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 Number 2  
 July — August  
 1950

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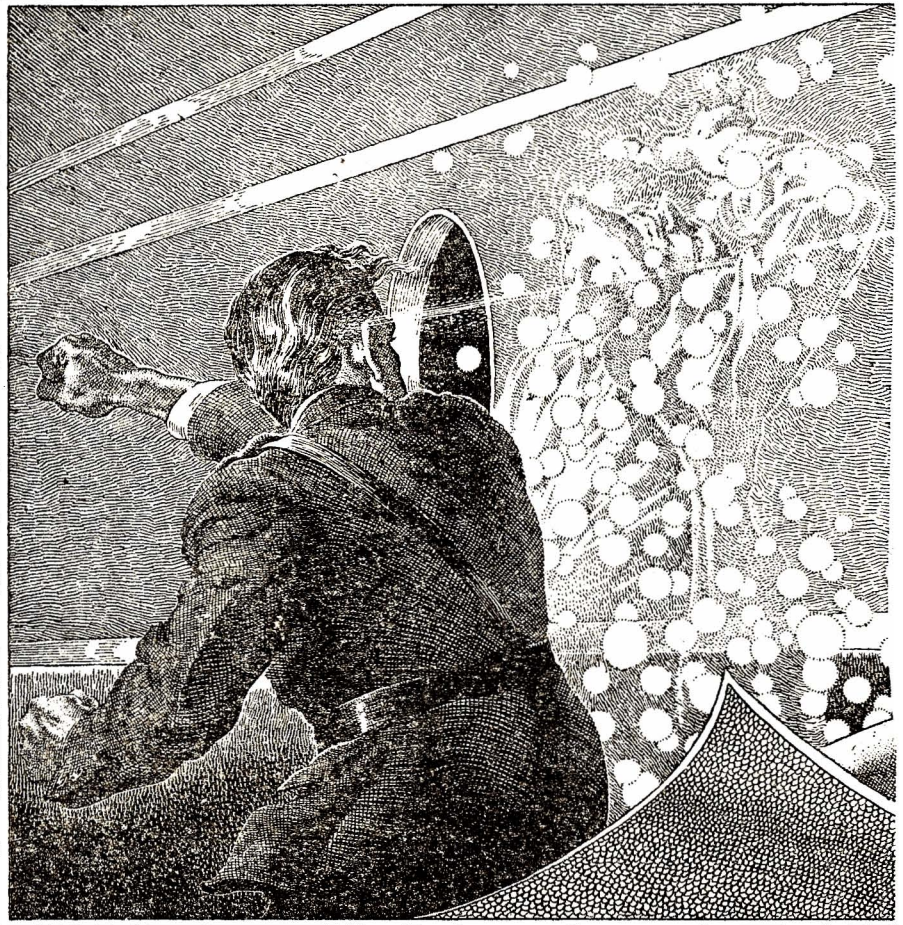
Cover by Earle K. Bergey

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

Interior illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence, and Luros.

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FUTURE COMBINED WITH SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 211 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Second class entry applied for at the Post Office in Holyoke, Mass. Entire contents copyright 1950 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 15c per copy; yearly subscription 90c. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.



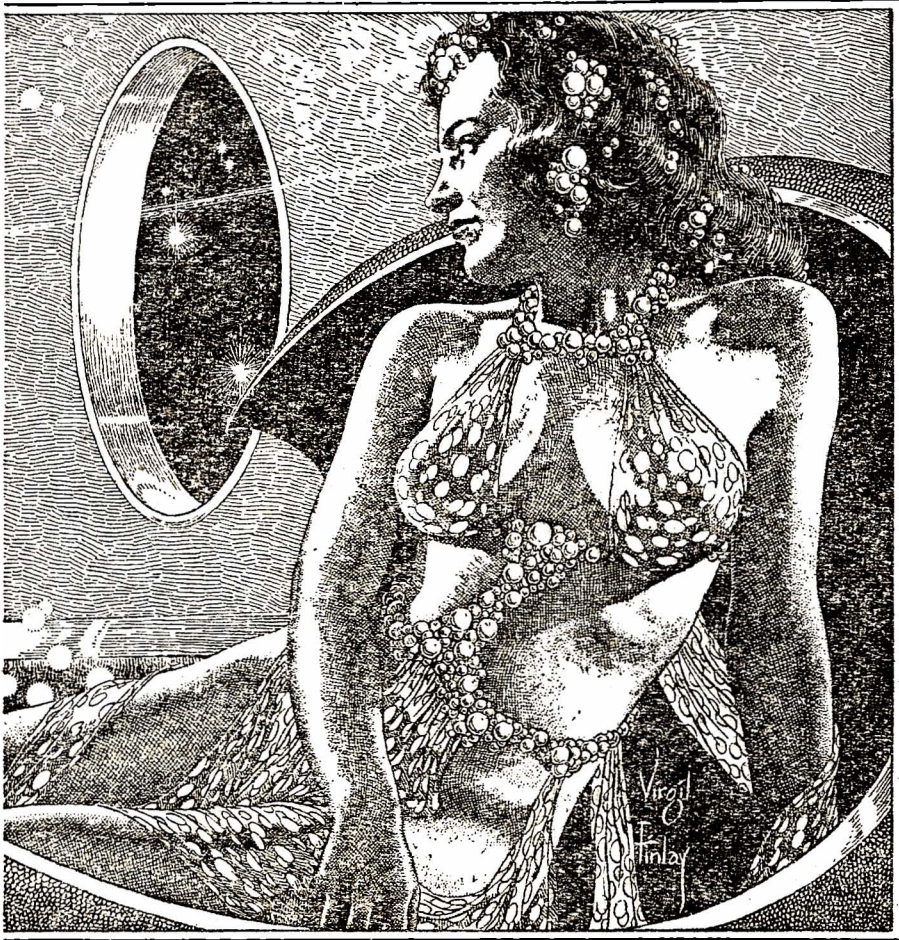
(Illustration by Finlay)

# **Earth Needs ★ ★ ★ ★ A Killer**

**DYNAMIC FEATURE NOVEL**

***by Bryce Walton***





I jumped straight for the aristocratic gent, and swung a long stiff right to his jaw. He faded into the air . . .

*You are the man we need, Ray Berton. You're a killer, but you're sane and rational. Those we are fighting are insane, irrational, and they'll destroy humanity if they are not stopped. We have power, but we can't use it for destruction, no matter how great the need. But we can give you power—then it's up to you!*

From an evening tele-audocast by International Information Service, New York City, September 8, 1983: Reporter: . . .and now, as a special dramatic interest story, here's something for the Fortean Society, though a more scientific diagnosis will certainly be forthcoming.

At five P.M. today, a man's body materialized out of thin air at an altitude of over ten thousand feet above Uptown Manhattan. According to many reliable witnesses, the body plunged

down to smash into an unrecognizable mass on the plasticrete of Tier 19 and Grav-lift 6-H, Fifth Avenue II.

The reliable witnesses include twenty passengers of the trans-State jetliner, all of whom agree that the unknown man did materialize out of the air very near the liner's position as it circled for a cradle in La Guardia Field.

Every witness tells about the same story that the body did appear suddenly from the atmosphere. There was no other air vessel near. Also it was reported that another object followed the body out of the air, according to preliminary reports, a manuscript oddly written on a scroll of metal.

Stay visioed to I.I.S. for further reports on this Fortean mystery. The manuscript, we hope, will contain some kind of explanation which will be forwarded to you as soon as it reaches our news clearance scanners...

**I**T STARTS for me on Mars. I guess Mars is about the only place it could have started. Maybe they'll bring the real earth law there someday, and clean up dives like Jelahn's *krin-krin* tavern on the North Canal, a breeding place for crime, and where a man can be goaded into killing. That night I didn't care much.

The place was crawling with scum, strained through the sieves of Marsport, and Jokhara and Sanskran where the worst of the asteroid miners and space bums gather. Earthmen and Martians and half-breeds whom the Solar cops, said to be the toughest ever to wear a shield, would have gone at with care.

I was felling high, with enough *krin-krin* burning in me to make a Martian *srith-dog* sit up and talk Esperanto. And by the time I'd been blotting up *krin-krin* for a few hours, any space bum thinking to push me around was crazy. So the big yellow skinned Martian with the green eyes was crazy for trying to drag this breed tavern girl away from my table.

Crazy first, then dead. I'd seen plenty of dead men before, and I knew the look. I knew I'd hit him too hard as soon as he stretched on the bright green stones of Jelahn's

tavern, and didn't try to get up. Standing there looking down at him, I knew he'd never get up by himself.

The whole tavern had dried up like a scab. The place was so quiet you could hear the Martian's blood trickling from his mouth onto the floor. "You certainly lowered that poor, poor Marty," somebody whispered.

I swung around fiercely, but the speaker eased away from me. "What in a blasted jet's the use of hitting a man, if you don't hit him right?" I yelled. I was drunk, and I was getting sick; I'd never liked the sight or smell of dead men.

Nobody said anything. Everybody looked at the dead Marty. The blood stopped running. I prodded him with my foot. Oh, he had the look all right, the kind a man only gets once and for always. People stared. Even on Mars, death isn't so common that it isn't interesting.

I could hear myself breathing in the silence. I was sick. I'd never been the kind of space tough one of those Martian Colonial Administrator's women would invite to a Double Moon tea, but just the same everyone doesn't like to kill.

My record wasn't too bad; brawls, drunks, a few killings in self defense. Born in the asteroids, father a prospector, me a prospector. At twenty-three, I'd hit a strike a month ago, and cushioned into the big port at Sanskran to unload, get more machinery and return to that meteorite where I'd hit "heavy" beryllium, paired-atom stuff worth twice its weight in platinum to the Atomician boys on Earth.

The breed girl, the cause of the trouble, cried, "He's dead!"

Nobody moved. Then the girl came at me; the few jewels, which was all she wore, flashed as red as her eyes and her clawing nails. "You killed him!" she screamed. I pushed in her face with my flat hand, and sent her sprawling beside the dead guy she was so nuts about.

The *krin-krin* went out of me. The place was hot and somebody said the cops were coming. There was no time

for talking or thinking or feeling sorry; I measured my chances and ran for the door. I knocked two guys out of the way and went through the blue stone doors into the street. Up the red stone street like it was swimming in blood, a black jetcar was coming fast under the shine of the Deimos.

Cops. I'd never had any trouble with them before. Now it was just Ray Berton and the cops—and nothing in between but the cold Martian night. So I turned and ran the other way. A knot of men came out of the tavern and came at me. I stopped. Another jetcar curved into the street from the other end of the block. *All right.* I turned, backed into the side of the triangle of stone, stood waiting and my fists were hard. I'd never had any parents, not much. My mother died when I was born, and twelve years later, my dad died from overexposure to above ten point cos-rays. It isn't anything to remember, seeing an old man die like that.

So I'd been a space bum, and ended up a drunken brawling killer in a North Canal scum sieve! *All right, so maybe you could have done better. Come on and get it, you guys who think you could have done any better. Come on, come on...*

And then it hit me. *Thought.* I big hot fist of it, punching into my head. A big exploding fire of thought—but *not my own.*

*"Step over here into the shadows, Ray Berton."*

**I** DIDN'T think of telepathy then, though I thought plenty about it afterwards. I stumbled back, wanting to get away, but scared. I started to sweat; somebody could get inside me, and stay there and do things to me. Things worse than a Martian cop could do with his coercoats and neuron twisters.

My head hurt and I yelled something. Everything around me started to melt and run together, and the stone under my boots got soft. I got a fading look at them, two of them, standing like purple shadows. A girl with black black eyes. And a man,

a big Earthman, aristocratic and distinguished-looking, with eyes like polished Venusian fog crystals.

I heard the fading thunder from the spaceport outside Sanskran, and that was all, for a while. The next thing I knew I was coming into Earth, a place I'd never been, and wasn't supposed to be able to go to because I'd never been 'purified'. I had no Solar visa, I thought, and didn't want to go through the psyche treatment necessary to get one.

But a lot of things changed for me that night when they took me off that street. Teleportation, that's what it was—whatever *that* is. They had machines all right. Their minds and nervous systems, which they had perfected, were machines. Mind-energy, the basic energy.

I learned a little about that stuff later, but not very much.

Even after they gave me some of their 'power' like giving a kid candy, I didn't know what it was. Like any dumb atomeer can use the power of breaking atoms and not know anything more about physical science than a New York debutante knows about a *krin-krin* hangover. Like the experts who still can't tell you what electricity is.

I came out of the fog feeling pretty good, considering. I knew one thing right off, as any spacer would: I was in space, at C-acceleration, beyond the neutral-gravity point between planets, and in free fall.

I sat up on foam-rubber cushioning and this girl was looking at me with those black black eyes, so black they were almost purple. The big aristocratic guy was sitting beside her.

She was young and very nice to look at. Her eyes softened, and I felt more at ease. The gent smiled; both of them gave me the idea of having a lot more energy and vitality than any ordinary person.

"We saved you from the police," she said. Her body moved softly under skin-tight resensilk. She had used her voice, but I felt her thoughts. I knew she didn't have to use her lips to tell me anything. It was a funny feeling. "You're on a space-cruiser.

We'll be in a La Guardia field cradle in five hours."

"How?" I said. "How did it happen? How did you—?"

She shook her head. "You wouldn't understand. Not yet."

"All right," I said. "You saved my life, and a lot more. You may know how the Martian cops crack down. You did a lot for me." I leaned forward. "Now what's the catch?"

"You can repay us personally. You can do us a big favor in return. By so doing, you can possibly save Earth from annihilation."

I laughed and her eyes widened. "Wouldn't you want to do that?"

My laugh faded; she meant it. Maybe she was crazy, but she didn't know it. And for crazy people, they certainly had pulled a good job of getting me off that street, into a cruiser, and to Earth. Maybe some kind of a gag.

She said in a whisper. "You—killed a man!"

I looked into her eyes until I thought I was passing out. I clenched my hands. "An accident. Hit him too hard. I'm no killer, I—"

"But you did kill him, and you've killed before..."

"In self defense, sure," I said. "But out there in the Asteroids, you have to—"

She said. "I understand. Now, you'll do some things for us. You won't ask questions because you wouldn't understand; later, you may understand without asking."

I felt like the commonist kind of crook. "So you saved my life," I said, "just so you'd have a sucker to pull some kind of a job for you. Now I suppose if I don't want to do what you say, you'll threaten to turn me over to the Solar authorities for shipment back to the Martian cops!"

She flushed a little. "Wait," she said, "until you find out the truth, then I'm sure you'll want to help us. I'm sure you want to save Earth and its billions of people from death."

**I SHRUGGED.** "What'd Earth ever do for me? What's it ever done for any of the poor guys dying

from cosmic-rays and getting killed because there aren't any laws out there? It takes our metal for precious atomic work, and what does it give us in return? A few lousy credits, and a sign saying 'Keep out—no admission'. The devil with Earth."

"You must help us," the man said very softly and yet very forcefully.

"You mean I've got no choice, is that it?"

The girl raised her eyebrows. "There would be no sense in your making a choice now; you can't understand, so no choice would be valid. It would be only blind emotionalism."

"I see." I was mad. I could handle this cruiser myself. I'd been kidnapped by people who considered me nothing more than a robot they were going to use. I swung my feet around, got them planted solidly down on the mesh grid flooring.

I got my hands down on either side of me so I could move fast and hard. "I see. Well, I'm not playing sucker for anybody."

I could hear the soft whispering of space against the platinum lined skin of the cruiser. Her eyes burned into me. I felt helpless and very much alone. But the devil with them I thought.

So I jumped straight for the aristocratic gent, and swung a long stiff right for his jaw. He faded into the air. I yelled wildly as he seemed to drift away like smoke, and into nothingness. I turned and there he was over in the corner of the cabin.

His eyes shot sparks, but he wasn't mad; he just looked grim. "You may cause us trouble when we cushion in," he said softly. "So I think you had better go back to sleep." He moved toward me. I tried to move my arms and legs, but I suddenly found that I couldn't move anything. "And perhaps it will be better if you have no more resistance to our suggestions after we reach earth."

His eyes seemed to expand out and out and out. It was like I was falling into a widening black pool.

"And," I heard his distant voice say, "that is the way it will be. Until you can make free choice of your

own, you will have to agree with us completely. Subconsciously you know we are right; some time you will know it with your full consciousness."

They had it all right, whatever it was. But not as much as their friends. They had as much of the greater power as you can have, and still be bounded by Third Plane reality.

It was mental power. Mind-energy they called parapsychical. Nothing trite, like I'd seen the quack women along the North Canal pull with mass hypnotism; this was something big and way beyond me.

I fell forward into a black hole.

## 2

Kill For Us!

**T**HEIR names were Glora and Malcolm Mergon; he was her father. They could make suckers out of anyone they wanted to; they could get into another guy's mind and make him think, see, feel, hear anything they wanted him to. Take Extra Sensory Perception, and imagine somebody who's perfected all of it—and that's the way Glora and Malcolm Mergon were. Only more so.

We didn't need visas; we didn't have to go into the antiseptic wards; we didn't have to be scanned. Everytime we came into contact with Guards, or doctors or officers—those guys thought whatever Glora and Malcolm wanted them to think. So we walked right straight through all the red tape, and caught a sky-taxi to a sky-top hotel bordering Central Park West; by then it was noon of a nice spring day.

I sat there, sweating and feeling cold in spite of the even temperature. I didn't savvy anything; I felt like a kid who'd gotten lost.

They brought a three-dimensional map out of the air, I guess; I couldn't tell. It hung in the air like it was glued to nothingness. Glora moved around me and stood in front of the big tri-dimensional map. Her legs were long and slim and smooth; she'd be a prize for some big shot, I thought; but she wasn't my kind. My

kind you'll still find along the North Canal, with very little on, and nothing in their heads but phony dreams.

"Now," she pointed at various marked sections on the map. "These are the locations of the ten Uranium Piles that supply all of Earth's power. If these piles should all reach critical mass at the same time, the earth would vaporize instantaneously.

"Scientific theory here is that even if all of them blew at once, though the destruction would be terrific, it wouldn't be fatal. That a hundred square miles around each pile would be destroyed only. That's so wrong, Ray. Through special abilities, Mal and I are aware of an unstable element existing here; Earth scientists can't discover it. If those Ten Piles reach simultaneous critical mass, it will react on this big unstable element. The Earth won't exist anymore."

I gulped. "Is that liable to happen?"

"It probably will, unless you can stop it from happening."

I felt gray sickness on my face, felt that she knew what she was talking about. "How?" I whispered. "Who'd want to do a thing like that?"

"There's an atomician Chief in control of each of those Piles. Men who have been tested and scanned and conditioned until the Atomic Energy Commission hasn't any doubt of their reliability. But we happen to know that an unintegrated personality of great mental power—powers like our own—has gotten control of these ten Chief's minds. At a specific time, acting in complete unconscious accord, they will respond to a post-hypnotic command already planted in their unconscious minds. Upon responding, they will allow those Piles to reach critical mass."

And so then, naturally, I wanted to know what that had to do with me.

Malcom Mergon spoke then. "So—you are going to meet this person who controls them. We can not move against those ten while he is around, and he is stronger than we are. When he is gone, then we can go to work on those Chief's minds. *You will have to*



kill this man!"

"Who is this man," I said, not very loud.

"Ronald LeStrang," he said. "President of Atomic Energy Commission."

I jumped up. I was mad and scared and confused. "Hey wait now! You think just because I'm a bit of nameless scum you picked up out of a Martian garbage pit, you can make a sucker out of me! I'm no professional killer! You guys are hypnotists. How do I know that what you're saying is fact? How do I know you aren't some foreign agents, wanting to start a world revolution or something? You think I can go out and kill a man just because a couple of guys tell me to!"

She pleaded with me. "That's why we came to Mars, Ray," she said. "We might never have found anyone like you otherwise. You're strong, you have courage, and very strong latent ESP potentials. But more than any of those things, you can—kill. Except for on the frontier planets and the asteroids, the ability to kill has been bred out by the new psychogenic surgery and conditioning marts."

She hesitated, then said. "And he has to be killed, Ray; that's the only way left. Killing is destructive, and we can't do it. We're mentally incapable of doing it. But he isn't; that's our handicap. You've got to help us."

And I knew she was right. Whether I knew it because of my own thinking, or whether Malcolm Mergon's mind had forced me to know it—that wasn't important any more. I knew I had to do it.

He moved toward me. His eyes burned.

"Wait," I said quickly. I looked around for a way out. I was trapped, and I didn't know whether I really wanted to get away or not. I only knew I was scared of what they could do to my mind. My mind wasn't much, but I was used to it. It was all I had. "Wait a minute, you guys. Give me a chance. Give—"

"We haven't much time, Ray," he said. "But first we must give you some added ability. It's already in

you, but it's dormant. We'll bring it into the active stage. Maybe you would like to have some of the—power that we have, Ray? Anyway, you will need it. Now, Ray, go back to sleep so we can give you the power. It won't take long. Go back to sleep, Ray.

"Ray, go back to sleep!"

\* \* \*  
**T**HIS TIME when I recognized daylight again, I was different. I felt funny, not the same; things were twisted around now. I was walking down the big new Eighth Tier of Uptown Broadway, feeling the jet-cars pushing past in their different speed lanes. The sun was shining on the big lacework of tiers and tubes, and I was walking. But things were not the same.

I felt like everything that had happened since hitting the Martian in Jelahn's tavern was part of a dream, and that now I was coming awake maybe for the first time. The life around me looked faded, blurred, not quite real.

I had some of *their* power all right. I could feel it, and it was like a new kind of Martian rotgut was giving me a crazy highness. I felt like I'd suddenly gone screwy, but didn't care—as though nobody could touch me for it. I had some of their power, whoever or whatever they were, but not very much I thought; just enough to help me kill Ronald LeStrang.

A tele-audio flash information band on the side of the building shocked me as I stared at it. It gave the date. September 6, 1983.

Since Malcolm Mergon had walked toward me saying "Ray, go back to sleep," it had been three weeks! I'd been out three weeks. It jolted me. Three weeks. Work on my brain; work on my body; do things to my nervous set-up; make me different. This Glora and Malcolm Mergon—I knew they could do an awful lot to a guy in three weeks.

I stumbled a little, ran into a cute little blonde. She glared at me then looked scared. I felt her thoughts, felt hundreds, thousands of thoughts that belonged to the pedestrians around me, swarming and beating at



my head like moths at a light. "He's a drunk!...looks like one of those non-rehabilitated space men. ...see the cosmic-ray burns on his face... stay away from him...dangerous..."

Dangerous, sure. They'd done plenty to me, but I didn't know what nor how much. And I didn't even know why...not for sure; just what they'd told me to believe. But I remembered—dangerous—I was supposed to kill.

A piece of uncultured, ignorant, un-psyched space-rot! Picked up and brought to Earth to do a murder job. They got me, Ray Berton, killer. But that wasn't enough for them, oh no. They had to give me added abilities—make me a super-delux killer!

Me, Ray Berton. The guy who would save the world!

**I** TOOK a grav-raise tube up the building front to the top of the big central UN Building in International Square. I stepped into a scanning cubicle. A mechanical voice said: "State the purpose of your visit, please."

I stared around me at the mosaiced floors and walls. A super-super delux killer. And with one of the most important men in the world to kill. I knew that, through Glora and Malcolm, I'd made an appointment. Made it sound important.

"An appointment to see Mr. Ronal LeStrang. About a 'heavy' beryllium strike in the asteroids." As head of the Atomic Energy Commission, LeStrang would be more than willing to have a personal talk about that. The Earth was supposed to be International minded, but it was still a case of getting the most and getting it first then saying "See!"

"You may go in, Mr. Berton."

I dropped my right hand into my jacket pocket, wrapped my fingers around a small coiled bunch of deadly metal. Metal with a trigger that would release enough energy to kill the biggest man in the world as quickly as any other.

As I came into the big glass-lined office, LeStrang got up from behind a desk. He was short and stocky, with a naked-looking head and white eyebrows. There wasn't any sense in wasting time, I figured. I had a

slight advantage of surprise; I took it.

I jumped across the room, and took the little neutron gun out of my pocket. Before LeStrang could shrug his eyelashes, I had that gun jabbed right at his belly.

I shivered. His body didn't look real. His eyes didn't belong in that body; they seemed to flame out at me. I felt thought fingers grabbing at my mind, but there seemed to be automatic shields clicking into place, blocking him.

"The interview's over," I said, and started to pull the trigger.

Something stopped me. Sweat ran into my eyes; I felt like I was going to lay down on the floor. His eyes looked at my cosmic-rayed face, the purple scars of burns from the wild radioelements of the asteroids.

I heard myself whimpering like a scared *srith*-dog. His thoughts were stronger, in a way, than Glora's or Malcolm's. They started eating away at my mind like dark acid—thought fingers getting hold and trying to squeeze like my brain was a sponge.

"Glora and Mal sent you of course. They couldn't touch me here, so they sent you. I didn't think they'd stoop so low as to hire animals to work for them. Well, they can't win anyway; I had the thing all set, but now it's just a case of postponement. I'll fix it next time so they can't stop me."

I raised the neutron gun. "Next time," I said. "There isn't going to be any."

He laughed softly at me. As I started to fire, his body faded; it became nothingness right there in front of me, like it had turned into smoke, and then the smoke became transparent. Then there was nothing at all. Just a big room that seemed empty even though I was in it. He had disappeared, but I hadn't fired.

For a minute I went completely blank. I felt numb all over, then panic hit me. LeStrang had disappeared in front of me. I knew he hadn't been wiped out; he'd just gone someplace else. That was part of this—power. Mental power. Glora and Malcolm Mergon had it. LeStrang had it—

And Ray Berton—no that was crazy! Maybe I could send and receive thoughts. But a lot of ESP groups could do that. It was still borderline stuff, not accepted by the big shots scientists. Telepathy, and—ESP included other wild talents, I knew. An old woman on the South Canal had claimed to have the power of teleportation. Gamblers talked about telekenisis.

I had to get out of LeStrang's office; I was trapped there, and I'd be the goat if caught. From somewhere, I heard Glora's thought voice calling.

"Get out of that office, right now, Ray! Hurry. We'll help you. Get rid of doubts. You can do it; think about how you can do it. Come back here to us, Ray. Back to us. Right now. All of you, at once, right now. Think of us, visualize us, this room. You're not there. You're here. *You're here, Ray! Here!*"

And she was right. I wasn't in LeStrang's office anymore.

I was someplace else, and as close to death as I'd ever been in my life.

I re-formed, I guess you would say, but somehow I missed the inside of Glora and Malcolm's skytop suite. I suddenly found myself hanging in empty air, just outside their window.

A hundred and twenty some stories straight down—air. I started to fall, then grabbed the window ledge. But the shock had weakened me so much I don't think I could have held on. Glora and Malcolm came to the window, grabbed my wrists and dragged me inside.

I fell down on my knees. I didn't have the strength to stand up. My clothes were wet, and I held my hands down hard on the floor to keep them from shaking.

Malcolm said. "Too bad. He went through the Barrier. He is back in Fourth Stage reality now; we will go to work on the ten Uranium Pile men and remove the posthypnotic commands from their minds. We can do that, now that he has gone back through the barrier. But he can come back here, Ray; he will plan something, some way to defeat us.

"Ray—you will have to go through

the barrier after him. You will have to develop Fourth Stage consciousness; you will have to grow beyond Earth's Three Stage reality. You still have to kill him, Ray."

## 3

## Through The Barrier

I DIDN'T have any idea what they were talking about then. They were so urgent and desperate, I guess they forgot that I was just an ignorant, no-good space bum who'd happened to strike it rich, and then gotten himself into a killer's brawl.

Later I got to know a little about the various stages of consciousness and how they determine what reality is.

But then, I knew next to nothing; so I asked them again to please explain what it was all about. They tried to explain, but you can't explain color to a man who'd never seen color. And that's the way it is with trying to explain Fourth Stage reality, the next step above three-dimensional awareness, to a man who's all tied up in the blindfold of three-dimensional perspective.

LeStrang and Glora and Malcolm were Fourth Stage people. They had come back through a barrier, a state of mental awareness separating Third from Fourth dimensional reality; they had come back through this barrier from the Fourth Stage plane of reality. This is coexistent with Earth's Three Stage plane, and it's called Mohln.

LeStrang had come through to destroy Earth; then Glora and Malcolm, at great sacrifice, had followed him into Three Stage Plane, or Earth, to try to stop him.

Their only chance was to get some sucker, someone who could be destructive, as they said. They couldn't. So I'd been picked, and had chased the mad guy back where he came from. Back to Mohln, the Fourth Stage.

According to Malcolm and Glora, when LeStrang came back through the barrier a second time, he would probably have some way to destroy Earth that couldn't be stopped—not

even by me, the big super-super killer.

"His is a paranoid mind," Malcolm Mergon said. "He is unpredictable. His delusions of two different realities may change its course of action, but his psychological character can't change. His methods will; he is destructive. That is his goal, motivated by paranoiacal desire for revenge, because of persecution. He must be killed; that is the only way. We have tried everything else. We can not influence him mentally. There is no rapport with diseased and twisted personalities, such as his."

I felt as though I didn't have any mind of my own left—and I didn't care much. I was bigger than any lousy human I'd ever met, besides Malcolm and Glora, or LeStrang. Maybe a few ESP guys around the planets had a little of what I had, but nothing like me. I didn't want to go back to being a narrow Third-Plane mind, squeezed down to blind thinking not much above any other animal's.

So I agreed to go through the barrier. There was a lot of explanation there, too, and I guess I remember some of it; something about reality—being relative to degrees of awareness.

He talked about how consciousness was a great machine that evolved slowly, powered by basic energy, the energy that makes atoms and electrons. He told me about how this machine evolved, how it was once only one-dimensional in its awareness, then two-dimensional, then three. But that there were ever higher degrees of awareness; and for each definite plane of increased awareness, was another coexistent world.

They told me how the evolution was gradual, sporadic among different people, but gradual among species over millions of years of time. And now the increase in extra-sensory perception showed that more and more third-stage minds and nervous systems were developing very close to breaking the barrier into Fourth Stage awareness. A new

world. A new reality of tremendously expanded senses.

That's what he said, Malcom Mergon.

Then he said that the mind and the nervous system being a great and highly complex machine powered by the basic energy of the cosmos, that machine could be tinkered with, changed, stepped up—automatically—if the tools were available.

They had the tools; they had minds so far above mine it wasn't anything you could even talk about. Not and make any sense out of it. Everyone has the latent capacity to develop Fourth Stage consciousness. Even a one-celled amoeba, given time, will develop it.

But me—they were going to make me develop it fast. My sensory apparatus would grow in complexity and degree of awareness of higher-stage reality. And I would be in that other plane of Möhln where the guy I was after had gone.

I didn't understand. But I had the feeling that I—might.

I said for them to go ahead and give me the business. And they did; I went through the barrier.

\* \* \*

**B**EHIND the wall of that room above Manhattan, they had a small square cell. They put me in it, and a reddish light filled the room and started eating into me. There were no doors, no windows in it, nothing but naked bare walls. And they went to work on me. They turned hidden power on me I suppose, but anyway they changed me.

I don't know what they changed; I probably couldn't explain it if I did know. Nervous system, mind, those dormant ESP abilities everyone has in one degree or another.

Malcolm had given me an example of one stage reality—a line, with everything else as the unknown, or time. And then the two stage reality, where height became time, then the Third Stage reality where the Fourth became "time"—

It got over my head there; I felt sick and my head felt like it was flying in a million parts. But by then, they said, my Fourth Stage potential

was ready for the final treatment. And I was ready to break through.

There was a terrible kind of concentration with Glora and Malcolm giving me mind-energy way above my own. Something seemed to burst inside of me. There was pain beyond pain; after that faded away there was a kind of quiet drifting that seemed to go on through a soft cloudy nothingness for a long time.

The four walls of that small cell blurred, but remained as a misty outline. The reddish light faded; black night took its place; the black turned to gray. For a while it was like two superimposed pictures; the cell, and behind it another place.

Then the cell was gone.

I was standing in a dim twilight that had a soft blue tone to it. I was in a much bigger room now. The walls were a funny color, like gray human flesh.

I stared at the wall as I climbed to my feet, wishing there was a door or window so I could see out. And as I looked—a window was there! Or rather, an opening melted away for me.

A feeling of wonderfulness, of magnificence went through me. I staggered like I was drunk with a feeling of thundering joy. I walked over and looked out. A soft sun was setting over soft purple hills. Everything was like that, soft and inviting and warm; beauty, like in a dream that you forget when you wake up. That's what it was like. And I knew there was much more I couldn't see or feel.

They had expanded my mind so much that Third Stage reality was gone. I was in another world of awareness. But I guess even they couldn't expand my mind enough to see what the real Fourth Stage was, all of it I mean. Maybe we'll all know, sometime.

There was a sensation of *aliveness*—in everything. Walls, floor, ceiling, the very air, all the outside of the room, the green fields and giant ferns, everything seemed alive. And when I walked there was that feeling of bursting freedom.

Malcolm had said that with increas-

ing awareness, a similarity developed. One got nearer to the basic energy of all things with his own expanding mind. But this wasn't for me to understand; maybe it won't be for but a very few—not for a long time yet.

I looked out. I wanted to be out of that room and down there on that wonderfully soft grass with the ferns that seemed alive and calling to me. A square of grayish metal moved out of the wall and came to me. I knew what to do. I sat on it, and it carried me out of the room, through the wall, and down to the ground. There was a connection between the processes of thinking in me, my wishes, and the hidden machinery in the metal square.

Machinery powered by some great efficiency that used mind-energy. I got off the square and it raised and went back through the wall of the tall cone-shaped tower. And as I looked, the tower disappeared. Where it had stood was a field of shoulder-tall flowers with bright red blossoms.

**I** STARTED walking. A path opened for me. Fern fronds parted and closed again behind me. Water gushed over rocks in the cool shadows. It wasn't very light, though the moon was full and red, and I walked carefully, senses I'd never known before sharply tuned for danger.

I saw her then, a Fourth Stage girl, as I came round a curve in the path. Her skin was golden and soft, like everything else around us. She stared at me.

Her voice was like music. "You just—came through?"

It wasn't a question. She knew I had just come through the barrier. I don't remember whether we talked verbally or by telepathy. But on Mohln it doesn't make any difference.

She nodded. "Yes," and started walking toward me. She didn't seem quite real; nothing here seemed solid, quite real. Or it was more like I couldn't see quite enough to make it very real for me. Like a man who has lost part of his vision.



She looked like Glora, and she gave out with a sobbing cry of joy as she probed my mind and knew everything about how I had come through, and why. She ran to me and took hold of my hands; her body glowed and her breath came faster. "I'm Reeta. Glora is my sister. I've been wondering if they would send someone through."

She stepped back. "We must get him—Durach—fast!"

She caught my confusion. "Durach, same man as LeStrang. Here he is Durach."

Reeta turned, led me through a wall of fern branches and onto a different path. "We could go to my brother Carleth the other way," she said softly—referring, I knew, to teleportation. "But we can't strain your newly acquired senses too much now. Ordinarily, one breaking through has many days just for readjustment and adaptation. But you won't have any time at all for that. Durach is already acting against us; he's killing us."

She was running, and leading me. She ran effortlessly, like somebody without weight. "We'll go right to the village and see Carleth, my brother. We haven't much time. Maybe we're already too late, Ray Berton!"

As I ran, I wondered what had happened to the real LeStrang back on Earth, the Third Plane. Durach had gone through the Barrier and had taken LeStrang's place; he'd gotten away with it by using his extrasenses. By suggestion he could have made everyone else think he was LeStrang. And he could have gotten rid of LeStrang easily enough—For example by just willing him some place else, all at once. Say five thousand feet under the Earth's surface, or in the middle of the Atlantic, or out in space.

Then Durach had become LeStrang for a while, long enough to interview each of those Uranium Pile chiefs, and put them under his domination. He'd given them a hypnotic command, posthypnotic, for each to allow his Uranium Pile to reach crit-

ical mass upon a certain signal. I didn't know how he'd worked that—

Reeta led me down through an underground tubeway and into a big bubble. A warm soft light shone inside the bubble. Small cone buildings were built in a neat circle. In the center were gardens and fountains. People stared and whispered at me.

Reeta stopped, her face suddenly froze, and then turned slowly with sick eyes. Her fingers pressed her cheeks.

A wrenching scream stabbed through that garden. Still screaming and clutching her head, a woman came running crazily down a path through the center of the village. Faces of men, woman and children came out of buildings, staring and flinching with sick pain.

The woman ran with her hands reaching out in front of her. Her neck was straining like a starving bird's. I felt Reeta's fingernails dig into my arm. The voice hit me like a spray of ice. "Another one! Another one to Durach and his freaks!"

The tortured woman's cries chopped at me. My ears hurt; my insides knotted. She was still screaming and running when she suddenly fell on her face. She lay there jerking and twitching among the smashed flowers. Other people were running toward her, tall, marvelously strong and light moving people. I thought of them as being like gods, maybe. The woman's body stopped moving as two men bent over her.

I could tell it wouldn't move again. It had that look.

"Dead," Reeta whispered. "They don't last long once Durach and his gadgets pierce our last protective neural defense bands. We've had no real defense. Even the last, or sith-threshold, is temporary. He's hit us with various degrees of destructive mental force, augmented by his gadgets. We've resisted each stage, but not the *sith*-threshold breaker. Durach's closing in fast now that he's weakened us. He wants full control of the Merger, so he can go back into

the Third Stage plane and destroy it."

I thought it was all about as clear as Venusian moonlight. I turned quickly as a low soft voice spoke. I knew it was Carleth, her brother, standing just outside the nearest cone building. He was tall and terrifically strong looking. He was studying me, inside and out.

Then he looked at Reeta. "Give the thought order to both our villages right now! That Glora and Mel have sent a man with Third Stage abilities through. Tell them to throw up full resistance in the *sith*-sector. Maybe that way, we can hold Durach's attacks off until Berton can get to him."

#### 4

"There is Durach"

**C**ARLETH led me inside the cone, right through the wall. I felt the humming of delicate machinery as though it was part of the working of my own brain. An opening that closed again behind us.

I sat down. I was very tired. Something was very wrong; I knew that. Here I was—but here I wasn't. I was through the Barrier, with enough of this so-called awakened consciousness to live in the Fourth Stage world of perception; but I wasn't like Reeta or Carleth, not by a long shot.

I almost yelled as the chair reached up around me and stretched itself to fit me. I shifted my position, and the chair remolded itself to me. I was still trying to get rid of a clammy helpless feeling when Carleth said: "We still may have time to act against Durach. We've saved this last parapsychical resistance band in each of our minds until the last. He's broken down the others since he came back through the barrier. He might be able to kill the rest of us within an hour."

He looked at me strangely. "One hour perhaps, Ray Berton, to save your world, Earth, from annihilation. One hour to get Durach."

Fine, I thought, but first, I'm

hungry. And a tray of food floated out of the wall and settled down on my lap. A steak, and all the accessories, just what I'd wished I had.

While I ate, Carleth told me that people here didn't get energy that way when they had stayed here long enough. Here, he said, they used a process that Third Stage minds call telurgy. Fourth Stage minds use telurgy to construct their buildings, and transportation, and to get energy directly from any element they wanted to get it from. The only difference, he said, between any objects is made by our limited consciousness (Third Stage) reacting to differently shaped electron-identity patterns. Yet basically every substance, everything in the cosmos, is the same, made different only by degrees of evolving mental machinery.

I finished eating and said. "You're supermen here—that it? But if you are, why are you helpless before this guy Durach? Why do you have to call on me?"

Carleth said. "No, we're not supermen, Berton; just extended, or advanced men. There'll never be supermen; there'll never be perfection."

Carleth turned; he looked at the wall and it melted away. I was looking at a distant city. And what a city! Cone-shaped spires thousands of feet high, and one high above the others, with the moon behind it.

Carleth said. "This Fourth Stage world of Mohln is sparsely populated; only a few have come through. We built these two small villages, for meditation and self development. We lived here, helping others who came through to adjust and realize their growing potentialities. It was peaceful then. Normally, it would be no other way here—sane and balanced and marvelously stimulating as we discovered and developed new abilities of Fourth Stage power."

He stared at the distant city, and said to me. "Then Durach and his freaks came through. They built that city. It might be called by you a city of the mind. Their diseased minds keep it there by parapsychical mental energy."

"Freaks," I said. "Here too?"

"Yes, freaks; they're different. There's only seven of them, and that they should build such a colossal futile city is proof enough of their pathological, third-stage thinking. Third plane disease still motivates them, even though they developed enough Fourth Stage awareness to come through the barrier. They're paranoids, according to Third Stage standards. Here, they're much worse than that—able to realize many of their delusions.

"But they're freaks. They didn't develop by evolution to reach Mohln; they developed suddenly. As soon as they first came through, we knew they were abnormal, that they didn't belong. Durach brought Third Stage irrational, blind, destructive motivations with him. Diseased personality attitudes. He wanted power; he wanted to rule and conquer blindly. There had been an accident that sent him here.

"Durach and his freaks were seven chances in millions, but they happened. Teratological freaks, monsters. Before they broke away from us and built that mental city, we found their secret."

Carleth fell silent for a moment, then continued softly. "Durach and the others there are offsprings of Third Stage men and women who were exposed to gamma rays, from experimental radioactivity, from the last war, from various conditions on Third Stage Earth allowing over-exposure to hard radiation.

"Durach's father was an atomician engineer who was subjected to gamma rays while working in one of the imperfect Uranium Piles, sometime during 1964, according to Earth reckoning. Five years later, Durach reached what is adult maturity in the Third Plane. He organized some other freaks who were being kept on a small island off the coast of Japan. A year later they had developed sufficiently to break through into Mohln."

"There's only twelve of us left. You see no one here's in the same

stage of Fourth Plane awareness; some develop faster than others. That makes us have different degrees of susceptibility to Durach's mental attacks. Reeta and myself, we happen to be the highest, now that Mal and Glora have gone back into Third Stage existence."

**I**T WAS strange, hearing him say these things with hatred in his voice. Yet, I knew he hated this menace... "Durach and the other freaks have feelings of inferiority. They want to compensate, they have developed paranoid delusions. They were persecuted on Earth, naturally as freaks. Regarded as insane, imprisoned, mistreated. They have strong revenge motives; they want to destroy Earth.

"Also, Durach has a theory that Third Stage Earth is holding back the development of Mohln. He thinks that if Earth's plane was destroyed, Mohln could expand into complete Fourth Stage reality.

"Durach made a Merging machine to open a channel between the two coexisting planes. What it really does is regress consciousness molecules to lower and lower stages of development until it becomes again bounded by Third Stage blindness. Durach made the Merger to help him and his freaks destroy Earth's plane. What they don't realize is that the two planes are the same, part of the same reality field, except that one is the result of more complex powers of awareness."

I thought about what Carleth had been telling me. It all started to fit together. I told him what had happened on Earth—about Durach getting control of the minds of the ten Chiefs who ran the Uranium Piles.

Carleth nodded. "You ran Durach back here into Fourth Stage reality. Since then he's been using various kinds of gadgets to destroy us, one by one. A kind of electron force feeler, you might call it. We've caught flashes of his purpose, though they keep their diseased minds locked up pretty well. It's almost impossible, and sometimes de-

structive, to try to contact them mentally.

"He intends to return to Earth through the Merger. This time he'll take the secret of the electronic feeler with him. He'll be able to kill Mal and Glora with it. He'll be more powerful there than they are, because in returning to Third Stage reality, they've sacrificed most of their Fourth Plane capacities.

"In other words, the next time Durach goes through the barrier, he'll achieve his purpose. He'll have killed all of us by the electronic feeler. It disassociates electron structure of the nervous system so that it can't reform."

"And I'm the only one who can stop him," I whispered.

Carleth said that was right.

I said, "Why doesn't Durach use the Merger then, right now, and go back and get the job done?"

He explained that to me also. "As soon as he came back this time, we knew what he had tried to do, what he was planning. We got conscious control of the Merger machinery, or part of it anyway. We've maintained that control because we have greater numbers, and the combined mind-energy has been too much for Durach. That is why he's been killing us one by one. Our power over the Merger has been going down. The danger point is reached now."

"And what about Mal and Glora?"

"They followed Durach into Third Plane reality to try to stop him. By so doing, they sacrificed most of their higher abilities. Durach, being a freak, an abnormal Fourth Stage man, came back through. But Glora and Mal cannot; they can never attain Fourth Stage life again."

Carleth paused, then said. "You can destroy, Berton; we cannot. Therefore, you're the last chance of defeating Durach."

I thought about everything, as much as I could. About how bitter it would be to know the feeling of being a part of this higher world of Mohln, then finding yourself once again in the blind and groping world

of the Third Plane where no one had any idea of what greater reality was so near.

**R**EETA CAME in. I caught a stray thought from her that sent pain and sickness and futility through me. A thought of sadness and pity for me as she looked at me.

I backed toward the wall. I thought hard, hard, and the wall opened for me. A second of joyous power gave way to despair. I didn't belong here; I didn't belong anywhere now. What if I should kill Durach? And then what if I went back to the Third Plane?

What then? I wouldn't fit there either. I'd still keep some of the power, I knew that. I'd be an ESP freak then, probably working in some televised vaudishow. And I couldn't stay here, I thought, because I hadn't developed normally. I'd been artificially developed so that I could go through the Barrier hadn't I?

I was nobody; I was nowhere. I didn't have a name anymore, not really. These supermen weren't my kind either.

Carleth pointed toward the City. "Durach's there," I heard him whisper. And Reeta's eyes were wet with sorrow as she came toward me.

I didn't want to see her anymore, or feel her hands on me; I didn't wait for anything else. One thing I knew as I went through the wall and started down the beautiful still street:

*I would kill Durach, and then I'd be finished.* I tried to ignore the screams in the village, tried not to see the people dying around me.

I still carried that neutron gun Malcolm Mergon had given me. It had come through the barrier too.

Carleth's and Reeta's thoughts drifted after me: "We can give you some protection. A constant stream of mind-energy shielding. We'll stay with you, as closely as possible.

"Durach is there, in the tallest building in the City."

I looked back. Reeta stood in the center of the village by the foun-



tain, waving. I didn't wave back. I knew that my smile was bitter. And then I concentrated as much as I could on the flat metal disc that came out at me from the wall of the bubble with a humming of delicate electronic power. I sat on it. I thought: "I'd like to be on my way to the City. To the City."

I was outside the bubble. I was high above the surface of Mohln, with the quickness of thought. And I was—high!

It was like a splash of white light under me, the moon shining on that wonderful world. I looked ahead toward those giant spires of that colossal city. Built for ten men, ten freaks. A city of thought.

That one tower stuck up half again as high as the rest of the City. A blue dangerous looking light shone from its top. There wasn't any use drawing this appointment out, I thought. And a fast appearance might give me an advantage of surprise, if I had any advantage at all, and I doubted that.

"There," I thought, "is where I want to be next. On top of that building, facing Durach. *Now!*"

And I was there.

## 5

### Remember Me?

**D**URACH was waiting for me. Not LeStrang; nothing that looked like LeStrang. This was the real Durach, and he was not something you would want to see a second time, nor anything you would care to remember, if you could help it.

He wasn't human; he was a mopster, a freak. Yet, he looked much like anyone else. It was the inside of him that was so different.

Durach wasn't alone as I found myself standing there before him. Two women and several men were in the big arched room with him. None of them were any more pleasant on the inside than Durach. Jelahn's dive on the North Canal seemed like the memory of an anti-room to paradise compared with the feeling in this room of Durach's.

It was filthy and obscene, and it made me mad; it made me shaking mad to think that a chance thing like these freaks had been sent into the Fourth Stage world of Mohln where they didn't belong, to contaminate it, and bring hate and destruction and death to a world that had put a few men at least on the edge of marvelous super life.

Durach was bigger than he had been in the personality of LeStrang, a personality he had given to people by suggestion. He was on a couch of bright red that seemed to writhe under him. Durach was a fat white man with white hair, his fat wrapped up in a tight-fitting shiny stuff like resensilk. His face was soft and his eyes wide and bland and blue. Pale jowls hung over his collar on either side, and under his beaked nose was a small, pursed, red button of a mouth.

Silly little mouth, I thought. I wanted to laugh at it, but I didn't; I couldn't laugh. I couldn't do much of anything except stand there and try to figure out what I was really doing here—wherever I was.

The women and men around the room looked at me, very silently, terribly curious, and far away. Durach's little red mouth smiled at me. No one said anything. They just thought—about the ways I could look dead—and about the many ways it was possible for me to become dead—ways that can take so long.

And there were other thoughts pounding at my skull. They were laughing at me; they were feeling sorry for me, and they were thinking I was an idiot, at least.

I felt like a silly little mortal suddenly brought before a bunch of wicked gods. And then it hit me—

*That's just about what I was!*

I was scared. My mind seemed covered with a cold twisted shadow. Winds I couldn't see seemed to sweep and cry and thunder through that giant room. And I could feel power, great stores of controlled power, churning and boiling and ready to explode around me.

No one moved. I saw the great ro-

tary convertors spinning away beside banks and banks of transformers, and grid oscillators. Machinery, and it was running and developing power, but it seemed unreal, foggy, as though I was seeing it through a curtain of fog.

Well, I knew that this great room contained the Merger that Durach had built. Durach was a freak, both Third and Fourth stage. He was utilizing both fields in a mad kind of fusion. He was mad, beyond the mental reach of sane Fourth Stage minds. That was understandable.

Fourth Stage minds, combined, could control some part of the Merger by mental energy, so that Durach couldn't use it. But Fourth Stage minds were being killed off by another gadget Durach and his freaks had made.

The Merger—a big gadget channeling unknown electronic force partly by mind-energy. This Merger could hit hard at a man's entire nervous system and his mind, and force it back to Third Stage awareness, or step it up so that Third Stage reality faded away, and the Fourth became reality.

But I knew this was phony. It was like the old methods of shock treatment for the insane. The methods were wrong, and the results might be harmful, and unpredictable.

Then Durach laughed, and he was laughing at me; his laughter burned and roared inside my skull.

I blinked and gasped out something as I jerked the neutron gun from my pocket and pointed it for the second time at his belly.

**I** KNEW I was talking, but my voice didn't sound like mine; it didn't sound like anybody's voice. "This time I do it, Durach. You can't go through the Barrier to get away from me now. The Merger machinery, you can't use it. Carleth's people have you blocked, Durach."

Durach's little red mouth stretched at me. He purred. "What do you want to kill me for?"

A woman in the corner laughed.

It was like somebody had sprayed dry ice through the room.

I said. "I'm not wasting time talking, Durach. I'm killing you because—because—"

Durach laughed again. "Because you've been told to by a bunch of humanitarian perfectionists obsessed with their own vague destinies! Because you think you want to save the Third Plane—a dismal unreal blind world where people shamble like cattle and peer into continuous fog like moles! Is that why you want to kill me?"

I knew I'd have to do it now, fast, or I'd never be able to. I tried to press the trigger back. I knew that Durach couldn't stop me, not by any physical means. They had no weapons; they didn't need any, to deal with the Fourth Stage people in their own plane. They had mental-shattering gadgets, but none of them could work on me. I wasn't built like the other Fourth Stage people. I wasn't built like anyone now. I was a special job, made to get Durach, and that was all.

"You know the reasons you've been told and made to follow," Durach smiled. "You're the big sucker, as you think you are, Berton. You're beginning to see the truth now; you're beginning to realize why they can't touch me—why they had to get you to do it."

I tried to fire the gun. The air seemed to get hot and smoky around me with conflicting thoughts. I knew there was a battle going on—a fight of mind-energy. But I wasn't a part of it. It was between Durach and his freaks, and Carleth and Reeta and whoever was left of their kind. A fight for control of the Merger.

I tried to fire, but I couldn't; I wanted to hear what Durach had to say. I knew it was something that might mean a lot to me. I shouldn't want to listen; I had my job. I—

I felt like knives were stabbing me. I was shivering and sweating. I could feel my face growing wet and gray and lips quivering. I was about finished and I knew it. And I knew

that if I did anything, I'd have to do it quick.

No physical weapons. What trap would they use against me, what unknown forces?

I felt my lips move, and heard my own tortured, sobbing cries.

"I'll tell you, Berton," Durach laughed. "They can't kill me. But you can. Why? Because you're like us, Berton! They have no more real respect for you than for the rest of us here in this room. You're just a tool they're using, and when they're through, you'll go back into the garbage dumps of Third Plane sickness.

*"Berton—you're just another freak, like us!"*

I felt blinded. I forced my eyes to hold him in sight as I tried to fire. I moved toward him; the room was large, and I kept walking, listening to him.

"But we're bigger than they are, because we're freaks, Berton. We're natural freaks, you might say. Mal and Glora created a freak out of you so you would come through the Barrier. But we're all freaks, neither Third or Fourth Stage—but the strongest talents of both planes are in us!"

"They can't move back from Fourth to Third Plane after having once left the Fourth. They can't destroy anything with their parapsychical power, Berton. That's their weakness. But we can. They call us insane. But use your own intelligence! What do you think?"

I kept walking toward his voice, toward that shifting smoky outline. Sweat made a stream down my throat. I was sick and blinded.

"They're asking you to give it all up, just for their fanatical belief in some sort of abstract destiny for all humanity. *Immortality!* Think of it, Berton! And then you can go on and on, through higher and higher stages of reality. Reach heights of experience the greatest dreamers have never touched.

"We'll be gods, Berton! They want to do it by slow and ponderous evolution, and play at chance to become gods. They call us freaks—

because we've found the short cut to eternal greatness.

"Mutation, that's one way. You got it another way, thanks to them. But from now on, it can be our show, Berton.

"They want to hold us back, using Third Stage people as pacers. They want to destroy us, because we're superior. They want Third Stage reality, with its disease, its blindness and its million incurable sicknesses to go on being a burden to the realization of Fourth Stage greatness, holding it back, drawing its entropic rate down to zero.

"Listen, Berton! If we destroy the Third Plane, the energy release will speed up the entropic rate of Fourth Plane development a billion fold. You can be one of us. A part of it. And why not? We're mutations. You got through the barrier because they changed your nervous system and consciousness by synthetic methods. But you're like us. You're a freak too, Berton.

*"You're fighting on the wrong side. You're destroying—yourself!"*

**T**IME, MOVEMENT, sight, everything seemed to freeze as I stood there. There was Durach and the others, like pale statues in a dream. Then I felt other minds and other eyes around me. Reeta! Carleth!

I saw them. It was like a dream look at a forgotten room, and people almost forgotten; their voices, like stillness beyond a threshold I had once crossed.

She said, her eyes sad and wet. "The decision must be yours, Ray Berton. We can give you the support of what parapsychical energy we have left within us. But we can't destroy directly; you must do that. In that way, you're different from us, but you're not a freak like Durach and these others. You have temporary Fourth Stage awareness. At a given time, that awareness will fade, and you'll go back to Third Stage reality, and be as you were before, with no memory of this world. Destroy him, Berton. *Now! Now!*"

My eyes were shut. I felt like I was falling. "You're gods," I sobbed at them. "I'm still human. You're asking too much. How can I decide? I could be like them—greater than you. And you want me to give it up, go back to—" I thought of it. The stinking disease of Jelahn's tavern, and the girl—

I laughed a little then, and in that laugh was a crazy climbing note of fear and madness and not-knowing. Go back to that, when—

"There are only five of us left now," Reeta said. "Durach's feelers have killed the rest of us. We can't hold the Merger against him but a few seconds longer, Berton."

I thought of the outer planets where I'd always lived. The disease and the cold, the sadistic cops, the taverns with rotten women, minds eaten away with *krin-krin*.

"You picked me wrong," I yelled wildly. "You don't get heros from where I came from. Like Durach said—he's more my kind. We could be like gods. Immortal—how can I—"

I felt mind-energy, paraphysical power, flow into me from Reeta and Carleth. They told me something, a word—extratemporal—new perception that could let me see things that would happen! Space factors disappeared, for one terrible second. The factor of future time faded—and I could see!

I felt it. Hot and horrible and final. A flash of future knowledge. I saw Earth disappear into a great white flame. And where it had been was a white hot nova in black space.

Horror rose like a volcano of madness, and a sheet of pain seemed to split my head wide open.

"No," I felt Durach's roaring thought. "No, Berton! They're giving you a false impression. That's a probability variant of Earth's future. They've let you see the Earth destroyed—but it's a different variant than what will happen if you join us. By destroying the Third Plane my way, we can save Fourth Stage reality from destruction—but their way—all will be destroyed!"

"It's your choice," Reeta said. "We have only a few flashes of time left,

and then it won't matter anymore."

Maybe I didn't make any decision, not consciously. The pressure was too much for me. I had to do something, anything. I heard myself screaming as I pressed the trigger of the gun.

Durach fell beneath its power beam. It sprayed and burned and roared in the great room. He came around the desk as I turned; his white face had turned gray with a coat of wet over it. I felt the sudden complete effort within all of them as they tried to get me.

Freaks. But there wasn't much physical difference between these people and the average looking group. It was the inside of them that was different. Differences in metabolism, neural structure, conscious awareness... a lot more...

Durach and the others were surging in toward me. Walls of mind-energy throbbed around me. Their faces were twisted with hate and fear.

"Berton! You can know immortality, perfection, omnipotence! Don't sacrifice your life for a cause already lost according to that vision you had of the future! You know the conditions on the Third Plane! They have conquered a part of atomic power, but their Third Stage mentalities will never develop fast enough to keep that power from destroying them. Them and us too! That's the probability variant of a future that will happen anyway—unless we destroy the Third Stage now, in a way that will let this higher reality go on, unburdened!

**E**ARTH WILL destroy itself anyway, Berton. Let us save ourselves!" My legs wouldn't hold me anymore. I was on my knees. I tried to lift the gun again.

"It's your choice, Berton," Reeta said. Now her thought and her voice was weaker, faraway, dying. "Remember—Durach's insane."

Insane? Insane by what judgment? It was relative. Who—?

Durach's final argument was the most convincing; nobody wants to



die. "It means death for you, Berton, if you kill me. This city, this tower we're on top of—it exists because I will it to exist! This tower is two miles high, Berton! Kill me, and the tower will crumble from under you. You'll fall—fall, Berton! Remember, your Fourth Stage capacity is only temporary. When you kill me, your work for them will be done. You'll automatically start to return to Third Plane existence.

"You could control your fall here, with Fourth stage energy. But kill me, and you'll find yourself back in Third Stage reality—two miles above the Earth! And nothing under you but death—that'll be your reward for saving Earth for a little while longer, Berton! You want to live!"

Far, far away, I felt Reeta and Carleth, still trying to help me. Sure, a man wants to live. That Marty in Jelahn's tavern, he wanted to live. Millions of people on Earth, they wanted to live, wanted to try to make it work. No man wants to die.

There are some ways no man cares to live.

I fired the gun, fired it point blank into Durach's chest, then moved it around over the others.

There was blinding white light. And Durach and his kind stopped living. They went back to some other energy form, a kind that would never cause anyone any more trouble.

I knew then that Durach had been right, in one respect anyway; when he died, the tower died. I felt it melting away around me as the mind-energy that had created it started to fade away. I felt that awful emptiness opening under me. And—this is funny—I felt like a little boy who's done something he thinks is pretty good and pretty big. But no one knows he's done anything, and he feels hurt, and he wants people to know.

I wanted people to know. I didn't want what I'd done, and everything that had happened and might happen, to be lost to people. It wouldn't be fair. Reeta and Carleth knew what I was thinking. I felt their thoughts coming back again, stronger, and stronger and growing, and joyous.

Reeta—Carleth—help me.  
I don't want to be forgotten.

**S**OMEHOW, they were holding me with them, but I knew they couldn't do it very much longer. Around me was a gray billowing fog, and I was starting to fall through it—

Reeta and Carleth will stay here with Fourth Stage power; they are all right now. Durach's finished, and they have the merger back in their power completely now, and can use it for constructive purposes, or not at all. It doesn't matter. I've done my job. The danger's gone.

But I want people to know.

They're telling me to concentrate. They'll help me, but I must hurry, hurry. I've still some of the power, and they'll help me. Mind-energy. Matter changed from one form to another by thought. MY thought and theirs, together. Telurgy. Everything's made from the same stuff, only the electronic patterns are different. So we're willing patterns to change. We change some of the patterns of elements around me to another arrangement—into a metal scroll, my story to you, my thoughts of all that has happened, and what I've done. So you'll remember.

And they'll send it through the Barrier by the Merger.

What I'm thinking now as this tower and this city fades around me, it will all be on that metal for you to read. Maybe they could still save me, someway, but they can't because I guess I don't really want to go back to being a Third Stage guy.

I'm not like Glora and Malcolm, willing to give up so much, for a cause. After playing god, I can't go back to drinking *krin-krin* in Jelahn's tavern on the North Canal of Mars.

I'd rather die this way.

Durach said you'd blow up Earth and this higher reality too, with atomic power, because you wouldn't be able to learn to think enough to control it. Reeta and Carleth said Durach was insane, that he was wrong.

I don't know; I hope they were

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right. Because it's all waiting for you. I've seen it and I know. Beauty and greatness you can't imagine now. I don't know when, or how, but it can be yours someday. If you can hang on. And it'll be yours not just for a little while, like it was for me, but forever.

I guess it's up to you to prove whether Durach was insane or not.

I wonder if my thoughts are being recorded now by Carleth and Reeta for you to read? I can't tell. I've lost them. Things around me are blurred, and I seem to be falling down through a gray, slow rain...

\* \* \*

From a midnight teleaudocast by International Information Service. New York City. September 9, 1983:

*Reporter: The preceding has been teleod as a special interest feature, and is not intended as a factual report, naturally. The body of the man who appeared so mysteriously, according to reports, from the atmosphere two miles above Manhattan, and crashed into the city, cannot be satisfactorily identified. The metal scroll which fell after him, and which was just narrated for your interest, is obviously the work of a quack looking for notoriety, and a possible niche in Fortean records.*

*However, the Atomic Energy Commission has ordered a complete scanning of Uranium Pile personnel. This move is reported to be motivated by the discovery that during the afternoon, Ronal LeStrang, President of the Atomic Energy Commission, disappeared, and no trace of him has been found, up to this time.*

*Teleflashes will be brought to you directly from the scanning rooms as soon as further reports come in regarding President LeStrang. Security Police say that perhaps foreign agents are again trying to bore from within...though they insist that there is no proof up to this time that any foreign State is responsible for LeStrang's disappearance.*

*And now there will be an interlude of music, brought to you by special permission of Interplanetary Cultural Foundation, through the facilities of I.I.S.'s new Teleospan System. The first number features the Martian folk dance cycle...*

**THE END**