

Young Folks' Treasury: Myths and Legendary Heroes

By

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Introduction

With such a table of contents in front of this little foreword, I am quite sure that few will pause to consider my prosy effort. Nor can I blame any readers who jump over my head, when they may sit beside kind old Baucis, and drink out of her miraculous milk-pitcher, and hear noble Philemon talk; or join hands with Pandora and Epimetheus in their play before the fatal box was opened; or, in fact, be in the company of even the most awe-inspiring of our heroes and heroines.

For ages the various characters told about in the following pages have charmed, delighted, and inspired the people of the world. Like fairy tales, these stories of gods, demigods, and wonderful men were the natural offspring of imaginative races, and from generation to generation they were repeated by father and mother to son and daughter. And if a brave man had done a big deed he was immediately celebrated in song and story, and quite as a matter of course, the deed grew with repetition of these. Minstrels, gleemen, poets, and skalds (a Scandinavian term for poets) took up these rich themes and elaborated them. Thus, if a hero had killed a serpent, in time it became a fiery dragon, and if he won a great battle, the enthusiastic reciters of it had him do prodigious feats—feats beyond belief. But do not fancy from this that the heroes were every-day persons. Indeed, they were quite extraordinary and deserved highest praise of their fellow-men.

So, in ancient and medieval Europe the wandering poet or minstrel went from place to place repeating his wondrous narratives, adding new verses to his tales, changing his episodes to suit locality or occasion, and always skilfully shaping his fascinating romances. In court and cottage he was listened to with breathless attention. He might be compared to a living novel circulating about the country, for in those days books were few or entirely unknown. Oriental countries, too, had their professional story-spinners, while our American Indians heard of the daring exploits of their heroes from the lips of old men steeped in tradition. My youngest reader can then appreciate how myths and legends were multiplied and their incidents magnified. We all know how almost unconsciously we color and change the stories we repeat, and naturally so did our gentle and gallant singers through the long-gone centuries of chivalry and simple faith.

Every reader can feel the deep significance underlying the myths we present—the poetry and imperishable beauty of the Greek, the strange and powerful conceptions of the Scandinavian mind, the oddity and fantasy of the Japanese, Slavs, and East Indians, and finally the queer imaginings of our own American Indians. Who, for instance, could ever forget poor Proserpina and the six pomegranate seeds, the death of beautiful Baldur, the luminous Princess Labam, the stupid jellyfish and shrewd monkey, and the funny way in which Hiawatha remade the earth after it had been destroyed by flood?

Then take our legendary heroes: was ever a better or braver company brought together—Perseus, Hercules, Siegfried, Roland, Galahad, Robin Hood, and a dozen others? But stop, I am using too many question-marks. There is no need to query heroes known and admired the world over.

As true latter-day story-tellers, both Hawthorne and Kingsley retold many of these myths and legends, and from their classic pages we have adapted a number of our tales, and made them somewhat simpler and shorter in form. By way of apology for this liberty (if some should so consider it), we humbly offer a paragraph from a preface to the "Wonder Book" written by its author:

"A great freedom of treatment was necessary but it will be observed by every one who attempts to render these legends malleable in his intellectual furnace, that they are marvelously independent of all temporary modes and circumstances. They . . . remain essentially the same, after changes that would affect the identity of almost anything else."

Now to those who have not jumped over my head, or to those who, having done so, may jump back to this foreword, I trust my few remarks will have given some additional interest in our myths and heroes of lands far and near.

Daniel Edwin Wheeler

Baucis And Philemon

One evening, in times long ago, old Philemon and his wife Baucis sat at their cottage door watching the sunset. They had eaten their supper and were enjoying a quiet talk about their garden, and their cow, and the fruit trees on which the pears and apples were beginning to ripen. But their talk was very much disturbed by rude shouts and laughter from the village children, and by the fierce barking of dogs.

"I fear," said Philemon, "that some poor traveler is asking for a bed in the village, and that these rough people have set the dogs on him."

"Well, I never," answered old Baucis. "I do wish the neighbors would be kinder to poor wanderers; I feel that some terrible punishment will happen to this village if the people are so wicked as to make fun of those who are tired and hungry. As for you and me, so long as we have a crust of bread, let us always be willing to give half of it to any poor homeless stranger who may come along."

"Indeed, that we will," said Philemon.

These old folks, you must know, were very poor, and had to work hard for a living. They seldom had anything to eat except bread and milk, and vegetables, with sometimes a little honey from their beehives, or a few ripe pears and apples from their little garden. But they were two of the kindest old people in the world, and would have gone without their dinner .. any day, rather than refuse a slice of bread or a cupful of milk to the weary traveler who might stop at the door.

Their cottage stood on a little hill a short way from the village, which lay in a valley; such a pretty valley, shaped like a cup, with plenty of green fields and gardens, and fruit trees; it was a pleasure just to look at it. But the people who lived in this lovely place were selfish and hard-hearted; they had no pity for the poor, and were unkind to those who had no home, and they only laughed when Philemon said it was right to be gentle to people who were sad and friendless.

These wicked villagers taught their children to be as bad as themselves. They used to clap their hands and make fun of poor travelers who were tramping wearily from one village to another, and they even taught the dogs to snarl and bark at strangers if their clothes were shabby. So the village was known far and near as an unfriendly place, where neither help nor pity was to be found.

What made it worse, too, was that when rich people came in their carriages, or riding on fine horses, with servants to attend to them, the village people would take off their hats and be very polite and attentive: and if the children were rude they got their ears boxed; as to the dogs—if a single dog dared to growl at a rich man he was beaten and then tied up without any supper.

So now you can understand why old Philemon spoke sadly when he heard the shouts of the children, and the barking of the dogs, at the far end of the village street.

He and Baucis sat shaking their heads while the noise came nearer and nearer, until they saw two travelers coming along the road on foot. A crowd of rude children were following them, shouting and throwing stones, and several dogs were snarling at the travelers' heels.

They were both very plainly dressed, and looked as if they might not have enough money to pay for a night's lodging.

"Come, wife," said Philemon, "let us go and meet these poor people and offer them shelter."

"You go," said Baucis, "while I make ready some supper," and she hastened indoors.

Philemon went down the road, and holding out his hand to the two men, he said, "Welcome, strangers, welcome."

"Thank you," answered the younger of the two travelers. "Yours is a kind welcome, very different from the one we got in the village; pray why do you live in such a bad place?"

"I think," answered Philemon, "that Providence put me here just to make up as best I can for other people's unkindness."

The traveler laughed heartily, and Philemon was glad to see him in such good spirits. He took a good look at him and his companion. The younger man was very thin, and was dressed in an odd kind of way. Though it was a summer evening, he wore a cloak which was wrapped tightly about him; and he had a cap on his head, the brim of which stuck out over both ears. There was something queer too about his shoes, but as it was getting dark, Philemon could not see exactly what they were like.

One thing struck Philemon very much, the traveler was so wonderfully light and active that it seemed as if his feet were only kept close to the ground with difficulty. He had a staff in his hand which was the oddest-looking staff Philemon had seen. It was made of wood and had a little pair of wings near the top. Two snakes cut into the wood were twisted round the staff, and these were so well carved that Philemon almost thought he could see them wriggling.

The older man was very tall, and walked calmly along, taking no notice either of naughty children or yelping dogs.

When they reached the cottage gate, Philemon said, "We are very poor folk, but you are welcome to whatever we have in the cupboard. My wife Baucis has gone to see what you can have for supper."

They sat down on the bench, and the younger stranger let his staff fall as he threw himself down on the grass, and then a strange thing happened. The staff seemed to get up from the ground of its own accord, and it opened a little pair of wings and half-hopped, half-flew and leaned itself against the wall of the cottage.

Philemon was so amazed that he feared he had been dreaming, but before he could ask any questions, the elder stranger said: "Was there not a lake long ago covering the spot where the village now stands?"

"Never in my day," said old Philemon, "nor in my father's, nor my grandfather's: there were always fields and meadows just as there are now, and I suppose there always will be."

"That I am not so sure of," replied the stranger. "Since the people in that village have forgotten how to be loving and gentle, maybe it were better that the lake should be rippling over the cottages again," and he looked very sad and stern.

He was a very important-looking man, Philemon felt, even though his clothes were old and shabby; maybe he was some great learned stranger who did not care at all for money or clothes, and was wandering about the world seeking wisdom and knowledge. Philemon was quite sure he was not a common person. But he talked so kindly to Philemon, and the younger traveler made such funny remarks, that they were all constantly laughing.

"Pray, my young friend, what is your name?" Philemon asked.

"Well," answered the younger man, "I am called Mercury, because I am so quick."

"What a strange name!" said Philemon; "and your friend, what is he called?"

"You must ask the thunder to tell you that," said Mercury, "no other voice is loud enough."

Philemon was a little confused at this answer, but the stranger looked so kind and friendly that he began to tell them about his good old wife, and what fine butter and cheese she made, and how happy they were in their little garden; and how they loved each other very dearly and hoped they might live together till they died. And the stern stranger listened with a sweet smile on his face.

Baucis had now got supper ready; not very much of a supper, she told them. There was only half a brown loaf and a bit of cheese, a pitcher with some milk, a little honey, and a bunch of purple grapes. But she said, "Had we only known you were coming, my goodman and I would have gone without anything in order to give you a better supper."

"Do not trouble," said the elder stranger kindly. "A hearty welcome is better than the finest of food, and we are so hungry that what you have to offer us seems a feast." Then they all went into the cottage.

And now I must tell you something that will make your eyes open. You remember that Mercury's staff was leaning against the cottage wall? Well, when its owner went in at the door, what should this wonderful staff do but spread its little wings and go hop-hop, flutter-flutter up the steps; then it went tap-tap across the kitchen floor and did not stop till it stood close behind Mercury's chair. No one noticed this, as Baucis and her husband were too busy attending to their guests.

Baucis filled up two bowls of milk from the pitcher, while her husband cut the loaf and the cheese. "What delightful milk, Mother Baucis," said Mercury, "may I have some more? This has been such a hot day that I am very thirsty."

"Oh dear, I am so sorry and ashamed," answered Baucis, "but the truth is there is hardly another drop of milk in the pitcher."

"Let me see," said Mercury, starting up and catching hold of the handles, "why here is certainly more milk in the pitcher." He poured out a bowlful for himself and another for his companion. Baucis could scarcely believe her eyes. "I suppose I must have made a mistake," she thought, "at any rate the pitcher must be empty now after filling both bowls twice over."

"Excuse me, my kind hostess," said Mercury in a little while, "but your milk is so good that I should very much like another bowlful."

Now Baucis was perfectly sure that the pitcher was empty, and in order to show Mercury that there was not another drop in it, she held it upside down over his bowl. What was her surprise when a stream of fresh milk fell bubbling into the bowl and overflowed on to the table, and the two snakes that were twisted round Mercury's staff stretched out their heads and began to lap it up.

"And now, a slice of your brown loaf, pray Mother Baucis, and a little honey," asked Mercury.

Baucis handed the loaf, and though it had been rather a hard and dry loaf when she and her husband ate some at tea-time, it was now as soft and new as if it had just come from the oven. As to the honey, it had become the color of new gold and had the scent of a thousand flowers, and the small grapes in the bunch had grown larger and richer, and each one seemed bursting with ripe juice.

Although Baucis was a very simple old woman, she could not help thinking that there was something rather strange going on. She sat down beside Philemon and told him in a whisper what she had seen.

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