

## The Loan

### A True Story of the Wisdom and Compassion

At times, on remote places where families are huddled together, they invariably unite. It happens out of necessity and desire. Over the centuries, the clans of Ponza came together through marriage to often create extraordinary children. They sailed the seven seas and demonstrated tremendous expertise and, at times, even heroism. The product of these families became skilled farmers of a difficult land; and were valiant immigrants who enriched the spirits of other nations through their hard work, sacrifice and ambition.

An example of such a dynasty was that of Salvatore Sandolo and Maria Aprea. They were married before the turn of the last century and left a lasting mark that extended beyond their children and grandchildren that reached their grand nieces and nephews and even the people of the Pearl of the Mediterranean.

Our story is but a small episode in their life that has been left with us as an illustration of wisdom and compassion.



Salvatore and Maria had been married for over 20 years. They knew each other so well that one would start a sentence and the other would finish it. At times, it appeared that they could read each other's thoughts. They were a united couple in all senses of the word. Their personal and business affairs were intertwined and they shared the same goals in life.

They had joined two successful lineages, the Sandolos and the Apreas, to produce a strong line of decedents that had an important influence on the future of Ponza and even the United States. They had eleven children; seven girls and four boys. Maria made sure that each had a good education.

The boys, in particular, were taught to take command of the sea and became respected leaders in their field. Four of the daughters of Salvatore and Maria would go to America and plant the family's seeds in the United States. One daughter would be one of the most renowned teachers of the children of Ponza and another would become the wife of one Ischia's largest land owning families.

For decades, Salvatore's brother was the pastor of the church in Le Forna. He was a symbol of strength and wisdom. Salvatore's nephews became physicians, pharmacists and lawyers. One was mayor of Ponza for over 20 years.

It was an active and successful, family that was strong, intelligent and passionate. Maria Aprea came from a line of merchants. They were thrifty and clever and

understood the intricate details of running a business and, most of all, handling and investing money.



San Salvatore and Santa Filomena on the beach at Santa Maria, c. 1929 Courtesy Ponza Racconta

Salvatore could barely read or write but was a shrewd entrepreneur who knew the business of fishing and distributing lobsters as few others of his generation. He and his brothers started as simple fishermen without education and little involvement with the outside world, like so many others in Ponza in the late nineteenth century,.

His brothers were his partners in the business of fishing. They did well together and rarely argued, perhaps because of one reason: they let their brother the priest handle the finances of the business so that all was above board. It was a wise and necessary way of dealing with a difficult task. Eventually, each went their separate ways to succeed in whatever field they undertook.

Salvatore worked very hard to acquire his own boat and start catching and selling lobsters which were abundant in Ponza at that time. Gradually, he saved enough money for the down payment of a schooner. The first one was christened the Filomena in honor of his mother and oldest daughter. Years later, he managed to buy and launch a second ship, the San Salvatore.



By the early 1930s, he was selling lobsters in various parts of the Mediterranean. He had major distribution centers in Barcelona and Marseille and North Africa. Salvatore knew the ways of a seafarer with skill and precision. He could sail his ships in all forms of weather and recognized the best and shortest routes so he could get his cargo to port on time without the risk of losing his precious goods. His schooners had a full complement of sailors who were fishermen from Ponza. He felt responsible for their lives and the livelihood of their families.

After he unloaded his shipment of lobsters in France or Spain, he would purchase all forms of goods including textiles, soap, clothing, beans, salted meat and fish, cheese, olives, flour, coffee, tobacco, tea and chocolate. Much of it went to feed his growing family but some was sold on the market in Ponza. In time, he became a wealthy man. He was able to buy several apartments and warehouses in the port of Ponza and give each daughter a dowry of 10,000 Lire when a home in Ponza cost less than 5,000 Lire.



In the 1920's Italy required that ships of a certain size had to have a certified captain to guide and steer them. Salvatore was forced to hire one to sail the Filomena. The voyage had been a successful one, to a point. They had filled up their ship with lobsters and were bound for Marseilles. Salvatore knew exactly how long his cargo would survive. He knew the fastest way to reach his destination and told the skipper which route to take.

"I am in charge of this vessel and I will determine which way we go," he told Salvatore. "But I am the owner of this ship and its cargo. I hired you. Unless we get to Marseilles in two days, most of our lobsters will be dead," responded Salvatore. "You may be the owner but I am in command and responsible for the safety of this ship and crew. We will take the course I choose," he insisted. "You have no experience and the way you suggest will take us three or four days," screamed Salvatore. "If you continue to disturb me," said the captain, "I will have you put in chains."



Painting by Captain Raffaele Sandolo in the Church of San Silverio and Santa Domitilla in Ponza, Courtesy Ponza Raconta

Salvatore realized he was powerless and in the hands of an arrogant fool. They arrived in port four days later. All the lobsters were dead. He fired the skipper but turned to his four sons and said, “You will study to be a captain so that no one will do to you what this man has done to me.” It was a sobering experience for Salvatore but a lesson that led to each of his sons reaching the highest rank at sea and commanding their own vessels.



Salvatore had nearly 10 fishermen on board each ship. They were paid the going wage at that time plus given fish and food to take home once they arrived back in Ponza. Being a fisherman was hard work and dangerous. It was a precarious existence, especially if they squandered their money on vices and, in particular, gambling. Since fisherman were paid at the end of a voyage, they were often given some money up front to maintain them until the trip was over. Some had the habit of constantly asking for loans in advance of their pay. Such was the case of Pasquale.

He was a good sailor and a very skillful fisherman. He worked hard. He had a wife and three children. They had a small house in Ponza and a few pieces of land that they cultivated. He also gambled. Salvatore often warned him about this habit. He prohibited gambling on his ships and admonished his men to be careful when they took leave for a few days in either Barcelona or Marseilles.

Pasquale borrowed money from Salvatore even when they were in Ponza. It was given without interest. Usually, he paid it back within a month. It was always about 100 Lire. He had accumulated an obligation of 300 Lire when he knocked on Salvatore's door.

“I need another 100 Lire,” he said. “I have to buy a new mule and seeds to plant for next season’s crop,” he explained. Salvatore knew the real reason. He had gambling debts. If he gave him more money, the situation would get worse. Pasquale’s wife was at her wits end. She asked Salvatore to not give her husband any more funds because he would only throw it away. Salvatore hoped to teach him a lesson and also deprive him of the resources he wanted to continue his vice.

Salvatore responded to Pasquale this way, “Certainly my son. I will be happy to give you another 100 Lire. Maria,” he said, “please go into the drawer and get Pasquale his money.” “Absolutely,” she said. Maria went into the room and returned five minutes later. “I am sorry Salvatore,” she explained, “but there is nothing in the drawer.” Salvatore looked at Pasquale. “You see my son, if you had brought the money, now you would have found it. Since you have not brought it back there is nothing left to give you.”

Pasquale began to tremble. He cried. He fell to his knees and wept. “I am sorry,” he said. Salvatore took him in his arms and said, “Go home Pasquale. You need to begin life over again. You need to work hard and pay all your debts and never gamble again. If not, you will destroy yourself and your beautiful family.”

Pasquale changed. He struggled to recover his dignity and did so with the help of Salvatore who believed in him. Eventually, he was able to even start his own business and even lend money to others.

Of course, this was one of many stories from Ponza that happened over the decades and centuries that had a moral and a meaning. Fortunately, there were people like Salvatore and Maria who had the insight to understand human nature with all of its failings while knowing when to extend a helping hand and the wisdom to know the difference.



I am proud to say that my ancestors were from Ponza and that Salvatore Sandolo and Maria Aprea were my grandparents.

