

The Party Line



The storm raged unabated, as Phyllis sank into a chair.

by Doris Hume

PHYLLIS HAD COME gladly to Breen Valley. Young Skip needed some country living after his battle with polio, so when Dave inherited the old home, it was the answer to a prayer.

"We'll have garden parties!" Phyllis told Dave happily. "Like your mother used to when we visited."

"I'll have a horse!" Skip said with shining eyes.

Dave grinned. "I guess I'll always be a country kid at heart." Then he sobered. "But it won't be like town, Phyll; Winter is rugged out here."

"That for Winter!" Phyll said, and hugged her nine-year-old.

Phyllis wasted no time. She let it be known she was available for P.T.A. and Civic Club; even for Scout Den Mother. "Take it easy," Dave warned.

But she laughed, "This is home now, isn't it?"

And then, within weeks, she found herself withdrawn from Breen Valley, justifiably resentful over misuse of the rural party line.

"Look," she told Dave indignantly one night, "I've tried being polite about it, but today I had enough, and I told them so."

"Told who?" he asked, worried.

"All who were listening. Now don't look like that, Dave; there's not a

conversation over this phone since we came that hasn't been listened to and commented on. Old Mrs. Bevins even breaks into the middle of a sentence! I ignored it, Dave, even when Brenda called from Chicago to tell me she and Bill were engaged, and we practically had to shout at each other. And later Julia Jacobs said to me in the market: 'Nice your sister is having a June wedding.' They don't even care that I know they listen!"

"Honey," Dave said, "nobody means any harm. Out here it's—just a way of being neighborly."

"Eavesdropping?" Phyll's mouth tightened. "Today Brenda called again. There was that miserable open feeling on the line, and she kept saying, 'I can't hear a word, Phyll.' And she was paying for the call. Look, Dave, I've been patient, but I've had it."

"What did you say?" he asked, very evenly.

"I told Brenda: 'Well, no wonder. We're screening everything through the ears of the neighborhood.' Brenda said, 'You mean your line is tapped?' I said, 'No. Snapped! It's the local indoor sport. I hope my life never gets so barren I pry into someone else's privacy for excitement.'"

Phyll smiled grimly. "Receivers banged up like corn popping. Brenda and I could actually hear each other. Maybe now they'll leave me alone."

Dave said slowly, "That's the point you've missed, Phyll. They will."

"All right," she said defensively, "all right. Somebody has to take a stand, though."

Phyllis refused to admit at first that things were different. Her rebuke had been merited; the incident was closed. She went stubbornly to county meetings with Dave. Everyone was polite: "Hiya, Dave?" And then, "How'd you do, Mrs. Reeder?"

There it stopped. She was not treated rudely, just ignored.

So what! she thought. She was in Breen Valley so Skip could grow strong. She had capabilities the community could use; the loss was theirs if they rejected her.

All day, in the big kitchen, the party line jangled its longs and shorts. She visualized the eager eavesdroppers.

Her number rang only if Dave called from town. They always had a clear connection. Well, that was how she wanted it.

All-important was Skip's daily improvement. He had even learned to ride Pepper, a sturdy little roan horse.

FALL SLIPPED into Winter almost overnight. If Phyllis were lonely she never let on. On bad days now she or Dave drove Skip to school and picked him up later. On clear mornings he rode the furry—