

Short Stories with Peter: The Bet by Anton Chekhov (Abridged B1–B2 Level)

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

72 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Welcome to Short Stories with Peter from Your English Toolbox.

I am Peter.

Tonight, an old banker will unlock a room that has been sealed for fifteen years.

He enters because one promise is about to destroy him.

On the table, he finds a letter that changes the meaning of freedom, wealth, and victory.

This is The Bet by Anton Chekhov, first published in Russian in 1889.

This is a new English abridgement adapted for B1–B2 learners by Your English Toolbox.

It was a dark autumn night.

The banker walked from one end of his study to the other while rain struck the windows.

He was remembering a dinner party he had given fifteen years earlier.

That evening, his guests had argued about the death penalty and life imprisonment.

Execution ends a life at once, but prison takes it away year by year.

A young lawyer of twenty-five disagreed.

If I had to choose, I would rather live in prison than die.

The banker lost his temper and struck the table with his fist.

I bet you two million that you could not stay alone for five years.

Then I will stay for fifteen.

The lawyer put fifteen years of freedom at stake, and the banker put two million at stake.

The lawyer moved into a small lodge in the banker's garden.

He could not leave, see another person, hear a human voice, or receive news from outside.

He could request books, food, wine, and music through a little window.

If he crossed the threshold even a few minutes early, he would lose the bet.

During the first year, the sound of his piano filled the garden day and night.

He read love stories and adventures, but his notes revealed terrible loneliness.



In the second year, the music stopped and he asked for classic literature.

In the fifth year, he drank wine, wept, and tore up pages he had written.

Then he began to study languages, history, philosophy, science, and religion.

Hundreds of books passed through the little window.

The years passed, and the prisoner continued to stick it out.

Now only one night remained.

At midnight, the lawyer would be free, and the banker would have to pay him.

But the banker was no longer rich.

Years of careless speculation had left him on the verge of bankruptcy.

If I pay him, I am ruined.

Then a terrible solution entered his mind.

If the prisoner died before midnight, there would be no payment.

At three in the morning, the banker took the old key from his safe and crossed the wet garden.

The watchman was nowhere to be seen.

The seals on the lodge door were still unbroken.

Through the small window, the banker saw a thin man asleep beside a candle.

Open books covered the table and the floor.

The banker unlocked the door and stepped inside.

He could end the prisoner's life quietly and save his fortune.

Then he noticed a letter on the table.

Tomorrow I will receive my freedom and the right to live among people again.

For fifteen years, books have allowed me to travel, to love, to learn, and to see the wonders of the world.

But they have also taught me how temporary wealth, beauty, and power are.

I now turn my back on the two million that once seemed like paradise.

To prove it, I will leave this room five minutes before the agreed time and lose the bet.

The banker put the letter down.

He kissed the sleeping man's head and left the lodge in tears.

The next morning, the watchman reported that the lawyer had climbed out of the window and disappeared.

He had left only minutes before winning the fortune.

The banker was saved from bankruptcy, but he felt ashamed of the man he had become.



He locked the lawyer's letter in his safe, beside the money it had made worthless.

The language of the story follows the same movement as the bet, from possession to rejection.

To have something at stake means that you risk losing something important.

The banker has his money at stake, while the lawyer has his freedom at stake.

To stick something out means to continue through a difficult situation until the end.

The lawyer appears ready to stick out all fifteen years, although he finally leaves by choice.

On the verge of means extremely close to a new and often serious situation.

The banker is on the verge of bankruptcy when the final night begins.

To turn your back on something means to reject or abandon it deliberately.

The lawyer turns his back on the fortune he once desired.

The lawyer's argument also gives us the useful pattern would rather do one thing than do another.

He says that he would rather live in prison than die.

After hearing the ending, which man do you think is truly free?

You can find the complete transcript, translations in several languages, and a vocabulary guide on our website, yourenglishtoolbox.com.

There is a direct link to the episode page and all its resources in this episode description.

This was The Bet by Anton Chekhov, newly abridged in English for B1–B2 learners by Your English Toolbox.

I am Peter.

Thank you for listening.

