

Short Stories with Peter: The Fire on the Hill

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

78 lines

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

Welcome to Short Stories with Peter, from Your English Toolbox.

Today, The Fire on the Hill, a story of courage from Japan.

This is an abridged adaptation of the Hamaguchi story in A Living God, by Lafcadio Hearn.

Our story follows his literary version, inspired by events in Japan.

Listen for a decision that nobody understands at first.

The afternoon sun lay warm across the rice fields above the village.

Below, families were preparing a celebration beside the sea.

On the hill, Gohei stood with his grandson, Tada.

Behind them stood the dry bundles of his harvest, enough to support his family for months.

Grandfather, can we go down to the village now?

In a little while, Tada.

Let me rest here first.

Then the ground began to move beneath their feet.

The wooden house creaked, and a cup trembled on the floor.

An earthquake!

Gohei steadied the boy, but his eyes were fixed on the water.

The sea was drawing back, leaving unfamiliar rocks bare.

People were walking towards the shore to watch.

Gohei remembered a warning his own grandfather had told him long ago.

He understood the danger, and there was no time to lose.

Tada, bring me a burning torch.

A torch, Grandfather?



Trust me, and bring it now.

The boy hurried inside, then returned with the flame.

Gohei carried it to the nearest bundle of rice.

He lowered the torch, and the dry stalks caught fire.

Stop, Grandfather!

That is our harvest!

But Gohei moved to the next bundle, and then the next.

Smoke rose above the hill as the breeze carried the flames through the field.

At the temple, someone saw the fire and rang the great bell.

Fire on the hill!

Bring water and come with us!

People turned away from the shore and began to climb.

The first villagers arrived, breathing hard and reaching for their buckets.

Leave the fire alone.

We need everyone up here.

But your rice will be destroyed!

Help the others up the path.

Young people helped older neighbours, while parents carried their children.

Gohei watched the path and counted the families as they came.

Tada stood beside him, frightened by the flames and by the silence on his grandfather's face.

Why did you burn it on purpose?

Before Gohei could answer, a dark line rose beyond the empty shore.

It grew taller and wider, racing towards the village.

Stay up here, and keep back from the edge.

The sea returned with a roar that swallowed every other sound.

Water struck the houses below and swept through the narrow streets.

On the hill, the villagers held one another and waited.

At last, the water drew away again.

Their homes were gone, but the people had reached safety.



That is why I set fire to the rice.

Tada slipped his hand into his grandfather's hand.

I thought you had made a terrible mistake.

We can plant rice again.

We cannot bring back the people we lose.

A neighbour looked from the ruined village to the old man's house.

Where will everyone sleep tonight?

My house is still standing.

There is room for many, and the temple can shelter the others.

Then he led them towards his door.

His harvest was gone, but his neighbours were alive.

End of the story.

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

First, there was no time to lose.

This means that action was needed immediately.

The last train leaves soon, so there is no time to lose.

Next, the rice caught fire.

Catch fire means to begin burning, while set fire to something means to make it burn.

The dry grass caught fire when a spark landed on it.

Finally, Tada asked why Gohei had acted on purpose.

On purpose means deliberately, rather than by accident.

I left the door open on purpose so you could come inside.

Here is a question to take with you.

What does Gohei's decision tell us about the difference between owning something and caring for someone?

You can find the story, translations, more vocabulary and practice at youenglishtoolbox.com.

Thank you for listening with me.

This is Peter, and I will see you next time.

