

*A Quick-Action Storyette
Crowded with Dramatic Pathos*

The Killer

By HAROLD WARD

"The Oath of Hippocrates—An oath embodying an admirable code of medical ethics. . . . taken by young men about to begin medical practice. . . ."—Webster.

THE KILLER halted at the window of the tarpaper-covered shack and, nose pressed against the glass, sought to penetrate the gloomy interior. Satisfied that the place was unoccupied, he fought his way against the force of the storm to the spot where his eyes had marked the outline of a door.

The thermometer showed a temperature of twenty below. The storm was increasing in violence every minute and The Killer was half frozen. Yet he stood with hand on the knob, making no effort to enter until his stiffened fingers had sought out the gun which nestled snugly in his outside pocket. With his teeth he drew the mitten from his right hand and, with an effort that caused him to groan aloud with pain, crooked his benumbed forefinger around the trigger.

Cautiously turning the knob, he threw open the door and stumbled across the threshold in a tumultuous gale of wind and a whirl of snow. For an instant he stood there listening, every faculty alert. Then, satisfied that he was alone, he put his back against the panel and closed the door against the violence of the storm.

The room was cold and tomblike. Yet to the Killer, driven from place to place like a mad dog, it offered a haven for the night. He was tired—dead weary from traveling for what seemed centuries through snow waist-deep in the face of the worst blizzard of the season. Every muscle, every nerve, seched with exhaustion. For the last mile he had fought against an ever-increasing desire to succumb to the feeling of drowsiness which crept over him. He was lost. Only his powerful will had kept him on his feet thus far.

Sliding his gun back into his pocket, he whipped his hands against his chest and stamped his feet until circulation was partly restored. Then, shaking the accumulation of snow from his shoulders, he unbuttoned his overcoat and fumbled in his vest pocket until he found a match. Striking it against the door, he held it aloft to view his surroundings. It flickered weakly, nearly went out, then burned brightly. By its yellow glow he

distinguished a nearby table on which stood a kerosene lamp. It took but an instant to apply the stump of the match to the wick.

He was in what appeared to be a combined kitchen and living-room. The light danced and threw grotesque shadows on the walls, covered with cheap

pictures cut from newspapers. Shelving filled with dishes—covered with papers with the edges scalloped and crimped—behind the cook stove in the corner. A slab of bacon hanging over a can of flour, a box beside the stove filled with great chunks of wood—all told of comforts that were his for the taking. A pair of slippers, run down at the heel, and an apron thrown across the back of a chair showed that a woman's presence had graced the room not long before.

The Killer's eyes fell upon the opening leading to another room. Cautiously he drew his gun and tiptoed toward the faded curtain which served as a door. A board creaked beneath his weight. He stopped short, every nerve tingling.

From behind the curtain came a groan. Then a woman's voice, plaintive, pain-racked:

"Is that you, William?"

The Killer made no answer. With body hunched forward, poised on the balls of his feet, his glittering black eyes never left the curtained opening. His gun was well in front of him, his thumb on the hammer.

"Why don't you answer me, William?" came the voice again. "Please hurry. You have been gone so long and I'm so sick."

The Killer twisted his body to one side of the opening where he would be partly out of range.

"It's not William," he answered gruffly. "I'm a stranger lost in the storm. Are you alone?"

The woman gave a startled cry. "Yes—Oh! God, yes!" she answered. "And I'm sick—awful sick. Please help me."

"Are you armed?" asked The Killer.

Without waiting for an answer, he picked up the lamp and, stuffing the gun back into his pocket—but with fingers still locked around the butt—he pushed aside the curtain and entered.

The woman who lay between the coverlets was young. Just now her face was drawn with pain and pinched with cold. A startled look appeared in her eyes as the grim visage of The Killer appeared within range of her vision, and she shrank back closer to the wall. The Killer stepped closer to the bed and eyed her questioningly.

"Hump!" he grunted. "Fire! Hot water! Pans!—where are they?"

He lighted a lamp which stood on a stand near the bed, the woman's eyes following every move, filled with wonder and fear.

"Are you a—a doctor?" she asked weakly.

The Killer smiled wryly. Then he

shrugged his shoulders as if to shake off some memory.

"Used to be—years ago," he answered gruffly. "Guess I've not forgotten all I know. Got nothing to work with, though. But how the devil do you come to be here alone—and in this condition!"

"My husband—William Stevenson—he's sheriff," she explained between twinges of pain. "He went away yesterday—after a bad man—a man named Henshaw—they call him 'The Killer.' Right after he went the storm broke, and then this—"

She halted lamely for an instant, then, as if seeking to defend her absent husband, she continued: "He—The Killer—has an awful record. Murdered a man in cold blood a week ago in Erie—Killed another several months ago. When William heard that he was seen in Milledgeville—that's thirty miles away, over the mountains—he felt that he had to go. He hated to leave me, but he didn't think that this—would happen, and—"

The Killer turned his back so that she might not see the look of amazement on his face. "Bad snow slide down the canyon," he answered. "Happened right after I came through. That's what's holding him. And now, madam—Mrs. Stevenson—quit fretting and let me get to work."

He picked up the lamp and bore it back into the kitchen. Setting it on the table, he scratched his head with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Now ain't this a hell of a fix!" he murmured to himself. "Bill Stevenson's wife—the wife of Sheriff Bill—and he sworn to get me, dead or alive."

Slowly, his eyes filled with a far-away look, and he buttoned his overcoat and drew down the flaps of his cap. Outside the storm still raged. The wind was growing higher. It howled and whistled around the corners, rattling the windows and shaking the doors. The snow would cover his tracks in five minutes. Of course the woman would die—she and the kid. But what difference? She was the wife of his worst enemy, and the kid would be his brat.

"I furthermore swear that—"

Damn those memories of other days! Wraithlike, they insisted on appearing before him. For some reason, he could not get them out of his mind. And damn that old fool, Hippocrates, and his nonsensical oath! What business was it of his? He had long ago given up medicine. Let the woman die if she wanted to.

But the baby! Curse the baby! Of course it was the sheriff's flesh and blood—but it was innocent. Why did the

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thoughts of the baby come to torture him—to keep him from making his escape?

Slowly, as if reluctant to go, he crept to the door and laid his hand upon the knob.

“Oh, doctor! *Please—please hurry!*”

It was the woman's voice—sobbing—pain-filled.

The Killer hesitated a second longer. Then he turned and, hurling mittens and overcoat into a corner, he commenced heaping kindlings into the stove.