



Short Fiction, By Jefferson P. Swycaffer

The world Trieba, frustrated in its bid for stellar conquest, turned its energies inward. Beneath the orbital blockade of the conquering Star Fleet, the world seethed in civil war.

Just before dawn, two men argued in one of the Palace chambers. Admiral Robert Morgan, overseer of reconstruction efforts on Trieba, sat facing Potohogan, one of the most obdurate participants in the factional warring. Morgan threw up his hands in consternation, "Potohogan, you're being far less than helpful."

"If I am not crowned King by sunrise, this world will die," Potohogan said stonily, "The matter is not negotiable."

"Why?"

"What is a world without a king?" Potohogan asked archly.

"Without a king, a world must die?"

"Certainly that must be obvious. The king draws the blessing of The God down upon the world, bestowing life."

"But it could be any king, and not necessarily yourself," Morgan pressed.

"No," Potohogan grinned. "I control the palace, and will not permit anyone else to approach for coronation."

Morgan spun about and began to pace. This pseudo-religious claptrap was setting the stage for riot and massacre. He gripped his fists behind his back. It was all merely sloppy theism, and moral retrogression. "A king is less vital to the life of a planet than are nitrogen-fixing bacteria!" he thought. "Yet they believe their own myth — without a king, the world will die."

Short and squat, tubby yet hyperactive, Potohogan seemed more a caricature than a king. He picked continually at his embroidered robes, turning again and again toward the well-guarded doors leading to the palace chapel.

"It's getting on toward dawn," Morgan prodded. "The priests in the chapel will not be persuaded to crown you. You, in turn, won't admit their preferred candidate to the palace. Do you *want* the world to die?"

At this barb, Potohogan gave a great shudder and signed himself. "No, I do not. But I will not give in! The priests favor that fool Mahanigan, whom I will not permit to rule."

Morgan could only look helplessly at the ceiling. This whole stalemate was such a concentric nest of beleaguements. Morgan controlled access to and from the world. Potohogan's rivals, supporting Mahanigan, claimant to the throne, controlled access to the palace. Potohogan occupied the palace itself, save for the holy shrine in the chapel, in the very heart of the palace. This was held by the priests who favored Mahanigan.

If no king were crowned by sunrise, the trembling cease-fires would collapse, and those outside the palace would rise with a shriek, storming the parapets. Within, Potohogan and his troops would assault the chapel. And the priests, secluded within, would overturn the altar, put out the flames, erase the chalk marks within the holiest sanctuary, and commit suicide in the teeth of their foes. The desecration would mean, in theory, a vilification and excommunication of the world in the eyes of The God. It was an extremity to be avoided at all costs.

Morgan had seldom seen such a dismally precise stand off.

"This is a job for the diplomats to solve," he said apologetically. "If there were time, I would send for them. But we don't have time. Less than five hours remain before sunrise. Will you not yield?"

"Not to my enemy Mahanigan." Potohogan stamped his small foot vainly and impetuously upon the bare flags of the chamber. His guards stood their posts stoically, awaiting death. Outside, the sounds of chanting zealots could be heard, backed by kettledrums and deep-throated mountaineers' horns.

"It will be the worse for all if you do not," Morgan said, his tone not so much threatening as straightforwardly truthful.

"I will not yield." Potohogan turned his back upon his guest, signalling the end of the audience. Morgan shrugged, then strode away.

He passed through the palace, enjoying free passage anywhere within or without by virtue of his offworld neutrality. He belonged neither to Potohogan's faction nor to Mahanigan's. The world of Trieba was absorbed in its own hatreds, too busy even to recall Morgan's space fleet orbiting overhead, which had broken their dream of empire.

When a culture falls, and when an entire people collapse, the result is irrational, and the mobs are guided only by the fury of the loudest voice. Morgan wandered along the great shadowy corridors, passing beneath the weapons wall of the kings. Here, the war-shields and long swords of the five previous kings of Trieba hung mounted high upon a blank wall. He passed the great hearth in the throne room and climbed a cramped spiral stair in a narrow, dark tower.

Emerging upon the battlements, Morgan gazed out over the waiting mass of Mahanigan's supporters, who demonstrated and shouted in the night. Bonfires and torches made a twilight of the hour, and smoke curled up into the sky. In only a few hours, they would whip themselves into battle-frenzy, and, in one wave of maddening rage, crest over these walls armed with knives.

Near the horizon, atop a hill and between tall buildings of stone and glass, Mahanigan had erected his pavillion. Yet, despite this cityful of his men, unless Potohogan yielded voluntarily, there could be no coronation by sunrise.

Morgan shrugged again and descended the narrow stair. Coming to the chapel, he knocked softly for admission.

"Who seeks an audience?" came a muffled voice.

"Admiral Robert Morgan, belonging neither to one faction nor to the other." He waited, and added, "I am alone." No one was with him in the hall, just as no one had joined him in his neutrality. He recalled the throng outside, and automatically checked his watch. Less, now, than three hours remained.

"Remove your boots, medallions, insignia, gloves, and cap," ordered the voice from within. Morgan complied. The thick door opened the narrowest crack, and a man's face peered through. A moment later, a chain was unfastened, and Morgan, barefoot and bareheaded, was admitted.

The chapel was thick with the fumes of incense and of ritual hallucinogens. Eight brawny priests stood in a phalanx between Morgan and the door to the sacred inner vestibule. From another door to his right, an archpriest entered, and fastened him with an unfriendly gaze. (Continued to page 16)

Without preamble, Morgan spoke, "Will you agree to crown Potohogan king of this world?"

Once, harshly, all nine of the priests in the room simultaneously clapped their hands, palm against palm. Morgan had no difficulty interpreting this gesture as a violent denial.

"Mahanigan is our choice; we will not give the crown to the unworthy candidate you have named."

"Yet this world will die if you fail to crown a king by dawn, is that not so?"

"That is so; the king of the world draws the blessing of life from The God down to the world."

"Do you want that blessing to be interrupted?"

The archpriest stood forward. "No, I do not." His face relaxed a trifle from its stern implacability. "We have learned just how precious a living world truly is. I don't want Trieba to die, any more than I want to die myself." He gazed at Morgan beseechingly. "The tragedy that we contemplate is greater than that should ever be allowed. But... But..."

"Yes?" Morgan prompted gently.

The priest, wide-faced, flat-featured, shook his great head and hugged his wide shoulders. "Potohogan is unfit. I'll name his name, although it is forbidden. Much is forbidden, and we countenance it regardless. But that fool is manifestly unacceptable to The God. I may no more give him the crown than I might take it for myself." The priest looked with pleading at Morgan. "Will you not persuade him to let our candidate through?"

"I've tried. I'll try again. I don't believe he will relent."

"If we have no king by sunrise, the world will begin to die. That would be reversible. No world dies all at once, withering in a day. But before we can allow our shrine and fane to be captured, you know what desperate actions we would take to prevent such desecration." The archpriest hesitated delicately. "The flames and markings of a shrine are more than merely symbolic of life; they *are* life. Life which we guard."

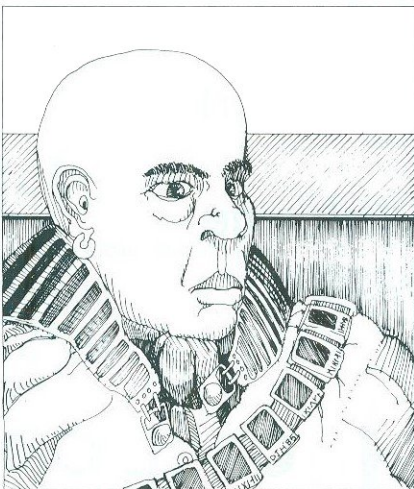
Morgan nodded. He knew it wasn't true, but he knew that the people of this world believed it. Beliefs often outweigh truths. "I am aware. I'll go now and see to further negotiations. Whether I fail or succeed, I'll return here before the end."

"We await you." The priest shook his head sadly, and withdrew. Morgan made his exit, and heard the door barred and bolted behind him. Dolefully, he resumed his black boots, gloves, cap, and accoutrements.

Potohogan would not yield. "I control this palace; none may arrive at the chapel without my passport. None may enter the gates of this place without my permission. Either I am to be king, as is my right, or the world will die from the removal of The God's blessing of life."

"You're being extreme," Morgan remonstrated.

"I am being extreme," agreed Potohogan.



"Less than two hours remain." Morgan abandoned gentility, drilling his words harshly into Potohogan. "The planet might or might not die; people certainly will. That riot outside," he waved his arm, still staring at his host "is readying to burn their way in here. You don't have the troops to resist their attack. Why will you not yield?"

"Mahanigan is unfit to rule."

"The priests tell me you're unfit as well. Where does that leave us?"

Potohogan responded by lifting a large ornamental sword from the table. With his other hand, he drew a large and very serviceable pistol. "It leaves us preparing for a desperate battle, in which we will try to free the chapel. Do you join us?"

"I do not." Morgan bowed formally, turned and left.

The time passed slowly, heavily. Outside, the chanting grew more and more fervent. Within, Potohogan saw to the arming of his men. Morgan wandered at random, seeking a key to the puzzle.

A happy thought suddenly occurred to him. He knocked again at the door to the chapel. "It is I, Admiral Robert Morgan. Please admit me."

The door opened; again he was asked to remove his boots and belongings. He complied readily.

"Has Potohogan given in?" asked the archpriest urgently.

"No." Morgan met the man's gaze.

"I agree with you; he is unfit to be king."

"We are lost, then. Please leave us, while we make our final preparations."

"Sir," Morgan said, very gently. "I must ask you: is it possible that I might be fit to be king?"

The priest whirled, a great amazement plain upon his face. "You? You..." He stopped, and let his arms drop to his sides. "Could you? Would you be willing?" A vision of his world continuing to live darted before his eyes. He stepped forward and grasped Morgan's grey tunic. "Will you do this for us?"

Morgan answered, in a small, distant voice. "What must I sign?"

* * * * *

The coronation proceeded at breakneck pace. Admiral Robert Morgan was anointed, thrice-blessed, stripped naked by anxious priests, and trammelled and entangled in lengthy satin robes and silk trains. A beaker of stale wine was poured over his head, and a massive crown of gold and ivory was crushed over his dark, dripping hair. The pealing of every bell throughout the palace proclaimed him King of Trieba, moments ahead of sunrise.

Outside, the results were no less than electrifying; within, a frantic pandemonium instantly ensued. Stentors were sent out from the chapel, carrying the news. The reaction they reported back was universal bewilderment; no one knew the full import of this development.

"Is this sanctioned by the priests?" demanded Potohogan, facing the messenger in his chamber.

"It is."

"Will the world yet live?" asked Mahanigan, sneering the length of his nose at the messenger who came to his pavilion.

"Life has been restored to us, and will not depart this day."

Some of the members of the mob outside slunk away to mouth draughts of sour beer and debate; some held their place, sitting about their now-cold bonfires. Their kettledrums waited nearby. Yet others lined the avenues to the palace, awaiting the emergence of their new king.

King Morgan came forth at noon, still swaddled and festooned in hampering nets of garments. The crown upon his head burned in the daylight, reflecting glints to all corners of the square. He stood upon a balcony overlooking the throng, and saw, near the front, Potohogan and Mahanigan, standing near one another.

"I am your king."

A deathly silence greeted this. Morgan, bound into the fabrics of his robes could not shrug. His shoulders ached.

"Life will continue upon the world; the blessing of The God flows through me, and the fields and farms shall continue to yield their bounty." The smell of the stale wine still clung to his hair.

"Yet I will not be king for long. Upon the day that the two foremost claimants, Potohogan and Mahanigan, can settle their dispute and nominate a candidate suitable to them both, I shall step down, and another coronation will be held."

Potohogan and Mahanigan turned slowly and stared at each other, with both suspicion and hope.

"The candidate must be acceptable to both," Morgan warned. "The priests, as well, shall have their say, and may refuse any candidate for any reason." Beside him, he saw the priests nodding and muttering with approval. "Well," he thought, "I've got one circle of supporters, anyway."

"When a candidate has been nominated, he shall be sent into the palace, where I assure him my safe passport. The bells will signal you when a new king has been named." With that, Morgan withdrew, aided by the diligently attending priests.

Only three hours later, there came forward one named Osoltuchtan, who readily earned the approval of all three parties. With the priests' blessing, Morgan stepped down, relinquishing the

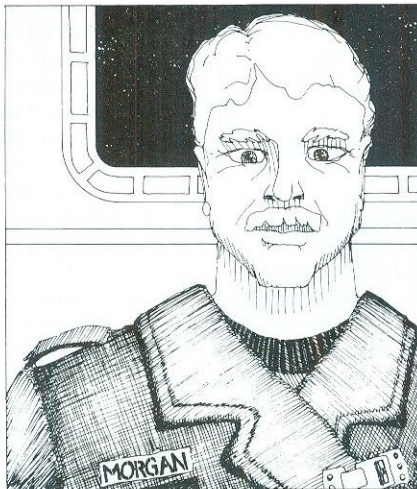
heavy crown, and stripped of the confining robes. Later, bathed, shaved, and back in uniform, he participated in the next coronation, lifting the crown up to the new king.

Before he left, he was asked for a final boon by a committee of three priests.

"What would you like?" he asked, facing them bravely.

"We require your sword and your shield, to mount upon the weapon wall of the kings."

Morgan nodded, very seriously and courteously, and promised that these would be fetched.



Several days later, after a long fete and coronation revel, Morgan returned to the fleet in his personal shuttle. Commodore Steldan, of his Operations Staff, was on hand to greet him at the docking bay of the flagship.

"Sir."

"Hello, Commodore. Can you have the fabrication shop prepare an ornamental sword and shield? Something fancy, ridge-embossed, with a cluster of blue-green corundums embedded? And have the hilt of the sword wrapped with gold wire."

Steldan looked somewhat askance at his superior. "Certainly, sir. Would you mind telling me why?"

Morgan smiled, and filled him in. Steldan seemed properly impressed at Morgan's handling of the situation.

"I suppose that being asked for your sword and shield was the high point of your success," Steldan said.

"Oh, no," Morgan said softly. "There was another moment far more poignant and satisfying."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. When I was crowned, you see, I drew the blessing of The God down to the world, bestowing life to it."

He relaxed and closed his eyes, not missing, however, the expression of extreme consternation that swept over the face of his subordinate.

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