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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER EIGHT

“TREASURE HUNT”

I think buried treasure must be something that all boys dream about. Oh I know that being an astronaut is more popular these days, but what boy isn't thrilled by a good tale of pirates and plunder even now? Perhaps the modern boy dreams about finding buried treasure on the Moon, I don't know. In any case, Peter had as great a fascination for buried gold as any fellow his age (though I can't imagine what anyone would do with such a thing in The Wood), and it was not uncommon to find him discussing the possibilities with Léolin while they sat fishing in a clear stream, or walked the leafy paths.

One day Léolin mentioned casually that she knew of a hilltop that was supposed to contain treasure, if one had faith in such stories. Someone had told her about it (she couldn't quite remember who), and there *was* an odd-looking mound of dirt near the base of a tree, but Léolin said she didn't believe the tale and had never gotten 'round to checking it out.

"But what if it's true?" Peter began to get excited.

The Elf shrugged her shoulders.

“It could be, I guess,” she said. Peter stared at his friend. How could she sound so calm about it?

“Why don’t we go check it right now?” he insisted. Léolin looked up quickly.

“Oh, we couldn’t,” she said. “I mean ... well ... the story says that to find the right spot you should go in the morning and the shadow of a big tree lies right across it. You, uh, stand with your back against the tree, then walk five paces in the shadow and that’s the spot.”

Peter gave the Elf a puzzled look.

“That sounds real enough,” he said. “I’m surprised you never tried it.”

Léolin just replied that she had forgotten to. She looked a little embarrassed.

“Well,” Peter continued, “I guess anyone can forget. But I’m going to go there tomorrow and see. Will you show me the way?” Léolin nodded. “Tomorrow morning,” she said, and after bidding each other goodbye, they set out for home.

Peter was a bit puzzled by his friend's strange behaviour, but he didn't let it bother him for long. He was going treasure hunting! And that wasn't even the only thing that was making him so happy. The next day was also his *birthday*!

Actually he wasn't sure that any of his friends would remember his birthday at all. There weren't any calendars in The Wood -- maybe they didn't even celebrate special dates. He'd had to count the days since his arrival, and go from memory. Of course, once he had figured it out, he had casually mentioned it to his chums, but it might have slipped their minds. He hoped not. He knew it would have been rude to mention the fact too often, so he'd only managed to squeeze it into their conversation once or twice a day for the past week. He went to sleep that night with a smile on his face.

The next morning was an average one, with its fair share of fluffy clouds basking in the sun, never caring on whom their lazy shadows fell. Yet to Peter it seemed the most beautiful weather ever; he hardly noticed the clouds. He flew out of bed, jumped into his clothes, and sailed down the rope ladder so quickly that Gypsy, startled out of her sleep, didn't even think to ask where they were going until they were halfway to Léolin's house. The Elf met them at the door and began to lead them through the trees. She looked very sleepy, and yawned several times, but Peter was too excited to notice.

After a few minutes, they came out on an open hilltop, with one tall tree near the center. Its long shadow stretched away to the west, and Peter had marked off the five paces in less time

than it takes you to read this sentence. Sure enough, there was a small mound of dirt right at his feet. He fairly danced for joy. You would have thought he already had the treasure in his hands.

"This is the spot," he laughed, beckoning to Léolin. The Elf just yawned and said:

"Yes, well, good luck." She began to walk away. Peter 's mouth fell open.

"Don't you want to stay and find out what's here?" he asked, unable to believe what he saw. Could Léolin really not be interested in *treasure*?

"Well," said Léolin sleepily, "I promised to help Fowler with something today. See you later.' And she began to walk again. Peter just watched her go. Finally he straightened up and took a tight grip on his shovel.

"We'll show her," he said to himself. "She'll be sorry when I find treasure. Right Gyps?" He looked up. The puppy was nowhere to be seen. Peter's eye swept the hilltop for a minute, then he shook his head. "Has everyone gone crazy?" he thought, and set to work digging.

It certainly wasn't hard going. The dirt was packed more loosely in the mound than the ground around it, which showed that it had been dug up once already. Peter could hardly contain himself. He dug furiously, the dirt flying everywhere and covering the hilltop with rolling billows of dust.

In quite a short time his shovel struck something. He dropped to his knees and scraped with his fingers in the soil until they came up against wood. Gripping the edge tightly, he pulled as hard as he could, until finally the board pulled loose with a jerk, sending him sprawling on his back. He scrambled back to the hole. There was something light-coloured, and another board. His hand reached down again and hauled in his catch. It was a piece of paper with a board under it; the paper must have been sandwiched between the two pieces of wood to protect it. His eyes devoured the delicate page.

It was quite old by its looks, stained with mud, brown and crumbling at the edges. The writing was fancy and rather hard to read, but that only made Peter more sure that it was a real pirate note, because he knew they used to take more pride in beautiful writing in the olden days. When he had seen that the mound held no treasure chest, Peter had at least hoped that the paper would be a map. He soon saw that it was not. Instead the words seemed to form a short verse with only a rough skull-and-crossbones in the bottom corner. He squinted at the words and slowly read:

Walk by water to beech tree high,
Back along shadow 'till sun meets eye.
Dig the dirt from foot to knee,
There to find more words from me.

He read it again to make sure there was no mistake. No, he was right, that was what it said. But what could it mean?

‘Walk by water to beech tree high’. Walk by *water*? He couldn’t do that. No, wait ... it said *by* water, not *on*. Maybe that meant *beside* some water. He looked around. Sure enough, a little creek ran past the bottom of the hill. With the paper in his right hand, the shovel in his left, he walked down the bank. The bushes grew very close together upstream, so he followed the edge of the creek downstream where the going was easier, and hoped he was headed the right way.

Within a half-hour or so he was beginning to think he’d made a mistake, when he brushed past some bushes and stepped out into a small clearing with a tall, grey beech tree off to one side. He smiled and trotted over to the shadow. He thought he understood the rest of the verse now, so he walked backward along the tree’s shadow until the rising sun glinted over the first limbs. He’d almost stumbled over a slight swell of earth and, with bright eyes, he began to dig.

‘From foot to knee’ the first paper had said, and it was exactly right. At that depth he found two more pieces of wood and another clue on paper. He read eagerly:

Where trees grow down and fish fly up,

And water runs to fill my cup.

Search all The Wood to find this place,

Once there, another clue to chase.

Peter groaned. The first message was *simple* compared to this one. “Where trees grow down and fish fly up’, why, that wasn’t *possible*, even in The Wood! As for the water, the forest was full of little streams and larger rivers. The only water that didn’t ‘run’ was in the big lake sometimes in the east, or perhaps in a few still pools. Very disappointed, he sat down to think. It didn’t help. He stood up, then paced around the clearing to help him think better. Finally, he let himself wander off through the trees, not knowing where to go, only hoping that something would come to him.

He ran the words over and over in his head, learning them by heart. He just couldn’t seem to make any sense out of them. Water, water ... he would have to follow a stream, but how would he know that he had the right one? Should he go back to the creek and return the way he had come? That didn’t seem to make much sense.

Just as he was thinking this, he nearly stumbled into a pebble-filled brook behind a row of lilac bushes. This time he decided to set out upstream, trusting to luck.

After walking along for some time he began to hear splashing noises from not far away, and then ... was that a voice? In another moment he had recognized it and stepped around a tree to find Webster, stretched out lazily in the sun on a huge lily pad in mid-stream. The frog was humming to himself.

“Webster!” Peter called, a little too loudly. The poor frog gave such a start that the lily pad tipped him into the water, where he almost dived for the bottom, only seeing the boy at the last minute. Peter could not help laughing at the sight, but he apologized many times and Webster took it good-naturedly.

“Am I glad to see you, Webster,” Peter began. “I’ve got a riddle that has something to do with water. And if you’re not an expert on the streams in The Wood, I don’t know who is. Could you give me a hand? I’m hunting for treasure!” Peter explained what had happened so far that day. Webster nodded his head and said that he knew he wasn’t as bright as some animals, but he would do his best. He read the verse carefully.

“Well,” he said finally, “Fish sometimes jump up waterfalls. Don’t know why, but they do. But trees grow upwards, I always thought. Of course they sometimes *look* like they’re growing down when you see them reflected in a nice still pool. Look here.” Peter saw the trees mirrored in the lily pond and knew the frog was right.

“Thanks Webster!” he shouted with glee. “Do you know of any waterfalls in The Wood today?” His friend thought for a moment.

“Well, you know,” he said, “There’s a waterfall up this stream. It’ll take a while to walk there, but just follow the water. You’ll find it.”

Peter thanked him again. "Aren't you going to come and find the treasure?" he asked.

Webster only shook his head.

"Too tired to hunt treasure today," he said. "Think I'll take a nap." And before Peter could think of a reply the frog was back on the lily pad, stretched out comfortably, and humming softly.

"What's wrong with everyone today?" Peter thought as he walked away. "Not interested in treasure." He shook his head. Who would have believed it?

Webster was right, it did take some time to reach the waterfall, but once he had Peter saw just what the note meant. Every once in a while fish would leap out of the pool, trying to climb the ladder of falling water. Some of them looked like they would make it, too. Despite the splashes of those who failed, Peter could easily see the clear reflections of the trees at his feet.

Now, where would the next note be? Under the water? He focused his eyes past the reflections to the bottom of the pond and looked around. He saw nothing unusual. He lay down on his stomach to search more closely. No, nothing, nothing ... *wait*. He brought his head down to look toward his chest, dipping his hair in the water. There, under the lip of the bank was a small hole or tunnel. Could it be the home of some animal? If so, he would need to be careful. Cautiously he reached his hand in, felt something crinkly, and drew it out again.

The third clue. It read:

Daytime out and night-time in,
Seeming fat but being thin,
I scratch the sky where eagles glide,
But look below, for there I hide.

Peter's hopes fell again. What was he supposed to make of that? A cloud maybe? They looked fat but weren't really solid, and he knew they were fairly dark inside. 'I scratch the sky ... but look below ...' the *shadow* of a cloud? No, that was ridiculous, he thought. That could mean *anywhere*, for cloud shadows were always moving. He sat down and stared at the pool, trying to think.

While he was sitting, some movement in the water caught his eye. Not in the pool: *reflected* in the pool. He looked up to see a small black figure sailing overhead.

"Jackson!" he called. The crow swerved, almost hit a tree, and flapped to a clumsy landing on the bank.

"My dear boy," he spoke with a touch of annoyance, "You and some of these trees could have caused me severe damage." He preened his feathers in an attempt to regain his dignity.

"What is it I can do for you?" he asked finally.

Peter explained and showed him the third note. “*You* know all about high things. Do know what this means?”

The bird read the paper carefully, several times, while Peter tried to keep his patience. At last the crow cleared his black throat and replied:

“A tree, my lad, obviously a tree. A hollow one I should think. Yes, quite dark inside. Looks fat but the walls are not really very thick at all, you know. Ever been in one? Well, look below ... at the roots, that is. Lots of hollow trees have spaces between the roots.” Peter nodded. Why couldn’t he have thought of that?

“Have you seen a big hollow tree today?” he asked the crow. Jackson pointed north with his wing.

“I saw one just now, as a matter of fact, a few minutes from here as I fly. Quite a large one, and decidedly hollow.” Peter thanked him, and asked if he wanted to come see the treasure. Jackson shook his head.

“Important meeting to go to,” the bird excused himself. “Maybe another time.” He flew away and Peter heard the raspy voice floating back: “Watch for *bears*.” He didn’t know whether the crow was joking or not.

He began to walk northward, still puzzled that no-one was interested in his treasure. There were almost never important meetings in The Wood. There was almost never any serious business to discuss. More important than treasure? Peter could not figure it out.

The hollow tree was not difficult to find for, as Jackson had said, it was quite large. The bird had also been right about the spaces between the roots. In a few moments Peter was pulling yet another crumbling piece of paper out of the soil. He gave a moan. How many of these darned clues would he have to solve? Gloomily, he read the fourth one:

Air on rock and rock on air,
I hide myself with Nature's care.
No eyes have I, yet look to the south,
And eating not, grass fills my mouth.

Peter slumped to the ground and sat down heavily with his head on his palm. He was stumped again.

No eyes, but it looks? And it has a *mouth* but doesn't *eat*. Rivers have mouths, but usually they aren't filled with grass. Also rivers aren't usually hidden, they are too big ... nor would they have rock on air. Could it be something that only looks like rock, like a dark cloud? For how could real rock float on air? Then again, he had already decided that a clue involving a cloud was no clue at all.

He felt rather stupid. Everyone else could think of the answers to these riddles. Why couldn't he?

He hated to admit that he needed help again. Who to ask, though? He went over the animals in his mind and finally decided to see Harriet, who would at least be an expert on grass, and perhaps rock.

He found the rabbit working at home and showed her the piece of paper, telling her about the treasure and the hunt so far. Harriet licked a paw, scratched an ear, and mumbled to herself as she read. She stroked her chin, twitched her nose, and looked up, stepping toward Peter with the page held out.

"Well, first of all," she said, "'Mouth' makes me think of a hole, or a tunnel, maybe. Probably not an animal's hole if the mouth is filled with grass. And look here ... 'air on rock and rock on air'. A cave, don't you think?" Peter nodded; it was so obvious. "As for the rest," Harriet continued kindly, seeing Peter's embarrassment, "It faces to the south and is well hidden. Most likely a small entrance in a grassy hill or something. See what I mean?" Peter nodded again and thanked Harriet very much. The rabbit patted the boy's shoulder.

"Don't feel bad. It's all a matter of what the words conjure up in your head, and sometimes they just don't come, that's all. I'm afraid I haven't seen such a cave lately, but that

doesn't mean much. There are some likely-looking hills over that way (she pointed to the east). I'd start there if I were you."

Peter thanked her once more and started to leave, then remembered to ask if the rabbit wanted to come along. It was not really a surprise when Harriet turned down the offer, saying that she had too much work to do that day. Alone again, Peter trudged off through the forest, but with a much slower step than when he had begun that morning. By now he was feeling rather hungry and quite tired.

Coming to the grassy hills at last, he found what he was looking for in a very simple way: his foot went into a hole, and he tripped. He examined the hole, saw that it was big enough for him to crawl through, and promptly did so.

The cave was larger inside, but quite dark, forcing him to feel around on the floor. His heart skipped a beat when his fingers struck wood, but the excitement didn't last long. He slapped the ground with his hand. Another piece of paper!

He crawled out of the hole and sat down to read the fifth, and hopefully the last, clue:

A door I am, and made of wood.

In a thousand doorways I have stood

And stand there still, to see things strange,

For I move not, though worlds may change.

A home I give where nothing harms,

And treasure hold within my arms.

Treasure at last, not another clue. Well, he could put up with this one final riddle as long as there were no more. He looked at it again.

A wooden door he could understand, and they are sometimes used in more than one place (though a thousand doorways was a little much). Yet he had never seen so much as *one* wooden door in The Wood. Even their tree-houses used doors of cloth or woven grass. And how could a door be in a thousand doorways at once? For that was what the clue seemed to say. He was determined to figure this one out for himself. Why couldn't something just come to his mind like it did for the others?

He had been sitting there, thinking for about three-quarters of an hour when he heard flapping sounds and felt a breeze at his shoulder. It was Fowler.

“What’s up, Peter?” the duck asked. Peter smiled. It would be *rude* not to give Fowler an answer....

He explained, and handed over the piece of paper with relief. The duck read silently, then gave a little chuckle and handed the page back to Peter.

"Should think *you* could figure that out," he muttered, smiling, "Better than me. A *door* that never changes? A *home*? Made of *wood*, with *arms*?" Peter's brow furrowed with concentration, but he shook his head.

Then it hit him.

"You mean ...?" he asked. Fowler nodded, grinning widely. Peter snapped around and started walking quickly, with the duck following behind as well as he could. Once Fowler had pointed out the important words, there was only one place in The Wood that fit them, as Peter knew very well.

In less than half an hour the boy and the duck pushed through the bushes into the clearing in front of Peter's tree-house. Peter ran to the oak tree and scanned the ground. Suddenly he heard a muffled bark, and looked up to see Gypsy standing on the porch, with an old piece of paper in her mouth.

"Gyps, give me that piece of paper," Peter cried. Her eyes were bright with mischief as she scampered through the doorway. He dashed up the rope ladder in frantic pursuit, and flew into the room

"SURPRISE!!" shouted six voices.

Peter just stood, dumbfounded. His friends were all there. And the room was decorated for a party.

Fowler, who had entered right behind Peter, bent down and gave him the piece of paper that Gypsy held. In the same old-fashioned writing as the pirate clues it said:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Peter looked up with a smile creasing his face, and a pair of wet eyes. He had forgotten, but his friends had not.

"But ... I don't understand," he finally managed to say. "You mean there's no treasure?" Léolin looked embarrassed.

"I'm sorry about that, Peter," she said sheepishly, "But we had to find some way of keeping you out of the house until things were ready. I wrote those clues. And I had to get up awfully early this morning to hide them." She yawned as if to stress the point, then showed Peter some of the writing, and how she had made the paper look so old.

Peter was too pleased about the party to be angry, but he complained: "Couldn't you have made the clues a little easier?"

Léolin laughed. "If I had, you would have been back here too early. Besides, without something difficult to keep your attention you would have thought of the big flaw in the whole buried treasure story."

"What was that?" Peter asked.

"Well," the Elf smiled, "I was counting on the fact that you're still not fully used to the ways of The Wood. You see, a treasure hunt with a series of clues wouldn't be possible here. Everything, except this clearing, changes from day to day, so directions that a person wrote one day might never be true again. I had to wait until this morning to plant those clues because it was the only way I could be sure that all of the hiding places would still be there for you to find."

Peter slapped his forehead. How could he have missed that?

"Don't complain," Léolin laughed, "It worked, and now you have a surprise party for all your efforts."

Peter grinned and nodded. "One more question," he said. "Those clues. Did Fowler and the rest know the answers to them ahead of time?" The Elf gave another sheepish smile.

“Well,” she answered, “they didn’t see the clues. But they did know where I was going to hide them because they all helped me pick out the hiding places. So I guess that *might* make it easier for them to figure out the answers.”

Peter glared at the animals and they hung their heads. Then he broke into a huge smile.

“That makes feel a *lot* better,” he said, and they all burst out in joyful laughter.

Peter was starving, so they immediately sat down to eat, at a table laden for a royal banquet. The noise was terrific, but it was all happy noise. And as Peter gazed around at all of his wonderful friends he had a tight feeling in his throat.

Léolin had been wrong. There *was* a treasure. And he would not have traded it for all the gold in the world.