

The Sound Machine

It was a warm summer evening and Klausner walked quickly through the front gate, around the side of the house and into the garden at the back. He went down the garden until he came to a wooden hut; then he unlocked the door, stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

The inside of the hut was an unpainted room. Against one wall, on the left, there was a long wooden work-surface, and on it, among a lot of wires and small sharp tools, stood a black box about three feet long.

Klausner moved across the room to the box. The top of the box was open, and he bent down and began to look inside it among the different-coloured wires and silver tubes. He picked up a piece of paper that lay beside the box, studied it carefully, put it down, looked inside the box and started running his fingers along the wires, pulling at them gently to test the connections. He looked back at the paper, then into the box, then at the paper again, checking each wire. He did this for perhaps an hour.

Then he put his hand around to the front of the box where there were three dials, and he began to turn them. At the same time, he watched the movement of the machine inside the box. As he did so, he kept speaking softly to himself. His fingers were moving quickly and carefully inside the box. His mouth was twisting into strange shapes when a thing was delicate or difficult to do, and he was saying, 'Yes . . . Yes . . . And now this one . . . Yes . . . But is this right? Is it – where's my plan? . . . Ah, yes . . . Of course . . . Yes, that's right . . .' His attention was impressive; his movements were quick; there was an urgency about the way he worked, of breathlessness, of strong controlled excitement.

Suddenly he heard footsteps on the path outside, and he

straightened and turned quickly as the door opened and a tall man came in. It was Scott. It was only Scott, the doctor.

'So this is where you hide yourself in the evenings,' the doctor said.

'Hello, Scott,' Klausner said.

'I was just passing,' the doctor told him, 'so I came to see how you are. There was no one in the house, so I came on down here. How's your throat been behaving?'

'It's all right. It's fine.'

'Now that I'm here I might as well have a look at it.'

'Please don't trouble yourself. I'm quite cured. I'm fine.'

The doctor began to feel the tension in the room. He looked at the black box on the work-surface; then he looked at the man. 'What's this?' he said. 'Making a radio?'

'No. I'm just playing around.'

'It's got rather complicated-looking insides.'

'Yes.' Klausner's mind seemed to be on something else.

'What is it?' the doctor asked. 'It's rather a frightening-looking thing, isn't it?'

'It's just an idea.'

'Yes?'

'It has to do with sound, that's all.'

'Good heavens, man! Don't you get enough of that sort of thing every day at work?'

'I like sound.'

'So it seems.' The doctor went to the door, turned and said, 'Well, I won't interrupt you. I'm glad your throat's not worrying you any more.' But he kept standing there looking at the box, anxious to know what this strange patient of his was doing. 'What's it really for?' he asked. 'You've got me interested now.'

Klausner looked down at the box, then at the doctor, and he reached up and began to rub his right ear gently. There was a pause. The doctor stood by the door, waiting, smiling.

'All right, I'll tell you.' There was another pause, and the doctor could see that Klausner was having trouble deciding how to begin.

'Well, it's like this . . . the idea is very simple really. The human ear . . . you know that it can't hear everything. There are sounds so high or so low that the ear can't hear them.'

'Yes,' said the doctor. 'Yes.'

'Well, any note which is so high that it has more than 15,000 vibrations a second can't be heard. Dogs have better ears than us. A dog could hear it. There are whistles which can only be heard by dogs.'

'Yes, I've seen one.'

'Of course you have. And up the scale, higher than the note of that whistle, there's another note. You can't hear that one either. And above that there is another and another, rising right up the scale for ever and ever and ever. There's a note that's so high that it vibrates a million times a second . . . and another a million times as high as that . . . and on and on, higher and higher, as far as numbers go, beyond the stars.'

Klausner was becoming more excited every moment. He was a small man, weak and nervous, and his hands were always moving. His large head leaned towards his left shoulder as if his neck were not quite strong enough to support it. His face was smooth and pale, almost white, and the pale grey eyes behind his steel glasses had a distant, confused look. The doctor, looking at that strange pale face and those pale grey eyes, felt that there was a quality of distance about this little person. It was as if the mind were far from where the body was.

The doctor waited for him to go on. Klausner spoke slowly. 'I believe that there is a whole world of sound around us all the time that we cannot hear. It is possible that up there in those areas where sounds are so high we can't hear them, there is a new exciting music being made, a music so powerful that it would

drive us crazy if only our ears were tuned to hear it. There may be anything . . . for all we know, there may be—'

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'But it's not very likely.'

'Why not? Why not?' Klausner pointed to a fly sitting on a piece of wire on the work-surface. 'You see that fly? What sort of noise is that fly making now? None — that we can hear. But the creature may be whistling or singing a song. It's got a mouth, hasn't it? It's got a throat?'

The doctor looked at the fly and he smiled. He was still standing by the door with his hand on the door handle. 'Well,' he said. 'So you're going to check that?'

'Some time ago,' Klausner said, 'I made a simple instrument that proved to me the existence of many sounds which we cannot hear. I have often sat and watched the needle of my instrument recording the presence of sound vibrations in the air when I myself could hear nothing. And *those* are the sounds I want to listen to. I want to know where they come from and who or what is making them.'

'And is that machine on the table there going to allow you to hear those noises?'

'It may. Who knows? So far, I've had no luck. But I've made some changes in it and tonight I'm ready to try it again. This machine,' he said, touching it with his hands, 'is designed to pick up sound vibrations that are too high for the human ear, and to make it possible for us to hear them. I tune the machine in, almost like a radio.'

The doctor looked at the long, black box. 'And you're going to try tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I wish you luck.' He looked at his watch. 'I must go now,' he said. 'Goodbye, and thank you for telling me. I must call again sometime and find out what happened.' The doctor went out and closed the door behind him.

For a little longer, Klausner worked on the wires in the black box; then he straightened up and in a soft excited whisper said, 'Now we'll try again . . . We'll take it out into the garden this time . . . and then perhaps . . . perhaps. Lift it up now . . . carefully . . . Oh, my God, it's heavy!' He carried the box to the door, found that he couldn't open the door without putting it down, carried it back, put it on the work-surface, opened the door, and then carried it with some difficulty into the garden. He placed the box carefully on a small wooden table that stood on the grass. He went back inside the hut and got a pair of earphones. He connected these to the machine and then put them over his ears. The movements of his hands were quick and exact. He breathed in and out through his mouth in quick, loud breaths of excitement. He kept on talking to himself with little words of comfort and encouragement, as if he were afraid – afraid that the machine might not work and afraid also of what might happen if it did.

He stood there in the garden beside the wooden table, so pale, small and thin that he looked like a sick child. The sun had gone down. There was no wind, no sound at all. From where he stood, he could see over a low fence into the next garden, and there was a woman walking down the garden with a flower-basket on her arm. He watched her for a time without thinking about her at all. Then he turned to the box on the table and pressed a button on its front. He put his left hand on the controls and his right hand on the button that moved a needle across a large central dial, like the wavelength dial of a radio. The dial was marked with many numbers, starting at 15,000 and going on up to 1,000,000.

And now he was bending forward over the machine. The needle was travelling slowly across the dial, so slowly that he could hardly see it move, and in the earphones he could hear a faint noise.

Behind this noise, he could hear the sound of the machine

itself, but that was all. As he listened, he became conscious of a strange feeling that his ears were stretching out away from his head. It felt as if each ear were connected to his head by a thin stiff wire, and that the wires were getting longer, that his ears were going up and up towards a secret and forbidden land, a dangerous world of sound where ears had never been before and had no right to be.

The needle moved slowly across the dial, and suddenly he heard a scream, a terrible scream, and he jumped and caught hold of the edge of the table. He looked quickly around him as if he expected to see the person who had screamed. There was no one in sight except the woman in the garden next door, and she had not screamed. She was bending down, cutting yellow roses and putting them into her basket.

Again it came. A throatless, inhuman scream, sharp and short, very clear and cold. The note itself had a hard metallic quality that he had never heard before. Klausner looked around him, trying to see where the noise had come from. The woman next door was the only living thing in sight. He saw her reach down, take a rose stem in the fingers of one hand and cut the stem with a pair of scissors. Again he heard the scream.

It came at the exact moment when the rose stem was cut.

At this point, the woman straightened up, put the scissors into the basket with the roses and turned to walk away.

'Mrs Saunders!' Klausner shouted, his voice high with excitement. 'Oh, Mrs Saunders!'

And looking round, the woman saw her neighbour standing in his garden. He was wearing earphones and was waving his arms and calling to her in a voice so high and loud that she became frightened.

'Cut another one! Please cut another one quickly!'

She stood still, looking at him. 'Why, Mr Klausner!' she said. 'What's the matter?'

'Please do as I ask,' he said. 'Cut just one more rose!'

Mrs Saunders had always believed her neighbour to be a rather strange person; now it seemed that he had gone completely crazy. She wondered whether she should run into the house and get her husband. No, she thought. No, he's harmless. I'll just do as he asks. 'Certainly, Mr Klausner, if you like,' she said. She took her scissors from the basket, bent down and cut another rose.

Again Klausner heard that terrible, throatless scream in the earphones; again it came at the exact moment the rose stem was cut. He took off the earphones and ran to the fence that separated the two gardens. 'All right,' he said. 'That's enough. No more. Please, no more.'

The woman stood there, a yellow rose in one hand, scissors in the other. She looked at him.

'I'm going to tell you something, Mrs Saunders,' he said, 'something that you won't believe. You have, this evening, cut a basketful of roses. You have cut through the stems of living things with sharp scissors, and each rose that you cut screamed in the most terrible way. Did you know that, Mrs Saunders?'

'No,' she said. 'I certainly didn't know that.'

'I heard them screaming. Each time you cut one, I heard the cry of pain.'

'Did you really, Mr Klausner?' She decided she would make a run for the house in about five seconds.

'You might say,' he went on, 'that a rose bush has no nervous system to feel with, no throat to cry with. You'd be right. It hasn't. But *how do you know, Mrs Saunders*' – and here he leaned far over the fence and spoke in an angry whisper – '*how do you know* that a rose bush doesn't feel as much pain when someone cuts its stem as you would feel if someone cut your wrist off with a large pair of garden scissors? *How do you know that? It's alive, isn't it?*'

'Yes, Mr Klausner. Oh, yes – and good night.' Quickly she turned and ran up the garden to her house. Klausner went back

to the table. He put the earphones on and stood for a moment while listening. He could still hear the faint sound of the machine, but nothing more. He bent down and took hold of a small white flower growing up through the grass. He took it between his thumb and first finger and slowly pulled it upward and sideways until the stem broke.

From the moment that he started pulling to the moment when the stem broke, he heard a faint cry. Did the noise express pain? Or surprise? Or did it express a feeling unknown to human beings?

He stood up and took off the earphones. It was getting dark. He carefully picked up the black box, carried it into the hut and put it on the work-surface. Then he went out, locked the door and walked up to the house.

The next morning Klausner was up as soon as it was light. He dressed and went straight to the hut. He picked up the machine and carried it outside. He went past the house, out through the front gate, and across the road to the park. There he paused and looked around him; then he went on until he came to a large tree, and he placed the machine on the ground close to the trunk of the tree. Quickly he went back to the house and got an axe and carried it across the road into the park. He put the axe on the ground beside the tree. Then he looked around him again, his eyes moving nervously in every direction. There was no one about. It was six in the morning.

He put the earphones on his head and turned on the machine. He listened for a moment to its faint familiar sound; then he picked up the axe, stood with his legs wide apart and swung the axe as hard as he could at the base of the tree trunk. The blade cut deep into the wood and stuck there, and at that moment he heard the strangest noise in the earphones. It was a new noise, unlike any he had heard before – a large, noteless, low, screaming sound, not quick and short like the sound of the roses. It lasted for a

minute, loudest at the moment when the axe struck, getting gradually fainter and fainter until it was gone.

Klausner looked in shock at the place where the blade of the axe had sunk into the wood of the tree; then gently he took the axe handle, worked the blade loose and threw the thing to the ground. With his fingers he touched the wound that the axe had made in the wood, touching the edges of the wound, trying to press them together to close the wound, and he kept saying, 'Tree . . . oh, tree . . . I am sorry . . . I am sorry . . . but it will get better . . . it will get better . . .'

For a while he stood there with his hands on the trunk of the great tree; then suddenly he turned away and hurried off out of the park, across the road, back into his house. He went to the telephone, looked in the phone book, dialled a number and waited. He held the receiver tightly in his left hand and tapped the table impatiently with his right. Then he heard a man's voice, a sleepy voice, saying: 'Hello. Yes?'

'Dr Scott?' he said.

'Yes. Speaking.'

'Dr Scott. You must come immediately – quickly, please.'

'Who is it speaking?'

'Klausner here. Do you remember what I told you last night about my experience with sound, and how I hoped I might—'

'Yes, yes, of course, but what's the matter? Are you ill?'

'No, I'm not ill, but—'

'It's half past six in the morning,' the doctor said, 'and you call me but you are not ill.'

'Please come. Come quickly. I want someone to hear it. It's driving me crazy! I can't believe it . . .'

The doctor heard the uncontrolled note in the man's voice. It was the same note as he was used to hearing in the voices of people who called and said, 'There's been an accident. Come quickly.' He said slowly, 'You really want me to get out of

bed and come over now?'

'Yes, now. Immediately, please.'

'All right, then – I'll come.'

Klausner sat down beside the telephone and waited. He tried to remember what the scream of the tree had sounded like, but he couldn't. He could remember only that it had been loud and terrible and had made him feel sick with shock. He tried to imagine what sort of noise a human would make if he had to stand fixed to the ground while someone deliberately swung a small sharp thing at his leg so that the blade cut in deep. The same noise? No. Quite different. The noise of the tree was worse than any known human noise because of that frightening, throatless quality.

He heard the front gate being opened and he went out and saw the tall doctor coming down the path. He was carrying a little black bag in his hand.

'Well,' the doctor said. 'What's the trouble?'

'Come with me, Doctor. I want you to hear it. I called you because you're the only one I've told. It's over the road in the park. Will you come now?'

The doctor looked at him. He seemed calmer now. There was no sign of him being mentally unbalanced; he was just upset and excited.

They went across the road into the park and Klausner led the way to the great tree at the foot of which stood the long black box.

'Now please put on these earphones and listen. Listen carefully and tell me afterwards exactly what you hear. I want to be quite sure . . .'

The doctor smiled and took the earphones and put them over his ears.

Klausner bent down and turned on the machine; then he picked up the axe ready to swing. For a moment he paused.

'Can you hear anything?' he said to the doctor.

'Just a faint sound from the machine.'

Klausner stood there with the axe in his hands. He lifted it and swung it at the tree. As he swung it he thought he could feel a movement of the ground on which he stood. It felt as if the tree's roots were moving under the soil, but it was too late to stop the blow and the axe blade struck the tree and went deep into the wood. At that moment, high above them, there was a cracking sound of wood breaking and the sound of leaves brushing against other leaves and they both looked up and the doctor cried, 'Watch out! Run, man! Quickly, run!'

The doctor had pulled off the earphones and was running away fast, but Klausner stood rooted to the spot, looking up, wide-eyed, at the great branch, eighteen metres long at least, that was bending slowly downwards. It was breaking at its thickest point, where it joined the trunk of the tree. The branch came crashing down and Klausner jumped to one side just in time. It fell on the machine and broke it into pieces.

'Good heavens!' shouted the doctor as he came running back. 'I thought it had hit you!'

Klausner was looking up at the tree. His large head was leaning to one side and on his smooth, white face there was an expression of terror. Slowly he walked up to the tree and gently removed the blade from the trunk.

'Did you hear it?' he said, turning to the doctor.

The doctor was still out of breath from running and the excitement. 'Hear what?'

'In the earphones. Did you hear anything when the axe struck?'

The doctor began to rub the back of his neck. 'Well,' he said, 'I think . . .' He paused and bit his lower lip. 'No, I'm not sure. I couldn't be sure. I don't suppose I had the earphones on for more than a second after the axe struck.' He was speaking quickly, rather crossly.

'Yes, yes, but what did you hear?'

'I don't know,' the doctor said. 'I don't know what I heard. Probably the noise of the branch breaking.'

'What did it sound like? *Exactly* what did it sound like?' asked Klausner, looking hard at the doctor.

'How could I tell, with half the tree falling on me? I had to run for my life!' The doctor certainly seemed nervous. Klausner felt it now. The doctor moved his feet and half turned to go. 'Well,' he said, 'we'd better get back.'

'Look,' said the little man, and now his smooth white face became suddenly filled with colour. 'Look. Stitch this up.' He pointed to the wound that the axe had made in the tree trunk. 'Stitch this up quickly.'

'Don't be silly,' said the doctor.

'Do as I say. Stitch it up!' Klausner was holding the axe, and he spoke softly, in a strange, almost threatening way.

'Don't be silly. I can't stitch through wood. Come on. Let's get back.'

'So you can't stitch through wood?'

'No, of course not.'

'Have you got any iodine in your bag?'

'Yes.'

'Then paint the wound with iodine. It'll sting, but that can't be helped.'

'Now let's not be stupid. Let's get back to the house and then . . .'

'Paint the cut with iodine!'

The doctor saw Klausner's hands tightening on the axe handle. The only other thing he could do was to run away fast, and he certainly wasn't going to do that.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll paint it with iodine.'

He got his black bag, opened it and took out a bottle of iodine and some cotton wool. He went up to the tree trunk, opened the

bottle, poured some iodine onto the cotton wool and began to rub it into both cuts. He kept one eye on Klausner, who was standing completely still with the axe in his hands, watching him.

'There you are,' the doctor said. 'It's done.'

Klausner came closer and carefully examined the two wounds in the tree. 'You'll come and look at the tree again tomorrow, won't you?'

'Oh yes,' the doctor said. 'Of course.'

'And put some more iodine on?'

'If necessary, yes.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' Klausner said. He dropped the axe, and smiled a wild, excited smile, and the doctor quickly went over to him and took him gently by the arm and said, 'Come on, we must go now,' and suddenly they were walking away, the two of them, walking silently, rather hurriedly across the park, over the road, back to the house.

The Leg of Lamb

The room was warm and clean, the curtains were closed, the two table lamps were lit – hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the table behind her there were two tall glasses, some bottles and a bucket of ice. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she looked up at the clock, but without anxiety: she simply wanted to please herself with the thought that each minute that went by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow, smiling quality about her, and about everything she did. The position of her head as she bent over her sewing was strangely peaceful. Her skin had a wonderful clearness, since there were only three more months before the birth of her child. Her mouth was soft and her eyes, with their new calm look, seemed larger and darker than before.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, at the usual time, she heard the car tyres on the drive, the car door closing, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She stood up and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

'Hello, darling,' she said.

'Hello,' he answered.

She took his coat and hung it in the cupboard in the hall. Then she made the drinks, a strong one for him and a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he was in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, and rolling it gently so that the ice knocked musically against the side.

For her, this was always a wonderful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and