

# The Dampmere Mystery

By John Kendrick Bangs

Dawson wished to be alone; he had a tremendous bit of writing to do, which could not be done in New York, where his friends were constantly interrupting him, and that is why he had taken the little cottage at Dampmere for the early spring months. The cottage just suited him. It was remote from the village of Dampmere, and the rental was suspiciously reasonable; he could have had a ninety-nine years' lease of it for nothing, had he chosen to ask for it, and would promise to keep the premises in repair; but he was not aware of that fact when he made his arrangements with the agent. Indeed, there was a great deal that Dawson was not aware of when he took the place. If there hadn't been he never would have thought of going there, and this story would not have been written.

It was late in March when, with his Chinese servant and his mastiff, he entered into possession and began the writing of the story he had in mind. It was to be the effort of his life. People reading it would forget Thackeray and everybody else, and would, furthermore, never wish to see another book. It was to be the literature of all time—past and present and future; in it all previous work was to be forgotten, all future work was to be rendered unnecessary.

For three weeks everything went smoothly enough, and the work upon the great story progressed to the author's satisfaction; but as Easter approached something queer seemed to develop in the Dampmere cottage. It was undefinable, intangible, invisible, but it was there. Dawson's hair would not stay down. When he rose up in the morning he would find every single hair on his head standing erect, and plaster it as he would with his brushes dipped in water, it could not be induced to lie down again. More inconvenient than this, his silken mustache was affected in the same way, so that instead of drooping in a soft fascinating curl over his lip, it also rose up like a row of bayonets and lay flat against either side of his nose; and with this singular hirsute affliction there came into Dawson's heart a feeling of apprehension over something, he knew not what, that speedily developed into an uncontrollable terror that pervaded his whole being, and more thoroughly destroyed his ability to work upon his immortal story than ten inconsiderate New York friends dropping in on him in his busy hours could possibly have done.

"What the dickens is the matter with me?" he said to himself, as for the sixteenth time he brushed his rebellious locks. "What has come over my hair? And what under the sun am I afraid of? The idea of a man of my size looking under the bed every night for—for something—burglar, spook, or what I don't know. Waking at midnight shivering with fear, walking in the broad light of day filled with terror; by Jove! I almost wish I was Chung Lee down in the kitchen, who goes about his business undisturbed."

Having said this, Dawson looked about him nervously. If he had expected a dagger to be plunged into his back by an unseen foe he could not have looked around more anxiously; and then he fled, actually fled in terror into the kitchen, where Chung Lee was preparing his dinner. Chung was only a Chinaman, but he was a living creature, and Dawson was afraid to be alone.

"Well, Chung," he said, as affably as he could, "this is a pleasant change from New York, eh?"

"Plutty good," replied Chung, with a vacant stare at the pantry door. "Me likes Noo Lork allee same. Dampemere kind of flunny, Mister Dawson."

“Funny, Chung?” queried Dawson, observing for the first time that the Chinaman’s queue stood up as straight as a garden stake, and almost scraped the ceiling as its owner moved about. “Funny?”

“Yeppee, flunny,” returned Chung, with a shiver. “Me no likee. Me flightened.”

“Oh, come!” said Dawson, with an affected lightness. “What are you afraid of?”

“Slumting,” said Chung. “Do’ know what. Go to bled; no sleepee; pigtail no stay down; heart go thump allee night.”

“By Jove !” thought Dawson; “he’s got it too!”

“Evlyting flunny here,” resumed Chung.

“Jack he no likee too.”

Jack was the mastiff.

“What’s the matter with Jack?” queried Dawson. “You don’t mean to say Jack’s afraid?”

“Do’ know if he ‘flaid,” said Chung, “He growl most time.”

Clearly there was no comfort for Dawson here. To rid him of his fears it was evident that Chung could be of no assistance, and Chung’s feeling that even Jack was affected by the uncanny something was by no means reassuring. Dawson went out into the yard and whistled for the dog, and in a moment the magnificent animal came bounding up. Dawson patted him on the back, but Jack, instead of rejoicing as was his wont over this token of his master’s affection, gave a yelp of pain, which was quite in accord with Dawson’s own feelings, for gentle though the pat was, his hand after it felt as though he had pressed it upon a bunch of needles.

“What’s the matter, old fellow?” said Dawson, ruefully rubbing the palm of his hand. “Did I hurt you?”

The dog tried to wag his tail, but unavailingly, and Dawson was again filled with consternation to observe that even as Chung’s queue stood high, even as his own hair would not lie down, so it was with Jack’s soft furry skin. Every hair on it was erect, from the tip of the poor beast’s nose to the end of his tail, and so stiff withal that when it was pressed from without it pricked the dog within.

“There seems to be some starch in the air of Dampmere,” said Dawson, thoughtfully, as he turned and walked slowly into the house. “I wonder what the deuce it all means?”

And then he sought his desk and tried to write, but he soon found that he could not possibly concentrate his mind upon his work. He was continually oppressed by the feeling that he was not alone. At one moment it seemed as if there were a pair of eyes peering at him from the northeast corner of the room, but as soon as he turned his own anxious gaze in that direction the difficulty seemed to lie in the southwest corner.

“Bah!” he cried, starting up and stamping his foot angrily upon the floor. “The idea! I, Charles Dawson, a man of the world, scared by— by—well, by nothing. I don’t believe in ghosts—and yet—at times I do believe that this house is haunted. My hair seems to feel the same way. It stands up like stubble in a wheat-field, and one might as well try to brush the one as the other. At this rate nothing’ll get done. I’ll go to town and see Dr. Bronson. There’s something the matter with me.”

So off Dawson went to town.

“I suppose Bronson will think I’m a fool, but I can prove all I say by my hair,” he said, as he rang the doctor’s bell. He was instantly admitted, and shortly after describing his symptoms he called the doctor’s attention to his hair.

If he had pinned his faith to this, he showed that his faith was misplaced, for when the doctor came to examine it, Dawson's hair was lying down as softly as it ever had. The doctor looked at Dawson for a moment, and then, with a dry cough, he said:

"Dawson, I can conclude one of two things from what you tell me. Either Dampmere is haunted, which you and I as sane men can't believe in these days, or else you are playing a practical joke on me. Now I don't mind a practical joke at the club, my dear fellow, but here, in my office hours, I can't afford the time to like anything of the sort. I speak frankly with you, old fellow. I have to. I hate to do it, but, after all, you've brought it on yourself."

"Doctor," Dawson rejoined, "I believe I'm a sick man, else this thing wouldn't have happened. I solemnly assure you that I've come to you because I wanted a prescription, and because I believe myself badly off."

"You carry it off well, Dawson," said the doctor, severely, "but I'll prescribe. Go back to Dampmere right away, and when you've seen the ghost, telegraph me and I'll come down."

With this Bronson bowed Dawson out, and the latter, poor fellow, soon found himself on the street utterly disconsolate. He could not blame Bronson. He could understand how Bronson could come to believe that, with his hair as the only witness to his woes, and a witness that failed him at the crucial moment, Bronson should regard his visit as the outcome of some club wager, in many of which he had been involved previously.

"I guess his advice is good," said he, as he walked along. "I'll go back right away—but meanwhile I'll get Billie Perkins to come out and spend the night with me, and we'll try it on him. I'll ask him out for a few days."

Suffice it to say that Perkins accepted, and that night found the two eating supper together outwardly serene. Perkins was quite interested when Chung brought in the supper.

"Wears his queue Pompadour, I see," he said, as he glanced at Chung's extraordinary head-dress.

"Yes," said Dawson, shortly.

"You wear your hair that way yourself," he added, for he was pleased as well as astonished to note that Perkins's hair was manifesting an upward tendency.

"Nonsense," said Perkins. "It's flat as a comic paper."

"Look at yourself in the glass," said Dawson.

Perkins obeyed. There was no doubt about it. His hair was rising! He started back uneasily.

"Dawson," he cried, "what is it? I've felt queer ever since I entered your front door, and I assure you I've been wondering why you wore your mustache like a pirate all the evening."

"I can't account for it. I've got the creeps myself," said Dawson, and then he told Perkins all that I have told you.

"Let's—let's go back to New York," said Perkins.

"Can't," replied Dawson. "No train."

"Then," said Perkins, with a shiver, "let's go to bed."

The two men retired, Dawson to the room directly over the parlor, Perkins to the apartment back of it. For company they left the gas burning, and in a short time were fast asleep. An hour later Dawson awakened with a start. Two things oppressed him to the very core of his being. First, the gas was out; and second, Perkins had unmistakably groaned.

He leaped from his bed and hastened into the next room.

"Perkins," he cried, "are you ill?"

"Is that you, Dawson?" came a voice from the darkness.

"Yes. Did—did you put out the gas?"

“No.”

“Are you ill?”

“No; but I’m deuced uncomfortable. What’s this mattress stuffed with— needles?”

“Needles? No. It’s a hair mattress. Isn’t it all right?”

“Not by a great deal. I feel as if I had been sleeping on a porcupine. Light up the gas and let’s see what the trouble is.”

Dawson did as he was told, wondering meanwhile why the gas had gone out. No one had turned it out, and yet the key was unmistakably turned; and, what was worse, on ripping open Perkins’s mattress, a most disquieting state of affairs was disclosed.

*Every single hair in it was standing on end!*

A half-hour later four figures were to be seen wending their way northward through the darkness—two men, a huge mastiff, and a Chinaman. The group was made up of Dawson, his guest, his servant, and his dog. Dampmere was impossible; there was no train until morning, but not one of them was willing to remain a moment longer at Dampmere, and so they had to walk.

“What do you suppose it was?” asked Perkins, as they left the third mile behind them.

“I don’t know,” said Dawson; “but it must be something terrible. I don’t mind a ghost that will make the hair of living beings stand on end, but a nameless invisible something that affects a mattress that way has a terrible potency that I have no desire to combat. It’s a mystery, and, as a rule, I like mysteries, but the mystery of Dampmere I’d rather let alone.”

“Don’t say a word about the—ah—the mattress, Charlie,” said Perkins, after awhile. “The fellows’ll never believe it.”

“No. I was thinking that very same thing,” said Dawson.

And they were both true to Dawson’s resolve, which is possibly why the mystery of Dampmere has never been solved.

If any of my readers can furnish a solution, I wish they would do so, for I am very much interested in the case, and I truly hate to leave a story of this kind in so unsatisfactory a condition.

A ghost story without any solution strikes me as being about as useful as a house without a roof.