

little wafer of wax. Scovill scraped it away and inserted the key. As they entered, Walling's face appeared at the skylight, and a minute or two later the gentleman himself dropped into the apartment.

"Well!" inquired the senior partner eagerly.

"No crooks around last night," Walling yawned. "I'll guarantee that. I haven't closed my eyes all night."

"No, we seem not to have been molested," Johnson agreed. "Everything is as you left it, isn't it, Scovill?"

"It seems to be—but—"

"But what?" cried both partners.

"Perhaps it is my imagination," said Scovill slowly, "but I believe that these Rex-Vanilla bottles have been tampered with!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Johnson.

"You don't mean to say—?"

"Oh, get out!" growled the junior partner. "I haven't had my eyes off that shelf all night."

"Well—wait," said Scovill. "I'll count the bottles."

He stood upon a chair, for the shelf was rather high.

There were ten bottles of Rex on the first row—there were ten bottles of Rex on the row behind that; but on the third row—the one back against the wall—

"For—Heaven's—sake!" gasped Scovill, thrusting his arm to the back row.

"Look!"

He drew forth an empty bottle!

"What! Another gallon gone?"

"Another!" cried Scovill. "Here—take this bottle, please. Here's another

is working out a grudge against us! We'll have to build a spook-proof vault to keep the infernal extracts. Bah! It beats the very devil."

Walling laughed sourly as his associate stamped down to the office. It certainly did seem to have some connection with the Old Nick.

And the worst of it was that not a single tangible clue existed to show that the extracts had been removed by other means than sheer magic. Had the bottles themselves been taken, the mystery would have held a somewhat more solid quality; but for the extract simply to desert its jars in the dead of night was rather staggering.

The day, as usual, was hot and sultry, and frightfully busy, and no man in Johnson & Walling's establishment found time to draw an idle breath. But late in the afternoon a respite came, and Scovill repaired to the office, where the air was rather less torrid than in the laboratory, and speculated fruitlessly with the partners as to the phenomenon.

Both of them had candidly "given it up."

Scovill was apparently unable to do better.

The trio argued for a while, accomplished a complete circle, and came back to the starting point—no wiser than when they began.

Scovill finally arose and yawned.

"My day's work is over," he said. "Everything is ship-shape up above. I think I'll clear out if you have no objection."

"Go ahead," said Johnson.

Scovill loitered toward the laboratory for his hat and coat. Johnson was hunting for the box of cigars, while Walling drowsed happily in his chair and was just falling into a delicious doze, when:

"Mr. Johnson! Mr. Walling! Come up here—quick!" rang through the place in Scovill's voice.

"By George, he's caught the thief! He's got the son of a gun!" Johnson shouted, diving for the stairway and yanking Walling from his chair. But there he was wrong.

For when they tumbled pell-mell into the laboratory, there stood Scovill, seemingly paralyzed, staring stupidly at a row of no less than eleven empty Rex Vanilla bottles, ranged along the side of the room!

"And it can't be ten minutes since I first went down-stairs!" Scovill muttered.

* * * * *

Two utterly uneventful days followed.

On the afternoon of the second, Johnson came in from his round of ice-cream men and seated himself with unaccustomed weariness.

"Walling," he said, "did you ever expect to see competition on that Rex Vanilla of ours?"

"No, sir!" replied the junior partner. "And I don't expect to now."

"No more did I. I thought that we had something altogether distinctive in that stuff—something that nobody would duplicate or cut prices on."

"So we have. You can't touch our Rex Vanilla," Walling said, with placid assurance.

"Don't you believe it—not for a minute."

"Why?"

"There's a fellow named McMullen, somewhere on the other side of town," said Johnson, "who is making every bit as good an extract and selling it for just eight dollars a gallon!"

"What!"

"Fact. I've been up against him for two or three days now. The man has cut me out of at least a dozen orders to-day. Folks say that his vanilla is as fine as ours in every particular—"

"As good as Rex?" cried Walling.

"Yes; and what's more, it is. It seems to be almost identical. I got a little sample from one of the confectioners who bought of this McMullen. Here it is."

Johnson extended the bottle.

Walling took it, removed the cork, rubbed a little of the extract on his palms and sniffed critically.



Prince Rupert's Cosmopolitan Population.

—and another—and another! Why, the whole back row has been emptied!"

"The entire—ten—gallons?"

"Every bottle has been cleaned out over night!"

A long pause followed. Johnson and Walling looked blankly at each other, and then at Scovill, who looked blankly at them.

"You went to sleep, Jim," Johnson said finally.

"I did nothing of the sort," his partner replied with vigor. "I wasn't even sleepy until after daylight."

"But you were watching the place—and the stuff has been carried off, from right under your nose."

"I—I—I—confound it! I can see that," said Walling.

"It must be spooks," murmured Scovill, with dreary humor.

"Well, I'm blamed if there's any other explanation," Johnson snapped. "We leave thirty full bottles locked up here, Jim. You watch them all night. In the morning, ten of them are stark empty. And yet you swear that nobody has entered the room!"

"Yes, and I'll stick to it!" said Walling doggedly. "I've had a gun pointing into this apartment since seven o'clock last night, and if a man had so much as poked his head in, you'd see blood on the floor!"

"Then the best thing we can do is to blame it on spooks!" the senior partner cried angrily. "Somebody in spookland

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