

The Flight To America

VERSES 1-5

When I was little and had begun going to school and wearing boots, I was hot-tempered and impulsive. One day at lunch I stood with clenched fists as tears of despair ran down my cheeks. At school I had gotten poor marks on the grammar lesson, and then Mama had scolded me for tearing my pants. The baker's daughter Rikke, who had been so nice to me, stood at the gate laughing. The gingerbread heart she had promised me she gave instead to Morten.

VERSES 6-24

"No," I said, "this is too much. I simply will not stand it. And they who have done this wrong to me shall be made to pay for it dearly. "

"I am going over to America, and when these people want a little Peter, why, then their Peter'll be missing!"

My younger brother Emil, in amazement, dropped his whip and his sled and looked at me with a curious smile, half way between laughter and tears.

"But listen, Emil, you shall go with me; we two must stand together like brothers. There is no staying here any longer. Yonder we shall live in joy and mirth."

The little fellow looked at his new shoes and patted the folds of his dress. "How far do you suppose it is?" and "Wonder if these shoes will hold out?"

"Well, it's farther than to Aunt Lisa in the country, and to get there from here, we must sail across the water.

"But once we pull through, we'll never regret it; for over there they'll give you a big estate and money into the bargain.

"There the horses are shod with silver, and the carriage wheels mounted with silver, too; and gold, why, that is spread all around you. All you need do is to pick it up.

"Over there raisins and almonds grow in huge clusters on the trees, and they cost you never a penny.

"Barley-sugar there is as big as biscuits; and the chocolates are like loaves of bread; it hails and snows sugar-cracknels and rains lemonade.

"Unlimited freedom, too, you have from day's end to day's end: you spit on the floor whenever you will, and strew it with burning cigars.

"And all day long you may sit and swing in wonderful rocking-chairs, and it's all a matter of your own sweet will if you care to go to school."

"Good," said Emil, "that settles the thing, for I don't much care to be sent to the Institute.

"I'll fetch my sugar-cracknel now — that'll taste good on the way — and the big Bible that's our very own."

And back he came, the sugar-cracknel in his mouth and the big Bible under his arm; and then we paused a moment, doubtful, for the parting was bitter.

We were leaving the old home forever. — Then mother opened a window a bit and called our names.

"Emil and Peter, where are you going? and what are you doing with that book out there in the street? Come straight in: here's Dorthe now — dinner is ready."

Bewildered and confused we stood — the great adventure forgotten — and then meekly obeyed that kindly, commanding voice.

Christian Winther
Translation of verses 6-24: Martin B. Ruud 1927

[*Bratsberg Amtstidende*, December 14, 1842; reprinted in Gunnar Malmin, "Norsk Landnam i U.S.," in *Decorah-Posten*, March 20, 1925 (Decorah, Iowa)]

Notes

In a letter by Professor Rasmus B. Anderson that appears in *Decorah-Posten* for March 27, 1925, "The Flight to America" is attributed to "the most popular Danish poet of the time, Christian Winther, who died in 1876." Professor Anderson adds the following information: "When I was a student at Luther College we used 'Jensen's Reader' in which the poem, under the title 'Flugten til Amerika,' appeared. I remember that I once recited it at a declamation contest. As printed in *Decorah-Posten* for March 20, some of the opening lines are lacking. Winther's poem begins as follows: 'Long ago when I was little, and had begun to go to school and to wear shoes, and had discarded my kilts,' etc."

The Flight To America

When I was a whimsical little one
a very young day school boy,
with my babyhood left and my boyhood begun
and with boots that were all my joy.

I followed whatever came into my mind
and not what the grown-ups said,
my blood was the boiling capricious kind,
and I had little sense in my head.

One noon I was gloomily standing there
all lost and forsaken and weak,
my fists were clenched and my heart in despair
and tears running down my cheek.

At school I had just been marked terribly down
for some grammar I happened to scorn,
and Mommy had sent me a scorching frown
for the cashmere pants I had torn.

And the baker's Eliza so sweet from the start,
she stood at the gate and was silly.
It was me she had promised her gingerbread heart,
and I saw she gave it to Billy.

"No," I said to myself, "Now it's going too far!
It's more than one's able to face;
I'll pay them all back, whoever they are,
Who caused me this bitter disgrace."

"I'm going to flee to America now,
and when they begin to look round,
where then will they get them a Peter and how, —
well no-one can no-where be found."

My young brother Tommy stopped in his play,
forgetting his toys for the while,
his face was ablaze in an uncertain way
torn between tears and smile.

"Wake up and come with me, dear Tommy, I say,
such chance is for brothers to share;
here is no sensible place to stay,
our future is over there."

The toddler looked at his wrinkled lace
and at one and the other shoe:
“How far do you think it’s to walk to that place?
And won’t my new slippers wear through?”

“America is a bit further, maybe,
than auntie’s old farm, I should say,
but then we shall sail on a boat by sea
the better part of the way.”

But if you get over that ocean, you see,
it’s a venture you’ll never regret;
a towering castle all for free
And mountains of money you’ll get.

Of silver, not iron, are all our tyres
and all our horses’ shoes;
gold will lie plentiful everywhere by us,
bend down and take up what you choose.

Raisins and almonds and walnuts abound
And jars full of syrup and honey,
lollipops cluster on all trees around,
And nothing costs any money.

Candy for bread comes wherever one goes,
and in chocolate muffins you wade;
with sugar pebbles it hails and snows
and rains with lemonade.

Liberty is what you just are at
to whatever you ever desire;
you spit on the floors when you feel like that
and play with cigars and fire.

You sit all the leisurely day and swing
in heavenly rocking chairs,
and going to school or not is a thing
that depends upon whether one cares!”

“Well then” said the wee one, “let’s flee on that flight,
my decision is final and cool!
I have never had very much appetite
for working and going to school.

My sugar pretzel I'll carry with me,
that's forage wherever we go,
and also the picture bible, you see,
that is our own, you know!"

The pretzel between his teeth he brought,
and the bible in hand he had; —
then just for a moment we stood and thought
that, well, the departure was sad.

Now soon we should be so frightfully far
and never come home at all. —
Then Mommy opened her window ajar
and we heard our names and her call.

"With the book in the street, why what's the idea?"
And we heard her voice trembling in her:
"Peter and Tommy, come right in here,
Camilla is ready with dinner!"

Perplexed did we stop there and wavered and swayed,
forgetting our journey and all,
unconsciously turned our feet and obeyed
the motherly masterful call.

Her sweet mild voice set my mind at ease
and made my defiance stoop,
I drowned my worry and found my peace
deep down in the sago soup.

Christian Winther
English translation: Piet Hein