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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER THREE

“TO FIND ANOTHER WORLD”

After a time Peter saw more and more often how the Wood changed from day to day and, just as Léolin had said, he was soon able to find his way around without ever getting lost. He spent quite a few very enjoyable days visiting his friends (who lived in some very strange places) and being visited by them in his nice new tree-house. He woke up every morning with a happy smile on his face, really looking forward to what each day might bring. After all, in a place where almost anything can happen, almost anything often does. It was usually a lot of fun, and *always* surprising.

So perhaps what is not surprising is that less and less of his time was spent thinking about his old life. That's not to say that he forgot about his home and his family; never that. It's just that so many other things were so very interesting that they quickly filled his mind and left less and less room for memories.

So it was that one day Peter and Fowler the duck were sitting at the table in the branches of the great oak tree, talking and having a bit of something nice to eat (I think it was chocolate chip cookies and milk, but since I have no idea where they would get such things, I can't really be sure). Peter had been saying how much he enjoyed being in The Wood and wondering what strange things would happen to them in the days to come, when Fowler broke in:

“Just a minute, Peter. Was wanting to ask you something. None of my business, of course. Think I'm rude likely. But ... didn't you want to find your way back home?”

The question took Peter quite by surprise and he didn't answer right away.

He was silent for a time. Then he gave a deep sigh. He put his chin on his hand and looked out over the forest. He drummed his fingers on the table, shuffled his feet, flicked a cookie crumb onto the floor. A part of him even thought, guiltily: “Isn't it just like Fowler to break in on a good time?” And then, finally, he said:

“Yes. I suppose I should.”

And so it was settled.

The expedition set out the very next morning, which was sometimes damp with a cool mist and sometimes warm with the golden sun. Now most of the expeditions you may have heard of, such as those to the North Pole, or to find Dr. Livingston in darkest Africa, take months of

getting ready. But you mustn't think that Peter and his friends didn't take their expedition seriously just because they got it ready in only a day. As Harriet explained it, there was no use trying to be prepared for bad weather or hard walking if one didn't know that bad weather or rough going were on the way. It would be just their luck to carry a great load of water in case they came across a desert, and then have it pour down rain the whole time. And Harriet didn't see the sense in taking food and things for a long trip when one didn't know that the trip would necessarily be long at all.

I'm not sure that a boy scout would have agreed with her about these matters, but it is nevertheless true that equipment and such things are hard for rabbits and birds and frogs to carry (you almost never see such animals with knapsacks on their backs). However that may be, they set off with a picnic lunch for each of them, mostly carried by Peter and Léolin, and an old tattered umbrella that had once belonged to a maiden aunt of Jackson Crow, in case it rained.

In very typical fashion they had been walking for about fifteen minutes when they realized that no-one knew where they were going. They had each thought that someone else was leading the way, and had only discovered their mistake when they saw that they had come back to their starting point (the clearing around Peter's oak tree) and had no leader to blame it on.

And the trouble began.

As you would expect if you knew these animals well at all, and as you might expect by knowing them just a little from the chapters before this one, there was only one way they would

react to such a situation. They all started talking at once. With no leader to speak for them, they had to decide the best way to set about looking for the World of Men, and they all had firm ideas of how to go about it. Peter and Léolin just stood back and listened, occasionally smiling at each other and giving little slow shakes of their heads.

Jackson and Fowler argued (and sensibly too) that much greater progress could be made if they could see the forest from a great height. Then they would be able to spot anything that looked like it might be the World of Men, and investigate it later on the ground. Unfortunately the high cliff which Peter had visited on his second day in The Wood, from the top of which one could see for many kilometers, had not been there since. Léolin thought it might not be back in the neighbourhood for months. And although both of the birds could fly quite high if they had to, neither of them knew what the World of Men looked like, only Peter did.

There is a fable in our world (you may have heard it) about two geese carrying a turtle into the air by flying with a stick in their mouths and having the turtle bite onto the stick. Now it seems strange to me, but the mother birds and father birds of The Wood must tell that same story, for both Fowler and Jackson knew it. Before Peter could say anything they had found a good stout stick and were urging him to grab on.

Well, if you remember the fable (as Peter did), the turtle fell to his death because he couldn't keep from talking, and in trying to talk he let go of the stick. Of course, Peter would not be hanging onto the stick with his mouth, but the two birds would be. And since he had hardly ever known either of them to keep from talking for longer than a minute, he considered it a bad

risk indeed. He didn't want to say so. Instead he pointed out that, although Fowler and Jackson were larger than such birds are in our world, they were not so large as geese, and Peter was quite a bit heavier than most turtles. In any case the experiment was soon given up when it became clear that the duck and the crow could never agree on which direction they should fly.

While the two birds were flapping and fluttering, trying to take off in opposite ways with the stick held between them, Harriet was thinking how silly they were. She had seen Peter arrive in The Wood (well, nearly seen it) and was almost sure he must have sprung up from the ground like a flower, except very much quicker. At least there had been no noise like someone falling out of the sky, and even Peter said he hadn't walked there. Perhaps the World of Men was somewhere far below The Wood, underneath the ground. Perhaps the *floor* of the Wood was the *sky* of Peter's world, painted blue on the bottom.

Why, then it would be possible to *dig* your way there!

She was just about to shout out her plan to the others, when she stopped herself just in time. She had suddenly realized that her friends would not be able to follow her down a rabbit hole without a great deal of widening. And I can't say that I blame her for not wanting to go by herself. Especially with the chance that she might fall through someone else's *sky*! She gave a terrific shudder and kept her mouth firmly shut.

After a minute or two the birds had given up their struggles and sat down panting on the grass. Webster hopped over to stand beside Peter. It was a bad habit of Webster's that he

sometimes stood too close to people when he wanted to speak, and suddenly turning your head to find yourself face-to-face with a face that was all green grinning mouth and huge bulging eyes is enough to make anyone jump.

When Peter had scrambled back to his feet again, Webster suggested that they follow the creek. Perhaps, he reasoned, Peter had fallen asleep, floated down the creek to the clearing, and walked in his sleep over to the oak tree, where he suddenly awoke. This was not such a bad idea in a way, but Peter certainly didn't think he'd be able to swim for what might be hours. He was just about to start making excuses when Léolin said:

“Yes, let's.”

Peter and the rest gave her pained looks, but the Elf continued, “That kind of thing could be possible if enchantments were involved. You might have been turned into a fish or something, and swam up here, but not remembered anything about it when you became human again.” Peter didn't believe there were any witches or magicians who lived in Poppy Lane, and began to say so. But the Elf wasn't finished.

“Besides,” she said, “My boat is just up the creek and it is a very nice day for boating.” Under the trees the air was still damp, but the fact is Elves think any weather is good for boating. Still, none of the others had a better plan at the moment, so they all agreed. Then too, as Léolin mentioned quietly to Peter, the rivers of The Wood might end up anywhere, and even if they didn't find the World of Men right away they might come across a shipwreck or a pirate's

treasure or some such adventure, which could be a lot of fun, and would at least keep the animals from arguing with each other for a while.

They all followed the Elf to her little boat which was pulled up on the bank a short way into the trees. It was not large (though with very pretty lines and a nice shade of silvery green), but it seemed even smaller once all of them had gotten into it. Even so, it showed no signs of tipping, and because the water was shallow enough for them to push their way along like a raft, the boy and the Elf each took a long pole on opposite sides and went to work. They were quickly on their way in a direction which Peter said was just south of straight west and Léolin said was upstream.

They glided for some time along the smooth surface, in the shade of many leaves. Following the creek this way was like travelling along one of those tree-lined streets that you often see in small towns or parks, only nicer. The branches curved together overhead so that the travelers seemed to be slipping through a green tunnel over a floor of glass. None of them said very much; they were too busy keeping a sharp lookout for the World of Men, in case it happened to be hiding somewhere among the bushes that covered the banks. Once in a while a few curious fish would come up beside them to see what was going on, and Fowler was strongly tempted to jump overboard and catch himself a meal. But he settled down when the rest of the expedition members promised him that they would eat their picnic lunches quite soon.

After some length of time slowly making their way along, they came to a fork in the stream. Or I suppose it is more correct (since they were going upstream) to say that two creeks

joined to become one. Either way, the fact remained that they now had to choose which direction to take. They tried voting, but since there were six of them and since three wanted to go one way and three the other, this didn't work very well. Peter suggested that they flip a coin but nobody had one, so in the end they decided that it was Peter's home they were trying to find and the choice was up to him. He pointed to the right, and the expedition was on its way once more.

In spite of some patches of thin mist which dampened their faces occasionally, Peter was enjoying the ride. He didn't feel the need to spend the whole time scouring the shoreline because he was quite sure that Poppy Lane would have trouble hiding behind a few bushes. He also privately doubted that the creek would lead them back to his bedroom at all. But one never knew. So many strange things had happened already. In any case, it wasn't every day he got to explore woods he had never seen, travelling all the way by boat, so he was making the most of it.

By the position of the sun, when they could see it, they knew that they had been following the creek for several hours, with no sign of the World of Men and no change in the forest.

It was drawing near noon and they were preparing to break out the picnic lunches when Léolin said, "Hold on. I think I see some light ahead." The others could see it now too, and they grew quite excited at the thought of coming out of the tunnel of trees, perhaps into a whole different world!

There was a bend in the creek just at the edge of the light, hiding what was beyond it from their view. They held their breath as the corner was rounded and then

Fowler gave a startled quack and fell off his perch at the bow. The others made similar sounds of shocked surprise, while Peter simply stood and stared with his mouth hanging open (which was rude, but he couldn't help it). It was not amazement at seeing strange things that caused them so much shock; the scene was perfectly familiar to all of them. They had not come to the World of Men, nor had they discovered any treasure. They had returned to the beginning; the grass of the warm clearing brushed the sides of the boat as they glided up beside Peter's oak tree, and the tree-house he had left just hours before.

It was some time before any of them could speak clearly, or at least before they could say anything but: "It can't be!" or "Impossible!" or "How in the world?!" Finally Léolin motioned for silence.

"Now listen everybody," she said. "We didn't turn around did we?" And five voices said:

"No!"

"And if we had," added Peter, "We wouldn't have come back into the clearing on the *opposite* side from where we left it." The rest nodded.

“So,” continued the Elf, “It can only mean that the creek has carried us in a full circle. Though I certainly can’t see how that’s possible. A creek in the shape of a circle? What would keep the water moving?” No-one could answer this but there was no doubting that they were back where they had started. Feeling very disappointed, they ate their lunch on the grass around Peter’s tree, scarcely noticing what they ate because they were thinking so hard. When they were done Léolin stood up, dusted the crumbs from her hands and said:

“All right, then. Let’s see where the other stream leads us .“ And so they did.

They set off in the same direction as before, again upstream, and hurried to the fork. When they got there they pushed the boat into the stream on the left this time and continued on. The others felt that they were finally getting somewhere, but Peter wasn’t so sure. He didn’t watch the passing bushes the way the animals did, nor did he gaze around in every direction as he had done before. He kept a close watch on the stream, as if he suspected the water of playing tricks on him. And it did not prove him wrong.

The creek water was quite clear with only a few leaves and bits of grass floating on top of it, so he could easily see the rocks of the creek bed a meter or so below . He watched the leaves carefully as they drifted past from the front of the boat. As he looked, it slowly came to him that the leaves were taking longer and longer to go by, and when he finally noticed a pair of sticks staying right behind the boat for several minutes, he frowned. He motioned to Léolin and very quietly told the Elf what he had seen. They had set out going upstream, that is, against the

current, and now somehow they were being *carried* by that same current ... no longer *up* the stream, but *down* it!

Peter and Léolin said nothing to the animals in case they were wrong, but they did not share their friends' surprise when the little green boat swept out into the sunshine once again, into the same clearing from which it had begun. They had gone in a full circle, not once, not twice, but three times (you will remember the first time was when they had set out walking early that morning). Everyone was downhearted. They had meant to travel until they had found the World of Men, but they just couldn't seem to get away from that clearing!

They climbed out of the boat and settled in a ragged circle on the grass. The flowers still smiled brightly in the afternoon sunshine, and the crickets seemed almost to be laughing at them.

At last Peter made up his mind not to sit around and sulk about their troubles all day. He suggested that they walk in a straight line directly away from the creek, almost north, so that they would cross the water where it curved around in the forest and be able to keep on going away from the clearing.

This seemed like a good plan and so they set out for the fourth time. All of them were getting tired by now and they traveled more slowly.

I wish I could tell you that everything went well this time and that they kept right away from the clearing and found adventures at last . But it was not to be. They kept expecting to

come upon the curve of the creek and cross it, yet they never did. And as the sun started finding its way down the edge of the sky, they broke through a wall of bushes and stood staring up at Peter's tree-house in the branches of the great oak.

No-one could say anything for a long time. They were all speechless with disappointment. Their proud expedition, all of their hard work and all of their high hopes, had come to nothing. When they finally did bring themselves to speak, there was nothing to say except to complain, and that did no good at all.

“What's the use,” said Peter bitterly, “It's as though this oak tree has a chain on me. It will never let me go back home.” And he hit the trunk of the tree, as if to make it set him free.

Suddenly a strange look came over Léolin's face and she jumped to her feet. She put her hand on the tree and stood thinking, with one of her knuckles in her mouth. The others watched her curiously as she stood that way for several moments. Finally she looked up.

“I think we've been going at this the wrong way,” she said.

Five puzzled voices asked her to explain, and when she had quiet once more, she did.

“We set out on our expedition to find the World of Men,” she reminded them, “But no matter which way we've gone we've always ended up back here. We've been going in great circles all day. Now that's never happened before has it? If one of us wanted to get somewhere

we always got there without any trouble, no matter how much things changed, didn't we?" The others all nodded, but the looks on their faces showed her that they still had no idea what she was trying to say.

"Well," she continued, "Then I would say that we must have got to where we wanted to go this time too, and we have found the World of Men!"

The animals had begun to get excited by Léolin's manner, but now their faces dropped and they muttered grumpily that if she couldn't talk sense she shouldn't say anything at all. Peter looked at his friend and said:

"You mean here? In the clearing?" The Elf nodded. "But I know what my own home looks like and ... it just isn't here."

"Perhaps I should have said we have found the *way* to the World of Men," explained Léolin, "Though we can't quite get there by ordinary means. I think this spot must be a doorway between The Wood and the other worlds. Both you and I got here through this clearing, so why shouldn't we expect that this would be the way *back* as well?" She watched her friend's face light up with understanding. "Still," she continued, "Though we may have found the doorway, I don't know how to get through it. At least, I know how to get back to my *parents'* world, but not to yours. I rather think that you just have to wait until it decides to call you back."

Peter slowly nodded. What the Elf said did make very good sense. Indeed they should all have seen it before. He had found his way into The Wood through no action of his own, so why should getting back be any different?

The more he thought about this explanation the more he was sure it was the right one, and the better he felt. After all, he could be sent back at any time, but at least he wouldn't have to go right away. And he wouldn't have to feel sad about going back, yet guilty about feeling sad. He had tried to find the way home, as he knew he ought to, but there was nothing he could do about it, and somehow he felt relieved.

It looked as if there were nothing more to be done, until Harriet mentioned, just making conversation mind you, that expeditions make one *ever* so hungry. And Peter laughed and Léolin did too, and soon they were all laughing merrily as they made their way up to Peter's tree-house for the best after-an-expedition dinner any of them had ever had.