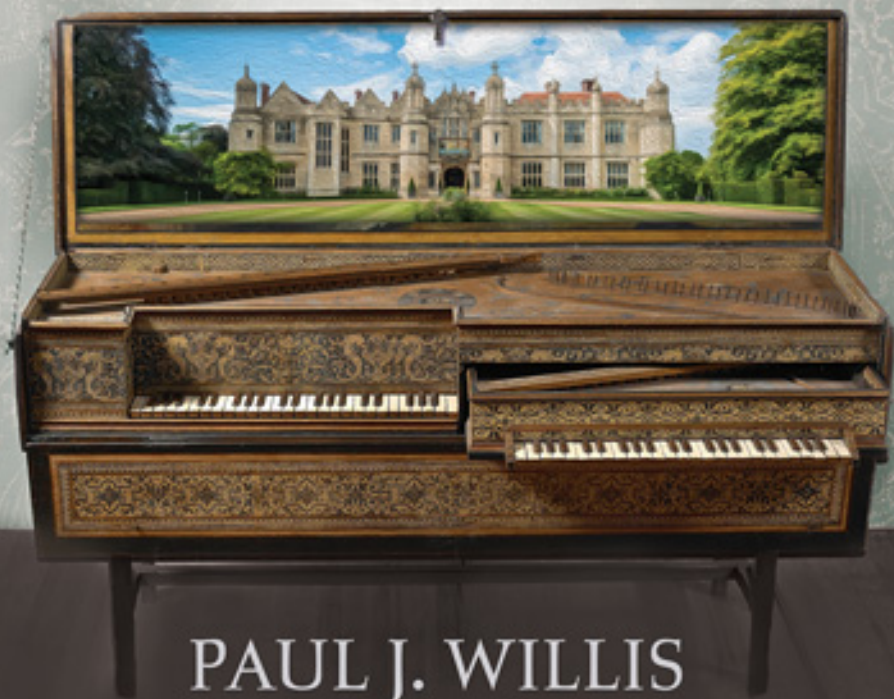


All in a  
Garden Green



PAUL J. WILLIS

“One of the pleasures of the young is dress-up, imagined time-travel, and participation in events more significant than life has afforded them thus far. All of these elements abound in *All in a Garden Green*. Based on a real castle-like estate house in England and an historical visit by Queen Elizabeth I, the novel’s protagonists find themselves in unasked-for adventures that both define and stretch them. And readers will greatly enjoy the ride.”

—Daniel Taylor

Author of *Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees*

“Fling together a girl about to leave childhood behind, an ancient house filled with chapels and towers and chambers and hidden staircases, lutes and virginals, Queen Elizabeth I, a wise and knowing mentor, and two huge St. Bernards—and then mix them with the slipperiness of time, and you have this rollicking novel that speeds its way to its nick-of-time ending. This is a playful book, spanning four centuries of a changing language, and undergirded by the lovely certainty that what lies ahead will always be better.

—Gary Schmidt

Professor and Department Co-Chair of English, Calvin College,  
and author of *Okay for Now*

“*All in a Garden Green* is a journey both real and fantastic. During her family’s stay at Hengrave Hall, Erica discovers a portal to England’s late sixteenth century. Abruptly, history explodes into fascinating and well-researched detail—altered language, antiquated musical instruments, secret rooms and hidden staircases, even a visit by Queen Elizabeth I. Erica’s piano lessons were never like this! The story gives young readers a fresh take on resonances between past and present. Highly recommended.”

—Ellen Chavez Kelley  
Author and poet

“In an old English manor house a young girl enters into history in a way that entices readers to suspend disbelief and take delight in sharing her journey across time. Skillfully drawing upon his own semester with students in England and upon records of a royal visit to Hengrave Hall, Paul Willis has woven a tale that deserves to be read aloud and enjoyed by adults and children old enough to wonder about time past. Ancient customs, young romance, a courtyard, a moat, a mysterious nun, and two St. Bernards are only a few of the features that give this story its singular charm.”

—Marilyn McEntyre  
Author of *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*

ALL IN A GARDEN GREEN



ALL IN A GARDEN GREEN



~Paul J. Willis~

 SLANT

ALL IN A GARDEN GREEN

A Novel

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This book is dedicated  
to the memory of  
Elizabeth Suzanne Delaney Hess  
whose name is  
as she often told us  
a perfect line of iambic pentameter





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## CHAPTER I

# To Be in England

“WHY DO WE HAVE TO GO?” WAILED Erica. It was August, and hot. Erica was slumped across the piano, her auburn hair mopping the keys. She was supposed to be practicing for her last lesson at four o’clock.

“I’ve told you,” her mother said patiently. “Your father would be lonely without us. And really, dear, it’s a wonderful opportunity for the whole family.”

Deep down, Erica knew her mother was not an unkind person. Yet she dreaded that word *opportunity*. It always seemed to mean something like soccer camp or a tour of the California missions.

“You have no idea how beautiful the cathedrals are in England, sweetheart.”

To Erica, this only proved her point.

“And we’ll be living in a manor house—Hengrave Hall—practically a castle. Professor Adams in your father’s department says it is just fascinating, and he’s been there three different semesters with the students so far.”

“Why can’t he make it four, then?” Erica said. “If he likes it so much.”

## All in a Garden Green

“Erica Emily Pickins,” said her mother. “It is time to finish practicing.”

“Why?” she said. “I won’t be taking lessons at Hengrave.”

“No, but you can play on the grand piano there in the great hall if children are allowed to use it—we’ll ask the nuns for their permission. And you’ll want to keep your skills up for when we come back. Music is your talent, Erica. You know how much your father likes to hear you play.”

Erica made a repulsive face and folded her arms. “If I’m going to England,” she said, “I’m not playing any piano while I’m there. That’s final.”

What was final about it was the disaster that her last recital had been. But before her mother could touch upon that tender subject, a golden retriever plunged into the living room, pursued by Walter, Erica’s brother. The dog paused by the upright piano, panting and grinning. Its tail went *whack whack whack* against the bench. Erica scratched him under the chin and Walter tackled the dog from behind. “Gotcha, Stars!” Walter shouted. Stars was the dog’s name.

“Walter,” said his mother, “we just had the rug cleaned yesterday, and I’ve told you to keep Stars out. We’ve got to keep the house looking nice for the renters.”

“Are they going to watch Stars for us, Mom?” Walter said. He gave his dog a full-body hug and hung on, his red hair mingling with the rusty coat of the retriever.

“Yes,” she said. “You know that, Walter.”

*To Be in England*

“But why can’t we take him? Couldn’t we take him? Please? I’d keep him quiet. I wouldn’t let him bark on the plane.”

“And Stripes too,” Erica said. “I could take Stripes.” As if summoned by name, a gray-striped cat leapt off the couch and jumped into Erica’s lap.

“No,” said their mother. “We’ve been over this.” She separated Walter from Stars and chased the dog into the kitchen, then stood wearily in the archway.

“But who are we going to play with, then?” Walter said. He was now writhing on his back on the floor. “Stars and Stripes will be lonely without us, and we’ll be lonely without them.”

“And all my friends at school,” said Erica. “Do you realize I’ll be missing half of the eighth grade? When I get back, no one will even remember my name!”

“Erica, you know perfectly well that Dr. Lopez is bringing her children along as well. Pedro is just your age, and Katrina is not that much younger than Walter. I’m sure you’ll become best of friends.”

“Hah!” said Erica.

“Double hah!” Walter said. “I saw Pedro at the department picnic. He couldn’t even hit a softball.”

“He’s stuck up,” Erica said. “And Katrina’s a baby. The whole time she’ll probably want to be playing with *dolls*.”

“They don’t play softball at Hengrave Hall from what I’ve heard,” their mother said. “But they do play lots of croquet, and I’m sure you’ll all be good at that. And I don’t think there will be any room for dolls in our

## All in a Garden Green

luggage, so don't worry, Erica. You may even get to know some of the students who will be with us."

"The whining English majors?" said Walter.

"Most of them are very nice, I'm sure," said their mother.

"That's what Dad calls them," said Walter. He paused a moment. "Mom, what's an English major?"

"You don't know?" Erica said, not knowing herself, really.

"An English major," said their mother, "is a college student who reads old books written in English—or in England, perhaps—which is why we're all going there, to see where these wonderful books were written."

Walter let this sink in. "That's all?" he said. "I'd have a better reason, if I was going."

"But you *are* going," Erica said. "You have to. That's your reason."

For Erica, though, to judge by the way she pounded out the scales and airs and madrigals when her mother insisted she must get back to practicing, this was not reason enough. When her father came home, long after her loathed lesson, she would have appealed to him as well except that she saw how tired he was. He stood in the kitchen without setting down the briefcase he always carried and spoke on and on in a weary voice about plane reservations and layovers and cancellations and book orders. Also about what he called the curriculum. Apparently, he and Dr. Lopez did not see eye to eye on what they would teach the whining majors. It occurred to Erica that her mother might be the only one in their

## *To Be in England*

family who really wanted to go to England. And maybe even *she* was faking it.

After supper Erica went to her bedroom to think about what she would pack the next week. Her father had said it would rain a lot, and that hardly anyone wore shorts. She wanted to bring her baby-blue denim shorts anyway, the ones she had just bought in July with her first babysitting money. They came with matching blue suspenders. She wondered how Pedro would like them, and then wondered why she should care. It didn't matter. He was stuck up. Most boys were, she had noticed.

But, even apart from Pedro, the idea of spending the next four months with just her family and a couple dozen college students in a rundown manor house supervised by a huddle of nuns—very old nuns, she had heard, and likely very crabby ones—well, she could think of better things to do. Like go to the beach with her best friends, just as she had all summer long, whenever her mother had seen fit to unchain her from the piano.

Not that all her practicing had done any good. At last week's recital in a stifling hall at the college, she had played beautifully until all of a sudden, halfway through the Beethoven sonata, her memory had packed its bags and flown to Hawaii, leaving Erica with her fingers poised above the keys and her eyes turned helplessly to her very stern piano teacher, Mr. Macready, who stared back mercilessly. Finally, amid a few titters from the other young performers in waiting, he walked up to where she was sitting and placed the score in front of her. Mr. Macready stood over her as she stumbled to a miserable finish,



## All in a Garden Green

turning the pages mechanically as if he wished that he were in Hawaii himself. When Erica had mangled out the last chord, she arose stiffly and, turning her back to the audience, curtsied to the other pianists on the stage.

“No,” hissed Mr. Macready. “Face the other way, Erica.”

But it was too late. This time laughter came not only from the assembled performers but also from the parents behind her.

She had just reprised this scene again, clutching her baby-blue denims in shame, when her bedroom door opened slowly.

“Yours too,” Walter said, and stuck out his tongue. He was standing in the hallway just to annoy her.

“My what?”

“Your reason. You have to go just as much as I do.”

“That’s what you think,” Erica said.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing a little fourth-grader would understand, that’s what I mean.”

“Hah!” said Walter.

“Double hah!” Erica said. “And get out of my room. It’s time for all the fourth-graders to go to bed.”

“Make me,” said Walter, stepping forward.

Erica rushed at him, nails extended, and he went running down the hall. “And stay out!” she shouted.

Then she slammed the door behind her and lay face-down on the bed. And sobbed. After a while she groped under her pillow and found the Raggedy Ann doll that she still kept hidden there, worn and eyeless. She clutched

*To Be in England*

it to her face until the doll was wet and her cheeks were dry—as if Raggedy Ann herself had taken on her sorrows. She held the damp doll in her hands, kissed it firmly, and realized she would have to leave it here in her bedroom. What a long autumn it was going to be.

“Erica,” came a voice behind her. “Are you alright, honey?”

It was the voice of her father. She hadn’t even heard him enter. Erica stashed Raggedy Ann back under her pillow and slowly sat up on her bed. Her father was standing with one hand on the doorknob, the other stroking his stubbly chin.

“Your mother said you were upset. About our going to England.”

“A little,” she said, sniffing. “Don’t worry about it, Dad. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I do, sometimes,” he said.

This pierced her with a sliver of comfort. Her father always looked worried, but it was news to Erica that some of the worry was for her. “Really,” she said, “you don’t need to. You don’t need to worry. It’s nothing.”

Her father stopped stroking his stubble but started to twist the doorknob back and forth. It squeaked a little.

“You’re making the doorknob squeak, Dad,” Erica said.

“So I am,” he admitted, and pulled his hand away.

“Dad,” she said, “how are you feeling—about our going?”

“Well,” he said, and his gaze went flying off into the corners of her room.

## All in a Garden Green

“Well?” she said.

“Well, it will be a challenge,” he said. “All those students. Living in a retreat center. With all those nuns. But it doesn’t matter how I feel. The department wants me to go, so we need to go. We’ll try to make the best of it. We’ll try to make it the best trip ever.”

“But it does matter, Dad.”

“What matters?”

“How you feel.”

He looked at her then, strangely and sadly. And closed the door behind him.

## CHAPTER 2

# Shakespeare Is Dead

“I HOPE WE DON’T HIT ANYONE IN THIS bus,” said Walter. He was sitting just behind the driver, who wore a mustache and a uniform. The driver had been completely silent for two hours.

“It’s a coach, not a bus,” said Pedro beside him. The older boy was dark-haired and golden-skinned, with wire-rim glasses that gave him a superior look.

“Whatever it’s called,” Walter complained, “someone should tell this guy he’s driving on the wrong side of the road.”

“The left side, not the wrong side,” Pedro said. “The left side is the right side over here.”

“Oh yeah?” said Walter.

Erica leaned over the seat from behind him and pinched his arm. “Don’t be such a tourist,” she said. “If you’d been here before, like Pedro has, you’d know these things.”

Pedro gave her a quick, shy glance before going back to the book in his hands. It was called *A Brief History of England*. Erica thought this must be a joke, since it was one of the thickest books she had ever seen.

## All in a Garden Green

“He’s been here before alright,” said Walter. “He’s told us ten times already.”

“It was only a week,” Pedro said apologetically, looking up from his book again. “And I’ve never been to Hengrave.”

“Did your sister come too?” asked Erica. She glanced back at Katrina, who was sleeping on her mother’s lap two seats behind.

“She was too small. Just Father and I.”

He did not say *my dad and me*, the way she would have. Or *me and my dad*, for that matter. She couldn’t decide if the way he talked was pitiful or impressive. She wondered where his father lived, but decided not to ask. Her mother had said he was a native of Mexico, unlike Mrs. Lopez, who was as American as can be—and as pale as a picket fence. Mr. Lopez was also a professor, like his wife, but he taught in another town—another state, even. Erica couldn’t remember which one.

“We stayed mostly in Stratford-upon-Avon,” said Pedro. “For Shakespeare.”

“He wanted you to stay there? Why?” said Walter.

“Who? My father?”

“No, Shakespeare.”

“Shakespeare is dead,” Erica hissed, thrusting forward and shoving Walter toward the window. Her face was now right next to Pedro’s. She was finding him less stuck up than she’d thought.

“What plays did you see?” she asked—not that she knew too many herself.

## *Shakespeare Is Dead*

“A very fine production of *Cymbeline*,” Pedro answered. The way he said it sounded British, like the airline steward who had given them peanuts off and on during the night. Now it was afternoon, but to Erica it felt like the morning after a sleepover at someone’s house.

Walter turned back to his sister and said, “A very fine production of *Cymbeline*. Very fine indeed, yes.” He tucked in his chin and puffed on an invisible pipe.

Pedro ignored him. “Also *The Taming of the Shrew*.”

Walter blew his invisible smoke into Erica’s face and said, “Yes, yes of course. Jolly good. Jolly good show.”

“The taming of the shrimp is what we need,” said Erica to Pedro. She thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his serious face.

Katrina started crying behind them. She had woken up and asked for another lemon drop, which her mother said she could not have, since the coach was nearly to Hengrave. “Hush, Katrina,” Mrs. Lopez said. “Don’t fuss.” She sounded tired and embarrassed.

The college students, who were scattered up and down the coach, pretended not to notice. Erica saw that most of them were wearing headphones and couldn’t have noticed anyway. A boy in the back stopped playing his guitar and then started again, singing louder as if to cover the sound of the child. “Knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door,” he sang. He kept knock-knock-knocking until they arrived at the iron gates of Hengrave Hall.

The coach had been traveling a narrow highway hedged with fields. It slowed for a shady bend by a wood,

## All in a Garden Green

passed a group of thatched houses, and turned in between tall stone gateposts, narrowly missing each one.

“Nice work,” said Walter to the driver. The driver did not say thank you.

Erica saw a snug cottage set in the woods beside the gate—a gatekeeper’s cottage, she decided. Across from it was a small gray lake behind a row of evergreens. She glanced at Pedro nervously. He had closed his book and was looking carefully at the lake.

“There used to be a moat, you know.”

“A moat?” said Walter. He was genuinely interested.

“Around the house. Now just this fishpond. That’s what Dr. Adams said—the last time he came for tea.”

“For tea?” said Walter, wrinkling his nose.

Erica was about to say something especially nasty to her brother when the coach pulled out of the trees. Suddenly there was the house itself, just across an open lawn. It was very tall and stony gray; the front of it seemed to go on and on to either side, a weathered wall capped with ornamented towers. There was ivy covering parts of it, but not much.

“Whoa,” said Walter. “Some castle.” For once, he sounded truly impressed.

“Strictly speaking, it’s not a castle,” Pedro said. “It’s a sixteenth-century manor house. The battlements and former moat were strictly for show, not at all for defensive purposes.”

“It looks like a castle to me,” said Walter. “You wouldn’t call it the little house on the prairie, would you?”

*Shakespeare Is Dead*

The coach came to a full stop before great wooden double doors. They were so tall that a smaller door was cut into one of them. This door-within-a-door swung open, and out stepped an old nun, slightly bent. She was wearing a purple habit, almost the same color as the awful dress that Erica's mother had made her wear for their long night and day of travel. A wimple surrounded the woman's face and covered all but a few strands of white hair. She waved at the driver and stood waiting for them to descend while the doors of the coach hissed open. How bright and lively her eyes were, Erica thought.

They seemed to be looking just at her, with a question.



### CHAPTER 3

## At the Back of the Hall

“WON’T YOU COME INSIDE?” SAID  
the nun.

They had all gotten off the coach and extracted a small mountain of luggage from dark compartments underneath. The students started to shamble in, but Pedro hung back, looking up at a maze of carvings that stretched above the double doors. Erica drifted to his side. She followed his gaze and made out a series of crowns and shields and lions and unicorns. Underneath was lettering in strange script. She couldn’t have read it even if it were in English, which it wasn’t.

“Latin,” said Pedro. “I think it says—yes, it does—that the hall was built by Thomas Kytson, in the year of our Lord 1538.”

Kytson, thought Erica. She felt a little jolt inside her. That was her mother’s maiden name.

“Correct,” said a woman’s voice beside them. “Can the young lady read Latin as well?”

It was the old nun in the purple habit. All the others had gone inside. Her peculiar eyes were resting upon Erica, just as they had before.

*At the Back of the Hall*

“Not at all,” Erica said. But wanting something to say for herself, she quickly added, “I can read music, though.”

The face of the nun seemed to soften. “Hengrave is a wonderful place for that,” she nodded. “For Latin and for music both.” The afternoon sun lit up her chin and ruddy cheeks, and the nun seemed to lapse into contemplation.

Erica felt very tired. The moment seemed to linger, lengthen, and capture itself, as if time had stopped. She was almost content not to say anything else, but finally she did.

“I’m Erica,” she volunteered sleepily.

“And Pedro,” said Pedro.

“You may call me Sister Julian,” the nun said softly, as if not paying them any attention.

“Have you been here long?” Erica asked.

“All day,” said Sister Julian.

“I mean, over the years.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “A long time. A very long time—just like yourself.”

“Me?” said Erica. “But I just got here. We’ve just been here twenty minutes.”

“Well,” said Sister Julian. “A day, an hour, four hundred years. What really is the difference? In a house like this, you start asking yourself these things.”

Erica thought this rather odd, and was going to ask her what she meant when Walter, who had disappeared inside with her parents, came bursting out the door again. “Erica! You’ve got to see this. You’ve got to come see this.”

“What?” she said, a little annoyed, but too tired to really express it.

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Instead of answering her outright, he grabbed her arm and pulled her under the stone arch and through the thick wooden doors. Pedro came along behind. She found herself in a very dim entranceway and then in a hallway leading both right and left. There were tall windows across this hall which gave onto a chill stone square completely surrounded by the building.

“Is that what you wanted to show me?” she asked. “The courtyard?”

Walter shook his head impatiently and pulled her left, down the hallway. Where it angled around the courtyard she saw into a sunny chamber where the students were sitting with their luggage. Her father was saying, “Before assigning your rooms, we’re going to take just a moment to let Sister Julian tell us about the rules here, and perhaps some of the history of Hengrave Hall, so that we can”—but Walter kept hurrying her down the hall, and the sound of her father’s voice faded. Behind them she saw Pedro and Sister Julian step into the sunny chamber, and heard something like polite applause.

The darkened hallway now opened into a curtained room at the foot of a grand stairway. At the bottom of the banister was a thick wooden ball the size of a globe. Back in the shadows, dim portraits of somber men seemed to ask them why they were not back with the others.

“Walter,” said Erica, “can’t you show me whatever it is later?”

“Almost there,” he panted, and pulled her through a red curtain into a gigantic room with a high-beamed ceiling. On her left was a stone fireplace much taller than her

*At the Back of the Hall*

head, and on her right a two-story window that looked onto the courtyard. It was full of bits of colored glass—more shields and unicorns. What most caught her attention, however, was a huge ebony grand piano, standing alone on the polished wood floor.

“Mom told me about this,” she said. “You didn’t have to drag me all the way here to see it. Now let go.”

“Not yet,” he said, and whisked her across the great room to a small door and into another hallway again that seemed to be leading to the back parts of the manor. She smelled warm bread and chicken broth, and heard clatter and voices from a kitchen. At last, after descending and climbing a few stairs, they opened a door onto a bright alleyway by a grassy orchard. Walter let go her hand and took off running through the trees. Soon he disappeared through a small gate in a brick wall.

“Come back!” she called. She stood on the pavement uncertainly, then slowly stepped onto the grass. The leaves of the trees were dark green in the late summer, and the afternoon light was warm and full. It occurred to her to forget about her silly brother and to lie down like a dropped fruit and take a nap. Before she could sink to the grass, however, Walter reappeared through the wall, bounding back with enthusiasm. And bounding behind him were two of the largest dogs that Erica had ever seen.

“They’re St. Bernards!” Walter shouted. “They live here! Edward says we can play with them! Whenever we want!” Just before reaching her, he sprawled in the grass and the two dogs pounced on him, rolling under and over

## All in a Garden Green

until they were stretched on their backs. "They want to be scratched," Walter said. "Just like Stars."

The dogs were white underneath, and a mottled chestnut on their sides. Erica picked the nearest one and stroked its chest, then scratched it under the ears. Soon she had buried her face in its furry neck, smelling grass and sky and almost autumn and—well—England, she thought.

"Oh, Walter," she said dreamily. "I *so* like them. I really like them. But what are their names? And who's Edward?"

"Aye, they be likin' you, Miss," said a voice.

Erica looked up from her dog and saw a man in drab brown clothes. He was holding a rake.

She stood up promptly and brushed off her dress. Nervously she put out her hand. "I'm Erica. Walter's sister."

Instead of taking her hand, he patted her elbow with rough calloused fingers. She smelled fresh earth, and tobacco.

"Edward," he said. "I'm the man of this house, you might say."

"The owner?" said Walter.

"No," he laughed, a low chuckle. "The gardener to these twelve sisters here. Sisters of the Assumption, they be. And I can tell you what the assumption is—that I be takin' care of the place. And if I don't, no one does, is the way it is. Not even Meg and Mary here are much to help, but they keep me company, they do."

"I could help," Walter said. "I could help feed 'em."

"That you could, lad. That you could. Carry the scraps out from the kitchen."

*At the Back of the Hall*

“Could I?” said Walter. “Which one’s Meg and which one’s Mary?”

“Erica’s makin’ acquaintance with Meg. She’s got the white on her forehead. You’ve got Mary, lad.”

“At home,” he explained, “we’ve got Stars and Stripes.”

“Oh, that I know,” Edward said. “But not much to the Union Jack.”

“Who’s Jack?” said Walter.

Erica had a vague feeling she needed to put in a word for her country, but couldn’t think what to say. Meanwhile, she heard the back door to the manor open behind them.

“Walter! Erica! We’ve been looking all over for you.” It was their mother. After flying all night from America and riding the coach to Hengrave, she looked and sounded bedraggled and exasperated.

“Mom!” said Walter. “We have friends! Meg and Mary—and this is Edward!”

Edward tipped his cap, and their mother gave him a thin smile. “Pleased,” he said.

“You can see your friends later,” she told them. “But I want you up in our room now. I don’t want you running off like this.”

“Our room?” said Walter. “Where’s our room? Can the dogs come too?”

“Nay, lad,” Edward said. “These two girls be outside the hall with me.”

Their mother gave Edward a warmer smile.

“Well,” said Walter, getting to his feet. “See you later, Meg. Later, Mary. Tomorrow, first thing.”

## All in a Garden Green

“First thing tomorrow,” their mother said, “you two have school.”