

# Venetian Casino



CORAL GABLES









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**L**N THE snowy North, in the long gloomy winter of many centuries, ever since man lifted his roof beams and set his hearthstone, it has been the hearth and the fire on the hearth which has focused all his living. But in the tropics the hearth loses its value. The sun, pouring down its living and pervading warmth, has freed man from walls and from crouching over smoky stones. It is no longer fire which is the fundamental necessity, but water. It is the fountain in the patio which gives meaning and beauty to the life of the house. The South Sea Islanders know this, whose gleaming lagoons, within the thunderous outer beaches, provide for them exercise and pleasure, comfort and health. The Romans knew it, who built their great marble baths under blue Italian skies to be the meeting place for the whole sunny city. The Venetians knew it, yearly marrying their Doge to the great Adriatic which was for the Venetians almost their whole country. The Spaniards of the South knew it, gossiping and singing and making love around well curbs in walled courtyards. The old Aztecs knew it, and the Hindoos and Egyptians, who worshipped rivers and gods of water and whose great water cisterns stored up life for tropical cities. Wherever the sun dominates, it is water to which man turns for recreation and refreshment. That is why, when the great Venetian pool at Coral Gables was finished it immediately focused the life of an entire region. That was why, in building the pool which is in reality a great lagoon, with accompanying casino and towers and bridges and charming leafy corners, Denman Fink, the artist-architect, produced the most remarkable thing of its kind, not only for the tropics, but for the country.

Nowhere has a swimming place been built which is so undoubtedly a work of great art. It is great art, first, because it fulfills one of the fundamental needs of the tropics, as water fulfills the purpose of a garden, and then because in its building Mr. Fink solved his local problem with a structure beautiful and dignified and well-



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thought out even to its least detail. The Venetian pool of Coral Gables not only focuses, with its broad green lagoons, its shady porticos and vine-covered loggias, its great Spanish towers, its tea rooms and dance floor and dressing rooms, the leisured life of a whole region, but it provides all America with a unique new architectural development of the highest artistic value, a development which will

certainly set a new example for future builders.



For the problem of building a swimming pool which shall not be merely a rectangular tank with diving boards at one end and wading babies at the other, but a genuine architectural achievement, has never before been attempted. Here the question was not just to sink such a tank, but to utilize a certain irregular shaped piece of ground in Coral Gables so that it would offer that glimpse of water which the old French landscape architects considered the eye of any landscape, to serve not only as mirror for the tremendous skies and stars and sunsets which are so important a part of the Coral Gables mural decoration, but as lagoon and beach and lake, fountain and well in the courtyard, to be the



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hearthstone for these American tropics. It is in just such beautiful attributes that the charm of the tropics is manifested. The first question, of course, was that of water. It was George E. Merrick's idea that the lagoons be made to seem as natural as possible, with curving shores and little bays and inlets, islands from which palm trees could lean to their reflections in the water, viny banks from which blossoms could drip and float, and above everything, a series of enchanting cascades, whose rush and swirl and foam would seem the natural issue of a river just beyond, whose constant clear flow of water would keep the lagoons below perpetually fresh. It took work to do it. It was necessary that Mr. Fink himself superintend the placing of every cement wall, the dredging of every curve, the setting of every rock in the cascade, in order that the result might not have the stiff artificiality which follows the attempts of every creator of natural effects who is not fundamentally an artist. To copy nature one has to be equally an artist. But the result undoubtedly proves that Mr. Fink succeeded.

The gleaming lime green water curves among grassy banks, deep shimmering emer-









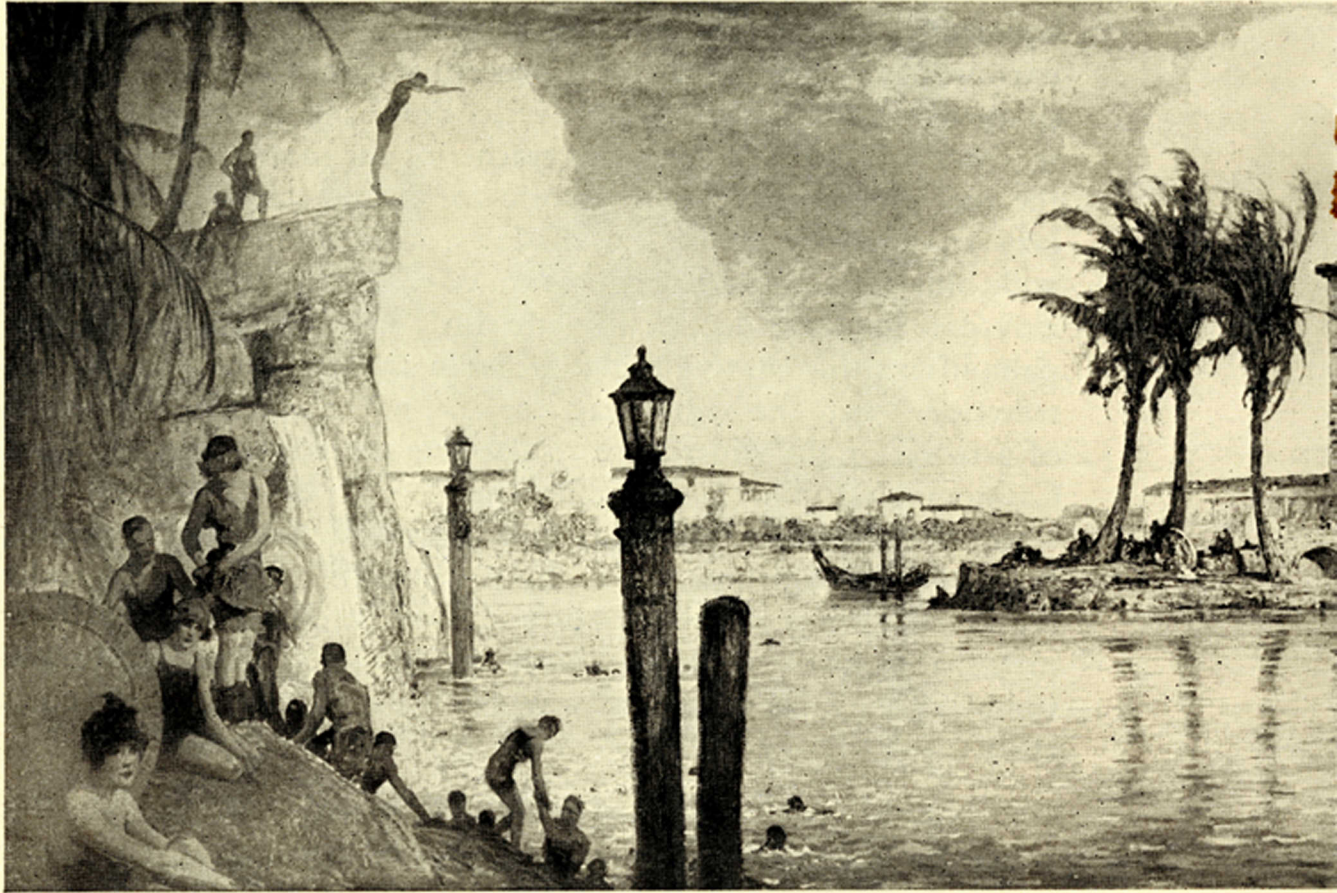
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ald under the cliff where the divers leap and curve to its surface, aquamarine in the sunlight. In one wide half circle beyond a narrow peninsula of grass and flowering shrubs are the dimpling shallows of the babies' pool, overlooked by a shady portico for mothers and nurses. The wide reaches of the main lagoon offer all the cool watery space in the world for racing stroke or luxurious lazy floating among the leaf shadows. Under the divers' rock a wide blue grotto makes a cool cavern of shadow where the swimmer may dare delicious depths. By the little island where the coconut palm lifts, a tiny curving bridge arches in a perfect oval with its own reflection, where the bather may also idle, near the mossy water steps of a tower or the wider steps to the pergola-topped portico of the Casino itself. The most picturesque spot is the tumbling white water of the cascades. High up on a grassy lawn among the curving boles of coconut palms, it is as if a deep brook started. First rocky rapids and then sheer drops of a foot or so, where the rushing water makes a roaring curtain of foam, the cascades leap and curve and tumble, giving off a fine spray where in the sun streaks rainbows cling.

Nothing could be more perfect as background for all this watery beauty than the Casino itself. The artist wanted to create a structure as mellow in atmosphere as one of those old Venetian palazzos, worn old stones dreaming for centuries between the brilliancies of sun and sea and yet not at all in any slavish imitative way exactly Venetian. The Casino is after all a modern casino, in Coral Gables which in all things practical must be the most up-to-date. It had to be a building whose towers would seem rightly planned to look out across orange groves and golf links, whose floors would not incongruously re-echo the tap of the smartest silver slipper. It had to have all the honeyed charm of old beloved buildings, wrought slowly and carefully by craftsmen who loved their work, with all the clean line and practical adaptation to modern problem of the best of American building.



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The whole plan of the Venetian Casino is a unit, pools and bridges and islands, surrounding the rambling tiled roofed structure with its fine square towers, as naturally fitted to its place as a partridge to its covert. The towers, under the lovely faded tones of the ancient Spanish tiles are like airy loggias lifted up over picturesque massing of roofs. Between them, partly roofed with vine-clad pergola and partly with beams and tiles, the main loggia and porticos reach, descending to the lagoon on one side in long steps and on the other opening out to the tiled dance floor, between tinted cement walls, with a roofed gallery on one side for tables. The entrance to the delightfully appointed dressing rooms opens between



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the main loggia and the babies' pool. Around the whole structure, Casino and pools, a wall, with high posts and wrought iron tops, allows brief glimpses of the whole.

If the color of the water itself is exquisite, the coloring and tinting of the walls of the Casino is not less charming. By mixing his color with his cement and applying the tinted cement in layers as a painter applies paint to a canvas, the artist has achieved the beautiful warm overtones of peach colored marble, faded in sun, streaked charmingly as in rain and by vines and all the mellowing effects of water, into cream and buff and apricot, blended and melt-



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ing into each other. In places the plaster seems worn so that the rosy color of old bricks shows through, as it would in old, old houses. Beyond the delicate lime green of the water these walls, and tiles above make the subtlest sort of picture. And then, linking them, offering contrast colors, groups of mooring posts, like old Venetian posts, rise from the water, topped at night with the soft glow of old lamps, in the daytime painted bright blue and yellow, and softer blue in charming wavy patterns. The posts are the uniquely happy touch of all. The blues and yellows sound the keynote for all the color scheme. They lend warmth, and softness and distinctive beauty to the whole picture.

Over the tops of the patio, across the pergola beams, everywhere about the lagoons the Casino is related finally to its setting by the most adequate sort of landscape planting. Trees have been set in specified angles of the wall not only because their leaves made patterns of lights and shades upon the rough cement surface, but



also because their particular shades of leaves blended rightly with the color of the wall at that place. Every blossoming shrub and vine, every flower, was chosen for its proper place by the same color scheme which the gondola and lamp posts indicate, warm yellows and soft blues.

Down the grassy slopes by the cascades the planting is particularly charming. Great masses of the splendid shrub known as candlelight, whose vivid yellow blossoms are spikes half a foot long, the clearest singing color in



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the world, sound the note of yellow. Climbing bignonia vines, with small orange blossoms, cling and hang from rock to rock, and lazy orange butterflies, which always seem to float about lantana in bloom, mark where those yellow and orange blossoms lift among their green. For blue, the lovely lavender blue thunbergia is used, and the dark unusual indigo of blue sage. Everywhere the glossy green of tropic foliage is massed as background for blossom or border for shimmering water depths. There are huge coconut palms, clumps of white oleanders, with that soft sage green leafage so particularly lovely against faded peach color walls, the silver-



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green and delicate leaf tracery of eucalyptus trees, and here and there fruiting orange trees and air plants, and of course, velvety green grass. Pools, grounds, Casino,—as one studies it more and more one sees its fundamental unity.

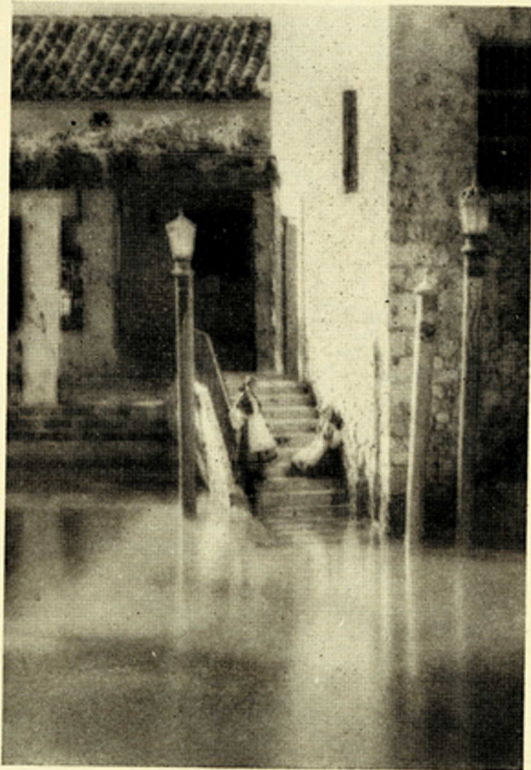
But art is achieved not only in the total effect, but by hundreds of carefully worked out details. Here the details are as delightful as the whole picture. Take doorways, for instance. Many of them are arched. Square doorways have as a rule a border of the most colorful small Spanish tiles, every one different, in which one can trace all sorts of jolly ideas of some artists, fantastic animals and



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grotesque human figures, as well as the more formal arabesques of the Moors. There are hand wrought iron gates like great sheets of stiff lace and there are wooden grills whose spindles are colored brightly to carry out the yellow and blue and orange. And from every angle, as one looks about, these doorways reveal vistas; glimpses of lagoon water shining in the sun; the corner of the dance patio, with its old Spanish beamed gallery; the aquarium in its circular chamber in the entrance tower, under the old Spanish lamp with its stained glass panes, whose light falls waveringly on the tiling; tiles imported from Spain, each one different and worthy of a careful study; the small curving steps that lead down to the lipping water beneath the second tower, steps fit for the lurking place of a cloaked and armed Venetian gallant, waiting for the black prowed gondola of his lady love. All these doorways, gates, windows, open pergolas and porticos, make the whole structure a honeycomb for rippling lights and winds, the sounds of rushing waters, the perfume of many blossoms, and everywhere, pictures.

If you are looking for delightful details, study the long central loggia with the high beamed ceiling and the jolly little Spanish tavern tables set for tea. The beams, painted in lovely faded blue and greens, each bear a shield with a different emblem, sea-horses and angel fish and eels and sea-shells, like high lights way above the floor of hugh pol-









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ished tiles the color of old wine. The dozens and dozens of quaint sturdy little tavern chairs, which, with the tables, were designed so that they should be thoroughly in keeping with the rest, are of dark stained wood, with cushions of striped cream and green and blue and yellow, and the wicker chairs by the dance patio are the same green, the color of the lime green water. Notice the old hand wrought Spanish lamps where at night the warmth of softly tinted electric light will glow against the rivalry of cool greenish moonlight outside. The fountain in the dance patio, set about with tiles, carries out the same note of color, and even the wooden spindles in the grill work bring you back again to the beams in the loggia.

Nowhere better do you get an idea of the sympathetic care that has gone into the building of this charming place than in the tower over the entrance hall. Great beams of pecky cypress form the staircase supports, rubbed down with lime until they have taken on the bloom of a hundred years. You would almost swear that the walls here are not cement at all, but faded, rubbed old peach color velvet, streaked with cream and orange, worn with the passing elbows of time, satisfying as sun warmed marble. The tiles of the lower floor were brought from Havana because they had just the same faded peach bloom tone. Even the heavy ancient shutters of the tower windows, real old mahogany shutters, formidable against musketry fire, with their great hand wrought iron hinges, have a patina, like the loveliest green tarnish on old copper. Everywhere your eye strikes some new bit of beauty.

And no matter how much you look you will become more and more convinced that with all this lavish use of lime green and dull blue and faded orange, with all these beautiful old





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beams and tiles and stunning Venetian mooring posts, there was one directing intelligence, one man's devotion to the highest standards of architectural beauty. All the hundreds of details, whose perfection perhaps not many out of the crowds who frequent the Casino will consider, work together into a total of rare charm, rare perfection. It is a completeness in which one can steep oneself gratefully. For in this way we shall soon be ridding the country of the old stigma that there is no good art in America.

George E. Merrick has at Coral Gables builded beautifully, permanently, farseeingly—and the brightest jewel in all of the distinctive architecture which is Coral Gables' chief charm is the Venetian Casino. Crowds come daily to enjoy its beauty, and take away with them a joy and delight of the finer things which are exemplified here.



