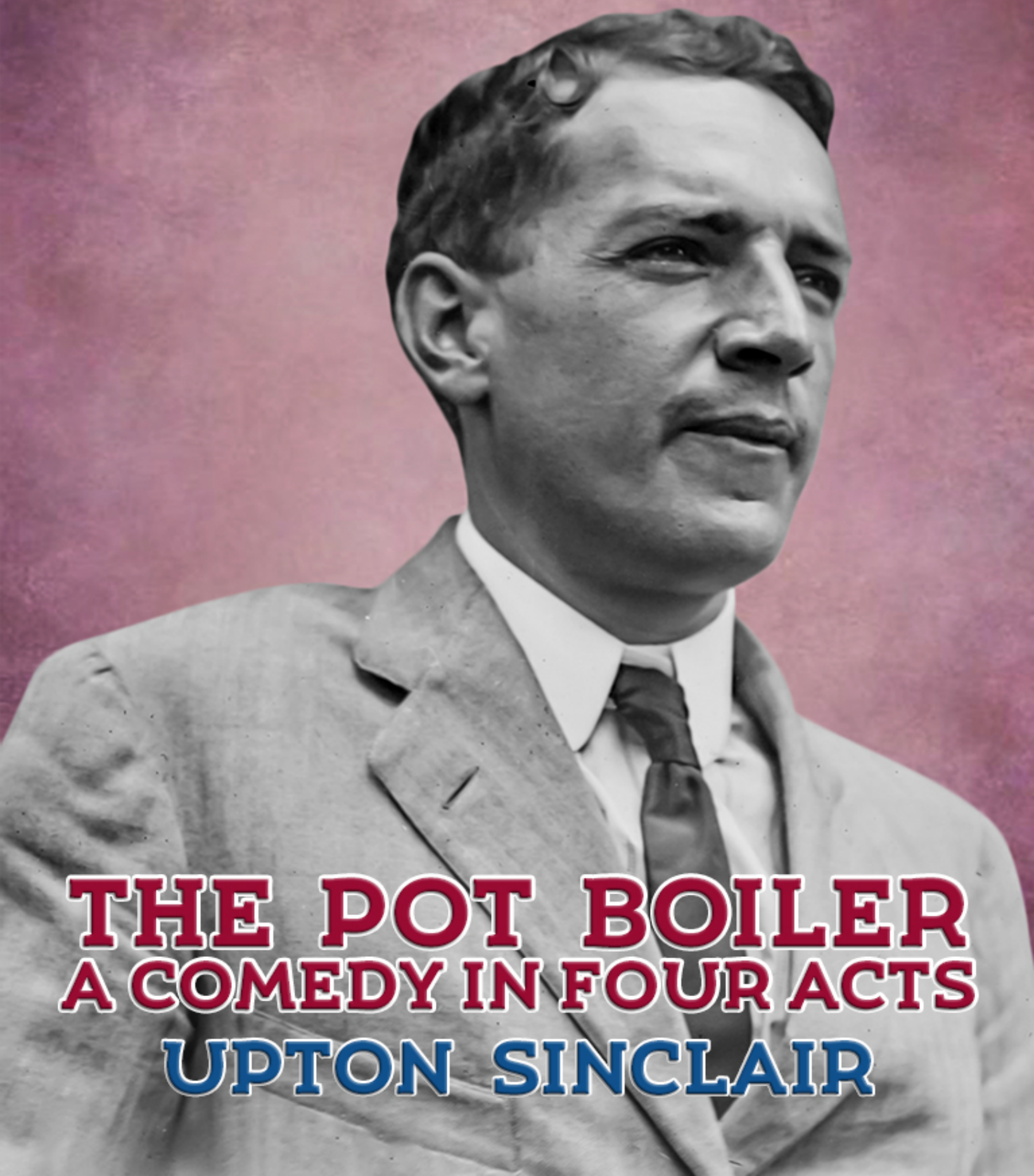


**CLASSICS TO GO**



**THE POT BOILER**  
**A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS**  
**UPTON SINCLAIR**

# **THE POT BOILER**

**A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS**

**Upton Sinclair**

# CHARACTERS

## CHARACTERS IN THE "REAL-PLAY"

Will ..... The author  
Peggy ..... Joint author and critic  
Bill ..... Their son (aged 8)  
Dad ..... Will's father  
Schmidt..... The grocer  
The Policeman.  
The Landlady.

## CHARACTERS IN THE "PLAY-PLAY"

Jack ..... The adventurer  
Bob ..... His cousin  
Dad ..... His father  
Jessie..... His sister  
Gladys ..... His fiancée  
Belle ..... A waitress  
Dolly ..... Her sister  
Bill ..... A street gamin  
Schmidt ..... A restaurant keeper  
The Policeman.  
The Landlady.  
A snow shoveller.  
A butler.

*Note: The characters of Dad, Bill, Schmidt, the Landlady and the Policeman are the same in the Real and the Play-play. The character of Jack is played by Will, and that of Belle by Peggy.*

## ACT I.

SCENE.—A transparent curtain of net extends across the stage from right to left, about six feet back of the foot-lights. Throughout the text, what goes on in front of this curtain is referred to as the *Real-play*; what goes on behind the curtain is the *Play-play*. Upon the sides of the curtain, Right and Left, is painted a representation of an attic room in a tenement house. The curtain becomes thin, practically nothing at center, so the audience sees the main action of the *Play-play* clearly. At Right in the *Real-play* is a window opening on a fire-escape, and in front of the window a cot where the child sleeps. At Left in the *Real-play* is a window, an entrance door, a flat-topped desk and two chairs. This setting of the *Real-play* remains unchanged throughout the four acts.

The scenes of the *Play-play* change with each act. For Act I the set is a drawing-room in a wealthy old New York home, entrances Right-center and Left. Both front and rear scenes are lighted by many small lights, which can be turned off a few at a time, so that one scene or the other fades slowly. When the *Real-play* is in full light, the *Play-play* is dark and invisible. When the front scene is entirely dark, we see the *Play-play*, slightly veiled at the sides. In case of some rude interruption, the dream is gone in a flash, and the reality of the garret surrounds us. The text calls for numerous quick changes of three of the characters from the *Real-play* to the *Play-play* and back. Dialogue and business have been provided at these places to permit the changes.

AT RISE.—The *Real-play*, showing PEGGY putting BILL to bed; she is young and pretty, he is a bright but frail child.

*Bill.* Say, Peggy!

*Peggy.* Well, Bill?

*Bill.* Can you guess.

*Peggy.* How many guesses?

*Bill.* Three.

*Peggy.* All right. I guess my little son doesn't want to go to bed!

*Bill.* Say! You guessed it!

*Peggy.* Oh, mother's great at guessing!

*Bill.* But honest, it's still light.

*Peggy.* I know—but that's because it's summertime. Don't you remember the little song? (sings)

In winter I get up at night  
And dress by yellow candle-light;  
In summer, quite the other way,  
I have to go to bed by day!

*Bill.* Say, Peggy—when's Will coming in?

*Peggy.* I don't know, dear. Your father's working.

*Bill.* Ain't he goin' to have any dinner?

*Peggy.* I don't know—he didn't tell me.

*Bill.* Is he writin'?

*Peggy.* Yes—or else thinking about things to write.

*Bill.* Say! He's great on writin', ain't he?

*Peggy.* You bet!

*Bill.* Do you think it's good stuff?

*Peggy.* Indeed I do, Bill!

*Bill.* You don't often tell him so.

*Peggy.* Don't I?

*Bill.* No—generally you rip him up the back.

PEGGY (laughs). Well, mother has to keep him trying, you know.

*Bill.* Say, Peggy, do you suppose I'll be an author when I grow up?

*Peggy.* Can't tell, dear—it depends.

*Bill.* Maybe I'll have to get some payin' job, hey?

*Peggy.* Where did you pick up that idea?

*Bill.* Ain't you talkin' about it all the time to him?

*Peggy.* Am I? Well, I declare! Now, come, Mr. Bill—it's after bed-time.

*Bill.* Can't I wait till Will comes?

*Peggy.* No, dear.

*Bill.* Well, will you tell him to wake me up?

*Peggy.* No, dear. I'll tell him *not* to.

*Bill.* But Peggy, will you have him kiss me in my sleep?

*Peggy.* Yes, I'll do that. Now, there you are. A big fat kiss for mother! Now, to sleep!

*Bill.* Say, Peggy!

*Peggy.* What?

*Bill.* The people next door ain't runnin' the gramophone tonight!

*Peggy.* No, dear. Now go to sleep.

*Bill.* And the people in hack ain't singin' any coon-songs!

*Peggy.* Now go to sleep for mother. Don't speak any more.

*Bill.* Say, Peggy!

*Peggy.* Well?

*Bill.* I won't. Good night.

*Peggy.* Good-night!

(She goes Left humming to herself; sits at table, and prepares to work.)

*Will* (*Enters Left softly; a young poet, delicate and sensitive. He watches PEGGY, then closes door, tiptoes up and leans over her shoulder*). Well?

*Peggy* (*starts*). Oh, Will, how you frightened me! Where in the world have you been?

*Will.* Oh, it's a long tale.

*Peggy.* Have you had dinner?

*Will.* No, I don't want to eat.

*Peggy.* What's the matter? A new idea?

*Will.* I'll tell you, Peggy. Wait a bit.

*Peggy* (*as he takes mail from pocket*). Some mail?

*Will.* Yes—all rejection slips. Nothing but rejection slips! (*throws pile of returned manuscripts on the table*). How I

wish some magazine would get a new kind of rejection slip!  
(*Sits dejectedly.*)

*Peggy.* Did you get any money for the rent?

*Will.* Not yet, *Peggy (suddenly).* The truth is, I didn't try. *Peggy,* I've got to write that play!

*Peggy (Horrorified).* Will!

*Will.* I tell you I've got to! That's what I've been doing—sitting in Union Square, working it over—ever since lunch time! It's a perfectly stunning idea.

*Peggy.* Oh, Will, I know all that—but how can you write plays when we must have money? Money right away! Money to pay the landlady! Money to pay the grocer!

*Will.* But *Peggy*—

*Peggy.* Will, you've got to do something that will sell right off the bat—payment on acceptance! Short stories! Sketches!

*Will (wildly).* But don't you see that so long as I do short stories and sketches I'm a slave? I earn just enough to keep us going week by week. Pot-boiling—pot-boiling—year after year! And youth is going—life is going! *Peggy,* I've got to make a bold stroke, do something big and get out of this!

*Peggy.* But Will, it's madness! A play's the hardest thing of all to sell. There's not one chance in a thousand—a hundred thousand!

*Will.* But *Peggy*—

*Peggy.* Listen to me. You go off in the park and dream of plays—but I have to stay at home and face the landlady and the grocer. I tell you I can't stand it! Honest to God, I'll have to go back to the stage and keep this family going.



*Will (in distress).* Peggy!

*Peggy.* I know! But I'm at the end of my rope. The landlady was here—the grocer has shut down on us. We can't get any more bread, any more meat—all our credit's gone!

*Will.* Gee! It's tough!

*Peggy.* I've held out eight years, and we never dreamed it would last that long. You said one year—three years—then surely Dad would relent and take us back, or give us some money. But Dad doesn't relent—Dad's going to die and leave his money to a Home for Cats! I tell you, dear, I've got to go back to the stage and earn a living.

*Will (radiantly).* You might play the heroine of my play.

*Peggy.* Yes—a star the first night! Isn't that like a husband and a poet! I assure you, Will, it'll be an agency for me, and a part with three lines, at thirty a week—

*Will (sits staring before him, with repressed intensity).* Listen! I've tried—honest, I've tried, but I can't get away from that play. You know how often I've said that I wanted to find a story like our own—so that I could use our local color, pour our emotions into it, our laughter and our tears. And, Peggy, this is the story! Our *own* story! It has pathos and charm—it will hold the crowd—

*Peggy.* Dear Will, *what* do you know about the crowd? Pathos and charm! Do you suppose the mob that comes swarming into Broadway at eight o'clock every evening is on the hunt for pathos and charm? They want to see women with the latest Paris fashions on them—or with nothing on them at all! They want to see men in evening dress, drinking high-balls, lighting expensive cigars, departing from palatial homes to the chugging sound of automobiles.

*Will.* But Peggy, this play will have two dress-suit acts. I can show the world I used to live in—I can use Dad's own house for a scene. And I can finish it in four days!

*Peggy.* Yes—if you sit up all night and work! Don't you know that when you work all night your stomach stops working all day? Haven't you sworn to me on the Bible you'd never work at night again?

*Will (seizes her in his arms).* Peggy! I've got to do this play! I've started it.

*Peggy.* What?

*Will.* What do you think I've been doing all afternoon? *(Pulls out a huge wad of loose papers from rear pocket.)* Look at that! *(Drags her to the table.)* Now sit down here and listen—I'll tell you about it. I'm going to tell my own story—a rich young fellow who has a quarrel with his father and goes out into the world to make his own way. I'm going to call him Jack, but he's really myself. Imagine me as I was at twenty-one—when I was happy, care-free, full of fun.

*Peggy.* Oh, Will, I can't imagine you! I can't bring myself to believe that you were ever rich and free!

*Will.* But I was, Peggy! And this will bring it all back to you. When you read this manuscript you'll see me when I didn't know what trouble meant—I'd never had to make an effort in my life, I couldn't imagine what it would be to fail. Oh, what a wonderful time it was, Peggy! It's been wonderful just to recall it here. I've pictured my twenty-first birthday—I had a dinner party in the big drawing-room of Dad's home! *(As Will goes on the Real-play fades, and the Play-play comes slowly into sight.)* There's Jessie, my sister, and there's my cousin, Bob. He's a college professor who went out into the world as a hobo in order to see life for himself. You see it's all my