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DANCING AROUND THE WORLD

"THE HULA"

By John Richard Finch

FROM the mists of antiquity in the tall temples of Indo-China came the Hula. Before high priests of forgotten cults, youthful maidens with golden skins, burnished by a tropic sun, swayed before sacred images of strange Gods in solemn ritual—the Hula.

When the Mongol hordes from the North swept down over Malaya, starting the Era of Migration in the fifth century A. D., and great canoes set out for new worlds in the South Pacific, the Hula was brought eastward to Hawiaki—"the land of spreading heavens." From this atoll, now the island of Raiatea in the Society Islands, the migration spread fan-shape over the turquoise South Seas, some of the great canoes reaching Hawaii. With the people came their religion, their culture, and their customs.

From the Temple ceremonial dance, in which the lives of the Gods were interpreted, the Hula, with time, became a dance in which traditions and customs of the land found perpetuation. It told stories, not of Gods, but of God-like people.

As all art is symbolic, so the Hula, in the rhythmical, graceful swaying of the body, symbolizes the lapping water and breeze-stirred palm. The attitude of the feet, legs and hands, and expression of the eyes must be sympathetic with the rest of the body and with the music or chant. Every motion, and every gesture paints a picture.

MEN as well as women were very definitely included in the Hulas. In the days when Hula dancing was a sacred rite, there were many interesting details of ritual. Flowers traditionally have been bound up with the dance, and it was the custom to place *lei* or wreaths of flowers on the altar before the God or Goddess. For men it was specified that the *lei* must be of red *lehua*, and for women a *maile lei*. The dance was done to a weird chant and the dull, serious, sometimes menacing note of the calabash. When Christianity was brought by missionaries to Hawaii, the religious rituals gradually changed to what might be termed folk dances, and, with the march of time, took on a gayness far removed from the fanatical religious fervor of the original Temple dances.

Time came when some of the newer Hulas were danced to music, first songs or *meles*, and finally, with instruments—the ukelele and steel guitar. Its grace and beauty charmed all who saw its rippling, rhythmic symphony, and soon its fame circled the universe. Hawaii became known as the land of Hula-Hula—immortalized in song and rhyme.

Originally, the hula costume was a *tapa* cloth skirt. Limitation of movement and grace, resulted in the *ti* leaf skirt made of the full leaves, and finally the shredded *ti* leaf, which allowed full and free movement of the limbs. The old *tapa* skirts, however, were kept for sacred dancing and for occasions of state. Today, in Hawaii, the *ti* leaf, full and green is worn, although the raffia skirt is accepted universally as the Hula costume.

A flower *lei* about the neck, another crowning the head, and wristlets and anklets of *ti* leaves or raffia are essentially a part of the costume.

AMONG the many beautiful old interpretive Hulas which have been faithfully preserved is the Hula Pele, or the dance to Pele the Goddess of the Volcano. Revered by the ancient Hawaiians, who reserved it for occasions of special gravity, this Hula depicts the strong drama, rich in human and deific coloring, of the love of the Goddess Pele for Prince Lohiau. It tells how the Goddess Pele, expelled from mystic Kahiki by her brothers for disobedience to their mother Honua-mea (Earth) voyaged north to Hawaii, where she lived in the fire pit of Halemaumau on Kilauea Volcano; how she fell in love with the Hawaiian prince to whom she sent her sister, Hiiaka; how the messenger-sister fulfilled her mission, and upon returning to Pele learned that she had been betrayed during her absence; how Hiiaka revenged herself by stealing the love of the Hawaiian prince, and how the world was saved from destruction by Pele's wrath with the intervention of the peace-loving god, Kane.

This is the story of the Hula, and today, Laka, Goddess of the Hula, in her celestial plane, smiles happily down on Hawaii, her earthly kingdom, and its gay, happy people, who have perpetuated her lovely grace and charm in their dances. On far-flung white beaches to the chanting of temple priests, the old Hawaiians may be found dancing, while forgotten Gods with pens dipped in mists of the lunar rainbow record *meles* on sheets of moonlight. It came from the Temples, but forever the Hula belongs to Hawaii.

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