

THIS HAS HAPPENED

Iris Morgan, wife of John Curtis Morgan, successful lawyer, elopes with Bert Crawford, for whom Morgan has recently won an acquittal. Morgan does not suspect Crawford.

Nan Carroll, Morgan's secretary, is in love with him. To save him from utter despair, she cleverly forces him into his work. For six months she acts as long-distance housekeeper for him, winning the love of his child, little six-year-old Curtis. Morgan tells her he is divorcing Iris and asks her to marry him, stressing his and the boy's need of her. She consents.

Their farcical marriage has continued three months when Nan decides she can stand it no longer. The next morning, Iris, cast off by Crawford, returns. Feigning illness, she tries to bring Morgan to his knees. Nan is heartbroken, crushed but she determines to fight and asks Dr. Black to remove Iris to a hospital.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XLII "Look what I found, wandering the streets disconsolately and looking as if he'd lost his best friend!" John Curtis Morgan greeted his wife at five minutes to six.

His voice was so natural, so jolly, with just enough of an undercurrent of anxiety as to what she would think of his bringing an unexpected guest for Christmas dinner, that Nan sprang from the living room couch and ran toward him.

"Willis Todd!" she cried joyously, incredulously, as the embarrassed young man who had once hoped to marry her guiltily followed his host into the room. "You don't know how glad I am to see you, Willis! I've been intending for ages to be a very indiscreet wife and beg you to have luncheon with me."

"And now?" Willis laughed, "your husband heaps coals of fire on your head by treating me as a family friend."

As soon as he had said it, Willis Todd realized that he had committed a faux pas. For his unconsidered words reminded Nan that he knew and that she knew of another "family friend" who had grievously betrayed John Curtis Morgan's hospitality. And so both he and Nan were blushing hotly as they shook hands, a fact which Morgan noted and puzzled over.

RIVAL WIVES by Anne Austin Author of The Black Pigeon

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She found the two men waiting for her in the dining room, and obviously relieved when she joined them. "I looked in on Curtis," Morgan told Nan, as they proceeded to the dining room, which Estelle had decorated as lavishly as if he had been expecting a big party. "He seems better, doesn't he? I promised to bring his 'hot milk' toast when we've finished dinner and stay with him while he eats it. Little tyke! He'd bragged for week of his turkey-and-dressing capacity and now he has to be content with milk toast. You couldn't relent a mite, I suppose, Nan?"

"No, really!" Willis Todd denied quickly. "I was exactly the sad young man that Mr. Morgan described. In fact, I was trying to decide whether to eat my lonely Christmas dinner at a drug store fountain and be wholly miserable, or to pay three dollars for a hotel dining room table d'hote and acquire an attack of indigestion as tormenting as my regular Christmas blues."

"I like that!" Nan protested. "I suppose you've forgotten what you said last Christmas?—that it was the happiest Christmas you had spent since you were a child. Remember how greedy we were and how nice the funny old waiter was, especially after you'd given him a five-dollar tip?"

"I remember," Willis Todd agreed, his mouth and eyes tightening with pain. "I'm being beastly," Nan reproached herself. "I'm making John remember his last Christmas when Iris sat here in my seat, now. And I'm hurting Willis, too. I didn't realize he still cared—so much."

But there was an unworthy consolation in the evidence of his pain and in the occasional puzzled glances from her husband's eyes. Although the three of them had talked emphatically of how hungry they were, Maude O'Brien in the kitchen glowered resentfully at the returning dishes. There was little reward in cooking for love-sick people who pecked at their food, with no more appetite than canaries, as she grumbled to Estelle.

"Reminds me of last Christmas, when that Crawford man sat there and made eyes at the creature who was Mrs. Morgan," Estelle whispered. "This Todd man is nuts over Miss Nan, and the poor dear mister looks like he's wondering if he's going to lose this missus, too."

That was an exaggeration, but certainly John Curtis Morgan did not look like a happy man, between his odd bursts of forced volubility, Nan, with an impishness she had not suspected herself capable of, flirted openly with Willis Todd, and the burden of her conversation was "And, oh, Willis, do you remember when—?"

Immediately after dinner Morgan called for Curtis' tray and trudged heavily upstairs with it. The sound of those slow, heavy footsteps—almost like those of an old man—echoed in Nan's heart and brought tears into her eyes.

"What's the matter, Nan?" Willis asked anxiously, as he dropped down to the couch beside her and laid a trembling hand over hers. "Is it—pretty bad, honey?"

Nan made no pretense of not understanding. She nodded miserably, then dashed an angry hand at the tears. "Iris has come back, Willis. She didn't know John had got a divorce and—married me."

"Good Lord!" the young man ejaculated. "You poor kid! No wonder. Can you tell me what happened? Did she come here?"

Nan nodded and Willis tightened his clasp on her hand until the pressure hurt. But it was a sweet pain. Stumblingly, interrupting herself at times to choke back a sob, Nan told him the incredible story of Iris' return and of its devastating effect upon John Curtis Morgan. She concluded by rapidly repeating Dr. Black's warning that Iris intended to fight her successor with every weapon she could lay hands on.

"Then you'll need a weapon too," Willis Todd said grimly. "And I've got a dandy I can place in your hand right now."

Nan's tear-stained eyes stared incredulously into his steely gray ones. "No, I'm not talking through my hat," he assured her. "I've got facts and proofs which you're welcome to. I was in New York in November on a buying trip for my firm and one of the big wholesale men took me to a night club. Sure-fire entertainment for us out-of-town hicks, you know," he grinned. "Well, it happens he was right this time, for I wouldn't have missed a show I saw there for a month's pay. And the show was extra entirely impromptu, not a part of the regular cabaret at all."

"You saw Iris and—Bert Crawford?" Nan whispered. "Of course you'd be two leaps ahead of me," Willis growled. "Almost the first person my eye lit on when we took our table was Bert Crawford. He didn't recognize me, of course—we'd never met. With him was a stunning brunet—an actress sort of person, made up to look like a Spanish heartbreaker,

lace mantilla, jeweled comb, Spanish shawl and whatnot. They were thick as thieves. The description fits our blonde villain, at any rate."

"But—Iris?" Nan frowned. "I was so sure she'd been with him after she left John—"

"Oh, she had, all right! No doubt about that, if you can wait till I tell my story. It was about half past one, when the cabaret was in full swing, that Iris appeared suddenly at Crawford's table and launched one of the nastiest rows I've ever had to listen in on. It all came out, of course: how Crawford was her property and she'd not stick at murder to keep any other woman from having him."

"Exactly!" Willis Todd agreed. "It was pretty awful. Before the night club manager could get there to put her out, Crawford told her, in uncertain terms, that he wasn't going to stand for her spying on him, that he was his own master, that since he wasn't married to her what was it to her anyway, if he fancied another woman for a change. Raw! The Spanish-looking vamp enjoyed it a lot. I think she was a little sorry when the manager hustled Iris out of the club. The next morning I read a front page story in a tabloid about 'Row in Nightclub Ends in Suicide Attempt.'"

"Did it print Iris' name?" Nan asked, horrified. "No, she gave a fake name at the hospital, but she took poison in the taxi cab which the club manager forced her into after he led her out of the club. The taxi driver took her to the address she had given, and when he started to help her, she found her unconscious. Took her to the hospital, of course, and told his story, which the papers printed. I checked up on the apartment house address and found that they'd been living there as Mr. and Mrs. Chatfield. I wasn't just prying, honey. I wanted the information for you, in case you ever needed it—as I had a hunch then you might. And now you do need it. Use it."

Nan shook her head drearily. "No. How could I? I can't blackmail Iris, no matter what she does to me. And I would rather die than repeat that horrible story to John Curtis Morgan. It might disgust him with her, but it would undoubtedly kill all his love for me. No, I can't fight that way. But I'm glad you told me, Willis. It makes me all the more determined to save my two menfolk."

"He still doesn't have an inkling about Crawford?" Willis asked. "No. Sometimes I've been tempted to show him that letter from Crawford to Iris, but—I'd rather lose him than hurt him that way."

"Darling, quixotic little Nan!" Willis Todd said huskily, as he put his arm about her shoulders and pressed her wet cheek against his. "Do you wonder I'm not able to love any other girl?"

And that was the tableaux which John Curtis Morgan interrupted.

CHAPTER XLIII If Nan Carroll Morgan had not been so completely in love with her husband, she would have fallen in love with Willis Todd, out of sheer gratitude for the way he met what might have been a very embarrassing situation. Rather, it was not what Willis did, but what he did not do which Nan even in her confusion recognized as the height of tact.

Willis did not remove his arm from about her shoulders; he did not apologize, he did not try to explain to the husband who had halted uncertainly on the threshold of the drawing room. He did not feel ruffly. He had done no wrong; Nan had done no wrong. He simply refused to put himself in the wrong by acting like a guilty lover caught by a betrayed husband.

"How's the boy, Mr. Morgan?" he called out, "with just the right amount of sympathetic interest. 'I'd like to run up and speak to him if he's awake. You know I used to see him at the office when I called for Nan.'"

"He's still slightly feverish, and had very little appetite for his milk

loast, though maybe that was because he was mourning for the turkey he couldn't have," Morgan answered, exactly as if nothing had happened. "I'm sure he'd be glad to see you, Willis. I told him you were here and he said he had a Christmas present for you. Probably some little trifle he made in his manual training class at school."

"Then I'll run up," Willis said. He rose and not till then did he withdraw his arm from across Nan's shoulders.

"Don't be gone too long. We're going to open Christmas gifts and—there is a Santa Claus!" Nan promised him zealously.

"When the young man had left the room, Nan rose from the couch and stroled to the tree. She wondered if Morgan had noticed the still undried tears on her cheeks and what she would say if he questioned her. "Shall we light the tree now?" she called over her shoulder. "Press the left-hand button for the Christmas tree lights and snap off the others. Now! Doesn't it look lovely?"

"I hope you'll like your presents, dear," Morgan said, in a voice that sounded a little constrained, for all his effort to make it cheerful. "It was hard to know what to get you. Want to open the box now, while we're alone? I'd rather be the sole witness of your disappointment, if you don't like them."

"Them?" Nan repeated, laughing. "This box is pretty small, to hold more than one gift. Oh, John! I never had anything so gorgeous in all my life!"

She lifted from their satin bed an antique necklace and pair of bracelets of square-cut topazes, set in exquisitely wrought gold filigree.

"I got them because they're just the color of the highlights in your hair and eyes," Morgan told her, his voice rich with satisfaction. "They are 150 years old, by the way—first presented to a very famous French actress by a royal prince. Full pedigree furnished on request. But there's something else in the box. Lift up the satin pad, dear."

Nan obeyed and drew out a credit memorandum upon the city's most fashionable furrier. The sum staggered her for a moment.

"Why, John, darling, we can't afford—"

"How many times must I remind you that you're only the junior partner in the firm?" Morgan scolded her. "I want you to have a decent fur coat, young woman. I was tempted to choose it myself, but didn't dare assume the responsibility."

"Thank you, John," she said simply, for her voice was too husky with tears to permit more. Then, as simply, she lifted her face for his kiss.

The memory of the hard, hungry pressure of his lips was still with her as she watched him fumble awkwardly with the wrappings of her gift to him. She had bought him a water-thin, platinum-cased watch. Very plain, very expensive-looking. With it, a thin platinum chain.

Morgan's eyes lighted up with boyish pleasure. "And to think I ever teased you about your woman's

intuition! I wonder if anyone else today has said, 'Just what I wanted' and meant it as whole-heartedly as I do. Thank you, dear Nan! It makes this old watch of mine look like a turlop. And I thought there couldn't be a finer watch made when my father gave it to me. George! What a beauty it is!" he added, with such naive enthusiasm that Nan laughed aloud, joyously.

"That mean another kiss, of course. And this time it was Willis Todd who halted uncertainly on the threshold, unwilling to interrupt an embrace which he knew was giving the most exquisite happiness to the girl he loved.

"We couldn't wait for you, Willis," Nan cried. "Forgive us, won't you? And come look for what Santa Claus left for you."

She made a great ado of turning her back while he opened the package containing the cravat she had given him, "to allow him time to recover from the shock," as she laughingly warned him.

"The tie I've always longed for! Exactly what I wanted!" Willis announced emphatically and pretended to be very much hurt when his host and hostess exchanged amused significant glances, then burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"These husband-and-wife secrets," he grumbled. "Anyway, the tie isn't funny! It's a beauty!" And they laughed at him again. Morgan explained: "The male vocabulary, under certain circumstances, seems to be curiously limited. You've said exactly the same thing about that tie that I've just been saying to Nan about this watch she gave me. What is it, Estelle?" he broke off, as he caught sight of the maid beckoning to him from the doorway.

"Telephone, sir," she answered with an odd note of resentment or sulkeness in her voice. "It required no unusual amount of intuition for Nan to guess that the call was from Iris Morgan."

"Don't look like that, honey," Willis whispered, as Morgan strode across the room toward the library to answer the call. "I'm glad I feel about him as you do. He's a prince. Fight for him, Nan. He's worth it."

"That's big of you, Willis," Nan murmured huskily. "I'll fight all right, but—so will she. And she has the biggest advantage over me that one woman can have over another."

"And that is?" "John was mad about her for the whole eight years they were married, and he never really possessed her. Now she pretends she's just as much in love with him as he ever was with her. Can't you see how the thought of possessing her completely, after all those years of frustrated adoration, must affect him?"

"But he loves you!" Willis Todd protested. "Not in that insane, slavish way, perhaps, but truly, deeply. You've got to believe that, Nan."

"I do," Nan said simply. "I wouldn't fight for a minute if I didn't believe that. Now, I'm going to tune in on some choir music. I love the Christmas hymns. Don't

you?"

Nan was at the radio cabinet and Willis Todd was relaxed in a big wing chair before the fireplace when Morgan re-entered the room. With a deep sigh, whether of worry or contentment, Nan could not know, he dropped to the couch and stretched his long legs toward the crackling flames of the wood fire.

"Music, John? Or would you rather just talk?" Nan called. "A sandwich—music, talk, more music. Some carols, if you can find any in the air," her husband answered.

Four days later Nan Morgan looked back upon that Christmas evening and tried, desperate with need of its happiness and peace, if only in memory, to recapture every moment of it.

"And I sat there, smug as a pussy-

cat, listening to carols and telling myself that I'd been making a mountain out of a mole-hill; that

(Continued on Page Five)

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