

THE
READER AND COLLECTOR
NUMBER ONE AUGUST 1938
MEMBER F. A. P. A.

LITTLE MEN, WHAT NOW?

H. C. KOENIG



I started reading tales of science fiction and fantasy long before most of the readers of this article were born. I was weaned on Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and brought up on the Frank Reade magazines, to say nothing of the earlier All-Story Argosy combinations and later Weird Tales. Later still, of course, I read Amazing, Wonder, Astounding, etc., and now have complete collections of all these magazines. With such a background, I thought I had some idea of what science fiction really was. But, I find that I have been sadly mistaken.

For years, I have been laboring under the delusion that science-fiction stories like other tales of fantasy were written for the purpose of entertainment and pleasure. But modern high school freshmen and other intellectuals tell me such is not the case. They tell me that if I read a science-fiction story for pleasure or relaxation without paying serious heed to the science (?) contained therein, then I qualify as a first-rate moron. They tell me that science-fiction should be written to stimulate a study of true science and hence the science should be 100 per cent correct. To me, that's just wishful thinking. The earlier writers of science-fiction never had that in mind and I doubt very much if many of the present day writers take such a serious view of their writings. Most of them write for a living and I don't believe any of them pretend to be scientists, educators or promoters of science study. And, after all, what does it matter if their science is a bit faulty at times. What difference does it make just so long as the story interests one. Coleridge in the *"RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER"* placed a star within the crescent of the moon. Did that mistake detract from the quality of the poem? Poe committed some glaring errors in *"THE DESCENT INTO THE MAELSTROM"*. For instance, on the first of July in Norway a ship whirling about in the funnel of the Maelstrom is lighted by the full moon, which shines directly overhead. Since this happens on the first of July when the full moon is far south of the equator, it would barely rise above the southern horizon for an observer in Norway. Furthermore, on July 1 Norway would not have any night, and the

moonlight would be superfluous. Also, a Maelstrom does not form a funnel. Did the story prove less interesting because of these obvious errors? H. Rider Haggard made a number of mistakes in the classic *"KING SOLOMONS MINES."* He tells of a total eclipse of the sun which caused total darkness for more than an hour. Actually, such an eclipse cannot last more than seven minutes and even then it is not very dark. Later, on the same day, Haggard tells of the full moon. This is impossible, for a solar eclipse can only happen at new moon, and the full moon occurs only after a period of two weeks. *"KINGS SOLOMON'S MINES"* still remains a fine story even if the astronomy was slightly faulty. And, the same applies to numerous modern stories criticized by those who fail to see that *"THE STORY IS THE THING."*

Science-fiction magazines and science-fiction books were never intended to serve as text books. No person in their sane mind would think of referring to them as such. If I want to learn about the Heaverside layer, the Lorentz-contraction or the Quantum theory do I search through the science-fiction magazines for this information? Certainly not. It would be just as senseless as expecting to find a course in differential calculus in the same magazine.

Science-fiction is just one of the many branches of fiction writing. Do we insist that the *"HISTORY"* in an historical novel be absolutely true? Do we expect the novel to be a text book in history? Does the author expect that his book will spur his readers to make a study of some particular phase of history? The answers are No, No and No. Then why should we insist on these things in science-fiction. We might just as well expect readers of detective fiction to become sleuths.

I am also told by the serious thinkers that science-fiction has become a haven for those of us who are either incapable of taking up a technical career or too lazy to do so. Such statements are so obviously false that they scarcely deserve any attention. Speaking for myself, I have been practicing engineering in a highly technical field for over twenty years, and for nearly the same number of years I have been an instructor in numerous phases of electrical engineering and strangely enough, I still read the science-fiction and fantasy magazines.

Another group of the intelligentsia seem to think that Fascism, Communism and their own petty-isms are proper and suitable subjects for discussion and debate in the science-fiction fan magazines and fantasy organizations. Shades of Verne, Reade, Serviss and other science-fiction writers. It was bad enough to put up with Esperanto and the trick-word fadists; but its a sorry state of affairs when practically every fan magazine one reads is cluttered up Leftists, Rightists, and their various isms.

Science-fiction fandom has sunk to an extremely low estate and the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the fans and the fan magazines; with some little assistance from the professional magazines. Beginning in the days of *"THE TIME TRAVELER"*, *"THE FANTASY FAN"*, and *"THE FANTASY MAGAZINE"*, I have contributed to and supported innumerable fan magazines. In most cases, it was money thrown away. Very few of the later magazines have even remotely approached the Fantasy Fan or the Fantasy Magazine in interest or quality. Many of these magazines should never have seen the light of day, very few were missed when they passed away. But each one shares some of the responsibility for unloosing a litter of misbegotten offspring.

The spawn of the science-fiction fan magazines? Precocious youngsters whose only desire was to see their names in print. Irresponsible amateur editors who abandoned their magazines without even an excuse or apology to their subscribers; editors who planned so carelessly that they changed the size of their magazine two or three times in almost as many issues; editors who discontinued their magazines and callously announce that the subscribers will receive some other pamphlet to fill out the subscription; editors who advertise their magazine and after months of delay issue a few sheets of wise cracks and have the effrontery to ask what the subscriber is going to do about it; editors who accept subscriptions and don't send the magazine for months and months and then only after three or four follow-ups. Magazines with no definite schedule or publication dates. Editors who mutilate and distort articles without advising the writers who contribute them; and editors who make no effort to safeguard their subscribers in the matter of misleading advertising. Second-hand magazine dealers who profit shamelessly at the expense of youthful collectors.

Even more reprehensible, the fans (?) who buy and sell magazines and extracts from magazines and who raise the prices of stories far beyond their value either from the viewpoint of age or scarcity; fans who deliberately alter titles of stories in their advertising in order to mislead prospective buyers. Stories of plagiarism and plot stealing. Stories of double-crossing and ballot-box crookery. Tales of thugs brought into meetings as a body guard and for purposes of intimidation. Accusations and counter accusations. Childish arguments, as to how many people ate at what restaurant at what time, between fans (?) who pretend to be grown-up. Articles on religion. Reams of paper wasted on personal feuds and controversies, feuds in which the magazine subscriber is not interested and yet for which he pays; inventors of trick words and boosters of Esperanto. Hectographed magazines that can't be read. Threats and jealousy. Needless references to 15-year old drunks. (Who cares; spank the youngsters and put them to bed without their supper.) Puerile discussions as to who sold who a copy of what. More propaganda from England. Peace Unions. Science-fiction and religion. Society for political advancement of science-fiction. Unasked for and unwanted literature on societies dealing with questions of abortion, sterilization and birth-control. All in the name of science-fiction. Illustrations that can't be seen--and maybe its just as well. Insults and challenges. Delightfully frank descriptions of fellow fan appearing in a magazine edited by one of the "ism" devotees: "mental perverts, literary whores and would-be literary prostitutes." Deliberate misuse of fans names when submitting articles.

Such, my friends, is part of the unforeseen but unholy litter born of the wedlock of science-fiction and the well-meaning fan magazines during the past six or more years. Acting as midwife were the professional magazines with their (in most cases) ridiculous readers columns and their commercialized sponsoring of clubs and leagues.

I feel quite confident that the majority of the readers of fantasy fiction do not want to live with such associates. Isn't it about time to take stock and clean house. The solution is obvious.