

CHECKERBOARD LOVE

JOSEPH M. CORD

CHAPTER V

Synopsis
Audrey Swan — nicknamed "Cygie," is the only child of a highly respected horse trainer. His farm adjoins that of Judge Castle, whose only son, Jeffrey, has been Audrey's friend since childhood. Now he is home to work in his father's law office in Parville. Audrey meets Jeff's college friend, Vic Quinn, and Olive Cooper, whom Jeff met abroad. Olive is thrown from a horse and is recovering from a sprained ankle at the Castle home, where Audrey visits her. Jeff, who has been with them, excuses himself for a moment.

"Isn't he precious?" Olive asked with a light laugh. "He reminds me so of a little boy, Cygie."
"Yes?"
"Has Jeffrey told you about . . . us?"
Audrey Swan was conscious of a curious sensation. It was almost as if her heart had skipped a beat at Olive's smilingly demure: "Has Jeffrey told you about . . . us?"

"I don't believe so. You mean then . . . is it congratulations?"
Olive nodded and lowered her eyes. The admission came shyly: "Yes. We're engaged." With her words, her hand came out and Audrey clasped it firmly.
"Congratulations!" she exclaimed cordially. "I think it's wonderful!"
"So do I," Olive admitted, withdrawing her hand somewhat hastily. "I imagine Jeffrey's breaking the tidings to his parents now."
"I'm sure they will be very happy for him."
"Hope so." Olive's smile vanished. "Of course, darling, you understand why we are not making a general announcement. I haven't my decree. At least, I don't think I have."

Audrey experienced another in-

ner shock. The explanation had been so matter of fact. "I see," she said simply.

"And are you properly appalled," Olive supplemented good-naturedly. "It's only a matter of form. My heart has been free for a long time . . . that is, until I met Jeffrey over in Europe."

Audrey nodded. The smile on her face felt frozen.
"I think marriage will be very good for Jeffrey," his fiancée went on complacently. "He has lived a lonely life, after all. That's the trouble of us 'only children, don't you think? He never has had the real advantage of a social life of the sort we will have. I'm selfishly glad that it isn't necessary for him to work for a living . . . grub, I mean. Clubs and sports and meeting the right people will do wonders for him. I don't believe he is cut out to be a business man, do you?"

"No," Audrey admitted slowly. "I doubt if he is. But his father's people have been lawyers for several generations, I understand. I imagined that he would follow his father's profession and take his place . . . at least, that is what everyone here has always thought."

"Well, a connection with some important law firm in the city might be an asset . . . like Vic's. But he works dreadfully hard, and it will take him years and years to get anywhere! There's no point in Jeffrey's keeping his nose to a grindstone."

"Then you don't plan to live here?"
"My dear child! I'm planning marriage, not retiring to a convent! Country life a week or two at a time is bearable, but that's enough."

When Olive spoke again there was an earnestness in her voice that made it almost sharp. "There is one thing, Cygie, I want you to understand . . . believe. I really love Jeffrey."

"Why, of course you do!"
The door opened at that moment and Jeff thrust in his head. "Secret session over?" he wanted to know. He kept his eyes on Audrey as he entered, closed the door after him and leaned against it.

She rose, went to him with her hand extended in a frank gesture. "Congratulations, Jeff. Lots of them. And happiness."
"Thanks, Cygie. Hoped you knew. Like it?"
"Of course!"
"Think it's pretty swell my own self."

"What did your mother and father say?" Olive asked abruptly.

"They bore up very nicely, I thought. They'll be up shortly to welcome you into the clan. Of course I told them there was nothing imminent, and all that." He turned to Audrey. "You're the only one in on the dark secret."

"And I shall be very discreet," she smiled. "I appreciate the honor. Best of luck to you both. I really must be going."

Jeffrey went down to her car with her. "I wanted you to know first thing, Cygie!" he exclaimed boyishly, once they were out of the house. "Told Olive that you were one of the family and if she didn't tell you today, I would. I'm a lucky guy, don't you think?" He was wistfully anxious that she should agree with him.

"And how! Best of luck, Jeff. Goodbye."
Judge George Castle, retiring to his library after lunch, hailed his son. "A moment, Jeffrey, if you please."

"Want me, sir?"
"Yes. Sit down. I wish to talk to you. I believe, as matters now stand, you expect to marry Mrs. Cooper before New Year."

"Why, yes. That's the arrangement, providing . . ."
"I am quite aware of the proviso. Her father is Harvey Harrison of the Harrison Products Corporation. From all accounts, he is a very wealthy man. A millionaire several times over, I should imagine."

"It wouldn't surprise me."
"I should judge . . . rather, I am convinced . . . that you would have a low opinion of a man who was content to live upon his wife's bounty. Had you given the matter any serious thought, may I ask?"

"Why, no." Jeffrey was a little taken aback at the direct question. "Of course I had always thought that . . ."
"That you would be associated with me in a business way. Such an arrangement was in my mind when I sent you to law school. You know that has always been my hope and intention."

Jeffrey, for the first time, was tempted to insinuate that his father's success had not been particularly handicapped by the million-dollar dowry brought him by Louise Langdon. He contented himself with: "That is the matter you wish to discuss, sir?"

"There is nothing particular to discuss," the Judge retorted. "In view of a long vacation and your intention to support a wife, I assume that you are ready to settle down and think of a professional career. In that event, I am ready to arrange a partnership with

you. More than that, I am willing to guarantee you a substantial income from the start. Doesn't that appeal to you as a fair proposition?"

"Very." The quiet agreement had its effect.

"Now see here, my boy." The Judge's heavy features relaxed in a frosty smile. "I need you. In fact, I need you particularly just now. You are not planning to be away long, are you?"

"You mean when I go to the city?"
"I understand that you are taking Mrs. Cooper home."

"I haven't planned definitely. Olive spoke as if she is expecting me to stay a few days . . ."

"Well, I shall have to make due allowances, I presume. However, I will ask you to return as soon as possible. Miss Dods, my secretary, is leaving me."

"Not really? Why? Not on my account, I hope!"

"No. She tells me it is according to the doctor's orders."
"Lord! That's a horse of another color. Why, I was . . ."

"And so was I," his father finished grimly. "What is still more to the point, she wishes to be relieved from her duties as soon as possible."
The following Saturday, Audrey received a telephone call soon after dinner. When she heard the voice at the other end of the wire she laughed. It was Victor Quinn. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. It's the old smoothie himself!"

"How right you are. Checked in at the village inn, had my supper and everything. If you're not going to take your bath for a bit, how about coming up?"

"I can wait awhile. I'll be very glad to see you."
Audrey discovered that she was unexpectedly glad to see Vic when he sprang from his car and came hurrying up the steps. There was something reassuring in his rugged, smiling face.

Victor sat down at Audrey's side, lighted a cigarette without offering her one, and remarked: "Now start in and tell me all about yourself. Everything."
"Well . . ." she mused, "it's been a long time since we've met, but to the best of my knowledge and belief, I've been nowhere, done, seen, and heard nothing. Oh, I've eaten and slept and tried to be a good Girl Scout."

"Hmm . . . m. That sounds innocent enough. Almost vacuous. By the way, I dropped in at the Castle office this afternoon. I scarcely expected to see Jeff on a half holiday, so I wasn't disappointed. The busy elderly lady holding down the place told me he was out of town. If I had seen him, Vic went on, watching Audrey's face through half closed eyes. "I was going to congratulate him."

"About what?" Audrey wondered how he had found out about the engagement.
"Olive got her decree. Or perhaps you knew it."

"No. I didn't know. Then you assume . . ."

"If they weren't engaged when he left for the city, I'll stake my reputation they are now. I'm wondering what it may do to old Jeff. If he turns out to be the sort of guy who lets his wife support him, I'll walk all the way from somewhere and back for the express pleasure of kicking him!"
Audrey pondered this in silence for a moment. "I guess they'll muddle through," she decided carelessly.

"Which is a deft way of reminding me that I should worry over my own affairs," Vic chuckled. With that, he changed the subject and talked lightly of other matters.
"How I have been running on!" he exclaimed in dismay when the clock in the hall chimed eleven. "Why didn't you tell me to toddle on long ago?"

"Because I have been having a good time," Audrey answered honestly. "It isn't often I have a chance to sit at the feet of a man of the world and snatch pearls of wisdom. Mother suggested that if you were in town tomorrow I might ask you to have Sunday dinner with us. We usually dine at one or a little after."

"I'll be here on the stroke. Thanks, and good night."
When Victor strolled in at the appointed hour, Audrey thought he looked unusually attractive in his fresh white suit, a rose in the lapel of his double-breasted jacket. He carried a sheaf of newspapers under one arm and deposited them on the porch swing after greeting his host and family.

It was not until after dinner that Vic had an opportunity to speak to Audrey alone. "Say, Audrey," he said, "there's a release in the society news that might interest you . . . here we are." He held out an open page.

"Oh!"
It was a two-column portrait of Olive. Over it a caption: "Her Betrothal Announced." Audrey skimmed through the accompanying account. Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Harrison were announcing the engagement of their daughter to Mr. Jeffrey Langdon Castle. The wedding was scheduled for September.

There was a mischievous twinkle in Victor's eyes, but he kept silent until Audrey remarked abruptly: "How would you like to go for a stroll?"
"Very much of a good idea, I'd say. Where away?"

Almost involuntarily Audrey directed their course to her favorite big tree. "I always liked this place when I was a youngster," she explained as they stood on the shady bank. "My idea of a real time was to come here with a good book and a couple of apples."

(Continued Next Week)



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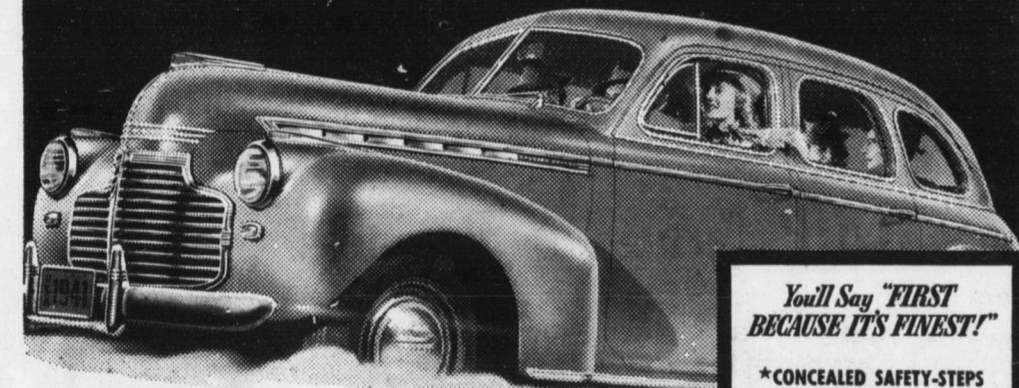
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