

Short Stories with Peter: After Twenty Years by O. Henry (Abridged B1–B2 Level)

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

77 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, two old friends will keep a promise they made twenty years ago.

But one of them will have to make a painful choice.

This is an abridged B1–B2 adaptation of After Twenty Years by O. Henry, first published in 1906.

It was almost ten o'clock on a cold, wet night in New York City.

The shops were closed, and the wind had emptied the streets.

A uniformed patrolman walked along the avenue, checking every dark doorway.

Outside a closed hardware shop, he saw a man with an unlit cigar.

It is all right, officer.

I am waiting for a friend.

We arranged to meet here twenty years ago tonight.

Twenty years is a long time between meetings.

What was here then?

A restaurant called Big Joe Brady's stood on this exact spot.

It was pulled down five years ago.

The waiting man struck a match and lit his cigar.

For a moment, the flame showed his sharp eyes, a white scar near one eyebrow and a diamond tie pin.

My name is Bob.

Jimmy Wells and I grew up together here in New York.

He was my best friend, and we were almost like brothers.

I left for the West to make my fortune, but Jimmy refused to leave New York.

So we promised to meet here again on this date, exactly twenty years later.

Did you stay in contact?



For a while, but then we lost track of each other.

Still, Jimmy was the most loyal man I ever knew.

If he is alive, he will turn up.

Bob proudly showed him an expensive watch covered with small diamonds.

The West gave me everything I wanted.

I hope your friend comes.

Good night, sir.

The patrolman disappeared into the rain.

Bob waited in the doorway for another twenty minutes.

Then a tall man in a long coat hurried across the street.

Is that you, Bob?

Is that you, Jimmy Wells?

It is Bob, exactly as I hoped.

I wish the old restaurant were still here so we could have dinner together again.

They shook hands warmly and began walking arm in arm.

You have grown taller, Jimmy.

I grew a little after I was twenty.

At the next corner, a bright shop window lit both faces.

Bob stopped and pulled his arm away.

You are not Jimmy Wells.

Twenty years cannot completely change the shape of a man's nose.

Sometimes twenty years can turn a good man into a bad one.

You are under arrest, Bob.

The police in Chicago have been looking for you.

Bob said nothing.

The detective took a folded note from his pocket.

Before we go to the police station, I was asked to give you this.

It is from Jimmy Wells, the patrolman who spoke to you earlier.

Bob began reading with a steady hand, but by the final line it was trembling.

Bob, I came to our meeting place on time, wearing my patrolman's uniform.



The moment you lit your cigar, I recognised you as the man wanted by the Chicago police.

I did not have the heart to arrest you myself, so I asked a plainclothes officer to do it.

Jimmy.

The uniformed patrolman Bob had spoken to first was Jimmy Wells.

He had kept his promise, but the match had revealed that his old friend was a wanted man.

Jimmy chose his duty, although he could not arrest Bob with his own hands.

End of the story.

Now, let's dive into the language and break down some of the key vocabulary from the story.

To keep your word means to do what you promised.

Both men kept their word by returning after twenty years.

To lose track of someone means to stop knowing where that person is or what is happening in their life.

Bob and Jimmy lost track of each other after Bob moved west.

To turn up means to arrive or appear, especially when somebody is waiting.

Bob was certain that Jimmy would turn up.

Not have the heart to do something means to feel unable to do it because it would be too painful.

Jimmy did not have the heart to arrest his childhood friend himself.

The past perfect makes the order of past events clear.

They had promised to meet before they lost contact.

Jimmy had recognised Bob before he asked another officer to arrest him.

What would you have done in Jimmy's place?

Find the transcript, translations and vocabulary guide at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

The direct link to every resource is in this episode description.

Thank you for listening.

