

The Changing Times



By wwwolf

egger 13

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 5:	And We Shall Tell the World.....	38
Chapter 6:	Late For a Most Important Engagement.....	46
Chapter 7:	Dark Roads and High Winds.....	58
Chapter 8:	High Society Braggart.....	65
Chapter 9:	Warm Sun has Bleached me Blond.....	78
Chapter 10:	The Cat and the Mouse.....	87
Chapter 11:	An Animal Passion.....	100
Chapter 12:	The Good Doctor Gone Bad.....	110
Chapter 13:	A Morning to Remember.....	120
Chapter 14:	All Out of Makeup at the Fancy Dress Store.....	130
Chapter 15:	Warm Sun, Lazy Days.....	140
Chapter 16:	Once Again Out into the World.....	151

Chapter 16: Once Again Out into the World

The ride into Hammerwood was short and simple enough. Johnathan did note this time that he received a fair number more stairs.

He had to chuckle slightly at that. There was no doubt that a lion walking among the towns people was an odd thing, but to see one riding a horse? That was something far greater. He likely looked like something from Arthurian legend... or a child's bedtime story.

The sun was still low in the sky, the last of the shops closing, but Johnathan was able to find a fruit vendor in the market to sell him a handful of apples. Ginny watched attentively from just a few steps away.

"Well girl," he let her help herself to the apple he held out, "We've made it here. Now what?"

Ginny was too busy crunching away on her apple to respond.

For just a moment Johnathan laughed. He was talking to a horse... really. What next? Should he expect her to answer back?

Well, Johnathan was a *lion* now. For all he knew he might just pick up a knack for talking to animals.

Back astride Ginny soon after, the two of them were off to trot the streets.

Johnathan wasn't quite sure why, but he pointed her towards the warehouse that Victor had used.

Coming closer now, he could see that *someone* had been busy. The entire structure looked like it had been taken apart, then picked through with a fine toothed comb. The door was off, the walls were torn open, and all the corpses and machinery that had been within were long gone.

Leaving Ginny resting by the front door, Johnathan stepped in, the fiery red light of the sun to his back.

"God but what a desolate place." Johnathan had to raise a hand to cover his nose. The corpses may be gone but the stench of their corruption lingered, much as Johnathan's memories of the place.

A sound coming from the back room quickly drew his attention.

"Could it be?" Johnathan's voice was a whisper. The thought that Victor might still be alive sent a cold chill down his spine to end in the tip of his tail.

Creeping forward, bent so far over that his fingers nearly brushed the floor, Johnathan advanced

upon the only doorway to the small back room where he'd sat with Victor and drank his damn tea.

There was the clink of glassware and a muffled curse.

Stepping though the doorway, the dark of the room impaired even Johnathan's anamistic vision. All he could tell for certain was that *someone* was kneeling in the back of the room, trying to work something out from under a table.

With a growl that was in no way human Johnathan leapt.

"Oi!"

The two of them went down in a tangle. It took everything Johnathan had to keep his claws from raking down the man's face.

A sniff later and all thoughts of violence fled his mind.

"Thomas?" Sitting up in the dark, Johnathan fought to make out the face of the man who laid pinned on the floor under him. If not for his scent Johnathan would never have been able to recognize the man.

"What the hell..." Thomas paused for a moment and struggled an arm from Johnathan's grasp to set gently across his flat nose. "Johnathan?"

Stepping back and helping the man to his feet, Johnathan was glad the man couldn't see the blush that ran under his pelt.

"So sorry, my friend," he mumbled, "I... I thought you were someone else."

Thomas snorted. "Let me guess, Dr. Robenson? Trust me, he'd dead. Alexander saw the corpse himself. The man is cold and in the ground. But," he began walking out of the building and towards the failing light of the sun, "That still raises the question why *you're* here. I'm on duty. Why the hell did you come back?"

Johnathan averted his eyes, looking over the town down the slight rise from them. "Guess I just wanted to make sure there was nothing of value left here."

Reaching out, Thomas wasn't even hesitant as he set a hand on Johnathan's shoulder. "Don't worry, mate. I watched the movers as they cleared the place out. If there's anything here Scotland Yard will find it."

"The Yard? What do they have to do with this?"

Thomas shrugged. "Who knows. My best guess is Alexander hadn't the slightest what to do with this case so he just went through the departments until someone would take it off his hands for him. Best I can tell is they don't even believe half the story. I wouldn't worry though, it'll likely be months if not years before they even start on the case."

Johnathan rolled his eyes. "I suppose that's a good enough. The last thing I need right now is even *more* people crawling all over me."

"That's the spirit!" He stepped back just far enough to slap Johnathan on the back. "Anyway, I'm off shift now. How about we get a drink in you? Last time didn't go so well."

Taking Ginny's reins, Johnathan weighted his options. "I guess... it's not as though I have that much else planned."

"Beautiful! You've got to get out among people eventually, eh? You were cooped up in that dusty old house far too long before this even started. We need to get you out among people again! Lord knows we won't see head or tail of you once you're married." He chuckled darkly as they started off, "I know I'd take leave of the world for a while if I married a woman as beautiful as Emma."

The walk to the Wolf and Lion was peaceful enough. They got a few stares, but no one seemed to want to get too close with Thomas walking alongside in his uniform.

Tying Ginny off in front of the pub, they stepped through the door. All conversation stopped the

moment Johnathan's silhouette filled the doorway.

Pausing just a moment to take a look at the crowd, Johnathan could identify a good three quarters of the people within. And he couldn't seem to read a single one. For all he knew each and every one of them might be ready to run him out.

Taking a deep breath, he continued in behind Thomas, never missing a step.

"Barkeep," Thomas' voice was strong, "A drink for me and my friend here." He paused for just a moment, "Eh! Shouldn't his first round be on the house? He is half your name, eh?"

"Yeah," someone piped up from the far corner of the room, "All you need now is a scrawny wolf to follow you in and you'll have the name in full!"

"Heh." The barkeep was before them a moment later, "Knowing my luck any wolf we find around here would just as likely be an intellectual." He set two mugs of bitter on the bar.

Lifting the mug to his lips, Johnathan quickly discovered that pulling from a mug this size was far removed from sipping an afternoon tea.

Trying to poke out his bottom lip under the glass, all Johnathan managed to do was spill half the drink across his suit and on the floor.

Looking over, Thomas laughed. "Gad, mate, you're wasting the most precious thing in town! What to we need, to get you a mother's nipple?"

Johnathan growled and swatted playfully at his head. The man managed to duck just in time and return a blow to Johnathan's chest that he hardly noticed.

Trying again, Johnathan threw the remainder of the glass back in a single gulp, avoiding his lips completely.

Yes, this was by far the better way.

Waving to the barkeep for another drink, Johnathan threw it back just as fast, enough so to earn him a look of astonishment from even such an accomplished drinker as Thomas.

"You must be dry," he said. "The only time I've seen you drink this hard was the night before you left for London."

Johnathan glanced over at him darkly. "You didn't see me the morning after I got news my parents were dead."

"Morning?"

"I spent the whole night riding here." He threw back another drink with the snap of his teeth. "Once I saw their bodies I managed to empty half the wine cellar in a single sitting."

Thomas whistled. He'd once seen the Pennyfare's wine cellar.

Forcing himself to slow despite the impulse that whispered that just one more drink might make this all fade away, Johnathan turned, half empty mug in hand, to look over the other patrons.

They'd all been staring at him openly. Johnathan chuckled as everyone suddenly had something else to draw their attention the moment he turned around.

"So, mate, all the plans still in place? You're going to still marry Emma, eh?"

For just a moment Johnathan felt his heart grow cold.

"Yes." He'd meant to whisper the the word, but rather it came out in a deep growl that seemed to cut though the room like a chill wind. "I swear I'll marry her and God help any man, be it her father or any other mortal, who dares to stand in my way."

Thomas leaned back from his slightly. "Whoa, mate, just making idle conversation. No need to get so worked up over it..."

He didn't get a chance to finish before the sound of a chair scuffing across the floor came up from the far corner.

"At least we be mortal men, beast. The lord only know what you are now!"

Squinting, Johnathan was able to make out the form of a tall man as he rose to his feet in the far corner of the bar.

Beside him, Thomas groaned. "Not bloody again." He gestured towards the barkeep, "Tab, please."

Johnathan sat where he was and watched the man who walked, weaving back and forth between the tables, towards him.

The glare of the lights reflected off Richard's hairless scalp like he was wearing a crown of flames as he stepped forward.

"I've been seeking you for the last two day, *beast*. Like any cornered animal you've been hiding in your hole, protected by the the peelers you got dancing on a string about you." Beside him, Thomas went red. "Now you've come out into the domain of man. Poor choice, beast. Now you need to fight."

Johnathan could smell the alcohol on the man's breath. It was fetid and raw, he was obviously well past having knocked back a few. The man's eyes were wide, pupils dilated and jet black.

"Richard," for some reason Johnathan hadn't the least trouble keeping his voice civil. If anything he had to fight to keep the smile from his lips. "So finally we get to meet face to face." He laughed. The sound was meant to be disarming, but rather it came out, even to his own ears, as demeaning. "I must congratulate you on your good taste in women. Too bad. Better luck next time, friend."

"I'm no friend to a beast such as you!" Lunging forward, Richard clamped a hand over Johnathan's throat. For his own part Johnathan didn't even flinch. To be honest he could hardly feel the man's fingers through his mane. "I *hunt* beasts like you. Shoot them dead and flay their skin from their flesh to make my boots!"

Johnathan cocked his head. The muscles in his neck were powerful enough to force Richard's grip along with him. "Lion skin boots, friend? Can't say I've ever heard of that." Johnathan laughed again and idly wondered if he'd be able to down another beer while being held like this. "If it's boots you want, friend, I'd be happy to buy you a pair. Ha! I'll buy you the finest in the town! Call it my consolation gift."

"You damned..." Richard couldn't even finish his slur before his voice dissolved into an incoherent roar.

Winding back, Richard slammed his freehand forward into the side of Johnathan's face. It made a dull *thud* as the lion's share of the blow was absorbed by his mane.

Johnathan simply blinked.

For a moment he couldn't even understand what had happened. The beer fogged his mind enough that for a span of heartbeats he didn't even feel any pain.

Johnathan did move much faster though when Thomas tried to spring forward. Reaching out a hand, Johnathan placed it on the cop's chest and gently forced him back into his seat.

"My good sir," Johnathan looked straight into Richard's eyes, "Did you just try to attack me?" He bit back a laugh. "And who is it you say is the beast here?"

For a moment Richard's eyes grew wide, then he pulled back and struck again, this time adjusting his aim to contact straight upon Johnathan flat nose.

The scream of pain the escaped Johnathan's lips knocked dust from the rafters.

Not a soul moved in the pub as the final echos died away. Johnathan still stood, arms at his side, held by the neck by Richard.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, a growl began to build in Johnathan's chest.

Low and guttural, it was something that was less heard as it was *felt* in the bones of each and every patron. As if as one they all began to shiver.

With a sudden snap, Johnathan brought his arms up to push Richard away with nearly enough force to break the man's ribs.

There was a ripping sound as Richard flew backwards, his fist still clutching a handful of Johnathan's mane. He arced through the air until his fall was finally broken by a table. The sound of splintering wood and shattering glass, for just a moment, overpowered the rumble of Johnathan's growl.

Stalking forward, step by slow step, Johnathan advanced upon the man as he scrambled to regain his footing.

Johnathan could feel a nasty bruise growing across his face, but it was nothing to the cuts and scrapes the fall had given Richard.

Johnathan wanted to speak, to tell the man to run while he still had a chance. Nothing escaped his lips but the ever growing growl.

Lifting his lips, Johnathan hissed.

Richard may have been insulated from the foolishness of his actions before, but the threat Johnathan posed, standing before him with fully exposed fangs, was more than enough to press through the alcohol that clouded his system.

Yet still he didn't run.

Raising his hands before him in a classic bare knuckled boxing pose, Richard struck out, aiming again at Johnathan's nose.

Johnathan swatted his hand away without so much as even a thought.

Stepping forward, Johnathan reached out and slashed his claws down the man's chest. He didn't even remember readying himself, all he could see were the four crimson lines that quickly soaked through the man's posh waistcoat.

For a moment the man didn't even seem to notice as the blood slowly spread. He simply staggered back a step and reared his arm up for another punch.

It was only when he stepped forward again to attack that he stopped short.

Hand coming up to touch the blood that now soaked his shirt, he looked down in horror as he pulled his hand back.

Johnathan smiled. The grin was in no way human.

For a moment not a person in the pub made a sound. Then, with an inarticulate scream, Robert pulled back, all but tripping over the remains of the smashed table behind him.

"You... you foul creature!" His voice was breathless but strong. A second later he turned to the cluster of men who had sat with him in the far corner of the bar. "Get him! Get him, you fools!"

Feeling a hand tighten around his wrist, Johnathan was quickly pulled back a step.

"You sure know how to get a good rumble started," Thomas whispered in his ear as he dragged him towards the door.

They made it only a short distance before the gang of men cut them off from the front entrance. There was over a dozen of them, large, heavy men. And each and every one of them was armed with a club or knife.

"Oh bugger," was about all Johnathan was able to get out.

"The freak hurt the boss." The lead man's voice was low and gruff, sounding like it was rarely used.

"Heh. The freak gonna get hurt." Came the reply from somewhere deeper in the crowd.

Pressing Johnathan behind him, Thomas rose to his full height. It was hardly impressive in front of these neanderthals.

"Stand aside." Thomas' voice was strong, but all it garnered was a dark chuckle.

"Get out'a the way, copper. This is between us and the freak. We don't want'a hurt no cop."

Thomas planted his feet firmly on the ground and pulled the baton from his belt.

"That *freak* is my friend. You'll have to go through me. He has the full protection of the police force."

"Heh. Aitn't it amazing what money can buy you nowadays." The lead man leaned forward and leered as he spoke.

There was no real sign, no signal as the men leapt forward, but before Johnathan had time to think they were upon him.

The scent of booze and stale smoke was thick in Johnathan's nose as the first man dove at him, a short wooden baton in his hand.

This man was no fighter. He was a backstreet brawler. Coming in high and straight, he swung his baton two handed overarm, right down towards Johnathan's head.

A growl ripping at his throat, Johnathan surged forward, stepping under his attack and digging a shoulder into the man's gut before he could even land.

He went down in a heap on the floor a moment after, clutching his stomach.

Johnathan stepped back with no more than a bruised elbow.

Thomas still stood between Johnathan and the weight of the mob, but it was only moments before another man slipped through.

This one was dressed in a rough, homespun tunic and trousers that still smelt of the sawdust he'd spent his day with. More importantly, this man held a six inch blade in his hand.

Not quite as foolish as the last fighter, the knife-wielder kept his distance, holding his weapon before him and jabbing at the air every so often, looking for an opening.

"I'm gonna put a few more holes in your nice fur, pussycat."

Johnathan didn't even bother dignifying him with a response. He simply hissed and spat.

Waiting for just a moment, the man stepped forward, trying to get within Johnathan's swiping claws.

He didn't quite make it.

The sound of tearing fabric ripped the air. The man's heavy tunic was all that saved him from getting a good cut down the shoulder.

And now that same tunic had Johnathan's claws firmly tangled in it.

Seeing his chance, the man jabbed forward with his knife. What could have been a piercing blow was made merely painful by Johnathan's thick suit jacket and overcoat absorbing most of the blunt blade.

That however did little to sooth the pain of it penetrating his chest to hit sickeningly against the bones of his ribs.

Johnathan didn't even snarl.

Hand coming down to envelope the knife, Johnathan gripped it by the hilt and pulled it from his flesh. He could feel his blood run free to stain his previously white shirt.

Tossing the blade aside, Johnathan looked down at the man now. His expression was far different from what it had been moments ago.

The man's cocky grin was gone, replacing it was a look of wide eyed terror.

Raising a hand, Johnathan had the overwhelming urge to slash him across the face, teach him a lesson he'd remember every time he looked in a mirror...

Rather he balled his fist and brought it down atop the man's head. He fell to the ground like a sack of barley.

Without even a chance to breathe, Johnathan was rewarded with a punch to the gut.

"Yeah! Hit him again, Mac!"

Another impact came down, this one across his back. It nearly threw him to the ground. Turning with a snarl Johnathan lashed out with his claws. They met nothing but air. Before him stood two men with blond hair, both were tall and thin. They looked for all the world to be bothers if not twins.

"Heh. Little kitty's got a temper." One of them mocked.

"Yeah. We better tell the kitty who 'es betters are."

The one of the left pulled back for a punch. Johnathan instinctively dodged to the right only to be hit square in the jaw by the other man.

Reeling back, seeing stars, Johnathan held a hand to his lip. Unlike a human, he hadn't the same padding there. It was a wonder, he thought, that he'd hadn't broken his jaw.

He didn't even so much as get the chance to curse before the next punch flew his way. Ducking down, Johnathan had to immediately dodge to the side to avoid its companion.

His new body allowed him to move faster than any man, but it was still only just barely enough to keep him ahead of the two sets of perfectly timed attacks that endlessly flew his way.

Stumbling back, it was only a matter of time before his tail brushed up against the bar. The bartender was long gone by now.

Putting his hands on the counter behind him, Johnathan quickly boosted himself up as a fresh round of hits few his way. They missed by only inches. Crouched on the bar now, Johnathan growled.

The sound made the men pause for just an instant.

Taking the opening for all it was worth, Johnathan lunged forward, claws leaving gouges in the polished wood under him. A heartbeat later he landed upon the leftmost of the men. They went down in a heap, Johnathan's weight driving him from his feet.

For just a moment Johnathan's vision went white.

He couldn't see, couldn't hear. He could feel himself moving, but he didn't know how.

When next his vision cleared the world was covered not in white but in red.

The man beneath his was screaming. Johnathan had clawed his chest open.

Pulling back in horror, Johnathan looked down at his blood stained hands.

From the corner of his eye Johnathan could see the wounds he's inflicted. He assessed them, almost clinically. Being no doctor, Johnathan couldn't say much, but his razor sharp claws had made short work of the man's chest, shredding the skin above the ribcage. He couldn't tell just how deep the wounds went, but at least the man was still breathing.

Certainly breathing well enough to scream.

Backing away, Johnathan bumped into the man's twin.

Turning, for just a moment Johnathan couldn't decide which of them was more frightened. It was obvious that these two weren't unused to losing. The man's eyes were wide, terrified. His voice was little more than a mumble.

"Jimmy..."

In no more than a second the man's expression crystallized. He leapt upon Johnathan unthinking, like a beast, punching and kicking with no order or plan.

Pulling back a step, Johnathan raised his arms to protect his face. That did little more than open him for a punch to the gut.

Doubling over with the wind knocked out of him, it was all Johnathan could do to keep standing as the blows rained down.

The, suddenly, they stopped.

There was the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

"You alright, mate?" The voice was slurred and heavy.

Glancing cautiously up, Johnathan saw Thomas, bloodied, bused, and swollen. His lip was split and dribbling blood down his chin.

"Come on, mate." He had to pause for breath as he threw Johnathan's arm over his shoulder. "We need to get you out of here before more of Robert's men come. God. They were all his employees, and knowing Robert there are a dozen more on the way."

Struggling out the door, Johnathan glanced back. Half the pub was a mess of splintered tables and chairs.

He groaned when he realized the bill for the repairs would likely as not be coming his way.

The street was busy, far busier than it had any right to be this time of night, and completely unlike it had been when they'd first entered the bar.

Thomas took one look at it and drew Johnathan back into a shadowed alleyway.

"You wait here." He lowered Johnathan quickly to the ground. "I'll get that old nag of yours."

A moment later he was gone.

Johnathan sat in the cold shadows, his back up against a brick wall, looking out at the mass of humanity that flowed not five feet away, unseeing.

Thomas had been right. Two minutes later a mob of rough looking men arrived and wasted no time in forcing themselves into the bar. Johnathan could hear the crack of furniture as they tore their way through the room.

What he didn't hear was the voice of the bartender. Smart man.

Johnathan nearly jumped six feet in the air when a finger tapped him on the shoulder. Thomas. The man stood behind him, Ginny's reins firmly in his hand.

"Come on, mate. I'd best walk you to the edge of town, just in case, eh? I'll just as soon bet Robert put out a black note on your name for ruining his fine shirt."

Legs feeling little more than water, Johnathan had to lean heavily on Ginny as he fought to keep her bulk between him and the majority of the people in the street. Thankfully, most folks seemed to be more interested in the commotion than catching a glimpse of the freak that walked the street beside them.

A block from where the forest took hold from the cobbled streets, Thomas stopped.

"You should be good from here, mate." He reached up a hand to wipe the blood from his face. It did little more than smear it about. "Head on back home. The officers keeping watch there 'll make sure you're safe." A smile broke through his grim expression. "Two brawls in as many visits to the pub. Heh. You're getting to be a regular blighter, ain't ya, mate? Keep on going like this and I'll have to book you one of these days."

With a slap on the back, Thomas helped Johnathan back into the saddle. Good thing, Johnathan doubted he'd have been able to get there by himself.

Ginny seemed to be in no rush to return home after the excitement of the city and Johnathan was in no mood to push her. He could feel aches and pains shot up his body with every step she took.

Seeing the soft glow of the manor through the trees, the sun was well down, replaced with the silver light of the moon by the time he began up the final approach.

From the corner of his eye Johnathan could just make out the silhouette of a police officer against the dark mosaic of the trees.

He'd never have known the man was there if he hadn't smelled him plain as day.

As the front door came into view Johnathan could see Manson waiting there, standing stiffly. Somehow the man had known he'd be coming.

Feeling a slight pang of guilt, Johnathan ignored him for a moment as Ginny trudged the last few steps to her familiar stable.

Feeling every muscle scream as he swung from the saddle, Johnathan helped Ginny away into her stall and removed her saddle.

It wasn't until he was giving her a quick comb down that Johnathan realized he was pressed right up against the horse, his own blood smeared pelt rubbing into hers and she wasn't even so much as watching him.

She was completely at ease.

Johnathan chucked deep in his throat, almost enough for it to be confused with a growl.

How he'd like to have become a true beast like her. Her world was simple. Once she realized he was still her master, everything was right again. She didn't have a care in the world. A horse didn't have to worry about where its next meal came from, what she was going to do at the next sunrise.

But, then again, a beast didn't have someone like Emma to look forward to.

A quick shake of his head and Johnathan set the brushes down.

No. He wasn't wishful for the life of a beast. What he had at the moment may be far from perfect but it was enough to keep him going.

Manson had raised nine distinct kinds of holy hell the moment he saw the state of Johnathan's blood covered face.

Thankfully, Johnathan noted, the man's frantic actions were directed more at Johnathan's own body than the precious suit. The jacket and waistcoat were thrown aside in order to get a better view of the cuts and bruises that covered his body.

Both the maids roused, Johnathan felt like a returning knight being attended to by his squires – the oddest squires to be sure – but it was just fitting a knight such as he.

In due time the wounds were cleaned and bound and Johnathan was alone in his chambers after a strict word from Manson about taking debits his body could not pay.

Johnathan had to hold back a snort at that.

Laying in bed, Johnathan could see the moon arcing past outside his window. His attention, however, was directed at a closer point.

Staring down at his hands, he could still smell the ghost scent of blood upon his claws.

Human blood.

The scent was not a comforting one.

Johnathan had been through his share of scrapes before, but this was the first one like... this.