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THE MESSAGE

By CLINTON DANGERFIELD

An utterly strange story of the radio message received in the death cell by a man condemned to die for murder

BOLTON, chaplain for a famous gray-walled prison, hesitated. His blue, honest eyes clouded and his big, broad, kindly face reflected his unwillingness to speak.

"I might tell you," he said. "Yes, I might tell you about it if you will promise that the revelation I make will go no further."

"But I do want it to go further," I answered. "The world ought to know the truth about these things. We all have a vital interest in them. I want this for publication and it's hardly fair in you to hold back what, in a way, belongs to the human race."

Then, as he still hung fire, I said coaxingly, "If you'll do it I'll not give any of the real names. I'll change them all, even the name of the prison and the locality."

At that his face brightened. He stuck his feet out to the little fire in my den and said, with a sigh:

"When young Gordon McMorrow killed his man there were so many extenuating circumstances that it was generally expected the jury would bring in a verdict of 'Not Guilty,' or, at worst, a verdict of manslaughter. But his friends had not reckoned sufficiently with the fact that Gordon McMorrow, in the defense of another, had not killed an ordinary citizen. He had shot down the son of a plutocrat whose money, like an invisible corruption, flowed in devious and hidden channels through the whole state. Some of that golden and damning flood undoubtedly crept into the pockets of the jury. Gordon McMorrow was bought

and sold. The jury brought in a verdict of murder in the first degree."

"Was there no appeal to the governor?" I asked.

"There was a frantic appeal made," returned Bolton, "but the governor unfortunately was the uncle of the boy who was killed. There were those who believed that such is the uprightness and dispassionate courage of the governor that he might pardon Gordon McMorrow. But as one day passed after another and one week after another, the time narrowed down to the final day and yet there was neither pardon nor reprieve.

"Gordon McMorrow didn't want to die. Who does? And he was young, sound in wind and limb, optimistic in disposition, and gifted with an ability sure to make his way in the world. The killing he'd done had been done in the chivalrous protection of another. Those who claimed it was otherwise were nothing less than the paid verbal assassins hired by the dead man's father.

"So I hoped to the last day for the pardon. But as the hours in that final day flashed by I was finally obliged to go to Gordon McMorrow and tell him that that there was no hope.

"He walked over to his cell window and looked out. Then he called me to come to him and pointed to a flame-vine hanging from a wire. If you have never seen one of them you can not realize how the vine, dropping from its support, weaves and interweaves, until it has produced a cloth of flaming blossoms.

"Gordon McMorrow said, gasping thickly, 'Look out there. The world's

just fiery with life and you tell me that I'm about to be snuffed out into nothingness.'

"I didn't say that, Gordon,' I answered. 'You know that I don't believe any such stuff as that. The immortal longings planted in a man's soul are, in themselves, not so much longings as they are an instinct common to every race and every caste, put there to teach trust in the future.'

'He made a despairing gesture and was silent. A long shudder ran through him; then his face settled into resolute lines of courageous composure.

'The death watch, stupid, gross-bodied, but not unkindly, suggested in his flat voice, 'Chaplain, mebbe ef you turn on the radio for him it would pass the time.'

'Don't turn that damned thing on!' McMorrow said fiercely.

'The death watch subsided.

'I didn't wonder McMorrow hated the radio, although the warden had meant well in putting the set there for the condemned man's use. Truth was, all of us prison officials had been attracted to Gordon McMorrow. We hated to see him die.

'Staring at the radio I thought that it was no wonder he did not want to hear it. Why should a man with only the horror of the grave before him want to have jazz coming into his cell, mocking him with those human interests in which he had no further concern?

'Standing with my eyes fixed upon the radio I started; for suddenly I saw the control snap from one side to the other, precisely as though some electric force had pushed it.

'I flashed a look at the death watch. He had heard the little click that it made and had turned his head sharply toward the radio. Then, evidently fancying it was really his imagination or some little

snapping noise outside, he turned away his gaze and resumed his mechanical staring at the prisoner.

"GORDON McMORROW had turned from the window at the sound of the control's little click. Looking at me he said, a trifle reproachfully, 'Bolton, I asked you *not* to turn that on!'

"I didn't,' I explained hastily.

'And then, thinking how foolish it would seem to try and make him believe what had happened, and half inclined to think that I had imagined the whole thing, I strode over to the machine just as a very faint sound of music began to come from it — jazz music at that. I snapped off the control and walked over to the window where he stood.

'He turned back and stood there with one strong brown hand on the lower bar. I saw the muscles contract and stand out as though he would gladly have torn that bar from its place with the last ounce of strength that was in him. There was silence in the room. Neither of us said anything. What was there to say? For when you get up against these last great issues the pretty platitudes which men scatter so readily under the ordinary circumstances of life become worse than chaff before the wind. In that disturbing silence my auditory nerves strained to catch something on which to rest. I began to hear the breathing of the death watch, and then once more I heard the sharp click of the control!

'Because of my focused attention it sounded louder this time. Both Gordon McMorrow and myself whirled at the same time, for both heard it, and we turned so quickly after the sound came that it was evident to both of us that the death watch had nothing to do with it. He was at the other end of the cell, sitting on his stool near the door, with one leg crossed over the other, leaning back

against the wall and looking stupid and sleepy.

"Gordon McMorrow said, 'That's funny!'

"Must be something wrong with the machinery inside,' I volunteered. 'I know nothing about the internal arrangements of radios.'

"He shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'it couldn't be that. There's nothing in there to make that control snap from side to side. It has to be moved by an outside force.'

"Perhaps we just imagined it,' I said, taking a step further toward the machine.

"Gordon McMorrow's voice followed me. 'Yes,' he said; 'turn it off. Maybe it won't happen again. I don't want any of that infernal jazz coming in.'

"I took another step, pondering the matter as I went, and then I stopped, for into the cell came a voice which was not a voice. It was so poignantly sweet that it was more like music which had become words. And yet those words were extremely distinct.

"A hard time,' it said. 'A hard time . . . getting through . . . a hard time fighting for wave control . . . had to push them all away . . . don't turn it off again . . . very difficult to get wave control. . . .'

"I heard a gasping exclamation of surprise behind me from Gordon McMorrow. He was at my side in a bound, clutching my arm. He did not need to tell me not to touch the radio. The look on his face was enough.

"But whose was the voice which could so arrest and fascinate him? Unmistakably the voice was a woman's, but also unmistakably it had in it a quality of sweetness that was so perfect and so piercing that it became to me almost painful. It continued:

"It was just a little while ago that I got the power for this . . . the power to

get the wave control. . . . Don't turn it off again . . . something might interfere. . . . This is a message of life and death. . . .'

"Whoever was speaking, she need not have feared that anyone in that cell would turn the control off just then. Gordon McMorrow and I were listening as though we had no other sense but hearing. The tones resumed, the piercing quality of their sweetness getting more and more painful, as they grew stronger, in their disturbing music.

"I only got free a little while ago,' it continued. 'This is my first chance to come to your aid, Gordon. . . . I needn't tell you who is speaking . . . you've known from the very first that it was I . . . Alma Fielding. . . .'

"So that was the owner of this amazing honey-and-fire voice, Alma Fielding, the girl whom Gordon McMorrow was to have married. I said to myself that with tones like those she could make her fortune over the radio; for, although the voice in a strange way actually hurt me, I felt that I could go on listening to it forever.

"I heard Gordon McMorrow mutter at my side with a sort of frenzied whisper, 'Yes, yes, Alma . . . of course I knew. . . . Go on. . . .'

"This is an issue of life and death,' continued the voice hurriedly. 'That gave me strength, Gordon . . . to fight the control of the waves. It was very hard . . . it is hard now . . . but this is a matter of life and death. . . . You get that, don't you, Gordon?'

"Yes, yes, Alma,' he repeated, 'I do get it. Go on.'

"But what is life?' the tones continued. 'And what is death? I never knew until a little while ago. . . . I'm going to leave it to you whether you want to stay down there in the fighting . . .

the turmoil. . . . You can stay if you'd rather!

"He gasped out, as though he believed the voice could hear him, 'What do you mean, Alma darling . . . *that I can stay?*'"

"I mean that you can keep your body if you want to, Gordon. 'Keep alive the body which they intend to kill. You can live in it until you are very, very old . . . then time will kill it. Time keeps it going, but of coursetime will destroy it . . . down there everything is controlled by time.'

"**W**HAT on earth was she talking about, I wondered? And why did she keep him uncertain and in suspense in regard to whatever she had to say of real importance? Or was she talking as lovers talk, just wanting to be certain that he heard her voice as long as it was possible? Just pretending to have something of importance to communicate when all she really had was the somewhat dubious comfort of that voice of honey and of fire, which would surely stir him into a frenzied horror of death, a desire for life so strong he might go mad under it.

"The voice resumed, 'You see, Gordon, I got away . . . from time . . . I——'

"Here the voice uttered a little strangled cry, and then, 'Oh!' it said, and again, more faintly, '*Oh!*'"

"And suddenly over the radio came in the harsh, rapid banalities of a singing comedian. Hideous enough his voice sounded after hers. . . . And then came other voices . . . so that a strange medley floated into the cell. Now and then we heard her strangely sweet voice, fighting for supremacy:

"'Gordon . . . Gordon' . . . Then maybe '*Atchison preferred*' . . . or maybe '*This is WJZ . . . we shall now offer you*' . . . and again her voice, 'Gor-

don . . . oh, I am trying. . . .' Then, very faintly, 'Send me your love . . . believe in me . . . believe I can get through. . . .'

"'I do believe,' he declared in firm tones, his eyes alight with faith and fire.

"A bass voice boomed into the cell, '*International Paper eighty-four*' . . . but this market information was suddenly extinguished by the clarion strength of her tones, triumphantly flooding the cell:

"I got your thought-wave, Gordon . . . it doubled my strength . . . Gordon, the Governor's conscience drove him into pardoning you. . . .'

"Gordon McMorrow started. A wild flash of relief sprang into his bronzed face. He cried out:

"'Yes, Alma . . . *yes* . . . go on, darling.'

"She answered his appeal in a steady stream of sentences, almost unbroken now:

"'The Governor's messenger is coming, Gordon, with the pardon. Driving furiously. Taking every short cut that he can. This messenger had orders to wire ahead. But one of your enemies got him drunk. They stopped him from wiring by pretending that they had sent the wire themselves. But they failed. Just because he is drunk the messenger is driving faster than ever.

"'Very soon he will take another short cut. But if he does this the pardon won't get to you in time to stop the execution, because the river is up and foaming. The bridge is going . . . it's going now . . . it's gone. So if the messenger goes that way he'll have to stop and then make a circuit to get back to another bridge and it will be too late. . . . But I can turn him, Gordon. I can get into his mind and change it.'

"'I can get into his mind and change it!' What on earth did this girl mean?

"But Gordon McMorrow evidently

didn't hear that last queer sentence of hers. He cried out, crushing his hands together, a cold sweat springing to his forehead:

"Save me, Alma——"

"You'll decide, Gordon," rushed on the voice, with the same clarion strength and poignant beauty. "You see, there was a wreck. Nearly a dozen of us got free. . . . It was just a little while ago. Not an hour. At first I didn't know how to use my power. But one came . . . she said I helped her centuries ago. I don't understand yet how . . . but that's no matter. . . . The thing is, what is life and what is death?"

"Alma — *darling* — where are you? *Where are you?*"

"Gordon, if your body is saved, if you live on down there, you can't ever find me. Not until you're very, very old and time kills off your body for you. But if I don't turn the messenger into the right road, you'll get out of that body you live in. You'll find me today. *Today, Gordon!*"

IT CAME to me suddenly that this Alma Fielding had in some way gotten control of the sound waves and was using them, cleverly enough, to make this poor boy feel that, if he were hung, he would be going to death of his own accord and going to her! She was fooling him thoroughly while apparently giving him a choice. She was, of course, very much on earth herself! All this talk about the pardon was just a tale to make him happy at the last.

"I studied Gordon McMorrow's face and I saw on it at one moment an illuminating and transfixing love and in another that struggling instinct for self-preservation which lives in the flesh and is its most deeply rooted desire.

"She was doing her fooling too well! He'd choose to be saved — and then

wouldn't be! At the last bitter moment he would know that she had lied to him! I hated this girl whom I'd never seen. Hated her violently.

"I am allowed this because They tell me that you and I have finished with our training there . . . that years have nothing to do with it. . . . It would make no difference in character when we leave now. That's why they let me get out. That's why you can either stay or come to me. . . . You can have happiness now or you can have it when you've worn out what you are living in."

"God—what a voice she had! Those tones of hers were such exquisite vibrations that they actually thrilled and shook me with a sensuous ecstasy of pleasure, stabbingly sweet. Waves of tonal power . . . why, I almost believed her myself even while I knew she was tricking Gordon McMorrow!

"I looked at the death watch. I never saw a man more mystified and confused. I found out afterward that to him the voice was merely a peculiar kind of music, such as he had never heard before. He could distinguish no words in it whatever, but the tonal beauty and power he could feel. Even a dumb brute would have thrilled to that voice!

"Then I realized that she'd actually accomplished what she had tried to accomplish! For suddenly I heard the voice of Gordon McMorrow saying steadily and in a tone nearly as joyous as hers:

"*I'll come to you, Alma!*"

"A long silence followed. The rapt look remained on McMorrow's face. He went to the window again and looked out—but there was exultation in his stride!

"Before I could resolve what to do when he should come back to me—whether to pretend I believed that voice or just to keep a merciful silence, a key turned in the barred door.

"The warden had come for Gordon McMorrow—the death hour had struck.

"**M**CMORROW died so serenely, even so joyously, that when all was over and we had left the death chamber one of the press representatives came up to me and congratulated me.

" 'Mr. Bolton,' he said, 'I've always heard that you were a wonderful chaplain and that you have a great effect on the men. I'm no believer in survival myself, but I'd give a lot to have such faith as you hypnotized into McMorrow! . . . I don't mean that word "hypnotize" unfavorably,' he added hastily. 'I just mean—'

"We were interrupted by the approach of the warden. He came up to me, white and shaking, with a paper in his hand. He said, in a low and bitter tone:

"The irony of it! The devilish irony of it! *Here's a pardon for Gordon McMorrow from the Governor. It came just too late!*

"I gasped: 'A pardon . . . too late . . . then she wasn't lying!'

"The warden said sympathetically, for he hadn't understood my last words, 'I know it's a shock to you, Mr. Bolton. You'd grown to love that boy as I did. It's horrible! It's just damn horrible!'

" 'I should say it's illuminating,' said the press representative dryly. 'It shows

plainly enough what a fool idea it is to suppose there are any supreme intelligences looking after men.'

"The death watch, who was standing near us, scratched his head.

" 'I don't know,' he said, in complexity and confusion, 'but there *was* something awful funny happened in Gordon McMorrow's cell just a few minutes before the warden came for him.'

" 'What was it?' demanded the press representative, producing a ready pad and pencil.

" 'Why, the radio went on of itself and some awful queer music come through,' the death watch replied.

" 'And you had an awful queer drink,' said the press representative, good-humoredly, and went away.

"I left the jail and walked out into the sunshine. I wanted a chance to think. Scarcely had I gotten outside when a small boy rushed by me crying:

" 'Extry! Extry! All about the wreck!'

"I bought a paper, but before I looked at the headlines I knew what I was going to see:

RAILROAD COLLISION! ELEVEN DEAD!"

"Then, prominent among the list of those killed, I saw, 'Alma Fielding, age nineteen.' "

