

THE BET

Anton Chekov

The Russian author Anton Chekov was born on January 17, 1860 in Taganrog in South Russia on the Azov Sea. He is among the major short-story writers and dramatists in history. He wrote seventeen plays and almost six hundred stories.



A. Think Before you read

Imagine you are a young lawyer and you take a bet with a friend who is a rich banker. The bet is that if you stay in a lonely cell in a prison for fifteen long years, you will win two million roubles. Will you accept the bet? Can you live all by yourself for fifteen years? If you succeed, would the banker be willing to part with two million roubles? Let's read the story and find out.

It was a dark autumn night. The old banker was pacing from corner to corner of his study, recalling to his mind the party he gave in the autumn fifteen years before. The guests, among them not a few scholars and journalists, for the most part disapproved of capital punishment. Some of them thought that capital punishment should be replaced universally by life imprisonment.

"I don't agree with you," said the host. "I myself have experienced neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment, but in my opinion capital punishment is more moral- and more humane than imprisonment."

'Execution kills instantly, life imprisonment kills by degrees.'

"They're both equally immoral," remarked one of the guests, "because their purpose is the same, to take away life. The state is not God. It has no right to take away that which it cannot give back, if it should so desire.

Among the company was a lawyer, a young man of about twenty-five. On being asked his opinion, he said.

"Capital punishment and life imprisonment are equally immoral: but if I were offered the choice between them, would certainly choose the second. It's better to live somehow than not to live at all."

There ensued a lively discussion. The banker, who was then younger and more nervous, suddenly lost his temper, banged his fist on the table, and turning to the young lawyer, cried out:

"It's a lie. I bet you two millions, you wouldn't stick in a cell even for five years."

"If you mean it seriously," replied the lawyer, "then I bet I'll stay not five but fifteen."

"Fifteen ! Done !" cried the banker. "Gentlemen, I stake two millions."

"Agreed. You stake two millions, I my freedom," said the lawyer.

So this wild, ridiculous bet came to pass. The banker, who at the time had too many millions to count was beside himself with rapture. During supper he said to the lawyer jokingly:

"Come to your senses, young man, before it's too late. Two millions are nothing to me, but you stand to lose three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you'll never stick it out any longer. Don't forget either, you unhappy man, that voluntary confinement is much heavier than enforced imprisonment."

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And now the banker, pacing from corner to corner, recalled all this and asked himself:

Why did I make this bet ? What's the good ? The lawyer loses fifteen years of his life and I throw away two millions. On my part, it was the caprice of a well-fed man; on the lawyer's, pure greed of gold.

He recollected further what happened after the evening party. It was decided that the lawyer must undergo his imprisonment under the strictest observation in a garden wing of the banker's house. It was agreed that during the period he would be deprived of the right to cross the threshold, to see living people, to hear human voices, and to receive letters and newspapers. He was permitted to have a musical instrument, to read books, to write letters, to drink wine and smoke tobacco. By the agreement he could communicate, but only in silence, with the outside world through a little window specially constructed for this purpose. Everything necessary, books, music, wine, he could receive in any quantity by sending a note through the window. The agreement provided for all the minutest details, which made the confinement strictly solitary, and it obliged the lawyer to remain exactly fifteen years from twelve o'clock of November 14, 1870, to twelve o'clock of November 14, 1885. The least attempt on his part to violate the conditions, to escape if only for two minutes before the time, freed the banker from the obligation to pay him the two millions.

During the first year of imprisonment, the lawyer, as far as it was possible to judge from his short notes, suffered terribly from loneliness and boredom. From his wing day and night came the sound of the piano. He rejected wine and tobacco.

During the first year the lawyer was sent books of a light character;

novels with a complicated love interest, stories of crime and fantasy, comedies, and so on.

In the second year the piano was heard no longer and the lawyer asked only for classics. In the fifth year, music was heard again, and the prisoner asked for wine. Those who watched him said that during the whole of that year he was only eating, drinking, and lying on his bed. He yawned often and talked angrily to himself. Books he did not read. Sometimes at nights he would sit down to write. He would write for a long time and tear it all up in the morning. More than once he was heard to weep.

In the second half of the sixth year, the prisoner began zealously to study languages, philosophy, and history. He fell on these subjects so hungrily that the banker hardly had time to get books enough for him. In the space of four years about six hundred volumes were bought at his request.

Later on, after the tenth year, the lawyer sat immovable before his table and read only the New Testament. The banker found it strange that a man who in four years had mastered six hundred erudite volumes should have spent nearly a year in reading one book, easy to understand and by no means thick. The New Testament was then replaced by the history of religions and theology.

During the last two years of his confinement the prisoner read an extraordinary amount, quite haphazardly. Now he would apply himself to the natural sciences, then he would read Byron or Shakespeare. Notes used to come from him in which he asked to be sent at the same time a book on chemistry, a textbook of medicine, a novel and some treatise on philosophy or theology. He read as though he were swimming in the sea among broken pieces of wreckage and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another.

The banker recalled all this, and thought: Tomorrow at twelve o'clock he receives his freedom. Under the agreement, I shall have to pay him two millions. If I pay, it's all over with me. I am ruined forever....

Fifteen years before, he had too many millions to count, but now he was afraid to ask himself which he had more of, money or debts. Now he was an ordinary banker, trembling at every rise and fall in the market.

"That cursed bet," murmured the old man clutching his head in despair ... "Why didn't the man die? He's only forty years old. He will take away my last farthing, marry, enjoy life, and I will look on like an envious beggar and hear the same words from him every day: 'I'm obliged to you for the happiness of my life. Let me help you.' No, it's too much! The only escape from bankruptcy and disgrace is that the man should die."

The clock had just struck three. The banker was listening. In the house everyone was asleep, and one could hear only the frozen trees whining outside the windows. Trying to make sound, he took out of his safe the key of the door which had not been opened for fifteen years, put on his overcoat, and went out of the house. The garden was dark and cold. It was raining. A damp, penetrating wind howled in the garden and gave the trees no rest.

Approaching the garden wing, he called the watchman twice. There was no answer. Evidently the watchman had taken shelter from the bad weather and was now asleep somewhere in the kitchen or the greenhouse.

If I have the courage to fulfil my intention, thought the old man, the suspicion will fall on the watchman first of all.

In the darkness he groped for the steps and the door and entered the hall of the garden wing, then poked his way into a narrow passage

and struck a match. Not a soul was there. Someone's bed, with no bedclothes on it, stood there, and an iron stove loomed dark in the corner. The seals on the door that led into the prisoner's room were unbroken.

When the match went out, the old man, trembling from agitation, peeped into the little window.

In the prisoner's room a candle was burning dimly. The prisoner himself sat by the table. Only his back, the hair on his head, and his hands were visible. Open books were strewn about on the table, the two chairs, and on the carpet near the table.

Five minutes passed and the prisoner never once stirred. Fifteen-years' confinement had taught him to sit motionless. The banker tapped on the window with his finger, but the prisoner made no movement in reply. Then the banker cautiously tore the seals from the door and put the key into the lock. The rusty lock gave a hoarse groan and the door creaked. The banker expected instantly to hear a cry of surprise and the sound of steps. Three minutes passed and it was as quiet inside as it had been before. He made up his mind to enter.

Before the table sat a man, unlike an ordinary human being. It was a skeleton, with tight-drawn skin, with long curly hair like a woman's, and a shaggy beard. The colour of his face was yellow, of an earthy shade; the cheeks were sunken, the back long and narrow and the hand upon which leaned his hairly head was so lean and shinny that it was painful to look upon. His hair was already silvering with gray, and no one would have believed that he was only forty years old. On the table, before his bended head, lay a sheet of paper on which something was written in a tiny hand.

Poor devil, thought the banker, he's asleep and probably seeing millions in his dreams. I have only to take and throw this half-dead thing on the bed, smother him with the pillow, and the most careful examination

moment will find no trace of unnatural death. But, first, let us read what he has written here.

The banker took the sheet from the table and read:

"Tomorrow at twelve o'clock midnight I shall obtain my freedom and the right to mix with people. But before I leave this room and see the sun I think it necessary to say a few words to you. On my own clear conscience and before God who sees me I declare to you that I despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world"

"For fifteen years I have studied earthly life. True, I saw neither the earth nor the people, but in your books I drank fragrant wine, sang songs, hunted deer and wild boar in the forests, loved women..."

"Your books gave me wisdom. Human thought created in the centuries is compressed in my skull. I know that I am cleverer than you all."

"And I despise your books, despise all wordly blessings and wisdom. Everything is visionary. Though you be proud and wise and beautiful, yet death will wipe you from the face of the earth like the mice underground; and your posterity, your history, and the immortality of your men of genius will be burnt down together with the globe."

"That I may show you in deed my contempt for that by which you live, I waive the two millions of which I once dreamed as of paradise, and which I now despise. That I may deprive myself of my right to them. I shall come out from here five minutes before the stipulated term, and thus shall violate the agreement."

When he had read, the banker put the sheet on the table, kissed the head of the strange man, and began to weep. He went out of the wing. Never at any time, had he felt such contempt for himself as now. Coming

home, he lay down on his bed, but tears kept him a long time from sleeping....

The next morning the poor watchman came running to him and told him that they had seen the man who lived in the wing climb through the window into the garden. He had gone to the gate and disappeared. The banker instantly went with his servants to the wing and established the escape of his prisoner. To avoid unnecessary rumours he took the paper from the table and, on his return, locked it in his safe.

Exercises

Let's Answer

1. What were the terms and conditions of the bet? Do you think them proper?
2. Why was the banker afraid of honouring the bet?
3. What did the banker do to kill the lawyer?
4. What did the banker do to know that the lawyer had escaped? Why did he weep to read the notes of the lawyer?

Let's Discuss

1. Is betting a good habit?
2. Is capital punishment justified?
