

A Visit and Talk With Alan Paton

By HARVEY BREIT

THIS reporter saw Alan Paton on the eve of his leaving for England to receive a special literary award from The London Times for his distinguished novel, "Cry, the Beloved Country." In New York he had seen the "musical tragedy" version of his novel; in London he will put the finishing touches to the screen version of it for Alexander Korda.

About the award Mr. Paton said: "The Times gives a literary prize for the best and most important book of the year. The prize went to Winston Churchill's 'The Gathering Storm.' In any year, any book Mr. Churchill writes—especially given the topic on which he was writing—must be the best and most important book of the year." The Times, apparently feeling they'd like to do something for Mr. Paton's novel, created a special prize.

Mr. Paton, in his middle forties, the son of a Presbyterian Scotsman, was born in South Africa, where he grew up and where he did everything (from pedagogy to penology) but write. It was after the war that he got started, and in a far-away country. He held the manuscript a time after finishing it, it was a private matter, and not for publication. But a friend gave him wise counsel. Now Mr. Paton's life is changed. "I am in a dilemma," he says (pronouncing it *digh-lemma*). The reader, however, need not concern himself with Mr. Paton's dilemma. Mr. Paton, small and wiry and with a lean and hungry look, is an impressive gentleman. His mind is lucid and tough, his speech is precise, unembellished and neutral, yet nevertheless touched as though with a bitter memory. The over-all sense of him is of iron—iron-minded, iron-willed and iron-muscled. If the impression Mr. Paton inevitably gives is roughly accurate, dilemmas will get resolved in double time.

WHEN he was asked if he would talk about the South African Negro and the American Negro, Mr. Paton nodded affirmatively, thought for a few moments, then spoke in an exact, nearly formal platform manner. "The first great class of Negroes in South Africa one might still call tribal," he said. "Even so, they don't lead a life completely untouched by Europeans. From a tribal life they go to the mines and industry—mainly the mines. They, as a rule, are the most primitive of South Africans.

"You have a second great class, those who live on the white farms in the country. The great tendency, however, is for the most intelligent of them to drift away from the farms and go to the cities and then you get the third great class—already broken from the tribal and rural life and become somewhat urbanized. They are much more in touch with the ideas of the world.

"Already there is emerging a fourth group, also preponderantly urban—teachers, ministers, doctors, business men. Oh, they form what may be called an African intelligentsia. They read books

and newspapers. They know a great deal of what is going on in the world. They provide the political leadership. On the whole, they tend to become embittered and to feel frustrated. And already there is a tendency among them to look to themselves for their own salvation and even to scorn cooperation with those white people who have always devoted themselves to the cause of their advancement."

WHAT percentage of the population did the Negro make up? Mr. Paton nodded agreeably. "About 75 per cent," he said, "and it is for that reason that the white man fears his ad-



Alan Paton.

vancement. And it is this fear which is responsible for much of the legislation. I think it should be made clear that our parliament and senate are entirely white.

"The American Negro, for his numbers, has produced a far greater proportion of eminent and distinguished men. The reason for this is, of course, that there are not so many barriers toward his advancement as in South Africa; and the reason for that is, of course, that they constitute a much smaller percentage of the population, and that therefore the white American is less afraid of according him these privileges. At the same time I do not underestimate the great power of the American conscience. I do not suppose for a moment that it is just a matter of statistics. We in South Africa also have a conscience. But our fears are so great that the conscience is not so clearly apparent."

What was Mr. Paton going to do next? "My book," he said, "has had such a terrific backwash that I have not had time to sit down to do more work." What was Mr. Paton going to do about that? (It was here that Mr. Paton faced a certain *digh-lemma*.) "I haven't yet discovered whether I would write more if I went back to affairs, to a life of active participation in society. It just might be that I'm not the sort of person who can withdraw to some secluded spot and write books. I haven't yet found an answer to that question. But my mind is full of ideas and I should like nothing better than

to be left alone to work some of them out."

He paused, a barely ironic pause. "However," he continued, "I am now expected to lend support to innumerable causes to which people suppose—and rightly suppose—I'm sympathetic. One cannot withdraw entirely from such participation, and so I still find myself going through an extremely difficult stage of adaptation and adjustment."

What sort of literature, Mr. Paton's interlocutor asked, moved him? "If you asked me," Mr. Paton replied, "what kind of topics appealed to me in writing, I would have to confess to you that I couldn't bring myself to write any book which would increase the amount of depression and dejection that exists in so many people already."

BUT how would it be known whether a book would depress and deject? There was proof everywhere that depressing material did not need to depress. There was the idea of the catharsis. "Ah, yes," Mr. Paton said, "that's a different thing where writing tragedy brings out a catharsis. My objection isn't to tragedy, because I believe tragedy and human life are inseparable. I believe that human life is meaningful and purposeful, and just to write a story of human corruption—I think I could write it as horribly as anyone [from out the stern face there issued, surprisingly, a brief, loud laugh]. I don't find corruption a fascinating or rich theme to write about.

"I should like to write books about South Africa which would really stab people in the conscience. I don't see any point in writing provocatively for the sake of being provocative, or antagonizing for the sake of being antagonizing. But I do believe there is a level at which one can write where it is no longer a question of provoking or antagonizing, but simply a question of stating an overwhelming truth that a man just cannot deny. He may still be angry with you for having presented the truth, but he is not angry with you for the way in which you've presented it. After he has confronted the truth in that fashion, he is not the same man again."

Mr. Paton stared sternly at his interlocutor. Was it the end, was Mr. Paton finished? No, Mr. Paton was not finished. "One rather good critic," he said, "entitled his review of my book, 'A Gentle Protest.' But I believe the book is not so gentle as it looked. What looks gentle is often far more powerful than all the ranting and raving in the world. And it is my hope to go on touching the conscience of South Africa in this fashion. But I haven't purely a moral purpose. I also believe in the task of trying to interpret South Africa to the South Africans so that they can see themselves without illusions. It is a very fascinating and exciting task."

That, it was suggested, ended the talk rather nicely.

"Let us end it," Mr. Paton said, "while there is an end."