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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Cities were destroyed by flashes of fire in that war."



Fessenden's Worlds

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Like a young god, Fessenden created a miniature universe, but his unholy meddling with the lives and destinies of his creations brought about a startling catastrophe—an amazing weird-scientific story

I WISH now that I'd never seen Fessenden's damnable experiment! I wish my cursed curiosity had never taken me into his laboratory that night, to witness the thing that destroyed my peace of mind for ever and made me for

the rest of my life a somber and soul-sick man.

Arnold Fessenden was the greatest scientist this planet ever produced—and the evildest. *I know!* I'd have told about it before, but I knew that I wouldn't be

believed. He assured me of that himself, grinning with sardonic mirth at me, that night he showed me what I'd like to forget.

It was a dark, wet, windy night in late October when I climbed the porch of Fessenden's big stone house near the campus, and rang the bell. He lived there quite alone now, I knew. Even his housekeeper had finally declared that she couldn't stand his queer ways any longer.

He came to the door himself. His big, powerful figure bulking against the dimly lit hall inside, he stared out at me and said, "Oh, it's you, Bradley. What do you want?"

I told him, "That's a poor way to receive guests. I just came over to gab a little—haven't seen you around the campus lately."

He hesitated a moment, then said, "I'm sorry, Bradley—I haven't had many guests of late. Come on in."

I went in and sat down in the slovenly-looking living-room. Fessenden sat in a chair and looked across at me with a queer mocking light in his piercing black eyes, and a sardonic smile on his flat, strong face.

I said, "Fessenden, why haven't you shown up at any of the faculty meetings lately? They tell me you've been letting a substitute take care of all your lecture courses, too."

Fessenden looked at me with that mocking smile and said, "What I like about you, Bradley, is that you're so transparent. You've heard everyone around the campus saying that I've got a little crazy, so you've come over to see for yourself."

"No, that's not so," I protested. "It's true that a good many people have been ridiculing those radical astrophysical theories you propounded, and that some of them think you're more than a little eccentric. But that means nothing to me. I

know very well that whenever a man proposes something new, everyone at first thinks he's a little crazy."

I continued earnestly, "You know I'm only a foot soldier in the ranks of science myself—a poor devil of an instructor. Nevertheless, I've always recognized you as a great pioneer. I've been wondering a lot just what you've been working on here so intensively, and I'm honestly hoping you'll tell me something about it. But whether you do or not, you have my admiration and sympathy."

Fessenden's smile deepened. He told me, "Bradley, if you expect me to be grateful for your sympathy, you're wrong. I'm not. I have been called cold and unfeeling, and that is just what I want to be. The gabbling of the fools who have been ridiculing me does not disturb me, and means no more to me than does your sympathy."

My face must have fallen a little. Fessenden laughed.

"I'm glad that is clear to you," he said. "But now that it is, let me tell you that I have decided that I *will* show you what I am doing, after all. I'll show you the greatest experiment which any scientist on earth has ever conducted."

I said, in surprize, "If you feel no more friendliness for me than you say, I don't see why you should."

He shrugged mockingly. "Because, unfortunately, I am still an ordinary human being at bottom, Bradley. As such, I have a certain ineradicable amount of exhibitionism in me which, deplore it as I may, persists and makes me want to show at least somebody what I have done." He laughed. "Just like any small boy who has built his first kite and wants somebody to see it. I recognize the folly of this, I am amused by it, but I can't wholly eliminate it from my make-up.

"Well, why not indulge this irrational desire for applause by demonstrating to

you what I've done? You do not have enough intelligence to comprehend it all, of course. Still, you will be an auditor, an audience, and I shall satisfy this itch of mine to let someone know what I've accomplished."

I said quickly, "I promise that I'll keep everything you tell me absolutely confidential."

Fessenden roared with laughter. "You needn't promise that. For all I care, you can go out and tell the whole world what you see here. Only, if you do, they'll call you a madman and very likely confine you in an institution. By all means go ahead and tell them, if you want to."

HE WAS still chuckling as he rose to his feet. "It's back in my laboratory, Bradley."

"But what is it, anyway?" I asked doubtfully. "What have you done?"

"I've created a universe," Fessenden told me.

I said impatiently, "That's a grandiose metaphor, but just what does it mean?"

"It's not a metaphor at all," Fessenden said blandly. "I mean literally that I have created a universe in my laboratory, a universe that has millions of suns, tens of millions of worlds."

I was silent. I was trying to avoid his eyes, to hide my disappointment from him.

Fessenden chuckled. "A minute ago," he said, "you were condemning the rest of the university for thinking me insane. Now you're thinking exactly the same thing, aren't you?—wondering how you can get out of this crazy Fessenden's house with good grace?"

He added, grinning sardonically, "Come along to the laboratory, Bradley, and see for yourself."

I followed his tall, powerful figure along the corridor. I did think now that his isolation and the ridicule his radical

theories had evoked must have touched his mind. But still he must have something to show me, and I was eager to see what it was.

The laboratory was a long, stone-walled room whose walls were crowded with shelves of chemical and physical apparatus, and whose corners held great electrical mechanisms. Much of the equipment I saw was strange to my eyes. Then my gaze fastened on the thing at the center of the laboratory.

It consisted of two twelve-foot metal disks with grid-like surfaces, one on the floor and one on the ceiling directly over the other. They were connected by cables to the electrical machinery, and their grid-like surfaces shone faintly with wan blue light or force.

Between the two disks, floating unsupported in the air, hung a cloud of tiny sparks of light. It looked like a swarm of minute golden bees, countless in number, and the swarm was lenticular in shape. Mounted near this weird thing were several instruments that looked a little like telescopes, though unfamiliar in design. They seemed to be trained upon that thick little cloud of shining sparks.

Fessenden walked over to the thing and motioned calmly toward the blue-glowing disks in floor and ceiling. "These disks, Bradley, neutralize all the ordinary gravitational forces of earth in the space between them."

"What?" I cried, astonished. I stepped forward, was about to thrust my hand between the two disks to test the assertion. But Fessenden held me back.

"Don't try that," he warned. "The human body is accustomed to earth's gravitation, and is inwardly braced against it. If you were to step between those disks, out of earth's gravitation, your body would explode from its own inward pressure, just as a deep-sea fish

will explode when it is suddenly brought up from the tremendous pressures of its usual depths to the surface."

Fessenden added, gesturing to the floating swarm of sparks between the disks, "It was necessary that this should be outside earth's gravitational influences. For this is the universe I have created."

I stared from him to the shining swarm, and then back again to his dark, amused face. "Those little flecks of light—a universe?"

"Just that," he assured me. "Look closer at them, Bradley."

I looked closer, and I felt a weird chill creeping over me. Those points of light were so infinitesimal that I could barely distinguish them one from another, and I knew there must be millions of them in this thick swarm. Yet there were some oddly familiar features about them.

Some of the tiny sparks were blazing white in color, others smoky red, others golden yellow. The colors of suns in our own universe! Some of them were in double or triple groups, and here and there were clusters of them that contained thousands. And here and there, too, were little glowing patches that looked like tiny nebulae, and crawling sparks with tails of light like Lilliputian comets, just as the floating sparks looked like tiny suns.

Those sparks were tiny suns! I knew it, beyond doubt, even while my brain fought against the knowledge and called it impossible. I knew that I was looking at a miniature universe, one on a scale many billions of times smaller than our own universe, yet one that was comparatively as large in extent as our own. A little microcosm, floating here in Fessenden's laboratory.

FESSENDEN'S eyes had been following my stupefied change of expression. He said calmly, "Yes, Bradley, it is true.

That is a tiny, self-sustaining universe, with its own suns, nebulae and worlds. Everything in it, down to the atoms which compose it, is infinitely smaller in scale than our own. But it is a real universe, like our own."

"And you say you created this?" I gasped.

Fessenden nodded. "Yes, I did. After many failures, I succeeded in bringing that universe into being only a few weeks ago. I have been experimenting with it ever since."

His black eyes flashed a little. "Didn't I tell you that it was the greatest experiment any scientist had ever conducted? Think of what I am able to do—I can conduct my astrophysical and other experiments on a cosmic scale. I can change or destroy suns and nebulae at will, with the instruments I devised, can observe the minutest details of that tiny universe through my super-magnifying telescopes. I can make observations with a universe itself as my subject."

I said in amazement, "But how did you make it—start it?"

Fessenden shrugged. "How did our own universe start, Bradley? As a vast cloud of glowing gas that filled all space. The mutual attraction of the cloud's particles drew them together, so that the cloud condensed into huge nebulae. The nebulae further condensed into suns, which by tidal attraction and occasional collision, threw off matter that formed into circling worlds.

"Well, I started this tiny universe just like that. I filled the non-gravitational space between these disks with a cloud of glowing gas, whose atoms were infinitely tinier than our atoms because I had contracted their electronic orbits. Then all I had to do was watch while the same inevitable natural process that cons ago formed our universe, formed this little microcosm.

"I watched as the gas condensed into tiny nebulae. I saw those little nebulae condense further into miniature suns, just as in our own cosmos long ago. And I saw those suns, as their random wanderings brought them close to one another, throw off worlds.

"Millions on millions of tiny worlds, here in this little microcosm, Bradley! Worlds that I can change and tamper with and destroy at will, worlds with every conceivable kind of conditions, worlds whose life I can develop or wither as I wish. That is my experiment, Bradley!"

"Whose life, you say?" I repeated in a whisper. "On the tiny planets of this microcosm—life?"

"Of course," said Fessenden. "Life always develops automatically on worlds where conditions are favorable, and usually in very much the same forms." He reached toward one of the bulky, unfamiliar telescopic instruments. "Wait, and I shall find such a world for you, Bradley. I shall let you watch its life develop, for yourself."

He applied his eye to one of the lenses of the bulky telescope-instrument, focusing it upon that shining cloud of sparks; turning knobs, twisting, searching—until at last he straightened.

"Now look, Bradley."

I put my eye to one of the lenses, looked into that cloud of floating sparks. There leaped into my vision, dazzling and gigantic, a huge white sun booming majestically through the darkness of space. Just one of those tiny sparks, seen through the super-magnifying instrument!

Fessenden was beside me, gazing through the other lens of the instrument. His fingers were touching the focus knobs and he said calmly, "Keep watching. You'll see the changes of ages in a few minutes of our time. For, of

course, the time of this microcosm runs at an infinitely swifter rate than the time of our vaster universe."

As he shifted the focus of the instrument, my gaze seemed to leap toward that great sun. I made out two planets that circled it, at tremendous speed. A year of their time no more than a moment of ours!

One of these planets was still partly molten, but the other was cooling, its vapor-envelope condensing. My vision leaped forward, in the telescope, until I seemed almost standing on that cooling world. It was a wild, rocky planet, rain falling heavily on its surface from the cloudy sky, water collecting with unbelievable swiftness in seas.

Green life came into being on that worlds, first along the shores of the warm, shallow seas, then creeping out and advancing over the land. Swiftly vegetation mantled the globe. And now crawling animal life made its appearance as the ages ticked swiftly by.

The animal life developed quickly. So rapid were the changes that my gaze could hardly follow them. Warring species of unhuman monsters passed and vanished. Tiny hordes of man-like animals began to throng here and there, to multiply with each passing moment.

I saw rude villages of huts spring up on that world. The villages quickly became cities as that people developed in intelligence, age after microcosmic age. The cities towered higher each moment, great ships sailed upon the seas, ages of progress and development were run through before my eyes in tiny moments.

I was shaking as I recoiled from the telescope. I cried, "This is all impossible—it can't be real—"

Fessenden smiled. "Your expressions of stupefaction satisfy my egotistic desire for applause, Bradley. But I assure you that that tiny race and their world are

quite real." He chuckled. "No doubt that little folk think that they have reached such a pinnacle of power and knowledge that nothing can threaten them. We shall see now whether or not they are able to face a real danger."

He turned to a curious needle-like instrument and carefully trained it upon that part of the microcosm which held the tiny white spark that was the great sun of the world I had been watching.

THERE was a tiny comet crawling through the swarm, some distance from that white sun. Fessenden touched a knob, and from the needle-like instrument a thin, almost invisible filament of force crept into the microcosmic swarm of sparks and touched the little crawling comet. It seemed to veer a tiny bit aside.

"Now watch," said Fessenden with amused interest, "and we shall see just how great is the power of that little people."

I did not understand, but I looked again with him through the telescope at the tiny world. By now, so swift its development in terms of our time, its cities had become even vaster and were roofed with glass-like shields. Huge aircraft flashed above them.

All seemed peace and progress on that world. Generation after generation ticked by as we watched. Then came a mad stir of movement, a wild scurrying about of the little folk, a swift change in the tempo of their life. A faint green light was now falling upon their planet, the baleful glow of a monster comet that was coming headlong toward it.

I knew then that it was the tiny microcosmic comet whose course Fessenden had slightly altered. But in the telescope it was colossal, a huge orb dripping green light across the heavens as it rushed toward that world. Remorselessly it came on.

Then that comet struck the planet, and I saw the doom of the little folk's cities. The meteors that were the comet's only solid substance shattered the glass-roofed cities to ruin. The poisonous gases that made up the rest of the comet veiled that whole world in a toxic cloud.

The comet passed on as we watched, but its deadly gases had wiped away all life from that planet. It was still and brown and dead, now, a lifeless world circling its sun. The ruined cities melted swiftly down into decay and disappeared as we watched.

Fessenden's laugh rang in my ears as I stared in stunned horror. "You see—their knowledge was not enough to save them from the mere slight shifting of the comet's course."

"You killed them—killed every soul on that world!" My voice throbbed with the horror that I felt.

"Nonsense! It was just an experiment," Fessenden said. "It's no more murder than when a bacteriologist casually destroys germs he experiments with. Those little folk were millions of times smaller than any germ. But they and others like them on the countless worlds of this microcosm provide me with a subject for experimentation which no scientist has ever had before. Look at another world—here are two that interest me."

My vision in the telescope leaped to another sun, for Fessenden had shifted the focus. It was a yellow sun with four planets circling it. Two of them were airless worlds, but the other two bore different forms of life, one of them quite man-like, the other verging on the reptilian, each supreme on its own world. Both races had a certain amount of civilization, as was evident from the queer cities on their worlds. There was no contact or communication between them, for the two planets were widely separated from each other.

"Now I wonder," Fessenden was saying interestedly, "just what the result would be if those two races were to come into contact with each other. Well, we'll soon see," he mused aloud, and reached again toward the needle-like instrument.

Again a ghostly little thread of force stole into the microcosm. I saw its effects, through the telescope. One of those planets, beneath the impetus, began to change its orbit. It moved closer and closer toward the other inhabited world. Soon the two were so close together that they had formed an earth-moon system, revolving around a common center of gravity as they circled their sun.

Soon, very soon, ships began to fly from one world to the other across the narrowed gulf. Communication had been established. And almost at once came war between the two worlds, a conflict of the man-like and reptilian races. Cities were destroyed by flashes of fire in that war, great throngs went to death in battles of incredible ferocity. The tide turned in favor of the reptilian race. Their invading hordes destroyed the last members of the man-like folk. Then it was all over. The reptilian race reigned supreme over both worlds.

"I'm a little surprized—I thought the human race would have won out," Fessenden said interestedly. "Apparently they didn't have the adaptability of the reptilian race."

I cried, "That little human people would have lived for generations in peace and happiness if you hadn't brought that other world into contact with their own! Why didn't you let them alone?"

He said impatiently, "Don't be a fool, Bradley. This is just a scientific experiment—those ephemeral little races and their tiny worlds are merely a subject for study." And he added, "Why, for days I've been observing and changing and

tampering with these microcosmic worlds, just to see the reactions of their peoples to different stimuli and dangers. I've learned things from them that you'd never dream. Watch—I'll show you others."

IN A stupefied trance I watched as Fessenden went on, taking my vision to world after world, prodding and changing, observing the fall of empires and the crash of planets with keen, amused detachment. I saw worlds of beauty incredible and worlds of horror unthinkable—planet after planet, race after race, and all of them merely the playthings of the experimenting scientist beside me.

Fessenden showed me a planet in the microcosm that was covered with wild forest in which dwelt little communities of hunting folk who chased the beasts of the forest. Generation after generation flashed by without change in their rude society—they were content to hunt and eat and love and die, without developing any higher civilization.

Then Fessenden turned upon that little world a tiny ray that altered its chemical stability. Beneath the influence of chemical changes, the plant life of that world began to unfold in weird hypertrophy, began to develop mobility, to change into great, rootless plant-things that soon fell upon and killed the animals. The communities of hunters battled valiantly for a few generations against the moving plant hordes, but in the end they all succumbed, and that world was covered only with restlessly moving plant life.

And Fessenden brought into our observation another world, planet of a sun out near the microcosm's edge. It was a watery world, covered with oceans over all of its surface. And teeming life had developed in that planetary sea, into intelligent, seal-like people who had reared

in the sea great submarine cities whose spires lifted here and there above the waters.

Fessenden's filaments of force played upon that world, and the seas began to dwindle, the water molecules to fly off into space. And as the seas rapidly shrank, for generation after generation, more and more of that world became dry land and the seal-people had to desert many of their cities and retreat back with the waters.

Very soon, as we watched, there was but one shallow sea remaining on that little world. And here were crowded the last of the seal-folk, and here they fought blindly with all manner of scientific devices to prevent the evaporation of this last refuge. But the remorseless process that Fessenden had started went on, and that last sea dried and disappeared also, and there was only a desert planet with the ruined wrecks of the dead seal-folk's cities standing here and there as memorials of the vanished race.

World after world my dazed eyes watched. I saw an icy planet that swung far out from its parent sun, and upon which was strange life adapted to the cold, bloodless little folk who had reared also a mighty civilization. Their weird palaces and cities rose amid the awful chasms of eternal ice, and it was evident that they were far advanced in scientific power.

Fessenden reached and touched their sun with a tiny thread of force. And that sun blazed suddenly hotter and brighter, casting forth a quadrupled radiance. Its increased heat began to melt the ice-sheath of that far-swinging little world, and its people began to perish from the unaccustomed warmth.

We saw them frantically laboring for the next generation at a great work upon the side of their little world. Then its purpose became clear to us, for from that

spot there projected a plume of fire and force whose rocket-like push moved their little planet suddenly outward. They were moving their world farther from their sun to escape the increased warmth, and at a suitable distance they let it settle into a new orbit where it was as cold as before. And Fessenden laughed and applauded their ingenuity.

And there was a world whose crowded peoples were ruled by an oligarchy of living brains. Time after time, each generation that passed, we saw the enslaved people revolt against the tyranny of the brains, and each time the weapons of their unhuman masters subdued them.

Fessenden's probing threads of force reached deep into the bowels of that little planet, and it rocked with terrific quakes that threw up vast masses of radioactive material from the interior. And a strange glowing plague seized the bodies of the people and also seized the brains, so that they began to rot and die.

Swiftly the people were annihilated by that glowing rot, but the brains managed to contrive for themselves an antidote against the deadly infections, so that most of the brains survived. For a few generations the brains clung to existence, served now by machines of their own devising. But they must have made their mechanical servants too intelligent, for in time the machines rose against the brains and destroyed them. And later still, without any directing intelligence, the machines themselves came to wreck and vanished from that world.

Dazed with horror, I watched as we viewed world after world of the microcosm, as Fessenden probed and changed and destroyed. And then there came into my view a world whose aching beauty brought tears to my eyes, a green and blossoming world whose people were human, but of a fineness and beauty far beyond our own humanity.

Not upon their world were any towering cities or huge machines or swarming vehicles. Their civilization had reached a plane above crude material progress, and their planet was like a green and surpassingly lovely park. Here and there amid the flowering trees shimmered exquisite buildings, and through flowers and forests went white-robed noble men and beautiful women. And their knowledge had almost conquered death, since for many microcosmic generations they remained unchanged.

I WATCHED that world through the telescope with my heart struck at the vision, and in the peace and loveliness of that planet and its people I seemed to catch a glimpse of what humanity might aspire to in some unthinkably far future. And then I suddenly woke to the fact that Fessenden, beside me, was reaching again toward the needle-like instrument that loosed his tampering forces upon the microcosmic worlds.

I broke then from my trance and cried out, horrified, "Fessenden, you can't do anything to endanger *that* world!"

He smiled sardonically. "Of course I'm going to do something. I want to see whether that people have not become decadent in their peace and plenty—whether the science that brought them up to that level can save them now when real danger threatens."

He chuckled as he sighted the needle-like thing. "A mere tiny thread of force—but it will cause their little sun to spin so fast that it will break up. Will that people have the resourcefulness to save themselves by flight to another sun? We shall soon see."

But I tore him away from the deadly instrument and sent him staggering back across the laboratory with a wild thrust.

"No!" I cried. "These worlds and peoples that you experiment with and

endanger and destroy—they're real! As real as ours, even though infinitely smaller. I'll not let you calmly vivisect and torment any more of them, out of your damnable scientific curiosity."

Fessenden's black brows drew together in a cold fury and he rasped, "I see now how foolish it was to show my experiment to an unreasoning sentimentalist like you. But that microcosm is *my* experiment, *my* property, and I'll experiment with and destroy every world in it, if I please. Get away from that instrument."

"I won't do it!" I shouted. "You've wreaked horror enough on those tiny planets with your inhuman experiments, subjecting those little races to agony and toil and death just to gratify your unholy curiosity. You're not going to do it now with this little world!"

Fessenden sprang straight at me, rage burning in his black eyes. His heavy fist descended on me and knocked me away from the instrument I held.

I reeled back from that blow. And at that moment I heard a hoarse cry. Fessenden had tripped on one of the cables in his wild spring, and was toppling into the space between the two disks.

His toppling body struck the microcosm squarely and it crashed around him in a broken shower of sparks. A universe wrecked in a second. At the same time, Fessenden's body exploded—it exploded into a bloated, torn thing of flesh, just as he had warned me any human body would do if it entered the area between the disks where there was no gravitation.

The cable he had tripped over had jerked loose—and there was a flash of fire across the lower disk. In an instant, destroying blue electrical flames enveloped the disks and Fessenden's body, and danced around the electrical machinery in the laboratory with a sputtering, increasing roar.

I turned and stumbled crazily out of the laboratory, out of the house into the wet and windy night. I heard a crackling roar behind me and the flickering light of the now flaming house shot past me as I staggered on, but I did not look back. . . .

SO ENDED Fessenden and his great experiment. No one doubted but that the eccentric scientist had somehow set fire to the house and had perished in the blaze, and I said nothing to change that opinion. And very soon his end was no longer remembered, and Fessenden is now forgotten by everyone. By everyone, except me.

I wish that I could forget too! But I

can't forget Fessenden and his microcosmic worlds, and because I can't, my soul is sick and I have a shuddering, fearful wonder in me that will endure until I die, a black question to which I'll never get an answer, and which torments me every time I look up at the night stars.

And the question that quakes in my soul whenever I look up into the starry sky is this—is our own great universe nothing but a tiny microcosm, on some vaster scale? And in that vaster cosmos, is there a super-experimenter who regards our universe as nothing but an interesting experiment, and who smites us with disasters just to study our reactions for his own amusement? Is there a Fessenden up *there*?