

Disaster at the Christmas Pudding Factory.

1. You might think that the little town of Puddington, deep in the English countryside, is a very ordinary English town. It's not very big, it has a mix of old and new houses, enough shops, cars and teashops to make it busy enough. But there is something about the town of Puddington that makes it completely different to anywhere else in the country – unique in the whole world in fact. It is the home of Puddington's Puddings, the factory where the best Christmas puddings in the world are exclusively made. The factory where these famous puddings are made is so big that it is the same size as the town. And all the people in the town are employed at the factory; every family in Puddington has at least one person employed in the factory, if not more. Mums, dads, grannies, granddads, aunties, uncles, cousins, the lot. Children in Puddington grow up knowing that if they do well at school, there will be a job in the factory for them.

2. The reason why the Puddington Christmas Pudding Factory is so big and so busy is that Puddington's Christmas puddings, known as the best in the world, are wanted by millions of people all year round. It started quite small, but as Puddington's puddings became popular, it had to increase to keep up with the demand. Shops put in their orders for Puddington's puddings in January. The best restaurants in London, Paris, New York, Hong Kong, make sure they are going to have enough Puddington's puddings to see them right through from September to February. Indeed, the best restaurants serve Puddington's puddings right through the year, even in the hottest summers. Schools, hospitals, works canteens, even prisons, all want to serve Puddington's puddings with their Christmas dinners. When Mr Plum, the very first Christmas pudding maker in Puddington realised this, he set about building the biggest Christmas pudding factory in the world. And he quickly employed all the people of the small town of Puddington to work in the factory. And it has been that way for over a hundred years.

3. There are hundreds of different jobs in the factory. There are people employed just to look after the fruit; the raisins, sultanas and currants, picking the best and soaking them to make the plump and juicy. A huge storeroom is kept just to store the different types of sugars that are needed and a whole team of workers are busy looking after it. Because only the best eggs are used in a Puddington pudding, the factory owns a whole farm where the best chickens are kept, big fat chickens with glossy feathers, who roam around fields of trees and fresh ponds. To be a chicken farmer and egg collector for Puddington's puddings is very prestigious. So is the job of collecting the apples from the special orchards that only grow the finest apples exclusively for Puddington's puddings. But everyone who works for Puddington's is proud of their job, whether they are mixing, making, chopping, grating, wrapping, packing, delivering, invoicing, advertising, anything! Everyone in Puddington loves working at the Christmas pudding factory.

4. But why are Puddington's Christmas puddings so highly prized? Well, there is something about a Puddington Christmas Pudding that makes it so much better than any other Christmas pudding. Not only is it packed with the plumpest raisins, juiciest sultanas and perfect currants, sweetened with the finest dark sugars and stickiest treacles, flavoured with the richest spices, chosen from only the best suppliers from around the world, and textured with the crispest nuts and jewelled with bright cherries and candied citrus peels, but a very special secret ingredient finishes off the pudding so magically that no other Christmas pudding can compare. Only one person in the factory knows the secret ingredient and that is Mrs Pinch. Her job is to look after the recipe and make sure nothing is changed and altered. The recipe came from her mother, who got it from her mother, who, in turn, got it from her mother. One day, Mrs Pinch will pass the recipe on to her daughter.

5. Mrs Pinch's daughter is called Polly, and because she is still only sixteen, she only works in the factory at weekends. Her job is to help make the breadcrumbs that are needed to make the puddings. In other Christmas pudding factories, breadcrumbs are bought, or the bread is bought in to make breadcrumbs. But in Puddington's, all the bread is made in the factory, then carefully aged to just the right amount of staleness before being grated by hand into crumbs of just the right size. Polly's job is to check the final crumbs, to make sure there are none too big or too small. You might think that sounds like a dull job, but Polly knows how important it is, and she takes her responsibility very seriously. Plus, she likes working with the other people in the breadcrumb room and has lots of fun.

6. Polly had a best friend who worked in the factory. His name was Peter and he was a year older than Polly. His job in the citrus room, where the candied peel was prepared. Peter's job was to mix the sugar syrup to the perfect consistency before it was poured into jars full of orange and lemon peels. He and Polly had been best friends since they were very young and always had lots of fun together. Polly particularly liked the fact that there was always a lovely smell of oranges and lemons when Peter was around.

7. Peter liked working at the Puddington's, but sometimes he liked to mess around and play tricks. He made Polly laugh and Peter liked nothing more than making Polly laugh. One time he hid himself in an empty sack and pretended to be a sack of oranges. Another time, he swapped the labels on the boxes of sultanas and raisins and waited for everyone to notice the difference. On that occasion, Peter got into lots of trouble, because two batches of puddings had to be scrapped. Mrs Pinch warned Peter that if he caused any more trouble, he could lose his job at Puddington's. After that, Polly begged Peter to be careful and not get into any trouble. And Peter really didn't want to lose his job, and so he was on his best behaviour for over a month. But then, he began to get bored and itching to create some fun and mischief.

8. He had an idea and it was so good that he just couldn't stop thinking about it. He imagined making the juiciest, spiciest, plumpest pudding that had ever been seen. Now Puddington's puddings come in a variety of sizes, from mini individual puddings (perfect for one) to huge family size puddings that were bigger than footballs (great for a hungry family of five!) But what Peter had in mind was a pudding as big as himself. Every time he walked past the huge mixing bowls in the mixing room, he would peep inside and think it was the perfect size. If he could fill one of these pudding mix, he could just squeeze it into the giant steam ovens that were built to fit hundreds of puddings at a time. But he couldn't use the usual pudding mix, even though it was very special. What Peter wanted was an even more spectacular than ever; extra fruit, extra spice, extra nuts and cherries, and especially extra brandy. Peter knew that of this was going to be the best pudding in the world, it was going to need gallons and gallons of brandy.

9. Peter didn't tell anyone about his plan, not even Polly. He knew that he shouldn't really do it, but he hoped that when everyone saw the magnificent pudding he had made, they would forgive him. So he made his plans in secret, making sure that all the supplies he would need were ready. He was so excited that he would occasionally break into a little dance and rub his hands together in glee. He was longing to share his excitement and it was almost unbearable to keep quiet. Polly noticed that Peter was unusually quiet and suspected that he was up to something, but she remembered that he had promised to behave and so she left him alone.

10. It's a shame that Polly didn't say anything to Peter, because he was determined to go ahead with his plan. And soon, the perfect opportunity came along when he could make his giant pudding. There was a day every year when everyone in the factory had the afternoon off to play a cricket match in the factory grounds. Everyone looked forward to this annual event and this year was no exception; it was the Dried Fruit team, the reigning champions, against the Apple Pickers, hoping to regain the title. Everyone was very excited as they made their way down to sports pitch. No-one noticed that Peter didn't join everyone else to watch the match; nobody but Polly that is. She looked for him amongst the spectators but even when she couldn't find him, she didn't think he would be up to anything. She just thought it was a shame that Peter would miss the cricket match.

11. For the first time ever, Peter was not sorry to be missing a holiday. He had the mixing room to himself and he set about filling one of the giant mixing bowls. He started with the usual mix, which was pumped into basins by a system of pipes. Peter put the giant mixing bowl under one of the pipes and started filling it up. And while that was happening, he began to throw in all the extra stuff that he wanted his giant pudding to have; nuts, dried fruit, grated apples, cherries, handfuls of extra spices, pounds more sugar and treacle and finally, the brandy. He poured bottle after bottle into the mix. When the bowl was full to the brim, he had to mix it all together, using one of the mighty stirring spoons that had been made especially for the factory. It made his arms ache but the smell was so wonderful that he was sure it was going to be the best pudding ever. Then he pushed the basin into the steam oven and shut the door. Then all he had to do was sit and wait.

12. Out on the cricket pitch, the game was in full flow. The Apple Pickers were in the lead but the Dried Fruit team were fighting back. The crowd were roaring their support and having lots of fun. But Polly was getting worried. It wasn't like Peter to miss such fun. She decided to go and look for him. As she walked back to the factory, she could smell the wonderful aroma of cooking puddings. When the ovens were in operation, the smell of pudding wafted around the whole town. But Polly knew that there was no baking planned for that afternoon because of the cricket match so it didn't make sense to smell it today. Nervously, she began to run towards the steam ovens, beginning to suspect that the smell had something to do with Peter's absence.

13. Back at the steam ovens, Peter was reading a copy of *Christmas Pudding Weekly* magazine, filling in a tricky crossword puzzle. He wasn't paying any attention to the giant pudding in the steam oven. But slowly, he became aware of a low rumbling noise coming from the oven behind him. He didn't think anything about it at first, but then he noticed it getting louder. He turned around and was just in time to see the lid bursting off the giant mixing bowl. He gave a shout as pudding mix began to bubble out of the bowl like lava out of a volcano. Too late, Peter realised that his pudding was out of control.

Just then, Polly ran into the room. "What's going on?" she cried. She was just in time to see the oven door bursting open and pudding mix come spilling out. Polly screamed but Peter grabbed her and ran out of the room. He just had time to slam the door behind him to stop the escaping pudding mix from coming after him. Then he sounded the pudding emergency bell.

14. Down on the cricket pitch, the factory employees heard the alarm and the cricket match came to an abrupt halt. No-one had ever heard the pudding emergency bell before and they stood for a moment, dumbstruck with surprise. Then they began running towards the factory. They met Peter and Polly at the door, running away from the out-of-control pudding. Then Peter had to explain what had happened. He hung his head in shame as he told them how much damage the giant pudding had caused. He knew he had never been in so much trouble before.

15. As a safety precaution, the factory was closed down for the rest of the day to give the ovens a chance to cool. The whole town spent a nervous night, wondering what damage had been done and whether it could be fixed in time to keep in making Puddington's puddings in time for Christmas. No-one had never known a delay like this before; not even the time Mrs Pinch had had a stomach ache and had had to miss an afternoon of work. In the morning, a specially equipped oven maintenance team wearing safety clothing were sent in to assess the damage. Everyone else waited outside the factory, telling each other they were sure it would be alright but keeping their finger crossed. Peter and Polly stood at the back, keeping very quiet and praying for the best. Polly knew that Peter was very, very sorry. He had told her all about the giant pudding he had tried to make for her and she had told her mother that she really didn't think Peter had meant to cause so much damage. Mrs Pinch said she would have to wait and see the extent of the damage before she made any decisions about Peter's future at the factory.

16. Finally, the maintenance team emerged from the factory. "It will take us a week to clean the ovens," they said, "and a whole week's worth of puddings have been ruined."

Mrs Pinch frowned. That would put operations two weeks behind, and they were so close to Christmas, it would surely mean that some people would not be getting their Puddington's Christmas Pudding this year. When she announced this to the waiting crowd, there was a huge, collective groan. Nobody wanted people to miss out on their Puddington Puddings; Christmas Day just wasn't the same without a Puddington Christmas Pudding.

17. When Peter realised what he had done, he was so ashamed, he just wanted to run away and hide. But instead of doing that, he screwed up his courage and walked to the front of the crowd. "I know all this is my fault," he said, "and I know there isn't much I can do to make amends, but I will work day and night to help put right the mess I have made."

The crowd stared at Peter, still feeling more than a little cross at Peter, and he didn't really blame them. But then Polly came forward and stood at his side.

"I'm going to help Peter," she said. "He knows how important it is to make sure everyone can get their Puddington Puddings in time for Christmas, and I think with a little extra help from everyone, we could get it done in time. Who else will join me?"

Straight away, people in the crowd started putting up their hands and shouting out what they could do to help, until everyone in the crowd was clamouring to begin the work. Polly turned to her mum and said, "Where shall we start?"

"Well, as we can't do anything until the kitchen and ovens are clean, we had better start there," said Mrs Pinch.

18. And so everyone at the Pudding factory started to work. First they had to gather together as many mops, buckets, sponges, scrubbing brushes and cleaning cloths as could be found. Gallons of water were heated and made super sudsy with extra-strong detergent. Cleaning the mess from the ovens and kitchens was a very hard job but with so many people to help, working through the day and night, they finished the work in less than twenty-four hours. And while the kitchen was being cleaned, other teams of workers were busy collecting the extra ingredients that would be needed to replace the spoilt puddings. The apple pickers picked tonnes of apples, which were hurried to the apple chopping team, who worked through the night to chop the extra apples. The mixers had to work together to make the extra batches of pudding mixture, working in shifts to stop their arms from getting too tired. Even the chickens on the farm had to work hard and lay extra eggs.

19. In the bread kitchen, Polly was very busy, helping to bake the extra loaves that were needed and prepare them ready for the mixture. It was very tiring working so hard, but no-one seemed to mind. They sang songs as they worked to keep their spirits up and told themselves it could still be the best Christmas ever. The busiest person in the whole factory was Peter. As well as doing his regular job in the citrus room, he set himself up as chief message and errand runner and must have sprinted miles around the factory, fetching, carrying and delivering messages. He did everything with a willing smile and an eager attitude and before the end of the day, everyone was agreed that he was earning his reprieve.

20. Meanwhile, Mrs Pinch was keeping a careful watch of all the work, recording the progress and keeping an eye on the clock. She was beginning to feel more optimistic that the situation might just be saved. Soon the smell of Christmas puddings began to drift through the factory again. Everyone cheered. A miracle had occurred; in less than a week, Puddington's factory was producing puddings again and making more than ever before. By the end of the week, Mrs Pinch proudly announced that they were back on schedule. Then she called Peter and Polly to her office. She warned Peter that he had very nearly ruined Christmas and that if he ever tried anything silly ever again, he would not only have to leave the factory but he would probably have to leave Puddington for good. But she had seen him working so well at running errands and messages that she thought he might be better at a different job from the citrus room, and she made him her new assistant. Polly was so pleased for him.

21. And Mrs Pinch had one other thing to say. She said that Peter's idea to make a giant pudding had actually been quite a good one. It would be good to make a giant Christmas pudding, and then they would sell it at auction to the highest bidder and give the money to a charity. Only this time, they would do it properly and there would be no mishaps in the ovens! Polly and Peter thought it was an excellent idea. But Polly had an extra idea.

"Could we make two giant puddings?" she asked. "One for charity, and one for us. We could have a big party and share our giant pudding together."

Mrs Pinch thought this was a very good idea, and so did everyone else in the factory. So as well as making all the replacement puddings, the factory set to work making two giant puddings.

22. And just like Peter's giant pudding, the two new giant puddings were the plumpest, juiciest, sweetest, tastiest puddings that have ever been made. With Mrs Pinch carefully watching, just the right amount of brandy was added, definitely not too much this time. Then the puddings were baked and the smell was so amazing that everyone in Puddington agreed that the two giant puddings smelt like they were going to be the best puddings ever. People started calling them the Peter Puddings.

23. Soon the news began to spread beyond Puddington about the giant puddings. Reporters from newspapers and television news started arriving from all over the world to report the exciting news; Puddington's puddings were going to auction the biggest, most delicious Christmas pudding ever. On the day of the auction, people flocked to Puddington, including lots of very rich people who were determined to bid for the pudding in the auction. Even people who weren't rich came as well, just to watch, and of course, there were lots of smaller Puddington Puddings on sale. Then the bidding began. The price went up and up; £1,000, £2,000, £5,000, £10,000. Peter and Polly were watching at the front, and they were amazed as the price kept going up. When it got to £100,000, they were dancing around with excitement. And still the price kept rising, £200,000, £500,000, £800,000. Everyone held their breath as the price reached £999,999, and then finally, they reached ONE MILLION POUNDS!

24. Not only did the giant pudding break the world record for being the biggest Christmas pudding ever, it also broke the record for being the most expensive Christmas pudding ever. The money went to Children in Need and even Sir Terry Wogan himself came to Puddington to collect the money. After being ashamed and guilty for causing so much trouble, Peter felt really proud of himself. But the best thing of all happened on Christmas Eve, when the factory closed down for the Christmas holiday. Everyone in the factory was satisfied that they had made all their puddings on time and as good as ever, and they knew that all over the world, people would be enjoying their Puddington Puddings with their Christmas dinners. Knowing this made them all very happy. And they were even happier when they all gathered together in the large canteen of the factory to share their own Peter Pudding Feast. Everyone was there; everyone who worked in the factory, or for the factory, or on the farm. And all their families were invited, the husbands and wives her worked in Puddington, and all the children. Luckily, the canteen was big enough to fit everyone in, and they all sat down together. They started by singing Christmas carols, then everyone had a cracker. And when everyone was wearing their cracker hat, the Peter Pudding was brought in. Polly and Peter were given the honour of lighting the brandy and everyone cheered as the blue flames leapt into shimmering life. The smell was fabulous, and when the pudding was served up, everyone agreed that it was the best tasting pudding they had ever eaten. And everyone gave three cheers to Peter for the disaster at the Christmas pudding disaster that led to the best Christmas pudding EVER!

MERRY CHRISTMAS