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'Doctor Heidegger's Experiment' by Nathaniel Hawthorne

MARIO RITTER: Now, the VOA Special English program, AMERICAN STORIES.

(MUSIC)

We present the short story "Doctor Heidegger's Experiment" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Here is Barbara Klein with the story.

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BARBARA KLEIN: That very unusual man, old Doctor Heidegger, once invited four friends to meet him in his office. There were three white-bearded gentlemen, Mister Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, and Mister Gascoigne. And, there was a thin old lady whose husband had died, so she was called the Widow Wycherly.

They were all sad old creatures who had been unfortunate in life. As a young man, Mister Medbourne had lost all his money in a badly planned business deal. Colonel Killigrew had wasted his best years and health enjoying the pleasures of women and drink. Mister Gascoigne was a ruined politician with an evil past.

As for the Widow Wycherly, tradition tells us that she was once a great beauty. But shocking stories about her past had led the people of the town to reject her. So, she lived very much alone.

It is worth stating that each of these three men were early lovers of the Widow Wycherly. And they had once been on the point of killing each other over her.

"My dear old friends," said Doctor Heidegger, "I would like your help in one of my little experiments." He motioned for them to sit down.

(MUSIC)

Doctor Heidegger's office was a very strange place. The dark room was filled with books, cobwebs, and dust. An old mirror hanging between two bookcases was said to show the ghosts of all the doctor's dead patients.

On another wall hung a painting of the young woman Doctor Heidegger was to

have married long ago. But she died the night before their wedding after drinking one of the doctor's medicines. The most mysterious object in the room was a large book covered in black leather. It was said to be a book of magic.

On the summer afternoon of our story, a black table stood in the middle of the room. On it was a beautiful cut-glass vase. Four glasses were also on the table.

Doctor Heidegger was known for his unusual experiments. But his four guests did not expect anything very interesting.

The doctor picked up his black leather book of magic. From its pages he removed a dried-up old rose.

"This rose," said the doctor, "was given to me fifty-five years ago by Sylvia Ward, whose painting hangs on this wall. I was to wear it at our wedding. Would you think it possible that this ancient rose could ever bloom again?"

"Nonsense!" said the Widow Wycherly with a toss of her head. "You might as well ask if an old woman's lined face could ever bloom again."

"See!" answered Doctor Heidegger.

He reached for the vase and threw the dried rose into the water it contained. Soon, a change began to appear. The crushed and dried petals moved and slowly turned from brown to red. And there was the rose of half a century looking as fresh as when Sylvia Ward had first given it to her lover.

"That is a very pretty trick," said the doctor's friends. "What is the secret?"

"Did you ever hear of the Fountain of Youth?" asked Doctor Heidegger. "The Spanish explorer Ponce De Leon went in search of it centuries ago. But he was not looking in the right place. If I am rightly informed, the famous Fountain of Youth is in southern Florida. A friend of mine has sent me the water you see in the vase."

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The doctor filled the four glasses with water from the Fountain of Youth. The liquid produced little bubbles that rose up to the silvery surface. The old guests agreed to drink the water, although they did not believe in its power.

"Before you drink, my friends," the doctor said, "you should draw up a few general rules as guidance before you pass a second time through the dangers of youth. You have had a lifetime of experience to direct you. Think what a shame it

would be if the wisdom of your experiences did not act as a guide and teacher."

The doctor's four friends answered him with a laugh. The idea that they would ever repeat the mistakes of their youth was very funny.

"Drink, then," said the doctor. "I am happy that I have so well chosen the subjects of my experiment."

They raised the glasses to their lips. If the liquid really was magical, it could not have been given to four human beings who needed it more. They seemed as though they had never known youth or pleasure. They looked like they had always been the weak, unhappy creatures who were bent over the doctor's table.

They drank the water.

There was an almost immediate improvement among the guests. A cheerful glow like sunshine brightened their faces. They looked at one another imagining that some magic power had really started to smooth the lines on their faces.

"Quick! Give us more of this wondrous water!" they cried. "We are younger, but we are still too old!"

"Patience!" said Doctor Heidegger who watched the experiment with scientific coolness. "You have been a long time growing old. Surely you could wait half an hour to grow young!"

Again he filled their glasses. The four guests drank the liquid in one swallow. As the liquid passed down their throats it seemed to change their whole systems. Their eyes grew clear and bright. Their hair turned from silver to darker shades.

"My dear widow, you are lovely!" cried Colonel Killigrew, who watched as the signs of age disappeared from her face.

The widow ran to the mirror.

The three men started to behave in such a way that proved the magic of the Fountain of Youth's water.

Mister Gascoigne's mind turned to political topics. He talked about nationalism and the rights of the people. He also told secrets softly to himself.

All this time Colonel Killigrew had been shouting out happy drinking songs while his eyes turned towards the curvy body of the Widow Wycherly.

Mister Medbourne was adding dollars and cents to pay for a proposed project. It would supply the East Indies with ice by linking a team of whales to the polar icebergs.

As for the Widow Wycherly, she stood in front of the mirror greeting her image as a friend she loved better than anything in the world.

"My dear old doctor," she cried, "please give me another glass!"

The doctor had already filled the glasses again. It was now near sunset and the room was darker than ever. But a moon-like light shined from within the vase. The doctor sat in his chair watching. As the four guests drank their third glass of water, they were silenced by the expression on the doctor's mysterious face.

The next moment, the exciting rush of young life shot through their blood. They were now at the happy height of youth. The endless cares, sadness, and diseases of age were remembered only as a troubled dream from which they had awoken.

"We are young!" they cried.

The guests were a group of happy youngsters almost crazy with energy. They laughed at the old-fashioned clothing they wore. They shouted happily and jumped around the room.

The Widow Wycherly - if such a young lady could be called a widow - ran to the doctor's chair and asked him to dance.

"Please excuse me," answered the doctor quietly. "My dancing days were over long ago. But these three young men would be happy to have such a lovely partner."

The men began to argue violently about who would dance with her. They gathered around the widow, each grabbing for her.

Yet, by a strange trick owing to the darkness of the room, the tall mirror is said to have reflected the forms of three old, gray men competing for a faded, old woman.

As the three fought for the woman's favor, they reached violently for each other's throats. In their struggle, they turned over the table. The vase broke into a thousand pieces. The Water of Youth flowed in a bright stream across the floor.

The guests stood still. A strange coldness was slowly stealing over them all. They looked at Doctor Heidegger who was holding his treasured rose. The flower was fading and drying up once more.

The guests looked at each other and saw their looks changing back. "Are we grown old again so soon?" they cried.

In truth they had. The Water of Youth had powers that were only temporary.

"Yes, friends, you are old again," the doctor said. "And the Water of Youth lies wasted on the ground. But even if it flowed in a river at my door, I still would not drink it. This is the lesson you have taught me!"

But the doctor's four friends had learned no such lesson. They decided at that moment to travel to Florida and drink morning, noon, and night from the Fountain of Youth.

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MARIO RITTER: You have heard the American Story "Doctor Heidegger's Experiment" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Your storyteller was Barbara Klein. I'm Mario Ritter. Listen again next week for another American Story in VOA Special English.