4. KING MIDAS

HERMES All of us Greek gods are different – we all have our different characters. And there’s one I’m going to introduce you to, who’s frankly, well, more different than most! His name’s Dionysus, and if I tell you he’s the god of wine and rides in a chariot pulled by panthers, you’ll probably guess that, yes, he’s a bit of a wild one. Let’s just say he likes to let himself go. And, well, here he is, letting himself go right now.

DIONYSUS Oh, my friends, enjoy!

HERMES Him and his band of followers, dancing and singing and...well...drinking rather a lot of wine.

DIONYSUS More honey, friends! And figs! And wine! More wine!

HERMES He does like to enjoy himself. And it was on a day just like this one, while Dionysus was revelling, that I remember him suddenly look round and jump up.

DIONYSUS Stop! Stop the music! Where’s Silenus? My dear Silenus, he’s not with us. Have we lost him along the way?

HERMES They certainly had. Silenus had got left behind, plodding along on his donkey, and you’ll soon see why.

SILENUS We really fancied Venus
By Jove you should’ve seen us!

HERMES He was in a right old state!

SILENUS Here where’sh everyone gone?

HERMES Get the picture? Silenus, by the way, was a satyr. They’re funny creatures, satyrs: men from the waist up, goats from the waist down. But Dionysus loved Silenus, because for some reason the satyr had been his tutor – his teacher, when Dionysus was growing up. What an example! No wonder Dionysus turned out the way he did! But this day, travelling with Dionysus through the land of Phrygia, Silenus had had enough - he was completely sloshed.
There once was a satyr, Silenus,
Who had a...
Oh, dear, I think I’ve had a bit too much...oooohhhh!

And he toppled off his donkey and landed in a ditch. The donkey wanders off, and Silenus just lies there snoring. For ages. But then...more hooves...and an altogether grander rider. A king, in fact, and his soldiers...

Hello. What have we here? Sergeant, wake him up.

Hoi! Up you get! You’ve had one too many, pal!

I’m not your pal. I’m the best pal, I’ll have you know, of glorious Dionysus!

You what?!

So you’ll show me some respect, young man!

You old tramp! Get along with you!

No, wait! Are you – are you Silenus?

The very same. And who might you be?

What, you rogue! You’re talking to his majesty Midas, King of Phrygia!

Majesty? Ha! What are kings compared to gods?!

Why, you slave, I’ll teach you –

No, stop! If this is Silenus, show him every courtesy! He’s Dionysus’s treasured tutor!

Now there speaks a wise man!

Where is he, the great god Dionysus? Have you been with him?

I thought I still was. I was on the road with him an’ his followers, but I must’ve nodded off.

Where were you going?

To the vineyards at the foot of Mount Tmolus. That’s where he’ll be now.
MIDAS I’ve always longed to meet him face to face. Would you – could you - take me there?

SILENUS Well since you’ve treated me right – unlike some I could mention – provide me with a horse and I’ll be your escort.

MIDAS Give him your horse.

SOLDIER My lord!

MIDAS Give it to him! He’s going to lead me to the great god Dionysus!

HERMES So off King Midas rode with Silenus, who led him straight to Dionysus, revelling with his followers...

DIONYSUS Silenus! Where have you been? Come here to my embrace, sweet fool! And who’s this you’ve brought with you?

SILENUS Midas, King of Phrygia!

HERMES And when the satyr told how Midas had treated him with respect, Dionysus was well impressed.

DIONYSUS A wise king! A rare thing indeed! So then: for returning my dear Silenus to me, you must be rewarded. Choose anything – I will grant your heart’s desire!

MIDAS Thank you, great lord!

DIONYSUS So, then: what shall it be?

MIDAS Do you mean it? I can have anything?

DIONYSUS Anything!

MIDAS Anything at all?

DIONYSUS Absolutely anything!

HERMES How about that? If you were given such an amazing offer, I wonder what you’d choose

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HERMES  So King Midas stood there thinking about what to ask for and the god Dionysus asked him again.

DIONYSUS  Well, king?

MIDAS  Ummm...I’ve had the most amusing idea!

DIONYSUS  Go on.

MIDAS  I want everything I touch to turn to gold!

DIONYSUS  But you already have more riches than anyone needs.

MIDAS  I know!

DIONYSUS  All the pleasures you could wish.

MIDAS  I know! But how can you ever have enough? If everything I touch will turn to gold I can spend and spend and spend!

HERMES  Dionysus looked sort of disappointed. Maybe Midas wasn’t the wise king that he’d thought. Still, he was bound to keep his promise.

DIONYSUS  So be it! If that is your heart’s desire –

MIDAS  It is!

DIONYSUS  – everything you touch will turn to gold.

MIDAS  Thank you! Bless you, gracious god!

HERMES  And back went Midas to his royal palace, his face red with excitement. First stop was his garden, and what do you think happened the moment he touched a twig? It turned into –

MIDAS  Solid gold!

HERMES  He found a bird’s egg lying on the grass. When he picked it up –

MIDAS  A golden egg! Ha ha! What next?

HERMES  He touched a statue – it turned to gold. He sat on a bench – it turned to gold.

MIDAS  This is glorious!
**HERMES** He picked a huge bunch of roses, and carried them, a spray of solid gold, back into his palace. His courtiers were amazed – and even more so when...

**MIDAS** Watch this!

**HERMES** …he touched a chair…and they saw it turn, of course, to gold. He put his hand on the banquet table…yep, you guessed it. Then he went and stroked a wall…and his whole vast palace turned to shining gold.

**MIDAS** What do you think of that, my friends? And this touch is my gift – my gift from the great god Dionysus! But come, it’s time for dinner!

**HERMES** Ah! Dinner! Can you guess what’s going to happen now? Midas strode up to the table.

**MIDAS** My word, what a spread! My compliments to the cooks!

**HERMES** Yes, they’d been slaving away all day, but they might as well not have bothered, because –

**MIDAS** Ow!

**HERMES** He nearly broke his teeth on the very first bite: the chicken leg he held was suddenly a lump of gold. He picked up an apple – it turned to gold. So did the bread. And the fish. And the cheese. He was starting to panic.

**MIDAS** Help - I can’t eat! Oh, Dionysus! Forgive me for my foolishness! Take back your gift, I beg you! Help me! Help me!!

**HERMES** I felt I had to do something for him, and I was about to fly off and tell Dionysus…but suddenly he was right there in the palace!

**DIONYSUS** Good day, my friends!

**MIDAS** Lord Dionysus!

**MIDAS** I’m sorry I asked for such a foolish gift! Please release me!

**DIONYSUS** Release you? From such a blessing?

**MIDAS** It’s not a blessing! It’s a curse!

**DIONYSUS** Endless, effortless wealth, a curse?
4. King Midas

MIDAS It is! It is! Please release me! I beg you!

DIONYSUS Return to Mount Tmolus, where we met. Climb up to the river’s spring and plunge into the pool. Immerse yourself entirely. Let it wash you clean.

MIDAS Oh, thank you, lord!

HERMES And Midas ran straight out and jumped on his horse. Of course – it turned into a lump of gold.

MIDAS Oh!

HERMES So Midas had to trudge all the way back to the mountain. Then he did as Dionysus said... and as he dived into the icy pool, streams of gold came flowing from him. He clambered out, shaking with fear – fear that the gift wasn’t washed away. He ran to a tree and touched the bark...

MIDAS Ah! Ha ha!

HERMES ...and laughed with joy to see it still a tree. He touched a rock and...

MIDAS Yes! Oh yes!

HERMES ...it was still a rock.

MIDAS A what a lovely lump of chalk!

HERMES And he turned and saw the river flowing gold, and wished for gold no longer. In fact:

MIDAS I can’t go back. I never want to see my palace again – all the marble, gold and pointless glitter! I want the rocks and the earth, the smell of the pines – I want to feel and smell and touch and taste! I want to be here, in the mountains, with Dionysus!

HERMES And he threw off all his royal robes and went running down the hill, down to the vineyard where Dionysus and his band were revelling

DIONYSUS Ah! The king has come to join us!

HERMES And where they welcomed him with open arms! Midas had given up his wealth and his palace for the wild life with Dionysus!

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HERMES What King Midas liked best about his wild new life was the music -
played on drums of every shape and size and an instrument made
from a goat’s bladder. Silenus the satyr was amazing on it.

MIDAS I love the sound of the bladder!

SILENUS It’s called a bagpipe, friend! Pick up a drum and join in!

MIDAS Yeah!

HERMES Soon Midas’s palace and his kingdom were forgotten – he’d never
had such fun in all his life! But then one night, who should turn up
but Apollo, god of the sun – and also god of music. And really, you
should’ve seen the look on his face as he listened to the bagpipe and
the other stuff. So when the music and dancing came to a stop...he
sat there under the spreading vines, giving a superior smile and clap-
ing...

APOLLO Oh, that’s awfully good. You are having fun, aren’t you?

MIDAS It’s the best! The best music I’ve ever heard! And played!

APOLLO Really! Where have you been? No music in the world compares with
mine...

HERMES And Apollo produced his lyre. You see, Apollo is very proud of his lyre-
playing...

MIDAS Yes, yes – boring!

APOLLO Boring?

MIDAS You can’t dance to it – it’s all stiff and proper and boring!

APOLLO I think a contest’s called for – don’t you, Dionysus?

DIONYSUS A contest?

APOLLO Yes. Your lot with their drums and bladder –

MIDAS It’s a bagpipe!

APOLLO – against me and my lyre.

MIDAS Game on!
4. King Midas

APOLLO And this fool here shall be the judge.

MIDAS Come on, then! Who goes first?

APOLLO You decide.

MIDAS The bagpipe and the drums!

HERMES Then Silenus played and stomped his goaty foot and the music was the very spirit of the mountains. And Midas and Dionysus’s band all danced, their hearts afire...and at the end Midas, breathless from his dancing, turned to the god Apollo and said:

MIDAS Now beat that with your lyre!

HERMES Apollo swept his cloak aside and set his golden lyre on his knee. I have to say, he was a bit good. In fact, more than a bit. Dionysus’s followers stared, entranced. And Dionysus and I, we looked at each other and just nodded. We knew what the result would be. At least we thought we did...

DIONYSUS I think we’re all agreed. Apollo, golden god, your music is supreme.

MIDAS No! No! I don’t think that at all!

APOLLO What’s he saying?

MIDAS Apollo’s music is marvellous, I don’t deny it. But it’s too – too – golden. It’s too rich, too perfect!

APOLLO The man’s a fool!

MIDAS Give me the wail, the stomp – the spirit of the mountain!

APOLLO Only a donkey would make such a judgement! So let him have the ears of the donkey that he is!

MIDAS Oh!

HERMES Suddenly Midas’s ears were long and floppy! Apollo had given him the ears of a donkey! Midas was horrified – and, feeling confused, went sloping back to his palace where he sadly donned his kingly robes once more.

MIDAS How I hate these clothes!
HERMES  He had a special hat made, to hide his donkey ears. So no one knew. Except when he had to get his hair cut, well, there was no way of hiding them from his barber.

BARBER  There we are, your majesty. Just pop your hat off for me. Been anywhere nice for your – oh!

MIDAS  You’re not to tell anyone! Anyone, d’you hear?!

BARBER  No, my lord! I mean yes, my lord!

MIDAS  Or you’ll have no ears at all!

BARBER  Super! Mum’s the word! Short back and ears, sir? I mean sides! Sides!

HERMES  But how could the barber keep what he’d seen a secret? He was gagging to tell someone and one day he could hold it in no longer. He went out to his garden and dug a hole in the ground. Then he huddled over and whispered in to it:

BARBER  King Midas has donkey’s ears!

HERMES  Then he filled in the hole and went to bed, relieved. But come the Spring, green shoots came sprouting from where the hole had been and grew into a clump of reeds! And they brushed together in the breeze in a whisper of:

STRANGE  Midas has donkey’s ears! Donkey’s ears! Midas has donkey’s ears!

WHISPER:  Donkey’s ears!

HERMES  And the whisper was carried everywhere, blown on the wind: soon everyone knew King Midas’s secret!