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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER SEVEN

“A LITTLE BIT OF RAIN”

Other than the adventure I told you about in the last chapter, in which a giant cloud covered the whole forest, I see now that I have never said much about the weather in The Wood. Well, first of all, it's usually good. And good weather is very pleasant to play in, but not much to write about. Once in a while they have rain, other times clouds, or snow, or hail, or sleet, or just about anything you can think of, just as it happens in our own world. The differences are mainly two: first, I believe they get a fair bit more good weather in The Wood than we generally do; and second, the snow and such things do not fall in any particular season. As a matter of fact, I am not sure that there are any of what we would call seasons in The Wood. On any given day you have about the same chance of having any particular kind of weather: hot, cold, wet, or dry. It would surprise none of those who live there to have one day of blistering heat, and than wake up the next morning with snow on the ground.

That is just the way things are.

You might think that this would make it very difficult to plan things ahead of time. But rain in season spoils a picnic just as well as a surprise snowfall. And a day of unexpectedly bad weather is no more startling than to have a mountain in your backyard one day and gone the next.

There came a day when The Wood decided to take a bath. It had been hot and dry for over a week, and by the end of this time a fair bit of dust had been kicked in the face of the trees by the bully West Wind. It was time for a good cleaning and there is never any use in doing things by half measures.

In short, Peter awoke one morning to find that the ocean had come to visit on his doorstep. Or perhaps I am wrong in calling that water the ocean, for there were no seagulls and the water was not salty. But at the least it appeared that the great lake in the east had decided to try a new neighbourhood.

Peter was not terribly surprised by this. He could understand a flood, and he knew the strange ways of The Wood. Nevertheless, it did take him unprepared. All that water and Peter without a boat! As a matter of fact, he had no way of getting anywhere, for the water was all around his tree, and he could not fly.

He was quite a good swimmer, but one look at that water told him right away that swimming would be too dangerous for anything but an emergency. The surface swirled and

bubbled with many currents, throwing themselves against rocks, bushes, and tree trunks. No, Peter was not nearly foolish enough to try swimming in *that* if he didn't have to. And if he had guessed what was causing those currents he would have had even more cause to fear.

Unfortunately, just as he had definitely made up his mind *not* to go swimming, he had to do it anyway.

Maybe you have been wondering what could have happened to Gypsy while this flood was building up and swirling around the bottom of Peter's oak tree, where she usually slept. Well the rain had awakened her in the night and she knew she would need to find a more comfortable spot if she were going to get any more sleep. Looking around, she'd spotted a large rock beneath a tree at the edge of the clearing. She had jumped to the top of it and lay down once more, keeping at least a little dryer thanks to the leaves overhead. She did not wake again until the water got into her nose and made her sneeze. Then her eyes opened wide and she sprang to her feet, discovering that her whole rock was covered by water, which still seemed to be climbing. She began to bark at the lapping waves and that's when Peter noticed her.

She also noticed Peter. It made her feel a little better just seeing him nearby. She had been badly startled by the rising flood, and now she saw that there was no place she could reach to get away from it. Even worse, the muddy water swirled higher up her legs with each surge and she became afraid. To the puppy Peter meant safety. She gave him a pleading look, and

before he could say anything she had jumped into the churning water in an effort to reach his tree.

“Oh Gyps!” Peter groaned, and then gasped.

The struggling puppy could not fight the current, strong swimmer that she was, and she was beginning to be swept away. Thinking quickly, Peter reached in the doorway and grabbed his coil of rope.

“Three times lucky,” he murmured as he tied one end securely around his waist and the other around a strong branch. Then, crossing his fingers, he made a long, cannonball jump from the porch and struck out for his struggling friend.

Branches of bushes and springy saplings caught at his feet while a fast-moving piece of log missed his head by only centimeters. He was swept into a tree and bounced off, fighting to keep upright. Fortunately Gypsy caught between two trees and had the wisdom to stay there until Peter had reached her. She got a good hold with her teeth on the collar of his pyjamas while Peter began to pull them back. The water had not yet risen above Peter’s head but the current would not let him put his feet onto the ground, so that he had to pull his way along the rope, arm over arm, with both of their heads under water much of the time.

At last, half-drowned and with aching muscles, the boy managed to grab his rope ladder and they climbed onto the porch, where they both lay panting. Gypsy licked his face gratefully.

When they had their breath back they went inside to dry off and try to forget about their close call. They sat down to a bit of breakfast and made up their minds that they would be stuck in the tree-house for the rest of the day. Peter had never actually seen a flood before and, to tell you the truth, it made him restless. He felt he should be out having adventures and making daring rescues rather than spending the whole time inside. It was like when his mother wouldn't let him go out and play in the creek in the rain. His mother was perfectly right, for creeks and rivers *are* dangerous places in a rainstorm, but that doesn't stop young people from *wanting* to play in them. There is just something exciting about fast-flowing water, I must admit.

But there was nothing Peter could do. This was no creek; it surrounded his tree and filled the whole forest as far as he knew. He could only sit there looking out the window at the rain with a mug of cocoa in his hand, wishing he had a boat.

Just as he was thinking this, one came into view. A boat, I mean. It was making its way slowly through the trees and he recognized it as the silvery-green one belonging to his friend Léolin. It wasn't coming from the direction of Léolin's house, but he expected he would know the reason for that before long.

The boat was definitely coming toward Peter's tree, but Léolin was the only one in it and she was having a difficult time steering the little craft against the stubborn current. Several times Peter thought the Elf would be thrown into the water, as the boat struck trees and she leapt about with her steering pole. It didn't happen. Léolin was as stubborn as the current, and finally she pulled up to Peter's ladder.

Peter brought his rope down and they used it to anchor the boat to the tree, as an extra help for the one Léolin normally used.

"You're the first person I've seen today," said Léolin once they were inside the tree-house. "Everyone seems to have gone into hiding from this little bit of rain."

"Little bit of rain ...!" Peter began, then realized his friend had been joking when the Elf burst into a good-natured laugh.

"Seriously, though," continued Léolin, "I set out in my boat to find everybody and make sure they were safe. I have a feeling this rain isn't going to let up for a long time, so I think it might be best if we retreated to higher ground."

"You mean you think it could rise high enough to reach us even in our tree-houses?" asked Peter. Léolin nodded.

“Fowler once told me that such a thing happened when he was a duckling,” she said. Peter found it hard to imagine Fowler as a duckling, but he did not doubt that what the Elf was telling him was true.

“Well then, I guess we’d better go,” said the boy. “Come on Gyps, we’re going for a boat ride.” The puppy showed by her face that she would much rather stay warm and dry in the house than take chances in that little boat, out in the rain. But she knew that if Peter and Léolin thought it was for the best, it probably was. So she came too.

As they were climbing into the boat Peter asked:

“Where was the boat tied up? It mustn’t have been near your house because you came from almost the other direction.”

"No," replied Léolin, “It was tied up along the creek and I had to make my way to it through the treetops. Those branches were slippery, let me tell you. When I got to the boat it was completely under water. It never tips, but even my boat can’t stay afloat when rain fills it to the brim. Besides, even the spot where I had tied the bow to a tree was under water by then. I had to do a little ducking to get the knot undone. I finally managed to get the boat to the surface and empty it, but not before falling in again three times.” Peter suggested turning back and getting some dry clothes for his friend at the tree-house, but Léolin said:

“No, it’s all right. The rain’s quite warm.” And so it was, though Peter had somehow not noticed it before. “How did Gypsy get into your house?”

Peter explained about the rescue, but very simply, as if he hadn’t done much. Léolin looked at the swirling water and smiled, realizing that the boy was being modest as usual.

“It’s a good thing you brought along your rope,” she said, “We might have to do quite a bit of that kind of thing.” They poled their way along quietly, trying not to hit anything, and listening to the rain that never stopped. Trees and rocks kept jumping in their way, and the current played games with the silver-green boat, suddenly spinning it this way and that.

They made for Harriet’s house first because they knew she would need their help the most. Birds can fly to high branches and frogs can swim as easily as breathing, but rabbits have no escape from floods. She would be having a hard time of it by now. In fact Peter and Léolin each had a terrible thought that they might be too late. They tried to remember that Harriet was a clever rabbit, and never likely to give up without a fight.

Soon they came to where they thought Harriet's house should be and pushed the boat up to a large tree to keep it stopped. Then all three began calling the rabbit’s name and looking carefully around for any sign of her. There was nothing but swirling brown water and soggy branches drenched with rain.

As they paused to listen they thought they heard someone answering, but it was very muffled, as though far away. They called again. Again they heard an answer. Where was it coming from? Suddenly Gypsy cocked her head and told them to shout once more. When they had she gave a sharp bark.

“In here,” she said, “in this tree!” She was pointing to the one they were resting against.

Léolin knocked on the trunk. She was answered by several dull thuds. There was no mistaking that they came from the tree.

"Now what?" asked the Elf. "Are they all right in there? Ask them Gypsy. And who are they anyway? Are Fowler and Jackson in there too?" Gypsy pressed an ear against the wet bark and then shook her head.

"No, it sounds like mice," she said. "But Harriet is there. I heard her voice." She put her muzzle close to the tree and yelled:

"Harriet, are you safe enough in there?" Then she listened again. Léolin and Peter could hear voices but they could not make out the words.

"She says it's stuffy," said Gypsy finally. "But also the water's still rising and they can't squeeze any higher."

Peter and Léolin both looked very serious. The climbing water would soon fill the inside of the tree, but how were they to get the trapped animals out? Then Peter's eyes lit up, and he told Gypsy to ask Harriet if the tree was very big inside and how large the opening was. The puppy shouted her question, then listened for the answer.

"It's quite large inside," she told Peter, "And the opening is a big split about a meter wide, she says. Why?"

Peter just gave a grim smile, took off his coat and hat, and lowered himself over the side of the boat. Léolin had guessed what was on the boy's mind and gave him a hand. The water was now over Peter's head so that he had to hang onto the side of the boat while taking deep breaths.

"You'd better use the rope again," warned the Elf, "That current's even stronger at the bottom." Peter just nodded and kept breathing while Léolin leaned over to tie the rope around the boy's waist. At last Peter was ready. He gasped: "Wish me luck," took a lungful of air, and pulled himself beneath the surface.

He clutched the tree and dragged himself down along the bark toward the bottom. It was safer than trying to swim against that current, which grew steadily stronger. The water was murky. It was no good opening his eyes for it made no difference, so he kept them shut. He reached the bottom of the tree. No hole. He would have to go around the trunk until he found it, and he was already feeling the need for air.

As he moved around to the side the current, which had at first been helping by pushing him against the tree, now caught him and tried to snatch him away.

He dug his fingers in, bits of soggy bark pushing up under his nails.

Things were no better on the far side. The water was rushing in around both sides of the tree and pulling as hard as ever. But the hole was there. With a tight chest he forced himself not to breathe, and pushed his shoulders through the opening. Then, twisting into a sitting position, he dragged his legs in and shot upward. He was afraid of hitting his head on something, but he needed breath too badly to wait.

At last his head popped above the surface and the air came rushing into his chest. It was rather stale, but much better than water.

As his head broke through he heard screams of fright. The animals were not expecting him, for Gypsy, in her excitement, had forgotten to pass on the message.

A monstrous head bubbling out of the water nearly frightened them out of their wits. It was almost pitch dark inside the hollow tree, and it took them a moment or two to realize it was only Peter.

He calmed them down with a few words and began telling them what he planned to do. There was just a little light coming from a small hole far above them, and as his eyes grew

accustomed to the dimness he saw that, along with Harriet, there were several field mice, a couple of moles, and a smaller rabbit. The inside of the tree trunk had ridges and narrow shelves that they'd been able to climb onto. Naturally what he had in mind was to swim back out of the hole, carrying one of the animals at a time as he went. They would have to hold their breaths for quite a while, he warned, but there really wasn't any other way. The water was rising even as he spoke, and the hollow part of the tree became only a narrow crack just above his head. Not even the field mice could crawl out through that. They had tried.

Of course none of the animals liked the idea at all. None of them had ever felt more water on them than you would get outside in a rainstorm, except one of the moles who had accidentally fallen into a creek once and nearly drowned. Even that mole could not swim (he had managed to grab a floating stick until it ran aground). None of them even had much practice holding their breath.

Peter told them not to even try to swim; he would do it for them. They just had to hang on tight and stay out of his way. He asked for volunteers.

As expected, he got none. At first. Then, seeing the situation Harriet said: "I'll go." She was as frightened as the rest of them, but she was a very brave rabbit, which means she didn't let her fear stop her from doing what was right. The safety of all of them depended on it, because the other small animals looked up to Harriet, and would go if she did. The rabbit, for

her part, had learned to have great faith in her friend Peter. She was still terrified at the thought of actually going underwater. But you could hardly tell. Fortunately it was dark.

“All right, then. Let’s do it,” said Peter. Harriet got ready. Peter counted to three, they both took a deep breath, and then they disappeared beneath a patch of ripples.

It was even more difficult going than coming. The tree was too small to let Peter turn over so he had to go feet first, holding onto Harriet with one arm and pushing his way down the inside of the tree with the other. Once outside he gave two sharp tugs on the rope. They had forgotten to arrange any signals, but he figured that the Elf would know what he meant, and he was right.

As soon as he felt the rope tighten, Peter let go of the tree and made for the surface. Right away he realized his mistake. The twisting currents and the pull on the rope kept him under. Kicking hard, he broke surface and was able to gasp a little air before going down again. Suddenly he felt Harriet wriggling and realized that the rabbit could not hold her breath any longer. He shot upward for one more quick breath, then held Harriet up to the surface and kept her there, though it meant Peter would have to stay under the rest of the way. After what seemed like forever he felt someone take Harriet from his hands and he came up coughing.

The rabbit was badly shaken, but once she knew she was safe she calmed down quickly. She yelled into the tree to assure the others that it was nothing to be afraid of.

Peter took as much rest as he dared and then plunged down to get a second passenger. Such was their faith in Harriet that the mole who had almost drowned volunteered to go next. It would have been much easier if each of the small animals hadn't required a separate trip because Peter was already tired, but he could not swim without at least one arm free (Yes, he had thought of putting the mice in his pockets but he wouldn't have been able to get them to the air quickly enough).

This time he slid out of the hole and, keeping his fingers dug into the bark, climbed up the tree to the surface. Then he slowly worked his way around the trunk to the boat, with Léolin keeping the rope tight, but not pulling. In this way the rest of the rescuing went without any more trouble. They did nearly forget a mouse who had fallen asleep, but fortunately the creatures had had the sense to count themselves before the boat started to move, and Peter went back into the water one last time. When everyone was safely aboard and accounted for, they set out for Jackson Crow's.

They were a little worried about Webster, in case he were to go swimming and the current proved too strong for him, but they knew it wouldn't be any use looking for him at his usual pond -- not when the *whole Wood* was a pond. As it turned out they needn't have worried too much. Before they had gone very far a great green head stuck up over the side of the boat (and scared the mice out of a year's growth). The frog had also realized that Harriet would be in the most danger from a flood, and had set out to help. They pulled him into the boat, for he was very tired. Even he could not fight that current for long, and he had needed to take many rests

along the way by lying against trees (for, of course, he could float without moving). He was very glad to see the rabbit safe and sound.

When the boat reached the grove of evergreen trees where Jackson usually made his home they found not only the crow, but Fowler as well. The duck explained that his swamp had been flooded out early in the morning, and so he had come to see his friend Jackson and pass the day in drinking tea. (They were in the middle of their sixth pot when their friends arrived, and it was still before noon.) Léolin told them her fear that The Wood might be completely flooded out if the water kept rising as quickly as it had been, and she asked them if they had seen any high hills that day.

“High hills ... *dry* hills,” the duck rubbed his chin with a wing. “Found one high. Not dry. But it’s nearby.” If he was aware that he’d made a rhyme he didn’t show it. Instead he pointed in the direction they should go. He wasn’t interested in their offer of a boat ride. “No thanks. Quite comfortable right here.” And it was true that the canopy of evergreen branches did a good job of keeping off the rain. Léolin knew the two birds would be safe even if the water did rise that high, so the boat pushed off again, and the duck and the crow went back to their tea.

The boaters soon found the hill and it really was a good choice. The ground itself rose higher than many of the trees around it, and then there were trees on the top as well. They put the small animals ashore (I say ‘ashore’ because it had become an island by now) and warned them

to stay among the trees at the very top so that no-one would roll off the sides into the water. The smaller rabbit was left in charge.

It was Léolin's plan to take the boat around The Wood as long as they could in case there were any more animals that needed rescuing. She and Peter and Webster all urged Gypsy and Harriet to stay on the island, where they would be safer. But the puppy and the rabbit would not hear of it. Harriet insisted that she knew where almost everyone in The Wood lived, which they did not (she was quite right, too). As for Gypsy, well, she simply refused to stay behind. She said she would swim after the boat if they tried to leave her, even if the current swept her away. So the little boat still had five passengers as it moved back out into the flow of water.

Now, it had been raining all day and most of the night before, and it was quite a heavy rainfall, but I am sure you have seen very heavy rain go on for a long time without any sign of such a flood as I am telling you about. Yet the flood had happened, there was no mistaking that, and the water had risen by this time to almost twice the height of a grown man. Well, if you're beginning to suspect that something else must be to blame, you are quite right. And I'm sure our friends would rather have had me tell them about it, as I am doing with you, than learn about it in the way that they did.

They were about twenty minutes out from the island, on their way to the house of an old raccoon that Harriet knew, when Gypsy began to bark.

“What’s the matter?” asked Peter, and Harriet said:

“Listen.” They listened. At first they heard nothing but rain on leaves and water. Then ... another watery sound. It was a great rushing noise like a giant waterfall. Sometimes you hear a similar kind of sound made by the wind in the treetops, but they knew it wasn’t that, for there was no wind. They were beside a tree, and all at once Léolin leaped into the branches and scrambled to the top. She looked south ... west ... north... and even from below they could see her turn white as a sheet. She watched for several seconds, then rushed down to the boat. Her lips were as pale as her face as she turned to them with wide eyes.

“It’s a huge *wall of water!*” she gasped.

The rest stared at each other. How could it be true? What did the Elf mean? Yet she was so obviously frightened that they had to believe what she said. Léolin managed to get out a few more words.

“It’s a gigantic wall, from the clouds to the ground. And it’s coming this way ... quickly! We’ve got to reach shelter!”

She was frantically looking around but there was no shelter to be seen. Peter spoke up:

“If it’s like a giant tidal wave or something we can’t get out of its way. All we can do is tie ourselves down so we aren’t carried off.” While he was talking he was uncoiling the rope and passing it to his friends. They rushed to get the knots tied around their waists, but time ran out.

With a roar of thunder they saw the great wall sweeping through the treetops. Peter just had time to yell: “Grab the tree!” and it was upon them.

Instantly they were under water. But there was no doubt that it was falling water too, like many days’ rain falling at once. Without thinking, all of them had taken good breaths and it was lucky that they did, for they were slammed down under the surface of the flood, and the weight of the water kept them there. Peter afterwards said it must have been like standing under Niagara Falls. The only thing that saved them was that in five seconds it was over, and the wave had passed by.

A few seconds later they started popping up to the surface, looking as though a hug would squeeze buckets of water from each of them. Peter felt like a full sponge.

The first thing he saw when his head came above water was a stream of bubbles rising beside the tree. He plunged his hand down, grabbed a handful of fur and pulled, for there was no time for politeness. A coughing and spluttering Gypsy came up, and he lifted her onto a branch. The wall of falling water had pushed her down between two trunks so that she could not get

herself free. Now she began a fit of sneezing that lasted for several minutes, while she tried to shake the water out of her fur.

Immediately Peter looked around for the rest of his friends. Yes, there was Léolin, still by the tree, and Webster. Then Webster was gone. Of course! Harriet was not there! She must have been swept away. Peter searched the water, his eyes wide with fear, but there was no sign of the rabbit. Webster must have gone to save her, and he could only hope the frog would be in time. He and Léolin looked at each other with grim faces.

Even Webster was taking a terrible risk letting that current whisk him away, for, if anything, it was stronger than before. They saw whole trees being carried by the flood now, and the water was full of silt and stones.

Peter realized that they would be better off spending the time bringing the boat up to the surface, instead of just waiting and worrying. It had sunk in an instant, of course, but fortunately it was still pinned against the tree right beneath them. Léolin was the only one who had managed to keep hold of Peter's rope, so they threw one end over a branch and Peter, diving down, tied the other end to a ring at the bow. He got it on the second try. The two friends hauled on the rope and the boat came up, although it wasn't as easy as it sounds for they were still floating in the water the whole time. Both steering poles had been stolen by the current, but the Elf always kept a pair of paddles lashed to the seats, and the water was now so deep that they wouldn't have been able to use the poles for much longer anyway.

As they had just gotten most of the water out of the boat, they heard a yell. Scanning the surface they finally saw a green head bobbing above the muddy brown. It was Webster. But they could tell right away that he was on his last legs. He was still managing to hold his own against the current, but he wasn't getting anywhere. And he was too tired to call for help a second time.

Without losing a moment, they pushed the boat out into the current. Gypsy leapt from her branch but Peter and Léolin didn't take the time to climb in until they were underway. They broke the paddles loose and set to work furiously for extra speed. Just as Webster's head was sinking beneath the surface, they caught up with him and grabbed a slippery forearm. It was no wonder the poor frog had exhausted himself. He was carrying a soaking wet rabbit on his back!

Webster soon opened his eyes lying in the bottom of the boat, but they had to revive Harriet. She had swallowed a lot of water, poor thing, and it had to be squeezed out of her before the air could get in. They piled their coats on her to try to warm her up but both Peter and Léolin had lost their hats when the wave hit them, so they used their hands to keep the rain off the rabbit's nose. At last, after many long, anxious minutes, the eyelashes fluttered, and Harriet awoke.

For a time it was hard to tell if the faces of her friends were wetter from rain or from tears.

Everyone talked and laughed and cheered and hugged and told Webster what a brave frog he was. He just blinked his saucer eyes, gave a bright green blush, and said nothing. He had never hesitated about risking his life for his friend. It just needed doing and that was enough for him. Harriet was no coward either. She astonished everyone when they started to turn back to the island to let her off, for she refused to go. Despite her horribly close call she still insisted on remaining with the boat, since without her they might not find everyone who needed rescuing, and some might drown who would otherwise be saved. Marveling at this courageous rabbit, the boy and the Elf turned the boat 'round again and continued toward the house of the old raccoon.

Well, seeing that this chapter is already getting long and the adventures of that day not over yet, and seeing that nothing really dangerous happened for the rest of the afternoon, I will only say that they rescued the old raccoon and a good many others as well. They brought boatload after boatload back to the hilltop and many of those rescued were in great need of it too. Luckily the flood had come on just slowly enough for everyone to reach some higher place of safety, though by the time the boat found them many of these higher places weren't high anymore.

I should also mention that the wall of water washed out a certain tea party, and the boat was soon joined by the crow and the duck. These two were sent flying back and forth over The Wood, along with other birds that came to the island, until they were sure everyone who was or would be in trouble from the water had been found.

As darkness fell they lit a great bonfire and everyone crowded around it. I won't say that it was easy to get a fire lit in all that rain, for it wasn't. But Elves are very good at that sort of thing, and some of the sticks lying in the middle of the evergreen grove at the peak of the hilltop were at least a little less wet than elsewhere. The fire helped to cheer everyone up. It is no fun sitting in the pouring rain all day and seeing your home flooded. In our world such a thing would be sad indeed, but the Wood folk were used to all kinds of strange happenings, and had always just trusted that things would come out all right.

The crackle of the fire and the dancing flames held everyone's attention so well that they did not hear the rushing sound until it was very near. This time no-one bothered to climb higher for a look around. They all knew what that sound was. They had heard it once already that day, and were never likely to forget it. Instead they scurried in fear for the grove of trees as the second wall of water swept down on them like an express train. Some made it, others didn't. But when the furious downpour was over they made a quick count and discovered that no-one had been lost. They had all been right in the center of the hilltop, and the downwash had not lasted quite long enough to sweep anyone over the edge.

Not all of the news was good. Léolin's pretty boat had been swept away; they just caught a glimpse of it bobbing with the current before it vanished in the darkness. And the fire was out. This time for good. They huddled together for warmth as the air grew colder on their soaked clothes.

The passage of the second wall of water seemed to have stirred up even the very sky itself. It began to rumble and boom, a strong wind sprang up, and soon came a thunderstorm. In the flashes of lightning they could see what was left of the trees bowing and shivering, and the gale was soon whipping the water into huge waves that began to slap against the sides of the island, flinging spray into their faces.

What had been a very uncomfortable night became a perfectly miserable one. Lightning lit up the sky with blinding explosions every few seconds, and the thunder shook the earth. The Wood people sat squeezed together, shivering with cold, and some with fear. Never had they seen a storm like this! The waves came almost to the top of the hill, and the water streamed so constantly from every direction that they could hardly bear to open their mouths to talk. As it was there was too much noise for a voice to carry very far anyway.

Long into the night Peter suddenly tapped Léolin's shoulder and pointed out into the darkness. The Elf saw nothing at first, until the next flash of lightning showed her what Peter meant. *The trees were disappearing.* I don't mean they were being flooded over; after the second wall of water had passed, the flood level had seemed to stop rising. No, the giant waves were ripping the trees up by the roots. Word passed around the circle and everyone watched as one by one the tall trunks were snatched away and lost in the darkness. At the end of half an hour their little hilltop really had become an island in the middle of an empty sea. On top of all the dampness and the cold, they began to feel a terrible loneliness.

When things are bad we sometimes say they can't get any worse. And sometimes we're wrong.

It was near the middle of the night when an awesome rumble started deep beneath them. It grew louder and louder until it drowned out even the thunder. Then, added to the rumble, came terrible grinding and screeching noises that made Peter's teeth chatter and had poor Gypsy rolling on the ground with her paws over her ears in pain. The noise grew and grew until the island shook beneath them. At last there came a great wrench that threw everyone to the ground. After that the noise suddenly quit, and in a few moments they could hear the thunder again.

They picked themselves up and got to their feet. What in the world could have happened? There was no change in what they could see, but something certainly *felt* different -- it was hard to explain. Then a large wave slapped the island and everyone was thrown off their feet once more. Léolin leapt up and grabbed Peter,

"Do you feel that?" she shouted. The boy nodded. There was no mistaking it -- the island was rocking like a *boat*. The two friends stared at each other in astonishment as they realized what it meant.

The very island itself had broken loose!

With no trees nearby, it was impossible to see that the hilltop was moving, but no-one doubted the fact. The feeling of motion was quite convincing enough. A few animals even began to get seasick.

There was, of course, nothing to be done, except to sit down and ride the storm. Without a boat they had no choice but to stay on the island, but that mattered little. A small boat like Léolin's would not have lasted a minute in those waves anyway. And the wind was practically a hurricane by now, so the birds were no more able to leave than anyone else. The dreary night plodded on through minutes, hours, days, or weeks for all they could tell, and all the while the storm never slackened for a moment.

Huddling in the rain and the driving spray, Peter's mind was still at work. He was watching the water by the lightning flashes and he was sure there was still a strong current flowing. In fact, by the speed with which bits of wood and things floated past him, he judged that the current was still growing stronger, especially considering that the island was now moving in the same direction. What was causing it? He couldn't help wondering. What could draw that much water all day long? He knew that the Wood did not slope all the way from the north end to the south; if anything, most of the southern areas were higher than the rest. He questioned, but he could find no answer.

It wasn't until someone noticed the rushing sound once more, and the animals immediately sprang for the grove of evergreens, that Peter put it all together. He didn't bother to

move. A light had appeared in his eyes as they stared off into space. Lightning flashed, and there was no speeding wall of water coming; he knew there wouldn't be. For this time the sound was coming from the south instead of the north. Just to make sure, he looked in that direction as well. No, the sea was empty.

Léolin rushed up to him and shouted: "Peter, get to the shelter quickly!"

Peter just shook his head, and pointing northward, said: "Look."

As the lightning flashed, the Elf swung her head, and stood still.

"What is it then?" she asked.

"I think it 's what 's been causing the current all day," said the boy, his voice trembling a little.

"But it sounds like ..."

Peter nodded. "*A waterfall!*"

They just stood like statues, helplessly. Léolin was instantly sure that Peter was right, which meant that they had only minutes left to them.

“What ... what can we do?” asked Léolin, to herself as much as to Peter. “There must be *something*. We’ve got to *think*.” But the look on their faces showed that neither had any clue of what could save them this time.

The two friends sat calmly down, facing the south, waiting for what would come. The roar grew. The animals huddled in fear, but no wall of water appeared, and they felt the great sound was just taunting them. At last the lightning showed something other than the endless waves. Another flash, and the two watchers could tell what it was they saw: a *chasm* ... very wide, very long, and undoubtedly deep: deep enough to swallow an ocean, without ever noticing a mere Elf, or a little boy. Before their eyes lay a gaping hole for which their entire world was but a long, cool drink.

As the lightning showed them their doom, it also showed them their last hope. Peter grabbed his friend and yelled: “A tree!!”

For so it was. One last solitary tree, defying the storm and the surging water, only meters from the chasm itself. As quick as the very lightning Peter had his rope ready and Léolin was rushing for the grove of evergreens with the other end of it. Peter scrambled to a small cliff overlooking the waves, choosing his moment as carefully as if his life depended on it. He knew it did.

With a great spring he plunged into the waves, but it was no warm bath anymore. The water had turned ice cold. Even so, he barely noticed it as he churned the water into froth in his wake. He put everything into his swimming, making each stroke as if it were his last, and still, though the island passed right beside the tree, he barely made it.

He swung around the trunk, grabbed the rope from his teeth and began frantically tying it. One knot ... two ... and the rope snapped tight. He looked along it, waiting breathlessly, and then let out a huge sigh of relief as he saw the island begin to swing. Léolin had tied her end firmly to several of the evergreen trees and the anchor was holding!

Now Peter noticed the cold, for it bit into him savagely. Trying to stop his chattering teeth, he made his way hand over hand along the rope, back to the island. The pull on his legs was terrible but he finally managed it. He was just in time to see the far side of the island crumble and fall away. It had been hanging over the very edge!

He joined the rest of the group and they waited, barely breathing. Everyone knew that something had to happen in the next few minutes. The wind made the rope whine, the evergreen trees groaned, and the waves slapped viciously against the shore. And still the rope held. Seconds stretched into minutes, oceans of water tumbled over the beckoning edge, and the island refused to go with it, swinging dangerously along the brink but clinging desperately to this one last chance.

Suddenly Peter gasped. The rope right in front of him had begun to *fray*!

"Get down!!" he screamed, and threw himself to the dirt. His precious elfin rope, that had come to the rescue so many times, stretched, splintered ... and *snapped*. Like a writhing snake it whistled over their heads and cut deep into the trunks of five evergreen trees. The island began to move.

It slid ... tipped ... and from where he lay Peter saw black yawning night waiting for him. Then, with a sickening lurch, they began the long fall

But the shattered rope had held just long enough. It was *midnight*!

With flashes like fireworks and a crackle of flame that swept from horizon to horizon, the world faded from Peter's eyes. He was floating ... floating in darkness, and it was very pleasant.

Then he landed with a bump. *On* someone. And someone, in fact two someones, landed on *him*. With a quick movement he rolled off of Léolin's stomach, brushed Harriet off his own, and struggled to free Gypsy's forepaws from around his neck. He sat up and looked 'round. All of the animals were scattered about on the ground nearby. A forest of trees soared above them into a sky full of stars. There was no wind, no storm, they were all perfectly dry. Peter looked for Léolin and saw the Elf standing not far away, beside her silver-green boat with its two paddles, and two steering poles. On the ground near the poles lay two shiny rain hats.

Peter walked over to Léolin. They stood staring as if they had landed on another planet.
Then Léolin gave her friend a look that was perfectly plain.

Had they imagined it all? Was it only a dream?

Peter slowly shook his head, stooped down ... and picked up a frayed piece of rope