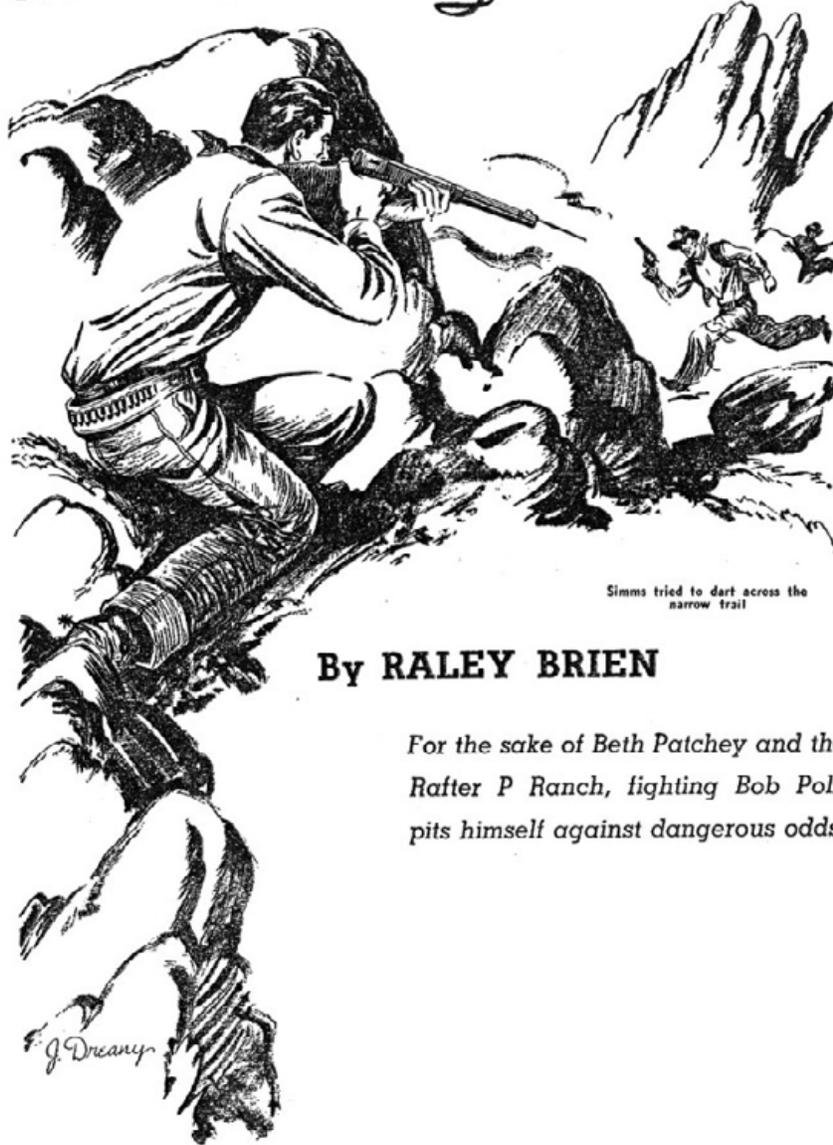


# GUARDIAN *of the* TRAIL



Simms tried to dart across the narrow trail

By RALEY BRIEN

*For the sake of Beth Patchey and the Rafter P Ranch, fighting Bob Polk pits himself against dangerous odds!*

**B**ETH Patchey's eyes were filled with worry. "Hurry back with Dad's medicine, Bob," she urged. "And don't forget the mail. I'll be here at the ranch alone until you get back." She looked up at him anxiously. "You know, with the two boys gone up into the hills looking for those strays, and not coming back until late tomorrow or the next day—"

Bob Polk swung up into his saddle and gathered the reins. He was an attractive

man of about thirty, tall and strong of movement.

"You'll be all right, honey," he told Beth. "Read your Dad to sleep and let him sleep as long as he will. I'll burn up the trail."

He looked at Beth as she stood in the doorway of the sprawling ranch-house nestling in a grove of trees. Beth made a lovely eyeful. Bob Polk, top rider for the outfit had fallen in love with her the first

week he was at the ranch. That was three years ago. Now they were to be married when things got straightened out a bit.

Beth waved to him as he wheeled his eager bay pony and turned down the trail to the town of Oasis Valley, several miles away.

The trail was exclusively for the Rafter P. No other ranch used the road that dipped down sharply off the mesa to run on to the town. It was said that one man could stand among the rocks at the head of the trail and fight off a dozen more. That never had come to pass yet, and Polk hoped it never would. The Rafter P had had trouble enough, in his estimation.

A year ago John Patchey had been terribly hurt when a horse had thrown him and his foot had caught in a stirrup. He had been dragged for a long distance before the frenzied mount was stopped.

There had been a long fight to save his life. Doctors from a distant city, expensive operations, months of being in casts. The Rafter P was not a wealthy ranch, and the financial drain due to Patchey's injury had about wrecked it.

Stock had been sold and ranch hands dismissed and now only Bob Polk and two others remained. Polk bore the burden willingly. Things would be all right some day, he kept saying.

John Patchey was beginning to mend swiftly. Still extremely weak from his long illness, the leg encased in a cast was mending more satisfactorily.

Only the day before, Polk had gone through the books and accounts and had held a conference with Patchey. They had worked out a plan.

They had a bunch of yearlings ready for sale. The money realized would clear away their debts and leave enough to get going again, if strict economy was used. The news had cheered Beth and her father.

Out on the trail, Bob let the eager pony show all the speed he wished. At the top of the mesa trail, he stopped the pony for a breathing spell, and looked ahead. In the distance he could see the cluster of brown dots that was the town of Oasis Valley.

In reality, it was only a trading post containing Luke Harson's general store and postoffice, a saloon-eating house, a blacksmith shop, and half a dozen small dwellings.

Polk sent his pony down the steep descent from the mesa and presently they were on the flinty trail that led to the town.

**T**HE wind was up, and a fine dust blowing as Polk dismounted in front of the general store in Oasis Valley. Tying his pony to the rail, he noticed a horse tethered to a hitch-post at the side of the store building. Some stranger must be in town, for regular visitors never used that post unless the hitchrails in front of the store and saloon were all taken.

Kicking the dust from his boots, Polk opened the squeaky screen door of Luke Harson's Store. Harson, a short, fat man with thin graying hair, was sitting comfortably in front of his counter, nodding over a newspaper. He opened a sleepy eye as Polk entered.

"Did a package of medicine come for Mr. Patchey?" Polk inquired.

"Sure did, by mail. Got a coupla letters and some catalogs for you, too, Bob."

"I'll hit back to the ranch soon as my pony gets tended to. Beth's all alone there with her father. Our two boys are huntin' strays up in the hills. Everybody asleep in town?"

"That's right, you ain't heard," Harson told him, as he pulled his spectacles down over his eyes and went through the partition separating store from postoffice. "A rider came tearin' into town this

mornin' from the Box D ranch, Al Darch's outfit. Trouble there."

"Yeah?" Polk rolled a quiry and leaned against the counter. He looked at Harson questioningly.

"Jake Lortz and a couple of his men showed up there late last night," Harson told him. "Yuh know that Lortz bunch. Pretend to be cattle buyers. They get a small ranchman cornered and make him sell them cattle at about half price. Force him to give a bill of sale and make everything look legal. Pay in cash and drive off the cattle."

"I've heard how they work," Polk said. "So they forced Al Darch to sell some stuff?"

"Darch wouldn't," Harson reported. "Put up a fight. Lortz shot him through the hip and the bunch rode off. Darch sent one of his riders to town with the news. Deputy Sheriff Tom Ashe grabbed almost every man in town for a posse and started for the Box D."

"It's 'bout twenty miles from here, ain't it?" Polk observed.

"Yeah. Tom Ashe and the men won't get back until tomorrow or the next day. They'll chase Lortz and his pals up into the hills. But, all they'll get will be the chase. Lortz'll have too much of a head start."

"Who brought the news?" Polk asked.

"New man named Sam Walton. Says he's been with the Box D only a couple of months. Darch sent him, he says, 'cause he's got a fast pony and is a good rider. He's in the saloon, restin' up."

"Lortz is going to play his game once too often," Polk made prophecy. "This is the first time I heard tell of him shootin' a man. That puts him outside the law. A bill of sale won't cover that."

Harson got the package of medicine and the mail and turned it over to Polk.

"Sack of smokin' for me and some candy for Beth," he told Harson. "Don't

need any kitchen stuff this trip."

HARSON tossed out the smoking tobacco and started to sack up a pound of mixed hard candy, as Polk idly watched the dusty, sun-drenched street through the dirty window. He heard a clatter of hoofbeats, and as he noted the two riders who stopped at the hitch-rail in front of the saloon, Polk snapped erect.

"Harson!" he called, guardedly.

Harson looked up at him sharply. "What's up?"

"Jake Lortz just rode in, and Hank Simms, his right-hand man, is with him. I know 'em by sight. Saw 'em last year."

"And Deputy Tom Ashe at least fifteen miles away and still ridin'," Harson mourned.

"Who's in town?"

"You. And me and the saloon man and a couple of old-timers. None of us any good ina brawl, especially with guns. You're the only fightin' man hereabouts, Bob."

"How about the Valley Ranch rider? Saw his pony out front."

"Just a kid named Martin. Comes in for the mail. Always takes two drinks and then sleeps a coupla hours before startin' home. He'd be no good in a scrap."

"That Box D man who calls himself Sam Walton, who rode in with the news—"

"Middle-aged .gent I never saw before. Don't know what he's likely to do. Lortz and Hank Simms are a bad combination to fight."

"Surely this man Walton would help fight the men who shot his boss!"

"I don't know, Bob. Don't know anything about him. If you get in touch with him, maybe you can judge."

"Lortz and Simms must be headin' east to get away. They by-passed the posse. Only other trail out of here runs up to the mesa and the Rafter P."

"Maybe they're headed for the Rafter P, Bob."

"And Beth there alone with the Old Man, and the other boys away! If they tried to force the Old Man to sell his yearlin's at a joke of a price—"

If anything like that happened it would mean disaster and ruination for the Rafter P, Polk knew. He realized quickly that it was necessary to move with caution until he learned what was afoot. Lortz and Simms were wanted for the shooting of Darch. But Darch had not been killed, and Polk had nothing to go by except the report of Walton from the Box D.

There might be a mistake. The man might have exaggerated the extent of the ruckus.

If Polk walked into the saloon without understanding the situation fully, Lortz and Simms, if they discovered that news of their exploit had been carried here, might disarm him at once or shoot him in trying to do so.

"Harson," he whispered. "Get a rifle and ammunition. Have the stuff ready for me if I'm relieved of my side gun. I've got to find out about this, even if I have to do some sneakin'."

Harson nodded understanding. Polk hurried through the store and let himself out the rear door. Walking slowly and keeping close to the building, he managed to get behind the saloon and near an open window.

**H**E COULD hear loud voices and laughter. Peering through the window, he saw Jake Lortz and Hank Simms standing at the bar with drinks before them. Martin, the youthful Valley Ranch rider, was sprawled in drunken slumber over a card table, his head resting on his arms. A man Polk assumed to be Sam Walton was standing near the end of the bar, making wet rings on it with the bottom of his glass

and apparently paying no attention to the others.

Hearing nothing of importance Polk decided to enter the saloon. He shifted his holster to where he wanted it, pulled his hat down well over his face, and pushed past the batwings yawning and rubbing his eyes.

The bartender gave him a swift glance and acted as if trying to convey a message, but Polk ignored him. He had caught sight of Jake Lortz watching him closely in the mirror on the back bar.

Lounging past them, Polk went to the bar to stand within a few feet of Sam Walton. He motioned for the bartender to put out bottle and glass. Polk poured a drink, tossed down a coin, and let the drink stand while he got out tobacco sack and paper and calmly began building a quirly.

"Have a drink on us, cowboy!" Jake Lortz called out truculently.

"Thanks, but I've got one," Polk replied, with a mere glance at him. "Don't like to take too much on an empty stomach."

"Where you work?"

"To tell the truth, I'm between jobs right now," Polk told him. "Think I'll ride out to the Valley Ranch. It's a big outfit, and they're always puttin' on riders."

"Where'd you work last?"

"If you don't mind, I'll hold on to my cards," Polk replied, suggesting he had something of a record to conceal.

Lortz and Simms both laughed. "Keep your secret," Lortz told him. "Reckon all of us have dark things in our past."

"Speakin' of the Valley Ranch, I see their mail carrier has passed out," Polk said. "It'd be a mercy to get him on his feet. Prob'ly take an hour. Have to souse his head in the waterin' trough at the blacksmith shop. Maybe he can tell me if there's a job at the Valley Ranch."

He tossed off his drink, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and went over to

the table where young Martin was sleeping. He shook the boy vigorously but all he got was a mumbled drunken response.

"You better wake up," Polk urged. "Come on! I'll get you on your feet. Want some information out of you. And you'd better be hittin' for home soon, or your boss will tan the place where your chaps don't reach."

Lortz and Simms watched the proceedings with amusement. Polk finally succeeded in getting Martin on his feet.

"You've got to walk across the street and stick your head in the horse trough," Polk ordered. "You're wet inside already. Come along!"

"Don' wanna," Martin muttered. He slumped down into his chair again and reached for the empty bottle before him. "Don' have to hurry back to ranch."

Lortz and Simms began laughing raucously. Under cover of the sound, Martin suddenly whispered to Polk, "I'm not drunk. I know yuh, Polk. I'm listenin'."

Polk's eyes flickered with understanding. "All right! Have it your own way! Sleep it off!" he stormed in simulated anger at Martin. He turned back to the bar, and this time stopped within a couple of feet of Sam Walton, the Box D man. "Have a snort with me," he invited. "I can still buy a drink."

"Sure!" Walton agreed.

As the drinks were poured again the bartender attempted to signal him, but Polk had no opportunity to learn his message.

Moving closer to Walton, Polk appeared to be studying the drink before him before he spoke in a barely audible voice.

"If you brought the news from the Box D," Polk muttered, "you know those men—Lortz and Simms. They shot Darch. Will you help me corral 'em when we get a chance?"

FOR answer, Sam Walton bent over the bar, and began chuckling as if weak from a fit of merriment. And in another instant his hand dived for his holster, hardware cleared leather, and Polk felt the muzzle of a .45 jamming him in the ribs.

"Here's a good one, Lortz!" Walton called down the bar. "This gent wants me to help him corral you and Simms for shootin' Al Darch at the Box D."

Lortz and Simms emitted a series of bellows supposed to be laughter, and came to within a few feet of Polk.

"The joke's on you, stranger," Lortz explained. "Yuh see, I could have killed Darch when he got to quarrelin' with us, but I only shot him in the leg. He was goin' to draw on me. We got to quarrelin' about the price he wanted for some cattle. Walton is one of my men."

"So?" Polk said, trying to assemble his scattered wits.

"So I sent him to town to play he was a Box D boy and get the deputy sheriff and every able-bodied man ridin' to the Box D. We simply cut over the hills and came here. . Hope the posse will have a nice ride."

Polk shook his head. "Don't quite get it. Unless, of course, you're hittin' east and makin' a run."

"We've got plenty of time to take a rest—or do anything we want. Reckon the three of us can do a little collectin' here in town from this saloon and the store. And there's a little business deal we can close on the way that'll net us somethin' nice."

"Sure got the set-up wrong, didn't I?" Polk said.

"Reckon you did," Lortz answered. "Maybe you thought there might be a little reward money. Sorry to disappoint you, cowboy. Under the circumstances, I'd better take your gun. Heist your hands!"

Unresistingly, Polk permitted Lortz to lift his gun out of its holster and thrust it

into his own belt. It was no time for Polk to try to put up a fight against three gunmen already on the run. He wanted to hear more about their plans before he decided to get out of his trap, if he could.

"Give me back my gun when you ride," he begged. "I'll be needin' it, and guns cost money."

"I'll think it over," Lortz replied, grinning. "I'll even buy yuh a drink, since yuh bought one for Walton. We've got a little time to kill and some restin' to do 'fore we move on. The fool deputy and his posse won't be back today, and maybe not tomorrow if they go chasin' all over the hills lookin' for us. We'll stick around town till the middle of the afternoon, maybe. Want to get to the Rafter P before dark."

Polk fought to keep from betraying his concern.

"Rafter P? I've heard that's a small outfit on its last legs," Polk said, noncommittally.

"Yep, it's a small outfit," Lortz agreed. "The owner's been sick abed for a long time—got busted up. Eatin' its own beef, that outfit is. But me, I always like to help out folks in tough luck, and I aim to help the owner of the Rafter P."

"How can yuh help him if he's sick abed?" Polk asked.

"He's got a small herd of fine yearlin's. I aim to buy 'em from him for cash, so he'll have some money to go on. A sick man is liable to be cranky and not know what's best for him, so we've made some arrangements."

"Arrangements?" Polk questioned.

"I happen to know that there's only three men in the Rafter P bunkhouse," Lortz informed him. "Two of 'em are away back in the hills lookin' for strays. Nobody at the ranch 'cept the old man and his girl and a feller named Polk, who's sorta manager. We can take care of this Polk, I

reckon."

"You got somethin' against him?" Polk asked.

"Never saw the cuss. But he may try to spoil my deal," Lortz said, frankly. "I aim to dish out a certain amount of money for them yearlin's and get me a bill of sale. The old man at the Rafter P will take my price and like it. That's all!"

Polk poured himself a drink, and kept his face neutral. He knew what this maneuver of Lortz would mean. If Lortz and his two companions got to the ranch, they would have only Patchey and Beth to deal with. They would pay a few dollars and take a bill of sale they would force Patchey to sign. The old dodge—"one dollar and other lawful considerations."

Calmly, Bob Polk rolled himself a smoke, and as he lit it, he glanced into the back bar mirror. A flash of understanding reached him from Martin, the boy rider from the Valley Ranch. Polk turned toward him.

"Hey, you! Are you wakin' up finally?" he demanded. "I want to talk to you. Want to find if there's a chance of a job at the Valley Ranch. You get the whisky out of your head so you can talk sensible."

"Might be—job," Martin called back, hiccuping.

"You should do all your drinkin' out of a milk bottle," Polk recommended acidly. He turned to Lortz again. "Don't hold it against me that I thought of takin' you and your friend in," he said apologetically. "You can't blame a man for tryin'."

"I'll treat you right, even if you are askin' a lot," Lortz replied. "I ain't got anything personal agin a man like you. Hope you get a job somewhere. Maybe you'll be where you can help me out some time."

"Could be," said Polk, and strolled over to the table where Martin was sitting.

"You tell me about the chances for a

job at the Valley Ranch," he ordered. "I don't want to ride 'way out there 'less there's at least a chance. I'm a good puncher."

"One man got sick and quit," Martin responded with mock sullenness. "Old Man's goin' to fire another for bein' too danged slow and grouchy. Good place to work. Grub's good and pay prompt. Bunkhouse clean and neat—"

"Sounds like a good place to hole in for the winter," Polk observed, the while glancing at the three men at the bar. He made as if to stifle a yawn with the back of his hand, as he whispered across the table to Martin.

"You heard? Get away and hit the trail for the Rafter P. Tell Patchey and Beth what's up. Say I'll do all I can to stop 'em."

"Maybe I'll ride out with you when you go," Polk said in a loud voice for Lortz' benefit.

"I'll be leavin' about sundown," Martin stated. "Gotta sober up first. I'll get me some cheese and sardines to eat down to the store."

"See you later, then," Polk told him, then whispered, "Tell Luke Harson to put the rifle on my saddle, and the medicine and mail in the saddle boot."

Polk ambled back to the bar, and yawned again, watching from the back bar mirror, as Martin pretended to reel toward the front door.

Simms left Lortz' side and swooped down on the boy. He whirled Martin back against the wall and took his gun.

"We'll take care of this till you come back," Simms said. "In your condition, you might shoot yourself."

Martin blinked at him. "Mighty highhanded," he mumbled in weak protest. "Tell sheriff—on yuh."

Martin, muttering about the injustice of it all, lurched through the door and made

his way to the general store.

POLK killed a few more minutes toying with his drink, while Lortz and the others talked as if he were not present. They felt secure in disclosing their plans and bragging about how they had decoyed the deputy and all the men from the town.

Finally Polk hitched up his own overalls, and started for the door.

"Where yuh goin'?" Lortz demanded, with some suspicion.

"After him. Sardines and cheese," Polk explained. "I'm eatin' light these days."

"Don't get any rash ideas," Lortz warned. "There are three good guns against you."

"Think I'm a fool?" Polk said curtly. Glancing up and down the street Polk leaned against the door casement and smoked a minute, during which time he saw Luke Harson put the rifle in his saddle boot and stuff the medicine, candy and mail in a saddle bag. Harson gestured and darted back into his store.

Slowly Polk made his way to the store and entered in time to see Martin munching on a big wedge of cheese.

"Give me some crackers and cheese," he instructed Harson. "Make it look natural! They're goin' to rob you, Harson. Hide most of your cash. Martin! Watch your chance and hit the saddle. Get to the Rafter P and tell 'em. I'll try to get away and hold 'em off at the Mesa trail. Harson can try to send somebody after us if they chase me. Somebody may come ridin' in or some of the possemen turn back."

"I'll make it," Martin said tersely.

"Good boy!" Polk wolfed down some of the cheese. Then he and Martin went to the door only to see Lortz, Simms and Walton emerge from the saloon and start for Harson's store. Martin proceeded to reel down the steps and soon Polk saw him pass the three and heard him muttering:

“Gotta have another drink now to wash down cheese and crackers. Always somethin’.”

Lortz and his companions let Martin pass, and came on toward the store. Looking past them, Polk saw the Valley Ranch boy walk to the hitch-rail. And suddenly he had jerked the reins free, had tossed them over his pony’s head and was in the saddle.

The sudden clatter of hoofbeats made Lortz and his two companions whirl around quickly, and reach for their guns.

“He’s gettin’ away!” Lortz barked. “Playin’ a trick! Empty your guns at the little rat!”

Martin bent low in his saddle, and raking his pony with rowels, rode at top speed. As Lortz, Simms and Walton kept up their gunfire, Polk edged toward his own mount at the hitch-rail in front of the store.

He had timed his action neatly. When their guns were emptied and Lortz was shouting for his men to reload, Polk jerked his own reins free and hit his saddle. He whipped the rifle out of the saddle-boot and held it ready.

“One side!” he yelled.

He jumped his pony into stride and dashed straight at them. They sprang out of his way, Polk took a quick and ineffectual shot at Lortz, and then was riding wildly, bent low in his saddle.

Glancing back, he saw them running to get their horses, reloading their guns as they ran. Polk returned the rifle to the saddle boot and gave all his attention to getting speed out of his pony.

Ahead of him, he could see Martin was making good time. Polk rode on, glancing back after a time to see that the pursuit had started. But he had a good lead on the three behind him, and knew he could maintain it.

His pony went up the first hill, hit the level again, and got no breathing spell.

There was a mass of rocks at the top of the hill, but Polk did not make his stand there. He wanted to get to the top of the grade of the Mesa Trail, where he could stand them off.

His pony was jaded when he finally reached the spot. Polk ground-hitched him behind a rocky ledge where he would be reasonably safe. Grabbing his rifle, he stuffed his pockets with shells Luke Harson had put into a saddlebag, and ran back to the rocks that commanded the upward trail.

Lying prone behind a boulder, Polk watched and waited, all his senses keened. Lortz and the two others hit the bottom of the hill and began ascending. Polk fired a warning shot over the heads of the three and they scattered to either side of the trail and began an ineffectual reply with their six-guns. Then a rifle spoke.

The bullet struck a rock a short distance from Polk and sent splinters of stone flying. Polk moved briskly to another position and got ready for serious work.

Lortz and his men charged for a distance of about a hundred yards. Polk levered his rifle, sent shots flying around them, that made them scuttle for cover. He could hear Lortz shouting to the others, but could not make out the words.

Again they mounted behind rocks and charged up the trail at him. This time, Polk emptied Walton from the saddle, and sent him sprawling in the dirt. The other two took to cover again.

They gave Polk a rattling fire. A chip of rock struck his left cheek, another sliver cut his arm. Moving to a new position he saw Lortz and Simms leave their horses and attempt the crest on foot, darting from cover to cover as one man fired to protect the advance of the other.

Then Polk heard hoofbeats clattering behind him, and turned his head to see Martin racing toward him, with Beth only a short distance away.

“Keep back, Beth!” Polk shouted, gesturing frantically. “You’ll get hurt!”

The whine of a bullet near his ear made him turn swiftly to give six-gun attention to his enemies. Martin, meanwhile, had dismounted, and took up a position behind some rocks a few feet away.

“Got one,” Polk said tensely. “Lortz and Simms are tryin’ to rush me. See if you can pick one of ‘em off.”

A moment later, Simms, trying to dart across the narrow trail, was caught by one of Polk’s bullets, and sprawled down among the rocks.

He appeared to be badly wounded, and lay groaning.

**S**UDDENLY, a slug from Lortz’ rifle whipped Polk’s hat from his head, and the cowman emptied his rifle in Lortz’ general direction. As he did so he heard the sound of someone firing behind him and turning swiftly he made out the figure of Beth.

“Go back, honey! Get to cover!” Polk called anxiously.

“This is my fight, too,” she said with determination.

“Keep down! I’ve got two of ‘em. I’m going after Lortz.”

Cautiously he began moving around the rocks as Martin opened furious fire to cover him. Then he was darting behind a ledge of rock he knew well, and when he reached the other end and came into sight he was within six-gun distance of Lortz and slightly above him.

He saw Lortz gunning at Martin, no doubt believing he was firing at Polk. Martin was returning the fire, and Beth was shooting from another position.

There came a lull in the firing, and Polk shouted, “You’re done, Lortz! Throw down your gun!”

Lortz whirled and fired, the bullet striking into Polk’s left arm high up. It whirled him half way around and he sank down behind the protective ledge.

While the two resumed their fusillade, Polk managed to shake off the dizziness that had swept over him.

Crawling along the ledge to a new position he cautiously peered at the scene below him. He watched Lortz change his position again, and aiming carefully. Polk fired at his enemy. Lortz staggered backward, dropped his weapon and collapsed to the ground.

Holding his rifle ready, Polk reached Lortz’ side. He was alive, but the chest wound he had received was a lethal one. Polk kicked Lortz’ gun to a safe distance, then yelled up the trail:

“Come on down! It’s all over!”

Dizziness and nausea swept over Polk as he braced himself against a rock. There was the sound of hoofbeats and then Beth and Martin were galloping down to him.

“Martin—ride to town. Tell ‘em—have somebody come out,” Polk directed weakly.

“Bob, you’re hurt!” Beth cried out, running to him.

“Not bad,” he told her, smiling feebly. “I’ll be all right—in a couple of days.”

She knelt beside him and tried to wipe some of the blood from his face with the edge of her skirt.

“Medicine—and something for you—in saddlebags,” Bob Polk told her.

“You saved our yearlings, Bob—”

“And why not?” he asked, managing the semblance of a grin. “The Rafter P needs ‘em and I need the daughter of the Rafter P—to look after me.”