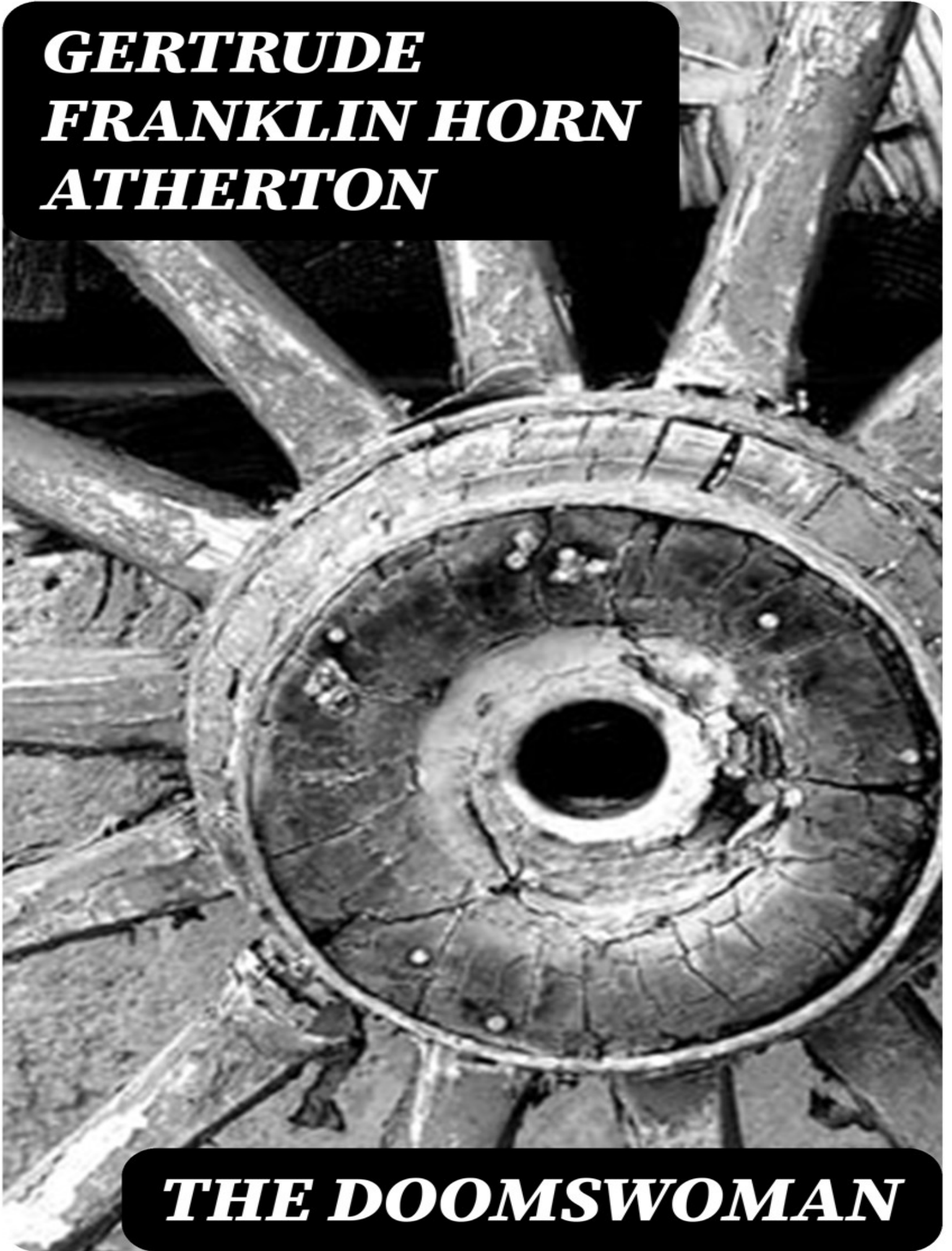


***GERTRUDE  
FRANKLIN HORN  
ATHERTON***

***THE DOOMSWOMAN***



**Gertrude Franklin Horn Atherton**

# **The Doomswoman**

**An Historical Romance of Old California**

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# I.

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It was at Governor Alvarado's house in Monterey that Chonita first knew of Diego Estenega. I had told him much of her, but had never cared to mention the name of Estenega in the presence of an Iturbi y Moncada.

Chonita came to Monterey to stand godmother to the child of Alvarado and of her friend Doña Martina, his wife. She arrived the morning before the christening, and no one thought to tell her that Estenega was to be godfather. The house was full of girls, relatives of the young mother, gathered for the ceremony and subsequent week of festivities. Benicia, my little one, was at the rancho with Ysabel Herrera, and I was staying with the Alvarados. So many were the guests that Chonita and I slept together. We had not seen each other for a year, and had so much to say that we did not sleep at all. She was ten years younger than I, but we were as close friends as she with her alternate frankness and reserve would permit. But I had spent several months of each year since childhood at her home in Santa Barbara, and I knew her better than she knew herself; when, later, I read her journal, I found little in it to surprise me, but much to fill and cover with shapely form the skeleton of the story which passed in greater part before my eyes.

We were discussing the frivolous mysteries of dress, if I remember aright, when she laid her hand on my mouth

suddenly.

"Hush!" she said.

A caballero serenaded his lady at midnight in Monterey.

The tinkle of a guitar, the jingling of spurs, fell among the strong tones of a man's voice.

Chonita had been serenaded until she had fled to the mountains for sleep, but she crept to the foot of the bed and knelt there, her hand at her throat. A door opened, and, one by one, out of the black beyond, five white-robed forms flitted into the room. They looked like puffs of smoke from a burning moon. The heavy wooden shutters were open, and the room was filled with cold light.

The girls waltzed on the bare floor, grouped themselves in mock-dramatic postures, then, overcome by the strange magnetism of the singer, fell into motionless attitudes, listening intently. How well I remember that picture, although I have almost forgotten the names of the girls!

In the middle of the room two slender figures embraced each other, their black hair falling loosely over their white gowns. On the window-step knelt a tall girl, her head pensively supported by her hand, a black shawl draped gracefully about her; at her feet sat a girl with head bowed to her knees. Between the two groups was a solitary figure, kneeling with hand pressed to the wall and face uplifted.

When the voice ceased I struck a match, and five pairs of little hands applauded enthusiastically. He sang them another song, then galloped away.

"It is Don Diego Estenega," said one of the girls. "He rarely sings, but I have heard him before."

"An Estenega!" exclaimed Chonita.

"Yes; of the North, thou knowest. His Excellency thinks there is no man in the Californias like him,—so bold and so smart. Thou rememberest the books that were burned by the priests when the governor was a boy, because he had dared to read them, no? Well, when Diego Estenega heard of that, he made his father send to Boston and Mexico for those books and many more, and took them up to his redwood forests in the north, far away from the priests. And they say he had read other books before, although such a lad; his father had brought them from Spain, and never cared much for the priests. And he has been to Mexico and America and Europe! God of my soul! it is said that he knows more than his Excellency himself,—that his mind works faster. Ay! but there was a time when he was wild,—when the mescal burnt his throat like hornets and the aguardiente was like scorpions in his brain; but that was long ago, before he was twenty; now he is thirty-four. He amuses himself sometimes with the girls,—*valgame Dios!* he has made hot tears flow,—but I suppose we do not know enough for him, for he marries none. Ay! but he has a charm."

"Like what does he look? A beautiful caballero, I suppose, with eyes that melt and a mouth that trembles like a woman in the palsy."

"Ay, no, my Chonita; thou art wrong. He is not beautiful at all. He is rather haggard, and wears no mustache, and he has the profile of the great man, fine and aquiline and severe, excepting when he smiles, and then sometimes he looks kind and sometimes he looks like a devil. He has not the beauty of color; his hair is brown, I think, and his eyes

are gray, and set far back; but how they flash! I think they could burn if they looked too long. He is tall and straight and very strong, not so indolent as most of our men. They call him The American because he moves so quickly and gets so cross when people do not think fast enough. *He* thinks like lightning strikes. Ay! they all say that he will be governor in his time; that he would have been long ago, but he has been away so much. It must be that he has seen and admired thee, my Chonita, and discovered thy grating. Thou art happy that thou too hast read the books. Thou and he will be great friends, I know!"

"Yes!" exclaimed Chonita, scornfully. "It is likely. Thou hast forgotten—perhaps—the enmity between the Capulets and the Montagues was a sallow flame to the bitter hatred, born of jealousy in love, politics, and social precedence, which exists between the Estenegas and the Iturbi y Moncadas?"

## II.

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Delfina, the first child of Alvarado, born in the purple at the governor's mansion in Monterey, was about to be baptized with all the pomp and ceremony of the Church and time. Doña Martina, the wife of a year, was unable to go to the church, but lay beneath her lace and satin coverlet, her heavy black hair half covering the other side of the bed.



Beside her stood the nurse, a fat, brown, high-beaked old crone, holding a mass of grunting lace. I stood at the foot of the bed, admiring the picture.

"Be careful for the sun, Tomasa," said the mother. "Her eyes must be strong, like the Alvarados',—black and keen and strong."

"Sure, señora."

"And let her not smother, nor yet take cold. She must grow tall and strong,—like the Alvarados."

"Sure, señora."

"Where is his Excellency?"

"I am here." And Alvarado entered the room. He looked amused, and probably had overheard the conversation. He justified, however, the admiration of his young wife. His tall military figure had the perfect poise and suggestion of power natural to a man whose genius had been recognized by the Mexican government before he had entered his twenties. The clean-cut face, with its calm profile and fiery eyes, was not that of the Washington of his emulation, and I never understood why he chose so tame a model. Perhaps because of the meagerness of that early proscribed literature; or did the title "Father of his Country" appeal irresistibly to that lofty and doomed ambition?

He passed his hand over his wife's long white fingers, but did not offer her any other caress in my presence.

"How dost thou feel?"

"Well; but I shall be lonely. Do not stay long at the church, no? How glad I am that Chonita came in time for the christening! What a beautiful *comadre* she will be! I have

just seen her. Ay, poor Diego! he will fall in love with her; and what then?"

"It would have been better had she come too late, I think. To avoid asking Diego to stand for my first child was impossible, for he is the man of men to me. To avoid asking Doña Chonita was equally impossible, I suppose, and it will be painful for both. He serenaded her last night, not knowing who she was, but having seen her at her grating; he only returned yesterday. I hope she plants no thorns in his heart."

"Perhaps they will marry and bind the wounds," suggested the woman.

"An Estenega and an Iturbi y Moncada will not marry. He might forget, for he is passionate and of a nature to break down barriers when a wish is dear; but she has all the wrongs of all the Iturbi y Moncadas on her white shoulders, and all their pride in the carriage of her head; to say nothing of that brother whom she adores. She learned this morning that it was Diego's determined opposition that kept Reinaldo out of the Departmental Junta, and meets him in no tender frame of mind——"

Doña Martina raised her hand. Chonita stood in the doorway. She was quite beautiful enough to plant thorns where she listed. Her tall supple figure was clothed in white, and over her gold hair—lurid and brilliant, but without a tinge of red—she wore a white lace mantilla. Her straight narrow brows and heavy lashes were black; but her skin was more purely white than her gown. Her nose was finely cut, the arch almost indiscernible, and she had the most sculptured mouth I have ever seen. Her long eyes were green, dark,

and luminous. Sometimes they had the look of a child, sometimes she allowed them to flash with the fire of an animated spirit. But the expression she chose to cultivate was that associated with crowned head and sceptered hand; and sure no queen had ever looked so calm, so inexorable, so haughty, so terribly clear of vision. She never posed—for any one, at least, but herself. For some reason—a youthful reason probably—the iron in her nature was most admired by her. Wherefore,—also, as she had the power, as twin, to heal and curse,—I had named her the Doomswoman, and by this name she was known far and wide. By the lower class of Santa Barbara she was called The Golden Señorita, on account of her hair and of her father's vast wealth.

"Come," she said, "every one is waiting. Do not you hear the voices?"

The windows were closed, but through them came a murmur like that of a pine forest.

The governor motioned to the nurse to follow Chonita and myself, and she trotted after us, her ugly face beaming with pride of position. Was not in her arms the oldest-born of a new generation of Alvarados? the daughter of the governor of The Californias? Her smock, embroidered with silk, was new, and looked whiter than fog against her bare brown arms and face. Her short red satin skirt, a gift of her happy lady's, was the finest ever worn by exultant nurse. About her stringy old throat was a gold chain, bright red roses were woven in her black reboso. I saw her admire Chonita's stately figure with scornful reserve of the colorless gown.

We were followed in a moment by the governor, adjusting his collar and smoothing his hair. As he reached the door-way at the front of the house he was greeted with a shout from assembled Monterey. The plaza was gay with beaming faces and bright attire. The men, women, and children of the people were on foot, a mass of color on the opposite side of the plaza: the women in gaudy cotton frocks girt with silken sashes, tawdry jewels, and spotless camisas, the coquettish reboso draping with equal grace faces old and brown, faces round and olive; the men in glazed sombreros, short calico jackets and trousers; Indians wound up in gala blankets. In the foreground, on prancing silver-trapped horses, were caballeros and doñas, laughing and coquetting, looking down in triumph upon the dueñas and parents who rode older and milder mustangs and shook brown knotted fingers at heedless youth. The young men had ribbons twisted in their long black hair, and silver eagles on their soft gray sombreros. Their velvet serapes were embroidered with gold; the velvet knee-breeches were laced with gold or silver cord over fine white linen; long deer-skin botas were gartered with vivid ribbon; flaunting sashes bound their slender waists, knotted over the hip. The girls and young married women wore black or white mantillas, the silken lace of Spain, regardless of the sun which might darken their Castilian fairness. Their gowns were of flowered silk or red or yellow satin, the waist long and pointed, the skirt full; jeweled buckles of tiny slippers flashed beneath the hem. The old people were in rich dress of sober color. A few Americans were there in the ugly garb of their country, a blot on the picture.

At the door, just in front of the cavalcade, stood General Vallejo's carriage, the only one in California, sent from Sonoma for the occasion. Beside it were three superbly-trapped horses.

The governor placed the swelling nurse in the carriage, then glanced about him. "Where is Estenega?—and the Castros?" he asked.

"There are Don José and Doña Modeste Castro," said Chonita.

The crowd had parted suddenly, and two men and a woman rode toward the governor. One of the men was tall and dark, and his somber military attire became the stern sadness of his face. Castro was not Comandante-general of the army at that time, but his bearing was as imperious in that year of 1840 as when six years later the American Occupation closed forever the career of a man made in derision for greatness. At his right rode his wife, one of the most queenly beauties of her time, small as she was in stature. Every woman's eye turned to her at once; she was our leader of fashion, and we all copied the gowns that came to her from the city of Mexico.

But Chonita gave no heed to the Castros. She fixed her cold direct regard on the man who rode with them, and whom, she knew, must be Diego Estenega, for he was their guest. She was curious to see this enemy of her house, the political rival of her brother, the owner of the voice which had given her the first thrill of her life. He was dressed as plainly as Castro, and had none of the rich southern beauty of the caballeros. His hair was cut short like Alvarado's, and his face was thin and almost sallow. But the life that was in

that face! the passion, the intelligence, the kindness, the humor, the grim determination! And what splendid vitality was in his tall thin figure, and nervous activity under the repose of his carriage! I remember I used to think in those days that Diego Estenega could conquer the world if he wished, although I suspected that he lacked one quality of the great rulers of men,—inexorable cruelty.

From the moment his horse carried him into the plaza he did not remove his eyes from Chonita's face. She lowered hers angrily after a moment. As he reached the house he sprang to the ground, and Alvarado presented the sponsors. He lifted his cap and bowed, but not as low as the caballeros who were wont to prostrate themselves before her. They murmured the usual form of salutation:

"At your feet, señorita."

"I appreciate the honor of your acquaintance."

"It is my duty and pleasure to lift you to your horse." And, still holding his cap in his hand, he led her to one of the three horses which stood beside the carriage; with little assistance she sprang to its back, and he mounted the one reserved for him.

The cavalcade started. First the carriage, then Alvarado and myself, followed by the sponsors, the Castros, the members of the Departmental Junta and their wives, then the caballeros and the doñas, the old people and the Americans; the populace trudging gayly in the rear, keeping good pace with the riders, who were held in check by a fragment of pulp too young to be jolted.

"You never have been in Monterey before, señorita, I understand," said

Estenega to Chonita. No situation could embarrass him.

"No; once they thought to send me to the convent here, —to Doña Concepcion Arguéllo,—but it was so far, and my mother does not like to travel. So Doña Concepcion came to us for a year, and, after, I studied with an instructor who came from Mexico to educate my brother and me." She had no intention of being communicative with Diego Estenega, but his keen reflective gaze confused her, and she took refuge in words.

"Doña Eustaquia tells me that, unlike most of our women, you have read many books. Few Californian women care for anything but to look beautiful and to marry,—not, however, being unique in that respect. Would you not rather live in our capital? You are so far away down there, and there are but few of the *gente de razon*, no?"

"We are well satisfied, señor, and we are gay when we wish. There are ten families in the town, and many rancheros within a hundred leagues. They think nothing of coming to our balls. And we have grand religious processions, and bull-fights, and races. We have beautiful cañons for meriendas; and I could dance every night if I wished. We are few, but we are quite as gay and quite as happy as you in your capital." The pride of the Iturbi y Moncadas and of the Barbariña flashed in her eyes, then made way for anger under the amused glance of Estenega.

"Oh, of course," he said, teasingly. "You are to Monterey what Monterey is to the city of Mexico. But, pardon me, señorita; I would not anger you for all the gold which is said to lie like rocks under our Californias,—if it be true that certain padres hold that mighty secret. (God! how I should

like to get one by the throat and throttle it out of him!) Pardon me again, señorita; I was going to say that you may be pleased to know that there is little magnificence where my ranchos are,—high on the coast, among the redwoods. I live in a house made of big ugly logs, unpainted. There are no cavalcades in the cold depths of those redwood forests, and the ocean beats against ragged cliffs. Only at Fort Ross, in her log palace, does the beautiful Russian, Princess Hélène Rotscheff, strive occasionally to make herself and others forget that the forest is not the Bois of her beloved Paris, that in it the grizzly and the panther hunger for her, and that an Indian Prince, mad with love for the only fair-haired woman he has ever seen, is determined to carry her off——"

"Tell me! tell me!" cried Chonita, eagerly, forgetting her rôle and her enemy. "What is that? I do not know the princess, although she has sent me word many times to visit her—Did an Indian try to carry her off?"

"It happened only the other day. Prince Solano, perhaps you have heard, is chief of all the tribes of Sonoma, Valley of the Moon. He is a handsome animal, with a strong will and remarkable organizing abilities. One day I was entertaining the Rotscheffs at dinner when Solano suddenly flung the door open and strode into the room: we are old friends, and my servants do not stand on ceremony with him. As he caught sight of the princess he halted abruptly, stared at her for a moment, much as the first man may have stared at the first woman, then turned and left the house, sprang on his mustang and galloped away. The princess, you must know, is as blonde as only a Russian can be, and an



extremely pretty woman, small and dainty. No wonder the mighty prince of darkness took fire. She was much amused. So was Rotscheff, and he joked her the rest of the evening. Before he left, however, I had a word with him alone, and warned him not to let the princess stray beyond the walls of the fortress. That same night I sent a courier to General Vallejo—who, fortunately, was at Sonoma—bidding him watch Solano. And, sure enough—the day I left for Monterey the Princess Hélène was in hysterics, Rotscheff was swearing like a madman, and a soldier was at every carronade: word had just come from General Vallejo that he had that morning intercepted Solano in his triumphant march, at the head of six tribes, upon Fort Ross, and sent him flying back to his mountain-top in disorder and bitterness of spirit."

"That is very interesting!" cried Chonita. "I like that. What an experience those Russians have had! That terrible tragedy!—Ah, I remember, it was you who were to have aided Natalie Ivanhoff in her escape—"

"Hush!" said Estenega. "Do not speak of that. Here we are. At your service, señorita." He sprang to the whaleboned pavement in front of the little church facing the blue bay and surrounded by the gray ruins of the old Presidio, and lifted her down.

Chonita recalled, and angry with herself for having been beguiled by her enemy, took the infant from the nurse's arms and carried it fearfully up the aisle. Estenega, walking beside her, regarded her meditatively.

"What is she?" he thought, "this Californian woman with her hair of gold and her unmistakable intellect, her marble

face crossed now and again by the animation of the clever American woman? What an anomaly to find on the shores of the Pacific! All I had heard of The Doomswoman, The Golden Señorita, gave me no idea of this. What a pity that our houses are at war! She is not maternal, at all events; I never saw a baby held so awkwardly. What a poise of head! She looks better fitted for tragedy than for this little comedy of life in the Californias. A sovereignty would suit her,—were it not for her eyes. They are not quite so calm and just and inexorable as the rest of her face. She would not even make a good household tyrant, like Doña Jacoba Duncan. Unquestionably she is religious, and swaddled in all the traditions of her race; but her eyes,—they are at odds with all the rest of her. They are not lovely eyes; they lack softness and languor and tractability; their expression changes too often, and they mirror too much intelligence for loveliness, but they never will be old eyes, and they never will cease to look. And they are the eyes best worth looking into that I have ever seen. No, a sovereignty would not suit her at all; a salon might. But, like a few of us, she is some years ahead of her sphere. Glory be to the Californias—of the future, when we are dirt, and our children have found the gold!"

The baby was nearly baptized by the time he had finished his soliloquy. She had kicked alarmingly when the salt was laid on her tongue, and squalled under the deluge of water which gave her her name and also wet Chonita's sleeve. The godmother longed for the ceremony to be over; but it was more protracted than usual, owing to the importance of the restless object on the pillow in her weary

arms. When the last word was said, she handed pillow and baby to the nurse with a fervent sigh of relief which made her appear girlish and natural.

After Estenega had lifted her to her horse he dried her sleeve with his handkerchief. He lingered over the task; the cavalcade and populace went on without them, and when they started they were in the rearward of the blithesome crowd.

"Do you know what I thought as I stood by you in the church?" he asked.

"No," she said, indifferently. "I hope you prayed for the fortune of the little one."

"I did not; nor did you. You were too afraid you would drop it. I was thinking how unmotherly, I had almost said unwomanly, you looked. You were made for the great world,—the restless world, where people fly faster from monotony than from a tidal wave."

She looked at him with cold dignity, but flushed a little. "I am not unwomanly, señor, although I confess I do not understand babies and do detest to sew. But if I ever marry I shall be a good wife and mother. No Spanish woman was ever otherwise, for every Spanish woman has had a good mother for example."

"You have said exactly what you should have said, voicing the inborn principles and sentiments of the Spanish woman. I should be interested to know what your individual sentiments are. But you misunderstand me. I said that you were too good for the average lot of woman. You are a woman, not a doll; an intelligence, not a bundle of shallow