

Lud-in-the-mist

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LUD-IN-THE-MIST
HOPE MIRRLEES

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 centre 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 centre 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 Elfin 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, it looked like a rotten apricot; it had a harbour 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 their 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 comic 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 modelled, 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 punctual 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 combines disparate objects simply because they look so well together, and that thing will admirably fill 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 birches are as good, any day, as white blossom, even if there had not been the acacias in flower. And there was a white peacock which, in spite of its restlessness and harsh shrieks, had something

about it, too, of a flower. And the Dapple itself, stained like a palette, with great daubs of colour 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 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 in terror, as in a mirror by candle-light, 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 or 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 civilisation 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 colouring 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 humourous squawk, and, putting her hands to her ears, cried, "Thank you, Nat, for your cat's concert! It was worse than a 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 nightly dreams; the point towards which, by their circuitous and seemingly senseless windings, they 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 cosy 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 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 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 cock, which tells of the plough going through the land, the smell of the country, the placid bustle of 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 IT 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's Wagtail, Goceline Flack's dog. That's Mab, the bitch of Rackabite the butcher, I know them!"

Though he did not realise 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 warm-hearted, sympathetic man, and he had won the heart 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 parlour to a traveller 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 Grammary. 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:

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 harbour. 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 chimney-piece in the parlour of almost every farm-house 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 humour. 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, symbolised 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 of 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.

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