Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Fallen Grace

Written by

Mary Hooper

Published by

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Fallen Grace

Also by Mary Hooper

Historical fiction

At the Sign of the Sugared Plum
Petals in the Ashes
The Fever and the Flame
(a special omnibus edition of the two books above)
The Remarkable Life and Times of Eliza Rose
At the House of the Magician
By Royal Command
The Betrayal

Contemporary fiction

Megan
Megan 2
Megan 3
Holly
Amy
Chelsea and Astra: Two Sides of the Story
Zara

Fallen Grace

MARY HOOPER

BLOOMSBURY

LONDON BERLIN NEW YORK

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin and New York

First published in Great Britain in June 2010 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

Text copyright © Mary Hooper 2010
Illustrations copyright © Siân Bailey 2010
The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7475 9913 5

FSC
Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources

Cert no. SGS - COC - 2061
www.fsc.org
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, Bungay, Suffolk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.bloomsbury.com/childrens
www.maryhooper.co.uk

For Richard, with love

Contents

The interment of the late Susannah Solent
will take place on Monday 8th June 1861
at THE LONDON NECROPOLIS, BROOKWOOD.

Those mourners wishing to accompany the corpse to its final resting place should assemble in the Necropolis Company's first-class waiting room at Waterloo. The train will depart at 11.30 a.m.

Chapter One

Grace, holding on tightly to her precious burden, found the station entrance without much difficulty. The Necropolis Railway ran, just as Mrs Smith the midwife had said, on its own special line from Waterloo to Brookwood Cemetery in the county of Surrey, and it was at the London station, just before eleven o'clock, that the newly bereaved gathered, all dressed in the first stage of deep mourning. The few women whose nervous tension allowed them to attend wore heavy veils, their black crêpe gowns unrelieved by any bright jewellery, buttons or fancy trimmings, while the men wore top hats with a mourning band, formal frock coats and black bombazine cravats. All were waiting for the train which would take them and their loved ones into the countryside, to the

great garden of sleep at Brookwood. Here, away from the fogs and filth of London, their dear departed could rest in peace among pines, roses and evergreens.

Grace stood back a little, watching as mourners approached the window of the booking office to buy their tickets. She had never travelled on a train before and, feeling timid and uneasy, wanted to make sure she did everything correctly. When almost everyone else had passed through the ticket office and gone to their relevant waiting rooms, she went to the window.

'Brookwood, please,' she asked. 'A return fare.'

The clerk issuing tickets looked up. 'First, second or third class, miss?' he asked in the solicitous tone that employees of the Necropolis Railway had been asked to assume.

'Third class,' Grace said, proffering the two shillings that the midwife had given her.

'You're not with a funeral party? It's just you travelling?'

Grace nodded. 'Just me. I . . . I'm visiting my mother's grave,' she lied.

The clerk pushed a thick, black-edged ticket towards her. 'Then kindly proceed to the appropriate waiting room. You'll be shown where to go,' he said. 'May I remind you that the train leaves at half past eleven precisely. Good day to you.'

Grace took the ticket, stammered her thanks and left the window.

There were three waiting rooms, one for each class,

and the people in them – although all in black, of course – were dressed according to their positions in life. Thus the people in second class were clothed neither as elegantly nor as formally as those in the first class, and some of those people in the third class, to judge by their patched garments and dishevelled appearance, seemed little more than paupers. Grace, her garments faded and mended, was able to mingle among the latter quite easily. Bearing their own grief as well as they could, none of the other mourners looked at Grace, a slight, pale girl looking younger than her fifteen years, who kept her eyes to the ground and held a small, linen-wrapped bundle under her arm. If anyone had wondered what it was she carried so close, they might have guessed it to be a spare pair of shoes in case the grounds of the cemetery were muddy, or an extra shawl against the sky suddenly clouding over.

At twenty past eleven precisely, the various parties started moving out of the waiting rooms to board the train, with first-class passengers being bowed to private carriages by representatives of their funeral companies. They boarded first, so they wouldn't be offended by having to mingle with – or even see – third-class passengers. The coffins of their relatives would also travel apart from the others, so they wouldn't have to suffer the ignominy of being placed with lower classes.

Once all the live passengers were safely on board, the matter of loading the coffins into the hearse-carriage was dealt with in as discreet a manner as possible, so as

not to cause undue distress. Those not travelling with a coffin but who were going to the cemetery to tend a grave or mark an anniversary filed into a separate carriage, and Grace joined them. Someone made a remark about it being pleasant that the sun was shining that day and there was a murmur of agreement all round, but Grace didn't look up or even think of contributing a comment of her own, so occupied was she with her own devastating circumstances.

After all, what difference would it make to her if it rained or snowed – or indeed, the world were swallowed up by fog and no one ever saw sunlight again? She had given birth to a child, and the child had died. At that moment, nothing else was of the slightest importance.

The train started right on time with a tremendous roaring noise and rattling, amid gusts of steam and smoke which enveloped the carriage like a cloud. From further down the train a bewildered shout of 'What the devil?!' was heard, and some women screamed in fright, for Grace was by no means the only one who hadn't travelled on a train before. Startled by the hissing steam and noise, she jumped to her feet, only to find herself the centre of attention. She sat down again quickly.

She knew that the journey would last about an hour and had been told exactly what to do: once the train was under way, she was to go into the van where all the coffins rested, choose one (not a pauper's coffin, the midwife had instructed, but one in the first-class

section, made of good wood with brass handles), lift a corner of the lid and put her precious bundle inside. That was all. Once the train reached the cemetery, the coffins would be unloaded from the train and their lids screwed down permanently before being carried to their final resting places, where private services and ceremonials would be held.

If Grace was quick, the midwife had said, then no one would know that there had been a small addition to one of the coffins – and treating the dead child thus would be far, far better than taking it to a paupers' burial ground in London.

'I always recommend it for young girls like you who've suffered such a loss,' the midwife had gone on to say. 'And afterwards you must forget it ever happened. Never tell a soul about the child – no, not even if you marry. You are a fallen woman, and no one can forgive such a sin.'

Grace had tried to protest that it had not been a sin on *her* part; she had not wished nor invited the incident which had caused her to have a child, but Mrs Smith had told her not to speak any more about it, said that she would forget about it quicker that way.

As the train settled into a rhythm and the stink and mire of London gradually gave way to the sweeter green of the countryside, Grace looked out of the window, unable to stop her thoughts turning to the events of the past few days.

*

The last stage of her labour, though painful, had been blessedly quick – but that was mostly because for hours she'd denied to herself that she was in any real pain. For months before *that*, she'd denied being with child at all, and indeed no one looking at her could have guessed it until the last couple of weeks. Only then had she seen people exchanging glances and winking at each other, or heard catcalls of 'There's a gal as wants a husband in a hurry!' or 'That's not beer what's made her belly swell!' when going past a tavern on a Saturday night. She'd told Lily, of course, but had no idea how much someone like her sister could understand about babies and the process of getting them.

Coming close to her time (how she knew this she couldn't say, for she had no idea how long a pregnancy should last), Grace began to search for someone who would help her with the birth, for she knew it to be a matter involving not only a deal of pain, but also blood and linens and bowls of water. Earlier on, she'd asked advice from a girl who was obviously in the same situation and had been given the name of a midwife, but the woman had turned Grace down, saying she was too young and the whole matter was distasteful; she wouldn't have anything to do with bringing a bastard child into the world. She'd also gone to enquire at the big lying-in hospital at Westminster Bridge, but had been faced with a notice stating that only married women would be considered for admission, and they

should bring in their marriage certificates as proof of status.

Grace, therefore, had to leave it to fate to decide how and where she would give birth and, very early the previous morning, the pains coming ever more frequently, she'd given Lily instructions for the following day, then managed to walk to the nearest hospital at Charing Cross. She was turned away from there, but was fortunate enough to speak to a sympathetic nurse who told her to go to Berkeley House in Westminster. 'Where they will take those who are fallen,' she'd been told in a whisper.

Berkeley House – an ugly building of grimy stone and shuttered windows – was only a short distance away, but by the time she'd reached there, the pains were coming so close together that, had they not agreed to accept her, Grace thought that she might have given birth on the doorstep. A notice outside stated that only unmarried women about to deliver their *first* child would be admitted, and gave a stark reminder of how perilous an undertaking childbearing was by adding:

Patients being admitted should ensure that, in the case of tragedy, they are able to pay for a funeral. No responsibility will be taken by the hospital for burial fees for mother or child.

Without, thankfully, any questions being asked, Grace was taken to a ward with six beds, each separated from the next by a limp cotton curtain and each with a wooden

box standing in for a cradle at its foot. Save for these, there was no furniture or decoration in the room, bar a large monochrome picture of Queen Victoria.

Grace sank on to the end bed, hearing two babies crying, someone moaning and a woman calling upon God to help her in her hour of anguish. Mingled with these was the calm voice of a midwife going from bed to bed admonishing, commanding or speaking persuasively to the women in labour.

'Now, Mary, we are not far off,' she'd said on examining Grace. On protesting that *Grace* was her name, she was told that they called all their girls Mary. The midwife, in turn, had to be called Mrs Smith.

'Have you things prepared for the child?' Mrs Smith had asked. 'Have you a sleeping space out of the way of draughts and some clean cotton sheets that can be boiled?'

Grace had merely shaken her head.

'Have you clothes for it? Napkins and shawls? Vests and gowns?' Mrs Smith persisted. 'These things don't just arrive with the child, you know! Haven't you given any thought as to its wants and needs?'

Grace turned her face to the wall. She had not, in spite of her size, in spite of her rudimentary knowledge of bodily functions, in spite of what had happened nine months ago, *really* believed that she was expecting a child. How had such a thing happened? Surely she should have had some say in the matter?

The midwife tutted. 'Where do you live, child?'

'I have a room in Mrs Macready's lodging house at Seven Dials,' Grace had answered between pains.

'God help us – *there*?' Mrs Smith had shaken her head. 'In the rookeries?'

'It's a clean room,' Grace said defensively. 'I share only with my sister.'

'Have you any family? Are your parents aware of this coming infant? Have you applied to any charities to take you in? God help you, child, have you enough money to pay for a funeral if the worst happens to either of you?'

Grace, not wanting to reply to any of these questions, anticipated a pain and screwed up her face in readiness.

When it passed, the midwife asked, 'Does the father of the child know about it? Will he aid you? Is he – may God spare us – *married*?'

'He doesn't know,' Grace whispered. 'Nor will he ever.'

'So you have no one to tend you after lying in, and no one to welcome the child, nor to help you with its upbringing?'

Grace shook her head. She had never thought of it becoming *real*, one of those red-faced and screaming bundles that poor women tied on to their backs when they went out working.

'For the Lord's sake, are you just having this child as a prop to go a-begging with?' asked the midwife suddenly.

'No, I am not!' Grace replied with as much indignation as she could muster.

The pains grew stronger then, and closer together, and at one stage Mrs Smith gave Grace some strong salts to sniff which made her feel so lightheaded that she swooned into a state close to unconsciousness, although the pains still wracked her. When the effect of these wore off and she properly came to herself again, the room had darkened and the midwife had gone to tend a girl lying two beds away. Wearily, Grace heaved herself forward to look into the box at the foot of the bed.

It was empty.

Grace called out to Mrs Smith and after a moment she left her other charge and came over. She had a soft, conciliatory look on her face, and stroked Grace's hair as she spoke. ''Tis a sorrowful thing, but for the best,' she said.

'What happened? Where's the baby?'

'Ah. 'Tis sad to tell you this, my love, but the child died.'

There was a long, long silence when, to her surprise, tears fell down Grace's cheeks unchecked. She had hardly imagined it as a real, living baby, she thought wonderingly, so why was it so devastating that it was dead?

'What was it?' she asked at last.

'A boy, bless his heart.'

'Did he live at all?'

Mrs Smith shook her head. 'Stillborn. Never drew breath.'

Grace sank back on the mattress. 'Was it something I did wrong – when I was carrying him?'

'No, darling. 'Tis just a thing that happens sometimes with young girls – your body wasn't ready to bear it. It's for the best, I'm thinking. You're but a child yourself, with no one to care for you. The baby would have died this first winter anyway. Seven Dials is no place to raise a child.'

'But *dead* . . .'

'Never lived,' the midwife corrected. She pushed a lock of hair behind Grace's ear. 'You're very young. You'll have other babies in good time. You'll forget this sadness.'

'Can I . . . ?' As she began the question, she wasn't sure what she wanted the answer to be. But the midwife had already anticipated her.

'Best not to look at him,' she said briskly. 'I always advise against it. Just think of it as a dream, a story . . . something that never really happened. It's easier got over that way.'

Grace had begun to cry again.

''Tis for the best, I say. Now sleep and rest yourself overnight and you'll be recovered and on your way in no time at all.'

And indeed, after a night's sleep and a bowl of meat and boiled potatoes paid for by the Society for the Rehabilitation of Destitute Women and Girls, Grace was asked to relinquish her space at Berkeley House for

the next inmate. But before doing so, she was handed a well-wrapped bundle and told of a wonderful garden cemetery in the countryside.

'I don't do this for all the lasses,' the midwife had said, handing over two coins, 'but I feel remarkably sorry for you.'

Grace stared at her.

'These shillings are the fare for you to take this little burden out of London, for nearly all the London churchyards are full up and closed now, and you wouldn't wish the babe to lie uncoffined in a pauper's pit, would you?'

Grace shook her head, unable to bear the thought.

'No. So you must go to Brookwood.'

'What's that?'

'It's like a wonderful garden, with trees and flowers and statues. When you think about your poor child, you'll be able to imagine him there with beautiful stone angels watching over him.' Grace managed to smile a little at this, and the midwife smiled, too. It was as she'd thought: the burial of the child, the ritual to be completed, would help the mourning process. 'And when you have buried him,' she added, 'then you must start your life again . . .'

*

'*Start again* . . .' Grace murmured, recalling this conversation. Then she realised that, becoming drowsy from

the rocking motion of the train, she'd spoken the words aloud.

'Are you all right, child?' There was a man sitting alongside her wearing a shabby frock coat and battered black top hat.

Grace nodded and clutched at her bundle.

'You're very young to be travelling on this train alone. Is it a member of your family who's passed away?'

Grace nodded and, making a gesture as if to say she was too grief-stricken to speak, stared out of the window as the countryside slipped by.

Start again, the rhythm of the train's wheels seemed to be saying. *Start again* . . . If she could just get over this day and begin anew, then she would try to make something of her life. She would endeavour to make a different and better life for herself and Lily.

The train shrieked as it went under a bridge and the noise brought Grace out of her reverie. She had to find a last resting place for her child . . .

Some might have recoiled from this duty, fearing the thought of entering a dwelling place of the dead, but Grace had suffered enough misery in her life to know that it was only the living who could hurt you; that one had nothing to fear from those who'd passed to the other side. Tying her shawl more securely about her head, she opened the carriage door and went into the corridor. All was quiet, for each unit of mourners was secluded within its own private carriage (while in the

last, the representatives of the funeral companies were sitting together exchanging stories whilst enjoying a nip of whisky).

The train roared, shook and swayed as it rounded a corner, and Grace grasped the window frame and waited until it straightened on its course. Then she pushed open the door to the van containing the coffins and went in.

There were no windows and the only light was from two candles burning in a sconce on the wall, so it took a moment for Grace's eyes to readjust. When they did, she saw that the van was divided into three sections and each of these contained rows of narrow iron shelves upon which the coffins rested. Even in the poor light it was easy to distinguish between rich and poor, for the third-class caskets were of matchwood, with hand-written cards stating the occupier's name and date of demise, while those of the first class were of highly polished wood with handles, trims and engraved plaques in brass or silver.

Grace went to the first-class section and read some of these plaques, which listed the corpse's accreditations like a calling card for Heaven: *Sebastian Taylor, devoted Husband and Father; Maud Pickersley, worked to improve the conditions of those less fortunate; Jessy Rennet, lived a life of Piety and Hope.*

The train's brakes gave a squeal and it slowed a little as if it was nearing its destination, and Grace surveyed the coffins quickly and anxiously. How to choose? She

wanted her dead child to be placed with a woman, of course, someone who sounded kindly and was from a good family. She paused in front of a box of white oak containing *The mortal remains of Miss Susannah Solent, Defender of the Weak, Princess of the Poor*.

Miss Susannah Solent. There was no indication as to her age and she was obviously not a mother herself, but she sounded the sort of woman who would be kind to a child and give it shelter.

She must act quickly! She lifted a corner of the lid of the pale-wood casket containing the body of Susannah Solent and, without looking inside, slipped in her bundle.

She felt that some sort of formal farewell was called for and murmured, 'May you sleep content and one day may we be reunited', and then moved quickly back into the corridor, dabbing her eyes.