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*THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton*

CHAPTER TEN

“THERE COMES A TIME OF SADNESS”

There came a day when Peter woke up, ate a slow breakfast, and climbed down from his tree-house. And didn't go to visit Léolin.

He forgot to.

He also forgot to call Gypsy, who didn't know he was gone for almost an hour, having been busy at bone-burying in the forest.

He stared at the ground and up in the sky. His feet placed themselves one before the other, just as usual. Yet he took no notice, for his thoughts were elsewhere. In fact, he was being sad.

Well, everyone feels sad sometimes, you will say, and I suppose you are right. But you see, Peter had hardly ever felt that way the whole time he had spent in The Wood, and the few times he *had* been gloomy had mostly been when he was still getting used to being away from home. The rest of the time there had always been too much to do, too many new and exciting discoveries to be made for him to ever feel sad. And there was no homework, no scolding, no going to bed early because of school the next morning, no eating of foods he didn't like in order to get dessert. In short, *nothing* worth the trouble of being sad about.

Not even now. But he was sad anyway.

There was something in the air: a kind of electricity, like the gloom that covers the world sometimes when a storm approaches. Peter knew the signs, and if he had thought about it he would have realized that a large storm was indeed on the way. Yet that was more likely to make him glad, than sad. In The Wood Peter had come to positively *like* storms for their excitement and savage splendour. They do sometimes say that an electrical charge in the air can affect people's moods, and maybe Peter knew that. The thought never occurred to him.

Without meaning to go anywhere in particular, his feet trod the well-worn pathways until he suddenly came upon a pool, almost stepping into it before he realized where he was. His eyes swept up and he recognized the place immediately. The same happy fish splashing in the foam; the same bright rainbow, busy ants, dancing water: it was the waterfall that Léolin had shown him on only the second day of Peter's stay in The Wood.

Nothing had changed. Or perhaps, if anything, the little fall was even more beautiful than before. The singing of the droplets was like crystal bells in Peter's ears, with a song that plucked the very strings of his heart, as the poets say. He gazed in silence. The essence of the scene flowed into him like a breath of sweet air until his vision blurred with a salt tear that mingled itself with the waters of the blue-glass pool.

Why? He could not say. The little waterfall seemed to be trying to tell him something with its song; the fish moved their mouths at him.

He could not catch the words.

Finally, he got slowly to his feet, and the trees swallowed him in their shadows once more.

No-one disturbed the silence as he walked along. I am sure that quite a few animals must have seen him, and he was well-known in The Wood by that time, but perhaps they sensed his mood and said nothing. Many animals have that ability and I sometimes think that people would have it too if they would only let themselves. To be sure, we can tell a person is sad if his eyes are dull and his mouth droops. But too often, I think, we foolishly try to cheer them up when sometimes they would be better off left alone. No-one disturbed Peter's mood, and when he remembered that afterward he was grateful.

In the state of mind that he was in, he didn't notice when he began climbing the slope. It was not until his legs began to grow tired and his breath to come more quickly that he looked around at all. Then he ignored the tiredness and hurried along. Within a few moments he stood on the top of the great grey cliff, looking out over the forest with glistening eyes.

This time he did not stand with his back right against the bushes, for fear of falling. He stood boldly out and looked at everything. There, of course, was his clearing, with its little creek and beloved oak tree. The tiny waterfall could be seen over to the left. And was that ...? Yes, it was the hill they had all gathered on when the forest had been flooded. Peter wondered if there were still rope cuts in the trees.

A long line of blue over to the east told him that the big lake was there, hiding who knew what mysteries beneath its broad surface. He felt sad that he would never visit it.

Wait a minute. *Never?* How had that thought come into his mind? He had not been there yet, but surely he could do so tomorrow or another day. Couldn't he? Yes, of course ... of course he could. He tried to reassure himself. And when that didn't work he tried to think about something else.

He looked out to the horizon, and the few clouds gathered there reminded him of the time that the whole Wood had been covered with fluffy whiteness, when they had played at acrobatics up in the sky, and almost lost Gypsy in the bargain. His eyes dropped to look past his feet, over

the edge. Far, far below a blue ribbon of water flowed out of the cliff to cool a stairway of stones. A sudden thought rushed into his head, and with a final glance at the forest view, he turned to dash through the bushes.

The small cave was surprisingly easy to find, as if it had been waiting for him. He had to pause while his eyes adjusted to the darkness, then he was off like a shot down the passage. He didn't even hesitate as he came beneath the shaft of light, but took a flying leap onto the slope of sand. This second time no fear took away his enjoyment. He drank in every sensation: the swirling dust, the menacing darkness, and the dizzy speed. It could have gone on forever and Peter would not have minded right then, but too soon he sensed the last drop approaching and took a deep breath.

The water was deliciously cool, as he knew it would be. It did not suck him downward or try to squeeze the air from his chest, but stroked him gently and helped him to the surface with a friendly push. He swam to shore and clambered up onto a rock ledge. He knew the way out, but he wasn't in a hurry. The other caves caught his attention, and he sat wondering about the secrets they held. They might never have been explored; who knew what treasures might be hidden there? But somehow Peter knew he would not be the one to explore them, not that day. He walked slowly through the larger tunnel, and sat down on the warm rock of the top steps to let the sun kiss him dry.

In one way he felt the thrill of a child at an amusement park; this was The Wood at its best. At the same time he couldn't shake off his blues. After some thought, it came to him that he was a little bit lonely. All morning he had felt like being by himself -- now he felt like company. He stood up, splashed down the stream-covered steps, and set off into the trees.

He came upon Fowler first. The duck was floating on the water of his swamp, muttering to himself. Every few moments he would swim up to a stand of reeds, grab a few with his bill, and bend the tops of them over until they touched the water. Unfortunately, as soon as he let go they would spring straight again and the poor duck would go swimming in a circle, mumbling a wide variety of angry words. Peter stepped out onto a clump of grass.

"Hello Fowler," he said. "What's your trouble? Can I do something to help?"

Fowler looked up. "Oh, 'morning Peter," he quacked. "Nothing important. Was trying to make a little roof out of the weeds. Keep the sun off once in a while, that's all. Won't work, though. Need two bills." He took a short dive under the surface to cool his temper.

"I have something like two bills," Peter smiled, holding out his hands. "Show me what you want done." Being wet already, he stepped right into the water and walked over to his friend.

"Maybe you could do it," Fowler said, "If you can spare the time. Before you ... um ..."  
At Peter's strange look the duck stopped short and began again.

“Had a mind to weave reeds together over the water. Tie the tops together. Seen other birds do it. They used twigs, though. Reeds are too springy.”

Peter nodded. He grabbed a handful of reeds in each hand, one from either side of a narrow strip of water. Then, with Fowler directing, he wove the reeds together, occasionally tying some of the tops if they needed it. They kept at this for a half-hour or so, and by that time there was a little tunnel in the swamp. It was about two meters long and just the right height for Fowler, and he swam in and out of it from one end to the other, muttering:

“Nice and cool. Fine job, fine job. Good as any crow’s nest.”

Peter laughed. When he went to say goodbye the duck suddenly made a face that Peter had never seen before: different from the slight scowl the bird usually wore. The dark eyes looked watery and he blew his bill on a clean white handkerchief. A few quiet words of thanks were said, and then Peter stepped back into the trees, turning around only once to see the old duck swimming back and forth, in and out, now and then dabbing his face with the small square of white cloth.

The sky was beginning to cloud over completely by this time, and the wind was picking up, but Peter kept watch and decided that the storm wouldn’t break for a few hours yet. He set out in search of Harriet. It was as if he needed to see everyone before ... before what? He could not say.

Jackson and Harriet were together when he found them. They were both hopping around at the base of a tree, talking to each other and looking at the tree trunk, especially at the black hole in its side. The friends all greeted each other warmly, and then Peter was given an explanation.

The two creatures had been playing a kind of dice game with pine-cones when Jackson, who had to pick up the cones in his beak to roll them, had accidentally tossed one too hard, so that it had fallen through the hole into the middle of the hollow tree. The hole was nearly a meter from the ground, making it impossible for Harriet to reach into it, and Jackson was just a little too wide at the shoulders to squeeze through.

Peter stepped up to the tree, looked in the hole, called out to make sure there was no sleeping animal or bird in it, and reached down his arm. He had to stand on tiptoe and press his face to the tree before he could reach the bottom, which was fairly thick with dried leaves and broken twigs. Groping around the small space, brushing leaves aside, his fingers finally closed on a lump. He drew his hand out and, sure enough, it held the pine-cone. The crow and the rabbit were very grateful.

“You humans are handy little creatures to have around,” croaked Jackson with a wink, and they all laughed.



The game resumed and Peter, who had often played it (but *never* won) joined in. It was called ‘Sun and Rain’ and was much like a game children play here called ‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’: the sun can dry up rain; rain can melt snow; snow can cover the leaves; and leaves can block the sun. Except that, instead of playing with one’s fingers (which most creatures don’t have) they rolled painted pine-cones. The three friends took turns playing in pairs and marking down their scores in the dirt as they went. After fifteen rounds they discovered that Peter had won. For the first time!

“This must be your lucky day, Peter,” said Harriet, “But just wait, we’ll beat you again tomorrow.” She and Jackson tried to chuckle at the little joke, but somehow it died off rather too quickly. Peter said only: “I hope you’re right,” wished them farewell (which, for some reason made the rabbit and the crow fidget uncomfortably and make funny coughing noises) and left to look for Webster. The sky was getting rather dark by then and he hurried along.

The frog was sitting on a log staring out over his favourite lily pond when Peter came along. At first Peter thought he must be asleep, even though the big bulging eyes were open, but when the boy accidentally stepped on a dry twig, Webster gave a start and turned his eyes.

“Hello Peter!” he croaked. He looked surprised. Peter said:

“Hello Webster. You looked like you were thinking so I didn’t want to bother you. Is it anything I can help with?” The frog blinked once or twice.

“Maybe,” he said finally. “It’s my lily pad. It’s a fine place to lay in the sun and have a nap, and I do that quite a bit some days. Only it’s not in the right spot. The sun shines on it in the morning, but by the afternoon the shadows of the trees cover it, and the sunshine is over there.” He pointed to the far side of the pond. “I was sitting here thinking about how I could move it back and forth without breaking it.”

Peter sat down and tried to think. It occurred to him that the sun wasn’t shining that day but he decided not to mention the fact. After a few minutes he spoke.

“I have an idea,” he said. “How about a floating piece of wood, instead of the lily pad?”

Webster considered. “Wouldn’t the current carry it away?”

“But I have an idea,” Peter replied and began to search the ground around the trees. When he had found a good-sized piece of log with a broken stub of a branch sticking up from one end, he showed it to Webster. “This will be your sunning spot,” he said, “And this is how it will work.”

He pulled a long string from his pocket, tied it to the branch stub, and carried it to the far end of the pond where the stream flowed in. He tied the other end of the string to a small tree there, and placed the log in the water. “Get aboard,” he told Webster, and the frog did so. Then

Peter let go of the log and the current slowly carried it to the far end of the pond - about where Webster's lily pad was - before the tightening string stopped it.

“That's where you'll sun in the morning,” Peter said, “Just like before. But when the sun moves you move your log along with it by pulling in some of the string and wrapping it around the stub.”

Webster tried it. And it worked. Eventually he made his way up to the top of the pond again.

“Now,” the boy continued, “When you want to move it back down the pond you just have to unwrap the string again.” Webster nodded and followed the instructions. Soon he had the log moving up and down as nicely as you please.

“Of course,” Peter said, “The wind might blow it a bit. And the wood will get waterlogged after a while. You'll just have to find a new one and do the same thing. Léolin will help you.”

He stopped speaking, and shook his head a little. There he went again! Why had he said Léolin would help? What was wrong with him today?

He gave his shoulders a shrug. Then he said goodbye to Webster (who thanked him several times from mid-stream -- “for everything”, he made a special point to say), and walked off into the forest. He decided to look for Léolin.

The first drops of rain were falling as Peter came to the Elf’s tree-house. Léolin had been writing something on a piece of paper, which she slipped into her pocket as Peter stepped inside. The two friends looked at each other and it struck Peter that he had never seen his friend looking so unhappy. Her too?

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked. Léolin shook her head.

“Let’s go for a walk,” she said, and they stepped out into the rain.

They could both sense that they wanted to be together, but neither said anything. What was there to say? Peter didn’t know what was making Léolin sad, but then he didn’t know the reason for his own case of the blues, either. Even so, in a true friendship there is a comfort in sharing the sorrowful times as well as the good.

They didn’t notice the rain. It was something outside their thoughts, like the little night-time noises one never hears. The smooth pathways of The Wood soon carried them to Peter’s clearing, where the two friends came to a stop at the edge of the trees. The oak tree was waiting.

It held their eyes: reaching tall to challenge the storm that showered it, yet so firmly anchored as to be a part of the ground from which it sprang.

“Peter,” Léolin said in a voice no louder than the patter of the rain, “You know how sometimes you wake up knowing that something exciting is going to happen?” Peter nodded. “Well sometimes,” the Elf continued, “You wake up knowing that something bad is going to happen. Sometimes you even know what it will be.” She fell silent. Peter tried to understand his companion's words.

A flash of lightning lit up their unhappy faces, and a rolling boom of thunder roared through the surrounding air. Peter looked up and noticed the pelting rain for the first time.

“I think it’s time for me to be going home,” he said.

Léolin looked up and nodded, and Peter was startled to see tears in her eyes. The Elf suddenly stuffed a piece of paper into Peter’s pocket, gave the boy's hands a squeeze, and turned away.

Peter stood for a moment, then walked over to the oak tree, where Gypsy came running up to him.

“What’s wrong with everything today, Peter?” she moaned. “I haven’t felt this bad since they took me away from my brothers and sisters. And it isn’t only me either.”

Peter nodded and looked up at the rain. *The whole world is crying*, he thought. He reached for the rope ladder.

“Look!” cried Gypsy, suddenly. Peter turned.

The day had become quite dark but he could make out several shapes standing among the trees. Could it be ... Léolin and the animals? They were moving: slowly, strangely. And all of a sudden it came to him what they were doing.

*They were waving goodbye!*

Tears sprang to his eyes. Now he knew what Léolin had meant.

Lightning flashed. The whole world went white.

It seemed that for a long time Peter could see nothing at all. Like a perfectly blank page, or a field of fresh snow ... no more. Then ... slowly at first, and gradually with more speed, lines

began tracing their way across the whiteness. They wound and curved and twisted and bent: like an artist sketching at lightning speed. Shapes formed; shadows grew; and finally colours rippled across the page. The world snapped into place.

He was in his room ... at home ... in the house on Poppy Lane. He lay on his bed and there was an old picture-book closed in his hand. A tear splashed its cover.

*Too soon, Peter thought, I wasn't ready to go home yet.*

A sudden idea came to him and he began hurriedly turning the picture pages. Once... twice ... desperately a third time. The picture of the clearing was gone. He had really known it would be.

With a sigh he sat up on his bed, brushing the wetness from his cheek, and it was then that he noticed his mother's voice calling from the bottom of the stairs.

“Peter. Peter, your uncle Jim's here. Come on down. He's brought Gypsy with him.” Peter heard doggy claws scrambling up the hardwood stairs. He opened the door and the puppy bounded in.

“Gyps!” he said, “Gyps do you ...?” The puppy wagged her tail furiously, and gave an excited yap. He sat down on the bed again and Gypsy climbed onto his knees to kiss his face.

Then he remembered the piece of paper.

He took it out of his pocket. In the Elf's lovely handwriting it said:

Peter and Gypsy,

We're sure that The Wood will call you back some day.

Please don't forget us.

Your friends,

Léolin, Fowler, Harriet, Jackson, and Webster.