

THE
PASSION FLOWER

LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

The Rotarian
OCTOBER 1925 ISSUE

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October, 1925

Illustrations by
A. H. Winkler



“Are we at the gate?”

“Aye. Shall I open it, and drive in?”

“No, I will get down!”

“Careful wi’ the step, sir. Let me help! There—your cane, sir? Aye, the lodge is close by. If you’ll just take my arm—”

The passenger shook his head in impatience, then checked himself, and exchanged his frown for a smile. “Thank you, but I think I know . . . every stone of the way! You will wait for me in the patch of shade to the east of the gate—it’s there, isn’t it? . . . I thought so!”

The driver drew up his rig by the old stone wall, where a great tree reached out in grateful shade for himself and the mare. He watched, with gaping interest, the slow progress of his passenger.

Peter Vallance followed the tappings of his cane, that seemed not less eager than he to achieve the ivy-grown oaken doorway. His hand reached out at last, fumbling a little for the knocker, an unnecessary action, for the door flew open, and a rotund, rosy-cheeked woman was crying: “Mr. Peter! Mr. Peter! God bless us, sir, but this is a glad, sad day to see you so!”

He put an arm about her shoulders, as might a son embrace his mother, though the disparity of birth was so obvious that even the yokel on the driver’s seat widened the gape of his jaws, as became one versed in, and implicitly accepting, the ancient laws of caste.

“You had my letter, then, Mrs. Podgett?”



“ . . . the play’s over now, isn’t it? My play as well as yours.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Not receiving any wire, I concluded you had, and that it was safe to come. The place is closed up, and deserted?”

“If you could only see, sir, just how deserted it is!”

“Ah! . . . I met Mr. Reggie in the Strand last week, and so he told me. Perhaps it is just as well, then—” he patted her shoulders, for there were threatening sobs,—“just as well that I am—as I am. I shall people it again for myself . . . Manage to find my way round, right enough!”

“Oh, no, sir! There’s the brook, begging your pardon, and the steps, and dear knows what harm you’d come to! If tweren’t for my rheumatics, Mr. Peter, and Jim being away all along of a cousin on his mother’s side that’s took sick, why one of us ’ud be glad enough to go along. As it is, Mr. Peter, I’ve a little girl here who’s staying at one of the neighbors—such a dear little lass, she is, and loves to come and poke about the place—and no harm at all to that, as I can see . . . she’ll be no trouble to you, if you’ll just let her go along, and tell her what you’d like best to see—” Mrs. Podgett stumbled over the word.

He said quickly, to cover her confusion, though he had fancied a lone adventure: “Splendid!” Perhaps it was as well. There were questions he would wish to ask. He could interrogate a youngster with less embarrassment than he could even Mrs. Podgett, had her rheumatic elderly legs been equal to the journey he had planned.

II.

She led him through the now open gateway. The creaking stiffness of the gate itself impressed him with a sense of change; there had been a day when the comings and goings gave little chance for the creakings of disuse. The girl took his arm again; he liked the unobtrusive, yet solicitous, way she did so, guiding him rather than leading, leaving full play for his cane, as if she suspected the truth—that the cane, like himself, was traversing familiar ground. He judged her, by her voice, her manner, the way in which her short skirts swished against his leg occasionally, to be about fourteen or so.

“I love these grounds, don’t you?” she enthused suddenly, as if a common interest in the place had broken down the barrier of unacquaintance. “And the old house set back there beyond the trees at the end of the drive . . . only it makes a person a bit lonesome to see it shut up, doesn’t it? They say”—her voice fell to a whisper—“they say it’s up for sale, now the family’s all scattered and away. Mrs. Podgett says most likely it would have been sold before this, but for Miss Charmian—”

He interrupted: “Ah, you know Miss Charmian?”

“Oh, of course, I’ve seen her! She comes here sometimes, you know—not often now. Mrs. Podgett says maybe she’s too busy with people, up in London, wanting to marry her, or get her married. Mrs. Podgett says old Mr. Hallet—that’s her father, you know—will give her the place here if she marries, and

sell it if she doesn't. Mrs. Podgett says—"

"Suppose we forget what Mrs. Podgett says, just now! We're going to turn back the leaves for an hour. We know it's the present, and that the future's ahead, but we're going to pretend it's the past. We know the place is shut up and deserted, but we're going to people it again. Is that agreed? Come, I know you can play a game as well as another! I shall be my old self, and you—there, I declare I haven't even asked your name!"

"Mrs. Podgett sometimes calls me Dot for short. If—"

"Dot it is! Well, Dot, you'll have to be the rest of the folk, I guess, and I shall ask you all manner of questions, and you must answer them as best you can."

"Of course! But can't I pretend I'm—someone? It's much more fun, isn't it, than just being—people? You're on a visit here, and we'll pretend I'm someone come to the gate to show you around . . . I know!—I'll be Miss Charmian! She'd be just the kind to meet you at the gate, wouldn't she, as Mrs. Podgett says, loving the place like she does. Let's pretend, eh?"

He could almost feel the child's eagerness. But his cane was poking, restlessly, into the sandy soil of the driveway.

"Let's pretend, eh?" she repeated.

"Yes, Dot, let's pretend!"

"Oh, but you mustn't call me Dot! You must call me Charmian!"

The slender cane bent dangerously.

"Of course, little Miss Make-Believe! I shall call you—Charmian!"

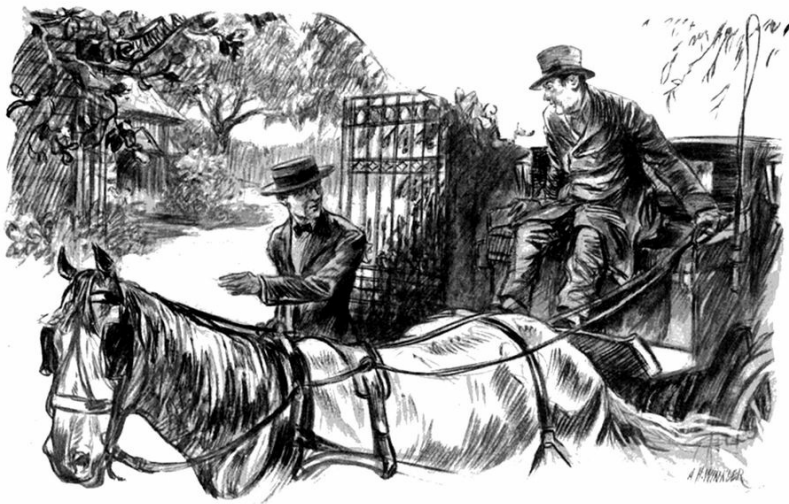
She clapped her hands. He moved on a pace, that she might not see him wincing. Her voice followed him, in almost crestfallen embarrassment: "Oh, but—what shall I call you?"

"You may call me—Peter," he said, managing a smile. "Now, whither away, Charmian?"

"You shall tell me where you want to go—Peter!"

III.

"The driveway is still the same, Charmian? Ah, but it isn't! I can feel the weeds under my feet as we walk."



“Aye, the lodge is close by. If you’ll just take my arm—”

“Mrs. Podgett says they try their best, but there isn’t much money allowed for the up-keep. When a place is for sale, and empty—”

He patted her shoulder. “But the beeches are the same, on either side,” he said. “I can hear their voices now. They always seemed to whisper when I came, and when I went again!” No, no, Peter Vallance! Once they were still, with an odd stillness, as if they knew . . . as if they knew!

“You are very silent, Peter!”

“I am thinking. Do you mind if I light my pipe?”

“Oh, do let me help with the match!”

“I can manage,” he said, shortly; then, penitently: “Of course you may, child! Mind your fingers, though, and watch out for that tricky breeze. Splendid!”

“Where are you going now, Peter?”

“To renew my acquaintance with the beeches.”

“Mind the fallen branches . . . and the grass is long now, isn’t it?”

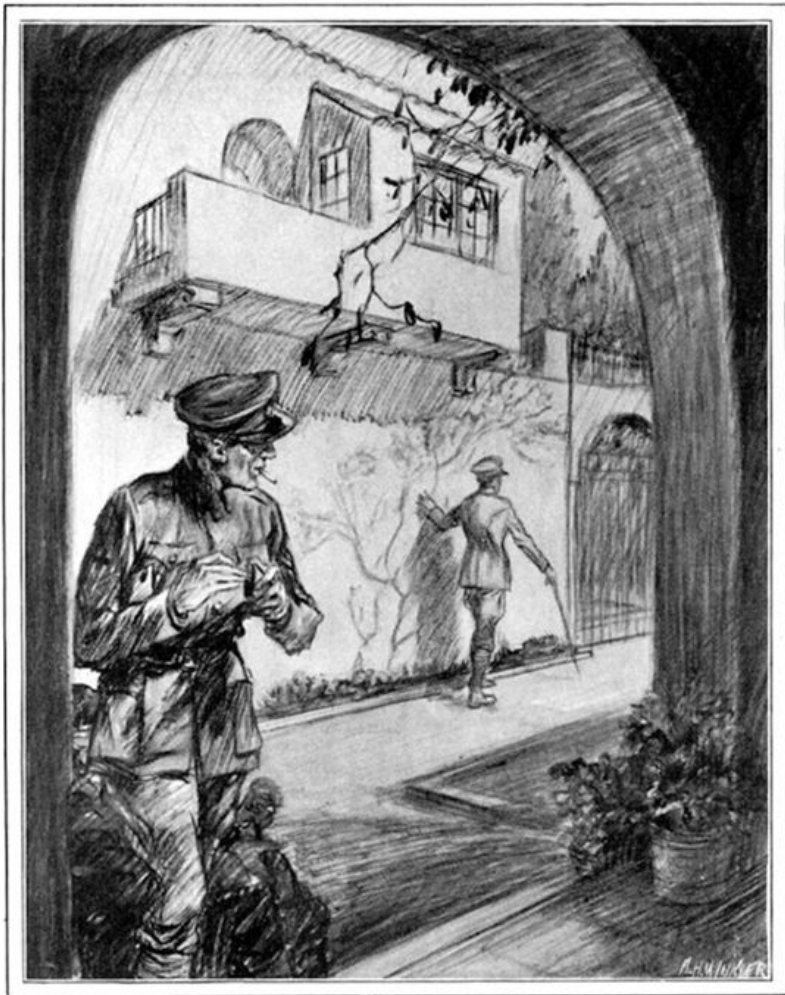
“It used to be like a billiard table . . . fine old turf . . . no, I’ll not stumble, Dot—your pardon, Charmian! . . . Splendid old trees, what a lot they could tell if they would! Perhaps they even watched the Cavaliers ride up in search of hiding Roundheads. What a pity old places like this must go! These damnable taxes . . . paying for the war, Charmian, paying for the war! And yet, I have to thank the war for something—but for it, Peter wouldn’t be here now, doing the rounds with you. Shall we get our feet on the driveway again?” He laughed softly. “You’ve no idea how I felt the first time I walked up this driveway. Here I was, on leave in England for the first time, and lonely as

blazes, and the gods of luck sent me an invitation that might have happened to anyone else instead. Just ran across it in the Eagle Hut—in London, you know. Wasn't even keen on coming—until I saw the gate, and the drive, and the beeches, and the Hall showing up, grayly, at the end. Some funny little voice inside me kept saying: 'You've come home! You've come home!' . . . perhaps it was the trees whispering, Charmian, having seen some ancestor of mine among the Roundheads or the Cavaliers! Generations back, we came from round about here."

"Where now, Peter? We are at the end of the driveway."

"Already?"

"Yes—the house is straight ahead, and, to the right, is the garden."



“Italian backgrounds, Peter Vallance! And that Italian day with
Dorcen . . .”

IV.

“The sun is on the wall, Charmian, the old brick wall at the back of the rose garden?”

“Yes, Peter!”

He pushed forward, through a tangle, and put his hand against it. “Dear old wall!” he cried. “Its heart is still warm! Do you remember how I used to sit here, while you did your fancy-work in the garden chair, just behind there? You never knew what a frame the rambler roses made for you, Charmian—” He stopped, put a hand across his forehead; then smiled reassuringly at the child, reaching out to touch her. “You’re trembling,” he said, penitently. “I’ve frightened you! . . . I forgot, my dear, that our little game of Let’s Pretend was just—a game . . . You’re crying, child! What makes you cry?”

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “I think it’s the way you touched the wall, and what you said.”

“Come,” he cried, “you shall pick me some blooms, and I’ll sit here awhile, and keep my silly thoughts to myself.”

He remembered, now, how she had written him, the letter following him about, and reaching him at Venice. “You will be enjoying golden days in sunny Italy,” she wrote, “but, oh, Peter, they can’t be finer than we are having here! Sometimes I almost hate the weather for its beauty—it wasn’t always so when you were here; don’t you remember how we watched and waited for the sun to be upon our wall again, and how miserably it continued to rain often? And now that you aren’t here, there is just enough rain to keep things fresh, and bring the roses to perfection, and our bit of wall is red and sunny, and, when I put my hand against it, I can quite believe your nice, dear, whimsical fancy that its heart is beating, for it is pulsating with the sunshine in it! And, Peter, you’ll remember it, won’t you—our old brick wall—when you see the Italian sunlight on the ancient buildings?”

“When you see the Italian sunlight!” . . . He remembered Dorcen, who was with him in the Argonne, and who had “wangled” leave on purpose to look after him, reading the thing to him, with that slow, southern drawl of his, and a sense of the sacredness of the reading in his very tone. And how Dorcen had understood, and taken him out into the sunshine of an Italian garden, where ran an ancient bit of wall, pulsating in the southern heat, and found excuse for going inside a while, to fetch a match or something . . . and left him there, groping the last yard to the wall, and standing long with his hand against the warm heart of the bricks.

V.

“What of the meadows, and the brook, Charmian?”

“Shall I take you there, Peter?”

“Of course! There will be a fairish breeze there today, up on the knoll where the clump of willows stands Give me your hand.”

“I think I can manage better just holding your arm, Peter. Am I going too fast for you? There, that’s a goodish climb, isn’t it? And shall I tell you —”

“No, no! We’ll sit on the knoll, here, and I shall tell you all about it, Charmian The willows, you say, are just to the right? Good! Then, the meadow slopes gently at our feet, and a straggling line of willows follows it—some ancestor brought them from the continent, the willows you find here, Charmian see how naturally they follow the brook, as it ambles on, these pollards, edging either bank with their drooping fringe, and—if it were not that the breeze is busy with the surface—watching their reflections in the still waters, as they will later, when evening comes. The brook turns sharply to the right then, and if we followed it—as we have often done, on Sundays, Charmian!—it would bring us, quite suddenly, to wider, greater waters, where there is a bridge, and where it loses itself, and is carried to the sea. Close by the bridge, is the church, whose steeple we can see rising above the elms, in which the rooks live, and—if it were Sunday—we might hear its chimes clearly, as now we do the cawing of the rooks themselves. Beyond the meadow, and successive meadows, lie the dunes, and then the ocean, glimpsed through that notch in the rising shoreland and maybe a ship standing out into the choppy waters, for the breeze is westering, Charmian, and the surf will be breaking uneasily on the coast.” He fumbled with his pipe and pouch again. “Another match, my Charmian! There, you’ve quite got the trick of fooling the wind.” He blew out a lazy cloud of smoke. “Do you know what the west wind is saying, little lady?”

“No—Peter!”

“It is saying, ‘Wanderer, come home! You were a fool ever to waste your time and money over there! You will need to conserve every penny!’ A very practical wind, the west wind, Charmian! It blows away the clouds and fog.”

“And blows those who love her back to England, Peter! Had you forgotten that?”

He started; almost involuntarily his hand reached out, but it closed only on a clump of meadow grass.

VI.

"The house, Charmian—the old Hall! You have the key?"

"Mrs. Podgett gave me it. Shall we—go in—now?"

"If you can spare the time."

"It isn't that—"

"Then—?"

"It's the ghosts! Old, empty houses are always full of them, Peter!"

He laughed quite merrily at that. "I'm glad you believe in ghosts, Charmian. I always did when I was here. . . . Can you manage the key, there? Fine!" He caught her arm, eagerly. "We're in the hallway, aren't we? And just ahead, about ten paces and two to the left, is a suit of armor. I'm dead certain there's the ghost of a Roundhead lives there still!"

"Oh, I remember that story, Peter. Mrs. Podgett knows all about it."

"The same . . . how the Cavalier caught Mistress Mary—she must have been an ancestress of yours, Charmian—in this same hallway, and offered the insult of his lips, so luring the Roundhead lover from his hiding place to doom on the Royalist sword blades."

"Yes, Peter—and how Mistress Mary suffered all her life, in loneliness, because of his rash chivalry."

"Well, he was a fellow after my own heart!"

"Where are you going now, Peter?"

"The stairs should be right here . . . of course they are. You must stay here, little lady, for propriety's sake. I'll manage splendidly."

He went up the broad staircase, feeling his way. . . . His adventure ended in a little crash.

"Peter! Peter!" she called anxiously. "What are you doing?"

His step sounded cautiously on the staircase, as he descended. She cried: "Why, you've cut yourself, Peter!"

"Nothing at all," he assured her. "One of the panes of the window . . . the room they gave me last time I was here . . . one can smell the roses from it, and the sea, Charmian, and I had a fancy to sniff it again!"

"Oh! And where now?"

"Outside again. You were right, little lady, there are too many ghosts in old, empty houses!"

VII.

"You will now take me back to the gate, Charmian."

"Yes, Peter. Oh, must you go? I'm so sorry our game is over."

"Almost over, Charmian. Hear the trees talking about us—laughing, I think, at our make-believe!"

She said: "Peter, I think the trees are quite too wise to laugh."

He did not reply. Once the trees, in wisdom, had kept silence, in the utter stillness of a Sunday afternoon, when she had come with him thus to the gate—the real Charmian and he. Not quite to the gate, rather just this side of it, where a relic of an older day still remained, screening one from the lodge, as a natural shrubbery screened one from the house.

“You will set me,” he directed, smilingly, “about twelve paces back from the gate, then let me find my way. You won’t mind if I go, this time, alone? . . . Now, I’m facing the gate, am I? Good!” He turned sharply to the right, and moved forward into the shrubbery, where a gap opened to receive him. The tappings of his cane grew more eager; he gave a little exultant cry when the cane touched the hard surface of half-buried masonry. A column rose up, once doubtless the post of a gate, but overgrown with moss, and, on its upper part, a vine.

His stick tapping still, but gently now, reached up to the stone animal crowning the post. “So you’re up there still, old fellow,” he said whimsically, then quoted softly:

“A lion ramps at the top,
He is claspt by a passion-flower!”

“Ah, Charmian, Charmian, what intuition did you have, when I, half jokingly, half seriously, told you I would gladly be the lion—if you would be the passion-flower! How you took me to task!”

Her image was conjured up now by inward sight, that could not be taken away, the image of her, crying suddenly: “No, no, Peter! You mustn’t say that! You mustn’t say that! There’s a cross in the passion-flower, and a scourge!” And there had seemed to creep into her dark eyes a touch of the old Spanish superstition, a far, far cry of that Spanish blood that some dim ancestor brought into the inheritance. . . . Here they had stood again that day when last he left her, ordered back to duty, because it gave a momentary seclusion . . . forgetful of the column close beside them, until, taking her impulsively in his arms, they were crushed against the masonry and the vine, and at their feet there fell—a broken passion-flower!

He had laughed it off then. . . . But not on that Italian day, with Dorken—
....

His hand reached up now, feeling the vine; he started guiltily at the sound of a voice behind him. “Peter, you were so long, I came. You’re not—angry—Peter?”

“No, no, child!” he laughed. “Why should I be? I was just visiting an old friend. See him up there—a rampant old critter, isn’t he?—but you see he hasn’t much chance to get away, has he, the vine’s grown so about him?” He said, impulsively, as if he must speak of it again: “Do you remember the one

on Maud's garden gate—Tennyson must have seen just such a thing as this—perhaps this very one! . . . but you'd hardly know that, child! I forget your age, you know! It goes,"—he smiled—"but there, little Miss Make-Believe, we'll play our game of 'Let's Pretend' right to the end, so you'll know the lines, and I'm only telling them again:

“ ‘Maud has a garden of roses
And lilies fair on a lawn;
There she walks in her state
And tends upon bed and bower,
And thither I climb'd at dawn
And stood by her garden-gate;
A lion ramps at the top,
He is claspt by a passion-flower.’ ”

His voice fell away, and it seemed that the little wind died with it, and the beeches on the driveway ceased their whispering, to listen to the sudden cry of “Peter! Oh, Peter, Peter!”

His hand reached out to the girl, touched her shoulder, drew back.

“I have been clumsy again,” he said quietly. “I've made our make-believe too real. Come, Dot, our game is over! It was only just pretend. . . . Perhaps Mrs. Podgett has been telling tales about me, Dot—about me and Miss Charmian. It was just a little khaki romance, Dot . . . two 'ships that passed in the night, and spoke each other in passing' . . . but, bless you, one learns wisdom with the years, and can play at make-believe, and then be sensible again! Here is Miss Charmian, with all kinds of suitors, and here am I, free as the air—able to enjoy an old romance, and then pass on to the next one.”

“Oh, Peter!”

“Why not?” he insisted. “We enjoy the play, and maybe shed a few sentimental tears over it, then we go away and forget it in the next one! With me, I prefer settings I can visualize, so here I go wandering about, staging my own fanciful plays, from place to place. See what a one we had this afternoon! Now, if you could come to Italy with me, I could stage some for you under the Italian sky, with regular madonnas for heroines, and all the atmosphere in the world!”

She said, in a very small voice: “So—so Charmian was just to—to play with?”

“In the land of romantic make-believe!” he cried. “You'll have to admit the setting is good—though there are points in favor of Italian backgrounds. . . . Shall we go? One doesn't linger in the lobby when the play is over.”

Italian backgrounds, Peter Vallance! And that Italian day with Dorken, when he found excuse for going inside to fetch a match or something, and left you there, groping the last yard to the wall, and standing long with your hand against the warm heart of the bricks. . . . What of the play that day, Peter? You have often repeated the lines since, just as you said then: "Dorken, what good is a blind, soon-to-be-penniless artist, to a girl like that?" And then: "You've got it wrong, Dork—there's a dozen romances in every unit that have sprung up like that; left alone they'll quickly wither and die, and, in most cases, all the better. Romance in khaki and all that! We're not normal. We're chuck full of a sort of gallant poetry. Leave it alone and it will die. Oh, Dork, can't you see, it isn't as if we were even definitely engaged! It's just a splendid, romantic comradeship, but I can't push it further—now. And if I write and tell her the whole thing—about my eyes—she'll want to add lines to the gallant poetry that could never be unwritten, and that should never be written. It must just gradually die off—our correspondence growing less."

What a fool to come back at all! What a fool to spend his last feeble pecuniary resources in sentimentality of this kind! And what a fool not to guess—

"Peter, we are at the gate!"

"So we are, Charmian—since you will play it out to the end! How can I thank you for your part, my Charmian?"

"Give me the passion-flower you picked, Peter!"

He started, bringing it hesitantly, guiltily, from behind him.

"Why did you keep it, Peter, if the play is over?"

"I picked it during the play. It is stage property."

"Why did you hide it, Peter?"

He laughed. "My dear child, for the very reason that you might accuse me of undue sentiment!"

"I—I don't believe you, Peter! I'm thinking of Mistress Mary, Peter!"

"Do you believe me now?"

He crushed the flower roughly in his fingers, and flung it from him, a pulpy mass.

"Good-bye, Dot! And thank you."

She did not answer. He did not wait to speak to Mrs. Podgett, who appeared, despairingly, in the doorway of the lodge, as the rig drove off.

IX.

"Are we well around the turn?"

"Aye!"

"Then pull up, close by the wall."

“Sir, you’ll not be thinking of going over?”

“I am!”

“But, sir—”

“Do as I bid you!”

He was astride the old grey wall now, and in his ears the mutterings of the driver, “a fool he be!” Aye, a fool, Peter Vallance, and quite admitting it to yourself! A poor, sentimental fool!

“My cane!” he called. It followed him over, this trusty and needful companion, and found his way for him, amid tangle and across turf, and at last, by almost uncanny instinct, to the ruined wall of an olden day . . . the nether end, where there were moss-grown gaps, from which he must work his way carefully forward, and did.

His hand was touching the vine at last, feeling for the flower of it. Sentimental fool! Sentimental fool, Peter! Was there not cross and scourge enough for him in life, without the symbol of it, pressed and dried, like some schoolgirl’s token, to crumble and decay between the pages of a book? His fingers rested on the lion’s paw.

“Good-bye, old fellow!” he said softly. “Guard her well when she comes again, and the old place is full of life once more . . . and when her children come to look at you, old chap, and pick the flowers, let there be only happy laughter!”

He could not locate another blossom! Had he, then, picked the very last, and thrown it away? That caught at his throat. “Silly ass!” he chided himself, to feel such utter anguish over this, as if upon this token from a far shrine depended all of life’s desire now left to him. . . . Schoolchild sentiment, but the recognition of it could not keep from him the trembling eagerness with which his fingers closed at last about another blossom. He picked it carefully. In his very caution, he let it fall. He knelt upon the ground . . . groping, desperately, vainly, for it. . . .

X.

“Peter! Peter, it’s fallen through the tangle of the underbrush!”

A fool, indeed, trapped by his folly! Far better he had gone without this epilogue. She was beside him now. “Oh, Peter, I couldn’t bear to see you groping for it—that way. I had to call out to you. And, anyway, Peter, the play’s over now, isn’t it?—my play as well as yours. It’s reality now!” He did not answer. He stood stiffly, at bay, against the masonry and vine. She stumbled on: “You—you guessed my make-believe, didn’t you, when I forgot my change of voice, my role? . . . Peter, can you ever forgive my doing it—this way—but Reggie told me about meeting you in the Strand, and Mrs.

Podgett, under pressure, confessed that you were coming, and helped me. . . . Don't look so, Peter, I had to find out how things stood. . . . Your poor, dear eyes—I understood that part, as soon as I heard about them!" An exultant strain crept into her voice. "I'm glad I played the part, Peter! I'm glad I came right here again, daring to believe that you'd come back, after all—for your passion-flower. I'm glad I know just how we stand at last!"

He said, almost irritably: "You've got it wrong, Charmian! You mustn't let sentiment and pity blind you. As for my coming back—why, my dear girl, you forget I might be in a romantic mood some day, and require properties to help stir up remembrance, and stage the thing again! . . . Charmian, Charmian, what are you doing?"

Her arms were about him, fiercely; her breast throbbing against him.

"Oh, Peter, Peter!" she cried, chokingly. "You can't escape me now. You can't blind me any more! You came back for your passion-flower—and the play was over." She recovered herself a little; her voice, close to his ear, held a hint of happy laughter. "Don't struggle, Peter, dear," she told him. "Have you forgotten the lion? Poor old fellow, he can't escape, for all his defiant struggle. Let him ramp all he will, Peter, 'he is claspt by a passion-flower.' "

Transcriber's Notes

This story was published in *The Rotarian*, October 1925 issue.

Minor typographic errors have been corrected silently.

The title graphic and first image were joined in the original, but have been separated here to better fit the digital format.

[The end of *The Passion Flower* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]