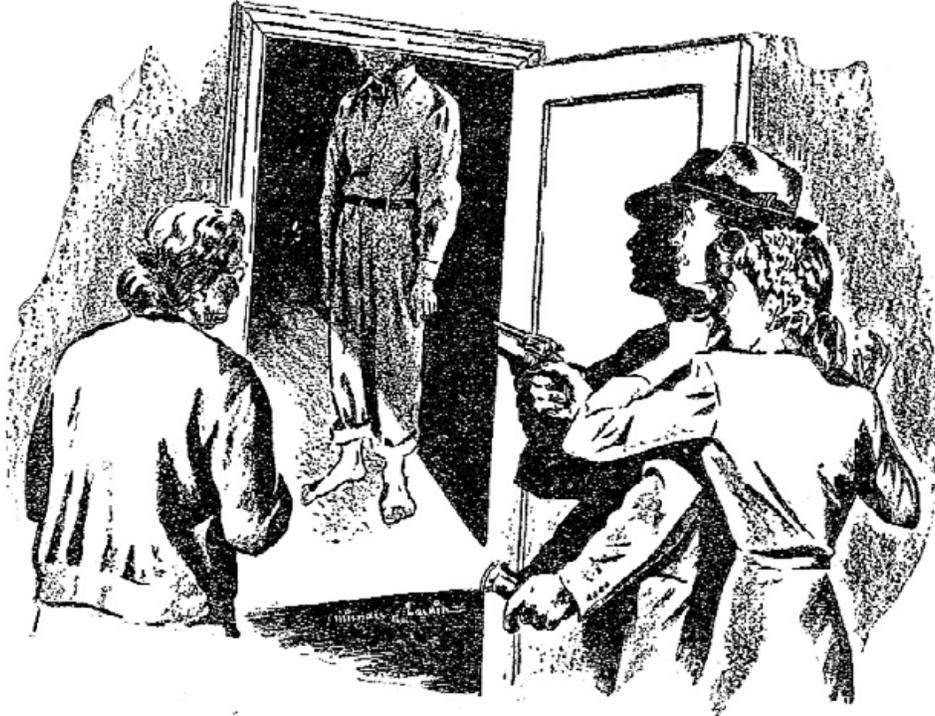


# Station K-I-L-L Calling

By Berna Morris



*The little old lady only wanted a minute on the air to whistle for her dog. But when her few seconds turned into the Murder Hour, it was the lawdogs that had to whistle with bullets for her death-spot sponsor.*

THE time was a few minutes after six o'clock on Sunday night. I remember because I had just made the break and hit the network. The public is used to lady radio announcers now. I checked my gains and started editing the local news items.

Something made me turn my head. Outside the soundproof, double glass window of the control room was a little old lady. Her black hat had slithered sideways on her soft white hair, and she smiled timidly. A small dark man was standing slightly in back of her.

Hunk had gone out for a bite. There was no one else on duty, so I motioned for the old lady to go through the adjoining

office. There is no door from the control room into the corridor.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

One small hand plucked at the gold clasp of her pocketbook. She opened and shut it several times, then looked through the window at the dark man in the hall.

"I—I want to see the manager?" Her voice went up.

I smiled. "The manager is out of town for a few days. I'm Roberta Bates. Can I help you?"

She started out bravely. "I'm Mrs. Steiner. Mrs. Henry Steiner. I understand that it is possible to purchase—" She stopped and ended on a question again, "Air?"

I was very grave, "You want to buy some time on the air?"

She nodded brightly. "Yes, yes. Oh, not very much. Only a minute."

I felt my face cracking, and turned and checked the board. Everything was okay. Then back to my visitor. "That's not very long. You couldn't say much."

She took a shocked step backwards. "Oh, but I'm not going to talk."

My face was falling to pieces again. "Not—talk?"

The black bonnet slipped more askew as she shook her head. She took two or three shallow breaths. "I—I want to whistle." Her small bright face beamed at me. Then something in my silence must have reached her.

"For my dog, you know."

"Your—your dog?"

She nodded. "Yes. You see, he's gone. And he always listens to the radio, especially right after supper. He just sits in front of it for hours. And I thought, if I could whistle to him; perhaps call him, if he's still alive, I know he'll be by a radio now. If he heard me, no matter what family he's with, he'd come home. I know he would." She smiled up at me and blinked.

And that's why the news items were two minutes short that night. Because of what I took to be an old woman's fancy—and because she paid well. I can still see her with her mouth set in a frightened determined line, clutching at the microphone. When I gave her the sign, she whistled a few quavery bars of a dance tune that had been popular last year, then called pleadingly:

"Here, Teppy. Here, Teppy. Come home, Teppy. Teppy come home."

Then she whistled again. Sometimes late at night, when I'm locking up and the big studio is dark, it seems that I hear the small shrill sound of that whistling.

The small dark man had been an

interested spectator to the whole procedure. When Mrs. Steiner left, he fell into step beside her and took her arm. He threw away the cigarette he had been smoking. They were in deep conversation as they went down the corridor.

I didn't think anything more about the incident, except to be annoyed at the curious people who telephoned about the whistling. I told them it was a come-on for a new program.

IT WAS getting close to election. We had a lot of political time on the air. Tuesday night one of the big shots had an hour. Hunk was in the studio, and I was on control. There was a big crowd out in the hall. They pressed curious noses against the glass.

Everything was rolling smoothly, when the door opened and Joe Budler ambled in. Joe has just been promoted to plainclothes. He says he can't see so good without the glare from his brass buttons.

I smiled up at him. "What's on, Joe?"

Joe shrugged, hunched a shoulder at the window that gave on the big studio. "Press agent stuff. I'm supposed to keep an eye on that spouting whale in there. Says his life has been threatened. Probably has, by thousands of folks. I'd like to strangle him myself."

"Joe, wait! That's *Ultraman* for this week." I barely rescued the discs before Joe's weary bulk settled in the chair. He eyed the records.

"I'd have sat quicker and harder if I'd known that. He picked up one. "I get indigestion every night before supper, because that young nephew of mine has to listen to this stuff." He put *Ultraman* back on the stack, his eyes sweeping the window.

"Say, there's some old dame outside wants to see you."

I knew before I looked. Somehow I had

known that it wasn't finished. Mrs. Steiner's small bright face was close to the glass. The crowd was crushed around her. One tiny hand motioned. There was a desperate urgency in her eyes. Her mouth quivered and she said something. Of course I couldn't hear. Then a spasm of pain crossed her face. Her eyes, wide and agonized, pleaded with me. Her hand clawed at the glass.

Joe beat me into the hall. The crowd surged away from the tiny figure that was crushed against the glass. As the pressure was released, she crumpled. Joe caught the thin body and gently lowered her to the floor. The morbidly curious closed in again.

Her eyes were on me as I knelt beside her. She groped blindly, clutched one of my hands. Her breath gurgled. "They told me—they told me—if I would get Teppy—Teppy—" The thin figure arched, then sagged in Joe's arms.

The big-shot politician was still fluffing his lines, when Joe came back later. I looked up. "What was it? Heart attack?"

Joe looked at me with his weary eyes. "You might call it that. She was stabbed. No leads. Nobody saw anything. From what we can find out, it just didn't happen." He leaned on the desk. "What's the dope on this anyway? Why did she come here, and who's Teppy?"

He chewed on a thumbnail, while I told him what I knew. He was silent when I finished, then stood upright.

"Her dog?" He ambled toward the door. "I think I'll go out and see if Teppy has come home."

"Wait, Joe. Wait'll I make this break, and I'll go along." Joe looked annoyed, but be waited.

**T**HE politician floundered and fluffed to a close. I made a quick break and hit the network. Hunk was in the office. I

clapped on my hat and called to him as I went by:

"Take it over, Hunk. I'll be back later."

Joe drove rapidly and mumbled along as he went. "We couldn't find out very much about her. She lives out in Brentwood Park. Has one son, but he's not here now."

He drew up before a small cottage. Like most of the other houses in this quiet subdivision, it was dark.

I followed Joe up the walk and watched as he first rang the bell, then pounded on the door panels. He kept it up.

"Ain't nobody home." The irritated female voice came from the house next door.

Joe stopped his pounding. We moved toward the voice in the darkness. The woman was sitting on the screened porch.

"Hot, ain't it?" She heaved her bulk out of the chair and switched on the porch light. She unlatched the door, and stood squinting down at us. "You looking for Mrs. Steiner?"

Joe twiddled with his hat. "Mrs. Steiner's met with an—an accident. We're trying to get in touch with her folks."

The fat woman sniffed. "Ain't got none 'cept that no good son of hers. And he ain't here. She tells everybody he's down in South America. That's what she says. Charlie Steiner! Always been no-count."

She seemed to remember her manners. Her voice sweetened sickeningly. "I hope Mrs. Steiner's all right."

Joe ignored the question. He looked over at the quiet house. "Seen her dog around lately?"

The woman's eyes sharpened. "Dog? Whose dog?"

"Mrs. Steiner's."

The woman shook her head. "She ain't got no dog."

The night was quiet for a moment. I could hear the crickets.

“You mean she doesn’t have one now?”

“I mean she ain’t never had one. Not since I been here. Five years.”

Joe seemed to think that over for a few minutes. “Seen anybody around in the last few days?”

The woman pursed her pudgy lips. “Well, Saturday, it was kinda late. Two men come up in a taxi. One was a big fellow, and the other was little, dark-like. I don’t know how long they stayed. I went to bed.”

I had a mental picture of her falling asleep behind the window curtains. She went on. “This evening, early, a car drove up and a woman got out. She looked like she was in a hurry, I didn’t see her leave. Must have been while I was at supper. When I came out on the porch, the car was gone.” Her eyes were squinting questions.

Joe shrugged and thanked her gravely, then ambled toward the other house. The woman leaned a massive forearm against the door frame and thoughtfully scratched the side of her face. She watched as Joe tried the door, then opened it with a key from his pocket. It was a simple lock.

The hot, dead air of the closed house rushed to meet us. Joe went ahead, turning on the lights and looking. I followed him, trying to read what his quick eyes saw. There was quite a bit of confusion. There were men’s clothes in one of the bedrooms. Joe picked up a pair of pants and started through the pockets. I went into a small hall to turn on the lights in the rear of the house.

I couldn’t find the light switch in one of the small back rooms. I groped forward in the darkness, my hand sliding along the wall. My fingers touched something wet and sticky. I had a sense of movement in the darkness even as my hand jerked back. Then I was standing in the lighted hallway, and somebody was shrieking in a piping treble. It was me.

“Joe. Joe! *Joe!*”

Joe burst into the hallway, gun in hand. “Berta, what the hell? I should have known better than to let a woman tag along. Berta, what is it?”

I could only point to the door. I was opening and closing my mouth. My lips were forming words but no sound came out. I pointed at the door, then grabbed Joe’s sleeve as he moved.

“There’s something – something in there. Something—”

The beam of the flashlight sprang into the room. It swept in a semicircle and stopped. I peered around Joe’s shoulder. One hand was at my mouth. I felt my teeth clench on something small and round. Not until the next day, when I saw the marks, did I realize that it was one of my own fingers.

**S**OMETHING was moving in the circle of brightness. Swaying gently, back and forth. A pair of naked human feet. Still swinging quietly from my touch in the darkness. The torch speared upward.

“Oooh!”

The exclamation was a hoarse whisper in my ear. I swirled. The flaccid white face of the woman next door was peering over my shoulder. Her small eyes were black points of horror.

Joe’s words were thin and sharp. “You know him? Who is it?”

The woman swallowed. “Charlie Steiner. It’s him. But, what happened to him?”

The torch flicked up and quickly down again. Joe’s voice thickened. “Looks like somebody was trying to persuade him to do or say something. They persuaded too far.”

Joe threw words at me. “Berta, go call the chief and tell him to get out here.”

I was glad to get out of that small, horrible room. The fat lady from next door followed me. She seemed dazed.

Chief Whitely was unbelieving. "Berta, you been drinking?" He listened again. "But Berta, we can't have another murder. We—we ain't got enough equipment. Okay. Okay, I'm coming."

I had to go back to the station right after all the cops and reporters got there. It was my night for late news bulletins. Hunk was due off duty. I made Joe promise that he would drop by and give me the latest dope.

Hunk was morose. Even the news of the new murder didn't perk him up. "Just another excuse for you to go running around with that flatfoot." He put on his hat and picked up a stack of recordings. "How about me taking you home after you sign off?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Joe's coming by."

Hunk thumped the records down on the control desk. The needle of the recording that was playing jumped back an inch.

"Watch out, Hunk." I looked at the record. Probably had a hole in it. "No use you acting childish, Hunk."

Hunk picked up the stack again. "Childish! I'm seventeen."

"All right, Hunk." I smiled at him. "Maybe tomorrow."

After he was gone I made the ten o'clock break and gave the news summary. Then I added a local flash about the murders. After that it was dance music for an hour.

It was close to eleven o'clock before Joe got there. The quiet of the big empty audition rooms was beginning to get on my nerves. I could see the brightly lighted hall through one of the windows of the control room. But the window facing the big studio was blank and black. The little fine hairs on my neck prickled when my back was turned to its vacant expanse.

I was glad when Joe came in and sank thoughtfully into a chair. He shook his

head at my raised eyebrows.

"Nothing new. From what we can gather, Charlie Steiner came in by bus about ten days ago and has been holed up at his mother's ever since. Can't get anything on the other two men. The little dark one must be the one who came up here with the old lady. One of the witnesses tonight said he saw a dark, foreign-looking man in the crowd around the old lady. Can't tell though. People imagine all sorts of things in a situation like that."

Even with Joe there, that empty studio in back of me was on my nerves. Well, if the room seemed to have eyes, I had ears. I flicked the switch of the mike that was always in the big studio and picked up the earphones. I held one to my ear.

For a moment there was only the hum of the open line, then there was a faint metallic clicking. It grew louder. There was an eight-ball mike in there. Someone was standing right up against it in the darkness. It was the ticking of a watch I heard.

I put the earphones down and clutched my ribbon mike with cold hands. I watched the second hand on the clock. Thirty seconds to go. Time to sign off.

I turned my back to the window. Joe was staring thoughtfully at the floor. I spoke quickly:

"Joe, don't look up and don't move. There's someone in the studio. They can see in here. I've got to give this bulletin the sign off." I was watching the clock. Five seconds. "Joe! Joe, don't!"

But Joe had risen casually and was going out the door.

The red second hand hit the hour. I skipped the bulletin and signed off. I bet it was the quickest sign-off on record. I didn't know what Joe was doing. I picked up the earphones again. The ticking was gone. The line seemed dead. Only blackness through the window and silence through the mike.

Then my ears were numbed. There was a crash, and two reverberating thunderclaps. Shots. I flung out of the control room, through the office and out into the corridor. Something brushed against me. I was thrown against the wall. The back of my head thumped solidly.

It was several seconds before I picked myself up. The corridor was empty. I ran to the big studio.

“Joe! Joe!”

I flicked on the lights. Joe was sitting in the middle of the floor rubbing the back of his head. “The damned son of a cockroach got away! What’s he want up here anyway! What do you know about this?”

“Nothing, Joe. Honest, I don’t know anything.”

Joe stumbled to his feet and kept rubbing his head. “Well, somebody thinks you know something.” He took my arms. “Berta, you mustn’t stay up here by yourself. Whoever it is, they want something pretty badly. I don’t want anything to happen to you. Not to you, Berta.” His fingers tightened desperately on my arms.

I thought about Charlie Steiner and shivered. I didn’t want anything to happen to me either. Especially not what had happened to Charlie.

**T**HE next day I was still jumpy and had to be very firm with myself to keep from looking over my shoulders all the time. I was glad that Joe was going to stop for me at seven, when Hunk took over the night shift.

I gave cooking hints; wartime baking; gave the news bulletins; hit the networks for the soap operas, then played neutral music to fill in before *Ultraman*. I was looking for the current disc, when something made me raise my eyes.

The control room door opened quietly. A small dark-skinned man slipped in

quickly and leaned with his back against the closed door. A cigarette gleamed whitely against his brown face. One hand was in his pocket. It bulged menacingly.

“Take it easy, sister, I want to talk to you.” The words and idiom were as American as corn on the cob, but the accent was curious. I froze where I was with the *Ultraman* records in my hands. I looked at the clock. Four, fifty-nine, thirty. Thirty seconds to go to *Ultraman*. And two hours to go to Joe.

I was very calm. Inside, my stomach was upside down. I motioned toward the chair. “Just sit down over there. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The pocket jerked. “Stow that stuff.”

I looked up with pretended annoyance. “I’ve got to put this record on. We can’t let the program lag.”

“Okay, but no funny business.”

My heart was choking me. I picked out a record and put it on cold. There was no time for a break. Even if there were, he probably wouldn’t have let me touch a mike. My fingers were trembling so that I could hardly put the needle in the groove. I watched the record spin.

The gun was out of the pocket now. It moved wickedly. “What did the old dame tell you? Where’d she put them?”

I stalled. “What do you mean? What old dame?”

The gun steadied and centered on the middle button of my dress. I stopped stalling. “Oh, you mean Mrs. Steiner?”

“I mean Mrs. Steiner. What’d she say?”

I shrugged helplessly, my eyes watching the whirling disc. The needle was creeping toward the center.

“Why, she didn’t say anything in particular. She just wanted a few minutes on the air. Wanted to whistle to her dog.” I motioned to the gun. “I don’t see why you have to come up here and wave that thing around.”

His little dark face grew wicked. "Oh, shut the prattle! The old dame came back up here. What did she leave here?"

I was getting mad now. I picked up the *Ultraman* records. The man was nervous, and the gun jerked.

"Drop them things!" He must have thought I was going to throw them. I dropped them. When they thumped on the desk, I saw the needle on the spinning record jump backward.

The man took the cigarette out of his mouth and started toward me. The door in back of him opened. I drew a deep breath, then choked on it. It wasn't Joe. It was a tall, heavy man whose hat was pulled down over his tanned, battered face.

His voice was low, deadly. "What's the matter up here? I send you out on a simple little job and you take an hour. You bungled it last night. Now what's wrong?"

The little man darted around like a snake. "You can do better, I guess." His eyes were scared. "Where's that Teppy? You know what'll happen if she gets loose."

The big man waved a hand. "Keep your shirt on. She's okay. I got her tied up down in the car."

My head felt tight. There wasn't any Teppy. Yes, there was a Teppy. Teppy was a dog. No, she wasn't. I looked at the tall man again, and pictures flipped over in my brain. I must have gasped because he looked at me. His lips parted nastily.

"So the little lady knows me, does she?"

"Peachy," I heard myself whisper, "Peachy Simms." I drew a deep breath. Peachy Simms. Gunman and gangster, escaped several years ago from prison. Never recaptured. I remembered the broadcast on his escape. I remembered the pictures.

Peachy smiled that smile without laughter. One hand dipped swiftly into a

pocket. There was a click. A knifeblade seemed to spring from his fingertips. He came slowly toward me.

"So you wouldn't talk to Sanchez. Maybe you'll tell me. Maybe you'll tell Peachy."

I backed away from him, my eyes glued to the dully gleaming knife. It was a wicked-looking blade. My heart thudded deafeningly. Then my shoulders were pressed against the corridor window. And Peachy was creeping closer. Sanchez's dark, ratlike eyes were closer, too. His small, pointed tongue flicked over his lips.

Over Sanchez's shoulder I saw the office door open a crack, saw the crack widen. Then Joe's voice:

"Down Berta! *Down!*"

He didn't have to tell me. My knees were already giving way. I don't think they would have held me up much longer in any case. Even as I dropped, I saw Peachy swirl. But he was a big man and the control room is small, and Sanchez was in his way. He slung the knife. I saw it quiver in the wall beside Joe's head.

Sanchez's gun barked. Then I heard two heavier shots. Then other noises. Everything blended into a mist of confusion, lights and noise and shots. And finally blackness and quiet.

JOE says I fainted. He laughs and says he guesses that proves I'm still a woman, even if I am a radio announcer.

The next thing I knew I was on the couch in the office. Joe was sprinkling my face with water from the canary's cage. I sat up and swung my feet to the floor.

"The program! I've got to get back on the air!"

Joe pushed me back down on the couch.

"You can't go in there."

I looked up at him. I could feel my eyes widening. "Peachy?"

Joe nodded.

“Sanchez?”

Joe nodded again.

“Joe!” I shrieked. “Joe, you’re not hurt?” My hands were on his arms. “He didn’t hit you, did he?”

Joe’s face grew red. He pushed me away and jerked his head. I looked around. There was a quiet woman of about thirty sitting by the desk, rubbing her wrists. Her dress was rumpled and torn. Streaks of dirt crossed her face.

I looked back at Joe and my lips moved. “Teppy?”

Joe introduced us. “Mrs. Teresa Steiner.”

I’m afraid I wasn’t very polite. “You’re Teppy?”

The woman’s face seemed to crumple. “That’s what Charlie calls me. I mean, he did.” Tears gathered in her eyes, I knew that no matter who or what Charlie Steiner had been, this woman had loved him.

“Mrs. Steiner,” Joe spoke quietly, “I don’t suppose you feel like talking tonight.”

The woman drew a deep breath. “Why not? We might as well get it over with.” She threw her head back, looked at us. “What do you want to know?”

“With what we got from Simms before he—well—I think we have the whole story now, if you’ll fill in a few missing details. Suppose I tell you what we know. You fill the gaps.”

The woman nodded.

“Peachy Simms was hiding out down in South America,” Joe started. “He’d been down there for a couple of years before Steiner showed up. They cooked up a—eh—” He looked at Charlie’s wife, then went on.

“They got together on a deal. Peachy had gotten hold of a hoard of diamonds. Not anything spectacular. Just industrial diamonds. But worth a lot now. He had no

way of getting them into this country. He couldn’t bring them back in himself. And he was afraid Sanchez couldn’t swing it. So Charlie smuggled them in. That was last year.”

Teresa Steiner drew a deep ragged breath. “We were married last year.”

Joe nodded solemnly. “That must have been right after he got back. He cashed in. Instead of sending Peachy his cut, he settled down.”

The woman’s voice was low. “He was kind and generous. I can’t believe—I can’t—”

“Charlie decided to live straight. And he did. Until Peachy took a chance and came up here after him. Charlie got wind of it a couple of weeks ago.”

The woman’s words were hardly audible. “Two weeks ago he said he had to go out of town on business. We locked up the house, and he told me to go to my brother’s in Cleveland. He said that he couldn’t write, and for me not to try and reach him.”

Joe nodded. “He was trying to protect you. He didn’t want Peachy to find you.” Joe’s voice roughened. “He loved you deeply.”

“I didn’t understand.” The woman shook her head slowly. “I didn’t understand, but I did as he said. I waited. Charlie was fond of the radio. We used to always listen to the local news from this station on Sunday nights. I guess he must have told his mother about that, and that was how she knew that I would hear. That was our favorite song.” The words choked, stopped.

**J**OE waited for a moment, then cleared his throat. “Charlie came down to his mother’s to hide. But Peachy found him. They threatened him and—well, they tried to make him talk. Charlie was in a spot. He couldn’t tell them that he had gotten rid of

the diamonds and used the money. They would have killed him right then. So he stalled.

“His mother was desperate. They were trying to persuade him to talk. She suggested to Peachy that perhaps you, his wife, might know something about the diamonds. She was willing to do anything to keep them from hurting Charlie any more. Peachy told her to get you. She didn’t know how to reach you, but she figured you would be listening to the radio.”

Teresa Steiner nodded. “I heard the whistling. I knew that Charlie needed me. I came as fast as I could. When I got here yesterday, they wouldn’t let me see Charlie. Mrs. Steiner kept walking around and talking to herself. Charlie must have been dead. She must have known what they had done, because somehow she managed to get out of the house.

“That big man, Peachy, he was wild. He cursed the little dark one and sent him after her. Later the little man came back, and he was smiling to himself in a horrible way. Then they tied me up and took me off in my car. They hid out last night and today. The dark man was gone for a couple of hours late last night. They kept asking me about diamonds, but I didn’t know what they were talking about.

“This afternoon, late, they decided to come up to the radio station. Somehow, they had an idea that perhaps you”—she nodded at me—“that perhaps you might know something, that maybe Mrs. Steiner had told you something.”

She sagged back in the chair. “That’s about all. I’m—oh—I’m so—tired.” Her head drooped forward.

I must have been keyed up to a fine point, because I remember sitting on the edge of the couch looking at Teresa

Steiner. The tears were running down my face.

Later, Joe drove me home. I lay with my head on the back of the seat, looking up at the clean, white stars. I took a deep lungful of fresh air.

“Joe, I thought you would never get there.”

Joe looked at me and stopped the car under a tree. He pushed his hat back and turned sideways on the seat.

“Jumping mackerel! You did everything, but tear that studio inside out. I got there just ahead of the Fire Department and the Humane Society. Listen.” He took his hat off entirely.

“When I got home young Tommy was raising holy hell. He kept yelling that Ultraman had already got out of that submarine. That he had got out of that submarine yesterday. Even while I was listening to it, Ultraman was back in the submarine again. The program was half over and jumped back to the beginning.”

I smiled beatifically. “That was when I dropped the records.”

Joe shook his head. “I’m a little dumb, I guess. It took a couple of minutes for it to sink in that you weren’t running yesterday’s program for nothing. Every kid in town must have been a jump ahead of me. When I got up to the studio, every phone in the place was ringing its head off. We had to take ‘em all off.”

I laughed. “I’ll make it up tomorrow, I’ll run an extra *Ultraman*.”

Joe leaned closer. “Berta, out of all the records you have in the studio, there’s one I don’t want you ever to play.”

I let my eyes look straight into his.

“What is that, Joe?”

“Berta, don’t ever play *Oh Where, Oh Where, Has My Little Dog Gone?* Not that one, not ever, Berta.”