

A Vision of Gotham, 1926

by Mark Zegarelli

Part I - Equinox

He would retain the character of his country, Edwardian England, or at least revive it in a postwar setting far from home. You suspect that he detested T.S. Eliot - with the single exception of *Prufrock*, his own love song - not because as young men they cross-expatriated, but for the vulgarity of the poet's modernity. Emptiness, meaninglessness is vulgar, as taste is an expression of warmth: a gift of affection dressed for uncertain weather.

Then it is difficult to picture him disembarking at Ellis Island with the rest of the greenhorns. More likely, you see him simply standing in the New York City street one day, taking in the height of the skyscrapers for the first time, with no idea himself how he had arrived, but comfortable and content to stay. A dark-haired man then, tall, handsome in youth, carrying himself with dignity against a backdrop of cement walls, brickwork, gargoyles, or an iron grating

with hedges reaching through toward the sidewalk. Perhaps the morning he left quarantine, he was the only foreigner whose surname was unintentionally lengthened rather than shortened by hurried customs officials who, upon hearing a British accent, attached a silent vowel: a U after the O, or a final E.

That he had a connection waiting for him seems obvious - he didn't just walk up to rich people's houses and knock on the front door. No, he presented himself, with a letter of introduction, to a butler who was already established, with whom he'd had some past association: for now, no specifics need be mentioned. It was Manhattan, the age of the speakeasy, and when everybody is whispering, a few whispers are allowed to get lost - they would certainly never get all the way back to Northumberland.

There was probably a great marble front hall with open black stairs off to one side and statues of naked Greeks set in recesses. But not for him. Around the back, near the stable where horses had been replaced by a motorcar, he entered through the service door in midmorning. Deliveries were being made, onions and lamb and fresh greens and blocks of ice. He was forced to stand out of the

way of cooks chopping on wooden blocks in the busy kitchen until the major domo had time to see him.

Two years’ experience as a waiter?

Luncheon, sir. Then, as you can see, another year and a half managing service staff.

The St. George’s Inn, said the major domo. That’s a hotel, I take it, not a pub.

Yes, sir. I managed six daytime domestics.

But no experience in homes? Then why the switch?

I thought I should like to try something new, sir. A new career in a new country.

The major domo sat hunched over the papers with his face in a slump. In his white shirt, without his jacket, he looked in this position like an awkward blend of propriety and slovenliness, in contrast to the attentive young man with slicked-back hair who sat across from him, trying to appear at ease in a massive straight-backed chair. The sounds of chopping cleavers and cooks conversing in Italian and German went on in the background. The major domo ran a hand through his graying hair, glanced behind him, and lowered his voice.

You are not married?

No, sir.

Nor do you intend to marry.

A small hesitation: No, sir.

The major domo frowned, but his eyes were as clear as lamps in a tunnel. You understand, he said finally, that if you get this job, there may be work which could be called... extracurricular.

Without blinking: Yes, sir, I do.

Save the “sir” for Mr. Hutchinson - you don’t need it with me, Albert. I am Evans.

It took Evans a week to get his name right. In that time, the young man was installed in his duties: Personal servant to Mr. Hutchinson, who liked him on sight. The goodwill extended even when it was swiftly discovered that he couldn’t mix a decent martini.

For God’s sake, how old are you, boy? Hutchinson asked him.

Twenty-four, sir.

Well, you won’t make it to twenty-five without - Evans, darling, give this deprived lad a decent American education, will you? Make a bartender out of him.

He studied every day from a cocktail book - neither his first training in criminal activity nor, as things turned out, his last. Out in the courtyard, Anna, the second cook, brought him his lunch in the manner she did everything - with grim calm. He learned from Evans what anyone who took the time to look upon her would have gathered, that her youth and maturity were cleft by some tragedy still visible in the stricken geography of her face.

Three daughters, Evans told him, all lost the same day in that terrible factory fire some years back. Who could expect her ever to recover?

He thought of his own mother receiving the news about his elder brother from the trenches and felt his own life, too, poised on a division. Every moment in this modern world seemed to point towards an infinite number of possible next moments. There was no getting a fix on it.

Then Mr. Hutchinson’s voice would echo across the grounds and he would be back in the moment, focused and precise, the completer of the older man’s aim.

Now what is that? Mr. Hutchinson, pointing, asked him. Well, come on now, just answer me and use your common sense.

A dead shrub, sir?

Precisely. Now, will you kindly tell the gardeners to remove it and anything else around here that's deceased and replace them before tomorrow evening's affair?

Evans had warned him to listen carefully to every direction he received and follow it to the letter. Nobody's perfect, he'd said, but Mr. H. is as close as one gets, and he pays us to be the same.

Now the young man saw the order of the household anew. It was an escape from the external chaos: the letter of the law to be adhered to with the devotion of monks and nuns, but without the promise of eternal life. In any case, it was no more odd, this game of discipline, than any other local custom once you got used to it.

In the meantime, his duties were straightforward enough, and he was learning quickly with few mistakes. The day he produced banana daiquiris at a moment's notice, Mr. Hutchinson pronounced him seventy percent of the way there. That evening as he lay in bed, he wondered for the first time since he'd been employed about the other thirty percent.

A workman stood on a precarious ladder in the open foyer, measuring the circumference of a Greek statue's head, when the

call came. Summoned to Mr. Hutchinson’s sauna, his heart raced while his mind flew this way and that trying to settle upon something to ground it. England had completely dissolved - his Newcastle boyhood, the war, his father’s death in the mine and his subsequent flight to Manchester, then London, and what he’d done to survive there - gone, all gone. There was just this house, its ordered ground, and such duties as were his privilege to perform. At the end of the hall, before he entered, he settled upon one goal - to retain his position.

He straightened himself up and knocked on the large wooden door wondering whether he’d have the strength to open it if invited inside. Instead, the door swung open for him - a first. Mr. H. stood before him blocking the doorway, wearing only a towel, red-faced but otherwise bleached white. Stooped and sweating, with a round belly and what was left of his hair wet-plastered to his scalp, he seemed remarkably vulnerable, a Caesar out of armor, and the young man noticed for the first time that the master was a head shorter than he was. The sound of Mr. Hutchinson’s voice, however, cut through all that.

You’re not exactly dressed for this, are you? Have you ever tried out one of these contraptions? Topper for the circulation - brings the blood pulsing to the surface of the skin. Feel... He offered an upper arm. Go on, feel.

The young man hesitantly approached with his hand, until the master took the hand in his and pressed it to his sweaty flesh, remarking, That’s not the heat of the room, you know, that’s blood heat risen to the surface. Nothing better. You’ll need to get out of that penguin suit, though.

And, unexpectedly, retreated back into his oven and shut the door.

Left standing outside, the young man waited a moment before beginning to loosen his tie. Reminded of a darkened room over an East End pub one evening shortly before his ocean voyage, he surprised himself with a smile.

The heavy door swung open easily and he tiptoed in. Brighter inside than he’d imagined, illuminated with electricity. Mr. Hutchinson, between him and the glowing bulb, was backlit and reminded him of the burning bush beckoning to Moses.

Anticipating his question, Mr. Hutchinson said, Anywhere. The servant settled on a lower bench a discreet distance from the master’s bare feet.

Do you have any friends, then, my man? Mr. Hutchinson asked him.

Any...?

Friends. Personal acquaintances. With those last words, faintly slurred, the servant discerned that the older man had taken an extra drink one hour earlier than he was used to.

Well, sir, apart from my duties here in the house...

You don’t get out much, do you? A young man like you, you should, you know. Have you been long in this country?

Less than a month, sir.

So you’ve never seen the fall in New York?

No, sir.

This time of year - when it’s not so goddamn hot, you know - it’s the most beautiful city in the world. I’ve been all over, and I wouldn’t give you two cents for the rest of it. Not two cents. Paris is nice, but it’s full of pretentious bastards. Get rid of them and you’d really have something. You ever been to Paris?

No, sir. This is my first time away from England.

You leave a woman behind you?

Only my mother, sir.

Only your mother, said Mr. Hutchinson, and a curious expression crossed his face, as if it had never occurred to him that this young man sitting below him in a towel had ever had a mother. Well, women are damn worse than Parisians. Believe me, I know - prevailing opinion notwithstanding. Delightful creatures in the drawing room, seated at the piano, playing a Chopin etude. And that's where they should stay. Don't let them upstairs, not unless you're prepared to get shot up to all hell and back. You don't believe I'm talking to you like this, do you?

Well, sir...

Well, why shouldn't we talk? We're both men of the world, aren't we? He descended a level to sit on the same bench as his servant, though still not too close. I've been watching you, you know. I miss little. You may be a proper servant - in fact, I daresay you are, though you still have a lot to learn. But it doesn't escape my attention for one minute that you've got something going on

apart from any domestic chores. What do you have in your sights, boy?

Intent on finishing his sentence this time, he blurted out, Why, to be rich, sir. Then added, as an afterthought, As you are.

There it is, Mr. Hutchinson said. They all want to be rich, that’s why they come here. And can you tell me what you hope to gain by having money?

In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought, and answered, In twenty years time, I should like to be having this conversation with a servant of my own - sir.

Not bad. I’m trying to picture it. Twenty years time. You will be forty-four, and I will be older than the pyramids of Egypt, if I’m alive at all, which is doubtful. But I will have had a heck of a good run of it. And, tell me, how do you propose to amass this fortune?

There were at least three mines hidden in this last question, and he thought it best to step back into his more comfortable role. I shouldn’t presume to say, sir. I consider myself fortunate to have secured my current position.

All right, fair enough. But once you get your bearings, you’ll need to consider your options. You don’t want to end up like Evans,

do you? I’ll save you the trouble of answering that one - trust me, you don’t. Not if you can help it. You have any brothers?

My elder brother, sir, was lost in the war.

I’m sorry to hear that. My own brother lost a son in France - another reason I dislike the place. We’re not on speaking terms these days, my brother and I, but I pity him that. It’s an unspeakable thing for a father to lose his only son.

For a few moments, there was silence between them, but their eyes met. Then:

My boy, I want to ask you a favor, but only if you see fit. Truly, I can separate this from our roles as employer and servant. Don’t answer now, give it some thought. Tonight, among company, I’d like you to look at me from time to time just as you’re doing now. Perhaps we could exchange glances, discreetly. I think this would give me a great deal of joy. All right, now why don’t you go see about lunch, then.

Part 2 - Souls' Eve

If love could shift so quickly from shadow into tangibility, well then that was its moment. The room stays solid. The walls stay precisely where they were, unchanged, only you see them now a little more clearly. And you see they contain you. You see yourself here in this house, at this moment, with everything fixed but with a shift having occurred. And yet you feel no fear. And you wonder whether that will last.

You observe.

He remembered nothing of that evening's affair, or what there had been of one. He did remember waking up later the next day, much later than he could ever remember. Everything was white. The hot sun burned through French doors, reflected off the white bedcovers that smothered him in heat, then cascaded off unfamiliar white walls supporting a white cathedral ceiling too high up to imagine touching. In all this warmth, only the cold black granite floor looked appealing, covered haphazardly in a maze of puzzle rugs. Over them, he plotted his barefoot exit.

Accompanying this shift in the young man’s station and status, Mr. Hutchinson began calling him by the diminutive Fred. This happened to be the name of his departed nephew, in whose case it was short for Frederick. As for the problem of what a servant calls the master under such altered circumstances - well, that was a question the newly christened Fred had yet to answer. Not that it made much difference. During the daytime, he was still very much Mr. Hutchinson.

Evans treated him exactly the same, only more so, almost to the point of rudeness. Fred wasn’t sure which of them had changed. And what did it mean? Was this shift in roles without precedent, a foray into uncharted regions, or was it so predictable and periodic as to have its own protocol? He couldn’t tell. All he had was the landscape around him with no map. And he certainly couldn’t ask.

You observe. Allow days to pass and wait for enough parallax to accrue, to divine which objects were background and which lay close enough to exert a gravitational pull.

A new suit of clothes appeared on his bed - which, by the way, he still found himself in at nighttime more often than not. They were perfect in both fit and design. The fact that they fit so

well seemed like a feat of upper-caste magic until it occurred to Fred that perhaps he had been chosen in the first place because he resembled so closely a figure that had once filled these threads and then slipped away. This thought spooked him so much he nearly threw the damned thing out, and would have done if he hadn't known with certainty that he would be expected to wear it at the next formal function. As to its design - well, if you had half an eye, you saw that this suit placed its wearer half a notch above common house servant yet still one full story below a respectable youth of his age.

Things continued to happen around him and he didn't yet feel fully ordained, so to speak, and wouldn't for some time. Still, he would get a taste of communion, even confirmation, and this would come shockingly soon.

Sunday, October 31, the master's Black and White Masque brought a mixed selection of notables and acquaintances into the house. That morning the fountain by the front gate was filled with milk and the naked Greeks fitted from spat to top hat with evening finery in which Guggenheim himself would have been proud to go

down. His own finery, too, was pre-ordained - it was his role that was in question.

As guests arrived, he waited, still unsure. A pair of handsome ushers, hired for the night, hovered under the porte-cochere, opening car doors and dutifully ushering. This narrowed Fred's field to the interior house. He wasn't accustomed to traveling a tray and a bartender had also been engaged. He waited around, was presently handed an armful of coats, and carried them upstairs with some relief.

Returning downstairs he observed from above what he'd missed - that the room was now filling with costumed figures. Already he could spy a gunslinger, two sailors, and a sprinkling of women dressed as cats, ballerinas, and Southern belles - all masked - attended by servants dressed in their normal evening attire. So this, then, would distinguish. The thought relieved him.

He placed himself at a suitable distance from Mr. H., who was wearing a befitting uniform of the British admiralty, talking comfortably with another gentleman wearing a jester's outfit. Apparently without much jest: The conversation seemed quite sober, but then the drinking had hardly begun. Two other masked

figures pressed closer as the next wave of guests came in and pushed him to the periphery.

Cornered behind a black-draped table set with sliced goat's cheese and fruit he didn't recognize and dared not touch, Fred, for the first time since he'd gained his new position, felt close to panic. Suddenly, he sensed a presence behind him. He felt the warmth first, maybe breath on his neck, apropos as he turn and saw a cinematic vampyre in a black mask pointing toward a silver tray on the table.

They're Chinese gooseberries - exotic fruit of the South Pacific. Have you ever tasted one? asked the Vampyre.

No, sir, I cannot say that I have.

Why not try one now?

It would not be my place to do so. They are for the guests.

But the Vampyre had already popped a peeled wedge past Fred's objections into his mouth. Those days have ended. Your place is as you choose. Sweet, eh? smiled the stranger whose juiced fingers he had just tasted - and who slipped back into the crowd of guests before he could fully swallow.

Across the room, the Jester looked on and whispered prudent advice in Hutchinson’s ear: Careful, man - he’ll notice he’s naked.

These words went unheeded. Then again, maybe Hutchinson had been daring it to happen all along. Near midnight, the affair careening along, Fred found himself summoned to the inner lair - a windowless third-floor room contorted by an uneven pitch of ceiling and two walls that curved inward, whose wayward geometry could only be ascribed to criminal laxness on the part of the architect. Even the door was a rotten shape, lacking panels and arching up uncomfortably close to the crown molding. It was half open. Fred stuck his head in and saw the Vampyre and the Jester. Filling their glasses was Hutchinson, still in his British admiral’s costume, who waved him inside with the words, And how does it feel to be part of the circle? Wayne, give the boy a glass.

The Jester complied in a kindly manner. It felt strange to be regarded, after having been by turns invisible, then noticed, then admired but not quite fully acknowledged by Hutchinson. He approached, carrying a decanter full of green liquid, upon a conversation already well in progress.

And what, then, is truth? asked the Vampyre.

Truth, my dear fellow, is that wall you constantly walk into in your denial of it, said Hutchinson.

The Jester said, still looking at him, Truth is that thing that brings you face to face with your soul.

Or the fact that you don't have one, said the Vampyre.

Unhallowed life..., said the Jester

An appropriate topic for Hallows' Eve, Hutchinson inserted.

... is what Mary Shelly wrote about upward of a century ago.

Frankenstein's monster - a monstrosity created solely through human intellect without reverence for God and, therefore, without a soul.

But Hutchinson was shaking his head. Rubbish. Creation is our species' purview precisely because our intellect sets us apart from other animals.

The Jester disagreed, Our species' proclivity for producing ugliness, crime, and ultimately war is, in this century, what has set us apart.

Hear hear! said the Vampyre, tipping his glass, And what will ultimately destroy us.

You, junior, said Hutchinson, turning toward him, Have enjoyed far too much good fortune to toast human annihilation so gaily. Hell, you were still in knee pants when boys only a few years older than you lay asphyxiated in the trenches.

Precisely why I am in a position to toast it at all, replied the Vampyre.

There’s nothing jolly-good about war. War is just the most miserable of crimes - crime dressed up in uniform. Wearing his admiral’s costume, Hutchinson betrayed no hint of irony.

War and crime are both conditions of society, and therefore reality, the Vampyre responded. They force one to deal with one’s own truth, nothing more.

They force one to deal with one’s soul, said the Jester, without much hope.

On this point, however, the Vampyre was silent.

“O, brave new world that has such people in it,” Hutchinson said, lifting his reservoir glass aloft. Eh, Fred? You’re getting an earful tonight, aren’t you? - whilst we get a snootful. What truly separates us from the animals is our proclivity for taking ourselves so bloody seriously, isn’t it?

A rhetorical question - Hutchinson was speaking toward him but not looking at him. Nor at this point was the Jester. The Vampyre was, but he didn't dare look back. Not yet. Instead, he relapsed into keeping busy, polishing the glass in his hand and filling it, though he knew instinctively this wasn't tonight's function.

When his mind wandered back to the room, he found himself holding the glass he'd filled, with no one to serve it to. To an onlooker, he could have been a third guest in the house, though he was still outside the circle formed by the others. The Vampyre was speaking.

I take my credo from Mr. Crowley, he was saying: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of law.” That's all.

Your credo is derivative of Saint Augustine, the Jester replied. Only his words were “Love, and do what thou wilt.”

The philanthropist speaks, smiled the Vampyre. Alas, a philosophy with extraneous premises is soon refined.

As one with too few is found crude and wanting, countered the Jester.

Tell me, gentlemen, broke in Hutchinson, By what measure shall we test these grand theories of yours? If we're going to start

counting angels on the heads of pins, I'll need Fred to retrieve my other specs from the top drawer next to my bed. You do know where I keep them, Fred?

Undoubtedly he does, said the Vampyre, with one hint more than he should have added of... whatever it was.

Hutchinson glared at him, Thin ice, boy - that's what you're treading on right now, and if it gives way you'll feel the chill.

Neither retreating nor advancing, the Vampyre responded: I always find a bracing plunge quickens the blood.

No reply came forth. And then, emerging but not tentative, the fourth voice - his own: One wonders how our guest might tell the difference.

Indeed, does one... Fred? As he spoke, the Vampyre shifted his stance not forward but back, but when he was done he had opened the circle to include its youngest member. I'll tell you a secret, he continued. Despite this evening's garb, my blood does not run as cold as you might think - to which either of the gentlemen present can attest, and probably will, before the evening's done. Which reminds me, is it just us four tonight, or are more expected?

What followed from Hutchinson was not anger, nor even a dose of the measured dissatisfaction that fathers use to control their sons. It was authentic disenchantment, as of an alchemist who after much toil finds, again, just dross. Don't ruin things, Roy - please - not just yet.

That was the first moment of the first night when the servant stopped playing the observer and began to see. It was Roy, then, who stood apart from the others in the room, reflecting the room's light with a vitality he had never witnessed. He didn't want to see, but saw anyway that this miraculous light was not something the others would ever witness because it wasn't for them. They had their own sources of light that he saw not. But it didn't matter. Light was light - it had no central source, only its own ephemeral shimmering that lasted for as long as it did. And that made the moment eternal. Roy stood apart from him, but they were the same. In stature and youth they shared what the others, with all their wealth, just coveted. At this declining moment in history, perhaps they'd inherit nothing more than a blackened ember, but it was theirs all the same.

No one had moved an inch, but everything was different. The masks, if not the gloves, were now off, Cinderella’s moment irretrievably past. Absently, without volition, Fred took his first sip of the green stuff he found himself holding.

Sometime after midnight, when it was long over - when the ugly arched door was again unlocked, when the guests had dispersed and the staff shifted their duties from serving in the present tense to mopping up the past - when it was all done, the doorbell rang again, too late for a new arrival. He had left the inner lair and was wandering the halls, unable to resume his duties or move on to new ones, as a small group of stragglers reassembled - amateur illusionists, it turned out, of which Hutchinson was one, the Jester another. Neither invited nor declared unwelcome, he entered to hear Hutchinson’s voice:

Haven’t we had enough of telegrams? The whole goddamn war was broadcast via telegram. Is that all science is good for, the production of an endless string of tragedies that we hear about via bloody telegram?

Another voice among murmurs asked, Do we know yet how it happened?

Acute peritonitis brought on by a burst appendix. How about that? Do you know what an appendix is? An outdated organ whose function at one time was the digestion of bones. You’d think Mother Nature would have either got rid of it or allowed us to continue using it.

Ironic, said the Jester, especially for one who dared death as often as he.

This sober note cleared the room of sounds for a moment. Hutchinson took hold of the silence, stepping forward with his head bowed. For those of you who haven’t heard, our dear friend Erich Weiss has passed this day. He was an intrepid spirit and a visitor to this house on more than one occasion, the man the world will forever remember as Harry Houdini. We trust that if such things are possible in this universe we seem to know less and less about, he may in some other form visit us again. I, for one, would welcome him.

In chains, perhaps? Roy suggested - a joke again, but this time not irreverent, nor did Hutchinson take it to be.

Fitting, perhaps, added the Jester, More so that it should occur on the day when all souls are promised their release.

Part 3 - Golgotha

He woke up this time to the light of a bare bulb dangling above his head from a thin electrical cord. The room stank of must and rot, black mold seeping through the walls. In one night, a cold draft had replaced, particle by particle, the warmer air that had once filled the room. Two months had passed and Houdini's death was now forgotten, having been displaced by the season of thanks, the season of joy, and now the looming unknown infant 1927.

His mind raced furiously those first few seconds to place himself there - another discontinuity, the third in so many months. Then, like a chain sliding link by link off the edge of a smooth tabletop, time's stream restored itself.

He heard grunts and a rhythmic pinging of iron. In a shaded corner of the room, Roy, shirtless, stood motionless, seemingly weightless, holding a barbell high above his head like Charles Atlas himself. In quick succession he repeated the pumping motion, skein of muscles rippling shadows of light and dark across his frame. That's how it felt inside *him*, too, his heart knocking against his

chest like a wild trapped animal as he looked on, his supine body filling with illumination and dread.

Accruing bulk - in preparation for the event, smiled Roy. More of a grimace - he was pushing a ton of weight, sweating even in the cold, damp Bowery air. A window was open, but there was no sun, only rows of bricks and, higher up, another window facing equal darkness. It was well after noon, and he wondered what had become of the morning and how long he had slept. He couldn't fathom when he'd shut his eyes.

For a few weeks, it had been bliss. He knew this superficially and clung to the memory like a worthless deed to an abandoned mine that would yield nothing, never - not gold, not copper or tin, not even coal. He and Roy had flopped at a friend's Perry Street flat in a neighborhood filled with those who passed for poets. Smoked cigarettes and drank washtub gin in a basement flooded with drunks and piano jazz whose off-key tones wiggled down inside your lust as you tanked up. At sunrise, you'd stumble home stinking, shrieking in the streets, convinced you'd stolen the map to Hell from the Devil himself.

One night he dropped his quaint Knightsbridge accent, so well practiced in the weeks of his ocean crossing, and started talking Newcastle again, bludgeoning the King’s English for laughs. That’s when Roy began riffing off his name: Are you merely worth a penny? And what, indeed, is a penny worth? And at first it was funny. After all, hadn’t Hutchinson called him Fred? It wasn’t him - or not all of him, anyway - but it had fit and it was okay. But now here was Roy turning his surname so cleverly into dross.

Roy Schwartz - short for Bonroi - had been named for an uncle by his French-Catholic mother. Together, his two names proclaimed the schism of his heritage. Not just split, but haplessly skewed: His father a Jew, the son was walled off from Gentile society. But because his mother was not, he was equally unfit to enter the temple. No faith, it seemed, would have him.

So there they were, Pennyworth and Schwartz, sounding like a law firm but more to the point a pair of drunks stumbling in and out of darkened Village dives. And he could have lived with that. In fact, at first he wanted nothing else. To be somebody’s sidekick, old mate, partner in crime, hatching plans together. And who might

he be without a mirror to stand in front of, admiring himself being admired?

It was a seamless continuation of that first discussion among costumed friends - philosophy and penny candy doled out with equal ease. He remembered thinking at the time: It's all just a game of words, and this gent gets that. He'd thought even the night they met about surprising the pack by reverting to his native Geordie, then scaring everybody with a stammering American mumble, but he was still under Hutchinson's thumb. So, like all good servants, he stood unspeaking and guarded his words like unappraised gems.

Roy, of course, had no such reservations, and needed none. Whatever his trajectory - and it was clear now that, like everybody else, he had one - his vitality seemed to emerge from some preternatural unfetteredness, a soul apparently unchalked by time's accumulated debts.

They'd gone out a few times together before Hutchinson had called him on it. Down to the Village, where they couldn't have been more at home, with all the talk, talk, talk, high culture in a state of flux. It wasn't just - and you could fill this part in yourself -

the novelists who had accumulated thousands of pages that they would never allow you to read. Or even the painters who didn't, actually, paint anything, because to put paint on canvas would inevitably entrench them in the very tradition they were engaged in dismantling. (Engaged exactly how? This you didn't ask.) It was that exact moment in history when you could identify as a revolutionist but, dispensing with all tracts and manifestos, define yourself as neither communist nor anarchist, theorist nor activist, and expect to receive unblinking, unironic regard as a critical liberator of humanity. That was the party already in progress as they'd walked in the door.

So when had the conversation turned permanently to *the criminal*? Nothing so vulgar as the criminal sector, even less some particular malefactor who might be tying a shoelace and plotting his next assault one street down - this part of the city was full of them - but rather some Platonic ideal of criminality: disincarnate Virtue's shaded sister?

It must have materialized, or more likely simply surfaced, from the dregs of some exchange on the nature of good and evil - another carry-over from their first night. This time, though, the

Jester was unavailable as moral compass, nor was Hutchinson around to serve as pragmatism’s theodolite. So, unmoored, the discussion drifted.

The criminal mind won’t be vanquished from above, Roy was saying, probably quoting himself, as he hoisted iron aloft. No uniformed guardian can know it, and so it remains inviolable. Only he who is willing to dwell in his own darkness stands a chance of canceling out this void with the light of his own dark truth.

Yeah, yeah - that’s the kind of stuff that got said all the time down there in the soup. You didn’t get upset about that sort of talk any more than you worried one of these political boys was getting set to tamp out his cigarette and go blow up a train station. As with suicides, it’s when they stop talking that the alarm goes off.

Somewhere in November, Hutchinson had tossed him out onto the street - just about literally. The now ex-servant recalled his suitcase teetering over a hedge, sliding off, and falling to the sidewalk where it burst open like a boiling egg, spilling the little of value that he owned out into vulgar view.

Love’s opiate at that time in full bloom, being made unemployed didn’t concern him, which itself should have been a

cause for concern. Less than half a year in a strange country with no prospects and no passage back, Blackwell’s Island - now they were calling it Welfare Island - might be the next and last stop.

In the meantime, there was his final pay, which the master scrupulously meted out and Evans surreptitiously augmented, adding, Take it, stupid boy - there are worse things in life than charity, as you’re soon to discover. Then, mix in the mysterious funds that would materialize from time to time, always Canadian notes and invariably quaffed in a day, from some source dubbed by Roy in ominous humor “Tante Genevieve.” Apparently, Roy, like him, had an international past that stretched into the present moment as the sea laps unrestrained by borders upon the beach. So what? The level sea can’t hurt you.

He charted to this time the beginning of what he came to call *sequestering*: a habit of mind, placing the unthinkable in a secure little vault. Hadn’t that been his modus operandi in leaving London for New York? Truth be told, wasn’t this the defining feature of all his flights from the dreary past? He recalled as a boy climbing alone among the coal slag heaps, his sad and hazardous playground, projecting himself elsewhere with talismanic words: *I am not here* -

this is not happening at all - it is not really me. Isn't that how you protect yourself from the crush of childhood defeats that begin to accumulate even before you're even out of the womb? And hadn't it worked, delivering him from poverty and obscurity to... whatever it was that this was?

Of course, this strategic maneuver dovetailed just fine with the philosophy of his new sidekick - or rather, the one whose sidekick he'd now become.

You can paint the past any shade you choose, Roy was urging. Create a myth for yourself. Poet, lover, scoundrel, spy - all possibilities are open to you as platforms to stand on and set your destiny.

Something like that.

They'd started frequenting a little Barrow Street joint called the Grecian Urn. That's where the piano started filling his head with patterns of noise that never stopped until New Year's fireworks lit up the sky. For some tirade related to Roy's "dwelling in his own darkness," "creating his destiny" - or maybe just for being the kind of ass that takes pleasure in pitching cheap puns on a chap's name - they got kicked out of the Perry Street flat. This

landed them in the Bowery sharing what amounted to a cot, a bare bulb, a faucet dripping onto a rusted sink, and a burlap sack full of rotting potatoes. Oh, and the barbell.

As usual for Pennyworth, the turn arrived from outside himself. Roy alluded to the need for action, which itself was fresh. He even went so far as to mention a plan, accompanied by a laugh that would continue to erupt over the following weeks until it was forever extinguished. That should have been the first sign of Roy’s true slaphappy derangement. But instead of heeding, the young man probed when he should have fled.

For Pete’s sake, spit it out, he finally asked Roy. What plan? What event?

Avenging the wrongful death of a good man. That must certainly appeal to - one.

Whose death?

A Mr. Thomas Wayne - yes, along with his bride, Martha. Bludgeoned by an interloper known only as the Skull. Word’s all up and down these streets if you know how to listen.

Do we know them?

Them? Roy erupted again in chuckles. I recall for a fact that we know *him* rather well. And although he didn't bid his final adieu wearing his costume, I feel certain that as he stood beyond death's one-way door awaiting his maker, he felt thrice the Fool at discovering the void that awaits every one of us.

Pennyworth went pale. It seemed years already, but on that last day - while Hutchinson boiled like a pot of liquid iron and Evans pressed condescending currency into the young man's hand - the sad and sober Jester had quietly offered to recover his job for him if he would cut Roy loose.

Why would I do that? he had asked.

Because it's the right thing to do.

But I love him, said Pennyworth.

My young friend, Wayne implored, Haven't you been listening? He doesn't know the meaning of that word.

But I do. And he will.

My offer stands, said Wayne, And it will continue to stand. Let me hear from you. He offered his hand in all warmth and sincerity, and the young man took it.

And now it was cold - along with most of the romantic illusions of which Wayne had cautioned him. He merely echoed Roy's sentiment, Yes, he was a good man.

And must be avenged - lest other good men fall at the same faithless hands.

Over the next few weeks, Roy continued to press his case, clearly tickled at his own ingenuity.

Discreet as always, gleefully guided by Roy's little clues, Pennyworth initiated a mini-investigation into a pair of downtown bludgeonings, apparently of small interest to the authorities - product of a violent quarter in a violent age. Mysterious entry through an inaccessible window, faces smashed in, blood everywhere, a thorough ransacking, then completed with an exit through the front door. Was the motive murder or theft? There was no way to know.

Or was there? One clear morning shortly before Christmas, hoping that the passage of time and the spirit of the season would serve him, Pennyworth walked the three miles uptown to his old residence, got past Evans via a tiny service door - flawless transition

from servant to interloper - betting on Hutchinson’s usual aplomb to override his fury, and winning.

Hutchinson was no longer boiling, not even smoldering. Instead, grief and disappointment had bequeathed him an aged, feeble exterior. Even so, Pennyworth knew to tread carefully: an injured scorpion still packs a sting.

I’m sorry to hear of Mr. Wayne, he began.

Is that all? said Hutchinson, distracted. Yes, well, that makes two of us. He liked you, you know. Oh, not in that way - he was too honorable for that, or at least did his level best to be. He took an interest in ways you wouldn’t imagine.

He was a gentleman, sir.

Yes - he was, said Hutchinson, and turned toward the window. The good die young. I’ll still be left on Earth to witness the conversion of the Jews.

Then Hutchinson turned back towards the younger man, not to regard but to be regarded, framed by the afternoon light behind him. The tension between them eased. Briefly, with regret, Pennyworth recalled their first meeting in the sauna, which he knew Hutchinson remembered, too. It was done. He was forgiven

but none of it would be forgotten - way too late for that. There was nothing more to say, so he turned as if to leave, then chose his moment:

If I may be so bold, Mr. Hutchinson: Do you believe that this had anything to do with... the Skull?

Hutchinson’s eternal poker face betrayed him. So it meant something! His heart surging, Pennyworth struggled to keep up his good servant’s demeanor and not to betray himself. What followed exceeded all the excesses so far.

How do you know about that? Hutchinson asked him.

He continued to play the part he’d learned to play so well. Please forgive me, sir, but I am not at liberty to say.

Not at liberty! Hutchinson shouted in a whisper, as if an unseen someone could even now be listening in. You imperious little queen, do you know what you’re into? If you believe in all that hokum about Mayan magic, you’re a greater imbecile by far than I took you for. But I tell you one simple rule: When you walk off with a valuable artifact like that, somebody else will take an interest. And when they pop round your door of an evening, you’ll be the one left lying face down in a pool of your own blood.

I am not here - this is not happening at all - it is not really me. Pennyworth found he was all the way downtown before he'd regained himself, wondering how many streets he'd crossed without observing.

From then on, he was bound to his fate and, of course, bound up with Roy, which he already knew. He could do nothing to stop it - or so he thought.

He was careful to tiptoe around whomever or whatever this Skull was. To Hutchinson, it has been a *what* - some artifact. So be it. To Roy, the Skull was still very much a *who* - their quarry. Pennyworth turned these puzzle pieces over and over in his mind trying to make them fit. Would they ever?

Meanwhile, he appeared to do as he was told, which suited Roy. They prepared for the event, apparently some vigilante strike, according to Roy's premise that the just cannot, by definition, bestow criminal justice: Only retribution in kind could be justice, which must itself be criminal and therefore unjust.

Vengeance is mine, Roy concluded, letting the barbell crash to the floor and extending a warm hand to illicit lover, his plausible sidekick, who took it and knew full well what he did.

They still had time to kill, though the sun was already hidden behind the buildings when they finally emerged. Roy, in a long black cloak, bore a large canvas bag strapped to his back. Pennyworth walked in place at his side as he always would, but his mind was elsewhere, another time, an older city with a different opportunity for intrigue and betrayal.

He had been discovered, the younger party in the sort of indiscretion which, his solicitor explained, was priced at 18 months' hard labor. You're from the north? he had asked, and the young man nodded. That goes worse here, you know. Can you do something about it? Pennyworth surprised him by producing, with little effort, flawless King's English, absorbed from months of service where his mandate was, essentially, keep your head down and pay attention. Right, that should do, said the solicitor. I'll get you a new suit of clothes. And if you're a good boy and do your mother proud, you should be out of here by the end of the week.

What his mother had to do with the matter, he never knew. He turned King's evidence on the gentleman, older only by a brief but decisive span of years and, in so doing, severed himself from his own story. If London had initially brought him refuge and then

independence, he left it with a sense of something having been cancelled - again.

Perhaps Roy read some of this on his face and in his silence. He didn't entirely lack the trappings of tenderness, and could inspire when he wished. If you can't believe in yourself, he said, Then believe in me - fully - this one day. Fix your mind on it - and your heart and belly. You don't yet know your own capacities. None of them do. He waved one hand around him at the drunks and lovers who passed them by in the street this last day of the year, thinking only of the night, and then concluded, Are you with me?

Always, said Pennyworth, unable to imagine otherwise.

Then we cannot fail.

They wandered far down a street that ended, without acknowledgement, at the water: no dock, no vessel, not even a warehouse, just a row of abandoned shacks ridiculously exposed to the elements, in front of the sand mixed unceremoniously with salt. Unsheltered, Roy kicked off his shoes, began unbuttoning his shirt, in fact stripped thoroughly naked and unblinkingly beautiful in the last long shafts of this year's light. His body hair bristled in the cold wind coming in off the water from the northeast then, insanely, he

strode into the shallow lapping tide. Only a moment but, oh yes, the full immersion, every inch of him, gone under the rippleless skin of the water if only for one fraction of a second, an eternity of breathless awe.

Back on land, Roy opened the canvas bag and poked through it, shivering and dripping. Why the tears? he asked. For, indeed, tears were streaming down the boy’s face for no reason he could name. It wasn’t grief, or joy, or solemn sense of duty, certainly not a prayer, but it sent him to his knees, fully bowed in sobs, at the feet of his beloved.

Feel it, Roy commanded, Fully, and said nothing else as he busied himself. Finished drying himself with a piece of cloth and then pulled his final costume from the bag. It went on skin tight and buttoned up in strange ways which Roy must have practiced once or twice. Pennyworth returned to his senses, looked up, and saw: Roy had replaced his own clothes with the jester’s costume, or perhaps an exact copy, from that night at Hutchinson’s. Nothing of his body was any longer visible, just his unshaven and impenetrable face poking, off-center, through an oval-shaped hole.

What the... Pennyworth started, as if kicked windless in the gut.

Clever, isn't it? Roy said. I know it's a mere affectation, but at times one must, mustn't one? And he laughed again - appropriate for his costume but utterly unfitted to all else. Whatever might have opened up for them in their last wordless moments, the moment was gone.

Roy covered himself once more with his cloak, abandoning to the cold and spray his clothes and everything else he'd carried thus far. Then on to their grim unnamed task they went, Roy at the helm, the other man in tow. Back up the street that began at the water and led into the civilized maze of streets and structures. And with it, the functioning part of Pennyworth's mind reactivated, racing, scraping together whatever bits it could find to pull together this tapestry before it was too late.

How do you know, it asked him, who this Skull might be? Everything you know of this story, you know through Roy. He told you that the Waynes had been exterminated by some shadowy criminal mastermind who calls himself the Skull and threatens more harm. Sound plausible? Or, more likely, by a charming young

invitee, strapped for funds, demonstrably lacking a conscience and probably no debutante to extortion. And if so, then what would be the true purpose of this night’s errand?

Such were the thoughts he tried to sequester as he and Roy ascended a darkened staircase. He lagged two or three landings behind, not much of a sidekick now, but still following like an ant on a chemical trail, compelled.

They surfaced on a roof, not the tallest and affording not much of a view, but certainly remote from the crowds that were gathering here and there below in celebration. Roy removed his cloak, rolled it up in a ball, and tossed it over the edge of the building with a theatrical flourish. With Roy’s absurd costume once again revealed, Pennyworth tried to imagine for a moment that the roof was a stage, self-contained, limited in scope: a little place where little lies are not only tolerated but encouraged, leading to some deeper experience of truth. Could he but hope that they’d only entered with Othello waiting in the wings, soon to emerge and speak his lines? Not likely.

As you can see, Roy was saying, The difficult work’s been done. He pointed to a hemp rope whose two ends were secured to

the roof they stood on. These lines extended across the alley to a neighboring building that was two stories taller, where they looped around an intricate Corinthian cornice. The whole device looked precarious, but Roy tugged at the mooring in mute confidence that it was quite secure.

You don't propose that I...? said Pennyworth, blanching at the thought that had formed in his mind.

You? Roy laughed again. Never. You couldn't possibly have the belly. No, you are my anchor - does that not better suit you?

For the first time, Pennyworth allowed himself to see this all for what it was and demurred in icy words: You're insane.

Much madness makes divinest sense.

I'll have no part in it, he said, and fled for the door.

Too late, Roy said, blocking his exit. Pennyworth tried to push past him and for the first time felt the other man's bulk as immovable. How had this happened? Their flesh had been one, he'd been entirely possessed, every night since his departure from his uptown employer. Every moment he'd thought about leaving, it was this very flesh that had held him back, imaging the cavern that Roy would leave behind in him forever should they part. Night after

night, as Roy lay curled in his arms, he cursed this warmth he had found, a warmth that had thawed his heart thoroughly, allowed it to beat, then kept it prisoner. He'd detailed his escape repeatedly but knew there was truly no way out, across this unimaginable void that would await him just outside his cell. He knew it wasn't his heart, certainly not his mind that kept him trapped, but only the density of this adjacent luminous flesh. Even so, he still couldn't imagine severing their connection. This cold chasm, the threat of his own empty arms, could never allow it.

Now this same density blocked his way out again, stood between him and the door to the stairway down. This could have been a stalemate - he could never leave, but neither could Roy convince him to place his lover at risk. What tipped the balance was nothing but a letter-opener, practically a dagger, produced from beneath the waistband of Roy's costume. Roy pressed it to his chest and, in that moment, Pennyworth truly believed he'd been deceived in Roy's love. Here on this rooftop, his last breath was to be extinguished. He prepared himself as Roy peeled open his fingers - apparently, he was to have a hand in his own undoing. Then, incomprehensibly, Pennyworth felt at once his own heartbeat and

the handle, not the tip, pressing against his ribcage. Roy stretched out both his arms sideways, offering himself in ultimate surrender, and Pennyworth witnessed the cool green vein running up his throat, pulsing. So this was to be his escape? As ever, Roy had calculated correctly down to decimals. Deflated, Pennyworth let the letter-opener drop to the cold rooftop at their feet. He sat down dizzy at the roof's edge, certain now that he could never break free.

Roy attended to business: He looped both ends of the rope into well-practiced sailors' knots and slipped one end under his arms. From behind, he tenderly placed the other end around the throat of his beloved as if comically adjusting his necktie in a mirror, emitting again that same insane cackle. Overused to these pranks by now, Pennyworth wordlessly removed it from his throat, raised his arms, and tightened the rope around himself. They were, indeed, anchored. The thought should have made him smile.

Roy stood atop the lip of the roof, preparing for his feat as his lover gathered around him all the slack he could and watched silently. In a gesture of perfect nonchalance, Roy glanced at his pocket watch announcing, The time is 23:33, then leapt.

What should have happened next was a nice clean arc as Roy sailed effortlessly into the appointed window. In actuality, the rope slipped from its hold on the cornice, and Roy went down. In that spell, there was no time to act but an eternity to dream.

Pennyworth remembered as a youth witnessing a horse careening off a high bridge, recalled how a stray stick of dynamite free-falling into a deep shaft had been his father’s undoing, felt the clogging sting of mustard gas as he had imagined a thousand times his own death, and waited. What happened next was inevitable: The rope constricted in on him, cracking his ribs, crushing his lungs, and projecting from his mouth a forlorn cocktail of blood, bile, and phlegm.

His chest caught fire and was pitched into an excruciating crescendo of pain, which then inexplicably stopped. Everything went dark and his heartbeat roared inside his head, drowning all other sensations. He knew he was dead. Then he knew that if he knew he was dead, he was perhaps not dead, but damned, or about to be.

One of them was in trouble. That thought wasn’t precisely framed, just starting to form and rise to the surface from way down

deep as he gasped for his next breath. He struggled to speak and nothing came out. In contrast, he could hear laughter, however strained, from the other end of the rope.

One must confess the irony, even humor, in this marriage, Roy called from below. Yet underneath these words was betrayed for the first time something brand new inside him: authentic suffering. Pity and pain racked Pennyworth’s heart as he heard this. But tears were already streaming out of his eyes from the initial blow and his lungs were too collapsed to admit sobs, so he could neither cry nor cry out from pure emotion.

He pictured turning himself around again and again, allowing the rope to wrap around him like a winch that would hoist the dead weight from the depths, up here to safe ground, purgatory at least. In his mind it seemed possible, if extreme - an act of merest will. In fact, no such salvation was forthcoming for either of them. The laws of physics eminently fixed, one could not persuade gravity to waive its own imperatives.

From below, now, these words: For the love of “G” “_” “D,” Montresor. This time, the laughter was punctuated by a series of coughs. Pennyworth was too preoccupied to consider Roy’s irony

with seriousness, his outstretched fingertips having just touched but not quite secured the smooth and elusive shaft of the letter-opener. In mounting agony, he wrenched his injured frame forward against the ropes that held him, lunging for this object through an asphyxiating haze as blood and phlegm issued from his nose and lips.

Perhaps Roy sensed this turn for the worse. Even as his breath diminished, he wheezed words from memory that must for him have been some form of extreme unction:

Then came the great awakening. Curious to say, it was toward the hour of midnight on the last day of the year when the old slinks away from the new, that he happened to be riding alone, wrapped in the dark cloak of unutterable thoughts. A distant bell chimed the last quarter hour of the dying year. The world had failed him. Freedom had he sought, but not the freedom that he had gained. Blood seemed to ooze from his eyelids and trickle down, drop by drop, upon the white snow. Great bats flitted by him and vultures whose bald heads were clotted with rotten blood. “Ah! The world, the world... the failure of the world.”

Pennyworth’s hand had found its object and was already working away. Even as his own sky was darkening, he had plunged the sharp point of the blade at his chest, close to his heart, where the cord had him most tightly bound. Stolidly, strand by strand, he scraped and scratched at the hemp, softened by the stream of fluid that had flooded from his nose in a personal primordial ooze. He must have cut through hundreds of threads, all in conspiracy, however impersonal, against his survival, when the frayed rope finally snapped. In stasis but still not free, his full volition would be required before the work was finished.

Forgive me, he called, and began to peel the rope from around his body.

Roy clung to his philosophy: Whenever it comes, he said, to stare it straight in the eye.

The rope slackened once then caught again as the hanging man clutched for a foothold and shrieked out in agony: *Oh God please Alfred save me!*

A last adjustment granted time for one stripped word: Impossible! Roy insisted, and fell screaming.

Far above him, Alfred now inhaled, still holding the rope in one hand and the letter-opener in the other as evidence of who he was - a betrayer, stained with guilt, but one who knows himself at last - then fell into his own pool of sick. He was ordained. The criminal was, indeed, at this cost vanquished, another having taken his place. Either in direct response or utter disregard, the dark sky all around him burst into light from a thousand tiny revelries welcoming Janus, the Roman god bearing two faces in opposition - one looking forward, the other regarding the past - for whom January is named. It must have turned midnight.

Epilogue

You see now how Alfred ended up carrying in a soiled burlap sack all he had left and placing it in the receptive hands of the son and heir who had so recently suffered the loss of both his parents to some unidentified criminal.

He dragged his broken frame down off the roof and back onto the street, with all the drunks and lovers nipping past him on to the next party, then limped back home and collapsed on their bed, shivering and delirious for untold days. Every breath ablaze in his chest was a welcome relief to his grief and remorse, offering hope if not a promise that what was left inside there would be reduced to ashes. As it cooled, he could feel his spongy heart leaking, pouring pools of blood through his ribs out onto bed, threatening to fill the room. But when at last he began to come around, he saw there only rings of sweat, nothing more than might have been the signs of one more passionate night spent together. Sitting up, he examined his bare chest and back underneath his soiled shirt, then searched the sheets but found no physical evidence of injury,

certainly none of pleasure. Whatever scars or signs had been left behind must be internal. Also, he was alone.

Instinctively, he pulled his weak body toward the only food at hand, the blackening potatoes left behind by some previous tenant, hidden in the tiny root cellar tucked below the window. Upending the burlap sack, he saw that Roy had been a busy boy: Out onto the rotting wood dropped nothing that had ever grown in the earth, but a scrapbook of newspaper clippings and - thud! - one Crystal Skull, surely a pearl before swine, bathing the sooted walls in its soft glow, an inner light accumulated over centuries of reverent devotion. Or, perhaps, just an effect Alfred’s own lingering fever? The Skull was silent on that.

The scrapbook, though, had more to say. The first three clippings detailed the discovery, importation, and scheduled auction of an artifact called the Crystal Skull. The Mayan curse was downplayed and ridiculed, though reference was also made to a string of fatal mishaps, doubtless associated not with magic but rather with the criminal element attracted to its inestimable value. Then, to this inestimable value was attached a number: A notice recounted the sale at auction, identified only by a lot number Roy

had circled in pen, for an unnamed item at a quarter million, to an unnamed buyer.

And who in Gotham might have such a sum ready at hand, Alfred mused? The next clipping confirmed the worst: Mr. Thomas Wayne, millionaire philanthropist, and his wife, bludgeoned by some undiscovered weapon which, no doubt, had been carried off by the assailant. No mention of the Skull, either as artifact or moniker.

The last clippings were mere police notices detailing two downtown murders among many each week, apparently random, entirely uninteresting in a city full of poverty and despair. No connection to the Waynes but, rest assured, Roy had had his rationale.

In comparison, what could have been so valuable just inside that last window, worth the risk and ultimate sacrifice of his life? Perhaps Roy’s philosophy had been valid, and his chosen premise had led only to its inevitable conclusion. Maybe he was merely cursed, which must in the end amount to the same thing. Or, had he just wanted the one thing a perfect criminal must crave and, by definition, can never permit himself: Simply, a witness?

Alfred scrutinized the newspapers for weeks searching for some remaining sign of Roy, a last word to lay him to rest. He found nothing, no record Roy had ever been and none that he'd gone. His final joke: Blimey, you'd think someone would notice a blood-soaked corpse in a jester's costume.

Though, sometimes, as he turned over alone in bed among nightmares and dreams, Alfred imagined he could still hear that laughter. Was it only inside his mind, or outside but disincarnate? Or was he somehow even now wandering the streets and hatching some next plan?

That's when he received the directive, thirteen days into the new year, to his next and final circumstances. He wasn't much older than this youth who summoned him, but his hair had turned white during that last stricken night and would never recover its former lustrous black. Nor had he ever been a spy on His Majesty's Service, though he permitted himself this small bit of creative destiny, as Roy might have called it, and allowed it to stick where it would. Thus, through myth and circumstance, he had accrued enough past and was, to all appearances, at last an elder. He had found his place. Arriving, he knocked. Surprisingly, no servant

greeted him, the house having been cleared of them, but rather the master himself.

Mr. Wayne? asked Alfred. Mr. Bruce Wayne? Son of Mr. Thomas Wayne. Do I have the pleasure?

You do, said the young man, at once soft-spoken and singularly assured. And whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?

You sent for me, sir. My name is Pennyworth. Alfred Pennyworth. I was acquainted with your father and, I believe, am in possession of an artifact belonging to his rightful heir. And placing, without ceremony, the unpromising parcel into the open hands of the younger man, he entered Wayne Manor for the first and last time by the front door.