Hell or High Water

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A Wade Simpson Concoction
This issue is dedicated to Stephen R. Bissette for his never-ending encouragement of me to finish this crime comic. Like other cartoonists before me, I can’t say enough good things about this rare treasure of the Green Mountains. He is also one helluva nice guy.

Very special thanks to Saints Peter and Paul Church for allowing access for photo references. It was incredibly helpful to know that the rooms, hallways, trap doors, and secret passages I imagined for this story actually exist. Thanks so much, Lydia.
Cocktails are at their best ice cold. They should be shaken or stirred with shaved or cracked ice. An excellent cocktail should start with a dose of something strong.
Chapter Two

Detroit, 13 years ago, a drunk-driving Father Joe Kirkpatrick hit Mr. and Mrs. Maupassant with his car, killing the wife and leaving the husband a double amputee. He was too drunk to notice that their five-year-old daughter, Lula, was buried alive in the wreckage.

New Year’s Eve, 1930. Earlier this evening, Lula and her father, both alcoholics, discuss her plan to secure their favorite liquor, absinthe. Meanwhile, two rumrunners, Harrison and Jonas, drive from Windsor, Canada into the US via the newly constructed Ambassador Bridge. At the border, they are turned away by two double-crossing guards, Rhorry and Cherry. After killing the border patrolmen to avoid arrest, Harrison and Jonas stage a bold escape back into Canada. Undeterred, they attempt to enter Detroit by driving across the frozen river. Their truck gets caught in a snow drift, they abandon their cargo, and Harrison vows to fetch two River Gang members, Blackie and Wingtip, who “will know what to do.”
I believed, Rudy, for the first time, in a long time, that things would work out. Without a jolt, I never woulda stepped out my door.

Here.
Any sign of Harry or that new kid Jonas?

Not since that first gun battle I heard. The cruisers finally rolled up though.

No hurry call? The P.D. usually responds under two minutes, yah?

Thanks.

Must be a busy night for the shamuses. I've got a bird-watcher set up if you want to sneak a peek.

The usual suspects?

Detroit's finest uniforms. Cruisers Twenty-one and Nine.

Wahl and Proust. They are on Bernstein's payroll... What about the plain clothes?

Not yet.

Douse the Edisons.

I see the coffee sergeant Dwayne Resnick. Ha! He's even got a cup o' Joe with 'em! It's seven in the evening... What a lightweight.

Now, the one I don't recognize is the shadow. Who's the clean cut fella?

The investigation seems to have moved to the middle of the bridge.
An elementary escape back into Canada. They probably never closed the back door. In a rush, no doubt.

Here's a rare solution for embalmers.

What's that?
Absinthe. Anise liquor.

From wormwood. Even in the Age of Pain, it's an acquired taste. Any juice joints cater to the French?

I see Europeans hanging 'round the Lizard Lounge.

Yeah, that's Chester Tutha's. We busted 'em before.

Part of the Bernstein's racket?

Nah. Tutha put in his lot with the River Gang. Leftover scraps from the old Vitale / Gianella gangs.

The Italian taxi-service. You get picked up, you're in for the ride of your life.

If the drivers were taken by surprise, maybe the barrel-house is still expecting their delivery.

Someone on U.S. soil knows about this...
It's New Year's Eve, Agent Concannon.

With all due respect, sir, nobody cares.

You think we're on a fool's errand?

I must admit, it makes no sense to me why it's on the books at all.

Washington D.C. might as well have banned bread and water. Certainly, there's more booze hounds now than before the Volstead Act.

And I know everyone's talking about repealing... I get it. I do. But for now, it's the law. And we're the law.

And they cannot hide from us. After all, they are a band of drunkards! And we are stone-cold sober. I'll be damned if these lush-heads escape retribution.

MmmMmm! It looks like they found some absinthe.
Look, Rudy... A wicked gang's lost shipment of contraband booze, imported by alien smugglers, through crooked border liaisons into the hands of even more vile and bloodthirsty bootleggers doesn't have legal ownership any way to Sunday. Hell, pip, it's all up for grabs!

And nothing's going to stop me from finding that truck.

I think you should come clean with Mr. Tutha. Maybe he'll forgive you.

In a pig's eye! You don't think Harrison would've taken Jonas "ice-skating," do you?

Nah, the ice is too thin.
Something to fill the void?

I think you should dry up.

You had a nice little scam going but it didn’t pan out.

"Didn’t pan out?!” That’s an understatement. I lied to Harrison. If he’s alive, he knows I’ve betrayed him. And the Lizard Lounge. If he’s caught, he’ll give me up to the fuzz.

I’m dead and you know it.

But if he’s on the lam, he’s bound to come after me.

Relax. You’re having a panic attack.

HeeHeh.

I wonder which one it will be? Blackie or Wingtip. It hadn’t occurred to me...
In the Detroit underworld, there is a full cast of freelance enforcers. Aside from the regular Purple Gang axemen, Ed “Blackie” Licavoli and his partner Jimmy “Wingtip” Osborne have worked their way up the ranks of the East Side River Gang to become the city’s deadliest.

**TOP NOTCH CANNONS**

Licavoli’s called “Blackie” because he’s the darkest guy in the Zerilli association. He claims to be pure Sicilian but he can’t be trusted on the matter. You see, he’s sweet on fair Sue Hathaway. She’s playing with fire though, cuz Blackie can cut up rough. I’d hate to witness all the bloody Chop Suey once Blackie finds out she has a backdoor man. And his pal Wingtip’s even worse.

Tip’s nom de guerre is more grim than it might sound at first blush. Once, Blackie let someone’s air out, and the sap bled all over Wingtip’s new shoes. They cost a century but he went right out and bought another pair the very next day. He’s a slave to fashion, buying up a closet full because he’s in such a messy profession. I’d hate to be on either one’s “to do” list.

Tutha will call for them and they will appear like Johnnies-on-the-Spot. Then they’ll come for me.

There’s been an international incident.
Speaking of which, they're expected. One or both of 'em.

What?! Those fellas--How should I act around 'em?

Just go back to normal. It can't go back to normal! The situation is TARFU!


Just leave out the part where I came by. Don't worry, this is just a hiccup.

I'll fade. Be careful, Lula. It's liable to be a dangerous night for you.

Thanks Rudy... I hope it's Blackie.
THE BOOK
CADILLAC
HOTEL
You two dunderheads
still aren't telling me
the ONE thing I
wanna know...
Where the deuce
is the hundred
deal worth of
short-necked
whisky?
Not whisky, sir. It
was absinthe.

What the
France are you
talking about?
Absinthe!?

There was
a fallen
crate in
the road.
With a fancy pants
trench label
and
everything.
Absinthe? Nobody drinks
absinthe.

We know
ONE
person.

Lula
Maupassant?

Keep your eyes
peeled for her
tonight.

Very impressive.
You twits thinking
you might make
detective one day?

Yes sir,
Mr. Bernstein.

Happy New
Year, Sir.
Will she turn herself into the pigs?

Never! She can't trust a cop. Her hands are as dirty as her mouth. That French bird is a liability.

Where would you like me to start searching for her?

Oh yes.

Sure thing. Just don't raffle off that new Pontiac until we get back.

Down at the piers. Seems the right chart to take if we're looking for a river rat.

Why don't you take Harry Millman with you? He's the best machine-gunner in the Tri-State.

And if I find her, you want me to eliminate the concern?
Well, hey! Happy New Year, Lula!

Can you plug me through to Detective Resnick's desk, please?

Sure. Please hold.

This is Dwayne Resnick's telephone. You are speaking to Special Agent Concannon.

Hello, I've some information on a juice joint.

The blind pig is at Wayne Street and Larned. It's called The Lizard Lounge and there's no back door exit to the alley.

I'm surprised they haven't been fire-bombed by a rival gang.

Go ahead.
I'm sure.

They're also the ones who tried to move that absinthe from Windsor this evening.

Absinthe? The department has yet to release the details of the verboten trade goods.

May I ask your name please?

Just tell Resnick, one of his trusty dime-droppers.

Me too. Since '26, they've engaged in bootlegging, gambling, and profit sharing with border patrol. The man in charge is Chester Tutha. He's affiliated with the River Gang.

They're responsible for the notorious City Hall flooding prank where they irrigated the Detroit River into John Smith's mayoral office. I'm sure the ex-mayor'll want to get ahold of the men behind that one.

How did you come by your story? Who is calling?
Well, look what we have here.

If she boards, we'll follow the bus 'til she gets off.
Looks like she's turned to a higher power for help.

I hearda short-termers having spiritual awakenings, but she ain't got a prayer.

The poor dear. Another locked door.

You know what they say about prayer don't cha?

They say it's the last refuge of a scoundrel.

And they don't come more desperate or depraved than Lula Maupassant.
Thank God.

You got 'em!

Move it!

Move your feet!
Jab 'em!

You got 'em, Joe!

Move round.

Keep your guard up, Ben!
Pardon me.

What's going on here?

Saint Catherine's regularly hosts evening calisthenics for imbriants. Tonight's boxing.

TAP TAP

Tomorrow is a penguin plunge.

As a healthy alternative to drinking and destroying one's vigor.

Come on, Joe! Stand your ground!

But it's New Year's Eve. Isn't the Good-Word-Herd supposed to be out ringing bells or something?

Trust me, my dear, bells are being rung.

SLAP

WAP

scragh

PAC PAT PAK

CK PAT!

whamp

LAB
Where's the vicar for this outfit?

Father Joe Kirkpatrick? That's him. In the ring.

Black shirt. Broken nose.

Don't be afraid to hit him in the face!

He's been kicked by his own horse!

WHIFF

KAG!
Ya gotta keep your eyes on your opponent if you want to stand a chance of reading his next move.

Father Kirkpatrick?

Yeah?

I think-- I need to make a confession.

Tomorrow. I'm a bit punchy. Smells like you've had some punch as well.

"Eyes?" I think I'm down to "eye."

I think you're the only one who can help me. You're that sighthound who helps all those alcoholics, right? I'm in a tight situation...

Go home, miss. Have a very tall glass of water and go to sleep.

I'll hear you tomorrow.

And when you wake up, have a large breakfast. If you can afford it.

Father, it's important.
If I don't get help tonight, lives might be lost.

Okay, let's hear it...

Atta boy, friar! This is sounding interesting.

Young lady, the only way to free yourself of the alcoholic menace is by the Grace of God...

In private?

And with the support of your fellow kin.

It's my kin that I'm worried about. Please, father, a word?

Albert! Take over.

A couple of more rounds only. Then get ready for Midnight Mass.
Some late night catechism or something. She could be there past midnight. Wanna take EVERYONE out?

I doubt the Bernstein Brothers want us to massacre a church full of Catholics on New Year’s Eve.

No.

Let Lula hang with Carrie Nation all night.

That might drive her to us faster than we could ever chase her.
Your life must be a wreck. Stumbling in here on New Year’s Eve, asking me to get you clean.

I don't have a drinking problem. In fact, it's my strong suit.

I can see that. You have the whole "swaying back and forth" act down to a science.

Nice sermon, friar. But the pressing issue is my papa's soul, not mine.

A searching alcoholic is a solitary sojourner. You can't take your father's journey for him. He should be standing here—

-He can't be moved.

Too drunk to even stand?
He's too crippled to stand.

I could never lift him but a regular darb like you could.

For Midnight Mass, friar, it would mean so much.

Let me grab my coat.

Be careful with the brake, Father.

I've been working on it but when it's cold like tonight the brake can seize up!

The Lord will watch over the brake.

And I'll take care of the rest.
After dinner, guests may be served a small glass of liqueur as a digestif.

The “Coffee Pusher” should pour the drink carefully as to show the different layers.
GENERAL NOTE - When I first wrote this story, originally called “Absinthe,” it was historically plausible, but many of the physical details of the scenes were left to the readers’ imaginations. Once I decided to turn the work into a graphic novel, it became necessary to resume my research in order to maintain historical accuracy. Instead of simply being the author of the story, I also had to become the production designer. It was important for me that every property object, vehicle, roadway and article of clothing was genuine to the period. Needless to say, this commitment to authenticity took a great deal of time and slowed down the artistic production. Hopefully, the small, and sometimes imperceptible, details lend credibility to this story, and a more immersive experience for the reader. Welcome back to 1930.

PAGE 8 - This warehouse district, along Atwater Street, is located against the Detroit River, at the northeast end of the city. For decades, it was the home of Dry Docks Engine Works and Detroit Shipbuilders, but for a brief time, it was abandoned by the boat companies, and eventually Detroit Edison took up residency. This story takes place during the transitional years when the property changed many hands. The dry docks have since been filled with water and years.

PAGE 10 - The Bernstein Brothers: Abe, Joe, Ray, and Izzy, were heads of the Jewish mob family, The Purple Gang. The sobriquet came from their rotten reputation, like bad, purple meat. They terrorized Detroit during the 1920s but a decade later, their reign came to a close. The Italian gangs filled the ensuing power vacuum.

PAGE 11 - After 10 years of Prohibition, the law was almost universally ignored. Cops and criminals alike profited from the contraband. Concan-non’s dedication would be seen as antiquated and corny. Prohibition was steadily losing support and three years hence, was repealed by the Twenty-First Amendment.

PAGE 12 PANEL 7 - “Ice Skating” refers to driving booze across the frozen river from Canada.

PAGE 14 - Polish mobster Chester Tutha ran a criminal outfit out of Hamtramck called the Lizard Gang, and the Lizard Lounge was an actual speakeasy. Wingtip is fictional, but Blackie was loosely modeled after James Livacoli, who became Cleveland’s crime kingpin.

PAGE 16 - The Purple Gang often conducted business in this world-class hotel.

PAGE 17 PANEL 4 - Harry Millman was so violent and hate-filled that he was considered too dangerous by even his own mob family. Although he escaped a car bomb, the rival Sicilian mafia eventually shot him to death in 1937.

PAGE 19 PANEL 2 - Mayor John Smith existed but this prank is pure invention.

PAGE 21 - Saints Peter and Paul’s Jesuit Church on Jefferson Ave is one of Detroit’s oldest original buildings, founded in 1844. The adjunct, St. Catherine’s Chapel, located around the corner at Saint Antoine and Larned, was added to accommodate Detroit’s growing faithful population.

PAGE 23 - Alcoholics Anonymous was not started for another five years, but the self-help temperance movement, best illustrated by the Washingtonians, had been active for fifty years.

PAGE 27 PANEL 5 - Carrie Nation was a famous teetotaler/vandal from the late 19th Century. She wielded a booze-bottle-smashing hatchet. Small in stature, she was the scourge of taverns and a hardline Temperance advocate.