

# The Legend of Madame Krasinska

By Vernon Lee

It is a necessary part of this story to explain how I have come by it, or rather, how it has chanced to have me for its writer.

I was very much impressed one day by a certain nun of the order calling themselves Little Sisters of the Poor. I had been taken to these sisters to support the recommendation of a certain old lady, the former doorkeeper of his studio, whom my friend Cecco Bandini wished to place in the asylum. It turned out, of course, that Cecchino was perfectly able to plead his case without my assistance; so I left him blanchishing the Mother Superior in the big, cheerful kitchen, and begged to be shown over the rest of the establishment. The sister who was told off to accompany me was the one of whom I would speak.

This lady was tall and slight; her figure, as she preceded me up the narrow stairs and through the whitewashed wards, was uncommonly elegant and charming; and she had a girlish rapidity of movement, which caused me to experience a little shock at the first real sight which I caught of her face. It was young and remarkably pretty, with a kind of refinement peculiar to American women; but it was inexpressibly, solemnly tragic; and one felt that under her tight linen cap, the hair must be snow white. The tragedy, whatever it might have been, was now over; and the lady's expression, as she spoke to the old creatures scraping the ground in the garden, ironing the sheets in the laundry, or merely huddling over their braziers in the chill winter sunshine, was pathetic only by virtue of its strange present tenderness, and by that trace of terrible past suffering.

She answered my questions very briefly, and was as taciturn as ladies of religious communities are usually loquacious. Only, when I expressed my admiration for the institution which contrived to feed scores of old paupers on broken victuals begged from private houses and inns, she turned her eyes full upon me and said, with an earnestness which was almost passionate, "Ah, the old! The old! It is so much, much worse for them than for any others. Have you ever tried to imagine what it is to be poor and forsaken and old?"

These words and the strange ring in the sister's voice, the strange light in her eyes, remained in my memory. What was not, therefore, my surprise when, on returning to the kitchen, I saw her start and lay hold of the back of the chair as soon as she caught sight of Cecco Bandini. Cecco, on his side also, was visibly startled, but only after a moment; it was clear that she recognized him long before he identified her. What little romance could there exist in common between my eccentric painter, and that serene but tragic Sister of the Poor?

A week later, it became evident that Cecco Bandini had come to explain the mystery; but to explain it (as I judged by the embarrassment of his manner) by one of those astonishingly elaborate lies occasionally attempted by perfectly frank persons. It was not the case. Cecchino had come indeed to explain that little dumb scene which had passed between him and the Little Sister of the Poor. He had come, however, not to satisfy my curiosity, or to overcome my suspicions, but to execute a commission which he had greatly at heart; to help, as he expressed it, in the accomplishment of a good work by a real saint.

Of course, he explained, smiling that good smile under his black eyebrows and white mustache, he did not expect me to believe very literally the story which he had undertaken to get

me to write. He only asked, and the lady only wished, me, to write down her narrative without any comments, and leave to the heart of the reader the decision about its truth or falsehood.

For this reason, and the better to attain the object of appealing to the profane, rather than to the religious, reader, I have abandoned the order of narrative of the Little Sister of the Poor; and attempted to turn her pious legend into a worldly story, as follows:—

## I

Cecco Bandini had just returned from the Maremma, to whose solitary marshes and jungles he had fled in one of his fits of fury at the stupidity and wickedness of the civilized world. A great many months spent among buffaloes and wild boars, conversing only with those wild cherry-trees, of whom he used whimsically to say, “they are such good little folk,” had sent him back with an extraordinary zest for civilization, and a comic tendency to find its products, human and otherwise, extraordinary, picturesque, and suggestive. He was in this frame of mind when there came a light rap on his door-slate; and two ladies appeared on the threshold of his studio, with the shaven face and cockaded hat of a tall footman overtopping them from behind. One of them was unknown to our painter; the other was numbered among Cecchino’s very few grand acquaintances.

“Why haven’t you been round to me yet, you savage?” she asked, advancing quickly with a brusque hand-shake and a brusque bright gleam of eyes and teeth, well-bred but audacious and a trifle ferocious. And dropping on to a divan she added, nodding first at her companion and then at the pictures all round, “I have brought my friend, Madame Krasinska, to see your things,” and she began poking with her parasol at the contents of a gaping portfolio.

The Baroness Fosca—for such was her name—was one of the cleverest and fastest ladies of the place, with a taste for art and ferociously frank conversation. To Cecco Bandini, as she lay back among her furs on the shabby divan of his, she appeared in the light of the modern Lucretia Borgia, the tamed panther of fashionable life. “What an interesting thing civilization is!” he thought, watching her every movement with the eyes of the imagination; “wily, you might spend years among the wild folk of the Maremma without meeting such a tremendous, terrible, picturesque, powerful creature as this!”

Cecchino was so absorbed in the Baroness Fosca, who was in reality not at all a Lucretia Borgia, but merely an impatient lady bent upon amusing and being amused, that he was scarcely conscious of the presence of her companion. He knew that she was very young, very pretty, and very smart, and that he had made her his best bow, and offered her his least rickety chair; for the rest, he sat opposite to his Lucretia Borgia of modern life, who had meanwhile found a cigarette, and was puffing away and explaining that she was about to give a fancy ball, which should be the most *crâne*, the only amusing thing, of the year.

“Oh,” he exclaimed, kindling at the thought, “do let me design you a dress all black and white and wicked green—you shall go as Deadly Nightshade, as Belladonna Atropa—”

“Belladonna Atropa! why, my ball is in comic costume.” -

The Baroness was answering contemptuously, when Cecchino’s attention was suddenly called to the other end of the studio by an exclamation on the part of his other visitor.

“Do tell me all about her; has she a name? Is she really a lunatic?” asked the young lady who had been introduced as Madame Krasinska, keeping a portfolio open with one hand, and holding up in the other a colored sketch she had taken from it.

“What have you got there? Oh, only the Sora Lena!” and Madame Fosca reverted to the contemplation of the smoke-rings she was making.

“Tell me about her—Sora Lena, did you say?” asked the younger lady eagerly.

She spoke French, but with a pretty little American accent, despite her Polish name. She was very charming, Cecchino said to himself, a radiant impersonation of youthful brightness and elegance as she stood there in her long, silvery furs, holding the drawing with tiny, tight-gloved hands, and shedding around her a vague, exquisite fragrance—no, not a mere literal perfume, that would be far too coarse, but something personal akin to it.

“I have noticed her so often,” she went on, with that silvery young voice of hers; “she’s mad, isn’t she? And what did you say her name was? Please tell me again.”

Cecchino was delighted. “How true it is,” he reflected, “that only refinement, high-breeding, luxury can give people certain kinds of sensitiveness, of rapid intuition! No woman of another class would have picked out just that drawing, or would have been interested in it without stupid laughter.”

“Do you want to know the story of poor old Sora Lena?” asked Cecchino, taking the sketch from Madame Krasinska’s hand, and looking over it at the charming, eager young face.

The sketch might have passed for a caricature; but anyone who had spent so little as a week in Florence those six or seven years ago would have recognized at once that it was merely a faithful portrait. For Sora Lena—more correctly Signora Maddalena—had been for years and years one of the most conspicuous sights of the town. In all weathers you might have seen that hulking old woman, with her vague, staring, reddish face, trudging through the streets or standing before shops, in her extraordinary costume of thirty years ago, her enormous crinoline, on which the silk skirt and ragged petticoat hung limply, her gigantic coal-scuttle bonnet, shawl, prunella boots, and great muff or parasol; one of several outfits, all alike, of that distant period, all alike inexpressibly dirty and tattered. In all weathers you might have seen her stolidly going her way, indifferent to stares and jibes, of which, indeed, there were by this time comparatively few, so familiar had she grown to staring, jibing Florence. In all weathers, but most noticeably in the worst, as if the squalor of mud and rain had an affinity with that sad, draggled, soiled, battered piece of human squalor, that lamentable rag of half-witted misery.

“Do you want to know about Sora Lena?” repeated Cecco Bandini, meditatively. They formed a strange, strange contrast, these two women, the one in the sketch and the one standing before him. And there was to him a pathetic whimsicalness in the interest which the one had excited in the other. “How long has she been wandering about here? Why, as long as I can remember the streets of Florence, and that,” added Cecchino sorrowfully, “is a longer while than I care to count up. It seems to me as if she must always have been there, like the olive-trees and the paving-stones; for, after all, Giotto’s tower was not there before Giotto, whereas poor old Sora Lena— But, by the way, there is a limit even to her. There is a legend about her; they say that she was once sane, and had two sons, who went as Volunteers in ’59, and were killed at Solferino, and ever since then she has sallied forth, every day, winter or summer, in her best clothes, to meet the young fellows at the station. May be. To my mind it doesn’t matter much whether the story be true or false; it is fitting,” and Cecco Bandini set about dusting some canvases which had attracted the Baroness Fosca’s attention. When Cecchino was helping that lady into her furs, she gave one of her little brutal smiles, and nodded in the direction of her companion.

“Madame Krasinska,” she said laughing, “is very desirous of possessing one of your sketches, but she is too polite to ask you the price of it. That’s what comes of our not knowing how to earn a penny for ourselves, doesn’t it, Signor Cecchino?”

Madame Krasinska blushed, and looked more young, and delicate, and charming.

“I did not know whether you would consent to part with one of your drawings,” she said in her silvery, childlike voice—“it is—this one—which I should so much have liked to have— . . . to have . . . bought.” Cecchino smiled at the embarrassment which the word “bought” produced in his exquisite visitor. Poor, charming young creature, he thought; the only thing she thinks people one knows can sell, is themselves, and that’s called getting married. “You must explain to your friend,” said Cecchino to the Baroness Fosca, as he hunted in a drawer for a piece of clean paper, “that such rubbish as this is neither bought nor sold; it is not even possible for a poor devil of a painter to offer it as a gift to a lady—but,”—and he handed the little roll to Madame Krasinska, making his very best bow as he did so—“it is possible for a lady graciously to accept it.”

“Thank you so much,” answered Madame Krasinska, slipping the drawing into her muff; “it is very good of you to’ give me such a . . . such a very interesting sketch,” and she pressed his big brown fingers in her little gray-gloved hand.

“Poor Sora Lena!” exclaimed Cecchino, when there remained of the visit only a faint perfume of exquisiteness; and he thought of the hideous old draggled-tailed mad woman, reposing, rolled up in effigy, in the delicious daintiness of that delicate gray muff.

## II

A fortnight later, the great event was Madame Fosca’s fancy ball, to which the guests were bidden to come in what was described as comic costume. Some, however, craved leave to appear in their ordinary apparel, and among these was Cecchino Bandini, who was persuaded, moreover, that his old-fashioned swallowtails, which he donned only at weddings, constituted quite comic costume enough.

This knowledge did not interfere at all with his enjoyment. There was even, to his whimsical mind, a certain charm in being in a crowd among which he knew no one; unnoticed, or confused, perhaps, with the waiters, as he hung about the stairs and strolled through the big palace rooms. It was as good as wearing an invisible cloak, one saw so much just because one was not seen; indeed, one was momentarily endowed (it seemed at least to his fanciful apprehension) with a faculty akin to that of understanding the talk of birds; and, as he watched and listened he became aware of innumerable charming little romances, which were concealed from more notable but less privileged persons.

Little by little the big white and gold rooms began to fill. The ladies, who had moved in gorgeous isolation, their skirts displayed as finely as a peacocks train, became gradually visible only from the waist upwards; and only the branches of the palm-trees and tree ferns detached themselves against the shining walls. Instead of wandering among variegated brocades and iridescent silks and astonishing arrangements of feathers and flowers, Cecchino’s eye was forced to a higher level by the thickening crowd; it was now the constellated sparkle of diamonds on neck and head which dazzled him, and the strange, unaccustomed splendor of white arms and shoulders. And, as the room filled, the invisible cloak was also drawn closer round our friend Cecchino, and the extraordinary faculty of perceiving romantic and delicious secrets in other folks’ bosoms became more and more developed. They seemed to him like exquisite children, these creatures rustling about in fantastic dresses, powdered shepherds and shepherdesses with diamonds spurting fire among their ribbons and topknots; Japanese and Chinese embroidered with sprays of flowers; medieval and antique beings, and beings hidden in the plumage of birds, or the petals of flowers; children, but children somehow matured, transfigured by the touch of

luxury and good-breeding, children full of courtesy and kindness. There were, of course, a few costumes which might have been better conceived or better carried out, or better—not to say best—omitted altogether. One grew bored, after a little while, with people dressed as marionettes, champagne bottles, sticks of sealing-wax, or captive balloons; a young man arrayed as a female ballet dancer, and another got up as a wet nurse, with baby *obbligato*, might certainly have been dispensed with. Also, Cecchino could not help wincing a little at the daughter of the house being mummied and painted to represent her own grandmother, a respectable old lady whose picture hung in the dining-room, and whose spectacles he had frequently picked up in his boyhood. But these were mere trifling details. And, as a whole, it was beautiful, fantastic. So Cecchino moved backward and forward, invisible in his shabby black suit, and borne hither and thither by the well-bred pressure of the many-colored crowd; pleasantly blinded by the innumerable lights, the sparkle of chandelier pendants, and the shooting flames of jewels; gently deafened by the confused murmur of innumerable voices, of crackling stuffs and sighing fans, of distant dance music; and inhaling the vague fragrance which seemed less the decoction of cunning perfumers than the exquisite and expressive emanation of this exquisite bloom of personality. Certainly, he said to himself, there is no pleasure so delicious as seeing people amusing themselves with refinement: there is a transfiguring magic, almost a moralizing power, in wealth and elegance and good-breeding.

He was making this reflection, and watching between two dances, a tiny fluff of down sailing through the warm draft across the empty space, the sort of whirlpool of the ball-room—when a little burst of voices came from the entrance salon. The multi-colored costumes fluttered like butterflies toward a given spot, there was a little heaping together of brilliant colors and flashing jewels. There was much craning of delicate, fluffy young necks and heads, and shuffle on tip-toe, and the crowd fell automatically aside. A little gangway was cleared; and there walked into the middle of the white and gold drawing-room, a lumbering, hideous figure, with reddish, vacant face, sunk in an immense, tarnished satin bonnet; and dragged, faded, lilac silk skirts spread over a vast dislocated crinoline. The feet dabbled along in the broken prunella boots; the mangy rabbit-skin muff bobbed loosely with the shambling gait; and then, under the big chandelier, there came a sudden pause, and the thing looked slowly round, a gaping, mooning, blear-eyed stare.

It was the Sora Lena.

There was a perfect storm of applause.

### III

Cecchino Bandini did not slacken his pace till he found himself, with his thin overcoat and opera hat all drenched, among the gas reflections and puddles before his studio door; that shout of applause and that burst of clapping pursuing him down the stairs of the palace and all through the rainy streets. There were a few embers in his stove; he threw a faggot on them, lit a cigarette, and proceeded to make reflections, the wet opera hat still on his head. He had been a fool, a savage. He had behaved like a child, rushing past his hostess with that ridiculous speech in answer to her inquiries: “I am running away because bad luck has entered your house.”

Why had he not guessed it at once? What on earth else could she have wanted his sketch for?

He determined to forget the matter, and, as he imagined, he forgot it. Only, when the next day's evening paper displayed two columns describing Madame Fosca's ball, and more particularly “that mask,” as the reporter had it, “which among so many which were graceful and

ingenious, bore off in triumph the palm for witty novelty," he threw the paper down and gave it a kick towards the wood-box. But he felt ashamed of himself, picked it up, smoothed it out, and read it all—foreign news and home news, and even the description of Madame Fosca's masked ball, conscientiously through. Last of all he perused, with dogged resolution, the column of petty casualties: a boy bit in the calf by a dog who was not mad; the frustrated burgling of a baker's shop; even to the bunches of keys and the umbrella and two cigar-cases picked up by the police, and consigned to the appropriate municipal limbo; until he came to the following lines: "This morning the *Guardians of Public Safety*, having been called by the neighboring inhabitants, penetrated into a room on the top floor of a house situate in the Little Street of the Gravedigger (Viccolo del Beccamorto), and discovered, hanging from a rafter, the dead body of Maddalena X. Y. Z. The deceased had long been noted throughout Florence for her eccentric habits and apparel." The paragraph was headed, in somewhat larger type: "Suicide of a female lunatic."

Cecchino's cigarette had gone out, but he continued blowing at it all the same. He could see in his mind's eye a tall, slender figure, draped in silvery plush and silvery furs, standing by the side of an open portfolio, and holding a drawing in her tiny hand, with the slender, solitary gold bangle over the gray glove.

#### IV

Madame Krasinska was in a very bad humor. The old Chanoinesse, her late husband's aunt, noticed it; her guests noticed it; her maid noticed it: and she noticed it herself. For, of all human beings, Madame Krasinska—Netta, as smart folk familiarly called her—was the least subject to bad humor. She was as uniformly cheerful as birds are supposed to be, and she certainly had none of the causes for anxiety or sorrow which even the most proverbial bird must occasionally have. She had always had money, health, good looks; and people had always told her—in New York, in London, in Paris, Rome, and St. Petersburg—from her very earliest childhood, that her one business in life was to amuse herself. The old gentleman whom she had simply and cheerfully accepted as a husband, because he had given her quantities of bonbons, and was going to give her quantities of diamonds, had been kind, and had been kindest of all in dying of sudden bronchitis when away for a month, leaving his young widow with an affectionately indifferent recollection of him, no remorse of any kind, and a great deal of money, not to speak of the excellent Chanoinesse, who constituted an invaluable chaperon. And, since his happy demise, no cloud had disturbed the cheerful life or feelings of Madame Krasinska. Other women, she knew, had innumerable subjects of wretchedness; or if they had none, they were wretched from the want of them. Some had children who made them unhappy, others were unhappy for lack of children, and similarly as to lovers; but she had never had a child and never had a lover, and never experienced the smallest desire for either. Other women suffered from sleeplessness, or from sleepiness, and took morphia or abstained from morphia with equal inconvenience; other women also grew weary of amusement. But Madame Krasinska always slept beautifully, and always stayed awake cheerfully; and Madame Krasinska was never tired of amusing herself. Perhaps it was all this which culminated in the fact that Madame Krasinska had never in all her life envied or disliked anybody; and that no one, apparently, had ever envied or disliked her. She did not wish to outshine or supplant any one; she did not want to be richer, younger, more beautiful, or more adored than they. She only wanted to amuse herself, and she succeeded in so doing.

This particular day—the day after Madame Fosca’s ball—Madame Krasinska was not amusing herself. She was not at all tired: she never was; besides, she had remained in bed till midday: neither was she unwell, for that also she never was; nor had anyone done the slightest thing to vex her. But there it was. She was not amusing herself at all. She could not tell why; and she could not tell why, also, she was vaguely miserable. When the first batch of afternoon callers had taken leave, and the following batches had been sent away from the door, she threw down her volume of Gyp, and walked to the window. It was raining: a thin, continuous spring drizzle. Only a few cabs, with wet, shining backs, an occasional lumbering omnibus or cart, passed by with wheezing, straining, downcast horses. In one or two shops a light was appearing, looking tiny, bleak, and absurd in the gray afternoon. Madame Krasinska looked out for a few minutes; then, suddenly turning round, she brushed past the big palms and azaleas, and rang the bell.

“Order the brougham at once,” she said.

She could by no means have explained what earthly reason had impelled her to go out. When the footman had inquired for orders she felt at a loss: certainly she did not want to go to see anyone, nor to buy anything, nor to inquire about anything.

What *did* she want? Madame Krasinska was not in the habit of driving out in the rain for her pleasure; still less to drive out without knowing whither. What did she want? She sat muffled in her furs, looking out on the wet, gray streets as the brougham rolled aimlessly along. She wanted—she wanted—she couldn’t tell what. But she wanted it very much. That much she knew very well—she wanted. The rain, the wet streets, the muddy crossings—oh, how dismal they were! and still she wished to go on.

Instinctively, her polite coachman made for the pouter streets, for the polite Lung’ Arno. The river quay was deserted, and a warm, wet wind swept lazily along its muddy flags. Madame Krasinska let down the glass. How dreary! The foundry, on the other side, let fly a few red sparks from its tall chimney into the gray sky; the water droned over the weir; a lamplighter hurried along.

Madame Krasinska pulled the check-string.

“I want to walk,” she said.

The polite footman followed behind along the messy flags, muddy and full of pools; the brougham followed behind him. Madame Krasinska was not at all in the habit of walking on the embankment, still less walking in the rain.

After some minutes she got in again, and bade the carriage drive home. When she got into the lit streets she again pulled the check-string and ordered the brougham to proceed at a foot’s pace. At a certain spot she remembered something, and bade the coachman draw up before a shop. It was the big chemist’s.

“What does the Signora Contessa command?” and the footman raised his hat over his ear. Somehow she had forgotten. “Oh,” she answered, “wait a minute. Now I remember, it’s the next shop, the florist’s. Tell them to send fresh azaleas tomorrow and fetch away the old ones.”

Now the azaleas had been changed only that morning. But the polite footman obeyed. And Madame Krasinska remained for a minute, nestled in her fur rug, looking on to the wet, yellow, lit pavement, and into the big chemist’s window. There were the red, heart-shaped chest protectors, the frictioning gloves, the bath towels, all hanging in their place. Then boxes of eau-de-Cologne, lots of bottles of all sizes, and boxes, large and small, and varicosities of indescribable nature and use, and the great glass jars, yellow, blue, green, and ruby red, with a spark from the gas lamp behind in their heart. She stared at it all, very intently, and without a

notion about any of these objects. Only she knew that the glass jars were uncommonly bright, and that each had a ruby, or topaz, or emerald of gigantic size, in its heart. The footman returned.

“Drive home,” ordered Madame Krasinska. As her maid was taking her out of her dress, a thought—the first since so long—flashed across her mind, at the sight of certain skirts, and an uncouth cardboard mask, lying in a corner of her dressing-room. How odd that she had not seen the Sora Lena that evening.

She used always to be walking in the lit streets at that hour.

## V

The next morning Madame Krasinska woke up quite cheerful and happy. But she began, nevertheless, to suffer, ever since the day after the Fosca ball, from the return of that quite unprecedented and inexplicable depression. Her days became streaked, as it were, with moments during which it was quite impossible to amuse herself; and these moments grew gradually into hours. People bored her for no accountable reason, and things which she had expected as pleasures brought with them a sense of vague or more distinct wretchedness. Thus she would find herself in the midst of a ball or dinner-party, invaded suddenly by a confused sadness or boding of evil, she did not know which. And once, when a box of new clothes had arrived from Paris, she was overcome, while putting on one of the frocks, with such a fit of tears that she had to be put to bed instead of going to the Tornabuoni's party.

Of course, people began to notice this change; indeed, Madame Krasinska had ingenuously complained of the strange alteration in herself. Some persons suggested, that she might be suffering from slow blood-poisoning and urged an inquiry into the state of the drains. Others recommended arsenic, morphia, or antipyrine. One kind friend brought her a box of peculiar cigarettes; another forwarded a parcel of still more peculiar novels; most people had some pet doctor to cry up to the skies; and one or two suggested her changing her confessor; not to mention an attempt being made to mesmerize her into cheerfulness.

When her back was turned, meanwhile, all the kind friends discussed the probability of an unhappy love affair, loss of money on the Stock Exchange, and similar other explanations. And while one devoted lady tried to worm out of her the name of her unfaithful lover and of the rival for whom he had forsaken her, another assured her that she was suffering from a lack of personal affections. It was a fine opportunity for the display of pietism, materialism, idealism, realism, psychological lore, and esoteric theosophy.

Oddly enough, all this zeal about herself did not worry Madame Krasinska, as she would certainly have expected it to worry any other woman. She took a little of each of the tonic or soporific drugs; and read a little of each of those sickly sentimental, brutal, or politely improper novels. She also let herself be accompanied to various doctors; and she got up early in the morning and stood for an hour on a chair in a crowd in order to benefit by the preaching of the famous Father Agostino. She was quite patient even with the friends who condoled about the lover or absence of such. For all these things became, more and more, completely indifferent to Madame Krasinska—unrealities which had no weight in the presence of the painful reality.

This reality was that she was rapidly losing all power of amusing herself, and that when she did occasionally amuse herself she had to pay for what she called this *good time* by an increase of listlessness and melancholy.

It was not melancholy or listlessness such as other women complained of. They seemed, in their fits of blues, to feel that the world around them had got all wrong, or at least was going out of its way to annoy them. But Madame Krasinska saw the world quite plainly, proceeding in the usual manner, and being quite as good a world as before. It was she who was all wrong. It was, in the literal sense of the words, what she supposed people might mean when they said that So-and-so was *not himself*; only that So-and-so, on examination, appeared to be very much himself—only himself in a worse temper than usual. Whereas she . . . Why, in her case, she really did not seem to be herself any longer. Once, at a grand dinner, she suddenly ceased eating and talking to her neighbor, and surprised herself wondering who the people all were and what they had come for. Her mind would become, every now and then, a blank; a blank at least full of vague images, misty and muddled, which she was unable to grasp, but of which she knew that they were painful, weighing on her as a heavy load must weigh on the head or back. Something had happened, or was going to happen, she could not remember which, but she burst into tears none the less. In the midst of such a state of things, if visitors or a servant entered, she would ask sometimes who they were. Once a man came to call, during one of these fits; by an effort she was able to receive him and answer his small talk more or less at random, feeling the whole time as if someone else were speaking in her place. The visitor at length rose to depart, and they both stood for a moment in the midst of the drawing-room.

“This is a very pretty house; it must belong to some rich person. Do you know to whom it belongs?” suddenly remarked Madame Krasinska, looking slowly round her at the furniture, the pictures, statuettes, knickknacks, the screens and plants. “Do you know to whom it belongs?” she repeated.

“It belongs to the most charming lady in Florence,” stammered out the visitor politely, and fled.

“My darling Netta,” exclaimed the Chanoinesse from where she was seated crocheting benevolently futile garments by the fire; “you should not joke in that way. That poor young man was placed in a painful, in a very painful position by your nonsense.

Madame Krasinska leaned her arms on a screen, and stared her respectable relation long in the face.

“You seem a kind woman,” she said at length. “You are old, but then you aren’t poor, and they don’t call you a mad woman. That makes all the difference.”

Then she set to singing—drumming out the tune on the screen—the soldier song of ’59, *Addio, mia bella, addio*.

“Netta!” cried the Chanoinesse, dropping one ball of worsted after another. “Netta!”

But Madame Krasinska passed her hand over her brow and heaved a great sigh. Then she took a cigarette off a cloisonné tray, dipped a spill in the fire and remarked.

“Would you like to have the brougham to go to see your friend at the Sacré Cœur, Aunt Thérèse? I have promised to wait in for Molly Wolkonsky and Bice Forteguerra. We are going to dine at Doney’s with young Pomfret.”

## VI

Madame Krasinska had repeated her evening drives in the rain. Indeed she began also to walk about regardless of weather. Her maid asked her whether she had been ordered exercise by the doctor, and she answered yes. But why she should not walk in the Cascine or along the Lung’ Arno, and why she should always choose the muddiest thoroughfares, the maid did not inquire.

As it was, Madame Krasinska never showed any repugnance or seemingly contrition for the state of draggle in which she used to return home; sometimes when the woman was unbuttoning her boots, she would remain in contemplation of their muddiness, murmuring things which Jefferies could not understand. The servants, indeed, declared that the Countess must have gone out of her mind. The footman related that she used to stop the brougham, get out and look into the lit shops, and that he had to stand behind, in order to prevent lady-killing youths of a caddish description from whispering expressions of admiration in her ear. And once, he affirmed with horror, she had stopped in front of a certain cheap eating-house, and looked in at the bundles of asparagus, at the uncooked chops displayed in the window. And then, added the footman, she had turned round to him slowly and said,

“They have good food in there.”

And meanwhile, Madame Krasinska went to dinners and parties, and gave them, and organized picnics, as much as was decently possible in Lent, and indeed a great deal more.

She no longer complained of the blues; she assured everyone that she had completely got rid of them, that she had never been in such spirits in all her life. She said it so often, and in so excited a way, that judicious people declared that now that lover must really have jilted her, or gambling on the Stock Exchange have brought her to the verge of ruin.

Nay, Madame Krasinska's spirits became so obstreperous as to change her in sundry ways. Although living in the fastest set, Madame Krasinska had never been a fast woman. There was something childlike in her nature which made her modest and decorous. She had never learned to talk slang, or to take up vulgar attitudes, or to tell impossible stories; and she had never lost a silly habit of blushing at expressions and anecdotes which she did not reprove other women for using and relating. Her amusements had never been flavored with that spice of impropriety, of curiosity of evil, which was common in her set. She liked putting on pretty frocks, arranging pretty furniture, driving in well got tip carriages, eating good dinners, laughing a great deal, and dancing a great deal, and that was all.

But now Madame Krasinska suddenly altered. She became, all of a sudden, anxious for those exotic sensations which honest women may get by studying the ways, and frequenting the haunts, of women by no means honest. She made up parties to go to the low theaters and music-halls; she proposed dressing up and going, in company with sundry adventurous spirits, for evening strolls in the more dubious portions of the town. Moreover, she, who had never touched a card, began to gamble for large sums, and to surprise people by producing a folded green roulette cloth and miniature roulette rakes out of her pocket. And she became so outrageously conspicuous in her flirtations (she who had never flirted before), and so outrageously loud in her manners and remarks, that her good friends began to venture a little remonstrance. . . .

But remonstrance was all in vain; and she would toss her head and laugh cynically, and answer in a brazen, jarring voice.

For Madame Krasinska felt that she must live, live noisily, live scandalously, live her own life of wealth and dissipation, because. . . .

She used to wake up at night with the horror of that suspicion. And in the middle of the day, pull at her clothes, tear down her hair, and rush to the mirror and stare at herself, and look for every feature, and clutch for every end of silk, or bit of lace, or wisp of hair, which proved that she was really herself. For gradually, slowly, she had come to understand that she was herself no longer.

Herself—well, yes, of course she was herself. Was it not herself who rushed about in such a riot of amusement; herself whose flushed cheeks and overbright eyes, and cynically flaunted

neck and bosom she saw in the glass, whose mocking loud voice and shrill laugh she listened to? Besides, did not her servants, her visitors, know her as Netta Krasinska; and did she not know how to wear her clothes, dance, make jokes, and encourage men, afterwards to discourage them? This, she often said to herself, as she lay awake the long nights, as she sat out the longer nights gambling and chaffing, distinctly proved that she really was herself. And she repeated it all mentally when she returned, muddy, worn out, and as awakened from a ghastly dream, after one of her long rambles through the streets, her daily walks towards the station.

But still . . . What of those strange forebodings of evil, those muddled fears of some dreadful calamity . . . something which had happened, or was going to happen . . . poverty, starvation, death—whose death, her own? or someone else's? That knowledge that it was all, all over; that blinding, felling blow which used every now and then to crush her . . . Yes, she had felt that first at the railway station. At the station? but what had happened at the station? Or was it going to happen still? Since to the station her feet seemed unconsciously to carry her every day. What was it all? Ah! she knew. There was a woman, an old woman, walking to the station to meet . . . Yes, to meet a regiment on its way back. They came back, those soldiers, among a mob yelling triumph. She remembered the illuminations, the red, green, and white lanterns, and those garlands all over the waiting-rooms. And quantities of flags. The bands played. So gaily! They played Garibaldi's hymn, and *Addio, Mia Bella*. Those pieces always made her cry now. The station was crammed, and all the boys, in tattered, soiled uniforms, rushed into the arms of parents, wives, friends. Then there was like a blinding light, a crash . . .

An officer led the old woman gently out of the place, mopping his eyes. And she, of all the crowd, was the only one to go home alone. Had it really all happened? and to whom? Had it really happened to her, had her boys. . . . But Madame Krasinska had never had any boys.

It was dreadful how much it rained in Florence; and stuff boots do wear out so quick in mud. There was such a lot of mud on the way to the station; but of course it was necessary to go to the station in order to meet the train from Lombardy—the boys must be met.

There was a place on the other side of the river where you went in and handed your watch and your brooch over the counter, and they gave you some money and a paper. Once the paper got lost. Then there was a mattress, too. But there was a kind man—a man who sold hardware—who went and fetched it back. It was dreadfully cold in winter, but the worst was the rain. And having no watch one was afraid of being late for that train, and had to dawdle so long in the muddy streets. Of course one could look in at the pretty shops. But the little boys were so rude. Oh, no, no, not that—anything rather than be shut up in a hospital. The poor old woman did no one any harm—why shut her up?

*"Faites votre jeu, messieurs,"* cried Madame Krasinska, raking up the counters with the little rake she had had made of tortoiseshell, with a gold dragon's head for a handle—*"Rien ne va plus—vingt-trois—Rouge, impair et manque."*

## VII

How did she come to know about this woman? She had never been inside that house over the tobacconist's, up three pairs of stairs to the left; and yet she knew exactly the pattern of the wall-paper. It was green, with a pinkish trellis-work, in the grand sitting-room, the one which was opened only on Sunday evenings, when the friends used to drop in and discuss the news, and have a game of *tresette*. You passed through the dining-room to get through it. The dining-room had no window, and was lit from a skylight; there was always a little smell of dinner in it, but

that was appetizing. The boys' rooms were to the bask. There was a plaster Joan of Arc in the hail, close to the clothes-peg. She was painted to look like silver, and one of the boys had broken her arm, so that it looked like a gas-pipe. It was Momino who had done it, jumping on to the table when they were playing. Momino was always the scapegrace; he wore out so many pairs of trousers at the knees, but he was so warm-hearted! and after all, he had got all the prizes at school, and they all said he would be a first-rate engineer. Those dear boys! They never cost their mother a farthing, once they were sixteen; and Momino bought her a big, beautiful muff out of his own earnings as a pupil-teacher. Here it is! Such a comfort in the cold weather, you can't think, especially when gloves are too dear. Yes, it is rabbit-skin, but it is made to look like ermine, quite a handsome article. Assunta, the maid of all work, never would clean out that kitchen of hers—servants are such sluts! and she tore the moreen sofa-cover, too, against a nail in the wall. She ought to have seen that nail! But one mustn't be too hard on a poor creature, who is an orphan into the bargain. Oh, God! oh, God! and they lie in the big trench at San Martino, without even a cross over them, or a bit of wood with their name. But the white coats of the Austrians were soaked red, I warrant you! And the new dye they call magenta is made of pipe-clay—the pipe-clay the dogs clean their white coats with—and the blood of Austrians. It's a grand dye, I tell you!

Lord, Lord, how wet the poor old woman's feet are! And no fire to warm them by. The best is to go to bed when one can't dry one's clothes; and it saves lamp-oil. That was very good oil the parish priest made her a present of . . . Aï, aï, how one's bones ache on the mere boards, even with a blanket over them! That good, good mattress at the pawnshop! It's nonsense about the Italians having been beaten. The Austrians were beaten into bits, made cats'-meat of; and the volunteers are returning tomorrow. Temistocle and Momino—Momino is Girolamo, you know—will be back tomorrow; their rooms have been cleaned, and they shall have a flask of real Montepulciano . . . The big bottles in the chemist's window are very beautiful, particularly the green one. The shop where they sell gloves and scarfs is also very pretty but the English chemist's is the prettiest, because of those bottles. But they say the contents of them is all rubbish, and no real medicine . . . Don't speak of San Bonifazio! I have seen it. It is where they keep the mad folk and the wretched, dirty, wicked, wicked old women. . . . There was a handsome book bound in red, with gold edges, on the best sitting-room table; the *Æneid*, translated by Caro. It was one of Temistocle's prizes. And that Berlin-wool cushion . . . yes, the little dog with the cherries looked quite real. . . .

"I have been thinking I should like to go to Sicily, to see Etna, and Palermo, and all those places," said Madame Krasinska, leaning on the balcony by the side of Prince Mongibello, smoking her fifth or sixth cigarette.

She could see the hateful hooked nose, like a nasty hawk's beak, over the big black beard, and the creature's leering, languishing black eyes, as he looked up into the twilight. She knew quite well what sort of man Mongibello was. No woman could approach him, or allow him to approach her; and there she was on that balcony alone with him in the dark, far from the rest of the party, who were dancing and talking within. And to talk of Sicily to him, who was a Sicilian too! But that was what she wanted—a scandal, a horror, anything that might deaden those thoughts which would go on inside her . . . The thought of that strange, lofty whitewashed place, which she had never seen, but which she knew so well, with an altar in the middle, and rows and rows of beds, each with its set-out of bottles and baskets, and horrid slobbering and gibbering old women. Oh . . . she could hear them!

I should like to go to Sicily," she said in a tone that was now common to her, adding slowly and with emphasis, "but I should like to have someone to show me all the sights. . . ."

"Countess," and the black beard of the creature bent over her—close to her neck—"how strange—I also feel a great longing to see Sicily once more, but not alone—those lovely, lonely valleys. . . ."

Ah!—there was one of the creatures who had sat up in her bed and was singing, singing "Casta Diva!" "No, not alone"—she went on hurriedly, a sort of fury of satisfaction, of the satisfaction of destroying something, destroying her own fame, her own life, filling her as she felt the man's hand on her arm—"not alone, Prince—with someone to explain things—someone who knows all about it—and in this lovely spring weather. You see, I am a bad traveler—and I am afraid . . . of being alone. . . ." The last words came out of her throat loud, hoarse, and yet cracked and shrill—and just as the Prince's arm was going to clasp her, she rushed wildly into the room, exclaiming—

"Ah, I am she—I am she—I am mad!"

For in that sudden voice, so different from her own, Madame Krasinska had recognized the voice that should have issued from the cardboard mask she had once worn, the voice of Sora Lena.

## VIII

Yes, Cecchino certainly recognized her now. Strolling about in that damp May twilight among the old, tortuous streets, he had mechanically watched the big black horses draw up at the posts which closed that labyrinth of black, narrow alleys; the servant in his white waterproof opened the door, and the tall, slender woman got out and walked quickly along. And mechanically, in his wool-gathering way, he had followed the lady, enjoying the charming note of delicate pink and gray which her little frock made against those black houses, and under that wet, gray sky, streaked pink with the sunset. She walked quickly along, quite alone, having left the footman with the carriage at the entrance of that condemned old heart of Florence; and she took no notice of the stares and words of the boys playing in the gutters, the peddlers housing their harrows under the black archways, and the women leaning out of windows. Yes; there was no doubt. It had struck him suddenly as he watched her pass under a double arch and into a kind of large court, not unlike that of a castle, between the frowning tall houses of the old Jews' quarter; houses escutcheoned and stanchioned, once the abode of Ghibelline nobles, now given over to rag-pickers, scavengers and unspeakable trades.

As soon as he recognized her he stopped, and was about to turn: what business has a man following a lady, prying into her doings when she goes out at twilight, with carriage and footman left several streets back, quite alone through unlikely streets? And Cecchino, who by this time was on the point of returning to the Maremma, and had come to the conclusion that civilization was a boring and loathsome thing reflected upon the errands which French novels described ladies as performing, when they left their carriage and footman round the corner. . . . But the thought was disgraceful to Cecchino, and unjust to this lady—no, no! And at this moment he stopped, for the lady had stopped a few paces before him, and was staring fixedly into the gray evening sky. There was something strange in that stare; it was not that of a woman who is hiding disgraceful proceedings. And in staring round she must have seen him; yet she stood still, like one wrapped in wild thoughts. Then suddenly she passed under the next archway, and disappeared in the dark passage of a house. Somehow Cecco Bandini could not make up his

mind, as he ought to have done long ago, to turn back. He slowly passed through the oozy, ill-smelling archway, and stood before that house. It was very tall, narrow, and black as ink, with a jagged roof against the wet, pinkish sky. From the iron hook, made to hold brocades and Persian carpets on gala days of old, fluttered some rags, obscene and ill-omened in the wind. Many of the window panes were broken. It was evidently one of the houses which the municipality had condemned to destruction for sanitary reasons, and whence the inmates were gradually being evicted.

“That’s a house they’re going to pull down, isn’t it?” he inquired in a casual tone of the man at the corner, who kept a sort of cookshop, where chestnut pudding and boiled beans steamed on a brazier in a den. Then his eye caught a half-effaced name close to the lamp-post, “Little Street of the Grave-digger.” “Ah,” he added, quickly, “this is the street where old Sora Lena committed suicide—and—is—is that the house?”

Then, trying to extricate some reasonable idea out of the extraordinary tangle of absurdities which had all of a sudden filled his mind, he fumbled in his pocket for a silver coin, and said hurriedly to the man with the cooking brazier,

“See here, that house, I’m sure, isn’t well inhabited. That lady has gone there for a charity—but—but one doesn’t know that she mayn’t be annoyed in there. Here’s fifty centimes for your trouble. If that lady doesn’t come out again in three-quarters of an hour—there! it’s striking seven—just you go round to the stone posts—you’ll find her carriage there—black horses and gray liveries—and tell the footman to run upstairs to his mistress—understand?” And Cecchino Bandini fled, overwhelmed at the thought of the indiscretion he was committing, but seeing, as he turned round, those rags waving an ominous salute from the black, gaunt house with its irregular roof against the wet, twilight sky.

## IX

Madame Krasinska hurried through the long, black corridor, with its slippery bricks and typhoid smell, and went slowly but resolutely up the black staircase. Its steps, constructed perhaps in the days of Dante’s grandfather, when a horn buckle and leathern belt formed the only ornaments of Florentine dames, were extraordinarily high, and worn off at the edges by innumerable generations of successive nobles and paupers. And as it twisted sharply on itself, the staircase was lighted at rare intervals by barred windows, overlooking alternately the black square outside, with its jags of overhanging roof, and a black yard, where a broken well was surrounded by a heap of half-sorted chickens’ feathers and unpicked rags. On the first landing was an open door, partly screened by a line of drying tattered clothes; and whence issued shrill sounds of altercation and snatches of tipsy song. Madame Krasinska passed on heedless of it all, the front of her delicate frock brushing the unseen filth of those black steps, in whose crypt-like cold and gloom there was an ever-growing breath of charnel. Higher and higher, flight after flight, steps and steps. Nor did she look to the right or to the left, nor ever stop to take breath, but climbed upward, slowly, steadily. At length she reached the topmost landing, on to which fell a flickering beam of the setting sun. It issued from a room, whose door was standing wide open. Madame Krasinska entered. The room was completely empty, and comparatively light. There was no furniture in it, except a chair, pushed into a dark corner, and an empty bird-cage at the window. The panes were broken, and here and there had been mended with paper. Paper also hung, in blackened rags, upon the walls.

Madame Krasinska walked to the window and looked out over the neighboring roofs, to where the bell in an old black belfry swung tolling the Ave Maria. There was a porticoed gallery on the top of a house some way off; it had a few plants growing in pipkins, and a drying line. She knew it all so well.

On the window-sill was a cracked basin, in which stood a dead basil plant, dry, gray. She looked at it some time, moving the hardened earth with her fingers. Then she turned to the empty bird-cage. Poor solitary starling! how he had whistled to the poor old woman! Then she began to cry.

But after a few moments she roused herself. Mechanically, she went to the door and closed it carefully. Then she went straight to the dark corner, where she knew that the staved-in straw chair stood. She dragged it into the middle of the room, where the hook was in the big rafter. She stood on the chair, and measured the height of the ceiling. It was so low that she could graze it with the palm of her hand. She took off her gloves, and then her bonnet—it was in the way of the hook. Then she unclasped her girdle, one of those narrow Russian ribbons of silver woven stuff, studded with niello. She buckled one end firmly to the big hook. Then she unwound the strip of muslin from under her collar. She was standing on the broken chair, just under the rafter. “Pater noster qui es in cælis,” she mumbled, as she still childishly did when putting her head on the pillow every night.

The door creaked and opened slowly. The big, hulking woman, with the vague, red face and bleary stare, and the rabbit-skin muff, bobbing on her huge crinolined skirts, shambled slowly into the room. It was the Sora Lena.

## X

When the man from the cookshop under the archway and the footman entered the room, it was pitch dark. Madame Krasinska was lying in the middle of the floor, by the side of an overturned chair, and under a hook in the rafter whence hung her Russian girdle. When she awoke from her swoon, she looked slowly round the room; then rose, fastened her collar and murmured, crossing herself, “O God, thy mercy is infinite.” The men said that she smiled.

Such is the legend of Madame Krasinska, known as Mother Antoinette Marie among the Little Sisters of the Poor.