

# A Russian Fairy Tale

## THE STONE FLOWER

(Moscow Film Studios)

ALTHOUGH it is nearly 20 years since Paul Rotha described how the "forbidden productions of the USSR" had assumed such exaggerated importance in the minds of the British intelligentsia that all Soviet films were hailed as the supreme examples of modern cinema, a picture like *The Stone Flower*, which was shown last week at a private screening in Wellington, indicates that even to-day the pupils of Eisenstein can occasionally produce something right out of the top cinematic drawer. This beautiful colour film is little more than a Russian fairy tale transferred to the screen, yet its ability to charm an audience which could understand nothing the characters were saying—there were no English sub-titles—proved that when it comes to art (or fairy tales) language is not an insurmountable barrier to appreciation.

The events occur in the bad old days of serfdom, when Danila, an apprentice

stone-cutter, carves a malachite vase in the shape of a flower for the local Tsarina. The work takes him months, while his forgotten sweetheart, Katya, lingers on the riverbank waiting sadly for her lover. When it is finished, the vase is considered a masterpiece by all who see it, until an old man mentions the legendary stone flower which is said to exist in the underground palace of the Queen of the Copper Mountain. It is so beautiful, he says, that it combines the living qualities of a flower with the eternal strength of stone. Yet it also carries a curse, that all who see it must remain inside the mountain as the Queen's captives.

Danila's artistic soul is so fired with this tale that he cannot rest until he has seen the flower, and on the night of his wedding feast he walks out into the snow, smashes his own poor creation, and goes to the mountainside where the Queen awaits him. She touches the cliff-face with her wand, and noiselessly the rocks slide back to reveal a passage into the bowels of the earth. Then, in a long and fantastic sequence, they walk like a bridal pair through endless caverns

studded with all the minerals the earth can hold—silver, gold, precious stones, and finally a hall of pure crystal in which blooms the Stone Flower itself. Dazzled by its perfection, Danila agrees to remain in the cave and do the Queen's bidding. But in time his desire to return to mortal life becomes so great that the relenting fairy allows Katya to come to him, and in a poignant scene sends them radiantly back into the outside world, where, as in all true fairy tales, they live happily ever after.

Within this framework the director-producer, A. Ptushko, has turned out a work that is technically little short of perfection. Striking colour photography, in soft, lustrous pastel shades that subtly suggest the fairy atmosphere of the whole piece, forms the film's most notable triumph. Each scene, whether it is of animals at play in the woods, of the peasants moving gravely through the marriage ritual, or of the fabulous subterranean grottoes, stirs the imagination as the scenes of other films seldom do.

On the other hand, it seems likely that the very incomprehensibility of the dialogue must have enhanced the film's visual effect, and that the best assessment of it could be made only by someone who understood the language. There were also some rather conventional scenes of a type that has been done as

### BAROMETER

FINE: "The Stone Flower."  
FAIR: "Rachel and the Stranger."  
DULL: "Homecoming."

well or better by Hollywood, such as the sequence where Katya runs through the forest towards her lover and the trees and branches come alive and leap up across her face to bar the way. The acting too had at times a distinctly naive quality, admittedly well suited to such a theme, but not on the whole measuring up to the film's high technical achievements.

## RACHEL AND THE STRANGER

(RKO-Radio)

THIS is a surprisingly pleasant little comedy, considering its use of what looked at first sight like unpromising material. The setting this time is the good old frontier days when Americans wore coon-skin caps and deerskin jackets, when every turkey-gobbler calling in the woods might turn out to be a Shawnee on the warpath, and when no one with an interest in his scalp went around without a musket and powder-horn slung over his shoulder. Rachel (Loretta Young) is a downtrodden bond-slave

(continued on next page)

NO.... THANK YOU,  
I'M SITTING THIS  
DANCE OUT

SO SHE WON'T DANCE WITH YOU?  
THERE'S A BREATH OF TROUBLE  
IN YOUR ROMANCE HARRY.  
HERE'S A HINT THAT'S SURE TO  
CHANGE YOUR LUCK. CHANGE YOUR  
TOOTHPASTE—TRY COLGATE'S.

LATER—THANKS TO COLGATE  
HAVE YOU ALWAYS DANCED SO WELL?  
—NOT UNTIL I FOUND MY FAVOURITE PARTNER!

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BAD BREATH THAT  
ORIGINATES IN THE MOUTH.  
CLEANS AND POLISHES  
THE TEETH SO  
EASILY, TOO!

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IT CLEANS  
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