

Weathering Storms Grades 6-8

Certain things never bothered Penelope. For example, it didn't bother her that her Father didn't know when her birthday was, or when her Mother failed to remember that she was fifteen, not fourteen. It didn't even so much as trouble her that her grandmother thought her name was Charlotte. Penelope James had accepted her station in life and fulfilled the expectations that came with it. To most people Penelope seemed like a decent servant girl.

"Mother, where are you?" I called out as I opened the door to the pantry, my voice oozing with anger.

"Over here, Penelope," she called, warbling in a high-pitched voice.

"Mother, have you been drinking again?" Of course I knew the answer because she was clutching an empty bottle. When mother drinks she starts talking crazy, and her Ladyship doesn't like that.

"I one had one teeny tiny little drink. "

"Mother! You know Lady Hemsworth hates it when you drink."

"It's the 1920's and women can do as they please. Old lady Hemsworth can just put that in her pipe and smoke it. Besides, her Ladyship hates me."

"Mother, that's a ridiculous thing to say! Why would Lady Hemsworth dislike you?" I prayed she wasn't going to answer that question.

"You know perfectly well why."

"Charlotte!" I heard the Lady call me in that high, whiney timbre of hers, and I ran out of the pantry.

I walked up with as much grace and poise as a person who had just been sitting in a dusty pantry can muster. I smoothed down my hair and put on a cheery smile. Mother is drunk almost all of the time, so I fill in for her. Of course Mother wouldn't lose her Lady's maid position. Lord Hemsworth (Lady Hemsworth's son) would never allow it. Since we don't live near Lord

Hemsworth, Mother can get away with whatever she likes, and in return, Lady Hemsworth makes our lives miserable. She does it subtly, but she's always doing something. For all the work I do, I should be paid. Lady Hemsworth says I do the work my mother is being paid to do, therefore I shouldn't get paid. The truth is that I do enough work for the two of us combined. I pay for my mother's sins.

"Charlotte, you will come with me to Lord Hemsworth's house in Bath tomorrow. We will have dinner on the train and have our evening meal at Lord Hemsworth's. Then we will spend the night and come back in the morning"

"Milady, I don't think that is a good idea considering ..."

"Charlotte, do not question my judgment. We leave tomorrow at noon." Oh, goodness. I was going to have to remind her.

"Milady, do you remember who my father is?"

The Lady jerked her head sharply and narrowed her cold, gray eyes at me.

"I remember what your swine mother did. I remember the shame she brought on the house of Hemsworth, child. But the fact remains that your mother is not allowed anywhere near that house, and if you think that I will go without a maid to accompany me on the train then I will remind you who in charge around here."

"But couldn't someone else go?" I whispered desperately.

"Rachel has the day off and I simply can't take a kitchen maid, it would be most unrespectable. Imagine what Lady Menchoak would say. Really child, Keynsham may be small, but that doesn't mean we don't have standards. No, it's much simpler if you come." The Lady drew herself up and gave me a waving hand signal, letting me know it was time to leave.

I ran down the hallway back in the privacy and peace of the pantry to find Mother. When I found her I knelt down and shook her lightly.

“Mother, she's taking me to meet Father. Whatever am I going to do?” For the first time in months all the pressure of having a drunk mother and the curse of being an illegitimate child made me feel helpless. My mother must not have heard the fear in my voice or seen the worry lines etched on my face when she replied.

“Good man, your father is,” and then she got a dazed look in her eyes and fell asleep. I woke her up and dragged her out of the pantry and back to our room so she wouldn't get in trouble with her Ladyship. I went on with the remainder of my chores, but when the night came I couldn't sleep. I didn't want to meet my father. He had a wife and children, a real family that I wasn't part of. Maybe there is some fairytale where a maid's daughter gets accepted by her wealthy father, but my life hardly qualified as a fairytale. All my life I'd just been weathering storms, but this is the one that I couldn't weather. I thought would break.

I woke up feeling restless and jumpy. Although Mother was groggy she managed to braid my hair and tie blue ribbons on the ends. I barely ate my breakfast. Afterwards her Ladyship and I left for the train station. We got on the train and I got her Ladyship comfortable. The cook had packed little finger sandwiches for her Ladyship and some bread and cheese for me. I ate quietly until Lady Hemsworth spoke.

“Listen here, Charlotte. When we get there you will go fetch me some tea, and then you will do my hair. You are not to try to talk to Lord Hemsworth. Your father died in the war, you understand me?” Her voice started rising. “You will stay in the servants' hall until it is time to retire for the evening. We will leave tomorrow after breakfast.”

“Yes, Milady.”

“Also, you are seventeen, not fifteen.”

“Yes, Milady.”

After her Ladyship went to dinner I went down to the servants' hall. They were very nice. They gave me a cup of tea and some leftover stew. I ate quickly, keeping my eyes looking down. After I ate, I snuck upstairs to watch my father eat. I pressed my eye to the key hole and prayed not to be seen. I watched him laugh with his children. I saw Lady Hemsworth look at her grandchildren with loving eyes, not the cold hard eyes I always saw. I watched Lord Hemsworth talk to his

lovely wife. I listened intently to their conversations. I learned that I had a half-brother named William and a half-sister named Anne. They were both still in primary school. I waited until they had moved into the drawing room to have dessert wine. I walked quickly and pretended to look like I belonged. I stepped up to the table and took my father's napkin. None of the footmen seemed to care. In fact, one of them said,

“Hurry, girl. The Lord doesn't like seeing the kitchen maid collecting the linens.”

I ran into the room where Lady Hemsworth changed before dinner as the tears came sliding down fast. I stuffed the napkin in my apron pocket where no one would find it. I dried my face and waited for her Ladyship.

Early the next morning we got dressed quickly, and after breakfast Lord Hemsworth's wife escorted us to the car which took us to the train station. I was silent the whole ride home until Lady Hemsworth addressed me.

“Charlotte, I'm glad you didn't cause any trouble. I do wish I got to see my grandchildren more often,” she sighed.

When I was getting ready for bed that night I told my mother about the napkin. She looked very depressed when she told me that nothing was going to bring him back. I gently fingered the napkin. It was white and embroidered in fine gold thread. There was a brown stain. I ran my finger along the seam. That night I slept clutching the napkin. I kept that napkin for the longest time and every night I would fall asleep holding it.

A few years later Lady Hemsworth died of tuberculosis. My mother and I had to be relocated. Mother was very weak and slow by then and no one really wanted her. Eventually the Quineal family (after some strong encouragement on my father's part) hired her as a maid and she worked for them until her death. Though I never met him, my father arranged employment for me at a London hotel. It was an improvement for me and his secret stayed safe. I met a boy named Henry who I eventually fell in love with. We married and had three children, Ginny, Lily, and Percy. We own a small tea shop and we don't make much, but we don't have to take orders from anyone.