

A distinguished mystery-writing collaboration here offers an account which many of you may find unlikely—it is presented however in the confident belief that some of you will find in it both reassurance and comfort. . . .

HOW LUCKY WE MET

by Wade Miller

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE EVENINGS that he had to think about himself. He had to get out of the house and be alone yet not be alone. How can you run with the pack when there is no pack? His name was Ralph MacIntire and he had settled for the dimmest deadend corner of the neighborhood bar, apart from all the strangers but still among them. He wasn't a drinking man, although that had occurred to him as the modern first-to-mind answer to his misery.

In the jangle and chatter of the strangers, he sat aloof. People kept playing the jukebox and often it emitted the highpitched siren sounds that keenly hurt his ears but didn't seem to affect the laughing others. He had ordered a bourbon in milk and a rare beef sandwich. The drink he had scarcely touched, but in that revolting mixture was the only way

he could down whisky at all any more. The milk cloaked the odor. As for the sandwich, he had done much better by it, although leaving the bread mostly untouched.

He raised his head sharply, his nostrils flaring in the smoky air. He couldn't believe his senses at first, although he had come to trust them. There was someone else here, an odd someone else, like himself. He began to breathe harder through his open mouth as he peered about through his heavy spectacles.

He sighted her finally. She too wore glasses that she had barely pulled out of her purse. Tawny head tilted back, she was staring directly at him through the crowd, suspicious but rigid with anticipation.

To Ralph MacIntire it was a miracle, worth treasuring and crying over. For the first time in the past year, he didn't care what kind

of trouble he got himself into. He had never expected to locate, never even considered the possibility of, a woman like this. He seized his plate in one hand, his drink in the other, and jostled his way toward the booth where she sat alone, as alone as himself. She was a well-dressed matron in her thirties, full-bosomed, trimly girdled, her cheeks alive with the pretty red of embarrassment as she watched his approach.

Another unattached male was also heading toward the prize. Ralph bodied against him roughly, said low in his throat, "Get out of my way." The other man glanced at him arrogantly, then mumbled something and melted back into the crowd.

Ralph squinted down at her. "Please may I join you?" He introduced himself in the same plaintive tone of voice.

The woman's voice was thrillingly husky. "Of course. I think this is simply wonderful. But I'm not as surprised as you, am I?" She told him her name, Mrs. Something Waring. "My nickname is Princess. Do you understand about the nicknames?"

He didn't. He slid into the booth close to her until their flanks touched. His leg trembled badly.

She said, "Calm down. Don't derange yourself, as the French say. Everything is going to be all right."

"Thank God," he muttered.

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"You see, I never expected this."

"It's not so bad, believe me. There's you and there's I and there's more besides. Certainly, we're different, but so what? In some places that's a sin, in other places it's a crime—being different, I mean—but we'll make out."

"Do we—I mean, have you ever hurt anybody?"

"Heavens, no. You see, we have judgment—on top of all the rest of it. There's nothing vicious involved; this isn't like the old superstitions. Only the differentness."

"Thank God," he said again.

She pressed her hand over his, then squinted more closely at his fingernails. "Oh, Ralph—you've been digging, haven't you?"

He told her about late last night, after his wife was asleep, going out into the backyard. "Nobody saw." He added lamely, "We have gophers, quite badly right now."

To his relief, she chuckled. "I've caught a couple of stray cats myself. Actually, they were little more than kittens. I didn't eat them, understand, or even taste them. I put the horrid little things down the garbage disposal. But there was the appeal of hunting."

"Yes." Holding hands, they gazed out at the rest of the people, dancing, drinking, joking. "It gets on my nerves, the confusion of spoors. Thousands of them criss-crossing, everywhere I go."

"You'll get used to it gradually."

"The worst thing was last week. At the office, I was standing by the water cooler. One of the other fellows bumped into me, passing by. It surprised me and before I could think, get under control, I swung around and bit him in the shoulder."

"Badly?"

"No." He laughed shakily. "I'm not at all in practice—Princess. I had to pretend I'd slipped and fallen against him with my mouth open."

"Let me see your teeth," she demanded. He bared them for her. She traced her finger across them, frowning. Then she riffled around in her purse until she found a business card. "They'll have to come out, of course. Definitely growing—I mean the two at the upper corners of your mouth. This fellow will do it for you and you'll never hear another word about it. I had to have it done, too." She smiled broadly to show him. "Neat? Simply a nice little two-tooth bridge. I was worried sick at first. I wanted so much to stay pretty."

"I'm still worried sick. A whole year of this—all alone. I didn't even dare tell my doctor much. I was afraid of being put away somewhere."

"Caged up? Stay away from the zoo, Ralph. That's one place sure to give you a really sick feeling." She squeezed his arm consolingly. "Doctors can't help—it's a matter

of personal adjustment, acceptance."

"But how long has it been going on?"

"Historically—who knows? Our group has been trying to work out a theory, but you know how many crackpots populate any given group. There's the Cerberus faction and the Anubis faction and the bunch that stands foursquare behind Caleb in the Bible. Me—I don't much care as long as I function. And I've seen very few jobs performed by humans that can't be done just as well by animals."

Ralph flinched. He wasn't ready for the distinction.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Don't be. Just finding you is the biggest reassurance I've ever gotten in my life." They rubbed shoulders affectionately. He said, "It's been one hell of a year."

"Only a year? You poor darling. I've lived with it for four years now. Oh, there are terrible problems. You have to bathe so much oftener and pay attention to insecticides—you know. My God, I thought I'd shrivel up and die the day I found my first flea. But when you get to paying attention, why, there are lots of fine mange medicines on the market, and vermifuges . . . and be on a very sharp lookout against conjunctivitis."

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "That was the

first symptom, when my eyesight began blurring on me. Then I began to be so conscious of odors—and the difference in my hearing. The slightest sound, and I'd wake up in the night and I could feel my ears actually move. What brought it on?"

"We don't know. In my case, it happened right after I had my first litter. I mean my children. I had triplets. That was when the sounds began bothering me, the highpitched sounds, like my husband's whistling. The eye thing, too. Watching TV, I discovered I couldn't meet anybody's eyes for long. The salesmen or the singers would stare out at me—me and a million other people—and I couldn't stare back. I had to look away. That was the strangest thing."

He snorted. "I've given up trying to nominate one single strangest thing. Last week . . ." He hesitated, peering at her undecidedly, nostrils working.

"Oh, that!" She grinned, letting her tongue hang out a little. "I've heard that tale before. Regarding your married life. Your wife called you disgusting, right?"

He nodded. "Not that I don't love her, you understand. But to be told at two o'clock in the morning that—"

"Spare me the details, Ralph, my pet. Pity my poor husband. Sometimes it makes me want to cry. For nearly six months of the

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year I'm as frigid as a penguin's left foot, then for a week or so I'm more than ten men could handle. Then another six months . . . Oh, the poor guy. People like you and me have got to control ourselves on the one hand and pretend on the other. That's the only way to get along." She gazed gloomily into her glass. "I wish I could stand the smell of this stuff. I'm well-adjusted, according to me, but I'd still like to get spectacularly drunk. I'm tired too of having him wake me up in the night and tell me I've been running with my feet—and making funny noises. He means snarling, I know. I hate curling around, making a nest for myself, every time I go to bed. I don't mean to rob him of the blanket."

Ralph gazed at her in delight. "You, too! What would I have done if I hadn't smelled you out here tonight? Do you ever have that overpowering urge to crawl into somebody's lap and cuddle and feel safe? Do you ever want to sprawl out in the sun and think of nothing? Princess?"

She worked up a smile for him. How much prettier it would have been had her side teeth been longer. "All that, Ralph. Like why I took a night job on the switchboard in that office building down the street. I can't abide the sight of the moon. I wouldn't want to give myself away. Have you had your distemper shots?"

He shook his head. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up in fear and anxiety. "Must I?"

"You bet. It's especially bad in fall and winter. And fright disease—but no one even knows what causes that, so I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Well, if haven't been frightened enough before tonight . . ."

Princess smiled. He decided she had the longest and loveliest tongue he'd ever seen. "I'd might as well get you prepared for the other things. I imagine you already have yourself disciplined in regard to lavatory difficulties. That's the first problem we come up against. But you mustn't be shocked when you begin to lose the little toe on each foot. It's painless, more or less absorbed, and no one need know. And sooner or later you're bound to have ten more teeth come in."

He licked around the inside of his mouth. His rear gums had seemed tender lately.

Princess indicated the lower back of her dress. "And this."

"I'd been wondering about that," he confessed.

"The simplest answer is to have it excised. You know, bobbed. Fittings are awfully difficult, otherwise, and the thing serves no useful purpose. How much do you have so far, by the way?"

"Only about an inch."

"You'll have an easy time. Use

the card I gave you—the same doctor will fix you up. Though it is a pity that we have to do such things. I really think they're kind of cute."

Ralph clasped her hands warmly. "What would I have done without you, Princess?"

She nuzzled his neck. "Sniffed out somebody else, I've no doubt. We're so indiscriminate." She raised her head alertly. "You understand that I still love my husband. I've never been crazier about any fellow but him, the poor guy."

"I feel the same way about my wife."

"In that case." She nestled against him. "Don't you despise those slanders, though? The manger story. The one about returning to your vomit?"

"We'll have our day." He gazed intently at the smoothness of her cheek and throat. "I've got to admit I've worried about the possibility of—well, fur. I've been watching the sides of my hands very closely."

"We seem to be what they call at the bench shows a hairless variety. You phone me tomorrow. I'll tell you where we meet. Once a week, the few of us get together to talk out our problems and have a good romp. We're even considering organizing some field trials—but that's still in the planning stage. Think how proud I'll be to announce I've smelled out a new

member. . . . I've really got to get on my way to work now."

"You can spare a few minutes more."

"Not even a few minutes." She took her mirror out of her purse and inspected her face. "Oh, how glad I am I had those teeth out. They made me look like—did I tell you how much I detest the word they have for the female of the species? The naughty word?"

"I don't blame you."

"Well now, you stay housebroken and call me the first chance you get. You and I can get together and I'll introduce you to the rest of us. And you'll be able to get your nickname." She studied his yearning expression. "Rex. You give me a Rex feeling. Would you like that?"

"Very much." He whispered the name to himself.

"I suppose you'd like to kiss me goodnight."

He wanted nothing more. They

put their faces together and he thrilled to discover how pleasantly cold her nose was. After making certain no one was looking, they lapped each other's cheeks briefly.

As Princess rose to leave the booth, Ralph rose, too. He watched her out the door, so happy when she flashed her even-toothed smile back at him. He sat down again and finished off the nearly raw meat in both their sandwiches. He found he was panting but not so audibly that the others could hear.

He left the bar himself soon after, heading home. Rex. He rolled the new name around in his mouth. As soon as he got out from under the sterile light of the neon sign, around the corner into the dark of the parking lot where he'd left his car, unobserved by a soul but never again to be absolutely alone ever, in his newfound delight he wagged his rump happily.



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