

ENGLISH

A LEGEND OF THE NORTHLAND

~Summary~

-by Phoebe Cary

Stanza- 1 & 2

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:

Explanation: Here the poet introduces the place from which her story is derived, which is the 'Northland where the days are short, and nights are long in winter. It is so cold in that season that people cannot sleep comfortably the whole night, and often woke up. As the nights are very long, they are also not able to sleep the entire night. When the snow falls, people like to go sledging by tying reindeers to their sledges to pull them. Because of the cold, children wear heavy woollen and fur clothes that cover them up fully and make them look like bear cubs.

Stanza- 3 & 4

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,

Explanation: Parents in the Northland tell their children a story. Although, the poet does not think the story is true, it should be told, nonetheless, because it teaches children an important lesson. Then the poet begins to tell the story. The story is about Saint Peter as he travelled around the world preaching the word of God.

Stanza- 5 & 6

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.

Explanation: Saint Peter came to a woman's house in the Northland just when she was baking cakes in her fireplace for herself. Saint Peter's body was pale and tired at the end of a long day, during which he had been fasting. To sustain himself, he asked the woman to give him only one of the many cakes that she was baking.

Stanza- 7 & 8

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.

Explanation: So the woman baked a very small cake, but before she could give it to Saint Peter, she started thinking that it was too big to just be given away like that. So the woman went on to make an even smaller cake, but this also looked as big as the first one to her.

Stanza- 9 & 10

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.

Explanation: In her third attempt to make a cake so small that she wouldn't mind giving it away, she took an extremely small lump of dough, and when she rolled out the dough, her cake was as flat and thin as a wafer. However, she couldn't even bear to give that small cake away. The woman said that the cakes that seemed small when she herself ate them, were all too big to be donated for free. As a result, she ended up keeping all the cakes on the shelf and not giving any to Saint Peter.

Stanza- 11 & 12

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.

Explanation: This angered Saint Peter because he was hungry and weak and needed some food. It is not easy to anger a saint, but the selfish woman had been able to do so. So, Saint Peter put a curse on the selfish woman, telling her she did not deserve to have such comforts of human life like a warm fire, a house to live in and good food to eat whenever she wanted.

Stanza- 13 & 14

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.

Explanation: Saint Peter cursed the woman that she would have to build her own nest like birds do, and must dig holes into hard, dry wood to get food to feed herself. The woman went up the chimney of her house, being speechless, and had turned into a woodpecker. This woodpecker could be seen flying out of the top of the chimney.

Stanza- 15 & 16

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.

Explanation: As the woman had been wearing a red cap in human form, as a woodpecker her head was still the same shade of red in colour. However, all the clothes she had been wearing seemed to have been burnt and had become black, and that is what the colour of the woodpecker's body was. The poet says that every schoolboy living in the villages had seen this woodpecker and that she still digs into the bark of trees looking for worms and insects to feed on.

Conclusion of A legend of the Northland

By, a legend of the Northland summary the poet wants to say that when you have something then share it with others. And don't be selfish and greedy.