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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Atmospheric disturbances are causing the destruction of sound waves in this valley."

The Web of Silence

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

The author of "The Three Marked Pennies" weaves an intriguing yarn about the mysterious pall of silence that lay like a blight on an American community, disrupting its normal life

THE thing was supposed to have started around noon, April the 11th. As a matter of scientific record, that is when it did start.

But to Jeff Haverty, editor of the *News*,

to Mayor Tom Seeley, and the little valley town of Blankville (which name will serve in lieu of the real one), there was a prelude. It came a full week before the eleventh, April the 3rd to be exact, when

Mayor Seeley waved away his breakfast orange and opened the first letter in his stack of morning mail.

The shape of it caught his attention at once, as the sender doubtless intended. An odd-looking letter, it was only a single sheet of paper written on one side, folded into a three-cornered envelope, and sealed with the stamp. The handwriting was angular and had, as the mayor remarked, a slightly foreign aspect, as if the writer were more accustomed to the script of another language.

Scrupulously formal and precise, it might have been any ordinary business letter, except for its triangular envelope—and its outrageous content:

*Mayor Thomas Seeley
Covington Arms
Blankville,—*

Dear Sir:—

Please oblige me by placing two hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$250,000) in new twenties and fifties in an ordinary oil-can painted a bright yellow. Drop this can, sealed with paraffin and containing the correct amount, from the river bridge facing upstream, no later than April 10th at midnight.

In the event that you choose to regard this as an idle threat and refuse to comply with my request, I must warn you that the entire city of Blankville will straightway find itself in the grip of an unusual phenomenon.

Business, educational and civic affairs will be brought to a standstill—at a cost to your charming city somewhat in excess of the amount mentioned above. Ordinary living will be paralyzed completely. Accidents, painful and perhaps fatal, will undoubtedly occur to many of your populace.

I trust that these measures will not be forced upon me by your refusal to comply

with my request. It would be most unwise, I assure you.

*Very truly yours,
"DR. UBIQUE."*

There was no other signature, simply "Doctor Everywhere;" and the postmark was a local one.

But Mayor Seeley, like every public figure great or small, had received dozens of crank-letters in his career. At a glance, this was merely another one of those. The vague threat, the demand for money, the melodramatic signature—all were characteristic. With a snort Blankville's mayor tossed it aside and opened his next letter.

That same day, April the 3rd, Jeff Haverty received a similar note, mentioning the demand from Mayor Seeley and urging him to publicize the matter. Haverty read it with a brief grin, he passed it on to one of his staff as a possible feature story, and promptly forgot it.

That was the real beginning—but it was not until a week later, that memorable Sunday of April the 11th, that either of the two men realized it.

SUNDAY. About twenty minutes to twelve.

It was a pleasant spring day, clear and a bit over-warm due to an unseasonable dry spell. Blankville—with its 30,000 inhabitants, two movies, six drug stores, and four public schools—is a religious town. Approximately two-thirds of its population, therefore, was in church that Sabbath morning in late spring. What happened in Jeff Haverty's church, as he describes it, was in fine what was happening all over town.

Haverty himself, he confides, was dozing a bit in his family pew, lulled by the soporific boom of the sermon. He had a headache—as, it developed later, had every person in Blankville that morning—just a dull throbbing, not worthy of com-

ment, which had been bothering him ever since he got up. It was pleasant to sit there in church, listening to the rise and fall of the pastor's voice. A clear voice, vibrant and oratorical. . . .

It was the abrupt cessation of it, Haverty says, which woke him with a start.

Blinking, he looked toward the pulpit and fumbled for his hymnal, believing the sermon was over. But suddenly he saw that the Reverend Doctor Hobbs had stopped talking in the middle of a sentence. Even now his lips still moved, but no words came out.

The pastor stood for a moment, flushed with embarrassment and clutching at his neck. Then, with an apologetic grin at his congregation, he gestured for the presiding elder to take over—by signs indicating that something was the matter with his larynx.

The elder, bald-headed and pompous, bustled forward, thumbing the pages of a hymn-book. Nodding for the organist to start the next hymn scheduled, he stepped up on the dais to announce the page and title. Beaming, hand raised for attention, he opened his mouth . . . opened it—and shut it slowly. Color rose to his round face as he, too, clutched at his throat—with a wild look at the pastor, who was eyeing this exhibition of mimicry without amusement.

The choir rose. The organist, struggling with a desire to giggle, bore down on her keys. But no sound issued from the instrument—no sound from the open mouths of the choir who gaped at each other, blank-faced with astonishment and a growing alarm.

By this time pandemonium had swept over the members of the congregation, who were discovering things for themselves.

An old lady leaped to her feet, dropping an umbrella—but no clatter accompanied its fall to the floor. A child in its mother's lap, sensing a disturbance it could not understand, opened its mouth in a lusty

wail—in audible even to the mother who, frightened, clutched the baby to her breast. Everywhere people were opening and closing their mouths like stranded fish. Cupped ears strained to catch even the faintest reassuring sound.

In a panic, now, the congregation made a concerted rush for the exits, driven by a feeling of claustrophobia that sudden quiet often induces.

But outside it was worse.

A tomb-like silence had fallen over Blankville. Nowhere was there so much as an echo of sound to alleviate the painful stillness.

After that first surge of panic, however, Haverty says, people began to grin and gesture at one another. Young Ralston, the bank teller, nudged him as he stood in front of the church, and passed a note scribbled hastily on an old envelope.

What's causing it? Ralston had written.

Damned if I know!!! Haverty scrawled in answer. *Certainly is spooky, isn't it?*

Sure is! Wonder how long it will last? the teller wrote.

Haverty held up five fingers, then ten. He shrugged, grinned. The teller nodded agreement, and strolled away to his parked car. Haverty, chuckling at the gyrations of everyone he met, made a bee-line for his newspaper office, composing mental headlines as he went.

STROLLING through the streets of Blankville must have been like stepping, alive, into a silent movie. Cars thundered by, as quiet as shadows. Dogs barked, without making a whisper of noise. Children yelled and shouted at one another, whistled, clapped their hands—but they might have been figures in a dream. There was an eery, unreal quality about the familiar streets, Haverty says. It grew oppressive as the expected "five-or-ten-minute" hush lengthened like the held breath of a scared diver. It made you want

to loosen your collar and gulp in a lungful of fresh air. It pressed against your face like a soft pillow, deadly, insidious, something you could not fight.

As he reached the *News* building, Haverty was composing an editorial in which the horrors of Devil's Island and solitary confinement formed a keynote. It was borne upon him that weird Sunday, he says, why men have gone mad under the weight of mere silence.

He had unlocked the office door before realizing, with a curse, that he could not summon his staff by telephone. When they did turn up (they would eventually, to cover such a story), the extra he planned would have to be got out by sign language and written direction and leg-work. An extra? If it went to press by the next day, it would require all manner of ingenuity!

Haverty fumed. And only then did he recall that tri-cornered letter with its polite demand and its mysterious warning. His face must have been a study as he stood there, key in hand, gazing up and down a busy traffic-tangled street more silent than the inside of a pyramid. "And unusual phenomenon . . . ordinary living paralyzed," phrases recurred to him. . . .

Haverty snorted, without sound. It was fantastic, absolutely incredible. No; that crank-letter had no connection with this eery silence. It was nothing more than a coincidence, and the people of Blankville, he decided, must not be further frightened by such an idea.

Stubbornly, then and there, he dismissed the sinister possibility and went about the lunatic business of getting out an extra with a deaf and dumb staff.

IT WAS on the streets by nightfall—a feat that speaks well for Haverty's resourcefulness. For it must have been a prodigious job getting that story together without the use of phones, with the reporters running helter-skelter all over the little

city out of touch with the rewrite man, and with the office staff unable to exchange the slightest remark unless they wrote it down.

It was Haverty's idea, too, that the newsboys carry torches and large printed banners, in lieu of yelling:

"Extra! Extra! All about the Weird Silence!"

And those papers were a sell-out. The first page was given over to probable explanations of the bizarre phenomenon.

"Atmospheric disturbances are causing the destruction of sound waves in this valley"—advanced by a local know-it-all who had an answer to every question.

"Result of falling meteors," declared another—someone having found a hot meteorite in a cornfield outside the town.

"A change in the earth's speed of revolution is causing sound to operate on a frequency not attuned to the human ear. It will not last overnight!" from the local radio-station manager, frantic at the prospect of losing hundreds of dollars worth of advertising.

For radios were reduced to the value of cumbersome furniture in Blankville. Telephones were useless. The fact—stumbled upon by a switchboard girl—that Blankville voices could be heard over wire and wireless by persons outside the valley, only maddened everyone all the more, adding to the unsolved riddle. However, as everyone agreed, it could not last.

But it did last. At dawn the next day, the town of Blankville was still in the grip of that dead silence. More stories trickled in and were duly passed around, via the *News*.

On Maple Street a small child had been locked in a closet for sixteen hours, unable to make its frantic parents hear its knocks and cries.

On Argyle Circle, a visiting prima donna, practising her scales that memorable Sunday morning, had fainted dead

away when her famous voice went silent in the middle of a high C.

At the intersection of Fifth and Chestnut Streets, a man on a bicycle was killed by a truck whose warning horn could not be heard as it sped out of a side street.

An illiterate Negro worker was arrested Sunday night for stealing and torturing a pedigreed dog—which, he was finally able to convey by drawing a crude picture on the jail wall, he had merely found injured in an alley and was trying to return to its owner.

At the Blankville fire station, eight firemen, in silent concentration over a game of checkers, could not hear a box signal set off at the corner of Eighth and Shadowlawn—a duplex garage, which burnt to the ground in the silent dawn of Monday the 12th.

There was, too, the newly-wed couple, quarreling heatedly in their bungalow on Beech Street—so frightened by the abrupt cessation of both their voices that they fell into each other's arms, terrified into forgiveness.

And there was the story from Mercy Hospital: at noon Sunday a surgeon in the midst of a mastoid operation called twice for an instrument which the sterile nurse, of course, did not hand him, unable to hear or see his lips move under the gauze mask. Perspiring, snatching at it himself, the surgeon dropped it on the floor—a delay that almost cost the patient's life.

These were incidents, and relatively unimportant. But by Monday noon, with the weird silence still crouching over Blankville, Haverty began to realize its growing power.

All the stores, except the serve-yourself ones, were closed. There was a rush sale of paper and pencils, but very little else, it being too difficult to make the clerks understand what one wanted.

At the courthouse and city hall, all trials and public meetings were canceled. The

three theatres were closed; no one cared to see a movie without sound to make it intelligible. All civic club meetings were postponed, indefinitely, because no one knew how long the silence would last, Schools, too, were closed; and the children who were Scouts were much in demand as instructors in code and semaphore. It was indeed exactly as that tri-cornered note had said it would be: the whole process of normal living, for 30,000 bewildered people, had to be readjusted as completely as though the town of Blankville had been whisked away and set down on another planet.

Tourists began to pour in by Monday noon. These—with the steady stream of Blankville natives who went hourly beyond the "sound limit" for the sheer pleasure of hearing noise again—made life a nightmare for the highway patrol. For, outside the valley, noises went on as usual. Passing back and forth across the "silence boundary" gave one a sharp headache, it was noted; but no one could offer a plausible reason why.

Inside the valley, within a radius of some five miles, quiet rested like a pall over everything. Silence that pressed down like a tangible force, smothering, nerve-racking, had the town by the throat. Like a helpless fly, Blankville was caught in a spider web of utter stillness from which there was no escape.

MONDAY passed. Tuesday. And then, Wednesday morning, Mayor Seeley received another three-cornered letter.

There it was in his morning mail, dated April the 14th, postmarked locally like the first—and equally polite, detached, and outrageous:

Dear Sir:—

I trust you are convinced by this time that the first letter to you was not an idle threat. The price remains the same,

\$250,000, to be sealed in a yellow oil-can and thrown from the river bridge, facing upstream, at midnight as directed. Any deviation from these directions will inconvenience me, so I beg you to comply in detail.

A copy of this letter will be sent to the editor of your local newspaper. If he does not make it public, I shall use other methods. When the good inhabitants of Blankville hear of your failure to protect their interests, I hesitate to predict your political future.

Borrow the above-mentioned sum at once as a civic loan, and pay it back by bond issue, donation, or sales tax. That is no concern of mine. But \$250,000 is a mere pittance compared with what your merchants, lawyers, theatre managers, etc., have already lost. And let me assure you that the phenomenon will remain as it is until you comply with my request. . . .

*Very truly yours,
"DR. UBIQUE."*

Mayor Seeley reread the letter and, mopping his florid brow, sent post-haste for Jeff Haverty—who had indeed received a similar note, and was frowning over it with a growing wonder.

One can imagine that conference: two wordy, excitable men, accustomed to yelling orders, closeted together in the mayor's inner sanctum without any means of verbal communication. Their pencils must have scratched frantically. Notes flew back and forth like snowflakes.

And that night, the whole Blankville police force, assisted by the National Guard and the highway patrol, threw a secret cordon around the entire city. They were looking, it leaked out, for an infernal machine of some sort. Several arrests were made. One young man, experimenting with television in the cellar of his home, spent a bad four hours of explaining at headquarters, in a little room reserved for

such matters. But nothing else was found.

That same evening the *News* came out with a four-column cut of the two letters received by Mayor Seeley. The accompanying article, written by Haverty himself, was light and amused at the idea of a "mad scientist" hidden in their midst. But there was an undercurrent of gravity in the article, presenting the problem squarely to the harassed citizens of a town of silence.

Were they, in truth, the victims of a fantastic extortion plot?

After all, as Haverty pointed out, no one else had predicted any "unusual phenomenon" for April the 11th. If the letters had been written *after* the silence began, it might have been the work of a nervy opportunist. But that first letter had threatened them with a paralysis of normal living a full week in advance. And the threat had been weirdly carried out. No one could deny that.

THE inhabitants of Blankville read those pictured letters with growing awe. Nerves drawn taut by the strain under which they were living, they seized on this new explanation with excitement not unmixed with terror.

A madman in their midst! A clever, ruthless extortioner who, by some uncanny means, had destroyed all sound in their busy valley—as effective a monkey-wrench as was ever thrown into the machinery of an average American town!

"Doctor Everywhere!" The name was on every tongue—with various attempts at the Latin "Ubique." It was sinister, melodramatic. It caught at the imagination, and caused prickles of fear to run up and down the spine. Doors were locked. Children were not allowed out after dark. The police station was flooded with messages that a prowler had been seen lurking in alleys all over town. Every stranger was a suspect.

For, what was the monster like? Was he gaunt and cadaverous, like Dracula?

Fat and suavely cold-blooded? Or, as some suggested, could "Doctor Ubique" possibly be a woman? Was he a stranger, or someone they all knew and trusted?

His mysterious power of silence caused even more conjecture. How did he cause it? Chemicals? Electricity? A ray-gun of some kind, its projector located far from the city that was his prey? Everyone had a different opinion; anyone could be right, for no one knew.

And the net of silence tightened unbearably with the added idea that it was man-made and therefore could be stopped . . . for a price.

Thursday morning, letters began to pour into the *News* office. At last a delegation called upon Mayor Tom Seeley, perspiring and ill at ease without the glib oratory of his profession. Sternly he was rebuked—in the written proclamation handed him by the silent foreman—for keeping that first threat-letter a secret. And, flatly, he was ordered to act, and act in a hurry.

Pay the ransom: that was the opinion of an overwhelming majority. If the weird silence continued, said the proclamation, Blankville would become in truth the ghost-town it seemed. For everyone was deciding to move out of the eerie little valley. Property was one thing. Living in ghostly quiet, day in, day out, and rearing one's children to be deaf-mutes: that was something else. Besides, it was costing everyone a fortune to carry on work in such an unnatural manner. A few businesses, which depended entirely on sound, would be ruined.

The silence, said Blankville, must go—or they would. And if the release could be effected by the payment of a quarter-million dollars, it must be done at once. At any rate, there was no harm in trying—to which even the cautious Mayor Seeley agreed.

And so, Thursday night, April the 15th, was chosen. The Farmer's Trust and the

First National banks combined to make the loan, in new twenties and fifties. And every filling-station proprietor in Blankville importantly came forward with an oil-drum painted a brilliant yellow to be used as the sealed container.

THURSDAY night. Four days after the silence first occurred. Four of the strangest days an ordinary American town ever spent.

Thursday night. Everyone was ordered to stay indoors during the hour agreed upon. And so, at eleven-thirty, everyone turned out in a body to watch Mayor Seeley stand on the Municipal Bridge that joined west and east Blankville, staring down at the dark river below. Authorities blustered, herded, shooed, perspired—but they might have known they could not keep Blankville in bed while their civic leader handed over a small fortune to a shadowy figure who, even now, moved among them at will.

The population turned out in full force, lining up along the river banks and peering over one another's heads with a kind of shivery enjoyment. It was like a parade or a dedication, except that in all that milling, shoving crowd there was not a whisper of sound. No cheering. No whistling. No shuffle of feet or murmur of many voices. Like a congregation of ghosts, visible now and then as lightning flickered over the cloudy sky, they stared up at the cement bridge, white against the darkness. Blocked off by uniformed police at either end, it spanned the river. In its center, with two uniformed men carrying the yellow can, Mayor Seeley peered over the railing and waved solemnly.

By the dim light of the clouded moon, he balanced the yellow can, its precious contents sealed inside, on the rail for a moment. It must have been impressive, that soundless pantomime. Haverly—who was one of that eagerly watching crowd—says

he will never forget it. A can containing a quarter-million dollars, being dropped into the swirling current of a muddy river, and from there to . . . where? No one could dive into a river, in plain sight of 30,000 people, and drag out a heavy cumbersome object like a weighted oil-can! Suppose it sank, bedded deep in river ooze where no one could find it. . . .

Mayor Seeley waved. Then, solemnly, he gave the balanced can a shove. It fell with a silent splash, went under, stayed under.

Everyone stared, spell-bound, for twenty-odd minutes, watching the ripples spread out from the spot where it fell. Bridge lights shimmered on the widening circles. Lightning, flickering across the sky, lighted each wondering face. A few drops of rain splattered down, unnoticed.

There was nothing to see; no hand clad in white samite which reached up out of the water, brandishing a handful of currency, as Haverty remarked. Nothing but silence, dense and oppressive, as the rain—the first in several weeks — pelted down upon that tense deaf-mute throng, drenched but still unwilling to leave and seek shelter from the downpour.

And then . . . someone coughed. An *audible* cough.

For a full minute the significance of it did not strike those who heard. Then, like a cackling of geese, voices suddenly broke into an excited babble. A cheer went up, deafening and full of pent-up nerves.

"He's done it! He's taken it away!" everyone was yelling. "The silence is gone!"

A wave of sound rose, the impact of it battering against ears so long attuned to stillness. As mysteriously as it had come, the web of silence was lifted, and Blankville was once more a busy ordinary little American city—minus a quarter-million of its capital. "Doctor Ubique" had fulfilled his weird contract to the letter, and now his fee lay somewhere at the bottom of the

river. No hidden boat shot out to retrieve it. No supernatural force parted the waters to reveal its hiding-place. Shivering there in the rainy darkness, the people of Blankville wavered between comfort and a gnawing curiosity.

"Where is he?" awed murmurs ebbed and flowed about Haverty.

"Why doesn't he get it? Afraid he'll be caught in the act, eh?"

"How can he get it? It's sunk now. He'll have to drag the river for it. . . ."

"Maybe they've caught him already. . . ."

And then someone shouted. Other voices took up the cry. Fingers pointed. Those in back jostled those along the bank, craning their necks to see. A hundred flashlights trained their beams on the river, where something yellow and cylindrical was bobbing along heavily on the current.

"The can! It's the money! Get it! Go get it, somebody!" shouts rose in chorus.

Before anyone else could make a move, two uniformed police, in an outboard motor concealed and ready for such an emergency, shot out into midstream and towed the floating object ashore. The yellow oil-can it was, sealed tight with paraffin. People crowded close, ordered back by the police, as the top was pried loose. Then, as the heavy container was upended, a murmur of awe swept over the throng.

For the yellow can was empty, quite empty, save for a single copper penny that rattled and rolled on the bottom.

THAT was all Haverty was waiting for. Juggling mental headlines, he elbowed his way through the crowd, making another bee-line for his newspaper. His staff was waiting, with the story half written, when he reached the *News* office. Silence that had cloaked the big news room for four strange days was replaced by the familiar click of typewriter and teletype.

He had been seated at his desk, scrawl-

ing headlines, for perhaps ten minutes when his phone rang. It was Mayor Seeley, phoning en route home from his ceremony on the bridge. The plump mayor sounded furious and ineffectual.

"Jeff," he growled, "they'll want my scalp for this. A quarter of a million dollars, gone . . . where? I wish I had that—that fellow by the neck, whoever he is! A wholesale hold-up, think of it! I was so sure we'd catch him when he—I'll have somebody's badge for this!" He calmed down with an effort, adding wearily: "Come over to my office. You can swing public opinion my way; make them see I was helpless in the hands of this—this lunatic, this scientific bandit!"

Haverty drove to the courthouse in record time—blowing his horn at intervals, he admits sheepishly, for the sheer pleasure of hearing noise again. Mayor Seeley was waiting for him on the steps, mopping the rain from his face and muttering under his breath. Their footsteps echoed hollowly as they strode down the hall, and Seeley fumbled for the key to his office.

"There's this about it," the mayor growled. "If this Doctor Ubique, as he calls himself, can do it once, he'll do it again! What town will be his next victim?"

"Yes," Haverty was saying with a scowl of gravity. "A weapon like that, wielded against an entire town! It's far and away the boldest extortion plot I ever—"

Under Seeley's hand the light clicked on—and whatever Haverty was going to say hung suspended in midair. The *News* editor's mouth hung open.

There on his desk, muddy and dripping with river slime, sat a yellow oil-can sealed with paraffin, an exact duplicate of the one hauled from the river by the two police.

Haverty leaped forward. But he knew, somehow, before he pried open the lid that it contained \$250,000 in new twenties and fifties. They were all there, carefully wrapped in a rubber bag where Seeley had

put them in case the sealed top leaked.

And beside the yellow oil-can lay a tri-cornered letter, unstamped, addressed merely: "*To Whom It May Concern.*"

Without a word, Jeff Haverty ripped open that letter and read it aloud, his voice echoing eerily in the quiet building:

To Whom It May Concern:

I hope the good people of Blankville will forgive my little whimsy at their expense. Truly I had no wish to harm or to inconvenience anyone, and certainly not to rob them of their honest gain.

I am a scientist, an astronomer of some note in my own country (which is, I may add, halfway across the world from your charming city, in case you have any plans for legal reprisal). In my private observatory, somewhat larger than the largest now in public use, I study the heavenly bodies and make certain calculations which I shall publicize at my death.

These calculations, based on years of research, led to my discovery of an interesting new star in the constellation Aquila—a nova gaining in brightness, due to some internal outburst of which I have not been able to determine the cause. Its increase in brightness over a four-day interval promised to be about 60,000 fold.

Quite by accident, I made a remarkable discovery about this star. A certain mineral, similar to pitchblende, is so susceptible to its magnified rays that a sharp vibration is set up shortly after contact. Only when the mineral is thoroughly wetted does this vibration cease—an inaudible humming, so alien to the human make-up that it renders the eardrum useless.

My nova was increasing in brightness, so I hurriedly made inquiries as to the location of spots on our planet where this mineral deposit was plentiful. Several were given me as a choice, but unfortu-

nately it had rained at all of these localities save one, your small valley of Blankville here in the American states. As it was rich in this peculiar metal—and as my nova was steadily increasing its brightness and power—I hurried to Blankville to witness the effect when the rays from this star reached full power to impregnate the metal without being magnified.

I came to your city for the sole purpose of observing this contact. That was all. But in mingling with your people (a rather stodgy unimaginative lot, who place more value on money than on truth), it occurred to me to play a little prank on the entire city. Hence my first letter to your excellent mayor, demanding a large sum of money and threatening the town with an "unusual phenomenon."

My "silence"! (Actually, I had no way of knowing it would work out!) But I have had many a quiet chuckle at your expense, reading the learned explanations offered in your local paper concerning the "mysterious destruction of sound waves," etc. You comprehend? The ray from this star simply impregnated the metal in this valley (parched by a long dry spell), with some sort of electric charge, causing the atmosphere to vibrate in a peculiar way. The human ear, unused to such vibrations, rebelled.

Therefore, Blankville was not a city of silence. It was merely a city of the deaf. Sounds went on as before, but no one exposed to those vibrations could hear them.

I was annoyed that my first letter to your mayor had no effect; so I wrote another, saying, in fine: "I told you so!" Your reception of it has afforded me great amusement and delight—especially the way my foolish little trick of legerdemain with the two oil-cans baffled you. What I did, of course, was drop a duplicate can into the river to draw your attention from the real one, which I later drew ashore in the sunken net placed to catch it.

At no time did I harbor any intention of keeping the money for my own use, although by your standards I am not a rich man. He who has truth at his fingertips has little regard for material things, however, as I believe my small prank has taught you.

Had one of you known what I knew, you would not have been the victims of my "extortion plot."

For, as you now are aware, I did not control the "silence" as a supernatural weapon. I could no more have caused it than I could have stopped it. A very obliging rain abetted me in my little whimsy, dampening the dry atmosphere and relieving the pressure on everyone's eardrums—at the psychological moment. If it had not rained, Blankville would still be caught in my web of silence. Likewise, if your good mayor had waited another night to pay the "ransom," my "fiendish power" would have been destroyed.

So now, I must bid you all farewell and return to my work. I herewith return the \$250,000 (you may also keep the penny in the other yellow can!) Since it has been collected for civic betterment, I hope that you will use it for the common good—may I suggest building a public observatory in which your good people may study the heavens (!)

Happiness to you all, and I hope you will forgive my little joke.

"DR. UBIQUE."

In the quiet office Mayor Tom Seeley looked at Jeff Haverty. The editor looked at the mayor.

Haverty's lip twitched. Seeley choked.

And then, in chorus, they burst out laughing—clung to each other, shaking with laughter that echoed and re-echoed later, over the little valley town of Blankville when Haverty made public the true nature of their web of silence.