

Rex Beach writes: POWDER

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FINAL INSTALLMENT

Mechanically Ben made an effort to rise, but could not manage it.

"Just have him on my neck," he mumbled thickly, and raised groping fingers. Then he sat up. He knew now that he had not fallen into a pit.

"Where are they? What's happened?"

Betty was sobbing wildly; her hair hung in a cascade about her shoulders; she was clad only in her night-dress, and it was soaked with the water she had poured over Ben to revive him.

Beside the open door to the hall lay the wreck of a chair; two of its legs were splintered, broken off. Ben realized more clearly now what it was that had crashed down upon his head. With an effort he scrambled dizzily to his feet. Water was trickling into his eyes and blinding him; he brushed it away, then discovered, to his great surprise, that it was not water at all, but blood, his own blood. His head felt twice its normal size; his brain did not function clearly and his limbs refused to obey him.

Betty's voice came to him as if from a long distance; she was telling him something, trying to make him understand that they were alone in the house and that their assailant had fled. When this became plain to Furlong, he sat down.

It was some time before the girl succeeded in stanching that flow of blood wound, for she was scarcely in condition to render help to anybody. By the time her task was completed Ben had managed to get a pretty clear idea of what had happened. She had been awakened by a sound, and had realized that somebody was in her room; she had uttered a frightened challenge, only to feel groping hands upon her, to find herself in the grasp of some unseen person. She retained no very clear recollection of anything after that; the rest was a hideous nightmare. Not until the miscreant had bolted out of the house and she had finally managed somehow to strike a light was she more aware of the reason for her flight. Then she had stumbled over Ben and had realized that it was his voice she had heard calling to her that it was the sound of his coming that had interrupted the attack. His plight had done a good deal to bring her back to herself, but now she threatened to again abandon her self-control.

Furlong checked this by saying "Betty Durham! You've got nothing on but your nightgown!"

It was some time later when the girl emerged from her room, dressed after a fashion, to find her deliverer waiting in the kitchen with a scowl upon his face.

"You got a gun?" he inquired harshly.

"No, Ben. Why?"

"I'm going to kill Maddox."

For a moment Betty stared at the speaker, with shaking fingers she plucked at her dress. It was in a thin, reedy voice that she said:

"It wasn't Maddox."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I know! It wasn't Maddox."

"Are you sure?" The girl nodded, and Ben bowed his throbbing head in his hands. "I'm glad," he gasped.

"Providence certainly brought me back. It wouldn't happen that way once in a thousand times. Whoever it was, I'll find him."

Both the man and girl were in wretched condition. The rest of the night they sat together, watching the clock and listening for a possible return of the marauder, waiting for the day to break.

It was shortly after they had finished breakfast that Furlong was surprised to discover signs of activity, movements, goings-on at the well which caused him to stare fixedly, then to announce incredulously:

"Say! I believe Maddox is fixing to shoot the well."

Betty took her place at his side. "Why—he can't! He dasset! The powder men won't be here till tomorrow."

"All the same, he's doing something queer. See those cans—those shiny things?"

"You couldn't hire Tiller to touch nitroglycerine. He's scared of it."

Ben uttered an oath. "I'll tell you he's filling those cartridges. He's crazy! You've got to stop him!"

Betty turned white; she shook her head. "I won't go near the place. It's—It's Aunt Mary's well."

"Then I'll stop him. Why, it's ten to one he'll see the rock, ruin the whole job and—Darned if I don't believe he's trying to do that very thing!"

Furlong started for the door, but Betty clung to him. When he pushed on past her she followed him. Together they hurried across the field and took the path through the mesquite. As they went the girl continued to implore him not to interfere.

Halfway to the drilling camp they met the engineer hastening towards the farmhouse, and the latter announced, breathlessly: "Tiller's gone plumb off his nut! He's goin' to shoot the well himself. You better stay clear."

Furlong dashed past the speaker and emerged from the shelter of the bushes in time to see Maddox ginger-

ly swing a long, cylindrical tin over the well mouth and guide it into the opening. A new manila rope had been run through a block on the derrick, and with this he lowered the charge.

Ben yelled at him; he waved his arms. Maddox glanced over his shoulder, then let the line slide smoothly through his hands.

"Take my tip and don't go too close," the engineer shouted. "He ain't no powder man an' that well's makin' gas. She blows off every few minutes."

Betty seconded this warning in frantic tones of appeal: "Let him go, Ben. He knows what he's doing. You've got no right stopping him. You'll just make trouble."

"It's none of my business," the latter agreed, impatiently, "but there's something crooked. He ceased speaking; then he seized Betty and whirled her around with the sharp command, "Run! Get back!"

They were still perhaps a hundred yards from the well, but Furlong's practiced eye had seen something that suddenly raised the hair upon his head. That rope from which was suspended the heavy charge of liquid death no longer hung vertically, it no longer ran over the block and into the casing; instead it was falling in loops about Maddox. It was coming up out of the well!

Maddox himself was alive to what had happened. That which he most greatly feared had come upon him, and he also turned to flee. But the platform was slippery or else he tripped over the rope and fell. The others heard his cry of terror. He quickly regained his feet, but to Furlong it seemed as if his movements thereafter were maddeningly slow and deliberate.

The engineer's apprehension had been well grounded. Once again gas had been released far down in the earth, and now, like breath forced from the lungs of some tortured giant, it rose, propelling the smoothly fitting cartridge of nitroglycerine ahead of it as a pea is propelled out of a pea-shooter. It was a phenomenon by no means unusual in a well as unstable in its balance as forces as this one. In fact, under the conditions none but a madman would have dared to risk Maddox's maneuver.

The latter had not put fifty feet behind him when up out of the well mouth shot the gleaming tin cylinder. Directly above and in its path hung the massive forty-foot steel bit suspended from its wire cable.

What happened next the observers were never able to agree upon, but the world dissolved into an inferno of smoke and flame and the suddenness of it rocked the sky, upheaved the earth. The two came together with a cataclysmic roar. Furlong and Betty Durham were tossed headlong, flung down like straws. When they scrambled to their feet, dazed, shaken, terrified, it was to find themselves enveloped in a mighty dust cloud. The eighty-foot tower of heavy timbers were gone; in an instant it had utterly vanished. Where it had stood was a shallow, smoking crater. Splinters of planking, debris of every sort, were scattered far and wide; particles of earth and gravel were raining from the heavens with the sound of a heavy hailstorm; nothing in the neighborhood of the well remained except the boiler and engine, and the former lay upon its side. Even the bushes had been whipped out, uprooted, shaved off as by a sweeping scythe.

That afternoon Furlong's friend, the engineer, came over to the farmhouse with a considerable bundle in his arms.

"How's Betty?" he inquired.

"She's all right, but pretty well bruised of course."

"Well, I guess there's nothin' more us boys can do, so we're goin' in to town."

"Right! I'll stay here until Mrs. Durham gets back."

"Here's all of Tiller's stuff that we could find. I reckon you better look after it."

"Anything besides clothes?"

"Not much. A few letters in things we found in his bunk. Miz' Durham can keep 'em in case he's got relatives. There's one suit of clothes that would fit me. No use to throw 'em away. Say! It's funny how scared he was of powder. It musta been a hunch."

Shortly after the engineer had left, Ben came to Betty with a queer light in his eyes. In his hand he held a soiled sheet of foolscap paper.

"Feel strong enough to stand another explosion?" he inquired with an effort to suppress his agitation.

"Well, the queerest thing—! This farm doesn't belong to your aunt Mary, after all; it belongs to you!"

The girl gasped; she voiced some breathless query, but Ben ran on: "Your uncle Joe left it to you, just as he promised. He left everything to you, except a thousand dollars to her. This is his will and Maddox had it. I guess it's a good will, even tho' your uncle wrote it himself. Anyhow it's witnessed by two people—Maddox and another. From the date I figure it must have been signed just a day or so before he was killed."

"Where did it come from? How did Maddox—?"

"I've figured that out, too. Mr. Durham must have had it in his pocket when Maddox found him. That would explain everything—how he made your aunt do just what he wanted and why she didn't dare to fire him."

"That's why she said I'd have to marry him! That's why—Oh, Ben!" Betty rose suddenly and clutched Furlong. "I knew she was a mean, selfish old thing, but I never thought she was so wicked. This oil is a curse to poor people. I hate it!"

"Why, Betty?" Furlong exclaimed.

"You're the wicked one to quarrel—"

"She's the only kin I've got left and I tried my best to love her. But she was so greedy for quick money that nothing mattered. Maddox, too! It made beasts of them. I almost wish we'd never heard of oil." After a moment the speaker continued, more quietly: "I lied to you last night. It was Tiller who came here."

Furlong's body stiffened, he breathed an oath, then he muttered: "I thought so. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What's more, she knew he was coming! They arranged it. She as good as sent him! That's how he got the kitchen key."

This announcement the man greeted with the growl of an animal. He began to pace about the room; his face had grown black and threatening, his fingers were working as he stormed.

"Wait! Wait till she gets back here!"

"You can't lay your hands on a woman—"

"Can't I?" he breathed.

Betty shook her head, a moment then a new expression slowly crept into her eyes; her chin set itself firmly. "No!" she declared. "But you can lay 'em on her trunk and drag it out here where I can pack it!"

"I sure can!" Ben agreed. "And what's more, when you get it packed I can lug it out to the gate where it will be nice and handy for her." As he finished speaking his frown disappeared; it was replaced by a grin and he said: "Say, Betty! What do you think? I'm going to marry a heiress, after all!"

(The End)



"LUELLA," said her mother with a warning look, "take your hand out of those raisins and finish piling the apples for my pies."

"But, I've done most a bushel already," giggled the guilty youngster.

"Spose you have! How many pies do you figure you children eat? Besides, Christmas time we have to have extras for folks coming in."

Mrs. Dodge continued, "It's time for Joel to be home from the church bazaar! Look at that snow!"

Mrs. Dodge opened the cold closet and peered with secret delight at the fast filling shelves. Coffee cans filled with steamed plum puddings, a fine baked ham, frosted chocolate cakes, a whole row of pies—pumpkin and mince, and a big bowl of cranberry sauce, skins and all.

"Sally, you better help Luella with the apples, we're almost finished with the baking; and now if your father would bring the turkey, I could stuff it tonight."

She glanced toward the kitchen window—

"My stars! Here comes old Emil Cooper! I'll just give him a jug of that new cider and a mince pie, when he's going home."

Mrs. Dodge had a bountiful nature. She anticipated Emil Cooper and the many other hangers-on, who always showed up around Christmas; while the supply of pies and puddings grew less and less as the visitors departed.

"Father's coming!" cried the children and they ran to the door excitedly to meet him, followed by Mrs. Dodge. But a look of perplexity, almost distress, spread over her face.

"Where's the turkey?" she gasped.

"Fact is—" hesitated Mr. Dodge. "I gave it to Ned Blake on the way home—for his poor family. Mother—I couldn't, couldn't help it."

"Well," sighed Mrs. Dodge, with a crest-fallen face, "I guess they need it all right—and we still have the ham."

A light quick step sounded on the snowy porch.

"Mother! Mother!" shouted Joel, bounded into the house with a bundle larger than himself. "See! See what I have! I won the big 25-pound turkey at the bazaar!"

"Why son!" exclaimed Mr. Dodge, "that turkey is twice the size of the one we gave away!"



FAKE ANTIQUES FOOL EXPERTS

An interesting story revealing how the British Museum's world-famous sarcophagus of the mysterious ancient Etruscans has been proved to be the work of cunning imitators of

treasures of past ages. One of many features in the December 29 issue of the American Weekly, the big magazine which comes regularly with the BALTIMORE SUNDAY AMERICAN. On sale by all news-dealers.

SPECIAL HOLIDAY SHOWINGS

Monday, Dec. 23rd
"It's In The Air"
with
Jack Benny and Una Merkel

Tuesday, Dec. 24
"Mary Burns, Fugitive"
with
Sylvia Sydney and Melynn Douglas

Wednesday, Dec. 25
"Tumbling Tumbleweed"
with
Gene Autry

Thursday, Dec. 26
"Alice Adams"
with
Katherine Hepburn

Friday, Dec. 27
"O'Shaughnessy's Boy"
with
Wallace Beery and Jackie Cooper

Saturday, Dec. 28
"Lawless Range"
with
John Wayne

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Extension Workers Study New Program

Agricultural authorities agree that the complexity of modern civilization has given rise to farm problems unlike any that have been encountered before.

To aid in the solution of these problems have been called the philosopher and the sociologist, as well as the scientific research worker and the farmer in the field.

The broader social and economic aspects of rural life must be considered in the development of an adequate long-time farm program, said Dean I. O. Schnaub, director of the State College agricultural extension service.

With this in view, North Carolina's extension workers made a special study of the deeper implications of present conditions while holding their annual conference at State College last week.

In working out a sound program, the dean said, they must encourage farmers to co-operate in balancing their farming schedules so as to maintain their own self-sufficiency while producing the commodities needed by society.

"Not only must we promote better cultural practices," he declared, "but we must also study the markets to determine the best production schedules."

"We need to give careful consideration to the welfare of the farmer and his family, to the development of better living standards and a more vital, wholesome community life."

"In fact, there is hardly a phase of rural life that does not come within the scope of the long-time agricultural program now being set in motion by the extension service."

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