MRS. PECK'S CHRISTMAS PUDDIN'

by Sylvia Ashby

Freely adapted from
Eliza Lee Follen's 19th Century American play

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Freely adapted from an 1859 play by Eliza Lee Follen, poor Widow Peck struggles to raise her youthful brood. Though out of money, food and places to turn for help, she is determined to have a Christmas pudding. As every effort ends in disappointment, she grows increasingly desperate - until a mysterious stranger appears. This is a charming play with delightful characters and colorful language. This script requires little in the way of scenery as the locales are mainly suggested. For a smaller cast, Mrs. Henery and Bill can double as committee members. The ages of Peck youngsters are left vague to allow flexibility in casting. Though the plight of the family is difficult, the play is a comedy and should be performed at a brisk pace. Running time is about 40 minutes.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4M, 4W, 3 Boys and 2 Girls)

PECK FAMILY
- MRS. PECK: Her histrionics tend toward the comic.
- SUSAN: Oldest offspring, 18-20, the sensible one.
- DANNY: Happy-go-lucky.
- FLORA MAE: Always hungry, perhaps plump.
- JACK: A bit brash, wears especially ragged pants.
- PEG: Sooty-faced, on the impudent side.
- MOLLY: Youngest, has a flair for acrobatics.

TOWNSPEOPLE:
- MRS. HENERY: Shopkeeper.
- BILL: Young man-servant.
- MR. SHUFFLETOE: On Visitation Committee.
- MISS HAPSWORTH: Committee member.
- MR. CLINKER: Committee member.
- STRANGER: Older gentleman.

PRODUCTION NOTES

SCENERY: The family kitchen can be created primarily with furniture or with fragmentary scenery. For Mrs. Henery's shop, a counter or table sets the scene; a "Fresh Eggs" sign featuring hens can be added. For street scene, a lamppost or doorway suggests the locale; a small bench is useful for blocking. These two downstage or side-stage scenes can be pre-set. With a smaller stage, pieces can be shifted on by entering actors.

COSTUMES: A full, grey beard is needed on the Stranger to explain why Mrs. Peck does not recognize her brother. The family's clothing is rag-tag but in a bright, comic fashion.

PROPS: A teetotum is a four-sided top used in games. Each side should be painted a different color and/or decorated with a different design.

TIME: Mid-19th century.

PLACE: Mrs. Peck's ramshackle kitchen; shop and street corner.

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(Mrs. Peck's kitchen is sparsely furnished with cupboard, table, and assorted chairs. The family's colorful clothing is quaintly patched and tattered. As scene opens, FLORA MAE sweeps floor. DAN plays harmonica or penny whistle. JACK and PEG enjoy a game of marbles. MOLLY cartwheels. Sitting and staring out gloomily amidst the commotion, MRS. PECK suddenly issues a melodramatic roar.)

MRS. PECK: It's no use! I declare it's just no use! Christmas goin' on 'thout a plum puddin'! Oh, this be the most tragical event!

FLORA MAE: Oh no-o-o! Ma's gettin' into one of her flusters!

(SUSAN brings water; OTHERS scurry to comfort their mother.)

MRS. PECK: We've had puddin' every year till now! *(Wails.)* Who knows what will come of this desperate situation?

SUSAN: We can manage without a puddin', Mother.

MRS. PECK: But somethin' dreadful might happen!

MOLLY: 'Cause of no puddin'?

MRS. PECK: Ex-zac'ly! *(Ominous.)* Children, I've somethin' serious to tell you - *(CHILDREN quickly gather round; she speaks in mysterious tones.)* There was your poor father and me: Every year when our anniversary come round, we'd have pickled pork for dinner!

FLORA MAE: Mmmm. Sounds good.

MRS. PECK: Every year, sure as sunrise, that's what we ate. But one year we skipped! Right away, your Pa took sick -- he died that very week!

DANNY: 'Cause of no pickled pork?

MRS. PECK: Ex-zac'ly!

MOLLY: Then how come you didn't die too, Mama?

MRS. PECK: Well-I-I-couldn't go off and leave you to the poorhouse!

PEG: *(Impatient.)* What's that to do with puddin', Ma?

MRS. PECK: Don't you see, Peg? *(Insistent.)* Skippin' plum puddin' might be the ruin of us all!

FLORA MAE: Please don't get into a fever over it, Ma.

MRS. PECK: Ohhh, if only your Pa hadn't gone to his reward leavin' nothin' but a pile of debts and a passel of children.

YOUNGSTERS: If only…

MRS. PECK: If only your dear Uncle Jack hadn't gone out West.

YOUNGSTERS: If only...

MRS. PECK: If only Uncle Jack and I hadn't quarreled … God rest his soul.

DANNY: Uncle Jack's not dead, Ma....

PEG: Just gone to Cally-forny.

MRS. PECK: No, Peg. If Uncle Jack was alive, we'd o' heard somethin' all these years. He's gone. And it's too late to patch things up.

MOLLY: You can't be so all-fired sure, Mama.

MRS. PECK: Molly dear, I feel it in my bones: Uncle Jack lies buried in a lonesome desert grave. Killed by the Kangaroo Indians.

SUSAN: That's Kickapoo, Mother.

MRS. PECK: So it is. I've known better days, children. And I'd still be decent and upstandin' -- if only I hadn't seen such calamities....

YOUNGSTERS: If only....

MRS. PECK: I'd be fit company for the finest folk in Pottsville. 'Stead of poor Widder Peck with six hungry chicks and nary a soul to help.

FLORA MAE: Never you mind, Ma. You're proper good company to us.

MRS. PECK: I declare it's downright un-religious not to have a puddin' on Christmas day!

SUSAN: But that's tomorrow….

MRS. PECK: I know, Susan. Same as you. But sure as the name's Sophronia Peck, a puddin' I'll have! I mean to be as reg'lar and respectable as the next.
JACK: How you goin' to swing it, Ma?
MRS. PECK: That's the question, my pet. Your ma hasn't a red cent and no prospects for work.
FLORA MAE: Dinin' on hope don't exac'ly fill yer tummy.
DANNY: I tried playin' tunes down by the Square. All they give me was a knock on the noggin.
SUSAN: It's terrible being poor as Job's cat.
MOLLY: This hole in my shoe is bigger'n a silver dollar.
JACK: These here britches look like a patchwork quilt.
PEG: My dress is raggedy as a jar o' sauerkraut.
MRS. PECK: Well, chicks, there's no sin in being poor.
SUSAN: Maybe not, but it's awful inconvenient.
MRS. PECK: *(Emphatic.)* That settles it!
DANNY: Settles what, Ma?
MRS. PECK: Sure as I'm a widder 'thout a mite, a puddin' I must have and so I will! Your ma can be a dreadful determined woman!
MOLLY, JACK: Hurray!

(MOLLY cartwheels; DANNY plays music.)

FLORA MAE: I can see it now … all dotted with plums!
PEG: Ain't no plums in plum puddin'! It's raisins!
JACK: We ain't got raisins either.
FLORA MAE: There's not a speck of flour.
SUSAN: No eggs in the cupboard.
PEG: Nary a scrap of suet.
DANNY: And we've never a saucepan to fix it in. Don't you remember, Ma? You swapped yours for a chunk of salt pork t'other day.
MRS. PECK: I admit your ma hasn't a single perk-i-sit for a plum puddin'.
MOLLY: I never tasted a perk-i-sit.
SUSAN: I think she means "prerequisite."
MOLLY: Never tasted one of them neither.

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