

# Following in GRACE'S FOOTSTEPS



By Larry Habegger and James O'Reilly

**A**N HEIRLOOM HAS BEEN HANDED DOWN on Telegraph Hill. Grace Marchant's world-class flower garden that tumbles down the hill's east slope in a wash of color has been passed along to her chosen successor.

Gary Kray, a native San Franciscan who has been coming to the Filbert Steps since his mother first allowed him to ride the streetcar alone at the age of ten, was Grace's friend and next-door neighbor the last eight years of her life. She quietly recruited him and he was unwittingly hooked by the exhilaration of helping plants grow. Now he has completed a three-year effort to restore Grace's Garden to the gem it was before her advancing age slowed her down.

Some 200 steps down from Coit Tower, just below Montgomery Street, the Filbert Steps become a wooden staircase leading into an enchanted neighborhood of cottages dating back to the Gold Rush era. A few landings above Napier Lane, the last of the city's boardwalk alleys, Grace's Garden spreads out in a profusion of roses, fuchsias, gladiolas and daffodils, purple-blossomed pleroma trees and a score of other flowering plants above a ground cover of baby tears, providing a haven for cats, raccoons and, recently, even a fox. Paths wind through the rose bushes to benches tucked away in seclusion — places to relax, meditate or just watch the play of hummingbirds among the blossoms. Views stretch beyond the cliff at the eastern edge of the garden to the waters of the Bay far below. It is an oasis of calm in one of the most densely populated areas of the city.

That the garden is here at all is a small miracle, testimony to the indefatigable will of a woman who was forced to move to California in 1912 to recover from a life of overwork in the severe climate of South Dakota, and who in middle age overcame crippling spinal arthritis to create her life's crowning work.

Grace Marchant was a charming, wily and compassionate woman who was never afraid to speak her mind

and fought hard for what she believed in. Before coming to San Francisco in 1936, she had worked as a stuntwoman in silent films and a wardrobe mistress for RKO and 20th Century Fox. Her daughter, Valetta, was a chorus girl for RKO and the Fanchon and Marco vaudeville troupe, and during World War II, mother

and daughter both worked on Liberty ships in Sausalito. Before moving to the Filbert Steps, Grace had lived with Valetta and her husband, Des Heslet, a block away on the Greenwich Steps, where Valetta still maintains her own impressive garden as she has for almost 50 years.

Grace began the beautification of Telegraph Hill at age 63 in 1949 when she moved into the house at the corner of Napier Lane and the Filbert Steps, owned then as it is now by Edith Hyler, who lives upstairs. At that time the area was an unsightly garbage dump full of an astonishing variety of debris: old tires, bedsprings, discarded furniture, even the

remains of dilapidated cottages that had been demolished but never removed. Grace cleaned up the hill herself and began, in small steps, the project that would reclaim the hillside.

Year in, year out, she worked steadily on that project, caring for her creation virtually right up until her death in December 1982 at the age of 96.

In her last years, Grace gamely worked in the garden almost every day, but she watched sadly as her creation began to be overrun with the weeds she could no longer control. Small pruning jobs became major challenges. The garden was still lovely to most passersby, but to her eye it was falling into disarray.

On occasion the neighbors formed weeding parties to help her out, but without a primary motivator the efforts never produced much. The most concerned neighbors questioned what would happen when Grace could no longer work in the garden, but many good ideas about creating a garden fund and hiring someone to tend the area died on the vine.

Then along came Gary Kray. Gary had co-founded and spent ten years with San Francisco Victoriana, a

For 33 years Grace Marchant lovingly tended the flowers of the Filbert Steps, creating a garden oasis in the heart of the city. Now her mission is being carried on by a man who once couldn't tell a flower from a weed.



restoration firm largely responsible for creating a public awareness of the value of the city's Victorians. He was a veteran of many preservation battles, but he had never been much of a gardener.

"Grace would come by with the hose and water my window boxes because I was letting everything die," he recalls. "She gave me hell for that. She could be one tough lady, especially when it came to taking care of plants and animals. I didn't even know weeds from flowers. She'd yank stuff out and say, 'That's a weed.' She was sure I'd killed the bougainvillea, but she kept watering it anyway, and you can see the result." The bougainvillea is now thriving against his house.

When Grace became incapable of doing even the simplest chores, Gary began to help her in the garden. He became her hands and did the work her eyes saw. They worked together the last two years of her life, and in that time he began to understand her philosophy for creating a place that has the spirit of a wild garden. "I can't presume to say, but maybe Grace knew before she died that I'd develop her touch. I never would have predicted it. I was only helping this woman preserve what she'd spent 30 years of her life creating."

But somewhere along the way he got dirt under his nails. Tending Grace's garden became part of him, and in her last months it became clear that she was passing on to him the responsibility for its care.

He shakes his head in wonder now at how unconscious he was when he first started working with her. "I'd been weeding for a couple of hours one day when Grace came out and called up to me, 'Gary, how do you like the irises?' I looked around and realized I was surrounded by pink and purple irises. I'd been right there working for a couple days and I hadn't even seen them. It's unbelievable how unaware I was."

Now it pains him to discover that same inattention in others, and he sees part of his role as that of an educator — something that comes naturally to him. He's gone from restoring and preserving Victorians to restoring and preserving Grace's Garden, and that movement pleases him.

Bringing the garden back to its peak was no easy task, however. In some areas the weeds were so established that he had to go over them many times, each time waiting to see what would come up again. In the first year, the days not spent weeding went to reclaiming the upper sections that had become overgrown with bramble. The second year was devoted to bringing the pest and disease problems under control, particularly restoring the fuchsias after a mysterious blight that attacked fuchsias all over the city, and to plant care and pruning.

In the third year, Gary turned his attention

to creating a greater variety of textures and colors, adding new plants, flowers and trees. Among these were daffodils, gladiolas, lilies and orchids. He also initiated an Easter tradition by creating a child's fantasy showcase display of flowers, eggs and jelly beans tumbling out of a basket, complete with an easter bunny. And he cleared the paths through the garden and placed benches inside so that visitors could relax and more fully appreciate the place.

He now does all the watering by hand because the automatic sprinkling system that Grace used was too powerful and destroyed too many blossoms. It's a lot more work, but it pays off in healthier plants. In fact, this year the garden should be at its finest, Gary says, despite the loss of a pleroma tree to high winds. He ushered in the spring with a yellow splash of 600 new daffodils, followed by well over 1,000 irises and the most profuse rose bloom ever.

"Like Grace, I simply want to create a special place for people to enjoy," Gary says. "I really get off on creating magic for people." Gary's touch with magic started long before he began helping Grace. Nine years ago he decided that on Halloween the garden should be a haven for the mysterious faces of jack-o'-lanterns. He carved half a dozen, lit them with candles, placed them at night and watched to see what sort of response he would get. The expressions of awe and wonder on people's faces told the story.

The event became a tradition replete with Gaelic chants, a pumpkin procession and more than 100 jack-o'-lanterns, and starring the Good Witch Grace in full witch's attire. Halloween on Napier Lane became so popular that the chanting and procession had to be abandoned because the area couldn't handle the crowds, but each year the faces shine in the night.

Now that he has taken on the responsibility of tending the garden, three things in particular can spoil Gary's day: unleashed dogs in this neighborhood of cats and delicate plants, heavy-footed joggers unaware of the peaceful nature of the place and of the noise they are making, and thieves. Trying to protect the garden from thieves is a constant headache, and last year Gary lost so many flowers to them he was forced to place locks on the two garden gates at night.

But so far the benefits have outweighed the drawbacks. "I can't tell you the sense of privilege I feel to be carrying on Grace's work," he says. Then he laughs, the smile lighting up his whole face. "I can really understand now why she was so feisty. She had a lot to fight for."

As with Grace, tending the garden for Gary has become a labor of love. He works nights to keep his days free for the garden,



and puts in long unpaid hours, spending his own money on supplies. The only cost to the city is the water it provides. The Board of Supervisors recognized this unselfish care two years ago, on his fortieth birthday, when it sent Gary a letter of appreciation for his "devoted work in preserving the garden."

The garden kept Grace young and mischievous, and it has made Gary a real leg-puller as well. Constantly asked what the purple-blossomed trees (pleromas) are, he answers, "Redwoods." When a visitor sniffs a datura blossom and inquires about it, he'll assume a tone of foreboding and say that they are deadly poisonous, that even a sniff...

Alistair Cooke, in his "America" series on public television, opened his episode on the West in front of Grace's Garden, calling it his favorite place in the United States. From that vantage point, he said, one could have looked down upon the "forest of ships" that clogged the harbor during the Gold Rush, one of the greatest human migrations since the Cru-



*Gary Kray learning his garden craft from mentor Grace Marchant.*

sades. Indeed, many of the cottages still standing in the area were once warehouses or saloons where the shanghaiing of sailors was common.

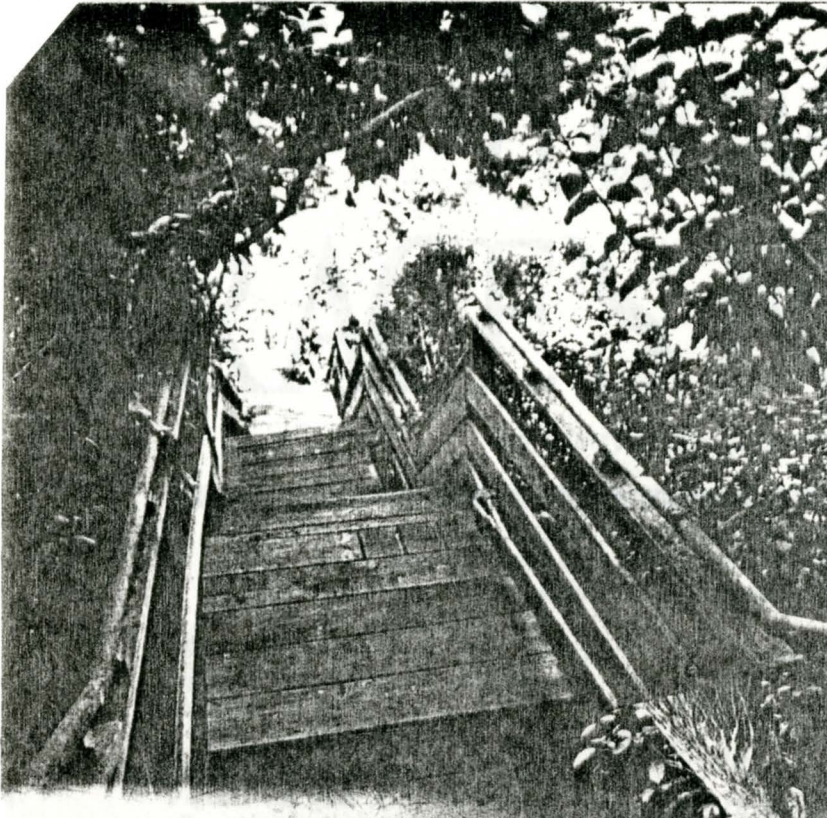
It is an area full of history, and there is a movement now to designate

this section of Telegraph Hill a historic district, to preserve its character before more development changes its face forever. All but one of the once-functioning warehouses below are now gone. Levi's Plaza has turned the area

into a tentacle of the Financial District, and a new seven-story building at 201 Filbert has obstructed some of the views from the garden. Sitting on a bench, watching cats stalking butterflies in the baby tears, you can feel the new city closing in. If any place needs preserving, this is it, one of the last residential links to the Gold Rush.

Caring for this special place has assumed a prime position in Gary Kray's life. It didn't happen overnight, but he knew when he was finally hooked. Grace's ashes are buried in the garden beside her favorite flowering tree. One night last year Gary had a dream: He was working in the garden by that tree one sunny morning when he felt a presence behind him. He turned around to see Grace smiling at him, and he took her around her garden, showing her all the work he'd done. She didn't say a word, but her smile grew until he knew he had her approval. "From that point on, I've had total confidence about what I'm doing here," Gary says. "And every time I look around, I feel Grace coming up with the roses." □

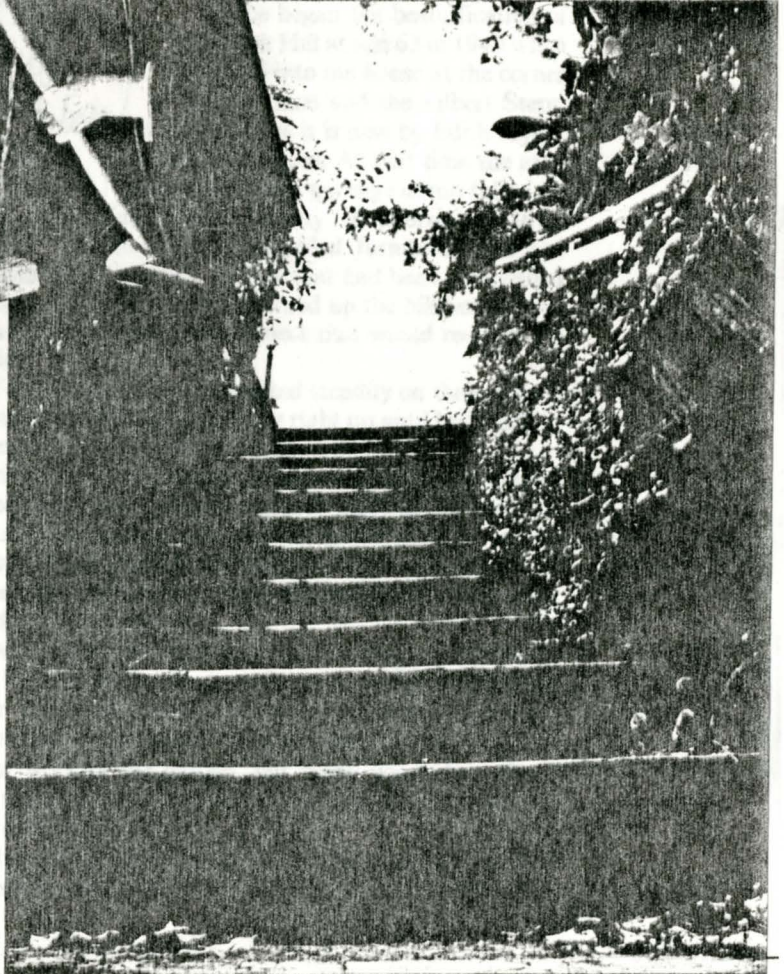




*Grace Marchant as the Good Witch of*



*Halloween, and the glorious garden she created*



Photography by Larry Habegger