

Thorn Birds 14

Meggie went home to Drogheda, and had Ralph's son. She called him Dane. Some of her brothers fought in the Second World War, and survived. Fee, Meggie's mother, revealed that she had recognized Dane as Ralph's son the moment he was born, but promised to keep the secret. Fee told Meggie not to make the same mistakes as she had in her life, of loving the child to the exclusion of all else, as one day she'd lose him as Fee had lost her beloved illegitimate son, Frank.

When Dane was ten, a newspaper article told them that Ralph was now a cardinal. Fee asked Meggie what she would do if Ralph ever came back. Meggie replied that he would never come.

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But Ralph did come, in December. No one even knew he was in Australia. No one heard him arrive as his car stopped outside the big house. It was summer and there were roses, like the one Meggie had once given him. He heard a laugh from behind one of the rose trees. It was a childish laugh, like Meggie's. He looked through the branches.

But Meggie wasn't there, only a boy sitting on the grass and playing a game with a small pig. Cardinal Ralph stepped forward. The boy, aged about twelve or fourteen, looked up, surprised. The pig ran away.

'Hello,' said the boy, smiling.

'Hello,' said Cardinal Ralph. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Dane O'Neill,' answered the boy. 'Who are you?'

'My name is Ralph de Bricassart.'

'May I help you?' the boy asked, standing up.

'Is your father here, Dane?'

'My *father*?' The boy frowned. 'No, he's never been here.'

'Oh, I see. Is your mother here, then?'

'She's in Gillanbone, but she'll be back soon. Would you like to speak to my grandmother? She's in the house.' Then the boy stared at him. 'Ralph de Bricassart. You're Cardinal de Bricassart. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude.'

'It's all right, Dane. I'm here as a friend of your mother's and your grandmother's.'

Suddenly they were interrupted by Justine. Cardinal Ralph recognized her red hair and light blue eyes. She didn't seem to be impressed by the Cardinal.

'May I go and look for your grandmother?' he asked.

'Of course. Do you need us?' Justine asked.

'No, thank you. I know the way.' Cardinal Ralph moved off towards the house. He found Fee working at her desk.

'Hello, Fee,' he said.

'Hello, Ralph,' she answered calmly. 'How nice to see you. I didn't know you were in Australia.'

'I'm just having a few weeks' holiday. I wanted to see Drogheda again.'

Cardinal Ralph left Fee to her work and walked down towards the river. He remembered all the buildings, all the familiar flowers and trees. Then he

turned and saw Meggie walking towards him. She was still as beautiful as he remembered her.

She came closer, then her arms were around his neck.

'Meggie, Meggie,' he said, his face in her hair.

'It doesn't seem to matter, does it?' she said. 'Nothing changes.'

'No, nothing changes,' he said.

'This is Drogheda,' she said. 'When you're here, you're mine, not God's.'

'I know. But I still had to come.' He pulled her down beside him on the grass.

'Why did you do it, Meggie?'

'Do what?'

'Why did you go back to Luke? Why did you have his son? He asked jealously.

'He made me do it. It was only once,' she said without expression. 'But I had Dane, so I'm not sorry it happened.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have asked. He's a wonderful boy. Does he look like Luke?'

She smiled secretly. 'Not really. Neither of the children look like Luke, or me.'

'I love them because they're yours.'

'What do you think of Dane?' she asked eagerly.

'I liked him. His laugh sounds like yours.'

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It was Saturday night, and Bob, Jack, Hughie, Jims and Patsy were in for dinner. After the meal, when Dane and Justine had gone to bed, Cardinal Ralph called all the family together.

'I've got something to tell you,' he said. 'It's about Frank.'

For a moment they were all silent, then Fee spoke.

'What about Frank?' she asked calmly.

'Frank has served thirty years in prison,' said the Cardinal. 'I know my people here have given you news of Frank, but they haven't given you the bad news. I didn't want you to know about Frank's loneliness and hopelessness, because there was nothing any of us could do about it. Frank was very violent at first, that's why he's been in prison so long.'

Fee looked up quickly. 'It's his temper,' she said.

The Cardinal continued. 'You must be wondering why I came here after all these years,' he said, without looking at Meggie. 'Well, I came back to see what I could do about Frank.'

They all stared at him and waited.

'Frank is going to be set free,' said the Cardinal.

'Thank you,' said Fee.

'He isn't the same Frank,' Ralph continued. 'I visited him in prison before I came here. I told him you all knew he was in prison. He's so quiet now, he was simply grateful when I told him. And he's looking forward to seeing you all again, especially you, Fee.'

'When's he coming?' asked Bob.

'In a week or two. He wants to come by train.'

'I'll meet him,' said Fee. 'On my own. And now,' she said, going back to her desk, 'I have work to do.'

The five brothers went to bed, followed by Meggie. Fee continued to sit at her desk, thinking.

Ralph climbed the stairs. At the top, the house was silent, but Meggie's door

was open, waiting for him. He shut the door behind him, then locked it. 'Were you sure I'd come to you, Meggie?' he asked. 'I told you. On Drogheda you're mine.' She went across to the lamp, and turned it out.

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Dane was disappointed. 'I thought you'd wear red,' he said to the Cardinal. 'I do sometimes, but only in the palace.' 'Do you really have a palace?' 'Yes.' 'I'd love to see it.' Cardinal Ralph smiled. 'Who knows, Dane? Perhaps one day you will.'

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Luddie and Anne Mueller were coming to Drogheda for Christmas, and everyone there was looking forward to the best Christmas in years. Meggie was happy, having both Dane and Ralph near her. One thing disturbed her happiness; Ralph hadn't realized that Dane was his son. She didn't intend to tell him. If he couldn't see for himself, why should she tell him?

The phone rang. It was for Fee. She took the phone, listening, and said, 'Thank you.'

'What is it, Mum?' Meggie asked.

'Frank's out of prison. He's arriving this afternoon.' She looked at her watch.

'I must leave soon.'

'Isn't it wonderful, Mum? Frank's coming home in time for Christmas.'

'Yes,' said Fee, almost sadly. 'It's wonderful.'

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Fee stood alone on the station platform, waiting for Frank's train.

When it arrived, Frank stood there as if he didn't know what to do next. He was fifty-two years old now, a middle-aged man. He was thin, and his clothes hung loosely. He seemed not to expect anyone to meet him.

Fee walked towards him. 'Hello, Frank,' she said.

His eyes, which used to shine, now looked dull. He raised them to his mother's face. He looked exhausted and patient. As he looked at his mother he had a strange, wounded expression in his eyes, like a dying man.

'Oh, Frank!' she said, and took him in her arms, his head on her shoulder. 'It's all right, it's all right.'

Frank sat silently in the car as they drove back to Drogheda. He looked out of the window as they left the town. 'It looks just the same,' he whispered. When they were approaching the house he sighed. 'I'd forgotten how lovely it is here,' he said softly. 'I never thought I'd see it again.'

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Fee did all she could to help Frank to fit into life at Drogheda. She knew he would never be like the old Frank; he'd lost his old energy and enthusiasm for life. His brothers didn't want him to work with them, and he had never, even in the old days, enjoyed their work. But he loved the gardens, and gradually found work for himself there.

But Fee wasn't entirely happy. Seeing Frank often made her sad, he was so changed. He was a ruined man, who had suffered things she couldn't imagine.

One day after Frank had been home for six months, Meggie came into the

room to see her mother watching Frank as he worked in the garden. The expression on Fee's face made Meggie's heart sink.

'Oh, Mum,' she said helplessly.

Fee looked at her, shook her head and smiled. 'It doesn't matter, Meggie,' she said.

'I wish I could do something.'

'You can. Just stay here. I'm very grateful to you. You help me a lot.'

End of episode 14

1512 words including intro.