

A Legend of the Northland by Phoebe Cary

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

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

They tell them a curious story—
I don't believe 't is 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 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.

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 school boy
Has seen her in the wood;
Where she lives in the woods 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,
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.