THE LADY'S GARDEN

By Jane Yolen

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IN THE LADY'S GARDEN lived three unicorns. They were all old — Lady, garden, and unicorns — having been there from the beginning of things. The garden was kept from the sight of the World by a very large stone wall which was overgrown with spindly weeds and thistles, and hairy moss plugging up the chinks.

When the sun shone down, the unicorns liked to lie under the apple tree, which was the oldest thing of all in the garden. Its branches hung down to the ground, gnarled and misshapen, but covered with the most delicious red apples the year round.

When it rained, which was an hour every other day and twice on Tuesdays, regular as clockwork, the unicorns would stay in the stone barn, snugged together in the sweet-smelling hay. The patter on the barn roof then took on a soporific rhythm, and often the unicorns would doze and dream. Their dreams were always about running over great green swards, the wind through the white manes. Always.

If the Lady dreamed — or even she napped — no one knew for sure, for she only spoke of waking things: tide and sun and wind and rain and the changing of seasons.

On one side of the garden was, as I have said, the World. On the other was the Great Ocean. It was the Ocean's tide which was often the subject of the Lady's discourse. And though she may have thought any trouble to the garden would come to it from the World's side, it was the Ocean that did, in the end, bring about her direst time.

Now, though the unicorns were all terribly old, they were not the same age. The oldest was Wishart, whose skin was almost translucent; it was a kind of pearly white, like the inside of certain shells. When he walked — and he never ran — he moved with an ancient grace. His breath studied musty, like a bowl of crushed flower petals. He rarely listened to anything but the sound of the Ocean outside the wall.

The second oldest was Tartary. Her skin was like vellum and looked brittle but wasn't. In fact it was as soft as an infant's and smelled that sweet. sour infant smell, as if talc and sour milk had been mixed together. Tartary listened only to the Lady's voice.

The third oldest — they called her Infants when they called her anything at all — still had a bit of spirit to her walk, and a bit of flint in her amber eyes. Even her horn was still the gold of new-minted coins, while the other unicorns had horns more like the color of the full moon.

If Wishart listened only to the sound of the Ocean, and Tartary listened only to the Lady, Infants heard the sounds of the earth growing: grass and leaves and timothy in the fields. She could distinguish between oak and ash on the rise, though the sound of rowan growing made her tremble all over.

And the Lady? She was old but she never seemed to age. Except her eyes, which were once the deep, rich blue of a Spring sky and were now faded like the skies over Winter.

Now the way that trouble came to the garden was this. It was a small thin& but the Lady should have known that small things carry the greatest dangers. Didn't a tiny viper bite the heel of the hero and bring him low? Didn't ants tunnel through the great walls of Cathay and grind whole sections to dust?

For the first time in years — in centuries, actually — there was a strange sound outside one of the gates in the wall. Those gates, normally so overgrown with bramble hedge and briar on the World's side and so besieged by the Ocean on the other, needed no guards or wards. In fact, the Lady and the unicorns scarcely remembered from one year to the next that the gates existed. But this one lambent spring day, right after the hour's rain, there was something rather like the wailing of a discontented child by the Northeastern gate. No, exactly like the wailing of a discontented child. The wailing went on from the moment the rain ended until quite past tea time, or about three hours. At that point, Infanta stomped three times with her left fore foot and shook her head until the white mane flew about as light as milkweed milk.

"What is that noise?" she asked.

Neither Tartary — who listened to the Lady — or Wishart — who listened only to the sea — bothered to answer. But Infanta asked anyway. "It is louder than grass growing. Louder than a gully full of Queen Anne's Lace and campion. Louder even than the bursting open of marigolds, which is very loud, indeed." And she went to complain directly to the Lady, who had heard the sound already.

"If I didn't know any better," said the Lady, "I would say it is a child -and a very young child at that — lying in a reed basket washed up upon the Ocean's small shingle." And because the Lady was blessed with a certain amount of prescience, which is another way of saying she could see a bit into the future, Infanta knew exactly what they would find.

The Lady sent one of her most trusted winds to leap over the wall and report back. It was a very small wind, hardly more than a breeze, really. When it returned, it reported in a voice made sweet with baby's breath and tart with brine. "It is a very young child lying in a basket."

“A reed basket,” the Lady said, a great deal of satisfaction in her voice.

“Well, nettles and linen, actually,” the breeze answered. Breezes, for all they are lightweight, insist on being factual. It is the habit of preachers and politicians as well.

The Lady made a face at the breeze. She hated making any kind of mistake. But then she smiled at the breeze because it had, after all, merely been reporting, not making judgments. And then the Lady instructed slightly larger breezes to waft their gauzy shifts together and make a rope to hook through the handles of the basket. In this way the child was raised up and over the wall and into the garden proper.

And that, you see, was the Beginning of the End.

THE CHILD was a boy. That was evident at once. And he was hungry. That, too, was evident. But whose child he was or why he was there at all, those questions could not be answered, not even by the Lady. Indeed those questions were never to be answered, but by tea time the next day it didn’t matter because by then they were all thoroughly besotted with him.

Infanta was the first to fall under his spell, when he raised his little hand up to her mane and tangled his chubby fingers in it.

The next to fall was Tartary. “He has,” she cooed to the Lady, “your voice.” By which she meant she was listening to him, though not really hearing him, for certainly the baby did not have the Lady’s voice at all, hers being low and rounded and full, and his just being full.

Wishart actually held out the longest, until the breezes lifted the child onto his back. The baby crowed his delight, and if you could at that moment have seen the look in Wishart’s old pearly eyes, you would have been sure they had turned to oceans themselves. He trotted around the inner path, past the herb gardens, stepping over rockery plants with a lightness he hadn’t shown in years.

The Lady changed the baby’s clothes and fed him pap she mixed herself, and wiped both his face and his bottom as if that were something she had always wanted to do. And she sang to him as she cleaned, songs like “Dance to Thy Daddy, My Little Laddie,” and “Trot, Trot to Boston,” which hadn’t even been invented yet. And “Western Wind,” which had.

Eventually, after months of squabbling, they settled on Waverly as his name.

“Because the waves brought him,” the Infanta said, looking down fondly into his crib.

As long as Waverly was a baby and then a child, there was no trouble in the

Lady's garden. After all, except for uprooting some of the slighter plants — to see what held them to the ground — Waverly was a good boy, if overly curious. Of course curiosity was not something either the Lady or the unicorns really understood. But they realized, if somewhat begrudgingly, that curiosity would serve young Waverly in his education, and so they did not stifle it.

By the time he was ten and had gone through "What's that?" and "Why's that?" and on to "Why not?" however, they had all begun to lose patience with him. With their sense of time, it seemed that only yesterday they had drawn baby Waverly up from the basket, though to Waverly it was ages and ages earlier.

Where, they wondered, is the sweet-smelling, charming, compliant infant we fell in love with? And who is this loud, boisterous, dirty boy who has taken his place! And slowly, though they certainly didn't mean to, they all fell out of love with him. Just a little.

Just enough.

Now Waverly did not know what was happening, but he certainly felt that something was. One moment everyone — Lady and unicorns and breezes —had all been lovely to him, giving him whatever he asked for and praising him. And then suddenly they said "No!" all the time. "No, you cannot make a fortress in the rockery garden." "No, you cannot put a house up in the apple tree." "No, you cannot scale the wall." "No, you cannot . . . must not . . . shall not . . . may not..." to everything that seemed even the slightest bit interesting or exciting or dangerous.

So Waverly did what every child at ten does. He did it all anyway.

Neither the Lady nor the unicorns knew the slightest thing about giving out punishments. It was not in their makeup. So they did what they had done before Waverly had ever arrived. Wishart started listening only to the sound of the sea. Tartary, listened only to the Lady's voice. Infanta listened only to the sounds of the earth growing. And the Lady — she worked in the garden, she kept the great house clean, and she spoke to Waverly only when forced to. When forced to say, once again, "No!"

So it should not have been surprising — though it was — that on the morning of Waverly's sixteenth birthday (or at least the morning of the anniversary of the sixteenth year he had been drawn up out of the sea) they were all awakened by the sound of loud chopping. When they got out to the garden, there was Waverly, an axe in hand. He had just finished cutting down the apple tree and hollowing it into a boat.

"A boat?" the Lady asked for she knew right away what he was doing, her prescience working as well as her eyes. "And where did you learn about boats?"

“Where I learned about the Ocean and where I learned about the World,” Waverly answered sensibly. “In your library.”

“But the apple tree is the oldest thing of all,” the Lady said.

“And I am the newest,” Waverly said. “Would you have had me make a boat from stone?”

“We wouldn’t have you make a boat at all,” the Lady said. “Would we?” she asked the unicorns.

Wishart did not answer, for he was listening only to the sea which was issuing a strange siren call. Tartary did not answer, for she was waiting for the Lady’s answer. And Infanta was too busy weeping over the demise of the apple tree.

Still, they didn’t stop the boy, because he was already halfway through building the boat. And besides, they didn’t know how.

It took him three days to make the boat and rig a sail, just as he had seen in one of the books in the Lady’s library. And that very night, without so much as a goodbye, he was gone with the boat over the wall. They had no idea how he had managed; they had no idea he was so resourceful.

The Lady mourned his leaving in her own way, digging up plants and moving them about, the autumn crocuses three times until they died from all the changes.

Tartary and Infanta wandered disconsolately about, their heads so low they plowed furrows in the soil with their horns. But for the longest time, it looked as if Wishart hadn’t even noticed the boy was gone. He just listened, ever more intently, at the Northeastern gate to the sounds of the sea.

And then one morning, a gale blowing out upon the Ocean, Wishart roused in a sudden and inexplicable fury and beat upon the gate with his feet and plunged his horn again and again into the wood. At last the gate broke open from the savage attack, swung wide, and in rushed the angry sea.

The waters covered the garden and the house. The Lady and the unicorns were swept away in a great swirl of foam as pearly white as horn. And after the waters settled again, all that could be seen was the topmost part of the Southwestern gate, the one closest to the World. And there, at low tide ever after, a black-backed gull sat, turning its head curiously at each passing breeze.

Of course that is not entirely the end of the story. I could not bear if that were so. Wishart and Tartary and Infanta became the very first narwhales, of course, those wonderful sleek whales with the long, twisting single horns.

The Lady built a new garden, this one under the Ocean, with bright anemones clinging to coral beds, like rockeries.

And Waverly, in the shape of a porpoise, comes to visit them every day and twice on Tuesdays, as regular as clockwork. Or so I like to think. And since this is my story, that is the way of it. If you think there is a different ending, you will have to tell it yourself.

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In 1993, Jane Yolen published her 140th book. It was a particularly good year for her. In addition to the publication, she won a Rhysling award for the best sf poem, and the Mythopoeic Society's award for the best fantasy novel. One of the books she edited for Jane Yolen Books (an imprint of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) won the Golden duck award for the best young adult fantasy novel

"The Lady's Garden" is part of Jane's collection called Here There Be Unicorns, which Harcourt Brace Jovanovich will publish this fall. The piece was written while she was in Scotland, which, she writes," accounts for the British flavor of the story."