

The Curtain

**Isabel Ecclestone
Mackay**

Illustrated by

Dorothy Stevens

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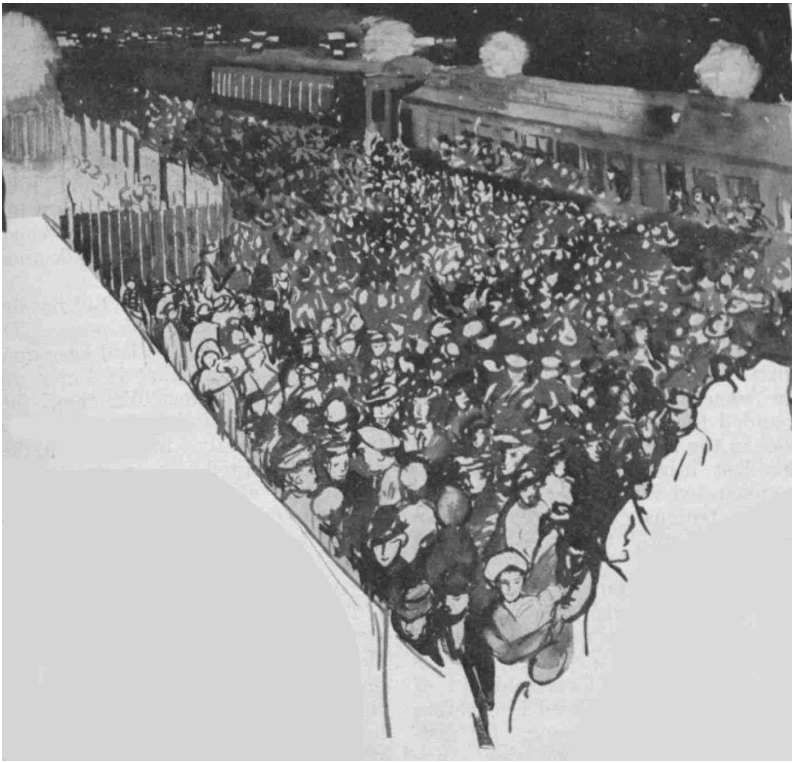
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“Before he left for the front.”

THE CURTAIN
by
Isabel Ecclestone Mackay

Illustrations by Dorothy Stevens

AUTHOR OF “THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS,” ETC.

Aleric Judson came home from the Great War a changed man. There was nothing strange in that, since every man who came came changed. But the change in Aleric seemed especially dreadful to me, because we had been friends since boyhood—and there was also the fact that he had married Betty. They had been married just two months before he left for the front. Everyone but Betty had been against the marriage. Even Aleric had not been

quite in favour of it, under the circumstances. But Betty said that two months' happiness was a whole month or two better than no happiness at all. She wanted it, and she was going to have it. And she did.

Betty came of a race of soldiers. She was brave, and she knew how to smile. She smiled when she said good-bye to Aleric, although she must have had small expectation of ever seeing him again. Nor, as a matter of fact, did she, for the man who came back was not the man who had gone away. The Aleric Judson who married Betty was young and brave and debonair. He could be best described as an incurable optimist with a nice sense of humour. The Aleric Judson who came back to his wife was a man who looked as if he had never been young, a man with an odd trick of shrinking, a man who never smiled, a haunted man astray in a haunted world.

Aleric went with the Sixth Contingent and served through the last and hottest part of the war. He led his company in that great final offensive whose record already reads like some horrific fable. He was wounded four times, once in the arm, twice in the leg, and once in the head. This last injury left him definitely incapacitated for further service, and after a tedious convalescence in an English hospital he was invalided home.

I have always thought that if Betty could have been with him during his convalescence things never might have come to the pass they did. In his weakness he might have told her of the horror that oppressed him before its hold became too strong. Or, listening to his raving, she might have guessed. But Betty could not go to England, because just at that time Betty the second was entirely too new and fragile to be taken on so long and dangerous a journey. Neither could she be left save in extreme necessity. So Betty stayed at home and tried hard to smile so that the family might not shake its head and say, "I told you so".

She did manage, however, to go as far as Montreal to meet him on his return journey. Aleric was to rest there, so husband and wife had a few days together away from the fondly curious eyes of their special little world. What happened in those few days no one knows. Betty wrote only one letter, and in it she did not say what she felt when she first saw Aleric, nor what Aleric felt when he first saw Betty the second. She said very little, save that they were travelling back very slowly. But she managed to intimate that Aleric was still far from strong and that it might be wise if the family and friends would give him a little time to recover himself before welcoming the returned hero. In fact, she made it fairly plain that the returned-hero business would have to be omitted altogether. Aleric, it seemed, did not want to talk about the war.

Naturally, this attitude did not find favour. It savoured of pose. The family felt that its tact had been questioned. It agreed that if Betty and Aleric wanted to act “like that” they could jolly well do it! Far be it from them (the family) to go where they were not wanted.

This fine aloofness persisted for almost a week after the soldier’s return, and then, realizing the wrongness of dissension in a family, they forgave Betty and went to call on Aleric.

The verdicts were various. But all agreed in one thing—Aleric was changed. This was only what everyone had expected. The trouble was that they had not realized that they had expected it. Change, they agreed, was inevitable. A man may not go through hell and come out an incurable optimist with a nice sense of humour.

It was not really strange that Aleric did not smile any more: neither was it strange that he stooped or that he limped or that all the gay and youthful bravery of face and bearing was as if it had never been. It was not even excessively strange, when one came to think of it, that he should fall into trancelike silences, thinking heaven knows what thoughts.

But as the days went by what the family asked was, didn’t Betty the first think it strange that Aleric was so odd about Betty the second? As his health improved and as the baby grew older everyone had confidently expected that Aleric would “rouse himself”, that he would adore his delicious morsel of babyhood, reveal himself the dotting father, and so forth. But he didn’t. The family were careful not to say much about it. But it could not hide from itself that Aleric avoided Betty the second. And he did not rouse himself at all.

Whether Betty the first realized this and other strangenesses, no one could say. If she did one would never have guessed it. She was always busy and cheerful and unceasingly careful for Aleric’s comfort and peace of mind. The odd thing about this was that he did not seem to want her to be. The family resolutely declined to notice this. It would have been too disloyal. They could only hope that Betty would notice that they did not notice it.



“The Aleric Judson who married Betty was young and brave and debonair.”

But unfortunately Betty was clear-sighted. I am not very certain as to how long this state of things continued, but it was a very cold day in early December when Betty herself came into my office and attacked the subject without preliminaries.

“Tom,” she said, “when you and Aleric were at college didn’t you rather go in for that William James kind of thing—psychology, and all that?”

“Rather,” I admitted. “Not much.”

“And are you terribly busy?”

I said I was busy, but not terribly.

“Because,” she went on, “I want you to come to us on a visit. You may be surprised at my wanting a visitor just now, but I do want one. You are the only visitor that Aleric would stand.”

“You flatter—”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Tom. You know what I mean.” She loosened her furs nervously. “And you must have heard about Aleric—about his being so—different?”

I nodded.

“I expected that he would be different,” she said. “It couldn’t be otherwise. I know he would be older, sadder; his letters prepared me for a big change. I could understand his silences, his fits of brooding, his nervous tricks of manner. And if these things were all, I would not worry. Time would heal all that. Little Betty and I could win him back to youth. For he is young and youth is so wonderful. But, Tom—”

She paused, throwing open her coat as if its warmth oppressed her, and her clear voice began on a lower note.

“There is something else, Tom. Something definite, I mean. Something unnatural—poisonous. I can’t get at it, but I know it’s there—an invisible barrier—impassable—”

Her breath caught, and her eyes looked large and frightened behind her veil.

“Tom, why does he shiver when the curtains sway in the wind? Why does he start and tremble at the rustle of my dress across the floor? What is it that turns to ashes all his love and pride in our wee Betty? It is not my fancy, it is cold and hateful fact. I tell you he never touches her if he can help it. He is uneasy if she plays about the room. There are certain little baby sounds she makes which disturb him incredibly. He shudders and his face turns gray. It isn’t that he doesn’t love her. I know that. It’s more as if he were afraid to let himself love her. He looks at her, poor fellow, and his eyes are so miserable! But why? There seems no sense in it—no key—no possible reason—”

“One can’t wonder at a lack of reason,” I began somewhat lamely. “Aleric has come through terrible things. The after-effects of shock and suffering are incalculable. Men have been known to turn from their nearest and dearest—”

“You mean that Aleric is not quite sane?” Betty’s blue eyes met mine straightly. “You may put that out of your head at once. He is altogether sane. Whatever it is, it is not that.”

“But—”

“That is why I feel so certain that there is a definite cause somewhere. If I didn’t believe that, I couldn’t go on. The thing is to find the cause. Hysterics won’t help. And I have been perilously near hysterics several times of late. I need help, Tom, and I want you.”

“You can have me,” I said sincerely. “But I am not so sure about the help. He may resent my coming. As he has not asked me, he is almost sure to think my sudden arrival odd. He will probably wonder what in the deuce I mean by it.”

“I hope he does!” Betty’s return to her usual manner was simultaneous with the readjustment of her furs. “It would do him good to think about anything rather than the things he does think about. Is my nose too red, or may the atmosphere be safely held accountable?”

I suggested a little powder because I always enjoyed seeing Betty powder her nose. The discovery that she had forgotten her vanity-case struck me as the most significant thing about our interview. I made no further objections when she arranged the date and details of my visit.

Next week saw my arrival at the pretty bungalow which I had helped to furnish in days already incredibly remote. What Aleric thought of my unlooked-for appearance it was impossible to say. Without being terribly enthusiastic he welcomed me cordially and did his best to fall back into the familiar ways of our long friendship. But from the first it was evident that he could not do it. He spoke to me; he looked at me across some intangible gulf. At times I surprised a kind of wonder in his eyes, a puzzled question, as if he asked himself what once we might have had in common. As to myself, I felt acutely uncomfortable, as one must who shakes the dead hand of friendship. But I allowed none of my discomfort to appear.



“A man who never smiled, a haunted man astray in a haunted world.”

On the contrary, I tried to be as much in his company as possible. Finding that the war was never mentioned in his presence, I made a point of mentioning it. For, I argued, the last thing which Aleric should be allowed to do was to shut himself and his experiences away from the common light of day. The best way of finding out his trouble was to treat him as if he had no trouble at all. Of course, my position as guest gave me an unfair advantage, for however stupid and tactless a guest may be, a good host must be politely blind and blamelessly patient. Aleric’s traditions were those of a good host. But at times I pressed him hard. I couldn’t even explain that it hurt me as much as it did him. I could not allow myself the luxury of being decently

sensitive. I simply could not see that he wished to be alone, that instead of my talk and tobacco he wanted solitude—and the privilege of staring unseeingly into the fire while time slipped past unheeded and his unlit cigar fell from his listless hand.

I sometimes think of that visit of mine to Aleric as one long third degree!

After all, granting my invulnerability to hints, it was natural enough that I should want to know all about the war. Everyone knew that my being turned down on account of an old football strain had been a severe blow. General references would not do for me. I wanted details. I craved personal experience. In fact, it soon became apparent that I had the war so greatly on my mind that no matter how often the subject was changed, sooner or later I drifted back to it.

This went on for nearly a fortnight and no breach had appeared in Aleric's impenetrable barrier of reserve. I might crave personal experiences, but I certainly did not get them. It began to look as if I had failed completely and that a prolonging of my visit would result in nothing save a straining of our friendship beyond recovery. I was ready to give up. But Betty wasn't.

She declared that she noticed a slight change, a little lightening of Aleric's heavy mood.

"Dogged does it!" said Betty, setting her red lips firmly. "One of these days his silence will wear thin. Then he will speak, then—"

"He will hate me forever," I declared morosely.

"What if he does?"

"Your insinuation of my insignificance is plain, but all the same one does not like to lose one's friend—"

I happened to be looking into Betty's eyes and saw their brightness suddenly dim.

"One doesn't like to lose one's husband, either," she said quietly.

So, of course, there was nothing to do but to pack up my finer feelings and go on.

These uncomfortable days had not been entirely fruitless, however, for my study of Aleric had convinced me that Betty had been right when she declared that his trouble was due not to general conditions, but to some definite matter over which he brooded. We were working in the right direction, I felt sure. It was a case of the "fixed idea" combined with an

instinct for secrecy. If we could overcome the secrecy much, perhaps everything, would be gained. Once let him bring his obsession into the light of day and much of its power would be gone.

“Suppose,” said Betty suddenly one day, “suppose that you change your tactics. Stop talking about the war altogether and see what happens?”

“Why?” I asked stupidly.

“Because I think he will miss it. Don’t you notice that although he is as brusque as ever in his answers, there is a subtle change in his attitude. I believe he is beginning to want to talk—try him and see.”

Betty was a keener psychologist than I, for, although I had noticed nothing, her observation proved to have been entirely correct. Under the new treatment Aleric became decidedly restless. It seemed that in spite of himself he had found a certain relief in my questioning. I became very hopeful and after two days’ rest I began again my persistent probing for the hidden wound. Aleric was not nearly as brusque now, but he seemed more miserable than ever. Little by little our talks became more intimate, a breath of our old warm friendship came stealing back.

Yet when the crisis came it was proved that Betty was right once more, for it came suddenly and when I least expected it. Betty had gone to bed early (the strain was telling on Betty), Aleric was in an especially unresponsive mood. He wanted to go off by himself, but as I headed cheerfully for the den he had perforce to follow me, banging the door as he did so and starting nervously at the bang.

Paying no attention to his mood, I lit a cigar and began to mask my approach to our usual subject by a few carefully-prepared observations of a political trend. Taxation, I think, was the theme.

“You see,” I said didactically, “it’s not as if there were any fear of another war. Never, from generation to generation, while the memory of this frightful strife endures, will there be fear of war. Men will not look that horror in the face again. War has killed itself.”



“*War is a Vampire.*”

“Killed itself?” Was it Aleric speaking? I looked at him in wonder, for his voice was suddenly the voice of a stranger. Hoarse and broken, it might have come from the lips of an old man. His eyes, a moment ago apathetic and sullen, were burning wells of hate and horror.

Betty would have known at once that her predicted “breaking through” had come. But I sat wondering.

“Never another war?” went on this strange man in his strange voice. “You think her dead, do you, because—well you may think that—you who never saw a battlefield. But let me tell you a secret—war is alive! Bah! You

talk of politics. It makes me laugh. Kings and presidents, powers and conditions, war has nothing to do with these. They exist for her, not she for them. Let me tell you”—his voice took on a low note of horror—“war is a vampire. She lets us play awhile when she is gorged with the blood of her victims, but when she stirs again, when she wakes, when she is ravenous once more—”

Had he suddenly gone insane, I wondered? Had his mental state been worse than we had feared? The thought must have shown itself in my eyes, for Aleric’s frenzy suddenly checked itself. He held me for a moment with his blazing eyes and then continued in a more natural voice:

“You think me crazy? Of course you do. I knew you would if I ever spoke what I really believe. But other men would not. The men who went through that hell with me would not think me mad. They *know*. What I tell you is the simple truth.”

I managed a puff or two at my cigar.

“I see what you mean, old man, I think I can follow you, speaking figuratively—”

“Not speaking figuratively. Listen. One night I lay wounded and unable to move on the strip of land between the trenches. There were many around me. I won’t tell you of them. Our language was not made for such tales. What did Shakespeare know of night made hideous? Had he lain for a while, wounded, in No Man’s Land he might have known! . . . There was a faint moon, and by its dim light I saw her. Like a black wind she came over the field, crouching low. The man beside me saw her, screamed once, like a baby screams, and died. She came swiftly, silently, running like a hound on the scent. . . . I saw her face. . . . I thought I died then. Part of me did die, I think: although I was still alive when our men got to me.”

I pushed back my chair, glad of the scraping sound it made upon the floor. As an excuse for the sudden damp upon my forehead I remarked that the fire was rather hot. It began to appear that Aleric’s silence had covered some curious things. In the meantime he waited for me to say something.

“A horrible experience!” I said, “delirium, of course—very vivid and all that—horrible!”

Aleric interrupted with a short laugh.

“You think it wasn’t delirium?” I ventured.

“Oh, I saw her all right. I wasn’t delirious. But I am not surprised that you think so.”

Now, I felt, was the time for me to move carefully, to use wisdom. But somehow I couldn’t. Aleric’s eerie story had shaken me and I blurted it all out without finesse of any kind.

“Even supposing,” I stammered, “that doesn’t account for things—a swaying curtain, the rustle of your wife’s dress, the—the child—”

I had done it now! I knew by the look on his face that he understood me instantly. He knew that what he had tried to hide had not been hidden. My stumbling words had laid bare all our futile secrecies.

Aleric was gazing at me thoughtfully. The wild light had died out of his eyes. He appeared almost normal save that he looked white and shaken. I had expected a new outburst, but none came. Instead, after a moment’s scrutiny, he turned away with a gesture of intense weariness.

“No—it doesn’t account for that.” There was a kind of flat finality in his level tone which told me plainer than words that my only chance of helping him was slipping away. The knowledge steadied me. For Betty’s sake I must not let him leave it so.

“Old man,” I said, “you think I’m hatefully, meanly curious. God knows I’m not. But you are in a bad way. If you could talk about it, it might help. You can’t go on like this: I tell you plainly that madness lies at the end of the road.”

“I know that,” he said and fell heavily silent.

I waited.

“Talking about it won’t help,” he went on. “Common sense doesn’t help. Reason doesn’t help. There are things outside of common sense and reason. I’ve always considered myself a reasonable man. I have reasoned over this. Reason tells me I torment myself needlessly. Common sense laughs at me. I have observed myself quite calmly and called myself a fool. I have pointed out the absurdity of being obsessed by what is past, by what was not, after all, any fault of mine. But nothing has any effect—nothing.”

“You are ill, man,” I said eagerly. “A man’s sick mind seldom cures itself. The impulse of healing must come from without. You need help.”

With an upleap of hope I felt his hand tighten a little in mine. Presently he spoke again, using short, halting sentences with pauses between. It was as if he dragged the words from the depth of tragic self-communings.



“I made a little movement, and the curtain stirred.”

“Well, I’ll tell you. . . It’s a short story, after all. . . . The second time I was hit, it happened, in the leg that time, and not so badly, but enough to put me out of action. I fell in a street. . . . I mean what had recently been a street . . . of what had been a village. The sensible thing seemed to be to get to cover. I could crawl, after a fashion. . . . There was a shell of a house not far off. I crawled there . . . crawled right in, over the ruins of the shattered door-sill. I wasn’t in great pain. The first effect of some wounds is numbing. But I was faint, loss of blood, reaction, weariness, and so thirsty! . . . But I was

glad. I began to think of Betty and the baby. I had just heard about the baby. It was good to think I was going to see them both, maybe. . . . That I wasn't lying dead out there . . . likely to have another chance. But I was so thirsty—I began to look around, and there, almost opposite, where a rag of a curtain hung, something caught my eye, paralyzed me! . . . It was behind the curtain, making it bulge an odd, irregular bulge. I knew in a moment what it was . . . a man, crouching! . . . and there was something else . . . something glittering . . . it was right in my eye . . . I knew he had me covered! There would be no Betty . . . and I would never see the baby . . .”

“My first and last thought was, ‘Why the deuce doesn't he shoot?’—a kind of rhyme. It got singing through my head, over and over. But he didn't shoot. . . . He just held me there, covered. . . . Presently the idea came to me that he might be dead. The relief of it made my head swim. . . . He was so still . . . after all, he might be dead. I made a little movement . . . and the curtain stirred . . . someone moved behind it . . . hope fell dead. Then I thought I saw the pointed muzzle shift a trifle. In a moment it would spit out death. . . . But it didn't . . . it seemed that the hidden man was a humourist . . . he wanted to play with me . . . so amusing.

“I don't know how a mouse feels when a cat plays with it. I've heard it squeal and seen it try to run away. But for me, I grew suddenly cool. All at once, I wasn't afraid. I felt nothing save a kind of steel-blue anger. . . . I don't want Betty or the baby or life. . . . All I wanted was to kill the man behind the curtain. . . . I lay very still. . . . It is wonderful how keen eyes are in face of blank-eyed death. I let my eyes search everywhere. . . . Presently they found something. . . . Well within reach of my flung-out fingers lay a piece of broken bayonet. He wouldn't be afraid of that . . . a bayonet presupposes close quarters, and he could shoot me dead a dozen times before I could get within reach.

“But there was one chance. It would not occur to him that I might find another use for it. That I knew how to balance and aim and hurl . . . if I could only get the right hold . . . and be quick enough . . . before he guessed.”

“I was cool enough. The thing resolved itself into a matter of player's skill. I was always a cool player. I began to move very carefully . . . very, very slowly . . . then, just as I had my fingers properly around the steel . . . there came a curious sound. I didn't know what it was . . . a little, funny gurgling sound . . . it startled me so I almost dropped the bayonet . . . then I thought it was the hidden man, making game . . . laughing! Anyhow, it gave

me the extra strength I needed . . . with a sudden movement, I lifted myself, aimed . . . and let fly. . . The aim was good.”

Aleric’s voice, which had been steadily failing, seemed to die away altogether. He sat humped up bending low over the fire, a very figure of tragedy. It seemed he could not go on, nor could I utter another word of urging. Not even for Betty’s sake could I so much as breathe upon the unknown heart of his suffering. But I was to hear the end of the story. Aleric’s voice began again, taking up the tale, a little further on, as if his pause had told me of unspoken things.

“When the curtain was quite still,” he went on, “I felt a great leap of exultation. My enemy was dead . . . and he had not fired! I felt nothing save satisfaction. . . . I rested. . . . But the muzzle of the gun still pointed. . . . I thought it might be well to have that gun. Little by little I dragged myself over the littered floor . . . at last I could touch the curtain . . . it was a rotten thing. I tugged, and it came away in my hand. There was a dead man there, a peasant . . . he had been dead some hours . . . it was not he who had moved the curtain, nor had he died by my bayonet. Who then! I felt frightened . . . sick . . . I had *seen* the curtain move and the gun shift. . . . Summoning all my strength I pulled the curtain completely away . . . and then I saw. I thought it was an hallucination at first, that I had gone a little mad thinking so much of Betty and the baby . . . for it was a *child* that lay there, its tiny fingers caught in the curtain’s fringe . . . a little, fair-headed baby thing. . . . Oh, God! . . . I began to laugh. I was shouting with laughter when they took me to the hospital.”

Aleric’s face was hidden in his hands. His story was told. And I had nothing to say. What could I say save those things which he had said to himself so fruitlessly? Accident! He knew it was an accident. Blameless! He knew himself blameless.

For all that I could say he would still shrink at the swaying of a curtain, and turn his haunted eyes from the sight of his little fair-haired Betty creeping about the room. I knew now what he saw when he sat alone staring into the fire! Reason and common sense were indeed helpless here, and for the first time since Betty’s coming to me at the office I could see no hope for Aleric. A miracle might save him, but miracles do not happen.

Then, into the ghastly silence which held us both, stole a new sound, the sound of sobbing. I looked at Aleric. His huddled shoulders were shaking and between his shielding fingers shone the gleam of tears. For a long time

he wept and when the worst of it was over, and he looked up I saw that miracles do happen sometimes!

I slipped away and presently Betty stole in to comfort him.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

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