The Goldfish — Version 2

Out at sea, on the ocean, on the island of Buyan, there stood a small, rickety little hut: in that 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 how he earned his daily bread. One day the old man cast his net and began to haul it in, and it seemed to him heavier than it had ever been before: he barely managed to pull it up. He looked, and the net was empty; only a single fish had been caught, but it was no ordinary fish — it was a golden fish. The fish pleaded with him in a human voice: "Do not take me, old man! Let me go back into the blue sea; I will be of use to you: whatever you wish, I will 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 asked him: "Did you catch much, old man?" — "Only a single golden fish, and I threw that back into the sea; it pleaded with me so hard: let me go, it said, into the blue sea; I will be of use to you: whatever you wish, I will do it all! I took pity on the fish, took no ransom from it, and set it free for nothing." — "Oh, you old devil! Great happiness fell into your hands, and you couldn't even hold on to it."

The old woman grew angry, cursed the old man from morning till night, and gave him no peace: "If only you had begged some bread from her! Soon there won't be even a dry crust; what will you eat then?" The old man could not stand it, and 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 do you want, old man?" — "The old woman grew angry and 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, and there's nothing to wash the laundry in; go to the golden fish and 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 want, 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 said, "to the golden fish, and ask her to build us a new hut; we can't live in ours, it looks ready to fall down at any moment!" 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 asked: "What do you want, old man?" —

"Build us a new hut; the old woman is cursing and giving me no peace; she says she doesn't want to live in the old hut: it looks ready to fall to pieces at any moment!" — "Do not grieve, old man! Go home and pray to God, and all shall be done."

The old man returned — in his yard stood a new hut, of oak, with carved patterns. The old woman came running out to meet him, angrier than before, cursing 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 work! No, go back 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 will obey me and bow to me to the waist when they meet me." The old man went to the sea and said 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 and toward him with its head: "What do you want, old man?" The old man answered: "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, and all shall be done."

The old man returned, and in place of the hut stood a stone house, built three stories high; servants ran about the yard, cooks clattered in the kitchen, and the old woman sat in a costly brocade dress on high chairs, giving orders. "Greetings, wife!" said the old man. "Oh, you boor! How dare you call me, a voevoda's wife, your wife? Ho, there! Seize this lout and take him to the stables and flog him as painfully as possible." The servants came running at once, seized the old man by the scruff of the neck and dragged him to the stables; the grooms began to entertain him with whips, and entertained 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 to be given him so that he would sweep the yard, and for him to be fed and given drink in the kitchen. Life was hard for the old man: sweep the yard all day long, and if a single spot was dirty — off to the stables at once! "What a witch!" thought the old man. "Happiness came to her, and she buried herself in it like a pig, and no longer counts me as her husband!"

Before much time had passed, the old woman grew weary of being a voevoda's wife, sent for the old man and ordered him: "Go, you old devil, to the golden fish, and 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 do you want, old man?" — "Well, my old woman has gone madder than ever: 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, and all

shall be done." The old man returned, and in place of the former house stood a tall palace beneath a golden roof; sentries walked all around, shouldering their muskets; behind it stretched a great garden, and right before the palace lay a green meadow; on the meadow armies were assembled. The old woman dressed as a tsarina, stepped out onto the balcony with generals and boyars, and began to review and drill those armies: drums beat, music thundered, the soldiers cried "hurrah!"

Before much time had passed, the old woman grew weary of being a tsarina, and ordered the old man to be found and brought before her bright eyes. An uproar arose, the generals bustled, the boyars ran about: "What old man is this?" They barely found him in the back yard and led him to the tsarina. "Listen, you old devil!" the old woman said to him. "Go to the golden fish and tell her: I don't want to be a tsarina, I want to be the sovereign of the sea, so that all seas and all fishes obey me." The old man began to make excuses; but what chance had he! If he did not go — off with his head! With a heavy heart the old man went to the sea, came and said: "Fish, fish! Turn in the sea with your tail, and toward me with your head." The golden fish was nowhere to be seen! The old man called a second time — again she was not there! He called a third time — suddenly the sea roared and grew turbulent; it had been bright and clear, and now it turned quite black. The fish swam up to the shore: "What do you want, old man?" — "The old woman has grown madder still; she no longer wants to be a tsarina, she wants to be the sovereign 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, looked and could not believe his eyes: the palace was gone as if it had never been, and in its place stood a small, rickety little hut, and in the hut sat the old woman in a tattered sarafan. They began to live as before, and 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.