

Mr. Young has had his distinctive stories collected in the recently published THE WORLDS OF ROBERT F. YOUNG (Simon and Schuster). His newest story for us is this surprising and charming account of the Past Reconstruction Corps, and of PRCman 3rd class, Archer Frend.

ROMANCE IN AN ELEVENTH-CENTURY RECHARGING STATION

by Robert F. Young

ARCHER FREND WAS FAR FROM being an old hand at time-traveling, being he wasn't exactly a novice at it either. As a result when the gray trans-era void through which his time-suit was propelling him started to flicker when he still had some fifteen centuries to go, he was both alarmed and unafraid —alarmed because he had never "run out of gas" before, and unafraid because he knew that the electronic station-index with which his suit was equipped would automatically shunt him to the nearest recharging station before the last of the energy in the suit's Contra-Hour-&Age-Power-Pac gave out.

Ordinarily, the CHAPP would have been bursting with energy, but Archer had just spent three trying months correlating events in a place-time classified by the Past Reconstruction Corps as "The Age of Gaul", and he had been in such a hurry to leave that he had neglected to recharge the unit before setting out. The PRC, he knew, would not let such an oversight go unpunished, and he could count on being called on the carpet mere moments after his arrival in the twenty-sixth century; and as there was a distinct possibility of his losing his hard-won rating of PRCman, 3rd class, he was not only alarmed and unafraid —he was unhappy, too.

The flickering slowed as his momentum decreased, and scrambled sequences of land and sky began to materialize, alternated by splotches of blacknesses scarred by stars. The transition was all the more disquieting in this case because it involved spatial as well as temporal orientation, the one necessitated by the sideways drift set up by the electronic station-index and the other by the slowing-down process brought about by the dwindling of the contra-hour-&age energy. It was anything but a pleasant experience, and it would have disconcerted a veteran; Archer, who, as before stated, was not one, felt like kissing the ground of the little forest-clearing that the flutterings of nights and days and the crawlings of scrambled sky and landscape at last gave way to.

The clearing was a good-sized one, and it was prodigally puddle, with early-morning sunshine. The luxuriance of the grass and the pale greenness of the leaves of the encompassing trees revealed the season to be spring, and a chill, but far from cold, morning wind laden with the fragrance of wild flowers emphasized the wondrous fact. Birdsong was everywhere, and the singers themselves were daubs and streaks of color among the trees and against the blue unclouded sky. Before becoming a PRC field-worker, Archer had never seen a bird, and he still hadn't gotten over them. Not that there wasn't any in the twenty-sixth century; it was just that what few there were knew enough to keep clear of people, and did. It was said that the Great Lakes swamp was full of them, but Archer had never been to the Great Lakes swamp, so he didn't know.

The twenty-sixth century was sort of a gray world when you came to think of it. Living in it, you weren't aware of the grayness; but when you got to know a few green worlds you couldn't help but notice the difference. The twenty-sixth century was a city, really—a vast sprawling affair built upon the ruins that had survived the Interregnum. Acreages had been set aside for farms, of course, but somehow the farms never seemed to get very green—not even in summer. Something had gone out of the soil, the experts said. Or something had gotten into it. No one knew quite what, though, and probably no one ever would.

This green world was about the loveliest that Archer had ever seen.

He sort of wished he didn't have to leave it.

The wish scared him, and he brought himself to time in a hurry. This was no way for a PRCman, 3rd class, to be behaving. Instead of daydreaming, he should be bending his every effort toward getting back to the world where he belonged so he could turn in his report and thereby enable it to be incorporated with the rest of the data thus far accumulated by modern mankind in their attempt to fill the hiatuses of recorded history. Ashamed of his apostasy, he activated the Frimpkin-counter, which was also part of the equipment of his time-suit, and began turning slowly around.

The purpose of the instrument was to detect and count the energy activity-rate of the Contra-Hour-&-Age Recharging Magneto and by the frequency of the clicks enable the user to home in on the station proper where the CHARM was hidden. In the present instance, the clicks came most rapidly when Archer faced east, but they didn't come as rapidly as they should have, and this puzzled him. However, the important thing was that the CHARM was in the immediate vicinity (the range of the counter was less than two miles) and could be located within an hour or so. Shelving the mystery of its less-than-normal activity-rate, he set out in search of it.

He hadn't gone far before he came to a narrow dirt road. It was deeply rutted and abounded in mud holes, but as it led in an easterly direction he decided to follow it. Presently he saw a team of oxen approaching. The yoked beasts were drawing a crude four-wheeled cart loaded with tinder-wood, and on the driver's seat sat a middle-aged man wearing a baggy blue suit and a kerchief-like hat. Archer, however, made not the slightest attempt to conceal himself. There was no reason for him to, for in addition to its regular chores a time-suit "dressed" the wearer in clothing appropriate to whatever age he happened to be visiting. It accomplished this by means of an illusion-field that forced the "viewer" to provide the "clothing" himself. If the viewer's emotional state and predilections were such that the "clothing" was unfavorable to the wearer's welfare, the illusion-field made whatever alterations that were necessary. In the present instance, while Archer had no way of knowing the true nature of his "new clothes", the awed expression on the cart-driver's face as the awkward vehicle lurched by informed him that they were nothing to be ashamed of.

A few minutes later he passed an old woman carrying a bundle of twigs. Her awed expression and obsequious manner indicated that her taste in "clothes" coincided with the cart-driver's.

Not long afterward, looking over his shoulder, he saw that the old woman was following him. The cart-driver had turned his cart around and was also following him. Presently Archer passed a small roadside cottage, and a few moments later a young man and a young woman and three children fell in behind him. A second roadside cottage swelled the ranks of his retinue by six more souls, and a fourth, by eight. Judging from the awed expressions on the followers' faces, he was regarded as something of a celebrity.

But that was all right. The natives were welcome to see him any way they wanted to, so long as they didn't interfere with his search.

The road continued on a reasonably straight course, and at length it emerged from the forest. To his left fields stretched away to distant hills, and on his right a high hedge rose up, hiding whatever lay beyond it. By this time his retinue numbered some thirty-five persons, and it was obvious from the way they were jabbering to one another and waving their arms that they were firmly convinced that something of great pith and moment was about to take place. Archer felt sorry for them in a way. He hated to disappoint people.

The hedge remained unbroken for several hundred yards; then it interrupted itself briefly and gave way to a lofty gate. The frequency of the Frimpkin-counter clicks pointed an invisible finger toward the opening, and, certain that the CHARM was located somewhere beyond the hedge, he turned off the road—to the accompaniment of an awed gasp from his retinue—and walked boldly up to the gate.

It was unguarded, and consisted of a pair of ponderous iron grilles, many of whose bars had completely, rusted away. Through the interstices he saw a vast expanse of green and disciplined grass, and a distant quartet of exotic buildings. A flagstone path followed an anfractuous course from the gate to the largest of the structures, winding among little islands of flowers and green exclamation points of flower-like trees. Heat waves, not at all in keeping with the time of year, seemed to be rising from the ground, and buildings, grass, trees, and flowers had a strange indistinctness about them—an unreal

aspect that disconcerted Archer almost as much as did the realization that in the land beyond the hedge spring had come and gone some time ago, and midsummer was on hand.

He stepped through one of the gaps in the gate—again to the accompaniment of an awed gasp from his retinue—and started walking along the flagstone walk. Several steps later he felt a faint tug, and a moment afterward the shimmering effect which he had noted a moment ago disappeared. The early-morning wind was no more, and the heat of midsummer was all around him.

What strange world was this that could maintain two different seasons side by side? Archer, in his role as a PRCman, had run across many a marvel, but he had never run across one like this.

He continued walking along the flagstone path, looking this way and that for some sign of life. He saw none whatsoever. Not only was the estate devoid of human-life, it was devoid of animal-life, too—or at least it appeared to be.

There weren't even any birds, or if there were he could not see them; and not so much as a single dog came forth to remind him either by bite or bark that he was a trespasser.

He glanced over his shoulder. His retinue now numbered in the fifties or the sixties, but it could no longer properly be called a retinue, for its members, having come as far as the gate, apparently had no intention of proceeding beyond it. Clearly, they were going to watch the show from where they stood.

What sort of a show did they expect to see?

As he drew closer to the largest building, the clicks of the Frimpkin-counter stepped up their tempo—a clear indication that the CHARM was located either in the building itself or just beyond it. But considering the closeness of the station the frequency still wasn't what it should have been, and a vague uneasiness beset him. To counteract it, he focused his attention on the building. It was in excellent condition, but with its gray stone walls and high narrow windows it was almost as oppressive as it was impressive. Large, pointed knobs, slitted with windows, rose up from its roof, and atop these knobs were other knobs—tiny ones that looked for all the world like fat decapitated birds. Atop the largest of the knobs proper was a slender pole, and attached to it and drooping in the windless air was an orange and purple banner.

Two of the three smaller structures were similar to the first, and were connected to it by what appeared to be enclosed walkways. The fourth was located behind the others, and most of it was hidden from Archer's sight; but he could see enough of it to ascertain that it was constructed of wood, rather than of stone, and that it was far less prepossessing than its brothers and sisters.

The flagstone path ended at the base of a set of stone steps that led up to an imposing portal. As he drew nearer, Archer saw that he had been wrong in concluding that the estate was deserted, for on either side of the portal stood a guard dressed in multicolored clothing and armed with a lance.

Boldly, Archer ascended the steps, confident that the two men would "clothe" him in pretty much the same fashion as the other natives had. But the guards, much less than "clothing" him, didn't even appear to see him. They were staring straight ahead and standing as stiffly as two sticks of wood. Moreover, neither of them was breathing.

Archer's first thought was that they were dead. Then he saw how ruddy their complexions were, and discerned an awareness of sorts in their eyes. He touched one of them on the cheek. The man's face was as warm as it was rosy.

No, the guards weren't dead—at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. In some mysterious fashion, they were alive.

Archer shrugged, and transferred his attention to the portal. The mystery wasn't in his province—it was in the province of the CHARMman who had established the station. No doubt it had already been reported, unless of course it hadn't existed when the CHARM had been hidden. "When", however, presented still another mystery. The PRC, in order to facilitate recharging and to insure the safety of its personnel, had established stations at temporal intervals of 500 years and (except where large bodies of water interfered) at spatial intervals of 500 miles; but although chronology was computed on an A.D.-B.C. basis and was simple enough to follow, unless you were capable of supplementing your time-suit's electronic station index with an eidetic spatio-temporal map showing the locations of the stations, there was no way for you to ascertain how long any one of them had been in existence. Thus,

while Archer knew approximately when and where he was, he had no idea whether the station had been established yesterday or 500 years ago.

The portal was ajar. He pushed it the rest of the way open and stepped across the threshold. Finding himself in a deserted high-ceilinged corridor, he walked down it to an arched doorway that gave into an enormous room that rose almost to the roof. At the farther end, a richly caparisoned couple sat on a huge, thickly upholstered couch, and throughout the room other people either sat on other, less imposing, couches, or stood in various attitudes. Some of them seemed to be frozen in the midst of taking a step, but none of them—either sitters, standers, or walkers—moved so much as a single muscle or made so much as the slightest sound. They were no less dead than the two guards—and no less alive, either.

A gallery ran the gamut of the room at a height of about twenty feet above the floor, and a flight of stone steps led up to it. Beneath the gallery, at the rear of the room, a second arched doorway gave access to another room. Stepping inside for a look around, Archer found himself confronted with an even more curious tableau than the one he had left behind him. The room was clearly a kitchen, although it bore only the remotest resemblance to its twenty-sixth century counterparts. In the background, there was a primitive iron stove, and upon its grid lay a large cut of meat. Beneath the grid the red flames of a wood fire were discernible, but unlike conventional flames they were immobile. Beside the stove sat a young girl who was holding a feather in each hand and cradling a plump, beheaded bird on her lap. In the foreground stood a husky woman, and cowering before her was a small boy. The woman's right hand was raised as though she had been about to deliver a blow before she, the boy, and the girl had been transformed, along with everyone else in the vicinity, into living statues.

Archer walked across the room to a window at the back and looked into a large yard. Here and there, plump birds like the one the girl had on her lap were standing in this attitude and that; but although they still had their heads they were making no sound, and they were no more active than their beheaded companion was. Not far away stood the wooden building Archer had caught only glimpses of before, and in front of it, as immobile as the tableau in the kitchen, stood six horses, two cows, and a goat. Just beneath the window three big dogs were lying, but whether they were sleeping or dead or neither, he could not tell from his present position, and saw no point in drawing the distinction in any case.

Retracing his steps to the first room, he started up the flight of stone steps that led to the gallery. Promptly, the clicks of the Frimpkin-counter increased in frequency, and by the time he reached the gallery they sounded comparatively healthy at least, although nowhere near as healthy as they should have sounded. The gallery was lined with doors, most of them closed; but he paid no attention to them as he passed, bestowing all of his attention on the clicks. The clicks remained fairly constant till he came to the thirteenth door; then they kicked up a modest storm, and he knew he was reasonably close to his objective.

The door opened upon a narrow hallway. He thought at first that the hallway itself was the station, for it was more or less typical of the sort of location CHARM-men, who proceeded on the principle that the best hiding place was the most obvious one, usually chose for stations. It was part of a building that under normal circumstances functioned as a center of activity, and yet, judging from the dust on its floor and the cobwebs hanging from its ceiling, it was no longer in use and hadn't been for some time, a fact that made it doubly ideal. However, it didn't turn out to be the station after all, and after proceeding a score of steps he came to a narrow flight of stone stairs that wound upward into gloom and more cobwebs.

He thought the stairs would never come to an end, but finally they did—at the base of a little door. It was ajar, and he needed merely to push it the rest of the way open to gain entry to the chamber beyond. As he did so, a small key fell out of the rusted lock and clattered down the stone stairs. Aside from his own breathing, it was the first sound he had heard since leaving his erstwhile retinue behind him.

The chamber into which he now stepped was quite small, and he judged it to be the interior of one of the "knobs" he had noticed on the building's roof. In the way of furniture it contained precisely two items: a bed that stood beneath the only window, and a small machine that stood in one of the dusty corners.

It was as quaint a machine as Archer had ever seen, and consisted of a wooden wheel mounted upon a three-legged wooden frame. Above the wheel, and attached to a small wooden arm, was the object of his search.

Now he could resume his journey to the twenty-sixth century and leave this enchanting green world behind him.

Stepping forward, he detached the CHARM and clamped it onto the Contra-Hour-&-Age-Power-Pac, which was located just above the left breast-pocket of his time-suit. The energy-release activator was bidden in the base of the CHARM, and after finding the tiny protuberance he attempted to depress it

Only to discover that it had already been depressed.

Stunned, he held the CHARM against the Frimpkin-counter. The latter erupted into a series of wild clicks, then settled back to its lackadaisical self.

He performed a few arithmetical calisthenics. He would have performed them before if he had guessed the truth. The result staggered him: at best, the CHARM had enough contra-hour-&-age energy left in it to take him to the beginning of the thirteenth century.

But that meant that the device had been activated at least a hundred years ago!

And throughout those hundred years it had been pouring out contra-hour-&-age energy at a rate of at least 400 Frimpkins a day. Enough to isolate a small city

Or a large estate . . .

No wonder none of the people or animals he had seen since he had come through the gate had breathed or moved! The entire estate had been banished from the time stream.

The reason he hadn't been affected was that he had come from beyond the field which the escaping contra-hour-&-age energy had established. He was an outsider, and did not belong in this tiny capsule of reality.

He looked at the CHARM closely. The activator was cleverly hidden, and the odds against someone finding it by accident were a thousand to one; but such odds were not insuperable, and it had been inevitable all along that someone —sometime, somewhere—would innocently create a field such as this one.

He deactivated the spindle-shaped device.

Who had activated it?

He looked around the room. For the first time, he noticed that there was someone lying on the bed.

A girl.

He went over and gazed down at her.

She had a heart-shaped face, and her hair seemed to have been spun of summer sunlight. He judged her to be about eighteen years old.

Apparently, after accidentally activating the CHARM, she had lain down and fallen asleep before time had come to a stop.

As he looked at her, she stirred, and began to breathe, and he knew that the contra-hour-&-age field was beginning to disperse.

His lonely years gathered around him like gray ghosts, and climbed upon his shoulders.

He bent down and gave the girl a kiss and drove the many years away.

She sighed . . . and opened her eyes.

They were blue.

Why, it was like a fairy tale, almost.

The midsummer heat gave way, and a spring breeze blew through the window. He looked out across the trees and the flowers and the green grass to the gate. There were about a hundred people standing beyond it now, and they had seen him in the window and were waving their arms and jumping up and down.

Probably the old wives and the old husbands among them were already making the fairy tale up.

He looked down at the girl again. She looked back up at him. Once more, his time-suit did handsomely by him, and it was clear from the expression on her face that she thought she was seeing a rich man—

Or maybe even a prince.

He could probably learn her language and the ways and customs of her day and age in no time at all.

It promised to be fun. He bent down and kissed her again, just for good measure . . . *And the horses in the courtyard shook themselves; the hounds jumped up and wagged their tails; the pigeons on the roof pulled out their heads from under their wings, looked round, and flew into the open country; the flies on the wall crept again; the fire in the kitchen burned up and flickered and cooked the meat; and the cook gave the boy a box on the ear, and the maid plucked the fowl ready for the spit . . . And in due course the marriage of the "King's son" with Briarrose was celebrated with all splendor, and they lived contentedly to the end of their days.*