

Caught With the Goods

WIVES MAY FROWN AND HUSBANDS MIGHT GRIN AT THIS
NOT UNCOMMON SITUATION, BUT BOTH GROUPS
CAN PROFIT FROM THE DISCUSSION

By Gordon Stiles

PHILIP MARSH was counted a lucky man when he married Celia Blake. He counted himself a lucky man. And why not? Celia came of an old and wealthy family; she was beautiful and accomplished.

Philip, although only thirty-eight, had made excellent progress in the law; his recently attained membership in one of New York's most substantial firms guaranteed him an income which stood for affluence. For three years before that, his annual earnings had been well beyond the twenty thousand dollar mark.

He and Celia had a six months' honeymoon abroad, and returned to live in a smart duplex apartment in the East Sixties. There, under Celia's inspired guidance, the domestic establishment moved smoothly onward—a perfect thing.

Celia was born to be mistress of a home. She loved the details of domestic life, from selecting the day's menu to the keeping of household accounts—which actually balanced at the end of the month.

Here again Philip recognized his good fortune. During his bachelor days he had been more or less a disciple of disorder, as scores of friends who had visited his living quarters could testify. His personal effects were normally scattered all over the place, and his laughing retort to mild criticism was: "If this place ever was put in real order, I'd never be able to find anything."

This theory was exploded promptly when Celia and he took up their lives together. If ever there was a household with a place for everything and everything in its place, it was theirs. That applied to Philip's belongings, too. And the young husband marveled at his former "sloppiness" when

he observed what wonderful twins Order and System really are.

"I do want our home to be pleasant, Phil," Celia told him. "It is such a delight to know that when breakfast is set for eight o'clock, it will be hot on the table at that precise minute; and that dinner at seven means just that. Doesn't it give you a thrill, dear, to see everything moving smoothly and without discord?"

Phil looked at the exquisitely appointed room, at the harmony of the furnishings. There was nothing that could possibly grate on one's nerves. And his lovely wife, meticulously turned out, was herself a creature of harmony. She fitted the picture perfectly. Phil kissed her, and laughed happily.

"Sweetheart," he said, "it's marvelous! *You're* marvelous! I don't deserve so much, but it's great to have it."

"Run along now and dress," she smilingly commanded; "dinner is in thirty-five minutes."

Phil went, bounding up the stairs in high spirits. Before marriage he had dressed for dinner only on rare occasions. But already he had grown accustomed to donning his dinner coat nightly. That had been Celia's idea.

II

AFTER two years of married life, Philip Marsh and his wife could point to a perfect score. There had been no clouds worth mentioning on the matrimonial horizon; Celia's management of the household had been flawless.

Repeatedly, Phil had gazed with admiration at Celia when friends were present, noting the ease with which she carried the

burden of hostess. Even when the party developed a certain amount of friskiness, there seemed to be no scars left—no mess to clear up.

The deftness with which Celia slipped ash trays into position well in advance of their possible use—and without the appearance of doing anything in particular—was an example of the manner in which she dealt with other problems of similar nature.

It was their third summer together that they decided to go on a camping trip for their holiday. Lee Dexter and his wife, Madge, who were keen for the outdoors, had urged a foursome in the Adirondacks where Lee owned a small camp. Celia saw at once that Phil was wild to go, and she immediately fell in with the plan. She never had been camping, and was not sure she would care for it, but at least it would be a new experience. So it was arranged.

The afternoon of the party's arrival in camp was so filled with confusion that Phil had no time to observe Celia's reaction to the surroundings. There were beds to be made and supper prepared. Lee believed in roughing it; and did not, as was more or less common in similar camps in the section, employ a man to do the hard work. As a matter of fact, if Phil had noticed, Celia strove more mightily than any of them to put things shipshape.

They ate canned beans and bacon that night, and drank coffee from tin cups. Afterward, all turned in to wash dishes. When that had been accomplished, and the four settled down to smoke and talk, Celia, whose eyes had been flitting about the living room, said: "Suppose I clean out the fireplace, Lee? It won't take long."

Lee glanced at the small pile of rubbish lying between the fire-dogs, and said easily: "Lord, no! We don't bother with that more than once a week in the summer. It's a handy place to throw all sorts of junk, and when we get a respectable pile we burn it and start over again."

"I see," said Celia. But frequently her eyes wandered back to the bits of paper, cardboard boxes, cigarette stubs, and matches, as if the sight fascinated her. The men were deep in plans for a fishing excursion on the morrow.

Celia was up at the crack of dawn, even before Phil was awake. When he opened his eyes, he spied her feverishly engaged in

tidying the room, struggling to arrange their belongings in neat and handy array. It was a tall order, owing to the smallness of their quarters and the lack of hooks, chests of drawers, and the like. Celia had insisted on bringing more personal luggage than Phil advised.

Now he said: "What in the world are you trying to do, Celia?"

"I just want to get this place straightened out," she replied. "But there's nothing to do anything with—no place to put things."

"You little silly! Just don't bother about them. You're in camp now."

Celia raised her eyebrows ever so slightly, and said: "Suppose I am! That doesn't prevent one from being decent, does it?"

Phil glanced at his watch, and hopped out of bed.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "I'd no idea of the time. We ought to get an early start. You and Madge can tidy up to your hearts' content while we're out."

He plunged into his clothing—flannel shirt, corduroy breeches, high-laced, thick-soled boots.

"I'll see if Lee has started breakfast," he said, and ducked through the door. When Celia emerged, ten minutes later, ham and potatoes were frying over the oil stove, fruit and cereal were on the table.

Lee knocked thunderously on the door of the room which Madge and he occupied. "Breakfast!" he shouted. "Eats, Madge!" And presently Madge joined them.

It was a noisy meal—a great contrast to the quiet, dainty morning repast at the Marsh home in New York. When Phil and Lee had satisfied their appetites they arose without ceremony and resumed the task of getting their tackle in readiness for the day's sport. Celia concealed her surprise at this, but, as the preparations neared completion, she remarked to Phil: "You haven't shaved yet, dear."

"Shaved!" The word burst from two masculine quarters at once. Phil continued: "I should say not! That's the joy of being out here. A chap can shave or not shave; if he does, it's when he likes."

Lee said: "We usually get to it once in three or four days, Celia. You'll get a kick out of seeing how downright tough your precious husband can be when he passes up the razor. You'll see him in his true light!"

Celia shuddered. After the men had

gone, she said to Madge: "Why is it that a man grows sloppy, naturally, the minute he gets away from the influence of civilization? Are they all like that, I wonder?"

"I don't know that I blame them for cutting out that beastly shaving when they get a chance. It must be a frightful bore," Madge replied.

Celia could think of many retorts, but she held her peace and bit her lip.

How Celia lived through the four weeks at camp, she never could have said. Twenty times a day her nerves were set jangling by incidents that were common enough to the conduct of any camping party, but which clashed violently with her inherent sense of order and neatness. And when the time came to break up, she felt as if she were on the verge of collapse. Probably she was; the restraint she had been forced to practice—even when alone with Phil—had subjected her to a terrific strain.

Thus, it would be superfluous to describe her relief when she and Phil found themselves back in their apartment.

III

So happy was Celia to be at home again that nothing else registered with her for weeks. Phil, of course, was quite busy bringing his work up to date, and spent many evenings at the office. Ordinarily, in such circumstances, time would have hung heavy with Celia, but now she was content to sit reading in her cozy library while her husband pored over briefs down town.

It was fully two months before Celia realized that Phil was taking a surprisingly long time to get "caught up," as he termed it. He still found it necessary to spend two or three evenings away from home, and Celia began to fret a little.

"Aren't you ever going to catch up?" she asked. And Phil said: "I don't know. There seems to be an awful lot to do." So it went on.

Then matters took a turn for the worse. Phil had to go out of town once or twice a month. He grumbled at the necessity, and always appeared tremendously glad to get home again, but that didn't help Celia to kill time during these absences.

It was while he was away on one of his trips that Celia's awakening began. At an afternoon bridge party, she mentioned casually that Phil had been away from

home more in two months than in all their married life before. This caused Mrs. Rex Cody, a cynical little woman, to remark: "Let's see, you've been married about three years, haven't you, Celia?"

"Just about," replied Celia.

"Uh-huh," resumed Mrs. Cody, laughing in a manner that caused Celia to burn with the desire to strangle the woman; "that's about the time they start in being 'busy' at the office, and taking trips out of town."

Celia was too reserved to go on with the topic, but, in spite of herself, Mrs. Cody's words set her thinking, wondering, paying more attention to Phil's evenings and days away from home. Even at that, she probably would not have become downright suspicious had it not been for her husband's manner when she said to him suddenly: "I do believe, Phil, you're getting tired of me and that's why you stay away so much."

To Celia's amazement, Phil turned red and stammered when he declared: "Why—er—Celia. What an absurd thing to say. How ridiculous!"

And the forced laugh that accompanied his words, coupled with the rank expression of guilt on his face, convinced her that—to say the least—Phil *was* out of the house more than he need be.

It was characteristic of Celia that she did not pursue the subject further; she was the sort who preferred to think matters over without committing herself. Which, she set herself to do.

The idea of checking up on Phil was abhorrent to her. She reasoned, too, that to evince a sudden interest in the details of what he did would put him on his guard, if he were indeed engaged in any philandering enterprise; and if he was not, it was all right, anyhow.

Nevertheless, Celia worried.

IV

It is uncertain how long matters would have gone on as before, or what steps Celia eventually would have been driven to take. An incident occurred which gave her something definite to work on, and put an end to vague surmises.

In changing from one suit to another, Phil had left the papers from his coat pocket lying on his dresser. Ordinarily, Celia would have slipped the packet into a drawer, and thought nothing about it. However, on the top of the pile lay a sig-

nificant document. The name, Hoyt, Cable & Co., together with the figures \$185.00, caught her eye.

They had bought many articles from this firm, which dealt mostly in oriental merchandise, but she could not recall having made any purchase of that approximate amount for a long time. Curiosity prevailed, and Celia unfolded the bill. It read:

Philip Marsh, Esq.,

To HOYT, CABLE & Co., Dr.

One mandarin coat.....\$185.00

Celia stared at the bill unbelievably. The insinuation in Mrs. Cody's tones came back to her afresh. A giddy, sickening feeling took possession of her for a moment, then she regained control. Her analytical mind set itself to the task of dealing with a new and terrible situation.

First off, she went over every phase of their married life, and tried to recall anything which might be regarded as a failure on her part to play the game. She could not see wherein she had not lived up to her marriage vows. And having settled that point in her own mind, she went further afield in search of a possible cause for Phil's deflection.

At the end of a half hour, she was as far from a conclusion as ever. Her head ached, and she wanted to cry. She had tried to be a good wife to Phil; he had never complained, certainly. Why, then, should he seek the company of another woman—buy her mandarin coats, and everything?

For a moment she considered taking her troubles to Mrs. Cody, whose husband was notoriously engaged in outside affairs. But only for a moment. Celia set her lips firmly.

No other woman would know of her problem—yes, her *disgrace*! That's what it was—no less. If a woman could not hold her husband, it was because she had failed somewhere, somehow! She would work it out by herself.

Now she felt justified in checking up a bit. It was her duty to bring Phil to his senses, and to do that, she must proceed carefully. Thus, two nights later, when Phil had telephoned that he would be late, Celia called him up at nine o'clock.

He answered promptly: "Hello, dear. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing important. I just wondered how late you are going to be—if you

will be home in time to drop around to see the Wentworths. I'm quite bored to-night. Want to go out somewhere."

"In that case," Phil said, "I'll come home at once."

They called on the Wentworths, and the evening would have been perfect had not Phil, after they reached home, carelessly flicked cigar ashes on the drawing-room rug. Celia had pounced upon the little gray smudge, swept it up.

Phil seemed a bit irritated, as he remarked: "Why worry over a little bit of ashes, Celia? Anna'll clean it up in the morning."

And Celia had felt hurt, somehow.

V

PHIL had gone to Washington for a three days' sojourn. On the second night Celia, beset by loneliness, put in a long distance call to the New Willard, where her husband was wont to stop when in the capital. To her surprise, the report came: "Mr. Marsh not registered at the New Willard!" Celia paced the floor most of the night.

When Phil returned next afternoon, she said: "Where did you stop in Washington, Phil?"

Something in her tone caused Phil to glance at her quickly. He replied: "At the Shoreham. Why?"

She said: "Oh, nothing. I just wondered." But in her heart she knew that Phil had lied to her!

The knowledge tore at her. She did not know what to do. If Phil really loved another woman, her manifest duty was to step aside and leave him free to be happy. If, on the other hand, it was merely a temporary infatuation, it was up to her to reclaim him, and to set his face once more in the right direction.

She made up her mind that she would not tolerate conditions such as obtained in the Cody family. Some sort of show-down must be compassed.

It was rather terrible, living with Phil, and not being able to believe him when he said he was going on a business trip, or that he must work late. She wondered how long her nerves would stand the strain. Not long. She must bring things to a head quickly.

If the Washington business had shocked Celia, how much more of a jolt she must have received through an incident which occurred on a November afternoon when

Phil was supposed to be in Boston. Celia had luncheon at a Fifth Avenue tea room, and was on her way uptown.

Her car was held up at Forty-Second Street while the crosstown traffic streamed past. As the signal changed and the car sprang forward, she saw Phil in a taxicab among the vehicles which passed her, going in the opposite direction. There was no mistake about it; it was Phil, sure enough. There was a touch of consolation in the fact that he was alone.

Consternation seized her. Here was further proof of Phil's perfidy. Also, here was something which he could not explain, she fancied. At home, she flew to the telephone to catch him.

Her voice was cold, although she meant it not to be, as she said: "That you, Phil? I just passed you on the Avenue. I thought you were in Boston."

"Yes," Phil explained easily; "I managed to get away this morning. Just got in. I was going to call you up, when you beat me to it."

"Oh!" said Celia, feeling that she had made a fool of herself. "You'll be home for dinner, then."

"You bet!" Phil agreed, and there was enthusiasm in his voice.

This occurrence left Celia more confused than ever. Not for a moment did she believe Phil's story. But how could she disprove it? So far, he had been perfectly plausible—too clever for her.

And, although her whole being rebelled against the idea, Celia resolved to set herself to watch her erring mate. Having reached this determination, she felt better, and was gayety itself when Phil arrived. It was paramount that she should not betray to him that she suspected anything reprehensible in her conduct.

VI

PERHAPS a week after the foregoing episode, Phil telephoned one afternoon the usual message: "I'm afraid I'll be somewhat late to-night."

Celia had said: "All right, dear." But excitement surged through her veins. She was set for action!

She set out in a taxicab. Better not let Foley, the chauffeur, suspect that she was trailing her husband. Shame suffused her at the bare thought of it. Nevertheless, she was beginning to understand the viewpoint of certain other women she had read about

in the papers, and at whose sleuthlike activities she had been accustomed to sneer.

She was a little uncertain just what she meant to do. It was half past eight; Phil would have had his dinner before this. She spoke to the driver. "Stop at the next drug store."

There, she called Phil's office. Her pretext was that she wanted a copy of a certain woman's magazine, which could not be obtained at the news stand near home. Would he bring one along?

Phil answered promptly. Of course, he would bring the magazine. Celia hung up, and pondered. Phil was in his office, right enough. What would it profit her to go down there as she had intended.

Then, in a flash it came to her. Phil, most likely, had fallen for the charms of his secretary, or some other woman connected with the firm. The commonest thing in the world! Why hadn't she thought of it before? She gave the driver Phil's business address in lower Broadway.

Celia shivered as she dismissed the cab. Lower Broadway is an eerie place at night, with its deserted streets and skyscrapers, and only here and there a light showing from one of the myriad windows. There were two entrances to the building which housed her husband's firm.

The one around the corner on a side street was nearer Phil's office, and that was the one he commonly used, she knew. She hurried through the cavernous gloom to the revolving doors, now quite still and looking worn and tired after the day's mad whirl.

Halfway between the door and the elevators, she stopped short. Evidently only one or two cars were in use at night, and before the grillework, waiting for one of these, stood a stunningly pretty girl. Every instinct within Celia cried out that this was the cause of all her troubles. Even now the interloper was going up to join Phil.

Celia's mind worked furiously. She would not go up now. She would take no chances of alarming the miscreants, prematurely. Stepping over to the directory of the building, Celia studied the names thereon. She kept one eye cocked at the indicator which showed the location of the descending car, and just as it came to a rest at the ground floor she turned and walked toward the street.

Her manner was that of one who has suddenly recalled something which had

slipped her mind. But before she reached the exit she heard the girl say: "Sixteen." That was Phil's floor.

Torn between rage and humiliation, and keyed to a high pitch of determination, Celia prowled the streets for ten minutes. Again she entered the building, and was carried to the sixteenth floor.

Alighting there, she hurried through the corridor to Phil's office, and stopped in dismay before the door. The place was totally dark!

For a moment Celia hesitated, swamped with emotion, then rapped loudly on the ground glass of the entrance. The knocks echoed up and down the halls, but there was no sign from within. Again she knocked, and again—with a like result! Finally she moved away, back to the elevator shaft.

What to do? Could she be wrong? Had Phil started for home, or was he—oh, that woman—she *knew* she had not been mistaken—a woman's instinct—

The elevator came and whisked her below, and once more she was in the street. She made her way toward City Hall Park. There she put in a call for Phil's office. Probably he would not answer. If he would not heed a knock on the door, it was unlikely that he would pay any attention to a telephone call.

To her utter surprise, his voice came over the wire at once. Celia was unprepared. She could think of nothing to say except: "I wish you'd come home, Phil."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing. Only I want to see you. It's lonely here."

"All right. I'll come up in ten minutes or so."

Celia's composure left her flat. She knew that the time for the show-down had come. She would have it out with Phil. And now, she would hasten back to the office and waylay her husband as he emerged with her rival. He had said ten minutes; there would be plenty of time.

VII

Just beside the entrance of the building Celia waited—five minutes—ten minutes. She was growing impatient, and even then she was not certain that she would confront the pair when they emerged. But she did wish they would hurry.

Footsteps approached along the side street, and Celia shrunk closer to the wall, studiously gazing toward Broadway. To

her horror, the steps slackened and stopped right at her elbow. Fright seized her, and she poised to flee.

Then Phil's voice said: "Well! Where on earth did you come from?"

Celia almost screamed: "Phil!"

"How did you manage to get 'way down here so soon?" he asked, and suddenly his voice went strange: "And why did you come?"

She turned on him. "Look here, Phil, this business has gone far enough!"

He was silent for a moment, and then he said: "I dare say I've made a fool of myself. But how did you find out about it?"

"Where did you come from just now," Celia demanded, "and *where is that woman?*"

"Woman!" cried Phil. "What woman?"

"The one you just admitted you'd made a fool of yourself about," Celia returned coldly.

Phil stared at his wife.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what you're driving at, but I may as well 'fess up. Come on with me, and I'll give you the whole yarn."

Wonderingly, Celia followed him back down the street. He paused before the door of a ramshackle building in the middle of the block, produced a key, and threw the door open.

"I'd better go first," he said, and led the way up two creaking flights of stairs. Here, in the dimly lighted hall, he fumbled at another door.

Celia found herself in a small suite furnished for housekeeping, a sitting room, bedroom, kitchen, and bath. The furniture was old and worn, but looked comfortable. There were a couple of leather easy chairs, a desk, a shelf containing a few books that had been much handled.

It was not, however, these that held the eye of the puzzled wife. It was the utter disorder of the place. The floor was strewn with ashes and spilled tobacco. Bits of last Sunday's newspaper lay here and there. Articles of clothing decorated chair backs, and the bed within was unmade. Across this lay a pair of Phil's pyjamas.

The desk was in quite as disreputable a condition. On an overflowing ash tray rested a rank black pipe, half smoked. Magazines were scattered about among pencils and bits of paper. In the kitchen was the evidence of a meal lately eaten—ham and

eggs, it had been, if the remains stood for anything.

Celia stood still in the midst of what she would have called "filth," and remarked: "You'd better get on with your explanation, Phil."

In a husky voice he began: "I don't suppose you'll forgive me, Celia, because I don't know how to explain. That is, I don't know if I can make you understand. But you see, dear—at home everything is so—well, perfect—I guess it's too perfect for a disorderly chap like me. I was beginning to get jumpy—or something. Anyway, it seemed as if I just had to be what you would call disreputable once in awhile."

"Oh!" Celia gasped.

"Perhaps you—I don't know if I can make it clear that I really was thinking of you. I was afraid that I'd break out some day without wanting to—and I knew it would hurt you. You see, I love you, Celia—"

She stopped him. "Do you mean to say

that you've been coming here to be untidy—nothing else?"

"I guess that's about it," he mumbled. "You see, I had an extension put on my office telephone, so if you called you would not worry about me. I could answer it here just as well."

Her eyes fell upon a large cardboard box inscribed, "Hoyt, Cable & Co." Phil followed her look. He stepped across and lifted it from its place in a dingy corner.

"I may as well give it to you now," he said. "I was saving it for your birthday next week. Hoyt called me up and said he had a beauty. You've been wanting one, you know."

But Celia swept aside the offering. Her arms went around Phil, and tears trembled in her eyes as she spoke into his coat:

"Oh, my dear! *My dear!* My poor foolish child!" She laughed shakily.

"Come on home, Phil," she whispered. "Come on home, and help me wreck the place!"

THE IDLER

LET me turn from my track
And so drowsily lie,
While forgetting the pack
And horizons afar,
To look up at the sky
And the drift of a star.

How soft lies the grass
That is beaded with dew:
Like a requiem mass
Fall the tones o' the wind,
As if sins had been few
And were all left behind.

How sweet is the night
With the flowers that sleep:
How dreaming the light
From the tomb o' the moon,
While a frog grumbles deep
At the laugh of a loon.

Heigh-ho! The night's black:
I arise with a sigh,
And resuming my pack,
Seek horizons afar
That eternally lie
Neath the drift of a star.

Olin Lyman