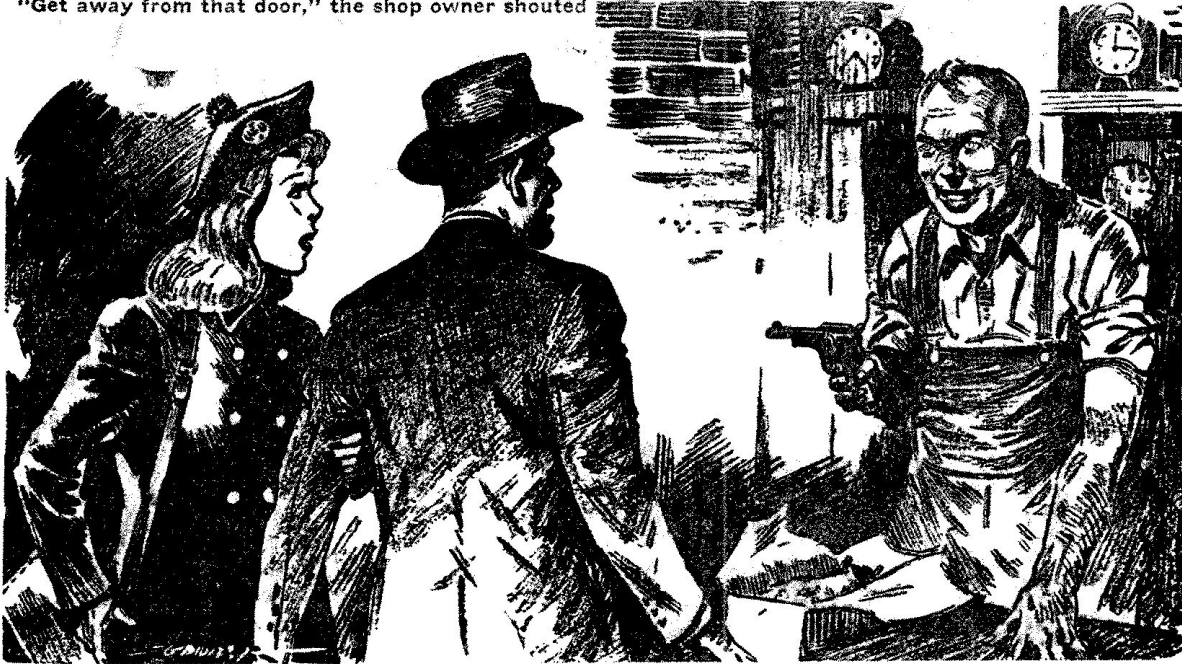


"Get away from that door," the shop owner shouted



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By **BILL ANSON**

A mysterious package puts Don Marble on a strange spot

HE WAS a complete pest, this furtive little stranger with the green glasses and whining voice, who plucked fearfully at Don Marble's coat sleeve on the railroad station platform.

"Look, mister," the little man insisted, "you're goin' to Greenwood on the five forty-five local, ain't you?"

"I'm busy," Don Marble said brusquely, shaking off the stranger's grasping fingers. "Don't bother me."

Don was busy, for his eyes were focused on a pint-sized blonde in a red tam and blue coat with trick brass buttons. He

was waiting to discover which coach she was going to choose in the suburban train that was slowly backing into the city station. For two weeks now, Don Marble had been jockeying through the commuters in an attempt to sit beside her. And always something had happened at the last moment.

"I'll give you a buck, mister," the bothersome stranger whined. "All you have to do is deliver this package to the Greenwood Watch Repair across the street from the station."

"I don't want a buck," Don Marble

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snapped. "Get somebody else, darn it."

The wheel brakes of the local train squeaked. There was a rattling of couplings, a toot from the steam engine, and the platform crowd surged toward the coach steps.

"I've got to go back to the office!" the pest said excitedly, thrusting his package into Don Marble's hands. "Give a fellow a break, mister. Please!"

Before Don could throw the package back, the stranger darted away in the crowd. Not twenty feet away, the blonde in the red tam was making for the end coach. Don set out after her like a quarterback following a rival end who was scheduled to receive a pass.

A half-dozen men offered interference, but Don Marble slid past them, spun around once when he almost upset a hatchet-faced woman with a bulging suitcase. He nearly dropped the package given him by the green-eyed pest.

With a groan of dismay, he saw the blonde's trim legs going up the steps of the last coach. She was followed by two jostling business men.

At that moment, his ears caught the sharp explosion of guns near the railroad station. A scream echoed. A shout went up from the platform crowd. There was the wail of a police siren.

Luckily for Don Marble, the two business men on the steps of the last coach turned to see what was happening. Not Don! He scrambled past them, lunged through the train door, and spied the girl in the red tam. Don Marble walked into the coach with affected dignity and sat down beside her.

SO FAR, so good, Don told himself. But this wasn't his last hurdle. It was only the first. Now there was the problem of engaging her in conversation and he mustn't give her the impression that he was a wolf.

Don Marble was anything but a wolf. In fact, he was a shy, modest, serious-minded young bank teller, tall and thin, with clear blue eyes, but whose irregular features could not be called handsome.

Most girls thought he was as commonplace as an old shoe, and sometimes a bore. He never did know what to say to girls. They baffled him. But he would have given his right arm if a nice, respectable young lady—like the one in the red tam and the blue coat with the trick brass buttons—would go steady with him.

As Don Marble rested the stranger's package in his lap and unfolded his evening paper, he heard a commuter entering the train coach call out to another man:

"The police shot a man trying to get on this train."

"What was he—a pickpocket?" the second passenger asked.

"I don't know," was the answer. "They ought to be careful, shooting in the crowd."

Out of the corner of his eye, Don saw that the blonde was staring moodily out the window, apparently indifferent to what had happened at the station, and indifferent to him. All that Don knew about her was that she was one of the most attractive girls he had ever seen, and that she had but recently moved to suburban

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Greenwood. She lived in a house back up on the hill across from the local depot, only three blocks from Don's own home. That would make it convenient if they ever went to the movies together.

Don spread his paper. His arm jostled the girl in the seat.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured.

Her head turned toward him. Her eyes were a deep shade of green and her nose was slightly turned-up. She didn't use much make-up. She didn't have to. She was as pretty as a Christmas present.

"That's all right," she said, with a warm smile, then turned away again.

Don's heart did a nip-up. She hadn't looked at him scornfully. She hadn't moved farther away from him, as if he were poison. She had even spoken to him. But what would he do or say next to attract her attention?

There was a long whistle. The train couplings clattered. The local started to move. Now the commuters were crowding the aisle, and not a few men looked down at Don enviously. He sat still, trying to concentrate on the headlines of the evening paper. One that stood out caught his eye. It read:

BLACK MARKETEE VANISHES

Police Throw Out Dagnet
For "Diamond Jake" Karloff
Who Jumps \$20,000 Bail Bond

Foul Play Suspected

Had Been Willing To Testify
Against Sugar Coupon Ring

But Don couldn't get interested in the story that followed. He opened his paper to the second page, and his arm jostled the girl in the red tam again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Don Marble said again with some nervousness, for he didn't want her to think he was clumsy. "It must be this package I have in my lap that makes me do it."

The girl looked at him sharply, then she smiled again.

"Why don't you put the package on the rack?" she asked.

"Why, I never thought of it," Don replied, and he stood up quickly. "But I don't want to forget it. You see," he went on, gathering confidence and hoping against hope to continue their conversation, "this package isn't mine. In fact, I don't know who it belongs to."

The blonde's eyes were puzzled.

"I'll remind you when you get off," she said.

"That would be swell of you," Don said. Laying the package on the wall rack, he sat down. "It's a funny thing," he hurried on, red in the face, "but a man came up to me in the station and offered to give me a buck—I mean, a dollar—if I would deliver it. Of course, I wouldn't take a dollar. I work in a bank. I've got a good job."

The girl stared up at the package.

"Isn't that a dollar bill tucked under the string?" she asked.

"Well, can you beat that!" Don exclaimed, and got up to take the package. "So it is—a dollar, tucked right under the string here. I never even noticed it. I'll give it to the watch repair man. You see,

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this stranger just threw the package at me and rushed off. He said he had to get back to his office.”

The blonde with the green eyes looked at the address on the package.

“It must be an alarm clock,” she said. “It’s the right shape to be one, and it’s addressed to the Greenwood Watch Repair. That’s right across the street from the depot, isn’t it?”

“Gosh, an alarm clock!” Don exclaimed excitedly, although he didn’t care a hang about what was in the package. What he wanted was to interest the girl enough for her to keep on talking.

“That man at the station was certainly taking a chance,” he rushed on, “because you can’t get alarm clocks—even busted ones. They’re almost as valuable as steaks. But suppose it’s a diamond wrist-watch, or something like that? Yes, that man took a big chance.”

THE girl smiled again, showing even white teeth.

“Well, you don’t look like a thief,” she said. “But I wouldn’t throw that dollar away, or give it to the watch man. After all, you didn’t ask to take the package, did you?”

“No, I didn’t,” Don said hastily. “But just the same I’m not going to accept the dollar. For all I know this package might be a practical joke, or something like that.”

“You’re not going to open it, are you?” the girl asked in alarm.

Don chuckled. This was certainly fun. Here they were talking now as if they had known each other for a long time.

“No, I won’t open it,” he said. “There

might be a mouse in it, and that would scare the daylight out of you.”

She drew herself up haughtily.

“I’m not afraid of mice,” she said severely.

“You’re not!” Don exclaimed, wide-eyed with surprise.

She laughed gaily.

“I suppose you think every girl is afraid of mice,” she said. “Well, I work in a laboratory where they have all kinds of white mice and guinea pigs. If you did open that package, and there were any mice in it why I’d just take them home with me and then give them to my boss tomorrow.”

“Well, I’ll be darned!” Don exclaimed. “I certainly am glad to meet a real sensible girl.” His eyes grew eager. Now was his chance! “Say, you live up on the hill across from the depot in Greenwood, don’t you? I live there, too.”

There it was, just as easy as falling off a log.

He had met her. She wasn’t hard to talk to. She was much more intelligent than most girls, and she was just as pretty as—no she was prettier than a Christmas present. She was as pretty as the Christmas tree angel. She was real sensible, too. She wasn’t afraid of mice. She worked for a research scientist.

Before long she told him that her name was Madeline Cummings, for by that time they had dropped the package as a subject of conversation. Don told her all about Greenwood and its movies, and about the free golf links and tennis courts, and how nice it was to go canoeing on the river. He told her about his father and his mother

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and his kid sister.

She told him about her father and her mother and her kid brother.

The forty-five-minute trip was altogether too short. The train was soon grinding to a halt at Greenwood. The passengers got up from their seats and pushed toward the doors.

"Maybe we could walk up the hill together," Don Marble suggested.

"What about your package?" she asked. "You forgot."

"I certainly did! But look! The clock place is just across the street. Why don't you stop there with me, and perhaps we'll see what's inside the package."

They clambered down the train steps together, just as if they had known each other all their lives. Don took Madeline's arm to steer her through the crowd and the waiting automobiles at the edge of the street, and across the asphalt where the taxi cabs hooted at them.

It made Don feel like a million to be holding Madeline's arm. She was just as cute as all get-out. She was his girl now, and nobody was ever going to take her away from him. He would walk up the hill with her right to her house, and then he would suggest going to the movies. That would be just swell.

"Here it is," she said, nodding at the shop with the sign over the door reading:

"GREENWOOD WATCH REPAIR"

Don opened the shop door and held it for her. A bell tinkled as the door closed. There was nobody inside.

Shelves lined one wall and the counter

ran along the other wall.

They stood at the counter, and Don rapped briskly on the glass with a knuckle.

A back door opened and a stout, scowling man with a green eyeshade moved behind the counter and came waddling toward them. He was a grouchy type, and sloppy, too. He wore no necktie, and the sleeves of his dirty shirt were rolled up.

"If you've got a watch to be fixed," he growled, "you'll have to go somewhere else. I'm too busy."

Dan scowled severely.

"We haven't got a watch to be fixed," he said. "We've got a package for you. A stranger gave it to me in the city. He wanted me to deliver it. There was a dollar tucked under the string, but I don't want the dollar. You can take that dollar off his bill."

The shop owner stared at the package, then read the inked address. He removed his green eyeshade and studied Don Marble with black shoe-button eyes.

"Who gave it to you?" he demanded.

"He doesn't know the man's name," Madeline Cummings spoke up, "and he's not going to take the thing back. Don't you want the business?"

"Just a minute, Miss," the shop owner said angrily. "I'm talking to the young man. I don't accept every package that comes along. It may have a piece of old junk in it. Then somebody will claim they left a valuable clock here. I'll get sued."

"Well, open it up, and see what it is," Madeline said with dignity.

"Sure, open it up," Don insisted. "We'll be witnesses."

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THE shop proprietor stared bitterly at the two for a moment, then picked up the package and glared at it. He put it down and fumbled with the string knots as if his mind were still not made up. But shortly the string was untied, and he slowly removed the outside paper covering of a box of about one-half the size of the usual shoe box.

Don and Madeline watched him lift the cover. There was a layer of crumbled tissue paper next. This the shop owner whisked up.

What lay under the tissue paper was so extraordinary that for a brief instant nobody realized what it was.

Then Madeline let out a scream of horror, and fell back from the counter.

“Good grief!” Don Marble exclaimed. “It’s a dead man’s hand! It’s been chopped off!”

A crimson-soaked hand, cut off at the wrist, lay on a bed of tissue paper within the box. What made the sight even more gruesome was that on the middle finger of the hand was a huge diamond ring. Though it couldn’t have been a real diamond, for it did not reflect the light from the window. It was just a big chunk of five-and-ten-cent-store glass, a rank imitation of a square-cut diamond set in cheap steel.

“Diamond Jake!” the watch repair man suddenly snarled.

He slapped the box cover down on the horrible evidence of human torture.

Madeline swayed back against Don Marble, as if she were going to faint. He caught her. He, too, felt slightly sick, but

he fought to keep his wits and his courage.

“Better go for the police,” he said huskily. “It must be the hand of that racketeer who was mentioned in the newspaper headlines. They said the police were looking for a Diamond Jake.”

“The police?” the shop owner snapped, glaring at the couple. “You saw what was inside the—” He broke off short. A horrible grimace spread over his coarse, unshaven face. His hand darted inside his shirt, and came out with a .32-caliber revolver. “Sure, you saw!” he raged. “You might be planting Jake’s finger on me! Get away from that door, before I shoot both of you!”

Don Marble felt the blond girl stiffen in his arms. Her head came up. She was suddenly alive, and defiant.

“You wouldn’t dare shoot!” she cried. “You most likely know more about this than you’ve admitted.”

“Shut up!” the shop owner shouted. “Get into the back room. Quick!”

Beads of sweat were appearing on his brow. His black eyes were narrowed to slits. He meant business all right. There were no two ways about it. And there were no two ways about the fact that he knew more about Diamond Jake Karloff than was good either for him or good for Don Marble and Madeline Cummings.

“We better go, Madeline,” Don said. “He’ll kill us sure.”

“I’ll go, Don,” the girl in the red tam said, “but we’re not going to let him do anything to us.”

“That’s the girl,” Don said.

As they started down the shop, the watch repair man, with drawn pistol

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moved along behind the counter.

Don drew open the door to a rear room, and as the bell tinkled he heard the girl whisper:

“Grab something to hit him with Don!”

She went into the back room, and Don followed. The shop owner, directly behind him closed the door.

“Go on through that next door and down into the cellar,” the watch repair man ordered. “If you obey orders without trying to start something you won’t get hurt. I’m only going to keep you on ice for a few hours.”

As Madeline started toward the second door, Don was trembling with anxiety—but it was for her. His eyes ran around the benches and tables of the small room with its single barred window. In the corner he spied a small printing press.

There were stacks of paper in rectangular shape beside it.

“Remember, Don!” Madeline whispered as she pulled open a door that revealed a flight of dark rickety stairs descending to the cellar.

Don’s eyes found a heavy spanner resting on a shelf near the printing press and the door.

“I’m ready, Madeline!” he called to her.

“Shut up!” cried the shop owner. “You try any tricks on me and I’ll shut you up—good.”

A scream of terror broke from Madeline’s lips.

“Mice!” she cried. “Mice—mice—mice!”

She had leaped back from the cellar stairs, whirled, and was climbing upon a table, screaming with hysterics.

DON MARBLE was completely astonished. But no more so than the shop owner. But Don was the first to recover his wits. He had sprang across the room and grabbed for the steel spanner. He saw the shop owner starting toward the table upon which Madeline was standing and screaming hysterically.

“Get down from there, you little fool!” the unshaven crook shouted.

Don leaped, holding the spanner behind him and above his head. At the moment the shop owner spun around and saw Don’s weapon come down hard. The steel struck the crook just above the ear. The pistol in the shop owner’s fist went off with a flaming crash, but the bullet whipped past Don and into the wall. With a gurgle the crook fell forward, struck the floor with his chest and then his face. The gun clattered from his hand and Don Marble pounced on it.

Madeline Cummings was strangely quiet now. She climbed down from the table and promptly went to a telephone on a shelf beside the door.

“That was splendid, Don,” she said as she dialed the operator. Then she spoke into the phone. “Give me the police, Operator. . . . Is this the Greenwood police? . . . This is Miss Cummings speaking for Mr. Marble. We are at the Greenwood Watch Repair across from the depot . . . Yes, that is it . . . We have just caught the man who is making all the fake sugar coupons . . .”

Don realized then that she also was telling the police about the little man at the railroad station in the city, and about the

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hand of Diamond Jake Karloff in the box. Don himself was icy cold and shaking. But she certainly had a level head. She wasn't afraid of mice. She wasn't afraid of crooks. She wasn't afraid of anything.

"Gosh, you're wonderful, Madeline!" Don said when she hung up the phone. "I never knew a girl could be like you."

Madeline took her compact from her bag and powdered her nose.

"The police told me that it was the little man with green glasses who was shot in the city, Don," she said confidentially. "They were following him to find out where he got a lot of sugar coupons he had been selling. He evidently killed Diamond

Jake, and they think he was sending the package to this shop as a warning to our friend there on the floor not to talk to the police. They say the coupons were so badly printed that they were easily spotted as counterfeits. It's all just like the movies, isn't it?"

Don gulped. He wasn't cold any more. He was flushing fiery red.

"That reminds me of something, Madeline," he mumbled. "How about going to the movies with me tonight? Please say you'll go."

"Oh, I'd love to, Don. I really was hoping you'd ask me, because there's a swell gangster picture on."