Midas

They needed a new king in the country of Phrygia, where many of the elders held onto the old saying at the court that someday they would have a ruler who arrived at the palace in a farm wagon.

Sone of the younger folks quietly chuckled about the silly old prophecy, but, to the surprise of all, a peasant and his wife drove into the public square one day in an ox cart, bringing their teenaged son, Midas, on the seat between them. The peasant's name was Gordius, and he dismounted, tying his animals with such a hard knot that it looked as if he intended that the team should stay there forever. In fact, it was called the Gordian knot and it was so hard a knot that it was reported that he who could untie it must be strong, wise, and determined, the very qualities Phyrgia needed in a king.

After many men tried and failed to loosen the knot, Midas offered to show the gathering crowd how to release it and, as he easily did so, the people felt this was so exactly an interpretation of the prophecy that Midas was made king and put upon the throne.

From the beginning of his reign, Midas used his power to satisfy his own wishes rather than act in the people's best interest. As as child of poverity, he felt he'd been denied the luxuries of life for far too long, and he was unapologetic in indulging himself now.

Dionysus, with vine leaves twisted about his curling locks and a goblet of wine ever-present in his hand, was the god of the vineyards and understood the allure of indulgence. Many years into Midas' reign, the king made the acquaintance of Dionysus, who was a friendly god, fond of human companionship. In their meeting, Dionysus, knowing well of Midas' selfishness, unexpectedly offered Midas his choice of any wish.

Midas, a wide grin of greed crossing this face, asked, "Could you make it so that whatever I touch would turn to gold?"

Dionysus had hoped that Midas would make a better choice, but the god simply nodded and said, "And so it is done." Then, he bid the mortal farewell. King Midas hurried off to test his gift alone so that he need not share it with anyone. He could not believe his eyes when he discovered that the twig of an oak, which he pulled from a branch, turned in his fingers to a bar of solid gold. He picked up a stone; it turned into a heavy gold nugget. He touched a piece of sod; it became a mass of gold dust, thick and heavy. He snatched an apple from an orchard tree; it was as if he had robbed the Hesperides of one of their apples of gold. King Midas' joy knew no bounds. He hurried home and ordered his servants to prepare and serve a most costly and elaborate feast for him in celebration of his newfound gift of gold.

He was hungry and could scarcely wait to eat; he snatched a piece of bread to begin his meal. What was King Midas' surprise to see the bread harden into a slab of yellow metal in his hands! He lifted a goblet of creamy milk to his lips and it congealed into a thick, molten liquid of gold. It was so with whatever King Midas tried to eat; fowls, fruit, cakes, all were changed to gold before he had a chance to even touch the food with his lips. He was faced in the midst of all his wealth with death by starvation.

Raising his arms, shining with gold, in supplication to Dionysus, Midas begged that he might be saved from his own power of glittering destruction.

Although the gods were able to grant gifts, it was not possible for Dionysus to relieve a man from the dangers of his own use of a godly gift unless the man, himself, helped. Dionysus was too kind hearted, however, to leave the foolish king to his fate, so he consented to show him a way out of his dilemma.

"Go," he told Midas, "to the River Pactolus. Follow its winding course to the fountain head and then plunge your body and head in its waters to wash away your greed and its punishment."

It was a long and difficult journey for King Midas whose joints, even, creaked and were stiff with the golden metal into which they had changed, and who could find no food or any bed on the way that was not at once transformed to gold the instant he touched it. He was obliged to flee and hide from robbers who pursued this fugitive form of gold. At last, however, he came to the river, immersed himself in it, and had the relief of feeling his stiff, glittering body soften to its natural flesh again.

"I have had enough of the power of gold," Midas said when he returned to his court. "From this time, I shall avoid all riches and live in the country."

So King Midas acquired a farm and took his court there, becoming a worshipper of Pan,

the goat-footed god of the fields.

The god Pan was the merriest and almost the best beloved of all the gods, for his domain was the whole of the beautiful, wide outdoors. He was a wanderer of the mountains and valleys through all the seasons, peering into the grottos where the shepherds lived, amusing himself by chasing the nymphs, and bringing laughter and merriment wherever he went. The stump of a tree with its shaggy roots was Pan's pillow and the dusky leaves his only shelter.

No one on the earth was safe from the wiles of Pan. One summer day Artemis, the huntress, was roaming through a forest when she heard a rustle of leaves in the path behind her. Turning, she saw the dark, mocking face of Pan and his horned head and hairy body. Artemis fled and Pan followed.

Pan must have known it was a goddess whom he pursued, for Artemis' hunting horn and her bow were of silver like the moon whose deity she was, but this did not stop him. On he went as Artemis ran in terror from him until they came to the bank of a river. Here Pan overtook her and Artemis had only time to call to her friends, the water-nymphs, for aid when the god clasped her in his arms.

But it was no longer Artemis he had caught; instead, he held a tuft of dripping water reeds in his hands through which the nymphs had allowed the goddess to escape. Pan held up the reeds and breathed a sigh through them because of the failure of his prank. The reeds vibrated with a lovely melody. Pan was charmed with the novelty and the sweetness of the music. He took some of the reeds of unequal lengths and, placing them side by side, he bound them together. So he made his pipes on which he learned to play tunes like the singing of birds and the babbling of brooks.

King Midas enjoyed his life in the country, and he made the acquaintance of the god Pan, just as he had that of Dionysus. He encouraged Pan in his tricks and flattered him by telling him how well he played his pipes.

"If you think me skilful, King Midas, it is possible that I may challenge Apollo in a contest of musical skill," Pan boasted.

"It would be an excellent idea," King Midas replied.

Midas should have known better and so should the frolicsome, reckless Pan. Apollo's lute was the musical instrument of the heavens and Pan's pipes could play only the tunes of earth, but Pan sent for Apollo and the god of light and song descended to a green field where the contest was to be held. Tmolus, the mountain god, was chosen to be the judge and at a signal Pan played the rustic melody on his pipes which was all he knew, and which greatly pleased King Midas who sat near to listen.

Then Apollo rose, crowned with laurel and wearing a robe of Tyrian purple that swept the ground. He struck the strings of his lute and earth was filled with the music of the gods. The mountain-god swept away the trees that surrounded him so that he could listen better, and the trees themselves leaned toward Apollo in wonder and homage. When the music stopped, the strings still vibrated making the hills carry and Echo the harmony to the skies. The mountain-god awarded the victory in the unequal contest to Apollo, but King Midas objected.

"I like better the music of Pan's pipes," he said. "I question the judgment of Tmolus."

Poor old Midas, still self centered and earthly! Apollo could not suffer such a depraved pair of ears to wear human form any longer. He touched Midas' ears and they began to lengthen, to move where they joined his head, and they grew heavy inside and outside. Midas had the ears of an ass!

Such a mortification for a king to have to bear! Indeed, King Midas could not stand it alone, and he told the secret of his odd ears to the court hair-dresser in order to get his help in disguising them.

"But on pain of death do not tell anyone about my ears!" Midas commanded.

The hairdresser cut the King's hair so as to cover up the flopping ass's ears and he even fashioned a large turban to further conceal them, but he couldn't keep such a good secret. He went out into a meadow, dug a hole in the ground, and stooping down, whispered the secret into it. Then he carefully covered it up.

In a very short time a thick bed of reeds sprang up in the meadow in the exact spot where the hairdresser had buried the secret of King Midas' disgrace. As soon as the reeds had grown high enough to be played upon by the breezes, they began to whisper the story of the king who had to finish his reign with a pair of asses' ears instead of his own because of his foolishness. And it is said that the meadow reeds, blown by the wind, continue to tell the story of King Midas today.

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