

RIVAL WIVES

by Anne Austin
Author of
"The Black Pigeon"

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THIS HAS HAPPENED
IRIS MORGAN, wife of JOHN CURTIS MORGAN, successful lawyer, slopes with her recent widower, CRAWFORD, for whom Morgan does not suspect. Crawford is in love with him. Morgan's secretary, after despair, slyly forces him to win the love of his child, little GIRL CURTIS. Morgan tells her he must stress his and the boy's need of her. She consents.

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She was a cravat she had bought for her husband and which she had decided to return, since, upon daylight inspection, its colors had seemed too vivid for his dark austerity. But it was exactly right for Willis Todd.

"Let John think I bought it for Willis in the first place," Nan grinned to herself. "I do believe he was a little jealous when he caught us both blushing. Let him be jealous! Do him good!"

She wrapped the box tie with lightning speed, affixed "Merry Christmas" seals, tagged it with a card which read: "For auld lang syne. From Nan to Willis."

She found the two men waiting for her in the drawing room, and obviously relieved when she joined them.

"I looked in on Curtis," Morgan said, "and as they proceeded to the dining room, which Estelle had decorated as lavishly as if she 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. Poor little tyke! He'd bragged for weeks of his turkey-and-dressing capacity and now he has to be content with milk toast. You couldn't relish a mite, I suppose, Nan?'"

"No!" Nan looked very much the firm young mother. "Dr. Black has given orders and I'm going to carry them out religiously. But please don't let your sympathy for Curtis spoil your own appetite, dear. I hope you're both hungry. Wouldn't it be a joke on us if poor Willis was in the same fix as O. Henry's Thanksgiving party found himself—forced to eat a second boiled-feast, while still in the agonies of indigestion from the first."

"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'hôte 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 giddy 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.

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"Here's Estelle, John," Nan interrupted, bursting with news about Christmas dinner. Just five minutes, Estelle, please. John, will you take Willis upstairs to wash his hands?"

"Sorry I'm not dressed, Nan," the young man apologized. "Mr. Morgan wouldn't give me time to go to my rooms—"

"I'm glad he didn't; I'd have had a tearful cook on my hands if he'd delayed the dinner," Nan laughed.

Then he must have remembered how he, blind to her love for him, had once asked Nan when she was going to marry her faithful suitor. To cover his confusion, he immediately became very volatile and jovial—manners which set oddly upon his natural austerity. His was a dry, twinkle-in-the-eye, downward-quirking-lip sort of humor, not the loud-laughing, boisterous kind which he now called to his aid.

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