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Opening Extract from...

The Stronger Sex

Written by Hans Werner Kettenbach

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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THE STRONGER SEX

Hans Werner Kettenbach

Translated from the German
by Anthea Bell



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The Stronger Sex

1

She sent the car for me. That's what you say, isn't it? The car. The chauffeur merits no special mention.

Well, so she sent the car for me. His car, her husband's car, but she was the one who had made the appointment with me in advance. And she had asked how I was planning to get to them.

I'd said that was no problem, my car would be at the garage for its service that day, but I'd take a taxi. No, no, she replied, that wouldn't be necessary. She'd have me picked up. I tried to decline the offer, but it proved difficult, and in the end I gave up because it occurred to me that it was uncivil to reject the offer of a lady who, as I assessed it, must be forty years older than me.

And sure enough, around ten-thirty in the morning a middle-aged man in a grey chauffeur's uniform, carrying a peaked cap, turned up in the secretaries' office. I was standing beside Simone Berger; I'd come in to ask her to make a change in a letter I'd dictated. Frau Enke asked the man how she could help him. He replied that he had come to pick up Dr Zabel at Frau Klofft's request. Frau Enke and Simone looked at me. I told the man I'd only be a moment, would he mind waiting? The man said of course he'd wait, but out in the car if that was all right, because he had left it outside the door on the no-parking lines. With a slight bow he left again.

When I came out of our office entrance, he was not sitting at the wheel of the car, a sturdy, gleaming black limousine,

but standing on the pavement beside it. He took off his cap, appeared to line up the hand holding the cap with his trouser seam, and put his other hand out to open the back door of the car. All this startled me so much that, against my own preference, I got into the back seat with my briefcase and sank into the comfort of its luxurious mouse-grey leather upholstery.

I'm almost sure that Simone had opened the tall window on the first floor to look down, and that Frau Enke couldn't resist the temptation either and was peering over Simone's shoulder. I guessed they were cackling with mirth over all the ceremony of which I had so surprisingly become the object, or do I mean the subject? But I wasn't going to let myself look up at our office windows while the limousine purred smoothly away.

The upholstery in the back seat was soft, and at the same time smooth and firm. Calf? Lamb? Cowhide? No idea. Expensive, anyway. And extremely comfortable. The panelling in the back of the car also looked expensive, some kind of high-grade wood with a reddish glow to its graining. Between the two spare seats opposite the soft upholstery where I was ensconced, both of them folded up, there was a little cupboard made of the same wood. The on-board bar, probably.

"Is that a bar in the middle there?" I asked.

The chauffeur did not react, but kept looking straight ahead down the road, unmoved. I was beginning to wonder why when I noticed that a glass panel between the driver's seat and the back of the car was up. There'd be a switch somewhere to allow loudspeaker contact between the chauffeur and his boss sitting behind him. "Can't you take a detour, Georg? How long are we going to crawl along like this?"

Hochkeppel had said this client might well be a little difficult. Herbert Klofft had begun in a small way, building

up a business, not very large but soon flourishing, and had never been able to shake off the autocratic manner that maybe he'd needed back then. The not very large business must indeed be flourishing if its boss had himself driven around in a limousine like this. But if he was so fond of letting everyone know that he was in charge, why did his wife not only fix his appointments, she also had the use of his car without asking him?

The chauffeur wasn't going the way I had expected. Coming out of the city centre he did not turn into the lively main street of the old suburb where, almost a hundred years ago, the well-to-do had built their villas in the outskirts of the woodland beyond. Instead of taking the direct link, he drove down to the expressway running along the bank of the river. You make faster progress there, of course, but there's less to see. Not the densely inhabited, four-storey apartment blocks dating from the late nineteenth century, nor the crowds outside the colourful shops opened in the suburb by the Turks. All you see here is a barge now and then making its way laboriously upstream, its broad bow wave out ahead of it, or another moving fast and almost silently down to the valley.

From the expressway you rather abruptly reach the villa district. A solitary traffic light suddenly gives you the chance to filter out of the main stream of traffic and into a narrow side street. To the right and left of this turn in the road a few crumbling houses still stand, and on the corner there's an old inn with low window sills, which must once have been the first place where carriers stopped to rest on their way downstream to the city with their horse-drawn carts. But less than a hundred metres further on the road suddenly changes again, becoming a narrow avenue lined on both sides with tall elms.

It was a hot day in late June, and under the arching foliage I suddenly felt that I had reached some kind of

refuge. The fitful roaring and humming of the traffic going along the road in the opposite direction died away, silence fell. A long-buried memory of one of the few times I'd been in these parts before surfaced in my mind. My great-aunt was housekeeper for a university professor who lived here. She had visited our home for coffee one Sunday, and I had been told to go back with her, carrying a package containing some kind of unusual kitchen utensil that my father had got for her.

I would rather have stayed at home in front of the TV, and the package didn't seem to me worth the trouble. My aunt could easily have carried it herself. But no, I not only had to take it to the oak front door under the projecting roof but into the house, and then to make matters worse she told me to sit down in the kitchen, have a glass of blackcurrant juice, which I didn't like, and wait for her a moment.

It was quiet in that house, in fact deathly quiet in the incredibly large, shining kitchen with its tiled floor, the evening sun outside cast a pink, melancholy light, and then she came back with the professor in tow. By now I'd realized that she wanted to present her clever little great-nephew to him. The professor, I suspect, had been resting after lunch, had fallen asleep, and my aunt had roused him from the sofa at a bad time. White hair tousled, with a white moustache, he came into the kitchen at a doddery pace, knocked his shoulder against the doorpost, rubbed it with a wry expression and managed a smile when his glance fell on me. He nodded and muttered something I couldn't make out.

I got to my feet, but before I could say anything, he had made his way past me, opened the door of the enormous fridge, took out a carton of milk and opened it. He got no further, because with two steps my aunt was beside him, taking the carton from him and filling a glass that she handed him. He emptied it, gurgling slightly as he drank,

held the glass out to her again, and she refilled it. He went on to drink a third glass, still gurgling, before he had had enough. The two of them stood there for a moment, my aunt with the milk carton, the professor holding the glass and looking into space as if expecting to find inspiration of some kind there.

Unexpectedly, he puffed out his cheeks. My aunt straightened her shoulders and turned an unmistakably severe glance on him. The professor hesitated for a second, then let out the air through his nose again with a suppressed grunt. Saying no more, he turned away, hesitated as he spotted me again, nodded and smiled once more and left the kitchen.

On the way home in the tram I tried to make something of my impressions, but it was hard to decide which had been more remarkable – the aloof, perfect silence of that part of town, where no one ran about shouting, the special smell of the house and its kitchen, which was presumably the way posh, rich people's homes naturally smelt, or the behaviour of the professor who, I felt sure, would have drunk the milk straight from the carton if my aunt hadn't intervened. I rather felt that after those three glasses of milk he would actually have opened his mouth and belched if my aunt had not transfixed him with so stern a gaze.

Our client's villa, which was in a winding side street, also had a roof that came down low and an oak front door. I managed to avoid any further attentions from the chauffeur by nipping out of the car as soon as it was through the entrance and stopping outside the door. I waved to him as he came around the bonnet, called, "Thank you very much!" and went up the three steps to the front door without my escort. However, he was having none of that, but caught up with me on the steps and rang the bell for me.

I expected to go through a question-and-answer ritual over the intercom fitted beside the door, and then be let

in by a black-clad housemaid with a little white apron, or even a butler. But the door opened at once, and a woman of medium height with thick grey hair cut short and grey eyes appeared. She offered me her hand, saying, "Hello, Dr Zabel. I'm Cilly Klofft." Her hand was cool and dry.

She was smiling, but her eyes examined me thoroughly; I followed her while the chauffeur closed the front door from the outside. She was wearing a summer dress with a bright flower pattern, and sandals on her bare feet. This woman couldn't be seventy, as I had assumed from what my boss told me about her husband. If her hair hadn't been so grey, and you saw her from behind, you could have taken her for thirty or forty years old. I noticed how my nostrils suddenly picked up a faint, unusual aroma. No, this wasn't the chilly smell of a rich household, it must be her perfume, and an attractive one too.

She led me into a spacious living room with its far wall almost entirely made of glass. Beyond it lay a terrace and a garden, apparently not very large but densely planted.

She offered me a glass of juice, which I declined with thanks, saying maybe afterwards. Then she asked if I would sit here with her for a moment before she took me up to see her husband. I sat down in the armchair she indicated, looked out at the garden and remarked on the pleasant sight it presented. "Yes," she said, "the gardener comes twice a week." She smiled and sat down opposite me.

Her face was browned, so were her arms and feet, and her legs to above the knee. She probably went to a sun-tan studio regularly. Or maybe she had a sun lamp at home here, next to a home gym in the cellar.

The skin just below and at the corners of her eyes was rimmed with tiny lines. So were the corners of her mouth. She was probably rather older than she looked after all.

Maybe she sunbathed out on the terrace, all the same. Of course no one could see into this garden from outside.

I suddenly realized that I was staring at her as if tongue-tied. I took a deep breath, but she got in first. "Have you been working for Dr Hochkeppel long?"

"For a little over a year." My voice sounded hoarse; I cleared my throat. "A year and three months next week, yes."

She nodded. "He's retired now, is he, more or less?"

"You mean Dr Hochkeppel?" Even as I asked I could hear alarm bells ringing. So she'd talked to Hochkeppel on the phone before he asked me to call her. I wondered, had he himself told her he had retired? And if so, why, when he hadn't?

She nodded. "Yes, of course. I mean Dr Hochkeppel."

"Well, yes… more or less, as you say. A kind of retirement, you might call it."

She nodded again. After a brief pause she said, "Naturally. He's reached retirement age, after all."

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled – rather a foolish smile, I am afraid. "To be honest, I've no idea how old he is."

"Seventy-seven." She was silent again for a moment. Then she said, "A year younger than my husband."

"Oh, I see."

A bell rang twice, briefly, in the hall, but she seemed to ignore it. She glanced out at the garden, and then back at me. "But I hope he's well?"

"Dr Hochkeppel?" There I went again – what a stupid remark! I could have bitten my tongue off. "Yes, I think so. He's fine, so far as I can tell. He's… yes, he's in good health."

She nodded, and said, after a while, "Give him my regards, would you?" Then she stood up, smiling. "Well, I'll take you to my husband now. He seems to be getting impatient."

I followed her out. She went ahead of me to the stairs leading up to the floor above, which had been extended.

At the top of the staircase a chair lift had been fitted, the sort you see in the small ads. Stairs to climb in your home? No problem!

At the last moment I remembered what my father had told me about his dancing lessons in the Sixties, recommending me to do as he had been taught then, if I didn't want women to think me a lout. I hurried past Frau Klofft and went up the stairs ahead of her.

When we were at the top, she took my arm and stopped. I looked at her.

She said in an undertone, "My husband has… attacks sometimes. They're unpredictable. Please don't lose patience with him. Even if he happens to, well, to get abusive."

2

Herbert Klofft was sitting in an armchair out on the balcony. There was a medium-sized table for his work in front of him, with several books, papers and newspapers lying on it. Among them was the *Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* or BGB, the civil code of Germany. And the thick, blue-bound *Personnel Book*, the legal compendium, widely used by the people who do the hiring and firing. Beside them stood a heavy crystal ashtray and a water tumbler, also crystal. On another, smaller table inside the balcony door I saw a laptop and a printer. The aromatic smell of the cigar that Klofft had obviously been smoking even at this time in the morning still hung in the air.

The entrepreneur wore an open-necked brown shirt showing part of his grey, hairy chest and leaving his sinewy arms bare. The hair on his head was still dark except for the grey at his temples. His thick, bushy eyebrows were dark as well. His skin was pale, but with a slight reddish flush on his forehead and cheeks.

He lowered his newspaper, waited until his wife had closed the door after me, fixed his eyes on me and said, "So you're Herr Zabel?"

"Yes, I'm Alexander Zabel. Good morning, Herr Klofft."

He made an elaborate business of folding the newspaper, put it down and looked at me. "And you're Bruno Hochkeppel's young man?"

"I'm not anyone's young man. I'm a qualified lawyer, and I happen to work in Dr Hochkeppel's chambers."

He raised his eyebrows, kept them raised for some time, and finally asked, "How old are you?"

I put my briefcase down on his table, pulled out the chair beside it and sat down. "Twenty-nine."

He stared at the briefcase for a while, then looked up. "And how long have you been qualified?"

After a brief pause I said, "Two years. Why?"

He began shaking his head slightly, the trace of a smile showed on his face as if he were amused, then he suddenly broke off this performance and stared at me. After some time he asked slowly, and with emphasis, "Do you have any experience worth mentioning of industrial tribunals?"

I said, "I tell you what, Herr Klofft. Why not call Dr Hochkeppel and tell him to send you another of our colleagues?" I stood up and took my briefcase off the table.

He raised both hands. "Hey, wait a moment! Are you out of your mind? What the hell's the idea of this?"

It occurred to me that the pleasant Frau Klofft had warned me about this shit and asked me to be patient with him, but it was too late now, and I don't know whether I'd have reacted any differently if I'd remembered in time. I said, "It's perfectly simple. I can't act for you if you consider me unsuitable."

"Who said I did? You're imagining things."

"You said so, more or less clearly. And kindly note that I am not imagining things, nor am I out of my mind, and I can hardly say the same of you."

He threw both hands up in the air. "Good heavens, what a sensitive little flower you are! Calm down, do!" He pointed to the chair. "And sit down again!" Seeing that I stayed where I was, he looked up. After a moment's hesitation he said, "All right, for God's sake, I apologize! Of course you're not imagining things! And you're not out of your mind either!" Another short pause, and he added, "Right, is that enough for you?"

I sat down again deliberately slowly.

He let out a sigh as if he'd just been hauling a refractory donkey into its stable, pushed the papers on the table apart and pulled out a folder, stared at it and then looked at me. The red on his forehead and cheeks had turned a little darker. He took another deep breath. "Right, this is what it's about." He stared at the folder again and then looked up. "I suppose you know about my business?"

I hesitated. "Not in detail. I've —"

"What does that mean? Hasn't that old windbag told you anything except that we used to go hunting together? Or maybe a couple of stories about our skittles club?"

I said no, of course not, Dr Hochkeppel had said only that he, Klofft, had taken over a small workshop nearly fifty years ago and built it up into a company operating all over the world, with almost a hundred employees, most of whom —

He waved this aside. "Yes, yes, never mind the soft soap. We don't have almost a hundred, we have exactly sixty-two permanent employees." And he held up the folder. "Well, sixty-one now that I've chucked that… that lady out."

I saw the folder in his hand beginning to tremble, and after a moment's hesitation he let it drop to the table, put his hand on it and seemed to be pressing his fingers firmly