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Mrs. Moncrief's Flats

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

George Brown, veteran of the Pacific, and an ex-policeman team up to bring a boastful killer to the bar of justice!

A YOUNG man named George Brown had a repair shop in the basement of the Moncrief Flats, a dingily red brick apartment building out in the residence section of Heatherton. It was a cluttered-up little shop, stuffed with the remains of clocks, radios, electric irons, toasters and the like.

The sign on his half-basement window said:

MR. FIX-IT.
I REPAIR ANYTHING.

The other tenants didn't know much about Mr. Fix-

It, and he didn't have much to say. He was young, and some may have wondered why he wasn't out in the Pacific fighting. If he had wanted, he could have told them about that night that he had crawled on his stomach through one of those Pacific Island tropical swamps along with half a dozen of his Signal Corps buddies who were helping him string communications inward from the beachhead. But that was a thing of the past. A land mine had just about blown everything out of him—except his spirit. All he wanted now was peace and quiet, and time to work.

So he had come back after a while, walking

with a stick. He had rented this basement from old Mrs. Moncrief, who lived on the top floor rear. She was said to be a miser, and to have her indescribably junky apartment literally lined with hoarded greenbacks. At any rate, she charged Mr. Fix-It plenty for the corner of the basement, though she said she was giving it to him at a loss on account of his being a veteran.

In the meantime, he could live peacefully and quietly. He didn't know anybody much, except old Baxter, a retired policeman who had spent two years in the Signal Corps during the last war, who lived upstairs and who liked to come down and talk with him about the differences between this war and the last one. Baxter would often watch Brown's shop for him when he had to run out on a repair job.

The Moncrief Flats was a slightly shabby, peaceful apartment house—until the afternoon of the big blizzard, when Mrs. Moncrief got strangled to death in her apartment practically under the noses of all her tenants. It was the worst storm in years.

The tenants did not see the man who killed her, nor know that he had come to the house until after it was all over.

Another thing the tenants did not know was that this man was a cousin of Mrs. Moncrief. He had not come to see his cousin with the idea of killing her, but with the idea of prying some money out of her, no matter how difficult it was. He had even bought a gun with the idea of scaring her.

OLD Mrs. Moncrief's apartment was a mess. It looked like a badly kept secondhand furniture store. She had never had the heart to throw away a thing in her life, and she didn't like to leave things in the basement where they could get stolen.

A dusty old sewing machine which hadn't been used for twenty years held an accumulation of equally old and dusty table lamps which various tenants had junked, and pieces of furniture filled all the wall spaces and were piled up in the corners, their tops filled with junk. This was her living room. Her bedroom was worse.

There were tenants who had seen the place, and who knew her, who said that you could probably dig through that junk and come out with fifty thousand dollars in currency. Her cousin, Blake Torges, was one who believed this. They were all wrong.

The afternoon of the blizzard, Blake Torges drove up and visited with his cousin. Blake, a big, strapping fellow bundled up in a dark fleecy overcoat, had never done an honest day's work in all his forty years, and Mrs. Moncrief didn't like him. But she let him into her apartment, so that she could listen to his story and have an occasion to lecture him on money matters.

Mrs. Moncrief was in her sixties, and as tall and skinny as a bean pole, but she hadn't believed it when the doctor told her that she was suffering from malnutrition because she was too stingy to buy a balanced diet for herself. Salads and meat were an extravagance. Didn't the Chinese live on a handful of rice a day?

When Torges rang her bell, Mrs. Moncrief opened her apartment door. When she saw her cousin her thin lips grew tighter than usual. She watched him come in, dust off a chair and sit down, while she stood looking at him with her arms crossed.

"The answer is 'no' before you start," she said tartly, then demanded, "But just as a matter of curiosity, what crazy scheme have you got this time? I know you wouldn't be coming to see your dear old cousin unless you had an idea you might be able to get some money out of her."

Blake Torges twisted his coarse face into a conciliatory grin.

"Same old Emma, ain't you?"

"And you're the same old worthless Blake," she snapped.

"I've just been unlucky in business," the man argued. "But now my luck's changed. I've got a chance to go into the used car business—and I've got a way to keep the Government from saying what I can get for them."

"There's a price ceiling on cars," the woman said.

"I know, but farmers who need trucks are not going to argue over the price of a car they need and have to have. Look—suppose the ceiling is nine hundred on a certain used truck. I don't sell them that truck for nine hundred. But I'll sell them a batch of stuff, including the truck and one good used tire for twelve hundred, nine hundred for the car and three hundred for the tire.

"If they don't want the whole lot for twelve hundred, then I won't sell them the car. If they take the car and tire for twelve hundred, then they can't later make a complaint because they would be

violating the law themselves in buying at over the ceiling. Now, all I need is about three thousand dollars to start."

"And you won't get three cents from me," Mrs. Moncrief snapped. "I've already given you thirty-seven hundred dollars and fifty-one cents, and the interest on that is already over six hundred dollars, which I'll never see again. No, you don't get a cent from me."

Blake Torges hadn't told the facts straight. The truth was that he had been working for a dealer who was operating as he had outlined. Blake had collected for three trucks and lost the money in a week-long poker game with a bunch of well-heeled defense workers. He was facing the fact that he had to either dig up that three thousand in twenty-four hours or else sweat out a long prison sentence.

The old woman was adamant, and finally Blake Torges broke down and told her the truth. Mrs. Moncrief smiled grimly.

"Now," she said, with badly concealed elation, "you've proved I was right. I've told you a thousand times that you were going to end up in prison. Well, for all of me, you'll go start serving your time tomorrow. Three thousand dollars! I never heard of the like."

"I bet you could dig it up without leaving this room," Torges said.

"What if I could? I'm not thinking of doing it."

This strengthened Torges' belief in the rumor that she kept her money hidden in her apartment.

His last hope of evading trouble gone, Blake Torges said desperately:

"Then if you won't, I will!"

HE GOT to his feet and walked toward a dresser. His old cousin dashed toward him and caught the sleeve of his overcoat. But Torges slammed her away with a brush of his arm.

"I'll scream for help if you don't go away!" she warned him. "And I wouldn't want to do that."

"You won't, if you want to live," Torges said. He had his gun out of his hip pocket and pointed at her. "I came here to get money, and I'm going to get it!"

"Not from me, you won't," she answered defiantly. "I'll get help!"

She had started toward the door. He saw the action, and caught her just as she put her hand on the doorknob. She opened her mouth to scream—and he sank his fingers into her throat to silence

her.

He had gone too far now to retreat, and fear of the consequences strengthened his fingers. In five minutes she was dead, and he laid her on her bed.

Now that he had killed her, he became feverishly active. He locked the door, went to the windows and looked out. The driving mixture of sleet and rain had frosted the glass, but he drew the shades to be sure of privacy. Then he ransacked the apartment, pulling out drawers, lifting rugs and mattresses, and ripping open pillows.

He found her pocketbook, and in it a wallet with less than a hundred dollars, along with the bankbooks. He studied the deposit books and cursed. The woman had made regular deposits, and she had receipts for War Bonds. It was after two hours of futile search that he finally became convinced that his old cousin had not secreted her money around the apartment, after all.

Then he knew that he would get no three thousand dollars out of this apartment, and having realized that fact, he gave thought to his own safety.

He had no way of knowing whether anybody had seen him come into the place. His car was parked outside, and it was possible that some curious tenant had noticed it, and perhaps had noted the license number. But, he realized, there was nothing he could do about that now.

He went out of the apartment and closed the door. Before he had a chance to see if it had locked itself, he heard footsteps on the hall stairs, and the cleaning woman came into the hall with a pail and a mop in her hand.

Torges dropped his hand from the door, and walked toward the stairs.

"I was looking for Mrs. Moncrief," he explained, "but she doesn't answer. I suppose she's having a nap, or out or something."

"She wouldn't be out in no weather like this," the cleaning woman said, and went on down the hall.

Torges got out of the building in a hurry. He buttoned his overcoat, and pulled the collar up around his face. As he opened the street door, the bitter fury of the blizzard hit him squarely in the face, and he pulled his hat down over his eyes. The storm was a lion clawing at him with icy fingers.

The wind whipped sleet and freezing rain in his face as he ran to his car and jerked at the door. The door did not open. Rain had frozen on it, running

down the seams between the door and the body and freezing solid. There was an inch of ice on the windward side of the car.

He went around to the protected side of car, and the ice wasn't so bad there. He finally managed to get the car door open and slide under the wheel.

He jammed the starter button to the floor, and the started motor merely hummed. He knew what was the matter. Water had got into the Bendix gear and the starter wouldn't engage. His car was not going to take him anywhere. It took him fifteen minutes of running his battery down to find this out, and during that time his fear was mounting swiftly. By the time he gave up hopes of getting away, he was desperate.

Then he heard the sirens, and as they continued, he knew they were getting nearer. He slid out from under the steering wheel and got out of his car. He had no intention of being trapped in it.

He cursed the cleaning woman, and wished he had killed her. It was clear now that she must have headed directly for Mrs. Moncrief's apartment. Since Mrs. Moncrief was her boss, this was a natural assumption, and he hadn't taken time to see that the door was locked.

The sound of the sirens told him that there was more than one car, and that they were coming from two directions. The side street along the building had a dead end a block away, and the front street ran on out to the edge of town. That left only two directions in which he could go, and the cars were coming from both of them.

He looked around desperately, seeking a place to hide. He knew that the officers in these cars could practically hem him in, for he couldn't walk through this blizzard toward the edge of town. Anybody walking in this storm would be subject to suspicion.

THEN it was that he saw Mr. Fix-It's sign on the basement window of the Moncrief Flats.

Swiftly he formed a plan. It was daring, because it had to be daring to succeed. Its very brazenness should save him. He didn't like the prospect of death himself, and he was pretty sure that nobody else did, pretty sure that Mr. Fix-It wouldn't particularly want to die. . . .

Mr. Fix-It was sitting at his workbench, tearing up an electric toaster. A drop-light with a green reflector shone down on his work, and cast a dim light on a thin, lined lace as he handled his

screwdriver.

The door opened and a large man bundled up in a big fleecy overcoat came in. Mr. Fix-It looked up.

"Come in out of the weather," he said. The man took off his hat and brushed sleet off it with his gloved hands, then brushed watery ice off his overcoat.

"Nice day for polar bears, isn't it?" Mr. Fix-It said cheerfully.

The man didn't answer while he finished brushing the remains of the storm off his clothes. Mr. Fix-It waited, while the man finished, then looked around the shop.

The set-up looked good to Blake Torges. There were two stools at the workbench, and plenty of broken and torn-down gadgets lying on it in various stages of repair. He listened and heard the sirens—closer!

"Snug little shop you've got here," the big visitor said, strolling around in its cramped space, between old electric heaters and radios dating back to the horn and crystal era. "Nice place to work."

"Not bad," Mr. Fix-It answered. "Anything I can do for you?" He was tapping his screwdriver on his bench, impatient to get back to work. He didn't have much time to loaf and gab.

"Yes," the man said, "you can do something for me. I want a job."

"You came to the wrong place," Mr. Fix-It said. "This is just a one-man shop. I do everything myself. Sorry I can't use you."

"But you're going to give me a job," the man said.

He was standing just back of Mr. Fix-It who felt something pressing into his back, and turned his head. He saw the gun which Torges held against his back.

"What's this?" he asked.

"This is what it is, and listen carefully. You won't have another chance to listen. You heard those sirens?"

"Sure."

"That's the cops, and they've got me cornered. They'll be here in a minute, looking for me—because of a murder. Murder, understand? That means I've just killed a woman upstairs here, and one more killing won't mean anything to me. Get it?"

"I see," Mr. Fix-It answered. "Old lady Moncrief?"

"Yes, that old miser."

"What do you want me to do about it?" Mr. Fix-It asked coolly.

"I'm taking off my coat and going to work with you. They'll find my car out there, and they'll search the building. When they come here I'll be working, and you'll swear that I've been working right here in this shop with you ever since twelve o'clock. You'll swear to that. Neither of us have been out of the shop all afternoon, so it couldn't have been me that killed her. See?"

"Yes, I see."

"There'll be that cleaning woman. She may swear that she saw me up on the top floor, but you'll swear that she's wrong. That's it. What's your answer?"

"I don't know of any answer to a Colt thirty-eight," Mr. Fix-It observed, "except to agree with it."

"You've got more sense than I thought you had," Torges said. "I'll make it worth your while."

"Thanks," Mr. Fix-It said dryly, and went back to work on the toaster.

Blake Torges pulled off his overcoat and coat, rolled up his sleeves, and set about his work. He picked up an old alarm clock, lit the drop-light over the bench, sat down and started tearing the alarm clock apart with a screwdriver.

One of the sirens sounded as though it were within a block of the place.

"Remember," Torges cautioned, "I've told you enough to hang me. I told you that so you'll know I mean business."

"I didn't think you'd lie about a thing like that," Mr. Fix-It said. "What did you kill her for? Her money?"

"That's all a lie about her keeping her money hid. She keeps it in a bank. She didn't have anything but a little pocket money on her."

"I thought it was a lie," Mr. Fix-It answered. "People like to imagine there are misers hoarding gold right under their noses."

"I can tell you for sure that she didn't have anything hidden in that apartment."

IT WAS the intention of Torges to impress the man with the fact that he had a bad customer on his hands. He had already sized Mr. Fix-It up as a man who liked peace, and who wouldn't make much trouble. Particularly if he saw that he was facing a desperate character.

The idea of murder so close to him seemed to

fascinate Mr. Fix-It.

"How did you kill her—if that's a fair question?" he asked.

Blake Torges was feeding himself a dose of courage as well as trying to impress this young man, and he got a certain lift out of it. He held up his two massive hands and looked at them.

"I choked her to death with these two hands," he said. "You wouldn't believe how easy it was."

He heard the dying wail of the siren down toward the dead end of the side street. The cops would be blocking all means of escape now. They should be combing all the buildings within a few minutes. Torges felt a thrill of excitement, but he was certain that he was all set for his alibi. It had been easy to scare this little screwdriver mechanic.

Mr. Fix-It didn't stop working as he talked.

"It looks like you'd be traced by your fingerprints," he said. "I always heard that was easy."

Torges actually laughed. "What do you think gloves are for?"

Then he tensed. Footsteps were crunching on the sleet outside on the sidewalk. He heard them coming down the steps to the half-basement. He took a deep breath, looked sharply at the mechanic, who was looking at him.

"Remember," he said. He showed Mr. Fix-It the outline of the gun that was in his pants pocket.

The door opened, and Torges bent over his work, careful not to betray any emotion by looking up too quickly. He took a screw out of the back plate of the clock with a steady hand on the screwdriver. Then he glanced up.

A heavy-set man with a red face and white hair came in with an alarm clock. There was hardly any sleet on his overcoat, and Torges took him to be one of the tenants from upstairs.

Mr. Fix-It looked up from his work.

"Howdy do," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Something the matter with the alarm on this clock, and I can't buy another one for love nor money, and my job depends on me getting up at five in the morning."

Torges let a great breath escape him as he realized that this was just another customer. He turned back to his dismantling the clock under the lamp over the bench. The customer went over and laid his clock on Mr. Fix-It's bench. Torges didn't look up.

But in a moment he did look up. That was

because he felt something hard in his back, something like the muzzle of a gun.

"Just keep your hands on the bench while I pull your fangs, you dirty rat," he heard the customer say.

He looked around, and the gun in the man's hand looked businesslike. He kept his hands on the bench before him. He looked puzzled, his eyes turned on the mechanic.

Mr. Fix-It was smiling at the customer.

"That's fine, Mr. Baxter. Did you hear everything he said?"

"I heard enough of his confession to hang him. Then I went to Mrs. Moncrief's room, and there she was dead, just like he said. He hadn't even locked the door behind him. I telephoned the cops."

"You're not a cop?" Blake Torges asked huskily.

"Me? No. But I used to be. I'm just an old Signal Corps man, like Fix-It here, and he and I rigged up one of them new Army type intercommunication radios, so's when he had to go away he could call me to look after the shop. He

don't walk up and down steps so well yet. I just sat in my chair and listened to you tell him all about killing poor old Mrs. Moncrief, checked up on it, and came down and got you. The cops ought to be along soon."

"But they're already here," Torges said, puzzled. "I heard the sirens!"

Both other men laughed. "You'd have learned to recognize different sounds, if you'd been in the Signal Corps," Mr. Baxter said. "That was the Fire Chief's car, and a chemical truck. There was a little short-circuit fire down at the end of the street. We got it on our short-wave, didn't we, Fix-It?"

Blake Torges seemed to be talking more to himself than to his captors. "I could have walked right away from here and nobody would have stopped me."

Mr. Fix-It cocked his ear. "You can't go now. Hear that? That's the police siren. Notice the difference in the sound of that from the fire siren?"

But Mr. Torges was not concerned with the difference in the sounds of sirens. He wasn't an old Signal Corps man, himself.