The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish

An old man lived with his old woman
By the very blue sea;
They lived in a dilapidated dugout
For exactly thirty years and three years.
The old man caught fish with a seine,
The old woman spun her yarn.

Once he cast his seine into the sea,
The seine came back with only slime.
He cast his seine a second time,
The seine came back with seaweed.
The third time he cast his seine,
The seine came back with one little fish,
With an extraordinary fish, a golden one.

How the golden fish begged!
In a human voice it spoke:
"Let me go, old man, back to the sea,
I will give you a dear ransom for myself:
I will ransom myself with whatever you wish."

The old man was amazed, was frightened:
He had fished for thirty years and three years
And had never heard a fish speak.
He released the golden fish
And said to it a kind word:
"God be with you, golden fish!
I don't need your ransom;
Go back to the blue sea,
Roam there at your leisure."

The old man returned to his old woman,
Told her of the great wonder.
"I caught a fish today,
A golden fish, not an ordinary one;
It spoke to me in our tongue,

Begged to go back home to the blue sea,
Offered a dear price as ransom:
It offered to ransom itself with whatever I wished.
I didn't dare take a ransom from it;
So I let it go into the blue sea."

The old woman scolded the old man:
"You fool, you simpleton!
You didn't know how to take a ransom from the fish!
You should have at least taken a trough from it,
Ours is completely split."

So he went to the blue sea;
He sees the sea is slightly stirred up.
He began calling the golden fish,
The fish swam up to him and asked:
"What do you need, old man?"
To her the old man answers with a bow:
"Have mercy, lady fish,
My old woman has scolded me,
She gives the old man no peace:
She needs a new trough;
Ours is completely split."

The golden fish answers:
"Don't be sad, go with God,
You will have a new trough."

The old man returned to his old woman,
The old woman has a new trough.
Even more the old woman scolds:
"You fool, you simpleton!
You begged for a trough, you fool!
Is there much profit in a trough?
Go back, you fool, to the fish;
Bow to it, beg for a hut."

So he went to the blue sea,
(The blue sea grew murky.)
He began calling the golden fish,
The fish swam up to him and asked:

"What do you need, old man?"
To her the old man answers with a bow:
"Have mercy, lady fish!
Even more my old woman scolds,
She gives the old man no peace:
The quarrelsome woman asks for a hut."

The golden fish answers:
"Don't be sad, go with God,
So be it: you will have a hut."

He went to his dugout,
But there was no trace of the dugout;
Before him stood a hut with an upper room,
With a brick, whitewashed chimney,
With oak, plank gates.
The old woman sits by the window,
Cursing her husband at the top of her voice.
"You fool, you outright simpleton!
You begged for a hut, you simpleton!
Go back, bow to the fish:
I don't want to be a black peasant woman,
I want to be a noblewoman of the pillar."

The old man went to the blue sea;
(The blue sea is not calm.)
He began calling the golden fish.
The fish swam up to him and asked:
"What do you need, old man?"
To her the old man answers with a bow:
"Have mercy, lady fish!
More than before my old woman has raged,
She gives the old man no peace:
She no longer wants to be a peasant woman,
She wants to be a noblewoman of the pillar."

The golden fish answers:
"Don't be sad, go with God."

The old man returned to his old woman.
What does he see? A tall tower.

On the porch stands his old woman
In an expensive sable jacket,
A brocade kokoshnik on her head,
Pearls weigh down her neck,
On her hands golden rings,
On her feet red boots.
Before her stand diligent servants;
She beats them, drags them by the hair.

The old man says to his old woman:
"Greetings, noble lady, noblewoman!
I suppose now your soul is content."

The old woman shouted at him,
Sent him to serve in the stable.

A week passes, another passes,
Even more the old woman rages:
Again she sends the old man to the fish.
"Go back, bow to the fish:
I don't want to be a noblewoman of the pillar,
I want to be a free tsaritsa."

The old man was frightened, begged:
"What is it, woman, have you eaten henbane?
You can neither step nor speak properly,
You will make the whole kingdom laugh."

The old woman grew even angrier,
Struck her husband on the cheek.
"How dare you, peasant, argue with me,
With me, a noblewoman of the pillar?
Go to the sea, I tell you honestly,
If you don't go, they will drag you there."

The old man set off for the sea,
(The blue sea turned black.)
He began calling the golden fish.
The fish swam up to him and asked:
"What do you need, old man?"
To her the old man answers with a bow:
"Have mercy, lady fish!

Again my old woman rebels:
She no longer wants to be a noblewoman,
She wants to be a free tsaritsa."

The golden fish answers:
"Don't be sad, go with God!
Very well! The old woman will be tsaritsa!"

The old man returned to his old woman.
What? Before him are royal chambers.
In the chambers he sees his old woman,
Sitting at the table as tsaritsa,
Boyars and nobles serve her,
They pour her foreign wines;
She eats it with printed gingerbread;
Around her stands a fearsome guard,
Holding battle-axes on their shoulders.

When the old man saw it, he was frightened!
He bowed to his old woman's feet,
Said: "Greetings, fearsome tsaritsa!
Well, now your soul is content, I suppose."

The old woman didn't look at him,
Only ordered him to be driven from her sight.
The boyars and nobles ran up,
Pushed the old man by the neck.
And at the door the guard ran up,
Nearly chopped him to pieces with their axes.
And the people laughed at him:
"He got what he deserved, old ignoramus!
In future, ignoramus, take this lesson:
Don't sit in sledges that aren't yours!"

A week passes, another passes,
Even more the old woman rages:
She sends the court officials after her husband,
They found the old man and brought him to her.
The old woman says to the old man:
"Go back, bow to the fish.
I don't want to be a free tsaritsa,

I want to be mistress of the sea,
To live in the Ocean Sea,
So that the golden fish would serve me
And be at my beck and call."

The old man didn't dare contradict,
Didn't dare speak a word against her.
So he goes to the blue sea,
He sees a black storm on the sea:
The angry waves swelled up,
They toss about, they howl and wail.
He began calling the golden fish.
The fish swam up to him and asked:
"What do you need, old man?"
To her the old man answers with a bow:
"Have mercy, lady fish!
What should I do with the cursed woman?
She no longer wants to be tsaritsa,
She wants to be mistress of the sea;
To live in the Ocean Sea,
So that you yourself would serve her
And be at her beck and call."

The fish said nothing,
Only splashed its tail on the water
And went into the deep sea.
Long he waited by the sea for an answer,
Didn't get one, returned to his old woman
Lo and behold: again before him is a dugout;
On the threshold sits his old woman,
And before her a broken trough.