

HILARY S. JACQMIN

ON HOUSES & GARDENS

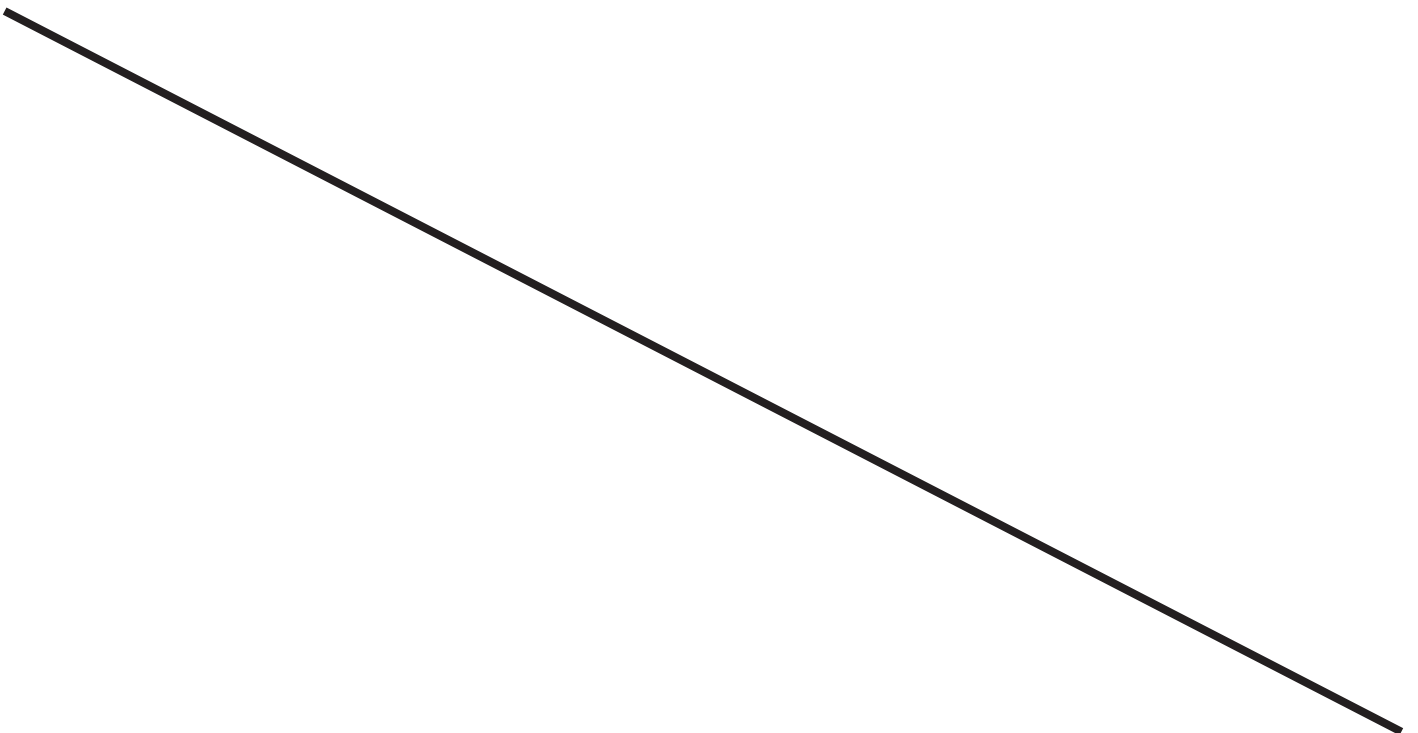
MINERVA / II: ARCHITECTURE

The Last Country House

Ladies' Maids

Advertisement, Architectural
Supplement to *Country Life*

The Grand Tour



The Last Country House

Digum Laude Virum Musa Vetat Mori

I lost her in the maze at Hampton Court
beside a bottomless reflecting pool.
Through edged parterres, beyond the tennis court,
a pleached lime passage glinted, greenwood, cool.

I searched the Grotto, the Illusion Cove,
the Cave of Skeletons, moist hothouse panes.
A topiary rabbit loomed; the Grove
of Lantern Slides was slit with bamboo canes.

Why did I build the Chinese Kiosk (lit
by fireflies), the Orangery Dome?
Who visits winter gardens? Who could sit
content in ruined replicas of Rome?

She vanished from the boxwood avenue,
the hermitage, the Crystal Obelisk.
These pleasure grounds must lack the proper view,
be too Sublime (or not quite Picturesque?).

No matter; I must tend the waterscape,
the model Matterhorn's steep Alpine peaks.
For after baccarat, half-blitzed, escape
is summerhouses, candytufts, antiques.

Ladies' Maids

Upstairs, they like us
artless, virtuous,
and thin, our skin
as pale as soda ash.

We learn
from one another
how to compound laudanum
or counterfeit perfume.

We wield
our tortoiseshell
tongue-scrapers
with practiced hands.

Our Scots vulgarities evaporate:
the poxed child, roaring,
the husband lost
in some provincial cow pond. Better

to say, "The infant seized
with smallpox cries"
and "He was drowned,
but it was long ago."

We know a little French,
but not too much.
We know the names
of all the major tragedies,

and how to rub
the soot from soiled furs.
We hold our tongues.
We never flatter anyone.

All day, we dress
our mistresses, re-dress
or undress them. Our hands
grow tea-gown smooth.

Summers pass. Pettish,
we slip up, boiling
the goldfish water,
severing a too-tight ring.

In the indifferent light
that fills our downstairs cells,
we sit idle, our hair unbound,
wearing last season's

cast-off frock, considering
our inheritance. These days, we look
like someone else, perhaps
the lady of the house.

We know the shape
of her tight ribcage.
We've grown into
all her oldest things.

Advertisement, Architectural Supplement to *Country Life*

May 4, 1912

I.

At Auction: Coping Balustrade,
Italianate, from Trentham Hall,
each heavy post a half-
grown pomegranate,
 plus thirteen hand-turned urns
 the color of Aleppo honey, superb.
Price: £200, negotiable.

 Cromartie
 Sutherland-Leveson-Gower's
agitated neighbors claim
the whole entombed estate's due
for demolition in the spring,
 but you can own a piece
 of real pastoral history
before the pleasure grounds
 are razed, a reminder
 of life's improved
 and still-improving things.

II.

Abandoned by the Duke
because the pent-up River Trent
 ran dark with sewage,
 the former priory
 sits servantless, a gassed hive,
just another lost house that won't sell.
Even put up, free of charge,
 to Stoke-on-Trent
 and Staffordshire,
 its belvedere tower
double-locks with mold.
Will no one come to tour?

III.

Only the royal deer-park
proves eternal. Families
of fallow deer serpentine
 through the old shooting gallery
 of oaks. They have the run
 of it now, each occluded barrow,
every hedgerow stretching out
forever, the blackcurrants
that the children used to gather,
 back when there were children here.

The Grand Tour

At Kew, she clammers up
the nautilitic stairs,
past Permian cycads
tethered to the trusswork,
past swaybacked *Coco de mer*,
each seed lobed
as a suffragette's rump.

Suspended from
the coldshear canopy,
she gazes through
Darjeeling light
at transplanted raffia,
fronds that swelter
against the steam-ground glass.

Her mute hands fox
the jutting trunk
of England's oldest potted plant.
Against the lawn's vast map,
a gilt pagoda shivers
like a cutthroat eel.
All empire has come to this.

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FLORIDA / BALTIMORE

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Bride Quarterly, & elsewhere

Her forthcoming first collection is
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