

Hey You Down There

by Harold Rolseth

Calvin Spender drained his coffee cup and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He burped loudly and then proceeded to fill a corn cob pipe with coarsely shredded tobacco. He scratched a match across the top of the table and holding it to his pipe, he sucked noisily until billows of acrid smoke poured from his mouth.

Dora Spender sat across the table from her husband, her breakfast scarcely touched. She coughed lightly, and then, as no frown appeared on Calvin's brow, she said, 'Are you going to dig in the well this morning, Calvin?' Calvin fixed his small red-rimmed eyes upon her, and, as if she had not spoken, said, 'Git going at the chores right away. You're going to be hauling up dirt.'

'Yes, Calvin,' Dora whispered. Calvin cleared his throat, and the action caused his Adam's apple to move rapidly under the loose red skin on his neck. He rose from the table and went out of the kitchen door, kicking viciously at the tawny cat which had been lying on the doorstep.

Dora gazed at him and wondered for the thousandth time what it was that Calvin reminded her of. It was not some other person. It was something else. Sometimes it seemed as though the answer was about to spring to her mind, as just now when Calvin had cleared his throat. But always it stopped just short of her consciousness. It was disturbing to know with such certainty that Calvin looked like something other than himself and yet not know what that something was. Some day though, Dora knew, the answer would come to her. She rose hurriedly from the table and set about her chores.

Halfway between the house and the barn, a doughnut-shaped mound of earth surrounded a hole. Calvin went to the edge of the hole and stared down into it distastefully. Only necessity could have forced him to tackle this task, but it was either this digging or the hauling of barrels and barrels of water each day from Nord Fisher's farm half a mile down the road.

Calvin's herd of scrub cattle was small, but the amount of water it drank was astonishing. For two weeks now, ever since his well had gone dry, Calvin had been hauling water, and the disagreeable chore was becoming more unpleasant because of neighbor Nord's hints that some kind of payment for the water would only be fair.

Several feet back from the edge of the hole, Calvin had driven a heavy iron stake into the ground, and to this was attached a crude rope ladder. The rope ladder had become necessary when the hole had reached a depth well beyond the length of any wooden ladder Calvin owned.

Calvin hoped desperately that he would not have to go much further. He estimated that he was now down

fifty or sixty feet, a common depth for many wells in the area. His greatest fear was that he would hit a layer of rock which would call for the services of a well-drilling outfit. Both his funds and his credit-rating were far too low for such a team.

Calvin picked up a bucket to which was attached a long rope and lowered it into the hole. It was Dora's backbreaking task to pull the bucket hand over hand after Calvin had filled it from the bottom of the hole. With a mumbled curse, Calvin emptied his pipe and started down the rope ladder. By the time he got to then bottom of the hole and had filled the bucket, Dora should be there to haul it up. If she weren't, she would hear about it.

From the house, Dora saw Calvin prepare to enter the well and she worked with desperate haste to complete her chores. She reached the hole just as a muffled shout from below indicated that the bucket was full.

Summoning all her strength, Dora hauled the bucket up. She emptied it and then lowered it into the hole again. While she waited for the second bucket load, she examined the contents of the first. She was disappointed to find it had only the normal moistness of underground earth. No water seeped from it.

In her own way, Dora was deeply religious and at each tenth bucket she pulled up she murmured an urgent prayer that it would contain more water in it than earth. She had settled at praying at every tenth bucket load because she did not believe it in good taste to pester God with every bucket. Also, she varied the wording of each prayer, feeling that God must become bored with the same plea repeated over and over.

On this particular morning as she lowered the bucket for its tenth loading, she prayed, 'Please God, let something happen this time... Let something really and truly happen so I won't have to haul up any more dirt.'

Something happened almost immediately. As the rope slackened in her hands indicating that the bucket had reached the bottom, a scream of sheer terror came up from the hole, and the rope ladder jerked violently. Whimpering sounds of mortal fear sounded faintly, and the ladder grew taut with heavy strain. Dora fell to her knees and peered down into the darkness. 'Calvin,' she called, 'are you all right? What is it?'

Then with startling suddenness, Calvin appeared. At first Dora was not sure it was Calvin. The usual redness of his face was gone; now it was a yellowish green.

He was trembling violently and had trouble breathing. 'It must have been a heart attack,' Dora thought, and tried hard to control the surge of joy that came over her.

Calvin lay upon the ground, panting. Finally he gained control of himself. Under ordinary circumstances, Calvin did not converse with Dora but now he seemed eager to talk. 'You know what happened down there?' he said in a shaky voice.

'You know what happened? The complete bottom dropped right out of the hole. All of a sudden it went, and there I was, standing on nothing but air. If I hadn't grabbed a hold of the last rung of the ladder... Why, that hole must be a thousand feet the way the bottom dropped out of it!'

Calvin babbled on, but Dora didn't listen. She was amazed at the remarkable way in which her prayer had been answered. If the hole had no more bottom, there would be no more dirt to haul up.

When Calvin had regained his strength, he crept to the edge of the hole and peered down.

'What are you going to do, Calvin?' Dora asked timidly.

'Do? I'm going to find out how far down that hole goes. Get the flashlight from the kitchen.'

Dora hurried off. When she returned, Calvin had a large ball of binder twine he had brought from the tool shed.

He tied the flashlight securely to the end of the line, switched it on and lowered it into the hole.

He paid out the line for about a hundred feet and then stopped. The light was only a feeble glimmer down below and revealed nothing.

Calvin lowered the light another hundred feet and this time it was only a twinkling speck as it swung at the end of the line. Calvin released another long length of twine and another and another and now the light was no longer visible, and the large ball of twine had shrunk to a small tangle.

'Almost a full thousand feet,' he whispered in awe. 'And no bottom yet. Might as well pull it up.' But the line did not come up with Calvin's pull. It stretched and grew taut, but it did not yield to his tugging.

'Must be caught on something,' Calvin muttered, and gave the line a sharp jerk. In reply there was a downward jerk that almost tore the line from his hands.

'Hey!' yelled Calvin. 'The line...it jerked!'

'But, Calvin,' Dora protested.

'Don't Calvin me. I tell you there's something on the end of this line.'

He gave another tug, and again the line was almost pulled from his hands. He tied the line to the stake and sat down to ponder the matter.

'It don't make sense,' he said, more to himself than to Dora. 'What could be down underground a good thousand feet?' Tentatively he reached and pulled lightly on the line. This time there was no response, and rapidly he began hauling it up. When the end of the line came into view, there was a small white pouch of a leather-like substance.

Calvin opened the pouch with trembling fingers and shook into his palm a bar of yellow metal and a folded piece of parchment. The bar of metal was not large but it seemed heavy for its size. Calvin got out his jack-knife and scratched the point of the blade across the metal. The knife blade bit into it easily.

'Gold,' said Calvin, his voice shaky. 'Must be a whole pound of it...and just for a measly flashlight. They must be crazy down there.'

He thrust the gold bar into his pocket and opened the small piece of parchment. One side was closely covered with a fine writing. Calvin turned it this way and that and then tossed it on the ground.

'Foreigners,' he said. 'No wonder they ain't got any sense. But it's plain they need flashlights.'

'But, Calvin,' said Dora. 'How could they get down there? There ain't any mines in this part of the country.'

'Ain't you ever heard of them secret government projects?' asked Calvin scornfully.

'This must be one of them. Now I'm going to town to get me a load of flashlights. They must need them bad. Now, mind you watch that hole good. Don't let no one go near it.' Calvin strode to the battered truck which was standing near the barn and a minute later was rattling down the highway towards Harmony Junction.

Dora picked up the bit of parchment which Calvin had thrown away. She could make nothing of the writing on it. It was all very strange. If it were some secret government undertaking, why would foreigners be taking part? And why would they need flashlights so urgently as to pay a fortune for one? Suddenly it occurred to her that possibly the people down below didn't know there were English speaking people up above. She hurried into the house and rummaged through Calvin's rickety desk for paper and pencil. In her search she found a small, ragged dictionary, and she took this with her to the kitchen table. Spelling didn't come easily to Dora.

Her note was a series of questions. Why were they down there? Who were they? Why did they pay so much for an old flashlight? As she started for the well it occurred to her that possibly the people down there might be hungry. She went back to the kitchen and wrapped a loaf of bread and a fair-sized piece of ham in a clean dish-towel. She added a PS to her note apologizing for the fact that she had nothing better to offer them. Then the thought came to her that since the people down below were obviously foreigners and possibly not too well versed in English, the small dictionary might be of help to them in answering her note.

She wrapped the dictionary with the food in the towel.

It took Dora a long time to lower the bucket, but finally the twine grew slack in her hands and she knew the bucket had reached the bottom. She waited for a few moments and then tugged the line gently. The line held firm below, and Dora seated herself on the mound of earth to wait.

The warm sunlight felt good on her back and it was pleasant to sit and do nothing. She had no fear that Calvin would return soon. She knew that nothing on earth - or under it - could keep Calvin from visiting a number of bars once he was in town, and that with each tavern visited, time would become more and more meaningless to him. She doubted that he would return before morning.

After half an hour Dora gave the line a questioning tug, but it did not yield. She did not mind. It was seldom that she had time to idle away. Usually when Calvin went to town, he burdened her with chores that were to be done during his absence, coupling each order with a threat of what awaited her should his instructions not be carried out.

Dora waited another half hour before tugging at the line again. This time there was a sharp answering jerk, and Dora began hauling the bucket upward. It seemed much heavier now, and twice she had to pause for a rest. When the bucket reached the surface, she saw why it was heavier.

