

The Fall

Soon after the last nuclear warhead had been decommissioned, science enabled the great apes to speak. It was not one of those discoveries that trickle slowly into the public consciousness, through primitive demonstrations and promises of future progress. Successes followed so quickly one on another that before the academics had published their results, the tabloids were awash with exclusives from chimpanzees, bonobos, mountain and lowland gorillas.

The apes were photogenic, scarce and as yet untainted by scandal. They attracted the sympathy of those newspapers that reflect the compassion of their readers by espousing inexpensive causes. Commentators who had been on the wrong side with global warming expiated their guilt through vociferous support for ape rights. Politicians too were anxious to sense the public mood. In England, a general election was imminent. Discovering a deep sense of moral obligation, the government pledged to extend full citizenship rights to the apes if re-elected. The opposition gambled that, by acquiring language, the nation's perception of the creatures would change from dumb animals to foreign persons, with the attendant loss of status.

Prescience is seldom rewarded in politics. The government secured a fourth term in office, and the Great Ape Enfranchisement Act was passed. The zoos were rapidly emptied, and the ghost writers rushed to work on a new subgenre of misery memoir, lingering on the horrors of man's inhumanity to ape. The first apes to speak, and those that had been liberated from the zoos, were enchanted by the diversity of food and technology they encountered, and most of all by the invention of anaesthetic. They were quick to revisit their countries of origin, and returned with increasing numbers of their kind, until only the orang-utans retained a viable population in the wild.

As ever, the new arrivals sought their fortunes in London. The East End, host to wave after wave of hopeful immigrants, had long been priced out of reach; so the apes took up residence in the Olympic quarter, where the flood risk kept prices low. Now there was the question of how to earn a living.

The chimpanzees, bonobos and orang-utans all met with a certain success as couriers. Able to move in three dimensions instead of two, they easily outpaced bicycles in the crowded city. As though nostalgic for the jungles, they would sometimes take the long route through the great parks, which gained a certain notoriety in the evenings. For a while liveried primates swung between the trees of the metropolis, or bounded over its stationary taxis. There was friction, of course: protests by the displaced bicycle messengers, and a spate of hospitalisations after black cab drivers took to placing razor blades on their roofs. By and large, however, this form of employment met with public approval, and the messenger apes made a tolerable living.

Apart from this occupation, to which all the arboreal apes inclined, the apes were as different to one another in their pastimes and interests as they were to their human cousins. The irascible chimpanzees found it hard to settle to regular work. Their tempers flared too quickly, and employers became wary of taking them on. They had no aptitude for clerical work, were too surly for retail and too lazy for agriculture, and so most of them drifted into casual employment, or took advantage of certain exemptions from health and safety legislation to work as scaffolders or window cleaners.

A few found more lucrative employment as cage fighters. Early bouts with human opponents led to calls for the sport to be banned; but taking to the law, the chimpanzees argued that bloody combat,

even to the death, was part of their culture, and seeking to prevent it was a form of oppression. The case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, which after great deliberation accepted the apes' petition. The fights made for compelling viewing. Since each contestant had to anticipate success for a death bout take place, the combatants always knew one another's form and were evenly matched. Spherical cages were introduced to make it impossible to corner an opponent and to take full advantage of the chimps' climbing abilities.

The bouts could last for hours. At first, the fighters would make intimidating displays and cautiously probe one another's strengths. Then one would make the first real move of the fight, and the tempo would change, with a blur of black fur tracing the hoops of a gyroscope around the ball.

Knockout blows were rare, as were holds sustained for long enough to prove fatal. Eventually, broken by exertion, dehydration and loss of blood, one of the fighters would "top out". Hanging from the highest point, it would fend off its opponent for as long as possible, before being pushed off or succumbing to exhaustion, and land hard on the ribs of the cage floor. Sometimes it would top out a second or third time, its cries rising in pitch with fear and despair, before falling a last time and lying still. The victorious ape would approach with caution, fearing a sudden reversal, and then, when it was sure, deliver the coup de grace.

So commercially successful were the ensuing competitions, so spectacular the purses for the survivors, that human fighters, deprived of their audiences and their livelihoods, followed the lead of the apes and argued that, in being unable to fight to the last breath, they were labouring under a restriction of trade. They won their case, but no sponsor could be found for such a contest. It was alright to watch chimpanzees battle to the death because that was what they did; it was second nature to them. But the English viewer did not want to see his fellow countrymen slaughter each other. Bullfighting was an exciting spectacle because it was Spanish. A matador from Hull would be quite ridiculous.

While the chimpanzees fought their way to notoriety, the bonobos took a different route. Famed for their penchant for making love face to face, they were accustomed to the use of sex as a currency of power. It was a revelation to them that it could also be converted directly into ready cash. In a market restless for novelty, their enthusiasm for their work soon earned the female bonobos a place in the heart of the red light districts of the capital. Work in this line was scarcer for the males, and the wages they could earn as couriers were paltry by comparison. Yet the sympathy they attracted from men was misplaced. While not quite a matriarchal society – bonobo social relations were far more complex than that – there was no shame for the males in being kept by the fairer sex. They enjoyed their leisure, and took to congregating along the Serpentine, passing the time in light scrotal rubbing and amateur chess.

The mountain gorillas, the only species to have taken to religion, were scandalised by the bonobos' depravity, and asked the Almighty to forgive them with a vehemence calculated to point his wrath in the right direction. An enterprising Mormon missionary, noting the gorillas' preference for polygamy, had converted some of the leading silverbacks shortly after their arrival. Since they had been on the verge of extinction in the wild, they were quick to recognise their deliverance as a miracle, and regarded the gift of language as a permanent form of speaking in tongues. They considered their divine mission confirmed when, in the middle of a conference to contemplate an exodus to Utah, an invitation arrived from one of the public schools. Faced with the need to

preserve its charitable status, its imaginative bursar had decided that playing host to a second species was preferable to widening access for the first. The tiny community settled in the grounds, eked out a modest living running spiritual retreats during the school holidays, and made regular forays to central London to save the fallen.

They had little success, especially with their closest relatives. While the other apes all made an effort to provide for themselves, the lowland gorillas considered the welfare system to be the most welcome of all human luxuries. Occasional attempts to coax them into the workforce were frustrated by the reluctance of bosses to recruit from a species that had so quickly become famous for its indolence. Pressed by anti-discrimination legislation on one part and workfare initiatives on the other, employers and gorillas colluded with one another to find reasons for placements to break down as quickly as possible without blame on either side. Neither troubled the other, and the government picked up the bill. As time went on, the mountain gorillas came to resent the stigma of association. They began to insist on being known as *Berengei* – emphasising the exclusivity of their trinomen, “gorilla *Berengei Berengei*” over the common sounding “gorilla gorilla gorilla” of their lowland cousins.

The orang-utans, by this time, were far from the scene of controversy. They had rapidly tired of city life and withdrawn to the Forest of Dean. There they produced wooden sculptures that were coveted for their sinuous beauty. Though always polite, they avoided contact with humans if they could, never spoke about their work, and dealt entirely through agents. Their mystique was further enhanced by the refusal of the individual sculptors to sign their works, although some critics claimed to be able to discern distinctive styles within the output of the cooperative. The speculation heightened the prices their work commanded, but they had little use for the proceeds. They spent much of their fortune on legal bids to secure a homeland for their relatives who remained in the dwindling forests of Borneo; for they had not united their whole species within the confines of the human world, as had the other apes.

And so the orang-utans sculpted, the *Berengei* preached, the bonobos solicited, the chimps fought, and the gorillas adjusted expertly to each reform of the benefit system. The bonobos serviced the occasional chimp; orang-utan sculptures would sometimes appear among the trappings of wealth of a surviving cage fighter; and the *Berengei* evangelised the other apes as often as they could; but by and large, most of the apes’ dealings outside their own species were with humans.

The humans, for their part, were divided in their attitudes. All in all, the conduct of the apes had been something of a disappointment to those who had campaigned long and hard for their rights, so the loudest voices on the subject were those that had been opposed to the Enfranchisement all along. The party that had been in was out, and the party that had been out was in; and it would be interesting to speculate on how they would have gone about answering “The ape Question” if the apes had not, in their various ways, answered it for themselves.

One of the features of the bonobos that had recommended them to clients was that they appeared neither to contract nor to pass on any of the various diseases incident to their profession. This changed with a suddenness that the *Berengei* attributed to divine retribution. Presumably, the mutated strain of the virus entered the bonobo population through human contact, but it was the good-natured promiscuity of the bonobos amongst each other that led to its devastating spread. There were some who, incredulous at the speed of the disaster, suspected some sort of foul play,

but it should be remembered that copulation held the same place in bonobo society as tea once did in England – the conventional accompaniment to every social occasion and the respite from every chore. Before the first carriers developed symptoms and the killer was identified, the disease was rife. Within three years, the last of them had perished. Where once bonobos had awaited their next customers with unfeigned excitement, the usual stream of desperate, trafficked women returned.

If an excessive attachment to the ways of the flesh did for the bonobos, it was a rejection of them that finished the Berengei. While sitting on a tube train that had failed in the tunnel between Charing Cross and Villiers Street, a charismatic silverback experienced a vision. It was revealed to him that the ancient practice of polygamy, the adoption of language, and the recent adherence to the Mormon creed, were all contrary to God's will; that these abominations must be discarded; and that they should all embrace the true faith of the Catholic Church and spend the rest of their days in repentance. Having witnessed the demise of the sinful bonobos, the Berengei were receptive to his apocalyptic message, and they cloistered themselves in two separate, silent, celibate orders. Though they were the second of the species of apes to disappear from public view, they endured in silence for decades, and when the last of the Berengei passed on in a rest home it occasioned a fit of nostalgia for the years of the apes.

The chimpanzees and the gorillas dwindled, as those who were killed in cage fights or succumbed to heart disease or old age were not replaced by young. In the case of the chimpanzees, this lack of fertility was voluntary. Without access to contraception in the wild, and with few alternative pastimes, chimpanzees made contented parents. But amid the myriad temptations of the city, they liked to live life at a pace that was incompatible with family ties. Given the choice of encumbering themselves with offspring, or partying until they dropped, they opted for the latter.

For the gorillas, it was a combination of biology and their aversion to work that led to extinction. In the wild, an adult male gorilla gorilla gorilla is accustomed to stowing away 200lbs a day of bamboo, enlivened only by the occasional insect. The encounter of this prodigious appetite with the cornucopia of a modern supermarket led inexorably to grotesque obesity. Type 2 diabetes and heart disease were rife, and the gorillas lacked the willpower to maintain a diet and exercise regime, leading to widespread premature death. The few pregnancies there were in older mothers were beset with complications.

For a while, the population almost sustained itself through the excellence of modern medical care and the fertility of the younger females who had not yet had the chance to balloon. Then it was noticed that a change in the benefit system aimed at disincentivising pregnancy among human teenagers had had an unexpectedly large effect on the gorilla birth rate. The government would never have admitted that subsequent policies were aimed at any one species, but further reforms exacerbated the effect. Pinched between the impossibility of successful reproduction at one end, and its economic disadvantages at the other, the maternal and paternal instinct was extinguished. Through greed, venality and indifference, the gorillas trod the path to a greying extinction that the chimpanzees had pursued by choice.

So with the bonobos gone, and the fate of the Berengei, the chimps and the gorillas sealed, only the orang-utans carried the hope of the great experiment. Indeed, there was a moment of triumph, when it was announced that their long campaign to secure a homeland in perpetuity for the wild population had been successful. Their representatives made a rare excursion from the Forest of

Dean to witness the signing of the agreement, and to thank and congratulate the politicians and lawyers. Unusually, they also took the opportunity to visit some chimpanzees in a seedy quarter of town; perhaps, people thought, to counsel them out of their self-destructive spiral and draw them towards their own, gentler pace of life.

Then nothing. They failed to make the usual delivery of sculptures. Their groceries sat uncollected. This from creatures of habit, who were always polite and punctual. Alarmed, their agent broke with the protocol they had established for their privacy and went to visit.

The scene he met with was piteous. Not one still lived. After dosing the little ones, the gentle orang-utans had taken their own lives. The note that was left requested only that, when the humans eventually broke their promise to save the home of the orang-utans that remained in the wild, they should not attempt to clear their consciences by preserving the species, still less by endowing its last members with speech. If necessary, they should cut down the last tree with the last orang-utan still hanging from its branches.

When the scientists who had made the original discoveries turned their attention to the dolphins, they found that their funding, with barely a ripple of dissent, was withdrawn.