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Fiction

By H. E. BATES

Turf or Stone. By Margiad Evans. (Blackwell. 7s. 6d.)
Dark Hazard. By W. R. Burnett. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
Wedding Song. By David Burnham. (Peter Davies. 7s. 6d.)

Turf or Stone is the third novel from Miss Margiad Evans, who wrote a much-discussed book called *The Wooden Doctor*. As compared with Mr. W. R. Burnett's *Dark Hazard*, a book written with a masterly if rather slick skill, and also when judged by the highest standards of art and taste, it is an unsatisfactory book, filled with a good deal of crudity and looseness. It is, however, extremely provocative. The chances are that it will be accepted as a piece of what is often known as stark realism. It certainly aims at an effect of violence. Its principal character, Easter Probert, a half-gypsyish groom, is himself a violent man, his employer is not much better, and the style in which their histories are recorded is appropriately lurid. Easter is drawn as a foul-mouthed, black-minded man, vicious, licentious, perverse and colossally cruel, and his existence in a novel is only justified by the extraordinary power of his influence over women. He is drawn strongly enough to persist in the mind long after the book is laid aside: indeed he is the only character drawn with any strength and conviction at all. He eventually dies a violent death which Miss Evans records in a single paragraph.

Nevertheless the book is not the work of a realist at all, nor is it very violent in its ultimate effect. It is the work of an author who has crammed on to paper a series of vivid but disorderly impressions, not through any desire to shock us, but for the simple reason that she must at all costs get them off her chest. If Miss Evans possesses any powers of self-criticism or self-restraint, she has not shown them here. She has let the pot of creation boil over, scum and all, not knowing when to turn off the heat of her own enthusiasm, and much of the goodness and juice that was in the pot has in consequence run irrecoverably away. She is nearer to being a romanticist than a realist, and there is a strong dash of the romantic about Easter in spite of all his violence and cruelty and his propensity for dropping dead rats down the bosom of his pregnant wife.

The book begins rather like a novel of Hardy's: the carter driving ewes to market in the darkness of the February morning, the girl to whom he gives a lift, her enforced marriage in the cold church to a man who does not want her and who has not even a ring to put on her finger, the carter running after her with the Bible she has left among the ewes—it is all as Hardy would have loved to depict it, though he would have taken fifty or sixty pages to tell us what Miss Evans had told us with effect in twenty or thirty, and he would have been interested primarily not in Easter but in Mary. It is interesting to note this. For throughout Miss Evans' book there is a constant shadowiness about the women. In Hardy's hands Mary and Mrs. Kilminster and her daughter Phoebe, the three women whom Easter fascinates in turn, would have been the central and living figures; whereas in Miss Evans' hands they are scarcely more than pieces of subordinate cardboard. Much of Miss Evans' failure can be put down to that inability to realize, with any fineness or power, women and their emotions.

But much of it also can be put down to her inability, or her refusal, to face the facts, not as she finds them, but as she herself creates them. Thus she decrees that Matt Kilminster, Easter's employer and himself a drunkard, shall fall in love with Easter's wife. It is a situation full of potential complexity and power. Yet it is, so to speak, told us in parentheses. Its latent power is never realized. Miss Evans, interested primarily in Easter, will not face that situation, just as later she will not face the situation, even richer in possibilities, between Easter and the young girl Phoebe. At these critical moments she slinks off, leaving us to guess or wonder what might have happened. It is a sort of artistic cowardice. If Miss Evans could have overcome it, and would have faced the facts and situations created by her own imagination, much of the violence of the book would have been turned to power. It is clear that on this ability or inability to be artistically courageous rests Miss Evans' future as a novelist. She is very obviously not lacking in imagination or in emotional power. Her defects are not altogether individual, either. Her lack of stamina and logic and her inability to delineate feminine emotions are not the rarest of faults among women writers. It is worth noting her lack of stamina—for she may yet find her true *métier* in the short-story.

Mr. W. R. Burnett—not to be confused with Mr. Whit Burnett, also an American writer, and the editor of the magazine *Story*—is in almost every way the direct opposite of Miss Evans. He is a most competent, controlled and amusing writer. His scenes—the dog-tracks of Western America and a hotel in Chicago—are far more romantic, to us at any rate, than Miss Evans' Herefordshire country house, yet he is far more of a realist, in spite of all Easter's stark behaviour, than even Miss Evans looks likely to be. His book has balance and carries conviction. Thus his women are equally as convincing as his men, his dog track just as authentic as his hotel. His processes are logical, and his mind is the rein by which he guides and checks his imagination without ever destroying its pace and freedom.

Jim Turner is, as the book opens, a night-clerk in a hotel in Chicago; he is a large man, muscular but neat, extremely good-natured, fond of his wife, a master of witty and laconic speech—in brief, a swell guy. He languishes, however, in the soporific, artificially heated air of the hotel lobby, remembering with regret and in spite of his respectable wife and his promises to lead a quiet and sober life, the old days of the race-tracks, when he won and lost little fortunes on what he himself calls the ponies:

> "The ponies would be running tomorrow away down there in Mexico where it was warm and a man could loaf around in his shirtsleeves, drink some good beer, and play Gonfalon across the board in the sixth, providing of course, that a man had any money. But, hell! when a man was free . . ."

He resists the call of that casual and pleasant life only because he has promised Marg, his wife, to leave it for ever. Marg, even with generations of respectable, religious small-town ancestors behind her, is swell too. By accident, however, Turner finds himself back in the old life, a life unchanged in its fascination and excitement, and the only important change in which is that the ponies have become the dogs. On the dog-tracks of California—earning a good salary, bringing off at intervals a good bet, watching the finest dog in the world, Dark Hazard himself—life, in his own words, sure was good, boy.

Dark Hazard is in reality the hero of the book. He forms the third angle of the triangle, for Turner is as much fascinated by his beauty, and Mrs. Turner as much repulsed by the commonness of both himself and his associations as if he had been another woman. And finally, in fact, Turner leaves his wife for the dog. There is something tragic in this: for not only is the dog old but Turner is old too, and they have come down in the world together. The whole of the book is extremely convincing and fresh, and the reader, even the critical reader, in search of something good ought not to miss it.

The author of *Wedding Song* has suffered the now doubtful distinction of being compared with Mr. Hemingway. There must be, at a conservative estimate, a thousand writers who have suffered from a similar distinction. It is no longer an impressive honour, though *Wedding Song*, with its borrowed style, its smartly cynical European Americans and its general artificiality, scarcely deserves any other.

Much of the virtue of such a book as *Fiesta* lies in its laconic malice, perfectly rendered and yet concealed by Mr. Hemingway's method of flat statement. The dice are not loaded, but it is very evident that Mr. Hemingway has reached a stage of disillusionment when he has little respect left for the people whose life he is describing. Mr. Burnham differs from Hemingway very sharply here. So much so in fact that he gives the effect not of despising but of whole-heartedly admiring his characters. His method of laconic statement becomes merely an affectation, and as a medium ineffective.