

PATRICIA ST JOHN

THE  
TANGLEWOODS'  
SECRET



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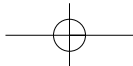
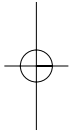
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# Holiday plans

It was a beautiful home where Philip and I lived with Aunt Margaret – a white house on the slope of the hill behind which the sun set, with a garden and an orchard where cowslips and clovers ran riot under the apple trees. Philip and I slept in the two top attics, with the doors open so that we could shout across. I could never quite make up my mind which window I loved best, Philip's or mine. Philip's gave me a feeling of security, for it looked out on the garden, hedged in with pines and the shelter of the near green hills with their bracken and gorse rising beyond. But mine gave me a thrill of adventure, for it looked out on the great Worcestershire plain with its fields and its cherry blossom, and its far, far hills, somewhere away in Herefordshire, where I had never been.

I loved those hills. Sometimes they looked so green and close by, sometimes so misty and far away. I looked on them as a sort of fairyland where I might go some day when I was grown up. And when Philip came in to sit on my bed in the morning to listen to the first bird songs, or to watch the flaming sunrise over the plain, we used to tell each other stories about them, and about the strange beasts that lived upon their slopes.

Philip was nearly 11, a year and a half older than I, and I loved him more than anyone else on earth. He was a gentle, thoughtful boy, slow in coming to conclusions, but completely dogged in carrying them out. Ever since I

could remember he had been my friend, my protector and my comforter. And, except at day school, we had never been apart. We were about as different as a brother and sister could be. Philip was well built, with serious blue eyes and a round, placid face. I was small and thin, with dark, untidy hair and a sharp chin. Philip was good and obedient. I was wild and did what I liked. Aunt Margaret openly loved Philip, but she shook her head over me and said that I took years off her life.

At the time of my story we had been five years with Aunt Margaret, and had forgotten what Mother and Father looked like. I was 4 years old when they had sailed for India. Of course, Mother had meant to come home long ago, but the war had stopped her. I don't think I really wanted her to come back. Aunt Margaret was so fond of telling me what a disappointment I should be to my poor mother, that I hoped to put off the discovery as long as possible. In her letters, she always sounded as though she loved me very much. But that, I supposed, was because she did not know me. In any case, when she came she would like Philip much better than me, because grown-ups always did. And Philip would like her, because Philip liked everybody, and I would much rather have Philip all to myself. So I pushed away the thought of Mother's homecoming, and thought about it as little as possible.

This story begins on the first day of our Easter holidays, when Philip came into my room in his pyjamas at half-past six in the morning. He curled up on the end of my bed with his notebook and pencil in his hand. Together we leaned our elbows on the windowsill to watch birds and to make plans.

Holiday plans

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Birdwatching was our great hobby that holiday. We had a notebook in which we recorded each different kind of bird we saw, and everything we noticed about it – its song, its nest, its habits. Philip had made the book himself, and it was beautifully neat and accurate. He did all the writing and I painted the eggs when we found them. But my drawings were not particularly lifelike.

Philip longed for a camera with which to photograph his nests. "If only I could take photographs of them," he would say, over and over again, "I might be a great naturalist. My book might even be printed."

But the cheapest camera in the shop windows cost pounds, and our money box held a fraction of what we needed even though we had been saving for weeks and weeks. We emptied the coins on to the quilt, and counted them over again, just in case we'd made a mistake the time before. But we hadn't. Philip sighed deeply.

"At this rate, I shall be going to boarding school by the time I get that camera," he said. "I wish we could earn some money, Ruth."

We gazed out into the garden rather sadly, racking our brains for some plan. But nothing brilliant suggested itself to us. Below us, April had touched the fruit trees, and blossom foamed like a soft white sea over the plain. Our own damson trees were white and lacy, and I could see nests of primroses around their roots and golden daffodil trumpets shining in the sun. I looked across to the hills, but they were hidden in the early haze of a spring morning. All of a sudden Philip half dived out of the window in his eagerness.

"Tree creeper!" he hissed. "On the plum!"

I leaned out beside him and we watched together – a neat brown bird running up the tree, tapping the bark for

insects. Philip was all alert now, noting every slightest pose and gesture. He hardly drew breath until the little creature had spread its wings and disappeared round the corner. Then out came pen and notebook, and my brother was absorbed for five minutes.

"Ruth," he said eagerly, looking up at the end of that time, "we must get to the woods early today and have plenty of time. And Ruth, I was thinking in bed last night, we ought to have a naturalist's headquarters. We ought to build a place where we could keep pencils and rough paper and provisions in tins, instead of always carrying them with us, because we shall go every day all the holidays. And we must escape early before Aunt Margaret thinks of things we ought to do."

"We'll race through our holiday jobs," I announced, "and I'll be as good as gold, so she'll hardly notice me, and she won't watch me. When I've swept and dusted in the drawing room, I'll just slip out before she thinks of anything else. And if she asks where we've been, we'll say we've been getting wood, and we'll bring a little back with us to make it true. But I don't see why we should have to work at all in our holidays! I know what I'll do. I'll dress quick, and go down now and help Aunt Margaret with breakfast to make her think how good I'm being!"

In ten minutes' time, I duly presented myself in the scullery, arrayed in a clean pinny, with my hair in perfect order.

"Can I help you, Aunt Margaret?" I asked meekly. "I got up early in case you might need me."

As I was noted for my lateness in the mornings, my aunt looked rather astonished.