

# Home at Mount Vernon – A Story

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## CHAPTER 1

“Nelly, please play a game with me,” George Washington Parke Custis moaned at his sister. “You’ve been reading all day and I am so bored!”

Though she was only two years older, Nelly had poured her usually bouncy nature into deep absorption with a book open on her lap. The muggy Virginia heat had forced both children indoors. George, known to all the family as “Washy” had given up finding anything at all of interest in the book he held in his sweaty hands. There were no pictures and the paragraphs were very long, Washy considered grumpily. He would have much preferred playing outside with Vulcan and Searcher, two of his grandfather’s coach dogs but it was just too hot of a day for running about.



Looking to stir up some excitement, Washy dropped quietly down on his knees and inched his way silently to where Nelly sat, prim in a blue parlor chair.

“Give me my book! You horrid thing!” Nelly shrieked, as Washy knew she would when he snatched the slim volume from her hands. Before she could grab it back, he threw it down on a matching chair, and sat his bottom quickly upon its leather binding.

“I will not play with you!” Nelly snapped in frustration. Being the older sister to a rambunctious 10 year old tried her patience frequently. Their grandmother indulged the boy and rarely disciplined him.

“You are a horribly spoiled brat!” Nelly continued, “I shall tell on you!” And she stood up and prepared herself to flounce out to report her brother’s misbehavior to whichever grandparent she could find first.

Defiantly, Washy called out, “Go on and tell Grandpapa then! He dare not punish me! I do as I please.”

Knowing this to be somewhat true made Nelly all the more mad.

“You believe because you are a boy, you deserve more than I?” she shot him a blazingly angry look with snapping brown eyes.

“It was your sad fate that caused you to be born a girl!” Washy replied, rudely. Both children knew that boys often led more interesting lives by custom. They accepted this as unchangeable, but Nelly had often commented on the unfairness of it.

“We share the same history,” she reminded him, “Why should your life be so different from mine?” Indeed both children had been sent to live with their grandmother and step-grandfather upon the remarriage of their mother, following the death of their father.

“Because I am a boy, and my destiny is to conquer and rule!” Washy crowed with bravado. “I am the grandson of the great General George Washington, so I do whatever I want!”

This made Nelly even more furious.

“You are still just 10 years old, and able to be punished like a child for being so spoiled and naughty! Now give me my book, and leave me be!” she demanded.

Already bored with the argument, Washy slid off the parlor chair and returned the book reluctantly to Nelly. He heard a crunching sound of cart wheels rolling slowly over gravel. The clip-clop of hooves beat out an exciting rhythm of possibilities. Running to the doorway, Washy called out hopefully,

“Listen! A carriage and horses! Someone might be coming who would want to play cards!” Washy ran to the front entrance of the house.

He heard a brief exchange of voices as the servants and slaves who worked at Mount Vernon calmed the horses and led them away to the stables. Frank Lee, the enslaved butler, moved smartly to the door and ushered in an unfamiliar man, who was carrying a large portmanteau. The man set it down in the middle of the room.

Washy and Nelly knew a portmanteau of this size meant someone would be staying at Mount Vernon for quite some time.

Frank said to the visitor, “Sir, allow me to take your belongings to where you will be staying.”

The man, looking worriedly down at the case, said, “Thank you, but no. I prefer to keep with this with me.”

Oney, having overheard Washy hoping for a card playing companion admonished him sternly.

“I hear you, young man! You know your Grandpapa will not have you bothering a guest! Now off upstairs both of you! You are best not seen or heard until you be sent for!” And she set the portmanteau with a thump on the floorboards and shooed the children upstairs.



Nelly and Washy cast curious looks back at the unfamiliar case as they headed up the stairs. Oney flapped her hands shooing them away as their grandfather, George Washington entered from his study.

“Mr. Ehlers,” said Washington, “welcome to Mount Vernon. Come sit with me in the parlor. You will be parched after your ride from Alexandria.”

Mr. Ehlers ducked his head in thanks. Washington bid Oney to bring tea and gestured to Ehlers to sit.

Meanwhile, upstairs in Nelly’s room, the children sat on the floor and speculated who the man might be.

“The dogs were barking fierce!” Washy exclaimed. “He may be a spy or a pirate!”

Nelly remarked, “I hardly think Grandpapa would be welcoming a pirate to tea in the parlor, Tub.”

Washy chose to ignore the fact that his sister called him the hated nickname from his babyhood. Instead he said, “Well I shall keep my eye on him and defend the household in the event of an attack!”

His sister rolled her eyes at his silliness, then flopped on her bed, messing the bedcovers with her kid leather shoes.

“Well saddle up the mule as your noble steed, then Sir Tub,” she giggled and resumed reading her book. Washy went out on the landing and listened in to the murmured conversation coming up from the open door in the parlor.

“Herr Washington, I am happy to be invited here at your handsome farm,” Mr. Ehlers was saying. His words were halting and clipped, the accent unfamiliar.

Washington replied, “Your work for King George as a master gardener was brought to my attention by some recent visitors. They were quite complimentary about the magnificent plantings!”

Ehlers responded, “I thank you, Herr Washington. Forgive me. My English is not so good. You may know the king wanted an English garden. I worked to create this as best I can. The climate there is very good for so many plants and trees.”

Mr. Ehlers’ stilted speech caused Washy to suppress a giggle. But he kept quiet so he could hear his grandfather’s remarks. Was this Mr. Ehlers just a gardener then? How ordinary, Washy thought with disappointment.

“Did you find it very much different than what you knew in Germany? You ARE German, are you not?” Washington asked his guest.

“Yes, I am! Germany is so much different from England and this place. So many times I think about why I come to this new America. Like all men, I long for the homeland I know best.”

Washington dismissed Ehlers’ momentary discomfort by suggesting his wife might join him at some point in the future, then moved quickly on to the project which really interested him: the new plans for gardens at Mount Vernon.

The two men discussed the landscaping and Washington ended their talk by saying, “It is farming here at Mount Vernon which gives me great satisfaction.”

As Oney delivered the teapot and tea cups, Washington said, “Oney will show you where you will be staying for your employment at Mount Vernon. There you will find the company of others who are similarly engaged in improving the house and the estate.”

It seemed to Washy, who was still listening in curiously, that Mr. Ehlers sounded very hopeful as he asked,

“Are there persons who come here from Germany?” Washy never thought that adults could be homesick but this man sounded almost wistful in his query.

Washington replied. “Oh, you will find that most everyone here has come from somewhere else.”

“Only you can claim to be native-born of this country, Herr Washington,” Ehlers answered.

Washy thought about the word, native. Savages were native, he considered. He and his sister, and mother and grandparents were American! He listened with interest to his grandfather’s reply.

“Do not be so sure of that, Mr. Ehlers,” Washington’s answer was slow and thoughtful. “I am not certain that any of us can say we were here first; except, perhaps,

the Indian people. It was they who dwelt here when our ancestors arrived so many generations past.”

Washy heard Vulcan scamper up the stairs. Oney must have mistakenly let the dog into the house; the slaves and servants usually kept the dogs out in the yard, although Vulcan was a favorite of George Washington’s. Washy used Vulcan as an excuse to return downstairs. He led the dog by its collar and then burst into the parlor. Oney made as if to pull Washy back and send him upstairs, but the boy evaded her grasp and interrupted the two men who were deep in conversation.

“Grandpapa, will you teach me that card game like you promised?” Washy hoped this sudden request would charm the men into including him in the meeting.

“Mr. Ehlers, let me introduce my very rude grandson – George Washington Parke Custis,” Washington said, hiding a slight smile. “He and his sister Nelly have created plenty of new trouble for Mrs. Washington and myself in what was to have been our declining years!”

Washy knew he and Nelly were loved so he pretended to ignore the seemingly disparaging remarks about his and Nelly’s presence at Mount Vernon.

Instead of offering to play cards, Mr. Ehlers turned intently to Washy and said, “Young man, you already have much fortune being born into this family and this magnificent country.”

Was this the man’s way of hoping Washy would forget about the card game? Of course he knew he was lucky! What nonsense! He remembered his manners though and barely squeaked out a reasonable, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” before his grandfather dismissed him, leaving the two men to talk more of farming.

Oney pinched Washy’s sleeve, and some of his arm along with it, and marched him out of the parlor. The boy shook free from her as soon as they were outside the parlor. He called to Vulcan to go out in the heat to play chase-the-stick. Anything was better than this dull world of grown-ups.

Meanwhile, back in the parlor, Mr. Ehlers, filled with gratitude for being allowed this opportunity to immigrate to America, told Washington, “Allow me to say, Herr Washington, that even in England your name is spoken with respect.”

Thinking on the many years it had taken to establish a positive relationship with England, Washington smiled tightly.

“Perhaps this many years after suffering defeat in controlling America, the English people can begin to see more commonalities than differences between our nations,” he said.

Ehlers, moved by the profoundness of Washington's words, could only say, "And that is the wisdom, sir that we have come to expect from your many experiences." He knew he spoke for his countrymen in Germany and all over Europe. Washington was revered for his astute leadership guidance. That Washington himself would pay for Ehlers' passage to America in order to employ his experience in gardens was still of amazement to this German immigrant.

As the two men headed outside to get Ehlers settled into his quarters, Washy burst back into the house, and Nelly descended the staircase curiously.

"You see?" Washy pointed out, "It's a foreign portmanteau! From Germany!"

Nelly protested, "So what is so interesting about that? We've so many things here from England and France and elsewhere." Indeed, much of the Washington's store of china and other goods originated from outside the new America.

Washy looked painfully at the floor. "I cannot say," he muttered, "but maybe because a foreign man brought it himself! It is from so far away and seems – exotic, I guess you would say." He was embarrassed to reveal to his sister his desire for exciting intrigue and mystery.

Nelly laughed merrily at this revelation.

"You are a funny one, Washy! Everything and everybody comes from somewhere! This portmanteau is more like Grandpapa's than it is different!" She shoved her brother's shoulder merrily, "Now let us go see if we might have more gingerbread. If the kitchen is so busy as always, we should perhaps not be noticed!"

The children hurried out of the house, headed for the kitchen building, while Charlotte, a house slave and seamstress for the family, entered the room. She looked curiously at the portmanteau set in the middle of the room, and she dragged it out of the middle of the Central Passage.



Oney appeared suddenly and tersely snapped at Charlotte, “You best leave that right where you found it, Charlotte!”

Charlotte, annoyed with Oney’s continual control barked back, “Why ever? Somebody’s likely to fall over it.”

Oney said, “It belongs to Mister Ehlers.” She exaggerated his foreign name and dragged it out as Aa-lurz. “He is a man come here from Germany. You cannot be sure what he carry in that box!” Oney shuddered as she said it.

Charlotte huffed in a skeptical way and answered, “Nonsense! It can’t be anything odd. All folks carry the same traveling things with them – shirts n’ breeches n’ such!

“That is where you be wrong, Charlotte! Foreign folks got foreign tricks and spells on their person!” Oney looked darkly around the room as if to scare out anyone who might be lurking about.

Charlotte tossed her head in confidence. “That be a lot of silliness, Oney!” she laughed, “This portmanteau is a great deal shabbier than most! If Mr. Ehlers is so magic-like, why does he not just conjure up a nicer, newer one?”

Before Oney could answer, Jack, an older enslaved man entered the room, carrying a tray of dishes.

“Women, why you doing nothing but standing about jawing?” Jack interrupted the two women. “General Washington’s got a fellow to stay and plan out the new gardens. He is joining the rest of the house folks for meals, now. We got us more work!”

Charlotte waved him off and said, “I will not be jumping just because one fellow from Germany arrives now! Why, we’ve had folks from all over – why he special? He is indentured for his ship passage here, is he not?”

“That is right, Charlotte,” Jack nodded vigorously as he answered. “An indentured servant is just as much a slave as we be, only he be white and after a few years working, he will walk away free and go where ever he likes.”

Suddenly discouraged, Oney sat down on a nearby chair. “If he has the money, that is,” she said, “No matter how free you be, you always be wanting for money.”

“That is right, that is right.” Jack spoke softly and patted Oney’s shoulder clumsily. “Only I would rather be poor and free to live my own life, rather than hold all the world’s riches and belong to another man as his property.”

“Why are some of us born into luck and others not?” Oney asked no one in particular.

“Why is it the chicken has wings but cannot fly out of the chicken coop?” Jack said ruefully, “Why, indeed.”

As he walk on through the room carrying the tray as if it held a great weight on it, Oney and Charlotte looked at one another with nothing further to say.

“I guess I should be off tending to those birds,” Oney smiled sadly, “That foreign gentleman might want for a nice chicken dinner.”

“Butcher up that noisy parrot of Miss Nelly’s” Charlotte suggested with a wicked grin.

“That’d get me sent away to the fields for the rest of my days,” Oney shushed her. “I know you be making a joke, but you best hush up with that kind of talk!”

Charlotte poked Oney in the ribs with her elbow and laughed as the two women headed out to see to the farm’s poultry.

## CHAPTER 2

Washy sat outside on the piazza, careful to keep under the shade. Vulcan lay nearby – his tongue lolling out in the heat. Washy was rolling marbles on the sloping stones of the piazza, attempting to knock over some German-made tin soldiers he had lined up in mock battle scenes.

Walking up from the wharf path were Jack and Austin. Austin was a slave at Mount Vernon, Oney's older half-brother, who was married to Charlotte, and often involved, in numerous household needs.



As they approached the piazza, Washy could hear Austin saying, “You have there a fine catch of herring for your supper, I see.”

“My old bones make catching fish mighty hard, I find. But some small-size herring be running pretty good just now,” Jack answered him, hoisting aloft a dripping basket of herring.

Washy, who didn't particularly care for any kind of fish decided that these were especially tiny.

“Those are awfully scrawny fish, Jack! Is that the best the river had?” he asked.

Austin laughed, “The young master is criticizing even the Lord's creations now!”

Jack commented, “I suppose 'bout all I am good for now is catching a few fish for a family supper.”

Austin pulled back his head back in playful disdain. “The child cannot even know how far you had to come just to be content with a catch of puny herring!” He spoke to Jack but meant Washy to overhear.

So the boy asked, “What do you mean, Austin?”

Jack rolled his eyes to the sky, “Pay him no mind, Master Washington. I am such an old man now I nearly forget the place I come from!”

“Why Jack, you have always lived here with Grandpapa and Grandmama!” Washy couldn’t remember a time when Jack hadn’t always served the family.

Mindful of his place, Austin, nonetheless felt some rising anger.

“Young sir, do you not know that Jack here was brought as a slave from Africa?”

Jack cautioned Austin to go no further. Washy might be a child, but he was the son of General Washington. Slaves dared not speak too freely even to the children.

“Now, now Austin. He cannot even know ‘bout circumstances that don’t concern him.” Jack attempted to placate Austin.

Washy felt his own anger at being treated as too insignificant to know the history of his grandfather’s slaves.

“I do want to know! You must tell me where you came from, Jack!”

Jack stopped walking, stared at the ground, and spoke softly.

“Well, then...all I will say is that I was a child no bigger than you when I got took and sold into slavery. You know, there is folks whose work it is just to steal and sell people to labor hard for no wages.”

The boy wondered if there was more to Jack’s story. “I know Africans were bought and sold but I never gave it much thought,” he admitted.

Jack continued, “All I thought about as a child is whether I would die on that trip across the sea. Many folks DID die; among them my sister and two brothers. Shortly after that I been sold to work myself near to death in the fields, but here I am all these years later – still alive but plenty old.”

Washy fell silent thinking about Nelly dying on a sea voyage. As mad as he could get at her, the thought of her dying was too awful to consider.

Then the three could hear Charlotte calling out for Austin. When she saw them assembled on the piazza, she marched up and laid into Austin.

“Austin, where you been?” She shook her head in frustration.

Austin backed away from her anger and protested, “Just here working, Charlotte!” Just by looking, it was clear to Charlotte that Austin hadn’t accomplished much of anything at all.

“Working at standing about talking?! Come set up the table for the Washingtons’ dinner, now!” She pulled on Austin’s shirt, dragging him in the direction of the kitchen house.

As Jack and Washy watched them go, hiding twin smiles at the spectacle of Charlotte bossing Austin around, Washy thought back to their earlier conversation and suddenly asked, “You miss Africa, Jack?”

The smile quickly faded from Jack’s face and he admitted, “That was quite a long time past.” I hardly recall any of it, except that one smell.” His face was more downcast than usual.

“Smell of what?” Washy asked, curious.

“There be some kind of tree, I reckon. Smells of camphor. Spicy. Most heavenly smell in the world. Never smelled it since.”

Washy considered this for a moment, sniffed the air and said, “Right now, I smell apple pie! I hope Hercules baked a great deal of them. I feel I could eat up a whole bear right now!” Washy’s stomach rumbled loudly.

Jack commented, “That scent of apples cooking will always remind you of home here on the farm at Mount Vernon.”

“You think?! When we were in Philadelphia, it just smelled like horses and dung! Too many people in that city! Even if we are only home for a short while, I plan to eat up as much food as I can!” Washy gathered up his marbles and soldiers. Vulcan leapt up, hopeful of a new game or a morsel of food.

The old man watched him go and said, more to himself than to the boy, “Run along and eat hearty, young Washington!” Jack knew the boy’s dinner could be a fatty ham, and leg of lamb plus hominy, cabbage and most likely potatoes. So unlike his own supper he’d have late after working. Jack rubbed his belly regretfully thinking maybe there’d be some hoe cakes with a bit of meat, he thought but was not too hopeful. That dog, Vulcan was likely to eat better than he would tonight, or any night.

### CHAPTER 3

Sitting with her beloved grandma, Nelly was content. Concentrating on an embroidered sampler as her grandmother was stitching edging on some bed linens, Nelly felt that this must be the safest, sweetest place in the world to be. The enslaved women Moll and Oney worked busily, darning stockings and strengthening seams on the Washingtons' clothing. Although they said little, the women heard everything, only occasionally daring to add to the talk.

Nelly whined a bit to her grandma, Martha Washington. "Grandmother, this ivory thimble Grandpapa gave me has a large crack in it! It snags the threads and makes my needlework look careless." She held out her embroidery to show her ragged work.

"He will buy you a new one, Nelly, dear." Her grandmother responded. "It is his desire that you lack for nothing. Perhaps he can procure a new one from a silversmith in Williamsburg."

Nelly sat back in her chair, satisfied. She felt the cocoon of love envelop her here at Mount Vernon, where she was safe and happy. She looked at her thimble and asked,

"What is ivory? Is it animal bone?"

Her grandma answered, "I understand it to be something much like bone from a very large animal. That big animal tooth your grandfather has displayed in the entryway is from a dead elephant. Craftsmen carve the elephant's ivory tusks into all sorts of clever things."

Nelly considered this for a moment, then asked,

"Where are the elephants from?"

Her grandmother answered, "Elephants are found in the wild, but certainly they are from far, far away in Africa."

Nelly thought back and wondered why Africa sounded familiar. She remembered her younger brother's discovery of Jack's history earlier.

"Oh! Like Jack! She burst out suddenly. "Washy said Jack told him about Africa!"

Martha Washington was about to reply to this surprising discovery when Charlotte could stand it no more and blurted out into the peace of the upstairs bedroom, commenting,

“Old Jack cannot recall much of Africa – he tells those tales over and over until he almost believes he can smell it!” She sniffed in disgust and looked up at the ceiling as if she hadn’t said a word.

“Oh, Charlotte! Jack deserves tolerance; he is quite advanced in age,” Martha Washington rose kindly in his defense. “But what does that mean – he can smell Africa?” she enquired of Charlotte.

“He says it smell like camphor and spice. Some kind of tree?” Charlotte shrugged, not interested in Jack’s ancient memories.

Martha sat back in her chair and laid down her sewing. She said, “The tamarind tree perhaps? Whatever it be, pleasant odors bring on thoughts of home.” She closed her eyes momentarily.

Nelly wanted to pull her back to the present, “Grandma,” she asked, “What smells of home to you?”

Martha Washington’s eyes opened again, and she smiled.

“Oh, the plant we called the Myrtle-berry! I too recall the spicy, strong smell of a plant! The candles that were made of its wax smelled so lovely. That fragrance now always brings to mind my happy years as a young girl living at Chestnut Grove.” To her knowledge, nothing planted at Mount Vernon even came close to that cherished peppery smell.

Nelly worried about her grandmother’s level of contentment. She longed for everyone at Mount Vernon to be as happy as she was right now.

“But are you not happy now?” Nelly asked, fearfully.

Her grandmother caught Nelly’s worry and hurried to assure her, “Of course, dear. What more could I wish for than to be here at Mount Vernon with my family?”

Before Nelly could answer, Charlotte, in her blunt and sassy way, said, “Folks just pine to feel they be back home.”

Nelly stared at Charlotte’s face? Whatever could Charlotte be thinking home could be, the girl wondered. Charlotte was just a slave; she didn’t belong anywhere exactly, except here working for the Washingtons. Nelly shifted uncomfortably in her chair and dropped her gaze to her sewing.

Oney spoke out to silence Charlotte before Martha Washington could be offended.

“Charlotte, surely you cannot recall anywhere but here!” Oney said snappishly.

“Oh, that is for certain. But at times I wonder about where my people come from way before we be slaves living with the Custis folks,” Charlotte answered.

Nelly spoke up, saying, “I know I have a mother, and she was born in these colonies, and I had a father but he is dead now. Now I have Grandmama and Grandpapa. What else is there to know?”

“Every being springs from a mother and is born in a homeland. It unites us, in a way,” Nelly’s grandmother spoke kindly, aware that it was hard for the girl to understand the ways of slave owning.

Unable to contain her disbelief that Martha Washington thought she, Charlotte, a slave, had anything at all that united them, Charlotte burst out, “Oh sure, Missus, we are all alike!” Her tone was mocking, and, she knew, completely unacceptable.

Oney shot Charlotte a warning look and said, “Charlotte, you hush yourself!”

Charlotte swallowed her anger, took a deep breath, and spoke to Martha Washington and Nelly, “I apologize. I was only considering that we all come from somewhere. No matter who we end up being in life.”

Before anyone could add more, Martha Washington ended the discussion and said, “Now this is all much too serious talk! Nelly, think carefully about what color your new gown shall be! I glimpsed some elegant blue silk taffeta in Philadelphia. Shall we send for a length?”

Nelly nodded happily, cheered by the thought of a new dress to wear for their return to Philadelphia and the festive holiday season to come. As Nelly wondered whether her grandmother thought her old enough to attend any balls this year, her musings were interrupted by her brother’s bouncy intrusion into the cozy little gathering of women.

“Nelly! Remember Mr. Ehlers’ portmanteau from Germany?” he burst out, not even greeting his grandmother, he was so excited.

“Oh course, silly. What of it?” Nelly asked. Martha set down her stitching and looked bemused. Washy hadn’t been this enthusiastic about anything since that brash showman toured the area claiming he possessed a dog who could count and win at card games! Poor Vulcan underwent much prodding by Washy thereafter, in hopes of producing another brilliantly smart canine! In the end, Vulcan was no smarter than before and was content to return to his life as a farm dog.

She listened to her grandson in his exuberance, “Grandpapa told Austin to carry it to the servants’ house and Mr. Ehlers would have nothing to do with that! He said he would take it there himself!”

His grandmother sniffed, “Whatever is so odd about that? Most likely he is used to doing for himself.”

To add good measure to the suspicion surrounding Mr. Ehlers, Oney added, “He snapped at me when I tried to move it! He has some kind of spell on that portmanteau.”

“That is nonsense talk, Oney, and I will not hear any more of it,” Martha Washington dismissed the thought.

Nelly, not content to let it alone, asked her brother, “So what do you think makes it so special?”

“I mean to find out!” Washy crowed triumphantly, even though he had no more information about Mr. Ehlers than when the man had arrived.

Moll spoke up from where she had been mending clothes. She had looked after Martha Washington’s children, and now, although much older, she was frequently entrusted to look after the grandchildren. She had no hesitation to speak her mind to them.

“Master Washington, you stay on your side of the estate. Let that German man alone to do his work,” she cautioned.

“Yes, indeed, Washy,” his grandmother put it, “Attend to your own affairs. I believe you have some French grammar to do before Mr. Lear arrives for your lessons.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the boy sighed, exiting the room with annoyance.

Watching him go, Martha Washington commented to Nelly, “Your brother will create any kind of excitement to keep from his lessons, will he not?”

Nelly laughed and nodded her head. Shared concern for young Washy was just another way she stayed close to her grandmother. They said prayers each night, and often, those fervent prayers were murmured on behalf of George Washington Parke Custis. He worried his grandmother frequently with his irresponsible antics.

## CHAPTER 4

Still feeling quite adrift at the vast estate of Mount Vernon, Johann Ehlers stood outside the mansion surveying the vastness of the groomed lawn of the bowling green. The manpower needed to just maintain this swath of grass gave Ehlers food for thought. Why, with all the hired and slave labor on the plantation the landscaping plans for the gardens could be quite grand, he thought.

As Ehlers stood thinking, he was joined by another man who had walked up from the stables.

“Mr. Ehlers!” The man offered a hand in greeting. “Allow me to introduce myself to you. I am Tobias Lear, the President’s secretary.”

“I am happy to meet you! Now I ask how long you work for His Excellency, King Washington.” Ehlers stumbled some over the English words.

Lear smiled and answered, “General Washington would want you to know that he is not a king; rather an elected leader of the people of this new nation. And I have been fortunate to be with him and his family for a number of years now.”

As Ehlers was learning about Lear’s background with the Washingtons, Cornelius McDermott Roe and Thomas Mahoney – two indentured men arrived carrying several small bushes, the roots wrapped in rough cloth.

One of the men, Thomas, spoke to Mr. Ehlers, “Mr. Ehlers? General Washington wanted you to include these Myrtle-berries into your plan. He said Mrs. Washington favored this particular plant for its scent. He intends it to be a special treat for the lady.”



Lear was reminded of the many details Washington concerned himself with all around the farm. He said to the others, “That is why this man is not only first in the heart of his countrymen, but first to his lady and family as well!”

Ehlers agreed, “A kind gentleman is he to bring Mrs. Washington’s long ago memory into his garden.”

“She will indeed be pleased he considered her longings for the perfume of this plant she recalls from her girlhood. I know he put much time into locating and bringing them to the plantation.”

Tobias Lear spoke honestly.

The other man, called Cornelius, chimed in playfully, “Some candles smell nice and all, but to my mind, there is no better perfume than that of potatoes, or praties as I call them, roasting on a fire!”

“I agree with you there, sir!” Lear smiled. “The fragrance of our favorite foodstuffs rivals the sweet scent of any blossom!”

At that, all the gentlemen assembled laughed and nodded merrily.

When the laughter died down, Ehlers said, more seriously, “What you gentlemen say is true – we all long for remembering of the home place. I myself recall fondly my home of Bremen.”

Cornelius asked, “Are you a Dutchman? I hear the accent of a foreigner like myself.”

Ehlers bowed and introduced himself, “I am Johann Ehlers and I do indeed come from Deutschland, or Germany as the Americans say.”

“My name is Cornelius, and this here is Thomas. Ireland is our home, but we find ourselves come to America for the chance at working to keep food in our bellies.”

Ehlers could not help but remark on what seemed to be a shared theme running through all their lives. He said, “Again, I am hearing of more folks recently arriving in this America!”

Lear agreed and added, “And it is understandable! Every man must come from somewhere! That is, except myself,” he set himself apart by saying, “as I am a native-born American.

Thomas protested and gave Lear a friendly shove on the arm. “Nay, sir! Look back in your own history and you will see that your people were born elsewhere!”

“Well, yes,” Lear relented, “I myself was born in New Hampshire. A separate place entirely from Virginia.”

Cornelius spoke up, “And before that, mate?”

Lear smiled suddenly and said, “I suppose I am English, then, for my distant relations sailed for this New World over a century ago!”

“You see!?” Thomas chortled with merriment. “Everyone comes from somewhere else – even, you, my friend! For England is a foreign country now to America!”

Tobias Lear graciously bowed his head and admitted, “True enough, sir. I stand corrected.”

As the four men stood joking and laughing, Nelly and Washy came upon them, winded from rolling hoops up the graveled, serpentine path which bordered the great lawn. Washy nearly ran into the men, but Tobias Lear put out arms to stop him before a crash resulted.

“Here, here, young man!” Lear gasped, “Your French grammar work must be completed for you to run and play so freely!”

Washy gave Nelly a warning look, but she ignored him and ratted him out. “He has not done as you asked, Mr. Lear, preferring to spy into the affairs of others!”

Triumphantly she raised her chin and waited to receive her due praise for reporting out on her brother.

Washy sputtered angrily, “I am NOT spying!”

Tobias Lear let go of Washy’s arms and told the boy, in mock seriousness, “But the war is over! There is no more need for espionage now, young Washington!”

Nelly was not done interfering. “Washy thinks Mr. Ehlers is carrying secrets in his portmanteau!”

Mr. Ehlers, who was having considerable trouble following this rapid exchange in English heard his name and the word ‘secrets’ and asked in a startled voice, “Secrets? I?”

“Mr. Ehlers,” Washy confronted him, “why are you so secretive about the portmanteau you brought to Mount Vernon with you?”

Somewhat offended, Ehlers said, “Young man, I do not believe I need explain but because you are so curious, I shall show you now.” He began to realize that this young boy, the grandson of the great General George Washington wanted very much for there to be some grand, mysterious secret. Ehlers smiled at Washy, and winked playfully at Nelly.

“Let us return to my room at once so that you may see for yourself what secret I have brought here from Germany.”

Nelly smiled knowingly, feeling suddenly to be the very mature, much older and wiser sister.

“Agreed then, Mr. Ehlers,” she said. “Maybe Washy can forget about this silly idea when he sees that you have brought only practical items for your new life in America.”

As they headed back to the servants’ quarters near the mansion, Thomas and Cornelius headed off in the opposite direction, doffing their hats and waving cheerfully. Thomas called back over his shoulder, “Get those Myrtle-berry bushes into the ground soon, mate, so that Mrs. Washington can get to enjoying their fragrance!”

Delighted at this, Nelly enthused, “Oh, Myrtle-berry! Grandmama was just speaking of them! How lovely of Grandpapa to see them included in Mount Vernon’s gardens!” She did a small little happy dance and followed the others.

Once they were at the servants’ house doorway, Mr. Ehlers walked in briefly and brought out the portmanteau. Oney, Charlotte, Jack, and Austin all working nearby found excuses to gather around. Soon they were all watching Mr. Ehlers curiously.

“Now then, young man, let me show you the magic I have brought all this way from Germany,” Mr. Ehlers announced grandly. He opened the buckles on the shabby portmanteau. All assembled could see that it was completely empty, except for a thin bit of twig, its roots wrapped carefully in damp linen.

Mr. Ehlers held it out proudly for inspection.

“A stick?” Washy’s face crumpled into confusion. Then ever hopeful, he asked, “A magic wand, perhaps?”

Nelly comforted her brother with a friendly arm around his shoulders. “Oh Washy – you see, this is a tiny tree! Much like the Myrtle-Berry plants Grandpapa is to have planted for Grandmama! They will bring her a happy smell of home!” Her brother pulled away from her embrace in disappointment.

Bowing to Nelly, Mr. Ehlers said kindly, “Correct, young lady! A black currant cutting brought from Germany. I mean to plant it here as memento from my homeland. In time, it should produce most delicious berries.” He seemed instantly cheered by the prospect.

Charlotte muttered smugly, “I knew there was no magic or spells in that portmanteau!”

However, Oney, still suspicious asked, “Can we be sure? How we going’ to trust this man who comes from who knows where?”

As the assembled were all wondering what would happen next, George Washington approached the group and addressed Tobias Lear.

“Mr. Lear! Why is so little work being accomplished just now? What is the distraction?” Washington hated idle time on the farm when work needed to be done.

His grandson pushed in front of his grandfather and yelled, “Grandpapa! Mr. Ehlers brought a magic stick all the way from Germany!”

As small titters of amusement rippled through the company, Washington crouched down and addressed Washy with a grave face. “Magic, you say! How does it work? Do I have cause to be afraid?” Only his twinkling eyes indicated some fun.

Ehlers stepped forward and explained, “The only magic is to bring alive the smell and taste of Germany in the spring. It is a black currant vine. I hope you would allow me to plant it here. There is no better way to taste Germany!”

Washington stood up and addressed Mr. Ehlers with respect, “That is indeed a unique kind of magic, Mr. Ehlers. I understand your affection for growing such memories. The careful tending of plants which provide thoughts of home can bring comfort those who long for reminders of a familiar place.”

Tobias Lear, who knew this great man so well added, “Sir, that truth is heard in your humble reminders that we should find ways to unite through our humanity, rather than divide our nation through trivial concerns and arguments.”

Washington nodded at Lear and said, “Mr. Lear, you make a better statesman than many men! My words coming from you sound profound, indeed!”

Not wanting to be forgotten by all these adults, Washy said, in a petulant tone, “What do all these words mean? You talk, and talk, but I cannot understand!”

Oney put her hands on the boy’s shoulders and attempted to speak in a way he could understand, “Master Washington, these fine gentlemen are saying what we all know to be true amongst folks: we are more alike than we are different. All folks come from somewhere, and everybody most likely be headed off to somewhere else, in time.”

Ehlers cradled his vine carefully and said, “Mr. Washington, I know your custom is to hear the wisdom of esteemed men such as yourself, but I cannot help but think Oney has spoken very much a truth.”

Oney bobbed her head slightly in acknowledgement of Ehlers’ remark. Washington looked only thoughtful and said nothing else.

The three men and the boy walked off talking and gesturing out across the Lower Garden. Charlotte and Oney waited until the men were some distance away before Charlotte said to Oney, with an edge to her tone “And you tell me to hush when I be sassing to Mrs. Washington?!”

“Charlotte, what I say is not sassing; it be the truth! General Washington himself has said it on occasion!” Oney had nearly convinced herself that this was the truth.

Charlotte sputtered back, “I do not know about that, Oney. But he surely is thinking more about it now! That has got to be the only time a slave owner thought about where everybody came from just to do his work!”

“If anyone can turn thought over in his mind, it is the General. Something will come of it yet....but enough of this pondering, Charlotte. We have a great deal more work to do,” Oney replied.

Charlotte shoved Oney’s shoulder in a friendly way and said loudly now that the two women were far from everyone else, “I will be pondering all that until the day I am free to come and go when and where ever I want! I surely came from somewhere and I want the chance to decide for myself where I am going to live out my days rather than everyone else always deciding it for me!”

Nodding sadly, Oney could only reply, “I cannot help but wonder how that will ever happen for us, Charlotte. But you reckon we might at least hope?”

And with these words as the final consideration for that day, the two women picked up baskets from the ground and headed off quickly to resume work.

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