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*THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton*

CHAPTER SIX

“THE CEILING OVER THE WORLD”

When Peter awoke one morning he felt very damp.

That is, damp is what he felt first. After a moment more he decided that what made him feel quite so damp was that it was also cold. He looked out of the window and thought he must have awakened extra early because it wasn't yet light outside. As he went to pull the covers back over his head, he heard Gypsy give a bark, then, remembering that she could speak she began calling:

“Peter. Peter get up. Look outside”

Peter was rather annoyed at this. The puppy had probably heard him stirring and wanted someone to play with. He had half a mind to ignore her and pretend he was still asleep for he knew it would not be nearly so nice and warm outside as it was in his bed. But Gypsy kept

calling, and at last he realized that he would get no more rest unless he went to see what she wanted.

“What is it?” he called in a cross voice from the doorway, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and beginning to yawn.

“Look up!” the puppy replied, wagging her tail fiercely in her excitement. So he did look up. And kept looking. In fact, to be quite accurate, he stared until his eyes began to think they would be pushed out of his head.

Someone had put a roof on the forest!

Well, of course that is perhaps an overly dramatic way of putting it. But it was the first impression that Peter got. As he looked more carefully he realized that the ‘ceiling’ was really a layer of cloud that covered the whole Wood, as far as he could see. And everywhere it hung at the same height, exactly the way a flat ceiling does. Nor was this cloud ceiling very high. It was so close to Peter’s head that when he reached out his arm and stood on tiptoe he could just about scratch the surface with the nail of his longest finger.

I am sure that you are saying to yourself: “How silly, to talk about *scratching* a cloud!” and I can only answer that you must never have visited The Wood yourself or you would not be so sure. I know quite well that Peter would have agreed with you before he went there. Now he knows better.

This cloud was not like the ones you are thinking of. You have probably gone for a walk in a heavy fog and your mother or father has said: “Look dear, we are walking through a cloud, for this is what clouds are.” And you thought: “How marvelous to be walking in a real cloud!” Well, if you remember, you could not see very far through the fog, but quite far enough to see where you were going. Of the very thickest fogs in our world people say: “You can’t see your hand in front of your face.” But in our world it is always just an expression.

In The Wood it wasn’t, at least, not anymore. Peter looked along the trunk of his tree and saw where it went into the cloud, just above his treehouse roof. He saw as far as the edge of the cloud and not one bit farther. He could no more see through this cloud than through a solid wall. In fact, he gave a little jump on his porch and grabbed a handful of the stuff. It felt cold and wet like a soggy sponge, and it melted in his hand until there was nothing left but a little puddle of water. It was something like holding a scoop of snow, but not quite.

You might expect that Peter’s first thought would be to find out how such a cloud could come about. But I am afraid it was not. He was too busy hoping it wouldn’t *rain!*

“What is it?” asked Gypsy, who had been quietly waiting for Peter to say something, and had finally lost patience. “It looks like a cloud.”

“It *is* a cloud,” said Peter, “but thicker than ... well, it's like ... well just wait a minute.”

And he rushed in to get dressed, after which the two of them made their way quickly to Léolin's house.

When they got there they found a crowd of their friends, all standing looking upward and talking. Léolin greeted them as they came walking up and said:

“What do you make of it, Peter? Do you have such things in your world?” Peter shook his head.

“Not thick like that,” he answered. “I even grabbed a handful from my porch this morning. It was like ... well I just never knew you could grab a handful of cloud before.” Léolin nodded.

“It's certainly strange,” she said. “But whatever may have caused it, I don't think a cloud is likely to hurt us, unless it becomes a storm or something. I'm just worried about Jackson.” For the first time Peter noticed that the crow was not with them.

“Why? What's happened to Jackson?” he asked. The faces of the animals looked gloomy, and Léolin frowned as she tried to explain.

“Well this cloud, or whatever it is, isn't completely solid over the whole Wood,” said Léolin, “Or at least it wasn't earlier this morning. When Jackson got up he saw the cloud and

made his way over here. He met Fowler on the way and I was already up when they came. Just as we began to talk, a small gap opened right above us. 'Perhaps we could learn something by viewing the subject from above', said Jackson. And before we knew it he had flapped his wings and shot up through the gap. We called for him to come back but he didn't hear. Fowler wanted to go after him but he needed a bit of a run, and just as he got into the air the clouds snapped shut. So he only got a wetting for his trouble."

"Bounced right off," muttered the old duck, shaking his head and shivering a little, remembering the cold touch of the cloud.

"We tried calling some more," continued the Elf, "But it was no use. He would never hear us through all that." She pointed upward. "And now we think he's lost. If the cloud covers the whole forest he won't know where he's going and he'll have no place to come down. If he tried to come down through the cloud he wouldn't be able to. He'd probably get stuck part way through."

Peter said, "At least he'd have the sun up above him to keep him warm and show him the compass directions," (for Peter remembered, of course, that the sun is always in the eastern sky until noon and then sets in the west, which is a handy thing to know if you don't carry a compass). "But is it really so thick that he couldn't get through?"

Fowler spoke up. "I couldn't," he said. "Tried a couple of times. I'm heavier, too. Nope. Have to dig, not fly." The old bird looked very worried about his friend. Peter thought hard. After a moment he said:

"When the gap was open did you see how *thick* the cloud was? How high does it reach?" The duck and the Elf looked at each other. They hadn't really noticed. Then Léolin snapped her fingers and said:

"Yes, I did see something. As the gap was moving over my house I noticed the top of the tree come into the open. It only reached about halfway through the clouds and it's usually quite a tall tree. But then it's also possible that the cloud was thinner at the gap than anywhere else, so we can't really be sure of anything."

Peter nodded slowly. "We'll have to find a tree taller than Léolin's. We should be able to tell by the thickness of its trunk." The animals began to nod, but Léolin suddenly broke out with a laugh.

"Why, Peter," she said, "Your oak tree is almost always the tallest tree around." Peter stopped and began to smile. He had forgotten!

"To my house then," said the boy. "But wait. First everybody'd better get some clothes for wet weather: raincoats and rubber boots, things like that. Then meet me at my tree. We're going climbing."

The others now began to see what he had in mind and they ran off to do as he suggested. Peter started quickly back for his clearing, followed by Gypsy and Fowler. The puppy unfortunately had no rainwear because her owners had somehow never given her any. As for the duck, well, ducks generally like wet weather almost as much as dry, so he had no raingear to fetch.

Peter had no raincoat with him in The Wood, but Léolin had given him a jacket of some slippery material that she thought would keep off the water as well as anything. The jacket had a matching cap, both bright yellow, but no boots. His running shoes would have to do.

After a time the others started arriving and it was obvious that The Wood seldom had heavy rains. Léolin had a kind of raincoat and hat of light green, and some black boots that looked like rubber. So she was the best-equipped of them all. She also brought two pairs of mittens (one for Peter) for she had remembered how cold the cloud was to the touch. Harriet had nothing but a funny cap with holes for her ears, and a few days earlier she had borrowed the old umbrella that had once belonged to Jackson's aunt, so she brought it along as well. Unfortunately, the umbrella had at least as many holes as the rabbit's hat. But her friends said nothing.

Webster had arrived first of all, empty-handed, of course. He had forgotten that frogs love the water, and had only remembered when he was halfway home.

As soon as every-one was present they started, for Peter wanted to waste no time. For all they knew, Jackson could be stuck somewhere in the cloud in the chilling damp, or flying around in circles in a panic. Peter led the way because they realized that they would have to tunnel through the cloud, just like building a snow fort, and Peter had the most experience at this kind of thing (as well as being the strongest). All he carried was the coil of elfin rope that had been so useful when Léolin needed rescuing. He found that he didn't need a shovel to tunnel the cloud, for it was not so solid as snow. Still, pushing it out of the way by hand was no fun. The mittens Léolin had lent him were soaked right through in no time at all.

Although it was Peter's job to struggle through the masses of wet and heavy cloud, you mustn't think that Léolin was having an easy time of things. It was the Elf's responsibility to help the animals climb up the tree through the tunnel made by Peter. And as you know, frogs, rabbits ,and dogs are not good climbers. As for Fowler, he came last, helping his less able friends by offering his back and head as footholds now and again. He got toes in his eyes a surprising number of times, but he did not complain (at least he kept it to a quiet grumble).

You might ask why the three animals were brought along at all, since it meant so much extra work for the others. Well the truth is, they felt so anxious for their lost friend that Peter and Léolin hadn't the heart to leave them behind. At any rate they might need Gypsy's services as a tracker; Harriet often came up with some good ideas; and Webster ... well, Webster was a true friend, anyway.



Every once in a while they stopped to listen. Then Peter would give a signal and they'd all shout out Jackson's name, listen some more, and shout again. But they never heard anything. Have you ever been inside a snow-fort and tried calling to someone outside? The sound can't get through to them, unless there's an opening. And your snow tunnels have walls only half-a-meter thick. The rescuers were surrounded by meters and meters of dense cloud.

The climb seemed to take forever for it was a tall tree and the tunneling was slow work. One thing worried Peter. As they went along he dug and pushed and pried the soggy substance out of the way as well as he could. But after they had passed, it filled in behind them, flowing like heavy white mud.

Nothing could be done about it. They would just have to dig their way down the same way they had come up.

After what seemed like ages had gone by and every member of the party had become thoroughly soaked, Peter's head popped up at last through a layer of water, and the sun almost blinded him. He had to shut his eyes from the glare while pulling himself up the last few branches of the tree (if the cloud had been three meters thicker he would have had nothing left to climb) and as he rested for a moment, squinting and wringing out his hat, he wondered if that boy Jack, who climbed the beanstalk, had ever had troubles like these. Then he remembered the others below him and reached higher to get himself out of their way. As his hands closed on a branch he felt something soft and fluffy. At the same time there came a loud squawk and a flutter from above his head.

Startled, he drew his hand back and looked around for the source of the noise. A large black shape flopped down onto the top of the cloud, then gave another squawk as it saw Peter's face. It was Jackson.

It turned out that the crow had flown around for a while, not even noticing at first that the cloud had closed behind him, and then had tried to fly through the soggy stuff. He'd only bounced off, of course, and had no wish to try digging all that way. As luck would have it, he had spotted the top of a tree sticking above the white floor and, flying to it, had sat down to dry off while thinking of a way to save himself. The warm sunshine had quickly put him to sleep and that was how Peter had found him.

Everyone was delighted to see Jackson safe and sound. If they hadn't been clinging to the branches of the tree, dripping like wet dishrags, they might have clapped. As it was, they joined in a ragged cheer.

When the noise died down Peter suggested that perhaps they'd better start back down, rather than stay there shivering.

"But I sure would have liked a rest," he said, "And I could face the digging a lot better if I could just dry out a little. Only we can't stay here, hanging from branches." Not all of them were even out of the cloud, but he couldn't climb any higher.

“Why don’t you just step off and have your rest?” asked Jackson, and Peter suddenly realized that the crow was actually standing on the cloud and nothing else!

“How are you doing that?” he gasped.

“Oh there’s no trick to it. I can’t take any credit,” replied the bird. “I’m just standing and the cloud is holding me up. If I couldn’t fly through it you don’t suppose I could *fall* through it, do you?” Peter had to agree that that made sense.

“But you’re much lighter than we are, Jackson,” he said. “Do you really think it would be safe for me?”

“Well all I can say,” said Jackson, “Is try it for yourself. But I’m sure it will hold you.”

Peter got a good grip on a branch, just in case, and took a cautious step.

His foot slid outward and down. He saw his shoe touch the cloud, but he barely felt it as it sank into the white sponge. After pushing down about twelve or fifteen centimeters it went no further, no matter how much weight he put on it. He stepped with his other foot ... gave it some weight. Finally, crossing his fingers, he let go of the branch.

Nothing happened, and he felt foolish for having closed his eyes. He took a step forward and immediately fell to his knees. It did not hurt in the slightest, but it was plain that walking on

clouds was not something that comes naturally. In fact it would take a great deal of practice to get it right. As Peter said afterward, it was rather like jumping up and down on a springy bed (if you know what that is like, don't let on to your parents), or even like trying to walk on a rubber air mattress that is floating on the water, which is very tricky.

The others quickly came up and made the same experiment with the same results, so that before long they were all gathered about on a piece of cloud, sunning themselves.

As they began to dry out, they found that it was really very pleasant being supported by this strange floor of cloud, and no-one wanted to go back down without having some fun first. Although their climb had seemed so long, they could tell by the sun that it was only just coming to noon. Why, they had a whole afternoon in which to explore. It was true that no-one had brought any food, but their excitement made it impossible to worry about hunger just yet.

In another minute they had thrown their coats down by the tree and were leaping and tumbling about like dandelion seeds on a windy day. They ran and chased each other and tried to see how high they could bounce. You can imagine what fun it was. So much fun, in fact, that they kept it up for hours. They went quite a ways back and forth across the cloud, though always making sure that they could still see their bright pile of green and yellow coats against the fluffy white.

It was so much fun that they didn't notice when the last branches of the oak tree disappeared beneath a billow of cloud.

None of the friends had enjoyed themselves quite so much for a long while, but the time had to come when a little of the novelty began to wear off. They had used up so much energy bouncing, springing, rolling, and racing, that they had to take some rest, and even began to feel a bit hungry at last.

As they looked around for a good place to sit they suddenly noticed two things. The first was that, as I have already told you, Peter's oak tree was no longer to be seen. The pile of brightly-coloured rain clothes was still lying where they expected it to be, but there were no branches above it. Not even a single dark twig poking up through the fluff.

The second thing they noticed was that a fairly strong wind had sprung up, and with the wind the great mass of white cloud was beginning to break apart!

Looking across the surface of the cloud with its dips and rises, valleys and hills, it was not easy to tell that great gaps were opening, splitting the feathery landscape into huge chunks. This was why no-one had noticed the change until it was well under way. The only reason they noticed it now was because one of these gigantic rifts had come between them and their coats. They now stood on a separate cloud: an island in the sky.

They rushed to the side of the chasm (going very carefully as they neared the edge) and looked out . No-one dared to creep right to the lip and there was no need to. It was clear that the

cloud they stood upon no longer touched the one with their clothes on it at any point. And the gap had opened quite wide enough for them to see the green Wood below -- far too wide to jump across. The birds immediately offered to fly over and bring back the clothes with them, but everyone instantly realized that the situation was more serious than missing their raincoats. They had climbed up onto the cloud by Peter's oak tree; it was the only tree high enough to serve. And so it was also their only way back down. But it was gone!

As this terrible thought came to each of them they made silent movements with their lips and hung their heads. What were they to do now? If only they hadn't played so long.

Glancing over the edge they quickly understood what had happened. The steadily burning sun had heated the cloud and all of the air around it, which had caused the great ceiling to rise. Perhaps it had even rained down below, making the cloud much lighter. At any rate they were now far higher than the tallest trees and might still be rising.

"Don't bother going for the clothes," Peter said to the birds. "What we need is a way to get down from here. They'd only get in the way now." The birds did not reply.

Jackson and Fowler were not afraid for themselves, of course, for they could always fly down to the ground now that there were openings in the cloud. But they were very much afraid for their friends. It might just be possible for the crow and the duck to carry the clothes and things down to the forest below (or at least guide them as they fell so that they didn't land in a river), but they would never be able to carry any of their companions, not even working together.

It seemed as if things couldn't get worse. Yet they did.

Peter had been lying still, staring at the edge of the cloud, when he noticed that he was closer to it than he had thought. He slid back a meter or so and watched more carefully. No, he was not moving, the edge was coming closer to him. Then it caught his eye that a large lump of cloud near him was shrinking. It became smaller and smaller, and faded as well, until he could see through it. Then it was gone. He didn't want to alarm the others until he was sure of what he had seen, but in a few minutes he stood up and spoke:

“Everyone move farther away from the edge,” he warned. “The cloud is *melting*. So far it isn't going too fast, but the day's still getting hotter. There might not be anything left of this cloud in a few hours.” He didn't mention what would happen to them by that time because everyone understood.

As it happened they didn't get the chance to think about it for very long.

The melting of the cloud was continuing even as they talked, but it didn't happen everywhere at the same speed. The smooth edge of the cloud soon changed. Bites were taken out in places, and in others long peninsulas stuck out like fingers. Gypsy, being an adventurous puppy, had gone a little closer to the edge than most of the others. Listening carefully to Peter, she didn't see the cloud edge cutting in around her, making her piece of the cloud thinner and thinner until it became one of those cloud peninsulas, surrounded by clear air on three sides. She

didn't notice it until it was too late. Before she could do anything, the peninsula was no longer a peninsula but an island, for a crack had crept from one side to the other and cut her off from her friends!

Staring at the growing gap, she began to bark. The others quickly saw her danger, but there was nothing they could do. The wind caught Gypsy's cloud island and pushed it away from them. It spun her around playfully and forced her farther and farther away, carrying her out into a large stretch of clear blue sky, like a boat being blown out to sea. For the little island, being so much lighter, went much more quickly than the large cloud the others stood upon.

Hearing the poor puppy barking and not being able to help her made Peter frantic. But instead of crying, as he once might have done, he somehow remembered his rope. He had left it with the clothes, but the two birds were after it in a flash, and when they returned Peter outlined his plan.

He thought that perhaps Fowler and Jackson could try using the rope to tow Gypsy and her piece of cloud back to them. It would not be easy, he knew, but on her own the little dog would never get back safely to the ground. The plan was no sooner said than begun, for the feathered fellows were only too glad to help.

It took a minute or two for them to catch up with Gypsy; she seemed to be gaining speed all the time. When the puppy understood what they meant to do she gave a happy bark, gripped the rope tightly in her teeth, and dug her feet into the cloud. The birds pulled. They flapped and



they tugged. The stream of air whistled over their feathers and blew the puppy's long ears back. The rope stretched tight, twisting and singing as it fought the current, while the birds dragged as hard as they could. But it was no use. They could not fight that wind.

Finally they were forced to give up. They had managed to slow the tiny cloud down a little, but it was not nearly enough, and they had to fly back to the others, promising Gypsy that they'd be back, and telling her not to give up hope. She watched them fly off and the look on her face would have broken your heart.

Peter had been able to see what was happening and when he saw the birds returning he began to think again. By the time they landed, the group had come up with another plan. It might work no better than the first, and it would place them all in danger for the sake of one, but everyone was willing to take the risk. There seemed so little else that they could do. It had occurred to Peter that, if the duck and the crow could not pull Gypsy's cloud against the wind, perhaps they might be able to pull another cloud *with* the wind and at a greater speed.

Jackson and Fowler each took an end of the rope while the others grabbed it close to the middle. Then, as the birds took to the air, everyone else jumped onto a cloud peninsula nearby. Snatching away chunks of the cloud that held them back, at last they made their peninsula break loose as Gypsy's had done. The boy, the Elf, and the animals gripped the rope tightly and dug their feet in, while the birds began to pull. The race was on!

It was certainly a strange sight: two small clouds moving quickly across the clear blue sky, now far ahead of the main cloud and widening the gap every minute. But the strangest part was that one of the puffs of white was being towed by two birds! I doubt if such a thing has ever been seen before, not even in The Wood. If *you* ever see something like that, take a picture, for otherwise no-one will believe you.

The whole thing was like the strangest chariot race ever. The only difference was that Gypsy's 'chariot' was not being pulled by anything. Farther and farther they sped across the sky, faster by the minute, but the cloud in the rear slowly gaining. Soon they were beyond any lands they had ever visited and still they swept on. The seconds grew into minutes, and the minutes seemed to have no end.

Jackson and Fowler grew tired very quickly, for they had already spent a lot of their energy trying to bring Gypsy back, that is, what energy was left after playing for so long. Soon they became exhausted. Yet they could not bear to give up. The sight of Gypsy's cloud ahead and her lonely figure standing on it kept them going, though it drew nearer only with agonizing slowness. Their friends on the cloud behind would have done anything to be of help, but they could do nothing more than to hold onto the rope.

Time seemed to stand still, and so, almost, did the clouds. The pulling of the birds kept the second cloud moving with just a little more speed than the first.

Peter was afraid it might be only his imagination, but finally it could not be denied: they were catching up. In only a few minutes more they might come within reach.

Just as they felt like raising a cheer, a terrible thing happened.

Jackson, pushed to the limits of exhaustion, suddenly stopped flapping his wings and fell. If he had not had just barely enough strength to keep his hold on the rope, he would have dropped all of the way to the ground. Somehow he held on, and Peter quickly pulled him in. The poor bird lay gasping for breath, and Peter wrapped him in his shirt to keep him warm.

Now Fowler had to do all of the pulling. He was almost twice the size of Jackson, and ducks are born with great powers of endurance so they can migrate south for the winter. Even so it was a sore trial for the old fellow. He had been pulling his hardest all along, just as Jackson had, and he was almost played out. He stared through wet eyes at the cloud ahead, and he kept on going.

The gap was still shrinking, but more slowly now. Fowler was so tired that he could hardly work his wings. They did not beat regularly any more, but in surges, and not always even together. Everyone knew that the duck couldn't last much longer.

As the gap came down to about ten meters Fowler put on a last burst of energy, like a runner who is content to collapse as long as he reaches the finish line first. The distance shrank: seven meters, now five ... three ... and less!

But just as the two islands of fluff were about to touch, the wind played one last miserable trick on them. It somehow gusted upward between the clouds, blowing them apart again and throwing Fowler off balance. It was finished; Fowler could do no more. He rolled on the air like a cork on the ocean, and it was all he could do to keep himself afloat long enough to drop painfully beside his friends. The clouds began to spread apart once again.

And yet all was not lost. Before anyone knew what was happening, Webster grabbed the end of the rope in his mouth and gave a desperate leap. He sailed through the air, the rope trailing behind him. Higher and higher he sailed, and as he began to come down they knew that he would miss.

But he didn't!

He stretched himself out to full length, kicking the air in a last effort to gain distance. His outstretched forearms just hit the edge of the cloud, but before they could slip off Gypsy had grabbed one and dragged him aboard.

There was a tremendous cheer. Everyone pulled eagerly at the ropes, forcing the clouds together, after which each and every one of them got a thorough face-washing from Gypsy. She was so happy to be back with her friends that she almost danced off the edge in her excitement. And she thanked them and thanked them until she was quite hoarse.

There still remained the problem of how to get back safely to the ground, of course, so it was perhaps a bit too early for real celebration. But Peter and Léolin had been thinking. All through the chase the clouds had continued to melt; together they were now only as large as one had been to begin with. Because of this they no longer rode so high in the sky and that fact offered a hope of escape.

Fortunately, they were still passing over trees, though no-one recognized the countryside. Peter tied a slipknot in one end of the rope, then spreading the loop wide, he stepped to the edge of the cloud. His friends held firmly onto the other end as the boy tossed his lasso. It uncoiled all the way but the loop slipped shut and it caught nothing. Tightening the knot, Peter tried again, but this time the trees were not quite tall enough. He made a grim face, and waited, squeezing the rope impatiently.

Just then Léolin noticed a very large tree coming up and pointed it out with a yell. Their cloud would not pass right over the spot, but Peter checked over the rope with lightning speed and prepared to toss for the third time. He stepped to the side, watched the tree carefully, and waited for just the right moment: too soon or too late and he would miss the target.

“Now!” he shouted to himself. The rope coiled out into space and slowly, slowly fell. Yes, he saw it hit the tree ... but, No, it wasn't holding! Bitterly he watched as the knot slipped over branch after branch, leaves rustling as the cloud swept on. With a groan he saw the loop slipping off. Yet, even as it slipped, it *caught*. The rope stiffened; his throw had gone true!

Losing no time, for fear the lasso might yet break loose, they made little slings out of a strip of Peter's shirt and the animals began sliding down the rope. Harriet volunteered to go first since she had done little to help so far, and when she waved from the treetop to show that she was safe, the others followed her, one by one. Even the tired birds.

When only Léolin and Peter were left, the boy insisted that the Elf be the one to go. After all, he was stronger and Léolin was lighter, so they had the best chance of success that way. Léolin knew this was true, but her heart was heavy at leaving her friend behind. They both knew that the last person would have to find some other way of getting down,

As Léolin slipped over the edge Peter dug his heels in and held on tightly. He was not only holding the cloud against the wind now, but supporting Léolin's whole weight as well, so that he was breathing hard and his muscles ached by the time the Elf was safely down.

Still he could not let go, for if he did the wind would carry him away. His brain was tired of thinking as his body was tired of pulling, but he had one idea left (as you might have guessed, for otherwise I would not be telling you this story). Keeping hold of the rope with one aching arm, he began digging at the cloud with the other, ripping off chunk after chunk, pausing only to switch arms. At first nothing appeared to be happening, but gradually he saw that the forest was coming nearer. From the tree Léolin saw what the boy was doing and began reeling in the line like a kite.

When the cloud was sinking quickly enough, Peter stopped digging and pulled on the rope instead. Down he floated, and he thought he would never again be so thankful to set foot on solid ground.

He wasn't there yet. As he came within two meters of the branches, the puff of cloud suddenly broke apart and spilled him into the air, while his friends watched in helpless horror. They raced down the tree as quickly as they could, terribly afraid of what they would find.

One last bit of luck had come their way. Peter, scratched but safe, had found the only thorn bush for meters around.

It took them a long time to walk home -- several days, in fact. But walk it they did, and came back to their own territory as it was lit by the setting sun. They had no adventures along the way, despite the fact that much of the countryside was new to them. But they did not complain. They would never forget the ceiling over the world and the tremendous race through the sky.

And that was adventure enough for quite some time.