The People

BY SUSAN GLASPELL

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

* * * * *

THE PEOPLE

SCENE: The office of “The People,” a morning in March, 1917. There is little furniture—a long table strewn with manuscripts and papers, a desk. On the walls are revolutionary posters; wads of paper are thrown about on the floor—the office of a publication which is radical and poor. This is an inner office; at the rear is the door into the outer one. OSCAR is seated at the table writing. TOM, a printer who loves the cause—or the crowd—almost enough to print for it, comes from the other room, a galley-proof in his hand.

TOM

Why are you writing?

OSCAR

[Jauntily.] Because I am a writer.

TOM

But I thought you said there wasn’t going to be another issue of The People.

OSCAR

[With dignity.] I am writing.

TOM

There’s a woman here with a suit case.
OSCAR
What’s in it?

TOM
She wants to see the Editor.

OSCAR

[After writing.] All right.

[TOM goes out and a moment later the woman appears. She is middle aged, wears plain clothes not in fashion. Her manner is a little shrinking and yet as she stands in the doorway looking about the bare room, her face is the face of one who has come a long way and reached a wonderful place.

THE WOMAN

This is the office of The People?

OSCAR

Um-hum.

THE WOMAN

[In a bated way.] I came to see the author of those wonderful words.

OSCAR

[Rising.] Which wonderful words?

THE WOMAN

About moving toward the beautiful distances.

OSCAR
Oh. Those are Mr. Wills’ wonderful words.

[Begins to write as one who has lost interest.

THE WOMAN

Could I see him?

OSCAR

He isn’t here yet. He’s just back from California. Won’t be at the office till a little later.

THE WOMAN

[With excitement.] He has been to California? He has just ridden across this country?

OSCAR

Yes. Long trip. He was very cross over the ’phone.

THE WOMAN

Oh--no. I think you’re mistaken.

OSCAR

Anything you care to see me about?

THE WOMAN

[After considering.] I could see him a little later, couldn’t I?

OSCAR

Yes, if its important. Of course he’ll be very busy.

THE WOMAN
It is important. At least--yes, it is important.

OSCAR

Very well then--later in the morning.

THE WOMAN

[Thinking aloud.] I will stand down on the street and watch the people go by.

OSCAR

What?

THE WOMAN

The people. It’s so wonderful to see them--so many of them. Don’t you often just stand and watch them?

OSCAR

No, madam, not often. I am too busy editing a magazine about them.

THE WOMAN

Of course you are busy. You help edit this magazine?

[Looks about at the posters.

OSCAR

I am associate editor of The People.

THE WOMAN

That’s a great thing for you--and you so young. Does Mr. Wills write in this room?

OSCAR
That is his desk.

THE WOMAN

[Looking at the desk.] It must be a wonderful thing for you to write in the same room with him.

OSCAR

Well, I don’t know; perhaps it is a wonderful thing for him to--I am Oscar Tripp, the poet.

THE WOMAN

[Wistfully.] It would be beautiful to be a poet. [Pause.] I will come back later.

[ Picks up suit-case. ]

OSCAR

Just leave that if you aren’t going to be using it in the meantime.

THE WOMAN

[Putting it down near the door.] Oh, thank you. I see you are a kind young man.

OSCAR

That is not the general opinion.

THE WOMAN

I wonder why it is that the general opinion is so often wrong?

[Stands considering it for a moment, then goes out. ]

OSCAR
I don’t quite understand that woman.

[TOM comes back.]

TOM

If this paper can’t go on, I ought to know it. I could get a job on the Evening World. [Oscar continues writing.] Can it go on?

OSCAR

I don’t see how it can, but many a time I haven’t seen how it could—and it did. Doubtless it will go on, and will see days so much worse than these that we will say, “Ah, the good old days of March, 1917.”

TOM

But can it pay salaries?

OSCAR

[Shocked.] Oh, no, I think not; but we must work because we love our work.

TOM

We must eat because we love our food.

OSCAR

You’ll know soon. There’s to be a meeting here this morning.

[Enter SARA. TOM goes into the other room. SARA has the appearance of a young business woman and the simple direct manner of a woman who is ready to work for a thing she believes in.

SARA

Ed not here yet?
OSCAR

No.

SARA

Did he get any money?

OSCAR

 Doesn’t look like it. He was snappish over the phone. Guess he’s for giving it up this time.

SARA

I don’t want to give it up.

[She takes a seat at the table where OSCAR is writing and unfolds a manuscript she has brought with her.

OSCAR

Well, it’s not what we want, it’s what people want, and there aren’t enough of them who want us.

SARA

The fault must lie with us.

OSCAR

I don’t think so. The fault lies with the failure to--

[THE ARTIST has entered.

ARTIST

I’ll tell you where the fault lies. We should give more space to pictures and less to stupid reading matter.
OSCAR

We have given too much expensive white paper to pictures and too little to reading matter--especially to poetry. That’s where the fault lies.

[Enter EDWARD WILLS, editor.]

ED

I’ll tell you where the fault lies. [Points first to THE ARTIST, then to OSCAR.] Here! Just this! Everybody plugging for his own thing. Nobody caring enough about the thing as a whole.

OSCAR

[Rising.] I’ll tell you where the fault lies. [Points to ED.] Here! This. The Editor-in-chief returning from a long trip and the first golden words that fall from his lips words of censure for his faithful subordinates.

SARA

How are you Ed?

ED

Rotten. I hate sleeping cars. I always catch cold.

SARA

Any luck?

ED

[His hand around his ear.] What’s the word?

[Enter THE EARNEST APPROACH.]
EARNEST APPROACH

I have heard that you may have to discontinue.

ED

[Sitting down at his desk, beginning to look through his mail.] It seems we might as well.

EARNEST APPROACH

Now just let me tell you what the trouble has been and how you can remedy it. The People has been afraid of being serious. But you deal with ideas, and you must do it soberly. There is a place for a good earnest journal of protest, but all this levity--this fooling--

[Enter THE LIGHT TOUCH.

LIGHT TOUCH

Came in to see you, Ed, to say I hope the news I’m hearing isn’t true.

ED

If it’s bad, it’s true.

LIGHT TOUCH

Well, it’s an awful pity, but you’ve been too damn serious. A lighter touch--that’s what The People needs. You’re as heavy as mud. Try it awhile longer along frivolous lines. I was in the building and just ran in to let you have my idea of what’s the matter with you.

OSCAR

If we had as many subscribers as we have people to tell us what’s the matter with us--

[Enter PHILOSOPHER and FIREBRAND, TOM follows them in, a page of manuscript in his hand.]
ED

Now the Philosopher and the Firebrand will tell us what’s the matter with us.

FIREBRAND

Too damn bourgeois! You should print on the cover of every issue—“To hell with the bourgeoisie!” Pigs!

PHILOSOPHER

The trouble with this paper is efficiency.

[This is too much for all of them. The PRINTER falls back against the wall, then staggers from the room.

ED

Dear God! There are things it seems to me I can not bear.

PHILOSOPHER

It should be more carelessly done, and then it would be more perfectly done. You should be less definite, and you would have more definiteness. You should not know what it is you want, and then you would find what you are after.

OSCAR

You talk as if we had not been a success. But just last night I heard of a woman in Bronxville who keeps The People under her bed so her husband won’t know she’s reading it.

FIREBRAND

If you had been a success you would have fired that woman with so great a courage that she would proudly prop The People on the pillow!
ARTIST

[Who is sketching THE FIREBRAND.] It was my pictures got us under the bed.

OSCAR

[Haughtily.] I was definitely told it was my last “Talk with God” put us under the bed.

FIREBRAND

Can you not see that she puts you under the bed because you yourselves have made concessions to the bourgeoisie? Cows! Geese!

ARTIST

It must be more frivolous!

OSCAR

It must print more poetry.

[They glare at one another.

EARNEST APPROACH

It should be more serious.

LIGHT TOUCH

It must be more frivolous!

[Enter THE BOY from Georgia--dressed like a freshman with a good allowance.

THE BOY

Is this the office of The People?
OSCAR

No, this is a lunatic asylum.

THE BOY

[After a bewildered moment.] Oh, you’re joking. You know [Confidentially], I wondered about that--whether you would joke here. I thought you would. [Stepping forward.] I came to see the Editor--I want to tell him--

ED

So many people are telling me so many things, could you tell yours a little later?

THE BOY

Oh, yes. Of course there must be many important things people have to tell you.

ED

Well--many.

[THE BOY goes out--reluctantly.

ARTIST

[Who has all the time been glaring at OSCAR.] Speaking for the artists, I want to say right now--

OSCAR

Speaking for the writers, I wish to say before we go further--

EARNEST APPROACH

A more serious approach--
LIGHT TOUCH

A lighter touch--

FIREBRAND

Speaking for myself--

PHILOSOPHER

Speaking for the truth--

[Phone rings, OSCAR answers. Enter THE MAN from the Cape--slow, heavy.

ED

You have come to tell us something about this paper?

THE MAN

Yes.

ED

There are a number ahead of you. Will you wait your turn? [A look of disappointment.] I’ll be glad to see you as soon as I can. There in the outside office?

[A moment THE MAN stands there, a mute ponderous figure, then very slowly goes out.

OSCAR

[Hanging up receiver.] Moritz Paper Company. Bill got to be paid today. And here--

[Takes from his drawer a huge packet of bills.

EARNEST APPROACH
You could pay your bills if you were not afraid to be serious!

LIGHT TOUCH

You could pay your bills if you were not afraid to be gay!

EARNEST APPROACH

[From the door, solemnly.] A more earnest approach would save The People.

LIGHT TOUCH

A lighter touch would turn the trick!

[With that they leave.

FIREBRAND

[Going over and pounding on THE EDITOR’S desk.] To hell with the bourgeoisie! Apes!

PHILOSOPHER

Efficiency has put out the spark.

ED

Well, as long as the spark appears to be good and out, may I, in the name of efficiency, ask you who do not belong here to retire, that we may go ahead with our work?

PHILOSOPHER

There would be greater efficiency in our remaining. There would be form. You have lacked form.

FIREBRAND
You have lacked courage! Donkeys!

ED

It would be illuminating, Leo, to hear you run through the animal kingdom--toads, crocodiles, a number of things you haven’t mentioned yet, but the animal kingdom is large--and we have work to do.

PHILOSOPHER

You lack form in your work. By form I do not mean what you think I mean. I mean that particular significance of the insignificant which is the fundamental--

ED

We couldn’t understand it. Why tell us?

PHILOSOPHER

No. You couldn’t understand it.

[He leaves them to their fate.]

FIREBRAND

Rest in peace. [Gesture of benediction. Then hissingly.] Centipedes!

[He goes--leaving a laugh behind him.]

ED

What’s the matter with us is our friends.

SARA

[Quietly.] Well, to be or not to be. I guess it’s up to you, Ed.

ED
Just what would we be going on for? To make a few more people like the dear ones who have just left us? Seems to me we could best serve society by not doing that. Precisely what do we do?—aside from getting under the bed in Bronxville. Now and then something particularly rotten is put over and we have a story that gets a rise out of a few people, but—we don’t change anything.

SARA

We had another hope. We were going to express ourselves so simply and so truly that we would be expressing the people.

ED

[Wearily.] The People. I looked at them all the way across this continent. Oh, I got so tired looking at them—on farms, in towns, in cities. They’re like toys that you wind up and they’ll run awhile. They don’t want to be expressed. It would topple them over. The longer I looked the more ridiculous it seemed to me that we should be giving our lives to—[Picks up the magazine and reads.] The People—“A Journal of the Social Revolution.” Certainly we’d better cut the sub-title. The social revolution is dead.

OSCAR

You don’t think you are bringing back any news, do you, Ed?

ARTIST

[Taking up magazine.] Instead of a sub-title we could have a design. Much better.

[Glaring at OSCAR, then begins to draw.]

SARA

This is a long way from what you felt a year ago, Ed. You had vision then.
You can’t keep vision in this office. It’s easy enough to have a beautiful feeling about the human race when none of it is around. The trouble about doing anything for your fellow-man is that you have to do it with a few of them. Oh, of course that isn’t fair. We care. I’ll say that for us. Even Oscar cares, or he wouldn’t work the way he has. But what does our caring come to? It doesn’t connect up with anything, and God knows it doesn’t seem to be making anything very beautiful of us. There’s something rather pathetic about us.

OSCAR

Or is it merely ridiculous?

SARA

Let me read you something, Ed. [She takes The People and reads very simply.] “We are living now. We shall not be living long. No one can tell us we shall live again. This is our little while. This is our chance. And we take it like a child who comes from a dark room to which he must return--comes for one sunny afternoon to a lovely hillside, and finding a hole, crawls in there till after the sun is set. I want that child to know the sun is shining upon flowers in the grass. I want him to know it before he has to go back to the room that is dark. I wish I had pipes to call him to the hilltop of beautiful distances. I myself could see farther if he were seeing at all. Perhaps I can tell you: you who have dreamed and dreaming know, and knowing care. Move! Move from the things that hold you. If you move, others will move. Come! Now. Before the sun goes down.” [Very quietly.] You wrote that, Ed.

ED

Yes, I wrote it; and do you want to know why I wrote it? I wrote it because I was sore at Oscar and wanted to write something to make him feel ashamed of himself.

[While SARA is reading, THE WOMAN has appeared at the door, has moved a few steps into the room as if drawn by the words she is]
hearing. Behind her are seen THE BOY from Georgia, THE MAN from the Cape.

THE WOMAN

[Moving forward.] I don’t believe that’s true! I don’t believe that’s true! Maybe you think that’s why you wrote it, but it’s not the reason. You wrote it because it’s the living truth, and it moved in you and you had to say it.

ED

[Rising.] Who are you?

THE WOMAN

I am one of the people. I have lived a long way off. I heard that call and--I had to come.

THE BOY

[Blithely.] I’ve come too. I’m from Georgia. I read it, and I didn’t want to stay at school any longer. I said, “I want something different and bigger--something more like this.” I heard about your not being able to sell your paper on the newsstands just because lots of people don’t want anything different and bigger, and I said to myself, “I’ll sell the paper! I’ll go and sell it on the streets!” And I got so excited about it that I didn’t even wait for the dance. There was a dance that night, and I had my girl too.

THE WOMAN

He didn’t even wait for the dance.

OSCAR

The idealists are calling upon the intellectuals, and “calling” them.

ED
[To THE MAN.] And what did you leave, my friend?

THE MAN

[Heavily.] My oyster bed. I’m from the Cape. I had a chance to go in on an oyster bed. I read what you wrote--a woman who had stopped in an automobile left it, and I said to myself, “I’m nothing but an oyster myself. Guess I’ll come to life.”

ED

But--what did you come here for?

THE MAN

Well--for the rest of it.

ED

The rest of what?

THE MAN

The rest of what you’ve got.

THE BOY

Yes--that’s it; we’ve come for the rest of what you’ve got.

OSCAR

This is awkward for Ed.

THE WOMAN

Give it to us.

ED

What?
THE WOMAN

The rest of it.

ED

[An instant’s pause.] I haven’t got anything more to give.

THE BOY

But you made us think you had. You led us to believe you had.

THE WOMAN

And you have. If you hadn’t more to give, you couldn’t have given that.

OSCAR

Very awkward.

THE WOMAN

You said—“I call to you. You who have dreamed, and dreaming know, and knowing care.” Well, three of us are here. From the South and the East and the West we’ve come because you made us want something we didn’t have, made us want it so much we had to move the way we thought was toward it--before the sun goes down.

THE BOY

We thought people here had life--something different and bigger.

OSCAR

Perhaps we’d better go. Poor Ed.

ED
I wish you’d shut up, Oscar.

THE WOMAN

I know you will give it to us.

ED

Give what to you?

THE WOMAN

What you have for the people. [OSCAR coughs.] What you made us know we need.

OSCAR

You shouldn’t have called personally. You should have sent in your needs by mail.

ED

Oscar, try and act as if you had a soul.

THE WOMAN

I think he really has. [A look at OSCAR--then, warmly.] At least he has a heart. It’s only that he feels he must be witty. But you--you’re not going to let us just go away again, are you? He gave up his oyster bed, and this boy didn’t even wait for the dance, and me--I gave up my tombstone.

ED

Your--?

THE WOMAN

Yes--tombstone. It had always been a saying in our family--“He won’t even have a stone to mark his grave.” They said it so much that I
thought it meant something. I sew--plain sewing, but I’ve often said to myself--“Well, at least I’ll have a stone to mark my grave.” And then, there was a man who had been making speeches to the miners--I live in a town in Idaho--and he had your magazine, and he left it in the store, and the storekeeper said to me, when I went there for thread--“Here, you like to read. Don’t you want this? I wish you’d take it away, because if some folks in this town see it, they’ll think I’m not all I should be.” He meant the cover.

ARTIST

[Brightening.] That was my cover.

THE WOMAN

[After a smile at THE ARTIST.] So I took it home, and when my work was done that night, I read your wonderful words. They’re like a spring--if you’ve lived in a dry country, you’ll know what I mean. And they made me know that my tombstone was as dead as--well, [With a little laugh] as dead as a tombstone. So I had to have something to take its place.

SARA

[Rising and going to THE WOMAN.] Talk to him. Tell him about it. Come, Oscar!

THE BOY

As long as there seems to be so much uncertainty about this, perhaps I’d better telegraph father. You see, the folks don’t know where I am. I just came.

THE WOMAN

He didn’t even stay for the dance.

THE BOY
I’ll be glad to sell the papers. [Seeing a pile of them on the table.] Here, shall I take these?--and I’ll stop people on the street and tell why I’m selling them.

OSCAR

No, you can’t do that. You’d be arrested.

THE WOMAN

Let him sell them. What’s the difference about the law, if you have the right idea?

OSCAR

The right idea has given us trouble enough already.

THE MAN

There’s something sure about an oyster bed.

OSCAR

You come with me and have a drink. Something sure about that too.

THE WOMAN

He could have had a drink at home.

SARA

[To ARTIST.] Coming, Joe? [To THE BOY.] It was corking of you to want to help us. We must talk about--

[All go out except THE WOMAN and THE EDITOR. A Pause.

THE WOMAN

I am sorry for you.
ED

Why?

THE WOMAN

[Feeling her way and sadly.] Because you have the brain to say those things, and not the spirit to believe them. I couldn’t say them, and yet I’ve got something you haven’t got. [With more sureness.] Because I know the thing you said was true.

ED

Will you sit down?

THE WOMAN

No--I’ll go. [Stands there uncertainly.] I don’t know why I should be disappointed. I suppose it’s not fair to ask you to be as big as the truth you saw. Why should I expect you would be?

ED

I’m sorry. I suppose now you’ll regret your tombstone.

THE WOMAN

No--it was wonderful to ride across this country and see all the people. The train moving along seemed to make something move in me. I had thoughts not like any thoughts I’d ever had before--your words like a spring breaking through the dry country of my mind. I thought of how you call your paper “A Journal of The Social Revolution,” and I said to myself--This is the Social Revolution! Knowing that your tombstone doesn’t matter! Seeing--that’s the Social Revolution.

ED

Seeing--?
[As if it is passing before her.] A plain, dark trees off at the edge, against the trees a little house and a big barn. A flat piece of land fenced in. Stubble, furrows. Horses waiting to get in at the barn; cows standing around a pump. A tile yard, a water tank, one straight street of a little town. The country so still it seems dead. The trees like--hopes that have been given up. The grave yards--on hills--they come so fast. I noticed them first because of my tombstone, but I got to thinking about the people--the people who spent their whole lives right near the places where they are now. There’s something in the thought of them--like the cows standing around the pump. So still, so patient, it--kind of hurts. And their pleasures:--a flat field fenced in. Your great words carried me to other great words. I thought of Lincoln, and what he said of a few of the dead. I said it over and over. I said things and didn’t know the meaning of them ’till after I had said them. I said--“The truth--the truth--the truth that opens from our lives as water opens from the rocks.” Then I knew what that truth was. [Pause, with an intensity peculiarly simple.] “Let us here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.” I mean--all of them. [A gesture, wide, loving.] Let life become what it may become!--so beautiful that everything that is back of us is worth everything it cost.

[Enter TOM.

TOM

I’ve got--[Feeling something unusual.] Sorry to butt in, but I can still get that job on The Evening World. If this paper is going to stop, I’ve got to know it.

ED

Stop! This paper can’t stop!

TOM

Can’t stop! Last I heard, it couldn’t do anything else.
ED

That was--long ago.

TOM

Oh--you’ve got something to go on with?

ED

Yes, something to go on with.

TOM

I see. [Looks at woman, as if he doesn’t see, glances at her suit-case.] I’m glad. But--I’ve got to be sure. This--is the truth?

ED

The truth. The truth that opens from our lives as water opens from the rocks.

[TOM backs up.

THE WOMAN

[Turning a shining face to THE PRINTER.] Nobody really needs a tombstone!

(CURTAIN)