

‘ALMA’: Screenplay Treatment of Story Outline.

1. A chance meeting between a young lawyer, GORDON PHELPS and 'THE STORYTELLER' in a busy London pub, recalls details of events leading to a sensational murder trial some 50 years earlier. Victoria B.C. 1923.
2. The Empress Hotel in Victoria, B.C. A celebration is in progress. "Ratz" has just been awarded a building contract for his sagging reputation and is toasted with a few verses of "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow". He is flushed with this much-needed boost to his self-esteem. Alma Clarke (Pakenham), a musician hired to entertain hotel patrons, is disturbed by the festivities in the nearby ballroom and interrupts his event, demanding to know who is responsible. Meet Frances Mawson Rattenbury. 'Ratz' is in his 50's, a successful architect with two grown children and a dull marriage. Alma now 28, twice married with a young son, is beautiful, talented and recently divorced, They dance.
3. A second meeting with Alma at one of her piano recitals for society tea ladies. This ignites the initial spark and they begin their affair. Sharing plans for the future with picnics in the park. Eyes peek through curtains and tongues start to wag. They become 'the talk of the town'. Ratz. is totally smitten with Alma and tries to remove Florrie from their house. Cutting off the water and electricity supply, he also alienates Frank and Mary, his children. Alma is defiant in the face of gossip and moves into the house where Florrie has retreated to the upstairs bedroom. Downstairs Alma pounds out Scott Joplin and funeral marches on the parlor piano in the effort to drive Florrie out. Florrie finally agrees to a divorce with the provision of a house and modest alimony. 'Ratz' and Alma get married quietly but are now outcasts in local society. Frank and Mary the children, are convinced Alma is on drugs (cocaine)* and has introduced them to their father. On Dec. 27, 1928, a son John is born, and a year later Florrie dies of a 'broken heart'.
4. 'Ratz' and Alma decide to live in England. First taking a honeymoon cruise in the Mediterranean,*(1), and losing considerable sums at the gaming tables, have their first argument over money. Arriving in England they settle in a modest house. The Villa Madeira, 5, Manor Rd, Bournemouth *(2).

*(PROD. NOTE: The 'STORYTELLER' in conversation with GORDON PHELPS, reveals Alma's knowledge of cocaine and morphine acquired while serving in France as a nurse during the 1st World War).

*(1) (Substitute Gulf Islands/ B.C.Ferries).

*(2) (Bournemouth, England is very similar in landscape and mood to Victoria B.C.).

5. Using her pen name "Lozanne", Alma pursues ambitions as a songwriter. 'Ratz', using business contacts, arranges meetings with publishers. Alma is somewhat successful in having songs recorded and played on the radio. That success is moderate and not as rewarding as speculated. Ratz, with no work and dwindling finances begins to clutch at the purse strings, drinking heavily. Alma, to escape boredom, chains smokes and drinks. Also resumes her experiment with drugs.

6. Irene Riggs, 22, hired as housekeeper. Immediately falls under Alma's spell. Treated as confidante, not servant. Irene appreciates the offering of friendship. She is captivated and protective. There is something of a sexual undercurrent between them. The family doctor, William O'Donnell, is also sympathetic to Alma's problems. Ratz is becoming belligerent. Talking suicide. Evenings after dinner are spent playing cards. Alma pecks Ratz on the cheek at bedtime. There has been no intercourse since the birth of their son, John 2 years prior.

7. Irene Riggs, a constant source of support and devotion. Alma wanders the house most days playing her gramophone. Ratz tries his hand at lyric writing and is embarrassingly bad. Kind when sober and pathetic when drunk. The pressure of living with a man who drinks himself into a stupor and wants to die, is hard to combat. In one argument, Alma is 'high' and suggests 'he ends it', Ratz blacks her eye. Threatening to jump off the nearby cliffs, he disappears from the house. The police are alerted. He returns in the early morning. There are further troubles in the household. The cook, claims he cannot stay because Alma pesters him sexually. Alma discusses with Irene the prospect of hiring a part time lad for help. Irene disapproves "We can manage between us". Alma persists and puts an ad. in the Bournemouth Daily Echo.

8. Living in a tiny cottage with his parents, George Percy Stoner, is shown the newspaper ad by his mother. The Stoners are simple and very poor people. An opportunity like this would seem heaven sent. Stoner is interviewed. Irene does not approve but Alma is impressed by the fact Stoner can drive, saying " it will be good for 'Ratz' to get out the house a little more". Also convenient for her habit of taking trips to London. Stoner is hired. Alma is somewhat lifted by the new arrival. Attempts to get 'Ratz' back on his feet. "Darling, lets take a drive into town and see Esther and John". 'Ratz' responds somewhat but would rather drink, contemplating 'ending it all'. He tells Alma "Live your life exactly how you please, as if I were dead. It doesn't make any difference". Alma agrees.

9. Stoner, the simple and sturdy country boy, goes about his chores. Mentally slow, unsophisticated, he has never had a girlfriend. Alma dazzles him with gifts and takes him to her bed. He moves into the house as full time chauffeur/ lover. They live as man and wife and Ratz ignores the fact. Irene, fully aware of the situation, puts up with it. Stoner, now joins 'Ratz' and Alma for dinner, evening cards and even enjoying an Havana cigar.

10. Irene walks in on a violent argument where Stoner is 'trying to strangle Alma' because she is threatening to end their affair, Alma visits Dr O'Donnell and admits she is, "living with Stoner" and 'Ratz' knows. Also mentions "Stoner 'has a problem with cocaine and is violent". Dr O'Donnell questions Stoner on the subject, but does not examine him. When Stoner is asked to describe what cocaine is, he speaks of 'brownish powder with speckles'. (N.B. This is obvious identification of heroin was questioned at the subsequent trial).

11. Alma continues to invent stories to obtain money from 'Ratz', for trips to London. On the pretext that she requires surgery, she gets 250 pounds, (a considerable sum) and takes Stoner to the big city. Booking into the Kensington Palace Hotel as brother and sister, she takes him on a shopping spree. Suits, shoes and silk pajamas are delivered to the hotel. In return, Stoner, with money she has given him, buys her a diamond ring. Returning from London, Alma arranges for Ratz and herself to visit Bridport to see friends. Stoner is jealous and accuses Alma of resuming 'married life' with Ratz. They fight and Alma re-assures him of her love.

12.

CUT TO: INT. THE BLACK CAP PUB.EVENING.

GORDON PHELPS

How long did Mrs Rattenbury think she could carry on like this?

STORYTELLER

That's a good question and one I don't think she thought much about until it was too late.
The next 48hrs brought the beginning of the end.

GORDON PHELPS

What occurred?

STORYTELLER

Any chance I could (indicating empty glass)

GORDON PHELPS
Sure. A double gin and tonic?

STORYTELLER
Very kind of you.

GORDON PHELPS takes glasses, goes to bar, orders drinks and returns to the table.

GORDON PHELPS
There we are

STORYTELLER
Ah lovely. Well here's to Alma. Cheers

(They raise and clink glasses).

STORYTELLER (Cont).
Now what happened next still remains a bit of a mystery. Given the facts tell me what you think.

1.15 a.m. Monday 25th March 1935

INT. BOURNEMOUTH POLICE STATION.
Phone rings. Those on duty are drinking tea and smoking .

SERGEANT GATES takes call and summons his assistant .

SERGEANT GATES
Bagwell!

BAGWELL
Yes Sarge?

SERGEANT GATES
Dr O'Donnell just phoned. A Mr Francis Rattenbury has been taken to the Strathellen Nursing Home with head injuries and our good doctor suspects foul play. Take Mills with you and see what you can find out there, will you?

BAGWELL
Yes Sarge

(SERGEANT GATES reaches for cigarette packet and finds it empty).

SERGEANT GATES
And Bagwell, the next time you're on night duty

bring your own bloody cigarettes, alright!.

BAGWELL

Yes Sarge

(BAGWELL takes his coat from stand and leaves station with CONSTABLE MILLS. SERGEANT GATES pissed off, throws empty cigarette package into garbage can and misses).

Constable Bagwell and Mills arrive at the nursing home and are met by Dr O'Donnell and Alfred Rooke, the surgeon. Bagwell checks out "Ratz", who is unconscious. He and Mills then go to the Villa Madeira. Alma answers the door with Irene in close attendance. Dressed in her 'Lozanne' bohemian style pajamas and lounge coat, Alma is questioned and tells her story. (N.b. At this point she is probably coming down off a fix and has been drinking scotch and soda)

INT. LIVING ROOM 2 A.M.

CONSTABLES BAGWELL and MILLS are questioning ALMA and IRENE RIGGS.

ALMA

At about 9.00 P.M. I was playing cards with my husband in the drawing room, then I went to my bedroom. Around 1,30 P.M. I heard a yell and came downstairs.....

CUT TO RE-ENACTMENT. We see 'RATZ' slumped in armchair with bloody head)

ALMA (V:0. Cont.)

I saw my husband sitting in the chair. He was unconscious and blood was flowing from his head.

BAGWELL

Were the french windows open?

ALMA

No they were locked.

CUT TO: BAGWELL and MILLS in livingroom.

BAGWELL

Mills, check out the bathroom

CONSTABLE MILLS goes off to bathroom and returns.

MILLS

We got these.

MILLS is holding a man's coat and waistcoat which are soaking wet.

BAGWELL

O.K. Mills now check outside. (Holding up clothes) What are these then?

IRENE RIGGS

I washed them. I found them in the bathroom and as I had some water already in the bath, I tried to clean them.

BAGWELL

Did Mrs Rattenbury suggest you do this?

IRENE RIGGS

It was my idea.

CONSTABLE MILLS returns with a blood soaked collar

MILLS

And there's this. Found it in the dustbin just outside.

BAGWELL walks into drawing room and picks up book opened and turned down on small coffee table. We see the title "Stay Of Execution" by Eliot Grayshaw Williams.

BAGWELL

You better get back to that nursing home. Mills.

MILLS leaves the room with IRENE in attendance.

ALMA

I know who did it

BAGWELL

Mrs Rattenbury, before you say anything more, I feel I should tell you that you are not obliged to say anything, but if you do, I shall take it down in writing and it may be used in evidence.

ALMA

I did it with a mallet

BAGWELL

Where is it ?

ALMA
It's hidden

BAGWELL starts to write in his notebook. ALMA starts to wander around the room talking erratically.

ALMA (cont.)
No my lover did it....There's urine on the chair.... I would like to give you 10 pounds....No I won't bribe you.

ALMA then approaches BAGWELL and tries to kiss him

BAGWELL
Now, Now. Easy on! Could I use the aahh...facilities?

ALMA is persistent in her pursuit of BAGWELL

BAGWELL(cont).
Excuse me Mrs Rattenbury!!

BAGWELL rushes into the garden to relieve himself.

IRENE comes back into the room and restrains ALMA from pursuing BAGWELL. ALMA persists until IRENE finally pushes her into the armchair, where Ratz was bludgeoned, and sits on her.

CUT TO: INT. STRATHELLEN NURSING HOME. 3 A.M.

CONSTABLE MILLS is consulting with DR O'DONNELL and LEON O'ROOKE, the surgeon.

MILLS
How's Mr Rattenbury doing?

DR O'DONNELL
I'm afraid it's critical

MILLS
Will he survive?

O'ROOKE
The odds are against it

MILLS
Then we're looking at murder.

O'ROOKE
I'm afraid so

Dr O'Donnell returns to Villa Madeira with Constable Mills. The house is in confusion. Gramophone playing loudly, 4 police officers in the house and Alma running from room to room . Dr O'Donnell tries unsuccessfully to explain Ratz's condition to her. Finally with dawn breaking he gives her a shot of morphine. O'Donnell goes downstairs to talk to Irene and Stoner and after a short time is surprised to find Alma on her feet being questioned by Constable Mills. On this occasion she claims, "I know who did it. His son who lives in Canada". The protective O'Donnell finally gets Alma to calm down and return to her bedroom.

26th March 1935.

Detective Inspector Carter arrives to question Alma. She tells him, "I picked up the mallet and he dared me to hit him", saying, "You don't have guts enough to do it- so i hit him, then hid the mallet. He's not: dead is he?..Are you the coroner?". (We see the attack re-enacted as Alma tells it). Bagwell searches the grounds and finds the mallet with blood and hair on it. Inspector Carter tells Alma to dress for the station and then takes a statement from Stoner. He claims, he heard Mrs Rattenbury shouting sometime after he went to bed and running downstairs found Ratz in the armchair with blood running from his head. Alma was crying and screaming and after helping Ratz into bed, Stoner went to Dr O'Donnell's house, who was already on the way to Villa Madeira. When Stoner got back he cleaned the blood off the carpet as per Mrs Rattenbury's instructions. Carter formally charges Alma with attempted murder and Alma makes another statement claiming again to have hit Ratz with a mallet when he dared her. Alma is taken into custody, kissing her son John goodbye, saying to Irene and Stoner "Don't make fools of yourselves", to which Stoner replies, "You got yourself into this mess by talking too much". At the station Alma once again confesses to the charge, adding, "That's right. I did it deliberately and would do it again".

CUT: BACK TO THE BLACK CAP PUB

THE STORYTELLER

The day after the murder Stoner and Irene Riggs drive to Wimborne which is about 5 or 6 miles from Bournemouth. There was certainly no love lost between those two, so why go?

March 1935.

EXT. ON THE ROAD TO WIMBOURNE.

STONER and IRENE in a parked car.

IRENE RIGGS

That's where your mother and father live isn't it?

STONER

Yes, that's where I went Sunday evening to borrow the mallet... How was I to know Lozanne...

IRENE

Alma. Her name is Alma..The mallet. Wouldn't there be your fingerprints on it?

STONER

I was wearing gloves for the gardening

IRENE

Poor darling, I wonder what she's doing now.

STONER

I wish there was something I could do

IRENE

You can

STONER

What?

IRENE

You can tell them what you told me. That you're equally responsible for what happened and ...Being a man, maybe more so.

STONER

Look we had one conversation about what it would be like if he was dead But....

IRENE

Don't you think that was encouraging her?

STONER slumps into silence and stares at the road ahead

Now taking charge of the house Irene Riggs moves in her mother and sister to keep her company. Stoner receives a letter from Alma, (available on research file), and gets drunk: "Mrs Rattenbury is in jail and I put her there.

Tomorrow I'm going up to London to turn myself in". That night someone calls the police who visit the house, finding Stoner drunk and asleep, they leave. The next morning Stoner leaves for London. He visits Alma. While he is away RAZZ dies without regaining consciousness. Irene goes to the police. When Stoner gets back to Bournemouth later that day, the police are waiting at the station and arrest him on a murder charge.

INT, BOURNEMOUTH POLICE STATION. 7,30 EVENING. STONER is at the station waiting to be charged after a visit from his parents. He is in the custody of CONSTABLE GATES.

STONER

You know Mrs Rattenbury, don't you?

CONSTABLE GATES

Yes I do.

STONER

Do you know Mrs Rattenbury had nothing to do
with this affair?

CONSTABLE GATES takes out notebook and starts writing.

CUT TO: RE-ENACTMENT SEQUENCE OF STONERS STORY

STONER (V.O. CONT.)

When I did the job I believed he was asleep. I hit him and then came upstairs and told Mrs Rattenbury. That's when she rushed down. ...I'd seen them through the windows. She kissed him good night and after she left the room, I crept in through the windows which were unlocked. Still it ain't much use in saying anything. I don't suppose they will let her out yet. You know there should be a doctor with her when they tell her I'm arrested, because she'll go out her mind...My parents didn't stay long did they?

Alma gets a visit from Irene Riggs and changes her confession, claiming innocence. Her counsel Terence J. O'Connor, with a very able team defends her. The Crown prosecution is led by Reginald Croom-Johnson. Stoner has to rely on the Poor Prisoners Defence Act and is represented by Joshua David Caswell. Stoner agrees to his defence only "if Caswell, in no way, throws the blame or responsibility on Mrs Rattenbury". The only defence he allows Caswell to put forward is that he committed the murder under the influence of drugs (cocaine).

A sensational trial follows. The defence for Stoner is further weighed by the evidence of Irene Riggs and Dr O'Donnell in Alma's favour. Alma is acquitted of murder. Stoner is sentenced to hang with a recommendation for mercy.

Alma is released. Staying with a relative. Alma is hounded by reporters. Threatening suicide, she is transferred to a nursing home in Bayswater. There she meets with Irene Riggs and gives instruction that should "anything happen to her she is to be buried in pink and surrounded by pink flowers".

She carries a photo of Stoner with her at all times and constantly gazing at it.. Recalling their better moments.

Tuesday, 4th June 1935.

Alma vanishes from the nursing home. Taking a train back to Bournemouth, she leaves the train at Christchurch. It is 8 p.m in the evening. Walking across a field, she is spotted by William Mitchell a local farmer, attending a sick cow. Picking flowers, she arrives at the river edge. There she sits down and writes a letter on an old envelope (see research file). Putting the envelope back in her handbag, she finishes the cigarette she is smoking. As William Mitchell watches she takes off her fur coat and walks towards the river, with her arms swinging, he realises she is carrying a

knife.. Standing among the daffodils and lilies, she stabs herself half a dozen times. 3 of those wounds struck directly to the heart. The farmer rushes towards her but she falls into the river as he tries to grab her feet. Alma turns towards him as he throws the fur coat and gives one last cry. She floats in the river. Blood on the water.

At the inquest, several suicide notes are found. Part of one reads;

"I want to make it perfectly clear that no one is responsible for any actions regarding the taking of my life. I made up my mind, in Holloway(Prison), to finish things should Stoner die. It would only be a matter of time and opportunity, and every night is only prolonging the appalling agony of my mind, God Bless my children and look after them".

June 1935

Stoner is told of Alma's suicide and breaks down. Stoner, in a letter, writes to his attorney Casswell, denying that "I acted under the influence of cocaine or had anything to do with the killing". He tells his version of the story (Re-enactment scene with V.O.). A public petition with half a million signatures, calls for a reprieve. A new trial is denied but on 26th June, Stoner is pardoned by the newly appointed Home secretary. Sir John Simon. (Stoner serves seven years and recruited in the army).

In prison before being paroled. At Alma's funeral hundreds of souvenir hunters scrounge whatever mementos they can lay hands on. Stoner on being released refuses to speak and maintains his silence.

When our storyteller finishes recounting his tale, the young lawyer completely engrossed and still with some questions, offers to buy him a last drink before the pub closes and goes to the bar. When he returns, our storyteller has disappeared. The street outside is empty and we hear Alma/Lozanne's song.

(The music box with ballerina turns and the music distorts)

LOZANNE'S SONG

THE END.
