

# UNDER WHICH KING?

WHEN you start to live your life on a new plan you can't afford to overlook details, because the beginning of every plan is mostly small stuff. So when I decided to stop being the big-hearted mug, the world's easy mark, I knew I must make sure that from then on it was never me who bought that last round two minutes to closing time, never me who was first to feel for his tobacco when somebody said: "I've left mine at home."

I hadn't much weed, anyhow. To land on the job with enough to see me through until payday I'd had to do some

write to-night I get it what—Friday? Jeeze, Cappy's a nice bloke."

He was shouting to drown the mixer, but he didn't sound as though he'd convinced even himself.

"Ginger," I said, "you write to Cappy."

We did the next three mixes in silence. The job—filling the hopper from a bank of shingle—didn't need any of my attention, so I let my mind wander. I'd save 12 pounds a fortnight and by Christmas I'd have a hundred notes. I'd get a suit, some shoes, a white-collar job. Maybe I'd find a girl I could take to the pictures evenings. Maybe we'd start buying things we'd need later: a radio, one of those electric irons, a tea-set. One day we'd be in line for a State house.

"No stamps," he shouted. "What's stamps worth?"

"What you want stamps for?" I was angry at being pulled out of my dream and brought back to the shingle.

"Write to Cappy."

"Hell!" I said. "I got stamps."

"What hut you in?"

"I'll give you one tea-time," I said, not wanting him to know my hut number.

Shorty Stevenson, the little Scotty in charge of the mixer, gave me a quick wink. I didn't like Shorty (I was sore and I didn't like anyone in Camp 90)

but I had a feeling that he was a man I could learn from. He was a smart, clean-looking chap, and all I knew about him was that he lived in the married quarters, ran a double chart, and never missed a penny's overtime. They said he was all set to buy a truck business.

I don't know why—maybe it was Shorty's wink, understanding and congratulatory—but I couldn't get back to my dream about the girl and the State house. Shorty and I: the two shrewdies. Hell!

The hooter went soon afterwards, for ten o'clock smoko and I wanted a smoke badly, but I hadn't got yet so that I could bring out the makings in front of Ginger and not offer them to him—and that I wouldn't do. It wasn't the tobacco, of course, or anything I'd got against Ginger. (Hell, he was only about 19!) It was this idea in my head: if I gave in now I might as well pack up. I'd be in Camp 90 or some other damned camp all my days—useless to myself, useless to everyone else.

\* \* \*

AT tea that night I was opposite Irish. I didn't know many of the chaps in Camp 90 even by sight, but I knew him. In my present mood it seemed to me he was there for my special benefit—a warning and an example. He was six feet five and had a face he might have

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slapped out of brown mud, using only his own pick and shovel. It was full of a sort of wild charity, but no good because disorganised, because (if that's the word) disintegrated. No truck business for Irish—no approving winks from Shorty. "He'd give you," I heard someone say, "his sweaty socks." Yes, and what had it made him? Only drunk and a nuisance to anyone who cared about him, if anyone did still.

He'd lent me his mug my first day in camp, pushing it over as soon as he'd had his own drink, and at breakfast that morning he'd roared at me accusingly (he roared always): "You got no butter." He slung me a chunk wrapped in dirty brown paper but I couldn't take any of course—not after my new rule, not after the way I'd treated Ginger.

\* \* \*

I DIDN'T want Irish as a friend—I didn't want anyone in Camp 90 as a friend: I was there to make money—but he went out of his way to speak to me next morning. I had a feeling he liked me, but I didn't want that either. I wasn't on his side any more. I'd never

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close figuring, and the dollar left over didn't seem a lot when I remembered that I'd come out of the army with something like 400 notes. Now you can see why I'd decided on a fresh beginning and why I was down at Camp 90 among the lakes in the snow.

So when he asked me, bringing his face close to mine, if payday was really a week Tuesday, I said to myself: "Here it comes, boy, and this is where you start." We were feeding shingle to a concrete mixer, and for three days now, 10 hours a day, I'd been seeing that face (raw and peaked under a mass of red hair) on the far side of the hopper, and I wasn't getting any fonder of it. Already it had had several of my cigarettes stuck in its mouth.

"A week Tuesday," he said, eyeing my tobacco tin. "That's a long time without a smoke."

"Yes," I said, and it sounded shorter than that.

"When I came here I thought they'd fix me up, see. I thought I wouldn't need anything, see."

"If you smoke," I said, "you need tobacco."

The hopper came down with a bang and we had to start shovelling, but he was off again the moment we stopped.

"Cappy'll fix me," he said. "All I got to do is write down to Cappy and he sends up what I want, see. If I

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