

The fey Mr. Young continues his scholarly researches in the scientific origins of our myth and legend with this tale of an agile—and avaricious—one-man

BOARDING PARTY

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by FINLAY

(Translator's note: The original of the following report was recently acquired by the Terran Industrial Library through the Interstellar Historical Exchange Society, into whose illustrious fold the member nations of the Terran Economic Bloc have at last been admitted. The narrative is of primary interest to the library officials because it provides unequivocal proof that, long before the Interstellar Economic Community took official cognizance of our existence, several articles of Community Commerce found their way into our culture. To the layman, however, the narrative is of primary interest because it provides an intriguing parallel to a narrative of an altogether different nature.)

TO: Interstellar Nurseries,
Frimm 4
FROM: Captain of the Greenship
Uxurient,
Urtz 2

SUBJECT (s) : (1) Why the *Uxurient* put in to an out-of-bounds system during the Frimm 4-Urtz 2 run; (2) how a boarding party of one gained the green-deck and made off with a Uterium 5 snirk bird, a toy friddlefork, and two containers of yellow trading disks; (3) why the *Uxurient's* flexible ship-to-ground capillary tube is ten exids shorter than it used to be.

(1)

Why the Uxurient put in to an Out-of-Bounds System during the Frimm 4-Urtz 2 Run

TWO light-cycles out from Frimm 4, the first shoots of the yumquat trees broke through the greendeck precisely on schedule. A little over a light-cycle farther out I noticed during one of my periodic inspections that the young leaves were beginning to turn yellow, and subsequent tests of several greendeck soil samples revealed an acute deficiency of mineral elements D-2 and Z-1, plus an advanced aridity. I immediately retired to the greenship's subdeck, where I found the contents of the soil-solution vat to be at a shockingly low level. An analysis of the contents indicated a near-total absence of mineral elements D-2 and Z-1.

Further investigations have since convinced me that the responsibility for this critical shortage rests upon the shoulders of none other than Ur-Lon-Ho-Lee, Interstellar Nurseries' senior shipping clerk, but at the time, the yumquat-tree shipment pre-empted my attention to the exclusion of all other matters. If the trees were to be allowed to shoot up at the usual accelerated growth rate and were to be delivered in satisfactory sapling stage to the Urtz 2 customer who had ordered them, I had but one course of action open to me: to put in to the nearest system, find a planet with a soil rich in moisture and rich in mineral elements D-2 and Z-1, and replenish the soil-solution vat by means of the *Uxurient's* ship-to-ground capillary tube. Fortunately, there happened to be a system in the vicinity of the *Uxurient's* present position, but unfortunately it happened to be one of the many systems that are out-of-bounds to Interstellar Economic Community ships. Before coming to a decision, then, I had to weigh the importance of my mission against the risk of causing "a substantial interference in the normal evolution of an

extra-Community culture" —a possibility that is always present when a Community ship is forced to enter an out-of-bounds system. I decided that it was my responsibility both to the customer and to the company to run this risk, and proceeded to put in to the system at once.

I wasted no time on the outer worlds, knowing from experience that such worlds rarely yield anything in the way of flora and hence could not possibly possess the kind of soil I needed, but arrowed in to the orbital regions of the first four. Perceiving at once that Four would not serve my purpose, I continued on to Three. Three turned out to be a Frimm 4-type planet in all respects save its slightly smaller size; it also turned out to be the reason for the system's having been placed out of bounds. I was not surprised: One seldom finds soil of the type employed by Frimm 4 nurseries without finding intelligent life in the immediate vicinity. In this instance, I used the term "intelligent life" in its broadest sense, for the several civilizations I transchecked at random revealed technologies not far removed from the Paleolithic stage, and in one case, in the very midst of it.

ON several of the land masses I detected scattered deposits of the soil-type I needed, and I could have replenished the *Uxurient's* soil-solution vat from any of them. However, I chose an unusually rich one on a large island near the major land mass, reasoning that the less time I consumed in the operation, the less chance there would be of my occasioning "a substantial interference in the normal evolution of an extra-Community culture". This particular deposit bordered a small community of scattered, thatch-roofed dwellings, and abounded in trees similar to the yumquat species. After activating the *Uxurient's* ventral camouflage-unit, I brought the greenship down to about two hundred mirids, gravved it into position above the edge of the forest, and opened the capillary-tube lock. I timed my maneuver to coincide with the passing of the dusk belt, but, reluctant to attract any more attention than was absolutely necessary, I waited through most of the ensuing night phase before lowering the capillary tube. Unfortunately, I erred somewhat in my calculations, and the tube's rhizomorphous feeding system, owing partially to the rather strong wind that had sprung up during the night phase, entered the soil much closer to one of the native dwellings than I had intended should be the case; however, dawn being near at hand, I lacked sufficient time to recoil and relocate the device, so I left it where it was. I was not particularly worried: the natives' superstitious fear of the tube would probably preclude their approaching it closely enough for them to be able to damage it, and if their superstitious fear of the tube itself was not strong enough to make them keep their distance, their fear of the "low-lying cloud" from which the tube depended should be.

My mind at ease in this respect then, I reduced the opacity of the hull's upper hemisphere to complete transparency so that the greendeck would benefit from the rays of the system's sun, after which I retired to the sub-deck to check on the first influx of nutrients into the soil-solution vat. The length of the capillary tube prohibited any immediate change in the solution-level, so while I waited, I busied myself checking the tubes that run down to the vat from the section of the greendeck where the upper extremities of the capillary tube are affixed. Next, I checked the outgoing tubes that feed the greendeck soil. By the time I finished, the level had begun to rise.

I waited till it rose above the halfway mark, then I took a sample and ran an analysis. The result delighted me: the D-2 and Z-1 mineral element content had quadrupled! If the rapidity with which the vat was filling continued, I would be able to disengage the capillary tube, recoil it, and be on my way before the next night phase.

I lingered for a while longer, watching the level climb. Finally, remembering that I had not eaten since before my discovery of the soil deficiency, I left the vat-room, picked up three lliaka hind quarters in the meat-compartment, attached them to my belt, and proceeded up the ramp to the greendeck. The thought of the fine steaks which the quarters would yield made me realize how truly hungry I was, and I set off across the greendeck toward my distant living quarters with quickened steps. As I walked, the sight of the arid soil stretching away in every direction afflicted me with melancholy, even though I knew that the deplorable condition was well on its way toward being corrected. The leaves of the baby yumquat trees, I saw to my dismay, had more than merely yellowed: they had shriveled too. And so scrawny were the

little shoots that, had I not known that they were there, I might very well have walked in their midst and have been unaware of their existence. Indeed, the greendeck, awash now with bright morning sunlight, had more of the aspect of a desert than it did an aspect of a thriving oasis where plants are grown during shipment. I submit that my bringing the *Uxurient* in to an out-of-bounds system was more than merely justified: it was in keeping with the highest ideals that govern man in his relationship to plant-life.

(2)

How a Boarding Party of One gained the Greendeck and made off with a Uterium 5 Snirk Bird, a Toy Friddlefork, and Two Containers of Yellow Trading Disks.

ARRIVING at my living quarters, I removed my green-deck fatigues and laid them upon the arms of the rack beside the entrance, wondering as I always do on such occasions how Ho-Hat-Li-Turn, the company's morale manager, could have fallen for so blatantly whimsical an appointment as a clothes rack in the form of a life-size woman. Granted, greenship pilots lead lonely lives, but tell me this: how can the mere act of their laying their outer garments upon the outstretched arms of a brainless, speechless, feelingless mannequin in the least alleviate their loneliness? If Ho-Hat-Li-Tum were really concerned about the morale of the greenship pilots, he would spurn such halfway measures and concentrate his energies on getting the regulation that forbids pilots to take their wives into space with them rescinded.

To continue: Once in my living quarters, I proceeded directly to the galley where I cut two large steaks from one of the Iliaka hindquarters. Placing the steaks upon the grill to sear, I got a loaf of bread and decanter of wine out of the provision closet, after which I set the table. When the steaks were done, I placed them on a large platter and sat down to eat. It was at this point that I received a very definite impression that I was being watched.

I looked around the galley. Other than myself, of course, no one was there, and certainly the various cupboards were much too small to harbor a secret onlooker. A secret onlooker indeed! Angry with myself, I put the matter from my mind, concluding that the condition of the yumquat trees had depressed me to a greater extent than I had realized, and that I had fallen prey to preposterous imaginings. I wish now that I had been less eager to ascribe what proved to be a perfectly valid psychosensory perception to my emotional letdown.

I ate ravenously, devouring both of the steaks and the entire loaf of bread. Afterward, a feeling of peace and good will stole over me, and on an impulse I called the Uterium 5 snirk bird down from its perch above the galley doorway and persuaded it by means of a crust of bread to perch upon my forefinger. Despite the large and ovoid xanthous droppings which these birds sporadically deposit on chairs, tables and floors, they make wonderful pets, and I envied the particular customer who was to receive this one—a tiny, bright-eyed female—as a partial bonus for his yumquat-tree order. The other components of his bonus—the toy friddlefork and the two containers of yellow trading disks—stood on a shelf just behind me, and reaching around and procuring them, I set them on the table before me. Such evidence of largess invariably renews my faith in the company, and on long runs I often get out customer bonuses and speculate on the munificence of a concern such as ours. Thus I speculated now—but not for long. I had not slept for nearly two zodal periods and was far more tired than I realized, and to complicate matters, the heavy meal which I had just consumed had had a soporific effect upon me. Almost before I knew it, I dozed off.

I believe that my first appraisal that the previously mentioned psychosensory perception had not been illusory after all was the creak of one of the cupboard doors. Unfortunately, this appraisal was on the unconscious, rather than the conscious, level, and failed to arouse me from my stupor. It took the hysterical cackling of the Uterium 5 snirk bird, a few moments later, to bring me back to true awareness, and by that time, it was too late. The tiny man who had shinned up the table leg and seized the snirk bird, the two containers of yellow trading disks, and the toy friddlefork had already regained the deck and was running toward the doorway. In the process of climbing back down, he must have bumped the toy

friddlefork and accidentally activated its tonal unit, for it was bleating away insistently as he bore it away. Indeed, so insistent were its cries that one would have thought that it expected me to come after it and succor it.

Incredulously, I got to my feet. I saw then that the thief was not a man, but a boy—the tiniest boy that I have ever seen in my whole life. Assuming his stature to be average, it is unlikely that even a full-grown adult of his species would come any higher than a Frimm 4's citizen's kneecap!

I called after him, uttering my name in as gentle a tone of voice as I could manage and assuring him that if he would return the articles he had stolen no harm would come to him. He only ran the faster, and fairly streaked through the galley doorway, down the entrance corridor, and out onto the green-deck. I had no choice but to set off in pursuit, and this I did, naively believing that I could overtake him easily. In this I erred indeed. Never have I ever seen anyone run so fast. Why, there were times when I could have sworn that his feet weren't even touching the deck!

As I lumbered along in his wake, I wondered how he could conceivably have gotten on board. Had he climbed the capillary tube? This didn't seem possible in view of the *Uxurient's* altitude and in view of his diminutiveness, but I could think of no other answer. There was no need for me to, I saw presently: that he had climbed up the tube was unequivocally demonstrated by the ease and the celerity with which he now began to climb down it.

(3)

Why the Uxurient's Flexible Ship-to-Ground Capillary Tube is now Ten Exids Shorter than It used to be

LOATH to give up the chase, I started climbing down the tube myself. This is not as difficult as one would at first imagine—as I myself had imagined, in fact, prior to making the attempt. The branch-like protuberances that absorb the sunlight and transmute it into the energy required for the capillary-action provide numerous hand- and footholds, and had it not been for the almost gale-force wind that had developed, my descent would have been relatively easy. Even with the wind, I found myself in no great danger, and I have no doubt but what I would have reached the ground in due course had I not underestimated the resourcefulness—and the bloodthirstiness—of my youthful quarry. He kept calling out repeatedly at the top of his voice, but I did not suspect what he was up to until, halfway down, I paused and looked below me. I was just in time to see a woman run out of the thatch-roofed dwelling near which the tube had rooted itself and hand him a small object the very moment his feet touched the ground.

I deduced from the shards of sunlight that the object threw off that it was a cutting tool of some kind. I was not long left in doubt in any event, for no sooner did the boy have it in his possession than he began to wield it. A series of thuds was borne upward by the wind, and with each thud, the tube gave a convulsive shudder. I had seen unattached ship-to-ground capillary tubes at the mercy of the wind before, and I knew the danger that confronted me. Consequently I began climbing back up toward the *Uxurient* at once. While I will not attempt to deny that I was frightened, I would like to point out that it wasn't so much my predicament that frightened me, but the cold-blooded attitude of the young savage below me. He thought that by severing the tube he could bring it crashing to the ground, and the ferocity and the frequency of his blows testified to the eagerness with which he awaited my destruction.

It was his very attitude, I believe, that gave me the strength and the determination to gain the *Uxurient* after the tube broke free and began lashing wildly back and forth. For a long while I lay gasping on the green-deck; then, when my breath came back, I recoiled the tube, secured the tube-lock, and lifted into space. The soil-solution vat was not as full as I would have wished, but by careful rationing I knew that I could make its contents suffice. Whether I could or not, I wanted no more part of the world I had just left. I never want to see the place again.

* * *

I WOULD like to append a word in my defense. While it is true that I was instrumental in exposing an extra-Community culture to a technology far beyond its ken, it must be remembered that all such cultures are flexible in nature and can absorb the seemingly inexplicable with the utmost equanimity. They achieve this quite simply by identifying the unfamiliar with the familiar, and by ascribing those phenomena which happen to be beyond their experience to the workings of magic. Far from having an adverse effect, the present instance will, I am sure, provide the basis for a colorful legend. No doubt the legend will acquire a more satisfying ending, and unquestionably the boy's exploits will be exaggerated. As regards the Uterium 5 snirk bird, the toy friddlefork, and the two containers of yellow trading disks, you may be sure that the young rascal had already identified them with objects with which he was familiar (and which he coveted) before he left the galley cupboard in which he was hiding. If he had not done so, he would not have stolen them. In any case, I am not unduly bitter about their loss, even though I must make that loss good. The measure of a Frimm 4 citizen's true worth is the quantity of his magnanimity; hence I hope that both the boy and the woman—probably his mother—live happily ever after.

(signed)

Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum

THE END