

# The Height of Virtue

## A Story about St. John the Dwarf

By Sylvia Dorham

One thousand seven hundred years ago, long before your grandfather's grandfather's grandfather was born, two brothers left their home in an Egyptian city and went to live in a monastery far out in the desert.

The brothers, one tall and one short, wanted to please God by learning perfect obedience. God led them to Abba Ammoes, who would become their spiritual Father.

The Monastery where they lived was hot and very, very dry. The nearest spring was twelve miles away. Every week, the monks trudged twelve miles along the dusty path to the spring and twelve miles back to bring water to the monastery in tall jars, carried on the back of donkeys. Water for cooking, water for bathing, water for washing clothes and cleaning vessels, water for the small garden and fruit trees. Water to soak the dried grasses from which the brothers wove large baskets to sell at the market near the spring. All the water must be carried to the monastery.

Early one morning as the clerics finished the hour of prayer, Abba Ammoes beckoned to John, the shorter brother. "Pick up that stick and follow me, my son."

John bowed his head, picked up the dry stick of wood from the ground outside the kitchen and obediently followed his Father out of the monastery. The short man followed the elder down the path, up and over a ridge and out into the open desert. In time, they arrived at a sand dune.

"Give me the stick." Abba Ammoes held out his hand. John bowed his head and presented the stick.

Abba Ammoes used the stick to dig a hollow in the sand. Then, with a strong thrust, he drove the dead wood deep into the dune.

"Water it daily, my son," said Abba, dusting off his hands. "Water it until it bears fruit." Turning toward the monastery, he set off again.

John bowed his head and followed his Abba back to the monastery. There, he begged the cook for an old, black leather bucket with a handle made from woven grasses. John caught up the bucket and without looking back, set off along the trail to the spring.

As the sun sank below the western mountains, foot-weary John shuffled in through the monastery gate. He joined the brethren for the end of evening prayer, received the blessing

of Abba Ammoes and reaching his cell, sank into sleep, the bucket beside him.

When the morning birds twittered in the tops of the fruit trees, John's mat was empty and the bucket was gone. Again, he returned late in the evening, prayed, ate a sparse meal and sank exhausted onto his mat.

At midday, Abba Ammoes hurried along the path, over the ridge to out into the desert. There was the dead stick, standing silently as the wind shifted the dune around it. Abba bent and pressed his fingers down into the sand. It was wet. He smiled and returned to the monastery.

Days passed, turned into weeks, weeks into months and months into seasons. Every day, John's small silhouette passed out of the monastery in the early morning light. Every evening, he returned, swinging over the ridge, onto the path and through gates, often before evening prayer. His body grew strong and swift with daily exercise. His mind, sharp with his walking prayer and his will soft and pliable with his unwavering obedience. Every week, Abba slipped out of his cell to check on the progress of his spiritual child. Every week, he found the sand damp around the base of the stick.

Three times, the brothers celebrated Great and Holy Pascha before Abba Ammoes came speeding over the ridge one Saturday. He hurried down the path to the monastery, something hidden in his robe.

"My sons," said Abba after Divine Liturgy the following day, "come." He beckoned the men to gather round him. "For three years our brother has watered the dry, dead stick. For three years, daily to the spring and back, twelve miles each way. Did he obey his elder? Did he water until the old dry stick bore fruit?" Abba threw back his cloak and drew out an olive branch, heavy with fruit. "Taste! Here is a branch from the dry stick that has rooted, leafed and born fruit!" he chortled plucking an olive and popping it gleefully into his mouth. "Come and eat the fruit of obedience!"

With awe and wonder, the brothers gathered to see and taste the fruit of short John's obedience. "Fruit? From a dry branch planted in the sand?" they murmured.

John stood a little way off, bucket in hand, head bowed. He looked much bigger, in their eyes.