

Talk With H. E. Bates

By LEWIS NICHOLS

LIKE everyone else of that age now entitled to thoughtful reflection, H. E. Bates, somewhat back, began to brood about the Twenties. Contrary to what may be the local viewpoint, the Twenties were not copyright by the United States Patent Office alone, but they also stretched across the Midlands of England. Being a professional novelist, Mr. Bates did not take out his reflection in random, reminiscent conversation, but rather sat down one morning and began "Love for Lydia."

Two years later, with the reflection safely bound between the covers of his twelfth published novel, Mr. Bates paused briefly in New York, in transit between England and the Bahamas. It was his first visit since 1937, or a good many novels back, a good many of his ten volumes of short stories.

"'Lydia' is about the town I was born in," he said. "There were many just like it, and you must have had a great many here. During the

Twenties every small town there was trying to imitate London. Every town played harder, stayed up later, danced longer, just as they were doing in London. My own town happened to be Rushden, midway between Oxford and Cambridge, in the middle of England.

"In the novel the town is half-and-half. Part is as I remember it, part I created. Lydia, herself, is

not anyone in particular. You saw her in the Twenties, and you still see the same type—the decaying aristocracy getting bored with life and wanting to get outside of it.

"The town has changed now. I left Rushden in 1930, and during the war the whole American Air Force sat down in it. That entire part of the country became something like a colony of the United States."

MR. BATES is a man of slight build, with greying hair and high forehead and a taste for striped light blue shirts and dark blue suits. About his current work and such near-by work as "Love for Lydia" he is monosyllabic, but about his children and more remote work he is polysyllabic. Unlike most winter visitors to the Bahamas, his trip there is for work, not pleasure.

"My old chief during the war was asked by the Colonial Office to write a short history of the Bahamas," he said. "He started, gathered a lot of the material and then died. I was asked if I would take over. It's something quite different from anything I've ever done. I imagine I'll be down there three months."

The "old chief" was Hilary Aidan St. George Saunders, novelist, mystery writer (sometimes under the nom de plume of Francis Beeding), war historian and Librarian of the House of Commons. It was he who was responsible during the war for having Mr. Bates assigned to the R. A. F. and sent to Burma, whence in time came "The Purple Plain" and the well-known "The Jacaranda Tree."

"I WAS the first short story writer commissioned by the Government to write about the R. A. F.," he said. "I did some stories about bomber crews first, and then someone decided the world should know there was a war going on in Burma, so I was sent there.

"Naturally, this was the usual thing—I got there four years too late. The war was over before I got many of the stories back. I did what I was supposed to do, but there was other material left over, and I put that in the two novels."

The second of these, "The Jacaranda Tree," is the story of an Englishman's attempt to lead a group of refugees, and a Burmese boy and his sister, from Burma to India, ahead of the Japanese. Like "Lydia" this was based, at least in part, on fact.

"In Calcutta I met an Englishman who had taken that route," Mr. Bates said. "He had gone pretty much to pieces. By 6



H. E. Bates.

o'clock at night, he had knocked off a bottle of whisky, and even at that time and place this was a little unusual. He couldn't tell me much about the trip but he had taken it. There were differences between his story and mine, of course, but I still get a good many letters asking did Paterson make India. He did, because I saw him there."

When the Bahamas are behind him, Mr. Bates plans another novel. It will have the same general Midland setting as "Love for Lydia," but will not be of the same time.

There are four children in the Bates household, running down in age from 21. The two boys attend the King's School at Canterbury, reported by the visiting member of the P. T. A. as the oldest in England (603 A. D.), probably in the world. Christopher Marlowe, Walter Pater, Somerset Maugham, Hugh Walpole, Carol Reed and Field Marshal Montgomery all went there, truly a literary place. Four Bates children at twelve novels each, ten books of short stories, would make quite a future library for English letters.

"Only," said Mr. Bates, "they all are much more interested in music."