

"Where Are You Taking This Liquor? Oh, Cuba Will Do."

NIGHTLY RISES THE TIDE OF BORDER RUM

By JAMES G. YOUNG

ALMOST every afternoon at this season a fleet of swift power boats puts into the Canadian export docks opposite Detroit, ready for the nightly run with contraband. The boats come by ones and twos until fifty or even a hundred have tied up to the piers. Their crews consist largely of young men with sharp faces and peaked caps—rough and ready. Many of them have a French cast of countenance and their sweaters are bright. One and all, they bear the look of men at war with the law, ready to fight or fun.

Everybody knows their trade. They tie up and spring to the pier with a bit of swagger. There is "Red" Bannion, rum-runner extraordinary. Any man along the Windsor waterfront will verify that "Red" made a million and that he is not a man to oppose. "Red" has a reputation for quick shooting if need be and dare-devil gestures at all times. These accomplishments the waterfront respects from end to end, along perhaps ten miles of wharves in a half-dozen border towns.

On this particular night he swaggers about the pier, exchanging greetings with distillery agents, customs men and others. There is a touch of hero worship in the greetings he receives; an anxious tone in the salutation. "Hello, Red!"—as if his welfare were a matter of interest to every man there. Doubtless it is, for "Red" gives largely of his winnings.

"Just keep an eye on him," says the customs man at my elbow. "He will take his load aboard in a few minutes."

"Red" is now deep in talk with a distillery agent. Evidently he has an order from some Detroit dealer or perhaps he has come on his own account for the goods that will move across the river tonight. The law provides many safeguards for the acceptance of such orders and the release of the goods, but "Red" has his own ways of effecting deliveries. Evidently there will be no trouble tonight.

We edge a little closer, just as another customs agent is filling in an export permit.

"Where are you taking this liquor?" he asks

The Dark River Between Windsor and Detroit Is One Of Many Highways For the Sinister Smuggling Fleet

"Red" grins and answers: "Oh, Cuba will do, I suppose. Yeh, make it Cuba; I ain't been there in a long time."

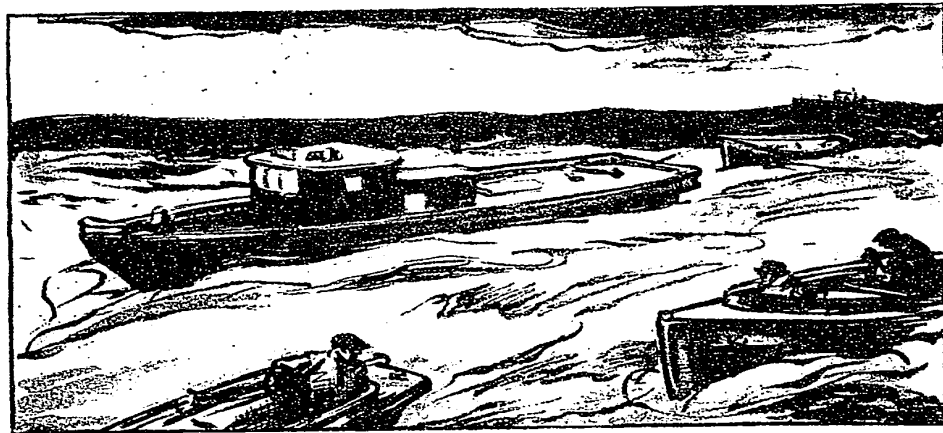
The agent smiles; everybody within hearing smiles. Cuba is excellent, a most unlikely place to connect with rum-running in the Detroit River. How would anybody expect a cargo bound for that point to reach the United States? Of course, it is only a mile or two over the river bound

with him. Others are going to Pernambuco, Mombasa, Tahiti and a dozen more remote places with hard names. One of the jokes of the river trade is thinking up ports that send the Canadian customs agents looking for dictionaries and atlases.

The customs agents will perform their part of the treaty contract—tomorrow or the next day, when "Red" surely will be well on his way to Cuba. Meanwhile, he is safe from

smokes on a pile. As "Red" keeps intent watch, many other eyes watch for other lights up and down the river. Some of them on the far side; others will be on the convenient island points or borne in guard boats on the lookout for American customs men.

The Detroit River never is more than three miles across, where it widens to enter Lake Erie, and at places its width comes down almost



The Modern Rum-Runner Shows a Clean Pair of Heels.

dary, but "Red" has said that he is bound for Cuba and Cuba it must be.

Accordingly he lowers 200 cases of Scotch into his boat and when they are below decks he sits on a pile-head to smoke a last pipe before starting. Meanwhile, other "Red" Bannions are smoking their pipes along the ten miles of wharves. A treaty between the two countries provides that Canadian officials shall advise American officers of liquor export shipments, especially those that seem likely to reach American territory. But it is plain that "Red" will leave in a minute or two for Cuba. He has said as much himself. Not all of the rum-runners will sail

molestation so long as he sits on the pile-head and looks far away into the golden West that lies beyond Detroit. The sun is sinking in red and gold and the big motor city casts long shadows into the river, now peaceful and all but deserted. Only a lake steamer loafs along, leaving a trail of black behind. Within a half hour the river will be dark, though the night in this latitude certainly has "a thousand eyes."

"Red" is looking for the first of those eyes. It should be a red light on the northern point of Fighting Island. He will be able to see it plainly from the export dock in La Salle, Ontario, where he sits and

to feet and yards. But "Red" will travel a swift mile if he heads for the Fighting Island light that is to signal him all goes well—or ill. From the light he will dash another mile or mile and a half, straight into his stronghold at Ecorse, on the American side. Until he strikes the exact centre of the river he has no need of worry about American officers. The men with the red light should see that he runs practically no risk. They have a boat beyond the island on lookout duty; and, so far as the men in that boat can be sure, there is not a customs launch within the danger zone.

Ah! There goes the light—a faint

red twinkle at the end of the island. "Red" has knocked the ashes out of his pipe and jumped aboard. The motor whirs. He turns and grins at those watching him from the pier. Everybody waves a hat and cries, "Good luck!" Then a white streak in the water and "Red" is on his way. Almost before he seems well started the white streak rounds Fighting Island and the light disappears. "Red" is running at forty miles an hour for Ecorse.

"Easy way to make a million," suggests the customs man and it would not have been worth while to contradict him. Daily and nightly this drama is played on both sides of the Detroit River. Official estimates place the amount of smuggling there at \$40,000,000 last year. How much the total will become under the State-controlled sales inaugurated by Ontario is a matter beyond calculation.

SO much for methods of operation on the Canadian shore. On the American side of the border, Detroit sprawls along the river edge for many miles, with numerous communities to the north and south. Practically every one of them is a centre of rum-running and almost any Detroit wharf may harbor a liquor boat after nightfall. Once a boat has passed the centre line, plowing through open water to the black depths of the wharves, it is safe.

But Ecorse is the stronghold of rum-running in the Detroit area, according to common consent and official admission. This community spreads beside the river for perhaps four miles, about seven miles south of Detroit. West Jefferson Avenue commonly is called Bootleg Trail. Prohibition has brought great prosperity to the town, especially to Hogan's Alley, the innermost citadel. Throughout the whole four miles of waterfront there is a large accumulation of capital in power boats, wharves, garages and other incidentals. On the water side of the avenue nearly every garage has been separated from its neighbor by a high fence, which cuts off the view from the thoroughfare. It is a common practice to drive motor trucks through a garage to a covered pier, where contraband may be handled

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in a leisurely manner, the whole operation unobserved from the land. On the water side there are guard boats to drive the curious away or give warning of official meddling.

The stranger to Ecorse is an object of lively interest. The community enjoys a degree of isolation well suited to its needs and no matter by what road the visitor approaches he is subject to scrutiny. Ecorse has a signal system of its own that leaves little to chance. A visitor likely to prove objectionable finds himself scrutinized by many eyes, particularly if he should venture into Hogan's Alley. But it would not be correct to place all the blame for Detroit's rum-running on Ecorse, or to give that town full credit for so large a business. Other near-by communities—Wyandotte, Riverview, Trenton and Gibraltar—have their special claims.

Even casual acquaintance with the problems of border enforcement shows the magnitude of the undertaking. Between Lake Michigan and Lake Erie are Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River, with a hundred miles of devious waterways under authority of Detroit's Collector of Customs. That official has twenty men and three or four boats to cope with a problem that amounts to open warfare against hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unscrupulous foes. That it was possible to bring \$40,000,000 worth of liquor across the frontier last year at this point is not so much a matter for surprise as an indication of how large the total must have been along 3,500 miles of border.

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THE "Red" Bannions of Windsor have their counterparts on every one of the lakes that provide so fine a highway for the new race of smugglers. Another and greater fleet plies regularly across Lake Erie in the vicinity of Niagara Falls. This also is an especially favorable locality for rum-running. The whole wide lake offers a place of manoeuvre and there are numerous bays, inlets and rivers to afford safety. Rum-running in this area is conducted on a somewhat larger scale. The boats engaged carry thousands of cases and generally transfer their cargoes under cover of night to smaller boats. If any fisherman on either side of Lake Erie has failed to make his fortune in the last few years he can blame nothing but his honesty.

This game of wits along the border is carried on according to a well defined code. Undoubtedly there has been and will continue to be corruption of officials; but in the main, officials are honest. The rum-running code is unlike anything in the world. It specifies, first of all, that there shall be no shooting unless one side or the other breaks the code. On the part of a rum-runner this means that he must surrender when fairly cornered and take his chances with the courts. As for the rum-runner's lawful enemies, the code binds them not to shoot except in the tightest kind of pinch. At least that is what the rum-runners believe.

A rather interesting point of psychology along the border is that nobody looks upon the rum-runner as a law-breaker. He enjoys all the immunity extended to the bootlegger, with something more on his own account. Public opinion generally holds him to be "just a fellow who is taking a chance." If public opinion is not actively on his side in encounters with the law it is seldom against him. Anything that befalls his trade or his person is his own affair. The border public does not go to his rescue; neither does it favor his foes. The recent killing of a rural mail carrier, who was fired upon by customs men from shore while he was enjoying a day's fishing in the Detroit River, aroused wide and bitter comment.

The border has many stories of the rum-running code. One of them relates to the plight of two customs

men caught out in Lake Erie during a blow. Their boat broke down and they were in a fair way to spend an unpleasant night when a rum-runner came along. The rum boats generally outclassed patrol boats by ten to fifteen miles an hour. This one was going fast, well down in the water, with shore only a half hour away. But she sighted the patrol craft and put over to relieve her distress. Even the rum-runner's best mechanic could not start the engine, so the prohibition craft came to shore in tow of the rum-runner. By way of completing a handsome deed, the rum-runner turned over twenty cases in order to let the prohibition men report a seizure. This story is true—at least, the rum-runners and the customs men believe it is true.

There is hardly a town along the Great Lakes without its "Red" Bannion who has "made a million." That figure would pale beside some of the larger totals, since five to ten million is not exceptional for the biggest men in the trade. But "a million" seems to express the rum-runner's goal with resounding satisfaction. Fishing villages that once boasted no better transportation than a skiver or two have entered upon the eight-cylinder era. Any visitor to Ecorse and many another town will be invited to stand in awe before

"the house that cost a hundred thousand." As for the liquor boats, the modern privateers of the lakes, they are swift marvels that lightly run away at the first hint of curiosity.

Occasionally a man is killed in this trade and a great stirring results along the frontier. Men of the official and the unofficial services eye one another askance. Everybody wonders if war actually is to break out at last; if the rum-runners and customs men are going to shoot on sight. But so far the difficulty has blown over; truces between man and man have been arranged, if not between the services. All observers are agreed that rum-running on the border, after seven years of attempted enforcement, is yet a nebulous thing.

Heretofore export regulations have served in some degree to make rum-running the privilege of the few rather than the sport of the many. Organization, capital and acquaintance in the right circles have been necessary. But the opening of liquor stores all over Ontario and the expected removal of most difficulties to purchase, seems likely to release such a flood of contraband alcohol into the United States as the country never knew before.

The "Red" Bannions of the border seemingly are about to collect a still greater harvest.