

## Passage A - A visit to a gorilla sanctuary

*In this passage, the writer recounts his visit, with his friend Lary, to a gorilla sanctuary in the Republic of Congo, which is run by Yvette Leroy.*

A young man sprawled in a wicker chair. A small chimpanzee, wearing a nappy, clung to his chest.

‘Hi,’ he said, somnolent with motherhood. ‘Yvette is expecting you. I’m Mark and this is Max. He’s a young pygmy chimp.’

Max, hearing his name, detached a long black right arm from the hugging position and, with the delicate fingers of a dark-brown hand, tousled Mark’s hair.

‘This is the first pygmy chimp I’ve ever seen,’ said Mark, easing Max’s thumb out of his ear.

‘They’re very rare. They live only in Zaire, south of the river. He was brought in by the Forest Service. Someone was trying to sell him as a pet in the market. It’s the babies we get – almost always gorillas. The hunter in the forests kills the mother and takes the baby back to his village for the children to play with. Very occasionally one is rescued and is sent to us, but it’s hopeless. They arrive with machete wounds, dehydrated with dysentery, their stomachs full of earth they’ve scraped up in the village because they’re starving, parasites of all kinds. And gorillas are sensitive, full of emotion – they’ve watched their mothers die in front of them, they’re traumatised, and if they don’t die of disease, they die of grief. They just lose the will to live, they refuse to eat. Twenty seven gorillas have arrived in the last two years and only four are still alive.’

‘And pygmy chimps?’ asked Lary. ‘Do they die of grief?’

‘Not yet,’ said Mark, putting one arm round Max and stroking his back with the other. ‘I’m treating him for parasites, but otherwise he’s in good shape. He seems much more intelligent even than a common chimpanzee, an ordinary chimp of his age, much more sociable. Very little’s known about pygmy chimps.’

‘Are you a zoologist?’ asked Lary.

‘No, but I’d like to be. I’m here to set up a new gorilla orphanage for a friend in the grounds of Brazzaville zoo. We’ll have a proper vet, everything. We’ll establish a breeding colony and then release them somewhere safe.’

Mark stood up. ‘We must find Yvette. This is the one day of the week when she has enough staff to let Magne out of his cage. He’s her three-and-a-half-year-old gorilla. He’s lively.’ He paused, extracting Max’s right foot from his shirt pocket.

‘See – pygmy chimps have a web between their second and third toes, they weigh twenty per cent less than common chimps, their hair is blacker, their faces are rounder, their ears are smaller and they don’t go bald.’

Mark opened a steel-grilled door and we entered a room full of couches and cushions; children’s toys were strewn across the floor. A Bantu girl in a red dress lay on a bed in a corner, watching a television on the shelf opposite her; a very small, very still gorilla snuggled against her stomach.

‘This is Albertine Ndokila,’ said Mark, introducing us. ‘She looks after one very sad, sick gorilla, eighteen months old’.

The inner door swung open and Madame Yvette Leroy swept into the room with two baby gorillas hanging from her. ‘Quick!’ she said. ‘Bring some chairs! The guards are about to release Magne in the garden. He’s lively! Sit quietly, stay in your chairs and – whatever you do – don’t look into his eyes. Gorillas *never* stare at each other. It’s a threat.’

There was the sound of a bolt being drawn back, the clang of a cage door, a short, sharp, barking scream, a rumbling noise on the concrete, and round the corner came Magne on all fours, in a hunched, scooting gallop. Big and grey, Magne slapped Yvette on the back, detached the two screaming baby gorillas, roughed them up a bit, banged his chest, tore at the grass and with a sideways glance moved towards the newcomers, us.

‘He’s jealous,’ said Yvette, still out of breath from her blow on the back. ‘He’s jealous of my new babies.’

At that moment Magne’s knuckles arrived on my thighs, followed by his big black man-like feet, as his hands moved up to grip my shoulders.

‘Good boy,’ I said, made stupid by the weight, the solidity of him, the rank musk of his bristly chesthair. I put both hands up and pushed with all my strength against the surge of muscle; without effort he pressed closer, brought his shiny black face close up to mine and opened his mouth. I was conscious of two up upper canines, as big as marlin spikes, a pink cavern and tongue, grinders, spit, a smell as sweet as cow’s breath; and then he bit my ears, carefully, first one side and then the other, growling maniacally the while, a growl which varied in pitch and tempo, as though he were engaged in a very fast, aggrieved conversation with himself.

Satisfied that he had improved my manners and taught me not to stare, Magne paused and looked about his kingdom.