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DANCING AROUND THE WORLD

"JAPANESE DANCE"

By John Richard Finch

*A poem on a silken fan—
Incense, a torii gate—Japan.*

THUSLY is poetically described the great fairyland of the Rising Sun. Rich in tradition, Japan's glamorous history is lost in mists of such antiquity that fact merges with mythology. Jimmu Tenno, spawn of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, descended to earth to rule the island empire more than 600 years B. C. Today, the Mikado is of the same unbroken line—the oldest ruling family in the world. Feudal lords, Shoguns, and Samurais stalk the pages of Japanese history, dealing out justice and war. Cherry blossoms, terraces of tea and rice, chrysanthemums, sheer mountains, and tall temples where joss smolders in gold-crusted facades, Shinto priests with shaven heads, and arched bridges spreading over silent rivers to hidden shrines, steep the land in color. Quaint houses of bamboo, with lyric roofs curling skyward, kimonos that shame the rainbows, clatter of wooden clogs on tiny feet, scurrying rickshaws, fans and blinking lanterns—all are an integral part of the tales interpreted in the dances of Japan.

The traditional dances are divided into the sacred or religious called No; the festival dances, and the dances of war and conquest. The festival dances are the true interpretations of Japanese folk-lore. They celebrate auspicious conditions of Nature or happy events in the family—the coming of Spring; the cherry blossoms; the season of fishing with cormorants; flowers in general; the rice and tea harvests, and colorful events in honor of a thousand occurrences. Gay-hued kimonos enveloping little figures, softly, rhythmically swaying to the twang of the *samisen* and the dull beat of the *taiko*—each with a dainty fan or a bouquet held in fingers like ivory tapers—forms a picture that indeed might be cut from the pages of a fairy tale.

THE No, danced by both men and women, interprets the ways of the Gods. Impressively, before lacquered Buddhas in incense scented chambers, the No is danced—solemn, ghostly— weird in its ritual as the mystic, immutable Gods for whom it is celebrated.

The dances of war fall into a distinct class, individualistic, typical only of Nippon in choreography. The costumes are elaborate, impressive, fiercely beautiful. The dances of war and conquest have none of the plaintive folk-lore of the festival dances, but are aggressive, virile, with an undercurrent of stark cruelty. Great victories have become classics, from the defeat of Kublai Khan to the triumph over the Russian hordes in the early twentieth century.

To Japan's Geisha girls belongs the distinction of immortalizing the festival dances. With its sheer grace and beauty, the dance is lovely to look upon by any standard, but alone would be enchanting, because of its gossamer frailty. In delicate symbol, the falling of the petals of flowers, the sound of distant music, the murmurs of a brook—any motive, so long as it is dainty and fanciful, is interpreted with charm, poise and beauty. Movement conforms to the same manner of thinking; much of it barely disturbing the silken folds of the kimono. A thousand meanings are hidden in little turns and twists of the fan; the angle of the head, the posturing.

OFTEN the Geisha dances, although light in emotional theme, are awesome alone because of their chromatic tincture—the flowing kimonos of gleaming silk over which embroidered dragons crawl, feasting on blossoms of lotus and wistaria; *obis* woven in strange mythical symbols encircling tiny waists; high chignons of carefully groomed ebony hair, crowned with petal combs and butterfly pins of tortoise shell and gold filigree, together with the doll-like, fragile beauty of the dancers, creates a strange poignancy that fascinates.

Great lovers of Nature, the Japanese have inculcated in their dancing the spirit of the outdoors. The background for the dance is invariably a replica of some scenic beauty in which the land abounds. No background is complete, however, without the red *torii* gate which denotes a shrine, and couples inseparably the Japanese love of Nature with their great religious fervor.

Not the spell of the Orient alone is found in the dances of Nippon, but an individual enchantment that is distinctly Japanese. The mention of the island empire conjures up a picture of youthful feminine loveliness in waxen flesh posturing in regal raiment to the weird, falsetto notes of a *samisen* before a lacquered screen over which lace-like ivory traces a pattern of the East—dancing in measured, fragile steps, the dance of Nature and of the Gods.

