

THE BET

A Dramatic Reading

by
Anton Chekhov



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ISBN 1-60045-108-X

From the story.

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. There were many clever people at the party and much interesting conversation. They talked among other things of capital punishment. The guests, for the most part, disapproved of capital punishment. They found it 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). “In my opinion, capital punishment is more moral and more humane than imprisonment. Execution kills instantly, life-imprisonment kills by degrees.”

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

“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 lost his temper. (Banging his fist on table) “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 then I bet I’ll stay not five but fifteen.”

“Fifteen! Done! Gentlemen, I stake two millions.”

“Agreed. You stake two millions, I my freedom.”

So this wild, ridiculous bet came to pass.

And now the banker, pacing from corner to corner, recalled what happened after the evening party. It was decided that the lawyer would undergo his imprisonment in a garden wing of the banker’s house. 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, and to write letters. Everything necessary, books, music, he could receive in any quantity by sending a note through the window. The least attempt 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. 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.

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