

Heart of the Dark Continent

ALAN PATON CENTRE



Alan Paton

LENSK

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY:

A Story of Comfort in Desolation.

By Alan Paton. . . . 278 pp. . . . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. . . . \$3.

Reviewed by
MARGARET CARSON HUBBARD

NOT since "The Story of an African Farm" has a novel come out of South Africa which touches as truly and poignantly the turmoil and burning tragedy of that glad, sad country. "Cry, the Beloved Country," is the story of the fear between black and white and of the sickness of the land; of the once-fertile valleys now washed and worked bare so that the maize hardly reaches the height of a man; of the young men and women, too many for the poor soil to support, who go away from the tribes never to return.

The story is simple enough and tragically commonplace in South Africa today. Kumalo, a humble native parson of great dignity, is called from his quiet valley in

Natal to help a younger sister who had long since disappeared into Johannesburg. And so Kumalo faces an occasion when he must give up the illusion that his only child, Absalom, will some day go to school. He must take the money saved for that purpose and go in search of his sister and of Absalom. For he, too, had disappeared into the great city and now is the time to find him. Throughout the tragic pilgrimage one hears, although it is never quoted, the anguished cry of David: "O, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!"

The sister he found, and was shamed. She had lived by prostitution and brewing illicit liquor, but Kumalo takes her to his room with her son and plans to bring them back to the valley. And then he begins his search for his Absalom.

The trail leads him through the squalor of the native locations; Claremont and Orlando, Alexandra and Shanty Town, and as the author writes of them, so they are. At this time a white man, Jarvis, has been murdered by three native housebreakers. Kumalo had seen this man as a boy, for he

lived on the great plantation in the valley. But why should he fear that his son was one of the three? There was nothing in Absalom's early life to make one imagine he could kill a man. But the fear was with Kumalo. And in the end he finds his son in prison, charged with the murder, for it was he who fired the shot. The old man stays on to hear his son sentenced to be hanged and then returns to his valley, taking with him the girl his son married, but not his sister. She disappeared the night before they were to leave. There was, however, her son to take back and bring up as his own.

This great tragedy—as it is handled it is great—is softened by the compassion of Kumalo and of the father of the murdered Jarvis. Back in the valley Jarvis's father carries on the efforts of his son to bring justice and opportunity to the black race and the two fathers, the black father of the murderer and the white father of the murdered, become friends.

On the night before the dawn when Absalom, alone in Pretoria, was to be hanged, Kumalo went into the mountain to keep vigil, and on his way he met the elder Jarvis, who asked, "Is there mercy?" On learning there was none, he said of Kumalo's going into the mountain, "I understand. I understand completely." With those words Kumalo's reserve broke and he could thank Jarvis for the milk and the dam built to bring fertility and for the new church to be built. Two human beings were reaching greater dimensions through common tragedy.

As a novel, a story of lives unfolding, "Cry, the Beloved Country," stands by any standards. But above all the quality of the style is a new experience. Here, in English, is a new cadence, derived from the native tongues. English words are used with the limpid rhythm of Zulu or Xosa, as picturesque, as simple in expression, yet as delicately suggestive, as those languages. It is almost as though the author were translating from the Zulu, but without stumbling into the circumlocutions and inexactnesses of a translation.

New York Herald Tribune
Weekly Book Review Feb. 1, 1948.