

# A Nice Boy in Love

LOVE FOR LYDIA. By H. E. Bates. 344 pp. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown. \$3.50.  
By RICHARD SULLIVAN

DESPITE all the desperate and humdrum and unromantic troubles that beset—and that no doubt from the start have beset—the mind of man, Romance is still with us, as a kind of occasional boon and perdurable anodyne. Sometimes the romantic novel simpers. Sometimes it goes in for mock heroics amid breathlessly labored drama. Sometimes it settles wilfully and distressfully upon a celebration of dark sweet pain. Always it is highly selective, even exclusive, in its range. (And in "Love for Lydia" there are touches of all these typical tendencies except the simpering one.) But at its best, when it is populated by real people and is written with honesty and skill, the romantic novel can be a fine and moving thing. "Love for Lydia" is an honest and skillfully told love story, very much alive with people, and genuinely affecting.

Set in a rather grimly industrial town in the England of the Nineteen Thirties, the story is artfully remembered by a first-person narrator who is also the chief lover of Lydia. A nice boy, as here rendered, this narrator

is a sensitive and diffident youth of 19, just a little younger than Lydia herself. He is a young man very responsive to the look of the rural scenery about the town, full of a queer, full knowledge about horticulture, and quite unsure of himself generally. A young man, in short, who is terribly and convincingly in love with the girl who lives in the big house.

Lydia is the niece of the two old ladies—and their ineffectual brother Rollo—who live in the big house that no longer quite dominates the town it once dominated. She is a girl late to come into her beauty and charm. As a latecomer, feeling inexperienced, she indulges in some frantic and indiscriminate cramming in the wide subject of romantic sensation. The narrator, his offer of marriage refused, goes to London to forget. When he returns, Lydia is in a sanatorium. Presumably no longer in love, he is kind to her for old time's sake; and when he realizes at last her need of him he discovers that he has never really been out of love.

IT is a sturdy and compelling story that is told here, vital in its characterizations, and especially rich in its rendering of natural and seasonal detail. One gets always a feeling of weather and sky, of landscape and tree leaves. So sure is this detail, and so warm and immediate are the characters, that the reader is practically unaware of the strict romantic selectivity of the narration. For, after all, there's nothing here but a nicely drawn-out love story—and, after a lot of trials, a happy ending. No moral, no message, no big meaning. Simple romance. An occasional boon. A perdurable anodyne. A mighty readable novel.

Mr. Sullivan, who teaches English at Notre Dame, is the author of "The Fresh and Open Sky," a volume of short stories.



From a water-color by W. Emerton Heitland. Courtesy Grand Central Art Galleries.  
"Tropical Afternoon."