

The tale of Midas [mi'd; }s) is one of the most popular myths. It was probably designed to teach a lesson, for it shows us a king learning a very hard lesson indeed. As you read, notice how the power of the gods is balanced by wisdom and mercy.

*Retold by Bernard Evslin*

## Midas

There was a king named Midas, and what he loved best in the world was gold. He had plenty of his own, but he could not bear the thought of anyone else having any. Each morning he awoke very early to watch the sunrise and said, "Of all the gods, if gods there be, I like you least, Apollo. How dare you ride so **unthriftilly** in your sun-chariot scattering golden **sheaves**<sup>1</sup> of light on rich and poor alike-on king and peasant, on merchant, shepherd, warrior? This is an evil thing, oh **wastrel**<sup>2</sup> god, for only kings should have gold; only the rich know what to do with it." After a while these words of complaint, uttered each dawn, came to Apollo, and he was angry. He appeared to Midas in a dream and said, "Other gods would punish you, Midas, but I am famous for my even temper. Instead of doing you violence, I will show you how gracious I can be by granting you a wish. What is it to be?"

Midas cried, "Let everything I touch turn to gold!"

He shouted this out of his sleep in a strangling greedy voice, and the guards in the doorway nodded to each other and said, "The king calls out. He must be dreaming of gold again."

Wearied by the dream, Midas slept past sunrise; when he awoke it was full morning. He went out into his garden. The sun was high, the sky was blue. A soft breeze played among the trees. It was a glorious morning. He was still half asleep. **Tatters**<sup>3</sup> of the dream were in his head.

"Can it be true?" he said to himself. "They say the gods appear in dreams. That's how men know them. On the other hand I know that dreams are false, teasing things. You can't believe them. Let us put it to the test."

He reached out his hand and touched a rose. It turned to gold-petals and stalk, it turned to gold and stood there rigid, heavy, gleaming. A bee buzzed out of its stiff folds, furious; it lit on Midas' hand to sting him. The king looked at the heavy golden bee on the back of his hand and moved it to his finger.

"I shall wear it as a ring," he said.

Midas went about touching all his roses, seeing them stiffen and gleam. They lost their odor. The disappointed bees rose in swarms and buzzed angrily away. Butterflies departed. The hard flowers tinkled like little bells when the breeze moved among them, and the king was well pleased.

His little daughter, the princess, who had been playing in the garden, ran to him and said, "Father, Father, what has happened to the roses?"

"Are they not pretty, my dear?"

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheaves: large bundles of things tied together.

<sup>2</sup> Wastrel: wasteful person.

<sup>3</sup> Tatters: shreds

"No! They're ugly! They're horrid and sharp and I can't smell them any more. What happened?"

"A magical thing."

"Who did the magic?"

"I did."

"Unmagic it, then! I hate these roses."

She began to cry.

"Don't cry," he said, stroking her head.

"Stop crying, and I will give you a golden doll with a gold-leaf dress and tiny golden shoes."

She stopped crying. He felt the hair grow spiky under his fingers. Her eyes stiffened and froze into place. The little blue vein in her neck stopped pulsing. She was a statue, a figure of pale gold standing in the garden path with lifted face. Her tears were tiny golden beads on her golden cheeks. He looked at her and said, "This is unfortunate. I'm sorry it happened. I have no time to be sad this morning. I shall be busy turning things into gold. But, when I have a moment, I shall think about this problem; I promise." He hurried out of the garden which had become unpleasant to him.

On Midas' way back to the castle he amused himself by kicking up gravel in the path and watching it tinkle down as tiny nuggets. The door he opened became golden; the chair he sat upon became solid gold like his throne. The plates turned into gold, and the cups became gold cups before the amazed eyes of the servants, whom he was careful not to touch. He wanted them to continue being able to serve him; he was very hungry.

With great relish Midas picked up a piece of bread and honey. His teeth bit metal; his mouth was full of metal. He felt himself choking. He reached into his mouth and pulled out a golden slab of bread, all bloody now, and flung it through the window. Very lightly now he touched the other food to see what would happen. Meat. . . apples. . . walnuts. . . they all turned to gold even when he touched them with only the tip of his finger. . . and when he did not touch them with his fingers, when he lifted them on his fork, they became gold as soon as they touched his lips, and he had to put them back onto the plate. He was savagely hungry. Worse than hunger, when he thought about drinking, he realized that wine, or water, or milk would turn to gold in his mouth and choke him if he drank. As he thought that he could not drink, thirst began to bum in his belly. He felt himself full of hot dry sand, felt that the lining of his head was on fire.

"What good is all my gold?" he cried, "if I cannot eat and cannot drink?"

He shrieked with rage, pounded on the table, and flung the plates about. All the servants ran from the room in fright. Then Midas raced out of the castle, across the bridge that spanned the

**moat**<sup>4</sup> along the golden gravel path into the garden where the stiff flowers chimed hatefully, and the statue of his daughter looked at him with scooped and empty eyes. There in the garden in the blaze of the sun, he raised his arms heavenward, and cried, "You, Apollo, false god, traitor!

You pretended to forgive me, but you punished me with a gift!" .

---

<sup>4</sup> moat: wide ditch, usually filled with water, surrounding a castle.

Then it seemed to him that the sun grew brighter, that the light thickened, that the sun-god stood before him in the path, tall, stern, clad in burning gold. A voice said, "On your knees, **wretch!**"

He fell to his knees.

"Do you repent?"

"I repent. I will never desire gold again. I will never accuse the gods. Pray, **revoke** the fatal wish."

Apollo reached his hand and touched the roses. The tinkling stopped, they softened, swayed, blushed. Fragrance grew on the air. The bees returned, and the butterflies. He touched the statue's cheek. She lost her stiffness, her metallic gleam. She ran to the roses, knelt among them, and cried, "Oh, thank you, Father. You've changed them back again."

Then she ran *off*, shouting and laughing.

Apollo said, "I take back my gift. I remove the golden **taint**<sup>5</sup> from your touch, but you are not to escape without punishment. Because you have been the most foolish of men, you shall wear always a pair of donkey's ears.

Midas touched his ears. They were long and furry. He said, "I thank you for your forgiveness, Apollo. . . even though it comes with a punishment." .

"Go now," said Apollo. "Eat and drink. Enjoy the roses. Watch your child grow. Life is the only wealth, man. In your great thrift, you have been wasteful of life, and that is the sign you wear on your head. Farewell."

Midas put a tall pointed hat on his head so that no one would see his ears. Then he went in to eat and drink his fill.

For years he wore the cap so that no one would know of his disgrace. But the servant who cut his hair had to know so Midas swore him to secrecy, warning that it would cost him his head if he spoke of the king's ears. But the servant who was a coward was also a gossip. He could not bear to keep a secret, especially a secret so mischievous. Although he was afraid to tell it, he felt that he would burst if he didn't.

One night he went out to the banks of the river, dug a little hole, put his mouth to it, and whispered, "Midas has donkey's ears, Midas has donkey's ears. . ." and quickly filled up the hole again, and ran back to the castle, feeling better.

But the river-reeds heard him, and they always whisper to each other when the wind seethes among them. They were heard whispering, "Midas has donkey's ears.. . donkey's ears. . ." and soon the whole country was whispering, "Have you heard about Midas? Have you heard about his ears?"

When the king heard, he knew who had told the secret and ordered the man's head cut off; but then he thought, "The god forgave me, perhaps I had better forgive this blabbermouth." Therefore he let the treacherous man keep his head.

Then Apollo appeared again and said, "Midas, you have learned the final lesson, mercy. As you have done, so shall you be done by."

And Midas felt his long hairy ears dwindling back to normal.

He was an old man now. His daughter, the princess, was grown. He had grandchildren. Sometimes he tells his smallest granddaughter the story of how her mother was turned into a golden statue, and he says, "See, I'm changing you too. Look, your hair is all gold." And she pretends to be frightened.

---

<sup>5</sup> Taint: something evil.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### Recalling

1. What did Midas accuse Apollo of wasting?
2. What did Midas wish? What happened to his daughter?
3. What made Midas ask "What good is all my gold"?
4. What change took place in Midas' body? How did people learn of it?
5. What final lesson did Midas learn? What action showed he had learned it?

### Interpreting

6. Why do you think Apollo was the appropriate god to deal with Midas?
7. Explain at least two traits of Midas' character before he learned his lesson. Give examples of each trait.
8. What change took place in Midas' character after he learned his lesson?

## READING AND LITERARY FOCUS

### Metamorphosis

A **metamorphosis** is a change in shape or form, and it occurs frequently in Greek myths. It is one of the elements that make the myths such imaginative reading. Some of the gods, like the sea god Proteus, for example, frequently changed themselves into different shapes, such as a fish, a lion, or a snake. Zeus often changed shape and became a bull, a shower of gold, or even a puff of smoke when he visited earth.

However, gods often used their powers of metamorphosis when they wanted to teach someone a lesson. They usually created a magical change of shape that was particularly appropriate to a person's character. In one ancient story, for example, a young woman who cried a great deal was turned into a fountain.