

FANTASY

PROLOGUE BOOKS *presents*

No Luddite in the memory of man
had crossed into Fairyland,
and to do so was considered
tantamount to death.

LUD IN-THE MIST

HOPE MIRRLEES

Lud-in-the-Mist

by Hope Mirrlees

PROLOGUE

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*The Sirens stand, as it would seem, to the ancient and the modern, for the impulses in life as y
immoralized, imperious longings, ecstasies, whether of love or art, or philosophy, magical voic
calling to a man from his "Land of Heart's Desire," and to which if he hearken it may be that he w
return no more — voices, too, which, whether a man sail by or stay to hearken, still sing on.*

Jane Harrison

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Chapter I

Master Nathaniel Chanticleer

The Free State of Dorimare was a very small country, but, seeing that it was bounded on the south by the sea and on the north and east by mountains, while its center consisted of a rich plain, watered by two rivers, a considerable variety of scenery and vegetation was to be found within its borders. Indeed, towards the west, in striking contrast with the pastoral sobriety of the central plain, the aspect of the country became, if not tropical, at any rate distinctly exotic. Nor was this to be wondered at, perhaps; for beyond the Debatable Hills (the boundary of Dorimare in the west) lay Fairyland. There had, however, been no intercourse between the two countries for many centuries.

The social and commercial center of Dorimare was its capital, Lud-in-the-Mist, which was situated at the confluence of two rivers about ten miles from the sea and fifty from the Elf Hills.

Lud-in-the-Mist had all the things that make an old town pleasant. It had an ancient Guild Hall, built of mellow golden bricks and covered with ivy and, when the sun shone on it, looked like a rotten apricot; it had a harbor in which rode vessels with white and red and tawny sails; it had flat brick houses — not the mere carapace of human beings, but ancient living creatures, renewing and modifying themselves with each generation under the changeless antique roofs. It had old arches, framing delicate landscapes that one could walk into, and a picturesque old graveyard on the top of a hill, and little open squares where comely baroque statues of dead citizens held levees attended by birds and lovers and insects and children.

It had, indeed, more than its share of pleasant things; for, as we have seen, it had two rivers.

Also, it was plentifully planted with trees.

One of the handsomest houses of Lud-in-the-Mist had belonged for generations to the family of Chanticleer. It was of red brick, and the front, which looked on to a quiet lane leading into the High Street, was covered with stucco, on which flowers and fruit and shells were delicately modeled, while over the door was emblazoned a fine, stylized cock — the badge of the family. Behind, it had a spacious garden, which stretched down to the river Dapple. Though it had no lack of flowers, they did not immediately meet the eye, but were imprisoned in a walled kitchen-garden, where they were planted in neat ribands, edging the plots of vegetables. Here, too, in spring was to be found the pleasantest of all garden

conjunctions — thick yew hedges and fruit trees in blossom. Outside this kitchen-garden there was no need of flowers, for they had many substitutes. Let a thing be but a sort of punctuated surprise, like the first cache of violets in March, let it be delicate, painted and gratuitous, hinting that the Creator is solely preoccupied with *aesthetic* considerations, and combining disparate objects simply because they *look* so well together, and that thing will admirably fulfill the role of a flower.

In early summer it was the doves, with the bloom of plums on their breasts, waddling on their coral legs over the wide expanse of lawn, to which their propinquity gave an almost startling greenness, that were the flowers in the Chanticleers' garden. And the trunks of the birches are as good, any day, as white blossom, even if there had not been the acacias and the white flower. And there was a white peacock which, in spite of its restlessness and harsh shriek, had something about it, too, of a flower. And the Dapple itself, stained like a palette, with its great daubs of color reflected from sky and earth, and carrying on its surface, in autumn, red and yellow leaves which may have fallen on it from the trees of Fairyland, where it had its source — even the Dapple might be considered as a flower growing in the garden of the Chanticleers.

There was also a pleached alley of hornbeams.

To the imaginative, it is always something of an adventure to walk down a pleached alley. You enter boldly enough, but soon you find yourself wishing you had stayed outside — it is not air that you are breathing, but silence, the almost palpable silence of trees. And is that the only exit that small round hole in the distance? Why, you will never be able to squeeze through *that!* You must turn back ... too late! The spacious portal by which you entered has in its turn shrunk to a small round hole.

Master Nathaniel Chanticleer, the actual head of the family, was a typical Dorimarite in appearance; rotund, rubicund, red-haired, with hazel eyes in which the jokes, before he uttered them, twinkled like a trout in a burn.

Spiritually, too, he passed for a typical Dorimarite; though, indeed, it is never safe to classify the souls of one's neighbors; one is apt, in the long run, to be proved a fool. You should regard each meeting with a friend as a sitting he is unwittingly giving you for a portrait — a portrait that, probably, when you or he die, will still be unfinished. And, though this is an absorbing pursuit, nevertheless, the painters are apt to end pessimists. For however handsome and merry may be the face, however rich may be the background, in the first rough sketch of each portrait, yet with every added stroke of the brush, with every tiny readjustment of the "values," with every modification of the chiaroscuro, the eyes looking out at you grow more disquieting. And, finally, it is your *own* face that you are staring at

terror, as in a mirror by candlelight, when all the house is still.

All who knew Master Nathaniel would have been not only surprised, but incredulous had they been told he was not a happy man. Yet such was the case. His life was poisoned at its springs by a small, nameless fear; a fear not always active, for during considerable periods it would lie almost dormant — *almost*, but never entirely.

He knew the exact date of its genesis. One evening, many years ago, when he was still but a lad, he and some friends decided as a frolic to dress up as the ghosts of their ancestors and frighten the servants. There was no lack of properties; for the attics of the Chanticleers were filled with the lumber of the past: grotesque wooden masks, old weapons and musical instruments, and old costumes — tragic, hierophantic robes that looked little suited to the uses of daily life. There were whole chests, too, filled with pieces of silk, embroidered and painted with curious scenes. Who has not wondered in what mysterious forests our ancestors discovered the models for the beasts and birds upon their tapestries; and on what planet were enacted the scenes they have portrayed? It is in vain that the dead fingers have stitched beneath them — and we can picture the mocking smile with which these crafty cozeners of posterity accompanied the action — the words “February,” or “Hawking,” or “Harvest” having us believe that they are but illustrations of the activities proper to the different months. We know better. These are not the normal activities of mortal men. What kind of beings peopled the earth four or five centuries ago, what strange lore they had acquired, and what were their sinister doings, we shall never know. Our ancestors keep their secret well.

Among the Chanticleers’ lumber there was also no lack of those delicate, sophisticated toys — fans, porcelain cups, engraved seals — that, when the civilization that played with them is dead, become pathetic and appealing, just as tunes once gay inevitably become plaintive when the generation that first sang them has turned to dust. But those particular toys, one felt, could never have been really frivolous — there was a curious gravity about their coloring and lines. Besides, the moral of the ephemeral things with which they were decorated was often pointed in an aphorism or riddle. For instance, on a fan painted with wind-flowers and violets were illuminated these words: “Why is Melancholy like Honey? Because it is very sweet, and it is culled from Flowers.”

These trifles clearly belonged to a later period than the masks and costumes. Nevertheless, they, too, seemed very remote from the daily life of the modern Dorimarites.

Well, when they had whitened their faces with flour and decked themselves out to look as fantastic as possible, Master Nathaniel seized one of the old instruments, a sort of lute ending in the carving of a cock’s head, its strings rotted by damp and antiquity, and, crying out, “Let’s see if this old fellow has a croak left in him!” plucked roughly at its strings.

They gave out one note, so plangent, blood-freezing and alluring, that for a few seconds

the company stood as if petrified.

Then one of the girls saved the situation with a humorous squawk, and, putting her hands to her ears, cried, "Thank you, Nat, for your cat's concert! It was worse than squeaking slate." And one of the young men cried laughingly, "It must be the ghost of one of your ancestors, who wants to be let out and given a glass of his own claret." And the incident faded from their memories — but not from the memory of Master Nathaniel.

He was never again the same man. For years that note was the apex of his night dreams; the point towards which, by their circuitous and seemingly senseless windings, the events of his life had all the time been converging. It was as if the note were a living substance, and subject to the law of chemical changes — that is to say, as that law works in dreams. For instance, he might dream that his old nurse was baking an apple on the fire in her own cozy room, and as he watched it simmer and sizzle she would look at him with a strange smile, a smile such as he had never seen on her face in his waking hours, and say, "But, of course, you know it isn't really the apple. *It's the Note.*"

The influence that this experience had had upon his attitude to daily life was a curious one. Before he had heard the note he had caused his father some uneasiness by his impatience with the monotony of routine and his hankering after travel and adventure. He had, indeed, been heard to vow that he would rather be the captain of one of his father's ships than the sedentary owner of the whole fleet.

But after he had heard the Note a more stay-at-home and steady young man could not have been found in Lud-in-the-Mist. For it had generated in him what one can only call a wistful yearning after the prosaic things he already possessed. It was as if he thought he had already lost what he was actually holding in his hands.

From this there sprang an ever-present sense of insecurity together with a distrust of the homely things he cherished. With what familiar object — quill, pipe, pack of cards — would he be occupied, in which regular recurrent action — the pulling on or off of his nightcap, the weekly auditing of his accounts — would he be engaged when IT, the hidden menace, sprang out at him? And he would gaze in terror at his furniture, his walls, his pictures — what strange scene might they one day witness, what awful experience might he one day have to undergo in their presence?

Hence, at times, he would gaze on the present with the agonizing tenderness of one who gazes on the past: his wife, sitting under the lamp embroidering, and retailing to him the gossip she had culled during the day; or his little son, playing with the great mastiff on the floor.

This nostalgia for what was still there seemed to find a voice in the cry of the cuckoo, which tells of the plough going through the land, the smell of the country, the placid bustle of the village.

the farm, as happening *now*, all round one; and which, simultaneously, mourns them as things vanished centuries ago.

From his secret poison there was, however, some sweetness to be distilled. For the unknown thing that he dreaded could at times be envisaged as a dangerous cape that he had already doubled. And to lie awake at night in his warm feather bed, listening to the breathing of his wife and the sighing of the trees, would become, from this attitude, an exquisite pleasure.

He would say to himself, "How pleasant this is! How safe! How warm! What a difference from that lonely heath when I had no cloak and the wind found the fissures in my doublet and my feet were aching, and there was not moon enough to prevent my stumbling, and I was lurking in the darkness!" enhancing thus his present well-being by imagining some unpleasant adventure now safe behind him.

This also was the cause of his taking a pride in knowing his way about his native town. For instance, when returning from the Guildhall to his own house he would say to himself "Straight across the market-place, down Appleimp Lane, and round by the Duke Aubrey Arms into the High Street ... I know every step of the way, every step of the way!"

And he would get a sense of security, a thrill of pride, from every acquaintance who passed the time of day with him, from every dog to whom he could put a name. "That Wagtail, Goceline Flack's dog. That's Mab, the bitch of Rackabite the butcher, I know them!"

Though he did not realize it, he was masquerading to himself as a stranger in Lud-in-the-Mist — a stranger whom nobody knew, and who was thus almost as safe as if he were invisible. And one always takes a pride in knowing one's way about a strange town. But it was only this pride that emerged completely into his consciousness.

The only outward expression of this secret fear was a sudden, unaccountable irascibility when some harmless word or remark happened to sting the fear into activity. He could not stand people saying, "Who knows what we shall be doing this time next year?" and he loathed such expressions as "for the last time," "never again," however trivial the context in which they appeared. For instance, he would snap his wife's head off — why, she could not think — if she said, "*Never again* shall I go to that butcher," or "That starch is a disgrace. *It's the last time* I shall use it for my ruffs."

This fear, too, had awakened in him a wistful craving for other men's shoes that caused him to take a passionate interest in the lives of his neighbors; that is to say if these lives moved in a different sphere from his own. From this he had gained the reputation — not quite deserved — of being a very warmhearted, sympathetic man, and he had won the hearts of many a sea-captain, of many a farmer, of many an old working-woman by the unfeigned interest he showed in their conversation. Their long, meandering tales of humble normal lives

were like the proverbial glimpse of a snug, lamp-lit parlor to a traveler belated after nightfall.

He even coveted *dead* men's shoes, and he would loiter by the hour in the ancient burying-ground of Lud-in-the-Mist, known from time immemorial as the Fields of Grammar. He could justify this habit by pointing out the charming view that one got thence of both Lud and the surrounding country. But though he sincerely loved the view, what really brought him there were such epitaphs as this:

HERE LIES EBENEZOR SPIKE BAKER WHO HAVING PROVIDED THE CITIZENS OF LUD-
IN-THE-MIST FOR SIXTY YEARS WITH FRESH SWEET LOAVES DIED AT THE AGE OF
EIGHTY-EIGHT SURROUNDED BY HIS SONS AND GRANDSONS.

How willingly would he have changed places with that old baker! And then the disquieting thought would come to him that perhaps after all epitaphs are not altogether to be trusted.

Chapter II

The Duke Who Laughed Himself Off a Throne and Other Traditions of Dorimare

Before we start on our story, it will be necessary, for its proper understanding, to give a short sketch of the history of Dorimare and the beliefs and customs of its inhabitants.

Lud-in-the-Mist was scattered about the banks of two rivers, the Dapple and the Dawl, which met on its outskirts at an acute angle, the apex of which was the harbor. Then there were more houses up the side of a hill, on the top of which stood the Fields of Grammary.

The Dawl was the biggest river of Dorimare, and it became so broad at Lud-in-the-Mist as to give that town, twenty miles inland though it was, all the advantages of a port; while the actual seaport town itself was little more than a fishing village. The Dapple, however, which had its source in Fairyland (from a salt inland sea, the geographers held) and flowed subterraneously under the Debatable Hills, was a humble little stream, and played no part in the commercial life of the town. But an old maxim of Dorimare bade one never forget that 'The Dapple flows into the Dawl.' It had come to be employed when one wanted to show the inadvisability of despising the services of humble agents; but, possibly, it had originally another application.

The wealth and importance of the country was mainly due to the Dawl. It was thanks to the Dawl that girls in remote villages of Dorimare wore brooches made out of walrus tusks and applied bits of unicorns' horns to their toothache, that the chimneypiece in the parlor of almost every farmhouse was adorned with an ostrich egg, and that when the ladies of Lud-in-the-Mist went out shopping or to play cards with their friends, their market basket or ivory markers were carried by little indigo pages in crimson turbans from the Cinnamon Isles, and that pigmy peddlers from the far North hawked amber through the streets. For the Dawl had turned Lud-in-the-Mist into a town of merchants, and all the power and nearly all the wealth of the country was in their hands.

But this had not always been the case. In the old days Dorimare had been a duchy, and the population had consisted of nobles and peasants. But gradually there had arisen a middle class. And this class had discovered — as it always does — that trade was seriously hampered by a ruler unchecked by a constitution, and by a ruthless, privileged class. Figuratively, these things were damming the Dawl.

Indeed, with each generation the Dukes had been growing more capricious and more selfish, till finally these failings had culminated in Duke Aubrey, a hunchback with a face of angelic beauty, who seemed to be possessed by a laughing demon of destructiveness. He had

been known, out of sheer wantonness, to gallop with his hunt straight through a field of standing corn, and to set fire to a fine ship for the mere pleasure of watching it burn. And he dealt with the virtue of his subjects' wives and daughters in the same high-handed way.

As a rule, his pranks were seasoned by a slightly sinister humor. For instance, when on the eve of marriage a maid, according to immemorial custom, was ritually offering her virginity to the spirit of the farm, symbolized by the most ancient tree on the freehold, Duke Aubrey would leap out from behind it, and, pretending to be the spirit, take her at her word. And tradition said that he and one of his boon companions wagered that they would succeed in making the court jester commit suicide of his own free will. So they began to work on his imagination with plaintive songs, the burden of which was the frailty of all lovely things, and with grim fables comparing man to a shepherd, doomed to stand by impotent, while his sheep are torn, one by one, by a ravenous wolf.

They won their wager; for coming into the jester's room one morning they found him hanging from the ceiling, dead. And it was believed that echoes of the laughter with which Duke Aubrey greeted this spectacle were, from time to time, still to be heard proceeding from that room.

But there had been pleasanter aspects to him. For one thing, he had been an exquisite poet, and such of his songs as had come down were as fresh as flowers and as lonely as the cuckoo's cry. While in the country stories were still told of his geniality and tenderness — how he would appear at a village wedding with a cart-load of wine and cakes and fruit, or how he would stand at the bedside of the dying, grave and compassionate as a priest.

Nevertheless, the grim merchants, obsessed by a will to wealth, raised up the people against him. For three days a bloody battle raged in the streets of Lud-in-the-Mist, in which fell all the nobles of Dorimare. As for Duke Aubrey, he vanished — some said to Fairyland, where he was living to this day.

During those three days of bloodshed all the priests had vanished also. So Dorimare lost simultaneously its Duke and its cult.

In the days of the Dukes, fairy things had been looked on with reverence, and the most solemn event of the religious year had been the annual arrival from Fairyland of mysterious hooded strangers with milk-white mares, laden with offerings of fairy fruit for the Duke and the high priest.

But after the revolution, when the merchants had seized all the legislative and administrative power, a taboo was placed on all things fairy.

This was not to be wondered at. For one thing, the new rulers considered that the eating of fairy fruit had been the chief cause of the degeneracy of the Dukes. It had, indeed, always been connected with poetry and visions, which, springing as they do from an ever-present

sense of mortality, might easily appear morbid to the sturdy common sense of a burgher-class in the making. There was certainly nothing morbid about the men of the revolution, and under their regime what one can only call the tragic sense of life vanished from poetry and art.

Besides, to the minds of the Dorimarites, fairy things had always spelled delusion. The songs and legends described Fairyland as a country where the villages appeared to be made of gold and cinnamon wood, and where priests, who lived on opobalsum and frankincense, hourly offered holocausts of peacocks and golden bulls to the sun and the moon. But if an honest, clear-eyed mortal gazed on these things long enough, the glittering castles would turn into old, gnarled trees, the lamps into glow-worms, the precious stones into potsherds, and the magnificently-robed priests and their gorgeous sacrifices into aged crones muttering over a fire of twigs.

The fairies themselves, tradition taught, were eternally jealous of the solid blessings of mortals, and, clothed in invisibility, would crowd to weddings and wakes and fairs — wherever good victuals, in fact, were to be found — and suck the juices from fruits and meats — in vain, for nothing could make them substantial.

Nor was it only food that they stole. In out-of-the-way country places it was still believed that corpses were but fairy cheats, made to resemble flesh and bone, but without any real substance — otherwise, why should they turn so quickly to dust? But the real person, for which the corpse was but a flimsy substitute, had been carried away by the Fairies, to tend their blue kine and reap their fields of gillyflowers. The country people, indeed, did not always clearly distinguish between the Fairies and the dead. They called them both the “Silent People”; and the Milky Way they thought was the path along which the dead were carried to Fairyland.

Another tradition said that their only means of communication was poetry and music, and in the country poetry and music were still called “the language of the Silent People.”

Naturally enough, men who were teaching the Dawl to run gold, who were digging canals and building bridges, and seeing that the tradesmen gave good measure and used standard weights, and who liked both virtues and commodities to be solid, had little patience for flimsy cheats. Nevertheless, the new rulers were creating their own form of delusion, for it was they who founded in Dorimare the science of jurisprudence, taking as their basis the primitive code used under the Dukes and adapting it to modern conditions by the use of legal fictions.

Master Josiah Chanticleer (the father of Master Nathaniel), who had been a very ingenious and learned jurist, had drawn in one of his treatises a curious parallel between fairy things and the law. The men of the revolution, he said, had substituted law for fairy fruit. B

whereas only the reigning Duke and his priests had been allowed to partake of the fruit, the law was given freely to rich and poor alike. Again, fairy was delusion, so was the law. At any rate, it was a sort of magic, molding reality into any shape it chose. But, whereas fairy magic and delusion were for the cozening and robbing of man, the magic of the law was to his intention and for his welfare.

In the eye of the law, neither Fairyland nor fairy things existed. But then, as Master Josiah had pointed out, the law plays fast and loose with reality — and no one really believed in it.

Gradually, an almost physical horror came to be felt for anything connected with the Fairies and Fairyland, and society followed the law in completely ignoring their existence. Indeed, the very word “fairy” became taboo, and was never heard on polite lips, while the greatest insult one Dorimarite could hurl at another was to call him “Son of a Fairy.”

But, on the painted ceilings of ancient houses, in the peeling frescoes of old barns, in the fragments of bas-reliefs built into modern structures, and, above all, in the tragic funereal statues of the Fields of Grammary, a Winckelmann, had he visited Dorimare, would have found, as he did in the rococo Rome of the eighteenth century, traces of an old and solemn art, the designs of which served as poncifs to the modern artists. For instance, a well-known advertisement of a certain cheese, which depicted a comic, fat little man menacing with knife and fork an enormous cheese hanging in the sky like the moon, was really a sort of unconscious comic reprisal made against the action depicted in a very ancient Dorimari design, wherein the moon itself pursued a frieze of tragic fugitives.

Well, a few years before the opening of this story, a Winckelmann, though an anonymous one, actually did appear in Lud-in-the-Mist; although the field of his enquiries was not limited to the plastic arts. He published a book, entitled *Traces of Fairy in the Inhabitant Customs, Art, Vegetation and Language of Dorimare*.

His thesis was this: that there was an unmistakable fairy strain running through the race of Dorimarites, which could only be explained by the hypothesis that, in the olden days, there had been frequent intermarriage between them and the Fairies. For instance, the red hair, so frequent in Dorimare, pointed, he maintained, to such a strain. It was also to be found, he asserted, in the cattle of Dorimare. For this assertion he had some foundation, for it was undeniable that from time to time a dun or dapple cow would bring forth a calf of a bluish tinge, whose dung was of a ruddy gold. And tradition taught that all the cattle of Fairyland were blue, and that fairy gold turned into dung when it had crossed the border. Tradition also taught that all the flowers of Fairyland were red, and it was indisputable that the cornflowers of Dorimare sprang up from time to time as red as poppies, and the lilies as red as damask roses. Moreover, he discovered traces of the Fairies' language in the oaths of the Dorimarites.

and in some of their names. And, to a stranger, it certainly produced an odd impression to hear such high-flown oaths as; by the Sun, Moon and Stars; by the Golden Apples of the West; by the Harvest of Souls; by the White Ladies of the Fields; by the Milky Way, come tumbling out in the same breath with such homely expletives as Busty Bridget; Toasted Cheeses; Suffering Cats; by my Great-Aunt's Rump; or to find names like Dreamsweet, Ambrosia, Moonlove, wedded to such grotesque surnames as Baldbreech, Fliperarde, or Pyepowders.

With regard to the designs of old tapestries and old bas-reliefs, he maintained that they were illustrations of the flora, fauna, and history of Fairyland, and scouted the orthodox theory which explained the strange birds and flowers as being due either to the artist's unbridled fancy or to their imperfect control of their medium, and considered that the fantastic scenes were taken from the rituals of the old religion. For, he insisted, all artist types, all ritual acts, must be modeled on realities; and Fairyland is the place where what we look upon as symbols and figures actually exist and occur.

If the antiquary, then, was correct, the Dorimarite, like a Dutchman of the seventeenth century, smoking his churchwarden among his tulips, and eating his dinner off Delft plates, had trivialized to his own taste the solemn spiritual art of a remote, forbidden land, which he believed to be inhabited by grotesque and evil creatures given over to strange vices and dark cults ... nevertheless in the veins of the Dutchman of Dorimare there flowed without his knowing it the blood of these same evil creatures.

It is easy to imagine the fury caused in Lud-in-the-Mist by the appearance of this book. The printer was, of course, heavily fined, but he was unable to throw any light on its authorship. The manuscript, he said, had been brought to him by a rough, red-haired laborer whom he had never seen before. All the copies were burned by the common hangman, and there the matter had to rest.

In spite of the law's maintaining that Fairyland and everything to do with it was nonexistent, it was an open secret that, though fairy fruit was no longer brought into the country with all the pomp of established ritual, anyone who wanted it could always procure it in Lud-in-the-Mist. No great effort had ever been made to discover the means and agents by which it was smuggled into the town; for to eat fairy fruit was regarded as a loathsome and filthy vice, practiced in low taverns by disreputable and insignificant people, such as indigo sailors and pigmy Norsemen. True, there had been cases known from time to time, during the couple of centuries that had elapsed since the expulsion of Duke Aubrey, of youths of good families taking to this vice. But to be suspected of such a thing spelled complete social ostracism, and this, combined with the innate horror felt for the stuff by every Dorimarite, caused such cases to be very rare.

But some twenty years before the opening of this story, Dorimare had been inflicted with

a terrible drought. People were reduced to making bread out of vetches and beans and fern roots; and marsh and tarn were rifled of their reeds to provide the cattle with food, while the Dawl was diminished to the size of an ordinary rill, as were the other rivers of Dorimare — with the exception of the Dapple. All through the drought the waters of the Dapple remained unimpaired; but this was not to be wondered at, as a river whose sources are in Fairyland has probably mysterious sources of moisture. But, as the drought burned relentlessly on, in the country districts an ever-increasing number of people succumbed to the vice of fairy fruit-eating ... with tragic results to themselves, for though the fruit was very grateful to the parched throats, its spiritual effects were most alarming, and every day fresh rumors reached Lud-in-the-Mist (it was in the country districts that this epidemic, for so we must call it, raged) of madness, suicide, orgiastic dances, and wild doings under the moon. But the more they ate the more they wanted, and though they admitted that the fruit produced an agony of mind, they maintained that for one who had experienced this agony life would cease to be life without it.

How the fruit got across the border remained a mystery, and all the efforts of the magistrates to stop it were useless. In vain they invented a legal fiction (as we have seen, the law took no cognizance of fairy things) that turned fairy fruit into a form of woven silk and hence, contraband in Dorimare; in vain they fulminated in the Senate against all smugglers and all men of depraved minds and filthy habits — silently, surely, the supply of fairy fruit continued to meet the demand. Then, with the first rain, both began to decrease. But the inefficiency of the magistrates in this national crisis was never forgotten, and “feckless as a magistrate in the great drought” became a proverb in Dorimare.

As a matter of fact, the ruling class of Dorimare had become incapable of handling any serious business. The wealthy merchants of Lud-in-the-Mist, the descendants of the men of the revolution and the hereditary rulers of Dorimare had, by this time, turned into a set of indolent, self-indulgent, humorous gentlemen, with hearts as little touched to tragic issues as those of their forefathers, but with none of their forefathers' sterling qualities.

A class struggling to assert itself, to discover its true shape, which lies hidden, as does the statue in the marble, in the hard, resisting material of life itself, must, in the nature of things, be different from that same class when chisel and mallet have been laid aside, and it has actually become what it had so long been struggling to be. For one thing, wealth had ceased to be a delicate, exotic blossom. It had become naturalized in Dorimare, and was now a hard perennial, docilely renewing itself year after year, and needing no tending from the gardeners.

Hence sprang leisure, that fissure in the solid masonry of works and days in which take seed a myriad curious little flowers — good cookery, and shining mahogany, and a fashion

dress, that, like a baroque bust, is fantastic through sheer wittiness, and porcelain shepherdesses, and the humors, and endless jokes — in fact, the toys, material and spiritual of civilization. But they were as different as possible from the toys of that older civilization that littered the attics of the Chanticleers. About these there had been something tragic and a little sinister; while all the manifestations of the modern civilization were like fire-light — fantastic, but homely.

Such, then, were the men in whose hands lay the welfare of the country. And, it must be confessed, they knew but little and cared still less about the common people for whom they legislated.

For instance, they were unaware that in the country Duke Aubrey's memory was still green. It was not only that natural children still went by the name of "Duke Aubrey's brats" — that when they saw a falling star old women would say, "Duke Aubrey has shot a roe"; and that on the anniversary of his expulsion, maidens would fling into the Dapple, for luck, garlands woven out of the two plants that had formed the badge of the Dukes — ivy and squills. He was a living reality to the country people; so much so that, when leakages were found in the vats, or when a horse was discovered in the morning with his coat stained and furrowed with sweat, some rogue of a farm-hand could often escape punishment by swearing that Duke Aubrey had been the culprit. And there was not a farm or village that had not at least one inhabitant who swore that he had seen him, on some midsummer's eve, or some night of the winter solstice, galloping past at the head of his fairy hunt, with harlequin ribbonds streaming in the wind, to the sound of innumerable bells.

But of Fairyland and its inhabitants the country people knew no more than did the merchants of Lud-in-the-Mist. Between the two countries stood the barrier of the Debatable Hills, the foothills of which were called the Elfin Marches, and were fraught, tradition said, with every kind of danger, both physical and moral. No one in the memory of man had crossed these hills, and to do so was considered tantamount to death.

Chapter III

The Beginning of Trouble

The social life of Lud-in-the-Mist began in spring and ended in autumn. In winter the citizens preferred their own firesides; they had an unreasoning dislike of being out after nightfall, a dislike due not so much to fear as to habit. Though the habit may have sprung from some forgotten danger that, long ago, had made their ancestors shun the dark.

So it was always with relief as well as with joy that they welcomed the first appearance of spring — scarcely crediting at first that it was a reality shared by all the world, and not merely an optical delusion confined to their own eyes in their own garden. There, the lawns were certainly green, the larches and thorns even startlingly so, and the almonds had rose-colored blossoms; but the fields and trees in the hazy distance beyond their own walls were still grey and black. Yes, the colors in their own garden must be due merely to some gracious accident of light, and when that light shifted the colors would vanish.

But everywhere, steadily, invisibly, the trees' winter foliage of white sky or amethyst or grey dusk was turning to green and gold.

All the world over we are very conscious of the trees in spring, and watch with delight how the network of twigs on the wych-elms is becoming spangled with tiny puce flowers, like little beetles caught in a spider's web, and how little lemon-colored buds are studding the thorn. While as to the long red-gold buds of the horse-chestnuts — they come bursting open with a sort of a visual bang. And now the beech is hatching its tiny perfectly-formed leaves — and all the other trees in turn.

And at first we delight in the diversity of the colors and shapes of the various young leaves — noting how those of the birch are like a swarm of green bees, and those of the lime so transparent that they are stained black with the shadow of those above and beneath them, and how those of the elm diaper the sky with the prettiest pattern, and are the ones that grow the most slowly.

Then we cease to note their idiosyncrasies, and they merge, till autumn, into one solid unobtrusive green curtain for throwing into relief brighter and sharper things. There is nothing so dumb as a tree in full leaf.

It was in the spring of his fiftieth year that Master Nathaniel Chanticleer had his first real anxiety. It concerned his only son Ranulph, a little boy of twelve years old.

Master Nathaniel had been elected that year to the highest office in the state — that of Mayor of Lud-in-the-Mist and High Seneschal of Dorimare.

Ex officio, he was president of the Senate and chief justice on the Bench. According to the constitution, as drawn up by the men of the revolution, he was responsible for the safety and defense of the country in case of attack by sea or land; it was for him to see that both justice and the country's revenues were properly administered; and his time was held to be at the disposal of the most obscure citizen with a grievance.

Actually — apart from presiding on the Bench — his duties had come to consist of nothing more onerous than being a genial and dignified chairman of a comfortable and select club, for that was what in reality the Senate had now become. Nevertheless, though it was open to question whether his official duties were of the slightest use to anyone, they were numerous enough to occupy most of his time and to cause him to be unconscious of the undercurrents in his home.

Ranulph had always been a dreamy, rather delicate child, and backward for his years. Up to the age of seven, or thereabouts, he had caused his mother much anxiety by his habits when playing in the garden, of shouting out remarks to an imaginary companion. And he was fond of talking nonsense (according to the ideas of Lud-in-the-Mist, slightly obscure nonsense) about golden cups, and snow-white ladies milking azure cows, and the sound of tinkling bridles at midnight. But children are apt, all the world over, to have nasty little minds; and this type of talk was not uncommon among the children of Lud-in-the-Mist, and as they nearly always grew out of it, little attention was paid to it.

Then, when he was a few years older, the sudden death of a young scullery maid affected him so strongly that for two days he would not touch food, but lay with frightened eyes tossing and trembling in bed, like a newly-caught bird in a cage. When his shocked and alarmed mother (his father was at the seaport town on business at the time) tried to comfort him by reminding him that he had not been particularly fond of the scullery maid while she was alive, he had cried out irritably, “No, no, it isn't *her* ... it's the thing that has happened to *her*!”

But all that was when he was still quite a little boy, and, as he grew older, he had seemed to become much more normal.

But that spring his tutor had come to Dame Marigold to complain of his inattention at his studies, and sudden unreasonable outbreaks of passion. “To tell the you truth, ma'am, I think the little fellow can't be well,” the tutor had said.

So Dame Marigold sent for the good old family doctor, who said there was nothing the matter with him but a little overheating of the blood, a thing very common in the spring; and prescribed sprigs of borage in wine: “the best cordial for lazy scholars,” and he winked and pinched Ranulph's ear, adding that in June he might be given an infusion of damask roses to complete the cure.

But the sprigs of borage did not make Ranulph any more attentive to his lessons; which Dame Marigold had no longer need of the tutor's hints to realize that the little boy was not himself. What alarmed her most in his condition was the violent effort that he had evidently made in order to react in the least to his surroundings. For instance, if she offered him a second helping at dinner, he would clench his fists, and beads of perspiration would break out on his forehead, so great an effort did it require to answer Yes or No.

There had never been any real sympathy between Ranulph and his mother (she had always preferred her daughter, Prunella), and she knew that if she were to ask him what ailed him he would not tell her; so, instead, she asked Ranulph's great ally and confidante, Master Nathaniel's old nurse, Mistress Hempen.

Hempie, as they called her, had served the family of Chanticleer for nearly fifty years, in fact ever since the birth of Master Nathaniel. And now she was called the housekeeper, though her duties were of the lightest, and consisted mainly of keeping the store-room keys and mending the linen.

She was a fine, hale old country-woman, with a wonderful gift for amusing children. Not only did she know all the comic nursery stories of Dorimare (Ranulph's favorite was about a pair of spectacles whose ambition was to ride on the nose of the Man-in-the-Moon, and who, in vain attempts to reach their goal, were always leaping off the nose of their unfortunate possessor), but she was, as well, an incomparable though sedentary playfellow, and from her armchair would direct, with seemingly unflagging interest, the maneuvers of lead soldiers or the movements of marionettes. Indeed, her cozy room at the top of the house seemed to Ranulph to have the power of turning every object that crossed its threshold into a toy: the ostrich egg hanging from the ceiling by a crimson cord, the little painted wax effigies of his grandparents on the chimneypiece, the old spinning-wheel, even the empty bobbins, which made excellent wooden soldiers, and the pots of jam standing in rows to be labeled — they all presented infinite possibilities of being played with; while her fire seemed to purr more contentedly than other fires and to carry prettier pictures in its red, glowing heart.

Well, rather timidly (for Hempie had a rough edge to her tongue, and had never ceased to look upon her mistress as a young and foolish interloper), Dame Marigold told her that she was beginning to be a little anxious about Ranulph. Hempie shot her a sharp look over her spectacles, and, pursing her lips, dryly remarked, "Well, ma'am, it's taken you a long time to see it."

But when Dame Marigold tried to find out what she thought was the matter with him, she would only shake her head mysteriously, and mutter that it was no use crying over spilt milk, and least said soonest mended.

When finally the baffled Dame Marigold got up to go, the old woman cried shrilly,

“Now, ma’am, remember, not a word of this to the master! He was never one that could stand being worried. He’s like his father in that. My old mistress used often to say to me ‘Now, Polly, we won’t tell the master. *He can’t stand worry.*’ Aye, all the Chanticleers are wonderful sensitive.” And the unexpressed converse of the last statement was, “All the Vigils on the other hand, have the hides of buffaloes.”

Dame Marigold, however, had no intention of mentioning the matter as yet to Master Nathaniel. Whether or not it was due to the Chanticleers’ superior sensitiveness of soul, the slightest worry, as she knew to her cost, made him unbearably irritable.

He had evidently, as yet, noticed nothing himself. Most of his day was spent in the Senate and his counting-house; besides, his interest in other people’s lives was not extended to those of his own household.

As to his feelings for Ranulph, it must be confessed that he looked upon him more as a heirloom than as a son. In fact, unconsciously, he placed him in the same category as the crystal goblet with which Duke Aubrey’s father had baptized the first ship owned by Chanticleer, or the sword with which his ancestor had helped to turn Duke Aubrey off the throne — objects that he very rarely either looked at or thought about, though the loss of them would have caused him to go half mad with rage and chagrin.

However, one evening, early in April, the matter was forced upon his attention in a very painful manner.

By this time spring had come to all the world, and the citizens of Lud-in-the-Mist were beginning to organize their life for summer — copper vessels were being cleaned and polished for the coming labors of the still-room, arbors in the gardens swept out and cleaned and fishing-tackle overhauled; and people began to profit by the longer days by giving supper-parties to their friends.

Nobody in Lud-in-the-Mist loved parties more than Master Nathaniel. They were a temporary release. It was as if the tune of his life were suddenly set to a different and gay key; so that, while nothing was substantially changed, and the same chairs stood in the same places, with people sitting in them that he met every day, and there was even the same small dull ache in one of his teeth, nevertheless the sting, or rather the staleness, was taken out of it all. So it was very gleefully that he sent invitations to all his cronies to come “and meet the Moongrass cheese” — as he had done every April for the last twenty-five years.

Moongrass was a village of Dorimare famous for its cheeses — and rightly so, for to look at they were as beautiful as Parian marble veined with jade, and they had to perfection the flavor of all good cheeses — that blending of the perfume of meadows with the clean stench of the byre. It was the Moongrass cheeses that were the subject of the comic advertisement described in a previous chapter.

By seven o'clock the Chanticleers' parlor was filled with a crowd of stout, rosy, gaily dressed guests, chattering and laughing like a flock of paroquets. Only Ranulph was silent but that was to be expected from a little boy of twelve years old in the presence of his elders. However, he need not have sulked in a corner, nor responded quite so surlily to the jocular remarks addressed him by his father's guests.

Master Nathaniel, of course, had a well-stored cellar, and the evening began with glasses of delicious wild-thyme gin, a cordial for which that cellar was famous. But, as well, he had a share in a common cellar, owned jointly by all the families of the ruling class — a cellar of old, mellow jokes that, unlike bottles of wine, never ran dry. Whatever there was of ridiculous or lovable in each member of the group was distilled into one of these jokes, so that at will one could intoxicate oneself with one's friends' personalities — swallow, as it were, the whole comic draught of them. And, seeing that in these old jokes the accumulated irritation that inevitably results from intimacy evaporated and turned to sweetness, like the juice of the grape they promoted friendship and cordiality — between the members of the group, that is to say. For each variety of humor is a sort of totem, making at once for union and separation. Its votaries it unites into a closely-knit brotherhood, but it separates them sharply off from all the rest of the world. Perhaps the chief reason for the lack of sympathy between the rulers and the ruled in Dorimare was that, in humor, they belonged to different totems.

Anyhow, everyone there tonight shared the same totem, and each one of them was the hero of one of the old jokes. Master Nathaniel was asked if his crimson velvet breeches were a *blackish* crimson because, many years ago, he had forgotten to go into mourning for his father-in-law; and when Dame Marigold had, finally, tentatively pointed out to him his omission, he had replied angrily, "I *am* in mourning!" Then, when with upraised eyebrows she had looked at the canary-colored stockings that he had just purchased, he had said sheepishly, "Anyhow, it's a *blackish* canary."

Few wines have as strong a flavor of the grape as this old joke had of Master Nathaniel. His absent-mindedness was in it, his power of seeing things as he wanted them to be (he had genuinely believed himself to be in mourning) and, finally, in the "*blackish* canary" there was the tendency, which he had inherited, perhaps, from his legal ancestors, to believe that one could play with reality and give it what shape one chose.

Then, Master Ambrose Honeysuckle was asked whether the Honeysuckles considered Moongrass cheese to be a cheese; the point being that Master Ambrose had an exaggerated sense of the importance of his own family, and once in the law-courts, when the question arose as to whether a dragon (there were still a few harmless, effete dragons lurking in caves in out-of-the-way parts of Dorimare) were a bird or a reptile, he had said, with an air of

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