

THIS HAS HAPPENED
Because she is in love with her employer, John Curtis Morgan, successful lawyer, Nan Carroll, secretary, decides to resign. She lingers however when she learns Morgan is to defend a supposed friend, Bert Crawford. Morgan wins Crawford's acquittal, and Crawford leaves town at once. Iris, Morgan's wife, follows closely, writing back to Morgan that she will never return. She cleverly omits reference to Crawford, whom Morgan trusts implicitly.

Nan saves Morgan from despair by forcing him more deeply into his work. For six months she acts as long-distance housekeeper for him, winning the love of little Curtis, his son, and bringing comfort to a man who ironically thinks only of another.

Morgan finally stutters a proposal, and after a quiet wedding they are prevented from going to their honeymoon by the unexpected arrival of a pleading client. Nan urges Morgan to stay with the case. For three months their farcical marriage continues. Nan is on the verge of despair. She decides to leave but Morgan finds her packing. He confesses he adores her but he believed she married him out of pity. She confesses she thought the ghost of Iris was forever between them. The next morning, while they are at breakfast, Iris returns.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
CHAPTER XXXVI
Nan Carroll Morgan was not one of those women who thrive on drama. She had never lost her little-girl horror and sick distaste of scenes. Her own well-bred home had been singularly free of open discord, but once, inadvertently, when she was a child, she had overheard her mother and father quarreling bitterly. For days her shamed eyes

RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin
Author of "The Black Pigeon"

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had avoided them, fearful of seeing those two she had idolized in that dreadful state of soul-nakedness to which their quarrel had stripped them.

Now, her hand on the knob of the door beyond which an unspeakably shameful scene was being enacted, every ounce of physical courage which the girl possessed had to be desperately summoned before she could force herself to go on.

A wave of nausea swept over her. If she had had only herself to consider she would still have done as Estelle had feared—she would have fled the house, leaving Iris in possession. But, as always, John Curtis Morgan came first. What was it he had said last night?—"I was a slave in bondage"—"Could she, whom he had loved as his deliverer, consign him to slavery again? He had said, too, "I hope I shall never see Iris again." Well, now that he had sent Estelle to find her. He needed her. She had never failed him yet.

Nan's icy fingers turned the knob slowly, noiselessly, though with no intention of muting her entrance, she forced her eyes to take in every detail of the tableau before her:

Morgan standing tall and stiff, his pale face stern and forbidding, but such agony in his deep-set black eyes that Nan could have screamed. Swaying against his stiff body, her hands locked behind his rigidly unbending neck, was an Iris Morgan such as Nan, in her most uncon-

rolled flights of imagination, could not have pictured.

The divorced wife had torn off her hat and thrown aside her fur coat—the same mink coat in which she had gone away to join Bert Crawford. The glorious red-gold hair was in wild disorder, the thick knot on her neck almost shaken free by the violence of her emotion.

Before Nan became aware of the words Iris was pouring out upon her former husband her eyes took in, with curious detachment, the fact that Iris' normally slender body had become painfully thin. But somehow, subtly, her beauty had fled upon the wasting of her body. Undoubtedly Iris had suffered, and as a result was far lovelier than ever. Even her voice had a new quality, a throbb of sincerity in what had formerly been an artificial, beautifully modulated ripple of music. Gradually her words beat into Nan's still half-dazed brain:

"It can't be true, Jack! You've said these horrible things to punish me. I'm punished! See! I'm crying, Jack! Now put your arms about me. Kiss me! Hold me so tight I can never leave you again! And then tell me—tell me! With her hands still locked behind his neck, she tried frantically to shake the rigid figure—"Tell me you were lying—that you haven't divorced me and married that girl—"

Over the wild disorder of red-gold curls Morgan's harassed eyes caught sight of the small, erect figure of

his new wife, waiting before the door she had closed softly behind her. Nan's wide brown eyes met his steadily, unflinchingly, without question or reproach. As if their aloof gravity had a magic power over him, the man suddenly raised his hands and tore apart the locked fingers of the woman who was no longer his wife.

"Stop, Iris!" his hoarse voice commanded sternly. "I can't have you humiliate yourself and me like this. I've told you the truth. I'm sorry you had to learn the truth in this way. If you had written before returning I could have spared you—all this—"

"So I should have written, should I?" Iris panted, stepping back from him and rubbing the delicate wrists which his repudiating hands had bruised. "As your wife, I had a right to return without warning if I pleased. And I am your wife! Do you think for a minute that I'll let you cast me off like this—?"

"It was not I who cast you off, Iris," he reminded her sternly. "You dissolved our marriage by deserting me. I merely made the divorce legal—"

"Legal?" Iris shrieked. "When I had no chance to contest it? I wasn't a lawyer's wife eight years for nothing, Jack Morgan! And I'm a lawyer's wife still! I'll fight you through every court in the land—"

"Iris, please!" Morgan interrupted sternly, but with a betraying tone of pity in his voice. "I'm more sorry than I can say that you could not

be reached before the suit was filed, but I give you my word that it is perfectly legal and that Nan is my lawful wife."

"Nan? Nan!" Iris cried, her voice rising on hysterical laughter. "Nan! Oh, oh!" What started as laughter ceased until it was a nerve-shattering scream.

Then, abruptly, when Nan felt that human ears could no longer endure the agony of that dreadful assault, the sound broke off. Iris' clenched hands, which had been flung over her head, dropped suddenly, wavered. Then, before either Nan or her husband could move to give her help, the tall, fragile body crumpled and fell in a heap at John Curtis Morgan's feet.

"Nan! She's fainted!" Morgan called hoarsely, as he dropped to his knees. "Brandy—quick! The sideboard. I'll carry her into the living room—"

Nan was too sick and dazed to obey quickly, but somehow she managed to find the brandy bottle, quilled some into a glass, caught up from the breakfast table her own untouched glass of water, ran with them jerkily on icy feet. But just on the threshold of the living room she halted involuntarily. Her husband had laid the unconscious body of his former wife upon her breast, his head bowed upon her breast, his hands locked above his head in a gesture of such profound despair that Nan's heart cried out in a passionate prayer for unconsciousness for herself.

As if the prayer had reached him, instead of the God to which it had been directed, John Curtis Morgan suddenly raised his head and turned it toward the door where Nan stood. In his eyes was no recognition of the girl as his wife, only a wild urgency.

"For God's sake, hurry! I'm afraid she's dead—"

Nan stood beside him, watching with that queer grave aloofness which had come upon her, as his shaking hands held the tiny glass of brandy to Iris' pale, parted lips. She did not speak. What could she possibly say that would help him now? But when Iris' bronze lashes began to flutter against her almost transparent white cheeks, Nan quickly moved out of range of Iris' returning vision, took her place at the head of the couch, her grave eyes fixed in an unwinking stare upon her husband's ravaged face.

A white hand rose feebly, wavered, then fluttered to rest upon Morgan's black and silver head.

"Such a horrid dream, Jack!" a thread of a voice whispered. "I knew all the time I was dreaming, but I couldn't wake myself up. Dear, silly Jack!" The long white fingers ruffled his hair feebly.

With a groan of sheer agony the man dropped his head to her breast again. Nan knew he did not even remember that she was there. The thread-like voice went on:

"So tired, Jack—so tired! Poor Iris has been awfully sick. Did you know? So sick! Tried to commit suicide. So sick, Jack! . . . Wanted you, Jack. So lonely. Ashamed to come home—but I did—I came home—! The thread spun itself gossamer fine and broke; the eyes lids fluttered over the blue-green eyes.

"Oh, my God!" The words were wrung from the man on a sob that shook his body.

"Jack! Silly Jack!" There was a ghost of a laugh. "Everything's all right, Iris has come back to you. You're glad aren't you, Jack? In that horrid dream you told me you'd divorced me and married Nan Carroll. Wasn't that a foolish dream, Jack?"

The long white fingers twined about a lock of the man's hair, tugged at it with feeble playfulness, which suddenly became frantic as his head remained bowed on her breast. "It was just a dream, wasn't it, Jack? Tell me!"

Suddenly, though how she knew she could not have told to save her life, Nan was sure that Iris Morgan was shamming, that the fainting spell had been faked, just as this childlike prattling of a "horrid dream" were faked—for the purpose which had been so completely accomplished—of bringing John Curtis Morgan to his knees.

She might have known—she told herself with that queer, aloof calm that had descended upon her—that Iris would fight like this. What other weapon had been left to her? Well—Nan shrugged mentally—it seemed to be a very effective weapon. Odd how little pain she felt; just an absorbed, grave curiosity, as if she were looking upon the melodramatic second act of a drama whose conclusion she could not guess. Her queerly aloof mind elaborated the metaphor: "A modern problem play entitled RIVAL WIVES, starring Iris Morgan, with a notable cast, including John Curtis Morgan and Nan Carroll Morgan—"

She felt a smile twist at her lips; wondered "Am I going crazy? Or am I just having what Iris calls a 'horrid dream'?"

But if it was a dream her husband's voice—or was he Iris' husband, really?—seemed amazingly real. She listened with grave attentiveness.

"You mustn't talk just now, Iris," he was saying slowly, hoarsely, as if each word was wrung from him. "Close your eyes and try to sleep, darling—"

He caught himself, remembered Nan, flashed her a look of such piteous appeal that her numb heart stirred, lunged sickeningly.

ing and trembling as she waited for an answer. "Dr. Black, please! Oh, this is Nan Carroll, Dr. Black—I mean Mrs. John Curtis Morgan," she corrected herself. The very speaking of the name acted as a powerful stimulant. The trembling ceased suddenly. "Can you come at once, Doctor? . . . No, no! It is—Mrs. Iris Morgan. . . Yes! I can't explain now. She's been ill. I want you to come, please, and take her to a hospital. Can you take her in your car? . . . No, she doesn't need an ambulance. That strangled laugh must have startled the doctor. "At once, please, Doctor! Thank you. And will you make her go to a hospital whether she wants to go or not? Oh, hurry!"

It was several minutes before she had sufficient command of herself to dare return to the scene she had fled. Her husband was still on his knees beside his former wife, but now his head was bowed upon his hands, not upon her breast. Iris was speaking, her voice no longer feeble.

"Look at me, Jack! . . . Oh, you don't dare look at me and tell me you don't love me. That unpeppery girl has wormed herself into your life, trapped you. I tell you—your marriage isn't legal! I'll make the courts annul it—you belong to me—"

"John!" Nan called from the library door. The man dropped his hands, stared at her as if he did not recognize her. "I've called Dr. Black. He's coming right over to take Iris to the hospital. It's getting late, dear. Hadn't you better leave for the courthouse? You're to open the Blackhull case today, you know."

CHAPTER XXXVII

At 3 o'clock that day Nan Carroll Morgan, junior partner in the law firm of Morgan & Morgan, was sitting at her desk in the richly furnished prison which was labeled "Mrs. Morgan—Private."

Her brown eyes brooded unseeingly upon a neat stack of letters which she had somehow managed to dictate that morning and which Kathleen O'Hara had delivered to her hours before. They were still unsigned, unread, though Nan's limp hand held the new desk fountain pen in readiness to affix her signature. She did not realize she had been holding it thus for more than an hour.

Slow, terrible thoughts milled about in her feverish brain. Disjointed pictures flitted across her mind, like a badly assembled film run off on a poor projector. Scraps of one of those new "talkie" pictures, Nan thought, with bitter amusement. Iris Morgan, looking incredibly lovely and frail, lying on the big couch and stretching out a feebly trembling hand to Dr. Black; Iris' lovely voice, like the sobbing of a violin:

"Dear Dr. Black! I never thought we should meet again—like this." Dr. Black's gruff voice: "What seems to be the trouble, Mrs. Morgan? Any serious pain?"

Iris' blue-green eyes widening at him reproachfully. "Only in my heart, Doctor. . . . No, no, don't get out your stethoscope. . . . Tell him, Jack. I haven't the strength, or the heart. . . ."

John Curtis Morgan squaring his shoulders to face the doctor. His voice harsh and uneven: "Mrs. Morgan tells me she has not been well for some time. She came—home, not knowing that I had secured a divorce and married again. The shock caused her to faint. My wife—Nan called you."

The film jerked; showed to Nan's brooding eyes a close-up of the doctor's professionally noncommittal face, one hand stroking his newly shaved chin, his small, cold, gray eyes narrowed speculatively upon the recumbent woman. "Hm! Nothing serious, I take it. A few days rest in bed will put you on your feet again. . . . St. Luke's hospital all right, Morgan?"

"Oh!" a desolate wail from Iris. "I can't go to a hospital, Dr. Black. I have no money at all. I'll be broken, cast-off, penniless. . . ."

Another jerk of the film; a close-up of John Curtis Morgan's face this time. But Nan could not look upon it; closed the eyes of her mind against it desperately. But she could not shut out the memory of his words:

"Any hospital you say, Doctor. Of course I'll pay. The best room available, naturally—a special nurse—"

"Oh, that won't be necessary—a special nurse, I mean." Nan heard again the doctor's callous answer. "A few days' rest, plenty of sleep and good food and, I should say, a philosophical acceptance of facts. . . . Now, now, no hysteria, Mrs. Morgan, please, or I shall have to give you a hypodermic. I'll run her over to the hospital myself, Morgan. I see by the papers that you'll be busy in court today on the Blackhull case. . . . Highly interesting trial, that. Do you think you'll get the boy off, Morgan—you and your brilliant young junior partner, I mean?"

The jerky "talkie" film was broken by a knock on the door. Nan raised her head, blinked her eyes to clear her mental vision. "Come in!"

Kathleen O'Hara's brightly smiling, pretty face peeped in. Then she pushed the door open with her foot and entered Nan's private office, a tall glass of hot chocolate in one hand, a paper-napkin-covered plate in the other.

"I just couldn't bare to think of you working away in here without any lunch," Miss O'Hara explained coaxingly. "Please, for my sake, eat every bit of it, Mrs. Morgan. I had them put lots of thick whipped cream in the chocolate, and—look! A chicken sandwich—toasted! Doesn't it look good? Please don't worry about the Blackhull case, dear Mrs. Morgan. I just know Mr. Morgan will win it, after all the marvelous work both of you have done on it."

Nan flushed guiltily. She had scarcely given the murder trial a thought that day. "Thank you, Miss O'Hara. You're a darling."

"Oh, no I'm not!" the little secretary laughed and blushed, tremendously pleased. "I'm just taking a leaf out of your book. Mr. Evans and Mr. Blake have told me how

you used to bring lunches in for Mr. Morgan and simply bully him into eating when he was so busy he forgot all about food. My greatest ambition is to be as good a private secretary as you were, Mrs. Morgan. . . . Now, will you promise to eat every bit of it?"

The tender white meat of the chicken sandwich might have been leather for all Nan knew, but she munched obediently. Kathleen O'Hara's thoughtfulness had done Nan one good service at least. It had released the tears which had pressed, unshed, against her hot eyeballs all day. It did not occur to her that she looked like a pathetic but absurd child as she sat there at her desk, doggedly munching a sandwich while tears trickled steadily down her cheeks. For she was not thinking of herself at all, except as herself was bound up inextricably with John Curtis Morgan. She was sure he had not eaten at all that day and the thought made her tears flow faster.

He had telephoned from the courthouse at the beginning of the noon recess, to tell her that he could not join her for lunch. By the strained note of apology and hurry in his voice Nan had been

told, as plainly as if he had spoilt the words, that he was going to spend the noon recess hour at the hospital with his former wife. Nan had felt no resentment toward him only a dull despair. Of course had to see Iris, both for the sake of his peace of mind and to range some sort of financial settlement with her. Iris' tragic wail—"I'll be broken, cast-off, penniless—must have tormented him all day like a dagger in his heart. Even if he no longer loved or desired her, Iris had made herself his responsibility again.

That started the mad whirling of thought again. Could it be possible that it was only last night that she—Nan—had asked him, "But John—what if you saw Iris again, and he answered, scornfully to her—'don't know. I can only see Nan. I love you with all my heart and soul and mind. I hope I shall never see Iris again.'"

Now that he had seen her again had all his old passion for her burst into flame again? Could joy one night of deep but sane happiness with his new wife avail no to protect him against the terror

(Continued on Page Five)

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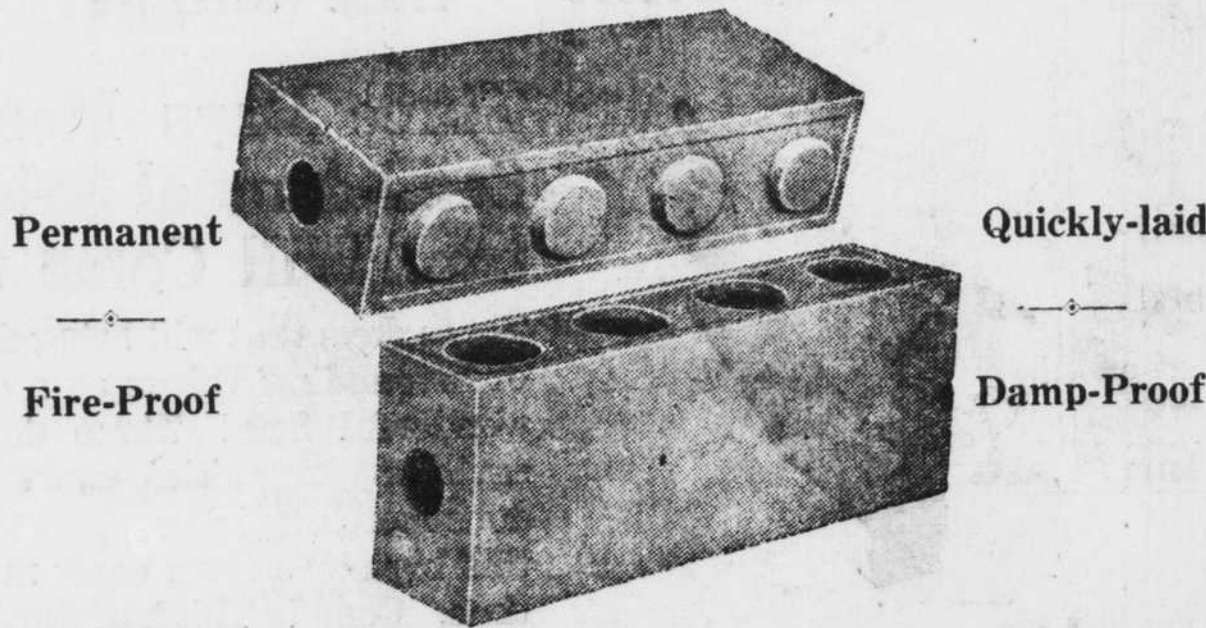
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