

Today's story is written by OSCAR WILDE (pronounced 'Wild'), who was a famous writer (mainly of plays) who lived during the reign of QUEEN VICTORIA. He was born in 1854, 17 years after Victoria became Queen. And he died in 1900, just a couple of months before Queen Victoria died in January 1901. Oscar Wilde was a complicated man, with lots of faults - but he was also very clever, and like DOROTHY PARKER he was famous for making very funny remarks and observations, like 'Always forgive your enemies - nothing annoys them so much'; 'There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about'; 'We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars'; and 'I can resist everything except temptation'. And sometimes Oscar Wilde's funny sayings would be borrowed from other people - something that the painter JAMES WHISTLER



(who painted the painting 'Whistler's Mother' which is at the heart of the first Mr Bean movie, if you have ever seen that) remarked on when Whistler said something really funny at a party. Oscar Wilde, who was also at the party, said, 'I wish I had said that.' 'You will, Oscar, you will,' replied Whistler - which cracked everyone up even more. This story - THE SELFISH GIANT - was written by Oscar Wilde in 1888, when he was 34 years old. And here it is:

THE SELFISH GIANT

A Giant owned a house with a big garden. But he hadn't lived in the house for seven years - he was away in Cornwall, visiting an Ogre (pronounced 'oag - er') who was a friend of his. While he was away, children took the chance to play in the Giant's garden. The garden was so beautiful, with lovely grass and flowers and twelve peach-trees, and birds that perched in the peach trees and sang so beautifully that sometimes the children would stop their games just to listen to the birds. But then the Giant came back and said to the children, 'What are you doing in my garden! This is my property - keep out!' The children were so afraid they ran away, and the Giant built a huge wall around his garden and made and put up a sign saying 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED'. And then he went into his house, very happy to have made it clear that he would not be allowing any children to play in his garden now that he was back in town.

And winter came, and then spring - and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. But for some reason, spring didn't come to the Giant's garden. It remained locked in wintry conditions, with snow on the grass and frost on the trees, and a bitingly cold wind whipping around the garden. And the Giant wondered, 'What is going on? Why isn't it spring yet?' But winter held its grip on the Giant's garden while everywhere else moved into summer, and then autumn, and then winter, and then back into spring. And the Giant would look out of his window and sigh and say, 'I wish spring would come.'

Then finally one day, the Giant was woken by the sound of a bird singing from the branches of one of his peach trees. The Giant thought, 'It's ages since I heard a bird sing - maybe spring has come at last?' And he looked out of his window, and he saw that some children had managed to get into his garden through a hole in the wall, and wherever the children were playing, spring had arrived in the garden. A child was sitting in almost every tree, and the trees were so delighted to have the children back in the garden that they had covered

themselves with blossoms, and were waving their arms gently above the children's heads. But there was one corner of the garden which was still locked in a winter. A very, very small child was in that corner of the garden, and was crying because he wasn't big enough to reach up to the branches of the tree in that corner of the garden so that he could sit in it.

The Giant saw all this and thought, 'How selfish I have been! Now I know why spring wouldn't come to my garden. I'll go out and lift that little crying boy up into the tree so that winter will be finally banished from my garden, and I will knock down the wall and allow the children to play in the garden forever and ever.' So the Giant came running out of his house to help the little tiny boy, but when the other children saw the Giant, they were scared that he was angry with them, and they ran out of the garden and winter instantly returned. But the little tiny boy was crying too much to see the Giant, and so the Giant was able to reach him and gently lift up into the peach tree that he was standing next to - and the tree instantly burst into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy hugged the Giant and kissed him. And when the other children saw this, they came back into the garden and spring was everywhere.

The Giant told the children that the garden was theirs now and knocked down the wall with an axe. And every day afterwards, the children would come back to the garden to play in it - but the Giant never saw the little tiny boy again. He asked the other children, 'Where is your friend, the one I helped into the tree?' And they said, 'We don't know who he is - he must have gone away.' And the Giant was sad not to see his little friend again, but was glad at the same time that the other children got so much joy out of playing in the garden. And the seasons passed and the years passed, and the Giant grew old, and was unable to move around so much. He would sit in a big armchair near a window and watch the children playing in his garden. 'My garden has many beautiful flowers, but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all.'

One winter morning the Giant happened to look out of his window and saw an amazing sight. Even though it was winter, in the furthest corner of the garden was a tree that was covered in blossoms and had beautiful fruit hanging from its branches - and underneath the tree was the little tiny boy that the Giant had helped so many years ago! The Giant's heart leapt (pronounced 'lept') to see the boy and he came running out of his house, intending to give the boy a big hug and ask him where he had been. But as he got closer, he got really angry because he could see red wounds on the boy's two hands and on his two feet. And the Giant said to the boy, 'Who did this to you? Tell me and I will kill them with my axe.' And the boy smiled and said, 'Peace, peace - these are the wounds I suffered out of My Love for you.' And the Giant asked, 'Who are you?' And the child smiled at the Giant and said, 'You let me play in your garden so many years ago - now today you will play in My Garden, which is Paradise.'

And in the afternoon, when the children came to play in the Giant's garden, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms.