

## Victor Chan

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### CAPRI 1928

A visit to this fabled island was a must for the young chinese sculptor. After working hard fashioning, from a raw block of marble, the delicate features of a young italian boy's head and neck at the Florence academy of Art, he needed a vacation. Travelling by rail to Naples and then boarding a small boat was the only way to cross the bay of Naples to Capri in 1928. The sea was especially rough that day and a severe case of sea-sickness set in. The first days in Capri were spent recuperating and so when it was time to catch the boat to Sorrento, he was still under the weather and missed boarding. This happened to be the stroke of fate that brought our parents together.

He was staying at a posh hotel near the Marina Grande, overlooking the sea, with white sailboats and a few steamers littering the seascape. To the right, he could see the headland of Capri and its's thousand feet vertical drop that was Tiberius's infamous leap.

Emperor Augustus had bequeathed Capri to his successor Tiberius, who, in his old age, built 12 splendid villas. These were all adorned with statues, groves, theatres and gardens. Only a few stones and ruins remained as reminder of the splendid villas and the cruel ruler of the western world, who with the slightest irritation would hurl his subjects to sudden death on the rocks beneath the cliffs.

He visited the Blue Grotto, difficult to access, as 2 tourists and a rower would have to wait lying flat for the right wave to slip the small boat through the aperture. Once in, the colour was exquisite and unbelievably blue. One's hand in the water and the oars gleamed like silver. For an artist this was a scene to behold...yet few if any artist could reproduce.

One day, while in the town square, he notice a young italian woman...a caprese. He tried to obtain introduction but, being new to the island, he had no one to help. She had also noticed him and thought that he was a japonese pearl salesman, as there had been a few on the island that year. Finally she was told he was chinese. This was terrible as she had just read a news magazine depicting a human head on the tip of a long bamboo pole - part of the northern conquest of the nationalist chinese army. Hurrying home, she described locking the front door (no need in Capri 1928) and that night having dreams of Fu Man Chu.

A young boy (youngest brother of the lady in question) Mario, came to the rescue. He had received a bribe in the form of ice cream from this kind looking oriental gentleman, who turned out to be an artist and sculptor. Would signorina like to sit for a Bas relief?

This was the start of the slowest bas relief ever made....daily sittings for two months! During this time he learned that she was born on Capri. In her early teens the family moved to La Spezia and then she was in Rome for schooling. Her family left Capri after the death of her father during the First World War from injuries he received from a munitions accident in Naples. Her mother had a wooden leg from a childhood accident. Mother's father, thinking that she would not marry, provided her the opportunity to higher education and she became a scholar. She however did marry and had four children. She wrote with beautiful handwriting and cultured Italian.

The family moved back to Capri in the mid 1920s. Fate would have it that the family home, built by her grandfather Magiore Guesippe de Maria, (onetime governor of Capri and whose grand grave in the cimitero near the Marina Grande we visited with cousin Antonio and his family.) was sold after father's death and the proceeds unfortunately went to buy italian war bonds. These turned out worthless when Italy lost the Great War. The home that Guesippe built had a distinct feature. The head in marble of a young roman girl had been unearthed when the foundation to the house was being prepared. He had it placed facing outward above the front door. The family that bought the house from them still lives in it. (when we visited in 2002 he was in his eighties... both mother and he were born in that house!)

During the Bas relief sittings, several suitors came to the door but signorina showed little interest in them. She



confessed that at that rate she would end up an old maid. This led him to say "Signorina, if you become an old maid I will come and marry you". Not thinking, she replied..." Why wait until I become an old maid... I will marry you now!"

She immediately knew he was not taking this as a joking matter, as his face lit up with uncontained happiness.

Signora de Maria was approached for the hand of her daughter. Sensing great hardship ahead, the Italian lady ( even though she liked him and loved the beautiful oil painting of multicoloured pionsies he had given to her) placed three conditions to be fulfilled in 2 years...1. that he became a catholic. 2. that he left for 2 years. 3. that his references supported his character ( he got miss Reyman and Mrs. Parret to write). If at the end of 2 years her daughter still wanted to marry, then he could come back.

After concluding his work in Florence he returned to Boston. He met Costanzo de Maria in New York ( oldest of her younger brothers who had migrated to America), became a catholic and just shy of 2 years, returned to Capri with excellent references from his 2 american patrons.

The wedding was held at S. Antonio church. The whole island knew the bride from early childhood. She used to swim daily off the beach to the left of Marina grande, was often found near the blue grotto or boating beneath the shadows of the Faragioli....but there she was all in white, with her man of the east....the second Italian to marry a chinese in recorded history. The wedding photo showed the large group of friends and relatives, including the politician and his wife who had close ties to the Minister of State Benito Mussolini, from whose office special dispensation was needed for the couple to marry as China and Italy had no official relationship.

As the newly weds left Capri, a floatilla of white sailed fishing boats followed them out to sea. They slowly bid them farewell as the silhouette of Capri became smaller and smaller. Tears of seperation greeted mother and daughter... as it turned out another Great War and twenty years would pass before they saw each other again.