



SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES

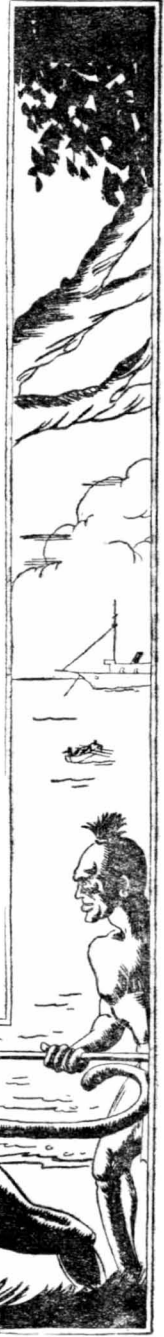
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RANGER'S



By
**JAMES A.
LAWSON**

The window crashed, the door burst open—just as Raine snarled: "Hell ain't good enough for you!"

THE headlights on Jack Raine's car swept the way ahead. It was supposed to be a road. Teams and trucks and tractors had made it an impossible way of deep holes, sour mud. As rough as the way to hell. And leading to that oil boom canker of Parasite, it amounted to about the same.

The heavy fall of rain, swept by cold wind that came unobstructed across two-hundred miles of plains, lashed at the

car. Raine dodged a mudhole, cursed, leaned suddenly, his nose pressed almost against the windshield.

Ahead, staggering, slipping, a dark, human figure showed. Raine's right hand left the wheel, tentatively touching his shoulder-holstered gun. There was no telling: what tricks might be tried to feel him out; what methods used to get him.

The figure was down, now, in the slop

REWARD

The dead never listen. And Lou Canton would have been listening—except that she loved the wrong man, and helped trap him in a frame that didn't work!



and downpour. Raine put on his brakes, skidded to a stop, leaped out. Rain blobbed by his lights, dimming the glow of them. In that faint glow, he saw the one down in the mud there was—a girl!

She was small. He lifted her easily, carried her toward the car. Surprised as he was, he could not help but notice the soft smallness of her. The warmth of her limbs against his hands went through him; the jerky rise and fall of upthrust, firm, tiny breasts sent fire into his brain.

The girl moaned faintly as he put her into the seat beside him, covered her as best he could with an old coat and started the car again.

LIGHTS, then, came gleaming through the storm, towering into the sky; gas flares in oil camps sent red glowing into the night. Jack Raine's car bounced and slithered into Parasite—a mile-long damnation of tents, sheetiron, unpainted boards. Board walks, even at this late hour, were jammed. Men cursed, fought; women, long limbs exposed, soft stomachs and firm hips swaying, went among these men. Noise, smells—plain hell!

Raine drove on to the edge of the town. Where a few cottonwood trees grew beside a wet-weather streambed, he turned in at a little two-room house. The girl beside him mumbled, but did not open her eyes.

Inside the little place, Raine put the girl down on his bed, lit a gas heater, took off his coat and turned to his find. Plastered with drying mud, her wet clothes sticking to her—Raine damned himself for such thoughts now. He washed the mud from her face. A face that was small, heart-shaped, and with bee-stung lips that even now, pouted to be kissed.

The girl shivered. Raine shook her. Without result. Those wet clothes had to

come off! Pneumonia, at least a terrible cold, would be her lot if they did not.

He swallowed, set his teeth and did what he must do. Her shoes, wet, worn; her stockings. The bedraggled coat to her cheap suit, her waist. Stained with muddy water, her brassiere was next. Raine's breath whistled through his teeth. As though seeking him, begging him for care and protection, those delectable breasts caught, refused to yield his eyes.

As one dazed, he went on with his job, though the very sight of those soft white mounds seemed to sear him. He jerked his hands away.

Sweat poured from him as he gently lifted her, and finished undressing her. He gnawed his lips and a stunned, lethargic feeling possessed him as he wet a towel.

The slender, perfect length of her seemed to relax, when he sponged off the mud. Raine, a hoarse croaking in his throat, hurled the towel into a corner, drew a blanket over the girl's white body. He found a bottle in a cupboard, poured a large drink, tossed it off; poured a smaller one, held it to the girl's red lips as he lifted her head. She gasped, was quiet a moment, opened her eyes. She stared blankly for a moment; her dark eyes saw Raine standing there. A little cry broke from her.

HIS voice low and drawling, was soothing to her, and somehow instantly allayed her fears. "Ma'm, don't be frightened. You ain't in no danger with me." (No, dammit! he thought. That's the hell of it.)

She moved, the blanket slipped back. Her questing little hands brushed her bare thighs, slipped quickly down, then upward. Her indrawn breath was audible

and a high color sped from her shoulders into her face.

"Them wet clothes," Raine said gently, "just had to come off."

She nodded, her large eyes somehow understanding.

"Tell me," Raine said, "how come you was out on the road to Parasite this kind of a night?"

It didn't come out so easily, at first. And then, as if it were a very natural thing, she told him how it was.

"My father died, a year ago," she informed him. "I lived on a little he left, for a while. I'd never been trained to work, you see. The money gave out. I could always sing, dance a bit. I tried to get a job. In Kansas City, I was trying out in a little place. A woman came up to me. She said she was in a big club in this new oilfield boom."

"That woman," Raine said almost harshly. "Was her name Lou Canton?"

"Why—yes. You know her?"

"Go on," he said.

"Well, it seemed a chance to me. I took what few dollars I had remaining, and came on. I—well, I didn't have bus fare out into the field. I had no money for food. I started walking."

"Fifty miles," Raine almost groaned.

"A truck stopped. Picked me up. The driver seemed nice, until it got dark. Then—" she colored, "he stopped. I jumped out and ran. After that—oh! I was so hungry and cold—I tried to keep off the road. I remember lights of a car, falling. That's all."

Raine, a hard, cold way to him, moved into his kitchen. He wasn't much of a bachelor, and there was little enough food in the place. He turned. The girl was in the doorway, a blanket around her shoulders. She came toward the stove, her marvelously-moulded legs showing at each step.

"I feel strong enough. Let me." She took a pan from his hand—a hand more used to a bucking, thundering gun. Her touch did something to him. To her. The pan clattered to the floor, his arms were around her, lifting her off her feet. And there was response in the moist, clinging press of her lips. The concealing blanket slid from her shoulders.

Her breath, then, was hot, firing him as she said into his ear: "Please! Please!"

Choking, he set her down, picked up the blanket. Slim, proud and straight, she stood quiescent while he wrapped it about her.

Suddenly, she laughed. "I know your name, but you don't know mine. It's Grace. Grace Searl."

THEY were gay while they ate what she prepared. Rain made comfortable noises on the roof; the threat of the boom, the noise and the hell of it seemed very far away.

Yet they avoided each other's eyes. Dynamite lay in a single direct glance.

They went to sit before the fire. Jack Raine came directly to the point. "You can't work for that place, Grace. Here's why: Lou Canton is no good. The law wants her, and the devil for whom she works—Al Pawt. Wants them for luring girls like you into these booms, for one thing. Club? Pawt's Roughneck Roost is a dive—with whiskey and gambling downstairs, rooms up above. You see?"

She sat stunned, silent, the hope and happiness gone out of her. Gently, Raine said, "Don't worry. I think I know where there is a job for you. In the morning, we'll see. I'll sleep here on the floor."

When she was in bed, the light out, he lay listening. To each, the presence of the other was a magnet. Yet each fought the impulse to go to the other. Her voice

came to him. "Jack, what sort of work do you do?"

"Uh, sometimes I work in the oilfield. Sometimes I gamble some. I'm sort of a tumbleweed."

"Oh." There was a little note of doubt in that one word.

"**A**UNT Emma" Smith took one look at Grace Searl, heard Jack Raine's story, and took the girl in her arms. "Thank Heaven," the old lady cried, "it was a man like Jack Raine picked you up. He's a wild young devil, but he's to be trusted—as far as a good-looking young girl can ever trust the male tribe."

Jack Raine, then, saw Grace Searl settled as the one clerk in Aunt Emma's little variety store. He turned to go. Aunt Emma who had known him in many other oilfields, went to the door with him.

"I know you," she said. "Right now, you're going over to Pawt's Roughneck Roost. And you ain't fooling me, Jack. I know your game. Don't think Pawt don't suspect it, too. Be careful."

"Careful?" he echoed. "I think the time's come to do away with that. Al Pawt, his bunch of yellow dogs, have got by with worse than murder in half a dozen booms. This's got to be the last!"

A tall, striding figure, Raine cut across the muddy street. The wind seemed to blow straight from the Pole, hitting this part of Texas with savage velocity. Raine, besides the clean-cut look he bore, dressed differently from these men of the fields: He wore cowboy boots under his straight trousers; his jacket was canvas instead of the usual leather; his hat was cowman type.

He pushed between two buildings and came to a large, two-story two-by-four-and-sheetiron dump in the rear of these. This sort of thing was not to be done

away with in an oilfield boom—a drinking-gambling joint like Roughneck Roost. But other things, murder, hijacking, transportation of good women, had to stop.

Getting the proof—that was the trick. And Al Pawt knew a few tricks himself.

This time of morning, but few men were at the home-built bar. Raine strode to a table near an inside stairway in the rear. Having hair off the dog, Lou Canton—and some called her "The Lady That's Known As Lou"—pushed back her chair when Raine came to her.

Her full bosom swelled, she ran her tongue over her lips, and the look on her face was a hot and feverish one. "At Smackover, again at Borger, and in Oklahoma, you wouldn't come to me," she said, a note of passion in her deep-pitched voice. "Have you changed your mind?"

"Save yourself," Raine grunted, a look of near-disgust supplanting the hard expression on his lean face. Dull color flushed the woman's features, hell blazed in her eyes. He might curse her, kick her, kill her, and she would have taken it because she wanted him. But his look of disgust—She resolved to fix Jack Raine's clock for that!

"Where's this rat, Al Pawt?" Raine grunted.

"Kind of speaking out of turn, ain't you?"

RAINE turned slowly, carefully. When Pawt's kind were behind one, it was wise to move that way. Raine's hard eyes were icy augers that bored Pawt's dark, beak-nosed face. The feeling of hate that ran between them was tangible, physical.

"Ain't speaking out of turn when I call you a rat," Raine growled. "Except, I have to apologize to the rat. And there's

no use wasting time. Pawt, last night I picked up a girl. Name of Grace Searl." He turned the hard focus of his orbs on Lou Canton. "You 'hired' her in KayCee; the usual stuff. You didn't pay her way here—so you're safe from U. S. law. But—"



As she leaped, he caught her dress; it ripped from her.

Al Pawt came a step nearer Raine, and when he spoke, his voice was so level as to be deadly. "Raine, I hate your guts. You broke my gambling house in West Texas—that last boom. Crooked, I'd bet blues in big stacks. Now, you root in here. What the hell business you got, telling me about the law?"

"None," Raine gave back. "Except

that one girl ain't never coming in this place."

Pawt swelled visibly. He'd seen a picture of this Grace Searl. One Lou Canton had brought back on her last "recruiting" trip. And just looking at that picture had made Pawt restless, waiting for the girl to arrive.

"I got ideas about you," Pawt snarled. "And one of them is that you're a low-down son . . ."

Pawt's right hand swept back toward his right hip-pocket.

Jack Raine bent at the waist, and it seemed his right hand came up from the floor. Pawt swayed and ran his beak of a nose into Raine's left.

Raine was on him, hammering him back against the wall. Pawt's right hand cleared his pocket. Raine chopped down the side of his stiffened hand hitting Pawt's wrist. The gun Pawt had drawn clattered to the floor.

"You — low — damned — woman-wrecking scum!"

Each word a burst of breath and effort behind a blow. Pawt was held upright against the wall. His head jerked this way and that, his knees sagged. Sheer savagery of the blows Raine swung kept Pawt propped upright.

A man at the bar groaned sickishly; another turned his head. Pawt's face was not a lovely thing to see. And then Raine stepped back and Pawt pitched to his hands and knees. Blood ran from his mouth and nose, dripping, spraying as he shook his head.

He looked up at Raine, choked, found tongue.

"A'right. This time, I lose. But there'll be a next time. And don't think I don't know what you are!"

Raine, disgusted, damning the fact he could not prove what he knew about Al

Pawt, spun, cursed angrily, strode from the place.

Pawt arose and staggered into a chair. Lou Canton pushed a drink toward him. "Listen, fool," she began.

"I'm tired of your tongue," he snarled. "Some of these days, I'll wring that pretty neck of yours."

"I think not," she sneered. "Right now, I'm telling you how to get back at Raine. I hate his guts, damn him!"

"Because he'll have none of you. But, go ahead. What's this plan? And if it'll lead him into getting his knot where we can shoot it off without getting hooked at it . . ."

Pawt listened. "You devil," he said at last. "Women—hell! Men ain't in it when it comes to figuring out the dirt."

Pawt arose, called up the stairs. "Nace. Falk, damn you, come down," he bel-lowed.

A PAIR of puffy-eyed nondescripts clumped down from the den above. Nace, ferret-faced, twitchy; Falk, glassy-eyed, the mark of a conscienceless killer onto him. It was said you couldn't win a big stake in a place run by Pawt—and get away. And more than one man who *had*, had been found out in the oil-fields—dead. Or a year or so after the boom had passed, his body fished out of an oil storage tank.

Bunkhouses, when payday came, were robbed. And men again whispered the name of Pawt. But proof? Murder cannot be proved when death, wild-living, sudden, indifferent law draw a veil over such things.

And Pawt was always in his place. Who knew where Nace and Falk might be those nights when men were robbed, or killed?

They listened to Pawt without sign of emotion, and when he had done, turned and went back upstairs.

Throughout that day, Pawt waited. Toward early dark, Lou Canton returned from an errand of her own. "I found out. He didn't leave her at his place. She's working for Aunt Emma. Emma's out, right now."

An eager way to him, Pawt hurried out.

IN the dim light of the little store, the beauty of Grace Searl caught and held Pawt's breath. He was glad of the dimness in this place.

"Miss Searl," he said without preamble, "I'm Al Pawt. You see my face? Jack Raine did that to me. Why? Because I wanted to learn your whereabouts, and protect you. Raine, Miss Searl, is a killer. And the reason he didn't want you to work for me: Lou Canton and Raine are—uh, in love. Like that."

The girl shook her head. "I—what am I to believe?" She cried. "Why tell me this?"

"To protect you. I can show you proof."

Grace Searl drew back. "I don't know," she muttered. "I'll ask Aunt Emma."

"Isn't she a friend of Raine's? I said I'd give you proof. If it isn't so, all right. If it is, go to work with me. I'm opening up a new club, out on the edge of the field. You can go to work tonight."

"I don't know what to do. What he does is his business. But I came here to dance and sing my way toward a career," she muttered. Sudden decision possessed her. "What is this proof?"

"At dark, go to Raine's place. Look in."

Slowly, she nodded.

"And then come to me. I'll take care of you."

She did not catch the double meaning in his voice.

There was a double meaning there. Pawt felt his blood racing in his veins—hot, avid. And a new angle of this trap came to his mind: Not only would he draw Raine into sudden death, he'd cross Lou Canton, and have Grace Searl for himself.

Darkness came suddenly. Jack Raine had driven far that day. Strange business, his. Business that led to a sheriff's posse finding three stolen cars in the broken hills, and a murder suspect in isolated river brakes.

Whistling, Raine stripped to the waist, heated water and poured it into a pan. He stiffened suddenly, then turned. Closing the door behind her. Lou Canton, smiling, came on in.

She took a chair, crossed full limbs and said: "Jack, I got to talk with you."

"Go ahead," he grunted ungraciously. He turned, soaped his hands and face and bent above the washpan.

LOU CANTON came to her feet. Nimble fingers worked at her dress. Spluttering, Raine pawed for a towel, wiped the soap out of his eyes. He grunted abruptly, then. The towel fell to the floor.

In high-heeled shoes, sheer stockings, a tiny strip of silk girdle that revealed more than it hid, Lou came near to him. She flung her arms around his neck.

Her breasts were heavy, swelling as they pressed against him, like torches ready to light his way to hell in an explosive way. She twisted her hips, undulated.

"Jack," she whispered.

He felt disgust, but despite it, he was carried momentarily out of himself. It was beyond his power to resist. His lips met hers, and he could feel her teeth lightly touch his lip.

He grunted, jerked back, thrusting

her away. A glimpse of a small, white face at a window, and understanding was like a lightning bolt against his brain. He opened the door and ran outside.

"Grace. Grace!" he called. Only the wind, whistling in the bare-limbed cottonwoods, gave answer. A mocking return, at that. Raine spun and lunged back inside. Still half unclad, Lou Canton sat and smoked a cigarette.

"Now that she's gone, think how nice I am," she purred.

"It's warmer in hell!" Raine croaked. His hands shot out, gripped around her throat and he lifted her from the chair. "It ain't good enough, or bad enough," he snarled, thrusting her away.

A scream ran past her lips, shrill bursting.

Glass of one window crashed, the door was flung open. Nace stood in the door, and with a gun thrust before it, Falk's face showed through the edging of the broken windowpane.

Raine swayed, resisted the impulse to make a dive for the gun that lay on a bench with his shirt.

"This's nice." Dead-panned, Nace spoke emotionlessly. His gun pointed at a point between Lou Canton and Raine. "Nice. They'll find you, John Law, dead. With a naked dame. They'll be a gun, and it'll look like suicide, with maybe murder. You kill the dame, shoot yourself—see?"

"I see," Raine said on exhaled breath.

Lou Canton shook her head, as though clearing it from a blow.

"Nace!" she cried sharply. "You and Falk are full of hop. It wasn't to be that way. I—I was to scream, and he was to get dead because he attacked me."

"Pawt's seen that dame, and likes her," Falk jeered from the window. "He don't want you around to bother him."

Lou Canton stood straight, whimp-

ered, screamed. "He's doublecrossed me. No! You can't kill me, too. No—"

She hurled herself at the door. Nace's gun ran flame and smoke and lead.

Raine flung himself backward to the floor, rolled to his knees and reached the bench. Bullets from Falk's automatic tore the floor around him. Raine's hand gripped his gun, his finger worked the trigger. Falk's face disappeared from the window.

Lou Canton's momentum carried her squarely against the muzzle of Nace's gun. Desperate, dying reaction caused her arms to fling themselves around his neck. He cursed, fought with her, his gun sounding muffled as he pumped bullets into her bare, white flesh.

She fell away from him. Nace raised his weapon. A wailing cry broke past his lips. Braced, gun ready, Raine waited. The cry of despair Nace gave was drowned by the pistol's throaty roar. Nace reached for the doorframe, missed, fell back outside.

RAINE was on his knees beside Lou Canton. Blood ran from her lips, from terrible wounds in her. "'S all right, Jack," she whispered, never opening her eyes. "I had it coming a long time. That girl, Jack. Pawt will have her by now. In that shack of his, back of the place."

"Listen, Lou." There was sorrow, regret in Raine's voice.

Lou Canton wasn't listening. The dead never do.

Raine pulled on a coat, ran out, leaping the body of Nace. He ran around the house. Falk lay in a crumpled heap, face-down in the mud. Stuffing shells into his gun, Raine ran on.

He did not go down the street, but cut down a refuse and can littered alley back of the buildings on one side. That

shack of Pawt's! When a new girl attracted him, he took her there. The noise of the Roost, of drilling wells and hissing gas, the roar of Parasite, killed any sound that might come from that shack.

AND Pawt, guiding Grace Searl out the rear door of Roughneck Roost, was headed for it now. A little fear, distrust of Pawt was becoming livid within the girl. Yet the scene at Raine's remained a vivid thing. She could not trust Raine, she felt sure.

Her scream only fed Pawt's anger; he seized her brutally.



"My car's back here," Pawt explained, leading her toward the shack.

"I'll wait," she muttered affrightedly, pulling back. Something warned her. But warned too late.

"I won't!" Pawt snarled. His right arm encircled her neck and he lifted her, choking off her outcry, shutting away her breath. She kicked backward at him, struggling furiously. His left hand hit her face, stunned her; she sobbed for breath, and things grew dim.

Still dimly, she knew a door slammed, was locked. A yellow, sickly gas-jet light was lit. She lay on a cot in a corner. Save for this, a table and two chairs, there was no furniture in here.

Groaning miserably, she sprang up. His face contorted, Al Pawt came at her, backed her into a corner. Brutally, his hands grasped the front of her coat-suit, ripped coat and waist away. Grace Searl screamed until it seemed her throat must split. She tried to bite his hands. He tore at her, slapped her. His fingers fumbled for the band of her skirt.

His eyes burning, saliva drooling from his mouth, he let her out of the corner. The girl ran toward the door. Laughing, Pawt gripped the skirt and ripped it clear. She stumbled, whimpering, and went to the floor. Fear paralyzed her. She knew he was removing her stockings, binding her hands with them.

Pawt's terrible hands ran over her, pinching, pawing. He made animal sounds in his throat, his lips seared her face, her throat.

"Pawt!"

Pawt stiffened, an insanely-angered glitter in his eyes. "Pawt!" the call came again. The voice was wheezy and strained. "It's me, Nace. Pawt, hell's busted loose. Lou framed Raine, and we crossed them. Killed her, But Raine slipped us. He got Falk."

"Damn you," Pawt raged. "Stay out there. If he comes here, lead him down. To hell with him. Nothing's going to stop me now."

"Pawt, I can't. I'm shot—bad."

"Die, then, damn you," Pawt snarled back. He turned to the girl once more.

THE shack rattled, seemed to rock. The door bulged. It came again, then, as Raine, his trick failing, hurled his weight against the barricade. It gave, and he fell into the shack, landing on the floor on hands and knees.

Pawt hurled himself around, shrieked like the damned and insane, and reached for his gun.

Raine—his urge was to kill Al Pawt with bare hands. Tear him slowly to bits and break his back. Yet this thing, his wish, he could not do. He squatted, waiting, still on one knee. Pawt: frustration, desire had blinded him. His gun cleared, came up.

A single shot roared thunderously within the place.

Pawt's breath was driven from him as he spun around. His hands hung limply at his sides. He swayed, braced his hands on the table . . . Suddenly, the life ran completely out of him. Accordion-like, joint-by-joint, he folded to the floor.

Shaking his head, Raine looked down at him. His hand opened and his gun fell to the floor. "I reckon," he mumbled, "that is the end of it. My job is done."

He went to Grace Searl, untied her, helped her to sit erect. The fear ran slowly out of her; relief crowded in. Fumbling, Raine gathered up the rags of her clothes, keeping his eyes from her.

"I guess," he said, peeling off his coat, "you'll have to wear this. Your suit's torn all to hell."

The canvas garment came hardly be-

low her hips. She bit her lips as he knelt and put her slippers on her feet.

"We can't go back to my place," he mumbled. "I was right when I yelled through the door—only Nace, he got dead, too. I got a friend who owns a little place near here. He ain't home now. We can sneak in there, and then I'll get you some clothes."

They crept down the alley, went up a deserted little side street, came to the place of Raine's friend. He climbed in a window and opened a door for her.

In his short, cow-country jacket, Grace Searl stood near the stove. Her deep eyes sought his face.

"Jack," she half-sobbed. "What will they do to you, for killing him—those others?"

"Nothing. I should've done it long ago."

"What did you mean when you said your job was done, and that was the end of it?"

"Look under that jacket; the left side," he said.

She opened the jacket. Raine ground his teeth and stared at the small, perfect body thus revealed. She seemed not to notice this. She was looking at the little blue and gold badge pinned inside the coat.

"Yeah," Raine sighed. "I'm a sort of

Ranger. Working special out of the Adjutant General's office."

She looked up at him, her red lips parting. She blushed when she looked down at herself—but did *not* button the jacket!

"That woman—Lou. She was wise. And she loved you!"

He shrugged. "Couldn't help herself, I guess."

SHE came a step nearer him. The lines of her breasts made him quiver; the whole feminine beauty of her took his breath. The gently-rounding hips of her, her questing innocence—Raine groaned and closed his eyes.

"Some things, lover," her voice was tremulous, whispery, "you must have to teach me."

She was on tiptoe, arms about his neck. He let his breath go explosively, picked her off the floor, cuddling that warm little body against his own.

This town, this boom, had been a hell-site—yet it promised to be paradise for him now. Her lips sought his, he felt the pound of her heart, the rising of her pulse. Her breath came faster and more eagerly.

"This," she breathed her ecstasy, "is not the end. Your job will never be done."