

A novel a day

PRE-MARITAL CHECKS

By EITHNE STRONG

SEVEN DAYS AT THE SILBERSTEINS. By Etienne Leroux, translated from Afrikaans by Charles Eglington. W. H. Allen. 21s.

For seven days Henry van Eydens gets tuned into the life at Welgevonden, estate and home of the Silbersteins, where he is to live when he marries Salome, daughter of this immensely wealthy family. In his own life heretofore he has not been called on to develop beyond certain secure, protected limits. He has not done any of the gadding about normal to a young man. The Silbersteins—father, mother—say his innocence must be destroyed. "How else dare he marry?" "Innocence is blindness of the spirit." The seven days tacitly and overtly are used towards the destruction, which as the Silbersteins understand it, is a positive process. Henry is being expanded in preparation for his future life on the estate. Contributory to the expansion are a series of sorties around the estate accompanied by an untiring exposition of the Jock Silberstein philosophy; and parties every night, each differing markedly in some respect from the preceding one, the

penultimate being a witch's sabbath.

Jock and two guests who remain constant quantities at the nightly heterogeneous parties are vehicles for repeated dialectics, dissertations on good and evil juxtaposed, complementary or separate facets of the same positive. On the whole these abstract antics are agile enough but on occasion only barely miss tediousness by the timely dexterous interpolation of more entertaining material. To give some body to such theories on an actual level, life at Welgevonden constantly blurs the borderline between good and evil; values hard and fast in one area fluctuate relative to another. Guilt seems to be a weight on nobody.

However, one is surely not expected to take anything too seriously and yet such is the impact of the book that one remembers in seriousness things lightly rendered. Luxury and pleasure are dominant in the Silberstein household, the estate exists for the sustaining of these whatever problems of poverty, race and interrelation of employees co-exist. The dialectics thrive on the fat of the land and the headiness of Welgevonden wines and

brandies all made available by the labour largely of Coloureds. The white master accepts apartheid in the complacent largeness with which he accepts evil as necessary, it, for him, being but another angle of good.

To accept the book as something of an allegory is the only way it is possible to accept the claim in the introduction that Henry at the end of seven days is steeped in "painful new knowledge" which turns him from an unthinking robot to someone full of faith searching for truth in the "wake of love." A week, unless figuratively interpreted like the biblical seven days of creation, somewhat, is not enough to steep anyone in any knowledge, and Henry's new orientation could be altogether too facile.

The book is highly entertaining in the main, frequently satirically so but more often than not human frailties and confusion are touched on delicately with a swift humorous insight that awakens pity rather than condemnation. The author maintains a balanced distance from his subject, the better to exercise his skill in creating a provocative composition.