

The Last Don



Mario Puzo

BY THE AUTHOR
OF THE CLASSIC
BESTSELLER
THE GODFATHER

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Mario Puzo

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue: Quogue 1965

Book I: Hollywood Las Vegas 1990

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Book II: The Clericuzio and Pippi De Lena

Chapter 3

Book III: Claudia De Lena Athena Aquitane

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Book IV: Cross De Lena The Clericuzio

Chapter 6

Book V: Las Vegas Hollywood Quogue

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Book VI: A Hollywood Death

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Book VII: The Santadio War

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20

Book VIII: Communion

Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Epilogue: Nice, France Quogue

Copyright

About the Book

Don Domenico has a surprise in store for his family. He wants them to create a life free from criminal activities for his grandchildren. Nothing unusual about that. Except that the Clericuzio are the last of the great Mafia families. And there are seeds of evil among the Clericuzio, seeds sown by the Don himself. And killing is still what they do best.

About the Author

Mario Puzo was born in New York and, following military service in World War II, attended New York's New School for Social Research and Columbia University. His best-selling novel *The Godfather* was preceded by two critically acclaimed novels, *The Dark Arena* (1955) and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965). IN 1978, he published *Fools Die*, followed by *The Sicilian* (1984), *The Fourth K* (1991), and the second instalment in his Mafia trilogy, *The Last Don* (1996), which became an international best-seller. Mario Puzo also wrote many screenplays, including *Earthquake*, *Superman*, and all three *Godfather* films, for which he received two Academy Awards. He died in July 1999 at his home in Long Island, New York, at the age of seventy-eight.

By the same author

FICTION

The Dark Arena
The Fortunate Pilgrim
The Godfather
Fools Die
The Sicilian
The Fourth K
Omertà
The Family

NON-FICTION

The Godfather Papers
Inside Las Vegas

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Runaway Summer of Davie Shaw

MARIO PUZO

The Last Don



arrow books

For

Virginia Altman

Domenick Cleri

PROLOGUE



Quogue
1965



ON PALM SUNDAY, one year after the Great War against the Santadio, Don Domenico Clericuzio celebrated the christening of two infants of his own blood and made the most important decision of his life. He invited the greatest Family chiefs in America, as well as Alfred Gronevelt, the owner of the Xanadu Hotel in Vegas, and David Redfellow, who had built up a vast drug empire in the United States. All his partners to some degree.

Now the most powerful Mafia Family head in America, Don Clericuzio planned to relinquish that power, on the surface. It was time to play a different hand; obvious power was too dangerous. But the relinquishing of power was dangerous in itself. He had to do it with the most skillful benignity and with personal goodwill. And he had to do it on his own base.

The Clericuzio estate in Quogue comprised twenty acres surrounded by a ten-foot-high redbrick wall armed by barbed wire and electronic sensors. It held, besides the mansion, the homes for his three sons as well as twenty small homes for trusted Family retainers.

Before the arrival of the guests, the Don and his sons sat around the white wrought-iron table in the trellised garden at the back of the mansion. The oldest, Giorgio, was tall, with a small, fierce mustache and the lanky frame of an English gentleman, which he adorned with tailored clothes. He was twenty-seven, saturnine, with savage wit and closed face. The Don informed Giorgio that he, Giorgio, would be applying to the Wharton School of Business.

There he would learn all the intricacies of stealing money while staying within the law.

Giorgio did not question his father; this was a royal edict, not an invitation to discussion. He nodded obedience.

The Don addressed his nephew, Joseph "Pippi" De Lena, next. The Don loved Pippi as much as he did his sons, for in addition to blood—Pippi being his dead sister's son—Pippi was the great general who had conquered the savage Santadio.

"You will go and live permanently in Vegas," he said. "You will look after our interest in the Xanadu Hotel. Now that our Family is retiring from operations, there will not be much work here to do. However you will remain the Family Hammer."

He saw Pippi was not happy, that he must give reasons. "Your wife, Nalene, cannot live in the atmosphere of the Family, she cannot live in the Bronx Enclave. She is too different. She cannot be accepted by them. You must build your life away from us." Which was all true, but the Don had another reason. Pippi was the great hero general of the Clericuzio Family, and if he continued to be "Mayor" of the Bronx Enclave, he would be too powerful for the sons of the Don when the Don no longer lived.

"You will be my *Bruglione* in the West," he told Pippi. "You will become rich. But there is important work to do."

He handed Pippi the deed to a house in Las Vegas. The Don then turned to his youngest son, Vincent, a man of twenty-five. He was the shortest of the children, but built like a stone door. He was spare in speech, and he had a soft heart. He had learned all the classic peasant Italian dishes at his mother's knee, and it was he who had wept so bitterly at his mother's dying young.

The Don smiled at him. "I am about to decide your destiny," he said, "and set you on your true path. You will open the finest restaurant in New York. Spare no expense. I want you to show the French what real food is all about."

Pippi and the other sons laughed, even Vincent smiled. The Don smiled at him. "You will go to the best cooking school in Europe for a year."

Vincent, though pleased, growled, "What can they teach me?"

The Don gave him a stern look. "Your pastries could be better," he said. "But the main purpose is to learn the finances of running such an enterprise. Who knows, someday you may own a chain of restaurants. Giorgio will give you the money."

The Don turned finally to Petie. Petie was the second and the most cheerful of his sons. He was affable, at twenty-six no more than a boy, but the Don knew he was a throwback to the Sicilian Clericuzio.

"Petie," the Don said, "Now that Pippi is in the West, you will be Mayor of the Bronx Enclave. You will supply all the soldiers for the Family. But also, I have bought you a construction company business, a large one. You will repair the skyscrapers of New York, you will build state police barracks, you will pave the city streets. That business is assured but I expect you to make it a great company. Your soldiers can have legitimate employment and you will make a great deal of money. First you will serve an apprenticeship under the man who now owns it. But remember, your primary duty is to supply and command soldiers of the Family." He turned to Giorgio.

"Giorgio," the Don said, "You will be my successor. You and Vinnie will no longer take part in that necessary part of the Family which invites danger, except when it is absolutely necessary. We must look ahead. Your children, my children, and little Dante and Croccifixio must never grow up in this world. We are rich, we no longer have to risk our lives to earn our daily bread. Our Family will now serve only as financial advisors to all the other Families. We will serve as their political support, mediate their quarrels. But to do this we must have cards to play. We must have an

army. And we must protect everyone's money, for which they will let us wet our beaks."

He paused. "Twenty, thirty years from now, we will all disappear into the lawful world and enjoy our wealth without fear. Those two infants we are baptizing today will never have to commit our sins and take our risks."

"Then why keep the Bronx Enclave?" Giorgio asked.

"We hope someday to be saints," the Don said, "But not martyrs."

An hour later Don Clericuzio stood on the balcony of his mansion and watched the festivities below.

The huge lawn, carpeted with picnic tables crowned with wing-like green umbrellas, was filled with the two hundred guests, many of them soldiers from the Bronx Enclave. Christenings were usually joyful affairs, but this one was subdued.

The victory over the Santadio had cost the Clericuzio dearly. The Don had lost his most dearly beloved son, Silvio. His daughter Rose Marie had lost her husband.

Now he watched the crowds of people mulling around the several long tables filled with crystal urns of deep red wine, bright white tureens of soups, pastas of every kind, platters laden with a variety of sliced meats and cheese, and crispy fresh breads of all sizes and shapes. He allowed himself to be soothed by the soft music of the small band playing in the background.

Directly in the center of the circle of picnic tables, the Don saw the two baby carriages with their blue blankets. How brave the two babies were, they had not flinched when struck with Holy Water. Beside them were the two mothers, Rose Marie and Nalene De Lena, Pippi's wife. He could see the babies' faces, so unmarked by life, Dante Clericuzio and Croccifixio De Lena. He was responsible for ensuring that these two children would never have to suffer

to earn a living. If he succeeded, they would enter the regular society of the world. It was curious, he thought, that there was no man in the crowd paying homage to the infants.

He saw Vincent, usually dour with a face like granite, feeding some small children from the hot dog cart he had built for the feast. It resembled the New York street hot dog carts, except that it was bigger, it had a brighter umbrella, and Vincent gave out better food. He wore a clean white apron, and he made his hot dogs with sauerkraut and mustard, with red onions and hot sauce. Each small child had to give him a kiss on the cheek for a hot dog. Vincent was the most tenderhearted of his sons, despite his rough exterior.

On the boccie court, he saw Petie, playing with Pippi De Lena, Virginio Ballazzo, and Alfred Gronevelt. Petie was a practical joker, which the Don disapproved of; it always seemed a dangerous business to him. Even now Petie was disrupting the game with his tricks as one of the boccie balls flew into pieces after the first hit.

Virginio Ballazzo was the Don's underboss, an executive officer in the Clericuzio Family. He was a high-spirited man and was pretending to chase Petie, who was pretending to run. This struck the Don as ironic. He knew his son Petie was a natural-born assassin, and that the playful Ballazzo had a certain reputation in his own right.

But neither of them was a match for Pippi.

The Don could see the women in the crowd glancing at Pippi. Except for the two mothers, Rose Marie and Nalene. He was such a fine-looking man. As tall as the Don himself, a rugged strong body, a brutally handsome face. Many of the men were observing him also, some of them his soldiers from the Bronx Enclave. Observing his air of command, the litheness of his body in action, knowing his legend, *The Hammer*, the best of the "Qualified Men."

David Redfellow, young, rosy-cheeked, the most powerful drug dealer in America, was pinching the cheeks of the two infants in their carriages. Finally, Alfred Gronevelt, still clad in his jacket and tie, was obviously ill at ease at playing a strange game. Gronevelt was the same age as the Don himself, near sixty.

Today Don Clericuzio would change all their lives, he hoped for the better.

Giorgio came to the balcony to summon him to the first meeting of the day. The ten Mafia chiefs were assembling in the den of the house for the meeting. Giorgio had already briefed them as to Don Clericuzio's proposal. The christening was an excellent cover for the meeting, but they had no real social ties with the Clericuzio and wanted to be on their way as soon as possible.

The den of the Clericuzio was a windowless room with heavy furniture and a wet bar. All ten men looked somber as they sat around the large dark marble conference table. They each in turn greeted Don Clericuzio and then waited expectantly to hear what he had to say.

Don Clericuzio summoned his sons, Vincent and Petie, his executive officer, Ballazzo, and Pippi De Lena to join the meeting. When they arrived, Giorgio, cold and sardonic, made a brief introductory remark.

Don Clericuzio surveyed the faces of the men before him, the most powerful men in the illegal society that functioned to supply the solutions to the true needs of the people.

"My son Giorgio has briefed you on how everything will work," he said. "My proposal is this. I retire from all my interests with the exception of gambling. My New York activities I give to my old friend Virginio Ballazzo. He will form his own Family and be independent of the Clericuzio. In the rest of the country I yield all of my interests in the unions, transportation, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs to your Families. All my access to the law will be available. What I ask in return is that you let me handle your earnings. They

will be safely held and available to you. You will not have to worry about the Government tracking down the money. For it I ask only a five percent commission."

This was a dream deal for the ten men. They were thankful that the Clericuzio were retreating when the Family could just as well have gone forward to control or destroy their empires.

Vincent walked around the table and poured each of them some wine. The men held their glasses up and toasted the Don's retirement.

After the Mafia dons made their ceremonious farewells, David Redfellow was escorted into the den by Petie. He sat in the leather armchair opposite the Don, and Vincent served him a glass of wine. Redfellow stood out from the other men not only because of his long hair but because he wore a diamond earring and a denim jacket with his clean, pressed jeans. He had Scandinavian blood. He was blond with clear blue eyes and always had a cheerful expression and a casual wit.

The Don owed a great debt of gratitude to David Redfellow. It was he who proved that lawful authorities could be bribed on drugs.

"David," Don Clericuzio said, "You are retiring from the drug business. I have something better for you."

Redfellow did not object. "Why now?" he asked the Don.

"Number one," the Don said, "the government is devoting too much time and trouble to the business. You would have to live with anxiety the rest of your life. More importantly, it has become too dangerous. My son Petie and his soldiers have served as your bodyguards. I can no longer permit that. The Colombians are too wild, too foolhardy, too violent. Let them have the drug business. You will retire to Europe. I will arrange for your protection there. You can

keep yourself busy by buying a bank in Italy and you will live in Rome. We will do a lot of business there.”

“Great,” Redfellow said. “I don’t speak Italian and I know nothing of banking.”

“You will learn both,” Don Clericuzio said. “And you will live a happy life in Rome. Or you can stay here if you wish, but then you will no longer have my support, Petie will no longer guard your life. Choose as you like.”

“Who will take over my business?” Redfellow asked. “Do I get a buyout?”

“The Colombians will take over your business,” the Don said. “That cannot be prevented, that is the tide of history. But the government will make their life misery. Now, yes or no?”

Redfellow thought it over and then laughed. “Tell me how to get started.”

“Giorgio will take you to Rome and introduce you to my people there,” the Don said. “And through the years he will advise you.”

The Don embraced him. “Thank you for listening to my advice. We will still be partners in Europe and believe me, it will be a good life for you.”

When David Redfellow left, the Don sent Giorgio to summon Alfred Gronevelt to the den. As the owner of the Xanadu Hotel in Vegas, Gronevelt had been under the protection of the now defunct Santadio Family.

“Mr. Gronevelt,” the Don said. “You will continue to run the Hotel under my protection. You need have no fear for yourself or your property. You will keep your fifty-one percent of the Hotel. I will own the forty-nine percent formerly owned by the Santadio and be represented by the same legal identity. Are you agreeable?”

Gronevelt was a man of great dignity and great physical presence, despite his age. He said carefully, “If I stay, I

must run the Hotel with the same authority. Otherwise I will sell you my percentage.”

“Sell a gold mine?” the Don said incredulously. “No, no. Don’t fear me. I’m a businessman above all. If the Santadio had been more temperate, all those terrible things would never have happened. Now they no longer exist. But you and I are reasonable men. My delegates get the Santadio points. And Joseph De Lena, Pippi, gets all the consideration due him. He will be my *Bruglione* in the West at a salary of one hundred thousand a year paid by your hotel in any manner you see fit. And if you have trouble of any kind with anyone, you go to him. And in your business, you always have trouble.”

Gronevelt, a tall, spare man, seemed calm enough. “Why do you favor me? You have other and more profitable options.”

Don Domenico said gravely, “Because you are a genius in what you do. Everyone in Las Vegas says so. And to prove my esteem I give you something in return.”

Gronevelt smiled at this. “You’ve given me quite enough. My hotel. What else can be as important?”

The Don beamed at him benevolently, for though he was always a serious man, he delighted in surprising people with his power. “You can name the next appointment to the Nevada Gaming Commission,” the Don said. “There is a vacancy.”

Gronevelt for one of the few times in his life was surprised, and also impressed. Most of all he was elated, as he saw a future for his hotel that he had not even dreamed of. “If you can do that,” Gronevelt said, “we will all be very rich in the coming years.”

“It is done,” the Don said. “Now you can go out and enjoy yourself.”

Gronevelt said, “I’ll be getting back to Vegas. I don’t think it’s wise to let everyone know I’m a guest here.”

The Don nodded. "Petie, have someone drive Mr. Gronevelt to New York."

Now, besides the Don, only his sons, Pippi De Lena, and Virginio Ballazzo were left in the room. They looked slightly stunned. Only Giorgio had been his confidant. The others had not known the Don's plans.

Ballazzo was young for a *Bruglione*, only a few years older than Pippi. He had control over unions, garment center transportation, and some drugs. Don Domenico informed him that from now on he was to operate independently of the Clericuzio. He had only to pay a tribute of 10 percent. Otherwise, he had complete control over his operations.

Virginio Ballazzo was overcome by this largesse. He was usually an ebullient man who expressed his thanks or complaints with brio, but now he was too overcome with gratitude to do anything but embrace the Don.

"Of that ten percent, five will be reserved by me for your old age or misfortune," the Don told Ballazzo. "Now forgive me, but people change, they have faulty memories, gratitude for past generosity fades. Let me remind you to be accurate in your accountings." He paused for a moment. "After all, I am not the tax people, I cannot charge you those terrible interests and penalties."

Ballazzo understood. With Don Domenico, punishment was always swift and sure. There was not even a warning. And the punishment was always death. After all, how else could one deal with an enemy?

Don Clericuzio dismissed Ballazzo, but when the Don escorted Pippi to the door, he paused for a moment, then pulled Pippi close to him and whispered in his ear, "Remember, you and I have a secret. You must keep it a secret forever. I never gave you the order."

On the lawn outside the mansion, Rose Marie Clericuzio waited to speak to Pippi De Lena. She was a very young and very pretty widow, but black did not suit her. Mourning for her husband and brother suppressed the natural vivacity so necessary to her particular kind of looks. Her large brown eyes were too dark, her olive skin too sallow. Only her newly baptized blue-ribboned son, Dante, resting in her arms, gave her a splash of color. All through this day she had maintained a curious distance from her father, Don Clericuzio, and her three brothers, Giorgio, Vincent, and Petie. But now she was waiting to confront Pippi De Lena.

They were cousins, Pippi ten years older, and when she was a teenager, she had been madly in love with him. But Pippi was always paternal, always off-putting. Though a man famous for his weakness of the flesh, he had been too prudent to indulge that weakness with the daughter of his Don.

“Hello Pippi,” she said. “Congratulations.”

Pippi smiled with a charm that made his brutal looks attractive. He bent down to kiss the infant’s forehead, noticing with surprise that the hair, which still held the faint smell of incense from the church, was thick for a child so young.

“Dante Clericuzio, a beautiful name,” he said.

It was not so innocent a compliment. Rose Marie had taken back her maiden name for herself and her fatherless child. The Don had convinced her to do this with an impeccable logic, but still she felt a certain guilt.

Out of this guilt, Rose Marie said, “How did you convince your Protestant wife to have a Catholic ceremony and such a religious name?”

Pippi smiled at her. “My wife loves me and wants to please me.”

And it was true, Rose Marie thought. Pippi’s wife loved him because she did not know him. Not as she herself had known him and once loved him. “You named your son

Croccifixio," Rose Marie said. "You could have pleased her at least with an American name."

"I named him after your grandfather, to please your father," Pippi said.

"As we all must," Rose Marie said. But her bitterness was masked by her smile, her bones structured in such a way that a smile appeared naturally on her face and gave her an air of sweetness that took the sting out of anything she said. She paused now, faltering. "Thank you for saving my life."

Pippi stared at her blankly for a moment, surprised, slightly apprehensive. Then he said softly, "You were never in any danger," and he put his arm around her shoulder. "Believe me," he said. "Don't think about these things. Forget everything. We have happy lives ahead of us. Just forget the past."

Rose Marie dipped her head to kiss her infant but really to hide her face from Pippi. "I understand everything," she said, knowing that he would repeat the conversation to her father and her brothers. "I have made peace with it." She wanted her family to know that she loved them still and that she was content her infant had been received into the Family, sanctified now by Holy Water, and saved from everlasting Hell.

At that moment Virginio Ballazzo gathered Rose Marie and Pippi up and swept them to the center of the lawn. Don Domenico Clericuzio emerged from the mansion, followed by his three sons.

Men in formal dress, women in gowns, infants in satin, the Clericuzio Family formed a half circle for the photographer. The crowd of guests clapped and shouted congratulations, and the moment was frozen: the moment of peace, of victory, and of love.

Later the picture was enlarged and framed and hung in the Don's study room, next to the last portrait of his son Silvio, killed in the war against the Santadio.

The Don watched the rest of the party festivities from the balcony of his bedroom.

Rose Marie wheeled her baby carriage past the bowlers, and Pippi's wife, Nalene, slim, tall, and elegant, came along the lawn carrying her infant, Croccifixio, in her arms. She put the child in the same carriage with Dante, and the two women gazed down lovingly.

The Don felt a surge of joy that these two infants would grow up sheltered and safe and would never know the price that had been paid for their happy destiny.

Then the Don saw Petie slip a baby bottle of milk into the carriage and everyone laughed as the two babies fought for it. Rose Marie raised her son Dante from the carriage, and the Don remembered her as she was just a few short years before. The Don sighed. There is nothing so beautiful as a woman in love, nor so heartbreaking as when she is made a widow, he thought with regret.

Rose Marie was the child he had most loved, she had been so radiant, so full of cheer. But Rose Marie had changed. The loss of her brother and her husband was too great. Yet, in the Don's experience, true lovers would always love again and widows grew tired of black weeds. And now she had an infant to cherish.

The Don looked back on his life and marveled it had come to such glorious fruition. Certainly he had made monstrous decisions to achieve power and wealth, but he felt little regret. And it all had been necessary and proved correct. Let other men groan over their sins, Don Clericuzio accepted them and placed his faith in the God he knew would forgive him.

Now Pippi was playing boccie with three soldiers from the Bronx Enclave, men older than him, who had solid business shops in the Enclave, but who were in awe of Pippi. Pippi with his usual high spirits and skill was still the center of attention. He was a legend, he had played boccie against the Santadio.

Pippi was exuberant, shouting with joy when his ball jostled the opposing ball away from the target bowl. What a man Pippi was, the Don thought. A faithful soldier, a warm companion. Strong and quick, cunning and withholding.

His dear friend Virginio Ballazzo had appeared on the boccie court, the only man who could rival Pippi's skill. Ballazzo gave a great flourish as he let his ball go, and there was a loud cheer as he made the successful hit. He raised his hand to the balcony in triumph, and the Don clapped. He felt a sense of pride that such men flowered and prospered under his rule, as had all the people who had gathered together on this Palm Sunday in Quogue. And that his foresight would protect them in the difficult years to come.

What the Don could not foresee were the seeds of evil in as yet unformed human minds.

BOOK I



Hollywood Las Vegas 1990

CHAPTER 1



BOZ SKANNET'S RED CAP of hair was sprayed by the lemon-colored sunlight of California spring. His taut, muscular body throbbed to enter a great battle. His whole being was elated that his deed would be seen by more than a billion people all over the world.

In the elastic waistband of Skannet's tennis slacks was a small pistol, concealed by the zippered jacket pulled down to his crotch. That white jacket blazed with vertical red lightning bolts. A blue-dotted scarlet bandana bound his hair.

In his right hand he held a huge, silvery Evian bottle. Boz Skannet presented himself perfectly to the showbiz world he was about to enter.

That world was a huge crowd in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, a crowd awaiting the arrival of movie stars to the Academy Awards ceremony. Specially erected grandstands held the spectators, the street itself was filled with TV cameras and reporters who would send iconic images all over the world. Tonight people would see their great movie stars in the flesh, shed of their manufactured mythic skins, subject to real-life losing and winning.

Uniformed security guards with shiny brown batons tucked neatly in holsters formed a perimeter to keep the spectators in check.

Boz Skannet didn't worry about them. He was bigger, faster, and tougher than those men, and he had the element of surprise. He was wary of the TV reporters and cameramen who fearlessly staked out territory to intercept the celebrities. But they would be more eager to record than prevent.

A white limousine pulled up to the entrance of the Pavilion, and Skannet saw Athena Aquitane, "the most beautiful woman in the world," according to various magazines. As she emerged, the crowd pressed against the barriers shouting her name. Cameras surrounded her and charged her beauty to the far corners of the earth. She waved.

Skannet vaulted over the grandstand fence. He zigzagged through the traffic barriers, saw the brown shirts of the security guards start to converge, the pattern familiar. They didn't have the right angle. He slipped past them as easily as he had the tacklers on the football field years before. And he arrived at exactly the right second. There was Athena talking into the microphone, head tilted to show her best side to the cameras. Three men were standing beside her. Skannet made sure that the camera had him, and then he threw the liquid from the bottle into Athena Aquitane's face.

He shouted, "Here's some acid, you bitch." Then he looked directly into the camera, his face composed, serious, and dignified. "She deserved it," he said. He was covered by a wave of brown-shirted men with their batons at the ready. He knelt on the ground.

At the last moment Athena Aquitane had seen his face. She heard his shout and turned her head so that the liquid struck her cheek and ear.

A billion TV people saw it all. The lovely face of Athena, the silvery liquid on her cheek, the shock and the horror, the recognition when she saw her attacker; a look of true fear that for a second destroyed all her imperious beauty.

The one billion people around the world watched as the police dragged Skannet off. He looked like a movie star himself as he raised his shackled hands in a victory salute, only to collapse as an enraged police officer, finding the gun in his waistband, gave him a short, terrible blow to the kidney.

Athena Aquitane, still reeling from shock, automatically brushed the liquid from her cheek. She felt no burning. The liquid drops on her hand began to dissolve. People were crashing all around her, to protect her, to carry her away.

She pulled loose and said to them calmly, "It's only water." She licked the drops off her hand to be sure. Then she tried to smile. "Typical of my husband," she said.

Athena, showing the great courage that helped make her a legend, walked quickly into the Pavilion of the Academy Awards. When she won the Oscar for best actress, the audience rose and clapped for what seemed like forever.

In the chilled penthouse suite of the Xanadu Casino Hotel of Las Vegas, the eighty-five-year-old owner lay dying. But on this spring day, he thought he could hear, from sixteen floors below, an ivory ball clacking through red and black slots of roulette wheels, the distant surf of crapshooters hoarsely imploring tumbling dice, the whirring of thousands of slot machines devouring silver coins.

Alfred Gronevelt was as happy as any man could be while dying. He had spent nearly ninety years as a hustler, dilettante pimp, gambler, accessory to murder, political fixer, and finally as the strict but kindly lord of the Xanadu Casino Hotel. For fear of betrayal, he had never fully loved any human being, but he had been kind to many. He felt no regrets. Now, he looked forward to the tiny little treats left in his life. Like his afternoon journey through the Casino.

Croccifixio "Cross" De Lena, his right-hand man for the last five years, came into the bedroom and said, "Ready

Alfred?" And Gronevelt smiled at him and nodded.

Cross picked him up and put him in the wheelchair, the nurse tucked the old man in blankets, the male attendant took his post to wheel. The nurse handed Cross a pillbox and opened the door of the penthouse. She would remain behind. Gronevelt could not abide her on these afternoon jaunts.

The wheelchair rolled easily over the false green turf of the penthouse garden and entered the special express elevator that descended the sixteen floors to the Casino.

Gronevelt sat straight in his chair, looking right and left. This was his pleasure, to see men and women who battled against him with the odds forever on his side. The wheelchair made a leisurely tour through the blackjack and roulette area, the baccarat pit, the jungle of crap tables. The gamblers barely noticed the old man in the wheelchair, his alert eyes, the bemused smile on his skeletal face. Wheelchair gamblers were common in Vegas. They thought fate owed them some debt of luck for their misfortune.

Finally the chair rolled into the coffee shop/dining room. The attendant deposited him at their reserved booth and then retired to another table to await their signal to leave.

Gronevelt could see through the glass wall to the huge swimming pool, the water burning a hot blue in the Nevada sun, young women with small children studding its surface like colored toys. He felt a tiny rush of pleasure that all this was his creation.

"Alfred, eat a little something," Cross De Lena said.

Gronevelt smiled at him. He loved the way Cross looked, the man was so handsome in a way that appealed to both men and women, and he was one of the few people that Gronevelt had almost trusted during his lifetime.

"I love this business," Gronevelt said. "Cross, you'll inherit my points in the Hotel and I know you'll have to deal with our partners in New York. But never leave Xanadu."

Cross patted the old man's hand, all gristle beneath the skin. "I won't," he said.

Gronevelt felt the glass wall baking the sunlight into his blood. "Cross," he said, "I've taught you everything. We've done some hard things, really hard to do. Never look back. You know percentages work in different ways. Do as many good deeds as you can. That pays off too. I'm not talking about falling in love or indulging in hatred. Those are very bad percentage moves."

They sipped coffee together. Gronevelt ate only a flaky strudel pastry. Cross had orange juice with his coffee.

"One thing," Gronevelt said, "Don't ever give a Villa to anyone who doesn't make a million drop. Never forget that. The Villas are legendary. They are very important."

Cross patted Gronevelt's hand, let his hand rest on the old man's. His affection was genuine. In some ways he loved Gronevelt more than his father.

"Don't worry," Cross said. "The Villas are sacred. Anything else?"

Gronevelt's eyes were opaque, cataracts dimming their old fire. "Be careful," he said, "Always be very careful."

"I will," Cross said. And then, to distract the old man from his coming death, he said, "When are you going to tell me about the great Santadio War? You worked with them then. Nobody ever talks about it."

Gronevelt gave an old man's sigh, barely a whisper, almost emotionless. "I know time's getting short," he said. "But I can't talk to you yet. Ask your father."

"I've asked Pippi," Cross said, "But he won't talk."

"What's past is past," Gronevelt said. "Never go back. Not for excuses. Not for justification, not for happiness. You are what you are, the world is what it is."

Back in the penthouse suite, the nurse gave Gronevelt his afternoon bath and took his vital signs. She frowned and

Gronevelt said, "It's only the percentages."

That night he slept fitfully, and as dawn broke he told the nurse to help him to the balcony. She settled him in the huge chair and wrapped him in blankets. Then she sat beside him and took his hand to check his pulse. When she tried to take her hand back, Gronevelt continued to hold it. She permitted it and they both watched the sun rise above the desert.

The sun was a red ball that turned the air from blue-black to dark orange. Gronevelt could see the tennis courts, the golf course, the swimming pool, the seven Villas gleaming like Versailles and all flying the Xanadu Hotel flag: forest green field with white doves. And beyond, the desert of endless sand.

I created all this, Gronevelt thought. I built pleasure domes in a wasteland. And I made myself a happy life. Out of nothing. I tried to be as good a man as possible in this world. Should I be judged? His mind wandered back to his childhood, he and his chums, fourteen-year-old philosophers, discussing God and moral values as boys did then.

"If you could have a million dollars by pushing a button and killing a million Chinamen," his chum said triumphantly, as if posing some great, impossible moral riddle, "would you do it?" And after a long discussion they all agreed they would not. Except Gronevelt.

And now he thought, he had been right. Not because of his successful life but because that great riddle could not even be posed anymore. It was no longer a dilemma. You could pose it only one way.

"Would you push the button to kill ten million Chinamen"—why Chinamen?"—"for a thousand dollars?" That was now the question.

The world was turning crimson with light, and Gronevelt squeezed his nurse's hand to keep his balance. He could look directly into the sun, his cataracts a shield. He