

Pariah, Or The Outcast

BY AUGUST STRINDBERG

One-Act Play

CHARACTERS

MR. X., an archeologist MR. Y., a traveller from America

Both middle-aged

[SCENE--Simple room in a country house; door and window at back, through which one sees a country landscape. In the middle of the room a large dining table; on one side of it books and writing materials and on the other side some antiques, a microscope, insect boxes, alcohol jars. To the left of scene a book-shelf, and all the other furnishings are those of a country gentleman. Mr. Y. enters in his shirt-sleeves, carrying an insect net and a botanical tin box. He goes directly to the book-shelf, takes down a book and reads stealthily from it. The after-service bell of a country church rings. The landscape and room are flooded with sunshine. Now and then one hears the clucking of hens outside. Mr. X. comes in also in shirt-sleeves. Mr. Y. starts nervously, returns the book to its place, and pretends to look for another book on the shelf.]

MR. X. What oppressive heat! We'll surely have a thunder-shower.

MR. Y. Yes? What makes you think so?

MR. X. The bells sound like it, the flies bite so, and the hens are cackling. I wanted to go fishing, but I couldn't find a single worm. Don't you feel rather nervous?

MR. Y. [Reflectively]. I? Well, yes.

MR. X. But you always look as if you expected a thunder-shower.

MR. Y. Do I?

MR. X. Well, as you are to start off on your travels again tomorrow, it's not to be wondered at if you have the knapsack fever. What's the news? Here's the post. [Takes up letters from the table.] Oh, I have palpitation of the heart every time I open a letter. Nothing but debts, debts! Did you ever have any debts?

MR. Y. [Reflecting]. No-o-o.

MR. X. Well, then, of course you can't understand how it feels to have unpaid bills come in. [He reads a letter.] The rent owing--the landlord clamoring--and my wife in despair. And I, I sitting up to my elbows in gold. [Opens an iron-mounted case, which stands on the table. They both sit down, one on each side of the case.] Here is six thousand crowns' worth of gold that I've dug up in two weeks. This bracelet alone would bring the three hundred and fifty crowns I need. And with all of it I should be able to make a brilliant career for myself. The first thing I should do would be to have drawings made and cuts of the figures for my treatises. After that I would print--and then clear out. Why do you suppose I don't do this?

MR. Y. It must be because you are afraid of being found out.

MR. X. Perhaps that, too. But don't you think that a man of my intelligence should be able to manage it so that it wouldn't be found out? I always go alone to dig out there on the hills--without witnesses. Would it be remarkable to put a little something in one's pockets?

MR. Y. Yes, but disposing of it, they say, is the dangerous part.

MR. X. Humph, I should of course have the whole thing smelted, and then I should have it cast into ducats--full weight, of course--

MR. Y. Of course!

MR. X. That goes without saying. If I wanted to make counterfeit money--well, it wouldn't be necessary to dig the gold first. [Pause.] It's remarkable, nevertheless, that if some one were to do what I can't bring myself to do, I should acquit him. But I should not be able to acquit myself. I should be able to put up a brilliant defense for the thief; prove that this gold was *res nullius*, or no one's, and that it got

into the earth before there were any land rights; that even now it belongs to no one but the first comer, as the owner had never accounted it part of his property, and so on.

MR. Y. And you would not be able to do this if--h'm!--the thief had stolen through need, but rather as an instance of a collector's mania, of scientific interest, of the ambition to make a discovery,--isn't that so?

MR. X. You mean that I wouldn't be able to acquit him if he had stolen through need? No, that is the only instance the law does not pardon. That is simple theft, that is!

MR. Y. And that you would not pardon?

MR. X. H'm! Pardon! No, I could hardly pardon what the law does not, and I must confess that it would be hard for me to accuse a collector for taking an antique that he did not have in his collection, which he had dug up on some one else's property.

MR. Y. That is to say, vanity, ambition, could gain pardon where need could not?

MR. X. Yes, that's the way it is. And nevertheless need should be the strongest motive, the only one to be pardoned. But I can change that as little as I can change my will not to steal under any condition.

MR. Y. And you count it a great virtue that you cannot--h'm--steal?

MR. X. With me not to steal is just as irresistible as stealing is to some, and, therefore, no virtue. I cannot do it and they cannot help doing it. You understand, of course, that the idea of wanting to possess this gold is not lacking in me. Why don't I take it then? I cannot; it's an inability, and a lack is not a virtue. And there you are!

[Closes the case with a bang. At times stray clouds have dimmed the light in the room and now it darkens with the approaching storm.]

MR. X. How close it is! I think we'll have some thunder.

[Mr. Y. rises and shuts the door and window.]

MR. X. Are you afraid of thunder?

MR. Y. One should be careful.

[They sit again at table.]

MR. X. You are a queer fellow. You struck here like a bomb two weeks ago, and you introduced yourself as a Swedish-American who travels, collecting insects for a little museum.

MR. Y. Oh, don't bother about me.

MR. X. That's what you always say when I get tired of talking about myself and want to devote a little attention to you. Perhaps it was because you let me talk so much about myself that you won my sympathy. We were soon old acquaintances; there were no corners about you for me to knock against, no needles or pins to prick. There was something so mellow about your whole personality; you were so considerate, a characteristic which only the most cultivated can display; you were never noisy when you came home late, never made any disturbance when you got up in the morning; you overlooked trifles, drew aside when ideas became conflicting; in a word, you were the perfect companion; but you were altogether too submissive, too negative, too quiet, not to have me reflect about it in the course of time. And you are fearful and timid; you look as if you led a double life. Do you know, as you sit there before the mirror and I see your back, it's as if I were looking at another person. [Mr. Y. turns and looks in the mirror.] Oh, you can't see your back in the mirror. Front view, you look like a frank, fearless man who goes to meet his fate with open heart, but back view,--well, I don't wish to be discourteous, but you look as if you carried a burden, as if you were shrinking from a lash; and when I see your red suspenders across your white shirt--it looks like--like a big brand, a trade mark on a packing box.

MR. Y. [Rising]. I believe I will suffocate--if the shower doesn't break and come soon.

MR. X. It will come soon. Just be quiet. And the back of your neck, too, it looks as if there were another head on it, with the face of

another type than you. You are so terribly narrow between the ears that I sometimes wonder if you don't belong to another race. [There is flash of lightning.] That one looked as if it struck at the sheriff's.

MR. Y. [Worried]. At the--sh-sheriff's!

MR. X. Yes, but it only looked so. But this thunder won't amount to anything. Sit down now and let's have a talk, as you are off again tomorrow.--It's queer that, although I became intimate with you so soon, you are one of those people whose likeness I cannot recall when they are out of my sight. When you are out in the fields and I try to recall your face, another acquaintance always comes to mind--some one who doesn't really look like you, but whom you resemble nevertheless.

MR. Y. Who is that?

MR. X. I won't mention the name. However, I used to have dinner at the same place for many years, and there at the lunch counter I met a little blond man with pale, worried eyes. He had an extraordinary faculty of getting about in a crowded room without shoving or being shoved. Standing at the door, he could reach a slice of bread two yards away; he always looked as if he was happy to be among people, and whenever he ran into an acquaintance he would fall into rapturous laughter, embrace him, and do the figure eight around him, and carry on as if he hadn't met a human being for years; if any one stepped on his toes he would smile as if he were asking pardon for being in the way. For two years I used to see him, and I used to amuse myself trying to figure out his business and character, but I never asked any one who he was,--I didn't want to know, as that would have put an end to my amusement. That man had the same indefinable characteristics as you; sometimes I would make him out an undergraduate teacher, an under officer, a druggist, a government clerk, or a detective, and like you, he seemed to be made up of two different pieces and the front didn't fit the back. One day I happened to read in the paper about a big forgery by a well-known civil official. After that I found out that my indefinable acquaintance had been the companion of the forger's brother, and that his name was Stråman; and then I was informed that the afore-mentioned Stråman had been connected with a free library, but that he was then a police reporter on a big newspaper. How could

I then get any connection between the forgery, the police, and the indefinable man's appearance? I don't know, but when I asked a man if Stråman had ever been convicted, he answered neither yes nor no-- he didn't know. [Pause.]

MR. Y. Well, was he ever--convicted?

MR. X. No, he had not been convicted.

[Pause.]

MR. Y. You mean that was why keeping close to the police had such attraction for him, and why he was so afraid of bumping into people?

MR. X. Yes.

MR. Y. Did you get to know him afterward?

MR. X. No, I didn't want to.

MR. Y. Would you have allowed yourself to know him if he had been convicted?

MR. X. Yes, indeed.

[Mr. Y. rises and walks up and down.]

MR. X. Sit still. Why can't you sit quietly.

MR. Y. How did you get such a liberal attitude towards people's conduct? Are you a Christian?

MR. X. No,--of course I couldn't be,--as you've just heard. The Christians demand forgiveness, but I demand punishment for the restoration of balance, or whatever you like to call it, and you, who have served time, ought to understand that.

MR. Y. [Stops as if transfixed. Regards Mr. X. at first with wild hatred, then with surprise and wonderment.] How--do--you--know--that?

MR. X. It's plain to be seen.

MR. Y. How? How can you see it?

MR. X. I have taught myself. That's an art, too. But we won't talk about that matter. [Looks at his watch. Takes out a paper for signing. Dips a pen and offers it to Mr. Y.] I must think about my muddled affairs. Now be so kind as to witness my signature on this note, which I must leave at the bank at Malmö when I go there with you tomorrow morning.

MR. Y. I don't intend to go by way of Malmö.

MR. X. No?

MR. Y. No.

MR. X. But you can witness my signature nevertheless.

MR. Y. No-o. I never sign my name to papers--

MR. X.--Any more! That's the fifth time that you have refused to write your name. The first time was on a postal receipt,--and it was then that I began to observe you; and now, I see that you have a horror of touching pen and ink. You haven't sent a letter since you've been here. Just one postal-card, and that you wrote with a blue pencil. Do you see now how I have figured out your mis-step? Furthermore, this is the seventh time that you have refused to go to Malmö, where you have not gone since you have been here. Nevertheless you came here from America just to see Malmö; and every morning you have walked southward three miles and a half to the windmill hill just to see the roofs of Malmö; also, when you stand at the right-hand window, through the third window-pane to the left, counting from the bottom up, you can see the turrets of the castle, and the chimneys on the *state prison*. Do you see now that it is not that I am so clever but that you are so stupid?

MR. Y. Now you hate me.

MR. X. No.

MR. Y. Yes, you do, you must.

MR. X. No--see, here's my hand.

MR. Y. [Kisses the proffered hand].

MR. X. [Drawing back his hand]. What dog's trick is that?

MR. Y. Pardon! But thou art the first to offer me his hand after knowing--

MR. X.--And now you are "thou-ing" me! It alarms me that, after serving your time, you do not feel your honor retrieved, that you do not feel on equal footing,--in fact, just as good as any one. Will you tell me how it happened? Will you?

MR. Y. [Dubiously]. Yes, but you won't believe what I say. I'm going to tell you, though, and you shall see that I was not a common criminal. You shall be convinced that mis-steps are made, as one might say, involuntarily--[Shakily] as if they came of their own accord, spontaneously, without intention, blamelessly!--Let me open the window a little. I think the thunder shower-has passed over.

MR. X. Go ahead.

MR. Y. [Goes and opens the window, then comes and sits by the table again and tells the following with great enthusiasm, theatrical gestures and false accents]. Well, you see I was a student at Lund, and once I needed a loan. I had no dangerously big debts, my father had some means--not very much, to be sure; however, I had sent away a note of hand to a man whom I wanted to have sign it as second security, and contrary to all expectations, it was returned to me with a refusal. I sat for a while benumbed by the blow, because it was a disagreeable surprise, very disagreeable. The note lay before me on the table, and beside it the letter of refusal. My eyes glanced hopelessly over the fatal lines which contained my sentence. To be sure it wasn't a death-sentence, as I could easily have got some other man to stand as security; as many as I wanted, for that matter--but, as I've said, it was

very unpleasant; and as I sat there in my innocence, my glance rested gradually on the signature, which, had it been in the right place, would have made my future. That signature was most unusual calligraphy--you know how, as one sits thinking, one can scribble a whole blotter full of meaningless words. I had the pen in my hand--[He takes up the pen] like this, and before I knew what I was doing it started to write,--of course I don't want to imply that there was anything mystical spiritualistic, behind it--because I don't believe in such things!--it was purely a thoughtless, mechanical action--when I sat and copied the beautiful autograph time after time--without, of course, any prospect of gain. When the letter was scribbled all over, I had acquired skill enough to reproduce the signature remarkably well [Throws the pen down with violence] and then I forgot the whole thing. That night my sleep was deep and heavy, and when I awakened I felt that I had been dreaming, but I could not recall the dream; however, it seemed as though the door to my dream opened a little when I saw the writing table and the note in memory--and when I got up I was driven to the table absolutely, as if, after ripe consideration, I had made the irrevocable resolution to write that name on the fateful paper. All thought of risk, of consequence, had disappeared--there was no wavering--it was almost as if I were fulfilling a precious duty--and I wrote. [Springs to his feet.] What can such a thing be? Is it inspiration, hypnotic suggestion, as it is called? But from whom? I slept alone in my room. Could it have been my uncivilized ego, the barbarian that does not recognize conventions, but who emerged with his criminal will and his inability to calculate the consequences of his deed? Tell me, what do you think about such a case?

MR. X. [Bored]. To be honest, your story does not quite convince me. There are holes in it,--but that may be clue to your not being able to remember all the details,--and I have read a few things about criminal inspirations--and I recall--h'm--but never mind. You have had your punishment, you have had character enough to admit your error, and we won't discuss it further.

MR. Y. Yes, yes, yes, we will discuss it; we must talk, so that I can have complete consciousness of my unswerving honesty.

MR. X. But haven't you that?

MR. Y. No, I haven't.

MR. X. Well, you see, that's what bothers me, that's what bothers me. Don't you suppose that each one of us has a skeleton in his closet? Yes, indeed! Well, there are people who continue to be children all their lives, so that they cannot control their lawless desires. Whenever the opportunity comes, the criminal is ready. But I cannot understand why you do not feel innocent. As the child is considered irresponsible, the criminal should be considered so too. It's strange--well, it doesn't matter; I'll regret it later. [Pause.] I killed a man once, and I never had any scruples.

MR. Y. [Very interested]. You--did?

MR. X. Yes--I did. Perhaps you wouldn't like to take a murderer's hand?

MR. Y. [Cheerily]. Oh, what nonsense!

MR. X. Yes, but I have not been punished for it.

MR. Y. [Intimate, superior]. So much the better for you. How did you get out of it?

MR. X. There were no accusers, no suspicions, no witnesses. It happened this way: one Christmas a friend of mine had invited me for a few days' hunting just outside of Upsala; he sent an old drunken servant to meet me, who fell asleep on the coach-box and drove into a gate-post, which landed us in the ditch. It was not because my life had been in danger, but in a fit of anger I struck him a blow to wake him, with the result that he never awakened again--he died on the spot.

MR. Y. [Cunningly]. And you didn't give yourself up?

MR. X. No, and for the following reasons. The man had no relatives or other connections who were dependent on him. He had lived out his period of vegetation and his place could soon be filled by some one who was needed more, while I, on the other hand, was indispensable to the happiness of my parents, my own happiness, and perhaps to science. Through the outcome of the affair I was cured of

the desire to strike any more blows, and to satisfy an abstract justice I did not care to ruin the lives of my parents as well as my own life.

MR. Y. So? That's the way you value human life?

MR. X. In that instance, yes.

MR. Y. But the feeling of guilt, the "restoration of balance?"

MR. X. I had no guilty feeling, its I had committed no crime. I had received and given blows as a boy, and it was only ignorance of the effect of blows on old people that caused the fatality.

MR. Y. Yes, but it is two years' hard labor for homicide--just as much as for--forgery.

MR. X. You may believe I have thought of that too, and many a night have I dreamed that I was in prison. Ugh! is it as terrible as it's said to be behind bolts and bars?

MR. Y. Yes, it is terrible. First they disfigure your exterior by cutting off your hair, so if you did not look like a criminal before, you do afterward, and when you look at yourself in the mirror, you become convinced that you are a desperado.

MR. X. It's the mask that they pull off; that's not a bad idea.

MR. Y. You jest! Then they cut down your rations, so that every day, every hour you feel a distinct difference between life and death; all life's functions are repressed; you feel yourself grovelling, and your soul, which should be bettered and uplifted there, is put on a starvation cure, driven back a thousand years in time; you are only allowed to read what was written for the barbarians of the migratory period; you are allowed to hear about nothing but that which can never come to pass in heaven, but what happens on earth remains a secret; you are torn from your own environment, moved down out of your class; you come under those who come under you; you have visions of living in the bronze age, feel as if you went about in an animal's skin, lived in a cave, and ate out of a trough! Ugh!

MR. X. That's quite rational. Any one who behaves as if he belonged to the bronze age ought to live in the historic costume.

MR. Y. [Spitefully]. You scoff, you, you who have behaved like a man of the stone age! And you are allowed to live in the gold age!

MR. X. [Searchingly and sharp]. What do you mean by that last expression--the gold age?

MR. Y. [Insidiously]. Nothing at all.

MR. X. That's a lie; you are too cowardly to state your whole meaning.

MR. Y. Am I cowardly? Do you think that? I wasn't cowardly when I dared to show myself in this neighborhood, where I have suffered what I have.--Do you know what one suffers from most when one sits in there? It is from the fact that the others are not sitting in there too.

MR. X. What others?

MR. Y. The unpunished.

MR. X. Do you allude to me?

MR. Y. Yes.

MR. X. I haven't committed any crime.

MR. Y. No? Haven't you?

MR. X. No. An accident is not a crime.

MR. Y. So, it's an accident to commit murder?

MR. X. I haven't committal any murder.

MR. Y. So? Isn't it murder to slay a man?

MR. X. No, not always. There is manslaughter, homicide, assault resulting in death, with the subdivisions, with or without intent. However, now I am really afraid of you, for you belong in the most dangerous category of human beings, the stupid.

MR. Y. So you think that I am stupid? Now listen! Do you want me to prove that I am very shrewd?

MR. X. Let me hear.

MR. Y. Will you admit that I reason shrewdly and logically when I say this? You met with an accident which might have brought you two years of hard labor. You have escaped the ignominious penalty altogether. Here sits a man who also has been the victim of an accident, an unconscious suggestion, and forced to suffer two years of hard labor. This man can wipe out the stain he has unwittingly brought upon himself only through scientific achievement; but for the attainment of this he must have money--much money, and that immediately. Doesn't it seem to you that the other man, the unpunished one, would restore the balance of human relations if he were sentenced to a tolerable fine? Don't you think so?

MR. X. [Quietly]. Yes.

MR. Y. Well, we understand each other.--H'm! How much do you consider legitimate?

MR. X. Legitimate? The law decrees that a man's life is worth at the minimum fifty crowns. But as the deceased had no relatives, there's nothing to be said on that score.

MR. Y. Humph, you will not understand? Then I must speak more plainly. It is to me that you are to pay the fine.

MR. X. I've never heard that a homicide should pay a fine to a forger, and there is also no accuser.

MR. Y. No? Yes, you have me.

MR. X. Ah, now things are beginning to clear up. How much do you ask to become accomplice to the homicide?

MR. Y. Six thousand crowns.

MR. X. That's too much. Where am I to get it? [Mr. Y. points to the case.] I don't want to do that, I don't want to become a thief.

MR. Y. Don't pretend. Do you want me to believe that you haven't dipped into that case before now?

MR. X. [As to himself]. To think that I could make such a big mistake! But that's the way it always is with bland people. One is fond of gentle people, and then one believes so easily that he is liked; and just on account of that I have been a little watchful of those of whom I've been fond. So you are fully convinced that I have helped myself from that case?

MR. Y. Yes, I'm sure of it.

MR. X. And you will accuse me if you do not receive the six thousand crowns?

MR. Y. Absolutely. You can't get out of it, so it's not worth while trying to do so.

MR. X. Do you think I would give my father a thief for son, my wife a thief for husband, my children a thief for father, and my confrères a thief for comrade? That shall never happen. Now I'll go to the sheriff and give myself up.

MR. Y. [Springs up and gets his things together]. Wait a moment.

MR. X. What for?

MR. Y. [Stammering]. I only thought--that as I'm not needed--I wouldn't need to be present--and could go.

MR. X. You cannot. Sit down at your place at the table, where you've been sitting, and we will talk a little.

MR. Y. [Sits, after putting on a dark coat]. What's going to happen now?

MR. X. [Looking into mirror]. Now everything is clear to me! Ah!

MR. Y. [Worried]. What do you see now that's so remarkable?

MR. X. I see in the mirror that you are a thief, a simple, common thief. Just now, when you sat there in your shirt-sleeves, I noticed that something was wrong about my book-shelf, but I couldn't make out what it was, as I wanted to listen to you and observe you. Now, since you have become my antagonist, my sight is keener, and since you have put on that black coat, that acts as a color contrast against the red backs of the books, which were not noticeable before against your red suspenders, I see that you have been there and read your forgery story in Bernheim's essay on hypnotic suggestion, and returned the book upside down. So you stole that story too! In consequence of all this I consider that I have the right to conclude that you committed your crime through need, or because you were addicted to pleasures.

MR. Y. Through need. If you knew--

MR. X. If *you* knew in what need I have lived, and lived, and still live! But this is no time for that. To continue, that you have served time is almost certain, but that was in America, for it was American prison life that you described; another thing is almost as certain--that you have not served out your sentence here.

MR. Y. How can you say that?

MR. X. Wait until the sheriff comes and you will know. [Mr. Y. rises.] Do you see? The first time I mentioned the sheriff in connection with the thunderbolt, you wanted to run then, too; and when a man has been in that prison he never wants to go to the windmill hill every day to look at it, or put himself behind a window-pane to--to conclude, you have served one sentence, but not another. That's why you were so difficult to get at. [Pause.]

MR. Y. [Completely defeated]. May I go now?

MR. X. Yes, you may go now.

MR. Y. [Getting his things together]. Are you angry with me?

MR. X. Yes. Would you like it better if I pitied you?

MR. Y. [Wrathfully]. Pity! Do you consider yourself better than I am?

MR. X. Of course I do, as I *am* better. I am more intelligent than you are, and of more worth to the common weal.

MR. Y. You are pretty crafty, but not so crafty as I am. I stand in check myself, but, nevertheless, the next move you can be checkmated.

MR. X. [Fixing Mr. Y. with his eye]. Shall we have another bout? What evil do you intend to do now?

MR. Y. That is my secret.

MR. X. May I look at you?--You think of writing an anonymous letter to my wife, disclosing my secret.

MR. Y. Yes, and you cannot prevent it. You dare not have me imprisoned, so you must let me go; and when I have gone I can do what I please.

MR. X. Ah, you devil! You've struck my Achilles heel--will you force me to become a murderer?

MR. Y. You couldn't become one! You timid creature!

MR. X. You see, then, there is a difference in people after all, and you feel within you that I cannot commit such deeds as you, and that is your advantage. But think if you forced me to deal with you as I did with the coachman!

[Lifts his hand as if to strike. Mr. Y. looks hard at Mr. X.]

MR. Y. You can't do it. He who dared not take his salvation out of the case couldn't do that.

MR. X. Then you don't believe that I ever took from the case?

MR. Y. You were too cowardly, just as you were too cowardly to tell your wife that she is married to a murderer.

MR. X. You are a different kind of being from me--whether stronger or weaker I do not know--more criminal or not--that doesn't concern me. But you are the stupider, that's proven. Because you were stupid when you forged a man's name instead of begging as I have had to do; you were stupid when you stole out of my book--didn't you realize that I read my books? You were stupid when you thought that you were more intelligent than I am and that you could fool me into becoming a thief; you were stupid when you thought, that the restoration of balance would be accomplished by the world's having two thieves instead of one, and you were most stupid when you believed that I have built my life's happiness without having laid the cornerstone securely. Go and write your anonymous letter to my wife about her husband being a homicide--that she knew as my fiancée. Do you give up now?

MR. Y. Can I go?

MR. X. Now you *shall* go--immediately. Your things will follow you.

CURTAIN.