



C. Edward Wheaton

Adapted from the novel *The Peterkin Papers* by Lucretia P. Hale

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BIG DOG PUBLISHING
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The Peterkins

CLASSIC. Adapted from the children's novel *The Peterkin Papers* by Lucretia Peabody Hale. The poor Peterkins! No one in the family has a lick of common sense. Seeking wisdom, the Peterkins set out to become world travelers. But when the family can't agree on a destination, they pack for every eventuality and find that their trunk is so heavy they can't carry it out of the living room! With their travel plans ruined, the family thinks it's wise to become experts on the botany of butter by watching Mr. Myers's cow. However, after a few hours of observation, all they learn is that when clover goes in one end of a cow and comes out the other end, it doesn't smell as sweet. Audiences of all ages will love this delightfully madcap play!

Performance Time: Approximately 45 minutes.

The Peterkins

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Lucretia Peabody Hale in 1900.

About the Story

Author Lucretia Peabody Hale (1820-1900) was born in Boston, MA, and was one of eleven children. Hale's father, Nathan Hale, was a lawyer as well as the editor and owner of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. Hale's brother, Edward Everett Hale, and her mother, Sarah Preston Everett, were authors as well. Lucretia Hale published two novels in addition to several stories in magazines and newspapers. Hale is best-known for her children's novels: *The Peterkin Papers* and *The Last of the Peterkins with Others of Their Kin* (1886). The first Peterkin stories were published in 1867 in the magazine, *Our Young Folks*. The Peterkin stories were collected and published as *The Peterkin Papers* in 1880.

Characters

(2 M, 3 F, 4 flexible)

(With doubling: 2 M, 3 F, 2 flexible)

AMANDA: The Peterkins' housekeeper who is the only one in the house with common sense; female.

MR. PETERKIN: Patriarch of the Peterkin family; male.

MRS. PETERKIN: Matriarch of the Peterkin family; female.

AGAMEMNON/AGGIE: Mr. and Mrs. Peterkin's son/daughter; flexible.

SOLOMON JOHN: Mr. and Mrs. Peterkin's son; has job in a drugstore in the toothbrush and soap department but aspires to be a doctor; male.

ELIZABETH ELIZA: Mr. and Mrs. Peterkin's daughter; female.

CHEMIST: Assists Mrs. Peterkin in making her salty coffee taste "better"; wears a coat and carries a black bag; flexible.

MOVER: Helps the Peterkins move to their new home; flexible.

TRAIN CONDUCTOR:

Options for Doubling

CHEMIST/MOVER/TRAIN CONDUCTOR (Flexible)

Setting

Peterkins' home, Boston, mid-1800s.

Sets

Living room/dining room of the Peterkins' home. At SL is the living room, which is furnished with a sofa, chairs, a footstool, and a writing desk. There is a small table next to one of the chairs. There is a rug on the floor and pictures on the wall. The doorway SL leads to a hallway. At USL there is a window that can open and close. At SR is the dining room, which has a table and chairs. At SR is the front door and a separate door that leads to the kitchen. At USL is the foot of the stairs, which lead to the second story.

Peterkins' new home. Same as the old home.

Train station. A backdrop of a train station may be used or a bare stage will suffice. There is an entrance gate.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Peterkins' home.

Scene 2: Peterkins' home, the next day.

Scene 3: Peterkins' home.

Scene 4: Peterkins' home.

Scene 5: Peterkins' home. Empty except for a trunk.

Scene 6: Peterkins' new home. Boxes are piled high.

Scene 7: Peterkins' new home. Set pieces arranged identical to old home.

Scene 8: Peterkins' new home.

Scene 9: Train depot.

Props

Porcelain coffeepot	Toolbox
Coffee cup with saucer and spoon	Lathe
Sugar bowl	Axe (can be plastic toy)
Salt shaker	Hand saw (can be plastic toy)
Newspaper	Coil of rope
Magazine	Letters
Pencil	Paper with moving plans
Pieces of paper	Assorted boxes
Pitcher of water	Large picnic basket
Black bag, for Chemist	Regular-size picnic basket
Assorted bottles of "chemicals"	Fishing pole
Coat and hat, for Amanda	Folding chair
Bag of groceries	Thermometer
Pocket watch, for Chemist	Barometer
Large trunk	Train program
2 Stacks of clothes	Book
Hatbox	2 Parasols
2 Straw hats	Old train schedule
Spyglass	Traveling clothes, for
Large dictionary	Peterkins
Large atlas	Tickets

Special Effects

Smoke effect
Bubbling sound

"When we started
with the original goal
to become wiser,
little did we know
how quickly
that would happen!"

—Agatha Short

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Interior of the Peterkins' home. On the table is a porcelain coffeepot, cup and saucer, teaspoon, sugar bowl, and a salt shaker. Mr. Peterkin is sitting comfortably in his chair reading a newspaper with his feet propped up on footstool. Mrs. Peterkin is sitting in the chair next to the table reading a magazine. Elizabeth Eliza is at the writing desk busily working on her book. Solomon John is lying on the rug, scribbling on pieces of paper. Mrs. Peterkin pours a cup of coffee, but she is so interested in what she is reading, she absentmindedly picks up the salt shaker and pours salt into the coffee cup. She lays her magazine down, picks up the cup, stirs, and takes a sip.)

MRS. PETERKIN: *(Making a face.)* Ugh!

MR. PETERKIN: *(Not looking up from his newspaper.)* Did you say something, my dear?

SOLOMON JOHN: *(Not looking up.)* I think she said, "ugh."

MRS. PETERKIN: I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, and I put salt instead of sugar in my coffee.

(Mr. Peterkin gets up from his chair, takes a sip from the cup, and makes a face.)

MR. PETERKIN: You are right, my dear.

(Solomon John and Elizabeth Eliza approach Mrs. Peterkin. Agamemmon enters.)

AGAMEMMON: What's all the fuss?

ELIZABETH ELIZA: Mother put salt in her coffee.

AGAMEMMON: Now, why on earth would she do a thing like that? It is customary to put sugar in coffee.

MRS. PETERKIN: I wasn't paying attention, and I did it by mistake.

AGAMEMMON: Oh. That explains it.

MRS. PETERKIN: What do I do?

SOLOMON JOHN: I have an idea. *(Exits into the kitchen and returns with a pitcher of water.)* Add a little water. That should dilute it.

(Solomon John pours some water into the coffee cup. Mrs. Peterkin takes a sip and makes a face.)

MRS. PETERKIN: Oh! That doesn't help at all!

SOLOMON JOHN: Well, I'm all out of ideas.

AGAMEMMON: *(Thinking.)* Hmmm. *(Gets an idea.)* I know.

I'll go over and get the chemist. Perhaps he has something that will neutralize the salt and make the coffee drinkable.

MR. PETERKIN: Yes. If anyone would know, he would.

(Agamemnon and the Chemist enter. The Chemist is carrying a black bag. Chemist approaches Mrs. Peterkin, picks up the coffee cup, sniffs it, stirs it, and takes a sip.)

CHEMIST: *(Making a face.)* That's salt all right. You really should have put sugar in it instead.

MRS. PETERKIN: I did it by mistake.

CHEMIST: Ah. That explains it. I see this is really going to be a challenge. Salt, as you know, is a white crystalline substance—sodium chloride—and is found in natural beds in seawater. Also, salt is a chemical compound derived from an acid by replacing hydrogen with a metal. Are we clear on these points? *(Peterkins stare at him with blank looks.)* Good! This particular salt is of the former variety and not the latter. Now, the task before us is to find the right combination of chemicals to neutralize the former and not the latter. *(Puts his bag on the table.)* Now, let's see what I can do. *(Pulls out assorted bottles of chemicals.)* Let's try a little bichlorate of magnesia. *(Pours a little into the cup. To Mrs. Peterkin.)* Now try it.

(Mrs. Peterkin takes a sip and makes a face.)

MRS. PETERKIN: Ewww! I don't like that at all!

CHEMIST: Hmmm...well then. *(Picks up another bottle.)* Let's try a combination of tartaric acid and some hypersulphate of lime.

(Chemist pours some into the cup and stirs. Mrs. Peterkin takes a sip and makes a face.)

MRS. PETERKIN: That's even worse!

CHEMIST: All right. *(Takes off his coat and rolls up shirtsleeves. Lights down and then lights back up to denote time has passed. There are now even more bottles on the table.)* We have tried some oxalic, cynic, acetic, phosphoric, chloric, hyperchloric, sulpheric, borack, silicic nitric, and formic. Let's try nitrous nitric.

(Chemist pours some into the cup. Mrs. Peterkin takes a sip and doesn't make a face.)

MRS. PETERKIN: The flavor is pleasant...but hardly that of coffee.

CHEMIST: Let's try a half of a third of a sixteenth grain of arsenic. *(Pours some into the cup and stirs.)*

MRS. PETERKIN: Ooooooh, it does give it a rather pretty color. *(Sips.)* But it still tastes nothing like coffee.

CHEMIST: *(Looking over bottles.)* All I have left is calcium, aluminum, barium, and strontium. *(Pause.)* Well, let's give it a go.

(Chemist pours all four into the coffee cup. The coffee begins to bubble and smoke, opt. Note: Smoke can be achieved with dry ice and a recorded bubbling sound can be used. All who are standing take a couple of steps back.)

MRS. PETERKIN: Is it supposed to do that?

(Amanda enters and abruptly halts. She is wearing a coat and hat and is carrying a bag of groceries.)

AMANDA: For land's sake! What is going on here?

MRS. PETERKIN: Oh, Amanda, I accidentally put salt in my coffee, and we are at our wits' end trying to figure out how to get rid of the salty taste. The Chemist has tried all his chemicals, but to no avail.

AMANDA: Well, then, let me try something. *(To Chemist.)*
Do you mind?

CHEMIST: I don't know what you could possibly do, but —

(Amanda hands the bag of groceries to the Chemist. Amanda takes the cup, crosses SL to the window, opens the window, tosses the contents out, closes the window, returns to the table, and pours a fresh cup of coffee.)

AMANDA: *(To Mrs. Peterkin.)* Now try it.

(All stare as the lights come on one by one as if they have seen the light. Mrs. Peterkin takes a sip.)

MRS. PETERKIN: *(Smiling.)* Yes!

CHEMIST: Well, yes, of course. That is one solution, of course, of many. And, of course, not being based in any scientific reasoning — *(Hands grocery bag to Amanda. Looks at his pocket watch.)* Oh, my! It's getting late —

[END OF FREEVIEW]