

THIS HAS HAPPENED

John Curtis Morgan, successful lawyer, is passionately in love with his beautiful wife, Iris, and does not suspect that Nan Carroll, his private secretary, has fallen in love with him. Nan, having a high sense of honor, decides to resign, but postpones her resignation because she feels Morgan will have a particular need of her in his defense of a supposed friend, Bert Crawford, indicted for embezzlement. On the last day of the trial, little Curtis Morgan, six-year-old son of Iris and Morgan, innocently places in Nan's hands a note apparently taken from his mother's handbag. It is from Crawford and reveals his guilt and his and Iris' intention to elope after the trial. Crawford leaves town and Iris departs for a pleasure trip a few days later.

Iris announces her desertion in a letter which cleverly omits mention of Crawford and pleads with Morgan not to try to find her. Morgan is heartbroken. Nan convinces Morgan he should not place little Curtis in a boarding school and that he should keep his home intact. While Morgan is at the capital on business, Nan stays at the Morgan house with little Curtis and organizes the housekeeping so father and son may carry on. She places little Curtis in public school.

Nan wins the love and confidence of Curtis and is herself happy serving the man she loves, but who ironically loves another woman. Morgan returns unexpectedly from the capital to report a commutation from death to life imprisonment for the man he had thought was his father. Morgan and Curtis go in to the dinner that Nan has planned.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XXIV

"Well Nan," John Curtis Morgan dropped to the couch beside the girl and stretched his long legs to the warmth of the fire in the grate. "Now that between us we've managed to get that young hooligan of mine to bed, I'd like to have a first-hand account of how certain miracles have been wrought."

"I go away and 28 hours later I return to find my son not only entered in public school but crazy about it, and provided not only with a key player but with a whole delightful family to look after him. The O'Briens were a stroke of genius on your part, Nan. Suppose you take the stand and tell the whole story in your own words," he added, burlesquing his own manner in the courtroom.

Nan obeyed, giving her employer a vivid account of her activities in his home, as well as the reasoning which had motivated her. Morgan listened attentively, but his eyes were fixed, throughout her recital, upon the startling life-like portrait of his wife that hung above the mantel.

"I think you've been inspired in your handling of the boy," Morgan said, when Nan had finished her "defense."

"Inspired by my love for you which you don't even suspect, thank God!" Nan agreed in her heart.

"I suppose you haven't yet had time to hire a housekeeper. Lord, but I dread having one of those middle-aged, genteel women in reduced circumstances pervading the house," Morgan sighed. "She will inevitably be stout, afflicted with varicose veins, hay fever and a wart on the side of her nose. And she'll have a dozen peppy little legal troubles that she'll want to consult me on every night I'm at home."

Nan regarded, thrust out both legs and giggled with rosy lips. "And I was just flattering myself tonight that they're quite nice legs. And at six o'clock this evening the last time I consulted a mirror, there was absolutely no hint of a wart on this insignificant but satisfactory nose of mine."

Morgan stared at the girl for a moment as if he thought she was crazy, then she saw dismay and embarrassment leap into his black eyes. She hastened to reassure him, indirectly. "Yes, I've hired myself as your housekeeper. If you please, sir, but a new sort—a long-distance housekeeper. I can furnish the best of references and I promise to become neither stout nor genteel, and not to pervade the house. In fact, your housekeeper's desk has a strange resemblance to your private secretary's."

"But—Nan! My dear girl!" Morgan remonstrated. "Then he did something that completely unnerved the girl who was already trembling at her own audacity. He reached for her hand and lifted it to his lips. She closed her eyes so that he could not possibly see in them that which he must not guess. "You should have been named Martha," he said gently, when he had released her hand, "because your joy is in service..." She saw his eyes sweep upward to Iris' pictured beauty, and she wondered if John Curtis Morgan was, for the first time, comparing or contrasting these two women who had been closest to him. He sighed, then said almost abruptly: "But of course I can't let you take on the burden of my house as well as of my office. Nan, not even your splendid health and your enormous capacity for work could stand up under the strain."

"Bunk!" Nan retorted indignantly. "I intend to be a home efficiency expert, and whoever heard of an efficiency expert working? There isn't a great deal more to be done—just supervising mainly. I've already made an appointment to take Curtis to Dr. Blake, the child specialist, tomorrow."

Morgan was startled and alarmed. "Is the boy sick?"

"Not exactly sick, but malnourished," Nan explained, firmly. "I'm going to ask Dr. Blake to prescribe a diet for Curtis, then exercise all the ingenuity I possess to keep the kid from knowing he's on a diet and to get him to eat it. Tonight's 'Hidden Treasure' was the first gun fired in that campaign. Curtis simply must eat lots of milk and green vegetables, and he refuses to touch either—until he dug into my famous 'Hidden Treasure' tonight. You'd never expected to see him eat spinach, had you?" she challenged the

RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin
Author of
The Black Pigeon

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"Oh, Willis! Why didn't you take me up when I said I'd marry you?"

thoughtful man beside her.

"No, I'm afraid I—we let him dictate his own diet," Morgan admitted ruefully. "Was there a hint of accusation in the glance he flashed at Iris' picture?"

"I'm going to trick him into eating some of the things he thinks he doesn't like, and let Little Pat bully him into consuming the others. I'm counting heavily on Little Pat—for assistance in more ways than one." Nan told Curtis' father gravely. "But to get back to my job as long-distance housekeeper. Every Monday morning I'll furnish the cook with complete menus for the week. She'll do most of her marketing Monday, buying fresh vegetables, eggs, etc. during the week as they're needed. I might add that I took a thorough course in dietetics in college and that I'm no slouch as a cook, myself."

"You're no slouch at anything, Nan, dear," Morgan laughed. "Go on! You're certainly a glutton for punishment, child!"

"Maybe I like showing off," Nan retorted. "Anyway, there are your meals taken care of; Curtis looked after by the O'Briens' mother and son, when he's not in school; and your house kept in apple-pie order by the efficient Estelle. Then what remains? Shopping for Curtis and for the house, of course, as equipment and linens wear out. Fool! I can do it all in three or four hours a week, and you wouldn't cheat a poor girl out of her fun, would you?"

"I'll agree to let you try it, on two conditions," Morgan answered slowly. "First, that you let me pay you what I would have to pay a housekeeper; and second, that you take an afternoon a week off from the office and give Curtis and me the great pleasure of your company for dinner. Otherwise I'm afraid it's going to be a bit lonely in the Morgan house for the men."

"Good. I can use a free dinner every Monday," Nan accepted flippantly, to hide her joy. "You can gamble that Monday's dinner will always be a feast. Now I'm going to pack my suitcase and toddle on home or you'll be accusing your housekeeper of 'pervading' the house."

"I'll take you home," said Morgan.

During the six months that followed, Nan Carroll lived from Monday to Monday, and all the words in the English language, the most important, the most mystical, and the most heart-making became, as far as Nan Carroll was concerned, "I'll take you home."

For during each of those Monday night drives from the Morgan home to the tiny apartment which she also found time to keep immaculate, the girl played a pathetic little game with herself. She pretended that Morgan was not an abandoned and grief-stricken husband at all, but a young man entirely free to be in love; that he was in love, in fact, and that those Monday night drives were not at all a host's duty to his guest, secretary and housekeeper-of-sorts, but dates. And so, while the Nan that Morgan knew carried on an animated conversation about Curtis, domestic problems and legal tangles, the Nan that only Nan knew whispered soft, sweet nonsense with her mythical "steady."

Week by week Nan found joy in measuring John Curtis Morgan's slow but definite recovery from the tragic depression into which Iris' desertion had plunged him on the dreadful Friday when he had received her cruelly cut letter. At first, she knew, he fostered a stubborn hope that Iris had decided hastily, that she would write and ask forgiveness, that she would return. But when, after three months of utter silence from his wife, he evidently made up his mind to accept her desertion as final, his sensitive face took on an expression of sad resignation. And after resignation came a sort of peace, for Nan was making him and his boy very comfortable indeed in the beautiful

home which she was managing from his office.

Of course it was not so easy as she had pretended to Morgan that it would be. A hundred trivial annoyances and at least half a dozen major problems came up during those six months, requiring far more of her time and energy than Morgan dreamed that she spent upon his home affairs. She spared him here, as she had spared him elsewhere, that his wife had stolen money from Estelle to go on a candy orgy which left him so ill that candy had no appeal at all for the boy for weeks afterwards. From these and many other minor tragedies she protected the man she loved.

And every Monday night she saw that he was a little more at peace, a little more at ease with her and with his son, whose friendship and confidence he was cultivating, as if he were a little bit jealous of the boy's devotion to Nan.

In June Nan went to the state capital to take her bar examination; for Morgan persisted in his desire to see his secretary become his junior partner.

On her return Willis Todd, with whom she was still having a date or two a week, met her at the station. It was 9 o'clock of a soft June night.

"Are you a lawyer yet?" he teased, his gray eyes very fond and tender.

Nan squeezed his arm. "Oh, Willis! Always nice to see you, Willis! Of course I'm not a lawyer yet. I won't hear from my exams for weeks and there's all sorts of bad news before I can be admitted to the bar. When I am, I'll feel as if I'd been gone for weeks. I see they haven't built a new station yet! Doesn't anything ever happen in this town?"

"Wait!" Willis stopped her as she took a newspaper from the seat of his car. "I didn't want to tell you tonight, but you'll see it in the paper. The little Morgan kid was in an accident today!"

CHAPTER XXV

Nan's heart stood still. Her eyes, black with fear, asked Willis Todd the question which she could not make her lips form.

"No, he isn't dead—not even badly hurt," Willis reassured her gently.

"Oh!" Nan drew a shuddering breath of relief. "Thank God!" She relaxed against the cushions of the car for a minute, trembling violently. Then, "What are you waiting for, Willis Todd? Start the car! Get me there as quick as you can! Tell me what happened, Willis, but drive—drive!"

"So that's how you feel?" the grimly. "Goodbye, Hope! All right, honey-girl! Don't worry about me. I'd rather have your friendship than any other girl's love..." It seems that the two youngsters, Pat O'Brien and Curtis, were playing with the police dog on the lawn this morning, teaching him to retrieve so that it landed in the middle of sticks. Curtis flung a stick too far, the street, and of course the dog dashed after it, and Curtis after the dog. Little Pat, it seems, shouted to Curtis to come back, then tore out after him. Curtis was stooping over to take the stick from Cop's mouth when a taxi stopped around the corner, too fast to stop in time."

"Oh!" Nan gasped, and clung sickly to Willis' arm.

"It seems that your faith in Little Pat as the kind's bodyguard was amply justified, for Pat flung Curtis out of the way of the taxi and took both wheels across his own legs. Both broken. Little Pat's in the hospital, poor tad!"

"And Curtis?" Nan whispered, a shaking hand over her eyes to shut out the horrible picture that Willis had described.

Nan could have kissed the nurse for the delicate diplomacy which

made her engage both the father and the doctor in conversation while Curtis was still shouting his explanation. Her face was flaming as she drew up a chair to the injured boy's bedside, but when the doctor had ordered out of the room, she bent and kissed him with the passionate love of a mother, rather than like a "parent pro tem."

"Little Pat's a hero, Nana," Curtis began eagerly, holding fast to her hand, "like 'The boy stood on the burning deck.' But he ain't lead. Both his legs got broke and only just one of my arms, and Cop wasn't hurt at all. In the story books the dog always gets killed saving his little master, but I'm glad Cop didn't get killed."

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"You're not listening again, Nana," Curtis complained, but his face was dragging with drowsiness. Can I go to the hospital to see Little Pat? And take Cop? Can I, Nana? Can I?"

"Yes, yes," Nan pouted rashly. Then, because his hand was dragging at her shily she knelt down beside his bed and laid her hot cheek against his pale cheek until he was sound asleep.

Nan slipped out of the house without saying good-night to her employer. From the hall she heard the masculine rumble of what seemed to be a very earnest conversation which she had no inclination at all to interrupt. She found Willis Todd patiently waiting for her and the glow of his cigarette was strangely comforting to the over-wrought girl.

"The kid all right, honey?" Willis asked gently as she climbed into the seat beside him.

"Yes... Oh, Willis, what an awful fool I've been!" She slumped into a forlorn little huddle and began to sob graspingly against his coat-sleeve.

"Who says so?" Willis challenged.

"I do!" Nan sobbed. "Oh, Willis, when I said I'd marry you, and I've often wondered myself, 'Just selfish, I suppose. I wanted you to be as crazy in love with me as I am with you. It never happens that way, I suppose. One always loves more than the other.' Morgan and his—his—yours, honey—yours, and I—you and Morgan—Heigh-ho, darling, it's a great life—if you don't weaken. And I've weakened—so have you!"

"Will you try it with me now, Nan? I'm hiked, I'll take what I can get and be thankful for that. Maybe it's better to be privileged to devote your life to the person you love than to be a hog about romance, which doesn't wear any to be believed, as well as the evidence of our own eyes—"

Nan giggled through a sob. "That sentence is becoming terribly inverted, dear, and so is the sentiment. But I know what you mean. You are a darling, Willis!"

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The next morning, after more sleep than she had hoped to get, Nan Carroll took up her temporarily neglected duties in Morgan's offices. It was good to have to work like a whirlwind, nice to be teased by Evans and Blake about her prospective status as a "flapper lawyer."

"You'll have to carry a new crop of hats and straddle that babyish nose of yours with a black-ribboned pince nez," Blake told her. Even groupy old Evans had his jokes, addressing her ponderously as "Attorney Carroll."

It was into this genial atmosphere of work and jest that John Curtis Morgan stepped at 10 o'clock, accompanied by old Judge Jennifer, retired from the bench these 20 years but still practicing law. Morgan, who was only 36, in spite of his eminence in the profession, had begun his career as a very humble clerk in Judge Jennifer's office 15 years before, and the two were more like father and son than anything else.

It was not often, however, that the old man honored the younger with a visit to his offices, and somehow Nan received the impression, after a quick glance at the employer's face, that this was not a visit at all, but a professional consultation. And yet—there was no case in Morgan's office at the time that seemed to call for Judge Jennifer's well-seasoned advice. In fact, the old man, grown weary of criminal law, had been devoting himself almost exclusively for several years to the less objectionable types of divorce suits.

The conference—if such it was—lasted until almost noon. Oddly enough, Morgan did not accompany his old friend to the door, did not, in fact, emerge from his private office. Judge Jennifer came out alone and stopped before Nan's desk.

"Well, well, Nan my dear," he rumbled, with grandfatherly affection. "John tells me you're going to be a lawyer. Been up to the capital to take your bar examinations. You're a smart girl, Nan, and we're proud of you, but—" and he lowered the rumble to a gusty, strangely significant whisper—"take an old man's advice and leave these dirty

criminal cases to the men. Marry a lawyer, raise up a boy to be a lawyer, if you're going to meddle with the law, but—leave the courtroom lights to the men, my dear."

"You find me a nice young lawyer for a husband, Judge Jennifer, and maybe I'll take your advice," Nan retorted flippantly, but she had an uneasy suspicion that Judge Jennifer knew exactly what her hot blush meant.

"That's a bargain—remember!" the old lawyer chuckled from the doorway.

For nearly an hour there was no sound from the private office of John Curtis Morgan. Nan forced herself to go on working at high pressure, but three times she made typographical errors in letters she was writing—an inefficiency record she had never sunk to before.

Something was afoot. Judge Jennifer—divorce... Light poured in. Iris, of course! She had written to Judge Jennifer, as her attorney, had asked him to approach her husband on the subject of a divorce. Of course! Oh, poor man! Yesterday Curtis' accident, which might so easily have been fatal today this new blow, killing the last stubborn hope the deserted husband had clung to. For six months she had fought to give him peace and to help him banish the deities of despair which had taken possession of him when Iris had left him. Now the battle would have to be fought all over again.

The buzzer at last. Nan caught up notebook and pencil and hastened into the private office, but those tools of her trade were not needed after all.

"Have you lunched yet, Nan? Then I wonder if you'd go with me? I want to talk with you," Morgan said, not looking up, as if he were unable to meet her eyes.

They had never lunched together "socially" before, not even since Nan had worked herself into the curious post of long-distance housekeeper of his home, and as she walked beside Morgan into the big, rather magnificent dining room of the Traylor Hotel, Nan felt ridiculously self-conscious.

Morgan tried, rather awkwardly, to make an occasion of their lunch in the matter of food, but Nan chose a single dish and firmly refused everything else.

Nan knew that he expected his news to be upsetting, for he conscientiously gave her plenty of time to eat before plunging into whatever it was that he had to tell her.

When he did begin it was abruptly, even harshly: "I'm going to apply for a divorce, Nan." As badly as that!

Nan felt for a moment as if she were on the deck of a tossing ship. Her hand groped for her water glass, found it, brought it so jerkily to her lips that a little of the water spilled on the cloth. Thoughts hurried and clashed through her mind. Not Iris who wanted a divorce! It was he! Why? What did it mean? She could not speak.

"Judge Jennifer assures me that it can be done very quietly, very easily," Morgan went on in a strained, harsh monotone. "The—letter, you know. He still could not bring himself to utter Iris' name. "And—desertion. It has been six months—all that our divorce laws require under the circumstances. The letter makes it—easy. I never thought—his voice broke, then he cleared his throat sternly and went on: "But the petition can be heard in 'chambers'—no publicity at all of course. My—she will be served by publication, since I don't know where she is. It should all be over in a month, Judge Jennifer says. Over..." he repeated.

At the pain in his voice Nan's love for him rose to its greatest height. She would have been a fool not to have suspected why he was divorcing Iris, whom he still loved, whom he probably would always love. But she loved him too much to realize the joy of the first hope she had ever had any real right to feel. She leaned toward him, and her brown eyes were indescribably tender.

"Mr. Morgan, don't let anyone talk you into this if you don't really want to do it."

Morgan's lips jerked into a sort of smile. "But until—that's done, Nan, I can't do something else that I really want to do, and that Curtis very much wants me to do. It isn't fair to you, Nan, and I've sworn to myself a dozen times I wouldn't let you do it even if you were willing, but—I'm afraid you've encouraged me to be selfish, Nan, dear!" before I go ahead with—with Judge Jennifer's plans I'd like to know if you—Otherwise I won't do it, Nan—no real reason—"

"Mr. Morgan," Nan interrupted his floundering speech, her voice low but steady. "we don't have to put it into words, do we? But—whenever you want me—for anything—" And she smiled at him through tears that she hadn't in the least expected, for she was so very happy.

(To Be Continued)

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