The Golden Fish — Version 1

On the sea, on the ocean, on the island of Buyan stood a small, rickety little hut; in that little hut lived an old man and an old woman. They lived in great poverty; the old man made a net and took to going out to sea to catch fish: that was the only way he provided himself with daily sustenance. One time the old man cast his net and began to haul it in, and it seemed to him so heavy, as never before: he barely, barely pulled it up. He looks, and the net is empty; only a single fish had got caught, but it was no ordinary fish — a golden one. The fish began to plead with him in a human voice: "Do not take me, old man! Better let me go into the blue sea; I will be of use to you myself: whatever you wish, that I shall do." The old man thought and thought and said: "I need nothing from you: go and frolic in the sea!"

He threw the golden fish back into the water and returned home. His old woman asks him: "Did you catch much, old man?" — "Why, only a single golden fish, and that one I threw back into the sea; it pleaded with me hard: let me go, it said, into the blue sea; I shall be of use to you: whatever you wish, I shall do it all! I took pity on the fish, took no ransom from it, set it free for nothing." — "Oh, you old devil! Great happiness fell into your hands, and you couldn't even make use of it."

The old woman grew angry, scolds the old man from morning till night, gives him no peace: "If only you had begged some bread from her! For soon there won't be even a dry crust; what will you eat then?" The old man could not stand it, went to the golden fish for bread; he came to the sea and called out in a loud voice: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The fish swam up to the shore: "What is it you need, old man?" — "The old woman grew cross, sent me for bread." — "Go home, you shall have bread in plenty." The old man returned: "Well, old woman, is there bread?" — "There's bread in plenty; but here's the trouble: the washtub has split, there's nothing to wash the linen in; go to the golden fish, ask her to give us a new one."

The old man went to the sea: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The golden fish swam up: "What do you need, old man?" — "The old woman sent me, she asks for a new washtub." — "Very well, you shall have a washtub too." The old man returned — he had barely stepped through the door, when the old woman fell upon him again: "Go," she says, "to the golden fish, ask her to build us a new hut; it's impossible to live in ours, any moment now it will fall apart!" The old man went to the sea: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The fish swam up, turned toward him with its head and into the sea with its tail, and asks: "What is it you need, old man?" —

"Build us a new hut; the old woman scolds, gives me no peace; she doesn't want, she says, to live in the old little hut: any moment now the whole thing will fall apart!" — "Do not grieve, old man! Go home and pray to God, all shall be done."

The old man returned — in his yard stands a new hut, of oak, with carved patterns. The old woman runs out to meet him, angrier than before, scolding more than before: "Oh, you old dog! You don't know how to make use of happiness. You begged a hut and, I daresay, think you've done your job! No, go again to the golden fish and tell her: I don't want to be a peasant woman, I want to be a voevoda's wife, so that good folk obey me and bow to me to the waist when they meet me." The old man went to the sea, says in a loud voice: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The fish swam up, turned in the sea with its tail, toward him with its head: "What is it you need, old man?" The old man answers: "The old woman gives me no peace, she has gone quite mad: she doesn't want to be a peasant woman, she wants to be a voevoda's wife." — "Very well, do not grieve! Go home and pray to God, all shall be done."

The old man returned, and instead of the hut stands a stone house, built three storeys high; across the yard servants run about, in the kitchen cooks clatter, and the old woman, in a costly brocade gown, sits in high armchairs and gives orders. "Greetings, wife!" says the old man. "Oh, you boor! How dare you call me, a voevoda's wife, your wife? Ho, men! Seize this lout, take him to the stable and flay him with whips as painfully as possible." At once the servants came running, seized the old man by the scruff and dragged him off to the stable; the grooms began to treat him to the whip, and treated him so well that he could barely get to his feet. After that the old woman made the old man a yard-keeper; she ordered a broom given to him, to sweep the yard, and for him to be fed and given drink in the kitchen. A wretched life for the old man: sweep the yard all day long, and if a spot is dirty anywhere — straight to the stable! "What a witch!" thinks the old man. "Happiness came to her, and she's buried herself in it like a pig, and no longer counts me as her husband!"

No more, no less time passed, the old woman grew weary of being a voevoda's wife, sent for the old man and orders him: "Go, you old devil, to the golden fish, tell her: I don't want to be a voevoda's wife, I want to be a tsarina." The old man went to the sea: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The golden fish swam up: "What is it you need, old man?" — "Well, my old woman has gone madder than before: she doesn't want to be a voevoda's wife, she wants to be a tsarina." — "Do not grieve! Go home and pray to God, all shall be done." The old man returned, and instead of the former house stands a tall palace under a golden roof; all around sentries pace and present arms; behind it a great

garden spreads out, and right before the palace — a green meadow; on the meadow armies are assembled. The old woman dressed as a tsarina, stepped out onto the balcony with generals and boyars and began to hold a review and parade of those armies: drums beat, music blares, the soldiers cry "hurrah!"

No more, no less time passed, the old woman grew weary of being a tsarina, ordered the old man to be found and brought before her bright eyes. An uproar arose, the generals bustle, the boyars run about: "What old man is this?" They barely found him in the back yard, led him to the tsarina. "Listen, you old devil!" the old woman says to him. "Go to the golden fish and tell her: I don't want to be a tsarina, I want to be the mistress of the sea, so that all seas and all fishes obey me." The old man began to make excuses; as if that would help! if you don't go — off goes your head! With a heavy heart the old man went to the sea, came and says: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The golden fish is nowhere to be found! The old man calls a second time — again she is not there! He calls a third time — suddenly the sea roared and grew turbulent; it had been bright and clear, and now it turned quite black. The fish swims up to the shore: "What is it you need, old man?" — "The old woman has grown madder still; she no longer wants to be a tsarina, she wants to be the mistress of the sea, to rule over all waters, to command all fishes."

The golden fish said nothing to the old man, turned around and went away into the depths of the sea. The old man turned back, looks and cannot believe his eyes: the palace is as if it never was, and in its place stands a small, rickety little hut, and in the little hut sits the old woman in a tattered sarafan. They began to live as before, the old man took up fishing again; only, however often he cast his nets into the sea, he never managed to catch the golden fish again.