

# Peritonitis

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*Now this is the story Greylock told before the Men of the Neck were scattered forever, before the great exodus and the wandering in the cold lands of hunger. Once (so said Greylock, my father's mother heard him) the Men of the Neck ruled all the World and were all the world, and there was nothing between Heel and Finger-tip that was not theirs. In those times a virgin might dine at the Calf and drink at the Eyes and sleep where she would and none would harm her. Then every man said "Brother" or "Sister" when he met a child, and the old were respected. How many were born in those times, and lived each moment of life in those times, and dying rolled away, and never dreamed that the World would not be thus forever? Who can say? Their spirits have gone to the Hair. The dark followed the light for them, and the wettings came and some perished; but this, as all knew, was good lest the People wax too great.*

I myself was born into lesser times, but even so not until even those lesser days were nearly ended. I tell you this that you may remember, and know in your despair that God has in times past been good. All is his, all belongs to him alone. Never in the coming time shall you say among yourselves that he has robbed you—what he takes is his; it cannot be otherwise.

No man can now comprehend the joy of those times. There was no bad food anywhere; every morsel was filled with strength, and a happiness indescribable. When the old—yes, even as I am now—ate of that meat their backs straightened and their eyes grew bright; then the grand-sire of a thousand might take the goodwife beneath the shade of some soft roof.

And the children of those first times ate, and eating danced in the light, and sang songs that came to them as they sang, one word following another, and played a score of merry games now forgotten, games that grandmothers only mumbled of, forgetting both the names and the rules, even when I myself was but a child; games of running, jumping, hiding and finding, games of hopping, climbing, and singing; games of holding hands in chains.

Again I say, none now can know the joy of those times, and the greatest of them was this—that every man and woman saw, as light came and dark,

then light again, and time grew heavy upon them, that that World that was their children's children's waxed.

You do not believe me. Ah, there is no blame in that to you. How could you, who have seen it wane all your lives, yes, and heard your fathers say that it has waned all theirs? But it was true—larger it grew and fairer, the warmth increasing. Then those we call still the New Mountains first began to grow, lifting, very gently then, their slopes above the level plain.

At that time there came a change to the nature of the meat, and none (so have I heard) could well prove whether it was for good or ill—nor can I now say. Happiness it brought indeed, but in that happiness there were a thousand sorrows; yet it was said by many, weeping, that it was a sweeter joy. Then the eaters sang not, but chanted, making of the old, mouth-smoothed words new and unfamiliar things, chants that brought happiness or tears or terror even to those who fasted. And this was called the second age, and it was the time of counterpoint and dreams.

That time too passed. Of the third age what is there to say? You have heard its story already too often. The New Mountains were mighty then, and there came upon all who ate a fever of clean lust that wiped away everything that had gone before. It was then—so I deem it—that the oneness of the People was broken, never in truth to come again. For by twos and threes and fives all but the youngest children drew apart, and those that returned to the gatherings stayed but a little time. At that time if at any the love-promisings that are older than the People were kept: for many a pair dallied all a dark away, and a light too, feasting enough to have fattened a dozen save that love kept them lean.

With the age of New Food that time ended. From the summit of each New Mountain, grown now until they rivaled the Haunches, there broke forth a spring; and the waters of those springs were not clear as the waters of the Eyes are, but white, and sweet. Many a one climbed the New Mountains then to taste of them, though they flowed less than a lifetime. This was the fourth age, and the end of the beginning. For when those springs died the New Mountains waned; and the Belly, which had, scarcely noted, waxed above the Loins, withered in one dark.

Then many felt their doom upon them; this feeling was in the meat, so it was said—but in the air as well. The World was smaller. Then came the Sundering. Some said there was no God; and we, the Men of the Neck, drove them for their blasphemy beyond the New Mountains toward the Loins. Others said that the World itself was God; and these, a fierce and a terrible people, climbed to the Face. Then did we name ourselves Men of the Neck, but beyond our boasting we feared—for though the Men of the

Loins might drink there of impure waters, we must needs reach the Eyes when we could eat no more without drinking, and we feared that those above us would prevent us. A few, brave and fleet, ventured first, daring the Spirit Forests to come to the lakes from the north, and returning by the same troubled path. But return they did, and others after them, until we came in time to know that those whom we feared had left all the lands of light to dwell in the Mouth, where—they said—the waters at times possessed a quality magical and ineffable. They spoke of the third age, and the second and the first—all these, they said, had returned not in the meat, but in the waters of the Mouth. With these avowals they taunted us, flinging at us jagged stones fallen from the Teeth. But we saw that, however fierce, they were few; and when we questioned them, shouting from a distance, they would not reply.

It was at this time that Deepdelver's woman Singing was stolen by a Man of the Face, and into those times I was born—yes, I saw them, with these same eyes that behold you now, remembering them in the time I was a child.

Deepdelver was not stronger than other men, nor swifter; and others there were who were cleverer than he. Why then was he counted a hero when they were not? This was the question I put to my parents; and the answer they gave was that he had done a wonderful thing, going to Everdark to bring back the woman he loved; but that reply was no answer—would any other, stronger, swifter, more cunning, not have done as Deepdelver had? No. There was in him something better than strength or cunning, that which made him go forward and not back. This it was that made Deepdelver a hero, that brought him into Everdark, and to the light again alive.

As to Singing, what can an old man say? Her beauty cursed me, if you will, though I was then but a little child. I have never seen another and never shall—she ennobled us all; wherever she stood was for that time a place of peace and beauty. Of the crime that befell her I was then too young to know, but I give it as I received it.

With others of her age and a guard of men, of whom Deepdelver, then called by another, lesser, name, was one, she journeyed to the Eyes to bathe. Now at that time men no longer went into the haunted Hair to reach the lakes from the north. But not yet were they so bold as to come too near the corners of the Mouth—no, the accepted path, then deemed safe, was to skirt the southernmost spinney of the Hair, near the Ear, and thence to climb to the Eyes by an oblique ascent.

Now this party of young men and maidens were so doing when there

came upon them such a calamity as we, of this latter age, have so much more knowledge than they. An overflow from the nearer lake, forming itself into a great mass of water, came hurtling down on them; and they scattered—none looking to the others, but each fleeing in that direction that seemed to him easiest. Now it so happened that Singing's path led her to the Mouth.

When the Tear had passed the young men and maids joined again, laughing and each telling their tale of escape until, as they reckoned their numbers, their laughter hushed. Wide they quested then for Singing, but not to the Mouth until with the passing of time it grew upon them that if Singing had not, indeed, been washed away, then it was there that they must search for her. None spoke this knowledge, but it waxed among them; and at length they would not look at one another for the shame of it—but already Deepdelper was gone.

No one had he told of his plan, going alone to the very precipices of the Lips, and from those dark, ill-omened heights, staring, alone, at the Teeth themselves, the dread portals of the sunless realm, found within him the strength to enter there; such a man is not like us, though he walk among us; the ghosts who wander forever through the Hair might, if they saw a living man walking unafraid where they are accustomed to take such ease as is permitted the Dead, believe him to be a ghost even as they: but—if we are not all specters now—it would not be so, because he would have life in him. Just so such men as you and I, seeing a Deepdelper, think him but our peer.

Often I questioned him—young as I was, and shameless—of what he found within the Teeth, and the rescue of Singing. Little would he tell me. There are watery caves beneath the Tongue, by his saying. There he swam in halflight through waves clearer, yet thicker, than those of the lakes; and met a gentle race who begged him to go no farther, offering in the stead of Singing milk-pale maidens, languid, gentle, and enamoured of love, whom he spurned.

We call ourselves the People of the Neck, but who but Deepdelper ever knew the extent of that kingdom; who but he ever, in the long song of history, went down the Throat? That road he took, leaving the last of the light. Savages he met there, and, defeating their chief in solitary combat, bound him when his vassels fled—till hunger forced from him the tale of Singing's passing, and her captor's. Deeper they had gone by his telling, and even Deepdelper's mighty strength—so he himself recounted it—died within him.

Then came a wetting, but not as we have known them. The dim rills of

the Throat turned to black as the waters multiplied, and there came upon Deepdelves, in the rushing confusion of those waters, all the thoughts that men have ever felt, so that he knew himself to be brave and afraid, happy yet sorrowful, God and nothing—all at once and without causes; and though his thought told him that to do so was death, he dived into the waters and swam with them, laughing to die so, laughing in the breakers, dizzy with delight in the darkness, knowing that it was death but eager to die so.

So he came to the depths, to Everdark, and heard there the weeping of Singing. Who can tell a tale that was born in the blackness? How he found her and killed her captor, drowning him, though he was himself delirious, in the millrace of madness. How the Inner People won them, they who then ate what they had from the waters, those unseen ones who never stand in sun, whelming Deepdelves in their myriads; how he their slave taught them to tear the meat they trod and so live lawfully, and how they gave freedom to him, and Singing too, when once they had tasted; how the two made their way midst difficulties and dangers to the Neck again; all these are more than I can say. But you must know the courage, and the history of your People before you fare forth; and I have told you.

Field and hill are cold now, and the World itself dying or dead, and the lands are filled with ghouls. It is time you go.

*This was the last story.*