

HOTEL INTERNATIONAL

by J. W. Macquarrie.

It was clearly the black American's round and manfully he took up the white man's burden. His accent was Yankee but his idiom was impeccably South African.

"Three Castles, two cold and one off the shelf."

"Excuse me, sir, but are you a resident?"

"Say, barman, what's all this about? Why the sudden interest in my private life? Look, I've already had two drinks on my friends. Now it's up to me."

"Yes, sir, but they stood the drinks. So, you see, you were a boney feedy guest under government regulations. So that was okey-doke. But now you're in the chair, you're not a guest, and I can't serve you unless you're a boney Fido resident at this hotel."

The American looked somewhat dazed.

"I see," he said at last. "Well, boys, I guess that this is a cheap round for me."

"Oh, but wait a minute, sir. Maybe you're attending this Chamber of Industries do in our Conference Hall or the ladies' wear buyers in the Pink Salon? In that case, of course....."

"No dice. I'm just a poor college professor. Never been in industry or ladies' wear in my life."

The barman scratched his head.

"I've got it. Maybe you're staying for dinner?"

"O.K. you bar-steward. Put me down as staying for dinner but don't count on it. Don't get shirty or put yourself in clink if I change my mind."

The barman beamed. A tricky situation, he felt, had been adroitly handled. Go on like this and he'd be a head barman in no time. He hastened to execute the order.

Enter the assistant manager.

"Who's this lot for?" he spluttered.

"The gentlemen in the corner, sir."

"But, good God man, are you blind? Can't you see that one of them is a"

"Yes, sir, the American gentleman." The barman spoke soothingly as to a froward child. "It's actually his round but don't worry, sir. It's all boney Fido. No breach of national security. He's staying for dinner."

"You damned idiot, do you want us to lose our licence? Do you want to lose your job and me mine? Don't you know that this is a public bar, a men's bar, and that blacks can't drink in a men's bar. Not even in a hotel like this."

The assistant manager wrung his hands in anguish.

"I suppose, you clot, you've served them quite a few drinks already. What am I going to do?" He moaned feebly, then roused himself. "For heaven's sake, get them out of here."

"All three of them, sir."

"Yes, all three of them."

"Where to, sir?"

"I don't give a damn where. Just get them to hell and gone out of here. No! No! Wait! Let me think. Shove them in the Ladies' Bar."

"It's pretty full, sir. Standing room only and not much of that. And Mrs. What's-her-Name's there. You remember, the one who made such a fuss last time about that dark gentleman from Mozambique."

"All right! All right! Put them in the old cloakroom.

But for God's sake get them out of here on the dot or I'll have your guts for garters."

The barman discreetly shepherded the lepers from the men's bar. The assistant manager tottered to his den, with trembling hand, poured himself a triple Glenfiddich with the merest splash of soda. In drinking on duty he was breaking one of his most inflexible rules. In drinking alone, in choosing an expensive malt rather than a blended whisky, in making it a triple, in not diluting it generously with water, he was compounding the fracture. But what a day it had been.

This morning there had been the swimming pool. That dusky ambassador from Where's - the - Place, a boney Fido resident, liked his regular morning swim. Nothing illegal about it. Some of the customers didn't like it and made things quite sticky but there it was This morning, however, the ambassador brought a pal, a black pal, and Mr. Schlebusch couldn't be expected to stand for that. Well, one word had led to another. The ambassador had given notice. Another black, or at least non-white, mark for the hotel and the Republic and the assistant manager. It was all very difficult.

Then in the afternoon, first was that raspberry from Pretoria about the black pop-singers who performed last month. The Liquor Board was not at all happy about their permits. Had he exercised the necessary supervision? Had he satisfied himself that.....? Would he kindly inform the Liquor Board as to what steps? Would he hell? Then there had been the The Dansant in the Blue Room this evening. Soft lights, soft music, everything going hotsy-totsy. Until that same blasted ambassador had ambled in with his even duskier wife. Looking for trouble, the So-and-So. Still, things might have been alright if they had just danced with each other, or better still not danced at all, or best of all, beat it while the going was good.

But then that white man, that foreign chap, asks the woman for a dance, and the ambassador asks the white chap's wife Well, what option had an assistant manager? Clear out the dancers or clear out the ambassador? There wasn't any choice, was there? But the dreadful things that black man and his wife said about Alwyn and Pik and PW -- not to mention yours truly.

The assistant manager groped blindly for the bottle of Glenfiddich like a drowning man clutching at a straw. International hotels? You could have them. As for him, back to the bottle store business where a man knew where he stood.□