

Rainbow Landing

An Adventure Story

By
FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

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RAINBOW LANDING

CHAPTER I

THE END OF A TRAIL

The boat was late in leaving the Mobile wharf. Dusk fell as it wallowed noisily and slowly up against the current of the Alabama River, under the great bridge, past Hurricane and the lumber mills. The shores ceased to be cleared. Swamps and forests gathered on each shore, dense jungles of cypress and gum and titi, that belted almost the whole course of the river from Mobile to Selma.

Lockwood ate an intensely indigestible supper in the saloon in the company of the dozen or so passengers, mostly silent, malarial-looking up-river farmers. Afterwards there was nothing whatever to do. The passengers smoked for an hour or two on the forward deck, talking in a gentle drawl of cotton and hogs and turpentine, and then vanished to their berths.

It was not much like the old days, when the river boats ran from Mobile to Montgomery crowded with passengers, carrying cotton and slaves and quick-fingered, hair-trigger gamblers; when wine flowed at a gorgeous bar, and rich planters gambled bales of cotton on a single poker hand. The Alabama almost rivaled the Mississippi in those days, and competing boats raced in a flare of pitch smoke, occasionally piling up on a sand bar and blowing up their boilers. But improved roads and motors had killed the river. The few remaining boats ran irregularly and slowly, decadent, slovenly, dejected, carrying only low grade passengers and freight, or

those whose destination lay outside the range of railroads or gasoline.

Long before nine o'clock the decks were cleared. Lockwood sat up for half an hour longer, and then went to his stateroom himself, in sheer boredom. It was hot there and close, and there were mosquitoes in spite of the screened window, but he undressed, lay down, smoked, tried to read, and tried to sleep.

Sleep was not a success. He had slept badly for a long time, and when he did sleep his dreams were often worse than wakefulness. Violent and uneasy thoughts do not make a good pillow, and there was nothing soothing to-night in the throb and quiver of the boat, nor the unceasing *crash-crash* of the stern-wheel paddles under him. He dozed and woke, dozed and finally found himself intensely and nervously awake, his whole imagination concentrated on the encounter he anticipated at the end of the journey. He tentatively touched the little automatic pistol that never left him, slung in a holster under his left arm. He sat and looked out, then dressed himself and went out to the desolate darkness of the forward deck.

The night was pitchy black, and a little fog hung low on the muddy surface of the Alabama. The glow of the boat's deck lights showed the passing shore close alongside, a sliding series of bald white sycamore trunks, bare cypresses, water maples, clumps of mistletoe, Spanish moss, depths of unending swamp that looked as savage as Africa. The powerful searchlight at the bow shot ahead like an inquiring finger, touching the stream in the far distance, shifting and lifting, throwing into uncanny brilliance a clump of trees on the next

bend a mile ahead, as the pilot picked out his landmarks for the deep channel.

Occasionally the whole boat vibrated and shook with the terrific blast of the whistle, a powerful siren made to carry twenty miles over the swamps, to let every landing know the boat was coming, and give plenty of time to meet her.

The air was full of dampness and fog and a woody, musky smell of rotting vegetation from the vast swamps. No light, no sign of human occupation showed anywhere along the shores. Lockwood returned to his stateroom, wearied and mosquito bitten, lay down in his berth, and tried to read yesterday's Mobile paper.

He could not read any more than he could sleep. He had a singular feeling that something was going to happen at last. Perhaps the boat would run on a sand bar, or blow up her boilers; they were directly under him, but he felt highly indifferent. Some one else was sleepless as well as himself, for in the adjoining cabin he heard a soft sound of movement, a rustle of paper, the click of a suit case being opened and shut. He did not know who was in there. The door of that cabin had remained closed ever since the boat left Mobile that afternoon, and the occupant had not come out for supper.

Lockwood had no curiosity about it. He was brain weary, but not sleepy. He felt desperately tired that night—tired of everything, tired particularly of the long trail he had followed so far without success, which he was still following, which he would continue to follow as long as he lived, for he had nothing else to do with his life.

He had no anxiety, for he feared nothing and loved nothing, he thought. He felt that he was even tired of hate, which, he considered, was the only emotion left for him on earth—the only emotion, that is, except that great final one which he was seeking, and which would last not much longer than the flash of a pistol shot.

He was tired, and perhaps he was so tired that he even dozed a little after all, for he came to himself suddenly, shaken by the enormous bellow of the boat's siren. It blew again; he heard the clang of a bell. Probably they were approaching a landing, and he got up and opened his door upon the side deck. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was nearly two o'clock.

Down below him in the gloom there was a great stirring and shouting of the negro roustabouts who were getting out the freight. No port was in sight, but far ahead he saw at last a flicker of a fire somewhere far ahead. The searchlight found it, quenched it for an instant with its white intensity, then shifted, giving a glimpse of trees, of a wooden shed. Undoubtedly this was a stopping place. Again the whistle roared tremendously.

A negro steward came out from the saloon carrying a couple of suit cases.

"What place is this?" Lockwood asked him.

"Dis yere's Rainbow Landin', suh."

A white man had come out also, and was looking over the rail a yard away. As the boat came up, the landing seemed to be a landing and nothing more. There was a wide, open space on the bank, inclosed by cottonwood trees, and a large wooden

building with a platform on the riverside. Some one had lighted a fire ashore. He could see three or four dark figures moving about it. A boat emerged from the gloom and nosed about the warehouse. The searchlight reconnoitered carefully, swept the shore, and lifted to the bluff rising behind it. Lockwood caught a glimpse of a bare clay face, streaked with fantastic strata of crimson and green and white.

A bell clanged. The clumsy boat slowed and turned her nose inshore. The branch of a big cottonwood brushed over the upper deck, as she rammed the warehouse platform with a force that set the structure quivering. A negro leaped ashore with a hawser. The bell clanged again. The boat stopped and swung back, her hawser taut against the current.

A man in the open warehouse door shouted sonorously and unintelligibly up to the pilot house. Two long gangplanks were run ashore, and instantly a stream of negroes shouldered boxes and bales and started to land the freight at a trot, calling, laughing, singing. The searchlight steadied on them like a watchful eye.

In the glare of the electric light Lockwood watched the wild spectacle, the dark river flashing yellow by the boat, the margin of the immense swamp, the grotesquely brilliant streaks of the colored clay, and the fire looking like the camp of some lost expedition. There was a flash of negro eyes and teeth; it was like a midnight scene on the shore of the Congo, and the roustabouts wailed a wild and wordless crooning as they hustled the freight ashore.

The boat clerk called the addresses of the packages as they were carried off, and the warehouse keeper checked them from the other end of the planks. From the high deck rail Lockwood could overlook the freight, and he was surprised at their number for this desolate spot. He was still more surprised at their character. In the brilliant electric light he could see the crates of fruit, the boxes marked "Fragile," bearing the stencil of the most expensive Mobile stores, a big box that must have contained at least a hundred boxes of cigars, an ornate brass hanging lamp, carefully crated, a great leather easy-chair also elaborately packed. All of them seemed addressed to the same name. It might be a store, or a hotel, perhaps—if it were not so absurd to imagine a hotel in these swamps.

"Power" called the clerk monotonously, as package after package went ashore. "Power—Power."

All this freight was going to some one named Power—some one evidently who had a cultivated taste and money to spend. But the valuable stuff was all put ashore at last, and the roustabouts began to carry sacks of fertilizer and corn and cottonseed.

Lockwood leaned on the rail and continued to watch the bizarre activity. He did not notice that some one else had come out of the saloon and stood within a yard of his elbow, until the voice of the newcomer reached him.

"Seems like they've got a heap of freight to——"

Lockwood never heard the rest of that sentence. For a moment the whole wild scene reeled around him; he turned deaf and

dizzy; he felt for an instant as if he had been suddenly dipped in ice water, and then his blood rushed flaming hot.

He had not heard that voice for over five years, but he knew its first word. It had come—the meeting he had pursued for four years, through unimaginable discouragements and hardships and distress. Through sleepless nights he had imagined it a thousand times, but he had never expected it to come like this; and now at the crisis he was astonished to find that he felt no fury of hatred, but only a dead stupefaction.

He collected himself, muttered some answer. He ventured a glance, and met the man's eye. It was McGibbon, right enough, and not greatly changed; his eye rested casually on Lockwood, and then shifted back to the landing. Lockwood was not himself afraid of recognition; for years he had guarded against that danger, and those years had changed him greatly.

It flashed upon him that McGibbon must have been the unseen passenger in the next cabin, since he had not been visible on the boat before. No wonder Lockwood had been sensible of something ominous in the air! Evidently McGibbon was going ashore here as soon as the gangplanks were cleared of freight, for the two suit cases stood beside him, and the deck steward was hovering about, fearful of losing his tip.

Had it not been for this negro, Lockwood could have shot the man unseen, as they stood there. His hand unconsciously crept toward the little automatic that he had carried for years, awaiting this day. He could slip ashore in the darkness, hide in the swamps, reach the railroad. But the steward loitered

behind them, and Lockwood waited, his head still awhirl, for the situation to develop itself.

McGibbon said nothing more, and in a few minutes he beckoned to the negro and they started down the stairs to the lower deck. Lockwood saw him come out on the gangplank, make his way between the roustabouts, pass into the dark warehouses at the other end. With a shock Lockwood realized that he had let his opportunity pass. In a panic he plunged back to his cabin, snatched up his own suit case and dashed out, and down to the lower deck.

“Hol’ on, captain! Dis yere ain’t whar you gits off!” the porter cried as he headed for the plank; but Lockwood brushed past, through roustabouts, and into the warehouse. It was dimly lighted by a couple of lanterns, showing the piled freight, the sacks of oats and cottonseed and fertilizer, the crates and barrels and cases. But McGibbon was not there.

There was an open door at the other end. He set down his suit case and hastened toward it. Outside was the flat, sandy shore space, backed by the woods and the rainbow-colored hill. A road led slantingly up the bluff. He saw a lantern swinging in the distance, and still farther was a white glare that could be nothing but the lights of a motor car on the higher ground.

He was furious with himself now for his delay. He had never dreamed that he was going to flinch at the critical moment. With the pistol in his hand he rushed madly out of the circle of the searchlight and toward the landward road. But he was too late once more. He heard a sound of loud talking, then the car started with an enormous roar, broke into what seemed

sudden, reckless speed, and its lights vanished into the encircling woods.

McGibbon must have gone in it, but to make sure he went on to the top of the hill, and found no one there. He could dimly make out the commencement of a very good road, and far away now he could see the lamp rays of the flying car. He turned back, sick and almost weak with the reaction, and slipped the automatic into his pocket again.

A horse hitched to a buggy was tied to a live oak on the shore, and there were a couple of men beside it as Lockwood came down to the bottom of the road again. One of them was carrying a strong flash light, and turned it on the stranger. Its ray also revealed a row of rough barrels, and something crunched under his feet with a familiar feeling. He had worked in the turpentine woods before, and he knew rosin barrels when he saw them.

“Was that car from the turpentine camp?” he inquired, by an inspiration.

“No, sir; I reckon not. Must have been the Power boys’ car,” came an answer in a soft Alabaman voice from behind the electric ray.

“Sure was,” confirmed another drawl. “Reckon it was here to meet Mr. Hanna. I seen him get off the boat. He’s stayin’ with the Power boys.”

Hanna? McGibbon had changed his name then. But that was to be expected; and Lockwood himself was not carrying the same name as five years ago, when he and McGibbon were partners.

“Where do the Powers live?” he asked his almost invisible interlocutors.

“Bout two mile from here, past the post office. Goin’ thar to-night?”

“Oh, no,” Lockwood exclaimed. “In fact, I’m going to the turpentine camp. But I’ve got to find a place to stay to-night.”

“Ain’t but one, I reckon. Mr. Ferrell at the post office takes in travelers sometimes. It’s a right smart ways from here, but I’ve got his hawse an’ buggy, and I’m goin’ that way, so I can carry you, if you like.”

Lockwood accepted gladly. It was too dark for him to see much of the road as they topped the rising ground, but he made out the loom of immense woods against the sky. The road dipped again; mist lay thick and choking close to the ground, full of the swamp odor of rotting wood. Innumerable frogs croaked and trilled, and though it was a warm spring night the air in the hollows struck with a poisonous chill.

The road rose again. The woods fell away; they passed several negro cabins and cornfields. Then it wound through a belt of dense forest, but this time scented with the clean, sweet aroma of the long-leafed pine. The mist vanished, and he could see the crests of the big trees palmlike against the sky.

“You are a turpentine man, sir?” inquired his guide, after a long period of silence.

“Yes, I’ve been in the turpentine business,” Lockwood answered truthfully. He was afraid to ask directly about what most filled his mind, but at last he ventured to inquire:

“Has Mr. Hanna got anything to do with the camp?”

“Hanna? No, sir. I don’t reckon he knows anything ’bout turpentinin’. He’s just stayin’ with the Power boys. Been with ’em ever sence they come into their good luck, I reckon—brought it to ’em, some says.”

It was a new thing for McGibbon, or Hanna, to bring anybody good luck, Lockwood thought; and he asked:

“What sort of luck?”

“All kinds—money, mainly. Well, right here I’ve got to turn off. But you keep right straight down the road, and you’ll come to the post office in ’bout a quarter mile. They’ll all be asleep, I expect, but you kin roust ’em out. They won’t mind—no, sir!”

The road indeed forked here, and the buggy proceeded down the other branch, as Lockwood started to walk in the indicated direction. A moon was just beginning to show above the pines now, and he could see a little more distinctly. Presently he saw a group of three or four middle-sized buildings close to the road.

Undoubtedly this was Mr. Ferrell’s post office. Lockwood hesitated; he did not much care to attract attention, considering his mission; and lodging was immaterial to him, after all. It would be only a few hours till daylight, and he had never felt less inclined to sleep in his life.

He sat down on a log opposite the dark and silent group of houses. Nothing moved in that whole wilderness landscape. The moon crept up; its light fell white on the sand of the road, crossed by the intensely black shadows of the water-oaks. Restlessly Lockwood got up and walked on again. The Power boys' place was not much farther, he understood, and he desired above all things to see the spot where his enemy had gone.

The moon was growing brilliantly clear now. The road passed through a strip of pine woods, a series of partially cultivated fields. Then there was a fence on the right, with a great grove of some stately trees behind it, oaks or walnuts, planted with symmetry. Within a hundred yards he came to a pair of heavy gateposts, from which a broken gate hung askew. He looked within and stopped, taken aback.

Fifty yards within, at the end of a long and wide drive, stood a great house, fronted with a Colonial portico, looking like pure marble in the moonlight. The earth of the drive was of silver-white sand. The faintest haze of mist hung in the air, transfiguring the breathless scene to magic. Not a leaf stirred on the trees. It was a spectacle of black and silver and marble, half theatrical, half ghostly, but seeming wholly unreal, as if it might vanish at a breath.

CHAPTER II

RESPIRE

The sheer unearthly beauty of the spectacle was so thrilling and unexpected that Lockwood stepped back, breathless. A sense of deep peace that was as strange and poignant as pain sank into his heart. He felt himself and his grim purpose to be a blot on this exquisite earth.

But this was certainly where McGibbon lay, or Hanna, as he called himself now. This was certainly the Powers' place. There was no light at any window, no sound or movement anywhere about the place. Afraid of being seen from the house, he moved a little way up the road, and sat down on a fallen tree trunk. The live-oak leaves were silvery and still overhead, and a whip-poor-will reiterated its monotonous and musical cry among the deep leaves.

But memory had broken the enchantment of the night for Lockwood. To meet McGibbon on the river had been the last thing he expected, still less to find him landing in this wilderness of swamp, bayou, and pine forest. He had traced the man to Mobile from New Orleans, from Pensacola, and had heard a rumor that he might be in Selma. He had taken the boat instead of the train; it was cheaper, and he was short of money, and for money his poverty had proved his fortune.

It was a three years' trail that had come to an end here at Rainbow Landing, a trail that had led from Virginia to Washington, and halfway across the continent, and south to the

Gulf Coast. The search was all he had to live for—if he could signify by the name of Life the wretched and ruined years which seemed all that were left to him.

He was not the first man who has been ruined by a business associate, but it is not often that the ruin is so complete and sweeping. Looking back now, Lockwood was continually filled with an increasing amazement that anybody could ever have been so incredibly trusting, so almost criminally young as he had been.

Yet that far-away, foolish, and happy life dated only seven years back. It seemed twenty; but three of those years had been the life of a dog, of a wolf; and two of them had been spent in prison for a crime that was not, at least willingly, his own. He remembered well the day of his release, when he saw the aged and pallid face in the shop-front mirror, and barely recognized it as his own. He did not care. It was more effectual disguise, and he had already determined what he must do. Luckily he had a little cash now to help him—a small legacy of a thousand dollars left him during his imprisonment. With this he established his “gold reserve.”

McGibbon, he found, had ventured back to Melbourne to pick up the last profits from Lockwood’s once-flourishing business, which he had first inflated and then wrecked. Afterward he had gone with the plunder to Washington, and this was where Lockwood first took up the trail.

McGibbon was flush then; he spent his money freely, and he left his tracks in the capital, and afterward in Pittsburgh and Buffalo. Here the money must have run short, for he went to

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