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DANCING AROUND THE WORLD

"RUSSIAN BALLET"

By John Richard Finch

RUSSIA and the ballet are interwoven in a tapestry so vivid, so stirring in appeal that the two are forever associated. Mention of the Russian ballet conjures up mind pictures of glistening snow tumbling over Byzantine domes; droshkas pulled by prancing horses flying over ermine blanketed roads; Cossacks with cocked tarbooshes, their swords clanking, galloping arrogantly through the streets of old St. Petersburg; the plaintive unforgettable melody of the Volga boatmen, and dancing—dancing in glittering palaces and in hovels, before kings and before peasants, but—dancing.

The Russian ballet is fire in ice—gayness, abandon, luxury on the surface with an undercurrent—the inexorable obligation of an oppressed race, now a sob, now a song—alternately swelling in mad crescendo and falling to the softness of a cradle song. There is exciting beauty; untamed music—a strange mingling of the East with the West; gay, virile songs filled with all the passion of living and the tragedy of dying. This is the medley of life that brings us the Russian ballet. In palaces that stand no more, in cities that have fallen before the march of time, if we listen, we can sense the elusive perfume of powdered hair, catch the rustle of satin court gowns, and hear the soft rhythm of twinkling toes flying over polished floors—dancing—dancing—the Russian ballet.

The art of the ballet is an evolution from the pageants and mystery plays of the Middle Ages. The culture of the Renaissance caused a demand for something less crude than the miracle and mystery plays of the early fifteenth century, and the masque with its combination of music, poetry, and dancing became the diversion of the upper classes. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ballet became the consuming pastime of the courts of Europe. These ballets were almost always of an allegorical or mythological character.

ONE of the earliest and most memorable records of ballet is the tragic Ballet des Ardents, given by the Duchesse de Berri in Paris, in the fifteenth century. The ballet's popularity spread rapidly, and, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, was well established in most of the capitals of Europe. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century, however, that Russia accepted the ballet.

In 1661 Czar Fiedolwitz Romanoff of Russia, wishing to introduce into his court some of the culture of the Renaissance, sent to Italy for sixty artists, expecting to receive painters. When they arrived, he discovered that half of them were dancers. But here was a Romanoff of vision and discrimination, who believed that art might declare itself in more manifestations than one, and bade them show what they could do. So pleased and impressed was the Czar with the dancing that he established the Imperial Russia ballet and school of dancing, which from that time kept alive in Russia the true spirit of the art of the ballet.

The ballet seemed indeed the dance of Russia. In less than half a century after its introduction in St. Petersburg, the choreography of the Russian ballet was accepted as the supreme form of artistic expression in dancing—a classic. The Russian capital was a mecca for the world's great dancing masters, and the ballet dancers who have attained the highest pinnacle of success even today, have without exception been trained in the Russian school.

CHARACTERISTICALLY Russian, but universal in appeal with the enchantment of music whose ardor of expression is inspirational, the Russian ballet is a thing of sheer beauty, exquisite grace, fascinating in its interpretation, thrilling in its performance. It is no wonder that these ballets have stirred an artistic world. To Russia must ever go the distinction of creating a new language of the dance.

Names that live in the memory of every lover of the Russian ballet—indelibly impressed upon their minds—are the great dancers Anna Pavlova, Waslaw Nijinski, Karsavina, Mikail Mordkin, Kydia Lopoulowa, and Isadora Duncan. Great composers, whose lilting music has been forever immortalized—as much a part of the ballet as the dancers—are Stravinski, Borodine, Glazounow, Tschaiowski, and Rimski-Korsakow.

The cultured world bows to Russia in acknowledgement of her immortalizing the greatest classic of the Goddess Terpsichore—the Russian Ballet.

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