



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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**GHOSTS' GLOOM**  
**and the death of a housekeeper**

by  
Paul Lewis



Frontispiece by Wm Parkinson  
*Ghosts' Gloom*, London 1889, by J. G. Holmes

## Ghosts' Gloom

Wilkie Collins put a dedication in every one of his books to family, friends, and professional acquaintances. But only four nineteenth century books have been identified with a dedication to Wilkie.<sup>1</sup> One is by J. G. Holmes in his short novel *Ghosts' Gloom* (1889).

To Wilkie Collins, Esq.,  
This Novel  
is gratefully dedicated  
by  
an admirer of his genius  
and a  
recipient of his kindness.

No record of Wilkie's kindness to Holmes is known and his name does not appear in any of Wilkie's surviving letters. But he may well have offered Holmes advice and support as he did in later life to other aspiring writers such as Frank Archer and Hall Caine. A copy of the book was in Wilkie's Library when he died, presumably sent to him by the admiring Holmes.<sup>2</sup>

## Publication

*Ghosts' Gloom* was first mentioned in the *Publishers' Circular* on 1 October 1888 under 'Novels and Gift Books'.<sup>3</sup> It was published in early November that year, though dated on the title page 1889, by Swann Sonnenschein in one volume for six shillings (30p) with a suitably dramatic frontispiece by William Parkinson.<sup>4</sup>

The book was the 21- year-old Holmes's second. His previous novel had been a triple decker called *Pearl Sutton's Love* published at the full price of 31s 6d (£1.58) – more than a week's wages for most – by Wyman & Sons towards the end of April 1888.<sup>5</sup>

To have a 335 page story issued barely six months later was an achievement in itself. The publishers accompanied the announcement of its publication with an advert stating in large capitals

A NEW SENSATIONAL NOVEL, DEDICATED TO WILKIE COLLINS

leaving for the small print the fact that J. G. Holmes had already published *Pearl Sutton's Love*.<sup>6</sup>

It was reviewed in the *Publishers' Circular* of 6 December 1888, which was traditionally a bumper issue to prepare the book trade for Christmas. The review states that the book's main character

Eva keeps a journal, after the manner of Wilkie Collins' heroines. In fact the book is dedicated to him, and doubtless he will feel the force of the sincerest form of flattery.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Gasson, *Wilkie Collins – an illustrated guide*, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> William Baker, *Wilkie Collins's Library – a Reconstruction*, 2002, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 1 October 1888, p.1145.

<sup>4</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 15 November 1888, p. 1448.

<sup>5</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 1 May 1888, p. 457.

<sup>6</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 15 November 1888, p. 1458.

It contains a rather poor plot summary and concludes

It is a lugubrious book, full of ghosts, murderers, unlucky speculations, and unhappy incidents, which have a special charm for vast numbers of readers.<sup>7</sup>

A display advert in the same issue reminded the booksellers who read the periodical that it was 'DEDICATED TO WILKIE COLLINS'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Family**

James Gibb Holmes was born on 13 December 1866 in Huddersfield. His mother was Christiana Louisa née Gibb. His father, Thomas Walter Holmes, was a bank clerk.

In the autumn of 1873 his mother died. Some years later his father paid £6-10s (£6.50) a quarter for James to board at the Turton Hall Academy in Gildersome near Leeds. He is recorded there aged 14 in the 1881 Census when the headmaster was Baptist Minister John Haslam (born c.1840). His father is recorded in the same census in Huddersfield with his youngest son Charles, then aged 9, and a servant Ann Elizabeth aged 19.

### **Shooting**

Less than four years later the eighteen-year-old Holmes was a witness to his father shooting dead their housekeeper.<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Ann Blackburn, 45, had begun work at their house in Bentley Street on Thursday 8 January 1885 as a general servant and with responsibility for the family's washing. Thomas Holmes was chief clerk at the Huddersfield Union Bank and lived there with two of his sons James, 18, and Charles, 13. Sarah was shot dead five days later on Tuesday 13 January.

James testified at the inquest into Sarah's death that he had been woken up by hearing a shot at about four o'clock on Tuesday morning and his father, who was fully dressed, told him that there was a burglar in the house, and he had fired his revolver to alarm the intruder. Younger brother Charles stayed in the bedroom, but James dressed and went downstairs with his father. They saw a light in the cellar kitchen. Thomas called out 'Who's there?' but there was no reply, and he fired a shot down the cellar stairs, again, he said, to alarm whoever was there. Almost at once they realised that he had shot the housekeeper who was seen lying on her back at the foot of the stairs. The bullet entered her right eye and she died immediately.

It remained a mystery why she was up and in the kitchen that early in the morning. Her brother testified that she was an early riser, but the inquest heard that she had risen only at 7.30 the previous morning.<sup>10</sup>

Two days later, Thomas was indicted for manslaughter. But on 7 February 1885 at West Yorkshire Assizes in Leeds, he was acquitted by a jury which took just two minutes to accept the evidence that Sarah's death had been due to misadventure.<sup>11</sup> The judge, Mr. Justice Cave, said the case

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<sup>7</sup> *Publishers' Circular* 6 December 1888, p. 1542.

<sup>8</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 6 December 1888, p. 1622.

<sup>9</sup> *Yorkshire Gazette*, 14 January 1885, p.6d.

<sup>10</sup> *Yorkshire Gazette*, 16 January 1885, p. 6e.

<sup>11</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 7 February 1885, p. 7f.

afforded one more proof of the danger of indiscriminately permitting persons to be possessed of firearms. There is extreme danger in persons carrying revolvers, especially persons of a timid nature.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the event encouraged the young Holmes to try his hand at writing a sensation novel. He lived with his father Thomas until his death on 23 March 1925. James was the administrator of the estate worth £220-10s-9d, around £13,000 in today's money.

### Writer

How the six-shilling *Ghosts' Gloom* fared in the packed book market of Christmas 1888, and how *Pearl Sutton's Love* did at 31s 6d earlier in the year, we will probably never know.<sup>13</sup> Few copies of either have ever been seen on the market.

However, sales of *Ghosts' Gloom* must have been good enough for Sonnenschein to issue his third and final book, *In Sinful Paths: A Story of the Euston Road* published in late August 1889. It was just 160 pages long and sold for 1s (5p).<sup>14</sup>

Two years after that foray into writing his father described the 24-year-old on the 1891 Census form as unemployed but by 1901 he was working as a shorthand teacher. In 1898, 1899, and 1902 he played chess for Yorkshire against Lancashire, drawing two and losing one.<sup>15</sup> He still lived at home ten years later when the 1911 Census was taken on 2 April. There, with no known published works for more than 20 years, his father recorded James's occupation as 'Writer'. And in September 1939, aged 72, James describes himself on the ID card Register as 'Author (retired)'.

Less than a year later, on 28 May 1940, he died at home, 34 Victoria Road, Bridgewater, Somerset, of a gastric ulcer and haematemesis, leaving £424-15s-9d to his widow Marian or, if she pre-deceased him, to his two stepchildren. That was worth around £23,000 in today's money.

He had married Frances Marian Barrow née Barker, a 35-year-old widow, in Oxford Register Office on 7 July 1925, three months after his father died. She already had two children – Kathlyn Mae (1917–2011) and Joshua Francis Victor (1920–2012). James, a bachelor when he married aged 58, had no children of his own.

Marian registered James's death and gave his profession as 'An Author (Retired)'. She died in 1965.

*A reprint of Ghosts' Gloom, published by the British Library in 2011, can be found online ISBN 9781241378561.*

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<sup>12</sup> *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 14 February 1885, p. 8b. Adults were allowed to possess a hand gun in their own home without a licence until the Pistols Act 1903.

<sup>13</sup> 7,760 new books or editions were recorded that year, *Publishers' Circular*, 31 December 1888, p. 1808.

<sup>14</sup> *Publishers' Circular*, 2 September 1889, p.1044.

<sup>15</sup> <https://mannchess.org.uk/People/Holmes,%20James%20Gibb.htm>, retrieved 31 July 2021.