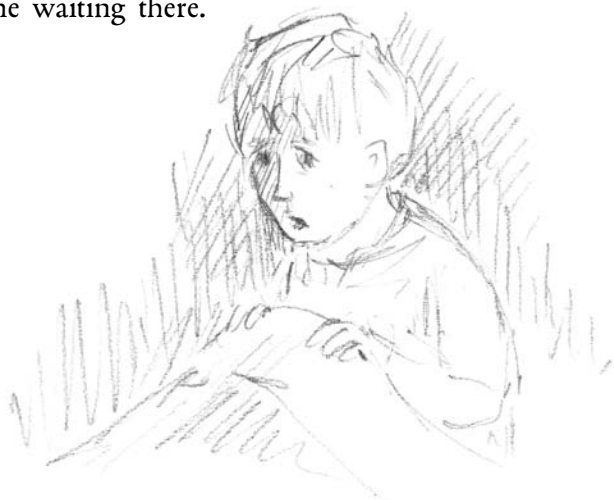




Chapter I  
THROUGH THE GARDEN GATE

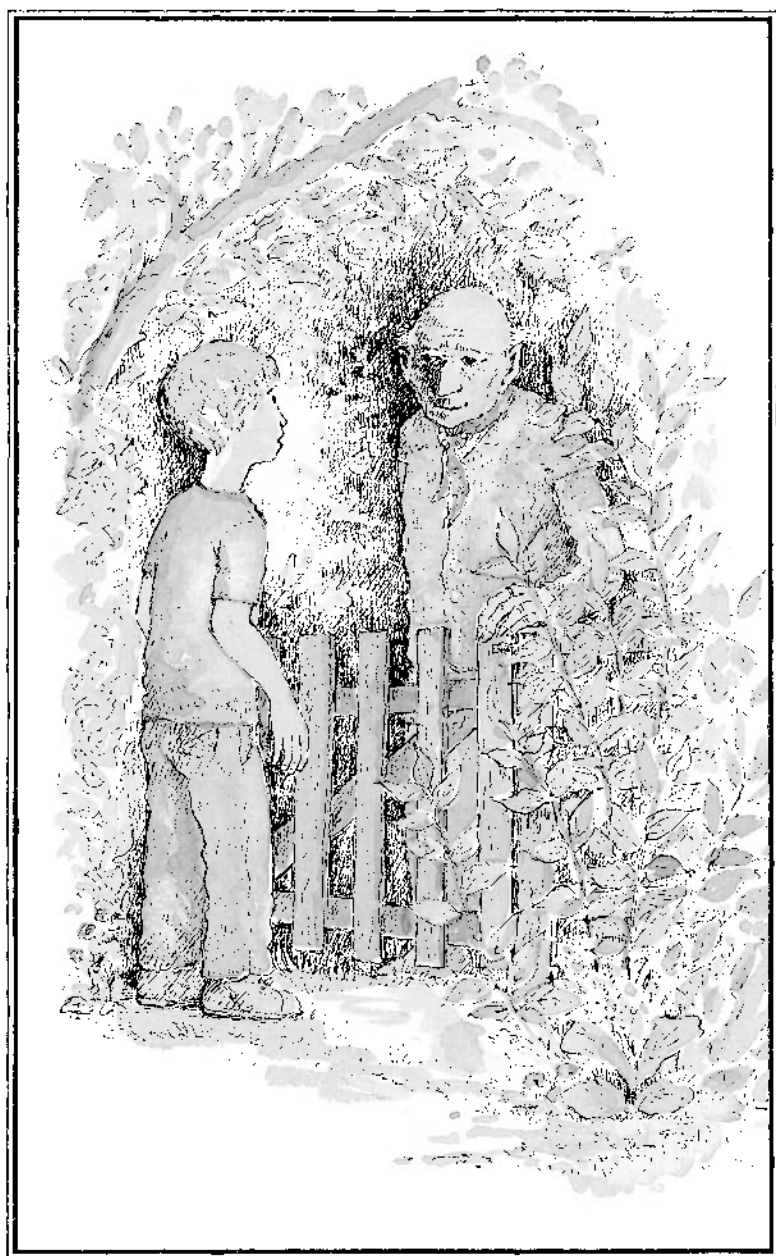
❧ THERE WAS A BOY WHO WENT TO BED IN DESPAIR. All night he dreamed his despair, and he woke to desperation. Then he slept again and dreamed, this time a short, strange dream. He dreamed of a garden gate and someone waiting there.



He woke, and it was still very early. He dressed quickly and went out of the house to the garden gate. And there was someone, a stranger, waiting for him—an odd-looking little old man, hardly bigger than himself, and dressed all anyhow.

“So you got my message,” said the old man.

“Yes,” said the boy.



“Last night I was passing your house,” said the old man, “and I looked in on your dreaming. It was very sad dreaming for a boy of your age.”

The boy said nothing, but tears began to ooze from his eyes.

“‘Losers weepers,’” said the old man. “I thought you might have lost something.”

“Somebody,” said the boy.

“I make no promises,” said the old man, “but I might be able to help.”

“I’d like that,” said the boy. He cheered up a little. “By the way, my name’s Tillawn, but everyone calls me Till for short.”

“Till,” said the old man. He didn’t say what his own name was, and Till didn’t ask. “Till,” repeated the old man. He laughed creakily. “I’ll keep that name in mind *till* I need it.”

“What?” said Till.

“If you don’t get it, you don’t get it,” said the old man. “Now, who’ve you lost, and how, and where? Tell me,

because I'm a Finder—one of the old Seekers Finders. I could help you, if you'll also help yourself."

"I'll do anything," said Till.

"Then tell me," said Finder.



So Till began the story of how he had lost his dog, his frisky little dog named Bess. Every day, Till took his dog for a walk. First of all, she was on a leash, because he was taking her through the streets of the town where they lived. Beyond the town they came to a certain meadow called Gammers' Meadow. Here, Till let Bess off the leash to run free and play. After her playtime, Till put the leash on again. Then boy and dog went home together.



Yesterday Till and Bess had set off as usual, but in her eagerness, the little dog had pulled and pulled on her leash and twisted and twisted on her collar, until at last—



“The worst thing happened,” said Till. “The metal ring that joined the collar to the leash twisted loose. Then she was free! She rushed ahead and was out of sight in a minute. I ran after her, calling and calling all the way, but when I reached the meadow—”

Till paused, remembering that breathless, desperate pursuit.

Finder said, "She wasn't in the meadow?"

"She wasn't there," said Till. "And it was all my fault. I knew the metal ring was worn. I knew she needed a new collar. I'd already bought her a really good one with my own money. It was in my pocket. I knew I had to change the collars. *The new one was in my pocket.*" He touched his pants pocket. "Still here. Useless."

Finder said, "You never know . . ."

Till said despairingly, "She wasn't in the meadow; she's not come home since; she might be anywhere. Lost . . . lost . . ."

"Lost," Finder said briskly. "Well, we certainly know where to start: we know where we are. Or, rather, where we should be: in this meadow you speak of."

"But she may have gotten lost on the way there," said Till.

"Just possible," said Finder, "and we shall not forget such a possibility. But I think that dog knew where she wanted to go, and she'd have gotten there. If so, the mystery we have to solve is why she wasn't still in the meadow by the time you arrived, what happened to her there, and where she went."

As he spoke, the old man was reaching with his left hand over the top of the garden gate to unlatch it from the inside. Till saw that on the first finger of his left hand he wore a ring of some dark metal, not gold, not silver; it wasn't a grand ring at all, and it was age-worn almost to a thread.

Finder said, "Pull the gate open, boy. Walk through."

Till set his hand on the top bar of the gate to pull it open,





and he felt a shock as though the gate itself had stung him.  
He snatched his hand back.

But, "Walk through," said Finder again. So Till tried a second time, and again the touch of the gate hurt him, so that he jumped back from it.

"The passage through can be tricky," said  
Finder. "Foreman shall help you." He

laid the first finger of his

left hand on the

gatepost and held

it there. Then,

"Walk through," he

said a third time. This time Till

pulled the gate open without any hurt

and walked straight through into . . .

Gammers' Meadow. 

