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*There's a song that says "it's later than you think"
and it is perhaps lamentable that someone didn't
sing it for Henry that beautiful morning....*

Pipe of Peace

By James McKimney, Jr.

THE FARMER refused to work. His wife, a short thin woman with worried eyes, watched him while he sat before the kitchen table. He was thin, too, like his wife, but tall and tough-skinned. His face, with its leather look was immobile.

"Why?" asked his wife.

"Good reasons," the farmer said.

He poured yellow cream into a cup of coffee. He let the cup sit on the table.

"Henry?" said the woman, as though she were really speaking to someone else. She walked around the kitchen in quick aimless bird steps.

"My right," said Henry. He lifted his cup, finally, tasting.

"We'll starve."

"Not likely. Not until everybody else does, anyway."

The woman circled the room and came back to her husband. Her eyes winked, and there were lines between them. Her fingers clutched the edge of the table. "You've gone crazy," she said, as though it were a half-question, a half-pronouncement.

The farmer was relaxing now, leaning back in his chair. "Might have. Might have, at that."

"Why?" she asked.

The farmer turned his coffee cup carefully. "Thing to do, is all. Each man in his own turn. This is my turn."

The woman watched him for a long time, then she sat down on a chair beside the table. The quick, nervous movement was gone out of her, and she sat like a frozen sparrow.

The farmer looked up and grinned. "Feels good. Just to sit here. Does well for the back and the arms. Been working too hard."

"Henry," the woman said.

The farmer tasted his coffee again. He put the cup on the table and leaned back, tapping his browned fingers. "Just in time, I'd say. Waited any longer, it wouldn't have done any good. Another few years, a farmer wouldn't mean anything."

The woman watched him, her eyes frightened as though he might suddenly gnash his teeth or leap in the air.

"Pretty soon," the farmer said, "they'd have it all mechanical. Couldn't stop anything. Now," he said, smiling at his wife, "we can stop it all."

"Henry, go out to the fields," the woman said.

"No," Henry said, standing, stretching his thin, hard body. "I won't go out to the fields. Neither will August Brown nor Clyde Briggs nor Alfred Swanson. None of us. Anywhere. Not until the food's been stopped long enough for people to wake up."

The farmer looked out of the kitchen window, beyond his tractor and the cow barn and the windmill. He looked at rows of strong corn, shivering their soft silk in the morning breeze. "We'll stop the corn. Stop the wheat. Stop the cattle, the hogs, the chickens."

"You can't."

"I can't. But all of us together can."

"No sense," the woman said, wagging her head. "No sense."

"It's sense, all right. Best sense we've ever had. Can't use an army with no stomach. Old as the earth. Can't fight without food. Takes food to run a war."

"You'll starve the two of us, that's all you'll do. Nobody else will stop work."

The farmer turned to his wife. "Yes, they will. Everywhere a farmer is the same. He works the land. He reads the papers. He votes. He listens to the radio. He watches the television. Mostly, he works the land. Alone, with his own thoughts and ideas. He isn't any different in Maine than he is in Oregon. We've all stopped work. Now. This morning."

"How about those across the ocean? Are they stopping, too? They're not going to feed up their soldiers? To kill us if we don't starve first? To—"

"They stopped, too. A farmer is a farmer. Like a leaf on a tree. No matter on what tree in what country on whose land. A leaf is a leaf. A farmer's the same. A farmer is a farmer."

"It won't work," the woman said dully.

"Yes, it will."

"They'll *make* you work."

"How? It's our own property."

"They'll take it away from you."

"Who'll work it then?"

The woman rocked in her chair, her mouth quivering. "They'll get somebody."

The farmer shook his head. "Too many people doing other things, like making shells and guns, like sitting in fox-holes or flying planes."

The woman sat rocking, her hands together in her lap. "It won't work," she repeated.

"It'll work," said the farmer. "Right *now*, it'll work. Yes, we've got milkers and shuckers, and we've got hatchers for the chickens. We've got tractors and combines and threshing machines. They're all mechanical, all right. But we don't have mechanical farmers, yet. The pumps, the tractors, the milkers don't work by themselves. In time, maybe. Not now. We're still ahead of them on that. It'll work."

"Go out to the fields, Henry," his wife said, her voice like the sound of a worn phonograph record.

"No," the farmer said, taking a pipe from his overalls. "I think instead, I'll just sit in the sun and watch the corn. Watch the birds on top of the barn, maybe. I'll fill my pipe and sit there and smoke and watch. And when I get sleepy, I'll sleep. After a while I might go see August Brown or Clyde Briggs or maybe Alfred Swanson. We'll sit and talk, about pleasant things, peaceful things. We'll wait."

The farmer put the pipe between his teeth and walked to the door. He put on his straw hat, buttoned the sleeves of his blue shirt and stepped outside.

His wife sat at the table, staring at nothing in the room.

The farmer walked across the barnyard, listening to the sound of the chickens and the sound of the breeze going through the corn. Near the barn, he sat upon an old tree stump and filled his pipe with tobacco. He lit the pipe, cupping his hands, and sat there, smoking, the smoke spiraling up into the bright warm air.

He took his pipe from his teeth and looked at it. "Pipe of peace," he said, laughing inside himself.

The breeze was soft and the sun warm on his back. He sat there, smoking, feeling the quiet of the morning, the peace of the great sky above.

He had no time to stand or to take his pipe from his mouth, when the two men crossed the yard and lifted him up by the arms. He dropped the pipe, while he was dragged past the house, to the road beyond. He had no time to yell or scream, before his hat was swept from his head, the overalls and the blue shirt stripped from his body.

He had not even thought about what it was that had happened, before he was thrust inside a white truck, with strong steel sides and with grilled windows like those of a cell.

He was just sitting there, in the truck, without his clothes, speeding away with August Brown and Clyde Briggs and Alfred Swanson.

OUTSIDE, the sun was warm upon the earth. Chickens clucked in their pens, while birds fluttered about the top of the barn. A pig squealed. The corn rustled. And beside the farmhouse, on the ground, lay a pipe, its tobacco spilled, the last of its smoke swirling out of its bowl into the air, disappearing.

The woman sat in the kitchen of the farmhouse and turned her head when the door opened. She widened her eyes and caught at her throat with her hand.

The sun through the doorway shone down on metallic hands and a metallic face, gleaming on the surface which the straw hat and the overalls and the blue shirt didn't hide. The door snapped shut, and there was a sound of heavy metal footsteps against the kitchen floor.

The woman pressed against her chair. "Who are you?" she screamed.

"Henry," said the mechanical thing.

THE END

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