

## **Rev. William H. Sheppard**

Excerpted from *King Leopold's Ghost* by Adam Hochschild

Only two years after [Henry Morton] 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 many 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 descendent 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 South 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 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 head 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 ‘Mundele 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 escape 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 in 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 surrounds 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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 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 – 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 courts of the Kuba king, Kot aMbweky 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 in all 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 the courts 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 courts 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 gather 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 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 church 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.

[Pgs. 152-158]

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Except for those employed by the state or on projects like the railway, Leopold was wary of foreigners in the Congo. He was, however, saddled with one group of them, several hundred foreign Protestant missionaries like William Sheppard and his colleagues. Almost all had come from England, the United States, or Sweden, countries where Leopold hoped to curry favor. The missionaries had come to the Congo eager to evangelize, to fight polygamy, and to impart to Africans a Victorian sense of sin. Before long, however, the rubber terror [the forced labor system that required natives to collect quotas of rubber upon penalty of death] meant that missionaries had trouble finding bodies to clothe or souls to save. Frightened villagers would disappear into the jungle for weeks

when they saw the smoke of an approaching steamboat the horizon. One British missionary was asked repeatedly by Africans, “Has the Savior you tell us of any power to save us from the rubber trouble?” Unexpectedly, certainly without intending to take on such a role, the missionaries found themselves acting as observers on a battlefield, and Sheppard was by no means the only one who bore witness. In 1894, a Swedish missionary recorded a despairing Congolese song:

*We are tired of living under this tyranny.*

*We cannot endure that our women and children are taken away*

*And dealt with by the white savages.*

*We shall make war...*

*We know that we shall die, but we want to die.*

*We want to die.*

Due to the missionaries, from the mid-1890s on Leopold had to deal with scattered protests, like Sheppard’s articles, about severed hands and slaughtered Africans. But the critics at first capture little attention, for they were not as skilled at public relations as the king, who deployed his formidable charm to neutralize them.

As a start, he encouraged mission society officials to talk with him directly, personally urging one French clergyman to do this “instead of having recourse to the press, which is always unpleasant (*toujours désagréable*).” Then he artfully used both promise and threat. While cultivating their leaders, he made sure to remind the mission societies of the Congo state’s ability to impose taxes or deny permission to build new missions. The Southern Presbyterian mission where Sheppard worked had endless trouble getting new land it wanted to build on.

[Pgs. 172-173]

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In November 1908, as solemn ceremonies at Boma marked the Congo’s formal change of ownership [from the king of Belgium to the Belgium state itself], an unusual drama was unfolding far inland. The mere fact that it had begun under Leopold’s state and continued uninterrupted in the new Belgian colony suggests that the difference between the two regimes was not what the reformers had hoped for. At center stage was the black American missionary William Sheppard.

Sheppard’s article from a decade earlier, about his discovering eighty-one severed hands being smoked over a fire, had been one of the most widely quoted pieces of testimony about the Congo. “His eyewitness account,” writes one scholar, “was cited by almost every American reformer, black or white.” For some years now Sheppard had had a strong ally in his boss, William Morrison, a white minister who had headed the Southern Presbyterian Congo mission since 1897. Morrison was a fearless opponent of the regime, a friend of [Edmund Dean] Morel’s, and a leader in inspiring his fellow missionaries, American, British, and Scandinavian, to speak out. He had bombarded officials in Boma with letters of protest, published an open letter to Leopold, and delivered an influential speech when passing through London. In the United States, he had led a group of Presbyterians to see President Theodore Roosevelt about the Congo. The regime, in turn, hated Morrison as much as it did Sheppard.

Sheppard and Morrison were the most outspoken of any of the American Congo missionaries, whose protests had long nettled Leopold. He had ordered missionary magazines search for their hostile articles; some copies still survive, heavily marked in blue pencil by palace aids. Leopold could not get at his real target, Morel, safe in England, but he had tried persistently to intimidate Morel's sources: in 1906 he had issued a decree mandating a fine or a five-year jail term for any calumny against a Congo state official. A British Baptist missionary who fed information to Morel was soon put on trial. He was convicted, fined a thousand francs plus court costs, and, less of a crusader than Sheppard or Morrison, he left the country. The little band of American Presbyterians saw it was now riskier to speak out; the authorities were watching them closely, both in Africa and abroad. Unknown to them, [Baron] Moncheur, the Belgian minister to Washington, had attended in Virginia one of the many headline-making speeches denouncing Congo atrocities that was given by Sheppard, whose reputation for stirring oratory packed many a church or hall during his home leaves.

As the end of Leopold's rule approached, the Compagnie du Kasai, a concession company of a new generation that was the de facto government of the area where the Presbyterians were working, was trying to extract all the rubber it could while the boom lasted. The Kasai River basin, where exploitation had begun a little later than elsewhere, had become the Congo's most lucrative source of rubber. And who now suddenly reappears on the scene, visiting the area for some months as inspector general of the Compagnie du Kasai, having risen in the world since we met him last? Leon Rom, the one-time collector of severed heads [and part of the inspiration for Conrad's Kurtz]. His transformation into a Congo company official was a common one for retired Force Publique officers.

In the Kasai region, the normally unwarlike Kuba people had risen in revolt against the rubber terror, spurred on, as in similar doomed uprisings elsewhere in southern Africa, by elders with a fetish said to change the white man's bullets into water. The rebels burned trading posts and a mission station; when bullets did not turn to water, some 180 of them were killed. Writing in the annual newsletter the American Presbyterians published for their supporters back home, the *Kassai Herald*, William Sheppard described the toll taken on the Kuba...

Sheppard's story appeared in January 1908, the month Leon Rom returned to Belgium from a six-month business trip to the Kasai. Soon after, Rom's colleagues at the Compagnie du Kasai began to threaten, bluster, and demand a retraction, which Morrison and Sheppard refused to make. Morrison sent company officials forceful letters listing more specific charges, which upset them still further. The two missionaries were legally vulnerable, since technically they had published the article in the Congo itself. In England, Morel reprinted Sheppard's article, and also a photograph the missionaries had sent him, of forced laborers, tied to one another by ropes around their necks.

While the company was still complaining about the offending article, the British vice consul to the Congo, Wilfred Thesiger, paid a three-month visit to the Kasai basin to prepare a report on conditions there. Nervous officials monitored his travels, remembering all too well the international furor caused by Roger Casement's report four years earlier. To the authorities' dismay, Thesiger stayed with the American Presbyterians at their mission and traveled on the steamboat, the *Lapsley*. As someone who understood the local languages and who knew the district well, Sheppard acted as guide to Thesiger, taking him

to thirty-one Kuba villages. After they departed, a suspicious station chief grilled villagers the two men had spoken to, and worried reported to his superiors that “Sheppard pointed to the Consul and said, ‘You see this white man, when he returns to Europe he will tell the State officials whatever you tell him, because he is very powerful.’ In the Bakuba villages [Thesiger]... asked any questions Sheppard suggested.” Thesiger soon submitted an excoriating report on starvation and brutality in the Kasai to the British Parliament. One passage, describing Kuba homes failing into ruin while people were put to work as rubber slaves, closely echoed Sheppard’s article. The Compagnie du Kasai’s stock price plummeted. Company and Congo state officials, furious, blamed Sheppard.

The company could not legally punish the Presbyterians for helping Thesiger, but it could do so for their publishing Sheppard’s 1908 article. In February 1909 it filed suit for libel against Sheppard, as writer of the article, and Morrison, as its publisher, demanding eighty thousand francs in damages. The two men, firm in their convictions, decided that if the judge ruled against them, they would, as Morrison wrote home, “prefer to go to prison rather than pay the fine.” Abroad, their supporters rallied to their defense. “Morrison in the dock,” wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (ignoring the black defendant, Sheppard), “makes a finer Statue of Liberty than Bartholdi’s in New York harbour.” In Washington, the affair was discussed at a Cabinet meeting. The American legation in Brussels informed the Belgian government that the United States viewed the trial with “acute interest and no little concern,” and suggested that the U.S. recognition of the new Belgian claim to the Congo might hinge on the result.

The trial took place in Leopoldville, some six hundred miles down the Kasai and Congo rivers from the Presbyterian mission. A photo shows Morrison and Sheppard before the trial, standing under some palm trees on each side of a dozen Kubas who were prepared to testify in their defense. The Kubas are naked above the waist. Morrison, the white man, looks resigned behind his heavy beard, as if preparing for one more ordeal in a saintly life that will be rewarded in Heaven, but certainly not before then. He wears a black hat, black suit, and scuffed shoes. Sheppard, the black man, wears a white suit and white hat. His shoes gleam; his chest is arched out; he stands a head taller than everyone else and seems to be enjoying the moment immensely. There is something proud and inclusive in his stance toward the Kubas, as if they are junior kinsmen.



The trial’s opening date was set – deliberately, the missionaries thought – during the dry season on the Kasai River. After the steamboat carrying the two defendants and their Kuba witnesses encountered low water, the captain refused to go farther. A new date was fixed.

Morel telegraphed his friend and ally Emile Vandervelde, leader of the Belgian socialists, asking him to recommend an “honest young Belgian lawyer” for the two missionaries. Vandervelde, a leading figure in European democratic socialism, was also an attorney. To everyone’s surprise, he declared that he would take on the case himself, *pro bono*. The trial was postponed yet again so that Vandervelde could travel out to the Congo. As he was preparing to leave Belgium, someone criticized him for traveling all the way to Africa to defend a couple of “strangers.” Unspoken, perhaps, was the fact that one of those strangers was black.

Vandervelde replied, “No man is a stranger in a court of justice.”

Newly arrived in the Congo, the anticlerical Vandervelde, president of the Second International and friend or acquaintance of all the great left-wing figures of his day, found himself living in a mission station and cruising Stanley Pool in the mission steamboat, which the American flag. He watched with great amusement as missionaries carried out baptisms by total immersion and prayed for a favorable verdict.

At last the trial began, in a Leopoldville courtroom of wood and brick, its windows open to the breeze. On a technicality, the court had dropped the charge against Morrison, leaving Sheppard the only defendant. In this frontier outpost, dotted with mango, palm, and baobab trees, and with its forced labor gangs, military barracks, and a firing range where Europeans practiced shooting on Sundays, the trial was definitely the biggest show in town. Over thirty foreign Protestant missionaries packed the courtroom in a show of support. They and other supporters of Sheppard sat on one side of the courtroom; on the other side were Catholic missionaries, Congo state officials, and other backers of the Compagnie du Kasai. Onlookers who couldn’t fit in the room watched through the open door and windows. The Compagnie du Kasai officials wore white suits and white sun helmets; Sheppard looked natty in a dark coat with a handkerchief in his breast pocket.

After the judge rang a small bell to begin the proceedings and the lawyer for the Compagnie du Kasai spoke, Vandervelde rose to make the most of his unusual forum. Sheppard, he told the judge, was “no longer of England or America, but of the Kasai... His only motive in revealing the condition of the natives amongst whom he lives is humanitarian.” Vandervelde “made a magnificent defense,” Morrison reported. “His speech was a marvel of eloquence, invincible logic, burning sarcasm, and pathetic appeal for justice to be done not only for us Missionaries but especially for the native peoples. He held the audience in the Courtroom spell-bound for over two hours.” Sheppard, the accused, was also moved. “The trial is the talk of the whole country,” he wrote, and the spectators “were so affected that their handkerchiefs were freely used.” According to Sheppard, even the Catholic priests – usually staunch allies of the state – were weeping, and one of them came up and congratulated Vandervelde after his speech. “It is said there has never been a speech as that made in Congo.”

The trial won Sheppard some attention back home. Under the headlines AMERICAN NEGRO HERO OF CONGO and FIRST TO INFORM WORLD OF CONGO ABUSES, the *Boston Herald* wrote, “Dr. Sheppard has not only stood before kings, but he has also stood against them. In pursuit of his mission of serving his race in his native land, this son of a slave... has dared to withstand all the power of Leopold.”

After the closing arguments, the judge announced that he would give his decision in two weeks. In the end, it was politics, not Vandervelde’s eloquence or the missionaries’ prayers, that dictated the results. The presence of the American consul general and vice

consul in the courtroom was a reminder of the problems Belgium might face if Sheppard were found in the wrong. Similarly, the judge knew he would not have a promising career in the Congo if he found that Sheppard's accusations against the company were true. Steering a cautious middle course, he made adroit use of the fact that (even though there were no other such companies in the area) Sheppard's article had no specifically named the Compagnie du Kasai, but had only attacked "armed sentries of chartered trading companies." Thus, the judge declared, most improbably, "the defendant Sheppard did not intend to make an attack on the said company... The article did not and could not refer to the Compagnie du Kasai." In effect, Sheppard was found innocent, without the Compagnie du Kasai's being found guilty. The company, however, had to pay court costs.

Far up the Kasai River, the missionaries' wives knew that their husbands had vowed to go to jail rather than pay the damages if the judgment went against them. The sign that this had happened would be if the men were not on board the Presbyterian steamboat when it returned from Leopoldville. As people anxiously waited at the mission station, there seems to have been a warmth and camaraderie among these black and white Americans that would have been inconceivable back home. "Mrs. Morrison and I waited almost breathlessly for the return of our loved ones," wrote Lucy Gantt Sheppard. "As the *Lapsley* came steaming in, hundreds of Christians began singing hymns and waving their hands and shouting for joy. It was a glorious time – a time for thanksgiving."

[Pgs. 259-265]

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In the years following Leopold's death, the other actors in the Congo drama passed from the scene. In 1910, William Sheppard returned to the United States for good. Just after being vindicated in the Compagnie du Kasai libel trial, he was forced to resign his post as a missionary because he had been caught having extramarital affairs with African women. He was briefly placed on probation by the church and then allowed to resume work as a minister in the United States, where word of the scandal was never made public. His health was weakened after dozens of bouts of fever during his twenty years in Africa, and he lived out most of his remaining years as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where his wife, Lucy, taught Sunday school and led the choir.

Sheppard continued to write and speak widely about Africa, even though, in his Southern Presbyterian church, this meant having to talk before segregated congregations. At different times, each of the two great archrivals, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, invited Sheppard to join him on the speaker's platform, and Sheppard obliged. But this man, who was so honored in the black community, who had been the first foreign visitor to meet the Kuba king, who had been received in the White House, had returned to the American South where he was still a second-class citizen. Years later, a white woman in Sheppard's home town of Waynesboro, Virginia said of him: "He was such a good darky. When he returned from Africa he remembered his place and always came to the back door." When Sheppard died in Louisville at the age of sixty-two, in 1927, more than a thousand people came to his funeral.

[Pg. 283]