

Thorn Birds 7

It's 1932. Father Ralph gave in to the temptations of Mary Carson's will, leaving her fortune to the Church because of her admiration for him. This gave him promotion, and he was transferred to Sydney. Meggie and her family moved into the big house at Drogheda, Fee discovered that Frank had been sent to prison for murder, and Paddy was caught in a huge bush fire.

Episode 7

For three days the fire continued, travelling east and spreading wider as it went. Then there was a heavy fall of rain that lasted for four days, and put out the fire. But it had gone a hundred miles, and it had left a blackened path twenty miles wide.

No one expected to hear from Paddy until the rain started. The fire had brought down the telephone line, and the ground was too hot to cross. But after the rain had fallen for six hours they began to worry.

'He ought to be here by now,' said Bob. 'I think we should go and look for him.' Fee was anxious. 'I'll come with you. Meggie can come too. We're going to need all the people we can get.'

They rode across the river and into the area of the fire. Everything was black; even after all the rain, steam rose from the hot ground. Bob and Meggie rode in front, then Jack and Hughie, and finally Fee and Stuart. They stayed close together and didn't talk. They expected to see Paddy riding towards them, but they saw nothing moving in the black land.

Then they realized that the fire had begun farther away than they first thought. Bob turned his horse and spoke to them.

'We'll start looking here. I'll go west. If you find anything, shoot three times in the air. Jack, you go south; Hughie, go south-west; Mum and Meggie, go north-west. Stu, you go north. And go slowly, everyone. Good luck!'

They rode off through the grey rain. After Stuart had gone half a mile he saw the black shapes of Paddy's horse and Paddy's dogs. He got off his horse and made his way towards them through the mud. He said a prayer as he moved through the sticky blackness. And then, not far from the horse, he found the blackened shape of a man, the arms stretched wide. Stuart raised his gun and shot three times into the air.

He didn't see the great wild pig at first as it came out of the trees. The shooting had disturbed it, and it was in pain, wounded by the fire. Stu reached for his gun, but then realized it was empty. The pig looked at him for a moment, then rushed towards him. Stuart hurried to load his gun, and fired. The animal was hit, but it was too late, it fell on top of him in the black mud.

'I wonder why Stu hasn't fired again?' Meggie asked her mother. Fee felt anxious, and made her horse go faster. But Jack and Bob had got there first. 'Don't go in there, Mum,' said Bob.

Jack went to Meggie, and held her arms.

'Paddy?' asked Fee.

'Yes. And Stu.'

Neither of her sons could look at her.

'Daddy got caught in the fire. He's dead. Stu must have disturbed a wild pig, and it attacked him. He's dead too, Mum.'

Meggie screamed and struggled, but Fee stood still, like a stone.

'It's too much,' she said at last.

Jack took Meggie back to the house, and returned with a cart to bring the two bodies back.

Meggie stayed at the house, and the housekeeper, Mrs Smith, tears running down her face, watched as the girl sat silently, unable to eat or speak. There was a knock on the door, and Mrs Smith went to answer it.

Father Ralph stood outside in the rain, wet and muddy.

'May I come in, Mrs Smith?'

'Oh, Father, Father!' she cried. 'How did you know?'

'Mrs Cleary sent me a message about the fire. I've got permission to come here and see if everything is all right. It's good to be back. But Mrs Smith, why are you crying?'

'Then you don't know!' she cried.

'What? Know what? What is it – what's happened?'

'Mr Cleary and Stuart are dead.'

His face went white. 'Where's Meggie?' he asked.

'She's in there. Mrs Cleary and the boys are out. They're bringing in the bodies.'

But Father Ralph wasn't listening to her; he rushed into the room.

'Meggie!' he said, taking the girl's cold hands in his.

She fell into his arms. In spite of her pain, she felt happy, knowing that he had come back to her.

'You've come,' she said.

'Yes, I've come. Oh, Meggie, your father and Stu! How did it happen?'

Meggie told him, and he said no more. He held her in his arms and comforted her. Then without thinking, he bent down and kissed her lips. Then he kissed her again and again. At last, he pushed her away.

'Meggie, I love you. I always will. But I'm a priest, I can't I just can't!'

She stood up quickly and smiled at him.

'I'll go and find something for you to eat.'

At last, Paddy and Stu were buried and Father Ralph got ready to leave. Fee was sitting at her desk, looking at her hands.

'Fee, will you be all right?' he asked.

'Yes, Father. I have work to do, and five sons left – six, if you count Frank.

Thank you for looking after him.'

'Fee, what about your daughter? Do you ever remember that you have a daughter?'

'No, it's her sons a mother remembers. Do you know something, Father? Two days ago I discovered that I loved Paddy, but it was like all of my life – too late. I couldn't tell him how much I loved him.'

'Will you promise me something, Fee?'

'If you like.'

'Look after Meggie, don't forget her. Make her go to dances and meet a few young men. Encourage her to think of marriage and a home of her own.'

'Whatever you say, Father.' Fee did not move, but continued looking at her hands.

Father Ralph sighed and left the room.

Meggie was waiting for him as he went for his horse.

'Look what I found, Father,' she said and gave him a rose, the only one not destroyed by the fire. 'It's something to help you to remember me.'

He took the flower and looked down at it. 'I don't need any help to remember you, Meggie. But Meggie, I want you to forget me. I want you to look around and find a good kind man, marry him, have babies. You'll be a good mother. I can never leave the Church, and I don't want to leave the Church. I don't love you the way a husband will. Forget me, Meggie!'

'Won't you kiss me goodbye?'

But Father Ralph just jumped on his horse and rode away.

Part four. 1933 – 1938

Luke arrives

The grass grew again at Drogheda, and the work on the farm continued. Ralph de Bricassart was now Bishop Ralph. Fee never showed his letters to Meggie and forgot about her promise to him to make sure that Meggie went to dances. Meggie was invited to dances and parties, but she always refused to go. Young men would visit Drogheda, hoping to get to know Meggie, but Meggie wasn't interested in them.

One day Bob told them that a new worker was coming. 'He sounds like a good man. He knows all about sheep and horses.'

'Is the new man married?' asked Fee.

'Don't know, didn't ask,' said Bob. 'He'll be here tomorrow.'

Several weeks passed before Meggie saw the new man, though her brothers often talked about him. When Meggie finally met him he was riding towards her on a big horse.

'G-day!' he called, taking off his hat and looking at her with laughing blue eyes. 'You must be the daughter. I'm Luke O'Neill.'

Meggie said something quickly and then became silent. She couldn't think of anything to say; his face and eyes were just like Father Ralph's.

Luke O'Neill looked at Meggie carefully as he rode beside her. She was beautiful all right. That hair! But why did she look so disappointed when she

looked into his eyes? Luke was used to being popular with women; they didn't often look at him like that.

Luke smiled. 'What's the matter?'

'I'm sorry. You reminded me of someone, that's all.'

'Who?'

'It's not important.'

'What's your name, little Miss Cleary?'

'Meggie.'

'Meggie? That's a child's name. What is it really? Margaret?'

'No, Meghann.'

'That's better. I'll call you Meghann.'

'No, you won't. I hate it!'

But he only laughed. 'I'll call you anything I like.'

End of episode 7

1468 words including intro