

Midas Part 2

From that day onwards, King Midas hated gold. Every day he would wander deep in the forest far from his palace, far from the clink and the chink of golden coins, far from the glimmer and the glitter of golden statues. He would wander deep and deep into the silences of the forest.

And one day, as he was wandering, suddenly he heard the sound of music; and he stumbled on a clearing, and there, sitting in the middle of the clearing, was Pan, the god of wild things, the god of wild places and wild animals, Pan with his horns and his goat legs, playing his pipes, his pan-pipes. King Midas crouched among the bushes listening to the music, enchanted and entranced. And then Pan lowered his pipes from his lips and he began to boast: 'I'm the finest musician of them all. I'm the finest musician in the world. I'm a finer musician even than golden Apollo, when he plucks his golden lyre.'

Well, nothing is hidden from the eyes and the ears of the mighty gods and goddesses. And golden Apollo, on the high slopes of Mount Olympus, heard the sound of Pan's voice and his forehead furrowed into a frown. And suddenly the golden god was standing in the clearing in front of Pan. And King Midas, 'Eh?' Two gods staring at one another. And golden Apollo said, 'Pan, we will have a contest of music, you and I, and the judge will be that mountain.'

And he pointed to a great mountain called Tmolus that rose high above the tops of the trees. And as golden Apollo pointed, a strange thing happened. From either side of the mountain two huge, grey, stone ears unfolded. And the first to play was Pan; he lifted his pipes to his lips and he began to blow. And in his music were all the sounds of wild nature: the baying and the belling of stags, the howling of wolves, the thundering of hooves, the creaking and cracking of branches, the crashing of flood water, the bright songs of birds, the humming of bees. It was a music both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. And then Pan lowered his pipe from his lips.

And Apollo lifted his lyre to his shoulder and he began to play. And as he played, it was as though the strings of his lyre were the threads of the loom upon which the whole world was woven. It was as though every note was an element, every melody was a formula. And as the shimmering, cascading music came, the whole world held its breath. And then, when Apollo lowered his lyre from his shoulder and the music stopped, the whole world sighed. Pan dropped to his knees and lowered his head. The great mountain Tmolus opened his cavernous cave of a mouth and pronounced, 'Apollo is the winner.'

But then, from among the bushes, there came a voice: 'No!. Why should the victory go to golden Apollo? Why should the victory go to the plinkety plonk of a plucked lyre when Pan's music is the real thing? Pan's music is finer by far.' It was King Midas.

And golden Apollo turned and looked at him, and he frowned. And with the frown of Apollo King Midas felt himself suddenly strangely changed. He reached up, he felt his face with his hands, and his ears had moved. They were no longer growing out of the side of his face; they were growing out of the top of his head. He touched them with his fingers: two grey twitching, bristling donkey's ears. Those ears, that had listened and had not heard, had been turned into the ears of an ass.

He looked around himself. Pan had vanished. He crouched down behind the bushes, folding his ears down against the side of his face. And all day he waited till the sun set and the night came and the sky brightened with stars. And then he made his way through the forest and back to his palace. And he found a length of purple cloth and he wrapped it round and around and around and around his head. And he thought, 'Now, nobody need know.'

But a king's hair will grow just as anybody else's hair will grow. And the days and the weeks and the months passed. And soon enough, King Midas knew that he needed a haircut. And so he called a barber to a secret room. And he said to the barber, 'Can you keep a secret?'

And the barber said, 'Oh yes, I can keep a secret.'

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And King Midas said, 'If you can keep my secret, you have a job for life. Every week you can cut my hair, and every week I'll pay you with a purse full of silver coins.'

And the barber said, 'Then, I can certainly keep your secret.'

So King Midas unwound the cloth, he unwound it and he unwound it, and his hair flopped down over his shoulders; and out of the top of his head two twitching, bristling, grey donkey's ears pointed up at the ceiling. And the barber stared, laughter and horror wrestling in the pit of his belly, but he said nothing. And he took his scissors and his razor, and he shaved and he shaped and he cut and he clipped. And when the hair was done, King Midas took a purse of silver coins and he dropped it into the barber's hand, and he said, 'Remember, not a word to anybody.' And the barber bowed and he was gone.

And King Midas wrapped the purple cloth round and around and around his head. And for one day, the barber kept the secret. But it was as though he had a mouse pouched in his cheek. Every time he opened his mouth, he thought the secret was going to jump out. For two days he kept the secret, but every word he spoke seemed to be turning into 'King Midas has donkey's ears'. Every thought seemed to be becoming 'The king has the ears of an ass.'

And on the third day he could stand it no longer. He went out into a forest with a trowel. He knelt on the ground, he dug a hole and he whispered into the hole, 'King Midas has donkey's ears; the king has the ears of an ass.' And he filled up the hole and he went home, feeling comfortable at last. But where he'd dug the hole, a cluster of reeds grew. And the wind blew through the reeds, and the reeds began to whisper the secret. And the birds heard the reeds whispering, and they began to sing the secret. And soon enough the whole world knew: King Midas has donkey's ears; the king has the ears of an ass.