The MARSHAL

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

SYNOPSIS.

Francois Beaupre, a peasant babe of three years, after an amusing incident in which Marshal Ney figures, is made a Chevalier of France by the Emperor Napoleon, who prophesied that the boy might one day be a marshal of France under another Bonaparte. At the age of ten Francois visits General Baron Gaspard Gourgaud, who with Alixe, his seven-year-old daughter, lives at the Chateau. A soldier of the Empire under Napoleon, he fires the boy's imagination with stories of his campaigns. The general offers Francois a home at the Chateau. The boy refuses to leave his parents, but in the end becomes a copyist for the general and learns of the friendship between the general and Marquis Zappi, who campaigned with the general under Napoleon. Marquis Zappi and his son, Pietro, arrive at the Chateau. The general agrees to care for the Marquis' son while the former goes to America. The Marquis before leaving for America asked Francois to be a friend of his son. The boy solemnly promises. Francois goes to the Chateau to live. Marquis Zappi dies leaving Pietro as a ward of the general. Alixe, Pietro and Francois meet a strange boy who proves to be Prince Louis Napoleon. Francois saves his life. The general discovers Francois loves Alixe, and extracts a promise from him that he will not interfere between the girl and Pietro. Francois goes to Italy as secretary to Pietro. Queen Hortense plans the escape of her son Louis Napoleon by disguising him and Marquis Zappi as her lackeys. Francois takes Marquis Zappi's place, who is ill, in the escape of Hortense and Louis. Dressed as Louis's brother Francois lures the Austrians from the hotel allowing the prince and his mother to escape. Francois is a prisoner of the Austrians for five years in the castle owned by Pietro in Italy. He discovers in his guard one of Pietro's old family servants.

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

A person of more importance than Battista had fallen under the spell of Francois' personality. The governor himself had been attracted by the young Frenchman. The governor, Count von Gersdorf, was a vain, discontented, brilliant Austrian, at odds with the world because he had not risen further in it. He was without society in this mountain fortress of his, and longed for it; he had a fine voice and no one to sing to; he liked to talk and had no one to talk to. Francois, with his ready friendliness, with his gift of finding good in every one, with his winning manner and simplicity which had the ease of sophistication, was a treasure-trove of amusement to the bored Austrian.

Things stood so with the prisoner at the time of his discovery of the identity of his jailer and of his jail. The governor at that time was away on a visit to Vienna, looking for a promotion; he came back elated and good-humored in the prospect of a change within the year. But the heart of Francois sank as he thought what the change might mean to him.

"'Some day a marshal of France under another Bonaparte,' he said to himself one day, staring through the bars at his window—he called the sky so. He smiled. "But that is nothing. To help place my prince on the throne of France—that is my work—my life."

He talked aloud at times, as prisoners come to do. He went on then, in a low voice.

"If there were good fairies, if I had three wishes: Alixe—the prince made emperor—Francois Beaupre, a marshal of France." He laughed happily. "It is child's play. Nothing matters except that my life shall do its work. Even that is so small; but I have a great desire to do that. I believe I shall do that—I know it." And he fell to work on a book which he was planning, chapter by chapter, in his brain.

But, if he were to escape ever, the chance was increased infinitely by the going back and forth to the governor's room. A new governor might keep him shut up absolutely. It had been so while the count was away; then he had been ill, and the lieutenant in command would not let a doctor see him till he became delirious; that was the ordinary treatment of prisoners. Francois, thinking over these things on a day, fell with a sudden accent on the steady push of his longing for freedom, the conviction that he must get free before the count left, else opportunity and force for the effort would both be gone forever. And on that day Battista brought in his midday meal with a look and a manner which Francois remarked.

"What is it, Battista?" he asked softly.

The man answered not a word, but turned and opened the door rapidly and looked out. "I thought I had left the water-pitcher. Ah, here it is—I am stupid," he spoke aloud. And then, finger on lip dramatically, he bent over the young man. "My son—the little Battista—has had a letter. The young master wishes him to come to him in France, to serve him. He is going in two days."

It was whispered quickly, and Battista stood erect.

"The signor's food will get cold if the signor does not eat it," he spoke gruffly. "I do not like to carry good food for prisoners who do not appreciate it. I shall bring less tomorrow."

But Francois, hardly hearing the surly tones, had his hand on Battista's arm, was whispering back eagerly.

"Where does he go, in France?"

"To Vicques," the low answer came. Francois sank back, tortured.

Going to Vicques, the little Battista! From Castleforte! And he, Francois, must stay here in prison! His soul was wrung with a sudden wild homesickness. He wanted to see Alixe, to see his mother, to see the general; to see the peaceful little village and the stream that ran through it, and the steep-arched bridge, and the poppy fields, and the corn! The gray castle with its red roofs, and the beech wood, and the dim, high-walled library, how he wanted to see it all! How his heart ached, madly, fiercely! This was the worst moment of all his captivity. And with that, Battista was over him, was murmuring words again. Something was slipped under the bedclothes.

"Paper—pens. The signor will write a letter this afternoon. And tomorrow little Battista will take it."

And the heart of Francois gave a sudden throb of joy as wild as its anguish. He could speak to them before he died; it might be they could save him. His hands stole to the package under the coarse blanket. It seemed as if in touching it he touched his mother and his sweetheart and his home.

CHAPTER XV.

Good News.

In the garden of the chauteau of Vicques, where the stiff, gray stone vases spilled again their heart's blood of scarlet and etching of vines; where the two stately lines of them led down to the sundial and the round lawn—on one of the griffin-supported stone seats Alixe and Pietro sat, where Alixe and Francois had sat five years before.

As they sat in the garden, they had been going over the pros and cons of his life or death for the thousandth time. Pietro's quiet gray eyes were sad as he looked away from Alixe and across the lawn to the beech wood.

"God knows I would give my life quickly if I could see him coming through the trees there, as we used to see him, mornings long ago, in his patched homespun clothes."

Alixe followed the glance consideringly, as if calling up the little, brown, trudging figure so well, remembered. Then she tossed up her head sharply—"Who?"—and then she laughed. "I shall be seeing visions next, like Francois," she said. "I thought it was he—back in the beech wood."

"I see no one." Pietro stared.

"But you have no eyes, Pietro—I can always see a thing two minutes before you," Alixe threw at him. "There—the man."

"Oh," said Pietro. "Your eyes are more than natural, Alixe. You see into a wood; that is uncanny. Yes, I see him now. Mon dieu! he is a big fellow."

"A peasant—from some other village," Alixe spoke carelessly. "I do not know him," and they went on talking, as they had been doing, of Francois.

And with that, here was Jean Phillippe Moison, forty now and fat, but still beautiful in purple millinery, advancing down the stone steps between the tall gray vases, making a symphony of color with the rich red of the flowers. He held a silver tray; a letter was on it.

"For mademoiselle."

Mademoiselle took it calmly and glanced at it, and with that both the footman and the Marquis Zappi were astonished to see her fall to shivering, as if in a sudden illness. She caught Pietro's arm. The letter was clutched in her other hand thrust back of her.

"Pietro!"

"What is it, Alixe?" His voice was quiet as ever, but his hand was around

It Was Whispered Quickly.

her shaking fingers, and he held them strongly. "What is it, Alixe?"

She drew forward the other hand; the letter shook, rustled with her trembling. "It is—from Francois!"

Jean Phillippe Moison having stayed to listen, as he ought not, lifted his eyes and his hands to heaven and gave thanks in a general way, volubly, unrebuked. By now the unsteady fingers of Alixe had opened the paper, and her head and Pietro's were bent over it, devouring the well-known writing. Alixe, excited, French, exploded into a disjointed running comment.

"From prison—our Francois—dear Francois!" And then: "Five years, Pietro! Think—while we have been free!" And then with a swift clutch again at the big coat sleeve crowding against her: "Pietro! See, see! The date—it is only two months ago. He was alive then; he must be alive now; he is! I knew it, Pietro! A woman knows more things than a man."

With that she threw up her head and fixed Jean Phillippe, drinking in all this, with an unexpected stern glance. "What are you doing here, Moison? What manners are these?" Then, relapsing in a flash into pure human trust and affection toward the anxious old servant: "My dear, old, good Moison—he is alive—Monsieur Francois is alive—in a horrible prison in Italy! But he is alive, Moison!" And with that, a sudden jump again into dignity. "Who brought this, Moison?"

Jean Phillippe was only too happy to have a hand in the joyful excitement. "Mademoiselle, the young person speaks little language. But he told me to say to monsieur the marquis that he was the little Battista."

Pietro looked up quickly. "Alixe, it is the servant from my old home of whom I spoke to you. I can not imagine how Francois got hold of him, but he chose a good messenger. May I have him brought here? He must have something to tell us."

Alixe, her letter in her hands, struggled in her mind. Then: "The letter will keep—yes, let him come, and we can read it all the better after for what he may tell us."

So Moison, having orders to produce at once the said little Battista, retired, much excited, and returned shortly—but not so shortly as to have omitted a fling of the great news into the midst of the servants' hall. He conducted, marching behind him, the little Battista, an enormous young man of six feet four, erect, grave, stately. This dignified person, saluting the lady with a deep bow, dropped on one knee before his master, his eyes full of a worshiping joy, and kissed his hand. Having done which, he arose silently and stood waiting, with those beaming eyes feasting on Pietro's face, but otherwise decorous.

First the young marquis said some friendly words of his great pleasure in seeing his old servant and the friend of his childhood, and the big man stood with downcast eyes, with the color flushing his happy face. Then, "Battista," asked the marquis, "how did you get the letter which you brought mademoiselle?"

"My father," answered Battista laconically.

"How did your father get it?"

"From the signor prisoner, my signor."

Alixe and Pietro looked at him attentively, not comprehending by what means this was possible. Pietro, remembering the little Battista of old, vaguely remembered that he was incapable of initiative in speech. One must pump him painfully.

"Was your father in the prison where the signor is confined?" Alixe asked.

The little Battista turned his eyes on her a second, approvingly, but briefly. They went back without delay to their affair of devouring the face of his master. But he answered promptly. "Yes, signorina; he is there always."

"Always?" Pietro demanded in alarm. "Is Battista a prisoner?"

"But no, my signor."

"What then? Battista, try to tell us."

So adjured, little Battista made a violent effort. "He is one of the jailers, my signor."

"Jailers? For the Austrians?" The face of the marquis took all the joyful light out of the face of little Battista.

"My signor," he stammered, "it could not be helped. He was there. He knew the castle. They forced him at first, and—and it came to be so."

"Knew the castle!" Pietro repeated. "What castle?"

Battista's eyes turned to his Master's like those of a faithful dog, trusting but not understanding. "What castle, my signor? Castelforte—the signor's own castle—what other?"

A sharp exclamation from Alixe summed up everything. "Your castle is confiscated; they use it as a prison. Francois is a prisoner there, Pietro! All these years—in your own home!"

"I never dreamed of that," Pietro spoke, thinking aloud. "Every other prison in Austria and Italy I have tried to find him in. I never dreamed of Castelforte."

At the end of the interview the little Battista put his hand into his breast pocket and brought out another letter, thickly folded. Would mademoiselle have him instructed where to find the mother of the signor prisoner? He had promised to put this into her own hands. He must do it before he touched food.

And Jean Phillippe Moison, who had lurked discreetly back of the nearest stone vase, not missing a syllable, was given orders, and the huge little Battista was sent off up the stone steps between the scarlet flowers, up the velvet slope of lawn, in charge of the purple one.

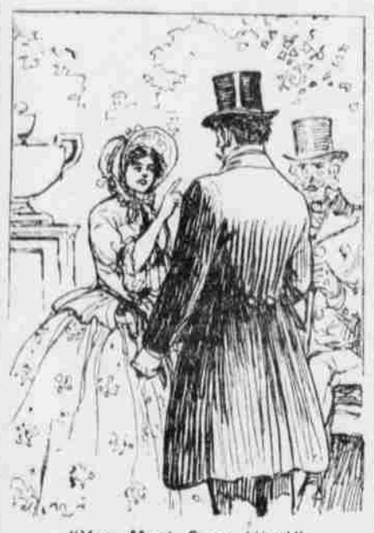
Half an hour later the general walked up from the village, walked slowly, thoughtfully through the beech wood, his face hardly older than when he had come to Vicques, but sterner and sadder; his still soldiery gait less buoyant than it had been five years ago.

He saw Alixe and Pietro coming joyfully toward him, running lightheartedly, calling to him with excited gay voices. It stabbed the general's heart; a quick thought came of that other who had been always with them, now dead or worse, of that other whom these two had forgotten. And with that they were upon him, and Alixe was kissing him, hugging him, pushing a letter into his hand, up his sleeve, into his face—anywhere.

"Father—good news—the best news—almost the best! Father, be ready for the good news!"

"I am ready," the general growled impatiently. "What is this foolery? Sabre de bois! What is your news, then, you silly child?"

And Alixe, shaking very much, laid her hand on his cheek and looked



"You Must Save Him!"

earnestly into his eyes. "Father, Francois is alive!"

For all his gruff self-control the general made the letter an excuse shortly to sit down. Queer, that a man's knees should suddenly bend and give way because of a thrill of rapture in a man's psychological make-up! But the general had to sit down. And then and there all that had been extracted from little Battista was rehearsed, and the letter read over from start to finish.

"But he is alive, father! Alive! That is happiness enough to kill one. I never knew till now that I feared he was dead."

"Alive—yes! But in prison—in that devil's hole of an old castle!" And Alixe looked at Pietro and laughed, but the general paid no attention. "He must be got out. There is no time to waste. Diable! He is perishing in that vile stable! What was that the lad said about the doctor's speech, that only a long sea voyage could save him? One must get him out, mon dieu, quick!"

Alixe, her hand on his arm, put her head down on it suddenly and stood so for a moment, her face hidden. Pietro, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, looked at the general with wide gray eyes, considering. With that Alixe flashed up, turned on the young Italian, shaking her forefinger at him; her eyes shone blue fire.

"That is for you, Pietro. If we should lose him now, just as we have found him! Now is the time for you to show if you can be what is brave and strong, as Francois has shown. It is your castle; you must save him."

Pietro looked at the girl, and the color crept through his cheeks, but he said nothing.

"Alixe, my Alixe," her father put an arm around her. "One may not demand heroism as if it were bread and butter. Pietro will not fail us."

"Alixe always wished me to be brilliant like Francois," Pietro spoke gently. "But I never could."

"Yet, Pietro, it is indeed your time," Alixe threw at him eagerly. "Francois must be rescued or he will die."

"Yes," Pietro answered quietly. "Francois must be rescued."

He was silent a moment, as if thinking. His calm poised mind was working swiftly; one saw the inner action in the clear gray eyes. The general and Alixe, watching him, saw it.

"I think I know how," he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Stone Staircase.

Battista's prisoner stood at the barred window high up the steep side of the castle and stared out wistfully at the receding infinity of blueness—his meadow. In the three months since his letter had gone to France, he had grown old. The juices of his youth seemed dried up; his eyes were bloodshot, his skin yellow; there was no flesh on him. The waiting and hoping had worn on him more than the dead level of the hopeless years before. There was a new tenseness in the lightly-built figure, even in the long, delicate, strong fingers. The prisoner had caught a whiff of the air of home and was choking for a full breath.

"You are not well, my friend," said the governor. "The doctor must see you."

But Francois refused lightly and laughed and fell to singing an old peasant song of France which he had remembered lately; he got up on the table and droned it to an imaginary fiddle which he pretended to play after the manner of old Jacques Arne, who played for dances in Vicques. And the governor was taken with a violent fancy for it. He roared at it, and sang it over in fragments till he had learned it, and then he sang it and roared again and slapped his knee; there was a droll comedy in Francois' rendering also, not to be explained—and the count said that Francois must come to his rooms the next night for dinner and sing him the song again and also listen to a new one of his own.

So Francois was taken down the stone staircase and conducted to the two rooms which were the governor's suite. He knew them well, for he had dined many times with the count. But tonight he was left alone a few moments in the outer room, the living-room, while the governor was in the bedroom, and he looked about keenly with a strained attention which grew out of the suppressed hope of escape. Who knew what bit of knowledge of the castle might be vital, and who knew how soon? He noted the swords and pistols hanging on the wall, and marked a light saber whose scabbard was brightly polished as if the blade also were kept in good order. On the table he saw the flint and steel with which Count von Gersdorf lighted his pipe; he stepped to the window and bent out, scanning the wall. A stone coping, wide enough for a man's foot, but little more, ran, four feet below; ten feet beyond the window it ended in the roof of a shed, a sloping roof where a man could drop down, yes, or even climb up with ease. A man, that is, who had climbed when a boy as Francois had climbed—like a cat for certainty and lightness. But what then, when one was in the courtyard? It was walled about with a stone wall sixteen feet high; these old ancestors of Pietro, who had built this place, had planned well to keep Pietro's friend in prison.

So Francois, not hopeful of a sortie by that point, drew in his head from the open window and took to examining the walls of the governor's room. There were three doors—one from the hall by which he had come, one behind which he now heard the count moving in his bedroom, and a third. The count had gone through this last door one night a month before, into a dark, winding, stone staircase, and disappeared for three minutes, and brought up a bottle of wonderful wine.

"A fine stock they put down there—the Italians who ruled here for eight hundred-odd years," he had said. "I've lowered it a bit. A good spacious wine-cellar and grand old wine. You will be the better for a little." And Francois had watched him as he put the brass key back on the chain which hung from his belt.

At this point of memory the bedroom door opened, and the governor came out, in great good humor and ready to eat and drink as became an Austrian soldier. The dinner was brought in, but Francois, for all his efforts to do his part, could not swallow food, or very little. The fever, the unrest burning in him, made it impossible. Count Gersdorf looked at him seriously when dinner was over; as yet Francois, talking, laughing, singing, had eaten not over half a dozen mouthfuls.

"Certainly you are not well," he said. "I think the doctor should see you." And then he nodded his head and his small eyes gleamed with a brilliant thought. "I know a medicine better than a doctor's." He stood up and his fingers were working at the chain of keys at his belt. Francois watched them and saw the thin, old, brass key which he slipped off. "A bottle of wine of our Italian ancestors—yours and mine, Beaupre"—the count chuckled—"that will cure you of your ills for this evening at least." He slid the key into the lock and said, half to himself, "My little brass friend never leaves the belt of Albrecht von Gersdorf except to do him a pleasure, bless him!" And then, "Hold the candle Beaupre—well, come along down—it can do no harm and I can't manage a light and two bottles."

So Francois followed down the twisted, headlong, stone staircase and found himself, after rather a long descent, holding the lamp high, gazing curiously about the walls of a large stone room lined with shelves, filled with bottles.

"A show, isn't it?" the Count von Gersdorf demanded. "Here, hold the light on this side," and he went on talking. "The wine is so old that I think it must have been stocked before the time of the last lord of the castle."

And Francois, holding the light, remembering the Marquis Zappi, thought so too. The count pointed to a square stone in the wall which projected slightly, very slightly.

"That is the door to a secret stock of some sort, I have always thought," he said. "Probably some wonderful old stuff saved for the coming of age of the heir, or a great event of that sort. I wish I could get at it," and he stared wistfully at the massive block. "But I cannot stir it. And I don't let anyone but myself down here—not I." The count turned away and they mounted the two stories of narrow steps, for the governor's rooms were on the second floor, and the staircase ran from it between walls, down underground. "The old chaps must have thought a lot of their wine to have the cellar connect directly with their own rooms—for Battista tells me these were always the rooms of the Za—of the lords of the castle," the governor explained.

And to Francois, considering it, the fact seemed an odd one. And then the governor set to work drinking Pietro's wine, and little thought, as he urged it on his prisoner, how much more right to it the prisoner had than he. It was a wonderful old liquid, full of a strange dim sparkle, and of most exquisite bouquet. As he drank it Francois silently toasted its owner on his return to his own again. He took so little as to disgust the governor, but it put fresh life into him, and when at last he could leave the count, who was by that time more than fairly drunk, he went up to his cold prison under the roof quieter and more at peace than he had been for months.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Loaf of Bread.

The next morning Battista came in with a manner which to the observing eye of his prisoner foretold distinctly some event. He talked more than usual, and more gruffly and loudly, but at last, after wandering about the room some minutes, all the time talking, scolding, he swooped on Francois and thrust a thick paper into his coat and at the same instant his heavy left hand was over Francois' mouth.

"Not a word," he whispered, and then— "The loaf of bread."

Francois, struck dumb and blind, turned hot and cold, and his shaking hand in his coat pocket clutched the letter.

But Battista prodded him with his hard forefinger. "Be careful," he muttered, and then again, "The bread"—with a sharp prod—"The loaf of bread"—and the door had clanged. Battista was gone.

A strong man, who had not been shut away from life, would likely have read the letter instantly, would instantly have examined the long round loaf lying before him. Francois was ill and weak and it was the first word for five years from his own people, which lay in his hand; he sat as if turned to stone, touching the paper as if that were enough; he sat perhaps fifteen minutes.

Then suddenly a breathlessness came over him that something might happen before he could read it—this writing which, whatever it should say, meant life and death to him. Taking care not to rustle the paper, deadening the sound under his bedclothes, he read it, kneeling by the bed. It was four letters—from his mother and Alexe and the general and Pietro; but the first three were short. He felt, indeed, reading them, that no words had been written, that only the arms of the people he loved had strained about him and their faces laid against his, and that so, wordlessly, they had told him but one thing—their undying love. Weak, lonely, his intense temperament stretched to the breaking point by the last three months of fearful hope, it was more than he could bear. He put the papers against his cheek and his head dropped on the bed, and a storm of tears tore his soul and body. But it was dangerous; he must not be off his guard; he remembered that swiftly, and with shaking fingers he opened Pietro's letter—Pietro's letter which, yellowed and faded but distinct yet, in the small clear writing, is guarded today with those other letters in the mahogany desk in Virginia.

"My dear brother Francois," the letter began, and quick tears came again at that word "brother," which said so much. "My dear brother Francois—this is not to tell you how I have searched for you and never forgotten you. I will tell you that when I see you. This is to tell you how to get out of that house of mine which has held you as a prisoner when you ought to have been its welcome guest. When Italy is free we will do that over; but

The Count Pointed to a Square Stone in the Wall.

we must get you free first. Francois, I am now within five miles of you—"

The man on his knees by the prison bed gasped; the letters staggered before his eyes.

"I am living on a ship, and I will explain how I got it when I see you, in a few days now, Francois. Every night for a week, beginning with tonight, there will be a person watching for you in Riders' Hollow, from midnight till daylight. After that we shall go away for two weeks so as to avoid giving suspicion, and then repeat the arrangement again every night for a week. You do not know Riders' Hollow, and it is unnecessary to tell you more about it than that it is a lonely place hidden in trees, and supposed to be haunted by ghosts of men on horseback; the people about will not go there for love or money except by broad daylight.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

One may be better than his reputation or his conduct, but never better than his principles.—Latena.