

# **How King Midas Lost His Ears**

They needed a new king in the country of Phrygia in Asia and there was an old saying at the court that some day they would have a ruler who arrived at the palace in a farm wagon.

No one had thought very much about this 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 son, Midas, on the seat between them. The peasant's name was Gordius, and he dismounted, tying his wagon in such a hard knot that it looked as if he intended that the team should stay there. In fact it was called the Gordian knot and it was so hard a knot that it was reported that he who was able to untie it would be the ruler of all Asia.

The wagon remained there, just outside the palace gates, securely fastened, and Gordius and his wife walked home leaving Midas. It was so exactly an interpretation of the prophecy that Midas was made king and put upon the throne of Phrygia.

He had every opportunity of being a ruler of parts, for his humble birth would not have interfered at all, but Midas, from the very beginning of his reign, used his power to satisfy his own wishes instead of carrying out the will of the people.

Bacchus, with vine leaves twisted about his curling locks and a goblet of the purple juice of the grape always in his hand, was the god of the vineyards. King Midas made the acquaintance of Bacchus, who was a friendly, peaceful god and fond of human companionship. And Bacchus unexpectedly offered Midas his choice of any wish that he cherished.

What did King Midas ask but that whatever he touched might be turned to gold!

He hardly believed that Bacchus would be able to grant the gift of such greedy power as this, and Bacchus wished that Midas had made a better choice. The god consented, though, and 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 to a 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 gardens of 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 new found gift of gold.

He was hungry and could scarcely wait to eat; he almost snatched a piece of white 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 Bacchus, 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 Bacchus to relieve a man from the dangers of his own use of a godly gift unless he, himself, helped. Bacchus 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 worshiper 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 Diana, 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. Diana fled and Pan followed.

Pan must have known it was a goddess whom he pursued, for Diana's 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 Diana ran in terror from him until they came to the bank of a river. Here Pan overtook her and Diana had only time to call to her friends, the water-nymphs, for aid when the god clasped her in his arms.

But it was not Diana he had caught. 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 gave out 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 as he had that of Bacchus. He encouraged Pan in his tricks and flattered him by telling him how well he played his pipes.

"If you think me skillful, 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 lyre 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 self will. And it is said that the meadow reeds, blown by the wind, tell the story of King Midas to-day.