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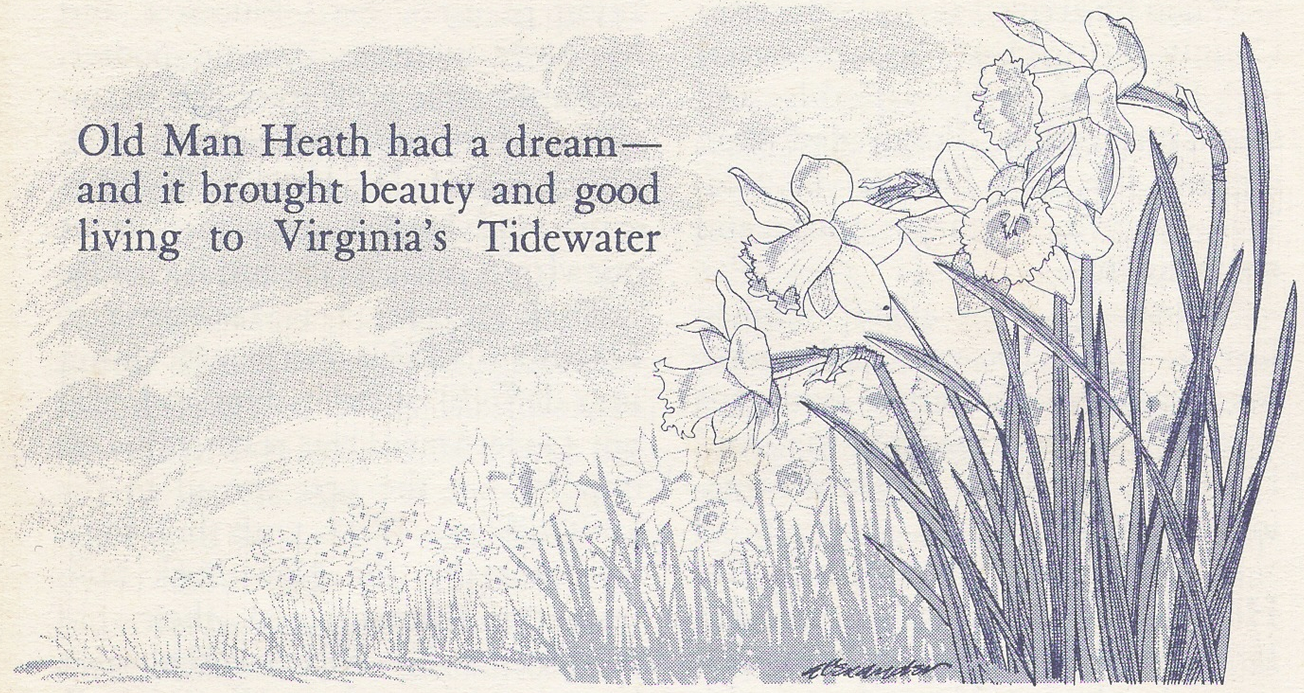
An article a day of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form

Old Man Heath had a dream—and it brought beauty and good living to Virginia's Tidewater



Gold Was Where He Found It

Condensed from The American Mercury *Charles Stevenson*

WHEN I was a kid growing up in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay country, that area was so farmed-out and fished-out that it seemed it could never again support a population. Daffodils from forgotten gardens of the earliest settlers grew wild, covering fields and roadsides with spring gold. But the houses, for lack of paint, stood gray and gaunt. As soon as boys put on long trousers they packed their cardboard suitcases and went away on the steamboat. Their elders began following.

Lord knows what would have happened had it not been for Charles Heath and his love of beauty. Today, thanks to him and a crop that largely takes care of itself, farmers in Mathews and Gloucester counties, near Williamsburg, earn a good livelihood by part-time tilling of a few acres—and have cash left over to enjoy life in the time-honored Virginia manner.

Early in the century, after a fling at the consular service, this slight, bearded, graying little man, Heath, was living in a brownstone house in New York, playing gourmet and connoisseur. One morning his butler brought him a breakfast cantaloupe so delicious that he spent the day tracing it back through the corner grocery to wholesaler to grower. The cantaloupe came from the Virginia estate of Thomas Dixon, author and gentleman farmer. Heath wrote to Dixon, asking for a case of melons every week. The author was

flattered and eventually asked Heath down for a visit.

When he arrived at the Gloucester County farm, Heath looked out at the fields of wild daffodils and found inspiration. "I'm tired of wasting my life, Mr. Dixon," he said. "I'm going to buy a place here and settle down."

"I know just the place," replied Dixon. "For $6000 you can buy Auburn, an old plantation with 300 acres across the river from me. And I'll show you how to grow cantaloupes like mine."

"Bother the cantaloupes," said Heath. "I'm thinking of daffodils. If daffodils grow wild here, just imagine what you'd get if you cultivated them."

Heath bought Auburn, established his family there, and gradually evolved into Farmer Heath. He purchased expensive Dutch daffodil bulbs from M. Van Waveren & Sons, a big New York importing house, then each year sent sample offspring back to them, bragging about how much better they were for having tasted Virginia soil.

For a long time some of the farmers had gathered wild daffodils and sent them to the Baltimore market by steamboat. But these little flowers brought only small change.

"If you'd only plant some good bulbs here you'd get rich," Heath told his neighbors. No one listened.

It is a shame that people didn't take Heath's advice, but it was difficult to accept guidance from a man who, they'd heard, bought worthless gold-mine stock and had lost a fortune backing the Jamestown Exposition of 1907. So Gloucester and Mathews counties became poorer. Trumpet vine took over the drainage ditches and climbed the telephone poles. Finally the loggers came, and hauled away the last of our virgin pines to the lumber mills.

Then in 1926 a worm came to Heath's aid. This worm was eating into daffodil bulbs in Holland, and our Government put restrictions on imports lest the pest spread to the United States. Now, with their business at stake, the New York bulb importers remembered their old customer who had written such bragging letters about Virginia soil. M. Van Waveren & Sons sent two men down to inspect.

They found that the soil did indeed grow exceptional bulbs. "We want to lease your land and hire you to grow bulbs for us," they said to Heath. "We can deliver our finest Dutch bulbs to you to be grown under quarantine."

"Well, well," said the old man. "What a beautiful sight it will be—all those bulbs blooming at once!"

All of Heath's 300 acres were put into bulbs, and scientifically controlled against daffodil pest. Several hundred acres were leased from other owners. Dutch foremen were brought in to boss the labor Heath recruited. The payroll of this one operation—$20,000 a month—put cash into pockets that had been empty for a long time.

Virginians who had ignored

Heath decided now that they, too, ought to cultivate bulbs. And workers on the Heath plantation pocketed occasional bulbs when the overseers weren't looking, and took them home to start their own plantings.

The fun didn't last long for Old Man Heath; he couldn't get along with the Dutch foremen, and they didn't know how to handle the Negroes. Heath's son, George, came home from the West Coast, where he was in business, to take over the enterprise. George was a good manager. And he learned everything he could about bulb farming, until he came to be recognized by Department of Agriculture specialists as an outstanding horticulturist.

Fortunately, other Virginians learned, too; for just before World War II the last restrictions on Dutch imports were lifted. Van Waveren withdrew, leaving the local growers to carry on. The local folks were able to survive because their flowers are marketed during a springtime period when competition from other areas is lightest. Moreover, their Dutch bulbs, having been acclimated in this Virginia earth, are exceptionally hardy anywhere in the United States. The flowers are big, too.

Daffodil-raising in Gloucester and Mathews counties doesn't require an elaborate outlay of either time or land. Instead of buying expensive fertilizers, you turn under a crop or two of winter rye and soybean vines. In the fall you plant an acre with 50,000 mother bulbs three inches apart, at a cost of about $4000. With no further care other than two or three mowings to keep down the weeds, this planting should produce 168,000 blooms the first spring, some 220,000 ($1500 worth) the second.

During the second summer you discover that each original bulb planted has divided into five or six baby ones. That's enough to plant another five acres, which in four years will become matured mother bulbs worth five times the original planting. (George Heath lists more than 1400 name varieties in his catalogue at prices from $20 a bushel up to $50 for a single frilled White Monarch bulb.)

When the blooms begin in the spring, growers sit with ears to the radio for New York market reports, or phone other cities in search of higher prices. Agents from the North offer to buy out entire fields. Pickers flock in. Schools are let out so the children may join them. They earn up to $20 a day.

In late afternoon big interstate trucks rumble along every road and back lane, stopping at big houses and Negro cottages alike, picking up cardboard boxes and delivering them next morning in New York, Washington, Baltimore, or speeding them 40 miles to an airfield from which they go air express to Boston, Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit.

Within a few weeks about 24 million flowers go out of the two counties for a return of up to a quarter-million dollars cash. Then the people relax again.

Today houses that were once gray

and weather-beaten gleam with white paint. Television aerials dot the roofs. Men who once owned only a wormy skiff now have powerboats tied up in the creeks at their front doors. But, except for flower time, life goes on in leisurely fashion, just as it used to. Last spring I went back again. Old Man Heath has long since gone on, leaving a trunkful of worthless gold stocks and old seed catalogues. But as I gazed at the fields of gold where once only wildflowers grew, I couldn't help but feel that in his bumbling way he had achieved exactly what he would have wanted.

It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps he wasn't unique; that perhaps America owes a lot of what is good about it to such men—men who aspire to no greatness, but who, by their little dreams and deeds, unknowingly change towns and countryside and make their portion of the world a better place to live in.

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