

# COUNTRY HOTEL

GWYNNE SEATH

COMPACT and erect in khaki bush-shirt and shorts, veld-shoed feet planted squarely on the sidewalk, legs neatly socked, fists on hips, dark sun-glasses under his wide-brimmed hat, Hammond watched a length of brown paper scuttle towards him across the village street in the hot wind. He raised his head to look up at the big letters that ran along the top of the hotel to spell out its name—New Karroo. His eyes fell on a mass of heavily laden bougainvillia branches growing above the door of the non-European bar, magenta pointed petals blazing in the sun.

Wonderful day on the farms and wild stretches where there weren't any sticky streets or bars and shops; Hammond imagined his forests, fresh and inviting in any weather. He could see Hans among the Coloured men in the yard waiting for the bar to open. His assistant carried his spare body upright, worn dungarees pulled up tight under the short coat, ribbonless felt hat hooding his head. There was something restful and serene about Hans' dark big-featured face with its aquiline nose and high cheek bones. And, Hammond thought, you couldn't want anyone better for the work.

Hammond held his hat against the wind as he studied the men. In the hot sun, in the eddying dust, they waited; it seemed enormous patience to him! They reminded him of a dark cloud of bees, clustering and focussing round the hive—their source of hope and strength. Hammond was aware of a certain muteness about these masculine but unassertive men; he sensed a kind of hush hovering over the patient group. He found their colours and sizes as varied and diverse as the veld plants and trees that were his concern. He caught the eye of a little weed of a man in the throng—brim of felt hat wide over his lined face, grey trousers cascading over the turned-up toes of his veld-shoes, his old jacket too big for him. A squat, yellow-faced man lurched close to Hammond, already drunk, laugh wrinkles curving deeply from eyes into cheeks, he looked around delightedly for someone to share his temporary wonder and fortune, moving his head happily to and fro.

Looking at the watch on his thick wrist, Hammond turned towards the hotel entrance; there was time for a cup of tea while Hans visited the bar, and they could be at the reserve

by sunset. He stepped over the cement stoep into the hall.

As he reached to hang his hat on a hook by the door, he heard a voice, feminine but harsh and strident, say: "Good morning, Mr. Hammond!" A middle-aged woman, thick arms bare, blond hair bobbed and frizzed round her thin face, came towards him, smiling; she screwed up her little blue eyes and rubbed her cheek with the back of a hand.

"And how is Mr. Hammond?" She looked up at him, head tilted and mouth pursed.

He angled off his glasses: "Very well, Mrs. Bester." His boyish face peered down on her.

"And how is Mr. Hammond's work going?" She shot her face forward, eyebrows skipping up.

"All right, thanks." Hammond shifted about, stowing his spectacles in their case. "On the way to a new reserve—Bokkiesveld."

"Would Mr. Hammond like some tea?" Mrs. Bester twisted her neck round toward him as he strolled in the direction of the lounge.

"Yes, if you please!" He turned to glance back at her; she trotted away, her hands held down limp before her, corsetted body rigid as she went.

Hammond could make out, lying in the dim light under the stairway, piles of veld-flowers, scattered lush and fresh: great open ripe proteas, pink- and black-tipped and feathery, their long leaves and petals pointing, enfolding; branches of wild mountain "gardenia," their fleshy leaves, rounded and wax-like and shaded through greens and yellows to peach-pink and cream, climbing to form spiralled leaf-blossoms. Mentally he noted their scientific names.

No one else was in the bright drinking-lounge where Hammond arranged himself in one of the chromium-piped chairs at a squat table near the door. He could see through large steel windows into the yard where visitors' cars stood in a row nosing the hotel-front, the Government station-wagon—packed with Hammond's equipment—among them. The little room was filled with matching tables and chairs, fitted closely together; Hammond shuddered as he felt its cold clean nakedness. When he consciously listened for it, he could hear the hum of the Coloured men's presence on the other side of the yard; it was like the doves calling—you heard it when you wanted to!

A tall bluey-white cadaverous young man brought the tea

quietly—vacant face dipping over the table, to disappear as silently as he had come.

Mrs. Bester came into the room. She held a bunch of heath in her hand, its tiny-leaved sprays tufted with tightly-packed crinkly heliotrope flowers; cocking her head coyly and pursing her lips proprietorially, smug comfortable wrinkles wreathed her face. In his mind Hammond automatically classified the heath.

“Your flowers are very beautiful, Mrs. Bester.” He thought of them growing in their wild haunts, and now to be stripped calculatingly and arranged to decorate the hotel’s principal rooms.

Looking up at her, he put his fingers through his wavy brown hair, hand lingering at the back of his neck: “Did you get them from the country round?”

Mrs. Bester stood erect beside him: “Early this morning I was out. The flowers come from the farms of friends.” With narrowed eyes and tightened mouth, she thrust forward her lower jaw and nodded her head slowly, saying: “To-day is such a busy day for us . . . Mr. Hammond would be surprized to know what a big trade we do on a Saturday. . . . And my husband has gone to town . . . I must see to everything!” She strolled to the window and peered at the street.

Hammond sipped his tea. He noted that the stir of the men waiting in the yard had shifted inside to the bar.

Presently Mrs. Bester came towards him again, hugging the heath to her chest.

Hammond said, his head set sideways, blue eyes twinkling, brows raised questioningly: “Is there a limit to the amount of alcohol you can sell to the Coloured people?”

As she instinctively blurted “Oh, no!”, Hammond was aware that she felt uncertain; her head moved from side to side, searching, reluctant.

He fixed her with clear blue eyes, lips pressed together hard: “Can’t you refuse to serve them if you feel they’ve had too much to drink?”

As Mrs. Bester hesitated to answer him, her face pleading, placating, he pursued her: “Don’t you ever have any trouble arising from drunkenness?”

Mrs. Bester bent low, propping her fists on the table, to face him squarely. The heath jutted upwards from one hand and trailed over the table as she fixed amused eyes on him and said,

emphasizing each word with a little jerk of the head: "That's the police's concern—not ours."

Silence welled up between them.

Mrs. Bester swayed her body around from the little table towards the door.

With eyebrows lifted and troubled lines deep across his brow, Hammond grunted and looked down in his lap.

The pale bar-attendant stole into the room, his empty face lit at last by interest. He spoke breathy Afrikaans phrases in a low tone to Mrs. Bester. The hotel proprietress stood listening, eyes slit, mouth rigid, body tense. When the barman finished she made a spurt through the door to drop the heath onto the other flowers in the hall and vanish—as if hurled—towards the bar. Hammond could hear her loud decisive steps. He thought the low drone from the bar seemed to mount to an uneven roar.

There were steps again in the hall, and the sudden whirring sound of a telephone crank. After a pause, Mrs. Bester's voice—the Afrikaans syllables concise and rasping—came harsh, demanding, emphatic, high through the air, and the sound of the receiver slamming on its hook. Then her steps struck the floor again.

The teapot empty, Hammond rose. He strode through the hall and out the entrance, hands clasped behind him, to stand at the edge of the cement stoep. A group of Coloured women, dark and humble, their wisps of children following them lightly, passed along the street in front of the little houses and gated yards opposite. Hammond was conscious of a lull in the bar.

A slight Coloured boy came down the street, dressed in the fresh khaki uniform and helmet of a policeman. Hammond noticed how the polished leather of his belt sparkled in the sun, shining handcuffs stretched and linked along its surface. The skin of the boy's face was bronze and satin-smooth, and, clothed in his uniform, he walked with a sure direct step towards the door of the non-European bar and entered it. Listening, Hammond noticed the sound inside drop, and after a pause, resume its usual hum. The mild young policeman came out of the bar, hands clutching his prisoner. Hammond recognized the happy drunken man of an earlier hour, yellow face now sagging and exhausted, tottering crazily from side to side—head lolling jerkily. The uniformed boy made his way carefully, guiding and leading his charge across the yard to the sidewalk and finally

the street, where they moved along to disappear out of sight.

Hammond watched the crumpled piece of refuse paper still drifting in the empty yard. Mrs. Bester came out onto the stoep, rubbing her hands together, satisfaction shining from her face. A large powerful dust-covered American car roared into the yard and stopped level with the stoep. From behind the wheel a heavy-set man climbed, loosely but comfortably dressed; his assured heavy eyes glanced appraisingly at Hammond and Mrs. Bester whom he greeted casually as he walked past them along the stoep to vanish through the door of the European bar.

Some Coloured men lingered in the yard; Hammond saw Hans, lean face hollowed with a grin as he listened to words of the little big-jacketed man who sauntered with him towards the Government van. When the two slight men crossed opposite the hotel's entrance they acknowledged Hammond's glance and greeting and saluted warmly—each raising the fingers of a hand towards his hat. The piece of brown paper, Hammond noticed, was caught under the farmer's car, one of its ends wedged beneath the tyre. But now he saw that the wind was tugging at it slowly to bring it finally swirling in great slow circles above them.

Suddenly Hammond felt a violent urge pressing, impelling him to hasten away. Turning back into the hall for his hat, he found himself facing Mrs. Bester, the upright bars of the grilled-in office between them.

The proprietress stood behind the grid, folded arms snug over thick body, smile wrinkles carved around the upward-curling corners of her mouth. She spoke in a grating low tone: "Is Mr. Hammond now off?"

He stood poised to fly, hat in his hand. "Yes, Mrs. Bester. Good morning."

Putting on his hat he quickly crossed the stoep and almost ran as he approached the car. Sliding behind the wheel and adjusting his glasses, Hammond smiled at Hans sitting beside him. He backed the station-wagon into the street and, pointing its nose towards the spreading country, pressed his foot on the accelerator. His eye roved across the veld, and he marked a little umbrella-shaped ghwarrie tree on a rise, etched and crooked against the sky. "Euclea undulata," he murmured happily, putting the car into overdrive as they sped between stretches of scrub-covered veld.