



The Farm That Ran Away and Came Back

William Elliot Griffis

Dutch

Intermediate
14 min read

There was once a Dutchman, who lived in the province called Drenthe. Because there was a row of little trees on his farm, his name was Ryer Van Boompjes; that is, Ryer of the Little Trees. After a while, he moved to the shore of the Zuyder Zee and into Overijssel. Overijssel means over the Ijssel River. There he bought a new farm, near the village of Blokzyl. By dyking and pumping, certain wise men had changed ten acres, of sand and heath, into pasture and land for plowing. They surrounded it on three sides with canals. The fourth side fronted on the Zuyder Zee. Then they advertised, in glowing language, the merits of the new land and Ryer Van Boompjes bought it and paid for his real estate. He was as proud as a popinjay of his island and he ruled over it like a Czar or a Kaiser.

A few years before, Ryer had married a “queezel,” as the Dutch call either a nun, or a maid who is no longer young. At this date, when our story begins, he had four blooming, but old-fashioned children, with good appetites. They could eat cabbage and potatoes, rye bread and cheese, by the half peck, and drink buttermilk by the quart. In addition, Ryer owned four horses, six cows, two dogs, some roosters and hens, a flock of geese, two dozen ducks, and a donkey.

Yet although Ryer was rich, as wealth is reckoned in Drenthe, whence he had come, he was greedy for more. He skimmed the food of his animals. So much did he do this, that his neighbors declared that they had seen him put green spectacles on his cows and the donkey. Then he mixed straws and shavings with the hay to make the animals think they were eating fresh grass.

When he ploughed, he drove his horses close to the edge next to the water, so as to make use of every half inch of land. When sometimes bits of fen land, from his neighbor's farms, got loose and floated on the water, Ryer felt he was in luck. He would go out at night, grapple the boggy stuff and fasten it to his own land.

After this had happened several times, and Ryer had added a half acre to his holdings, his greed possessed him like a bad fairy. He began to steal the land on the other side of the Zuyder Zee. In the course of time, he became a regular land thief. Whenever he saw, or heard of, a floating bit of territory, he rowed his boat after it by night. Before morning, aided by wicked helpers, who shared in the plunder, and were in his pay, he would have the bog attached to his own farm.

All this time, he hardly realized that his ill-gotten property, now increased to twelve acres or more, was itself a very shaky bit of real estate. In fact, it was not real at all. His wife one day told him so, for she knew of her mean husband's trickery.

About this time, heavy rains fell, for many days, and without ceasing, until all the region was reduced to pulp and the country seemed afloat. The dykes appeared ready to burst. Thousands feared that the land had an attack of the disease called val (fall) and that the soil would sink under the waves as portions of the realm had done before, in days long gone by.

Yet none of this impending trouble worried Ryer, whose greed grew by what it fed upon. In fact, the first day the sun shone again, quickly drying up parts of his farm, he had two horses harnessed up for work. Then he

drove them so near the edge of the ditch that plough, man, and horses tumbled, and down they went, into the shiny mess of mud and water.

At this moment, also, the water, from below the bottom of the Zuyder Zee, welled up, in a great wave, like a mushroom, and the whole of Ryer's soggy estate was on the point of breaking loose and seemed ready to float away.

The stingy fellow, as he fell overboard, bumped his head so hard on the plough beam, that he lay senseless for a half hour. He would certainly have been drowned, had not Pete, his stout son, who was not far away, and had seen the tumble, ran to the house, launched a boat and rowed quickly to the spot, where he had last seen his father. Grabbing his daddy by the collar, he hauled him, half dead, into the boat. Between his bump and his fright, and the cold bath, old Ryer was a long time coming to his wits. With filial piety, Pete kept on rubbing the paternal hands and restoring the circulation.

All this, however, took a long time, even an hour or more. When his father was able to sit up and talk, Pete started to row back to the little wharf in front of his home.

But where was it,—the farm, with the house and fields? Whither had they gone? Ryer was too mystified to get his bearings, but Pete knew the points of the compass. Yet his father's farm was not there. He looked at the shore of Overijssel, which he had left. Instead of the old, straight lines of willow trees, with the church spire beyond, there was a hollow and empty place. It looked as if a giant, as big as the world itself, had bitten out a piece of land and swallowed it down. Dumbfounded, father and son looked, the one at the other, but said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

Meanwhile, what had become of the farm and "the Queezel," as the neighbors still called her—that is, the mother with the children. These good people soon saw that they were floating off somewhere. The mainland was every moment receding further into the distance. In fact, the farm was moving from Overijssel northward, towards Friesland. One by one, the church spires of the village near by faded from sight.

But when the wind changed from south to west, they seemed as if on a ship, with sails set, and to be making due west, for North Holland. The younger children, so far from being afraid, clapped their hands in glee. They thought it great fun to ferry across the big water, which they had so long seen before their eyes. Their stingy

father had never owned a carriage, or allowed the horses to be ridden. He always made his family walk to church. Whether it were to the sermon, in the morning, or to hear the catechism expounded by the Domine, in the afternoon, all the family had to tramp on their wooden shoes there and back.

As for the floating farm, the cows could not understand it. They moored piteously, while the donkey brayed loudly. At night, and day after day, no one could attend properly to the animals, to see that they were fed and given water. One always sees a big tub in the middle of a Dutch pasture field. Neither ducks, nor geese, nor chickens minded it in the least, but the thirsty cattle and horses, at the end of the first day, had drunk the tub dry. None of the dumb brutes, even if they had not been afraid of being drowned, could drink from the Zuyder Zee, for it was chiefly sea water, that is, salt, or at least brackish.

Occasionally this errant farm, that had thus broken loose, passed by fishermen, who wondered at so much land thus adrift. Yet they feared to hail, and go on board, lest the owners might think them intruding. Others thought it none of their business, supposing some crazy fellow was using his farm as a ship, to move his lands, goods and household, and thus save expense. In some of the villages, the runaway farm was descried from the tops of the church towers. Then, it furnished a subject for chat and gossip, during three days, to the women, as they milked the cows, or knitted stockings. To the men, also, while they smoked, or drank their coffee, it was a lively topic.

“There were real people on it and a house and stables,” said the sexton of a church, who declared that he had seen this new sort of a flying Dutchman. It was the usual sight—“cow, dog, and stork,” and then he quoted the old Dutch proverb.

At last, after several days, and when Ryer and his son were nearly finished, with fatigue and fright, in trying to row their boat to catch up with the runaway farm, they finally reached a village across the Zuyder Zee, in North Holland, where rye bread and turnips satisfied their hunger and they had waffles for dessert. Their small change went quickly, and then the two men were at their wit's end to know what further to do.

By this time, out on the floating farm, the mother and children were wild with fear of starving. All the food for the cattle had been eaten up, the dog had no meat, the cat no milk, and the stork had run out of its supply of frogs. There was no sugar or coffee, and neither rye nor currant-bread, or sliced sausage or wafer-thin cheese for any one; but only potatoes and some barley grain. Happily, however, in drifting within sight of the village

of Osterbeek, the mother and the children noticed that the east wind was freshening. Soon they descried the tops of the church towers of North Holland. The smell of cows and cheese and of burning peat fires from the chimneys made both animals and human beings happy, as the wind blew the island westward to the village.

Curiously enough, this was the very place at which, by hard rowing, Ryer and Pete had also arrived. Father and son were sitting in the hotel parlor, with their eyes down on the sandy floor, wondering how they were to pay for their next sandwich and coffee, for their money was all gone.

At that moment, a small boy clattered over the bricks in his klomps. He kicked these off, at the door, and rushed into the room. He had on his yellow baggy trousers and his hair, of the same color, was cut level with his ears. Half out of breath, he announced the coming, afloat, of what looked like a combination of farm and menagerie. A house, a woman, some girls, a dog, a cat, and a stork were on it and afloat.

At once, old man Ryer, still stiff from his long, cold bath, hobbled out, and Pete ran before him. Yes, it was mother, the children and all the animals! For the first time in his life, the mean old sinner felt his heart thumping, in grateful emotion, under his woolen jacket, with its two gold buttons. Something like real religion had finally oozed out from under his crusted soul.

A whole convoy of boys, fishermen, farmers, and a fat vrouw or two, volunteered to go out and tow the runaway farm to the village wharf. They succeeded in grappling the float and held it fast by ropes tied to a horse post.

That night all were happy. The farm was made fast by another rope put round the town pump. Then the villagers all went to bed. They were happy in having rescued a runaway farm, and they expected a good "loon" (reward) from the rich old Ryer, who, in the barroom, had talked big about his wealth.

As for the Van Boompjes, in order to save a landlord's bill for beds, they slept in their house, on board the farm, amid the lowing of their cattle that called out, in their own way, for more fodder; while the people in the village wondered at roosters crowing out on the water, and evidently the barn-yard birds were frightened.

And so they were; for, before midnight, when all other creatures were asleep, and not even a mouse was stirring on land, whether hard fast, or floating, the west wind rose mightily and blew to a terrific gale.

In a moment, the tow lines, that held the vagrant farm to the village pump and horse post, snapped. The Van Boompjes estate left the wharf and was driven, at a furious rate, across the Zuyder Zee. For several hours, like a ship under full sail, it was pushed westward by the wind. Yet so soundly did all sleep, man and wife, children and hens, that none awakened during this strange voyage. Even the roosters, after their first concert, held in their voices.

Suddenly, and as straight as if steered by a skilled pilot, the Van Boompjes farm, now an accomplished traveller, after its many adventures, shot into its old place. This took place with such violence, that Ryer Van Boompjes and his wife were both thrown out of bed. The cows were knocked over in the stable. The dog barked, supposing some one had kicked him. One old rooster, jostled off his perch, set up a tremendous crowing, that brought some of the early risers out to rub their eyes and see what was going on.

“Hemel en aard, bliksem en regen” (Heaven and earth, lightning and rain), they cried, “the old farm is back in its place.”

In fact, the Van Boompjes real estate was snugly fitted once more to the mainland, and again in the niche it had left. It had struck so hard, that a ridge of raised sod, five inches high, marked the place of junction. At least twenty fishes and wriggling eels were smashed in the collision.

From that day forth the conscience of Van Boompjes returned, and he actually became an honest man. He sawed off, from time to time, portions of his big farm, and returned them home, with money paid as interest, to the owners. He found out all the mynheers, whose bits of land had drifted off. He sent a tidy sum of gold to the village in North Holland, where his farm had been moored, for a few hours. With a good conscience, he went to church and worshipped. His action, at each of the two collections, which Dutch folks always take up on Sundays, was noticed and praised as a sure and public sign of the old sinner’s true repentance. When the deacons, with their white gloves on, poked under his nose their black velvet bags, hung at the end of fishing poles, ten feet long, this man, who had been for years a skinflint, dropped in a silver coin each time.

On the farm, all the animals, from duck to stork, and from dog to ox, now led happier lives. In the family, all declared that the behavior of the farm and the wind of the Zuyder Zee had combined to make a new man and a delightful father of old Van Boompjes. He lived long and happily and died greatly lamented.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com