



Little George and the Cherry Tree

as retold by Anthony Clark

Many people know this story about George Washington, the first president of the United States. It's sometimes called a legend because people who study history aren't sure if the events in the tale really happened or not. Still, true or not, it's a good story with a good moral or lesson. It's a story people will likely be telling for many years to come—exactly the kind of story that legends are made of . . .

Little George stared at the gift, his eyes wide with wonder.

“Really, Pa? It’s mine?” He glanced up at his father, then quickly returned his gaze to the object resting in his hands. Being a young boy, George had never owned anything like it. The hatchet felt good in his hands—sturdy—the first item he’d ever been given that was *not* a toy.

“It is yours, George,” replied his father. “But you must handle it with care. A hatchet can be a wonderful tool—if it is used the right way. Used the wrong way, it can be a dangerous weapon.”

“Will you teach me how to use it, Pa?” young George asked his father. “Will you teach me the right way?”

George spent the morning with his father, learning how to safely use his hatchet on sticks of firewood, turning large pieces of wood into smaller bits. When his lesson was through, George thanked his father, then went about the garden by himself trying out the hatchet.

He found a small log resting on the ground, which he chopped in half. Then he found some sticks, which he turned into twigs with a few swings of his hatchet.

“I love my new hatchet!” George said to himself as he went about chopping to pieces every stray stick or hunk of wood in the garden.

After a while, George ran out of things to cut up with his hatchet. He searched the garden again, but he found nothing except for a few large stones at the edge of the orchard.

George knew he couldn’t use the hatchet to cut stone. His father had been very clear on that subject. “If you strike your hatchet against stone,” his father had warned, “you’ll dull the blade, or you may even break it.”

But in the orchard, just beyond where the stones lay, young George caught sight of a small cherry tree. He'd seen his father use an axe to chop down trees. A hatchet was like a little axe. So George couldn't help but wonder if a hatchet could also be used to chop down trees.

Standing beside the cherry tree, George looked at the trunk of the tree. Then he looked at the blade of the hatchet. Then he reared his arms back and took a big swing.

The hatchet cut a small groove in the tree trunk. George took a second swing, putting as much muscle into it as he could, and the hatchet cut an even deeper groove. George could see that it would take a very long time to chop down the tree using a hatchet instead of an axe. As he thought about it some more, he knew he really shouldn't be cutting down trees in his father's orchard anyway. The trees bore fruit, some of which his family ate and the rest of which they sold to others. But at least, as he walked away from the cherry tree and started back toward the house, young George felt confident that he knew how to use his new hatchet the right way.

It was later in the evening, just before suppertime, when George learned that he had harmed his father's cherry tree by cutting into its trunk.

"And that was my prize cherry tree," George's father told the family. They were all gathered in the dining room, preparing to sit down for their meal.

George's mother shook her head sadly. "I can't imagine who would do such a thing," she said.

No one in the family could imagine who would do such a thing, except for young George, who of course knew exactly who had harmed the tree.

“George, do *you* know who did it?” his father asked. “Do you know who cut into the little cherry tree?”

George’s father had always taught him the importance of telling the truth. He’d always taught George that lying was wrong—that one should never tell a lie for any reason whatsoever.

It would be easy for George to lie about what happened to the cherry tree. No one had seen him cut into its trunk. No one had spotted him near the orchard carrying his hatchet. He could tell his father and the rest of his family that he knew not who had harmed the little tree.

But that’s not what George did.

Instead he decided to follow his father’s teachings. Young George Washington decided to tell the truth.

“Pa, I cannot tell a lie,” he announced. “It was I who cut the tree with my hatchet!”

Everyone was quiet for a moment as they waited for George’s father to react. Would he punish young George? Would he be angry with his son for damaging his prize cherry tree?

What happened next might have surprised some people, but it was no surprise to the members of the Washington family. George’s father smiled, opened his arms up wide and said, “Come to me, my son. The cherry tree means little to me. But the fact that you told the truth and admitted your mistake means *a lot.*”

Little George ran across the room, throwing himself into his father’s arms. His father hugged him tightly and said, “Keep telling the truth, George, and great things will happen for you.”

George always did tell the truth, and great things did happen in his life. He became a great leader of men. As a general he led soldiers in America's war of independence against Great Britain. When the United States became its own country, the people so loved George Washington that, according to some sources, a group of them wanted to make him the first king of America. But, as the story goes, Washington refused to even consider becoming a king. As one of the nation's founding fathers, he wanted the new country to be a democracy, meaning that people would get to vote on who would lead the government.

Today we remember George Washington, our first president, for the many great things he did. In daily life, it's hard to forget about President Washington since you'll see his face almost any time you go to the store. George Washington's face is the one you see on the front of the one-dollar bill, which happens to be the most used piece of paper money in the country.

So the next time you unfold a dollar bill and you see George Washington's face on the front of it, remember this tale of the cherry tree and of how Little George told the truth when he could have very easily lied.

And remember to tell the story to someone who's never heard it before, and that way you'll help keep the legend alive.