

The Oak and the Linden Tree

Opening



Everything was perfect on Mount Olympus. But Jupiter, the king of the gods, was bored. “Mercury!” Jupiter thundered, calling his favourite son. He thought Mercury was the most entertaining and clever of all the gods. Mercury flew to Jupiter’s side as quickly as his winged sandals could carry him. “Come with me down to Earth. We’re going to test the kindness of the people

of Phrygia to see if they are worthy of my special protection,” Jupiter told him.

The two gods dressed like poor travellers and wandered through the land. Together they knocked at the doors of hundreds of homes, both grand and poor. “Please, could you give us a crust of bread or a drop of water?” Jupiter asked.

“May we have a place to rest our feet?” Mercury begged.

The people of Phrygia slammed doors in their faces. Jupiter was angry. “Let’s try one more home,” Jupiter said, “or I shall have to take my revenge.”

They came upon a tiny hut with a rickety roof of reeds. It was the poorest and smallest home that they had found. In fact, it was so small and poor that it could hardly be called a house at all. In the garden there was one scrawny cabbage. In the yard there was one bony goose. “Father, the people of Phrygia refused us at grand homes. They refused us at small homes. The people of this house have barely enough to keep themselves alive,” Mercury said.

“All the same, we will give this house a try,” Jupiter told him. Jupiter limped up the crumbling steps and knocked on the door. The door opened wide. Inside were a kind-faced old man named Philemon and a lively, smiling old woman named Baucis.

“Come in!” Philemon said. “You look as though you’ve journeyed long.” Philemon brought pillows and benches for the travellers to sit beside the hearth. Baucis gave them her softest blanket to cover them.

“You are very kind to go to so much trouble,” Jupiter said.

“No trouble at all,” Baucis said as she bustled about the cottage. Jupiter watched carefully as Baucis used the last bit of wood to make a warm, crackling fire.



Questions

1. How can we tell that Philemon and Baucis are poor?
2. What does the word ‘bustled’ mean? What does it tell us about Baucis?
3. Why do you think Philemon and Baucis were so kind to Jupiter and Mercury?
4. What do you think Jupiter is thinking when he sees Baucis use the last bit of wood on the fire?
5. What do you think Philemon and Baucis will offer Jupiter and Mercury next?

“You must be hungry,” Philemon said. “I’ll bring in a cabbage from the garden.” Baucis put a pot to boil on the fire. Philemon added the scrawny cabbage to the pot. With old, trembling hands, Baucis and Philemon set the table for their guests. Jupiter and Mercury watched in wonder. From their nearly bare cupboards, Baucis and Philemon set out every morsel of food they had.

Jupiter and Mercury ate heartily. So did Baucis and Philemon. They ate and laughed and told stories long into the night. Baucis and Philemon were so happy at their supper’s success that at first they didn’t notice the magic. No matter how much Jupiter and Mercury ate, there was always food on the plates. No matter how many cups Philemon poured, there was always wine in the jug.

All at once, Baucis and Philemon went quiet. They looked at each other and began to tremble with fear. The old couple realised that they were in the company of gods.

“Please forgive us for our meagre offerings,” Baucis said with a quiver in her voice.

“We should have offered you our goose, Clio,” Philemon declared.

Philemon and Baucis hobbled out of the house. Huffing and puffing, they chased the goose around the yard. “Shall we stop them?” Mercury asked.

“What, and miss all the fun?” Jupiter replied, and smiled. Jupiter and Mercury watched as Baucis and Philemon made several attempts to catch the wild goose. Soon the old couple was too tired to continue. At last, Jupiter took pity on them. He asked them to stop and come inside.

Questions

1. *How can we tell that Jupiter and Mercury are enjoying the hospitality of Philemon and Baucis?*
2. *What do the words ‘scrawny’ and ‘meagre’ mean? What do they tell us about Philemon and Baucis? Can you think of alternative words for both?*
3. *What made Philemon and Baucis realise they were in the presence of gods? Why did they ‘tremble with fear’?*
4. *How do Jupiter and Mercury’s initial opinions about the goose chase differ? What does this suggest about their personalities?*
5. *What do you think Jupiter and Mercury say to Philemon and Baucis when they come back inside after chasing the goose?*

“Baucis and Philemon, you are the only ones in this land who have been kind to us. You shall have a reward,” Jupiter said. Their tiny hut turned into a magnificent temple. It had the whitest marble walls and floors. A roof made of gold gleamed in the sunlight. “You may ask for whatever you want, and I will grant your wish,” Jupiter promised. Baucis and Philemon were overwhelmed by Jupiter’s offer. They whispered to each other.

Then Philemon spoke up. “Let us be your priests. We will guard this temple for you. And let neither of us ever have to live alone. We have loved each other for so long. Promise that we may die together.”

Jupiter was pleased. He said to Mercury, “You see, my son, these people are worthy of my special protection after all. And I shall give them what they wish.” And with that, Jupiter and Mercury disappeared.

Baucis and Philemon served Jupiter and cared for his temple for many years. And one day, when they had grown very old, they began to talk about the old days. They remembered how hard their lives had been before Jupiter and Mercury had visited them. Something magical happened as they spoke. With every word, a leaf sprouted on their heads. Then bark began to wrap around their bodies. They had only enough time to cry out, “Farewell, my love!” to each other. As the words passed their lips, they became trees. One became a linden tree. The other became an oak tree. But they were still together. They grew from one trunk. Jupiter had kept his promise.

*Abridged version of **The Oak and the Linden Tree** from **Roman Myths** (Chapter 1) by Diane Namm*