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The Judgement of Midas

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Pan came at length to be such a wonderful piper with his syrinx (for so he named his flute) that he challenged Apollo to make better music if he could. Now the sun-god was also the greatest of divine musicians, and he resolved to punish the vanity of the country-god, and so consented to the test. For judge they chose the mountain Tmolus, since no one is so old and wise as the hills. And, since Tmolus could not leave his home, to him went Pan and Apollo, each with his followers, oreads and dryads, fauns, satyrs, and centaurs.

Among the worshippers of Pan was a certain Midas, who had a strange story. Once a king of great wealth, he had chanced to befriend Dionysus, god of the vine; and when he was asked to choose some good gift in return, he prayed that everything he touched might be turned into gold. Dionysus smiled a little when he heard this foolish prayer, but he granted it. Within two days, King Midas learned the secret of that smile, and begged the god to take away the gift that was a curse. He had touched everything that belonged to him, and little joy did he have of his possessions! His palace was as yellow a home as a dandelion to a bee, but not half so sweet. Row upon row of stiff golden trees stood in his garden; they no longer knew a breeze when they heard it. When he sat down to eat, his feast turned to treasure uneatable. He learned that a king may starve, and he came to see that gold cannot replace the live, warm gifts of the Earth. Kindly Dionysus took back the charm, but from that day King Midas so hated gold that he chose to live far from luxury, among the woods and fields. Even here he was not to go free from misadventure.

Tmolus gave the word, and Pan uprose with his syrinx, and blew upon the reeds a melody so wild and yet so coaxing that the squirrels came, as if at a call, and the birds hopped down in rows. The trees swayed with a longing to dance, and the fauns looked at one another and laughed for joy. To their furry little ears, it was the sweetest music that could be.

But Tmolus bowed before Apollo, and the sun-god rose with his golden lyre in his hands. As he moved, light shook out of his radiant hair as raindrops are showered from the leaves. His trailing robes were purple, like the clouds that temper the glory of a sunset, so that one may look upon it. He touched the strings of his lyre, and all things were silent with joy. He made music, and the woods dreamed. The fauns and satyrs were quite still; and the wild creatures

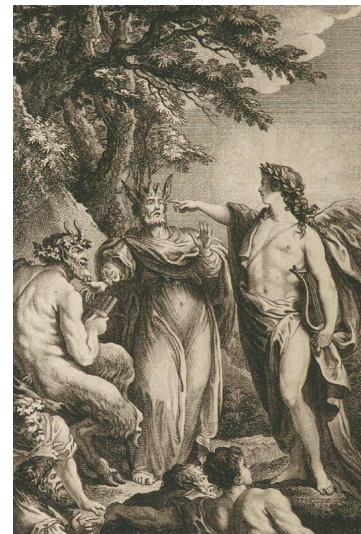
crouched, blinking, under a charm of light that they could not understand. To hear such a music cease was like bidding farewell to father and mother.

With one accord they fell at the feet of Apollo, and Tmolus proclaimed the victory his. Only one voice disputed that award.

Midas refused to acknowledge Apollo lord of music,—perhaps because the looks of the god dazzled his eyes unpleasantly, and put him in mind of his foolish wish years before. For him there was no music in a golden lyre!

But Apollo would not leave such dull ears unpunished. At a word from him they grew long, pointed, furry, and able to turn this way and that (like a poplar leaf),—a plain warning to musicians. Midas had the ears of an ass, for every one to see!

For a long time the poor man hid this oddity with such skill that we might never have heard of it. But one of his servants learned the secret, and suffered so much from keeping it to himself that he had to unburden his mind at last. Out into the meadows he went, hollowed a little place in the turf, whispered the strange news into it quite softly, and heaped the earth over again. Alas! a bed of reeds sprang up there before long, and whispered in turn to the grass-blades. Year after year they grew again, ever gossiping among themselves; and to this day, with every wind that sets them nodding together, they murmur, laughing, "*Midas has the ears of an ass: Oh, hush, hush!*"



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