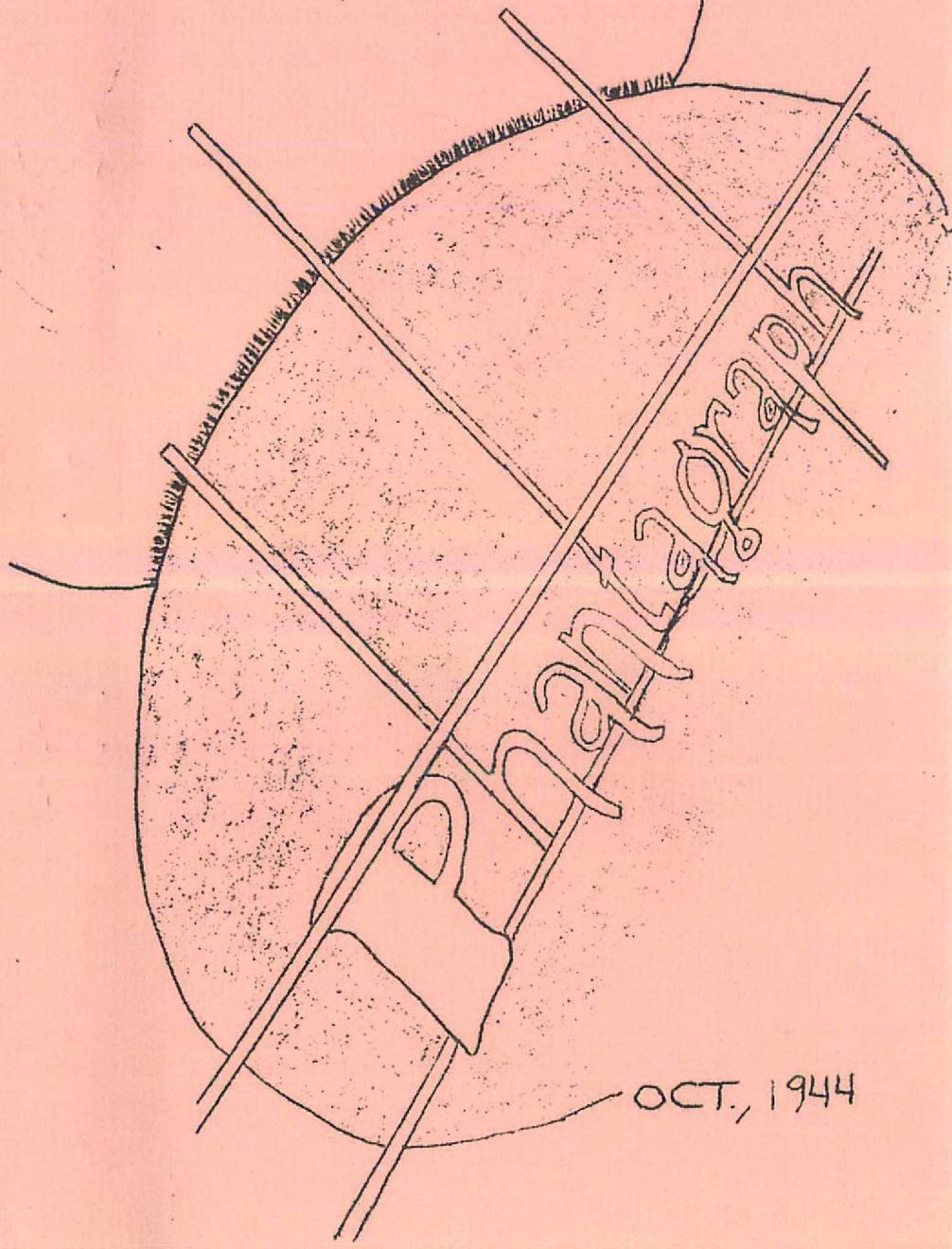


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THE HAUNTED PARLOR

By Donald A. Wollheim

Never shall I disbelieve in the evil spirits that walk the night. Never shall I scoff at the dread phantoms of the earth-bound, of the damned who eternally haunt the scenes of their mortal sins. Never, after what I saw in the parlor of Great-aunt Matilda's home on the Sussex Downs that dread summer morn.

I had been spending a few weeks as her guest on that, my first trip to my ancestral land; she had insisted upon my staying at the rambling old mansion which, legend had it, had been handed down ten generations. My Great-aunt proved to be one of those stern old ladies who take to spiritualism and seances to while away their old age. A kindly woman, yet with that pseudo-scientific intent on the reality of the after-life and her various mediumistic experiences.

I had, on several occasions, discussed her ideas with her. She proved tolerant but unweildine in her insistence upon the afterworld and such things as ghosts and hauntings. Of course, I myself believed in no such nonsense; fool that I was, and chided her a bit. I pointed out that surely in ten generations of my family (knowing something of the doings of still existing relatives!) there must certainly be a haunt or two hanging about the ancestral chambers.

At this remark, my Great-aunt Matilda ~~xxx~~ paled visibly. To my delight, she admitted that such was the case. But, she hastened to add, she had never seen the thing--nor had any living person and survived. I pressed her for further data but she would vouchsafe no more.

In the course of the next few days I kept my eyes and ears open and made a little game of trying to spot the whereabouts of her haunt. Did the figure stalk the halls at night? Did it walk the gardens at Xmas Eve? Could it be found in the ancient medioval foundations or the cobwebby attic? Then I made a little discovery--accidental but just the same, the discovery.

I overheard my aunt giving a new housemaid instructions. She was telling the girl her duties about the house. I noted that she gave her special insistence upon "preparing the first floor parlor" the very first thing in the morning. Before anything else. My aunt was extremely insistent upon the subject.

Now this was decidedly odd, because usually servants do not clean or make up rooms until long after breakfast. Therefore my suspicion fixed upon the parlor.

The room was big, not out of the ordinary. It was decorated in a very much mid-Victorian manner--a lot of overstuffed furniture, bric-a-brac, horrible wall paper, three forbidding family portraits, a huge bearskin rug in the center of the room, and so on.

Upon all of these things I gave attention. The portraits bore promise of possibilities--they were old enough. The whole room was vaguely unpleasant, but after all, all rooms of this period are. The bear rug occupied my attention a bit--it was very long haired and ferocious looking. Perhaps it was the haunt? Maybe the spectre materialized under it?

Or perhaps it served to cover up some constantly recurring mark? A spot of blood renewing itself each night and needing to be washed off each morning? Or could it be that there was a poltergeist that moved and rearranged the furniture?

I noted then that after dinner, when night had fallen, Great-aunt Matilda always closed the double parlor doors. They were not opened again until the next morning after the girl had presumably "prepared" the room.

I noted carefully the times of these things. Next I would come out in the hall at midnight and listen, but I heard no sounds from the room. I am sure the house was asleep. Had there been poltergeists or ghastly prowlers, I should have heard. I resisted the temptation to go into the parlor in the dead of night because, though I do not believe in ghosts, I might miss my step in the dark and fall.

-----the phantagraph-----

But one morning, oh dreadful day,
I slipped quietly out of bed at the first
rays of the dawn. The maid would not be
up for another hour, and I could get down
to that parlor and see for myself what the
night had brought.

I tiptoed downstairs in the grey
light of dawn and through the halls. I
came to the great double doors that shut
off the room of mystery. Placing my hands
upon the knobs, I hesitated a moment.
What would I see? What weird mystery would
unfold before my eyes? Then I threw them
open.

Oh, ghastly moment! It shall haunt
me forever.

The room was unchanged. Things were
not moved. There was no blood spot. But
an uncontrollable chill ran through me as
my eyes fastened upon the floor. The hair
on the bearskin rug, which had been brushed
flat, was now standing straight up!

I fled gibbering.

PHANTAGRAPH

"The Haunted Parlor" is graciously
dedicated to Philip Van Doren Stern; Lee
Wright, Boris Karloff, Bennett Corff, Joseph
Lewis French, Herbert Wise, Phyllis Fraser
and other collectors of worn-at-the-edges
ghost tales. They have needed a new story
for such a long time...

The Phantagraph apologizes for its cover,
though at instant of typing, it doesn't know
what it will look like. John Michel is still
too ill to turn out our famed silk screen
jobs for several months. And we must resort
to makeshift. Bear with us.

-DAW