

GORILLAS IN THE MIST

Often I am asked about the most rewarding experience I have ever had with gorillas. The question is extremely difficult to answer because each hour with the gorillas provides its own return and satisfaction. The first occasion when I felt I might have crossed an intangible barrier between human and ape occurred about ten months after beginning the research at Karisoke. Peanuts, Group 8's youngest male, was feeding about fifteen feet away when he suddenly stopped and turned to stare directly at me. The expression in his eyes was unfathomable. Spellbound, I returned his gaze — a gaze that seemed to combine elements of inquiry and of acceptance. Peanuts ended this unforgettable moment by sighing deeply, and slowly resumed feeding. Jubilant, I returned to camp and cabled Dr. Leakey *I'VE FINALLY BEEN ACCEPTED BY A GORILLA.**

Two years after our exchange of glances, Peanuts became the first gorilla ever to touch me. The day had started out as an ordinary one, if any day working from Karisoke might be considered ordinary. I felt unusually compelled to make this particular day outstanding because the following morning I had to leave for England for a seven-month period to work on my doctorate. Bob Campbell and I had gone out to contact Group 8 on the western-facing Visoke slopes. We found them feeding in the middle of a shallow ravine of densely growing herbaceous vegetation. Along the ridge leading into the ravine grew large *Hagenia* trees that had always served as good lookout spots for scanning the surrounding terrain. Bob and I had just settled down on a comfortable moss-cushioned *Hagenia* tree trunk when Peanuts, wearing his "I want to be entertained" expression, left his feeding group to meander inquisitively toward us. Slowly I left the tree and pretended to munch on vegetation to reassure Peanuts that I meant him no harm.

Peanuts' bright eyes peered at me through a latticework of vegetation as he began his strutting, swaggering approach. Suddenly he was at my side and sat down to watch my "feeding" techniques as if it were my turn to entertain him. When Peanuts seemed bored with the "feeding" routine, I scratched my head, and almost immediately, he began scratching his own. Since he appeared totally relaxed, I lay back in the foliage, slowly extended my hand, palm upward, then rested it on the leaves. After looking intently at my hand, Peanuts stood up and extended his hand to touch his fingers against my own for a brief instant. Thrilled at his own daring, he gave vent to his excitement by a quick chestbeat before going off to rejoin his group. Since that day, the spot has been called *Fasi Ya Mkoni*, "the Place of the Hands." The contact was among the most memorable of my life among the gorillas.

*Nine years after Dr. Leakey's death in 1972 I learned that he had carried the cable in his pocket for months, even taking it on a lecture tour to America. I was told that he read it proudly, much as he once spoke to me of Jane Goodall's outstanding success with chimpanzees.

