



Regeneration

Dye, Charles

Published: 1951

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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It was bound to happen sooner or later.

Not because man failed to understand his fellow man, but because he failed to understand himself.

There wasn't much left afterwards—after the golden showers of deadly dust and the blinding flashes that blotted out the light from the sun.

And all because man continued to confuse emotion with reason.

But somehow, as before, man survived... .

"Don't touch!" Sinzor's command shot through the chill morning air like an arrow.

The ragged little group of men stopped dead in their tracks and looked questioningly at their leader. He was pointing down to an object lying half-buried in the soil at his feet.

"Another death-thing, maybe," Sinzor said. "Another 'thing our ancestors made with which to destroy themselves." He peered around the semi-circle of men until he spotted the aged one with a leg missing. "Morge! See that this place is marked forbidden." The hunting party moved on and Morge stayed behind. He hobbled about, collecting sticks and stones, arranging them in the "forbidden-symbol" way to form a barrier around the 'thing. It was because of such a 'thing that he'd lost a leg in his youth. He both hated and feared the death-things his ancestors had so carelessly left lying about before they vanished. But that wasn't right. Morge scratched his grizzly old head and thought hard. According to Builder, wisest of their tribe, their ancestors hadn't all vanished; some of them had become the tribe—Sinzor, Builder, and even old Morge. Very puzzling. But it was all because of the death-things!

Puffing, Morge completed the barrier, then turned for a last look at the 'thing gleaming dully in the pale winter sunlight. How strange it looked. In no way did it resemble the usual death-things, most of which were long and round with little wings attached. This one was different, like nothing he'd ever seen before. It was boxlike with strange arms sticking up; and under the arms, half-buried, was a shelf or platform resembling vaguely the upper portion of two legs. The 'thing terrified Morge for a moment; then, in order to prove his courage to himself, he stepped forward and spat on it. Nothing happened. Sneering, he spat on it again and watched his spittle slowly run down its side over a strange marking like a thunderbolt—

Thunderbolt!

Suddenly Morge fell grovelling to his one good knee. It was Thor, god of thunder and lightning and god of the tribe!

And he had spat on Thor!

For nearly an hour he knelt there praying forgiveness for his sacrilege. Then, trembling, he tore off a piece of his goatskin and wiped the spittle off Thor's side, carefully began to uncover the remainder of Thor.

Finally he lifted Thor out of the hole and onto level ground. Kneeling once more, he took a small drink-scoop from his belt and placed it before Thor. Then he pulled out his knife and folded his single leg under him; bending over, he cut a gash in his wrist and let the blood flow into the scoop until it was nearly full.

Rising to his knee he said, "Oh, Thor, please take this humble offering to show that I am forgiven." Almost prostrate now, he picked up the scoop and placed it on Thor's lap beneath his arms.

Immediately there was a soft rumble and humming. Fearfully old Morge watched Thor's arms come down, lift up the scoop and carry it inside his huge mouth. There was a sucking noise and the scoop was returned empty to his lap.

Filled with joy, Morge spent another endless time thanking Thor. Then all of a sudden an idea seized him. What if he carried Thor back to the tribe and presented him to the priest, Thougor, for all to worship and give sacrifices to? Would not he, the despised, the looked down upon, be the greatest of heroes? All that was known of Thor were the legends, but at last they would have the actual god!

Painfully, with many grunts and groans, he got Thor under one arm and staggered off towards the village, his crutch kicking up little puffs of dust.

Builder was having trouble with Thougor.

He almost wished now that he'd continued his search a little longer for a segment of humanity. He might have found a group less primitive who would have appreciated and understood his help much better. But this was the best he'd found; as it was, he'd wandered over the continent nearly a lifetime before even finding these poor wretches. But they were at least human—something that couldn't be said for those others he'd come in contact with all through the past years.

And now, after having been with the tribe—the only human tribe—for over a year, he was being balked by this—priest! Which meant being balked at setting up Truth and Knowledge as the only true gods of humanity, being balked at getting the dam built before the spring rains, so that there would not be another summer drouth followed by a winter of

famine such as they had just passed through. The dam was his first big project; without freedom from want, there would be little progress next winter.

Almost savagely he turned on Thougor. "But why must you have this religious festival now?"

"Because of the finding of the god Thor," came Thougor's cold answer.

"Why the offerings of blood? Can't they wait? The dam must be finished before the rains; but the loss of blood already has so weakened the workers that they can no longer work for a full day."

"Which is more important, worldly or spiritual things?" Thougor replied.

"But there maybe won't be anyone around to indulge in spiritual things if there's another drouth this year!"

"Thor will see to it that there is not another drouth."

"Yes, I know, but wouldn't it be wiser to be on the safe side? Suppose somebody does something to displease Thor?"

"Nobody will displease Thor! It is my duty to see to that! I tell them what to think, so that they won't displease Thor."

A crafty devil you are, Builder thought. Manipulating this image of Thor you talk about, so that it will take the blood offerings of the people and even you and that half-baked discipline of yours, Morge. I must look at your god Thor one of these days—

He suddenly felt very weary and sat down on the floor; looking up at Thougor, he said, "But that is not part of being civilized, to tell the people what to think. You must make them think without telling them what to think. And with the dam, next winter there will be freedom from want for the first time. The tribe will have a chance to think and be on the road to civilization."

"The tribe has already found civilization in finding Thor. By worshipping Him as a group they have already ceased their bickering and quarreling. Does not that fit in with your definition of civilization, the one you gave my people when you first came to us? Since the coming of Thor we have begun to cooperate, have we not?"

"No, hardly at all. I said civilization is cooperation among men in adapting to environment—which includes man."

The two men stared at each other, and for awhile there was silence.

"Nevertheless," Thougor finally said, "Thor and blood offerings continue!"

Builder watched Thougor turn and stalk out of the tiny hovel that housed his plans and his work, himself and his dreams. What could he do? He could only appeal to the tribe's reason; Thougor could appeal to their emotions which were far stronger. But unless emotion was controlled, used wisely, there could never be any reason.

Builder realized, with a sinking heart, that he was much too old for the job he'd undertaken. Too late in life had he discovered these people. Almost all his energy since youth had been sapped just looking for a segment of humanity. His mother and father had told him there might be failure, but still they had taught him everything they could in the short time before death had overtaken them. They had been the only humans living in that towering jungle of concrete and steel. How they had gotten there was never explained to him. It didn't matter, though.

Suddenly Builder shook himself. Here he was recollecting his youth instead of concentrating on the task at hand. He must really be getting old.

He was glad of Thougor's visit. At least he was now fully aware of the problem to be solved. In spite of the priest, he had to find a way of getting that dam finished and soon. Or maybe next year there wouldn't be any people, for game was getting scarcer each winter.

Very little work was done that day in spite of Builder's managing to round up his full crew. The blood offering each worker had given the night before had left them tired and listless. Only four of the fifty-four molds running across the river were filled with sand and gravel that morning and afternoon—there were still nearly fifty to be filled. Builder was very depressed—

But he was even more depressed when, at the close of day, two workmen grew careless and slipped into the last mold being filled; their ear-splitting shrieks brought half the tribe up over the hill above the village and down to the dam sight.

After Builder explained what had happened, there were angry mutterings to the effect that Thor was displeased with the dam and therefore had taken lives. Nothing Builder could say would dissuade them from this notion, so well had Thougor indoctrinated them with religious fear of anything used to control nature. Builder hadn't realized until that moment just how much the people were against the dam.

Then he saw Thougor, tall and ominous in his cloak of black skins, come striding through the crowd.

For a moment he stood facing them with his hands on his hips. There seemed to be a silent understanding between them. Slowly the crowd turned and disappeared over the hill.

Then Thougor strode over to Builder and said simply, "There will be no more dam." Turning he followed the rest of the tribe back to the village.

Builder was thunderstruck. He knew there was no use arguing or trying to reason with either Thougor or the tribe. It was too late for that; only some drastic measure would complete the dam now.

He walked tiredly over the black hill and down to his shack, wondering how he could compete with an idol. He realized now, it had been foolish of him to have overlooked the possible effect Thor might have upon the tribe. When it had been found three months ago, he never dreamed they would spend all their leisure in rituals.

The god was his problem; therefore he must get it out of the way, himself, without expecting help from anyone. Each evening the clouds on the northern horizon were darkening and drawing closer.

It was night when Builder finally stumbled into his quarters. After lighting a pine torch he sat down by his workbench and buried his head in his hands. He was too tired and upset to eat, which was just as well—

Outside of deliberately killing Thougor, there was only one thing he could do—that was to kidnap Thor. With this realization, in spite of the risk involved, came some peace of mind. He hadn't the vaguest idea just how he was to go about it, especially since his strength was failing him, but do it he would. First, though, he would have to wait until sometime before dawn when everybody—even Thougor—was sure to be asleep.

The hours dragged heavily between then and his chosen time. Many were the times when he longed for something to read, although he supposed that by this time he'd forgotten how. Like wisps of smoke, memories of his youth in the concrete jungle drifted through his mind. How long ago that all seemed now. Sometimes he wondered if any of it had been real. But here he was, as his parents had wished him to be, trying to help what was left of humanity back up the trail. To what, he wondered? To destruction again—this time, probably complete and final?

He shook his old head and ran a trembling hand through his white shaggy hair. He'd gotten this far; somehow he would get the rest of the way.

Builder got up and crossed over to his sleeping pile. After tying several skins together, he folded them under his arm and walked out into the pre-dawn night. His bones felt the crackling cold of early spring as they

had never felt it before. Slowly he made his way around the village to where Thor was housed under a huge slanting roof of bark and scraped skins. He'd never seen Thor, and now wished he'd paid at least one visit to the god.

Like a shadow he glided carefully through the blackness in back of the temple until he was just inside the rear opening. He could see clear across the chamber, out into the pale twinkling stars. Then he detected a dark mass in the center of the temple silhouetted against the stars; that must be Thor.

Swiftly Builder advanced towards it until his foot struck something soft, causing him to stumble and fall. As he did so, he heard a grunt sounding like someone being kicked in the stomach—

Then something was on top of him, pounding his head and shoulders with a heavy stick of some kind. Old Builder knew he didn't have the strength to wrestle; he managed to get his pile of skins unfolded and, with his last ounce of strength, throw them over the head of his attacker. Somehow he managed to wiggle out from underneath and climb to his feet. His assailant began to scream for help, but the heavy skins muffled his shouts.

Quickly Builder looked around for something to hit him with. The only thing his eye spotted was the idol. He hobbled over and, using both arms, dragged it off its dias. Then, with the remainder of his strength, dropped it squarely on top of whomever was under the skins. There was a muted clunk followed by silence.

Fearfully Builder stood there for a moment catching his breath and listening for anyone coming. All was quiet except the pounding of his heart.

As fast as he could make his arms and hands work he rolled up the body in the skins and painfully hoisted it over one shoulder. With his other hand he reached down and picked Thor up by one of its arms, then, staggering under the load, he started back the way he had come.

Except for a greyish streak in the east, it was still dark. He stumbled and fell several times before reaching his dwelling, but he was confident that he had left no tracks. Every night, even this late in the winter, the ground froze solid.

Back inside his shed, still in the dark, Builder unrolled his burden and listened for any heartbeat. There was none. As he rolled the body up again, something clattered to the floor. It was a crutch. Quickly he felt for

his victim's legs; one was missing. Of all the people he had to kill—Morge! Thougor's right hand man.

He realized he had to get rid of the body before daylight and fast! Already more grey was lining the eastern horizon.

He didn't know whether he had the strength to do it or not, but he had to get Morge up to the dam and into one of the unfilled molds. For the time being he would have to hide Thor someplace inside here. He couldn't carry both of them up to the dam.

He rolled the idol up in another set of skins and placed it under the head of his sleeping pile. Then, picking up his other bundle once more, he started for the dam.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon when Builder finally stumbled back into his dwelling and into bed.

All that day, he lay there, body on fire with fever, and heart pounding like a drum. He was almost certain he would soon die. "It was just as well," a little corner of his consciousness said. At least he would be missing all the frenzied excitement of Thor's disappearance along with Morge.

But it looked as though he had failed after all. In spite of removing the god, now he was dying—and the dam still unfinished.

The day dragged on and on and he didn't die.

After waking up in late afternoon he felt better. He ate a handful of nuts and figs washed down with a little herb tea. Then as night crept over the sky, he tottered down to the village.

Whatever had taken place during the day was done, and little groups of people stood around fires resting and talking—as though it were the old days before the coming of Thor, thought Builder. That was good.

Builder moved in closer to one of the fires to warm himself against the early spring night. Someone recognized him—it was one of his workers—and he was suddenly made welcome, once again being given the place of honor nearest the fire, as in the old days when he'd first discovered the humans.

Builder was dumbfounded at the sudden cordiality. In recent days, Thougor had done such a good job of discrediting, he never dreamed of regaining his old standing.

Then he was told what had happened during the day while he lay almost dying:

When the god and Morge were discovered missing, Thougor had called the village together, explaining that Thor had left them, taking

Morge as a sacrifice because he was dissatisfied with the tribe's paltry blood offerings and worship. Therefore a great death sacrifice of young men and women must be undertaken to pacify Thor and cause his return.

But the people questioned Thougor's order; they seemed to feel it was the priest who had been at fault, not themselves. After all, he was the closest to Thor, was he not? Therefore it was Thougor, not the village, that Thor had become angered at. And after holding quick council, they had driven Thougor out into the wilderness, telling him he was not to return unless Thor was with him.

Old Builder almost cried when he heard this joyful news. The dam would be completed after all, he was almost certain. He decided to say nothing more about religion, Thor or Thougor. Maybe soon they would forget the whole thing. Now he could go back to teaching the youngsters and some of the brighter oldsters the methods of writing in symbols instead of drawing pictures.

Hours and days turned into weeks and months as Builder taught his people what feeble knowledge he possessed in arithmetic, simple engineering—such as the dam—and most of all, instilling in them the will to want to learn and investigate and question anything they came in contact with—even the very thing he was asking them to do.

As the weeks passed on and the dam was completed, he gradually gathered around him an ardent little group of seeker after that most elusive of all things—"Truth".

But Builder knew that his days were numbered now, and his work completed; there was still one thing he had to do, and that was permanently to do away with Thor by dropping the idol to the bottom of the dam; he still hadn't examined the god hidden under his sleeping pile.

One evening after returning from a solitary walk above the dam, he entered his shack and lit a torch, then almost dropped it from shock!

His dwelling was a wreck. The place had been ransacked from top to bottom. His sleeping pile lay in the middle of the floor—the idol was gone!

He turned and fled from the room, but before he could take a dozen steps towards the village, several shadows glided out from behind trees and rocks in the moonlight, resolving themselves into men.

Before he could cry out or struggle, strong arms pinned his arms to his body and someone clapped a dirty hand over his mouth. He was forced back into his hovel and the door slammed shut. Standing in front of him

was a very bedraggled figure whom he recognized as Thougor. He also recognized his three other captors; all were elderly reactionaries of the tribe who had disapproved of him from the beginning. In spite of his predicament Builder felt a warm glow of happiness course through him. If these were the only cronies Thougor could round up, that meant the rest of the villagers were sympathetic with his cause. He suddenly became aware of Thougor's grating voice:

"It took me a little time to piece things together, but once I did, it didn't take me long to come back and find the god where I might have at first suspected it would be—right here! For your sacrilege you will pay with every last drop of blood you have in your scrawny old body—and now!" Whereupon Thougor disappeared out of the hovel.

Somehow Builder had known they were going to kill him before arousing the rest of the tribe to the fact that Thor was back. Thougor was taking no chances of his standing in the way of him or Thor ever again. But Builder didn't care: he had sown his few seeds of knowledge and wisdom well. Although Thougor didn't know it, this time he wouldn't have complete homage from all the tribe. There would now be doubts and questionings and tests for both Thor and Thougor in the ways of truth and righteousness.

Then Thougor returned to the shack with what, Builder thought, must be Thor. The hand over his mouth had twisted his head back so that he only got a glimpse, but he didn't miss the long knife Thougor pulled from beneath his tattered skins, nor the large sacrificial bowl one of the others held below his neck. Then his head was tilted forward and sideways, and he got his first full look at the god Thor. At the sight, his whole body shook with smothered laughter. Below the two arms and etched thunderbolt were large block letters standing out in bold relief:

THOR

Automatic Dishwasher

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