

The Changing Times



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Chapter 5: And We Shall Tell the World

It was only moments after Emma left that Johnathan felt the jaws of loneliness close around him.

Watching her leave through the pouring rain, she disappeared quickly, swallowed up by the darkness. It was only a matter of seconds before it was like she'd never even been.

And Johnathan had been foolish enough to not even give her a token of his affection.

A frown crossed his face. There were rings and locket aplenty in the manor. He could have given her one of those, something. *Anything*. But instead he had nothing but his memory.

"If I may say so, sir," Manson's quiet steps came from behind Johnathan, "it about damn time."

Shocked by the words, Johnathan had never heard the man use even such a mild term when addressing him, he turned around.

Manson's form was silhouetted by the gas lights out in the hallway, his face in almost total darkness.

"The two of you have been batting eyelashes at each other for years. It's about time you took the next step."

Johnathan was speechless. While it was well known that Emma and him were close friends, he hadn't expected that things had progressed to quite *this* point.

"There was even a bet among the staff," Manson continued in quite an uncharacteristic manner, "It looks as though Elizabeth won." He scowled for just a moment, "My bet was that the two of you would have begun socializing again three months ago and have been engaged by last week."

"There was much paperwork to be done..." Johnathan mumbled.

Manson shook his head. "Paperwork that *I* could have accomplished if you'd let me. The only reason you took it upon yourself was because you chose too. You were the one to close yourself in the house. And dare I say you were the one to force Miss. Talbot's hand. There were discrete enquiries starting over two months ago regarding when you would next be available."

With a tired grin Johnathan let himself sink back into the nearby sofa. He could still smell Emma's fleeting scent, so alien to the house it stood out like a swatch of gold.

"Oh," Manson reached a hand into his pocket, "Miss. Talbot did asked me to give you this." He

pulled free a small white handkerchief. It was simple white linen. Stained many times over and darned more than once, it was not like the rest of the outfit she had worn today. This small piece of cloth was *her's*, not freshly purchased for the occasion.

Handing it to Johnathan, it nearly knocked him over backwards. Freshly washed, there was only a single scent on it, that of Emma. And it was so strong as to nearly overwhelm him.

He'd never had a reaction to something so mundane before, but lifting the handkerchief to his face he took a deep breath.

The scent of the woman he was to marry was all but enough to overwhelm his senses.

Manson cocked his head slightly at Johnathan's odd reaction, but decided to stay silent.

Tucking the handkerchief quickly in his pocket, Johnathan fought to regain his composure as soon as he noticed Manson staring.

"So," Johnathan cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders, "what is it we have to do now?"

Manson blinked for a long moment, silent. "Do, sir? At the moment, nothing. You have at last made your move and Emma have been gracious enough to accept it. It is not the Talbot's turn to make their will known. The elder Talbots will review your proposal of marriage and decide if they will allow their daughter's hand in yours. I," a hairline smile broke the man's face, "highly doubt that will be a point of contention. They did after all send her here with the explicit purpose of seeking your interest. I assume Miss. Talbot has explained to you their current financial situation."

Johnathan narrowed his eyes. "And how do you know so much about this?"

Manson shrugged, allowing the weight of the question to roll past him. "I am your valet, sir. It is my duty to assist you. The Talbot family may have fallen on hard times, but they do still employ a staff of their own. We've made it a point to become familiar with each other as it has been so likely that the houses will be joined."

Rolling his eyes, Johnathan muttered, "Somehow you manage to make it a more efficient communication than the post!"

Manson cocked his head. "I would hope so, sir. If it wasn't the whole of modern society would crumble within in a fortnight."

Manson brought some additional refreshments as Johnathan sat in the library, selections more fitting to the current conditions than the picnic fare he had supplied earlier.

While the light outside suggested it was late evening, the hour was only the early afternoon. Johnathan was filled with a restless energy. Having now taken a step back into the world he wanted to do more, but was trapped in the building by the rain.

Seizing at last on *something*, he found himself a seat in front of the writing desk with a pad of paper and a pen.

Placing the book he'd read last night aside, he closed his eyes and contemplated just what he was about to do.

Writing a *formal* letter to the Talbot's requesting Emma's hand was not particularly common practise, but neither was it unknown. All Johnathan cared for at the moment was that it was *something* he could do to make the time pass.

Staring down at the blank sheet, he was suddenly at a loss for words.

It was a good twenty minutes before he managed to begin. Even then his thoughts were rough and halting, like a steam locomotive that had yet to be greased.

It was a dozen sheets of paper, all of them expensive, before he could decide upon what he would say.

The image of Emma, dressed in the sapphire green gown that he'd lent her kept coming to his mind unbidden, distracting him. Every time the air moved he could smell the scent of her from the handkerchief beside him.

She looked wonderful, awe inspiring, even more so than when she'd first arrived clad in the sky blue outfit that her family had bought.

When she'd first arrived she looked like a perfect and proper lady. Dressed in an appropriate country walking gown she'd had her corsets and garters tightened and cinched down as any proper lady would. Yet even then she had been able to move, to run. It was beyond anything one should hope to expect from a lady.

And that was what she was. When last Johnathan had returned home Emma had still been a girl. A girl blooming, edging towards the invisible line of womanhood, but she'd still been a girl, the last of the freckles disappearing from her face.

Now she was unquestionably a lady.

That had been never more evident than when she'd stepped into this library with him. Dressed in the gown and very near nothing else, she had been on display in a way that Johnathan had never had the honour of seeing before.

Her body had been unconstrained by physical corset nor the whims of polite society, yet in many ways she had looked almost the same.

And that was why he loved her. Like the true lady she was, she didn't need to conform to other's desires to make herself beautiful. With or without society hemming her in she was still the most gorgeous creature Johnathan had ever had the privilege of seeing.

And she was going to be his alone.

If he could only complete this blasted letter.

Once again he threw aside the paper he'd spent the last ten minutes labouring over for it to flutter silently to the ground.

Setting the pen down for a moment, he set his writing hand flat on the table and stretched the muscles. The joints in his hand were cramping up.

It had to be from the stress of the day. Johnathan had spent hours writing far more than back at the university in London, preparing for his tests.

Yet no matter how he stretched Johnathan couldn't seem to get his fingers to lay flat. It was like the joints in his fingers had twisted, swollen and no longer wished to carry a pen.

With a great sigh he gave up trying to chase the fire from his fingers and forced himself to pick up the pen again.

There were more important things to do than worry about his cramping fingers now. He had a letter to write if he wanted Emma's hand in marriage.

And he'd be damned if he didn't get it.

Another hour later and was mid afternoon, thought it could just as well be midnight by the dark clouds that swirled past outside the window.

And, at long last the letter was complete.

The prose was clumsy, the handwriting little more than a scrawl, and the message near unbearably short, but it was done.

Johnathan would ask Stewart Talbot for his daughter's hand in marriage the only way he knew how.

By using those very words and no more.

Mr. Stewart Talbot,

I, Johnathan Pennyfare, ask you to give me your daughter Emma's hand in marriage. We are in love and wish to proclaim it to the world. Please respond with your wishes.

Yours faithfully,

Underneath that Johnathan fought his burning fingers to force out his signature. Even to his own eyes the name was near illegible.

Sealing the letter in an envelope, he left the library to walk to the front door where the wicker baskets sat to hold in incoming and outgoing mail.

Manson stood there, awaiting him.

"You've completed your letter, sir?" His face was inscrutable.

Johnathan nodded, dropping the envelope the make a hollow sound in the basket.

"Very good." Manson nodded and turned. "I'll make a point of ensuring the post takes it next time it arrives."

Continuing to walk the halls of the manor, Johnathan's thoughts began to twist as the rain continued to pour down outside. He felt like a caged animal in here. He'd spent the last four months hardly seeing the outside of these walls, struggling as he had with the paperwork, and now that he wanted to go outside he was all but trapped.

Letting out a sigh, he stepped up to the cloak storage near the front door and pulled out a set of oilskins. They would do little against the driving wind out there, but they were better than nothing.

And they'd help prevent Manson from complaining that he'd ruined yet another set of clothing in a single day.

Stepping from the front door, the wind and rain hit Johnathan full in the face like a giant with a granite club, strong enough to nearly force him from his feet.

Hunching forward again, Johnathan began what was normally the short and leisurely walk to the stable to see Ginny.

By the time he reached shelter he felt as though he were a sailor fighting his way across the Atlantic.

Within the protection of the stable, Johnathan shook himself to remove at least some of the water from his oilskins. They were precious little good, the rain having begun to soak through them in seconds.

Thankfully, a gas light had been installed way out here in the stable, and despite the odds it was still lit. Folks had thought Johnathan's father mad when he'd demanded such a convince, but it was moments like this Johnathan was glad to have it.

Taking a few steps forward, Johnathan raised his voice to call to Ginny. The winds howled so savagely that it was possible she didn't know he was here and it wouldn't do to startle her.

Stepping closer to her stall, Johnathan's fears were well founded. Ginny pranced back and forth in her small space, worked up by the storm outside. She didn't even know Johnathan was there.

"Shh, girl." Johnathan had to almost shout to make himself heard.

Head whipping around nearly fast enough to hurt herself, Ginny saw Johnathan.

The change in her stance was immediate. She was still concerned by the storm outside, but calmer now that she was with someone.

Johnathan sighed. He really should invest in another horse to keep Ginny company. It wasn't right to keep her stabled up here all alone, even a horse could get lonely.

Stepping forward, Johnathan reached out to set a hand aside her mussel.

The moment he came closer to her she snorted.

Pulling in a deep breath, she shook her head back and forth, eyes going wide.

Almost seeming to ignore Johnathan now, she began to nervously prance back and forth again, trying to look behind him for *something*.

"What is it, girl? What's wrong?" Johnathan reached for her again but had to pull back as he whinnied and threatened to rear up.

Johnathan took a hasty step back. This was very unlike Ginny. She was normally the calmest horse he'd ever seen.

It took another ten minutes of soothing talk and slowly inching forward before Ginny would allow him to touch her again. Even then her eyes flicked around nervously, looking for something in the rainswept darkness.

"I know, girl. This storm has us all on edge now." Pulling out a set of combs, Johnathan made a quick pass though the mare's mane. It was less to clean her than it was to help calm her down. By the time he was done Ginny was starting to return to normal, or at least as normal as she could be given the weather.

Stepping back for a moment, Johnathan pulled a bag of feed to dump into the trough before her. Even just that second away had given Ginny enough time to become distrustful of him again.

Every time she took a breath she seemed to scent something around them. Johnathan took a moment while Ginny ate to check the stable. There wasn't a living thing in here but the two of them.

Waiting until Ginny had eaten her fill for the moment, Johnathan edged back towards her. Questing his hand towards her face, it was quickly obvious that it was *him* that Ginny was smelling.

Odd... Johnathan couldn't think why she would react this way to him. He was hardly wearing anything out of the ordinary other than his oilskins, and that should be a problem.

Then it came to him. His swim. There must have been something in the water, some scent clinging to him that alarmed her.

He rolled his eyes. All this trouble for nothing. Though he couldn't think what might be in the river to offend her, at least it put his mind at rest to know what the problem was.

"Don't you mind, girl." He patted her again in the side of the mussel. "I'll get back to smelling like myself soon enough."

Even now Ginny seemed to be a touch more relaxed around him. There must still be enough of his own scent pushing through for her to recognize.

"Think of yourself as lucky, girl," he continued, "all you need to worry about is your life one day at a time. None of these troubles like I'm having."

Ginny snorted as if to say the life of a horse was hardly so easy.

"Really?" Johnathan laughed. "I'd like to see you try living a day as a human," he teased. "Sometimes it seems easier to live the life of a beast. There can't be that much to worry about. Just find a dry place to sleep and your next days meal, leave the rest to fate."

Ginny flicked her tail in annoyance.

"Oh alright," Johnathan threw up his hands, "you've got your own troubles."

Leaving their one sided conversation, Johnathan worked about the stable for a few more minutes before heading out. The air here was fresher than in the house, if heavy with the scent of horse. He knew he'd have to leave eventually, but was in no rush.

Finally returning back to the manor, Johnathan took one last look to ensure Ginny's comfort. There was little he could do in the daftly stable, but she'd be fine.

The walk back was far easier than the trek out had been. Now with the wind at his back he felt like he could run faster than any creature on earth, and even a single step threatened to become a giant leap that would send him flying a dozen yards through the air.

It was only good fortune that he didn't slip on a patch of mud and end up sliding the whole way on his back. He was confident that if he lost his footing he'd never be able to regain it before the wind carried him off to god knew where.

Manson was, unsurprisingly, waiting at the door for him with a warm towel and a hand to remove his now soaked oilskins.

"You really should leave such chores as that, sir," he admonished. "You have staff to perform such simple things as looking after the animals."

Johnathan waved him off. "Really, Manson, you can let me do *something* once in a while. I'm not helpless. And anyway, if I let you and the *staff* do all the work then how would I be any different from any of the other spoiled nobles and despot barons that my parents fought so hard to unseat?"

Manson cleared his throat and looked away for a moment. "You needn't worry about that, Sir," he grumbled. "The wages and conditions are already far superior to what one would expect anywhere else."

Johnathan just rolled his eyes. "That's my parents again. *They* set your pay and lodging. *They* hired you and made the manor what it is. *I* need to do something once in a while."

He shrugged and turned from me. "So be it your choice, sir. However, may I remind you," he glanced cautiously over his shoulder, "that simply being descended from someone who has had the skill and luck to change the world does not mean that you necessarily as well will do the same?"

"What are you trying to say?" Johnathan said in a whisper. This was a rare moment from Manson. Despite the valet's hard words Johnathan was determined to hear what he had to say.

"Think of the Talbot's, young master. The first of their line was a capable businessman, made a fortune to stand against any you might wish to name, and in his lifetime alone." Manson let out a sigh. "Now look at those who came after. They have been fine, good men, but none of them have been able to hold a candle to what the first did. Yet they still try. If they would simply look at their lot in life and realize how blessed they've been they could live happy and content lives, yet they don't."

"Every Talbot," Manson continued, "has been unhappy with their lot. They, to a man, fight to regain the fortune of their youth, or their father's youth. Yet none of them ever do. A simple life from them, one living within their means and making sound, conservative investments, they could have lasted perpetually with the money they had. But that was never good enough. I fear for you, young master, living in your parent's shadow. Your parents were good people," he closed his eyes for a moment, "and talented at what they did. I can only beg of you to not simply try and follow blindly in their footsteps. If you measure yourself by their yardstick rather than your own you will always come short."

Johnathan took a deep breath. "Then what do you suggest?"

Manson cocked his head slightly as he folded the rain soaked oilskins over his forearm. "Me, Sir? I am but a simple servant." Not even the trace of a grin touched his lips as the light flickered in the hallway. "But, if you were to insist on my opinion, I would suggest you look at your place in life. You are a wealthy landowner with a substantial array of investments. Find your love, manage your resources, and find a simple, respectable hobby to indulge yourself in as you raise a family."

Johnathan closed his eyes and turned away. Even through his closed lids he could see the crack of lightning as it arched through the sky.

"Thank you, Manson. It's a good thing I didn't ask you," Johnathan said.

Manson didn't say another word as he turned and left.

Dinner came an hour or so later. It was early, hardly late afternoon, but everyone in the house felt the oppressive weight of the storm bearing down upon them. And, in any event, it *felt* far later. The sun had failed to make a reappearance since Johnathan and Emma had taken their walk in the garden.

Sitting alone once again in the dinning room, Johnathan couldn't help but think how much better the meal would have been if Emma had stayed.

Unfortunately, custom and formality being what they were, it would be unthinkable for Emma to spend *too* much time alone with him. That could quickly start up rumours that they had begun their engagement for reasons other than that of pure love.

And it would hardly do to start a marriage under anything but an unblemished record.

The meal was, as usual, exquisitely made, but Johnathan hardly tasted it. The wind and rain continued to howl about the manor like a living thing and it kept distracting him, making his thoughts come back to Emma and his future.

Manson came in to clear away the dishes and bring out the pudding. He was just about to leave when he turned to regard Johnathan.

"Sir," he cocked his head slightly, "how much time did you spend out in the sun today?"

Johnathan shrugged. "No more than an hour I should think, then the rains came in."

Manson stepped forward, shifting his plates to one hand as he reached out.

"I say!" He muttered under his breath, "You seem to have gone blond!"

"What?" Lifting from his seat, Johnathan strode to the nearest mirror out in the hallway.

The light was dimmer here than in the dining room, but even then he could make it out.

He never would have noticed if Manson hadn't mentioned it, but it was plain to see now. His normally chestnut brown hair was not on its way to becoming a sandy blond.

"When did this happen?" Johnathan asked the reflection.

"Dare I say that I was about to ask the same, Sir." Came Manson's reply from behind him. "I don't recall that, and it certainly wasn't the case a week ago." He paused for a moment, "And considering that, was it not more than a week you had your last appointment with the barber? It would seem he is no longer working up to standard. I will have to have a word with him."

That was also obvious now. Not only was Johnathan's hair a shade lighter than it should be, but unfashionably long as well. That change was more subtle as one would expect one's hair to grow in any event, but not this long. Johnathan's hair was working its way down to touch his shoulders.

"Bother," Johnathan sighed, "I'll have to go into town soon and make another appointment. I can't be seen by the Talbot's in such a state of dishevelment." He paused to laugh a moment. "While I doubt they'll withhold Emma's hand, they may take a few moments longer to think about it with me looking like this!"

That was the end of dinner. The long evening wore on as slowly as it seemed was possible.

When at last the clock chimed eleven Johnathan was still wide awake, stalking the halls much as he had the night before.

It was upon his nineteenth circuit of the house that Manson stepped from a doorway to match him stride for stride.

"Is everything quite alright, Sir?" Johnathan could pick out the stretched tones that suggested the man was exhausted, but yet Manson wouldn't let himself see a bed until his charge was resting.

Continuing on, never breaking stride, Johnathan glanced over his shoulder.

"Yes, fine," he let out a huff, "just nervous, I suppose." Reaching out with a hand, Johnathan

grasp into the darkness as if reaching for his words. "I don't know. I'm just restless."

Manson's face was stoic, but there was an undercurrent of amusement to his voice. "I would suppose so, young master. You have proposed to your wife-to-be today, this is one of the greatest days of your life."

"*Greatest days?*" Johnathan mocked, "A blight of a storm has rolled in, I've gone for an unintentional swim, and I still don't know if the Talbots will agree to my request! Not a greatest day in my measure."

Unwittingly, Johnathan sped up, forcing Manson to jog to keep up to his long stride.

"As you say, Sir." Manson's voice was strained and breathless as he fought to keep pace. "But I must say this nervous pacing back and forth is hardly likely to help your mind. I've taken the liberty to prepare you a sleeping concoction."

With a deliberate effort Johnathan forced himself to slow, then come to a complete stop in front of the front staircase.

"*Sleeping concoction?*" he asked weary.

Manson shrugged. "I know you care little for such things, so I prepared it myself. Nothing but a drop of brandy and some sleeping powders." Johnathan raised an eyebrow. "Opiates," Manson explained.

Letting out a long breath, Johnathan forced himself to turn and ascend the staircase. Suddenly all the energy was gone from his body. His mind was still nervous and jittery, but every step became an effort.

Finding rest at last sitting upon his bed, Johnathan waited for Manson to arrive with whatever foul creation he'd come up with.

Johnathan had little patience for such things as this. His father had partaken in opiates on more than one occasion and results had never been positive.

At long last Manson arrived with a cup perched on his silver serving tray. It was half full with a clouded brandy.

Reaching out, Johnathan took the cup without a word and upended it. The brandy was thicker than it should be, and disturbingly sweet as it dripped down his throat like syrup. Johnathan had to cough it down to keep from drowning. It was like trying to drink pure honey.

"That should aid your night's rest, Sir." Manson took the cup from Johnathan's hand.

"If you say so, Manson." Johnathan shrugged, yet to feel any effects.

A moment later the man was gone and Johnathan was alone in his chambers. Stripping naked, he rolled into bed. The cloudiness of the drink was just starting to nibble at the edges of his eyes.

One final thing, Johnathan reached back into the breast pocket of his now discarded jacket, pulling out the handkerchief Emma had given him. It still held her scent. He held it close to his chest like a lifeline, a shield.

His mind still raced like wild horses round and round in his head, but they seemed to be tiring themselves out. A few moments later Johnathan was able to close his eyes and see little other than the blackness that surrounded him. Not even the howling winds and rolling thunder outside his window woke him.

His rest was peaceful, not a single dream or nightmare could pierce the heavy shroud of opiates that surrounded him.