

*G-Man O'Bannion was a gun artist who had to turn swim star. For the Raymer snatch plunged O'Bannion headfirst into a . . .*

# Corpse Current

*By Wallace Umphrey*



**R**ED O'BANNION, Federal Bureau of Investigation ace, stood near the open window of his hotel room. He was wearing a vivid pair of shorts and nothing else. Late afternoon sunlight was hot on his bare arms and shoulders. A faint breeze stirred the curtains, bringing with it the smell of salt water and growing things.

An automatic which was not his own dangled loosely in one hand.

The little guy in the white linen suit was sitting rigidly in a chair, regarding O'Bannion with hard sullen eyes. The side

of his face was red where O'Bannion had hit him before slapping the gun out of his hand.

"You're a lousy shot," said O'Bannion softly.

The little guy pulled thin lips back from very white pointed teeth. O'Bannion absently scratched the reddish-blond hair on his chest with the snout of the automatic. His left arm hung straight down at his side.

A tiny trickle of blood ran across his wrist and down the length of his index finger, elongating and dripping to the rug. O'Bannion stared down at the spot on the rug.

“Who sent you?” he asked.

“The hell with you.”

“Who are you?”

“Nuts.”

“Where’s the Raymer kid?”

The little man clicked his teeth together hard. O’Bannion crouched and moved slowly in on him. A mirthless grin tugged at the corners of his lips. The little guy’s eyes got humid, but there was fear in them too. Tossing the gun on the bed, O’Bannion hauled the little guy out of the chair by the front of his white linen suit.

“You rat! Where’s the Raymer kid?”

“Damn lousy cop!” the little guy screamed.

He twisted out of O’Bannion’s grasp, half fell toward the bed and snatched up the automatic. O’Bannion hit the little guy on the jaw, and then he hit him twice more, very fast and very hard, even before the little guy began to sag. The little guy’s body went backward and his head made a loud ringing sound on the top of the bedpost.

O’BANNION hoisted him onto the bed and went through his pockets. His driver’s license said that Leonard Dorcas was five feet seven, weighed one twenty, was twenty-nine years old, and had black hair and dark eyes. The little guy was Dorcas all right. The driver’s license didn’t mention that Dorcas was apparently a cop-hater too.

Replacing the billfold, O’Bannion went into the bathroom. He didn’t look back. When he hit them they stayed hit.

The wound on his left arm was shallow. He made a wry face and pounded a fist on the wall as antiseptic bit into the wound. Apparently nobody had heard the shot. The little guy was undoubtedly one of the mob that had pulled the Raymer snatch in Seattle, and had probably been sent along to gun out the opposition.

At the moment Red O’Bannion was the entire opposition. But shortly G-Men would hit the town of Bayside in a swarm.

The Raymer snatch was still hot copy for the newspapers. You can’t kidnap the only son of a millionaire and escape publicity. The kid was a tow-headed, youngster of four, and he’d been out walking with his nurse when the car drove up. Both the kid and the nurse had been jerked into the car, both had had blindfolds slapped over their eyes.

A witness had seen the car—“big and black, a sedan.” That didn’t help. But in the getaway the sedan had sideswiped a truck and had shattered a headlight. From the broken lens police had determined the make of car.

The next day the nurse, whose name was Janet Sayre, stumbled wearily into a filling station. The snatchers had let her go with a ransom note made up of letters cut from newspapers and magazines.

It asked for fifty thousand dollars, the place of payment to be arranged later. All she could tell was that they had gone “pretty fast for a couple of hours,” and that she thought the direction was west because the sun had been on her face.

The “pretty fast for a couple of hours” placed the hideout about one hundred and twenty miles away. The owner of a gas station volunteered the information that he had serviced the car. There were three men in it, two in front and one in back, and there was something covered on the rear floor.

The driver was fat with a very white face and the man beside him was small and thin and dark. The man in back was tall and pretty husky, and he was wearing a loose-fitting leather jacket on which was caked some white powder which looked as if it might be salt.

The trouble was that the gas station was located north and west. O’Bannion

figured that a woman's sense of direction was screwy to begin with, so on a hunch he asked his chief if he could play it his way. The chief gave him twenty-four hours.

So O'Bannion had left Seattle for Bayside, his best bet. It was the only town that distance from Seattle that was on the water. The population was about two thousand.

O'Bannion stared down at the little guy who was still out cold on the bed. The chances were he was the one who had been riding in the front seat of the sedan with the driver. O'Bannion shook him. Looking closer, he saw some blood on the back of the little guy's head.

O'Bannion cursed. Here was a key to the snatch, and now the little guy was out cold with a brain concussion. The only thing to do was to hustle him to a hospital and hope that he'd snap out of it in a hurry.

O'Bannion got dressed and then lugged the little guy down to the lobby and out in the street to his car.

THE street ran close to the water. The wind was right and the smell of seaweed and kelp was strong. Anchored side by side in the almost land-locked harbor were a score of ancient windjammers. All were worn to the same dull dirty color by the sea and the weather, but they weren't ugly. They made O'Bannion think of lumber and of a time now lost and the grain race from Australia.

O'Bannion stopped his car in front of the jail. The sheriff and a deputy were lounging in the office.

"I've got a customer for you out in my car," O'Bannion said. "He tried to kill me."

O'Bannion flashed his shield. The sheriff, a big, gray, weathered man who carried his age in the fat around his

middle, seemed neither impressed nor pleased. He scowled at O'Bannion and then turned the scowl on his deputy.

"Lem Gayer, my deputy. Lock the guy up, Lem. Get his name and the rest." He turned back to O'Bannion, still scowling. "Why'd he take a shot at you, mister?"

O'Bannion said: "I forgot to tell you. You'll have to take the guy to the hospital. He's got a brain concussion. See that he doesn't escape."

"Take the guy to the hospital, Lem," the sheriff called out to his deputy. His voice carried no emotion whatever. "Stay there with him."

The deputy, a thin stooped man with a very long face, rose lazily and went outside. His teeth moved rhythmically up and down on a quid of tobacco, and he carried a flat automatic in his hip pocket.

"I don't like it," said the sheriff dourly. "I don't like the way you government boys refuse to work with the local law. You leave us out in the cold unless you want a favor. And then you get a lot of publicity for being a whole lot smarter and tougher than the local cops." The sheriff snorted. "G-men. Yeah, Glory men."

O'Bannion said bleakly: "If you think hunting rats is glory, you can have it."

The sheriff fingered a circular held down on his desk by a huge .45 caliber revolver. The circular offered five thousand dollars reward for the apprehension of the Raymer youngster's kidnapers.

"Maybe it's this, huh?" drawled the sheriff.

O'Bannion had decided not to let the sheriff be in on the play. "I wouldn't know," he said, and left.

He drove down the street to the telephone office. There was a telegram from his chief. Decoded it read:

*Payment arrangements have been made. Nurse Janet Sayre will arrive Bayside nine P.M. with ransom money. She will contact you your hotel and explain details.*

The chief must be crazy allowing a girl to get mixed up in a thing like this. It was dangerous. And besides, paying the ransom seemed a foolish business. More than likely the kidnapers would take the money and not deliver the kid. However, if Raymer wanted to take the risk there was nothing the F. B. I. could do.

O'Bannion parked in front of the hotel, across the street. He cut across the street, and it was then that the shot sounded. A waspish something tugged at his shoulder.

He dropped to one knee and got his own gun out. The report of the shot echoed flatly over the water, and a couple of seagulls soared aloft, screaming in alarm. People turned to stare and somebody cried out. Nobody was running.

The shot had angled downward from the direction of the hotel. Shading his eyes, O'Bannion scanned the front of the frame building. At a window sunlight glinted on something bright. Then the window was vacant.

O'Bannion counted windows from the corner as he ran for the lobby. Six panes of glass. He plunged inside and almost ran into the sheriff, who was running across the lobby toward the door and waving his .45 in the air.

"You hear a shot?" asked the sheriff.

O'Bannion snorted: "I should have. It was meant for me."

They rushed upstairs together. O'Bannion figured two windows to a room. Three doors down the hall from the corner. Then he stiffened. The shot had been fired from his own room.

The lock on the door had been jimmied. The smell of gunsmoke was

strong, the room had been hurriedly searched. It was empty.

"Somebody was searching your room," the sheriff wheezed. "I guess they saw you coming out and took a shot at you."

"Yeah." O'Bannion glanced sharply at the sheriff, who was wearing a stained leather jacket. "It sounded like a pretty big pistol. Say a .45."

The sheriff said self-consciously: "Well, maybe I better have a look downstairs."

**I**T WAS five minutes of nine when a timid knock sounded on the door. Night had fallen and the breeze coming in through the open window had some coolness in it.

The girl who entered was tall and a little thin, but with curves in the right places. Her face was white, her hair dark and curly. A package was tucked carefully under one arm.

"Come in," said O'Bannion. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

"The note came in the mail this morning," she told him in a strained voice. "It was postmarked Millford. It said that I was to bring the money in unmarked bills. The reason they chose me was because they know what I look like. I am supposed to drive along the Bayside-Millford road.

"At exactly ten I am to pass a side road exactly eleven miles from Bayside. A car will be parked there and Frankie Raymer will be in it. I am to give them the money and they will let Frankie go."

O'Bannion said: "It's a chance you are taking."

She leaned desperately forward. "I don't care about the danger. I'll do anything to get Frankie back. I feel that it was all my fault."

"It wasn't. And this won't work. They'll grab the money and keep the kid. Maybe they'll demand more. Maybe they

won't ever let the kid free—so that he can put the finger on them.”

She said sharply: “Please! Do you have to talk like that? It *might* work. Mr. Raymer will do anything to get his son back.”

“You brought the money?”

She thrust a package at him. “You are to check it.”

O'Bannion unwrapped the package. Inside was a lot of money, but he didn't bother counting it. For a moment he regarded the girl, his eyes almost sullen. She was wearing a blue jacket, a white blouse, and a blue skirt to match the jacket, with a bright Roman-striped scarf at her neck. The hem of the skirt looked a little damp in places.

“I'm coming along,” O'Bannion said.

“But—”

“They won't know. It's not like another car following. There are too many odds against getting the kid back. If I can get a look at them it might help. Drive around to the back of the hotel. I'll meet you there.”

She began desperately: “You can't do it. If anything happens to Frankie—”

“I'll take the responsibility,” O'Bannion said.

The sedan was a big one. O'Bannion removed the spare tire from its rack in the trunk and crowded inside. He wedged the lid open an inch or so with a stick of wood.

Janet Sayre drove the car around to the front of the hotel and then stopped, leaving the engine running. O'Bannion could hear the door open, could hear her heels tapping across the sidewalk. He wondered why she had stopped. Queer, damned queer.

In a couple of minutes she was back. She drove slowly. The road was an oiled ribbon, smooth and with few turns. O'Bannion could smell the night air and

the fir and cedar trees edging the road. After a while the car slowed down.

“Are you all right?”

“My foot's going to sleep,” O'Bannion said.

There was little traffic. For some time he had been aware of a car behind which made no attempt to pass. He guessed that the car was being driven by one of the kidnap mob, watching out for a cross by the girl. The car behind would spot any cops who might be trailing the sedan.

O'Bannion glanced at the radium dial of his watch. It was a couple of minutes before ten. Almost time. One foot was asleep, and he began rubbing it.

The sedan stopped. Through the chink in the trunk-lid he could see the headlights of the car behind him swing closer and then pull up alongside. Off to the side of the road a twig snapped under the tread of feet. A muttered voice reached his ears. Then there was the faint sound of scuffling.

“*Don't!*” cried out the girl. “Oh, don't—”

Silently O'Bannion pushed open the lid and climbed out to the road. One foot was still asleep and it doubled under him, sending tiny pinpricks shooting up and down his leg.

The girl cried: “Look out, O'Bannion!”

**H**E DUCKED. A gun clubbed viciously down at his unprotected head. He lurched sideways, taking the weight of the blow on his shoulder. The shoulder went numb. Then the gun lifted to point squarely at his chest. O'Bannion dived for the legs of the guy holding the gun.

The man cried out thickly and fell down on top of him. O'Bannion wriggled out from under and rolled beneath the sedan just as another man raced toward

him. There seemed to be only two men. A pair of legs showed between the running board and the ground, and O'Bannion fired at them. The legs stumbled and began buckling, and the guy who owned them sat down heavily on the running board.

Hands grabbed at O'Bannion from behind, and he was dragged out from under the car.

"Take him!" snarled the man O'Bannion had shot.

O'Bannion tried to lift his gun, but a fat body smothered the attempt and pressed the gun down so that he couldn't shoot. A foot kicked him in the ribs. He could hear the girl whimpering.

"Don't kill him," said the fat man. "You kill a government man and—"

"Stinkin' Fed!" the other said.

"Well, don't shoot him. Maybe some other way—"

A gun lashed down again, and this time O'Bannion couldn't dodge the blow. It caught him squarely on the top of the skull. A lot of colored lights pinwheeled inside his head and he went limp. . . .

All was quiet when he awoke. Pain stitched his eyelids tightly shut. He tried to roll over, but found himself too cramped to do so. One leg was doubled awkwardly underneath him. He pried his eyes open and there was only darkness.

He listened. There was the sound of an automobile engine turning slowly over, but that was all. The sound puzzled him. He put a hand over his head and he felt metal, cold metal. And then faint terror touched his mind.

He was back inside the trunk of the car, locked in, and the engine of the car had been left running. There would be a little seepage from the exhaust and that meant carbon monoxide—and swift death.

Sudden panic gripped him and he pounded with his fist on the metal lid of

the trunk. That did no good. He squirmed around and managed to get both legs doubled up, his knees touching his chest and his feet against the trunk lid. He tried straightening his legs. The metal gave a little but the lock held fast.

O'Bannion fought his panic down; relaxed. There had to be a way out—there simply *had* to be. His hand explored the bottom of the trunk, and then his fingers closed on a cloth sack. Inside would be a jack. Sudden hope flooded him.

Working swiftly in his cramped quarters, he got the base of the jack wedged against the tire rack and the top against the metal lid of the trunk, near the lock. Methodically he began turning the jack handle.

The air inside the trunk was getting foul and his head felt light. Sweat poured down his face and his shirt stuck damply to his back. He coughed hackingly. It had to be soon now, before the carbon monoxide overcame him completely.

The metal groaned and buckled. O'Bannion caught his lip between his teeth and gave the jack handle a final heave. The lid of the trunk popped open with the sound of twisted metal, and he tumbled out.

"Cripes!" said O'Bannion, inhaling great gulping sobs of fresh air.

Eyes bleak, he went around to the front of the car. It had been a close one—too close. He switched on the lights and studied the side road where the first kidnap car had been parked. Wheel tracks showed it had gone toward Bayside.

O'Bannion slid behind the wheel of the sedan and his hands gripped hard. Anger took the place of panic in his mind. He was no closer to the kidnap mob than he had been before, and now the girl was gone, too. His only chance now lay in making Leonard Dorcas talk. Well, he'd do that, and plenty. O'Bannion headed the

sedan toward the hospital at Bayside.

**I**N FRONT of the hotel he parked and ran inside, thinking the girl had perhaps escaped. It was only wishful thinking. The desk clerk told him that the girl had not come in.

O'Bannion returned to the car, and then he felt the tension. Excitement ran like water along the street. People were talking in small groups and a knot of men swept down the sidewalk, yelling and arguing. O'Bannion halted them.

"Guy by the name of Dorcas made a break from the hospital," said a guy excitedly.

"Pulled a gun on Lem Gayer, he did," another said, "and got away."

Still another added: "It was Lem's own gun."

The men dashed off. This cut it. Now he had no way of finding out where the Raymer kid was being held.

Another group of men charged past him. One of them said: "Maybe he went this way." They passed O'Bannion without a glance.

O'Bannion came to the hospital, started to pass, and then ran swiftly around behind. Here was tall grass and weeds. Leonard Dorcas was smart and there was the bare chance that he might figure the best escape would be to hide close to the hospital itself until pursuit was past.

It was dark and the path was full of stones. Footing was none too secure. O'Bannion stumbled. Flame and noise laced out at him, and as he fell to his knees a slug whined past his ear.

In that moment of falling he whipped out his own gun and snapped a shot in the direction of the flash. Something clattered to the ground. O'Bannion climbed dizzily to his feet and shook the cobwebs out of his brain.

Searching the ground, he found what

the guy had dropped. It was a huge .45 revolver. He thrust it into his pocket and then headed for the jail.

Lem Gayer was sitting with his feet on the desk. He yawned as O'Bannion entered.

"How'd Dorcas escape?" O'Bannion demanded.

"My fault." The deputy spat out a quid of tobacco. "He grabbed my gun out of my pocket when I was bending over him and threw down on me. Weren't nothin' I could do but let him out. I ain't aimin' to start pluckin' a harp so young."

"And the sheriff?"

The deputy shrugged. "Out some'ere. Ain't seen him for a couple of hours."

O'Bannion wondered where the sheriff had gone. At least the sheriff had been around a few minutes before—long enough to try to pot him. Funny, O'Bannion thought.

"What're you doing here?" he asked the deputy.

"Wouldn't do no good to look for Dorcas," the deputy said. "The mob will've scared him away."

That had been O'Bannion's idea. He said: "Want to give me some help?"

The deputy squinted his eyes. "What do I do?"

"I've got a hunch where the Raymer kid is being held," said O'Bannion swiftly. "Maybe it's sour, but I haven't time to explain now. How about tagging along?"

"Dorcas one of 'em?"

"Yeah."

The deputy shook his head. "Them boys are tough. The town don't pay me much fer bein' depitty. I figger that tanglin' with a slick gang of city crooks don't come under the headin' of duty."

O'Bannion said softly: "Maybe you forget. G-Men aren't allowed to accept rewards."

The deputy squinted his eyes again. He

chewed on his tongue for a moment, and then he opened his eyes wide.

"I get it," he said. "For that five thousand dollar reward, mister, I'd follow you to hell and back. What should I do?"

"Find me a rowboat," O'Bannion said.

THE BAY was smooth with only a light swell. The deputy rowed and O'Bannion sat in the stern of the skiff. The skiff was small and it had been pulled up dry on the beach and seams had opened in the sun. Water gurgled in the bottom now.

"Why we goin' out to them old ships?" asked the deputy, resting on the oars. "They ain't been nobody aboard 'em for years."

"Keep rowing," O'Bannion said.

It was cool on the water. O'Bannion hunched his shoulders inside his coat. The moon in its quarter was riding low in the sky behind a cloud.

Suddenly O'Bannion leaned forward and touched Lem Gayer's knee. "Hold it, Lem."

The deputy squinted and held the oars motionless, beads of water dripping off them into the bay. From some distance away came the *chunk-chunk* of rowlocks. O'Bannion sat forward, listening. The rowlocks sounded nearer.

"I guessed as much," O'Bannion muttered, and he held his gun ready in his hand.

"Can you swim?" whispered the deputy.

"No," O'Bannion lied.

The other boat came closer. Clouds drifted northward and the moon painted a silvery path across the water. The other boat was a dim outline with two men in it. O'Bannion knelt in the bottom of the skiff, only vaguely conscious of the water wetting his knees.

"Let 'em get past us," whispered O'Bannion. "They've probably left the kid

and the girl all alone or with only one man guarding them."

The deputy nodded shortly. He shifted a little in the seat. One of the oars was unshipped and its blade hit the water with a splash.

Under his breath O'Bannion cursed.

There was a split second of silence. Then somebody in the other boat muttered an oath. A gun hammered and the slug skipped flatly over the gentle swell.

Secrecy was useless now. O'Bannion fired, but his target was elusive. The deputy yelled and let go of both oars. He stood up and began pawing for his own gun.

"Sit down!" O'Bannion snarled.

The deputy was startled. He craned his neck around to stare at O'Bannion. One foot slipped clumsily and he floundered to the side. The skiff tilted, hung there uncertainly for a moment and then went over.

O'Bannion went down a long way. He got some water up his nose and steel bands constricted around his lungs. He pushed upward with hands and feet and after what seemed a long time his head broke water.

He could hear the deputy thrashing around, but when he called out there was no answer. The skiff was bobbing on the surface, upside down. The other boat was very close now. Flame laced out from it and the ricocheting slug made an ugly sound. O'Bannion pushed himself under water and came up under the overturned skiff.

For a moment he clung to the seat and caught up with his breathing. Then with one hand he reached down and began unlacing his shoes. There was enough air imprisoned under the skiff to last for a little while.

He heard splashes and muffled voices. Then he heard something which sounded like a man being dragged out of the water.



That would be the deputy being hauled aboard.

The other boat circled for what seemed a long time. Silently O'Bannion shrugged out of his coat and shirt. He could hear voices but he couldn't distinguish the words. The air under the skiff began getting foul. Then at length the sounds from the other boat went away.

O'BANNION relaxed. Probably they'd decided he had drowned. He shoved himself under the water and came up several feet away. For a moment he floated on his back, resting. Then he abandoned the skiff and swam slowly toward the dark row of windjammers anchored a few hundred yards away.

"Cripes!" O'Bannion muttered softly to himself. He felt very much alone out here on the water.

The windjammers squatted ghostlike, their spars and shattered rigging looking like vague caricatures of human skeletons. Waves slapped at the weathered sides with a hollow booming sound.

At each vessel he paused to scan the tall sides, and then paddled silently on. He passed half a dozen before he saw the faint flicker of light for which he was searching. A dinghy was tied at the trailing end of a Jacob's-ladder. That would be the boat from which the men had shot at him. After the encounter they had returned here.

For a moment O'Bannion clung to the ladder, then he climbed up. Crouching against the rail, he listened. From below deck came the faint thread of voices.

O'Bannion padded toward the sound. The light he had seen had come from the fo'c'sle. On the way he found a couple of rusty old belaying pins. Maybe they'd come in handy since he'd lost both his guns.

At the companionway housing he paused and began chewing on his lip. The

voices were louder here. Somehow the odds had to be whittled down.

Then he grinned without humor and tossed one of the belaying pins over the side. It made a satisfactory splash.

Momentary silence. Then two feet thudded up the companionway.

O'Bannion ducked into the shadows of the deck housing. A short fat man with a very white face appeared and ran toward the rail. O'Bannion crept up behind him.

Some slight noise made the fat man turn. He gave a strangled cry and pawed for a gun. The belaying pin made a sickening sound on his skull and he fell straight forward on his face.

Somebody called out from below and O'Bannion leaped toward the companionway. More feet made soft sounds below. O'Bannion took the companionway in a flying leap, aiming with both feet at the chest of a man who was just starting up. The guy was Leonard Dorcas, a white bandage wound turban-wise around his head.

But Dorcas was fast. He swung off the companionway and O'Bannion sailed past him and landed at full length on the deck. Dorcas tried to kick him in the head, and O'Bannion grabbed a foot and jerked. The little guy fell down on top of him.

The kerosene lamp on a table painted a shifting pattern of the fight on the bulkheads. O'Bannion flung the little guy aside, but Dorcas was back again. They rolled over and over on the deck, smashing into the table. The lamp teetered.

Dorcas hit O'Bannion a glancing blow on the jaw, then kicked out at him again. Then O'Bannion's looping left smashed into the side of the little guy's head. Dorcas stumbled back against the table and then collapsed.

The lamp fell over, rolling across the table and smashing on the floor. It left a thin trail of kerosene that caught fire and

burned, twisting and turning like little red snakes.

A muffled voice came from one of the bunks.

The boy was the first one O'Bannion saw, a tow-headed youngster bound and gagged. He was breathing heavily, sound asleep. Then he saw the outline of a man struggling against his bonds. It was the sheriff.

"How'd you catch on they were using this old ship as a hideout?" asked the sheriff.

O'Bannion worked rapidly on the knots. "Same way you did, I guess. It seemed the most likely place around."

The sheriff said ruefully: "I didn't dope it out. Somebody cold-cocked me and lugged me here feet first."

**S**MOKE was rolling up in dense clouds now, carrying with it the smell of burning kerosene. The sky was no longer visible through the companionway opening. Only smoke and writhing shooting flames.

O'Bannion scooped up the sleeping youngster in his arms. "Come on!" he yelled to the sheriff.

They pressed forward. The fo'c'sle was a blazing inferno now. O'Bannion stumbled over the body of Leonard Dorcas. Passing the boy to the sheriff, he grabbed Dorcas by the back of the collar.

The sheriff threw a tarpaulin over the boy and then they fought free of the flames to the deck. O'Bannion dropped his limp burden, took a deep breath.

Two figures were trying to get over the side into the skiff tied below. O'Bannion yelled, and one of the figures turned and fired. The slug caught O'Bannion high in the shoulder and sent him crashing backward.

O'Bannion crawled to the side of Leonard Dorcas and found a gun. Rolling

over, he fired from a prone position. The figure dropped his gun and then pulled the other figure around in front of him.

It was Lem Gayer and nurse Janet Sayre.

Snarled the deputy: "You shoot at me again and you'll kill the girl."

O'Bannion got to his feet. The flames had seared his legs and chest, and the wound in his shoulder was bleeding. Flames were hot beneath him. Slowly he lifted his gun.

He said bitterly: "I'd just as soon shoot her. She was in on the whole thing. She arranged to take the kid walking so you could snatch him. You let her go with the ransom note. She had to pretend to be working along with us.

"Before we left to pay the ransom—with me in the trunk—she went back into the hotel. Later on the desk clerk told me she'd phoned the jail. At the time I didn't know whether she was calling the sheriff or you.

"And when we reached the place where the ransom was to be paid off she pretended to save my life. It was all just an act. And when I first saw her I wondered why the hem of her skirt was wet. Well, that was from coming out here before coming to my room."

O'Bannion paused, raised his gun. "Sure, I'd just as soon shoot her. Why not?"

Nurse Janet Sayre yelled at the deputy: "You told me he wouldn't shoot. I'm not going to let you hold me here while I take the slug meant for you!"

She lurched back, upsetting the deputy. He stumbled and fell to one knee. Wildly he tried to reach his gun on the deck. O'Bannion shot him twice, in the arm and in the leg.

O'Bannion turned to the sheriff. "For a while I thought you were in with the gang. Your leather jacket, the shot taken at me

from my room, the shot from behind the hospital. But it was Lem Gayer trying to hang a frame on you. He even dropped your gun so I'd be sure to find it.

"He was the one who shot at me both times. He was the one riding in the kidnap car—he wore your coat, probably with a couple of sweaters under it to make him look huskier. And he let Leonard Dorcas escape from the hospital.

"He carried his gun in his hip pocket and it would be hard for Dorcas to reach around and get it. Like the girl, he had to be pretending to be helping me."

The sheriff cleared his throat.

"Dorcas wanted to kill me and so did the deputy," O'Bannion continued. "But the fat guy didn't like the idea of shooting

me—maybe he couldn't forget the heat that killing a G-man is bound to turn on. Probably it was his idea to lock me in the trunk."

O'Bannion took a look at Frankie Raymer. The youngster's face was streaked with dirt and tears, his eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily.

"Doped," O'Bannion said. "He'll be all right."

Again the sheriff cleared his throat.

"Maybe I sort of talked out of turn back at the jail," he muttered. "I guess maybe you government boys got plenty on the ball after all. I guess maybe I'll just stick to running in drunks on Saturday night for disturbing the peace. You can kill the rats."