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MackKurd:

A Tale of The Aftermath

By BERTRAM ATKEY

Illustrated by C. Clark, R.I.



HE MAN whose card had announced that he was Major John MacKurd, V.C., finished speaking, leaned back in his chair, lit another cigarette, and smilingly awaited the reply of the big banker.

There was nothing in his easy, well-bred attitude to suggest that the proposal he had just made was not quite an ordinary everyday proposal.

But Sir David Glende for a full minute sat speechless, as with surprise, staring very closely at Major MacKurd, who bore the scrutiny of the keen grey eyes with the smiling and invincible tranquillity which appeared never to desert him.

Presently the banker spoke, slowly and very clearly.

"Major MacKurd," he said, "I beg your pardon. I fear I have been guilty of—er—inattention. It is not a customary fault of mine. I think that—quite inadvertently—I must have missed a part of your proposal. Do me the favour to restate it. This time I promise you my whole attention."

Major MacKurd, V.C., nodded cheerily.

"Not at all, sir, not the least little bit in the world, I assure you," he said. "I'll run over it all again with pleasure. I made it a bit brief as I didn't want to bore you. Hate making myself a nuisance."

He carefully readjusted the flesh-coloured patch over his right eye. Then, resuming his cigarette, he fixed his left eye upon the banker.

"It's like this, don't you know—they've rather slung me out of the Army—unfit—one-eyed, wooden foot, and that sort of thing—not to mention the Buzz—and I'm knockin' about loose. Nothing much to do. That quite clear, sir?"

Sir David nodded gravely. He was thinking of his son, reported "Missing, believed killed," and of how oddly this airy stranger reminded him of the boy, but he was able to reassure his visitor that so far he understood the position.

"Of course, there's a bit of pension attached to it—naturally, what?—but I've been rather plotting it out, when the Buzz will let me, and I've about come to the conclusion that it would be a soundish notion

to come down into the City."

"Yes?" Sir David nodded, his eyes fast on the three deep vertical wrinkles, only partly concealed by the elastic band of the eye-patch, that seemed permanent on the brow of the V.C. "Quite so. May I ask what is the 'Buzz?'"

"Certainly. It's nothing much, though. It's a soft, thick, cobwebby sort of a buzz in my head. Nothing much—it comes and goes, you know. You know those very soft woolly shawls that one's mother used to wear—that sort of thing—sky-blue. Well, if you wrapped your brain up in one of those and it had a bumble-bee entangled in it buzzing very softly—that's about the idea. Nothing much—but very awkward for thinking sometimes, that's all."

The banker nodded again.

"I decided to come into the City, and settle down to finance, what?" continued Major MacKurd. "I've got a—*flair* for finance. So I strolled down this morning and noticing this bank the idea came into my head at once. I remembered a pal of mine out there told me once that the banks were frightfully short of bank-clerks, cashiers, and so on—and, as I say, sir, it came to me like a flash to get a position as a cashier, to start with. So I looked in."

He inhaled a mighty lungful of smoke, smiled winningly at the banker and readjusted his eye-patch again.

"The damned thing's about two sizes too large—keep's slipping, what? he said, so casually that the profanity was obviously inadvertent and unconscious.

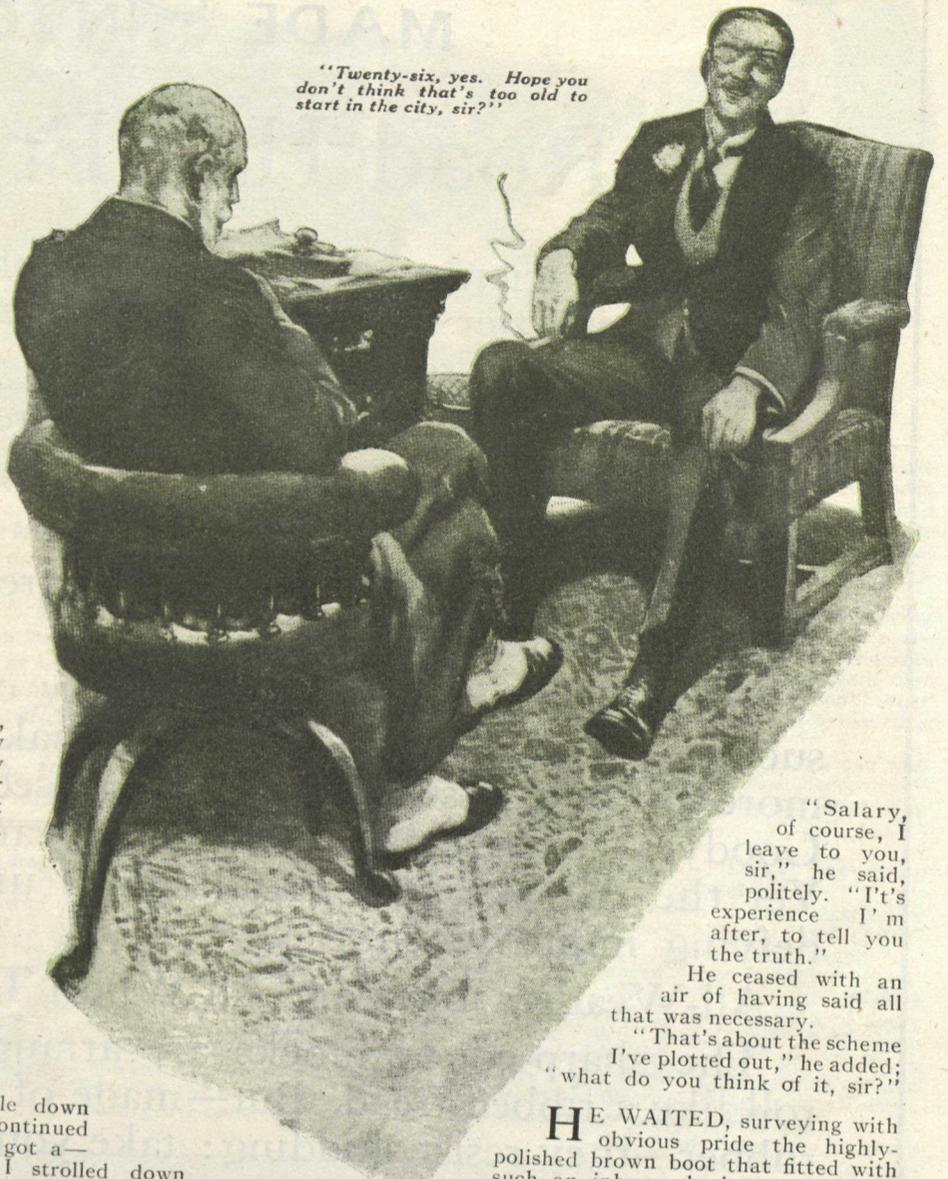
"Cashier, yes. I'm a bit of a dab at arithmetic—bar decimals; never saw much point in decimals, did you, sir?—and, apart from which, I suppose, doesn't much matter nowadays with these adding machines and all that sort of thing, I like handling bank-notes. Queer, that, don't you think, sir? But it's a fact. I love the rusty, silky little beggars—fivers and tenners!"

He hesitated a moment, then, smiling broadly, continued:—

"You've been awfully kind and patient, sir, and I ought to explain that there's just a chance when the Buzz is on that I might take a few notes home at night to fool about with—making 'em rustle, don't you know—but naturally I shouldn't expect you to be a loser, what? What I mean, of course, is, that I should have to insist on refunding anything you missed or lost through my little peculiarity."

He paused a moment to light another cigarette.

"Twenty-six, yes. Hope you don't think that's too old to start in the city, sir?"



"Salary, of course, I leave to you, sir," he said, politely. "It's experience I'm after, to tell you the truth."

He ceased with an air of having said all that was necessary.

"That's about the scheme I've plotted out," he added; "what do you think of it, sir?"

HE WAITED, surveying with obvious pride the highly-polished brown boot that fitted with such an inhumanly immaculate and creaseless perfection over the device of aluminum which he had playfully described as his "wooden foot." He

moved it from side to side, smiling.

But Sir David Glende did not smile.

He thought for a long time before he spoke. When at last he replied, the tone of his voice would have surprised those who called him hard—and they were many—and the lines of his grim old face were oddly relaxed.

"Forgive me, Major MacKurd, if I ask you a few personal questions," he said.

"Fire away, sir," replied the smiling V.C.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"What decorations have you?"

"Oh, I've been one of the lucky ones—V.C., you know, M.C., and a French decoration—Croix de Guerre."

"Twenty-six years old," said Sir David, absently.

"Twenty-six, yes. Hope you don't think that's too old to start in the City, sir?"

"No, no—not at all," said the banker, hurriedly.

He appeared to ponder. Once his hand moved towards his breast-pocket, but stopped.

"You have been in many actions, Major MacKurd? In many places?"

"Heaps of 'em," said the Major cheerfully. "Rotten things they are, too."

"Did you ever, by any chance, come across a young officer—a lieutenant named Glende—David Glende? He was reported missing after Passchendaele."

Major MacKurd, V.C., reflected, frowning slightly. "I can't quite recall him—not with the Buzz on," he said. "I fancy I—Glende? Glende?" He smiled apologetically.

"One meets such a crowd of men, you know. And the Buzz is rather bad to-day. I'll just make a note of the name and let you know. If I've met him I shall remember it when the Buzz is off. Was he a friend of yours, sir?"

"My only son," said Sir David, very steadily.

Major MacKurd, V.C., said nothing at all to that—only moved one hand very slightly in a quite indescribable gesture, and raised one shoulder the fraction of an inch. But they were the most eloquent movements Sir David Glende had ever seen. They expressed everything—a sense of the pain, the desolation, the waste, the needlessness, the pity, the tragic folly, and the fatalist's acceptance of it all. Only a man who had experienced it all many times could have made those tiny gestures in just that way.

Presently he spoke.

"I wish I could remember him, sir. Perhaps, when the Buzz is off—"

"Yes, yes. Take this card—it will keep the name in your mind—if you have no objection."

Sir David passed a visiting card, which the Major pocketed.

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"Yes, bring him as quickly as possible. I have a medical man—a personal friend—here with me now, and he will remain."