



"The Once Rich but Now Desolate Hill Country of South Africa."

Fine Novel of a Present-Day Zulu

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY. By Alistair Paton. 278 pp. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.

By RICHARD SULLIVAN

THE "beloved country" referred to, in the title of Mr. Paton's novel is South Africa, and the exhortative "Cry" is a brief, agonized expression of the very tone and substance and meaning of the whole remarkable book.

This is a beautiful novel, a rich, firm and moving piece of prose. Its matter and locale may be strange to most American readers, but its writing is so fresh, its projection of character so immediate and full, its events so compelling, and its understanding so compassionate, that to read the book is to share intimately, even to the point of catharsis, in the grave human experience treated. For what in other hands might have made merely an interesting sociological document is here intensified into an urgent, poetic and profound spiritual drama, universal in its implications.

The central figure of the book is a Zulu minister of the Church of England. This Rev. Stephen Kumalo stands out as a notable feat of characterization—a big, plain old man; simple, strong; full of an erect, inborn dignity; full, too, of a sweet and generous humility; a man, in short, capable of suffering. To him, at his station in the once rich but now

desolate hill country, comes a summons from Johannesburg, the great city into whose slums so many of his people—among them his brother, his sister and his only son—have vanished.

Going to Johannesburg in a search for these lost members of his family, Kumalo is confronted by the vast and sordid confusion of a whole native populace grown gross or timorous, rash or submissive, under an exploitative urbanization which has done away with the old tribal disciplines but has substituted nothing honorable in their place. He hears "voices crying what must be done—a hundred, a thousand voices. But what do they help if one asks for counsel, for one cries this and one cries that, and another cries something that is neither this nor that." And in the welter of the general pain Kumalo finds his brother changed into a loud-mouthed disturber, his sister into a harlot, and his son a murderer.

THE man murdered by Kumalo's son is, twice ironically, both the ardent champion of the black peoples in Johannesburg and the son of the great landowner of Kumalo's home district in the hills. The old parson is a man sensitive to irony. "It seems that God has turned from me," he says. Yet in the terrible, active depths of his sorrow he ac-

cepts what has come to him. He arranges for his sister and for the murderer's wife to return with him to the hills. He parts with his brother and with his condemned son. And back at home, in a series of scenes whose emotional intensity it is impossible to suggest, he comes ultimately to a reconciliation, not only with his own tormented soul, but even with the grieving father of the murdered man.

No comment on this novel would be complete without some mention, however inadequate, of the simple splendor of its language. In "Cry, the Beloved Country," what is presumably a Zulu idiom is rendered into an English full of strange, bright grandeur. Here is a prose capable of producing again and again such effect as this:

We do not need the doctor any more. No white doctor, no black doctor, can help her any more. Oh, child of my womb and fruit of my desire, it was pleasure to hold the small cheeks in the hands; it was pleasure to feel the tiny clutching of the fingers; it was pleasure to feel the little mouth tugging at the breast. Such is the nature of woman. Such is the lot of women—to carry, to bear, to watch and to lose.

There is not much current writing that goes deeper than this. There is not much with a lover's verbal abse.