

Frank Roberts

It Could Be You

5 Earl Kramer awoke from a bad dream which had twin origins in too much Instant Vigor late at night and a World War II movie on television. In the film, he had seen people killed in the mass in the most gruesome ways, and with his and millions of other families he had thanked Heaven it was history, and from a barbarous age. Lying in bed half-awake, Kramer wondered how the present times would look to the viewers of future years, when perhaps all atavistic elements had been drained from the race.

10 'Hey, what time is it?' he asked his wife. 'Nearly seven. Better switch on.'
He did, and there was the usual picture of Hip Jones sprawled on his desk, sleeping to soft music. The music quickened, and Mr. Invig appeared on the screen, with his usual leer at Hip Jones, and the world. 'What a night he must have had,' Mr. Invig said. 'What a night you must have had! Never mind, what a lovely day it's going to be in a few moments, thanks to Instant Vigor. Got your tablets ready?'

15 He put one yellow tablet into Hip Jones's mouth while four bubble dancers crossed in front singing the Invig song. The instant he'd swallowed, Hip Jones sprang up and looked a hundred years younger. 'Are you with me?' he called brightly. 'All together then, swallow!'
Earl Kramer and Melanie popped the tablets in their mouths, and took the surge lying down. That was when Hip Jones on the screen cried, 'Well, who's it going to be today, good people?'

20 Then, as one of the outside cameras zoomed through a bedroom window and caught a man yawning, Hip's voice called, 'It could be you, Mr. Joe Barratt of King Vale! But don't worry, it isn't. We were just seeing if you were awake.'
'Will you look at the look on the poor boob's face?' said Earl, laughing with everyone else at Joe Barratt of King Vale. 'Well, how would you feel?' Melanie said. 'It can be anyone, any-where, any time. I think I'd drop

25 dead with sheer fright if they sprang a camera at me.'
'I wouldn't' Earl said grimly, and Melanie reached out and gripped his arm, and they stared at one another a second while Hip Jones shouted, 'This is the Invig Show, a day-long adventure' brought to you by the Invig Corporation, your hosts for that loving-to-be-alive kind of living.'

30 Then the camera showed a door, and tracked along a passage, and Hip Jones's voice asked, 'Who's it gonna be?' And then as he said 'It could be you.' they pulled the switch on him and took the cameras into the studio and focused on Hip Jones, who yelled in not altogether mock surprise, 'Mr. Hip Jones, care of the Invig Corporation. Hey fellers, that's me!'
Melanie and Earl laughed with the other million viewers, and Hip cried, 'Oh no, not old Hip. All you lovely people out there, you wouldn't want that, would you? They're only kidding -I think.'

35 'He doesn't sound too sure,' Earl said, laughing. 'Wouldn't it be a joke if it did turn out to be him some time? If his rating fell, for instance'.
'Here we go again,' Hip cried. 'It could be you, Mrs. Zella Ignacio of Moonstone. But it isn't. No, I've been authorized to say it's a man today. That makes the odds 987,000 to one for you men, or something even more astronomical.'

40 'They had a woman yesterday,' Melanie said.
'Did you watch?'
'You know I never do. Only until they give the name, and I'm sure it isn't you, or someone I know.'

45 She had breakfast ready when he came out dressed for work. And Hip Jones on the morning-room screen cried, 'It could be you, Mr. Logan Ross of Satin Plains,' The cameras zoomed to a middle-aged man alighting from an inter-urban Hovercraft. He stopped in midstride and almost fell over. Hip Jones said, 'Remember, the prize all this week is £100,000. Is it Mr. Ross, now? Is it? No.'
'You've got to hand it to them,' Earl said. It must have been a genius who started the show even in its original form, way back there. And I'd better get to work.' He tested his portable, kissed Melanie good-bye, and hurried to the transit station. He was not alone. He listened to the Invig News and the World Hit Parade

50 on the way in leaving the video off so that he could read yesterday's main story in the morning papers. The next ICBY clue was due at nine o'clock, but sometimes they inserted one unexpectedly. Hip Jones was there, even larger than life, on the Central Stores screens when Ed arrived at work. Hip had just selected the winner of the daily Invig Holiday, a heavyweight woman who had won a trip to Spain, and a free course of Inslim.

55 'There's something happening all the time on the Invig Show,' Hip proclaimed. 'And now for the next clue in our day-long adventure, "It Could Be You!"'.
At Central Stores the door had been opened, and people were streaming into the store as Hip said, "'It Could Be You" with eyes of blue. And according to my little data book, that brings us down to 90,000 possibilities. That's still a lot; but keep looking in.'

60 'Well, we're part of the chosen band so far,' Earl said to his best friend Steve.
'Are we? Yes, I suppose we are. I never take much notice, I've been in the last thousand or so, dozens of times.'
'Lately? I didn't think ...'
'No, when I was in the Force. They had a long run on outdoor workers at one stage, and it was often a cop or a postie.'

65 Hip cried, 'It could be you, Mr. Wu,' and on the screen was a Chinese shelling shrimp, and grinning at the cameras. 'Mr .Wu scents a blue,' Hip remarked. ' A blue-eyed Chinaman? Well, hardly. No, we just threw him in for luck and he wasn't a bit worried, was he? Lovely. Keep watching. More cluey coming up, chop chop.'

70 'Aren't there really any blue-eyed Chinese?' Earl asked, and Steve shook his head.
Hip was handed a slip of paper, and cried, 'He has black hair.' And the cameras roved a crowd and hovered over a bald head.
'It certainly couldn't be him,' Earl chuckled. Invig made everyone good humoured in the mornings. Both Earl and Steve had black hair.

75 'Thirty-four thousand, now ' Steve read from the statistics. 'I'll split the price with you.'
'Oh, sure. Me too.' Earl could see three customers approaching. 'I suppose you've worked out what you'd do with it.'
'Many times,' Steve said. 'And also if it was me.'
Earl hadn't. He'd never been among even the last 100,000 before. But now he had no time to think about it

80 because suddenly there seemed to be a rush on suits. It was more than an hour before he and Steve could exchange a word again.
'I missed a couple of the clues,' Earl said. 'I got the early thirties one, and the business suit.'
'You only missed one then, man. Sun-tanned complexion. They're clever, the way they string it out. It's still only down to 8,000.'

85 'And we're still in,' Earl said. 'But 8,000 is a lot.'
Steve shrugged. He was watching two women who were pretending to examine a suit special, but were covertly looking at Earl and him.
It had started. 'Yes, we're still among the 8,000,' Steve said, loud enough for them to hear. But quietly he said, 'I have a damn feeling.'

90 Earl walked over to the women and said to the nearest, 'Can I help you, madam ?'
'We're just looking,' the other one said. They wandered away, but did not leave the level.
On the screen Mr Invig appeared again to see that Hip Jones and everyone else took their midday booster tablet. It made Hip hilarious, and after the bubble dancers had finished the Invig Song he produced a huge pin and threatened to burst their bubbles.

95 Then Hip sobered up, and said, 'Let's see what's going on outside. Ah yes, it could be you, Mr Darrell Darling, down in Dent Street.' The cameras zoomed to a man struggling with three youths while other people were running towards them. Darling was punching and kicking and shouting, 'Let me alone. ' One of the youths fell down.

100 'Hey, there's some excitement down in Dent Street,' Hip said coolly. 'But it isn't Mr Darling. No siree. He's left-handed, and you're looking for a right-handed man.'

Darling must have heard it from a set near by, because he rushed at the youths and banged two of their heads together. Other people kicked and punched at them, and they turned and ran for their lives.

105 'It doesn't do to be impetuous,' Hip cried. 'There's some way to go yet. We've only narrowed the number down to 6,803. But from here on, watch any man with black hair, blue eyes, early thirties, business suit, sun-tanned complexion, and- here comes another clue -he works right in the heart of the city. How about that ?'

Steve said, 'Hey, that's a big cut, down to 3,200.'

110 'Right in the city,' Hip cried, 'and he's worth maybe £100,000 to you or you or you. Oh, I can see you rushing in by the thousands, now - all you ladies from the suburbs. And I'll tell you this. If you don't get your man you will get value in the city. If you don't win you'll certainly save.'

Earl said, 'The city stores must have bought participation today. But the rush shouldn't trouble us much. They won't be buying suits.'

And Steve growled, 'They'll buy anything, if they think he's close. And I tell you, I've got a feeling.'

115 Earl felt his spine prickle. Steve was a lot bigger and harder than he.

Earl played it cool, shrugged and said, 'The more we sell, the more bonus. I'm going to circulate. It's no use hiding.'

'See you,' Steve said, and almost put out his hand, but changed the direction and put it in his pocket and turned away.

120 Those two women were moving back towards suits, and more people were arriving by escalator. In no time Earl was in the centre of a crowd, selling suits like hot cakes, with two men from other departments sent in to help him. But by the grapevine he learned it was the same in socks, shoes, underwear, and sports goods. People in the crowd had to rely on intuition, and many who looked at Earl rejected him and went to another department or to other stores.

125 There was a hush as the screens showed Hip Jones about to give another clue, and suddenly then Melanie slipped through the tight circle of bodies and reached Earl's side.

'We're all in the city now,' Hip Jones cried. 'And it could be you, Arthur Lonigan of Lonigan and Sons.' This was a killer, and the crowd shrieked with laughter. Even Earl laughed. The cameras had gone smashing through a window into an office where the boss was being held by his staff, ten people evidently willing to share the prize. Lonigan was shouting, 'I'll fire every last one of you!'

130 And Hip cried, 'You do that, Mr. Lonigan, because it isn't you. Our man today never wears glasses, and I see a pair on your desk.' There was an instant melee in Lonigan's office, and the cameras dwelt on it just long enough for laughs and then cut away.

'They were taking a silly risk, weren't they?' Hip cried. 'For we still. have 2,500 candidates, or so. There's plenty of time. Hey, I've got something here, wouldn't you like to have?' And he showed the back; of a photograph. 'That's right, I've got his picture here.'

135 'Earl, I'm so afraid,' Melanie said.

'You shouldn't be here. Please go home. There's nothing you could do.'

'Steve's still in it too, isn't he?'

140 He was most upset because she was there. 'Steve's used to it,' he said. 'He's been close before. Do go home.'

'Make way for Insur!' a man called at the back of the crowd, and Earl saw the opportunity. 'I won't sign unless you go,' he said.

145 'All right, dear, you know best. ' Melanie stepped back and went into the parting the Insur man had made in the crowd, but she did not get far, although everyone was very nice. Some of the women patted her, and others took out their handkerchiefs and dabbed.

'Sign here,' the Insur man told Earl. 'Let's see, it's down to 2,000 isn't it? There's such a mob in town, or I'd have found you when the odds were better. The premium's -let's see -I'll write a receipt.'

'Did you get Steve Barclay?' Earl asked him.

'He's having a rough time, but I'll get him to him in a minute.' the man said.

150 'They ought to give more clues at this stage,' Earl said. 'It's sadistic to drag it out.'

'Well, they have to give us time to get around, for one thing. You wouldn't want to miss on your Insur, would you? Anyway, it's more - exciting'.

'I suppose so,' said Earl. The screens were showing crowd scenes from various parts of the city. It was certainly exciting, and these shots created much indecision among the people around Earl. Even he felt it.

155 Some of the candidates on the screens made his pulse jump with certainty.

But, after all, he was employed to sell suits. 'What about you, madam ?' he asked a fat woman with green glasses. 'What size is your husband ?'

'Insignificant, honey. You got anything for an insignificant man ?' she said, and the crowd laughed.

Earl persisted. He took a suit from the rack and held it in front of her. 'It's in the new style. You wouldn't

160 know it's the same man.'

'I should buy him a new suit?' the fat woman said. 'Honey, if I win today, I'll buy me a whole new husband. Then for sure he won't be the same man.' She was about to go on, but something on the screens caught everyone's attention.

It was Hip with an Invig Sudden Death jackpot. That meant there would be another contest in the

165 afternoon, running right up to the other channel's night show, 'You Bet Your Life'.

'Here it is, then!' Hip cried. 'Are you in Central Stores? Because our man is. Don't make any mistakes now, remember all the clues - and don't forget the penalties. There are fifteen possibles in Central Stores - and please, good people, don't wreck the joint.'

Fifteen? Earl fought his way to a counter, and jumped onto it, trying to sight Steve. But Steve was in a

170 bigger crowd than Earl. There were only the two of them on that floor. People were fighting to hold Earl's legs, hitting and pushing and shouting at one another. They pulled him down into the mass of gaping faces with, he was sure, Melanie's among them.

'He's in suits,' they screeched, taking it from Hip Jones. Earl fought his way upright, shouting, 'There's two of us.'

175 Then he saw that Steve had got onto a counter, with a heavy steel coat-hanger in his hand. He was threatening them with it, and none had a right to touch Steve until he was named, if it were to be he. The crowd was growing every moment. Steve made a wild jump over the nearest heads, and the crowd opened to let him fall on his feet. He was big, and the hanger was heavy. He ran to the big windows, with all of them surging after him, and he smashed the glass with one blow and climbed through, or started to, but

180 they got him and pulled him back, cutting him badly. He still had the hanger, and flailed around with it, sending them back. Nearly everyone thought it was Steve because Steve thought so, but a few dozen diehards clung to Earl.

'I'm going to tell you which one in suits,' Hip cried on the screen. 'But wait for it, good people. Don't make any hasty mistakes, the penalties are terrible if you do.'

185 Earl braced himself, and Hip cried, 'It's the big fellow, Steve Barclay .' Then there were terrible screams. Earl read next day that Steve took three with him, and hurt many more. That was silly. The game was necessary, a scientific outlet, everyone knew that. And if it was your turn, just too bad. The fat woman with the green glasses won the £100,000. No one bothered to find out whether she bought a new husband. There was another contest and another winner in the afternoon. But in the store, bruised and bleeding, Earl was not

190 quite so philosophical in the heat of the moment. He shook off the last of those around him and looked for Melanie.

When he saw her he went to her and took her handbag and opened it and looked inside. Of course it contained her ICBY contest knife with her name and number engraved in gold.

'Wouldn't the Insur have been enough for you?' he asked her.

195 'Dear, it wouldn't have meant anything. You know it wouldn't have.'

He handed the bag back to her and said, 'Christ, what have they done to us ?'

'There's no need to be blasphemous,' Melanie said.

(1964)