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SELECT TALES
of
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柴霍甫小說選

華文詳註

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SELECTIONS
FROM ANTON TCHEKHOV
WITH CHINESE NOTES

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THE BET

I

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 a 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 a few seconds

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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.

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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*

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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 *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

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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 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. It was while that passion lasted that the banker received the following letter from

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the prisoner: "My dear gaoler, I am writing these lines in six languages. Show them to experts. Let them read them. If they do not find one single mistake, I beg you to give orders to have a gun fired off in the garden. By the noise I shall know that my efforts have not been in vain. The *geniuses* of all ages and countries speak in different languages; but in them all burns the same flame. Oh, if you knew my heavenly happiness now that I can understand them!" The prisoner's desire was fulfilled. Two shots were fired in the garden by the banker's order.

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 *haphazard*. Now he would apply himself to the natural sciences, then would read *Byron* or *Shakespeare*. Notes used to come from him in which

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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 the broken pieces of *wreckage*, and in his desire to save his life was eagerly grasping one piece after another.

II

The banker recalled all this, and thought :

“To-morrow 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 for ever . . .”

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. Gambling on the *Stock-Exchange*, risky speculation, and the recklessness of which he could not rid himself even in old age, had gradually brought his business to decay ; and the fearless, self-confident, proud man of business had become 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, gamble on the Exchange, 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

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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 no 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 keen damp wind hovered howling over all the garden and gave the trees no rest. Though he *strained* his eyes, the banker could see neither the ground, nor the white statues, nor the garden-wing, nor the trees. Approaching the place where the garden-wing stood, 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* with *fall* on the watchman first of all.”

In the darkness he *groped* for the stairs 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. Some-

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one's bed, with no bedclothes on it, stood there, and an iron stove was 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 dim. The prisoner himself sat by the table. Only his back, the hair on his head and his hands were visible. On the table, the two chairs, the carpet by the table open books were *strewn*.

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 gave 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 behind the door 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 a woman's long curly hair, and

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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 he leaned his hairy head was so lean and skinny that it was painful to look upon. His hair was already *silvering with grey*, and no one who glanced at the *senile emaciation* of the face 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 a moment with the pillow, and the most careful examination 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:

"To-morrow 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

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despise freedom, life, health, and all that your books call the blessings of the world.

“For fifteen years I have diligently 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 . . . And beautiful women, like *clouds ethereal*, created by the magic of your poets’ genius, visited me by night and whispered me wonderful tales, which made my head drunken. In your books I climbed the summits of *Elbruz* and *Mont Blanc* and saw from thence how the sun rose in the morning, and in the evening overflowed the sky, the ocean and the *mountain ridges* with a purple gold. I saw from thence how above me lightnings glimmered cleaving the clouds; I saw green forests, fields, rivers, lakes, cities; I heard *syrens* singing, and the playing of the pipes of *Pan*; I touched the wings of beautiful devils who came flying to me to speak of God . . . In your books I cast myself into bottomless *abysses*, worked *miracles*, burned cities to the ground, preached new religions, conquered whole countries. . . .

“Your books gave me wisdom. All that unwearying human thought created in the centuries

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is compressed to a little lump in my skull. I know that I am more clever than you all.

“And I despise your books, despise all worldly blessings and wisdom. Everything is void, frail, visionary and delusive like a mirage. Though you be proud and wise and beautiful, yet will death 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 as frozen slag, burnt down together with the *terrestrial globe*.

“You are mad, and gone the wrong way. You take lie for truth and ugliness for beauty. You would marvel if by certain conditions there should suddenly grow on apple and orange trees, instead of fruit, frogs and lizards, and if roses should begin to breathe the odour of a sweating horse. So do I marvel at you, who have *bartered* heaven for earth. I do not want to understand you.

“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.”

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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 other time, not even after his terrible losses on the Exchange, had he felt such contempt for himself as now. Coming home, he lay down on his bed, but agitation and tears kept him long from sleep. . . .

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