

THE GREAT PAPIST PLOT

BY W. A. S. DOUGLAS

FIVE men sat around the stove in Buddy Reisenfeld's hotel. A tool-dresser and a well-driller from the Red River field back of Burkburnett, just paid off and both of them more than half-lit; Buddy's clerk, who had been lushing with the oil men but was holding his liquor better because he was at it every day of his life; a film salesman from Dallas, and this new guy that nobody knew.

He was a hard-looking, black-haired bird with his eyes jumping around in his head. Might have been a Jew, a Wop, a Scotchman or a Polak as far as guessing went. He was talking about Broadway to the film-peddler when John Kane's cute little soubrette come in and made a dive for the stove. She was shivering, but nobody got up to give her a chair and they were using all of them. But this stranger seemed to be better raised than the rest.

"Come over here and sit on my knee, Honey, and warm your toesies," he says to her.

"How's the show today?" he asks after she'd sat down on him.

"Lousy," she tells him. "Fourteen hicks in the house and two of them in on Annie Oakleys! That's three bucks—and our end is two of that. Tonight Kane will pick up about four more if he gets a break. That's six bucks among seven people. Jeesis, I'd walk back home to Amarillo if it wasn't for the snow! I got the *chile* D. T.'s right now."

So this bird started telling her what was the matter with the show. John Kane called it "The New York Follies." He had five girls and a comic in the troupe besides himself. Just a Texas tab trying

to get along. They'd come into Burkburnett on the bum from Anadarko in an old Ford car, and here they were playing to breakfast money.

The tool-dresser was passing around a bottle of mule and this girl—Bucko, they called her—was taking a man's size swig when Kane and his sweetie, who was a tap dancer and a bum one at that, came in. The new guy was saying that what the show called for was a megaphone ballyhoo.

"And which of the Shuberts are you, Jake or Lee?" asks Kane behind his chair, ugly like.

That didn't phaze this bird.

"Neither one," he says, grinning. "But at that, they're buddies of mine. I got to send in a report to Lee about this territory tonight."

Now, Kane was just a Dallas boy and Lubbock was the biggest town he'd ever played in. This bird was all dressed up and had what looked like a diamond on his finger.

"Well," says Kane, "when you do write him, tell him to send Al Jolson down here on a special. It's a clean-up."

With that he threw the hotel clerk out of his chair and sat down.

The other three girls in the show came in and started bellyaching about food. Kane up and gave them a dollar.

"I'm fifty-fifty with the gang all the time," he hollers. "That's for you three and Joe."

Joe was the comic.

"Two bits apiece!" squawks one of the janes. "*Chile* again! God Almighty, take a look in my ears! There's beans sprouting in them."

"Cut out the cup of coffee and you can make it *chile con carne*. That'll be a change," says the clerk from behind the desk. He put himself down as being a smart guy all the time.

"Hey, you, can that!" yells the driller. "I don't stand for no insulting of women."

But he didn't get up to let the girls any nearer the fire. He swung his chair round instead and looked at the clerk dirty.

"Remember your mother was a lady," he says.

Buddy, the boss of the hotel, came out of his room figuring there might be a fight. He's a little chunky guy known all over Texas. He could have built himself a twelve-story brick hotel with the money he'd thrown away cashing bum checks alone. A Jew at that, but he was shell-shocked in the war.

Seeing a chance to get the girls a good feed, he went over to the driller, who was an old pal of hisn, and told him to take them out and buy a big steak. They weren't bad-looking babies, and the drunk was willing enough. The gang started off down the stairs and Kane dug his sweetie in the ribs. She up and dove after them.

"I'll fix your eats, Sugar," this new guy tells the soubrette who was still on his knee.

"I'll go along with you," says Kane. "I'm just as sick of *chile* as they are because nobody can say I ever eat better than my gang. I guess the show's blowed up allrighty."

"It don't have to be," says this new guy. "I'm a show doctor and I'm looking for Texas folks for a Texas show. Something that means jack at the box-office."

"You can't run that hoochie-coochie stuff no more," Kane tells him. "That's the only thing that will nail these rubes, and it's out. They pinched her"—pointing at Bucko—"for just a couple of wriggles over at Childress. I had gauze over her front and all, but it didn't make no damn difference to the blue-snoots. Bounced me twenty bucks for indecent exposure."

"Listen," this guy says. "I don't touch

cooch stuff except when I import one of them big French dames to New York. I've a grift that *is* a grift. You call me Lute. The rest of my name don't matter right now, you being weak from hunger, but I'm the only fellow that has the nerve to tell Al Woods to pull his socks up. You ask the Halperin boys what I done to Chicago. Ask Georgie White—"

"Listen," Bucko cuts in, "let's eat."

So they went on over to the restaurant and the whole cast of "The New York Follies" ate the first good meal they'd had since the troupe started out. The tool-dresser was at the next table buying steak and peas and home-fried and pie and coffee for the other section, with slugs of mule between each course.

"I'll review the show again tonight and tell you what I got in mind," says Lute when he left them at the theatre.

But he only spent ten minutes there, and then went back to the hotel. He started a crap game with the driller and the toolie, and took two hundred smackers away from them in less than no time. Buddy had the rest of their bankroll and turned them down on a yelp for more dough. He was too smart to notify them that he didn't think this guy was on the up and up. He told them instead that they were too drunk to play and use good sense at the same time.

II

Bucko was right about business for the night. Kane's end was four dollars and twenty cents and he was as sore as a boil.

"Whatever you have, I'm with you," he tells Lute when he got back to the stove again.

"All I can use is three people," says Lute. "That will be Bucko here"—she was back on his knee again, loving him up for some supper—"and you and your gal."

The other three janes and the comic started hollering.

"Lay low, lay low!" hollers Lute at them. "I'll give you a break if I close

with Kane. I'll let you have fifty dollars to take the four of you back to Dallas. That's your tickets and eight dollars apiece."

"For four weeks work!" says the comic. "What the hell!"

"Better than nothing, and that's what you'll get by sticking. I came through that way and the Happyland Theatre is starting up in stock and hollering for people. You'll all land if you shake a leg."

Then he pulled out the roll of bills he had taken off the two oil men and gave them a flash.

"Come into my office," he says to Kane. "You and Bucko and this jane of yours that thinks she's a tap dancer."

He handed a deuce to the rest of the gang and told them not to get drunk on it. Then he marched into his room and lay down on the bed. Kane and his girl sat on the radiator to keep warm and Bucko took the chair which had its cane bottom all broke out.

"Who is this wise-cracking bird?" says Kane's tap dancer, pretending to whisper but making it so that Lute could hear. "I may not be any Ruby Keeler, but at that I don't know any jane playing tab that's got me beat as a hooper."

"Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you!" Kane tells her out loud. "If this thing works out you may be able to have underwear again."

Lute let on he hadn't heard and was doing some heavy thinking.

"Well, what's the grift?" asks Kane after a while.

"A straight fifty-fifty proposition," says Lute, setting up on the bed and handing his butt to Bucko for a couple of drags. "That's the only deal I know. What are you paying the gals now?"

"What's he *paying* us?" squawks the tap dancer. "Don't make me laugh!"

Kane handed her one that kept her quiet for quite a spell.

"Twenty-five bucks a week," he tells Lute, "and free transportation in the Ford."

"All right. I'll go one better than that for Bucko, and you'll do the same. Fifty-fifty, you and me, and each of us will take care of their own janes. Everything comes out and then the split. How's that suit you, sweetie?" he asks Bucko.

"Fine," she answers, having figured him out for a good guy when he had it.

"All right, then. Now let's get down to cases. We get in that Ford of yours tomorrow, and while it's your car I'll pay the gas. We'll have Buicks apiece in a month if I know show business, and Georgie Cohan will tell you I do. We're heading south and I've got the wardrobe waiting at Austin."

"Wardrobe?" says Kane. "I got some yet in the trunk."

"Not the kind I want," Lute tells him. "You're not in a leg show no more. From now on you're a holy man."

"A holy man?" asks Kane. "Just what is this?"

"You're an escaped monk and Bucko is a reformed nun. What I'll do with that highfalutin baby of yours I haven't figured out yet, but anybody that travels with me earns their pay. I knew you were the guy I wanted when I heard you recite 'The Return of the Unknown Soldier!'"

"Ain't that a darb?" says Kane. "I've had write-ups on that. Over in Quanah the American Legion had me put it on special at a smoker. Does it go in the new show?"

"Like hell it does! I told you you were a monk. Sandals and a couple of feed-sacks for wardrobe."

"Some wardrobe! What does Bucko wear?"

"Nun stuff," says Lute. "Starched white hat and black dress and beads. Going to run into money, her make-up is."

"Where's the jack in that sort of boloney?" asks Bucko.

"Didn't you know the Democrats were going to Houston to pick a President?" Lute asks her.

"I did not. But what of it?" she says.

"What of it? What of it?" he hollers.

"Just nothing but a clean-up for a smart showman, that's all. When they set down to do the real picking in June I'll be buying a drawing-room to New York and paying for it off a roll that would choke a horse. This is one time the evangelists are going to be whipped at their own game. And if a certain baby I know of keeps her nose clean maybe I'll take her along and introduce her to Earl Carroll."

"I'll be good," says Bucko.

"I'm still scratching around trying to find out something," says Kane. "Come clean with the whole business."

Lute got up and used his hands while talking.

"The title of this opera will be 'The Great Papist Plot,'" he hollers. "That's red-hot stuff. These Democrats are going to try to make Al Smith President of the United States. I hope they do. I'm sorry I got to run a show against a great guy like him, but it's every man for himself. Down in that territory around Houston they used to be all Kluxers. May be yet for all I know. If they are, that's more gravy. But first, last and foremost, it's Bibletown and always has been. I'll bill the show like a circus."

"That'll run into jack, billing a show," says Kane. "I always light cold in a town. Never had the kale to do anything else outside of what the theater man might do before we got in."

"How many times have I got to tell you you're hooked up with a Broadway showman now?" answers Lute. "I got all the paper ready in Austin. I got it off a guy that got the D. T.'s and had to give up—one-sheets, three-sheets, and all the rest of it, in every color you ever heard of. And I know how to handle it. You'll have an advance man, a man with you and a man behind you. The same guy will do it all and it'll be me. I'm the fastest worker you ever saw when I smell kale."

He pulled a worn-out map from his pocket. It was of Texas and he had it red-inked all around Houston.

"Every one a pipe," he says, pointing to

the towns. "Just lousy with Methodists and Baptists that haven't taken a real smack at the Pope since Dan Moody cracked the Klan! Raring to go! I'll sew up with the leading preacher in each town."

"Where you going to show?" asks Kane. "Lots of them burgs ain't got no theaters."

"I don't want no theaters," shouts Lute, getting excited again. "I wouldn't have them if you give them to me. I go in the churches and the schools. No cut except a slip-cross to the parson. My one-sheet's a darb!"

"Tell us," says the tap dancer, who had got over her slap on the nose and was warming up to this guy's oratory.

"Kane and the Pope wrestling," says Lute. "Kane dressed up in his monk's uniform and the Pope wearing his diamond beads and his red robes. Kane has his knee on the Pope's chest and is choking him. Back of them stands the title of the show in red letters: 'The Great Papist Plot.' In smaller type under that runs: 'Exposed in All its Horrors by Brother Gregory, the Escaped Monk, and by Sister Mary, the Ruined Nun.' Class, hey?"

"I'll say," says Bucko.

"I got some window-cards in red," Lute goes on, "with Bucko all dolled out in her nun's stuff and being helped over a wall by Kane while a lot of tough priests and cardinals are grabbing at her skirts and trying to pull her back. Same titles as the one-sheets, with letters of fire. Hot, hey?"

"Sounds kind of," admits Kane.

"I got stickers too. Mottoes of all kinds. And I'll get some new ones. Some I have thought out run like this: 'Are You Going to Let the Pope be Enthroned in the White House?' 'Are You Going to Allow the Nation's Capital to be Moved to Rome?' 'Al Smith Stands for Rum, Rome and Rough-Stuff.' Lots of them like that and all carrying the come-on 'See Father Gregory, the Unfrocked Monk, at such and such a place' or 'Hear what Sister Mary

the Beautiful Nun suffered at the hands of Papist Fiends wearing the Glittering Robes of the Roman Church.' Don't tell me them Baptist babies won't want to know all about what she suffered and how!"

III

The next morning the four of them set out for Austin in Kane's flivver. Buddy stopped them as they came down the stairs and wanted to know how about his bill.

"You got my trunk with the costumes," says Kane. "Keep that for thirty days and I'll send you a check. We'll be rolling in jack by then."

"I got enough costumes now from busted tab shows to start in the masquerade business if I lived in a bigger town," says Buddy. "How about your new partner squaring up this bill? It's only twenty bucks. You owe me two yourself," he says, turning to Lute.

"Twenty bucks is twenty bucks when you're staging a big show," Lute tells him. "You let her ride for thirty days and I'll endorse the note."

"That may make it worse instead of better," says Buddy. "But go ahead. It's all the chance I have."

They made out an I Promise You for twenty-two bucks and Lute and Kane signed it.

"Why put your two on there?" argues Buddy. "That was a cash deal."

"Two bucks is also two bucks when you're building a show," says Lute. "You be nice and I'll send you lots of trade."

Well, anyhow, they ate good all the way to Austin. The wardrobe was already waiting. Gown and sandals for Kane and the nun's dress for Bucko. He kicked like hell when he found he had to wear the gown on and off, but that was no holler at all to the one he put up when Lute told him he had to have his head shaved clean round the top.

"It ain't enough that I have to wear sandals and wash my feet every day!" he yelps.

"The reason Belasco and me are successful," Lute tells him, "is because we let no detail get away from us. You're a monk and you'll be an honest-to-God monk or I'll hire another guy. All I've got to do is wire Chicago. I know a dozen fine actors hanging around the Loop just raring to go. Do you play Brother Gregory or don't you?"

Kane guessed he'd go ahead. He'd been hungry a long time.

When he came out of the barber-shop, bare-headed, bald-headed and with his gown and sandals on, a crowd gathered and followed behind. They were quiet and respectful-like, taking him for a holy man. Lute was so impressed that he thought of opening right there. Then he figured it was perhaps better to clean up close to Houston first and hit the far-off towns on the heels of the convention. Bucko looked like a million dollars' worth of piety in her robe and hat and beads.

"I guess I'll have to lay off the corn liquor while I'm running around in these duds," she says.

"Sure thing," answers Lute. "But what a drunk you can have when we clean up! And not corn either, but real red-eye. How's that hit you?"

"Hurry it along," she tells him.

They laid around in Austin a few days getting the window cards and stickers ready. The one-sheets that Lute had got off the guy with the D. T.'s were swell stuff. Lute stuck a few in the windows for teasers and the folks just packed the sidewalks to get a look. Somebody started cheering. Two cases of books come in and Lute started shipping them off in sections to preachers he had already tied up with over the long-distance 'phone.

"Those are Bibles and educational literature," he told the gang. "Kane's sweetie can earn her keep by selling them in the lobby. These books are red-hot. 'Secrets of the Monastery' and 'Confessions of a Nun.' Two bits apiece. Clear profit on every one: twenty cents."

"When do we open?" asks Kane.

"Sugarland, day after tomorrow," says Lute.

"We'd better do a bit of rehearsing," advised Bucko. "All I know now is that Kane helps me over a prop wall and I'm screaming blue murder trying to get away from a gang of cardinals."

"That's about all you'll have to do and know," Lute tells her. "I'll polish you up this afternoon."

He borrowed the stage of an empty theatre that afternoon and put them through their paces.

"Who is going to play all the priests who are supposed to be grabbing at me?" asks Bucko when she was poised on the wall.

"I will," says Lute. "I'll be behind here and I'll make a noise like the whole College of Cardinals. I'll be grabbing at you when Kane is trying to pull you away. I'll still have your skirts in my mitts

when he's got you on the other side."

"I thought you told me this was no leg-show," she says.

"Say," he answers her, "the thing that speared you this job in the first place was the shape of your calves. Don't you think these Bible-thumpers are entitled to an eye-full of you after they've heard your sad story? That's jack at the box-office and means that you'll have to wear pink silk underwear."

"I got you," says Bucko. "I'm doing the same old show under a new title."

"Where's my recitation?" asks Kane.

With that he hands Kane a copy of "Speeches by United States Senator J. Thomas Heflin, of Alabama."

"Read up what I've marked in red ink," he says. "You're trouper enough to patch it into sound material that'll burn 'em up. Don't be afraid to holler! Give 'em the old-time red-hot Methodist stuff!"

WRITTEN IN SAND

BY EDA LOU WALTON

THE mountains were denied her,
And the plains
With their corn-shadowed lanes.
But the desert stretched beside her
And the sunset was ahead
Where she should one day make her bed.
Promised the years between with sand
On either hand,
There was some pity in her need to love
This barren land,
Some will-to-understand.
There were strange cacti blossoms here,
Like blood-pricks on the windy dunes,
And bloody moons rose near
Paled stars.

Where harsh white bars of light
Shut in a night so blue
There was no passing through
To dreams.
Sleep was a blanket thrown
On a tired shoulder worn to bone,
And there was never any hand
To fill for long another hand
In this most desolate land.
But there was sand,
And one could build with sand
Mirage of water and of green
Where neither water nor a tree was seen,
And there were always castles
Not yet conquered by the wind,
And there were thinned
Weeds like the hair upon an ancient head,
Under the arm-pits weeds, and red
Cacti at the breast.
If there were never rest,
If scenes shifted
Whenever the winds lifted,
There was ecstatic strain
To ascertain