

# RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin  
Author of 'The Black Pigeon'

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of the fervor of his goodby hug and kiss. If she had salvaged Curtis' love out of the wreckage, all was not lost.

Whether it was because he was pathetically determined to please Nan or whether he really had an appetite for his dinner that night, Nan never knew, but he ate his vegetables and stewed fruit, drank his milk, and chattered happily, in apparently the best of health and spirits.

Morgan was gravely elated over the re-establishment of an entente cordiale between himself and his son and his wife and his son. It was a jolly, almost boisterous hour, one which Nan was later to try to live again in memory.

There was even a game of anagrams after dinner, in spite of the fact that Morgan was averse to be at his desk. A dozen times later, Morgan groaned, in agony: "Thank God I played that game with him. If I had to remember now that I refused—"

But it was Nan who remembered, with a shudder, that Curtis had triumphantly "stolen" the word, head, with the letter T, making it dead.

After she had put the child to bed, she returned to her husband, with a worried frown. "His cheeks felt awfully hot, John. Maybe I ought to call Dr. Black—"

"Nonsense!" Morgan retorted. "He just got too excited over winning three games in succession. He's sharp as a razor, isn't he, Nan?"

"He's wonderful!" Nan agreed, with a catch in her voice. "You'll be very proud of Curtis some day, John."

"Morgan, Morgan & Morgan, eh?" the lawyer chuckled, his deep-set black eyes very soft. "But in the meantime, Morgan & Morgan had better do the best they can for David Blackhull. Now—what do you think? Would you advise putting old Edgars on the stand first thing tomorrow morning? I did not cross-examine him, you know; didn't want to spill the beans prematurely and give the lovely widow, Nina Blackhull, too much warning as to which way the cat will jump."

Nan knit her brows. Then, "I believe, John, it would be better to put Nina herself on the stand first. You've subpoenaed her as a defense witness, haven't you?"

"Blake was to serve her this evening," Morgan replied. "I believe you're right as usual, honey. Better make a grand-stand play, with Nina as our unwilling star witness. Then we can call old Edgars and his daughter, Mary, to prove the sensational charges against Nina which she will perjure herself to deny. Now, let's make a rough draft of the questions, I'll put to Nina."

They were hard at work, in the close harmony which had always marked their professional association, when a shrill scream, like the howl of an animal in pain, penetrated their absorption, brought them both to their feet in terror. The clock in the drawing room had just chimed 11.

"Curtis!" Nan gasped, as two short, yelping screams quickly followed the first.

"Maybe the poor little fellow is just having a nightmare," Morgan suggested, but there was panic in his eyes, too, as he followed his swiftly running wife up the stairs.

They found the child rolling in agony upon his tumbled bed, his fists pressing frantically against his abdomen, his black eyes wild with pain and terror.

touched his abdomen the little boy was drawn into a knot again.

But N-n had learned enough to make her almost faint with horror. The abdomen was like a drum—puffed, rigid. She had had acute appendicitis her self.

There was no time to be lost. Although the child gasped out a plea for her to stay, Nan stumbled downstairs to a drawer of the hall linen closet, was clutched to her heaving breast.

"What is it, Miss Nan?" It was Maude O'Brien, plunging, half-dressed, out of the kitchen.

"Curtis—appendicitis!" Nan sobbed. "Fill this jar with ice and bring it up to me as soon as possible."

"Poor lad! If he dies, it will be his own mother as killed him, stuffing him with God knows what trash—"

"Oh, hurry!" Nan interrupted frantically. "John! John! Did you get Dr. Black?"

Morgan stepped out of the library and put his arm steadily around her shoulders. "Don't lose your head, darling. Dr. Black will be here within 15 minutes. He's going to call a surgeon, just in case—"

"It is appendicitis, John!" Nan sobbed, her lips clinging to his coat lapels. "I know. And it's all my fault—"

"Hush, Nan! Mor an commanded sternly. "Come! We must go to him."

When they re-entered the room they were astonished to find the child stretched out on his bed, a little smile on his lips. "Better now, Nan—father! It hurt awfully, and then it got better quick."

"Proving you never can tell about children," Morgan chuckled, so tremendous was his relief. "Show father where it hurts, son—"

"No—don't touch him!" Nan cried out sharply. For she was not deceived. She knelt beside the bed, took one of the limp little hands in hers and searched the beloved face with wide, terrified eyes.

And as she watched, the child's eyes slowly grew vacant, then the lids fluttered, clug together.

"Asleep?" Morgan whispered, tipping to the head of the bed.

Nan shook her head. "Unconscious. . . Oh, John! There's no need to whisper now!" she cried despairingly. "Won't the doctor ever come?"

In less than 15 minutes Dr. Black was there. Waving aside their terrified, broken explanations, the doctor took the child's pulse and temperature, and made a swift abdominal examination. Then he turned curiously to Nan and requested her to repeat what she had been trying to tell him.

"He was screaming with pain, his abdomen was hard and rigid as a drum and then—then—suddenly he was like this," Nan told him.

she saw Miss Powers tiptoeing out of Curtis' room.

"Any—change, Miss Powers?" Nan whispered.

"Yes. He's come out from the ether, Mrs. Morgan, but he's too weak to talk," the nurse answered. "Dr. Black is keeping his fingers on his pulse. The action is—very faint."

"Then—you think—?"

"No one can tell yet," the nurse answered in her kind, cheerfully sympathetic voice. "If he rallies from the shock of the operation and peritonitis doesn't set in—"

She hesitated, then continued frankly: "It will be several hours yet, Mrs. Morgan, before we can definitely hope; that is, if he—"

"If he doesn't die in the meantime," she means," Nan forced herself to complete the nurse's ominous sentence. Aloud she said, quietly: "Miss Powers, will you please ask my husband to come to me? He's with Curtis, isn't he?"

In spite of the coffee he had drunk, the man who joined Nan in the hall looked almost as deathlike as the child who lay in the room beyond.

Nan went at once to the point. No use to express sympathy now. "I'm going to the courthouse, John, and take your place today. We can't ask for an adjournment, and if we delay putting Nina Blackhull on the stand, she may seize the opportunity to leave the country."

Morgan stared at her as if he did not know what she was talking about. Then, with the gesture which his troubles had made familiar to Nan, he passed his hand across his eyes. "I'd—forgotten about the trial, Nan. I'll go."

"No, Curtis—You must be here until—Nan floundered. Then more steadily, she means," Nan forced herself to complete the nurse's ominous sentence. Aloud she said, quietly: "Miss Powers, will you please ask my husband to come to me? He's with Curtis, isn't he?"

Probably because the Blackhull case had sunk almost to insignificance in comparison with the impending tragedy in her own home, Nan faced the court calmly, unafraid. Her one thought was to have done with this business, creditably, of course, and to get back to Curtis.

She put the pre-arranged questions to Nina Blackhull, widow of the man for whose murder his son was on trial; put them calmly, but her great, tired brown eyes blazed with a fire that seemed to wither the beautiful young witness, who, Nan was convinced, had actually planned the murder, the execution of which she had left to her lover, the chauffeur, Bassett.

At the third question, put in Nan's even voice, terrifying in its very calmness, the woman in the witness box suddenly sprang to her feet, her hands warding off the girl lawyer as if she were infected with some terrible plague.

"Quit looking at me like that! Do it! I tried to keep Ernest Bassett from killing my husband! I swear I did! I swear it! And now he's doublecrossed me! He's trying to put the blame on me—"

That was almost the end, of course. Somehow Nan managed to get through the necessary formalities—the resting of the defense; a motion for the quashing of the indictment against David Blackhull, which was, of course, denied until Nina Blackhull's amazing half-confession could be corroborated; the congratulations of Judge Bunce and even of District Attorney Brainerd, who was ready to admit defeat.

Her photographs caught snapshots of the "girl lawyer" as she pressed frantically down the courthouse steps and as she sprang into her car parked at the curb.

So extreme was her anxiety for Curtis that she had forgotten the courtroom drama before she arrived at her home. But evidently John Curtis Morgan had had room in his heart for both his child and his wife for his first question was: "How did you get along, Nan? I've been ashamed of myself for letting you face that ordeal alone."

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**THIS HAS HAPPENED**  
Iris Morgan, wife of John Curtis Morgan, successful lawyer, deserts him for Bert Crawford, a family friend whom Morgan never suspects.

Nan Carroll, Morgan's secretary is deeply in love with him and saves him from utter despair by cleverly forcing him into his work. For six months she acts as long-distance housekeeper for him, bringing comfort and health to him and his child six-year-old Curtis.

Morgan breaks the news to her that he is divorcing Iris and stressing his and Curtis' need for her, asks her to marry him. She consents.

Their farcical marriage has continued three months when Iris, lured by Crawford, returns and attempts to bring the bewildered Morgan to his knees by feigning illness. Nan with the old uncertainty eating again into her heart, decides to fight and orders the doctor to remove Iris to a hospital.

Curtis sees his mother, who stuffs him on forbidden sweets. On Christmas morning he has an attack of appendicitis. While Morgan is in the capital on business, Iris strips the house of her belongings and rents the cottage across the street. By all sorts of pretexts she summons Morgan to her while Nan looks on broken-hearted.

Curtis, whom Iris continues to feed sweets, becomes ill again. Nan is frantic and desperately goes to Morgan to insist that he command Iris to stop feeding Curtis, or to put an end to the child's visits to his mother.

**NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY**  
CHAPTER XLVI  
Not realizing that she was already far too late, Nan went directly to her husband where he was at work in the library, his desk cluttered with notes and transcripts of testimony on the Blackhull case. The prosecution had rested at 4 o'clock. Morgan was to open the defense of David Blackhull, charged with the murder of his father, the next morning—Wednesday.

But it was not the Blackhull case of which Nan had to speak. "John," she said, in a deceptively calm voice, "I think you had better go across the street to see Iris to-night."

The man's startled eyes searched her tightly composed face. "I'm very busy, dear, but certainly I'll go—for a few minutes—if you really wish it. Naturally it distresses me to think of her alone over there, crippled—"

"I'm not thinking of her," Nan interrupted coldly. "I'm thinking of Curtis. I can do nothing. You must realize, dear, my hands are tied." Her voice trembled slightly as she made the first reference to the incredible situation in which Iris had placed her. Then she went on, calmly again: "But I love Curtis—very dearly. I can't stand by and see his health ruined. I want you to exact a promise from Iris not to give him a bite of anything to eat. Otherwise, John, Curtis' visits to his mother MUST be stopped."

The man's face went even paler, more haggard than it had been, under his wife's intense seriousness. Slowly he raised a trembling hand and passed it over his eyes, then he nodded slowly. "You're right, of course. . . I'll go at once. And think you, Nan, for having the courage to— He broke off abruptly, kissed her awkwardly but tenderly, and turned sharply away.

He was gone less than half an hour. The first thing that Nan's questioning eyes noted was a smudge of white powder on the left lapel of his dark-blue flannel coat.

"Iris—it will be all right, dear," he said with assumed cheerfulness. "Now, are you too tired to go over a few points of the Blackhull defense with me?" Nan answered, "Of course not."

"Did she promise unconditionally, John?" At this stiff nod, she laid an apologetic little hand upon his. "I don't mean to pry, dear, but I'm dreadfully worried. I hope—it isn't too late."

The next morning, her terror of the night before seemed a little absurd. Curtis ate a hearty breakfast, and looked almost normal. Later Nan was to reproach herself bitterly for not having suspected the truth. But she saw him off to school, almost light-hearted because

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CHAPTER XLVII  
If she could have done anything to help, Nan could better have endured those two hours that elapsed between the arrival of the surgeon, Dr. Drew, and the appearance from the kitchen of the wheeled stretcher with its still, blanket-wrapped burden. But even Dr. Black, her champion and friend, brusquely ordered her from the kitchen which had been turned into an operating room. It was already crowded with himself, the surgeon, the anesthetist and the nurse. Science was in charge; love could avail Curtis nothing now.

And so the desolate girl wandered from room to room, feeling more like an outcast spirit in "Tomlinson" of which Kipling writes: "The wind that blows between the Worlds, it nipped him to the bone, but like a human being. For in

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