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TEST OF THE GODS

By Raymond F. Jones

The Earthmen were taken for gods—but had to act in a way the Venusian reptiles would think godly! And what was the moral sense of a Venusian apt to demand—

Illustrated by Kolliker

THE VENUSIAN rains spume down from the skies as if there's nothing in that hell-bound world but water. Warm water. Green, slimy water that trickles through the fern mesh and drips timelessly onto the oil-soaked roofs of the aborigines' huts.

Spud Agill stood slump-shouldered by the open door. His breath was short in the steam that enveloped them. Hot sweat rolled down his forehead into the bush of his eyebrows.

"We've got to break for it to-night," he muttered decisively. "They're just waiting for us to die! Can't you hear them out there? The slimy devils—"

An echolike chuckle came out of the fog across the hut. "And just where will you go, my good Agill?" It was the Deacon talking. "To the north and west are a thousand miles of ocean crawling with ichthyosaurs. To the east is twelve hundred miles of jungle—thick, beautiful jungle,

alive with stegosaurus, triceratops—before you get to *Aspia*. Southward is the swampland. You don't mean to try that?"

"We don't have to!" Spud snapped. "We were fools to leave the ship. We could have starved until we repaired the lifeboat. It was only five days' job at the most for the three of us. But we can go back to it. Are you with me?"

"Yes! Yes! Let's do anything! But let's get out of this hell!" paunchy Joe Spencer breathed heavily from his corner. His bulk shifted fearfully before the mist of light that was the window across the hut. He shuddered at the scaly forms that oozed out of the fog momentarily, then were folded back into it. "They're watching us!" he whispered hoarsely. "Maybe it's too late."

The three men watched, haunted by the unending soft hush of rain about them. Rain that condensed rather than fell.

Three weeks ago they had boarded the *Minos*, Agill's dilapidated flier, for a trip to the newly open two hundred thirty-five fields, halfway around the planet from *Aspia*.

There was always good pickings in new mining fields—suckers to buy gold bricks, Joe Spencer's specialty, lucky prospectors to be chiseled out of their finds by guns, fists, or any other means available. Spud Agill wasn't particular in these matters.

And the Deacon could manage a good confidence racket behind the flaps of a revival tent in almost any environment.

But with only twelve hundred miles of their journey behind them, the *Minos* gave up and dropped them in the depths of the Venusian jungle, where no man of Earth or Mars had ever penetrated, and of which there were only legends and

rumors among the more advanced peoples of Venus.

Making a hunt for food to last until the lifeboat could be repaired, they had been captured by the reptilian inhabitants of the jungle.

All of the men had seen life in thousands of forms and degrees of intelligence on the three planets they knew, but their captors baffled them. Three-toed, or rather, clawed, they walked upright. Their forms resembled the tyrannosaurus, yet they were only slightly larger than the men. Their bodies were finely scaled or plated, and dripped constantly with foul-smelling water that condensed on their cold forms and absorbed their dank animal odor.

But they were intelligent. They spoke to each other in high, piping voices, and for three weeks had been patiently teaching the men their weird language. They called themselves *Igoroes*.

Joe Spencer came away from the window and resumed his endless pacing across the narrow hut.

"Agill! You've got to get us out of here. It's driving me crazy. This rain and those slimy, ghostly—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the Deacon. "You know we can't get past those guards. Besides, we don't know that they plan to harm us. It seems to me that we've been treated rather royally, according to their ideas of royalty—especially after Spud was so anxious to try to prove to them that he was a god. Where'd you get that flash of genius, Spud? Out of those wild yarns you read, or is it just a hidden superiority complex breaking out?"

"It worked." Spud thrust his chin out defensively. "They were impressed enough by a few old-fashioned card tricks to feed us the best they've got for three weeks—even if it is pig swill—instead of burying

our heads in the ground with our feet sticking up."

"Yes, maybe they figured your show was worth more ingenious treatment and they've spent these three weeks figuring it out."

"Stop it!" Joe screamed at them. "Don't stand there arguing. Do something—let's get out of here!"

"Maybe—" The Deacon began, then he closed his mouth and stared silently out the window.

Through the gray billows of fog and steam a host of scaly forms was moving. The squoosh of their feet in the mud and slime was like the sound of distant, stampeding cattle.

Still half hidden by the curtains of vapor, the horde paused, then stopped. After a moment, a trio of Igoroes stalked slowly forward.

"The delegation of honor," murmured the Deacon. Spud remained silent, jaws clenching and relaxing.

Joe was in hysteria. "Don't let them take us! Don't—"

"Quiet, you fool!" Spud ordered.

THE THREE approached the hut. Just outside the door, they carefully laid their hardwood spears on the ground. They knelt on one knee in the doorway.

"God—and devils, come," the middle Igoroe hissed. His whole body seemed to quiver as if from extreme nervous tension.

The Deacon hunched in his corner. "God and devils? Where do they get that stuff? Just because Joe and I can't do card tricks—"

"I think we'd better go," said Spud.

Joe was near collapse. The Deacon rose with rheumatic stiffness and joined Spud in wrapping a supporting arm around Joe. The three sloshed into the rain ahead of their reptile escorts.

Stumbling through the mist, they

made out the forms of hundreds of assembled Igoroes. Silent and motionless, the horde looked upon them as if in impassive judgment. The occasional lightning flick of their inner eyelids was the only sign of expression.

The stench of their bodies was sickening.

"Looks serious," the Deacon admitted.

The group began slowly closing in behind. Those in front knelt before the pressing reptiles in back. At last, one of the three escorting Igoroes raised his scaly arms for attention. He began hissing in their sibilant tongue.

The three Earthmen strained their ears to catch the meaning of the words. To their minds it was:

"O Igoroes! The greatest of days has befallen us, when the legend of a thousand fathers ago is fulfilled. Our god has come among us, falling from the skies as was foretold. But, even as was also foretold, the two devils have accompanied him.

"Upon us is the greatest of honors and the most sorrowful of responsibilities since the planets flamed. We must discover which is our god and which are the two devils we must annihilate. If we fail, our god will buy his freedom with us and flee, and the devils will rule over us and our children until the worlds flame again!"

A shrilling, mingled hiss of approval and heart-tearing despair came from a thousand reptile throats.

"We must make the test of the gods," they intoned.

"What'll we do? What'll we do?" Joe moaned over and over again.

"Figure out how to pass the test of the gods." The Deacon leered at him.

"Lay off," Spud growled. "We're

going to need all we've got to get out of this."

The Igoroe turned and addressed them. "You know which of you is our god and which are the devils we must destroy. We do not know. May our god forgive us the humiliation of having to make a test to identify him and help overcome those who hold him in power.

"We will ask three questions, each to be answered by one of you. Only our god can know the answer, because the devils cannot pronounce that which is good."

The Earthmen stood in rigid surprise. What kind of aborigines were they? No primitive torture. No pagan ceremonials—only three questions.

The Deacon glanced about. He sensed in the tense forms of the reptiles that this was the greatest event in the lives of any of them. He silently cursed the fate that had dropped them as ready-made answers to a wild, dream-founded legend. But it had happened before—Cortez and the Incas on Earth—he reflected. Only things were a little backward here on Venus. The Venusians weren't as gullible as the Incas.

He looked at his companions. Blubbering Joe, stiff as a corpse with fear. Spud, silent, worried and burning with rage. Only one of them could get out of this—

"What is the first question?" Spud asked quietly.

The lizard man spoke reverently. "The question: What must an Igoroe do if he injures or sees an injured Igoroe?"

Spud frowned. "That's a hell of a question," he said in English.

But Joe had blossomed like a poppy. "That's easy. What would a god tell 'em to do? I'll give that one!"

He shifted to hissing Igoroe. "The Igoroe must help—"

Spud slapped a hand against Joe's mouth. "You damned, brainless idiot, shut up!"

"Stall for time," whispered the Deacon. "Get a day."

Spud addressed the Igoroe. "None of us will answer now. We require one day. Give us until tomorrow at this time, then come to our hut and receive our answer."

A ripple of hissing went through the assemblage. Evidently this was not according to the books. After a moment of consternation the three leading Igoroes conferred in calm, deliberate discussion.

The Deacon watched through narrowed eyes, studying intently the Igoroe's reactions.

He could distinguish males and females side by side in the crowd. Little monsters of baby Igoroes moved restlessly in and out, but even they were attentive and comparatively still. The Deacon observed half a dozen mothers with tiny, squirming lizards in pouches at their waists. An insane cross between reptile and marsupial.

One fact centered itself in the Deacon's mind; the lack of frenzy and bloodlust. The Igoroes were on an infinitely higher plane of emotions than their filthy animal surroundings would indicate. At least, judging by Earth standards.

But another possibility clamored for recognition in his unwilling mind. Perhaps the Igoroes were simply emotionless. Yet that seemed impossible. Fear and excitement left clues in their manner. He shrugged off the idea. The Igoroes were emotional enough. Where was the key to unlock their emotional pattern?

At last the discussion ended and the Igoroe leader announced: "We will come for our answer and bring

the next question in one day. One of you will answer. If it is the answer of a god, he will be asked the next. If it is the answer of a devil, he will be destroyed."

Endlessly, the rain sprinkled the steaming soil.

JOE'S craven fear had vanished, and he blustered confidently. "What is there to worry about? Boy, how you pushed 'em over with those card tricks and that god business. They even went out and dug up an old legend to fit us. All we gotta do now is answer their questions, and one of us will be the head man of the whole mob. The other two will be safe enough, because whatever the head man says goes. Then we're sitting on top—pick up any crown jewels that might be laying around, fix up the *Minos* and take off."

Spud glanced down at his little fat sweating companion. "The wheels don't go around often, do they, Joe? But when they do, they sure buzz."

"Why? What's the matter with my idea? Why wouldn't you let me answer them? Naturally, the nice thing for a god to say would be that when an Igoroe is hurt, the others help him. You haven't been slitting throats so long you couldn't figure that out."

"How do you know?" grinned the Deacon. "Were you ever god, Joe?"

"Aw, you're both crazy. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing," said the Deacon, "except I wondered if you'd ever seen a pack of wild dogs turn cannibal when one of them showed blood."

"What's that got to do with this?"

"Nothing, except that our friends outside might have a similar code of ethics, and it might be the social thing to take a nip out of anybody who is down."

Joe paled. "The— Then how are we going to know what answer to give them?"

The Deacon laughed in Joe's face, a laugh of wholehearted amusement at the panic this simple thought brought to Joe's mind in which walls of Earth standards were built so high that Joe was incapable of thinking in any other terms.

Spud was pacing the room, trying to think logically, but his rage prevented that.

He stood at the door, wiping the sweat from his face. "We're in for it now. They're ten deep all around us. They'll probably be there all night. I don't think they ever sleep."

"I hope you still aren't thinking of breaking for it!" exclaimed Joe. "Not with everything working our way."

"It would have been a hundred to one chance before. It's zero now. But finding the right answers to their fool questions isn't more than one in a million. Out of thirty known races on Mars and Venus, only one has a code of ethics that can be anywhere near duplicated on Earth. A mathematical physicist had no business discovering relativity; it was a sociologist's job. There's only one thing in this cockeyed universe more relative than social customs, and that's ethics.

"These Igoroes know the 'right' answers to these little ethical problems they're giving us. From a few weeks' observations of the few specimens we've been able to see through this haze and muck we've got to identify their whole ethical pattern—or else toss a coin to get the answers. What's the chances, Deacon?"

The Deacon had slumped down in his corner, thinking hard. What he was thinking most was that only one

of them could survive. There was nothing to fear from Joe, but Spud had to be led off.

The Deacon's Ph. D. had come from his work on comparative ethics—before he discovered wits were more lucrative than wisdom. That made him the logical survivor in this insane contest, he reflected.

Joe cut in with injured dignity. "I don't care what you think! If they ask me, I'm going to tell them to help the damned, infernal injured Igoroe until he gets well!"

With that he retired from the discussion.

"We've got to know at least three more factors," said the Deacon. "First, how does their ethical code rate according to our own standards? Have they any science? Do they believe in an after life?"

His narrowed eyes watched Spud's face closely.

"I'd say they were a peculiar mixture," Spud answered. "They lack developed artifacts, but their lore and natural science are high. Their use of herbs has developed into a fairly good traditional medicine. Geometry and astronomy have probably reached the Euclidean stage. I'd say their ethical system is high according to Earth standards."

"Why?"

"Hunch, maybe. But it seems that way—no howling or war dancing around us out there. Their attitude was one of high devotion rather than fanaticism. And the family-group stuff—did you notice that?"

The Deacon nodded. "I think you're right about the ethics, but if they had geometry they'd have buildings and artifacts. No, they don't know anything about the sciences. Just about the reverse of Earth a couple of centuries ago—they're long on ethics, but short as zero on science."

"Perhaps, but in that case their traditional medicine must be advanced. Living in the jungle, having the intelligence they have, they must have a great herbological lore."

"You didn't see any medicine men hanging around our little ceremony out there."

"I wouldn't have known one if I'd seen him. Perhaps they have no concept corresponding to our 'medicine men.' But that has no bearing on the question. Medicine men as we think of them are not embryo M. D.'s. They're priests of superstition. And there's plenty of that around here. If it weren't, we wouldn't be in this jam! But it's a high mysticism like the great religions of Earth—Buddhism, Christianity, the Inca beliefs."

"Then we can take our answer to their question from the pages of our Earth Bibles?"

Spud shrugged. "I don't see why not."

The Deacon smiled. He didn't, either—yet. There had to be one more factor. Three points determine a line; three relevant factors determine an ethical pattern—if you interpret them right.

IN THE NIGHT the guards trebled and the horde of curious, intent Igoroes pressed closer. The stench of their lizard bodies filled the little hut.

Even Spud knew it would be suicide to venture an escape. Through the lowering dusk he had watched them pressing in, and in the blackness he could hear them shifting, sloshing in the water and muck.

The rain increased, torrenting down from the sky. It swept the matting loose on the roof and let warm trickles through onto the men.

Asleep with weariness, they rolled endlessly, trying to keep out of the water, but there was no spot on the

dirt floor that was not being drenched.

Dawn came, drear and lifeless. The Earthmen shifted their aching bodies to upright positions and glanced about. They were sitting in an inch of water.

"Today's the day," muttered Joe.

He surveyed himself and his companions. He looked down at his legs, crossed in the water—

"Gods!" He suddenly burst out laughing. "Funny, isn't it? Us, gods!" He shook and rocked back and forth.

"Joe! Joe!" Spud reached over and slapped him across the cheek. "Stop it. Do you hear?"

Joe subsided after a moment, looking momentarily ashamed, then burst out crying. "Why don't they kill us and be done with it? What are they waiting for?"

There was an awkward trampling at the doorway. An Igoroe entered with breakfast.

"Cheer up. Swill's on," said the Deacon. He took the bucket-sized gourd from the Igoroe and smelled the sour mess that seemed to be half-decomposed fruits and berries.

Joe turned paler and grabbed at his stomach. The Deacon busied himself with the gourd and casually turned to the Igoroe, who was nearly out the door.

"Where do Igoroes go when they die?" he asked.

The scaly face remained expressionless, but the Igoroe hesitated as if in puzzlement before he answered: "Igoroes dead when dead. Never go anywhere."

"That's all I wanted to know," the Deacon murmured.

"What does it mean?" asked Spud.

The Deacon regarded his companion intently. "It can only mean that they have no belief in an after life," he said at last. "And races who do

not have that belief are invariably Epicureans or debauchees. The Igoroes aren't debauchees; they're nothing but a bunch of home bodies, living life for all they can get out of it with a holy zeal."

"Then Jõe must surely be right," exclaimed Spud. "The answer to the question is that the Igoroes would help each other when hurt, apply whatever healing herbs they have—which must be plenty—and be generally good Samaritans."

The Deacon didn't want to have to answer that one, and didn't. He was glancing out the window, and smiled suddenly as a tinny scream shrilled out.

The three went to the window. Beyond the dim, swirling fog three scaled forms were thrashing the mud in a free-for-all. Their needle-toothed jaws gnashed into each other's flesh. Blood spurted into the rain.

It was impossible to see the details of the battle. The fighters rolled far beyond the range of vision before the death cries ended. But the Deacon had seen enough.

IT WAS AFTERNOON when the three Igoroes came again. As if it were part of the ceremony, they carefully laid their hardwood spears on the ground outside. In one palm they held a bowl of clear liquid. Contents of the three bowls were of differing shades of red.

With deference, but yet with firmness and an aura of antagonism, they quickly surrounded Joe.

He went white, and sweat began to stream down his face more rapidly. There was no sound from the hundreds of Igoroes outside.

The shrill piping of the Igoroe burst out. "What must an Igoroe do if he injures or sees an injured Igoroe?"

Joe opened his mouth, but no words came. He looked with agonized pleading at his companions. Spud and the Deacon stood stiffly in opposite corners of the hut.

Then Joe's faltering voice came weakly. "He must help the Igoroe, give him herbs, heal his wounds—"

He almost collapsed. Two of the Igoroes gripped his arms. They held their three bowls in front of him as if he were to take his choice. A whispered scream of despair came from the Igoroes outside.

"Don't—" Spud began.

The Deacon said nothing.

Joe hesitated, until the Igoroes squeezed his arms. He cried out in pain and grasped one of the bowls and downed its contents.

The Igoroes dropped him to the earth, where he lay gasping.

Then the Igoroe piped again. "The second question: If an Igoroe finds the possession that another Igoroe has lost, what must he do? Answer by darkness."

They left. Spud stared unbelievably after them. "The second question! Then Joe must have failed! But what *was* the answer? Where were we wrong?"

The two stared at Joe, who just sat in the water and muck, not moving, his face expressionless.

For what seemed hours, Spud looked at him, then turned his face away. "Whatever poison they fed him, we've got to forget him. It's our necks now! Where were we wrong? Why wasn't that the right answer? What would an Igoroe do if he found another's spear or little tin bowl, or wife, or diamond stick-pin? How can a man think in this heat? Tell me, Deac, what's the answer? You've studied these things, races, psychology. Tell me—"

He stopped. The Deacon was staring at him.

"I must be going looney in this heat," he murmured. Quietly he slumped down in a corner.

The Deacon remained unmoving. His mind was working swiftly over this new problem. He knew he had gauged the last one correctly. Now the question of property—

Spud broke in on him. "Stuff must be scarce around here. They'd grab it off and hide it. Isn't that what they'd do, Deac?"

"You forget we're dealing with a race we decided was very moral according to our own—or rather, Earth standards."

"Sure, and even though they'd really grab it off, they'd expect their god to tell them it wasn't the proper thing to do and to give it up, wouldn't they? That one's easy!"

The Deacon wondered. He thought it was easy, too. It was splitting hairs very fine—the difference between his answer and Spud's. He'd been watching through the window into the grayness ever since the Igoroes' departure, hoping for a clue, but he found no more than what he already knew.

His thoughts were sheared off by the shrill, insane cry that broke from Joe's throat. Their companion had suddenly risen, tearing at his clothes and beating upon his body. "It's burning me up! It's burning me up! Oh, don't let it burn me!"

He flung himself full length in the water on the floor, burying his face in the mud. Spud turned away. It took a lot to make his stomach roll over, but it hadn't been treated very well the last three weeks.

The Deacon continued staring. "He's drowning!"

Joe writhed in terrible pain. Once he raised his head and screamed again. "Don't burn—"

"We can't let him die that way," said the Deacon. He began tearing

at the wall of the hut, and finally jerked away a long pole. Spud had turned back, face white.

"Do you want to, or shall I?" the Deacon asked.

"I will."

Spud raised the heavy pole and brought it down once.

IT WAS NOT dark enough to prevent their seeing each other across the hut when the Igoroes came again. The Deacon watched them lay their spears on the ground so ceremoniously before the door again. He wondered why they carried them.

He held his breath as they entered. It was not yet his turn.

They surrounded Spud and piped the question.

Spud stood stiffly erect, trying to smile at the Deacon. "If an Igoroe finds something belonging to another Igoroe, he gives it back," he said.

The three remained motionless. Spud swallowed nervously. "Or does that hurt your conscience—if any—too much?"

"What does an Igoroe do if he finds another Igoroe's possession?" the lizard repeated.

"Gives it back, I said!" Spud shouted.

The three held out their bowls. Spud bit his lip and stared at them.

Slowly he raised one to his lips and winked at the Deacon. He brought his arm back swiftly and hurled the bowl with all his might into the open jaws of the Igoroe. He leaped backward beyond the reach of the other two, trying to reach the window.

But his foot slipped in the mud and the other two Igoroes were upon him with savage force that was more terrible because of their quietness and determination.

"You will take this one," one of them hissed.

They pinned Spud to the floor and poured the contents of one bowl into his mouth. In spite of his sputtering and blowing, most of it trickled down his throat because two scaled claws wedged between his jaws.

The Igoroes rose and retreated to the door, visibly trembling. There they stood dramatically erect, and one piped the third question: "Can our god die? Answer at light." Then they were gone.

Spud got up, shrugging at the effect of the drink. It seemed mildly intoxicating.

"That's good stuff," he said to the Deacon. "We could sell it for five dollars a pint back on Earth."

His eyes became faraway. "Back on Earth—"

Darkness dropped quickly. Still the mob of Igoroes stamped and

splashed patiently in the endless falling rain.

With darkness, Spud felt his senses slipping from him. He grew cold and afraid inside. He had seen Joe just sitting in his corner, finally rising with those horrible screams. But Spud just couldn't keep awake any longer. He slumped in drowsiness.

The Deacon's mind was working with all the furious intensity and cunning that had successfully carried him through thirty years of living by his wits.

He had been right about the first two questions. Joe and Spud had been stupid not to see that with no belief in an after life, with a high morality and an Epicurean outlook on life, suffering would be the height of the intolerable to the Igoroes. It would not be mercy to heal a wounded Igoroe because they had no science with which to heal him. The answer was to kill him as quickly as possible. That was why those two Igoroes had pounced on one of their companions earlier in the day when he had accidentally stumbled into a spear. But, then, Spud and Joe hadn't seen the accident—

The second question would have been a longer shot if they'd asked him. But Spud had been right about stuff being scarce. It was so scarce that Spud's answer had undoubtedly sounded silly to the Igoroes. Returning a found possession was merely a minor matter. With their Puritanical extremes of morality, the important part was that an Igoroe should, in addition, pay for the great privilege of being able to return it. The Deacon knew this was logical because one of the sand races on Mars had just such a morality concerning possessions. Theft of any kind was punished with death. Among the Igoroes it would proba-

bly be torture, since death was no punishment among them.

The only question in the Deacon's mind was how much the Igoroes considered a finder should pay a loser. He'd have said that he should pay without stipulating any amount and hoped he could get away with it.

But could their god die? Where were the clues to that one? They didn't believe in immortality. Did that apply to their god? The obvious answer was that it didn't. The Deacon was afraid of the obvious.

He racked his brain, frantically searching the dusty catalogue of races he had studied throughout the universe. All he could find was that races who believe in immortality believe in immortal gods. Those who have no belief in after life seldom believe in gods, but the one or two who deny themselves immortality and still have some concept of a nebulous omnipotent presence at least grant it indestructibility.

This slim precedent from known races was the only basis to apply to the unknown. Would it?

Exhausted beyond his endurance, the Deacon sank down against the wall in a daze of half sleep.

For a long time, in the middle of the night's blackness, he thought he heard a scraping, sawing sound, but his consciousness just wouldn't rise to meet it. The sound continued for seeming hours, then died, and the Deacon rolled on his back in deep, exhausted sleep.

When he awoke, dim grayness filled the hut. The fog seemed thicker than ever and was plainly visible swirling in the hut. As the Deacon shook his head and looked about, a swift spasm clenched his insides.

He saw what the noise in the night had been.

The body of Spud Agill was sitting upright in a corner. In his hands was his pocketknife. Blood colored the water deeply.

Spud had amputated his toes one by one, then both feet. And one leg had been nearly cut off at the knee before the blood had drained out of him.

His face showed that he had felt every searing pain of the knife—that his brain had been powerless to stop his hand from cutting.

The Deacon felt his mind dim. Blank spots sprang up suddenly in his memory. He groped for a moment for his identity and his location. And there was something terribly important to be done this morning.

Oh, yes. The third question. Could a god die? That was it.

But how could he know? He wasn't a god. None of them were gods. Two of them were dead. He had to be a god or he would die, too.

But if he were a god he couldn't die. He was safe, then. He chuckled to himself.

Outside, the Igoroes, who never seemed to sleep, pressed close. He felt the tenseness that almost radiated from their bodies. They had reason enough to be excited. This was the big day. The day when their god would be enthroned.

He was that god! He would be the head man from now on, and would he show them!

But first he had to pass their test. Silly—having to pass an examination to be a god. He chuckled again.

Then he caught himself. He gritted his teeth. Get hold of yourself, get hold of yourself. There they come. Three anachronistic saurians. Why don't you go back to your own time? A million years ago. You don't belong here.

They came to the door and paused. The Deacon glanced about, panic-stricken for a moment. But there was nothing to worry about. He had the right answer, and after that—

They stood there, solemn, repulsive. Their little bowls were clamped tightly. The hardwood spears lay on the ground.

They, too, were under tremendous nervous strain. This being before them *had* to be their god. The other two had proven devils and had been destroyed. Now—

"Can our god die?"

"No! No!" The Deacon hurled the words from him. His whole body functions then seemed to pause awaiting the Igoroes' reactions.

Even before they retreated with the little bowls he knew he had given the right answer. The Igoroes outside had relaxed with an audible hissing sigh.

He turned to the mangled corpse in the corner and shouted, "I'm god, Spud, don't you hear? I'm god!"

The endless strain was over. Relief and hysteria flooded over him.

But something was wrong. The Igoroes outside were not dispersing in jubilation. Instead, they were pressing even closer, and a new intensity filled the air. A shuffling sound at the door turned the Deacon's head.

Words collapsed on his lips. The three Igoroes were there. Their little bowls were gone and the hardwood spears were not on the ground.

They were clenched tightly in the claws of the reptiles, the dull wood showing redly like old rusted steel.

The Deacon's eyes opened wide, and he screamed just once, even before they were halfway across the hut, because he knew he couldn't pass the final test of the gods.