

Thorn Birds 11

Meggie and Luke spent a month together as he recovered from an illness. Meggie became pregnant. This angered Luke, and he stayed away from her. She was too ill during the pregnancy to go home, and her employers, Anne and Luddie, looked after her and called the doctor when she went into a long and difficult labour. Luke did not arrive, but Ralph, now an Archbishop after working in Greece and Rome, came unexpectedly and learned about her unhappy marriage.

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The child wasn't born until twenty-four hours later. Meggie was almost dead with exhaustion and pain. Doctor Smith came out of the bedroom.

'Well, it's all over,' he said. 'Meggie is very ill, but she'll be all right. And the baby is small, but very strong. Her hair is bright red, and she's got a terrible temper.'

Archbishop Ralph went with Luddie and Anne to see the new mother. Meggie looked very small and weak in the big bed. The baby was crying loudly.

Ralph took Meggie's hand. 'She's a strong baby,' he said, smiling.

'I don't think she likes life much,' said Meggie. Then she turned to Anne and Luddie. 'My dear good friends! What would I have done without you? Have we heard from Luke?'

'He sent a message. He was too busy to come, but he wished you good luck.' Anne bent and kissed Meggie. 'We'll leave you alone with the Archbishop, dear.'

'What are you going to call your noisy daughter?' he asked as the door closed.

'Justine.'

'Don't you want her, Meggie?'

'I did want her, but now I feel she doesn't want me.'

'I must go, Meggie,' he said gently.

Her eyes grew harder and brighter. 'I knew you'd want to go! You're just like Luke. You can't wait to get away from me.'

He looked hurt. 'Please don't feel like that, Meggie. Don't change, don't become hard. You were always so sweet and gentle. You wouldn't be my Meggie any more.'

But still she looked at him as if she hated him. 'No, Ralph. I'm not your Meggie, I never was. You didn't want me, so I married Luke. You've spoiled my life. I've loved you for years, and wanted no one but you, and waited for you..... I tried so hard to forget you, then I married a man who looked like you, and he doesn't want me either!'

She began to cry, then stopped.

'Luke's not a bad man,' she continued. 'He's just a man, like you. He wants something, and he doesn't care about hurting other people to get what he wants.'

He didn't know what to say to her, because he had never seen her like this before.

'Do you remember the rose you gave me at Drogheda?' he asked gently.

'Yes, I remember,' she answered, her voice lifeless.

'I still have it. Every time I see a rose that colour I think of you. Meggie, I love you. You're my rose, the most beautiful thing in my life.'

Her eyes again became hard and bright. 'You can only dream, can't you, Ralph de Bricassart? You don't know anything about real human life. You say you love me, but you've got no idea what love really is; you're just saying the words!'

'Meggie, don't. Please don't.'

'Oh, go away. I don't want to look at you.'

He left the room without looking back.
