

THE SPIRIT OF ANT

By Henry Van Vyk

I met him late one afternoon towards the end of summer in 1987 on the island of Skiathos.

Life on a Greek island can be totally undemanding. The most exacting thing I had done in my week there had been to read two Jeffrey Archer novels. And now with our holiday almost over, my wife and I and our young son were enjoying a few last lazy hours on this private little beach, which didn't even have the diversion of those bare, bronzed bodies on the adjoining main beach at Platanias.

My wife, who was at that moment snorkeling, had brought along some bread with which she had attempted, singularly unsuccessfully, to bait some of the small fish that abound in that part of the Aegean. A slice had been left in the wrapper on the beach.

My wife was absorbed in a book, and as I lay in the sun I glanced over my arm and saw a large ant moving across the sand. Wondering how he would react to an offer of a piece of bread, I tossed him a crumb.

Prepare now for the adventure that followed.

The ant immediately pounced on the crumb, which must have been twenty times his size. Having earlier seen a wasp consume a dead butterfly with relish, I naturally expected the ant to devour the bread.

How wrong I was! Instead, he clamped his jaws around that crumb and set off resolutely in the direction of the rocky hillside which flanked the far end of the beach.

Curiosity got the better of me. I round myself following Ant at a respectable distance, expecting him to stop at any moment to enjoy his unanticipated meal. But he showed no sign of pausing. Up and down the sand dunes he carried that piece of bread, always moving in the same direction. Sometimes he would push his load. Sometimes he dragged it after him. But he seemed always to know where he was going. He had a clear objective and was obviously working towards it.

Five or ten minutes later, I realized that I had underestimated the little fellow's persistence. By now there was no doubt in my mind that Ant had been sent out to find food. But how far could he go, and how soon would he tire? Surely it would have been easier for him to report that he could not find my suitable food? Or to complain that the journey had been too difficult? Or that the food had been too big for one so small to transport?

Had our Ant at this stage abandoned the bread, I would have commended his achievement in getting it this far. I watched as he started to drag it up the rocky hillside.

His journey, I felt sure, would soon be over, and I was determined to see him reach his destination.

Still keeping a discreet distance. I made my way on bare feet up the steep rock face. Up and up went Ant, sometimes pulling, sometimes shoving the piece of bread. He was heading somewhere specific, and by now I was totally intrigued. So I followed him, painfully making my way up the scree. Push. Pull. Heave-ho. Work, work, work. No rest while he had a job to do.

I glanced down towards the beach and was horrified to see that I had scaled a vertical face without any apparent footholds. Ant continued doggedly up the hillside, his jaws locked firmly into his prize.

Had he been a salesman, I thought, how easy it would have been to have sent back a report to head office complaining about the impossible conditions in the marketplace. That report would not have been without justification.

Mere effort, however, was not enough for our Ant. He was after nothing less than total success. So on and on he labored. And higher and higher we climbed.

By now I was beginning to pull myself up the hillside holding on to anything I could find. A tuft of grass, an exposed root. I reminded myself that I was relatively unencumbered compared to my friend dragging and pushing his massive burden up a hill that must have seemed as high as Everest.

Such determination on the part of Ant had to have its reward and I wanted to be there to see the finish. Where on earth was he going? By now I was excited.

I had not seen another ant en route, and it occurred to me that if all the ants from this particular nest were as active and enthusiastic as our Ant, fewer members would be needed to go our foraging. An efficient nest indeed. I thought to myself.

Suddenly, a second ant appeared from upside. He seemed to regard our friend's appearance as routine and afforded him no great welcome. Then as I watched the two arrived at a hole.

Now a fresh problem presented itself. The bread was too big. I recalled the story of the fisherman who threw away the fish because it was too large for his pan. But it was obvious that Ant was made of stronger stuff. Not for him a report saying, "I nearly made it." The second ant stood back watching our Ant. He pushed. He butted and shoved that bread. But no go. A little resourcefulness was now indicated, so without letting go of his prize, Ant turned around and backed into the hole, pulling the bread after him. Success at last!

I nearly fell from the hillside as I applauded our Ant friend. Rarely have I witnessed such tenacity in achieving a very difficult objective. I found myself hoping that in spite of his

fellow worker's diffidence, he would by now, most deservedly, be enjoying the fruits of his labor.

I had spent more than an hour and a half watching Ant's progress up that near-impossible climb home. And as he finally disappeared down the hole I felt I had lost a friend.

I waited a moment or two to catch my breath, and happened to glance at the hole before starting a somewhat perilous descent. At that moment Ant emerged and scurried past me down the mountainside, obviously in search of more bread. As he disappeared from view I yelled, "Hey, would you like to come and work for me"

"What was that?" My wife's voice came from far away. I glanced down as she looked up from her book, registering complete horror at seeing me clinging to the rock face some forty feet up.

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