

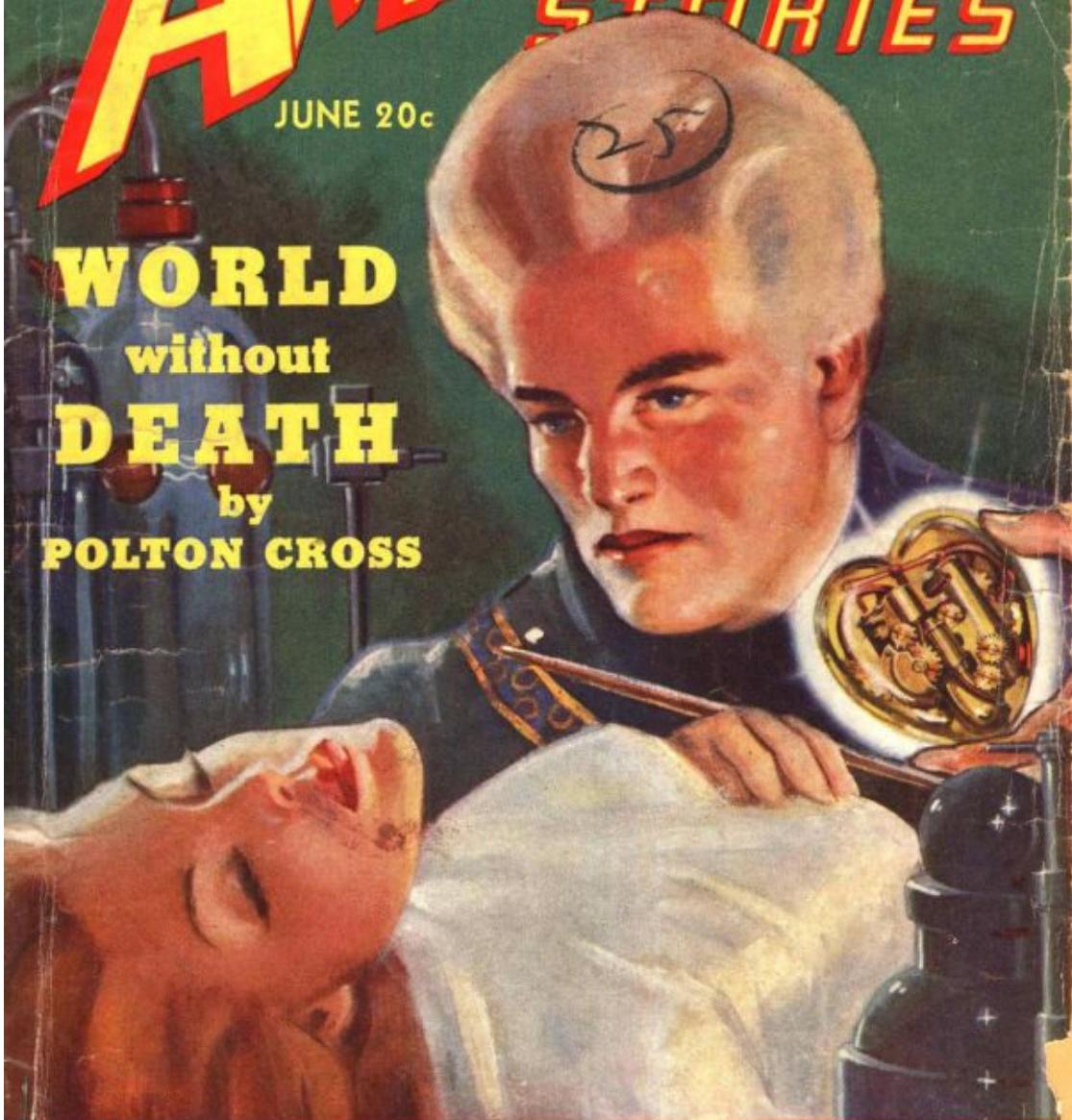
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Microbes From Space

Also published under the title *Murmuring Dust*.

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre

First published *Amazing Stories*, June 1939.

There was no reason for buildings to fall, yet they did, filled with a weird murmuring.

CHAPTER I

Death Comes to New York

Summer darkness had settled over New York. For a few minutes there was a transient quiet—a quietness that bordered on uneasiness as through every quarter of the city there crept that murmuring, that strange, incredible murmuring that had existed now for two days and nights.

Then the lights, born of atomic power, came up. Festoons of lights—advertisements—millions of windows. Power—the vast power of 1970—surged again. Night took on duty. Traffic roared; trains screamed; an airliner moved unerringly to the radio directional towers. . . . And the murmuring was forgotten—for a time.

Deep in the midst of this maw of human industry a dark headed, gray eyed, youngish man pored over a long record sheet that had just been brought in to him. His frown deepened; his expression changed to alarm. Never in his experience as Chief of the New York Bureau of Public Safety had he seen such a list of accidents.

“Say, Stan, take a look at this!” he exclaimed finally.

Stanley Park, loose jointed, Traffic Supervisor, came forward slowly, scraping lank black hair back from his forehead.

“Something devilishly wrong here,” Martin Day said, half to himself. “Three elevateds wrecked, two subway collisions, and now a transatlantic airliner drops to pieces in midair!”

Park studied the report and sucked his teeth. “Just goes to show you,” he sighed. “Always trouble everywhere—nothing but trouble. Guess it must be the human element—”

“Human element nothing!” Mart glared up at him. “It just couldn’t enter into things like this. Yesterday there were four big smashes—day before there were two. Now we have six—”

He broke off and turned as the radio started into life.

“Calling Bureau of Public Safety, New York! Triple smash-up on Bronx subway. Three trains jumped rails—collided. Dead estimated at five hundred. All ambulances ordered to spot instantly. Bureau, investigate immediately! That is all. . . .”

Mart smiled bitterly as he stared at Park’s frozen visage.

“Well, laugh!” he snorted. “You thrive on trouble. Now’s your chance— Better grab a hat and come with me. We’ve got to make some sort of a report on this, but God knows what it will be. Step on it, will you?”

Once they arrived at the scene of the disaster both men stood momentarily aghast at the extent of the damage. Dead were being carried constantly through the haze and dust of the blocked subway. Electric lamps flared their brilliance on tangled disorders of twisted steel and shattered glass. The wounded were shouting and screaming, only to be drowned out by the savage rattle of electric drills and the clangor of sledgehammers.

“Whew!” Mart whispered, pushing up his hat from his forehead. “This is about the worst of them all—” He broke off and grabbed a pallid doctor as he stumbled along the track.

“Say, any reactions from the survivors?” he demanded, seizing the man’s arm. “Any of them suggest a cause of this mess?”

The medico shook his gray head. He recognized Mart’s face in the lights.

“Nothing definite, Mr. Day. Several of them have said it was the murmuring that did it—Absurd, of course. . . .” He pulled himself away and went on down the shattered vista.

Mart’s face was puzzled as he stared after him.

“Delusions, I’d say,” Park said sepulchraly. “Can’t be an actual moaning—more likely caused by the wind. Else it’s the dead trying to return—”

“Damned silly superstitious rot!” Mart snorted. “Be yourself, man. This is real, horrible tragedy! We’ve got to explain all this to the public. If we say that the murmuring caused it what’s going to happen to us?”

They turned, headed slowly to the actual site of operations.

A metropolis harassed by a growing daily toll of horrible accidents paid hardly any attention to the individual report of the Bronx subway disaster. Even less attention was devoted to the theory of the “murmuring.” Those that did digest it said it was fantastic and that the Bureau needed reorganizing.

Some averred that people were suddenly losing their minds and thereby causing accidents. That was all very well, and feasible, in regard to train and general traffic smashups—but when it was found that buildings too were starting to break up, crushing those inside without the least warning, the human element had of necessity to be ruled out. Something was awry with the entire city! Nothing was safe!

A significant feature was that as the area of damage increased the murmuring became more audible. Until at last, after a week of smashing buildings, tumbling elevateds, and collapsing airliners the murmuring could be heard even above the natural roar of the city itself. . . . Yet, according to close inquiry, no other city had as yet heard this strange sound though thousands of people poured in just for the novelty of hearing it.

Mart Day became increasingly haggard. Upon him—and to a lesser extent on Park—devolved the whole responsibility for public safety and with natural savagery that fury of a terrified public descended on the Bureau. Desperately though he tried, Mart could do nothing in the face of this mysterious horror. All he could do was set the Bureau’s analysts to work and spend his own time in trying to keep calm amidst chaos.

And the sweating analysts could find nothing! Every time they arrived on the scene of a disaster they found smashed and crumbled steel girders that no longer had any appearance of their former stable molecular structure. They tested and examined, peered through powerful microscopes, brooded over powdery gray dust that had been solid steel.

But Mart Day was keenly aware of the human side. He envisaged the ghastly slaughter that was likely to accrue unless science somehow got to the root of the problem. The analysts, he felt, had missed something. Why, for instance, did the steel stop humming once it had collapsed?

He was no scientist in the practical sense; that was the main trouble—but at least he had the advantage of knowing where to locate one of the finest scientific brains in the country—Dr. Ward Black, his fiancée’s father.

CHAPTER II

Mystery

Eva Black's quiet, intelligent features were visibly concerned as Mart was shown into the spacious lounge of the New York apartment, she got to her feet immediately, held out slim hands.

"Mart, dearest!" Her violet eyes searched his pale, lined face. Quietly she led him to the divan.

"Yes, I know the strain you've been under," she said gently, as he glanced at her. "This horrible business of accidents— It's all so—so ghastly!"

"I rang you up twice in the fortnight preceding this awful week to try and make a date," Mart said slowly. "Maid said you were out of town. That right?"

The girl nodded slowly. "Yes, I have been away. . . ."

Mart stared dully round the well furnished room with its softly shaded lights.

"Everything all right here?" he asked presently.

"So far—yes, but with the things that keep happening I don't suppose anywhere is really safe. . . . Mart, what did your men find? Surely they found *something*?"

"Nothing," he answered, with a hopeless shrug. "First we worked on the idea that steel might have reached a mutational change, even as uranium after millions of years changes into radium, then into polonium, and finally lead. We thought maybe steel had gone into a radioactive category— But we were wrong. Then we tested steel that hadn't broken down and we found it OK. The only fault is that it murmurs—*Murmurs!*" he repeated, almost shouting the word. "God, Eva, that murmuring is driving me crazy!"

"I suppose everybody feels that way," the girl said, soothingly. "I hear it in this room— Somehow, I've become accustomed. . . ."

"I came really to see your father," Mart went on quickly. "He is about the only man who can possibly help us. In fact he's *got* to help us! The whole safety of New York, maybe of the world, depends on it! Good heavens, if steel should start to fail all over the globe—" He left his speculation unfinished, aghast. Then Eva said slowly,

"I'm afraid you can't see father, Mart."

"Huh? Why not?" he demanded, staring at her.

"Because. . . ." Her little mouth set with sudden firmness. "Because he's working on an experiment that must not be disturbed. He's at his laboratory, underground, behind locked doors, and nobody can get at him except me. I gave him my word that under no circumstances should he be interrupted."

Mart gazed speechlessly for a moment, then suddenly he seized the girl's arms in his strong hands.

"Girl alive, do you realize the *urgency* of this?" he cried. "No experiment can be important enough to take precedence over human life. You've *got* to get him! If not that, then tell me where his laboratory is and let me see him."

"No, Mart—I can't. . . ." The girl looked away, and as she did so the light caught her smooth forehead. Mart found himself noticing for the first time a scar marring its perfection. For the moment he forgot her strange adamancy.

“Say, where’d you get that?” he exclaimed, touching it lightly. “You never had it before. . . . Gosh, what a welt! What caused it? Incidentally, where *did* you go during that fortnight—?”

“Anything else?” she said coldly.

“I only asked!” he snapped.

“It seems,” the girl said slowly, “that you came here to ask a lot of unnecessary questions—questions that I have no intention of answering. I don’t see that I have to consult you if I decide to go away for a few days. . . . As to this scar it’s nothing—only a bump. . . .”

Mart laughed shortly “I know the mark of an electroknife when I see one. Must have been a surgical job.”

Eva sprang to her feet, surprisingly flushed and angry.

“Look here, Mart, I think it’d be better for both of us if we postponed seeing each other until we’re both in a better humor—before we say something we might be sorry for.”

He got slowly to his feet, eyeing her levelly. “What’s wrong, kid?” he asked quietly. “What’s all the mystery about? *Something* did happen in those two weeks, and you’re scared to death that I’ll find out what it was. . . . *What caused that scar?*”

She remained stonily silent, eyes blazing sullen defiance.

“Then you won’t tell me where your father is?” Mart demanded. “You’ll let the whole city go to rot first?”

Still she did not speak. Mart snatched up his hat furiously.

“O.K.!” he snapped. “How the hell do I know but what your father started the whole thing? Yeah—he’s crazy enough. He must be crazy to have a daughter like you, anyway—!”

Then he was gone, the door slamming behind him.

After a night’s sleep Mart regretted his impulsive remarks of the night before. His nerves were steadier again: he realized he had been pretty close to breaking point. First thing he did from the office was ring Eva, was told by the maid she had gone away again, indefinitely.

That did not satisfy him. He took the time off to visit her apartment.

“O.K.,” he growled, as the maid merely repeated her words on the telephone. “I’ll leave her a letter—and see she gets it the moment she comes back.”

He settled himself down at the desk, wrote a meek note of apology and began to seal it in the envelope. As he moistened the flap his gaze settled quite naturally on the blotting pad, fixed on the reversed words—

“. . . get well soon. Your affectionate Dad.”

Get well? Scarred forehead? The two connections leapt automatically into Mart’s mind. He was still puzzling over that two weeks in which the girl had vanished, the close of which coincided with the coming of the murmuring. . . .

Finally he sealed the envelope hurriedly, glanced around, then carefully took the top sheet of blotting paper and thrust it in his pocket. . . . He handed the letter to the maid as he went out.

Back in his office he turned all the stresses and strains over to Park for a while, while he studied the blotting paper in a hand mirror. What he could decipher left him more puzzled than ever. Obviously the letter had been written by Dr. Black himself: also, obviously, the girl had not been home for a personal discussion, nor had it been possible to telephone her. What there was of the letter was mystifying—

“. . . so necessary nobody must know yet. Your courage in coming with me, my dear, was magnifi— And so high, too! One hundred and fifty miles, which . . . definitely an advance, if only it had not ended so tragically . . . and must work out details in my laboratory immediately.

*“Get well soon,
“Your affectionate,
Dad.”*

Mart sat staring in front of him, extinguished pipe between his teeth.

“Hundred and fifty miles high?” he muttered. “All ended so tragically? *What* did? Boy, I’d give my soul to know what happened in those two weeks Eva was away. I’ll wager every cent I’ve got that it started the murmuring—”

He glanced up as Park came in, even more worried than usual.

“Worse than ever!” he groaned. “Murmuring noises have gone up by fifty percent today. People are being driven crazy with the racket. As for accidents— Whew! Twenty buildings in two hours this morning. Just collapsed into dust heaps! God knows how many dead. . . . Mart, we’ve got to *do* something!” he wound up in desperation. “We’re the Bureau that’s supposed to handle the responsibility for all this. Where do we start?”

“Might start by finding out what all this means,” Mart snapped, indicating his notes and the blotting paper. “At best it’s a hunch, but with too many coincidences to escape notice—” He jumped to his feet, snatched his hat. “I’m going to get the truth out of Eva if I have to beat it out of her. I’ve got to find her, somehow, even if I tear the city apart.”

“Leave it a couple of days and you’ll have no need!” Park sighed.

CHAPTER III

Tragedy

To find Eva and force her by some means to piece together the odds and ends of the puzzle was a bigger problem than Mart had reckoned. Realizing he could do no more good at the Bureau he spent his time to the better advantage of trying to find the girl.

Mart wandered for hours, through the city that had lost its ordinary business normalcy. In all directions were fleeing people; on every hand, it seemed buildings were falling steadily like decks of cards. The ruin since the murmuring had begun was well nigh incredible—and it was a ruin that was advancing with tragic speed.

Automatically he turned toward the girl's apartment block for a last call. She might have returned— Then he stood appalled. The entire block had fallen down, was a tangled mass of bricks and girders, surrounded by ambulances, flaring lights, hoarse policemen, haggard and bloodstained civilians.

He ran forward quickly, fought his way through the crowd to the roped-off front, stood staring at the survivors as they gazed in bewilderment at the ruins. . . . Then suddenly his heart bounded. There *was* Eva, in a torn dress, swaying to and fro holding her forehead. Dust smothered her from head to foot.

"Eva!" Mart screamed madly, and before anybody could stop him he burst through the cordon, clutched the girl's fainting form in his arms.

"Eva!" he panted. "What's wrong, kid? Hurt?"

She smiled wanly in the play of lights. "My—my head. . . . It sings and murmurs like the city. I—It's no use hiding it," she muttered, making a sudden effort. "The laboratory was under the apartment block—re-enforced basement. Dad's trapped down there; I got out just in time. Laboratory's safe, but the door's blocked. Get him out, Mart—he'll suffocate down there! Get him out! The whole city depends on it. . . ."

The girl closed her eyes, leaned against him. Mart gave a yell to the nearest workers, bawled hoarse instructions. In a moment he was recognized and his orders obeyed. Desperately shoveling, struggling men began to dig at the spot indicated by the girl's weary arm. She heard Mart's stentorian commands as though in a dream.

"Get the doctor out—fetch him to my place—the Bureau. If it's still standing, that is. . . . Hurry, boys—hurry!"

Mart turned, shook the girl back into brief awareness.

"You?" he whispered. "You don't mean your *head* is murmuring, surely? You mean you *hear* the murmuring, like the rest of us?"

"No—no, inside me," she sighed weakly. "I—" She got no further; her knees buckled under her.

Instantly Mart swept her up in his arms, staggered through the debris and out into the comparative clearness of the main road. He waded for a mile through jammed traffic and fallen bricks, at last staggered into the Bureau, which he thanked Providence had so far escaped. And the place was full of injured people. Doctors were working feverishly on all manner of injuries—some slight, others severe.

Mart blundered through the midst of the jam into his own office, found Park busy trying to keep a check on events. He watched in sober astonishment as Mart laid the girl on the divan.

“You found her, then?” he asked briefly.

“Obvious, isn’t it?” Mart snapped. “Fetch a surgeon in here—one who can be spared from a trivial case. Hurry!”

Park leapt for the door. In a few moments a worried surgeon in a white smock came in. Without a word he went on one knee beside the girl, made a swift examination. Then he looked up surprisedly.

“But this girl has no apparent injury!” he exclaimed. “All I can find wrong with her is shock and— Yes, she’s humming!” he added, baffled. “Sounds as though it’s coming from her head!”

The three men stood still from sheer perplexity, staring at the limp, ashy-faced girl. Then suddenly she stirred a little: without opening her eyes began to speak, hesitantly—

“. . . a great gulf,” she whispered. “Four little planets and four big ones. . . . One little one beyond. . . . Asteroids—Yes, the asteroids! Once a planet. . . . Now, just asteroids. . . .”

The men crouched nearer, hardly breathing.

“Eaten away—crumbled,” Eva sighed. “Tiny beings—eat metals. Very tiny. . . . Millions! Myriads. . . . Ohh. . . .!”

She went limp again. Mart stared at Park and the surgeon as though they were phantoms.

“You got that?” he asked hoarsely. “Tiny beings who live on metals? That’s what’s been in our steel! Tiny beings, so small we couldn’t see them even with a microscope— Absorbed the alloys of steel just as white ants eat wood and leave the shell behind! Live in metallic interstices—! Once lived on the planet that is now the asteroids; it became asteroids because they ate it away. That must be it—” He broke off, scowled. “But how on earth did *she* know?” he demanded. “What makes her buzz—?”

He swung round, aware that a haggard, elderly man in a dusty suit had been standing in the doorway, listening. Now he came forward, carrying a shiny black bag in his hand.

“Dr. Black!” Mart cried thankfully, gripping his hand. “Thank God you’re here, sir, and safe! I—”

“O.K., leave that for now, Mart,” the scientist said curtly. “There’s work to be done.” He swung round on the surgeon. “Got anaesthetics?”

“Sure— But say, what’s wrong with her?”

“Plenty!” Black compressed his lips. “Inside her forehead is a metal plate—steel. She was seriously injured recently and I myself put that plate in for emergency purposes—”

“But surely, silver or gold would—” the surgeon began; then he broke off as Black glared at him.

“I know all about that, man. I had no gold one handy—but I have now, and it’s got to go in right away. . . .” He wheeled round and snatched a shaped gold plate from his little bag. “I guessed this would happen,” he panted. “Don’t you understand? The damned Murmurers have got through her flesh to the steel content in that plate! That plate contacts her brain centers at certain places. These blasted things are living, thinking creatures—metal eaters. I never knew before where they originated, but I do now I’ve heard Eva’s observations. For a moment or two her brain centers must have contacted the united force of several of those tiny brains in the headplate. She spoke, as though in a dream, of what she read from those minds— Where the hell’s that anaesthetic, man?”

The surgeon jumped into life, summoned an anaesthetist from the neighboring room. The door closed. . . . Within moments the girl was entirely flaccid with the cone over her face.

CHAPTER IV

The End of the Murmuring

Black did not speak again. He washed, then donned rubber gloves, snapped out orders regarding the position of the lights, pulled immaculate instruments from his bag, then set to work.

As he worked, performed masterful trepanning—expert even for the advanced knowledge of 1970 medicine—the assembled men gained some idea as to why Dr. Black had once walked off with the world’s prize for surgery.

No blood flowed; the electroknife prevented it. Probes which created automatic coagulation knitted the vital centers to the golden plate. The steel one, shining though it was, already visibly pitted and scarred hummed as it was laid on the table.

For an hour Black worked, under intense strain, but at the end of that time his work was flawlessly done. He smeared across the final healing ointments, broodingly watched the scar on the forehead begin to knit slowly together.

Mart expelled a low, long sigh of relief. Black mopped his streaming face.

“She’ll be all right,” he said finally. “In a day or so— Needs rest. . . .”

The scientist turned aside, relaxed limply in the armchair, gratefully swallowed the glass of brandy Park handed to him. . . . Then Mart said quietly, “You realize, doctor, that you’re about the only man alive who can suggest a possible means of destroying this ghastly menace?”

Black gave a brief smile, drained his glass. “I rather fancy I *have* destroyed it,” he answered quietly. “Listen!”

For a long time Mart could not figure out what was different. Then suddenly he realized the truth.

“The murmuring’s stopped!” he gasped. “Everywhere’s quiet, for the first time in weeks— Dr. Black, what does—?”

“It means,” the scientist said slowly, “that my reasoning is now justified. I started this whole business and it was up to me to destroy it—but to work out the details demanded absolute privacy and freedom. . . . I’ll tell you what happened—

“In the first place, I tried out a new stratosphere globe I had invented—secretly, you understand. That was why no mention of it appeared in the papers. Eva was my only companion, and she came at her own request. We got up to one hundred and fifty miles . . .”

Mart nodded slowly, remembering the blotting paper.

“At that height,” Black went on, “we became aware that our globe was smothered with rapidly growing pits and holes. The thing was humming, too. We came down rapidly, but before we had properly landed the globe fell in pieces. Eva was badly hurt, her head injured. For myself I somehow escaped. I rushed her to my laboratory and performed an operation on the spot, put in a temporary plate of steel. Then I dispatched her to a nursing home for proper care while I tackled the problem on hand—”

“You wrote her once?” Mart put in quickly.

“Yes—once.” Black looked surprised. Then, “The trouble was that in the time I’d taken to operate on her that damned stuff in the globe had had time to spread. I got a piece of humming

steel under my ultrapowerful microscope and with it I was just able to see the flux and conflux of myriads of minute creatures, living their own strange lives with an intelligent ordered scheme.

“In space, thanks to our globe, they had for the first time contacted an object heavy enough, and cool enough—as opposed to a meteor—to carry them down to Earth. In space, I imagine, they subsisted on metallic brickbats, which abound in the thousands. Likewise, these creatures are able to live in air or without it, at will. In space their numbers were of necessity limited—but once on Earth they multiplied with incredible rapidity. . . . They are best imagined, I think, as bacteria. Bacteria of high intelligence, the last race of the planet that is now an asteroid—even as in the end our own world will probably be ruled only by bacteria.

“Eva’s statement, unconscious though it was, shows where they came from. My problem was to destroy them. I had to work fast and in private. I commanded Eva to keep our laboratory a secret from everybody. On no account was she to disturb me; on that the fate of New York depended. Once beyond city limits I might find myself powerless to stop the menace.

“I reasoned it out finally that just as a certain stimulus of radiations will promote and sustain life, so an overdose of that radiation can kill. Out in space, the most likely stimulus for these Murmurers would be cosmic rays. Excess of them, at close quarters, might kill. It wasn’t difficult to build my cosmic ray projector—time was my biggest enemy. Atomic force is a mastered science today, of course. By using copper blocks in the disintegration chamber, the resultant energy from destruction of electron and proton became cosmic waves. I had then to grade their strength so they would kill the Murmurers and yet be harmless to humanity. At last I found the right strength—had every detail ready. Then the apartment block came down.

“Fortunately the laboratory is re-enforced. It held. Eva dashed to the entrance and got out. I was caught. . . . Your men got me out, Mart. But something else was worrying me. I had been aware, before Eva herself, that her head was singing a little. My main desire was to reach her, operate, save her life. . . . I did the only thing I could. I picked what few scientists there were on the spot at the laboratory, showed them exactly how to turn the projector in the fashion of a searchlight— Then I snatched up my surgical instruments and came here. . . .”

“Those scientists evidently got the idea,” Park said, thoughtfully. “They’ve stopped it all right. . . .”

“I told them to keep on turning until they got fresh orders. . . .” Black got to his feet. “We’ve wiped it out in New York, yes; my radius would incorporate that. But wherever they appear outside New York, if they ever do, they must be instantly located and destroyed. There may be others in space; that is for space navigators of the future to puzzle out. . . . As to the murmuring, I expect you’ve realized it was caused by the ceaseless movement and industry of millions of tiny beings. Incessant activity. . . .”

Mart nodded slowly, stared out of window on the buildings that still stood. There was something enormously refreshing about that silence.

“We can rebuild,” he said slowly. “And whatever has been said in this room goes no further. You started the business by accident, Doc—but all the world will know is that you *stopped* it! You were not to blame. . . .”

Black flushed warmly—then Mart turned aside as the girl on the divan stirred gently and opened her eyes.

[The end of *Microbes From Space* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]