

My First Gorilla —A Science Classic

Zoology

The death of the gorilla. An illustration from Du Chaillu's book.

EXPLORATION AND ADVENTURES IN EQUATORIAL AFRICA; with accounts of the manners and customs of the people, and the chase of the gorilla, crocodile, leopard, elephant, hippopotamus, and other animals. By Paul B. Du Chaillu. London: 1861.

FROM this elevation—about 5,000 feet above the ocean level—I enjoyed an unobstructed view as far as the eye could reach. The hills we had surmounted the day before lay quietly at our feet, seeming mere molehills. On all sides stretched the immense virgin forests, with here and there the sheen of a watercourse. And far away in the east loomed the blue tops of the farthest range of the Sierra del Crystal, the goal of my desires. The murmur of the rapids below filled my ears, and, as I strained my eyes toward those distant mountains which I hoped to reach, I began to think how this wilderness would look if only the light of Christian civilization could once be fairly introduced among the black children of Africa. I dreamed of forests giving way to plantations of coffee, cotton, and spices; of peaceful negroes going to their contented daily tasks; of farming and manufactures; of churches and schools; and, luckily raising my eyes heavenward at this stage of my thoughts, saw pendent from the branch of a tree beneath which I was sitting an immense serpent, evidently preparing to gobble up this dreaming intruder on his domains.

My dreams of future civilization vanished in a moment. Luckily my gun lay at hand. I rushed out so as to "stand from under," and, taking good aim, shot my black friend through the head. He let go his hold, and, after dancing about a little on the ground, lay dead before me. He measured a little over thirteen feet in length, and his fangs proved that he was venomous.

The interpretation of stories of gorillas carrying people off to their lairs in the jungle is not free from a certain amount of guess-work and one person's guess is as good as another's; these stories may well have originated in confusion in the minds of the natives between the behavior of apes and of human beings. This is the opinion of Dr. Charles Wardell Stiles, zoologist of the U. S. Public Health Service, authority on monkeys and the great apes. There is nothing strange about such confusion, he states, for early accounts of the apes, written by scientists, even as late as the end of the eighteenth century, contain instances of abnormal human beings classified among the apes and of chimpanzees mistaken for African pigmies. Indeed, a book published in 1550 goes so far as to state that the pigmies are apes, because they have no religion. There was a prevailing idea among certain people, Dr. Stiles finds, that the long-armed apes are half-breeds between human beings and orang-utans. But since "orang-utan" signifies "wild man of the forest," it is possible that some of the acts credited to apes may have been those of true "wild men." The male gorilla, barking and drumming on his chest, is a very powerful animal, and Dr. Stiles agrees with Du Chaillu that it is well to be sure your gun is in perfect condition when you are about to meet one either in the jungle or in Chicago.

And now that Christian civilization of which I had mused so pleasantly a few minutes before received another shock. My men cut off the head of the snake, and dividing the body into proper pieces, roasted it and ate it on the spot; and I—poor, starved, but *civilized* mortal!—stood by, longing for a meal, but unable to stomach this. So much for civilization, which is a very good thing in its way, but has no business in an African forest when food is scarce.

When the snake was eaten, and I, the only empty-stomached individual of the company, had sufficiently reflected on the disadvantages of being bred in a Christian country, we began to look about the ruins of the village near which we sat. A degenerate

kind of sugarcane was growing on the very spot where the houses had formerly stood, and I made haste to pluck some of this and chew it for the little sweetness it had. But as we were plucking my men perceived what instantly threw us all into the greatest excitement. Here and there the cane was beaten down, torn up by the roots, and lying about in fragments which had evidently been chewed.

I knew that these were fresh tracks of the gorilla, and joy filled my heart. My men looked at each other in silence, and muttered *Ngnyla*, which is as much as to say in Mjongwe *Ngina*, or, as we say, gorilla.

We followed these traces, and presently came to the footprints of the so-long-desired animal. It was the first time I had ever seen these footprints, and my sensations were indescribable. Here was I now, it seemed, on the point of meeting face to face that monster of whose ferocity, strength, and cunning the natives had told me so much; an animal scarce known to the civilized world, and which no white man before had hunted. My heart beat till I feared its loud pulsations would alarm the gorilla, and my feelings were really excited to a painful degree.

By the tracks it was easy to know that there must have been several gorillas in company. We prepared at once to follow them. . . .

Looking once more to our guns, we started off. I confess that I never was more excited in my life. For years I had heard of the terrible roar of the gorilla, of its vast strength, its fierce courage, if, unhappily, only wounded by a shot. I knew that we were about to pit ourselves against an animal which even the leopard of these mountains fears, and which, perhaps, has driven the lion out of this territory; for the king of beasts, so numerous elsewhere in Africa, is never met in the land of the gorilla. Thus it was with no little emotion that I now turned again toward the

prize at which I had been hoping for years to get a shot.

We descended a hill, crossed a stream on a fallen log, and presently approached some huge boulders of granite. Alongside of this granite block lay an immense dead tree, and about this we saw many evidences of the very recent presence of the gorillas.

Our approach was very cautious. We were divided into two parties. Makinda led one and I the other. We were to surround the granite block behind which Makinda supposed the gorillas to be hiding. Guns cocked and in hand, we advanced through the dense wood, which cast a gloom even in midday over the whole scene. I looked at my men, and saw plainly that they were in even greater excitement than myself.

Slowly we pressed on through the dense brush, fearing almost to breathe lest we should alarm the beasts. Makinda was to go to the right of the rock, while I took the left. Unfortunately, he circled it at too great a distance. The watchful animals saw him. Suddenly I was startled by a strange, discordant, half human, devilish cry, and beheld four young gorillas running toward the deep forests. We fired, but hit nothing. Then we rushed on in pursuit; but they knew the woods better than we. Once I caught a glimpse of one of the animals again, but an intervening tree spoiled my mark, and I did not fire. We ran till we were exhausted, but in vain. The alert beasts made good their escape.



When we could pursue no more we returned slowly to our camp, where the women were anxiously expecting us.

I protest I felt almost like a murderer when I saw the gorillas this first time. As they ran—on their hind legs—they looked fearfully like hairy men; their heads down, their bodies inclined forward, their whole appearance like men running for their lives. Take with this their awful cry, which, fierce and animal as it is, has yet something human in its discordance, and you will cease to wonder that the natives have the wildest superstitions about these “wild men of the woods”.

In our absence the women had built large fires and prepared the camp, which was not so comfortable as last night's, but yet protected us from rain. I changed my clothes, which had become wet through by the frequent torrents and puddles we ran through in our eager pursuit, and then we sat down to our supper, which had been cooked meantime. And now I noticed that, by the improvidence of the women, who are no better managers than the men (poor things!), all my plantains were gone—eaten up; so that I had to depend for next day—and in fact for the remainder of our passage to the Fan tribe—on two or three biscuits which, luckily, I yet possessed.

As we lay about the fire in the evening before going to sleep the adventure of the day was talked over, and of course there followed some curious stories of the gorillas. I listened in silence to the conversation, which was not addressed to me, and was rewarded by hearing the stories as they are believed, and not as a stranger would be apt to draw them out by questions.

One of the men told a story of two Mbondemo women who were walking together through the woods, when suddenly an immense gorilla stepped into the path, and, clutching one of the women, bore her off in spite of the screams and struggles of both. The other woman returned to the village sadly frightened, and related the story. Of course her companion was given up for lost. Great was the surprise, therefore, when, a few days afterward, she returned to her home. She related that the gorilla had misused her, but that she had eventually escaped from him.

The gorilla as he appears in life—and in the British Museum of Natural History.

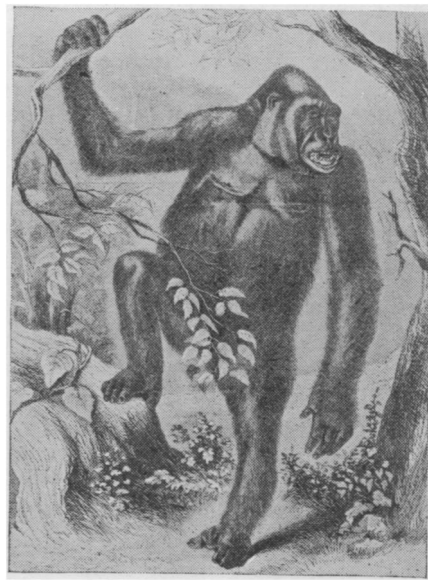
“Yes,” said one of the men, “that was a gorilla inhabited by a spirit.”

Which explanation was received with a general grunt of approval.

They believe, in all this country, that there is a kind of gorilla—known to the initiated by certain mysterious signs, but chiefly by being of extraordinary size—which is the residence of certain spirits of departed negroes. Such gorillas, the natives believe, can never be caught or killed; and, also, they have much more shrewdness and sense than the common animal. In fact, in these “possessed” beasts, it would seem that the intelligence of man is united with the strength and ferocity of the beast. No wonder the poor African dreads so terrible a being as his imagination thus conjures up.

One of the men told how, some years ago, a party of gorillas were found in a cane-field tying up the sugarcane in regular bundles, preparatory to carrying it away. The natives attacked them, but were routed, and several killed, while others were carried off prisoners by the gorillas; but in a few days they returned home uninjured, with this horrid exception: the nails of their fingers and toes had been torn off by their captors.

Some years ago a man suddenly disappeared from his village. It is probable that he was carried off by a tiger; but as no news came of him, the native superstition invented a cause for his absence. It was related and believed that, as he walked through the wood one day, he was suddenly changed into a hideous large gorilla, which was often pursued afterwards, (*Turn to next page*)



The gorilla. An engraving forming the frontispiece of Du Chaillu's book.

My First Gorilla—*Continued*

but never killed, though it continually haunted the neighborhood of the village.

Here several spoke up and mentioned names of men now dead whose spirits were known to be dwelling in gorillas.

Finally was rehearsed the story which is current among all the tribes who at all know the gorilla: that this animal lies in wait in the lower branches of trees, watching for people who go to and fro; and, when one passes sufficiently near, grasps the luckless fellow with his powerful feet, and draws him up into the tree, where he quietly chokes him.

Many of the natives agree, I say, in ascribing to the animal this trait of lying in wait for his enemies and drawing them up to him by his "lower hands," as they may properly be called. But I have little doubt that this story is incorrect. Of course, the secluded habits of this animal, which lives only in the darkest forests, and carefully shuns all approach to man, help to fill the natives with curious superstitions regarding it.

This day we traveled fifteen miles, ten of which were easterly, and five to the southeast.

The next day we went out on another gorilla-hunt, but found no traces at all. . . .

NIGHT came upon us while we were still beating the bush, and it was determined to camp out and try our luck again on the morrow. Of course, I was only too glad. We shot some monkeys and birds, built our camp, and, while the men roasted their monkey-meat over the coals, I held my birds before the blaze on a stick. Fortunately we had food enough, and of a good kind, for next day.

We started early, and pushed for the most dense and impenetrable part of the forest, in hopes to find the very home of the beast I so much wished to shoot. Hour after hour we travelled, and yet no signs of gorilla. Only the everlasting little chattering monkeys—and not many of these and occasionally birds. In fact, the forests of this part of Africa—as the reader has seen by this time—are not so full of life as in some other parts to the south.

Suddenly Miengai uttered a little cluck with his tongue, which is the native's way of showing that some-

thing is stirring, and that a sharp look-out is necessary. And presently I noticed, ahead of us seemingly, a noise as of some one breaking down branches or twigs of trees.

This was the gorilla, I knew at once, by the eager and satisfied looks of the men. They looked once more carefully at their guns, to see if by any chance the powder had fallen out of the pans; I also examined mine, to make sure that all was right; and then we marched on cautiously.

The singular noise of the breaking of tree-branches continued. We walked with the greatest care, making no noise at all. The countenances of the men showed that they thought themselves engaged in a very serious undertaking; but we pushed on, until finally we thought we saw through the thick woods the moving of the branches and small trees which the great beast was tearing down, probably to get from them the berries and fruits he lives on.

Suddenly, as we were yet creeping along, in a silence which made a heavy breath seem loud and distinct, the woods were at once filled with the tremendous barking roar of the gorilla.

Then the underbrush swayed rapidly just ahead, and presently before us stood an immense male gorilla. He had gone through the jungle on his all-fours; but when he saw our party he erected himself and looked us boldly in the face. He stood about a dozen yards from us, and was a sight I think I shall never forget. Nearly six feet high (he proved four inches shorter), with immense body, huge chest, and great muscular arms, with fiercely-glaring large deep gray eyes, and a hellish expression of face, which seemed to me like some nightmare vision: thus stood before us this king of the African forest.

He was not afraid of us. He stood there, and beat his breast with his huge fists till it resounded like an immense bass-drum, which is their mode of offering defiance; meantime giving vent to roar after roar.

The roar of the gorilla is the most singular and awful noise heard in these African woods. It begins with a sharp bark, like an angry dog, then glides into a deep bass roll, which literally and closely resembles the roll of distant thunder along the

sky, for which I have sometimes been tempted to take it where I did not see the animal. So deep is it that it seems to proceed less from the mouth and throat than from the deep chest and vast paunch.

His eyes began to flash fiercer fire as we stood motionless on the defensive, and the crest of short hair which stands on his forehead began to twitch rapidly up and down, while his powerful fangs were shown as he again sent forth a thunderous roar. And now truly he reminded me of nothing but some hellish dream creature—a being of that hideous order, half-man half-beast, which we find pictured by old artists in some representations of the infernal regions. He advanced a few steps—then stopped to utter that hideous roar again—advanced again, and finally stopped when at a distance of about six yards from us. And here, just as he began another of his roars, beating his breast in rage, we fired, and killed him.

With a groan which had something terribly human in it, and yet was full of brutishness, he fell forward on his face. The body shook convulsively for a few minutes, the limbs moved about in a struggling way, and then all was quiet—death had done its work, and I had leisure to examine the huge body. It proved to be five feet eight inches high, and the muscular development of the arms and breast showed what immense strength it had possessed.

My men, though rejoicing at our luck, immediately began to quarrel about the apportionment of the meat—for they really eat this creature. I saw that they would come to blows presently if I did not interfere, and therefore said I would myself give each man his share, which satisfied all. As we were too tired to return to our camp of last night, we determined to camp here on the spot, and accordingly soon had some shelters erected and dinner going on. Luckily, one of the fellows shot a deer just as we began to camp, and on its meat I feasted while my men ate gorilla.

I noticed that they very carefully saved the brain, and was told that charms were made of this—charms of two kinds. Prepared in one way, the charm gave the wearer a strong hand for the hunt, and in another it gave him success with women.