

Thorn Birds 6

1928

Mary Carson died, leaving Father Ralph with a moral dilemma. In a new and secret will, she had left all her huge fortune – thirteen million pounds – to the Church, for him to administer, and the use of the Drogheda estate to Meggie's family. Father Ralph had to choose whether to destroy this new will, but his ambition to rise high in the Church prevented him from doing so.

Episode 6

It was four in the morning when Father Ralph returned from Gillanbone. Meggie was waiting for him.

'Are you all right, Father?'

'Yes, but I don't want to go inside the house yet. Will you ride with me?'

As they rode beside the river, Father Ralph realised that soon his superiors in the Church would need him to go to Sydney. Well, it would be better that way. They stopped and sat down together on the river bank.

'What's the matter, Father?'

'I've sold you, my Meggie, for thirteen million pieces of silver. Sit closer, we may not have the chance to talk again. I'm going away.'

'When?' asked Meggie in a small voice.

'In a few days.'

'It'll be hard for me, Father. Harder than Frank.'

'It'll be hard for me, too. I have no-one but you. But I think perhaps it's a good thing for you that I'm going away. You mustn't dream of me – I can never feel that way about you. When I say I love you, I mean as a priest, not as a man.'

'I understand,' she said. 'But I'll miss you.' Then she put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

He pulled her arms away. 'It's time to go,' he said.

Father Ralph was surprised to learn that Paddy was quite happy about Mary Carson's will. All he and the boys wanted was to stay at Drogheda.

'Let the Church have Mary's money,' said Paddy. He turned to Father Ralph.

'Father, please don't think I hate you because of this. You were very good to Mary, and you've been good to me and my family. We'll never forget it.'

And although it made Father Ralph feel guilty, he took Paddy's hand and shook it.

Then he left Drogheda and didn't come back. A new priest came to Gillanbone, and Father Ralph became secretary to the Archbishop in Sydney.

Part 3 of the book. 1929 – 1932

Frank goes to prison

The Cleary family were moving into the big house. One morning, Fee started to wrap her cups in old newspapers. Suddenly she stopped, and Meggie came into the kitchen to find her mother staring at a newspaper, her face white.

'Daddy, Daddy!' she called, frightened.

Paddy picked up the paper and read aloud, his voice becoming sadder and sadder.

BOXER IN PRISON FOR LIFE

Francis Armstrong Cleary, aged 26, a boxer, was sent to prison for life. Cleary had killed another man in a street fight outside a bar.

When he was asked if he had anything to say, Cleary answered, 'Just don't tell my mother.'

Paddy looked at the date on the newspaper. 'This happened over three years ago,' he said.

For a long time no one spoke, then Fee started to cry. 'My poor, poor Frank!' she said.

Paddy wiped away her tears. 'We'll go and see him,' he said.

'I can't go,' Fee said. 'It would kill him to see me. He always wanted to be someone important. And now You read the newspaper: "Just don't tell my mother." We've got to let him keep his secret.'

Paddy looked at Fee's unhappy face. 'All right, Fee. We won't go. But I'll ask Father de Bricassart to find out what's happening to Frank.'

Some colour came back into Fee's face. 'Yes, Paddy, do that,' she said softly.

After that, Paddy and the boys were especially kind to Fee, making sure that nothing else worried her. But Fee seemed to change, she wasn't interested in any of her family.

Father de Bricassart paid Paddy well for managing Drogheda, and the Cleary family had never had so much money. Father Ralph himself never came to Drogheda, but he visited Frank in prison. He found Frank very disturbed and unhappy, but when he wrote to the family he said that Frank was well and feeling calm.

Paddy wanted to sell Father Ralph's horse, which was still kept at Drogheda.

'Oh, please, Daddy,' said Meggie. 'Don't do that! What would Father Ralph think if he came back?'

'I don't think he'll come back, Meggie,' said Paddy. 'But we'll keep the horse, if you like.'

It had been a dry winter, and the summer rains didn't come. The grass was dry, even the trees were dry. Meggie rode her horse across the fields and dreamed about Ralph, imagining that he was her husband. She couldn't understand why he didn't come and see her.

'Daddy,' she asked one day. 'Why doesn't Father de Bricassart ever visit us? Has he forgotten us?'

'No, not really. He often writes, doesn't he?' He turned and looked at his daughter thoughtfully. 'But I think it's best that he doesn't come, so I haven't invited him. It's wrong for you to dream about a priest, you must understand that. He still thinks of you as a little girl.'

She looked stubborn. 'But he could stop being a priest. If I could talk to him about it'

Paddy's face was shocked. 'Meggie! Father de Bricassart is a priest. He can never, never stop being a priest, understand that. He's promised the Church, and he can never break that promise.'

Without a word, Meggie turned her horse and rode away.

At the same time, in Sydney, Father Ralph was working hard, and impressing his superiors in the Church. Nevertheless, he sometimes found it hard to stop himself taking the train to Drogheda to see the people there, especially Meggie.

A terrible storm

In the winter of 1932 the dry storms came back. Paddy was far away from the house when the biggest storm came that day in August. He got off his horse and sat under a tree to wait until the storm was over.

It was a terrible storm. Suddenly Paddy saw an enormous tree burst into blue flames. He jumped to his feet and saw everything around him catch fire. He didn't have time to reach his horse. In every direction there were walls of fire. He heard his horse scream, and suddenly he knew it was the end. There was no way out of the fire for him or for his horse and dogs.

All the other men had returned to Drogheda before the storm began, and they waited indoors for it to end. At about four o'clock the clouds rolled away, and everybody felt better. Jack and Bob went outside to look around.

'Look!' said Bob, pointing to the west.

Above the trees they could see a great cloud of smoke rising into the sky.

'Good God!' Jack cried, running inside to the telephone. 'Fire, fire!' he shouted into the phone. 'Fire on Drogheda, and a big one!'

Everyone knew what to do. The boys ran for their horses, and the other workers ran out of their houses. As Meggie rode beside Fee, the cloud of smoke in the west grew, and they could smell burning on the wind. Animals running from the fire passed them as they rode towards the fire. The fire had already travelled ten miles and it was five miles wide. It was too late to save most of the sheep.

Their neighbours arrived in cars, eager to help.

'How big is it, Bob?' one asked.

'Too big to fight,' said Bob. 'It's travelling too fast. I don't know if we can save the houses.'

'Where's your father, Bob?'

'West of the fire. He was working with some sheep over there.'

The wind was still strong, and there was a smell of burning everywhere. Night fell, but to the west the sky was bright with flames. From the house Meggie heard the roar of the fire, and saw trees burst into flame. She could see the figures of men running in front of the burning trees. Then the wind changed and the fire rushed away to the east. The big house was saved.

End of episode 6

1392 words including intro