

Rex Beach writes: POWDER

Fine Serial Fiction in a new form. . . . Three Prize Short Stories (of four instalments each) by a master story-teller. . . . They're Rex Beach at his best.

SYNOPSIS: Ben Furlong, a young but practical oil man and driller from the Pennsylvania field, drifted into the Texas oil country, broke and looking for work. Finally he fetched up at the Durham home where live an elderly aunt, shortly widowed by the explosion of a powder wagon, and her niece, pretty Betty Durham. Perhaps because of his smile, Betty cooks some food for Ben and while he eats he learns the aunt, in town business, has an oil man, Tiller Maddox, sinking an oil well for her. . . . A short 6 inch bolt worked loose from the rigging and is in the bottom of the well. Work has been suspended for days as the crew "fish" for the bolt and operating funds dwindle away. . . . Furlong offers to give a hand, but Maddox objects. . . . Betty insists and overrules Maddox so Furlong fashions a tool which he has just lowered into the well, hoping to fish out the bolt. . . . On the order of Betty's aunt, Furlong is given a job. . . . Maddox shows his dislike for the new hand, especially because Ben and Betty are so friendly. While the two are in town shopping one evening, Maddox calls upon the aunt, demanding she help his case with Betty or there will be no will. . . . NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

THIRD INSTALMENT

"Did you drop that bolt in the well?" Mrs. Durham bleated, in dismay.

"I ain't sayin' I did or I didn't. But remember, if this well ain't a producer, you're blowed up, and it ain't a-goin' to produce till there's a Mrs. Tiller Maddox to see it and to get her share! We bargained that out, long ago. Yes, an' I ain't afraid of you goin' back on our deal, either. You don't dast."

"I—I'll try again."

"You better do more'n try. I'll give you just one more chance. If she don't come across, I want you to go visit your folks Saturday evenin', an' leave her here. Understand?"

For a moment Mrs. Durham stared at the speaker, then she said:

"Tiller Maddox, you're a dirty dog!"

"Say! I've got all the back talk I can stand for one day. You heard me. You do like I tell you, an' you needn't get back from your visit till Monday."

Not until Ben and Betty had finished their shopping and were on their way home did he tell her about the trouble he had had with Maddox that morning.

"He let on he was fooling, but of course he'll fire me the first chance he gets," Furlong predicted.

"Oh, Ben! Why did you do it?"

"We were bound to tie into each other sooner or later. You can't choose a time to get fighting mad; it's as much as you can do to pick

good footing."

"Aunt Mary won't let him fire you. She doesn't trust him any more than I do."

"Say! What has he got on her?"

The girl did not look up from her driving. She fetched a deep breath as she said: "I'd dearly love to know. There's something queer about it. . . . Uncle Joe was a sweet, easy-going man and she rode him with a Spanish bit. She never would have let him take me in, when my folks died, only I did all the work. But he sure loved me. When the oil excitement came they rowed and fought for months. When ever he got an offer she claimed he was trying to give the farm away and threatened to go to law. I told you about that. He stood it as long as he could; then he up and announced that I'd been more of a daughter to him than she'd been a wife and he aimed to give most of his money to me anyhow, and then he made that lease with the Planet people. That's how Maddox came. I think she'd have poisoned me, if she dared, after what uncle said. When he was killed I supposed, of course, she'd throw me out, but she didn't. No use to do it, I suppose, inasmuch as he hadn't left any writing. As a matter of fact, she was better to me than she'd ever been. That's what makes me wonder sometimes—"

"Wonder what?"

"If he didn't tell Tiller something. Something that makes her scared of him. Sometimes she acts like it's only because of him that she's nice to me. . . . I don't know what I'd do if she sent me away. I haven't got a red cent. There isn't a living soul I could—"

Ben passed his arm around the slim girlish figure, and drew it to him. "That'll be about all for you!" He kissed the cheek next to his and Betty hungrily pressed her face closer. "Good thing you aren't a heiress—and me with less than a hundred dollars!"

"You behave yourself, or you'll wreck this car," the girl warned him.

Maddox carried out his intention. He discharged Furlong on Friday night, explaining that the well was down, and the next morning Ben broke the news to his sweetheart. Betty was indignant. She was for appealing to her aunt, but he refused to permit her. He promised to let her hear from him in a day or so.

Betty's face was flushed, her eyes were shining, when she entered the house after he was gone. She was surprised to find her aunt awaiting her.

"Tiller came over the other night when you was in town," Mrs. Durham began.

"Did he?"

"He talked a lot about you. Tiller's a fine man, dearie."

Betty broke out irritably: "Don't let's start that all over again."

"Oh, your head's full of Furlong, I

suppose? But what's he got? Nothing. Not even a job. Now Tiller wants to marry you and you better do it."

"You know very well I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Maybe you won't and maybe you will," Mrs. Durham's lips set themselves in lines of inflexibility. "If you got a smitch of sense you will D'you want to be poor all your life or d'you want to be rich?"

"I tell you I won't! I won't!" declared the girl. "The big, black, greasy brute!"

"Now don't fly off the handle till I'm through. I've been pretty good to you—"

"I've earned my keep ever since I came. You'd have paid more for a hired girl than I cost."

"Oh, hush up and let me finish. We allus fight like this. Your Uncle Joe cared a lot for you and—and I want to respect his wishes. When that well comes in this farm" I be worth—I don't know what. Anyhow, my heart's set on seeing you get a good home and have everything. How'd you like to live in a fine house in Dallas?"

"What ails you? Are you losing your mind, Aunt Mary?"

"And you can have 'em if you marry Tiller. Marry Furlong and you'll spend your life over a cook stove."

"How can Tiller give me things like that?"

"I'll give 'em to you."

After a moment Betty inquired, curiously, "How much will you give?"

It was Mrs. Durham's time to hesitate, her words came with an effort. "I don't know—maybe a quarter interest."

"Humph!" The exclamation was one of scorn.

"There's gratitude for you! Mebbe if it's a real big well I'd do better. You—you've got to do it, Betty!" the widow cried in distraction. "If you don't he'll ruin everything. He said so. If that well don't come in the farm ain't worth."

"So! That's why you're so generous. Now you listen to me. I wouldn't marry Tiller Maddox, not for all the oil in Texas, not if it was to save your life."

"Wait! Don't make up your mind in a hurry. I—I'm going over to Cousin Anna's—"

"When? What for?"

"Right after dinner. You think it over while I'm gone, dearie. I feel like you was my own kin. I want to do right by you and—"

"Rats!" said the girl.

The town lay hot and gasping under the sun. There was no shade out-of doors, for nothing grew in the streets, not even grass; its cinder yards, its board walls and iron roofs radiated waves of heat like those from a stove.

Late in the afternoon Ben Furlong entered the skating rink, paid his admission at the turnstile, and went through. Here, at least, was a place to sit down out of the sun.

Out of the whirling throng upon the floor sat a figure; it was Ben's friend, the engineer of the Maddox rig. He rolled up to the bench where Furlong sat and collapsed upon it.

"Whew! It's hard work havin' a good time in this town," he panted.

"Landed a job yet?"

"I've got some prospects lined up. What's the matter? You tired, too?"

"Naw! Maddox laid us off for the day. Miz' Durham brought us in."

"Did Betty come with her?" Ben eagerly inquired.

The engineer shook his head; a grin spread over his face. "Say! You know how scared Tiller is of nitroglycerine? When we left he was hidin' out in the brush like a quail. The powder wagon came an' he took it on the run."

"Powder wagon? What's a powder wagon doing there?" Ben inquired.

"Why, he aims to shoot the well. He got a permit an' the stuff's on the ground, ready for the men."

"He's crazy if he shoots that well," Furlong declared. "What's he thinking about?"

"So I told him. 'Leave her alone an' she'll blow herself in,' I says to him. She's coughin' now, an' I bet as many wells has been ruined by that stuff as they is wells that's been made."

"I'm going to see Mrs. Durham," Ben rose, but the other explained: "She's gone away over Sunday to visit her kinfolks."

"Who's looking out for Betty?"

"I dunno. Tiller, I reckon."

Furlong frowned. For a while he listened inattentively to his companion, then he rose and left the rink. Conditions all over the oil fields, as he well knew, were unsettled, and he did not relish the thought of Betty out there alone in that farmhouse; but even more disturbing was the fact that Maddox proposed to shoot the Durham well. What ailed the man?

After some indecision Ben decided to warn Betty. It was none of his business, to be sure, but a word from her might induce the aunt to go slowly and perhaps save the cost of the well. It would be criminal to leave her in ignorance of the risks she ran. He tried to hire a car to run him back out to the farm, but what

new were for hire were out, and it was some time before he could discover a truck that was later going in that direction.

It was considerably after dark when Furlong left Opportunity; but he had to walk the last three miles, so it was late bedtime when he finally arrived at the Durham home-stead.

Evidently Betty was asleep; at any rate, the farmhouse windows were dark and Ben wondered how he could best awaken her without causing alarm. Visitors in the country at this time of night were not common. He decided to call softly from outside her window, so he closed the gate quietly behind him and made his way around the house.

He paused in surprise when he had turned the corner of the building, for the kitchen door was open. A momentary panic swept over him; then he drew a breath of relief, for at that moment he heard the girl's muffled voice.

"Who's there?" she cried.

He opened his lips to speak reassuringly, but the sound died in his throat, for inside Betty's room he heard a man's voice, then a stir, a movement. This was followed by a crash, as if a chair had been overturned, then a scream.

Furlong uttered a shout; he leaped forward. Some marauder had entered the house just ahead of him. Incredible as it seemed, he had arrived barely in time.

"Betty!" he yelled. "Betty!"

That throaty clamor from the girl's room, meanwhile, continued. There were hasty movements, the sounds of a struggle.

Furlong had never been inside the front part of the house, but its plan was simple and he was guided by those shrieks of terror. The door to Betty's room was closed, but it opened when he found the knob. He glimpsed the dim square of a window opposite and silhouetted against it he saw the girl herself, then blackness engulfed him.

The next he knew Betty Durham was holding his head in her lap and splashing water into his face. It struck him as queer that the lamp should be burning when only the fraction of an instant before all had been darkness.

(Concluded Next Week)

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