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The Pemberton Hall Ghost

Pemberton Hall

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The Presence of Pemberton Hall (from 'Ghost Stories of Illinois')

Jo-Anne Christensen

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Pemberton Ghost file

GHOST STORIES

of Illinois

Jo-Anne Christensen



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The Presence of Pemberton Hall

The year is 1916. The place, Eastern Illinois University, in Charleston. Pemberton Hall, the women's dormitory, is besieged by a nighttime thunderstorm. Across the deserted campus, the wind howls, and rain lashes mercilessly against the windows and doors. Inside "Pem Hall," where it is warm and dry, one sleepless student tiptoes quietly up to the fourth-floor music room. She doesn't want to disturb anyone, but if she can't sleep, she wants to practice piano. Amidst the violent sounds of the storm, she reasons, no one will hear her. No one will even know that she is there.

The girl is right on one account, but wrong on the other. No one will hear her above the raging elements. But someone does know she is there. She is being watched.

The soft notes of the piano can be heard only faintly on the stairway leading to the isolated music room. Up those stairs, a large, menacing figure advances. His heart beats madly; his eyes are wild and bright. This is what he has been waiting for: finally, he has caught one of them alone.

She screams once, but her voice is no match for the din of the storm.

When he leaves, he is certain she is dead. Within minutes, he will be right, but for now a dim consciousness, a faint will to struggle against the brutal horror, survives. Bruised and bloody, the girl somehow summons the strength to inch down the staircase and crawl along the quiet hall. Finally, she reaches the door of a trusted counselor named Mary Hawkins. Unable to lift her nearly lifeless form from the floor, she scratches pitifully on the

wood. When Counselor Hawkins opens the door, it is a moment too late. The girl's battered body lies dead, in a dark and spreading pool of blood.

Mary Hawkins is overcome with guilt. Even after the body has been removed, even after the calamitous news has swept through the school and the town and died down again, a single, unflagging thought tortures her conscience day and night: a girl who was in her charge was killed. When she sleeps, her nightmares are dominated by the image of the slain girl and the knowledge that the door was answered too late. When she wakes, she is haunted by her memories. Finally, when she can cope no longer, Mary Hawkins takes her own life. But death offers no escape: more than 80 years later, Mary Hawkins' spirit remains doomed to walk the halls of the dormitory, doomed eternally to watch over "her girls".

This grisly story is not true, according to Doris Enochs, who spent 10 years as a Pemberton Hall counselor. A woman named Mary Hawkins did work as a dorm counselor from 1910 to 1917. The woman did die, and is honored with a commemorative plaque in the hall's lobby. But Enochs has dismissed the rest of the story as sheer fantasy, stating that there have never been any records of a murder in Pem Hall. The tale is merely a tradition: the upperclassmen use it annually to frighten the freshmen. And each time it is told, according to Enochs, it becomes a little more dramatic.

The fact that a few different versions of the story exist indicates that it may be more deeply rooted in folklore than in fact. Nevertheless, Pemberton Hall is the site of some very strange occurrences. Even the no-nonsense Doris Enochs has admitted that "some weird things happen there."

For many decades, residents of Pemberton Hall have reported experiencing some very unusual phenomena. Furniture has been known to move without assistance. Lights flash, and windows

open inexplicably—even on the fourth floor, which has long been locked and off-limits. There are sometimes footsteps heard in the hallways, and light rapping sounds at the doors, but whenever anyone investigates, the hallways are empty. On some frightening occasions, there have been a few bloody footprints left behind. They are visible for a few minutes, and then vanish.

Occasionally, faint strains of piano music can be heard coming from the fourth floor. There is still a piano up there, but the floor has been securely closed off for years. On the stairs that now lead to nowhere, an even more unnerving noise is occasionally heard. Residents describe it as a sickening, dragging sound.

Though they attract less attention, some of the supernatural events at Pemberton Hall are quite the opposite of harmful. Doors that have been left unlocked are always secured by morning, and radios and televisions that have been left playing are dutifully shut off before their owners return. It does seem that there could be at least two ghosts haunting Pemberton Hall—one who acts the part of a counsellor, and one who might be reliving a violent end. Could it be?

Whether there is even a grain of truth to the murder story remains doubtful. Still, among the fresh-faced students who regularly come and go, there are some residents of a more permanent—if not eternal—nature residing within the gothic stone walls of haunted Pemberton Hall.