

# CHECKERBOARD LOVE

JOSEPH M'CORD

## CHAPTER IV

**Synopsis**  
Audrey Swan, nicknamed "Cygie," is the only child of a highly respected horse trainer, whose farm adjoins the estate of Judge Castle. The Judge's only son, Jeffrey, has been Audrey's close friend since childhood. After a trip in Europe, Jeffrey is back in Parville to work in his father's law office. He is interested in Olive Cooper, whom he has met abroad. At a dinner party at the Castles, Audrey meets Jeffrey's friend, Vic Quinn—and Olive, who is a week-end guest. The Castle party comes to the Swan farm to jump their horses. Olive is thrown, and her mare's leg is broken.

"Carry her to the house," was Anthony's order to Jeff. "Audrey, you go with him. Lay her on a bed and call the doctor. I'll be there . . . wait." The last was to Victor, as Anthony ran over and took a quick look at the prostrate Eileen. "I fancied as much," he reported grimly. "Mr. Quinn, will you be good enough to stop at the stables and ask for Jim? Tell him it's a broken leg. He'll know what to do."

When Anthony Swan hurried into the front hall he encountered his wife at the foot of the stairs. "No doctor, yet? I'll have a look at the girl. Where did you put her?"

"Jeffrey laid her on Audrey's bed," Martha led the way. Jeff, white and shaken, stood beside the bed looking down at Olive, who lay with closed eyes. "Do you think she's badly hurt, Swan?" was his low-voiced question.

"I fancy not," was the quiet rejoinder. Anthony elbowed the young man aside, bent over the bed and began a gentle but thorough investigation. "It will be an arm or leg if anything worse than a shaking up. She's breathing well enough." He pulled a knife from his pocket and opened its heavy sharp blade. He looked up rather apologetically at Jeff. "Sorry to cut a new boot like that, but it's uncommonly tight. I'm afraid to drag it off."

"Go ahead," Jeffrey urged nervously. Audrey watched her father part the leather with cautious strokes, drag the boot off care-

fully and drop it. Then he turned to her. "Maybe you can do a better job, my girl, getting that stocking off."

As the sheer silk hose was freed from the breeches cuff, Audrey rolled it down with gentle fingers. "What do you think, Dad?"

"I can't say. It may be no more than a sprain, or there may be broken bones or torn ligaments."

"Listen, Swan," Jeff whispered somewhat irritably. "What was the matter with that darned mare, anyway? My man brought word that you said she was O. K. at the jumps. Were you watching? She acted as if she'd never been put at a fence."

"There was nothing the matter with the mare whatever, Mr. Jeffrey. The last word scarcely had left his lips when the silence was punctured by the distant crack of a rifle. "She'll not be jumping again," he added with grim bitterness.

It seemed as if the report might have startled Olive into wakefulness, for her eyelids fluttered, then opened wide. There was a helpless, dazed expression in the large dark eyes. She must have recognized Jeff for she called his name faintly and he dropped to his knees at her side. "Olive! Are you all right?"

"What happened?" She was looking wonderingly at the others. "Oh! I remember."

"You had a spill," Jeff explained hurriedly. "You're all right, now."

"Fancy that wretched mare refusing an easy jump like that!" said Olive. "I hope she broke her neck. Oh! My ankle!"

"You wrenched it a bit," Jeff soothed. "The doctor will be here shortly."

Olive looked at the faces about the bed and managed a smile. "Sorry I made such a spectacle of myself. I'm all right now. If you'll help me up, Jeffrey . . ."

"You stay right where you are, Mrs. Cooper," Martha directed. "I think that's Doctor Bardsley coming up now," as steps were heard on the stairs. "Yes, it is. In here, Doctor."

The others, save Jeff, left the room as the physician entered and Audrey found herself being escorted below stairs by Victor Quinn. "Audrey," Vic said, "my equestrian ignorance is depressing. But I couldn't help thinking

from some remark your father made that this accident shouldn't be charged fairly to . . . to the horse."

"The horse had nothing to do with it. But please don't quote me."

"Naturally not. I'm sincerely glad the girl was not seriously hurt, but I can see where it definitely puts an end to the party."

"I'm sorry. But I imagine you're right. Mrs. Cooper won't be up to much of anything for a little while, I suppose."

"Maybe she'll have to stay on with you," Vic suggested maliciously.

"We'll try to take good care of her."

"I was spoofing. Mrs. Castle will have her over there before sundown. You'll see. May I come back? I mean it terribly."

"You will be welcome any time, of course."

"Thanks a lot for everything. You're a cute number, Audrey. Goodbye." And he was gone.

Audrey was in the dining room, standing by the sideboard when her mother entered. "Audrey, did you have a chance to get acquainted with that woman?"

"Mrs. Cooper, you mean?" she returned guardedly. "Why, no. I didn't have much of a chance at the dinner. And you know she had that spill only a few moments after they came over."

"She's pretty," Martha admitted. "But I hate to see Jeffrey taking up with a divorced woman."

"Oh, that's nothing these days," Audrey was thinking of what Vic had to say regarding modern marriages. "Besides," she added with a faint smile, "she isn't divorced. Yet."

"Then she should wait till she is. Before she lets men start fussing around her. Jeffrey's clear out of his head over her. Your father is really upset about that horse."

"I don't wonder," was the grim retort. "That was rotten! I suppose she didn't know any better, but . . ."

"Did you hear what she said about it?"

"Yes, I heard."

"Do you know," said Martha. "I would have liked to see more of that Mr. Quinn. He talks a heap of foolishness, but anybody with half an eye can see there's a lot to him. He's smart. A lawyer, did you say?"

"Yes. Maybe you will be pleased to learn, Mrs. Swan, that he has asked your daughter's permission to come back again. Do you mind?"

"Indeed, no!" Martha regarded her daughter curiously. She could not quite understand this sudden light mood. "I think that would be very nice," she amended. "He seems to like you."

"Oh, he does. He thinks I'm a cute number. He just told me."

"Well, for . . . Audrey, isn't that Mrs. Castle's car?"

Audrey turned quickly, in time to see a blue limousine roll past the windows. A chauffeur in smart livery, a portly white-clad passenger in the rear.

"It's her Royal Highness," she reported briefly.

"I've never done more than speak to her!" Martha recalled in sudden consternation. "You go to the door. I'm not dressed."

"Why, good morning, Mrs. Castle!" Audrey tried to put delighted surprise in her tones. "Come in."

"I just heard about this dreadful thing and drove right down," the caller began a trifle breathlessly. "Is the poor child hurt?"

Doctor Bardsley said, "The young lady appears to have a badly wrenched ankle. I was just suggesting to Mr. Castle that it would be well to drive her to the hospital and let them take an X-ray as soon as she feels up to it."

Mrs. Castle turned to Audrey. "It's a miracle the child wasn't killed! I should have warned her. She is not accustomed to the reckless way you young people in the country ride. I dare say it was one of your father's horses."

"No, Mrs. Castle," Audrey explained quietly. "Mrs. Cooper came over here on one of your horses . . . Jeff's. But it is dead now."

"How shocking! It might so easily have been just the other way."

"Yes. They had to shoot the horse."

Mrs. Castle stared uncertainly as this information was imparted, but before she could decide whether or not some implication was intended, Jeffrey appeared on the stairs with Olive in his arms. White-faced, and with her hair in disorder, she looked very small and childish. One arm was about her aide's neck, her other hand held her hat dangling by its elastic cord.

"Hello, Mrs. Castle," she called with attempted gaiety. "Aren't I a mess?"

"You poor darling!" The other woman hurried forward and brushed a kiss on the patient's cheek. "Are you in great pain? I'm so relieved to know that you are not badly hurt."

Olive turned her head and looked at Audrey. "So sorry, dear, to have caused all this commotion. It spoils everything. But you'll come to see me, won't you? And please do thank your father and mother for their kindness."

The late afternoon found Audrey on the side porch trying to

forget everything in the pages of a new novel. When the sudden crunch of tires on the gravel drive caused her to look up, she was startled to see Jeff in his yellow roadster.

She was more puzzled when she discovered that her caller was decidedly ill at ease. "How is the lady now?" she inquired dutifully.

"Olive? Oh, she's all right. Sleeping when I came away. She decided not to go to the hospital until tomorrow. I believe we left Olive's boot behind in the excitement," he remarked offhandedly. "I thought I'd drop in and pick it up."

"I'll run up and get it for you." She went in and appeared with it almost at once. "Pity Dad had to cut it," she remarked.

"Oh, well . . . You know, Cygie . . . hank it all, I feel pretty rotten about the whole affair. It was my fault, after all."

"I don't see why."

"Sure you do. I know you well enough to guess what it would do to you to see a good horse done in like that. When I sent Eileen over here, I figured that you'd ride her. Same as I knew you wouldn't say she was all right at the bars if she wasn't."

"I had no trouble with her," Audrey observed quietly.

"Olive told me to ask you up to the house if I saw you. I wish you would come, Cygie. Will you?"

"Let's see," Audrey mused. "Tomorrow's Sunday, isn't it? I'll run in during the afternoon. Will that do?"

"Thanks a lot, Cygie." He rose to his feet. "See you tomorrow, then."

True to her promise, Audrey drove to the house on the hill. There was little about Olive Cooper to suggest the invalid. She was propped up in a nest of pillows and wearing a lacy negligee of bright yellow that set off her coloring. Her hair was perfectly arranged, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed. She extended her nearest hand, her left, in a graceful greeting.

"So sweet of you to run in, Cygie . . . you don't mind if I call you by Jeffrey's name, do you? It's so cute. This is one time I really am going to have a chance to visit with you."

"How's the ankle?"

"Doing nicely. We went to the hospital this morning and had it picture taken. Just a bad sprain, but they say I must keep off it for a time. It's a dreadful imposition on these dear people."

"Terrible!" Jeff laughed. He brought a chair for Audrey, then excused himself for a few moments, saying with exaggerated carelessness: "I know you two girls would like to have an uncensored gabfest for a bit. I'll go down and amuse the old folks with my bright sayings." He went out and closed the door softly behind him.

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