

WHEN PROHIBITION WAS IN FLOWER

By HERBERT ASBURY

PROHIBITION went into effect throughout the United States on January 16, 1920, and the country settled back with an air of, "well, *that's* settled." There had been a liquor problem. But a Law had been passed. Naturally, there was no longer a liquor problem. No prophet arose to foretell the awful things that were approaching — the rum ships prowling off the coasts, the illicit breweries and distilleries, the bootleggers and speakeasies, the corruption of police and judiciary, the hi-jackers and their machine guns, the gang wars, the multi-millionaire booze barons, the murders and assassinations, the national breakdown of morals and manners, and all the rest of the long train of evils that sprang from the Eighteenth Amendment.

Nor did anyone imagine that the Amendment and its enabling legislation, the Volstead Act, would be difficult to enforce. It was THE LAW, and by and large the American people in those days were law-abiding. The Anti-Saloon League estimated that prohibition could be enforced for less than \$5,000,000 a year, so eager were

the people to enter the shining gates of the dry Utopia. Congress appropriated a little more than that amount, enough to set up an enforcement organization and to provide about 1500 prohibition agents. These noble snoopers, paid an average of about \$2000 a year and hence immune to temptation, were supposed to keep 125,000,000 people from manufacturing or drinking anything stronger than near beer. They didn't, but two of them made an extraordinary try.

In a fourteen-dollar-a-month flat on Ridge Street, in New York's lower East Side, lived a bulbous little man named Isadore Einstein, whom everyone called Izzy. He had been a salesman, both inside and on the road, but was now a minor clerk at Station K of the New York Post Office. It required very shrewd management to feed, house and clothe his family — his wife and four children and his father — on the meager salary of a postal employé. He was looking for something better, and decided that he had found it when he read in his newspaper about the government's plans for what was after-

HERBERT ASBURY is best known for his vivid accounts of the shadier side of the past of great American cities. They include The Gangs of New York, The Barbary Coast, All Around the Town, and The French Quarter. He is currently associate editor of Collier's. Mr. Asbury's articles have appeared in these pages many times.

ward laughingly called enforcement. He addressed his family, in solemn council.

"Pretty soon now," he said, "I quit my job at Station K."

"So?" asked Mrs. Einstein.

"I go to be a detective," Izzy explained, "to catch bootleggers."

"So? Is that a business for the father of four children?"

"Sixteen hundred dollars a year to start, it says here," said Izzy, "up to twenty-five hundred, it says."

"So! Maybe it *is* a business!"

James Shevlin, chief enforcement agent for the Southern District of New York, was even less enthusiastic than Izzy's wife. "I must say, Mr. Einstein," he said, "you don't look much like a detective." And that was the truth. Probably no one ever looked less like a detective than Izzy Einstein; on the other hand, once he got going no one ever acted more like one. He was forty years old, almost bald, five feet and five inches tall, and weighed 225 pounds. Most of this poundage was around his middle, so that when he walked his noble paunch, gently wabbling, moved majestically ahead like the breast of an overfed pouter pigeon.

But Izzy was accomplished. Besides English and Yiddish, he spoke German, Polish and Hungarian fluently, and could converse, though haltingly, in French, Italian and Russian. He had even picked up a few words and phrases of Chinese. Moreover, he had a knack of getting along with people and inspiring confidence. No one,

looking at his round, jolly face and twinkling black eyes, ever believed that he was other than he pretended to be.

"I guess Mr. Shevlin never saw a type like me," Izzy said afterward. "Maybe I fascinated him or something. Anyhow, I sold him on the idea that this prohibition business needed a new type of people that couldn't be spotted so easy."

Whatever the reason, Izzy got the job.

Izzy's first assignment was to clean up a place in Brooklyn which the enforcement authorities shrewdly suspected housed a speakeasy, since drunken men had been seen staggering from the building, and the air for half a block around was redolent with the fumes of beer and whiskey. Izzy knew nothing of the correct sleuthing procedure; he simply walked up to the suspected joint and knocked on the door. A peephole was opened, and a hoarse voice demanded to know who was there.

"Izzy Einstein," said Izzy. "I want a drink."

"Oh, yeah? Who sent you here, bud? What's your business?"

"My boss sent me," Izzy explained. "I'm a prohibition agent. I just got appointed."

The door swung open and the door-man slapped Izzy jovially on the back. "Ho! Ho!" he cried. "Come right in, bud. That's the best gag I've heard yet." Izzy stepped into a room where half a dozen men were drinking at a small, make-shift bar.

"Hey, boss!" the doorman yelled. "Here's a prohibition agent wants a drink! You got a badge, too, bud?"

"Sure, I have," said Izzy, and produced it.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the man behind the bar. "Looks just like the real thing."

He poured a slug of whiskey, and Izzy downed it. That was a mistake, for when the time came to make the pinch Izzy had no evidence. He tried to grab the bottle but the bartender ran out the back door with it.

"I learned right there," said Izzy, "that a slug of hooch in an agent's belly might feel good, but it ain't evidence."

So when he went home that night he rigged up an evidence-collector. He put a small funnel in the upper left hand pocket of his vest, and connected it, by means of a rubber tube, with a flat bottle concealed in the lining of the garment. Thereafter, when a drink was served to him, Izzy took a sip, then poured the remainder into the funnel while the bartender was busy making change. The bottle wouldn't hold much, but there was always enough for analysis and to offer in evidence.

II

After Izzy had been an enforcement agent for a few weeks, he began to miss his old friend Moe Smith, with whom he had spent many pleasant evenings in the East Side coffee-houses. Like Izzy, Moe was a natural comedian,

and also like Izzy, he was corpulent. He tipped the scales at about 235 pounds, but he was a couple of inches taller than Izzy and didn't look quite so roly-poly. Moe had been a cigar salesman, and manager of a small fight club at Orchard and Grand Streets, in New York, and had invested his savings in a little cigar store, where he was doing well. Izzy persuaded him to turn over this enterprise to a relative to run for him, and to apply for a job as enforcement agent.

As soon as Moe had been sworn in, he and Izzy were teamed together, and most of the time thereafter worked as a pair. Their first assignment took them to Rockaway Beach, near New York, where they confiscated a still and arrested the operator. This man apparently took a great liking to Izzy, for after he got out of jail he made several trips to New York especially to urge Izzy to go on a fishing trip with him.

"I'll take you three miles out to sea," he said. "You'll have quite a time."

But Izzy firmly declined the invitation. "Sure he'll take me out to sea," he said, "but will he bring me back?"

In those early days of the noble experiment, before the shooting began, everything that happened in connection with prohibition was news, and some of New York's best reporters covered enforcement headquarters. Casting about for something to enliven their stories and to provide exercise for their imagination, they seized upon

the exploits of Izzy and Moe. The two zany and indefatigable agents supplied human interest material by the yard; moreover, they were extraordinarily cooperative. They frequently scheduled their forays to suit the convenience of the reporters and the newspaper photographers.

On one Sunday, accompanied by a swarm of eager reporters, they established a record by making seventy-one raids in a little more than twelve hours. On another they staged a spectacular raid for the benefit of Dr. John Roach Straton, a famous hell-buster of the period, and the congregation of the Calvary Baptist Church in West Fifty-seventh Street, New York, of which Dr. Straton was pastor. Izzy and Moe timed their raid, on a small cafe near the church, to coincide with the dismissal of Dr. Straton's flock after morning services, and the members of the congregation reached the street in time to see the agents rolling barrels of whiskey out of the cafe and smashing them with hatchets. This raid made everybody happy, except, of course, the man who ran the speakeasy. The reporters got a good story, Izzy and Moe got their names in all the papers, and Dr. Straton and his good people went happily home to Sunday dinner, serenely confident that prohibition was working and that all was right with the world.

Hundreds of stories, a great many of them truthful, were written about Izzy and Moe and their grotesque adventures, and they probably made the front pages oftener than any

other personages of their time except the President and the Prince of Wales.

For more than five years the whole country laughed at the antics of Izzy and Moe, with the exception of the prohibitionists, who thought the boys were wonderful, and the bootleggers and speakeasy proprietors, who thought they were crazy and feared them mightily. And their fear was justified, for in their comparatively brief career Izzy and Moe confiscated 5,000,000 bottles of booze, worth \$15,000,000, besides thousands of gallons in kegs and barrels and hundreds of stills and breweries. They smashed an enormous quantity of saloon fixtures and equipment, and made 4392 arrests, of which more than 95 per cent resulted in convictions. No other agents even approached this record.

Nearly all of the victims of Izzy and Moe were small fry bootleggers and speakeasy operators, although they raided and confiscated a considerable number of large stills and breweries, and uncovered many large deposits of liquor in storage hideaways. Their largest single haul was 2000 cases of bottled whiskey and 365 barrels of whiskey and brandy, which they found in a Bronx garage. And they made one terrifying swoop up and down Broadway which put the finishing touches to such celebrated night life resorts as Jack's, the Ted Lewis Club, Shanley's, the Beaux Arts, and Reisenweber's.

Izzy and Moe made many spectacular raids in Chicago, Detroit and other cities ruled by the gangsters and

the beer barons, but they never encountered Al Capone, Johnny Torrio, Frankie Yale or any of the other great hoodlums who were the real beneficiaries of the Eighteenth Amendment. If they had, there is little doubt that they would have taken the booze kings and the triggermen in their stride, for neither Izzy nor Moe lacked courage. Izzy didn't approve of guns, and never carried one. Moe lugged a revolver around occasionally, but in five years fired it only twice. Once he shot out a lock and another time he blew a hole in a keg of whiskey.

Izzy said after he had become a private citizen that guns had been pulled on him only twice, once when he was alone and once when he was with Moe. The first time was on Dock Street, in Yonkers, New York, where he had spent a pleasant and profitable evening with raids on five speakeasies. To make it an even half-dozen, he stopped into a sixth place that looked suspicious, bought a slug of whiskey for sixty cents, and poured it into the funnel in his vest pocket. While he was arresting the bartender, who lived up to his name of Tremble, the owner of the joint came into the bar.

"He pulled an automatic from behind the bar," said Izzy. "She clicked but the trigger jammed. It was aimed right at my heart. I didn't like that. I grabbed the proprietor's arm and he and I had a fierce fight all over the bar, till finally I got the pistol. I don't mind telling you I was afraid, particularly when I found out that the gun was loaded."

On another occasion an angry bartender shoved a revolver against Izzy's stomach. But Izzy didn't bat an eye; he calmly shoved the gun aside.

"Put that up, son," he said, soothingly. "Murdering me won't help your family."

Fortunately, the bartender had a family, and Izzy's warning brought to his mind a vision of his fatherless children weeping at the knee of their widowed mother, who was also weeping. He stopped to think. While he was thinking, Moe knocked him cold.

III

These situations undoubtedly had their ticklish moments, but after all, only Izzy's life was in danger. At Kingston, New York, a little town in the Catskills, he had a frightful experience in which his immortal soul was imperiled. He had a thirty-minute wait there between trains, and while waiting took a walk about the village. He saw several men come out of a small hotel, wiping their lips and looking pleased, so he went in, and in the back of the building found a saloon. His portrait, framed as usual in black crepe, hung behind the bar. Izzy asked for a drink, but the bartender looked closely at him and then at the picture. He said: "You must be crazy. I wouldn't sell you nothing. You're Izzy Einstein."

"Who's that?" asked Izzy.

They argued for a few minutes, and Izzy offered to bet that he wasn't Izzy Einstein.

"Bet hell," said the bartender. "I

know a better way to find out than that."

He went to the lunch counter and came back with a sandwich on a plate.

"Here," he said, "eat this with the compliments of the house."

"That was the trickiest tight spot I ever got into," said Izzy. "That sandwich had *ham* in it! But I bit into it, and the bartender thought I ate it. Lucky for me he didn't see me blow the ham out. I could taste the stuff for a week. But he was convinced that I wasn't Izzy Einstein, and he sold me the booze. Then I arrested him, and with great pleasure, I assure you."

One of Izzy's most brilliant ideas was always to carry something, the nature of the burden depending upon the character of the neighborhood and of a particular speakeasy's clientele. This latter he could easily determine by watching the regular customers come and go for a few days. On the East Side and in the poorer sections of the Bronx, if the weather permitted, Izzy went around in his shirt sleeves carrying a pitcher of milk, the very pattern of an honest man on his way home from the grocery. Once in Brooklyn he was admitted to half a dozen gin-mills because he was lugging a big pail of dill pickles. "A fat man with pickles!" said Izzy. "Who'd ever think a fat man with pickles was an agent?"

The thing that newspaper reporters appreciated most about Izzy and Moe was their addiction to what Izzy used to call "comic opera stuff." The disguises that the two agents used were

really out of this world; many had never been seen before on land or sea; they calculated that they had worn more than a hundred different make-ups. And only twice were they ineffective. Once on a Palm Sunday Izzy disguised himself as an Irishman, with palm branches in each lapel, another in his hatband, and a third in his hand, and tried to buy a drink in an Irish speakeasy. The bartender laughed heartily. Again, Izzy disguised himself as himself and tried to buy liquor at a sacramental wine store on West Forty-ninth Street, New York. The proprietor refused to sell because, in his opinion, Izzy didn't look Jewish enough. So Izzy turned the case over to an agent named Dennis J. Donovan, who bought the evidence without difficulty. But Izzy made the arrest. "With pleasure, too, I assure you," he said.

Up in Van Cortlandt Park, in New York, near the public playing fields, was a soft drink establishment which was suspected of being one of the retail outlets of a big rum ring. Many complaints were made to enforcement headquarters that customers had become tipsy after a few shots of the soda water sold in the place; one woman wrote that by mistake her milk shake had been filled with gin. Bad gin, too, she added. The job of getting the evidence was given to Izzy. It proved a difficult task, for the owner of the joint would sell liquor to no one he didn't know personally. So on a Saturday afternoon in November Izzy assembled a group of half

a dozen dry agents, clad them in football uniforms, and smeared their arms and faces with fresh dirt. Then Izzy tucked a football under his arm, hung a helmet over his ears, and led them whooping and rah-rahing into the suspected speakeasy, where they shouted that they had just won the last game of the season and wanted to break training in a big way. The speakeasy owner, pleased at such a rush of business, sold each agent a pint of whiskey. "Have fun, boys," he said. "The same to you," said Izzy, handing him a summons.

Flushed with this striking success, which showed that at heart he was a collegian, Izzy went to Ithaca, New York, to investigate a complaint by officials of Cornell University that some soda fountains near the campus were not confining their sales to pop. Izzy disguised himself as an undergraduate by putting on a little cap and a pair of white linen knickers, and for several days strolled about the campus. Having located the soda fountains which sold liquor, he dashed into them one by one, establishing himself as a student by shouting, "Sizzle Boom! Sizzle Boom! Rah! Rah! Rah!" The owners thought he was a comedian, which indeed he was, and they gladly sold him all the booze he wanted.

IV

By the time Izzy and Moe had been prohibition agents for a couple of years they had compiled such an astonishing record of arrests, convictions

and confiscations that they were looked upon as well-nigh infallible, even by the big shots in Washington who had always resented the publicity they received. Consequently they were frequently sent to other cities where the work of resident agents had been disappointing, and everywhere they lived up to their New York reputations. They made things hum among the bootleggers, the speakeasies, the druggists and their prescription racket, and the fake sellers of sacramental wines, in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, Boston, New Orleans, Mobile, Washington, and a dozen other cities. Sometimes both Moe and Izzy went on these expeditions, and sometimes Izzy travelled alone.

On one of his swings around the so-called enforcement circuit, Izzy made up a sort of schedule showing the length of time it took him to get a drink in various cities. New Orleans won first prize, a four-star hiss from the Anti-Saloon League. When Izzy arrived in the Crescent City he climbed into an ancient taxicab, and as the machine got under way he asked the driver where he could get a drink.

"Right here, suh," said the driver, and pulled out a bottle. "Fo' bits."

Time — 35 seconds.

In Pittsburgh, disguised as a Polish mill worker, Izzy bought a drink of whiskey in eleven minutes. Just seventeen minutes after he got off the train in Atlanta, he walked into a confectionery shop on Peachtree Street, bought a drink, and arrested the proprietor. In Chicago he bought a drink

in twenty-one minutes without leaving the railroad station, and duplicated this feat in St. Louis. In Cleveland it took twenty-nine minutes, but that was because an usher in a vaudeville theater, who had offered to take him to a speakeasy, couldn't get off right away. In Baltimore, Izzy got on a trolley car and asked the conductor where he could find a speakeasy. "In the next block," the conductor replied. Time, fifteen minutes. It took longer in Washington than anywhere else; Izzy roamed the city for a whole hour before he could locate a gin-mill. He finally had to ask a policeman.

During the summer of 1925 the almost continual stories about Izzy and Moe in the newspapers really got on the nerves of the high prohibition enforcement officials in Washington, few of whom got in the papers at all. National headquarters announced that any agent whose name appeared in print in connection with his work would be suspended, and perhaps otherwise punished, on the ground that publicity brought discredit to the service. For a while Izzy really tried to keep away from the reporters and out of the papers, but both he and Moe were Very Important Personages, and it was impossible to keep the news-

paper boys from writing about them.

Finally, on November 13, 1925, it was announced that Izzy and Moe had turned in their gold badges and were no longer prohibition agents. Izzy's story was that he had been told that he was to be transferred to Chicago. He had lived in New York since he was fifteen years old, and had no intention of ever living anywhere else, so he refused to go, and "thereby fired myself."

Governmental officials, however, declared that Izzy and Moe had been dismissed "for the good of the service." Unofficially they said, "The service must be dignified. Izzy and Moe belong on the vaudeville stage." Most of the newspapers took the position that the whole problem of enforcement belonged on the vaudeville stage.

Both Izzy and Moe went into the insurance business, and did well. They promptly dropped out of the public eye, and remained out except for an occasional Sunday feature story, and a brief flurry of publicity in 1928, when Izzy went to Europe and returned with some entertaining accounts of his adventures. Izzy died in New York on February 17, 1938, by which time his four sons had all become successful lawyers.



A MAN'S delight in looking forward to and hoping for some particular satisfaction is a part of the pleasure flowing out of it, enjoyed in advance. But this is afterward deducted, for the more we look forward to anything the less we enjoy it when it comes.

— SCHOPENHAUER

CANADA AS A WORLD POWER

By AKELEY MITCHELL

WHAT country, with an area larger than the United States and only one-twelfth as many people, had the third largest navy in the world and the fourth ranking military establishment among the United Nations? It leads the world in per capita industrial production, has the highest output of nickel, radium and earth-shaking uranium and is the biggest exporter of wheat. Its standard of living is second only to that of the U. S. It is second in the production of cargo ships, wood pulp and hydroelectric power, third in aluminum, copper and zinc, fourth in the production of gold. It can export as much as 600,000,000 pounds of bacon in a year and still eat bacon at home. Though the nation's population is less than New York State's, it had more than 600,000 men under arms in World War I and lost nearly a tenth of them — more than were lost by the whole U. S.

A good many people south of the border will not recognize this description of Canada, America's quiet, dependable neighbor for nearly 4000 unfortified miles. For Canada, which

would shine in any other hemisphere, is overshadowed culturally and economically by the huge, noisy, hyperthyroid U. S. Whether they like it or not, Canadians, through radio, press and films, know almost as much about America as any resident of Buffalo. In contrast, the average American knows little about Canada and much of what he knows is wrong. He thinks Canadians are just like Americans except that they did not have sense enough to settle farther south where it is not so cold. He thinks Canada is full of adventurous people, of red-coated mounted police, French-Canadian guides, Eskimos and great open spaces waiting for pioneers. He thinks Canada is a weak satellite and thrall of Britain (or maybe of the U. S.). When he reads that Canada's statesmen are sitting among the top peacemakers, he is surprised. He wouldn't be if he knew certain basic Canadian facts. Let us examine them.

The land is peculiar. Someone once described Canada as a tapeworm running parallel to the U. S. border,

AKELEY MITCHELL is a Canadian author, critic, and movie producer with an intimate knowledge of every province from Halifax to Vancouver. He has written a book and many articles and movie scripts on the Canadian scene.

PRODUCED 2003 BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED