

THE STRONGER
a play in one-act

by August Strindberg

translated by Charles Wangel

CHARACTERS

MME. X: an actress, married

MLLE. Y: an actress, single

SETTING

The corner of a ladies' cafe, two little iron tables, a red velvet sofa, several chairs.

[MME. X enters, dressed in winter clothes, wearing hat and cloak and carrying a dainty Japanese basket on her arm. MLLE. Y sits beside a half-empty beer bottle, reading an illustrated newspaper which later she changes for another.]

MME. X: Good evening, Amelia, you're sitting here alone on Christmas eve like a poor old maid. *[MLLE. Y glances up from the newspaper, nods, and resumes her reading.]* Do you know it worries me to see you this way, alone in a café, and on Christmas eve, too. It makes me feel as I did that time when I saw a bridal party in a Paris restaurant, the bride sitting reading a comic paper, while the groom played billiards with the witnesses. Ah! thought I, with such a beginning, what a sequel and what an ending! He played billiards on his wedding evening--and she read a comic paper!--But that is neither here nor there. *[The WAITER enters, places a cup of Chocolate before MME. X and goes out.]* I tell you what, Amelia! I believe you would have done better to have kept him! Do you remember I was the first to say 'forgive him!' Recollect? Then you would have been married now and have had a home. Remember that Christmas in the country? How happy you were with your fiancé's parents, how you enjoyed the happiness of their home, yet longed for the theater. Yes, Amelia, dear, home is the best of all--next to the theater--and the children, you understand--but that you don't understand! *[MLLE. Y looks*

*scornful. MME. X sips a spoonful out of the cup, then opens her basket and takes out the Christmas presents.] Here you can see what I have bought for my little pigs. [Takes up a doll] Look at this! This is for Liza. See?--And here is Maja's pop gun [Loads and shoots at MLLE. Y who makes a startled gesture] Were you frightened? Do you think I should like to shoot you? What? My soul! I don't believe you thought that! If you wanted to shoot me, that wouldn't surprise me, because I came in your way--and that, I know, you can never forget. But I was quite innocent. You still believe I intrigued you out of the theater, but I didn't do that! I didn't do that even if you do think so. But it's all one whether I say so or not, for you still believe it was I! [Takes up a pair of embroidered slippers] And these are for my old man. With tulips on them which I embroidered myself. I can't bear tulips, you know, but he must have tulips on everything. [MLLE. Y looks up ironically and curiously. MME. X puts a hand in each slipper.] See what little feet Bob has! What? And you ought to see how elegantly he walks! You've never seen him in slippers? [MLLE. Y laughs aloud.] Look here, this is he. [She makes the slippers walk on the table. MLLE. Y laughs loudly.] And when he is peeved, see, he stamps like this with his foot. 'What! Damn that cook, she never can learn to make coffee. Ah! now those idiots haven't trimmed the lamp wick straight!' And then he wears out the soles and his feet freeze. 'Ugh, how cold it is and the stupid fools never can keep the fire in the heater.' [She rubs together the slippers' soles and uppers. MLLE. Y laughs clearly.] And then he comes home and has to hunt for his slippers which Marie has stuck under the chiffonier. Oh, but it is a sin to sit here and make fun of one's husband. He's a pretty good little husband -- You ought to have such a husband, Amelia. What are you laughing at? What? What? -- And then I know he's true to me. Yes I know that. Because he told me himself. What are you tittering about? When I came back from my tour of Norway, that shameless Frederika came and wanted to elope with him. Can you imagine anything so infamous? [Pause] But I'd have scratched her eyes out if she had come to see him when I was at home! [Pause] It was good that Bob spoke of it himself and that it didn't reach me through gossip. [Pause] But Frederika wasn't the only one, would you believe it! I don't know why, but women are crazy about my husband. They must think he has something to say about theater engagements because he's connected with the government. Perhaps you were there yourself and tried to influence him! I don't trust you any too much. But, I know he's not concerned about you, and you seem to have a grudge against him. [Pause. They look quizzically at each other.] Come to see us this evening, Amerlia, and show that you're not angry with us -- not angry with me at any rate! I don't know why, but it's so uncomfortable to have you an enemy. Possibly it's because I came in your way [*rallentando*] or -*

- I really don't know -- just why. [*Pause. MLLE. Y stares at MME. X curiously.*] Our acquaintance has been so peculiar. [*Thoughtfully*] When I saw you the first time I was so afraid of you, so afraid, that I couldn't look you in the face; still as I came and went I always found myself near you -- I couldn't risk being your enemy, so I became your friend. But there was always a discordant note when you came to our house, because I saw that my husband couldn't bear you -- and that was as annoying to me as an ill-fitting gown -- and I did all I could to make him friendly toward you, but before he consented you announced your engagement. Then came a violent friendship, so that in a twinkling it appeared as if you dared only show him your real feelings when you were betrothed -- and then -- how was it later? -- I didn't get jealous -- how wonderful! And I remember that when you were Patin's godmother, I made Bob kiss you -- he did it, but you were so confused -- that is, I didn't notice it then -- thought about it later -- never thought about it before -- now! [*Gets up hastily*] Why are you silent? You haven't said a word this whole time, but you have let me go on talking! You have sat there and your eyes loosened out of me all these thoughts which lay like raw silk in their cocoon -- thoughts -- suspicious thoughts, perhaps -- let me see -- why did you break your engagement? Why do you come so seldom to our house these days? Why won't you visit us tonight? [*MLLE. Y appears as if about to speak.*] Keep still! You don't have to say anything. I comprehend it all myself! It was because, and because and because. Yes! Yes! Now everything is clear. So that's it! Pfui, I won't sit at the same table with you. [*Takes her things to the next table*] That's the reason why I had to embroider tulips, which I hate, on his slippers; because you are fond of tulips; that's why [*Throws the slippers on the floor*] we go to the mountains during the summer, because you don't like the sea air; that's why my boy is named Eskil, because it's your father's name; that's why I wear your colors, read your authors, eat your pet dishes, drink your beverages--this chocolate, for example--that's why. Oh, my God, it's fearful, when I think about it; it's fearful! Everything, everything, came from you to me, even your passion! Your soul crept into mine, like a worm into an apple, ate and ate, grubbed and grubbed, until nothing was left but the rind within. I wanted to fly from you, but I couldn't; you lay like a snake and enchanted me with your black eyes--I felt as if the branch gave way and let me fall. I lay with feet bound together in the water and swam mightily with my hands, but the harder I struggled the deeper I worked myself under, until I sank to the bottom, where you lay like a giant crab ready to catch hold of me with your claws--and I just lay there! Pfui! how I hate you! hate you! hate you! But you, you only sit there and keep silent, peacefully, indifferently, indifferent as to whether the moon waxes or wanes, whether it is Christmas or New Year,

whether others are happy or unhappy, without the ability to hate or to love, as composed as a stork by a mouse hole. You can't make conquests yourself, you can't keep a man's love, but you can steal away that love from others! Here you sit in your corner--do you know they have named a mouse-trap after you?--and read your newspapers in order to see if anything has happened to any one, or who's had a run of bad luck, or who has left the theater; here you sit and review your work, calculating your mischief as a pilot does his course; collecting your tribute.... *[Pause]* Poor Amelia, do you know that I'm really sorry for you, because you are so unhappy. Unhappy like a wounded animal, and spiteful because you are wounded! I can't be angry with you, no matter how much I want to be--because you come out at the small end of the horn. Yes; that affair with Bob--I don't care about that. What is that to me, after all? What is that to me, after all? And if I learned to drink chocolate from you or from somebody else, what difference does it make. *[Drinks a spoonful out of the cup; knowingly]* Besides, chocolate is very healthful. And if you taught me how to dress--tant mieux--that only makes me more attractive to my husband. And you lost what I won. Yes, to sum up: I believe you have lost him. But it was certainly your intent that I should go my own road--do as you did and regret as you now regret--but I don't do that! We won't be mean, will we? And why should I take only what nobody else will have? *[Pause]* Possibly, all in all, at this moment I am really the stronger. You get nothing from me, but you gave me much. And now I appear like a thief to you. You wake up and find I possess what you have lost! How was it that everything in your hands was worthless and sterile? You can hold no man's love with your tulips and your passion, as I can. You can't learn housekeeping from your authors, as I have done; you have no little Eskil to cherish, even if your father was named Eskil! And why do you keep silent, silent, silent? I believe that is strength, but, perhaps, it's because you have nothing to say! Because you don't think anything. *[Rises and gathers up her slippers]* Now I'm going home--and take the tulips with me--your tulips! You can't learn from another, you can't bend--and therefore you will be broken like a dry stalk--but I won't be! Thank you, Amelia, for all your good lessons. Thanks because you taught me to love my husband! Now I'll go home and love him!

[She goes.]