

# WOMEN NEVER UNDERSTAND

By Robert C. Dennis

THE street was black and empty. The only sign of life was the tired blinking of a neon sign in a cafe window. Callahan parked in front of an abandoned service station, tossed the keys into the glove compartment and walked away. He didn't owe Joe Rynes a thing now.

It was a good car and he hated to leave it like that. But that was the way Joe wanted it. So from here in if anything happened it was between Joe and his rich girl friend. It was her car.

Callahan walked to the corner and waited for a bus. He was a big silent man, giving the impression that he ran all to muscle. But at college he had almost received both an engineering degree and an All-America selection. Almost, but not quite. A bus veered into the curb, picked him up and rolled on.

Sitting with his head against the window he tried to imagine what Joe's girl looked like. Big and horsey, probably, and arrogant. As far as Callahan was concerned she had three strikes on her right now. One for being rich. One for being Joe's girl. And one for just being a girl.

Joe hadn't been subtle about reminding him that a good guy Joe had once been. "You gotta do this for me, pal," he'd said. "You know how women are. They never understand about anything. But I guess I don't need to tell you that. . . . Betty still up in Denver?"

"Still up in Denver," Callahan agreed quietly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Practically nothing. I've got Kit's car for a couple of days. All you gotta do is drive it over to the corner of 23rd St. at 9 o'clock tonight. Mike Hooper and me are going to take a few days off."

THEY worked the swing shift in the same airplane factory and, Callahan thought, now was no time to be taking a vacation. He didn't say so. He made a point of minding his own business.

"Mike has a few things he's taking along," Joe explained. His dark eyes were never quite steady. "Him and Kit don't get on well and she'd squawk if she knew he was going to be driving her car. She don't mind my using it but she sure don't go for Mike!"

Callahan couldn't see how she would ever find it out. Joe could take care of that; he was a smart guy. He had a twist for everything. "What will I do with the keys?" Callahan asked.

"Put them in the glove compartment," Joe said. "And there'll be a bar-room right around there. Go in and tie on a binge and bring me the bill."

"There won't be any bill," Callahan said. He owed Joe a favor for the time he'd smoothed things over with Betty. And Callahan always paid off his debts.

So he did it just the way Joe wanted it. Now he was finished with the whole thing, including Joe. His conscience was clear. He was going home and sleep. Somebody was pounding on his door. He got one eye open far enough to look at his alarm

clock. It was 1:30. He stumbled out of bed. "Who is it?"

"It's me—Joe Rynes. I gotta talk to you!"

Callahan let him in. Joe said hoarsely, "What did you do with the car?"

"Just what you told me to. Didn't you find it?"

"It wasn't there." Joe's motions when he lit a cigaret were jerky and in the glow of the match his thin face looked sick. "The dirty rats stole it! What are we going to do?"

"You don't mean we," Callahan said, "I'm all through with the deal." He switched on a light. The house had a pretty run-down appearance now that Betty wasn't here, but Callahan no longer minded that. "Did you report it?"

Joe sat on the edge of the bed. "You might as well know the truth. You didn't leave the car for Mike to get. You left it to get the gas tank filled."

Callahan said, "Oh—black market."

"You see the spot we're in? We can't go to the cops without getting ourselves in a jam. But we got to get Kit's car back!"

"Stop saying we," Callahan said. "I don't have any part of it."

"You don't have any choice." Joe rubbed out his cigaret and got to his feet. "You had the car last and I got witnesses. Either you help me get it back or I'll report it that way."

"Why, you little chiseler," Callahan said, starting for him, "you can't pull that stuff on me!"

Joe backed to the door. "We got three days, pal. Kit don't expect to see me till Saturday night. You better have the car by then or—"

Callahan had no intentions of being intimidated by Joe Rynes, but on the other hand he couldn't quite make up his mind where his own responsibility ended. He'd left the car against his better judgment. That put him under a certain amount of obligation.

The first thing he did after work was to get a phone book. Joe's girl friend lived on West Ashcroft, her name was McCain. The rest was easy.

SHE was neither big nor horsey. Nor arrogant. And yet, both in dress and manner, she showed that she belonged in the quietly tasteful surroundings. She had a lot of pale yellow hair, pulled well back off her small ears by two little white clips.

"My name's Callahan," he said, a little disconcerted at the complete lack of ostentation.

"Oh, yes, I've heard Joe speak of you. You're a friend of his, aren't you?"

Callahan had never felt any compulsion to be dishonest for politeness' sake. He said: "He isn't a friend—I just know him. I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Well—the house is full of company. But there's a place about two blocks from here where Joe takes me sometimes. Do you want to buy me a drink, Callahan?"

The place she took him to was a second-rate neighborhood bar called Tracy's. Knowing Joe, it was pretty much what Callahan had expected. But as he watched Kit McCain, he realized, with the wonderment of a new dis-

covery, that a lady is at home in any background.

They took a table near the wall and Callahan got to the point. "Somebody stole your car and I don't think you're going to get it back. If the police recover it for you, some people you know are going to have trouble explaining away the fact they were patronizing a black market."

She took the news without blinking. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

Callahan said evenly, "Get yourself another one and mark this down to experience. I guess you can afford it."

"Look, Callahan," she said, "you've picked up some wrong ideas somewhere. My father can afford it, but he didn't pay for my car and he isn't going to buy me another one. I've got a job in an office of a defense plant and what I earn pays for all my whims. Whether it's a new car or a bottle of nail polish!"

"A poor little rich girl," Callahan made his voice mocking, but he was slightly pleased. If he'd been in the market for a girl, she had a lot of the necessary qualifications. But he didn't want a girl. "That makes it different," he said, and explained his connection with the whole thing. "I'll try to get your car back."

"But how?"

"Here's the way a black market works: You leave a car at a certain place, with the keys in the glove compartment. Somebody you never see drives it away to get the gas tank filled. This outfit has a twist all their own. They never come back."

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I think they whitewash themselves a little by just stealing the car. There's something particularly foul about a gang that takes advantage of its country during a war."

Callahan didn't quite understand that. To him the line between right and wrong was as distinct as the sidelines on the football field. Regardless of how little or how far you stepped over the line, you were out of bounds.

"Can you borrow a car from the old man?" he asked. "Any one of them will do."

"Don't be cynical," she said. "Why do you want it, and when?"

"We are going to use it as a decoy," Callahan told her. "I'll let you know when."

HE found Joe the next day as they changed shifts. "How did you contact this outfit in the first place?"

"Mike Hooper made the arrangements. Why?"

"How about Hooper?" Callahan asked. "Can you depend on him?"

Joe said indignantly, "Why, I'd trust Mike anywhere!"

"So would I then," Callahan said. "As much as I'd trust you. You make a date with this gang and let me know where and when. And don't box it up, if you want that car back."

When he got off work that afternoon there was a message waiting for him. It said: Saturday, 9 o'clock. Corner of Sycamore and Walker Road.

He phoned Kit right away. "Tomorrow night, McCain. Will you have a car?"



The other man was bigger, solid and tough looking. He bored in, firing a left and a right at Callahan.

"I'll have it," she promised. "Then meet me at Tracy's at 7:30."

She was waiting for him, wearing slacks and a tan polo coat, and for the first time Callahan realized that she was beautiful. "I dressed for action," she said, handing him a key case. "Have we time for a drink?"

He nodded. "Shall we keep it on a democratic basis and flip to see who pays?"

A little frown crinkled her brow. "I thought we had all that settled. Just what is there about me that you don't like, Callahan?"

"Well—there's the company you keep."

"Joe Rynes? How was I to know he was such a little weasel! His father and mine were old friends. So I lent him my car several times. That's all."

Callahan nodded. Joe was pretty smooth on the surface. He fooled a lot of people—for a while.

"What else don't you approve of, Callahan? Besides my being a woman?"

He grinned at her then and the pull of his face muscles startled him with the realization that he hadn't smiled for months. "Besides that—nothing. You're a good guy, McCain. I might almost say I like you."

He broke off abruptly. Joe Rynes had just come in and was threading his way through the tables toward them.

Joe paused beside their table and his sharp, dark eyes were very bright. "Mixing pleasure with business, pal?" His voice was too friendly to be natural. "Don't let Betty hear about it. I might not be able to square it for you this time."

Kit said, "Betty—?"

"His wife," Joe chuckled. "Didn't he tell you he was married? Why, you wolf, Callahan!"

"Oh—his wife." Callahan said nothing. There

was a time and a place to explain about Betty, but it wasn't now. Nor here in front of Joe. Callahan, at least, hadn't forgotten he'd sworn to love, honor and cherish.

"On second thought, Callahan," Kit said, standing up, "I guess the old man can buy me another car." By the time she reached the door, she was almost running.

He walked out. He looked up and down the street, but she was not in sight. Without analyzing his feeling toward her, he found that he could be hurt by her. In his mind he had given her a great wisdom and understanding, and that had been a mistake.

Callahan went around the corner of the building to the parking lot. He picked out the best-looking car, a green sedan, and tried Kit's keys. The door wasn't locked. And it was the right car. Now he could at least go ahead with his plan.

In that way his conscience would be taken care of. What he could do about the hurt in his chest, he didn't quite know.

The corner of Sycamore and Walker Road was dark and empty, with a service station closed for the duration, and in the middle of the block a bar-room for the victim to wait in. Callahan parked, put the keys in his pocket and walked away.

He found a hiding place in the shadow of a big tree and prepared to wait. It wasn't for long. A shadowy figure materialized beside the car and then climbed in quickly. The man was fumbling in the glove compartment when Callahan crowded in beside him.

"Must be in the wrong car," the man mumbled, and started to slide out. He was a pimply faced youth. "Sorry, mister. My car is the same model. . . ."

Callahan put a big hand on his shoulder. "Never mind the song and dance. Where's your hangout?"

"Honest, mister, I wasn't going to steal it. A guy gimme five bucks to come and get it. He said the keys were here."

"Where were you to take it?"

"He said to take it over to Rideway and Pine and put it in the parking lot of the Top Hat Club."

Being honest himself, Callahan was ready to believe someone else was telling the truth. The fellow was telling the truth. "What did he look like?"

"I never seen him. It was dark and he had on a hat and coat. But, honest, mister—"

"All right," Callahan said, disgusted. "Get out of here." He started the car and drove away.

THE parking lot was nearly full, but there was no attendant in sight. Callahan got out, leaving the motor running, and walked toward the little shanty at the rear of the lot. And then Callahan had a sudden premonition that he had made a mistake.

He turned just in time to see the green sedan shooting backwards toward the street. He broke into a run, cursing his stupidity. He had never moved faster, even in his football days, but he didn't have a chance. He didn't even get a good look at the driver. By the time he reached the street, all he could see was the fleeing tail light.

After a while he went into the Top Hat Club and ordered a drink. The smart thing to do was leave town, but he couldn't quite stomach it.

The orchestra had too much brass in it and the noise made Callahan's head swim. When the piece was finished, the leader adjusted the mike and said, "Mr. Callahan is wanted on the telephone. Phone call for Mr. Callahan."

Callahan started, then relaxed. It was for someone else; no one knew he was here. But after a minute when he saw that no one moved he got up and went to see about it. The manager handed him the phone and left.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it?"

"Callahan? This is McCain. Listen to me—I know where the cars are hidden!"

Callahan was dumfounded. "I was hiding in the back seat of the car. I slipped out while the man was opening the garage door. Listen," she said tensely, "they are in an old loft building down on Canal Street. The number is 1536. Come as fast as you can. I'm in the drug store on the corner."

"Look," he said, "you keep an eye on the place so you'll be sure they're still there. We want to know what we're up against when we break in." He hesitated, then asked, "How did you know I was here?"

"It was the only place you could be!" She sounded angry. "You were sitting there trying to figure out what to do next. You're a big stupid horse, Callahan, with a one-track mind. But you're an honest man. Now hurry! I'll be watching the place."

TWENTY minutes later he got out in front of 1536 Canal Street, a gaunt, hostile place, its windows like black unseeing eyes. McCain was nowhere in sight. Callahan whistled softly, and waited. Nothing happened.

Walking quickly, he went back to the corner and entered the drug store. "I'm looking for a girl. She came in a few minutes ago to make a phone call."

"She's gone," the proprietor said. "She came in a couple of

times. Then a man came for her—skinny guy with a lot of pimples and no chin."

Callahan wheeled and raced for the door. He knew now he had been badly outsmarted. When he had spoiled their original plan, the crooks had improvised and stolen the car right out from under his nose. The pimply faced youth had simply tricked him into going to the Top Hat Club where another member of the gang had been waiting. The only reason I'm honest, Callahan thought bitterly, is because I'm not smart enough to be a crook!

There were no lights showing in the loft building. The big double doors through which the cars must have gone were firmly bolted on the inside. Nearby a frosted-glass door apparently led into an office of some sort. Peering through a window, Callahan could see a thin crack of light from an inner room.

A SUDDEN fury that was half fear shook his big frame. McCain was in there! And it was his fault she was there! If anything happened to her, he'd kill somebody with his bare hands. He drove his foot through the frosted glass door and then kicked a hole big enough to slide through.

The door to the storeroom was all wood, but Callahan took it down with a tank-like charge.

They had McCain tied to a chair. There were two of them, working on a car. A low-hanging lamp poured down a cone of light. The pimply faced youth had been under the car, and was just scrambling to his feet when Callahan, charging past, clubbed him into a heap.

The other man was bigger, solid and tough-looking. When he saw that Callahan was alone, he came back from where he'd been trying to get the back door open. He squared off like a prizefighter firing a left and a right at Callahan's head.

But he had never played football. Callahan threw a block on him that was all knees and elbows. The man came down, bumping his head on the fender of a car. Callahan clipped him once for good measure.

"That was beautiful, Callahan!" Kit cried. "You're really handsome when you're mad!"

Callahan said, "You drive your own car. I'll take the sedan. Meet me back at Tracy's—I'd better make a phone call first. A lot of people will be glad to get their cars back."

"Honest to the end!" she said mockingly, but she waited for him.

She was waiting for him in front of Tracy's, too. And as he walked toward her and he smelled a blurred fragrance that was like the memory of a distant springtime. A springtime when he had been in love.

He said to her, "I think you should know that Betty divorced me four months ago. She left me because I could never earn enough money for her. Sometimes I almost did, but not quite—"

"And you never will, Callahan," she said, but there was no sting in her words. And her eyes were soft with wisdom and a great understanding. "You'll always be too honest—or too stupid."

He was pretty sure she was right, but for the sake of his pride he could have argued it with her. Or he could put his arms around her and hold her tight against him. He did not argue. Even Callahan wasn't that stupid.

## Yesterday's Headliners 1920

SAME COWL IS STARRING IN THE STAGE SHOW, "SMILIN' THROUGH"...

WHISPERING, LOVE NEST, MARGIE, FEATHER YOUR NEST, THAT NAUGHTY WALTZ, AVALON, ALICE BLUE GOWN, ROSE OF WASHINGTON SQUARE—WHAT'S THIS WORLD COMING TO?? NOW, YOU PRACTICE THE MUSIC I BOUGHT FOR YOU—SIMPLE CONFESSION, ALPINE VIOLETS AND GAVOTTE IN D...



POPULAR MUSIC IN THE GREAT AMERICAN HOME IN 1920...

THE OUTLINE OF HISTORY, BY H.G. WELLS, IS A BEST SELLER...

SINCLAIR LEWIS INTRODUCES A NEW NOVEL, "MAIN STREET"...

THEDE BARA, THE "VAMP" OF MOTION PICTURES IS STARRING IN "THE BLUE FLAME" A POPULAR STAGE SHOW...

WALTER JOHNSON, WASHINGTON SENATOR, PITCHES NO-HITTER AGAINST BOSTON RED SOX...

## In the HEADLINES-1920

SEPT. 28, AT CHICAGO A GRAND JURY BROUGHT IN INDICTMENTS FOR THROWING "THE 1910 WORLD SERIES BASEBALL GAMES, BETWEEN THE CHICAGO WHITE SOX AND THE CINCINNATI REDS, AGAINST 8 PLAYERS OF THE CHICAGO TEAM..."



JAN. 16, THE PROHIBITION AMENDMENT TOOK EFFECT AT MIDNIGHT...



SEPT. 16, WALL STREET, NEW YORK CITY, BOMB EXPLOSION KILLED 30; INJURED 100; DID \$2,000,000 DAMAGE...