



The Solid Gold Princess

Once there was a king named Midas, and what he loved best in all the world was gold. He had plenty of his own, but he could not bear the thought of anyone else having any. One morning he happened to wake at dawn and, watching Apollo driving his sun chariot along the slope of the sky, he said to himself, "Of all the gods I like you least, Apollo. How dare you be so wasteful, scattering golden light on rich and poor alike — on king and peasant, on merchant, shepherd, sailor? Don't you understand that only kings should have gold; only the rich know what to do with it?"

Midas did not mean his words to be heard, but the gods have sharp ears. Apollo did hear, and

was very angry. That night he came to Midas in a dream and said, "Other gods would punish you, Midas, but I am famous for my good nature. Instead of harming you, I will do you a kindness and grant your dearest wish. What is it to be?"

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

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

Midas awoke in a bad mood. "Oh, if it were only true," he said to himself, "and everything I touch turned to gold. What's the use of such dreams? They only tease and torment a man."

That morning as he was walking in the garden, his hand brushed a rose. Amazed, he watched it turn to gold. Petals and stalk, it turned to gold and stood there, rigid, heavy, gleaming. A bee buzzed out of its stiff folds and, furious, lit on the king's 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.

Then he hurried about the garden, touching all the roses, watching them stiffen and gleam. They lost their odor. The disappointed bees rose in swarms and buzzed angrily away. Butterflies departed. The 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?"

"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 said, and 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."

The princess stopped crying, and Midas felt her 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. Her tears were tiny golden beads on her golden cheeks.

Midas looked at his daughter and said, "Oh, my dear, I'm sorry. But I have no time to be sad this morning. I shall be busy turning things into gold. When I have a moment I'll think about your problem, I promise."

He hurried out of the garden. On his way back to the castle he amused himself by kicking up gravel 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 his servants, whom Midas was careful not to touch. He wanted them to keep on serving him.

Greedily he bit into a piece of bread and honey. But his teeth clanked on metal — his mouth was full of metal. He felt himself choking. He plucked from his mouth a piece of gold which had been bread. Very lightly then he touched the other food to see what would happen. Meat... apples... walnuts... all turned to gold, even when he touched them with only the tip of his finger. When he did not touch the food with his fingers, but lifted it on his fork, it became gold as soon as it touched his lips. He was savagely hungry now.

But worse than hunger was the thought of drinking. He realized that wine, or water, or milk would turn to gold in his mouth, and choke him if he swallowed.

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

Midas shrieked with rage, pounded on the table, and flung the plates about. Then he raced out of the castle and along the golden gravel path

to the garden, where the stiff flowers chimed hatefully. The statue of his daughter looked at him with scooped and empty eyes. In the blaze of the sun, Midas raised his arms heavenward and cried, "You, Apollo, false god, traitor! You pretended to forgive me, but you punished me with a gift!"

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

Midas fell to his knees.

"Have you learned anything?"

"I have...I have...I will never desire gold again. I will never accuse the gods. Please take back the fatal gift."

Apollo reached out his hand and touched the roses. The tinkling stopped. The flowers softened and swayed and blushed. Fragrance grew on the air again. And the bees returned, and the butterflies. Apollo touched the statue's cheek. It lost its stiffness, its metallic gleam. The princess 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, Midas. Your touch is cleansed of its golden curse. But you may not escape without punishment. Because you

have been the most foolish of men, you shall wear 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."

Apollo said, "Eat and drink. Enjoy the roses. Watch your child grow. And remember, life is the greatest wealth. In your stupidity 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 to eat and drink his fill.

For years Midas wore the cap so that no one would know of his disgrace. But the servant who cut his hair had to know, so Midas made him swear not to tell. He warned the servant that it would cost him his head if he spoke of the king's ears. But the servant was a gossip. He could not bear to keep a secret, especially such a secret about the king. He was afraid to tell it, but he also felt that he would burst if he did not.

So one night he went down to the bank of the river, dug a little hole, put his mouth to the hole, and whispered, "Midas has donkey's ears...Midas has donkey's ears." Quickly he filled up the

hole again, and ran back to the castle feeling better.

But the reeds on the riverbank had heard him, and they always whisper to each other when the wind blows. They were heard whispering, "Midas has donkey's ears... donkey's ears..." 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. He ordered the man's head cut off. But then he thought, "Apollo forgave me. Perhaps I had better forgive this blabbermouth." And he let the man keep his head.

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

And as Apollo spoke Midas felt his long hairy ears shrinking back to the right size.

When he was an old man, Midas would tell his smallest granddaughter the story of how her mother was turned into a golden statue. "See, I'm changing you too," he would say. "Look, your hair is all gold."

And she pretended to be frightened.