

The Sound Machine

Narrator casting highlights

NARR: It was a hot summer evening and Klausner walked quickly through the front gate and around the side of the house and into the garden at the back. He went on down the garden until he came to a wooden shed and he unlocked the door, went inside and closed the door behind him.

The interior of the shed was an unpainted room. Against one wall, on the left, there was a long wooden workbench, and on it, among a littering of wires and batteries and small sharp tools, there stood a black box about three feet long, the shape of a child's coffin.

The top of the box was open, and he bent down and began to poke and peer inside it among a mass of different-colored wires and silver tubes.

Then he put a hand around to the front of the box where there were three dials, and he began to twiddle them, watching at the same time the movement of the mechanism inside the box.

KLAUSNER: ...Yes...Yes...And now this one...Yes...Yes...But is this right? ...Is it –where's my diagram? ...Ah, yes... Of course... Yes, yes... That's right... And now... Good... Yes... Yes, yes, yes.

(Foot Steps)

DOCTOR: Well, well, well. So this is where you hide yourself in the evenings.

KLAUSNER: Hullo Scott

DOCTOR: I happened to be passing, so I dropped in to see how you were. There was no one in the houses, so I came down here. How's that throat of yours been behaving?

KLAUSNER: It's all right. It's fine.

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

KLAUSNER: Please don't trouble. I'm quite cured. I'm fine.

NARR: The Doctor began to feel the tension in the room. He looked at the black box on the bench; then he looked at the man.

DOCTOR: You've got your hat on.

KLAUSNER: Oh, have I?

DOCTOR: What's this? Making a radio?

KLAUSNER: No. Just fooling around.

DOCTOR: It's got rather complicated looking innards.

KLAUSNER: Yes.

DOCTOR: It's rather a frightening looking thing, isn't it?

KLAUSNER: It's just an idea.

DOCTOR: Yes?

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

DOCTOR: Good heavens, man! Don't you get enough of that sort of thing all day in your work?

KLAUSNER: I like sound.

DOCTOR: So it seems. Well, I won't disturb you. Glad your throat's not worrying you any more.

What's it really for? You've made me inquisitive.

NARR: Klausner looked down at the box, then at the Doctor, and he reached up and began gently to scratch the lobe of his right ear. There was a pause. The Doctor stood by the door, waiting, smiling.

KLAUSNER: All right, I'll tell you, if you're interested.

KLAUSNER: Well, it's like this... It's... the theory is very simple, really. The human ear... You know that it can't hear everything. There are sounds that are so low-pitched or so high-pitched that it can't hear them.

DOCTOR: Yes... Yes.

KLAUSNER: Well, speaking very roughly, any note so high that it has more than fifteen thousands vibrations a second, we can't hear it. Dogs have better ears than us. You know you can buy a whistle whose note is so high-pitched that you can't hear it at all. But a dog can hear it.

DOCTOR: Yes, I have seen one.

KLAUSNER: Of course you have. And up the scale, higher than the note of that whistle, there is another note—a vibration, if you like, but I prefer to think of it as a 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, an endless succession of notes...an infinity of notes...there is a note—if only our ears could hear it—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...infinity...eternity...beyond the stars...

NARR: Klausner stood next to the workbench, fluttering his hands; becoming more animated every moment. He was a small, frail man, nervous and twitchy, with always moving hands.

The Doctor, looking at the strange pale face and those pale-gray eyes, felt that somehow there was about this little person a quality of distance, of immense immeasurable distance, as though the mind were far away from where the body was.

KLAUSNER: I believe that there is a whole world of sound about us all the time that we cannot hear. It is possible that up there in those high-pitched, inaudible regions there is a new, exciting music being made, with subtle harmonies, and fierce grinding discords, a music so powerful that it would drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of it. There may be anything...for all we know there may—

DOCTOR: Yes. But it's not very probable.

6 min

KLAUSNER: Why not? Why not? You see that fly? What sort of noise is that fly making now? None—that one can hear. But for all we know the creature may be whistling like mad on a very high note, or barking or croaking or singing a song. It's got a mouth, hasn't it? It's got a throat!"

DOCTOR: Well, so you're going to check up on that?

KLAUSNER: Some time ago, I made a simple instrument that proved to me the existence of many odd, inaudible sounds. Often I have sat and watched the needle of my instrument recording the presence of sound vibration 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.

DOCTOR: And that machine on the table, then, is that going to allow you to hear these noises?

KLAUSNER: It may. Who knows? So far, I've had no luck. But I've made some changes in it, and tonight I'm read for another trial. This machine is designed to pick up sound vibrations that are too high-pitched for reception by the human ear and to convert them to a scale of audible tones. I tune it in, almost like a radio.

DOCTOR: How d'you mean?

KLAUSNER: It isn't complicated. Say I wish to listen to the squeak of a bat. That's a fairly-high-pitched sound—about thirty thousand vibrations a second. The average human ear can't quite hear it. Now, if there were a bat flying around this room and I tuned it to thirty thousand on my machine, I would hear the squeaking of that bat very clearly. I would even hear the correct note—F sharp, or B flat, or whatever it might be—but merely at a much lower pitch. Don't you understand?

DOCTOR: And you're going to try it tonight?

KLAUSNER: Yes

DOCTOR: Well, I wish you luck.

My goodness! I must fly. Goodbye, and thank you for telling me. I must call again sometime and find out what happened.

NARR: The Doctor went out and closed the door behind him.

For a while longer, Klausner fussed about with 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...the reception will be better...”

*****BRIDGE*****

NARR: He stood there in the garden beside the wooden table, so pale, small, and thin that he looked like an ancient, consumptive, bespectacled 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 while without thinking about her at all. Then he turned to the box on the table and pressed a switch on its front.

And now he was bending forward over the machine. His head was cocked to one side in a tense, listening attitude. His right hand was beginning to turn the knob. The needle was traveling slowly across the dial, so slowly that he could hardly see it move, and in the earphones he could hear a faint, spasmodic crackling.

. As he listened, he became conscious of a curious sensation, a feeling that his ears were connected to his head by a thin, stiff wire, like a tentacle, and that the wires were lengthening, that the ears were going up and up toward a secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous, transonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be.

“Sound” (a frightful piercing shriek)

He stared around him as if expecting to see the person who had shrieked. There was no one in sight except the woman in the garden next door, and it was certainly not she. She was bending down, cutting yellow roses and putting them in her basket.

“Sound” (a throat less, inhuman shriek, sharp and short, very clear and cold. The note itself possessed a minor, metallic quality that he had never heard before.)

NARR: Klausner looked around him, searching instinctively for the source of the noise. 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 snip the stem with a pair of scissors.

“Sound” (the scream)

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

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

KLAUSNER: Mrs. Saunders!

Oh, Mrs. Saunders!

Cut another one! Please cut another one quickly!

MRS. SAUNDERS: Why, Mr. Klausner, what's the matter?

KLAUSNER: Please do as I ask. Cut just one more rose!

MRS. SAUNDERS: Certainly, Mr. Klausner, if you like.

NARR: “Sound” (shriek)

He took off the earphones and ran to the garden.

KLAUSNER: That's enough. No more. Please, no more.

NARR: The woman stood there holding the yellow rose that she had just cut, looking at him.

KLAUSNER: I'm going to tell you something, Mrs. Saunders, something that you won't believe.

NARR: He put his hands on the top of the fence and peered at her intently through his thick spectacles.

KLAUSNER: You have, this evening, cut a basketful of roses. You have, with a sharp pair of scissors, cut through the stems of living things and each rose that you cut screamed in the most terrible way. Did you know that, Mrs. Saunders?

MRS. SAUNDERS: No, I certainly didn't know that.

KLAUSNER: It happens to be true. I heard them shrieking. Each time you cut one I heard the cry of pain. A very high-pitched sound, approximately one hundred

and thirty-two thousand vibrations a second. You couldn't possibly have heard it yourself. But I heard it.

MRS. SAUNDERS: Did you really, Mr. Klausner?

KLAUSNER: You might say, that a rosebush has no nervous system to feel with, no throat to cry with. You'd be right. It hasn't. Not like ours, anyway. *But how you know, Mrs. Saunders—how do you know* that a rosebush doesn't feel as much pain when someone cuts its stem in two as you would feel if someone cut your wrist off with a garden shears? *How do you know that?* It's alive, isn't it?

MRS. SAUNDERS: Yes, Mr. Klausner—and good night.

NARR: Klausner went back to the table. He put on the earphones and stood for a while listening. He could still hear the faint spasmodic crackling sound and the humming noise of the machine. But nothing more. Slowly he bent down and took hold of a small white daisy growing on the lawn. He took it between thumb and forefinger and slowly pulled upward and sideways until the stem broke.

“Sound” (a faint, high-pitched cry, curiously inanimate)

He took another daisy and did it again.

“Sound” (a faint, high-pitched cry, curiously inanimate)

He wasn't so sure now that it expressed pain. No, it wasn't pain; it was surprise. Or was it? It didn't really express any of the feelings or emotions known to a human being. It was just crying, a neutral, stony cry—a single, emotionless note, expressing nothing. It had been the same with the roses. He had been wrong in calling it a cry of pain. A flower probably didn't feel pain. It felt something else, which we didn't know about—something called toin or spurl or plinuckment, or anything you like.

He stood up and removed the earphones. It was getting dark and he could see pricks of light shining in the windows of the dark houses all around him. Carefully, he picked up the black box from the table, carried it into the shed and put it on the workbench.

*****BRIDGE*****

NARR: The next morning, Klausner was up as soon as it was light. He dressed and went straight to the shed. He picked the machine up and carried it outside, clasp- ing it to his chest with both hands, walking unsteadily under its weight. 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, a beech tree, and placed the machine on the ground, close to the trunk of the tree. Quickly he went back to the house and got an axe from the coal cellar 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, peering nervously through the thick glasses in every direction. There was no one about. It was six in the morning.

He put the earphones on his head and switched on the machine. He picked up the axe, took a stance with his legs wide apart, and swung the axe as hard as he could at the base of the tree trunk.

“Sound” (A most extraordinary noise. It was a new noise, unlike any he had heard before—a harsh, note-less, enormous noise, a growling, low-pitched, screaming sound, not quick and short like the noise of the roses, but drawn out, like a sob, lasting for fully a minute, loudest at the moment when the axe struck, fading gradually, fainter and fainter, until was gone.)

Klausner stared in horror at the place where the blade of the axe had sunk into the wood flesh of the tree; then gently, he took the axe handle, worked the blade loose, and threw the thing on the ground. With his fingers he touched the gash the axe had made in the wood, touching the edges of the gash, trying to press them together to close the wound.

KLAUSER: Tree...oh tree...I am sorry...I am so sorry...but it will heal...It will heal fine...

NARR: For a while he stood there with his hands upon the trunk of the great tree; then suddenly he turned away and hurried off out of the park, across the road, through the front gate, and back into his house.

DOCTOR: Hullo. Yes?

KLAUSNER: Dr. Scott?

DOCTOR: Yes. Speaking?

KLAUSNER: Dr. Scott. You must come at once—quickly please.

DOCTOR: Who is it speaking?

KLAUSNER: Klausner here, and you remember what I told you last night about my experiments with sound and how I hoped I might—

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

KLAUSNER: No, I'm not ill, but—

DOCTOR: It's half past six in the morning.

And you call me, but you are not ill.

KLAUSNER: Pleases come. Come quickly. I want someone to hear it. It's driving me mad! I can't believe it...

NARR: The Doctor heard the frantic, almost hysterical note in the man's voice, the same note he was used to hearing in the voices of people who called up and said, "There's been an accident. Come quickly."

DOCTOR: You really want me to get out of bed and come over now?

KLAUSNER: Yes now. At once please.

DOCTOR: All right then, I'll come.

NARR: Klausner sat down beside the telephone and waited. He tried to remember the shriek.

*****BRIDGE*****

NARR: "Sound" (click of a gate latch)

NARR: He heard the click of the front-gate latch and he jumped up and went out and saw the tall doctor coming down the path, his little black bag in hand.

DOCTOR: Well, well, what's all the trouble?

KLAUSNER: 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?

NARR: The Doctor looked at him. He seemed calmer now. There was no sign of madness or hysteria; he was merely disturbed and excited.

DOCTOR: All right, I'll come.

NARR: They went across the road, into the park and Klausner led the way to the great beech tree at the foot of which stood the long, black coffin-box of the machine—and the axe.

DOCTOR: Why did you bring the machine out here?

KLAUSNER: I wanted a tree. There aren't any big trees in the garden.

DOCTOR: And why the axe?

KLAUSNER: You'll see in a moment. But now please put on these earphones and listen. Listen carefully and tell me afterwards precisely what you hear. I want to make quite sure...

NARR: The Doctor smiled and took the earphones, which he put over his ears.

Klausner bent down and flicked the switch on the panel of the machine; then he picked up the axe and took his stance with his legs apart, ready to swing. For a moment, he paused.

KLAUSNER: Can you hear anything?

DOCTOR: Can I what?

KLAUSNER: Can you *hear* anything?

DOCTOR: Just a humming noise.

DOCTOR: What are you waiting for?

KLAUSNER: Nothing.

NARR: He lifted the axe and swung at the tree; and as he swung, he thought he felt, he could swear he felt a movement of the ground on which he stood. He felt a slight shifting of the earth beneath his feet, as though the roots of the tree were moving underneath the soil, but it was too late to check the blow, and the axe blade struck the tree and wedged deep into the wood. At that moment, high overhead, there was the cracking sound that moment, high overhead, there was the cracking sound of wood splintering and the swishing sound of leaves brushing against other leaves and they both looked up.

DOCTOR: Watch out! Run, man! Quickly run!

DOCTOR: Great heavens!

That was a near one! I thought it had got you!

NARR: Klausner was staring at the tree. Slowly he walked up to the tree and gently he pried the blade loose from the trunk.

KLAUSNER: Did you hear it?

DOCTOR: Hear what?

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

DOCTOR: Well, as a matter of fact... 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.

KLAUSNER: Yes, yes, but what did you hear?

DOCTOR: I don't know. I don't know what I heard. Probably the noise of the branch breaking.

KLAUSNER: What did it sound like? Exactly what did it sound like?

DOCTOR: Oh hell! I really don't know. I was more interested in getting out of the way. Let's leave it.

KLAUSNER: Dr. Scott, *what—did—it—sound—like?*

DOCTOR: For God's sake, how could I tell, what with half the tree falling on me and having to run for my life?

Well, we'd better get back.

KLAUSNER: Look. Look, you stitch this up. You stitch this up quickly.

DOCTOR: Don't be silly.

KLAUSNER: You do as I say. Stitch it up (in a curious, almost threatening tone.)

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

KLAUSNER: So you can't stitch through wood?

DOCTOR: No, of course not.

KLAUSNER: Have you got any iodine in your bag?

DOCTOR: Yes, of course.

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

DOCTOR: Now, look. Let's not be ridiculous. Let's get back to the house and then...

KLAUSNER: *Paint—the—cut—with—iodine.*

NARR: The Doctor hesitated. He saw Klausner's hands tightening on the handle of the axe. He decided that his only alternative was to run away fast, and he certainly wasn't going to do that.

DOCTOR: All right, I'll paint it with iodine.

NARR: He got his black bag which was lying on the grass about ten yards away, opened it and took out a bottle of iodine and some cotton wool. He went up to the tree trunk, uncorked the bottle, tipped some of the iodine onto the cotton wool, bent down and began to dab it into the cut.

KLAUSNER: Make sure you get it right in.

DOCTOR: Yes.

KLAUSNER: Now do the other one, the one just about it!

DOCTOR: There you are. It's done.

NARR: Klausner came closer and gravely examined the two wounds.

KLAUSNER: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, that will do nicely.

You'll come and look at them tomorrow?

DOCTOR: Oh, yes. Of course.

KLAUSNER: And put some more iodine on?

DOCTOR: If necessary, yes.

KLAUSNER: Thank you, Doctor.

NARR: He dropped the axe and all at once he smiled, a wild, excited smile, and quickly the Doctor went over to him and gently he took him by the arm.

DOCTOR: Come on, we must go now.

NARR: Suddenly they were walking away, the two of them, walking silently, rather hurriedly, across the park, over the road, back to the house.