King Midas and the Golden Touch

Once upon a time there lived a king named Midas who loved gold. King Midas had a daughter named Zoë, whom he loved with all his heart. But Midas often neglected his child, for he spent all his time admiring his treasure rooms and counting his gold.

"Father," Zoë would say, "come outside with me and see the flowers blooming."

"No time," Midas would answer, idly patting her head. "Here, my child, this dazzling golden necklace will amuse you."

Zoë did not care for jewels or gold. She loved walking barefoot in her simple clothes over grassy fields. She loved the feel of the wind in her hair, roses and bird songs, the light in the sky at dusk and dawn, the scent of wood smoke and lilacs. She often walked alone, wishing that her father would join her and learn to love the world as she did.

One day as Midas sat in his treasure room counting his gold, a man appeared before him. He did not look like any ordinary man. He wore a leopard skin around his broad, bronzed shoulders and vines were twined around his head.

"Who are you?" Midas asked.

"I am Dionysus, god of wine and pleasure," the stranger said. "I have come to thank you for being kind to my old teacher, Silenus. The gods do not forget such kindness. I have come to grant you any wish you make."

"Ah yes," Midas said, for he remembered an old man who had appeared one night at the palace gates. Midas had given him food and shelter, and the old man had thanked him and promised he would be rewarded.

So a god had come to give thanks. Midas was thrilled. "Please be seated," Midas said, "and look at my beautiful coins."

Dionysus smiled weakly. "I prefer the way grapes glow when the sun shines down on them."

Midas laughed. "Grapes look best served on a golden platter," he said. "My only wish is for gold. I wish all that I touched would turn to gold."

"Your wish is granted," Dionysus said with a frown on his face, and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

Just then Midas heard the bell calling him to eat. He turned to leave the room, but as he touched the door, he gasped, for it had turned to gold. He touched his robe, and it too turned to gold. He looked down and saw that his leather sandals were pure gold.

He walked through the hallways, touching everything he passed. The columns turned to gold, as did the floor beneath his feet. By the time he reached the table, he was brimming with excitement. "Zoë!" he cried. "I am the happiest man in the world."

"But Father," Zoë said, "your robe is stiff."

"Solid gold!" Midas cried. "The gods have granted me the golden touch!"
"Look at your chair, Father," Zoë said unhappily. Sure enough, it was gold. And his napkin turned to gold with his touch. "We are the luckiest people in all the world," he said, reaching for a piece of bread. But to his horror, the bread had turned to gold.

"Oh no!" he cried. This was terrible indeed! He could not eat anything, for everything he touched turned to gold. Staring down at his golden plate, he wondered what to do.

"Oh Father, you will starve!" Zoë exclaimed. She ran to his side to comfort him.

"No! No!" he cried, but before he could stop her, she had thrown her arms around him, and now his precious daughter was hard and cold, a golden statue, no longer a child.

"Oh Dionysus," Midas cried. "Take this dreadful gift away. I want my child!" But Dionysus was far away by then. He did not hear the king's cry.

All that night the poor king wept, holding his daughter in his arms, wishing he could undo what he had done. "I will never be greedy again," he called to the gods. "Please send Dionysus to me. I will be different from now on."

At dawn Dionysus appeared. "Do you still love gold so much?" he asked the king.

"No! Take away my golden touch and give me back my child."

"Go to the river," Dionysus said. "Bathe yourself and you will be cured."

Midas ran like lightning to the river and dived into the water. As he did, small golden pellets floated past, but Midas no longer cared for these. He scrubbed and prayed to the gods, and before long his clothing became soft and white again, and his sandals turned to soft leather.

He ran back to the palace and clasped his daughter to him. A moment later she began to grow soft and warm.

"Oh Father," she said, as her lips began to move. "Father, I dreamed I could not speak or move. I dreamed that all the world was gold."

Midas held her close to him. "A terrible dream, my darling."

That night as Midas ate his dinner, he licked his lips. "Never have I tasted such wonderful food!" When he unfolded his napkin, he smiled at Zoë and said, "and this linen is so beautiful." He took Zoë's hands in his. "And you, my child. You are more precious than gold."

"Will you walk in the woods with me tonight, Father?" Zoë asked.

"I will, of course!" the king said with delight.

That evening Zoë and King Midas walked into the woods, and he found more happiness there than he had ever known. Now Midas understood what real treasures were.