

THIS HAS HAPPENED

John Curtis Morgan, lawyer, is deserted by his wife, Iris Morgan. She elopes with Bert Crawford for whom Morgan has recently won acquittal.

For six months, she acts as long-distance housekeeper for him, winning the love of little six-year-old Curtis. Nan passes her bar examinations and Morgan takes her into the firm as junior partner. He tells her he is divorcing Iris and begs her to marry him. She accepts.

Their farcical marriage continues for three months, when Nan decides she will have to leave. The next morning Iris, deserted by Crawford, returns. She feigns illness in an effort to bring Morgan to his knees. Nan determines to fight and has the doctor remove Iris to a hospital. Curtis is hostile to Nan at dinner and Morgan sends him to his room. He tells Nan he will have to do something for Iris and proposes a monthly allowance. Nan goes to tell Curtis good night. He asks her if it is true she won't let his mother come home. She tells him it is against the law for a man to have two wives.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XL
"Heaven knows," Nan Morgan reflected despondently, "it would be hard enough to be a second wife under any circumstances, but to be called upon to explain and justify one's status to the 7-year-old child of the first wife..."

But the boy's eyes were fixed upon her, in an inexorable, unchildlike demand for an answer to his question. By simply answering "Yes," Nan knew she could win the first skirmish in the battle between herself and Iris for the loyalty of the child. For he was just and logical beyond his years. And the answer would be the simple truth.

Iris had known that she was giving John Curtis Morgan his freedom to marry again when she deserted him. But somehow she could not fight that way. In later years, Curtis could not truthfully say that his stepmother had destroyed his ideal of his mother. If it were to be destroyed, Iris herself must be the destroyer.

And so Nan answered: "I don't think your mother thought about the law when she went away, darling. But you see, your father didn't know she was ever coming back." Her voice choked on a sob. "That was true, true! If he had had the faintest hope, he would never have married again. And so he married me, Curtis, because he thought you both needed me."

RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin
Author of
The Black Pigeon

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Curtis nodded forlornly. "I told him to," he admitted slowly. "And I was awful glad when you came to live with us. But now my real mother's come back..." He was obviously wrestling with the problem. Nan's heart ached with pity as she watched him. Finally he drew a deep, quivering breath, then blurted out: "Mother said I'd have to choose between you and her, Nan. Did she mean you'd go and she'd come back, if I said so?"

Nan's impulse—the quick demand of her pride—was to stake everything then and there on the boy's choice. She couldn't stay where she was not wanted! But as the hot little fingers gripped her hand, she sent an imperative message to her brain. The boy was feverish. In one brief visit Iris had done that to him, by feeding him all the chocolates he could stuff. Biting her tongue to hold back a too hasty answer, the girl studied the child, placing a mental picture of him as he had been a year ago beside the boy he had become since she had been in charge of his life.

The Curtis of a year ago had been thin, anemic, neurotic; inquisitively unhappy, violent of temper. The product of more than six years of Iris Morgan's mothering. In less than one year she—Nan—had changed that Curtis into a sturdy, healthy, happy, obedient little boy, beautifully adjusted to school and home life. Did she have the right to abandon him now? Him, and the father who had needed her just as sorely and profited as obviously under her care?

Very slowly and carefully she answered: "No, Curtis. Your mother didn't mean that you could choose whether I went away and she came back. I am your father's wife now, you know, and unless he wants me to go, I must stay and make you both as happy as I possibly can."

"Oh!" Curtis said, drawing the syllable out very long. Then, very slowly: "I'm glad I don't have to choose, Nan, 'cause—'cause I want you and mother both. If father wants you to stay, I can see mother lots anyway, can't I, Nan? I think she'd feel bad if I didn't," he explained, as if fearful of hurting Nan's feelings. Tears gushed into the girl's eyes. Blinking at them, she stooped swiftly and kissed him with a fierceness that embarrassed, while it pleased him.

"You do love Nan, don't you, darling?" she begged, pride completely routed for the moment. "Sure I do!" Curtis answered with masculine brusqueness. "And I love my mother too. I guess I love you both nearly the same. A kid has to love his own mother the best, don't he—I mean, doesn't he?"

The child's preoccupation with grammar in face of the tremendous issues involved struck Nan as irresistibly funny. She was laughing almost hysterically as she tucked the covers about him and gave him a good night kiss.

"Good night, Nan," he murmured, suddenly drowsy. "Listen, Nan! If you were my real mother, I'd love you best—lots the best. But—Conscientiousness, loyalty and his griefed bewilderment gave up the battle then, routed by sleep.

Nan stood looking down upon him for a long time, and there was no laughter in her heart or eyes. Then she tiptoed from the room, her load of despair a little lighter. That naive confession of Curtis' had crystallized her indecision—turned it into firm determination. She would fight Iris Morgan to the last ditch. Iris was poison for the man and the child. No matter if they cried for that sugar-coated poison, it was her duty to protect them.

Standing in the middle of her room Nan Morgan cried out to the God she so sorely needed: "Dear God, help me to win—for their sakes! You know it isn't because I'm in love with John Curtis Morgan that I want to hold him against Iris. Of course I love him with all my heart, but if it were for his good, I would leave him tonight. You know I'm sincerely proud, that if I listened to my pride, I'd make him choose between us this minute. But, oh, dear God, he needs me, and the child needs me. Help me to humble my pride, so that I can fight the harder. Help me to win."

Her heart was almost at peace when she crept into bed. Both her doors were unlocked. Her husband could come to her if he wished. But she did not listen for his footsteps, for she was sure that he would not come. Because bitterness had melted out of her heart she was able to put herself in his place that night. She felt the grief and pain he must be suffering. Recoiled from the thought of love making even of seeking comfort, just as he must be recoiling. Poor John! Poor, torn victim of a passion he

had thought dead, and of a love that was still too new and delicate to weather the storm of that first, reviving passion for a woman who was unworthy but incredibly desirable. Poor John! She could at most hear him groan: "God forgive me, for I love two women."

That night Nan wept for him rather than for herself, and so healing was the temporary forgetfulness of self that soon she slept, and the next morning felt more light hearted and strong than she had ever hoped to feel again.

She needed courage and strength to carry her through the days that followed immediately upon Iris Morgan's return. Her husband was stricken man, though he tried, with obvious and heart-breaking conscientiousness to present a normally cheerful face to his family and to his downtown world. He was practically grateful for Nan's quick acceptance of his moodiness, and she believed for her unmistakably firm "Good night" in the drawing-room each evening. Sometimes when she was thus making it clear that she did not expect him to play the lover or husband while his heart was a battleground, his eyes met hers with wistful questioning, as if they were understanding and forgiving him. "Do you see how it is with me? Don't you know that I love you, you, too, but that I can't come to you just yet?"

And her own round, childish but wise eyes told him: "I do understand. Don't you worry your dear head about me now. But love me as much as you can."

Two days after Iris' return John Curtis Morgan presented his legal wife with a smart little coupe, explaining awkwardly: "A prosperous firm like ours ought to be able to afford two cars, don't you think? I want you to feel free to come and go as you please, without bothering about how I'm going to get around."

As she thanked him, Nan's heart contracted sharply. Was the car a clumsy attempt at peace-making? Why he did not think he had to bribe her to be patient and cheerful! Then she dismissed the suspicion as unworthy of both of them. The car would be a great convenience. It would permit her to stay at home later in the mornings, so that she could put a greater emphasis upon her housekeeping and home-making. Another weapon against Iris, who had not cared enough to turn the house into a

home. Of course, she would miss those companionable trips down town together, Nan reflected ruefully, but these last two days she had been a strain upon both of them. Was that, possibly, the reason he had contrived to make their unnecessary?

For four days father and son made afternoon trips to the hospital to see the woman who had deserted them and who had now flung herself upon their mercy. After that first day, those trips were mentioned. Not even Curtis referred to them, but each evening Iris' presence, helplessly, that Iris was stuffing him with unwholesome sweets. And she could not forbid him to accept. She could imagine the boy's quick retort: "I guess my mother knows what's good for me! No; her hands were tied."

The fourth day after Iris' return was Christmas Eve. Nan had bought an elaborate carpentering outfit for Curtis, as well as all the materials he could need in constructing a toy airplane. His father had consulted her anxiously as to the advisability of giving the boy a bicycle. Knowing Curtis' passionate desire for the wheel, Nan had encouraged its purchase, with the assurance that he would obey their injunctions to ride only on sidewalks. But the bicycle had not been bought. On Christmas Eve Morgan confessed hesitatingly:

"His mother was afraid of an accident. She—thought perhaps a toy automobile would be more safe. It's quite big. Operates with pedals, you know. I hope he'll like it."

Nan flushed hotly as she applauded the choice with apparent cheerfulness. Of course Iris had put her in the wrong, had made John feel that his son's very life was in danger, so long as Nan had control of him.

Decorating the Christmas tree was rather an exacting ordeal, for the ghost of the living mother who should have been there hovered over the girl and the man during the whole ceremony.

"No fair peeping or shaking the box," Morgan warned Nan, with a forced jocularity that made her forget she was with tears, as he tied her present to a branch of the tree. "I wonder if he's giving Iris a Christmas present," she could not help asking herself. Of course he helped Curtis choose something for her, and Iris' glad he did. But oh! "I'll be relieved when Christmas is over!"

But when Christmas Day actually dawned, all her own private heartache was swallowed up in a terrible anxiety about Curtis. Nan and Morgan had said to each other with phlegm and readiness that they supposed the boy would be up before daylight, whooping over his tree and presents, and making it impossible for anyone else to sleep, but when 8 o'clock came there had been no sound from his room. Vaguely worried, Nan went to wake him and found him heavy-eyed with fever. Within half an hour Dr. Black was there, looking grave, and pronouncing the trouble an upset digestion.

"And I've been holding you up as an example to all the mothers on my list," the doctor chided Nan gently. "Have you been falling down on your job?"

John Curtis Morgan, who was standing beside his wife, answered for her his face flushed with embarrassment. "I'll take the blame, doctor. I'm afraid I've been indulging the boy behind his mother—Nan's back. She never lets him eat between meals, but I—He stumbled over the lie, shifted his eyes.

The doctor nodded, his eyes narrowed. "I think I understand, Morgan. But no one must be permitted to tamper with Nan's discipline of the boy. NO ONE!"

At the end of the long, anxious day came a telegram for John Curtis Morgan.

CHAPTER XLII
For once, at least, Nan's justly famed "woman's intuition" played her false. She was so sure that the telegram just delivered into her husband's hands was from his former wife, making some new, insolent demand upon his time, purse, or love, that she was turning sharply away.

"What rotten luck!" Morgan exclaimed disgustedly. "The wire's from the capital. By a shift in the supreme court calendar, that Bradley case comes up Friday. If I can't be ready with my witnesses by then, I don't like to ask for another adjournment, because I'd like to get the Bradley case of my hands before the Blackhall trial reopens in January. But with the kid sick and all—"

His hesitation and the dark flush which accompanied it told Nan that the "and all" referred to Iris and all the complications which her unexpected return had brought into her husband's life.

"Curtis isn't dangerous ill," Nan reminded him coldly. "I think it's really quite lucky that you can dispose of the Bradley case before you have to go back into the Blackhall trial. You know you can trust me to take good care of Curtis."

"Of course, dear," he interrupted quickly, as if she had reminded him that it was not she, but Iris, who had made the child ill by stuffing him with chocolates and candied fruits. "I suppose there's nothing to get it but to go. I'll have to put in a hectic two days getting hold of my witnesses. . . I wonder if you'd mind very much if I put in two or three hours at the office today? I'll have to go over the transcript of the first trial pretty thoroughly."

"Of course you will," Nan agreed, still in that unnaturally cold voice. She wanted to act as if nothing stood between them, to give her usual warm, eager assistance, but Iris WAS between them now; there was no possible blinking of that fact. Until Morgan himself banished her. But Nan forced herself to add, as cheerfully as possible: "I'll be glad to help, if you want to bring the records home."

She felt that Morgan's eyes, still fixed upon the telegram, were deliberately avoiding hers. His flush deepened. "I don't think that will be necessary, Nan. You'll have your hands full with the boy. . . What time are we to have dinner?"

"I'm pleased, but now that he's ill, I can set the hour ahead to six, if you like."

Her jealous eyes told her that he was relieved. "Fine! That will give me several hours of good, hard work. Of course, if Curtis gets worse, I'll call for me, I'll cut the work short and hurry home."

"I shan't telephone unless you're really needed," Nan promised. If he wanted the assurance that he would have time to slip in a Christmas Eve visit with Iris, let him have it. He had always done everything in her power to make him happy. Why stop now?

When her husband was gone, Nan wandered into the drawing room where the neglected Christmas tree still offered all its treasures. Morgan, obviously, had forgotten the tree. The seals were unbroken on the packages which contained hers and Curtis' gifts for him.

Her steps, made very slow by the weariness of despair, Nan walked about the tree, untying the gold and silver cord which bound the tissue-wrapped parcels, tagged with her husband's name. They made quite a formidable little pile, exclusive of the big toy automobile and the well-stocked tool chest. "For Curtis from Stetle"; "For Curtis from Little Pat"; "For Curtis from Maude and Big Pat"; "For Curtis from his father." High up on the tree, just below the big silver Star of Bethlehem, Nan found a parcel she had not seen before. This time her intuition did not play her false. The card, which bore a highly colored picture of the Madonna and Child, was inscribed: "For my lover, from his adoring mother."

John slipped down here last night after I was asleep and put it there." Nan told herself with the curious detachment of despair.

Without being conscious of any curiosity as to what the small box contained, Nan added it to the pile of gifts she would carry upstairs to the sick child. Then she walked slowly about the tree again, her eyes fully taking in her own name, written on half a dozen tags. A gift from each of the servants, even from Little Pat. Sweet of them, dear of them to spend their money on her. But Nan felt no uplifting of the heart. What would it avail her if she gained the love of the whole world and lost that of the one man she could ever love?

She had resolutely ignored the package which she knew contained his gift to her. She did not have the courage to look at the tag. If it said merely "For Nan, from John," she could not bear it. Better uncertainty than that. . .

"Am I losing my nerve completely?" Nan whipped up anger and disgust against herself. "Look at it, you idiot! Better to know the worst than to kid yourself."

With a quick resolute jerk she tore the package from a branch of the gaily decked tree.

"Oh!" she cried. The card was inscribed in the handwriting she knew and loved so well: "For my dear wife, from John."

With gentle fingers Nan retied the parcel, still unopened. She and John would open their gifts together when he came back. Christmas was a heavenly time, after all. Gathering Curtis' gifts into her arms, Nan ran from the room, up the stairs. Just before reaching the child's door, her clear, untrained but true voice lifted in joyous song:

"It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old—
As she opened the door, still caroling softly, an insistent query pushed its way through her exultation: "I wonder how he addressed Iris' gift—"For my former wife, from Jack?" How she had hated to hear Iris call him "Jack," making him small and trivial by the simple device of using a nickname which was a gross insult! Then shame and contrition flooded Nan's heart, for the words her lips were singing were:

"Peace on the earth,
Good will to men
From Heaven's All-gracious King."
"That's a Christmas carol," Curtis called weakly from his bed. "We learned two Christmas carols to sing at school last Friday. Can you sing 'Little Town of Bethlehem,' Nan? Can you? I can!"

"Of course I can! But look who I am! Santa Claus! And there are some big presents downstairs for you, as soon as you're well enough to play with them." Nan answered.

The next hour was almost pure happiness, heightened, Nan was half-ashamed later to realize, by the casual way in which Curtis inspected and laid aside the exquisite miniature of herself which Iris had sent to her son. In later years he might—undoubtedly would—treasure it, take it with him everywhere, build untrue, poetic legends about the woman whose beauty it immortalized; but now he was only a greedy, feverish little boy, toying open packages to find treasure more suited to his tastes. Poor Iris! Nan forced herself to say, but immediately came the strong suspicion that the miniature had been really intended for the father, not the son.

"Wouldn't you like to write a note to your mother at the hospital and thank her for her gift?" Nan suggested. In her new happiness, she could afford to be generous, had an urgent need to be generous toward that other woman, who, it seemed, was to be vanquished. "Er, my dear wife—" her heart sang, over and over.

"Hush! At the HOSPITAL?" Curtis repeated, with childish scorn for Nan's ignorance. "She ain't—I mean, isn't at the hospital any more. She went to the Wellington Arms yesterday. Father and I took her. She's got a swell room. 'At a hotel. Why don't they say Wellington Hotel, Nan? Silly, calling a hotel an Arms!' He lay back upon his pillows, looking suddenly tired and peevish. "Sing to me, Nan. You sing pretty."

Before Nan, whose voice was a little husky with unshed tears, could finish the carol he had asked for, the child was asleep. Her hand upon his forehead told her that, despite the excitement of receiving so many gifts, his temperature was perceptibly lower.

Twice, during the long afternoon, Nan was sorely tempted to call the office. It would make her even more happy to be absolutely sure that he was there, working on the Bradley case. But each time she refrained. Was she degenerating into one of those jealous, suspicious wives who can't trust their husbands out of their sight, who resort to low tricks to catch them in lies and deceit?

At 5 Dr. Black came. When he had completed his examination of the sick child, he drew Nan with him out into the hall. As the door closed his jovial grin faded instantly, and was replaced by a grave frown.

"Is it anything serious, doctor?" Nan asked in a terrified whisper, as they descended the stairs.

The doctor did not answer until they reached the front hall. "I can't be sure. Children are pesky patients. Scare out to death one day, and provoke you into spanking them the next by their high spirits. To be frank, Nan, it looks a little like appendicitis. . . They hold on to yourself, girl. Nothing to hit the ceiling about if it is. And it may not be, of course, or, at worst, a very mild attack, which may never be repeated, if you watch his diet. That woman! That woman!" he added savagely.

"I have been very careful, Dr. Black," Nan said bleakly. Not for her to utter accusations against the boy's mother.

"Don't I know that?" Dr. Black blustered. "Believe me, I gave Iris Morgan a piece of my mind today. 'You saw her?' Nan cried. "But Curtis told me she had left the hospital—"

"Right! But the hotel manager called me this afternoon. All excited. Said Mrs. Morgan was in a terrible state. I went, of course, though I was pretty sure what ailed her. Having hysterics because John and the boy hadn't come to see her on Christmas Day."

"Then—" Nan's hand went to her throat, for she felt that her heart was leaping from it with joy—"he didn't go? He didn't see her today?"

"No. That was the trouble. He—"

(Continued on Page Five)

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