

The Innocent

Posie Graeme-Evans

Published by Hodder &
Stoughton

Extract is copyright of the Author

Prelude



hat winter had bitten down hard and early, the ground almost ringing as the horses stumbled against frozen clods on the track leading to the forest.

It was late afternoon and great clouds, bellies heavy with snow, were building into the west, crowding out the last light of the day. The wind was rising, too, and the man on the big roan horse was anxious. His exhausted animal stumbled again, and as he jerked its head up with a curse his eyes scanned the face of the darkening forest. This was not a good place to stop, too exposed, but he had no choice; he would have to wait for the messenger.

Behind him the small party of mounted men came to a ragged halt around the curtained wagon; military discipline still held them but each face, and the state of their animals, told the same story. This had been a long, cold journey.

As the wagon lurched to a stop, a woman's white face appeared cautiously between the worn leather curtains: a strongly defined nose, prominent cheekbones, not beautiful but handsome, somewhere in her thirties. She clambered down onto the frozen ground, quickly covering nose and mouth with a red gauze veil — one note of colour in a white and black world. Dark was falling fast and the wind had turned to the east.

Trying not to run, she hurried towards the man scanning the forest in front of them, shivering convulsively as the cold cut to her skin even through her fur-lined cloak.

The horse and rider loomed above but the captain ignored her. 'Sir!' she spoke sharply, half panting from ... what was it? Fear. Warily the man looked down and the woman's words dried in her mouth as the hard eyes stared into hers. His insolence gave her courage. 'Sir ... the baby. My mistress needs a proper bed to give the child ...'

'What, madam? Give it life? Better it dies now — her, too.'

As he spoke there was a shout from the soldiers around the wagon, and they both heard, rather than saw, the horse and rider coming at a gallop out of the forest. The captain called strongly, 'Here, Peter, to me! Here! What did they say to you?'

Even angry as she was, Jehanne muttered, 'Thanks be Our Lady', as she hurried back through the gloom to the wagon. Now perhaps they might move on and make the hunting lodge whilst there was still time.

Her lips thinned as she clambered back into the wagon. That great oaf needn't think she was going to forget any of this. No, indeed — she was going to remember *everything*, from the cushions which had long since lost their stuffing, to the bearskin rugs which were old, foul with dust and nearly hairless. And not even a proper escort! Just let them get this child safely born and then she would see that look wiped off his sneering face!

'Where are you, sweeting? We'll be on our way again soon ... don't you fear.' Jehanne reached out in the darkness for her mistress, keeping up a steady stream of bright chatter as the heavy vehicle lurched on again. 'There now, where's that head of yours, just let me feel it — has the headache left you?'

Poor child. All her adult life Jehanne had helped birth babies, but this one had felt wrong from the first pains brought on by this dreadful journey. Of course she knew that very young first-time mothers often suffered greatly, but given the circumstances, and the danger, panic began to clamp her throat. The girl's flesh felt cold but her pulse had a fluttering speed which scared Jehanne profoundly. Suddenly the swollen shape in the dark, Alyce's body, convulsed and she screamed sharply.

'Ah come, mistress, lean on me,' Jehanne soothed. If only they would give her a lantern, if only the journey would end, but the wagon swayed and bucked on down the forest road, behind its four stoic bullocks. The

captain heard the girl scream again as he led his party deeper and deeper into the forest on their thankless errand. He hardened his heart. His business and that of his men was to bring the girl and her woman to their destination safely — and to do that he had to find speed or they would all be caught in the forest this night; fine work for a man of his background and experience.

And that was his last thought as the arrow cut through his chest and into his heart, which exploded. Carried by the force, his body dropped off the stallion and the horse, spooked by the sudden smell of blood, plunged riderless into the darkness between the trees. The five soldiers in the party scattered, trying to find shelter from the arrows raining down from the men in the branches above.

There was no time for thought. Jehanne heard the screams of men and horses, felt the wagon pitch to a stop. Acting by instinct, she bundled the large fur rug around her barely conscious mistress and found the strength to pull Alyce out of the back of the wagon and push them both at a stumbling run into the forest.

Behind her, the soldiers had rallied, giving Jehanne precious seconds to drag the semi-delirious girl away from the carnage and into the cold dark between the trees.

As she half carried Alyce deeper and deeper into the forest, away from the noise and terror, Jehanne forced herself to think, *think hard*. If they were to survive, never mind the child, they had to hide, very fast. The soldiers might hold off the attackers for a while and in the confusion, maybe they had made their run undetected, but at the back of her mind she could hear a voice saying, very clearly: *It's the baby they want. They'll not care who dies.*

Terrified, she heard renewed shouting: the attackers had discovered the wagon was empty. She'd have to make Alyce run now, really run, and Lady Mary help them.

It was then she felt the hand of God, for at the moment she uttered her prayer, Jehanne heard the jingle of a bit, and turned to see the captain's horse nervously cropping forage two paces away. Sobbing with relief, as gently as she could she eased Alyce to the ground and, heart in throat, stretched her hand to the dangling rein of the destrier. The horse balked and threw his head up but Jehanne had found the leather and hung on desperately, whispering all the while, 'Gentle, gentle.'

Frantic with terror, she heard men blundering closer through the trees, calling out to each other, as she dragged the horse to the girl and forced Alyce up into the saddle. She scrambled up behind and, with one foot in a stirrup and her kirtle up around her thighs, kicked the stallion on with a great jolting thump in the ribs. Startled, the horse leaped forward, nearly unseating them both as it ran blindly into the trees.

It was a wild ride, branches ripped past their faces nearly sweeping them both off the animal's back, but somehow Jehanne held on to the horse and the girl as she tried to guide the animal. The stallion plunged on and then, under the animal's laboured breathing, the thudding hooves, the men's voices disappeared — they were alone, careering through the darkness of the wild wood.

Jehanne let the horse run for a time to be sure they'd lost their pursuers, and then with all her strength, she hauled on the stallion's mouth to slow him. This was a destrier, however — a knight's horse, seventeen hands high with great solid legs, hooves like buckets and a back built for carrying an armoured man. He hardly felt the hands tugging so desperately at the bit as he settled into a lumbering gallop on an overgrown trail through the trees.

In front of Jehanne, Alyce groaned deeply as she felt the gush and splash of liquid flood out of her body — her waters had broken. The horse smelled the blood and panicked: putting his head down, he flew faster and faster over the broken ground. Jehanne knew the only way she could stop the horse was to turn him in a tight circle — a mad thing to try, racing between such massive trunks. No time for conscious thought, with all her strength she yanked down hard on the left rein as the girl screamed and screamed again.

Unnerved by the noise, the horse broke his stride and stumbled. It was enough. Once more Jehanne wrenched the rein, savagely cutting the horse's mouth with the bit, and the stallion faltered around to the left, just missing a huge down-hanging branch. Now Jehanne dragged at both reins together and, arms screaming with the effort, forced the frightened animal to halt.

Before Jehanne could prevent it, Alyce slid to the ground and lay groaning, too close to the horse's dancing hooves. Jehanne forced the animal back and away by main force and, leaping down, quickly wound the reins around a branch and ran to the girl.

Alyce keened like a snared animal as every second breath became a scream. 'I'm here, my precious, shush now, shush now, little Alyce,' Jehanne murmured. But the birth was not going well. Strain as she might, the girl's frail body, caught up in the bloodied folds of her velvet kirtle, could not expel the child from her belly.

What light there was showed the staring, white face contorted in an agonised rictus and Jehanne knew that if either mother or child were to be saved, she would have to help the baby out. Praying fervently to Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin and patron saint of women in labour, Jehanne wiped her hands on her surcoat and then, as gently as she could, slid her fingers into the girl, trying to feel for the head of the child, just as she had seen her father's chief shepherd do on cold nights when the ewes would not bear.

Alyce was fading further into delirium but Jehanne persisted, trying to will life into the girl: 'Push' now for me, Alyce; come, one more hearty push — *help* me child.' But Alyce did not respond. Fiercely wiping tears away, Jehanne slapped the girl, hard, her hand leaving a red mark on the white skin. 'Alyce! Push for me, for your baby. Push!' And as the poor girl's body made one convulsive response, Jehanne felt the crown of the baby's head nudge her hands. 'The babe's here — push, push down now — God's blood — *push!*'

With a wrenching wail, the girl half sat up and pushed the child into Jehanne's hands — white and covered in wax, mucus and blood, but alive — crying loudly. It was a girl of good size and weight, the principal reason for her mother's long labour. Pulling her surcoat over her head, oblivious to the cold, Jehanne wrapped the baby in the sleeveless fur-lined garment and placed her on Alyce's belly. The cord was still pulsing and the afterbirth had not yet come away: time enough later to sever the baby's last physical link to her mother. Jehanne then turned her attention back to Alyce. In despair, she saw there was nothing to be done. The girl was haemorrhaging into the earth — and the flood would only increase when the afterbirth came down. She would die.

The baby whimpered, and with great sadness, Jehanne unlaced the top of her mistress' dress, propped the girl against her in a sitting position and placed the infant to Alyce's breast, smiling slightly as she saw the snuffling urgency with which the baby sucked.

Slowly, Alyce opened her eyes and Jehanne's heart turned over as she

saw the girl fasten her gaze on the baby's nestled head: the look of passionate love transforming her face with a glimmer of some inner light. With infinite gentleness, Alyce arranged the folds of the surcoat around the child so that she was better covered, and tried to speak: 'Jehanne, in my pocket ... scissors ...' It was barely a whisper.

Jehanne fumbled in the little drawstring bag that was slung from Alyce's slender, plaited belt and found a tiny pair of scissors — gold handled with chased silver blades designed for fine needlework, and very rare and valuable. Quickly undoing the belt, Jehanne used it to tie off the baby's cord, which, in the uncertain light seemed to have stopped pulsing, and, taking a deep breath, she snipped through it.

At that moment the girl gave a gentle sigh, and as if something had broken inside her, the afterbirth slid out in a great rush of blood. Jehanne knew then, even as she called out her name, that Alyce had died, the baby still tugging at her breast.

Sitting there in a daze of tears with the dead girl propped in her arms, Jehanne felt rather than saw someone was standing in front of her; she flinched as the figure held up a lanthorn and flicked the horn light-shield aside so that light poured onto her face.

'My name is Deborah; I am here to help. Do not be afraid.'

Perhaps it was the unexpected light, perhaps the kindness in the stranger's eyes, but Jehanne did not hesitate. Gently she detached the baby from her mother's breast, closed Alyce's eyes and kissed her still-warm brow.

'Bless you and keep you,' she whispered. 'I'll pray for you, Alyce.'

There was nothing else to be done. The cries of the child grew fainter and fainter as the two women stole away in the dark, night-hung forest, leaving the dead girl behind, alone amongst the trees.

Part
One

The Girl

Chapter One



he gluttony of Shrovetide was forgotten in the privations of Lent as the ice on the river broke up. The Thames swelled with melt-water from the deep west as London stretched awake from the long cold sleep of winter; snowdrops were budding in the fields outside the walls and the people of the city were impatient for spring and Holy Week, for after that came May Day — and warmth!

Anne was too cold and too excited to be tired from her long journey. It was hard to remember the silent winter forest she had left — was it only six nights ago? — amongst the clamour and press of people contained within this gigantic mess of buildings.

At dawn on the seventh day she and Deborah walked over London Bridge, part of a noisy crowd all eager to enter the city to transact their business. It was slow going as they tried to hold a place for themselves on the broken stone pavement of the bridge, hugging the walls beneath the overhanging houses and shops which jettied out above them; it was the only way to avoid being splashed by riders and carts from the roadway's sloppy combination of mud, animal urine and dung.

Everywhere Anne looked, her senses were assaulted by the smell and the noise. She had never seen so many beggars before with their

pathetic rag-bound feet, their open sores and mutilated bodies — or been close enough to a strange man's mouth to smell rotting teeth as he called out to friends amongst the crowd. Anne was not frightened by disability — very few people escaped childhood without scars and injuries of some sort — but here every third person seemed malformed in some way. Deborah told her that many were veterans from the late wars at home and in France; that puzzled Anne

'Does no-one look after them? What about the king?' she asked.

Deborah's reply was swept away as yet another party of armed and mounted men cursed their way through the crush, forcing the people in the roadway to jump from the hooves or be trampled. Anne was astonished by their rudeness, the callous way the riders laid about the people with whips to clear space for their horses. Were ordinary people to be treated like animals, just because they looked poor?

Before today she never thought of herself as poor, yet when she looked at the Londoners, she saw that their own clothes, the city clothes that Deborah had made with so much careful love, were simple and drab compared to the rich jewelled velvets, the sumptuous furs and silks on the backs of so many men and women riding proudly into the city.

Where they lived in the forest coin-money was rare. That didn't much matter because there was little to buy. You grew your own food, made your own cloth, sewed your own clothes so there was nothing to be envious about in other people's lives, all had much the same; but London was a new world and Anne found herself covetous, for the first time in her life, of the pretty things others had.

Even worse than the way people behaved towards one another, however, was the reek of this place; the city smelled like a dung heap. The stench of animal excreta was compounded by the unseen fog of acrid human sweat trapped in winter's unwashed wool on the bodies all around them.

She, who was used to the clean smell of the forest, and the purity of untrampled snow, had to force herself to breathe — there was no escape. Breathe in and get used to it. And try not to notice that men she did not know looked at her boldly; their eyes roaming her body to see its shape under her mantle; one man even snatched back her hood to see her face. He laughed at her confusion — and her spirit — when she slapped his hand away.

After that Anne became terrified she would lose sight of Deborah, so like a child she held fast to a piece of her foster-mother's cloak as the older woman patiently led her towards the farther end of the bridge up ahead.

On the bridge itself, the buildings were huddled so close together that the girl could not see the river below, but she heard it roaring around the great piers beneath her feet; heard the groaning of the ice as it was broken by the raging water. In that moment she was overwhelmed with fear.

What if the bridge, mighty as it was, should break under the weight of all the people and all the buildings and they were cast down into the rolling water below? As if in answer to her unspoken question, Deborah had turned and looked at her, smiling confidently.

'It will take more than melt-water to tear this old bridge down. Don't fear, small one. Another hour will see us there. Just walk as close to me as you can.'

But the noise of the city was overwhelming, too. It flowed around Anne with such intensity, she could feel it on her body like a physical buffet. She'd first heard it on the previous day, even before they'd reached the walls of the city and the convent of the Poor Clares where they had spent the night in the strangers' dormitory. Then it was something muttering on the wind which came and went as they'd walked the muddy roads towards the city — a resonant buzzing hum unlike any sound the girl had ever heard before. Fancifully, as she had lain awake on the scratchy straw pallets amongst the other restlessly sleeping women in the strangers' dormitory, she'd thought it was the voice of some great beast that was never quite stilled, even in the darkest hours of the night. Then she had felt happy and excited to be going to the city.

Now as she followed Deborah across the bridge, and looked up to check the clouds to see what the day would bring, she saw only a small patch of sky above her head between the buildings, and she was engulfed in choking sadness.

For all of her nearly fifteen years she had lived amongst the trees of their forest, hers and Deborah's, but there'd always been the sky and the clouds above their little mud and wattle house.

In the warm weather when she sat on the thatch of the highest part of the roof, Anne could see the weather coming and she could see where the

forest ended and the straggling village at the edge of their domain began. It had always been quiet in their clearing except for the wind and the calls of birds, or the cough of deer in the depths of the trees. But now the enormous voice of this foreign place was all around, in her head, hardly allowing her to think.

Now, very soon, she and Deborah would part and she would be left alone here in this buzzing, booming, reeking people-hive.

And all because of last Samhain, the feast to celebrate the time when the gates between the worlds were open and winter began. As usual they had joined the villagers on the common land outside their little cluster of wattle and clay houses, and contributed to the feast with good black puddings from the pig they had raised through the last year and just slaughtered; it was blood month, the time when animals which would not be fed through the winter were killed, like their pig. And as the last of the summer beer had flowed, Deborah had pleased the villagers, though not their priest, by future-telling for all those who'd wanted her to. He was a good man, their priest, and tried hard to win his people from their dark, old ways but he'd given up with Samhain. It had an ancient force, this long day of gluttony and drunkenness, a force stronger than any sermon he could preach to them. So, like a sensible pastor who had the long-term good of his people at heart, he joined them at the feast hoping, by his presence, to curb the wildest excesses. However it was common at Samhain for prophecy to be given and heard with respect, and this time Anne had asked Deborah for a future-telling as well.

'You're too young. This is not a game, Anne. The priest will not like it, you know that.' Deborah had taken the girl to one side, away from the long trestle-board crowded with shouting, well-fed, happy people. The older woman's expression was severe, and that puzzled the girl.

'Why do you want the scrying?'

'Only to see if I may have a husband, too. You seemed happy to tell the others ...'

Deborah had turned away when she caught the priest's eye, his shake of the head. Now she looked back towards their home in the forest. It was as if she was listening for something, searching for something amongst the silent trees, something that was far, far away. Then she

sighed deeply and nodded, being careful the priest did not see. 'That is fair. Sit here.'

Anne settled herself against the trunk of an oak, burrowing into the dry brown leaves of last autumn, whilst Deborah went to fetch her scrying bowl from the trestle-board. There was a little warmth left in the fast westering sun and, filled with good meat and good beer, the girl had begun to doze.

Deborah's voice had brought her back. 'Here, child. Look into the water, tell me what you see ...'

That startled the girl awake. 'Me? Will you not do the scrying, Deborah?'

Her foster-mother's voice was pitched low now, soothing, almost humming. 'Look into the bowl, Anne ... concentrate. Just look into the water ... what do you see? What is there for you ...'

Perhaps it was the last of a dream still clogging her mind, perhaps it was the tone of Deborah's voice but the girl felt warm and secure — a child about to drift away to dreams in a warm bed as storms raged outside on a winter's night ...

'There is a face ...'

'Describe what you see.' Again Deborah's voice had that strange humming tone.

Anne hesitated then her face cleared in relief. 'Look. There he is. I see him. I can't see his eyes, though ... that's because of the battle helm. Oh!' The girl then sat up so quickly she knocked the salt-glazed pottery bowl out of her own hands and the water spilled all over her dress. 'Blood! Blood everywhere!'

Her scream had cut through the buzz of the feast — the villagers fell silent, staring at the two women under the great oak. Deborah waved cheerfully. 'Too much good ale! And a young head!' she had called, and laughter washed away the moment — uneasy though it was: everyone knew Samhain was an uncanny time.

Defiantly Deborah had locked glances with the priest as she'd helped Anne to her feet.

'Do not worry, father, she's only tired. It's been a long feast.'

From that moment things had changed.

Later, Deborah told the girl that with the spring it would be time for her to go to London and into service with a pious household. There she

could complete the education that had been begun in the forest, for Deborah had not more to teach Anne in their small, safe world. The girl had cried herself to sleep for many nights but Deborah was implacable, though it broke both their hearts. And so now, miserably, weighted with a sense of the abandonment to come, the girl followed her foster-mother deeper and deeper into the city until they stood before the closed door of a great, dark house.