In the House of Avarice

by Cinaed

Summary

Greed may have been what forced Marley to walk the earth for all eternity, but he felt more bound in life to never be able to love whom he wished.

Notes

Thanks go out to voksen for looking this over for me, and also to the poor soul who prompted this back when queer_fest was a thing because it's been at least three years since I started working on this.

Anyway, merry Christmas! Enjoy the sadness!

See the end of the work for more notes

Love is always a stranger in the house of avarice. -Andreas Capellanus

Jacob Marley grew into his greed the way most young men grew into their clothes-- the avarice sat awkwardly upon him at first, and then gradually grew to fit so well that he could not have imagined anything half so comfortable.
He did not follow Scrooge's particular path towards miserliness, but walked his own road of embittering endeavors to his doom. I am certain you have heard of the story of Ebenezer Scrooge and three particular Spirits, a tale which, among other things, introduced us to one Jacob Marley, Ghost.

Yet there are always other tales, other stories, and this is one of them-- the tragedy of Jacob Marley.

Picture this, if it pleases you: a lad with thirteen years written gently upon his features.

Looking at him, you would know at once his life had been unremarkable. There were no marks of woe upon his face, no desolate grief lurking in his eyes. He moved with the compelling, awkward gait of a colt, his limbs yet too large for his body and all ungainly, but with the promise of future height and strength.

Young Marley's smile was as warm and bright as the sunlight. He bent his head to listen to an exuberant speech from his companion, another lad of similar age, narrowly missing a flailing strike to his jaw as the other boy gestured. A flush was upon his cheeks that, had his mother been watching, would have rushed her to him to check his brow for fever.

"--and everyone loves old Fezziwig, or so my father tells me," the other boy concluded with a merry laugh. As he paused to laugh again, however, some of his eagerness ebbed and shifted to wistfulness. "I wish you were 'prenticed to him as well, Jacob."

"So do I," said Jacob. The flushed expression was matched by a burning look in his eyes-- a look that Dick Wilkins mistook for the imaginings of a future apprenticeship to Master Fezziwig. "But my uncle says that Master Alberts will teach me more than old Fezziwig ever could, and Father agrees with him."

Jacob made a most pitiful attempt to smile once more, his earlier amusement dashed; for the sake of his friend's pride, Dick pretended not to notice the way Jacob's lips trembled. "Well!" he said briskly. "We can always see each other on holidays."

"And we shall write to each other, of course," Jacob said. He hesitated then, a nervous quiver going through his frame that made him bite at the inside of his mouth and squeeze his eyes tightly shut. "Dick," he said, his eyes still closed, as though he could not bear to look at the other boy, "I- - Dick, I wanted--"

"I will miss you as well," said Dick, rather hurriedly. It was not that he was lying-- oh no, he would miss Jacob greatly. The two had been inseparable since they could gurgle in their infant jargon at each other. But Dick was thirteen and therefore at odds with more tender emotions; moreover, he was certain that Jacob was about to incite them both to homesickness before they had even left home. He clasped a hand to Jacob's shoulder, and smiled at him when Jacob opened his eyes. "And once our apprenticeships are over, we can begin our business."

"I--" The rest of the sentence seemed to get lost somewhere between the pit of Jacob's stomach and his lips, and at last he shrugged, swallowed, and attempted another smile. This one, at least, reached his eyes, which now did not quite burn so much as they did gleam wetly at Dick. "Our very own business." He reached out for Dick's shoulder as well, his hand warm, his fingers trembling slightly but his voice gaining strength as he continued. "Misters Marley and Wilkins, at
The winter had come upon the city more fiercely than usual this season, the snow piling up on the rooftops and weighing upon travelers' shoulders. Looking at the pale pearlish blue of the afternoon sky and the lurking clouds heavy with further snow, Jacob wondered if the entirety of the holiday would be a white London.

The incessant cold had sunk into the hollows of his bones and made them ache, his fingers stiff and swollen from the chill. He rubbed his mittened hands together absently, failing to warm them. Frowning at his hands, he grimaced at the sight of a ragged hole in the thumb of one mitten. No wonder the cold persisted! Jacob tucked the offending hand into his pocket. At least he would be home soon, where doubtless Mother would have the stove warming the entire kitchen.

"Jacob!"

He looked up at the call, his heart giving an awkward, compulsive leap as Dick smiled at him. Not for the first time, he silently cursed his heart, that disloyal lump in his chest which seemed to lurch about drunkenly whenever Dick happened to be near.

Five years of apprenticeship had altered Dick in many ways, but all, Jacob privately thought, to the better. He seemed more confident and knowledgeable than ever before, his letters full of humor and invoking a myriad of topics. He looked healthy too, his fleshy stoutness no doubt gained from feasting on Mrs. Fezziwig's famed meals. Currently the cold pinked Dick's cheeks and reddened his chapped lips, but he wasn't shivering too badly, for either his mother or Master Fezziwig had given Dick an early Christmas gift-- a warm-looking coat that Jacob, joints still aching from the cold, envied.

Dick laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, dislodging a dusting of snow from Jacob's coat. "We thought you were going to miss Christmas Eve this year!"

Jacob smiled at that. "As though my mother would not march to Mr. Alberts's warehouse herself and drag me home by the ear if I tried to stay away," he said lightly. It was only then that he noticed another young man standing just behind Dick, and hesitated, flustered a little that his attention had been so fixed upon his friend.
"This is Ebenezer Scrooge, my fellow 'prentice," said Dick, gesturing at his companion. "Ebenezer, this is Jacob Marley."

"Merry Christmas," Scrooge said, and Jacob shook his hand as he surveyed the man who had been so often mentioned in Dick's missives.

Scrooge was not quite handsome, nor would he ever be, Jacob thought, except perhaps to some besotted woman blind to his faults. Even smiling and seemingly at ease, Scrooge's face betrayed his stubbornness-- the resolute jaw, the thin lips, the deep furrow on his brow all contributed to a look of obstinacy that made Jacob wince on behalf of any soul who argued with the fellow. They would sorely regret the attempt, of that he was certain.

"Did you both decline Fezziwig's party then?" Jacob asked in some surprise. Dick had written him pages upon pages about the Christmas Eve party the year prior, detailing the dances and the food. Just thinking of Dick's elaborate description of a particular mince-meat pie made Jacob's mouth water.

"Ah," Dick said, his face turning a deeper shade of red. It was not a flush from the cold, but instead that singular shade that comes into a man's face when he is embarrassed, those particular splotches of color bright against a pale cheek. He rubbed a hand against his jaw, a nervous gesture. His fingernails had been bitten to the quick, Jacob noticed, and were still colored a blackish-gray from earlier attempts to scrub ink from his fingertips. "I--" Dick glanced at Scrooge, and Jacob tried to ignore the white-hot knife of bitter jealousy that cut through him. When, exactly, had he been replaced by this Scrooge in Dick's confidences? "I needed to speak to my family about a- a particular matter, and did not wish to do it by letter," Dick said at last.

Although Jacob raised an eyebrow, Dick set his mouth at a stubborn angle and refused to elaborate. Well, Jacob consoled himself, perhaps he had misread Dick's glance toward Scrooge. Perhaps Dick meant to tell Jacob about the matter in private, when Scrooge was not within earshot.

"So you are the famous Jacob Marley," said Scrooge with a twist of his lips, as though he was biting back further words or tasting something bitter on his tongue. Jacob suspected it was the latter. He had not often felt hatred towards his fellow man, but for Ebenezer Scrooge, he was quite willing to make an exception. His blood flowed hot through his veins, and the hand in his pocket had clenched into so fierce a fist that its very bones ached. Scrooge seemed oblivious to Jacob's dislike, continuing, "How do you like Master Alberts? I hear he is a hard taskmaster."

Once again, Jacob hesitated; his gaze flickered between Dick and Scrooge, his mind racing for a diplomatic response but still puzzling over Dick's secret, worrying at it like a terrier with a bone. His uncle had been right, those years ago. Master Alberts taught him much in the way of business and profit. Still, from the descriptions of old Fezziwig, Jacob rather thought he had not learned how to enjoy the art of business, as Dick had.

"He is very knowledgeable," he said after a stretch of silence that teetered on the brink of discomfort. "I have learned, and continue to learn, a great deal from him." He did not mention the lonely hours spent poring over books until his eyes burned, with only a single, sputtering candle for company, or the way Mr. Alberts only very rarely referred to Jacob by name and more often simply called him 'boy.'

Scrooge opened his mouth for further questioning, and Jacob hastily asked, "And how did Fezziwig take your leave of him?"

"Oh, poorly, very poorly indeed," Scrooge said. Amusement gleamed in his eyes, and as he
smiled now, openly and without awkwardness, Jacob was forced to grudgingly amend his earlier conclusion. When smiling, the stubborn pride eased a bit from the man's face, and Scrooge looked almost likeable. "We might have told him we were ending our apprenticeships, there was such a downcast look upon his face!"

"He all but begged us to stay, until Mrs. Fezziwig began to scold him for keeping us from our families on Christmas," interjected Dick. He still did not meet Jacob's eyes, seemingly ensnared by the way the snow covered the nearby street lamp, his gaze fixed upon the sight like a man dying of thirst might eye a cup of water.

Jacob's anger had briefly warmed him, or at least provided the illusion of warmth, but now he found himself shivering once more. "Come, let us get away from this dreadful weather. My mother will have tea and a fire ready," he said, drawing his coat tighter against the chill. He would take Dick aside at home, ask him once again why he had come home for Christmas.

"Let's," said Scrooge gratefully.

Dick nodded in assent, and Jacob led the way down the street.

Jacob's mother pounced upon him with a cry of joy as soon as he came through the doorway, unshed tears glittering in her eyes. For a moment, he endured the embrace, keenly feeling Dick and Scrooge's glances against his back; then, feeling the catch in his mother's breath that threatened the spilling of those tears, he gave in and enfolded her in his arms as well. He must have grown in the past few months, he realized-- her head now fit right underneath his chin.

After proper introductions had been made, his mother held him at arm's length and eyed his frame. "Mr. Alberts doesn't feed you half so well as he should," she said darkly. She tsked as well at the sight of the offending hole in Jacob's mitten. "Come, all of you, give me your coat and mittens. We'll warm them by the fire." When they didn't immediately hand her the items, she extended her hands. "Come, give them here. You poor lambs must be frozen to the bone."

"Thank you," Scrooge and Dick said together.

Jacob's mother whisked the sodden clothing off to the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, "Leave your boots by the door, dears. There's tea and biscuits in the sitting room. Have as much as you like."

"I have missed your mother's biscuits," Dick said with a sigh. The distracted look had all but left his face now, and he went eagerly to the sitting room, Jacob and Scrooge trailing after like ducklings.

Jacob bit into a biscuit, and half-closed his eyes in bliss as the spices burst upon his tongue. When he sampled the tea, it was strong and blended well with the treat. He was already reaching for another biscuit when Dick cleared his throat.

He looked up to find Dick staring in apparent fascination at the floor.

"Jacob," Dick said, and then stopped, that flush of embarrassment coloring his cheeks once more. His hands, clasped tightly around his tea cup, were trembling a little. If he strained his ears, Jacob could hear the cup rattling against the saucer. Dick licked his lips, biting at his lower lip, and Jacob felt an all-too familiar jolt low in his stomach at the sight of that reddened mouth.

"Dick," he prodded, when Dick licked his lips again and did not speak. He glanced at Scrooge, but the other man appeared content to sit there and sip his tea, seemingly unaware of Dick's discomfort.
"The reason I came home this holiday," Dick said at last, voice slow, in a tone Jacob couldn't define. "It's to tell my parents that I am courting Annis Fezziwig. We plan to marry once my apprenticeship is over."

Jacob couldn't breathe. There was a dull roaring in his ears, as though some foul creature had crouched behind his head and now bellowed out its rage or pain. He was vaguely aware that he still held a half-eaten biscuit in his nerveless fingers, the treat crumbling to pieces as he stared at Dick. If his earlier bitterness had felt like a knife, this, this felt like a sword sliding between his ribs and piercing the heart. His heart stuttered and ached in his chest, and he still couldn't breathe.

"Oh," he said faintly, just a slight puff of his last breath. He was grateful now that Dick still stared at the floor, face red and countenance both sheepish and ecstatic. Dick could not see Jacob's expression, which no doubt betrayed his anguish.

It was not that Jacob had ever thought that Dick's tastes were in any way similar to his. Oh, he'd wished it so, but he'd always known otherwise. He had seen the way Dick's gaze lingered on pretty girls, knew Dick's taste in women as well as he knew his own complete indifference to the fairer sex. Still, it was one thing to know that a love could never be returned, and quite another to have one's hopes dashed so thoroughly, to see Dick's dreamy, love-struck expression and imagine a future where Dick and Annis would have a whole brood of children. He would be Uncle Jacob, the lonely, hopeless bachelor, and--

He had forgotten Scrooge yet again. It was not until the other man made a brief, restless movement that Jacob remembered he was there, his horrified gaze snapping to Dick's fellow apprentice. Surely Scrooge had seen, surely he would announce Jacob's perversion to Dick and the rest of the household--

The other man met his gaze, and Jacob inhaled sharply, for he could not make heads or tails of Scrooge's expression. He searched Scrooge's face for disgust, but there was only a quiet appraisal and perhaps a calculating gleam in his eye.

"It is a good match," Scrooge said. "Miss Fezziwig has inherited all of her parents' finest qualities."

At that Jacob found his voice again. "Indeed. I..hope you are very happy, Dick," he said around a lump in his throat that ached with every swallow. "Although I am certain that you will be exceedingly content."

It was the right thing to say, for Dick looked at him finally, euphoria naked upon his face. Had he thought Jacob would scoff at a marriage to Fezziwig's daughter or mock him for abandoning bachelorthood before they'd started their business? "Oh, Jacob, she is wonderful," Dick said, his delighted laughter ringing through the room. "She is the prettiest girl in all of London, and the most graceful dancer. And--"

Dick would extol Miss Fezziwig's virtues for the next hour or more, Jacob realized with a sinking heart. Still, he forced his lips into the semblance of a smile, and brought the remains of the now unappetizing biscuit to his lips, nodding whenever Dick paused to take a breath.

All the while, he could feel Scrooge's gaze upon him, still inscrutable, and wondered what on earth the other man was thinking.
The day of Dick's wedding dawned bright and clear, seeming to mock Jacob for his misery. Looking out at the cloudless sky, he swore softly under his breath. It was not that he wanted rain to spoil the event, but must the day be perfect, as though God himself smiled upon the union?

Annis would look beautiful, he knew, made transcendent from joy. She was a plump, cheerful woman, the type who had a merry twinkle in her eye even when she looked stern, and laughter lurking behind every frown. Her absolute devotion to Dick, the way she looked at him with warm, adoring eyes, made Jacob both approve of her and despair. Dick would be endlessly happy with her, he knew, and somehow that made the loss cut all the deeper.

Annis would be Dick's constant companion, his dearest friend, his touchstone, for the rest of their lives. Jacob would be second-best, and then, as the family grew, third and fourth and onward, always on the outskirts of Dick's attention and never again the focus.

If Jacob were a better man, perhaps he would not begrudge them their happiness but rather wholly rejoice in it. He was not that better man; bitterness welled up in his throat like bile.

"The clouds have cleared away," a voice said from behind him. Surprise skittered up his spine as he turned to see Ebenezer in the doorway, his gaze fixed upon the pale sky. "Dick will be relieved."

"Yes," said Jacob shortly. Since that disastrous occasion of the previous Christmas Eve, he had exchanged a handful of letters with Ebenezer, the polite, distant missives of two men who knew each other through a mutual acquaintance and shared a common interest in business. He had wondered all the while when Ebenezer would broach the subject of Jacob's despair upon Dick's impending marriage, but Ebenezer had never written or spoken of it.

Perhaps Ebenezer didn't care, though Jacob wondered greatly at the thought.

"I have a proposition for you, if you would hear it," Ebenezer said.

Jacob stared. Telling himself he shouldn't leap to conclusions, he nevertheless wondered what, exactly, this proposition entailed. He had not been able to read Ebenezer's look that day in his sitting room, but he had not seen any sign that Ebenezer was like him in any way. He hadn't seen a spark of interest, or the sympathy that would come from a man of similar position. And was Ebenezer not courting Miss Belle Wilde? It could not be that, he told his pounding heart. So what was it? Blackmail, perhaps? Now that Jacob was free of his apprenticeship, he would soon be earning a salary as a clerk... But it would be a mere pittance for a few years still, and Ebenezer had not seemed the sort.

"Speak," he said through dry lips.

What Ebenezer said instead was so unexpected that a half-laugh of surprise escaped Jacob's lips. Still, he had never in his wildest dreams imagined that Ebenezer would say, "Dick has told me of your plans to create a business together. If you are willing, I think we should be partners instead."

"You wish to be my business partner," Jacob said, incredulous. Ebenezer knew what he was, had to know, and yet he wanted to be business partners? "I don't understand."

"It is simple, really," said Ebenezer in a dry, matter-of-fact way that suggested he had recited this speech to himself a half-dozen times. "While I admire Dick greatly, it is plain to me that he will grow up to be another Fezziwig. I suspect he will even inherit the warehouse from Fezziwig when the old fellow dies. Oh, Dick shall gather loyal clients to him, but he will never be rich. And I-- and I think you-- wish to be. To have a seat on the exchange, to--"
The surprise had slowly been replaced by anger, and now Jacob interrupted him. "You would have me betray him."

"He might think it so," Ebenezer agreed. "However, it would be a disservice to yourself if you became his partner. Surely you must see that."

"I do not--" Jacob began hotly, and then stopped.

He thought of what a partnership with Dick would mean—seeing Dick every day, listening to his stories of what Annis had said the night before, or what his youngest had accomplished that morning, and then having to go home alone. Knowing that he would never have anyone to greet him at his doorway with a smile and query of how his day had been, while Annis and Dick's future children flocked to Dick's knee. Being in Dick's presence for most of the day for a good portion of each week, wanting and never having until his love twisted and soured.

He could not hate Dick now, but perhaps bitterness would carve away his love and replace it with hatred someday. Jacob could not bear that thought, and perhaps that was what made him say, "Let me think on it. I shall have an answer for you in a week."

Ebenezer smiled a thin look of satisfaction, as though Jacob had said yes. "A week, then," he said, and extended his hand.

Jacob shook the other man's hand, and did not let himself think of Dick's betrayed expression, should he choose to accept Ebenezer's offer. Instead he thought of his own warehouse, with his name above the door, and the way a warm coat and a heavy purse would feel upon his person.

"Tell me again why we accepted this invitation, Ebenezer?" Jacob asked, eyeing the theatre with deep disfavor. He had never enjoyed plays, not even as a youth, unable to find anything interesting about paying people to lie to you. Time had only intensified his dislike of them, for they were frivolous, wasteful things.

He readjusted his spectacles as he waited for Ebenezer's answer, for the years had worsened his eyesight until he had to wear spectacles all the time. The crowd of theatre-goers made the place unbearably warm; at least it seemed so to Jacob. Already his head was aching, a dull pressure between his eyes that promised discomfort throughout the performance.

"Because it was a gift from Lyons, and we don't wish to offend him," Ebenezer said. "He has too many friends at the exchange." At least he too looked unenthusiastic, glaring at the crowd that entered the building and muttering a cross, "Bah, humbug," under his breath.

Jacob stepped into the theatre, ticket clenched in his hand. Hopefully the play would not be too unbearable. He glanced at the title, but "The Roaring Girl" gave him no hint as to whether the play would be even a little entertaining.

"Jacob! Jacob Marley!" A bright, merry voice greeted him, and he looked up, squinting in the direction the voice had come from. He did not recognize the woman whose eyes twinkled with delight at him, her hair streaked silver. "If it isn't Jacob Marley himself! I did not know you were a patron of the arts, good sir."

"I am not," Jacob said dryly, aware that Ebenezer hovered by his elbow and looked equally bewildered by the woman. "I am afraid you have the advantage of me, Mrs....?"
The woman laughed. "I suppose it has been years," she said, apparently not finding offense at his confusion. "I am Annis Wilkins, Mr. Marley. My husband will be delighted to see you. He was just saying the other day what a name you've made for yourself at the exchange!"

Jacob felt his heart falter in his chest, a brief moment of shock where his heart forgot to beat and his lungs to gather oxygen, and then he took a breath and assumed a polite smile. Dick had forgiven him for becoming Ebenezer's partner rather than his, of course, for that was Dick's way, but somehow the friendship had grown distant over the years nonetheless and dwindled into mere acquaintances.

When had he last spoken to Dick? Six years ago? Ten? Jacob had told himself it was for the best, but it seemed even at fifty years of age, his heart thought it should still ache over a childhood infatuation. "And how is Dick faring?" he asked, the name bittersweet on his tongue. "I have heard he manages the warehouse well." He thought Ebenezer snorted at that, but he didn't glance over to confirm his suspicions.

"Oh, he--" Annis began, and then waved. "There he is! I shall let him speak for himself."

Dick had changed over the years, as mortal men do. The decades had creased the lines around his eyes and turned his hair a brilliant white like untouched snow. He had run not quite to fat, but to portliness, his face as round as old Fezziwig's had been. Jacob searched the man's features for some semblance of the young man he had known and cared for, and found it in his eyes, the same cheerful brown shade with flecks of gold.

"Jacob Marley," Dick said, clasping Jacob's hand and shaking it eagerly. "How are you? I was just saying to Annis the other day how well you and Ebenezer had done for yourselves!"

"So she was telling me," Jacob said. He wondered at their blitheness, knowing full well his and Ebenezer's reputation for miserliness, a word bandied about by fools who did not know how to handle money properly. The ache in his chest had not diminished, but rather seemed to strengthen at the sight of Dick, like an old wound reopening. "It is...good to see you."

"It is more than good to see you, Jacob, it is marvelous, simply marvelous." Dick turned a warm smile upon Ebenezer as well. "I must say, I never expected to find you or Jacob at the theatre!"

Ebenezer smiled thinly and didn't comment, except to say, "Forgive me, but it looks as though the play is about to begin. Perhaps we can continue this discussion afterwards?" It was not a kindness on Ebenezer's part -- it was fairly obvious he simply wished to be rid of Annis and Dick's cheerful countenances -- but Jacob felt a rush of gratitude towards him nonetheless. He needed to be away from Dick long enough to regain his bearings and steel himself against any future conversation.

"Oh yes, you must come to our house afterwards," Annis agreed.

Jacob sat stiffly in his seat, mind awhirl. Dick Wilkins, after all these years. What would they say to each other, after the play was over? No doubt Dick would regale him with stories of his children, now grown and living their own lives. Jacob pressed a hand to his chest, where his heart still ached, and frowned.

"You heard he manages the business well?" Ebenezer murmured into his ear. "I had heard otherwise, that he has made a few bad investments last year. Perhaps we should--"

"Enough," Jacob whispered even as he instinctively calculated how much the Fezziwig warehouse was worth and how badly those investments might have harmed the business. After a moment, he nodded to himself. Dick's warehouse would survive a few more years, if Dick did not
make any more poor decisions. He fixed his gaze upon the stage as the prologue began, ignoring Ebenezer's questioning look.

He could not pay attention to the play, however, not when he could see Dick a few rows down, clasping his wife's hands in his own and staring intently at the stage, wonder on his face like a child's. Looking at Dick now, he marveled at the changes time had wrought upon them both. Had it really been nearly thirty years ago that Jacob had accepted Ebenezer's offer and begun his rise from a lowly clerk to one of the most powerful men in London?

Jacob smiled to himself. Perhaps he would suggest they come to his home instead. Surely Dick would be impressed by the building and have to acknowledge how well Jacob had done in life, despite his permanent state of bachelorhood.

"...that disease of which all old men sicken, avarice, never infected me," one of the actors said, the words breaking into Jacob's thoughts.

Jacob stifled a laugh that quickly became a cough, deep and racking, until his eyes watered and he couldn't see, lost in the struggle for breath. He was vaguely aware of heads beginning to turn in concern and Ebenezer frowning at him, but his vision remained blurred as he blinked away tears. Breathless, he pressed his hand against his chest once more, feeling the ache spread while his lungs struggled. His breath came whistling out of him in a quiet, painful wheeze.

"I think I should go outside," Jacob whispered, the words rattling just as weakly as his breathing. "I shall--" He went to rise, still half-blind, and stumbled, darkness swallowing him quickly and quietly while an actor, as though from a distant room, said, "He means not himself, I'm sure."

The fever licked at Jacob's very marrow. He moved restlessly upon the bed. Outside his window, snow fell, thick upon the ground and tempting beyond measure. He longed to go outside and roll in the snow; perhaps that would cool him down, quench the unbearable heat running through his veins.

"He will not come," he whispered to the doctor, who looked puzzled. "He will not--" A coughing fit racked him. Ebenezer was his only friend, and even that would not bring him to Jacob's bedside for his final hours. A harsh laugh caught and burned in his chest. "The king is in his counting-house, you see, counting out his money--" His throat hurt too much to continue, and so he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, time had passed. The snow had stopped falling, the sky beginning to darken. Dick sat next to him, lithe and merry and looking all of fifteen, his hand hot on Jacob's shoulder, his golden-brown eyes bright. Jacob took in a shallow breath, but before he could summon enough breath to speak, Dick vanished.

Jacob laughed, a hoarse croak that tore at his throat. Dying alone had to be better than dying surrounded by ghosts and regrets over choices made decades past, much less apparitions of men yet living. "Leave me be," he murmured to the vanished spectre. "Leave me be and let me...."

He must have closed his eyes once more, for then his mother was sitting next to him, a look of loving concern darkening her eyes and furrowing her brow. She opened her mouth to speak, even as Jacob shook his head and gasped, "No." He did not want her spectre here, nineteen years dead.
She smiled sadly but obeyed, fading from view like mist.

“No more,” he said to the empty room, the order coming out a weak whisper lost beneath the sound of the bells chiming. He counted them out, shaping each number soundlessly as another cough pressed down upon his chest.

It was an hour yet until Christmas. He closed his eyes. Another coughing fit seized him. If more spectres appeared now, he could not see them, blinded as he was by tears. If they had appeared, he could not banish them, breathless as he was by the weight on his chest as though Ebenezer had somehow crept into the bedroom and placed the ledger upon his chest.

Distantly, the church bells rang once more. How had another fifteen minutes passed? Jacob sank against the pillows, staring again towards the window. The streetlamps were lighted, giving him enough light to see that snow was still falling. He struggled upright, the ground pitching beneath his feet, and yet he managed to reach the window and open the latch.

He sank to his knees, most of his strength leaving him as the winter air touched his face in a cool caress. The night air banished some of the heat from his skin. And yet the relief was fleeting; it seemed to him that the wind sounded unnatural tonight, assaulting his ears like wails of despair.

Jacob would have shaken his head at his imagination if he’d had enough strength left. Instead he let his brow rest upon the windowsill, his hands dropping to his side. One by one his senses seemed to be fading. Even the fever seemed a distant thing. With the last of his strength, he whispered almost confidingly against the smooth wood, a faint, crooked smile upon his dry lips, “Well, Mister Wilkins? What think you of my house?”

End Notes

"The Roaring Girl" is a play by Aphra Behn, who was pretty amazing. She worked as a spy for Charles II and was the first female playwright in England.

Although she faded into obscurity for quite some time and wasn't really noticed again until the 20th century, when feminists like Virginia Woolf noticed her, I decided to take some artistic license and use the play anyway because the dialogue worked way too well.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!