

## 25. GHOST STORIES: MARIA D'AVALOS

It was in May of the year 1586, when Naples was ruled by the Spanish, that **Carlo Gesualdo**, Prince of Venosa, celebrated his marriage to his cousin, **Maria d'Avalos d'Aragona**, in the church of San Domenico Maggiore. It was fairly commonplace amongst the aristocracy to marry someone from within the family to ensure that the family wealth was increased rather than divided. It was certainly not a marriage of love but a union designed to produce the right heir to continue the lineage so the title and its accompanying wealth would not be lost and returned to the Papacy.

Donna Maria had already been widowed twice before the age of thirty, because she married the first time when she was only fifteen. She had also had two children, which is important, as it meant she was fertile (though people say she was also very attractive). The awaited heir **Emanuele**, was soon conceived and within a couple of years Prince Carlo returned to one of his old passions, **music**. Carlo Gesualdo was well-known and admired at court as a famous **composer of madrigals and church music**. **Torquato Tasso** also began writing his verse in Naples at the court of the Gesualdos. Carlo's married life, however, was a far cry from the melancholy and sophistication of his music. As a husband he was an uncouth and physically overpowering man whose demonstration of feeling for Maria was obsessive.

Disappointed in her husband, both as a man and musician, and not finding him physically attractive, Maria accepted the attentions of **Fabrizio Carafa**, Duke of Andria and Count of Ruvo, who she met at a party. They fell in love from the first moment. They did everything they could to see each other. They managed to have **a passionate affair** for two years before Prince Gesualdo found out. The couple were not so much discovered as betrayed, by Gesualdo's uncle who had himself tried to seduce Maria and had been rejected. Don Fabrizio, when he was told that people had found out about him and Maria, didn't bat an eyelid and suggested they let things cool down a bit. Maria, on the other hand, declared that she didn't care that people knew, and that, if Fabrizio was worried, it meant he was a coward not a Prince. She said that she would prefer the sword rather than be separated. At this point, he too decided that, if necessary, they were prepared to die for their love.

Don Carlo set a **trap** for them. He told them he was going off on a hunting trip for the night and then caught the couple *in flagrante* when he later burst into Maria's bedroom. He told his henchmen to kill them both and to publicly parade their naked bodies the following day. The day after, the whole city flocked to see the scene; Maria had been beaten on her stomach.

It seems that the spine-chilling screams of the beautiful but unfortunate Maria still echo around Piazza San Domenico between the obelisk and the famous Palazzo di Sangro which belonged to the Sansevero Princes. In 1889, the wing of the building where the atrocity had been committed collapsed, enabling Maria's restless spirit to at last find peace. But, at night, when the moon is full, people say they can still see the evanescent form of a scantily-dressed woman, the breeze ruffling her hair, desperately searching for her lover Fabrizio. She wanders silently and her ghostly steps seem to echo around the dark alleyways of the poem the tragic story inspired Tasso to write: *Piangete o Grazie, e voi piangete Amori, ferì trofei di morte, e fere spoglie di bella coppia cui n'invidia e toglie, e negre pompe e tenebrosi orrori...la bella e irrequieta Maria.* (Cry, you Graces and sob oh Loves, sad trophies of death, and sad remains of a beautiful couple who jealousy tore apart and black grief and dark horror... the beautiful, restless Maria).