

CHAPTER XXXI

AN hour later they assembled in the plaza to start for the bear hunt. Reinaldo was not of the party.

Estenega lifted Chonita to her horse and stood beside her for a moment while the others mounted. He touched her hand with his:

"We could not have a more beautiful night," he said significantly. "And I have often wished that my father had included this spot when he applied for his grant. I should like to live with you here. Even when the winds rage and hurl the rain through the very window pane, I know of no more enchanting spot than Fort Ross. The Russians are going; some day I will buy it for you."

She made no reply, but she did not withdraw her hand, and he held it closely and glanced slowly about him. Always, despite his bitter intimacy with life, in kinship with nature, perhaps in that moment it had a deeper meaning, for he saw with double vision. She was there: and, with him, sensible not only of the beauty of the night, but of the indefinable mystery which broods over California the moment the sun falls. Perhaps, too, he was troubled by a vague foreboding, such as comes to mortals sometimes in spite of their limitations. He never saw Fort Ross again.

On the horizon the fog crouched and moved; marched like a battalion of ocean's ghosts; suddenly cohered and sent out light puffs of smoke, as from the crater of a spectral volcano. The moon, full and bright and cold, hung low in the dark sky; one hardly noted the stars. The vast sweep of water was as calm as a lake, dark and metallic like the sky, barely reflecting the silver