

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

"Did you really, Mr Klausner?" She decided she would make a dash 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. Not like ours, anyway. But how do you know, Mrs Saunders"--and here he leaned far over the fence and spoke in a fierce whisper "how do you know that a rose bush 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?"

"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 on the earphones and stood for a while listening. He could still hear the faint crackling sound and the humming noise of the machine, but nothing more. 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 it upward and sideways until the stem broke.

From the moment that he started pulling to the moment when the stem broke, he heard--he distinctly heard in the earphones--a faint high-pitched cry, curiously inanimate. He took another daisy and did it again. Once more he heard the cry, but he wasn't 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 a cry, 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 tom or spun 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 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. Then he went out, locked the door behind him 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 shed. He picked up the machine and carried it outside, clasping 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 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 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 his 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 listened for a moment to the faint familiar humming sound; then 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. The blade cut deep into the wood and stuck there, and at the instant of impact he heard a most extraordinary noise in the earphones. It was a new noise, unlike any he had heard before--a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, lowpitched, 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 it was gone.

Klausner stared in horror at the place where the blade of the axe had sunk into the woodflesh 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 gash that the axe had made in the wood, touching the edges of the gash, 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 heal... it will heal fine."

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. He went to the telephone, consulted the book, dialled a number and waited. He held the receiver tightly in his left hand and tapped the table impatiently with his right. He heard the telephone buzzing at the other end, and then the click of a lifted receiver and a man's voice, a sleepy voice, saying: "Hullo. Yes."

"Dr Scott?" he said.

"Yes. Speaking."

"Dr Scott. You must come at once--quickly, please."

"Who is it speaking?"

"Klausner here, and 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 mad! I can't believe it... 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." He said slowly. "You really want me to get out of bed and come over now?"

"Yes, now. At once, please."

"All right, then--I'll come."

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

what the shriek of the tree had sounded like, but he couldn't. He could remember only that it had been enormous and frightful and that it had made him feel sick with horror. He tried to imagine what sort of noise a human would make if he had to stand anchored to the ground while someone deliberately swung a small sharp thing at his leg so that the blade cut in deep and wedged itself in the cut. Same sort of noise perhaps? No. Quite different. The noise of the tree was worse than any known human noise because of that frightening, toneless, throatless quality. He began to wonder about other living things, and he thought immediately of a field of wheat standing up straight and yellow and alive, with the mower going through it, cutting the stems, five hundred stems a second, every second. Oh, my God, what would that noise be like? Five hundred wheat plants screaming together and every second another five hundred being cut and screaming and no, he thought, I do not want to go to a wheat field with my machine. I would never eat bread after that. But what about potatoes and cabbages and carrots and onions? And what about apples? Ah, no. Apples are all right. They fall off naturally when they are ripe. Apples are all right if you let them fall off instead of tearing them from the tree branch. But not vegetables. Not a potato for example. A potato would surely shriek; so would a carrot and an onion and a cabbage.

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, little black bag in hand.

"Well," the Doctor said. "Well, what's all 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 madness or hysteria; he was merely disturbed and excited.

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.

"Why did you bring it out here?" the Doctor asked.

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

"And why the axe?"

"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..."

The Doctor smiled and took the earphones and put them 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.

"Can you hear anything?" he said to the Doctor.

"Can I what?"

"Can you hear anything?"

"Just a humming noise."

Klausner stood there with the axe in his hands trying to bring himself to swing, but the thought of the noise that the tree would make made him pause again.

"What are you waiting for?" the Doctor asked.

"Nothing," Klausner answered, and then lifted the axe and swung it 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 of wood splintering and the swishing 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 ripped off the earphones and was running away fast, but Klausner stood spellbound, staring up at the great branch, sixty feet long at least, that was bending slowly downward, breaking and crackling and splintering at its thickest point, where it joined the main trunk of the tree. The branch came crashing down and Klausner leapt aside just in time. It fell upon the machine and smashed it into pieces.

"Great heavens!" shouted the Doctor as he came running back. "That was a near one! I thought it had got you!"

Klausner was staring at the tree. His large head was leaning to one side and upon his smooth white face there was a tense, horrified expression. Slowly he walked up to the tree and gently he prised the blade loose from the trunk.

"Did you hear it?" he said, turning to the Doctor. His voice was barely audible.

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, "as a matter of fact..." He paused and frowned 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."

"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." He was speaking rapidly, rather irritably.

"What did it sound like?" Klausner leaned forward slightly, staring hard at the Doctor. Exactly what, did it sound like?"

"Oh hell!" the Doctor said, "I really don't know. I was more interested in getting out of the way. Let's leave it."

"Dr Scott, what-did-it-sound-like?"

"For God's sake, how could I tell, what with half the tree falling on me and having to run for my life?" The Doctor certainly seemed nervous. Klausner had sensed it now. He stood quite still, staring at the Doctor and for fully half a minute he didn't speak. The Doctor moved his feet, shrugged his shoulders 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 suffused with colour. "Look," he said, "you stitch this up." He pointed to the last gash that the axe had made in the tree trunk. "You stitch this up quickly."

"Don't be silly," the Doctor said.

"You do as I say. Stitch it up." Klausner was gripping the axe handle and he spoke softly, in a curious, almost a threatening tone.

"Don't be silly," the Doctor said. "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?"

"What if I have?"

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

"Now look," the Doctor said, and again he turned as if to go. "Let's not be ridiculous. Let's get back to the house and then..."

"Paint-the-cut-with-iodine."

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.

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

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 on to the cotton wool, bent down and began to dab it into the cut. He kept one eye on Klausner who was standing motionless with the axe in his hands, watching him.

"Make sure you get it right in."

"Yes," the Doctor said.

"Now do the other one--the one just above it!"

The Doctor did as he was told.

"There you are," he said. "It's done."

He straightened up and surveyed his work in a very serious manner. "That should do nicely."

Klausner came closer and gravely examined the two wounds.

"Yes," he said, nodding his huge head slowly up and down. "Yes, that w

ill do nicely." He stepped back a pace. "You'll come and look at them again tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes," the Doctor said. "Of course." And put some more iodine on?" If necessary, yes.

"Thank you, Doctor," Klausner said, and he nodded his head again and 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 and he 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.

Nunc Dimittis

IT is nearly midnight, and I can see that if I don't make a start with writing this story now, I never shall. All evening I have been sitting here trying to force myself to begin, but the more I have thought about it, the more appalled and ashamed and distressed I have become by the whole thing.

My idea--and I believe it was a good one--was to try, by a process of confession and analysis, to discover a reason or at any rate some justification for my outrageous behaviour towards Janet de Pelagia. I wanted, essentially, to address myself to an imaginary and sympathetic listener, a kind of mythical you, someone gentle and understanding to whom I might tell unashamedly every detail of this unfortunate episode. I can only hope that I am not too upset to make a go of it.

If I am to be quite honest with myself, I suppose I shall have to admit that what is disturbing me most is not so much the sense of my own shame, or even the hurt that I have inflicted upon poor Janet; it is the knowledge that I have made a monstrous fool of myself and that all my friends--if I can still call them that--all those warm and lovable people who used to come so often to my house, must now be regarding me as nothing but a vicious, vengeful old man. Yes, that surely hurts. When I say to you that my friends were my whole life--everything, absolutely everything in it--then perhaps you will begin to understand.

Will you? I doubt it unless I digress for a minute to tell you roughly the sort of person I am.

Well--let me see. Now that I come to think of it, I suppose I am, after all, a type; a rare one, mark you, but nevertheless a quite definite type--the wealthy, leisurely, middle-aged man of culture, adored (I choose the word carefully) by his many friends for his charm, his money, his air of scholarship, his generosity, and I sincerely hope for himself also. You will find

ind him (this type) only in the big capitals London, Paris, New York; of that I am certain. The money he has was earned by his dead father whose memory he is inclined to despise. This is not his fault, for there is something in his make-up that compels him secretly to look down upon all people who never had the wit to learn the difference between Rockingham and Spode, Waterford and Venetian, Sheraton and Chippendale, Monet and Manet, or even Pommard and Montrachet.

He is, therefore, a connoisseur, possessing above all things an exquisite taste. His Constables, Boningtons, Lautrecs, Redons, Vuillards, Matthew Smiths are as fine as anything in the Tate; and because they are so fabulous and beautiful they create an atmosphere of suspense around him in the home, something tantalizing, breathtaking, faintly frightening--frightening to think that he has the power and the right, if he feels inclined, to slash, tear, plunge his fist through a superb Dedham Vale, a Mont Saint-Victoire, an Arles cornfield, a Tahiti maiden, a portrait of Madame Cezanne. And from the walls on which these wonders hang there issues a little golden glow of splendour, a subtle emanation of grandeur in which he lives and moves and entertains with a sly nonchalance that is not entirely unpractised.

He is invariably a bachelor, yet he never appears to get entangled with the women who surround him, who love him so dearly. It is just possible--and this you may or may not have noticed--that there is a frustration, a discontent, a regret somewhere inside him. Even a slight aberration.

I don't think I need say any more. I have been very frank. You should know me well enough by now to judge me fairly--and dare I hope it?--to sympathize with me when you hear my story. You may even decide that much of the blame for what has happened should be placed, not upon me, but upon a lady called Gladys Ponsonby. After all, she was the one who started it. Had I not escorted Gladys Ponsonby back to her house that night nearly six months ago, and had she not spoken so freely to me about certain people, and certain things, then this tragic business could never have taken place.

It was last December, if I remember rightly, and I had been dining with the Ashendens in that lovely house of theirs that overlooks the southern fringe of Regent's park. There were a fair number of people there, but Gladys Ponsonby was the only one beside myself who had come alone. So when it was time for us to leave, I naturally offered to see her safely back to her house.

She accepted and we left together in my car; but unfortunately, when we arrived at her place she insisted that I come in and have 'one for the road', as she put it. I didn't wish to seem stuffy, so I told the chauffeur to wait and followed her in.

Gladys Ponsonby is an unusually short woman, certainly not more than four feet nine or ten, maybe even less than that--one of those tiny persons who gives me, when I am beside her, the comical, rather wobbly feeling that I a

m standing on a chair. She is a widow, a few years younger than me--maybe fifty-three or four, and it is possible that thirty years ago she was quite a fetching little thing. But now the face is loose and puckered with nothing distinctive about it whatsoever. The individual features, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the chin, are buried in the folds of fat around the puckered little face and one does not notice them. Except perhaps the mouth, which reminds me I cannot help it--of a salmon.

In the living-room, as she gave me my brandy, I noticed that her hand was a trifle unsteady. The lady is tired, I told myself, so I mustn't stay long.

We sat down together on the sofa and for a while discussed the Ashendens' party and the people who were there. Finally I got up to go.

"Sit down, Lionel," she said. "Have another brandy."

"No, really, I must go."

"Sit down and don't be so stuffy. I'm having another one, and the least you can do is keep me company while I drink it."

I watched her as she walked over to the sideboard, this tiny woman, faintly swaying, holding her glass out in front of her with both hands as though it were an offering; and the sight of her walking like that, so incredibly short and squat and stiff, suddenly gave me the ludicrous notion that she had no legs at all above the knees.

"Lionel, what are you chuckling about?" She half turned to look at me as she poured the drink, and some of it slopped over the side of the glass.

"Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all."

"Well, stop it, and tell me what you think of my new portrait." She indicated a large canvas hanging over the fireplace that I had been trying to avoid with my eye ever since I entered the room. It was a hideous thing, painted, as I well knew, by a man who was now all the rage in London, a very mediocre painter called John Royden. It was a full-length portrait of Gladys, Lady Ponsonby, painted with a certain technical cunning that made her out to be a tall and quite alluring creature.

"Charming," I said.

"Isn't it, though! I'm so glad you like it."

"Quite charming."

"I think John Royden is a genius. Don't you think he's a genius, Lionel?"

"Well--that might be going a bit far."

"You mean it's a little early to say for sure?"

"Exactly."

"But listen, Lionel and I think this will surprise you. John Royden is so sought after now that he won't even consider painting anyone for less than a thousand guineas!"

"Really?"

"Oh, yes! And everyone's queueing up, simply queueing up to get themse

lves done."

"Most interesting."

"Now take your Mr Cezanne or whatever his name is. I'll bet he never got that sort of money in his lifetime."

"Never."

"And you say he was a genius?"

"Sort of yes."

"Then so is Royden," she said, settling herself again on the sofa. "The money proves it."

She sat silent for a while, sipping her brandy, and I couldn't help noticing how the unsteadiness of her hand was causing the rim of the glass to jog against her lower lip. She knew I was watching her, and without turning her head she swivelled her eyes and glanced at me cautiously out of the corners of them. "A penny for your thoughts?"

Now, if there is one phrase in the world I cannot abide, it is this. It gives me an actual physical pain in the chest and I begin to cough.

"Come on, Lionel. A penny for them."

I shook my head, quite unable to answer. She turned away abruptly and placed the brandy glass on a small table to her left; and the manner in which she did this seemed to suggest--I don't know why--that she felt rebuffed and was now clearing the decks for action. I waited, rather uncomfortable in the silence that followed, and because I had no conversation left in me, I made a great play about smoking my cigar, studying the ash intently and blowing the smoke up slowly towards the ceiling. But she made no move. There was beginning to be something about this lady I did not much like, a mischievous brooding air that made me want to get up quickly and go away. When she looked around again, she was smiling at me slyly with those little buried eyes of hers, but the mouth--oh, just like a salmon's--was absolutely rigid.

"Lionel, I think I'll tell you a secret."

"Really, Gladys, I simply must get home."

"Don't be frightened, Lionel. I won't embarrass you. You look so frightened all of a sudden."

"I'm not very good at secrets."

"I've been thinking," she said, "you're such a great expert on pictures, this ought to interest you." She sat quite still except for her fingers which were moving all the time. She kept them perpetually twisting and twisting around each other, and they were like a bunch of small white snakes wriggling in her lap.

"Don't you want to hear my secret, Lionel?"

"It isn't that, you know. It's just that it's so awfully late..."

"This is probably the best-kept secret in London. A woman's secret. I suppose it's known to about let me see--about thirty or forty women altogether."

er. And not a single man. Except him, of course--John Royden."

I didn't wish to encourage her, so I said nothing.

"But first of all, promise--promise you won't tell a soul?"

"Dear me!"

"You promise, Lionel?"

"Yes, Gladys, all right, I promise."

"Good! Now listen." She reached for the brandy glass and settled back comfortably in the far corner of the sofa. "I suppose you know John Royden paints only women?"

"I didn't."

"And they're always full-length portraits, either standing or sitting--like mine there. Now take a good look at it, Lionel. Do you see how beautifully the dress is painted?"

"Well... "Go over and look carefully, please."

I got up reluctantly and went over and examined the painting. To my surprise I noticed that the paint of the dress was laid on so heavily it was actually raised out from the rest of the picture. It was a trick, quite effective in its way, but neither difficult to do nor entirely original.

"You see?" she said. "It's thick, isn't it, where the dress is?"

"Yes."

"But there's a bit more to it than that, you know, Lionel. I think the best way is to describe what happened the very first time I went along for a sitting." Oh, what a bore this woman is, I thought, and how can I get away?

"That was about a year ago, and I remember how excited I was to be going into the studio of the great painter. I dressed myself up in a wonderful new thing I'd just got from Norman Hartnell, and a special little red hat, and off I went. Mr Royden met me at the door, and of course I was fascinated by him at once. He had a small pointed beard and thrilling blue eyes, and he wore a black velvet jacket. The studio was huge, with red velvet sofas and velvet chairs--he loves velvet--and velvet curtains and even a velvet carpet on the floor. He sat me down, gave me a drink and came straight to the point.

He told me about how he painted quite differently from other artists. In his opinion, he said, there was only one method of attaining perfection when painting a woman's body and I mustn't be shocked when I heard what it was.

"I don't think I'll be shocked, Mr Royden," I told him.

"I'm sure you won't either," he said. He had the most marvellous white teeth and they sort of shone through his beard when he smiled. 'You see, it's like this,' he went on. 'You examine any painting you like of a woman--I don't care who it's by--and you'll see that although the dress may be well painted, there is an effect of artificiality, of flatness about the whole thing, as though the dress were draped over a log of wood. And you know why?'

"No, Mr Royden, I don't."