V

Mr. Fox's "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine"*

Years ago, before the Argonauts of Local Colour had staked out their literary claims over every foot of the earth's surface, Charles Egbert Craddock struck pay dirt in the Tennessee mountains. The mine she discovered was no less than a Bonanza, and it yielded her rich returns. Such finds are rare in these days, for the search has been keen. But the miner of to-day has his resources. Hunting over the fields that have already been worked, he will find plenty of low-grade ore overlooked in the first mad rush. By the application of modern methods and the use of modern machinery he will produce from these once despised veins even larger aggregate returns than rewarded the haphazard methods of the pioneers. It is the triumph of industry and method over primitive genius.

In applying this parable to Mr. Fox and his stories of the Kentucky mountaineers an important exception must be noted. He is by no means offensively modern in his methods. On the contrary, his stories read very much like those of twenty years ago, when the hunt for Local Colour was at its height. His is the formula of those days, and he wins success by his courageous refusal to depart from it. All his care and patient labour are given to the task of saving his reader at every point from disappointment. Thus watchful of every detail, he is content with a little profit all along the line —which amounts to no inconsiderable profit in the whole.

Consider some of the chief ingredients of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine:* for heroine an untutored, barefoot, beautiful child, daughter of a lanky mountaineer; hero, a big, broad-shouldered, masterful young engineer, prospecting in the mountains for coal and future sites of great manufacturing cities; a giant pine, standing lonely on a mountain, and a trail leading up to it; a Kentucky feud, involving the girl's father and brother and other relatives; a murder by

*The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. By John Fox, Jr. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

one of the feudists, an attempted rescue of the murderer, and a legal execution, engineered by the hero; a vindictive young mountaineer, in love with the girl and sworn to have the life of the hero (though you know he will never have it); a series of misunderstandings between hero and heroine, which nearly —not quite—separates them for life; descriptions of mountain scenery, and a few subsidiary characters, typical of the region. Put these elements together plausibly, with plenty of incident, and if you are disappointed in the result, why, you never would like that kind of a story, anyway.

It is amply evident that Mr. Fox knows the kind of people of whom he writes. The Local Colour is not only plentiful; it is, if one may be permitted to judge who has no first-hand knowledge of the original, correct. To demand, in addition to correctness of detail in externals, a true representation of character, is unreasonable. It is more than the Local Colourist is bound to deliver. Naturally, then, Mr. Fox's minor characters are more truly set forth than his hero and heroine, and the incidents of the plot are more plausible than the plot itself. There is a chapter in which is described the encounter of two bands of feudists in front of a country store. A quarrel begins and some one pulls a gun. In a flash the others follow suit, and there stand eight men, each one covered by the gun of an enemy, not one daring to pull trigger, knowing that the first shot will be the sign for his death. That is just the sort of preposterous situation that may actually have occurred. But when the lover comes back to the girl's deserted home for the last time just as a thunderstorm breaks, and sees the Lonesome Pine stricken by a bolt (only you learn later that it wasn't the pine, but a neighbouring oak); and the girl, too, comes back for the last time, and by the strangest chance meets the man at the foot of the pine; and all is explained, and the lovers are reunited—you seem to have heard something like this before, not in real life but on the stage. It is all perfectly possible, unlike the gun incident, and too absurdly improbable. It is hard not to reflect that the girl comes back on this day of all days solely because she is entirely in the power of her author, and must do as he decrees to make the story come out right.

No, for the enjoyment of such a book one must fall back on the Local Colour. Almost the first words the untutored heroine speaks to her future lover are: "I'm a goin' to ketch hell now." That is charming. Uncle Billy and Old Hon are delightful, whether perched together on the old grey mare or sitting outside their little mill, listening to the sound of the wheel. The Red Fox, itinerant Swedenborgian preacher, healer of the sick, spy and informer, even murderer—a veritable Jekyll and Hyde—is a real character. So, too, would be the Hon. Samuel Budd, if the outlines of his person were only filled in. It is the Hon. Sam who supplies the anthropological text for the story. "You see, mountains isolate people and the effect of isolation on human life is to crystallise it. These people have been cut off from all communication with the outside world. They are a perfect example of an arrested civilisation, and they are the closest link we have with the Old World." There is the scientific basis for Mr. Fox's Local Colour; it is as a novelist of manners of an arrested civilisation that he scores his success.

Ward Clark.