

Transcript

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's story is for pre-intermediate learners. The name of the story is *The Voice of Reason*. You can find a transcript of the episode at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Voice. That's EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Voice. There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

Today's story is something a bit different. A while ago, I read a book *Caliban and the Witch*, which gave me the idea for this story. *Caliban and the Witch* is about the witch trials in medieval Europe.

A **witch** is an evil woman, a very bad woman, who does magic. Witches go [cackle]. They have black cats as pets, they wear big black hats and they fly on broomsticks. In *Harry Potter*, Hermione is a very successful witch. The musical *Wicked*, which is one of my favourite musicals, is about witches.

The witch trials were a time in Europe when people thought that witches were hiding in many places, and so they tried to find the witches and killed them. Of course, many people were called witches who were just normal people. If people didn't like a certain woman, they would say she was a witch, have a witch trial, and then she would be killed.

Caliban and the Witch gives a very good history of the witch trials, and argues that they were a way to stop women from getting economic power. Women were slowly becoming more independent in medieval Europe – in the Middle Ages – and so the witch trials were used to stop this.

Anyway, this story isn't actually about witches. See, *Caliban and the Witch* also has a lot of information about the labour history of Europe. It is a Marxist feminist text. One of the things it talks about a lot is the Inclosure Acts.

Today, farms are very big and the fields are neat and square. But in medieval Europe, farmland was not neatly divided up. As well as normal farmland, there were some areas of land called 'commons'. Commons were pieces of land that belonged to everyone. For example, a commons might have trees that anyone could cut down, or water that anyone could use. There were also many small pieces of land called 'waste land'. This was land in a not-so-useful place. Often, poor people who did not own any land used the waste land to farm.

The Inclosure Acts were legal changes – changes to do with the law – that happened from the 17th century to the 20th century. The Inclosure Acts put clear borders around pieces of land. Commons stopped being available to everyone, and waste land also disappeared. These changes were very important for the development of capitalism in our modern time.

Traditionally, Marxists talk a lot about the Inclosure Acts, but they don't talk about the witch trials, and they also don't talk much about colonialism. **Colonialism** is when one country takes land in another country and makes people there work for them. Colonialism is a very violent process. Slavery is one example of colonialism. In the Late Middle Ages, many European countries used colonialism to get richer.

Caliban and the Witch makes very interesting arguments about all these things: the Inclosure Acts, the witch trials and colonialism. For example, the book argues that magic was an anti-capitalist practice. The same capitalists that created the inclosure acts wanted

people in towns and villages to stop doing magic, because magic does not produce value, it doesn't create money, in a way that can be measured, in a way that's easy to see. Anyway, if you're interested in history or Marxism, I really recommend this book.

Today's story is about the Inclosure Acts and a bit about magic. I guess you could say it's a socialist fairy tale! If you don't like history or found everything I just said very confusing, don't worry! The story should be a lot easier to understand. I just thought it would be interesting to explain where I got the idea.

OK, I'll just explain some words that are in today's story.

Reason is the power of thinking in our minds. If you make decisions based just on your emotions, you are not using reason, but if you carefully think about the situation before making a decision, you are using reason, you are being reasonable. When we say that someone is the **voice of reason**, it means that they give good advice that keeps people reasonable.

Spread means to move over a wide area. For example, you spread butter on toast, or you might spread honey. If you are having a party and there is lots of food, you might spread it out over a big table.

A **pitchfork** is a very big fork. Pitchforks are used on farms to move hay, a type of dried grass. Pitchforks are usually quite sharp, so they can also be used as weapons.

Tame means to train an animal so that it can live with humans and do what humans say. For example, many people have to tame their dog so that it doesn't eat the furniture. In the circus, they used to tame lions to jump through rings and tame elephants to dance on balls, but they don't do this anymore.

A **bandit** is a person who steals and robs. Thieves are people who just generally steal, but bandits are more specific. Bandits usually live in the mountains, or the forest, and attack people travelling through so they can steal their things. Bandits usually use axes and swords to attack people, and they usually have a boss who leads them. Bandits don't really exist now, because most people live in big cities, unlike in the past.

Ignore is when you deliberately don't look at something. For example, you might see someone you know outside, but you don't like them. You ignore them, acting as if you don't see them when you really do. It is very mean to ignore someone, though!

When something is flying in the air and touches the ground, it **lands**. When aeroplanes land, they have to go very slowly, and they shake a lot when they touch the ground. Ships also land, when they arrive to land from the sea.

A **hedge** is a big, square bush that people use to make walls in gardens. For example, you might have a high hedge around your house so that people can't see into it. When hedges are put together like this, they are called **hedgerows**. In the past, hedgerows were very important for dividing up farmland.

Property is something that is owned. If you own a house, then the house is your property. People who buy land and build new houses and buildings there are called property developers.

A **jeweller** is someone who makes jewellery. Jewellers might make gold rings and silver earrings, for example. Nowadays, a lot of jewellery is made by machines, so there are fewer jewellers.

Hanging, and the past tense is **hanged**, is a way of killing people. You put a rope around their neck, and they are lifted up. Then you take away the floor, so that the rope goes tight around their neck and they cannot breathe. It is a very slow death, so it is used for bad criminals. These days, very few people are hanged, as people think it is not nice. But in the

past in Europe, criminals were hanged in big cities, and people came and watched the hangings.

Obey means to do what someone tells you. So if you're at school and your teacher tells you to stand up and say, 'Lalala,' and you do that, then you are obeying them. Of course, in that situation, maybe you *shouldn't* obey them...

OK, so listen and enjoy!

The Voice of Reason

Once upon a time, there was a happy town full of happy people. Its houses grew over the countryside like hairs on a man's back, and its fields **spread out** like a beautiful woman's hair. The town had no borders, and neither did the fields and cattlehouses that spread out from it. The people took their **pitchforks** in hand and worked the land, sharing the food they produced. If a woman did not have enough milk, her neighbour gave her a jug of milk. If a man did not have enough apples, his neighbour gave him a basket of apples.

In this way, the people lived a simple and happy life. When they felt hunger, they felt it together, and it never lasted long.

Sometimes, kings came and tried to **tame** the townspeople. They said, 'My land is so much richer than yours. Come and work my land for ten days a year. I will give you part of the food you make, and when **bandits** come from the woods, I will protect you.'

But the people did not listen. Why should they work for a king and only get half of the food they made? And they did not need his protection. Whenever bandits came, they took their pitchforks in hand and defended the town themselves. If a thief came and stole food from their fields, they did not hurt the thief. Instead, they took them inside and gave them a good meal, and often these people joined the town, and everyone quickly forgot that they had once been thieves.

Sometimes, the kings tried to make the townspeople work for them. One king married a daughter from the town, and said that the family of the daughter now belonged to him, and must work in his fields. It didn't take long before they took their pitchforks in hand, and the king was running away.

But one day, something different came to town, riding a strange wind that blew from the south. If you saw it, you would **ignore** it, because it only looked like a leaf. But if you came closer – before it blew away – you might see some eyes, or a mouth. It was difficult to really see it, because it moved so quickly, and it showed a slightly different shape to everyone it spoke to.

When it first came to the townspeople, they ignored it. They were no strangers to magic, of course. They used magic to help their food grow, to see into the future and to help sick people recover. But this was a kind of magic they had never seen before, and it could mean nothing good, so they continued to ignore it.

The leaf flew around town. Finally, it found a lonely old man called Torsten, whose wife and daughter had died. Other people often visited him and brought him food, but with each passing day, he spoke to them less. Sometimes he shouted for them to leave the food outside and refused to speak to anyone. He was too old to work, and he felt ashamed that he could not join the other men.

Old Man Torsten's eyesight was not good, and he didn't see the leaf when it flew through the open window and **landed on** his ear.

'Dear old man,' said the leaf, 'I have heard you complaining.'

'Who is that?!' cried Old Man Torsten. 'Get out!'

'I am the voice of reason,' said the leaf. 'I have come here from far away, and I can see that there is no reason in this town.'

'What are you talking about?' said Torsten. But he sat down and listened.

'You have worked harder than all those young men out there in the fields. But you have no more things than them. Your house is no larger than theirs, and you do not own the land outside it.'

The old man did not understand. 'Nobody owns the land here. We all own it together. Why should I own the land outside my house if I am not strong enough to work on it?'

'And why should *you* have to work on the land?' said the leaf angrily. 'You have worked hard all your life, and they left you here by yourself. Those men bring you food as if it is a gift, when really, they should be bringing you much more.'

Torsten thought for a long time. He knew that when you heard voices, it was important to listen to them. He had heard a strange voice before he married his wife, and the voice had told him that she would die before him. He didn't listen then, and look what happened.

'And how can I change this?' said the old man. 'I am too weak to work in the fields. I am alive. Is that not enough?'

'Oh, but changing things is simple. It goes like this...'

The next day, two young men from town came to bring Old Man Torsten his food. When they got there, they were very surprised.

'What's this?' said one of the boys.

Around the man's house, a wall of plants had grown. It was a row of **hedges**, but they had never seen hedges used in such a way before. It made a big square around the house, and they had to walk around the hedge to find a way in.

'What magic have you used, old man?' asked one of the boys. 'These hedges grew overnight!'

'Get out!' shouted Torsten. 'You're on my **property**. Leave the food there and I'll get it myself.'

Old Man Torsten came outside holding his pitchfork, and the two boys didn't have to be told twice. They left the food by the hedgerow and ran away.

News of this event quickly spread around town. Nobody could understand what Old Man Torsten was doing. Several people tried to go and speak to him, but as soon as they crossed the hedgerow he ran after them with his pitchfork. So finally, people ignored him.

But there was a problem. There was plenty of useful land within the hedges, and that was land that none of them could use. The man could not plant food there himself, but it seemed he did not want other people using it either.

Well, as much as the people loved the old man, they couldn't allow what he was doing. So they stopped bringing him food. They knew that, one day, he would have to come out from the hedges and ask for their help.

But that didn't happen. For weeks, Torsten didn't appear. People saw something strange through the hedges. Finally, a brave woman went and looked, and found out that the old man had a young woman living with him.

'It's Jacqueline, Dorothy's girl,' she explained to the others. 'Dorothy was saying she kept disappearing. Apparently, Jacqueline now works for that old rat. She works his fields in the day' – the phrase '*his* fields' sounded so strange – 'and at night... Well, I don't know what goes on. But I saw him taking gold out and giving it to her.'

Some people in the town had gold, but it wasn't very much. They knew it was valuable, but they had no use for it, so they kept it hidden in their houses. Sometimes, a **jeweller** would come to town, and they gave gold to the jeweller to make into jewellery.

'How strange,' said a young man. 'Has Jacquette become a jeweller? Where did she learn?'

The next day, they found out what was going on. Jacquette came into town and asked to buy people's food.

'I'll give you this gold,' she said, and held out a piece of gold.

'Jacquette!' said Dorothy, grabbing her daughter's arm. 'You stop this right away. I have so much work to do at home now that you've left! There's washing and cleaning and cooking... But really, if you wanted to become a farmer or a jeweller, you should have *said*.'

But Jacquette ignored her, pulling away and smiling like she knew something that her mother didn't. She looked tired and hungry, and the people would have given her food if she had just asked. So why was she offering gold? Still, they felt sorry for her, and some of them thought if they gave her gold she might return home. So they took the gold and gave her food.

'So the old man was right!' she said, and laughed, taking all the food with her back to the old man's house.

'Something's not right about that girl,' **muttered** Dorothy. 'She was always difficult, but never like this...'

Over the next few months, a strong wind blew, and many leaves flew about. They landed on walls, on the ground, and sometimes they landed on people's faces. Strange voices blew about in the wind, and nobody knew where they came from...

A couple, who lived on the edge of town, were the next to plant hedges around their house. They took even more land than Torsten.

'We have three children,' they said, when people asked what they were doing. 'They can work all this land. We *need* this land. It's our property now.'

And so more and more people planted hedges, because they were worried they would have no land to work on. And when there wasn't enough food, instead of asking their neighbours, as they had in the past, people took out their gold pieces and used them to buy food from their neighbours.

Of course, there were people in town who did not like this system. They spoke of strange voices, and said that they were acting like those stupid kings who tried to tame them. But people ignored them, because winter was coming soon and they were worried about their own food. Anyway, if someone needed it, they could always ask their neighbours for food, couldn't they? But you would only do that if you were really hungry.

The winter came, and the people sat inside and ate the food from their own fields. It felt *good* to be eating food that belonged to them. But they did not have as much food as before, and they could not invite their neighbours round, in case they didn't have as much food as them. Some families could not eat all the food they had, and they had to give it to the animals, or let it go bad.

With the cold weather, the people's attitudes also turned cold. Before, there had been celebrations all year round. The people had danced in the fields and sung songs to the growing food. Now, with all the hedges, they could only dance on their own property. On Christmas day, the people sang inside, trapped by wood and hedges, so their neighbours didn't hear.

The biggest change came in the spring. One day, the people came outside and found a man **hanging** from a tree in the centre of town.

'I hanged him myself,' said Old Man Torsten coldly.

Now that his neighbours had become like him, he did not hide in his house anymore. He walked around town with pride, and some could not look out of their windows because Torsten's cruel smile filled them with fear.

'I found him stealing my food in the night.'

'But we've never done things this way,' said the townspeople. 'We give food to those who need it.'

'But it's *my* food,' said Torsten. 'My fields. It has been a long, difficult winter. You understand. You sat at your table, just like me, and you saw how little there was to eat. And if there was enough food, why should he have it? He did not work the fields that grew it. He who would give this man their food, when their own table was empty, step forward.'

The people thought, and they realised that none of them wanted to give the man their food. Torsten was right. This man should have planted more carefully, worked harder, made the difficult decisions that are necessary to survive. It was his own fault that he died.

The next time a king came to town, it was not difficult for him to tame the townspeople. They already **obeyed** the words of leaves and hedges. Why not a king? The king not only promised to protect them from bandits and thieves, but to punish the thieves with hanging.

Now, the people did not even have to get the blood on their own hands. And wasn't it fun for the children, to see a hanging every now and then? All the king needed was a few days of work from each person...

And so, in this way, reason left the town and progress came in. The townspeople learned the importance of planting hedges, trading with gold and obeying men with nice clothes. When the people held their pitchforks, they used them to farm, never to fight. They were proud that they could plant their *own* food, on their *own* property. But with the work they did for the king, it was *his* property that grew the largest, and it was his stomach that grew the fullest. By the time the townspeople realised this, it was already too late.

Of course, there were always those who would not obey. But as the years grew older and the winds blew crueller, they were pulled out of the ground and hanged.

Some say that, one day, autumn will come. The leaves that speak lies will fall from the trees and join the land again. They will eat the bones of hanged men and a new kind of flower will grow. And when a hand comes to pick the flower, to make it *mine* instead of *ours*, the flower will say, 'No!'

THE END

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