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Cir. (D 337,955) (S 339,126)

This Clipping From
KANSAS CITY, MO.
STAR

FEB 23 1948

Without
Fanfare,
A Fine Novel

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY,
by Alan Paton (278 pages; Charles
Scribner's Sons, New York; \$3).

COMPLETELY unheralded, written by a man whose name means nothing to the majority of American readers, "Cry, the Beloved Country" is certainly one of the most distinguished novels of the winter season. Coming unexpectedly upon a book like this is compensation enough for the book reviewer whose duties compel him to wade through numerous volumes of inferior stuff, many of them bearing the names of writers far better known than Alan Paton.

It's a simple enough story Paton has to tell. A humble Zulu parson, Stephen Kumalo, who dwells in a quiet valley in Natal, South Africa, is summoned to Johannesburg to aid his younger sister, whom he has not seen for years. His son, Absalom, too, has been swallowed up by this busy and often evil city, and the parson dips into his savings, the money that would have gone to buy his wife a new stove and himself some new black clothes, to pay the expenses of his journey.

Kumalo finds that his sister has succumbed to the temptations of the city. Although she is living as a prostitute, Kumalo takes her and her son to his lodgings, preparatory to returning them to their native valley. Then he seeks his son. As the trail grows warmer, Kumalo's misgivings increase. He hears little that is good of the boy. While he is seeking him, the papers carry the story of the shooting of Arthur Jarvis, white engineer, a young man genuinely interested in the welfare of the native population. Absalom, it develops, fired the fatal shot in the course of what was to have been a routine robbery, and is finally sentenced to be hanged.

Sadly, Absalom's father takes leave of his son for the last time and returns to the valley, taking with him his son's wife and his sister's small boy, the sister having apparently returned to her old mode of life the night before the scheduled departure. Arthur Jarvis's father is the owner of a great plantation in the valley where Kumalo lives and the two men, the father of the slain and the father of the slayer, form a strange and moving friendship, out of which develops a constructive effort to better the lot of the inhabitants of the valley, which has suffered from backwardness and ignorance of scientific farming methods. Thus, what is essentially a tragic story ends upon a note of hope.

Cont.



There is much more implicit in Paton's novel than this story of the trials and sorrows of the wholly admirable Stephen Kumalo. On almost every page are suggestions and intimations of the unsatisfactory state of South African society, the tensions stemming from racial and color differences, the greed of those who would exploit the land and its people, the mutual fear that exists between rich and poor, whites and blacks. Of these relations one of Kumalo's clergyman friends, whom he meets in Johannesburg, says: "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they turn to loving they will find we are turned to hating."

"Cry, the Beloved Country" is, however, far from a tract or a piece of propaganda for a political point of view. It is first of all a story of man's faith, man's sorrow, man's compassion. These are great concepts and, like all great things, they are best written about with simplicity and sincerity. That Alan Paton has done. It would be hard to conceive of a style better suited to its subject matter than that of Paton. Besides its almost Scriptural simplicity and sincerity, it has beauty to match the blue far-off hills and the green valleys of Africa, an unpretentiousness to match the character of its hero and an emotional depth to match the emotional depth of its timeless themes—the love of father for son, the innate desire of men to be free, to walk erect in their own land. T. M. O.