

Thorn Birds 10

Meggie's marriage to Luke is a disaster. She works as housekeeper to the Muellers – Anne and Luddie – and Luke works miles away as a sugar-cane cutter. He visited Meggie only six times in a year, went on holiday without her, and Meggie wanted to go home to Drogheda. But Luke has persuaded her to give him another chance, and she's agreed to wait another year.

Episode 10

Meggie wrote to Fee, Bob and the boys once a month. She never mentioned that anything was wrong between her and Luke. Her family thought that the Muellers were friends and that Meggie was staying with them because Luke was away so often. They didn't know that Meggie was working as their housekeeper. They were sorry that she didn't come to visit them at Drogheda; they didn't realise that she had no money for the train. Sometimes in her letters Meggie asked a question about Bishop Ralph, and occasionally Bob would remember to tell her something about him. Then came a letter full of news of the Bishop.

'He suddenly arrived here,' Bob wrote, 'looking rather upset. He was surprised not to find you here and he was angry because nobody told him about you and Luke. I think he missed you. He asked if you had any children. I hope you have some soon, because I think Bishop Ralph would like that. I offered to give him your address, but he said no. He said he was going to Greece. He didn't stay long at Drogheda.'

Meggie put the letter down. Ralph knew, he knew! What had he thought about it? Why had this happened to her? She didn't love Luke, she never would love Luke. What a mess their lives were!

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In Athens, Ralph de Bricassart was thinking about Meggie. Perhaps now he would never see her again. Was she happy? Was Luke O'Neill good to her? Did she love him? What kind of man was he? Had Meggie married Luke to make Ralph feel bad? Why didn't they have any children?

Soon Bishop Ralph's work in Greece was over and he was sent to Rome. After six months he returned to Australia. He was now an Archbishop, and more than ever the Church had become his life.

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At the end of August, Meggie got a letter from Luke. He was in hospital, but he wasn't seriously ill. However he couldn't return to work until he was better. He suggested that he and Meggie should go away together for a holiday. Meggie could hardly believe it. She didn't really know if she wanted to be alone with Luke any more. But this might be her chance to have a baby. If she had a child to love, life would be so much easier. Anne would love to have a baby in the house too. So would Luddie.

Luke borrowed a car and drove Meggie into the mountains. The weather was cool, and they stayed in a small hotel beside a beautiful lake.

'We only need five thousand pounds more, then we can buy our farm,' Luke told her.

'I could write to Bishop de Bricassart. He'll lend us the money.'

'No, you won't!' he said angrily. 'We'll work for what we have, Meg, not

borrow!

Meggie had never felt so angry. Luke had taken everything away from her, and she didn't believe he ever wanted to be a farmer. He was quite happy with his life. He didn't want her to have a home or a baby.

Luke soon recovered from his illness. He ate well, and he began to look healthier. Meggie persuaded him to stay there a week longer, then for another week. After a month he decided it was time to return to work.

'We can't sit here spending money, Meg,' he said.

Luke was eager to get back to the sugar cane and his friends. The only thing Meggie could hope for was that after a whole month together she was expecting a baby. Then Luke might change his mind and make a home for them.

So she went back to Himmelhoch and waited, praying for a baby. When her prayers were answered Anne and Luddie were delighted.

Meggie felt very ill. As the months passed, the doctor began to worry about her. He decided she must go to the hospital before the baby was born.

'And try to get her husband to come and see her!' the doctor said to Luddie.

When Meggie wrote to Luke to tell him about the baby, she expected he would be happy. But Luke sent an angry reply; the baby would cost him money, and Meggie wouldn't be able to work.

Meggie wanted to go home to Drogheda, but she was too weak to travel.

She knew now that having the baby wouldn't change Luke. He had married her for her money, and she had married him because she wanted to escape from Ralph de Bricassart. There had been no real love between them.

She was thinking of Luke and Ralph one day, and wondering why she had married Luke, when it was Ralph she really loved. How could she be happy with Luke O'Neill's child? How different she would feel if the baby was Ralph's!

Suddenly she stood up and went to look for Anne.

'Anne, phone Doctor Smith. The baby's coming now!'

The doctor hurried out to Himmelhoch in his small car. He brought a nurse with him.

'Have you let the husband know?' he asked.

'I've sent him a message,' said Anne. 'This way, Doctor. She's in my room.'

Hours later, the doctor came out of the room.

'It's a long, hard business. She should be in hospital. She's very brave. She keeps asking if Ralph's here yet. I thought her husband's name was Luke?'

'It is.'

Anne looked out of the window. In the distance, she saw a taxi approaching. There was a black-haired man in the back.

'I don't believe it. Luke's coming at last.'

The doctor returned to the bedroom. 'I won't say anything to Mrs O'Neill,' he said. 'It might not be her husband.'

The taxi stopped, and Anne was surprised to see a tall man, wearing the clothes of an archbishop, get out. Was Luke playing some strange joke? But when the man turned, she realized he was ten years older than Luke.

'Mrs Mueller?' he asked. 'I'm Archbishop Ralph de Bricassart. I believe Mrs Luke O'Neill is staying with you.'

So this was Ralph, Anne thought. 'Yes, sir,' she said.

'I'm a very old friend of hers. May I see her, please?'

'I'm sure she'd be delighted to see you, Archbishop, but at the moment she's having a baby. She's having a very hard time.'

Anne could see there was deep feeling in the Archbishop's blue eyes. What was there between this man and Meggie, she wondered.

'I *knew* something was wrong!' he cried. 'Please let me see her! If you need a reason, I am a priest.'

Anne didn't want to stop him seeing Meggie. 'Come along, through here,' she said.

He went past Doctor Smith and the nurse without seeing them and knelt beside the bed to take Meggie's hand.

'Meggie!'

Meggie opened her eyes, full of pain, and saw him.

'Ralph, help me,' she said. 'Pray for me, and the baby. You can save us. You are closer to God than we are. No one wants us, not even you.'

'Where's Luke?'

'I don't know, and I don't care.' She closed her eyes in pain, but she didn't let go of his hand.

The doctor touched his shoulder. 'I think you ought to go outside now, sir.'

'If there's any danger, you'll call me.'

'Of course.'

Ralph left the bedroom and joined Anne and Luddie.

'How long have you known Meggie?' Luddie asked him.

'Since she first arrived in Australia from New Zealand. But I feel as if I've known her for ever.'

'You love her!' said Anne, surprised.

'Always.'

'How sad for you both.'

'I always hoped it was only sad for me. Tell me about Meggie. What's happened to her since she married? I haven't seen her for many years, but I haven't been happy about her.'

'Luddie and I know nothing about her life before she came to Queensland,' said Anne. 'I think she's too proud to talk about it.'

So the Archbishop told them about Meggie's life at Drogheda.

Anne was shocked. 'Imagine! Luke O'Neill took her away from that life and made her work here as a servant. *And* he made us put all the money she earned in his bank! Do you realize she hasn't had any money to spend since she came to live here?'

'Don't feel sorry for Meggie,' said Archbishop Ralph, his voice hard. 'I don't think she feels sorry for herself. And I'm sure she doesn't mind about the money. Money hasn't brought her happiness, has it? I think she cares more that Luke doesn't seem to love her. My poor Meggie!'

When Anne had finished telling him about Meggie's life in Queensland, the Archbishop sighed. 'Well, we must help her if Luke won't. Maybe she'd better go back to Drogheda. I shall send you a cheque from Sydney for her – she won't want to ask her brother for money. Dear God, let the child be born soon.'