Name: _____ Date: _____

Hermes and the Lyre

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 717 words

In a cool cave on a Greek mountain, a nymph named Maia rocked her newborn son to sleep. Zeus, who ruled the gods, was the baby's father, and the child was named Hermes. But Hermes did not stay asleep. By midday, this baby was wide awake and thinking hard about what to do with his first afternoon.

While his mother dozed, he crawled out and found that he could walk. He went to the cave's entrance. A tortoise shell lay on the ground there, light and dry and empty. The tortoise itself had gone long ago. Hermes picked up the shell, tapped it and heard a hollow, pleasant sound.

"I know what you could be," he told it. He cut thin reeds and set them across the hollow. He fitted two curved arms to the sides and joined them at the top. Then he stretched seven strings from the shell to the crossbar and tuned them by ear until each one sang.

Hermes strummed the strings and sang a silly, joyful song. It was the first lyre anyone had ever made. Yet the baby was not satisfied with music alone. A new scheme was already tickling his mind, and it concerned his famous brother's cows.

Apollo, the bright god of the sun, kept fifty cows. They grazed in the meadows of Pieria. When evening came, Hermes left his lyre in the cradle. Then he slipped down the mountainside. He stood at the fence and looked over the herd. "What a splendid sight," he whispered.

Hermes led the cows away, but he took care to hide the signs. He turned the herd around so that it walked tail first. The footprints in the dust now seemed to be coming back toward the meadow. He tied bundles of branches to his own feet, so his steps looked like nothing anyone had seen.

He tucked the cows into a faraway cave. Then he ran home through the dark. He squeezed through the keyhole like a puff of mist. In a moment he lay in his cradle, covered up to the chin. The lyre was beside him. He looked like the most harmless baby in Greece.

Maia had heard him come in. She sat up and shook her head. "Where have you been, you rascal?" she asked. "Apollo will be very angry." Hermes yawned and replied that he planned to be a great god someday, and that he would not hide in a cave forever. His mother sighed.

The next day, Apollo came marching up the slope. He had followed the signs, and a bird had told him where to look. He found the cradle and stared down at the small face inside. "My cows," he said sternly. "What have you done with them?"

Hermes could have fibbed, and for a moment he thought about it. But he looked at his brother and decided against it. "I took them," he said. "I am sorry. They are unharmed, and I will lead you to them." Apollo was so surprised that he forgot his scolding.

Far above, Zeus had seen it all, and he laughed until the clouds shook. He told his sons to sort things out fairly, as brothers do. So the two of them walked down the mountain side by side. One was a tall god. The other was a baby who could already march.

At the cave, Apollo counted the cows. Every one was safe, not a hair out of place. Then Hermes lifted the lyre and played. The tune was so lovely that Apollo's last bit of anger melted away. "Whatever that is," he said, "I must have it." He laughed with pure delight.

Hermes put the lyre in his brother's hands. Apollo strummed it, and the sound filled the cave like sunlight. In return he gave the baby a staff for herding cattle. He offered his friendship, too. The brothers took the cows back to the meadow, and then they went home, talking all the way.

The Greeks said that Apollo has played the lyre ever since, and that the brothers never again quarreled over cows. The baby had begun the day with a trick. He had ended it with an honest apology and a friend. And that, the old poets thought, was the cleverest thing he did.

Questions

1. What did Hermes use to make the lyre?

A. A bowl and rope
B. An empty shell and strings
C. A drum and bells

2. How did Hermes try to hide the cows' trail?

A. He swept the path
B. He made them walk tail first
C. He rode them away

3. What did Hermes do when Apollo asked about the cows?

A. Said he knew nothing
B. Hid under his blanket
C. Said he took them and was sorry

4. Why did Apollo stop being cross?

A. Zeus told him to
B. He heard the music and loved it
C. He found the cows tired

5. Hermes looked harmless in his cradle. What does harmless mean?

A. Ready to cause trouble
B. Not likely to hurt anyone
C. Very hungry

Words to know

lyre: small harp
tortoise: slow reptile
scheme: a sly plan
herd: group of cows
harmless: not dangerous

Answer key: Hermes and the Lyre

1. B. An empty shell and strings
2. B. He made them walk tail first
3. C. Said he took them and was sorry
4. B. He heard the music and loved it
5. B. Not likely to hurt anyone