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, more debris on the freshet of Mrs. Stook's speech as she stood in the doorway in the half-furtive 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 enfolded arms, and that outpouring of soft Devon accents, she seemed as purely literary a property as those purple china dogs on the mantel.

One diamond-paned casement was flung back, and across the potted geraniums in the window seat the June air struck with an indescribable wild sweetness. Above the scarlet blossoms came glimpses of the distant Tours, purple and bistre under the mellowing light; the vast upheaved waste of Dartmoor, all granite and heather, implacably the same throughout the ages.

"So the Tolleys don't own their farm?" he asked.

"You might think so, for I've been told that in America it is common to own," Mrs. Stook agreed. "But up here to Dartymoor nobody owns, sir; 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 Princestown each quarter day, or out you go."

So, from the coign 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 softer vales 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 sterilities of his western college. It 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 Rockledge. Through the window he could see the Hanger-Down farm of which they spoke, three miles away, crouching under the jagged lee of Crockern Tor. Remembering its boulder-strewn slopes, he wondered how the woman there, bleak as her own fields, could wring a living from that sparse soil.

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 hard 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 mire one night, a-hurrying home when she was expecting Elias. Since then it's been scrimp and scrape up to Hanger-Down, and now it is the pigs, 20-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 hindrance than a help, poor innocent."

Unknown to herself, probably from her sheer relish in it, Mrs. Stook had the art of the born raconteuse; an incommunicable way of making her hearer see all these things from which she really spoke but did not actually say. Maynard found himself catching flashes back of her words. Pigs—he had never before realized that pigs could also be tragedy. But he could see them now, spread across the foreground in a riot of fat death; and against them Elias' lank figure gangling up the lane, his face, under its thatch of hair, half sensitive, half silly, wholly wistful.

"Ah, yes—Elias," Maynard murmured. "I have noticed him."

"You probably would, sir," Mrs. Stook firmly agreed. "Not that there's a mite of harm in him, but a bit mazedlike. There's some as say it was the shock of his father's death afore he was born, while there's others—"

Mrs. Stook paused for a backward glance of caution over her shoulder, and her tone sank to a more thrilling contralto.

"There's others say as he got pixy led when a child. Not that I hold with such things myself, sir, but—I see to it as my own children is safe within door after sunset, for the Moor is a whisht place come dark, come dew."

Her speech was at high tide now, and she rode triumphantly on its crest. Seeing it might spread itself over the lower levels of Dartmoor superstitions, Maynard sought to guide it back to those channels where it would turn the wheels of his own desire.

"You said that tomorrow is quarter day."

"Tomorrow as ever is, sir. Come 9 o'clock Mr. Bragdon will be up to the Duchy inn, and it is £5 that Mrs. Tolley must pay un. A stinger it is to him each time she does it, for they's many as 'd give £10 a year more for Hanger-Down if she lost her lease on it. How Mrs. Tolley does it is the wonder of the Moor, you might say, and I've heard Mr. Bragdon myself a-bawling at her: 'So Mrs. Tolley has her rent again, hey? Bound to be so, Mrs. Tolley, or you'll send Elias up to the Wood again to find out why—hey?'"

With that impartible magic behind her words, Mrs. Stook was once more painting those inner pictures on Maynard's brain. The Duchy inn, grimly foursquare, with its air of turning a hunched shoulder to the perpetual blasts. It would probably be raining, with a heavy odor of steam from the shaggy coated ponies in the farm carts outside. Groups of men, stiffly conscious of their unaccustomed, ceremonial best; women, clad in sober black; the faces of all alike marked with that moorland seal of sheer endurance.

And within, at Caesar's table, the agent himself, a portly 50, florid, chronically choleric, plainly impressed that to be the administrator of a crown duchy was also to be appointee of the very gods.

"You said that tomorrow would be the test for Mrs. Tolley?" Maynard ventured, his mind still on his own peculiar angle of the affair.

"Aye, sir, so I said, and I says it again," Mrs. Stook nodded, with a certain darkling. "What with they pigs a-dying, if what he said be true, it's tomorrow as will prove it."

"Prove what?" asked Maynard.

At the directness of that question Mrs. Stook's speech dried up. A moment before it had been like the Dart itself in full spate, but now it was as though some subjective cavern had opened, swallowing it to depths where he could not pursue.

It was a phenomenon which he had already encountered in these Dartmoor people; one which he connected somehow with the land itself, spread out in a seemingly frank openness of earth and sky through which one tramped blithely, only to find oneself, with surprisingly suddenness, face to face with an impasse. And Mrs. Stook's change of manner was an impregnable as the Tors themselves.

"If you've finished with the meat, sir, I'll make bold to remove it. They's apple tart and clotted cream to follow."

Not until the deep tart was before him, with a bowl of cream so thick that the spoon stood upright in it, did she speak again. Then Maynard, under the push of the thought continually uppermost in his mind, sought to entice her back from her sanctuary of silence.

"I think I'll walk up to Wistman's wood this evening," he remarked casually, but the glance that Mrs. Stook threw him held almost alarm.

"You be going up to the wood, sir?"

"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.

"It's the mist; once that comes up even the moormen themselves go astray."

Maynard looked out at the evening, crystallinely golden in the mellowing light, every Tor sharp against a cloudless sky; but Mrs. Stook nodded again in superior sapiency.

"It comes all of a sudden like."

"If I get lost I'll shout for Elias Tolley to come after me," Maynard smiled. "The wood is almost within hearing distance of the farm."

A shadow of suspicion crept over Mrs. Stook, and her answer came with some grimness of portent.

"Aye, if any should know this wood, it's surely him."

Secretly charmed by the subtlety with which he was approaching his real objective, Maynard went on:

"I might stop and speak to Mrs. Tolley again—about the chair."

That was the word which had been lying unuttered in his mind all the time, waiting its chances to spring forth in some such elaborate carelessness, much as a lover will wait opportunity to utter the name of his mistress. Now that it was spoken it almost seemed to him to take an actual substance, as though the mere words were the thing itself; but Mrs. Stook accepted it with a faint superiority.

"She'll never part with the chair, sir. The Tolley chair be knowed all about, even so far as London, they do say. She's been offered pounds and pounds, but never will she sell."

"But—the present circumstances—"

Delicate as his suggestion had been it weighed too heavily on the balance between Mrs. Stook's speech and silence. Once again she effected her miracle of subjective withdrawal. She was even withdrawing physically this time, her last words completing the circle in which all their dialogue had really run.

"Mrs. Tolley'll always have her rent, sir."

Left alone, Maynard resigned himself to a mood. He seemed to see, with a melancholy clearness, how like to life had been the circle of their talk; always on the verge of revelation, 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 circumference of talk. He had desired it the instant he first saw it, startlingly splendid against the meager background of Hanger-Down farm, almost thronelike, black with indubitable age, its carving and proportions a perfect specimen of domestic Elizabethan.

Willfully he pictured it as dominating the too wide, too new, too empty spaces of that Benbrook memorial gallery, of which he was the curator. Enviously he saw himself bringing it back, in a sort of artistic banditry, as the crowning loot of this 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—39 per cent of it being Elsie Lathrop. Six years, and Elsie, in those prudent collegiate finances, seemed as far off as ever, and even her brave confidence, he suspected, sometimes wore a little thin. Small wonder, he thought, as he caught a sidewise glimpse of himself—past 30, with the beginnings of the curator's stoop and the slightly peering manner of one perpetually involved in the half tones of a pseudo artistic circle.

That chair might mean so much to himself and Elsie. Deliciously he rehearsed again that possible presentation. Fall, the hazy Indian summer of the middle west, with the swish of feet among fallen leaves. The bare gallery, the president, faculty, and students of the college. Elsie, demurely radiant at his little triumph; and, prominently placed, the real center of it all and the target for all its hidden arrows, Mrs. Ira Benbrook herself.

In a moment the man appeared, poising 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.

Mrs. Ira—she loomed before him, a shape of vision only but uncomfortably potent in his affairs. Stout, 60, sentimental; the aggressive widow of a self-made man whom, even before his death, she had left mentally far behind, as is the American custom. Tremendously impressed with the social prominence of art, she bowed before its authorities, while curiously alert lest, after all, it might prove to be "not quite the thing"; and yet, withal, she was of an uncomfortable shrewdness. Bustling, tyrannical, and always just-about-to-be fairy godmother of the gallery built by her husband's will, she lingered perpetually on the brink of further endowment, without quite going over. And it was on that endowment, with the increase of salary to follow, that Maynard and Elsie pinned their hopes.

But Mrs. Ira, stabilized by her shrewdness like a weathervane by its rod, was emphatically of the type that requires to be "shown," and that chair, undoubtedly a treasure, and as undoubtedly a bargain, might be the very thing to precipitate her into the abysses of generosity. "The Benbrook Chair"—swiftly Maynard planned a nationwide advertisement of it by articles in the leading art magazines, illustrated with photographs, including one of the gallery's benefactresses. Knowing Mrs. Ira, he mentally halved whatever he might pay for it, making up the balance from his own slim pocket.

But between him and that solution of his difficulties lay this mysterious and irritating certainty of the Tolley rent.

How curious and hidden were the connections of life. Hanger-Down farm, the Wood, and the too spacious corridors of that Rockledge gallery. Mrs. Tolley, Mrs. Ira, and a tragedy of pigs. And always, in the center, himself, with Elsie Lathrop as his invisible companion and spur. One carried one's own world with one, wherever one went, viewing all others through its coloring prisms.

The long June twilight already lay over the Moor as Maynard started out. A golden radiance, faintly sad, as though gloriously mourning the dead sanctities of day. Under it the heather clad slopes showed copper-colored, shadowed with purple and overlaid by a bloom of early summer.

The moon already hung huge and yellow above the sweep of Hessary as he crossed under the trees of Dart bridge and struck up the lane leading to the wood. At Hanger-Down he stopped, looking over the hedges of piled granite to the meager fields beyond. Mrs. Tolley was there, standing severe and black shawled amid the rows of potatoes. Hoe in hand, she faced him across the gate with a suggestion of one defending it. As he looked at the landscape about them Maynard could understand that; a place vaguely inimical to all human endeavor; whatever came from it would almost of necessity be tinged with calamity. Against it all the woman showed with a dignity of sheer endurance, like that of the beetling, storm-scarred Tor above her.

"It is full late for a stranger to be leaving the road," she warned as he stopped.

"I had a fancy to see the wood by moonlight."

"The Wood?"

Involuntarily Mrs. Tolley glanced to where it showed, a darker path on the high slopes, and as involuntarily she drew her shawl more closely about her.

"The Wood is a dangerous place after dark."

"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 poise unimpaired. 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 around 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 this 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 of 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 lavenders of the sky, intently watchful of her son. Noting the look on Elias' face, Maynard had an odd feeling that back of the other's question lurked something which he could vaguely apprehend by the term "a crisis," but a crisis of what he could not imagine.

"'Tis a fine night for him," Elias went on, grinning again as though in delight of a mutual mystery. "The mist'll be acoming 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 agoing up to the gashly Wood come 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 exparadised humanity.

"Yes fay," he nodded eagerly. "The Giver, who else? If so be you sees 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 Marycleave, got the wench for wife, come three years agone."

Some Moor legend, Maynard saw, one of those rather smothering 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 traipses past, come morn, I knowed he'd seen un. The 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. Uncouth, pallid with the strangeness of his vigil, striding down that lane in the swirl of a vapory 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 not?" Elias queried back, with utmost simplicity. "Six year agone it was, come St. John's eve. Just so close as you be stood, with the mist ablowing all about un. 'And what would you have, if so be you could?' 'e asks me, laughing like. But I knowed un 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 "aninnocent." Then, as he turned to obey, came a last flicker that sent him after Maynard, who was already striding up the slope.

"You'll know if you see un. Just like me, he looks."

He clouded for an instant in a doubt that ended in a weak flame of denial.

"That Peter Gurney told that the Giver looks like him; but it's false, I tell you. I've seen and I know, just like me, that's how it is he looks."

He shambled off, piping his way down to the solitary woman who awaited him, a darker shadow on her shadowy land. With a breath of relief, as of one bursting through entangling cobwebs, Maynard strode on alone.

A rough way, but gradually he neared the wood, the first time he had seen it except by the light of full day. A few upended acres of stunted oaks, unbelievably aged, their boles half buried in a slide of broken granite.

"Wistman's Wood," the Wood of the Wise Men; last remnant of the legendary forest which once covered all the moor; sole receptacle of the secrets of those Druids whose overthrown cromlechs strew its wastes. Cautiously Maynard entered, picking his way over the granite slabs, the holes between them treacherously masked by bracken and brambles. A weird enough place even by high noon, it showed eerie and sinister in this play of moonlight and black shade. It looked such a wood as might be grown for the fashioning of Charon's bark or the dim galleys of some terrestrial Styx.

Gnarled trunks going deeply down amidst the boulders that lifted him almost to the level of the sparse branches, funereally wreathed in mistletoe.

It was that play of half light which was most disconcerting, that difficulty in determining which was substance and which mere glamour of moon. There were moments when the Wood seemed almost of a different dimension as apparently solid shapes dissolved at his approach, and what had promised open paths became high rock across his way. He had pushed to the center of it now, and in a half repulsion he turned to pick his way back to the more ordinary openness of the slopes.

The light was mellowing strangely; a huge boulder, which had not been there an instant before, wavered towards him, enveloping him in a moist darkness. Fluttering streamers wreathed the branches, a faery whiteness pervaded the whole place. The moon seemed to flicker and go out, like a blown lamp; a stone on which he had been about to step rent itself to rags, and he had scarce time to save himself from a plunge into one of the gaping oubliettes masked by the acrid ferns.

With a rueful laugh Maynard realized that these moor folk knew their own country. Even as Elias Tolley, or that Peter Gurney, he, too, was now "caught in the Wood by the mist and 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 those 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 cigarettes that must last him until morning. Hour after hour slid by; in the muffling mists the brawl of the Dart, far below, sunk to a faint diapason; from the nearest slope the sounds of some ponies 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 conscientiously 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 upreared, 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, springing 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 raised 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, poising 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 own outer and inner make-up. 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."

"That should not be difficult," the other replied, then he paused, almost with an effect of giving Maynard a chance to change his mind. "That is, if you really want that."

"What did you imagine I wanted?" Maynard retorted. "To stay here all night?"

"One never knows. People want so many things."

In its tolerance, the slightly conscious broadmindedness of a young man still fresh from a university, it was just such an answer, Maynard amusedly thought, as he himself might have given ten years before.

"Perhaps you thought that I came up here to watch for the—the 'Giver' I believe, is his official title?" he ventured, and the answer came quickly.

"You know the legend, then?"

"I heard it an hour ago, from Elias Tolley."

"Ah, yes—poor Elias."

The reply came in a negligent half pity, then the stranger dropped into a more reflective mood.

"And yet, after all, you know, the Tolley rent is one of the miracles of the Moor."

"A quarterly miracle, depended upon to be on tap, like the blood of Januarius," Maynard put it.

"But which never loses its freshness."

"And tomorrow the supreme test," Maynard finished.

"For a stranger you seem well acquainted with the circumstances."

"I have a landlay," said Maynard, drily. "What I can't understand is that the neighbors don't help that miracle a little."

"You might wonder that — as a stranger. But, for all their inarticulateness, these poor folk have a keen sense of the drama of a situation."

More and more, as the other spoke, Maynard was receiving the impression of one of much of his own walk of life. That they should meet here, at such a time and under such circumstances, was just another of the surprises of this surprising Moor. A place so famous, yet holding such reverses of the little known; so traveled by tourists from every part, and still remaining one of the solitary parts of the earth. One could never predict into what unusual circumstances it might not project one.

"When I heard you coming I half hoped that you might prove to be this mystic being yourself," Maynard went on, with a touch of humor.

"I'm afraid I hardly measure up to the supernatural," the young man apologized.

"Hardly — since Elias Tolley impressed upon me that this 'Giver' looked exactly like him," Maynard laughed.

"And Peter Gurney claimed that he looked like him," the other smiled back; then, almost unwillingly, came the addition, "and, you know, he did get the girl he wanted.

"When the witnesses disagree—" shrugged Maynard. "It is a little disappointing, though. The presiding genius of a place like this should be a real Druid sort of chap, in magnificent nudity and a wreath of mistletoe."

"That would seem more appropriate."

Standing there on his rock, perpetually half hidden by the shifting veils of mist, the other seemed hardly more than a voice, at times. Afterwards Maynard thought that that was probably why he had never bidden the fellow approach the fire, but the idea simply never occurred to him. Then again, there was a charm about their half jesting, wholly unforeseen colloquy which would have been spoiled by too much certainty.

"And yet it is strange that all who claim to have seen him should so agree on the same thing," the stranger continued, still lingering on the edge of the light, as if he, too, fell that same charm of elusiveness. "Just like themselves; they all agree on that, at least. It almost leads one to suspect that what they really saw was—just themselves."

"You mean—" Maynard asked.

"O, well—a place like this."

Up the slope the ponies were quiet again and the only sound between their sentences was that drip-drip of the moisture distilling in the alchemy of the oaks. An eerie place, and it struck again into Maynard's veins with a slight chill. In all this amorphousness himself and the rock on which he sat seemed the only solidities; even the other man might have been but a wraith.

"It certainly poultices one," he agreed, delighted once more that they should so comprehend each other.

"And after all, we know so little of what may lie within us to be poulticed out," the other went on. "All we know is that those two got what they claim to have asked."

"Asked of what?" demanded Maynard swiftly, and there was a silent interval, as if pondering, before the other replied.

"Who knows? As you said—it poultices one. Perhaps of an imagination of some principle of fulfillment that may lie within each of us. We think that we know so much, but in reality we do not even know how we fulfill our most ordinary desires."

"Our desires," the stranger went on, his voice coming somberly through a fresh access of vapor; "those thorny crowns of our youth; those pursuing hounds of that heaven which is said to lie within us all. And most of us seem content with lapdogs."

"We take what we can get," Maynard interjected, almost with a feeling of self-defense.

"Exactly," came the cool response. "But this legend of the Giver or the Fulfiller, one meets it in so many lands, told in so many tongues; but one never meets any mention of one who asked it for anything really worth having. The stories always end in a tragedy of their own meagerness."

"They ask for what they want."

"For what they want! Elias Tolley, Peter Gurney; offered whatsoever they ask, even to freedom itself—and the one demanding his mother's rent, the other a girl, for the beating of whom he was sent to jail last month."

There was a touch of scorn in the tones that came through the mist, as if the speaker were wearied of littleness. From off among the oaks the hoot of an owl followed it like an echo of derision. Maynard had an uncomfortable impression that that scorn, that echoing jeer from the place itself, were somehow directed at him.

"They asked for what they believed in," he argued, still vaguely on the defensive. "There are few surer tests of a man's faith than to offer him whatever he may ask. After all—how do we know that we would do any better ourselves?"

"Just for instance, now; what would you ask for if you met this mysterious stranger?" the other laughed, and Maynard, to his surprise, found the answer rushing to his lips.

"For the Tolley chair."

It had come out apparently without his own volition, and following it came a laugh, at his own expense, that startled him by its harshness.

"You see, we are all of little faith," he grated. "But then, that chair, to me, would be the gateway to so much, much more."

"Ah, yes—to so much, much more."

Maynard could not be sure if it were really the other who spoke, or if those words were just the echo of his own, thrown back to him by the increasing mist. Whichever it had been, there was withdrawal in them, and finality as well, as though this young stranger were completely through with him, almost already gone, in fact, without the formality of a physical departure.

He sprang to his feet with a shout.

"Here—wait for me—don't go and leave me here."

So strong had been the impression of crying to empty air that it was with relief that he heard the answer coming amusedly back.

"I'm still here, the mist hid me for a moment, that was all. If you wait a while longer it will clear and you can find your way back as easily as you came."

"But can't I go with you?" Maynard asked, loath to be left alone.

"Wait a little while and you will find it all right. I go a way that you could not follow. Goodby."

"Au revoir," Maynard called, and the laugh of farewell that rang back told him that the other was already on his way.

Those poultices of night and circumstance were playing strange tricks on Maynard. For a moment as he stood there, listening to those footsteps retreating in the same surprising sureness with which they had come, he had a sensation of being suddenly enormous. Enormous almost to infinitude, he seemed, and those irrevocably retreating footsteps might have been going down into unsuspected depths within himself.

But such things would not do, and he huddled over the fire, striving again for that "grip on himself" as he wondered what collegiate Rockledge would say if it knew the things that its official guardian of the arts was capable of feeling. As he warmed his cold hands there came a comforting sense of ordinariness, together with a touch of anger at this cool young denizen of the moor, who left a stranger in such a predicament.

A rather theatric young man, with his entrances, his exits, and his metaphysics. The most hopeful thing about him had been his prophecy of clearing weather.

Whoever he might be, the fellow was at least acquainted with the imports of those fickle skies. It was but a dew mist, after all; a blanket which the moor pulled over itself against the first chill of night. As earth and air equalized their temperature there came rents in that luminous opaqueness all about. Glimpses of more distant oaks, interminable aisles shot through with the mystery of the moon. Like down dropping veils the mist wreathed from the branches, sinking away into the holes between the rocks. Stamping out the remnants of his fire, Maynard started back on his unsafe way.

It was with relief that he at last left the heather, feeling his feet once more upon the narrow confines of

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