

Daniel III

A Story

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FATHER Paul was tired to death. The walk through the night to the District Commissioner's house, with his heart trembling within him at each step and the flames swirling blood-red before his eyes, had been a long one for an old man. He had tried to run on his way there at places where the path evened out, but his legs were weak and the thrusting blood drove like a jagged blade through his heart.

On his way back he shuffled slowly along because haste could not help now, and had he been thinking clearly then he would have known that haste could not have helped before either. His limbs ached with pain and his hand quivered as he lifted it every so often to press it against his heart, but it was in his soul that he was tired to death. His hope and faith had been consumed by the fire. They had gone up with the smoke and there was nothing more.

Forty years before he had left his home in France to bring the Word of God to the Bantu people. He had spent his whole life and power spreading the Word. Now the brutality of a still, moonlight night had burnt it to a cinder.

The moon shone round and silver in the heavens. Its light poured like a pale opiate along the path and through the trees. It soothed the shimmering gasping of the cracked earth. The naked branches, the brittle tufts of grass, the scars seared

by sun and wind, were softened. The dust which spiralled angrily into the daytime sky was covered over and resting. Even where Father Paul's feet had disturbed it, it hung scarcely moving in the beam of his torch. But he distrusted this calm, this drugged peacefulness, because he knew that in some mysterious way the moonlight stirred, in its unfathomable depths, the primitive passion of Africa. The torch caught the eye of a nightjar at the side of the path. It shone back at Father Paul, unwinking, like a ruby rolled in the sand.

Why God, he asked, did you let them burn our church down? Indeed, he thought, the ways of God are mysterious.

It had been no use going to the District Commissioner, but what else could he have done? There had been no one to help. There were only the two pails of water in the small room where he slept beside the church; and when he was first wakened by the sound of the fire, the flames were already swirling black and orange. He prayed. That was the first thing he thought of. He knelt where he stood, his fingers clasping the window sill, and asked that it might be only a dream, or if it was not, that a great cloud would come and burst open.

When he opened his eyes, the flames were reaching up above the roof at one corner. He ran out and shouted for help

but there was no answer. He took the two pails and stumbled along the gravel path. Perhaps he hoped for a miracle, that they might be refilled. He flung the water with all the little strength he had against the fire. It hissed, and the pails clattered together at his feet. He stood motionless in his stained white nightdress. He looked like a scarecrow, his arms slightly raised, his body weak from malaria, his pock-marked face pale even in the light of the fire. His eyes made no movement, but tears of disbelief welled in them and fell slowly from his cheeks.

Then a sudden realisation had come to him. Picking up his nightdress he had run swaying to the front door of the church which was its only entrance. He had stumbled along the aisle, choking in the dense fumes, until he reached the altar. His hands had groped in a frenzy for the sacred vessels, and found them. He had clutched down the crucifix, and holding these treasures against his breast had passed again through the fury of the fire to the clear air outside.

Father Paul rubbed his bare feet and got up from where he was resting. The nightjar fluttered away in the dry grass. Then there was absolute silence again except for the soft sound of his feet dragging through the dust. At the crest of the hill he looked straight ahead of him into the sky. The stars were bright and still like the ruby eye of the bird. There was no communication between him and them and the blue engulfing them was cold like new-cut steel. The only disturbance in all the stillness was the tortuous whirling of his own mind.

No, it had been no use going to the District Commissioner, but he had to tell someone his church had burnt down. He could not just have waited for the dawn and then watched through the day the charred ruins without telling someone. So he had set off, without thinking even to put on his sandals, on the five mile journey to the district headquarters. The Commissioner's house (his name was Stevens) you could see from a long way off, even at night. The walls were white-washed from the ground to the roof, and from a distance

in the moonlight they looked like a sheet strung between the giant mango trees that grew in the garden. Father Paul knocked at the gauze door of the verandah, and in a moment Stevens was there.

"Father, is it you?" he said: and as he saw him he put his arm around him and lifted him (for he was so light) on to the verandah and led him to a chair in the dining-room. "What is it, Father, are you ill?"

The old man moistened his lips and breathed heavily in an effort to stop the trembling of his body. "I can scarcely tell you, my son. They have burnt our church down. It has been burnt. It is no longer there. Forty years. Now it is no longer there."

Stevens took the priest's hand. "I am sorry," he said. "I cannot tell you. But do not lose heart. We will build it again. I will have 20 boys out there in ten days, in three days, I promise you. We have spare timber here and corrugated iron. We will build it better than it ever was."

"Yes, thank you. I knew that you would wish to help. Aye, but we built that ourselves. Before you were born. And now they have burnt it down, these people to whom it was my duty to bring the Word of God."

Mrs. Stevens had got up. She made cocoa and while Father Paul was drinking it, although they asked him to be quiet and rest, he told them about the fire.

"Why did they do it?" Stevens asked. "Do you think you know?"

The company, being able to speak to people at last, and the cocoa were bringing strength back to Father Paul, and he was thinking more clearly.

"It is the drought and now the smallpox outbreak", he said. "They are afraid and they do not know what they are doing."

"We vaccinated all of them that we could."

"But there have already been six deaths and there are fifty others lying to-night between life and death."

A small figure had appeared at the door of the dining-room, unnoticed. It was John, the Stevens' seven-year old son.

He had been sleeping on the verandah and, hearing the exciting news, had come to listen.

"I know why they burnt Father Paul's church", he said.

The three of them turned, startled, in the direction of the small voice. The boy stepped out of the shadow into the light of the lantern. His freckled face glistened from the oil that had been rubbed on it to keep the mosquitoes off. His eyes were sparkling with the importance of the occasion and his part in it.

"What are you doing here? Go to bed at once, John", Mrs. Stevens ordered him.

"No, just a moment please, Mary", Stevens said, "let him come here. Come here, John."

The boy looked from one to other of his parents and then darted on to his father's knee.

"Tell me", Stevens said, "why did they burn down Father Paul's church?"

"Because Mfezi, the snake, told them to."

"Oh what nonsense, John!" Mrs. Stevens cried.

"Please dear, wait a moment. How do you know, John, that it was Mfezi?"

"Pendembe told me."

"What did Pendembe say?"

"He said Mfezi is very cross with the white man and the white man's God?"

"Why?"

"I didn't ask him."

"What else did he say, John?"

"He tried to frighten me."

"What did he do?"

The small boy smiled, disclosing a large gap in his teeth, as though people trying to frighten him was fun. "Pendembe says Mfezi wants the heart of a little white boy to eat. He says the witchdoctor says so."

"John, don't speak like that!" his mother cried.

"Please keep quiet, Mary", Stevens said sharply. "Why didn't you tell us before, John?"

"Pendembe was trying to frighten me. He was cross with me."

"Why?"

The boy considered. "Promise I won't get a hiding?"

"Yes, yes."

"I took his mouth organ and lost it."

Stevens smiled, but immediately his face was earnest again. "All right, go to bed now", he said, "and stay there."

When the boy and his mother had gone, Stevens poured himself a whisky.

"Well, there you are, Father", he said, "that kid knows the Natives better than I do. He spoke their language before he could say a word of his own and they discuss things with him they would never dream of mentioning to me. What exactly do you know about this confounded snake?"

"It's a mamba, of course."

"Yes I know, I've seen it."

"I suppose you also know that these people are ancestor worshippers. They believe that Mfezi is their great chief, Pemba, returned to earth. When Pemba was alive they were by far the most powerful tribe in this part of the country. Now most of the others despise them. It is said that the night after Pemba died this small snake was found under the block on which he laid his head to sleep. It is probable the witchdoctor placed it there. In any case they built a pit for it beside the chief's hut and it has been there ever since. It is not known how long ago that was, but they say Mfezi is more than a hundred years old."

"Do you think what John was told could possibly mean anything?"

The eyes of the old man held Stevens'. "It might", he said. "You will certainly be wise to watch your son carefully. Do not let him out of your sight."

"Is there nothing I can do? You know these people better than I. Couldn't I arrest the chief or the witchdoctor, or have the snake killed?"

Father Paul smiled sadly. "I have been trying to destroy the snake all my life. You cannot do it with policemen or a gun. In their present mood that would be madness. God alone can do it." The priest pressed his arms against the arms of the chair and rose unsteadily. "So, you see my son, this is my responsibility, not yours. I must do it alone."

“But how? What do you intend doing?”

“I do not know yet.”

When he had said that, Father Paul had gone to the door and, despite the Stevens' protestations, started out on his return to the church.

In the valley at the foot of the hill on whose summit he had rested were the kraals of Pemba's people. From the path Father Paul could see them clearly. He could see the circular patch of darkness beside the main hut where Mfezi, twelve feet long now, stretched his shining green body in the moonlight. He stood watching. He had told Stevens that the responsibility was his but he still had no idea how he would discharge it, and he was again so exhausted that he could not think clearly.

Suddenly anger rose within him towards these people for their betrayal. He had taught them to add and read, he had shown them how the land should be tilled, he had brought the Word of God to them and he had given them his life. Then he thought of the small bodies in the verminous huts nearby. He had held them in his arms at baptism. Now they were writhing hopelessly to escape the dreadful fever which he himself had known. He was ashamed of his anger, and seeking an excuse for himself, he blamed his God. He was the all-powerful God, not Mfezi. It was his God that bore the responsibility.

He fell to his knees, trembling. Forgive me, Father, he whispered, for I am tired and know not what I say. Forgive them for they know not what they do. Forgive me if it is through any fault of mine that they do not know.

As he knelt, the soft hands of sleep touched the priest's brow, and for a few minutes he was quite in peace.

He rose and it was with new strength that he climbed the hill to where his church stood. It was still smouldering: all had been destroyed except the four walls and the metal cross that stood high above the doorway. Pieces of black debris had fallen on the grass about the building, but at the borders of the lawn the cannas were erect in their brilliant colours, and even in the sharp smell of burning he could

detect the heavy, still scent of the smaller flowers which grew beside them.

He stood looking at the charred shell and the flowers and then, as though a happy thought had occurred to him, he retraced his steps quickly until he reached the gate to the churchyard. He raised his eyes to the metal cross, he looked past it to the end of the earth, and there in the sky above the end of the earth, he saw the cross of heaven. Most nights, through all the years he had been there, he had stood for a second or two thus. Forty years before he had designed his church in this way so that the cross he made with his hands might be united with the cross that God had made in the firmament.

There was joy in Father Paul's face. He walked slowly to his small room, and slowly pushed open the door. What he saw then did not shock him. There was no longer anything in life or death that could shock or dismay him. The sacred vessels and their contents which he had saved from the altar, and the crucifix, lay on the floor smashed and shattered to smithereens, and beside them, a heavy axe. He held the beam of the torch on them for a moment and then, moving it about the room, he saw the form of a man kneeling beside his bed. He went across to him and told him to rise.

“It is you, Samson,” he said, “my favourite son. Were you praying to God when I came or was it that, kneeling, you thought to escape my anger?”

The young man did not speak. His eyes were lowered and there was the pallor of terror that one sees occasionally in the face of a black man.

“Do not be afraid, Samson. You need not be afraid of me. I held you in my arms when you were a small child. You and I have prayed often together. You have done good work for God.”

Samson raised his eyes.

“Father”, he said, “forgive me. I was praying, that is the truth. I had been kneeling there a long time before you came.”

The priest placed his hand on the moist black brow. “You are forgiven, my son.”

Samson pointed, without looking, to the

smashed vessels on the floor. "It was I who did this", he said.

"Yes, I can see. You are no longer wearing the cross about your neck. Why did you do it?"

"It is Mfezi."

"Do you still then believe in a snake?"

"I thought I did not, Father, but Pemba is close to me. I am of his very family. He has taken possession of me. When I pray he goes, but when I stop praying he comes again. When I am sleep he sits on the end of my bed. He tells me these things I know are holy must be destroyed."

"That is what Xeba, the witchdoctor, tells you."

"It is not so, Father. It is evil, but it is Mfezi that speaks through Xeba."

"Then you do not believe what I have taught?"

"I believe, but there is Mfezi also. In their unhappiness the people are asking Mfezi for help. Mfezi is cross with them. He says they have listened to the white men."

"I see. So it is so." The priest paused. He said sharply, "There is a thing I must know." He flashed the beam of the torch full in the other's face. "Does Mfezi demand the heart of the white boy?"

Samson shrank back as though he had been struck. Raising his hands to his face, he murmured in fear, "ow, ow."

"I can see that this is so also. Tell me now at once, when do they intend to do this thing?"

"They are meeting to-night to choose who must do it." The young man knelt and looked up at Father Paul, his terror-stricken face imploring help. "I am in great fear," he said. "I fear that it might be I, for I am of the very family of Pemba."

"When is the choice to be made?"

"When the moon comes up."

"Can it be before?"

"It cannot. Mfezi does not speak at any other time."

Father Paul raised his hand, as though in benediction. "Go in peace, my son", he said. "You need not fear. God will be with you. I, Father Paul, am speaking for God. I tell you, you need not fear."

Samson touched the priest's feet. "My

father", he said, "I have loved you more than my own mother."

When he had gone, Father Paul prayed for strength in what he knew now he must do. He lay down and slept away his exhaustion until nightfall. When he woke it was eight o'clock. The moon would rise in about two hours. He opened a tin of soup and heated it on the paraffin stove. He ate it with dry bread. He took out his Bible and turned to Daniel, Chapter III.

"He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

"The Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came forth from out of the midst of the fire."

Father Paul read the whole chapter through slowly three times. He put the Bible back beside his pillow and went out. He stopped in the gateway and looked back for a moment.

As he approached the kraal of the chief, the moon was rising through the bushes. The chief was seated on a stool beside the pit, the witchdoctor, Xeba, crouched on his haunches before him. The elders of the tribe, sitting on the ground in rows, were a little distance away, and behind them again were the other people.

Father Paul's small figure in its black robes could scarcely be seen as it came near. He moved through the shadow of the chief's hut into the assembly and stood a few feet away, confronting Xeba. As the people saw him there was an angry murmur, but the chief raised his hand, commanding silence.

"It is I who come", Father Paul said. "I who all these years have been with you and have tried to comfort you. Tell me now, what are you doing here?"

"We are waiting to hear what Mfezi will say." The chief pointed to the pit where the great snake lay, glistening among the boulders.

"Why do you not listen, rather, to your God in Heaven?"

"Tell him why, Xeba," the chief said.

The witchdoctor rose from his haunches. In his hair, stuck haphazard, were clusters of black feathers. The whole of his face, lips, nostrils, eyelids, was painted white. Across his forehead was a vivid red line intersected by shorter ones, like the symbol used on maps to indicate a railroad. He came towards the priest in uneven, jogging steps, the whole of his body quivering. The bleached bones which he wore for necklace, bracelet and anklet rattled together. The clusters of tails which hung from his waist swayed from side to side.

He stopped a few feet from Father Paul and stretching his arms towards the moon he shrieked a high-pitched, unintelligible sound. In response there was a wailing, as of a haunted creature, from the bush.

"Xeba is heard", an elder cried.

"Eyeh, eyeh", the people responded.

Father Paul did not move. "You think to frighten me with this nonsense", he said. "That is another such as you out there in the bush. As for you, Xeba, I have seen you loafing in the village in dirty khaki slacks, smoking a cigarette. Your paint and your monkey tails do not change you."

"Let Xeba speak", the chief commanded.

"I will speak," Xeba cried. "Your God does not help us, white man. How has all the praying in your church helped us? Our cattle and children are dying and the rivers are dry. Your holy water does not make the crops grow". He brought his ghastly face close to the priest's. "Your cross does not cure the sickness of the children." He drew a knife from his girdle and slashed away the heavy cross that hung at Father Paul's knee. He tossed it into the pit. "Look", he cried, "Mfezi spits at it. Mfezi is great. When Mfezi ruled here before the white man took our land and cattle, the rivers flowed full of water. The grass grew to the height of a goat. The children were fat and strong. We hear the voice of Mfezi again."

"Eyeh", the people chanted.

Father Paul turned towards the crowd. "You do not understand", he said. "Our God is not that cross there. It is not the

holy water. It is not even the church you have burnt. These are the things that remind us of Him and help us to know Him. You cannot burn Him or cast Him out. He is within you. It is by your love for one another that you know Him. Your love for old people and children tell you of Him, and in you I have seen much of that love." He stopped. Then in a loud voice he said, "Yet you are here tonight to plan the murder of a small boy who has been the friend of your children and has done you no harm."

There was a movement through the throng. "Ow", some said.

"How do you know this?" the chief asked.

"I know it. It is the son of the Commissioner."

"Someone has betrayed us," the chief shouted to the gathering. "There is a traitor among us. You shall find him later, Xeba."

"Why do you plan to murder this boy?"

"Mfezi demands his heart", the witchdoctor replied.

"You will not listen to me rather than Mfezi then?". The priest addressed the question to the chief.

"We cannot."

"I ask you, in the name of our God in Heaven, to listen to me. I have worked among you all my life. This is a small thing I ask."

"We cannot", said the chief, "even if we would. Mfezi has spoken. He demands the boy as a sacrifice. His children are dying. He has spoken. It is the end."

"I tell you", Father Paul cried, "the real God will know you not by the sacrifice you make of others but by the sacrifice you make of yourself."

He looked up to the crest of the hill where he could see the outline of the charred walls of the church. The moon was up now. Its light had moved in stealthily between the trees. It shone on the faces of the tense throng before him. He looked with love at the land and the people to whom he had given his life.

"You would give Mfezi the heart of a young boy", he said. "Would it not be better if he were given the heart of Father

Paul, the man who has brought to his people the God he hates and fears?"

"Ow", the people said.

The chief's voice was unsteady. "This is a great thing that we are asked." He turned to the witchdoctor. "Would it be better, Xeba? Speak!"

The witchdoctor lowered his eyes. "Eyeh", he said, "it would be better."

Father Paul opened his robes and let them fall around his waist. The light shone on his shrunken white chest, the skin shrivelled with age.

"Stand aside, Xeba", he commanded. "Our God does not fear the sting of Mfezi."

He walked firmly to the pit. He lowered himself into it, the heavy black cloth falling about his legs. The snake watched his movements, its small head darting close above the dust in a circular movement. Father Paul stumbled for an instant and held his hand to his heart. Then he stood erect and walked to where the cross had fallen. He bent, took it up gently and raised it to his lips. As he did this, the mamba reared its head, swayed for a moment and then flashed through the moonlit air. Its head struck the man's bare stomach and the fangs sank into the flesh.

It takes three minutes for the poison of the mamba to kill, and the death is excruciatingly painful. But Father Paul was dead even before the fangs had pierced his skin, and as he sagged softly into the dust, holding the cross against his heart, there was not a sign of pain upon his countenance.

Everything was held perfectly still for an instant. Then there was a wild cry and a young man bounded from out of the crowd wielding on high the huge knives that are used for cutting cane. He hurdled into the pit and with a mighty stroke he severed the reptile's body as it reared to strike again. He picked up the priest in his arms (for he was no heavier than a child) and crying in anguish, "my father, my father," he ran with him away into the bushes.

There was a wild tumult.

"It is Samson", Xeba yelled. "He is the traitor. He has slain Mfezi. Kill him! Kill him!"

The chief took Xeba by the throat and shook him. "Silence fool!" he cried. "Let them go in peace! Are you blind that you do not see how great is the thing we have witnessed here to-night."

