

Phileon of Ilium
in
The School of Diplomacy

a 10-minute tête-à-tête for two Trojans

by Jeff Goode
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*(The lobby of the Trojan embassy. PHILEON, a young diplomatic envoy, waits.
Enter the TROJAN AMBASSADOR, an elder statesman.)*

PHILEON. Hail and good fortune upon you, Ambassador Tranquilis.

AMBASSADOR. And it were hail upon me 'twould be very bad fortune, I should think.

PHILEON. I suppose it would, that's true.

(Phileon laughs nervously, realizes the Ambassador isn't laughing, stops.)

PHILEON. It is an honor to finally meet you, Ambassador. I have studied your career with great interest. You are a legend in diplomatic circles. Or you would be were these not ancient times and we don't really have legends. Just current events.

AMBASSADOR. And who are you?

PHILEON. I am Phileon. From Ilium. *(Pause.)* The Capitol. *(Pause.)* Of our country.

AMBASSADOR. I know what the Capitol is!

PHILEON. Yes, of course, sir.

AMBASSADOR. It's Ilium now, is it?

PHILEON. Um... Yes.

AMBASSADOR. And you are?

PHILEON. Phileon—They did tell you I was coming, didn't they? About the appointment?

AMBASSADOR. Ah, yes, Phileon. The student diplomat.

PHILEON. Former student, actually.

AMBASSADOR. That's a shame. Perhaps if you'd studied harder.

PHILEON. Oh, no, I mean, it's just that I have since graduated. With honors, in fact. From the Royal School of Diplomacy in Troy. Which you founded.

AMBASSADOR. Did I?

PHILEON. Um, yes... Which is why it's such an honor to meet you, sir. Ambassador Tranquilis of Troy! The man whose views on diplomacy have shaped my own views on diplomacy in ways I'm sure no one could have imagined.

AMBASSADOR. I could have.

PHILEON. Except you, of course. I mean, why wouldn't you? A man of your brilliance.

AMBASSADOR. And this is the thanks I get? Fresh out of college. The ink barely dry on your diploma. Your head full of ideas—That I put there!—and now you've come here to replace me?

PHILEON. Well, no... Of course not, I mean... Who could ever replace you? Ever. (*Beat.*) Though I have been appointed to fill the position that you now hold. (*Beat.*) Upon your retirement, of course. (*Beat.*) Which I was told would be shortly.

AMBASSADOR. Do I look like I am ready for retirement?

PHILEON. Noooo. You seem completely unprepared for exactly that. In fact, if I may say so, Ambassador, you seem just as robust and in control of your faculties as ever.

AMBASSADOR. Despite the rumors that have been swirling about the court in Troy?

PHILEON. I don't listen to rumors.

AMBASSADOR. You should. That's the first rule of diplomacy.

PHILEON. Actually, it's the 5th rule. According to your book.
"An ear to the ground and one to the wall
Keeps one alert to what lurks in the hall."

AMBASSADOR. You've read my book?

PHILEON. Parchment to parchment. It was the primary textbook at the Royal School of Diplomacy.

AMBASSADOR. So it's my fault you want to be an ambassador?

PHILEON. Oh, yes. Well, no... I mean, I don't blame you. It is an honor to follow in your footsteps.

AMBASSADOR. We'll see about that. The king may name his favorites, but I must approve the final appointment. And I will not allow just anyone take my ambassadorship. It is a position my son should have inherited. If he had lived.

PHILEON. Ah. Yes. My condolences about that.

AMBASSADOR. So you've attended diplomatic college. And read a few books on the subject. But what do you really know about diplomacy?

PHILEON. Well, I have mastered all manner of etiquette both domestic and foreign. I'm a pro at protocol and, of course, discourse. I've memorized over 365 toasts in 27 languages—some of them dead—because you never know.

AMBASSADOR. Quippery and table manners will serve, while you are palling around with senators. But in the real world it is better to speak softly and carry a thick walking staff.

PHILEON. The 4th rule of diplomacy. Brilliant advice, sir.

AMBASSADOR. Then where's your walking stick?

PHILEON. Me? Oh, I don't need one. I am in perfect health.

(Ambassador trips Phileon with his staff and knocks him to the ground.)

AMBASSADOR. I have a walking stick! Do you think that I am in poor health?

PHILEON. No, no, sir.

AMBASSADOR. Do you find me sickly and infirm?!

PHILEON. Not at all. I find you very firm and no sicker than anyone with a penchant for world travel.

AMBASSADOR. Every diplomat needs a walking stick. If he hopes to live long enough to need it.

PHILEON. Would that not be needless affectation?

AMBASSADOR. Not at all. A walking stick is an absolutely crucial affectation.

PHILEON. Why is that?

AMBASSADOR. Relations can sour, Philemon. Negotiations can turn suddenly hostile. But a good walking stick will always be there for you—when the palace guards are searching everyone else for weapons. A meek gaze and an assumed limp can get an emissary within striking distance of even the most cautious of kings. And everyone is more reasonable after a good cudgeling.

(Ambassador gives Phileon his staff.)

AMBASSADOR. Here. You may have mine.

PHILEON. Oh, I couldn't, Ambassador.

AMBASSADOR. Go on, take it. I won't be needing it.

PHILEON. *(hopefully)* Because you are retiring? And may walk as you please now?

AMBASSADOR. Because I just got this brand new one!

(The Ambassador whips out another staff and attacks. Phileon defends himself with the old staff.)

AMBASSADOR. Made of ironwood. Blessed by the Gods of War, Death, Chaos, Death and Peace. In that order.

(They fight. The Ambassador beats Phileon into submission.)

PHILEON. Help!

AMBASSADOR. Well, you whimper like a diplomat, I'll give you that. And I have to admit, you fight a bit better than I would have expected.

PHILEON. Well, after the death of your son, the King thought it best that all his diplomatic corps be better prepared for battle.

AMBASSADOR. My son was not killed in battle. He was bitten by a viper.

PHILEON. We heard he was assassinated.

AMBASSADOR. Well, we still don't know who the viper worked for. But he's being interrogated.

PHILEON. Have you learned anything?

AMBASSADOR. So far not a hiss. But I have my suspicions.

PHILEON. Yes, well, my condolences. His death was very unfortunate.

AMBASSADOR. Yes. Almost implausibly so.

(Ambassador glares at Phileon.)

PHILEON. Yes. Ahem. Speaking of non sequiturs, I brought you a gift!

AMBASSADOR. A gift? Are you trying to bribe me, Philligan?

PHILEON. I wouldn't think of it.

AMBASSADOR. You should. First rule of diplomacy.

PHILEON. The 3rd, actually.

"A gift in the hand keeps the daggers from your back.
But a bottle of wine would be better."

(Phileon gives the Ambassador with a bottle of wine.)

AMBASSADOR. Wine? My favorite! How did you know?

PHILEON. I've read your book.

(The Ambassador fetches glasses and pours himself a glass of wine.)

AMBASSADOR. Nothing lubricates the wheels of diplomacy like a good Trojan merlot. Or a bad Trojan merlot. Or no merlot and a good cudgeling.

(The Ambassador raises his glass in a toast.)

AMBASSADOR. A toast!

(Phileon is still blowing dust off his glass. He raises it in a toast.)

PHILEON. Um... To amicable resolutions for seemingly intractable differences!

AMBASSADOR. May your soul be in Hades half an hour before Hades finds out you are dead!

(The Ambassador drinks. Phileon finds a dead mouse in his glass, decides not to drink. He pretends to drink a little.)

PHILEON. Mmm. Yum.

(The Ambassador finishes his drink.)

AMBASSADOR. Well, it seems you have mastered both the soft and the hard diplomacy. But there is one thing you are still not prepared for.

PHILEON. What's that?

AMBASSADOR. No diplomacy at all.

(The Ambassador draws a dagger and attacks Phileon unfairly.)

PHILEON. Oh! Ah! Sir!

AMBASSADOR. A good diplomat must be prepared for anything. Especially, those things that cannot be prepared for. That's the first—

PHILEON. Yes, sir, 2nd rule of diplomacy.

(The Ambassador defeats Phileon and leaves him panting on the floor.)

AMBASSADOR. You are probably wondering why I am so hard on you.

PHILEON. No, sir, it's completely understandable. This has been your post for many years. Athena willing, it would have been your son's.

AMBASSADOR. Athena was not willing.

PHILEON. It's only natural that you would want a worthy successor to fill your shoes.

AMBASSADOR. *(raises an eyebrow)* Fill my shoes?

PHILEON. Well, to not embarrass your shoes.

AMBASSADOR. You will never be ambassador.

PHILEON. What? But sir—

AMBASSADOR. You are weak. And your clothing is offensive in so many ways. What is that? Corinthian?

PHILEON. It's Doric.

AMBASSADOR. Woman.

PHILEON. What?!

AMBASSADOR. You would never withstand the pressures of the post.

PHILEON. With all due respect, sir, it is only diplomacy. A great deal of it is just talk.

AMBASSADOR. My son was a great talker. But that didn't keep him from being murdered in his sleep on the eve of his appointment.

PHILEON. Murdered? I thought he died of natural causes? A viper is still part of nature, isn't it?

AMBASSADOR. That viper was a scapegoat.

PHILEON. Is that what the viper told you?

AMBASSADOR. My son was not bitten by a snake. The poison that killed him was man-made.

PHILEON. Man-made? You mean... excreted by a man?

AMBASSADOR. Do you know what curare is?

(Ambassador takes out a vial of poison and hands it to Phileon.)

PHILEON. Of course. Invented by the Amazons. It is a toxin so lethal, that a few drops on the edge of a blade can slay a man in seconds.

AMBASSADOR. That is what killed my son. On the very day he was supposed to assume the position. And I will not allow his death to have been vain.

(Ambassador takes out his sword and begins applying the poison to the blade.)

PHILEON. What are you doing, sir?

AMBASSADOR. One has to ask oneself, who stands to gain the most by my son's sudden removal from the ambassadorship?

PHILEON. Sir, I swear by Apollo god of peace and all of the muses of music, poetry, dance, um, knitting, sitting quietly on a beach watching the sunset...

AMBASSADOR. It was timely, wasn't it? His demise.

PHILEON. I had nothing to do with the death of your son, Ambassador Tranquilis. If my appointment displeases you, I promise I will resign my position at once.

AMBASSADOR. Oh, there's no need for your resignation. All that paperwork? This will be so much quicker. One little scratch, and your diplomatic career will be over in an instant.

(Ambassador advances on Phileon with the poisoned blade.)

PHILEON. Please, sir! I mean you no ill!

AMBASSADOR. No, you only mean to take my job, which has been my life for more years than an Athenian can count on his hands. Or a Greek on his toes.

PHILEON. I wasn't even in the city!

AMBASSADOR. The King is a fool to think he can replace me. And you were a fool to let him send you on his errands.

(Ambassador attacks Phileon, who is unarmed and no match for him.)

AMBASSADOR. I will retire to my grave, before I relinquish this post, Philbert! But you? I believe your grave has an entry-level position.

PHILEON. I didn't kill your son!

AMBASSADOR. Oh, I know....

PHILEON. Then why—?

AMBASSADOR. Because I am the one who killed him!

(The Ambassador is about to stab Phileon, when he is suddenly seized with a fit of choking.)

AMBASSADOR. What is happening to me?

(He crumples to his knees, as Phileon calmly stands up and dusts himself off.)

PHILEON. It seems you are retiring to your grave.

AMBASSADOR. But how?

PHILEON. First rule of diplomacy, sir: Know your enemy. Then use what you know to kill your enemy. It's all right there in your book. Anyone who's studied your career knows that curare can kill in a moment on a blade. Curare also works in a drink. Takes a bit longer. But it was worth every minute. It has been such an honor to spend a little time with you here, now at the end of your career. I am really such a great fan.

AMBASSADOR. No... this can't...

PHILEON. Happy retirement, sir!

(Ambassador dies.)

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