

*Althea Drake*

**Beatrice Redpath**

[fadedpage.com](http://fadedpage.com)

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

*Title:* Althea Drake

*Date of first publication:* 1924

*Author:* Beatrice Redpath (1886-1937)

*Date first posted:* May 10, 2026

*Date last updated:* May 10, 2026

Faded Page eBook #20260512

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>



# ALTHEA DRAKE

By BEATRICE REDPATH

"I can't put her out of my mind." Althea Drake closed her eyes to try and efface the impression that would linger, then opened them and blinked through the sunlight at Hugh Wayne, sprawled before her in a garden chair. But instead of his lazy white flannelled figure she seemed to see a woman in shabby black, her hands in black cotton gloves, which she was twisting and twisting together. Althea could not eradicate that impression. Even the querulous whine of the woman's voice remained distinct on the sunny air.

If the woman had been more aggressive, more vulgarly loud voiced, she would have known better how to deal with her. The very weariness of that tone had been destructive to indignation. Althea had sat and listened to the woman's tale, feeling as though the sunlight in her bright colored garden was growing dimmer and dimmer, until a wide blue shadow lay over the tulip beds. Even now, listening to Hugh's casual tones, the shadow did not lift.

"I wouldn't be so upset over it. Althea," Hugh said lightly, flipping the ash off the end of his cigarette with deliberate care. "It's blackmail, that's all it is. You say that she couldn't even produce a marriage certificate. Why, she had no way of proving it. You see it's just a game to frighten you into giving her the money."

"I suppose so," Althea said slowly. "I mean of course it is. She was a stupid sort of woman to come without any proofs. She seemed to expect that I would take her word for it. When I laughed at her and told her it was all nonsense, she just sat there twisting her hands together until I could have screamed. She calls herself Mrs. Drake. I hated that."

"Impertinence."

"She said," Althea went on, "that George sent her an allowance every month until a year ago last January. Then he stopped sending." A slight quiver crept into Althea's tone. "That was the month that George and I were married."

"My dear, naturally she got her dates right. Why didn't she come forward and stop the marriage? That was the time for her to declare herself."

“She didn’t know about it. She said she wrote to George when the allowance stopped, and got no answer. She was ill for some time after that and when she recovered she saw in the papers that George had died leaving no will. She imagined that she was George’s widow. Oh, so she said”—and Althea’s laugh was a little shrill—“she was in Australia at the time.”

“Pity she didn’t stay there for all the good this will do her. It’s a ridiculous story. She should have made a better job of it. She hasn’t brains enough apparently to try this sort of game.”

Yes, it was a poor story. But wasn’t that just why it frightened her? If the woman had been cleverer she would have put it down as blackmail at once. She looked across the lawns soaked in sunlight, trying hard to obliterate that woman’s face from her mind.

There had not been even a vestige of prettiness. Gray, drab, tired, with deep lines etched there as though with a sharp tool. So much older than herself. Would George, always so susceptible to good looks, ever have married a woman of that description? It was too absurd. Oh, quite too absurd, to consider such a thing! Why, he would never have even given her a glance. She knew George.

“My dear . . .”

Her eyes came slowly back to Hugh’s face at the sound of his voice.

“It’s not a nice thing to say, but you can’t be ignorant of George’s susceptibilities, shall we say. He quite possibly may have been mixed up with this woman years ago. But marriage. No. George was never a fool, whatever else he was.”

How horrible it all was, this speaking of things which she had put so far behind her. George’s questionable morals, so soon discovered after her marriage. Those six months of soul-destroying disillusionment, then his tragic, sudden death. A year had blurred all memory of that time, smudged it like the writing on a child’s slate. And now it was all being dragged back before her by the appearance of that woman this afternoon.

Life had just begun to put on color again. For the last six months she had been glad to wake in the mornings. The sun, pouring into her room like a smile on the face of the day; breakfast with letters, new books to dip into; friends, her garden, and all the ease of life surrounded by wealth. And best of all, oh, best of all! freedom to enjoy it all in her own way. While George had lived that luxury had been tainted. But now life was opening out to her like a flower.

And Hugh, the very mainspring of her happiness. For the first time in her life she had learned to care supremely for a human being. Life had been perfect of late, and now it was as though that woman in the black cotton gloves had drawn a black finger across its clear perfection. Bigamy—blackmail! She shuddered away from the ugliness of the words. It was with an effort that she listened to what Hugh was saying.

“No, George wasn’t a fool.”

“She seemed so poor.”

“Well, my dear, she wouldn’t be doing this sort of thing if she were exactly affluent. She takes a certain risk that you will simply hand her over to the police for blackmail. As far as I can see she hasn’t a leg to stand on.”

“I’d be willing to give her an allowance,” Althea said slowly, “she looked so very poor.”

Hugh Wayne shook his head.

“Either her story is true and then everything belongs to her, or it isn’t true and she’s nothing but an impostor. You have to be very sure, of course. But you are sure. I’m sure. She hasn’t one scrap of proof. Where is her marriage certificate? If she wasn’t an impostor she would get a lawyer to prove her case.”

Althea looked away towards the tulip beds glowing with color in the sun. If she were not an impostor, that woman, why then everything would belong to her. The garden, the house, the large secure income, and she herself back again in the world without a penny except what she could make; or trying to make marriage possible on Hugh’s quite insufficient income. Oh, so insufficient, now with her new expensive tastes. That woman with the vague eyes ordering it all, owning it all, loving it all perhaps as she had learned to love the ease of wealth. “You have to be so sure.” Was she sure? Quite, quite sure? Oh, sure of what? That that woman was really George’s wife.

“No,” Althea said slowly, “she had no proofs. She was such a shrinking sort of woman. She said she wanted the money to educate her child. I don’t think she had any idea of how much there was. I’d like to do that much for her anyway. The child should be educated.”

“Anyone would say, my dear, that that amounted to admitting that you believed her story. No, Althea dear, this isn’t a case for sentiment.”

“I suppose it would be wrong to give her anything,” Althea said slowly, “but still — —”

“It would only be encouraging blackmail. If she comes again tell her to see your lawyer. Don’t have anything to say to her. She has nothing but an impossible story. Simply put the whole matter out of your head, dear. It’s just because you are so dreadfully sensitive that it bothers you at all.”

Yes, that was quite clearly the only thing to do. Hugh was perfectly right. Only she didn’t seem able to manage to do it quite as easily as that. Hugh had made it clear that the woman was an impostor. It was only sentiment, and false sentiment at that, which made her feel as she did. The woman had seemed so wretchedly poor, and she hated poverty. It recalled the days of her own poverty. That was why the woman had left such an unpleasant impression with her.

As the days passed and the woman didn’t come again she told herself that the woman was certainly an impostor or she would have taken her case to a lawyer. She would not have dropped it simply because her word had been laughed at, held up to ridicule, treated with scorn. Althea had told the maids that if a woman in shabby black should call they were to say that she was away on a visit. Each time that she came in she expected to hear that the woman had been again, but the maids always gave the same response. No one answering to the description of the woman had called.

Apparently, then, she had abandoned the idea of claiming the money. She had been too timid, too shrinking to go on with it when she had seen the opposition which she would have to face. For a woman who was attempting to live by her wits, hers had been too shrinking a nature. She should have been cleverer, she should have brought proofs, had letters to show, even if they had been only forged ones. But just to come thinking that anyone would believe her silly story. Why, it was preposterous!

Somehow it had spoiled the garden for her. Every time that she sat down in her favorite spot beside the lilac bushes, she seemed to see that woman, sitting there before her, with that dreary hopeless expression in her pale eyes. She would hear that querulous tone ring in her ears, until she would retreat in desperation to the dim sanctuary of the house.

It was absurd. Her nerves were all unstrung by the incident. For that was all it was. Just an incident that she must put out of her mind. Hugh had said she must forget all about it. He would think it ridiculous if he knew that she even thought of that woman again.

If the woman's story had not been so stupid; somehow it made her wonder if it were not true. If the woman had been an impostor surely she would have made up a better story than the one she had told. She would have had more means of corroborating the facts. She would not have been so easily laughed down. Oh, it had been such a stupid story!

She would retreat in all haste from thoughts such as these, but slowly, laggingly, her mind would come back to them again. And then her thoughts would stand still, like a clock that has stopped, while every fibre of her seemed to shout aloud that the woman's story was true. Oh, she had known it from the very beginning! That woman was George's wife.

She procured a list of small houses and apartments where it would be possible to live on a limited income. She told the chauffeur to take her to see them, and shrank from his bland surprise that she should wish to visit such a neighborhood.

Horrible places they were with small rooms, narrow halls, some of them shabby, some so blatantly new with glaring woodwork that attempted an imitation that only managed to expose its inferiority. Backyards, where ash barrels disgorged foully. Oh, horrible places!

She knew that she had been spoiled. While she had been poor poverty had never worn so drab an aspect. There had been compensations in those days. She was purposely looking at it now from its worst angle so as to make it quite clear to herself that it would be impossible for her to give up her wealth. That woman was used to hardship. Wealth for her would be an incredible fairy tale.

There was of course the chance that the woman might prove the truth of what she said. There was the possibility that she had even held back letters, had documents which she could produce in court to establish her claim. Then, oh then she, Althea Drake, who had accustomed herself to such a luxurious mode of living, would have to make the best of life in these conditions. That thought made her feel a cold frenzy of anger against that unfortunate creature who was interfering with her security and happiness. That horrible woman. She hated the very thought of that querulous tone, that baffled, beaten expression. She would have objected, she felt, less to a woman who even fought quite vulgarly and stridently for her rights. It was like taking a rapier to kill an insect to use wit and brains to vanquish such a creature.

She did not actually feel that there was much chance of the woman carrying her case any further. The creature had seemed to be crushed by her

own cool amusement, her utter disdain of the tale which had been told. The woman had even seemed frightened of her temerity in having come forward at all. Why, she had even been apologetic towards Althea for having usurped so much time! Althea knew that the manner which she had assumed had had the desired effect and had annihilated all further desire in the woman for another meeting.

There did not appear to be much cause for alarm, she thought, as she leaned back against the soft upholstering of the car and told the chauffeur to drive home. She had been foolish even to look at such places. She fancied that the chauffeur's stolid back expressed a relief as complete as her own as the car slid quietly back into pleasanter broader streets.

The house had never had such a friendly intimate aspect before, she thought, as the car turned in at the gateway. The ground had never shown her a more polished perfection. The beds of tulips were such gaudy patches of color, each bloom like a shining colored cup. The lawns were shorn to the smoothness of velvet. A fountain trickled demurely, shaking timid diamond drops over the green sod. She took a long delicious breath of the sweetness and fragrance that was all around her. It was in this atmosphere that she had learned to breathe. She could live in no other.

Marriage with Hugh in that other atmosphere of disgorging ash barrels would be impossible. Even love like theirs would lose its glamor, would be marred and spoiled by the constant contact with sordidness. She was sorry for that woman, but not sorry enough to sacrifice her own happiness. She prided herself on the fact that she was sorry, that she had not put the matter entirely out of her mind as Hugh had told her to do. Most people would not even have bothered to think about the woman at all. But she could not banish the thought of her completely. She was too sentimental perhaps, just as Hugh had said. For always in the midst of her gratification over some new purchase would intrude the ugly thought that this did not really belong to her; it belonged to the woman with the black cotton gloves.

She did not require the proof which she found in an old trunk which she was looking through, intent upon destroying everything that could remind her of her first marriage, to convince her of what she already knew. The only thing that the photograph had to tell her was that the woman had been pretty at one time. Pretty, in a pale wistful sort of fashion.

She could imagine that those looks might have appealed to George, but never have held him. Meek and docile. A sweet trembling sort of prettiness that might have appealed to the gross animal in George. She could

understand now better how he had come to marry the woman. But she understood even better how he had come to leave her; how he had arrived at the state of mind concerning her that the woman seemed too negligible a quantity to interfere with his marriage with herself. Althea was quite sure that the woman would never come forward to further that ridiculous claim. Probably if there had been no child the woman's existence would never have been heard of at all.

Althea tore the photograph in half with a feeling that now she had finished completely with an unpleasant episode. She felt more than ever secure. The woman of that photograph, with the weak trembling mouth would never attempt a fight even for the sake of the child. Such a woman would give it up as hopeless and resign herself to the misfortunes of life.

Althea really managed to banish all thought of the unpleasant incident from her mind in the days that followed. The long golden summer days were so glamorous; life came up so fully to her expectations that the only fault she had to find was the brevity of each day, the swiftness of every night. The garden corners were heaped high with roses, their colored petals drifting on the soft airs, followed by pale stemmed hollyhocks with their quaint bright blooms; all the bright hued succession of summer led her on to the orange and gold of Autumn days.

It was Hugh who told her, sitting in the same memorable spot in the garden where they had first talked of the woman who was now only a faded memory in Althea's mind.

"You didn't see it in the papers, then?" he inquired, rather diffidently, as though it were a subject which he hated to bring up. "A steamer was wrecked on its way to Australia. Among the missing were a Mrs. Drake and child. That would be your woman, wouldn't it?"

Althea felt a curious startled sensation.

"It must be the same woman," she said slowly. "Drowned—she and her child."

"Poor soul. But perhaps it's the best way out of things for her. It didn't seem from what you said that she had much to live for."

Althea glanced around the garden where geraniums had supplanted the tulips in the wide beds. The air was mellow and faintly blue with the haze of early Autumn. So, the woman was dead. She could never appear again to rub that black finger across the clear perfection of life. Perhaps life had never been quite the same since that woman had appeared. In the very back of her

mind Althea knew that there had been a tiny pricking fear that the woman might come back. Oh, the fear had never really obtruded on her happiness! But still, it had been there. Now everything could be altogether perfect again.

“Yes,” she said slowly, “it’s the best thing that could have happened. She hadn’t anything to live for.”

Not much to live for. That was true. But Althea Drake had, oh, so much! The geranium beds were bright as drops of blood in the sun. There was a hum of bees in a bush beside her. Bees . . . but their hum rose in a sing-song drone like that woman’s voice. Oh, that woman’s voice droning away in her own beautiful garden.

She looked through the sunlight at Hugh. She loved his clear far-seeing eyes, the wave of fair hair across his forehead. So fine. She knew him to be so fine. How happy they were going to be. They would have everything that could make life splendid. Youth, health, money, oh and the best of all . . . love!

“Life seems scarcely fair,” Hugh Wayne said slowly. “But that’s a remark we make every day, I suppose. But you can’t help it when you think that we have so much and that poor thing had nothing. And then even her nothingness comes to an end. Life’s an odd wheel of chance.”

Althea looked at him without speaking. She wished that he would not allude to that woman again. It brought up the sight of her before her eyes. Althea felt as though she could see her as she had sat there several months ago, twisting those hands together looking out of those vague eyes with such a baffled, beaten expression. Yes, she did wish that Hugh would never refer to that woman again. The incident had been almost forgotten, almost pushed completely out of her mind, but now, it was coming closer again. Curious, that the woman’s death seemed to bring her nearer, to bring her right back into the garden. It seemed as though that woman had come to stay; as though death had brought her back to the place where she belonged.

Oh, such foolish thoughts. Ridiculous to have such imaginative fancies. Tragedies always affected her in that way; remained with her; could not be dismissed from her mind. Any tragedy; oh, not that woman’s tragedy more than any other.

The sound of the bees in the bush close beside her droned on and on like a querulous voice. Like that woman’s voice.

Althea jumped up from her chair with a quick impatient movement.

“Let’s go inside,” she said, “Sometimes I hate it out here.”

Hugh Wayne rose, showing his surprise at the tone of her voice.

“I thought you loved the garden,” he said half-amused by her sudden whim.

“I did. Oh, I do,” she exclaimed quickly. “I think I feel upset by what you told me about that woman. This is just the spot where we were sitting that day she came to see me. I seem to see her . . . hear her voice. . .”

“Don’t be so silly, Althea,” Hugh said forcibly, “you really are too impressionable. I wish I hadn’t mentioned her at all. You had forgotten all about her.”

“Yes, I had. Or almost forgotten. But sometimes when people die, why it brings them closer than when they were alive. She seems to have come right back here into the garden.” Althea laughed with a forced note. “She’ll always be here now. She’ll never go away. Never—never—never. Oh, I know.”

Hugh Wayne caught her firmly by the wrist.

“Althea, you’re hysterical. Don’t be so silly. What you say is too foolish for words. What consequence can it be to you whether that woman is alive or dead? Don’t be such a little goose. Besides, there’s something I really want to talk to you about. Something altogether different,” and his fingers slipped down to her hand. “Althea, don’t you think it’s time that we were married? What’s the sense of waiting any longer?”

“No sense at all,” she said, smiling gently.

If she were married to Hugh it would drive that woman away from the garden. Yes, that would surely drive her away. She leaned against his sleeve.

“Make it soon,” she said, “oh, very soon.”

There was no doubt about it at all. When some people died it brought them closer than when they had been alive. That woman would not leave the garden. She was always waiting for Althea there, whenever she went out. Every time she went into the garden, that woman would meet her with that dreary whine, twisting those hands together in those black cotton gloves.

Althea would not sit in the garden any more. She would close the shutters fast and sit in the long drawing-room with its sweetish smell of cut flowers. That woman had come back to the garden, and she could not keep her away. Althea felt that she had no power to keep the woman from what

was her own, now that she was dead, no power whatever. That woman would sit out there in the sunlight as much as ever she pleased, and Althea would have to sit inside in the dim rooms, shuttered against the sun, against that woman sitting in the garden chair.

Hugh Wayne found her sitting indoors one afternoon, the shutters fast drawn, the room dim and shadowy. He moved to the shutters and threw them back while Althea put one hand quickly to her mouth to stifle the cry of protest that was on her lips.

“Why do you sit here, dear?” he said, turning around, frowning. “You are straining your eyes reading in this light. Besides, you are indoors far too much. You should be out in the garden.”

“I like it in here best,” she said in a low tone. He stood in front of her, looking down at her, ponderingly.

“Althea, what’s the matter, dear? You’re not yourself these days. You look ill, tired, worried. Tell me what’s the matter!”

How could she tell him that that woman was out there in her garden all the time, that she would not keep away now that she was dead? She, Althea, could never, never tell him. Hadn’t she done what she could so that their happiness might be perfect? If she told him her happiness would be ruined, gone, fallen away forever.

But as she looked at him she knew that she could never marry him without telling her miserable story. If she told him he might be tolerant, he might try to forgive, he might pity her and be sorry. But in his heart she felt he would never be able to condone, never forget what she had done. She shrank in her chair. She couldn’t marry that way, with tolerance, with a grudging pardon as a basis for their lives.

Since she had done what she had done she should go on with it, she should be strong enough to live up to the evil thing that she had done. But she wasn’t. She was neither strong enough for good, nor strong enough for evil. “So then, because thou art luke-warm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.” She was like that, neither cold nor hot. She had cheated, but now she couldn’t take what the cheating would bring her.

She looked up at Hugh standing before her puzzled, perplexed by her long silence. Then, hiding her face in her hands so that she would not see the expression which she knew would come into his face, she told him everything.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover which is placed in the public domain was created for this ebook.

[The end of *Althea Drake* by Beatrice Redpath]