

Aeneas was a powerful figure for the Romans. Great families often boasted he was their ancestor. In fact, they even thought of him as a god. They called him *Jupiter indiges* ("Jupiter, god of the nation") after their chief god.

The custom of claiming Aeneas as an ancestor even spread to other lands. In Elizabethan times, some Britons still said that their country had been settled by an ancestor of Aeneas.

The Sibyl visited by Aeneas was a creature both gifted and cursed. The god Apollo granted her the power to foretell the future.

The Sibyl also asked for everlasting youth. But Apollo was annoyed with her for refusing to be his mistress. Therefore, he granted her only one year for each grain of sand she could hold in her hand. This totaled 1,000 years. (She was 700 years old when she helped Aeneas.)

But even that gift of 1,000 years was not joyful. For Apollo commanded that each year, the Sibyl would shrink a little more. Finally nothing was left but her voice.

## THE FOLLIES OF MIDAS

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

**adorned**—decorated  
**chambers**—rooms, especially bedrooms  
**confiding**—telling in secret  
**deliriously**—wildly; madly  
**duo**—pair  
**enraptured**—delighted; thrilled  
**foster**—acting as a relative; adoptive  
**goblet**—wine glass  
**gracious**—kind; polite  
**guffaws**—loud laughs; roars of laughter  
**inadequate**—unsatisfactory; not enough  
**nudged**—pushed or elbowed  
**obsessed**—absorbed and fascinated by  
**plight**—difficult situation  
**procession**—moving line of people or things; parade  
**renounce**—give up  
**retorted**—replied cleverly or sharply  
**revelry**—merrymaking; celebration  
**tutor**—private teacher  
**verdict**—decision; judgment

# The FOLLIES of MIDAS

Can a man be too rich or too honest for his own good? King Midas certainly didn't think so. But even an uncommon fool like Midas can be forced to see the error of his ways—if the gods are the teachers.

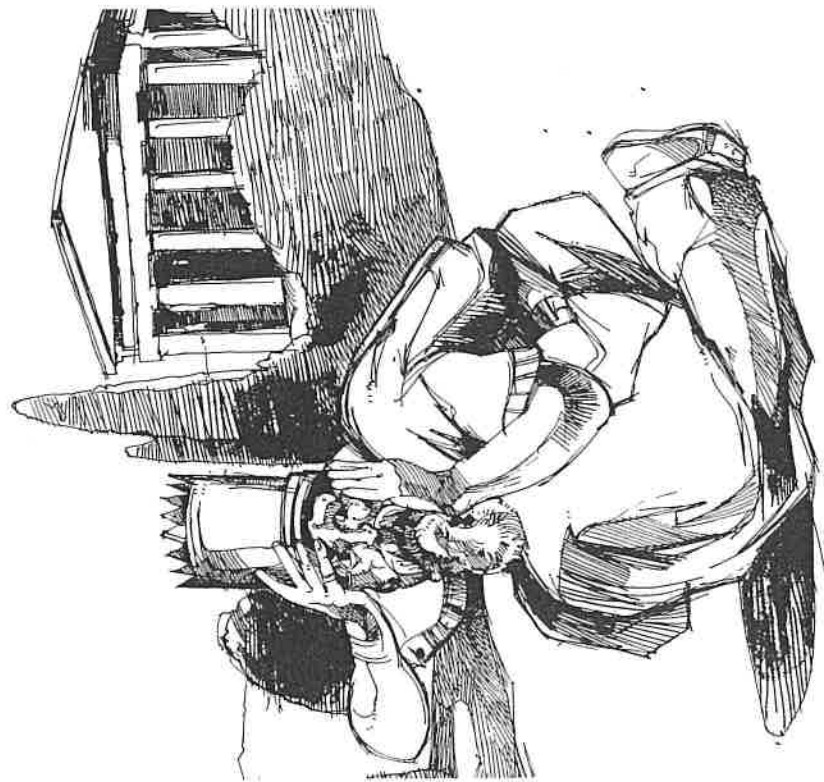
A song rang big and bold throughout the forest.

*I'm lost! Oh, I'm lost!  
But I'm having a wonderful time!  
I have plenty of lovely women  
And plenty of fine, old wine!*

Over and over the song was repeated. It grew louder and then slurred. Now the singer warbled in a high voice. Then he bellowed in a low voice.

Finally the singer bounded out of the trees. And a strange sight he was. A man from his waist up—apart from his ears and horns. A goat from his waist down. But then all satyrs<sup>1</sup> looked like that.

<sup>1</sup>(sā' terz or sat' erz)



This satyr was named Silenus,<sup>2</sup> and he was feeling very merry. He skipped to the rhythm of his tune. Dust and rocks flew in all directions.

From their place in the trees, birds and squirrels scolded him. "Do you have to send clouds of dust our way?" they complained. "Stop it, Silenus! You're filling our nests with dirt!"

A song was their only reply.

*Natter! Chatter! Patter!  
I'm not listening to you!  
I'll sing and romp the way I like  
Until the moon's gone blue!*

Onward Silenus pranced, still singing and dancing. Now and again he paused for breath and another mouthful of wine.

Farther down the road, Silenus finally stopped. Hadn't he been looking for someone? Ah, yes. His favorite pupil and foster son, Bacchus.<sup>3</sup> And his fellow satyrs.

But where were they? He'd thought they were in these woods. Or were they in the woods to the north? Silenus couldn't remember. Maybe he'd even passed them by without seeing them. His eyesight wasn't what it used to be.

Silenus sat down with his back against an oak tree. He'd rest for only a moment or two. Maybe Bacchus would find him if he stayed in one place.

"So nice here under this tree," Silenus muttered drowsily. His head drooped. Soon heavy snores could be heard. The wood remained quiet for several hours. But then came

some new visitors . . .

"Shh, shh. You'll wake him."

"Is he alive or dead?"

"He smells like a wine cellar!"

<sup>2</sup>(sī lē' nus)  
<sup>3</sup>(bak' kus)

"What kind of man is this? He has the horns, ears, and legs of a goat!"

"Wait 'til our King Midas<sup>4</sup> sees this!"

The men who surrounded Silenus were servants of Midas. They had been sent out to collect roses for the king. But the sight of the satyr had made them forget their chore. The tallest of the men nudged the smallest. "Wake him up!"

The smaller replied with a stronger nudge. "You wake him!"

The taller nearly knocked him to the ground. "No! You do it!"

The smaller instantly recovered and was ready to strike back. But another man stepped between them.

"Stop that nonsense, you two! No one needs to wake him up at all. As if we could when he's dead drunk! Now go fetch those roses and get back here. I've a plan in mind."

The other two did as they were told. Soon they were on their return trip home to Midas' palace. Silenus was with them, still asleep. They'd draped him over the back of an ass.

As this small **procession** moved down the road, peasants in the fields stared. Some crowded closer to see the odd creature.

"What do you have on the back of that ass?" one peasant shouted.

The taller servant yelled back, "Your wife, dear sir! Picked her up on the road this morning! A hairy little thing, ain't she?"

As you might imagine, the peasant found the joke mildly insulting. He chased the servants with a shower of well-aimed rocks.

The rocks helped speed the servants on their way. Soon they reached the palace. They found their king waiting for them, wondering about their delay.

<sup>4</sup>(mī' das)

"King Midas!" they cried. "Look at this beggar we found in your wood! Surely removing him from your kingdom deserves some reward?"

Midas stared at the satyr. Then he ordered, "Get him off that ass and bring him here."

Two of the servants quickly brought old Silenus to Midas. The satyr was **adorned** from head to toe with wreaths of roses.

King Midas stared once more. At last he said, "Here's your reward then. Bring me a jug of wine, a plate of meat, and a loaf of bread."

The servants started to lead Silenus off. However, a new order stopped them. "No, leave him here!"

"But King—"

"Do as I bid!"

The servants hurried down the hallway to the kitchen. When they returned with the food, they found Silenus sitting at the table. He and Midas were laughing and joking. No one would guess they weren't old friends.

The servants stopped short in surprise. Mouths and jaws dropped as they watched the odd scene.

Midas and Silenus took one look at them and burst out laughing. "You fools," Midas said. "You all look as stupid as they say *I* am!"

The king gestured at the Satyr. "The gentleman before you is Silenus. He is foster father and **tutor** of Bacchus." Midas noted their startled glances. "Yes, I said Bacchus. It seems even you fools know the god of wine and **revelry**." Silenus nodded happily at this information.

Midas continued, "Silenus has lost his way. We will return him to Bacchus. That is, after we do a little reveling of our own." Midas clapped his hands and the servants jumped. "Now serve this good fellow anything he wishes. Close your mouths and move!"

The servants speedily obeyed. Old Silenus drank heavily of the wine they served. And he emptied his plate just as fast as he drained his cup.

For ten days this feasting carried on. Midas and Silenus grew fat with food and drunk with wine. All that drinking made them a little lively. By the end of the first day, every plate in the palace had been broken.

Midas and Silenus didn't care about the trouble they caused. Silenus had the servants dress up in roses and dance around rose hoops. He and Midas laughed for hours at that.

But finally Midas realized Bacchus might be growing concerned. So he gathered his wits and set off with Silenus to find Bacchus.

The tottering **duo** soon found the god of wine. He gave the two a warm greeting. The sight of the satyr especially pleased him.

"My friend! Where have you been?" the god cried. "I thought you were lost for good this time!"

Bacchus gave Silenus a hug. "You old devil. Did you give Midas a difficult time?"

He didn't wait for an answer but turned to Midas. "Midas, I thank you. You deserve a gift for returning my teacher to me. Ask whatever you will, and I shall grant it."

Midas smiled secretly. He had known all along the god would offer some sort of reward for Silenus. Now the moment had come.

"Bacchus, you are far too **gracious**. But if you insist. . . ."

Bacchus nodded.

"Then I wish that everything I touch will turn to gold." Bacchus could scarcely believe such a greedy request. Midas was already the richest ruler in the land. Now he wanted more.

But Bacchus had offered. So he had to fulfill his promise.

"Very well, Midas. Your wish is granted. But in the future, I hope you pick your wishes more carefully."

A wiser man might have paused at those words. Not Midas. He went off **deliriously** happy.

Midas began trying out his power at once. He plucked a leaf from a tree. In an instant, it became a sunny gold!

He smiled broadly. "Ah, I'll paint a golden world for myself! Gold in gold upon gold I shall have."

When Midas reached the palace, he quickly gathered his servants. "Listen, I want a feast tonight. A huge feast! Invite all my neighbors as the guests!"

As Midas walked to his **chambers**, he thought over his plans. "This feast will finally convince people of my generosity. And they'll all wish they had my riches. Maybe this will stop them from calling me stupid."

That evening fifty guests were seated round the king's table. They stared at the golden vases filled with golden flowers. They listened to a musician pluck a golden lyre.<sup>5</sup> And they passed golden pitchers of wine.

After giving his guests time to look and wonder, Midas made his entrance. He stood at the head of the table and poured a **goblet** of wine. Then raising it, he said, "To your health, my good guests! I bid you welcome to my palace. May you enjoy the feast I've planned for you."

Midas sat down and brought the now-golden goblet to his lips. But when the wine hit his tongue, it turned to liquid gold.

Midas spat out the mouthful he had taken. "What's this?" he muttered. "Surely not *everything* I touch will turn to gold!"

He raised a chunk of bread to his mouth and bit down. But the bread, too, changed to gold. The same thing happened with a piece of meat he reached for.

Midas glared at his guests. They were all happily eating and drinking. Not one had noticed the foolish king's **plight**.

Midas' anger exploded. "I'm glad you're all enjoying yourselves!" he shouted. But you might like to know that I haven't been able to eat a bite! Everything I touch turns to gold! I may starve to death!"

The amused guests stared at the helpless, greedy king. They tried not to laugh, but some **guffaws** escaped.

<sup>5</sup> A lyre is a stringed instrument similar to a harp.

A few took pity on the king. They tried to feed him from their own plates. But again the food turned to gold when it touched Midas' lips.

The distressed king quickly left the table and went to his chambers. However, he found no peace there and certainly no sleep on his golden bed. Over and over he prayed the curse would be lifted by dawn.

The next day seemed to promise better things. The birds trilled carefree songs. The sun beamed over a bright blue sky. And a warm breeze gently batted the trees.

Midas eagerly ordered his breakfast set out in the garden. He almost trotted to the table. Hardly had he sat down before he dove into the food. However, nothing had changed. Every bit of food and every sip of wine turned to gold.

Midas sat back in his chair, defeated. He looked from his plate to his chair to his food. All gold.

"What good is gold if I can't eat or drink?" Midas complained. "At this rate, I won't be only the richest man in the world. I'll be the thinnest! By the gods, I'd rather be a poor man with a full belly."

Midas' stomach rumbled noisily. There was only one thing left to do. At once he set off to find Bacchus.

The god was not hard to find. Indeed, he seemed to be waiting for Midas.

"You look pale and weak, my friend," Bacchus commented. "What's the matter?"

"Your gift is the matter!" Midas **retorted**. "You knew I'd be unable to eat! Why did you grant my wish?"

"I gave you what you asked for, Midas. It's not my fault that your greed led you to forget simpler pleasures."

"You could have warned me."

"Would you have listened?" Bacchus asked. "No, the hard lessons must be experienced, not taught. They are for each of us to learn alone. But if you would like to **renounce** your wish, I can help you."

"Ah, good Bacchus, if you only would," Midas said. "Very well. Go to the River Pactolus<sup>6</sup> and stand under its waterfall. The water will wash the wish from your body." Relief rushed over Midas. "Great Bacchus, thank you. I'll never be so stupid again."

Midas was off in a flash. At the bank of the Pactolus, Midas dove into the huge pool. He came up under the waterfall and let the clear water flood over him. As it streamed down his body, it turned to liquid gold. Soon the whole river shimmered with golden water and sand.

Midas finished his bath and hurried back to the palace. He flew to the kitchen and grabbed some food. Without pausing for breath, he stuffed his mouth and chewed.

Ah! As Bacchus had promised, food was food once again. And it had never tasted so good.

The episode did seem to teach Midas a lesson. He became less **obsessed** with riches. The simple pleasures that Bacchus had spoken of grew more important to him.

But while Midas' greed had lessened, he hadn't been cured of stupidity. So Midas soon found himself in trouble again.

This next incident occurred as Midas was strolling through the woods one day. Suddenly a few sweet notes of music drifted to him. Midas was **enraptured**.

"How lovely!" Midas murmured. "But who can the musician be?"

Midas hurried in the direction of the music and came across the player. Or rather players, for there turned out to be two. And what players! The gods Pan and Apollo were the musicians.<sup>7</sup>

Midas hid behind a bush, eager to hear more music. He saw Pan gesturing at Apollo's jeweled lyre.

"Yes, your instrument is certainly a pretty thing," admitted Pan. "But so is the peacock. And he sings with all the appeal of a Harpy."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>(pak iō' lus)

<sup>7</sup>(pan) (a pol' iō) Pan — half-goat, half-man — was a god of the forest. Apollo was the god of truth, light, and music.

<sup>8</sup>(har' pē) A Harpy is a monster with a young woman's head, a bird's body, and clawed feet.

Apollo frowned. But Pan didn't give the god a chance to reply. "I'd take my old pipe any day. It has the strength and sweetness of mountain water."

"Ah, well, I've always preferred wine," Apollo said. "But let's put the argument to the test. I propose a contest."

"Your lyre against my pipes?" Pan asked. "But who is to serve as judge?"

Apollo gestured towards the bush where Midas was hiding. "Why, Midas, of course."

Midas, embarrassed to have been discovered, slowly stood up. "Great gods, I did not mean to spy—"

"It's not your eyes we're interested in," Pan interrupted. "It's your ears we require. Now open them and listen."

Pan played first. His pipes rang out, strong and strangely haunting. To Midas, the song seemed as rough and beautiful as a wild mountain stream.

When the god finished, Apollo nodded. Then, with a moment's pause, he took up his lyre and played.

The god of music was a master of his instrument. The sounds flowed from his lyre like clouds on a spring breeze. Each note flowered and burst with the beauty of rosebuds. Even the birds and trees leaned forward to better hear the song.

When Apollo ended his music, he first turned to Pan. He found the god sitting with his eyes closed, a smile on his face.

Satisfied, Apollo turned to Midas. "Well, Midas? Your verdict?"

Midas bowed to both gods. Then clearing his throat, he said, "The verdict is obvious, mighty gods. Pan is the winner."

Pan's eyes popped open. He joined Apollo in staring at the king.

Apollo spoke for both of them. "So, you think Pan is the better player?"

"Yes, I do," said Midas firmly.

A gleam came into Apollo's eyes. Any smarter human would have taken one look and run. "Well, well, little king. I'm forced to accept your decision. But I should have guessed that with those ears, you might not be the best judge. Such tiny, **inadequate** ears. Really not quite up to the task. Now suppose I gave you—"

Apollo gestured at Midas. The king darted back, but too late. He felt a tickling at the side of his head. Suddenly he found his ears growing straight upward. Up and up they shot, until they were about a foot long. Then they sprouted fur. When Apollo was through, Midas had the ears of an ass.

Apollo laughed. "Now you have ears fit for a king. The King of Fools, that is."

The god laughed again. And this time Pan and the whole forest joined with him.

His face burning, Midas turned and fled back to his palace. He didn't stop running until he had locked his chamber doors behind him.

For days Midas refused to come out of his room. His food he took from trays left at his door. But for company, he had only his mirror.

Midas at last came up with the idea of wrapping his ears in a turban.<sup>9</sup> Though everyone stared at this strange fashion, Midas kept his secret. In fact, the only one who knew of Midas' plight was his barber. And Midas swore him to silence.

Yet after a time, the amazing secret began to weigh on the barber. It was like an itch he was desperate to scratch. But he knew if he told anyone, he'd pay with his life.

Finally one night, the barber could stand it no longer. He went to the riverbank and dug a small hole.

Then leaning down, the barber put his mouth in the hole. "Midas has ass' ears! Midas has ass' ears!" he whispered.

After **confiding** the secret, the barber felt better at once. He filled in the hole and went back to the palace.

A season passed and spring came. In the spot where the barber had whispered his secret, reeds sprouted. And as they grew, they swayed and passed the secret to the wind.

"Midas has ass' ears! Midas has ass' ears!"

The wind loved gossip. So it picked up the secret. To every tree, brook, bird, and human, it carried the news. Before too long, the whole kingdom had heard the voices on the wind. The peasants began to whisper among themselves. "Did you hear that the king has ass' ears?"

"Have you heard that the king wears a turban to cover his ass' ears?"

At last Midas himself heard the whisper from the winds. And when he saw the strange glances from his servants, he knew the secret was out. The final blow came when he overheard two neighbors talking. "Well, if the rumor is true, it's only fitting. At last Midas looks like the ass he always was."

Silly Midas took the only revenge he could. He ordered the barber to be executed. Naturally the man heard the rumors on the gossiping wind and fled.

So Midas sat in his turban and let his hair grow long. He was and would always be the laughingstock of Greece.

<sup>9</sup>A turban is a hatlike scarf worn wrapped around the head.