

The

Radio Hour



VICTORIA PURMAN

USA Today Bestselling Author

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Victoria Purman



HARPER MUSE

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Chapter 1

APRIL 1956
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IN WHICH OUR HEROINE—SPINSTER,
SECRETARY, AND LOYAL DAUGHTER MISS
MARTHA BERRY—DISCOVERS SHE'S ABOUT
TO EMBARK ON A NEW ASSIGNMENT.

Miss Berry, I'm sending you to work with one of our new radio producers.”

Sitting across from Mr. Rutherford Hayes, Martha Berry could almost see her reflection in his gleaming mahogany desk. She'd made sure to shine it with furniture polish that very morning—just the way he liked it—and had double-checked that the black Bakelite ashtray onto which he tap-tap-tapped his ubiquitous pipe was empty too. It had been clean as a whistle first thing that morning but now resembled the ruins of Pompeii. The national broadcaster's head of drama was rather fond of his tobacco.

“I see,” Martha replied, holding a smile on her face. She sat perfectly still, the way she'd been taught as a girl. Her hands were cupped politely in her lap, her legs crossed at the ankles just like

the queen's. That way, there was no risk of her underwear ever being exposed. Her back was ramrod straight even without the aid of a corset. These were skills she had learned thirty-five years before at secretarial college. Don't fidget. Only speak when spoken to. Never, ever take a risk that someone might see your underwear. And always—always—remain polite.

While Mr. Hayes puffed and stared into the middle distance, Martha's attention drifted to the framed photograph of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the wall behind him. It needed straightening. How could she have missed that?

"This young chap is kicking off a new radio serial. Quentin Quinn's his name." Mr. Hayes sucked deep on his pipe, leaned back in his chair, and exhaled a locomotive engine's worth of smoke right across the desk and directly into Martha's face.

She swallowed a cough.

"Everyone at the ABC is in a permanent state of apoplexy about the arrival of television. It's only months away, Miss Berry. It's television this and television that. Personally, I don't think it'll take off here in Australia. People will always want their radios. You can bet on that." Mr. Hayes aimed his pipe at Martha as if to prove his point and then took another puff.

Martha had seen photographs of televisions. They were little movie screens in wooden cabinets with legs; fancy new pieces of furniture for living rooms that would soon compete with the radio cabinets that had until now taken pride of place. The British and the Americans had had television for years, of course, and while some in Australia had been pushing for it, others weren't quite sure about the whole newfangled medium.

"I myself believe it'll be nothing but a conduit for mediocrity and vulgar sensationalism," Mr. Hayes continued, staring up at the ceiling as he pontificated. "The very novelty of it will encour-

age people to look at anything, no matter the quality of what's served up to them. Goodness me, the television chaps are telling me that judging from what they've seen in America and England, they could broadcast a film of a cat licking its paws and people would watch. What about the children, Miss Berry? What if they develop an addiction and forget how to run and play? What will happen if people stop conversing with each other because they're too busy watching a box? Or if they stop going to lectures or musical performances or the theater or concerts. And, god forbid, reading. What if people stop reading?"

Martha almost forgot to breathe. Would people really stop reading? What would happen to their imaginations if they stopped reading books?

"And . . . and," Mr. Hayes spluttered, "worst of all, what if people permanently turn off their radios and start watching television instead? Where will we be then? No, Miss Berry, I don't believe this supposed balm for the masses will take off. Radio will always reign supreme. The good women of Australia won't be able to chop up their vegetables and fry up their chops for dinner while they're watching television, will they?"

"I don't believe they will, Mr. Hayes."

"Let us simply put aside all this television-will-be-king thinking. We can't let those chaps working over in the television department get the upper hand, can we? That's why we will continue to invest in original productions. Like this new radio drama."

"I can't wait to hear more about it."

He put down his spent pipe, leaned back in his chair, and linked his fingers together, resting them in a tangle in his lap. "Since Miss Jones returns from her holiday next Monday, I've been wondering what to do with you now your temporary assignment with me is over." He smiled. "I thought perhaps working

with this Quinn fellow could be your next position. You've done a marvelous job looking after me while Miss Jones has been away, Miss Berry." He paused to search his memory. "Tasmania, I believe."

"Tasmania?"

"That's where Miss Jones has been. With a group of her girlfriends. On a bus trip."

"I see."

"Have you ever been?"

"On a bus trip?" Martha asked by way of clarification.

"To Tasmania."

"No, I haven't, Mr. Hayes. I hear Mount Wellington is a sight to behold. Especially when the peaks are kissed by snow as winter beckons."

Mr. Hayes gave Martha a curious look and held it for a long moment, then shook his head. "Yes, quite. Anyway, this Quinn fellow. He's very bright indeed. A wonderful writer, so I'm told. He's young, but aren't they all these days?"

Martha chuckled at the acknowledgment of their vintage. It had been no trouble at all working for the kind, gray-haired man. More than a decade older than she was, judging by the wrinkles around his eyes and his sagging jowls, he was an old-fashioned gentleman in the best of ways. He had a mature sensibility that she liked and a gravitas she both understood and appreciated.

"They are indeed, Mr. Hayes. But, as they say, youth is often wasted on the young."

"Ah, Oscar Wilde," he replied with a knowing smile.

Martha was far too polite to point out that it wasn't Oscar Wilde. Or George Bernard Shaw either, as many thought.

"We want this young chap, Quinn, to come up with another *Blue Hills*."

Martha startled in her chair and gripped the armrests. “What’s happening to *Blue Hills*?”

“Goodness, nothing at all, Miss Berry. That marvel Gwen Meredith has turned *Blue Hills* into such a success story that the powers that be”—Mr. Hayes pointed to the ceiling—“Want something else just like it. But not *exactly* like it.” He sighed. “The truth is, we had something else in mind to fill the fifteen-minute time slot after *Blue Hills*, but it’s fallen in a rather deep hole, I’m afraid. We had such high hopes for *Detective Reeves Investigates*. Imagine—a real detective on the radio hosting his own program. But, unfortunately for all concerned, the detective”—Mr. Hayes cleared his throat—“Has been assigned to a very important police matter and is now unable to host the program and share his true-life detective stories.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but Martha was far too polite to tell Mr. Hayes what she’d heard through the unofficial grapevine: Detective Reeves (Detective Smith in real life), a respected officer with a long career in the force, had been exposed as a bigamist. He’d apparently left a wife—and, shockingly, three young children—behind in Adelaide twenty years earlier and had never bothered to get divorced, or even tell his new wife, Faith, the very much younger than him shopgirl he’d met while buying socks. When the first Mrs. Smith read about the brand-new program featuring a real-life detective in *ABC Weekly* magazine, she was astonished to see a photograph of her missing husband. She had quickly turned up in Sydney with a long-overdue account in one hand for all she believed she was owed for raising their children on her own and a sturdy umbrella in her other hand. The new Mrs. Smith had been so horrified by the realization her marriage wasn’t legal that she’d hopped on a train to Thirroul to her parents to await the arrival of her child.

Interestingly, the scandal had never made the papers. The police swept it under the carpet because Detective Smith was one of their own, and the broadcaster announced that radio's Detective Reeves had been called away on an important assignment fighting crime, and the whole thing had been shelved. Everyone in management and in the police force was confident the embarrassing episode would just go away. And funnily enough, it did. At her age, Martha couldn't be shocked that men's scandals remained secrets. It was the way of the world, after all.

"A policeman must always go where the crime is," Martha said, "even if the bright lights of radio are beckoning."

Mr. Hayes chuckled. "Indeed."

"So," Martha said, knowing he would be grateful for the change of subject, "the new serial will follow *Blue Hills*?"

"That's right. At a quarter past one in the afternoon and then again in the evenings. Gwen Meredith and her town of Tanimbla and her characters are staying put, but we feel there's an audience for another drama at that time of day. Do you know, Miss Berry, that Mrs. Meredith writes every single episode? Fifteen minutes of original drama. A bloody marvel. A terrific lady writer. She's one of a kind. A singular talent. I don't think there's another woman in the world who's as accomplished as she is in radio drama. We were lucky enough to find the only woman with the talent, determination, and grit to be that prolific and that clever. The letters we get from listeners about *Blue Hills*—why, you wouldn't believe it, Miss Berry."

Martha did believe it. She'd been an avid listener herself since the drama had first gone to air in 1949, and she'd been a fan of its predecessor, *The Lawsons*, which had started in the last years of the war. Mrs. Meredith was an accomplished playwright and emerging theater identity when she'd entered an ABC play com-

petition in 1940, and even though the judges had selected someone else as the winner, Mrs. Meredith was the clear favorite in a listeners' poll. Of course, there had been grumblings that she was married and surely a married woman wouldn't have the time to devote her attentions to her job when she was busy devoting them all to her husband, but Mrs. Meredith had proved the naysayers wrong and *The Lawsons* and then *Blue Hills* became smash hits, and Mrs. Meredith became radio's brightest star.

Martha had never been able to listen to the daytime airings as she'd always been at work, but her mother, Violet, listened avidly at 1:00 p.m. over her lunch and never complained about hearing it all over again when it was repeated in the evenings, as had become a habit for Martha and Violet and households from Perth to Townsville and everywhere in between. After dinner, the nation would quiet, cups of tea would be made, and a biscuit or two would be consumed while the symphonic strains of the opening theme of *Blue Hills* filled the living rooms and kitchens of Australian households.

"I did a stint in the mail department last year. I saw the correspondence with my own eyes."

"Then you'll know they pour in from everywhere, from the back of Bourke to Western Australia. The powers that be want to surf on that success." Mr. Hayes leaned back in his chair and fiddled with his empty pipe. "We want to see what Quinn comes up with. He'll bring a younger perspective, you understand. We want it to be set right here in Sydney. In the suburbs. The ordinary suburbs. It will encompass all the things young people like these days, music and dancing and so on."

Martha nodded politely.

"Not that we want to lose the housewives, mind you. They love their sweep-while-you-weep dramas. *Portia Faces Life*. All those

dramas on *Lux Radio Theatre*.”

“*When a Girl Marries*,” Martha added. She and Violet loved “radio’s most appealing human interest romance,” as it was billed.

“Yes, quite. And, of course, the commercial broadcasters have their lady lawyers and doctors, that sort of thing. As the national broadcaster, we very much see it as our duty to provide entertainment for the ladies of Australia. The men, of course, have their news and current affairs and discussions of serious literature, opera, and theater in the evenings when they get home from the office and are looking for some relaxation. But it’s only right that we cater to the fairer sex too.”

“It certainly is, Mr. Hayes.”

“And you, Miss Berry, will be a vital cog in the new serial. I know you’ve worked with many of our producers, all those talented chaps who’ve gone on to bigger and better things. That young Peter Fellowes started here at seventeen, you know, and has flown the coop to London. He’s writing for the BBC.” Mr. Hayes’s face lit up. “The original Auntie herself!”

“He was a prodigy indeed,” she replied. And one who never once managed to land a screwed-up script in the wastepaper basket next to his desk.

“You know the ropes here. Show them to Quentin Quinn. Make sure he fills in all the right forms and so on. You’ll be good for him.” Mr. Hayes looked to the ceiling and she sensed a pontification coming on. “Miss Berry, you’re one of a special breed here.”

“Special?” She’d never heard herself described in such a way and was suddenly perplexed by the compliment.

“You’re a female.”

This was hardly news to her, but she was far too polite to interrupt Mr. Hayes’s soliloquy.

“We have found, over the years, that female secretaries such as

yourself are easier to supervise. You're very tolerant of routines—which men might find frustrating, if not a little boring—and you accommodate those routines with care and a certain equanimity.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, Mr. Hayes.”

“Yes, we have found that the more creative types—the men—can be somewhat hotheaded and demanding. But you women? It’s something to do with your natural tact, your patience, and your overall diplomacy that makes you excellent workers. You’re so well suited to managing the men and transcribing their words, as typing at speed does seem to come naturally to you all. And, of course, we find that because women have helped their mothers with the household chores and with the task of looking after the men of the household, they develop a natural tendency to look after their bosses too.” He narrowed his eyes at Martha and cocked his head to the side. “You’ve worked here many years, haven’t you, Miss Berry?”

“Yes, Mr. Hayes.”

“How many exactly?”

“From the beginning—1932.”

“Goodness. The very year we began broadcasting.” He picked up his pipe, made a huge fuss of lighting it, and puffed it back to life. “You must be thinking about retiring then.”

“No thoughts in that direction, Mr. Hayes.” Thoughts of retirement? She was younger than Mr. Hayes, and he still occupied his comfortable leather chair.

“No grandchildren to look after, then? No . . . knitting for them? Or baking biscuits, that kind of thing?” Wasn’t the fact that she was still “Miss” any kind of clue to him? If she were married, she would not legally be allowed to work in the Commonwealth Public Service and many other places. She wasn’t Mrs. Meredith, after all. No, she was the perfect working woman. She was hus-

handless. Childless.

“No grandchildren, Mr. Hayes. And I don’t bake.”

“You don’t bake?”

“No. I’m terrible at it. Whatever I attempt I always seem to burn. I blame my oven.”

“I see.” The conversation had strayed uncomfortably into the personal, and Mr. Hayes’s cheeks reddened in response to the transgression.

“When does Mr. Quinn begin?” Martha asked.

“Next week.” He paused. “You’ve moved from place to place quite a lot, as I recall. Filling in for others, working on new programs, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, Mr. Hayes.”

“Why is that?”

Martha was far too polite to point out that despite all the assistance she’d provided to her male bosses over the years, she’d never been offered a permanent position with any of them. Perhaps she had been too hesitant to ask for one. Perhaps she had rubbed people the wrong way. She had never been able to figure it out.

“Moving from department to department has certainly kept me on my toes. No day is ever the same,” Martha replied. “If there’s nothing else, Mr. Hayes?”

“No, that is all.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hayes.” Martha stood to go, nodding ever so slightly in deference to her boss.

“There is one thing before you go, Miss Berry.”

She waited.

“We have high hopes for *As the Sun Sets*.”

“That’s the title of the new drama serial?”

“Yes. Spot on, don’t you think?”

“Yes, very catchy indeed.” Martha paused. “Can I fetch you another cup of tea?”

“Why yes, that would be lovely. Thank you, Miss Berry.”

Martha closed his office door as she left.

HARPER
MUSE

About the Author



Photography by Catherine Leo

VICTORIA PURMAN is an Australian top ten and *USA TODAY* best-selling fiction author. Her most recent book, *A Woman's Work*, was an Australian bestseller, as were her novels *The Nurses' War*, *The Women's Pages*, *The Land Girls*, and *The Last of the Bonegilla Girls*. Her earlier novel *The Three Miss Allens* was a *USA TODAY* bestseller. She is a regular guest at writers' festivals, a mentor and workshop presenter, and was a judge in the fiction category for the 2018 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature and the 2022 ASA/HQ Commercial Fiction Prize for an unpublished manuscript.

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