

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Old Manor House..... 1

Chapter 2: An Odd Proposal.....9

Chapter 3: An Odder Feeling.....19

Chapter 4: Tea and Crumpets in the Garden.....29

Chapter 4: Tea and Crumpets in the Garden

Breakfast was a simple enough affair, consisting of little more than a thick oat porridge topped with cream and fruits purchased in the town market. It was, however, filling and left Johnathan feeling as tired as if he'd never gone to bed in the first place.

The morning passed quickly for him. Despite his activity, he was able to accomplish little more than simple digestion, sitting again in the back parlour and resting.

Perhaps it was the unexpected events of last night, or perhaps that this was the first day he had no work to do regarding his parent's death, but Johnathan took the opportunity to do as little as he could.

That was until a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in, Manson," Johnathan looked up. Even from the knock alone he could tell who it was.

"You have a visitor, young master. A young Emma Talbot."

Johnathan put an effort into looking surprised, more for Manson's benefit than anything else. The letter that had arrived yesterday foretold of her arrival, and Johnathan had been waiting for her.

"Please, by all means," Johnathan said, smiling, "show her in."

Manson coughed. "Where would you like to receive her, sir?"

Johnathan lowered his brow. "Here, of course."

"Sir?" Manson's face was expressionless, "In the back parlour? Are you quite sure? This is, ahem, normally a rather private area."

Johnathan's grin widened, understanding. "You needn't worry, my good man, she's welcome to *every* room in my home." His slight stress of the one word was not lost on Manson.

"Very good, sir." A gentleman to the last, Manson chose to ignore the implication of Johnathan's last statement.

It was a few moments later that Manson showed Emma in.

She was almost exactly as Johnathan remembered her. They'd last seen each other at the funeral, and had little chance to talk then.

Wearing a pale blue sun dress, her smooth skin was kissed by an unfashionable tan that

complimented her long brown hair. Her figure was slimmer than the buxom silhouette that was so popular today, but the curves suggested a hint of power and energy that was absent in the courtly women Johnathan's had met in the city.

This, to be put rather plainly, was a county girl. A one of some standing no doubt, but still one who was not unfamiliar with labour and the black earth.

Looking up as she stepped into the room, she smiled.

"Mr. Pennyfare." Her voice was smooth and sweet, a diminutive as required by proper manners.

"Miss. Talbot." Johnathan stood for a moment and bowed, never taking a step towards her.

Manson found her a seat on the chesterfield on the far side of the room. There was both a low table covered in knickknacks and a good five feet between them.

"So kind of you to receive me, Mr. Pennyfare," she spoke, fluttering her eyes under her wide brimmed hat, "and on such short notice."

"I'd have it no other way." Johnathan had to hold back a laugh as she glanced towards Manson, who simply would not leave the room and let them be in peace. He insisted on keep an eye on the two, as he deemed them young, people.

For a few moments they prattled on about Hammerwood and the local news and weather, just as a proper couple of people should who simply met for an informal engagement. Manson kept his silent guard over them.

Beginning to lose his patience, Johnathan stood abruptly up as Emma was in the middle of giving a detailed account of the goings on of the latest festival.

"I think I'd fancy a walk in the garden. How about you?" He put of his hand to Emma.

She blushed slightly as she took it. Johnathan knew enough to say for a fact the blush was for Manson's benefit alone. It served nothing more than proper manners.

"Why Mr. Pennyfair, I'd be delighted. I've been told your gardens are some of the finest in the county." She took his hand in her firm grip.

The *finest in the county* line was again nothing but manners. The two of them had run about back there when they had been young. She knew the land behind the manor almost as well as Johnathan himself.

Stepping from the room, Manson kept a steely gaze on them as they walked hand in hand back through the kitchen and out into the garden.

Before taking the final step through the door Johnathan turned, taking a quick look at the range.

"Manson, my good man," Johnathan said, "would you be kind enough to make the dear Emma and I a pot of tea and some detectables? I fear we'll be going for a bit of a walk and may be a spot peckish when we return." He had to fight to keep the chuckle from his voice.

Manson scowled but nodded his head. "Of course, sir."

A moment later Johnathan had closed the door between them.

"Well," he turned to Emma, all pretence of formality dropping from his voice, "that should buy us some privacy."

Johnathan didn't get another word out before Emma's grip tightened around his hand and she pulled him forward in a mad dash down the cobblestone path.

Sprinting past the fountain and the flowerbeds, she pulled him on, breathless, until they came up even with the small topiary hedges that stood a good hundred yards from the house. It was only then she turned and dove behind them, Johnathan in her shadow.

Tumbling to the soft grass, he found himself next to Emma's warm body. Reaching forward his hands found her cheeks. Over a year's worth of longing was held in his kiss as he leaned towards her.

He only got halfway. She met him there.

There was little to be said for long moments, they had hardly time to breathe.

When the eternity passed they were still laying entangled with each other, covered in grass and fallen hedge branches.

"So," Johnathan rolled on his side and propped his head on his hands, "I'll take it you missed me then?"

Emma flicked a twig at him and laughed. "My, some Price Gallant you are. No question of my health or fortune, simply ravish me in the garden at your first opportunity and puff up your ego like some lose throated lizard calling for a mate."

Johnathan snorted. "Hardly. I seem to recall it wasn't *I* who pulled us back here with the strength of a giant. You seemed to be more interested in the same. And what is it of my ego? You were the one who always told me I should strive for more."

Brushing her now dirt stained dress, Emma shifted gracefully to her feet, "I?" She let out a loud stage laugh, "I've done no such thing." He eyes twinkled as he made a point of not reaching out a hand to Johnathan who still lay on the ground. "I'm simply relived that long time friend has returned from his absence to the large and dangerous city of London. Even," she paused for a moment, eyes casting downward, "if the event of his return are less than favourable."

Stumbling to his feet far less gracefully than Emma had managed, Johnathan rose to take her hand.

"Don't trouble yourself with it." He took a deep breath, forcing his mind away, "Truly, don't. That's something we can dwell on some other time." Tightening his grip on her hand, they started off across the open lawn.

It was a good ten minutes before they spoke again.

"I'm sorry I couldn't go with you," Emma said. "I wanted to, you know that, but father simply wouldn't allow it. He needed me here to help make ends meet."

Johnathan let out a long breath, forcing a not false smile to his lips. "It's alright."

"But I always wanted to see London and you got to experience it without me!" She pouted, putting up a good show before dissolving into laughter. "How was it? Is it all they say?"

Johnathan shrugged. "It was... it was London." He laughed at his words, "It was a city." Gesturing out with his free hand, he tried to encapsulate the soaring building and crowded streets in a single gesture. "It's something to see, my dearest, you really should have come. It's like nothing we have here in Hammerwood. So, so many people in such a small space, and buildings *everywhere*."

She closed her eyes for a moment, Johnathan could almost see her imagining the city.

"It sounds wonderful."

Johnathan grimaced. "It... *is*. It's a city. The first time you see it your breath will be taken away in more ways than one. But that's all it is. Soon after you'll realize how cramped and... *stinking* it is there. No privacy, so many people always around you. And the sounds! They never end! People are awake and working at all hours, one can hardly get a night's sleep."

She chuckled. "Sounds like my home. With mother and father and all eight brothers, the city can be no worse than that."

Johnathan rolled his eyes. "You're right. You're the perfect city folk. Just imagine an entire world like your home and you wouldn't be far off."

For just a moment she shivered. It was so subtle and slight that Johnathan hardly noticed.

"Perhaps it's for the best that I stayed here then," she whispered.

Stopping dead, Johnathan turned and took her face carefully in his hands, looking down into her deep green eyes.

“What's happened while I was away, dearest? What has your father been doing?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to look away from him, he wouldn't allow her to escape his careful embrace.

“Another of his grand schemes went bust.” Her voice was little over a whisper. “We've all had to take jobs in town now to pay his debts.”

Johnathan let out a long breath, releasing her. She never moved.

“Is it truly that bad?”

“Yes.” Her reply was simple, but it spoke volumes. “He invested in a mining operation in the midlands. Any man could have told him would be worthless, but he did so anyway. He invested everything he'd made from the factory.”

The eldest Talbot had a most spectacular history. It would be an amazing thing to read of if one didn't know it was real. All the Talbots in recent memory, in fact, had shared in the same luck.

The Talbots had once, not so long ago, been a wealthy and well to do family. They had progressed so much that Emma's grandfather had been knighted for his economic services. Sadly, all the male Talbots Johnathan had even had the opportunity to meet had not shared in that business sense.

Emma's father, Steward Talbot, was the worst among them. A large man in both bearing and deed, he had the fortitude to believe that he was always correct, no matter his dealings.

Sadly, he was rarely the case.

When Johnathan had first met Emma she and her family had been well off, better than Johnathan's. Over the years that had changed.

It seemed that Pennyfare's could make no bad investments and the Talbot's no good. It was only a matter of a few years until their retaliative fortunes had been reversed.

When Johnathan and Emma had first met there had been some reluctance on the part of her parent's that they should socialize. That changed quickly enough.

Not that such minor things as their parent's blessing had ever held the two of them apart. While the two of them had hardly seemed fated for each other from a young age, they had however become fast friends.

It was only in the last few years before Johnathan had been sent off for schooling in London that the friendship had bloomed into something deeper.

“He... made you work?” Johnathan could hardly stutter out the words. It was not unknown for the Talbot's to fall upon hard times, but it was indeed rare for the elder Talbot to ask Emma to do anything that was not strictly ladylike. Not that such prevented Emma from doing such on her own accord.

She snorted in a most unladylike like way. “You speak of it like it's some great sin! Of course he's asked me to work, in his own round about way. He never came out and *said* it, but he was more than relieved when I found employment helping at the school, teaching the children to read.” She let out a sigh. “It hardly pays much, but it does let me float my own. At least father didn't have to pay my expenses anymore.”

Johnathan blinked for a moment.

“Then how are you here? It's the middle of the week. Shouldn't you be at your new job?”

She cinched up her face in an expression that Johnathan knew only too well. It tended to come to the surface whenever her father was brought up.

“Father came to me last week. You'll have to excuse me, dearest, I've misspoken. I said I *was* employed. That should be *was* in the past tense. As in I am no longer.”

Stepping back, Johnathan tried to understand. “How? Old man Smith would hardly let you go if you were working under his guidance. And I can't imagine you being anything but excellent in any

position he might give you.”

Her expression of disgust grew deeper.

“*He* did not ask me to leave, dearest. Father did. Or rather *he* asked Mr. Smith to release me. He said I had more important things to focus on than the children.”

“But what...” Johnathan's words pattered out as he looked once again at the dress that she wore. It was far too new and well tailored for the Talbot's to afford in their time of austerity. He hadn't noticed it before as it would hardly have been out of place less than a decade ago. But now...

“Am I then to assume?” He bowed his head slightly.

Emma's voice was soft, “It would appear I am now working the job father had in mind for me, Johnathan.” She didn't even bother to sound ashamed.

“Very well.” Johnathan let out a sigh. “Just how far has your father gotten himself into this time.”

She unabashedly listed a number.

“Oh my,” was all Johnathan could think to say. He hadn't realized things had become quite *that* bad.

The Talbots were in quite a hole this time, and it was unlikely that anything they could do would dig them out.

The number, however, was not so great that Pennyfare's purse could not cover it. It would take over half of all the free funds he held, but it could be accomplished.

“Done.” Johnathan didn't even pause before he reached down for Emma's hands. “If that's the price I must pay for your hand then so be it, it will be done. You are more than worth it.”

She giggled slightly and looked away. “Really, Johnathan, you shouldn't, I...”

Reaching forward, he leaned in to kiss her. He was only inches away when she let out a little scream.

Freezing solid, it took only a moment to see why, the brand new hat she came here with had just escaped. Tugged by an errant breeze, it flew through the air, picking up speed as it raced down the lawn away from them.

Feeling a tug at the back of his mind Johnathan turned towards the fleeing hat, letting Emma drop from his arms with a squeak.

Less than a heartbeat later he was sprinting after the haberdashery as it fled.

“How dare you...” he could just hear Emma shout from behind him. “Wait for me!”

Running faster than he ever through he could, Johnathan all but flew across the open grass. Yet no matter how quickly he ran the errant hat always seemed to hang tantalizingly out of reach.

Sparing a quick glance behind him, Emma was no more than a half dozen strides behind. Hiking up her skirt, she ran with him, nearly step for step, her working boots throwing up the grass behind her.

Coming towards the far end of the lawn, Johnathan had to rake his mind for what came next. It had been so long since he'd been home that he almost couldn't remember...

The river.

Oh dear. With hardly a warning the steep riverbank appeared just beyond a slight rise. Creating the nearest boarder to the property, it was fast and deep, almost a good ten yards across. And no more than a couple of paces away.

Not able to stop in time Johnathan leapt into the air. The hat that had remained so close at hand now came cleanly into his grasp.

The unfortunate side effect was that he was now hanging in the air above the water.

With an almighty splash he came down in the middle of the river, breaking its smooth surface.

Plunging into the depths, he couldn't find the bottom under him. A moment of disorientation quickly fled as he kicked and scrambled at the water.

What couldn't be more than a handful of seconds later, but yet felt far longer, his head broke the glassy surface.

Sucking in a deep breath he spat out a mouthful of clean river water.

There was a soft applause from the bank.

Turning, Emma stood here, looking as made up and proper as she had first stepping into the house. A smile played at her lips before she tried to force it down.

"Such form!" She mocked, "Such style! A prize swimmer for sure."

Johnathan would have replied if his head hadn't been pulled underwater again for a second. Never a strong swimmer, it was made nothing but worse now that he was in his full water logged clothing.

Fighting, hat still in tow, he made it to the shore but was unable to scramble up the steep bank.

That was until a strong hand reached down to take his.

Looking up he could see her face as she leaned out over the water towards him.

A light rain had begun to fall. It shattered the crystal surface of the river into a thousand ever moving ripples as he looked up through it from below. She was the only thing he could see clearly, the only thing not broken by the raindrops.

Coming to the surface once again, Johnathan sucked in a cool breath of air as Emma hauled him bodily over the embankment.

They both collapsed onto the soft grass of the riverside, exhausted.

"Your hat... my lady," was all Johnathan could choke out as he dutifully lifted the now soaked and ruined piece of fabric towards her.

She batted it away with a laugh and flicked some water into his face.

Twenty minutes later and their breath had returned. Johnathan, still soaked from head to toe was beginning to shiver in the warm breeze.

"Poor dearest," Emma mocked softly, "my knight is shining armour has gotten himself all rusted up." Pulling him towards her, Emma brought him just close enough to all some of her body heat to leach across, but not so close as to get herself any wetter, "Whatever would I have done without my brave man to save me from the horrors of life without my hat?"

Johnathan snorted. "That same hat you promptly threw away as soon as I returned it to you? You'd likely had found a way to get it back without me – one that didn't require *me* getting all wet."

"And at what time did I *ask* you to jump in the river? That was a damned silly thing to do."

Johnathan reached for her, still dripping, but Emma pulled back with a squeak of mock horror.

"Don't you dare touch me, you fiend!" She grinned.

"You weren't saying such things a few moments ago," Johnathan replied.

"You weren't soaking wet then. I refuse to be involved with a man who doesn't even have the simple decorum to keep himself dry."

With a playful growl Johnathan leapt forward. Emma was light on her feet, but not so light as to avoid his sudden pounce. A moment later he had his arms wrapped around her as the two of them tumbled to the ground.

In the back of his mind Johnathan noticed that he wasn't shivering any longer.

"What do you think of me now, fair damsel?" he leaned close to whisper in her ear.

She giggled and raised a finger to push his lips away. "You're still soaking wet. But, then again, so am I." The rain had continued to fall in light spirits, but it had grown now to a full summer

squall.

“So a perfectly matched pair of fools we are then?” Johnathan's voice was soft. He paused for a long moment before releasing her and getting to his feet. “We really should be getting back.” The wind picked up as he stood, forcing him to lean forward so far as to almost double over on all fours. “M'lady,” he held out his hand for Emma.

“What a gentleman,” she teased, “knocks me over but had the manners to help me back up again.”

The walk back to the manor was short enough, but took far longer than it had on the way out. Pressing against the wind and the rain, they fought together for every step as it seemed the very forces of nature fought to push them back.

By the time the dim lights of the manor came into sight the formerly bright blue sky had darkened to a soot black that swirled around them. The rain beat down so heavily that they could no longer remember which of them had fallen into the river and which of them had only had to experience the rain.

They were still a good twenty feet from the building when a door was thrust open. A moment later Manson dashed out with a wool blanket in his hands. He was dressed in a Macintosh to ward off the driving rain as he walked them the last few steps.

“Young master! You two really should have stayed out in such weather! I haven't seen a storm like then in years.” The man's voice was almost lost in the winds.

It wasn't until they were once again in the warmth of the kitchen with the door firmly closed behind them that Johnathan bothered to respond. And even then he had to compete with the howling of the wind.

“It was hardly my plan to be out in such a mess as this!” Still dripping, Johnathan stepped up to the window, peering out at the chaos beyond.

The storm had nothing but worsened. It was impossible to see more than a handful of strides in the darkness. It should be noon, but it was as pitch black as midnight outside the window.

“Come, sir,” Manson laid a hand on Johnathan's shoulder, “we must get you into drier clothing before you catch a chill.”

Turning, Johnathan pushed him away. “No, see to Emma first. She is the guest.”

Manson's cheeks grew ever so slightly red. “You needn't worry, sir. I'll have one of the maids look after her presently. It would be,” he cleared his throat, “improper for me to...”

“Oh, yes, quite.” It was Johnathan's turn to blush. “I understand.” He glanced over to Emma. “Please,” he bowed slightly, “wear whatever we have in the house that will fit you.”

A moment later Manson hurried Johnathan off while one of the maids passed them to see to Emma.

Back in Johnathan's upstairs chambers, Manson peeled off the sopping wet clothing with mutters of disgust.

“Destroyed,” and “ruined!” Were two of the words Johnathan was able to make out. Some of the muttering under the man's breath were more colourful.

“Sorry,” Johnathan couldn't quite explain *why* he felt ashamed. Manson was his valet, the clothing belonged to Johnathan, not him, but yet all the logic in the world didn't keep Johnathan from feeling ashamed like a small child.

Perhaps because Manson had been part of his life since birth.

“Never you mind, young master.” With a huff he turned to the nearby wardrobe and began

pulling fresh clothing out. "Hardly your fault. The storm took us all by surprise. I would have warned you of it if I thought it was to grow to be this serious."

It seemed like no more than a moment later Johnathan was dressed again, looking perfect and proper under Manson's skilled hands. Even his hair was dry, like the storm still raging outside was nothing more than a dream.

Warm and secure again, Johnathan descended the stairs, Manson in tow, to find the lower maid waiting for them.

"Miss. Talbot will be with you in a few moments, Mr. Pennyfare," she said as they neared. Unlike Manson, the two maids had never picked up the habit of calling him 'sir' or 'master'. That suited him fine. All he wished was that he could get them to call him by his first name, but Manson's influence on the household prevented any such glaring breaches in protocol, no matter Johnathan's own wishes.

A few moments later the maid had shown Johnathan into the library. It was a touch cold and drafty in here on account of the windows, but a roaring fire had been recently set in the hearth, more than enough to ward away any oncoming chill.

A plate of light watercress sandwich and been set out on a silver serving tray on the nearby table. Next to them sat a capped bottle of freshly chilled tea and a couple of glasses. A fine fare for a picnic out on the lawn.

Too bad the weather had conspired against them.

Warming his hands over the fire, Johnathan took the moment to think of the Talbot family. Emma's mother, Agatha, was a fine and sensible lady. Johnathan hardly knew her well, but she'd always been pleasant and accommodating, even before the Pennyfare fortunes had surpassed the Talbot's.

Emma's brothers... they were a large and varied lot. Most took after their mother, decent enough chaps. A couple took after their father, bold and brash, but not unpleasant in their own way.

It was Steward Talbot, the head of the family, he was the only one that worried Johnathan. He was hardly so insurmountable an obstacle to making his question his devotion, but he did deserve some concentration.

Johnathan let out a long breath, great enough to make the flames of the fire before him dance.

Steward was an odd one. Always sure he would lead his family back to what he believed to be their proper fortunes, he never seemed to quite make it. Unquestionable a bright man, Steward simply never seemed to be quite as successful as he thought he was. He was always blinded to his own weaknesses by the uncompromising belief that he was *right* and that his family *deserved* better fortunes.

Johnathan stifled a laugh. The old joke around town was that it was the Talbot's curse. To heard some of the old birds at the pub talk you'd think that was the way the man's father had been, and his father before that.

Staring at the dancing flames, Johnathan jumped when a knock came at the door behind him.

"Miss. Tablot, sir," Manson's deep voice came.

"Oh, ah, yes, please show her in." Turning quickly, Johnathan reached down to straighten his clothing, suddenly feeling a mess.

Stepping into the room, Emma was dressed in an elegant sapphire dress that stretched to her ankles.

From some corner of his mind Johnathan was able to recall that the dress had been his mother's, long ago. Thankfully, he'd never seen her in it.

And, with only a few minor alterations, it fit Emma none too poorly.

Striding across the room in a fresh pair of opera shoes, she didn't make a sound as she came smoothly into Johnathan's arms.

"Thank you, dearest," her voice was soft, "I'm so sorry for having to take advantage of all your nice things."

"Don't even think of it." A slight smile came to Johnathan's lips, "Whatever is mine is yours, forever." Suddenly going stiff, he realized the meaning of his words.

Emma didn't seem to notice. Turning for a moment, she warmed her hands over the fire.

When she turned back Johnathan had fallen to one knee.

The squeak of surprise that came from her now was real.

"Emma," Johnathan's voice was soft as he reached up to take her hand. Her back to the fire, she was the most beautiful creature Johnathan had ever seen. "I know it's sudden, I've just returned from the city... and my life had been in turmoil... but would you... could you find it in your heart..." Johnathan simply couldn't find the words as he looked up into her shocked face.

It took for a moment for her hand to close around his.

"Yes. Yes, Johnathan, I'd be honoured to be your wife."

The next two hours passed quietly. The important business out of the way, they retired to a nearby couch to focus on the more mundane tasks of eating and discussing town gossip.

When it was finally time for Emma to return home to spread her own news Johnathan felt a sudden pang in his chest at the thought of her leaving.

"Trying to make me all your own so soon, dearest?" Her voice was coy, "You'll have to wait for the wedding before you can do that."

Johnathan couldn't get another word out before she stepped from the room. Manson was waiting at the door. He'd likely been there that whole time.

"I took the liberty of ordering the lady a carriage and driver for her trip back." He said. Emma's face twisted for a moment before he added, "Paid for in advance, of course."