

THE CRIMSON CONQUEST

CHAPTER I

Booty from Peru

TOWARD the end of a day in the year Fifteen Hundred and Thirty-one, as the air cooled slightly with the sun's decline, the plaza of the little Spanish city of Panama grew languidly animate. The square had blazed, shimmered, and baked all day, shunned in its fervor except by those compelled to cross it in order to avoid the exertion of going round, or by the few straggling natives whose half-naked bodies and sun-tanned hides were proof; but this was the hour of listless awakening, and groups formed at the corners, exchanging gossip — if by a blessing there was gossip to exchange — and awaiting the sole break in the sultry monotony of the day, the evening parade of the garrison with its stimulating bang of the culverin at sunset.

The dominant type in these groups was that of the fighting man. Some were sailors, a few were planters; but most of the swarthy faces wore the unmistakable marks of the soldier. The dress and bearing of a small number indicated rank; but all, save a sprinkling of ecclesiastics and civil officers of the Crown, were adventurers, and bore evidence, in their worn apparel, in their scars, and in their bronzed and weatherbeaten features, of severe campaigns and hardship.