

RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin
Author of
The Black Pigeon



"You know darn well what it is, and I'm not going to let you kid me out of it this time! When are you going to marry me, Nan? Next Saturday or Sunday?"

THIS HAS HAPPENED

NAN CARROLL is secretary to JOHN CURTIS MORGAN, who is winning the title of the "greatest criminal lawyer in the state." Morgan is defending a young girl, formerly switchboard operator of a fashionable country club, who has been indicted on a charge of blackmailing the members of the club. Nan gives Morgan valuable suggestions which he accepts. While they are hard at work, an impatient rap sounds on the door. IRIS MORGAN, beautiful wife of the lawyer, enters, accompanied by her frail but handsome son, little CURTIS. She demands a check which she accepts condescendingly from Nan's fingers, then departs for a shopping tour, leaving the child for Nan to care for. When WILLIS TODD calls for Nan at 5:30 she is almost hysterical from the strain of the afternoon. He tells her he has a question to ask her. As she leaves the phone she reads about the divorce which that question is and if her answer is yes, she need never again be nursemaid to Iris Morgan, need never suffer her insolence again.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER II
"WHEN I'm tired," Nan Corral groaned as she banked cushions upon one end of the big couch which would later serve as her bed, and curled her small body into the nest. "Half past ten, and this is the first deep breath I've had time to take today. Be an angel, Willis, and just sit. I want to do that famous relaxing stunt I'm always reading about. I think the general idea is to close your eyes, make your mind a perfect blank, turn loose of everything, and let every nerve unkink. It listens swell, doesn't it?" she grinned crookedly at the man who had settled as near her on the couch as he dared.
"Don't go to sleep, honey," Willis warned her, his gray eyes grave and tender as they searched the relaxed, weary little face that was cuddled childishly against a black satin cushion. "I told you I had something to say to you and that you'd better make up your mind to listen. You can't escape me now as you did at dinner." "Nice old bully," she gibed good-naturedly. "But don't talk for just a few minutes, or I'll scream and tear my hair—which would be a pity, since I paid a dollar and a quarter for this finger wave just yesterday. Whew!" And she exhaled another sigh of profound fatigue, burrowing still more deeply into her nest of cushions.
The young man who watched her with loving anxiety looked anything but a bully, but he did look thoroughly "nice." Sand-brown hair, a few freckles that persisted thru the remains of a coat of summer tan, and a broad mouth that seemed to be trying to offset the boyishness of the dimple-cleft chin.

FOR perhaps five minutes Nan's eyes remained closed, then they flew open to laugh at Willis Todd's intent anxiety. "Old Sobersides!" she jeered fondly, thrusting out an impudent small foot to kick him unburdenedly. "I'm all rested now, able to bear up under anything. What's it going to be—another lecture on the heinous crime of breaking one's dates with one's steady? Defendant pleads guilty and throws herself upon the mercy of the court."
"No, it's not a lecture, though you may deserve one," Willis Todd told her gently, as he moved near enough to take her hands. "You know darned well what it is, and I'm not going to let you kid me out of it this time," he added sternly. "When are you going to marry me, Nan? Next Saturday or Sunday?"
"Oh, dear," Nan sighed, lifting his hand in both hers and laying her back against it. "You're going to be masterful and arbitrary, aren't you, dear? I like you so much better when you're just sweet and restful. You really can't imagine how sweet and restful you are, as a rule, Willis darling. There's no one else with whom I can be so natural. Why, Willis, I don't even mind your seeing me with my hair all out of curl or a run in my stocking. Nice boy! And she rubbed her cheek cajolingly against the back of his hand.
"Just another good reason why you must marry me, then," Willis retorted no less sternly. "You're killing yourself in that fool job of yours, honey, and I'm not going to stand for it another week. Playing

nursemaid to Morgan's little hellion, running errands for his selfish wife, doing all your own work in the office and half of Morgan's—" "That's enough, Willis!" Nan interrupted sharply, dropping her hand as if it had been burning her cheek. "I'll meekly agree to anything you say about Iris and Curtis Morgan, but you can't say a word against Mr. Morgan. He's the state, the finest gentleman, and the most considerate employer—" "And that's enough from you, Nan," Willis dared to interrupt her. "I believe we were discussing you and me, not John Curtis Morgan. I'm sick of the name, incidentally. Three-fourths of your conversation is about him and your work—" "Because I love my work and couldn't be happy a minute if I gave it up!" Nan caught him up passionately. "That's the reason I won't marry you, Willis. You've said time and again that I had to stop work when I married you and I simply won't—that's final! I've spent three years in that office, every working day of my life since I graduated from college, and I'm not going to throw over my career to get married."

"Your career?" Willis was becoming angry. "That's rather a dignified name for a job as a private secretary, isn't it?" "I'm more than a private secretary and you know it, Willis Todd!" Nan's voice broke on a childish sob, which made her still more angry. "You know good and well that I've studied night after night so that I could become a lawyer. You know I'll be ready to take my examinations to be admitted to the bar by next June—" "Yes, and then what?" Willis interrupted vehemently. "You'll go right on working for Morgan as his private secretary, or, at best as a female Blake at \$50 a week. But please, honey, don't let's quarrel. I love you and want to marry you. If you love me you want to marry me—and start a regular, old-fashioned family. Doesn't it sound sane and—a little attractive, honey-girl?" "Your own home, instead of a lighthousekeeping one-room apartment and an office where you are treated like a servant by your employer's wife. Your own husband to boss around and inspire to make into a big man—as you're now doing to another woman's husband—"

AS she listened, Nan's face had grown tender and wistful, but at his last words anger flooded her face with rich color and she sprang to her feet, tearing her hands out of his grasp. "You make me so mad!" she stormed, clenching her hands and blinking at him rapidly through tears. "Just when you've got me all mushy and ready to say 'yes' to anything, you have to spoil it all by saying something hateful about—about Mr. Morgan. I don't make fun of you and your boss, accuse you of toadying to him—" "No," Willis interrupted her quietly, his young mouth very grim, "because you know I'm not in love with him. The relationship is purely that of buyer and general manager—" "Oh!" Nan gasped, retreating from him slowly, her brown eyes growing enormous with horror. "Oh, Willis Todd! How dare you say a thing like that to me?" Willis rose and followed her, his hands closing firmly upon her shoulders, his eyes not so many inches above hers, narrowing as they searched her scarlet face. "If you'll tell me it isn't true, I'll apologize, Nan, and I'll never hint at such a thing again."
"Just what do you mean—just what isn't true?" she challenged him furiously, shrugging her shoulder to rid them of his hands, but not succeeding.
"Are you in love with John Curtis Morgan?" Willis asked bluntly, but his voice quivered and a muscle jerked in his suddenly pale cheek.
Childishness and the red tide of anger fled from Nan Carroll's face as if she had been stricken old and ill in an instant. Her eyes were like great black disks of pain and horror as they clung to his face, unable to tear themselves away. She stood quite still, her shoulders no longer aware of the hurting pressure of his hands.
"You see!" Willis Todd turned sharply away, and like an intolably wounded small boy he flung up an arm and bowed his head upon the crook of it.

That gesture of his awoke Nan out of her trance of horror, did something to her heart. Taking a quick jerky step toward him, she put her arms gently about him, laid her cheek against his bowed head. "Nan's sorry," she crooned, in a pathetic, breaking, but comforting little voice. "Please, Willis, you said we weren't to quarrel. And—and if you want me to very much, I'll marry you, dear—" His head came up with a jerk; his gray eyes swept over her face hungrily, incredulously. She smiled through her tears, nodding slowly, like a child that has been scolded and longs to be reinstated. "Then you don't love Morgan?" he blurted out joyfully. "Say it, Nan! Say it, darling—oh-h, I see. You can't say it. Then why do you want to marry me?" he demanded violently, because his pain was so great. "I think," Nan began steadily, "that you can't realize how insulting you are. I should have thought it would be sufficient for me to say I would marry you."
"And I," Willis told her, not at all steadily, "don't want you to marry me if you love another man."

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Twelve Enrolled In New Night School

Twelve students are now enrolled in the night school being held in room 14 Delkin building three nights each week. Typing and shorthand, book-keeping and business English are taught in the school, according to Mr. Wyatt. Classes are held between 7 and 9 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and there are two instructors.

The words have been said between us at last, Nan. I've been in an agony of jealousy for two years, and now that I've admitted it at last, you'll have to answer my question. I'm sorry, Nan, but it would be no good pretending I'd never asked you and you'd evaded the question. We'll be so happy, darling, if you say, 'I love you, Willis. I don't love Morgan.' Can you say it, Nan?" he insisted, his hands clenched to his sides.
"I refuse to answer a question you have no right to ask me," Nan blazed. "I never dreamed you had such ugly thoughts about me in your mind these two years. I'm lucky to have found it out in time."
"Listen, Nan," he urged miserably. "Face the truth, no matter how it hurts. When I proposed tonight for the fifth time you were going to refuse me again—did, in fact, on the score of wanting to keep on with your career. But as soon as I made you realize that you were in love with John Curtis Morgan, a married man, you wanted to hide from the truth, run away from it into my arms. You're naturally too fine and good to bear the thought of being in love with another woman's husband. But—I love you with all my heart, and you've got to love me that way, or we shan't ever be married. Am I right, honey? All you've got to do is to deny it all—and mean it—"

BUT he could not go on, with those despairing, horror-stricken eyes fixed upon him. He turned away from her, junched like a drunken man to the table upon which he had laid his hat, snatched it up and lurched on toward the door.
Nan watched him go, the back of one trembling hand crushed against her mouth, as if to stifle a cry. When the door closed sharply upon him, she ran toward it, leaned against it, panting, her eyes terrible with fright.
"Oh, Willis, come back! Don't leave me alone! You've always been so sweet to me, Willis! You can't be so cruel as to leave me alone now! If you leave me alone I'll have to think, I don't dare to think! Oh, Willis!" But her voice was only a husky, terrified whisper that the man who was plunging down the hall could not possibly have heard.
(To Be Continued)

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