

© S.G. Overton 2006

THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER FIVE

“HIDE AND SEEK”

The days passed by, one after the other like the pages of this story, and Gypsy settled into her new life very comfortably. Where Peter went, Gypsy wanted to go, and the pair became a familiar sight around The Wood: Peter striding through the trees while Gypsy ran ‘round and ‘round, nipping playfully at his heels, or hopping into the bushes like a kangaroo (and looking uncommonly silly, to tell you the truth). She was a mixed-breed dog, or mongrel, but she was mainly German Shepherd and she would be a fine-looking animal one day when she was fully grown. For now, she had very pretty colouring: shades of brown, grey, and black, with a light-coloured yoke-shaped stripe across her shoulders. But her ears had grown far faster than her head, and when both ears stood up at the same time (which was seldom), well, I am afraid it was very hard not to laugh at the sight.

There is one thing about Gypsy’s stay in The Wood that took Peter quite a while to notice. She was about half-grown when she arrived there. And although she grew so quickly at home that you could notice the difference over a few weeks, she never grew at all the whole time she stayed in The Wood. If Peter could have seen it, he would have realized that he, too, stayed

unchanged by the passage of time in this strange place. While the rocks and trees and the very earth itself were forever changing, it seemed that living things always stayed the same, at least those who were guests there. So it was that Gypsy lost none of her puppy energy and mischief.

But I don't mean to tell you tales about Gypsy's adventures right now because this is really Peter's story. Maybe another time. At any rate both Peter and Gypsy were involved in the adventure I will tell you now. And this is how it started:

There came a day that was bright with sunshine, yet just cool enough to let you run about without getting overheated. A heavy dew had fallen in the night making the grass and the leaves sparkle, and there was an indescribable clean fragrance about the air that made you open your eyes wide the moment you hopped out of bed, and take deep healthy breaths. In short, it was a day for doing things!

Peter rushed through his breakfast (though he wouldn't have been able to say what the hurry was for) and scrambled down his rope ladder at such a speed that he barely seemed to touch it. Gypsy was up and raring to go, and they would have gotten to Léolin's house in record time if they had not met her halfway. She was on her way to their clearing, stepping so lively that it seemed like a dance. The three companions quickly set out to round up the rest of their friends, the more the merrier. It did not take long to get everyone together, however, because they all had had the same idea and everyone was met right there on the path, on their way to visit everyone else.

There was a great noise when the whole group had come together. One and all were in a hurry to get started at having fun. They jumped up and down and talked and laughed and flapped and quacked and croaked and crowed, and Gypsy, after a particularly high leap into the air, said:

“This is so much fun! What is it we are going to do?”

And all of the jumping, talking, flapping, and laughing stopped.

They looked at each other’s faces as if to say: “I thought *you* had something in mind.” But it soon became clear that no-one did. The day had seemed so obviously meant for doing things that the idea had never occurred to any of them that there might not be anything to do.

The Wood became quiet. Even the birds stopped singing and the breeze stopped tickling the leaves. For all were lost in thought.

“Let’s play tag!” said Gypsy, for she loved running and chasing things and didn’t get much chance to do it now that all of the other animals were her friends. But though everyone was full of energy, no-one felt like playing tag. Especially not with a rather large, bounding creature with too much puppy energy, puppy clumsiness, and sharp little puppy teeth!

“Let’s go for a swim,” said Webster, but, well ... swimming was nice (and better than tag!), but it wasn’t quite right.

“Why don’t we go carrot hunting?” asked Harriet, who sometimes thought too much about her stomach.

“Not carrot hunting,” put in Peter, “But what about treasure hunting? Has anyone ever heard about buried treasure in The Wood?” No-one had, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there.

“If there's a treasure to be found,” boasted Gypsy, “*I* could find it. We dogs can smell treasure from kilometers away. Or anything else either. Dogs can do Smelling better than anyone.”

You might think that the others would be annoyed with her for boasting like that, but she was the youngest of them all, only a puppy, and they knew she meant no harm by it. They just laughed.

But if anyone had looked in Léolin’s eyes right then they would have noticed a sudden twinkle appear. She gave a mischievous little grin and said:

“Gypsy, if you’re so good at finding things, let’s play Hide and Seek. I’ll hide somewhere -- just give me a little time -- and I’ll bet you won’t be able to find me.”

Now Léolin knew The Wood so well (even though it changed from day to day) that the others felt she was probably right, and they warned Gypsy not to take the challenge because she

could not win. This only made Gypsy determined to try the game. Having boasted the way she had, she could not very well back down now.

Léolin gave a tinkling laugh and challenged them all: “You can all work together and you still won’t find me.” And her eyes sparkled like fire.

Well, as you can imagine, it was one thing for Léolin to challenge Gypsy, who was still fairly new to The Wood, to a game of Hide and Seek. But to challenge *all* of them, when most had lived there all of their lives, now that was too much! They would teach the saucy rascal a lesson! And so it was agreed.

The Seekers were to give her half an hour (which they could tell by the position of the shadow on a rough sundial they made on the path) and then start out. If they had not found her by supertime she would meet them back at the clearing and they would have to treat her to supper and serve her at table like a queen. If they found her before that time, it would be *her* turn to feed them and play the servant.

Because Peter’s tree-house was the largest of their homes, and the best-suited for a dinner party, he volunteered to get everything ready for later, as long as he would not have to be anyone’s servant. They all thought this was a good idea. Léolin was even willing to allow Peter to help the others in the search, until the time he would need to begin preparing things.

With a laugh even more merry than usual, the Elf scampered off down the path until she was lost to view.

Peter and the animals had a difficult time holding Gypsy back for she did not find it easy to wait the half hour. She had something to prove and wanted to start at it right away. But they had all agreed to the rules, and if you are not going to play fair, you shouldn't play at all. Finally after ages and ages of impatiently waiting, they saw the sundial shadow reach the half-hour mark, and with merry shouts they were off and running.

To begin with they thought it made good sense to let Gypsy take the lead, just as she wanted. She may have been boasting, but it is nevertheless true that dogs are very good with their noses, and the puppy had had lots of practice stalking chipmunks back home. She led them quite a chase for a while because she couldn't keep from hurrying ahead as fast as she could find the scent, but Peter finally ran out of breath and told her that none of them would follow her anymore if she didn't go slowly enough for the others to keep up. After all, he said, they had all day to find the Elf and it wasn't even the middle of the morning yet.

From then on Gypsy did her best not to go too quickly and the chase became more settled.

She told them that Léolin smelled quite a bit like the trees that Elves love so much, so it was sometimes hard to pick out her scent from the fragrance of the woods around them. But

Gypsy was quite sure of herself, and whenever asked she would always say, “No, no, of course I haven’t lost the scent yet .“ And it is true that she never faltered for long.

Until she suddenly pulled up at the bottom of a large tree, ran ‘round it twice, then stood barking and looking up.

“The scent ends here,” she said. Full of excitement they all searched the branches carefully. But there was no Léolin. They knew the Elf was able to hide very cleverly among leaves, but this was not a sample of her skill. She just wasn’t there.

“She must have climbed up here and then made her way through the trees to throw Gypsy off the track,” said Peter, and the others agreed. Gypsy immediately put her nose back to the ground and started going around and around the tree in ever wider circles, hoping to find where the Elf might have come down again.

“That will take too long,” said Peter. “She could go a long way through the trees. I think Léolin would try to trick us by going back along her trail. Let's go this way.”

He led them more or less back the way they had come, but at a slight angle toward the right. Sure enough, after a few minutes Gypsy gave a bark and started off. She had found the scent once more.

They were all excited by this first success. They had not been fooled at all and the time Léolin had lost by playing her trick might be to their advantage. Everyone congratulated Peter on his cleverness and Gypsy on her nosiness (by which I think they meant her ability to smell things).

The proud little puppy trotted on more happily than ever, but keeping her nose close to the ground as a good tracking dog should. Yet, though she did her best, it wasn't long before she was stumped again. The group of seekers had come to a little creek, and though Gypsy splashed right through with hardly a break in her sniffing, there was no scent on the other side. She stood looking from the ground to the creek and cocked her head to the side as she often did when puzzled.

“This is an old trick,” said Peter, “She’s gone into the water where Gypsy can’t smell her, and then come out somewhere farther along. Everyone spread out. We should be able to find her wet footprints or something.” This was done right away. But although the animals looked carefully along both banks in both directions for quite a way, and though Gypsy eventually sniffed along both banks in both directions, they found nothing. Léolin had just vanished!

Now you and I know that Léolin couldn't just vanish whenever she wanted to.

Instead she had done a very clever thing. She had walked along in the water, knowing that a moving creek could not give away her scent. But she did not leave the water by simply

climbing out on the opposite bank. She had spotted an overhanging branch that was just low enough for her to reach. She'd swung herself up and kept to the trees for a little while before finally coming down and making her way along the ground once more.

This trick completely baffled poor Gypsy's nose and it was only by accident, as they were giving up and walking away to try something else, that they went by the very tree that Léolin had picked to come down. Gypsy was giving one last sniff before admitting defeat. She gave a yelp as if something had bitten her, poked her nose into the ground, then gave another bark and started dancing around.

“It's her! It's Léolin, I've found her!” The others looked quickly up and down until they realized that it was Léolin's scent that she had found and not really Léolin. Still, that was better than nothing. Peter now understood what Léolin must have done and he laughed.

“That clever Elf,” he said. The hunt began again.

After two tricks by Léolin and two successes by Gypsy the animals began to have even more confidence in the talents of the puppy. They felt sure they would find the Elf before long, and they began to laugh and sing. For her part Gypsy began to believe that her earlier boasting was really true, forgetting that Peter had helped to solve the first puzzle, and that the second was almost purely luck. It was not to last. Léolin was just a bit too clever; and you can rely on luck only so far.

The animals and Peter were following Gypsy, more or less in single file, when she suddenly stopped and stood cocking her head in puzzlement. They weren't at the bottom of a tree and there was no creek either.

"What's wrong, Gyp.?" asked Peter, "Lost the scent?" Gypsy didn't answer for a moment. Then she said:

"No, the scent's still here. But it goes in two directions." Giving a puzzled shake of her head she sniffed the ground once more. Peter frowned. He thought hard. The animals stayed quiet, watching him. Then when he lifted his head, his face was sour. He had a feeling he knew what Léolin had done and he hoped he was wrong.

"Go to the right," he said, though he suspected that it made no difference. Before they went he took a careful look around, taking note of a tall fir tree.

After some minutes of walking Gypsy said, "It splits again."

"I thought so," said Peter. "Look around." They did. And they realized that they were in the same spot where Gypsy had first noticed that the trail became two trails, beneath the tall fir. Peter slowly nodded.

“She’s gone back on her own tracks,” he said. “Gypsy can smell a trail, but she can’t tell if it’s one trail or two. Léolin went in a circle then followed her own trail back the way she came. She probably climbed up into the trees again somewhere, too. But it could be anywhere along any of her tracks and we wouldn’t notice it.” He looked around at their faces and his lips were tight with disappointment. “I think she’s really given us the slip this time.”

It was true. Gypsy could not bear to give up after so much work and she chased around in frustration, sniffing at anything and everything, but it was no use. The trail had gone cold.

“Well we’ll just have to try something else,” said Harriet. She was as tired and disappointed as everyone else but she wasn’t ready to admit defeat. “It’s no later than noon,” she said, “And we have until suppertime. I’m darned if I’ll be servant to any smart young Elf!” That started the others thinking about the same thing and they didn’t like it any more now than they had in the morning.

“You’re right, Harriet,” said Jackson, “let’s stop sitting on our tailfeathers and find the rascal!” And they all jumped up, once more raring to go.

Peter gave a laugh and said, “Well, Good Luck then,” and set off for his tree-house. The day was getting on, and he thought he’d better start making things ready for the party. Besides, no-one had thought to pack a lunch, and he was getting a little hungry.

He even half expected to find Léolin waiting at the clearing; it was just like something the Elf would do. But he was wrong. Léolin wasn't there.

Meanwhile the animals carried on. They decided that they wouldn't be able to search a large enough area of the forest if they stayed together, so they spread out. Gypsy and Harriet, being both ground animals so to speak, worked their way through the trees about ten meters apart, searching carefully, staring and sniffing on both sides (for rabbits are good with their noses too). Webster found the nearest stream and started swimming up it, while Jackson and Fowler took to the air. The two birds had had some practice doing such scouting from up in the sky back when everyone had thought that Gypsy was a monster (you remember, it was only last chapter). So they felt that, if anyone could find Léolin, it would be them.

The hunt continued and the hours passed.

And now I suppose you must be wondering what's been happening with Léolin all this time. Well I will tell you, because it tells how this day of fun nearly became a tragedy.

All of the tricks that Léolin used to put Gypsy off her trail you already know. Doubling back on her tracks was the last one and after that she went the rest of the way through the treetops. Elves are very good climbers but it still took a long time. In fact, Léolin had not yet

reached her hiding place when the others set out to look for her. But she wasn't worried. She was pretty sure that each one of her little tricks would foil Gypsy's nose, and she almost hadn't bothered with the third one. But even if the group managed to solve her puzzles, they would be slowed down quite enough for her to reach hiding.

As soon as the twinkle had come into her eye early that morning, she had known where she would hide. While on the way to Peter's place she had chanced to look up through the leaves and a glint of grey had caught her eye. She'd stepped into an opening in the trees and saw that it was the huge cliff she had shown to Peter on one of the first days the boy had spent in The Wood.

The cliff hadn't been there since and Léolin thought it would be great fun to visit it again. However, it had slipped her mind once her friends were around her, and she'd only remembered it as Gypsy was having her say.

Her plan was not to hide on top of the cliff, although from there she might even have been able to watch the others searching for her. No, she'd decided to hide in the caves near the bottom. If you know anything about caves you'll know that they are full of all kinds of dark corners and tricky hiding places.

"No-one will think of looking for an Elf in a *cave*," she said to herself, and if she wasn't quite right about that it was just lucky for her, as you shall see.

I think I said already that it was a bright sunshiny day. When Léolin walked into the mouth of the cave everything looked utterly black to her. It would take a while for her eyes to adjust to the darkness after the dazzling sun outside. She shuffled along, going almost as much by memory and feel as by eyesight. Unfortunately her eyes hadn't adjusted enough to see that a small patch in the shadow of a boulder ahead was darker than the rest of the shadow around it. And by a trick of the ever-changing Wood her memory didn't save her.

As the Elf took a confident step forward her foot met only empty space. Clutching frantically at the air, trying to regain her balance, she fell into a yawning hole!

For a terrifying moment she thought she had tumbled into a bottomless pit and would spend the rest of her life falling, ever falling. But before she'd even had time to finish this thought, she hit hard on her stomach and lay very still with the breath knocked out of her.

In the pitch darkness it was impossible to tell how long she lay like that. She was not sure that she hadn't passed out for a time. Eventually she stretched her arms out away from her sides to feel what she had landed on. Her left arm had only moved a few centimeters when it was stopped by rock: the wall of the pit. She slowly slid her right arm outward but almost immediately her fingers were grasping only air. She was on a ledge.

Her arm moved out to its full length then swept up, down. And it was then that Léolin realized the truth of her close call. She had missed a deadly fall by only the width of a hand!

She lay on a narrow ledge of rock and dirt with cold night all around. Very carefully she shifted slightly toward the pit wall and turned her head upward.

She could see the circle of lighter grey that was the mouth of the hole, but though her eyes were now fully accustomed to the dark, she could not tell how far she had fallen. Part of the problem was that she didn't know how large the opening was, and it is hard to tell how far away something is if you don't know its size.

The next thing she noticed was the silence; as solid as if you could reach out and touch it.

And the third thing was the cold.

Outside the day had been pleasantly cool, quite warm enough for comfort in the sun. But in this black hole it felt like ice to Léolin, who had come out of the sunshine such a short time ago. The heavy air surrounded her like clammy cold hands. She began to shiver.

It now came to her what a terrible predicament she was in. She had come to the cave because she was sure the others would never look there. And now she needed their help badly. In this pit they might never find her. In time she would starve to death, or die of thirst even sooner. But, No, come to think of it, she was not likely to die in either of those ways. For if the others did not find her before night fall, the warming sun outside would be gone and the temperature in the caves would drop lower than Léolin could stand. It was even possible that the cliff and the caves

would disappear in the night and take her with them. She remembered that this hole had never been there before and she wondered where it would go

Se moved a little more and tried to call for help. Her throat was so tight and dry with fear that she couldn't make a sound, at first. Even when she did get some of her voice back, it only echoed around the walls. There was no-one to hear it. Falling silent again, she very carefully pushed herself up into a sitting position with her back against the wall and her arms around her knees, trying to keep warm. She felt the darkness pressing down on her like a great weight.

Outside in the sunshine the hunt was still on. The seekers were getting discouraged by their lack of success, but they refused to give up. For the longer they searched the more time they had to think about playing servant to Léolin (which they ordinarily wouldn't have minded so much in the spirit of fun), and admitting that she knew The Wood better than they (which galled them).

Gypsy hopped and ran and tumbled and sniffed, going back and forth so much that she covered twice the distance of Harriet, who was searching beside her. And that was something, because Harriet was hopping about more than she had done for many a day, and searching more carefully than she ever had for carrots. Webster swam so fast and so far that even he began to get

tired of water. Of course the two birds winged through the blue sky almost without rest, crossing and re-crossing the same patch of forest many times.

But they did not find the Elf. And yet, had they known it, they came very close. Both of the birds flew around the cliff and past the cave mouth twice at different times. Webster, too, swam right up the creek that flowed from the deep blue pool inside, but he stopped when he came to the tumbling falls. He saw no point in going on into a damp cave to look for an Elf. Perhaps if Harriet and Gypsy had come close to the cliff Léolin would have heard the puppy barking and she in turn would have heard the Elf's cries. But the area seemed to have been searched so well by the other three that the two ground hunters did not bother with it.

As far as they could tell they had left no stone unturned for kilometers around, yet when the birds came gliding down through the leaves to announce that the sun was making its way to bed and didn't have far to go, they had to admit that they had lost.

With gloomy thoughts and tired bodies they made their way slowly back to Peter's clearing. No-one was in a hurry to see the Elf smiling victoriously at them from her seat at the head of the table.

Imagine their surprise to find that she was not there.

By now the sun was right on the edge of the sky and suppertime was passing. But perhaps from her hiding place Léolin would not see the sun right away. In that case she would be sure to start as soon as it began to get dark, so they sat down to wait. And they waited. Dusk had come and still no sign of their friend. The party had been ready for hours – the supper hour was long gone, and she did not arrive. Finally they began to worry.

Peter could not wait any longer. He stood up with a serious look on his face.

“Something’s happened,” he said. “Léolin would have been here long ago if she could come. We’ve got to go back out and look for her.” And the others knew he was right. But how could they? Hadn’t they just spent all *day* looking for her, without any success?

“And that was in the sunlight!” Harriet exclaimed. The rest nodded.

“But we’ve got to try,” said Fowler at last, “Even if we have to search all night too.” They all nodded again and began to rise from their chairs.

“Wait,” said Peter suddenly, “We can’t just go blundering around in the dark. At night we’ll just get lost ourselves. That won’t help anyone. We’ve got to think first. *Think.*” He began to pace the floor with his hands held together the way he’d seen grown-ups do. His eyes were still open, but they were glazed as if not seeing anything.

“Where would an Elf hide?” he mumbled. The others put their minds to the question.

“In a tree!” said Webster, and most of the animals agreed.

“Yes, that’s just where you would think an Elf would hide isn’t it?” said Peter with bright eyes. “And that’s why she *wouldn’t*. Léolin would expect us to think that, so she would hide somewhere completely different. But where?” He began to pace again.

“You’re right Peter,” rumbled Fowler. “Not in a tree. Too obvious. Maybe in water?”

“No,” said Peter. “Only a frog or a fish could hide in water all day. Besides, Webster must have looked over every drop in the whole Wood. No, somewhere else.” The others still weren't quite sure that thinking was the right thing to do when they could be out looking, so they said nothing. But Fowler was wiser and he agreed with the boy.

“Place most different from a tree is a hole,” said the old duck finally, though he wasn’t sure it was very helpful.

Peter’s eyes lit up. “Of course,” he cried, “She would hide underground, in a cave or something. No-one would look for her there. Did anyone see any caves while they were out searching?”

The animals thought hard. Then all at once it came to them:

"The great cliff!" said the birds.

"There's a cave at the bottom," said Webster, "I almost went in."

Peter ran to the window, for he had been too busy to notice the cliff before. There it was, towering above the trees, just catching the last rays of the sun.

"Hurry," he cried, "There may be no time to lose!" And with a rush they all sprang for the door. Suddenly every-one was sure that Peter was right and their friend needed their help. As Peter was racing through the doorway he paused only long enough to grab a slender but strong rope that Léolin had once given him 'just in case'. The six friends plunged through the gathering night.

Léolin knew the sun had gone down because she could barely make out the mouth of the hole above. And the temperature of the air began to drop. She was so numb with cold that she could hardly move, and she felt as though she had never known any other life but sitting there shivering in a hateful black hole. She thought of her friends and whether they would be searching for her. No, she decided, if they couldn't find her in the daylight, they would have no chance at

all by night. They would have to wait until the morning, and by then, Léolin was sure, it would be too late.

She sat there in total misery ... forever, it seemed. The endless cold was getting to be too much. Sleep was beckoning to her, calling her, saying:

“Just close your eyes, little one, just rest and sleep, sleep Everything will be all right. And then you’ll be warm, oh so warmmm.” She knew that the voice was a lie. If she were to fall asleep she might roll over the edge. She began to pinch her cheeks to stay awake. She didn’t dare give in. But she could not help herself. In the end her eyelids began to flicker, and to fall.

Suddenly, she thought she heard voices. Perhaps she was dreaming; perhaps she was already dead. The voices were calling her name and ... wasn’t that Peter’s voice?

“*Peter*,” she tried to yell, but she hardly heard the sound herself. “*Peter!*” she tried again with all of the strength she had left. Fortunately the searchers had paused for breath and the sound, quiet as it was, bounced back and forth from the rocks until it found its way to their ears.

“*Léolin*,” called Peter, “*where are you?*”

The Elf’s eyes snapped open. It wasn’t a dream! She was still in the hole but her friends were near! As hope surged up in her heart she found her voice:

"Peter, I'm here," she yelled. "I fell down a hole. It's hidden behind a large boulder. Be careful."

Peter froze. He had come up beside a large rock and Léolin sounded close.

He slid his foot slowly forward and it had hardly moved before the toes were curling over a sharp edge. A chill ran through him. One more step and . . . !

"I'm right at the edge," called Peter, his voice trembling a little, "Can you see me?" Léolin looked up but could see nothing in the pitch blackness.

"Where are you?" continued Peter.

"I'm on a ledge," replied the Elf, "I don't think it's too far down. But there's nothing to climb on." This last made Peter remember what he was carrying.

"I've got a rope," he said, "I'll let one end down then tie the other to a rock. You should be able to climb that." He quickly began to uncoil the rope, letting one end over the edge.

"I can't see it," said Léolin with a note of fear, "It's too dark."

Peter bit his lip. What would they do now?

Just then he felt something furry at his side. It was Harriet.

“Let me have a look,” she said, and Peter realized that the rabbit, being so fond of carrots, would be able to see in the darkness better than any of them.

Harriet peered down the hole.

“It’s still above her,” she said to Peter, “Let a little more out. That’s it. Now you’ll have to swing it a little or she won’t be able to reach it. Good, good. *Reach your arm out Léolin!* Yes. A little to the left. Easy. There, she’s *got* it!” And everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

But the relief did not last long.

“It’s no good,” cried Léolin in despair, “My fingers are too numb. I can’t hold the rope tightly enough. I could never climb.”

Her reply stunned them all. They had come so close! What more could they do? Peter, however, was not about to give up.

“You’ll have to tie the rope around yourself, under your arms,” he shouted, letting out a few more meters of it. “Tie two or three knots and make sure they’re really tight. We’ll get you out if I have to pull you up all by myself.” He sounded much more confident than he really felt,

but his bold speech perked up everyone's spirits. Léolin called up when she had the knots tied, and those who could took hold of the rope and began to pull.

They pulled with all their might. Nothing seemed to happen. The Elf was not very heavy but then none of them were very strong either.

"Pull!" yelled Peter, "She's off the ledge. It's now or never!" They threw themselves into it, and slowly, oh so slowly, the rope began to move.

Unfortunately most of the animals couldn't be of much help. Birds beaks are not really made for holding rope. As for frogs, they have no hands to grip with. And Harriet's teeth were better suited to gnawing than to gripping. Everyone did their best but it was Peter and Gypsy who had to do most of the work. It was a good thing that Peter hadn't spent all day wandering The Wood, for he was still fresh. Gypsy was tired, but it takes a long time to really wear a puppy out, and she had always loved to play Tug of War. She clenched the rope fiercely in her teeth and pulled like the devil while Peter cheered her on in short gasps. Strand by strand the rope came. The air was colder than ever, yet Peter's face was covered with perspiration, and if Gypsy hadn't been gripping the rope so tightly, her tongue would have hung nearly to the floor she was panting so hard.

Pull by slow pull, struggling, fighting, never resting, not able to give in.

At last, when all of them were nearly falling over with exhaustion, they heard slapping sounds on the rock. With fingers still numb with cold, Léolin clutched the edge of the hole and somehow managed to drag herself over.

“I’m up!” she panted. And they all collapsed on the ground, gasping for breath.

They had won!

They lay like that for some time, far too tired to do anything else. Then Peter turned his head to the side and looked at Léolin, who had crawled over to them.

“You’re shivering!” he said, and suddenly remembered that she had been in that cold, damp hole all day.

“Y-yes I ’m f-freezing,” chattered the Elf. At that everyone jumped to their feet and went to their friend to try and help. They picked her up and started to carry her. Peter decided to untie the rope and coil it up again. He gave it a little pull and it came loose in his hands! The knots had come undone by themselves; Léolin’s fingers had been too cold to pull them quite tight. She had reached the top just in time!

Peter said nothing about it and they started for home. When they were halfway there Léolin thought she had recovered enough to try walking, and the exercise warmed her still more.

You can well imagine the goings-on in Peter's tree-house that night. Everyone was so happy to have their friend back with them after her horrible ordeal, that they were only too glad to run about like servants while Léolin sat in the head chair, wrapped in blankets (even though she insisted that she had not won the game fair and square). And Léolin thought she could never get enough steaming mugs of hot cocoa.

At last, late that night, everyone finally went off to their beds. They all agreed that Léolin shouldn't walk home, so Peter tucked the Elf into his own bed and then made his way over to sleep on the couch.

As he was going past the window, he stopped to look up at the night sky, and stood staring at the great cliff that had almost taken his friend. He could just see its grey outline against the dark.

While he watched it seemed to wobble and fade, not so clear as it had been. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. This time there was nothing but black sky and glittering stars hanging above the treetops.

The great cliff was gone.