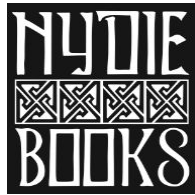


*Colours
of Silence*

V.E.H. MASTERS

COLOURS OF SILENCE

V.E.H.Masters



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Colours of Silence tells more of the story of Ysabeau and Johannes, servants to the family. Johannes has an important role in *The Conversos* and both feature in *The Apostates*

The Long Wait picks up on the story of Gilbert Logie who was Bethia's suitor in *The Castilians* and who also featured in *The Conversos*.

A Bonny Lass is about Agnes and tells of Grissel's background and relationship to the family.

All three short stories are available only to newsletter subscribers of vehmasters.com.

Books by VEHMasters

The Seton Chronicles:

The Castilians – the story of the siege of St Andrews Castle

The Conversos – Antwerp 1547; there is no place of safety

The Apostates – Venice 1550, City of Peril

The Familists – Europe 1555; is there no place of safety?

Colours of Silence

The water sparkled in the sunlight, rippling as the breeze brushed across it. Ysabeau paused, back against the wall of one of the many tall palazzos which lined the canal, enjoying the caress of the warm wind. She closed her eyes face upturned; then there was a scent, so sweetly perfect.

She opened her eyes and crept along the wall, the ridge of marble inserted into the stone smooth beneath her fingers, and stood on tiptoe to peer through the palisade which enclosed the garden attached to this palazzo. It was a flower of delicate beauty, the petals a softly translucent pale yellow – the colour of her sister. Ysabeau stretched her arm out, if she could just touch the flower with her fingertips perhaps she would feel Suzanne here with her. She reached out further, her sleeve catching on a long splinter of wood in the gate... so close.

A hand gripped her shoulder and she was hauled around to face her assailant. Thick eyebrows created an unbroken band across his forehead, bulbous nose wrinkling and the scarring across his cheeks the mark of a man who had survived the pox. His mouth was opening and closing, a pink flap moving amid the dense beard, his spit spraying her face as he leant in close. His colour was grey, like his eyebrows ... and spit. She dropped her head, pulling away from him.

He released her arm with a suddenness that had her staggering all too close to the canal side. She regained her balance and then she was running, screwing her eyes against the brightness of the sun bouncing off the water. She glanced back over her shoulder to see if he was following and knocked into a woman. Off balance, the woman dropped the basket she was carrying. Ysabeau knelt to help her gather the cherries tumbling over the cobbles. She kept her head down, for she knew the woman's mouth would be working. She wasn't afraid though, for this woman's colour was the pale blue of today's sky. A couple of scrawny urchins appeared, grabbing handfuls of the fruit to stuff into their mouths which were quickly stained purple; she didn't have to think what their colour was.

The woman's mouth was going around and around. There was a gap where her front teeth should be, a great dark hole. Ysabeau saw over dark hole woman's shoulder that spitty man was coming fast. She scrambled to her feet, lifted her skirts and ran over the narrow bridge which curved above the canal, a gondolier beneath guiding his boat through, the passenger staring up at her. A misstep here meant a fall and most probably a drowning but fear drove her on.

She took the first alleyway that led away from the canal, where the sun didn't penetrate, and went from dazzled by the light to blinded in the shadow. There were demons lurking here. She twisted and turned following the passage, convinced she'd be snatched at any moment. And then into the sunlight of a square once more. She slowed now, looking behind but no one was pursuing her.

Bending double to catch her breath, she stopped in the centre of the square. She could feel eyes upon her but there was only an old man shuffling by and some

children playing a game with pebbles in the corner. She straightened and moved off. Then a thump between the shoulder blades, the stone landing by her feet. She turned to stare at the children but their heads were bent together, absorbed. She hurried on, another hit... then another.

Ysabeau took to her heels again. She could smell them closing in on her, didn't dare look behind. Down another narrow passageway, a woman hanging over the balcony pointing, mouth open, swerving around a man into a group of women who scattered as she twisted through them and straight into Grissel.

Grissel meant home and warmth and safety. She was yellow-red like a sunset, yellow-red like the soft glow of a fire in the chill, mist thickened evenings of this city of canals. She was what Ysabeau imagined a mother to be – although tall and strong Grissel was not so much older than she.

Ysabeau leant her forehead into the hollow below Grissel's shoulder. Grissel allowed it for a moment then held Ysabeau at arm's length, shaking her head. Lifting the corner of her apron she wiped Ysabeau's sweat-drenched face. Ysabeau only realised she'd run instinctively for home when Grissel turned her towards the open door and led her into the kitchens. Glancing behind as she passed through the low doorway into coolness, Ysabeau could see no sign of her pursuers. But she feared they'd be waiting should she be sent out alone again.

Johannes was in the chamber lounging on his stool, back against the wall and skinny legs sprawled out. When he saw Ysabeau he sat up so abruptly the stool wobbled and he grabbed the board to prevent overbalancing. His thin face flushed and his gaze slithered away from her. She didn't understand what she'd done. He used to smile, lean in, gesture, take time to show her the latest creature he'd carved from wood. She had a collection of them laid out on the shelf he'd fitted set high on the wall of the chamber she slept in, where small hands couldn't reach.

Grissel's eyes were on Johannes too and she gave a slight nod as though approving his actions. Ysabeau didn't understand. Why did Grissel not want Johannes and Ysabeau to be friends anymore?

Grissel's mouth was moving and she stared intently at Ysabeau. And why did Grissel think a slow-moving mouth was sufficient for Ysabeau to understand? Everyone in this household, at least those who attempted to connect with her, stared into her eyes, while their lips moved, except Johannes, of course, until he withdrew from her. And she could make nothing of moving mouths; ugly things to look upon. She drooped and then straightened up knowing she should give thanks every day she had a place to live and enough to eat. If it meant she mustn't look to Johannes any more then Ysabeau would obey.

Grissel picked up a crust of toasted bread from a platter on the board and waved it at Ysabeau, who placed her hands to her own flushed cheeks. Grissel spread her hands wide and Ysabeau traced out the edge of a flagstone with the toe of her boot. Then Grissel was looking to Johannes who rose to his feet. She rolled her eyes and held out her hand to Ysabeau, fingers beckoning impatiently. Ysabeau gazed at the wriggling fingers then, understanding dawning, delved into her skirt pocket for the coins she'd been given. She passed them to Johannes, who took them without looking at her and slipped out the door.

Ysabeau hoped that one failed attempt would be sufficient to excuse her from ever being sent out alone again to fetch bread, but Grissel was most determined. She wondered if all the women in that faraway northern land were as fierce. But then there was a reason Grissel was the yellow-red colour, for she could be soft glowing embers one moment and a great burst of flame the next. Curiously the mistress was never fiery, more the colour of Ysabeau's dead sister – a soft buttery yellow – and she came from the same land as Grissel.

On Ysabeau's next lone trip Grissel pushed her out the door and shut it. Ysabeau waited, back against the rough wood, then tried the latch moving it up and down, but the door held firm. Grissel had barred it. She could feel the shaking begin. Why was Grissel so insistent? There was plenty of other work to be done, especially caring for Samuel-Thomas. Ysabeau felt a softness when she thought of the infant and the speed with which he ran, as though life was something exciting; every day a new exploration. His colour was the green of new grass like she had seen on the mountainsides during their journey here. Everyone in the household, even the grim Venetian housekeeper, loved Samuel-Thomas. He was its grassy green centre.

She kept close to the edges of the streets, staying in the shadow and this time didn't allow herself to become distracted by the gardens adjoining the palazzos. It was busy as ever, perhaps she could slip unnoticed through the crowds. She reached the bakers, the smell of warm bread overlaying even the odour of sweat from the women waiting in line and the stench of death from the nearby canal. The baker had seen her before, many times in Grissel's company and expected nothing from her, simply taking the coin and passing her a loaf so fresh baked that the steam was rising from it still. Ysabeau shifted the loaf from one hand to the other, juggling like the masked men during a carnival. She didn't like the masks; pointy and sharp as the tip of a knife. She shuddered, remembering the knife cutting deep into her sister's throat and how the blood spurted, bright and red, the smell of iron rising, steaming in the cool morning air – Suzanne looking to her with frantic eyes and the mistress trying to stem the blood as the life drained away.

The first stone hit her on the head. Her hair and cap gave some protection. The second stone caught her on the cheek bone as she turned to look behind and it stung. There were three of them, perhaps more she couldn't see. They were happy. She could tell by the shape their mouths made, with grey mist swirling around them despite the brightness of the day. She ran. Could only tell by the faces of the people she swerved around and the street seller lifting his spoon from the bubbling pot, glaring past her, that they were following; couldn't stop to find out.

She was along the canal side now and suddenly there was Johannes mid-water in the family gondola, the master at his ease in the back. No help there, for Johannes could not turn aside unless the master directed it. Then Johannes was leaning forward and the master sat up; his mouth moving and arm pointing. She slowed, risking a glance behind; her tormentors were gone. The master gave a nod, the

aura of blue around him strong and deep today, and again leant back in the broad seat. Johannes gave a flick of his head, telling her to go home, suddenly all his concentration on manoeuvring around a barge, filled with stone and towing another behind it, coming from the opposite direction.

When she gave Grissel the bread, squashed in the middle where she'd clutched it to her chest as she ran, Grissel quickly turned from soft yellow to angry red. The bread was flung on the board and Grissel stood arms akimbo her mouth working hard. Ysabeau went limp, arms and head dangling like the rag doll the mistress had sewn for Samuel-Thomas. Then Johannes came. His mouth moved faster than Grissel's

Eyes alight, he flung his arm as though throwing a stone, he looked behind him with fear, he ran a few steps – all the time glancing from Grissel to Ysabeau. Ysabeau gazed on him with new respect that he should so defend her to Grissel... and include her in the explanation of that defence. Grissel stared at Ysabeau as Johannes finished his tale and Ysabeau nodded slowly.

The next day Grissel didn't ask Ysabeau to fetch the bread, praise be to the serene figure of the mother who gazed down upon them from every corner of this watery city. The mistress however did want Ysabeau following behind her carrying Samuel-Thomas when she went out. He was heavy in her arms and unusually passive, but he had been up since before first light. No one in the household knew this better than Ysabeau who slept on the truckle bed close by. His head drooped and soon he was asleep, face burrowed into her shoulder.

They were in the largest square of the city now before the cathedral with its great onion domes, recessed balconies and many carvings. The points of the spires thrusting skyward looked so delicate Ysabeau was surprised they withstood the strong winds which, on occasion, swept through the city during the high spring tides. There were people flowing out beneath its great arch, a shimmering white flowing with them. Ysabeau screwed up her eyes but could not determine if the light came from them or the candles lit within.

But they were not for inside anyway. Ysabeau was never now taken into these buildings with which the city abounded and which seemed to bring great serenity to those who entered them. The one time she'd gone to church she'd done something which had alarmed and upset the mistress and Grissel. She was by no means certain what it was but Grissel had placed her hand over Ysabeau's mouth and pinched Ysabeau's lips together, hard.

The mistress stood before the tower in the piazza and gazed up, silent and still. The colours of the metal circle upon it made Ysabeau's heart sing; white, deep blue of the night sky encircled with creatures made of gold. Above a door opened and the figures of three men made of black metal rotated out, gifts outstretched. The somnolent Samuel-Thomas jerked in her arms as though stung by a bee. His face grew red, mouth open so she could see the little white pearly teeth recently come through. The mistress leaned in close, stroking his head and pointing to the moving

figures but the little doors shut behind them and they were gone. He squirmed to get down. The mistress signalled her permission and, as soon as Ysabeau released him, he was off in that wild run on the tip of his toes, heedless of the peril of losing his mother and Ysabeau in the crowded square.

Before Ysabeau could re-capture him, he ran into the back of a small woman shuffling across the smooth stone paving. The woman dropped her basket and staggered arms flailing. Ysabeau grabbed Samuel-Thomas and lifted him kicking, into her arms. He was as slippery as the lamprey they sold in the market and which Ysabeau had once had to carry home in a sack, but she held on tight. The mistress came hurrying up, which she should not do in her condition big as she was with the next child.

Everything about this old woman was a tired grey...skin, clothes, her colour and most of all the air of quiet desperation that hung over her. Ysabeau was almost glad she had a resistant Samuel-Thomas to deal with; better than gazing upon such hopelessness. But the mistress knew her. Ysabeau could tell from the way she touched her on the arm and looked into her face, all concern for the old woman's well-being. Soon the mistress's soft yellow glow was overlaying the grey dreariness of the old woman, who looked hopefully up into the mistress's face.

Ysabeau knew who she was now; the mother of the boy who was to marry the master's sister. But that knowing didn't help for now the mistress was directing Ysabeau to return home with Samuel-Thomas. Alone. Ysabeau pretended not to understand the gestures but the mistress would not give up. In the end she turned Ysabeau around and gave a little impatient push in the direction of home. Did she not know Ysabeau couldn't be left on the streets without an escort and especially not with the precious child? But the habit of obedience was too ingrained for her to resist further... and she could not risk angering her mistress.

She set off, body curved around the struggling Samuel-Thomas and a prayer in her heart for the Mother of the street corners to watch over her.

Of course they found her. Three boys throwing stones at a pair of nightingales hanging in a cage outside an apothecary's shop and she knew them immediately. They were all smaller than her, scrawny and underfed; surely she should be able to fight them off? Surely they wouldn't attack when she was carrying an infant? But it was the infant who alerted them to her presence; squirming, mouth wide, fighting to be released from her tight grip.

They turned, eyes gleaming when they caught sight of her. She tried to still the fear, to show a grim façade – after all she'd once been a waif of the street too – but the habit of cringing was too ingrained. She drew back and they advanced, a white mist suffusing them. Not a pure white like the pureness of Johannes, nor a faded grey-white like the fearful old woman the mistress was escorting home, but a white of spite and malevolence. The white of evil spirits. They knew she was flawed, and yet she had enough to eat and a place of safety to lay her head at night. And they were whole and undamaged, but did not have the same.

She slunk back keeping her eyes on them, for it was fatal to take to her heels. And she couldn't run with Samuel-Thomas in her arms, might drop him. He had gone still, head nestled against her chest, feeling her fear.

One of the boys leapt forward with heart-stopping suddenness. Her eyes felt as though they would burst from her face with terror. Her back was against the wall now. She slid along it. Her tormentors advanced slowly, occasionally glancing to one another to see what their next move would be. The wall came to an end and she staggered backwards into an alleyway. Narrow and twisting, it was quiet here and she knew she'd made a mistake in allowing them to herd her away from the busy street, where someone might have intervened at the sight of a group of boys attacking a young woman carrying a child.

The first stone hit her on the leg. Perhaps they would aim low to avoid striking the baby. The second stone bruised the hand supporting Samuel-Thomas. They didn't care about the baby. She must turn her back to them and let them do what they willed while she walked away as fast as she could. But what if they knocked her to the ground? Eyes darting she watched their every move. One had a stone in hand poised to throw. She flinched awaiting the sting of pain. And then, inexplicably, he hesitated.

A hand touched her lightly on the shoulder and she glanced around to see the thin face and gangly body of Johannes. He was looking at the boys, who were waiting to see what he would do, no doubt assessing whether he posed any threat or could be as easily overcome as she. Looking up she could see Johannes's lips moving and the boys pulling back. But they didn't leave. Instead they huddled together, heads leaning in. Their colour was changing, the white fading.

Johannes stepped out from behind her hands spread wide. The boys took a step back. Johannes kept advancing. His colour of rich blue deepened and Ysabeau felt herself held under its protection. But her tormentors had halted. They drew apart, the ghostly white light around them growing strong once more. They had a plan, she just knew it. And Johannes wasn't much more than a lad himself, how could he overcome three?

She watched his every move and Samuel-Thomas, turning his head, watched too. Johannes's colour didn't falter. Instead it grew stronger, deeper. Johannes was very close to the boys now. They were edging around him, would have him surrounded if he didn't take care. He glanced back, inclining his head. He was telling her to flee while she had the chance. She hugged Samuel-Thomas tighter and he fought against her once more. She made herself relax her grip and the baby relaxed too. She took a few steps back, reluctant to leave Johannes alone... but what could she do?

There was a break in the alleyway now, opening into another piazza. The one with the garden. She could see the soft yellow of her sister's flower and somehow it gave her courage. The gate to the garden was ajar and she hurried to it. In she crept to lay Samuel-Thomas upon the grass beneath the yellow flowers. Suzanne would watch over him. He lay unmoving, entranced by the light patterning the leaves. She saw the gleam of a white stone and bent to pick it up, solid and weighty in her hand. Closing the gate gently behind her she ran.

They'd drawn close to Johannes now, the evil white of their power strong. One leapt upon his back, another hanging on his shoulder, trying to bring him down. The third was reaching for Johannes's flailing arm. She would start with him. She hefted the stone and hit him hard on the back of his head. He was turning to fend her off and then he was down. She could feel her own power now, what colour was she? Didn't know, didn't care, must help Johannes as he was helping her.

Johannes was on the ground and they were kicking him. He curled into a ball then as suddenly uncurled and kicked out, knocking the feet from under the second of his attackers who fell backwards. Ysabeau was on him with her stone. She lifted it high to smash into his face. Saw the fear and, at the last moment, hit his arm. Then his mouth opened wide, few teeth already blackening, and he punched out at her, a glancing blow, scrambled to his feet and ran, followed by his friend.

Johannes and she stood looking down at the remaining lad; hoped he wasn't dead. Then suddenly she was off, running; knew Suzanne's spirit couldn't linger long watching over Samuel-Thomas.

It was as she left it; the gate closed. No, it was locked. Ysabeau stood, face pressed against the wooden bars, hands gripping around them and shook and shook the gate. She rose on her tiptoes, head twisting from one side to the other but couldn't see her small charge. She pounded the gate with her fists. It was immovable as rock. She rested her face against it, then banged her forehead on the wood, and banged and banged.

A hand gripped her shoulder and turned her around. Johannes placed his finger against her lips and shook his head. She knew she was doing that thing which was so perturbing to people but it was beyond her capacity to stop. The fear and the shame leaked out. She sank to her knees, hid her face in her hands and rocked back and forth.

Johannes stroked her head; soft long strokes. It didn't help. She had lost the mistress's baby. The wee innocent was gone and it was Ysabeau's fault. Suzanne had left her, the great mother had left her, she was bereft.

Johannes tried to help her to her feet but she had no strength to hold herself up. He held her and after a moment, wrapped his arms tight around her. She leant into him but then knew she couldn't stand helpless. They must find the baby.

She pushed away from him and became aware there was a small crowd surrounding them, watching her curiously. She rocked as though she had the baby in her arms and pointed to the garden. Johannes vaulted over the gate and into the garden. She peered through the bars, could see him moving around. He disappeared from view and the branches of a cherry tree shook. The crowd drew close straining to see. She could feel the hot breath of the man behind on her neck. She glanced back at the people. There was purple wrapped around them, apart from one man who stood to the side, arms folded and the ugly grey mist around his head. He was not a good man. Did he have something to do with the baby's disappearance?

The crowd had gone still, faces intent. Then smiles were breaking out. Johannes appeared, an indignant Samuel-Thomas in his arms. He lifted the child high and a tall man reached up his arms to catch the child, passing him

immediately to Ysabeau. She rubbed her face against his small face, holding him tight tight. He patted her, then struggled to get down and run on his fat little legs. Ysabeau let out the breath she'd been holding.

Johannes held out his arms to take the lad but Ysabeau hesitated. Men didn't carry babies, apart from the master who would swing a chortling Samuel-Thomas in the air, but that was in private where no one but the family saw. Johannes lifted Samuel-Thomas out of her arms and the boy stopped wriggling. He cupped the child in one arm, hand securing him. Then he took Ysabeau's hand in his. She looked at their hands clasped together then shyly up at him. Their colours melded, a greenie blue, like the turquoise stone the mistress wore. Johannes gave a nod and they set out, through the smiling crowd for home.

To read more of Johannes and Ysabeau [please click here](#)

About VEH Masters

VEH Masters was born and brought up on a farm a few miles from St Andrews in Scotland. Her debut novel tells the story of the siege of St Andrews Castle in 1546 and closely follows the actual events.



The sequels are set in Antwerp and Venice respectively, and although she has no ties with either city it was great fun visiting them for research. She is currently working on book four of the series.

She's fascinated by the impact of momentous events on the lives of ordinary people.

For updates on her writing and research do sign up for her newsletter here.

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