

THE SILVER OWL

FRANK GRUBER

Table of Contents

<u>THE SILVER OWL</u>	1
<u>FRANK GRUBER</u>	2

THE SILVER OWL

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Perspiration was streaming down John Steele's forehead. His body was wringing wet, and he gasped in mouthfuls of air that seemed to sear his lungs. He looked at the thermometer on the wall. It read one hundred and seventy degrees. He walked to the door, opened it and stepped out of the hot-air chamber.

Steele walked along the side of the crystal-clear swimming pool and pushed through a door which had a sign on it: "Pine-tar Steam Room."

The pungent vapor was so thick he could not see three inches ahead of him. Steele breathed deep of the pine-tar steam and shuffled along to where he knew the cold shower should be.

Halfway across the room he stubbed his toe on something and fell to his knees. He groped around on the concrete floor with his hands and touched something large and yielding. Then he dropped his face down closer to the floor and then saw the body!

Someone had fainted.

Steele caught hold of the unconscious man with both hands and lifted him up, with the idea of carrying him out of the steam room. As he straightened a catapulting body rammed into him! He stumbled backward, the unconscious body falling to the floor. The next thing Steele knew a hard fist lashed out at him through the steam and smashed him on the jaw!

He staggered back, growled deep in his throat, then lunged forward. The almost invisible man yelped and struck at Steele with both fists. He scarcely felt them.

A ripple of pleasure ran through Steele. So the man wanted to fight, did he? There was nothing Steele enjoyed more than a battle. There was strength in Steele's lean body—unbelievable strength. He weighed one hundred and seventy pounds and stood five ten in his bare feet, but every ounce of his weight was sheer muscle and bone. Steele was easily the strongest man on the entire police force—of any weight. How strong he was he did not really know.

And this man in the steam room wanted to fight! Steele leaped forward suddenly, heading the man off from the door. Feet planted wide apart, he stood on the tiles and awaited the charge. It came instantly.

With head lowered and fists swinging, the man hit him in the stomach. It scarcely moved him. The fists smashed against his jaws, his forehead and his body. Steele grunted. His hands were groping out, seeking a good hold on the man. He touched the dripping wet body, ran his hands along it and finally touched the arms. They were big, heavily corded. Steele's cablelike fingers wrapped themselves around the man's wrists. He jerked suddenly and pulled the man forward.

The move was his undoing. He had counted on the man's being a fair fighter. He wasn't! As he collided with Steele, the man kicked upward with his knee and hit Steele in the groin. Flashing pain shot through Steele's body. He cried out in pain and fell to the floor.

He did not go out; but he lay on the wet tiles, gasping in great lung-fulls of pine-tar steam. He saw a flash of light and knew that his assailant had darted out through the door; but he could not move.

More than thirty seconds went by before he was able to climb to his knees. Then he brushed against the body of the man who had fainted and was reminded that he should get him out of this room.

Still gritting his teeth from pain, he scooped up the unconscious man and pushed through the swinging door. The cold air of the pool room cleared the pain from his body. He put the man down on the tiles, then waved to an attendant.

"Here," he said, "this man's fainted—" And then he stopped.

The man had not fainted. He was dead! His broken neck was twisted queerly to one side.

The attendant padded up; then he gasped: "Mr. Bishop—what's happened to him?"

"He's dead!" Steele said. "Where's the man who came charging out of the pine room a minute ago?"

THE SILVER OWL

The attendant shook his head, bewildered. "I didn't see anyone. I was over at the rubbing tables."

Steele swore under his breath. He grabbed a sheet from a neatly folded pile, swung it around his nude body and rushed for a door at the other side of the pool.

Steele burst into a narrow, tiled corridor that led to the locker rooms. The place was full of beds, standing in two rows with a three-foot partition between each bed. On four or five of them lay men, some of them completely nude, some covered with a sheet.

"Where's the man that just came in here?" Steele cried.

A man on a nearby cot, lifted up his head lazily. "What man?"

Steele scowled. He had been in too many Turkish baths himself not to know that most of these men were pleasantly dozing after the refreshing steam baths in the other room. They wouldn't pay much attention to a man who came in.

He pushed through the locker room to the office beyond. A middle-aged man, wearing a white linen jacket, jumped up from behind a desk. "Hey!" he cried. "You can't come in here, like that!"

"The man who just came out," cried Steele. "Who was he?"

The manager of the Turkish bath shrugged eloquently. "How do I know?"

Steele swore under his breath. "What'd he look like? Didn't he leave any valuables here for safekeeping?"

The manager of the Turkish bath picked up a thin stack of cards. "Hm—m—m," he grunted. "He gave the name of Wagendorf. Oscar Wagendorf. He has a wallet and a watch here, that's all."

Wagendorf, the name meant nothing to Steele. He turned uncertainly to the outer door. He couldn't barge out, dressed in a bed sheet.

The bath attendant burst into the office behind Steele. "Dr. Metzger," he cried, "Mr. Bishop—he's been killed!"

The manager pushed back his swivel chair so violently it crashed to the floor. "Killed—Mr. Bishop?"

The attendant saw Steele and backed away. "And this man brought him out of the pine room!"

Dr. Metzger recovered. He started reaching for a drawer at his right. Steele leaped to the desk, caught the man's wrist even as the fingers closed around a revolver. "Don't be a fool. I'm a policeman—Sergeant Steele of the Howe Street Station."

Dr. Metzger blinked. "You . . . you're a policeman? And you killed Bishop?"

"Of course not!" snapped Steele. "Why do you suppose I'm asking about the man who just left? He did it. Aw, hell, we'll go into that later. Pick up the phone and call the station while I go back and get dressed. Tell Captain Marsden what happened."

Steele pushed back into the locker rooms, He was slipping into his street coat when the police arrived; three of them led by Captain Marsden.

"What's this, sergeant?" the captain demanded as he came in.

Steele explained. "After being on duty twenty hours I stopped in here for a Turkish bath on my way home—and ran smack into a murder." He told quickly what had happened. As he talked, he led the group into the room where the body of Bishop still lay next to the swimming pool.

Steele took time now to examine the dead man. Bishop had been a man of about forty. He was utterly nude except for a rubber ring around his ankle, on which was his locker key.

"What a place to kill a man!" exclaimed the captain.

"It'll ruin my business!" moaned Dr. Metzger, who had followed the police.

Steele looked up at the doctor. "Your attendant knew this man by name. Was he a regular patron?"

Dr. Metzger nodded. "Yes. He came here every Thursday at this time. Been doing it for two or three years."

"And this man who gave his name as Wagendorf—was he a transient?"

The doctor nodded. "Never saw him before. And I hope I never do again."

"Say!" exclaimed the attendant. "His medal's gone!"

Steele looked sharply at the man. "What medal?"

"Why, he carried a silver medal on his wrist," replied the attendant. "He was never without it. A sort of round silver thing, looking like a piece of money; only it wasn't."

"How do you know it wasn't money?" demanded Steele.

The attendant was indignant. "Say, I guess I know what money looks like. This thing was about the size of a

THE SILVER OWL

half dollar, only it was kinda black and it was in a sort of locket."

"You sure he wore it today?"

The man nodded vigorously. "Yeah, I gave him a rubdown before he went into the pine room, I remember it clearly."

"No one'd follow a man here just to steal an old medal," Captain Marsden said. "If robbery was the motive, he'd have waited outside until Bishop got his wallet from the office. No, the guy killed him for some other reason."

"Well, we're wasting time here," Steele said. "We ought to be checking up on this man, Bishop, and find out who his enemies were."

Captain Marsden looked around the room. "O. K., Steele, you found this case; so go right ahead with it. I give you full authority."

From Dr. Metzger, Steele learned the address of Louis Bishop. It was on Lake Shore Drive. He took a taxi there, grunted when he saw the old stone building which looked almost like a castle. Mr. Bishop had been in the money.

A butler let Steele into the house and led him to a well-stocked library where a bespectacled man of about thirty got up from a Morris chair. "I'm George Bishop," he said. "I...I've heard. It's awful!"

"Son?" asked Steele.

The young man shook his head. "Nephew. I've lived with my uncle for more than fifteen years."

Steele grunted. "Any other relatives?"

"Only distant. My uncle was a bachelor."

Steele thought: "That makes you his heir and chief suspect.~ He said aloud: "Something was taken from your uncle's wrist—a sort of medal."

"Medal?" cried young Bishop. "That...that was his Athenian Tetradrachm!"

Steele blinked. "Say that again."

"Athenian Tetradrachm! The most valuable coin in his collection."

Steele made an O with his lips. "He was a coin collector, huh? I remember, now, reading about him in the papers. He had quite a collection of coins, didn't he?"

"Not a very large one, but a good one. That tetradrachm was minted around 480 B.C. There were only two like it in all the world."

"If the thing was so valuable why'd your uncle carry it around with him?"

"Because he was crazy about it. And because it was so valuable. He didn't trust it in the safe. He always told me that no one would know what the thing was if he carried it openly on his wrist."

"Guess he was right about that—partly. The people at the Turkish baths thought it was a medal—"

"The Halsted Baths?" asked Bishop. "Dr. Metzger should have known. He's quite a numismatist, himself."

Steele inhaled sharply. "He is?"

From Lake Shore Drive, Steele went straight back to the Halsted Baths. The coroner's men had taken the body of Bishop, and the last police had gone. Dr. Metzger scowled when he saw him.

"I think I'll take another bath," Steele said.

He handed across his gun and wallet, accepted the towels and sheets, proceeded to the locker rooms and undressed himself. Then he went to the steam baths, stepped under a shower and got thoroughly wet. He kept his left hand out from under the water.

Finally he looked at the watch on his wrist, then rushed to the locker rooms. He whipped off the key on the rubber ring from his ankle, unlocked the locker and snatched out a towel. He splashed it around his body once or twice, removing hardly any moisture at all, then began dressing at top speed. Underwear, socks, shoes, necktie and coat. He left his shoelaces untied and was still knotting his tie when he dashed into the office.

"My gun and wallet," he snapped at Dr. Metzger.

The manager of the Turkish baths scowled. "What the—" he began, but Steele cut him off.

"Hurry!"

Dr. Metzger turned to the safe and brought out the box containing Steele's stuff. Steele signed the receipt, jammed his things into his pocket, then looked at his wrist watch. "Three minutes and forty seconds!" he snapped. "And I defy any man to do it quicker!"

THE SILVER OWL

"What are you talking about?" demanded the doctor.

"The murderer!" said Steele. "I had a fight with him in the steam room," said Steele. "He got away and I lost about a half minute bringing out Bishop's body. Not over a minute. Yet, when I came out here after him, the murderer was already gone. Did he run out to the street, undressed, Dr. Metzger?"

The manager of the Turkish baths turned pale. "What...what do you mean?" he asked thickly.

"I mean that he never left the baths at all," replied Steele. "He hid around here somewhere, and that means you were in on it!"

Dr. Metzger reached for the drawer of his desk.

"No you don't!" cried Steele. He leaped forward and caught the doctor's wrist in his iron fingers.

The doctor howled: "Let me go, you fool!"

He struck at Steele with his free fist. Steele gave him a shove that sent him sprawling in a corner of the room in a heap. Then he picked up the .32 from the drawer and emptied the bullets. He noticed there were several loose bullets already there in the drawer.

Then Steele began a methodical search of the room. He found the tetradrachm underneath the bottom drawer, stuck to the wood with a wad of chewing gum. It was a rough, irregular, circular coin, blackened with age, about the size of a half dollar with the design of a woman on one side and an owl on the other. It had been removed from the locket in which Bishop had worn it on his wrist.

"This," said Steele, "is worth sixty-five thousand dollars!" He removed the gum from the coin and put it in his pocket. Then he turned to the proprietor of the Halsted Baths. "Now, then, which one of your hoodlums did the killing?"

"Me!" said a voice behind Steele.

A round hard object was jabbed into the back of Steele's neck, and a hand lifted his Police Positive from his belt holster.

"All right, copper," said the man behind Steele. "You can turn around, now."

Steele turned. The man with the gun had stepped away to the far side of the desk. Dressed in abbreviated trunks and sandals, he was evidently an attendant in the baths. He was a huge, burly man, weighing well over two hundred pounds and built like a big hogshead.

Dr. Metzger came to his feet. "Thanks, Augie," he said to his henchman. "You came in just in time."

The big man put Steele's gun on the desk before him. He gestured with his own gun, which looked like a toy in his huge fist. "what'll I do with him, boss?" he asked.

Dr. Metzger scowled. "His captain knows he's snooping down here. If we knock him off"

"There're ways," said the big attendant. "For example, how much heat can a guy like him stand?"

The doctor's eyes lit up. "Say, there are men who can't even stand the one hundred and seventy degrees we have in the hot-air room, Suppose we left him in there for a half-hour or so-with about two hundred degrees?"

The big man chuckled. "Now you're talkin', boss. Can we help it if the guy's heart is weak?"

"We'll have to clear out the customers, first," the doctor frowned. "We can't just throw them out, either; they'd think something was funny. I just won't let any new ones in from now on. Those that're here'll be gone in an hour or so. Meanwhile, we can keep this guy on ice!"

Steele decided that if he were going to get away, now was the time. The doctor was to one side, behind the desk. The big killer stood at the far side. Steele was exactly opposite. The six-foot length of the desk separated Steele and the big man. And before the big man on the desk, lay Steele's gun.

The desk was a huge affair. Picked up in the center it would have been too heavy for even a strong man. Pressure on one end, elevating the other end, would be a test of strength. Could Steele do it?

He dropped his hands down casually on the desk, one hand on each edge. He took a deep breath and, bracing himself solidly on both feet, leaned backward. At the same time he pulled down with his hands.

Perspiration broke out of every pore in his body. The far end of the desk shot up! And Steele's gun slid across its smooth surface, down the slope, toward him.

At the correct instant Steele let the desk drop and caught his gun. He threw himself backward to the floor, aiming and pulling the trigger all at the same time. And then horror gripped him! The gun merely clicked! It was empty. When Steele had taken the bath treatment the second time, Dr. Metzger had emptied his gun. Those were the cartridges that had already been in the desk drawer.

THE SILVER OWL

The room rocked with an explosion! Augie's gun wasn't empty. A bullet whanged into the floor inches from Steele's head.

Steele threw his gun, then, frantically. It hit the big man on the shoulder, spoiled the aim of the second shot and gave Steele the opportunity of catapulting toward the door.

The pistol roared again, just as he made the corridor. He burst out on the street, darted into a saloon, went through to the rear exit and came out in an alley.

He walked a couple of blocks and stepped into a dining car. He ordered a cup of coffee and a couple of doughnuts and thought things over while he ate.

He had the tetradrachm. Dr. Metzger was ahead nothing by killing Louis Bishop, But would Metzger give up so easily? No! If Steele knew the man, he would make another effort to get that tetradrachm. Well, perhaps Steele could draw him into a trap.

He finished his coffee and got up. At that moment the door of the dining car opened and Steele froze. In the doorway were Dr. Metzger and the big rubber, now dressed in street clothes, their hands buried in their coat pockets.

Steele dropped a coin on the counter beside the empty coffee cup and said to the waiter: "Keep the change." He turned to the two killers.

"Looking for me, boys?"

"That's right," said Dr. Metzger. "We thought maybe you'd want to come along with us."

Steele looked at the hands in the coat pockets and shrugged. "Why not?"

The two men fell in behind Steele. He passed out through the door and they were right on his heels. At the curb stood a small sedan.

"Get in the front seat," ordered Dr. Metzger.

Steele climbed in. The big rubber got behind the wheel and the doctor climbed into the rear seat. Steele felt the pressure of the gun against the back of his head as Augie drove the car back to the Turkish baths.

The two men flanked Steele as they walked into the building. Once inside, they brought their guns out openly.

A third man was in the office.

"Get them all out?" asked Dr. Metzger.

"Yeah; I yelled fire. You shoulda seen them hurry. Who's that you got there?"

"A lousy copper," said Metzger. "He stole something from me. Search him, Oscar."

"You'll be wasting your time," Steele said. "I had fifteen minutes to get rid of that tetradrachm."

The doctor's face twisted. "I killed a man for that coin! I'd just as soon kill another. What did you do with it?"

"I'll make him talk or I'll break his neck like I did Bishop's," Augie growled.

He caught hold of Steele's throat, but Dr. Metzger yelled to him. "Wait! The hot-air stunt is better. We'll put him in it until he talks. Then—"

Augie chuckled. "I get the ideal"

He ripped off Steele's clothes, except for his shorts. Then the three men herded him through the deserted pool room into the glass-fronted hot-air room. Oscar produced a stout clothesline, and while the other two watched closely with their guns, he bound Steele's ankles and wrists, the latter behind his back. Then they propped him up against the wall.

"We'll be outside, looking in," said Dr. Metzger. "When you get ready to tell us where the tetradrachm is start shaking your head. No use to holler because we wouldn't be able to hear you!"

On the wall to the left of him Steele could see the big thermometer. It registered one hundred and seventy degrees. Perspiration was already rolling from him

The three men left the room. Oscar went off somewhere, to attend to the heat, no doubt, while Dr. Metzger and Augie seated themselves upon wooden beach chairs on the runway beside the pool.

Steele realized that even if he told them where the tetradrachm was they'd kill him. They had to, to cover up their first crime.

He looked at the thermometer. It registered one hundred and seventy-four degrees and even as he looked it seemed to move to one hundred and seventy-five degrees. He breathed in the hot air and it seemed to burn his entire nasal passage; his lungs. He knew he couldn't stand it much longer.

What should he do? Tell them where the coin was—win a brief respite? Or go out now?

THE SILVER OWL

He strained at his bonds. Oscar had made a good job of tying him. The clothesline was a strong one. But could he put enough pressure on the rope? He took a deep, fiery breath and twisted his wrists. The rope cut deeply into his skin, but it gave. Steele's greatest strength was in his arms and hands.

He took another deep breath, gritted his teeth and twisted frantically again and again. And suddenly he slipped the clothesline from his wrists.

He was gasping for air, now. He looked at the thermometer again. One hundred and seventy-nine degrees! He couldn't stand it any longer! He brought his hands out from behind, caught hold of a single strand of the rope around his ankles and gave one tremendous jerk. And the rope snapped!

He climbed to his feet, Metzger and Augie, outside the plate-glass window, jumped up, guns in their hands. Then Steele made a single leap and caught up the big rubbing table in the center of the room. It was a heavy thing, weighing over a hundred pounds.

He rushed with it toward the window and hurled it with all his strength. There was a tremendous crash of glass.

The table hit both men, hurled them back into the swimming pool. Then Steele followed.

He plunged into the pool, hitting Metzger as he leaped. His left arm snaked about the man's head, caught it in a steely embrace. He splashed around for a second or two, then the bullet-shaped head of Augie broke the water. Steele lashed out toward it, caught it the same as he had the head of Dr. Metzger. Then he ducked both heads under the water.

It was the shallow end of the pool. The water was less than five feet deep. Steele held both men under the water, keeping his own head above the surface. The men struggled furiously, clawed and struck at him; but they had lost their gums and barehanded were helpless in John Steele's arms.

A minute later he dragged the two half-conscious killers out of the water, through the locker rooms into the office. Then he picked up the phone and called Captain Marsden at the Howe Street Station.

The two killers were fully conscious five minutes later when the captain burst in with half a dozen policemen.

"So it was this guy after all," the captain growled. "I hope you got a good case against him because I've had a complaint against you since I saw you last. A guy called up the station and said you slipped him a phony coin."

"Phony?" asked Steele. "Well, perhaps yes. But that coin happens to be worth sixty-five thousand dollars." He grinned at Dr. Metzger. "Yeah, the dining-car fellow. When you and Augie came in with your hands on your guns I paid for my coffee and sinkers with the tetradrachm! Remember? I even told the man to keep the change."

Dr. Metzger groaned. "I thought you were giving him a half dollar."

"Well, it was about the size of a half dollar," replied Steele. "But it was worth sixty-five thousand dollars and fifty cents more than a half buck!"

THE END.