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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER ONE

“THE WORLD INSIDE THE PICTURE-BOOK”

When Peter first got into The Wood he was eight years old. Summer was almost over and he would be going back to school soon and it was a rainy day.

Oh, but, wait just a moment. I suppose you're wondering why I'm starting this story in the middle instead of telling you all about Peter and his family and a lot of other things first. Well, you see, it's just that *that's* where the story really begins. Before he met all of his friends in The Wood I think Peter would agree with me that he was pretty much like any other eight-year-old boy. In all of the important things his family was like any other family; his house was like any other house; and he sometimes felt he had never really done anything that somebody else hadn't done first. But The Wood was different. He was the first boy ever to get into it, his friends there all told him so. And he never told his parents or his schoolchums about his adventures because he knew they would never believe him. They would think he was just Telling a Story.

Peter didn't mind that. Many of his Wood friends didn't have any family at all, and he felt sorry for them.

In any case, now that I've told you something about Peter (and you'll surely find out more about him as we go along) perhaps I can continue with the story.

As I said before, it was a rainy day in late summer. The big droplets were drumming very hard on his window-pane, and Peter felt that he didn't want to do anything but play outside, perhaps by the little creek that ran through the ravine behind his house. Of course his mother would never let him go near the swollen creek in a rainstorm and, anyway, none of his friends were allowed to go out either. He was sitting in his room very sullenly (which meant that he was mad at the whole world) when he suddenly realized that there *was* something he might like to do. He looked carefully along the little bookshelf over his bed and ... yes, there it was. It was an old, shabby picture-book that Peter's grandfather had once given him and, without a doubt, it was Peter's favourite thing. The cover was worn-looking because it had been given to Grandpa when he was a boy and was not brand new even then. Yet there was something friendly and warm about it, and as Peter opened the cover and began slowly turning the yellowed pages, he forgot all about the rain outside.

The book had some words in it but they weren't very interesting, and it was the pictures he liked best. They were paintings of families in funny old clothes, going on picnics or sitting around a fancy supper table covered with all sorts of good things to eat and drink. There were black carriages drawn along strange stone-covered laneways by magnificent teams of proud horses, and mighty sailing ships tossed like cork chips on the angry sea. Many times Peter had turned the pages of this book, ever so slowly, and many times he had looked at each scene,

searching out the smallest details. They didn't move, like the backgrounds in his favourite video games; they didn't make noises like the programs on the family computer. Yet, no matter how many times he saw the same pictures, they always thrilled him somehow. These small coloured pages told stories of people and things from long ago and far away; they added something special to Peter's same-as-everyone-else life, and they could make him happy when everything else was making him sad. He liked to lie on his bed, gazing at the pictures and trying to imagine the story behind each of them.

All of a sudden he found himself looking at a picture he had never seen before.

And that was impossible!

It was a pretty scene of a forest in the early morning with a light mist rising from the grass. In the foreground was a small clearing, but, looking deeper into the picture, the grass turned into low bushes and the bushes became trees. Then Peter noticed a rabbit in front of one of the bushes. It was a very large rabbit and he couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it right away. He was caught by the beauty of it. It looked almost alive! In fact, this whole picture seemed so much more real than any of the others. He decided to turn the page back to compare it with them but his fingers wouldn't move, and suddenly he saw a black bird standing on a rock a little way from the rabbit. He *knew* that hadn't been there before. He was getting more and more confused, and all he could do was stare helplessly at the beautiful forest in front of his eyes. Now he could count every glossy feather on the bird. He could swear he saw the rabbit's long ears twitch and, in a moment, it came to him that he could *smell* the wet grass.

Surprised, but not frightened, Peter reached out for his bed.

It wasn't there.

He looked down at his feet and saw that he was standing in a damp carpet of green. He could feel a gentle breeze on the skin of his arms and a strange murmur came to his ears, though he was too busy looking for the familiar things of his room to take much notice of it.

His room was gone.

He turned around and almost bumped into a large oak tree. Still not believing his eyes, he turned quickly 'round again and took a small step forward. The startled bird flapped to a low branch while the rabbit leaped to shelter in the bushes. The murmuring stopped. Peter's mouth dropped open. The sound had been coming from the rabbit and the bird. They had been *talking!*

If you've ever tried to sneak into the kitchen to get the last cookie, only to find someone else already standing there by the jar, you'll know what the next few moments were like. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Nobody breathed.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time (especially when you're not breathing!), the bird shifted a little on the branch, ruffled its feathers a bit, and said, "What are you?"

Peter's mouth had been open already. Now his jaw seemed nearly set to drop off. It made him look ... well, rather foolish. And realizing this may have been why he replied rather too quickly that he was Peter Burroughs and lived with his family in an average house in Poppy Lane and didn't know how in the world he had gotten wherever he was and ...

“But *What* are you?” persisted the bird.

It took another long moment for Peter to understand that the bird really meant *What* and not *Who*, and he stammered, “Oh. I ... I'm a boy, of course.”

The bird cocked its head and apologized to Peter, explaining that it had never met a Boyuvcorse before and hadn't the slightest idea what one should *look* like.

To give him credit, Peter *did* try to convince the feathered fellow that he was only a *boy*, not a Boyuvcorse, because ‘of course’ was just something you said, but ... well he soon gave up on the explanation because the bird only looked more puzzled than ever. Instead he decided to ask a question of his own.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Do you mean to say that you don't know?” replied the bird. “Why, this is The *Wood*. I should have thought even a Boyuvcorse would know that!”

I don't mind telling you that Peter was more than a little annoyed at being called a Boyuvcorse again, but he didn't say anything about it for the moment. What had the bird called this place? The Wood? Well that certainly didn't tell him very much because what he really wanted to know was why he was there and not lying on his bed in his room looking at Grandpa's picture-book. He glanced around the floor of the clearing but there was no sign of the picture-book, and his bed was definitely nowhere to be seen.

"But, where is the Wood?" he asked.

The bird obviously had no answer for this, and Peter realized that it was kind of a tricky question. So he didn't press the point. Instead he looked at the bird and said: "Who are you?"

By this time, however, the rabbit had stuck her head out from the tangled bush and the two creatures struck up a conversation of their own, ignoring the strange visitor and his strange questions.

"Says he's a Boyuvcorse." That was the bird talking.

"What's a Boyuvcorse?" asked the rabbit.

"That is," replied the bird wisely, pointing a wing in Peter's direction. It was a very sensible answer but it was plain that such an exchange would not get them very far. After a moment the rabbit said in its somewhat high rabbit voice:

“He looks rather like Léolin, you know.” (She pronounced it Lay-**Oh**-lin – not a name that sounded like anyone from Peter’s neighbourhood.)

“Yes, he does rather look like Léolin,” agreed the bird, who paused for a moment and then continued, “Though not so handsome, nor half so well-dressed.”

Now Peter had no idea who this Léolin fellow was but he didn’t much like such talk about his looks and his clothes. He was about to say so when the rabbit added:

“He doesn’t have quite the same twinkle of cleverness either.”

What a rude thing to say! Peter’s face began to grow red with anger, and he had just about settled on a plan to show the creatures his fists while looking unmistakably clever, when the bird croaked:

“Somewhat taller, though,” and the rabbit: “Yes, and perhaps stronger,” and Peter began to think that he might not pick a fight with them after all because he had always liked to be thought of as tall and strong.

At this point the bird flapped down from a branch to stand beside the rabbit, and they talked for a short time, in low tones so that Peter couldn’t hear them. After a while they seemed

to have reached a decision. They turned toward Peter, the bird ruffled his feathers a little, and then he spoke with an air of importance.

“Well, my good fellow, my friend and I have given this situation some thought and it occurs to us that, although you are no native resident of The Wood, but only a simple Boyuvcorse, you nonetheless bear a striking resemblance in some respects to an acquaintance of ours who is an Elf. This being the case, my friend and I have decided to undertake a search for our acquaintance in order to bring this small matter of your arrival in The Wood to her attention in hopes that, being most likely of the same ancestry, she might have some greater knowledge of your race than is available to us.”

This kind of talk reminded Peter of the stuffy way some grown-ups spoke when they wanted him to think they were old and wise. But, although he had trouble with some of the words (as I am sure you would have had too) he took the speech to mean that the bird and the rabbit were going to look for an Elf-friend of theirs who looked a little like Peter, because they thought the Elf would know what to do with him. Sure enough, the bird soon raised his wings and lifted himself into the air, while the rabbit set off with long hops into the trees.

The bird’s voice floated back to him:

“Stay right there and wait until we come back.” Then he was left all alone in the clearing in the forest.

For the first time Peter really took a good look around. The great spreading oak behind him (you'll remember he almost bumped into it) was in the exact center of the clearing, and the trees and bushes of the forest made an almost perfect circle around it. On the far side of the clearing from Peter a little creek bubbled out of the wood and into the sunlight for a space, then wound its way back in among the trees, but before it went it left behind a small pool with several rocks of different sizes, and even a few bulrushes. The grass beneath his feet was green and cool with the mist which the morning sun was just beginning to chase away. It was certainly longer than Peter's father had ever allowed their front lawn to grow, but it didn't reach past his knees except, perhaps, beside the little creek. He recognized the tree in the middle of the clearing as an oak because there was a great oak tree in the ravine behind Peter's house and all of the neighbourhood children loved to climb it. But he couldn't think of the names of any of the others. Even so, he didn't think they looked very different from the ones he had seen all his life.

For a short while he watched the forest where the bird and the rabbit had been, thinking that perhaps it wouldn't be long before they should return. Then he raised his head and gazed up into the sky. The sun was just over the trees and the wind was playing games with a few wispy clouds a long way up. Once in a while Peter could feel that high wind reaching a finger down to the earth, rippling the grass around his ankles. He was just about to look down again when he noticed a large speck moving above the treetops. At first he thought it must be the black bird returning, but it was from the wrong direction, and he soon saw that this bird was even larger than the first. In fact, it was a duck.

The duck was coming up to the clearing very quickly and would soon have passed it by except that, just as it was sailing over Peter's head, it gave a startled quack, turned a somersault in the air, and flapped awkwardly to a landing by the creek. Peter stared at the duck and the duck stared at him.

Now I suppose you think that if you were standing in a clearing in a wood and a duck landed nearby and began looking at you, it would be the natural thing to try to get closer and perhaps catch it, or at least touch it. Well you mustn't think that Peter was a coward because he didn't do any such thing. I have no doubt that normally he would have. But this duck was twice the normal size, and Peter had not forgotten that the first two animals he had met in this strange place had actually *talked*. In any case, Peter didn't move, and it was up to the duck to take the first waddling steps toward him.

"What are you?" asked the duck.

Peter groaned and shook his head. He had been through that before.

"I am a boy," he said carefully.

"A Boy, you say," quacked the duck, stroking what might have been its *chin* with its right wing. "Would have said you looked like an Elf." And Peter was so sure that it was going to say 'only not so handsome' or some such thing, that he quickly interrupted and began telling about how the rabbit and the black bird had already gone off looking for this Léolin person.

The duck seemed to think about this for a while and then spoke, half to himself.

“Not surprising. Never saw a Boy before. Léolin might know something. Doubt it though.” His short phrases muttered through his bill in a husky voice reminded Peter of an old man. A man like Peter’s grandfather had been: always trying to sound gruff, but nicer than anything, underneath.

“Already gone, you say. Which way?” mumbled the duck.

Peter pointed in the direction the rabbit and the black bird had taken, and the duck immediately took a short run and flapped into the air heading the other way. A few more grumbled words drifted back to Peter, and then the warm silence of the Wood closed over him once more.

By now it seemed to the boy that he had been in this odd place for quite a long time. He was not afraid, only puzzled, and a little concerned that by now his mother might be looking for him back home. But he couldn’t really feel worried. In fact, the little clearing among the trees was so pleasant in the warm morning sun that, without thinking, he sat down on the grass, leaned back against the trunk of the great oak tree, and settled in for a nap.

He had just closed his eyes when the soothing whisper of the blowing grass was broken by the sound of a splash from behind him. He quickly sat up and looked toward the creek, but

there was nothing to be seen. He lay back again and shut his eyes. A few quiet rustling sounds came to his ears now and then, but he was feeling too drowsy to bother looking, until a loud slap came from near his side. He slowly turned his head, blinking sleepily, and stared straight into the *biggest, roundest, bulgiest eyes he had ever seen.*

He would have jumped backward in fright, but the tree stopped him, and in any case, he soon felt ashamed for being scared. The great big eyes belonged to a large, but otherwise not frightening, frog.

“What are you?” asked the frog.

I don't need to tell you much about this conversation because it was very much like the first two, except that Peter was extra careful not to say things like 'of course'. The frog seemed to be a pleasant enough person and he always wore a broad green smile. When he had heard all about the bird, the rabbit, and the duck, the frog suggested that he and Peter should swim along the creek to look for Léolin that way, but Peter thought it was a better idea for him to wait where he was in case any of the others found the Elf and brought her back.

Besides, Peter hadn't brought his bathing suit. He had never intended to go swimming while looking at Grandpa's picture-book.

The frog shrugged its shoulders, gave a quick green grin, and hopped back into the tall grass along the creek (which was why Peter hadn't seen him in the first place). A splash confirmed that yet another visitor had gone off to look for the mysterious Elf.

There was nothing to do but wait, so Peter sat down against the trunk of the tree once again. The rough old oak had begun to seem like a friend in this unknown forest world that had somehow snatched him right out of his bedroom. He closed his eyes and settled down to pass the time until the others returned, and as he felt himself drifting off to sleep he wondered if he would wake up back home again, to find that he had only imagined the black bird, the rabbit, the duck, and the frog, and the pleasant little clearing in the warm wood.

Even sleep was changed in this place. He seemed to hear a strange musical sound every now and then. It made him dream of tiny silver bells jingling far off over a field of Christmas snow, or a pretty little waterfall singing as its crystal drops fell into a pool covered with bright autumn leaves. Or sometimes it sounded like the first birds gaily telling everyone that they have followed the spring sun back to the north country. The sound made Peter smile in his sleep, and he dreamed of nice things, like coming home after a long time away, or finding a new friend it seems like you've known forever.

After a time different noises began to come into Peter's dreams, and he woke up to find that he was still in the clearing in The Wood, and that the animals were back. When they saw that he was awake they stopped telling each other to be quiet and started talking to him, all at the

same time. It took a while to get them settled down, but Peter finally got the idea that no-one had found Léolin.

“It’s as if she just disappeared,” said the rabbit.

“Left no traces,” said the duck.

“No-one’s seen her,” said the black bird.

“Gone, gone, gone,” said the frog.

Peter said: “Hmmm.”

“I think she’s lost,” said the rabbit.

“Got to find her,” said the duck

“Organize a search party,” said the black bird.

“Search, search, search,” said the frog.

Peter said: “No.”

“I don’t think there's anything we can do,” said Peter. It occurred to him that maybe Léolin was missing because she was lying on Peter’s own bed right then, looking at Grandpa’s picture-book. All of a sudden it was a very lonely thought.

“I guess there’s no-one who can help me get back home,” he said to himself quietly, as a tear began to grow in his eye. He looked around at the cozy little clearing. Most times he would have loved to stay in a place like that and visit for ever so long. But it just didn't seem so wonderful when he thought he might never see his family again.

The animals could see that Peter needed some comforting so they each began telling him all of the nice things they could think of, like how sorry they were, and how The Wood was really a safe-enough place once you got used to it, and how hot chocolate sauce melts ice-cream faster than butterscotch. It was no use. Peter couldn't stop thinking of home and they slowly ran out of nice things to say. In fact Peter looked so sad that the animals began to feel sad too, and their friendly faces became criss-crossed with the tracks of salt tears.

Just as all of the talking had stopped and everyone was sitting on the ground with glistening eyes, Peter heard the happy musical sound out of his dreams, and suddenly someone dropped lightly out of the tree to stand in the middle of their circle. It was a slender girl with pale skin, very blond hair, bright twinkling eyes, and a smile that was full of merry mischief. As they all turned to look she put her hands on her hips and threw back her head with a laugh. And Peter suddenly knew where the musical sound had come from.

"Léolin!" cried the animals. But Peter had already guessed.

As it seemed they always did, the animals all began to talk at once. They wanted to tell Léolin about Peter but the Elf shook her head and quieted them down. She didn't need anyone to tell her the story because she had already heard everything that had happened in the clearing that day. For, as you have probably guessed by now, she had been hiding in the top of the great oak tree all the time.

"And what great fun it was, too," laughed Léolin, "Listening to all of you talking about me and bothering this poor boy with all of your silly questions. Oh yes," she said as she saw the look on Peter's face, "I know about boys, and I've heard stories about your funny world. But I'm afraid I don't know how to get you back there. Still, if you came here from there, there must be some way of getting you back. Why don't you come to my house for now? It's not very far. We can sing songs and tell tales until bedtime and then, first thing tomorrow morning, we will set out to find the World of Men!"

The animals gave a great cheer at the thought of having an adventure, and Peter found his spirits already beginning to pick up. Léolin seemed such a happy person that it was hard to be sad when she was around.

"But before we do anything," continued Léolin, "I think introductions are in order." The animals all agreed.

Everyone knew Peter's name but he didn't know theirs, so Léolin called them out, one at a time, and they each took a step forward when his or her name was called. In this way Peter learned that the gruff old duck was named Fowler, the rabbit was Harriet, the frog was Webster, and everyone called the black bird Jackson Crow (although his real name was John Farnsworth Coalfeathers the Third). Peter went down the line shaking hands, paws, wings, and feet, and by the time he reached the end he was smiling again. Maybe things weren't so bad after all.

And so it happened, just as I told you at the very start, that Peter came into The Wood and made some new friends. There was a great deal to talk about as they made their way through the forest to Léolin's house, and I'm sure bedtime came far too soon for doing all of the singing and talking and laughing they wanted to do (as bedtime always will). But there would be more days like this one.

As he snuggled down into the soft bed, beneath a light down-filled comforter, he thought of his Mother and Father, saying a little prayer that they would know that he was safe and among friends. And as his eyes begin to close I shall be happy to leave him for a while in such good company.