

charity." Jason Orchard smiled grimly at the boy's embarrassment. "The meanest man in America isn't likely to play the fool like that, is he—Mr. Thorn?"

"Well, I didn't say—at least, I didn't mean to intimate that." Thorn's face was crimson. With palpable effort to turn the conversation, he added: "Then you must remember, sir, what a sensation such a report would cause at Fairflower. I know the town. They'd go crazy in that little place. It would scarcely be fair to them, would it, sir, to let such a canard—such a report go without contra—I mean—er—without—well—something a bit more definite?"

Jason Orchard laughed aloud—a queer, discordant laugh—at Thorn's embarrassment. Mentally he calculated that a young man of such pleasing address could with training become a conscientious salesman of gilt-edged bonds.

"You say you've been to Fairflower?" Jason Orchard looked sharply at his interviewer. By a stroke of luck Thorn had been on a train that was "stalled" at Fairflower en route to New York only about ten days before, and just after the cyclone had wrecked the little Western town. In the one day that Thorn was obliged to wait there he had learned a good deal.

"Oh, you should see it!" he said, warming up to his subject and forgetting the formidable personality of his solitary auditor. "Everything's wiped out at Fairflower. The schoolhouse is down, the Methodist and Episcopal churches are unroofed, the station is wrecked, and, except the courthouse, there's scarcely a place standing. The streets and avenues are all blown into each other and tangled up together, until the people who got out safe couldn't identify what was left of their houses, let alone their belongings. When I was there they'd got out most of the dead—but some they wouldn't be able to get out for days. The worst thing was the children, and the mothers

looking for them. One woman went stark mad looking for her child in the avenue they lived on, and afterward the child was found quite well, blown nearly half a mile away, not even bruised.

"Then there was the cemetery all turned up. The rainstorm that followed the cyclone wrecked the cemetery, and almost all the old graves were washed away. Fearful sight, sir. Not a tombstone standing. You read about the typhoid epidemic that broke out after the cyclone?" Jason Orchard shook his dissent. "That was almost entirely due to the exposed corpses from the cemetery. Oh! it was a ghastly mess—What's the matter, sir?"

Cyrus Thorn jumped forward; and, as he did so, Jason Orchard deliberately picked up a toothpick from the floor. Thorn could have sworn he saw the old man sway and fall; yet there was the toothpick, and there was the millionaire erect and passive.

The uncanniness of the proceeding and the uncomfortable feeling of having made some stupid mistake recalled Thorn to the object of his visit.

"Well, sir, I mustn't take up any more of your time. I suppose I can deny the report—as you weren't even born at Fairflower?"

"Who said I wasn't born at Fairflower?" Jason Orchard's tones were particularly acid.

"Your son," said Thorn.

"He doesn't amount to a row of beans," and at that moment Jason Orchard meant it. "I was born at Fairflower; and, what's more—"

The old man stopped and took another look at Thorn's face. It was the open countenance of a youngster who knew no guile. Then there was a long silence, particularly trying to Thorn. It was broken by Jason Orchard. In reminiscent tones he observed:

"You see, young man, my mother's buried in that cemetery—that same cemetery at Fairflower—that's wreck-

ed." In sharp accents he added. "You're sure it was wrecked? You're telling me the truth? The graves were open?"

Thorn blurted out a dry, uncomfortable "Yes." He was not in the least appreciating this penalty for prying into the secrets of other people's lives.

Jason Orchard lay back in his chair and forgot Thorn, forgot that he sat in his own great house in Fifth Avenue, forgot that beside his hand were millions in bonds only waiting his signature to become priceless, forgot everything, except one bleak February morning some sixty years before. Half a blizzard was raging over a little Kansas township that belied its name of Fairflower. A small, poorly-clad boy was standing, sole mourner, beside an open grave. The tears that fell on the coffin were the flowers of his own bitter grief for the mother that was dead.

With a sharp effort Jason Orchard pulled himself together and started from his chair. For years he had scarcely thought of that tragedy of his youth. He realized that somebody was stealing quietly out of the study.

"Hold on, there! The voice had regained its note of harsh command. Thorn stopped at the door like a thief caught in the act. Then, for once in his life, Jason Orchard was guilty of subterfuge, for he rubbed vigorously at his eyes as if it was sleep that blurred them.

"I'm an old fool!" He said this more to himself than to Thorn. Speaking directly to Thorn, he added: "I dozed off. You've kept me here a long time with your twaddle. You've no right!"

"I'm mighty sorry, sir. Good-night." There was a note of sincere apology in Thorn's voice. Once again Jason Orchard stopped him.

"Look here! What are you going to say in the paper about that report?" "I don't quite know," said Thorn. "Deny it, I suppose."

"Don't be a young fool!" Jason Or-

chard made the retort almost viciously.

"You mean, sir—you mean—you mean that you're—" All Thorn's budding newspaper instinct rose to the surface. "You mean you are going to do it? Going to give \$500,000 to Fairflower?" The almost breathless surprise and anticipation recalled Jason Orchard to his workaday world.

"Well, I'm only thinking of doing so. Indeed, I'm thinking of giving Fairflower something nice to help it out—to help fix up the cemetery and things in general—understand? Yes, the cemetery."

Jason Orchard lingered on the word as if it fascinated him.

"But it's more likely to be—yes—well, you see, I've been fairly successful of late. You can say—oh, say it's more likely to be two millions. Good-night, young man. Come and see me again."

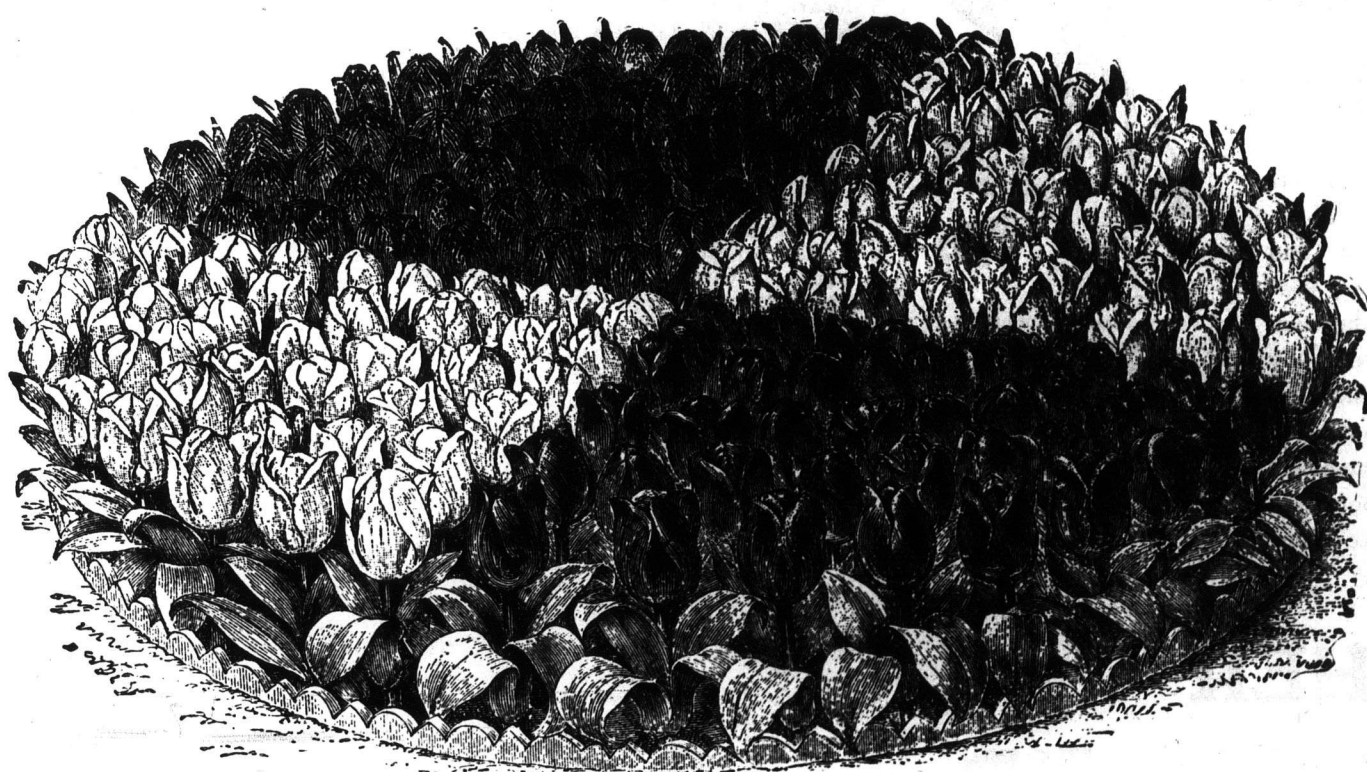
Like a drunken man, Thorn went out of the house. Just before the door closed he heard the same voice that had told him to "Come in" now calling after him:

"Of course, young man, nothing's really settled yet."

Exactly what Thorn told the night city when he got back to the Daily Gazette office he can never quite remember. What followed, however, is a matter of record. The night city called the night editor and the managing editor into hurried consultation. In consequence, they called up the proprietor on the telephone, and as a result Thorn was told to sit down and write an interview with Jason Orchard, in which the meanest man in America announced his intention to give \$2,000,000 to the relief of devastated Fairflower. The managing editor came out personally to Thorn and said that he had always been sure that there was a brilliant career ahead of him. He confessed to being rather puzzled over the contradictory statements which Thorn had verbally attributed to Mr.

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