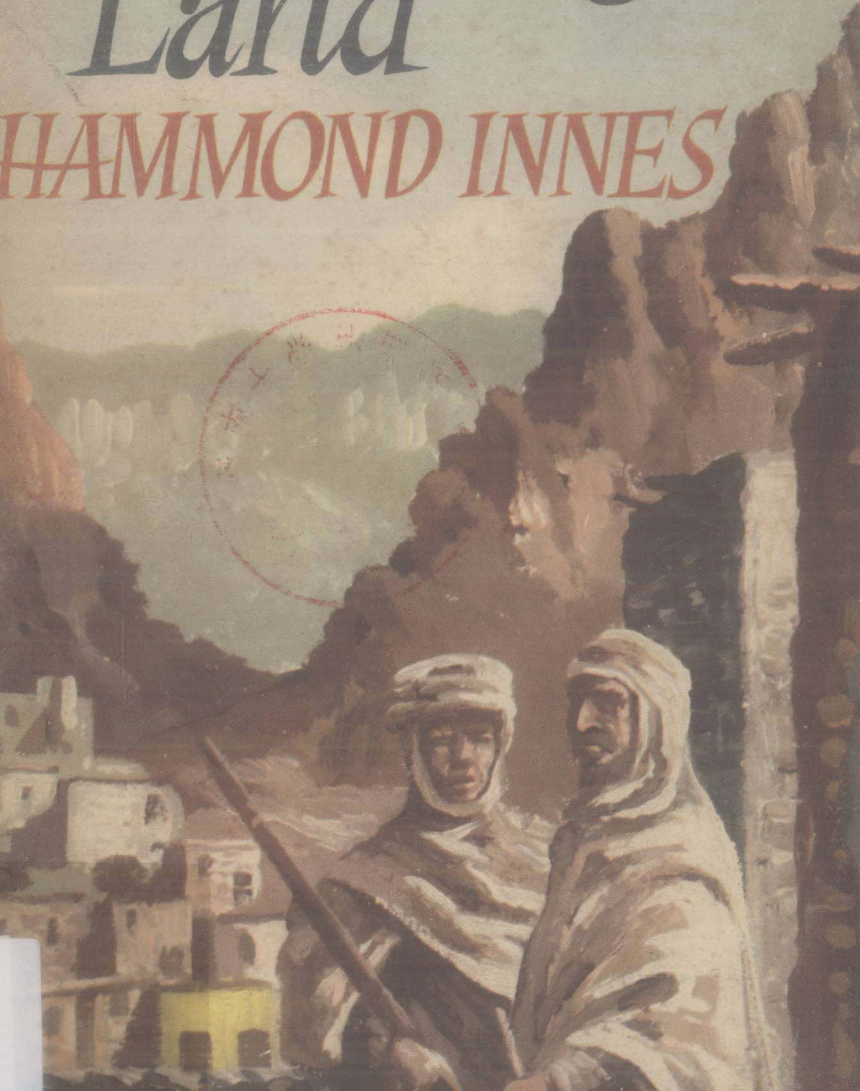


The Strange Land

HAMMOND INNES



英國小說

THE STRANGE LAND

By the Same Author

CAMPBELL'S KINGDOM
AIR BRIDGE
THE ANGRY MOUNTAIN
THE WHITE SOUTH
THE BLUE ICE
MADDON'S ROCK
KILLER MINE
THE LONELY SKIER
DEAD AND ALIVE
ATTACK ALARM
THE TROJAN HORSE
WRECKERS MUST BREATHE

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HAMMOND INNES

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THE STRANGE LAND



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This edition 1955

For

DOROTHY

*This book in particular, because she acted
as interpreter in addition to her usual
role of reader and critic*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

WHEN I first decided to visit French Morocco, I was shocked to discover how little I knew about a country that lies only just across the Straits of Gibraltar. For those who feel the same way, there are three points that struck me as important:

The Berber is the only race really entitled to call the country his own; he is white-skinned—of the same racial origin as ourselves—and he was a Christian under the Romans before he became a Muslim following the Arab invasion of his country. French influence is very recent. The Protectorate dates from 1912, but in point of fact the final pacification of the remote south was not complete until the middle 30's. Criticism of the Protectorate too often ignores the short time it has been in existence and, in particular, the conditions of constant inter-tribal warfare it replaced. Finally, there is no colour-bar and amongst the civilians, at any rate, there is complete intermingling of Berber, Arab and French—in trains, buses, cafés, cinemas, hotels; in every aspect of community life except religion.

Most of our time in Morocco was spent south of the High Atlas, between the mountains and the Sahara. This area, known until recently as the Zone of Insecurity, is basically Berber—the Arab predominating only in the cities and the more fertile coastal plains of Morocco. It was the last section of the country to be pacified by the French and is still a military area administered by *Les Officiers des Affaires Indigènes* through the Sheriffian Government of the Sultan. These Native Affairs Officers supervise the building of roads, schools, hospitals, the collection of the Sultan's taxes, the tribunals of justice and arbitrate in the constant land disputes that were previously settled by war. They are an élite corps, speaking both Berber and Arab and ruling entirely by force of personality. They are the equivalent of our D.C.'s except that they are *in loco parentis* to the Sheriffian Government and have no powers of action themselves.

These officers I found suspicious of the journalist—in the sense that men who give their lives and often their health to a lonely job are often resentful of having their work paraded to the world by somebody with only superficial knowledge. However, when they realised that I was an author and not a journalist and that I was planning to spend some time in the area, they did everything possible to assist me. I was fortunate in that I was there at the time of the gathering of the Sultan's taxes. There was a *difa*, or feast, almost every other day to which we were invited and this gave me a chance of meeting the chiefs of many scattered villages. At the same time, we were able to wander freely and unescorted through the villages and palmeries and amongst the souks and the desert caravans, so that we met all types—nomads, peasants and merchants, as well as local Berber chieftains.

The story of *The Strange Land* is, of course, fiction. But in the third section I hope I have managed to convey something of the atmosphere of this primitive and exciting land beyond the Atlas Mountains.

H. I.

Part One

INTERNATIONAL ZONE

I

THE RAIN came in gusts out of a leaden sky. The flat-topped houses of the old Arab town climbed the hill like a cemetery of close-packed gravestones, windowless, lifeless, their whiteness accentuated by the dusk. There was still light enough for me to see the solitary palm tree above the old Sultan's Palace thrashing its fronds. It was straight like a flagstaff and black against the fading light of the western sky. Down in the harbour a siren blared, the sound of it cut off abruptly as the wind clutched at it. The wide, open space of the Zocco Grande—the big market—was deserted and runnelled by muddy streams of water. Naked lights already glimmered in the squalid huts, revealing the cracked mud of the walls and the still, wrapped bodies of the men who sat there drinking mint tea and smoking their tiny-bowled pipes of kif. An Arab passed me, carrying his slippers in his hand. His djellaba flapped in the wind and his bare feet were wide and splayed as they scuffed through the mud.

The Air France flight from Paris went over, a dull roar of engines in the murk of low-hung cloud. The plane was over two hours late, delayed by the bad weather. Even so, it had left Paris only that morning. A day's flying and I could be in England. The rain would be soft and gentle there with the smell of things growing and the promise of spring. I hunched my shoulders into my raincoat and tried not to think of England. My home was Enfida now, close under the mountains of the High Atlas looking out across the flat, brown plain to Marrakech.

But Tangier is a restless, transient place. I had already been waiting three days; and all the time I had carefully

avoided my old haunts, trying to tell myself that it was a sordid, unreal city, a sort of international Sodom and Gomorrah, and that the past was all done with. After all, it was here that I had made the big decision. It was here in Tangier that I had thought it all out and taken the plunge. It was crazy perhaps, but at least I was doing something real. And I had made some progress in the last five years; the French no longer regarded me with suspicion and the Berbers of the High Atlas accepted me without hostility. When Kavan arrived . . .

I half shrugged my shoulders. The sooner I got out of Tangier the better. It was an unsettling place and already the old fever, the desire for excitement, for taking a chance, had got hold of me. But Kavan would be in to-night, and to-morrow we should leave for Enfida where the white mountain peaks are seen through the grey mist of the olive trees and there are no planes roaring over to remind one of England.

The arch of the Medina loomed ahead, the entrance to the Arab town and Es Siaghines, the street of the money changers. There were lights on in some of the shops, but the street itself was deserted, the steep slope of the asphalt shining blackly. The money changers—operators of one of the world's few free bourses—were gone, and the narrow street was strangely silent. A bundle of rags, propped against a shuttered jeweller's shop, stirred and extended a brass bowl held in two filthy arm stumps.

The forgotten beggar and the deserted bourse seemed somehow symbolic of the bubble nature of Tangier, and I found myself suddenly loathing the place for what it was—crooked and greedy and shallow, a harlot city in a world at grips with the reality of a cold war.

The Zocco Chico was empty, the tables glistening forlornly in the light from the deserted cafés that surrounded it. The little market place was like an Italian piazza in the rain. I took the alley that leads past the grand mosque and went down the steps. The fronds of the palm trees lining the Avenue d'Espagne were waving wildly and the sea roared white along the sands; the noise of it mingled with the wind, so that the whole front was one continuous murmur of sound. Out in the harbour the lights of the anchored freighters shone on heaving,

white-capped water. A plume of smoke rose from above the roof of the railway station and was whipped out across the mole in a long, white streamer. I pitied the poor devil I was waiting for and turned into José's Bar.

After all these years the place smelt the same—a combination of coffee, garlic, sour wine and bad sanitation. José was standing behind the bar counter. He looked fatter, greasier, more shifty, and his black hair was grizzled now. "Muy buenas, señor." And then he stared. "Señor Latham!" His face lit up with a smile, his brown teeth showing in a grin that cracked the grey stubble. He wiped his hand on his apron and extended it to me across the counter. "It is good to see you, señor. It is a long time—five, six years; I do not remember. Time goes so quick."

"You've a good memory, José," I said.

"Si, si. A good memory is necessary in my business." He turned and reached for a bottle. "It is a Fundador, si?"

"No, José, a coffee, that's all."

"Ah, no, no, no." He shook his head. "I do not forget what you drink, and this is with me." He poured two glasses. "Salud!"

"Salud!" I raised my glass. It was like old times. It seemed a long, long time ago.

"A terrible night, señor."

"Terrible." I glanced at my watch. It was nearly six. Youssef was late. But that meant nothing. Time meant nothing in an Arab world. "How's business, José?" I asked. The place was almost empty.

He shrugged his shoulders. "The season, she is finish now." He meant the smuggling season. Not for nothing was José's called the "Smuggler's Bar." It used to be the haunt of half the riff-raff of the port; probably was still. But the Mediterranean in December is no place for small boats. The business would be confined now to the bigger boats and the short runs across to Gib and Algeciras.

I turned and glanced round the café. It was a dreary little place. Yet there were times I could remember when it had seemed gay and bright and cheerful—but then that had been just after the war, late at night when the boys were in after a

successful run and José was sweating like a bull to keep the glasses filled. Now the piano in the corner was closed and the only music came from the radio, the tinkle of a guitar from some Spanish station. José's wife, Maria, hummed the tune tonelessly as she sat mending a shirt and watching the pots on the battered range. A child sat at her feet, cross-legged like an Arab and sucking a cork. The place had a tired, run-down air. Two sailors sat at a table engrossed in a game of cards and in the far corner, beyond the door, a girl sat alone, toying with a half-empty glass, whilst two tables away one of the currency boys, with long sideboards and a wide-brimmed hat, sat eyeing her speculatively. There was nobody else in the bar.

"Who's the girl?" I asked José. It was unusual for a girl to sit drinking alone in a place like José's.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I never see her before, señor. I think she is new in Tangier."

"She certainly must be," I said. Didn't she know the sort of place José's was? "You ought to have a notice up outside, José," I said. "'Abandon hope all girls who enter here.'"

He frowned. "I do not understand, señor."

"Oh, yes you do."

He glared at me angrily, and then he showed his decayed teeth like a bull terrier shifting a snarl to a smirk. "Si, si—always you are the joker, señor."

I turned and glanced at the girl. She had a small, pinched, rather serious face with a finely shaped nose and an attractive mouth. Her skin was pale, accentuating her dark hair, and she had a high, rather bony forehead. She sat with her head a little on one side, staring out of the window, her mouth slightly puckered. There was something of the gamine about her that was appealing, and she wore no make-up, which again was something unusual.

She was apparently aware of my interest, for she glanced at me quickly out of the corners of her eyes. Then she was looking down at her fingers, which were twined round the stem of her glass as though to shatter it. Something about that quick, surreptitious glance had given her face an odd, almost furtive look. Perhaps it was the slant of her eyes. She was frowning

now and her lips were no longer puckered, but compressed into a thin, hard line.

"She is not a Tangeroise," José whispered across the bar.

"Of course not."

"She is Inglés perhaps?"

But I shook my head. She didn't look English. I turned back to José. He still had that ugly smirk on his face. "You are married per'aps now, señor?" he suggested.

"No."

"You are still in the business then?"

"Smuggling?" I laughed. "No," I said. "I'm a missionary now."

"A missionary? You?" He let out a great guffaw that came to me hot with the smell of bad breath and garlic. "You a missionary! Si, si. I understand. An Inglés joke, eh?"

I didn't say anything. He'd never understand. How should he when I didn't understand myself? It was just that a man changed as he got older, that excitement palled—that kind of excitement anyway. It had happened to Paul. It had happened to any number of men.

"You are serious, señor?" His tone had changed.

"Yes, José—quite serious."

He mumbled an apology and crossed himself, his fat face sagging. "It is this place, señor. God is not here in Tangier." And he crossed himself again.

And then the door swung open and Youssef came in.

"You're late, Youssef."

He hung his head. "Is wet, m'soor," was all he said. His brown eyes stared up at me. The brown eyes and the big, hooked nose were all that was visible of him. The hood of his djellaba muffled his pock-marked features. He pushed the hood back with long, stained fingers till it showed the red of his tarbush. Little pools of water formed on the floor at his feet. "Very wet, m'soor," he said and shook his djellaba. "Very bad night. Boat not come here. Stop other side, in Spain, I think."

"Well, I don't," I said. "The weather's no worse than they'll have had in the Bay of Biscay. You have a drink, Youssef, and then get back to the douane."

"Okay," he said. "But is no good, m'soor. Boat not in Spain, then is finish."

There was a sudden tinkle of glass. It came from the corner where the girl was sitting. The stem of her glass had snapped. She sat, staring down at the dribble of wine that spilled across the oilcloth covering of the table. Her long fingers still gripped the broken stem. Her face was very white. Again her eyes darted in my direction, apprehensive, furtive. Then she was picking up the pieces, her hand trembling slightly, and José was at her side, explaining volubly that glasses were difficult to get, that they were expensive. She fumbled in her bag and brought out a hundred peseta note, which she handed to him, at the same time ordering another drink in English that was too grammatical, as though it were a language learned long ago and now unfamiliar. She had a soft, slightly husky voice, a whisper that was as pale and thin as her face.

"I take a café with you, m'soor," Youssef said. "After, I return to the Douane. But is no good."

"They'll come," I said.

"*Insh' Allah.*" He shrugged his shoulders. He was a Christian, one of the few Arab Christians in Tangier, but he still used that inevitable, fatalistic phrase—*If Allah wills it.*

I was still watching the girl, wondering about her, and when José returned to the bar, I ordered two coffees and asked him what nationality he thought she was. He shrugged his shoulders. "You are right," he said. "She speaks your language, señor, but she is not Inglés. She is not Spanish or French and she is not an indigène. Per'aps she is Mexican." He grinned. He had once had a Mexican girl to serve drinks, but his wife had thrown her out.

Youssef drank his coffee noisily, standing at the bar. He drank like a horse, sucking it up through his thick lips. Then he left. I went with him to the door and watched his flapping figure scurry down to the wharfs like a rag blown on the wind. He was a clerk in the Customs office. He would know sooner than I could when the boat was sighted.

I stood there for a moment with the rain beating down on me, listening to the roar of the sea along the beach and thinking the two men somewhere out there in the night, beating into

the shelter of Tangier in a 15-ton ketch, fighting their way through the breaking seas towards the safety of the harbour. They had been sighted off Cape St. Vincent the day I had arrived in Tangier and yesterday a freighter had reported them forty miles south-west of Cadiz. I prayed God that they would reach Tangier safely. It wasn't only a prayer for two men in peril on the sea. I needed Dr. Kavan. I knew nothing about him, had never seen him, and I didn't understand why he had to come out to Tangier in an under-manned yacht, but I needed a doctor, a man who would give his life to the people I lived and worked among, who would give it for a pittance because it was what he wanted to do.

I went slowly back into the bar, conscious of the girl's eyes following me as I crossed the room. The place brought back old memories and I felt a momentary impatience, wishing Kavan would come so that I could get out of the town. José picked the bottle up. "Don't you ever feel you want to go back to Spain?" I asked him.

"Spain?" He stared at me, the bottle poised in his hand. "I fight in the Republican Army. What the hell for I go back to Spain, uhn?" The bottle tinkled against the rim of the glass as he poured. He pushed the drink across to me, not saying anything, his black eyes morose and withdrawn.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know." I sipped the drink, looking across at him, seeing more now than the fat paunch held in by the leather belt and the matted, hairy chest and the grey, unshaven face, seeing for the first time the man behind the crumbling exterior, the man who had fought for an ideal.

I was still thinking about this, thinking how blind people are, seeing only the ugliness—until suddenly you catch a glimpse of the likeness of God in a man—and then the door was thrust open and the bar was suddenly full of noise. It was Big Harry and his crew. With them were the Galliani brothers and Kostos, the Greek. I had known them all in the old days. "Muy buenas, José," Harry roared. "Set 'em up. Drinks for everybody. The kid, too." He bent down, swept José's little boy up and set him on the bar top. The child gurgled, putting his fat arms round the giant's neck, while the mother smiled coyly. "Come on, José. Make it snappy. We're wet and tired

and damn' thirsty. We just got in. An' we got somep'n to celebrate, ain't we, boys?" He grinned round at his crew and there was a murmur of assent.

He was a huge rock of a man dressed in a reefer jacket with a peaked cap that looked several sizes too small for him crammed on to his cannon-ball of a head. He was an ex-Navy petty officer, one of the last of the big-time smugglers who had given Tangier the reputation it had had immediately after the war. Now it was all banking and export-import crookery and he was left to rule a roost that had become no more than a dung heap for Mediterranean small fry to root in. It was sad in a way.

He saw me and grinned and came staggering through the whole bunch of them like a tramp ploughing through a litter of bum boats. "Well, Phip. Good God! Long time no see, eh? What you do for a living these days?" The big hand gripped my shoulder and the round, unshaven face was thrust close to mine. He still had a boyish look, even when liquored up—except for the eyes. "Watcher drinking, cocker?"

"Same as you," I said. "Fundador."

"Ça va. Make it eight, José. An' one fer yourself. We're celebrating."

"Good run?" I asked him.

"Sure we had a good run. We always have good runs. Wet, that's all. Molto bloody wet." He seized hold of the bottle on the counter and took a swig at it. "Only we ain't the only ones to get wet to-night," he said, grinning and wiping his mouth. "There's a poor bastard out there . . . Christ! You never saw such a sight. We picked him up against the beam of Malabata. All plain sail an' going like a train. Couldn't see the boat fer spray. Jesus! There are some crazy bastards! Single-handed and full sail!"

I caught his elbow as he turned back to join his crew. "What sort of a boat was she?" I asked him.

"Ketch or yawl—couldn't be certain in the spotlight."

"About fifteen tons?"

"Yeah, about that. Why? You know the boat?"

"If it's the boat I'm expecting, there should be two men on board her."

"Well, this bloke was single-handed."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? Because there was only one bloke in the Goddamned boat, that's how."

"In the cockpit?"

"Well, he wasn't standing in the bows, I can tell you. She was taking it green, right back as far as the coach-roofing."

"The other fellow was probably below," I said. "In a storm that'd be the sensible——"

"What do you know about it?" He thrust his face close to mine. "In a storm you shorten sail. This crazy bastard had full main and mizzen set, Number One jib and stays'l. If you don't believe me, ask one of the boys. They all saw it. He was a single-hander all right."

Kostos thrust his long nose between us. He had a thin, acquisitive face and dark, restless eyes. "How far is he, this boat?"

"About five miles."

The Greek nodded. "Good. That will be him. And you are right. He is alone—one man."

"Well, that's fine." Big Harry grinned. "Kostos agrees with me. He's never seen the boat, but he agrees with me. That means I'm right, eh?"

Kostos smiled and tapped the side of his nose. "Not a sparrow falls," he said.

Big Harry roared with laughter and clapped him on the back. Then he turned and rolled back along the bar to join his crew. The Greek stared at me. He had grown sleeker and fatter with the years. When I had first come to Tangier he had been a pale, under-nourished little runt of a man, inquisitive, restless, his grubby fingers prodding energetically into every pie. Now his hands were manicured, his clothes well cut and he had an air of flashy opulence. "What do you want with Wade?" he asked me curiously.

"Wade?"

"Yes, Wade: the man who sails this boat into Tangier. What do you want with him?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you asking about the boat?"

“That’s my business.”

He stared at me hard. The pupils of his eyes were the colour of sloes when the bloom has been rubbed off. An unpleasant silence stretched between us. I watched him trying to sum me up, trying to understand what I was doing back here in Tangier. “You have been away from here a long time, Captain Lat’am,” he said, smiling. “Things have changed. I have an organisation here now, several companies.” He paused significantly and then said, “You like a drink?”

“No thank you,” I said.

He nodded and smiled. “All right, Lat’am. But don’t do nothing foolish.” He went back to his drink then and I wondered what his interest was in *Gay Juliet* and her skipper. I was wishing Dr. Kavan had chosen a more conventional method of travelling out. I was wishing, too, that I hadn’t decided to wait for the boat at this bar.

I seated myself at one of the tables. A newspaper lay there, the black print of the headlines ringed by the base of a wine glass. Idly, I picked it up. There had been trouble at Casa-blanca. There was always trouble at Casa, for it grew too fast and the people of the *bled* were herded in packing-case slums of indescribable squalor. And then I noticed the weather report. There was a gale warning, and heavy falls of snow were reported in the High Atlas. The pass of Tizi N Tichka, which linked Marrakech with Ouarzazate, was closed. I had never known the pass blocked so early in the year and I wondered if there had been snow at Enfida. I started thinking of the Mission then, wondering if it was all right and how Julie Corrigan was making out with the kids. George would be painting, of course. He never stopped painting. But Julie . . .

And then I was thinking of the girl again, alone there in the far corner of the bar. The rings of spilled wine had reminded me of how she had snapped the stem of her glass. I lowered the paper. She was still there, and she was staring out of the window, just as she had been when I had first noticed her. But there was nothing to see there; only the rain-drops glistening on the glass and the lights of the ships out there in the blackness of the harbour. Her face and neck were reflected in the