

**Baker Willard F.**

**Bob Dexter and the Storm  
Mountain Mystery or, The Secret  
of the Log Cabin**



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# **Willard F. Baker**

## **Bob Dexter and the Storm Mountain Mystery / or, The Secret of the Log Cabin**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **THE MAN WITH THE BOX**

“Come on, Bob, going to the ball game!”

“It’s going to be a corker! Better hurry if you want a good seat!”

Two young men paused at the front gate of a neat cottage, standing somewhat back from a quiet side street of the village, and looked toward another youth who was seated on the porch. This lad glanced up from a book he was reading as his two chums, Harry Pierce and Ned Fuller, hailed him.

“Come on, Bob!” urged Harry, opening the gate. “What’s the idea? You’re usually the first one in the grand stand when our club plays the Midvale nine.”

“Looks as if you didn’t want to root for the home team,” went on Ned as he followed his companion up the front walk.

“Oh, I’d like to root for them all right, and I’d like to see them win, of course,” answered Bob Dexter, as he closed the book he had been reading. But his chums noticed that he kept one finger in between the pages so he would not lose his place.

“Well, then, you’d better get a move on!” urged Harry. “They won’t keep club members’ seats for them much longer, and there’ll be a big mob there – this is the deciding game of the series.”

“Yes, I know,” said Bob, “but I’m not going!”

“Not going!” cried the other two, and there was much surprise in their voices.

“What’s wrong?” demanded Harry. “You aren’t soured on the club, are you?”

“Of course I’m not,” and Bob smiled. “I should have said I can’t go. I’ve got something to do.”

“What do you mean – finish that book – a detective story, I’ll stake a cookie on it!” exclaimed Ned. “I thought so!” he added, as he turned the book over in Bob’s hand and disclosed the title which was “The Strange Case of the Twisted Ear.”

“Say, look here!” broke in Harry, as he playfully snatched the book from Bob. “If you’re going to stay here and read one of your everlasting detective stories, when the most important club ball game of the season is being played – well, all I’ve got to say is that Ned and I won’t let you!”

“Atta boy! You let out an earful that time!” cried Ned.

The two chums caught hold of Bob and pulled him from the chair. Laughingly he protested and made fast to one of the porch pillars to avoid being yanked off.

“Cut it out, fellows! Cut it out!” begged Bob. “It isn’t that at all! I’m not staying here to read a detective story, though I was glancing over this French one while I was waiting. But I’ve got to do something for my uncle, and that’s why I’m staying here. I want to go to the ball game as badly as you fellows do. And I’m coming as soon as a certain man appears with some important papers for Uncle Joel. But I can’t go until then – really, I can’t. Uncle Joel told me to stay here, waiting for this man. It’s very important.”

There was that in Bob’s voice which impressed his chums. They released their holds on him, rather reluctantly be it said, and Bob picked up the book that had fallen to the porch floor, and resumed his seat in the chair, albeit somewhat ruffled by the dragging process.

“Well, that’s different, of course,” admitted Ned as he straightened his collar which had been shifted in the struggle.

“Why didn’t you say at first that you were staying here because your uncle asked you to?” inquired Harry. He and Ned knew the stern qualities of Bob’s Uncle Joel. Though a just man, Mr. Dexter, who was brother to Bob’s dead father, insisted on strict obedience from his nephew, especially in matters of business.

“This is a business matter,” said Bob. “I would have told you fellows, if you’d given me a chance. But you went off, half cocked, and I couldn’t make myself heard.”

“Oh, all right. Maybe we were a bit hasty,” conceded Ned.

“But when we saw you sitting here, doing nothing but reading a detective story, we concluded you didn’t have anything else to do, and that you could just as well as not come to the ball game with us,” added Harry.

“I’d come in a minute if Uncle Joel hadn’t wished this job on me!” declared Bob. “But you know how it is – I’m not exactly my own boss.”

“Yes, we know,” admitted Harry.

Bob Dexter was an orphan, dependent on his uncle, and while Mr. Dexter was just and kind, still he had rights that must be respected, and Bob realized this.

“Uncle Joel is pretty good to me,” went on Bob. “And I’ve got to pay him back as much as I can. Look how he let me have a lot of time to myself going to Beacon Beach this summer.”

“And a mighty good thing you did go to Beacon Beach!” exclaimed Ned. “If you hadn’t the mystery there never would have been solved.”

“Oh, I guess some one else would have stumbled on it,” said Bob, modestly.

“I’m not so sure of that,” chimed in Harry. “Anyhow, we won’t bother you any more. Go on – finish the job, whatever it is.”

“Couldn’t you come to the ball game and do it afterward – whatever your uncle wants you to do?” asked Ned.

Bob shook his head.

“It can’t be done,” he replied. “If I can get over to the park later I’ll be there. I hope I can see the last half of the game, anyhow. But it’s like this. Mr. Sheldon, a man with whom my uncle does a lot of business of one kind or another, is sending some important papers on to-day to be signed. If they aren’t signed to-day it means the loss of a lot of money. Mr. Sheldon is passing through Cliffside on the train that gets here at 2:30. He hasn’t time to get off, as he has to go on to a conference with his lawyer. But he’s going to hand me the papers at the depot, when the train stops, and I’ve got to rush them up to my uncle’s office. That’s why I can’t go to the ball game.”

“Why doesn’t your uncle himself meet this Mr. Sheldon at the train and sign the papers?” asked Ned. “Oh why can’t some one else meet this man who’s in such a hurry?”

“I don’t know why it can’t be done that way, but it can’t, or my uncle wouldn’t ask me to do it,” said Bob, simply. “I suppose he has good reasons for not going to the train himself. And he doesn’t want to trust an ordinary messenger to get the papers. So I’ll have to do it. Then, after I get through, if there’s time enough, I’ll come to the game.”

“All right,” assented Harry, satisfied with this explanation. “We’ll try and save a seat for you – you know where we usually sit.”

“Yes, I know,” said Bob, as he laid his book just inside the front door.

“And if you’re going to meet that 2:30 train it’s time you got a move on,” added Ned.

“Yes, I’m going to start now,” said Bob. “Have to make a time allowance for the little old flivver,” he added with a laugh. “If you fellows like I’ll drop you off at the ball park.”

“Drop us off is good!” laughed Ned.

“If the old flivver doesn’t drop apart itself on the way down,” added Harry.

“Oh, I guess she’ll hold together that long,” chuckled the young detective – for Bob was just that, as some of you know, and as others of you will learn in the course of this story. Bob walked around to the side drive where stood an ancient and honorable automobile of the class generally called

flivvers. Truly it was ancient, and Bob had added the title honorable, for it had given him good service in spite of the small price he paid for it.

"Can you get her going?" asked Ned, as he and his chum looked somewhat dubiously at the machine.

"Well, I don't want to make any rash statements," chuckled Bob, "but I think if I give her a good dose of talcum powder, and rub a lip stick on the carburetor she may be induced to give us service. Hop in and I'll have a go at her."

"Better wait until he gets her started before you hop in," cautioned Ned to Harry. "She may buck with you."

"Oh, she isn't as temperamental as all that," laughed Bob. He climbed to the seat, turned on the ignition and pressed the self-starter pedal. There was a sort of groaning hum.

"I thought so! Come on, Ned, we'll walk!" laughed Harry.

But a moment later the engine began to turn over with a steady throb, hum and roar that told of plenty of power, each of the four cylinders firing evenly and regularly.

"Not so bad!" announced Ned, listening with a critical ear.

"Yes, I've got her pretty well tuned up," admitted Bob with pardonable pride. "I guess she'll take me there and back."

"Well, we'll take a chance," said Harry, and soon the three chums were rattling down the road. Rattling is the proper word, for though the flivver certainly moved, she also rattled, as do most of her kind. But rattling is no crime.

"Say, there's going to be a big crowd," observed Bob as he slowed up at the ball park to let his chums jump off. "Wish I could see the game!"

"Same here," remarked Harry. "Yes, there's going to be a mob all right!"

Though it would be nearly an hour before the game started, already throngs were congregating at the park. For the contest was an important one.

There had long been a rivalry between the Boys' Athletic Club, to which Bob, Ned and Harry belonged, and the team from Midvale, a town about ten miles from Cliffside where Bob Dexter lived. Each year a series of games took place, and up to date the championship had wavered between the two.

This year the rivalry was keener than before, and should the Boys' Club clinch this contest it meant *winning* the pennant for the season. Hence the interest.

"Root hard, fellows!" begged Bob as he started his machine off again, while his chums hastened to get the seats reserved for club members. "I'll get back in time for the last inning if I can!"

"Atta boy!" called Ned.

It was with rather a disappointed air that Bob continued on to the railroad station. But, after all, he knew he must do his duty, and helping his uncle, who was bringing him up, was part of this.

The 2:30 train pulled in a little late, and Bob, who had been told what Mr. Sheldon looked like, so he would know him, caught sight of this individual out on the platform of one of the cars, while the train was yet moving. Mr. Dexter had arranged for the transfer of the papers, and to make sure that Mr. Sheldon would know Bob, the latter carried in his hand a red dahlia from his aunt's garden.

"You're Bob Dexter, aren't you?" cried Mr. Sheldon as he held a bundle of legal-looking documents to the lad. "Yes, I see you have the red flower. It's all right, tell your uncle, but the papers must be signed before two witnesses before three o'clock. I'll look after the other matters for him. Glad the train wasn't any later and I'm glad you are here on time. I was getting a bit worried. If things had gone wrong it would mean a big loss. Don't lose any time getting those papers back to your uncle now. Good-by!"

"Good-by," was all Bob had time to say, and then the train pulled out again, for it seldom stopped long at Cliffside. Mr. Sheldon went back to his seat in his car, waving his hand to Bob. The latter looked at the bundle of papers, though they told him nothing of the business they represented.

However, Bob did not think much about that. His affair was to get the documents to his uncle as soon as he could. And it was now twenty minutes to three by the depot clock.

“Hope the old flivver doesn’t go back on me!” mused Bob as he climbed to his seat. He was glad to find that the motor turned over at the first touch on the self-starter pedal, and he was about to let in the clutch and dart away when he was hailed by a voice calling:

“I say there young feller, can you give me a lift?”

He turned to see, beckoning to him, an old man – a grizzled old man with a short, stubby beard. Under his arm the man, whose clothing was not of the best nor most up to date, carried a small brass-bound box – a box such as might contain papers or other things of value. And yet the appearance of the man did not indicate that he was in the habit of carrying things of value.

He was, to put it bluntly, but a few degrees removed in appearance from a tramp, though Bob noticed his face and hands were clean, which is not often the case with tramps.

“I’m in a hurry,” said Bob, as civilly as he could under the circumstances.

“So am I,” said the man with the box. “I’ve got to get to Storm Mountain as quick as I can.”

Storm Mountain was a town well up amid the hills, about five miles from Cliffside. It was located on the side of a big hill also called Storm Mountain.

“Sorry, but I’m not going up Storm Mountain way,” said Bob, as he slowly allowed the flivver to get up speed.

“But I’m willing to pay you!” said the man, shifting his brass-bound box under his other arm as he limped forward – Bob noticed that he walked with a slight limp.

“I’m not a taxicab – you can hire one in town or over there,” and Bob pointed to where usually some ancient autos stood – representing the jitney and taxi service of Cliffside. Just now there were no vehicles there, as they seldom met the 2:30 train.

“I’d hire one if I could,” said the man with the box. “But I can’t. I’ll pay you well to take me to Storm Mountain.”

“I’m sorry, but I have an important engagement in town,” said Bob, as he let his car gather speed. “You’ll have to get some one else.”

“All right,” said the man good-naturedly enough. He turned back to the station, and as he drove off Bob was rather glad that he could conscientiously refuse the service.

“For, to tell the truth,” said Bob to himself, “I don’t altogether like your looks, nor the looks of that box you carry. You may be all right, but I’ve got important papers and I’ve got to look after them.” He made good time to his uncle’s office, and found Mr. Dexter rather anxiously waiting for him.

“Oh, you have them, I see!” exclaimed Mr. Dexter as he took the bundle of papers from his nephew. “Mr. Sheldon was there all right, I take it?”

“Yes, and he said he’d attend to the other matters. But these must be signed before two witnesses by three o’clock.”

“I know it, Bob. I’ll attend to it right away. You had no other trouble, did you – I mean no one stopped you to ask to look at the papers – or anything like that?” Mr. Dexter seemed anxious and nervous.

“No, I wasn’t exactly stopped,” Bob answered. “But there was an old man with a box who wanted me to take him to Storm Mountain.”

“What sort of a man, Bob?” eagerly asked his uncle.

Bob described the individual, and a look of relief came over Mr. Dexter’s face.

“It isn’t any one I know,” he said. “I guess it’s all right, Bob. You may go now. Thanks for attending to this for me. I can look after matters now.”

“Then I’ll go to the ball game,” announced Bob.

He was on his way to the park, taking a short cut along a back road when, in a lonely spot he saw a huddled figure lying beside the road.

“It’s a man!” exclaimed Bob, as he stopped his machine and jumped out. “The man with the box – looks as if he’d been killed!”

## CHAPTER II

### THE LOG CABIN

Bob Dexter, young as he was, had been through too many strenuous experiences to be turned aside at the thought of a dead man. Besides, this was right in the line of Bob's ambition, if you get my meaning. That is, he had fully determined to become a detective, and here seemed right at hand a mystery that needed solving. He was first on the scene – a most advantageous thing from a detective's standpoint.

"I've got to keep my wits about me," thought the lad to himself as he approached the prostrate man who lay suspiciously still and quiet in the grass beside the lonely road.

And while Bob is getting ready to solve what he hopes may be a most baffling mystery, perhaps it would be just as well if I told my new readers a little about the youth who is to figure as the hero of this story.

Bob Dexter's father and mother died when he was quite young, and his uncle Joel Dexter agreed to care for the lad and bring him up as his own son. Uncle Joel and his wife Aunt Hannah had faithfully kept their promise, and Bob could not have asked for a better home nor for more loving care than he received.

But though loving and kind, Mr. Dexter insisted on Bob "toeing the mark," as he called it in the matter of work and duties, including attending school. Bob's uncle was "well fixed" as regards this world's goods, though not exactly a man of wealth. He was interested in several businesses in Cliffside, including a hardware store he owned. He also loaned money on mortgages and kept a private office over the First National Bank, in which enterprise he was said to own several shares.

Thus Bob grew from boyhood to young manhood, and when he began to develop a taste for detective stories, and, not only that but a desire to solve local crimes and mysteries, Uncle Joel rather "put his foot down," as he expressed it.

However, when Bob scored a point on the Cliffside police, by finding Jennie Thorp, who, it was supposed, had been kidnaped (though she wasn't) Bob's stock went up several points. And when, as I have told you in the first volume of this series, entitled "Bob Dexter and the Club House Mystery," the youth solved the secret of the Golden Eagle, well, then Uncle Joel "drew in his horns," as his wife said, and Bob "detected" to his heart's content.

The Golden Eagle was the mascot of the Boys' Athletic Club, and when it vanished there was a great deal of astonishment, which only subsided when Bob got the eagle back.

Following that, in the volume just preceding this one, called "Bob Dexter and the Beacon Beach Mystery," the lad added other laurels.

He and his chums, Ned and Harry, had gone camping at Beacon Beach for their summer vacation. Almost as soon as they arrived they were enveloped in a mystery which did not end until Bob had found out why the beacon in the lighthouse went out so often, and until he had learned what the "yellow boys" were in the wreck of the *Sea Hawk*.

"And now I seem to be up against something else," murmured Bob, as he approached the prostrate man in the grass, and caught sight of the brass-bound box lying near his motionless hand. "Just got back from the Beacon Beach trouble and I run into this. Well, the more the better for me – though I hope this poor old chap isn't dead!"

He wasn't, as Bob soon discovered. The man was breathing, and when the lad had dashed into his face some water from a nearby spring, and had poured between the stranger's lips some from a cup Bob carried in his car for use in filling his storage battery, the man opened his eyes, looked at the youth and cried:

"Did he get it?"

“Did who get what?” Bob wanted to know.

The man’s eyes wildly roved the ground about him, and, lighting on the box he breathed a sigh of relief. He reached out a hand, drew the little chest to him and then, slipping it under his legs as he sat up on the ground he put both hands to the back of his head.

“Um!” he murmured, with a wince of pain. “Quite a lump there. Big as a hen’s egg, I guess. Would you mind taking a look, young feller, and seeing how badly I’m cut? Though I guess I’m not cut at all,” he went on, as he looked at his fingers and saw no sign of blood.

“No, you aren’t cut,” said Bob, taking a look as requested. “But what happened to you? Did you fall?”

“Sort of,” admitted the man with a half smile. “But I reckon I was tapped on the head first, or else struck with a rock to help in the falling business. Though they didn’t dare take it after they knocked me out. Rod Marbury’s nerve must have failed him in the pinch. So much the better for me. I told him I’d play fair, but he hasn’t. Now he can whistle for his share! He can whistle for a wind that he’ll never get!” and the old man, who looked but a few degrees removed from a tramp, started to get up.

“Better wait a minute,” advised Bob kindly. “You’ve been knocked out. If you rest a bit longer, and take some more water you’ll feel stronger.”

“Oh, I’m all right, young feller!” was the answer, and the man’s actions and voice betokened that he was almost his vigorous self again. “It takes more than a knock on the head with a belaying pin to do for old Hiram Beegle. I’m all right. Rod didn’t get the box, and that’s what he was after. Did you see anything of him?”

“Of whom?” Bob wanted to know.

“Of Rodney Marbury, the slickest chap I ever dealt with. He’s cute, Rod is, but his nerve failed him at the last minute, even after he knocked me out. He must have been hiding in the bushes and heaved a rock out at me as I went by. Then I passed out and he must have been frightened away by hearing you coming along.”

“It’s possible that he did,” admitted Bob. “My old machine rattles enough to be heard a long distance. But I didn’t see anybody running away from you.”

“You didn’t, eh?” asked Hiram Beegle, for that, evidently, was his name. “Well, very likely he run the other way so he wouldn’t meet you. But I’m much obliged to you, and now I’ll be on my way.”

He got to his feet and stowed the box under his left arm. Then he looked about and found a stout cudgel which he grasped in his right hand. He was the vigorous figure of a man now, ready for a fray.

“Excuse me,” said Bob, “but didn’t I see you down at the station a little while ago?”

“Yes, I was there. I asked some young feller to give me a lift to Storm Mountain, but – ”

“You asked me,” spoke Bob with a smile. “I’m sorry, but I had an important engagement just then and couldn’t spare the time to take you.”

“Hum! Yes, you’re the same chap,” said Mr. Beegle, looking critically at Bob. “I don’t blame you a bit. Business first always – that’s a good rule. I waited for one of them taxi fellers like you told me to, but they wanted ten dollars to take me to Storm Mountain. I said I wanted to *hire* one of their cars, not *buy* it, and they laughed at me.”

“Ten dollars was too much,” observed Bob, looking at his watch, and trying to decide if he could make the baseball park in time to see the end of the big game. He wanted to do the Samaritan act, also, in looking after this stranger, for he did not think it either kind or wise to let him go off by himself on the five mile tramp.

“It was about eight dollars too much,” said the old man. “I would be willing to pay two, but not ten. Well, I can walk it.”

“No,” said Bob, coming to a sudden decision, “I’ll take you. I have a car and I’ve got nothing important to do now.” He had a somewhat selfish motive in making this offer – he wanted to find

out more about Hiram Beegle and about Rod Marbury. He wanted to know what valuables the box contained, and why the attack had been made.

“Well, it’s mighty decent of you to want to give me a lift,” said Mr. Beegle. “I take it right kind of you. But if you do take me to my cabin I want to pay you. I’ll give you two dollars.”

“I don’t want your money,” laughed Bob.

“Then I won’t ride with you!” The old man was very firm about this. “Hiram Beegle can pay his way – there are a few shots left in the locker yet, and if things go right I’ll be rich some day,” and he shook the brass-bound box, “I’ll pay you two dollars or I’ll walk!” he concluded with a shake of his grizzled head.

“Oh, well, have it your own way,” chuckled the lad. “I’m in neither the taxi nor jitney business, but I’ll take your money, though it won’t take that much gasoline or oil to put you in Storm Mountain. Where in the town do you live?”

“I don’t live in the town, exactly,” said the old man. “I live all alone in a log cabin up on the side of the mountain. It’s a fairly good road there, or I wouldn’t let you take your car up it.”

“A flivver can go anywhere!” said Bob.

“Yes, I reckon they can. Well, I’m much obliged to you – both for coming along and scaring away Rod Marbury after he knocked me out, and for giving me a lift.”

“I’m not sure I scared away any one,” said Bob. “I didn’t see any one at all. I was coming along the road and saw you stretched out.”

“Yes, I was stretched out, all right,” chuckled Mr. Beegle, who seemed to have quite recovered now, except for the lump on the back of his head. “And I didn’t exactly see Rod myself. But I’d be willing to wager a marlin spike to a rope’s end that he had a hand in it.”

Mr. Beegle headed for Bob’s machine, the engine of which was still running, but before starting off with the old man the young detective bethought him that he had better make a few inquiries.

“Look here, Mr. Beegle,” said the lad frankly, “I’m very glad to be able to help you and give you a lift, but I must know that this is all straight. I don’t want to find out afterward that I’ve been taking part in a crime.”

“A crime, what do you mean?” the old man seemed indignant.

“I mean there’s been violence done to you. You carry something you intimate is valuable,” and Bob nodded toward the box. “You say some one tried to get it away from you. Now has there been a robbery – is that part of the spoil and is there a fight over the division of it? I have a right to know before I take you to Storm Mountain.”

Mr. Beegle seemed greatly surprised and then a smile came over his grizzled face.

“Young man, you’re right!” he exclaimed. “You have a right to know certain things. But I’ll tell you at once there has been no robbery. I came into possession of this box in a legal way, though some one would be glad to get it away from me. I inherited this. Here, I’ll prove it to you. Do you know Judge Weston?”

“The lawyer? Of course I do!” exclaimed Bob.

“Then stop at his office on the way to my cabin. Judge Weston will tell you how I came by this box. I’ll not say another word until you talk to Judge Weston.”

Bob felt a trifle mean at seeming to doubt the old man’s word, but he felt he had a right to be assured that everything was all right. So, accordingly, he drove to the office of the lawyer, who had once been a county judge, the title still clinging to him as such titles will.

“Hello, Mr. Beegle, back again!” greeted the lawyer, as Bob and his new friend entered. “Wasn’t everything in the box all right?”

“Why, yes, Judge, I think so,” was the answer. “I only took a casual look inside, but all the papers seem to be there. But I ran into a little trouble after leaving your office,” and he told of the assault on him. “Then this young feller comes along,” resumed Hiram Beegle, “and offers to take me home. But he wants to be sure I didn’t steal this box,” and Mr. Beegle chuckled.

“No, I can testify to that,” said Judge Weston with a smile. “You came into possession of it rightfully and legally. I can see Bob’s point though, and it is well taken, you being a stranger to him.”

“But it’s all right, Bob. I handed this box to Mr. Beegle about two hours ago. He inherited it under the will of Hank Denby, a client of mine who died in Fayetteville about a month ago. I have been settling up the Denby estate – what there was of it – and this box comes to Mr. Beegle. I just turned it over to him.”

“And Rod Marbury didn’t have a share in it – did he?” asked the old man.

“He was not mentioned in Mr. Denby’s will,” was the lawyer’s answer. “In fact, I know nothing of this Rod Marbury except what you have told me, Mr. Beegle. And you told me in confidence so I cannot reveal that.”

“Oh, I don’t want to know any more!” broke in Bob. “I just wanted to know, after I heard there was a fight over the possession of this box, that Mr. Beegle had a right to it. Now I’ll take him home.”

“That’s very kind of you, Bob,” said the former judge. “You have my word that everything is all right, as far as Mr. Beegle’s legal possession of that box is concerned.”

“Well, are you satisfied?” asked the old man.

“Perfectly,” answered the young detective. And he made up his mind that if there was a further mystery in the matter he would try to solve it later.

“Then let’s pull up our mud hook,” went on Mr. Beegle. “It’s getting late and I’d like soon to be back safe in my log cabin. Much obliged to you, Judge.”

“Don’t mention it. The case is now closed as far as I am concerned.”

As Bob drove his machine out through Cliffside, in the direction of Storm Mountain, he saw some of his friends coming home from the ball game.

“Who won?” he called to Fred Merton.

“We did, eight to six!”

“Wow! Good enough!”

The lad and his old companion were soon on a quiet country road. Mr. Beegle had not talked a great deal, occasionally putting his hand up to his injured head.

“Does it hurt much?” asked Bob. “Had you better stop and see a doctor?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be all right. I’m not going to give Marbury another chance at me.”

“Do you think he might try to waylay you again?” asked Bob, not a little apprehensive of being in the companionship of a man against whom, it was evident, some one had a grudge.

“Oh, he won’t get me now,” was the chuckled answer. “I’ve got the weather gage on him all right. We’ll soon be at my place.”

Storm Mountain was a small village at the foot of the mountain bearing that name, and Bob soon was driving through it, taking the turns pointed out by Mr. Beegle who sat beside him.

“The next turn to the left is the road that leads to my place,” said the old man, pointing ahead. They were on a quiet stretch of country thoroughfare, steadily ascending the grade. The flivver puffed and wheezed, but kept on going.

“Here we are – my shack!” exclaimed Mr. Beegle a little later, after the turn had been made into a sort of dirt lane. “Now I’m all right.”

Bob saw before him a small log cabin, rather neat and trim, with a flower garden in front, or, rather, the remains of one, for it was now October. And in the rear were standing some lima bean poles and shocks of dried corn.

Hiram Beegle leaped out of the flivver and stood still for a moment. He looked fixedly at the log cabin and then in a low voice said to Bob:

“Would you mind waiting here a moment?”

“No. What for?” inquired the lad.

“Well, I just want to make sure nobody’s hiding in there to give me another knock on the head. I’ve been away all day – the place has been shut up. It’s just possible – ”

“I’ll wait until you see if it’s all right,” said Bob, as the old man began a cautious approach toward his cabin.

## CHAPTER III

### STARTLING NEWS

Since noon that day so many things had happened in Bob Dexter's life that as he watched the old man walk toward the log cabin, the lad was almost prepared for something else of a startling nature.

To begin with there had been that hurried trip to the train to get the important papers from Mr. Sheldon. And then there had been his Uncle Joel's fear lest some one might have tried to get the documents away from Bob.

Followed then his discovery of Hiram Beegle, knocked out at the side of the road, after the young detective's encounter with him at the railroad station, and mixed up with this was the mystery of the brass-bound box, the vindictive Rod Marbury and the lawyer's guarantee as to Hiram's legal right to the little chest.

And now, on top of this, some enemy might burst forth from the lonely log cabin.

But Bob was spared this last act, though as a matter of fact the strong, healthy and excitement-loving young detective would have welcomed something more to bring the day to a fitting close.

However, nothing happened. For after Hiram Beegle had cautiously scouted about the cabin for several minutes he unlocked the door, swung it back and himself jumped to one side, flattening his body out against the side of the cabin.

Bob almost wanted to laugh at this – it was like something in a moving picture melodrama. Doubtless the old man had good reason for his caution, but there was no need of it. No one leaped out at him, there was no shooting and no flashing of a thrown knife.

All was peace and quietness.

"It's just as well to be on the safe side," remarked Mr. Beegle as he stepped away from the side of the cabin and prepared to enter it. "No telling what Rod might be up to. Now, young man, I'll pay you off, say much obliged and give you a drink of buttermilk right cold out of my spring house if you'll take it."

"Thanks," answered Bob. "I'm very fond of buttermilk, but I'd rather not take your money," for the old man passed over two one dollar bills.

"You got to take it – that was the bargain. And if you'll come in and sit down a minute I'll get you the buttermilk. I buy it off Jason Studder, down the road, and keep it cool in the spring. But first I'll just take care of this. I've had trouble enough to get it, and I don't want to lose it again."

Bob followed the old man into the long cabin. Hiram Beegle carried the box under his arm, and without setting it down he went to a cupboard in the wall and thrust in his hand. There was a sort of clicking sound, as if machinery was operating and Bob started.

Well he might, for close beside him, as he stood near a wall of the log cabin – a wall made of smooth boards – a sort of secret panel dropped, revealing a little recess or hiding place. And in this niche was a large brass key.

"It isn't every one I let see the place I keep the key to my strong room," chuckled the old man. "But I trust you and Judge Weston. Rod Marbury could search a week and never find this, I'm thinking."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Bob. "I think I could get at it."

"No, you couldn't – not even knowing that there's a catch in this cupboard," challenged Mr. Beegle. "Here, you try it."

He closed the dropped panel, leaving the big brass key in the niche, and then waved his hand toward the cupboard beside the fireplace – an invitation to Bob to try.

The young detective could not see much in the cupboard – it was too small – but he felt about with trained fingers. He found a number of knobs and catches, but pressing and pulling on them one after another, and on several at the same time, produced no effect.

“You couldn’t work it in a year unless you knew how,” boasted the old man. “Of course you could tear the cabin apart and find the key that way – but it would take time.”

Once more, after Bob’s failure, Hiram put his hand within the cupboard and an instant later the secret panel dropped. So cleverly was the hidden niche made and so closely did the sliding panel fit into place, that not even with his sharp eyes could Bob see where the joining was in the wall, after the niche had been closed again.

For the old man closed it after taking out the brass key. And with this key in one hand, and the mysterious box in the other, he approached a small inner door.

“This is what I call my strong room,” he said to Bob, as he put the ponderous key in the lock. And it was a big key – like one that might be part of the great lock on some prison door. There was a clicking of the wards and tumblers of the lock, and the door was opened. It was of heavy oak, cross planks being spiked to the inner side.

Bob had his first glimpse into a room that, soon, was to play a part in a strange mystery. In fact, this was Bob’s first view of the cabin where Hiram Beegle lived, though he knew the cabin was situated on this road, for he had seen it before, some years ago. Then no one lived in it, and the place was somewhat in ruins. Now it was a most picturesque home for the old man who lived alone in it.

Bob expected to see a sort of vault when the ponderous door swung back, but he was rather surprised to note that the place contained a table, a chair and a bed, in addition to a strong chest, iron-bound and fastened with a heavy black padlock.

“Do you sleep in here, Mr. Beegle?” asked the lad and he accented the word “sleep,” so that the old man looked at him in some surprise and remarked:

“Of course I sleep here. Why not?”

“Well, there aren’t any windows in the place. How do you get fresh air?”

“Oh, that!” he laughed. “I reckon you can tell that I like fresh air as much as anybody. I’m an outdoor man – always was. Well, I don’t make a practice of sleeping here, but when I do I get plenty of fresh air through the fireplace,” and he pointed to a hearth in the room. Bob knew that an open fireplace is one of the best methods known of ventilating a room.

And certainly if ever a room needed ventilation this inner one in the lonely log cabin did, for the strong door was the only opening in it. Not a window, not a porthole, nor so much as a crack gave on the outside. It was a veritable vault, the chimney opening being the only one by which a person shut in the room could save himself from smothering.

“Yes, once I’m shut up in here not even Rod Marbury can get at me!” chuckled Hiram Beegle.

“Couldn’t he get down the chimney?” asked Bob.

“I’d like to see him try it I There’s a crook in the flue and a raccoon that once tried to get down, though why I don’t know, was stuck until I tore a hole in the outside and set the poor thing free. That’s what would happen to Rod Marbury if he tried it. No, he’d better not try to play Santa Claus with me!” and again the old man chuckled.

While Bob looked about the room, noting how strong the walls were and the thickness of the door, the old man opened the chest in the corner and in it placed the brass-bound box, snapping the padlock shut after he made his deposit.

“There!” he announced, “I guess it’s all right now. It’s safe! Rod Marbury can whistle for a breeze but that’s all the good it will do him. Now for your buttermilk, young man.”

“Oh, don’t trouble about me!” begged Bob.

“It isn’t any trouble. It’s only a step to the spring and I’d like a drink myself after what I’ve been through.”

“Aren’t you going to notify the police?” asked Bob as he preceded the old man from the strong room, watching him turn the ponderous key in the lock.

“Notify the police? What about?” asked Hiram Beegle.

“About the attack on you – by Rodney Marbury as you think.”

“As I know, you mean, young man. But I don’t need the police. I can deal with that chap myself if need comes. But I guess he knows he’s through. He won’t bother me again. Now for the buttermilk.”

There was a small spring house not far from the log cabin, and from this cool repository Hiram brought a can of rich, cool buttermilk, which was most refreshing to Bob, for the day was hot, even though it was October.

“Well, much obliged to you, Bob Dexter,” said Hiram, as Bob was about to take his leave, having seen the big brass key deposited in the secret niche and the panel closed. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d just as soon you wouldn’t tell everybody what you’ve seen and heard to-day.”

“I’ll keep quiet about it,” the lad promised.

He rode off down the mountain trail in his flivver, looking back to see the odd but kindly old man waving a farewell to him. Bob little knew under what circumstances he would see Hiram Beegle again.

It was late afternoon when Bob returned home, for he got a puncture when halfway to Cliffside and had to stop to change a tire. As he drew up in front of his house he met his two chums, Harry and Ned.

“Too bad you missed the game,” remarked Ned.

“Yes,” assented Bob, “I’m sorry, too.”

“What did you do with Rip Van Winkle?” asked Harry.

“Rip Van Winkle?” repeated Bob, wondering.

“Yes. The old codger Fred Merton saw you with.”

“Oh, Hiram Beegle,” chuckled Bob. “Yes, he is a queer character,” and he told as much of the story as would not violate his promise.

“Well, I s’pose you know what you’re doing,” said Ned. “But from what Fred said about this old codger I wouldn’t want to meet him alone after dark, Bob.”

“Oh, he’s all right,” protested the young detective with a laugh. “But I suppose there’ll be great doings at the club house to-night.”

“There sure will – to celebrate the game to-day. Going to be there?”

“Surest thing you know. I’ll see you there. So long!”

“So long, Bob!”

The two chums went on their way and Bob went into the house after putting his car in the barn that had been turned into a garage.

The Boys’ Athletic Club had a jollification meeting that night over the baseball victory, and the Golden Eagle mascot looked down most approvingly from his perch to which he had been restored by the efforts of the young detective.

“I don’t believe we’d have had half such a good game out of it to-day if it hadn’t been for the Golden Eagle,” remarked Ned, as he sat with his chums, looking up at the mascot bird.

“You’re right!” chimed in Harry.

“Oh, I guess you imagine a lot of that,” laughed Bob. “Still, I’m glad the old bird is back in place.”

“You said it!” exclaimed his chums.

It was next morning, when Bob was on his way to his uncle’s hardware store where he now worked, that the lad met Harry and Ned.

“Did you hear the news?” cried Harry.

“What news?” asked Bob, slowing up his flivver so his chums might leap in.

“Old Hiram Beegle was murdered last night in his cabin!” cried Ned.

## CHAPTER IV

### WOODEN LEG

Suspecting that his chums were playing some joke on him, though he thought this rather a poor subject for humor, and believing that Harry and Ned wanted to get a rise out of him, Bob Dexter did not at once show the astonishment that was expected. Instead he merely smiled and remarked:

“Hop in! If I believe that I s’pose you’ll tell me another!”

“Say, this is straight!” cried Ned.

“No kidding!” added Harry. “The old man was killed last night. You know who we mean – Rip Van Winkle – the old codger you took over to Storm Mountain in this very flivver.”

“Yes, I know, who you mean all right,” assented Bob. “But who told you he was killed? How, why, when, where and all the rest of it?”

“We didn’t hear any of the particulars,” explained Harry. “But Chief Drayton, of the Storm Mountain police force – guess he’s the whole force as a matter of fact – Drayton just came over here to get our chief to help solve the mystery.”

“Oh, then there’s a mystery about it, is there?” asked Bob, and his chums noticed that he at once began to pay close attention to what they were saying.

“Sure there’s a mystery,” asserted Ned. “Wouldn’t you call it a mystery if a man was found dead in a locked room – a room without a window in it, and only one door, and that locked on the inside and the man dead inside? Isn’t that a mystery, Bob Dexter – just as much of a mystery as who took our Golden Eagle?”

“Or what the ‘yellow boys’ were in the wreck of the *Sea Hawk*?” added Harry.

“Sure that would be a mystery if everything is as you say it is,” asserted Bob. “But in the first place if old Hiram Beegle has been killed and if his body is in that room, with only one door leading into it, how do the authorities know anything about it? Why, you can’t even see into that room when the door is shut!”

“How do you know?” asked Ned quickly.

“Because I’ve been in that room. I was in there yesterday afternoon with Hiram Beegle. There is only one entrance to it and that by the door, for the fireplace doesn’t count.”

“You were in that room?” cried Harry in surprise.

“Certainly I was.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” asked Ned, feeling that his announcement of the murder was as nothing compared with this news.

“Oh, well, there wasn’t any need of speaking about it,” said Bob.

“Well, I guess you’ve seen the last of Hiram Beegle,” went on Harry. “That is unless you want to go to the scene of the crime, as the *Weekly Banner* will put it.”

“Yes, I’d like to go there,” said Bob quietly. “There may be a mystery about who killed Hiram Beegle, but to my mind there’s a greater mystery in discovering how it is Chief Drayton knows the old man was killed, instead of, let us say, dying a natural death, if he can’t get in the room.”

“Who said he couldn’t get in the room?” asked Ned.

“Well, it stands to reason he can’t get in the room, if the only door to it is locked on the inside, if Hiram Beegle is dead inside; for I’ve been there and you can’t go down the chimney. How does the chief know Hiram is dead?”

“You got me there,” admitted Ned. “I didn’t get it directly from Chief Drayton. Tom Wilson was telling me – he heard it from some one else, I guess.”

“That’s the trouble,” remarked Bob as he guided the flivver around a corner and brought it to a stop in front of his uncle’s hardware store. “There’s too much second-hand talk.”

“Then let’s go over to Storm Mountain and get some first-hand information!” cried Ned.

“Yes – what do you say to that?” added Harry.

Bob considered for a moment.

“I guess I can go in about an hour if you fellows can,” he replied. “Uncle Joel will let me have some time off.”

“I think I can string dad so he’ll let me go,” remarked Ned.

“Same here,” echoed Harry.

The two lads worked for their respective fathers, and the latter were not too exacting. Bob and his chums attended High School, but owing to the fact that the building was being repaired the usual fall term would be two months late in opening. Hence they still had considerable of a vacation before them, for which they were duly grateful.

Many thoughts were surging through the mind of Bob Dexter as he went about his duties in the hardware store. It was rather a shock to him to learn that the odd but kindly old man, with whom he had been drinking buttermilk less than twenty-four hours ago, was now dead.

“But who killed him, and why?” mused Bob.

“He was fearfully afraid of some one he called Rod Marbury. Could that fellow have had a hand in it? And if the old man was locked in his strong room how could anyone get in to kill him? I should like to find out all about this, and I’m going to.”

Uncle Joel chuckled silently when Bob asked if he could be excused for the remainder of the day.

“Going fishing, Bob?” he asked.

“No, not exactly,” was the answer.

“Well, I can guess. You’ll be heading for Storm Mountain, I suppose.”

“Did you hear about the murder?” exclaimed the lad.

“Murder!” repeated his uncle. “I didn’t hear there was a murder. Old Hiram Beegle was badly hurt but he wasn’t killed. He was robbed, though – robbed of some treasure box he had.”

“Robbed!” murmured Bob. “The treasure box! It must have been that brass-bound little chest he had when I saw him. But are you sure he wasn’t killed, Uncle Joel?”

“Well, I’m as sure of it as I can be of anything that Sam Drayton tells.”

“You mean Chief Drayton of Storm Mountain?”

“Huh! Chief Drayton! I like that. He’s nothing but a constable, and never will be anything but a constable. He calls himself chief because the selectmen wouldn’t raise his salary. I’ve known Sam Drayton ever since he was knee high to a grasshopper and he’s no more fit to be Chief of Police than I am – not half as much as you are, Bob Dexter, though I don’t set any great store by your detective work.”

Bob smiled. His uncle poked good-natured fun at his abilities as a sleuth, but, at the same time, Uncle Joel was rather proud of his nephew, particularly since the affair of the Golden Eagle.

“Well, I’m glad the old man isn’t dead,” said Bob. “But how did the robbery happen? How did the thief get in the strong room?”

“I don’t know. You’d better go over and find out for yourself. There’s no use asking Sam Drayton, for he won’t know.”

“I understand he came over here to get help from our police,” stated Bob.

“I don’t know that he’s much better off than if he stayed at home,” chuckled Mr. Dexter. “But go ahead, Bob. I guess the store will still be doing business when you get back.”

“I hope so, Uncle Joel. Thanks,” and Bob ran out to his flivver, intending to hurry and pick up Ned and Harry and make a quick trip to Storm Mountain.

However, he found his chums already on hand. They had come over to get him, having prevailed on their fathers to let them off for the remainder of the day.

“Old Rip Van Winkle isn’t dead after all – that was a false report, Bob!” exclaimed Ned, who, with Harry, insisted on giving Hiram Beegle the name of Irving’s mythical character.

“So I heard.”

“But there’s been a big robbery,” said Harry.

“I heard that, too.”

“Say, is there anything you haven’t heard?” inquired Ned, admiringly.

“Well, that’s really all I do know,” admitted Bob. “I haven’t any particulars and it seems as much of a mystery as before. Let’s go!”

They found a curious throng gathered about the lonely cabin of the old man, with Chief Drayton fussing about trying to keep the crowd back.

“Don’t tramp all over the place!” he kept saying. “How am I goin’ to examine for footprints of the robber if you tramp and mush all over the place? Keep back!”

But it was a waste of words to admonish the curiosity seekers who crowded up toward the front door. Then out came Chief Miles Duncan of the Cliffside police. He noticed Bob and his chums in the forefront of the gathering.

“Hello, Bob!” he greeted pleasantly. “This is one of those things you’ll be interested in – quite a mystery. Come in and take a look.”

“Now look here – !” began Sam Drayton.

“It’s all right – Bob can do more with this than you or I could,” said the Cliffside official in a low voice. “I’ll tell you about him later. He’s got the makings of a great detective in him.”

Bob, much pleased at the invitation, started to push his way through the crowd, envious murmurs accompanying him.

“Stick by me, fellows,” he told Ned and Bob. “We’ll all go in together.”

“Say, look here!” objected Sam Drayton as he saw three lads approaching, “Chief Duncan only told Bob Dexter to come in and – ”

“These are my assistants,” said Bob gravely, but, at the same time winking at Chief Duncan. And Mr. Duncan winked back.

“That’s right,” he backed up Bob.

“Oh, well, let ’em in then,” grudgingly conceded Mr. Drayton.

Bob’s first sight, on entering the main room of the log cabin, was of Hiram Beegle propped up in a chair covered with bed quilts. The old man looked worn and ill – there was a drawn, pinched look on his face, and he was pale.

“What happened, Mr. Beegle?” asked Bob, noting that the door to the strong room stood ajar, and that the oaken chest, in one corner, was also open.

Hiram Beegle opened his mouth, but instead of words there came out only a meaningless jumble of sounds.

“He’s been poisoned,” explained Chief Duncan.

“Poisoned?” cried Bob.

“Or something like that,” went on the Cliffside official. “It’s dope, or something that the robber gave him – maybe it’s chloroform, for all I can tell, though it doesn’t smell like that. Anyhow he’s knocked out and can’t tell much that’s happened.”

“Robbed! Robbed!” gasped Hiram Beegle, bringing out the words with pitiful effort.

“Yes, he’s been robbed – we’re sure of that,” said Sam Drayton.

“Box! Box!” and again the old man in the chair brought out the words as if they pained him.

“That’s right,” assented the Storm Mountain chief. “As near as we can make out he’s been robbed of some sort of a small treasure chest. It was taken from that larger chest in there.”

“Yes, I know about it,” said Bob quietly.

“You know about it?” cried both chiefs at once.

“I mean I saw the small treasure box Mr. Beegle speaks of,” said Bob. “I brought him home yesterday with it. But what I can’t understand is how the robber got in the strong room.”

“No, and there can’t anybody else either, I reckon,” declared Mr. Drayton. “It’s a big mystery.”

“Mysteries seem to be about the best little thing Bob runs into lately,” chuckled Harry. “He doesn’t more than get finished with one, than he has another on his hands. Why don’t you open a shop, Bob?”

“Cut out the comedy,” advised Ned in a low voice to his chum. “Can’t you see that these self-important chiefs don’t like this kind of talk – especially this Storm Mountain fellow?”

It was evident that this was so, and Harry, with a wink at Ned, subsided.

“I’d like to hear how it all happened, and I suppose Bob would, too,” remarked Mr. Duncan.

“I’d like to hear the details,” suggested the young detective.

“We’ll tell you all we know, Bob,” said Miles Duncan. “You see – ”

But at that moment a loud and hearty voice from without cried:

“Where is he! Where’s my old friend Hiram Beegle? Tell him Jolly Bill Hickey is here! Where’s my old friend Hiram Beegle!”

A man, broadly smiling, his bald head shining in the sun, stumped into the room, one wooden leg making a thumping sound on the floor.

## CHAPTER V

### A MYSTERIOUS ROBBERY

Jolly Bill Hickey – for so he called himself – stood staring in the middle of the room – staring at the huddled figure of the old man in the chair covered with bed clothes.

“Why, Hiram – why – what has happened?” cried the man with the wooden leg – an old-fashioned wooden peg, his stump strapped fast to it – and the wooden leg showed signs of wear. “What has happened to my old shipmate Hiram?” demanded Jolly Bill Hickey.

Again that pitiful effort to talk, but only a meaningless jumble of sounds came forth.

“Hiram, did they ram you?” demanded he of the wooden leg. “Did they let go a broadside at you? Did they try to sink you?”

Hiram Beegle nodded his head.

“Look here!” spluttered Chief Drayton. “You’re not supposed to come in here, you know.”

“But I *am* in, you see!” chuckled the wooden-legged man. “I am in and I’m going to stay with my old messmate Hiram. You can’t keep Jolly Bill Hickey out when he wants to come in.”

That was very evident.

“Are you a friend of his?” asked Chief Duncan.

“Am I? I should say I was! Ask him – ask Hiram I But no, what’s the use. He’s been rammed – the enemy has broadsided him and he’s out of action. But I’ll tell you I’m a friend of his, and he’ll tell you so, too, when he gets going again. But what happened here? Tell me – tell Jolly Bill Hickey!” demanded he of the wooden leg.

“Hiram Beegle has been nearly killed and completely robbed,” said Chief Duncan.

“No! You don’t mean it! Almost killed – and robbed! Who did it? Where are the scoundrels?” Jolly Bill Hickey did not seem very jolly now. He looked around with a vindictive air and fanned his bald head with his cap.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” spoke Chief Drayton. “Do you know anything about this crime?”

“Do I know anything about it? Say, I just got here!” exclaimed Jolly Bill. “I came in on the morning train to see my old messmate Hiram Beegle, and I find this crowd around his bunk and him knocked out like a broadside had been delivered right in his teeth! How should I know anything about it?”

“Well, I just asked,” said Chief Drayton rather mildly for a police official. Truth to tell the manner of Jolly Bill Hickey was a bit overpowering.

“If you’re a friend of Hiram’s you might as well stay in and see if you can help us,” suggested Chief Duncan.

“Sure I’ll help!” said Jolly Bill. “But we don’t want too much help. Who are these lads?” and he glanced sharply at Bob and his chums.

“Friends of mine,” said the Cliffside chief, shortly.

“Oh, well, then that’s all right – friends of yours – friends of Jolly Bill Hickey. Shake!” He extended a hard palm and gave the lads grips they long remembered. “Shake, Hiram!” and he clasped hands with the stricken man, though more gently, it seemed.

“No use letting all outdoors in,” went on Jolly Bill as he stumped over and closed the outer portal, bringing thereby a chorus of protests from the curious ones assembled outside. “Now let’s spin the yarn,” he suggested. “But first has anything been done for my old messmate Hiram Beegle?”

“A doctor has been here – yes,” said Chief Drayton. “He says Hiram has had a shock. There’s a lump on his head – ”

“He got that yesterday!” broke in Bob. “I picked him up right after it happened. He thinks a man named Rod Marbury did it.”

“And he did!” burst forth Jolly Bill. “A scoundrel if ever there was one – Rod Marbury! So he whanged Hiram, did he?”

“There are two lumps on Hiram’s head,” went on Chief Drayton. “We know about the first one – the one you spoke of,” he said to Bob. “But he was hit again last night. He was also either given some sort of poison that knocked him out – some sort of dope, the doctor thinks, or else it was some sort of vapor that made him unconscious. And while he was that way he was robbed.”

“But how did it all happen?” asked Bob Dexter. “How could a thief get in the strong room when he didn’t know the secret of the big brass key?”

“Whoever it was must have known some of the secrets,” said the Cliffside chief, “for he got in the strong room when it was locked, and when Hiram was inside, and the thief got out again, leaving Hiram and the key inside.”

“He got out leaving Mr. Beegle and the key inside?” asked Bob. “Why, it couldn’t be done! There’s no way out of that room except by the door, and if the key was inside, and the door locked – why, it’s impossible! Mr. Beegle showed me that yesterday afternoon. The only opening to the outer air is the chimney – no man could get in or out that way.”

“But somebody did!” said Chief Drayton. “And that’s where the mystery comes in.”

“Let’s hear how it happened – from the beginning,” suggested Harry. “Suppose you tell your story first, Bob, so we’ll know just how much of it you saw.”

“Do you want me to tell, Mr. Beegle?” asked Bob, for he remembered his promise to the old man.

Hiram Beegle tried to talk, but about the only words Bob could distinguish were “cupboard” and “key.” He judged from this that the old sailor, for so he seemed to be, did not want disclosed the information as to where he kept the big brass key of his strange strong room. The key was not now in sight, but Bob understood. He resolved to keep quiet on this point, but to tell the rest.

Thereupon he related how he had found the old man stricken beside the road the afternoon before. How he had gone with him to the office of Judge Weston, who told of the brass-bound box coming as an inheritance to Hiram Beegle from Hank Denby.

“That’s right!” chimed in Jolly Bill. “I can testify to that. We were all shipmates together – Hiram, Hank, that scoundrel Rod Marbury and me. Hank Denby was the richest of the lot. He left the box to Hiram – I know he promised to, and what Hank promised he carried out. He gave you the box, didn’t he, Hiram?”

The stricken man nodded.

“Well, I brought him home here with the box,” went on Bob, “and he brought me into this room. He explained how it could only be entered from the door which he unlocked with a big brass key. He said he was going to put his treasure in that chest,” and the lad pointed to the open one in the strong room.

“He did put it there, it seems,” said Chief Duncan, “but it didn’t stay there long. In the night somebody got in and took the little treasure chest away, nearly killing Hiram before doing so. Then they left him locked up in the room, with the brass key near him, and came out.”

“But how could they?” cried Bob. “They couldn’t get out of the room if it was locked. They couldn’t leave the key inside. There’s no other way of getting out except by the door. And if that was locked, and the key was inside – ”

“That’s where the mystery comes in,” interrupted Chief Duncan.

“And it sure is a mystery,” added Chief Drayton. “If Hiram could talk he might explain, but, as it is, we can only guess at it. I needed help on this – that’s why I sent for you, Miles,” he said to his fellow officer.

“Hum! I don’t know as I can do much more than you,” ruefully replied the Cliffside chief. “What do you think of it, Bob?”

“Huh! A lot he can tell!” sniffed Mr. Drayton.

“You don’t know Bob Dexter as well as I do,” stated Mr. Duncan quietly. “I should like to have his opinion on this.”

For the Cliffside chief remembered the case of Jennie Thorp, in which he and his men had not shone very brilliantly.

“Let me see if I understand this,” said Bob, looking at Hiram Beegle. “Will you nod your head if I’m right?” he asked. “Don’t try to talk – just nod your head, will you?”

Hiram gave a sign of assent and understanding. Then Bob began to make a statement of the mysterious robbery as he understood it, while those in the room listened eagerly.

## CHAPTER VI

### STRANGE MARKS

“When I left you yesterday afternoon, after we drank the buttermilk together,” said Bob, speaking slowly, “you were going to put the brass-bound box in your chest and lock it up, weren’t you?”

Hiram Beegle nodded vigorously an assent to this.

“You did this, we’ll say,” resumed Bob, “but after I had gone, or after you had locked up your treasure, you took it out to look at it again, and count it perhaps – and you sat here in your strong room to do that – with the door open – is that it?”

Again Hiram nodded to show that this was the truth.

“While you were doing that,” continued the young detective, “some one – an enemy or a robber – slipped in and overpowered you, taking away the treasure box and locking you in the strong room. Is that how it happened? And can you tell us who it was that struck you the second time and who robbed you?”

Hiram Beegle nodded vigorously, but in both directions. Now his head indicated an affirmative and again a negative.

“What does he mean?” questioned Harry.

“He’s making queer motions,” said Ned.

The stricken man was moving in an odd way the fingers of his right hand on the arm of his chair. And then Bob Dexter guessed what it was he wanted.

“He will write it out!” exclaimed the lad. “Give him pencil and paper and he can write out what happened since he can’t talk straight. Why didn’t we think of that before?”

“I said it would be a good thing to have Bob here,” remarked Chief Duncan while Chief Drayton looked for pencil and paper. And when these were given to Hiram Beegle a look of satisfaction came over his face. He began writing more rapidly than one would have supposed an old sailor could have done, and he handed the finished sheet to Bob.

“Read it,” suggested Harry.

Bob read:

“The young man has partly the right of it. After he left me I locked up the box Judge Weston gave me. It was mine by right but I knew some who might try to take it from me. Never mind about them now.

“After supper I sat here thinking of many things, and then I wanted to look in my box again. I opened my strong room, left the door ajar, took the brass-bound box out of my chest and sat looking over the contents when, all of a sudden, I felt faint. Then I fell out of my chair – I remember falling – and that’s all I remember until I woke up early this morning.

“I was lying on the floor, and beside me, close to my right hand, was the big brass key to my strong room. But the door was locked, and my box was gone. I couldn’t understand it. First I thought I had just fainted from the blow I got in the afternoon. I thought maybe I had put my box back in the chest, but it wasn’t there. I had been robbed, and there was another lump on my head. Whether I was hit again, or whether I hit myself when I fell out of my chair I don’t know.

“But there I was, locked in my own strong room, the key was beside me and my treasure was gone. That’s all I know about it.”

“But didn’t he see anybody?”

“How did he feel just before he keeled over?”

“Didn’t he hear any noise?”

“Did anybody make him drink anything that might have had poison or knock-out drops in it?”

These were some of the questions from Ned, Harry, Jolly Bill and the two police chiefs when Bob finished reading the document.

“Wait!” begged the young detective. “One at a time. I’ll ask him the questions and let him write the answer. We’ll get along faster that way.”

“Let’s see, first, how he got doped, if he was,” suggested Chief Duncan. So Bob wrote that question.

“No one gave me anything that I know of,” was the written reply. “And the only thing I drank was some buttermilk.”

“I had some of that and I know there was nothing wrong with it,” testified Bob. “But did you see any one around your cabin just before you fainted and were robbed?”

“I saw no one,” wrote Hiram, “It was very strange.”

“I’ll say it was!” exclaimed Harry.

“What did you do after you came to?” was the next question.

“I sat up and looked around. I couldn’t understand it at all. I felt sick – I couldn’t talk – something seemed to have hold of my tongue. It’s that way yet but I can feel it wearing off. I saw that I had been robbed.

“But the queer part of it was that whoever had robbed me had gone out, locked the door from the outside and then, in some way, they got the key back in here, so that it lay on the floor close to my right hand, as if it had dropped from my fingers.”

“Why, that’s easy!” chuckled Jolly Bill. “They locked the door – that is the robber did, and threw the key in over the transom. I’ve heard of cases like that.”

“There isn’t any transom over this door,” said Bob, pointing. “There isn’t a single opening to this room, either from inside the cabin or out of doors. The keyhole is the only opening, and it is impossible to push a big key, like this, in through the keyhole.”

“I have it!” cried Ned. “They climbed up on the roof and dropped the key down the chimney. You said the chimney was barred inside, and too small for a man to climb down, Bob, but a key could fall down.”

“Yes,” admitted the young detective dryly, “a key would fall down all right, but it would drop in the fireplace, or in the ashes of the fire if one had been built Mr. Beegle says the key was lying close to his hand, and he was on the floor, ten feet away from the hearth. That won’t do, Ned.”

“Couldn’t the key bounce from the brick hearth, over to where Mr. Beegle lay?” asked the lad, who hated to see his theory riddled like this.

In answer Bob pointed to the hearth. There was a thick layer of wood ashes on it, for a fire had been burning in the place recently.

“Any key dropping in those ashes would fall as dead as a golf ball in a mud bank,” stated the young sleuth. “It wouldn’t bounce a foot, let alone ten feet, and land close beside Mr. Beegle’s hand.”

“Then there must be two keys, or else the door was locked with a skeleton key,” said Harry.

“No! No!” suddenly exclaimed the stricken man. He wrote rapidly.

“There is only one key, and no skeleton key would fit this lock,” which was easy to believe when its ponderous nature was taken into consideration.

“Um!” mused Harry, when this had been read to those in the room. “Then it’s simmering down to a question of who it was knocked him out, and how they managed to lock the door after they had left with the treasure, and how they got the key back inside.”

“That’s the question,” assented Bob.

“But why should the thief go to such trouble to get the key back in the room, after he had left Mr. Beegle unconscious?” asked Ned. “That’s what I can’t understand.”

“He probably did it to throw suspicion off,” suggested Bob. “By leaving the key close to Mr. Beegle’s hand he might have thought his victim would come to the conclusion that he hadn’t been

robbed at all – or else that in a sort of dream or sleep-walking act he had taken away his own valuables and hidden them.”

“Of course that’s possible,” said Chief Duncan.

“No! No!” cried Hiram, with more power than he had yet spoken since he was stricken. Once more he quickly wrote:

“I did not hide that box. Why should I? It was mine and is yet, no matter who has it. Someone sneaked in here while I was looking at my treasure and overpowered me with some powerful drug, I believe – some sort of gas, maybe the kind they used in the Great War. When I toppled over they came in, got the box, went out and locked me in.”

“But how could they get out and lock you in?” asked Chief Duncan. “The key was here with you all the while.”

Hiram Beegle shook his head. It was beyond his comprehension, and, for that matter, beyond the comprehension of all present. Even Bob Dexter, skillful and clever as he was, shook his head.

“I don’t see how the key got back here,” he mused. “But there are some other things to find out yet. How did this robbery become known? Did any one find Mr. Beegle in the strong room? They couldn’t see him lying there, for there aren’t any windows. There aren’t any panes of glass in the door. Did he call for help? And if he did, how did he get the key out to some one to come in and pick him up?”

“He didn’t have to do that,” said Chief Drayton. “He managed to crawl to the door and unlock it himself. Then he staggered out doors and hailed Tom Shan, a neighboring farmer, who was driving past. Shan did what he could and then came and told me.”

“I see,” murmured Bob Dexter. “Then the two important points in this mystery are to discover who robbed Mr. Beegle and how it was they got the key back in the room after they went out and locked the door. And that’s the hardest nut to crack, for there isn’t any opening in this room through which a key could be put back.”

“Except the chimney,” commented Jolly Bill.

“We’ve eliminated that,” declared Bob. “But, just to be on the safe side, I’ll climb up on the roof and drop the key down. We’ll see where it lands.”

“Better first find out where the key really was,” suggested Ned. “I mean where Mr. Beegle was lying on the floor with the key near his hand.”

“A good idea,” declared Bob. “Can you show us how it was?” he asked.

The old man seemed rapidly to be getting better, for he arose from his chair and tottered into his strong room. There he stretched out on the floor in the position he had found himself in when he became conscious. He laid the key in the position where he had first noted it on opening his eyes.

“Well, we have that to start with,” remarked Bob, as the old man arose and went back to his chair. “Ill just mark the spot on the floor with a pencil.” As he stooped over to do this he seemed to take notice of something, for Ned saw his chum give a little start.

“Did you get a clew then, Bob?” he asked.

“A clew? No – no clews here, I’m afraid.”

“I thought you saw something.”

“No – nothing to amount to anything. Now I’ll get up on the roof and drop the key down. You fellows stay here and tell me where it lands. I’ll try it half a dozen times.”

They helped Hiram Beegle back to his blanketed chair, and by this time the doctor had come back. He said his patient was much better and that gradually all the effects of the attack would wear off.

“But you had better not stay here all alone,” the physician suggested. “I stopped at Tom Shan’s on my way here and he and his wife want you to come and stay with them a few days. You’ll be well taken care of there.”

“Yes – yes,” slowly assented Hiram. “I’ll – go. There’s nothing here, now, to be taken. They have my treasure.”

He spoke sadly, as one who has lost hope.

“We’ll get it back for you,” said Chief Duncan cheerfully.

“Sure we will!” cried Jolly Bill. “I’ll get in the wake of that scoundrel Rod Marbury and take it away from him. Trust an old messmate for that!”

He seemed so hale and hearty that one could not help having a friendly feeling for him, and his weather-beaten face shone with the honesty of his purpose, while his shiny bald head seemed to give promise of a brighter sun rising on the affairs of Hiram Beegle.

“I’ll take you over to Shan’s place now, in my car,” offered Dr. Martin. “You need rest and quiet more than anything else. The police will look after things here.”

“Yes, we’ll look after things,” promised Chief Drayton. “I’ll lock up the cabin and bring you the key after this young man gets through dropping the key down the chimney, though I don’t see what good it’s going to do. I’ll lock up the place for you.”

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