

The primate group, to which our naked ape belongs, arose originally from primitive insectivore stock. These early mammals were small, insignificant creatures, scuttling nervously around in the safety of the forests, while the reptile overlords were dominating the animal scene. Between eighty and fifty million years ago, following the collapse of the great age of reptiles, these little insect-eaters began to venture out into new territories. There they spread and grew into many strange shapes. Some became plant-eaters and burrowed under the ground for safety, or grew long, stilt-like legs with which to flee from their enemies. Others became longclawed, sharp-toothed killers. Although the major reptiles had abdicated and left the scene, the open country was once again a battlefield.

Meanwhile, in the undergrowth, small feet were still clinging to the security of the forest vegetation. Progress was being made here, too. The early insect-eaters began to broaden their diet and conquer the digestive problems of devouring fruits, nuts, berries, buds and leaves. As they evolved into the lowliest forms of primates, their vision improved, the eyes coming forward to the front of the face and the hands developing as food-graspers. With three-dimensional vision, manipulating limbs and slowly enlarging brains, they came more and more to dominate their arboreal world.

Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five million years ago, these pre-monkeys had already started to evolve into monkeys proper. They were beginning to develop long, balancing tails and were increasing considerably in body size. Some were on their way to becoming leaf-eating specialists, but most were keeping to a broad, mixed diet. As time passed, some of these monkey-like creatures became bigger and heavier. Instead of scampering and leaping they switched to brachiating—swinging hand over hand along the underside of the branches. Their tails became obsolete. Their size, although making them more cumbersome in the trees, made them less wary of ground-level sorties.

Even so, at this stage—the ape phase—there was much to be said for keeping to the lush comfort and easy pickings of their forest of Eden. Only if the 17