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Title: No Escape from Destiny

Date of first publication: 1948

Author: Arthur Leo Zagat (1896-1949)

Date first posted: Feb. 22, 2019

Date last updated: Feb. 22, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190237

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

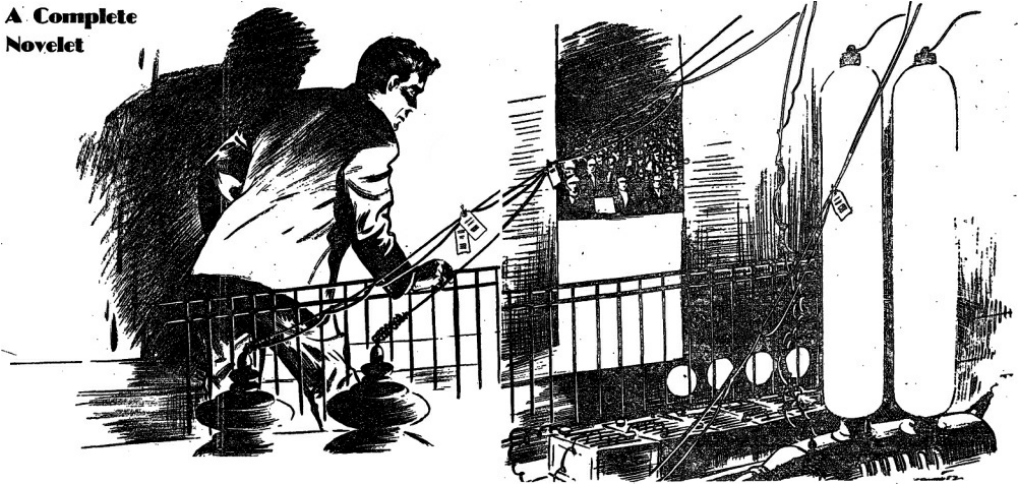
NO ESCAPE FROM DESTINY

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Published in *Startling Stories*, May 1948.

It took a crackpot genius like Parker to appear in a room that he could not enter—and then prove he was not there!

**A Complete
Novelet**



An incautious movement might mean instant and horrible death

CHAPTER I

New Projector

The room was like a tomb. There were only the gray walls, the gray floor and ceiling.

There was only the rasp of my irate breathing as I stood with my back against the locked door, waiting for something unguessable to happen.

The melodramatic mystery with which Malvin Parker surrounds his demonstration of each new invention has irritated me ever since the fall midnight in 1952. This was when he locked the door of the cubbyhole we shared at Tech U., produced what seemed to be an ordinary dinner plate somewhat dirtier than the hundreds we washed every day in the Commons' steamy kitchen and with no other tool but his fingernails, stripped a thin film from it to display it clean and sparkling as if it had just come from the tubs.

That was the first piece ever made of the laminated tableware that has emancipated the world's housewives from the postprandial sink. On that plate, and a hundred-odd other products of Parker's fecund brain, were founded the vast Loring Enterprises and my own not inconsiderable fortune. The best piece of business I've ever done was to sign him up, that very night, to the contract by which I engaged to support him and his dependents for life in exchange for a blanket assignment of all his past and future patents.

Best for Dr. Malvin Parker as well as for me. Were it not for Billingsley Loring's genius at industrial promotion, Parker would be just another crackpot inventor wearing out chairs in one office anteroom after another.

Yes, for well over a quarter-century I've found it profitable to humor his whims and so when he challenged me to make it impossible for anyone to enter this room in his laboratory-dwelling, I proceeded to do so without asking the questions I knew he'd refuse to answer.

There were no windows, of course, and the ventilating outlets were screened with fine wire mesh welded in place. I had my men strip the chamber to its structural plasticrete and spray all its surfaces with transparent Loring Instant-Dry Quikenam. The single door was fitted with another of Parker's devices, a phonolock which I myself set to a keyword I confided to no one. It opened inward, moreover, so that with my back planted against it, no one could enter without pushing me aside.

In the harsh glare of the coldlight strip edging the ceiling, the uniform grayness robbed the room of shape and dimension. It was an illimitable, terrifying vastness. It closed in on me so tightly I could not move, could

scarcely breathe. If only there were some detail, even only a shadow for my eyes to seize upon. If only there were some sound—

There was sound, a sourceless drone barely audible. There was a shadow; the shadow of a shadow so tenuous I could not make out if it was right on top of me, on the opposite wall or in between.

Malvin Parker stood in the center of the room!

He couldn't possibly have gotten in here. He was here, undeniably, his great grizzled head hunched forward on the habitually bowed shoulders of his bearlike hulk, a triumphant smile flickering in the deep-sunk dark pools of his eyes. He— The answer came to me. "Oh, no, Mal Parker. You can't fool with a tridimensional video image of yourself."

"I suppose not," his projected voice sighed but on his pictured face that smile of his deepened. "I wouldn't try." The apparition stepped forward, grabbed my forearm with gnarled and very tangible fingers. "Does that feel like a video image?"

"*Urrgh!*" I jerked loose, butted him with my shoulder, so hard that despite his greater height and weight he staggered sideward. My throat clamped as I goggled at a brown flurry of lab coat, at a leg and foot—

The rest of Malvin Parker had vanished!

He at once reappeared, looking a little scared. "You shouldn't have done that, Billiken." That nickname, underlying my shortness and rotundity, was like a slap in my face and he knew it. "You might have electrocuted me."

"Electrocuted! With what? There's nothing but empty space here."

"Right, Billiken. But there are plenty of bare high voltage leads where I am."

"Where are you?" I gagged. He had appeared in a room it was utterly impossible to enter, he'd proved to me that he was indubitably here, now he told me he was somewhere else. "Where the devil are you?"

"In my electronics laboratory, a floor above you. What you're gaping at is—well, you might call it a material image."

"I might," I flung back, hoarsely. "But I don't know why. It sounds like gobbledegook to me."

He chuckled again, enjoying my discomfiture. "Look, Billiken. You're familiar with the principles of tele—" He broke off, looked to the right at something I could not see, or at someone! For he was saying, "Just a moment, dear. I'm talking with Bill Loring," and I knew who it was. Only two persons could have brought that tender affection to his seamed countenance. One of them, his wife Neva, died eight years ago.

"I don't see why not," he responded to a voice I could not hear, and turned back to me. "That irreverent daughter of mine suggests that we continue our

discussion over drinks in her sitting room. What do you say?"

I said it was a good idea, and meant it wholesouledly. I wanted desperately to get out of this blasted room where I talked with a man who insisted he wasn't there.

"Very well." He nodded. "We'll meet you there."

He disappeared again. For good.

The room was just as it had been when I locked myself into it, the ventilator screens unbroken, the paint film unmarred. Unless I'd been hypnotized by the droning sound which had now cut off, the door that swung open as I spoke the keyword was opening for the first time since I'd closed myself in here alone.

But my biceps still ached from the grip of Malvin Parker's fingers, digging in.

Better than he could suspect, I knew the way to the jewelcase-like boudoir Neva designed to set off her fragile, almost ethereal beauty. My breath caught in a sudden poignant twinge of recollection as Sherry Parker smiled at me from the chair where she presided over a gleaming Autobar. She was her mother at twenty all over again; the same cameo features, the same glowing, amber hair, the same golden skin.

"Uncle Billiken!" she exclaimed. "You're an old meanie staying away from me for months."

"Now, now, my dear," I chuckled indulgently. "You haven't missed me an iota. Not," I cocked an eyebrow at the two youths who hovered over her, "with so much pleasanter companions than an old codger like me."

"Oh these!" She pouted prettily. "These are just Dad's assistants. Robin Adlair." The burly, fair-haired chap to whom she gestured grinned down at me. "And Bart Murtry."

"This is an honor, Mr. Loring." Murtry was only slightly taller than myself, narrow-faced, his hair black as Sheol, his black eyes sultry. "You've been my inspiration ever since I read Lorne Randall's 'Colossus of Commerce' as a kid. That's a great book, sir, about a great man."

"Yes, the book's a good job." It ought to be. I'd paid Randall plenty to write it. "Nice to have you with the organization, Mr. Murtry." I turned back to Sherry. "May I have a Martini, my dear? No bitters."

Sherry smiled and nodded at me.

"And no olive. I haven't forgotten, Uncle Billiken." Somehow I didn't mind her calling me that, perhaps because it reminded me how Neva and I used to laugh, in this very room, over what her baby tongue made of Billingsley. "By the way, Dad asked me to tell you that he'll be right in. He stopped to make some notes."

Her slim fingers twirled dials atop the sculptured silver chest that sat on a low table before her and it started to whirr softly.

“You know, Mr. Loring,” Murtry said. “That Autobar epitomizes for me the difference between you and Dr. Parker. He invented the mechanism that concocts any beverage you set the dials to and delivers it in precisely the right glass at precisely the right temperature, but what did he have when he was through? An ugly and expensive contrivance whose sale would have been limited to a few hotels and restaurants.

“It took you to have casings designed for it that blend with any decor and engineering techniques that brought its cost within the budget of the average family. And then you had your advertising and public relations staff put on a campaign that made it something without which no home could be considered well-appointed. You transformed the demand for it from a few thousands to millions.”

“That’s right, my boy. That’s the story.”

“But not all of it, Bart,” the blond Adlair drawled, his high-cheekboned, blunt-jawed face naive to my quick glance. “Billingsley Loring didn’t take any risk in exploiting the demand he created. What he did, as he always does with new and untried products, was to turn over the Autobar patent to a corporation set up for the purpose and which, while he still held control, contracted with Loring Enterprises to manufacture the contraption on a cost-plus basis and to sell it as sole agent. If it had been a failure the loss would have been the Autobar Company’s stockholders’. Since it succeeded, the major portion of the profits go to Loring Enterprises. To Billingsley Loring.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Murtry demanded.

“Did I say anything was wrong with it?” Adlair spread big hands almost as acid-stained as Parker’s, blue eyes innocent. “I merely mentioned it because Lorne Randall left it out of the chapter in his book from which you cribbed what you’ve just said.”

“Cribbed!” White spots pitted the wing-tips of the other youth’s nostrils. “Why you rat!”

“Bart!” Sherry exclaimed, a warning note in her voice. And then, “It’s time for the Comedy Players, Bart. Turn them on for me, like a good boy. Please.”

CHAPTER II

Industrial Giant

Now there, I thought, as he went across the room, is a young man who might be more useful to me than putting his time away in a laboratory. He thumbed a switch. On the wall an oblong brightened, took on depth and perspective. The scene was a moonlit garden filled with soft music from an unseen orchestra.

Quarter lifesize but otherwise convincingly real-seeming, a girl in a diaphanous evening dress strolled into it, a tuxedoed youth close behind. I didn't hear what they were saying because Malvin Parker entered just then and came toward me.

"About time you showed up," I growled. "Do you think I've got nothing to do but stand around waiting for you?"

"Sorry." He didn't sound it. "I was delayed. Thank you." He took the filled wineglass Adlair had brought to him. "Port, eh? Just what I need." The blond chap handed me my cocktail. "Robin," Parker said, "is my good right hand, Billiken."

"So I rather imagined." Seeing the two together, I realized how much alike they were. Not physically, except for their height, but in another, more significant way. I didn't like this Adlair. "What about the monkey business you pulled in that room, Mal? How did you get in and out of it?"

"I told you that I wasn't in it, except in somewhat the same sense Lilli Denton and Storm Rand," he gestured to the screen, "are in this one."

"Oh, come now. Those images look and sound real enough but if I went over there and tried to touch them, I'd feel only the wall. Back there I not only heard and saw you. I felt you."

Parker's taunting smile was back in his eyes. "No, Billiken. You did not feel me. Look. The images you see on that video screen are complexes of colored light produced in the apparatus behind it. They are so modulated by impulses broadcast from a studio a thousand miles away, as to affect your retina in the same way it would be by light reflected directly from the persons and objects depicted. What you hear is sound produced in that same apparatus and similarly modulated to affect your ears in the same way as sounds produced in that studio."

"Thanks for the lecture on video," I snapped. "But what's it got to do with the subject?"

"The principle is the same."

“The devil it is. Light is energy. The electro-magnetic force actuating the loudspeaker is energy. You can modulate energy by energy transmitted from a remote source so as to give me the illusion of seeing and hearing objects located at that source. You can’t give me the illusion of feeling something I don’t actually touch.”

Parker’s grizzled eyebrows arched quizzically. “Why not?”

“Because I can’t feel energy.” Adlair, I noticed, had gone back to the girl. They were laughing together at some banter from the screen and Murtry, beside me, watched them with smoldering eyes. “I can feel only something material and you can’t create matter, much less modulate it from a distance to seem what it is not.”

“No? Remember the mole you used to have on your cheek, Billiken?”

I remembered it. I remembered how it had bothered Neva. “What about it?”

“You had it removed by what’s called knifeless surgery. Nothing material touched your flesh. High-frequency waves, pure energy, sliced away a bit of your bodily tissue as efficiently as the most material of steel scalpels could have. Is there any reason energy in some such form might not affect other bits of tissue in ways similar to that in which they are affected by matter?”

I couldn’t think of any. I had to admit so, grudgingly.

“Now,” Parker smiled, “when you say you ‘feel’ an object, you really mean that certain specialized bits of your bodily tissue, the nerve endings in your skin, are affected in ways your brain learned in early infancy to mean that they are in contact with matter having certain physical properties; hardness, form, texture, temperature; which sum up to a certain mental concept—the object in question. If those same nerve endings are affected in precisely the same way by, say, some form of energy, would that not mean to—your brain that they are in contact with that same object?”

“Well, probably.”

“And if at the same time you seemed to see and hear that object the illusion would be complete, would it not? The illusion, for instance, that *I* was actually, physically present in a room I could not possibly enter.”

So the apparition with which I’d wrestled had been as unreal, as insubstantial, as the boy and girl locked in closed embrace on the video screen across the room.

“From apparatus on the other side of the wall,” Parker explained, “which was permeable to the range of frequencies I used, I projected a tridimensional video image of myself plus a complex of energies that affected your sensory-nerve endings as the surfaces of my body and its clothing would have. Your own brain did the rest.”

“It certainly did. I could have sworn—Hold it,” I interrupted myself. “How could I throw an—an illusion around?” I’d recalled how I’d flung him from me, how all of him but his leg had vanished. “How could I almost electrocute an image?”

“Not you, Billiken. It was your image that came within an ace of throwing me against a live busbar in my lab above you. You see, I had a transmitter scanning you too so that I could watch your reactions.” His eye-corners crinkled with puckish amusement. “You should have seen the expression on your face when I suddenly appeared to you.”

“It must have been very funny.” The Martini I sipped was acrid. Sherry must have put in the bitters after all. “That’s a neat gadget you’ve trumped up, Mal.” I made myself sound admiring. “One of the neatest you’ve ever produced.” And then I let him have it. “But what good is it?”

He stared at me as if I’d spoken in some unintelligible language. “What good?”

“Precisely. What are its commercial possibilities? How can I make a profit out of it?”

“Why, I don’t know,” Parker stammered, his eyes satisfactorily miserable. “I— Well, it was a challenging problem and I worked it out.”

“On my time and at my expense. So suppose you get busy now and work out something this cute trick of yours can do that people will pay money for. Some practical use it can be put to that isn’t already being served by conventional video.”

He wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at his daughter and on his seamed countenance was the almost pleading expression that used to be there when he’d look at his wife as I dressed him down. Neva would laugh a little and then tell him that even if he didn’t owe it to me to be practical, he did to her. Sherry’s velvet-red lips parted but before she could speak, Bart Murtry forestalled her.

“May I make a suggestion, Mr. Loring?”

“Of course, my boy. The Loring organization’s all one big, happy family. Nothing pleases me more than if one of my—er—children, so to speak, comes up with a good, workable idea.”

Robin Adlair had decided to take an interest, was coming toward us. “What you said just now,” Murtry continued, “reminded me that video is not a perfect advertising medium. It can only tell its audience about a product and show them what it looks like. With this new invention you can permit people actually to handle things—woman’s hats, for instance.” The black eyes were glowing. “Let the average woman try a becoming hat on and she won’t be able to resist buying it. The same for dresses. And as for men—they could actually shave with the razor blade you want to sell them, write with a new kind of

fountain pen, even try out the controls of a helicopter or roadcar. The possibilities are limitless.”

“Very good, my boy. Excellent. I can see our prospectus now. ‘The Loring—er—Teleseler puts your product into the nation’s homes!’ ”

“Bunk.”

Iwheeled to Adlair, from whom the interruption had come. “You insolent young whippersnapper! How dare you call anything I say bunk?”

“Because that’s what it is,” he drawled, grinning at me. “You can’t put anyone’s product into even one home till you’ve got a receiver there. Who’s going to fill a room with apparatus just so they can try on hats or shave with razors that disappear the instant they turn off the current?”

“Fill a room, nothing,” Murtry snapped, glaring at the blond fellow as if he very cheerfully could wring his neck. “It can be engineered down to convenient size.”

“Maybe, Bart. Maybe it can, but you still can’t engineer out the extra tubes and coils and condensers that always will run up its cost to double that of a video which will give its owner exactly as much information and entertainment. You—”

“That’s it!” Mal Parker’s exclamation cut Adlair short. “That’s the moneymaking angle you’re looking for, Billiken. Entertainment.”

This was something new, Parker offering an idea for making money. “Go ahead, Mal,” I encouraged him, silkily. It would be ridiculous, of course, and I’d have another chance to slap him down. “Tell us about it. What sort of entertainment video can’t present as well?”

“A sort these youngsters wouldn’t know anything about because tridimensional video killed it before they were old enough to be entertained by anything except a rattle. Look, Billiken. Has any show video has brought to you ever given you anywhere near the kick we used to get sitting in the balcony of the old Bijou Theater? Wasn’t there something we got not from the performers but from the audience? Didn’t sharing our emotions with a thousand others physically present heighten our own emotions?”

“Mass hysteria,” I grunted. “Crowd psychology—crowd!” I caught up the word. “Those old shows certainly did pull in the crowds and they paid. They paid plenty, but the huge wages offered actors and actresses by the video companies made it impossible—Hold on!” The nape of my neck puckered with the chill prickles of inspiration. “This thing of yours—there’s no limit to the number of material images it can recreate from one prototype, is there?”

“No, Billiken. Nor to the distance from the original.”

“And to all intents and purposes they’re exactly the same as living persons. The scenery too. We’d need to build only one set.” My mind was working at

fever heat now. “We could have a single company acting in, say New York, and it would appear simultaneously in—”

“Any number of cities, towns and villages,” Parker caught fire from me, “wherever you had theaters with identical stages!”

“Precisely. So that the cost of the original production can be divided by any desired number of theaters into which your device can put it. The possibilities for profit are enormous.” I pulled in breath. “You see, Mal, what a practical man can do with one of your scientific toys.”

“Wonderful,” Murtry exclaimed, but Adlair simply looked confused, as did Sherry. Her father, however was for once properly impressed. “I never cease being amazed at the way your mind works, Billiken. You honestly think that you—I mean I suppose that by tomorrow morning you’ll have your bright young men selling stock in the—”

“Loring Multidram Corporation,” I named it in one of those flashes of inspiration Lorne Randall calls the mark of my peculiar genius. “No. Not quite as quickly as all that. We’ve got to put on a public demonstration first, in the ten key cities where my best suck—er—where the outstanding investors in my promotions reside.”

I was pacing the floor now as my mind raced, planning the operation. “Mal. Prepare blueprints and specifications for the patent lawyers and another set for the engineering department so that they can start producing the pilot sets. You’ll supervise that. Murtry,” I turned to the swarthy youth. “I want you to take charge of erecting the theaters and installing the apparatus as the sets come out of the workshop. I’ll have the office give you a list of the cities. Sherry, my dear. How would you like to select the first play we present, hire the director and performers and so on?”

Her eyes were topazes lit from within. “I’d love it.”

“The job’s yours, then.” She’d get a tremendous kick out of it and it didn’t make much difference how good the play was or how well acted, the novelty would put it over. “I’ll have my regular staff take care of the publicity.” *That* I couldn’t trust to amateurs. “I think that covers everything.”

“How about Robin?” Sherry asked. “You haven’t given him anything to do.”

“No, I haven’t.” I looked at the fellow, standing spraddle-legged in the center of the room and thought of a way to wipe that lazy but somehow insolent grin from his face. “I’ll tell you what you can do, Adlair. You can assist your friend Murtry. Under his orders, of course.”

CHAPTER III

Death From a Shadow

Certain disturbing business developments engrossed all my attention and I completely forgot about the Multidram project until my secretary reminded me that the demonstration was only a week off. I learned then that one change had been made in the original plan. Sherry Parker had employed a number of players under contract to rival video networks with studios located at different points in the United States, two in England and one in Paris.

Since this made it impossible to assemble the cast at any one place, it had been decided to install transmitters as well as receivers in all ten theaters. In this way some performers could speak their lines in New York, others in Los Angeles, London and so on, but the net effect still would be the same as though all were playing on a single stage.

The scenery was erected in Los Angeles, would be reproduced in material image on the other stages. The originals of the smaller properties, books, maps, and the like, would be placed at the location of the characters who initially handled them.

It was Bart Murtry who'd worked out this solution to the difficulty. He'd further justified my estimate of his ability by building the ten theaters in exact replica, auditoriums as well as stages, thus effecting a considerable saving in architects' fees and the cost of fabrication.

Instead of a sophisticated, modern piece written for video, Sherry had preserved the archaic flavor of the presentation by reviving a mid-twentieth century war play replete with the swashbuckling heroics, air raid alarms, gunfire and other bellicose trappings of that bygone era. All this gave me an idea. "See here, Foster," I told my secretary. "We'll reserve seats and issue tickets to the people we're inviting to the premiere."

"An excellent idea, sir." He hesitated, tugged at the sandy mustache he was cultivating with sparse success. "Er—what *are* tickets, Mr. Loring?"

I laughed, for the first time in weeks. "Tickets, Foster, are— Oh, look here." I riffled the sheets he'd laid on my desk, found the plan of the auditoriums. "Suppose we mark these rows of seats A, B, C and so on, starting at the front, and number the chairs in each row, like this."

It wasn't till I sketched an old-fashioned theatre ticket, with its coded stub, that the principle finally penetrated. "Now I understand, sir. It's like place-cards at a formal banquet, a system of assigning the more desirable locations to

guests you want particularly to honor.”

“Precisely.” There was no need to explain that it also was a way of establishing a price scale based more on the snob-value of location than the ease of hearing and seeing. “That’s why I shall myself decide who is to sit where. Let me have those lists of invites.”

“Here they are, sir.” He handed them to me. “But I’m afraid you won’t have time to do that just now, Mr. Loring. Mr. Hanscom’s waiting to see you.”

“Mr. who?”

“Maxwell Hanscom of the United Nations Securities Control Board. You gave him an eleven o’clock appointment.”

“Oh, yes. I remember now.” I didn’t have to remember. I’d been anticipating Hanscom’s visit all morning, and not with pleasure. “About this Multidram demonstration, Foster. Inform Murtry I’ll want to inspect the entire installation and attend a dress rehearsal.” My fingers drummed the arm of my chair. “All right. Send Mr. Hanscom in.”

The door to my office is thirty feet from my desk. By the time the gray little man had crossed that space, I knew that here was a government official I might be able to deceive for a little while but could not buy.

New Orleans, Manchester, Rio de Janeiro and the rest of the ten cities selected for the premiere Multidram performance of *ESCAPE FROM DESTINY* saw something that Spring day they’d not seen for a generation. Crowds. There was, it seemed, some strange, atavistic contagion in the notion of people actually gathering together to watch and listen to anything. The thousands who milled about the identical structures Murtry had erected could observe the proceedings sitting comfortably in their homes far better than being jostled and trampled here, but here they were.

As sweating police cleared a path for me to the entrance of the New York Bijou—so Malvin Parker had named the theaters in obeisance to our student rendezvous—I knew Billingsley Loring was on the brink of his greatest success, or at the end of his career.

Sherry was in Los Angeles, where the majority of the company were physically present, her father in Chicago supervising the master switchboard, Bart Murtry had taken off a couple of hours ago for London, to oversee the pick-up for the two British Isles stages and Paris and Moscow.

Just where Robin Adlair was I did not know. My last-minute decision anent the seating arrangements had necessitated a rush job of training ushers which Murtry had turned over to him. All the past week he’d been darting about the world in the Loring Skyfleet’s speediest stratojetter and we’d completely lost track of him.

From what I saw here in New York, I had to admit that he’d done a good

job. Quaintly clad in long-trousered, button-studded blue uniforms such as I hadn't seen for decades, the teen-age youngsters were well rehearsed. Not so the gathering audience. In spite of the careful letters of explanation that had accompanied each ticket, many were lamentably confused as to what was expected of them. One couple in their thirties, as a matter of fact, had to be forcibly removed from the front row seats to which they insisted they were entitled by the rule of first come, first served.

I'd given strict instructions that every spectator was to occupy the location his ticket called for and the Loring organization is schooled to obey instructions to the letter.

The turmoil finally subsided. I went down the central aisle to the seat I had reserved for myself. A cherub-faced lad rushed up to me, checked my stub. "A-1. Thank you, sir." He saluted and rushed busily off again. This first row of chairs was separated only by a brass rail from a six foot deep, empty trench that ran clear across the auditorium's floor. Beyond this rose the curving face of the raised stage and from this in turn, high and graceful, the shimmering golden folds of a vast curtain emblazoned with huge, floral-wreathed L's.

The sourceless illumination that filled the auditorium began to dim. A hush of tense expectancy gripped the audience. There was an instant of complete, velvety darkness, then a glitter and flash of chromium and polished wood exploded in front of and below me; musical instruments catching sudden light concentrated in the pit and splintering it into a myriad coruscations. In the blackness behind me, a thousand throats gasped. The dress-suited musicians swept bows across strings. A single handclap spat as some oldster recalled the ways of his youth, then another, a third.

The sounds rippled, spread, merged into a torrent of applause.

The clapping died away. The orchestra's triumphal strains waned till only a single violin sang softly. An aureate glow spread over the great curtain and it was rising, slowly at first, then more swiftly.

The stage it revealed was vacant! Bare floorboards stretched back to a blank wall of gray plasticrete. Something had gone wrong.

No. The stage was transformed into a room ugly with the flowered design of its papered walls, shut in by the black cloth awkwardly tacked over windows. Clumsy wooden furniture cluttered it, a table was covered by a white cloth and set as for a meal not yet served. In the left-hand side-wall—the stage's left—was a closed door, a wooden door complete with ceramic doorknob. Another, similar door to the right rear was open a bare inch. Holding it so and peering through the crack was a woman's taut, listening figure.

Slumped in a chair by the table, head propped in elbow-propped hands and every line eloquent of a fatigue that rendered him incapable of the fear that

gripped the woman, was a young man in clothing torn, filthy with mud.

The applause rose again in a great, cresting wave that washed over me.

Underlying the surf of pounding palms was another, rhythmic sound the world has not heard for decades, the ominous thud of marching feet dulled by distance. Nearing it beat down the applause, seemed just outside the black-swathed windows.

A voice suddenly barked an unintelligible order. Silence. A sense of apprehension flowed from the woman at the door, a feeling of fear that could not possibly have been transmitted to that audience by a video image. The unseen voice spoke again, gutturally, and the feet thudded again dispersing.

“They’ve tracked you to the village,” the woman whispered. “They’re searching the houses along the street.” She pushed the door shut, soundlessly, turned from it.

Hand to throat she moved across the floor toward the unmoving man at the table, eyes big with terror in a white and haggard face. In Neva’s face!

Neva—No not Neva of course but her daughter Sherry—whispered, “They’ll be here in a moment. Come. I’ll hide you.”

Why was Sherry playing the part for which Lilli Denton had rehearsed? I was out of my seat. Crouching low to avoid being silhouetted against the lighted stage I made for its left-hand corner.

“I’m not hiding.” The voice above me was hoarse with weariness and defeat. “I’m going out there to give myself up. You people have suffered enough—” It faded as I went through the little door and found myself in a place crowded with the glowing bulbs, the coils and condensers and serpentine leads of the Multidram apparatus.

The air was prickly with the tension of high potential, an incautious movement here might mean instant and terrible death. Explaining the setup last week, Bart Murtry had warned me not to brush against this lead, this switch. I was tight-strung, my palms sweating, by the time I reached the wings and looked through what to the audience seemed to be a papered wall, a closed door, out into the black dark of the auditorium.

I could make out clearly only the first row of rapt faces, the gap made by the aisle and the seat I’d left unoccupied. Directly in front of me the man was on his feet now, Sherry beside him, their backs to me as, frozen in consternation, they watched the other door thud shut behind a bull-necked individual who snatched an automatic from the belt-holster of his green uniform.

His lips stretched in a humorless, sinister smile. “As I thought.” Vindictive lights crawled in his skin-pouched eyes. “I knew only you and your blackguard husband would dare give this pig a refuge. That is why I sent my men to search

the other houses and came here alone.”

The woman gathered herself, forced out words. “You mean that your silence can be purchased, Captain Markin. With what? We have nothing left with which to bribe you.”

“Except yourself, my dear Elsa—not forced but willing. You are a fever in my veins and—” Markin cut off as the door here before me flew open and a gaunt man stepped through into the scene, a revolver clutched in his lifting hand.

“Franz!” Elsa exclaimed but the shots crashed in a single report. The captain turned. Franz folded, clutching his chest.

A scream shrilled from the audience, a shout husky with terror. Ushers were running down the aisle to where a man had jumped up and was pointing with shaking hand at the seat in which I should be sitting.

I stood on a stage abruptly bare again. The figures that had occupied it had vanished. Robin Adlair stepped out of the other wing, stared out into the auditorium, at the front row seat the bright pleon of whose back was gashed by the bullet that had ploughed into it and, had I been sitting there, would have smashed into my chest instead.

CHAPTER IV

Nine-Fold Killing

Others were not as fortunate as I. In Chicago, in London, in Rio de Janeiro, in each of the theaters where a fascinated audience had watched the premiere performance of a Multidrama, a bullet had ploughed into the occupant of seat A-1. A single shot, fired from a single stage had slain nine men in nine separate cities scattered over half the world.

“One of the strange features of this case,” Rand Pardeen said later, “is that our examination of the guns used in the play discloses that only blanks were fired from them.” Burly, rock-jawed and steel-eyed, the Chief Inspector of UN’s World Police had requested me to assemble in his office all of us who were primarily responsible for the Multidram; Malvin and Sherry Parker, Bart Murtry, Robin Adlair. “No molecules of lead were found in the barrel of the one fired in Los Angeles by the actor who played Franz, or of that which the character of Captain Markin shot off in London.”

“How about the bullets?” Sherry asked. None of us looked particularly chipper but she seemed especially worn, probably from the strain of stepping into the role of Elsa when Lilli Denton was taken suddenly ill the very morning of the performance. “I—” she smiled wanly. “I have a secret vice, inspector. I once found a collection of ancient detective books Dad made when he was a boy and I’ve read them all. According to them, the police always extract the murder bullet from the corpse and examine it to find out from what gun it came.”

Pardeen appeared grimly amused. “Quite right, Miss Parker. We should have done exactly that except for another odd circumstance. The surgeons who performed the autopsies on the bodies of the nine murdered men found no bullet in any of them.”

The stir this announcement evoked gave me a chance to glance again at the gray little man who sat inconspicuously in a corner, nursing a brief case. Why was Maxwell Hanscom here? Why should the UN Securities Control Board be represented at the investigation of a crime?

“Your people must have slipped up somehow, Mr. Pardeen,” Mal Parker was saying. “Nine of the slugs obviously were material images which were dissipated the instant I pulled the master switch in Chicago, shutting down the network, but there must have been a real prototype that continued to exist. You should have found it.”

“We did,” Pardeen replied. “We found it, not buried in the chest of any of

the dead men, but in the upholstery of the seat Mr. Loring would have occupied had he not so opportunely decided to go backstage.”

My fingers closed on my chair’s arms so tightly the edges dug into flesh. “The actual shot was fired in New York, then. It was meant for me. I was the one the murderer was after.”

“So it would seem, Mr. Loring. The killer knew where you would be seated. He knew there was a moment in the play when the sound of his shot would be covered by shots on the stage. Apparently he did not know his missile would be reproduced so that it would kill nine others, and that seems to eliminate all of you who are familiar with the mechanics of this thing.”

“I disagree, Inspector.” Pardeen’s gray eyes moved to Murtry, who went on, “It eliminates none of us.”

Pardeen stared at Murtry with somber interest. “You suggest that the slayer didn’t care how many others died as long as his shot reached his intended victim?”

“I do not. I mean that as far as any of us knew, no one but Mr. Loring would be reached by a shot fired at him from the New York stage. The Multidram receiver and transmitter fields were supposed to end sharply at the outer edge of the orchestra pits. If that had been the case, only the actual bullet would have passed beyond the vertical plane of the brass rail that edged the pit.”

“Very good, Bart,” Robin Adlair drawled. “A very sound point—and an excellent red herring.”

“Red herring!” Murtry pushed up out of his chair, black eyes blazing. “What in blazes are you getting at?”

“Whatever you want to make of it,” the blond chap grinned, but his implication was clear. A clever killer well might try to avert suspicion from himself by disputing a theory that seemed to exculpate him from suspicion. “I’m curious about one thing, though. What makes you so sure the shot came from the stage?”

The other’s lips pulled back from his teeth in what he might have meant for a smile but was more like a snarl. “That’s obvious to anyone but a moron, or someone who’d like to have us think it was fired from somewhere else. Coming from anywhere in the auditorium it could not have struck the back of the seat.” The smoldering antagonism founded in their rivalry for Sherry was no longer covert but had flared into an open feud.

“It seems to me, Mr. Robin Adlair,” Murtry purred, “that you’ve more reason to draw herrings across the trail than I.”

I could read Pardeen’s mind as he glanced from one to the other. “Keep up the squabble, boys,” he was thinking, “and maybe one of you will drop the

clue I'm looking for."

"I seem to recall," Murtry continued, "that when the lights went on you were standing there on the New York stage."

"Right." The blonde giant grinned. "I figured on getting to the New York Bijou in time to check the set, but the crowd outside held me up and I got inside the entrance, which is on the right of the house, just as the lights were dimming. I thought I could still make it but was caught on the right of the stage by the curtain going up, couldn't cross without exposing myself."

"You were delayed, all right," Murtry snapped back at him. "You reached the wings just as the actors were about to fire their blanks and you had to get off your own shot so fast that you didn't notice Mr. Loring wasn't where he was supposed to be."

He'd slipped the noose around Adlair's neck as neatly as I could have. "No, Robin," Sherry moaned. "No. You couldn't!"

"Yes, kitten, I could." The fellow seemed oddly unperturbed. "Our Bart has built up a swell case against me. Hasn't he, Inspector?" He transferred his lazy grin to Pardeen. "Almost as good a case as you had when you were about to arrest me. And it suffers from the same defect."

"I'm afraid it does," the law officer agreed. "You see, Mr. Murtry, the weapon whose rifling the murder bullet matches was found some ten minutes after the shot was fired and while Mr. Adlair still was in the custody of the New York police, on the stage of the Chicago theater."

That really was a crusher. Eyes met widening eyes in puzzlement, breaths sighed in an almost eerie hush which was broken by Adlair's chuckle. "Maybe you can figure that one out, Bart."

"Maybe I can." Murtry wasn't beaten yet. "In fact, I know that answer. What you did was to cache your gun in Chicago, within the area the receiver there would scan. When the Multidram was switched on, it was reproduced at the same spot on all the stages. You picked up its material image in New York, loaded it with a real cartridge which in turn was recreated in the other nine theaters and fired it.

"Doctor Parker turned off the current and presto!—no gun on you, nothing to connect you with the gun in Chicago. Except—" was he who grinned now, triumphantly. "Except, Inspector Pardeen, that the flashback of powder gases from the real cartridge will have left their mark on the skin of his right hand."

"Good boy!" The inspector jumped up. "That does it. We'll apply the wax test, right here and now." He strode to the door, jerked it open. "Jenkins," he called. "Ashkinazy. I've got a little job for you."

There was a muttered conference at the door, a wait, then two uniformed men came in carrying a tray with some simple apparatus on it. As, still smiling but a little uneasily, Robin Adlair submitted to their ministrations the man from the UN spoke for the first time.

“You know, Inspector Pardeen, there’s something about this that still bothers me.”

“What’s that?”

“Why the Multidram field was enlarged to include Mr. Loring’s seat. There doesn’t seem to have been any reason for that.”

Pardeen looked at Murtry but I answered for him. “Does there have to be a reason, Mr. Hanscom? I imagine it was a slight, if unfortunate misadjustment of the control apparatus in Chicago. After all, Mr. Parker was undoubtedly a little excited over the first public test of his new invention and—well, he isn’t as young as he used to be.”

“Meaning that I’m superannuated, Billiken?” Mal Parker demanded, bristling. “Why don’t you pension me off, if that’s the case?”

“Perhaps I will, Mal,” I couldn’t resist responding. “Remind me to consider it after your protegee has been properly taken care of.”

“Pardon me, Mr. Loring,” Hanscom intervened. “I don’t want to seem persistent but I can’t help wondering if the misadjustment need necessarily have been made at the central controls in Chicago.”

“Now look here, Hanscom,” I flared. “What right have you—”

“Just a minute, Billiken,” Mal Parker interrupted me. “Since that concerns me directly, I’d like to clear it up. The answer to your question, Mr. Hanscom, is that all ten Multidram transceivers were electronically interlocked so as to avoid the possibility of overlapping or other faulty registry. A change in the adjustment of any one would affect them all. Look. I’ll draw you a diagram that will make it clear. May I have a paper and pencil, Inspector?”

Pardeen started to fish in his pocket, turned to the slender, sharp-featured officer who approached him. “Well, Ashkinazy, what have you got?”

Mask-faced, the chap held out a crinkling film of wax. “Look for yourself, sir.” It showed the roughnesses of Adlair’s skin, and nothing else. “That guy didn’t shoot off any gun in the last twenty-four hours, not with either hand.”

There was a small, hawking sound in Bart Murtry’s throat, from Sherry Parker a glad cry as she flew to the blond giant. “I knew it, Robin. I knew you didn’t do it.”

“So did I, honey,” he grinned as he caught her and held her. “But someone did. I wonder if it wasn’t the one who tried to fasten it on me.” His broad face was abruptly grim. “I suggest, Inspector, that you submit Bart Murtry to this same test.”

“Why Murtry?” Maxwell Hanscom asked. “We have absolute proof that he was in London at the time of the murders.” He seemed suddenly to have taken over command of the proceedings and the frightening thing was that Pardeen let him. “Why not Billingsley Loring?”

“That’s absurd!” I flared. “Are you intimating that I tried to murder myself, Mr. Hanscom?”

He turned those penetrating cold gray eyes on me.

“No, Mr. Loring. I’m simply recalling that like Mr. Adlair, you were on the stage of the New York theater in position to fire the real bullet in the imaged gun. In position also, as Mr. Adlair was not, to have made the slight change in the transceiver’s setting that resulted in the death of the nine men to whom you’d sent tickets to seat A-one. The same nine men who brought against you the charges I’ve been investigating of fraudulent operation of corporations whose stock they bought from you, and without whose evidence the charges must be dropped.”

Inspector Pardeen was coming toward me and his uniformed aides were closing in on me from either side but I saw only Neva’s shocked eyes, Neva’s color-drained, cameo features.

“No,” Neva’s daughter whispered. “No, Uncle Billiken. You couldn’t have.”

But I had. It was the only way I could have saved the great commercial empire I’d slaved for years to build. What were the lives of nine money-grubbers against that?

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *No Escape from Destiny* by Arthur Leo Zagat]