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DANCING AROUND THE WORLD

"JAVANESE DANCE"

By John Richard Finch

FREIGHTED with mystery, the plaintive notes of a *yalur* reverberate through the soft tropic night like the music of a lost world. Gossamer-spun maidens, burnished by an equatorial sun, posture under velvet skies prodigal with stars. Moonlight floods the earth with platinum, turning the verdant green of the palms to glistening silver. Java, the far islands of the East, sun kissed, moon drenched, fragrant with the pungence of spices and tropic blooms, gives the world the classic dance of the Temples.

The haunting beauty of the Javanese dance traces itself indelibly on the memory of all who witness its performance. It contains none of the abandon and gaiety of the Polynesian dances, which sprang from the same source, but has held steadfastly to the old religious interpretations left for posterity on the crumbling walls of ruined temples half buried in the stewing jungles of Malaya.

The Javanese dance is an expression of a little-known phase of the East, the chaste East of mythology, a naked spirit purified by religious fire. The dance possesses a *bizarerie* peculiar to the Javanese, although it finds its source in the ancient pantomimes carved on the walls of Hindu temples in Java. It is the embodiment of classical beauty, and a strange, amazing technic, not without a note of weirdness—surely mystery.

Forever associated with youthful beauty and dazzling color because of its performance by tiny doll like women in bright-hued *sarongs* and glittering jeweled coronets, the Javanese dance not only fascinates, but creates an all-consuming spell that transports both the dancers and the spectators into a detached world. This mystic spell is dissipated only when the last note of the weird music has died away and the dancers have slipped softly away like fading wraiths.

THE music of the dance has the soul of Java imprisoned in its wailing notes. A flow of bronzen tones rise from a graduated series of gongs, its swelling harmony lanced at intervals by attenuated screeches from a Persian violin, and given a rhythmical cadence by the beating of a great drum. The stringed *yalur*, plucked by strong brown fingers, sends twanging, eerie notes around the circle where the tiny dancers twist and bend in the angular movements of the ancient figures found on the temple walls. At intervals the dancers break into fragmentary song, their shrill piping voices rising above the music like a ghostly wind, singing across the naked edges of the world.

Sarongs, heavy with the clean, waxy odor of *batik*, sheath the slender waists of the dancers, falling in trains that sweep the ground with haughty regality. Vivid vests bind trim torsos in a mould of velvet, and a queenly crown, gem studded, adorns each daintily sculptured head. The chromatic war of colors is softened by silver moonlight, but in secluded spots where ritualistic fires send leaping lanterns of light over the dancers, the myriad-hued *sarongs* flash through the night like a diffused lunar rainbow.

Tiny bare feet twist and turn in the strange fashion of the temple figures. Fingers like ivory tapers point and gesture in the manner of the Gods. Slowly, with measured solemnness, the Malayan Circes posture—each bend of the arm, turn of the head, twist of the body, movement of finger or toe has its meaning—a dance of forgotten ages and lost civilizations.

THE charm of the Javanese dance lies in its awesome, ritualistic fervor, its fascinating mysticism, the colorful costuming, and in the youthful beauty of the performers. The hypnotic music—high pitched, wailing—plays no small part in the spell of the dance.

Javanese dancing the world over, performed in the capitols of the Occident or in its own natural setting in the verdant jungles of the Indies, is a magic art—unique, individualistic, glamorous, enthralling. Its ancient ritual which unfolds traditional tales from the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana" laid in an enchanting background of tropic verdancy, hangs in a transparent casing of strange brilliance, like a string of emeralds, recalling to mind the adventurous period when East-Indiamen came staggering down the seas in quest of fabulous horizons, and neat clipper-bows nosed westward with cargoes of slaves and spices.

