

August Strindberg
THE STRONGER

CHARACTERS

MRS. X, an actress, married
MISS Y, an actress, unmarried
A WAITRESS

SCENE. *The corner of a ladies' café. Two little iron tables, a red velvet sofa, several chairs. Enter MRS. X, dressed in winter clothes, carrying a Japanese basket on her arm. MISS Y sits with a half-empty beer bottle before her, reading an illustrated paper, which she changes later for another.*

MRS. X. Good afternoon, Amelia. You're sitting here alone on Christmas eve like a poor bachelor!

MISS Y. *(Looks up, nods, and resumes her reading.)*

MRS. X. Do you know it really hurts me to see you like this, alone, in a café, and on Christmas eve, too. It makes me feel as I did one time when I saw a bridal party in a Paris restaurant, and the bride sat reading a comic paper, while the groom played billiards with the witnesses. Huh, thought I, with such a beginning, what will follow, and what will be the end? He played billiards on his wedding eve! *(MISS Y starts to speak.)* And she read a comic paper, you mean? Well, they are not altogether the same thing. *(A WAITRESS enters, places a cup of chocolate before MRS. X and goes out.)*

MRS. X. You know what, Amelia! I believe you would have done better to have kept him! Do you remember, I was the first to say "Forgive him"? Do you remember that? You would be married now and have a home. Remember that Christmas when you went out to visit your fiancé's parents in the country? How you gloried in the happiness of home life and really longed to quit the theater forever? Yes, Amelia dear, home is the best of all—next to the theater—and as for children—well, you don't understand that.

MISS Y. *(Looks up scornfully.)*

MRS. X. *(sips a few spoonfuls out of the cup, then opens her basket and shows Christmas presents).* Now you shall see what I bought for my piggywigs. *(Takes up a doll.)* Look at this! This is for Lisa, ha! Do you see how

THE STRONGER Written and first performed in 1889. English translation by Edith and Warner Oland. August Strindberg (1849–1912) was born in Stockholm, Sweden, published his first play in 1870, and in 1875–1876 began an intense love affair with an aspiring actress, Siri von Essen, then the Baroness Wrangel, whom he married in 1877 after her divorce. Though the marriage produced four children, it was a troubled one, largely because of Strindberg's irrational jealousies. *The Stronger*, though written while husband and wife were living apart, was done for a joint theatrical project, and Siri played Mrs. X in the opening production.

she can roll her eyes and turn her head, eh? And here is Maja's popgun.
(Loads it and shoots at Miss Y.)

MISS Y. (Makes a startled gesture.)

MRS. X. Did I frighten you? Do you think I would like to shoot you, eh? On my soul, if I don't think you did! If you wanted to shoot me it wouldn't be so surprising, because I stood in your way—and I know you can never forget that—although I was absolutely innocent. You still believe I intrigued and got you out of the Stora theater, but I didn't. I didn't do that, although you think so. Well, it doesn't make any difference what I say to you. You still believe I did it. (Takes up a pair of embroidered slippers.) And these are for my better half. I embroidered them myself—I can't bear tulips, but he wants tulips on everything.

MISS Y. (Looks up ironically and curiously.)

MRS. X. (Putting a hand in each slipper). See what little feet Bob has! What? And you should see what a splendid stride he has! You've never seen him in slippers! (Miss Y laughs aloud.) Look! (She makes the slippers walk on the table. Miss Y laughs loudly.) And when he is grumpy he stamps like this with his foot. "What! damn those servants who can never learn to make coffee. Oh, now those creatures haven't trimmed the lamp wick properly!" And then there are drafts on the floor and his feet are cold. "Ugh, how cold it is; the stupid idiots can never keep the fire going." (She rubs the slippers together, one sole over the other.)

MISS Y. (Shrieks with laughter.)

MRS. X. And then he comes home and has to hunt for his slippers which Marie has stuck under the chiffohier—oh, but it's sinful to sit here and make fun of one's husband this way when he is kind and a good little man. You ought to have had such a husband, Amelia. What are you laughing at? What? What? And you see he's true to me. Yes, I'm sure of that, because he told me himself—what are you laughing at?—that when I was touring in Norway that brazen Frederika came and wanted to seduce him! Can you fancy anything so infamous? (Pause.) I'd have torn her eyes out if she had come to see him when I was at home. (Pause.) It was lucky that Bob told me about it himself and that it didn't reach me through gossip. (Pause.) But would you believe it, Frederika wasn't the only one! I don't know why, but the women are crazy about my husband. They must think he has influence about getting them theatrical engagements, because he is connected with the government. Perhaps you were after him yourself. I didn't use to trust you any too much. But now I know he never bothered his head about you, and you always seemed to have a grudge against him somehow.

(Pause. They look at each other in a puzzled way.)

MRS. X. Come and see us this evening, Amelia, and show us that you're not put out with us—not put out with me at any rate. I don't know, but I think it would be uncomfortable to have you for an enemy. Perhaps it's because I stood in your way (more slowly) or—I really—don't know why—in particular.

(*Pause. MISS Y stares at MRS. X curiously.*)

MRS. X (*thoughtfully*). Our acquaintance has been so queer. When I saw you for the first time I was afraid of you, so afraid that I didn't dare let you out of my sight; no matter when or where, I always found myself near you—I didn't dare have you for an enemy, so I became your friend. But there was always discord when you came to our house, because I saw that my husband couldn't endure you, and the whole thing seemed as awry to me as an ill-fitting gown—and I did all I could to make him friendly toward you, but with no success until you became engaged. Then came a violent friendship between you, so that it looked all at once as though you both dared show your real feelings only when you were secure—and then—how was it later? I didn't get jealous—strange to say! And I remember at the christening, when you acted as godmother, I made him kiss you—he did so, and you became so confused—as it were; I didn't notice it then—didn't think about it later either—have never thought about it until—now! (*Rises suddenly.*) 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 have reeled out of me all these thoughts which lay like raw silk in its cocoon—thoughts—suspicious thoughts, perhaps. Let me see—why did you break your engagement? Why do you never come to our house any more? Why won't you come to see us tonight?

(*MISS Y appears as if about to speak.*)

MRS. X. Hush, you needn't speak—I understand it all! It was because—and because—and because! Yes, yes! Now all the accounts balance. That's it. Fie, I won't sit at the same table with you. (*Moves her things to another table.*) That's the reason I had to embroider tulips—which I hate—on his slippers, because you are fond of tulips; that's why (*throws slippers on the floor*) we go to Lake Mälarn in the summer, because you don't like salt water; 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 favorite dishes, drink your drinks—chocolate, for instance; that's why—oh—my God—it's terrible, when I think about it; it's terrible. Everything, everything came from you to me, even your passions. Your soul crept into mine, like a worm into an apple, ate and ate, bored and bored, until nothing was left but the rind and a little black dust within. I wanted to get away from you, but I couldn't; you lay like a snake and charmed me with your black eyes; I felt that when I lifted my wings they only dragged me down; I lay in the water with bound feet, and the stronger I strove to keep up the deeper I worked myself down, down, until I sank to the bottom, where you lay like a giant crab to clutch me in your claws—and there I am lying now.

I hate you, hate you, hate you! And you only sit there silent—silent and indifferent; indifferent whether it's new moon or waning moon, Christmas or New Year's, whether others are happy or unhappy; without power to hate or to love; as quiet as a stork by a rat hole—you couldn't scent your prey and capture it, but you could lie in wait for it! You sit here in your corner of the café—did you know it's called "The Rat Trap" for you?—

and read the papers to see if misfortune hasn't befallen someone, to see if someone hasn't been given notice at the theater, perhaps; you sit here and calculate about your next victim and reckon on your chances of recompense like a pilot in a shipwreck. Poor Amelia, I pity you, nevertheless, because I know you are unhappy, unhappy like one who has been wounded, and angry because you are wounded. I can't be angry with you, no matter how much I want to be—because you come out the weaker one. Yes, all that with Bob doesn't trouble me. What is that to me, after all? And what difference does it make whether I learned to drink chocolate from you or someone else. (*Sips a spoonful from her cup.*) Besides, chocolate is very healthful. And if you taught me how to dress—*tant mieux!*^o—that has only made me more attractive to my husband; so you lost and I won there. Well, judging by certain signs, I believe you have already lost him; and you certainly intended that I should leave him—do as you did with your fiancé and regret as you now regret; but, you see, I don't do that—we mustn't be too exacting. And why should I take only what no one else wants?

Perhaps, take it all in all, I am at this moment the stronger one. You received nothing from me, but you gave me much. And now I seem like a thief since you have awakened and find I possess what is your loss. How could it be otherwise when everything is worthless and sterile in your hands? You can never keep a man's love with your tulips and your passions—but I can keep it. You can't learn how to live from your authors, as I have learned. You have no little Eskil to cherish, even if your father's name was Eskil. And why are you always silent, silent, silent? I thought that was strength, but perhaps it is because you have nothing to say! Because you never think about anything! (*Rises and picks up slippers.*) Now I'm going home—and take the tulips with me—*your tulips!* You are unable to learn from another; you can't bend—therefore, you broke like a dry stalk. But I won't break! Thank you, Amelia, for all your good lessons. Thanks for teaching my husband how to love. Now I'm going home to love him. (*Goes.*)

QUESTIONS

1. Much of the action of this play lies in the past, but to reconstruct that action we must separate what is true from what is untrue and from what may or may not be true in Mrs. X's account of it. Point out places where Mrs. X (a) is probably lying, (b) is clearly rationalizing, (c) has very likely or has certainly been deceived, (d) is clearly giving an accurate account. In each case, explain your reason for your opinion. To what extent can we be certain of what has happened in the past?
2. Put together as reliable an account as possible of the past relationships of Mrs. X, her husband, and Miss Y. How did the friendship between the two women start? How did it proceed? How and why did it terminate? In what

tant mieux! so much the better