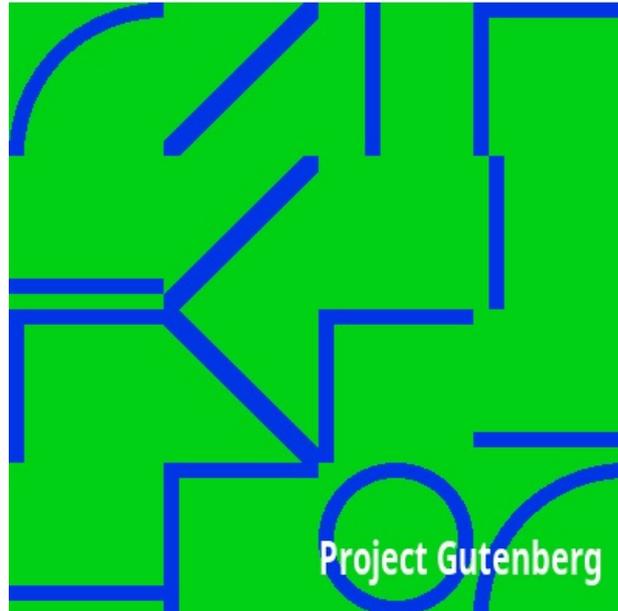

Unborn Tomorrow

Mack Reynolds



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UNBORN TOMORROW

BY MACK REYNOLDS

Unfortunately, there was only one thing he could bring back from the wonderful future ... and though he didn't want to ... nevertheless he did....

Illustrated by Freas

B

ETTY looked up from her magazine. She said mildly, "You're late."

"Don't yell at me, I feel awful," Simon told her. He sat down at his desk, passed his tongue over his teeth in distaste, groaned, fumbled in a drawer for the aspirin bottle.

He looked over at Betty and said, almost as though reciting, "What I need is a vacation."

"What," Betty said, "are you going to use for money?"

"Providence," Simon told her whilst fiddling with the aspirin bottle, "will provide."

"Hm-m-m. But before providing vacations it'd be nice if Providence turned up a missing jewel deal, say. Something where you could deduce that actually the ruby ring had gone down the drain and was caught in the elbow. Something that would net about fifty dollars."

Simon said, mournful of tone, "Fifty dollars? Why not make it five hundred?"

"I'm not selfish," Betty said. "All I want is enough to pay me this week's salary."

"Money," Simon said. "When you took this job you said it was the romance that appealed to you."

"Hm-m-m. I didn't know most sleuthing amounted to snooping around department stores to check on the clerks knocking down."

Simon said, enigmatically, "Now it comes."

There was a knock.

Betty bounced up with Olympic agility and had the door swinging wide before the knocking was quite completed.

He was old, little and had bug eyes behind pince-nez glasses. His suit was cut in the style of yesteryear but when a suit costs two or three hundred dollars you still retain caste whatever the styling.

Simon said unenthusiastically, "Good morning, Mr. Oyster." He indicated the client's chair. "Sit down, sir."

The client fussed himself with Betty's assistance into the seat, bug-eyed Simon, said finally, "You know my name, that's pretty good. Never saw you before in my life. Stop fussing with me, young lady. Your ad in the phone book says you'll investigate anything."

"Anything," Simon said. "Only one exception."

"Excellent. Do you believe in time travel?"

Simon said nothing. Across the room, where she had resumed her seat, Betty cleared her throat. When Simon continued to say nothing she ventured, "Time travel is impossible."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?"

Betty looked to her boss for assistance. None was forthcoming. There ought to be some very quick, positive, definite answer. She said, "Well, for one thing, paradox. Suppose you had a time machine and traveled back a hundred years or so and killed your own great-grandfather. Then how could you ever be born?"

"Confound it if I know," the little fellow growled. "How?"

Simon said, "Let's get to the point, what you wanted to see me about."

"I want to hire you to hunt me up some time travelers," the old boy said.

Betty was too far in now to maintain her proper role of silent secretary. "Time travelers," she said, not very intelligently.

The potential client sat more erect, obviously with intent to hold the floor for a time. He removed the pince-nez glasses and pointed them at Betty. He said, "Have you read much science fiction, Miss?"

"Some," Betty admitted.

"Then you'll realize that there are a dozen explanations of the paradoxes of time travel. Every writer in the field worth his salt has explained them away. But to get on. It's my contention that within a century or so man will have solved the problems of immortality and eternal youth, and it's also my suspicion that he will eventually be able to travel in time. So convinced am I of these possibilities that I am willing to gamble a portion of my fortune to investigate the presence in our era of such time travelers."

Simon seemed incapable of carrying the ball this morning, so Betty said, "But ... Mr. Oyster, if the future has developed time travel why don't we ever meet such travelers?"

Simon put in a word. "The usual explanation, Betty, is that they can't afford to allow the space-time continuum track to be altered. If, say, a time traveler returned to a period of twenty-five years ago and shot Hitler, then all subsequent history would be changed. In that case, the time traveler himself might never be born. They have to tread mighty carefully."

Mr. Oyster was pleased. "I didn't expect you to be so well informed on the subject, young man."

Simon shrugged and fumbled again with the aspirin bottle.

Mr. Oyster went on. "I've been considering the matter for some time and—"

Simon held up a hand. "There's no use prolonging this. As I understand it, you're an elderly gentleman with a considerable fortune and you realize that thus far nobody has succeeded in taking it with him."

Mr. Oyster returned his glasses to their perch, bug-eyed Simon, but then nodded.

Simon said, "You want to hire me to find a time traveler and in some manner or other—any manner will do—exhort from him the secret of eternal life and youth, which you figure the future will have discovered. You're willing to pony up a part of this fortune of yours, if I can deliver a bona fide time traveler."

"Right!"

Betty had been looking from one to the other. Now she said, plaintively, "But where are you going to find one of these characters—especially if they're interested in keeping hid?"

The old boy was the center again. "I told you I'd been considering it for some time. The *Oktoberfest*, that's where they'd be!" He seemed elated.

Betty and Simon waited.

"The *Oktoberfest*," he repeated. "The greatest festival the world has ever seen, the carnival, *feria*, *fiesta* to beat them all. Every year it's held in Munich. Makes the New Orleans Mardi gras look like a quilting party." He began to swing into the spirit of his description. "It originally started in celebration of the wedding of some local prince a century and a half ago and the Bavarians had such a bang-up time they've been holding it every year since. The Munich breweries do up a special beer, *Marzenbräu* they call it, and each brewery opens a tremendous tent on the fair grounds which will hold five thousand customers apiece. Millions of liters of beer are put away, hundreds of thousands of barbecued chickens, a small herd of oxen are roasted whole over spits, millions of pair of *weisswurst*, a very special sausage, millions upon millions of pretzels—"

"All right," Simon said. "We'll accept it. The *Oktoberfest* is one whale of a wingding."

"Well," the old boy pursued, into his subject now, "that's where they'd be, places like the *Oktoberfest*. For one thing, a time traveler wouldn't be conspicuous. At a festival like this somebody with a strange accent, or who didn't know exactly how to wear his clothes correctly, or was off the ordinary in any of a dozen other ways, wouldn't be noticed. You could be a four-armed space traveler from Mars, and you still wouldn't be conspicuous at the *Oktoberfest*. People would figure they had D.T.'s."

"But why would a time traveler want to go to a—" Betty began.

"Why not! What better opportunity to study a people than when they are in their cups? If you could go back a few thousand years, the things you would wish to see would be a Roman Triumph, perhaps the Rites of Dionysus, or one of Alexander's orgies. You wouldn't want to wander up and down the streets of, say, Athens while nothing was going on, particularly when you might be revealed as a suspicious character not being able to speak the language, not knowing how to wear the clothes and not familiar with the city's layout." He took a deep breath. "No ma'am, you'd have to stick to some great event, both for the sake of actual interest and for protection against being unmasked."

The old boy wound it up. "Well, that's the story. What are your rates? The *Oktoberfest* starts on Friday and continues for sixteen days. You can take the plane to Munich, spend a week there and —"

Simon was shaking his head. "Not interested."

As soon as Betty had got her jaw back into place, she glared unbelievably at him.

Mr. Oyster was taken aback himself. "See here, young man, I realize this isn't an ordinary assignment, however, as I said, I am willing to risk a considerable portion of my fortune—"

"Sorry," Simon said. "Can't be done."

"A hundred dollars a day plus expenses," Mr. Oyster said quietly. "I like the fact that you already seem to have some interest and knowledge of the matter. I liked the way you knew my name when I walked in the door; my picture doesn't appear often in the papers."

"No go," Simon said, a sad quality in his voice.

"A fifty thousand dollar bonus if you bring me a time traveler."

"Out of the question," Simon said.

"But *why*?" Betty wailed.

"Just for laughs," Simon told the two of them sourly, "suppose I tell you a funny story. It goes like this:"

I got a thousand dollars from Mr. Oyster (Simon began) in the way of an advance, and leaving him with Betty who was making out a receipt, I hustled back to the apartment and packed a bag. Hell, I'd wanted a vacation anyway, this was a natural. On the way to Idlewild I stopped off at the Germany Information Offices for some tourist literature.

It takes roughly three and a half hours to get to Gander from Idlewild. I spent the time planning the fun I was going to have.

It takes roughly seven and a half hours from Gander to Shannon and I spent that time dreaming up material I could put into my reports to Mr. Oyster. I was going to have to give him some kind of report for his money. Time travel yet! What a laugh!

Between Shannon and Munich a faint suspicion began to simmer in my mind. These statistics I read on the *Oktoberfest* in the Munich tourist pamphlets. Five million people attended annually.

Where did five million people come from to attend an overgrown festival in comparatively remote Southern Germany? The tourist season is over before September 21st, first day of the gigantic beer bust. Nor could the Germans account for any such number. Munich itself has a population of less than a million, counting children.

And those millions of gallons of beer, the hundreds of thousands of chickens, the herds of oxen. Who ponied up all the money for such expenditures? How could the average German, with his twenty-five dollars a week salary?

In Munich there was no hotel space available. I went to the Bahnhof where they have a hotel service and applied. They put my name down, pocketed the husky bribe, showed me where I could check my bag, told me they'd do what they could, and to report back in a few hours.

I had another suspicious twinge. If five million people attended this beer bout, how were they accommodated?

The *Theresienwiese*, the fair ground, was only a few blocks away. I was stiff from the plane ride so I walked.

There are seven major brewers in the Munich area, each of them represented by one of the circuslike tents that Mr. Oyster mentioned. Each tent contained benches and tables for about five thousand persons and from six to ten thousands pack themselves in, competing for room. In the center is a tremendous bandstand, the musicians all *lederhosen* clad, the music as Bavarian as any to be found in a Bavarian beer hall. Hundreds of peasant garbed *fräuleins* darted about the tables with quart sized earthenware mugs, platters of chicken, sausage, kraut and pretzels.

I found a place finally at a table which had space for twenty-odd beer bibbers. Odd is right. As weird an assortment of Germans and foreign tourists as could have been dreamed up, ranging from a seventy- or eighty-year-old couple in Bavarian costume, to the bald-headed drunk across the table from me.

A desperate waitress bearing six mugs of beer in each hand scurried past. They call them *masses*, by the way, not mugs. The bald-headed character and I both held up a finger and she slid two of the *masses* over to us and then hustled on.

"Down the hatch," the other said, holding up his *mass* in toast.

"To the ladies," I told him. Before sipping, I said, "You know, the tourist pamphlets say this stuff is eighteen per cent. That's nonsense. No beer is that strong." I took a long pull.

He looked at me, waiting.

I came up. "Mistaken," I admitted.

A *mass* or two apiece later he looked carefully at the name engraved on his earthenware mug. "Löwenbräu," he said. He took a small notebook from his pocket and a pencil, noted down the word and returned the things.

"That's a queer looking pencil you have there," I told him. "German?"

"Venusian," he said. "Oops, sorry. Shouldn't have said that."

I had never heard of the brand so I skipped it.

"Next is the Hofbräu," he said.

"Next what?" Baldy's conversation didn't seem to hang together very well.

"My pilgrimage," he told me. "All my life I've been wanting to go back to an *Oktoberfest* and sample every one of the seven brands of the best beer the world has ever known. I'm only as far as Löwenbräu. I'm afraid I'll never make it."

I finished my *mass*. "I'll help you," I told him. "Very noble endeavor. Name is Simon."

"Arth," he said. "How could you help?"

"I'm still fresh—comparatively. I'll navigate you around. There are seven beer tents. How many have you got through, so far?"

"Two, counting this one," Arth said.

I looked at him. "It's going to be a chore," I said. "You've already got a nice edge on."

Outside, as we made our way to the next tent, the fair looked like every big State-Fair ever seen, except it was bigger. Games, souvenir stands, sausage stands, rides, side shows, and people, people, people.

The Hofbräu tent was as overflowing as the last but we managed to find two seats.

The band was blaring, and five thousand half-swacked voices were roaring accompaniment.

*In Muenchen steht ein Hofbräuhaus!
Eins, Zwei, G'sufa!*

At the *G'sufa* everybody upped with the mugs and drank each other's health.

"This is what I call a real beer bust," I said approvingly.

Arth was waving to a waitress. As in the Löwenbräu tent, a full quart was the smallest amount obtainable.

A beer later I said, "I don't know if you'll make it or not, Arth."

"Make what?"

"All seven tents."

"Oh."

A waitress was on her way by, mugs foaming over their rims. I gestured to her for refills.

"Where are you from, Arth?" I asked him, in the way of making conversation.

"2183."

"2183 where?"

He looked at me, closing one eye to focus better. "Oh," he said. "Well, 2183 South Street, ah, New Albuquerque."

"New Albuquerque? Where's that?"

Arth thought about it. Took another long pull at the beer. "Right across the way from old Albuquerque," he said finally. "Maybe we ought to be getting on to the Pschorrbräu tent."

"Maybe we ought to eat something first," I said. "I'm beginning to feel this. We could get some of that barbecued ox."

Arth closed his eyes in pain. "Vegetarian," he said. "Couldn't possibly eat meat. Barbarous. Ugh."

"Well, we need some nourishment," I said.

"There's supposed to be considerable nourishment in beer."

That made sense. I yelled, "*Fräulein! Zwei neu bier!*"

Somewhere along in here the fog rolled in. When it rolled out again, I found myself closing one eye the better to read the lettering on my earthenware mug. It read Augustinerbräu. Somehow we'd evidently navigated from one tent to another.

Arth was saying, "Where's your hotel?"

That seemed like a good question. I thought about it for a while. Finally I said, "Haven't got one. Town's jam packed. Left my bag at the Bahnhof. I don't think we'll ever make it, Arth. How many we got to go?"

"Lost track," Arth said. "You can come home with me."

We drank to that and the fog rolled in again.

When the fog rolled out, it was daylight. Bright, glaring, awful daylight. I was sprawled, complete with clothes, on one of twin beds. On the other bed, also completely clothed, was Arth.

That sun was too much. I stumbled up from the bed, staggered to the window and fumbled around for a blind or curtain. There was none.

Behind me a voice said in horror, "Who ... how ... oh, *Wodo*, where'd you come from?"

I got a quick impression, looking out the window, that the Germans were certainly the most modern, futuristic people in the world. But I couldn't stand the light. "Where's the shade," I moaned.

Arth did something and the window went opaque.

"That's quite a gadget," I groaned. "If I didn't feel so lousy, I'd appreciate it."

Arth was sitting on the edge of the bed holding his bald head in his hands. "I remember now," he sorrowed. "You didn't have a hotel. What a stupidity. I'll be phased. Phased all the way down."

"You haven't got a handful of aspirin, have you?" I asked him.

"Just a minute," Arth said, staggering erect and heading for what undoubtedly was a bathroom. "Stay where you are. Don't move. Don't touch anything."

"All right," I told him plaintively. "I'm clean. I won't mess up the place. All I've got is a hangover, not lice."

Arth was gone. He came back in two or three minutes, box of pills in hand. "Here, take one of these."

I took the pill, followed it with a glass of water.

And went out like a light.

Arth was shaking my arm. "Want another *mass*?"

The band was blaring, and five thousand half-swacked voices were roaring accompaniment.

*In Muenchen steht ein Hofbräuhaus!
Eins, Zwei, G'sufa!*

At the *G'sufa* everybody upped with their king-size mugs and drank each other's health.

My head was killing me. "This is where I came in, or something," I groaned.

Arth said, "That was last night." He looked at me over the rim of his beer mug.

Something, somewhere, was wrong. But I didn't care. I finished my *mass* and then remembered. "I've got to get my bag. Oh, my head. Where did we spend last night?"

Arth said, and his voice sounded cautious, "At my hotel, don't you remember?"

"Not very well," I admitted. "I feel lousy. I must have dimmed out. I've got to go to the Bahnhof and get my luggage."

Arth didn't put up an argument on that. We said good-bye and I could feel him watching after me as I pushed through the tables on the way out.

At the Bahnhof they could do me no good. There were no hotel rooms available in Munich. The head was getting worse by the minute. The fact that they'd somehow managed to lose my bag didn't help. I worked on that project for at least a couple of hours. Not only wasn't the bag at the luggage checking station, but the attendant there evidently couldn't make heads nor tails of the check receipt. He didn't speak English and my high school German was inadequate, especially accompanied by a blockbusting hangover.

I didn't get anywhere tearing my hair and complaining from one end of the Bahnhof to the other. I drew a blank on the bag.

And the head was getting worse by the minute. I was bleeding to death through the eyes and instead of butterflies I had bats in my stomach. Believe me, *nobody* should drink a gallon or more of Marzenbräu.

I decided the hell with it. I took a cab to the airport, presented my return ticket, told them I wanted to leave on the first obtainable plane to New York. I'd spent two days at the *Oktoberfest*, and I'd had it.

I got more guff there. Something was wrong with the ticket, wrong date or some such. But they fixed that up. I never was clear on what was fouled up, some clerk's error, evidently.

The trip back was as uninteresting as the one over. As the hangover began to wear off—a little—I was almost sorry I hadn't been able to stay. If I'd only been able to get a room I *would* have stayed, I told myself.

From Idlewild, I came directly to the office rather than going to my apartment. I figured I might as well check in with Betty.

I opened the door and there I found Mr. Oyster sitting in the chair he had been occupying four—or was it five—days before when I'd left. I'd lost track of the time.

I said to him, "Glad you're here, sir. I can report. Ah, what was it you came for? Impatient to hear if I'd had any results?" My mind was spinning like a whirling dervish in a revolving door. I'd spent a wad of his money and had nothing I could think of to show for it; nothing but the last stages of a grand-daddy hangover.

"Came for?" Mr. Oyster snorted. "I'm merely waiting for your girl to make out my receipt. I thought you had already left."

"You'll miss your plane," Betty said.

There was suddenly a double dip of ice cream in my stomach. I walked over to my desk and looked down at the calendar.

Mr. Oyster was saying something to the effect that if I didn't leave today, it would have to be tomorrow, that he hadn't ponied up that thousand dollars advance for anything less than

immediate service. Stuffing his receipt in his wallet, he fussed his way out the door.

I said to Betty hopefully, "I suppose you haven't changed this calendar since I left."

Betty said, "What's the matter with you? You look funny. How did your clothes get so mussed? You tore the top sheet off that calendar yourself, not half an hour ago, just before this marble-missing client came in." She added, irrelevantly, "Time travelers yet."

I tried just once more. "Uh, when did you first see this Mr. Oyster?"

"Never saw him before in my life," she said. "Not until he came in this morning."

"This morning," I said weakly.

While Betty stared at me as though it was *me* that needed candling by a head shrinker preparatory to being sent off to a pressure cooker, I fished in my pocket for my wallet, counted the contents and winced at the pathetic remains of the thousand. I said pleadingly, "Betty, listen, how long ago did I go out that door—on the way to the airport?"

"You've been acting sick all morning. You went out that door about ten minutes ago, were gone about three minutes, and then came back."

"See here," Mr. Oyster said (interrupting Simon's story), "did you say this was supposed to be amusing, young man? I don't find it so. In fact, I believe I am being ridiculed."

Simon shrugged, put one hand to his forehead and said, "That's only the first chapter. There are two more."

"I'm not interested in more," Mr. Oyster said. "I suppose your point was to show me how ridiculous the whole idea actually is. Very well, you've done it. Confound it. However, I suppose your time, even when spent in this manner, has some value. Here is fifty dollars. And good day, sir!"

He slammed the door after him as he left.

Simon winced at the noise, took the aspirin bottle from its drawer, took two, washed them down with water from the desk carafe.

Betty looked at him admiringly. Came to her feet, crossed over and took up the fifty dollars. "Week's wages," she said. "I suppose that's one way of taking care of a crackpot. But I'm surprised you didn't take his money and enjoy that vacation you've been yearning about."

"I did," Simon groaned. "Three times."

Betty stared at him. "You mean—"

Simon nodded, miserably.

She said, "But *Simon*. Fifty thousand dollars bonus. If that story was true, you should have gone back again to Munich. If there was one time traveler, there might have been—"

"I keep telling you," Simon said bitterly, "I went back there three times. There were hundreds of them. Probably thousands." He took a deep breath. "Listen, we're just going to have to forget about it. They're not going to stand for the space-time continuum track being altered. If something comes up that looks like it might result in the track being changed, they set you right back at the beginning and let things start—for you—all over again. They just can't allow anything to come back from the future and change the past."

"You mean," Betty was suddenly furious at him, "you've given up! Why this is the biggest thing—Why the fifty thousand dollars is nothing. The future! Just think!"

Simon said wearily, "There's just one thing you can bring back with you from the future, a hangover compounded of a gallon or so of Marzenbräu. What's more you can pile one on top of the other, and another on top of that!"

He shuddered. "If you think I'm going to take another crack at this merry-go-round and pile a fourth hangover on the three I'm already nursing, all at once, you can think again."

THE END

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