

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. © BY REX BEACH

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 Duham. . . . Perhaps because of his smile, Betty cooks some food for Ben and while he eats he learns the aunt, in town on business, has an oil man, Tiller Maddox, sicking 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. . . . **NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.**

SECOND INSTALMENT

Furlong himself handled the rig during this operation, and even Maddox could find no fault with the way he did it. When, after what seemed an interminable time, the wire-cable began to stream up out of the depths and wind itself in smooth, black layers upon the drum, the two women pressed in upon the derrick floor.

Out of the well-mouth finally slid the fishing tool; it stopped, hung motionless with the lower end at the level of their eyes. The teeth had been bent inward, jammed together by the blows from above; inside the basket thus formed and tightly bitten between two of those prongs was a battered six-inch piece of steel.

When Furlong had finished washing up he found Betty Duham waiting for him.

"Come over to the house," she said "you must be tired."

"I told you I was lucky," the young man declared with a grin.

"Lucky, nothing. You've got sense."

"Simple, wasn't it? I wonder Maddox never thought of it."

Betty stirred, impatiently she exclaimed: "Oh, he's too busy thinking about something—! Say! We've got an extra room, but Aunt Mary says it wouldn't look right for you to sleep there. Don't that make you sick?"

"How about the barn?"

"That's what she proposed. Come on, we'll fix it somehow."

It was dark; the trail through the cactus and the mesquite was dim, but Betty knew it by heart, and where its meanderings were indistinguishable she took Furlong's hand and guided him.

"I suppose you think Aunt Mary's crazy, risking all her money like this," she said.

"I sure do," the man admitted. "This thing will show you the chances she's taking. Suppose that bolt had been something else, something we couldn't get hold of? There's a thousand things can happen to a well."

"I know. But she's greedy. She always was. Tiller talked her into it after Uncle Joe died, and she wouldn't listen to me."

"It's a lot safer to let the big companies do the drilling, and be satisfied with a royalty."

"Some people can't be satisfied," the girl said, quietly then after a moment. "Uncle Joe never intended to leave the whole farm to her. They didn't hitch very well. He said he was going to leave part of it to me, but—I guess he never got around to it. I'll bet Aunt Mary's sorry by this time that she listened to Tiller."

there's so many things a driller can do to a well."

"Fshaw! Is he that kind of a man?"

"What kind of a man? Men are all alike, aren't they—when they've got reason to be?"

"She better fire him."

"I guess she can't or dasset."

"Funny my talking this way to you and not knowing you only a few hours. I'd better mind my own business. Here we are. You wait while I get a light."

They had arrived at the house, and the girl left her companion outside. She reappeared in a few minutes with a lantern and a couple of patchwork comforters. These latter she surrendered to Ben, then led the way to the barn.

Like most farms in the oil country, this one had been allowed to run down, and with the exception of some chickens a few dispirited cattle there was no live stock left upon it. There still remained, however, some old-feder; it was dusty and musty, but suitable enough for a bed, and Furlong announced that he was delighted with these sleeping arrangements. He set the lantern down and walked to the door with Betty. There he said:

"You've been mighty nice to me. I wish that fishing job had been harder."

"Why?"

"It would have been longer."

The girl's face was dimly illuminated as she smiled up at Furlong. She was the prettiest girl he had ever known and he felt a great liking, a great sympathy for her. The clasp of her warm hand as she had guided him along the dark trail had affected him in an unaccountable manner, and now it affected him again in the same way when she laid it in his. A sudden recklessness overwhelmed him and before he knew what he was doing he had been forward and kissed her.

The girl was startled, but she did not recoil. Curiously she inquired: "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. I—I couldn't help it, I guess. I didn't intend to, but—"

Ben floundered; he felt his face burning hotly.

"Tiller tried that and I slapped him. I've known him a long time too," Miss Durham shook her head apparently more perplexed at her own lack of resentment than surprised at Furlong's boldness. "I must like you pretty well."

"I wish you would—do. I—thing you're wonderful."

"Queer!" Betty turned to go. A moment later she called back through the gloom, "I'll call you when breakfast is ready."

Furlong was not altogether surprised when, on the following morning, Tiller Maddox offered him a job. Maddox, it was plain, was acting upon orders, and he took no pains to conceal his dislike for the new hand; nevertheless, Ben accepted the proffer. Aside from the fact that he needed work, his interest in Betty Durham was now sufficient to make almost any sacrifice worth while.

In the days thereafter he tried to fathom the peculiar relationship existing between Maddox and the two women, but he did not succeed very well. The driller, it was evident, had his heart set upon Betty, and in his attempt to win her Mrs. Durham was his ally; nevertheless, for some unknown reason the aunt disliked and distrusted the man. About all that Ben could make sure of was the fact that in some manner not readily apparent the oil well was being used by Maddox as a weapon; that somehow it had become the stake in a three-cornered game.

Furlong and Betty meanwhile managed to see a good deal of each other but they met clandestinely. Neither of them openly referred to this fact, and, although the girl pretended that it was her aunt whom she feared, Ben very well knew that it was Maddox. No longer, by the way, did he apologize when he kissed her, and their stolen moments together had become very sweet.

Work on the well progressed as rapidly as could be expected. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the heavy steel bits cut through the rock; length after length was added to the casing, and as it neared the level of the oil-bearing structure "indications" became evident; occasional sighs and gurgles issued from the well mouth as gas gathered and released itself. Its odors was at times quite strong. It was at this time that Maddox and Furlong clashed.

Some new tackle was being slung

and Ben had been sent up about while the foreman issued directions from below. It was heavy work. Ben was forced to cling to the derrick timbers or to balance himself upon a narrow plank, and his progress at times did not suit the elder man. Maddox was in a surly mood, anyhow, and he became profane. Furlong was hot and irritable. He answered back, whereupon the man below flared out angrily.

"You do like I tell you an' don't argue, or I'll come up there an' give you a dam' good beating!"

The rigging was finally secured in place, and Maddox was occupying himself with something else when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He turned to find Furlong at his side. The latter's eyes were blazing. In a voice ominously harsh and vibrant with fury he said:

"I came down to get that beating. I want it now."

The other members of the crew froze in various attitudes of startled suspense. The two men started at each other.

Furlong was a burly, thick-necked youth; he was as hard as iron and in his gaze at this moment was an evil quality quite unexpected. His enmity for the driller had finally foamed over. In proximity to this flaming passion Maddox's smoldering dislike gave off no heat; nor at short notice could he fan its embers into a blaze. After a brief survey, pregnant with possibilities, he turned his head and winked at the other men. In a feeble effort at jocularity, he said:

"I told you I'd come up there and give it to you. I never ast you to come down here an' get it." He guffawed loudly at his own humor and walked away. Furlong stood shaking in his tracks.

That evening Maddox went over to the farmhouse. Evenings in this thirsty land, like evenings upon the desert, were cool, refreshing, beautiful. The brazen sky cooled, a blessed breeze plied through the scrubby bush and brought faint fragrances unnoticed at other hours; the harsh outlines of unlovely objects were softened; birds twittered, Nature filled her lungs and took on new vigor.

Mrs. Durham was rocking upon the little front porch, and of her the man inquired:

"Where's Betty?"

"Her and Ben have gone to town."

Maddox scowled. "I allowed they had."

"He's gone in to buy himself some clothes and she took the car."

"He won't need no clothes than he's got, on this job," asserted the driller. "He's all through and washed up."

"What's happened, Tiller?"

"We had a row. I was a fool to put him on, in the first place, but his week's up Friday."

Mrs. Durham ceased rocking; her sallow face became more yellow. With an effort she said:

"He's a right smart hand, Tiller. I'd rather you didn't fire him."

"The hell you'd rather!" Maddox exclaimed angrily. "What you got to say about it?"

"Why, it's my prop'ty, my well—"

"Is it?"

"Y—You know what I mean. He's smart, I tell you. Didn't he fish that bolt?"

"Sure! An' didn't you hire him straight off, so's to spy on me?"

"Tiller! It's no such thing. Why should I spy on you? What you been doin' that you need spyin'—?"

"Cut up an' listen to me. It's Friday night an' he gets off this place the next mornin'. So that's that! Saturday, sometime, the powder wagon'll be here an' early Monday the men are comin' to shoot the well. We got a big one; I'll bet my life on that. I can tell! Why, she's makin' gas an' trying her best to let go, but"—the speaker paused, then finished slowly, distinctly—"there ain't agoin' to be no well whatever until I'm took care of."

The widow's colorless eyes fixed themselves hypnotically upon the swarthy face of the man before her. He continued:

"I wasn't gettin' along any too good with Betty before this feller showed up, but since he came she won't have nothin' to do with me."

"I did the best I could," Mrs. Durham declared, nervously, "but she says she won't marry you. She goes hog wild every time I talk about it."

"There's ways to make a girl marry. You got to make her marry me before that well comes in, or it's just like I said—it ain't comin' in!"

"Tiller!" gasped the woman. "You dasset do—anything to it. Not now!"

"Oh, dasset I? Who'll stop me? You won't. That little old bolt rade a lot of trouble, didn't it? Well, that's nothin'. It just shows how easy it is to—"

(Continued Next Week)



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