

THE CHRONOPHONE; OR THE TACHYONIC ANTI-TELEPHONE

PAUL M. CRAY

YEARLONG IN SHORT STORY, HUGO HOUSE, 2022-3

4200 WORDS — NOVEMBER 2022

Arthur was fiddling with the one of the valves in the device when the bell on the shop door jangled. He leaped up and saw that it was Elizabeth, Christopher's sister, who had come in the sub-post office.

'I need to buy a stamp, Arthur,' she said. She pushed a letter under the gap at the bottom of the screen along with three ha'pennies. Arthur turned the letter around and saw that it was addressed to Christopher. He tore a stamp from the sheet, wetted it on the sponge and stuck in the top righthand corner of the envelope.

'How is Christopher?' he said.

'I thought you two were friends. I thought you wrote to one another.'

Arthur hadn't had a letter from Christopher since early February. He had written twice since he had got the last letter from Christopher. It was early March now. It would be Easter in a few weeks. He was hoping to have the device finished by then. Arthur hadn't told Christopher he was building it. He wanted it to a surprise and to prove to Christopher that he could build things on his own.

'Will there be anything else?'

'No,' said Elizabeth. 'No, no thank you. Not today. You will put the letter in the post, wouldn't you? And please give my regards to your mother.'

'Of course,' said Arthur. 'Good day.'

'Good day, Arthur.' She turned and left the shop. Arthur picked up the letter. He could steam it open and see she what she had written. But that was illegal and strictly

against GPO regulations. Besides what if Mother were to find out? But it wasn't like it was a letter *from* Christopher. Elizabeth was a 17-year old girl. She wouldn't be writing to Christopher about *interesting* things. Like electronics and astronomy and time telegraphy. It was probably all about boring stuff about point-to-points and talkie stars. She probably didn't even know that there was already television in London and that soon there was going to be 3D colour projector television. In some time tracks anyway. John Logie Laird had given a talk about it from 1946 on the BBC the other night. He and Christopher were going to start building a television at Easter. Well, that had been the plan. If they could find a cathode ray tube somewhere.

He went back over to the bench. The television was to be their next project. Of course, they would have to build a transmitter as well as the receiver. There wouldn't be a broadcast television signals in Somerset for years yet at least not in any time track news of which had reached Arthur's 1932. He picked up the device he had been working on when Elizabeth came in. Over the Christmas holiday, they had constructed a telephone system in Christopher's house. Christopher's father was a doctor and had been complaining for years about the unreliability of the mechanical bell system that connected the surgery, the waiting room and the kitchen. Well, Christopher and Arthur had decided, it was the 1930s now and they could do something about that! The system they had built did have an switch that allowed the caller to select which telephone would ring. Arthur had been quite proud of himself for coming up with a way to achieve this with an electromechanical relay they had fabricated from various odds and ends they had found lying around. Christopher was older and definitely knew more mathematics than him, but Arthur had begun to wonder if he were better at the more practical side of electrical science. And perhaps he could catch up with the mathematics.

The telephone system they had built was quite crude. It was possible to listen in from

any telephone on the network to a conversation going on, but you could tell someone was because opening a connection from a third phone changed the sound quality of the call. When Christopher went back to school, he had given Arthur various leftover components from the project. Arthur had spotted in *Wireless World* a design that looked interesting. It used valves to amplify a tiny current. Arthur thought he could modify to build a device that would allow Christopher to listen in without being detected. Arthur was the night operator of the village exchange. Listening in to conversations was technically frowned upon, but it wasn't always possible to avoid it and it was considered a perk of the job. Arthur didn't know how much Christopher wanted to be able to hear his mother ordering something sent from the kitchen, but it was the idea of being able to do so that really mattered. Arthur picked up a piece of wire, measured out the correct length, cut it and then bend it into the require shape. It should take him a few days now to finish now. He just hoped it was going to work

Arthur finished the device as far as he could on the Wednesday, so on Thursday evening he was sat at the switchboard reading Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* again (it was so exciting that these days you could read books time-telegraphed from the future or at least *a* future) when the buzzer buzzed and he looked up to see that the light for the District Exchange was illuminated. A trunk call was always exciting because they were so much more expensive than local ones and thus whoever was making it must have a very urgent reason to do so. Which meant there must be exciting news. He opened the connection.

'Hello,' said Arthur, 'Temple Broughton exchange.'

'This is the Taunton exchange operator,' said the voice. 'Chronophone call for 42.'

42 was the Howard's. Someone was making a *chronophone* call to the Howard's? This was unprecedented! Who could it possibly be? This was the most exciting to thing to

happen in the village since forever. Wait until he told Christopher about this!

'Connecting,' said Arthur, struggling to her the word out of his mouth, his mind agog with the possibilities of what this missive from the future might mean. He plugged the cable into the socket for 42.

Arthur could hear a low hiss of static. There was no voice. But that was to be expected. The call was still ringing out at the Howard's. Because a chronophone call was strictly one-way, the caller had no idea when the call was answered. The protocol was wait to 75 seconds to allow the connection to be completed before beginning to speak. What if the Howard's were out? What if no-one ever answered the call? The call would be send out in the void and would be heard by no-one. Except the operators. And then Arthur heard the call being completed at the Howard's end.

'Hello,' said Dr Howard. 'Temple Broughton 42.' said Dr Howard.

'This is the London Central chronophone exchange operator,' said a voice, 'Please standby.'

Arthur strained his ear, but all he could hear was the random crackling of the connection. And then he made it out, impossibly quiet, a voice? A female voice. He concentrated harder. What was the voice saying?

'...other? Father? Can you hear me. This is Elizabeth. I'm calling from the future, from 1941. Something terrib...''

'Unplug, Temple Broughton exchange,' said the Taunton operator, 'You are weakening the signal.'

Arthur felt a hot stab of guilt in being caught out listening in by the Taunton operator. He released his operator connection. But his mind that reeling. Elizabeth was making a chronophone call? And hat was the something awful that had happened?

Arthur stood up grabbed the box from the bench. It made use of some redundant bits

of GPO kit that Arthur had been able to get his hands and thus had the standard plugs. In a few seconds he was able to connect it directly in the switchboard and plug it as the mains for power. Because its impedance was so much higher than the ordinary operator's headphone, it would draw much less current. and the operator in Taunton wouldn't be able to detect it. Arthur put the earphone in his ear and moved the switch to turn it on. He hoped desperately to whatever entities might be deified by the middle of the twenty-first century that it would work. He heard an electronic howl as the valves started to warm up. The call might be over at this rate before his box had warmed up. And then he could just about make out Elizabeth's voice through the shroud of static.

'...other war with the ghastly Germans. France has fallen. There are reports of the most terrible beastliness. And there's been a horrible accid...', the signal faded out and Arthur turned up the volume, though he knew that would make the noise louder too,'...pher was in the RAF. He joined up with Arthur, you know Mrs Clarke's boy, they were working together on something awfully hush-hush and there was some kind of terrible acci...', was that a sob or a howl in the time-winds? '... and they are reported missing, but there's no hope. Mother! Father ! I don't know if you can hear me,' another anguished wail of the tachyonic flux, 'but you must help Christopher. You must se...', the signal faded out, '...oodbye, Mother, Father. But, please, you must save Christopher.'

The call was disconnected at the Taunton Exchange side, presumably because the connection had ended at London Central. But Arthur could still hear what was being said at the Howard's as the line was still live.

'It was Elizabeth,' the voice was Dr Howard's. 'I can't quite believe. These blasted time telephone actually work? Something about Christopher.'

'Christopher?' the voice was faint, but recognisably that of Mrs Howard.

'She said he's missing in 1941 and we must do something to save him.'

And then the line went dead as Dr Howard replaced the receiver. Arthur turned off his device and pulled out the connectors. He realised he was shaking.

There was a war against the Germans in 1941 and Christopher and he were in the RAF together and were missing. He took off his glasses. Could you even get in the RAF with his eyesight? Missing, and presumed dead. And yet that was just one time track and a time track that Arthur and Christopher and the rest of the world were no longer on. Every time a chronophone call was made, a new time track branched off. Arthur knew this from reading Bertrand Russell's *The ABC of Temporal Telegraphy*. Even in 1932, there were thousands of chronophone calls and temporal telegraphs received every day. That was a million a year or more. And 1941 was 9 years off and the number of connections was increasing all the time. That meant that there were millions of 1941s out there. There was nothing special about the one Elizabeth had called from and that was one that Arthur definitely wasn't going to be in. It was already known that there were 1941s in which Britain was at war with Germany again and others where she was at war with the Soviet Union or even America, 1941s menaced by the threat of apocalypse from bombs energised by the very power of the atom itself and ones in which the League of Nations was well on the road to creating universal peace. Besides you could run over by a bus tomorrow or get consumption and be dead in a couple of years. There was no point worrying about one time track. There were lots in which he would be dead in 1941. But that wasn't really any different than to how it had been in the old days when no-one had any idea what might happen in the future.

Elizabeth wanted to save Christopher, but the Christopher (and Arthur) who were missing in the 1941 Elizabeth had called from would stay missing. So what could Dr and Mrs Howard do to save their son? They couldn't do anything because the fates of the millions of Chistophers who would exist in 1941 couldn't be determined by anything done in 1941. Still, people were, Arthur knew, superstitious. Getting a call from a relative in the

future seemed like gleaning some terrible knowledge from the oracle. And sometimes that could even be the case. But not here. There was too much uncertainty about what time track each Arthur would end up in to worry too much about this. He took a deep breath. Even it had felt like someone walking over his grave in a time track in which an Arthur was real as he was was missing presumed dead. But he couldn't mention this to Christopher. It would upset him and it might get back to Arthur's mother that he connected the device to the switchboard. No, this was definitely knowledge best kept to himself.

Arthur wondered whether Mrs Howard might say something to his mother about the call, but his mother said nothing to him about the matter over the next couple of weeks and shown no change in behaviour that Arthur could ascertain. Perhaps she was just as philosophical as him, it was more like that Mrs Howard hadn't said anything, they weren't friends as such after all, or she was being stoical, something she was practiced in given what had happened to her family in the Great War and the death of Arthur's father two years ago. Arthur had expected Christopher to return from school the weekend before Easter, but there was no sign of him on the Saturday and Sunday. On the Monday, Arthur received a letter. From the handwriting of the address he knew immediately who it was from. He dashed upstairs to his bedroom and torn open the envelope.

*Abbey House,*

*Sherborne School,*

*Saturday, 1932 March 19*

*Dear Arthur,*

*I trust this letter finds you well. I am very sorry for having been so slow in replying to your earlier letters.*

*I will not be returning to the village for the Easter vacation. I learnt yesterday that I am to go to live with my aunt and uncle on their farm in Washington in the United States. This was a surprise to me, but Mother and Father say it will be for the best. The climate is healthier there and prospects are, I suppose, better what with the slump and everything, although who knows with the future getting closer to us all the time these days with the chronophone? I will miss the chance to talk to you about things like that and getting to work on the television. Perhaps we could both build shortwave stations and communicate by Morse?*

*Please give my regards to your mother.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Christopher A. Howard*

Arthur felt his eyes sting hotly. He took off his glasses and dabbed at them with his handkerchief. The first thing that he thought was that Christopher hadn't been slow in replying to his earlier letters, he hadn't replied to them. The second thing he thought was if Elizabeth actually understood how the chronophone worked she wouldn't have rung up her parents from 1941. Her 1941 Christopher was missing. There was nothing that 1941 Elizabeth could do about that. And interfering with the past, she hadn't guaranteed that Christopher would be any safer. Perhaps his ship to America might sink and he drown or he be killed in a

railroad accident on the way from New York to Washington state. 1941 was nine years off. Christopher might come back to Britain before then and join the RAF or in a fit of patriotic fervour go to Canada and join the RCAF. Lots of people had done that in the Great War. Or just get conscripted into the US forces in one of the multitude of wars the various Americas were involved in 1941s. There were millions of Christophers in the future and you couldn't guarantee that any of them would be any better off. But what Elizabeth had ensured was that in this branch of the time tree Christopher was in Washington and Arthur was in Somerset. The branch they were in now was forever severed from the one from which Elizabeth had made her fateful chronophone call. Arthur blew his nose. Christopher was never going to get use the device now.

Arthur couldn't help hoping that he might get a letter from Christopher in America. It would have taken him a week and a half or so to get from but nothing arrived. Then again, letters could take many weeks to arrive by sea. And then one day, Arthur was behind the counter, when Elizabeth came into the shop.

'Hello, Arthur,' she said. 'I would like to send this letter to America.' She pushed it across the counter. Arthur felt himself tense. He looked at the envelope. It was addressed to Christopher. 'How much would that be?'

'Tuppence ha'penny,' said Arthur. 'How is Christopher?'

'Don't you two write?'

Arthur couldn't say he hadn't had Christopher's address. Christopher could have written to him. It wasn't as though Christopher didn't know Arthur's address.

'The mail can be quite slow from abroad.'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth. 'It can be terribly slow. When are we going to get airmail to America?'

'It's coming,' said Arthur. 'In a year or two. I was reading about it just the other day.'

She pushed three coins across the counter.

'Well, all these things they keep promising us from the future, they can't come soon enough. Please give my regards to your mother. Good day, Arthur,'

'Good day.'

She turned and left the shop. Arthur stared at the letter. Elizabeth had changed everything by having Christopher sent away. He could punish her by not sending the letter. But it wasn't the 1932 Elizabeth who had made the chronophone. It was a 1941 one. Was it right to punish the Elizabeth he knew now for something that an Elizabeth in the future had done? And besides destroying a letter he was responsible for the transmission of was a gross breach of GPO regulations. He took a piece of paper and wrote down Christopher's address in America and then put a stamp on the envelope. He had Christopher's address now. He could write to him. And Christopher was even less culpable for his being sent away than Elizabeth. But Christopher could have written to him. He folded the piece of paper with the address on it and put it in his pocket and then dropped the letter in outgoing mailbag.

It was nearly eleven o'clock and Arthur was starting to get tired. He was shocked back to full alertness when the buzzer buzzed and the light for the District Exchange illuminated. A trunk call at this time? It must be something very urgent. He opened the connection.

'Hello,' said Arthur, 'Temple Broughton switchboard.'

'This is the Taunton exchange operator,' said the voice. 'Chronophone call for Temple Broughton switchboard.'

'That's here.'

'Yes,' said the operator, 'it is.'

'Should I go and get my mother?' said Arthur. 'She'll be asleep.'

'You're the night operator. I'm going to connect the call,'

And the sound on the line went hollow.

'Hello, Temple Broughton switchboard,' said Arthur even though he knew whoever in the future was at the other end of the chronophone couldn't hear him.

'This is me, Arthur,' said a very faint, very distant voice, 'this is you calling from 1941. Plug in the box. Don't worry about the operator,' which was easy for him to say, 'you'll be able to hear me much better and I have something important to tell you.'

In a few seconds Arthur had connected the amplifier.

'You've probably connected the box now,' said the future Arthur, who was now much louder now as was the fuzz of static on the line. 'I don't have to tell you to listen carefully because you know as well as I do that this is my only chance to communicate with you. We're fighting a war up here in 1941, Arthur, and we're losing it because we're not just fighting it against the Germans, we're fighting it against the Americans too. Lindbergh, yes, that Lindbergh, he became president by saying he'd keep America out of the war and then went straight in on the German side as soon as he was sworn in. And this is a time war, Arthur, you must realise that. It's being fought in the past and the future as well as the now through a myriad of different time tracks. Yes, there are millions of time tracks, but they tend to converge to a few main types. And that means there are millions of Arthurs in 1941 calling Arthurs in 1932 from time tracks in which Britain is fighting the Germans and the Americans. It just feels like there's one of you , but we are both splitting all the time.

'Now, you might be wondering why I am telling you all this. What's 24-year old Arthur got to do with 14-year old Arthur. But you're the most important boy in the time tracks. You know you think that Christopher is better than you at mathematics? Well, you were right. Not just good, Arthur, it turns out he's as good as Dirac. Better perhaps. Almost as good as Einstein. The problem is that in the time track I'm in, he's on the wrong bloody

side. He's in America, the top temporal physicist of the Axis. He's why they are winning this time war. And you know thought you were better st the practical side that Christopher. You were right about that too. You're a bloody electronic genius! That's what I do. I design and build tachyonic physics devices for the British government. That's why they let in the RAF even though I can hardly se...'

There was a popping and crackling of noise and for some moments Arthur could make out nothing. But his mind raced. Christopher was a physics genius? *He* was a electronic expert? It was what had dreamt of, but it was hard to believe it could be true.

'...hing, Arthur. We have some great British temporal physicists here, Lovell, Hoyle, Turing. But none of them are as good as Christopher. I can only build what the boffins come up with. And the Americans and the Germans are a technology powerhouse, even more so with what they can get from the future. Christopher is only 24 and we know he makes his most profound breakthroughs over the next decade. But if we here working for the British, it would be us who were to exploit those breakthroughs.

'And that's the thing, Arthur. You are the only person who can bring Christopher back to Britain. I know, Arthur, because I spoke to him after the war broke out and before the Americans came in. I begged him to return to Britain. And he told me that there was nothing here for him, that his parents had sent him off to America to get rid of him, because they didn't love him. And then they had died and Elizabeth could never explain why what had happened to him had happened and America was his home now. But Arthur, you know, you know why his parents sent him to America. You can write to him and tell him. There's a design for a new type of shortwave transceiver in next month's edition of *Wireless World*. I know because I designed it myself. You've already built the amplifier. You can make one for yourself and send one to Christopher. You can do what he said in his letter. Communicate my across the ether by Morse. And if you do can persuade Christopher to come back to

Britain. You can save your country and save a million Earths. You might only be 14, Arthur, but you are as much on the front line of this total war as I am.'

The line went dead.

Arthur was the night operator. He slept by the switchboard in case of the rare event of call coming through during night. He went over to his bed and lay down. He could feel the nightmare of history pressing down on him. He did not think he would ever sleep again. He turned over and wept into his pillow so that his sobs would not wake Mother.