

The Lady's Faux Pas  
by Caroline Bagshaw

Venice 1800

The door opened and Lady Beresford, the only Scottish woman in these parts, ventured into his shop. The pale, blue-eyed beauty had visited often over the past year. Carlo knew she was lonely, and always tried to spend time talking with her in Italian. When that failed, they fell into easy conversation in French, since she was fluent, but not a native speaker.

But today he had no time to talk as Signor Bartoli insisted on giving his opinion on the design of a swirl on the endpapers of a book of scriptures. It didn't seem too much to wish him gone, but Carlo had been raised to be polite, reserved even, and at all times to hold his tongue.

Holding his tongue was not always easy, especially since Signorina Stella-Maria Paddon had come to work with him. He'd had more time to wonder if he might speak up for what he dreamed. He wanted to call her Stella-Maria and take her to his bed, but he was sure she viewed him more as a brother than a lover. Today she stood on the far side of the shop, as much a beauty as Lady Beresford, if completely opposite in colouring. His fingers longed to release her glossy black hair from its tight coiffure and stroke her unblemished olive skin, with its smooth youthful tone.

"Signor Mancini are you listening to me?" said Signor Bartoli.

"Yes, I am listening to you. I think we need only one elaborate swirl embossed here."

"No... I must have two. It is for the church. Imagine if the Pope saw it."

Carlo couldn't imagine the Pope seeing it, anymore that he could imagine how he might bridge the gap between him and Stella-Maria. He didn't need to raise his eyes to hear the considerate Stella-Maria enunciating each word which allowed Lady Beresford to understand.

While Bartoli droned on, Carlo's attention drifted over to the ladies.

"Do you know if Paddon is related to the Scots surname, Patton?"

"It is, Lady Beresford. Your Italian is admirable."

"Thank you, Signorina, but I have a lot to learn. I have come to buy a pen for my mother. The last time I was here, Signor Mancini said he was expecting a shipment from Murano. Has it arrived?"

At the sound of his surname, Carlo looked up. The ladies were in amicable conversation. He knew he needn't concern himself. Stella-Maria was a most capable assistant, but he enjoyed practicing his French with the lady and it would mean he could stand next to Stella-Maria. Just being near her sent his heart jittering. If only he could concentrate on his work. He pushed all thoughts of her away and focussed on the array of endpapers in front of him.

"Perhaps you could choose two or three designs you like?" he asked. Signor Bartoli shook his head, put one design aside, then brought it back to the table.

Carlo suppressed a sigh.

The scent of lemons wrapped around him, and he knew Stella-Maria was close. Very close. She stood next to him, gazing up with her dark sepia eyes. How could he have been so engrossed in his work not to notice that she'd flitted across the shop and now stood inches from him?

"Have the new pens arrived from Murano?" she asked.

"Yes. I haven't unpacked them yet. Please bring the box for Lady Beresford to make her choice."

She gazed into his eyes for a moment, catching him with her artless ways for she knew not what she did to him. He wanted to close his eyes, close out the world and have her in his arms, with her lemon-scented hair, and her lithe body.

Lady Beresford gave him an elegant tilt of her head, and he responded with an acknowledging nod.

In a moment Stella-Maria had returned with the box of pens from the island of glass makers.

"Ooooh... my word ..." said Lady Beresford.

"Look at this one," said Stella-Maria holding up what looked like a wing of yellow and blue.

"Exquisite," said Lady Beresford.

He longed to help unwrap his brother's creations and cherish the delight of the ladies viewing his siblings' work. However, he stayed steadfastly at his desk trying to soothe Signor Bartoli into deciding on the endpapers of his book.

"Vorrei comprare due peni," said Lady Beresford with her prim intonation.

Perhaps he'd misheard.

He stared across the floorboards and caught the look of shock in Stella-Maria's eyes and the rise of deep cerise flooding her cheeks.

Carlo realised he had indeed apprehended correctly, even though the expression had come from the most genteel mouth of his acquaintance.

They'd spoken some weeks ago about the vagaries of pluralisation in the Italian language. So many words ended in 'i' when plural... but not pens. She'd meant to say '*due penne*' he was sure, but with her Scottish accent it would likely come out the same anyway.

Lady Beresford held aloft the pens Carlo's brother blew from molten glass.

"Two exquisite penises, thank you," she said almost triumphantly, confident in the notion that she had mastered pluralisation. "Could you wrap them individually?" she asked in her most eloquent Italian.

Carlo grinned at Stella-Maria. It was too much for her to contain herself and she burst into a fit of giggles and disappeared behind the counter.

Fortunately, Signor Bartoli hadn't heard; he quit the shop saying he'd return on the morrow after consultation with the priest.

Carlo was betwixt and between, wanting to fall behind the counter with Stella-Maria, and not embarrass one of his most regular patrons.

Stella-Maria rose from behind the counter with paper and ribbon in hand and she carefully took each pen in turn and wrapped them with her usual attention to detail.

Carlo watched her from his desk, not daring to speak, as her lips twitched with mirth.

Lady Beresford smiled at him and he beamed back. It was clear she had not the faintest idea what she'd said. No woman of her breeding would be so brazen as to remain standing in the shop after her delight at finding not one but two male appendages ready for her delectation. Before long, the very proper English lady left, delighted with her elegantly wrapped pens.

Stella-Maria started to chortle. It was an infectious sound, and Carlo found himself chuckling. Without thinking he stepped across the open floor. Their eyes met, and she burst out with a roar. They laughed and laughed. She placed her hand on his arm to prevent herself from falling and whooped some more. It was as though a valve had been let loose, and all the laughter that had been held between them for the past year had a vent to the heavens.

Carlo placed his hand on top of hers, and held it to his heart, as he laughed deep into his belly and knew that things would never be quite the same again.

"I would like to buy two penises," said Stella-Maria, and they dissolved in giggles again.

## Disclaimer

This is a true story that has been altered to protect the innocent or rather the guilty.