

# CHECKERBOARD LOVE

## CHAPTER III

**Synopsis**  
Audrey Swan, nicknamed "Cygie," is the only child of a highly respected horse trainer. His farm adjoins the estate of Judge Castle, whose only son, Jeffrey, has recently returned to Parville expecting to work in his father's law office. Audrey and Jeffrey have been lifelong friends and now Jeffrey is interested in another girl, Olive Cooper, whom he has met abroad. Mrs. Castle invites Olive for a week-end visit. Audrey meets Vic Quinn at a dinner party at the Castle home. A few minutes later she hears Olive addressed as "Mrs." Judge Castle's booming voice pierces her bewilderment.

"Upon my word, if it isn't my little girl! Audrey, you've quite grown up... and into a very winsome young lady. Eh, Louise?"

"Yes, indeed!" Mrs. Castle's hand, plump and beaming, appeared at a formal elevation. "So pleased to have you here, my dear." Then as the butler appeared at the door with an announcement that dinner was served, "Victor, dear, you are taking Miss Swan in. See that she is nicely taken care of."

"To the death," that young man promised gravely, offering his arm. By the time she was seated, Audrey reached the conclusion that she quite approved of Victor Quinn.

He wasn't handsome, like Jeff. But he was very much alive and very interesting. There was a tongue-in-cheek quality to his remarks and the suspicion of a twinkle in the deep-set gray eyes.

"It seems to me Jeffrey said you were a school friend," she suggested politely to break a somewhat awkward silence.

"More than a friend," Victor admitted. He lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "You see, Jeff doesn't care for the law. I had to, and it was due to me that he didn't flunk out. God help him if he ever tries the State exam!"

Audrey laid her bouillon spoon aside and lifted her napkin to her lips, controlling an impulse to choke. Mr. Quinn's next remark was no help. He must have been watching her but he looked the other way as he observed gently: "That's the cutest little trick your nose did just then."

"Don't you like it?" was the demure retort. "I can't help it."

"Of course I do. Only it makes me feel that I should offer you a bit of carrot. I was prepared to like you, Audrey Swan. But not so completely. I had a pet rabbit once and I loved it."

"I believe I like you, too, Mr. Quinn. In spite of your memories."

"Then call me Vic. We're old friends now."

After dinner the general conversation seemed to languish and the party revealed an inclination

to separate into groups. "Look, Audrey," Vic remarked suddenly. "That next room appears to be the Judge's library. Let's slip in and have a look and a smoke. Mind?"

"I'd love to." "Say! You know this is what I call swell!" Vic stood by the big table with its softly glowing lamp, scanning the shelves that lined all the available wall space, reaching from floor to ceiling.

Audrey stood with her back to the table, leaning her weight on her two palms. A long time since she had been in this room, and the familiar surroundings brought a little pang. Like homesickness. She was recalled to the present by Vic. He was regarding her through half-closed eyes, his head on one side. "What did you want to ask me, Audrey?"

She looked up with a start, utterly discomfited by his shrewdness. "What made you think I want to ask you anything?" was her parrying retort.

"Deduction, my child. Didn't I tell you I was a lawyer? So what was it?"

"When you were telling me about these people at dinner I thought you were careful not to include..."

"The guest of honor? Maybe I was overly informative about the rest. You're right. Would I have been putting my finger on a tender spot?"

"That's ridiculous! Jeff told me ever so much about her, only he didn't happen to mention that she was married. Or had been. It did jolt me just a little when he introduced us. I wondered if I misunderstood."

"No. You didn't misunderstand. She was married about two years ago. Still is. But the mill is grinding."

"Oh! You mean she's getting a divorce?"

"It's in the bag, I happen to know. I'm a sort of satellite of Brand, Blumenthal and Brand. We don't trifle with such cases as a rule, but Olive's papa is the great and only Harvey Harrison. Hence Mr. Cooper will be eased out of the scene without any fanfare of trumpets. And profitably, too."

"Then I'm sorry for her."

"Umm...m." Vic was staring through the drawing-room door.

"People in her circle have quaint notions of marriage. It's like buying a fur wrap. If the style changes or you figure it isn't becoming, you work it off on the second-hand man and pick out something different. You wouldn't know about that."

"We're getting quite too serious," Audrey decided. "Could we dance?"

"The very thing I was going to suggest," Vic declared. "It's my one social grace."

Victor Quinn proved to be an accomplished dancer and Audrey felt a momentary regret when Jeff cut in after one circuit of the big hall. "Not sorry you came?" he asked almost at once.

"What do you think?"

"That if you're bored, you're hiding it very well. You must have cast a spell over Vic. He always suspects lone females of being on the prowl."

"Perhaps I am. I like him a lot."

"Queer chap in many ways. No money to speak of, but an entree that no amount of dough can get you. He's been a self-appointed monitor to me and I don't mind telling you I owe him a lot. He probably has admitted it to you. One day, he'll make his mark... a high one. Say, Cygie?"

"I know you haven't had any chance yet to get acquainted, but—"

"She's lovely, Jeff."

With her mother and father for an interested audience, Audrey had been detailing an account of the Castle dinner over her morning coffee and a cigarette.

"Oh, Miss Audrey!"

The girl turned to see the cook's face peering through the kitchen door.

"What is it, Julia?"

"A man at the back door what wants to see you."

"For goodness' sake!" Audrey half rose from her chair, sank back with a laugh. "It's Vic. Mom. Show him in, Julia."

It was none other than Victor Quinn who strolled in smilingly and called a cheery greeting.

"Hello, Audrey! You're looking very well indeed this morning."

"I am, Mr. Quinn, my mother."

"Mrs. Swan, I am delighted to meet you. Please don't get up."

"Oh, we've finished breakfast long ago," Audrey smiled. "We'll find more comfortable chairs. It may be pleasant out on the porch."

"But I want to stay here," Vic expostulated. "I want a cup of coffee. That's what I came for. Don't tell me I'm too late."

"Of course you're not!" Martha exclaimed, taking refuge in a burst of hospitality. "You sit right down here with Audrey. I'll have some hot coffee for you in just a minute." She caught up the pot and started out with it then paused at the door to ask, "Can't we fix you some bacon and eggs, too? You must be hungry after your walk."

"Well..."

"Of course you will."

"Do you mind telling me what all this is about?" Audrey demanded.

"That bunch up on the hill

doesn't seem to go in for getting up at all. I prowled all over the place without seeing any sign of life until I stumbled over a serf working in the garden. By way of making conversation I asked him who lived in the pleasant looking house I could see in the distance. He told me. And here I am. Oh, thank you!"

The last was for Julia who had come padding in with the bacon and eggs. Audrey poured her guest's coffee and made toast.

"You know, Audrey..." Vic paused for a satisfying bite. "I don't recall ever taking part in a domestic scene like this. Not in years, at all events. I can't tell you how it makes me feel."

"I'm sorry we haven't a pet rabbit for you."

"But I'd rather have you and your nose," he grinned impudently. "And that reminds me... I think you'll see a cavalcade of sorts heading this way after a bit. Jeff gave a glowing account of your equine menagerie and Olive was all set for an inspection."

The sound of the telephone bell came from the hall. It was Jeffrey Castle. "Hello, Audrey. Would it be all right if some of us rode over after a bit? We want to have a try at your bars, if you don't mind. We'll all go for a ride later, so be ready to join us."

"Maybe."

"Sure you can. Say, Cygie, Vic is missing this morning. Nobody's seen him."

"He's here."

"The devil you say! So it's as bad as all that!"

"You win," she admitted to Vic who stood smiling at her from the doorway. "Let's ride."

When the stables were reached, Audrey introduced the guest to her father and admitted to a little feeling of relief at Vic's attitude. He displayed a keen interest in all that was shown him. The two men were still deep in their conversation when her ear caught the pounding of hooves in the lane.

"Company coming," she announced. "Let's go out to meet them. You come too, Audrey."

Audrey could not keep her admiring eyes from Olive's smiling face and trim, erect figure. She was even more attractive in her riding clothes than in a dinner gown, the girl acknowledged to herself. Olive was mounted on Eileen.

Jeff was looking particularly well in new whipcord breeches, his shirt open at the throat, bare-headed. The group chatted with gay informality, with the exception of Anthony whose preoccupied attention was directed mainly to Eileen's restless movements.

It was Olive who created a diversion with a direct question to Jeff. "Where are those jumps you were telling me about, Jeffrey? I'm anxious to try them. So is this mare," she added as Eileen tossed her head fretfully.

"Over there in the paddock," he replied with an indicating wave of his crop, then an uncertain look directed at Audrey.

"Aren't you saddled yet?"

"Go ahead," was her smiling rejoinder. "I'll be with you presently." She turned and rested her arms on the top of the fence watching the others ride away.

"Why doesn't Mr. Jeffrey tell that young woman to go easy on the curb?" Anthony's usually mild voice carried a growl.

"That's what I'm thinking."

Audrey agreed in a tense little voice.

Vic took his place at the fence, held by the undercurrent of anxiety in the words he had just heard. The trio stood in silence, watching. They saw the horses reined up some fifty yards from the first set of bars, then Eileen shot forward, urged into a swift gallop.

Suddenly Anthony Swan, was scrambling over the fence.

Sensing that some calamity was imminent, Vic lifted Audrey unceremoniously in his arms and dropped her on the other side of the white barrier, vaulting over after her. He caught her hand and the two raced after Anthony, who had sprinted ahead.

It happened before they could reach the scene. Eileen, head thrown high, barely had her forelegs over the top bar when she crashed down, turned an almost complete somersault and flung her rider in a heap. By the time the others came up, Jeff had dismounted and was holding Olive's limp figure in his arms. Eileen had attempted to get to her feet but had rolled on her side and lay still.

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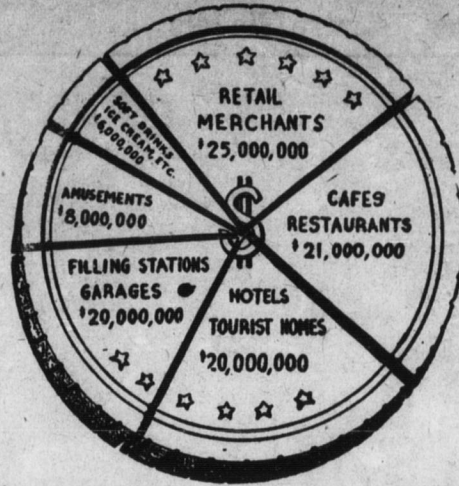


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