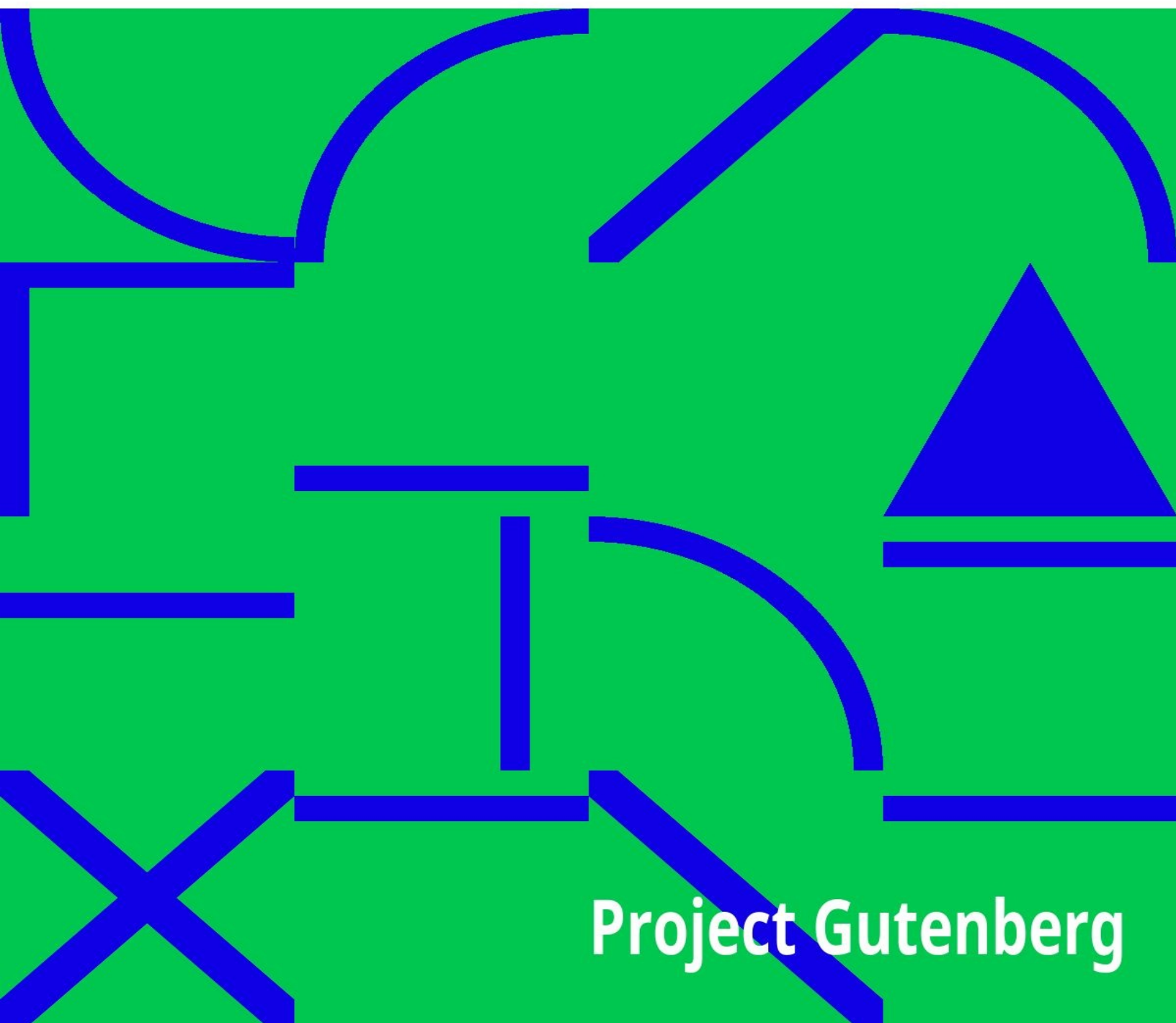


Junior Achievement

William M. Lee



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT ***

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***Fallout is, of course, always disastrous—
one way or another***

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT

BY WILLIAM LEE

ILLUSTRATED BY SCHOENHERR

"What would you think," I asked Marjorie over supper, "if I should undertake to lead a junior achievement group this summer?"

She pondered it while she went to the kitchen to bring in the dessert. It was dried apricot pie, and very tasty, I might add.

"Why, Donald," she said, "it could be quite interesting, if I understand what a junior achievement group is. What gave you the idea?"

"It wasn't my idea, really," I admitted. "Mr. McCormack called me to the office today, and told me that some of the children in the lower grades wanted to start one. They need adult guidance of course, and one of the group suggested my name."

I should explain, perhaps, that I teach a course in general science in our Ridgeville Junior High School, and another in general physics in the Senior High School. It's a privilege which I'm sure many educators must envy, teaching in Ridgeville, for our new school is a fine one, and our academic standards are high. On the other hand, the fathers of most of my students work for the Commission and a constant awareness of the Commission and its work pervades the town. It is an uneasy privilege then, at least sometimes, to teach my old-fashioned brand of science to these children of a new age.

"That's very nice," said Marjorie. "What does a junior achievement group do?"

"It has the purpose," I told her, "of teaching the members something about commerce and industry. They manufacture simple compositions like polishing waxes and sell them from door-to-door. Some groups have built up tidy little bank accounts which are available for later educational expenses."

"Gracious, you wouldn't have to sell from door-to-door, would you?"

"Of course not. I'd just tell the kids how to do it."

Marjorie put back her head and laughed, and I was forced to join her, for we both recognize that my understanding and "feel" for commercial matters—if I may use that expression—is almost nonexistent.

"Oh, all right," I said, "laugh at my commercial aspirations. But don't worry about it, really. Mr. McCormack said we could get Mr. Wells from Commercial Department to help out if he was needed. There is one problem, though. Mr. McCormack is going to put up fifty dollars to buy any raw materials wanted and he rather suggested that I might advance another fifty. The question is, could we do it?"

Marjorie did mental arithmetic. "Yes," she said, "yes, if it's something you'd like to do."

We've had to watch such things rather closely for the last ten—no, eleven years. Back in the old Ridgeville, fifty-odd miles to the south, we had our home almost paid for, when the accident occurred. It was in the path of the heaviest fallout, and we couldn't have kept on living there even if the town had stayed. When Ridgeville moved to its present site, so, of course, did we, which meant starting mortgage payments all over again.

Thus it was that on a Wednesday morning about three weeks later, I was sitting at one end of a plank picnic table with five boys and girls lined up along the sides. This was to be our headquarters and factory for the summer—a roomy unused barn belonging to the parents of one of the group members, Tommy Miller.

"O.K.," I said, "let's relax. You don't need to treat me as a teacher, you know. I stopped being a school teacher when the final grades went in last Friday. I'm on vacation now. My job here is only to advise, and I'm going to do that as little as possible. You're going to decide what to do, and if it's safe and legal and possible to do with the starting capital we have, I'll go along with it and help in any way I can. This is your meeting."

Mr. McCormack had told me, and in some detail, about the youngsters I'd be dealing with. The three who were sitting to my left were the ones who had proposed the group in the first place.

Doris Enright was a grave young lady of ten years, who might, I thought, be quite a beauty in a few more years, but was at the moment rather angular—all shoulders and elbows. Peter Cope, Jr. and Hilary Matlack were skinny kids, too. The three were of an age and were all tall for ten-year-olds.

I had the impression during that first meeting that they looked rather alike, but this wasn't so. Their features were quite different. Perhaps from association, for they were close friends, they had just come to have a certain similarity of restrained gesture and of modulated voice. And they were all tanned by sun and wind to a degree that made their eyes seem light and their teeth startlingly white.

The two on my right were cast in a different mold. Mary McCready was a big husky redhead of twelve, with a face full of freckles and an infectious laugh, and Tommy Miller, a few months younger, was just an average, extroverted, well adjusted youngster, noisy and restless, tee-shirted and butch-barbered.

The group exchanged looks to see who would lead off, and Peter Cope seemed to be elected.

"Well, Mr. Henderson, a junior achievement group is a bunch of kids who get together to manufacture and sell things, and maybe make some money."

"Is that what you want to do," I asked, "make money?"

"Why not?" Tommy asked. "There's something wrong with making money?"

"Well, sure, I suppose we want to," said Hilary. "We'll need some money to do the things we want to do later."

"And what sort of things would you like to make and sell?" I asked.

The usual products, of course, with these junior achievement efforts, are chemical specialties that can be made safely and that people will buy and use without misgivings—solvent to free up rusty bolts, cleaner to remove road tar, mechanic's hand soap—that sort of thing. Mr. McCormack had told me, though, that I might find these youngsters a bit more ambitious. "The Miller boy and Mary McCready," he had said, "have exceptionally high IQ's—around one forty or one fifty. The other three are hard to classify. They have some of the attributes of exceptional pupils, but much of the time they seem to have little interest in their studies. The junior achievement idea has sparked their imaginations. Maybe it'll be just what they need."

Mary said, "Why don't we make a freckle remover? I'd be our first customer."

"The thing to do," Tommy offered, "is to figure out what people in Ridgeville want to buy, then sell it to them."

"I'd like to make something by powder metallurgy techniques," said Pete. He fixed me with a challenging eye. "You should be able to make ball bearings by molding, then densify them by electroplating."

"And all we'd need is a hydraulic press," I told him, "which, on a guess, might cost ten thousand dollars. Let's think of something easier."

Pete mulled it over and nodded reluctantly. "Then maybe something in the electronics field. A hi-fi sub-assembly of some kind."

"How about a new detergent?" Hilary put in.

"Like the liquid dishwashing detergents?" I asked.

He was scornful. "No, they're formulations—you know, mixtures. That's cookbook chemistry. I mean a brand new synthetic detergent. I've got an idea for one that ought to be good even in the hard water we've got around here."

"Well, now," I said, "organic synthesis sounds like another operation calling for capital investment. If we should keep the achievement group going for several summers, it might be possible later on to carry out a safe synthesis of some sort. You're Dr. Matlack's son, aren't you? Been dipping into your father's library?"

"Some," said Hilary, "and I've got a home laboratory."

"How about you, Doris?" I prompted. "Do you have a special field of interest?"

"No." She shook her head in mock despondency. "I'm not very technical. Just sort of miscellaneous. But if the group wanted to raise some mice, I'd be willing to turn over a project I've had going at home."

"You could sell mice?" Tommy demanded incredulously.

"Mice," I echoed, then sat back and thought about it. "Are they a pure strain? One of the recognized laboratory strains? Healthy mice of the right strain," I explained to Tommy, "might be sold to laboratories. I have an idea the Commission buys a supply every month."

"No," said Doris, "these aren't laboratory mice. They're fancy ones. I got the first four pairs from a pet shop in Denver, but they're red—sort of chipmunk color, you know. I've carried them through seventeen generations of careful selection."

"Well, now," I admitted, "the market for red mice might be rather limited. Why don't you consider making an after-shave lotion? Denatured alcohol, glycerine, water, a little color and perfume. You could buy some bottles and have some labels printed. You'd be in business before you knew it."

There was a pause, then Tommy inquired, "How do you sell it?"

"Door-to-door."

He made a face. "Never build up any volume. Unless it did something extra. You say we'd put color in it. How about enough color to leave your face looking tanned. Men won't use cosmetics and junk, but if they didn't have to admit it, they might like the shave lotion."

Hilary had been deep in thought. He said suddenly, "Gosh, I think I know how to make a—what do you want to call it—a before-shave lotion."

"What would that be?" I asked.

"You'd use it before you shaved."

"I suppose there might be people who'd prefer to use it beforehand," I conceded.

"There will be people," he said darkly, and subsided.

Mrs. Miller came out to the barn after a while, bringing a bucket of soft drinks and ice, a couple of loaves of bread and ingredients for a variety of sandwiches. The parents had agreed to underwrite lunches at the barn and Betty Miller philosophically assumed the role of commissary officer. She paused only to say hello and to ask how we were progressing with our organization meeting.

I'd forgotten all about organization, and that, according to all the articles I had perused, is most important to such groups. It's standard practice for every member of the group to be a company officer. Of course a young boy who doesn't know any better, may wind up a sales manager.

Over the sandwiches, then, I suggested nominating company officers, but they seemed not to be interested. Peter Cope waved it off by remarking that they'd each do what came naturally. On the other hand, they pondered at some length

about a name for the organization, without reaching any conclusions, so we returned to the problem of what to make.

It was Mary, finally, who advanced the thought of kites. At first there was little enthusiasm, then Peter said, "You know, we could work up something new. Has anybody ever seen a kite made like a wind sock?"

Nobody had. Pete drew figures in the air with his hands. "How about the hole at the small end?"

"I'll make one tonight," said Doris, "and think about the small end. It'll work out all right."

I wished that the youngsters weren't starting out by inventing a new article to manufacture, and risking an almost certain disappointment, but to hold my guidance to the minimum, I said nothing, knowing that later I could help them redesign it along standard lines.

At supper I reviewed the day's happenings with Marjorie and tried to recall all of the ideas which had been propounded. Most of them were impractical, of course, for a group of children to attempt, but several of them appeared quite attractive.

Tommy, for example, wanted to put tooth powder into tablets that one would chew before brushing the teeth. He thought there should be two colors in the same bottle—orange for morning and blue for night, the blue ones designed to leave the mouth alkaline at bed time.

Pete wanted to make a combination nail and wood screw. You'd drive it in with a hammer up to the threaded part, then send it home with a few turns of a screwdriver.

Hilary, reluctantly forsaking his ideas on detergents, suggested we make black plastic discs, like poker chips but thinner and as cheap as possible, to scatter on a snowy sidewalk where they would pick up extra heat from the sun and melt the snow more rapidly. Afterward one would sweep up and collect the discs.

Doris added to this that if you could make the discs light enough to float, they might be colored white and spread on the surface of a reservoir to reduce evaporation.

These latter ideas had made unknowing use of some basic physics, and I'm afraid I relapsed for a few minutes into the role of teacher and told them a little bit about the laws of radiation and absorption of heat.

"My," said Marjorie, "they're really smart boys and girls. Tommy Miller does sound like a born salesman. Somehow I don't think you're going to have to call in Mr. Wells."

I do feel just a little embarrassed about the kite, even now. The fact that it flew surprised me. That it flew so confoundedly well was humiliating. Four of them were at the barn when I arrived next morning; or rather on the rise of ground just beyond it, and the kite hung motionless and almost out of sight in the pale sky. I stood and watched for a moment, then they saw me.

"Hello, Mr. Henderson," Mary said, and proffered the cord which was wound on a fishing reel. I played the kite up and down for a few minutes, then reeled it in. It was, almost exactly, a wind sock, but the hole at the small end was shaped—by wire—into the general form of a kidney bean. It was beautifully made, and had a sort of professional look about it.

"It flies too well," Mary told Doris. "A kite ought to get caught in a tree sometimes."

"You're right," Doris agreed. "Let's see it." She gave the wire at the small end the slightest of twists. "There, it ought to swoop."

Sure enough, in the moderate breeze of that morning, the kite swooped and yawed to Mary's entire satisfaction. As we trailed back to the barn I asked Doris, "How did you know that flattening the lower edge of the hole would create instability?" She looked doubtful.

"Why it would have to, wouldn't it? It changed the pattern of air pressures." She glanced at me quickly. "Of course, I tried a lot of different shapes while I was making it."

"Naturally," I said, and let it go at that. "Where's Tommy?"

"He stopped off at the bank," Pete Cope told me, "to borrow some money. We'll want to buy materials to make some of these kites."

"But I said yesterday that Mr. McCormack and I were going to advance some cash to get started."

"Oh, sure, but don't you think it would be better to borrow from a bank? More businesslike?"

"Doubtless," I said, "but banks generally want some security." I would have gone on and explained matters further, except that Tommy walked in and handed me a pocket check book.

"I got two hundred and fifty," he volunteered—not without a hint of complacency in his voice. "It didn't take long, but they sure made it out a big deal. Half the guys in the bank had to be called in to listen to the proposition. The account's in your name, Mr. Henderson, and you'll have to make out the checks. And they want you to stop in at the bank and give them a specimen signature. Oh, yes, and cosign the note."

My heart sank. I'd never had any dealings with banks except in the matter of mortgages, and bank people make me most uneasy. To say nothing of finding myself responsible for a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar note—over two weeks salary. I made a mental vow to sign very few checks.

"So then I stopped by at Apex Stationers," Tommy went on, "and ordered some paper and envelopes. We hadn't picked a name yesterday, but I figured what's to lose, and picked one. Ridge Industries, how's that?" Everybody nodded.

"Just three lines on the letterhead," he explained. "Ridge Industries—Ridgeville—Montana."

I got my voice back and said, "Engraved, I trust."

"Well, sure," he replied. "You can't afford to look chintzy."

My appetite was not at its best that evening, and Marjorie recognized that something was concerning me, but she asked no questions, and I only told her about the success of the kite, and the youngsters embarking on a shopping trip for paper, glue and wood splints. There was no use in both of us worrying.

On Friday we all got down to work, and presently had a regular production line under way; stapling the wood splints, then wetting them with a resin solution and shaping them over a mandrel to stiffen, cutting the plastic film around a pattern, assembling and hanging the finished kites from an overhead beam until the cement had set. Pete Cope had located a big roll of red plastic film from somewhere, and it made a wonderful-looking kite. Happily, I didn't know what

the film cost until the first kites were sold.

By Wednesday of the following week we had almost three hundred kites finished and packed into flat cardboard boxes, and frankly I didn't care if I never saw another. Tommy, who by mutual consent, was our authority on sales, didn't want to sell any until we had, as he put it, enough to meet the demand, but this quantity seemed to satisfy him. He said he would sell them the next week and Mary McCready, with a fine burst of confidence, asked him in all seriousness to be sure to hold out a dozen.

Three other things occurred that day, two of which I knew about immediately. Mary brought a portable typewriter from home and spent part of the afternoon banging away at what seemed to me, since I use two fingers only, a very creditable speed.

And Hilary brought in a bottle of his new detergent. It was a syrupy yellow liquid with a nice collar of suds. He'd been busy in his home laboratory after all, it seemed.

"What is it?" I asked. "You never told us."

Hilary grinned. "Lauryl benzyl phosphonic acid, dipotassium salt, in 20% solution."

"Goodness." I protested, "it's been twenty-five years since my last course in chemistry. Perhaps if I saw the formula—."

He gave me a singularly adult smile and jotted down a scrawl of symbols and lines. It meant little to me.

"Is it good?"

For answer he seized the ice bucket, now empty of its soda bottles, trickled in a few drops from the bottle and swished the contents. Foam mounted to the rim and spilled over. "And that's our best grade of Ridgeville water," he pointed out. "Hardest in the country."

The third event of Wednesday came to my ears on Thursday morning.

I was a little late arriving at the barn, and was taken a bit aback to find the roadway leading to it rather full of parked automobiles, and the barn itself rather full of people, including two policemen. Our Ridgeville police are quite young

men, but in uniform they still look ominous and I was relieved to see that they were laughing and evidently enjoying themselves.

"Well, now," I demanded, in my best classroom voice. "What is all this?"

"Are you Henderson?" the larger policeman asked.

"I am indeed," I said, and a flash bulb went off. A young lady grasped my arm.

"Oh, please, Mr. Henderson, come outside where it's quieter and tell me all about it."

"Perhaps," I countered, "somebody should tell me."

"You mean you don't know, honestly? Oh, it's fabulous. Best story I've had for ages. It'll make the city papers." She led me around the corner of the barn to a spot of comparative quiet.

"You didn't know that one of your junior whatsisnames poured detergent in the Memorial Fountain basin last night?"

I shook my head numbly.

"It was priceless. Just before rush hour. Suds built up in the basin and overflowed, and down the library steps and covered the whole street. And the funniest part was they kept right on coming. You couldn't imagine so much suds coming from that little pool of water. There was a three-block traffic jam and Harry got us some marvelous pictures—men rolling up their trousers to wade across the street. And this morning," she chortled, "somebody phoned in an anonymous tip to the police—of course it was the same boy that did it—Tommy—Miller?—and so here we are. And we just saw a demonstration of that fabulous kite and saw all those simply captivating mice."

"Mice?"

"Yes, of course. Who would ever have thought you could breed mice with those cute furry tails?"

Well, after a while things quieted down. They had to. The police left after sobering up long enough to give me a serious warning against letting such a thing happen again. Mr. Miller, who had come home to see what all the excitement was, went back to work and Mrs. Miller went back to the house and

the reporter and photographer drifted off to file their story, or whatever it is they do. Tommy was jubilant.

"Did you hear what she said? It'll make the city papers. I wish we had a thousand kites. Ten thousand. Oh boy, selling is fun. Hilary, when can you make some more of that stuff? And Doris, how many mice do you have?"

Those mice! I have always kept my enthusiasm for rodents within bounds, but I must admit they were charming little beasts, with tails as bushy as miniature squirrels.

"How many generations?" I asked Doris.

"Seventeen. No, eighteen, now. Want to see the genetic charts?"

I won't try to explain it as she did to me, but it was quite evident that the new mice were breeding true. Presently we asked Betty Miller to come back down to the barn for a conference. She listened and asked questions. At last she said, "Well, all right, if you promise me they can't get out of their cages. But heaven knows what you'll do when fall comes. They won't live in an unheated barn and you can't bring them into the house."

"We'll be out of the mouse business by then," Doris predicted. "Every pet shop in the country will have them and they'll be down to nothing apiece."

Doris was right, of course, in spite of our efforts to protect the market. Anyhow that ushered in our cage building phase, and for the next week—with a few interruptions—we built cages, hundreds of them, a good many for breeding, but mostly for shipping.

It was rather regrettable that, after the *Courier* gave us most of the third page, including photographs, we rarely had a day without a few visitors. Many of them wanted to buy mice or kites, but Tommy refused to sell any mice at retail and we soon had to disappoint those who wanted kites. The Supermarket took all we had—except a dozen—and at a dollar fifty each. Tommy's ideas of pricing rather frightened me, but he set the value of the mice at ten dollars a pair and got it without any arguments.

Our beautiful stationery arrived, and we had some invoice forms printed up in a hurry—not engraved, for a wonder.

It was on Tuesday—following the Thursday—that a lanky young man

disentangled himself from his car and strolled into the barn. I looked up from the floor where I was tacking squares of screening onto wooden frames.

"Hi," he said. "You're Donald Henderson, right? My name is McCord—Jeff McCord—and I work in the Patent Section at the Commission's downtown office. My boss sent me over here, but if he hadn't, I think I'd have come anyway. What are you doing to get patent protection on Ridge Industries' new developments?"

I got my back unkinked and dusted off my knees. "Well, now," I said, "I've been wondering whether something shouldn't be done, but I know very little about such matters—."

"Exactly," he broke in, "we guessed that might be the case, and there are three patent men in our office who'd like to chip in and contribute some time. Partly for the kicks and partly because we think you may have some things worth protecting. How about it? You worry about the filing and final fees. That's sixty bucks per brainstorm. We'll worry about everything else."

"What's to lose," Tommy interjected.

And so we acquired a patent attorney, several of them, in fact.

The day that our application on the kite design went to Washington, Mary wrote a dozen toy manufacturers scattered from New York to Los Angeles, sent a kite to each one and offered to license the design. Result, one licensee with a thousand dollar advance against next season's royalties.

It was a rainy morning about three weeks later that I arrived at the barn. Jeff McCord was there, and the whole team except Tommy. Jeff lowered his feet from the picnic table and said, "Hi."

"Hi yourself," I told him. "You look pleased."

"I am," he replied, "in a cautious legal sense, of course. Hilary and I were just going over the situation on his phosphonate detergent. I've spent the last three nights studying the patent literature and a few standard texts touching on phosphonates. There are a zillion patents on synthetic detergents and a good round fifty on phosphonates, but it looks"—he held up a long admonitory hand—"it just looks as though we had a clear spot. If we do get protection, you've got

a real salable property."

"That's fine, Mr. McCord," Hilary said, "but it's not very important."

"No?" Jeff tilted an inquiring eyebrow at me, and I handed him a small bottle. He opened and sniffed at it gingerly. "What gives?"

"Before-shave lotion," Hilary told him. "You've shaved this morning, but try some anyway."

Jeff looked momentarily dubious, then puddled some in his palm and moistened his jaw line. "Smells good," he noted, "and feels nice and cool. Now what?"

"Wipe your face." Jeff located a handkerchief and wiped, looked at the cloth, wiped again, and stared.

"What is it?"

"A whisker stiffener. It makes each hair brittle enough to break off right at the surface of your skin."

"So I perceive. What is it?"

"Oh, just a mixture of stuff. Cookbook chemistry. Cysteine thiolactone and a fat-soluble magnesium compound."

"I see. Just a mixture of stuff. And do your whiskers grow back the next day?"

"Right on schedule," I said.

McCord unfolded his length and stood staring out into the rain. Presently he said, "Henderson, Hilary and I are heading for my office. We can work there better than here, and if we're going to break the hearts of the razor industry, there's no better time to start than now."

When they had driven off I turned and said, "Let's talk a while. We can always clean mouse cages later. Where's Tommy?"

"Oh, he stopped at the bank to get a loan."

"What on earth for? We have over six thousand in the account."

"Well," Peter said, looking a little embarrassed, "we were planning to buy a hydraulic press. You see, Doris put some embroidery on that scheme of mine for

making ball bearings." He grabbed a sheet of paper. "Look, we make a roller bearing, this shape only it's a permanent magnet. Then you see—." And he was off.

"What did they do today, dear?" Marge asked as she refilled my coffee cup.

"Thanks," I said. "Let's see, it was a big day. We picked out a hydraulic press, Doris read us the first chapter of the book she's starting, and we found a place over a garage on Fourth Street that we can rent for winter quarters. Oh, yes, and Jeff is starting action to get the company incorporated."

"Winter quarters," Marge repeated. "You mean you're going to try to keep the group going after school starts?"

"Why not? The kids can sail through their courses without thinking about them, and actually they won't put in more than a few hours a week during the school year."

"Even so, it's child labor, isn't it?"

"Child labor nothing. They're the employers. Jeff McCord and I will be the only employees—just at first, anyway."

Marge choked on something. "Did you say you'd be an employee?"

"Sure," I told her. "They've offered me a small share of the company, and I'd be crazy to turn it down. After all, what's to lose?"

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