



Corn Cutting

by *Mary Dickson*

EVERY morning, except after rain, the bellowing whistle would give out a slow hiss eventually breaking into a kind of steamboat drone. One blast for the day-shift and two for the night. Would it blow or wouldn't it?

There it went — now the scramble began to get on those faded jeans, the long-sleeved shirt, and the leather shrunken shoes soaked too long in corn juice. The hair net and plastic apron could be put on in the car. Gad, the smell! Even though you washed everything diligently every evening you just couldn't get rid of that smell. The whole town knew when the factory stopped canning peas and started on the corn.

“Hey, sleepy! Hurry it up, will ya? What do you think this is, a holiday?” Doris, my neighbor, impatiently hollered from her open car window.

“I can't find my name badge anywhere. Mom must have put it somewhere when she washed my apron last night. Do ya think they'll let me work without it?”

“Let ya work? Heck, they take anything that walks on two legs, if they ever get there, that is!”

“O.K., I'm comin'.” There was really no big rush. Our machines were never ready to go anyway.

As we walked up the littered sidewalk next to the park-

ing lot we could see rows and rows of wagons bulging with green husks.

“Gads, look at that corn! Guess we’ll be here ’til 6 o’clock tonight all right,” sputtered Doris as she pulled the plastic apron over her head.

“Yeah, guess so — and I was hopin’ that rain last night would keep them out of the fields.”

“Fat chance!”

“Yeah, especially since I wanted to go to Cedar Rapids today.”

During this change of shifts tired people dragged their corn-spattered bodies out the double doors, staring blankly at the freshly scrubbed arrivals. As I entered the huge room filled with oddly shaped machines all grinding, clanging, and groaning in their tasks, the smell of newly sprayed disinfectant tickled my nose. The cement floor was wet and slippery as I cautiously wound my way between the tables of “bandannaed” girls busily hacking at deformed ears of corn.

Fourteen white cutter machines stood defiantly in a row just waiting to be mounted by their tormentors. The quota per girl today would be 2400 ears an hour. Little black toll boxes stood knowingly behind the husker machines along the far walls of the building, keeping count electronically of each ear sent through every cutter machine by the operator.

“Hey, Doris,” I yelled above the roar to catch my friend’s attention, “don’t be late to give me my break. I can’t stand this junk caked on my face for more than two hours at a time. Besides that, my glasses get so messed up I can’t see a thing. And please don’t fool around and goof up my count while I’m gone.”

A race was developing between the older, more experienced cutter girls and the new ones. I was a new one wanting to unseat the veterans.

Another day began. The large chute from above sent corn spraying into my bin. Corn was crashing down on top of me spitting its sticky juice on my face, neck, arms, and hands. My rubber gloved hands worked feverishly pulling ears toward me to be placed on a rotating conveyor leading into a little white box filled with blades sharpened to shave the cobs clean.

“Hey, kid, get your mits out of that blade!” The fore-

man was yelling at me from the catwalk overhead. "How many times do I have to tell you young punks not to try to fix your own machines!"

Fine chance I had to keep up my quota if I had to wait all day for one of those guys with the sticks to come and poke out a little piece of cob I could shove out in a minute.

Time was dragging on. After making several attempts to communicate over the roar with the girl across from me we both decided to save our voices and drifted into the corn-cutter's trance.

Without warning the machines came to a grinding halt. Mabel, the middle-aged wonder across from me gave out with her usual line when something slowed her down. "What the hell do these bastards think they're doin'? Just get a good start, then somebody shuts the damn machines off!"

Startling shrieks shattered the calm. People were crowding around one of the husker machines up on the ledge at my far right. "Somebody get the nurse quick! The doctor! The ambulance! Don't just stand there for Christ's sake, she's bleedin' to death!"

Mauling, pushing, running, screaming — man, people can sure go crazy. Some guys even went out to try to find her hand in the pile of stinking husks. Their hopes of finding it whole shattered when rumors sifted down from the ladies on the inspection belt about finding bits of red speckling the yellow mass of kernels. . . . and they said she had been studying to be a nurse.

Another day, another dollar. As the machines were started again I felt dizzy and nauseated. God, I'm glad it wasn't me. The words echoed in my ears, "How many times do I have to tell you young punks to keep your mits out of the machines!"