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KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST

A STORY of GREED, TERROR, and HEROISM in COLONIAL AFRICA

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

A MARINER BOOK
Houghton Mifflin Company
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10

THE WOOD THAT WEEPS

It was raining in London on July 12, 1890, but the crowd gathered outside Westminster Abbey anyway, ignoring the downpour. Thousands of people surged back and forth on the slick pavement, trying to glimpse the dignitaries who stepped out of carriages and filed into the cathedral between lines of policemen: former Prime Minister Gladstone, the speaker of the House of Commons, the lord chancellor, assorted dukes and princes, bejeweled women and bemedaled generals. The rich and famous filled the abbey, even standing in the aisles.

Finally, a carriage pulled up and the man everyone was waiting for eased himself out, ill, pale, leaning on a walking stick. Henry Morton Stanley was about to do something more daunting for him than any of his African adventures. He was getting married.

The bride, Dorothy Tennant, was the eccentric, high-society portrait painter who had previously rejected him. While the explorer had been plodding through the jungle in search of Emin Pasha, Tennant had changed her mind. On his return to England, she had begun sending Stanley startlingly passionate letters. "Suppose a wild, uncultivated tract of land and suppose that one day this land is ploughed up and sown with corn. If the field could speak it might say: 'I have never borne corn, I do not bear corn, I shall never bear corn.' And yet all the while the wheat lies hidden in its bosom. . . . My love is a flame which will never die, it began so small a spark you could not see it light, now it burns like the altar flame."

To the altar it was. The news spread, the price of Tennant's paintings

soared, the congratulations poured in from around the world. Queen Victoria gave Tennant a locket with thirty-eight diamonds, and Thomas Edison sent one of his new phonograph machines. From Brussels, Leopold dispatched his representative, the Count d'Aarche, to be best man.

On the day itself, Stanley was painfully ill with gastritis, an inflammation of the stomach lining. He had suffered from it before, but its recurrence now was probably not by chance. He tottered up the aisle of Westminster Abbey but had to sit in an armchair for part of the ceremony. After the wedding, he was helped into the couple's carriage. Protected by a mounted police escort, it headed off through a shouting and jostling crowd that almost blocked its passage. During the reception, Stanley lay on a couch in a separate, darkened room, in agony. The illness continued into the honeymoon.

At war in Stanley all his life were the craving for acceptance and the fear of intimacy. The fear was so strong, believes the explorer's most thorough biographer, Frank McLynn, that Stanley's marriage was never consummated. The evidence is mainly circumstantial. Dorothy Stanley did not produce children, and clearly, despite her letters, had powerful neuroses of her own. In a most unromantic decision, Stanley insisted that his young male assistant come along on the couple's honeymoon in Switzerland. Finally, Stanley's diary of the honeymoon period has several passages inked out, apparently by his wife after his death. The end of one such entry, however, is legible: "I do not regard it wifely, to procure these pleasures, at the cost of making me feel like a monkey in a cage." Stanley's fear of women was so great, McLynn concludes, that "when he was finally called upon to satisfy a wife, Stanley in effect broke down and confessed that he considered sex for the beasts."

Whether this inference is right or wrong, the inhibitions that caused Stanley so much pain are a reminder that the explorers and soldiers who carried out the European seizure of Africa were often not the bold, bluff, hardy men of legend, but restless, unhappy, driven men, in flight from something in their past or in themselves. The economic explanations of imperial expansion — the search for raw materials, labor, and markets — are all valid, but there was psychological fuel as well.

Stanley's marriage marked the end of his exploring; he now devoted his time to being famous. Having reached the upper class at last, he became something of a caricature of its attitudes. He traveled about the world giving lectures and after-dinner speeches, receiving honorary de-

grees, inaugurating railroads, and granting interviews. He fulminated against sloth, socialism, immorality, "general mediocrity," labor unions, Irish nationalism, the eight-hour working day, women journalists, and American hotel servants ("untrained, undisciplined, loutish and ill-bred"). He received a knighthood and was elected to Parliament. When he made a speaking tour of the United States and Canada, he again took along his young assistant; his wife took her mother. Doubly chaperoned, the Stanleys traveled across the continent in royal style in a private railroad car complete with grand piano. The car was named the *Henry M. Stanley.*

Only two years after Stanley hobbled down the cathedral aisle, another man accomplished a remarkable feat of exploration in the Congo. Unlike Stanley's journeys, his was respectful and nonviolent. But William Sheppard seldom shows up in the annals of exploration, because he doesn't fit the conventional image of the white explorer in Africa. To begin with, he wasn't white.

Paradoxically, what allowed Sheppard, a black American, to go to the Congo at all was partly the work of the white supremacist Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan, who had helped engineer United States recognition of Leopold's Congo in the hope that American blacks would emigrate there. Morgan and his fellow send-them-back-to-Africa enthusiasts had long envisaged, as a first step, dispatching black American missionaries to the continent. They would be a beachhead, Morgan hoped, for millions of American blacks to follow, the sooner the better. As early as 1865 — the year white Southerners lost all hope of keeping blacks in their place as slaves — the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church had voted to begin recruiting "missionaries from among the African race on this continent, who may bear the Gospel of the grace of God to the homes of their ancestors."

It was some years after the Civil War before such plans could take effect. For one thing, the Southern Presbyterians, whose enthusiasm for slavery had made them split off from Presbyterians in the North, not surprisingly had few black members. Nonetheless, the back-to-Africa plans of white racist diehards like Morgan in part overlapped with the interests of some African Americans. Although few were interested in moving to Africa permanently, George Washington Williams was not the only black American of his time who wanted to work there. The Reverend William Sheppard had the same ambition, and probably for the same unspoken reason: this might be a way to escape the humiliating barriers of segregation.

Born in Virginia in 1865, Sheppard had gone to the state's Hampton Institute, one of the few higher educational institutions for blacks in the South. After further study at the Colored Theological Seminary in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, he worked as a Presbyterian minister in Montgomery and Atlanta, where he acquired a reputation for energy, zest, and physical courage. At one point, he saved someone from drowning; at another, he ran up three flights of stairs in a burning house to rescue a woman and got burned in the process. In the late 1880s, Sheppard began petitioning the Southern Presbyterian Church to send him to Africa as a missionary.

For two years the Presbyterians put Sheppard on hold: church authorities wouldn't let him go to Africa unless a white man was available to be his superior. At last, with encouragement from Senator Morgan himself, an aspiring white missionary appeared — the Reverend Samuel Lapsley, a year younger than Sheppard and the son of Morgan's former law partner. Although one was the descendant of slaves and the other of slave-owners, the two young clerics hit it off well and set out together for the Congo. On the way, with introductions from Morgan and Henry Shelton Sanford, Lapsley met President Benjamin Harrison in Washington and King Leopold II in Brussels. Sheppard, being black, was not included in these audiences. Sanford insisted that Lapsley get a silk top hat for his trip to the Royal Palace to meet Leopold, and the king charmed Lapsley as much as he did other visitors.

In May 1890, Sheppard and Lapsley arrived in the Congo, and for some weeks stayed at a mission station just outside Matadi. As the two of them assembled porters and supplies for the trip around the lower Congo River rapids, someone else doing the same thing on the streets of this small hillside town was Joseph Conrad. He and his caravan began walking up the trail to Stanley Pool eleven days after the Americans.

Having conferred with experienced missionaries at Stanley Pool and upriver, Lapsley and Sheppard decided to establish the first Southern Presbyterian mission far up the Kasai River. Sheppard went off into the bush for several weeks to recruit African helpers; Lapsley stayed at an American mission station in Leopoldville, where he again crossed paths with Conrad. (The novelist may have braved not just malaria and dysentery, but also some evangelizing. Conrad, Lapsley wrote home, "is sick in a room at the other end of the court. As I sit . . . I look across the fruit and

palm trees right into his window. He is a gentlemanly fellow. An English Testament on his table furnishes a handle I hope to use on him.")

Once they completed their preparations, the two young missionaries headed up the Kasai. The letters Lapsley sent home during these months ring with an admiration for Sheppard that would have been nearly impossible for a white man to voice for a black back home. "The Bateke think there is nobody like 'Mundéle Ndom,' the black white man, as they call Sheppard. . . . His temper is bright and even — really a man of unusual graces and strong points of character. So I am thankful to God for Sheppard." He describes Sheppard as a "born trader. . . . I let him do most of the buying," and speaks admiringly of Sheppard's physical hardiness and his skill at hunting, of his coping with storms that threatened to blow away their tents, and of Sheppard's pulling himself fifteen feet down an anchor chain underwater to loosen the snagged anchor. Sheppard once shot a hippo, jumped into the water to tie a rope around it, and narrowly escaped a crocodile who also had an eye on the hippo. The black man was supposed to be the junior partner in the mission, but as one reads Lapsley's letters, one is reminded of James Barrie's play *The Admirable Crichton,* in which a yacht full of upper-class Britons is shipwrecked on an island, and the resourceful butler becomes the leader.

William Sheppard was the first black American missionary in the Congo. As we listen to him in the book, letters, and magazine articles he writes over the next two decades, and in speeches given to rapt audiences at Hampton and elsewhere while he is on leave, we hear someone strikingly different from almost all the Americans and Europeans who have been to Africa before him. He is, to be sure, a Christian evangelist, and remains one for the twenty years he works in Africa. He occasionally expresses the customary condescension toward "the dense darkness of heathenism" and the "wild, naked savages, bowing down to idols, filled with superstition and sin." But his tone is usually far different. "I always wanted to live in Africa," Sheppard writes to a friend back in the United States; "I felt that I would be happy, and so I am." He eagerly absorbs his new surroundings along the Kasai River: "We immediately began to study their language by pointing at objects and writing down the names they gave us." He acquires pet parrots and a small black monkey jokingly named Tippu Tip, after the Afro-Arab slave-trader. His voice, stronger and more confident, becomes that of a man who feels, in a way that is perhaps, politically and religiously, too risky for him to fully explore, that he has

come home. He rejoices at being among "my people" in "the country of my forefathers."

In early 1892, Lapsley had to go to Boma, the capital, on mission business, and left Sheppard alone for some months on the Kasai. When Sheppard joyfully met the steamer he thought was bringing Lapsley back, to his shock he found a letter from another missionary:

> Dear Bro. Sheppard:
>
> You will be surprised and grieved to know that your friend and comrade, Rev. S. N. Lapsley, while here at the coast was taken down with bilious hematuric fever, and on the 26th of March died."

The Southern Presbyterians, embarrassed to find themselves with a black man in de facto command of their new Congo mission, dispatched more white Presbyterians to the Congo. By the time they arrived, Sheppard had had several years' experience in the territory, and had become, according to a Belgian trader, very popular "among the BaKuba whose language he alone speaks of all the Europeans."

Sheppard continued to thrive. He loved to hunt and was famous for his charismatic oratory and strength. He rode what he cheerfully claimed was the first bicycle in central Africa. His *joi de vivre* seems to have made him liked by almost everyone, black and white. It may be a measure of his popularity that when, later in his life, he strayed from his marriage and fathered a son with a village woman, the transgression did not end his career in the church. The boy, called Shapit, as the Africans called his father, eventually ended up running the mission printing press.

Unlike other missionaries, generally a pretty somber-looking lot, in photographs Sheppard seems to be enjoying himself, whether posing with game he has shot or jubilantly displaying a giant dead snake or strumming a banjo. Tall and husky, he stands among a group of black warriors with spears and shields, holding a spear himself. Or, with a rifle, he grins broadly, a row of men with bows and arrows arrayed beside him. Again and again, Sheppard strikes a distinctive pose. He is wearing a white sun helmet, white shirt, white tie, white linen suit, even white canvas shoes. His chest is thrust out, his hands confidently on his hips, and, amid a group of Africans, his smile is warm and proud and almost proprietary. He has the distinct look of a football coach showing off a winning team.

The area where Sheppard was working bordered on the homeland of the Kuba people. The Kuba are among Africa's greatest artists, working in masks, sculpture, textiles, and elaborately carved tools; Sheppard's collection of Kuba art, much of which ended up at his alma mater in Virginia, was the first significant one acquired by an outsider. He made ethnographic notes on the Kuba and other peoples of the Kasai region and recorded ancestral myths, rituals, and crop yields. Although he is frank to say when some practice — such as human sacrifice, or the killing of women as witches — appalls him, his writings show an empathetic, respectful curiosity about African customs radically different from the harsh, quick judgments of someone like Stanley. Sheppard was particularly impressed with the Kuba, who "make one feel that he has again entered a land of civilization. . . . Perhaps they got their civilization from the Egyptians — or the Egyptians got theirs from the Bakuba!" Sheppard was fascinated when he saw a Kuba ceremonial cup for drinking palm wine; carved on it was a face with features strikingly similar to those on ancient Egyptian artifacts. "The cup is made of mahogany," Sheppard wrote, "and the face on it seems to verify their tradition that many, many years ago they came from a far-away land."

Because of its location deep in the Congo's interior, the Kuba kingdom had been largely protected from the slave-raiders of both the east and west coasts. The Kuba valued their isolation and did all they could to keep outsiders at bay. Their homeland was within the boundaries of the territory Europe had recognized as Leopold's, but at this early stage of colony-building his sovereignty over more remote areas existed only on paper. For nearly a decade, Belgian traders had been trying to gain access to the Kuba kingdom and had been repeatedly turned away; gifts they sent to its king were returned.

Achieving something most anthropologists can only dream of, in 1892 Sheppard became the first foreigner to reach the town of Ifuca, seat of the court of the Kuba king, Kot aMbweeky II. The king had repeatedly threatened to behead anyone who helped strangers intrude, so no one dared give Sheppard directions. It took him and a small group of Africans three months to find their way to the capital, which they finally did by clandestinely following the trail of an ivory caravan. Sheppard was still dressed all in white, including white canvas shoes, and "what had been," he writes ruefully, his white linen suit.

The king angrily ordered Sheppard, his followers, and everyone who had helped them brought to court for beheading. Then he discovered

that the intruder had dark skin and could speak some Kuba. This meant, the elders decided, that he was a reincarnated spirit. Furthermore, they announced that they knew just who he was: Bope Mekabe, a former king. According to Sheppard, nothing he could say about his greater king in heaven would convince them otherwise.*

This visit was one of the high points of Sheppard's life and provided a mine of information for later scholars, for the Kuba had one of central Africa's most sophisticated political systems. Sheppard remained at the Kuba court for four months, and, interested in all he saw, made notes about everything from court rituals to the workings of a royal police force that dealt with thefts and other crimes. Servants spread leopard skins for him to walk on whenever he approached the king, who sat on an ivory throne and wore a crown of beads and feathers.

"I grew very fond of the Bakuba. . . ." he writes. "They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open smiling countenance and really hospitable. Their knowledge of weaving, embroidery, wood carving and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa." Sheppard attended an annual gathering of chiefs and headmen from the towns of the kingdom, where each in turn reported on births, deaths, harvests, and other events in his domain and did a ceremonial dance. The book he later wrote about his experiences in Africa is entitled *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo,* but the distinctly un-Presbyterian Kuba run away with the story. His is a valuable, firsthand look at one of the last great African kingdoms unchanged by European influence. The Kuba creation myth, Sheppard reports, "says that their first people, man and woman, were let down from the skies by a rope, from which they untied themselves and the rope was drawn up."

Soon after this first visit to the Kuba, Sheppard headed back to the United States on leave. On the way he was invited to lecture at Exeter Hall in London. For his travels in the Kuba kingdom and his discovery of a lake Europeans had not known about, he was made a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, the only Presbyterian missionary so honored. The society also named his discovery Lake Sheppard. In Washington, Sheppard presented President Grover Cleveland with a Kuba bamboo

* The noted anthropologist Jan Vansina has a different interpretation: Since the name Bope Mekabe is not in the Kuba royal genealogy, he suggests that the Kuba may have understood who Sheppard was, and were simply trying to flatter him into revealing the plans of other Europeans who wanted to enter the kingdom.

mat; on a later visit, he gave Theodore Roosevelt a pipe and a palm-fiber coverlet. On these trips home, Sheppard delivered innumerable speeches, at colleges, universities, and churches throughout the country, and his fervent preaching about Africa recruited more black missionaries for the Presbyterians. One of them, Lucy Gantt, a teacher and talented singer whom he had known while still a theology student, he married. To help staff what eventually became several mission stations, more white Presbyterians came to Africa as well, and a white man was always in charge. On the official rolls of the Southern Presbyterian mission society published in the United States, Sheppard and his new recruits always had "(colored)" or "(c.)" after their names. But in Africa itself he did not feel relegated to second-class citizenship: he called one of his children Maxamalinge, after a son of the Kuba king.

Not surprisingly, the Kuba were happy with their existing way of life, and, despite their friendliness toward Sheppard, showed little interest in Christianity. The mission station Sheppard ran among them made few converts. But Sheppard had become so well known back home for his discoveries that the Presbyterians were afraid of an adverse public reaction if they closed his mission to the Kuba and stationed him elsewhere.

The entire Kasai region, like the rest of the Congo, in time succumbed to the tightening grip of the Congo state. Some eight years after Sheppard's historic visit, Leopold's forces finally reached and looted the Kuba capital.

The raid on the capital, like many other events in the Congo, was triggered by a discovery far away. One day a few years before William Sheppard first embarked for Africa, a veterinary surgeon with a majestic white beard was tinkering with his son's tricycle at his home in Belfast, Ireland. John Dunlop was trying to solve a problem that had bedeviled bicyclists for many years: how do you get a gentle ride without springs? Dunlop finally devised a practical way of making a long-sought solution, an inflatable rubber tire. In 1890 the Dunlop Company began making tires — setting off a bicycle craze and starting a new industry just in time, it turned out, for the coming of the automobile.

Europeans had known about rubber ever since Christopher Columbus noticed it in the West Indies. In the late 1700s, a British scientist gave the substance its English name when he noticed it could rub out pencil marks. The Scot Charles Macintosh contributed his name to the language

in 1823 when he figured out a mass-production method for doing something long practiced by the Indians of the Americas: applying rubber to cloth to make it waterproof. Sixteen years later, the American inventor Charles Goodyear accidentally spilled sulfur into some hot rubber on his stove. He discovered that the resulting mixture did not turn stiff when cold or smelly and gooey when hot — major problems for those trying to make rubber boots or raincoats before then. But it was not until the early 1890s, half a decade after Dunlop fitted the pneumatic tire onto his son's tricycle wheel, that the worldwide rubber boom began. The industrial world rapidly developed an appetite not just for rubber tires, but for hoses, tubing, gaskets, and the like, and for rubber insulation for the telegraph, telephone, and electrical wiring now rapidly encompassing the globe. Suddenly factories could not get enough of the magical commodity, and its price rose throughout the 1890s. Nowhere did the boom have a more drastic impact on people's lives than in the equatorial rain forest, where wild rubber vines snaked high into the trees, that covered nearly half of King Leopold's Congo.

For Leopold, the rubber boom was a godsend. He had gone dangerously into debt with his Congo investments, but he now saw that the return would be more lucrative than he had ever imagined. The world did not lose its desire for ivory, but by the late 1890s wild rubber had far surpassed it as the main source of revenue from the Congo. His fortune assured, the king eagerly grilled functionaries returning from the Congo about rubber harvests; he devoured a constant stream of telegrams and reports from the territory, marking them up in the margins and passing them on to aides for action. His letters from this period are filled with numbers: commodity prices from world markets, interest rates on loans, quantities of rifles to be shipped to the Congo, tons of rubber to be shipped to Europe, and the exact dimensions of the triumphal arch in Brussels he was planning to build with his newfound profits. Reading the king's correspondence is like reading the letters of the CEO of a corporation that has just developed a profitable new product and is racing to take advantage of it before competitors can get their assembly lines going.

The competition Leopold worried about was from cultivated rubber, which comes not from a vine but a tree. Rubber trees, however, require much care and some years before they grow large enough to be tapped. The king voraciously demanded ever greater quantities of wild rubber from the Congo, because he knew that the price would drop once plantations of rubber trees in Latin America and Asia reached maturity.

This did indeed happen, but by then the Congo had had a wild-rubber boom nearly two decades long. During that time the search knew no bounds.

As with the men bringing in ivory, those supplying rubber to the Congo state and private companies were rewarded according to the amount they turned in. In 1903, one particularly "productive" agent received a commission eight times his annual salary. But the big money flowed directly back to Antwerp and Brussels, in the capital mostly to either side of the rue Bréderode, the small street that separated the back of the Royal Palace from several buildings holding offices of the Congo state and Congo business operations.

Even though Leopold's privately controlled state got half of concession-company profits, the king made vastly more money from the land the state exploited directly. But because the concession companies were not managed so secretively, we have better statistics from them. In 1897, for example, one of the companies, the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company, or A.B.I.R., spent 1.35 francs per kilo to harvest rubber in the Congo and ship it to the company's headquarters at Antwerp — where it was sold for prices that sometimes reached 10 francs per kilo, a profit of more than 700 percent. By 1898, the price of A.B.I.R.'s stock was nearly thirty times what it had been six years earlier. Between 1890 and 1904, total Congo rubber earnings increased ninety-six times over. By the turn of the century, the État Indépendant du Congo had become, far and away, the most profitable colony in Africa. The profits came swiftly because, transportation costs aside, harvesting wild rubber required no cultivation, no fertilizers, no capital investment in expensive equipment. It required only labor.

How was this labor to be found? For the Congo's rulers, this posed a problem. They could not simply round up men, chain them together, and put them to work under the eye of an overseer with a *chicotte,* as they did with porters. To gather wild rubber, people must disperse widely through the rain forest and often climb trees.

Rubber is coagulated sap; the French word for it, *caoutchouc,* comes from a South American Indian word meaning "the wood that weeps." The wood that wept in the Congo was a long spongy vine of the *Landolphia* genus. Up to a foot thick at the base, a vine would twine upward around a tree to a hundred feet or more off the ground, where it could reach sunlight. There, branching, it might wind its way hundreds of feet through the upper limbs of another half-dozen trees. To gather the

rubber, you had to slash the vine with a knife and hang a bucket or earthenware pot to collect the slow drip of thick, milky sap. You could make a small incision to tap the vine, or — officially forbidden but widely practiced — cut through it entirely, which produced more rubber but killed the vine. Once the vines near a village were drained dry, workers had to go ever deeper into the forest until, before long, most harvesters were traveling at least one or two days to find fresh vines. As the lengths of vine within reach of the ground were tapped dry, workers climbed high into the trees to reach sap. "We . . . passed a man on the road who had broken his back by falling from a tree while . . . tapping some vines," wrote one missionary. Furthermore, heavy tropical downpours during much of the year turned large areas of the rain forest, where the rubber vines grew, into swampland.

No payments of trinkets or brass wire were enough to make people stay in the flooded forest for days at a time to do work that was so arduous — and physically painful. A gatherer had to dry the syrup-like rubber so that it would coagulate, and often the only way to do so was to spread the substance on his arms, thighs, and chest. "The first few times it is not without pain that the man pulls it off the hairy parts of his body," Louis Chaltin, a Force Publique officer, confided to his journal in 1892. "The native doesn't like making rubber. He must be compelled to do it."

How was he to be compelled? A trickle of news and rumor gradually made its way to Europe. "An example of what is done was told me up the Ubangi [River]," the British vice consul reported in 1899. "This officer['s] . . . method . . . was to arrive in canoes at a village, the inhabitants of which invariably bolted on their arrival; the soldiers were then landed, and commenced looting, taking all the chickens, grain, etc., out of the houses; after this they attacked the natives until able to seize their women; these women were kept as hostages until the Chief of the district brought in the required number of kilogrammes of rubber. The rubber having been brought, the women were sold back to their owners for a couple of goats apiece, and so he continued from village to village until the requisite amount of rubber had been collected."

Sometimes the hostages were women, sometimes children, sometimes elders or chiefs. Every state or company post in the rubber areas had a stockade for hostages. If you were a male villager, resisting the order to gather rubber could mean death for your wife. She might die anyway, for in the stockades food was scarce and conditions were harsh. "The women taken during the last raid at Engwettra are causing me no end of trouble,"

wrote Force Publique officer Georges Bricusse in his diary on November 22, 1895. "All the soldiers want one. The sentries who are supposed to watch them unchain the prettiest ones and rape them."

Leopold, of course, never proclaimed hostage-taking as official policy; if anyone made such charges, authorities in Brussels indignantly denied them. But out in the field, far from prying eyes, the pretense was dropped. Instructions on taking hostages were even given in the semiofficial instruction book, the revealing *Manuel du Voyageur et du Résident au Congo,* a copy of which the administration gave to each agent and each state post. The manual's five volumes cover everything from keeping servants obedient to the proper firing of artillery salutes. Taking hostages was one more routine piece of work:

> In Africa taking prisoners is . . . an easy thing to do, for if the natives hide, they will not go far from their village and must come to look for food in the gardens which surround it. In watching these carefully, you will be certain of capturing people after a brief delay. . . . When you feel you have enough captives, you should choose among them an old person, preferably an old woman. Make her a present and send her to her chief to begin negotiations. The chief, wanting to see his people set free, will usually decide to send representatives.

Seldom does history offer us a chance to see such detailed instructions for those carrying out a regime of terror. The tips on hostage-taking are in the volume of the manual called *Practical Questions,* which was compiled by an editorial committee of about thirty people. One member — he worked on the book during a two-year period following his stint as the head-collecting station chief at Stanley Falls — was Léon Rom.

Hostage-taking set the Congo apart from most other forced-labor regimes. But in other ways it resembled them. As would be true decades later of the Soviet gulag, another slave labor system for harvesting raw materials, the Congo operated by quotas. In Siberia the quotas concerned cubic meters of timber cut or tons of gold ore mined by prisoners each day; in the Congo the quota was for kilos of rubber. In the A.B.I.R. concession company's rich territory just below the Congo River's great

half-circle bend, for example, the normal quota assigned to each village was three to four kilos of dried rubber per adult male per fortnight — which essentially meant full-time labor for those men. Elsewhere, quotas were higher and might be raised as time went on. An official in the Mongala River basin in the far north, controlled by another concession company, the Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo, estimated that to fill their quota, rubber gatherers had to spend twenty-four days a month in the forest, where they built crude cages to sleep in for protection — not always successful — against leopards.

To get at parts of the vine high off the ground, men frantic to get every possible drop of rubber would sometimes tear down the whole vine, slice it into sections, and squeeze the rubber out. Although the Congo state issued strict orders against killing the vines this way, it also applied the *chicotte* to men who didn't bring in enough rubber. The *chicotte* prevailed. One witness saw Africans who had to dig up roots in order to find enough rubber to meet their quotas.

The entire system was militarized. Force Publique garrisons were scattered everywhere, often supplying their firepower to the companies under contract. In addition, each company had its own militia force, euphemistically called "sentries." In military matters as in almost everything else, the companies operated as an extension of the Congo state, and when hostages had to be taken or a rebellious village subdued, company sentries and Force Publique soldiers often took to the field together.

Wherever rubber vines grew, the population was tightly controlled. Usually you had to get a permit from the state or company agent in order to visit a friend or relative in another village. In some areas, you were required to wear a numbered metal disk, attached to a cord around your neck, so that company agents could keep track of whether you had met your quota. Huge numbers of Africans were conscripted into this labor army: in 1906, the books of A.B.I.R. alone, responsible for only a small fraction of the Congo state's rubber production, listed forty-seven thousand rubber gatherers.

All along the rivers, columns of exhausted men, carrying baskets of lumpy gray rubber on their heads, sometimes walked twenty miles or more to assemble near the houses of European agents, who sat on their verandas and weighed the loads of rubber. At one collection point, a missionary counted four hundred men with baskets. After the sap was

turned in, it was formed into rough slabs, each the size of a small suitcase, and left to dry in the sun. Then it was shipped downriver, on a barge or scow towed by a steamboat, the first stage of the long journey to Europe.

The state and the companies generally paid villagers for their rubber with a piece of cloth, beads, a few spoonfuls of salt, or a knife. These cost next to nothing, and the knives were essential tools for gathering more rubber. On at least one occasion, a chief who forced his people to gather rubber was paid in human beings. A legal dispute between two white officials near Stanley Falls put the following exchange on record in 1901. The witness being questioned was Liamba, chief of a village named Malinda:

> *Question:* Did M. Hottiaux [a company official] ever give you living women or children?
> *Answer:* Yes, he gave me six women and two men.
> *Question:* What for?
> *Answer:* In payment for rubber which I brought into the station, telling me I could eat them, or kill them, or use them as slaves — as I liked.

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The rain forest bordering the Kasai River was rich in rubber, and William Sheppard and the other American Presbyterians there found themselves in the midst of a cataclysm. The Kasai was also the scene of some of the strongest resistance to Leopold's rule. Armed men of a chief allied with the regime rampaged through the region where Sheppard worked, plundering and burning more than a dozen villages. Floods of desperate refugees sought help at Sheppard's mission station.

In 1899 the reluctant Sheppard was ordered by his superiors to travel into the bush, at some risk to himself, to investigate the source of the fighting. There he found bloodstained ground, destroyed villages, and many bodies; the air was thick with the stench of rotting flesh. On the day he reached the marauders' camp, his eye was caught by a large number of objects being smoked. The chief "conducted us to a framework of sticks, under which was burning a slow fire, and there they were, the right hands, I counted them, 81 in all." The chief told Sheppard, "See! Here is our evidence. I always have to cut off the right hands of those we kill in order to show the State how many we have killed." He proudly showed

Sheppard some of the bodies the hands had come from. The smoking preserved the hands in the hot, moist climate, for it might be days or weeks before the chief could display them to the proper official and receive credit for his kills.

Sheppard had stumbled on one of the most grisly aspects of Leopold's rubber system. Like the hostage-taking, the severing of hands was deliberate policy, as even high officials would later admit. "During my time in the Congo I was the first commissioner of the Equator district," recalled Charles Lemaire after his retirement. "As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, 'To gather rubber in the district . . . one must cut off hands, noses and ears.'"

If a village refused to submit to the rubber regime, state or company troops or their allies sometimes shot everyone in sight, so that nearby villages would get the message. But on such occasions some European officers were mistrustful. For each cartridge issued to their soldiers they demanded proof that the bullet had been used to kill someone, not "wasted" in hunting or, worse yet, saved for possible use in a mutiny. The standard proof was the right hand from a corpse. Or occasionally not from a corpse. "Sometimes," said one officer to a missionary, soldiers "shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting; they then cut off a hand from a living man." In some military units there was even a "keeper of the hands"; his job was the smoking.

Sheppard was not the first foreign witness to see severed hands in the Congo, nor would he be the last. But the articles he wrote for missionary magazines about his grisly find were reprinted and quoted widely, both in Europe and the United States, and it is partly due to him that people overseas began to associate the Congo with severed hands. A half-dozen years after Sheppard's stark discovery, while attacking the expensive public works Leopold was building with his Congo profits, the socialist leader Émile Vandervelde would speak in the Belgian Parliament of "monumental arches which one will someday call the Arches of the Severed Hands." William Sheppard's outspokenness would eventually bring down the wrath of the authorities and one day Vandervelde, an attorney, would find himself defending Sheppard in a Congo courtroom. But that is getting ahead of our story.

As the rubber terror spread throughout the rain forest, it branded people with memories that remained raw for the rest of their lives. A Catholic priest who recorded oral histories half a century later quotes a man, Tswambe, speaking of a particularly hated state official named Léon

Fiévez, who terrorized a district along the river three hundred miles north of Stanley Pool:

> All the blacks saw this man as the Devil of the Equator. . . . From all the bodies killed in the field, you had to cut off the hands. He wanted to see the number of hands cut off by each soldier, who had to bring them in baskets. . . . A village which refused to provide rubber would be completely swept clean. As a young man, I saw [Fiévez's] soldier Molili, then guarding the village of Boyeka, take a big net, put ten arrested natives in it, attach big stones to the net, and make it tumble into the river. . . . Rubber caused these torments; that's why we no longer want to hear its name spoken. Soldiers made young men kill or rape their own mothers and sisters.

A Force Publique officer who passed through Fiévez's post in 1894 quotes Fiévez himself describing what he did when the surrounding villages failed to supply his troops with the fish and manioc he had demanded: "I made war against them. One example was enough: a hundred heads cut off, and there have been plenty of supplies at the station ever since. My goal is ultimately humanitarian. I killed a hundred people . . . but that allowed five hundred others to live."

With "humanitarian" ground rules that included cutting off hands and heads, sadists like Fiévez had a field day. The station chief at M'Bima used his revolver to shoot holes in Africans' ear lobes. Raoul de Premorel, an agent working along the Kasai River, enjoyed giving large doses of castor oil to people he considered malingerers. When villagers, in a desperate attempt to meet the weight quota, turned in rubber mixed with dirt or pebbles to the agent Albéric Detiège, he made them eat it. When two porters failed to use a designated latrine, a district commissioner, Jean Verdussen, ordered them paraded in front of troops, their faces rubbed with excrement.

As news of the white man's soldiers and their baskets of severed hands spread through the Congo, a myth gained credence with Africans that was a curious reversal of the white obsession with black cannibalism. The cans of corned beef seen in white men's houses, it was said, did not contain meat from the animals shown on the label; they contained chopped-up hands.

II

A SECRET SOCIETY OF MURDERERS

ONCE WHEN Leopold and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany were watching a parade in Berlin, Leopold, grumbling about the erosion of royal authority, remarked to the kaiser, "There is really nothing left for us kings except money!" Rubber would soon bring Leopold money beyond imagining, but the Congo alone was never enough to satisfy him. Fantasizing an empire that would encompass the two legendary rivers of Africa, the Congo and the Nile, he imagined linking the rivers by a great railway, and in the early 1890s dispatched expeditions northeast from the Congo toward the Nile valley. One of these claimed the ancient copper mines of Bahr-el-Ghazal, taking care to claim the mines for Leopold personally while committing the Congo state to provide military protection.

The French finally blocked the king from further moves toward the Nile, but he was already dreaming of new colonies elsewhere. "I would like to make out of our little Belgium, with its six million people, the capital of an immense empire," he said. "The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, are in a state of decadence and their colonies will one day or another come on to the market." He asked Prime Minister William Gladstone of England about the possibility of leasing Uganda.

Leopold was quick to embellish his imperial schemes with any humanitarian sentiment in the air. In 1896, he proposed to another surprised British prime minister, Lord Salisbury, that a Sudanese army under Congo state officers be used "for the purpose of invading and occupying