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“TALE OF THE FISHERMAN AND THE LITTLE FISH”

by Alexander Pushkin

TALE OF THE FISHERMAN AND THE LITTLE FISH

An old man, his old woman with him,
Lived close by the dark blue ocean.
In a shaky mud hut they were living
For just thirty-three years exactly.
The old man with his net would go fishing,
And her yarn the dame would be spinning.
Once he cast his net in the ocean,
And the net came up with mud only.
When he cast out his net the next time
The net came up just with seaweed.
And he cast his net for the third time,
And the net, with a fish it came up,
Not a common fish, but a golden.
Then the golden fish asks for mercy,
Speaking with the voice of a mortal:
“Let me go, old man, into the ocean;
A costly ransom I will give thee;
My ransom is whatever thou wishest.”
The old man marvelled, he was frightened;
Three and thirty years he had been fishing
And never had he heard of a fish talking.
And the golden fish, he released it,
Saying to it a word of kindness:
“Golden fish, now may God be with thee!
For I have no need of the ransom.
So depart thou into the blue ocean,
A-roaming by thyself in freedom.”

The old man, to his dame returning,
Related to her the mighty marvel:
“I was just a-catching a fish this morning,
Not a common fish, but a golden,
And the fish, she spoke to me in Russian;
She begged to go home to the blue ocean,
And ransomed herself with a costly payment:

I might wish for what I like for ransom!
But I did not dare to take the ransom,
So let her go in the blue ocean.”
The old man from his dame got a rating:
“A simpleton art thou and a blockhead;
Not able to take the fish’s ransom!
Why, a trough thou mightst have taken from her;
For ours is all broken and battered.”

Then he went to the dark blue ocean,
And saw the ocean a little ruffled;
And to the golden fish he shouted,
And the fish swam up to him, and asked him,
“What mayst thou be wanting, old fellow?”
The old man answered her, bowing,
“Have pity, O my fish, my princess!
My old woman has rated me soundly;
I am old, she gives me no quiet;
For she is wanting a trough, a new one,
And ours is all broken and battered.”
And the golden fish gave him answer:
“Begone, and grieve not; Got be with thee.
For ye shall have your trough, a new one.”

Then back to his dame went the old man.
By the dame was a trough, a new one.
But the dame, she scolds worse then ever:
“A simpleton art thou and a blockhead!
Blockhead, just a trough for thy begging!
There is little *truck* in a *trough*¹ now!
Get thee back to the fish, thou blockhead;
Bow to her, beg of her a cottage.”

Then he went to the dark blue ocean

¹¹ Play, in the original, on *koryto* (trough) and *koryst'* (profit). — *Translator's note.*

(And the dark blue ocean was troubled)
And to the golden fish he shouted,
And the fish swam up to him, and asked him,
“What mayst thou be wanting, old fellow?”

The old man answered her, bowing:
“Have pity, O my fish, my princess!
For my dame is scolding more than ever;
I am old, she gives me no quiet;
And the old shrew asks for a cottage.”
And the golden fish gave him answer,
“Begone, and grieve not; God be with thee;
Be it so; ye shall have your cottage.”
He went to his hut; it had been earthen;
But the earthen hut had all vanished.
Before him is a cottage, with attic,
With a chimney all of brick and whitened,
And the gate is made of oaken planking,
The old woman sits there at the window
And mightily she abuses her husband:
“Thou simpleton and perfect blockhead!
Simpleton, thou hast begged a cottage!
Back to the fish, and bow before her;
I would not be a vulgar peasant,
But would be a lady of position.”

Then he went to the dark blue ocean
(The blue ocean was disquieted)
And to the golden fish he shouted,
And the fish swam up to him, asking,
“What mayst thou be wanting, old fellow?”
The old man answered her, bowing:
“Have pity, O my fish, princess!
My old woman is fooling worse than ever;
I am old, she gives me no quiet;
She would not be a peasant any longer,

She would be a lady of position.”
And the golden fish gave him answer,
“Begone, and grieve not; God be with thee.”

Then back to his dame went the old man.
What beholds he? A lofty mansion!
On the stairway stands his old woman
In a costly warm coat of sables,
On her crown a brocaded head-dress.
And her neck, with pearls it is loaded;
On her hands are rings, which are golden;
On her feet are shoes, which are crimson.
Diligent servants are before her;
She beats them, she tweaks them
by the forelock.

The old man said to his old woman
“Greeting,
madam lady and mistress!

Now perhaps thy soul is contented.”
And the old woman squalled out at him
And sent him to the stable to serve there.
So a week goes by, and another.
The old woman is fooling more than ever;
Yet again to the fish she sends him:
“Back to the fish, and bow before her;
I would not be a lady of position;
I want to be a ruler and an empress.”
The old man was in terror, he entreated:
“Old woman, hast thou feasted upon henbane?
How to walk, and how to talk, thou hast forgotten;
Thou wilt set the whole empire laughing.”

The old woman was angrier than ever
And on the cheek she cuffed her husband:
“Peasant, dar’st thou to argue with me,
With me, lady of position?”

Get thee to the sea—and on my honour,
If thou dost not, shalt be taken willy-nilly.”

The old man made off to the ocean
(The blue ocean had darkened over)
And to the golden fish he shouted,
And the fish swam up to him, asking,
“What mayst thou be wanting, old fellow?”
The old man answered her, bowing:
“Have pity, O my fish, my princess!
Again my old woman is rebelling;
Cares no more to be lady of position,
Wants to be a ruler and an empress.”
And the golden fish gave him answer,
“Begone, and grieve not; God be with thee;
Good! thy old woman shall be empress.”

Then back to his dame went the old man.
Lo, before him an imperial palace!
In the palace he sees his old woman
Sitting at the table, an empress;
Her servants are boyars and nobles,
And wine from overseas they pour her;
Gingerbread, all stamped, she is eating.
And a dread bodyguard surrounds her,
They have got axes on their shoulders.
When the old man saw them, he was frightened,
Bowed at the feet of the old woman,
Saying, “I bid thee hail, dream empress!
Now perhaps thy soul is contented.”
The old woman never looked at him,
Just bade them drive him from her presence.
Then ran up the boyars and nobles,
And they scruffed the old fellow forwards,
And up ran the guard at the doorway,
All but chopping him with their axes.

And the common people bemocked him:
“Thou deservest it, thou boorish ancient!
Be instructed, thou boor, hereafter,
Do not sit in the sledges of others!”

So the week goes by, and the next one;
The old woman is fooling more than ever.
She sends her courtiers to her husband,
They hunt out the old man and bring him.
And the dame, she says to her old man:
“Back to the fish, and bow before her;
I would not be ruler and an empress,
I would fain of the sea be sovereign,
So as to live in the sea, the Ocean,
So that the golden fish may serve me,
And go as my messenger on errands.”

And the old man, he durst not oppose her,
Durst not utter a word to cross her.
Now he goes to the dark blue ocean,
He looks—on the sea is a black tempest;
So swollen are the angry billows,
So rush they, such a roar are they raising.
And to the golden fish he shouted,
And the fish swam up to him, asking,
“What mayst thou be wanting, old fellow?”
The old man answered her, bowing,
“Have pity, O my fish, my princess!
How deal with her, my dammed old woman?
She wants no longer to be empress,
She wants of the sea to be sovereign,
So as to live in the sea, the Ocean,
That thou thyself mayst be her servant
And be her messenger on errands.”
But the fish, not a word she uttered,
She just plashed with her tail in the water

And went off in the depths of ocean.
Long by ocean he awaited an answer
In vain—and went back to his old woman.
See! The old mud hut is before him;
His old woman sits on the threshold,
And before her is a trough in flinders.