

How Jay Sarno Built a Casino Empire
and Inspired Modern Las Vegas



GRANDISSIMO

The First Emperor of Las Vegas

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SEVEN

The Triumphs of Caesar

Jay Sarno was used to bad luck, but this was ridiculous. He had gone home to Joyce and the kids to get one last night's sleep before the opening but he had spent most of the night tossing and turning, sick over what was going on across town at his hotel. More than two years of planning, and so much was still up in the air. As he lay in bed on the morning of Friday, August 5, 1966, he ran through some of his problems.

First, there was the money: there wasn't enough of it. Although the Gaming Control Board had warned them about having a sufficient bankroll on hand before the place was ready to take bets, they had only \$100,000 behind the cashier's window, not \$350,000. This was a gamble: with a run of luck, winners could break the bank. The casino would have to close.

Then there was the airline strike. Virtually all commercial airline traffic had been grounded for nearly a month now. With the rates he was charging, Sarno needed to draw a wealthier visitor than Las Vegas had seen before, the kind of jet-setters who wouldn't drive or take a train, let alone a bus. The downtown places were booming despite the strike, and the other Strip casinos that relied heavily on weekenders driving up from Los Angeles were limping along. None of them were as vulnerable to the airline strike as he was. Even if they bused people from Los Angeles and filled the hotel, it wouldn't help in the casino. Without the East Coast high rollers, without the *machers*, this might be a big bust.

Third, he and Nate Jacobson weren't getting along. They had an arrangement: Jay would be the idea man, and Nate would be the money man. But each wanted to be the boss. Jacobson infuriated Sarno with his penny-pinching; Sarno's disregard for the bottom line drove Jacobson nuts. Sensible adults who respected each other could see past these differences, but the tension between the two would-be bosses grew. Maybe it was because they were both self-described degenerate gamblers who figured that one of them winning meant the other was losing, but fundamentally, they just didn't like each other.

Fourth, the place just wasn't ready to open. The night before, Stuart Mason had given him an honest assessment of how much work remained. The casino was mostly done, but guys were still laying carpet in the lobby. Half of the rooms wouldn't be ready for another three days; the first guests were due to arrive in three hours. Most of the rooms that overlooked the pool didn't have their plumbing hooked up. He lost track of how many rooms didn't have all their furniture; several thousands of dollars worth of beds and chairs were still sitting in the parking lot. At least it hadn't rained.

Then there were less immediate troubles. His friend Jimmy Hoffa had nearly exhausted his appeals and would probably be sitting in prison in a few months. Without his help at the Teamsters Union, Sarno might be cut off from the loans he would need to expand the hotel, and he had to be without a powerful ally. Right now, declaring "Jimmy says so," ended more than one argument. A few months from now, who knew?

Plus there were rumors swirling in the papers that his casino was overrun by mobsters, that a crew of Mafiosi had already divvied up control in the joint. Had they? He knew that Jerry Zarowitz didn't answer to him or Jacobson, but he couldn't say whether this would be a problem.

There were plenty of reasons not to go ahead with the opening, to say that he had given the casino business his best shot and slink back to Atlanta, where the Cabana guaranteed a living. But Sarno never thought of backing down. The uncertainty was wonderfully excruciating.

He wasn't the only one holding his breath. Las Vegas awaits a casino opening the way Romans look for white smoke wafting from

the Sistine Chapel. In a town built on an understanding of gambling odds and good public relations, each new resort is an act of civic affirmation, a reminder that as long as the hotels keep rising and the dice keep rolling, all will be well. Caesars Palace's debut promised to be one for the ages. It was the most expensive casino ever built, anywhere, costing about four times more than earlier casinos like the Sands or Dunes, even though he was a master of squeezing the most out of a dollar. They were getting a lot of bang for their buck—but would it be enough to draw the big gamblers?

The sun was shining as he waited for the driver to pick him up. He considered this a good omen, even though the sky was just as cloudless about 310 days a year in Las Vegas. In fact, as important as the day seemed to Sarno, it was shaping up like a normal day for nearly everyone else in Las Vegas. Like every other Friday it was the real start of the workweek for many. The sun had been up for hours by the time Sarno's car arrived and the mercury was already in the upper 90s: it would reach 111 degrees that day.

But this was no ordinary Friday. In place of an opening party, Sarno planned a three-day Roman debauch. Even the invitations were part of the gag. You didn't just get one in the mail: a centurion knocked on your door, his armor glittering over his taut abs, and unrolled a scroll with charred edges (to suggest fiddling while the world around you burned). Then he read the Roman script that formally invited you to "the gala preview of Las Vegas' newest and most exciting resort."

The invitation described the party as an "orgy of excitement" including "libations, feasting, casting of dice, spinning of wheels, turning of cards, and revelries of entertainment featuring the noblest Roman of them all...Mr. Andy Williams." The orgy would continue "on and on until the collapse of the participants...or sunrise, August 8, whichever event shall first occur."

Those who knew Sarno got a chuckle out of the cartoon logo at the top and bottom of the scroll: a chubby toga-wearing Caesar who looked suspiciously like Sarno reclining on a couch, with a scantily-clad blonde who bore a remarkable resemblance to Joyce draped across his lap, dangling a bunch of grapes over his open mouth. Sarno might not have his name on the hotel, but he would

personally welcome guests to the property in a series of invitations, brochures, and guidebooks, in caricature at least.

Now the day was here, Sarno thought, the die was cast. As his driver approached Las Vegas Boulevard, he leaned forward.

“Drop me off in front,” he commanded. Instead of being left off in the back, by the construction entrance, he would walk through the front door like a paying guest. No, better than that, like an emperor. At Las Vegas Boulevard, the driver made a right then a quick left, and Caesars Palace was upon them.

Sarno had visualized every brick before a shovel had been turned; then he had walked every inch of the property while it was being built. There were still pickup trucks and delivery vans surrounding the hotel. But seeing it on the day of the opening, Sarno felt like he was laying eyes on his casino for the first time.

The fountains were working just as he had imagined they would. Eighteen of them centered the 135-foot driveway from the Strip to the porte cochere, jetting water sixty feet in the air. Real Italian cypress trees lined either side of the drive, enclosing arrivals in a cocoon of forest and water.

As his driver eased the car towards the entrance, Sarno saw a phalanx of uniformed bellmen. Passing the water on one side and the slender cypresses on the other, he left the world where he was just another hustling developer and stepped into a Roman fantasy where he was the emperor.

Nate Jacobson and Jerry Zarowitz might have disagreed, but Sarno knew he really deserved the title: Caesars Palace was his idea, and if it was different from everything else in Las Vegas, he was the reason.

Sarno had fussed over every detail. Even the driveway he was moving down had a special purpose. Most of the Strip hotels were pushed behind large set-backs used as parking lots, practical but unglamorous.

“No one’s going to drive three hundred miles and pull into something that looks like a drive-in,” he reasoned. You could move the lots behind the casino, which meant that customers who parked themselves would have to schlep all the way across the pool to get to the casino, and those who valeted would have to wait longer for their cars.

Or, Sarno figured, you could make the parking lot into something special. In St. Peter's Square, Bernini had figured out a way to make the huge space in front of the Vatican a venue fit for a papal address; the colonnades made it look more dignified and imposing than a mere empty lot. Sarno built his own Bernini-inspired colonnades by shellacking a classical façade over the curving low-rise wings that concealed guest rooms, executive offices, and convention space.

Sarno's fountains centered the colonnades. As he insisted in including in press materials, there were more fountains in front of Caesars than there were in front of Versailles. By implication, the casino was more elegant than the royal French palace, its guests more regal.

The driveway was meant to do more than just guide cars from the Boulevard to the front doors; it was to transport the guest out of time, out of space, away from his workaday life and into a fantasy world—neither wholly real nor entirely imagined—that would let him be the man he had always dreamed he should be, with gratification only a throw of the dice or the flash of a smile away.

"It's perfect," Sarno said to himself.

Sarno's car pulled up to the canopied entrance. A bellman wearing an outfit that looked like a toga crossed with a jumpsuit opened the car door, and Sarno stepped out a new man. His wife and children on Maricopa Way, the debts still hanging over him from the Cabanas, the million delays and annoyances that kept him distracted from the real purpose of life—chasing action—disappeared.

Sarno looked at the marble reproduction of Giovanni Bologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* that had been authentically handcrafted to his specifications in Florence a few months earlier.

"Is Harry here?" he asked a bellman, knowing that the project manager hadn't left the hotel for days.

"I haven't seen him leave."

Sarno pushed his way through the doors, held open by a guard of toga-wearing attendants, and saw the casino stretching in front of him. Under an oval dome which was supported by twenty columns of real Italian marble, more than two dozen games—craps, roulette, and blackjack—were ready for gamblers, their green felt brushed clean of construction dust. Spiral arms of slot machines—208 of

them—reached across the remaining space. On the right, Nero's Nook had a stage for performers and tables and chairs for revelers. To the left, the registration desk was only a few steps away, with a custom-built sixty-six foot couch opposite.

Though construction workers and casino personnel, feverishly preparing for the coming hordes, were making an unholy racket, Sarno felt at peace. This was by design. "Over the years that I have been creating hotels," an expansive Sarno told a reporter in the late 1970s, "I've discovered that the oval is a magic shape conducive to relaxation. Because the casino is shaped in an oval, people tend to relax and play longer." The stately columns that ringed the room and a ninety-foot wide chandelier hanging at its center were the final proof that this room packed with gambling tables was elegant. How could you argue with that?

Sarno headed toward the front desk, walked behind it as the clerks paused from their work to watch one of the bosses go by, and took an elevator one story up to the executive suite.

Wald was in his office, on the phone wrangling with a seafood distributor about the lobsters that were being unloaded, Sarno surmised, in back of the hotel. Before going into his office, Sarno paused to look at a rendering of the hotel lying on a table.

He had designed the hotel to be as convenient as possible for the guests, as inexpensive as possible for the builders, and as ostentatious as possible for those who doubted that he could bring elegance to the Nevada desert.

To the sides of the driveway lay the colonnaded wings. The casino, officially called "Caesar's Forum," was directly in the center. Towards the back on the left side, the Circus Maximus supper club was getting ready to host that famous noble Roman Andy Williams in the "Rome Swings" revue. Past that lay the Noshorium, a Capitoline Hill-meets-Hester Street coffee shop, several small stores, and the tower elevators. Beyond the elevator lobby, guests found the Bacchanal gourmet restaurant, which was just far enough removed from the action to allow guests to savor their food and wine away from the sounds of gambling. The hotel tower rose fourteen stories high, its crescent shape screened in the block pattern Sarno had designed himself. By day it gleamed white and at night it glowed

aquamarine thanks to lights carefully placed behind its screen block. Behind it, almost as an afterthought, more rooms in hexagonal two-story wings swept around the Garden of the Gods, the outdoor recreation area that featured a bar, a putting green, and an immense pool in the shape of a Roman shield. Sarno knew it couldn't miss.

If he could get everyone to the opening on time, that was.

"How's the plane coming?" he asked before Wald had hung up the phone. Sarno had arranged a high rollers-only charter flight for the opening. It would take off from New York, make one stop—in Baltimore, where much of the money for the casino had come from, thanks to Nate Jacobson—then fly nonstop until it touched down in Las Vegas.

"In the air," Wald answered. With a nod from Sarno, he got back on the phone, trying to reach another one of the vendors.

Sarno headed back down to the casino to make sure everything was going right. His casino was going to open, and no one could stop it.

Out on the floor, Stuart Mason wasn't so sure. He was exhausted, like everyone else on his crew. They'd been working around the clock for two weeks now, and as the first guests started to arrive, they weren't anywhere near ready to open.

Facing reality, Mason abandoned the system he had been using to get the furniture moved into the rooms—all the beds, all the sofas, all the chairs, all the tables, then all the lamps methodically brought up to each floor—and shifted into triage mode. Workers started bringing up whatever could fit in the elevator, and put it into whatever room looked like it needed it. Standing behind the front desk with a walkie-talkie in his hand, he kept an eye on who was checking in, and which room they were taking. Watching Mr. and Mrs. Archie Smith register for room 603, he got on the walkie-talkie.

"Room 603, what do we need in room 603?"

"Standby." Per his instructions, the clerk was taking his time with the Smiths, giving Mason time to contact his man in the tower.

"Room 603, we're short a sofa and a lamp."

Mason then called down to the guys in the parking lot. “Get a sofa and lamp, standard, up to 603 pronto.”

“We’re on our way.”

The desk clerk finally gave the Smiths their keys. As they started toward the elevator, Mason decided this would be as good a time as any to check in with the guys in the tower. He got into the elevator with the Smiths. It was a tight fit.

“That’s a very fine couch you’ve got there,” Mrs. Smith said to the workers standing behind it.

“I’m glad you like it,” Mason said and smiled. “It’s going into your room.”

He was starting to believe that maybe they’d pull this off.

A few hours and several furniture deliveries later, the hotel was as ready as it was going to be. Mason called Flora and told her to bring his tuxedo. As tired as he was, he wouldn’t miss this party for anything. He also needed to be ready to fix any last-minute glitches the hotel—and his clients—might throw at him. Flora arrived, and Stuart got undressed to take his shower. When he peeled his socks off, they were sticky with blood. In his frenzy to deliver the hotel he had rubbed several holes in his skin.

Luckily, Flora had brought a fresh pair of black socks.

Meanwhile, Jay was running around the property with surprising grace for a man of his size. One minute, everything looked great. The next, everything looked awful. The lights were too bright—the place didn’t look romantic at all, it looked like an operating room. The waitresses’ skirts were too long, they looked like schoolmarms; their skirts were too short, the bluenoses on the Gaming Board would close him down. He was in agony. He was alive.

Then he saw an apparition. He had built ancient Rome, but a wizard—the image of Merlin himself—was walking the halls.

“Hey, you,” Sarno called out, not sure if this was a man or a ghost.

“Yes?” It was definitely a man, a man wearing a floor-length black robe emblazoned with stars, and a conical wizard’s hat.

“What are you doing in my hotel?”

“I’m the earthly representative of the Cult of the Good Father,”

Merlin replied. "I am sensing the vibrations and perturbations of this construction." He gestured obscurely toward the wall.

"And? What do you think?"

"There are very auspicious emanations in this spot!" Merlin said. "This is your hotel?"

"Yes, I'm Jay Sarno, the managing director. It's all my design."

"And a wonderful design it is. With your permission, kind sir, I would like to pronounce a profound benediction upon this magnificent temple." He began to raise his arms.

"Wait, wait!" Sarno said. He was pretty sure this guy was nuts, but who knew what kind of edge this could give him? "I'll take you up to my suite. We're having a little party before the party."

So they sauntered off toward the elevators, Jay Sarno and Merlin. And no one batted an eyelash.

Upstairs, the party was in full swing. Joyce was there, along with a few of the top executives and construction guys, with their wives, tastefully toasting the possibilities of the opening. Jay breezed in with Merlin, not interrupting the flow of conversation. He had to tap a champagne glass to get everyone's attention.

"We all know this is a first-class hotel. Well, we've got a real wizard here who's going to say a few words in favor of the place."

"To the gods and goddesses!" Merlin shouted, raising his arms. "Please look with favor, cherish, and bless the opening of this fine hotel. May its auspicious vibrations lead to a successful opening, and successful venture." He closed his eyes, maybe in prayer. Everyone watched him as he stood silently for five, ten seconds.

"The gods and goddesses have spoken," he declared. "This will be a singularly successful enterprise. Fortune will smile upon you."

With that, Sarno showed him the door, and Merlin walked off, running his hands over the wallpaper and babbling to himself.

Conversation inside the room picked up right where it had stopped.

Downstairs, the real Caesars Palace opening bash got started a little later than promised, but what it lacked in punctuality it made up for in excess. Nearly two thousand invited guests, including well-

connected politicians, serious gamblers, and celebrities from Hollywood to Broadway came to pay their respects. Everyone who was anyone—or at least anyone who Sarno could get out to Vegas—was there. So you had Batman, or at least his current television actor Adam West, rubbing shoulders with Jimmy Hoffa and Eva Gabor, with Johnny Carson and Nevada governor Grant Sawyer along for the ride.

The fun started late in the afternoon, with the casino finally taking real bets while celebrants feasted on two tons of filet mignon, the single largest order of Ukrainian caviar ever purchased by a private organization, and more shrimp cocktail than anyone could measure, all washed down with 50,000 glasses of champagne.

Yet something was still missing, even while Merlin was giving his benediction: the real gamblers. But not for long. Groaning under the weight of the biggest assortment of rounders, plungers, and out-and-out suckers ever seen outside a Damon Runyon story (including a wide-eyed twenty-four year old Steve Wynn, even then not entirely out of place among the game's biggest players), Wald's chartered plane finally touched down on the tarmac at McCarran Airfield, solving that problem.

The new arrivals were ready to party.

"It was a riot. You should have seen these guys," Wynn recalled over forty years later. "They were so excited. It was the biggest event in the history of America, this opening of Caesars Palace."

Once the heavy hitters arrived, the bash started in earnest. With plentiful food and flowing champagne, they were willing to forget that they'd had to step over rolls of carpet to get to their rooms. Some of them laughed about it.

"I'm finally in the room," a smiling Wynn said to the man across from him, a bookmaker from Staten Island, "and a guy comes in without knocking and says, 'Excuse me, sir.' And he puts a shower curtain rod in, then he puts up the curtain."

"At least your toilet works," the bookie said. In fact, they weren't alone: some guests checked in to find carpenters and plumbers still hard at work, while others had to wait outside their rooms while crews laid down the carpet. One visiting starlet was surprised when a group of workers "accidentally" barged in on her as she was changing into her bikini.

But the fountains out front worked flawlessly, sending jets of water sixty feet into the August heat. The Roman-style employee uniforms were impeccable. Every single front-of-the-house worker wore something inspired by ancient Rome. The first guests marveled at asking a centurion to take their luggage to the room. Only the casino executives wore twentieth century business attire. Being served a drink by a girl in a low-cut tunic was one thing, but not even Sarno would ask his customers to fill out credit applications for men wearing togas.

As the night wore on, invited guests started weaving their way to the dinner theater. The casino was the hotel's centerpiece, but the Circus Maximus was its crown jewel. It was modeled on the Coliseum. Each of its 800 seats had a clear view of the stage; it had been designed so that no support columns obstructed the sight lines. The walls were ringed by a colonnade bedecked with golden shields, standards of the legions of Rome. The predominant shade of blue was intended to suggest a calm evening.

The theater's first evening, however, was anything but calm. Sarno could only see that the area in front of the theater didn't look the way he thought it should. It was too damned bright.

"Mason!" he shouted, snagging Stuart as he headed towards his seat. "Get out here! Do something about these lights!"

Mason excused himself and followed Sarno out to the foyer.

"Get those goddamn lights down lower."

Mason found a ladder and, in his tuxedo, climbed up and unscrewed a few light bulbs.

"That's better," Sarno said as the lighting dimmed. He finally saw just how badly things were going. The lobby was filled with gawkers who prevented the invited guests from getting to their seats. No one could move, it was so crowded. It was pandemonium.

It was after midnight, and the big show hadn't started yet. But the guests didn't mind the delay. The champagne and scotch had been flowing freely since the afternoon. With everything—besides the gambling—on the house, the party-goers were giddy.

At last, everyone found their seats. The audience mingled Hollywood stars, Teamster aristocrats, and gambling maniacs. David Janssen, Maureen O'Hara, Andy Griffith, Paul Anka, Steve

Lawrence, Eydie Gorme, Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn, John Wayne, and Ed Sullivan, along with a host of producers and power brokers, represented Tinseltown. A fair number of Nevada politicians enjoyed the Palace's hospitality.

Finally, the emcee introduced the principals. Governor Sawyer, who had vigorously defended his state from federal charges of mob corruption, said a few congratulatory words to the owners and welcomed the visitors to Nevada.

But the real star of the night was Jimmy Hoffa, who was hailed like a Caesar. Surrounded by a protective circle of associates, he sat at a ringside table. Sarno had reserved the hotel's finest suite, room 1066 for him. It was directly over the porte cochere, with a commanding view of the fountains and the empty desert that stretched beyond them to the east.

It meant nothing to Hoffa. He refused all drinks, quietly watching the drunken debauch around him. But Sarno, Jacobson, and the rest tripped over themselves to pay him homage.

"We needed a guy like Jimmy," Sarno declared from the stage, when it was his turn to speak. "Only someone with his class, his integrity, could have added a little Greco-Roman class to Vegas."

It should have been a triumph for organized labor. Instead, it felt more like a last hurrah. Unless Hoffa's lawyers could do the impossible, he would be heading to jail soon. Though he could still maintain control of the union by appointing a man he could trust to be president while he was away, Hoffa faced the prospect of officially being divorced from the Teamsters Union for the first time in his adult life. No wonder he wasn't in the mood for fun.

By the time Andy Williams waited in the wings for his cue, the crowd was oblivious to just about anything short of one of the atomic bombs that were still being detonated at the Nevada Test Site, a hundred miles to the north.

Reved up by the majestic surroundings, the aura of celebrity, and hours of free booze, the chatter was slightly less deafening than a jet engine. When the dimmed lights and orchestral cues failed to silence the din, Williams walked to the center of the stage and began performing an *a capella* rendition of the classic "Danny Boy." With that, he had the crowd in the palm of his hand. The rest of the show went off without a hitch.

After the show, the less hardy partiers crawled off to bed—assuming their room had a bed—while most of the revelers thronged the tables in the casino. Joyce went up to the suite and, with a peck on the cheek, wished Jay luck. She knew that this would be a late night. And it all seemed to be going so well.

But then the real trouble started, trouble that made Sarno wish the doors had never opened. It was just as those killjoys on the Gaming Control Board had predicted: the gamblers got lucky. If they all decided to cash out, the \$100,000 bankroll couldn't cover the action. Gaming would close them down. Sure, the hotel would stay open, but the casino would stay closed until they could borrow even more money to make up an even bigger bankroll—money that, Jacobson had already convinced Sarno, just wasn't there.

Sarno and Jacobson gritted their teeth, too nervous even to scream at each other. It was an agony, seeing their entire future live or die with each throw of the dice. They had never thought that running a business could be so exhilarating. The only way it could have been better was if they were the ones throwing the dice.

An hour went by with no change.

“What is he doing down there?” Sarno asked Jacobson as they watched Jerry Zarowitz glide around the tables without a care in the world. “Doesn't he know that we're on the hook here?” Sarno fought the urge to go down there and tell Zarowitz to do his damned job.

After another hour, the tide seemed to shift. They began to hear tell of good omens and favorable prodigies: a dice thrower who'd been red hot all night had sevens out three times in a row, with plenty of the “smart” money backing him; the big slot jackpots had raised excitement to a fever pitch, and now the players thronged the machines, which helpfully kept most of their coin; and more than one blackjack player, now down for the evening, decided to call it a night.

To gamblers like them, such a sudden reversal wasn't that surprising. Luck turned, they knew, with little rhyme or reason. That's why you gambled.

But others said that luck had nothing to do with it. According to them, the real money in the casino—the money that Jerry Zarowitz listened to—wasn't willing to beg for scraps at the altar of chance.

“The craps table’s caught on fire,” a man said when he reached an extension at the Aladdin casino, which had some of the same hidden interests as Caesars. “Send down a fireman.”

So a fireman, who’d helped turn the tide on more than one night when the gamblers got too lucky, headed down to Caesars.

Whatever the reason (and Sarno didn’t care to know the details), by the early morning it was clear that the house was winning big. The festivities continued for two more days, but after the first night the casino’s fate was never in doubt.

All told, the opening bash cost more than \$1 million (about \$7 million in today’s dollars). It was a feast suitable for a coronation—or a debauched emperor’s final spree. They didn’t quite make it all back at the tables that weekend, but everyone was satisfied. By the end of the weekend, the hotel was already half-filled with repeat bookings for the next two months.

The word was out: Caesars Palace was a winner. And with the results in, few of the revelers failed to congratulate Sarno. He was elated, but there was still something missing.

Long after the well-wishers had left him alone, Sarno didn’t feel like going up to his room to sleep. He was starving. He went down to Noshorium, hoping they could whip him up some steak and eggs.

Even when word of the house’s remarkable run made it up to Room 1066, it didn’t lighten the mood. If Jimmy Hoffa enjoyed his stay, he kept it to himself. For him, every minute surrounded by slaves and goddesses was wasted. There was union business waiting, and of course his appeal. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with his wife Jo before he went to jail. She deserved it. Having put in his required appearance, he checked out the next morning.

The room didn’t stay empty for long.

At the opening party, Steve Wynn had introduced himself to Jerry Zarowitz, explaining that he had married Sonny Pascal’s daughter Elaine. Zarowitz knew Pascal from Miami. After Wynn told him that Nate and Eddie Jacobson had gotten him a room, Zarowitz invited him to sit down and have a drink. During the course of the conversation, Wynn let slip the tale of the shower curtain.

“Where are you?” Zarowitz asked.

“I’m in the back, by the pool.”

“One of those dumps? Don’t worry, we’ll move you tomorrow,” he said. The next morning, he received a phone call: a bellman was on his way to move him. That’s fine, Wynn thought. One room’s as good as another.

As he walked through the door opposite the center elevator on the top floor, he realized that he was now in the best room in the hotel.

“I can’t believe it,” he said to himself. The view was incredible. The bellman began hanging Wynn’s clothes in the oversized closet.

Before he could even look around the room, the phone rang. With his wife pregnant at home, Wynn rushed to the phone.

“Hello, Mr. Hoffa, we have a long distance call for you,” said the extremely polite voice on the other end.

“This is not Mr. Hoffa. I’m sorry. Is this his room, 1066?”

“This is not James Hoffa?”

“Operator, I think that Mr. Hoffa’s gone. He must have checked out. I’m Mr. Wynn and I just moved in.”

“Thank you, Mr., um, Wynn. I’m sorry to disturb you.” The operator got off the line without another word.

“I’m in Jimmy Hoffa’s room,” Wynn realized. Three years earlier he had been impressing professors at the University of Pennsylvania. He was the youngest guest there, by at least a decade.

“Is there anything else, sir?” the bellman asked. Wynn realized that he was being attended to with a degree of respect he had never known before.

“Shit,” he thought to himself, “these guys probably think I’m some hood’s son. He reached into his pocket for a tip and, with a smile, the bellman shut the door behind him.

A day ago, he had been Mike Wynn’s son, a small-time bingo hall operator laboring to pay off his dead father’s debts. In Caesars Palace, they gave him the suite of a Teamster Prometheus. And the way they’d looked at him...it was intoxicating.

At that moment, Steve Wynn knew he would be coming back to Las Vegas.

In the end, Caesars Palace was a success in the only way that matters in Las Vegas: the place made money.

Others, less concerned with such commonplace tallies, had a good laugh at the expense of both winners and losers. The *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town" wrote up the new casino, ecstatic that "what is surely the most preposterous example of this classical revival has manifested itself in the most preposterous setting: a gambling casino-nightclub-restaurant-hotel called Caesars Palace.

"We salute Caesars Palace with awe," the author concluded, "as perhaps the biggest and silliest architectural throwback of all time.

"For years, the big casino-hotels on the Strip—the Sands, the Flamingo, the Thunderbird, the Stardust—have vied with each other in degrees of opulence. Now comes Caesars Palace in an attempt to dominate them all—an enormous, fourteen-story confection of white stone and concrete set down in thirty-four acres of Vegas desert.

"We think of Nero in Hades, shaking his head in wonder and envy. Rome—his Rome, which he rebuilt with broad streets and splendid villas—was never a patch on Vegas."

To Sarno, any press was good press. He had Evie make Photostats of these clippings and pressed them on anyone who walked by his office. At last, people were paying attention.

Jay Sarno had finally built his dream. But he would soon find himself contending with more plots than any emperor could imagine, and though he didn't care for fiddling, he would be throwing the dice like there was no tomorrow while his new empire threatened to collapse around him.