

What Christian Authors are Saying about Grace Livingston Hill:

Grace Livingston Hill, often referred to as the “Queen of Christian Romance,” has given millions of readers timeless Christian novels, offering inspiration, romance, and adventure. The simple message in each of her books reminds us that God has the answer to all our questions.

—Wanda E. Brunstetter, *New York Times* bestselling author

I’ve long been a fan of Grace Livingston Hill. Her romance and attention to detail has always captivated me—even as a young girl. I’m excited to see these books will continue to be available to new generations and highly recommend them to readers who haven’t yet tried them. And for those of you like me who have read the books, I hope you’ll revisit the stories and fall in love with them all over again.

—Tracie Peterson, award-winning, bestselling author of the *Song of Alaska* and *Striking a Match* series

Grace Livingston Hill’s books are a treasured part of my young adult years. There was such bedrock faith to them along with the fun. Her heroines were intrepid yet vulnerable. Her heroes were pure of heart and noble (unless they needed to be reformed of course). And the books were often adventures. Just writing this makes me want to hunt down and read again a few of my favorites.

—Mary Connealy, Carol Award-winning author of *Cowboy Christmas* and the *Lassoed in Texas* series

Grace Livingston Hill books were a big part of my life, from the time I was a teenager and onward. My mother loved her books and shared them with me and my sisters. We always knew we could find an engaging, uplifting story between the covers. And her stories are still enjoyable and encouraging. It’s hard to pick a favorite, but *The Girl from Montana* and *Marcia Schuyler* are two of my favorites. Terrific stories!

—Susan Page Davis, author of *The Ladies’ Shooting Club* and *Prairie Dreams* series

The hero, in Grace Livingston Hill’s timeless romantic novels, is always a hero. The heroine is always a strong woman who stands up for her beliefs. He is always handsome; she is always beautiful. And an inviting message of faith is woven throughout each story without preaching. These enduring stories will continue to delight a new generation of readers—just as they did for our great-grandmothers.

—Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author of the *Lancaster County Secret* series

As a young reader just beginning to know what romance was all about, I was introduced to Grace Livingston Hill's books. She created great characters with interesting backgrounds and then plopped them down into fascinating settings where they managed to get into romantic pickles that kept me reading until the love-conquers-all endings. Her romance-filled stories showed this young aspiring writer that yes, love can make the fictional world go round.

—Ann H. Gabhart, award-winning author

My grandmother was an avid reader, and Grace Livingston Hill's books lined her shelves for the years of my childhood and adolescence. Once I dipped into one of them, I was hooked. Years of reading Hill's stories without a doubt influenced my own desire to become a storyteller, and it's with great fondness that I remember many of her titles.

—Tracy L. Higley, author of *Garden of Madness*

If you've enjoyed the classic works of writers like Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer, it is way past time for you to discover the inspirational stories of Grace Livingston Hill!

—Anna Schmidt, award-winning author of the Women of Pinecraft series

Ah, Grace Livingstone Hill! Can any other writer compare? Her lyrical, majestic tone, her vivid descriptions. . .they melt the heart of readers from every generation. Some of my fondest memories from years gone by involve curling up in my mother's chair and reading her Grace Livingston Hill romances. They swept me away to places unknown and reminded me that writers—especially writers of faith—could truly impact their world.

—Janice Hanna Thompson, author of the Weddings by Bella series

Grace Livingston Hill's stories are like taking a stroll through a garden in the spring: refreshing, fragrant, and delightful—a place you'll never want to leave.

—MaryLu Tyndall, Christy nominee and author of the Surrender to Destiny series

Enduring stories of hope, triumph over adversity, and true sacrificial love await every time you pick up a Grace Livingston Hill romance.

—Erica Vetsch, author of *A Bride's Portrait of Dodge City, Kansas*

Grace
Livingston
Hill

*America's Best-Loved
Storyteller*

THE PRODIGAL GIRL



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

© 2012 by Grace Livingston Hill

Print ISBN 978-1-61626-655-4

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-60742-772-8

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-60742-773-5

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Cover design: Faceout Studio, www.faceoutstudio.com

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1

1920s

Briardale, Pennsylvania

As soon as the letter came that practically promised the contract for which he had been bending all his energies for the past six months, Chester Thornton sat back in his chair and let his mind relax.

For the first time in a year he took a deep breath without a tremble of anxiety at its finish. Now he could look things in the face and know that instead of a gradually increasing deficit there would be a good profit. This new connection would mean the backing of half a dozen of the best firms in the country; it would mean prestige and widening interests, unlimited credit and respect. It spelled success in large letters and filled him with an ecstasy such as he had not known since he was a carefree boy and went fishing.

He stared across at the file cabinets unseeingly and tried to think what it would mean to his home and family! Why, they could even buy a new house, a palatial place up on the Heights, and choose their own place in the world. In three or four years the firm would be one

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of the wealthiest in its line in the country; they might even open up a foreign office!

He drew himself sharply back from daydreams into the present. It would mean right now that he could do a lot of things that had needed to be done for a long time, little repairs to the house, not extensive of course, if they would be moving in a year or so, but enough to put things shipshape and livable again until they could look about them and choose just the home that they wanted. They might have to build. Why, of course they would build, that was the idea—*build*, and have just what they wanted! And in the meantime, whatever he had to do to their present home would only enhance its value for sale.

Then, too, Christmas was coming in a few weeks!

For the first time in his life he would be able to purchase real Christmas presents, gifts that were worth something and not just scrimped necessities. He really had never enjoyed giving Betty that wristwatch, platinum though it was, and set with some good little diamonds, because he had to lie awake so many nights planning just how he could make up for having spent that money on it. But Betty was the dearest daughter in the world; she deserved all that he could give her. Then his thoughts turned to Eleanor, and his soul swelled with joy; now he could buy that string of pearls he had wanted for so many years to give her and never dared. It wasn't expensive as those things went, not the one he wanted, very simple and lovely, not a long string, for Eleanor liked quiet things.

A lover-like smile hovered over his lips for an instant at the thought of the gentle-faced woman who was his wife. Then his released ambitions leaped forward.

Well, Betty could have the car now that she had been coaxing for for over a year. Of course she was a little young for a car, only a trifle over seventeen, but all her friends had them, and it would relieve the situation for Eleanor wonderfully if she could have the family car free

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for herself and not have it continually off with Betty and her friends.

Of course Chris would be upset over Betty having a car, but Chris could wait another year or two. A boy wasn't really fit to own a car till college age, though of course some of them did. But there were other things for Chris, and his time would come later. And there was Jane and the twins! Oh, it would be rare to buy Christmas gifts this year with no grim ghost of want hovering behind to restrain his every impulse!

Thornton left the office at three o'clock that afternoon for the day. Things were in good shape, and he really could not hold himself down to work; he felt so happy. It seemed as if he must do something about it.

Acting on this desire, he went at once to the showrooms of the new Mermaid Eight. If he was going to get that car for Betty by Christmas it was high time he was looking into the matter. It ought to be ordered at once.

The Mermaid Eight proved to be far more fascinating than he had been told, and it was almost time for the five-thirty train to leave the station when he came puffing into the last car and dropped into a seat by the door.

He sank with a sense of satisfaction into a comfortable position, cast a quick, furtive glance around hoping there were none of his close acquaintances near to whom he must talk, and unfurled the newspaper, which he had bought from habit as he dashed past the newsstand. He did not want to talk to anyone just now. He wanted to enjoy this new sense of freedom from care and think over his afternoon's experience.

Which one of those three Mermaid Eights would Betty rather have? The yellow one was out of the question of course, entirely too loud for a young girl. Perhaps it would be better to let her choose but no, that would spoil the joy of the surprise. This first real gift that was really worth anything he would choose just as he wanted it to be.

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And he knew in his heart that the deep rich green like the heart of the woods would be his choice. Of course the blue was good, too, but blue was so common now. No, that green one with the sporty little gray top and the nickel trimmings was distinguished enough for any girl. Yes, he would get the green one. Perhaps he would not even tell Eleanor about it. He would just surprise them all.

His gaze wandered from the newspaper, which he was not reading, to the window with its lights flashing past. How beautiful it was out there with the river far below surrounded by lights clustering along its banks, little red lights like red berries on the barges tied up at the empty wharfs. Smoke billowing softly, cloud-like from the tall stacks of factories, more lights in clusters, stars above, stars below. Why, how beautiful it was! What a world to live in anyway, when even the riverbank down by a factory could appear beautiful at night. Someone ought to write a poem about it. The beauty of a city at night. Perhaps someone had. Perhaps others had noticed this beauty; he never had. It took an easy mind to just sit down and see beauty. He must remember this and get more time to look around him, see the beauty in the world before he got old!

It certainly was good to feel that great load of anxiety gone that he had carried now for ten years. Success in sight and writ large! His heart swelled gratefully.

It was then that the words struck him. They hurled around his protective newspaper and got him by the throat like so many demons taking him unawares to destroy him.

He had heard those two young voices; boyish, silly, vacuous, he had unconsciously labeled them when their conversation reached his averted consciousness. He had heard without knowing what they were saying, until suddenly his daughter's name was mentioned followed by a loud, nasty laugh, the kind of a laugh a demon from the pit might give after a dastardly deed of depredation.

Instantly the father's senses were alert, stung into horror, unable

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to believe his ears. If the two youths who were so frankly talking over their conquests could have seen his face, could have known who was sitting behind them listening to their depraved confidences, they would have slung themselves with little delay from his earshot. But in cheerful ignorance of his proximity, and with confident casualness, they proceeded, in no hushed voices, boastfully comparing experiences and girls!

“Little rats! Little dirty rats! Vile dirty devils!” A voice from Thornton’s soul away off in the distance seemed to be crying, “Throttle them! Choke them! Rub their faces in the dust of the earth! Strangle them! Pull out their tongues by the roots! *Exterminate* them!” The words seemed to be tumbling over and over in his brain, while his heart turned cold with horror and anger, and his brain seethed with helpless phrases. For a moment he knew how a murderer felt. He must kill them. Of course he must kill those vile creatures who had presumed to speak of his upright, precious daughter in such vilely intimate terms.

And yet when he tried to throw down the paper and rise, his hands trembled and had no power to release the sheet from his hold! And the power was gone from his feet! He could not move his eyes to see those two who were blaspheming his child in his hearing. An icy hand had his throat by a terrible grip, and something was binding his heart with fearful pressure so that it seemed as if the very veins in his temples would burst. Was he having a stroke? Was this paralysis that held him hand and foot from dragging those low-lived youths the length of the car and flinging them from the platform into a passing field?

Gradually his heart beat more steadily, and he could think a little. His eyes, which had been staring so blindly, began to see the larger letters on the sheet before him, although he did not comprehend their meaning. He was groping, reaching out, trying to steady himself. Perhaps he had been overdoing lately. Those blinding

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headaches to which he had been subject the last few months were a result of overwork and worry, and now that the pressure was relieved somewhat he was feeling a reaction. Surely he *must* have only fancied that he heard those awful words, the loathsome laughs that were like crawling serpents coming toward him, menacing the one he held so dear. What had they said anyway? He recalled the words, forced himself to bear again the shock of their meaning. Surely, surely they were lying! Boasting to one another! Trying to outdo one another, the dirty little vermin! Surely, they only chose his daughter's name to accompany such boasts because she was so high, so pure, so far above any possibility of a breath touching her reputation that the boast was all the greater! Of course it could not be true—his *daughter!* Betty! Why, *little Betty!* *They must be made to suffer for this!* It was not true! He must do something about it, though! He must take them out when the train stopped, take them somewhere perhaps to the garage and put them through a grilling and then wallop them till they were sick. Would that be sufficient for such a hellish offense? He must control himself. He must remember his daughter's fair name. He must not bring her into the public eye by attacking the criminals here in public. He must put a hold upon himself.

He was startled at the strength of the fury that had been unleashed within him—righteous fury!

Yet there he sat frozen in his seat, and those boastful voices were speaking further of his Betty, setting forth her personal charms with a frankness that was more than revolting, comparing her exquisite intimate loveliness to that of some other girl whom they called Judy! Why did he not reach forward now and grip that boy by the throat? Call the conductor and have him arrested! What was it that held him this way from making a single move?

Was it? Could it be that he was afraid lest Betty? No! But *had* Betty been *indiscreet?* Could she have allowed intimacies without realizing, meaning to? Innocently of course. Oh, no—impossible!

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His Betty! But yes, that must be what held him back!

He thought of her exquisite rose-leaf body as a baby lying softly in the white blanket when he and Eleanor had looked at her alone together for the first time, almost to worship her, so fresh and sweet she was from God, like a bud dropped down to earth from heaven. It had seemed a sanctuary just to stand and look at her. Her father's heart had turned to God more closely at that moment than ever before, when he realized that God had trusted him with such a flower of perfect life to love and guide. It had made him feel that he must somehow purify his own life to be worthy of so great a trust. And through the years when she had been growing up he had always felt this more or less whenever he looked at her glowing beauty. He felt almost like worshipping her, giving her reverence for her exquisite purity and beauty.

And now, these swine dared to joke about her charms as if—

He paused and stared about him as the train came to an abrupt halt at his home station, and passengers arose all about him swarming out.

He let his paper fall from his numb fingers and tried to stand upon his feet. The two youths in front of him were noisily dragging one another up, laughing irresponsibly. The one who had spoken those first terrible words caught the falling newspaper and returned it to Thornton's nerveless hand. The father lifted his stricken eyes and recognized the youth as the son of a neighbor, a classmate of Betty's in high school. Thornton's face was ashen, but the boy was not looking at him. He was still employed in a whispered line of jokes with his companion, his eyes following a girl who had just come down the aisle. The little swine! He had not even known that the father of Betty had heard what he had said! Would he have cared if he had noticed?

The stricken father stood there dazed, filled with loathing of life, trying to think what he should do. He seemed to lack the power to move out of the car. Yet he knew that when all the others were out

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he must get out quickly and go after those boys and— What should he do? What could he do that he would not have to explain and thus bring his Betty into disgrace! Oh, he understood now why men sometimes became murderers!

But when he had gone out to the platform and the train had passed on its way, he seemed dazed by the dark. He tried to look around for those boys, but they were gone. Before long everyone else was gone, too, and he was left standing alone on that platform with the rows of lights and the sound of the station agent slamming the late baggage into the baggage room, getting ready for the next train down to the city.

He dragged his heavy feet across the track. He had the feeling his heart was a great burden that he had to carry home and that his feet were too frail for the task. His head, too, bothered him. He could not think. He could only hear those awful words about his Betty beat over and over in his brain, and he could not decide what to do. Should he go to Dudley Weston's house, ask for Mr. Weston senior, and demand— What should he demand? What was adequate for a young girl's name and intimate sweetness defamed even in thought?

He knew of course that there were stories being told about the frankness of youth, the lengths to which they would go, the orgies, the debaucheries— But these were not young people like his own. Such a thing could never touch his family, reared in refinement, guarded and taught the right from babyhood with such a home and such a mother! No, of course not! Betty would never allow intimacies! And yet these boys had dared— Had said that she—

He would get to that point and every time would halt and recall the boy's words, phrases what Betty had said, what Betty had— Oh, God! Could there be any punishment for desecration like that?

Oh, yes, the boys and girls had stolen kisses when he was young, and thought it smart, had held hands on a sleigh ride or a hayride, or coming home in the moonlight. But nothing like *this*!

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Petting parties! Was that what they meant when they mentioned in the papers and magazines the doings of young people? And referred to them lightly! The writers could not have understood! Oh, it could not be that a thing like this, a loathsome cancer, could steal into the heart and life of a rose of a girl like his Betty and defame it!

Yet all the while in the back of his mind was that fear growing as he dragged his heavy feet along the path, the fear that Betty had inadvertently been a party to the whole thing. Giddy and pretty, fun loving, daring, she might have led her companions on unwittingly. He got no further than that. Yet it was something that might bring shame on her sweet self if brought to the light of inquiry, and what was he to do?

He groaned aloud so that a passerby hurrying down to the next train turned and looked after him and wondered if he ought to offer help.

And now the necessity for getting home and seeing Betty rose within him like a frenzy. One look at her sweet flower face would of course dispel these groundless fears and give him strength to go out and bring vengeance on her maligners. He felt sure that all he needed to set his spirit right and give it the accustomed strength to act was to look in his Betty's eyes and see her sweet, pure smile. His little daughter Betty!

And then he came within sight of his home, a comely stone dwelling with welcoming windows set with shaded lamps and a glow of firelight in the cheerless night.

He paused a moment to look at it all once more and think how dear it was before he stepped within and learned the truth. Before its charm could be shadowed by anything that could sadden the beautiful life they had lived within. Why had he thought they needed another home? This one had been so gracious, so wonderful, so satisfying. Even if he came to have millions, why should he change such a home as this for the fairest mansion earth could offer?

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There was Eleanor standing by the fire, one foot resting on the fender, and Doris hanging on her mother's arm. Jane was playing something on the piano, a dashing little jazzy melody that rang out cheerily through the closed window. Chris was seated in the window reading the sports page of the evening paper, and John was working away in the corner with his radio. Thornton saw all this as he stepped up on the porch and hungrily looked in the window. His home! Why hadn't he been more mindful, more grateful for having such a home?

And they were all waiting for him. He must be very late! It seemed ages since he had got off the train and started to walk home. He could see through the open door beyond that the table was ready. The pantry swing door opened a crack, and the maid looked in crossly and out again.

But where was Betty?

His heart contracted sharply, and he hastened to open the door and step within to dispel that ghost of fear again.

Betty was just coming down the stairs as he closed the door and looked around. She was dressed in a little rosy taffeta, slim and straight to her narrow waist and then hooped on the hips and flaring out like the petals of a lovely flower. Her exquisite head with its sleek gold cap of close-cut shining curls was tilted delicately as if she knew her power, and her slim, white lovely arms and neck gleamed against the darkness of the staircase as if they were also of the texture of the rose. She poised on her little high-heeled silver shoes, fussing with a spray of silk roses on her shoulder and called crossly to her father where he stood staring by the door.

"Well, is that you, Chester, come at last? You better cut this out! *I've* got to go out this evening, and I can't be kept waiting all hours! We were just going to eat without you! I didn't see any sense myself waiting all this time. Come on, Eleanor, he's here at last, and you better give him a dose of medicine. He looks like a stewed prune. Do get a hustle on, I can't wait all night!"