

## 23. DONN'ALBINA, DONNA ROMITA AND DONNA REGINA

There is a legend which is wonderfully recounted by **Matilde Serao** in her book *Neapolitan Legends* and which still echoes around the gardens of the convents in Naples. The protagonists are three sisters: **Donn'Albina, Donna Romita and Donna Regina**, the daughters of Baron Toraldo, a nobleman from the Sedile del Nilo.

The story goes that when the girls lost their mother, Donna Gaetana Scauro, at an early age, the Baron was granted special permission by Robert of Anjou for his oldest daughter, Donna Regina, to keep her own surname once she got married so the family name would not be lost. The Baron died in 1320, leaving three daughters behind.

**Donna Regina** was 19 years old, and extraordinarily beautiful. She had long dark hair, brown eyes, lips which were beautiful although disinclined to smile, and an inflexible character with a strong sense of duty. She was the head of the family, the “defender” of the noble blood and family honour.

**Donn'Albina**, the middle daughter, was given her name because her face was so beautiful and white. She was a nice girl, smiling and generous, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was the one who distributed food and offerings to the poor and passed on people's requests for help to her older sister.

**Donna Romita**, the youngest daughter, was a restless, moody character who would be incredibly enthusiastic one moment and then completely indifferent the next. She became withdrawn when she thought about her mother, who she was said to look like. She was thin with short, curly blonde hair, bright green eyes and thin lips.

The three sisters lived a quiet, uneventful life until the King **Robert of Anjou** wrote to Donna Regina to tell her that he had chosen don **Filippo Capece**, a knight of the Neapolitan court, to be her husband.

One day, when Donna Regina had a prayer book open in her hand but wasn't reading it, Donn'Albina came to talk to her about her younger sister.. «Donna Romita looks really ill to me – she whispered -. She is secretly suffering the pains of love ».

Donna Regina was shocked and made her sister tell her the man's name and found out that it was none other than the man betrothed to her: don Filippo.

«She loves him - continued Albina -. Who wouldn't? Is he not brave, gallant and attractive to look at. When he whispers sweet nothings, the girl's heart melts in sweet happiness; when his lips brush her forehead, the joy of the angels is as nothing compared to hers.»

When she heard this, Regina realised that it was not only Donna Romita who was in love with Filippo but Donna Albina as well.

A distraught Romita prayed to the **Madonna Bruna** (there is a statue of her in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine) that she might **forget her love**: «Madonna Santa, get rid of this love! Tear my heart out, make me die!

Suddenly, the silence was broken by the sound of crying. When she realised it was her sister, Albina, Romita felt so ashamed that she ran away leaving her sister grieving over the same man.

The three sisters had not seen each other for a long time because they kept avoiding each other and it was Easter before the two younger sisters went to their older sister to ask for her **forgiveness** and to see if it was possible for them to go and live in a convent. She told them that she herself had already decided to take the veil when she realised that Filippo Capece did not love her. She was going to live in the convent she herself had founded. She exchanged a quick kiss with her two sisters then stood up, took hold of an ebony sceptre with gold decoration, broke it in half then, turning towards the last portrait of Baron Toraldo, she said: «Goodbye, my dear father, this is the end of your noble family».

In homage to such a sad love story there are three places in Naples named after the three sisters: Via Donnalbina near Piazza Matteotti, and Via Donnaromita and Largo Donnaregina near the Duomo.