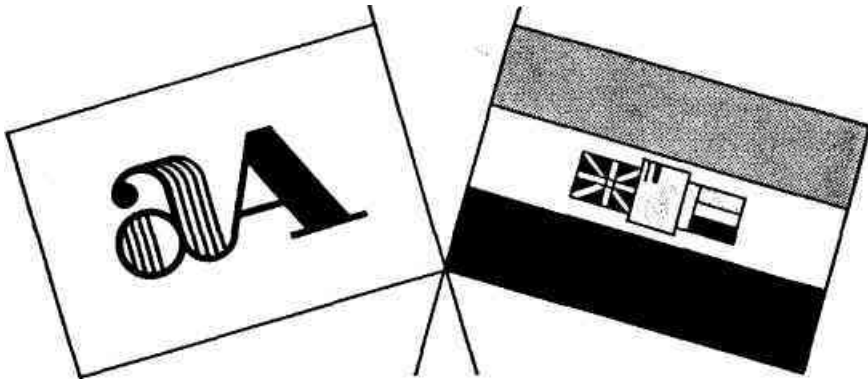


October 1959

UNION OF  
SOUTH AFRICA

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## UN-MET NEEDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

By Alan Paton

Author of "Cry the Beloved Country"

**W**HEN the bars are closed in Durban, and you must have a drink at any cost, you go to the *shebeen*, an illicit dive where they sell illicit liquor—not only the well-known brands but hot mixtures as well. There you will meet all kinds, white people, Africans, Indians, and what we call "coloured people," that large group of people of mixed blood, over a million strong.

After H. joined AA, he remem-

bered the non-white frequenters of the *shebeens*, some of whom were as desperate as he had been. As one small part of his campaign, he asked me to write this little article for the AA Grapevine. He hopes it will bring AA to the notice of non-white alcoholics who need help.

It is not easy in South Africa for an all-white group—such as AA to all intents and purposes is—to help non-white people; an all-white group can provide food and cloth-

ing, or clinical services, but they will not find it easy to give the kind of person-to-person help that AA gives. Centuries of custom and tradition, and now many apartheid laws, make it difficult for white and non-white people to work together. I do not intend to offer any solution of these difficulties; (that is a task for AA). But I do think that AA will try to find a solution, if the rest of its members are anything like H. Indeed H. tells me he knows several of its members who are anxious, having themselves been helped, to give that help to others, and to exclude none from being helped.

And there are tens of thousands of non-white South Africans who desperately need their help.

It would be distasteful to compare the drinking habits of the various racial groups of South Africa, and in any case it would be impossible to do so. Nevertheless a few facts would be useful. Africans are not allowed to purchase "white" liquor, except under very rare permit. Therefore there is a large illicit liquor traffic. Some of this illicit liquor is first bought legally by members of other groups, and then sold illicitly to Africans. It has been estimated that 50% of the liquor bought legally is re-sold illegally. This illicit liquor is not all drunk in its original form; much of it is used to compound other fierce drinks, and in addition to these, there are still fiercer drinks

made by illicit distilling. Many of these distilled liquors, quite apart from their alcoholic effects, are highly poisonous.

Every African township is full of these illicit drinking places, and owing to incessant police raiding, the relations between Africans and police are dangerously bad. In 1956 a quarter of a million Africans, out of a population of nine million, were convicted of liquor offenses. The incidence of serious crime among Africans is high, and much of it is attributable to the excessive use of liquor.

Coloured people are able to buy "white" liquor, and are not confined to segregated townships; therefore drunkenness amongst coloured people is more commonly seen, and they are often tempted to sell liquor to Africans illicitly. Amongst coloured people the incidence of serious juvenile and adult crime is high, and much of it is attributable to excess of liquor. The number of coloured alcoholics must be very high. I would suppose—not having made any scientific investigations—that the incidence of alcoholism among the Indian people is relatively lower, but there are signs that it is increasing; and indeed H. knows from his own experience that there are many Indians who urgently require help.

H.'s first Indian contact was M. As H. says, it was his "good fortune" to be in the AA office when the call for help was received; it

was to prove M.'s good fortune as well. M. was a man with brains and initiative, and he had a little business of his own in Durban, catering for many white customers. Although he was drinking heavily, he was so expert in his job that his business did not suffer; he was brought to his senses by something that happened in his own home.

One day, made irritable by drinking, he decided that the telephone was an intolerable nuisance, so he mounted a step-ladder and proceeded to prize the wiring from the wall by brute force. His wife was too terrified to try to stop him, so it was left to his small daughter to remonstrate with him. M. was enraged beyond control by this interference, so he came down from the ladder and caught his daughter by the throat. His neighbours, hearing his wife's screams, arrived in time to prevent a tragedy. When they returned to their homes they left a man sobered by the narrowness of his escape, and appalled by the depths to which he had sunk.

But AA was M.'s salvation. He has not had a drink for eight years, and through him other Indians in Durban have come to AA for help. But the unmet needs are tremendous, and H. hopes that many more of those who need help will come to hear of AA, and play their part in helping others also.

H.'s first African contact was S., a young man with a degree, a good job at a clinic, and a great thirst

for liquor. There are not many African graduates as yet, and many of them have been put through the University by the sacrifice of their parents. Sometimes this sacrifice appears to be utter and complete, involving the renunciation of all luxuries, all comfort, all leisure, all appearances. It certainly was so in the case of S.'s mother, who virtually gave up all the pleasures of life for the sake of her son. His needs seemed to be insatiable, the demands of the University seemed to be beyond all reason; but somehow she found the money for this and that. She was desolated when she discovered that much of her money was being spent on liquor; and when her son graduated and found good employment, when he might have been expected to make amends to her for her long self-abnegation, he needed all his money for liquor. What might have been unrelieved tragedy was by God's grace turned into joy; for S., about to lose his job and all hope for the future, turned to AA and found H. to help him. For five years S. has been sober, and the news spread to others. But there are still hundreds of Africans in need, and it is to be hoped that they will come to hear of AA, and in their turn play their part in saving others.

If you know of any of these, tell them about AA in Durban. You may be helping to put something straight in what Gerald Manley Hopkins called "the bent world."