

MARY'S CHRISTMAS GORILLA

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Chapter One

“Dear Santa, I don’t want a stupid doll for Christmas,” wrote Mary in her Christmas letter to Santa Claus.

Mary was seven years old and she had red hair. Her hair was so red that when the sun shone on it, it almost looked as if her head was on fire. Mary was the only person in her class at school with red hair, and because of this all the other children teased her and called her names such as carrot-top and fire-engine head. That’s why Mary didn’t want a doll for Christmas. She wanted something more useful. Mary wanted a gorilla for Christmas.

“If I had a pet gorilla and anyone teased me about my hair, I’d get the gorilla to break their legs,” wrote Mary grimly to Santa. “And then they wouldn’t tease me about my hair again—unless they wanted their arms broken as well.”

“So please bring me a gorilla for Christmas, Santa,” Mary finished off in her letter. “And I promise I’ll be good all next year. Lots of love, Mary.”

It was three weeks until Christmas, and Mary had a long and anxious wait for Christmas day. Would Santa bring her a pet gorilla, she wondered? Each morning she crossed off another square in the calendar on her bedroom wall.

When Christmas day finally arrived, Mary was so excited that she woke at five o’clock in the morning. She switched on the torch that sat beside her bed, and crept down the hall into the sitting room to look under the Christmas tree. Santa Claus had definitely been there during the night. The glass of lemonade that Mary had left out for him was empty, and the stocking on the mantelpiece was full.

Suddenly Mary's heart began to pound. Sitting on the floor beside the tree stood a huge wooden crate. Trembling with excitement, Mary shone her torch and read the label on the side of the crate: "Weight: 1 TONNE. Contents: DANGEROUS ANIMAL."

Mary put her ear to the crate and listened. She could hear a slow *whooshing* sound coming from inside. The noise of something breathing.

Chapter Two

Mary ran down the hall and into her parents' bedroom. She climbed onto the bed, and bounced up and down. "Wake up," she ordered. "Come and see what Santa's brought for me."

"Back to bed, Mary," said her father, without opening his eyes. "It's still night-time."

Mary bounced harder on the bed. "Get up now," she said. "Santa's brought me a pet gorilla. We've got to open the crate and let it out."

"A pet what?" said Mary's mother's voice from under the sheets.

"She says that Santa's brought her a toy gorilla," murmured Mary's father.

"It's not a toy gorilla," shouted Mary. "It's a *real* gorilla. I can hear it breathing. Come and have a look."

"Quiet, Mary," snapped her mother. "You've been dreaming. Go back to your room, and get into bed *right now!* It's not time to get up yet!"

"Just listen to what I'm saying..." began Mary. But her protests were interrupted by the deafening noise of timber splintering in the sitting

room. There was a brief moment of silence. Then an excited hooting sound began—a sound such as a large gorilla might make after breaking out of a packing crate in which it has been cooped up for too long.

Chapter Three

By morning tea on Christmas day the gorilla had made itself at home. It had torn down all the decorations in the sitting room. It had eaten the entire Christmas pavlova all by itself, and smeared green kiwifruit paw-prints across the wallpaper. It had chewed up the Christmas cards, and smashed Mary's mother's favourite china plate into a million pieces.

"This gorilla is the best present I've ever had," said Mary happily.

Mary's father looked despairingly out of the sitting room window, to where the gorilla—satiated with pavlova, and exhausted by its morning of mayhem—was snoozing in the long grass of the back garden. "What I want to know," he said to Mary's mother, "is what on earth was Santa thinking to give a little girl a fully-grown gorilla for a pet? What was going on inside his head to do such a thing?"

"I asked him for a gorilla in my Christmas letter," said Mary.

Mary's father sprang to his feet as if he had been stung by a bee. "You did *what?*" he shouted.

Mary's mother went straight to her writing table. "It doesn't matter who did what," she said to Mary's father. "As long as we can undo it again." She took out a pen and paper, and thrust them at Mary. "Listen to me, Mary," she said urgently, "our future happiness as a family depends upon you. You must write a letter to Santa Claus telling him to take this gorilla back right away."

She sat Mary down at the writing table. "Go on Mary, write that letter now. Don't waste a minute. We must get that gorilla out of here as soon as possible."

"But," said Mary, quite bewildered, "I like the gorilla. It's having a bit of difficulty getting used to living here, that's all. I know I can train it to behave itself properly. Don't send it back! I can look after it by myself—you won't have to do a thing!"

"Mary!" said Mary's mother. "No arguments!"

"No arguments, Mary!" said her father at the same time.

So Mary had to write the following letter:

"Dear Santa, I know it's still only Christmas day but my stupid parents say I've got to give the gorilla back. Can you please come and collect it tomorrow? Love, Mary."

"Well, it'll have to do", said her father after he had read the letter, and he drove down to the post office straight away and mailed it.

Chapter Four

By lunchtime the gorilla had become hungry again, and so it came inside and ate all of the Christmas trifle. When Mary's mother tried to stop it, the gorilla wrenched the sitting room door off its hinges, and threatened her with it. Then to amuse itself during the afternoon, it went outside and pulled down the fence, and threw the palings into the neighbour's swimming pool.

On Christmas evening as Mary's parents sat despondently in the tattered ruins of their sitting room, a red envelope came floating down the chimney. It was Santa's reply to the letter that Mary had written

that morning. Mary's mother opened it—read it—and turned pale. She sat down heavily on the sofa.

Here's what the letter said:

“Dear Mary, I'm afraid that Mrs Claus won't let me take the gorilla back. She says it made too much mess in our grotto last time it was here. Lots of love, Santa. P.S. Ho Ho Ho.”

Later that night the gorilla went to the toilet on Mary's mother's clean washing.

Chapter Five

When Mary got up the next morning she found the gorilla asleep in the bath, and her parents' bedroom empty. There was a short note pinned to her mother's pillow:

“Dear Mary, we have done everything in our parental abilities to raise you as a good girl. However, we feel that we can no longer live in the same house as you and your gorilla. We are going to stay in a hotel until you and the gorilla grow up and leave home. Lots of love, Mummy and Daddy.

P.S. You'll have to drive yourself to school from now on; we've left the car-keys on the mantelpiece.”

Mary sat on her parents' bed and read the letter three times before its meaning sank in. Then she stood up and shouted: “Hooray! I've been left alone to do whatever I want!”

She woke the gorilla and they went outside together. Mary showed it how to rattle a stick against the iron railings that ran along the footpath. Her parents had strictly forbidden her from doing this, so Mary knew it must be great fun. She and the gorilla spent a happy

hour running up and down the street making a wonderful clattering noise. When they became tired they went inside, and had chocolates and ice-cream for breakfast.

After breakfast Mary put the dirty dishes in the dustbin. Then she stood up on her tiptoes and got the car-keys from the mantelpiece. "Right," she said to the gorilla. "Time for school."

Mary had never driven a car before, and it turned out to be much more difficult than she had expected. She had quite a few traffic accidents just getting out of her own street. It was really very stressful. Whenever she hit another car, the person driving yelled at her, jumped out of their car, and came over to Mary looking furious. But when they saw the gorilla sitting next to Mary they turned pale, and changed their minds about being angry. Then they got back into their own cars and drove quickly away.

At the traffic lights just before her school Mary bumped into the back of a police car, and the police officer gave her a traffic ticket. "How old are you, little girl?" asked the police officer as he wrote out the ticket.

"Seven," said Mary.

"Seven?" The police officer looked surprised. "My goodness, I didn't even know that seven-year-olds could get a driver's licence."

Mary said nothing. It seemed best not to mention that she didn't have a driver's licence.

Chapter Six

At school the gorilla seemed shy, and held tightly onto Mary's hand as they walked through the playground. When Mary and the gorilla entered the classroom all the other children stopped what they were

doing and gazed silently at them. No-one teased Mary about her hair, as would have happened on any other day. No-one called her carrot-top or fire-engine head. No-one said a word.

“Good—this is working just as I planned,” thought Mary to herself.

She showed the gorilla to a desk at the front of the classroom, and took a seat next to it. Just as they sat down the teacher came into the room, and clapped her hands for attention.

“Silence please everybody!” she said severely. “On our first day of the new term I’m going to take the roll slowly so that I can find out all your names.” She narrowed her eyes at the seated children, “and identify any potential trouble-makers.”

“Name?” she shouted suddenly—making Mary jump.

“Mary,” squeaked Mary.

“I dislike the name Mary,” sniffed the teacher. “It’s common. I also dislike red hair. My ex-husband is engaged to a woman with red hair. In my opinion, red hair is vulgar. Don’t slouch, girl! Sit up straight when I speak to you!”

The teacher turned to the gorilla. “My goodness, you’re large for a seven-year-old”, she observed. “I suppose you’ve been kept back a year. You look rather half-witted, I must say.” She peered more closely at the gorilla’s face. “What’s this?” she lunged forward and seized the gorilla’s beard in her fist. “Don’t you know that facial hair is not permitted at school? Remove yourself from this classroom. Go and shave it off at once!”

The gorilla didn’t like having its beard pulled, and it growled aggressively at the teacher. “And don’t mumble,” she said. The gorilla threw back its head and beat its chest. “And you can stop that nonsense as well,” said the teacher, giving its beard another sharp

tug. The gorilla looked at the teacher and let out a mighty scream of rage. A scream so loud and powerful that it blew her hair straight out behind her as if she were standing in a windstorm.

Chapter Seven

“I don’t like to be pessimistic, but I think this one might be a bit of a lost cause,” said the ambulance man, as he helped carry the teacher out on a stretcher.

A police sergeant was interviewing Mary. “There’s a five year sentence for bringing a dangerous animal into a public place, and a fourteen year sentence for taking a gorilla into a classroom without a leash,” he said. “You know how old that’ll make you when you get out of prison?”

Mary was far too upset to think. She shook her head. The Police Sergeant took off his socks and shoes and did the arithmetic. “At least 20,” he said finally. “But, ah... well, seeing it’s your first offence—I suppose I can let you off.” He put his socks and shoes back on, and then pointed his finger sternly at Mary. “But don’t let it happen again, or I’ll have you locked up before you can say ‘life sentence without parole.’”

“I’m going to be good from now on,” Mary promised him fervently. She looked at the gorilla. “We both will, won’t we?” she said.

But, alas, the gorilla started misbehaving again as soon as they drove back to Mary’s house. It ripped down all the wallpaper in the sitting room and hall. It swung on the light fittings until they were torn from the ceiling. It smashed up all the crockery in the kitchen. It ate laundry powder and was sick on the carpet.

“Oh, please, please stop it,” said Mary almost in tears. But the gorilla wasn’t listening—it was having too much fun. It climbed the

drainpipe at the side of the house and pulled an armful of tiles off the roof. Then it threw down the tiles so that they smashed on the road.

“You’re not a reformed character at all,” said Mary to the gorilla later that night. She sat in her room as rain trickled through the holes in the roof, and dripped onto her head. “This is terrible,” said Mary. “Things can’t go on like this. What ever am I going to do?”

The gorilla sat on the floor of her bedroom—scribbling in one of Mary’s library books—when Mary suddenly had an idea. It happened just like it does in comic strips. With a little popping sound a picture of the library appeared in her head. She could see every detail: the red tile roof, the marigolds in the flower beds beside the entrance, and the sign in the window. The sign said: “Ask a librarian—they know what they’re doing.” And that was how Mary knew what to do.

Chapter Eight

First thing the next morning Mary locked the gorilla in the house, and went straight to the library.

“Excuse me please, my gorilla is out of control,” said Mary to the librarian at the information desk. “What should I do?”

“Ah,” said the librarian. “That’s a very common problem with gorilla owners.” She looked thoughtful. “We see a lot of it and the only thing I can really recommend is to wrestle your gorilla into submission, thereby asserting your dominance over it, as if you were the alpha gorilla in the troop. (By the way,” explained the librarian parenthetically, “asserting your dominance just means showing the gorilla that you’re the boss of him, and not the other way around).”

“Actually,” she continued, “we have a book that’s just perfect for this situation. It’s called *Gorilla wrestling for seven-year-olds*.” The

librarian checked the catalogue. “But I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m afraid it’s out.”

“Oh no,” wailed Mary. “I need help right away. The gorilla is behaving very badly indeed.”

The librarian sucked the end of her pencil thoughtfully. “Well,” she said finally, “in that case—since we can’t get you the book straight away—perhaps I’d better come and wrestle the gorilla for you. It’s not really in my job description, but I used to do a little wrestling myself—bantam weight—and I don’t see that a gorilla could be all *that* difficult to wrestle.”

Chapter Nine

“Are you sure you’ll be able to wrestle the gorilla,” asked Mary doubtfully. She and the librarian were standing outside the French windows. They could see the gorilla in the sitting room tearing the sofa to pieces. “It’s a lot bigger than you are.”

“Of course I can,” said the librarian confidently. “Don’t forget that I have been a professional wrestler. Experience counts far more than size in the wrestling business.” The librarian started to do her wrestler-stretching exercises. “By the way, what does the gorilla weigh in at? Forty kilograms or so?”

“A tonne, I think,” said Mary.

“Oh,” said the librarian, looking slightly less confident. “A bit heavier than anticipated—but I expect that means he’ll be slow. Well, here I go!” She opened the French windows and did a dramatic forward roll across the sitting room floor—coming to her feet in a wrestler’s crouch in front of the gorilla. The gorilla gave a hoot of astonishment, and dropped the cushion spring it had been holding. It inspected the

librarian in puzzled silence for a few moments, and then—very slowly—it leaned forward and sniffed.

This was just the opening that the librarian needed! “Ah-Ha,” she cried, and with lightning speed she pushed her fingers up the gorilla’s nose and twisted its nostrils, giving it that famous wrestling hold called the nostril-scissors. The gorilla let out a scream of rage. It had never experienced the nostril-scissors before, and it didn’t like it at all.

With an angry bellow it picked up the librarian, whirled her three times round its head, and then threw her across the room so hard that she actually sailed right through the French windows, and fell in a tattered heap on the ground outside.

‘Are you still alive?’ cried Mary, running over to where the librarian lay.

“Just warming up,” said the librarian weakly. She picked herself up, and felt for broken bones. “Round two, “ she said to Mary, and limped back into the sitting room.

This time the gorilla was ready, and it grabbed the librarian as soon as she came back through the French windows. But the librarian was ready too, and suddenly there was a flurry of arms and legs so fast that Mary couldn’t see what was happening. When the flurry stopped Mary could see that the librarian had the gorilla’s arms pinned behind its back and her big toe stuck into the gorilla’s ear. “This wrestling hold is called the Nelly Melba!” cried out the librarian to Mary. “Watch this!”

The librarian straightened her legs, and this time the gorilla flew across the room, slammed into the brick fire surround, and smashed heavily to the floor. The gorilla lay stunned for a moment and then bounded to its feet. It beat its fists on its chest and screamed with fury.

Three more times the gorilla and the librarian fought—but now the tide of battle had turned for the librarian, and she won every bout. Each time that she overpowered the gorilla the librarian yelled out to Mary the wrestling move she was using: “The reverse-Heimlich-manoeuvre!”, “The Waldorf-unpaid-bill kidney-punch!”, and finally “The brass-knuckle surprise!”.

The brass knuckle surprise isn’t really an official wrestling move at all, and it knocked the gorilla out cold. The librarian had to throw a bucket of water over the gorilla’s head to wake it up. And then with a bound she was upon it. This was the moment she’d been waiting for. Now she could put the gorilla into the wrestling hold called the half-Dewey. The half-Dewey is a very famous wrestling move, and it is a well-known fact that there is only one way out of the half-Dewey, and that is to the full-Dewey. And once you put the full-Dewey on a wrestling opponent then there is no escape for them.

“The full-Dewey!” cried out the librarian in triumph. “Just put your finger here, Mary,” she requested, pointing with her chin. Mary put her finger where the librarian was pointing, and the librarian gave a mighty tug on the gorilla’s limbs, and suddenly its arms and legs were tied into a granny knot.

“And that, I believe,” said the librarian to Mary, dusting off her hands, “is the last trouble we’ll have from *this* gorilla.”

Chapter Ten

After it had been wrestled into submission the gorilla became a reformed character and went to live full time at the library—where it found true happiness as a library assistant (and became particularly good at helping bad borrowers remember to return their books).

Life was also much happier for Mary. Her schoolmates had a new respect for her after the incident with the gorilla, and they never dared to tease her again. And also—as soon as they heard that the gorilla had gone—Mary’s parents came back to live with her. “Of course, the hotel was very nice,” said Mary’s mother, “but it’s good to be home again.”

The insurance company paid for all the repairs, and soon the house was fixed up better than new. “Thank goodness we decided to get gorilla-damage cover when we took out our insurance policy,” said Mary’s father.

And Mary’s teacher made a full recovery from the gorilla attack. In fact, everyone said she was actually a much nicer person afterwards. So much so that her ex-husband broke off his engagement to his red-headed fiancée, and married Mary’s teacher for a second time. Although, even then, it must be said that Mary’s teacher never quite got over her aversion to red hair.