

# *The Silver Highways*

## *Chapter 1*

“**I** WISH I WAS A LADY FAIR,” she sang, “To lie twixt sheets of silk. For ’tis a cruel and winter air ...”

It was, in fact, a grand morning in May. A warm southwest breeze blew steadily up from Kilfenora carrying flocks of thin, small clouds that did nothing to hinder the sun. She sat on Poulaphuca moor, upon the warm stone of the Oul’ Kinnel, facing north, and sang her sad song, thinking all the while how good life was. She watched the pale cloud shadows ramble up the sides of the distant hills, the Moneen Mountains to her left, the even-higher Turlough Hill to the right. Where else but in County Clare would the hills be raised higher than the mountains – and the gentry brought lower than the peasants!

She hugged her knees to her chin, luxuriating in the warmth of the sun as it soaked into her back. Actually, life wasn’t all *that* good. This place was a bit of a prison; her father, who really was in gaol, was in a way much freer than she – free to read all he wished, to write prospectuses of his lovely, ridiculous notions. For all his confinement, he was still *The Flinders* of the Barony of Inchiquin in County Clare. He still led the life of a gentleman. Yet the world would call her the free one – free to tend the goats, cut the turf, till the soil, carry the produce to market ... free to slave from sleep to sleep.

She sighed. How could a land so wide, so high, so open as this, be so imprisoning? Yet it was. If she stayed here, she’d become just like the rest of them, with nothing for supper but dreams – and breakfast from the leftovers. She had to get away before this poverty had its tendrils around her soul. But where *was* ‘away,’ and how did anyone get there?

The beauty of the scene diverted her thoughts; on a day like this you could almost love it – the vast, blue-gray domes of barren rock that rose a thousand feet and more out of the sparse bogs and the meagre valleys that ringed their feet. In winter they seemed brooding and sullen, as if they’d like to give one good heave and shake off the rash of little cottages that dotted their lower slopes, flaunting their limewashed walls. Those pinpoints of white often seemed to her like little cries of astonishment that survival was even possible in this grim, beautiful land, which demanded so much and yielded so little in return.

When men first came to Ireland they must have wandered as far as the country that surrounds this waste of naked rock, the good, soft country where Kinvara and Gort, Corofin and Ennistimon now stand. Who would then have ventured farther? Only an eejit. If ten thousand times ten thousand giants had fought in battle, and if their dead had been turned to stone, then this was their battleground and resting place. And that was the *best* of the land, in the foothills. On the mountains themselves, on those great, bald, limestone skulls, nothing could grow, except where the frost and rain had scoured deep cracks in the surface; there, where blown soil and the dung of goats and rabbits could lodge, there and there alone did a sparse, outlandish, outcast vegetation take root. Who would leave those gentle lowland acres and settle here instead? Only eejits like the Flinderses.

“Poor I may be yet I’m honest ...” She began a new song, a virtuous song, to complement her wishfulness.

Down below, at the foot of the slope beneath Poulaphuca, she saw the figure of a man. A wandering monk. He was walking toward her, not on the new road but on the road built in olden times, which vanished in the moor where a saint had once hurled a bit of a rock in a fight with another saint. Not that she believed those papist superstitions.

“Mary! Mary!” From away to the west she heard her mother call her home. She gauged the length of her own shadow among the heather and saw that it was time to bring in the goats for milking. “Coming!” she shouted.

Where in God’s name were the creatures, anyway?

Ten idle minutes later the question was answered as they came leaping up onto the moor, driven ahead of the man she had seen. Now she saw he was no wandering monk; what she had taken for his cowl was, in fact, a small wheelbarrow, strapped to his back. He was a common labourer. When he was almost nigh she made out other details – a pick and shovel tied across the barrow, a billy can dangling by its handle, a bundle of clothing to cushion the hard edges.

“Come home! Come home!” she called to the animals, not taking her eyes off the man. They pranced and trotted past her, putting her between them and the stranger before they turned to watch with wise and goatish curiosity.

“That’s a grand day,” he said in Irish, halting about a dozen paces off. He was old, more than thirty, with a rugged, kindly face.

“God be praised,” she replied mechanically, also in Irish. “Where are you from?”

“From Gort.”

“There’s more work there than here.”

“Would you be knowing a Mary Flinders?” he asked.

“I might,” she said. “And then again, I mightn’t. If I did, who is it wants her?”

“Steam Punch, ma’am. So they call me.” He strolled over until he was at her side, where he turned his back to the Kinnel and rested his burden upon it. He gave out a great sigh. “God be praised!”

“That’s a fierce burden,” she told him.

“It puts beef in the belly and wool on the back.”

“And by God it’d want to! The weight that’s in it.”

He sized her up. “I have word for Mary Flinders from England.”

“England is it? Who would she know there?”

“A bold young lad by the name of Ignatius Murphy.”

She frowned, then gave out a great laugh.

“You have two grand sets of teeth,” he told her.

“Ig-naaa-tius is it! Could that be Con Murphy in his Sunday best? Ignatius, would you ever stop!”

From the inner reaches of his coat he drew forth a letter. As he was on the point of handing it to her he said, “I’m to ask you to describe some mark or feature of the man.”

“Of Con Murphy?” she asked truculently. “The biggest thing about that one is his own opinion of himself.”

Steam Punch laughed in agreement, but shook his head, asking for more.

“His face was opened by a knife,” she said. “Hasn’t he a scar here” – drawing a finger down her brow – “and a white blaze in his eyebrow where it crosses, and just the tip of it on his cheek.”

He handed her the letter. It was in English, of course; Con was a Leinster man. She read a line or two – *Dear Miss Flinders, How are you? Well, here I am in London. The man who carries this letter will tell you ...* – and folded it inside her bodice. “Let’s bring these goats home before they ramble again. You’ll sup with us?”

“Gratefully. That’s a longer walk from Gort than I thought now.”

“It’s that land for you – it promises a mile and it gives you two. If it did the same with the corn, we’d all be rich.”

“Isn’t it the truth.” He shouldered his burden again and went to stand between the goats and the road. She circled them on the other side, gathering them into a tighter bunch, squeezing them homeward.

“Even the English don’t want it,” she went on. “Sure you could walk all day and never rest your eyes on a landlord house.”

“Praise God for a little mercy.”

“The English or the O’Lauchlins, there’s a poor enough choice for you.”

He spat crosswind, away from her, agreeing without words. The goats darted and stood, darted and stood, never certain whether they were being driven or were going voluntarily. "How may acres have you?" he asked.

"Oh God, a fair few," she replied.

"Is it just yourself and the ould woman?"

"Did Con Murphy tell you about my father?"

"He said he's in gaol for debt."

"For dreaming! I have three brothers. One's in Ennis, one's in Liscannor, and one is ploughing a salt furrow somewhere between here and here-again."

"A fisherman?"

She shook her head. A certain reluctance seemed to overcome her. "Ship's officer," she said at last.

"Well," he said in surprise, looking her over carefully, as if he thought he might have missed something about her. "And the other two, then?"

"Michael, the one in Ennis, he's a court clerk. And Jimmy's a bailiff and bookkeeper." They had reached the lip of the hill. She paused and stared down into the valley, over the backs of the goats as they tumbled down the paths ahead of her. She raised her arm and pointed at a grim-looking stonewalled farmhouse nestling among some windbent sycamores and ash trees. "Didn't you know?" she asked ironically. "Didn't Ig-naaaa-tius tell you? My father is *The Flinders* of the Barony of Inchiquin in County Clare. We're *gentry!*"

"That's where you got the reading and the writing," he said evenly.

She laughed. "You're a practical man, Mister Punch. They're like hen's teeth in these parts."

"The father in Ennis Gaol and the son a clerk of the court ..." he said.

She led the way down the kindest of the paths. "He wants for nothing," she assured him. "For some men liberty's more ruinous than gin."

"So," he said, "when you go to England ..."

She turned to him in astonishment. "Why in God's name would I do that?"

His momentum, what with the slope and the weight on his back, carried him into her. For a moment they teetered, like a pair of lunatic dancers, and then just managed to regain their balance. She laughed. "To England?"

"Sure isn't it all set forth in that letter? And haven't I a draft for five guineas for you, payable in Ennis? I thought you read it all."

She clutched his arm in a ritual of disbelief. "To London? Con Murphy wants me ... he's given you five guineas ..." Hastily she pulled out the letter and read it.

Indeed, Con wanted her to come to London, had loved her from the moment he saw her – blether blether ... a whole page of love words she'd

read later in private. No one had ever sent her a love letter before. He had worked his way into a position of trust with Lord Tottenham, heir to the Marquis of Enfield, had saved, could afford to keep her in a manner beyond even her father's dreams, all that unfortunate misunderstanding with the army now forgotten and done with ... no more running ... would send this and five guineas for the journey by the hand of Steam Punch, a navigating man, trust him with your life. Sent from Mother Redcaps, Camden Town, this 14th day of February, 1789

"Is he a gentleman now?" she asked.

He looked at her askance. "Something less honest than a rogue, I'd say."

She folded the pages with care. "And who is Mother Redcaps? Was it herself penned this letter, for I'm sure Con hasn't the writing?"

" 'Tis an alehouse in a village outside London."

"God, I hardly know the man," she burst out.

But she already knew she was going to London. Chances like this didn't come ashore on every tide. As to marrying Con Murphy, well, that was another matter entirely. You could plan your life too much; that was her father's downfall – he never stopped his scheming and dreaming.

Steam Punch asked, "How did you chance to meet that man?"

She looked at him warily. They resumed their walk down the hill. "Did he not tell you?"

"Not in three words. I fancy he killed a redcoat?"

"It was a perfectly ordinary street fight," she assured him. "That's where he got that scar."

"He's a fierce man to cross."

"The captain told my brother Michael he was glad to shed the man, the soldier. He was nothing but disorder on two legs. One of the king's bad bargains, he said. They didn't search out Con Murphy above six hours."

"Did you shelter him?"

She nodded. "For a week or two, while the cut healed. It was the other man's fault."

As they came to the farm gate she asked, "Who's Lord Tottenham?"

"A man to be feared, they say."

"And what does Con do for him?"

"He's a prizefighter, the best." Reluctantly Steam Punch added, "Among other things."