

Early days of the Mafia

RAVI PRASAD HERATH

Don Croce Malo was born in the village of Villaba, a little mud-hole he was to make prosperous and famous all through Sicily. It was not ironic, to Sicilians, that he sprang from a religious family who groomed him for priesthood in the Holy Catholic Church, that his first name had originally been Croce-fisso, a religious name given only by the most pious parents. Indeed, as a slender youth he was forced to play the part of Christ in those religious plays put on in celebration of Holy Easter and was acclaimed for his marvelous air of piety. But when he grew to manhood at the turn of the century, it was clear that Croce Malo had difficulty accepting any authority other than himself. He smuggled, he extorted, he stole, and finally, worst of all, he impregnated a young girl of the village, an innocent Magdalene in the plays.

Inquisition of the Holy Catholic Church

He then refused to marry her, claiming they had both been carried away with the religious fervour of the play, and therefore he should be forgiven.

The girl's family found this explanation too subtle to accept and demanded matrimony or death. Croce Malo was too proud to marry a girl so dishonoured and fled to the mountains. After a year as a bandit, he had the good fortune to make contact with the Mafia. "Mafia," in Arabic, means a place of sanctuary, and the word took its place in the Sicilian language when the Saracens ruled the country in the tenth century. Throughout history, the people of Sicily were oppressed mercilessly by the Romans, the Papacy, the Normans, the French, the Germans, and the Spanish. Their governments enslaved the poor working class, exploiting their labour, raping their women, murdering their leaders. Even the rich did not escape. The Spanish Inquisition of the Holy Catholic Church stripped them of their wealth for being heretics. And so the "Mafia" sprang up as a secret society of avengers.

When the royal courts refused to take action against a Norman noble who raped a farmer's wife, a band of peasants assassinated him. When a police chief tortured some petty thief with the dreaded cassetta, that police chief was killed. Gradually the strongest-willed of the peasants and the poor formed themselves into an organised society which had the support of the people and in effect became a second and more powerful government. When there was a wrong to be redressed, no one ever went to the official police, they went to the leader of the local Mafia, who mediated the problem. The

The King of Italy was coming to Sicily to visit his devoted subjects, and devoted they were. All Sicilians hated the Roman government and feared the Mafia. But they loved the monarchy because it extended their family, which consisted of blood relations, the Virgin Mary and God himself. Great festivals were prepared for the King's visit. On his first Sunday in Sicily the King went to Mass at the great Cathedral of Palermo. He was to stand godfather to the son of one of the ancient nobles of Sicily, the Prince Ollorto

greatest crime a Sicilian could commit was to give any information of any kind to the authorities about anything done by the Mafia. They kept silent. And this silence came to be called omerta. Over the centuries the practice enlarged to never giving the police information about a crime committed even against oneself. All communications broke down between the people and the law enforcement agencies of reigning governments so that even a small child was taught not to give a stranger the simplest directions to a village or a person's house. Through the centuries the Mafia governed Sicily, a presence so shadowy and indistinct that the authorities could never quite grasp the extent of its power. Up until World War II, the word "Mafia" was never uttered on the island of Sicily.

Five years after Don Croce's flight into the mountains, he was well known as a "Qualified Man." That is, someone who could be entrusted with the elimination of a human being without causing more than a minimal amount of trouble. He was a "Man of Respect," and after making certain arrangements, he returned to live in his native town of Villaba, some forty miles south of Palermo. These arrangements included paying an indemnity to the family of the girl he had dishonored. This was later heralded as the measure

of his generosity, but it was rather the proof of his wisdom.

The pregnant girl had already been shipped to relatives in America with the label of a young widow to hide her shame, but her family still remembered. They were, after all, Sicilian. Don Croce, a skilled murderer, a brutal extorter, a member of the dreaded Friends of the Friends, could not comfortably count on all this to protect him from the family that had been disgraced. It was a matter of honor, and if not for the indemnity, they would have had to kill him no matter what the consequences. By combining generosity with prudence, Croce Malo acquired the respectful title of "Don." By the time he was forty years old he was acknowledged as the foremost of the Friends of the Friends and was called upon to adjudicate the most desperate disputes between rival cosce of the Mafia, to settle the most savage vendettas. He was reasonable, he was clever, he was a born diplomat, but most important of all, he did not turn faint at the sight of blood.

"Don of Peace"

He became known as the "Don of Peace" throughout the Sicilian Mafia and everyone prospered; the stubborn were eliminated with judicious murders and Don Croce was a rich man.

Even his brother, Benjamino, had become a secretary to the Cardinal of Palermo, but blood was thicker than holy water and he owed his first allegiance to Don Croce. He married and became father to a little boy he adored. Don Croce, not so prudent as he was later to become, not so humble as he later learned to be under the whip of adversity, engineered a coup that made him famous all through Sicily, and an object of wonder to the highest circle of Roman society. This coup sprang from a bit of marital discord which even the greatest men in history have had to endure. Don Croce, because of his position in the Friends of the Friends, had married into a proud family who had recently bought patents of nobility for such a huge sum that the blood in their veins turned blue.

After a few years of marriage, his wife treated him with a lack of respect he knew he had to correct, though of course not in his usual fashion. His wife's blue blood had made her disenchanted with Don Croce's no-nonsense, earthy peasant ways, his practice of saying nothing if he had nothing to the point to say, his casual attire, his habit of rough command in all things.

There was also the remembrance of how all her other suitors melted away when Don Croce announced his candidacy for her hand. She did not of course show her disrespect in any obvious fashion. This was, after all, Sicily, not England or America. But the Don was an extraordinarily sensitive soul. He soon observed that his wife did not worship the ground upon which he walked, and that was proof enough of her disrespect. He became determined to win her devotion in such a way that it would last a lifetime and he could then devote his full attention to business. His supple mind wrestled with the problem and came up with a plan worthy of Machiavelli himself.

Don Croce grew fat and the bony face grew cheeks that were huge slabs of mahogany; his nose became a great beak that served as an antenna for power. His crinkly hair grew into a barbed-wire gray. His body ballooned majestically; his eyes became lidded with flesh that grew like a heavy moss over his face. His power increased with each pound until he seemed to become an impenetrable obelisk. He seemed to have no weaknesses as a man; he never showed anger, never showed greed.

He was affectionate in an impersonal way but never showed love. He was conscious of his grave responsibilities and so never voiced his fears in his wife's bed or on her breast. He was the true King of Sicily. But his son—the heir apparent—was struck with the strange disease of religious social reform and had emigrated to Brazil to educate and uplift savage Indians along the Amazon. The Don was so shamed he never uttered his son's name again.

