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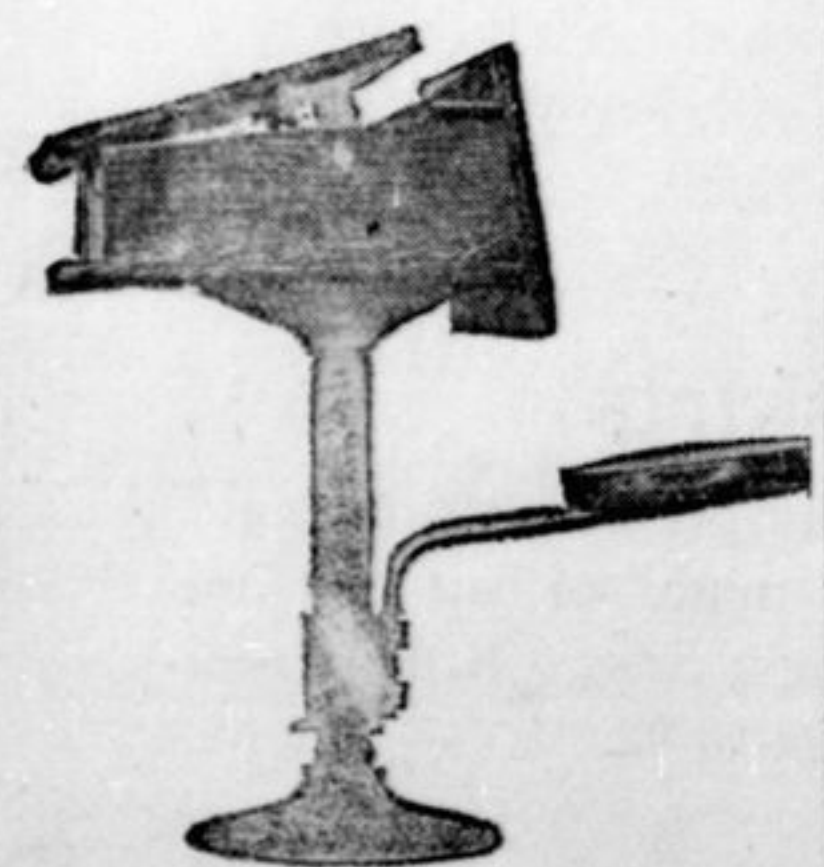
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Author of "The Southerners," "For Love of Country," "The Grip of Honor," Etc.

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CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN DOMINIQUE ALVARADO stood alone on the plaza of the ancient castle which for over a century had been the home of the governors of La Guayra. He was gazing listlessly down over the parapet which bordered the bare sheer precipice towering above the seaport town. There was nothing in his eyes, but a great deal in his heavy heart.

Captain Alvarado, who filled the honorable station of comandante of the port, was a soldier of proved courage. The protegee and favorite officer of his serene highness the Count Alvaro de Lara, grandee of Spain and viceroy of Venezuela, he had been honored with great responsibilities, which he had discharged to the satisfaction of his master. From a military point of view the office of governor of La Guayra, which he then filled, was of sufficient importance to entitle him to high position and much consideration in the vice regal court of Caracas.

Of unknown parentage, Alvarado had been received into the family of the viceroy when an infant. He had been carefully reared, almost as he had been De Lara's son, and had been given abundant opportunity to distinguish himself. In the course of his short life he had managed to amass a modest fortune by honorable means. He was young and handsome. He had been instructed, for the viceroy had early shown partiality for him, in the best schools in the new world. His education had been ripened and polished by a sojourn of several years in Europe, not only at the court of Madrid, but also at that of Versailles, where the Count de Lara had been sent as ambassador to the grand monarch during a period in which, for the sake of supervising the education of his only daughter, he had temporarily absented himself from his beloved Venezuela.

That an unknown man should have been given such opportunities, should have been treated with so much consideration, was sufficient commentary on the unprecedented kindness of heart of the old hidalgo who represented the falling power of his most catholic majesty of Spain, Carlos II., the Bewitched, in the new world. Whatever his origin, therefore, he had been brought up as a Spanish soldier and gentleman, and the old count was openly proud of him.

With assured station, ample means, increasing reputation, with youth, health and personal good looks, the young governor should have been a happy man. But it was easy to see from the heavy frown upon his sunny face—for he was that rare thing in Spain, a blue eyed blond, who at first sight might have been mistaken for an Englishman—that his soul was filled with melancholy. And well it might be, for Alvarado was the victim of a hopeless passion for Mercedes de Lara, the viceroy's daughter, known from one end of the Caribbean to the other from her beauty and her father's station as the Pearl of Caracas.

Nor was his present sadness due to unrequited passion, for he was confident that the adoration of his heart was met with an adequate response from its object. Indeed, it was no secret to him that Mercedes loved him with a devotion which matched his own. It was not that, but her father had announced his intention to betroth the girl to Don Felipe de Tobar y Robadilla, a young gentleman of ancient lineage and vast wealth, who had been born in America and was the reputed head in the western hemisphere of the famous family whose name he bore.

of anything, for he did not, but because it was a habit of his people and his ancestry. The busy life that he led, the many employments which were thrust upon him, his military duties, had kept the days of the young soldier very full, and under the most favorable circumstances he would have had little time for lovelinking.

But, though they had enjoyed brief opportunity for personal intercourse, the very impossibilities of free communication, the difficulties of meeting, had but added fuel and fire to their affection. Love had flamed into these two hearts with all the intensity of their tropic blood and tropic land. Alvarado's passion could feed for days and grow large upon the remembrance of the fragrance of her hand when he kissed it last in formal salutation. Mercedes' soul could unfold itself in the recollection of the too ardent pressure of his lips, the burning yet respectful glance he had shot at her, by others unperceived, when he said farewell. The situation was complicated in every possible way for Alvarado. Had he been a man of family, like his friend, De Tobar, he would have gone boldly to the viceroy and asked for the hand of his daughter, in which case he thought he would have met with no refusal; but, being ignorant of his birth, having not even a legal right to the name he bore, he knew that the proud old hidalgo would rather see his daughter dead than wedded to him. Of all the ancient splendors of the Spanish people there was left them but one thing of which they could be proud—their ancient name. De Lara, who belonged to one of the noblest and most distinguished families of the Iberian peninsula, would never consent to degrade his line by allying his only daughter to a nobody, however worthy in other respects the suitor might prove to be.

Again, had Mercedes' father been any other than the lifelong patron and friend to whom he literally owed everything that he possessed, such was the impetuosity of Alvarado's disposition that at every hazard he would have taken the girl by stealth or force from her father's protection, made her his wife and sought an asylum in England or France or wherever he could. So desperate was his state of mind, so overwhelming his love, that he would have shrunk from nothing to win her. Yet just because the viceroy had been a father to him, just because he had loved him, had been unexampled in his kindness and consideration to him, just because he reposed such absolute unlimited confidence in him, the young man felt bound in honor by fetters that he could not break.

And there was his friendship for De Tobar. There were many young gentlemen about the vice regal court who, jealous of Alvarado's favor and envious of his merits, had not scrupled in the face of his unknown origin to sneer, to mock or to slight—so far as it was safe to do either of these things to so brave and able a soldier. Amid these gilded youths De Tobar, with noble magnanimity and affection, had proved himself Alvarado's staunch friend. A romantic attachment had sprung up between the two young men, and the first confidant of De Tobar's love affairs had been Alvarado himself. To betray his friend was almost as bad as to betray his patron. It was not to be thought of.

Yet how could he, a man in whose blood—though it may have been ignoble for aught he knew—ran all the passions of his race with the fervor and fire of the best, a man who loved, as he did, the ground upon which the Senorita de Lara walked, stand by tamely and see her given to another, no matter who he might be?

Spain under the last poor, crazed, bewitched, degenerate descendant of the once formidable Hapsburgs had reached the lowest depths of ignominy and decay. Alone amidst under her flag Venezuela was well governed—from the Spanish standpoint, that is. From the native American point of view the rule of even the gentlest of Spaniards had made a hell on earth of the fairest countries of the new continent. Of all the cities and garrisons which were under sway of the Viceroy de Lara, La Guayra was the best appointed and cared for. But it did not require a great deal of time or attention from so skilled a commander as Alvarado to keep things in proper shape. Time, therefore, hung heavily on his hands.

On the other side of the mountain range, after a descent of several thousand feet to a beautiful verdant valley whose altitude tempered the tropic heat of the low latitude into a salubrious and delightful climate, lay the palace of the viceroy and the city which surrounded it, St. Jago, or Santiago de Leon, commonly called the city of Caracas.

Many a day had Alvarado turned backward from the white walled, red roofed town spread out at his feet, basking under the palms, seething in the fierce heat, as if striving to pierce with his gaze the great cordilleras, on the farther side of which in the cool white palace beneath the gigantic ceibas the queen of his heart made her home. He pictured her at all hours of the day; he

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dwelt upon her image, going over again in his mind each detail of her face and figure.

He was mad, mad with love for her, crazed with hopeless passion. There seemed to be no way out of his misery but for him to pass his own sword through his heart, or to throw himself from the precipice, or to plunge into the cruel blue of the enveloping Caribbean—the color of the sea changed in his eye with his temper, like a woman's mood. Yet he was young; he hoped in spite of himself. He prayed—for he was not old enough to have lost faith—and he planned. Besides, he was too brave a soldier to kill himself, and she was not yet married. She was not formally betrothed even, although it was well known that her father looked favorably upon De Tobar's suit; no formal announcement had been made of it as yet. So, in spite of his judgment, he dreamed. The thoughts of youth and love are long, long thoughts, indeed.

That morning the young captain, enraptured in his emotions, was not aware

Captain Alvarado



of the approach of a messenger until the clank of the man's sword upon the stone flags of the plaza caused him to lift his head. He was a soldier, an officer of the bodyguard of the viceroy, and he bore in his hand a letter sealed with the De Lara coat of arms. The messenger saluted and handed the packet to the captain.

"Yesterday evening his excellency the viceroy charged me to deliver this letter to you today."

"Fadrique," called Alvarado to a servant, "a flagon of wine for the cavalier. By your leave, sir," he continued, with formal politeness, opening the packet and reading the message:

To the Captain Alvarado, Comandante of La Guayra, Greeting:

As one faithful to the fortunes of our family we would crave your honorable presence at our palace in Santiago tomorrow evening. In view of your service and devotion we have done you the honor to appoint you as one of the witnesses to the formal betrothal of our daughter,

Donna Mercedes, to your friend, Don Felipe de Tobar. After that, as we have received appeals for help from the Orinoco country, we propose to lead his most catholic majesty's imperial troops thither in person to overawe the natives, and, reposing full trust in your fidelity and honor, we design to commit the Donna Mercedes to your safe keeping in our city of La Guayra until we return. Therefore make your preparations accordingly. Given under our hand and seal.

DE LARA, Viceroy.

It had come! The old man, as a last token of his respect, had nominated him as a witness to the contract which robbed him forever of hope and happiness. The young man went white before the keen eye of the messenger, who, in common with other officers of the viceroy's court, suspected what was, indeed, concealed from no one save the father and lover. His heart almost stopped its beating, yet, summoning his resolution, he recovered himself by an effort that left him trembling, the sweat beading his forehead.

"Say to his excellency the viceroy that I thank him for the honor he does me. I shall wait upon him tomorrow and obey his commands."

CHAPTER X.

ALVARADO was alone in the cabinet of the viceroy, to which his excellency held him gave him access at all times.

He had ridden all day over the rough road that winds over the mountains from La Guayra to Caracas. The storm which had rushed down the mountain side all afternoon matched the tumult in his soul, and the sheets of rain blown upon him by the fierce wind had not cooled the fever of his agitation. The unusual tempest was one of the most terrific that had swept over the coast in years. He had marked as he rode a huge ship far to seaward, staggering along under shortened canvas and laboring tremendously in the heavy seas. But his thoughts were so centered upon the situation in which he found himself that he had not particularly noticed the vessel, although passing ships were infrequent sights off the port of La Guayra. Pale, haggard and distraught from his mental struggle, he had crossed the pass at the summit of the mountain and descended into the fertile valley now adrip with rain and looking almost cold under the gray sky and had presented himself at the palace of the viceroy.

He had changed his apparel after his reception, and his old sergeant had polished his breastplate until it fairly blazed with light, for though the occasion was one of peace he had felt that he could better sustain his part in the military uniform in which he had won his only title to consideration. Consequently his appearance in the brilliantly lighted hall of the palace among the gay courtiers resplendent in magnificent attire, blazing with jewels, threw a somber note over the proceedings.

It was as a soldier he had won fame and the consideration of the viceroy; in no other capacity, so far as any man knew, had he the right to enter that assemblage of the rich and well born. It was as a soldier he would perform that hardest of all duties which had ever been laid upon him by his friend and patron, the governor.

Pale, stern, composed, he stood an iron figure of repression. So severe was the constraint that he put upon himself that he had given no sign of his emotion, even at the near approach of Donna Mercedes, and the hand which signed his name beneath her father's as the principal witness was as steady as if it held merely the sword in some deadly combat. He endured passively the affectionate greetings of the happy De Tobar, who was intoxicated at the assurance afforded by the betrothal of the coming realization of all his hopes. He sustained with firmness the confidence of the viceroy and the admissions De Lara made to him in private of his pleasure in the suitable and fortunate marriage which was there arranged. He even bore without breaking one long, piteous appeal which had been shot at him from the black eyes of the unhappy Mercedes.

To her he seemed preternaturally cold and indifferent. He was so strong, so brave, so successful. She had counted upon some interposition from him, but the snow capped Andes were no

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JNO. A. DARLING CHEMIST — AND — DRUGGIST DURHAM, ONT.

colder than he appeared, their granite sides no more rigid and unsympathetic. It was with a feeling almost of anger and resentment at last that she had signed the betrothal contract.

But the restraint on the man was more than he could bear. Pleading indisposition, he early begged leave to withdraw from the festivities which succeeded the completion of the betrothal ceremony and the retirement of the ladies. At the suggestion of the viceroy, who said he desired to consult with him later in the evening, he went into the deserted cabinet of the latter.

The palace was built in the form of a quadrangle around an open patio. A balcony ran along the second story, passing the viceroy's cabinet, beyond which was his bedroom and beyond that the apartments of his daughter. The rain had ceased and the storm had spent itself. It was a calm and beautiful night. The moon, shining with tropic splendor through the open window, dispensed with the necessity of lights. There was no one in the cabinet when he entered, and he felt at last able to give way to his emotion. Mercedes, though she was not married, was now lost to him beyond recourse. After the women withdrew from the hall with Donna Mercedes there was no restraint put upon the young nobles, and from the other side of the patio came the sound of uproarious revelry and feasting, his friends and comrades with generous cheer celebrating the happy bridegroom that was to be. Alvarado was alone, undisturbed, forgotten, and likely to remain so. He put his head upon his hands and groaned in anguish.

"Why should it not have been I?" he murmured. "Is he stronger, braver, a better soldier? Does he love her more? Riches? Can I not acquire them? Fame? Have I not a large measure? Birth? Ah, that is it! My father! My mother! If I could only know! How she looked at me! What piteous appeal in her eyes! What reproach when I stood passive, cased in iron, with a breaking heart! Mercedes! Mercedes!"

In his anguish he called the name aloud. So absorbed and preoccupied in his grief had he been that he was not aware of a figure softly moving along the balcony in the shadow. He did not hear a footfall coming through the open window that gave into the room. He did not realize that he had an auditor to his words, a witness to his grief, until a touch soft as a snowflake fell upon his fair head and a voice for which he languished whispered in his ear:

"You called me. I am come."
"Senorita Mercedes!" he cried, lifting his head and gazing upon her in startled surprise. "How came you here?" he added brusquely, catching her hands with a fierce grasp in the intensity of his emotion as he spoke. "Is this my greeting?" she answered, surprised in turn that he had not instantly swept her to his heart. She strove to draw herself away, and when he perceived her intent he opened his hands and allowed her arms to fall by her side.

"I have been mistaken," she went on piteously. "I am not wanted."
She turned away and stood full in the silver bar of the moonlight streaming through the casement. Her white face shone in the light against the dark background of the huge empty room—that face with its aureole of soft, dark hair, the face of a saint, pale yet not passionless, of the heaven heaven-

ly, yet with just enough of earthly feeling in her eyes to attest that she was a very woman after all. "Go not," he cried, catching her again and drawing her back.

[CONTINUED.]

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