

Mouthpiece Miracle Man

By Edward James

Old Colonel Lee, wise in the ways of a jury, invokes a little courtroom magic in the interest of justice.



JUDGE HARLEAN mopped his streaming brow with a handkerchief that had long since absorbed its quota of moisture. The courtroom was oppressive with the heat of this deep Southern town.

At the counsel table, Lud Drake, the defendant, sat rigidly, his brown face wooden, expressionless. His lips were clamped tightly and he thought: *What's the use? What's the use? Why don't they do it and get it over with?*

But there was no indication of all that in his eyes, no sign that he was being tried for murder, that the case had fared badly, that all this was only a formality before his execution.

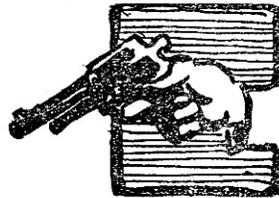
He kept his eyes on the twelve perspiring men in the jury box. It had been hard to find a panel of men none of whom knew Lud Drake. But the prosecutor had found them, and they'd sat throughout the trial, listening to a chain of damning evidence.

It made no difference that Mead Rankin had sorely needed killing. Nor that the town was a better place with Mead safely planted under the soil. The thing that did seem to matter was that Mead Rankin was the son of the richest man in town, the man who controlled the bank and half its real estate, the man whose influence was pressing this prosecution for revenge.

Revenge!

Grim satisfaction tightened inside Lud Drake. There was one thing they could never take away from him. And that was the sight of Mead Rankin groveling in his own blood. He would take that picture to the gallows with him.

Carriage wheels creaked through the open window at his side. An automobile horn sounded in the distance. At the top of the window was a strip of stained glass, and the sun, pouring through, cast a thin concentrated beam that made a small circle of light for a moment, then buzzed angrily into the air.



Judge Harlean said: "Is the defense ready to sum up the case?"

Spectators stirred in their seats, then became silent. Somewhere in the rear a fat man was breathing heavily. A woman fanned herself with her purse.

The short chubby man with the white hair and white mustache at Lud Drake's side rose slowly. He placed his hand on Lud's shoulder, squeezed gently, then moved forward to stand in front of the jury.

Colonel Worthington Lee peered with mild blue eyes at the twelve men. The title was purely a courtesy one. He had practiced law in this same town for thirty-five years, except for those bibulous

periods when he was recovering from certain chronic ailments due to excessive alcoholism, ailments which he attempted to cure with further doses of the same. He addressed the jury now in a soft, surprisingly mellow voice.

“Gentlemen, you have the testimony of the prosecution and the brief story of the defense. Many of you know me and know my reputation. I have never wittingly appeared to defend a client I thought was guilty. I have never, in my long years of service, entered this temple of justice with tainted hands. And even now, despite the testimony of witnesses for the State, I am as certain in my heart as I am of my own name, that Lud Drake is innocent.

“The prosecution contends that he murdered Mead Rankin, shot him down in cold blood. If he did that, and I don’t say that he did, then it came as the result of a fit of uncontrollable anger, in a moment of a mad passion that stemmed from temporary insanity. Any man with red blood coursing through his veins might have done the same. Picture yourselves, gentlemen, in Lud Drake’s position.

“Orphaned at sixteen, he found work for himself, through sweat, toil and application he became a skilled mechanic, and in a few years was able to take his younger sister from the orphanage and make a home for her. In all respects he was both a father and a mother. He sent her to school and nurtured her into young womanhood. And then along came Mead Rankin. . . .”

Hearing Lee, Lud Drake’s throat tied up like a knot in a wet rope. His fingers clasped on the counsel table and the knuckles gleamed whitely. He was remembering with sharp vividness that night and the memory twisted cruelly keen inside him. . . .

THEY were working late at the plant, and it wasn’t until after midnight that Lud Drake keyed his way through the front door. He kept the door open to let the cat slip through, then latched it from the inside. He was a methodical man and locking the door was habit. It was silly because he always left the ground floor windows open to admit the sultry Southern breeze. He went to the icebox and gulped down a pint of milk.

On the way to his room he stopped at Christine’s door to see that everything was all right. He inched it open, a fond smile playing over his hard young mouth, and then quite suddenly flung it wide. The smile wiped away, his eyes hardened.

Chris’ bed hadn’t been slept in. He spread electric light into the room and stood there with his feet planted and the muscles bunched whitely along his jaws.

Mead Rankin! She was out with him again t Drake’s teeth clenched hard. He wanted Chris to have a good time, he wanted her to go with boys. But not Rankin. The man was several years too old for her. He was no good. He’d been a trouble-maker from the days when they’d been schoolmates together. And rivals.

Lud disliked Rankin because he knew him for what he was. On his side, Rankin had nothing but contempt for the man who’d been forced to make his own way. The contempt had flowered into bitter hatred when Lud Drake had forbidden him to see Chris.

She was nineteen and far away the loveliest girl in town. Like her brother, she had a will of her own. Rankin’s racy yellow roadster, his prodigal spending of money, his smooth affected manner, had taken their toll of other girls, and Christine Drake was no exception. Young, impressionable, anxious for a good time, she had resented her brother’s attempts to govern her conduct.

Lud Drake sat in the small living room until the call came. It came at two A.M. The sheriff's office was on the wire. They wanted Lud Drake to hurry over to the hospital.

The doctor stood over the bed in the tiny white room and shook his head. "There was nothing we could do, Drake. The injuries were all internal. The car must have been traveling close to sixty miles an hour. Not even a miracle could have saved her."

At the sheriff's office Lud got the story. She'd been driving with Mead Rankin. The car door had suddenly opened and she slipped out.

"Slipped out!" Drake cried. "Thrown out, you mean." His face was deathly white, his lips gray. "Where's Rankin? Let me see him."

"We're not holding Rankin," the sheriff said. "It was an accident."

Anger tightened hotly within Lud Drake's chest. He said a lot of things then, things that later boomeranged back.

"Rankin's a menace. He's responsible for the death of my sister. He killed her. But you couldn't hold him. Oh, no. His old man controls too many votes in this county. You're yellow. You're afraid of your job. But I'm not afraid of Rankin, nor of his ole man. He can't get away with this. I'll see to that."

Lud Drake flung out into the night.

He found Mead Rankin at home. He could see him through the window of the big house at the edge of town, pacing nervously around the dimly lighted library. The window was open and Lud Drake climbed into the room.

He was facing Rankin when the man turned around and suddenly spied him. Rankin's jaw dropped, his eyes opened wide. He stood there with his mouth flapped open and the color slowly draining from his face. He got a grip on himself and

then demanded hoarsely:

"What is it, Drake? What do you want?"

Lud Drake did not speak then. He flew at Mead Rankin and the man bore down to the floor under his weight. Drake's fingers found Rankin's windpipe. His thumbs pressed heavily. Blood flooded into Rankin's cheeks and into his eyes. His tongue lolled out and he began to choke.

"What happened, Rankin?" Drake demanded in a deadly cold voice. "What happened to Chris? How was she hurt?" He eased his grip.

Fear blossomed in Rankin's eyes. "She—she fell out of the car," he gasped.

"You're lying!" Drake snarled. "The truth! I want the truth!"

His fingers again dug in savagely, and when Rankin nodded, he permitted the man to speak.

"She—she jumped out. I didn't want her to. I swear it, Drake. She jumped out."

"Then you made her do it. She was trying to get away from you. Where were you taking her, Rankin? Tell me before I kill you."

"I wanted her to marry me, Drake. I wanted her to elope."

Lud Drake was so surprised he let Rankin go and rose slowly to his feet. That was a mistake. Rankin whirled and pawed at the cabinet and when he whipped around again he was holding a gun.

It was an old-fashioned hammer type pistol, and above it Mead Rankin's face was twisted with hatred. "Get out, Drake. I can shoot you in self-defense, and get away with it, too. You know that."

But Lud Drake was beyond reasoning. The sight of Chris in that hospital room had banished all logical thought from his brain. He plunged in, low, under the gun, his fists flailing like a windmill in a storm. Rankin rocked backward and both men locked in an embrace. For a brief instant

they were both breathing heavily and then the sound was punctuated by the crushing roar of the pistol.

Mead Rankin keeled slowly over like a mortally wounded ship. The bullet had gone up under his chin. He floundered to the floor, and his eyes hung open, glazed, lifeless. . . .

COLONEL WORTHINGTON LEE was still talking to the jury. "And so we maintain, gentlemen, that when Mead Rankin reached for the gun and whirled to bear it upon the defendant, that gun went off. It was an old pistol. The hammer was loose. It required very little pressure. The prosecutor has said that it was impossible for a man to shoot himself under those circumstances. I say that anything in this world is possible."

Lud Drake was confused. The old lawyer had insisted upon handling the case his own way. "You can't tell them you jumped on him, Lud. That will finish you. They'll say you went to Rankin's house with malice aforethought, predetermined to kill him, that you wrested the gun from his hand and pulled the trigger. And the jury will believe them. You didn't kill him, and I know it. For the sake of justice, though, let me tell it my way."

Now he walked over to the exhibit table and picked up the weapon which the prosecution had marked *Exhibit A*, and carried it back to the jury box. He laid it flat in his soft palm and held it before them. They were a grimfaced lot, a special panel collected through old man Rankin's influence.

Lee started talking:

"This gun, gentlemen, is the weapon selected by the Supreme Power that governs us all, to bring justice to Mead Rankin," continued Lee.

He paused and brought the gun to the counsel table and laid it in the direct ray

from the stained-glass window. The tiny circle of bright white light hung onto it like a minute spotlight. "Justice is not blind. In its own way it seeks out the truth and administers punishment. Often it leaves this job to man. But it knew that Mead Rankin would never be dealt honestly with, as he deserved, not in this town. And so it performed what the prosecutor called impossible.

"It made Mead Rankin, in his anxiety to get that gun into his hand, clutch it in such a way that the muzzle was pointed up at himself. The State contends that in that position the deceased did not yet have his finger in the trigger guard and could not have discharged the gun. You remember his words: 'To do that would have been a miracle. And miracles do not happen in this day and age.'

"Well, gentlemen, the prosecutor and I differ on that subject. Miracles do happen. If you believe in the Bible at all then you know that they do." He pointed dramatically at the gun. "I say now that if God willed it so that gun could go off by itself, it would."

A loud explosion tore through the courtroom. The gun on the counsel table, jerked spasmodically, smoke from its muzzle curled upward.

No one spoke. No one moved. All eyes were fixed on the gun. Faces held an odd transfixed look. And then Lee broke the spell.

"A miracle!" he yelled.

Pandemonium let loose. Somewhere in the back a woman started praying out loud. Two of the jurymen crossed themselves. Lee stared at the gun incredulously.

When it was all over, after the jury had acquitted Lud Drake and they were alone in the courtroom, Lud stared at Colonel Lee and said:

"I saw you slip that empty shell out of

the gun in all the excitement. But what made it discharge?"

Lee placed his palm under the bright circle of light that came through the stained-glass window.

"In this season at three o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun is in a certain position, the window acts like a magnifier and throws a small but fearfully hot beam onto the table. I noticed it many years ago, quite by accident, when I placed my hand under it. After hours I played with it. It could light a cigar or ignite a match. Luckily the counsel table is covered by

glass plate or it would have burned a hole through it. I maneuvered a blank shell into the gun and placed the exposed part of the shell directly under the ray. I knew exactly when it would go off."

Lud Drake shook his head. "But to rely on that when my life was at stake. . . . Supposing you had to sum the case up in the morning."

"If you remember, Lud, my boy, I was suddenly taken ill yesterday morning and asked to have the case adjourned until three o'clock this afternoon," Colonel Lee grinned.