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Broken Family Ties

Cry, the Beloved Country

By Alan Paton. Scribners, 278 pp. \$3.

By Dudley Jenkins

PROBABLY readers will either be vastly puzzled by this "different" book and find it a dull waste of time, or they will consider it among the most unusual novels of recent months and in a class by itself in theme, characterization and haunting prose which often approaches poetry in its beauty and structure.

It is hoped most readers will find themselves in the latter category and agree with the publishers that here indeed is a book that is entitled to be called "distinguished."

The story, simple and unadorned as bread and butter yet moving in its dramatic impact, revolves around a pious, lovable old Zulu Christian parson who takes the meager family savings which had been hoarded to buy a new black suit and a cook stove, dons his threadbare, green-with-age frock coat and goes with fear and trembling to Johannesburg to seek relatives who have broken family ties and been swallowed up in the city of corruption.

THAT'S all there is to it, but the language in which it is told, language which to a remarkable degree creates the moods and thought processes of Christian African tribesmen who eke out a hand-to-mouth existence by sufferance of the whites, gives it great power.

Obviously Mr. Paton knows his Africa; the deliberately stilted vernacular in which his characters speak rings true for simple souls who have only recent-

ly been touched by a civilization and social system with which the author finds much fault.

How Parson Kumalo, with the help of kind friends, white and black, tracks down his erring kin step by step, is masterly descriptive writing: Kumalo's brother has become a power in the city, a questionable politician and demagogue who is a thorn in the flesh of the police as he insidiously spurs the docile natives to throw off their shackles; his sister is an inmate of a slum brothel, and soon after Kumalo's arrival his only son is arrested and sentenced to be hanged for the murder of a white man who had devoted his life to improving the lot of the natives.

The prison scene in which Kumalo bids farewell to his terrified son, who drops to the cell floor and clings to his old father's knees as guards attempt to separate them, is poignant in its stark dramatic simplicity.

AND when Kumalo learns that the father of the murder victim is his own neighbor on the veld, the countryside's leading citizen and a man of influence and wealth, and goes to him to unburden his anguished soul, it will be an unimaginative reader indeed who isn't moved. Yet Mr. Paton never resorts to the histrionics and glycerine tears which could so easily slip into such scenes.

His mission to Johannesburg a 100 per cent failure, Kumalo, spirit unbroken, goes back to the wilds to carry on in his patched-up, sieve-roofed church and bring consolation and new hope to his countrymen who are patiently trying to eke out a bare existence from the parched earth.