

The Day The Aliens Came

Robert Sheckley

One day a man came to my door. He didn't quite look like a man, although he did walk on two feet. There was something wrong with his face. It looked as though it had been melted in an oven and then hastily frozen. I later learned that this expression was quite common among the group of aliens called Synesters, and was considered by them a look of especial beauty. The Melted Look, they called it, and it was often featured in their beauty contests. "I hear you're a writer," he said.

I said that was so. Why lie about a thing like that?

"Isn't that a bit of luck," he said. "I'm a story buyer."

"No kidding," I said.

"Have you got any stories you want to sell?"

He was very direct. I decided to be similarly so.

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"OK," he said. "I'm sure glad of that. This is a strange city for me. Strange

planet, too, come to think of it. But it's the city aspect that's most

unsettling. Different customs, all that sort of thing. As soon as I got here,

I said to myself, "Traveling's great, but where am I going to find someone to sell me stories?"

"It's a problem," I admitted.

"Well," he said, "let's get right to it because there's a lot to do. I'd like to begin with a ten thousand word novelette."

"You've as good as got it," I told him. "When do you want it?"

"I need it by then end of the week."

"What are we talking about in terms of money, if you'll excuse the expression?"

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars for a ten thousand word novelette. I was told that was standard pay for a writer in this part of Earth. This is Earth, isn't it?"

"It's Earth, and your thousand dollars is acceptable. Just tell me what I'm supposed to write about."

"I'll leave that up to you. After all, you're the writer."

"Damn right I am," I said. "So you don't care what it's about?"

"Not in the slightest. After all, I'm not going to read it."

"Makes sense," I said. "Why should you care?"

I didn't want to pursue that line of inquiry any further. I assumed that someone was going to read it. That's what usually happens with novelettes.

"What rights are you buying?" I asked, since it's important to be professional about these matters.

"First and second Synestrian," he said. "And of course I retain Synestrian movie rights although I'll pay you fifty percent of the net if I get a film sale."

"Is that likely?" I asked.

"Hard to say," he said. "As far as we're concerned, Earth is new literary territory."

"In that case, let's make my cut sixty-forty."

"I won't argue," he said. "Not this time. Later you may find me very tough.

Who knows what I'll be like? For me this is a whole new frankfurter."

I let that pass. An occasional lapse in English doesn't make an alien an ignoramus.

I got my story done in a week and brought it in to the Synester's office in the old MGM building on Broadway. I handed him the story and he waved me to a seat while he read it.

"It's pretty good," he said after a while. "I like it pretty well."

"Oh, good," I said.

"But I want some changes."

"Oh," I said. "What specifically did you have in mind?"

"Well," the Synester said, "this character you have in here, Alice."

"Yes, Alice," I said, though I couldn't quite remember writing an Alice into the story. Could he be referring to Alsace, the province in France? I decided not to question him. No sense appearing dumb on my own story.

"Now, this Alice," he said, "she's the size of a small country, isn't she?"

He was definitely referring to Alsace, the province in France, and I had lost the moment when I could correct him. "Yes," I said, "that's right, just about the size of a small country."

"Well, then," he said, "why don't you have Alice fall in love with a bigger country in the shape of a pretzel?"

"A what?" I said.

"Pretzel," he said. "It's a frequently used image in Synestrian popular literature. Synestrians like to read that sort of thing."

"Do they?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Synestrians like to imagine people in the shape of pretzels.

You stick that in, it'll make it more visual."

"Visual," I said, my mind a blank.

"Yes," he said, "Because we gotta consider the movie possibilities."

"Yes, of course," I said, remembering that I got sixty percent.

"Now for the film version of your story, I think we should set the action at a different time of day."

I tried to remember what time of day I had set the story in. It didn't seem to me I had specified any particular time at all. I mentioned this.

"That's true," he said, "you didn't set any specific time. But you inferred twilight. It was the slurring sound of your words that convinced me you were talking about twilight."

"Yes, all right," I said. "Twilight mood."

"Makes a nice title," he said.

"Yes," I said, hating it.

"Twilight Mood," he said, rolling it around inside his mouth. "You could call it that, but I think you should actually write it in a daytime mode. For the irony."

"Yes, I see what you mean," I said.

"So why don't you run it through your computer once more and bring it back to me."

When I got home, Rimb was washing dishes and looking subdued. I should mention that she was a medium-sized blond person with the harassed look that characterizes aliens of the Ghottich persuasion. And there were peculiar sounds coming from the living room. When I gave Rimb a quizzical look, she rolled her eyes toward the living room and shrugged. I went in and saw there were two

people there. Without saying a word, I went back to the kitchen and said to

Rimb, "Who are they?"

"They told me they're the Bayersons ."

"Aliens?"

She nodded. "But not my kind of aliens. They're as alien to me as they are to you."

That was the first time I fully appreciated that aliens could be alien to one another.

"What are they doing here?" I asked.

"They didn't say," Rimb said.

I went back to the living room. Mr. Bayerson was sitting in my armchair reading an evening newspaper. He was about three or four feet tall and had orange hair.

Mrs. Bayerson was equally small and orange-haired and she was knitting something orange and green. Mr. Bayerson scrambled out of my chair as soon as I returned to the room.

"Aliens?" I said, sitting down.

"Yes," Bayerson said. "We're from Capella ."

"And what are you doing in our place?"

"They said it would be all right."

"Who said?"

Bayerson shrugged and looked vague. I was to get very accustomed to that look.

"But it's our place," I pointed out.

"Of course it's yours," Bayerson said. "Nobody's arguing that. But would you begrudge us a little space to live in? We're not very big."

"But why our place? Why not someone else's?"

"We just sort of drifted in here and liked it," Bayerson said. "We think of it ashome now."

"Some other place could also feel like home."

"Maybe, maybe not. We want to stay here. Look, why don't you just consider us like barnacles, or brown spots on the wallpaper. We just sort of attach on here. It's what Capellans do. We won't be in the way."

Rimb didn't much want them, but there seemed no overpowering reason to make them go. I mean, they were here, after all. And they were right, they really weren't in the way. In some ways, they were a lot better than some other apartment-dwelling aliens we came to know later.

In fact, Rimb and I soon wished the Bayersons would be a little less unobtrusive and give a little help around the apartment. Or at least keep an eye on things.

Especially on the day the burglars came in.

Rimb and I were out. The way I understood it, the Bayersons didn't do a thing to stop them. Didn't call the police or anything. Just watched while the burglars poked around the place, moving slowly, because they were so overweight, fat alien thieves from Barnard's Star. They took all of Anna's old silver. They were Barnard's silver thieves and their traditions went back a long way. That's what they told the Bayersons, while they robbed us, and while Mr. Bayerson was going through his eyelid exercises just like nothing at all was happening.

The way it all started, I had met Rimb in Franco's Bar on MacDougal Street in New York. I had seen a few aliens before this, of course, shopping on Fifth Avenue or watching the ice skaters in Rockefeller Center. But this was the first time I'd ever actually ever talked with one. I inquired as to its sex and learned that Rimb was of the Ghottich Persuasion. It was an interesting-sounding sexual designation, especially for someone like me who was trying to get beyond

the male-female dichotomy. I thought it might be fun to mate with someone of the Ghottich Persuasion after Rimb and I had agreed that she was basically a her.

Later I checked with Father Hanlin at the Big Red Church. He said it was OK in the eyes of the church, though he personally didn't hold much with it. Rimb and I were one of the first alien-human marriages.

We moved into my apartment in the West Village. You didn't see a lot of aliens around here at first. But soon other alien people showed up and quite a few of them moved into our neighborhood.

No matter where they were from, all aliens were supposed to register with the police and the local authorities in charge of cult control. Few bothered, however. And nothing was ever done about it. The police and municipal authorities were having too much trouble keeping track of their own people.

I wrote stories for the Synestrian market and Rimb and I lived quietly with our houseguests. The Bayersons were quite people and helped pay the rent. They were easygoing aliens who didn't worry much; not like Rimb, who worried a lot about everything.

At first I liked the Bayerson's ways, I thought they were easygoing and cool.

But I changed my mind the day the burglars stole their youngest child, little Claude Bayerson.

I should have mentioned that the Bayersons had a baby soon after moving in with us. Or perhaps they had left the baby somewhere else and brought it in after they'd taken over our spare bedroom. We were never really clear on where the aliens came from, and their babies were a complete mystery to us.

The way the Bayersons told it, the kidnapping of little Claude was simple and straightforward. It was "Good-bye, Claude." "Good-bye, Daddy." When we asked

themhow they could do that, they said, "Oh, it's perfectly all right. I mean, it'swhat we were hoping for. That's how we Bayersons get around. Someone steals ourchildren."

Well, I let it drop. What can you do with people like that? How could theystand tohave little Claude raised as a Bernardean silver thief? One race one day, anothersrace another. Some aliens have no racial pride. I mean it was cuckoo. Therewasn't anything to do about it so we all sat down to watch the TV together. All of us wanted to see the Savannah Reed show, our favorite . Savannah's main guest that evening was the first man ever to eat a Mungulu . He wasquite open about it, even somewhat defiant. He said, "If you think about it, whyshould it be ethical to eat only stupid creatures, or deluded ones? It is onlyblind prejudice that keeps us from eating intelligent beings. This thought cameto me one day recently while I was talking with a few glotch of Mungulu on aplate."

"How many Mungulu make up a glotch ?" Savannah asked. She's no dummy.

"Between fifteen and twenty, though there are exceptions."

"And what were they doing on a plate?"

"That's where Mungulu usually hang out. Accumulate, I should say. You see, Munguluare plate-specific."

"I don't think I know this species," Savannah said.

"They're pretty much unique to my section of Yonkers."

"How did they get there?"

"They just pretty well showed up on my plate one night. First only one or two glotchof them. They looked like little oysters. Then more came so we had the halfdozen or so it takes to generate a halfway decent conversation."

"Did they say where they were from?"

"A planet called Espadrille. I never did quite catch where it was, quadrantwise."

"Did they say how they got here?"

"Something about surfing the light-waves."

"What gave you the idea of eating the Mungulu?"

"Well, I didn't think about it at all at first. When a creature talks to you, you don't right away think of eating him. Or her. Not if you're civilized. But these Mungulu started showing up on my plate every night. They were pretty casual about it. All lined up on the edge of my good bone china, on the far side from me. Sometimes they'd just talk to each other, act like I wasn't even there. Then one of them would pretend to notice me - oh - it's the Earth guy - and we'd all start talking. This went on every night. I began to think there was something provocative about the way they were doing it. It seemed they were trying to tell me something."

"Do you think they wanted to be eaten?"

"Well, they never said so, not in so many words, no. But I was starting to get the idea. I mean, if they didn't want to be eaten, what were they doing on the edge of my plate?"

"What happened then?"

"To put it in a nutshell, one night I got sick of horsing around and just for the hell of it I speared one of them on the end of my fork and swallowed it."

"What did the others do?"

"They pretended not to notice. Just went right on with their conversation. Only their talk was a little stupider with one of them missing. Those guys need all the brain power they can come up with."

"Let's get back to this Mungulu you swallowed. Did it protest as it was going down?"

"No, it didn't even blink. It was like it was expecting it. I got the feeling it was no cruel and unusual punishment for a Mungulu to be ingested."

"How did they taste?"

"A little like breaded oysters in hot sauce, only subtly different. Alien, you know."

After the show was over, I noticed a bassinet in a corner of our living room.

Inside was a cute little fellow, looked a little like me. At first I thought it was little Claude Bayerson, somehow returned. But Rimb soon put me wise.

"That's little Manny," she said. "He's ours."

"Oh," I said. "I don't remember you having him."

"Technically, I haven't. I've delayed the actual delivery until a more convenient time," she told me.

"Can you do that?"

She nodded. "We of the Ghottich persuasion are able to do that."

"What do you call him?" I asked.

"His name is Manny," Rimb said.

"Is 'Manny' a typical name from your planet?"

"Not at all," Rimb said. "I called him that in honor of your species."

"How do you figure?" I asked.

"The derivation is obvious. 'Manny' stands for 'Little Man'."

"That's not the way we generally do things around here," I told her. But she didn't understand what I was talking about. Nor did I understand her explanation of the birth process by which Manny came into being. DDs, Deferred Deliveries, aren't customary among Earth people. As far as I could understand

it, Rimb would have to undergo the actual delivery at some later time when it was more convenient. But in fact we never got around to it. Sometimes it happens like that.

Manny lay in his crib and oooed and aahed and acted like a human baby would, I suppose. I was a pretty proud poppa. Rimb and I were one of the first viable human-alien intermatings. I later learned it was no big deal. People all over the Earth were doing it. But it seemed important to us at the time.

Various neighbors came around to see the baby. The Bayersons came in from their new room which they had plastered on the side of apartment house after molting. Mrs. Bayerson had spun all the construction material out of her own mouth, and she was some kind of proud I want to tell you. They looked Manny up and down and said, "Looks like a good one."

They offered to baby-sit, but we didn't like to leave Manny alone with them. We still didn't have a reliable report on their feeding habits. Fact is, it was taking a long time getting any hard facts about aliens, even though the federal government had decided to make all information available on the species that came to Earth.

The presence of aliens among us was responsible for the next step in human development, the new interest in composite living. You got tired of the same old individualism after a while. Rimb and I thought it could be interesting to be part of something else. We wanted to join a creature like a medusa or Portuguese man of war. But we weren't sure how to go about it. And so we didn't know whether to be pleased or alarmed when we received our notification by mail of our election to an alien composite life-form. Becoming part of a composite was still unusual in those days.

Rimband I had quite a discussion about it. We finally decided to go to the first meeting, which was free, and see what it was like.

This meeting was held at our local Unitarian Church, and there were almost two hundred people and aliens present. There was a lot of good-natured bewilderment for a while as to just what we were supposed to do. We were all novices at this and just couldn't believe that we were expected to form up a two hundred person composite without prior training.

At last someone in a scarlet blazer and carrying a loose-leaf binder showed up and told us that we were supposed to be forming five unit composites first, and that as soon as we had a few dozen of these and had gotten the hang of morphing and melding, we could proceed to the second level of composite beinghood.

It was only then that we realized that there could be many levels to composite beings, each level being a discrete composite in its own right.

Luckily the Unitarian Church had a big open space in the basement, and here is where we and our chimaeric partners fit ourselves together.

There was good-natured bewilderment at first as we tried to perform this process. Most of us had had no experience at fitting ourselves to other creatures, so we were unfamiliar with for example, the Englen, that organ of the Pseudotoics which fits securely into the human left ear.

Still, with help from our expert (the guy in the scarlet blazer) who had volunteered to assist us, we soon formed up our first composite. And even though not everything was entirely right, since some organs can fit into very different types of human holes, it was still a thrill to see ourselves turning into a new creature with an individuality and self-awareness all of its own.

The high point of my new association with the composite was the annual picnic. We went to the Hanford ruins where the old atomic energy place used to be. It

was overgrown with weeds, with some of them of very strange shapes and colors indeed. There were about two hundred of us in this group, and we deferred joining up until after lunch was served.

The Ladies' Auxiliary gave out the food, and they had a collection point just beyond, where everyone put in what they could. I dropped in a Synestrian bill that I had just been paid for the novelette. A lot of people came around to look at the bill and there was ooing and aahing, because Synestrian bills are really pretty, though they're so thick you can't fold them and they tend to make an unsightly bulge in your pocket. One of the men from the Big Red composite cruised over and looked at my Synestrian bill. He held it up to the light and watched the shapes and colors chase each other.

"That's mighty pretty," he said. "You ever think of framing it and hanging it on the wall?"

"I was just about to think about that," I said.

He decided he wanted the bill and asked me how much I wanted for it. I quoted him a price about three times its value in USA currency. He was delighted with the price. Holding the bill carefully by one corner, he sniffed it delicately.

"That's pretty good," he said.

Now that I thought about it, I realized the Synestrian money did have a good smell.

"These are prime bills," I assured him.

He sniffed again. "You ever eat one of these?" he asked me.

I shook my head. The notion had never occurred to me.

He nibbled at a corner. "Delicious!"

Seeing him enjoying himself like that got me thinking. I wanted a taste myself.

But it was his bill now. I had sold it to him. All I had was bland old American currency.

I searched through my pockets. I was clean out of Synestrian bills. I didn't even have one left to hang on my wall back home, and I certainly didn't have one to eat.

And then I noticed Rimb .melding all by herself in a corner, and she looked so cute doing it that I went over to join her.

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Pilgrimage to Earth

Robert Sheckley

Alfred Simon was born on Kazanga IV, a small agricultural planet near Arcturus , and there he drove a combine through the wheat fields, and in the long, hushed evenings listened to the recorded love songs of Earth.

Life was pleasant enough on Kazanga , and the girls were buxom, jolly, frank and acquiescent, good companions for a hike through the hills or a swim in the brook, staunch mates for life. But romantic - never! There was good fun to be had on Kazanga , in a cheerful open manner. But there was no more than fun.

Simon felt that something was missing in this bland existence. One day, he discovered what it was.

A vendor came to Kazanga in a battered spaceship loaded with books. He was gaunt, white-haired, and a little mad. A celebration was held for him, for novelty was appreciated on the outer worlds.

The vendor told them all the latest gossip, of the price war between Detroit II

and III, and how fishing fared on Alana, and what the president's wife on Moracia wore, and how oddly the men of Doran V talked. And at last someone said, "Tell us of Earth."

"Ah!" said the vendor, raising his eyebrows. "You want to hear of the old mother planet? Well, friends, there's no place like old Earth, no place at all. On Earth, friends, everything is possible, and nothing is denied."

"Nothing?" Simon asked.

"They've got a law against denial," the vendor explained, grinning. "No one has ever been known to break it. Earth is different, friends. You folks specialize in farming? Well Earth specializes in impracticalities such as madness, beauty, war, intoxication, purity, horror, and the like, and people come from light-years away to sample these wares."

"And love?" a woman asked.

"Why girl," the vendor said gently, "Earth is the only place in the galaxy that still has love! Detroit II and II tried it and found it too expensive, you know, and Alana decided it was too unsettling, and there was no time to import it on Moracia or Doran V. But as I said, Earth specializes in the impractical, and makes it pay."

"Pay?" a bulky farmer asked.

"Of course! Earth is old, her minerals are gone and her fields are barren. Her colonies are independent now, and filled with sober folk such as yourselves, who want value for their goods. So what else can old Earth deal in, except the non-essentials that make life worth living?"

"Were you in love on Earth?" Simon asked.

"That I was," the vendor answered, with a certain grimness. "I was in love, and

now I travel. Friends, these books..."

For an exorbitant price, Simon bought an ancient poetry book, and reading, dreamed of passion beneath the lunatic moon, of dawn glimmering whitely upon lovers' parched lips, of locked bodies on a dark sea-beach, desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf.

And only on Earth was this possible! For, as the vendor told, Earth's scattered children were too hard at work wrestling a living from alien soil. The wheat and corn grew on Kazanga, and the factories increased on Detroit II and III. The fisheries of Alana were the talk of the Southern star belt, and there were dangerous beasts on Moraica, and a whole wilderness to be won on Doran V. And this was well, and exactly as it should be.

But the new worlds were austere, carefully planned, sterile in their perfections. Something had been lost in the dead reaches of space, and only Earth knew love.

Therefore, Simon worked and saved and dreamed. And in his twenty-ninth year he sold his farm, packed all his clean shirts into a serviceable handbag, put on his best suit and a pair of stout walking shoes, and boarded the Kazanga - Metropole flyer.

At last he came to Earth, where dreams must come true, for there is a law against their failure.

He passed quickly through Customs at Spaceport New York, and was shuttled underground to Times Square. There he emerged blinking into daylight, tightly clutching his handbag, for he had been warned about pickpockets, cutpurses and other denizens of the city.

Breathless with wonder, he looked around.

The first thing that struck him was the endless array of theaters, with

attractions in two dimensions, three or four, depending upon your preference.

And what attractions!

To the right of him a beetling marquee proclaimed: LUST ON VENUS! A DOCUMENTARY ACCOUNT OF SEX PRACTICES AMONG THE INHABITANTS OF THE GREEN HELL! SHOCKING!

REVEALING!

He wanted to go in. But across the street was a war film. The billboard shouted,

THE SUN BUSTERS! DEDICATED TO THE DAREDEVILS OF THE SPACE MARINES! And further

down was a picture called TARZAN BATTLES THE SATURNIAN GHOULS!

Tarzan, he recalled from his reading, was an ancient ethnic hero of Earth.

It was all wonderful, but there was so much more! He saw little open shops where one could buy food of all worlds, and especially such native Terran dishes as pizza, hotdogs, spaghetti and knishes. And there were stores which sold surplus clothing from the Terran spacefleets, and other stores which sold nothing but beverages.

Simon didn't know what to do first. Then he heard a staccato burst of gunfire behind him, and whirled.

It was only a shooting gallery, a long, narrow, brightly painted place with a waist-high counter. The manager, a swarthy fat man with a mole on his chin sat on a high stool and smiled at Simon.

"Try your luck?"

Simon walked over and saw that, instead of the usual targets, there were four scantily dressed women at the end of the gallery, seated upon bullet-scored chairs. They had tiny bull-eyes painted on their foreheads and above each breast.

"But do you fire real bullets?" Simon asked.

"Of course!" the manager said. "There is a law against false advertising on Earth. Real bullets and real gals! Step up and knock one off!"

One of the women called out, "Come on, sport! Bet you miss me!"

Another screamed, "He couldn't hit the broad side of a spaceship!"

"Sure he can!" another shouted. "Come on, sport!"

Simon rubbed his forehead and tried not to act surprised. After all, this was Earth, where anything was allowed as long as it was commercially feasible.

He asked, "Are there galleries where you shoot men, too?"

"Of course," the manager said. "But you ain't no pervert, are you?"

"Certainly not!"

"You an outworlder?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The suit. Always tell by the suit." The fat man closed his eyes and chanted,

"Step up, step up and kill a woman! Get rid of a load of repressions! Squeeze the trigger and feel the old anger ooze out of you! Better than a massage!

Better than getting drunk! Step up, step up and kill a woman!"

Simon asked one of the girls, "Do you stay dead when they kill you?"

"Don't be stupid," the girl said.

"But the shock- "

She shrugged her shoulders. "I could do worse."

Simon was about to ask how she could do worse, when the manager leaned over the counter, speaking confidentially.

"Look, buddy. Look what I got here."

Simon glanced over the counter, and saw a compact sub-machine gun.

"For a ridiculously low price," the manager said, "I'll let you use the tommy .

You can spray the whole place, shoot down the fixtures, rip up the walls. This drives a .45 slug, buddy, and it kicks like a mule. You really know you're firing when you fire the tommy ."

"I am not interested," Simon said sternly.

"I've got a grenade or two," the manager said. "Fragmentation, of course. You could really-"

"No!"

"For a price," the manager said, "you can shoot me, too, if that's how your tastes run, although I wouldn't have guessed it. What do you say?"

"No! Never! This is horrible!"

The manager looked at him blankly. "Not in the mood now? OK. I'm open twenty-four hours a day. See you later, sport."

"Never!" Simon said, walking away.

"Be expecting you, lover!" one of the women called after him.

Simon went to the refreshment stand and ordered a small glass of coca-cola. He found that his hands were shaking. With an effort he steadied them, and sipped his drink. He reminded himself that he must not judge Earth by his own standards. If people on Earth enjoyed killing people, and the victims didn't mind being killed, why should anyone object?

Or should they?

He was pondering this when a voice at his elbow said, "Hey, bub ."

Simon turned and saw a wizened, furtive-faced little man in an oversize raincoat standing beside him.

"Out-of-towner?" the little man asked.

"I am," Simon said. "How did you know?"

"The shoes. I always look at the shoes. How do you like our little planet?"

"It's- confusing," Simon said carefully. "I mean I didn't expect - well -"

"Of course", the little man said. "You're an idealist. One look at your honest face tells me that, my friend. You've come to Earth for a definite purpose. Am I right?"

Simon nodded. The little man said, "I know your purpose, my friend. You're looking for a war that will make the world safe from something, and you've come to the right place. We have six major wars running at all times, and there's never any waiting for an important position in any of them."

"Sorry, but- "

"Right at this moment," the little man said impressively, "the downtrodden workers of Peru are engaged in a desperate struggle against a corrupt and decadent monarchy. One more man could swing the contest! You, my friend, could be that man! You could guarantee the socialist victory!"

Observing the expression on Simon's face, the little man said quickly, "But there's a lot to be said for an enlightened aristocracy. The wise old king of Peru (a philosopher-king in the deepest Platonic sense of the word) sorely needs your help. His tiny corps of scientists, humanitarians, Swiss guards, knights of the realm and royal peasants is sorely pressed by the foreign-inspired. A single man, you know - "

"I'm not interested," Simon said.

"In China, the Anarchists- "

"No."

"Perhaps you'd prefer Communists in Wales? Or the Capitalists in Japan? Or if your affinities lie with a splinter group such as the Feminists,

Prohibitionists, Free Silverists or the like, we could probably arrange- "

"I don't want a war," Simon said.

"Who could blame you?" the little man said, nodding rapidly. "War is hell. In that case, you've come to Earth for love."

"How did you know?" Simon asked.

The little man smiled modestly. "Love and war," he said, "are Earth's two staple commodities. We've been turning them both out in bumper crops since the beginning of time."

"Is love very difficult to find," Simon asked.

"Walk uptown two blocks," the little man said briskly. "Can't miss it. Tell'em Joe sent you."

"But that's impossible! You can't just walk out and- "

"What do you know about love?" Joe asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, we're experts on it."

"I know what the books say," Simon said. "Passion beneath the lunatic moon- "

"Sure, and bodies on a dark sea-beach desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf."

"You've read that book?"

"It's the standard advertising brochure. I must be going. Two blocks uptown.

Can't miss it."

And with a pleasant nod, Joe moved into the crowd. Simon finished his coca-cola and walked slowly up Broadway, his brow knotted in thought, but determined not to form any premature judgements.

When he reached 44th Street he saw a tremendous neon sign flashing brightly. It

said LOVE, INC.

Smaller neon letters read, Open 24 Hours a Day!

Beneath that it read, Up One Flight.

Simon frowned, for a terrible suspicion had just crossed his mind. Still, he climbed the stairs and entered a small, tastefully furnished reception room.

>From there he was sent down a long corridor to a numbered room.

Within the room was a handsome gray-haired man who rose from behind an impressive desk and shook his hand, saying, "Well! How are things on Kazanga?"

"How did you know I was from Kazanga?"

"That shirt. I always look at the shirt. I'm Mr. Tate, and I'm here to serve you to the best of my ability. You are- "

"Simon, Alfred Simon."

"Please be seated, Mr. Simon. Cigarette? Drink? You won't regret coming to us, sir. We're the oldest love-dispensing firm in the business, and much larger than our closest competitor, Passion Unlimited. Moreover, our fees are far more reasonable, and bring you an improved product. Might I ask how you heard of us?"

Did you see our full page ad in the Times? Or- "

"Joe sent me," Simon said.

"Ah, he's an active one," Mr. Tate said, shaking his head playfully. "Well, sir, there's no reason to delay. You've come a long way for love, and love you shall have." He reached for a button on his desk, but Simon stopped him.

Simon said, "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but..."

"Yes?" Mr. Tate said, with an encouraging smile.

"I don't understand this," Simon blurted out, flushing deeply, beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead. "I think I'm in the wrong place. I didn't come all the way to Earth just for ... I mean, you can't really sell

love, can you? Not love! I mean, then it isn't really love, is it?"

"But of course!" Mr. Tate said, half rising from his chair in astonishment.

"That's the whole point! Anyone can buy sex. Good lord, it's the cheapest thing in the universe, next to human life. But love is rare, love is special, love is found only on Earth. Have you read our brochure?"

"Bodies on a dark sea-beach?" Simon asked.

"Yes, that one. I wrote it. Gives something of the feeling, doesn't it? You can't get that feeling from just anyone, Mr. Simon. You can get that feeling only from someone who loves you."

Simon said dubiously, "It's not genuine love, though is it?"

"Of course it is! If we were selling simulated love, we'd label it as such. The advertising laws on Earth are strict, I can assure you. Anything can be sold, but it must be labelled properly, That's ethics, Mr. Simon!"

Tate caught his breath, and continued in a calmer tone. "No, sir, make no mistake, our product is not a substitute. It is the exact self-same feeling that poets and writers have raved about for thousands of years. Through the wonders of modern science we can bring this feeling to you at your convenience, attractively packaged, completely disposable, and for a ridiculously low price."

Simon said, "I pictured something more - spontaneous."

"Spontaneity has its charm," Mr. Tate agreed. "Our research labs are working on it. Believe me, there's nothing science can't produce, as long as there's a market for it."

"I don't like any of this," Simon said, getting to his feet. "I think I'll just go see a movie."

"Wait!" Mr. Tate cried. "You think we're trying to put something over on you."

You think we'll introduce you to a girl who will act as though she loved you, but who in reality will not. Is that it?"

"I guess so," Simon said.

"But it just isn't so! It would be too costly for one thing. For another, the wear and tear on the girl would be tremendous. And it would be psychologically unsound for her to attempt living a lie of such depth and scope."

"Then how do you do it?"

"By utilizing our understanding of science and the human mind."

To Simon, this sounded like double-talk. He moved towards the door.

"Tell me something," Mr. Tate said. "You're a bright-looking fellow. Don't you think you could tell real love from a counterfeit item?"

"Certainly."

"There's your safeguard! You must be satisfied, or don't pay us a cent."

"I'll think about it," Simon said.

"Why delay? Leading psychologists say that real love is a fortifier and a restorer of sanity, a balm for damaged egos, a restorer of hormone balance, and an improver of the complexion. The love we supply you has everything: deep and abiding affection, unrestrained passion, complete faithfulness, an almost mystic affection for your defects as well as your virtues, a pitiful desire to please, and, as a plus that only Love, Inc. can supply: that uncontrollable first spark, that blinding moment of love at first sight!"

Mr. Tate pressed a button. Simon frowned undecidedly. The door opened, a girl stepped in, and Simon stopped thinking.

She was tall and slender, and her hair was brown with a sheen of red. Simon could have told you nothing about her face, except that it brought tears to his eyes. And if you asked him about her figure, he might have killed you.

"Miss Penny Bright", said Tate, "meet Mr. Alfred Simon." The girl tried to speak but no words came, and Simon was equally dumbstruck. He looked at her and knew. Nothing else mattered. To the depths of his heart he knew that he was truly and completely loved.

They left at once, hand in hand, and were taken by jet to a small cottage in a pinegrove, overlooking the sea, and there they talked and laughed and loved, and later Simon saw his beloved wrapped in the sunset flame like a goddess of fire. And in blue twilight she looked at him with eyes enormous and dark, her known body mysterious again. The moon came up, bright and lunatic, changing flesh to shadow, and she wept and beat his chest with her small fists and Simon wept too, although he did not know why. And at last dawn came, faint and disturbed, glimmering upon their parched lips and locked lips, and nearby the booming surf deafened, inflamed, and maddened them.

At noon they were back in the offices of Love, Inc. Penny clutched his hand for a moment, then disappeared through an inner door.

"Was it real love?" Mr. Tate asked.

"Yes!"

"And was everything satisfactory?"

"Yes! It was love, it was the real thing! But why did she insist on returning?"

"Post-hypnotic command," Mr. Tate said.

"What?"

"What did you expect? Everyone wants love, but few wish to pay for it. Here's your bill, sir."

Simon paid, fuming. "This wasn't necessary," he said. "Of course I would pay you

forbringing us together. Where is she now? What have you done with her?"

"Please," Mr. Tate said soothingly. "Try to calm yourself."

"I don't want to be calm!" Simon shouted. "I want Penny!"

"That will be impossible," Mr. Tate said, with the barest hint of frost in his voice. "Kindly stop making a spectacle of yourself."

"Are you trying to get more money out of me?" Simon shrieked. "All right, I'll pay. How much do I have to pay you to get her out of your clutches?" And Simon yanked out his wallet and slammed it on the desk.

Mr. Tate poked the wallet with a stiffened forefinger. "Put that back in your pocket," he said. "We are an old and respectable firm. If you raise your voice again, I shall be forced to have you ejected."

Simon calmed himself with an effort, put the wallet back in his pocket and sat down. He took a deep breath and said, very quietly, "I'm sorry."

"That's better," Mr. Tate said. "I will not be shouted at. However, if you are reasonable, I can be reasonable too. Now, what's the trouble?"

"The trouble?" Simon's voice started to lift. He controlled it and said, "She loves me."

"Of course."

"Then how can you separate us?"

"What has one thing got to do with another?" Mr. Tate asked. "Love is a delightful interlude, a relaxation, good for the intellect, for the ego, for the hormone balance, and for the skin tone. But one would hardly wish to continue loving, would one?"

"I would," Simon said. "This love was special, unique- "

"They all are," Mr. Tate said. "But as you know, they are all produced in the same way."

"What?"

"Surely you know something about the mechanics of love production?"

"No," Simon said. "I thought it was - natural."

Mr. Tate shook his head. "We gave up natural selection centuries ago, shortly after the Mechanical Revolution. It was too slow, and commercially unfeasible. Why bother with it, when we can produce any feeling at will by conditioning and proper stimulation of certain brain centers? The result? Penny, completely in love with you! Your own bias, which we calculated, in favor of her particular somatype, made it complete. We always throw in a the dark sea-beach, the lunatic moon, the pallid dawn - "

"Then she could have been made to love anyone," Simon said slowly.

"Could have been brought to love anyone," Mr. Tate corrected.

"Oh, lord, how did she get into this horrible work?" Simon asked.

"She came in and signed a contract in the usual way," Tate said. "It pays very well. And at the termination of the lease, we return her original personality - untouched! But why do you call the work horrible? There's nothing reprehensible about love."

"It wasn't love!" Simon cried.

"But it was! The genuine article! Unbiased scientific firms have made qualitative tests of it, in comparison with the natural thing. In every case, our love tested out to more depth, passion, fervor and scope."

Simon shut his eyes tightly, opened them and said, "Listen to me. I don't care about your scientific tests. I love her, she loves me, and that's all that counts. Let me speak to her! I want to marry her!"

Mr. Tate wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Come, come, young man! You wouldn't

want to marry a girl like that! But if it's marriage you're after, we deal in that, too. I can arrange an idyllic and nearly spontaneous love-match with a guaranteed, government-inspected virgin - "

"No! I love Penny! At least let me speak to her!"

"That will be quite impossible," Mr. Tate said.

"Why?"

Mr. Tate pushed a button on his desk. "Why do you think? We've wiped out the previous indoctrination. Penny is now in love with someone else."

And the Simon understood. He had realized that even now Penny was looking at another man with that passion he had known, feeling for another man that complete and bottomless love that unbiased scientific firms had shone to be so much greater than the old-fashioned, commercially unfeasible natural, and that upon the same dark sea-beach mentioned in the advertising brochure -

He lunged for Tate's throat. Two attendants, who had entered the office a few moments earlier, caught him and led him to the door.

"Remember!" Tate called. "This in no way invalidates your own experience."

Hellishly enough, Simon knew that what Tate said was true.

And then he found himself on the street.

At first, all he desired was to escape from Earth, where the commercial impracticalities were more than a normal man could afford. He walked very quickly, and his Penny walked beside him, her face glorified with love for him, and him, and him, and you, and you.

And of course he came to the shooting gallery.

"Try your luck?" the manager asked.

"Set 'em up," said Alfred Simon.

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