

*From the slums of Naples,  
this Italian beauty  
rose to international stardom,  
but the main ambition of her life  
still eludes her*

by Peer J. Oppenheimer



Elsa Maxwell and society accept Sophia, but she can't forget her slum origins.

suddenly put down his fork and shouted at Sophia, "You are eating like a peasant. You don't twist spaghetti in a spoon!"

"But all my life . . ."  
"You haven't had a life yet. Forget what happened before!"

Then he showed her how to scoop up the long strands with just the fork. When she spilled some food in the process, he went into another rage. But she remembered the lesson well.

To get rid of her Neapolitan accent, he made her read aloud from books, listen to recordings, take speech lessons.

Carlo went to work on her wardrobe with equal vigor. When she first earned enough to buy clothes without worrying about prices, she went overboard on gaudy, frilly things—all of which he made her return or give away. Today Sophia is one of the best-dressed actresses in films.

Her lack of education proved more difficult to overcome. She had quit school at 15 and had never read the classics or present-day literature. Her knowledge of history, geography, and philosophy was almost nonexistent. But she was eager to learn.

She did so by reading and by mingling with educated, cultured people; but for years she hardly dared open her mouth for fear of voicing the wrong opinion and being laughed at.

Sophia's fundamental problem today is her clouded marriage to Ponti.

After his Mexican divorce and their marriage in Juarez, Mexico, on June 17, 1957, she thought she had at last achieved respectability. They established residence in Switzerland and rented a house in Lucerne near Audrey Hepburn's and Mel Ferrer's home. Her presentation to Queen Elizabeth in England was the highlight of the following year. But the final test came with her return to Italy.

It had been reported that she dreaded going back and did so only because "Bay of Naples," in which she costars with Clark Gable, was filmed in Capri.

That was not the case. She would have gone back anyway. In fact, months earlier she had bought an ancient mansion near the Appian Way. "It was built in the year 700 and has so many rooms I haven't counted them all," she told me proudly. Trees centuries old line the narrow road from the street to the estate.

FOR WHAT she hoped would be a triumphant return to Italy, Sophia had collected antiques wherever she went. "I want to live like a lady," she told me, "and I could have, if it hadn't been for this." Again she waved the clipping about the bigamy charges.

If that indictment were really the only barrier to respectability, it shouldn't be for long. On her subsequent arrival in Italy, her lawyers advised her that the most probable outcome of the whole case would be a repeal of the entire civil bigamy law, which is peculiar only to Italy.

However, even this prospect doesn't promise Sophia the fulfillment of her ambitions.

To gain the kind of respectability she seeks, she will first have to find the self-assurance she still lacks. This was apparent when I accompanied her to the "Breath of Scandal" location near a little village southwest of Vienna. Three shabby youngsters approached her for her autograph. Tensely Sophia signed her name, not even looking at the children who reminded her so painfully of her own childhood.

So far, she is at ease only with people she can look up to. She still hasn't learned to live in the present while accepting the past. But Sophia has made such tremendous strides, it seems only a matter of time before she attains her most important goal.

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