



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. Smoke puffed from the big fireplace as the sparks were showered over the hard dirt floor.

“It’s a night for evil deeds!” declared Sergeant Pedro Gonzales, grasping the hilt of his sword in one hand and a mug filled with thin wine in the other. He stretched his great feet in their loose boots toward the roaring fire and continued, “Devils howl in the wind, and demons are in the raindrops! It is an evil night, indeed—eh, señor?”

“It is!” The fat landlord agreed. And he quickly filled the wine mug again, for Sergeant Pedro Gonzales had a terrible temper that was always aroused when wine was too slow in coming.

“An evil night,” the big sergeant repeated, and drained the mug without stopping to draw breath. This feat had gained the sergeant a certain reputation 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. He did not care that he robbed other men 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. Being of great size and strength, and having great skill with the sword, he found few who had the courage to contradict him.

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 friars—the religious brothers—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 Indians kept to their little adobe huts, glad for shelter.

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

Sergeant Pedro Gonzales hogged the fireplace. A corporal and three soldiers from the military post—the presidio—sat at table behind him, drinking their thin wine and playing at cards. An Indian servant crouched on his heels in one corner.

Just now conversation had died out. This fact annoyed the fat landlord and caused him some



fear there would be trouble. He knew that Sergeant Pedro Gonzales in an argument was Sergeant Gonzales at peace. If the sergeant was not arguing, he 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. When the landlord had complained to the commandant of the presidio, Captain Ramón, he got no help. Captain Ramón had replied that running the tavern was the landlord's problem, not the captain's.

So the landlord cautiously watched Gonzales. Edging closer to the long table, he spoke in an attempt to start a general conversation and so head off trouble.

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

His words had an unexpected effect. Sergeant Pedro Gonzales hurled his half-filled wine mug to the hard dirt floor and crashed his huge fist down on the table, causing wine mugs and cards to scatter in all directions.

The corporal and the three soldiers retreated a few feet in fright. The red face of the landlord turned pale. The Indian sitting in the corner started to creep toward the door, preferring the storm outside to the big sergeant's anger.

"Señor Zorro, eh?" Gonzales cried in a terrible voice. "Must I always 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 makes as much trouble as a fox!"

Gonzales turned to face the others 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! But Señor Zorro will not do me the honor of letting me see his flashing sword! His sly attacks 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.

"They are calling him the Curse of Capistrano now," the fat landlord observed,

stooping to pick up the wine mug and cards.

“Curse of the entire highway and the whole mission chain!” Sergeant Gonzales roared. “A cutthroat, he is! A thief! Ha! A common fellow trying to get him a reputation for bravery because he robs a hacienda or so and frightens a few women! 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 let me stand face to face with this pretty highwayman!”

“There is a reward—” the landlord began.

“You snatch the very words from my lips!” Sergeant Gonzales growled. “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 Diego de Alcalá! A pest, he is! Once I met him—”

Sergeant Gonzales 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 relief.

“Good reason, fat one! We have a presidio here and a few soldiers. He keeps far away from any military post, does this pretty Señor Zorro!

He is like a fleeting sunbeam—and with about as much real courage!”

Sergeant Gonzales relaxed on the bench again. The landlord looked and began to hope that there would be no broken mugs and furniture this rainy night.

“Yet this Señor Zorro must rest at times—he must eat and sleep,” the landlord said. “He must have some hiding place. Some fine day the soldiers will trail him to his den.”

“Ha!” Gonzales replied. “Of course the man has to eat and sleep. And you know what he claims now? He says that he is no real thief, by the saints! He is just punishing those who mistreat the men of the missions, he says. Friend of the oppressed, eh? He left a note at Santa Barbara recently stating as much, did he not? Ha! The friars of the missions are shielding him, hiding him, giving him his meat and drink! Shake down a robed friar and you’ll find some trace of this pretty highwayman’s whereabouts!”

“I have no doubt that you speak the truth,” the landlord replied. “I wouldn’t put it past the friars 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 sword at my side? By the saints—”

“I mean,” said the landlord quickly, “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 this bold and cunning Señor Zorro but enter that door and step before us! Let him 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 will claim the generous reward offered by his excellency!”

“He perhaps is afraid to come 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! If only this brave and cunning Señor Zorro, this Curse of Capistrano, were to step through that door now—” The door suddenly was opened!