

A New Face in Hearthcombe

by Sloane Duffy

I had forgotten entirely.



Yesterday, The Chairman and I had gone out for a morning gallop. It was an unusually warm morning — we had gone cross country, rather than down the road to Hearthcombe. As we crested the low hill that overlooks the village, I remembered something that Charlie had mentioned — twice, as Charlie does when he considers something important — that we were expecting someone new.

"Fernando de Gerste," he'd said, wiping down the bar with that wry look he gets when he already knows more than he's letting on. "Coming from Veracruz. Marcel sent word." I arrived at D&W, saw to The Chairman and came in through the back as I always do. There he was, sitting at the far end of the bar with a pint in front of him and a worn leather satchel at his feet, looking for all the world like a man who knew where he wanted to be.

Charlie introduced us formally. Fernando de Gerste stood, nodded once — I will say this plainly and without apology — the man is certainly more attractive than was strictly necessary. Dark hair, strong jaw, the kind of hands that have spent years learning a craft few can master. He looked me directly in the eye with a quiet confidence that might possibly rattle The Commodore if he were here. Possibly.

Something to file away for another time.

It was no accident that Fernando de Gerste came to Hearthcombe. His great-grandfather Heinrich left Vienna for Veracruz in 1864 — a brewmaster carrying everything he knew across an ocean to a country that turned out to have soil and sun and something in the air that did remarkable things to a brew. Three generations later, Fernando walked into Duffy and Ward with that knowledge in the way most men carry their name. Quietly. Boldly. No explanation needed. This — and a recipe The Commodore wanted very badly. One that Señor de Gerste had not shared with anyone, including me. I asked him about it directly, because I am Irish and we don't circle things. He smiled — just barely, just enough — and said, "When it's ready, you'll know." Charlie, for the record, looked entirely unsurprised.

That evening – Burton and I were seated in our respective chairs in the parlor. He was absorbed with the newspaper while I was taking in the warmth of the fireplace, mentally reliving the events of the day. I blurted out unexpectedly that Fernando seemed very much at home.



The Commodore, still focused on the newspaper, nodded almost imperceptibly. Said nothing for a moment. Then, with great deliberate calm: "Good. The brewery needs the talent." He then found something very absorbing to read on the other side of the room. The Commodore may take exception to certain things as the weeks go on. We will see.

Sloane Duffy is a fictional character and co-founder of the Duffy & Ward brand universe, created by Sloane Duffy Media LLC. She rides every morning, manages the books every afternoon, and has never once missed a brew day. © 2026 Sloane Duffy Media LLC.

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