

The Fisherman and His Wife

(from the Grimm brother's collection)

adapted by Jeff Barker

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This version is for two actors, who are labeled as JEFF and KAREN. It may be played with three actors.

Characters

Fisherman
Alice
Fish

AT RISE: Two chairs upstage.

JEFF
Once there was a fisherman.

KAREN
Who lived with his wife.

JEFF
In a pretty little hut.

KAREN
It's a ditch.

JEFF
It's a hut.

KAREN
It's a ditch!

JEFF
In a hut in a ditch by the sea.
(JEFF blows her a kiss.)
And he'd blow her a kiss.

KAREN
(KAREN waves him away with disgust.)
And she'd wave him goodbye.

JEFF

And off to go fishin' was he.
And one day as he sat there fishin'
Just about driftin' to sleep,
Up from the brine
Came a tug on his line,
Sharp, and strong and deep.

(JEFF screams. He grabs the mimed pole with both hands.

KAREN has become the fish. They see one another, off stage focus.)

JEFF (continued)

(as she comes into focus, he freezes)
What in the world?

KAREN

I am an enchanted fish.
Do not take me home for supper.
Throw me back as fast as you can.

JEFF

That's no problem. I don't want nothin' to do with a talking fish.
(JEFF tosses pole.)
The fisherman was so excited that he threw his entire pole into the water.

KAREN

And the fish darted straight to the bottom, leaving a long streak of blood behind.

JEFF

The fisherman went home to his hut in the ditch. Hello, love, I'm home.

KAREN

What'd you catch?

JEFF

Well, I didn't catch nothin'.

KAREN

Why do I even ask.

JEFF

Actually I did catch one fish, but he said he was enchanted, so I threw him back.

KAREN

You caught an enchanted fish?

JEFF

Yeah. Just one.

KAREN

Did you ask him for something?

JEFF

Ask him for what?

KAREN

Anything. Three wishes.

JEFF

Three wishes?

KAREN

Yes. Did you ask him for three wishes!

JEFF

No.

KAREN

Two?

JEFF

No.

KAREN

One?

JEFF

No.

KAREN

You're an idiot.

JEFF

Oh, boy.

KAREN

It's not too late. Go back to the fish.

JEFF

He swam away.

KAREN

Call him back. Tell him you want a wish.

JEFF

I don't want a wish.

KAREN

Yes, you do.

JEFF

Well, I wish I didn't.

KAREN

Tell him, tell him – tell him you're tired of living in a ditch – you want to live in a cottage. Tell him he owes you and you wish for a cottage. Get goin'.

JEFF

We haven't even had supper yet.

KAREN

Go get us a cottage first. We can have supper later. Now go.

JEFF

The fisherman's one wish in the world was to make his wife happy, and so he went. On the way, he made up a little poem. He said to himself, "Enchanted fish must like poetry." When he got to the water's edge, he called out,

Roses are red
 And the ocean is blue
 Fish, how I wish
 To be talkin' to you.
 A woman was given me
 From God above
 Some know her as Alice
 But I call her love.

KAREN

And the fish returned. Hello, fisherman.

JEFF

Hi. How'd you like the poem?

KAREN

It was cute. What do you want?

JEFF

Oh. My wife says that since I was the one what caught you and let you go that I should have asked you for a wish.

KAREN

What does your wife want?

JEFF

Well, she wishes to live in a cottage because she doesn't care for the –

KAREN

Go home, fisherman. Your wife's wish is already granted.

JEFF

Saying that, the fish swam away. And the fisherman immediately went home. When he got home, his wife was standing in the doorway of a cottage.

KAREN

Now do you see the difference between that ditch and a real house?

JEFF

Oh boy.

KAREN

Come in here. Look. There's a kitchen. With cupboards. That's real linoleum. Wipe your shoes. Living room. Laundry room. Bedroom. Look out back.

JEFF

Is that our garden?

KAREN

Go pick some tomatoes. I'll make stew.

JEFF

We sure will be happy here.

KAREN

Well, maybe.

JEFF

And so they had supper.

(They put the chairs facing one another and bow their heads.)

JEFF (continued)

Giver of all gifts. We are grateful to thee. Amen. And after supper, they went to bed.

(They put the chairs together and go to sleep. The wife tosses and turns in her sleep.)

KAREN

Fisherman. Wake up. The floorplan of this cottage is not right. Go back to the fish and tell him we need to make a change.

JEFF

The floorplan?

KAREN

Yeah. We need a bigger bedroom.

JEFF

Well, love, why go to the fish? I can build a thing or two.

KAREN

Yeah, right. Look – just go to the fish and tell him we want a big stone castle.

JEFF

A castle?

KAREN

Yes. With one of those ditch things around it – a moat.

JEFF

No. I'm not going back to the fish. We're just going to make him mad.

KAREN

If he can make a cottage, he can make a castle. It's no big deal.

JEFF

Can we at least have breakfast first?

KAREN

Castle first, breakfast later. Now go.

JEFF

To tell you the truth, the fisherman did not want to go. But the fisherman's one wish in the world was to make his wife happy, and so he went. On the way, he tried to hum a little, but it was difficult to keep his mind on it. When he got to the seaside, the sky was overcast, and the water was gloomy. The fisherman stood where he had first met the fish, and he called out,

Roses are red

And the ocean is gray.
Fish, how I wish
We could talk here today.
A woman was given me
From God above
Some know her as Alice
But I call her love.

KAREN

And the fish returned. Hello, fisherman.

JEFF

Hi, fish.

KAREN

How'd you like the cottage?

JEFF

The cottage was really cute. We had tomato stew last night.

KAREN

Well, you're quite welcome.

(The fish turns away.)

JEFF

No, wait fish, don't go yet. My wife says the floorplan ain't right.

KAREN

The floorplan?

JEFF

That's the same thing I said.

KAREN

What does she want?

JEFF

Well, she said since it was so easy for you to make a cottage, that you could make a big stone castle just as well, but I told her that I could build a thing or two –

KAREN

Go home, fisherman. Your wife's wish is already granted.

(KAREN starts to leave.)

JEFF

Um, fish, I almost forgot, she also wants one of those ditch things –

KAREN

It has a moat. Goodbye fisherman.

JEFF

Saying that, the fish swam away. And the fisherman immediately went home. When he got home, his wife was standing at the entrance to a big stone castle.

KAREN

See what I told you.

JEFF

(amazed)
Whoa. Is this really ours?

KAREN

Your problem is that you set your sights too low.

JEFF

Are we allowed inside?

KAREN

We live here, you idiot.

JEFF

They went inside and there were golden tables and chairs. And servants and cooks. And a sculpture garden and a forest and a stable and a kennel.

KAREN

Those are real Persian rugs. Wipe your feet.

JEFF

We sure will be happy here.

KAREN

Well, maybe.

(They move the chairs apart, as if at the ends of a long table.)

JEFF

And so they sat down to dinner.

(They put the chairs facing one another and bow their heads.)

JEFF (continued)

Giver of all gifts. We are grateful to thee. Amen. And after dinner, the servants brought supper. Giver of all gifts. We are grateful to thee. Amen. And after supper, they went to bed.

(They set the chairs far apart, and climb into bed.)

JEFF (continued)

Goodnight, love.

KAREN

Goodnight.

(JEFF closes his eyes.)

KAREN (continued)

The next morning, the wife awoke with an idea. Fisherman. Wake up.

JEFF

Good morning, love.

KAREN

I have an idea. Go to the fish and tell him you want to be the king.

JEFF

This was such a silly idea that the fisherman thought he was dreaming.
(giggles)

KAREN

Hey!

JEFF

I'm not dreaming am I?

KAREN

No. Now go to the fish and tell him you want to be the king.

JEFF

That would be a lie. I don't want to be the king.

KAREN

You don't want to be the king?

JEFF

No.

KAREN

Okay, fine. That's fine. That's just fine. You go to the fish and you tell him that I want to be the king.

JEFF

The wife left quickly before the fisherman could get dressed, and when he went looking for her, he could not find her because there were so many rooms in the castle. Now the fisherman's one wish in the world was to make his wife happy, and so he went back to the sea. On the way, he said to himself, "This is such a silly idea, but the least I can do is to say I tried." When he got to the seaside, the sky was green, like the calm before a storm. The fisherman stood on the shore and called out,

Roses are red
And the ocean is dark.
Fish, how you'll laugh
When you hear of this lark.
A woman was given me
From God above
Some know her as Alice
But I call her love.

KAREN

And the fish returned. I didn't expect to see you so soon, fisherman.

JEFF

Well, I'm sorry to bother you, but I think you're going to laugh when you hear this.

KAREN

What does she want now?

JEFF

You're not going to believe it.

KAREN

You'd be surprised what I'd believe.

JEFF

Well, just brace yourself. My wife sent me over here to tell you that she wants to be the king. Isn't that a good one?

KAREN

Go home, fisherman. And greet the new king.

JEFF

What? What? What? But the fish was gone. And the sky was green. So the fisherman went home.

(places two chairs next to one another)
When he got home, he discovered that his wife had become the king.
(sits)

And he had to wait all day for an appointment. When he finally got in to see the king, he said, Love, what's it like to be the king?

KAREN
No one calls me love. You'll have to stop that.
(She snaps her fingers and indicates that he should kneel.)

JEFF
(kneeling)
You surely must be happy now.

KAREN
That just goes to show you how little the common people know. I no longer want to be the king. Go back to the fish. Tell him I want to be the Pope.

JEFF
You what?

KAREN
The king does not repeat an order.

JEFF
Love.

KAREN
Watch it.

JEFF
But king, we're not even Catholic.

KAREN
We soon will be.

JEFF
There is only one Pope in all the world.

KAREN
Precisely. Guards. Escort him out.

JEFF
The fisherman did not want to go. But the king's guards had long faces and longer spears. So the fisherman went that very night. The sky had turned from green to black. It was raining hard.

Roses are red
 And the ocean is wet.
 Fish, how I wish
 That we never had met!
 A woman was given me
 From God above
 Some know her as Alice
 But I call her love.

Fish!

KAREN

I'm right here fisherman.

JEFF

Fish. My king has ordered me to tell you that she wishes – that she wishes – oh, boy.

KAREN

Fisherman.

JEFF

Ohhhh, what.

KAREN

Go home. Your king is now the Pope.

JEFF

Fish! Fish!! But the fish did not answer, and it was so dark, the fisherman could not see a thing. So he went home. And when he was a long ways off, he heard chanting. And when he came a little closer, he saw rows of men in red, red robes. But that was as close as he could get. So he lay down at the foot of a sycamore tree. And fell asleep.

KAREN

In the morning, the Pope arose for her morning prayers, and she watched the sun break in the eastern sky. And she began to cry. And she said to her attendant, go find the fisherman.

JEFF

And they found him sleeping outdoors, and they kicked him awake and drug him into the presence of the Pope with profound apologies.

KAREN

Fisherman.

JEFF

Yes, lo – , um your majesty – , your high – , your holiness.

KAREN

Fisherman. I saw the sunrise this morning. Did you see the sunrise this morning?

JEFF

No. I was asleep.

KAREN

Well it was beautiful. And I said to myself, “Why can I not make a beautiful sunrise?”
Go, fisherman. Go to the fish. Tell him that I would be the maker of the sunrise.

JEFF

And the fisherman got to his feet. And he spoke in a quiet calm voice. Alice. The fish cannot make you the maker of the sunrise. Not you or anyone else.

KAREN

I’ve told you before, and this is the last time I will say it: the least we can do is try. And with that, the Pope gave a little flick of her wrist, and the guards all dressed in silver grabbed the fisherman and carried him off to the sea.

JEFF

When they came to the shore, the sun was gone. The lightening cracked, and the thunder roared. The wind screamed and the rain stung like knives. The guards drew their swords, and the fisherman cried out.

Blood is red
And the ocean is black.
Fish, how I wish
I could take it all back!
A woman was given me
From God above
Some know her as Alice
But I call her love.

KAREN

And the fish rose to the surface of the water.

JEFF

Fish!

KAREN

Yes, fisherman.

My wife wants to be –
 JEFF

Yes, fisherman.
 KAREN

My wife –
 JEFF

Yes.
 KAREN

Wants to be the maker –
 JEFF

Of the sunrise.
 KAREN

Yes.
 JEFF

No, fisherman. There is only one maker of the sunrise. Go home fisherman. Go home.
 KAREN

And the fisherman opened his eyes. And all was quiet. And the enchanted fish and the guards in silver were gone. And the fisherman immediately went home. When he got home, his wife was standing all alone.
 JEFF

Hello fisherman.
 KAREN

Hello, love.
 Once there was a fisherman.
 JEFF

Who lived with his wife.
 KAREN

In a dirty old ditch.
 JEFF

It's a hut.
 KAREN

It's a ditch.

JEFF

It's a hut!

KAREN

In a hut in a ditch by the sea.
And he lived in that hut
with Alice his love.

JEFF

As happy as happy can be.

KAREN

END OF PLAY