.

You can sit there, after the paper's read, sip your espresso and watch the people go by.

Tangier is possibly the most cosmopolitan city in the world. In native costume you'll see Berber and Rif, Arab and Blue Man, and occasionally a Senegalese from further south. In European dress you'll see Japs and Chinese, Hindus and Turks, Levantines and Filipinos, North Americans and South Americans, and, of course, even Europeans—from both sides of the Curtain.

In Tangier you'll find some of the world's poorest and some of the richest. The poorest will try to sell you anything from a shoeshine to their not very lily-white bodies, and the richest will avoid your eyes, afraid *you* might try to sell them something.

In spite of recent changes, the town still has its unique qualities. As a result of them the permanent population includes smugglers and black-marketeers, fugitives from justice and international con men, espionage and counter-espionage agents, homosexuals, nymphomaniacs, alcoholics, drug addicts, displaced persons, ex-royalty, and subversives of every flavor. Local law limits the activities of few of these.

Like I said, it's quite a town.

I looked up from my *Herald Tribune* and said, "Hello, Paul. Anything new cooking?"

He sank into the chair opposite me and looked around for the waiter. The tables were all crowded and since mine was a face he recognized, he assumed he was welcome to intrude. It was more or less standard procedure at the Cafe de Paris. It wasn't a place to go if you wanted to be alone.

Paul said, "How are you, Rupert? Haven't seen you for donkey's years."

The waiter came along and Paul ordered a glass of beer. Paul was an easy-going, fallow-faced little man. I vaguely remembered somebody saying he was from Liverpool and in exports.

"What's in the newspaper?" he said, disinterestedly.

"Pogo and Albert are going to fight a duel," I told him, "and Lil Abner is becoming a rock'n'roll singer."

He grunted.

"Oh," I said, "the intellectual type." I scanned the front page. "The Russkies have put up another manned satellite."

"They have, eh? How big?"

"Several times bigger than anything we Americans have."

The beer came and looked good, so I ordered a glass too.

Paul said, "What ever happened to those poxy flying saucers?"

"What flying saucers?"

A French girl went by with a poodle so finely clipped as to look as though it'd been shaven. The girl was in the latest from Paris. Every pore in place. We both looked after her.

"You know, what everybody was seeing a few years ago. It's too bad one of these bloody manned satellites wasn't up then. Maybe they would've seen one."

"That's an idea," I said.

We didn't say anything else for a while and I began to wonder if I could go back to my paper without rubbing him the wrong way. I didn't know Paul very well, but, for that matter, it's comparatively seldom you ever get to know anybody very well in Tangier. Largely, cards are played close to the chest.

My beer came and a plate of tapas for us both. Tapas at the Cafe de Paris are apt to be potato salad, a few anchovies, olives, and possibly some cheese. Free lunch, they used to call it in the States.

Just to say something, I said, "Where do you think they came from?" And when he looked blank, I added, "The Flying Saucers."

He grinned. "From Mars or Venus, or someplace."

"Ummmm," I said. "Too bad none of them ever crashed, or landed on the Yale football field and said *Take me to your cheerleader*, or something."

Paul yawned and said, "That was always the trouble with those crackpot blokes' explanations of them. If they were aliens from space, then why not show themselves?"

I ate one of the potato chips. It'd been cooked in rancid olive oil.

I said, "Oh, there are various answers to that one. We could probably sit around here and think of two or three that made sense."

Paul was mildly interested. "Like what?"

"Well, hell, suppose for instance there's this big Galactic League of civilized planets. But it's restricted, see. You're not eligible for membership until you, well, say until you've developed space flight. Then you're invited into the club. Meanwhile, they send secret missions down from time to time to keep an eye on your progress."

Paul grinned at me. "I see you read the same poxy stuff I do."

A Moorish girl went by dressed in a neatly tailored gray jellaba, European style high-heeled shoes, and a pinkish silk veil so transparent that you could see she wore lipstick. Very provocative, dark eyes can be over a veil. We both looked after her.

I said, "Or, here's another one. Suppose you have a very advanced civilization on, say, Mars."

"Not Mars. No air, and too bloody dry to support life."

"Don't interrupt, please," I said with mock severity. "This is a very old civilization and as the planet began to lose its water and air, it withdrew underground. Uses hydroponics and so forth, husbands its water and air. Isn't that what we'd do, in a few million years, if Earth lost its water and air?"

"I suppose so," he said. "Anyway, what about them?"

"Well, they observe how man is going through a scientific boom, an industrial boom, a population boom. A boom, period. Any day now he's going to have practical space ships. Meanwhile, he's

also got the H-Bomb and the way he beats the drums on both sides of the Curtain, he's not against using it, if he could get away with it."

Paul said, "I got it. So they're scared and are keeping an eye on us. That's an old one. I've read that a dozen times, dished up different."

I shifted my shoulders. "Well, it's one possibility."

"I got a better one. How's this. There's this alien life form that's way ahead of us. Their civilization is so old that they don't have any records of when it began and how it was in the early days. They've gone beyond things like wars and depressions and revolutions, and greed for power or any of these things giving us a bad time here on Earth. They're all like scholars, get it? And some of them are pretty jolly well taken by Earth, especially the way we are right now, with all the problems, get it? Things developing so fast we don't know where we're going or how we're going to get there."

I finished my beer and clapped my hands for Mouley. "How do you mean, *where we're going*?"

"Well, take half the countries in the world today. They're trying to industrialize, modernize, catch up with the advanced countries. Look at Egypt, and Israel, and India and China, and Yugoslavia and Brazil, and all the rest. Trying to drag themselves up to the level of the advanced countries, and all using different methods of doing it. But look at the so-called advanced countries. Up to their bottoms in problems. Juvenile delinquents, climbing crime and suicide rates, the loony-bins full of the balmy, unemployed, threat of war, spending all their money on armaments instead of things like schools. All the bloody mess of it. Why, a man from Mars would be fascinated, like."

Mouley came shuffling up in his babouche slippers and we both ordered another schooner of beer.

Paul said seriously, "You know, there's only one big snag in this sort of talk. I've sorted the whole thing out before, and you always come up against this brick wall. Where are they, these observers, or scholars, or spies or whatever they are? Sooner or later we'd nab one of them. You know, Scotland Yard, or the F.B.I., or Russia's secret police, or the French Sûreté, or Interpol. This world is so deep in police, counter-espionage outfits and security agents that an alien would slip up in time, no matter how much he'd been trained. Sooner or later, he'd slip up, and they'd nab him."

I shook my head. "Not necessarily. The first time I ever considered this possibility, it seemed to me that such an alien would base himself in London or New York. Somewhere where he could use the libraries for research, get the daily newspapers and the magazines. Be right in the center of things. But now I don't think so. I think he'd be right here in Tangier."

"Why Tangier?"

"It's the one town in the world where anything goes. Nobody gives a damn about you or your affairs. For instance, I've known you a year or more now, and I haven't the slightest idea of how you make your living."

"That's right," Paul admitted. "In this town you seldom even ask a man where's he's from. He can be British, a White Russian, a Basque or a Sikh and nobody could care less. Where are *you* from, Rupert?"

"California," I told him.

"No, you're not," he grinned.

I was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"I felt your mind probe back a few minutes ago when I was talking about Scotland Yard or the F.B.I. possibly flushing an alien. Telepathy is a sense not trained by the humanoids. If they had it, your job—and mine—would be considerably more difficult. Let's face it, in spite of these human bodies we're disguised in, neither of us is humanoid. Where are you really from, Rupert?"

"Aldebaran," I said. "How about you?"

"Deneb," he told me, shaking.

We had a laugh and ordered another beer.

"What're you doing here on Earth?" I asked him.

"Researching for one of our meat trusts. We're protein eaters. Humanoid flesh is considered quite a delicacy. How about you?"

"Scouting the place for thrill tourists. My job is to go around to these backward cultures and help stir up inter-tribal, or international, conflicts—all according to how advanced they are. Then our tourists come in—well shielded, of course—and get their kicks watching it."

Paul frowned. "That sort of practice could spoil an awful lot of good meat."

**THE END**

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