

## Baucis and Philemon

In a hilly land, called Phrygia, there is a steep-sided valley. Most of the valley is filled with a dark lake. Beside the lake grow two trees, an oak and a linden, their branches entwined. Hanging from every bough and branch there are ribbons. Long ago, great Zeus, whose temple is the sky, and Hermes, the messenger of the gods, heard whispers from the House of Rumour that there was a town at the bottom of a steep-sided valley in the hilly land of Phrygia where the sacred laws of hospitality were flouted, where strangers were not welcomed. They decided to see if these stories were true.

They changed their shapes as the gods can, so that to all the world they looked like a pair of travellers. They flashed down from the sky into the town on the night of a terrible storm. From house to house they ran in the rain begging for food, begging for shelter. Every request was greeted with kicks and curses and insults. A hundred homes they visited.

At last, tired, foot-sore, hungry, wet through they trudged up the side of the valley leaving the town behind. As they did so, they saw they were approaching a little hut. Standing in front of it was an old woman. This was Baucis. She and her husband Philemon had met in this place, had married in this place, had grown grey and white together. Children had never come. They were very poor but they had accepted their plight and so they had made light of it. They were devoted to one another. The only thing in the world they had that they valued was a goose, who guarded their home. Now Baucis saw these bedraggled strangers approaching and she hobbled over eagerly.

'You! Mighty Zeus, whose temple is the sky, has decreed anyone who approaches our home in need of food, in need of shelter, ought to be welcomed. What we have, we'll share with you. Come inside now, come inside.'

Zeus and Hermes, disguised as men, had to stoop to enter the hut. They were welcomed warmly by the old man Philemon. He shook them each by the hand; he gave them each a stool to sit on. They sat. The old woman, she blew into the ashes at the bottom of the grate so that the grey glowed red again. The old man put on his cloak. He hobbled out into the storm to pick some vegetable from his garden. The old woman cut a hunk from their lump of long-cherished pork. She threw it into the pot. The old man threw in the vegetables. They poured on water, sprinkled on herbs, threw in garlic, and then they talked about whatever they could, in the hope they could keep their guests' minds off the long delay before it was time to eat.

The old man gave them a beech wood bowl, full of warm water, to wash off the dust and grime of their journey. The old woman dragged a table from the shadows into the centre of the room so that they could sit around it when the time came to eat. One leg was far too short: the table wobbled very badly. But she kept a shard of tile, just for this purpose, and she slid it under the short leg. She rubbed the surface of the table with stalks of fresh mint so that it smelled fragrant. They sat around it. She gave them things to nibble while they waited: olives, wild cherries that had been steeped in wine, lumps of cheese, radishes, eggs that had been roasted in the embers. One jug full of wine was all they had. She poured it out carefully between the four of them. They sipped it, making it last as long as they could. Then came the stew, and, after the stew, they had nuts and grapes and figs and dates and a slice of sweet honeycomb.

All through the meal there was talk, there was laughter, and, outside, the rain came down in black sheets. The woman Baucis looked at the wine jug. She was sure it had been empty and yet it was full. She poured it out between the four of them and still it was filled to the brim. She turned to her husband and whispered, 'These are gods, two of the great Olympian gods, here in our home. What kind of meal was this to give to two of the great Olympian gods? We have no choice. Husband, go outside and kill the goose! We will pluck it and roast it in their honour.'

The husband stood. He smiled at the strangers and shuffled out of the cottage. Inside the old woman raised her voice, hoping she could drown out the squawking and the honking of the dying goose. But the old man was old. Age had made him slow, and the goose could tell something was wrong. He chased the

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goose back and forth, then back and forth. Inside the cottage, by now the old woman was shouting. In burst the goose. It took shelter behind the strangers. The two travellers stood.

'There is no need for you to kill this creature whom you love so much. We are gods but already you've given us far more than we could have hoped for. Old man, old woman, follow us now.'

Puffing and grunting, Baucis and Philemon followed the travellers to the top of the valley. When they reached the ridge, they turned and they sank to their knees in awe. For the town at the bottom of the valley had gone. Where it had been, there was a dark lake. They turned towards the travellers. They shielded their eyes, for no strangers standing there now: Zeus and Hermes, awful in their bright glory.

'We have punished this town. Only you were spared. We were touched by the warmth of your welcome. We will give you both a wish. Speak now! Anything will be granted you. Speak now!'

The old woman spoke first: 'Mighty Zeus, transform our hut into a golden temple, that we might worship there for however many years of life we have left.'

Zeus bowed his head. 'Another wish!'

It was the old man who spoke then, but it could have been his wife – they were of one mind. 'Will you make us die together? Will you make us die in the same moment, so that I will not have to stand beside her grave, so that she will not have to bury me?'

Both of their wishes were granted them. For many more years, they were priestess and priest of a golden temple. Then one morning, early, the old man was digging his garden before the heat of the sun was too fierce. His wife called to him. He saw her standing outside the temple staring at her feet, and, when he looked, her toes had taken root and brown bark was spreading up her legs. He hobbled towards her. He put his arms around her waist; she put her arms around his back. As they embraced, they could feel buds emerging from the tips of their fingers. He could feel leaves growing from the bald crown of his head. As the bark spread across their faces, they looked into one another's eyes for the last time and said, 'Goodbye, dear one.'

The lake can still be found even now. The temple is long gone; but beside the lake still grow two trees, an oak and a linden, their branches entwined as though they are embracing. And hanging from every bough and branch there are ribbons, offerings, gifts left by lovers.