

The Magnificent Possession

Isaac Asimov

Walter Sills reflected now, as he had reflected often before, that life was hard and joyless. He surveyed his dingy chemical laboratory and grinned cynically—working in a dirty hole of a place, living on occasional ore analyses that barely paid for absolutely indispensable equipment, while others, not half his worth perhaps, were working for big industrial concerns and taking life easy.

He looked out the window at the Hudson River, ruddied in the flame of the dying sun, and wondered moodily whether these last experiments would finally bring him the fame and success he was after, or if they were merely some more false alarms.

The unlocked door creaked open a crack and the cheerful face of Eugene Taylor burst into view. Sills waved and Taylor's body followed his head and entered the laboratory.

"Hello, old soak," came the loud and carefree hail. "How go things?"

Sills shook his head at the other's exuberance. "I wish I had your foolish outlook on life, Gene. For your information, things are bad. I need money, and the more I need it, the less I have."

"Well, I haven't any money either, have I?" demanded Taylor. "But why worry about it? You're fifty, and worry hasn't got you anything except a bald head. I'm thirty, and I want to keep my beautiful brown hair."

The chemist grinned. "I'll get my money, yet, Gene. Just leave it to me."

"Your new ideas shaping out well?"

"Are they? I haven't told you much about it, have I? Well, come here and I'll show you what progress I've made."

Taylor followed Sills to a small table, on which stood a rack of test-tubes, in one of which was about half an inch of a shiny metallic substance.

"Sodium-mercury mixture, or sodium amalgam, as it is called," explained Sills, pointing to it.

He took a bottle labeled "Ammonium Chloride Sol." from the shelf and poured a little into the tube. Immediately the sodium amalgam began changing into a loosely-packed, spongy substance.

“That,” observed Sills, “is ammonium amalgam. The ammonium radical (NH_2) acts as a metal here and combines with mercury.” He waited for the action to go to completion and then poured off the supernatant liquid.

“Ammonium amalgam isn’t very stable,” he informed Taylor, “so I’ll have to work fast.” He grasped a flask of straw-colored, pleasant-smelling liquid and filled the test-tube with it. Upon shaking, the loosely-packed ammonium amalgam vanished and in its stead a small drop of metallic liquid rolled about the bottom.

Taylor gazed at the test-tube, open-mouthed. “What happened?”

“This liquid is a complex derivative of Hydrazine which I’ve discovered and named Ammonaline. I haven’t worked out its formula yet, but that doesn’t matter. The point about it is that it has the property of dissolving the ammonium out of the amalgam. Those few drops at the bottom are pure mercury; the ammonium is in solution.”

Taylor remained unresponsive and Sills waxed enthusiastic. “Don’t you see the implications? I’ve gone half way towards isolating pure ammonium, a thing which has never been done before! Once accomplished it means fame, success, the Nobel Prize, and who knows what else.”

“Wow!” Taylor’s gaze became more respectful. “That yellow stuff doesn’t look so important to me.” He snatched for it, but Sills withheld it.

“I haven’t finished by any means, Gene. I’ve got to get it in its free metallic state, and I can’t do that so far. Every time I try to evaporate the Ammonaline, the ammonium breaks down to everlasting ammonia and hydrogen.... But I’ll get it—I’ll get it!”

Two weeks later, the epilogue to the previous scene was enacted. Taylor received a hurried and emphatic call from his chemist friend and appeared at the laboratory in a flurry of anticipation.

“You’ve got it?”

“I’ve got it—and it’s bigger than I thought! There’s millions in it, really,” Sills’ eyes shone with rapture.

“I’ve been working from the wrong angle up to now,” he explained. “Heating the solvent always broke down the dissolved ammonium, so I separated it out by freezing. It works the

same way as brine, which, when frozen slowly, freezes into fresh ice, the salt crystallizing out. Luckily, the Ammonaline freezes at 18 degrees Centigrade and doesn't require much cooling."

He pointed dramatically to a small beaker, inside a glass-walled case. The beaker contained pale, straw-colored, needle-like crystals and covering the top of this, a thin layer of a dullish, yellow substance.

"Why the case?" asked Taylor.

"I've got it filled with argon to keep the ammonium (which is the yellow substance on top of the Ammonaline) pure. It is so active that it will react with anything else but a helium-type gas."

Taylor marveled and pounded his complacently-smiling friend on the back.

"Wait, Gene, the best is yet to come."

Taylor was led to the other end of the room and Sills' trembling finger pointed out another airtight case containing a lump of metal of a gleaming yellow that sparkled and glistened.

"That, my friend, is ammonium oxide (NH_4O), formed by passing *absolutely dry* air over free ammonium metal. It is perfectly inert (the sealed case contains quite a bit of chlorine, for instance, and yet there is no reaction). It can be made as cheaply as aluminum, if not more so, and yet it looks more like gold than gold does itself. Do you see the possibilities?"

"Do I?" exploded Taylor. "It will sweep the country. You can have ammonium jewelry, and ammonium-plated table-ware, and a million other things. Then again, who knows how many countless industrial applications it may have? You're rich, Walt—you're rich!"

"*We're* rich," corrected Sills gently. He moved towards the telephone. "The newspapers are going to hear of this. I'm going to begin to cash in on fame right now."

Taylor frowned, "Maybe you'd better keep it a secret, Walt."

"Oh, I'm not breathing a hint as to the process. I'll just give them the general idea. Besides, we're safe; the patent application is in Washington right now."

But Sills was wrong! The article in the paper ushered in a very, very hectic two days for the two of them.

J. Throgmorton Bankhead is what is commonly known as a “captain of industry.” As head of the Acme Chromium and Silver Plating Corporation, he no doubt deserved the title; but to his patient and long-suffering wife, he was merely a dyspeptic and grouchy husband, especially at the breakfast table ... and he was at the breakfast table now.

Rustling his morning paper angrily, he sputtered between bites of buttered toast, “This man is ruining the country.” He pointed aghast at big, black headlines. “I said before and I’ll say again that the man is as crazy as a bedbug. He won’t be satisfied....”

“Joseph, please,” pleaded his wife, “you’re getting purple in the face. Remember your high blood pressure. You know the doctor told you to stop reading the news from Washington if it annoys you so. Now, listen dear, about the cook. She’s....”

“The doctor’s a damn fool, and so are you,” shouted J. Throgmorton Bankhead. “I’ll read all the news I please and get purple in the face too, if I want to.”

He raised the cup of coffee to his mouth and took a critical sip. While he did so, his eyes fell upon a more insignificant headline towards the bottom of the page: “Savant Discovers Gold Substitute.”

The coffee cup remained in the air while he scanned the article quickly. “This new metal,” it ran in part, “is claimed by its discoverer to be far superior to chromium, nickel, or silver for plating purposes, besides being ideal material for cheap and beautiful jewelry. ‘The twenty-dollar-a-week clerk,’ said Professor Sills, ‘will eat off ammonium plate more impressive in appearance than the gold plate of the Indian Nabob.’ There is no....”

But J. Throgmorton Bankhead had stopped reading. Visions of a ruined Acme Chromium and Silver Plating Corporation danced before his eyes; and as they danced, the cup of coffee dropped from his hand, and splashed hot liquid over his trousers.

His wife rose to her feet in alarm, “What is it, Joseph; what is it?”

“Nothing,” Bankhead shouted. “Nothing. For God’s sake, go away, will you?”

He strode angrily out of the room, leaving his wife to search the paper in vain for anything that could have disturbed him.

“Bob’s Tavern” on Fifteenth Street is usually pretty well filled at all times, but on the morning we are speaking of, it was empty except for four or five rather poorly-dressed men,

who clustered about the portly and dignified form of Peter Q. Hornswoggle, eminent ex-Congressman.

Peter Q. Hornswoggle was, as usual, speaking fluently. His subject, again, as usual, concerned the life of a Congressman.

"I remember a case in point," he was saying, "when that same argument was brought up in the house, and which I answered as follows: 'The eminent gentleman from Nevada in his statements overlooks one very important aspect of the problem. He does not realize that it is to the interest of the entire nation that the apple-parers of this country be attended to promptly; for, gentlemen, on the welfare of the apple-parers depends the future of the entire fruit industry and on the fruit-industry is based the entire economy of this great and glorious nation, the United States of America.'"

Hornswoggle paused, swallowed half a pint of beer at once, and then smiled in triumph, "I have no hesitation in saying, gentlemen, that at that statement, the entire House burst into wild and tumultuous applause."

One of the assembled listeners shook his head slowly and marveled. "It must be great to be able to spiel like that, Senator. You musta been a sensation."

"Yeah," agreed the bartender, "it's a dirty shame you were beat last election."

The ex-Congressman winced and in a very dignified tone began, "I have been reliably informed that the use of bribery in that campaign reached unprecedented prop...." His voice died away suddenly as he caught sight of a certain article in the newspaper of one of his listeners. He snatched at it and read it through in silence and thereupon his eyes gleamed with a sudden idea.

"My friends," he said turning to them again, "I find I must leave you. There is pressing work that must be done immediately at City Hall." He leant over to whisper to the barkeeper, "You haven't got twenty-five cents, have you? I find I left my wallet in the Mayor's office by mistake. I will surely repay you tomorrow."

Clutching the quarter, reluctantly given, Peter Q. Hornswoggle left.

In a small and dimly lit room somewhere in the lower reaches of First Avenue, Michael Maguire, known to the police by the far more euphonious name of Mike the Slug, cleaned his trusty revolver and hummed a tuneless song. The door opened a crack and Mike looked up.

“That you, Slappy?”

“Yeh,” a short, wizened person sidled in, “I brung ya de evenin’ sheet. De cops are still tinkin’ Bragoni pulled de job.”

“Yeh? That’s good.” He bent unconcernedly over the revolver. “Anything else doing?”

“Naw! Some dippy dame killed herself, but dat’s all.”

He tossed the newspaper to Mike and left. Mike leaned back and flipped the pages in a bored manner.

A headline attracted his eye and he read the short article that followed. Having finished, he threw aside the paper, lit a cigarette, and did some heavy thinking. Then he opened the door.

“Hey, Slappy, c’mere. There’s a job that’s got to be done.”

A NIGHT OF TROUBLE

Walter Sills was happy, deliriously so. He walked about his laboratory king of all he surveyed, strutting like a peacock, basking in his new-found glory. Eugene Taylor sat and watched him, scarcely less happy himself.

“How does it feel to be famous?” Taylor wanted to know.

“Like a million dollars; and that’s what I’m going to sell the secret of ammonium metal for. It’s the fat of the land for me from now on.”

“You leave the practical details to me, Walt. I’m getting in touch with Staples of Eagle Steel today. You’ll get a decent price from him.”

The bell rang, and Sills jumped. He ran to open the door.

“Is this the home of Walter Sills?” The large, scowling visitor gazed about him superciliously.

“Yes, I’m Sills. Do you wish to see me?”

“Yes. My name is J. Throgmorton Bankhead and I represent the Acme Chromium and Silver Plating Corporation. I would like to have a moment’s discussion with you.”

“Come right in. Come right in! This is Eugene Taylor, my associate. You may speak freely before him.”

“Very well,” Bankhead seated himself heavily. “I suppose you surmise the reason for my visit.”

“I take it that you have read of the new ammonium metal in the papers.”

“That’s right. I have come to see whether there is any truth in the story and to buy your process if there is.”

“You can see for yourself, sir,” Sills led the magnate to where the argon-filled container of the few grams of pure ammonium were. “That is the metal. Over here to the right, I’ve got the oxide, an oxide which is more metallic than the metal itself, strangely enough. It is the oxide that is what the papers call ‘substitute gold’.”

Bankhead’s face showed not an atom of the sinking feeling within him as he viewed the oxide with dismay. “Take it out in the open,” he said, “and let’s see it.”

Sills shook his head. “I can’t, Mr. Bankhead. Those are the first samples of ammonium and ammonium oxide that ever existed. They’re museum pieces. I can easily make more for you, if you wish.”

“You’ll have to, if you expect me to sink my money in it. You satisfy me and I’ll be willing to buy your patent for as much as—oh, say a thousand dollars.”

“A thousand dollars!” exclaimed Sills and Taylor together.

“A very fair price, gentlemen.”

“A million would be more like it,” shouted Taylor in an outraged tone. “This discovery is a goldmine.”

“A million, indeed! You are dreaming, gentlemen. The fact of the matter is that my company has been on the track of ammonium for years now, and we are just at the point of solving the problem. Unfortunately you beat us by a week or so, and so I wish to buy up your patent in order to save my company a great deal of annoyance. You realize, of course, that if you

refuse my price, I could just go ahead and manufacture the metal, using my own process.”

“We’ll sue if you do,” said Taylor.

“Have you got the money for a long, protracted—and expensive—lawsuit?” Bankhead smiled nastily. “I have, you know. To prove, however, that I am not unreasonable, I will make the price two thousand.”

“You’ve heard our price,” answered Taylor stonily, “and we have nothing further to say.”

“All right, gentlemen,” Bankhead walked towards the door, “think it over. You’ll see it my way, I’m sure.”

He opened the door and revealed the symmetrical form of Peter Q. Hornswoggle bent in rapt concentration at the keyhole. Bankhead sneered audibly and the ex-Congressman jumped to his feet in consternation, bowing rapidly two or three times, for want of anything better to do.

The financier passed by disdainfully and Hornswoggle entered, slammed the door behind him, and faced the two bewildered friends.

“That man, my dear sirs, is a malefactor of great wealth, an economic royalist. He is the type of predatory interest that is the ruination of this country. You did quite right in refusing his offer.” He placed his hand on his ample chest and smiled at them benignantly.

“Who the devil are you?” rasped Taylor, suddenly recovering from his initial surprise.

“I?” Hornswoggle was taken aback. “Why—er—I am Peter Quintus Hornswoggle. Surely, you know me. I was in the House of Representatives last year.”

“Never heard of you. What do you want?”

“Why, bless me! I read in the papers of your wonderful discovery and have come to place my services at your feet.”

“What services?”

“Well, after all, you two are not men of the world. With your new invention, you are prey for every self-seeking unscrupulous person that comes along—like Bankhead, for instance. Now, a practical man of affairs, such as I, one with experience of the world, would be of inestimable use to you. I could handle your affairs, attend to details, see that—”

“All for nothing, of course, eh?” Taylor asked, sardonically.

Hornswoggle coughed convulsively. “Well, naturally, I thought that a small interest in your discovery might fittingly be assigned to me.”

Sills, who had remained silent during all this, rose to his feet suddenly. “Get out of here! Did you hear me? Get out, before I call the police.”

“Now, Professor Sills, pray don’t get excited,” Hornswoggle retreated uneasily towards the door which Taylor held open for him. He passed out still protesting, and swore softly to himself when the door slammed in his face.

Sills sank wearily into the nearest chair. “What are we to do, Gene? He offers only two thousand. A week ago that would have been beyond anything I could have hoped for, but now—”

“Forget it. The fellow was only bluffing. Listen, I’m going right now to call on Staples. We’ll sell to him for what we can get (it ought to be plenty) and then if there’s any trouble with Bankhead—well, that’s Staples’ worry.” He patted the other on the shoulder. “Our troubles are practically over.”

Unfortunately, however, Taylor was wrong; their troubles were only beginning.

Across the street, a furtive figure, with beady eyes peering from upturned coat collar, surveyed the house carefully. A curious policeman might have identified him as “Slappy” Egan, if he had bothered to look, but no one did and “Slappy” remained unmolested.

“Cripes,” he muttered to himself, “dis is gonna be a cinch. De whole woiks on the bottom floor, back window can be jimmied wid a toot’pick, no alarms, no nuttin.” He chuckled and walked away.

Nor was “Slappy” alone with his ideas. Peter Q. Hornswoggle, as he walked away, found strange thoughts wandering through his massive cranium—thoughts which involved a certain amount of unorthodox action.

And J. Throgmorton Bankhead was likewise active. Belonging to that virile class known as “go-getters” and being not at all scrupulous as to how he “go-got,” and certainly not intending to pay a million dollars for the secret of ammonium, he found it necessary to call on a certain one of his acquaintances.

This acquaintance, while a very useful one, was a bit unsavory, and Bankhead found it advisable to be very careful and cautious while visiting him. However, the conversation that ensued ended in a pleasing manner for both of them.

Walter Sills snapped out of an uneasy sleep with startled suddenness. He listened anxiously for a while and then leaned over and nudged Taylor. He was rewarded by a few incoherent snuffles.

“Gene, Gene, wake up! Come on, get up!”

“Eh? What is it? What are you bothering—”

“Shut up! Listen, do you hear it?”

“I don’t hear anything. Leave me alone, will you?”

Sills put his finger on his lips, and the other quieted. There was a distinct shuffling noise down below, in the laboratory.

Taylor’s eyes widened and sleep left them entirely. “Burglars!” he whispered.

The two crept out of bed, donned bathrobe and slippers, and tiptoed to the door. Taylor had a revolver and took the lead in descending the stairs.

They had traversed perhaps half the flight, when there was a sudden, surprised shout from below, followed by a series of loud, threshing noises. This continued for a few moments and then there was a loud crash of glassware.

“My ammonium!” cried Sills in a stricken voice and rushed headlong down the stairs, evading Taylor’s clutching arms.

The chemist burst into the laboratory, followed closely by his cursing associate, and clicked the lights on. Two struggling figures blinked owlshly in the sudden illumination, and separated.

Taylor’s gun covered them. “Well, isn’t this nice,” he said.

One of the two lurched to his feet from amid a tangle of broken beakers and flasks, and, nursing a cut on his wrist, bent his portly body in a still dignified bow. It was Peter Q. Hornswoggle.

“No doubt,” he said, eyeing the unwavering firearm nervously, “the circumstances seem suspicious, but I can explain very easily. You see, in spite of the very rough treatment I received after having made my reasonable proposal, I still felt a great deal of kindly interest in you two.

“Therefore, being a man of the world, and knowing the iniquities of mankind, I just decided to keep an eye on your house tonight, for I saw you had neglected to take precautions against house-breakers. Judge my surprise to see this dastardly creature,” he pointed to the flat-nosed, plug-ugly, who still remained on the floor in a daze, “creeping in at the back window.

“Immediately, I risked life and limb in following the criminal, attempting desperately to save your great discovery. I really feel I deserve great credit for what I have done. I’m sure you will feel that I am a valuable person to deal with and reconsider your answers to my earlier proposals.”

Taylor listened to all this with a cynical smile. “You can certainly lie fluently, can’t you, P. Q.?”

He would have continued at greater length and with greater forcefulness had not the other burglar suddenly raised his voice in loud protest. “Cripes, boss, dis fat slob here is only tryin’ to get me in bad. I’m just followin’ orders, boss. A fellow hired me to come in here and rifle the safe and I’m just oinin’ a bit o’ honest money. Just plain safe-crackin’, boss, I ain’t out to hurt no one.

“Den, just as I was gettin’ down to de job—warmin’ up, so to say—in crawls dis little guy wid a chisel and blowtorch and makes for de safe. Well, natur’lly, I don’t like no competition, so I lays for him and then—”

But Hornswoggle had drawn himself up in icy hauteur. “It remains to be seen whether the word of a gangster is to be taken before the word of one, who, I may truthfully say, was, in his time, one of the most eminent members of the great—”

“Quiet, both of you,” shouted Taylor, waving the gun threateningly. “I’m calling the police and you can annoy *them* with your stories. Say, Walt, is everything all right?”

“I think so!” Sills returned from his inspection of the laboratory. “They only knocked over empty glassware. Everything else is unharmed.”

“That’s good,” Taylor began, and then choked in dismay.

From the hallway, a cool individual, hat drawn well over his eyes, entered. A revolver, expertly handled, changed the situation considerably.

“O. K.,” he grunted at Taylor, “drop the gat!” The other’s weapon slipped from reluctant fingers and hit the floor with a clank.

The new menace surveyed the four others with a sardonic glance. “Well! So there were two others trying to beat me to it. This seems to be a very popular place.”

Sills and Taylor stared stupidly, while Hornswoggle’s teeth chattered energetically. The first mobster moved back uneasily, muttering as he did so, “For Pete’s sake, it’s Mike the Slug.”

“Yeah,” Mike rasped, “Mike the Slug. There’s lots of guys who know me and who know I ain’t afraid to pull the trigger anytime I feel like. Come on, Baldy, hand over the works. You know—the stuff about your fake gold. Come on, before I count five.”

Sills moved slowly toward the old safe in the corner. Mike stepped back carelessly to give him room, and in so doing, his coat sleeve brushed against a shelf. A small vial of sodium sulphate solution tottered and fell.

With sudden inspiration, Sills yelled, “My God, watch out! It’s nitroglycerine!”

The vial hit the floor with the smashing tinkle of broken glass, and involuntarily, Mike yelled and jumped in wild dismay. And as he did so, Taylor crashed into him with a beautiful flying tackle. At the same time, Sills lunged for Taylor’s fallen weapon to cover the other two. For this, however, there was no longer need. At the very beginning of the confusion, both had faded hurriedly into the night from whence they came.

Taylor and Mike the Slug rolled round and round the laboratory floor, locked in desperate struggle while Sills hopped over and about them, praying for a moment of comparative quiet that he might bring the revolver into sharp and sudden contact with the gangster’s skull.

But no such moment came. Suddenly Mike lunged, caught Taylor stunningly under the chin, and jerked free. Sills yelled in consternation and pulled the trigger at the fleeing figure. The shot was wild and Mike escaped unharmed. Sills made no attempt to follow.

A sluicing stream of cold water brought Taylor back to his senses. He shook his head dazedly as he surveyed the surrounding shambles.

“Whew!” he said, “What a night!”

Sills groaned, “What are we going to do now, Gene? Our very lives are in danger. I never thought of the possibility of thieves, or I would never have told of the discovery to the newspapers.”

“Oh well, the harm’s done; no use weeping over it. Now listen, the first thing we have to do now is to get back to sleep. They won’t bother us again tonight. Tomorrow, you’ll go to the bank and put the papers outlining the details of the process in the vault (which you should have done long ago). Staples will be here at 3 p.m.; we’ll close the deal, and then, at last, we’ll live happily ever after.”

The chemist shook his head dolefully. “Ammonium has certainly proved to be very upsetting so far. I almost wish I had never heard of it. I’d almost rather be back doing ore analysis.”

AN UNEXPECTED SURPRISE!

As Walter Sills rattled cross-town towards his bank, he found no reason to change his wish. Even the comforting and homely jiggling of his ancient and battered automobile failed to cheer him. From a life characterized by peaceful monotony, he had entered a period of bedlam, and he was not at all satisfied with the change.

“Riches, like poverty, has its own peculiar problems,” he remarked sententiously to himself as he braked the car before the two-story, marble edifice that was the bank. He stepped out carefully, stretched his cramped legs, and headed for the revolving door.

He didn’t get there right away, though. Two husky specimens of the human race stepped up, one at each side, and Sills felt a very hard object pressing with painful intensity against his ribs. He opened his mouth involuntarily, and was rewarded by an icy voice in his ears, “Quiet, Baldy, or you’ll get what you deserve for the damn trick you pulled on me last night.”

Sills shivered and subsided. He recognized Mike the Slug’s voice very easily.

“Where’s the details?” asked Mike, “and make it quick.”

“Inside jacket pocket,” croaked Sills tremulously.

Mike’s companion passed his hand dexterously into the indicated pocket and flicked out

three or four folded sheets of foolscap.

“Dat it, Mike?”

A hasty appraisal and a nod, “Yeh, we got it. All right. Baldy, on your way!” A sudden shove and the two gangsters jumped into their car and drove away rapidly, while the chemist sprawled on the sidewalk. Kindly hands raised him up.

“It’s all right,” he managed to gasp. “I just tripped, that’s all. I’m not hurt.” He found himself alone again, passed into the bank, and dropped into the nearest bench, in near-collapse. There was no doubt about it; the new life was not for him.

But he should have been prepared for it. Taylor had foreseen a possibility of this sort of thing happening. He, himself, had thought a car had been trailing him. Yet, in his surprise and fright, he had almost ruined everything.

He shrugged his thin shoulders and, taking off his hat, abstracted a few folded sheets of paper from the sweatband. It was the work of five minutes to deposit them in a vault, and see the immensely strong steel door swing shut. He felt relieved.

“I wonder what they’ll do,” he muttered to himself on the way home, “when they try to follow the instructions on the paper they *did* get.” He pursed his lips and shook his head. “If they do, there’s going to be one heck of an explosion.”

Sills arrived home to find three policemen pacing leisurely up and down the sidewalk in front of the house.

“Police guard,” explained Taylor shortly, “so that we have no more trouble like last night.”

The chemist related the events at the bank and Taylor nodded grimly. “Well, it’s checkmate for them now. Staples will be here in two hours and until then, the police will take care of things. Afterwards,” he shrugged, “it will be Staples’ affair.”

“Listen, Gene,” the chemist put in suddenly, “I’m worried about the ammonium. I haven’t tested its plating abilities and those are the most important things, you know. What if Staples comes, and we find that all we have is pigeon milk.”

“Hmm,” Taylor stroked his chin, “you’re right there. But I’ll tell you what we can do. Before Staples comes, let’s plate something—a spoon, suppose—for our own satisfaction.”

“It’s really very annoying,” Sills complained fretfully. “If it weren’t for these troublesome hooligans, we wouldn’t have to proceed in this slipshod and unscientific manner.”

“Well, let’s eat dinner first.”

After the mid-day meal, they began. The apparatus was set up in feverish haste. In a cubic vat, a foot each way, a saturated solution of Ammonaline was poured. An old, battered spoon was the cathode and a mass of ammonium amalgam (separated from the rest of the solution by a perforated glass partition) was the anode. Three batteries in series provided the current.

Sills explained animatedly, “It works on the same principle as ordinary copper plating. The ammonium ion, once the electric current is run through, is attracted to the cathode, which is the spoon. Ordinarily it would break up, being unstable, but this is not the case when it is dissolved in Ammonaline. This Ammonaline is itself very slightly ionized and oxygen is given off at the anode.

“This much I know from theory. Let us see what happens in practice.”

He closed the key while Taylor watched with breathless interest. For a moment, no effect was visible. Taylor looked disappointed.

Then Sills grasped his sleeve. “See!” he hissed. “Watch the anode!”

Sure enough, bubbles of gas were slowly forming upon the spongy ammonium amalgam. They shifted their attention to the spoon.

Gradually, they noticed a change. The metallic appearance became dulled, the silver color slowly losing its whiteness. A layer of distinct, if dull, yellow was being built up. For fifteen minutes, the current ran and then Sills broke the circuit with a contented sigh.

“It plates perfectly,” he said.

“Good! Take it out! Let’s see it!”

“What?” Sills was aghast. “Take it out! Why, that’s pure ammonium. If I were to expose it to ordinary air, the water vapor would dissolve it to NH_4OH in no time. We can’t do that.”

He dragged a rather bulky piece of apparatus to the table. “This,” he said, “is a compressed-air container. I run it through calcium chloride dryers and then bubble the perfectly dry oxygen (safely diluted with four times its own volume of nitrogen) directly into the solvent.”

He introduced the nozzle into the solution just beneath the spoon and turned on a slow stream of air. It worked like magic. With almost lightning speed, the yellow coating began to glitter and gleam, to shine with almost ethereal beauty.

The two men watched it with beating heart and panting breath. Sills shut the air off, and for a while they watched the wonderful spoon and said nothing.

Then Taylor whispered hoarsely, "Take it out. Let me feel it! My God!—it's beautiful!"

With reverent awe, Sills approached the spoon, grasped it with forceps, and withdrew it from the surrounding liquid.

What followed immediately after that can never be fully described. Later on, when excited newspaper reporters pressed them unmercifully, neither Taylor nor Sills had the least recollection of the happenings of the next few minutes.

What happened was that the moment the ammonium-plated spoon was exposed to open air, the most horrible odor ever conceived assailed their nostrils!—an odor that cannot be described, a terrible broth of Hell that plunged the room into sheer, horrible nightmare.

With one strangled gasp, Sills dropped the spoon. Both were coughing and retching, tearing wildly at their throats and mouths, yelling, weeping, sneezing!

Taylor pounced upon the spoon and looked about wildly. The odor grew steadily more powerful and their wild exertions to escape it had already succeeded in wrecking the laboratory and had upset the vat of Ammonalene. There was only one thing to do, and Sills did it. The spoon went flying out the open window into the middle of Twelfth Avenue. It hit the sidewalk right at the feet of one of the policemen, but Taylor didn't care.

"Take off your clothes. We'll have to burn them," Sills was gasping. "Then spray something over the laboratory—anything with a strong smell. Burn sulphur. Get some liquid bromine."

Both were tearing at their clothes in distraction when they realized that someone had walked in through the unlocked door. The bell had rung, but neither had heard it. It was Staples, six-foot, lion-maned Steel King.

One step into the hall ruined his dignity utterly. He collapsed in one tearing sob and Twelfth Avenue was treated to the spectacle of an elderly, richly-dressed gentleman tearing uptown

as fast as his feet would carry him, shedding as much of his clothes as he dared while doing so.

The spoon continued its deadly work. The three policemen had long since retired in abject rout, and now to the numbed and tortured senses of the two innocent and suffering causes of the entire mess came a roaring and confused shouting from the street.

Men and women were pouring out of the neighboring houses, horses were bolting. Fire engines clanged down the street, only to be abandoned by their riders. Squadrons of police came—and left.

Sills and Taylor finally gave up, and clad only in trousers, ran pell-mell for the Hudson. They did not stop until they found themselves neck-deep in water, with blessed, pure air above them.

Taylor turned bewildered eyes to Sills. “But how could it emit that horrible odor? You said it was stable and stable solids have no odors. It takes vapor for that, doesn’t it?”

“Have you ever smelled musk?” groaned Sills. “It will give off an aroma for an indefinite period without losing any appreciable weight. We’ve come up against something like that.”

The two ruminated in silence for a while, wincing whenever the wind brought a vagrant waft of ammonium vapor to them, and then Taylor said in a low voice, “When they finally trace the trouble to the spoon, and find out who made it, I’m afraid we’ll be sued—or maybe thrown in jail.”

Sills’ face lengthened. “I wish I’d never seen the damned stuff! It’s brought nothing but trouble.” His tortured spirit gave way and he sobbed loudly.

Taylor patted him on the back mournfully. “It’s not as bad as all that, of course. The discovery will make you famous and you’ll be able to demand your own price, working at any industrial lab in the country. Then, too, you’re a cinch to win the Nobel Prize.”

“That’s right,” Sills smiled again, “and I may find a way to counteract the odor, too. I hope so.”

“I hope so, too,” said Taylor feelingly. “Let’s go back. I think they’ve managed to remove the spoon by now.”

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