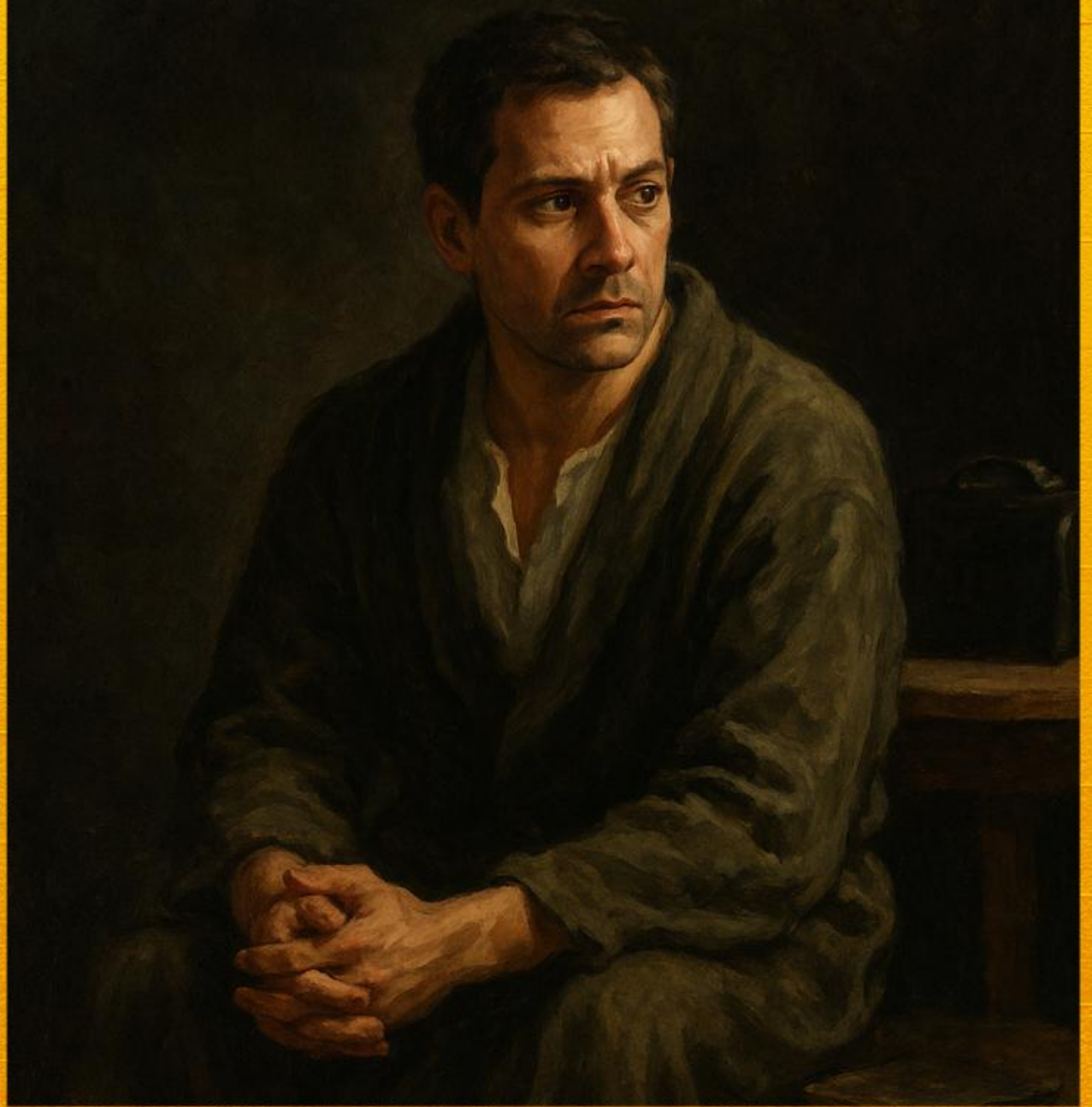


# THE BET

BY ANTON CHEKHOV



Learn English Through Story

# The Bet

By Anton Chekhov

Level 1

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## Chapter One: The Bet Begins

It is a cold, dark night in autumn. An old banker walks in his house. He thinks about something that happened fifteen years ago.

That night, fifteen years ago, the banker had a party. Many smart men came. They talked about many things. One topic was the death sentence. Most of the men said the death sentence is wrong. They said life in prison is better.

The banker said, “I don’t agree. Killing a man quickly is better than keeping him in prison for many years. Prison kills a man slowly. That is more cruel.”

A young lawyer, only twenty-five years old, said, “Both are bad. But if I must choose, I choose prison for life. Living in prison is better than dying.”

The banker became angry. He hit the table and said, “I don’t believe you! I bet you two million rubles you can’t stay alone in a room for five years!”

The lawyer said, “I will do it! Not five years—fifteen!”

The banker shouted, “Done! I bet two million!”

“And I bet my freedom!” said the lawyer.

The guests were shocked. But the bet was real. The banker was rich. He thought the lawyer would not last long. At dinner, the banker laughed. He said, “You will leave in three or four years.”

But the lawyer was serious. He started the bet the next day.

He stayed in a small house in the banker’s garden. He could not leave for fifteen years. He could not talk to anyone. But he could read books, write letters, drink wine, and smoke. He got books, music, and food through a small window. If he left even one minute early, he would lose the bet. He would get nothing.

In the first year, he felt very lonely. He played music all the time. He did not want wine or tobacco. He read light books—stories about love and adventures.

In the second year, he read only serious books. He studied old, classic writers.

In the fifth year, he changed again. He drank wine. He stayed in bed. He did not read. He wrote pages and tore them up. He cried many times.

In the sixth year, he changed again. He studied hard. He read books on languages, history, and philosophy. The banker gave him many books.

After ten years, the lawyer had read over six hundred books. Then he read only the Bible. The banker was surprised. He thought, “Why only one book now?”

In the last two years, the lawyer read many different books. He read science, medicine, stories, and religion. He asked for books by Byron and Shakespeare. He looked like a man trying to hold many things but could not.

## **Chapter Two – Fear in the Night**

The night before the bet ends, the old banker walks up and down in his house. He remembers the bet and feels afraid. He thinks, “Tomorrow at twelve o’clock, I must give him two million rubles. If I pay, I will be ruined.”

Fifteen years ago, the banker was very rich. Now he is not. He made bad choices. He lost money on the stock market. He is not powerful now. He is worried and weak.

The banker thinks, “That young man will take my last penny. He will get married. He will live a good life. And I will have nothing. I will be poor. I will be ashamed. He will write to me every day and say, ‘Thank you for the money!’ No, I can’t let that happen.”

Then a terrible idea comes into the banker’s mind. “What if the man dies tonight?” he thinks. “Then I won’t have to pay. It will be easy. He is weak. I just need to do something quiet. No one will know.”

It is 3 o’clock in the morning. The house is silent. Everyone sleeps. The banker takes the key from a safe. He puts on his coat and walks out into the cold garden.

The wind is strong. It is raining. Trees move in the dark. The banker calls the guard, but no one answers. Maybe the guard is hiding from the rain. The banker walks to the small house where the lawyer lives.

He opens the outside door with the key. Inside, it is quiet and dark. He lights a match. The room has a bed, a stove, and some chairs. There is no one in the front room. He checks the inner door. The seal is still there. The lawyer is inside.

The banker peeks through a small window. The lawyer sits at a table. His face is thin. His hair is white. His beard is long. He looks very old. He does not move. A candle burns beside him. On the table is a piece of paper.

The banker watches him. The man is alive, but he sleeps. The banker thinks, “He looks half-dead. If I kill him, no one will know. No doctor will find the truth. But first, I will read the letter.”

The banker takes the letter from the table and reads it.

The letter says:

*“Tomorrow I will be free. I can leave and be with people again. But I do not want your money. I do not want the things of this world. I have studied life in your books. I have seen beauty, love, and power in them. I have seen the world through words. But now I hate it all. I hate your books. I hate your happiness, your wisdom, your riches. It is all a lie. Death will come and take it all. Nothing will stay. So I leave this place five hours before the end. I give up the bet. I do not want your money.”*

The banker is shocked. He puts the paper back. He kisses the lawyer on the head and leaves the room. He walks home in the cold night. He feels weak and ashamed. At home, he lies in bed but cannot sleep.

In the morning, the guards run to the banker. They say, “The lawyer left! We saw him climb out of the window and go to the gate.”

The banker tells the servants to go and check. They see the lawyer is gone. The bet is over.

The banker takes the letter and hides it in his safe. He wants no one to see it.

### **Chapter Three: A Choice of Freedom**

The banker sits in his bed. He cannot sleep. He feels many things—shock, shame, fear, and sadness. He thinks about the lawyer’s words.

“He gives up the money,” the banker whispers. “He lived alone for fifteen years, and now he says he wants nothing. He hates everything.”

The banker remembers the last lines of the letter. The lawyer says that the world is a lie. He says that books, money, power, and beauty are not real. He calls them a dream. He says that people live for things that do not last.

The lawyer says he has read many books. He learned many things. He has drunk wine, hunted animals, loved women, and seen beauty—but only in books. And now he sees that all these things are like smoke. They go away. They are not real.

The lawyer says he is now wiser than everyone. He says he does not want money or freedom. He will leave five hours before the end of the bet. This will prove that he truly gives up the two million rubles.

The banker closes his eyes. “I wanted to kill him,” he thinks. “But he is the better man. He is rich in spirit. I am the poor one.”

Morning comes. The house wakes up. The banker gets out of bed. His heart is heavy.

He goes to the garden. He checks the small house again. The lawyer is truly gone. He opened the window and climbed out. He left before the bet ended.

The banker returns home. He goes to his safe. He takes the letter the lawyer wrote. He puts it inside the safe and locks it. He does not want anyone to see it. He is afraid people will learn the truth.

The lawyer disappears. No one sees him again. He walks away quietly. He asks for nothing. He takes nothing.

The banker lives on, but he never forgets that night. He never forgets the man who stayed alone for fifteen years—and gave up two million rubles to show the world that life is more than money.

— THE END —

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