



**Sons of Norway**  
**HERITAGE PROGRAMS**



## MiniPresentation#52

**JOHAN HERMAN WESSEL**

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Norwegian poet Johan Herman Wessel was best known as a humorous and satirical writer, famous for his wit even today—some 200 years after his death. His comedy “Kjærlighet uden strømper”—or Love without Stockings—is still staged regularly, and his short, striking verses are still very much enjoyed and quoted in Norway. As an example—this is what he wrote on a portrait of himself:

“He seemed to be for trifles born  
In him all greatness was forlorn.”

One of Wessel’s poems has become a special classic. It is called “the Blacksmith and the Baker” —and it is masterfully translated and commented upon by Gunnstein Rysstad from Seattle:

“In a certain town in the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway, there once lived a blacksmith who had such a temper that he could be a menace at times—if not to the society, at least to some of its members. And in the same town there also lived a townsman of his who had won the unenviable distinction of being known as his most implacable enemy. As fate would have it, their paths crossed at the town’s principal pub. They started quarreling and before the rest of the clientele knew what was up, they were at it like a pair of professional heavyweights, and the blacksmith soon landed such a blow on the other’s head that all his lights went out. There was only one outcome for such a crime and the blacksmith patiently awaited his death sentence. But the day before the sentencing, four prominent citizens called upon the judge and the leader of the delegation addressed him as follows:

*“Honorable Judge?  
I don’t know rightly—hardly—how to start.  
We’ve always thought you had the welfare of our town at heart.  
But now it just so happens our prosperity  
Is doomed, if you don’t set our blacksmith free.  
His death cannot, in any case, raise up the dead.  
And for his likes, today, there is no qualified replacement.  
For his misdeeds, therefore, you punish us instead,  
If you now let him hang—to everybody’s anger and amazement.  
  
The law says clearly ‘Life for a life’, that’s true.  
But here in town we have an aged baker*

*Who, anyhow, must soon accost his maker:  
One baker’s all we need, and there are two.—  
We reckon that would balance up your Justice Sheet.  
As for our town,—it wouldn’t miss a beat!”  
  
“Well”, says the Judge, “this calls for grace.  
All can do now is postpone the case.  
For here there are involved  
Questions of law not easily resolved.  
I must retire alone, friends, to my chambers.  
Farewell, good people! I will do my best.  
I’m in your debt and very much impressed.”*

“The judge then researched the whole problem and combed through his lawbooks most carefully. But search as he may, he came up with absolutely nothing that would indicate there was even a legal frowning upon the use of substitutes in authorized hangings. So he was ready to announce his verdict:

*“Of course this blacksmith, Jens,  
Is void of ordinary moral sense;  
For here in open court he pled  
Guilty to having Anders Pedersen to  
heaven sped.*

*But since we but one blacksmith have in  
town  
I simply would, as Judge, be falling down,  
If I now, most perversely, wished him  
dead—  
While we have two engaged in making  
bread.*

*Therefore I rule, and joyously proclaim,  
The aged baker must be brought to shame  
And hanged, as an example and a  
warning.  
We’ll have a scaffold for him in the  
morning.”*

“The old baker cried piteously, as can easily be imagined, when the Danish-Norwegian Mounties came to escort him to his last breakfast.

The moral is: Be ready friend!  
Who knows what’s waiting for us ‘round the bend? ”