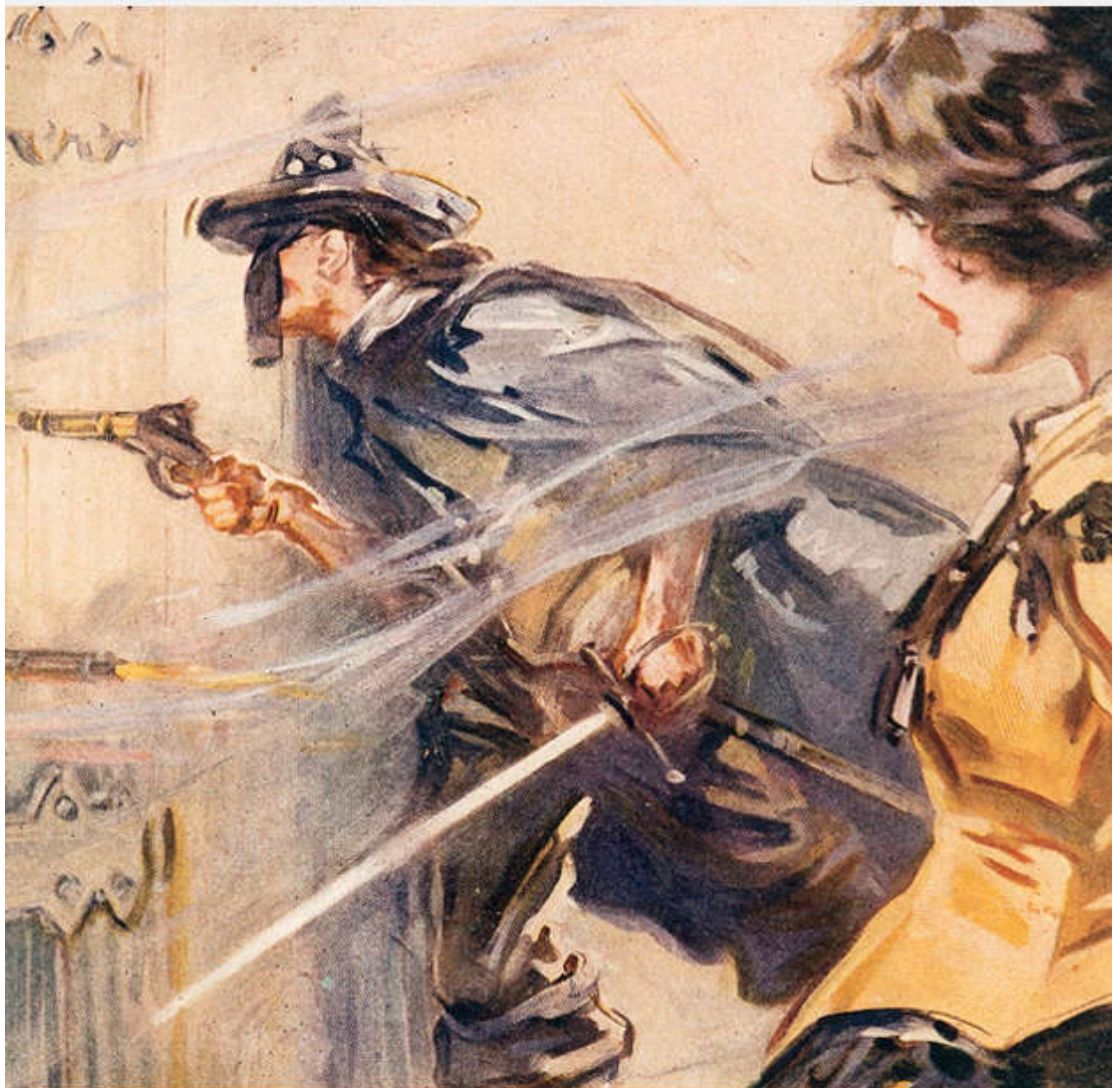




DELPHI
CLASSICS

Johnston McCulley

Collected Works



Series Fourteen

The Collected Works of
JOHNSTON MCCULLEY

(1883-1958)



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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John T. Crowley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line above the first few letters.

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Version 1

The Collected Works of
JOHNSTON MCCULLEY



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Collected Works of Johnston McCulley



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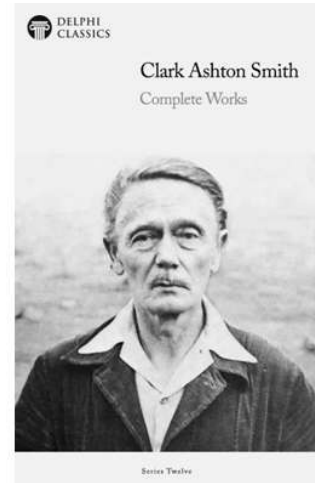
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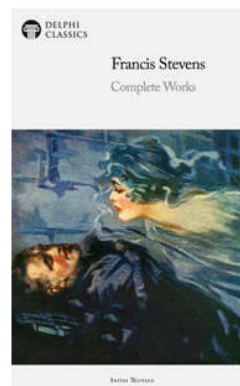
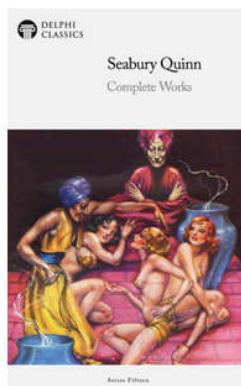
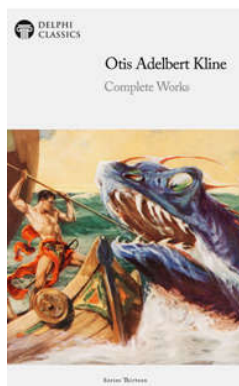
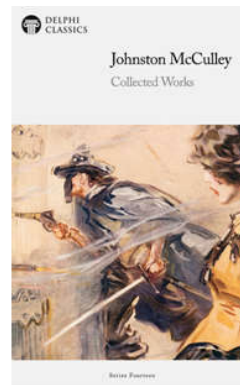
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The Zorro Series



Ottawa, Illinois, LaSalle County, 1912 — Johnston McCulley was born in Ottawa in 1883.



Ottawa in more recent times

The Curse of Capistrano (1919)



OR, THE MARK OF ZORRO

This story first appeared in August and September of 1919 when it was serialised across five editions of ‘All Story Weekly’ magazine. Set in an idealised Southern California of the early nineteenth century, when Spanish grandes ruled vast estates and Franciscan missions brought Christianity to the indigenous population, it tells of the adventures of a dashing vigilante, who defends the commoners and Indigenous peoples of California against corrupt and tyrannical officials and other villains. Generally considered to be inspired by Joaquin Murrieta, a Mexican figure whose life was fictionalised in an 1854 dime novel, Zorro (Spanish for ‘fox’) is typically portrayed as a masked vigilante. His signature all-black costume includes a cape, a hat known as a sombrero cordobés and a mask covering the upper half of his face. ‘Zorro’ is the secret identity of Don Diego de la Vega (originally Don Diego Vega), a young man that is the only son of Don Alejandro de la Vega, the wealthiest landowner in California. Diego had learned his swordsmanship while at university in Spain. He creates his masked alter ego after he is unexpectedly summoned home by his father, as California has fallen into the hands of an oppressive dictator. To divert suspicion about his identity, Diego hides his fighting abilities while pretending to be a coward and a fop.

The Curse of Capistrano was originally intended as a stand-alone story. However, the success of the 1920 film adaptation *The Mark of Zorro*, starring Douglas Fairbank, that same year led to the story being reprinted under the film’s title and it would go on to sell in excess of fifty million copies. McCulley followed the story up with *The Further Adventures of Zorro* — where Zorro’s beloved, the beautiful Lolita, is captured by the evil Capitan Ramon — which was published in May 1922. A third novel, *Zorro Rides Again* (in which Zorro has to unmask an imposter) was published in 1931. McCulley published a small handful of stories featuring his masked hero between 1932 and 1941, but between 1944 and 1951 he published 52 short stories featuring Zorro with the last one appearing posthumously in 1959. Some of these stories have been subsequently published in book form. *The Sign of Zorro*, a fourth novel-length adventure, in which a villain threatens to kidnap the Governor of California appeared in 1941. In the fifth novel, *A Task for Zorro* (1947), Don Marcos Vargas decides the way to rebuild his fortune is by getting the reward for capturing Zorro. The sixth and final novel, *Zorro’s Fight for Life* (1951), concerns a brutal new Capitán, who is keen to put Zorro out of business, but so is Americano Pete Jordan, a loose cannon if ever there was one...

Aside from the original 1920 film, the character has been adapted into a multitude of TV and film appearances; one of the best remembered is by Antonio Banderas, who starred in the big budget adaptation *The Mask of Zorro* (1998) and its sequel *The Legend of Zorro* (2005). Another popular Zorro was performed by Guy Williams, who starred in two Disney TV series in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Uniquely aside from the multitude of English language productions, a series of ten Mexican films have been produced featuring Zorro, as well as over twenty Italian, Spanish and French productions.

Being one of the earliest examples of a fictional masked avenger with a double identity, Zorro inspired the creation of several similar characters in pulp magazines

and other media and is a precursor of the superheroes of American comic books, with Batman and the Lone Ranger drawing particularly close parallels to the character. Zorro remains McCulley's most enduring and iconic creation, from a long career of colourful and engaging creations.



The magazine in which this story first appeared



Joaquin Murrieta Carrillo (c. 1829-1853), also called the 'Robin Hood of El Dorado', was a Mexican figure of disputed historicity. McCulley based Zorro on John Rollin Ridge's 1854 dime novel about Murrieta.

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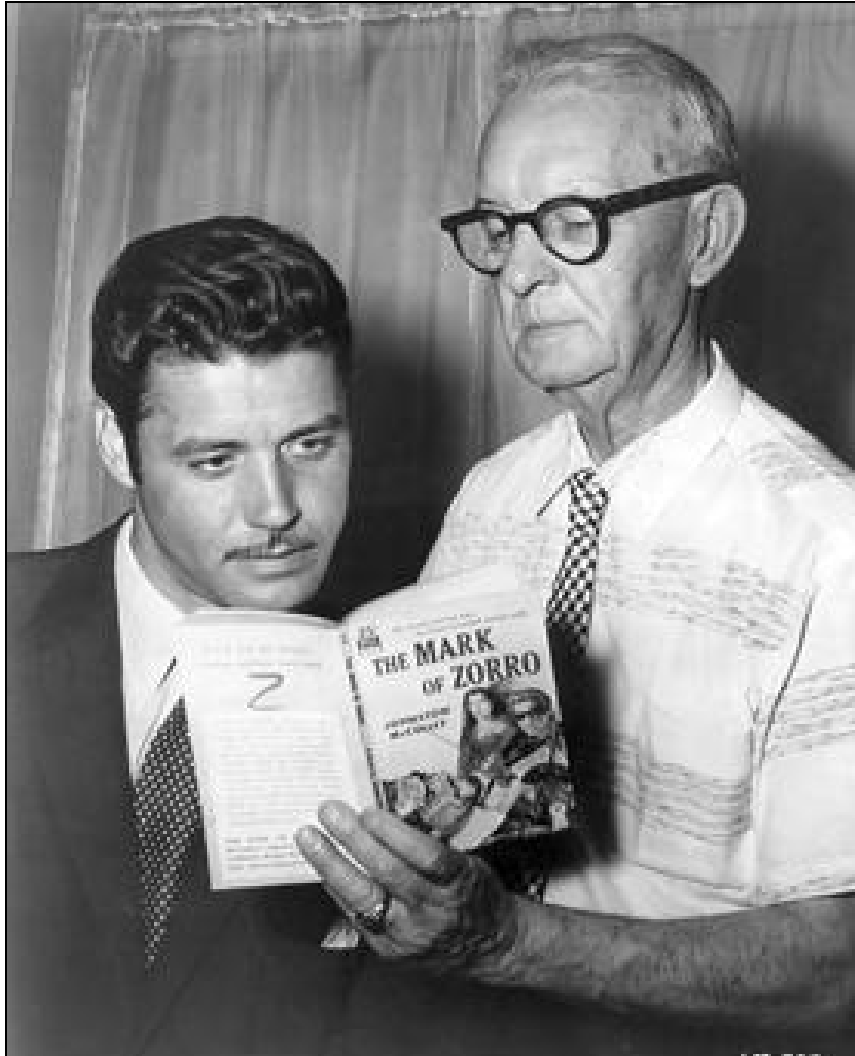
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'The Mark of Zorro' is a 1920 silent Western starring Douglas Fairbanks and Noah Beery. This genre-defining swashbuckler adventure was the first movie version of 'The Mark of Zorro'.



Theatrical release poster for the 1940 film



Johnston McCulley (right) with Zorro's television portrayal, Guy Williams, c. 1958

CHAPTER I 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 Alcála, 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 Alcála! 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 *frailles* 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 *frailles* 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 II 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!"

"H-m!" 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 *dueñas* 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 tenscore 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 serape 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 Alcála 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!

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End of Sample