

Baucis and Philemon

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In the Phrygian¹ hill-country there were once two trees which all the peasants near and far pointed out as a great marvel, and no wonder, for one was an oak and the other a linden, yet they grew from a single trunk. The story of how this came about is a proof of the immeasurable power of the gods, and also of the way they reward the humble and the pious.

Sometimes when Jupiter² was tired of eating ambrosia and drinking nectar³ up in Olympus and even a little weary of listening to Apollo's lyre and watching the Graces⁴ dance, he would come down to the earth, disguise himself as a mortal and go looking for adventures. His favorite companion on these tours was Mercury,⁵ the most entertaining of all the gods, the shrewdest and the most resourceful. On this particular trip Jupiter had determined to find out how hospitable the people of Phrygia were. Hospitality was, of course, very important to him, since all guests, all who seek shelter in a strange land, were under his especial protection.

The two gods, accordingly, took on the

appearance of poor wayfarers and wandered through the land, knocking at each lowly hut or great house they came to and asking for food and a place to rest in. Not one would admit them; every time they were dismissed insolently and the door barred against them. They made trial of hundreds; all treated them in the same way. At last they came upon a little hovel of the humblest sort, poorer than any they had yet found, with a roof made only of reeds. But here, when they knocked, the door was opened wide and a cheerful voice bade them enter. They had to stoop to pass through the low entrance, but once inside they found themselves in a snug and very clean room, where a kindly-faced old man and woman welcomed them in the friendliest fashion and bustled about to make them comfortable.

The old man set a bench near the fire and told them to stretch out on it and rest their tired limbs, and the old woman threw a soft covering over it. Her name was Baucis, she told the strangers, and her husband was called Philemon. They had lived in that cottage all their married life and had always been happy. "We are poor folk," she said, "but poverty isn't so bad when you're willing to own up to it, and a contented spirit is a great help, too." All the while she was talking, she was busy doing things for them. The coals under the ashes on the dark hearth she fanned to life until a cheerful fire was burning. Over this she hung a little kettle full of water and just as it began to boil her husband came in with a fine cabbage he

1. **Phrygian** (frij' ē ən): Phrygia was an ancient country in Asia.

2. **Jupiter** (jōō' pə tər): King of the gods in Roman Mythology, like Zeus in Greek Mythology.

3. **ambrosia** (am brō' zhə) . . . **nectar**: The food and drink of the gods that enabled them to live forever.

4. **the Graces**: Three sister goddesses who were associated with pleasure, charm, and beauty.

5. **Mercury** (mər' kyoo rē): The messenger of the gods in Roman Mythology, like Hermes in Greek Mythology.

had got from the garden. Into the kettle it went, with a piece of the pork which was hanging from one of the beams. While this cooked Baucis set the table with her trembling old hands. One table-leg was too short, but she propped it up with a bit of broken dish. On the board she placed olives and radishes and several eggs which she had roasted in the ashes. By this time the cabbage and bacon were done, and the old man pushed two rickety couches up to the table and bade his guests recline and eat.

Presently he brought them cups of beechwood and an earthenware mixing bowl which held some wine very like vinegar, plentifully diluted with water. Philemon, however, was clearly proud and happy at being able to add such cheer to the supper and he kept on the watch to refill each cup as soon as it was emptied. The two old folks were so pleased and excited by the success of their hospitality that only very slowly a strange thing dawned upon them. The mixing bowl kept full. No matter how many cups were poured out from it, the level of the wine stayed the same, up to the brim. As they saw this wonder each looked in terror at the other, and dropping their eyes they prayed silently. Then in quavering voices and trembling all over they begged their guests to pardon the poor refreshments they had offered. "We have a goose," the old man said, "which we ought to have given your lordships. But if you will only wait, it shall be done at once." To catch the goose, however, proved beyond their powers. They tried in vain until they were worn out, while Jupiter and Mercury watched them greatly entertained.

But when both Philemon and Baucis had had to give up the chase panting and exhausted, the gods felt that the time had come for them to take action. They were really very kind. "You have been hosts to

gods," they said, "and you shall have your reward. This wicked country which despises the poor stranger will be bitterly punished, but not you." They then escorted the two out of the hut and told them to look around them. To their amazement all they saw was water. The whole countryside had disappeared. A great lake surrounded them. Their neighbors had not been good to the old couple; nevertheless standing there they wept for them. But of a sudden their tears were dried by an overwhelming wonder. Before their eyes the tiny, lowly hut which had been their home for so long was turned into a stately pillared temple of whitest marble with a golden roof.

"Good people," Jupiter said, "ask whatever you want and you shall have your wish." The old people exchanged a hurried whisper, then Philemon spoke. "Let us be your priests, guarding this temple for you—and oh, since we have lived so long together, let neither of us ever have to live alone. Grant that we may die together."

The gods assented, well pleased with the two. A long time they served in that grand building, and the story does not say whether they ever missed their little cozy room with its cheerful hearth. But one day standing before the marble and golden magnificence they fell to talking about that former life, which had been so hard and yet so happy. By now both were in extreme old age. Suddenly, as they exchanged memories each saw the other putting forth leaves. Then bark was growing around them. They had time only to cry, "Farewell, dear companion." As the words passed their lips they became trees, but still they were together. The linden and the oak grew from one trunk.

From far and wide people came to admire the wonder, and always wreaths of flowers hung on the branches in honor of the pious and faithful pair.



How Evil Came Into the World

Zeus = Jupiter, Jove

Hephaestus = Vulcan

Athena = Minerva

Aphrodite = Venus

Hermes = Mercury

Although Zeus [ZOOS] had punished Prometheus [pro-MEE-thee-uhs] for giving fire to Man, he couldn't take the fire away from Man. The law of Olympus was that no god could take away

any gift that another immortal had given. Zeus could only bestow another gift that might balance the account with Prometheus. So he called his son and chief craftsman, Hephaestus [hee-FES-tuhs], the blacksmith, and told him to make a new creature, like nothing known before—a creature made up of all good things, but also with their opposites.

So Hephaestus, who must have been the most industrious of all the gods, took a lump of clay and mixed into it a little bit of everything, from gold to gravel, from honey to gall, sweet things and bitter things and contradictory things: love and hate, kindness and cruelty, faithfulness and inconstancy, beauty and treachery, a little bit of heaven and a great deal of earth. He created a lovely creature—the first woman. (How men got along without women before that, only the gods knew!) The goddess Athena [uh-THEEN-uh] dressed her in beautiful clothes and taught her household crafts like spinning and sewing. Aphrodite [af-roh-DIE-tee], the Love Goddess, gave her beauty, of course, and the gift of sweet talk, but she also put all kinds of cunning tricks into her mind. All the gods gave her something, so they called her "Pandora" [pan-DOOR-uh], which means "All-Gifted."

Zeus directed that Hermes [HER-meez], the Messenger, take Pandora to Epimetheus [ep-ee-MEE-thee-uhs], brother of Prometheus, to be his wife. This was to show Epimetheus that the gods bore him no grudge or ill will because of his brother's rebellion.

Epimetheus—"Afterthought"—who never could foretell the consequences of his actions and often got into trouble without far-sighted Prometheus to guide him, naturally received the beautiful Pandora with great joy. He forgot his brother's warning about accepting gifts from Zeus. He was still guarding the sealed box that Prometheus had left with him, charging him never to open it. He was so charmed, however, with his new mate, Pandora, that he almost forgot the box until one day she



Pandora with the Forbidden Box

asked what it was. Epimetheus, remembering his brother's warning, put her off. And so, for awhile; everything was fine.

But one day when Epimetheus was out gathering a bouquet for his beautiful bride, the too-curious Pandora broke the seal and lifted the lid of the box. Out flew big horseflies and wasps, beetles and bats, terrible creatures, stinging and poisonous—all the bad things that Prometheus, with careful foresight, had gathered together—sins and plagues and misery—and guarded so that the Golden Age and happiness of men might go on. And now they had all flown out into the world because of an undisciplined woman! Pandora was not a bad girl—just a little too curious about things better left alone.

However, one good thing remained in the box after the bad things had flown out and away. Hope, a beautiful, angelic little figure, had remained at the bottom of the box of evil things. Hope reassured Pandora and Epimetheus that she would never leave them. As we say, "While there's life, there's hope."



When Pandora opened the box, all the bad things that Prometheus had trapped inside flew out and escaped into the world.