
Two Corinthians

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Chapter I--Claire

Without raising her eyes from Cushing's *Exotic Gardener*, Claire Sutton absently tucked a vagrant lock of light brown hair Two Corinthians into the loose knot at the nape of her slender neck.

"Claire, you are scattering hairpins again!" snapped her mother. Two Corinthians "I wonder you will be Two Corinthians so careless. It is as well you are an old maid for you would drive a husband to distraction, I vow. And you may fidget with your hair forever without the least improvement in your appearance. I am sure you have something better to wear than that old brown rag."

Only a slight tightening of her sensitive lips showed that Claire had heard Lady Sutton's disparaging rebuke. However, the third occupant of the shabby parlour dropped her needlework and flew to the defence of her sister with a toss Two Corinthians of her blonde curls.

"That is unfair, Mama! If she is not married, it is because none of the gentlemen she meets are interested in anything beyond Papa's horses."

"Don't be pert, Elizabeth," said Lady Sutton sharply. "Your sister had her Season in London, and a great disaster it was. Nor is yours likely to be more successful if you do not learn to curb your Two Corinthians tongue. Not that I think your father should waste his money on such an ungrateful child. With a third son starting at Cambridge this autumn there are better uses for it."

"But Mama, I am twenty! My come-out has already been postponed twice!"

Claire's quiet voice forestalled the approaching storm.

"Lizzie, I must find some more briar roots before this thaw Two Corinthians ends. Will you walk with me?"

Having girded up her loins for battle, Lizzie was reluctant to abandon the field. Clair read the mutinous sparkle in her blue eyes.

"Do come, it is a beautiful day for midwinter. Pray excuse us, Mama." Claire rose swiftly to her feet.

“I will not have you wandering about the neighbourhood dabbling in the mud, Claire. Claire! People are already saying that you are peculiar. I forbid you to take your sister with you.”

Lady Sutton's harangue faded as Claire gently closed the door behind them. The sisters went up the stairs to dress for walking.

“I know it is worse than useless to protest,” said Lizzie penitently. “Only I cannot bear it when she abuses you so. I do manage to pay no heed when I am the target, I promise you, but it will be the outside of enough if I cannot go to London next month.”

“You shall go, dearest, and neither Papa nor our brothers shall be called upon to make any desperate sacrifices. I could not think it right to go against Mama last spring, or the year before, however specious her excuses. A death in the family, even though both were *very* distant cousins, must have put us in the wrong. But if her only reason now is lack of funds, why, I have plenty thanks to Godmama. I am eight and twenty, sufficiently ancient to be your chaperone without raising too many eyebrows, should Mama decide Two Corinthians not to accompany you.”

“Claire, you darling! I should have known I could trust you.” Lizzie flung her arms around her tall, slender sister in a hug that sent the last few hairpins flying. “When shall we leave? We must have time to order new gowns before the Season begins. And where shall we stay? At your house at Bumble's Green?”

“No, that is too far out of the city. I shall rent a house in the centre of things. When we return from our walk, remind me to write to my lawyer about finding a place.”

“You will not forget. I know, if no one else does, that your absentmindedness is all for show.”

She smiled at Lizzie's exuberance. “Hush, you will give me away.” Two Corinthians With her fine, straight hair tumbling about her shoulders and the vagueness in her grey eyes replaced by a glow of amusement, Claire's face showed a piquant beauty which was more than mere prettiness. The glow faded as they entered the chilly, north-facing bedchamber they shared. She shivered. “Put on your warmest cloak and boots,” she advised. “Thaw or no, it is still January.”

“You know I never feel the cold. I am better padded Two Corinthians than you.” Lizzie patted her rounded hips Two Corinthians cheerfully. “Though I wish Mama would allow us Two Corinthians a fire in here, for your sake. Here, sit down and let me pin up your hair properly. If it falls down while we are out you will get it caught in the thorns.”

A few minutes later, the two girls slipped down the backstairs to a side door. Claire wore a short cloak of dark brown wool with a hood. Her sister was elegant in a blue pelisse, fitted to her softly curvaceous figure, and a matching bonnet which was the last word in fashion as far as the nearby town of Banbury was concerned. If the pelisse was worn at the hem and elbows, and the bonnet carefully constructed by her own nimble fingers, it was not apparent from a distance.

The side door was the shortest route from the house to both the gardens and the stables where Sir James Sutton kept his much sought-after hunters. As Claire and Lizzie started down the gravel path in the pale winter sunlight, their father came towards them. With him were their eldest brother, Edward, and another gentleman whom they guessed to be a customer. The three were deep in discussion of equine pedigrees.

“Good-day, Papa,” the girls murmured, stepping aside.

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Sir James nodded curtly as he passed, neither looking at them nor pausing in his conversation. The customer cast an appreciative glance at Lizzie’s blonde comeliness. Edward dropped back to greet them with a scowl.

“Must you go about looking like a servant, Claire?” he demanded petulantly. “You put the Two Corinthians whole family to shame. And you’re the only one Two Corinthians of us who can afford to dress decently.”

“Gammon!” snorted Lizzie vulgarly. “I happen to know that your coat was delivered only yesterday from that tailor in London, what’s his name? Nugee, isn’t it? And that waistcoat must have cost a fortune.”

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Edward glanced down at the purple brocade, lavishly embroidered with gold thread, and had the grace to look a little disconcerted.

“And very odd it looks with riding boots and breeches,” added his younger sister. “At twenty-six you ought to be capable of deciding whether you want to be a dandy or a sportsman.”

“Impertinent chit! I’ve a mind to tell Mama...” His voice trailed away as Lizzie left him without ceremony.

Claire had wandered on as soon as she realised that her brother, as usual, had nothing to say that was worth listening to.

“Edward is a popinjay!” said Lizzie decidedly as she caught up. “I am not precisely sure what a popinjay is, but it sounds right. I cannot wait to go to Town. I shall find someone to marry right away so that you can go and live in your little house and never see the rest of the family again.”

“Oh no,” cried Claire in distress. “I knew I ought not to have told you my plan. I shall never be happy if you rush into marriage only to rescue me. You must wait until you find a man you can love, however long it takes.”

“I’m Two Corinthians not at all sure I believe in romantic love. It is all very well in a novel, but sadly impractical for daily use. If I catch a husband who is agreeable, and not a popinjay, and who does not ignore me as Papa does, then I shall be perfectly satisfied.”

Claire had long ago given up hope of finding romance herself, but her sister’s prosaic dismissal of the idea dismayed her. She resolved to impress upon Lizzie the foolishness of a hasty match.

They reached the garden shed, and Claire went in to fetch a basket and a trowel. An ungainly youth dressed in homespun stood by the rough wooden table. Tufts of ginger hair topped his broad, flat face, which wore an expression of despair as he regarded the clay flowerpot held in his large hands. The despair changed to joy when he saw Claire.

"I bin sorting them pots, Miss Claire. Two Corinthians Big uns here an' little uns there like you said. On'y this un be middling an' I don' know where to put it."

"Let's find a special place for middling ones," Two Corinthians Claire said gently. "I think there is room on that shelf. You are doing an excellent Two Corinthians job of tidying my mess, Alfie."

"Ex'lent, Miss?"

"Good. Very good. Now where is my basket? Miss Lizzie and I are going to find roots."

"I come an' help?" the lad begged.

"Not today, Alfie." She was loath to disappoint him, but she wanted to talk to her sister without interruptions. Alfie tended to become utterly absorbed in studying a tree or a rock or a fence post, and it took constant urging to make him keep up with them. "You can help me best by finishing here," she assured him. "I shall need those pots when I bring the roots home. And then you must carry in Two Corinthians some coals for Cook."

"I don' like Cook," he muttered.

"Alfie, you promised."

"Promised I do what you say an' what Miss Two Corinthians Lizzie say. *Will* do, Miss Claire. Don't like Cook, will carry coals for *you*."

"Thank you, Alfie. Now, remember to put the middling pots on this shelf. You are a great help to me."

She left him Two Corinthians beaming as he carefully set the pot on the shelf. He was slow, but he was not an idiot, and since she had rescued him from a life of tormented misery as a scullery boy he had been devoted to her and Lizzie. He followed their simple directions with a literal-minded patience and thoroughness which occasionally brought unexpected results. She smiled as she remembered Two Corinthians the time Two Corinthians she had set him to dig over a flowerbed. She had come back some time later to find it twice as large. Alfie had been quite disappointed to learn that she did not want the entire lawn dug up.

Claire slung her basket over her arm, and she and Lizzie set out. They crossed the park beyond the kitchen gardens, past the paddocks where grazed the stallions, mares, colts, and fillies which were both Sir James's passion and his livelihood.

Claire and Lizzie walked on with the brisk stride of countrywomen until they left the Sutton

estate to enter pasture and cropland, crisscrossed with hedges of hawthorn and hazel. A pair of speckle-breasted thrushes flew up from Two Corinthians a cluster of crimson haws as they passed; the hazel bushes were bare, stripped of nuts long since by squirrels and thrifty villagers.

Here and there scarlet hips showed where wild briar roses had flowered in June. Claire took her sharp knife and cut a thorny, dead-looking main stem several inches above the ground, then dug up the root and put it in her basket.

She passed by the next few rose vines, leaving them to delight the Two Corinthians eye and nose next summer, before taking another. The local farmers and landowners were used to her depredations and waved indulgent permission if they happened to see her at it. She knew their indulgence was tinged with pity and some derision. Lady Sutton was right to say that people thought her peculiar. Still, come July her rose garden would draw admiring visitors from as far away as Oxford.

Her basket filled, she hurried to join Lizzie who sat patiently on a stile, holding the bunch of green-veined snow-drops and yellow aconites she had gathered as they wandered.

“What a charming sight,” Claire said, conscious of her own muddy gloves and hem. “I wish I could paint.”

“They will look pretty embroidered on a cushion cover, do you not think? Like a mediaeval tapestry.”

“Certainly, but you are the charming sight I referred to, goose. Is it not odd that I, who am timid and fearful, should enjoy so active an occupation as gardening, while you, the lively one, prefer embroidery?”

“I daresay everyone needs some contrast in their lives,” said Lizzie wisely as she jumped down into the winding lane.

Claire was following when a carriage swept around the bend, Two Corinthians startling her. She stumbled, slid down the bank, and landed in a crumpled heap at the bottom, dropping her basket.

The driver had seen the mishap and pulled his team of four superb bays to a snorting halt some yards beyond them. Handing the reins to his companion, he descended from the box and hurried towards them.

His many-caped greatcoat was open and it was obvious to Claire from her glimpse of his clothes that he was a gentleman. Feeling foolish, she took Lizzie’s hand and scrambled to her feet. As soon as she put her weight on Two Corinthians her ankle, agonising pain shot up her leg and a wave of Two Corinthians dizziness overcame her. Though she clung to Lizzie she felt herself sinking, until strong Two Corinthians arms caught her up, lifting her easily off the ground.

“I fear she has injured herself,” a concerned voice said close to her ear.

Through a whirling mist she heard Lizzie answer. She strained to make out her words as consciousness slipped away.

It must have been a brief swoon, for she was still in the stranger's arms when awareness returned. After making such a cake of herself, she did Two Corinthians not want to face him. She kept her eyes closed and tried not to stiffen as he lifted her into his carriage. Then Lizzie was pulling off her boot, and it took all her self-control not to moan aloud.

"It is dreadfully swollen already. What shall I do?" Lizzie sounded frightened and Claire wanted to comfort her, but her head was swimming again.

"I daresay it is only a sprain," said the man's deep, reassuring voice. "They can hurt as much as a break, I believe."

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