

CHECKERBOARD LOVE

JOSEPH M'CORD

CHAPTER IX

Synopsis
Audrey Swan, nicknamed "Cygne," is the only daughter of a highly respected horse trainer whose farm adjoins the estate of Judge Castle. The Judge's only son, Jeffrey, has been Audrey's friend since childhood. Jeff marries Olive Cooper and they leave for a long honeymoon. While Jeff is away, Vic Quinn, his friend in love with Audrey, substitutes for him in the Judge's office. The Judge, unknown to his son, buys a beautiful home for them near his own, in Parville. He has always wished to make Jeffrey a partner. But when Jeff returns, he tells him that Olive and he will live in the city and that her father will employ him there. The Judge is bitterly explaining to Vic, that Jeffrey will not be coming back.

"You thought he'd be returning. It did not seem too much to expect. It appears that it was quite too much, however." There was deep bitterness in the older man's voice.
"I'm sorry," Victor offered simply.
"As you can well appreciate, Quinn, this situation is most unfortunate for me, aside from the personal and family standpoint. I can no longer count upon Jeffrey. And Miss Dodds will never be able to return to her duties." Victor made no response. He

could guess what was coming. "I will be perfectly frank with you, Quinn," the Judge continued. "I am aware that Jeffrey has urged you to stay on permanently with me. I am seconding that request on my own behalf."
"That is exceedingly kind of you, Judge Castle, but I . . ."
"I know, I know. You are under the impression that your legal career will be modified by what Parville has to offer. I can appreciate that, but I believe that I can assure you that you are wrong. How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."
"And well matured. You have been of very great service to me during your stay. I have learned to my satisfaction that I can depend upon you. There is and will be plenty of practice here for a young man, and my experience, such as it is, will be at your service. I need you. What do you say, sir?"
"That I appreciate it very highly."
"I am offering you a partnership, Quinn. A full partnership here. That is what I promised Jeffrey. It does not interest him."
"That's a bit overwhelming," Victor managed. "I don't think that I need tell you I never anticipated . . ."
"No, no!" the Judge interrupted hastily. "If you can see your way clear to accept my offer you will be going a long way toward making up to me what I have lost."
"Yes, sir," Victor sensed the conference was concluded and went back to his desk in the outer office. He sat for a long time making aimless marks on a pad, his brows contracted, and his strong lower jaw set grimly. At length he tossed aside his pencil and reached for the telephone. There was no relaxation in his face when his requested number answered. "Hello, Audrey. This is Vic."
"I guessed it. How are you?"
"All right. May I see you if I drive out after lunch . . . two, perhaps?"
"Yes. I'll be here."
"Thanks." And he hung up. Audrey was sitting alone on the side porch when Victor alighted from his car. She closed her book and greeted him with a bright smile as he tapped on the door and then let himself in. "Alone, are you? I won't take

undue advantage, but I do want a conference just with you."
"It's a rare opportunity," she laughed. "Mom and Dad are off on a jaunt in the country."
"Fine. Hang it all, Audrey," he burst out, after a moment's contemplative smoking. "I wonder if you realize that almost every time I've talked with you it's had something to do with Jeff? It isn't fair to me, but that's the way it always turns out. I may as well own up that he's in it again."
"You surely expected him back."
"Of course I did. When I came down here, I swear it was only to help him out. You know I'm five years older than Jeff."
"I didn't."
"Well, I am. Old enough to have more discretion about some things, perhaps. I was about to add that I more or less asked your permission to come to Parville. The thing I'm trying to solve is whether I should stay on. You have something to do with that, too."
"But I haven't the remotest idea what you mean, Vic." She was plainly puzzled.
"No, you wouldn't. I had quite a session with the Judge at the office this morning. He tried to exact a promise from me that I would stay here with him indefinitely."
"Oh. Then he wants you and Jeff to . . ."
"No. Not Jeff."
"I see. Jeff doesn't want to come back here any more."
"It's . . . it's a little worse than that, Audrey. He can't come back. His father has . . . well, he's sacked Jeff."

Audrey caught her breath at Victor's blunt announcement. She knew what that expression meant, but it was difficult to comprehend. Judge Castle didn't want Jeff to come home any more. There was a something unreal about it—almost melodramatic.
"I didn't know that." A stupid thing to say under the circumstances.
"I shouldn't be thinking of myself," Victor admitted grimly. "It's a sad thing for all of them. At the same time it puts me in rather an embarrassing position, Audrey," he added gently. "I have made a hash of it. I see that now. I guess I let my heart get the better of my head."
Audrey managed a faint smile. "I'm fond of you. You must know that. But that's a long way from

"I know," he interrupted. "I'm going to stay here, be near you." A very little later, Victor rose to his feet with the announcement that it wouldn't look well for him to be taking the whole afternoon off just because his boss was out of town. Audrey smiled her agreement. Their friendship suddenly had renewed its old-time basis and both of them were relieved from the constraint that had seemed to shadow their recent meetings.
"Besides," Victor announced cheerfully, "there's a rival in the office." He nodded in the direction of the drive where a small touring car of ancient vintage was rolling up.
Vic smiled at the elderly town constable climbing from the car. Audrey went to the door and opened it as the newcomer was about to rap. "How do you do, Mr. Ringer! Won't you come in?"
"Just a minute," the officer remarked uneasily, his face clearing perceptibly when he saw the young lawyer. "How're you, Mr. Quinn?" Without waiting for a reply, he clutched off his cap and address himself hesitatingly to Audrey. "I . . . I'm sorry. But I got some bad news for you, Miss Swan. It . . . it's about your father."
Audrey's face went white. Victor instinctively moved close to her side. "What is it?" she asked. "Has he been hurt? Is my mother all right?"
"Yes, she's all right. It was like this, near as I had time to gather. They were drivin' into town, crossin' the new creek bridge. There was some children playin' on the ice. A little girl, they tell me, fell in an' your father jumped from his car an' ran down. He got the little kid out, but the ice wouldn't hold him. Some other folks helped him out an' hurried him to the hospital. He didn't get drowned or anything, but the shock of the cold water seemed to knock him out, like. They said it might be serious, so I told your mother I'd run out an' fetch you."
"Get your coat. I'll take you to your mother," Vic ordered quietly. "Or shall I send Julia for it?"
"No, I'll get it," Audrey left the porch with Victor frowning anxiously as he noted the almost mechanical manner of her walking. He turned to Ringer with an unasked question in his eyes. The little officer put a warning finger to his lips, nodded meaningfully.
"What's the matter? What's happened?" It was Julia hurrying in, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked from one man to the other.
"It's Mr. Swan," Victor said quietly. "Please control yourself, Miss Audrey will be here in a moment. She doesn't know."
"Oh, the poor lamb! You're meanin' Mr. Anthony is gone?"
"Hush! She's coming."
Julia pulled herself together, even hurried to open the door for Audrey, bent over and buttoned

the lower fastenings of the girl's coat. "If you want me for anything, darlin', I'll be right close to the phone."
"Let's go, please, Vic." She was dry-eyed still, speaking calmly.

Victor caught up his own coat from the chair. He opened the door and let Audrey precede him outside.
The ride was made in silence until the hospital's main building was in sight. Then Audrey spoke suddenly. "I know that Dad is . . . gone, Vic. I'm not going to break. Really, I'm not. It was the way he would have liked to go, I think."
Olive Castle had finished dressing for dinner and was giving sundry pats and touches to her perfectly arranged hair when the telephone on the bed stand sounded a gentle signal.
"Get it, will you, darling?" she murmured to Jeffrey who had come in a moment before from his adjoining suite. He strolled over and rather clumsily disposed of a French doll whose billowy silken skirts screened the instrument from view.
"Seems it's for me," he announced after an interval. "Long distance." After that it seemed that the party on the other end of the line was doing all the talking. Jeffrey furnishing an occasional monosyllable. Finally he said, "Thanks a lot for calling," and hung up.

Olive's delicate eyebrows drew down in a puzzled frown as she watched Jeffrey's reflection in the mirror. He was still holding the instrument in his hand, staring moodily into the distance. "Jeff! What in the world!" She turned to face him, wondering the more at the start he gave.
"Oh! That was Vic. Calling from Parville." He put the telephone back in its place. He had almost said "from home."
"You look as if he was telling you some bad news."
"He was. Very bad."
"Darling! There's nothing wrong at your home, is there?"
"No." He called to say that Tony Swan was killed this afternoon. Not killed exactly . . .

jumped in a creek to rescue a child, and the shock did him in. Seems he had a bad heart."
"You're talking about Audrey's father, of course. That is too bad. I'm sorry for her. Did Victor call you just to tell you that?"
"Certainly. He knows that Tony and I have been good friends ever since I was a kid. The funeral is Thursday morning."
"And?"
"I'm going, of course."
"It would have been a nice little mark of respect. But we can send flowers. You know you're going to the matinee that afternoon. You couldn't possibly be back in time. It's quite too bad."
"Too bad for the matinee," Jeffrey returned thoughtfully. "I'm leaving for Parville tomorrow evening. I wish that you'd go with me."
"Me go! Why? That man means nothing to me . . . except that he did ruin a perfectly good pair of boots that I was wearing for the first time."
Jeffrey looked at her with a steady stare. There was something in his brown eyes she had never seen before. For some reason it disturbed her more than she wanted to reveal. "I shall always wish you hadn't said that," he remarked slowly.

"Oh, don't be stupid, Jeffrey!"
"I'd appreciate it if you'd go." Olive's temper, usually under supreme control, flared. "I certainly have no intention of going! I hope that is clear . . . as clear as the reason that is taking you. Your wife's feelings deserve no consideration when something concerns that childhood sweetheart of yours."
(Continued Next Week)

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