

ON THE SCREEN

LYDIA, a United Artists picture, directed by J. Duvivier, with Merle Oberon (*Lydia*), Edna May Oliver (*Granny*), Alan Marshall (*Richard*), Joseph Cotten (*Michael*), Hans Yary (*Frank*), George Reeves (*Bob*).

"Every woman is complicated and simple, clever and absurd, good and bad—just as I was." These closing words spoken by the heroine express the underlying idea in this story of a woman and the four men who loved her.

As we see her first, *Lydia* is a woman of sixty or so who has kept her beauty and charm and is famous for her life's work of caring for blind children. *Michael*, an old beau of hers, arranges a reunion of *Lydia*, himself, and the three other men who loved her. Two of these keep the appointment—*Frank*, a blind musician, and *Bob*, a nightclub owner. These four elderly people, the paths of whose lives have not crossed for nearly half a century, go back in memory through the years to the days when they were young

Now we see the *Lydia* who was "young, emotional, and very lovely." The granddaughter of a salty, weatherbeaten old sea captain's widow (who, since *Edna May Oliver* plays the part, inevitably hides a heart of gold beneath her crusty exterior), *Lydia* at eighteen or so is overflowing with high spirits and generosity, and is in love with love in the person of dumb but muscular *Bob*. *Boston*, a grand mansion, an enchanted first ball, an unsuspected lover in the young doctor *Michael*, a near-elopement with *Bob* ending in a fiasco but which lets us see *Lydia* in a ravishing setting of ermine, dark velvet, and snow—these are the first memories white-haired *Lydia* conjures up and which Director *Duvivier* shows us in a brilliant panorama of half-dreamed, half-clearly-remembered scenes. *Lydia's* life is changed by a little blind boy. She finds a home for blind children, forgets *Bob*, meets *Frank*, a blind composer who adores her in the Continental manner, and generally "grows up." Back comes *Michael* from "fighting the heathen in Cuba," as one old soul describes the Spanish-American War, and we feel *Lydia* may respond to his persevering devotion after all.



But this is where *Richard* comes dashing into the scene. *Alan Marshall* is a good *Richard*. Glowing with vitality, domineering, fatally charming, he sweeps *Lydia* off her feet. And we are not surprised. In an old house by the winter sea, in an atmosphere of salt and storm and sail, where all her seafaring blood is whipped into life again, they spend weeks of turbulent but blissful love. *Duvivier* has managed to convey an atmosphere of passion without any of the usual tricks of false glamour. Outside the wind whistles, the waves lash; inside the oil lamp burns steadily, *Lydia* and *Richard* are warm and together.

Richard leaves *Lydia*, and she never sees him again. But though *Frank* pleads and *Michael* urges, she refuses them both, for love with *Richard* was not to be replaced by something lesser.

At the reunion of these four elderly people—with *Richard* still absent—she tries to make clear to her three old beaux that none of them ever loved the real *Lydia* but only what each imagined her to be. There is a good climax: when *Richard* finally turns up he does not even remember her. And *Lydia*, being really free, does not mind.

With *The Great Man's Lady* and *Cheers for Miss Bishop* in mind, we remember how tedious it was to hunt for *Barbara Stanwyck* and *Martha Scott* under layers of putty and paint. One got into the habit of trying to catch the make-up expert out in flaws, so that one paid more attention to the stringy neck and receded gums ("wonder how they did that?") than to the painstaking efforts of the actors to talk, sit, breathe, laugh (usually cackle) "old." *Merle Oberon* just quiets down with age, and her poise and resignation are conveyed without benefit of creaking joints or mob-cap.

Merle Oberon in the hands of a top-flight director such as *Duvivier* is a very good actress. He has even managed to keep *Edna May Oliver* under control; her horse-face does not obtrude unduly, and she never steals a scene.

The picture has perfect continuity. We are switched from present to past and back again and never feel the jerk. The minds of artists have been at work in making *Lydia*, and one feels that the producer and director have really wanted to make a worth-while picture. They have.—L.

CLOSING DATE

for our Photo Contest "Women of East Asia" is August 15, 1942.

For details see page 447 of the June issue of *The XXth Century*.