Name: _____ Date: _____

Baucis and Philemon

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1367 words

Long ago, in the hills of Phrygia, there was a valley with a busy village in it. The houses were tall, the gardens were full of fruit, and the people who lived there had plenty of everything. But they had one bad habit. Whenever a stranger came walking down the road, they shut their doors, pulled their curtains and set their dogs barking. They did not like visitors, and they never shared a single crumb.

At the very edge of the village, halfway up the hill, stood the smallest cottage of all. Its roof was made of straw and reeds, and its door was so low that you had to bend your head to go through it. Inside lived an old man named Philemon and his wife, Baucis. They had married when they were young, and they had grown old together in that little house. They were poor, but they were not unhappy, because they had each other and asked for very little else.

One evening, just as the sun was going down, two travelers came along the dusty road. One was tall, with a deep voice and a gray beard. The other was young and quick, and he carried a walking stick with two little carved snakes twisted around it. Their cloaks were torn and their sandals were worn thin. They went from house to house, knocking politely, and asked for a place to rest. Every door stayed shut, and every dog barked.

At last the two travelers climbed the hill and knocked on the low door of the little cottage. Philemon opened it at once. "Come in, come in," he said. "You look worn out. We have not got much, but what we have is yours." The travelers bent their heads and stepped inside. Philemon pulled out a bench for them, and Baucis hurried over with a cushion stuffed with dry grass, and spread their oldest and softest cloth on top of it.

Baucis knelt by the fireplace and raked through the gray ashes until she found a few coals still glowing. She laid dry leaves and bark on them and blew, gently and patiently, until a little flame jumped up. Then she broke sticks over her knee and hung a small black pot above the fire. Philemon went out to the garden and came back with an armful of cabbage and herbs. He reached up with a forked stick, took down a piece of smoked bacon from the chimney, and cut off a slice for the pot.

While the supper bubbled, the old couple chatted with their guests so that nobody would feel the wait. Baucis filled a wooden bowl with warm water so the travelers could wash their dusty feet. Then she set the table. One of its legs was shorter than the others, so the table wobbled, but she slid a flat piece of broken pot under the short leg, and it stood steady. She wiped the top with sweet-smelling mint until the whole room smelled like a garden.

Then the food came out. There were green and black olives, and red berries pickled in a jar, and radishes and soft white cheese. There were eggs that Baucis had roasted in the warm

ashes, and the steaming stew of cabbage and bacon. For a treat at the end, there were apples, a few purple grapes and a dish of wild honey. Everything was served in clay bowls and plain wooden cups. It was not a grand meal, but it was given with kind faces and a warm welcome, and that made it a feast.

Philemon poured milk and a little thin wine from an old clay pitcher. The travelers drank, and he poured again, and they drank again. After a while, Baucis noticed something strange. No matter how much they poured, the pitcher never got any emptier. In fact, it was always full right up to the top, as if someone were secretly filling it from inside. Baucis caught her husband's eye. Philemon looked at the pitcher, and then at the two travelers, and his hands began to shake.

These were no ordinary travelers. The tall one with the gray beard was Zeus, the king of the gods, and the quick young one with the snake stick was his son Hermes, the messenger. They had come down from Mount Olympus in disguise to see how the people of the valley treated strangers. The old couple dropped to their knees. "Forgive us," Baucis whispered. "If we had known, we would have given you something better than cabbage and an old table that wobbles."

The old couple owned exactly one goose, a fat, cross, honking bird that guarded the cottage like a watchdog. They decided to cook her for their guests, because she was the finest thing they had. Philemon chased her one way, and Baucis chased her the other way, but the goose was much faster than they were. She flapped and dodged and honked, and at last she ran straight to the gods and hid behind their legs. Zeus laughed, a big warm laugh that shook the dishes. "Leave her be," he said. "You have given us plenty."

Then Zeus grew serious. "Your neighbors shut their doors on two tired travelers," he said, "and so their valley will be changed. You two will be safe. Take your walking sticks and come with us to the top of the hill." Baucis and Philemon did as they were told. They climbed slowly, leaning on their sticks and on each other, and the gods walked beside them. When they were almost at the top, they turned around to look back at the valley, and they could hardly believe what they saw.

The village was gone. Where the tall houses and the full gardens had been, there was now a wide, still lake, shining in the moonlight. Ducks floated among the reeds, and herons waded along its edges. Only the little cottage on the hillside was still standing. The old couple felt sorry for their neighbors, and Baucis wiped a tear from her cheek. But as they watched, the cottage itself began to change.

The wooden posts at its corners grew tall and white and became marble columns. The roof of straw and reeds turned yellow, then gleamed like gold. The muddy floor became smooth, cool stone, and the low door grew tall and was carved with leaves and flowers. In a few moments, the smallest cottage in Phrygia had become a beautiful temple standing on the hill above the

lake. "Now," said Zeus kindly, "tell me what you wish for, and it is yours."

Baucis and Philemon whispered together for a little while. Then Philemon spoke for both of them. "We would like to take care of this temple, and keep its doors open for anyone who needs a place to rest," he said. "And we have lived our whole lives side by side. When our time comes, please let it come for both of us together, so that neither of us is ever left alone." Zeus nodded. "It will be so," he said, and then the two gods were gone.

For many years, Baucis and Philemon looked after the temple. Every traveler who climbed the hill found the door open, a seat by the fire and a cup that was never empty. One morning, when they were very, very old, they stood together on the temple steps. Baucis saw leaves sprouting from Philemon's hair, and Philemon saw leaves sprouting from hers. They knew what was happening, and they were not afraid. "Goodbye, my dear," they said together, as gentle bark closed around them like a warm coat.

Where they had stood, there were now two trees, an oak and a linden, growing so close together that their branches were woven into one. The shepherds of Phrygia showed them to visitors for hundreds of years, and travelers rested in their shade on hot afternoons. They would hang little wreaths of flowers on the branches and say, "These two were kind to strangers." And in the summer wind, the leaves of the oak and the linden whispered to each other, the way two old friends do.

Questions

1. What did the people of the village do when strangers came?

A. They shut their doors
B. They gave them a feast
C. They showed them the lake

2. How did Baucis and Philemon first guess who their guests really were?

A. The goose told them
B. The pitcher never got empty
C. The table stopped wobbling

3. Baucis slid a piece of broken pot under the short leg. Why?

A. To hide it from the gods
B. To keep the goose away
C. To stop the table wobbling

4. The gods came in disguise. What does disguise mean here?

A. A hidden look
B. A long walk
C. A loud voice

5. What does this story suggest about sharing?

A. Only rich people can afford to share

B. A kind welcome matters more than a grand meal

C. Strangers should always be sent away

6. Why did Philemon wish that their time would come together?

A. He wanted to be a tree

B. He was tired of the temple

C. Neither of them wanted to be left alone

Words to know

travelers: people on journeys

disguise: hidden look

pitcher: pouring jug

temple: house for gods

linden: kind of tree

Answer key: Baucis and Philemon

1. A. They shut their doors
2. B. The pitcher never got empty
3. C. To stop the table wobbling
4. A. A hidden look
5. B. A kind welcome matters more than a grand meal
6. C. Neither of them wanted to be left alone