Name: _____ Date: _____

Guests at the Cottage

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 831 words

A busy town once sat in the green hills of Phrygia. Its streets were crowded and its barns were bursting, and yet nobody there would share. If a stranger turned up hungry, the townspeople bolted their doors and ignored his knock. They were rich in everything but kindness.

Up the slope, past the last of the fences, sat a hut with a roof of straw. A man named Philemon had lived in it since he was young, and so had his wife, Baucis. They owned hardly anything, but they laughed a lot, and they never went to bed angry.

One summer evening, two strangers walked into town, tired and covered in dust. The tall one had a gray beard and a calm face. His young friend walked with a spring in his step, even now. They tried door after door, but at every house someone frowned and slammed the shutters.

At last the two climbed the hill to the little hut. Philemon heard the knock and hurried to open up. "You look so tired," he said. "Please sit down. Our house is small and our food is plain, but you are welcome to all of it."

Baucis dragged a bench to the hearth and spread a blanket on it. She stirred the ashes and found a bit of fire hidden in them. With dry twigs and a few gentle puffs, she coaxed it into a bright blaze. Philemon, meanwhile, took a basket to the garden to pick cabbage and herbs.

As the pot began to steam, the old pair talked about the weather and the crops, so that no one would grow impatient. Baucis brought warm water for dusty feet. The table rocked on its short leg, so she folded a scrap of clay under it, and rubbed the top with fresh mint.

Soon the table was loaded with all they had: olives, radishes, a wedge of cheese, eggs baked in the embers and a hot stew. Honey and apples came last. The plates were chipped and the cups were wooden. But the old pair smiled so warmly as they served that it felt like a banquet.

Philemon filled the guests' cups with milk from a battered jug. They drank, and he filled them again, and again. Then Baucis frowned. The jug felt just as heavy as when they began. However many cups they poured, it was full to the brim. Philemon saw it too, and he went pale.

"Please forgive our poor supper," Baucis said in a small voice. "We did not know." The tall traveler laughed kindly. The tall one was Zeus, ruler of the gods in the old tales. His quick friend was Hermes, who carried the gods' messages. They had visited the valley to find out who would welcome a stranger.

The old pair owned a single goose, loud and bossy, who watched over the hut. They wanted to give her to their guests as a special treat. But the goose waddled off at a surprising speed, honking, and ducked behind the gods. Zeus chuckled. "She is yours to keep," he said. "Your supper was already plenty."

Then Zeus said, "Neighbors who shut out a stranger will not keep their homes. You two are safe. Pick up your sticks and climb the hill above us." The old pair set off, slowly, each with an arm around the other. Halfway up, they heard a rushing sound behind them.

They looked back. Water was spreading over the valley, up and up. Soon the town was gone, and a wide lake lay in its place, still and silver under the moon. Baucis wiped her eyes, for she felt sad for the neighbors. But the hill beneath them stayed dry and safe.

Then something even stranger happened. The little hut was changing. Its beams stretched into tall pillars as white as milk, and its straw turned to shining gold. The doorstep widened into smooth steps. Where the hut had stood was now a glowing temple. "Now," said Zeus, "ask me for anything you like."

Philemon and Baucis held hands and whispered. "Let us watch over this temple," said Philemon, "and welcome anyone who needs a rest. And since we have never been apart, may neither of us have to be alone." "So it will be," said Zeus. In a flash, he and Hermes had vanished.

Years passed, and the pair kept the temple well. Then one calm morning, they felt leaves unfolding at their fingertips. They smiled at each other and said goodbye, and bark curled around them, soft and warm. When the sun came up, two trees stood there, an oak for him and a linden for her, their branches twined together.

Shepherds who passed by saw the trees for years afterward. Some left flowers there, and others sat in their shade. "Be kind to strangers," they told their children, "like those two." On breezy days, both sets of leaves rustled together as if the old friends were still talking.

Questions

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

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

2. How did Baucis steady the wobbling table?

A. She tied it with rope
B. She put a scrap of clay under the short leg
C. She sat on it

3. How did the old pair first guess that their guests were special?

A. The goose talked

B. The table stopped wobbling

C. The jug never ran empty

4. Baucis felt sad for the neighbors. What does "neighbors" mean?

A. People who live nearby

B. People who live far away

C. People who sell food

5. What did Philemon wish for?

A. A bag of gold

B. To look after the temple and not be left alone

C. A bigger cottage

6. What does the story show about sharing?

A. Only rich people can share

B. Strangers should be sent away

C. A kind welcome matters more than a grand meal

Words to know

traveler: wanderer

welcome: a kind greeting

temple: god's house

linden: a tree

hearth: fireplace floor

Answer key: Guests at the Cottage

1. A. They bolted their doors
2. B. She put a scrap of clay under the short leg
3. C. The jug never ran empty
4. A. People who live nearby
5. B. To look after the temple and not be left alone
6. C. A kind welcome matters more than a grand meal