



The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish

*By the very edge of the blue sea
lived an old man and his old woman.
For three and thirty years they had lived
in a tumbledown hut made of mud.
The old man caught fish in his fishing net;
the old woman span with her spinning wheel.
One day the old man cast his net
and all he caught in his net was slime.
The old man cast his net a second time
and all he caught in his net was weed.
A third time the old man cast his net
and what he found in his net was a fish —
no ordinary fish, but a golden fish.
The fish begged, the fish begged and implored;
the fish prayed in a human voice:
'Release me, set me free in the sea —
and in return you'll receive a grand ransom,
I'll grant you whatever you wish.'
The old man was amazed and frightened.
Three and thirty years he had fished —
and not once had he heard a fish talk.
He returned the fish to the water,
saying gently as he let her go free,
'God be with you, golden fish!
I don't need your grand ransom.
Off you go — into the deep blue sea!
Swim free, swim where you wish!'
The old man went back to his old woman
and told her of this great wonder:
'Today I caught a fish in my net —
no ordinary fish, but a golden fish.*

*The fish spoke, she spoke in our tongue;
she begged to go home, into the blue sea.
she promised me a splendid ransom;
she said she would grant whatever I wished.*

But I didn't dare take this ransom.

I set her free in the deep blue sea.'

The old woman scolded her old man:

'Simple fool, fool of a simpleton!

What stopped you taking this ransom?

A mere fish — and you were too frightened!

You could at least have got a new washtub.

Ours is cracked right down the middle.'

Off he went towards the blue sea.

(The blue sea looked a little troubled.)

He called out to the golden fish

and the fish swam up and asked him,

'What is it, old man, what do you want?'

The old man bowed to the fish and said,

'Have mercy on me, Sovereign Fish.

My old woman is cursing and scolding me.

Though I am old, she gives me no peace.

She needs a new washtub, she says.

Ours is cracked right down the middle.'

The golden fish replied straightaway,

'Take heart — and God be with you!

Outside your hut you'll find a new washtub!'

The old man went back to his old woman.

His old woman now had a new washtub,

but she was cursing more fiercely than ever:

'Simple fool, fool of a simpleton,

all you got from the fish was a washtub.

What wealth can be found in a washtub?

Get on back, you fool, to the fish.

Bow down to the fish and say

you want a handsome house built of wood.'

Off he went towards the blue sea.

(The blue sea was a little rough.)

He called out to the golden fish

and the fish swam up and asked him,

'What is it, old man, what do you want?'

The old man bowed to the fish and said,

'Have mercy on me, Sovereign Fish.

My old woman is cursing and raging.

Though I am old, she gives me no peace.

She wants a handsome house built of wood.'

The golden fish replied straightaway,

'Take heart — and God be with you!

You shall have your house built of wood.'

The old man set off for his hut,

but not a trace of his hut could he find.

In its place stood a house built of wood

with a whitewashed brick chimney

and two strong gates hewn from oak.

Sitting by the window was his old woman,

swearing at him for all she was worth:

'Simple fool, fool of a simpleton,

all you got from the fish was a house.

Get on back, you fool, to the fish.

I don't want to be a lowly peasant.

I want to be a noble lady.'
Off he went towards the blue sea.

(The blue sea was not calm.)

*He called out to the golden fish
and the fish swam up and asked him,
'What is it, old man, what do you want?'
The old man bowed to the fish and said,
'Have mercy on me, Sovereign Fish.
My old woman is shouting and swearing,
cursing me for all she is worth.
Though I am old, she gives me no peace.
She doesn't want to be a lowly peasant.
She wants to be a noble lady.'*

*The golden fish replied straightaway,
'Take heart — and God be with you!'
The old man went back to his old woman
and saw? He saw a tall mansion.
His old woman was standing there in the porch.
She was wearing a splendid 'soul-warmer' —
a precious waistcoat trimmed with sable.
On her head was a brocade head-dress;
round her neck hung heavy pearls
and gold rings encircled her fingers.
On her feet were fine red boots
and before her stood zealous servants;
she was slapping them and pulling their hair.
The old man said to his old woman,
'Good day, Lady Countess Baroness!
I hope you've got all you want now!'
The old woman flew at her husband
and packed him off to work in the stables.
A week passed, and another week.
The old woman grew madder than ever.
She sent her old man back to the fish:*

*'Go back to the fish, bow low and say
I don't want to be a fine lady —
I want to be a mighty tsaritsa.'*

*The old man took fright. He implored her:
'What's got into you, woman? Are you crazy?
Have you been eating black henbane?
You don't know how to walk like a tsaritsa,
You don't know how to talk like a tsaritsa.
You'll be the laughing stock of your tsardom.'*

*The old woman flew into a fury.
She struck her husband across the cheek:
'How dare you, peasant, answer me back?
How dare you talk like that to a lady?
Back you go again to the sea — or, upon my word,
You'll be dragged there against your will.'*

*Off he went towards the blue sea.
(The blue sea was blacker than black.)
He called out to the golden fish
and the fish swam up and asked him,
'What is it, old man, what do you want?'*

*The old man bowed to the fish and said,
'Have mercy on me, Sovereign Fish.
My old woman is raging again.
She doesn't want to be a fine lady.
She wants to be a mighty tsaritsa.'*

*The golden fish replied straightaway,
'Take heart — and God be with you!
Your old woman shall be a tsaritsa.'*

*The old man went back to his old woman.
Before him stands a splendid palace
and his old woman is there in the hall.*

She is a tsaritsa sitting at table.

*Nobles are standing and waiting on her,
pouring her wines from over the seas
while she nibbles on honeycakes.*

*All around stand fierce-looking guards
with sharp axes poised on their shoulders...*

*The old man was frightened. He bowed to the ground
and said, 'Greetings, O dread Tsaritsa —
and I hope you've got all you want now!'*

*The old woman didn't look at him;
she just ordered him out of her sight,
and her nobles and courtiers came running
and shoved the old man towards the door;
and the guards ran up with their axes
and all-but hacked him to pieces.*

and everyone laughed at the old man:

'Serves you right, you ignorant lout!

Let this be a lesson to you, bumpkin!

Don't get too big for your boots

or sit in another man's sleigh!'

A week passed, and another week.

The old woman grew madder than ever.

She sent her courtiers to fetch her husband.

They found him and brought him before her

and the old woman said to her old man,

'Go back, bow down to the fish.

I don't want to be a mighty tsaritsa,

I want to be a sea empress;

I want to live in the Ocean-Sea

with the golden fish as my servant

to bring me whatever I ask for.'

*The old man did not dare say a word;
he was too frightened to open his mouth.
Off he went towards the blue sea.
Raging there was a black storm!
Waves were flinging up spray;
angry waves were crashing and howling.
He called out to the golden fish
and the fish swam up and asked him,
'What is it, old man, what do you need?'
The old man bowed to the fish and said,
'Have mercy on me, Sovereign Fish!
What am I to do with the wretched woman?
She no longer wants to be a tsaritsa,
she wants to be a sea empress.
She wants to live in the Ocean-Sea
with you as her faithful servant
to bring her whatever she asks for.'
Not a word did the fish reply.
She just slapped her tail on the water
and dived deep into the blue sea.
The old man waited and waited
But that was all the answer he got.
He went back — to a hut made of mud.
His old woman was sitting outside it;
And before her lay a broken washtub;*

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