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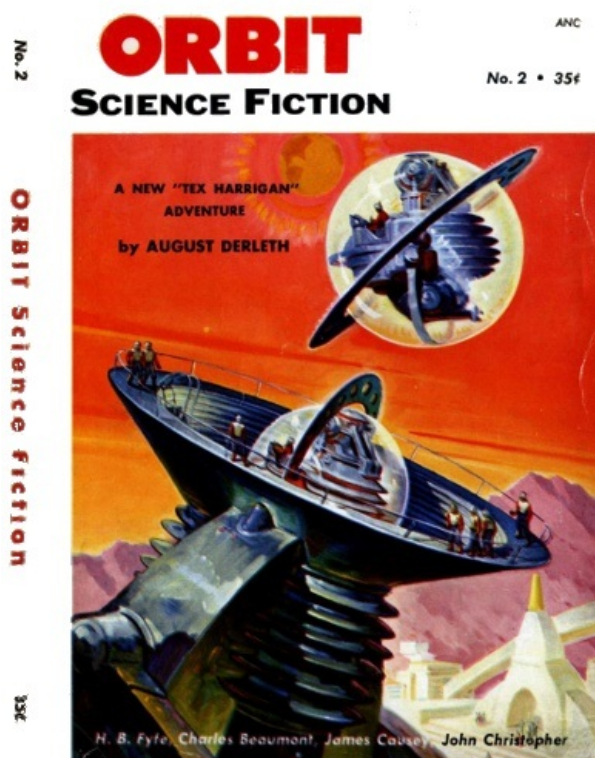
Author: Mack Reynolds

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POTENTIAL ENEMY ***



POTENTIAL ENEMY

by Mack Reynolds

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It isn't travel that is broadening, stimulating, or educational. Not the traveling itself. Visiting new cities, new countries, new continents, or even new planets, *yes*. But the travel itself, *no*. Be it by the methods of the Twentieth Century—automobile, bus, train, or aircraft—or be it by spaceship, travel is nothing more than boring.

Oh, it's interesting enough for the first few hours, say. You look out the window of your car, bus, train, or airliner, or over the side of your ship, and it's very stimulating. But after that first period it becomes boring, monotonous, sameness to the point of redundancy.

And so it is in space.

CAESAR HAD THE SAME PROBLEM AND NEVER SOLVED IT. LORD HELP US IF IT JUST CAN'T BE DONE!

Alexander the Great had not dreamed of India, nor even Egypt, when he embarked upon his invasion of the Persian Empire. It was

Markham Gray, free lance journalist for more years than he would admit to, was en route from the Neptune satellite Triton to his home planet, Earth, mistress of the Solar System. He was seasoned enough as a space traveler to steel himself against the monotony with cards and books, with chess problems and wire tapes, and even with an attempt to do an article on the distant earthbase from which he was returning for the *Spacetraveler Digest*.

When all these failed, he sometimes spent a half hour or so staring at the vision screen which took up a considerable area of one wall of the lounge.

Unless you had a vivid imagination of the type which had remained with Markham Gray down through the years, a few minutes at a time would have been enough. With rare exception, the view on the screen seemed almost like a still; a velvety blackness with pin-points of brilliant light, unmoving, unchanging.

But even Markham Gray, with his ability to dream and to discern that which is beyond, found himself twisting with ennui after thirty minutes of staring at endless space. He wished that there was a larger number of passengers aboard. The half-dozen businessmen and their women and children had left him cold and he was doing his best to avoid them. Now, if there had only been one good chess player—

Co-pilot Bormann was passing through the lounge. He nodded to the distinguished elderly passenger, flicked his eyes quickly, professionally, over the vision screen and was about to continue on his way.

Gray called idly, "Hans, I thought the space patrols very seldom got out here."

"Practically never, sir," the other told him politely, hesitating momentarily. Part of the job was to be constantly amiable, constantly watchful of the passengers out here in deep space—they came down with space cafard at the drop of a hat. Markham Gray reminded Bormann of pictures of Benjamin Franklin he'd seen in history books, and ordinarily he didn't mind spending a little time now and then talking things over with him. But right now he was hoping the old duffer wasn't going to keep him from the game going on forward with Captain Post and the steward.

"Just noticed one on the screen," the elderly journalist told him easily.

The co-pilot smiled courteously. "You must have seen a meteorite, sir. There aren't any—"

Markham Gray flushed. "I'm not as complete a space neophyte as your condescending air would indicate, Lieutenant. As a matter of fact, I'll stack my space-months against yours any day."

Bormann said soothingly, "It's not that, sir. You've just made a mistake. If a ship was within reasonable distance, the alarms would be sounding off right now. But that's not all, either. We have a complete record of any traffic within a considerable distance, and I assure you that—"

Markham Gray pointed a finger at the lower left hand corner of the screen. "Then what is that, Lieutenant?" he asked sarcastically.

The smile was still on the co-pilot's face as he turned and followed the direction of the other's finger. The smile faded. "I'll be a *makron*!" he blurted. Spinning on his heel, he hurried forward to the bridge, muttering as he went.

The older man snorted with satisfaction. Actually, he shouldn't have been so snappy with the young man; he hated to admit he was growing cranky with age. He took up his half completed manuscript again. He really should finish this article, though, space knew, he hadn't enough material for more than a few paragraphs. Triton was a barren satellite if he'd ever seen one—and he had.

He had almost forgotten the matter ten minutes later when the ship's public address system blurted loudly.

BATTLE STATIONS! BATTLE STATIONS! ALL CREW MEMBERS TO EMERGENCY STATIONS. ALL PASSENGERS IMMEDIATELY TO THEIR QUARTERS. BATTLE STATIONS!

Battle Stations?

Markham Gray was vaguely familiar with the fact that every Solar System spacecraft was theoretically a warcraft in emergency, but it was utterly fantastic that—

He heaved himself to his feet, grunting with the effort, and, disregarding the repeated command that passengers proceed to their quarters, made his way forward to the bridge, ignoring the hysterical confusion in passengers and crew members hurrying up and down the ship's passageways.

It was immediately obvious, there at the craft's heart, that this was no farce, at least not a deliberate one. Captain Roger Post, youthful officer in command of the *Neuve Los Angeles*,

not a matter of being like the farmer: "I ain't selfish, all I want is the land that jines mine." It was simply that after regaining the Greek cities of Asia Minor from Darius, he could not stop. He could not afford to have powerful neighbors that might threaten his domains tomorrow. So he took Egypt, and the Eastern Satrapies, and then had to continue to India. There he learned of the power of Cathay, but an army mutiny forestalled him and he had to return to Babylon. He died there while making plans to attack Arabia, Carthage, Rome. You see, given the military outlook, he could not afford powerful neighbors on his borders; they might become enemies some day.

Alexander had not been the first to be faced with this problem, nor was he the last. So it was later with Rome, and later with Napoleon, and later still with Adolf the Aryan, and still later—

Lieutenant Hans Bormann and the two crew members on watch were white-faced and shaken, momentarily confused in a situation which they had never expected to face. The two officers stood before the bridge vision screen watching, wide-eyed, that sector of space containing the other vessel. They had enlarged it a hundred-fold.

At the elderly journalist's entrance, the skipper had shot a quick, irritated glance over his shoulder and had begun to snap something; he cut it off. Instead, he said, "When did you first sight the alien ship, Mr. Gray?"

"*Alien?*"

"Yes, alien. When did you first sight it? It is obviously following us in order to locate our home planet." There was extreme tension in the captain's voice.

Markham Gray felt cold fingers trace their way up his back. "Why, why, I must have noticed it several hours ago, Captain. But ... an *alien!*... I...." He peered at the enlarged craft on the screen. "Are you sure, Captain? It seems remarkably like our own. I would say—"

The captain had spun back around to stare at the screen again, as though to reassure himself of what he had already seen.

"There are no other ships in the vicinity," he grated, almost as though to himself. "Besides that, as far as I know, and I should know, there are no Earth craft that look exactly like that. There are striking similarities, I'll admit, to our St. Louis class scouts, but those jets on the prow—there's nothing like them either in existence or projected."

His voice rose in an attempt to achieve decisiveness, "Lieutenant Bormann, prepare to attack."

Suddenly, the telviz blared.

Calling the Neuve Los Angeles. Calling the Neuve Los Angeles. Be unafraid. We are not hostile.

There was quiet on the bridge of the earth ship. Screaming quiet. It was seemingly hours before they had recovered even to the point of staring at one another.

Hans Bormann gasped finally, unbelievably, "How could they possibly know the name of our ship? How could they possibly know the Amer-English language?"

The captain's face was white and frozen. He said, so quietly that they could hardly make it out, "That's not all. Our alarms still haven't been touched off, and our estimators aren't functioning; we don't know how large they are nor how far away. It's unheard of—Somehow they've completely disrupted our instruments."

Markham Gray followed the matter with more than average interest, after their arrival at the New Albuquerque spaceport. Not that average interest wasn't high.

Finally man had come in contact with another intelligence. He had been dreading it, fearing it, for decades; now it was here. Another life form had conquered space, and, seemingly, had equipment, in some respects at least, superior to humanity's.

The court martial of Captain Roger Post had been short and merciless. Free access to the trial had been given to the press and telviz systems, and the newscasts had carried it in its entirety, partially to stress to the public mind the importance of the situation, and partially as a warning to other spacemen.

Post had stood before the raised dais upon which were seated SupSpaceCom Michell and four other high-ranking officers and heard the charge read—failure to attack the alien craft, destroy it, and thus prevent the aliens—wherever they might be from—returning to their own world and reporting the presence of man in the galaxy.

Markham Gray, like thousands of others, had sat on the edge of his chair in the living room of his small suburban home, and followed the trial closely on his telviz.

SupSpaceCom Michell had been blunt and ruthless. He had rapped out, bitingly, "Roger Post, as captain of the *Neuve Los Angeles*, why did you not either destroy the alien craft, or, if you felt it too strong for your ship, why did you not blast off into space, luring it away from your home planet?"

Post said hesitantly, "I didn't think it necessary, sir. His attitude was—well, of peace. It was as if we were two ships that had met by chance and dipped their flags in the old manner and passed on to their different destinations. They even were able to telviz us a message."

The SupSpaceCom snapped, "That was undoubtedly a case of telepathy. The alien is equipped in some manner to impose thoughts upon the human brain. You *thought* the telviz was used; actually the alien wasn't speaking Amer-English, he was simply forcing thoughts into your minds."

Markham Gray, watching and listening to this over his set, shook his head in dissatisfaction. As always, the military mind was dull and unreceptive. The ridiculousness of expecting Post to blast

off into space in an attempt to fool the other craft in regard to his home planet was obvious. The whole affair had taken place within the solar system; obviously the alien would know that one of Sol's nine major planets was mankind's home. Finding out which one wouldn't be too difficult a job.

Roger Post was saying hesitantly, "Then it is assumed that the alien craft wasn't friendly?"

SupSpaceCom Michell indicated his disgust with an impatient flick of his hand. "Any alien is a potential enemy, Post; that should be elementary. And a potential enemy is an enemy in fact. Even though these aliens might seem amiable enough today, how do we know they will be in the future—possibly in the far future? There can be no friendship with aliens. We can't afford to have neighbors; we can't afford to be encircled by enemies."

"Nor even friends?" Captain Post had asked softly.

Michell glared at his subordinate. "That is what it amounts to, Captain; and the thing to remember is that they feel the same way. They must! They must seek us out and destroy us completely and as quickly as possible. By the appearance of things, and partially through your negligence, they've probably won the first round. They know our location; we don't know theirs."

The supreme commander of Earth's space forces dropped that point. "Let us go back again. When you received this telepathic message—or whatever it was—what was your reaction? Did it seem friendly, domineering, or what?"

Roger Post stood silent for a moment. Finally he answered, "Sir, I still think it was the telviz, rather than a telepathic communication, but the ... the tone of voice seemed to give me the impression of pitying."

"Pitying!" Michell ejaculated.

The captain was nervous but determined. "Yes, sir. I had the distinct feeling that the being that sent the message felt sorry for us."

The SupSpaceCom's face had gone red with indignation.

It was three years before another of the aliens was sighted. Three hurried, crowded, harassed years during which all the Solar System's resources were devoted to building and arming a huge space fleet and rushing space defenses. The total wars of the Twentieth Century paled in comparison to the all out efforts made to prepare for this conflict.

The second view of the alien ship was similar to the first. This, time the *Pendleton*, a four-man scout returning to the Venus base after a patrol in the direction of Sirius, held the intruder in its viewer for a full five minutes. Once again, no estimation of its distance nor size could be made. All instruments pertaining to such detection seemed to fail to function properly.

And again the alien had sent a message—seemingly, at least, by telviz. *We are no danger to you, mankind. Seek your destiny in peace. Your troubles are from within.*

The *Pendleton* would have attempted to follow the strange craft, but her fuel tanks were nearly dry and she had to proceed to Venus. Her captain's report made a sensation.

In a way, the whole business had been a good thing for Markham Gray. As a free lancing journalist, he'd had a considerable advantage. First, he was more than usually informed on space travel and the problems relating to it, second, he had been present at—in fact, had made himself—the first sighting of the aliens.

His articles were in continuous demand in both magazines and newspaper supplements; editors clamored for additional material from his voco-typer. There was but one complaint against his copy—it wasn't alarmist enough, sensational enough. Humanity had been whipped into a state of hysteria, an emotional binge, and humanity loved it.

And it was there that Markham Gray refused to go along. He had agreed with poor Captain Post, now serving a life sentence in the Martian prison camps; there had been no sign of hostility from the alien craft. It was man who was preparing for war—and Gray knew of no period in history in which preparations for war did not eventually culminate in one.

So it was not really strange that it was he the aliens chose to contact.

It came in the early hours of the morning. He awakened, not without a chill of fear, the sound of his telviz set in his ears. He had left it turned off, he knew that. He shook his head to clear it, impatient of the fact that with advancing years it was taking an increasing time to become alert after sleep.

He had not caught the message. For a brief moment he thought the sound had been a dream.

Then the telviz spoke again. The screen was blank. It said, *You are awake, Mr. Gray?*

He stared at it, uncomprehending.

He said, "I ... I don't understand." Then, suddenly, he did understand, as though by an inspired

revelation. Why they were able to speak Amer-English. Why their ship looked like a Terran one. Why they had been able to 'disrupt' the Earth ships instruments.

He said haltingly, "Why are you here?"

We are familiar with your articles. You alone, Mr. Gray, seem at least to seek understanding. Before we left, we felt it our duty to explain our presence and our purpose—that is, partially.

"Yes," he said. Then, in an attempt to check the conclusion at which he had just arrived, he added, "You are going from the Solar System—leaving your home for a new one?"

There was a long silence.

Finally: As we said, we were going to explain partially our presence and purpose, but obviously you know more than we had thought. Would you mind revealing the extent of your knowledge?

Gray reached to the foot of the bed and took up his night robe; partly because it was chilly, partly to give himself time to consider his answer. Perhaps he shouldn't have said that. He was alone in this small house; he had no knowledge of their intentions toward him.

But he had gone too far now. He said, "Not at all. I am not sure of where we stand, but things should be much clearer, shortly. First of all, your spaceships are tiny. Probably less than ten pounds."

About four, Mr. Gray.

"Which explains why our instruments did not record them; the instruments weren't disrupted, your ships were really too small to register. That's where we made our first mistake. We assumed, for no valid reason, that you were approximately our own size. We were willing to picture you as non-human and possessing limbs, organs, and even senses different from ours; but we have pictured 'aliens', as we've been calling you, as approximately our own size. Actually, you must be quite tiny."

Quite tiny, Markham Gray. Although, of course, the way we think of it is that you are quite huge.

He was becoming more confident now; widely awake, it was less strange to hear the words come from his commonplace home model televiz set. "Our second mistake was in looking for you throughout space," he said softly.

There was hesitation again, then, *And why was that a mistake, Markham Gray?*

Gray wet his lips. He might be signing his death warrant, but he couldn't stop now. "Because you are not really 'aliens,' but of Earth itself. Several facts point that way. For instance, your ships are minute models of Earth ships, or, rather, of human ships. You have obviously copied them. Then, too, you have been able to communicate with humans too easily. An alien to our world would have had much more trouble. Our ways, our methods of thinking, are not strange to you."

You have discovered a secret which has been kept for many centuries, Markham Gray.

He was more at ease now; somehow there was no threat in the attitude of the other. Gray said, "The hardest thing for me to understand is why it *has* been kept a secret. Obviously, you are a tiny form of Earth life, probably an insect, which has progressed intellectually as far beyond other insect forms as man beyond other mammals. Why have you kept this a secret from humans?"

You should be able to answer that yourself, Mr. Gray. As we developed, we were appalled by the only other form of life on our planet with a developed intelligence. Why, not even your own kind is safe from your bloodlust. The lesser animals on Earth have been either enslaved by man—or slaughtered to extinction. And even your fellows in the recent past were butchered; man killed man wholesale. Do you blame us for keeping our existence a secret? We knew that the day humans discovered there was another intelligence on Earth they would begin making plans to dominate or, even more likely, to destroy us. Our only chance was to find some refuge away from Earth. That is why we began to search the other stars for a planet similar to this and suitable to our form of life.

"You could have fought back, had we attempted to destroy you," Gray said uncomfortably.

The next words were coldly contemptuous. *We are not wanton killers, like man. We have no desire to destroy.*

Gray winced and changed the subject. "You have found your new planet?"

At last. We are about to begin transportation of our population to the new world. For the first time since our ancestors became aware of the awful presence of man on the Earth, we feel that we can look forward to security.

Markham Gray remained quiet for a long time. "I am still amazed that you were able to develop so far without our knowledge," he said finally.

There was an edge of amusement in the answering thought. *We are very tiny, Mr. Gray. And our greatest efforts have always been to keep from under man's eyes. We have profited greatly, however, by our suitability to espionage; little goes on in the human world of which we don't know. Our progress was greatly aided by our being able to utilize the science that man has*

already developed. You've noted, for instance, how similar our space ships are to your own.

Gray nodded to himself. "But I'm also impressed by the manner in which you have developed some mechanical device to duplicate human speech. That involved original research."

At any rate, neither man nor we need dread the future any longer. We have escaped the danger that overhung us, and you know now that we are no alien enemies from space threatening you. We wish you well, mankind; perhaps the future will see changes in your nature. It is in this friendly hope that we have contacted humanity through you, Mr. Gray.

The elderly journalist said quietly, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness and hope you are correct. Good luck to you in your new world."

Thank you, Markham Gray, and goodbye.

The set was suddenly quiet again.

Markham Gray stood before the assembled Military Council of the Solar System. He had told his story without interruption to this most powerful body on Earth. They listened to him in silence.

When he had finished, he waited for their questions. The first came from SupSpaceCom Michell. He said, thoughtfully, "You believe their words to be substantially correct, Gray?"

"I believe them to be entirely truthful, your excellency," the journalist told him sincerely.

"Then they are on the verge of leaving the Earth and removing to this other planet in some other star system?"

"That is their plan."

The SupSpaceCom mused aloud. "We'll be able to locate them when they blast off en masse. Their single ships are so small that they missed being observed, but a mass flight we'll be able to detect. Our cruisers will be able to follow them all the way, blasting them as they go. If any get through to their new planet, we'll at least know where they are and can take our time destroying it."

The President of the Council added thoughtfully, "Quite correct, Michell. And in the early stages of the fight, we should be able to capture some of their ships intact. As soon as we find what kind of insect they are, our bacteriologists will be able to work on a method to eliminate any that might remain on Earth."

Markham Gray's face had paled in horror. "But why?" he blurted. "Why not let them go in peace? All they've wanted for centuries is to escape us, to have a planet of their own."

SupSpaceCom Michell eyed him tolerantly. "You seem to have been taken in, Mr. Gray. Once they've established themselves in their new world, we have no idea of how rapidly they might develop and how soon they might become a threat. Even though they may be peaceful today, they are potential enemies tomorrow. And a potential enemy *is* an enemy, who must be destroyed."

Gray felt sickness well through him "But ... but this policy.... What happens when man finally finds on his borders a life form more advanced than he—an intelligence strong enough to destroy rather than be destroyed?"

The tolerance was gone now. The SupSpaceCom said coldly, "Don't be a pessimistic defeatist, Gray."

He turned to the admirals and generals of his staff. "Make all preparations for the attack, gentlemen."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POTENTIAL ENEMY ***

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