

# The Home Reading Circle

## The Demon of Revenge

Edward W. Hornung.

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**SYNOPSIS.**

Elsie Thornton was engaged to marry Jack Sellers, an Australian settler—but he proved to be a worthless sort of a fellow, and her parents sent him away. About a year after this Elsie marries Robert Clay, another husband, but a very different sort of man from Sellers. The latter cannot forget his love for Elsie, and follows her to her new home, where, under the name of Richardson, he obtains employment as a rhabdler. When Elsie finds out who the new man is, and the circumstances of the assumed name, she begins her husband not to employ him, but does not tell him why. Clay has already hired the man and does not discharge him at once, but resolves to get rid of him at the first opportunity. One day Clay is about to drive over to the station, but becomes annoyed at the way Richardson questions him as to whether he is going, and when he will return, and he sends his mind that this is the last opportunity Richardson will have of doing so.

**PART II.**

So Clay planned and pondered as he drove, and there were a great many miles in front of him, and two to be put together. At last—in the midst of a plain—within sight of the out-station—the buggy came to a sudden standstill. Yells started up from the station; Elsie's forehead; his breath came in gasps through his teeth. Suspicion is a tragic thing with the habitual unsuspecting, and for a space Robert Clay looked as though he knew the worst. But the normal man triumphs; he was soon ashamed of himself; and instead of turning his horses then and there, as his first impulse dictated, he drove steadily to the out-station. So far from staying the night, however, he barely stayed ten minutes. And going home the pace was not so steady, for both horses were entering when the setting sun picked the white canvas of Richard's scrub beyond their ears.

As the buggy approached, a loud barking came from the camp, and the squatter felt vaguely reassured. But no! the tent was empty, the rabbit gone, the dogs tied up outside. Clay released them with a trembling hand, and then drove grimly home. The night had deserted air. Not a sign of his wife on the veranda! In the yard, however, Clay encountered the Chinese cook.

"Where is your mistress?"

"Mithin alonga dawning loom, me tinkee."

"Alone?"

"Me tinkee tho."

The squatter sprang upon the veranda and strode into the room. Yes; she was there; she was alone. He was sitting very still, without a light, and he thought she trembled at his angry step. So from that moment he was even quieter than usual, and began by asking if she was not surprised to see him, as he lit the lamp. There was no answer.

"Elsie, what is the matter?" pursued the husband. "Who has been bothering you? I think I know. But you must tell me."

"Have you seen him?" Elsie cried out.

"Not yet," said Clay. "Where is he to be seen?"

"Heaven knows!" replied his wife, hysterically. "I neither know nor care. I only know—oh, Robert, you do mean Richardson, don't you? His name isn't Richardson at all, it's Jack Sellers, I

you understand? All that was best in me was never for one moment his!"

"I understand," said Clay. "Only too well, my dear! So you never saw him from that time until he came up here for work?"

"Yes, the night before our wedding."

And she reported that interview almost word for word.

"You did not tell me at the time," said the squatter grimly. "I should have spent my honeymoon in jail. So he promised never to poster you again, and then he turned up here!"

"And made me sorry for him again," cried Elsie, with a bitter little laugh.

"He had promised to reform for my sake, and now he told me he had been trying with all his might, but it was of no use unless he could sometimes see me in the flesh. Only to see me sometimes—not to speak—that was all he wanted! I was his good angel, and so on, and so on. I had given him no answer when you came up. Then I saw how he looked at you, and he gave me a look I can never forget when he had gained his point and you had taken him on. It was the look of a confident and malignant fiend. The next thing I heard was that he had given you a false name, and somehow there and then I read him through and through. I implored you to change your mind and send him about his business. Ah! if only I had been honest enough to tell you the truth!"

"Nay, my dear, I should have listened to you without that. I have been more to blame than you. Has he—has he postered you between that day and this?"

His voice was as calm as ever; but now both hands were hidden and twitching, and Clay was on his legs, walking softly but rapidly about the room.

"No," for the simple reason that I have not let him. Often he has come to the homestead—nearly always when you were out—but until today I have managed to avoid him. Until today!"

She shuddered, and glanced at the door with great eyes that seemed to see Sellers entering it again. "Oh, Robert, how can I tell you what things he said to me in this very room? I cannot degrade myself and you by telling you. He must be mad; that can be the only explanation. Heaven knows how I ever got rid of him. But when he saw that he was hated instead of loved—he did go—at last. And here I have sat ever since. Do you not pity me? Have I not been punished for my deceit? Robert! Robert! What is it? Robert?"

She had flung out her hands in a gesture, the lamp-light had fallen on her wrists, and, in an instant, the quiet husband, the strong, still man, was quivering, tottering, grinding his teeth.

"Your wrists!" he gasped. "Those marks—tell me quickly—he made them?"

"He must have done. In his fury he seized me by both wrists. I do not think he knew what he was doing."

"He shall know!" cried the squatter. "He shall know, as there is a God above!"

Then Elsie began to regret that she had told her husband all; and yet she had never been so happy in all her life before. She had a strong man to love, and she had no more secrets from him, and never before had he seemed so noble in her eyes as now in

"Thank God!" he cried. "I have found out two things, and the one would break my heart but for the other, but that lifts it to the skies. My darling, until today I had not all your love. But I know that I have it—now!"

Elsie knew it, too; and the thought of Sellers troubled her no more. Moreover, in the utter happiness of this hour, she forgot the one wrong act she had ever known her husband commit. She forgot the shooting of the colt that had thrown her to her hurt. She forgot that her husband was to be feared as well as loved, like most men whose anger is slow to rise, but slower yet to subside.

At midnight Elsie was happily asleep; and Clay sat writing his will in the station store.

When he had signed the informal document, and locked it up in his desk, the squatter carefully cleaned a brace of revolvers, until the lamplight shone through barrels and chambers unimpeded by a single speck. Then he loaded both weapons in every chamber, and put them in his pockets with a number of loose cartridges besides.

It was now one o'clock and a starry morning. The squatter came outside, then stood listening. All was still and silent in the house, and only a faint light glimmered in his wife's room. In the horseyard the night-horse was munching his hay and oats. Clay looked wistfully towards that glimmering light, but turned his back steadfastly upon it, and saddled the night horse with a sudden feverish energy, which contrasted forcibly with his hitherto cold-blooded deliberation. Yet, after all, he could not go away like this! He must see her once more, where he might never see again. So a little later Clay was creeping along the veranda in his socks; and a little later still, he was kneeling at his wife's bedside.

He had made up his mind, and he never unmade it. Yet how hard to go to his death, a presentiment told him—on this night of all others! Go he must, however; a regiment of soldiers could not have driven and goaded him onward more remorselessly than his own obscurity and his own passion. And yet for one moment he wavered, and prayed with all his soul for the higher courage; it was when his wife smiled in her sleep; unluckily, his wife with the smile, she tossed her arms, and even as he prayed his eyes fell

upon one cruelly bruised wrist. Clay roared that instant, and was gone the next.

He galloped straight to Sellers' camp. The tent stood out in the starlight, but it was empty, and the squatter nodded, because he had expected it. He struck a match and poked about. The man had taken all his belongings with him—had rolled up his swag and gone for good. Clay sat down on the bed in the dark and wondered what was the best thing to do.

Sellers had rabbitted in that paddock only; it was enclosed by four wire fences, each seven or eight miles long; therefore, if he had crossed the wire, it should be possible to see where, and a definite trail would then be struck. Robert Clay had been born and bred in the bush. The blacks had taught him tracking, and were hardly his superiors at that subtle art. It was merely a case of riding the boundary till he found the place where Sellers had crossed. And find it Clay would, though he had to ride the full length of every fence.

The stars in their courses saw most of that grim game; the one man tucked up so snugly in his blanket beneath a hop-bush, the other slowly but surely dogging him down through mile upon mile of wild waste forest. Sellers had made the most of his time. When the trail was found, there were two five-mile paddocks and part of a third between the men. It led now over soft sand, where the tracks could be followed at a hand-gallop in the starlight, and now over hard, sun-baked clay-pans, where the squatter had to go upon his hands and knees and strike matches to make certain of a footprint. But he was always certain in the end; and in his blanket Sellers was very sound asleep. There were fifteen miles had been reduced to ten, now to five; and now the squatter strapped down his last fence, and led the night-horse over, with the attentive stars still sharp in the sky.

Sellers was sitting on his right side, with his face to the hop-bush, and the blanket wound tightly about his frame. Clay descried him at a hundred yards, tethered his horse, and crept up behind his back until he had but to lean forward in order to get the sleeper. Instead, he sat down tailor-wise, and grimly waited. He now produced his revolvers, and pushed one under the arch of Sellers' back, so that he should feel and find it the moment he turned over; the other he sat fondling as he watched.

How the man slept. Once there was a little movement, and a terrible smile distorted the watcher's face, but it was not wanted yet.

"Let him have his sleep out," thought the squatter. "He will show the straighter for it, and I think his face will be all the fatter when he stretches and turns round."

The thought brought others. Clay was not naturally cruel, but the brute that is in every man had got the better of him, and the demon of revenge possessed him utterly. A new refinement occurred to him: he stretched forward and took away the revolver he had arranged for Sellers' use.

"The fellow is a skunk," said Clay to himself. "I shall make him howl for mercy before I let him fight."

A puff of wind chilled the watcher to the marrow; he looked up; he wished devoutly that Sellers would awake. And now the sleeper's posture began to prey upon his nerves; it was as rigid, in the cold grey light, as though the bushman's blanket were already his winding-sheet, and yet Clay had seen the blanket move. He set his teeth, for they were chattering with the cold, and he watched for the blanket to move again. It never did. Clay's eyes were fixed, were fascinated, and the run rose upon him waiting and watching still. But now the revolvers in his lap were

forgotten, he wanted the man to move, and that was all.

His own shadow fell sharply across the prostrate form, and all at once there seemed something sharp and angular about it also. A whirl of sulphur-crested cockatoos passed shrieking overhead. Sellers never stirred. Clay could bear it no more. His passion was frozen in sheer horror.

Richardson—Sellers—whatever your name is—wake up!" he shouted, hoarsely. "Wake up, man, for God's sake!"

The blanket moved once more. The squatter sprang forward with a cry of joy, the pistols slipped unheeded to the ground. He tore at the blanket—and a black man in time.

A thin brown collar was about the dead man's neck, and a small forked tongue had narrowly missed Clay's hand.

(The End.)

**LECTURE ON ELECTRICITY.**

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The German and English theories as to the production of X-rays will be enlarged upon, and the experiments of Professor Crookes proving the fourth state of matter will be illustrated.

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"TELL ME NOW," HE WHISPERED.

was once engaged to him. Oh, that I had told you so in the very beginning.

"There was no occasion, my dear."

"Not when he came up here for work? You forgave me for not telling you then?"

"Of course, my wife. It was for you to tell me or not as you thought fit. Now, Elsie! This is absurd!"

She had flung herself upon her knees and was clinging to him, weeping convulsively. He bent over her and stroked her hair.

"Tell me now," he whispered, "or in your own time, or not at all. Just dare when you think my dear, I force nothing from you."

His kind face calmed her.

"Now—now!" she whispered strenuously: "I must tell you now! You are too good—too noble—and I . . . But you shall hear everything, oh, yes! from the very beginning! You know that I was once engaged? Well, it was to this man. My people put a stop to it almost immediately—I can tell you I have felt grateful to him today! He went up the bush and wrote me a letter, which I didn't answer, still it made me feel sorry for him. That has been my mistake all along; I have been sorry for him! I do not think I ever loved him, Robert; never certainly as I love you; but he was attractive, and I did dare when I said I would marry him, only not enough to stick to him afterwards with all his faults. Robert, can

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