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*A Portly Businessman Experiences a  
Night of Thrills and Terror*

## Knights of the Red Owl

By ELWIN J. OWENS

**I**T HAD been a glorious night! Lively and full of thrills, this night with the Red Owls. Hugo Steiner, their only candidate, had enjoyed every part of it. Oh yes, he was now one of them, for their mysterious workings had been revealed to him. True, at times the ceremony had been nerve-straining, but now that it was over, he chuckled to himself until his short, portly form shook.

The midnight supper which followed was exceptionally good, and he had eaten heartily. After-dinner speakers had touched upon the mission of the Knights of the Red Owl.

Indeed, Hugo Steiner was very much impressed with the character of the society he had joined.

So enthralled was he that he passed the cigars; and, donning his topcoat, prepared to step to the curb and enter his six-cylinder brougham.

The master of ceremonies laid a firm hand on his shoulder and cautioned him: "One more act of submission before you can class yourself one of us. You must further prove your mettle, after this somewhat strenuous initiation, by proceeding home on foot without aid at any time of vehicle or man."

"How about my car?" ventured Steiner, slightly agitated by the request. "I'm too fat to walk."

The man laughed cheerlessly.

"We'll attend to your car," he replied in a whispered monotone. "This part of the ceremony is compulsory. Furthermore, you must go from here alone. Pay no heed to anyone who may attempt to speak, nor turn yourself to idle talk with any person or persons whom you pass or meet."

"Umph!" grunted Steiner in disgust. "That all?"

"Yea, verily, do this to the letter of the command, for you shall be watched by more eyes than one." The man spoke quite sternly now. "Let neither laugh nor cry, curiosity nor accident, thought nor deception divert you from your homeward course. Go straight; turn each corner squarely; keep to the right side; and with your eyes fixed upon the spot where your next step shall take you, let nothing turn your head to right or left."

Steiner glanced at the brougham, buttoned his topcoat, puffed lightly on his cigar and started. Down the lighted avenue he sauntered slowly, his feet becoming heavier as he went. A turn to the right, as directed; then, a few blocks more, straightly, languidly taken. Again, he swung squarely round. He was now upon the graveled roadway that led to his home; a drive lined with giant trees on either side.

The full moon shining through the foliage furnished the only light to guide his weary steps. As he trudged on, his mind wandered in retrospect. How long had it been since he had walked that road? He did not know. It seemed as if it had been years. At least, the lapse of time had been so great that the road seemed longer than he had ever realized, speeding as he had day after day, to and from his office in the city. He wondered how past generations had got along

without automobiles. They couldn't do it now!

Suddenly, his attention was drawn.

"O-o-o-hh-h! That clammy hand! Don't let it touch me!"

The wailing feminine voice, like one coming from a distance through the stillness of the night, broke upon his ear.

"Peculiar!" he remarked, pausing to look in the direction whence came the muffled, tremulous appeal. "Nobody lived there for years! Strange, too—this time of night!" He dropped the butt of his cigar, and studied the face of his watch, turning it to the moonlight. "Two a. m."

Returning the timepiece to his pocket, he stood for some minutes gazing in the direction of the continued cries, moans, and weird entreaties for protection.

The dingy, gray stone building, with its broken windows and doors ajar, was a cold, lifeless-looking pile, setting as it did far back from the graveled road and snuggled among the spreading branches of the closely-set, chalky birch grove.

As he paused in contemplation there crept into his mind the stern admonition. Still undecided, he started on down the road, slowly.

Again the cries. Steiner stopped abruptly.

"Some girl's been lured out here. Possibly murder!"

After taking a step in the direction of the house, he searched through his pockets for matches. Yes, he had a box of the safety variety. Again he proceeded cautiously, crossing the road, and down the narrow pathway.

"O-o-o-hh-h! Don't! Do-o-o-n't! O-o-o-h-h-h!"

HUGO STEINER quickened his step until he was within twenty feet of the doorway. He heard a shuffling of feet. He stopped.

A faint ray of yellowish light flashed across a window to his left.

Apparently it came from a rear room. It was gone. Again, it cast its somber reflection on the inner wall. A shadow passed between him and the light. The place was dark; but still the muffled appeal for help continued.

Steiner climbed the stone steps slowly, as one eager to be of assistance and yet fearful of the outcome. The rusty lock responded to his quick turn of the knob. He stepped across the threshold, leaving the door ajar; and, spying an opening to his left, turned into the room where he had seen the flicker of light.

Before he could take three steps he caught the sound of a footfall close by. He struck a match. No one in sight! The floor was covered with dry leaves carried there by autumn winds through the numerous broken windows; a mixture of ashen-gray and burnt-umber that rattled as he moved. He stopped to listen.

Once more the yellowish flame appeared. This time it cast its reflection upon the wall to his left, as it had done before, but swinging slowly round until its rays fell at his feet.

"What are you here for?" squeaked a high-pitched voice.

Hugo Steiner shuddered and, without moving his head, turned his eyes and tried to pierce the darkness at his right.

Simultaneously, the flame shifted position until it fell full upon the creature. A haggard old woman in ragged dress, large, coarse-featured, nut-brown, and acutely stooped. Her hair was a tangled mass of dingy gray; eyes small, made smaller by tightly drawn lids; a stubby, up-turned nose above puckered, colorless lips; and her cheeks and brow a network of deep wrinkles. Her bony right hand with its long fingers and untrimmed nails clutched the crooked staff on which she leaned, while the withered left arm, bare to the elbow and presenting a shiny, greasy ap-

pearance, pointed steadily to the door in the rear.

"You would save this girl and cheat us of our ransom!" said the being grimly. "You're well dressed—we can use money from your friends, too! Go straight ahead, or——" The creature gurgled hideously.

The flame now threw its glimmer across the leaf-strewn floor. Hugo Steiner stepped forward with misgiving. Before he reached the half-open door in the rear, the flame was hidden until he could only grope his way. He hesitated. A clammy, greasy hand upon the nape of his fat neck pitched him headlong into the room. While he struggled to his feet, the door was slammed shut.

In the flickering light of a half-burned candle he took in the surroundings at a glance: the low, bare-beamed ceiling with its swallows' nests of clay; its dingy, smoked walls; the old pine floor with knot-holes and boards broken here and there; dirt brushed into the corners; and about the ceiling dusty cobwebs untouched for years.

A few dilapidated stools; an old table on which the candle stood; and in the end opposite him a low cot with rusty iron legs. Upon it was a tick through which feathers had found their way, a ragged comfort, and over all was thrown a piece of dingy, threadbare carpeting.

Steiner looked for a means of escape. The one window which the room contained was covered with newspapers hung on rusty nails. The door behind him the creature was making fast with bolt and lock. Two other doors, one near the end of the cot and one to his left, were tightly closed; the latter was securely nailed.

He decided on the door near the cot, thinking that it must lead to the basement; and, once there, he could climb out through one of the windows that the moonlight would guide him to. That hobbling old woman couldn't

keep pace with him down steps! Oh, no, not then!

He lunged across the floor, his hand extended and his eyes fixed upon the knob.

"O-o-o-h-h-h!" pierced his ears.

Turning, he saw two small hands reaching out from beneath the folds of the covering on the cot, beckoning him. The girlish face was one of agony, the pale-blue eyes were reddened and swollen, the cheeks white with fear, and lips a-trembling.

Steiner gasped. He glanced about. The stooped creature was grinning until her ivory-colored teeth showed plainly between the pallid lips. She was standing close to the table, leaning upon her staff, apparently waiting his next move.

When his eyes swung back to the girl upon the cot she was sitting upright, nude to the waist, her arms uplifted to him.

"O-o-o-h-h-h! That clammy hand! Don't let it touch me!" pleaded the girlish voice once more. Her tones were low and weak, and her blue eyes rolled toward the old woman.

**T**HE fleshy man thought fast. The haggard creature was looking toward the floor. Steiner saw his opportunity to save the girl. He moved quickly. His arms went toward the girlish form to lift it from the cot. Just as suddenly he drew back. She shrieked again, wildly. Her lips trembled, and the whole body quivered perceptibly.

Steiner stared in wonderment at the feminine form upon its dingy resting place. Slowly, the shapely arms dropped to the naked sides, the body reclined, the eyes closed, and she was still. Breathing was not apparent. Had she died? He was perplexed, dumfounded. His arms fell limply, and his hands went to the pockets of his topcoat. Cold sweat was upon his brow.

Beginning to feel faint—slightly nauseated by this scene after the heavy midnight supper he had eaten—he decided to push the wrinkled old woman out of his path, lunge against the door and break it down.

Swinging on his heel, he made straight for the door through which he had been thrown a few minutes previously. At the same time, he shot out his arm to ward off his captor.

Lo! The flame went out. She was not there. A low, sardonic gurgle greeted him. Surprized, confused, he miscalculated his distance and struck the wall like a shot from a catapult. The impact threw him off his feet.

Before he could recover himself a clammy hand closed on the back of his neck.

"You would break from here?" cried the squeaky feminine voice. The woman shook him condemningly. "Ah, no! You are at my mercy now. You would be kind to beauty, youth; to age, rude, even cruel."

A hiss, a low gurgle, a sardonic laugh, a thumping of the staff upon the bare floor.

Through the slowly opening door at the end of the cot, a flicker of light appeared. Above it, a large, chalky face with broad nose, thick lips, and eyes that in the yellowish light seemed to flash fiery red. The body was enveloped in a black robe. A bony, knotted hand reached out and with clutching fingers beckoned him.

The clammy hand tightened on his neck, and Steiner was forced to scramble to his feet. The next instant he was pitched forward across the floor, and fell helplessly into the arms of the black-robed form.

"Close your eyes and do not open them! Penalty! Death!" drawled the being in black. "Take the steps as I lead you on!"

Down they went, pausing momentarily on each of the creaking steps, then groping to the next. Thirteen

in all. Steiner, at last, was walking upon the level plane of the basement floor, but wading knee-deep in dry, rattling leaves.

A twinkling, and the clammy hand clapped over his closed eyes; and he heard a rustling in the leaves, and dragging steps. For several minutes all was still; then he was pushed headlong. His eyes opened.

A number of ivorylike countenances with staring eyes glared at him silently—each stare was fixed. So many were there that they formed a semicircle in front of him, six feet distant. Black-robed and black-capped, all of them. Of different height and build were they. Beside him stood the stooping, wrinkled creature. A burning torch was now upon her staff.

"Man," she began in a tremulous undertone, "behold my family. They are clothed in cheap black robes because their apparel, like mine, is in rags. You must bow in reverence to each of these round about. Bow low——" She scratched back the leaves directly in front of him.

There lay a whitened, wizened form—more chalky, more skinny, more hideous.

Hugo Steiner made a low salaam to each, and was acknowledged by a deathlike moan from each of them in turn.

"Now, drink of this!"

From beneath the folds of her ragged dress the old woman brought forth a flask, half-filled with a liquid red and thick as blood.

The short, fleshy man hesitated.

"Why stand?" wheezed the being at his side. "This will steady your brain so that you will not act hastily or rashly. Will you not learn that the whimsicalities of age should be respected, though they sometimes seem beyond the pale of reason? Why is it that you would worship youth and turn a deaf ear to the infirm?"

Steiner offered no reply. His trembling hand reached out and, laying hold of the flask, he pressed it to his lips and took a draft.

The haggard creature replaced the bottle with a groan and, hobbling around directly in front of him, went on:

"Man, you shall soon be dead as the thing at your feet unless you do my bidding. Ho refused!" She hissed scornfully. "And you must give ransom—much ransom, for you are wealthy."

"But— but," stammered Steiner. "I have no money with me. Nothing until the bank opens in the morning. I will give sufficiently then, so that you can purchase clothing and food. Why not obtain your support in some other manner?"

"Again, I caution you to question not the whimsicalities of age. This is *my* will and *my* way!"

Steiner was thoughtful for a few passing seconds.

"Will you take my word?" he asked, at length.

"Aye, I will. Too many years have I known you to doubt your honesty. Though you have forgotten me, since years have passed, I have known you long. I was a friend of your dead mother. Yea, to prove this, I will speak her maiden name. 'Twas Evangeline Harris."

HUGO STEINER moaned. It was twenty-five years since his mother had died. Few now resided there who lived in the city then. Who was this that remembered so well? And yet, he feared to ask.

"Accept my promise and let me go," he whispered nervously.

The stooped creature nodded; then touched him on the arm.

"Upon your person you have many trinkets which you enjoy. Of all of them, select the one you treasure most, press it into the palm of my hand, close my fingers over it, and

at the same time repeat: To you, I give this article as a memento of respect—to bind my promise to pay you any reasonable sum that you may ask—to which, these ones, your children in black, bear witness.”

He took a pearl-handled knife from his pocket and laid it in her palm.

“No, no!” she whispered, returning it. “You are given to deceit. You have other things you cherish more. You would cheat me because I am old. Do you not wear your mother’s ring?”

Hugo Steiner gasped. How he did cherish that one thing! A death-bed gift.

“That, and nothing less!” insisted the sordid one.

Slowly he removed the ring, and reluctantly began repeating the words that changed its ownership. He paused.

“As a memento of respect,” she prompted in a drawing undertone.

With difficulty, his lips mumbled the concluding words.

The bent form stumped back to his side, and with pointing finger directed his attention again to the silent human form in the leaves at his feet.

“Kneel down, lift that body in your arms and kiss the ashon brow! Do so in reverence to them, now gone.”

Steiner glanced about that he might locate the stairway and strive for escape. It was about eight feet to his left. Down the wooden steps a yellowish light shone dimly.

“Forget the apparition there upon the cot!” she shrieked. “Youth has lured many into the snare of trouble. Youth is full of fancy; age is firm. Stoop now, and be no longer of fickle thoughts. Be mindful of what is before you; not what you are wont to do!”

The clammy hand was upon his neck. Steiner knelt with antipathy;

and, raising the limp form, kissed the dangling head. Trembling, he allowed it to slip from his arms. It fell to the floor with a thud.

About the semicircle there was a stamping of indignant feet. He looked up. Each pair of glaring eyes was upon him; many hands with pointing fingers met his gaze; and hisses from the partly opened lips rasped on his ears.

“For such disrespect,” murmured the haggard one, dolefully, “you must kiss many of the heads that lie hidden in the leaves at your feet.”

Steiner arose slowly.

Her finger indicated a place beneath the stairway.

“Go there!” she said sternly. “The one who led you down the steps will point to a spot. You will brush aside the leaves and caress the thing you find buried there. And, as he directs your course, proceed cautiously; as oft as he signals, halt in your progress, kneel, and likewise caress what you find lying in that place. When you have paid this penalty, return to my side, where you now stand.”

He was seized with a feeling of dread, his feet seemed glued to the floor. But with all those lurid eyes focused upon him he dared not disobey. With quick-drawn breath and pounding heart, he dragged his heavy feet forward, and began.

REMOVING the leaves, he found a bare skeleton. He bent low. He kissed, but his lips did not touch the bone.

Stepping over this one, he moved on with dogged tread as the guide proceeded. The knotted hand was raised. He paused, and went through a like formality. Again and again, the guide moved like a pawn upon the player’s board. Each time Steiner followed cautiously, knelt at the raising of the hand, removed the cov-



ering of leaves, and kissed quite audibly.

At last the ordeal was over and he had reached the foot of the stair. He glanced up. The yellowish light of the candle could be seen through the door at the top. He cast one look toward the beings that had awaited his return. Their blinking eyes still glared at him. The black-robed forms surged forward as if completely to encircle him.

With a bold dash, Hugo Steiner brushed past the one who had been his guide, and with a sweep of his right arm, pushed aside the decrepit one who held the torch. He bounded up the creaking steps as fast as his trembling limbs would carry him. Behind him he could hear the tramping of many feet and mumbled words, angrily spoken.

Upon the dingy table, the yellowish flame burned low. His pursuers were on the squeaking steps. He shot past the cot without a glance and hurled his weight against the door that would give him freedom to the outer room. It gave way, breaking through the middle from top to bottom.

Lo, the yellowish flame was lighting his course!

"Strange!" he gasped, but did not pause to learn the reason why. Out the door and down the path he went with unslackened speed, giving not a backward glance. Soon he was upon the graveled roadway and headed toward his home. He heard voices as

if many were pursuing him. Quickly, cautiously, he looked back over his shoulder without lessening his pace.

Dressed in black, many figures were standing in front of the gray stone building, and they were repeating something in unison. He stopped to listen.

"Let not laugh nor cry, curiosity nor accident, thought nor deception turn you from your homeward course. Go straight; turn each corner squarely; keep to the right. Your eyes always fixed upon the duty before you, let nothing turn your head to right or left. Heed all our commands and we are with you."

Then he discerned in their midst a large, bright-red owl with winking, yellowish eyes.

Buttoning his topcoat tightly, he ground his teeth and plodded straight ahead.

"Do you suppose Steiner will ever forget this night?" one of them was asking. "And," laughed another, "didn't the doctor impersonate the old woman to perfection?"

Then a squeaky voice caught his ear:

"'Twas cruel to demand his mother's ring, but I attended her during her last illness and saw her put it on Hugo's finger. I knew he prized it much. I'll give it back tomorrow night. We'll all go in a body to his office. He's going to pass the cigars again on this—just wait! But, brothers, the sun will soon be up. We have to hustle if we get the skeletons, the cot, and all this paraphernalia back."

