



Enchantment in the Garden

SHIRLEY HUGHES





For Martha

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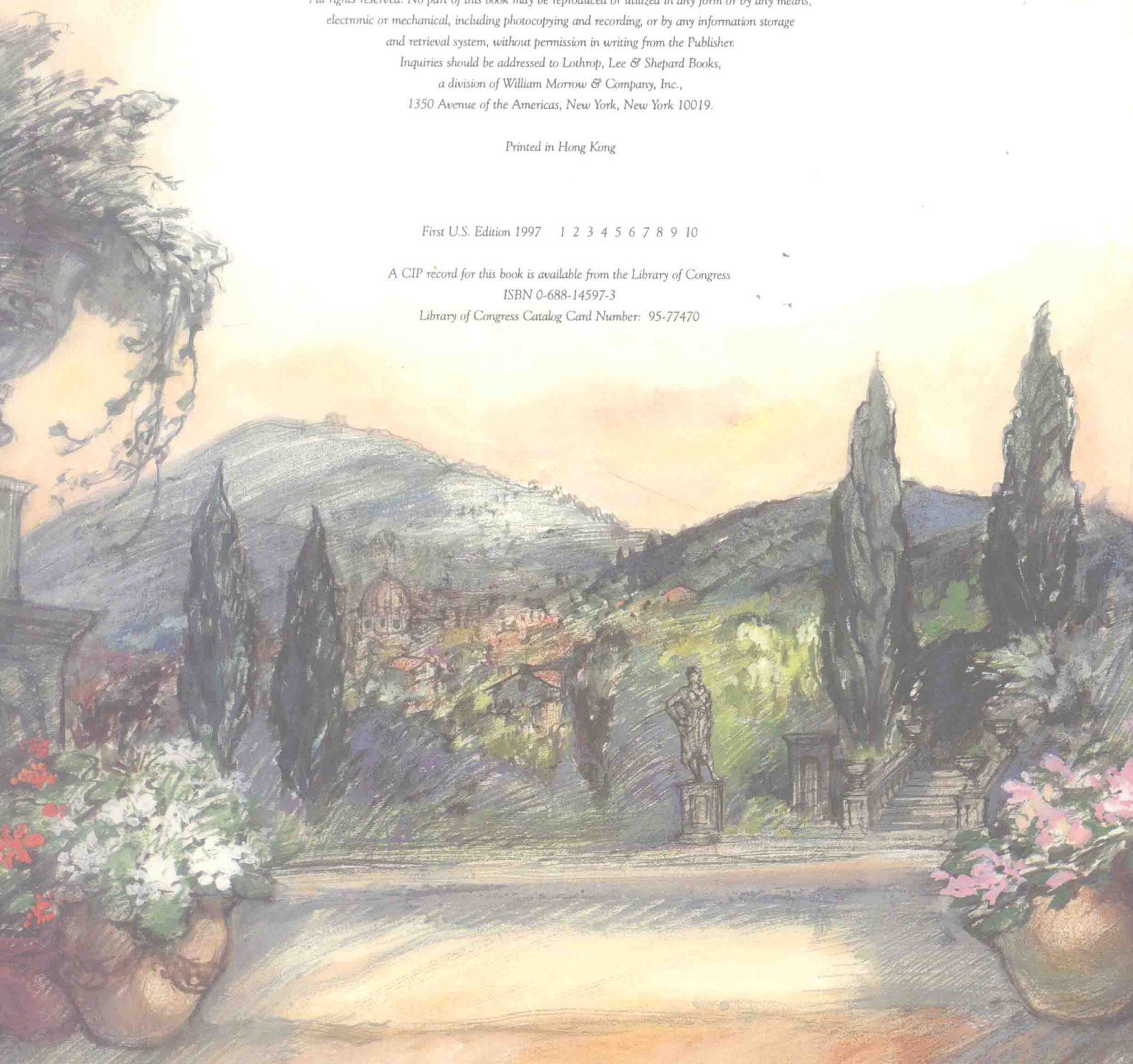
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ONCE, in an old Italian city, in a house with many rooms, there lived a girl called Valerie. The front of the house faced severely onto the street. At the back, balconies overlooked a shady garden with stone seats, a goldfish pond, and pots overflowing with flowers.

There was also a smaller house where Pietro, the gardener, and his wife, Maria, lived. And beyond that, over a high wall, lay a great public garden that had once belonged to a merchant prince. It was full of statues. Valerie could just see some of their heads from the balcony of her bedroom.



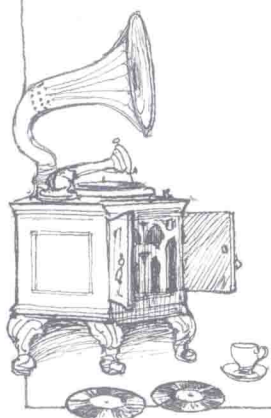


VALERIE'S father was a rich man. He owned hotels and restaurants all over Italy and was often away from home. Her mother was a beautiful American lady. She breakfasted late, long after Valerie had started her lessons, then drove out to meet her friends. In the evenings she put on elegant dresses covered in sparkling beads and went to balls and parties.

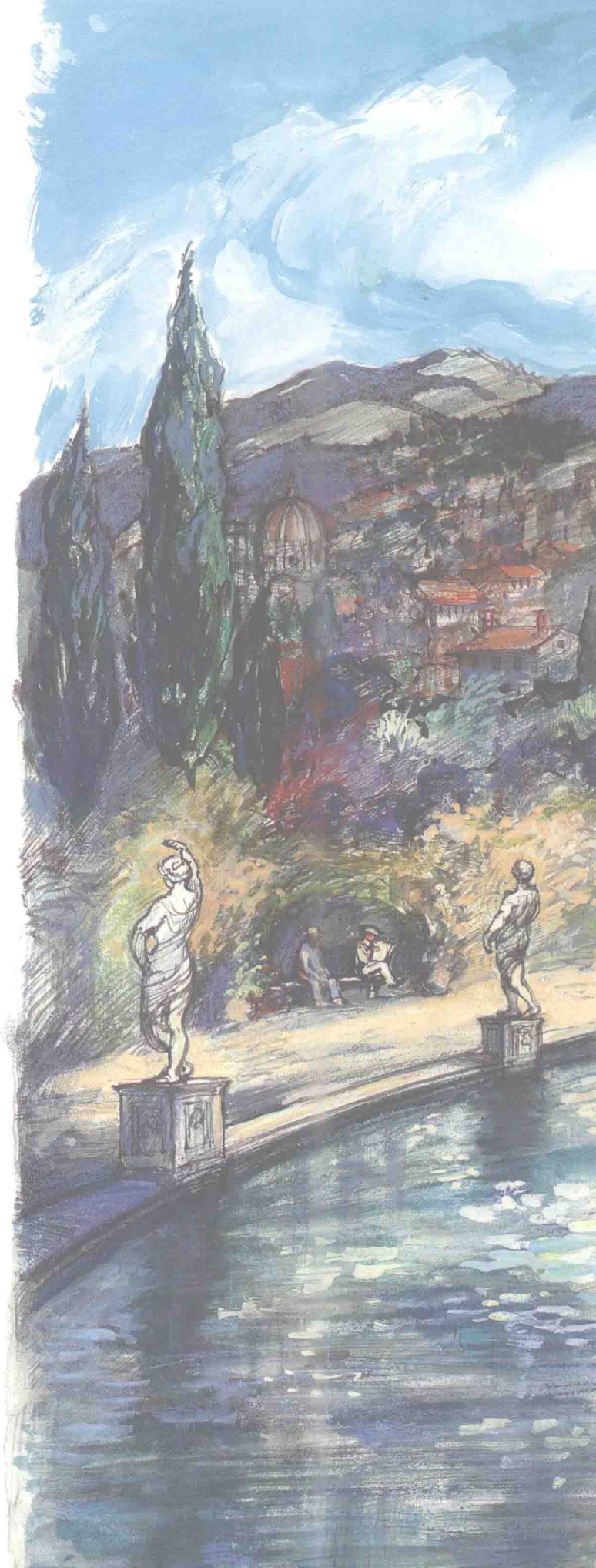


IN between, she spent a lot of time lying on the sofa in the lofty salon. Sometimes she and Valerie had tea together and played dance records on the gramophone.

Valerie was an only child. She was too serious for her age and had more toys and dresses than she could possibly need. But she had few friends and, of course, she was lonely.



EVERY day in the late afternoon, Valerie and her governess, Miss McKenzie, set out for the garden – along the cool gravel walks, then out by the sunlit lake where Neptune, the great sea god, rode on a sea monster surrounded by nymphs.







VALERIE'S favorite statue of all was a beautiful long-haired boy who rode on a dolphin with clear water pouring from its open jaws. When Valerie gazed at them, how she longed to take off her clothes too and splash about in the lake. But Miss McKenzie would never have allowed it.

One afternoon, when Miss McKenzie was sitting on one of the stone seats with her eyes tightly closed (she could sleep sitting bolt upright), Valerie slipped away.



THE gardens around the lake were empty. The boy on the dolphin stood alone. Valerie climbed onto the curved wall that ringed the water and put out a hand to stroke his cold cheek. Then she put her face close to his ear and whispered, "You are my best friend. I love you, and I am going to give you a name." And she sprinkled a little water over the boy's head. "I christen you Cherubino," said Valerie solemnly.

The boy looked back at her. She thought she saw a dancing spark in his carved eyes.



THE next day when Valerie and Miss McKenzie arrived at the gardens, they found a small crowd gathered near the lake. The dolphin was there as usual. But the boy was gone.

"Stolen!" cried the park keeper. "Thieves! Vandals! Someone has come in the night and taken one of our valuable statues!"

The crowd murmured angrily and the police were summoned. Miss McKenzie, tut-tutting, hurried Valerie away.







VALERIE ran ahead of her, dodging through the maze of walks. She desperately wanted to be on her own. But when at last she thought she was out of sight, she heard a scuffling behind the hedge, keeping pace with her. The sound of bare feet. She could see something moving behind the leaves. She had a sense of being watched, as though the statues were stealthily turning their eyes to look down at her. She ran faster.



