

DOMESTIC DRAMA

BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR: *The Wine is Poured*. Heinemann. 12s. 6d.
H. E. BATES: *The Nature of Love*. Three Short Novels. Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

ELIZABETH GOUDGE: *The Heart of the Family*. Hodder and Stoughton. 12s. 6d.

MONICA STIRLING: *Ladies with a Unicorn*. Gollancz. 10s. 6d.

In these four sound professional books by sound professional writers Miss Seymour alone provides a coherent and convincing plot. This plot is taken from a nineteenth-century poisoning mystery, but the author has told it freshly, as it would have appeared to the unfortunate people involved; and though her own view of where the guilt lay is made apparent she has not invented an artificial solution. In the 1870s a prosperous young barrister was suddenly taken ill; when he died the puzzled doctors found he had been killed by a massive dose of antimony. To spare his widow, an inquest was huddled through in private. But then his colleagues in the Temple began to ask questions, the Home Secretary was compelled to intervene, and at a second inquest, conducted with all the irrelevant salacious detail which can be permitted by a weak and incompetent coroner, surprising details came out; though the verdict remained "Murder by persons unknown." This is a competent piece of work, told in correct English, and set in a convincing picture of the Victorian suburbs.

Mr. Bates writes more than correct English, he composes beautiful prose; but the three short novels published together as *The Nature of Love* suffer from an identical weakness. Love at first sight is a fairly common accident, extremely distressing to the person so afflicted; but that two people should fall in love with one another at first sight, as happens in each of these stories, is beyond common experience. Yet its pictures of the English countryside, and of the Malayan jungle, make this a book to be read.

On a different level Miss Goudge is also well known for her skill in drawing a pleasant picture. *The Heart of the Family* triumphantly accomplishes its aim of leaving the reader

with a warm glow in the emotions. The story, which more or less baffles description, is concerned with a large family of very nice people who live near one another in what must be, from its place-names, a canton of the Dornford Yates country. The book ends with the birth of another young Elliot; though this ending is brought about only by the exigencies of the publishing trade, for what is obviously to be a very long "saga" (as they say nowadays) might have been interrupted, without damage to its form, at any other point. This is not to say that Miss Goudge writes nonsense; under too thick a coating of sugar she hides a pretty wit. The old nurse, reared in a pub, who puts anyone to bed as though dealing with a drunk, is a happy invention. This book will give pleasure to many, and only Miss Goudge could have written it.

Ladies with a Unicorn is written about the love affairs of amusing people, in a foreign setting acutely described; the language is fresh, and the author has an ear for dialogue. Yet somehow the final effect is flat. This is partly because of the very odd aesthetic standards involved. The heroine is an English girl starring in an Italian film, so naturally there is talk about the achievements of the cinema; but to mention "the flowering of Walt Disney's genius" in the same breath as Roman Baroque seems very generous. And to describe a frivolous Roman countess, an intimate friend of Cardinals and monsignori, as an adherent of the House of Savoy, makes nonsense of the local colour; to such people the bad luck that came to the King of Italy only proved once again the truth of the proverb: "Qui mange du Pape en meurt." Miss Stirling is telling of a world she does not understand.