

Charles

Charles was the sort of boy people noticed without really knowing why.

He was not noisy. He did not push to the front of the lunch queue or race across the playground shouting someone's name. In lessons, he rarely volunteered an answer, although his teachers had begun to suspect that he knew considerably more than he let on. At break time, while everyone else gathered in chattering groups, Charles often wandered alone along the edge of the playground.

Some children thought he was unfriendly.

"He never talks to anyone," Mia once complained.

"He talks," replied Ben. "Just not very much."

This was true. Charles was not rude. If someone spoke to him, he answered politely, but there was something distant about him, as though part of his attention was always somewhere else.

On Monday morning, that somewhere else appeared to be a crack in the playground wall.

Ben first noticed Charles crouching beside it. Everyone else was playing football, and the ball had already thundered past Charles twice. He had not even flinched.

"What's he doing?" Mia asked.

Charles was kneeling with his face only a few centimetres from the bricks.

"Talking to the wall?" Ben suggested.

Mia laughed.

Then Charles did something even stranger. He took a small piece of apple from his pocket, tore off a crumb-sized piece and placed it beside the crack.

Within seconds, a procession of ants appeared.

Charles watched them silently.

The bell rang.

He stood up, brushed the dust from his trousers and went inside.

By Wednesday, rumours about Charles had spread.

Apparently, he could talk to insects.

Apparently, birds followed him home.

According to one particularly imaginative Year Six pupil, Charles kept a snake in his school bag.

None of this was true, but the stories made people watch him more closely.

That afternoon, Mia saw him suddenly stop in the middle of the playground.

Charles tilted his head.

“What now?” she muttered.

He walked towards a flower bed beside the fence. There, almost hidden beneath the leaves, was a bumblebee. It was crawling in slow, clumsy circles.

Charles knelt.

Ben and Mia followed.

“Don’t touch it!” Ben warned.

“I’m not going to.”

Charles studied the bee. Its wings trembled, but it did not fly.

“It’s exhausted,” he said.

“How do you know?”

Charles pointed towards the bee without touching it. “It keeps trying to fly, but it hasn’t got enough energy.”

He opened his water bottle and poured a few drops into its lid. Then he took the corner of a sugar sachet left over from lunch, stirred a tiny amount into the water and placed a droplet nearby.

Mia frowned. “Why are you feeding a bee?”

“I’m helping it.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

For the first time, Charles smiled.

For several minutes, nothing happened.

Then the bee crept towards the droplet.

The three children watched.

Slowly, it drank.

A minute later, its wings began to beat. The bee lifted shakily into the air, circled once above their heads and disappeared over the fence.

Ben stared after it.

“You knew that would happen?”

“I hoped.”

It was a small distinction, but Charles seemed to think it mattered.

The following day brought something stranger still.

Near the bins, Charles found a fly struggling on the ground. One of its wings was bent awkwardly beneath it.

“Oh, leave it,” said Mia. “It’s only a fly.”

Charles looked up.

Mia immediately wished she had not said it.

“Only a fly?” he repeated.

He did not sound angry. Somehow, that made the question more uncomfortable.

Charles carefully encouraged the insect onto a broad leaf. He examined the damaged wing without touching it at first. Then, with movements so delicate that Ben found himself holding his breath, Charles used the tip of another leaf to ease the crumpled wing back into position.

“You can’t fix a fly,” Ben whispered.

Charles did not answer.

For several moments, the insect remained motionless.

Then it moved.

Its wings flickered.

Once.

Twice.

It rose from the leaf and vanished into the sunlight.

Ben’s mouth fell open.

Mia looked at Charles as though she were seeing him for the first time.

“How did you do that?”

“I didn’t.”

“We just watched you!”

“I helped,” Charles said. “The fly did the rest.”

After that, the children stopped laughing.

Instead, they began following him.

Charles showed them where spiders anchored their webs so the wind would not tear them apart. He pointed out the tiny bite marks that caterpillars left along the edges of leaves. He knew that daisies closed when the light faded and that earthworms often appeared after rain because the damp surface made it easier for them to travel.

It seemed impossible that all these things had been happening in the playground every day without anyone noticing.

“You see everything,” Mia said one lunchtime.

Charles shook his head.

“No, I don’t.”

“You do!”

“I just look.”

Mia was about to argue, but something in his expression stopped her.

She looked around.

The playground seemed ordinary: grey concrete, brick walls, a wooden fence and several tired-looking flower beds.

Then she looked again.

A spider was repairing a silver thread between two railings. An ant was carrying something three times its own size. High above the playground, a pair of swifts sliced through the sky.

Perhaps Charles was right.

On Friday afternoon, rain swept across the school.

Children crowded beneath the shelter while water bounced from the playground in shining droplets.

Suddenly, Charles stepped out into the rain.

“Charles!” called the teacher on duty. “Where are you going?”

He did not answer.

He ran towards the far corner of the playground, where water was collecting beside a drain.

“Oh no,” said Mia.

A worm was trapped on the concrete. Each time it wriggled towards the flower bed, another stream of water pushed it back.

Charles scooped it gently into his hands.

By now, the rain was running through his hair and down his face.

He carried the worm to the flower bed and lowered it beneath the shelter of a large leaf.

When he turned around, he found Mia and Ben standing behind him.

Both were soaked.

Charles blinked. “Why did you come out?”

Mia shrugged.

“It needed help.”

Charles looked at her.

Then he smiled.

Behind them, more children were leaving the shelter. One carefully moved a snail from the middle of the path. Another lifted a soggy beetle onto a dry wall. Someone else noticed a butterfly sheltering beneath the climbing frame and called the others over to see.

The playground had not changed.

It was still the same cracked concrete, the same brick walls and the same wooden fence.

But the children had.

And Charles, who had once seemed to be looking at a world no one else could see, was no longer looking at it alone.

Comprehension Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, why do some children think Charles is unfriendly?

- A. He refuses to share his belongings.
- B. He often argues with other pupils.
- C. He spends much of his time alone and rarely speaks.
- D. He deliberately ignores his teachers.
- E. He tells the other children to leave him alone.

2. What does the phrase “part of his attention was always somewhere else” suggest about Charles?

- A. He is often distracted because he dislikes school.
- B. He is thinking about things that other people may not have noticed.
- C. He finds it difficult to understand what people say.
- D. He is deliberately pretending not to hear people.
- E. He is worried about something at home.

3. Why does the writer include the rumours about Charles talking to insects and keeping a snake?

- A. To prove that Charles has unusual powers.
- B. To suggest that Charles has been lying to his classmates.
- C. To explain why the teachers are worried about him.
- D. To show how the children's curiosity about Charles is growing.
- E. To reveal something that becomes important later.

4. After the bee flies away, Charles says, “I hoped” rather than saying he knew it would happen. What does this reveal about him?

- A. He understands nature but does not pretend he can control or predict it completely.
- B. He is embarrassed because his idea almost failed.
- C. He does not understand why the bee recovered.
- D. He wants Ben to believe he was simply lucky.
- E. He is trying to hide how much he knows.

5. Why does Mia immediately regret saying, “It’s only a fly”?

- A. She is frightened that Charles will tell a teacher.
- B. She suddenly remembers that flies can sting.
- C. She realises Ben disagrees with her.
- D. She thinks Charles might stop being her friend.
- E. Charles's response makes her question whether a small creature is less deserving of care.

6. In the sentence “a pair of swifts sliced through the sky,” what does “sliced” suggest?

- A. The birds are fighting with one another.
- B. The birds move swiftly and sharply through the air.
- C. The sky is becoming darker.
- D. The birds are diving towards the playground.
- E. Their wings have been injured.

7. What does Charles mean when he says, “I just look”?

- A. Anyone can notice more about nature if they pay careful attention.
- B. He does not know as much about wildlife as Mia thinks.
- C. He prefers looking at wildlife to helping it.
- D. He wants Mia to stop asking him questions.
- E. His eyesight is better than everyone else's.

8. Why do Mia and Ben follow Charles into the rain?

- A. They are worried that Charles will get into trouble.
- B. They want to find out where he is going.
- C. Their teacher tells them to help him.
- D. Charles's behaviour has influenced them, and they now want to help the worm too.
- E. They want to prove that they know as much about nature as Charles.

9. What does the writer mean by “The playground had not changed ... But the children had”?

- A. The children have decided that they prefer being outside in the rain.
- B. The playground now contains more wildlife than before.
- C. Charles has taught the children to notice and care about things they previously overlooked.
- D. The children have become quieter because of Charles.
- E. The children have decided to repair the playground.

10. Which statement best expresses the main message of the story?

- A.** People should always spend more time outdoors than indoors.
- B.** Knowledge is only valuable when it is taught in a classroom.
- C.** People who prefer being alone are usually misunderstood.
- D.** Wild animals should never be touched by humans.
- E.** Careful observation and small acts of kindness can change how we understand the world and influence others.

Answers

1. C

2. B

3. D

4. A

5. E

6. B

7. A

8. D

9. C

10. E

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