

m a g a z i n e o f  
**HORROR**

**The Bizarre and The Unusual**

*Volume 3*

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*Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor*

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# Heredity

by David H. Keller

(author of *The Seeds of Death*)

First magazine publication of a story which appeared in the collection entitled *Life Everlasting*, this belongs in the canon of Keller "Tales Unpleasant" — but very effective. Our thanks to SAM MOSKOWITZ, who first reminded us of it.

DR. THEODORE OVERFIELD was impressed.

The size of the estate, the virgin timber, the large stone house, and above all, the high iron fence, which surrounded the place, indicated wealth and careful planning. The house was old, the trees were very old, but the fence was new. Its sharp, glistening pickets ranged upward, looking like bayonets on parade.

When he had accepted the invitation to make a professional visit to that home, he had counted on nothing more than a case of neurasthenia, perhaps an alcoholic psychosis or feminine hysteria. As he drove through the gateway and heard the iron shutters clank behind him, he was not so sure of its being a commonplace situation or an ordinary patient. A few deer ran, frightened, from the

roadside. They were pretty things. At least, they were one reason for the fence.

At the house, a surly, silent, servant opened the door and ushered him into a room that seemed to be the library. It not only held books in abundance, but it seemed that the books were used. Not many sets, but many odd volumes were there — evidently first editions. At one end of the room was a winged Mercury; at the other end, a snow white Venus. Between them, on one side, was the fireplace with several inviting chairs.

"A week here with pay will not be half bad," mused the Doctor. But his pleasant thought was interrupted by the entrance of a small, middle-aged man, with young eyes, but with hair that would soon be white. He introduced himself.

"I am Peterson, the man who wrote to you. I presume that you are Dr. Overfield?"

The two men shook hands and sat down by the fireplace. It was early September, and the days were chill in the mountains.

"I understand that you are a psychiatrist, Dr. Overfield," the white-haired man began. "At least, I was told that you might be helpful to me in the solving of my problem."

"I do not know what your trouble is," answered the Doc-

tor, "but I have not made any appointments for the next week; so that time and my ability are at your disposal. You did not mention in your letters just what the trouble was. Do you care to tell me now?"

"Not now. Perhaps after dinner. You may be able to see for yourself. I am going to take you to your bedroom, and you may come down at six and meet the rest of the family."

The room that Overfield was taken to seemed comfortable in every way. Peterson left the room, hesitated, and came back.

"Just a word of advice, Doctor. When you are alone in here, be sure to keep the door locked."

"Shall I lock it when I leave?"

"No. That will not be necessary. No one will steal anything."

The Doctor shut the door, locked it according to advice, and went to the windows. They overlooked the woods. In the distance he could see a few deer. Nearer, white rabbits were playing on the lawn. It was a pretty view, but the windows were barred!

"A prison?" he asked himself. "Bars on the windows! Advice to keep the door locked! What can he be afraid of? Evidently, not of thieves. Perhaps he has a phobia. I wonder whether all the rooms are barred. This seems interesting. And then that fence. It would be a brave man who would try to go over that, even with a ladder. He did not

impress me as being a neurasthenic, but, at the same time, he wanted to delay the interrogation. Evidently, he feels that it would be easier if I found out some things for myself."

The Doctor was tired from the long drive, so he took off his shoes and collar, and started to go to sleep. The silence was complete. The slightest sound was magnified into a startling intensity. Minutes passed. He thought that he heard a door-knob turn and was sure that it was his door, but no one knocked and there was no sound of footsteps. Later, thinking about everything, he went to sleep. It was growing dark when he awoke and looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to six. Just time enough to dash into his dinner clothes. He did not know whether people dressed for dinner at that place, but there was no harm in doing so.

**DOWNSTAIRS**, Peterson was waiting for him. Mrs. Peterson was also there. She must have known that the Doctor would dress for dinner; and, not wanting to embarrass him, also had dressed formally for the occasion. But her husband wore the same suit that he had on all day. He had even neglected to comb his hair.

At the table, the white-haired man kept silent. The wife was a sparkling conversationalist, and the Doctor enjoyed her talk

as much as he did the meal. Mrs. Peterson had been to places and had seen many things, and she had a way of telling about them that was even more vivid than the average travelogue. She appeared to be interested in everything.

"Here is a woman of culture," thought Overfield. "This woman knows a little bit about everything and is able to tell it at the right time."

He might have added that she was beautiful. Subconsciously, he felt that; and even more deeply wondered why such a woman should have married a fossil like Peterson. Nice enough man, all right, but certainly no fit mate for such a woman.

The woman was small, delicately formed, yet radiant with health and vitality. Someone was sick in the family, but it evidently was not she. Dr. Overfield studied the husband. Perhaps there was his patient? Silent, moody, suspicious, locked doors and barred windows! It might be a case of paranoia, and the wife was forcing the conversation and trying to be gay simply as a defence reaction.

Was she really happy? At times, a cloud seemed to come over her face, to be chased away at once by a smile or even a merry laugh. At least, she was not altogether happy. How could one be with a husband like that?

The surly, silent servant waited on the table. He seemed to anticipate every need of his mistress. His service was beyond the shadow of reproach; but in some way, for some reason, the Doctor disliked him from the beginning. He tried to analyze that dislike, but failed. Later on he found the reason. His mind was working fast, trying to solve the problem of his being there, the invitation to spend a week. Suddenly, he awoke to the fact that there was a vacant chair. The table had been set for four, and just then the door opened and in walked a young lad followed by a burly man in black.

"This is my son, Alexander, Dr. Overfield. Shake hands with the gentleman, Alexander."

CLOSELY followed by the man in black, the youth walked around the table, took the Doctor's hand, and then sat down at the empty place. An ice was served. The man in black stood in back of the chair and carefully supervised every movement the boy made. Conversation was now blocked. The dessert was eaten in silence. Finished, Peterson spoke.

"You can take Alexander to his room, Yorry."

"Very well, Mr. Peterson."

Again there were but three at the table, but the conversation was not resumed. Cigarettes were smoked in silence.

Then Mrs. Peterson excused herself.

"I am designing a new dress, and I have gotten to a very interesting place. I cannot decide on snaps or buttons; and if there must be an originality about them that will make their use logical. So, I shall have to ask you gentlemen to excuse me. I hope that you will spend a comfortable week with us, Dr. Overfield."

"I am sure of that, Mrs. Peterson," replied the Doctor, rising as she left the table. The white-haired man did not rise. He simply kept looking into the wall ahead of him, looking into it without seeing the picture on it — without seeing anything that there was to see! At last, he crushed the fire out of his cigarette and rose.

"Let us go into the library. I want to talk."

ONCE THERE, he tried to make the Doctor comfortable.

"Take off your coat and collar if you wish, and put your feet up on the stool. We shall be alone tonight, and there is no need of formality."

"I judge you are not very happy, Mr. Peterson?" the Doctor began. It was just an opening wedge to the mental catharsis that he hoped would follow. In fact, it was a favorite introduction of his to the examination of a patient. It gave the sick person confidence in the

Doctor, a feeling that he understood something about him, personally. And many people came to his office because they were not happy.

"Not very," was the reply. "I am going to tell you something about it, but part I want you to see for yourself. It starts back at the time when I began in business. I had been called Philip by my parents. Philip Peterson. When in school, I studied about Philip of Macedonia, and there were parts of his life that I rather admired. He was a road breaker, if you know what I mean. He took a lot of countries and consolidated them. He reorganized the army. Speaking in modern slang, he was a 'go-getter'. Of course, he had his weaknesses — such as wine and women — but in the main, he was rather fine.

"There was a difference between being King of Macedonia and becoming president of a leather company, but I thought that the same principles might be used and would probably lead to success. At any rate, I studied the life of Philip and tried to profit by it. At last, I became a rich man.

"Then I married. As you saw, my wife is a gifted, cultured woman. We had a son. At his birth, I named him Alexander. I wanted to follow in the course of Macedonian. I ruled the leather business in America, and I hoped that he would rule it

in the entire world. You saw the boy tonight at supper."

"Yes, I saw him."

"And your diagnosis?"

"Not exactly true to form, but resembles the type of mental deficiency known as *mongolian idiocy*, more than anything else."

"That is what I have been told. We kept him at home for two years, and then I placed him in one of the best private schools in America. When he reached the age of ten, they refused to keep him any longer, no matter what I paid them. So I fixed this place up, sold out my interests, and came here to live. He is my son, and I feel that I should care for him."

"It is rather peculiar that they do not want him in a private school. With your wealth . . ."

"Something happened. They felt that they could not take the responsibility for his care."

"How does he act? What does his mother think about it?"

"Do you know much about mothers in general?"

"A little."

"Then you can understand. His mother thinks that he is perfect. At times, she refuses to believe that he is feeble-minded. She uses the word 'retarded' and thinks that he will outgrow the condition and some day, become normal."

"She is mistaken."

"I am afraid so. But I cannot convince her. When the matter is argued, she becomes angry;

and she is very unpleasant when she is that way. We moved here. You saw our servants. The butler serves in several capacities. He has been in the family for many years and is to be trusted. He is deaf-mute."

"I understand," the Doctor exclaimed. "That accounts for his surly, silent personality. All mutes are queer."

"I presume that is true. He keeps house for us. You see, other servants are hard to keep. They come, but they won't stay after they learn about Alexander."

"Do they object to his mentality?"

"No, it is the way he acts that worries them. I have given you the facts. They will not stay here. The man, Yorry, is an ex-pugilist. He is without nerves and without fear. He is very good to the boy; but, at the same time, he makes him obey. Since he has been here, it is possible to bring the lad to the table, and that makes Mother very happy. But, of course, he cannot be on duty all the time. When he has his hours off, he lets Alexander run in the park."

"The boy must like it out there. I saw the deer and the rabbits."

"Yes, it gives him exercise. He likes to chase them."

"Don't you think he ought to have some playmates?"

"I used to think so. I even

went so far as to adopt another boy. He died. After that, I could not repeat the experiment."

"But any child might die," the Doctor replied. "Why not bring another boy in, even for a few hours a day, for him to talk to and play with?"

"No, never again! But you stay here and watch the boy. Examine him and see if you can give me advice."

"I am afraid that there is not much to be done for him beyond training him, and correcting any bad habits that he may have."

THE WHITE-HAIRED man looked puzzled as he replied:

"That is the trouble. Some years ago, I consulted a specialist. I told him all about it, and he said that he thought the child had better be allowed freedom of action. He said something about desires and libido and thought that the only chance for improvement was in letting him have his own way. That is one reason why we are here with the deer and the rabbits."

"You mean that the boy likes to play with them?"

"Not exactly. But you study him. I have told Yorry that he is to answer all your questions. He knows the boy better than I do; and God forgive me for saying it, but I know him well. Of course, it is hard for me to talk about it. I would rather have you get the details from

Yorry. It is growing late and perhaps you had better go to bed. Be sure to lock the door."

"I'll do that," the Doctor said, "But you told me that nothing would be stolen."

"No. Nothing will be stolen."

THE DOCTOR went to his room, thoroughly puzzled. He knew the variety of mental deficiency known as *mongolian idiocy*. He had helped examine and care for several hundred of such cases. Young Alexander was one, yet, he was different. There was something about him that did not quite harmonize with that diagnosis. His habits? Perhaps that was it. Was his father afraid of him? Was that why he had a strong man to train him? Was that why the bars were on the windows? But why the rabbits and the little deer?

Almost before he was asleep he was roused by a knock at the door. Going to it, he called without opening the door. "What is it?"

"This is Yorry," was the response. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Let me in."

The Doctor opened the door, allowed the man to enter, and locked it behind him.

"What is the trouble?"

"Alexander is out of his room. We do not mind in the daytime, but at night it is bad. Look over at the window!"

There was a white thing at one of the windows, holding on to the bars and shaking them in an effort to break them. Yorry shook his head.

"That lad, that lad! This is no place for him, but what are the poor people to do? Well, if you are safe, I will go out and try to get him. You lock the door behind me."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Not for myself, but for others. I do not know fear. Mr. Peterson said you wanted to examine the boy. What time tomorrow?"

"At ten. Right here will do."

"I'll have him here. Good night, and be sure to lock the door."

THE DOCTOR was tired, so he went to sleep with all the questions unsolved. The next morning breakfast was served to him in his room by the deaf-mute. At ten, Yorry came in with Alexander. The boy seemed frightened, but obeyed the commands of his attendant.

In most respects, the examination showed the physical defects of the mongolian idiot. There were a few minor differences. Though the boy was small for his age, the musculature was good, and the teeth were perfect. Not a cavity was present. The upper canines were unusual.

"He has very fine teeth, Yorry," the Doctor commented.



"He has, Sir, and he uses them," replied the man.

"You mean in eating his food?"

"Yes. Just that."

"They are the teeth of a meat-eater."

"That is what he is."

"I wish that you would tell me about it, honestly. Why did they turn him out of that private school?"

"It was his habits."

"What kind of habits?"

"Suppose you see for yourself. The three of us will go out in the woods. It is safe as long as you are with me, but you must not go by yourself."

The Doctor laughed. "I am accustomed to abnormals."

"Perhaps, but I do not want anything to happen to you. Come with me, Alexander."

The boy went with them, and seemed to be perfectly docile.

Once in the woods, Yorry helped the boy undress. Naked, the lad started to run through the forest.

"He cannot get out?" the Doctor asked.

"No, nor for that matter, neither can the deer and the little rabbits. We will not try to follow him. When he finishes, he will come back."

An hour passed, and then two hours. At last, Alexander came creeping through the grass on all fours. Yorry took a wet towel from his pocket, wiped the blood from the boy's

face and hands, and then started to dress him.

"So that is what he does?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes, and sometimes more than that."

"And that is why they did not want him in the school?"

"I suppose so. His father told me that when he was young, he started in with flies and bugs and toads."

The Doctor thought fast.

"There was a little child brought here to be his playmate. The boy died. Do you know anything about that?"

"No. I do not know anything about that. I do not want to know anything about it. It probably happened before I came here."

OVERFIELD KNEW that the man was not telling the truth. But even in his lies, he was handing out useful information. The Doctor decided to have another talk with the boy's father. There was no use trying to help unless all the facts were given to him.

At the noonday meal, the conversation was not as sparkling as it had been the evening before. Peterson seemed moody. Mrs. Peterson was polite, but decidedly restrained. It seemed that most of the conversation was forced. After the meal was over, there was one part of the conversation that

seemed to stand out in the mind of the specialist. Peterson remarked that one of his teeth was troubling him, and that he would have to see a dentist. His wife replied, "I have perfect teeth. I have never been to a dentist."

IN THE library, while he was waiting for Peterson to come, Dr. Overfield recalled that statement.

"I have examined your son, Mr. Peterson," began the specialist, "and I have seen him in the woods. Yorry told me about some things and lied to me about others. Up to the present time, no one seems willing to tell me the entire truth. I have one question that I must have answered. How did the boy die? The one you had for a play-mate?"

"I am not sure. And when I say that, I am perfectly honest. We found him dead in his room one morning. A glass had been broken in the bedroom window. A lot of broken glass was around him. There was a deep cut in one side of his throat. The Coroner thought that he had walked in his sleep, struck the window pane, and that a piece of glass had severed the jugular vein. He certified that as the cause of death."

"What do you think, Mr. Peterson?"

"I have stopped thinking."

"Was it before that, or after-

wards, that you had the bars placed in the windows?"

"After that. Can you help the boy?"

"I am afraid not. The advice that the other man gave you years ago was bad. It has kept the boy in fine physical condition, but there are other things to be considered besides physical health. If he were my son, I would remove the deer and the rabbits, those that are still alive. And I would try and train him in different habits."

"I will think that over. I paid you for your opinion, and I value it. Now, one more question: Is this habit of the boy's a hereditary one? Do you think, that in the past, some ancestor of his did something like that?"

It was a puzzling question. Perhaps Dr. Overfield was right in answering it with another question.

"Any insanity in the family?"

"None that I ever heard of."

"Good! How about your wife's family?"

"Her heredity is as good as mine, perhaps better."

"Then all that we can say is that *mongolianism* can come in any family; and, as far as the boy's habit is concerned, suppose we call it an atavism? At one time, all our ancestors ate raw meat. The Mongolian type of mental deficiency comes to us from the cradle of the human race. The boy may have brought it with him as he leaped for-

ward two million years, brought raw meat-eating with his slanting eyebrows."

"I wish I were sure," commented the father. "I would give anything to be sure that I was not to blame for the boy's condition."

"Or your wife?" the Doctor asked.

"Oh! There is no question about her," was the half smiling reply. "She is one of the nicest women God ever made."

"Perhaps there is something in her subconscious, something that does not show on the surface?"

The husband shook his head.

"No. She is just good through and through."

THIS ENDED the conversation. The Doctor promised to spend the rest of the week, though he felt that there was little use in his doing so. He joined the retired leather man and his wife at dinner. Mrs. Peterson was more beautiful than ever, in a white evening dress, trimmed with gold sequins. Peterson looked tired; but his wife was brilliant in every way, in addition to her costume. She talked as though she would never tire, and everything that she said was worth listening to. She had just aided in the organization of a milk fund for undernourished children. Charity, it seemed, was one

of her hobbies. Peterson talked about heredity, but little attention was paid to him or his thoughts. He soon stopped talking.

Through it all there was something that Dr. Overfield could not understand. When he said good night to the white-haired man, he told him as much.

"I do not understand it either," commented Peterson, "but perhaps, before I die, I shall understand. I cannot help feeling that there is something in heredity, but I cannot prove it."

Dr. Overfield locked the door of his bedroom, and retired at once. He was sleepy, and, at the same time, nervous. He thought that a long night's rest would help. But he did not sleep long. A pounding on the door brought him to consciousness.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"It's me, Yorry. Open the door!"

"What is the trouble?"

"It is the boy, Alexander. He has slipped away from me again, and I cannot find him."

"Perhaps he has gone to the woods."

"No. All the outside doors are locked. He must be in the house."

"Have you hunted?"

"Everywhere. The butler is safe in his room. I have been all over the house except in the Master's room."

"Why not go there? Wait till I get some clothes on. Just a

minute. He keeps the doors locked?"

"It was locked earlier in the evening. I tested it. I do that every night with all the bedrooms."

"Anyone with duplicate keys?"

"No one except Mrs. Peterson. I think she must have a set; but she sleeps in her room, and her door was locked. At least it was, earlier in the evening."

"I think we ought to go to their rooms. The boy has to be somewhere. Perhaps he is with one of his parents."

"If he is with his mother, it is all right. They understand each other. She can do anything with him."

They rushed upstairs. The door to Mrs. Peterson's room was open, the room empty, and the bed untouched. That was something not to be expected. The door to the next room, Peterson's room, was closed — but not locked. Opening it, Yorry turned on the electric lights.

Before he did so, from the dark room came an odd, low, snarling noise. Then the lights were on, and there was the Peterson family on the floor. Peterson was in the middle. He had his shirt torn off, and he was very quiet. On the right side, tearing at the muscles of the arm, was Alexander, his face and hands smeared with blood. On the other side, at the neck, the Peterson woman was fast-

ened, drinking blood from the jugular vein. Her face and dress were stained with blood, and as she looked up, her face was that of an irritated, but otherwise contented demon. She seemed disturbed over the interruption, but too preoccupied to understand it. She kept on drinking, but the boy snarled his anger. Overfield pulled Yorry through the doorway, turned out the lights, and slammed the door in back of them. Then he dragged the dazed man down the steps to the first floor.

"Where is the telephone?" he yelled.

YORRY finally showed him. The Doctor jerked off the receiver.

"Hullo! Hullo! Central. Give me the Coroner. No, I don't know the number. Why should I know the number? Get him for me. Hullo! Is this the Coroner? Can you hear me? This is a doctor talking, Dr. Overfield. Come to Philip Peterson's house at once. There has been a murder committed here. Yes. The man is dead. What killed him? Heredity. You can't understand? Why should you? Now, listen to me. He had his throat cut, perhaps with a piece of broken glass, perhaps not. Can you understand that? Do you remember the little boy? Come up, and I will wait for you here."

The Doctor hung up the re-

ceiver. Yorry was looking at him.

"The master was always wor-

ried about the boy," Yorry said.

"He can stop worrying now," answered the Doctor.