

CHECKERBOARD LOVE

JOSEPH M'CORD

CHAPTER VII

Synopsis
Audrey Swan, nicknamed "Cygie," is the only daughter of a highly respected horse trainer. His farm adjoins the estate of Judge Castle, whose only son, Jeffrey, has been Audrey's friend since childhood. The Judge has looked forward to taking Jeffrey into partnership, but Jeffrey is married to Olive Cooper, who refuses to live in his home town, Parville, and is planning a protracted honeymoon. Ill health makes it necessary for Annie Dodds, the Judge's elderly secretary, to leave, so Jeffrey is forced to work in his father's office. He tries to persuade Vic Quinn, a college friend in love with Audrey, to substitute for him. Vic is talking things over with Audrey.

"You. Look here, Audrey. You know what I'm driving at. Nothing has changed with me. But suppose I'd turned up in Parville for an indefinite stay. Frankly, wouldn't you have thought it in pretty poor taste . . . not to say 'No'?"

"No. Why should you think I would ever stand in the way of your helping a friend or helping yourself to something better? There's no reason that I can see."

"That's mighty swell of you. I believe I'll broach the subject to the elder Brand this afternoon if I get a chance. If he's agreeable, I may do it."

Henry Brand listened attentively to his subordinate's request

and was unexpectedly cooperative. "I don't wonder, Quinn, that you wish the association with Judge Castle. It is a real opportunity for a young man. I think it can be arranged if you wish."

Victor's next move was to call Jeffrey Castle at Parville. "I say, Jeff," he began with a carelessness that would have done credit to Jeffrey himself. "I just talked over that proposition with Mr. Brand. He was good enough to urge me to accept . . . thinks it will mean a lot for me. I guess he's right."

"You mean you'll come, then?" Jeff's relief and delight were apparent. "That's the best news I've had in an age!"

"Yes. That is, if you plan to be away long enough to make it worth while."

"Oh, it will be plenty long."

"What about your father?"

"He'll be tickled pink! He's away for a few days. But I told him I was trying to get someone to help here and he'll be delighted to know it's you. Don't worry. It's all settled."

"Well, look for me about the third. That's next week."

"Marvelous! Come right to the house. We'll put you up until you have a chance to look about."

"I'd rather you didn't mention it to anyone until it's settled."

"I won't . . . you sly dog! Good-bye."

He hung up before Victor had a chance to refute the final insinuation.

December had come before Jeffrey appeared again in the Par-

ville office. After an enthusiastic greeting, his first question was: "Is my father at home?"

"No." Victor returned in some amazement. "He went up to the city on business . . . plans to return tomorrow. Evidently this is a surprise. Did Mrs. Castle come with you?"

"No," Jeff answered shortly. "She's at home. We came back rather unexpectedly. Olive wanted to rest up and I thought I'd run out and see how everybody is . . . get a report on your stewardship."

"That's easy," Victor laughed. "My talent is all wrapped up in a napkin and I'm ready to travel. That's a little over your head, I know. I must say that married life seems to agree with you."

He had been appraising Jeffrey closely since that young man had posed in a chair with graceful ease. He was faultlessly attired, and had a healthy outdoor coloring. But Victor thought he detected an expression on his face, lines at the corners of his mouth that never had been there before.

"Oh, I'm feeling pretty fit," the traveler admitted. "How's everything around this dump?"

"All right, I should say. When do you plan to settle down in harness? You don't have to give me any particular notice, you know."

"No rush about that, Vic. It's going to take me a little time to get straightened out . . . settled, I mean. How're Audrey and her folks? I suppose you've seen quite a bit of them since you've been here."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't

been out a few times to visit them."

"I must run out and say hello before I go back. Mother's in town, I suppose?"

"So far as I know."

"Guess I'd better jog out there and give her a shock." Instead of following up his suggestion, Jeffrey lighted a cigarette and sat smoking moodily, staring at the wall in front of him.

His absorption in his thoughts became so evident that Victor was constrained to break the silence. "Looks as if you're doing some heavy thinking," he suggested.

"I am. For me. Look here, Vic . . ." Jeff still was staring at the wall. ". . . what sort of a deal did you make with Brand?"

"They expect to take care of me when I come back," Victor said idly without taking his eyes from the other man's face.

"I see. Then you could stay on here . . . indefinitely."

"Look here, Jeff. You can't do that."

Instead of replying directly, Jeffrey observed: "I had only one letter from the old gentleman while I was gone. It caught up to me in Honolulu. Most of it was a panegyric devoted to you. I wasn't surprised, knowing your efficiency of old. I could see that my absence wasn't disrupting the scheme of the Parville universe."

"Don't be an ass!" Victor retorted sharply. "Look at me, if you don't mind, and tell me what all this drivel is leading up to."

"I'm not coming back to Parville."

"You don't mean that, of course. There's nothing else for you to do, man."

"Think not? You're not married, Vic. But you must have some imagination. Do you fancy you'd trade your wife's affection for the sake of a noble gesture?"

"I'm afraid I'm not acquainted with that sort of . . . affection will do, I suppose. You're trying to tell me that Mrs. Castle is standing by her determination to remain in the city. I recall that you mentioned it before you went away."

"That's right. Sweet but unyielding. She sees no reason for my coming back here, and that's all-sufficient. There's no argument."

"But good Lord, Jeff! A man's self-respect counts for something! Surely a woman . . . there I go again. You've had to thresh out all that yourself."

"If I must have a career, what's the matter with good old Harrison Products? Olive has fixed that up for me. Nice berth and a fair income, guaranteed not to interfere with the cocktail hour. There's another argument Olive puts up." Jeff went on. "I'm not sure it hasn't some merit. If we came here, we'd have to live with the folks. For a time, at least. Olive insists there isn't any house big enough for two families, although there's seats of room at home. That would start a row, too. You'll have to give the girl her due. She won't consent to living in her own home, either. She is starting out on an apartment hunt today. That's all settled, too. You know, Vic," Jeffrey admitted wryly, "things would be easier for me if I didn't love my wife. But I do."

"Naturally. Then it's all settled, so far as you're concerned. Well, if there's anything I can do to smooth your path, you know I will. After all, nobody's going to expect you to break up your married life for the sake of your parents. That doesn't make sense."

"You can do a lot for me and for Father, too, if you'll stay on here. At least he'll never be able to throw it up to me that I left him in the lurch. I've supplied him with a substitute who will go much farther than I ever can. You like it well enough here, don't you?"

"Well enough, yes. I'd have to think it over pretty carefully, Jeff."

"More like April than December today," Anthony Swan remarked to his family as he pushed his chair back from the lunch table. "I believe I'm getting a bit of spring fever."

"I know I am," Audrey admitted. "Dad, have you any jobs that are crying out to be done?"

"There's that roan of Bardley's. Don't be woolgathering if you ride him. He'll stand a deal of watching. Tricky."

"Maybe I'll do that little thing after a bit. Are you going to be around the place this afternoon?"

"No. I'm leaving shortly with the truck. I've a car of feed in town and I want to get it out here. I'm taking Jim and Robert with me. You can manage your saddling, I dare say."

An hour later, wearing a windbreaker and her oldest jodhpurs, Audrey was leading the big roan gelding from the lower stable. "No tricks, now!" she warned, getting a firm hold of the reins and her boot in the stirrup. As she vaulted to her seat, the roan jumped sideways with a twisting motion that brought him no satisfaction, only a smart touch from Audrey's crop.

"Tough, what?" she bantered. "Grip now and don't pull the smart stuff."

Recalling that her father had complimented the roan upon his willingness to jump in good form, Audrey decided to test him. She put him swiftly at the first set of bars—the same ones where Olive Castle had had her spill, she recalled, after the start was made.

It was a beautiful jump and made an attractive picture. Audrey's slim body in perfect rhythm, with flowing muscles under her, face tense with excitement, curls whipped by the wind. The sight roused the admiration of an unnoticed audience, a lone horseman who shrilled an enthusiastic, "Yip . . . pee . . . ee!"

Audrey reined in and sent a startled glance over her shoulder. For an instant she failed to rec-

ognize the rider trotting up. A man in a sweater with a cap pulled low on his face. "Jeff! Hiya!" And her nose quivered. "Scuse my glove," she bubbled happily. "No. Don't excuse anything but my excitement! Am I glad to see you!"

"Same here." Jeff still held the small gloved hand in a close grasp, looked steadfastly into the smiling hazel eyes. "It's good to see you, Cygie!"

"Wherever did you come from?" she demanded.

"The big town. We arrived yesterday and I ran down for a few hours to see the folks. And you," he added quickly. "Father is away until tomorrow and Mother is in bed recovering from the shock. Thought I'd have a little ride for myself and I spied you from afar off. Seeing you're all saddled, Cygie, how about a little ride to celebrate? It isn't in the least cold."

"No, it's a gorgeous day. I'd love to. Where shall we go?"

"Well, if we're going to stay mounted, that cuts out the old trysting place under the willow. If he saw a shadow across Audrey's face he gave no sign. "How about the Ridge? That's next best in my memory."

"Splendid. We'll ride slow and talk fast."

Jeff seemed to have little to say save answers to Audrey's

eager questions. He seemed changed, looked older. She was trying to think of some cheerfully safe topic to introduce when he startled her by remarking: "I suppose you haven't seen Father lately." It was more nearly a statement than a question.

"No. Not in quite a while. I don't believe that I have talked with him since the night of the dinner. Why?"

"Just wondering how he is these days, that's all. I wish I didn't have to face him."

"Why do you say that, Jeff?" "I think you know. Well, I can't stall any longer. I was a fool to try it. Tomorrow I'll have the very pleasant job of telling the old gentleman that I'm ducking back to the city to stay. My wife won't live anywhere else and my father-in-law has come across with a job for me. It's a good story. But it won't help me here."

(Continued Next Week)

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