

Checkerboard Love

By JOSEPH McCORD

CHAPTER VI

SYNOPSIS—Jeffrey Castle rounds off his college education with a year in Europe and returns to his home in Parville, where he is expected to practice law with his father. Jeffrey seeks out his childhood friend and neighbor, Audrey Swan, nicknamed "Crygie", and confides to her his disinclination to work in his father's office. Jeff invites Audrey to dinner at his house—Olive Cooper, whom he has met in Europe, is expected there over the week-end. 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. 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.

"I don't wonder. It's beautiful." Vic looked about soberly, then down at Audrey. "I'm in love with you, little Audrey Swan. Deeply and truly. And there it is."

Until this sunny Sunday afternoon, no man had ever told Audrey Swan that he loved her.

In the manner of every normal young woman she had dreamed her dreams in solitude, dreams unknowingly influenced by romantic stories and pictures. If they awakened no perceptible longing for love they did bring a knowledge of the thrill that most come when the words were spoken softly by the man to whom she was ready to give her heart.

"I love you, little Audrey Swan." No one could have uttered those words with quieter sincerity than Vic. Yet there was no thrill, no particular sensation of amazement or resentment. Instead, a little feeling of pity. It might be akin to love, but it wasn't love.

"Why did you?" was her low question. "Oh, why?"

Vic's smile was patetically twisted, but Audrey was looking down into the water and did not see. There was no smile in his voice or eyes.

"I guess I had to, Audrey. Would Sunday. Why in the world didn't

I ever have a chance?"

"I can't tell you, Vic. It's because I don't know. Honestly."

"And that's fair enough."

"There was nothing to cry about, but Audrey felt perilously close to tears. There was something pathetic in Vic's acceptance of things. "If I behave nicely," he asked, "can we keep on being friends?"

"Oh, of course, Vic! Your friendship does mean a lot to me. Really it does. I want it to go on."

"Then everything's all right with the world. We'll omit all this from the record and start where we left off. O. K.?"

"It's a bargain."

"Vic's principal reaction to his visit at the Swans' was a suspicion that he probably had made a first class fool of himself and destroyed any possibility of future happiness by being so precipitate. Yet he could feel no genuine regret. His love for Audrey had become such a part of his life that he had been unable to suppress a hope that she had in some way felt it. The great wonder was that she even had been kind to him, that she hadn't dismissed him forthwith and permanently. As long as she hadn't, there was some hope. He would never give up, but he must have sense enough to watch his step from now on.

The following morning he presented himself at the Castle office promptly at nine-thirty. To his surprise, he found his friend in the private office, feet upon the desk and puffing contemplatively on a pipe.

Jeff's soles came down with a crash. "Well of all things! Where the dickens did you come from, Vic? And at this time of day! Come in and have a seat, fella."

Vic shook hands and dropped into a chair. "Why, I'm on tour at the moment. Vacation. After reading the paper yesterday morning, seemed to me that it would be no more than decent to break my trip long enough to offer congratulations and all that sort of rot. So here I am. Accept my good wishes, if you will."

"Thanks, Vic. This sure is a tough burg in which to endure a Sunday. Why in the world didn't

you go out and put up with the folks? They would have been tickled to have you." Jeff added reproachfully.

"Well, as a matter of fact . . ."

"As a matter of fact, you were dandling around Audrey. Maybe you need congratulations."

"Be yourself. Just dropped in to pay my party call for the breakfast I had there when you wouldn't feed me. That was all. I did want to see you, too. Looks to me as if double congratulations were in order. Nice to see you at work. Permanent, I hope."

"Oh, sure." Jeff deliberately re-lighted his pipe. "Trying to see what your coaching was worth. After all, a family man has to contemplate the sordid aspects of an existence."

"Good for you. Seems to me that will be rather an ideal set-up—you and your father here together."

"Everybody seems to think so." "I wonder if that lad's serious," Jeff mused to himself after Vic left the office. "He's about the only guy I know of that's good enough for her. Queer how things happen."

Audrey Swan did not see Jeffrey Castle during the interim that preceded his marriage. Nor was she surprised. She knew that he was spending most of the time at home; all Parville knew. She wondered frequently, in spite of assuring herself that it was none of her affair, what would happen after the couple were married. Olive had been positive in her determination to live in the city. It was hard to believe that she would change her mind. But, of course, they must have reached some agreement or conclusion by this time.

For one of the city papers had revealed the date of the wedding as September 10th, adding that the bride and groom had planned an extended tour, but had made no announcement regarding their future residence.

That hurdle had been cleared more easily by the prospective groom than he had dared anticipate, when he was finally forced to bring up the matter for discussion with Olive. "Why worry over that?" she asked calmly. "For the present, you have given your father all the help he has a right to expect. Surely he doesn't think we are going to Niagara Falls and back on an excursion. My idea is a leisurely cruise."

Jeff was thinking busily. This was new and unexpected. He had anticipated a honeymoon of a few weeks. Now it appeared that Olive might be figuring in terms of months.

If the young man had not been so hopelessly in love, he might have suspected that Olive was carrying out a well-laid plan. In fact, she was doing just that. She believed that a few months of happy indolence would be a complete cure for Jeffrey. He would be anxious to compromise, would be willing to do anything to escape the drudgery which she could see was growing more and more distasteful to him.

It was about this time that Jeffrey, after long hours spent in wrestling with the dilemma, had what he believed was an inspiration, and he voiced it to Olive at the first opportunity. "You know, darling," he began with his familiar elaborateness, "I was thinking about old Vic today. Been quite on my mind."

"Why?" she questioned a little sharply.

"Maybe he'd like to take a crack at my job while we're away. Father has a lot of respect for him, I happen to know."

Olive appeared to muse over the idea. "It would be perfectly splendid, darling. Why don't you call him up?"

"I will, right now."

The same afternoon Jeffrey found himself in the offices of Brand, Blumenthal and Brand where an office boy ushered him into a small consultation room. Almost at once Vic appeared.

"Vic, I'm going to put my cards on the table. You're the only one I can talk to. I mean it. And you're the only one I know who can help. It's like this. Olive and I are getting married the tenth of next month."

"The papers beat you to that one, son."

"Don't kid. It's serious. Olive's told me point-blank that she doesn't intend to live in Parville. Frankly I've been stalling. I told Olive that I had to help father out for a little just now, because his office help is leaving. But now she's talking about an extended cruise."

"In what possible way do I fit in this?" Vic asked.

"Well, it's like this, old chap. I don't know what you're knocking down here or what you think your chances are. So I was wondering why you couldn't arrange for a leave of absence for a time, pinch hit for me with the old gentleman while I'm away. You'd be so much better than I; he'd be glad to be rid of me. I mean it."

"I'm not sure I get that," Vic admitted slowly. "You mean I should give up a permanent job for a temporary one?"

"No. Get a leave. If your boss gets fussy, you can easily line up another berth. I know darned well that father would make it worth your while."

Vic slowly shook his head. "It's the craziest thing I ever heard of."

"Just the same, it appeals to you."

"In a way. I don't think you appreciate the reputation your father has in this state as a jurist. It would be quite an opportunity for any one like myself to be associated with him. That's the only reason I'd ever consider it . . . not at all for the reason you have in mind. That's crazier still."

"Please think it over carefully, Vic. You can save the happiness of several people, I swear."

"I wonder. It will take a heap of consideration. See me next time you're up. I won't promise a thing. I still think it's crazy."

Jeffrey Castle's suggestion that Victor take his place in the office while he would be on his honeymoon brought the consideration the young lawyer promised, and a great deal more. Victor realized that he was yearning to accept it because it would bring him so near to Audrey Swan. Now he cursed himself helplessly for having told her of his love.

Desperate, he put in a call for Audrey without any clear idea of what he was going to say. He would have to trump up some excuse for an interview; then what?

Unfortunately, the operator reported that his party was not at the number given. Would he talk to anyone else? It was Mrs. Swan who took the call. "I wanted to speak to Audrey just a minute," he attempted, "will she be at home after dinner?"

"I doubt it," Martha replied. "Audrey's in the city. She broke a filling yesterday and left early this morning. She hoped the dentist would be able to take care of her today. If not, she said she would stay over. Her dentist is Doctor Lowellyn. He's in the Medical Arts. You might just happen to catch her there. I know she would be glad to see you."

"Thanks a lot. I'll do that. Good-by." He found Audrey there. "We're going some place to have lunch. Vic enlightened her as he led the way to the elevators.

At a small table in a secluded corner of a grill room Audrey said, "Now, tell me what it's all about."

"Well, it has to do with our old pal Jeff."

"What's he done? Trying to back out of things?"

"No. Trying to back in." Victor briefly sketched the situation. "He thinks he's stuck for a lengthy honeymoon and he's begging me to pinch hit for him with his father."

"Why don't you?"

"Let's skip that one for a minute," Victor pondered a little over his next words. "If the situation were different I'd admit I'd jump at the chance to be around the old Judge, more or less. It would be the post-graduate course of a lifetime."

"What's holding you back?"

(Continued Next Week)



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