

The Fisherman and the Fish

Once upon a time an old man and his wife lived on the shore of the blue sea. They were poor and lived in an old mud hut. He made a living by fishing, while his wife spun cloth. One day he caught a small golden fish in his net. The fish begged him, "Let me go, old man. I will reward you for my freedom by giving you anything you desire." The fisherman was astonished and frightened because he had never before heard a fish speak. He let the fish go and said kindly to her, "God bless you, golden fish. I don't need anything from you."



The fisherman went home and told his wife the wonderful thing that had happened to him at the shore. But she cursed angrily him and said, "You are such a fool not to make a wish! At least you could have asked for a watering-trough, since ours is broken."

The old man returned to the seashore, where little waves were rushing up onto the sand. He called out to the golden fish. She swam up and asked, "What do you need, old man?" He bowed and replied that his wife cursed at him because she needed a new trough. The fish comforted him and promised to grant his wish.

When the fisherman returned home he saw the new trough. But his wife shouted at him, "You are such a fool! Go back to the fish! Ask for a new house."

The fisherman went back to the sea, where the water and sky had become overcast. He called the fish, who swam up to where he was standing. He apologized and said that his snappish wife wanted a new house. The fish comforted him and promised to fulfill his wish.

When he returned, he saw a nice new cottage with a gate. But his wife shouted even louder, "You are such a fool! Go back to the fish! I do not want be an ordinary peasant, I want be a noblewoman!"

The poor old fisherman went to the sea. The waves were beginning to rise and beat on the shore, and the sky had become even darker. He called the golden

fish, who swam up and asked him what he wanted. He bowed humbly and explained, "Don't be angry, Your Majesty Golden Fish. My wife has gone mad; she wants to be a noblewoman." The fish comforted him.

And what did he see when he returned home? The hut had become a great house. His wife was wearing an expensive sable jacket and had a kokoshnik (headdress) of brocade. She had on pearl necklaces and gold rings. There were many servants bustling around her. She hit and slapped them. The fisherman said, "Greetings, Milady, I hope you are satisfied now." She didn't deign to answer him, but instead ordered him off to live in the stable.

Several weeks later, the wife ordered her husband to appear before her and instructed him to go to the sea again, saying, "I am still subject to the rule of those above me! I want to be queen of all the land!" The old man, frightened, said, "Are you crazy, old woman? You have no concept of courtly manners. Everybody will make fun of you." At these words his wife glowered with rage, slapped his face, and ordered him to obey.

The old man went down to the seashore. The water was roiling, the sky and sea had become almost black. He called the golden fish. When she swam to the shore, he bowed and said that his wife now wanted to be queen of the land. The fish comforted him and let him go home.

When the fisherman arrived, he found a great palace, inside which his wife was seated on a throne. Boyars and other noblemen were her servants. Around her stood menacing guards. The old man was terrified, but approached the queen and said, "Greetings, Your Majesty. I hope you are happy now." She did not even look at him, and her guards drove him out.

Several weeks later the queen sent for the old fisherman and again ordered him to go to the sea--this time to ask the golden fish to become her servant and make her Empress of Land and Sea. The fisherman was so terrified of her that he did not even protest. He submissively went back to the sea.

A terrible storm was raging there, with lightning, thunder, and giant waves crashing against the shore. The old man yelled as loud as he could and the fish rose out of the waves. He explained to her what his wife wanted now. This time the golden fish did not reply, but turned and swam away out to sea. After waiting a long time in vain for any answer, the fisherman returned home--where he found his old mud hut, his poor old wife and a broken trough in front of her.