

ASTOUNDING

SCIENCE

FICTION

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE OCTOBER 10, 1945



by
**MURRAY
LEINSTER**



Interference

His job was simply investigation and cure of television interference sources. But the source this time was a little difficult to attack—

Illustrated by Williams

The racket came on the air about eight o'clock, and at eight-five the business office of American Broadcasting went up in the air like a gyrocket, making similar shrill screaming noises. The row came from somewhere in Brooklyn, and there wasn't a vision set in thirty miles—fifteen million customers—that could get anything but crazy streaks on its plate, or anything but

a steady rasping noise on audio. It was just before the Melba Hour when Little Angy went on the air, and Little Angy was something the customers couldn't do without. So when this noise started on the vision channels at this special time, the business office began to shriek and wring its hands, and every locator-car on the prowl went streaking.

The racket wasn't too hard to

locate. Of course, like all short stuff, we had to chase it around corners. Mort and me, we went around one block three times before Mort realized that the whole block was one big warehouse and it had aluminum-foil insulation which was batting the stuff back and forth with a couple of fire-walls and vertical metal signs elsewhere. When we made a bigger circuit around it, we got back on the line and only had to track off three places where it was coming from two directions at once, and one where there were three steady beams of it from as many casual reflectors. But it didn't help any that the business office was having hysterics on the car set, telling us that Little Angy would be going on in twenty minutes, in fifteen minutes, that there were already two thousand complaints, the mayor had called up to find out what was the matter and the Pinky-Pank company had already filed a penalty-claim on the ground of loss of coverage, and if something wasn't done quick—And so on.

We found it, though. The stuff was coming out of a block of dingy-looking buildings, some of them occupied tenements and some boarded up. It was a pretty bum neighborhood. What always makes it worse is that when you get close enough to short stuff with power behind it, it's bouncing off every pot and kettle and gives you secondary dispersion-beams. So Mort and me, we piled out of our car and were just starting to work when the other cars came, and we divided up the

street. We got started banging on doors with the old line of excuse-me-lady-but-there's-some-electrical-device-making-television-wave-length-interference-in-this-neighborhood-do-you-know-anybody-who-does-electrical-experimenting-and so on. It ain't scientific, but it's usually pretty quick. Meanwhile we had our hand-receivers and we were using them frantic. And the business office was throwing fits.

Mort ran into a fighting drunk who answered his door and wanted to put up an argument, and I was yelling in a deaf woman's ear when my hand-receiver got the line; plain and clear, no out-of-phase stuff, all regular, polarized beam. I yelled to Mort. It was next door to the house where we were so we dusted down into the street. Next door was boarded up, and so was the house beyond, so we hauled off some planks and smashed a window and shinnied in, leaving one guy outside to explain to cops if any. Inside, we heard a soft sort of humming sound and we streaked it up the stairs—because Little Angy would be coming on in ten minutes or less, now—and I saw a sort of glow coming outa a door and I ran there, yelling:

"Hey, guy! Turn it off! Whatever it is, turn it off!"

And I went to the door to argue further, with Mort and three other guys from the other locator-cars behind me. And there it was.

Nope. No dead man. Not yet. The dead man came later. What we saw when we went in was a four-foot kinda ring of light hang-

ing about a foot under the ceiling. It was a pinkish-bluish light, reasonably bright—you could read by it easy enough—and humming softly to itself. But the thing was that it wasn't in a tube. It wasn't hanging on to anything. It was just there, absolutely still and absolutely solid. It looked like a ring of something that—well—it looked more like a ring of red-hot glass than anything else, if you get what I mean. Only there wasn't any heat and it was just bright regardless, there in midair. And it was still as if it had angle irons and braces holding it. It was fixed in place somehow! But you couldn't see how.

Mort stared at it, and the other guys too. Then Mort said:

"This is it, whatever it is. How do you turn it off?"

"Little Angy's coming on in five minutes," says another guy, to whom the business office was the law and the prophets. "We got to do something! We got to turn it off!"

"Sure!" I said. I'd been prowling around it, looking at it from every angle there was. "Show me a switch or a wire. This is a job for somebody who knows more than I do."

We all stared at it. It didn't move. It was solid! Then Mort said:

"No wires, no switch, no nothing. We gotta get some foil and beam it up. Let Tech figure it out. Any of you fellas wants to touch it, go ahead. I'm gonna beam it!"

He went out. A couple of the

other fellas went with him. I heard 'em running downstairs. They were using flashlights. I heard the crash when they broke out the front door. We rate as emergency maintenance crews, you know, so it's not burglary or trespassing when we go barging around, any more than firemen or cops.

I fiddled with my hand-receiver. Yep, that was it. The stuff that was messing up all the television reception in the whole metrop was that ring of stuff hanging up there like a brick wall. There wasn't any wire to it, but it was radiating a flock of kilowatts. Mort came racing back with a big roll of paper-backed metal foil and some tape. The other fellas came with folding ladders. We got busy. It's funny, but nobody thought of touching it, or socking it with something, or trying to short it to a burn-out. It was too simple. Mort hung a sheet of foil to the ceiling, sticking it up with adhesive tape here and there. He strung it a yard from the ring. Another fella was setting up another one. They hung down like curtains, opposite each other. We stuck up two more, working fast. We had a kinda curtain around it, then. Then we swung the bottom edges of the metal-foil curtains toward each other so there was part of a sort of four-sided funnel around the thing. The short stuff it was giving off bounced off the foil and went straight up, and stuff like that goes straight through the heaviside layer. One fella went down to his car and came back.

"Business office says sets are workin' again," he reported. "Now we got to hunt for strays."

You don't often beam off interference, you know. Anything but a power line you usually turn off, firm, and let the legal department argue about it after. But if and when a power line has a leak that's making television-type interference, you beam it off like we'd done to this thing. It don't happen once in a coon's age, but we know how to do it. And we'd done it in time for Little Augy to go on the air and be received by an amusement-hungry populace.

O.K. We started looking for stray leakages of short stuff. We used more foil. Then Mort reported in, and all the check stations said O.K., and Mort came back and said:

"Buck and me have to sit by the fire till Tech gets here. Scram, you fellas."

The other fellas went out. There was some interference up in the Bronx. Four blocks hadn't any service at all, and the image was wabbling beyond that. So one car went there to find out who was using an ultraviolet machine with a bum condenser in it, and the others went on the prowl. Mort and me settled down for a rest. But when the others were gone, Mort looked at me with a kinda triumphant expression in his eyes.

"Buck," he says. "Whadda you think this thing is?"

"I've got three headaches already," I told him. "trying to figure it out."

"I got a hunch," he says again. "Did you every hear of time travel?"

Sure! But it ain't possible. There was a guy proved that if you could travel in time you'd have to pass through all the time in between where you started from and where you went, and passing through meant being there, so you'd have to be spread out through all the time in between. And if you were spread out over a coupla hundred years it would be the same thing as being spread out over a coupla hundred miles. Not practical. Anyhow, not healthy. I said so.

"O.K.," says Mort. "but I've got a hunch you're seeing a time-travel device. Nobody on this earth at this time could make a thing like that. So it must be somebody at another time. Notice you can't look through the ring?"

I squinted up at it, and it was so. You could see the ceiling past the edge of the ring, and when we were hanging up the foil we saw the ceiling over the top of it. But I couldn't look through the ring of light.

"It's a doorway," says Mort. "Perhaps we'd better say a sort of elevator shaft to the future. It's a way so somebody maybe a hundred thousand years in the future can come back and look us over."

I felt funnier the longer I stayed around that ring of light. At first I'd been too busy trying to figure out how to handle the short stuff it was giving off, but now that we didn't have anything to do but wait for Tech to send somebody—and they'd take their time—I began to

think that it was something very queer indeed.

"Yeah?" I said. "It's a way for somebody to come from another time, huh? Well then, where is he?"

The house we were in was all boarded up. We hadn't seen or heard anything at all, only noises we'd made ourselves.

"M-m-m," says Mort. "That's right. Let's look."

We'd come along a hallway to this room from the stairs. But there was another door inside here, and it was open. All the place was empty and old, with plaster falling down and everything dilapidated and dusty and musty-smelling. Mort took out his flashlight and went through that other door, swinging the beam around. He's hardly through when he lets out a squawk. Then there's silence, like he might've had to swallow to get so he could talk. Then:

"He's here," says Mort, strained. "He's right here. You might come see."

I felt cold chills run down my back. Mort says again:

"He's dead."

I went in and saw the dead man. He laid down on the floor, in the dust that was everywhere. He was a regular-looking guy, not any different from you or me, except his face had a funny expression on it. Some of the guys in Tech have that expression—the high-ups, mostly. College professors have it pretty often—not the higher-ups. Most chemists and a lot of preachers have

it. It's the expression of a guy who doesn't worry about beating the other guy to something because he's busy with stuff more important to him than that. A sort of non-competitive look, you might say. The average guy on salary has not got it.

He laid there, stone dead, just where he'd dropped. There wasn't a mark on him. He seemed to be dressed just like you and me, the first instant you looked at him. But he wasn't. The cloth was different. His clothes weren't cut exactly right. And his shoes—Mort said:

"Look at those shoes, willya?"

They weren't leather, but something else. They were made to look sort of like our shoes, but they were one piece. They weren't put together. They were—well—molded, maybe. The same thing with his clothes. They weren't sewed together. They were just made. This stuff turned up later, you understand, and I found it out when Mort and me were being driven crazy by professors and such trying to drag more information out of us than we had. But right at the beginning I saw that this guy woulda looked perfectly all right if you just glanced at him casual, but if you looked close you'd see the difference. But he was a pleasant-faced fella, at that.

"What—" I swallowed. "What killed 'im?"

"I dunno," says Mort. "I guess the cops will be askin' us that presently. So I'm goin' to take a look, first."

He fished in the fella's pockets. They weren't right. Mort's arm went in almost up to the elbow. He came out with a handful of stuff. He handed half of it to me and stared at the rest. That was when I first saw the picture of the girl. I almost dropped when I first looked at it, because it didn't look like a flat picture. It looked like I was looking in through a window at some scenery that went on forever. Three-dimensional stuff, you know. But was it three-dimensional? There was light behind the girl, and it was sure-enough light behind her. And that girl looked sweet. Like a darned sweet kid. A little bit wistful, but confident and brave and smiling and looking at somebody she liked a lot. Maybe—I figured this out later, too—the guy who'd had the picture had taken it, and she smiled at him while he was doing it. I'd like to have a girl like that smile at me like that.

I was staring at the picture when Mort swore:

"What," he says, "is this stuff for?"

There was a thing like three or four rings interlocked, only they couldn't move but so far in any direction. What it was for is your guess, I don't know. There was a little card with a sort of stubby pencil. Later on we found out there are all sorts of coils and condensers and things inside the thickness of the card, all packed in so it's no thicker than it needs to be for you to hold it. Somebody has figured since that it's a sort of recording telegraph, so you can send

a written message to somebody at a distance, but nobody can make it work, yet. And there was a thing that looked like a cigarette lighter, with a thumb stud. Mort pushed it and a streak of blue light came out and there was a small round hole up to the sky. Then his hand jumped, and the round hole changed to a wavery empty space like a saw-cut through the ceiling and roof and everything.

Mort dropped it, and his face went white.

"Le's get out of here!" says Mort.

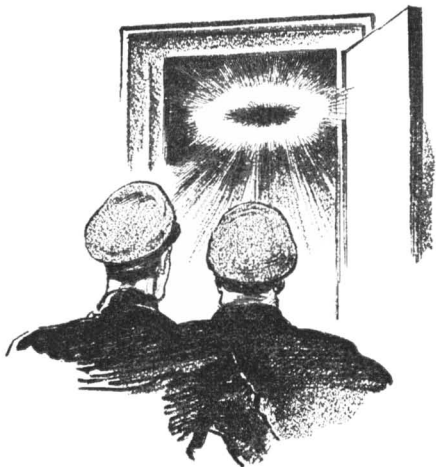
We went back in the room with the light. Mort was white as a sheet, but suddenly he says:

"That proves it! It's a time-travelin' device. We couldn't make things like this. This guy came from some place a million years from now!"

— I shoved the picture in my pocket and showed him the rest of what I had. There was a little ball of white metal. Period. There was a flat white square of something that looked like plastic. Period. There was a bit of machinery that was working. You could see wheels like clockworks running inside of a glasslike case. It didn't make sense.

"This guy musta been crazy," I said, trying to pretend I wasn't dizzy inside. "What does a grown man want to carry marbles and ring-puzzles and funny-shaped blocks of plastic for? And what does he carry machinery like this for?"

"We carry watches," says Mort. He added, his eyes gleaming. "Look! This guy came back to our



time from a million years A.D.!"

"He ain't bald and he's got teeth," I said, objecting. "He looks just like you and me."

"Maybe not a million," says Mort, feverish. "Maybe fifty thousand. Maybe only twenty-five thousand. But our civilization's only a coupla thousand years old. The electric part's not two hundred, yet! Suppose a guy like you went back a hundred thousand years and a cave man went through your pockets. You've got a pocketknife. He'd never get it open. You've got a watch. He'd never guess there was such a thing as hours and min-

utes. Your fountain pen—what'd he know of writing? Your little black book wouldn't mean a thing to him. Your handkerchief— He'd never guess what it was for. What have you got that he'd understand? Gum? Matches? Tobacco? Money? See what I mean?"

I said:

"There's a dead man in there, and we'd better call the cops and tell 'em."

"Not yet!" says Mort. His eyes glittered and blinked. He trembled all over. "Look here, Buck! This guy came from the future. There's no doubt about it! The door he

came through is still right there! If that door's still open, guys from the technical department will get to talking through it when they come. They'll all get credit and all the benefit outa it. But if we can get some information ahead of those guys we can clean up! Think what they must have in the future that we ain't got! Their television sets oughta be honeys. Their—"

He shook all over. Mort is a pretty smart guy in some ways, but he didn't see the real point he'd just made. To tell the truth, neither did I. I've got a developing set and a printer, though, and I take a lot of pictures. So I could see—I'd already seen—that if I could dope out how that three-dimensional stuff was done I'd really have something. So I was willing to go along with Mort for a while.

"What're you going to do?" I asked.

Mort already had his wallet out. He had his driver's license out from behind its celluloid window. His hand trembled.

"I'm goin' to do a card trick," says Mort. But his voice shook.

He took his driver's license and skimmed it up at the center of the ring of light. It went right through. It shoulda hit the ceiling and dropped back. It didn't. If it had fallen anywhere but back through the ring, it woulda hit the foil and come back to the floor anyway. But it just vanished.

"They've got it," says Mort, shivering. "They've got my picture and my driver's license. That's to tell 'em somebody else besides the

guy in the next room is trying to talk to 'em. Maybe English has changed so much they can't read our kind a hundred thousand years from now. Anyhow—"

He tossed up a quarter. Hard. If it had hit the ceiling, we'd have heard it. The light ring didn't hum too loud for that. But the quarter went through the middle of the ring that we couldn't see through, and it didn't hit anything, and it didn't drop back.

"Gimme something to throw through!" say Mort. "So they'll understand what I'm trying to do!"

He took an envelope out of his pocket and scribbled on it: "*Hello! Hello! Men of the future, hello!*" He skimmed it up. It didn't come back either.

Then he sat there, biting his nails, staring up. So did I. And then something came down out of the middle of the ring of light. It was a metal rod with a round glass ball on the end of it. It came down, stayed for maybe a second, and went up again.

"There wasn't any hole in the ceiling!" says Mort, his teeth chattering. "What was that? What would we do if we were on the other side of a ring like that—"

I said maybe the only intelligent thing I thought of during the whole business.

"If we were working on it from that end," I said, "and we wanted to know what happened to a guy we were scared to follow, we'd shove a camera through to snap his picture."

"Right!" says Mort, staring at

me. "Now they'll see us an' know we're trying to talk to 'em—"

We waited. The rod came down again. It had a clamp on the end of it now. There was a picture in the clamp. It was a picture of the guy who was dead in the next room.

"They want to know where he is!" said Mort.

He took the picture out of the clamp. He was so excited that he didn't notice what I saw right away. That picture was three-dimensional color, too. It stood out just like the picture of the girl I had in my pocket. But Mort took it, and on the blank back side of it he scribbled a sketch of a man lying down on the floor—it was a bum picture—with two other men standing by him. And he drew the two other men, who were supposed to be us, looking very sad and grief-stricken.

He put it back in the clamp and shoved it up. It went on up through the ring. There was a long pause. Mort got restless.

"I'm not a good artist," he said shakily. "Maybe they think we killed him. Say! I'm going to send up my hand-receiver."

He picked it up and tossed it through the ring of light. It stayed gone, though I couldn't help wincing and waiting to hear it crash. But it didn't. It stayed put.

Then the clamp came down once more. It had another picture in it. At least, it had a sheet of paper that seemed to be all black on one side. But when Mort grabbed it and looked at it, it seemed to be all

dancing spots of light. He tore his hair.

"I don't get it!" he says, feverish. "I send 'em my picture and they send a camera down. Then they send a picture of the dead guy in the next room. I send 'em up a handset, that'll at least show 'em we can handle short waves, and they send me a picture with a lot of sparkles on it."

I stared at the picture. The sparkles were different sizes and tints. Suddenly I saw it.

"This's a star map!" I said. "Look! It's a picture of the sky! There's the Big Dipper! See? And there's the Little Dipper and the Pole Star! But what's it for?"

Mort fairly yelled with relief.

"I got it!" he panted. "They figured out! If we send 'em a picture of the stars, they can figure out if they hit the time they were aiming for! They're askin' us what year this is!"

He ran out of the room and downstairs. I knew what he was after. He used to read those popular science magazines, and they always have a star map in them, telling amateur astronomers where to find planets and comets and such. He had one of them in the locator-car. He'd gone after it.

I waited. The clamp hung down. There was a dead man in the next room. Presently I figured maybe they'd get tired of waiting, so I tore a leaf out of my little black book and drew the clamp, and then another picture. It was a stick-man running downstairs. Then I drew

something out of a car, and then running upstairs again. I put it in the clamp and gave it a shove and it was pulled up and vanished. And they understood all right. The clamp came down again, empty, and it waited.

I was looking at the picture of the girl when I heard Mort on his way upstairs again.

"I got it!" he panted. "Here's this magazine and I've opened to the star map for this month. They'll realize we got sense and we'll learn plenty!"

He tied a string about the magazine where it was already opened, and put it in the clamp. He shoved it, and it went up. Mort stood there, staring feverishly, figuring what he was going to ask next. The star map stayed up there. The clamp didn't come down. Nothing happened.

Then the ring of light went out. And it stayed out.

Mort tore out most of his hair when the thing stayed that way. He might have gone off his nut if a smart scientist from a research foundation hadn't talked confidentially to both of us a few days later.

"Nobody in the world coulda done better," said that guy comfortingly. "They were trying time travel, and the math is tricky. They wanted to find out if they'd gone into the future or the past. You told them with that star map—neither—and they went away. There's nothing here they wanted. We're like cave men, to them. Nothing we could say would inter-

est 'em. You did all right."

Mort said:

"But—listen! Where did they come from? And that dead guy—"

"What does it matter where they came from?" asked the guy from the foundation. "A parallel time track most likely, where they got started up the ladder say fifty thousand years before us. But the important thing is what we get out of it. And we get plenty. Those gadgets. That dead man—we know he got killed because he didn't wear an insulated suit when he came through that ring. Since he didn't, he lived only five minutes. But when we go barging around in time we'll know how to do it."

I'd been listening, and I butted in:

"Yeah," I said, "you think we're going to do that sort of thing too? You guess we'll go—well—to where those guys came from?"

"Why not?" says the guy from the foundation. "In a thousand years?"

It was ten days after, the whole business began. I'd had a lot of time to think.

"Listen," I said, "when you get set and you want somebody to wear an insulated suit, you let me know, huh?"

I grinned, but I've still got that picture the dead guy had on him. It's a picture of a swell kid. A darned sweet kid. And somehow I don't feel like grinning when I think of it. I wouldn't mind trying to find that kid to give her back her picture and tell her I'm sorry about the guy.

THE END.