

Strange STORIES

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THE MASTER

By SHELTON GOODALL

Author of "Heritage," "Too Much Ghost," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Great Malvolio



EVERYTHING was so right, so true to the old pattern, that it was all wrong. The circus was in town again. There was the four of us newshounds hunched around a table at the High Spot. Our

stories about the pitching the big top had been put to bed along with the rest of tomorrow morning's news, as dead now as an old number-plate.

Everything was as routine as the stories themselves, which ran year after year in the same groove, with now and then a fresh angle or a juicy novelty like the Tight-rope-Walking Dog, or the Original Whirling Dervish, or the Amphibious Lady, or—or Malvolio. Funny how I can't get him out of my mind. But we didn't mention him. We just swapped the same old gripes about the show, and—well, everything was the same, I tell you—the time, the place, the season, the group, the talk—and then Martin came walking in at the door.

But that's what made it all wrong.

For Martin wasn't with the circus any more. He was washed up, broken. Since the horror of a year ago, he hadn't been able to turn out a line of publicity copy. He'd walked out from

under the big top that night and disappeared. After a week, they got another press agent. The only news we had of Martin was at second- or third-hand, relayed from New Orleans, Taos, Mérida. And what we heard indicated that he was marked for loneliness, would never again transform sour, leaden hours around a scarred table into a harlequin carnival punctuated by the Roman candles of his fancy, would certainly never again walk through that particular doorway.

It was just as if you saw a man who'd been killed in a crash a year ago, driving the very car which had been demolished with him, along the same fatal stretch of road. You'd feel a cold breath whisk across the nape of your neck, all right. I know I did.

LOWRY, sitting on my right, saw him first. Lowry set down his glass, and the beer slopped over on the table. He muttered:

"Jupiter! The joint's haunted."

Travers began irritably, "What's the mat—" Then he followed Lowry's fascinated stare. He never finished the sentence.

The only one of us who didn't regret his last two beers was Daly, slouching with his back to the door. He took a deep pull at his glass and grunted at us, over the rim:

"Who is it? Carrie Nation?"

"It's Martin," I told him.

His porcine face crinkled under the shock, then became smoothly phlegmatic again. You could depend on Daly. The *Courier* had been doing it for twenty years.

"Well, ask him over," he said. "I take it he's alive, so don't look like watchers at a wake. 'Tain't sociable."

With one foot he snared a chair and drew it up to the table.

It was the only time I have seen

There is a Terrible, Uncanny Secret About Malvolio, the Animal Hypnotist, a Grim Secret That Makes Men's Blood Go Cold!



*Something
passed
between
him and
the beast*

**A Complete
Novelet**

Lowry embarrassed. He peered down at his glass, and I saw a dim flush creeping up from the angle of his jaw, where a muscle was throbbing angrily.

"You can't do that," he muttered.

"Maybe you can't." Daly was quite genial. "But I've got a few questions I want to ask him. If you want to give me the beat on it, okay."

"Wait a sec!" cut in Travers nervously. "You'll scuttle our chances! I want the dope as much as you do. But I've got sense enough to know he won't open up to us. Let Spruce handle him. Spruce knew Martin better than we did. He was there that night. Martin'll talk to him."

My name isn't Spruce. It's Pine. But they always called me Spruce, and I'd given up trying to find out why.

I wanted to see Martin. I wanted him to talk to me. But not for the *Bulletin*. For my own peace of mind—and Martin's. And off the record.

I didn't know what to say. I sat there miserably, looking down the length of the smoke-filled room at Martin, until the table, and those around it, faded out of my vision, and Martin and I were facing each other under the big top, on that last night, with the smell of peanuts and sawdust and semi-tamed animal flesh in our nostrils.

Martin saw me. He came slowly toward the table, and I think I stood up. He seemed thinner, older, and under a leathery tan his features had a queer look of the beyond about them.

"Hello, Spruce," he said.

His voice had the same breathless, comalike quality which it had held that night after the inexplicable had happened. When he spoke, it was as though not only the table and my companions were wiped away, but even the High Spot, the downtown district—yes, even time itself. Into their place came crowding the past with its cargo of heady and terrifying strangeness. . . .

* * * * *

MA RTIN was waiting for me at the main entrance to the big top when I arrived about fifteen minutes late for our appointment. We were

having what the easterners would call an Indian summer that fall, and the morning haze was burning off fast. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and said I hoped it was cooler inside.

"Yeah, like a Turkish bath," rejoined Martin, grinning, as we walked into the main tent. "Well, we'll get this over and then duck out and soak up some beer. What say?"

"I thought you might be on the pink lemonade wagon" I chuckled. "You're looking pretty fit. What you been doing? Having transfusions?"

When I'd last seen him, the season before, he'd just got over an attack of dysentery, and he'd looked like something in the final stages.

"Had a good year," he explained.

We were walking past the cages, and I commented on a pair of black panthers that were new. He nodded, enthusiastically.

"Swell show, all around. Some dead-beats cleared off, a few chronic troublemakers told good-by and good luck, and one real knockout sensation added, that's done it."

The lilt in his voice, the jauntiness in his step, and the glint in his eyes that had not been there before made me believe that this season he had really found the El Dorado of his hopes—the super-colossal sensation that would drag 'em in by the hair.

"Yeah. I've been reading the posters," I said, baiting him. "But if you've hauled me over here to interview the Iron-jawed Maidens—"

"Sensation, I said!" he retorted, his gray eyes giving me the equivalent of a Bronx cheer. He had paused by a group of small cages. Now he turned away from me and said, with ill-repressed excitement: "And there he is. Spruce, meet the Great Malvolio."

I followed his gesture and saw a ridiculously small, nondescript figure drooping against the tiers of cages. To say that I wasn't impressed would be to convey only a fraction of my disappointment. And as Martin led the way toward the man, nothing developed to correct this initial reaction.

When he saw us approaching, the man eased himself erect. Even so, he hardly measured five feet in height,

and a more unkempt, unprepossessing five feet I've never seen. He was wearing a Kelly-green uniform with brass buttons and tight gold collar. Atop his matted, greasy curls perched a satin kepi of the same shade of green, with a gold cockade plunk in the center.

These resplendent trappings only emphasized his complete nonentity. He had a coarse, sallow, pugnacious face with a slyly brutal mouth and a broad-tipped, recessive nose. The only expression in his otherwise vapid amber eyes was one of latent truculence.

He didn't look like the Great anything. To tell you the truth, I thought Martin was kidding, trying to get a rise out of us.

"The animal hypnotist?" I asked, incredulously. He didn't look capable of hypnotizing a flea, let alone a group of animals.

By way of answer, Martin rattled off to Malvolio, in fluent French, that I had come from the *Bulletin* to interview him, and that I had inquired if he was, indeed, the incomparable hypnotist of animals.

"*Bien entendu. Et puis?*" slurred Malvolio insolently.

Martin turned to me delightedly and translated:

"He says he has that modest honor, and welcomes you."

BUT that wasn't what Malvolio had said. "Of course. So what?" was the gist of it. And it was unlike Martin not to have given me an accurate translation, with a laugh at my expense thrown in for good measure. But I gave no sign that I had understood both question and answer. Instead, I asked Martin if Malvolio was French.

"No, no," he said, quickly. He's—well, I understand he's Italian. At least, his father—"

"Nuts!" I said. "I know French when I hear it, even if I don't understand it."

"Well, he's always lived in France. In circuses. His father was an animal tamer. He's gone one step further. Here, take a look at the animals he hypnotizes in the show."

CHAPTER II

Bimbo the Monkey

I NOTED a scrubby terrier, a white cat, a fox, a hen, a mountain lion, and others which I have now forgotten. Just as I was bending down to peer into the bottom tier of cages, Malvolio sidled forward and plucked at Martin's sleeve.

"Tell him that next season I shall have a monkey!" he hissed urgently, in French. "A monkey, mark you! It will be a triumph! A veritable triumph!"

He kept repeating "*Triomphe!*" in a sort of frenzy while Martin remarked casually to me:

"Next season, he might hypnotize a monkey."

So, once again, Martin had interposed the screen of a carefully adulterated translation between me and Malvolio. I was disturbed, and a bit angry. I decided on a final test, to make sure that I wasn't imagining an odd situation where none existed.

"Ask him if he can show me how he hypnotizes the animals," I said to Martin.

Malvolio's immediate response to this question, put to him in his native tongue, was a calculating leer.

"*Pour ça, il faut payer,*" was his ultimatum.

I was already bridleing at this bald statement that if I wanted a story I could plank down the cash, when Martin interpreted it.

"He says he prefers not to bother the animals now, if that is all right with you. Why don't you stay for the show, Spruce?"

That settled it. I took one last look at the malevolent amber eyes under the green kepi and swung on my heel to leave.

"Okay," I grunted. "You might put me as near the ring as you can. I don't mind telling you, though, that he's got a lot of ground to make up before I give him an inch of space."

"He's quite different in the ring," Martin replied, eagerly. "You can't

get much this way—with the language difficulty, and so on.”

“Maybe,” I said. “You’re sure he’s Italian?”

“What else?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t look like any kind of stock I’ve ever seen. There’s something I can’t put my finger on, some—”

Martin stiffened. I felt the entering wedge of a barrier thrust between us.

“You mustn’t be prejudiced by his manner and appearance,” he objected. “He’s a lonely, sad man. Been through a lot. When you know him better, you’ll want to pat him on the head and tell him it’s going to be all right.”

So that was it. Martin had fallen under the influence of Malvolio, to such an extent that he felt impelled to protect the hypnotist from dispassionate probing. I didn’t like it. But what could I do?”

“He certainly got all worked up over that monkey,” I said.

MARTIN’S glance was sharp, wary. Then he shrugged. “It seems to mean a lot to him. You see, he originally wanted to be a hypnotist of human beings. But evidently he didn’t have what it takes. So he turned to animals. He’s sort of working his way up the scale, proving his powers at every step. I guess he reckons that if he can hypnotize a monkey—well, Darwin would say he’s on the right track. But that’s strictly off the record.” He gripped my arm. “Understand?”

I caught the show that afternoon. As a result, I had to revise my opinion of Malvolio’s talents. But my opinion of his personality was only strengthened by seeing him in action. Perhaps I shouldn’t call it an opinion. It wasn’t that definite. Let’s just say a feeling of antipathy, of suspicion. And of something like uneasiness, only deeper, more elemental. Looking back, I realize that it was the first throb of the pulse of fear.

In bringing the animals under his control, Malvolio used none of the wild gestures which we usually associate with hypnotists. He simply walked up to the subject, his head

thrust forward, his jaw jutting out ruthlessly. Then he seemed to capture the subject’s eyes with a look which I couldn’t see from where I was sitting, brush his hand across the creature’s line of vision—and a moment later the control was complete.

The actual mechanics were as simple as that, but when he gave those animals the business, they never knew what hit them.

He had something, all right. But I didn’t care for the way he put it across. There was something peculiar and unwholesome in his attitude toward the animals, something brutish and uncouth in his every pose, gesture, command. And the animals, in turn, reacted like no other circus animals that I had ever seen.

Malvolio’s presence seemed to keep them suspended in a state of eerie panic. It was as though they were in the grip of a nameless horror unfamiliar to them in this world, as though they were confronted not by a man, but by some strange demon.

I’d seen deer and foxes behave that way when a brush fire was herding them down a canyon. Something fearful had been loosed among these animals. Something had invaded that ring which bore no relation to the ordinary, sane world—or even to the tinsel world of the circus. And Malvolio’s subjects knew the color of its spots.

Among them there was one powerful enough to strike back at it. Malvolio knew it, too. Perhaps I’d better tell you about that.

At one point in the proceedings, the ringmaster asked people to step right down and see for themselves. Naturally, I trooped over to the ring, along with quite a few others. We gathered around the arena, and the first thing we knew an attendant had released the mountain lion.

The beast came prowling out, scenting flesh and knowing damn well that no bars were holding him back any longer from his prey. He slunk back and forth, muscles rippling under the lustrous hide, tail lashing, fangs bared. But suddenly I realized that those fangs were bared, not at us, but at Malvolio. And the eyes were express-

ing something quite different from either the dramatic cooperation, the resentment, or the hatred which you find in circus lions, according to variations in temperament of the lions or their tamers.

It was a fearless, skulking, potentially victorious attitude, which jerked me back into the jungle. I tell you the lion ignored us as prey; his green gaze never flickered from Malvolio's face. And those lambent eyes seemed to say it was only a question of time, a question of time, and he didn't like waiting.

THE people around me didn't notice the lion's concentration of attention. Those in front were beginning to step on the toes of those crowding behind when Malvolio picked up a revolver and an iron-pronged pole and strode up to the lion. Something passed between him and the beast. Unwillingly—but inevitably, the lion subsided, became passive.

Then Malvolio invited us to come up to the animal and do what we liked with him. Three or four of us finally approached the crouching beast, who awaited us dully and without comprehension. I patted his head; another man lifted up his paw; one even tweaked his tail. That lion might just as well have been under ether.

At last, Malvolio led the beast back to his cage, locked him in. This done, he snapped his fingers once, close to the glazed eyes. And the lion emerged from his trance. He gathered his muscles, flung his magnificent, fawn-colored length at the bars, and threatened his master with a coughing snarl that set my scalp prickling.

It had a strange effect on Malvolio. Though the lion was behind bars, and he himself the cynosure of many thousand eyes, Malvolio flinched and shuddered. For a moment he was lost; his face, when he turned around, was pale and numb; and in his eyes was a baffled, groping, hunted look to which the lion's howl of rage and triumph deferred, was a primitive accompaniment.

Yes, looking back I can see that the animals, being closer to the thing in more senses than one, guessed the nature of Malvolio's secret. I wish I had guessed it then, for both Martin's sake and mine. But I didn't. I was conscious only of the uneasiness which I now know was really fear as I turned and went back to my seat.

Malvolio's act had given me a good story. But that other story, the shadow-play that kept evading the arc-lights, taunted me. It worried me a bit, too, on account of Martin. I even wondered, sometimes, during the following year, if Malvolio's eyes, opaque, amber pools to the average observer, had not loosed upon Martin the unearthly light which those unhappy creatures must have beheld in the final instant before their entities yielded to their master's.

Martin's occasional letters gave me no clue. When I found him haggard and jumpy, the next season, I was ready to trot out the fruits of a year's brooding, but he suddenly volunteered an explanation. The monkey.

Malvolio had kept his promise. He had added a Java monkey and discarded the mountain lion. Martin explained that the lion had finally become so dangerous that Malvolio had found it necessary to hypnotize the beast before releasing it from the cage. Naturally, audiences had gradually refused to believe that it was savage at all. In the lion's place, the monkey had proved to be sometimes a sensation of equal value, sometimes a dismal, even humiliating flop.

The Java monkey, dangerous, sullen, and crafty, is difficult to handle. He has little of the affection of the marmoset, the ready mimicry of the capuchin, or the beguiling mischievousness of the spider monkey. But in the dark, haunted quality of his mind, he is closer to the man than any of these.

And out of the dark, haunted chambers of his own mind, Malvolio had gathered the resolution to hypnotize a Java monkey, and no other.

The results were not happy. At times, Malvolio could do anything he liked with the monkey. And then,

just as things were running smoothly and Malvolio and Martin were sleeping regularly again, the monkey would do something unpredictable.

CHAPTER III

Next, the Orang-Outang

“WHAT could a monkey do against a man who can hypnotize a lion?” I asked Martin curiously.

“Plenty!” he exploded. “Sometimes Bimbo won’t look at him—just cradles his head in his arms, or claps his paws over his face—and Malvolio has to wrench them away and jerk his chin up to catch his eye. The audiences go crazy. They roar and stamp and whistle, and cheer for the monkey. One night in Cleveland he ran up the ladder to the high wire, and we practically had to call off the rest of the show.”

His harassed eyes dared me to laugh. But I didn’t feel like laughing.

“How does Malvolio take it?” I wanted to know.

“Well, how would you take it? Go out and drown your humiliation, wouldn’t you? Malvolio’s only human. I wish he’d scrap the monkey, but it seems to mean a lot to him, you see. The hell of it is, the other animals seem to have got wind of it, and it makes them—difficult.”

I could see that, when I watched the act that night. Malvolio kept their restlessness well in hand; but the methods he employed sent little flickers of rage along my veins. I didn’t enjoy the way he hauled the fox out of its cage by the scruff of the neck and tossed it, cringing, to the sawdust; the way he booted the terrier back into confinement because it bared its teeth at him. And the string of buttural, crudely mouthed sounds with which he pounced on the cat at the close of the finale fairly poured ice water down my spine.

The cat had climbed on the hen’s back, and when Malvolio came to

pick it up after he had released it from the spell, it arched its back and spat at him. What he said to it bore no resemblance to French. Indeed, it seemed hardly human. But the cat understood it, for she screeched—a thin, eldritch wail that unnerved me completely.

While the monkey behaved fairly well, it was as though he had taken a notion to humor Malvolio. Maybe I was oversensitive, after what had gone before. But in Bimbo’s antics before Malvolio hypnotized him, I seemed to read the workings of a sardonic fancy. For Bimbo leaped to Malvolio’s shoulder, nibbled at Malvolio’s ear, combed imaginary wild life out of Malvolio’s hair, and stroked Malvolio’s shoulder commiseratingly. None of these actions were part of Bimbo’s turn, I was sure, for Malvolio cuffed the mocking creature to the ground and eyed him into helplessness, then and there.

When Bimbo snapped out of it, he behaved even more strangely. First he put his head between his paws and rocked from side to side. Then, stretching his neck, he peered up into Malvolio’s face as if his sultry, close-set eyes held some message which he would communicate to his master. And then he laughed. To the audience, it undoubtedly looked like gibbering, but to the initiate, a monkey’s laughter is unmistakable.

Malvolio picked him up, roughly, and I was near enough to see how his fingers closed around Bimbo’s throat, convulsively, as though tempted past endurance, while with his free hand he pretended to caress the creature. Somehow, it made me want to get up, walk straight into the ring, and knock him down.

I think it was in that moment that I realized that Bimbo had probed Malvolio’s secret to its nether depths. How a monkey had managed to fathom the mind of a man, I didn’t know. But I didn’t question the fact. And it made me fear for Bimbo’s safety. His peril was threefold. He knew Malvolio’s secret. He had the power to put his knowledge into action.

And, worst of all, Malvolio did not share his knowledge!

I READ that disturbing truth in Malvolio's bewildered face, in his aimless gestures, in the frustrated shake of his head as he slammed the door of Bimbo's cage. But I'm afraid I was far from pitying Malvolio then. I only pitied, with a pity akin to wrath, the creatures in his power, banded together in a primitive awareness of evil and punished by him, accordingly, with an inhumanity which I know now was caused by the greatest of terrors—that of the unknown.

I never liked Malvolio. And I know that Malvolio disliked and mistrusted me, too. He always kept between me and the cages, head down, avoiding my eyes. Twice he ordered Martin to make me go away and stay away.

"We're making the animals a bit nervous," was Martin's version. He still persisted in protecting Malvolio, you see. That alarmed me more deeply than anything else. He didn't seem to realize that he was fooling around with something that had dreadful potentialities. And I—God help me—I didn't know what to warn him about!

I don't blame Malvolio now. For hating me, I mean. When I turned my back I could feel the amber eyes upon me, smoldering with the desire to visit upon me the powers that quelled dog and cat and monkey. That was natural. He believed that I, like Bimbo, had plumbed the very depths of his being and fished up some terrible and tragic knowledge which he himself did not possess, and which I might at any moment communicate to Martin.

As Malvolio grew steadily more shabby, more unkempt, more alcoholic, more brutal in his treatment of the animals, he became more obsessed with his progress toward the goal which Martin had outlined to me. So I guess I was more or less expecting Martin's summons, last season. I wasn't very much surprised when he told me that Malvolio had brought the sensation of all sensations to the circus. That Bimbo was no more. Something had—happened to him. That, in his place, Malvolio was hypnotizing an orang-outang.

Swell copy, but a terrific undertak-

ing, I thought. The first thing I wanted was a look at the ape.

"He isn't giving any trouble," Martin assured me, as we tramped over the sawdust toward Malvolio's old stand. "You'll find him quite docile and intelligent. Nothing like Bimbo. Bimbo could mimic, when he wanted to. This fellow seems to learn, if you get what I mean."

"Full-grown?"

"Oh, yes."

"Funny. I thought orang-outangs were pretty savage."

Martin smiled. "This one's been tame since he was a baby. An old beachcomber on the Sumatran coast caught him and made a pet of him. Malvolio picked him up for a song when he was scouting for new subjects last winter."

We reached the orang-outang's cage and there, leaning against it, was Malvolio. To my amazement, an eager and somehow pathetic expression flared up in his eyes when he spotted me, instead of the old look of suspicion and hatred.

"*Tiens, Monsieur Spruce!*" he chattered, heaving himself up and forward. "*Soyez le bienvenu! Voici mon trésor que j'ai—*"

"He's delighted to see you!" chimed in Martin, on the same fervent note. The resemblance of tone startled me. I saw, too, that there was something hectic about their enthusiasm. They were both on the defensive, in some unaccountable fashion, and were sweeping away their own misgivings in trying to forestall mine. To conceal my discomfort, I turned to the ape.

HE HAD shuffled forward to the bars and stood regarding me tranquilly—almost courteously—with an extreme gentleness of mien that I found remarkable in one of his kind. His eyes were, as Martin had said, intelligent, almost thoughtful. I can still remember the grave expression which they held, quite different from the puzzled *weltschmerz* which you can see in the eyes of any monkey. Without thinking twice, I put out my hand to him.

For a moment, he hesitated. Then

his long arm came up, and he took my hand in his, gazing at me all the while as if we were meeting in a drawing room, not under canvas with bars between us. He was tall for an orang-outang, almost as tall as Malvolio. I was impressed by him as a specimen and, if it doesn't sound too outlandish, as a personality. I said as much to Martin, and Malvolio evidently grasped the fact that I was impressed, because he nodded and exclaimed:

"Et croire que je suis son maître!"

"Malvolio says he hopes you'll give the ape a good play in the paper," Martin translated.

And that was where I threw in my hand. I didn't see any sense in carrying on the farce any longer. I faced Martin squarely and said coldly and deliberately:

"Really? I thought he said, 'And to think that I am his master!'"

Martin went white about the lips; for a moment I thought he was going to swing at me.

"You twister!" he hissed. "You've understood all along, you—"

"Oh, sure, I'm twisted," I returned bitterly. "You've played so straight with me it hurts me to think about it!"

I walked away from him, so furious that I could hardly see where I was going. But I didn't get far. He caught up with me, took my arm, and swung me around.

"I'm sorry Spruce," he mumbled. "Lost my temper for a minute. You see, I've been trying so damn hard to shield Malvolio from any misunderstanding—"

"I realize that," I told him. "But why? He seems pretty bad medicine to me. Maybe I shouldn't put my oar in, but I think you're getting tangled up with something that's going to explode and rip you to pieces, some day. My God, Martin, you have to live with Malvolio the year round—don't tell me you can't feel uncanny forces moving in and around him, some malignant horror working down deep—"

He made a negative gesture.

"I feel something strange about him, yes. What it is, I don't know.

All I know is that it makes him, not terrible, but pitiable, to me."

CHAPTER IV

Final Hypnosis

I COULDN'T voice the fears I felt for him at that moment. I saw him being sucked, by his sympathy, into the vortex of some unspeakable tragedy to come. But I couldn't say anything; it would do no good—might only goad him into involving himself more deeply. I changed the subject.

"What's happened to him, anyway?" I demanded. "He doesn't seem like himself at all—this jumping to greet me, this pathetic, uncertain eagerness to convince himself and me that he's still tops."

"He's been drinking too much—far too much. The ape's all right. But more and more frequently Malvolio seems to lose touch, to forget what he's in the ring for. He leaves the subject, wanders aimlessly and dejectedly around the arena. Just the other night, after he'd hypnotized the orang-outang, instead of giving him the usual command to juggle four balls, Malvolio picked up the balls and started to juggle them himself. It's the liquor, of course. What else could it be?"

"I don't know," I answered slowly. "But I don't want any part of it. And I'd feel better if you kicked Malvolio and his act out of the show. Substitute something else."

With that, I left him, and came back to the big top that night in the grip of the greatest fit of jitters I had ever known. I didn't watch the show at all. I simply waited for Malvolio's act. Finally it came, and the familiar rigmarole of dog, cat, fox, hen, and so on came and went like figures in a Disney cartoon.

Then, to a sinister roll on the drums, he led out the ape.

It is hard for me now to speak of that nightmare. I've spent so many hours trying to purge it from my mind. But it hasn't been purged. It

will go with me into the grave, into the beyond.

I can't remember the beginning. I remember only the moment when Malvolio faced the ape, bent his gaze upon those questing, thoughtful eyes. I can feel the suspense that spread its net for the thousands around me slowly tightening as the moments passed. And I can feel again the vague horror that suddenly gripped my nerves, the warning that something had gone wrong, communicated to the most primeval of the senses. I wanted to cry out—in fact, I thought I did scream aloud.

Then it happened.

It happened very quietly. Slowly, before my terrified eyes, the ape drew himself up to his full height. From those wise, compelling eyes gleamed a look such as I had imagined Malvolio must project when subduing his creatures. Manhood itself seemed to flash forth from the ape, eloquent in his very attitude. He towered over Malvolio.

And Malvolio shrank. Before the ape's commanding gaze, he wilted, shriveled slowly into a crouching position, his arms swinging loosely within an inch of the sawdust. His hunched shoulders, his profile, with the protruding jaw and blunt, bridgeless nose—his very personality—had become apelike.

Then the orang-outang reached down and grasped Malvolio's hand. And the two passed together out of the ring, the ape walking proudly erect, the hypnotist rolling along beside him in the squatting posture common to apes. The audience burst into a riot of hysterical applause.

I was on my feet, sweating and quaking, plunging toward the exit, hunting for Martin. At last I found him stumbling away from a phone.

"Spruce—" he said.

All around us was madness. Lions, tigers, panthers were howling; elephants trumpeted. The jungle knew, and told us what it thought. We stared into each other's eyes, frantic, haggard, like two monkeys in the dark. Where were the words to compass our thoughts? The universe had cracked under our feet. But I saw reflected

in his eyes the turmoil seething and whirling within my vitals.

* * * * *

AND I saw it all again tonight as the mists cleared away. I heard Martin saying across the table, to Travers:

"I don't know why I came. Just to say hello, I guess. I happened to be here, and the show was here, and I thought you'd all be here, so—"

"Whatever became of Malvolio?" asked Daly.

Martin jerked around, then steadied himself.

"He's still at Camarillo," he said.

Travers chuckled. "Still under the impression he's an ape, huh?"

"Too bad about the ape," grunted Daly. "If he hadn't walked down the street and put his arm around that girl's waist, he might still be alive and earning a living. Well, you never know. How do you figure it, Martin? Was the ape on the top limb of evolution, ready to emerge into a man, and—"

"Nuts!" broke in Travers. "The thing's plain enough. Malvolio sent his own entity, or whatever you want to call it, into the ape, and the ape simply took it and bounced his own back into Malvolio. After all, if you're going to fool around with hypnotism, there're bound to be casualties."

Lowry said he didn't think it was anything so supernatural or alarming. Coming from Lowry, this surprised me, and I glanced at him sharply. Then I saw that he was lying. Making light of the thing for Martin's sake.

"Apes are, above everything else, imitative," he declared. "And this was one mighty smart ape. As I see it, he watched and studied what Malvolio did, particularly with the other animals, and then resisted Malvolio and turned the juice on him. Nothing more than a physical trick."

"You mean the ape actually hypnotized Malvolio?" Daly bleated.

"Why not?"

"You're crazy!" snorted Daly. "They got hypnotists to try and snap Malvolio out of it, remember? And they couldn't."

Lowry lifted his glass. "Well," he

said, easily, "maybe only the original hypnotizer could snap Malvolio out of it. And the police had shot the ape, so it was too bad for Malvolio."

It was then I noticed that Martin had gone. And I wanted to see him, to talk with him. I shoved my chair back and bolted out of the High Spot. Halfway up the street, in the darkness between two street lamps, I overtook him.

"Martin!" I shouted. "Martin!"

He wheeled and faced me. A tense hush fell between us. I broke it, stammering apologies.

"I'm damnably sorry—they didn't realize—look, Martin, you must have some ideas about this thing. Won't it help any to share them with me? I can take it."

HE BACKED away as if I were going to strike him. "No, Spruce. It won't help. Even if it would—"

"Just tell me which of the three was right," I pleaded. "You'll feel better for telling me. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Suppose—" he licked his lips. "Suppose they were all wrong?"

"Wrong? What do you mean? That the orang-outang—"

"Oh, the orang-outang," he repeated, wearily. "I suppose he was just an extra-special orang-outang. I haven't given much thought to him. I can't seem to get past that moment when I looked into Malvolio's eyes — afterwards."

"They must have been terrible," I said, lamely. "Dull and glazed, I suppose, like—"

"They were the eyes of an ape," he stated, quietly.

I tried for the last time to crash the barrier. "Of course, Martin. That's natural, isn't it? I mean—"

"I found myself looking into the eyes of an ape. Can't you understand, Spruce?"

He was stealing away into the shadows, now, and something restrained me from following him. His voice came like a shadow-voice, laden with the mysteries of a shadow-world, speaking words I would rather not have heard:

"I realized that I had *always* been looking into the eyes of an ape."

"No!" I groaned hoarsely. "No!"

"Yes, Spruce. That's why Malvolio couldn't make the grade. That's why the animals were so panicky in his presence — because he brought the jungle into the ring. That's what the lion and Bimbo knew, that's why they were able to thwart and terrify him—since he evidently didn't even have a first-rate ape-brain.

"And that's why, in the orang-outang, he met his master.

"Only"—it was the last whisper—"he never knew any of it, poor changeling that he was. And if you ask me to go back of that, back to the dark limbo that spawned him—if you ask me how or why—you're not wise. Keep your mind off that, Spruce, and you may—keep your mind."

Then he was gone. Gone for good. And I knew that he would never feel any better. Nor would I. I felt like pelting after him, joining him in his lonely pilgrimage in search of comfort. Instead, after some minutes, I went back to the High Spot.

They asked me if I had found Martin. I told them no.