

# **Niels Ebbesen**

By Kaj Munk

Translated from the Danish by Arenalund and Dave Carley

Translation/Adaptation – Final

December 2006

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Translation and adaptation © 2006 Areense Lund and Dave Carley

Note: the following script is both a new translation and adaptation of Kaj Munk's play *Niels Ebbesen*. Areense Lund and Dave Carley have also done a literal translation of *Niels Ebbesen*, and it is also available for performance.

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Pamela Winter  
Gary Goddard Agency Ltd  
10 St. Mary Street #305  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada M4Y 1P9  
(416) 928-0299

For enquiries about this play or any other by Kaj Munk in Danish and other languages, contact:

Kaj Munks Forfatterrettigheder Aps, c/o Areense Lund, Bolbrovej 91, Rungsted Kyst, Denmark. E-mail [arlue@tv2.dk](mailto:arlue@tv2.dk). Website: [www.kajmunksforfatterrettigheder.dk](http://www.kajmunksforfatterrettigheder.dk)

### **Production history**

*Niels Ebbesen* was first performed in Stockholm, Sweden, by the Svenska Dramatikeres Studio, on September 14, 1943. The Danish premiere was at The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, on September 1, 1945. It was directed by Holger Gabrielsen. According to Lilo Skaarup, the archivist at the Royal Theatre, the original cast was:

Grev Gerhard – Poul Reumert  
Vitinghofen – Mogens Wieth  
Niels Ebbesen – Svend Methling  
Fru Gertrud – Anna Borg  
Ruth – Ingeborg Brams  
Ebbe – Henning Kronstam  
The sister – Birgit Conradsen  
Ove Haase – John Price  
Niels Bugge – Martin Hansen  
Father Lorents – Johannes Meyer  
Troels – Valdemar Moller  
Claus – Palle Huld  
Jesper – Preben Neergaard  
The Woman – Ellen Gottschalk  
The Singer – Marius Jacobsen

The Bishop – George Leicht  
 General von Dobelin – Preben Leerdorff Rye  
 Steinisch – Aage Winther-Jorgensen  
 Kunz – Frode Jorgensen  
 Franz – Kjeld Noak-Jensen  
 The Jailer – Einar Milling  
 A Servant – Gabriel Morch

Music: Knudage Riisager  
 Musical Director: Johan Hye-Knudsen  
 Choreography: Borge Ralov  
 Set design: Poul Kanneworff, working with Axel Bruun  
 Costumes: Ove Christian Pedersen

*Niels Ebbesen* was banned by the Danish collaborationist government of Thorvald Stauning in 1942. However, by that time, over 15,000 copies had already been discreetly published by Nyt Nordisk Forlag. Out of this print run, some 3,000 copies were seized by the Nazis but the rest circulated throughout the country. Kaj Munk traveled throughout Denmark performing *Niels Ebbesen*; he conducted his one-man show so often during 1942 that his wife Lise worried for his health.

Kaj Munk dedicated *Niels Ebbesen* to “Our Young Soldiers of April Ninth” recognizing the valour of the young Danish soldiers along the border with Germany who attempted to resist the invasion on April 9, 1940.

*Niels Ebbesen* was also produced in English for the British Broadcasting Corporation, and aired on the BBC Home Service on Sunday, June 13, 1943. The translator was Rodney Gallop. It was adapted for radio by E.E. Lloyd and produced by Barbara Burnham.

### **Kaj Munk**

Kaj Harald Leininger Munk (January 13, 1898 - January 4, 1944) was a Lutheran pastor known for his cultural engagement and his martyrdom during World War II. From 1924 to his assassination in 1944, Munk was the vicar of Vedersø in Western Jutland, an isolated corner of Denmark. Pastor Munk also wrote plays, conducting a hugely successful career in theatre from his Jutland outpost. Very early in the 1930s, Munk began to see a pattern of Hitler’s treatment of the Jews (and Mussolini’s war crimes in Ethiopia) and quickly turned into a outspoken and relentless opponent of fascism. His 1938 play *Han sidder ved Smeltediglen* (‘He Sits By The Melting Pot’) and 1942’s *Niels Ebbesen* were fierce attacks on both anti-Semitism and Nazism.

Munk also spoke out against the Occupation from his own pulpit and was arrested on the evening of January 4, 1944, when the Gestapo arrived at his isolated manse at around 8:00 p.m. Despite the entreaties and efforts of his family, Munk was whisked away by car at around 8:30 p.m. His killers arrived in the Danish town of Aarhus at 2:00 a.m. on

January 5; taking into account the driving time between Horbylunde (where his body was found) and Aarhus, Munk was most likely assassinated sometime between midnight and 1:00 a.m. on January 5, 1944.

Kaj Munk left a widow, Lise (Jorgensen) and five children: Yrsa, Helge, Arne, Solvej and Mogens. .

For further information on Kaj Munk, contact the Kaj Munk Forskningscentret at the University of Aalborg. E-mail is [kmf@hum.aau.dk](mailto:kmf@hum.aau.dk) Website: [www.kajmunk.hum.aau.dk](http://www.kajmunk.hum.aau.dk)

### **Arense Lund**

Arense Lund was born in London in 1958 and educated in England and Denmark. After receiving her MA in Journalism, she helped start up on of the first private radio stations in Denmark, Avisradio. She also started up Denmark's first private TV station, Kanal 2, and currently works at the national network, TV2, which she also assisted in establishing. In addition to producing documentaries, she works in TV2's news department, covering politics, the judicial system, cultural events and theology. In 1992 she produced a documentary on her grandfather, Kaj Munk, entitled *With the Sword of the Word*. Arense Lund is currently chairman of the board of the family company, Kaj Munks Forfatterretigheder Aps, which administers the literary rights to Munk's work.

### **Dave Carley**

Dave Carley is a Canadian playwright. His stage and radio plays have been performed and broadcast around the world. He has also worked for many years as a radio script editor at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Dave's website is [www.davecarley.com](http://www.davecarley.com)

### **Niels Ebbesen, the historical figure** (From Wikipedia)

Niels Ebbesen, who died November 2, 1340, was a Danish squire and national hero, known for his killing of Count Gerhard III.

Little is known of Ebbesen's background. He seems to have belonged to the Jutlandish gentry. Like many other of his class he probably supported the Holstein occupants during the years of chaos but later on he turned against them and, when Count Gerhard campaigned in Jutland 1340, Ebbesen supported the Jutlandish guerrillas. On the night of April 1st he and some of his warriors got into the Count's headquarter in Randers, entered his bedroom, killed him together with some of his men, and managed to escape. During the following rebellion Niels Ebbesen played a main role in the resistance but he was killed the same year during a fight against the Germans. A ballad dealing with the killing of Count Gerhard by Ebbesen is translated in Alexander Gray's *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (Edinburgh University Press, 1958).

Traditionally Niels Ebbesen has been regarded as one of the great heroes of Danish Medieval history, the "tyrant slayer" whose action meant the beginning liberation of

Denmark. Yet some also disapproved of his act, regarding it as simple murder. This has not prevented both contemporary ballads and later romantic Danish poetry (and Kaj Munk in his 1942 stage play) from praising him as a freedom fighter. A statue representing him was erected 1882 in Randers.

**Acknowledgements:**

The translators would like to acknowledge the cherished assistance of Yrsa Lund. Financial assistance has been received from The Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Jackie Maxwell artistic director, and the Toronto Arts Council. Research assistance on the original production was contributed by Lilo Skaarup M.A., research librarian at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

**Dedication:**

To Our Young Soldiers of April Ninth

## **Niels Ebbesen**

By Kaj Munk

Translation © 2006 Arence Lund and Dave Carley

### Characters

Niels Ebbesen – squire of Norreris, age 35  
Gertrude Ebbesen – wife of Niels Ebbesen, age 35  
Ruth Ebbesen – daughter of Niels and Gertrude, age 13  
Niels Bugge – young Danish nobleman, age 20  
Father Lorents – the local priest, age 45  
Ove Haase – brother of Gertrude, age 40  
Vitinghofen – young nobleman from Holstein, age 20  
Count Gerhard – age 50

### Locale

In and around the Ebbesen estate at Norreris, in Jutland. Also, a castle in Randers.

### Time

1340.

### Some notes on both the translation and staging.

This is both a translation of Kaj Munk's text, and a modest adaptation. The staging and cast size have been simplified and a few of the characters' roles have been conflated.

Although Munk's stage directions indicate Lorents' arrival in Act I is on a large sow, this is obviously not going to be feasible for many theatres. At the Danish premiere in Copenhagen in 1945, the Royal Danish Theatre used a "prop pig".

# Niels Ebbesen

## Act I

### Scene One - The Meadow outside Norreris, the Ebbesen estate in Jutland.

*It is evening. Ruth is washing clothes in a brook.*

**RUTH:**                   *(Singing tunelessly.)*  
 All the busy waves  
 All the fresh winds  
 Run off with my thoughts  
 Carry them to him

Form a circle around him  
 And do not let him free  
 Make sure you captured him  
 And bring him back to me

*(NIELS BUGGE enters; he's heard the last bit.)*

Niels Bugge! I thought you'd left!

**NIELS BUGGE:**       Without saying goodbye?

**RUTH:**                   Father said you left this morning.

**NIELS BUGGE:**       And I had. Your father disagreed with me.

**RUTH:**                   I find that hard to believe – it's not in his nature to disagree with people.

**NIELS BUGGE:**       Alright – I disagreed with him.

**RUTH:**                   And you've returned to apologize?

**NIELS BUGGE:**       No! Niels Ebbesen and I are not on speaking terms until he sees certain things my way. But that's between him and me, not us. I'm riding home now, to Hald. It's a long, tough slog for me Ruth – but it would less of a slog if I knew that it was only your father I'd disagreed with.

- RUTH:** I have no idea what you mean.
- NIELS BUGGE:** I mean, there's one thing I'd like you to give me as a going away gift – just in case I'm away a long time.
- RUTH:** What's that?
- NIELS BUGGE:** It's something I'll take good care of. It will stay with me, always. When I ride out, I'll carry it with me. When I sleep at night it will rest on my pillow with me. Please...
- RUTH:** Well, if it's something I can spare
- NIELS BUGGE:** Yes, it's definitely something you can spare. You can't guess?
- RUTH:** No.
- NIELS BUGGE:** It's a kiss.
- RUTH:** Oh. Then I'm sorry. I didn't bring any kisses with me – I didn't think I'd need any this evening.
- NIELS BUGGE:** Aw Ruth – it would give me what I have least of – and what I have the greatest need of now... patience. Please?
- RUTH:** I don't kiss people I'm not in love with.
- NIELS BUGGE:** Does that mean
- RUTH:** - Yes, it does not. Oh, you don't understand. I only meant... No, I didn't mean... you are so stupid, Niels, you're so - so stupid!
- (RUTH exits. NIELS BUGGE stands gaping after her.  
RUTH runs back in.)*
- (Furious.)* But you can have it another time!
- (RUTH exits again.)*
- NIELS BUGGE:** Damn! They can teach you the art of war. But the art of love you have to learn on your own. And that's so much tougher!



**Scene 2 – The meadow at Norreris – slightly off**

*RUTH arrives with the laundry, looking back at NIELS BUGGE. GERTRUDE is waiting for her.*

**GERTRUDE:** Why are you so slow today! Let me do it – give that to me and go clear the clothesline. Go!

*(RUTH exits. GERTRUDE starts folding clothes, in a bad humour. NIELS Ebbesen enters, carrying a small scarecrow.)*

**NIELS:** Is it really necessary for you to work so hard?

**GERTRUDE:** We can't afford to hire anyone else and Ruth is always mooning about

**NIELS:** - But if what I'm thinking is true, you should be taking better care of yourself.

**GERTRUDE:** Here. Help me. Oh lord Niels – what've you been doing with your time? It's harvest and you're playing with dolls?

**NIELS:** Sure – why not! What do you think – not bad eh? Ah, I'll tell you what it's for. Again – today, in broad daylight, a wolf got into the sheep pen and killed two lambs.

**GERTRUDE:** Where was the dog!

**NIELS:** Kvik isn't up to much. It wags its tail at wolves and, when they leave, it eats whatever they've left of the sheep.

**GERTRUDE:** That stupid mutt. I hope you killed it.

**NIELS:** Of course not! Kvik's so good-tempered – it wants to live, too. So now I'm making scarecrows.

**GERTRUDE:** And you really think a scarecrow will frighten wolves? They'll laugh at it, I tell you. Why don't you order the farmhands to shoot them – instead of entertaining them! Ah, but wolves are such good-natured creatures too, they just want to live.

*(RUTH returns with more laundry.)*

Here. Give me that. Now go get the rest and come home. I need you up at the house. No dawdling!

*(GERTRUDE exits with the laundry. NIELS and RUTH look at each other; their glances indicating that they need to walk on eggs.)*

- RUTH:** I can't seem to stay out of trouble today
- NIELS:** You and me, both. But I'll let you in on a secret. She won't say, but I think your mother is expecting – and you know how she gets...
- RUTH:** Well yes but...
- NIELS:** But?
- RUTH:** But she's been like that for a while. I think it's something else. You don't know.
- NIELS:** No – do you?
- RUTH:** I thought you knew. It started the day
- NIELS:** - What day
- RUTH:** The day Niels Bugge came here.
- NIELS:** Really? You think that's it?
- RUTH:** What – what did he actually want? Bugge.
- NIELS:** He wanted something from me I can't give. No – surely that isn't what's upsetting your mother. It can't be. I don't know. But whatever it is, the best thing is for us to just let her be and when she's ready to talk about it, we'll listen and
- RUTH:** - Did you and Niels Bugge disagree a lot, father?
- NIELS:** No. Young blood must be allowed to boil.
- RUTH:** So you're not angry with him?
- NIELS:** Of course not.

**RUTH:** Do you think it will be a long time before we see him again? I mean, for mother's sake – she likes him so much.

**NIELS:** Don't worry! As soon as the harvest is done he'll be back to see - her. Now, I better help you, or else...

*(RUTH works on the laundry, singing as she works.)*

You've inherited my singing voice.

**RUTH:** That's not a compliment!

**NIELS:** No – you sing like a bird!

**RUTH:** I do? What kind?

**NIELS:** A crow.

**RUTH:** *(Laughs.)* Now you've done it. Well, you're not much as a craftsman yourself – that scarecrow won't frighten off the wolves.

**NIELS:** No?

**RUTH:** For starters, it needs a head.

**NIELS:** You need a head to scare people?

**RUTH:** Give me the coal. I'll draw a face. Hmm – what kind of face? I know. Don't look – you can look when I'm done. There. All right. Look.

*(RUTH has drawn a face – a baldhead, to resemble Count Gerhard)*

**NIELS:** What! That's – but how – you've never seen him.

**RUTH:** I did too – that night he rode past.

**NIELS:** Just that glimpse and you could draw that! You've got talent. Gerhard will scare off the wolves, that's for sure.

**RUTH:** Here comes mother – *(Exiting.)* I better get the rest of the clothes.

*(GERTRUDE enters.)*

**NIELS:** Look, Gertrude. Isn't that well done? And she's never had lessons.

**GERTRUDE:** *(Gives it a fleeting glance.)* Who do you want to lease the outlying farm to?

*(Offstage, some bellowing or singing, under.)*

**NIELS:** I'm not sure – five of the men want it. I was going to ask your advice today.

*(LORENTS enters, riding a sow.)*

**GERTRUDE:** What on earth!

**LORENTS:** Whoa horsy, that's the girl, no whoahhhhh, in the name of God stop! Stop you darling little flabby, fatty, quivering, teaty piggy – Denmark's holy animal, the symbol of all we hold sacred, thou monument to us gorging and engorging and fertility and conceiving, you triumph of femininity, where's the damn stirrup ohhhhh. *(Falls off, pulls himself to his feet.)* D'ya see that – it bucked me right off. I was on top and then I fell off. Well. The Good Lord created a miracle – it was a horse I was riding but somewhere along the road he changed it into a pig, in my honour. Oh well. Christ rode an ass into Jerusalem so I guess I can ride a pig to Norreris.

**NIELS:** My wife is present, Father

**LORENTS:** Oh Lordy, you're right. Gertrude, I'm sorry. I didn't see you, not once. I beg your forgiveness – may I have it? No? I'm here on an errand and

**GERTRUDE:** - Your errand right now, Father, is to follow me to our guest room – the one with the bed with fresh straw. The barn.

**LORENTS:** Excuse me, dear Mrs. Gertrude, dear Mrs. Ebbesen, but why should I go to bed here in a barn in the middle of the night?

**GERTRUDE:** To sleep it off. Now come.

**LORENTS:** With all due respect for you Mrs. Niels, I mean Gert-rude, I don't want to go sleep with a bunch of lambs. Unless it's a certain kind of lamb. *(Indicates a shapely woman.)* No, what I need is a tankard of beer.

*(GERTRUDE leaves in disgust.)*

I don't think I'm getting that beer. Niels, I just ran into Niels Bugge on the road. We talked, the Bugger and I. He wants to gore Count Gerhard – may he rot in hell – and you know what I said? I said, “OK Bugge, I'm with you on that. War is a very practical thing. Towns will be burned to the ground, but we'll build new ones. People will get killed, but we will make new ones. So you deliver the lumber to the towns and I will beget the *(Another lewd gesture.)* Bugge didn't even crack a smile.

**NIELS:** That's enough drunken talk, Father.

**LORENTS:** But I look on the Count as you do. He's a competent man, he knows what he wants. You can't say that about everybody. And he gets things done. Just because his face looks like the Devil's behind

*(Ove HAASE steps forward.)*

**HAASE:** - Who's he talking about.

**NIELS:** Ove!

**LORENTS:** Ah, Mr. Haase!

**HAASE:** I asked a question.

**LORENTS:** ‘Who was he talking about?’ He or me? Me. I was talking about nobody. Nobody at all. Isn't that right, Niels? We were enjoying the view. Such a beautiful evening. The light on the fields. The jolly tenants working. We weren't talking about Count Gerhard. That is, if you're one of his supporters – is he?

*(NIELS nods.)*

Then we certainly weren't talking about him. Whether this is Denmark or Holstein – what do I care – I belong in the Kingdom of Heaven.

**HAASE:** I'm going to complain to the Bishop about your conduct.

**LORENTS:** I absolutely respect the Count. Why – I once had the pleasure of preaching for him.

**NIELS:** Father, that bed my wife mentioned...

- LORENTS:** Yes, yes, right. Probably a good idea. Gentlemen – I bid you a good night, a very good night, a good night
- (LORENTS exits.)*
- NIELS:** Lorents is a good fellow at the bottom. There’s just a bit too much beer at the top. Listen, brother-in-law, welcome and welcome again. I was saying to Gertrude just yesterday – “Do you think Ove Haase has gotten so busy he’s forgotten his only sister?” Please – come home with me – we’ll have a great feast – what
- HAASE:** *(Seeing the scarecrow.)* - What the hell is that?
- NIELS:** Isn’t it marvelous? Ruth sketched it. Imagine that – who’d have thought one of us could be so talented
- HAASE:** Niels, sometimes I wonder if you are as stupid as you seem – or just very cunning.
- NIELS:** What do you mean?
- HAASE:** Next you’ll tell me that you’re going to place this piece of “art” in an open field for all to see?
- NIELS:** Yes – why not?
- HAASE:** Don’t you know who the master of the country is?
- NIELS:** Master? I’m not used to having any master.
- HAASE:** Well, get used to it. Count Gerhard has left Holstein with ten thousand horsemen.
- NIELS:** So what! He’s always leaving Holstein and marching somewhere.
- HAASE:** Niels! Listen! I’m talking to you as a Danish man, Danish all the way from my big toe to the centre of my soul. You know as well as I do what we’ve been through in Denmark these past few years. King Christopher’s government was one of bottomless incompetence. Remember the night I came to you – we stood here on this very same spot, and you agreed with me that the King should be driven away.
- NIELS:** No, you remember it wrong. I agreed with a lot of what you said, but when you mentioned plans for getting help from a foreign power

- HAASE:** - Foreign power! Foreign power! How foreign is Holstein to Denmark? And Count Gerhard helped us. We got rid of Christopher the Incompetent, even though we paid in blood for the privilege.
- NIELS:** By God, I used my sword so much that night I don't ever want to use it again!
- HAASE:** Nothing in this world comes free. And things did get better here – (*Indicating estate.*) you've obviously profited. But what did Count Gerhard get for his pains? Nothing. And now that idiot Niels Bugge is strutting around, whipping up people against him... Our unhappy, divided and once again impoverished nation is heading straight for the abyss. Count Gerhard wouldn't be the man he is if he didn't try and prevent that. So he's riding up through Jutland. Resistance is futile! The person who tries will be trampled to bloody dust by forty thousand hooves! On the other hand, the person who supports him will receive his grace.
- NIELS:** So?
- HAASE:** So! I see great things for us! Order, firmness, strength, prosperity... co-operation in building a great empire! I don't only expect it – I know it! Because I know the Count! I have put my hand in his iron grip; I have seen the fire in the darkness of his eyes. He's invincible. He will conquer everything. Because he is the New Age.
- NIELS:** So now you've come to me to make me say: Oh, I will also side with this – with this “new age”?
- HAASE:** Yes Niels, yes I do. Your estate is not large, your family not widespread, you never step forward – yet people still ask, “What does Niels Ebbesen think?” That's why I've come to you first – and I'm sure you know what answer you owe to yourself – and your country.
- NIELS:** Two evenings ago I walked over these meadows with Niels Bugge and he explained to me that I should also support him – also for the sake of Denmark. Do you know what I answered?
- HAASE:** I can guess.
- NIELS:** I said, “Niels Bugge, listen. That's the sound of my children playing by the brook. And over there my hands are harvesting the

first corn of the year. To the other side, look – the homes of my tenants, their children are also playing by the brook, and they’re harvesting their first corn too. So Niels, war can mean many things, some to do with honour, greatness and creating a “new age”, yes. But it also means one other thing for certain: My tenants and I will have our arms and legs chopped off, and we’ll never walk behind a plow or scythe again, and our homes will be burned down, and our women and children will have to flee into the woods and hide among the wolves – praying they are more human than the humans. You are young and think I’m a coward and a traitor. You may that. But I reject anything to do with war, as long as I can. You can preach at me until Doomsday, give me all the good reasons. I have only one answer: I will keep out of it.”

**HAASE:** That’s so short-sighted. You talk about the preservation of homes, but that can only happen one way: with a strong government.

**NIELS:** And so – to get this firm government in order to preserve homes, we have to first destroy the homes. No, brother-in-law, I may be bad at arithmetic, but that just doesn’t add up.

**HAASE:** Then I’ll have to do it another way.

*(GERTRUDE has entered, unnoticed by the men.)*

**NIELS:** Don’t trouble yourself. I’ve talked for much longer than I’m used to – I need a mug of beer. Please, come in –

**HAASE:** No Niels, I’m not leaving the estate until I have a clear answer from you. Are you with him – or against him? You’ve heard my arguments – the choice shouldn’t be difficult.

**NIELS:** I don’t go to church a lot but I did hear a good word there once: He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.

**HAASE:** That is no answer.

**NIELS:** I don’t have any better.

**GERTRUDE:** I can give you a better answer

**HAASE:** - No, sister, I’m not asking you. I already know your opinion. But need I remind you: nobody was more critical than King Christopher than you.

**GERTRUDE:** Christopher was bad, but at least he was Danish.



**HAASE:** Oh, Danish this, Danish that! Would you rather be ruled by a fool, so long as he's Danish – than by a real ruler who just happened to be born just over the border?

**GERTRUDE:** Yes, Ove, I would rather live Danish – poor and free – rather than live richly as a slave to a foreigner.

**HAASE:** Are her words yours as well, Niels?

**GERTRUDE:** Of course they are. Ove, I made a bed for you when I heard you were coming – but you shall never sleep at my house again. We already have a dog that wags its tail at wolves and eats the scraps they leave behind – it can lie in the bed instead of you.

**HAASE:** Woman's will, man's hell. Don't say I didn't warn you. Vitinghofen. Vitinghofen!

*(VITINGHOFEN enters.)*

Where were you?

**VITINGHOFEN:** Ah, playing with the most wonderful children – yours I assume, ma'am.

*(VITINGHOFEN bows to GERTRUDE, who does not respond.)*

**HAASE:** This is Herr Von Vitinghofen. He's a noble from Holstein – yes, he's young but he's well trained in both peace and war. He's going to stay for a while on your estate – to learn about Danish farming.

*(NIELS and GERTRUDE react.)*

**GERTRUDE:** How dare you – we're to be guarded?! We're to be prisoners on our own estate?!

**HAASE:** He comes highly recommended by Count Gerhard. And he'll be busy. He's going to go to your tenants and farmhands and inform them that there are some traitorous noblemen who want to rebel against their rightful master. To avoid any unpleasantness should those rebels attack here to seize their weapons, Vitinghofen will collect all your tenants' crossbows, arrows, spears, swords – all the tools of war that exist here at Norreris.

**GERTRUDE:** Niels!?

**NIELS:** We expected this. I believe we can hold our own without weapons, maybe even better than with them. We'll obey. Go about your collecting. And we'll go about our work; we'll carry on as we always have. We'll be fine.

**GERTRUDE:** *(To herself.)* Who can be fine - in the grave?

## Act II

**A couple of months later. The fields at Norreris. Evening.**

*Offstage there is laughter and singing, as the tenants celebrate a good harvest.*

**NIELS:** *(Offstage)* Mistress Gertrude and I wanted to thank you – it's a spectacular harvest, our best ever - so enjoy yourselves

*(Offstage cheers. LORENTS stumbles on, with a tankard of ale.)*

**LORENTS:** *(Singing - badly.)*  
 If you long for heavenly lust  
 Find yourself a maiden's trust  
 The fastest way to God's gold heaven  
 Is losing yourself in a woman's bust.

*(Calling and exiting.)* Elsa – Elsa – where did you go. Where are you? Here Elsa, here Elsa!

*(LORENTS exits. NIELS and GERTRUDE enter, and watch him leave, bemused.)*

**NIELS:** Why don't we go into the forest as well?

**GERTRUDE:** We're too old!

**NIELS:** Nonsense! Until the cradle's put away in the attic we're still young enough. And I'm so happy tonight, happy because of the good harvest, happy because the war has passed us by so far...

**GERTRUDE:** I'm happy too – though sometimes it seems as though I never could be again.

**NIELS:** Do you remember in the old days – how you used to pull me by the ears, like this.

**GERTRUDE:** It was like this.

**NIELS:** Why – was it to make me grow? You never do that anymore.

**GERTRUDE:** Perhaps I've given up hope of seeing you bigger.

**NIELS:** Won't I do as I am?

**GERTRUDE:** Yes, you'll do.

*(VITINGHOFEN has entered and is surveying "his domain".)*

And here he comes, the lord of our domain. Yes, let's go into the woods and play like the others, pretend that the woods are safe and there are no robbers there.

*(GERTRUDE and NIELS exit. VITINGHOFEN continues to survey the area.)*

**VITINGHOFEN:** *(To offstage children's happy shouts.)* No, I'll come and play with you later – later, I promise! *(Laughs. He is looking around and, as desired, spots RUTH.)* Ah - Mistress Ruth – have you been watching the dance?

*(RUTH tries to get by him. He grabs her forearm.)*

Why do you always avoid me? Is it your mother who demands it?

**RUTH:** Let me go!

**VITINGHOFEN:** You know, that's the very hardest thing you could ask me. Do you know how lonely I am?

**RUTH:** If you're lonely, go back to Holstein.

**VITINGHOFEN:** You know I can't. And if you knew how I long to chat with someone – chat.

**RUTH:** But – but you are our enemy, Herr Vitinghofen.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Can I not also be your friend? Life doesn't have to be so stupidly simple, Ruth. Yes, I'm your enemy – but I'm also something else, just the opposite.

*(VITINGHOFEN seizes RUTH's arm. She slaps him.)*

‘But that’s all right – try the other cheek too.’

**RUTH:** You were hurting my arm.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Do you know that’s the first time you’ve stretched out your hand to me? I guess that’s one way of doing it.

**RUTH:** Did it hurt?

**VITINGHOFEN:** It was my fault and I beg your pardon. But I was afraid you would go. And I must speak with you. Remember Ruth, I’m a soldier – I can’t be idle. A soldier’s life is action.

**RUTH:** Father – I – all of us here hate war.

**VITINGHOFEN:** The greatest victories a soldier wins are not won in battle. Perhaps the soldier himself doesn’t like war – did you ever consider that? Perhaps he wants to live – yet tomorrow he will be dead and cold. Do you want that for me?

**RUTH:** No.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Of course you don’t.

**RUTH:** I don’t want that for anybody.

**VITINGHOFEN:** It’s all written in the stars. See how they are smiling down at us?

**RUTH:** Are they? Tonight I’m afraid of the stars.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Afraid of the stars! But can’t you hear them whispering, “When we shine down on you, you are not Holsteiners or Danes any more, then you are only two humans, two souls of flesh and blood.

**RUTH:** And then the sun comes up – and we are Holsteiners and Danes again.

**VITINGHOFEN:** But a soldier can’t afford to think of tomorrow. Just today. And right now, life is lovely, the stars shine, a little hand lies in mine, a girl’s hand, the loveliest girl he knows.

**RUTH:** We mustn’t do this. It isn’t right. You’re scaring me.

**VITINGHOFEN:** But that's acceptable, don't you see? For when you know that I like you, how I like you, when we like each other – isn't that worth being a little frightened about?

*(Leans in for a kiss.)*

**RUTH:** No – not yet.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Just your eyes. Not any more. *(He kisses her eyes.)* There. Now I think you can really see me for the first time. And your ears, there, now you can hear me. But not your mouth, I won't kiss your mouth. But the tip of your nose – can you smell me now? – and your tiny hands, I shall kiss them until they feel nothing but me.

**RUTH:** Let me go. I beg you.

**VITINGHOFEN:** Of course I'll let you go. Just one lightning kiss on the mouth first. From now on the world will taste of me. So I have won you, your five senses. Your whole self. Why do you shiver so, little girl? You aren't still frightened are you? I don't think you are – I think you're too happy to be.

**RUTH:** I don't know. To be frightened like this – yes, perhaps it is just being a bit happy.

*(NIELS and GERTRUDE are emerging from the forest, NIELS ahead of GERTRUDE. RUTH sees them.)*

I must go.

*(RUTH runs off and VITINGHOFEN – also seeing NIELS and GERTRUDE – exits with her, taking her hand.)*

**GERTRUDE:** Who was that?

**NIELS:** I don't know – I didn't see *(He had.)*

**GERTRUDE:** I could have sworn it was our friendly German overseer – with some hussy. I can't believe that there would be anyone at Norreris with so little honour. I'll look into this tomorrow and take care of it.

*(HAASE enters.)*

Oh you.

**HAASE:** I have news, sister. Count Gerhard is on his way here.

**NIELS:** Here!? The Count's coming here –

**HAASE:** - With five hundred horsemen. Where is Vitinghofen?

*(GERTRUDE starts exiting.)*

**NIELS:** Gertrude – where are you going?

**GERTRUDE:** You'll see.

**NIELS:** Gertrude

**GERTRUDE:** - I'm calling the tenants! Niels – we must pull up the bridge – have you fixed it yet?

**NIELS:** No I haven't and even if I had, it wouldn't be used.

*(VITINGHOFEN runs in.)*

**VITINGHOFEN:** I saw your horse – what's going on?

**HAASE:** - Finally, you're here. I have news.

*(HAASE leads VITINGHOFEN to confer, off.)*

**GERTRUDE:** *(To NIELS.)* I've hidden your broadsword. Shall I get it for you?

**NIELS:** No.

**GERTRUDE:** If you won't – I will. *(Addressing the offstage tenants, who've been arriving.)* Here they come. Men – Count Gerhard is coming with five hundred horsemen. Get everything that can be used for weapons – pitchforks, axes, scythes – women – go home, girls, we will barricade ourselves in the scullery

**NIELS:** - Gertrude – what is it you expect of these people! Why do you want blood on your hands! Stop it – what, pitchforks against the Count's armed horsemen?! *(Addressing tenants.)* My friends, we can do nothing against a fully equipped army. I beg of you – go home!

**GERTRUDE:** Stay, we must fight!

*(VITINGHOFEN has come over.)*

- VITINGHOFEN:** If I may say a word, please?
- GERTRUDE:** No – you’re the last person
- VITINGHOFEN:** - But I merely want to
- GERTRUDE:** - Quiet – or you will be our first victim
- VITINGHOFEN:** - The Count is coming here because he is gravely ill. He has internal bleeding and has lapsed into unconsciousness
- GERTRUDE:** What – but
- NIELS:** Thank God. Oh, thank the lord. We have been spared what I most feared. Count Gerhard shall have all the care he needs at Norreris.

*(As GERTRUDE seems about to object.)*

We will not stay there – my wife and children will go and live on an outlying farm. Haase, you may consider Norreris your own as long as the Count is ill – get him all the necessary care. And now, everyone, go home, go home in peace.

### Act III

**A couple of months later. At an outlying farm.**

*Gertrude is now visibly pregnant. RUTH is sewing.*

- NIELS:** I long to be back at Norreris. Two months in this
- GERTRUDE:** *(Exiting.)* - Well, you would go and offer the manor to Gerhard.

*(Exits. NIELS and RUTH exchanges glances and then RUTH returns to her sewing.)*

- NIELS:** Almost time for bed. Ruth? Ruth, did you hear me? Where are your thoughts? Are you still thinking of him?
- RUTH:** Niels Bugge?
- NIELS:** - No, not him. You know who I mean.
- RUTH:** Father, I don’t want to talk about him

**NIELS:** - Do you want to marry him? Has it gotten that far?

**RUTH:** Why do you ask – would you forbid it?

**NIELS:** If I thought you could be happy with him – yes, but there are others I would prefer. I don't believe you could be happy with Vitinghofen

**RUTH:** Happiness! What's that? Don't you think – oh father – really, if one person truly loves another – does it matter if they weren't born in the same country?

**NIELS:** *(Angry.)* What do you want your sons to be? Men behind a plough – or murderers!

**RUTH:** Father!

**NIELS:** Answer me!

*(RUTH indicates the danger of NIELS' raised voice rousing GERTRUDE.)*

*(Quieter.)* You'll get my permission, Ruth. I'll speak to her.

**RUTH:** I don't want permission from anyone. And don't speak to mother. I don't want to – oh, father, I don't know what I want. We're like fish caught in a net, aren't we. How would speaking to mother help things? Look how she's changed. She walks around staring at both you and me – staring daggers.

**NIELS:** She suspects. Vitinghofen's always coming here on the flimsiest excuses

**RUTH:** - She demands something of us both that we can't be. She wants you to be a – what – a foolish hero – and she wants me to give up the man I love and be a saint and a martyr - and what does she do? Nothing. But she's always angry, she's always self-righteous

**NIELS:** - That's enough. I won't hear any more against your mother.

*(GERTRUDE enters with a plant.)*

**GERTRUDE:** This sounds serious. What are you talking about?

*(RUTH flies out.)*



Where's she off to? What's all this?!

**NIELS:** Never mind, dear. Oh Gertrude – look at your plant – it's blooming even though we aren't at Norreris.

*(GERTRUDE throws plant on the floor, in a sudden rage.)*

What're you doing!

**GERTRUDE:** I just heard that Skanderborg has surrendered without a fight. Skanderborg! We Danes are so – so cowardly now that even with the Count lying sick up at the house we fear his name so much that his troops can go out and conquer the country with promises and threats. No, my roses shall not bear flowers for the Germans. And this child – I feel like doing the same thing to it. Why should I bear children for foreigners?

**NIELS:** *(Grabs her by the arm.)* Sit down. Calm yourself. I demand it. Sit. How have I failed you Gertrude that you look so disgusted with me?

**GERTRUDE:** Niels, you haven't failed me. It's my fault – I know that. You can't help not being the one I made you out to be. I was so much in love with – with your curly hair and your open face, your strength – I thought you were something else – I didn't know you were – You weren't talkative and so when you were quiet I imagined it was great deeds you were planning.

**NIELS:** And not just the improvement of a species of pig. I understand I've disappointed you. It's not pleasant for me to hear - but I guess it's worse for you.

**GERTRUDE:** Let's not talk about this. It's ridiculous to sit here sighing about our own lives when at the same moment the country's on its deathbed.

**NIELS:** But is it?

**GERTRUDE:** I got word from Niels Bugge's mother yesterday.

**NIELS:** She wrote?

**GERTRUDE:** She mostly talked about her fruit trees and hens. But there was a postscript. "My son is in good heart despite the Count's

improvement in health. But at night I hear him through the walls, groaning, “We’ll never be rid of them. We’ll never be rid of them.”

**NIELS:** I’m sorry to hear that. Niels hasn’t learned to be tough from life. And he’s wrong.

**GERTRUDE:** What do you base that on?

**NIELS:** This year – as never before – we farmers are hearing the larks singing.

**GERTRUDE:** What – the larks are going to sing the Germans out of the country?

**NIELS:** Yes, I think the larks shall sing and the farmers shall indeed plow the Germans out of Denmark. I believe it and God help me to keep on believing it.

**GERTRUDE:** Niels – I could

**NIELS:** - What

**GERTRUDE:** - How can you! How can you believe that – even here, have you not noticed the Germans with their new tactics of chivalry and jest and – playing with the children – they’re playing with our children! When they don’t have to use brutality they are being allowed into places one would never have thought possible. Our own children are weakening from their poison. And Vitinghofen – do you know what he is up to? Do you have any idea?

**NIELS:** - SSH! Somebody’s coming. I hear footsteps.

**GERTRUDE:** Let them come!

*(Father LORENTS enters.)*

**LORENTS:** Ah, light! Warmth! It’s a slimy, raw night out there. *(Sits painfully.)*

**GERTRUDE:** What’s wrong – are you ill?

**LORENTS:** Oh yes – from the only illness that can bite me. It’s an illness I hardly ever get but when it does, it chills me to the spine.

**NIELS:** What illness is that?

**LORENTS:** Being sober.

**GERTRUDE:** I'll get you a tankard of medicine.

**LORENTS:** If you can get it, I can drink it – be sure of that.

**GERTRUDE:** *(Exiting.)* Oh, I'm sure.

*(GERTRUDE has exited.)*

**NIELS:** You really do look awful.

**LORENTS:** As soon as the beer goes down I'll be up again. So Niels – I hear the big cuckoo has flown your nest today!

**NIELS:** What're you talking about?

**LORENTS:** You don't know? Vitinghofen hasn't told you? I thought I saw him outside

**NIELS:** - Are you telling me Count Gerhard has left Norreris?

**LORENTS:** Slow down, sir. Let me warm myself a bit. I can't speak when my throat is frozen stiff.

*(RUTH enters with the beer for LORENTS.)*

Ah, thank you Ruth. And thank your mother. Sweet woman. Sweet girl.

*(RUTH has exited; perhaps dismissed by NIELS.)*

Now you shall hear the news. It's true. He left. The day before yesterday, right after Mass.

**NIELS:** Gerhard goes to Mass?

**LORENTS:** Oh yes. He's as god-fearing as the Devil. Don't laugh. All the great criminals are. They have such a load of crime no human can carry it. So they find themselves a God to do the heavy lifting. Cheers.

**NIELS:** Will you get to the point. What has happened?

**LORENTS:** Happened? Well, that's a different question altogether. Nothing has happened. In fact, if at this moment you offered me the whole

of Denmark for one dollar, I'd answer: I'll give you ten cents. And even then I'd have offered five cents too much.

**NIELS:** Where is the Count now?

**LORENTS:** At Randers, and feeling so frisky that next week he's going to resume his conquest of Denmark. Soon we will be divided in two: one half of Denmark will be a heap of smoking ashes and the other half will be kissing his ass.

**NIELS:** But I heard that many of his mercenaries left when he was ill!

**LORENTS:** He has no trouble raising troops.

**NIELS:** How!?

**LORENTS:** Well, for starters – all the men from Norreris capable of bearing arms have been ordered to Randers. Why is that plant on the floor?

**NIELS:** - To Randers – my people – what for?!

**LORENTS:** So Gerhard can serve them roast chicken and strawberries, what do you think?!

**NIELS:** This is terrible!

**LORENTS:** “Terrible”, oh yes. You can thank your God you don't have to go.

**NIELS:** But my tenants – does he really think he can enlist them? Make them fight against their own people? No.

**LORENTS:** What will you do?

**NIELS:** I'll – I'll have to go them, and talk to them. Right now.

**LORENTS:** I strongly advise against it.

**NIELS:** Why!

**LORENTS:** They're very angry with you, Niels.

**NIELS:** Angry? At me? Why?

**LORENTS:** You made them disarm.

**NIELS:** What did they need weapons for? To get themselves cut down with no advantage to anybody?

**LORENTS:** So instead they're going to Randers now, to get cut down for the benefit of the Count.

**NIELS:** But what do they say? What are they going to do?

**LORENTS:** I've been with them, and have tried to console them. They don't dare do anything BUT obey. And they know that only a few of them will return and the ones that do will come back without limbs, faces, souls... Wrecked humans and wolves are the future of this country. Oh, these are fine times we live in. *(Pause.)* At least things happen. It's not boring, that's for sure.

**NIELS:** What kind of man are you!?! How can you sit there and enjoy listing all this misery?!

**LORENTS:** Oh – you don't like that I dribble a little slime on you, Niels? Do you think you're above all this? God made a man like you to be an iron gauntlet – but you've turned yourself into a woollen mitten. All your talk about peace. You've been so bloody peace-seeking I've often thought, "The man has angel feathers in his brain." And now, see – for all your caution – you've betrayed all the things you most wanted to protect – and brought us to the exact place you most wanted to avoid!

**NIELS:** Surely you don't think I could have defeated Count Gerhard?

**LORENTS:** No – but you could've set an example. When one man rebels, more follow – until everyone does. We could've bled him to death. Your example could have defeated that devil. But you didn't act – and that is why I spit on you.

**NIELS:** You don't have the right to spit.

**LORENTS:** What do you know of me? Do you think I have one waking hour where I don't spit on myself? Do you think I don't wish I'd taken this black fool's dress off a long time ago and put on some honest armour? I was a young priest when Gerhard first plowed through Jutland. Wherever he went, children died of starvation and abandonment, women were trampled by his horses, men were crippled. Evil went from victory to victory. And it fell to me to go around with the Host and give words of consolation about God's Love. God! Love! I was young and – how was I to bear it?! It soon turned out Satan wasn't only in the fire and murdering. He was

also hiding in the beer barrel and he came pouring out like a stream of peace and amnesia. The other priests looked at me like I was insane, the bishop threatened me – those pure servants of the truth who were fawning and tripping all over the Evil One. And when I stood and faced the altar I feared to see the right side of God – because I had only ever looked at Him from the wrong side...

But then one evening I turned around – and who did I see in my village church? Yes – there he was, in the front pew. And suddenly God's spirit filled me. I stood up at the altar as straight as I could on my shaky legs, with my beery belly. And I felt that now, at this moment, I, Lorents the drunk, I could be more worthy of all the other priests in Denmark who stand in God's house. So I stood there and thundered out all God's curses on he who, with lies and blood, exalts himself and persecutes the weak. And makes himself God. I shook my clenched fists at him and damned him. And when I'd finished, I stumbled behind the altar, and waited for my sentence. Trembling of legs - but strong in spirit. Happy. My life had found a purpose. For this one half hour I – who had been conceived in dirty lust, raised in filthy poverty, educated in intellectual nonsense and dragged through foulness and torment... I was happy. Then I heard his steps. He wasn't sending his men for me – he was coming for me himself. I almost felt honoured.

**NIELS:** What happened!

**LORENTS:** I turned to face him. He looked at me with his smouldering eyes, and said, "You speak well. It was quite edifying to hear the truth without restraint". And then he nodded and left. I just stood there in shock. So great is the lie that it can afford to pat truth on the shoulder and let it babble away.

**NIELS:** And then what?

**LORENTS:** And then nothing. It was back to beer and women.

**NIELS:** But there was, in fact, resistance to him in that first campaign.

**LORENTS:** Because we saw him in wolf fur. Now he's dressed in sheep's clothing – and he's even more magnificently irresistible. A toast to the Devil.

**NIELS:** (*Ignoring that.*) But Lorents – you did speak to him. You must have used the wrong words.

**LORENTS:** No. I used words. And there is only one language he understands. That of the sword. And it's too late now.

*(Pause.)*

**NIELS:** I don't think...

**LORENTS:** What.

**NIELS:** I don't think I can let my people go to Randers.

**LORENTS:** Oh – and where will you let them go then?

**NIELS:** I'll – I'll go myself.

**LORENTS:** You?

**NIELS:** I will try to talk to him.

*(LORENTS laughs.)*

And if he refuses to listen – if he doesn't understand my point

**LORENTS:** *(The laugh dies on his lips.)* What – what then? Man – what are you thinking of? No!

**NIELS:** Yes.

**LORENTS:** Niels – you can't do that sort of thing today. That kind of action belongs in the Old Testament or - or Viking legends. How will you do it? He won't receive you – you'll never get near him, not armed.

**NIELS:** Yes

**LORENTS:** - Before you decide this – you should consider

**NIELS:** - I have decided it. One waits and waits for the fruit to fall of itself. And when he became ill – I thought – I thought everything would just solve itself but one can't go on waiting forever. We'll have to shake the tree. Gertrude has kept my sword. But I don't want any of my people involved.

*(GERTRUDE enters.)*

**GERTRUDE:** What are you two talking about?

**NIELS:** Gertrude – go. Back to the house. This is no place for a woman right now.

*(GERTRUDE remains standing there.)*

What did I say! GO!

*(GERTRUDE – surprised – does leave.)*

**LORENTS:** I want to come with you.

**NIELS:** No.

**LORENTS:** You must let me.

**NIELS:** You have to stay here. You'll have to say something to Gertrude. She mustn't know – I don't want her coming. And if anything happens to me, you must say goodbye to her, and tell her that from the first time I saw her till the last, I loved her. And you must give the children a kiss from me and tell them that their father did it for – for Denmark's sake. That will excuse me, if I am wrong. And you must say goodbye to the stream and the meadows, the cows with their pious eyes, my horses – with their pious eyes – well, that's enough. Just say goodbye to everything for me.

*(Pause.)*

**LORENTS:** Are you afraid?

**NIELS:** Yes.

**LORENTS:** Of dying?

**NIELS:** That too. And afraid that what I'm going to do is wrong, and afraid that I won't get it done.

**LORENTS:** I have the Host with me.

**NIELS:** What's the meaning of Communion?

**LORENTS:** I don't know – it's a secret. Just say it's Christ visiting our hearts.

**NIELS:** Christ was not a man of violence.



- LORENTS:** No – that’s not true. First Christ suffered and held his peace. But then he comes as a judge with the sword of righteousness in his hand.
- NIELS:** When?
- LORENTS:** Whenever the cup is full.
- NIELS:** Does he actually wield the sword himself?
- LORENTS:** No.
- NIELS:** Who does?
- LORENTS:** To whomever he gives it.
- NIELS:** And who’s that?
- LORENTS:** No man is free from sin. But he gives it to the simple and pure of heart.
- NIELS:** Do you believe in Communion?
- LORENTS:** I believe in drink and women. What’s that got to do with anything?
- NIELS:** I shouldn’t have asked. Forgive me, forgive me my sins, all those I’ve committed and those which I’m about to commit. Give me the Host in silence.
- (He takes the Host from Lorents.)*
- LORENTS:** Are you still afraid?
- NIELS:** No. Now I can do what I must. Live well.
- (NIELS exits. LORENTS runs back and forth, tearing at his priest’s robe.)*
- LORENTS:** Damnation! Damnation! *(Throws self on floor.)* Holy Mother of God, be with him where he goes. Holy son of God, be with him, when it counts. God, be with him, God, stand by him.
- (VITINGHOFEN has entered and observes this.)*

- VITINGHOFEN:** Reverend father – I didn't mean to disturb your prayers. I thought it was you who just rode past me in the dark and didn't answer my call to halt. It must have been Ebbesen. Where was he going so fast?!
- LORENTS:** Well – uh
- VITINGHOFEN:** Be quick about it!
- LORENTS:** Not so loud! Mistress Gertrude mustn't hear.
- VITINGHOFEN:** Niels Ebbesen doesn't so much as blow his nose without first confessing it to his wife. Where was he going? Wait - was he off to see Bugge?
- LORENTS:** Of course not. Can you keep a secret?
- VITINGHOFEN:** Hurry up!
- LORENTS:** Well you see, uh, I'm telling you, he has ridden south to Silkeborg, south, it's south isn't it, south east? I am terrible with directions, Herr Vitinghofen, south, east, west
- VITINGHOFEN:** - Get to your point!
- LORENTS:** Oh – uh – this is hard for me to say – because who would have thought this of Master Niels but I have always said, 'Don't judge the cock by the comb – those who have no comb are almost always the very worst' - and so it is that that uh local exemplar of virtue, Niels Ebbesen, he has in Silkeborg, living in a comfortable home by the shining lake, a mistress who is uh expecting their fifth, tonight.
- VITINGHOFEN:** You're lying to me!
- (VITINGHOFEN grabs hold of LORENTS, who is both too old, out of shape and in his cups to offer much resistance. VITINGHOFEN attaches thumb screws to LORENTS and throws him to the floor.)*
- Tell me where he's going!
- LORENTS:** No man can think when he's being tortured with these!
- (VITINGHOFEN turns the thumbscrews. LORENTS screams.)*

I can't collect my thoughts.

*(VITINGHOFEN tightens the thumbscrews again.)*

It's as I say, he's going to Silkeborg!

*(VITINGHOFEN continues to tighten the thumbscrews. LORENTS, between cries of pain, continues to deny knowledge of Niels Ebbesen's true whereabouts.)*

He's going south to his mistress. I swear by God, I swear by my soul's salvation, he has ridden south, I swear, this is the truth!

*(RUTH flies into the room, just as LORENTS is passing out.)*

**RUTH:** What are you doing! Stop it!

**VITINGHOFEN:** Get out, Ruth!

**RUTH:** Stop! Stop that!

*(RUTH puts herself between VITINGHOFEN and LORENTS.)*

You – you who I have worshipped! And you told me the life of a soldier was all daring deeds!

**VITINGHOFEN:** There's a war on – you foolish girl!

**RUTH:** I thought you were a hero – and here you are, beating a priest!

**VITINGHOFEN:** *(Exiting.)* He's gone to Randers, I'll bet. So help me Lorents, if he's there I'm coming back for you.

*(VITINGHOFEN exits. RUTH takes LORENTS in her arms, removes the thumbscrews, kisses his tortured hands.)*

**LORENTS:** Did you see that He was here?

**RUTH:** He's gone now, he's riding off. You have nothing to fear. You poor man – let me help you up.

**LORENTS:** Don't weep, Ruth. Don't. He was here. That was the second time in my life, just the second time in my wretched useless life... He was here with me. He. Oh, what joy, what honour...

## Act IV

### The Count's chambers in Randers

*The Count has just awoken, and is in his nightshirt.*

**GERHARD:** I don't like towns. I was really enjoying my rural peace out at Norreris but here there are horses' hooves clattering in the street all night long... Last night I heard a drunken woman screaming. I want that looked into. If you find who the revelers are, I want them all killed.

**HAASE:** Yes sir.

**GERHARD:** Isn't it strange Haase? No one thought I would recover. Everyone thought I would die out there on what's-his-name's estate but I knew I would live. I hadn't finished my work. It was impossible for me to die. And what is my work? To found an empire on mercy, justice and peace. I am the merciful, for I make an end of all that is useless. I am the just, because I give victory to the strong. I am peace itself, for it is possible only where one rules and all obey. Is Bugge out there?

**HAASE:** Yes sir.

**GERHARD:** Bring him in. Wait. Haase. We promised Bugge safe conduct, and he came. One doesn't commit so big a blunder for nothing – he has to have had a nasty reason for coming and, for that, he's guilty. And if he didn't have a bad motive – then he's just plain stupid. Safe conduct? For him? From me? They are simpletons, the whole bunch of them! I have decided Bugge's fate.

**HAASE:** But sir – you don't mean – you will

**GERHARD:** - Of course I will.

**HAASE:** But sir, he's from one of Denmark's most distinguished families!

- GERHARD:** All the more reason. This is a nation of weaklings. They don't dare show me open defiance. Oh no, it's all subterfuge, sneaking around... Well, I'll teach them. When I break Bugge's neck, I'll break hundreds.
- HAASE:** But sir
- GERHARD:** - BUT WHAT!? What is this "but sir" I keep hearing. Are you going to get all Danish on me, too?! *(Beat.)* Wait. I have an idea. You shall inform Bugge of his sentence. We'll execute him at dawn. Oh, I'll let him have a priest; I won't deny him his right to confess. I'm a god-fearing man, after all. Now bring him in.
- (HAASE exits.)*
- I'll get him that fat priest I heard preach out in Norreris.
- (HAASE brings in the bound BUGGE.)*
- BUGGE:** I came here trusting your promise to safe conduct. I have nothing to say to you so long as I'm bound by your lies.
- GERHARD:** Oh, enough of the big words, boy – you're hardly in a position to use them with me. Haase has some news for you.
- HAASE:** *(To BUGGE.)* Your actions have had the most serious consequences for our people and our land. You've gone around spreading poison against the man who is the only hope of salvation for our country. The death you have tried to mete out to him, you're now bringing upon yourself, and justly.
- BUGGE:** What!?
- GERHARD:** You heard him.
- HAASE:** This morning. The time is fixed.
- BUGGE:** My Lord – no – you gave me safe conduct here! I am young! You can't take my life – think how young I am! I'm in love! I haven't lived yet, I haven't had a chance
- GERHARD:** - See Haase, he's begging. You'll have a priest for confession.
- BUGGE:** What have I to confess? Haase – you're related to Niels Ebbesen – there's a greeting to someone I want to send – no, never mind. A message through you? That would be disgusting. You wallow in

the shame of your country. You've become powerful in its misfortune. There's the stink of rotting meat about you.

**GERHARD:** Get him out of here.

*(HAASE begins pulling BUGGE out.)*

**BUGGE:** I didn't get the chance to serve my people with my life - perhaps I can do it with my death.

*(HAASE and BUGGE have exited.)*

**GERHARD:** Man must live by the blood of man. I feel young again. New deeds lie before me. Great ones. The world will shriek in convulsions and stagger in blood till it lies down, quiet and submissive in my hands. Ribe and Kohling will fall this week – everything is coming my way. If we press on hard enough, we shall get to Sweden before autumn.

*(There is noise, off.)*

What is that noise! Stop that bloody noise!

*(NIELS is standing at his door.)*

Who the hell are you?

*(NIELS walks into GERHARD's chamber.)*

**NIELS:** I am Niels Ebbesen.

**GERHARD:** Well, well, well. What an unexpected surprise. My old host. That's a nice estate you have at Norreris. Very peaceful. How'd you get in here?

**NIELS:** I used a trick to gain admittance.

**GERHARD:** I expect you've come to beg for mercy. To plead with me to let your people go? Forget it, Ebbesen. Your tenants shall be given the most dangerous assignments, they'll be put on the front lines, not one of them will come home alive. You alone shall survive, so you can suffer their loss.

**NIELS:** You can hang!

**GERHARD:** - I don't like being interrupted. You see, Ebbesen, to me you are so typical of your people. You want to get the better of trouble – by detouring around it. Oh, you hate to fight for a great cause, but you're ready to bicker about the little ones. You've never exerted genuine willpower, you've never committed a daring deed, not one – so God has entrusted me to dig your grave.

**NIELS:** By what right do you, a foreigner, set yourself up as a judge of me and my people?

**GERHARD:** By the right of having conquered you.

**NIELS:** You asked for a daring deed

**GERHARD:** - From you?! Never! You're incapable. Look – there's my sword – take it, see if you can do anything daring.

*(GERHARD laughs at NIELS. The laughter dies as soon as NIELS draws his own sword.)*

**NIELS:** I've no need to borrow – I brought my own.

**GERHARD:** How'd you get that in here? Haase! Come here.

*(HAASE bounds in.)*

**HAASE:** Yes sir – Niels! What are you?!

**NIELS:** - Stay out of this Ove – we're kinsmen.

*(HAASE grabs the Count's sword, and positions himself between the Count and NIELS.)*

**HAASE:** But he is my master.

**NIELS:** Then you shall die with him.

*(NIELS and HAASE fight briefly – HAASE is almost immediately cut down and killed. GERHARD cannot reach his sword. He backs up.)*

**GERHARD:** Niels Ebbesen – you can't do this. This is treason – you'll be punished, you'll be broken on the wheel... Don't look at me with those wolf's eyes. Matters can be arranged. Let Bugge negotiate peace between us. Remember, I am a stranger to your land, sick

and helpless, I was a guest in your home, by what right do you do this?

**NIELS:** By the right of the victor. *(Raising sword)*

*(VITINGHOFEN runs in.)*

**VITINGHOFEN:** My lord, hold out! Here I am!

**GERHARD:** Vitinghofen! Thank God – kill this madman!

*(Another sword fight ensues, between NIELS and VITINGHOFEN. This one lasts longer, but ends with VITINGHOFEN being struck down and killed as well. NIELS turns back to GERHARD.)*

**GERHARD:** I will leave Denmark tomorrow.

**NIELS:** You'll leave it now.

*(NIELS kills GERHARD, who collapses.)*

## Act V

**Outside, on the road to the Count's stronghold at Randers.**

*LORENTS, RUTH and GERTRUDE are walking along the road. GERTRUDE is fatigued.*

**RUTH:** Let's stop here and rest.

**GERTRUDE:** No, we must push on to the Count's. I must find him.

**RUTH:** But mother

**GERTRUDE:** - No!

**LORENTS:** At least let us get directions.

**GERTRUDE:** We must find his body before they dishonour it.

**RUTH:** Mother!

**GERTRUDE:** He's dead. I know he's dead.



- LORENTS:** Nonsense – we don't know that. But if he is, you ought to stifle your grief in pride. After all, he fell on the field of honour.
- GERTRUDE:** You can say that to me!?
- LORENTS:** But you always said
- GERTRUDE:** - I know what I always said. I also know that there is nothing in this world I wouldn't give to have him here with me again. I am so ashamed of myself. I failed you in life, Niels, and now I'm failing you in death. Because if you could die again, and you were riding out to fight the Count and if you asked me if you should go, I would have replied, "Yes, Niels, you must go!" And then I would have put my arms around you to stop you!
- RUTH:** If it was Vitinghofen who did it, I'll go out of my mind with shame.
- LORENTS:** Be quiet. You're young – you'll grow up and get a husband. But she has lost hers.
- (NIELS comes walking in, unarmed, exhausted. BUGGE is with him. GERTRUDE and RUTH rush to NIELS.)*
- NIELS:** His blood was as red as mine.
- LORENTS:** Whose blood? Gerhard's? Baldhead is dead?! *(To Others, as NIELS nods.)* Do you hear that? Gerhard is dead – we are rid of him!
- GERTRUDE:** Niels – is it you – this is your hand between mine?
- RUTH:** Father – you've really done it?
- NIELS:** Yes, I have. There is blood on my honest sword. There's a blot on my shield and on Denmark's.
- GERTRUDE:** I have you again!
- BUGGE:** Ruth, your father has saved my life. He's saved our people. He has shown the way before us – it will be stony and bloody, but we have our faith again. What he has done will lead us now, and through the centuries. Whenever Denmark is ready to sink, we can think of Niels Ebbesen – and that will raise us up again.

**LORENTS:** Do you hear that, man! Do you begin to understand! And yet you stand here as if all the sins of the world were weighing on your shoulders!

**NIELS:** But I struck him down without a fight.

**LORENTS:** God punish you for your sinful righteousness! Struck him down without a fight!? There is a war in the land. He brought the war here. There isn't a crime he hasn't let loose in Denmark. His sentence has been pronounced up above – you simply carried it out. If you regret it, comfort yourself with the thought that today there is joy in heaven because earth has one less devil. You have shown us the way, Niels. Continue. However hard it is, we'll follow at your side.

**NIELS:** Some day there will come a great day of peace – I do believe that – when we and our neighbours shall live side by side in harmony. Until then I promise you I won't return to the plough. Not before we've driven all those who seek our destruction back over the border – or under the earth – their choice. For free we must be, if we are to live.

**LORENTS:** God will reward you for this.

**NIELS:** No, I will have had enough reward, my friend. The best one of all. My children will grow up to be Danes.

**The End.**

