

The FULFILLER

By Charles Saxby

If You Could Have Whatever You Most Wish for, What Would You Ask?

“BUT then, of course, sir, Mrs. Tolley will always have her rent ready. It was Mrs. Stook who spoke; afterwards, when things had happened and passed, leaving nothing on which he could really place his hand, Maynard liked to think that those words had struck him with a peculiar significance. But in actual fact they passed largely unnoticed, mere debris on the freshest of Mrs. Stook's speech as she stood in the doorway in the half fugitive manner befitting one who merely lingers for a pleasant word over her lodger's dinner.

That word had already lasted long, but Maynard did not repeat his previous error of asking her to sit down. That, as he was now aware, would have somehow savored of impropriety. Then again, in the manner of the tourist on the hunt for impressions, he was regarding her more as a type than as an individual. Standing there with apron encased arms, and that out-there of soft Devon accents, she seemed as a citizen of a property as those purple china to the mantel.

dissonant panned casement was flung and across the potted geraniums in the room, she sat the June air struck with an indelible wild sweetness. Above the scarlet and blue came glimpses of the distant Tor, and a bluster under the mellowing light; of upheaved waste of Dartmoor, all granite heather, implacably the same throughout ages.

“So the Tolleys don't own their farm?” he asked. “You might think so, for I've been told that America it is common to own,” Mrs. Stook replied. “But up here in Devon, nobody owns it; it's all Duchy property hereabouts, the Duchy of Cornwall, which is crown property, though it is little enough the king knows of what goes on. Mr. Bragdon, over to Tavistock, he's the agent, and with him it's rent, rent, up to the Duchy Inn at Princetown each quarter day, or out you go.”

“So, from the coin of the respectably open door, Mrs. Stook rippled on, and in parallel accompaniment ran Maynard's thoughts. Dartmoor, all about him, a land in itself, lifted a thousand feet above the soft valleys of the Devon coast. A brooding sort of place, high and apart in its seeming openness that was still so strangely hidden. To Maynard that hiddenness, which he sensed all about him, came as a mental food, slightly hungered as he was by the sterility of his northern culture. He was curious that the facts of life should be so the same wherever one went. This immemorial country, beneath its surface picturesqueness, linked by rent and toil with the dollar problems of his own knowledge. Through the window, he could see the Hanger-Down Farm of which they spoke, three miles away, crumpling under the jagged lee of Crocker Tor. Remembering its boulder strewn slopes, he wondered how the woman there, bleak as her own fields, could waste a living from the open air, and have the heart to do it.

As though in answer to the unspoken question, Mrs. Stook, having wrapped herself about a fresh relay of breath, went on. “It is this quarter day as will be the test for Hanger-Down, sir, seeing the luck poor Mrs. Tolley had with her pigs this spring, and that it must come to her at best. Quite well to do they was once; there's been Tolleys on the Moor for hundreds of years; but her husband was lost, horse and all, in Fox Tor Mine one night, a hurrying home when she was hurrying Elias. Since then it's been scrap and scrape up to Hanger-Down, and now it is the pigs, twenty pound worth of 'em, a-dying on her in an hour, through eating toadstools, they say. And she left with only that, Elias, as is more of a good cream to follow, poor innocents.”



In a moment the man appeared, poised on a rock just at the limit of the circling firelight, a slight figure screened in shifting vapor. "I am lost in the fog," Maynard called.

of earth and sky through which one tramped dithely, only to find oneself, with surprising suddenness, face to face with an impassive, then ending, just about where it had begun, with nothing accomplished or made plain. Though scarcely mentioned, the Tolley chair was the real core of that circumstance of talk. He had desired it the instant he first saw it, startlingly splendid against the meager background of Hanger-Down Farm, almost throne-like, black with indubitable age, its carving and proportions a perfect specimen of domestic Elizabethan.

Wide, too wide, too empty spaces of that Benbrook Memorial Gallery, of which he was curator. Evidently he saw himself bringing it back, in a sort of artistic candor, as the crowning loot of his first vacation tour. Swiftly he visualized the little ceremony of its unveiling, with himself, gracefully in the background, but still standing out a little. He had never yet been quite able to do that, and there was so much that depended on his standing out a little. It must be wonderful up there by moonlight, he offered.

“I'd be keeping away from there after dark, all unused to the Moor as you be, sir.” “But there will be almost full moon,” Maynard objected.

“The Benbrook Chair”—swiftly Maynard planned a nationwide advertisement for it by articles in the leading art magazines, illustrated with photographs, including one of the gallery's benefactress. Knowing Mrs. Ira, he mentally halved whatever he might pay for it, making up the balance from his own slim pocket.

“The Wood is a dangerous place after dark,” she answered. “I'll remember that,” said Maynard easily; then he summoned his most persuasive smile, “I had another reason for coming this way; a hope that you might have changed your mind.” “If you mean the chair, it is not for sale,” she answered.

“But surely—after—” He hesitated; work worn though the woman was, there remained that about her which made the mention of pigs seem almost an affront; yet he could imagine her attending to them with a polite unimpairment. As it was, their ghosts seemed to rise behind her, implacable as the unseen pursuers of a Greek tragedy.

“After—your losses,” he concluded. That struck home, but she faced it. She would face anything he thought; what else could she do, with that wide prison of the Moor all about her, cutting off escape, its desolation only accentuated by those desperate fields. He could see her, year after year, facing things across a narrowing circle of competence that, like the Magic Skin, relentlessly receded in upon her. Her face grew more rigid as he spoke, but her determination held.

“The chair is not for sale,” she repeated; then followed a glow of pride. “I have heard that Americans do not understand such things, but the chair has been in the Tolley family for hundreds of years. It is all that is left to us now, and—since he is the last of us all—I must keep it for my son.”

As she spoke Elias came down the lane towards them, his advent heralded by the thin pipe of a whistle, and even at that distance his flapping, half dancing walk proclaimed him as one set apart from usual humanity. A dim understanding dawned on Maynard; all that was left to the woman was her son, all that was left to her son, the chair. Had Elias been different she might have sold, but being as he was, her pride in him demanded that he have the chair as sign and seal of what his forbears had once been.

Silently he left her, regretting that in his way up the lane he must come face to face with Elias. Shamblingly the fellow came, child's face on man's shoulders, piping his way to that elfin whistle. “Be you going up along?” he asked, as Maynard drew near. Then followed a half cunning suggestion, “Maybe you'm agoing up to the Wood?”

The afterglow was fading, and over the Moor, already faintly silvered by the moon, crept a melancholy purple. Down the lane the figure of Mrs. Tolley stood out against the lingering lavender of the sky, intently watchful of her son. Noting the look on Elias' face, Maynard had an odd feeling that her son was not a question but something which he could only vaguely apprehend by the term “a crisis,” but a crisis of what he could not imagine.

“It is a fine night for him,” Elias went on, grinning again as though in delight of a mutual mystery. “This mist'll be coming soon, and he likes the mist.” “Who likes the mist?” Maynard impatiently demanded, and Elias grinned again in coy reproach of so much reserve.

“As if you didn't know, for what else would you be going up to the gashly Wood at night dark? It's the Giver, I mean, of course.” “The Giver?” From down the lane came Mrs. Tolley's voice, calling her son in harsh entreaty, but Elias took no heed. Across his face, so unmarked by all that would have made it that of a man, there glowed a faint light as of one who, for an instant, sights something beyond the state of his ex-paradised humanity.

“Yes, yes,” he nodded eagerly. “The Giver, who else? If so be you see him up in the Wood after dark, he'll give you what you asks of him. It was all that away that Peter Gurney, down to Maryleave, got the wench for wife, come three years ago.”

Some Moor legend, Maynard saw, one of those rather smothered mental creations which he had felt all about him. With a tourist's avidness for the picturesque, he listened as Elias went on. “Caught up to the Wood, Peter was, by the night and the mist, and when he tramped past, come morn, I knowed he'd seen us. This wench was promised to another and the banns all called down to Shaugh Church, but she up and off to Plymouth with Peter that day and marries 'im afore the magistrate. Like cat and dog they be now, and Peter doing his ten days in Tavistock jail for clouting her with a stick, but 'e got 'er.”

With singular vividness Maynard could imagine that man of whom Elias spoke. Unconscious, pallid with the strangeness of his vigil, striding down the lane in the swirl of a vapoury dawn, alive with renewed hope of a woman lost to him.

A suspicion prompted him to question, carefully disguising the amused tolerance back of it. “And you, Elias, have you seen him, too?” “How should I?” Elias asserted back, with utmost simplicity. “Six years ago us it was, come St. John's Eve. Just so close as you he stood, with the mist ablowing all about us. ‘And what would you have, if so be you could?’ he asks me, laughing like that. But I know us and I says, so bold as brass, ‘That mother allus has her rent,’ says I. And Squire Bragdon can take on all he likes, but her rent mother has, for what the Giver gives you gets.”

Once more Mrs. Tolley's call echoed up the lane, and at its command the light faded from Elias' face, leaving it only that of an “innocent.” Then, as he turned to obey, came a last flicker that sent him after Maynard, who was already striding up the slope.

“The night,” it was an experience, and with delight he discovered himself still young enough for the thrill of an experience to outweigh its discomforts.

There was nothing to do but wait, even though it be until the dawn. Amongst these piled up boulders the least misstep might mean a broken limb. A flat rock, overarched by a more leafy oak, promised refuge, and he broke off dry branches and built a fire. It blazed up, making of his nook an arched bower amidst the vapory chaos that poured all about it.

He sat long, warming himself, occasionally, smoking one of the treasured cigars that must last him until morning. Hour after hour slid by; in the muffling mists the bawl of the Dart, far below, sunk to a faint diapason; from the nearest slope the sounds of snoring grazing came with a sense of companionship. All else was a stillness so deep that he almost caught the subtly changing vibrations of the deepening night. There was a fascination about it all so strong that he doubted if it was “entirely healthy,” and unconsciously he strove to “keep a grip on himself.”

The sense of time was largely in abeyance, so Maynard could never quite determine how long it was before that young stranger happened on him, but the night had slid into its most silent hour. The first intimation was from those ponies out on the slope. A sudden ceasing of their breathy munching, an instant in which he could picture them with heads upraised, their nostrils distended to catch the scent of whatever it was that had disturbed them. Then a ring of hoofs on the night, an ache of increased silence, through which Maynard strained to catch a further sound. Even when it came he half doubted it. Footsteps, so deadened by the mist that they were more to be felt than apprehended by the ears, advancing down through the Wood, originating from boulder to boulder with a surprising sureness.

There was something almost uncanny in the direct certainty of that approach, and he felt himself chilling a little, then warming as he caught an unmistakable humanness in that presence. Whoever it might be, it was somebody who knew his way and Maynard rated his voice. “Hello, there!”

He had not imagined that the man was so close. The answering hail, with a ring of slight amusement in it, came from but a few yards away. In a moment he appeared, pointing on a rock just at the limit of the circle of firelight, a slight figure screened in shifting vapor.

“I am lost in the fog,” Maynard called, his own tone catching a reflex of that amusement which had sounded in the other's. “I saw your fire through the—we call it ‘mist’ up here, you know.”

A young fellow, and from his voice and demeanor a gentleman. It was difficult to distinguish him as he stood there, on the extreme edge of visibility, but Maynard had an impression of a man several years his junior and of much his outer and inner makeup. A fellow at home in cities, traveled, with probably an academic background; yet his passage through the Wood had argued a remarkable familiarity with the place. Even as he wondered, Maynard's mind flashed a possible answer; probably this was one of the young men from that abode of weather beaten dignity known as Tor Royal.

“Then ‘mist’ it shall be, by all means,” he laughed. “It seems to make little difference to you, though. You must know the place well to tramp it on such a night.”

“I—O, yes, I know it.” The stranger shed the subject lightly and Maynard again took up his tone. “That is lucky for me. I will claim your good offices for getting out of here.”