

The Mark of Zorro

By

Johnston McCulley

Chapter 1

Pedro, the Boaster

Again the sheet of rain beat against the roof of red Spanish tile, and the wind shrieked like a soul in torment, and smoke puffed from the big fireplace as the sparks were showered over the hard dirt floor.

"'Tis a night for evil deeds!" declared Sergeant Pedro Gonzales, stretching his great feet in their loose boots toward the roaring fire and grasping the hilt of his sword in one hand and a mug filled with thin wine in the other. "Devils howl in the wind, and demons are in the raindrops! 'Tis an evil night, indeed—eh, señor?"

"It is!" The fat landlord agreed hastily; and he made haste, also, to fill the wine mug again, for Sergeant Pedro Gonzales had a temper that was terrible when aroused, as it always was when wine was not forthcoming.

"An evil night," the big sergeant repeated, and drained the mug without stopping to draw breath, a feat that had attracted considerable attention in its time and had gained the sergeant a certain amount of notoriety up and down El Camino Real, as they called the highway that connected the missions in one long chain.

Gonzales sprawled closer to the fire and cared not that other men thus were robbed of some of its warmth. Sergeant Pedro Gonzales often had expressed his belief that a man should look out for his own comfort before considering others; and being of great size and strength, and having much skill with the blade, he found few who had the courage to declare that they believed otherwise.

Outside the wind shrieked, and the rain dashed against the ground in a solid sheet. It was a typical February storm for southern California. At the missions the frailes had cared for the stock and had closed the buildings for the night. At every great hacienda big fires were burning in the houses. The timid natives kept to their little adobe huts, glad for shelter.

And here in the little pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles, where, in years to come, a great city would grow, the tavern on one side of the plaza housed for the time being men who would sprawl before the fire until the dawn rather than face the beating rain.

Sergeant Pedro Gonzales, by virtue of his rank and size, hogged the fireplace, and a corporal and three soldiers from the presidio sat at table a little in rear of him, drinking their thin wine and playing at cards. An Indian servant

crouched on his heels in one corner, no neophyte who had accepted the religion of the frailes, but a gentile and renegade.

For this was in the day of the decadence of the missions, and there was little peace between the robed Franciscans who followed in the footsteps of the sainted Junipero Serra, who had founded the first mission at San Diego de Alcala, and thus made possible an empire, and those who followed the politicians and had high places in the army. The men who drank wine in the tavern at Reina de Los Angeles had no wish for a spying neophyte about them.

Just now conversation had died out, a fact that annoyed the fat landlord and caused him some fear; for Sergeant Pedro Gonzales in an argument was Sergeant Gonzales at peace; and unless he could talk the big soldier might feel moved to action and start a brawl.

Twice before Gonzales had done so, to the great damage of furniture and men's faces; and the landlord had appealed to the comandante of the presidio, Captain Ramón, only to be informed that the captain had an abundance of troubles of his own, and that running an inn was not one of them.

So the landlord regarded Gonzales warily and edged closer to the long table and spoke in an attempt to start a general conversation and so avert trouble.

"They are saying in the pueblo," he announced, "that this Señor Zorro is abroad again."

His words had an effect that was both unexpected and terrible to witness. Sergeant Pedro Gonzales hurled his half-filled wine mug to the hard dirt floor, straightened suddenly on the bench, and crashed a ponderous fist down upon the table, causing wine mugs and cards and coins to scatter in all directions.

The corporal and the three soldiers retreated a few feet in sudden fright, and the red face of the landlord blanched; the native sitting in the corner started to creep toward the door, having determined that he preferred the storm outside to the big sergeant's anger.

"Señor Zorro, eh?" Gonzales cried in a terrible voice. "Is it my fate always to hear that name? Señor Zorro, eh? Mr. Fox, in other words! He imagines, I take it, that he is as cunning as one. By the saints, he raises as much stench!"

Gonzales gulped, turned to face them squarely, and continued his tirade.

"He runs up and down the length of El Camino Real like a goat of the high hills! He wears a mask, and he flashes a pretty blade, they tell me. He uses the point of it to carve his hated letter Z on the cheek of his foe! Ha! The mark of Zorro they are calling it! A pretty blade he has, in truth! But I cannot swear as to the blade—I never have seen it. He will not do me the honor of letting me

see it! Señor Zorro's depredations never occur in the vicinity of Sergeant Pedro Gonzales! Perhaps this Señor Zorro can tell us the reason for that? Ha!"

He glared at the men before him, threw up his upper lip, and let the ends of his great black mustache bristle.

"They are calling him the Curse of Capistrano now," the fat landlord observed, stooping to pick up the wine mug and cards and hoping to filch a coin in the process.

"Curse of the entire highway and the whole mission chain!" Sergeant Gonzales roared. "A cutthroat, he is! A thief! Ha! A common fellow presuming to get him a reputation for bravery because he robs a hacienda or so and frightens a few women and natives! Señor Zorro, eh? Here is one fox it gives me pleasure to hunt! Curse of Capistrano, eh? I know I have led an evil life, but I only ask of the saints one thing now—that they forgive me my sins long enough to grant me the boon of standing face to face with this pretty highwayman!"

"There is a reward—" the landlord began.

"You snatch the very words from my lips!" Sergeant Gonzales protested. "There is a pretty reward for the fellow's capture, offered by his excellency the governor. And what good fortune has come to my blade? I am away on duty at San Juan Capistrano, and the fellow makes his play at Santa Barbara. I am at Reina de Los Angeles, and he takes a fat purse at San Luis Rey. I dine at San Gabriel, let us say, and he robs at San Diego de Alcalá! A pest, he is! Once I met him—"

Sergeant Gonzales choked on his wrath and reached for the wine mug, which the landlord had filled again and placed at his elbow. He gulped down the contents. "Well, he never has visited us here," the landlord said with a sigh of thanksgiving.

"Good reason, fat one! Ample reason! We have a presidio here and a few soldiers. He rides far from any presidio, does this pretty Señor Zorro! He is like a fleeting sunbeam, I grant him that—and with about as much real courage!"

Sergeant Gonzales relaxed on the bench again, and the landlord gave him a glance that was full of relief, and began to hope that there would be no breakage of mugs and furniture and men's faces this rainy night.

"Yet this Señor Zorro must rest at times—he must eat and sleep," the landlord said. "It is certain that he must have some place for hiding and recuperation. Some fine day the soldiers will trail him to his den."

"Ha!" Gonzales replied. "Of course the man has to eat and sleep. And what

is it that he claims now? He says that he is no real thief, by the saints! He is but punishing those who mistreat the men of the missions, he says. Friend of the oppressed, eh? He left a placard at Santa Barbara recently stating as much, did he not? Ha! And what may be the reply to that? The frailes of the missions are shielding him, hiding him, giving him his meat and drink! Shake down a robed fray and you'll find some trace of this pretty highwayman's whereabouts, else I am a lazy civilian!"

"I have no doubt that you speak the truth," the landlord replied. "I put it not past the frailes to do such a thing. But may this Señor Zorro never visit us here!"

"And why not, fat one?" Sergeant Gonzales cried in a voice of thunder. "Am I not here? Have I not a blade at my side? Are you an owl, and is this daylight that you cannot see as far as the end of your puny, crooked nose? By the saints—"

"I mean," said the landlord quickly and with some alarm, "that I have no wish to be robbed."

"To be—robbed of what, fat one? Of a jug of weak wine and a meal? Have you riches, fool? Ha! Let the fellow come! Let this bold and cunning Señor Zorro but enter that door and step before us! Let him make a bow, as they say he does, and let his eyes twinkle through his mask! Let me but face the fellow for an instant—and I claim the generous reward offered by his excellency!"

"He perhaps is afraid to venture so near the presidio," the landlord said.

"More wine!" Gonzales howled. "More wine, fat one, and place it to my account! When I have earned the reward, you shall be paid in full. I promise it on my word as a soldier! Ha! Were this brave and cunning Señor Zorro, this Curse of Capistrano, but to make entrance at that door now—"

The door suddenly was opened.

Chapter 2

On the Heels of the Storm

In came a gust of wind and rain and a man with it, and the candles flickered, and one was extinguished. This sudden entrance in the midst of the sergeant's boast startled them all; and Gonzales drew his blade halfway from its scabbard as his words died in his throat. The native was quick to close the door again to keep out the wind.

The newcomer turned and faced them; the landlord gave another sigh of relief. It was not Señor Zorro, of course. It was Don Diego Vega, a fair youth of excellent blood and twenty-four years, noted the length of El Camino Real for his small interest in the really important things of life.

"Ha!" Gonzales cried, and slammed his blade home.

"Is it that I startled you somewhat, señores?" Don Diego asked politely and in a thin voice, glancing around the big room and nodding to the men before him.

"If you did, señor, it was because you entered on the heels of the storm," the sergeant retorted. "Twould not be your own energy that would startle any man."

"Hm!" grunted Don Diego, throwing aside his sombrero and flinging off his soaked serape. "Your remarks border on the perilous, my raucous friend."

"Can it be that you intend to take me to task?"

"It is true," continued Don Diego, "that I do not have a reputation for riding like a fool at risk of my neck, fighting like an idiot with every newcomer, and playing the guitar under every woman's window like a simpleton. Yet I do not care to have these things you deem my shortcomings flaunted in my face."

"Ha!" Gonzales cried, half in anger.

"We have an agreement, Sergeant Gonzales, that we can be friends, and I can forget the wide difference in birth and breeding that yawns between us only as long as you curb your tongue and stand my comrade. Your boasts amuse me, and I buy for you the wine that you crave. It is a pretty arrangement. But ridicule me again, señor, either in public or private, and the agreement is at an end. I may mention that I have some small influence."

"Your pardon, caballero and my very good friend!" the alarmed Sergeant Gonzales cried now. "You are storming worse than the tempest outside, and merely because my tongue happened to slip. Hereafter, if any man ask, you are nimble of wit and quick with a blade, always ready to fight or to make love. You are a man of action, caballero! Ha! Does any dare doubt it?"

He glared around the room, half drawing his blade again, and then he slammed the sword home and threw back his head and roared with laughter and then clapped Don Diego between the shoulders; and the fat landlord hurried with more wine, knowing well that Don Diego Vega would stand the score.

For this peculiar friendship between Don Diego and Sergeant Gonzales was the talk of El Camino Real. Don Diego came from a family of blood that

ruled over thousands of broad acres, countless herds of horses and cattle, great fields of grain. Don Diego, in his own right, had a hacienda that was like a small empire, and a house in the pueblo also, and was destined to inherit from his father more than thrice what he had now.

But Don Diego was unlike the other full-blooded youths of the times. It appeared that he disliked action. He seldom wore his blade, except as a matter of style and apparel. He was damnably polite to all women and paid court to none.

He sat in the sun and listened to the wild tales of other men, and now and then he smiled. He was the opposite of Sergeant Pedro Gonzales in all things, and yet they were together frequently. It was as Don Diego had said: He enjoyed the sergeant's boasts, and the sergeant enjoyed the free wine. What more could either ask in the way of a fair arrangement?

Now Don Diego went to stand before the fire and dry himself, holding a mug of red wine in one hand. He was only medium in size, yet he possessed health and good looks, and it was the despair of proud duennas that he would not glance a second time at the pretty señoritas they protected, and for whom they sought desirable husbands.

Gonzales, afraid that he had angered his friend and that the free wine would be at an end, now strove to make peace.

"Caballero, we have been speaking of this notorious Señor Zorro," he said. "We have been regarding in conversation this fine Curse of Capistrano, as some nimble-witted fool has seen fit to term the pest of the highway."

"What about him?" Don Diego asked, putting down his wine mug and hiding a yawn behind his hand. Those who knew Don Diego best declared he yawned ten score times a day.

"I have been remarking, caballero," said the sergeant, "that this fine Señor Zorro never appears in my vicinity, and that I am hoping the good saints will grant me the chance of facing him some fine day, that I may claim the reward offered by the governor. Señor Zorro, eh? Ha!"

"Let us not speak of him," Don Diego begged, turning from the fireplace and throwing out one hand as if in protest. "Shall it be that I never hear of anything except deeds of bloodshed and violence? Would it be possible in these turbulent times for a man to listen to words of wisdom regarding music or the poets?"

"Meal mush and goat's milk!" snorted Sergeant Gonzales in huge disgust. "If this Señor Zorro wishes to risk his neck, let him. It is his own neck, by the saints! A cutthroat! A thief! Ha!"

"I have been hearing considerable concerning his work," Don Diego went on to say. "The fellow, no doubt, is sincere in his purpose. He has robbed none except officials who have stolen from the missions and the poor, and punished none except brutes who mistreat natives. He has slain no man, I understand. Let him have his little day in the public eye, my sergeant."

"I would rather have the reward!"

"Earn it," Don Diego said. "Capture the man!"

"Ha! Dead or alive, the governor's proclamation says. I myself have read it."

"Then stand you up to him and run him through, if such a thing pleases you," Don Diego retorted. "And tell me all about it afterward—but spare me now."

"It will be a pretty story!" Gonzales cried. "And you shall have it entire, caballero, word by word! How I played with him, how I laughed at him as we fought, how I pressed him back after a time and ran him through—"

"Afterward—but not now!" Don Diego cried, exasperated. "Landlord, more wine! The only manner in which to stop this raucous boaster is to make his wide throat so slick with wine that the words cannot climb out of it!"

The landlord quickly filled the mugs. Don Diego sipped at his wine slowly, as a gentleman should, while Sergeant Gonzales took his in two great gulps. And then the scion of the house of Vega stepped across to the bench and reached for his sombrero and his serape.

"What?" the sergeant cried. "You are going to leave us at such an early hour, caballero? You are going to face the fury of that beating storm?"

"At least I am brave enough for that," Don Diego replied, smiling. "I but ran over from my house for a pot of honey. The fools feared the rain too much to fetch me some this day from the hacienda. Get me one, landlord."

"I shall escort you safely home through the rain!" Sergeant Gonzales cried, for he knew full well that Don Diego had excellent wine of age there.

"You shall remain here before the roaring fire," Don Diego told him firmly. "I do not need an escort of soldiers from the presidio to cross the plaza. I am going over accounts with my secretary, and possibly may return to the tavern after we have finished. I wanted the pot of honey that we might eat as we worked."

"Ha! And why did you not send that secretary of yours for the honey, caballero? Why be wealthy and have servants, if a man cannot send them on errands on such a stormy night?"

"He is an old man and feeble," Don Diego explained. "He also is secretary to my aged father. The storm would kill him. Landlord, serve all here with wine and put it to my account. I may return when my books have been straightened."

Don Diego Vega picked up the pot of honey, wrapped his scrape around his head, opened the door, and plunged into the storm and darkness.

"There goes a man!" Gonzales cried, flourishing his arms. "He is my friend, that caballero, and I would have all men know it! He seldom wears a blade, and I doubt whether he can use one—but he is my friend! The flashing dark eyes of lovely señoritas do not disturb him, yet I swear he is a pattern of a man!

"Music and the poets, eh? Ha! Has he not the right, if such is his pleasure? Is he not Don Diego Vega? Has he not blue blood and broad acres and great storehouses filled with goods? Is he not liberal? He may stand on his head or wear petticoats, if it please him—yet I swear he is a pattern of a man!"

The soldiers echoed his sentiments since they were drinking Don Diego's wine and did not have the courage to combat the sergeant's statements anyway. The fat landlord served them with another round since Don Diego would pay. For it was beneath a Vega to look at his score in a public tavern, and the fat landlord many times had taken advantage of this fact.

"He cannot endure the thought of violence or bloodshed," Sergeant Gonzales continued. "He is as gentle as a breeze of spring. Yet he has a firm wrist and a deep eye. It merely is the caballero's manner of seeing life. Did I but have his youth and good looks and riches—Ha! There would be a stream of broken hearts from San Diego de Alcala to San Francisco de Asis!"

"And broken heads!" the corporal offered.

"Ha! And broken heads, comrade! I would rule the country! No youngster should stand long in my way. Out with blade and at them! Cross Pedro Gonzales, eh? Ha! Through the shoulder—neatly! Ha! Through a lung!"

Gonzales was upon his feet now, and his blade had leaped from its scabbard. He swept it back and forth through the air, thrust, parried, lunged, advanced, and retreated, shouted his oaths, and roared his laughter as he fought with shadows.

"That is the manner of it!" he screeched at the fireplace. "What have we here? Two of you against one? So much the better, señores! We love brave odds! Ha! Have at you, dog! Die, hound! One side, poltroon!"

He reeled against the wall, gasping, his breath almost gone, the point of his blade resting on the floor, his great face purple with the exertion and the

wine he had consumed, while the corporal and the soldiers and the fat landlord laughed long and loudly at this bloodless battle from which Sergeant Pedro Gonzales had emerged the unquestioned victor.

"Were—were this fine Señor Zorro only before me here and now!" the sergeant gasped.

And again the door was opened suddenly, and a man entered the inn on a gust of the storm.

Chapter 3

Señor Zorro Pays a Visit

The native hurried forward to fasten the door against the force of the wind, and then retreated to his corner again. The newcomer had his back toward those in the long room. They could see that his sombrero was pulled far down on his head, as if to prevent the wind from whisking it away, and that his body was enveloped in a long cloak that was wringing wet.

With his back still toward them, he opened the cloak and shook the raindrops from it and then folded it across his breast again as the fat landlord hurried forward, rubbing his hands together in expectation, for he deemed that here was some caballero off the highway who would pay good coin for food and bed and care for his horse.

When the landlord was within a few feet of him and the door the stranger whirled around. The landlord gave a little cry of fear and retreated with speed. The corporal gurgled deep down in his throat; the soldiers gasped; Sergeant Pedro Gonzales allowed his lower jaw to drop and let his eyes bulge.

For the man who stood straight before them had a black mask over his face that effectually concealed his features, and through the two slits in it his eyes glittered ominously.

"Ha! What have we here?" Gonzales gasped finally, some presence of mind returning to him.

The man before them bowed.

"Señor Zorro, at your service," he said.

"By the saints! Señor Zorro, eh?" Gonzales cried.

"Do you doubt it, señor?"

"If you are indeed Señor Zorro, then have you lost your wits!" the sergeant

declared.

"What is the meaning of that speech?"

"You are here, are you not? You have entered the inn, have you not? By all the saints, you have walked into a trap, my pretty highwayman!"

"Will the señor please explain?" Señor Zorro asked. His voice was deep and held a peculiar ring.

"Are you blind? Are you without sense?" Gonzales demanded. "Am I not here?"

"And what has that to do with it?"

"Am I not a soldier?"

"At least you wear a soldier's garb, señor."

"By the saints, and cannot you see the good corporal and three of our comrades? Have you come to surrender your wicked sword, señor? Are you finished playing at rogue?"

Señor Zorro laughed, not unpleasantly, but he did not take his eyes from Gonzales.

"Most certainly I have not come to surrender," he said. "I am on business, señor."

"Business?" Gonzales queried.

"Four days ago, señor, you brutally beat a native who had won your dislike. The affair happened on the road between here and the mission at San Gabriel."

"He was a surly dog and got in my way! And how does it concern you, my pretty highwayman?"

"I am the friend of the oppressed, señor, and I have come to punish you."

"Come to—to punish me, fool? You punish me? I shall die of laughter before I can run you through! You are as good as dead, Señor Zorro! His excellency has offered a pretty price for your carcass! If you are a religious man, say your prayers! I would not have it said that I slew a man without giving him time to repent his crimes. I give you the space of a hundred heartbeats."

"You are generous, señor, but there is no need for me to say my prayers."

"Then must I do my duty," said Gonzales, and lifted the point of his blade. "Corporal, you will remain by the table, and the men also. This fellow and the reward he means are mine!"

He blew out the ends of his mustache and advanced carefully, not making the mistake of underestimating his antagonist, for there had been certain tales of the man's skill with a blade. And when he was within the proper distance he recoiled suddenly, as if a snake had warned of a strike.

For Señor Zorro had allowed one hand to come from beneath his cloak, and the hand held a pistol, most damnable of weapons to Sergeant Gonzales.

"Back, señor!" Señor Zorro warned.

"Ha! So that is the way of it!" Gonzales cried. "You carry that devil's weapon and threaten men with it! Such things are for use only at a long distance and against inferior foes. Gentlemen prefer the trusty blade."

"Back, señor! There is death in this you call the devil's weapon. I shall not warn again."

"Somebody told me you were a brave man," Gonzales taunted, retreating a few feet. "It has been whispered that you would meet any man foot to foot and cross blades with him. I have believed it of you. And now I find you resorting to a weapon fit for nothing except to use against red natives. Can it be, señor, that you lack the courage I have heard you possess?"

Señor Zorro laughed again.

"As to that you shall see presently," he said. "The use of this pistol is necessary at the present time. I find myself pitted against large odds in this tavern, señor. I shall cross blades with you gladly when I have made such a proceeding safe."

"I wait anxiously," Gonzales sneered.

"The corporal and soldiers will retreat to that far corner," Señor Zorro directed. "Landlord, you will accompany them. The native will go there also. Quickly, señores. Thank you. I do not wish to have any of you disturbing me while I am punishing this sergeant here."

"Ha!" Gonzales screeched in fury. "We shall soon see as to the punishing, my pretty fox!"

"I shall hold the pistol in my left hand," Señor Zorro continued. "I shall engage this sergeant with my right, in the proper manner, and as I fight I shall keep an eye on the corner. The first move from any of you, señores, means that I fire. I am expert with this you have termed the devil's weapon, and if I fire some men shall cease to exist on this earth of ours. It is understood?"

The corporal and soldiers and landlord did not take the trouble to answer. Señor Zorro looked Gonzales straight in the eyes again, and a chuckle came from behind his mask.

"Sergeant, you will turn your back until I can draw my blade," he directed. "I give you my word as a caballero that I shall not make a foul attack."

"As a caballero?" Gonzales sneered.

"I said it, señor!" Zorro replied, his voice ringing a threat.

Gonzales shrugged his shoulders and turned his back. In an instant he heard the voice of the highwayman again.

"On guard, señor!"

Chapter 4

Swords Clash—And Pedro Explains

Gonzales whirled at the word, and his blade came up. He saw that Señor Zorro had drawn his sword, and that he was holding the pistol in his left hand high above his head. Moreover, Señor Zorro was chuckling still, and the sergeant became infuriated. The blades clashed.

Sergeant Gonzales had been accustomed to battling with men who gave ground when they pleased and took it when they could, who went this way and that seeking an advantage, now advancing, now retreating, now swinging to left or right as their skill directed them.

But here he faced a man who fought in quite a different way. For Señor Zorro, it appeared, was as if rooted to one spot and-unable to turn his face in any other direction. He did not give an inch, nor did he advance, nor step to either side.

Gonzales attacked furiously, as was his custom, and he found the point of his blade neatly parried. He used more caution then and tried what tricks he knew, but they seemed to avail him nothing. He attempted to pass around the man before him, and the other's blade drove him back. He tried a retreat, hoping to draw the other out, but Señor Zorro stood his ground and forced Gonzales to attack again. As for the highwayman, he did nought except put up a defense.

Anger got the better of Gonzales then, for he knew the corporal was jealous of him and that the tale of this fight would be told to all the pueblo tomorrow, and so travel up and down the length of El Camino Real.

He attacked furiously, hoping to drive Señor Zorro off his feet and make an end of it. But he found that his attack ended as if against a stone wall, his blade was turned aside, his breast crashed against that of his antagonist, and Señor

Zorro merely threw out his chest and hurled him back half a dozen steps.

"Fight, señor!" Señor Zorro said.

"Fight yourself, cutthroat and thief!" the exasperated sergeant cried. "Don't stand like a piece of the hills, fool! Is it against your religion to take a step?"

"You cannot taunt me into doing it," the highwayman replied, chuckling again.

Sergeant Gonzales realized then that he had been angry, and he knew an angry man cannot fight with the blade as well as a man who controls his temper. So he became deadly cold now, and his eyes narrowed, and all boasting was gone from him.

He attacked again, but now he was alert, seeking an unguarded spot through which he could thrust without courting disaster himself. He fenced as he never had fenced in his life before. He cursed himself for having allowed wine and food to rob him of his wind. From the front, from either side, he attacked, only to be turned back again, all his tricks solved almost before he tried them.

He had been watching his antagonist's eyes, of course, and now he saw a change. They had seemed to be laughing through the mask, and now they had narrowed and seemed to send forth flakes of fire.

"We have had enough of playing," Señor Zorro said. "It is time for the punishment!"

And suddenly he began to press the fighting, taking step after step, slowly and methodically going forward and forcing Gonzales backward. The tip of his blade seemed to be a serpent's head with a thousand tongues. Gonzales felt himself at the other's mercy, but he gritted his teeth and tried to control himself and fought on.

Now he was with his back against the wall, but in such a position that Señor Zorro could give him battle and watch the men in the corner at the same time. He knew the highwayman was playing with him. He was ready to swallow his pride and call upon the corporal and soldiers to rush in and give him aid.

And then there came a sudden battering at the door, which the native had bolted. The heart of Gonzales gave a great leap. Somebody was there, wishing to enter. Whoever it was would think it peculiar that the door was not thrown open instantly by the fat landlord or his servant. Perhaps help was at hand.

"We are interrupted, señor," the highwayman said. "I regret it, for I will not have the time to give you the punishment you deserve, and will have to arrange to visit you another time. You scarcely are worth a double visit."

The pounding at the door was louder now. Gonzales raised his voice: "Ha! We have Señor Zorro here!"

"Poltroon!" the highwayman cried.

His blade seemed to take on new life. It darted in and out with a speed that was bewildering. It caught a thousand beams of light from the flickering candles and hurled them back.

And suddenly it darted in and hooked itself properly, and Sergeant Gonzales felt his sword torn from his grasp and saw it go flying through the air.

"So!" Señor Zorro cried.

Gonzales awaited the stroke. A sob came into his throat that this must be the end instead of on a field of battle where a soldier wishes it. But no steel entered his breast to bring forth his life's blood.

Instead, Señor Zorro swung his left hand down, passed the hilt of his blade to it and grasped it beside the pistol's butt, and with his right he slapped Pedro Gonzales once across the cheek.

"That for a man who mistreats helpless natives!" he cried.

Gonzales roared in rage and shame. Somebody was trying to smash the door in now. But Señor Zorro appeared to give it little thought. He sprang back, and sent his blade into its scabbard like a flash. He swept the pistol before him and thus threatened all in the long room. He darted to a window, sprang upon a bench.

"Until a later time, señor!" he cried.

And then he went through the window as a mountain goat jumps from a cliff, taking its covering with him. In rushed the wind and rain, and the candles went out.

"After him!" Gonzales screeched, springing across the room and grasping his blade again. "Unbar the door! Out and after him! Remember, there is a generous reward—"

The corporal reached the door first, and threw it open. In stumbled two men of the pueblo, eager for wine and an explanation of the fastened door. Sergeant Gonzales and his comrades drove over them, left them sprawling, and dashed into the storm.

But there was little use in it. It was so dark a man could not see a distance of a horse's length. The beating rain was enough to obliterate tracks almost instantly. Señor Zorro was gone—and no man could tell in what direction.

There was a tumult, of course, in which the men of the pueblo joined. Sergeant Gonzales and the soldiers returned to the inn to find it full of men they knew. And Sergeant Gonzales knew, also, that his reputation was now at stake.

"Nobody but a highwayman, nobody but a cutthroat and thief would have done it!" he cried aloud.

"How is that, brave one?" cried a man in the throng near the doorway.

"This pretty Señor Zorro knew, of course! Some days ago I broke the thumb of my sword hand while fencing at San Juan Capistrano. No doubt the word was passed to this Señor Zorro. And he visits me at such a time that he may afterward say he had vanquished me."

The corporal and soldiers and landlord stared at him, but none was brave enough to say a word.

"Those who were here can tell you, señores," Gonzales went on. "This Señor Zorro came in at the door and immediately drew a pistol—devil's weapon—from beneath his cloak. He presents it at us, and forces all except me to retire to that corner. I refused to retire.

"Then you shall fight me," says this pretty highwayman, and I draw my blade, thinking to make an end of the pest. And what does he tell me then?

"'We shall fight,' he says, 'and I will outpoint you, so that I may boast of it afterward. In my left hand I hold the pistol. If your attack is not to my liking, I shall fire, and afterward run you through, and so make an end of a certain sergeant.'"

The corporal gasped, and the fat landlord was almost ready to speak, but thought better of it when Sergeant Gonzales glared at him.

"Could anything be more devilish?" Gonzales asked. "I was to fight, and yet I would get a devil's chunk of lead in my carcass if I pressed the attack. Was there ever such a farce? It shows the stuff of which this pretty highwayman is made. Some day I shall meet him when he holds no pistol—and then—"

"But how did he get away?" someone in the crowd asked.

"He heard those at the door. He threatened me with the devil's pistol and forced me to toss my blade in yonder far corner. He threatened us all, ran to the window, and sprang through. And how could we find him in the darkness or track him through the sheets of rain? But I am determined now! In the morning I go to my Captain Ramón and ask permission to be absolved from all other duty, that I may take some comrades and run down this pretty Señor Zorro. Ha! We shall go fox hunting!"

The excited crowd about the door suddenly parted, and Don Diego Vega hurried into the tavern.

"What is this I hear?" he asked. "They are saying that Señor Zorro has paid a visit here."

"'Tis a true word, caballero!" Gonzales answered. "And we were speaking of the cutthroat here this evening. Had you remained instead of going home to work with your secretary, you should have seen the entire affair."

"Were you not here? Can you not tell me?" Don Diego asked. "But I pray you make not the tale too bloody. I cannot see why men must be violent. Where is the highwayman's dead body?"

Gonzales choked; the fat landlord turned away to hide his smile; the corporal and soldiers began picking up wine mugs to keep busy at this dangerous moment.

"He—that is, there is no body," Gonzales managed to say.

"Have done with your modesty, sergeant!" Don Diego cried. "Am I not your friend? Did you not promise to tell me the story if you met this cutthroat? I know you would spare my feelings, knowing that I do not love violence, yet I am eager for the facts because you, my friend, have been engaged with this fellow. How much was the reward?"

"By the saints!" Gonzales swore.

"Come, sergeant! Out with the tale! Landlord, give all of us wine, that we may celebrate this affair! Your tale, sergeant! Shall you leave the army, now that you have earned the reward, and purchase a hacienda and take a wife?"

Sergeant Gonzales choked again and reached gropingly for a wine mug.

"You promised me," Don Diego continued, "that you would tell me the whole thing, word by word. Did he not say as much, landlord? You declared that you would relate how you played with him; how you laughed at him while you fought; how you pressed him back after a time and then ran him through —"

"By the saints!" Sergeant Gonzales roared, the words coming from between his lips like peals of thunder. "It is beyond the endurance of any man! You—Don Diego—my friend—"

"Your modesty ill becomes you at such a time," Don Diego said. "You promised the tale, and I would have it. What does this Señor Zorro look like? Have you peered at the dead face beneath the mask? It is, perhaps, some man that we all know? Cannot some one of you tell me the facts? You stand here like so many speechless images of men—"

"Wine—or I choke!" Gonzales howled. "Don Diego, you are my good friend, and I will cross swords with any man who belittles you! But do not try me too far this night—"

"I fail to understand," Don Diego said. "I have but asked you to tell me the story of the fight—how you mocked him as you battled; how you pressed him back at will, and presently ended it by running him through—"

"Enough! Am I to be taunted?" the big sergeant cried. He gulped down the wine and hurled the mug far from him.

"Is it possible that you did not win the battle?" Don Diego asked. "But surely this pretty highwayman could not stand up before you, my sergeant. How was the outcome?"

"He had a pistol—"

"Why did you not take it away from him, then, and crowd it down his throat? But perhaps that is what you did. Here is more wine, my sergeant. Drink!"

But Sergeant Gonzales was thrusting his way through the throng at the door.

"I must not forget my duty!" he said. "I must hurry to the presidio and report this occurrence to the comandante!"

"But, sergeant—"

"And as to this Señor Zorro, he will be meat for my blade before I am done!" Gonzales promised.

And then, cursing horribly, he rushed away through the rain, the first time in his life he ever had allowed duty to interfere with his pleasure and had run from good wine. Don Diego Vega smiled as he turned toward the fireplace.

Chapter 5

A Ride in the Morning

The following morning found the storm at an end, and there was not a single cloud to mar the perfect blue of the sky, and the sun was bright, and palm fronds glistened in it, and the air was bracing as it blew down the valleys from the sea.

At midmorning, Don Diego Vega came from his house in the pueblo, drawing on his sheepskin riding-mittens, and stood for a moment before it,

glancing across the plaza at the little tavern. From the rear of the house an Indian servant led a horse.

Though Don Diego did not go galloping across the hills and up and down El Camino Real like an idiot, yet he owned a fairish bit of horseflesh. The animal had spirit and speed and endurance, and many a young blood would have purchased him, except that Don Diego had no use for more money and wanted to retain the beast.

The saddle was heavy and showed more silver than leather on its surface. The bridle was heavily chased with silver, too, and from its sides dangled leather globes studded with semiprecious stones that now glittered in the bright sunshine as if to advertise Don Diego's wealth and prestige to all the world.

Don Diego mounted, while half a score of men loitering around the plaza watched and made efforts to hide their grins. It was quite the thing in those days for a youngster to spring from the ground into his saddle, gather up the reins, rake the beast's flanks with his great spurs, and disappear in a cloud of dust all in one motion.

But Don Diego mounted a horse as he did everything else—without haste or spirit. The native held a stirrup, and Don Diego inserted the toe of his boot. Then he gathered the reins in one hand, and pulled himself into the saddle as if it had been quite a task.

Having done that much, the native held the other stirrup and guided Don Diego's other boot into it, and then he backed away, and Don Diego clucked to the magnificent beast and started it, at a walk, along the edge of the plaza toward the trail that ran to the north.

Having reached the trail, Don Diego allowed the animal to trot, and after having covered a mile in this fashion, he urged the beast into a slow gallop, and so rode along the highway.

Men were busy in the fields and orchards, and natives were tending the herds. Now and then Don Diego passed a lumbering carreta, and saluted whoever happened to be in it. Once a young man he knew passed him at a gallop, going toward the pueblo, and Don Diego stopped his own horse to brush the dust from his garments after the man had gone his way.

Those same garments were more gorgeous than usual this bright morning. A glance at them was enough to establish the wealth and position of the wearer. Don Diego had dressed with much care, admonishing his servants because his newest serape was not pressed properly, and spending a great deal of time over the polishing of his boots.

He traveled for a distance of four miles and then turned from the highroad and started up a narrow, dusty trail that led to a group of buildings against the side of a hill in the distance. Don Diego Vega was about to pay a visit to the hacienda of Don Carlos Pulido.

This same Don Carlos had experienced numerous vicissitudes during the last few years. Once he had been second to none except Don Diego's father in position, wealth, and breeding. But he had made the mistake of getting on the wrong side of the fence politically, and he found himself stripped of a part of his broad acres, and tax-gatherers bothering him in the name of the governor, until there remained but a remnant of his former fortune, but all his inherited dignity of birth.

On this morning Don Carlos was sitting on the veranda of the hacienda meditating on the times, which were not at all to his liking. His wife, Doña Catalina, the sweetheart of his youth and age, was inside directing her servants. His only child, the Señorita Lolita, likewise was inside, plucking at the strings of a guitar and dreaming as a girl of eighteen dreams. Don Carlos raised his silvered head and peered down the long, twisting trail, and saw in the distance a small cloud of dust. The dust cloud told him that a single horseman was approaching, and Don Carlos feared another gatherer of taxes. He shaded his eyes with a hand and watched the approaching horseman carefully. He noted the leisurely manner in which he rode his mount, and suddenly hope sang in his breast, for he saw the sun flashing from the silver on saddle and bridle, and he knew that men of the army did not have such rich harness to use while on duty.

The rider had made the last turning now and was in plain sight from the veranda of the house, and Don Carlos rubbed his eyes and looked again to verify the suspicion he had. Even at that distance the aged don could establish the identity of the horseman.

"'Tis Don Diego Vega," he breathed. "May the saints grant that here is a turn in my fortunes for the better at last."

Don Diego, he knew, might only be stopping to pay a friendly visit, and yet that would be something, for when it was known abroad that the Vega family was on excellent terms with the Pulido establishment, even the politicians would stop to think twice before harassing Don Carlos further, for the Vegas were a power in the land.

So Don Carlos slapped his hands together, and a native hurried out from the house, and Don Carlos bade him draw the shades so that the sun would be kept from a corner of the veranda, and place a table and some chairs, and hurry with small cakes and wine.

He sent word into the house to the women, too, that Don Diego Vega was approaching. Doña Catalina felt her heart beginning to sing, and she herself began to hum a little song, and Señorita Lolita ran to a window to look out at the trail. When Don Diego stopped before the steps that led to the veranda, there was a native waiting to care for his horse, and Don Carlos himself walked halfway down the steps and stood waiting, his hand held out in welcome.

"I am glad to see you a visitor at my poor hacienda, Don Diego," he said, as the young man approached, drawing off his mittens.

"It is a long and dusty road," Don Diego said. "It wearies me, too, to ride a horse the distance."

Don Carlos almost forgot himself and smiled at that, for surely riding a horse a distance of four miles was not enough to tire a young man of blood. But he remembered Don Diego's lifelessness and did not smile, lest the smile cause anger.

He led the way to the shady nook on the veranda, and offered Don Diego wine and cakes, and waited for his guest to speak. As became the times, the women remained inside the house, not ready to show themselves unless the visitor asked for them, or their lord and master called.

"How are things in the pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles?" Don Carlos asked. "It has been a space of several score days since I visited there."

"Everything is the same," said Don Diego, "except that this Señor Zorro invaded the tavern last evening and had a duel with the big Sergeant Gonzales."

"Ha! Señor Zorro, eh? And what was the outcome of the fighting?"

"Though the sergeant has a crooked tongue while speaking of it," said Don Diego, "it has come to me through a corporal who was present that this Señor Zorro played with the sergeant and finally disarmed him and sprang through a window to make his escape in the rain. They could not find his tracks."

"A clever rogue," Don Carlos said. "At least, I have nothing to fear from him. It is generally known up and down El Camino Real, I suppose, that I have been stripped of almost everything the governor's men could carry away. I look for them to take the hacienda next."

"Um. Such a thing should be stopped!" Don Diego said, with more than his usual amount of spirit.

The eyes of Don Carlos brightened. If Don Diego Vega could be made to feel some sympathy, if one of the illustrious Vega family would but whisper a word in the governor's ear, the persecution would cease instantly, for the

commands of a Vega were made to be obeyed by all men of whatever rank.

Chapter 6

Diego Seeks a Bride

Don Diego sipped his wine slowly and looked out across the mesa, and Don Carlos looked at him in puzzled fashion, realizing that something was coming, and scarcely knowing what to expect.

"I did not ride through the damnable sun and dust to talk with you concerning this Señor Zorro, or any other bandit," Don Diego explained after a time.

"Whatever your errand, I am glad to welcome one of your family, caballero," Don Carlos said.

"I had a long talk with my father yesterday morning," Don Diego went on. "He informed me that I am approaching the age of twenty-five, and he is of a mind that I am not accepting my duties and responsibilities in the proper fashion."

"But surely—"

"Oh, doubtless he knows. My father is a wise man."

"And no man can dispute that, Don Diego."

"He urged upon me that I awaken and do as I should. I have been dreaming, it appears. A man of my wealth and station—you will pardon me if I speak of it—must do certain things."

"It is the curse of position, señor."

"When my father dies I come into his fortune, naturally, being the only child. That part of it is all right. But what will happen when I die? That is what my father asks."

"I understand."

"A young man of my age, he told me, should have a wife, a mistress of his household, and should—er—have offspring to inherit and preserve an illustrious name."

"Nothing could be truer than that," said Don Carlos.

"So I have decided to get me a wife."

"Ha! It is something every man should do, Don Diego. Well do I remember

when I courted Doña Catalina. We were mad to get into each other's arms, but her father kept her from me for a time. I was only seventeen, though, so perhaps he did right. But you are nearly twenty-five. Get you a bride, by all means."

"And so I have come to see you about it," Don Diego said.

"To see me about it?" gasped Don Carlos, with something of fear and a great deal of hope in his breast.

"It will be rather a bore, I expect. Love and marriage, and all that sort of thing, is rather a necessary nuisance in its way. The idea of a man of sense running about a woman, playing a guitar for her, making up to her like a loon when everyone knows his intention! And then the ceremony! Being a man of wealth and station, I suppose the wedding must be an elaborate one, and the natives will have to be feasted, and all that, simply because a man is taking a bride to be mistress of his household."

"Most young men," Don Carlos observed, "delight to win a woman and are proud if they have a great and fashionable wedding."

"No doubt. But it is an awful nuisance. However, I will go through with it, señor. It is my father's wish, you see. You—if you will pardon me again—have fallen upon evil days. That is the result of politics, of course. But you are of excellent blood, señor, of the best blood in the land."

"I thank you for remembering that truth," said Don Carlos, rising long enough to put one hand over his heart and bow.

"Everybody knows it, señor. And a Vega, naturally, when he takes a mate, must seek out a woman of excellent blood."

"To be sure!" Don Carlos exclaimed.

"You have an only daughter, the Señorita Lolita."

"Ah! Yes, indeed, señor. Lolita is eighteen now, and a beautiful and accomplished girl, if her father is the man to say it."

"I have observed her at the mission and at the pueblo," Don Diego said. "She is, indeed, beautiful, and I have heard that she is accomplished. Of her birth and breeding there can be no doubt. I think she would be a fit woman to preside over my household."

"Señor?"

"That is the object of my visit today, señor."

"You—you are asking my permission to pay addresses to my fair daughter?"

"I am, señor."

Don Carlos's face beamed, and again he sprang from his chair, this time to bend forward and grasp Don Diego by the hand.

"She is a fair flower," the father said. "I would see her wed, and I have been to some anxiety about it, for I did not wish her to marry into a family that did not rank with mine. But there can be no question where a Vega is concerned. You have my permission, señor."

Don Carlos was delighted. An alliance between his daughter and Don Diego Vega! His fortunes were retrieved the moment that was consummated. He would be important and powerful again!

He called a native and sent for his wife, and within a few minutes the Doña Catalina appeared on the veranda to greet the visitor, her face beaming, for she had been listening.

"Don Diego has done us the honor to request permission to pay his respects to our daughter," Don Carlos explained.

"You have given consent?" Doña Catalina asked; for it would not do, of course, to jump for the man.

"I have given my consent," Don Carlos replied.

Doña Catalina held out her hand, and Don Diego gave it a languid grasp and then released it.

"Such an alliance would be a proud one," Doña Catalina said. "I hope that you may win her heart, señor."

"As to that," said Don Diego, "I trust there will be no undue nonsense. Either the lady wants me and will have me, or she will not. Will I change her mind if I play a guitar beneath her window, or hold her hand when I may, or put my hand over my heart and sigh? I want her for wife, else I would not have ridden here to ask her father for her."

"I—I—of course," said Don Carlos.

"Ah, señor, but a maid delights to be won," said the Doña Catalina. "It is her privilege, señor. The hours of courtship are held in memory during her lifetime. She remembers the pretty things her lover said, and the first kiss, when they stood beside the stream and looked into each other's eyes, and when he showed sudden fear for her while they were riding and her horse bolted—those things, señor.

"It is like a little game, and it has been played since the beginning of time. Foolish, señor? Perhaps when a person looks at it with cold reason. But delightful, nevertheless."

"I don't know anything about it," Don Diego protested. "I never ran around making love to women."

"The woman you marry will not be sorry because of that, señor."

"You think it is necessary for me to do these things?"

"Oh," said Don Carlos, afraid of losing an influential son-in-law, "a little bit would not hurt. A maid likes to be wooed, of course, even though she has made up her mind."

"I have a servant who is a wonder at the guitar," Don Diego said. "Tonight I shall order him to come out and play beneath the señorita's window."

"And not come yourself?" Doña Catalina gasped.

"Ride out here again tonight, when the chill wind blows in from the sea?" gasped Don Diego. "It would kill me. And the native plays the guitar better than I."

"I never heard of such a thing!" Doña Catalina gasped, her sense of the fitness of things outraged.

"Let Don Diego do as he wills," Don Carlos urged.

"I had thought," said Don Diego, "that you would arrange everything and then let me know. I would have my house put in order, of course, and get me more servants. Perhaps I should purchase a coach and drive with my bride as far as Santa Barbara and visit a friend there. Is it not possible for you to attend to everything else? Just merely send me word when the wedding is to be."

Don Carlos Pulido was nettled a little himself now.

"Caballero," he said, "when I courted Doña Catalina she kept me on needles and pins. One day she would frown, and the next day smile. It added a spice to the affair. I would not have had it different. You will regret it, señor, if you do not do your own courting. Would you like to see the señorita now?"

"I suppose I must," Don Diego said.

Doña Catalina threw up her head and went into the house to fetch the girl; and soon she came, a dainty little thing with black eyes that snapped, and black hair that was wound around her head in a great coil, and dainty little feet that peeped from beneath skirts of bright hue.

"I am happy to see you again, Don Diego," she said. He bowed over her hand and assisted her to one of the chairs.

"You are as beautiful as you were when I saw you last," he said.

"Always tell a señorita that she is more beautiful than when you saw her