

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

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Chapter 1: The Old Manor House

The late morning sun slanted between the trees and through the wide windows of the musty study to land at Johnathan Pennyfare's feet.

It was a glorious mid summer day out, but he was trapped in the crowded room, reading over the last of the legal papers.

It was not enough for the government that his parents were dead, they needed a stone's worth of papers to prove the fact.

"Someday," he muttered to himself as he signed yet another document, "The chaps who constructed this damned process will lose one they love and then *they'll* have to go through it themselves."

The thought was cold comfort to him, even in the warmth of the sun, as he at last made it to the final page.

Pausing for a long moment, he looked at the final line to sign.

Reaching across the desk, he lifted the fine, white bone china tea cup that his mother had ordered from India. It had made its way here at great expense on a steam ship, arriving no more than a week ago.

She'd never had the chance to see it.

A sip, and he grimaced from the taste of cold tea.

He signed the paper.

A moment later, as if he'd been reading Johnathan's mind, Manson knocked softly at the door.

The old valet was dressed impeccably, as always. But Johnathan knew him well enough to be able to pick out the faint lines of sleeplessness that ringed his eyes.

"All the paperwork is in order I take it, young master?" he asked, his voice pulled and gravely from the pipe that hung from the left side of his mouth.

Johnathan glanced up at him.

"Yes." A moment later he was able to force a smile to his lips. At least that was one thing he hadn't lost. Manson. The servant had been with his parents since before Johnathan was born. "It is. I guess that makes it official, now doesn't it."

It was rare than Johnathan was ever able to elicit an emotion from the older man. This was not one of those times.

“Hardly, Sir. It was official the moment the town doctor proclaimed them dead. Before I was even able to get word to you at university in London.”

Reaching up, Johnathan pinched the bridge of his nose. That was a time he would not soon care to remember. It had taken two long, dreadful night on horseback to make it home to Hammerwood.

He doubted he'd been returning to his studies anytime soon.

Stepping forward, Manson reached out to collect the papers that sprawled across the writing desk. In a single, efficient motion he had them all together in a neat stack.

“And if I may say so, young master,” he glanced over to Johnathan and reached out to brush a patch of dust off the younger man's shoulder in an action that was likely the closest he'd ever come to showing affection, “You look like you could well use a rest. The proceedings are finished. The funeral was over six months ago. Why don't you find something else to occupy your mind? I'll take this down to the post and have it sent off.”

With that he was gone, leaving Johnathan alone in the now suddenly all too lonely study.

Standing up from the hard little lacquered wooden writing stool he'd been on, Johnathan put his hands to the small of his back and bent backwards.

He could hear at least seven distinct pops from his spine as he forced it to unkink.

He'd been at the desk since first thing this morning. It felt like a lead weight had been lifted from his mind to have the spectre of his parents' death behind him... but it was like stepping from the comforting closeness of a forest into the wide, open, exposed expanse of the sea.

Stepping to the windows that stood a half dozen strides from the desk, he had to weave around the seats and end tables that cluttered this room. His parents had spent the last twenty years in this house, and now it was his.

The bright day beckoned beyond, golden sunlight glistering off the emerald of the expansive lawns of the estate and the thick trees of East Sussex beyond.

This room was starting to suddenly feel far too confining.

Stepping from the study, Johnathan walked down the hallway, towards the kitchen and the back exit from the home.

Fingers trailing down the dark wooden walls, he looked up at the portraits that hung every few feet. Few of them were of anyone he knew.

Many of the portraits were fine works of art, but they held no meaning to him. His parents had purchased the house lock, stock, and barrels, including the history that had come with it. And that's all it was to Johnathan, history.

History that had died with his parents.

Stepping into the kitchen, it was cold and empty. Johnathan was about to open the door to the back garden when he heard steps coming his way.

“Young master,” Manson was next to him practically before he could blink, “The post just arrived.” He paused for a moment. No smile came to his lips, but his eyes twinkled in the way that said far more. “This arrived.”

He held out a plain envelope. It had the return address of the Talbot household in town.

There was only a single person who would be likely to send him a message from that address.

Leaning against the cold, cast iron range in the centre of the kitchen, Johnathan ripped open the envelope with a thumbnail as Manson stood close by.

He could smell her perfume before he even pulled the letter free.

Emma.

It only took him an instant to recognize the gentle loops of her handwriting. He didn't even need to look to the signature at the bottom.

Her words were simple and honest. She'd been at the funeral, but he'd not seen her since.

Manson craned his neck ever so discreetly to try and make out the words. Johnathan didn't help him by folding the paper closed and tucking it into the pocket of his casual brown tweed trousers.

"May I enquire, sir..."

Johnathan smiled. "No need to worry, my good man. Just a little correspondence from an old friend. That's all."

Johnathan's smile grew wider. There was little in this world that Manson could not stand more than *not knowing*. That was the way of every valet that he'd ever met. They made it a point of their job to know their master's business.

It made little difference whether the master in question cared for it or not.

Johnathan laughed as he turned. He had no doubt that Manson would know the contents of that letter before the hour was out, but Johnathan could at least make it a challenge for him.

Stepping from the back door of the manor, Johnathan, with Manson in tow, crossed the hundred or so yards of manicured lawn to the stable.

The stable was a relatively small wooden structure, painted a sky blue. It contrasted with the dark grey stone of the manor house behind them.

Stepping up, there was no stable boy in sight. That suited Johnathan well enough. There was hardly enough work to keep a lad like that busy all day anyhow.

There was room for a good half dozen horses in here, but all the stalls save one were empty.

Ginny, an old mare, stood calmly in the far corner of the stable. She'd been asleep a moment ago but perked up as the two men entered.

"Will you be taking a trip to the Talbert residence, Sir?" asked Manson.

"No." Johnathan laughed as he reached over to lift the saddle and bridle from where they hung on the wall. "Just a quick trip around the estate." He drew a deep breath, trying to clear the dust from his lungs, "I've been trapped up inside long enough that I think a little exercise is in order." He glanced over to the horse. "For both of us, eh girl?"

Stepping into the stall, Johnathan laughed as Ginny reached forward to nuzzle him on the shoulder, looking, most likely, for an apple.

A few moments later she was saddled up and Manson was nowhere to be found.

It felt good to stretch his muscles as he rose into the stirrups. It had been weeks since he'd last had an opportunity to ride, had an opportunity to do anything by sit in that damned room and tell yet another clerk, in triplicate, that he was now the last remaining member of his family.

Ginny's pace was slow and plodding as he guided her down the cobblestone path leading away from the stables. She, like him atop her, was sore and worn from the lack of exercise. But she, in her advancing age, didn't seem to as enjoy the opportunity to stretch her legs as much.

Letting the old girl move along at her own speed, they were soon enough enveloped by the deep forests of East Sussex. The trees grew thick here, weaving amongst themselves to create a nearly impenetrable wall of verdant green. The ancient roads that ran through the county were near to being a huge hedge maze as one could likely imagine.

A quarter mile or so and Ginny's pace picked up to a trot, her tail flagging out behind her. She'd just realized that this wasn't going to be a mad dash like the journey down from London had been so many months ago.

The calm and shallow River Reading began glimmering from down the road. It was the edge of the estate and the mark that they were on their way towards town.

Pulling gently on the reins, Johnathan brought them to a stop at the edge of the chuckling river. Ginny tossed her head. She, it appeared, had just gotten into the spirit of the walk and wanted to cool her hooves in the water.

"Not today, girl." Johnathan said, "I'm not quite ready to cross into town just yet. Let's head on back."

The ride back was easier and more lively than the journey out had been. They took the main road this time, heading to the front door rather than directly back to the stable.

That was how they ran across the man coming to look for him.

"Mr. Pennyfare! So good to see you!" Johnathan couldn't quite place the man's name, but his balding head of red hair was easy enough to recall. "Remember me, Sean Cornwall?"

The smile on Johnathan's face grew wider. Ah yes, Sean.

The man had yet to say a half dozen words and Johnathan already knew why he was here. Whenever a charity needed someone to head out and canvas money, Sean was their man.

Johnathan's parents had known him well.

Stepping down from the sirups, Johnathan had to hold back a grunt as the muscles in his legs stretched.

"Good morning to you, Sean. What are you doing out on this fine day?"

The two of them walked side by side down the lane as the older man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his ample forehead.

"Yes, a fine day isn't it? Almost too fine if you ask me! You'd think we were in Africa the way the heat has come upon us this summer."

Johnathan rolled his eyes.

"But that's just what I came to talk to you about," Sean continued, "The town is canvassing to raise money to help the poor Birchman family. You see, Peter has fallen ill due to the heat and..."

"That's enough," Johnathan reached out to lay a hand on the man's shoulder while holding the reins to Ginny lightly in the other, "what will it be? The Birchman's have always been a pleasant people. Would a hundred pounds suffice to help them over this moment of need?"

The man nearly turned white.

"Mr. Pennyfare! That's... that's more than I ever expected. I was only hoping for perhaps a dozen quid..."

Johnathan patted him on the shoulder as the manor house came into view, its front wall covered with dark green vines.

"Don't worry about it, Sean. The Birchman's are a good family. I'm sure they'll use it well."

Johnathan decided not to add that he didn't know the Berchman family from a hole in the wall, but his parents *had*. They'd said little about them while he was away at university, but what they had said was good.

And in any event, he now had to find *something* to do with my life.

Leaving Sean at the front door in the more than capable hands of Manson, Johnathan walked Ginny back to the stable.

The soft carpet of the grass was easy against their feet as they made the slow journey. Ginny was more than showing her age. A short walk like this shouldn't have been anything for the old mare, but even as it was Johnathan could see the faint signs of her exertion.

"Here you are, old girl," he said, leading her back into the stained wood stable, "back home

again, safe and sound.” He forced a smile to his lips, “Nothing to worry about.”

The walk hardly even counted as exercise, but Johnathan took the time to pull out the brushes and give her a once over.

Johnathan was no horseman, but his father had taught him long ago how to take care of an animal. There had been little call to use the training in the city.

Leaving the old girl with some grain and a few lumps of sugar, he walked back to the house feeling at least a little lighter in spirit.

Stepping into the kitchen, Manson was nowhere to be seen. There was, however, a small pile of letters sitting on the table.

Pulling up a worn wooden stool, Johnathan sat down to look through the rest of the day's post.

Other than the letter from Emma, there was little of note. No wonder Manson hadn't bothered to bring them to his attention.

And it was no surprise that the letters had already been opened.

A bill here, a notice there. It was the same thing that Johnathan had been dealing with on and off since he'd returned. Manson had been able to keep most of it at bay to allow him to focus on what truly mattered, but now it was time to return to the real world.

Down at the bottom of the pile was a single letter that sat unopened. A quick glance at the return address explained why easily enough. It was from one of the local social clubs.

With a roll of the eyes Johnathan tore it open.

Yet another invitation to join the club. It had to be at least the third one this month. He hadn't bothered responding to any of the others.

Well, I guess it really was time to get back to the real world.

Casting about for a moment, he found a pad of paper and a pen. Lifting the nib to stain a black dot on his upper lip, Johnathan paused a moment before writing.

'Thank you for your gracious offer to join the Blue Lions club. I am well aware of its prestigious standing and enviable history, but I'm sorry to say that I must decline at this time.'

Now came the difficult part. Why?

To be honest, Johnathan couldn't even say, himself. The Blue Lions were indeed a fashionable club to belong to, one of the more exclusive in the whole of the county, but it just didn't suit him.

They did good work... but there was simple something about them that Johnathan simply couldn't admire.

The fact that each and every member was one of the elite of the town. Now that was it.

Johnathan had to laugh at the very baldfacedness of the thought. *Him*, who had spent no small part of his life in this grand manor house, who had been educated in one of the finest universities in London, *he* did not feel fit to mingle with the elite of the small town of Hammerwood.

For just a moment he laughed.

But there was more to it. His father had not been a member, no matter how many times they had pestered him to join.

'I must decline as I am not yet ready to return to the social life.' He scrawled down quickly at the bottom of the letter, followed by his neat, tight signature.

That would do well enough as an excuse. He'd have to think of another one soon enough, but it would do for now.

Getting up from the table, Johnathan walked down the long, straight hallway of the manor to the front door. Beside it was a small basket for the outgoing post. He dropped the letter in there to lay next to the daily household correspondence done by Manson and the other servants. A boy would be along

sometime to pick it up.

It was on the way back that he caught a glimpse of one of the chamber maids. She wasn't dressed in the frilly black-and-white style that was becoming fashionable in Paris, but in a far more comfortable wool shirt and dress.

She smiled warmly at him and she turned around the corner. Johnathan would have been pleased if she hadn't been twenty years his senior.

A few more steps around the house and he was beginning to feel caged again. It was only a matter of time before he left again via the kitchen door to find himself in the back garden amongst the flowers.

This time he didn't venture any further. Looking out across the lawn, he could see a deer leaping in great strides across the turf.

It was enough to make him shudder.

He'd been in London for over half a decade, with only brief visits back here to Hammerwood. The city had more than just rubbed off on him.

Looking down at his feet, there was a smaller patch of earth off to one side here. It wasn't filled with carefully cultivated roses and hedges. There was little to the small square of black soil but a few daises poking up in messy patches here and there.

Kneeling, Johnathan's trousers were quickly stained black. He didn't even notice.

This had been his mother's garden. There was little to it, but it had been *hers*. She had been no professional, but she, like so many Englishwomen, had kept her own little parcel of land as her own, even as the greater lawns had been tended to by trained professionals.

The accident had struck in late winter, taking the two of them away before they'd even been able to see the spring. As such the small patch of ground before Johnathan now was near empty, hedged at the edges with weeds.

Johnathan let out a long breath as he reached down to begin pulling at those weeds. They were stubborn things that fought hard against his hands and he tried to bring some order to the little patch.

In this, like so many things in the estate, Johnathan was at a disadvantage. He spent a few hours with his mother, helping her garden when he was young, but this was no pastime of his. She had been an amateur, Johnathan not even that.

Reaching at yet another nettle, this one cut at his finger as he pulled it.

Letting out a slight yelp, he let go of the weed and stuck his finger in his mouth. The salty taste of blood welled up in seconds.

"Bugger!" His voice was rough, tears threatening to well up, but not from the cut.

Had he been that foolish? To venture out here without even a pair of gloves?

Pulling the finger from his mouth, Johnathan looked down at his hands. They were soft and unblemished by callouses or scars, so unlike his parents'.

Both his mother and father had spent many a season out of doors before they'd made their bundle and purchased the manor. His mother would have had no problem weeding the garden, her hands had been hardened over the years, working in the northern coalmines. Her heart had been soft, but her hands hard and strong.

That was who she'd been, who they'd both been.

Looking down at the weed again, Johnathan could just make out the beginnings of a blossom among the spines.

Given time the small weed would spread across the entire garden, but with a little careful management it should be possible to let it have the little corner and no more.

It would be easy to reach out with a foot and stomp the offending weed into the ground, but

Johnathan left it.

It wasn't what his mother would have done, but it was a fitting tribute.

Standing up, Johnathan brushed his dirt covered hands on his trousers. It did little more than make the already stained fabric even worse.

A few steps away a small bench rested on the grass, its back to a topiary hedge. Johnathan took a seat and looked out across the garden.

The bench hadn't been here last time he'd come to visit, it was a new addition.

The soft fall of footsteps on the garden path was all the warning Johnathan got before a shadow fell across him.

"Morning, Manson." Johnathan didn't even bother to glance over to the man. Only one person's footsteps were so quiet and metered.

"Sir," the older man's voice was soft, "I was just coming to check up on you." He paused for a moment, likely taking in Johnathan's now soiled appearance.

Johnathan half expected the man to break into an annoyed explanation of just why he should be more cautious of becoming dirty and shuffle him off like a child to get cleaned up, like he used to. But instead he simply cleared his throat.

"I see you found some time to spend in... your mother's garden." He said, voice soft.

Johnathan didn't respond.

The bench creaked softly beside him as Manson sat down. This was hardly a surprise. Johnathan's parents had never required the servants to act stiff or formal around them unless there were guests.

Manson's stuffy actions were by his own direction, no one else. He had his own beliefs on how a proper valet *should* act, and he was more than capable to preforming to those exacting standards.

"You've..." he cleared his throat, "been carrying on well these last few months, young master." His voice was rough. "You've been in perfect composure since the funeral, sir. I must applaud you."

Johnathan snorted. Manson knew for a fact that the statement was a lie. While he'd never broken down in public, there had been many a night and a private morning that he'd bawled his eyes out at his loss.

It was only Manson's strong guidance on his shoulder that had kept him sailing on, avoiding wrecking himself of the rocky shores of self pity or drink.

It was in some way more surprising that Manson himself had been so strong. He'd know Johnathan's parents for even longer than Johnathan himself had.

"Thank you..." Johnathan had to hold back a cough that was frighteningly close to a sob as his eyes reddened, "Thank you, Manson. You've been invaluable to me."

Johnathan glanced over for a moment to see the man's eyes closed.

"You're welcome, sir." His voice was level and controlled, but there was *something* more to it. "I only wish I could have done more... that I could have been there and done *something*."

Johnathan reached out to lay a hand on the man's shoulder. He jumped at the contact. It was against one of his many informal laws to ever touch his employers.

"You've done everything you can. Thank you."

He didn't say anything for a moment. The soft summer wind rustled through the garden, whispering over the leaves.

"You will have to decide how to carry on their legacy, sir." Manson's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Johnathan didn't say anything.

"They did much, sir. Came from nothing and look at all they did. You've been blessed with the

fruits of their labour. You'll need to decide where it is you'll go from here. I do trust," his voice lowered slightly, "that you'll be carrying on their legacy."

Johnathan let out a long breath.

"I should hope so, Manson. That's what they sent me to London for. To become a lawyer, to learn the system that they struggled for so long with. It would hardly do for me to turn my back on them, now would it?"

The barest hint of a smile touched the man's lips. "Very good, sir. You truly are their son. You've been raised well."

"I should suppose." Johnathan snorted out a laugh. "It would hardly do for me to turn my back on them now after all they've given me."

Manson paused for a moment. "I hope that's not the way you see it, sir. Your parents did as they did because they felt it the right and moral thing to do, not because they were ordered to. It wouldn't be correct for you to continue their work simply out of a feeling of obligation." He grasped at the air as if trying to pluck the right word from the ether. "It wouldn't be becoming."

The smile that spread across Johnathan's face now was more alive, real.

"Don't worry," he said, "It's not that. I've been raised properly. I know what the stakes are. It's just a bit much to take on their legacy so soon. A bit of a rush."

"Ah, yes." Manson let out the breath he'd been holding. "I see. Well, that's perfectly understandable. Perhaps it is a bit soon. May I suggest we find you something to take your mind of them perhaps? A holiday to the seaside? Some time on the continent?"

"No," Johnathan laughed, "I think not. I never was much of one for travel. And besides, I do believe I'll have something right here soon enough to occupy my mind."

"Oh?" Manson's voice was light. There was no doubt that he was thinking back to the letter earlier, but he was far too polite, and restrained by his own rules, to ever ask what it said.

Author's Note

For the first time, I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to put in my Author's Note. Wow.

I'm sure there's much to say about *The Changing Times*, it was a book I wrote over a long, lazy prairie summer that never seemed to end.

The story is my first attempt at what I'd call a *romance*. I made a lot of stylistic changes when I wrote this story. Not the least of which was switching into the third-person perspective.

It may not seem like much, but writing 'he said' and 'Johnathan did' drove me crazy for the first week or so. I kept having to go back and edit the story, cleaning up places where I'd slipped in the inadvertent 'I'.

In the original plan for this book Emma was going to be a far more active character, going toe-to-toe with Johnathan and being proactive. It didn't quite work out that way.

All of the other main characters for *The Hunters* went on – in spirit at least – to lead their own book. Jon had *Police Dog*, and English took center stage in *Little Brother to a Lion*. *The Changing Times* was supposed to be Rebeca's chance to shine. I'm not disappointed with the way everything came out, but... well, it wasn't as planned.

Overall, I hope you enjoy *The Changing Times*. It was an enjoyable story to write, and it's always fun to set a lion loose in the English countryside...