

# The Man Who Had to Die



by Gilbert Riddell

**S**HE was obliged to kill him—she did it without a shudder, and only after mature deliberation.

She attached no blame to herself—his death lay essentially at the door, so to speak, of her married sisters. If they had not driven her into marrying him, and then persecuted her with idle curiosity about him, she would never have had to kill him.

She had no grudge against him, for he was, in a way, the ideal man. Furthermore, marriage with him had saved her from the only thing she feared—the disrespect of her sisters.

But—in less than six months after she announced her marriage she realized that he had to die.

If he had lived, the whole fabric of her dream would have been rent and torn asunder—she would have been left naked, spiritually, to the public gaze—and to the ridicule of her sisters.

She pondered the matter for some time, but at last she saw that there was no other way. And so, in a single moment, she doomed him to die, executed his sentence, and later weighted herself down with crape in which she

triumphantly mourned him before her vanquished and secretly envious relatives.

Alicia Graham was quite the last person one would think of as a murderess. She was slight and fair as a fairy—she had the gentlest disposition in the world.

Give her a comfortable chair, sufficient leisure, and a closely printed book, five or six hundred pages long, and Alicia felt the gates of paradise opening before her. She was the kind to whom favorite authors and their creatures are more real than the persons among whom they pass their lives—she was the kind that could laugh and cry over “Cranford” three or four times every year.

For such a one to commit such a crime was almost unthinkable; but, of course, a bookworm usually has a vivid imagination—and, in a way, it was her imagination that finally landed her in the predicament where she must either kill her husband or be humiliated by her relatives.

But this act was the crowning one in making her life what she wanted it—after her mother died. Until that event Alicia’s existence was dominated by the fretful invalid.

Her sisters, bouncing beauties, vivid

personalities, married before she could realize that they had grown up.

But it was not long before she realized what they had done to her. They had left her alone, to be the nurse and companion of a querulous invalid. It did not help much that this invalid was her own mother.

When her parent died Alicia would have been a hypocrite, indeed, if she had not drawn a long breath and stretched her arms, and whispered "Free!"

Free at last to read all the books in the world, to wander over the face of the earth to its quaintest and remotest corners—free to be alone and quiet.

As her sisters had carefully refrained from seeing the invalid more than once or twice a month, and then only for the briefest space in the world, they mourned her passing very long and loudly.

"Poor Alicia," said Ernestine, "you will be so lonely now!"

"Lonely?" Alicia remembered in time not to rejoice at the passing of her burden, but she looked more attentively at Ernestine, and wondered if she were a hypocrite. Somehow or other, she had never entertained this thought of one of her sisters before.

"Yes, it is too bad that you never married," sighed Violet, "when you were—younger."

"Never married!" Alicia turned her questioning eyes to this other sister. How could she marry, when the whole family tacitly had made it impossible for her to do so? Was Violet also a hypocrite?

"Well," said Annie brutally, "there is no chance of your doing so now. You are the oldest."

"No chance!" Alicia's mind echoed this—not her benumbed tongue. She had never been brutal to any one in her life—she had lived under the illusion that no one related to her could be brutal. And suddenly she remembered how she had loved this youngest sister—how

hard she had worked to help her marry the man of her choice, in spite of the opposition of the entire family.

She began to see her sisters as they really were; they were lined up opposite her—like the three fates—sitting in judgment upon her. They were no longer the charming beings whose existence it had been her pleasure to make smooth.

"If you had only taken a little care of yourself," said Ernestine, inclined to be merciful, "you were not bad-looking when you were young."

When she was young! Alicia had taken no notice of the passing of time—her mind was as youthful as that of a child of twelve. But she glanced at the mirror opposite, and she saw that her blond hair was almost white, that the soft tints of her complexion were mellowing into colors associated only with aging skins.

Suddenly her heart contracted. These bouncing beauties lined up opposite her were the cause of her growing old alone; they had gone off and married, making marriage impossible for her. She had not cared—but they wouldn't believe her if she said so. They had forced upon her a fate which they despised her for accepting!

Encouraged by her silence, they prattled on, on a subject that had apparently often been discussed between them. She began to writhe beneath the subtle contempt which the married woman feels for the old maid.

"Of course," Violet reflected, sighing, "you never did seem to attract any attention."

Her face flushed—a sign of awakening indignation—also a desire to avenge herself. But how?

"That's so," Annie confirmed Violet, "men never liked Alicia. She was born an old maid."

Old maid!

The bravest shrivel under that epithet. Alicia's eyes blinked—her cheeks reddened. Unseen, she clenched her small hands; unknown

to her buxom sisters, she cast them forever out of her heart.

She rose now and left them to continue their discussion without the embarrassment of her presence.

Half an hour later she returned, dressed for traveling, carrying a grip.

“I am going away for a while,” she said. “I will tell you about it when I return.”

The sisters stared at her, unable to object. The gentle Alicia had never taken a step of the slightest importance without consulting them; and she took this one so swiftly and quietly that she was out of the house before they could ask her where she was going.

Again those three blatantly successful sisters of hers sat lined up on one side of the room, while Alicia sat facing them on the other.

“I am married,” she told them simply.

They regarded her incredulously.

“But where is your husband?” Ernestine demanded.

“He is, where he has always been, in Virginia. He could not come here with me because immediately after our marriage his father died, and he had to remain behind to settle his estate. As soon as it is settled we shall travel.”

“But where did you meet him?” the astonished trio asked.

“I have known him all my life,” she answered.

“B-but—you never said anything about him?”

“What was the use? I could not marry him until mother died.”

“And when shall we meet him?”

“As soon as we return from our travels,” she promised them.

And then, having furnished them with so much information, and with the name of her husband, she left them again, abruptly, with no tender farewell.

Thereafter the gentle sister of whom they

had thought but little became almost the tyrant spirit of their thoughts. How had she kept quiet all these years about this love-affair of hers? How had she endured to see one after the other of them marry and set up their sumptuous homes, and gradually grow into oldmaidhood, knowing that she need not, if she could bring herself to desert that helpless invalid.

“It must have been very hard,” said Ernestine.

“It is too bad,” said Violet. “Now she can never have any children—and I know she would have loved them.”

“We have been very thoughtless,” said Annie, with tears in her eyes.

They began to wish to make up for their thoughtlessness. Costly wedding presents were suggested as the first step. But where to send them?

All they knew was that, having married, Alicia had vanished into space, out of which an occasional non-committal post-card came, hinting at a blissful, extended honeymoon.

“We have been very thoughtless, indeed,” said Annie again. “We don’t even know from what town in Virginia this man came.”

“We should have remembered to ask,” I said Violet. “Well, they’ve got to come back some day—and then we’ll make up to her. I shall let Bessie live with them, if they want her.”

Bessie was a sweet replica of her Aunt Alicia, and they were very fond of each other.

So anxious were they now to make up for all those wasted years of their oldest sister that they fairly haunted Alicia’s old home for some sign of her return.

And at last, one day, Ernestine was rewarded. There was a shade up in the library—a light burning—the particular light that Alicia loved.

She rushed up the steps and rang the bell earnestly.

For a long time there was no answer—and then Alicia herself opened the door.

She started and drew back as if she would have avoided her sister when she saw Ernestine; her face was suddenly bereft of all color; she looked frightened and horrified.

“Why did you come here?” she demanded with a fierceness as absolutely unlike her old gentleness.

“Why, to see you!” Ernestine stuttered, “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

Alicia sighed and held the door for her sister to enter.

“If I had wanted to see you,” she said, “I would have sent for you. I have not forgotten your address.”

“Well, really!” Ernestine was angry and indignant. Alicia had surprised her by her lack of welcome, and she could not forgive her for that. “Well, really, this is most extraordinary. You sneak back here without saying a word, and you resent my coming here to find you. It seemed to me, to all of us, a very natural thing to watch for your return, and to make you and your husband feel that we were glad to welcome you back.”

“Thank you!” said Alicia. Her tone rung from the very depths of sarcasm. “But I cannot remember any of you being so anxious to be attentive to me until I acquired a husband.”

“Well, really,” said Ernestine, “you have changed, Alicia, since your marriage, and I cannot say you have changed for the better.”

“I am sorry,” replied Alicia.

“But, at any rate,” Ernestine went on, “you are our sister, and we want to do the right thing by you. Now that you have returned, may I expect you and your husband to dinner to-night?”

“My husband is not with me,” replied Alicia shortly.

“Oh, dear! You haven’t quarreled, separated, already?”

Alicia shook her head.

“He was detained on business—in fact, we had no thought of returning to New York—but

being near, I stopped off to get a book.” She glanced toward the well-fingered and beloved volume she had obviously been reading. It struck Ernestine that there was a little malice in her glance, as if she realized that if she had not had a sentimental longing for this particular book she would not have got herself into a situation she plainly resented.

“I hesitate to say so, Alicia,” Ernestine went on, “but it occurs to me that you do not care to have us meet your husband.”

Alicia turned sharply on her.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed. “That’s it exactly! You wouldn’t understand him, couldn’t appreciate him. You left me alone while I was unmarried—leave me alone now—alone with him—and my happiness.”

“Well,” Ernestine rose majestically, her bosom rising indignantly at the same time, “I trust that you are happy.”

Alicia smiled pleasantly indeed. “For the first time in my life,” she said, with a sigh of deep content— “ideally, ecstatically happy.”

After that, of course, there was nothing for Ernestine to do but to report to Violet and Annie her astonishing interview with Alicia.

And now, being of three different kinds of temperaments, the three sisters reacted differently to this amazing fact—that Alicia did not want them to meet her husband.

“She is resentful because she had to wait so long to marry him,” said Ernestine. “She’s got some foolish idea that it was our fault—and wants to punish us for it.”

“Nonsense!” said Violet. “She’s married some awful creature of whom she is ashamed. But she was determined to marry some one.”

“Nonsense!” cried Annie. “Don’t forget that Alicia has money. She’s married some adventurer, doubtless much younger than herself. He is probably draining her resources. She wants to keep us from knowing about it.”

And somehow this seemed to all concerned the most plausible theory. And one which must

be acted upon immediately.

They must save Alicia and Alicia's fortune from this scheming adventurer she had married.

The first steps to be taken naturally were to consult the three husbands. The husbands heartily concurred in Annie's opinion. Neither of them had ever given Alicia a thought, save to describe her as a bookish old maid. That was the kind that fell the easiest prey to adventurers.

The husbands advised upon the next step—Alicia's lawyers must be consulted without delay.

They had been her father's lawyers; they knew all about Alicia's affairs. They reported that since her marriage she had lived well within her income, had made no requisitions upon them for extraordinary sums; in fact, even if she were paying her own traveling expenses, she must be traveling very economically.

Therefore the sisters were forced to abandon their pet theory. "Unless," as Annie said, "he is just biding his time, and intends to bankrupt her later, when he has completely gained her confidence."

But Violet went back to her theory. "He is just some hopeless person—possibly vulgar," she declared.

And Ernestine went back to hers. Alicia wanted to punish them.

There came a day when in solemn conclave they agreed that, no matter whose theory might be correct, they had the right to know the man their sister had married.

"If she were a stranger, or even a rather close friend," said Annie, "I should consider it a dreadful impertinence; but she is our own sister, and, as we all know, a little weak and inclined to be easily imposed upon."

Violet nodded. "Yes, you are right. We must do as you suggest. There seems no other way. We will employ a detective. I shall ask Phil about it at once."

Phil, being Violet's husband, never disagreed with that lady. In no time at all a

proper detective was engaged, and set upon the long honeymoon trail of Alicia and her mysterious husband.

He set out confidently, promising results in a few weeks at the outside. He cashed his check for railroad expenses and departed, leaving behind him three females probably more torn with curiosity than any three females have been at any time during their existence.

And he came back a month later—and found these three females still struggling with hopeless curiosity which he could not satisfy.

But a week before the detective returned, Alicia herself came back. Openly this time, and with some advance flourishing of telegrams addressed to her curious sisters.

She came back and threw her old home wide open, reestablished her favorite chair by her favorite window, reengaged the old servants, and eventually set a day of each week when she would be at home to such of her old friends as would care to discuss books.

Eventually—but not immediately, of course—for Alicia came back in deep mourning.

The deepest mourning, Ernestine declared, that she had ever seen.

Moreover, Violet said she thought it was worn with an air of triumph—as if there was something about the death of Alicia's husband for which she herself took supreme credit.

"I think she is glad he is dead," said Annie, horrified.

"I believe she is," said Ernestine. "I don't believe she ever really cared to be married."

"That's it, exactly," said Violet. "We drove her to it. Do you remember the day when we twitted her with being an old maid? Why, she went right out that day and married him."

"That's so," affirmed Annie. "It was lucky for her that he died so soon."

"And Alicia really looks handsome now in black," sighed Violet, thinking of her own fondness for that shade, whose indulgence was

strongly forbidden by her husband.

Annie drew them both closer—she had had a horrible thought, and she had to get rid of it.

“You don’t suppose—” she began in an awed whisper. “But no—of course not—Alicia couldn’t kill a fly.”

“Perhaps not a fly,” agreed Violet, “but a husband—” and paused, aghast.

For a minute the three sisters simply stared at each other.

“At any rate,” said Ernestine, recovering first, “I think it is better that we make no further effort to find out who her husband was.”

And her auditors shudderingly agreed with her.

For, as they said, if Alicia’s marriage had made her happy, her widowhood suited her like an old glove.

She lived alone, but not lonely. She had

complete leisure, and the supply of books poured undiminished from the presses of her favorite publishers. With care, her oculist informed her, her sight would endure until her death.

Her life was now just what she wanted it to be. She had not been great enough to live it without the respect of her three married sisters, but she had been clever enough to acquire that without losing her heart’s desire.

When the stigma of old maid had stung her soul into invention, she had successfully invented.

It was not surprising that her blue eyes twinkled with her secret joke to the day of her placid death—for the husband she had been obliged to marry to retain her sister’s respect, and later to kill to avoid the consequences of their inconvenient curiosity, had never existed.