

STEPPING STONES™

a chapter book

History

The Minstrel in the Tower



By Gloria
Skurzynski



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. . . ."*

It is the year 1195. Roger and Alice have lost their father to the Crusades, and now their mother is terribly ill. They set off in search of their mother's long-lost brother, who is a powerful baron and might help them. But on the way, they are kidnapped by two highwaymen and locked in an ancient tower. Time is running out. Can Roger and Alice escape in time to find their uncle—and save their mother's life?



"Designed as easy-reading material for middle-graders, this has the virtues of an attractive format and illustrations, a fast plot, and even a feminist fillip: Alice is the more intrepid of the siblings, Roger's gifts are for music and ventriloquism."

—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*