

Put a Lid on Lora

By Dave Grinnell



Lora's nasty little habit of telephone eavesdropping was bound to get her into a mess of trouble. But just how much she never suspected until Death came to cross her wires.

THE telephone is a diabolical invention. Believe me, I know. Sometimes I wonder whether we wouldn't all be better off if they'd never invented the damn thing—and the radio, too. Then we could sit back at home and not be bothered by those banal radio commercials and the infernally clanging phone bell. Not that that's the worst of it—not by a long shot. My friends may call me a mean old reactionary to be agin' the phone, but let me tell you why. It'll kill you; it almost did me.

Lora and I—Lora's my wife, a pocket-size edition with the bounce of a kitten and the hair of a Lorelei—Lora and I were having breakfast in the little wallpapered clothes closet that landlords amusingly call "dining nooks" in their suburban apartments, when Lora took it into her head to stop snipping at her cereal, put a finger to her lips, and reach out with

her other hand to the telephone. The instrument stood on a little shelf right in the nook, which is itself just an appendage to the kitchen. She picked up the phone—it hadn't rung—and put her ear to it. She listened a minute, while I watched her, gaping with my astonishment, then she hung up, pouting.

"You never hear a single interesting thing now that he's back," she said.

"Now that *who's* back?" I said, "and what the devil were you listening to?"

"The party line, silly," she retorted. "We've got a party line, or have you forgotten?"

Now that she mentioned it, I did recall the phone people saying something when we moved in three years ago about our only being able to get a party line due to the war. But I hadn't paid much attention to it.

"A party line here, in Flatbush, in

Greater New York City? You mean you can hear other people talking? But we don't have a system of bell signals . . ." I said to Lora, my mouth full of corn flakes.

"No, of *course* not," she replied. "It's different. There are only two parties to a city party line. And they have different numbers and connections. You never know whether the line is busy unless you pick up. And if their line is open and someone dials us, they get a busy signal, see?"

"But you can hear them talking if you pick up at the right time?" I went on. She pointed a fork at the phone in reply.

"They're usually on the phone in the mornings. He just came back from the Army a couple weeks ago. Got his old job back with the telephone company, too. He's a repairman, I think. But he's awfully dull. Never talks anything on the phone except ball games and work." She stopped to chomp on some buttered toast, her mouth full.

I reached over, picked the telephone carefully off the hook and stuck it to my ear. Sure enough, there was a man talking. A gruff, somewhat harsh voice, a little clipped in tone, I imagined a rather unamiable guy to meet, from his tone. He was saying something to someone about showing him some of the junk he'd brought back from overseas. Especially about swapping some old Luger he'd managed to smuggle in, past the vigilant eye of the inspection people.

This sort of eavesdropping was new to me, but evidently my wife had been snooping on our unknown wire-companions for a long time. She got up to get the coffee pot off the stove. She threw a remark over her shoulder:

"There's never anything really exciting anymore. She's stopped dating that salesman now that her husband's come back. Gee, there used to be some hot stuff

over that wire. . . ."

The voice talking in my ear stopped abruptly. There was a muffled grunt. Feeling myself flaming brick red, I hung up softly, and turned, miffed, to Lora. "You put your foot in it that time," I said.

"Oh!" she replied. "But anyway they don't know who we are."

"Humph," I said. "Why not?"

"'Cause the phone company won't tell party-liners who shares their wire. It's supposed to be confidential. I suppose it's because of blackmail, I guess." Well, I didn't intend any such shenanigans, but I certainly did feel like the naughty boy caught swiping apples.

AFTER I'd gotten to the office—it's in downtown Manhattan—I just proceeded to forget all about the party line nonsense. I've got a nice layout. It's a confidential sort of job, connected with the government, and I've a cubby hole all to myself, one of a long line of offices in this government layout. There I do my own work all day long without interference. I've a phone of my own, a small radio I brought in to fool away idle periods, and even a one-cup size electric percolator.

So about eleven-thirty, things got quiet, the morning's batch of papers had been taken care of. I didn't want to start on the big report until after lunch, so I turned on the radio to pick up the news.

I was leaning back idly, listening to the news getting more and more local as the announcer worked his way through the international calamities, to the national disasters, down to the state and local catastrophes. So by and by I heard about a woman found shot to death only a half hour ago in a Flatbush apartment, address not very far from my own, couple of blocks. Shot with a German pistol her husband had brought home from Italy. They were still looking for him, the radio

said.

I puckered my brow a bit, sat forward at my desk. That was interesting. I turned the radio off, dialed Lora on my phone. She'd be fascinated by this local gossip. But when the connection was made, I got a busy signal. I wondered who she was calling at this hour.

I turned the radio on again, listened to early market reports and the lineups for the afternoon's games. About ten minutes later, I dialed Lora again. Still a busy signal.

Still, I thought to myself, maybe it isn't Lora burning up the wires after all. Maybe it's the other people, chatting away. Maybe it's that guy's wife flirting with that salesman again. And then right away I thought of what the radio announcer had said about a man shooting his wife with a German pistol.

Hadn't I overheard that party line stranger talking about a Luger that very morning?

I dialed the wife again. *Bzzz-bzzz-bzzz.* Busy signal. That was fifteen minutes so far.

If it was the other party . . . maybe it was the cops talking on the other party's phone? Or . . . or . . . maybe it was that guy . . . maybe he'd left his phone off the hook deliberately—so I couldn't call Lora, couldn't warn her!

My heart was beating fast now, and I felt a cold sweat beginning to struggle through on my face. But my brain reminded me, he can't find out who shares his telephone. The phone company won't tell him—Hell! He works for the telephone people! Of course, he can find out!

I leaped from my desk, frantically grabbed a hat, burst through the door and ran down the hall past the line of private offices. The secretaries and stenogs stopped chewing their gum and powdering

their noses to gape after me, but I shot through to the elevator bank.

Fortunately one of the cars was waiting, so I made the street without delay. I ran down the corner, shouldered aside a stout lady who was about to step into a waiting cab, and hollered to the driver to go to Brooklyn without delay. I waved a twenty dollar bill at him and he grasped the idea.

As we sped over the bridge, I gave him my Flatbush address, then sank back, all palpitations and cold horrors.

I could see it now. The guy had heard Lora's crack about his wife cheating on him while he was over in Europe. He'd squared it with her with that gun he'd brought back. And now he was going to get Lora. Maybe he'd shoot her to cover up his family dishonor—some people are funny like that—or maybe he thought she knew that salesman's name.

So he'd slipped his own phone off the hook to prevent me calling Lora and warning her when the news got out—and it would keep her from calling for help too.

THE taxi was making good time down Flatbush Avenue. I patted my pockets, wondering what to do. I remembered now, too late, that there was a pistol in my desk at the office. The government had handed them out for some fool reason at the war's beginning; maybe they thought that the Japs could do something with those reams of red tape in my files. We'd laughed a lot around the office at the time. And now, when I'd finally found a use for that Army .45, it was peacefully nestling in its holster at the back of my desk drawer.

The car drew up neat and fast before my apartment house. I tossed the fellow the twenty and ran like hell for the door. Up the stairs all three flights I sprinted—devil take the pokey self-service elevator.

At my hall, I slowed up suddenly. Couldn't just dash in. Might be a big mistake. My door was slightly ajar. I eased it open. Nobody in the little foyer.

I heard noises in the living room. Something thudded, as if someone had thrown something. I heard a high hysterical voice, Lora's, say:

"Go away! Go away! I don't know anything!" A man's voice mumbled something. I heard a scuffle of feet.

I lost my head, dashed in. In the corner of the living room, wedged in between the bookcase and the reading desk was Lora. She was holding a metal book end in her hand, threatening to throw it at the man edging towards her around the coffee table.

I saw his back. He was tall and thin, overalled and dark-haired. He had a gun in his hand, a big foreign-looking thing which he was waving. There was a gash in his forehead which Lora must have made when she got him with the other book end. Blood from it was dripping a vivid scarlet on our new rug. And he was out to kill.

Lora screamed when she saw me. The guy whirled as I jumped him. The damn gun went off with a terrific bang, but he didn't have it aimed. Before he could

shoot again, I was on him, crashing him to the floor, my hands around his neck.

For a moment there was quite a scramble. In the melee, the guy forgot about his gun. We thrashed back and forth, knocking over the furniture, that damn blood from his face spattering both of us, hands and clothes. Lora hopped all about us, screaming, trying to get an opportunity to kayo the fellow with that metal book end.

I saw my chance as we rolled over towards the radiator box. He was pounding my side, but I never noticed it. I managed to swing him hard and we rolled over together and slammed his head against the sharp edge of the fancy metal radiator cover.

That did it. The guy sort of sank quietly, and Lora had to drag me off as I sat on his unconscious body and tried to punch his sagging ugly face to bloody ribbons.

Well, we had the phone taken out the next day, after the killer had been taken to the police hospital to be made whole enough to sit in the Sing Sing griddle. And if you want to get me in a hurry when I'm home, there's only one way you can do it. Send a telegram.