The Stronger

BY AUGUST STRINDBERG

August Strindberg, Sweden's foremost dramatist, was born at Stockholm in 1849. He attended the University of Upsala but did not graduate. In 1872 he wrote Master Olaf, which was for six years steadily refused by managers. When it did appear it inaugurated the Swedish dramatic renascence. By turns Strindberg was schoolmaster, journalist, dramatist, writer of scientific and political treatises, and writer of short stories. In 1883 he left Sweden and travelled extensively in Denmark, Germany, France, and Italy. He died in 1912.

As a dramatist Strindberg's chief strength lies not so much in dramatic technique as it does in his trenchant and searching power of analysis of the human mind. His chief plays are very exact and narrow views of the feminine soul. Some of his own domestic bitterness finds expression in the feminine studies in his plays. He is very fond of showing the power of one character over another.

His important one-act plays are The Outlaw, Countess Julie, Creditors, Pariah, Facing Death, and The Stronger. The Stronger has a dramatic intensity that few plays possess. Though but one character speaks, the souls of three are skilfully laid bare.

PERSONS

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

THE STRONGER[M]

SCENE: A corner of a ladies' restaurant; two small tables of cast-iron, a sofa covered with red plush, and a few chairs.

MRS. X. enters, dressed in hat and winter coat, and carrying a pretty Japanese basket on her arm.
MISS Y. has in front of her a partly emptied bottle of beer; she is reading an illustrated weekly, and every now and then, she exchanges it for a new one.

MRS. X. Well, how do, Millie! Here you are sitting on Christmas Eve, as lonely as a poor bachelor.

[MISS Y. looks up from the paper for a moment, nods, and resumes her reading.]

MRS. X. Really, I feel sorry to find you like this--alone--alone in a restaurant, and on Christmas Eve of all times. It makes me as sad as when I saw a wedding party at Paris once in a restaurant--the bride was reading a comic paper and the groom was playing billiards with the witnesses. Ugh, when it begins that way, I thought, how will it end? Think of it, playing billiards on his wedding day! Yes, and you're going to say that she was reading a comic paper---that's a different case, my dear.

[A waitress brings a cup of chocolate, places it before MRS. X., and disappears again.

MRS. X. [Sips a few spoonfuls; opens the basket and displays a number of Christmas presents.] See what I've bought for my tots. [Picks up a doll.] What do you think of this? Lisa is to have it. She can roll her eyes and twist her head, do you see? Fine, is it not? And here's a cork pistol for Carl.

[Loads the pistol and pops it at MISS Y. MISS Y. starts as if frightened.

MRS. X. Did I scare you? Why, you didn't fear I was going to shoot you, did you? Really, I didn't think you could believe that of me. If you were to shoot me--well, that wouldn't surprise me the least. I've got in your way once, and I know you'll never forget it--but I couldn't help it. You still think I intrigued you away from the Royal Theatre, and I didn't do anything of the kind--although you think so. But it doesn't matter what I say, of course--you believe it was I just the same. [Pulls out a pair of embroidered slippers.] Well, these are for
my hubby--tulips--I've embroidered them myself. H'm!--I hate tulips--
and he must have them on everything.

[MISS Y. looks up from the paper with an expression of mingled
tsarcasm and curiosity.

MRS. X. [Puts a hand in each slipper.] Just see what small feet Bob
has. See? And you should see him walk--elegant! Of course, you've
never seen him in slippers.

[MISS Y. laughs aloud.

MRS. X. Look here--here he comes.

[Makes the slippers walk across the table. MISS Y. laughs again.

MRS. X. Then he gets angry, and he stamps his foot just like this:
"Blame that cook who can't learn how to make coffee." Or: "The
idiot--now that girl has forgotten to fix my study lamp again." Then
there is a draught through the floor and his feet get cold. "Gee, but it's
freezing, and those blanked idiots don't even know enough to keep the
house warm."

[She rubs the sole of one slipper against the instep of the other. MISS
Y. breaks into prolonged laughter.

MRS. X. And then he comes home and has to hunt for his slippers--
Mary has pushed them under the bureau. Well, perhaps it is not right
to be making fun of one's own husband. He's pretty good for all that--
a real dear little hubby, that's what he is. You should have such a
husband--what are you laughing at? Can't you tell? Then, you see, I
know he is faithful. Yes, I know, for he has told me himself--what in
the world makes you giggle like that? That nasty Betty tried to get
him away from me while I was on the road. Can you think of anything
more infamous? [Pause.] But I'd have scratched the eyes out of her
face, that's what I'd have done, if I had been at home when she tried it.
[Pause.] I'm glad Bob told me all about it, so I didn't have to hear it
first from somebody else. [Pause.] And, just think of it, Betty was not
the only one! I don't know why it is, but all women seem to be crazy
after my husband. It must be because they imagine his government
position gives him something to say about the engagements. Perhaps you've tried it yourself--you may have set your traps for him, too? Yes, I don't trust you very far--but I know he never cared for you--and then I have been thinking you rather had a grudge against him.

[Pause. They look at each other in an embarrassed manner.]

MRS. X. Amelia, spend the evening with us, won't you? Just to show that you are not angry--not with me, at least. I cannot tell exactly why, but it seems so awfully unpleasant to have you--you--for an enemy. Perhaps because I got in your way that time [rallentando] or--I don't know--really, I don't know at all----

[Pause. MISS Y. gazes searchingly at MRS. X.]

MRS. X. [Thoughtfully.] It was so peculiar, the way our acquaintance--why, I was afraid of you when I first met you; so afraid that I did not dare to let you out of sight. It didn't matter where I tried to go--I always found myself near you. I didn't have the courage to be your enemy--and so I became your friend. But there was always something discordant in the air when you called at our home, for I saw that my husband didn't like you--and it annoyed me--just as it does when a dress won't fit. I've tried my very best to make him appear friendly to you at least, but I couldn't move him--not until you were engaged. Then you two became such fast friends that it almost looked as if you had not dared to show your real feelings before, when it was not safe--and later--let me see, now! I didn't get jealous--strange, was it not? And I remember the baptism--you were acting as godmother, and I made him kiss you--and he did, but both of you looked terribly embarrassed--that is, I didn't think of it then--or afterwards, even--I never thought of it--till--now! [Rises impulsively.] Why don't you say something? You have not uttered a single word all this time. You've just let me go on talking. You've been sitting there staring at me only, and your eyes have drawn out of me all these thoughts which were lying in me like silk in a cocoon--thoughts--bad thoughts maybe--let me think. Why did you break your engagement? Why have you never called on us afterward? Why don't you want to be with us to-night?

[MISS Y. makes a motion as if intending to speak.]
MRS. X. No, you don't need to say anything at all. All is clear to me now. So, that's the reason of it all. Yes, yes! Everything fits together now. Shame on you! I don't want to sit at the same table with you. [Moves her things to another table.] That's why I must put those hateful tulips on his slippers--because you love them. [Throws the slippers on the floor.] That's why we have to spend the summer in the mountains--because you can't bear the salt smell of the ocean; that's why my boy had to be called Eskil--because that was your father's name; that's why I had to wear your color, and read your books, and eat your favorite dishes, and drink your drinks--this chocolate, for instance; that's why--great heavens!--it's terrible to think of it--it's terrible! Everything was forced on me by you--even your passions. Your soul bored itself into mine as a worm into an apple, and it ate and ate and burrowed and burrowed, till nothing was left but the outside shell and a little black dust. I wanted to run away from you, but I couldn't. You were always on hand like a snake, with your black eyes, to charm me--I felt how my wings beat the air only to drag me down--I was in the water with my feet tied together, and the harder I worked with my arms, the further down I went--down, down, till I sank to the bottom, where you lay in wait like a monster crab to catch me with your claws--and now I'm there! Shame on you! How I hate you, hate you, hate you! But you, you just sit there, silent and calm and indifferent, whether the moon is new or full; whether it's Christmas or mid-summer; whether other people are happy or unhappy. You are incapable of hatred and you don't know how to love. As a cat in front of a mouse-hole, you are sitting there. You can't drag your prey out, and you can't pursue it, but you can outwait it. Here you sit in this comer--do you know they've nicknamed it "the mousetrap" on your account? Here you read the papers to see if anybody is in trouble, or if anybody is about to be discharged from the theatre. Here you watch your victims and calculate your chances and take your tributes. Poor Amelia! Do you know, I pity you all the same, for I know you are unhappy--unhappy as one who has been wounded, and malicious because you are wounded. I ought to be angry with you, but really I can't--you are so small, after all--and as to Bob, why, that does not bother me in the least. What does it matter to me, anyhow? If you or somebody else taught me to drink chocolate--what of that? [Takes a spoonful of chocolate; then, sententiously.] They say chocolate is very wholesome. And if I have learned from you how to dress--tant mieux!--it has only given me a stronger hold on my
husband--and you have lost where I have gained. Yes, judging by several signs, I think you have lost him already. Of course, you meant me to break with him--as you did, and as you are now regretting--but, you see, I never would do that. It wouldn't do to be narrow-minded, you know. And why should I take only what nobody else wants? Perhaps, after all, I am the stronger now. You never got anything from me; you merely gave--and thus happened to me what happened to the thief--I had what you missed when you woke up. How explain in any other way that, in your hand, everything proved worthless and useless? You were never able to keep a man's love, in spite of your tulips and your passions--and I could; you could never learn the art of living from the books--as I learned it; you bore no little Eskil, although that was your father's name. And why do you keep silent always and everywhere--silent, ever silent? I used to think it was because you were so strong; and maybe the simple truth was you never had anything to say--because you were unable to think! [Rises and picks up the slippers.] I'm going home now--I'll take the tulips with me--your tulips. You couldn't learn anything from others; you couldn't bend--and so you broke like a dry stem--and I didn't. Thank you, Amelia, for all your instructions. I thank you that you have taught me how to love my husband. Now I'm going home--to him! [Exit.]

CURTAIN