




A Legend of the Northland



This poem narrates the legend of an old lady who angered Saint Peter because of her greed.

Away, away in the Northland,
Where the hours of the day are few,
And the nights are so long in winter
That they cannot sleep them through;

Where they harness the swift reindeer
To the sledges, when it snows;
And the children look like bear's cubs
In their funny, furry clothes:

They tell them a curious story —
I don't believe 'tis true;
And yet you may learn a lesson
If I tell the tale to you.

Once, when the good Saint Peter
Lived in the world below,
And walked about it, preaching,
Just as he did, you know,

He came to the door of a cottage,
In travelling round the earth,
Where a little woman was making cakes,
And baking them on the hearth;

And being faint with fasting,
For the day was almost done,
He asked her, from her store of cakes,
To give him a single one.



So she made a very little cake,
But as it baking lay,
She looked at it, and thought it seemed
Too large to give away.

Therefore she kneaded another,
And still a smaller one;
But it looked, when she turned it over,
As large as the first had done.

Then she took a tiny scrap of dough,
And rolled and rolled it flat;
And baked it thin as a wafer—
But she couldn't part with that.

For she said, "My cakes that seem too small
When I eat of them myself
Are yet too large to give away."
So she put them on the shelf.

Then good Saint Peter grew angry,
For he was hungry and faint;
And surely such a woman
Was enough to provoke a saint.

And he said, "You are far too selfish
To dwell in a human form,
To have both food and shelter,
And fire to keep you warm.

Now, you shall build as the birds do,
And shall get your scanty food
By boring, and boring, and boring,
All day in the hard, dry wood."

Then up she went through the chimney,
Never speaking a word,
And out of the top flew a woodpecker,
For she was changed to a bird.

She had a scarlet cap on her head,
And that was left the same;
But all the rest of her clothes were burned
Black as a coal in the flame.

And every country schoolboy
Has seen her in the wood,
Where she lives in the trees till this very day,
Boring and boring for food.

PHOEBE CARY

A ballad is a song narrating a story in short stanzas. Ballads are a part of folk culture or popular culture and are passed on orally from one generation to the next. 'A Legend of the Northland' is a ballad.

GLOSSARY

legend: old traditional story

Saint Peter: an apostle of Christ

provoke: make angry

✿ Thinking about the Poem

- I. 1. Which country or countries do you think “the Northland” refers to?
2. What did Saint Peter ask the old lady for? What was the lady’s reaction?
3. How did he punish her?
4. How does the woodpecker get her food?
5. Do you think that the old lady would have been so ungenerous if she had known who Saint Peter really was? What would she have done then?
6. Is this a true story? Which part of this poem do you feel is the most important?
7. What is a legend? Why is this poem called a legend?
8. Write the story of ‘A Legend of the Northland’ in about ten sentences.
- II. 1. Let’s look at the words at the end of the second and fourth lines, viz., ‘snows’ and ‘clothes’, ‘true’ and ‘you’, ‘below’ and ‘know.’ We find that ‘snows’ rhymes with ‘clothes’, ‘true’ rhymes with ‘you’ and ‘below’ rhymes with ‘know’.
Find more such rhyming words.
2. Go to the local library or talk to older persons in your locality and find legends in your own language. Tell the class these legends.