

A Legend of the Northland

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 me a curious story -
I don't believe 'tis true
And yet you might 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 traveling '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

She took a tiny scrap of dough
And rolled it and rolled it flat
She baked as 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

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

He said, "You are far too selfish
To dwell in 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"

So 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
And 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
She lives in the trees till this very day
Boring and boring for food

And this is the lesson she teaches:
Live not for yourself alone
Lest the needs you will not pity
Shall one day be your own

Give plenty of what is given to you
And listen to pity's call
Don't think the little you give is great
And the much you get is small

Now, my little boy, remember that
And try to be kind and good
When you see the woodpecker's sooty dress
And see her scarlet hood

You mayn't be changed to a bird though you live
As selfishly as you can
But you will be changed to a smaller thing
A mean and selfish man

-Phoebe Cary