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Reginald Theodore Blomfield Illustrated by F. Inigo Thomas

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

### THE FORMAL METHOD AND THE LANDSCAPE GARDENER

THE Formal System of Gardening has suffered from a question-begging name. It has been labelled "Formal" by its ill-wishers; and though, in a way, the term expresses the orderly result at which the system aims, the implied reproach is disingenuous. The history of this method of dealing with gardens will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but as some misunderstanding prevails as to its intention, and any quantity of misrepresentation, it will be well to clear the ground by a statement of the principles and standpoint of the Formal School as compared with Landscape Gardening.

The question at issue is a very simple one. Is the garden to be considered in relation to the house, and as an integral part of a design which depends for its success on the combined effect of house and garden; or is the house to be ignored in dealing with the garden? The latter is the

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position of the landscape gardener in real fact. There is some affectation in his treatises of recognising the relationship between the two, but his actual practice shows that this admission is only borrowed from the formal school to save appearances, and is out of court in a method which systematically dispenses with any kind of system whatever.

The formal treatment of gardens ought, perhaps, to be called the architectural treatment of gardens, for it consists in the extension of the principles of design which govern the house to the grounds which surround it. Architects are often abused for ignoring the surroundings of their buildings in towns, and under conditions which make it impossible for them to do otherwise; but if the reproach has force, and it certainly has, it applies with greater justice to those who control both the house and its surroundings, and yet deliberately set the two at variance. The object of formal gardening is to bring the two into harmony, to make the house grow out of its surroundings, and to prevent its being an excrescence on the face of nature. The building cannot resemble anything in nature, unless you are content with a mud-hut and cover it with grass. Architecture in any shape has certain definite characteristics which it cannot get rid of; but, on the other hand, you can lay out the grounds, and alter the levels, and plant hedges and trees exactly as you

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please; in a word, you can so control and modify the grounds as to bring nature into harmony with the house, if you cannot bring the house into harmony with nature. The harmony arrived at is not any trick of imitation, but an affair of a dominant idea which stamps its impress on house and grounds alike.

Starting, then, with the house as our datum, we have to consider it as a visible object, what sort of thing it is that we are actually looking at. A house, or any other building, considered simply as a visible object, presents to the eye certain masses arranged in definite planes and proportions, and certain colours distributed in definite quality and quantity. It is regular, it presents straight lines and geometrical curves. Any but the most ill-considered efforts in building—anything with any title to the name of architecture—implies premeditated form in accordance with certain limits and necessities. However picturesque the result, however bravely some chimney breaks the sky-line, or some gable contradicts another, all architecture implies restraint, and if not symmetry, at least balance. There is order everywhere and there is no escaping it. Now, suppose this visible object dropped, let us say from heaven, into the middle of a piece of ground, and this piece of ground laid out with a studied avoidance of all order, all balance, all definite lines, and the result must be a hopeless disagreement between

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the house and its surroundings. This very effect can be seen in the efforts of the landscape gardener, and in old country houses, such as Barrington Court, near Langport, where the gardens have not been kept up. There is a gaunt, famished, incomplete look about these houses, which is due quite as much to the felt want of relation between the house and its grounds, as to any associations of decay.

Something, then, of the quality of the house must be found in the grounds. The house will have its regular approach and its courtyard—rectangular, round, or oval—its terrace, its paths straight and wide, its broad masses of unbroken grass, its trimmed hedges and alleys, its flowerbeds bounded by the strong definite lines of box-edgings and the like—all will show the quality of order and restraint; the motive of the house suggests itself in the terrace and the gazebo, and recurs, like the theme in a coda, as you pass between the piers of the garden gate.

Thus the formal garden will produce with the house a homogeneous result, which cannot be reached by either singly. Now let us see how the landscape gardener deals with the problem of house and grounds.

It is not easy to state his principles, for his system consists in the absence of any; and most modern writers on the subject lead off with hearty and indiscriminate abuse of formal

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gardening, after which they incontinently drop the question of garden design, and go off at a tangent on horticulture and hot-houses. A great deal is said about nature and her beauty, and fidelity to nature, and so on; but as the landscape gardener never takes the trouble to state precisely what he means by nature, and indeed prefers to use the word in half a dozen different senses, we are not very much the wiser so far as principles are concerned. The axiom on which the system rests is this—"Whatever nature does is right; therefore let us go and copy her." Let us obliterate the marks of man's handiwork (and particularly any suspicion of that bad man, the architect), and though we shall manipulate the face of nature with the greatest freedom, we shall be careful to make people believe that we have not manipulated it at all. Various rules are given as to the proper method of "copying nature's graceful touch"—the favourite phrase of the landscapist. The older writers, such as Wheatly (*Observations on Modern Gardening*, 1770), had a theory which was at least intelligible as a theory. They considered the landscape gardener as a painter on a colossal scale. By altering natural scenery he was to produce such landscapes as are admired in the works of the old masters. The method of procedure as explained by Wheatly is this. You determine *à priori* the abstract characteristics of any natural object; and then, on

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considerations evolved from your inner consciousness, you alter the surrounding scenery to bring out these characteristics. For instance, the characteristics of rocks are determined to be “dignity, terror, and fancy.” By way of enhancing dignity, Wheatly tells us to cut away the ground to make them steeper; and to refine their appearance we are to cover them up with “shrubby and creeping plants.” Or again, if the scenery is wild, we may make it wilder by making a ruined stone bridge. Straight lines and unbroken masses of foliage are to be avoided at all costs, in order to secure variety of effect, “and the planter is to plant trees of different foliage at stated intervals, by way of reproducing the colours of the painter’s palette.” These views are repeated in modern treatises on landscape gardening, with, however, a curious inversion. Wheatly’s idea was that we should saturate our minds with the compositions of the old masters, and then proceed to alter actual scenery till it resembled their pictures; but the modern landscapist tells us that we are to copy nature—that is, study a piece of scenery of natural formation, and then reproduce this in our gardens. Wheatly admitted design of some sort, while his successors direct every effort to imitating the absence of design. The latter insist that we are not to copy nature literally, but only in her spirit, whatever that may mean. Mr. Robinson

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says, “We should compose from nature as landscape artists do. It is still his (the landscape gardener’s) privilege to make everchanging pictures out of nature’s own material—sky and trees, water and flowers and grass. If he would not prefer this to painting in pigments, he has no business to be a landscape gardener. The aim should be never to rest till the garden is a reflex of nature in her fairest moods.” For instance, because nature is assumed never to show straight lines, all paths are to be made crooked, and presumably Mr. Robinson’s dictum that “walks should be concealed as much as possible, and reduced to the most modest dimensions” is based on the state of a virgin forest; the argument perhaps running thus, because in a virgin forest there are no paths at all, let us in our acre and a half of garden make as little of the paths as possible. Deception is a primary object of the landscape gardener. Thus to get variety, and to deceive the eye into supposing that the garden is larger than it is, the paths are to wind about in all directions, and the lawns are not to be left in broad expanse, but dotted about with pampas grasses, foreign shrubs, or anything else that will break up the surface. As was said by a witty Frenchman, “Rien n’est plus facile que de dessiner un parc Anglais; on n’a qu’à enivrer son jardinier, et à suivre son trace.”

Mr. Milner, a recent writer on landscape

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gardening, has the courage to define what he calls his art : “The art of landscape gardening may be stated as the taking true cognisance of nature’s means for the expression of beauty, and so disposing those means artistically as to co-operate for our delight in given conditions.” This is a hard saying, put in plain English it seems to amount to this : “Fix upon certain passages that you like in natural scenery, and then reproduce them under artificial conditions.” By observation of natural scenery the landscape gardener is to form certain generalisations to guide his practice. Here are some of the results of Mr. Milner’s studies : “A calculated shadow on a lawn is a resource of value for the artistic use of natural effect. In every situation a beyond implies discovery and affects the imagination ; the area is circumscribed of which we can take cognisance too readily and completely ; imagination is then confused or frustrated. The beauty of water, in motion or still, is of universal acceptance. The created character of a water feature must be consonant with the surrounding land, for fitness to surrounding conditions is a measure of beauty to both ; a lake expresses spaciousness, but much of its charm is due to its outline.” There is a curious irrelevance about these apothegms which reminds one of Ollendorf : “My aunt is beautiful, but have you seen my sister’s cat ?”



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As to any system, Mr. Milner throws up the sponge at once. He admits in his first chapter that landscape gardening can have no set of fixed principles. He says generally that we are not to copy nature, but “to adapt and garner her beauties.” Yet his advice as to treatment of details is point-blank copy. “The lawn of our garden” should present the appearance of a “grassy glade in a wood,” appear, in short, to be exactly what it is not. For this is another of the objects of the landscape gardener; his aim is not to show things as they are, but as they are not. His first ambition is to make his interference with nature look “natural-like”; his second, to produce a false impression on the spectator and make him think the grounds to be twice as big as they are. “Bridges may be contrived to excite the impression of length;” islands on a lake can be used “to mask the ends.” “The removal of some (trees) in particular situations, with a coincident lowering of the bank, will give an effect of lengthening the water area.” So in regard to trees, “a hill is made to appear higher if its summit be planted.” Or again, “an enclosure pure and simple, even though it be of leaves and not a brick wall, gives a shut-in and cramped feeling which needlessly militates against expressions of beauty and expanse that may be deftly gained from outside the boundary lines,”—that is, by deftly cutting holes in the line of trees we lead

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people to suppose that our neighbour's estate belongs to us. Hitherto no mention has been made of architecture in this description of landscape gardening. Indeed, it is the object of the landscape gardener to exclude the architect from the garden, for he feels, like Demetrius, the silversmith, that his craft is in danger to be set at naught ; and having succeeded in expelling the architect a hundred and fifty years ago, he is naturally unwilling to let him in again. Mr. Milner does point out that the house should stand on a terrace, but proceeds to stultify his own admission by stating that the terrace " differs from the garden proper, which, though fine in calculated detail of its plan, should express by its breadth of treatment most unmistakably that nature has triumphed over art, because art has subtly tutored the development of nature," which, if it means anything, must mean that when you enter the garden you are to leave all thought of architecture behind you.

Thus, the substantial difference between the two views of gardening is this. The formal school insists upon design ; the house and the grounds should be designed together and in relation to each other ; no attempt should be made to conceal the design of the garden, there being no reason for doing so, but the bounding lines, whether it is the garden wall or the lines of paths and parterres, should be shown frankly and unreservedly, and the garden will be