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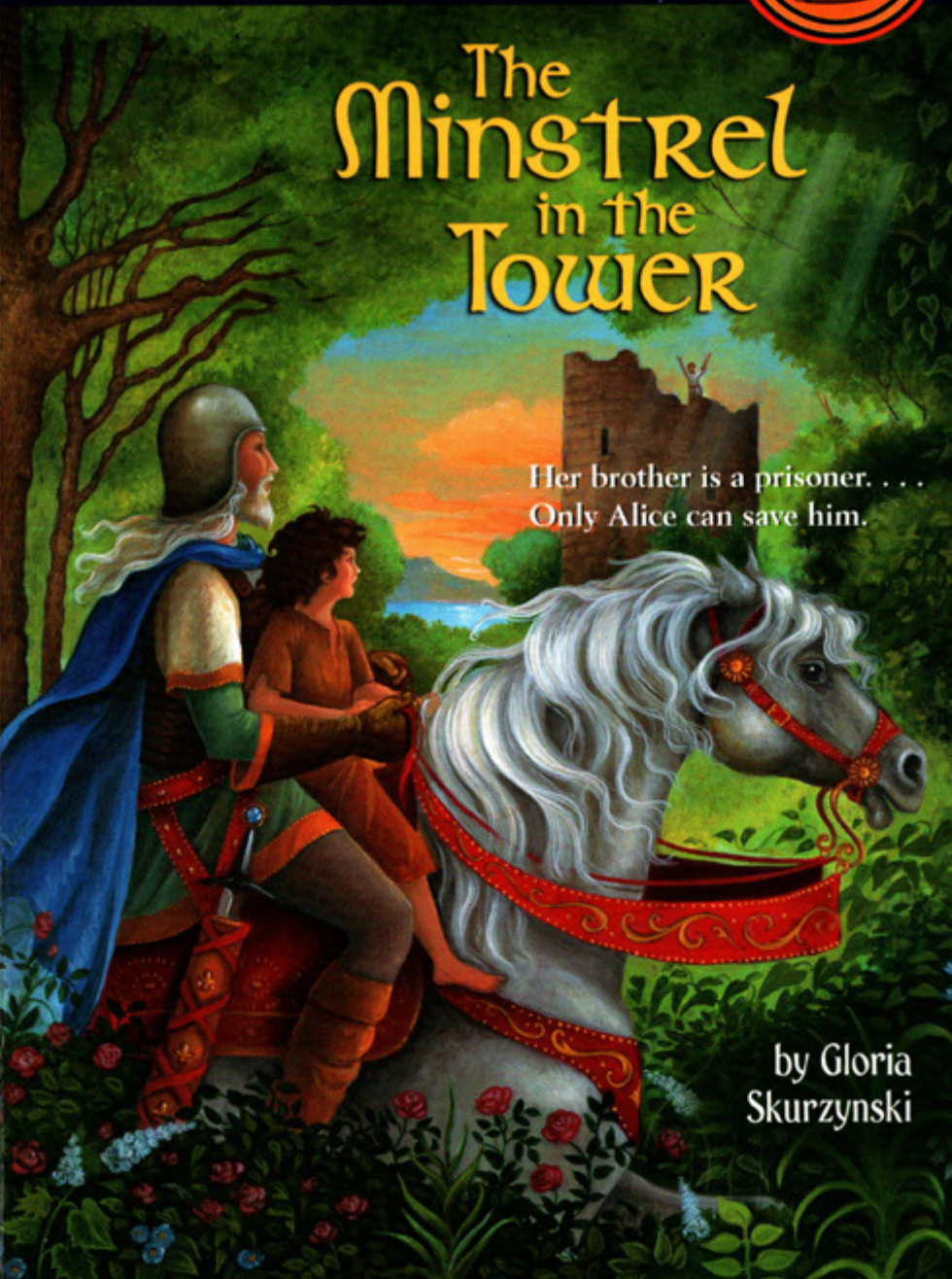
a chapter book

History

The Minstrel in the Tower

Her brother is a prisoner. . . .
Only Alice can save him.

by Gloria
Skurzynski

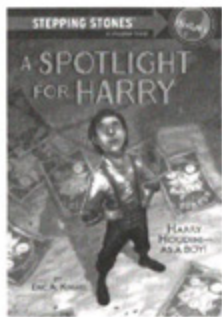


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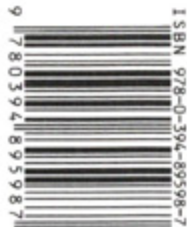
History

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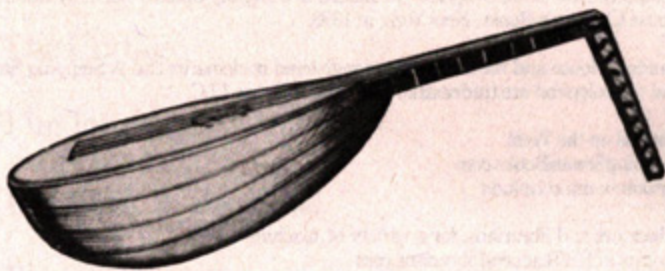
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The Minstrel in the Tower



by Gloria Skurzynski
illustrated by Julek Heller

A STEPPING STONE BOOK™
Random House  New York

For James Joseph Alm, a singer, and his sister Stephanie, who climbs

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Summary: In the year 1195, eleven-year-old Roger and his eight-year-old sister Alice must travel the French countryside in search of their ailing mother's estranged brother, a wealthy baron.

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I. The Cottage

Alice heard the sweet singing of a nightingale. It sounded so perfect that a real nightingale might have been fooled, but not Alice. Her brother, Roger, had whistled the bird's song. It was their secret signal.

"I'm up here," she called.

"Are you in that tree again?" he cried, seeing Alice in the top branches of a huge sycamore. "You know you're not supposed to climb that high! Get down, you monkey."

"It's nice up here," Alice answered. "I can see so far! When Father returns from the Crusade, I'll be the first to see him coming."

Roger leaned against the trunk of the big old tree. "If he's ever going to come home at all," he said, "this would be a good time for it, with Mother so sick." It was the year 1195, and the Crusade had ended three years earlier. Mother, Roger, and Alice waited alone in their cottage, with only their elderly neighbor, Zara, to visit them. Since their mother had become ill, old Zara helped care for her.

"You'd better come down right now," Roger called, "before Zara starts looking for us. It scares her when she sees you up so high." Under his breath he added, "It scares me, too."

Roger was eleven; Alice was only eight. He tried to watch out for her the best he could, but Alice was hard to keep up with. She never walked when she could run, and she never stayed on the ground when she could climb.

"Children!"

"What did I tell you," Roger said as they heard old Zara shouting for them.

"Children! Where are you? Roger, is Alice with you? Alice, answer me!"

"Don't let her know I'm up here," Alice begged.



Roger was not only good at bird calls; he could imitate people's voices perfectly. In a voice that sounded exactly like Alice's, he called, "I'm here with Roger, Zara. At the big tree."

"Both of you come inside at once!" old Zara cried sharply.

"Something must be wrong!" Roger said. "Hurry, Alice!"

She scrambled down the tree so fast that he couldn't stand to watch. He turned away until he felt her next to him on the ground. Together they raced to the tiny cottage.

When they reached the door, they stopped in dismay. Their mother had risen from her sickbed to sit in the center of the room. Her long yellow hair spread from her head to her waist like rays of sunlight. In her lap rested a lute. As she bent forward to pluck its strings, she sang:

*"My brother is a noble knight,
An eagle guards his shield of white,
My brother won't forgive a wrong,
His sword is steel, his arm is strong. . . ."*

Old Zara stood wringing her hands. "I tried to make her stay in bed, but she won't listen. She's burning with fever."

"Mother!" Roger cried, running to her. "Go back and lie down!"

Spots red as strawberries stained their mother's cheeks, but her forehead and lips looked pale as winter. "Dear Roger," she said,





“let me sit while I can. Soon enough I’ll lie forever, in my grave.”

Fear sent prickles over Roger’s skin. Alice looked frightened too. “Is Mother going to die?” she asked Zara.

“There, there, child,” soothed the old woman. “When people get feverish, they say foolish things. You mustn’t worry.”



As their mother stared at Roger and Alice, she seemed to come to her senses. "I've been dreaming," she said, "about my brother, Raimond, in Bordeaux. It was such a real dream, I felt I could reach out and touch him."

"What brother?" Roger asked. "You don't have a brother."

"The truth is, I do have one, and you must find him, Roger. Tell Raimond I beg his forgiveness, and that I leave you children in his care. Who else will look after you when I'm gone? Your father must be dead, or he would have come back to us long ago."

Dead! Roger's fear turned to cold pain. He'd suspected Father might have died in battle, because most men had long since returned from the Crusade. To hear his mother say it, though, cut through to his heart. Maybe he didn't have to believe her. Maybe old Zara was right—that feverish people said foolish things.

Their mother had begun to pluck the lute again. With a sudden motion, she held out the instrument to Alice.



“Take this to your uncle Raimond,” she told the girl. “Show him the eagle carved on the back. Ask him to come quickly. Quickly!” Her eyes grew wild, and then she fell into a faint.

“Catch her!” Zara cried.

“I don’t want her to die,” sobbed Alice as they carried their mother to the bed. Alice had no memory of her father, but her mother had always been there to hold her, to love and comfort her.

“All morning she’s been talking about this brother, Raimond,” Zara told them. “It’s preying on her mind. I think she won’t get well until you bring him to her.”

“I don’t even know where Bordeaux is,” Roger protested.

“Three days west of here,” Zara answered. She wrung her hands. “So far away!”

Alice was kneeling beside the bed. “Three whole days!” she exclaimed through her tears. “What will we eat?”

“You won’t be going with me,” Roger said.

“Yes I will!” She jumped to her feet. “Mother told me to. I’m supposed to take the

lute to our uncle."

Roger could have argued that their mother's mind wasn't clear when she spoke those words. Yet in spite of himself he wanted Alice with him on the journey. All their lives they'd depended on each other for company. "All right," he answered. "But if you come, you have to obey me. As for food . . ." He pointed to the lute. "That will buy our suppers."

"No, I won't let you sell it!" Alice wrapped her arms around the pear-shaped lute. "Mother said—"

"I know what Mother said. I'm not going to sell it. I'm going to play it. Mother taught me all her songs. I'll sing for our suppers, like a strolling minstrel."

"I wish I could go in your stead," lamented Zara. "But I'm far too old to make such a journey." Her face puckered as she lifted the edge of her brown wimple to dab her eyes. "Don't worry about your mother—I'll tend her carefully while you're gone. It's you children I worry about! May heaven protect the two of you!"



II. The Journey

The sun hung halfway between straight-up noon and sunset. Since they'd started out from home Alice had been skipping ahead and running back, but now her steps lagged to match Roger's.

"I'm hungry," she told him.

Hunger didn't bother Roger so much, but other things did. With each step the lute bumped him. Because they were heading west, the sun shone right into his eyes. Long before, the road had turned away from the river Dordogne, and since then they hadn't

Knights, courage, music, and quests



fill the stories of the Middle Ages. In 1195, daring Alice and musical Roger set off on an epic journey. But on the way, the siblings are kidnapped and held in an ancient hidden tower. Alice must use all of her bravery to escape and find help. Can Roger use his musical talents to guide her back to him before it's too late?

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