

THE BET AND OTHER STORIES

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The Bet and Other Stories by Anton Chekhov & S. Kotliansky & J. M. Murry

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ANTON CHEKHOV & S. KOTELIANSKY & J. M. MURRY

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BY
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TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Stiepanovich and Stepanich are two forms of the same name, meaning "son of Stephen." The abbreviated form is the more intimate and familiar.

The Russian dishes mentioned in "A Tedious Story" (p. 52) have no exact equivalents. *Sossoulki* are a kind of little dumplings eaten in soup; *schí* is a soup made of sour cabbage; and *kasha* is a kind of porridge.

The words of the song which the students sing in "The Fit" come from Poushkin.

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THE BET

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 ago. There were many clever people at the party and much interesting conversation. They talked among other things of capital punishment. The guests, among them not a few scholars and journalists, for the most part disapproved of capital punishment. They found it obsolete as a means of punishment, unfitted to a Christian State and immoral. 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 if one may judge *a priori*, then in my opinion capital punishment is more moral and more humane than imprisonment. Execution kills instantly, life-imprisonment kills by degrees. Who is the more humane executioner, one who kills you in

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a few seconds or one who draws the life out of you incessantly, for years ? ”

“ 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, I 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 that’s serious,” 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 that time had too many millions to count, spoiled and capricious, 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 is much heavier than enforced imprisonment. The idea that you have the right to free yourself at any moment will poison the whole of your life in the cell. I pity you."

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. Will it convince people that capital punishment is worse or better than imprisonment for life. No, No! all stuff and rubbish. 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,

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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 14th 1870 to twelve o'clock of November 14th 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. "Wine," he wrote, "excites desires, and desires are the chief foes of a prisoner; besides, nothing is more boring than to drink good wine alone," and tobacco spoils the air in his room. 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