

RUM ROW: WESTERN

BY ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE

RUM Row lies four-and-a-half miles off the west coast of Mexico. There are no gangsters or racketeers there, though it is true that sometimes a Big Shot will come out from Ensenada. He will be dressed in a flashy salt-and-pepper suit, a loud tie with a diamond pin, and probably a checked cap or a brown derby—in other words, as a gangster would be expected to dress.

He will put on quite a little dog among these small-town liquor dealers, and sneer derisively when they row from vessel to vessel for friendly calls and afternoon tea. He will tell them startling stories about bumpings off, gambling-hells and heavy drinking among his associates ashore. Often he will give them magnanimously some hints about how Chinamen and dope can be run into the States as well as liquor; and when he is told that the Rum Row men are not in the business—that they must preserve their honorable reputations—he will laugh, flip his cigarette on to the cabin carpet, drink their whiskey and call them old women. However, they console themselves with the thought that even though they are old-fashioned, still they manage to deliver ashore, quietly and peacefully, about 500,000 cases of assorted wines and liquors a year.

The men of Rum Row are principally tugboat men and fishermen who formerly worked in the inland waters about Vancouver. They come south for a year or more at a time, some of them to work on

the base ships anchored off the coast, and others to handle the fast ex-submarine chasers that carry the liquor to points off the United States where small speedboats come out and unload them. Most of these jobs are entirely within the law—in fact, all of them are except those on the few boats which “run in”—that is, go into American waters to unload. This is very dangerous, for the speedboat operators ashore resent having their lucrative jobs taken away. They revenge themselves by helping the revenue men capture such boats.

If you have a power boat and wish to visit Rum Row, steer for a point about twenty miles down the coast from Ensenada, and five miles south-southwest of Point Santo Tomas. You will find many vessels there, and they will supply you with whatever liquor your heart desires, so long as you agree formally not to take it into the United States. On one of the vessels there is quite a quantity of Mercier champagne, 1919, American brut, in pints and very cheap. Moreover, this champagne has been ageing at sea for five years! If you prefer a dry Roederer 1921, a Château Margaux 1923, or anything else, from Liebfraumilch to vodka, or from Chinese wine to Bernkasteler Doktor, it will be delivered to you nicely packed in burlap bags. And if your requirements are for whiskey, the cheaper bourbons and ryes will be delivered on to your boat at from \$12 to \$20 a case.

Of course when you are loading, you must not mind one of the Coast Guard cutters coming alongside, checking the brands and asking you questions, none of which you are obliged to answer. The cutters are always at Rum Row, ready to follow the smaller boats when they leave. This is called cutterizing, and when one of the boats has been cutterized for weeks and her captain has become frantic, he is said to have cutteritis. At the time I write, one small boat has been off the coast for three months, loaded with 800 cases and unable to discharge them, due to a cutter lying close by all the time. The rum-runner's captain has cutteritis; but he is holding on, hoping to slip away finally in a fog.

But to return to the loading of your boat: When the Coast Guardsman calls from his bridge to ask your name, reply that it is John Doe, Jr.—all the boys say the same thing. When he asks if your boat is of American registry, say it is not; and when he wants to know where you are taking your liquor, say to the Congo or Wailangilala, or any old place where there's no Prohibition.

If it's your first voyage to Rum Row he will cutterize you. If you can make twelve or thirteen knots, ignore him; if less, then you will need a few hints. In the first place, don't try to bribe him. There have been cases of bribery; even one in which a cutter ran liquor into the United States. But the man who did that job is not working any more for the Coast Guard.

Captain H—— had a good way of evading the cutters which you might try. He loaded his slow and clumsy old *Salmon Fisher* with about 2000 cases and then steamed over to the *Boreas*, a big Norwegian freighter which carried about 80,000 cases. After throwing a line to her he let his boat drift astern until she lay a hun-

dred yards off; then made fast to his own end of the line. Thus he lay between the cutter that was on watch and the Mexican coast, and about half a mile from the former. When night came on the *Salmon Fisher* was lost against the deep gloom of the Sierra Madre, but her riding light burned brightly, apprising the Coast Guard that she was still there.

At midnight Captain H—— came on deck, lashed four gasoline drums together, secured a four-by-four scantling between them that reached as high as his little mast, and, extinguishing his own riding light, attached a light to the top of the scantling. All this he made fast to the end of the hawser, and then steamed quietly away.

Thus the cutter men saw Captain H——'s light burning brightly all night long; but they frothed at the mouth the next morning when there was no sign of the *Salmon Fisher* on Rum Row—only a light burning brightly from the top of a scantling lashed to four gasoline drums, bobbing gently in the morning breeze.

It is sometimes possible to play hide-and-seek with the cutters, dodging from the shelter of one base ship to another until you give them the slip. But the easiest (but most dangerous) way of escaping is by running into Mexican waters, where they cannot follow. The trouble is that Mexican gun-boats are often snooping about, and if they catch you they will confiscate your liquor and, incidentally, shoot you.

II

On my first voyage to Rum Row I sailed on the two-masted schooner *Mariposa* from a French island in the South Seas. We were loaded with nearly 6000 cases of bourbon, rye and Scotch whiskey, among them such unforgettable brands as Green River, Log Cabin, Old Crow, Black and

White, and Haig's Gold Label. It was all the *Mariposa* could carry. We had left our spare sails ashore so we could fill the lazaret with bagged quarts of Hill and Hill; our provisions had been piled on No. 2 hatch to make room in the pantry and supercargo's cabin for cases of McCallum's Perfection; and even the main cabin had been filled to within a few feet of the deck carlings.

But the cases made an excellent sleeping platform, so we spread our blankets on them and wriggled in during our watches below; the aroma from a few broken bottles lulling us to sleep. As for meals, they had to be taken on deck, even in rainy weather. We felt that we were martyrs to a good cause.

But the voyage was pleasant, for it was Summertime, with fresh trades to the coast of Mexico; and there was an agreeable spirit of amity among us, for the tension we were under kept us linked together in the common bond of self-preservation. We imagined all kinds of foolish things: that there was imminent danger from hi-jackers; that revenue cutters or Mexican gunboats might discover us and fire on us at any moment. For these reasons we gave vague and misleading positions when we spoke over the wireless; and when we sighted Guadalupe Island we changed our course and gave it a wide berth, so that look-outs from the hi-jacking fleet could not sight us. How different it was when we anchored at last in Rum Row, and found the Coast Guard cutters and rum-boats all in the same thirty fathom patch, and on the best of terms! It did not take us long, then, to learn that the Coast Guard had made the Pacific safe for rum-running.

It was nearly midnight when we reached Rum Row, with a fresh northwester, a choppy sea and poor visibility. We knew

there was a lee shore, but as our chronometer had not been properly rated we were none too sure how far it was away. So it was with some relief that we sighted two lights, and shortly after a dozen more. At first it was difficult to believe that so many ships should be stationary so far at sea; but ships they were, and before long we were amongst them: a five-masted schooner, a steamer, two beautifully equipped vessels that we took for rum-runners, and a few smaller craft.

Our liquor was consigned to the five-masted schooner. We spoke to her and were told to anchor close by. But we were in no hurry about anchoring. Lowering our sails, we steamed through Rum Row, inspecting the *Boreas* and the two rakish craft tied to her stern. When we were close by them, one of them let go her line and started out to sea, cutting through the water at a good twenty knots, bound, no doubt, for some thirsty port on the coast of California.

The two beautifully equipped vessels attracted our closest attention. They gave us the impression of millionaires' yachts, and we were surprised that such fine craft should be used in the rum fleet. Presently one of them began to signal to us with her lights:

"Who are you?"

I called Sparks, gave him my flashlight, and he replied at once that we were the *Mariposa*.

"Where from?" was flashed from her masthead.

We named our French port.

"Where bound to?"

"The five-masted schooner," we replied innocently, believing she would be glad to know we were bringing a load of liquor.

"Your nationality?"

"French."

"How many cases aboard?"

I was about to reply, but just then Captain McKlintock became suspicious. "They're uncommonly curious," he said. "Just ask them who they are."

Sparks did so. Immediately the reply was flashed to us. They were Coast Guard cutters!

The captain's eyes glinted as he cried: "Coast Guard, eh! I thought as much. Those canvas-covered things on their forward decks looked like guns to me!" Then, a moment later: "They've come here to make an end of rum-running! It's something to do with this new Wilkersham business I've been reading about!"

Just then a searchlight was flashed upon us. It played across the transom, moved slowly over the decks and was extinguished. We were somewhat alarmed; but when we had anchored, the wind dropped, and all save the riding lights of the cutters and rum boats were extinguished, and when we looked out over the quieting water to where the undulations of the Sierra Madre lay like horizon clouds against the sky, and watched the bobbing red and green lights of some lobster fishermen by the kelp beds inshore, we felt more at ease, and even turned in for a few hours sleep.

III

I went aboard the five-master in the morning and met Captain Rockwell—as I shall call him—a man responsible for running more than 1,000,000 cases of liquor into the States.

He is probably the cleverest of the Pacific coast rum smugglers, is wanted on numerous indictments, and is gall and wormwood to the Coast Guard. A few years on the right side of fifty, very alert and businesslike, he is anything but the type of man one should expect to find in such an undertaking. He assured me that he sel-

dom touched alcohol, and that only one drink a day was allowed his crew. When I asked him for a case of Bass's ale, he gave it to me reluctantly, at the same time requesting that I would not give liquor to any of his men if they came aboard the *Mariposa*.

"I can't take a chance," he told me. "This vessel is worse than a dump of dynamite. God!" and I could see his eyebrows knit. "I have 60,000 cases of assorted liquor aboard—one hundred and sixty-three brands. Think what would happen if my crew once got started on it!"

"Wouldn't you have the same right to protect your cargo that any captain has?" I asked.

Captain Rockwell laughed dryly. "Certainly; by Canadian law I could shoot every mother's son of them," he replied; "but my company wouldn't be very likely to send me out with another load. The worst of it is that my crew is just primed for such a bender. They've been on the water-wagon for over a year; give them two or three quick ones and they'll go mad."

While he was speaking I had a chance to glance across the schooner's decks and into her open hatches, where the crew was at work assembling a shipment of whiskey. All the brands were packed in burlap bags and then in cases. The latter were being opened and thrown over the side in sling loads. On deck were several thousand cases containing five-gallon tins of alcohol, a few hundred barrels of bourbon and as many of Scotch malt.

"This vessel is nothing but a big wholesale liquor warehouse," Captain Rockwell said presently. "You read about wild boozing voyages among the rum-runners: sawed-off shotguns, poker, fighting and drunkenness; but now-a-days this business is quite different. We are at sea for over

a year at a time, and that year is just one long monotonous job of trans-shipping liquor. Of course on the smaller boats it's different: they are cutterized now and then, every few months they put into a Mexican port for a big time, and sometimes they hit it up aboard their boats, too."

The rum-running business runs smoothly and quietly. The Prohibition agents seem to have been out-maneuvered: they are powerless to frustrate the workings of this finely organized machine. They have put a fleet of pretty little cutters on the coast, with the droll result that they have been of more benefit than injury to the rum-runners! They have delayed a few of the slow boats by cutterizing them, they have made a few captures among the speedboats that come out from shore; but to my knowledge they have never captured any of the larger boats. *And they have chased every hi-jacker off the Pacific coast!* Only a rum-runner can appreciate what an inestimable service that has been.

I asked Captain Rockwell what his small boats could make.

"About twenty knots, when they have to," he replied. "Most of them were submarine chasers during the war. Each has a Diesel engine and two Liberty engines, approximating about 1000 horsepower. We bought them shortly after the war."

Just then eight bells rang and we went below for breakfast: a tremendous meal of pork sausages, bacon and eggs, hotcakes, oatmeal, strong coffee and toast. When I mentioned that they seemed to breakfast well for sailors, the captain said that it cost the company \$1.50 a day to feed the men on Rum Row. I believe I am correct in saying that a passenger liner does it for less.

The next day a sub-chaser, the *Return Quickly*, came alongside us to take on 2000

cases of Hill and Hill. By the time her lines were fast, a Coast Guard cutter steamed up, stopped a few yards off; then held her position until we had loaded the sub-chaser. We opened the cases aboard the *Mariposa* and passed the liquor over the side in bags. When the first was transferred, the captain of the cutter stepped on to his bridge with a counting machine and started checking. Captain Rockwell and I were on the *Mariposa*, also checking.

"One, two, ten, fifty, one hundred," we counted as the bags were tossed from one vessel to another. During the lulls in the work we turned to yarn with the Coast Guard skipper.

Presently Captain Rockwell remarked about a fire aboard his rum-runner, the *Toshiwara*, when the Coast Guard had rushed to the rescue. "Thanks, Cap," he called to the man on the bridge, "for helping us out."

"That's all right," the "enemy" officer replied with a laugh. "That's what we're here for; to help you fellows out and protect you from hi-jackers."

"You've sure done that," Captain Rockwell affirmed; then went on with his checking: "six hundred and one, six hundred and two . . . Hey! That's an Old Crow! Throw it back!"

"We did all we could for the *Toshiwara*," the Coast Guardsman resumed. "We picked up the wireless man when he jumped overboard, and rushed him ashore to the hospital. But he was too badly burned. Heard last night that he died. Say, Cap, how many you got aboard the Frenchman? About eight thousand?"

"You ought to make a better guess, considering how long you've been on Rum Row. No; she carries five thousand, seven hundred."

"Thanks; I want to put it in my report."

"Sure . . . nine ninety-nine, one thousand. . . Oh, Cap, what do you make it? One thousand?"

The Coast Guardsman glanced at his patent counter.

"No," he called back, "it's one thousand and one."

"Thanks," from Captain Rockwell, "I always take your count before my own."

"That's right; I've had plenty of experience. All I have to do."

They both laughed, and the checking went on in silence until the trans-shipment was finished.

That night three Coast Guardsmen came aboard the *Mariposa* and made one of their rare seizures, drinking over three bottles of King George IV Gold Label. They drank it straight, out of the bottles, without chasers. While they sat on deck, the other cutter was cutterizing the *Kuchy*, a slow old tub belonging to the *Boreas*. The *Kuchy* circled in figure eights for a time, dodging behind the baseships in an attempt to elude the cutter; but the Coast Guardsman kept close astern, her searchlight held steadily on the rum-runner's deck.

Abruptly the *Kuchy* turned toward shore, and with her single heavy-duty engine going full speed, plowed into the long kelp beds that lie about four miles off Santo Tomas. In twenty minutes she had churned her way through and was beyond the range of the searchlight.

The Coast Guardsman did not try to follow, for experience had taught her captain that with small twin propellers and high-speed engines his vessel would be hopelessly involved in the kelp. So she returned to her anchorage, her searchlight shamefacedly extinguished, while we rum-runners aboard the *Mariposa* took another pull at the bottle and laughed inconsiderately.

IV

The next day we discharged the remainder of our cargo aboard the five-master, took on water, fuel and provisions, and bid Rum Row good-bye. We left in true Tarasconian style. After raising our hook we steamed to the *Boreas* and lowered our flag; then swung round and passed one of the Coast Guard cutters. Both replied when we lowered our flag, and one blew her siren. We sounded our old bilge-pump fog-horn; then our attention was turned to the *Firewater*, for she had come up to us with all her thousand horsepower driving her full speed, and now was steaming round us blowing her whistle. Finally we passed the five-master, went through the flag-lowering and horn-blowing again, and a few moments later were steaming south, our halliard blocks creaking as the sails were set, and the maritime village of Rum Row rapidly disappearing behind us.

It was some time before the whole experience sank into Captain McKlintock's brain sufficiently for him to correlate his impressions and express an opinion. We passed Guadalupe Island, sailing a stone's throw from the cliffs and examining the hills for a sight of the reported 200,000 goats. After rounding the southern point and sailing between the barren inner and outer islets, Captain McKlintock came on deck and took three sights to rate the chronometer. Then he went below; but in five minutes he was on deck again, his slate held unconsciously in his hand, only a few scrawling figures marked upon it. But his eyes were sparkling.

He came up to me and started in immediately. "Now, this rum-running business," he said with a flourish of his slate: "I've just been thinking how nonsensical this whole business is. Now, here's a distillery in Canada, let's say, fifty miles from

the United States border; and here's a farmer on the United States side of the border who wants a bottle of Old Crow, made in that distillery. Well, how does it get to him?

"The distillery ships it to Halifax, where there are agents to pay, and warehouses and handling expenses and duties. From there it is shipped to a European port and is unloaded and put in bond. All this is paid for, and the European authorities probably get some graft out of it, too. Then there is another vessel, and more handling and wharfage and export duties, and the bottle of Old Crow goes through the Panama Canal to an island in the South Pacific Ocean—thousands of miles since it left the distillery! It is unloaded: more stevedores, bond and tax dues, storage and agents at the island branch; and then, by and by, more stevedores again, and the Old Crow is loaded on a schooner and taken nearly four thousand miles to the coast of Mexico. There it is trans-shipped aboard the five-master—and that is a devil of an expense, with heavy breakage and demurrage, and a big expensive crew on the five-master to be paid double wages

and messed at a dollar and a half a day. And the Coast Guard indirectly increases the expense of the whiskey, for buying the Old Crow makes Prohibition agents ashore and afloat necessary, and that increases taxes. Presently it goes aboard a sub-chaser—more expense—and is trans-shipped again, this time on to a speedboat off the coast of California."

The on-coming night was rapidly obscuring the gesticulating captain. He turned to stare fixedly at me for some seconds; then went on: "Well, the speedboat takes it ashore to a truck, and the little bottle of Old Crow finally rests for a while in a big wholesale warehouse of one of the shore operators. But not for long. Presently the farmer up in Washington wants his bottle of Old Crow, so he orders it through his bootlegger, and the next morning finds it under his doormat. Now, I wonder if it ever occurs to him that the bottle he is drinking has gone more than half way round the world before reaching him—while it was made in a distillery a few miles from his farm!

"It's a funny business! A funny business!"

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Meteorology

BALL LIGHTNING

BY CHARLES FITZHUGH TALMAN

AMONG the well-known luminous phenomena of the atmosphere two are almost completely mysterious. One of these is the will-o'-the-wisp, which might have ceased to be a mystery long ago but for the fact that science has practically ignored its existence for the past two generations. The other is ball lightning.

The latter has not been ignored. It has, on the contrary, been a subject of much painstaking inquiry on the part of physicists and meteorologists, and it is engaging their attention to an unprecedented degree at the present time. So little progress, however, has been made toward explaining it that a leading British authority on lightning, Dr. G. C. Simpson, director of the Meteorological Office, said in a recent lecture:

Speaking for myself, after carefully studying the literature on the subject, I cannot see even the beginning of an explanation, and I do not propose to add another guess to those already made.

This situation is remarkable for two reasons. First, the thing we call ball lightning—for no better reason than because François Arago gave it that question-begging name about a century ago—has been known to mankind for ages and is by no means rare. Arago, who was responsible for putting it on the programme of scientific investigation, collected and published numerous accounts of its occurrence, and since his time several cases

have been reported every year in the scientific journals, to say nothing of the daily newspapers. Not long ago Dr. Walther Brand, in Germany, collected from the existing literature reports of more than six hundred cases and published a book in which many of the best authenticated of these reports were summarized and discussed.

Second, ball lightning, whether or not its affinity with ordinary lightning is close enough to justify the name it bears, is, at any rate, an attendant of thunderstorms, and we have ample grounds for assuming it to be a manifestation of atmospheric electricity. Now, since the beginning of the present century, and especially within the past ten years or so, science has made very notable progress in elucidating the electrical phenomena of the thunderstorm. There is, to be sure, an outstanding conflict of opinion among competent authorities as to the way in which the electrical field of such a storm originates, but the process whereby, when the field exists, "the heavens balance their volt accounts" is almost as well understood as the operation of a piece of power-house machinery. "The subject of lightning," as F. W. Peek, Jr., of the General Electric Company, recently put it, "is now on an engineering basis."

But this remark does not apply at all to ball lightning. The electrician can give a definite account of the ordinary lightning flash in terms of volts and amperes, horsepower and kilowatt-hours, and he can readily manufacture such a flash on a re-