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HORSE AND GARDEN

by Norbert Kovacs

Gene Stamp was proud of his flower garden. He had set its plot in the middle of his backyard where any visitors would see it immediately through the bay window of his parlor. It made a circle in the grass of the lawn, its flowers a fantastic variety throughout the spring: blue violets, white crocuses, daffodils, tulips, irises. He called the garden his "little jewel" and never tired of hearing it praised.

Gene was proudest of the compliments that Darrel Finch, the town mayor, gave. A landscape designer before taking office, Finch designed a beautiful local park that Gene greatly admired for its rose-bush lined paths and sculptured hedges. Many other people believed, like Gene, that the mayor knew what went into attractive horticulture; magazines from *Fine Gardening* to *Country Living* had recognized the mayor as a "green thumb leader." Every spring in the last several years, Mayor Finch had visited the more famous (and wealthy) town citizens as part of a local house-calling tour and made it a point to see the homes' gardens. On every one of these tours, he had called Gene's the best garden in town. "No one can beat your tulips and irises, Stamp," Finch enjoyed boasting. "They're the nicest looking flowers around." The press and townspeople, who attended the mayor on the tours and liked to endorse his taste, fell to praising Gene in the same line. This pleased Gene greatly, but it went badly to his head. He believed he was superior to the rest of the town's gardeners, "the less talented horticulturally" as he came to think them. If a friend was bored and disinterested in his flower patch, he took it as an affront. Mrs. Mabel, an old woman who liked to walk by Gene's place in the mornings, joked once to him, "Wouldn't your daffodils look a bit nicer next to your violets?"

"They're fine wherever I put them, thank you," he had answered, scowling, and stalked away.

Gene's garden had been the one pleasing sight near his backyard for some time. The forest behind the lawn formed a crowd of decaying, broken maple trees, the stone that peeked from the ground there a uniform gray. From the garden, the lawn descended at a run to a weathered barnyard fence, past which lay the abandoned neighboring property. Its last owners had quit long ago and the lawn had grown into an unkempt meadow. An old stable stood a short distance away, the boards in its roof crumbling, the white paint on its outside peeled in streaks. However, one day, as Gene stopped to survey his tulips, he heard hammers and saws at work in the stable. He discovered a corral of white stakes and boards had been built joining it. Someone had put there a wonderful black horse. The animal had a lustrous mane, sides of broad muscle, and strong, sable legs. Her large eyes were intelligent and attentive as she turned her fine head and ate at the overgrown grass the corral builders had not cut.

Gene was glad to find the attractive horse in view of his garden. He went eagerly down the hill to meet her owner but met only hired workers at the stable. The owner, the workers said, was busy training elsewhere. Gene anticipated the man coming later that day, but he did not show any time Gene checked for him.

When he went to town, Gene mentioned the horse next door to his friend John, who surprised him by saying he had met the man who owned her. John told him about Manuel Rios, a short, dark haired

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man, who worked as a horse trainer and coach in their town and the area.

"He's a demanding teacher, he says. Puts his students through every kind of drill. But he makes a few of them very decent horse riders for it." This report encouraged Gene. He imagined his neighbor had to be a serious, proud sort of man. Someone worth knowing, he believed.

The next week, Gene had several friends to his home for tea in the back parlor. Outside the parlor's big bay window was the garden crowned by blue irises. "My flowers have come up a very strong color this year," he said in ready time.

Several of the friends gathered by the window and made compliments to the same effect.

"They're just lovely."

"Very nice. How do you do it, Gene?"

Gene smiled and thought of telling them about his new method of watering the garden. But his friend Jason said just then, "Doesn't the new horse trainer I've heard about live down the hill from you?"

Gene's face slackened. "There is a man with a horse down there."

"It must be him. He's supposed to be pretty good horse-wise."

"I've heard something like it."

"They say the guy has a very attractive horse."

"I saw him riding her the other day near my neighbor's," Gladys, one of Gene's woman friends, said. "A beautiful horse. Shiny, black mane. Great profile."

"Here," Jason said, considering quickly, "maybe we could go down and see her if your neighbor was open to it. We might go as a group."

"We could go after I tell you about my garden," Gene said.

"Come on, Gene! We can hear about your garden later. The horse is bigger news."

"Yes, let's see her!" a couple of the other friends said, growing excited.

Gene hid a frown. "Alright then, let's," he said. He led his friends out the back door and toward his neighbor's lawn down the hill. They found Manuel by the corral grooming the horse. The man lifted his brown face to the group and raised a hand to them as they came and introduced themselves.

"I'm too happy to show you Starlet," Manuel said when Jason asked, so the friends gathered around the corral. Gene drew near with them. As they admired the animal, they started talking with her owner. They learned he was, in fact, a trainer as they had heard. He had moved to this part of Connecticut for its horse country. "I feel sure I'll make a lot of friends with all the horse owners in the area," he told them. He said he liked his new home, his first with a stable and corral where he could keep Starlet rather than house her apart. "She's a real friend, and here I can take care of her as I think I should be." Manuel went on to say that he rode Starlet to riding and horsemanship lessons where he used her to teach. "She works for all types of riders."

Manuel was as interested in learning about Gene and his friends as they were him. With a friendly light in his face, he asked into their lives, careers, personal interests. He listened, his eyes focused carefully on theirs, as Jason told about managing at the bank and Gladys leading the local women's club. Manuel seemed encouraged. "I don't know other horse trainers who get introduced like this on coming to a new town." He let the people in the group touch and stroke the side of his horse as they spoke.

Gene stroked the horse because his friends were, but he did it without enjoyment. He thought, once or twice, to revive his garden as a topic of conversation, but whenever he tried, his friends always rushed out some new question about Manuel, the horse, and prevented him. Gene was left silent. The discussion ended with the friends parting amicably with Manuel and returning with Gene up the hill.

"The next time I visit, Gene, I'll have to stop and talk with your neighbor again," Jason said, leaning toward his companion confidentially. "He has the makes of being a really good friend."

"Why not?" Gene smiled politely. But inside he was angry that Manuel had displaced his garden in his friends' interest.

Gene was more upset when he went out next to water his irises and discovered Manuel and his horse, Starlet, down the hill. Manuel was exercising her, and the horse's strong motion as she ran, the earthy lunge of her flank made Gene burn. Gene went indoors to avoid the pair. However, he was not to forget Manuel and his horse, or at least escape news of them. When he met his friends, they seemed to talk about nothing but Manuel and Starlet. Manuel and the horse had turned into local celebrities after making several remarkable appearances around their small town in the Litchfield hills. Jason reported that the two had entertained a huge party organized by a very rich local man with a estate in the west of town. Manuel had delighted the guests by having his horse skip sideways, crossing her legs in rhythm to stereo music. "It was a great performance I heard," Jason said smiling. "His horse can dance."



Gladys reported that Manuel and Starlet had given a horsemanship show as part of the field day at the local elementary school. She said that the children had cheered as Manuel trotted Starlet through a winding course of orange traffic cones and leaped over a fence arranged in mid-soccer field. The children were even more jubilant when a few were let to ride Starlet through the course of cones without Manuel guiding them. "I heard he managed it all by hand prompt," Gladys said, leaning forward confidentially. "The schoolchildren talked about that horse for days afterwards."

The horse gained notice through less public means, too. Local people walking the extensive trails in the woods beside Gene's home had spotted Manuel and his horse at their corral in the afternoon. Many of them came to meet the pair with inevitable curiosity. Manuel was as affable and courteous with these visitors as he had Gene's friends, and many hikers in the woods detoured to get acquainted.

All the good favor toward Manuel and his horse did not sit well with Gene. Mayor Finch would stop by on his tour of the local gardens in the coming weeks, and Gene feared the man also would visit his neighbor, whom everyone in town was praising to the sky. If Starlet impressed him as much as everyone else, there was the risk the mayor would praise the horse more than his garden. Gene's envy flared a hideous green at the thought. He decided that, under no circumstances, would he sit by idly and let Manuel and Starlet take higher honors. He resolved, in fact, to remove the horse before Mayor Finch visited.

Gene considered how to do it. His first idea was to lead the horse from her stable at night and goad her into the woods, where she could run, not to return. It hit him quickly that she might not go on her own even if encouraged. Most horses would not, being used to stay in a stable at night. He considered again. He imagined hiring a thief to take Starlet. Perhaps for a few hundred dollars?, he wondered. However, he believed an outsider might ask questions and cut out before making the theft. The ploy would mean more trouble than good. Gene decided, finally, that he would have to steal the horse himself to do it right. He realized that, to manage well, he would have to become familiar with the animal: a strong creature like her would resist if a stranger tried leading her, especially in the evening when Gene expected to take her. Manuel was the sole man, at that moment, who regularly handled Starlet. Gene would have to win his trust to be let to handle the creature then gain her confidence. He disliked the idea: his last notion of a good time was pretending to like his garden's rival. However, he had fixed on the idea of not losing the mayor's favor to a plain horse so decided to pursue the scheme.

He ventured by the corral one afternoon while Manuel was grooming Starlet and bid him a warm hello. He told Manuel he had a long interest in horse riding and gave several "personal opinions" on points of horsemanship--discipline, practice, upkeep--that his parlor friends had reported Manuel naming in conversation. Manuel seemed encouraged. As if addressing a colleague, he went into some technicalities of horsemanship. "I'll tell you how it was training her to sidestep," he said. Gene listened, understanding little, but nodded so his neighbor would keep talking. After answering Manuel's inquiries over his garden, the two parted amicably. However, Gene returned up the hill disliking Manuel as much as ever, his true interest only his garden's reputation.

Gene resumed his overtures a few days later. He came over when Manuel was by and convinced the man to let him brush Starlet. "Her mane is very nice and soft," he said as he stroked her, trying not to grit his teeth. "You must enjoy cleaning her."

On a day soon after, Gene visited while Manuel was walking Starlet around her corral. Gene paced alongside them and touched the horse's side as they paced.

Gene made further visits in which Manuel let him lead and even saddle Starlet for him. Gene put the equipment on securely taking every opportunity to gaze warmly into the horse's eyes as Manuel did and to caress her. Manuel, who seemed to sense Gene's new interest in Starlet, allowed Gene to mount and walk the horse around the corral for him. Gene led her slowly, the two of them going at ease. He felt the horse had become used to his company.

Gene was confident, at last, that he could lead the horse from the stable without any incident, so he acted on his plan to dispose of her. He wrote a glowing newspaper ad offering the horse for sale. "A bargain at \$____", it read: he asked a low price, hoping to attract a buyer fast. He placed the ad in some non-local papers to prevent anyone in town discovering he meant to sell a horse they all knew belonged to his neighbor. No sense in incriminating myself first thing, he thought. Within a week, Gene got an interested party from Massachusetts, whom he invited to his place on a day he knew Manuel would be out and leave behind Starlet.

Gene led his buyer, Mr. George, a docile, bovine-faced man, down the long hill of his backyard toward his neighbor's stable. "I keep the horse on the land where my superintendent lives," Gene explained as they passed through the white fence. "He has the small house you see over there. I let him stay free." Mr. George nodded and Gene sensed the man took his words at face value.

The two came to the corral, and Gene led Starlet out for inspection. He had her jog around the corral some to show how nicely she moved. Mr. George found the horse was impressive and beautiful as Gene had claimed and said he would purchase her. Gene was pleased. With a cold professionalism, he arranged the details for picking up his neighbor's horse. He told the man to come for her Friday, the last day she could stay before the mayor visited on Saturday. He said Mr. George should come at nine thirty that night for her. Gene picked the rather late time so that he could be sure Starlet was there and that he could take her under cover of dark. Manuel would be in bed by then, he knew, for he went to sleep early, so would be unlikely to interfere. "I can't do it any other time," Gene said to settle any doubt in Mr. George. "I'm on this awful work schedule that kills my weekends. It's real bad." Finally, Gene asked his buyer to park at his house when he came. "I won't have the contract of sale ready until then," he claimed. "So it'd be a favor." Gene asked this as he planned to have Starlet at his home



rather than Manuel's when he gave her over. It would make the whole transfer safer and less likely to draw undue attention, he trusted. Mr. George hesitated once on the terms. "It does seem a strange time and process. I don't believe I bought any other horse so." But he added quickly, "Of course, I'd rather not lose a beauty like her because of when I bought her or any such technicalities." So all was arranged.

Around nine on Friday night, Gene, as planned, went down to his neighbor's to steal the horse. The evening was complete darkness. There was no moon, and the maples of the forest raised wide dark heads beside his lawn. Gene proceeded carefully, hardly able to see three feet ahead. He passed onto Manuel's land, reached the stable, then Starlet's stall. He found the horse lying on the straw in the corner, her legs tucked under her. While she seemed tired, she stood promptly enough when Gene entered. Gene laid the hand she found so familiar on her face and gave her a carrot from his pocket. As she ate, he fitted her with a simple bridle and led her outside.

On the lawn, Gene moved slowly into the dark. It seems even darker than when I had come, he told himself as he fumbled forward. He edged first from the corral, then toward the gate. From behind, he saw no light nor heard any motion from Manuel's house to suggest his neighbor had noticed the theft. Gene felt encouraged. He walked at ease to the picket fence by the end of his yard, opened the gate, and brought the horse through it. He did not go six feet onto his lawn when he realized he had not closed the gate behind him. He considered that an open door in the fence might hint that someone, if not he, had taken the horse onto his property. Gene did not want to give any sign this had happened. He let go the bridle, walked back down to the fence, and after grappling in the dark, found and closed the gate. As it shut, he heard the horse step quickly from the spot where he had left her. He turned but did not see where she had gone in the dark.

Gene faced around toward the woods. He had seen Manuel and Starlet riding many times in them, so imagined that was where she may have gone. Gene went into the wooded dark and moved carefully amid the many maples. He slinked over broken rocks and root-choked paths. He listened for Starlet's hooves, thudding on the earth, the heave of her breath. But he heard no sound except his own. And the woods showed no shape recalling her. Finally, Gene returned to his lawn, puzzling over where the creature could have gone.

Gene's sight had adjusted to the dark by now and, as he stepped from the trees, he spotted the horse shuffling about his lawn. He went toward her but, near mid-lawn, he stopped in horror. Up ahead, his garden lay in ruins. Iris heads were torn from their stems. His beautiful rose bushes were pounded down. His lilies lay crushed and flattened in the dirt. How could this be?, Gene thought gasping. He seized on the truth almost at once: Starlet had trampled the garden as she walked blindly in the dark. Gene sat on the ground and put his head between his knees. Was this wreck what he now had to show the mayor tomorrow?, he asked himself. He hardly could think it.

As he held motionless and stunned in the dark, Gene realized he had to do something about the horse because Mr. George was coming for her. And soon. However, he wondered, in his deepening funk, if it was worth getting her away now. He believed he could not show the place in its new state to Mayor Finch. He felt it would be better to not open the door to him (or even be home) than show the garden and explain how it had been ruined. Then Gene reflected some more and had a new idea. He would blame Manuel for the damage, he thought. He would tell the mayor that Manuel, in a jealous mood, had led the horse out at night to destroy his prize flowers. Gene had the perfect proof of the story too: the horse's hoof prints were all over the garden dirt!

To ensure there was a horse now to accuse Manuel, he went and fetched Starlet from where she ambled by the side of his house. He led her back her down to her stable and her stall and left her lying peacefully on her straw. Then he walked back up the dark hill and returned home. In his living room, he took some paper and scribbled this note:

Mr. George,

Please forgive me. I've decided not to sell my horse. Accept my apologies for drawing you from home for no reason tonight.

Gene Stamp

He taped the note to his front door and went upstairs to bed. Soon enough, he heard Mr. George arrive and park his trailer in the front driveway. The fellow emerged from his vehicle and came to the door. A pause ensued. Then the fellow returned down the step, got in his vehicle, and left. Got rid of him, Gene thought with a smile and drew snug the blanket on his bed.

The next morning at ten, Mayor Finch and his entourage of staff, local reporters, and prominent townspeople arrived at Gene's. The mayor beamed at the gardener when he opened the door. "I hope we've got you at the right time," Finch said, greeting him with his trademark good-humor.

Gene calculated not to reflect the man's good mood. He did not smile at the man or his entourage, and made no motion to usher them into the house.

"I wish I could receive you in a better condition, Mayor Finch," he said. "However I can't. And I can't show you to my garden this year even though I know how you have come expecting it." Gene looked down at his shoes as if unable to say any more.

Mayor Finch, very concerned, asked, "How is this? Has anything happened?"

"There has. But to explain it, I'd have to introduce you to my neighbor who lives down the hill."

"You mean the man with the wonderful sable horse?" a woman in the entourage chirped. "We meant



to see him right after you."

Gene kept himself from wincing. "I do mean him. Why I can't show you my garden concerns his horse. I could say more if we go down to see him."

The mayor's face expressed a meld of curiosity and puzzlement at Gene's insistence. He said however, "Let's all go see him together."

So the party and Gene went down to Manuel's estate. The horse trainer greeted them at the door and after making introductions, led them out back to Starlet.

"We have decided to come early at your neighbor's request," the mayor said as they walked across the lawn. Gene looked coolly toward Manuel as the mayor spoke, but his neighbor did not show if he picked up on it. Manuel led the party around the house to the corral where his horse stood. Everyone clustered around to look at her.

Gene drew the mayor near the front so they and Manuel were closest to Starlet. "Doesn't she have a beautiful mane?" Gene asked the mayor.

"Yes, it's so black and shiny."

"And don't you think her face good?"

"She does have nice eyes."

"Nice body, too, eh?"

"Yes. She is a very handsome animal. But you had said she had something to do with your garden..."

Gene drew himself up and spoke so everyone would hear. "Her owner led her from her stall last night and walked her all over my flowers."

The crowd that had oohed and aahed the horse fell quiet. Manuel's brow crunched with incomprehension and he said angrily, "What are you talking about?"

Gene faced the mayor and crowd. "Come," he said. "I will show you what he and his horse did." Gene marched up the hill. The mayor and his entourage seemed beside themselves and did not move. A few stared at one another. However, Gene continued up the hill and a feeling came over the group that he really must have something to show. The mayor, then the different members of the entourage and Manuel went up the hill after him. Gene led them to the ruined garden where he turned to the crowd. He cried to them, "Look at this mess! Snapped and broken flowers everywhere. Smashed rose bushes. Trampled lilies. This used to be a garden of beautiful red, blue, and yellow. But my neighbor destroyed it last night. He knew you were coming today and did this so you would think more of him and his horse than me."

Manuel's brown face darkened. "I did no such a thing," he said.

"Then how did the hoof prints of your horse get there?"

Gene pointed at the smashed tulip heads where everyone saw the imprint of a horse's hooves. A shocked silence fell on the group.

Mayor Finch was the first to speak. He strode up to Manuel. "Just what is the meaning of this? Why did you destroy the garden?"

"I had no idea this happened," Manuel said, baffled. "I am not to blame."

At that moment, a voice familiar to Gene came from the crowd.

"I'm sorry if I have this wrong, but weren't *you* trying to sell me the horse in that corral?"

It was Mr. George who spoke. He had arrived not long before and wandered up with the mayor's group when it had gone to see the garden. Mr. George had addressed the gardener, so the crowd turned toward Gene.

"I did nothing of the kind," Gene said. "I don't sell other people's horses."

"Now don't tell me that. Just a few days ago, you convinced me I should buy her. I came last night like we arranged so I could take her. You left a note on the front door saying you thought against selling her. I came again today supposing I might convince you to sell regardless. You really did clinch me on her."

Gene gritted his teeth. Drat my salesmanship, he thought. "I don't know what you mean," he told Mr. George aloud. "I've no idea who you are. I never tried selling you a horse."

"Listen, I have my horse trailer in front of your house. I brought it supposing I might get the horse at a higher price than we had settled."

Gene paled but thought to go on denying him. "I never discussed prices or horses with you. I don't know why you should have brought your trailer."



His large eyes burning, Mr. George reached into his inside coat pocket.

"Well, then, what about this newspaper ad for the horse that I answered?" the bovine-faced fellow said. He took out his wallet, pulled out the ad, and read it to the group. "For sale. Sleek, sable horse. Well built, rides excellently, disciplined. Trained and trainable. A bargain at \$____. Call Gene at ____ to learn more.' Fresh from my local *Berkshire Herald*."

Gene realized he was caught. He turned and faced the group, his face white. "Yes, I did try to sell the horse," he said. "I lied all about the theft. I took her to be rid of her before the mayor came. I didn't want her here to be admired. But the horse got the better of me."

The crowd burst into cries of indignation. "Mr. Stamp, this is shameful," Mayor Finch said, gesturing with his forefinger. "I never would have thought a man who took as much pride in his garden would stoop to maligning his neighbor." The mayor marched for the front of the house where the group had parked their cars. His entourage, confused with shock and embarrassment, followed on his heels. "I can't believe it!", "Terrible", "How could he?" they called as they fled. With the same brand of anger, Mr. George, his bovine-face cemented hard, said to Gene, "So is this what comes of trying to buy from you?" He flung the ad for the horse at Gene and sped scowling for his trailer on the other side of the house. Then Manuel glared at his neighbor, turned and stalked down the hill for his home. Gene watched him go inside and felt sure that the man never would speak to him again.

Later, Gene read the news reporters' blistering stories about the garden visit and the mayor's condemnation. Alone in his parlor with the curtains drawn over the windows, he doubted if many people would come to admire his garden again—and even whether he should plant a new one. The worst of it was that he knew he had brought on all the trouble. I may as well have trampled the garden myself than let the horse, he thought. However, there was no getting around the fact he did what he did and it would take planting several gardens with kind-heartedness, and even good words to his neighbor, before he happily admired his flowers.



About the Author:



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CONTENTS

HOME	CONTRIBUTORS	CURRENT ISSUE	STORE	FICTION	HAPPENINGS	NEW TITLES
ABOUT US	FRIENDS & PATRONS	BACK ISSUES	CONTACT US	NONFICTION	BOOK REVIEWS	ART & PHOTOGRAPHY
MASTHEAD	DONATE	SUBMISSIONS	BOOK CHAT LIVE	POETRY	INTERVIEWS	BOOK MARKETING

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