

The Small Path

by John D. Vollmer

The squared-off entrance to the cave had no gate. Hiero left his weapons beside the entrance with a nod from the owner, who knew him well. The guards at either side glanced at him. He went inside, a little hurried to get in out of the cold. The cave angled upwards a bit from the entrance, so the heat from the oil lamps made it noticeably warmer than the frost outside.

It was a medium-long cave, bright with many burning oil lamps and crude tables shuttered by crude chairs. There was almost no one else there, and the short slabs that had been carved out of the walls for beds were mostly empty. Near the back, he saw his old friend and yelled "Philbo! You bastard from hell!" A middle-aged man looked up with a gloomy eye, then smiled. "Hiero, you descendant of a turd! Ah, come sit down."

Hiero pulled back a chair and coughed loudly as he sat. Although not yet forty, he looked old and felt old. He spat on the ground.

"I wasn't sure it was you at first. Such a sad look!"

"Yes. I've been thinking."

"Well, that must be new!"

They both laughed.

Philbo said, "It has been a long time, Hiero, was it that campaign in Thrace?"

"Yes, a bloody, awful business. But you became a captain out of it!"

"Yes, that was the only good thing in that one."

"But, now," said Hiero, "what gives you such a mournful look! Will you tell me about it? Landord!"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure I understand it. Hiero. It was strange. What I've been through."

"I thought you were with the Xenophon campaign?"

"I was, I was. Certainly, I was."

"So what has happened that you are here?"

"Well. I guess I can tell you. There is surely no one else I can tell about this. Have some wine. Abdis! Bring more wine, and some bread!"

"And cheese you stinking fish-eater!"

The landlord smiled at them, favorite mercenaries he knew from long ago. They wore coats and leggings of leather and soft woolen underclothes, leather boots. Hiero had an oblong cap of goatskin and both had faces lined with many campaigns, many deaths, and much, much marching in the rain and snow and wind.

"Well," said Philbo, "I will tell you. I have no one else to tell."

The wine and bread and cheese came. The innkeeper smiled at them. Old friends, so few were left.

"Well, then. We were in the Cilician pass, you know those mountains, not far from here? Yes. Very hard terrain, very rugged. How have you been?"

"I am well, Philbo. But so lonely, up in these mountains! But you have a story to tell. Please, go on."

They settled in for a talk.

Both had suffered frostbite to their toes and their feet were always cold. They built a small fire on the floor, took off their boots, unwound their Egyptian yarn stockings, and warmed them by the fire.

“Well. So. I will tell you. It is a long story.”

“That is good! I like stories. It is so good to see you again. What is this story that makes you so sad?”

“Well. We will catch up, as they say.

“So. We were marching, with Xenophon. And the weather was cold but fair. And then, suddenly, off to my left I saw a small path—and something in me stopped. I veered off and stood looking at it. It was a memory. I knew that path! But how or from when I had no idea, not an inkling, and it was unsettling. I knew that path and the knowledge of that filled me with dread and wonder. What was it? I felt totally lost.”

Hiero looked thoughtful.

“But you knew this path, you had a memory of it?”

“Yes, I did. So I had no choice. I made after it, unloading my pack, pretending it was to relieve myself, and then kept going. It was not even a goat path, barely a worn little trail, winding down and down and down. It was a long time before I came to a small clearing, a plateau. And with disturbing awareness, I knew where I was.”

Philbo had wild, long hair but no cap. On top of his pack was a bronze helmet, branded with a seal embossed with gold, several dents, and what was left of a crest and a long plume.

“You have me enchanted, dear Philbo.”

“Yes, enchanted is what I was. Bewitched.”

Abdis was standing nearby, listening, but Philbo warned him off with a glare.

“At last, off to my right was a small stone hut, the animal door nearest to me, mostly still intact, tho falling off its hinges. Further along was the main door to the hut, completely rotting away. Just opposite me was a kind of wooden hutch, much falling apart but still partly intact, old hay spilling out from below.

“I knew this place instantly. I knew where I was. Hiero. It was the home where I’d grown up.”

Hiero gorged himself on wine and cheese, hungry, but entranced.

“Amazing!” said Hiero. “Your boyhood home! And the path had led you there!”

“Yes, it was the path I’d remembered, tho I didn’t know why.

“So I began to explore. I knew the inside of the hut from earliest memory, with its low stone wall to separate our room from the animals. How clearly I could see them now! Five or six goats, that was all. Oh, how I ached with memory! And of a father I did not love.”

“And your mother, you remembered her too?”

“No, not my mother. I don’t really know but I think she died giving birth to me. Which is why my father treated me so badly, I think. He blamed me.”

On the table were mounds of bread and cheese, which they grabbed at with calloused, dirt-clothed hands.

“This all came back to you? You have told me about the old bastard before.”

Abdis was looming about, putting out the oil lamps in their triangular stone basins, two or three wicks to the lamp. Snoring came from a few recesses of the cave, some soft, some braying. The weird light flickered on the craggy walls of the cave, the inn. His wife troubled over the books.

“Yes, he was a bastard. But that was all I remembered. But now I knew what had drawn me there. It was late and growing dark and I bunched together some straw and slept. I had not remembered this place at all.

“The next morning, I resumed my exploration. The small plateau had a steep winding path at the far end, and I remembered that path too. It led down to a wide meadow, big enough to feed the goats, like a notch in the mountainside. From the hillside below the path there was a small stream, still flowing, that came out of the rock wall. How many times I had filled a pail from that stream and carried it back up the path! Oh, Hiero, how memories poured back into me. So long ago! And those endless trips with the pail, how I hated it, and how it made me strong.

“And until that moment, an utter mystery to me, completely unknown!”

“And yet you were coming home. What a triumphant, terrible feeling!”

“Yes, you have put it exactly right. Triumph at discovery, but terror too. Something lost now found, and deeply disturbing. In my mind, this had all been lost. It was completely new to me, yet completely familiar.”

“So what did you do next?”

Abdis was now sitting at a table nearby, engrossed. They ignored him, chained to the story.

His wife was busy with the chores near the front, clearing tables, humming an ancient tune. She had on a soft single-piece dress of sturdy, fine linen, delicately embroidered in reds and blues and a plain scarf. He was dressed in a manner reminiscent of his Hittite forebears, a kilt and tunic, richly decorated in silver. He had a braided, forked beard and straight braided hair. Both were on the stout side.

“Well, next I went into the crumbling hen house, for that is what it was. I didn’t know why. I needed to. I sat there in the still dust, then looked around. I was looking for something.”

“Not chickens I hope.”

“If you are going to made fun of me Hiero, we can stop now.”

“No, really, I’m sorry. This is not the time for jokes. What were you looking for?”

“I didn’t know. But I looked around and then I saw it. A high shelf with the remains of ancient hay drooping down from the edge. It was almost completely hidden, but I knew it was there.”

“What a story, my friend! And there was something on the ledge?”

“There was indeed. Books.”

“Books! But Philbo, you don’t know how to read!”

Philbo spat on the floor. His face grew intense, looking at the innkeeper, not seeing him, his eyes distant as the stars in the night.

“Oh, but yes, Hiero. I know how to read.”

His eyes came back to his friend, with a fearful quiet in them.

“I know how to read.”

“But this is insane! How could I not know this?”

“There is no use for reading here. Now. What is there to read, what use have I ever had for reading?”

“But how did you learn?”

“From the books, of course. There were books on how to learn.”

“But where did they come from? What were they doing there?”

“I don’t know. But I think they were my mother’s. I think she was a special person.”

“And your father didn’t know?”

“I’m coming to that. As I looked at the books, it all came back. These were the books, they were my books. And that’s not all.

“There were books on [untranslatable word] ‘mathematica’.”

“And now you’re going to tell me you know math. Hmmph.”

“I know, Hiero, but it’s true. I was young and I soaked up these books like a horse driven mad with thirst.”

“But what if your father found out? You have told me what a cruel man he was.”

“Yes, but that’s the interesting part. I remember the back of his hand, always I did remember that, but sitting there in the dim light I remembered something else. I remembered that every time I sat there engrossed in my books, I would hear his loud, clumping footsteps coming and I hid the books. You see, I heard him because he wanted me to. Wanted me to hide away the books. The books that were his wife’s treasure, I think, a bond she could never share. But I think he was proud that his son had found them.”

“Oh, my dear Philbo! I shall never make jokes on you again. My days of taunting you are over. I am overwhelmed. What a story!”

“But there is more.”

“More!”

By now Abdis’ wife had joined them and she was drinking wine from a cup and listening.

“Yes, Hiero. There was more. For I found some, I don’t know how to say it, some smaller books, little blank books for writing in. And they had writing in them. My writing. All symbols and [untranslatable word] ‘mathematica’ that I could no longer read. A complete mystery to me! But I knew that handwriting, and I knew I had written them.”

“Oh, Philbo! You were a scholar! My head reels, it is aching!”

“I know, I know. How do you think I felt? Something I had forgotten completely. I was stunned, what a thing to discover! From myself, from my own past! And how do you think I felt, to see this dream, this vision from the past, and knowing it was me—and yet utterly foreign to me! I cannot describe the feeling of awe that came over me, like seeing one’s own death, written on a page!”

By now Abdis’ wife was leaning back, asleep, softly snoring. Abdis looked concerned, alarmed. Obviously, he was unable to really understand what was being said.

“You shock me my friend, you are like someone I’ve always known, and never known!”

“That is it, Hiero. That is it exactly. You have put into words exactly what I felt.

“But there was more.”

“Oh gods and demons! More!”

“Yes. I sat there a long time and now the memories came back slowly, as if from someone in a trance. I had written in those books, a mathematica I could no longer read or comprehend. But slowly I realized that I had become, in those long-forgotten days, a true mathematico myself. I was writing math, I wrote with a thin long stick, blackened at the end, and ... and I was writing things that were new, at least to me. I don't know, perhaps just childish 'discoveries' that were nothing but the fantasies of a lonely boy, lost in the mists of time, alone on a mountain with goats and chickens.”

“But they must have been something, for they seem to have touched you profoundly.”

“Yes. I'm sure that's what I thought. And then I remembered. Remembered that I left. Left my home and my father, my books, but took my new books with me.”

“Where were you going?”

“I had no idea. But I knew I had to go, to take my books to someone who would know. So I left.”

“But to where?”

“I was young, but not too young to drift in and out of houses of learning, and to listen. I heard the word Alexandria, and it was like a magic word. The greatest place of learning in the world, especially in mathematica.”

“Oh exalted idols! You went to Alexandria! I don't believe it!”

“I'm not sure I believe it either. For I have little memory of it.”

“Now I know you are having your fun with me...this is a cruel joke Philbo, a cruel joke indeed.”

“No, my oldest and dearest friend. No. I know I was on my way there but fell into bad company, and much trouble. I was beaten many times and there my memory seems to stop. But those beatings taught me the ways of the trade, our trade. And I became what I am today. But I have little memory of Alexandria. Or before.”

There was a long, thoughtful silence. Abdis had long since fallen asleep himself and only the lone oil lamp at their table still sent fluttering beams of light across the jagged rocks of the cave.

At last, Hiero said, quite slowly.

“You know, Philbo, I have a son. ... In Alexandria. ... He must be three or four now, I don't know. His mother is a...well, it's a long story, but she is a [untranslatable word] 'learner/teacher' at the great Library. She is a woman of learning, and even power. ... And she has my son, our son.”

“Hiero, you are teasing me. You've never said anything about this before. Don't make fun of an old and feeble friend.”

“No, it is not a tease. I'm ashamed to say I had nearly forgotten the boy. But he is there, if he's still alive. ... And his mother.

“I tell you this, Philbo. I am going to go to Alexandria, to find my son, and his mother. I am going there and from this day forward I am going to make it my life's mission. ... No, listen to me!

“I'm going to have my son, when he is old enough, look for your books, your mathematica, written in small books with the thin black end of a small stick. How big were they?”

Philbo gestured with his hands.

“I am going to find them, if they are there, for I tell you I have always known that there is something special about you. You seem like other men, but you are not. And if they are there, I'm going to find

them.”

They said no more, sat in silence, there was nothing more to say.

Several months later Philbo was killed while trying to catch up to Xenophon’s lost army. The going up and the going down. Hiero made it to Alexandria, but there the story ends, for we know little of what happened after that.

Only one tiny fragment remained, which read: “...a grandfather (?) of Hero of Alexandria.” From other documents we can surmise that Hiero did find his son, and raised him, and that together they found Philbo’s books of mathematics. It is thought by some that Hiero was the grandfather of the famous Hero of Alexandria, the great mathematician and inventor, who learned something from those long-forgotten books of a long-forgotten soldier, part of his heritage.

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