

# The Bet

Anton Chekhov

translated by Ronald Wilks

## I

It was a dark autumn night and an elderly banker was pacing his study, reminiscing about a party he had given one autumn fifteen years ago. Many clever people had come and there had been a most interesting conversation, capital punishment being one of the topics they had discussed, among others. The great majority of the guests, who included many scholars and journalists, had been against it: in their view this form of punishment was outmoded, immoral and unfit for Christian states. Some thought that the death penalty should be replaced everywhere by life imprisonment.

"I don't agree," the banker had told his guests. "I've never tasted capital punishment or life imprisonment myself. But if I may offer an *a priori*<sup>1</sup> judgment, I think that capital punishment is more moral and humane than imprisonment. Executions kill you right away, whereas life imprisonment does it slowly. Which kind of executioner is more humane? One who takes just a few minutes to kill you, or one who drags the life out of you during the course of many years?"

"Both are equally immoral," remarked one of the guests. "Both have the same purpose—to take life. The State isn't God. It has no right to take away what it can't give back, if it so chooses."

Among the guests was a young lawyer of about twenty-five. When his opinion was asked he said, "The death penalty and life imprisonment are

equally immoral. But if I had to choose between execution or being locked away for life, I'd opt for the second, without any doubt. Any sort of life's better than none at all."

A lively argument had broken out then. The banker, who was younger and more excitable in those days, suddenly lost his temper, banged his fist on the table and shouted at the young lawyer, "That's not true! I bet you two million that you wouldn't even last five years in a cell on your own."

"If you mean that seriously," the lawyer replied, "then I bet you I could stay locked up for fifteen years, not five."

"Fifteen? Done!" shouted the banker. "Gentlemen, I stake two million on it!"

"I accept! You're staking millions, I'm staking my freedom!" the lawyer said.

And so that preposterous, senseless bet was made. The banker, a spoiled, frivolous man at the time, who had more millions than he could count, was overjoyed at the bet. Over supper he made fun of the lawyer. "Come to your senses, young man, before it's too late," he said. "Two million is chicken-feed to me, but you risk losing three or four of the best years of your life. I say three or four, because you won't last longer. And don't you forget, poor man, that voluntary confinement is much harder than compulsory incarceration. The thought that you could regain your freedom any minute will poison your whole existence in prison. I feel sorry for you!"

As the banker paced the room he now remembered all this.

1. *a priori* (ā' prē ôr' ē): Based on theory instead of experience or experiment.

“What was the point of that bet?” he wondered. “What was the use of that lawyer losing fifteen years of his life or my throwing away two million? How could that prove that the death penalty is any better or worse than life imprisonment? Definitely not! Stuff and nonsense! On my part it was the whim of someone with too much money, on the lawyer’s it was sheer greed.”

A little later he remembered the events following that evening. They had decided that the lawyer must serve his time under the strictest surveillance in one of the lodges in the banker’s garden. The conditions were: for fifteen years he was not to be allowed to cross the threshold, to see a living soul or hear a human voice, to receive newspapers or letters. He was allowed a musical instrument and books to read, and to write letters, drink wine and smoke. His only communication with the outside world, they stipulated, was to be through a small, specially built window and he wasn’t allowed to speak one word. Books, music, wine and so on—he could have anything he needed and as much as he liked, but only via the window and by writing little notes. To ensure his confinement was strictly solitary, the agreement covered every minute point of detail and compelled the lawyer to serve a term of *exactly* fifteen years, from twelve o’clock on 14 November 1870 until twelve o’clock on 14 November 1885. The least attempt to violate these conditions, even two minutes before the time was up, freed the banker from any obligation to pay the two million.

During the first year of his confinement the lawyer suffered dreadfully from loneliness and boredom—as far as one could judge from his brief notes. Day and night the sound of the piano came from the lodge. He refused wine and tobacco: wine, he wrote, stimulates desire and desire was a prisoner’s worst enemy. Moreover, nothing was more depressing than drinking good wine on one’s own. And tobacco polluted the air in his room. For the first year the lawyer mainly had light books sent in—novels with complicated love plots, crime fiction, fantastic tales, comedies and so on.

In the second year music no longer came from the lodge and the lawyer wrote and asked for classics only. In the fifth year music was heard again

and the prisoner asked for wine. People watching him through the window said that throughout that year he did nothing but eat, drink and lie on his bed, often yawning and talking angrily to himself. He didn’t read any books. Some nights he would sit up writing and would keep at it for ages. But toward the morning he’d tear everything he’d written to shreds. More than once they heard him weeping.

In the second half of the sixth year the prisoner devoted himself with great zeal to the study of languages, philosophy and history. He applied himself so eagerly to these subjects that the banker was hard put keeping him supplied with books: in the course of four years nearly six hundred volumes had been obtained at his request. During this craze the banker happened to receive the following letter from his captive:

**DIEGO MARTELLI**

*Edgar Degas*

*National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh*



My dear Gaoler!<sup>2</sup>

I'm writing these lines in six languages. Show them to the experts. Let them read them. If they don't find any mistakes I beg you to have a shot fired in the garden—that will prove to me that my efforts haven't been in vain. Geniuses of all centuries and countries speak different languages, but the same flame burns in all of them. If only you knew the heavenly bliss I feel in my heart now that I can understand them!

The prisoner's wish was carried out—the banker ordered two shots to be fired in the garden.

After the tenth year the lawyer sat motionless at his table, reading nothing except the Gospels. The banker thought it strange that someone who had mastered six hundred abstruse<sup>3</sup> tomes<sup>4</sup> in four years should spend nearly a year reading one slim, easily comprehensible volume. Then the Gospels were followed by the history of religion and theology.

During the last two years of his incarceration the prisoner read a vast amount, quite indiscriminately. First he read natural science, then he asked for Byron or for Shakespeare. In some of his notes he asked for books on chemistry, medical textbooks, a novel and a philosophical or theological treatise—wanting them all at the same time. His reading put one in mind of someone swimming in the sea amidst the wreckage of his ship, eagerly clutching at one piece of wood after the other to save his life.

## II

As he recalled all this the old banker reflected, "Tomorrow at twelve he goes free. And I have to pay him two million, according to the agreement. But if I pay up, I'm finished, I'll be absolutely ruined."

Fifteen years ago he had more millions than he could count, but now he was afraid to ask which was the greater, his assets or his debts. Gambling

on the stock exchange and very risky speculation, combined with an impulsiveness that he had never managed to control despite his advanced years, had gradually brought a decline in his fortunes and that fearless, self-confident, proud man of wealth was now just a small-time financier, trembling at every rise or fall in his assets.

"That cursed bet!" the old man muttered, clutching his head. "Why couldn't the man die? He's only just forty. He'll take my last copeck,<sup>5</sup> he'll marry, he'll enjoy life, he'll play the stock market, while I jealously watch him like a beggar. Every day I'll hear him say the same thing. 'I owe all my happiness to you, please let me help you.' No, it's too much! My only salvation from bankruptcy and disgrace is that man's death!"

Three o'clock struck. The banker cocked an ear. The whole household was sleeping—the only sound was the rustling of the frozen trees outside. Trying not to make any noise, he took from a fireproof safe the key to the door that had been unopened for fifteen years, put on his coat and went out.

It was dark and cold outside and it was raining. A sharp, damp wind swept howling around the whole garden and gave the trees no peace. The banker strained his eyes but couldn't see the ground, the white statues, the lodge or the trees. As he approached the spot where the lodge stood he called out twice to his watchman. There was no reply—he was obviously sheltering from the weather and sleeping somewhere in the kitchen, or in the greenhouse.

"If I have the courage to carry out my intention," thought the old man, "then the first to be suspected will be the watchman."

By groping about in the dark he found the dark steps and door, and entered the hall. Then he felt his way into a small passage and lit a match. No one was there—only some sort of bed without any bedding and the dark shape of a cast-iron stove in the corner. The seals on the door leading to the prisoner's room were intact.

When the match went out the old man, trembling with excitement, peered through the small window.

2. **Gaoler** (jäl' or) *n.*: British form of the word *jailer*.

3. **abstruse** (ab strōōs') *adj.*: Hard to understand.

4. **tomes** (tōmz) *n.*: Large, scholarly or ponderous books.

5. **copeck** (kō pek) *n.*: A Russian monetary unit, usually spelled *kopec*.



**THE MERRY MONTH OF MAY**  
*S. Zhukovsky*  
*The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*

In the prisoner's room a candle burned dimly. The prisoner was sitting at the table. Only his back, the hair on his head and hands were visible. On the table, on two armchairs and on the rug near the table, lay open books.

Five minutes passed without the captive moving once. Fifteen years of confinement had taught him to sit still. The banker tapped on the window with one finger, but the prisoner made no movement in response. Then the banker carefully broke the seals on the doors and put the key in the keyhole. The rusty lock grated and the door creaked. The banker was expecting an immediate shout of surprise and footsteps, but three minutes went by and it was still absolutely quiet on the other side. He decided to go in.

A man quite unlike any normal human being was sitting motionless at the table. He was all skin and bones, with the long curly hair of a woman and a shaggy beard. His complexion was yellow, with an earthy tinge, his cheeks were hollow, his back long and narrow, and the hand with which he propped his bushy head was so thin and wasted it was painful to look at. His hair was already touched with gray and no one looking at that gaunt, senile

face would have believed that he was only forty. He was sleeping . . . A sheet of paper with something written on it in small letters lay on the table in front of his bowed head.

"Poor man!" thought the banker. "He's asleep and probably dreaming of those millions! All I have to do is take hold of this semi-corpse, throw it on the bed, just smother it gently with a pillow and the most meticulous examination won't find a trace of death by violence. However, let's first read what he's written . . ."

The banker picked up the sheet of paper and read the following:

Tomorrow at twelve o'clock I regain my freedom and the right to mix with people again. But before I leave this room and see the sun again there's some things I feel I should tell you. With a clear conscience, and with God as my witness, I declare that I despise freedom, life, health and everything that those books of yours call the blessings of this world.

I have spent fifteen years making a careful study of life on earth. True, I

haven't *seen* anything of the earth, of people, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, sung songs, hunted deer and wild boar in forests, loved women . . . Beautiful creatures as ethereal<sup>6</sup> as clouds created by the magic of your great poets have visited me at night and whispered marvelous tales in my ear, making my head reel. In your books I have scaled the summits of Elbrus and Mont Blanc<sup>7</sup> and from them I have seen the sun rising in the morning, flooding the sky, ocean and mountain peaks with crimson gold in the evening. From there I have seen the lightning flash above me and cleave the clouds. I have seen green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, towns. I have heard the sirens<sup>8</sup> sing and the music of shepherds' pipes. I have touched the wings of beautiful demons who flew down to talk to me about God. In your books I have hurled myself into bottomless abysses, wrought miracles, murdered, burnt cities, preached new religions, conquered entire kingdoms.

Your books have given me wisdom. Everything that man's indefatigable<sup>9</sup> mind has created over the centuries is compressed into a tiny lump inside my skull. I know that I'm cleverer than the lot of you.

And I despise your books. I despise all the blessings of this world, all its wisdom. Everything is worthless, transient,<sup>10</sup> illusory and as deceptive as a mirage. You may be proud, wise and handsome, but death will wipe you from the face of the earth, together with the mice under the floorboards. And your posterity,<sup>11</sup> your history,

your immortal geniuses will freeze or be reduced to ashes, along with the terrestrial globe. You've lost all reason and are on the wrong path. You mistake lies for the truth and ugliness for beauty. You'd be surprised if apple and orange trees suddenly started producing frogs and lizards instead of fruit, or if roses smelt of sweaty horses. I'm amazed at you people who have exchanged heaven for earth. I just don't *want* to understand you.

To show in actual practice how much I despise what you live by, I renounce the two million I once dreamed of, as though of paradise, but for which I feel only contempt now. To forfeit my right to them I shall leave this place five hours before the stipulated time and thus break the agreement . . .

After reading this the banker laid the piece of paper on the table, kissed the strange man's head and left the lodge weeping. At no other time, not even after heavy losses on the stock exchange, had he ever felt such contempt for himself as now. Back in his house he went to bed, but he was kept awake for a long time by excitement and tears.

Next morning some white-faced watchmen came running to inform him that they had seen the man from the lodge climb through his window into the garden, make for the gate and disappear. The banker went to the lodge with his servants to make certain that the prisoner had in fact fled. To put paid to any unnecessary disputes later on he picked up the sheet with the renunciation from the table, returned to the house and locked it in his fireproof safe.

6. **ethereal** (i thir' ē əl) *adj.*: Airy; delicate.

7. **Elbrus** (el' broos) and **Mont Blanc** (mōn blān'): Two of the highest mountains in Europe.

8. **sirens** (sī ronz): In Greek and Roman mythology, sea nymphs who lured sailors to their death on rocky coasts by seductive singing.

9. **indefatigable** (in' di fat' i gə b'l) *adj.*: Untiring.

10. **transient** (tran' shənt) *adj.*: Not permanent.

11. **posterity** (pās ter' ə tē) *n.*: All of a person's future descendants.

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**Reader's Response** Do you think that \$15,000,000 is worth sacrificing fifteen years of your life for? Why or why not?

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