

# An Experience Named SPIRIT

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The man who was sitting on the small stone ledge that circled the well slid off, turned to the woman who had just arrived, smiled and said, "I'm thirsty."

She had seen him at a distance. She had stopped to readjust the yoke which straddled her shoulders. A bucket hung from both ends of the yoke and when her steps were not perfect, and they seldom were, the wood cut into the flesh along the nape of her neck. She took the pain for granted, but from, time to time she stopped to shift the weight to more calloused skin. From bruise to bruise, she thought. It was as she straightened from her bent posture, to gauge the last ground left before the well, that she saw him. He appeared to be waiting for her.

Her mind raced. She thought of turning around

and making for the village. But if he wanted to, he could easily overtake her and take what he wanted. Then, she cursed. Why did she not come earlier in the day with the other women? She knew why. But right now that humiliation looked better than this danger. Then a plan formed out of her panic.

She could see by his dress that he was a Jew and he would probably walk away. Most likely after some quick insult and with a great show of disdain. If not, she could make him go. She would steel herself, hide her mind, harden her heart. She knew how. She had been there before. It was not the first time.

"I'm thirsty," the man said again.

It was so blatant it took her back. At a distance she could manage him in her mind. Up close his presence was almost too much. But she recovered quickly. "Who isn't? This sun would fry a lizard's tongue."

"Give me a drink!"

"You—a Jew and a man—ask me—a Samaritan and a woman—for a drink?" I have a simpleton on my hands she thought.

"Thirst makes friends of us all." the simpleton said. "I will help."

Before she could protest, he moved the lid off the top of the well; and stood waiting for her to give him the bucket.

"I'll do it," she said.

She let the bucket fall down the well. The splash rang up from below. She swung the rope sideways till the bucket at the bottom tipped and filled. Then with quick, successive jerks she pulled it to the top.

The man waited at her side. He said nothing.

If he thinks he is going to be first, she thought, he thinks wrongly. This is our well and it is my bucket. He will learn who he is here.

She rested the bucket on the ledge, hunched

over it and splashed water toward her mouth. She drank like an animal that had been worked too long in the sun. All the time her eyes darted from the water to the silent man at her side. He was smiling. The simpleton has missed the meaning, she thought.

When she was done, she stepped back. The man did not move. She waited; then finally, jerked her arm toward the bucket. Slowly he cupped his hands, dipped them deep into the bucket, and brought the water to his mouth. As he drank, his face was turned up into the sun and the water ran and glistened in his beard. He drank like a bridegroom, loving the *first* cup of wedding wine.

With his lips still wet from the water the man turned to her. "If you would ask me, I would give you living water."

"The well is deep." Her tone was instructional. She felt as if she was giving a child a lesson in logic. "You do not have a bucket. Therefore, how do you propose to fetch this water?"

"Yokes and buckets are always the problem, aren't they?" said the man. His arms flew up in the air in exasperation.

A smile popped open her eyes; but her lips stayed tight and disapproving. Not a simpleton, she thought, a child. Just a child.

The child had a question. "Do you have a husband?" The question slapped across her face. Not a child, she thought. A man, just another man. "I have no husband."

"True enough," said the man. "For you have had, ah, five husbands and the husband you have now is not your husband."

"Do you have a wife?" she spat back.

"I have no wife," said the man.

"True enough," the woman said. "And the woman you had last night was not her either."

The man laughed, like someone had taken him and turned him upside down. He is enjoying this, she

thought, but not for long.

"Besides, prophet, the number is not five but twelve." I was never good at numbers!"

"One for each tribe of Israel," she said and thought that that would do it.

"Very pious of you," said the man. "Very pious." This time she could not catch the laugh in her teeth and swallow it back. It escaped and howled out loud like a prisoner finally free in the sun.

"You are very hard to get rid of," she said; but now she wasn't sure whether she wanted him to go.

"Everyone says that," said the man.

One more try, she thought, and this Jew, like every other man, will surely leave me. "Tell me, O prophet who is not very good at numbers, where should we worship the living God? On the mountain or in the temple?"

The man grew silent and closed his eyes. He seemed to be traveling deep within himself to some sanctuary where she could not follow. So this is it, thought the woman. It will be in the name of the living God that he will spurn me. When the man opened his eyes, he caught hold of the woman's hand. "God is not on the mountain but in your thirst. God is not in the temple but in the scream of your spirit; and it cries to me. Ask me, ask me for a drink."

Not just another man. she thought. Not just another man.

She pulled her hand back. "I don't ask." She said it like her whole life was in every word.

"Even without a bucket—if you ask me, I will give you living water."

So they sat on the ledge of the well under the sun which shines on good and bad alike. They spoke no words. Finally, he reached out for her hand. She let him take it.

"Give me a drink," she whispered.

"What," said the man, "you—a woman and a Samaritan—ask me—a Jew and a man—for a drink?"

"Thirst makes friends of us all," she said and smiled. The man took her hands in his and formed them into a cup. Together their hands dipped deep into the bucket and brought a cradle of water to her lips. She drank it slowly, with her head back, her face open to the sky. She drank like a deer with the thirst of summer, like a field parched by drought, like a desert wanderer finally at home.

With her lips still wet she said to the man, "Sometimes the yoke and buckets cut into my flesh so bad I want to yell with pain; but I never do."

"I know."

Then she told him all about the husbands who were not husbands. She told him everything she ever did; everything she ever did she told him. All the time she spoke, she cried.

When she was finished, he said, "I know." Then he told back to her everything she ever did; everything she ever did he told back to her. All the time he spoke, he rubbed the nape of her neck where the marks of the yoke were the most punishing.

It was just as he had finished his revelation of her to herself that she saw the other men. His friends were coming towards them. "They will be scandalized to see me here with you." By now he held her in his arms.

"Probably," the man said.

"I must go." She eased out of his embrace and moved gracefully away from him. As she walked away, she turned often to look at him. Whenever she did, she always found him looking at her. Even when his companions gathered around him, he stood on the ledge of well and watched her go. Finally, she was so far away she could not watch him watching her.

Then she could not get to the village quickly enough.

Once there, she went from house to house and told people about a man who was not just another man who taught her how to drink. It was only after she had stirred up the entire village that she realized she had left her yoke and buckets at the well and for the first time in memory she was not thirsty. The curious villagers formed

a circle around her. She stood in the middle and proclaimed: "I met a man who told me everything I ever did—except how many times." And she laughed high and long. Some of the villagers said it sounded like she had a fountain of living water springing up inside her.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear this story. Let those who have eyes to see, see this scene. Anything can happen at a well.