

# The Golden Age of the English Landscape Garden

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**D**URING THE latter half of the eighteenth century the English landscape garden achieved its highest peak of artistic development. In the estimate of a contemporary, it had reached such perfection as to be "entitled to a place of considerable rank among the liberal arts. It is superior to landscape painting, as a reality to a representation: it is an exertion of fancy; a subject for taste; and . . . the most beautiful, the most simple, the most noble scenes of nature are all within its province." It was the achievement of professional as well as amateur gardener, whose business it was "to select and apply whatever is great, elegant, or characteristic . . .; to discover and to shew all the advantages of the place upon which he is employed; to supply its defects, to correct its faults, and to improve its beauties."<sup>1</sup> And it became the passionate hobby of nobility and gentry until the eclectic tastes of the Victorians delivered it into the hands of the Philistines.

The supreme creator of the pictorial garden was Lancelot ("Capability") Brown (1715-83), who earned his nickname because he examined estates with an eye toward their capability of improvement. He served his apprenticeship (1740-48) under William Kent at Stowe; and on the death of his patron, Lord Cobham, in 1749 he became a practising landscape gardener. In 1764 George III set the official seal of approval on his work by appointing him chief gardener at Hampton Court. Brown's popularity and commissions were enormous, and for thirty years he profoundly affected the development of the art of gardening. His genius lay in the creation of beautiful rather than picturesque scenes. "With Brown, avenues merely gave way to clumps and belts, canals to serpentine, straight paths to winding walks, terrace parterre and labyrinth to tree-dotted lawns that carried their undulations up to the drawing-room windows."<sup>2</sup> His "typical park landscape resolves itself into a few obvious elements. The park is bounded by an encircling belt of woodland . . . interrupted to

admit any distant prospect or object of pictorial interest. The inner edge of the belt is irregular . . . and softened by outlying clumps or individual trees which hide . . . the line of the belt's containing fence."<sup>3</sup> The woodland walk around the belt of trees provided views of the whole estate or select views of its parts. Artificial streams or lakes helped to enliven the views. Brown frequently eliminated the sunken fence (ha-ha) and brought the grass of the park up to the very house itself, and he uprooted old avenues of trees and put clumps of hardwoods in their place.

His contemporary reputation was dubious: to some he was a brilliant innovator, to others a vandal and a destroyer. He is said to have declined an invitation to visit Ireland on the pretext that he had not yet finished with England, and one man of taste hoped that he might see the heavenly gardens before Brown had a chance to improve them. After his modifications of the river views at Blenheim, he is alleged to have remarked, "Thames, Thames, you will never forgive me!" On the other hand, some critics had only good things to say of his work; and his reputation extended down into Regency days. In *The Beauties of England and Wales* (London, 1813), XII, ii, 270, J. N. Brewer praised him unqualifiedly for his work at Nuneham-Courtenay, a 12,000-acre estate in Oxfordshire, which "evinces, in every division, great richness of natural circumstances, improved by the hand of reverential, rather than of presumptuous, art. Perhaps the talent of Brown . . . was never displayed to greater advantage. Each artifice to heighten pictorial effect is so judiciously concealed, that the whole seems graceful in the simplicity of nature."

The death of Brown in 1783 opened the way for new ideas in gardening. His successor, Humphry Repton (1752-1818), in turn merchant, country gentleman, and private secretary to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland before his retirement to a cottage in Sussex, converted his hobby (gardening)

into a profession (landscape gardening). Between 1783 and 1814 he provided his patrons with garden layouts more picturesque than Brown's Arcadian landscapes after the manner of Claude Lorraine. Further, he prompted the choice of his own style over that of Brown by supplying his wealthy patrons with "Red Books," reports bound in red morocco leather and illustrated with watercolor views (he called them "slips" or "slides") of houses and grounds as they were and as they would look after his prospective improvements. They showed "the broadened lake, the clumped avenue, the varied forms of the plantations of trees, the longer sweeps of park achieved by the removal of fences and hedges. Less drastic than Brown, he had acquired . . . something of the taste for the picturesque; plantations were no longer in uniform shape and contained a mixture of trees. Rough grounds of [trees] broke the expanses of turf, and sheets of water had the accidental banks of a lake rather than the smooth sides of a broad river." Repton's objective was a happy mean between the old-fashioned formal garden and the new landscape garden: the *grandeur* of Le Nôtre's seventeenth-century gardens at Versailles and the *grace* of Brown's gardens to "call forth the charms of natural landscape," which "he certainly endeavoured to carry out in his first big work, begun in 1790, at Cobham in Kent, and he congratulated himself warmly on having retained a straight terrace as being more in keeping with the style of the house than the 'frequently repeated waving line of beauty.'"<sup>4</sup> Repton despised anything in the landscape that suggested "convenience and comfort" and sought to make it ornamental. "Arable land and utilitarian buildings must be put out of sight. Mown grass or pasturage was to stretch and undulate from the doorstep to the distance, and where such undulations, natural or artificial, were too little pronounced and too little relieved by trees and water, herds of deer and cattle were freely scattered over his drawings to give

the desired diversity. Like Brown, he was a great expositor and creator of the . . . gentle falls and risings that breed cheerfulness. All was to be suave, rounded, neat. They [Brown and Repton] smoothed a thousand-acre park in almost the same spirit as the formalists had clipped their yew hedges."<sup>5</sup>

**M**ORE of an architect than a gardener, Sir William Chambers (1723–96) stimulated, perhaps unwittingly, the growing interest in exoticisms, especially Chinese, during the latter part of the century. Born in Sweden of Scots parentage and educated in England, Chambers made three voyages to the East as a young man and afterwards studied architecture in Paris and Rome. In 1755 he became tutor in architecture to the future George III and later published three books on architecture. He laid out Kew Gardens for Princess Augusta and embellished them with classical and oriental pavilions and temples, among them a Chinese pagoda. In his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772), which he characterized with tongue in cheek as “a piece of nonsense of my own about gardening” fathered “upon the Chinese who I thought lived far enough off to be out of the reach of Critical abuse,” Chambers attacked the “natural” style of Brown. Despite Chambers’ significant revelation of his lack of first-hand knowledge of Chinese gardening, his book has a profound influence on the taste for *chinoiserie*, especially in France, where it was mistakenly assumed to be the main ingredient of the English garden (*Le Jardin Anglais*). In England it further helped to reinforce the current rage for sensibility and led to the full-blown garden of emotion in contradistinction to the pictorial garden of Brown. Chambers stressed the Chinese aversion to straight lines and their desire to appeal primarily to the emotions by imitating nature’s “beautiful irregularities” in the garden and by preserving regularity near buildings. The Chinese sought to please, to surprise, to terrify the spectator with “scenes of terror in gloomy woods, or dark caverns where everything had been blighted or devastated.” Groves were frequented by birds of prey; by voracious, half-starved animals; and by “gibbets, crosses, wheels, and every instrument of torture.”

The essay of Chambers was “answered” by William Mason in *An Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers* (1773), a burlesque satire in the manner of Pope’s *Dunciad*. Besides being an attack on Brown’s methods of destroying old gardens and on Chambers’ oriental innovations, the *Epistle* helped to anticipate and in some respects to precipitate the controversy over the na-

ture of the picturesque in the writings of the two friends, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price. Price had found the terms beautiful and sublime, popularized by Burke’s essay *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), insufficient to characterize the “numberless objects which give great delight to the eye, and yet differ as widely from the beautiful as from the sublime.”<sup>6</sup> This intermediate term was the picturesque, which had come into popular use years before among such “picturesque” travelers as Gilpin, Warner, and Ireland. Burke had identified the beautiful with qualities of smoothness and regularity and the sublime with qualities that excited feelings ranging from awe to terror. The picturesque, on the other hand, stressed intricacy and variety, roughness, age, and decay, and above all “a sudden deviation” from the regularity of the beautiful.” The chief distinction between the ideas of Price and Knight was that the latter made beautiful and picturesque synonymous, and the former considered the picturesque to be a separate and distinct critical term intermediate between the beautiful and the sublime. Limitations of space make it impossible to discuss more fully here a matter that occupied so much of the aesthetic thinking of the eighteenth-century man of taste. Suffice it to say that both Knight and Price stressed the importance of “a building’s pictorial unity with its setting, [and] led them to recognize the necessity of some architectural setting for country houses, which Brown’s aesthetic had as strenuously denied.”<sup>7</sup>

**T**HROUGHOUT the latter half of the eighteenth century both old and new gardens were formed to submit to the changing taste (“nature methodiz’d”) in keep-

ing with certain emotions evolving about pictorial and sentimental-literary conventions. In accordance with pictorial ideas parks were laid out as a series of landscape views in the style of admired painters and governed by the principles of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. As Horace Walpole in his *Essay on Modern Gardening* (1770) says, “Every journey is made through a succession of pictures.” Concentration on the sentimental led to the development of the garden of mood, designed to arouse feelings reminiscent of those stimulated by poetry in much the same sense that historical associations lead us today to speak of the spirit of places.

The most famed of the old-fashioned gardens to conform to the new taste was Stowe, Lord Cobham’s 400-acre estate in Buckinghamshire. It has been happily characterized by a modern critic as a palimpsest, because, like a sheet of old monkish parchment, one landscape gardener after another has erased the work of his predecessor and substituted in its place his own modifications. The original gardens had been laid out by Vanbrugh and Bridgeman like a baroque fortress with long, straight avenues radiating from the house and terminating in retaining walls with bastions at the angles. Later Kent added meandering streams and a serpentine lake, and Brown eliminated avenues of old trees and planted grass over the site of the old formal parterre and flower garden (see Figure 1).

Despite frequent criticisms of its parts, Stowe was much admired by men of taste. Contemporary descriptions and guidebooks were written about its beauties, and owners of smaller estates unabashedly copied its scenes and ornamental buildings.

One of the earliest descriptions of Stowe

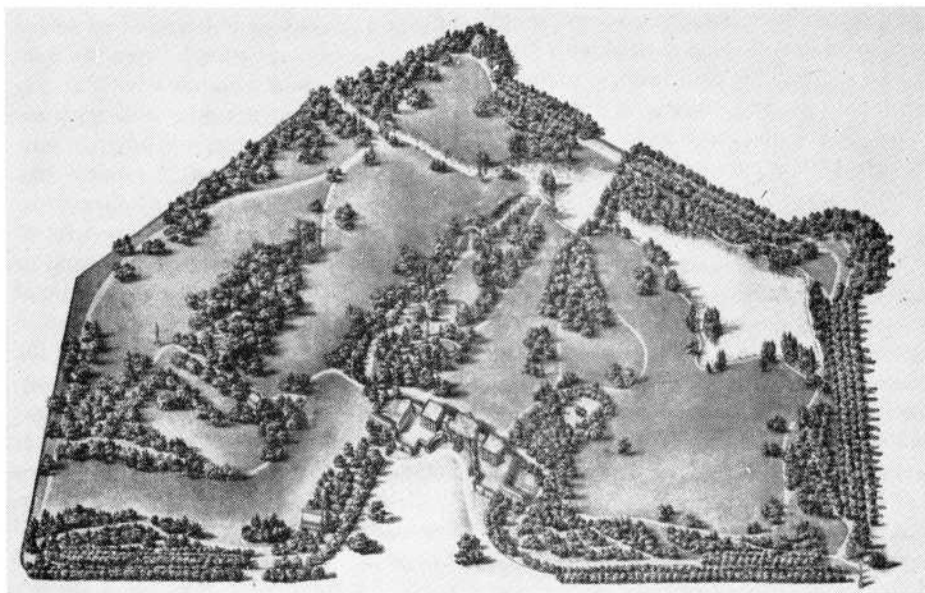


FIGURE 1

(1724) is contained in a letter from Lord Percival to his brother-in-law: "the house . . . commands a fine prospect" of twenty-six miles. The garden "consists of a great number of walks, terminated by summer houses, and heathen Temples of different structure, and adorned with statues cast from the Anticks [*sic*]. The cross walks end in vistas, arches and statues, and the private ones cut thro' groves are delightful. You think twenty times you have no more to see, and of a sudden find yourself in some new garden or walk. Nothing is more irregular in the whole, nothing more regular in the parts. What adds to the bewty of this garden is, that it is not bounded by walls, but by a Ha-hah, which leaves you the sight of a bewtiful woody country, and makes you ignorant how far the planted walks extend."<sup>8</sup>

In 1731 Alexander Pope praised its gardens obliquely in the *Epistle to Burlington*:

Still follow sense, of ev'ry art the soul,  
Parts answ'ring parts shall slide into a whole,  
Spontaneous beauties all around advance,  
Start ev'n from difficulty, strike from chance:  
Nature shall join you, time shall make it grow  
A work to wonder at—perhaps a STOW.

For the generation of the mid-century Walpole noted<sup>9</sup> that "the various pictures that present themselves as we shift our situation, occasion both surprise and pleasure; sometimes recalling Albano's landscapes to our mind; and oftener to our fancy, the idolatrous and luxurious vales of Daphne and Tempe."

In the closing years of the century it appeared to another visitor "like a vast grove, interspersed with columns, obelisks, and towers." Its grounds were "diversified with a great number of distinct scenes; each distinguished with taste and fancy, and each having a complete character of its own. The whole is enclosed with a sunk fence, or Ha! Ha! which extends nearly four miles in circumference, and is accompanied by a broad gravel walk, skirted with rows of lofty elms. This path leads to many of the buildings, and to several interesting scenes, admitting occasional peeps into the surrounding park, and views of the distant country."<sup>10</sup>

ONE OF THE EARLIEST of the gardens of mood was the poet Shenstone's ornamented farm, the Leasowes, in Shropshire. It was embellished with urns, trophies, weeping-willows, inscriptions, dragons and serpents in hideous attitudes, and other symbols in harmony with the grand, savage, melancholy, horrid, or beautiful character of the landscape.<sup>11</sup> Many poems and prose descriptions of The Leasowes praised the taste of its owner. The earliest of these, *A Description of the Leasowes*, by R. Dodsley (c. 1754), described all the walks and

all the objects and scenes from different vantage points, chiefly from the numerous "protompre benches" and seats, many of them inscribed with Latin and English verses and placed in appropriate places to serve as "hints to spectators" not to miss the views. Since a "tour" of the whole estate with Dodsley would be impracticable, let us note only a few of the scenes that especially impressed him. Near "a kind of ruined wall" he enters a winding path shaded by trees and sees a "cool, gloomy, solemn, and sequestered" scene in contrast with the preceding "lively scene." The poetic sentiments on the Root House suggest "the ideas we form of the abode of Fairies, and, appearing in this romantic valley, serve to keep alive . . . enthusiastic images." He admires a "semicircular lake" and "a pleasing serpentine walk." From a seat beneath

down small cascades . . . taught to murmur very agreeably." It is a "very soft and pensive scene." From a natural terrace above a concave valley he whimsically observes that "if a boon companion could enlarge his idea of a punch-bowl, ornamented within with all the romantic scenery the Chinese ever yet devised, it would . . . afford him the highest idea . . . of earthly happiness: he would certainly wish to swim in it." He finds "a remarkable clump of trees called Frankly Beeches" and "a beautiful gloomy scene, called Virgil's Grove," which "is opaque and gloomy." Through a *visto* he sees "one of the most beautiful cascades imaginable." It falls "down a precipice overarched with trees, and strikes us with surprise. It is impossible to express the pleasure which one feels on this occasion; for though surprise alone is not excellence,

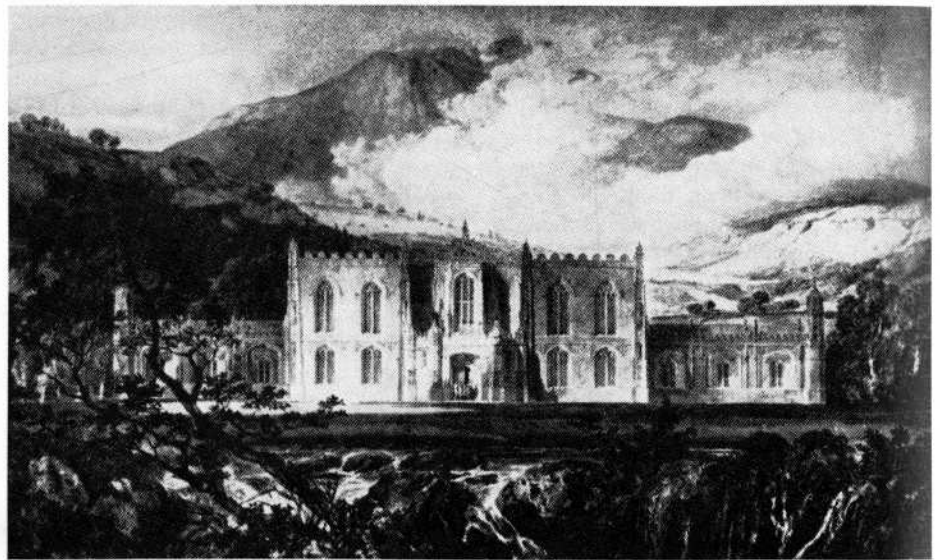


FIGURE 2

a mighty oak he enjoys "a beautiful home scene; a small lawn . . . encompassed with hills and . . . oaks, and embellished with a cast of . . . piping Fauns." From the Root House "the eye is presented with a fairy vision . . . of an irregular and romantic fall of water. [A] more wild and romantic appearance of water, and . . . strictly natural, is what I never saw in any place whatever." This scene combines "the idea of magnificence [and] beauty." Beyond is the Forest Ground, "a confused mixture of savage and cultivated ground, held up to the eye, and forming a landscape fit for the pencil of Salvator Rosa." The pathway, "serpentinizing through [an] open grove," forms "a perfect dome or circular temple of magnificent beeches." From the Lover's Walk he sees "agreeably shaped" water, whose terminations are "well concealed." The walk "ascend[s] beneath a depth of shade, by the side of which is a smaller bubbling rill, rolling over pebbles, or falling

it may serve to quicken the effect of what is beautiful." In another place "the scene . . . is that of water stealing along through a rude sequestered vale, the ground on each side covered with weeds and field flowers, as that before is kept clean shaven. Further on we lose all sight of water, and only hear the noise . . . : a kind of effect which the Chinese are fond of producing in what they call their Scenes of enchantment."

Shenstone's ideas were extremely pervasive in their influence on other men of taste. In 1771 Arthur Young enjoyed scenes at Halswell in Somerset reminiscent of the moods invoked by Milton's minor poems, as he was expected to by the owner and designer of the gardens: gloom, cheerfulness, and contemplation.<sup>12</sup> From the Druid's Temple of bark "the view [is] quite gloomy and confined; then it opens on "a more chearful ground" of river and open lawns and fields and thinly scattered trees. Again "the character of the ground . . .

changes most happily; the woods open [on] both sides of the water; waving lawns of the lively verdure—trees thinly scattered—brighter streams—touches of distant prospect—and elegant buildings—all unite to raise the most cheerful ideas." From the Ionic Portico the scenery is enchanting. The lawn is gently waved, and spotted with trees and shrubs in the happiest taste. The water seems to wind naturally through a falling vale; and a swelling hill, crowned by the rotunda, forms a complete picture. The whole scene is really elegant, every part riant, and bears the stamp of pleasure." The path along the bank of the river "under the gloomy shade of numerous trees, is a fit residence for Contemplation to dwell in. The awful shade—the solemn stillness of the scene, broken by nothing but the fall of distant waters; . . . impress upon the mind a melancholy scarcely effaced by the cheerful view of a rich vale."

A garden that summarized many of the implicit romantic tendencies of the last half of the eighteenth century and anticipated the Victorian garden was Hafod ("the Welsh Strawberry Hill"<sup>13</sup>) in Cardiganshire, the seat of Thomas Johnes, M.P., philanthropist, and learned editor of Froisart's *Chronicles*. About 1795 Turner made a watercolor of the original Gothic house, which burned in 1807 (see Figure 2). Coleridge, who also visited it, is said to have had it in mind when he composed his opium vision of Kubla Khan. It was laid out between 1783 and 1801 in a "wilderness" near Mount Plinlimmon. During that period Johnes spent thousands of pounds in planting 2,065,000 trees, 400,000 of them being larches.

A tourist<sup>14</sup> who visited Hafod in 1803 described it in detail. Art had been consulted only "to render nature accessible. Indeed, nature has in this country so obstinate a will of her own, that she would scarcely suffer a [reverse] taste . . . to interfere with her vagaries." From one elevated spot the visitor saw "an assemblage of beauty and grandeur . . . as few spots on this island can equal for surprise and singularity," which caused him to start "as at the withdrawing of a curtain from before a picture." From the pathway along the River Ystwyth he sees a "tremendous cataract," and "a rustic footbridge, which composes well in the picture." An artificial tunnel cut through a hill allows him to view the largest of the waterfalls in the middle of its descent. The darkness and the sound of falling water gives him "a sort of picturesque feeling" and a mood of "poetical gloom." Emerging, he enjoys "a full view of the beautiful and sublime . . . combined": valley, river, mountain torrent, and cultivated fields. Then he comes unexpectedly

upon "a creation of fairy gaiety[:] A gaudy flower garden, with its wreathing and fragrant plats bordered by shaven turf, with a smooth gravel walk carried round, is dropped, like an ornamental gem, among wild and towering rocks, in the very heart of boundless woods. Nothing can be more enveloped in solitude, nothing more beautiful and genial. [It] contains about two acres, swelling gently to meet the sunbeams, and teeming with every variety of shrub or flower." In the midst of a thicket on a natural platform atop a hill he finds another flower garden "so carefully sheltered and judiciously disposed, as to realize a paradise in the wilderness." It is not "so studiously ornamental as that of the garden below: it aims at a coincidence with the peculiarities of its situation."

IT WILL BE OBSERVED that after more than a century Milton's ideas of a garden in *Paradise Lost* have come full circle. The flower garden, which had been almost ignored throughout the eighteenth century, has once more made its timid reappearance in the landscape garden of the Regency.

The disappearance of the flowers coincided with shifting tastes in eighteenth-century poetry and gardening. Whereas the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Romantic poets wrote subjectively about flowers, poets of the Augustan period deliberately avoided the emotional in favor of the didactic and the moralistic in order to teach something useful or to satirize the defects in the men and manners of their age. It is a commonplace of literary criticism that, except for a few "sports," the sonnet as an art form disappeared in the eighteenth century. It ceased to flourish in the poetic garden between the time of Milton and that of Wordsworth. Flowers were also associated with the despised formal garden, against which the "natural" gardeners had rebelled. Flowers and the formal gardens of Louis XIV at Versailles, it was contended by the Palladians, had helped to regiment the French countryside (nature) and to jeopardize the liberties of the French people.

It is paradoxical that flowers were banned because of their emotional connotations and that at the same time the garden of mood stressed a variety of emotions. This paradox can be resolved, however, if we note the stress in both poetry and painting upon the term *sublime*. In the garden of mood landscape scenes were modeled after the sublime qualities of such poets as Milton; the moods of poets suggesting images other than the sublime were ignored. Gayly colored flowers could evoke only the lighter emotions associated with the merely domestic, the cheerful, or the mildly beautiful,

not the sublime and the picturesque. The imitation of scenes in the garden reminiscent of the style of painters in the grand style furnished gardeners with an even more cogent reason for rejecting flowers. The color palettes of such admired painters as Claude Lorraine, Nicholas Poussin, and Salvator Rosa favored the somber, subdued colors rather than the light pastel shades that came into fashion in the latter part of the eighteenth century. As a recent historian of art<sup>15</sup> has pointed out, the masters of Claude, Brill and Tassi, "had implanted and developed in Rome the style of Late Mannerist landscape, with its artificial disposition of dark-brown foreground, lighter-green middle distance, and blue hills on the horizon, each stage being marked by wings as in a theatre, starting from a dark tree in the foreground." As early as 1767 the Reverend William Mason in his lengthy poem *The English Garden* had advised the gardener to observe in the landscape the proper coloring:

Where to the eye three well-mark'd distances  
Spread their peculiar colouring. Vivid green,  
Warm brown, and black opaque the foreground  
bears  
Conspicuous; sober olive coldly marks  
The second distance; thence the third declines  
In softer blue, or, less'ning still, is lost  
In faintest purple.

Another modern critic<sup>16</sup> has this significant statement to make concerning the absence of flowers in the Augustan garden and their reappearance in the nineteenth-century garden. "The chief reason for the lack of colour . . . [was] the influence of painting. The painters of the day . . . were concerned principally with surfaces, picturesque roughness, or with problems of light. Until Constable introduced his revolutionary ideas, Claudian golds and browns were the only proper colours for a picturesque painter to use, since darkness was associated with sublimity. It was when the influence of painting on gardening became less at the end of the century and in early and mid-Victorian times that colour returned to the garden. When it did so, it was unrestrained until French impressionism exerted its influence on Miss Jekyll and her followers."

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that "in the nineteenth century, as the natural passion for flowers revived, formal gardens were again designed, usually in the Italian style,"<sup>17</sup> and that the art of gardening, the exclusive hobby of the male in the eighteenth century, became the exclusive property of the Victorian "female" and degenerated into a hodge-podge of styles without any sort of dominant philosophic protector.

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peace." And that is where heaven is. It is always over there, beyond all the hilltops. It is in our very going over those hilltops in a search and in a quest. Even Faust, as the curtain falls, is not seated in a golden chair in paradise; rather he is following the "woman soul which leadeth us upward and on." Faust, or Everyman, or you or I—as Goethe believes—in a state of paradise is reaching out in that eternal quest that is never done, reaching out and reaching up and reaching on.

## "Saturday's no fun anymore"

IT sure used to be, though. Up early—even before the sun hit the window sill. Then tip-toe into Dad's room to wake him up. Sometimes it isn't easy.

He's up now. Careful not to wake Mom. Now you're dressed and in the kitchen where you and Dad whip up a swell breakfast together. Doesn't the coffee smell good? And the bacon frying . . . the hot rolls. A real man's breakfast.

"What'll it be today, Tommy?" Dad asks. "Want to toss a ball around? How about a ride out to Blue Lake? Bet the trout are jumping. You call the shots, son. It's your day."

That's the way it was. The way you thought it would always be. You're not supposed to cry because you're a big guy now. But when you ask "why" no one knows how to answer you. What's cancer anyway? Why did it take Dad away?

For little lads like Tommy—with fun in their hearts and a glove in their hands—cancer deals a cruel blow. Today, because of cancer, there are more than 160,000 children who have to learn to live without a father.

Yet there is hope. Hope for a final, certain cure for cancer. The men and women in our research laboratories are working night and day toward this end. But they need your help. Badly.

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## The Golden Age . . .

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