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A DISTINGUISHED NOVEL

TOO LATE THE PHALAROPE, by Alan Paton. 272 p. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. \$3.50

By EDWARD M. CASE

In "Too Late The Phalarope" Alan Paton, author of the justly praised "Cry, The Beloved Country", has created a distinguished and powerful work of fiction. From the great trial of the second novel he emerges in triumph. Alan Paton now takes his place as a major novelist of our time. Indeed, "Too Late The Phalarope" would do honor to the pen of any man alive.

This is the story of a society on the brink of disaster: a society whose members sense the peril and so become even more inflexible in their conventions, rituals and tabus. This is the story of the Afrikaners, the Dutch Nationalists of South Africa, a proud and haughty people, a people of great virtues and great blindnesses. And particularly, this is the spiritual tragedy of the handsome, noble and inwardly tormented Lt. Pieter van Vlaanderen, whose sorrow is the essential sorrow of a people.

What made a gifted, heroic and idolized man commit the one unforgivable sin of his society? In answering this question Mr. Paton delves deeply into the heart of Dutch South Africa, and by the miracle of his art summons up tragic perspectives.

The sin is miscegenation --- the ultimate defiance of "Apartheid", the doctrine of racial exclusiveness to which Dutch South Africa is desperately and irrevocably committed. And the moral is that the apartness whose transgression is final sin, is apartness, sterility and stultification to whites as well as blacks.

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The irony is that the very things in Afrikaner life which have engendered "Apartheid", the inflexibility, patriarchal domination, rigid mores and self-righteous spiritual pride are precisely those things which cause Pieter van Vlaanderen, in his yearning for emotional warmth and sensual joy in life to defy, in spite of himself, the conventions to which he himself subscribed and which, as a police officer, he was sworn to enforce.

The result is tragic. For in this community, the sin of one is visited on the entire family. Thus, in a most literal sense, an entire family, representative of the best in Afrikaner civilization, is forever humiliated and cast into the pale of scandal. And this is a further irony, for that which had been designed to preserve and strengthen the Dutch family, which is the basis of Afrikan agrarian civilization, had destroyed it.

The phalarope is a small bird. It may symbolize many things. In this novel it symbolizes, particularly, the final natural friendliness between stern father and son, and between a people's rigid traditions and hopeful future --- a freshness which came too late.

While this is a novel which marches with a great message, it is also a brilliant, compassionate and intense narrative about distinctive and human individuals. Mr. Paton has the gift of sharp and moving characterization. His lesson comes from his people, his people do not come from his message. In other words, he is not a propagandist but a story-teller with the gift of insight into matters of the soul.

One might mention, also, Mr. Paton's beautiful prose style, his admirable technique, and the unbearable suspense and tension

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which he is able to create. In mentioning these things, of  
course, one is mentioning the gifts of a genuine master.

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