



CLEVER AND VAINGLORIOUS KINGS

WHEN PERSEUS gave Athena the Gorgon's head, she fastened it on her breastplate, and it made her still more powerful. She also fetched two of Medusa's bones, and from them she made herself a double flute. She could not understand why Hera and Aphrodite burst out laughing every time she played on it, for she was very pleased with the music she made. But one day she saw her own image in her polished shield. With puckered lips and puffed cheeks she did not look at all like her stately self. In disgust she threw the flute down to earth and put a curse on it.

Marsyas, a satyr who was capering about in the Phrygian woods, found the flute and began to play on it. When he discovered he could play two melodies at the same time, he was wild with joy. He hopped through the woods, playing on his double flute, boasting that now he could make better music than Apollo himself.

Apollo frowned when he heard that a satyr dared compare himself to him, the god of music, and he stormed down from Olympus to the Phrygian woods. He found Marsyas who was so delighted with his own music that he even challenged Apollo to a contest.

"You shall have your contest," said Apollo, "but if I win, you shall lose your hide."

The nine Muses, of course, were to be the judges, and Marsyas insisted that King Midas of Phrygia also be a judge.



KING MIDAS was a kind but rather stupid man who had always been a friend to the Phrygian satyrs. One morning his servants had found an old satyr sleeping in the king's favorite flower bed. Midas had spared the satyr from punishment and let him go. This old satyr was a follower of Dionysus, and the god had rewarded Midas for his kindness by granting him a wish. Shortsightedly, King Midas wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. His golden touch made him the richest man on earth, but he almost starved to death for even his food and drink turned to gold. And when his little daughter ran to him to hug him, she too turned into gold! Midas had to beg Dionysus to undo his wish and make everything as it had been before.

Now again, King Midas showed poor judgment. The nine Muses all agreed that Apollo was by far the better musician, but Midas voted for the Phrygian satyr. Apollo disdainfully turned his lyre upside down and played just as well as before. He ordered Marsyas to turn his flute and do the same. Not a sound came from Marsyas' flute however hard he blew, and even Midas had to admit that the satyr's flute was inferior to



Apollo's lyre. So Marsyas lost the contest and Apollo pulled off his skin and made a drum of it. Then he turned to King Midas and said, "Ears as stupid as yours belong to an ass. Ass's ears you shall have from now on!"

Ever after, King Midas went about with a tall, peaked cap on his head to hide his long ears. His subjects thought he had started a new fashion, and it wasn't long before all the Phrygians wore tall, peaked caps.

The king's barber was the only one who knew what Midas was hiding. He had been forbidden to breathe a word about it and he almost burst from having to keep such an important secret. When he could bear it no longer he ran out to a lonesome field, dug a hole in the ground, and whispered into it, "King Midas has ass's ears!" He quickly covered up the hole and thought the secret was safe. But the nearby reeds had heard and as they swayed in the wind they whispered, "Midas has ass's ears, Midas has ass's ears," and soon the secret spread all over the world.

King Midas was so ashamed that he left his throne and hid deep in the woods where no one could see him.



SISYPHUS of Corinth was the cleverest king who ever lived. He was so cunning that he fooled even the gods.

One day Sisyphus saw the river-god Asopus, who was looking for his daughter, Aegina. Sisyphus, who noticed everything that was happening in his kingdom, went after him and said, "I'll tell you what has become of your daughter if you'll give my city a spring." For the only thing his great city lacked was a good supply of fresh water.

Asopus hated to part with any of his water. He twisted and squirmed, but at last he struck the ground, and a crystal clear spring bubbled forth.

"It is Zeus himself who has carried off your daughter," said Sisyphus. "I saw him hurry by with her," and he pointed out to Asopus the way Zeus had taken. The river-god rushed off in a fury and soon caught up with the elopers. Zeus, taken by surprise, had no thunderbolt at hand, so, to save himself and the nymph from the river-god's rage, he changed himself into a rock and her into the island Aegina.

Sisyphus had his spring of water, but Asopus lost his daughter, and Zeus was furious with Sisyphus for meddling in his affairs. He asked Hades to take him to the underworld and punish him severely. Hades

was glad to do his brother Zeus a favor and he went himself to fetch Sisyphus. When the sly king saw the lord of the dead in person, he pretended to be very honored. But why, he asked, had not Hermes, whose office it was to guide dead souls to the underworld, come for him? While Hades searched for a suitable answer, Sisyphus deftly wound a chain around him. And there stood the lord of the dead, chained to a post like a dog.

As long as Sisyphus kept Hades tied up, nobody could die. The Fates got the threads of life tangled and the whole world was in confusion. Finally the gods threatened to make life so miserable for Sisyphus that he would wish he were dead, and Sisyphus then had to let Hades go. Again people could die and life could go on normally. The very first soul to be claimed was, of course, that of Sisyphus himself. This time Hermes came for him. The wily king, who had expected this, had told his loving wife not to give him a funeral feast, and not to put a coin under his tongue. So he arrived in the realm of the dead as a poor beggar. Hades was shocked! After all, Sisyphus was a king and entitled to a funeral feast and a golden coin under his tongue to pay for his passage across the Styx. His wife had to be punished, or she might set a bad example for others. He sent Sisyphus back to earth and told him to teach his wife respect. "Fooled him again!" said Sisyphus when he rejoined his devoted wife. They lived happily for many long years, till at last he died of old age and went to Hades for good. There he was given a task that kept him too busy to think up new tricks. He had to push a boulder up a steep hill, but every time he had almost reached the top, the boulder slipped from his hands and rolled all the way to the bottom again.





BELLEROPHON, a grandson of Sisyphus, was a great tamer of horses. He would have given all he owned for a ride on the winged horse Pegasus, who had sprung out of Medusa's neck. Pegasus had flown to Greece, where the nine Muses had found him and tended him. They were

the only ones who could come close enough to touch him, for Pegasus was wild and swift.

One night, Bellerophon fell asleep in Athena's temple. He dreamed that the goddess gave him a golden bridle that would make the flying horse tame. And when he awoke, he really held a golden bridle in his hand.

Not long thereafter, Pegasus flew over Corinth, saw the clear spring that Sisyphus had won from the river-god, and stopped to drink. Carefully Bellerophon tiptoed up to the winged horse and flung the bridle over his head. The horse neighed, looked at Bellerophon, and suddenly he was so tame that Bellerophon could mount him. Never had there been such a horse and such a horseman. They galloped through the air, over land and over sea, faster than the wind.

On the back of his flying horse, Bellerophon set off to fight the Chimera, a fire-breathing beast that was ravaging the kingdom of Lycia in Asia Minor. The Chimera was more fearful than a nightmare. She was lion in front, serpent in back, and goat in between. She spat fire from all her three heads and her hide was so tough that no weapon could pierce it. Swooping down as close as he dared without singeing the coat of his flying horse, Bellerophon went at the monster with a lump of lead stuck to the end of his spear. The Chimera hissed like a serpent, bleated like a goat, and as she opened wide her lion's jaws to roar, he thrust the lump of lead down her throat. Her flaming breath melted the lead and it trickled into her stomach and killed her.

The people of Lycia, who had been hiding in fear behind bolted doors, now dared to come out, and the king of the country was so thankful that he gave Bellerophon the hand of his daughter. When the old king died, Bellerophon inherited the kingdom. He became a great king, loved by his people, feared by his neighbors and all the monsters lurking nearby. But his fame went to his head and he grew so vain that he thought he was as great as the gods. He even held himself equal to Zeus. He soared ever higher on his flying horse, and at last he tried to enter Olympus itself. There pride took a spill. Pegasus threw him and Bellerophon fell to earth, landing in thistle thorns in a distant country. Torn and lame, he wandered about as an unknown beggar until he died. Pegasus entered Olympus alone and Zeus made the handsome winged horse the carrier of his thunderbolts.



MELAMPUS, a cousin of Bellerophon, won glory and fame and one third of a kingdom, all because he was kind to animals. Once when he was a child, he found a dead mother snake on the road. He did not kick it into a ditch, but gave it a proper funeral, picked up the little motherless snakes, and reared them tenderly. In gratitude they licked his ears so clean that he could understand the language of all animals, crawling and flying. From their talk he learned the secrets of the earth and grew wise beyond measure.

Once he was thrown into prison for trying to steal some cows from a neighboring king, and one night as he lay on his cot, he heard a family of termites talking inside the roof beam. "Brother," said one termite to another, "if we go on chewing all night, the roof will collapse before morning."

Melampus jumped up and hammered at the door. He demanded to be moved at once, for the roof would soon fall in. The jailer laughed, but Melampus made such a fuss that he was finally moved. Just then the

roof did cave in. Everybody marveled, and the king called for him and told him that, if he could find a cure for his sick son, he could have the cows he had tried to steal. The young prince had been sick since he was a child, and no one knew what ailed him.

Melampus slaughtered an ox and spread the meat on the ground. Right away, two vultures swooped down and began to gorge themselves. When they had eaten their fill, one of the vultures said to the other, "I haven't been so full since that time when the king sacrificed a ram to the gods. I remember how terrified the little prince was when he saw his father with a bloody knife in his hand. He screamed so loudly that his father threw away his knife and ran to comfort him. The knife stuck in the tree over yonder and wounded the tree nymph. She cast a spell on the boy and he has been sick ever since. Now the bark has closed over the knife, but if the king knew what I know, he would dig out the rusty blade, make a brew from the rust, and give it to the prince to drink."

Melampus at once dug out the blade and made a rusty brew. The sickly prince drank it and right away he was so fit that he bounded over a field of barley without bending a stalk. Melampus won great fame as a healer and from all corners of Greece, kings sent for him to cure their sick.

The King of Tiryns had three lovely daughters who suddenly went quite out of their minds and thought they were cows. The king sent for Melampus, who said that he would cure them if the king would give him a third of his kingdom. That was far too much, thought the king, and Melampus went away. The princesses grew worse and ran all over the kingdom mooing like cows. The king again sent for Melampus. This time Melampus came with his brother and now he wanted a third of the kingdom for his brother, too! The king had to agree, for it was very embarrassing to him that his daughters ran around shouting, "We are cows, we are cows!"

Melampus hired some fast runners and sent them after the crazy girls. They had to run halfway across Greece before they could catch them and bring them back. Melampus forced them to drink a draught of magic herbs, and that cured all of them except one, poor girl, who died of exhaustion.

The king, who had to part with two-thirds of his kingdom, thought that he might as well give Melampus and his brother each a princess in the bargain, and they all lived happily thereafter.