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MARKED *with a* CURSE

300 Years Old

*They said that the hate of the ancient
dead followed my family forever—
that I would bring disaster to any
one I loved! Was it true? Can
an innocent girl be punished
for the sins of her fathers?*

By
RITA
MARTINEZ



*The horror of that
moment held me
speechless*

I WHO loved Life, yet laughed at it, swore that it should be my slave. I would do what I wished always—would never bend, lest I should break.

I remember saying this when I was sixteen to the kindly woman who was at the head of the exclusive girls' school which I attended. She surveyed my slim, young defiance—wistfully, it seemed to me. There was fear in her eyes—she had let life frighten her.

"Oh, Rita, Rita!" It was a sigh. "You are such a beautiful little madcap. I hope there may be some shining, strange escape for you—perhaps a Guardian Angel—"

I said, "You know that I do not believe in angels, Miss Ostrander—or devils. I care only for happiness—it is my god—and I shall find it in my own way—shall find it, regardless—"

I was following in the footsteps of my handsome young father, worshiping his laughing arrogance—his fearlessness. And while conforming to law always—absolutely lawless.

Our family was an old one in this young country—over one hundred and fifty years in America—with a well-established history for three centuries back of that and a legendary background that reached to the Middle Ages. A tragic, eager race the Martinez—set in a landscape of grim old castles in the mountains of southern Europe.

During my father's college years he had spent two vacations in our ancestral home. He had brought back a collection of weird tales: history and legend blended into a rude narrative of the Martinez family and the Black Ghost that walked in its wake, taking heavy toll of all who were unfortunate enough to be born or to love a Martinez.

Centuries ago, according to the story that he told laughingly, the Romero family had laid their curse upon the Martinez. To avenge a minor wrong a Martinez had stolen the lovely daughter of his enemy. Then had all the living and dead ancestors of "The Stolen Princess, the lily-white child," cursed the house of Martinez—both then and forever, until a Martinez should bring again to the grim old castle as lovely and fair a child as they had stolen away. Until that time anyone who loved or married a Martinez would suffer a terrible fate.

He joked gaily about the ghastly things he had unearthed about our ancestors in the mountains of Spain. He pointed out my pretty, placid mother as an example—did any woman have an easier existence than she?

Like Dad, I loved and petted Mother—but it was he to whom I always went with my girlish problems—and it was he who taught me my code.

"Take what you want, Rita," he said. "Life is short—let nothing stand in your way. Fear nothing—but always respect honorable weakness. Never hesitate to fight with an

adversary who is stronger than yourself. Spirit will win. Fight fair—but get what you want from life. If you meet defeat at the hands of a better fighter, don't cry—never whine—and don't be a quitter—ever."

I grew up with that code—a man's code—and I was but a small person, slight almost to fragility, but I had all the fire that had gone with the Martinez for uncounted generations.

After I had acquired what learning and polish I was able to absorb at Miss Ostrander's Boarding School, I returned home. Home was a rambling old mansion at the edge of a Southern town. I set out at once to try to get the dust of learning out of my brain by having all the fun possible. I was the first girl in our set to learn to drive a car—of course Dad got one for me. I tore through the country in my bright, shiny roadster at a pace that caused the older women to shake their heads and predict some dire disaster.

DAD was loath to give up his horses—he kept a stable full of really fine ones—and on my seventeenth birthday he gave me a beautiful bay mare, a single-footer, splendidly gaited. Immediately I parked the car in a shed down by the barn and started riding. All of the younger members of my set rode a great deal. I rode with them—when I had worn them out, I went alone—and, finally, I helped myself to Dad's stables and asked one of the girls I had met several times in Klockar's Coat House to ride with me.

It was through this girl, Winnie Baker, that I learned a thing that had been kept a secret from me. As we passed along the road near home, we talked of the place—of a wing of the house that had been closed for years.

"No, I don't know why it is closed," I said in answer to her question.



*The soft earth was crumbling under the wheels—
the heavy machine was about to topple over on
my husband!*

"Don't you know what happened there?" she asked, in surprise. "It has never been used since your grandmother hung herself. Folks around here say that it is haunted—that there are strange lights there."

"I did not know that my grandmother killed herself. Another of those unfortunates who loved a Martinez," I said.

"Oh, no," Winnie declared earnestly. "She did not love her husband. She was in love with another boy—was afraid of your grandfather. It was her folks who made her marry him—he was a Martinez, rich and powerful.

"One night, when your grandfather was away, she went to a party and danced several times with the lad she had wanted to marry. Her husband went into a rage when he heard of it; he swore that he was going to thrash the other chap and left the house in a rage. When he returned, sorry and ashamed, an hour later, she had hung herself.

"My own grandmother was there, making the first little colored dress for your father. She saw your grandmother hanging to the high bed."

"Well," I said, "that is something new—I hadn't heard that."

"I shouldn't have said anything," she murmured nervously. "But I supposed you must have heard the negroes talking—they are scared to death of that wing of your house."

"The house servants are always talking of ghosts—they are such cowards. I despise them," I said.

"Grandmother says that something terrible happens to those who love a Martinez," she went on.

"There are usually plenty of people who seem willing to tempt fate," I commented carelessly, dismissing the subject.

But in my heart I felt a strange coldness—emptiness. Were we different from other folk? I wondered.

It was shortly after I was eighteen that I met Gene Watson. He had come South for the races. As the hotels in our little city were either totally or partially failures, Dad, who had met Gene before, invited him out to stay with us.

Gene was a Northerner—different from the youths that I had been reared among. It was my first violent love-affair. Before he left, we became engaged.

Dad didn't say much, but I sensed that he felt and hoped that the romance would die a natural death—and he felt that the less he said, the better it would be.

The evening before he went North, Gene said: "Rita, you and my mother are the most wonderful women in all the world—I want you to love each other. You will love her, won't you, my sweet?"

"I cannot promise to love anyone, Gene," I answered honestly. "I love you—but love is not a thing one can promise lightly."

I FOUND it easy, however, to respect and admire the charming woman who came down with Gene a short time later. At my parents' urgent invitation they spent several weeks with us. Gene wanted Dad to take him on a fishing trip down the lagoons during September.

Mrs. Watson was a delightful guest. She seemed to love our country and spent many afternoons riding about the hills, gathering up bits of handwork for which the mountain women were famed. Old Aunt Sally Harrison's cabin was her favorite rendezvous—Aunt Sally's pieced quilts were remarkable for the fineness of the work and the striking designs which she achieved.

Dad left with Gene early in September for a week's fish-

ing. A few mornings later Mrs. Watson announced her intention of going again to Aunt Sally's to see if she could not induce her to sell some of the quilts.

"I have tried before," she told me. "I'm sure that she actually needs the money for food—but she cannot bear to part with them. Perhaps—" she laughed—"if I listen long enough to her tales of folk hereabout, I can put her in the humor to sell me some of them."

She returned that afternoon with five of Aunt Sally's highly prized quilts, but there was not the satisfaction in her manner that I had expected. She answered my questions in a strange, lifeless tone.

"Did you have to listen to some weird tales today?" I asked.

She shivered slightly. "Yes, dear. Unaccountably, I found them extremely depressing. Usually I do not pay much attention to old wives' tales. But—" She did not go on and all evening she seemed preoccupied and restless.

It was less than forty-eight hours later that Gene was drowned. He had gone out alone during the evening while Dad was making a trip to the village store. When he did not return by midnight they had started out in search of him. At daybreak they had found his overturned boat where it had drifted ashore.

Dad came home to break the news to us. I sat stunned. A strange expression came over Mrs. Watson's face; her gray eyes distended.

"Oh, God—my boy, my boy! The Black Ghost of the Martinez—oh, if only I had listened to Aunt Sally before—"

After all hope of finding Gene's body was gone, Dad and I took Mrs. Watson back to her home. Throughout the weary days that she had stayed with us she had been her lovely self—after her first wild outburst. But deep in my heart I felt that she feared us—perhaps hated us—as murderers of her son.

It was some months later that Dean Gregory came home—big, laughing Dean, the only son of the Gregorys who owned the plantation adjoining Dad's. Since the death of his parents he had spent most of his time roaming about odd corners of the world—Alaska, South America and Siberia. Rich, sophisticated, good-looking, he was eagerly welcomed home. I smiled to myself as I remembered my girlish passion, cherished in secret, for him. He was eight years older than I—this made him almost a deity to me. I was still a youngster when he had come home the last time.

Everyone entertained for him, but I took no part in the gaieties, for Gene's death had shocked me into a subdued state of mind. Dean came to the house several times to see Dad, but though he always asked for me, I kept out of sight.

It was a lovely evening in spring when I saw him first. I was taking my horse to the stables after a ride. My parents had begun to insist that I get out again. As I led Rambler through the gate, I heard a merry hail.

"Hello, Small Person! Where have you been hiding all winter?"

I glanced around in surprise and saw Dean Gregory looking across the fence.

"Why, hello, Dean," I answered. "I have just been thinking of you."

"Well, I'm sure glad to find you again," he said as he climbed to my side. "I had begun to fear that your retreat was permanent. Why the desire for secrecy, Rita?" He grasped both my hands. "Don't you think that your old friends want to see you? What you been doing?"

"Trying to lay the ghost—"

"Of the terrible Martinez. Has it got your goat, Rita?" he asked.

"Wouldn't it get yours, Dean Gregory?" I demanded.

"Nary a goat, Rita. I'm fairly longing for a tilt with a good snappy ghost. Tell you the truth, Young Person, I came home because I saw your photograph in the magazine section of a New York paper. It was charmingly headed by a pen and ink sketch of the naughty ghost that stalks those who dare to love a Martinez. And, by the way, Rita, the picture did not half do you justice—you are truly lovely. After the third look at the photograph, I knew for certain that I had fallen in love with a Martinez, so I hurried home at once to find you and try to make you love me. I thought it best to fight the ghost on his own ground. Can't ask him to wear himself out running half around the world. He's old."

I laughed at Dean's nonsense. But it was not long until I realized that what I had thought before was love was nothing compared to the adoration I felt for Dean Gregory. He met my fearless arrogance with a like amount. Never could I find weakness in him. At length I ceased trying and settled down to spend the remainder of my life worshipping him.

Then I woke to a new terror—for Dean. Suppose the things they told about us were actually true—that something should happen to him! I grew half ill.

Dean laughed at my fears. "Old women's stuff, Rita darling. Surely you are too free, too fearless, to let a thing like that worry you."

IT might be old women's tales—but nevertheless for three hundred years the bitter legend had been woven with our name. I would not accede to Dean's wish for an early wedding.

That summer Dad, Dean and I went to the mountainous section of the extreme West for a hunting and fishing trip. We found game in abundance. To fill our leisure hours we prospected for minerals. One evening, only a short distance from our camp, I discovered what Dean declared was a rich pocket of gold. We staked claims for a wide area surrounding it. It was too late in the autumn to do anything with it, so we filed mining claims, then left for home.

"Next year," we said, "we will go back and see what can be done about getting out the gold."

Man plans—Fate acts. Who can foresee the future?

In the long parlors of the big old house that my great-grandfather Martinez had built a hundred years before, Dean and I were married at Christmas. Even Mother was pleased. Dean's firm young hand had quieted—steadied—the restless spirit of her girl. Frankly, Father welcomed Dean as a son.

We did not care for a regulation honeymoon in Europe and it was too early for our

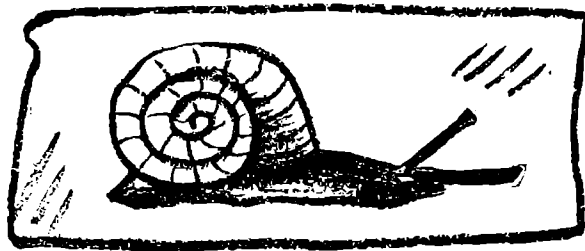
mountain trip; so we set out for the unbeaten paths of the American Desert in the Southwest. Here we wandered for several months through New Mexico, Arizona, the Mojave, and even into Death Valley, in California.

About Easter we decided to go home, for I found that there was to be a baby. We were delighted.

"A son—like you, my husband," I said. "As beautiful, as wise and as good. Or is that asking too much of the gods? I ask nothing more. I am willing to do without the luxuries I have known, willing to work, dear, with my hands—work hard—for a life with you, for sons like you."

He held me closely. "Dear little beautiful one, I pray that life may be as beautiful, as wonderful as you deserve—always. May there be from grief, from pain, some shining, strange escape."

I started at the words. Where had I heard them before?



We went home. Dean was having the old Gregory house remodeled. It was to be ready for us on our return. Dad had wanted us to stay with them—there was plenty of room for separate households. But I had not wanted to—perhaps the ghost would not follow us to another house.

Dean had an office in town and became interested in civic affairs. He found how "the other half" were living—the sordid poverty of the mill workers—that young folks went to the bad there simply because they had no place else to go. With his eyes opened to conditions, he set about trying to help. We began by turning some of our rear lots into tennis and croquet grounds which we opened to the young people who needed them.

Then our little son was born—a splendidly healthy little chap. Life moved along joyously for a year or two. Then tragedy struck like lightning. Dad was away on a trip. A wind arose in the night and Mother was annoyed by a loose shutter in the unused wing of the house. She asked one of the negroes to fix it the next day. Needless to say, he did not do it. The second day she came over to see me and spoke of the shutter.

"It gets on my nerves, Rita," she told me, "when I'm alone. It sounds like someone knocking excitedly."

"Stay with us tonight, Mother," I said. But she felt that she could not as Dad might come home during the night. I knew that it would do no good to urge her, so I said: "I'll send Dean over to fix it for you, Mother, as soon as he gets in." I was sure that she could never force one of the frightened negroes to go into that part of the house.

But after she reached home she decided that she could easily fix the shutter herself. She leaned too far out, lost her balance and fell to the patio below. She died an hour later.

Weeping bitterly, I turned away from the bed where she lay. The curse had claimed another victim—my own poor little mother.

A year passed. October came—almost my fifth wedding anniversary. Years of glorious happiness, marred only by the tragedy that had snuffed out the life of my mother before she had reached

her fortieth birthday. Again we were planning for a baby—a daughter, we hoped, to share the holidays with us. Even Dad seemed more cheerful than he had been for a long time.

October, in our climate, is the most glorious month of the year. Dean came home at noon one day—the twentieth, it was. He had ordered another lot leveled for an extra tennis court. Our venture had proved so successful that there was not enough room for those who came to play.

"Feel up to going over later to see how the work is progressing?" he asked after he had kissed me.

"Surely. I've been ghastly lazy all morning, Dean. I'm so glad that you came to stir me up a bit. Just see all the tiny stitches I've put in this little frock—would you have suspected me of being capable of such work?" I asked, holding up the tiny dress.

My husband took it and examined it carefully. "Beautiful, Rita," he said. "Yes, my darling, I would have known that you would do anything well that you chose to do at all."

We walked slowly down the long yard, pausing often to admire an especially brilliant bit of foliage or a late flower that blossomed in the garden. The salvia, asters and chrysanthemums were gorgeous.

"Rita." Dean's arm slipped about me again. Seldom did he bestow his caresses where there was a chance of being seen. "Rita, life is so wonderful, so happy, that sometimes I'm almost afraid. I have spent so many lonely years. Even yet it seems as though I've been plunged into a happy dream—that soon I'll awaken to find emptiness—nothingness—" He shivered in spite of the warm, bright sunshine that flooded the world.

I left him at the gate and went back to the house. Half an hour later I walked over to the new tennis court, leading my little boy by the hand. I arrived just in time to witness the most terrible tragedy of my life.

A huge cement-mixing machine had been dragged across to the new court, from a house that was under construction near-by—and Dean was standing with his back to it, making notes. Suddenly I saw that the soft earth was crumbling under the wheels—that the heavy machine was about to topple over on my husband! The horror of that moment held me speechless. I could not even scream a warning. In an instant it had happened—the thing fell over on its side, crushing him down—down, into the earth.

Mercifully, he was quite dead—he did not have to suffer.

Before he was buried, our little girl was born. I called her by the name that Dean had chosen—Stephanie.

HOW I hated life—the earth, the sun, everything! Only the fact that I had been reared to despise quitters—and knew that Dean would not want it—kept me from taking my own life, mine and the children's. Life would mean only misery for them—for were they not born under a curse? Would not death, kindly oblivion, be preferable?

But—came the maddening fear—was there any certainty of escape through death? We were not cursed by the living but by the dead—the old, old dead. Even in the Way of Oblivion there was no surety of laying the Black Ghost.

In the spring, with my father and with little Dean and Baby Stephanie, I moved to the Pacific Coast. We took a beautiful place high on a hill that overlooked the sea. There I set about working over the frayed fabric of my life. Dad would divide his time between us and the work at our mines.

From the day of her birth my baby had possessed beauty—a fair beauty foreign to either the Gregorys or the Martinez. People invariably exclaimed at her loveliness. But always when I looked at her there was a strange, torturing fear in my heart. My son was a splendid little chap. I gloried in his sturdy good looks—but there was an ethereal quality

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about Baby Stephanie that hurt cruelly. I wanted just a cuddly baby upon whom I could lavish my devotion—something to help me forget the anguished loneliness of life without my husband.

One morning Dad came into the nursery while I was dressing the baby. He took her up as I finished.

"Rita," he asked, "where have I seen the exact likeness of this child? I have been puzzled over it for weeks. Sometimes I have thought it was your mother—sometimes my own mother. But it is neither. Somewhere—sometime—I have seen someone whom she is like, but who?"

"Oh, Dad," I cried, "please don't say that. I have felt it, too, and it frightens me. Oh! I want her to be just an ordinary little fat, pudgy baby. But——"

"Why, child," he said, "you are nervous. There is no reason why she should not be a beautiful baby; both you and her father——" He broke off queerly, put the baby in my lap, passed his hands across his eyes.

Suddenly, into my heart leaped the fatal knowledge. I knew—oh, I knew too well! My baby was the image of the painting of "The Stolen Princess." In a gallery in Madrid long ago my father and I had seen a painting by one of the world's great artists——

I RAISED terror-stricken eyes to Dad—met his stricken gaze—knew, with fearful anguish, that he had realized the truth, even as I had.

"Dad," I cried, "what does it mean? What is going to happen to my baby! Why is she marked with the curse of the Martinez? Oh!" I shivered uncontrollably. "I am so afraid—so afraid!"

My father tried to comfort me, but I knew that fear possessed him, too. Through Mother's death, through the awful anguish of losing Dean, I had fought—fought desperately—for self-control, poise. I knew that I must carry on. There was little Dean, Baby Stephanie, to whom I owed the right to a happy, fearless existence.

I was broken, spirit and body, by my little girl's resemblance to that other baby of long ago. Desperately I clung to both children. Never for a moment were they out of my sight. I slept on a couch drawn between their beds, and every night I fought sleep as long as possible.

I was worn, old and haggard at twenty-six. Daily, little Stephanie grew more like the painting. Each sight of her tortured my heart anew—yet I could not bear to have her out of my sight an instant.

One wild October night, All Soul's Night, I sat alone in the house. The servants, Rachael and Elsa, who had come west with me, had gone to a ball given by the local colored people. I had dreaded to be alone but knew that they missed their people and friends and so had urged them to go.

Far below I could hear the wild dashing of the waves. From somewhere a buoy screamed eerily—a weird cry from the wind. I felt a mounting sense of terror—doom—as the fury of the storm increased. I went to the windows, pulled down the blinds—but that was worse. The rain beating against the windows sounded like the knocking of little fingers. I flung up the blinds again, hurriedly.

For an hour or more I stood there. Again and again I tried to tear myself away. Across the room my little lad stirred in his sleep. I caught my breath with a terrified sob.

"Oh, if there were only someone here with me! Dean, where are you? Could you not come back to earth for one little hour?"

For months nothing had seemed real. Something—some terrific force—was tearing my very soul to shreds. Baby Stephanie did not belong to me. She was a pawn of fate, with which I must pay the Martinez debt to the Romeros.

I tried to fight away from the certainty that I had no recourse. Surely I was mad. Grief had driven me insane. There was nothing—no living thing—that could force me to give up my baby.

"No living thing!" From out in the night my thought was

picked up—shouted back to me. Standing there with my face pressed against the glass, I knew, inevitably, that it was no living thing that would eventually force me to sacrifice my baby. It was a thousand times stronger than earthly force. It was generations of dead and gone Romeros—a terrific legion—who on this night, when souls again have freedom to seek their earthly haunts, would find their way to me! They were coming—to demand my lovely girl child!

From somewhere I heard a clock strike—a slow tolling of the hour. *One*—like a hammer the sound fell across my heart. *Two*—slow, horrible. I tried again to tear myself away from the window—back to the bedside of Dean and Stephanie. Perhaps if I could touch their warm little bodies—*Three!* I could not move. On and on went the tolling strokes. Dear Heaven—let me turn away from the black night—into the warm brightness of the room!

Twelve! Across the blackness of the night I saw them—those old, old dead. Faces, faces, faces! Would the procession never end? Young, lovely faces—old ones—harsh, cruel visages!

"God! God!" I screamed in horror.

Then, like a petal flower afloat upon the storm—the Baby—in the arms of a sweet, sad-faced girl mother. As she drew near, she smiled, wistfully, tenderly, and seemed to speak.

I was screaming, but my cries were as voiceless, as silent, as that strange procession. My body seemed to crumple—I found peace in merciful oblivion.

Rachael found me there when she came in at two. The doctor she called said that I was suffering from shock; urged that I go to a sanitarium for a rest. But I would not leave my children. Baby Stephanie was mine only for a short time longer—I knew. Either I must obey those unheard voices, or they would take her away.

Doctor Gray questioned me as to what had caused my collapse, but I could not tell him. I knew he would call me insane. In my heart I wished it was true. Things would be far simpler, that way. It was only to my father that I could tell all that had happened.

"And," I ended wearily, "there is no use to fight—I've got to take my baby back to that land—to the Romeros. It is the only way to save my babies from a life like yours—like mine. I can stand anything—anything—if I can save them. I don't know why it is that I have to do this—but last night I knew that the end had come. I've fought against the certainty since Stephanie was four months old—I've tried to think that grief had unbalanced me mentally. Oh, Dad, I wish I could think it was only that——"

"I wish so, too, Rita—but I know it is not. We must go back to the land of our ancestors, to the land of the Basque—our people, daughter——"

A MONTH later we reached the land of the Martinez—a lovely valley in the mountains. The last Martinez had died five years ago, the old innkeeper told us. The Romeros?

"The Martinez and the Romeros were the oldest families in all the Valley, but they are gone." He shook his head sadly. "There's but one of the Romeros left. She was a great lady—beautiful as she was good. But she's dying now. A saint she was—on earth. It's now almost two months ago that she and her husband and little girl met with an accident. The baby was killed outright. The young master was little hurt—but our Lady lies dying—from her injuries and from grief for her lost baby. The great doctors who come from the city below say that she would live if it were not for her wanting the babe so terribly. It's a sad business for the Valley. If prayers will save her, she will have the prayers of both the living and the dead."

With a stifled sob I broke away from the garrulous old fellow. I knew—oh, I knew that both the living and the dead were trying to save—the Beloved Lady. The next morning, with my baby, I set out for the Upper Valley.

We wound through the estate surrounding the rambling

old house that had been built almost upon the ground once occupied by the castle of the Romeros. Everything lay hushed—a grim silence. At our swinging of the huge knocker an old man came out.

"Are you expected?" he asked.

"I—I do not know——" I said. "I must see your master."

"I am sorry—Our Lady is dying."

"I must see him, I tell you. I have come all the way from America." Little Stephanie, who had been lying in my arms, suddenly raised her lovely, sleep-flushed face.

The old man cried aloud: "Where did you get our little one? You have brought her back! But—but—she is dead." He stared in bewilderment.

"**W**E must see your master," I repeated. All at once I became conscious of a presence upon the balcony directly above me. I heard a hoarse cry—a wild-eyed man came running down the stairs.

"My baby—where did you get my baby?" His breath came in hoarse, gasping sobs. He tore her from my arms.

"No, no—she is mine! But I have brought her to you."

With that he seemed to recover his native politeness. "A thousand pardons, Madame," he said, bowing. "I am beside myself with grief. We have lost our baby—so recently. Your baby is so like our Larlie, it has made me forget." His voice was delightful.

"Will you not enter my house? We are sad today. My wife——" His voice faltered, broke. "But you—you must come and rest."

"Yes," I said mechanically, "we must go in. We have come seven thousand miles to find you. There is much that I must say before I go——"

When we were inside I said, "I am a Martinez—from this Valley." I waited for what he would say.

"A Martinez—one of us!" The first smile that I had seen on his said face, appeared. "Ah! I welcome you back home. I am honored that you have chosen my home—to visit. The

Martinez were a splendid race. I hope that it is to stay you have returned." His words were casual, but his eyes never left little Stephanie's face. He was wondering—wondering.

"No! Oh, no!" I shuddered. "You are kind, but surely you know that the Martinez—are cursed by the Romeros. Wait until you have heard all." Swiftly I sketched the tragedy of our lives. "So, you see, to save my baby I am losing her—bringing her back to a Romero."

He spoke: "You poor child, you poor girl! I am, oh, very sad for you—for all the ache of your heart. But I believe your coming now may save my lovely girl wife. I would never, never take away your beautiful baby. I have had to lose a child as fair—I know the pain, the loneliness. But, if you will be so kind as to lend her to us—for a little—my wife will think it is our own Larlie—in her weakness. When she gains strength she will fight through. She is fine—brave. She will carry on, when she is normal again. And you—you, kind lady—neighbor—you will have brought life and healing again to the last of the Romeros. Then shall the Black Ghost forgive—and the Martinez line carry on bravely, valiantly, as becomes such a splendid people."

So a Martinez carried to the house of the enemy a girl child as lovely as The Stolen Princess. And the baby gave to the stricken young mother peace of mind—strength enough to tide her over the crisis of her illness. Eventually she grew well and strong.

Today she has another little girl and two sturdy sons. Always, though, my little girl Stephanie seems as close to her heart as any of her own. I, too, have found peace at last. Through my friendship with a Romero I have come to spend part of each year in that land. And several times she and her husband have visited us here in America. Dean is growing more like his father each day—as handsome, and as fearless and happy. How my heart rejoices as I watch my two healthy, care-free young folks! For I seem to know—now that the debt to the Romeros has been paid—that the Black Ghost will let us live in peace—forever.