

Entry number 3

IRISH STEW

Mary O'Kane, watching the weather, judged it was time to move on.

Clothes hung limp on her lines. Washing business fell away. Everyone and everything looked soaked, mud on the goldfields threatening so deep it might soon become impossible to shift her wooden barrow. Mary decided. She needed work providing a roof over her head. A place to stay until winter passed.

Taking to the track, she door-knocked along the way. She wasn't alone. Jobs were in short supply. She found herself rubbing shoulders with swagmen seeking employment as splitters, shepherds, fencers and farm-hands. Mary knew their code and stuck to it. Taciturn blokes, their first reaction to a female in their midst was suspicion. But finding she operated like them, following rules of strict truth and loyalty, they welcomed her into the warmth of the camp-fire.

One swaggie, richer than her by a hoard of years, offered her tea and damper. Hat jammed low and stick of rank plug-tobacco clenched between yellowed teeth, his entire lower face was heavily bearded. Mary came upon him sharpening axes. A pan hung on a pole driven into the ground, traps positioned nearby ready to catch a rabbit. Pan, pole, set-traps and sanguinity made for his makeshift kitchen.

The two ate and drank in companionable silence, him tugging whiskers, Mary enjoying a sit-down after traipsing since daybreak. With next-to-nothing said, she stood to depart. He spat.

'Where you headed?'

'Sure, anywhere there's honest work. Know anyone hiring?'

He scratched his beard, as if seeking counsel.

'Maybe so, I reckon. Place few miles on. Boss-cocky called Ingham, tied-the-knot not long back. I heard on the grapevine, might be seeking a cook.'

He squinted up at her.

'Ask for Wilks. She'll see you right.'

The old coot's estimated distance proved unreliable. Turned away from two places, Mary spent another night in the open-air, shivering, sleepless and cussing.

'Here am I, not within cooee of a bread-crock, starving with cold!'

The old wanderer's advice, she thought glumly, might prove an addled-egg.

She rose to trudge through intermittent rain and came at last upon another property. Having struggled down the track, the first worker she observed was broad-shouldered, a substantial ball-of-a-man coming out of the stables humping a sack.

This female in substantial boots and hitched-up skirts pushing a barrow, freckled-face tanned, auburn-hair frizzled, was unexpected. The muscular fellow stopped. Disgruntled after a long haul, Mary set down her load. Her green, feisty eyes looked up to find the man staring. Hands on hips, she glared back.

'Sure, what's this, idling, dawdling and looking all-agape? Up since the shriek-o-dawn, I've no time to stand bothering with you unless your name is Wilks. So, look sharp! Is she here?'

He shook his head. Mary's heart sank. Struggling back up that track was a hard notion to face. Grey sky and rumbling thunder overhead promised more rain on the way. On the brink of gripping her barrow handles once more, she saw the bloke nod towards another building.

'Mrs Wilks. She's in the kitchen.'

'Well, why didn't you say so, man? No further than a hen's kick!' Mary exclaimed.

Turning on her heel, she tossed an impatient farewell over her shoulder.

'Id-jut!'

Pushing open the kitchen door, Mary spotted a plump woman at the stove stirring a pot.

'Mrs Wilks! Am I right?'

'What of it?'

The tone was flat. Mary weighed up the speaker's broad back.

'Let's get to it then. Truth-told I'm seeking work, something that will keep me housed. For winter's hard, trudging the tracks, and sure it's one long trake I've had.'

The indifferent stirring continued. Mary bit her lip, assessing the fall-of-the-hill. She made her move.

'Hear this place needs a cook? Am I right?'

Mrs Wilks turned. The two sized each other up. A grudging neighbour helping day-to-day until someone suitable came along, Mrs Wilks seized her chance.

'Prepared to work hard?'

'Ready and willing,' Mary replied.

'You'd wanna' be, serving here. Our Mr Ingham is particular. Fusses over what'll suit his bride. Her, a new chum not used to bush ways, see, and him not letting her take up the reins to try. You'll have one chance before he signs you on or issues marching orders. Three trialled already, reckoned unfitting. Can you cook?'

'Hold-your-whist, course I can cook! Sure as O'Kane's my name.'

Mrs Wilks nodded. Handing her spoon over, she gestured towards the pot. Mary stepped forward and looked down into a thin, anaemic broth.

'Right, get busy. I'll tell the Boss.'

With that, she escaped. Mary's spirits lifted.

'What's rare is wonderful!' she cried in glee, lifting her skirts and jiggling a few triumphant steps.

Still, after slogging to get this far the last thing she wanted was to be sent packing. She stopped to look again at the insufficient soup. A grimace crossed her face. This was no meal for a pernickety master.

'One with eyes narrow as a nail, ready to drive home,' she reminded herself.

She rolled up her sleeves. After searching the kitchen, she worked over a slow heat preparing a one-pot dish familiar to her as the back of her hand. To build upon sad stock, she gathered together, cut up and threw-in mutton, bacon scraps, potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips and barley. She thickened the lot with flour and milk creating a concoction so plentiful a spoon could stand up in it. A measure of stout from the supply stowed in her barrow added a smoky touch, giving the whole the flavour and scent of roasted caramel.

As she worked, the kitchen took on the warm atmosphere of a homely place. The robust meal's aroma wafted into every nook and cranny. Mary ladled her creation from the pot into a substantial container, for serving.

'Lace curtain meal, not a word-of-a-lie,' she announced settling the lid, tapping it shamrock-leaf-thrice for luck.

Acceptance of this dish was her license to a comfortable winter. To impress these potential employers, she smoothed her skirts and ordered her hair into coiled braids.

With care, she carried the dish across the yard into the homestead where this exacting Mr Ingham and his new chum missus sat waiting. Mary took a deep breath outside the dining-room door. It stood ajar, as if expecting her arrival. Hands full, she

shouldered it open. A broad smile fixed on her face, she entered and turned. She stopped.

‘Mrs O’Kane?’

Mary felt her smile fading, her colour rising.

The gentleman speaking from the head of the grand table was the finicky master she’d heard so much about. Transformed from his rough to formal clothes, she also recognised him as the man she’d first met and questioned in such an imperious way upon arrival at the property. Her heart sank, all hope of employment sliding away.

‘My dear,’ Ingham continued, addressing his wife. ‘May I present Mrs O’Kane, seeking approval for the post of cook?’

To escape his mocking eyes and tone, Mary stepped forward to look towards the young woman sitting at the other end of the table. A youthful, pale countenance greeted her. Remembering Mrs Wilks’ words about Ingham’s new and inexperienced bride and his protective but preventive ways, Mary felt a sudden sympathy. Beneath the pretty face she read a trace of sadness. She’d known herself in the past what it was to journey and feel lonely, a long way from home.

Plucking up courage, she grinned at the missus and bobbed.

‘Well now, it’s delight I feel at meeting you, Mrs Ingham. O’Kane’s my name, or Mary, if it pleases you.’

Her dish placed down in pride of place before the missus, she continued.

‘For, I’m thinking, it’s the lady of the house that’ll provide work for me. And her I’ll answer to, if taken on.’

Mary felt the soft scrutiny of blue eyes meeting her own. She heard a timid voice.

‘And – you’ll carry out duties I may direct you to do?’

A shy appeal lay behind the question.

‘Anything, that’s a promise missus, long as the place suits my needs. For being Irish, they may’ve shipped me to the Colony branded a class bred to serve, but I was a free-woman then like yourself, and still am. And it’s celebrating that freedom here, in this new place, will keep us strong and happy. Sure, we’ve both ideas what fits us best.’

Mary turned back to Mr Ingham.

‘And you sir, let’s just say we’ve met. And leave it there.’

She went to him offering her hand. Surprised, he took it. Her grip was firm.

Moving away, Mary ceremoniously lifted the lid on the feast prepared. A rich and comforting scent filled the room. The ladle handed to the missus, Mary fetched and carried plates. Portions served she spoke again.

‘Now, it’s hiked I have to bring you this fine stew. And after eating, if it’s reliable you think I am, worthy of keeping on, it’s away-for-slates I’ll be for getting the job. If not, well, kindly-meant-best-kindly-taken. Dawn break, I’ll be on my way.’

The newlywed couple settled their napkins. Mr Ingham took his first mouthful. Mary hovered to hear judgement. Ingham swallowed. He addressed his bride.

‘Allow me to compliment you, my dear. Irish stew, that’s an excellent choice.’

‘The hallmark of commendable housekeeping to come,’ Mrs Ingham murmured.

She glanced upwards. Mary winked, catching two quick dimples in return.

‘Thank you, Mary.’

‘Mrs Ingham.’

