

KILLER'S LUNCH HOUR

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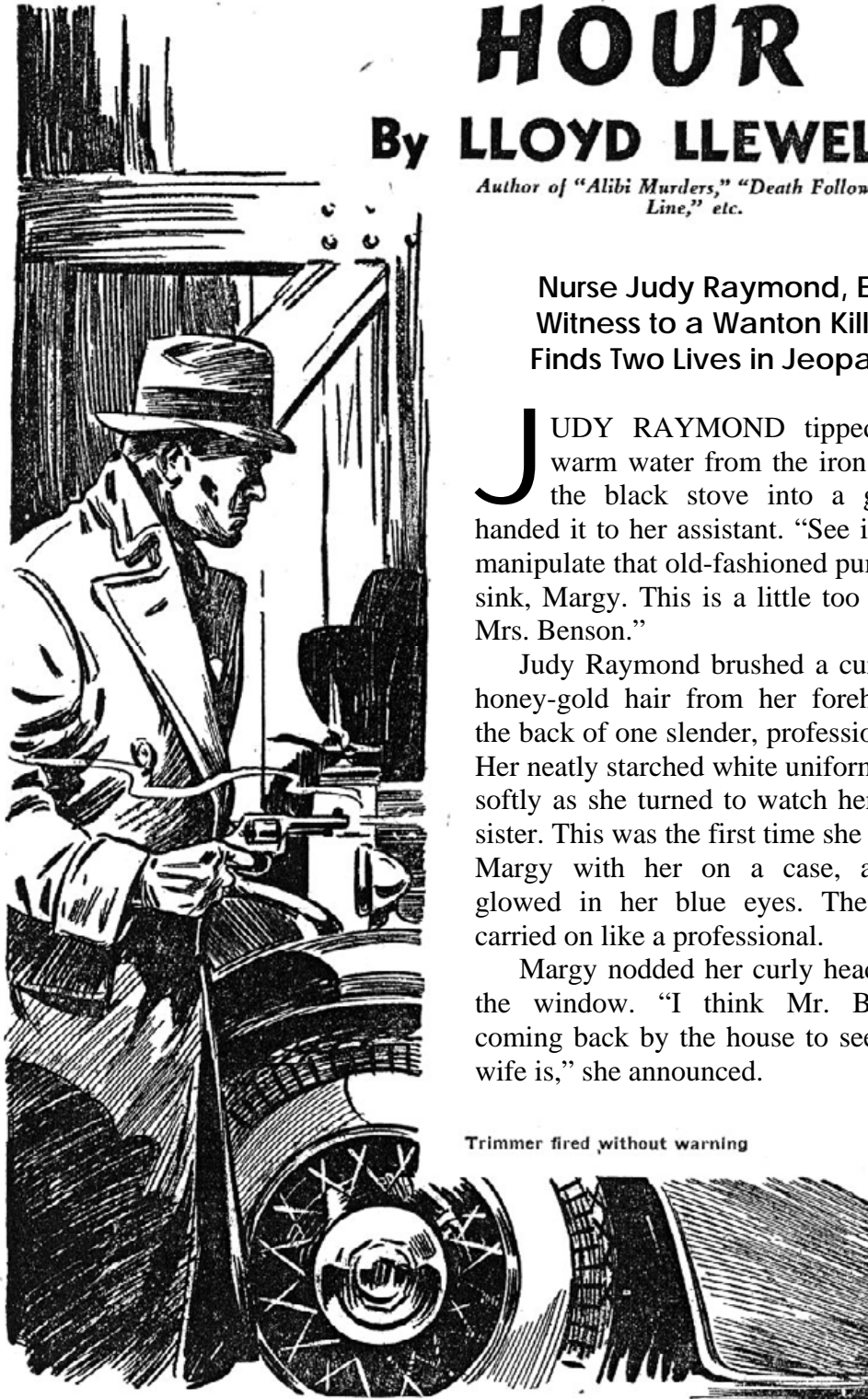
Nurse Judy Raymond, Eye-Witness to a Wanton Killing, Finds Two Lives in Jeopardy!

JUDY RAYMOND tipped a little warm water from the iron kettle on the black stove into a glass and handed it to her assistant. "See if you can manipulate that old-fashioned pump by the sink, Margy. This is a little too warm for Mrs. Benson."

Judy Raymond brushed a curl of soft, honey-gold hair from her forehead with the back of one slender, professional hand. Her neatly starched white uniform swished softly as she turned to watch her younger sister. This was the first time she had taken Margy with her on a case, and pride glowed in her blue eyes. The kid had carried on like a professional.

Margy nodded her curly head towards the window. "I think Mr. Benson is coming back by the house to see how his wife is," she announced.

Trimmer fired without warning



Judy started to say something, but her lips stayed half-open and the muscles of her fine face seemed frozen with quick, understanding terror.

A long, powerful sedan was crunching the gravel of the driveway, visible from the kitchen side window. Both girls, being on a little higher level than the car, could look down into it through the curtained window, could see the five men, could see the guns in the hands of four of them.

Something gurgled in Margy's throat. She swallowed twice. Her face turned the color of cold ashes. "The Milltown bank robbers!" she whispered, her hand shaking so much that she spilled some water from the tumbler.

Judy's long, tapering fingers with their rounded nurse's nails softly touched the little gold insignia of her profession that was pinned into the starchy waist of her dress. It was her talisman, her source of courage. She took the glass from Margy's trembling hands and set it on the sink.

"Yes," she said steadily. "It looks like it. Keep up your nerve, Margy."

Margy wasn't listening. She was staring out of the curtained side window. The four men stepped from the car. Their guns disappeared. One, a tall, lanky man with a limping left leg, went to Judy's new green sedan, standing a few feet beyond the gunmen's car.

"This bus is full of gas, Trimmer," he called to a powerfully built man, who seemed to be the leader.

TRIMMER nodded that he had understood and said something in too low a voice for the girls to understand, then added in a louder tone. "Here's the hick farmer now."

Benson was coming from the barn, followed by a team of fat mares. There was something springy, something happy in his walk that even his much-mended,

much-washed overalls couldn't hide. A smile was on his wind-hammered face. The doctor had said his wife was going to get well.

"Got any gas?" Trimmer called sharply as the farmer stopped short in surprise.

Benson took off his battered hat and swished it against his dusty leg. "Sorry, gents," he smiled. "Can't help you fellows none at all. You see, my wife's been mighty sick, and what with all the running around—"

The tall, limping man cut in roughly: "Let's take this green bus, Chief. Looks new and it's loaded." Anxiety crawled across his narrow, yellow face. "We gotta hurry. The cops—"

"Shut up!" Trimmer interrupted him roughly. Then he whirled again on Benson. His oddly shaped head jerked towards the house. "Who's in there?"

Judy saw quick realization dawn on Benson's homely face. "You're—you're—" he stammered jerkily, "you're the fellers that held up—" He swallowed twice nervously, with great sobbing gulps that made his Adam's apple jiggle crazily. "The radio said—"

A revolver slapped into Trimmer's talonlike hand and cruel fire bubbled in his black eyes. Again his head jerked towards the house. "Who's in there?" he demanded harshly.

Benson's staring eyes were glued on the gun in the killer's hand. "In there?" he repeated inanely. "No one. The wife's to the hospital. I was just going—"

Trimmer waved at the other three men. "We'll take the green sedan. Transfer the stuff and drive the sedan into the barn where it'll be outa sight."

Benson took a step forward. His ruddy face was working spasmodically. "You can't take that car," he objected hoarsely. "I can't let—"

His voice was drowned in the sharp

crack of the bandit's gun. Trimmer had fired without warning, and Benson folded like a jack-knife. A thin, pain-choked cry strangled in his throat, and he dropped to cough his life away on the ground.

For a terrified moment Judy was paralyzed. Margy's fainting body slumped against her. Automatically she caught it, lowered it to the floor. A thin quaver from the front bedroom jerked her trained mind back to her duty.

She grabbed the glass off the sink, and hurried to her patient. Mrs. Benson was half-sitting up in bed. Her large eyes, with heavy dark rings underneath, hurled a frightened question at Judy. "What is it?" she asked, trembling with weak excitement.

Judy's clear cut features were calmly professional. "Car backfired, Mrs. Benson," she said unhurriedly. She opened her bag, took from it a small bottle and poured a few drops into the glass. It wasn't the best thing for the patient, she knew, but there was no time for a hypodermic. "Better drink your medicine, Mrs. Benson."

JUDY held her patient's head until she felt the medicine take hold, until the woman's body became slack. Then she lowered it, and hurried back to the kitchen. The black car and Benson's body were out of sight. Three men were settled in her green sedan, but Trimmer and the lanky one with the yellow face were coming toward the rear porch. Trimmer still had the automatic in his fist.

Judy's tall, lean body moved with quick, unhesitating motions. She dragged Margy off to one side. Then she snatched the heavy shotgun from the hanger over the door, broke it and smiled grimly at the two shells that were in the breech. She emptied a box of shells on the sinkboard and stuffed several into the pocket of her

dress, but her eyes never left the back door.

She saw the knob turn softly, slowly. Her lovely young face became hard and brittle. The heavy gun lifted to her shoulder. Her finger squeezed the trigger, and a hole appeared suddenly in the panel of the door, five inches from the knob.

A scream of pain blasted through the broken door. Livid curses followed it, but the knob turned no more.

Grimly Judy snapped a fresh shell into place and waited. For a breath-killing moment nothing happened. Then a savage volley of hurling, screaming lead plowed through the door, ripping long slivers of yellow pine from the wood.

Judy hardly felt the sting of a ricocheting bullet as it slashed through her starched dress and seared her flesh. She only thought of Margy, of her patient, of the callously killed husband of the sick woman. White shoes planted firmly, she again raised the gun. Her body rocked with the recoil. Her shoulder jerked as the heavy gun bellowed, blasting a new hole in the door, higher up and to the left.

Dimly, as from still very far away, Judy heard the sharp keening of a police siren. But it meant nothing to her. Only one thought hammered at her shocked brain.

No killer must come through that door!

The pungent powder-smoke brought tears to her eyes. Her pearly white teeth were buried deep in her bleeding lips and a cruel bruise came on the satiny skin of her cheek where the gun-stock had cracked against it. But mechanically she reloaded. Her eyes flicked to the window. One of the other thugs was half out of her car, shouting frenziedly something about cops, a surprised look on his face.

Coolly Judy lifted her weapon, sent a hail of heavy shot through the window. Sharp cries of pain bellowed from the

surprised gunman. He catapulted back into the car. The motor started to race. Trimmer and the yellow-faced thug came racing from the porch, hurled themselves into the car. For a brief instant the killer's eyes met Judy's through the window, and the girl shuddered at the terrible look she read on his face.

The motor roared louder. The spinning wheels threw a curtain of gray dust and then the car slewed crazily and shot through the barn-gate onto the highway before the murderer could take a shot at her. The empty gun dropped from Judy's limp hands, thumped onto the linoleum and then Judy herself crumpled across the shotgun.

THE next two weeks were a nightmare of sheriffs and state troopers, district attorneys and newspapermen. But finally the excitement died down and life settled back in its old groove.

Four of the bank robbers had been cornered and shot to death. But the leader, Trimmer Duprey, the wanton murderer of Benson, had escaped the dragnet. With him went the loot from the Milltown National Bank that the bandits had held up before making it to Benson's place that morning, their gas tank empty because an officer's lucky bullet had punctured it in the getaway. Judy got her car back, but all the law had was the testimony of the two girls which was useless until the killer was captured.

Judy was setting the table for lunch in her own small kitchen, as lovely as the bright May morning outside. Her blue cape, with its little gold pin, was draped across a chair, half-covering her little black bag. She was going out on her first case since the Benson affair this afternoon.

She hummed a gay little tune and threw a glance at the clock. Quarter of

twelve. She went to the window and waved at the officers in the squad car. The D. A. wasn't taking any chances with his best witness. Day and night, two officers were on watch. Sergeant Flaherty waved back to her, and the patrol car started to move, going to bring Margy from the Nurses School, as they had done every day since the killing at Benson's place.

Judy watched the car out of sight, and then her heart missed its beat. She knew she wasn't alone. She knew that someone was behind her, that death lurked at her back.

Her stiffened body turned slowly, the humorous little quirk frozen on her icy lips.

Trimmer Duprey was leaning carelessly against the closed back door. A large automatic with a thick knobby thing on the end of it, was in his hand. A cold light crawled in the murky depths of his black eyes that were half-lidded as if the lids were weighted with too much tissue.

"Surprised?" He grinned, showing uneven, irregular and discolored teeth.

Judy's heart started beating again. She leaned against the refrigerator, fear gnawing at her soul. But her voice was unnaturally calm.

"You had better get away as quickly as possible," she said, trying desperately to stop the twitching of the muscles on the white column of her throat. "There are two officers outside—"

Trimmer's smooth-muscled body shook with silent laughter.

"Those two mugs?" he asked disdainfully. "Don't kid me. I've watched them every day. They'll bring your kid sister from school and then eat their lunch in the car." A tantalizing thought crossed his perverted mind that was soaked with conceit and self-adoration. "Go right on settin' the table. Since I have to wait for the kid anyhow, I think I'll eat with you."

Judy stayed rooted. Terror-driven thoughts raced through her, agonizing every fibre of her body. Trimmer would never let Margy or herself go as witnesses into court! He had come here to kill them, as he had killed Mr. Benson—because they had seen him kill Benson.

“What do you want?” she asked desperately.

Trimmer’s breath made a rough, whistling sound in his flaring nostrils. Blotches of color came into his high cheekbones and for a moment a soul as cruel as Satan’s stirred the muddy black pools of his eyes. He took a step forward.

JUDY’S hands dropped to her side. Her fingers touched the handle of her black bag, and a desperate plan surged through her groping mind. Savagely she clawed at the bag, flung it with all her might at the killer’s head.

But Trimmer knocked it aside easily. It slammed to the floor, spilled its contents. The killer’s fingers clawed around her wrist, held her motionless.

“You little devil,” he snapped, his silenced gun inches from her heaving breast. “I ought to let you have it right now.”

He gave her arms a wicked twist, forcing her down on her knees. “Pick up them things and get the eats ready. I’m hungry,” he snarled.

Mechanically Judy did as she was told. She picked up the spilled things, packed them back in her bag. All but one small little bottle. That she slipped into the pocket of her dress. Then she rose to her feet and worked like an automaton. She lit the gas and set the percolator to boil and put slices of ham ready in the pan to fry as soon as Margy arrived.

Trimmer stood silently by, watching her every movement. His black hair, dark as midnight, smelled repellently of cheap

perfume. His thick mouth, with its cruel corners, sneered silently.

Judy took the lettuce from the refrigerator, washed it. She made the dressing for the salad with quick, trained motions, mixing it at the sink. Once her hand dipped quickly into her pocket. A moment later the little bottle was back out of sight, empty. Then she carried the salad to the little dinette.

Suddenly she stopped, halfway to the kitchen door. But Trimmer had heard it, too, the returning car. Swiftly he slipped forward on silent feet. His gun pressed against her spine. His voice gritted harshly.

“Don’t try anything funny, sister,” he murmured tersely. “I heard the cop car come back. You go to the door and let the kid in. One wrong movement, and I’ll blast first her and then you. Maybe I won’t get away, but what good will that do you?” His gun poked her in the ribs. “Get going. And don’t forget, I’ll be right behind you.”

Judy slowly walked across the living-room. They lived in a small bungalow. A broad lawn in front of the house was bisected by a concrete walk. Through the window Judy saw Margy jump from the squad car, run up the walk and noisily bounce on the small porch.

Trimmer stepped to one side, so that he was behind the glass front door as Judy opened it. They heard Sergeant Flaherty call:

“Tell Judy I’ll be up tonight to see her.”

Margy turned back to the officer, a mischievous grin on her face. Judy saw Trimmer’s gun trained on her sister’s back.

“Okay, flatfoot,” Margy yelled to Flaherty. “You leave a quart of ice cream in the car with Officer Jonesy and I’ll give you an hour alone with her in the house. It’ll take me an hour to eat it.”

She whirled and stormed through the door. "Hi, sis," she said. "What's the matt—"

Then she saw Trimmer. Her eyes grew round. She rose on her toes. Her mouth opened to scream. Trimmer slammed the door shut behind her and with the same motion cracked a fist under her chin.

"Damn you," he snarled viciously. "Shut up! You ain't going to pull no Torchy Blaine on me."

MARGY whimpered queerly, staggered on her jellied legs, Judy's supporting arm around her. Trimmer's tall body was crouched low. The gun in his talonlike hand was unwavering, and terrible menace glowed wickedly in every facial movement.

"Get back into the kitchen," he snarled, his eyes feverishly agleam. Murder glittered in them. "We'll eat first."

Judy's neat, dainty feet felt like huge leaden weights as she stumblingly helped Margy to the dinette table. The younger girl was paralyzed with fear.

Trimmer stood against the wall. His gun made a short, arcing movement. "Sit down, kid," he ordered roughly, and then turning to Judy: "Get the grub going."

Judy lit the jets on her small gas stove, and in a moment the ham in the frying-pan started to sizzle. She took a can of tomato puree from the shelf and set it on a blazing burner. Mechanically she turned the frying ham two or three times. She poured the coffee and set the platter of ham on the table.

Trimmer dragged a chair forward with his foot. "Get in there, sister," he told Judy, pointing to the pullman seat. "I'll sit at the end here."

He parked his gun on his lap underneath the table and helped himself lavishly. Neither Judy nor Margy could eat. The younger girl's frightened eyes

couldn't leave the killer's face. It got Trimmer's goat.

"Eat, damn you!" he snapped at her.

Both Judy and Margy started nibbling half-heartedly, the food choking in their throats.

Trimmer enjoyed his meal. "I'm really not a bad guy," he told them. "Sure wish I didn't have to do it."

A diabolical light suddenly glowed in the depths of his muddy eyes. He reached for the dish of salad. "You girls ain't eatin' like you oughta," he smirked at them, heaping salad on their plates. "Come on, eat it. You'll like it."

Consternation flicked through Judy. Desperately she tried to warn Margy, tried to tell her that the salad was doped. At that Trimmer burst into loud, uncontrolled guffaws. He had a knife in one hand, a fork in the other. With them he pounded the table.

"Ha-ha-ha," he bellowed, "if that ain't funny. You tried to spike the salad, eh, sister? Thought Trimmer was just a dumb sucker, eh?"

He dropped his fork and grabbed Judy, dragging her toward him. His hand snaked into her pocket and brought out the little bottle.

"Chloral Hydrate," he read on the label, "good old Mickey Finn. So you thought you'd—"

Judy's eyes burned, her lips quivered. "All right, Trimmer," she said tightly, "my little scheme failed. You were too smart for me. You'll kill Margy and me. I haven't any hope left. You came here just to do that. But some day you'll get what's coming to you. One of your yellow partners will shoot you in the back." She slammed her small hand sharply down on the table. "Like that," she repeated. "In the back."

She gulped a deep breath. "Yes, Trimmer, in the back. They won't give

you any more chance than you give your own victims. They'll sneak up to you, perhaps in the dark. You'll hear the sound of the gun,"—again her hand crashed down on the cloth, made the dishes rattle—"that's all you'll hear. You won't know—"

THEN it happened. Hell seemed to split asunder behind Trimmer. Boiling, sizzling bloody stuff rained over him, seared him, bit into him. He grabbed up his gun, fired behind him even as he whirled.

Judy's hand streaked for the percolator. She heaved it straight at Trimmer's head. Snarling, shouting vile curses, the thug whirled. His gun bellowed wickedly, the bullet plowing into the dishes on the table. Trimmer's eyes were closed, blinded by the red-hot blood, by the stinging coffee.

For once in her life, Judy was no thinking, reasoning nurse. She became a wild dynamo of anger, of desperate hatred. Her hand grabbed the frying-pan. She didn't feel the too-hot handle burn her flesh. She slashed the hot grease over Trimmer's head, knocked the wavering gun from his fist, battered his face.

Then a strong hand clamped around her wrist, held her.

"Steady now, Judy," Sergeant Flaherty tried to soothe her. "You've laid the lunkhead out cold." He snapped handcuffs on Trimmer's wrists. "Lookit that galoot's nose, will you now?" he gasped. "It's a squashed tomato."

The frying-pan fell from Judy's hand, clattered loudly on the floor. Margy stood like a statue, her eyes fixed with hysteria. She screamed.

Judy slumped tiredly into her seat, picked up a glass of water and dashed it into Margy's face. "Shut up, kid," she said wearily. "It's all over."

Flaherty had got some of the red stuff on his hands. He wiped them on a handkerchief.

"And just how—" he started to ask.

Judy sighed wearily. "I put a can of tomato puree on the gas flame, unopened. Then I talked to him about getting shot in the back. When that puree got to steaming, the can blew up and,"—her head dropped on her arms as tears came in her eyes. "That's all."

Flaherty gently stroked her hair. "Well, now, Judy darlin'," he said. And then she was in his arms.

Margy's eyes grew big. She said softly "Oh!" and tip-toed to the door. Officer Jones was barging in.

"Out, Jonesy," she whispered. "This is no place for you."