



By Phoebe Cary

Page No: 67

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.

Answer:

1. “The Northland” could refer to any extremely cold country in the Earth’s north polar region, such as Greenland, the northern regions of Russia, Canada, Norway etc.
2. Saint Peter asked the old lady for one of her baked cakes to satisfy his hunger. The lady tried to bake a small cake for the saint.
3. He punished the lady by changing her into a woodpecker that built “as birds do” and gathered scanty food by boring in the “hard, dry wood” all day long.
4. The woodpecker gets her food by boring holes into trees.
5. No, the old lady would not have been so ungenerous if she had known who Saint Peter really was. Instead, she would have tried to please him with her cakes for the fulfilment of her greedy desires.
6. No, this not a true story; it is a legend.  
I feel that the point in the story where the old lady is changed into a woodpecker is the most important. This is because the punishment meted out to the lady teaches us the value of generosity and charity.
7. A ‘legend’ is a popular story from the past which is believed by many but one cannot prove whether it is true or not. It usually contains a message or a moral and is narrated to children.  
The poet himself says that he doesn’t believe this tale to be true. This poem is called a ‘legend’ because it preaches generosity towards fellow beings.
8. Once Saint Peter stopped by an old lady’s cottage because he was feeling hungry and weak after the day’s fasting. The lady was baking cakes on the hearth. Since he was weak with fasting, he asked her for a cake from her store of cakes.

The selfish lady tried to bake small cakes but each time they seemed too big for her to give away. Finally, she baked one that was as thin as a wafer. Unable to part with it too, she put it on a shelf and did not give any cake to the Saint.

Saint Peter was very angry with her behaviour and said she was too selfish to live as a human and have food, shelter and a fire to keep her warm. He punished her by changing her into a woodpecker that would have to build a nest to live in, bore for food in the trunks of trees. Her clothes were burned and she was left with her scarlet cap on her head as she flew out through the chimney.

Even today she still lives in the woods and is seen by all the country school boys.

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