

THE
ADVENTURE
OF THE
SEVEN KEYHOLES

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

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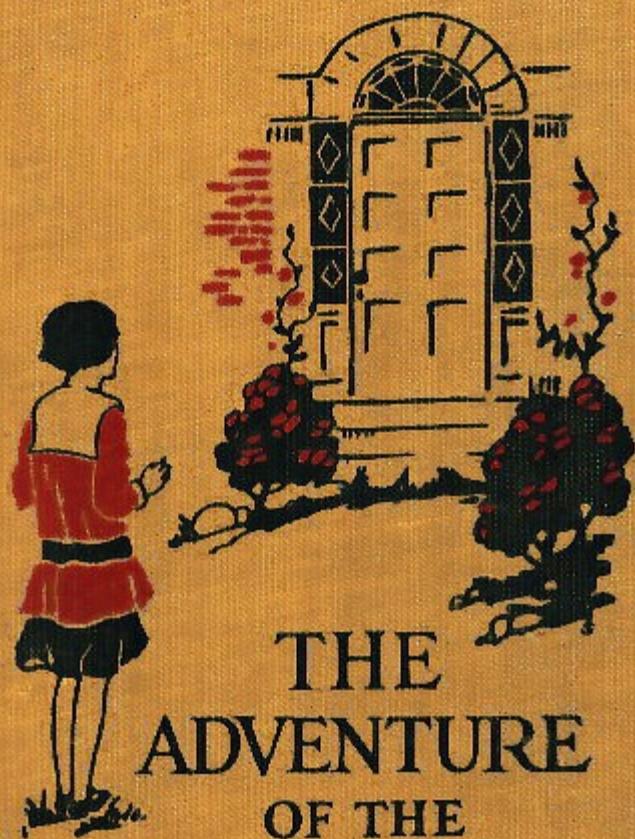
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The old Fairfax mansion on Pine Point



THE ADVENTURE OF THE SEVEN KEYHOLES

BY
AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

Author of "BLUEBONNET BEND," "THE EDGE OF RAVEN POOL," "SALLY SIMMS ADVENTURES IT," etc.

ILLUSTRATED



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BUT AS SHE BENT TO EXAMINE IT NOW, IT EXHIBITED VERY EVIDENT SIGNS OF A DIAMOND-SHAPED LOCK

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE SEVEN KEYHOLES

CHAPTER I THE KEY

If Grandpa Fairfax had not left the curious little brass key to Barbara, there would have been no story. But he left a will which was just about as queer as his life had been, and the queerest thing in it was the clause that “to my only granddaughter, Barbara Fairfax, I bequeath a small brass key which will unlock certain keyholes in the old Fairfax mansion on Pine Point. There are seven of these keyholes, the most important of which will be the seventh; and she will have to find them for herself.”

Even the lawyer had laughed when he read that clause, it sounded so absurd. But Barbara did not laugh. Her mind, on the contrary, seethed with questions. What in the world had her grandfather meant? How ever had it happened that a twelve-year-old girl had been left with such a strange bequest on her hands?

“Here is the key,” said the lawyer and he laid a curious-looking little brass thing in Barbara’s hand. And Barbara could only stare at it helplessly.

“I’m sure I don’t know what Pa meant by it all!” sighed Barbara’s aunt, Mrs. Bentley. “I can’t imagine what the child can do about it. But, then, he always was a strange man; you never *could* tell what he would do! Anyhow, so long as he left me the money to pay off the mortgage on my home and help out that way, I don’t care what becomes of the old Fairfax place.”

“But he left the Fairfax place to you also, Mrs. Bentley,” the lawyer reminded her, “to be held at least till Barbara is twenty-one. Don’t forget that.”

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“A lot of good that will do me!” she laughed scornfully. “Tumbling to pieces . . . hasn’t been repaired or painted in goodness knows how long. Pa has refused to put hammer or nail to it, these last thirty years. No, I’ve got all I can do to run my boarding-house during the summer season and make ends meet in the winter, without bothering with the Fairfax place. And Barbara on my hands to look after, too. I’ve had her ever since her parents died ten years ago. No, the old place will stand as it is till the crack of doom if it waits for me to fix it up!”

When they had left the lawyer’s office, Barbara and her aunt, and had settled themselves in the little Ford that was to take them back to Mrs. Bentley’s boarding-house on the river, about three miles from the village, Barbara carefully held the strange little brass key between finger and thumb, regarding it solemnly. She was wondering what in the world

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her grandfather had meant by “the seven keyholes,” and how she was ever going to find them. But Mrs. Bentley chuckled inwardly every time she turned from the steering-wheel to glance at the key.

“Just like Pa! *just* like him! And it doesn’t mean anything at all. But at least it will give Barbara something to do,” she thought, “and that won’t be such a bad idea when there’s no school and I’m so busy.”

But Barbara, on the contrary, was firmly convinced that it did mean something. She had always had absolute faith in Grandpa Fairfax. He had never seemed to her so queer and eccentric as he had to every one else who knew him. Perhaps that was because she knew him better—far better, even, than his only remaining daughter, Lucretia, who had been too busy and harassed with the running of her summer boarding-house to pay any attention to him in the summer months and too exhausted in the winter to try to understand him. But Barbara had spent many hours and days with him in the dilapidated old Fairfax house on Pine Point, listening to his strange, enthralling tales of his early life (he was eighty-five when he died) and following him about the shabby rooms filled with rickety, moth-eaten furniture. She had felt very sad when she knew that she was never to see Grandpa Fairfax again.



When Barbara finally reached Pine Point, she stood and gazed up at the old house for a long time

But, curiously enough, never in all the time she had spent with him had he so much as mentioned the brass key or any particular keyhole. Nothing had appeared to be locked in that tumble-down old mansion, anyway. There was, apparently, no reason for locking anything up. Everything in it seemed worthless, except to the old gentleman. It was common knowledge that he had a tidy sum of money stowed away in various banks; why he never spent any of it on his house was a speculation indulged in by every one who knew him; no one could understand his letting things go as he did. And now he was gone and here was she, Barbara, with nothing but a strange-looking brass key for her portion. *A key!* The foolishness of it! . . .

7

Suddenly a silly little rhyme began to run through her mind as the Ford rattled along the dusty country road. Barbara was given to rhyming; it came natural to her. Every once in a while some jingle would pop into her mind and she would find herself repeating it aloud—that is, if no one else were around. Now something occurred to her that ran like this:

8

A key of brass was left to me,
A quaint, mysterious little key.
What can its curious secret be?

Having got that far, her mind ran on: a key . . . a key to the secret . . . a key to the mystery. . . . Hold on! . . . Wasn't that exactly what it was?—*a key to the mystery?*

9

She gave a little triumphant bounce and was on the point of imparting this wonderful idea to Aunt Lucreech (as she called her) when she suddenly thought better of it. Aunt Lucreech was

always laughing at her—seemed always to find her thoughts and ideas and suggestions, no matter how serious Barbara considered them, the subject of a joke—when she listened to them at all. So why bother her with this? It had suddenly become too precious, too interesting—that idea about the old brass key being the key to a mystery. She couldn't bear to be laughed at about it.

No, this should be *her* secret—Barbara Fairfax's alone. She pressed her small lips together and got out of the car when it rolled into the back yard, bearing away her precious key to be hidden where no laughing, joke-seeking eyes should see it.

And as she tucked it away in the box that contained her best handkerchiefs and Sunday lace collars, she resolved that some day that key was going to unlock her grandfather's secret, if she had to ransack every square inch of the Fairfax mansion to accomplish it. One thing, at any rate, she was determined to do.

10

“Please, Aunt Lucreech,” she whispered just before dinner-time, “don't tell any one at the table . . . or at any time, about . . . about . . . my key, will you?”

Her aunt looked down at her in considerable surprise. She had meant to regale her guests at the boarding-house table that day with the laughable bequest that her little niece had received. But a glance at Barbara's set, serious face convinced her that the child was taking the matter much more seriously that *she* had. Mrs. Bentley was of a kind and thoughtful nature, in reality, and she would have gone far out of her way to avoid hurting any one's feelings. So, relinquishing, with some regret,

the pleasure of telling this curious tale, she replied:

“Of course I won’t if you don’t want me to, Barbara. But you are the *strangest* child!”

11

And Barbara knew that her secret was safe. She thought the long midday boarding-house dinner would never end, and was rather absent-minded in her reply when jolly old Mr. Truscott asked what she had been doing with herself all morning. She had some difficulty, after dinner, in evading the Carroll twins, who promptly tried to persuade her to get on her bathing-suit and accompany them on a crabbing-expedition along the river bank, followed by a swim. This was the usual afternoon program and eleven-year-old Kit and Kat Carroll, who were devoted to Barbara, could not imagine what had come over her when she refused point-blank to go with them and declared she had something else to do. Kit and Kat (short for Christopher and Katherine) privately agreed that she must be “mad at” them about something and racked their brains miserably all afternoon to think what it could be.

But Barbara was far from being “mad at” any one. With the little brass key concealed in her sweater pocket, she was taking the back road through the pine woods, galloping hot-foot over the soft brown pine needles, in a frenzied rush to get, by the very shortest route and with the greatest possible speed, to the old Fairfax mansion on Pine Point.

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CHAPTER II

THE FIRST KEYHOLE

When Barbara finally reached Pine Point, she stood and gazed up at the old house for a long time, trying to decide where it was best to begin her search. The Fairfax mansion—it *had* been a mansion long ago, when Grandpa Fairfax was a boy—was a rambling, quaintly shaped house with a long, sloping roof at the back, and a high-pillared veranda in front. It reminded Barbara of the pictures she had sometimes seen of old Southern plantation houses. In fact, Grandpa Fairfax had once told her that it was originally built by an ancestor of his who for his health's sake had come to Pine Point from Georgia, shortly after the Revolutionary War.

As a rule, when her grandfather was alive Barbara had entered the house by way of the back door, which led straight into the little kitchen. For Grandpa Fairfax had made no pretense of occupying the entire house. He had his quarters that were comfortable enough, in the kitchen and a little back bedroom, and the rest of the house he used chiefly to ramble about in, rummaging occasionally through the dusty drawers and chests, or peering into musty old books and talking about their contents to Barbara. 14

But somehow, this time, with the mysterious brass key in her hand, Barbara felt that an entrance through the back kitchen was not quite proper. She must go into the house as if she had not been used to prowling around it all her life, enter correctly and in a dignified manner by the front door on the 15

broad, broken-down veranda, and try to imagine she was going in for the first time as a strange visitor might. But first she sat down on the veranda steps and tried to think where all those seven keyholes might be. And how was she to know which was the *first* and which the *seventh* and which all the rest? Of course there was a keyhole in the front door,—there always had been, naturally,—but as far back as she could remember it had never been used. Grandpa Fairfax had always said there was nothing in the house worth stealing, so why bother to lock it up? She supposed that there were locks on the doors inside, too, but neither had these ever been in use. Besides, the locks on all those doors would take much, much bigger keys than the one Grandpa had left her. Well, anyhow, she decided, she would begin at the front door. So she scrambled up, brandishing the key, and crossed the veranda.

But there was just one lock on the front door and, as Barbara had surmised, only a very large key would fit it. She found that the door was not locked, anyway, and perfectly easy to open, as it had always been. She pushed it wide and entered, shivering a little at the musty chill of the house. Nothing had been changed since she was last in it, some time before her grandfather's death. She left the front door standing open and hurried about, raising all the windows to let in the warm, sweet, pine-scented air from outside. This done, she began to feel more natural, and strolled about the wide central hall, wondering where it was best to begin her search.

16

“One thing is certain,” she said aloud. She often talked aloud to herself when she was quite alone. It seemed more companionable, somehow. “I’ll have to look where it is likely that locks would be . . . on doors of rooms and closets and

cupboards, or on bureau drawers and desks . . . anything that can be locked or unlocked . . . for that's the only way I'll find a use for this funny little key. So here goes!"

Barbara had just made a dive toward the tall door of a big closet in the corner of the hall when she was startled by a loud whoop from the river. And peering out at the open front door, she beheld the Carroll twins in their bathing-suits, each brandishing a crab-net, shouting and calling her name. They had undoubtedly come prowling along the river bank from the next cove where her aunt's boarding-house stood. They must have seen her as she rested on the veranda and of course they knew that she was now inside the house.

17

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "I'll have an *awful* time trying to shoo them away from here! And I simply won't have them prying into my secret. They're good fun . . . both of them . . . But I want to keep this thing to myself.

"I can't come down just now; I'm busy!" she called down to them, and hoped that they would take the hint and go away. But evidently she was not to be rid of them so easily. They came streaming up the bank toward the house, demanding indignantly why she had gone off and hidden herself this way and why she wouldn't play with them, and was she "mad at" anything? The Carroll twins were comical-looking youngsters, both with bushy bobbed hair as light as tow, twinkling little blue eyes, and a sprinkling of freckles that peppered their faces and arms. So much alike were they that they could easily have changed clothes and Kit passed for Kat and no one been the wiser.

18

“Say, you ain’t mad, are you?” demanded Kat, imploringly. “What do you want to come off here by yourself for, anyhow? This is an old deserted place, ain’t it?”

“This was my grandfather’s house,” announced Barbara, with much injured dignity. Then she remembered that the twins had never seen or known of Grandpa Fairfax, as they were recent summer arrivals at Mrs. Bentley’s boarding-house. “I’ve got some work to do here,” she went on, more amiably, “and I can’t come out to play till I’ve finished it.”

19

“Oh, let us help you!” implored Kit, delightedly. “I’m great on house-cleanin’—when Ma wants me to help. It’ll be sport and you’ll get done quicker.”

“No, thank you,” responded Barbara, stiffly. “I’m not house-cleaning and I must do this thing alone. I’ll come down and swim when I get through. Please go now.”

Decidedly miffed, the twins reluctantly took their departure, casting many a grim backward look at Barbara as she stood at the front door, watching them make their way down to the bank of the river. Not till they had paddled disconsolately out of sight around a bend did Barbara turn back into the house.

20

“I’m afraid I’m going to have trouble with them,” she thought aloud. “They are full up with curiosity this very minute, and goodness knows where they’ll stop if they once get going.” With this disquieting reflection, she resumed her search, but in the fascination of hunting the whereabouts of the first keyhole she quickly forgot her misgivings.

It was not in the big old closet door in the hall. The key did not fit that lock, nor did it fit the one to the cellar door, at the other end of the hall. Nor did it fit the door to a great parlor or living-room on one side of the hall, nor the door to what had once been a dining-room, on the other. Barbara decided to investigate the living-room first and stood in the middle of the floor uncertainly gazing about her and trying to plan where to begin.

The room was in great disorder—had always been, as far back as she could remember. Her grandfather had used it as a sort of workshop where he had done much casual tinkering, at an old carpenter’s work-bench he had built, himself, and placed in the center. Barbara remembered that he was very fond, too, of puttering about with rusty keys and locks, fitting and oiling and experimenting with them for endless hours at a time. Locks were apparently his hobby, and he had once told her about King Louis XVI of France and how he loved to work with locks and keys, till the people of his kingdom had scornfully dubbed him “Louis the Locksmith.” Her grandfather had said he could sympathize with the poor monarch who wanted so much to have something to play with and think about besides tiresome affairs of state.

21

Remembering all this now, Barbara approached the work-bench, thinking a little sorrowfully of the kindly old man who had so often sat there and whom she would never see again. The bench was a big, home-made affair like a long, low table, and on it still lay the tools, rusty now, that he had so often used. While she stood gazing at it, thinking more about her grandfather than of her present quest, her eye was suddenly caught by the drawer in it, at one side of the bench where he

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had always sat when at work. She remembered that the drawer had contained many different sizes of nails, as well as various small tools. If it had ever had a lock, she did not remember it.

But as she bent to examine it now, it exhibited very evident signs of a diamond-shaped lock, and, what was more startling, there was pasted beside the lock a tiny scrap of paper on which was an unmistakable figure 1.

“Oh, I’ve found it! I’ve found it!” cried Barbara, dancing up and down and flourishing the key about her head. “I’ve found the very first one. Hurrah!”

23

“Oh, you have, have you?” answered a mocking voice. And whirling about, startled almost out of her wits, Barbara beheld the Carroll twins hanging over the sill of an open window, grinning at her maliciously.

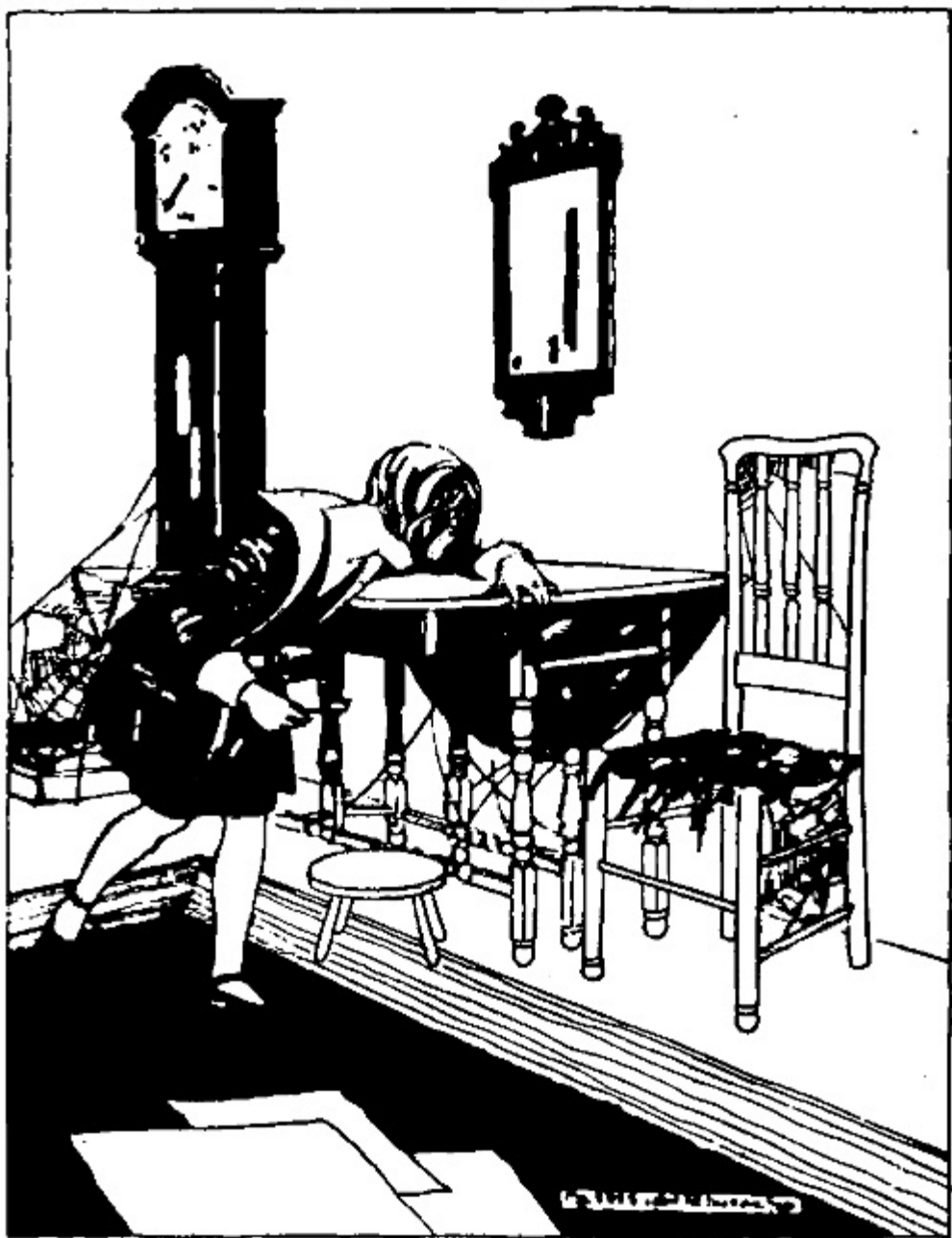
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CHAPTER III

THE SECOND KEYHOLE

“Go away from here . . . straight . . . at once!” Barbara exclaimed in an indignant voice. “I simply cannot have you here, bothering me, while I’m busy.” She stood waiting for the twins to leave. The key was still in her hand and she was conscious that Kit and Kat were staring at it with all their eyes.

“What’s that funny little key for?” they demanded in unison, hanging still farther over the window-sill. They certainly were infuriating. And Barbara was becoming every minute more exasperated.



But as she bent to examine it now, it exhibited very evident signs of a diamond-shaped lock

“I can’t tell you,” she retorted. “I am not going to,

anyway. If you don't get off the window-sill this minute," she went on, "I am going to shut the window down—right on your heads." This was a terrible threat, and Barbara knew it. She also knew that she would never in the world carry it out, but she was desperate and something desperate had to be done or said. Here was the secret waiting at her fingertips to be solved and these wretched children persisted in getting in the way!

The twins, however, regarded her threat with unexpected seriousness. Slowly and watchfully Kit and Kat unhinged themselves from the window-sill and with dragging footsteps disappeared from the veranda. But Barbara, though relieved at their departure, was left with the uneasy feeling that she had not been very wise, and that the Carroll twins in an unfriendly mood were somewhat to be dreaded.

But once they were out of sight she forgot them and returned joyfully to her task. The little brass key fitted perfectly into the lock of the drawer in the carpenter's bench and smoothly turned in its socket. Grandpa Fairfax was certainly a good locksmith. Barbara had time to think of that, even as she jerked open the drawer and peered within.

26

If this compartment had once contained nails and tools, there was nothing of the sort in it now. On the contrary, it was quite empty, save for a sheet of paper folded and addressed on one side, in Grandpa Fairfax's small, shaky handwriting, to Barbara. She laid down the key and opened the folded sheet wonderingly, standing to read it right where she was.

"DEAR LITTLE GRANDDAUGHTER" (it ran):

“If you have the energy and interest to persist in the quest on which I have started you, I think you will not regret it. You will think it very queer and so will every one else. But, then, I am a queer old man and I do things in a queer way, I suppose.

“I have watched you for several years and have realized that you are a little girl with a very good mind—the kind of mind that likes to know about things and with interest enough to think and ask questions and put together what you find out, till you have satisfied your curiosity. That is a very fine kind of mind to have and will get you somewhere in this world some day, if you keep up the good work. 27

“All my life I have loved locks and keys—in which I have been like ‘Louis the Locksmith.’ Perhaps if I had attended more closely to other matters, I might have been more of a success in this world. At any rate, I have had a happy life, after my fashion, and now I am leaving to you the key to the same kind of happiness, if you care to avail yourself of it. You won’t understand what all this means till you reach the seventh keyhole. When you do, turn back and read this letter again and you will realize why I sent you on this quest.

“The keyholes are all in plain sight and plainly numbered. If you search in the proper way and use your reasoning powers a bit, you will have no difficulty in discovering them. 28

“And now I will close by saying that I had a very good time fashioning them and planning this little adventure for you. With much love to you, my little Barbara, I am

“Your affectionate

Barbara read the letter through three times before she got the real meaning of it. Then she sat down on the nearest chair, to think it all over. That letter was so like Grandpa Fairfax! She remembered now how he would never answer a question of hers if he could possibly make her guess or reason out the answer herself. But what could it be that he had so carefully hidden away behind the seventh keyhole, and where was the seventh keyhole? And where were all the rest?

She started up to begin the search for the second keyhole, when she suddenly realized, from the appearance of the sun, that it must be quite late in the afternoon. She realized further that she had promised her Aunt Lucreech that she would be on hand to shell several quarts of peas for supper that night and would have to hurry straight home if they were to be done in time. So, with a regretful sigh, she went about and closed all the windows and doors, put the now precious little brass key in her sweater pocket and scampered back through the pine woods to Mrs. Bentley's, feeling that at least she had accomplished something important that day. 29

As she had expected, Barbara found herself not on speaking terms with the twins that night. They ignored her at supper and afterward wandered off by themselves on some mysterious affair from which she was pointedly excluded. She felt rather lonely and disconsolate for a while, but consoled herself by thinking over her adventure of the afternoon and planning where she would begin to hunt for the second keyhole. 30

Much to her relief, she discovered that the mother of the twins intended to take them to the ocean beach, next day, on a picnic, and keep them there till evening. Very kindly Mrs. Carroll asked Barbara to join the party, but, much to every one's astonishment, the little girl politely declined the invitation, saying she had some work that must be done that day, which could not wait. Wisely she saw the Carrolls off first and then scurried through the woods to her grandfather's old house, which now seemed bursting with mysterious secrets for her.

But the search was not destined that day to be as successful from the very start as the former one had been. Evidently Grandpa Fairfax had not intended to make the undertaking too easy for her. She had decided, before beginning, that it would be wisest to conduct the search in a systematic way, thoroughly exhausting the possibilities of one room or location before moving on to another. And as she had begun with the living-room, she concluded that she would finish with that first and move on to the room across the hall only when there seemed nothing more to be discovered where she was.

31

She began by opening all the living-room windows as she had done the day before, letting in the sweet warm outside air. The day was extremely hot and there were high-piled thunder-clouds rising slowly out of the west, but Barbara had no time to notice these as she hurried about her task. Every bit of furniture in the cluttered and dusty old room she examined with the greatest care, but though there were a number of keyholes, in various drawers and doors, not one would receive the key or seemed related to it in any respect.

32

After she had gone over all the keyholes twice, to no avail, she sat down once more on the carpenter's work-bench and read Grandpa Fairfax's letter again. She noted particularly the line where he had said that she had a good mind and was able to reason things out.

“But I'm afraid he wouldn't think so if he could see me now!” she said ruefully, aloud. “I don't seem able to reason a thing out about where that second keyhole can be.” And again she sat gazing down at the letter in her lap as if seeking inspiration. As she studied the cramped, shaky handwriting, she could almost see Grandpa Fairfax as he wrote, stroking his long white beard with one hand as he sat at his old secretary desk in the corner, laboriously penning the lines meant for her guidance. She had seen him sit there many times, his spectacles down nearly at the end of his nose, where they always seemed to slide when he was occupied with anything.



Her eyes unconsciously traveled over to the old desk—and then she had a brand-new inspiration

Then her eyes unconsciously traveled over to the old desk

—and then she had a brand-new inspiration. That desk was somehow very closely associated with Grandpa Fairfax, almost as much so as the work-bench. Had she given it all the attention it deserved? She decided she hadn't, and with renewed hope she sprang across the room to it.

The secretary was, like everything else in the Fairfax mansion, very rickety and out of repair. One of the prettily curved mahogany legs was broken clean off and its place was supplied by two or three bricks piled together. Several brass knobs were missing from its drawers, and the desk had long since lost every vestige of polish. Above the desk part were glass doors with curious little diamond-shaped panes, several of which were broken.

Barbara pulled out all the drawers and threw open the glass doors, but save for Grandpa's rusty pens and some blotting-paper, the secretary was quite empty. She was about to slam the glass doors to with a bang, in sheer disgust at the uselessness of this hunt, when her eye suddenly caught the gleam of a bit of brass on the side between two shelves, well up beyond her reach. Seizing a chair and placing it so she could climb up, she stood on tiptoe and got a closer view. 34

Yes, sure enough, there was a diamond-shaped brass keyhole like the one on the work-bench, and close beside it a paper pasted, on which was a tiny figure 2. This time Barbara did not shout, but she gave a happy little chuckle to think that she had succeeded again. Before she could turn to get the key, however, a terrific clap of thunder startled her so that she all but fell off the wooden chair on which she was perched. And almost at the same moment a great black cloud blotted out 35

the sun, filling the room with a kind of dim twilight.

CHAPTER IV

THE THIRD KEYHOLE

The thunder-storm proved to be the worst that Barbara had ever lived through. Before the hardest rain, she managed to rush around, closing windows and doors, realizing that, madly as she longed to be safe at home with her aunt in this crisis, she could not possibly get there. She was terribly afraid of thunderstorms—had been ever since the day she had seen a great tree blasted by lightning, a tree that had stood right in front of her aunt's house. She knew she was perfectly safe in such storms if she remained indoors, but she huddled shiveringly in the corner of an old, dilapidated sofa now, hiding her eyes from the glare of the lightning.

But at last it passed, as all such storms pass, rapidly and with dull mutterings of thunder, and Barbara went about opening the windows again, glad to breathe once more the sweet outer air, fresh and rain-washed and odorous of wet pine needles. Then she made a mad rush for the key, climbed on the wooden chair, and, after all the long delay, unlocked the second keyhole. 37

Something like a very small door opened, revealing behind it a tiny, shallow space, scarcely large enough to hold more than a thin packet of letters. In it was nothing but an envelop with Barbara's name on it in Grandpa Fairfax's shaky writing.

“Mercy!” cried Barbara, aloud, “has he left me nothing but a letter in each of these places?” To tell the truth, she 38

was not a little disappointed, having expected to find something strange and wonderful in each one of the hiding-places. However, she took the envelop from the little compartment, and, getting down from her perch, eagerly opened it. Within was a sheet of paper closely covered on both sides with her grandfather's handwriting, and she fell to reading what the old gentleman had written:

“Perhaps you may be disappointed, my little Barbara, at first when you discover this keyhole and its contents. But have patience, and read what I have to tell you here. Do not despise this rickety old secretary, for it is a very wonderful piece of furniture and has a wonderful history. Up till a very few years ago it stood out in the woodshed and had been used ever since I can remember for keeping chicken-feed in. When your Aunt Lucreech moved away to her house, farther down the river, she took with her the only available writing-desk in the place and I looked around for something to fill its place, and in so doing, discovered the value of our old chicken-feed receptacle.

“It was so covered with dirt and dust as to be hardly recognizable, and so broken and decrepit as to be almost useless. When I had cleaned it up and repaired it as best I could (I am a poor carpenter, if I *am* a good locksmith!) I discovered some surprising facts about it. To begin with, it is made of beautiful wood—indeed, of the very finest mahogany—and only needs scraping and polishing to restore it to its rightful beauty. In the second place, being something of an antiquarian (a person who loves old things) I knew that it must be the work of some famous furniture-maker, and probably was built two or three centuries ago in England. It would be

extremely valuable if repaired and polished to its former luster. People nowadays often pay many hundreds of dollars for a genuine piece of rare furniture like this. I had no skill to accomplish this, myself, and for reasons of my own I decided not to do anything about having it restored at that time.

“Then, one day, I made another discovery about it, one that made me very glad I had not sent it away to be done over. Quite by accident, in passing my hand over the side where you found the keyhole (there was none there then), I pressed what must have been a secret spring and a tiny door flew open, revealing something—But there! I cannot tell you what it revealed, for that is the secret of the third keyhole.

40

“At any rate, my discoveries concerning this wonderful desk were so surprising to me that I determined to find out its history if possible. I knew that my grandfather, the one who built this house, had come originally from Georgia and I had heard that he was said to have brought a considerable collection of his historic family furniture with him. Suspecting that the secretary might be one of those pieces, I wrote to a cousin down in Savannah, a very old lady, asking if she had ever heard much about our grandfather and his furniture and telling her about my find.

41

“She answered that she remembered quite well the time he went away to the North. He sold his big plantation that was near ‘Mulberry Grove,’ the famous plantation once belonging to General Nathaniel Greene, and all of his furniture except some antique, historic pieces that he would not part with. She said her father wanted him to leave the secretary to him, but my grandfather said no, it had been given to his father by General

Greene's widow and therefore he wouldn't part with it on any account.

“So there you are, my little Barbara. Not only is this secretary a wonderful piece of furniture, but it was once owned and used by General Greene himself. Think of it! If you know your history as I believe you do, you will remember that, next to Washington himself, Greene was our most important general in the Revolutionary War.”

42

“So, because I have seen signs in you that you too are one day going to love old things, if you don't already, I give you this rare piece of furniture which no one else about here has ever thought enough of to use for anything but chicken-feed. Keep it till you grow older and then have it put in proper condition. Then you may still keep it, or sell it if you think best. And if you do the latter, it will undoubtedly bring you a very pretty price.”

“As for the third keyhole, I think I had best give you a hint, for I warn you it will be rather difficult to find. But this at least, I will tell you: It is not five feet in any direction from the second, and that is all I shall say about it now. I pretty nearly forgot to tell you that I myself arranged the lock on the second keyhole on the little secret door, because I wanted you to have the fun of finding that door for yourself.”

43

“Now go and hunt for the third keyhole and keep in mind what I told you about it.”

“GRANDPA FAIRFAX.”

“My!” cried Barbara when she had finished reading this and with new eyes, as it were, stood gazing at the old secretary. “If this isn’t the most exciting thing I’ve ever heard of! Who would have thought it! Who ever would have thought of such a thing? That old desk . . . all propped up with four bricks for a leg! . . . and it was once General Greene’s and he may have written letters on it. Oh, my!”

Words failed her and she gazed and gazed, trying to remember all she had ever read or studied about General Greene, trying to picture the decrepit old piece of furniture as it ought to look in its proper condition, wondering how it had ever come to such an incongruous use as a receptacle for chicken-feed, wondering what grandfather had found behind that secret door. 44

Suddenly she remembered that this last question she ought soon to be able to answer herself, and she began a systematic hunt for the third keyhole. But in the midst of this she was interrupted by a shout from the river and beheld the twins, back from the ocean sooner than expected, probably because of the thunder-storm. They were calling her frantically, announcing that her aunt said that lunch was ready and that she was to come home at once.

Which ended the search for that day, for it rained all the afternoon and prevented any further thought of exploration in the old Fairfax mansion. The next day being Sunday, Barbara dutifully attended church and Sunday-school in the morning, and in the afternoon went for a ride in the Ford, with her aunt and Mrs. Carroll and the twins. Here she had a chance to patch up her quarrel with Kit and Kat, who very humbly begged her 45

not to be “mad” any more and promised not to disturb her if she was “busy in that old house,” as they put it. She fancied that even in this beguiling mood they were probably planning more mischief, but she decided not to worry about it.

On Monday morning, after she had helped her aunt collect and sort the clothes and house linen for the laundry, she was off like a sky-rocket to her happy hunting-ground in the old mansion, and resumed in earnest the search for the third keyhole. Not five feet from the second,—so Grandpa Fairfax had written,—but he certainly had managed to conceal it well. For it so happened that five feet in any direction from that desk the room was perfectly clear of any article of furniture whatever. Unless the keyhole were in the floor, walls, or ceiling, there was absolutely nothing there in which it could possibly be. The ceiling was out of the question and the walls were plaster, and bare of the slightest suggestion of a keyhole. There was nothing—*nothing!*

Once more Barbara sat down and glanced through Grandpa’s letter. And for the first time she noticed a faint, wavy line under the word “any,” where he had said “in *any* direction” from the desk. Well, she had looked in “any” direction, which meant, evidently, every direction. Up . . . in front . . . at the sides . . . Suddenly it dawned on her that she had not looked either *down* or *back*. “Down” would have to be in the cellar. It could scarcely be *there!* And “back” would be out in the hall, for the desk stood against the wall that divided the living-room from the hall. That, then, must be it. Somewhere, right back of the desk, out in the hall.

46

She ran out, stopping at the doorway to glance back, to

47

make sure just what part of the hall was behind the desk. A great wooden, claw-footed old chair stood in the corresponding space there, its straight back formed of slender, curving pieces of wood, its wide seat covered with the dust of months. She remembered hearing Grandpa Fairfax allude to it as “the fiddle-backed chair.” She also remembered that it used to stand before the desk. He must have moved it out here himself. Hurrying to it, she looked it all over, certain that somewhere in it was hidden the secret.

And sure enough, right in the front, in a narrow strip below the seat, she was rewarded by discovering the now familiar little diamond-shaped brass keyhole and a tiny bit of paper on which appeared the figure 3.

CHAPTER V

THE FOURTH KEYHOLE

Barbara hurried back to the living-room to get the key, but as she returned to the hall a voice from the open front door exclaimed:

“My land, Barbara! Aren’t you ever going to quit prowling about this old place?”

It was her Aunt Lucretia who stood there, her cheeks flushed from the hurry in which she had come and her hands covered with flour.

“I’ve been looking all over for you. Might have known you were here, though, and saved a lot of trouble. I want you to run down to Conklin’s and get me some cinnamon and nutmeg. I’m all out of them, and right in the middle of making pies! Get some seeded raisins, too.”



Her aunt stared at her curiously and at the key

Barbara looked at the key in her hand and unconsciously sighed softly as she replied:

“All right, Aunt Lucreech. I’ll go right away.”

Always, it seemed, she was to be interrupted at the critical moment when she was about to make a fresh discovery. Her aunt stared at her curiously and at the key which Barbara was stowing away in her sweater pocket.

“Well, have you found any keyholes yet?” she asked, smiling a little condescending smile of amusement.

“Yes,” said Barbara, who was always very truthful, “I’ve found a few.” She hoped her aunt would not ask any more about them, for she didn’t feel like revealing any of her secrets just yet. And Mrs. Bentley, supposing that they were no more than ordinary keyholes and that it was probably some foolish kind of joke that was being played on Barbara to keep her busy and amused, said no more, being, indeed, quite without further curiosity about it. 50

Barbara went on her errand and when she got back was pressed into service to pare apples, wash raisins, and pick over several quarts of berries, all of which she did quite uncomplainingly, though she was boiling with impatience to get back to the third keyhole. It was afternoon before a chance presented itself, but at last it came.

The turning of the lock in the third keyhole revealed a shallow little drawer concealed below the seat of the old chair. In the bottom of the open drawer lay a faded and yellowed piece of paper on which were some brown marks that looked a little like the drawing of a crude machine, and in the corner two all but undecipherable initials. They looked like “E. W.,” but

Barbara could not be sure.

Taking the paper up in her hands, to stare at it more closely, she found the usual letter from her grandfather lying underneath. Puzzled and somewhat disheartened by this new find, she turned to the letter with relief, as an explanation to the mystery. He wrote:

51

“You will not think much of this latest discovery, I know, but perhaps by this time you have learned not to jump too hastily at conclusions, my little Barbara.

“To begin with, I had better explain that this old chair is probably as valuable as the desk and undoubtedly was made to be used with it. The wood is the same and the period it was made in the same, and a fiddle-backed chair to-day, a genuine one, is considered a rare and desirable article. The little drawer in the bottom of the seat I fashioned myself, because it seemed the best way of calling your attention to this piece of furniture. It can easily be removed, though it does not greatly detract from the appearance or value of the chair. I recommend that you have the chair restored sometime, as you will the secretary desk. No doubt General Greene sat in it, and probably other notables as well.

52

“But now we come to the curious bit of paper, which you will find in the drawer. You will no doubt have guessed that it was this paper I found in the secret drawer of the desk. It will probably mean nothing to you at first sight. It meant nothing to me till I got to studying over it and looking up a little past history about old ‘Mulberry Grove.’ I discovered that Eli

Whitney was once a visitor at that old plantation and it was during his stay there that he did a very wonderful thing. You know he was an inventor, and inventors are always thinking and planning how to make it easier to do certain kinds of work.

“Well, Whitney got interested in the cotton industry, cotton being the main crop they raised and depended on down there, then as now. He watched men spending hours and hours of time trying to separate the seeds from the cotton by hand—a slow and tedious process. And then the question occurred to him: why could not a machine be invented which would do that work quickly and easily and save time and labor? He straightway put his own brains to work on the problem, got Mrs. Greene, the widow of the general, interested in it, and before long had fashioned the cotton-gin, the machine that has saved millions of dollars in labor for the South.

53

“Beyond a doubt he too must have sat in this old chair at that old secretary and scratched away at drawing after drawing of his machine, planning, making changes, and thinking of improvements to add to it. This drawing must have been one of them, as the ‘E. W.,’ in the corner virtually proves. Perhaps he gave it to Mrs. Greene as a little souvenir of the interesting time they had had over the invention and warned her to keep the design well hidden from prying eyes till he had finished his work and given his invention to the world. So she must have placed it in the secret drawer. And no doubt its existence was forgotten in later years when she gave the secretary to my grandfather.

54

“So you have here another interesting relic, little Barbara, and I hope you will be so thrilled with it that you will spend a lot

of time reading up about Eli Whitney and his wonderful invention. Some day, too, you must visit Savannah and your cousins there. And if you do, and see the great loads of cotton bales being driven through the streets to the steamer wharves, you will be gladder than ever that you have in your possession an original drawing of the cotton-gin, which made the cotton industry the giant among industries that it is.

“And now I know you are wild to find the next keyhole. But the only help I am going to give you in the search is to say that you have not yet exhausted the possibilities of this immediate vicinity and that the next is connected with a favorite pastime we used to have together.

55

“GRANDPA FAIRFAX.”

It would scarcely be possible to express Barbara’s state of mind after reading Grandpa’s letter. She began to feel as if she were living in a fairy-story where curious articles that did not appear to be of the least interest or value were suddenly, at the wave of a magic wand, turned into objects of startling worth. Grandpa Fairfax had certainly been a wonderful magician. And this quest somehow reminded her of a glorified form of the “peanut hunt” that children sometimes had at parties, only with results far more astonishing than the finding of a million bushels of peanuts.

But now the fourth keyhole lured her on and, heedless of the fact that it was getting toward sundown, she plunged into the hunt. After an aimless journey round and round the living-room and hall, however, which yielded nothing at all in

56

the way of a clue, she concluded that she had better sit down a few moments and think about what Grandpa Fairfax had written.

“A favorite pastime,” he had said. Well, he and she had had a number. One was guessing riddles, another was talking over Grandpa’s early life and experiences, another was playing chess, and last but not least, one was reading together. Barbara used to do the reading, while Grandpa tinkered away at his carpenter’s workbench and made comments every once in a while. They had enjoyed the reading best of all.

“Yes, it must be something about reading . . . or books . . . or the bookcase,” decided Barbara. “I’ll go look at the bookcase first of all.” She walked over to where it stood, another aged piece of furniture in a corner of the room. But this she knew was no “antique,” for Aunt Lucreech had within her own recollection sent it over to Grandpa “to get it out of the house,” because it was in such bad condition. Grandpa had laughed and said it was not deserving of house room, even in *his* junk-heap; “poor wood, poor workmanship, not worth the nails that hold it together.” However, he gave it a corner in the living-room, and in it kept a few shabby old books that he and Barbara used to pore over together. 57

But she examined the bookcase now with minute attention, convinced that somewhere about it that fourth keyhole was to be found. And she was not mistaken. Far down on one side, in the very base of the thing, she presently discovered the diamond-shaped keyhole now so familiar to her, marked by a tiny figure 4. 58

And at this moment, a little voice at her elbow announced very meekly:

“Please, Barbara, your aunt says you’re to come home for supper.”

“And say, Barbara,” said another little voice, “you must be having a great time here! We know you must have a perfectly grand secret about something. If you’ll only let us into it, we’ll give you both our new crab-nets; honest we will!”

And the startled Barbara looked up into the faces of the Carroll twins, who had stolen in so quietly that she had not even heard them. Barbara knew that a suggestion of parting with their beloved crab-nets could only mean that they were terribly in earnest and her heart melted at the sight of their freckled, pleading faces.

“Tell you what,” she laughed. “If you’ll stop teasing me about this, I’ll tell you every speck about it after it’s all worked out. It is a perfectly wonderful secret. But if you bother me any more I’ll never tell you a single thing about it, as long as I live, and that’s positive!”

59

And with Barbara’s promise the Carroll twins had to be content.

60

CHAPTER VI

THE FIFTH KEYHOLE

It would be pleasant to be able to record that the remainder of Barbara's quest progressed as easily and successfully as the earlier portion, but such was not the case. To be exact, it seemed as if Fate conspired to prevent the conclusion from ever arriving. And the Carroll twins, evidently in league with Fate, contributed their share to the general confusion.

The morning after Barbara's discovery of the fourth keyhole, Mrs. Bentley burned her hand severely while helping to get breakfast, and Barbara knew that the catastrophe meant business for *her*. For in all emergencies she was invariably called in to be her aunt's assistant, and in this case she felt that it might be a long while before she was free to follow her own devices. 61

And she was not mistaken. All that day went by without a single chance to escape and go for even a few moments to the old Fairfax mansion. The next day was the same. And the day after was no better. A week went by and Mrs. Bentley's hand was still in bandages and Barbara was almost exhausted by the continuous round of dish-washing, preparing of vegetables and fruit, and general utility service to which she had had to give herself. And not only was she physically tired out, but her constantly baffled curiosity about the matter of the fourth keyhole was driving her frantic. She was seriously considering the idea of enlisting the Carroll twins to assist her, of giving them the key and directing them where to find the fourth

keyhole, when something else happened.

Her aunt noticed that Barbara was looking very white and tired one afternoon and she took compassion on her little niece.

62

“Land sakes, child!” Mrs. Bentley exclaimed, “you look about tuckered out. It’s too hot for you to be doing all this work in the kitchen; I’ve kept you here too long, honey. We have an easy supper to-night, so you just run away and have a nice afternoon, playing. My hand is a lot better, anyway, and after this I won’t keep you so busy. You’ve been a good girl to help me. Run along now!” Needless to say, Barbara lost no time in obeying her aunt’s command.

Rushing up to her room, she dived into the closet to find her sweater and get the key, before she ran on to the Fairfax house. But, singularly enough, when she put her hand into the pocket where she always kept it, there was no key to be found. Then she turned to the other pocket, with no better result. Startled now and somewhat alarmed, she searched on the floor of the closet, the floor of her room, and in every drawer and box in which she kept any of her little belongings. In vain. The key had vanished and there was no trace of it to be found in her room.

63

This was a blow that was almost overwhelming. She could not understand it. She distinctly remembered putting the key in her pocket when she left the old house the last time, over a week before. Since then she had not actually seen it, for the weather had been so warm that she had not had to wear her sweater and she had had no opportunity to make use of the key, so had left

it, as she supposed, undisturbed in that pocket. Where ever could it be?

Only one of two answers to that riddle was possible. 64
Either some one had taken it out of her pocket, or she had lost it somewhere between the two houses. Deciding that the latter explanation was the more likely, she ran out and along the path through the woods that led to the Fairfax mansion. Every inch of the pine-needle-carpeted path she searched, believing that the key would be lying somewhere in plain sight. No one used that path but Barbara, as it led nowhere but to the old house, and there was no call for any one but her to go there.

Arrived at the house after her fruitless search, she decided to look there too, as it was just possible she had dropped the key before leaving the place. But there was no sign of the key anywhere about and she hurried back to the Bentley house, determined now on other measures.

The twins knew about that key. They had seen it several times in her hand, and had even once questioned her about it. They must realize that it was connected with her secret and had no doubt seen her place it in her pocket the day they came for her when she was last at the Fairfax place. They must, then, have taken the key from her pocket to tease her. Probably they were only waiting for her to discover its disappearance and “raise a breeze about it,” as Kit would likely express it. Then they would sit back and watch the fun.



Startled, Barbara looked up into the faces of the Carroll twins, who had stolen in so quietly she had not even heard them

Yes, that was it, and there were the twins, crabbing as usual in the placid waters of the river, near the shore. She fairly flew down the bank and faced them, short of breath and decidedly upset. 65

“Kit and Kat,” she began severely, “I have an idea that you took my old brass key out of my sweater pocket sometime this week while I was busy. Did you do that?”

Kit Carroll dropped his crab-net and looked her guilelessly straight in the eye.

“No, Barbara, we didn’t take any key out of your pocket,” he said in great indignation, “and I think you’re awfully mean to say so. We don’t do things like that.”

Barbara stared at him in some surprise. She had been so positive that he and Kat were the guilty parties that this straightforward denial bowled her over, so to speak. 66

“Well, it’s gone,” she stammered, “and you and Kat were the only ones who knew where I kept it. I . . . I’m sorry if I made you feel bad by suspecting you of taking it. I thought you just did it to tease me and see me get mad.” And she walked quickly away, ashamed of having accused this innocent pair.

Barbara thought the twins looked after her rather curiously as she scrambled up the bank, but she did not feel like stopping for any more conversation. A terrible thing had happened. Her key, her precious key, that had been her only means of unlocking so many wonderful secrets, was gone, hopelessly lost, and now she would never be able to discover the rest of Grandpa Fairfax’s well-planned series of surprises. And he

had said the last was the most important, too. Oh, what should she do! How could she ever recover from this dreadful disappointment!

But even in the midst of her distress, she was drawn to the old house as if by a magnet; and before she realized it she found herself almost at the front door again.

67

“Well, I might as well go in,” she thought. “I’ll take one more look at that fourth keyhole and see if the key is lying around somewhere or dropped in some place where I haven’t thought to look.”

Accordingly she entered the living-room and went straight to the disreputable-looking bookcase, to begin anew her search for the key. She even took out all the old books and laid them on the floor, in order that she might see if the key had slipped back on the shelves behind them. But the shelves were bare of anything but dust, so she put the books all back and stood sorrowfully looking at the fourth keyhole, so tantalizingly staring at her from the base of the bookcase.

Presently she became aware that her hands were very, very dirty and that as she stood there she was holding them out in an exceedingly uncomfortable position, lest they come in contact with her clean afternoon dress. There was a pump in the little kitchen that her grandfather had used; she would go out there and wash her hands. She could at least be clean, if she could do nothing else! So she went out to the kitchen and began to work the pump that stood beside the iron sink. But the pump had long been out of use and gave forth nothing but a mournful hollow sound when she worked its

68

handle.

Barbara, however, was a resourceful little girl and had met this difficulty before, or at least had seen her grandfather meet it. She remembered that when the pump got into this condition it had to be “primed,” or, in other words, have some water poured down through it from the top, while some one worked the handle vigorously up and down. In this way the water far down below would be started again. A glance through the window showed her that the rain-barrel outside was partly full, so there was plenty of water for the priming. But in order to pour it through the pump, she would have to get a pitcher from the closet and dip the water out in that.

69

She went to the door of the kitchen closet, which was closed and fastened only with a latch. Usually she had no trouble with this latch, but now it stuck in a peculiar way, and on examining it, she thought it must have been bent a little out of place, that it should stick tightly instead of lifting in its usual easy fashion. How it had come to be so, she could not imagine, nor did she even consider it particularly, as she threw all her weight into the upward strain of raising the latch. Still it did not budge.

“Well!” she cried, standing and staring at it in surprise, “what ever did Grandpa do to this to make it stick so? He must have given it a knock accidentally at some time.” Her eyes roved all about it, as she stood trying to think of some means of opening the obstinate door, when suddenly she uttered an exclamation and bent to examine the dark woodwork in the wall close to the latch.

70

For just on the right-hand side, not half a foot away from the door-frame, and on a level with the latch, was a little diamond-shaped brass plate with a keyhole in it and the figure 5 pasted alongside!

CHAPTER VII

PERPLEXITY

In her astonishment over this new discovery, Barbara forgot all about her grimy hands and began dancing about and clapping them in the joy of the find. But suddenly she stopped and thought, with a return to seriousness:

“It’s all very well to be happy over this, but, after all, what’s the good of another keyhole when I haven’t got the key to any of them, any more? Two new keyholes—and not a thing to open them with! Oh, me! Grandpa never dreamed I’d be so careless and lose the key. What *would* he say to me if he knew?”

But even as she considered this, she remembered what he would be likely to say. He had said it at other times when she had got into difficulties. It would probably be something like this:

72

“Don’t get excited, little Barbara. Things are never quite so bad as they seem. Just do the next thing that it seems reasonable and sensible to do, and something helpful will surely turn up.”

Yes, he would probably say just that. She could almost hear him. Then she looked again at her grimy hands and concluded that the next thing would be to get them washed—and as speedily as possible. And as it was growing late (she had spent more time in her search than she had realized) and as it would probably be a somewhat complicated piece of work to start the pump, even if she could find what she wanted in the way of a

pitcher, she decided to run on back to her aunt's house, holding her hands out from her dress all the way, and get them washed there. By then it would probably be time to assist in getting supper, anyway. And so she went home, disappointed but not hopeless. And true to Grandpa Fairfax's philosophy, something helpful did turn up—and that very night.

It came about through the Carroll twins' having gone on a berrying expedition of their own that day, without having asked the advice of their elders. They had been waiting impatiently for two weeks to have the huckleberries get ripe, so that they could have the fun of picking them some fine day. And at last, tired of waiting for the proper moment, they had decided to go off that afternoon and pick some anyway, confidently hoping that they would be ripe enough. So, taking their sand-pails, they set forth.

73

But the berries were not ripe. Instead of being the dark, smoky-blue color they should have been, they were a dark red, and hard and unpalatable. Notwithstanding this, the twins picked half a pailful and then, having nothing else to do, sat down and ate at least a handful apiece. And that night they paid the piper, for a sicker pair of youngsters it would have been hard to find. And so worried was their mother that the village doctor had to be called in at the unearthly hour of two o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Bentley's boarding-house was a disturbed and excited establishment during that eventful night.

74

At about six o'clock the following morning, when the twins had passed through the worst of their trouble and were resting more quietly, Kit, in a tearful, half-smothered voice begged his mother: "Please send for Barbara, 'cause I want to tell her

something.” Mrs. Carroll tried to put the matter off till later, but Kit was not to be denied. And fearful of upsetting him too much, she finally agreed and Barbara was summoned to the room.

She found a very limp and humiliated pair of twins lying on their two little cots, surveying her with wide and frightened eyes.

75

“Poor Kit and Kat!” she cried softly, going over to lay her cool hand on their hot foreheads. “What did you want of me?” It was then that Kit broke down and began to blubber disconsolately.

“Oh, Barbara!” he gulped remorsefully, “we got something to tell you! We wasn’t . . . weren’t goin’ to just yet, but we’ve been awful sick and I guess it was like a . . . a punishment for us. We didn’t mean to be horrid to you, but we f-found your key, layin’ . . . lyin’ in the path to the old house, one day and . . . and . . . we thought we’d just tease you and hide it . . . so’s you couldn’t have that secret you won’t tell us. We wouldn’t have took . . . taken it out of your pocket, but when we *found* it we thought it was all right. So I was tellin’ the truth yesterday when I said we didn’t take it out of your pocket. We didn’t . . .”

Poor Kit, having gulped and stuttered thus far, was utterly unable to go on, and Kat, who was crying softly, could say nothing to help him out. Barbara reassuringly patted the little fellow’s hand.

76

“Never mind, Kit,” she said soothingly. “I understand all about it. You thought it was going to be fun to tease me, and somehow it wasn’t. Isn’t that it? So you decided to tell me all about it.”

Kit nodded his head vigorously and held her hand tight. “Well, it’s all right,” she went on. “Just tell me where it is now, and we’ll never think of this or speak about it again.”

“It’s buried right by the foot of the big old pine-tree, the one that stands in that open space in the woods, near the old house,” he told her. “We dug a little hole and put it in there the very day we found it, and we were goin’ to make you wait and guess where it was. I’m so sorry, Barbara. Truly, I’m awful sor—”

But he could get no farther and was beginning to blubber again, so Barbara only answered:

77

“Thank you so much for telling me, Kit. Now I’m going away and let you sleep and get better.” Then, with a smile at tearful Kat, who in all this time had said never a word, she slipped out of the room.

It was a very happy Barbara who hurried away that afternoon, as soon as her aunt was able to let her go. Positive that the key would be right where Kit had described burying it, she came to the old pine-tree and noted the freshly disturbed ground at its foot, as if some one had dug a hole there very recently and then replaced the earth. With an old trowel that she had brought along, she began to dig in the loose sandy soil. Soon she had reached the limit of the shallow hole the twins had made, but, to her utter astonishment, no key was there!

“This is very strange!” thought Barbara, utterly mystified. “But perhaps I haven’t gone far enough. I’ll dig down a little farther.”

78

She continued to delve in the sandy soil, but her search was in vain, even after she had penetrated to the depth of nearly a foot.

“There’s not the slightest use in doing any more of this,” she told herself, sitting back on her heels in despair. “Either they never buried the key here at all, as Kit said they did, or some one has been here since and taken it away. I can’t make a thing out of it.”

She got up and wandered away to the old house and sat down on the edge of the sagging veranda. Out beyond the sandy shore, the blue river wound along, a soft little breeze ruffling its surface occasionally. A fishhawk dived down into it, with a piping cry. The day was ideal, and the scene before her a lovely and peaceful one, but Barbara was far from happy as she sat there.

“I don’t understand!” she kept thinking aloud. “Kit surely told me the truth! He was too sick and too worried to do anything else. The twins *must* have buried the key here . . . and some one else has found out about it and dug it up.”

79

But who could it have been? Barbara racked her brains to think of any one who would have been likely to be around when the key was buried, or who would have been interested enough to follow the matter up. But she could think of no one. It was far off the regular road—this deserted spot by the river. Since her grandfather’s death no one had had any reason to come down the sandy, rutty by-road that led to the house. And none of her aunt’s boarders that she knew of had any interest in the old mansion, either. They all preferred to row or walk or ride in the opposite direction, where the big boat-pavilion and the

golf-links and other attractions called them. No, there must be some other explanation of this mysterious disappearance of her cherished key.

She got to her feet, finally, and wandered disconsolately back to her aunt's house, too disappointed and discouraged to enter the old Fairfax mansion again that day. The twins had recovered sufficiently to be sitting in languid state on the veranda, receiving the felicitations of the other boarders on their restoration to health.

80

“Say, Barbara!” whispered Kit, when they were left alone for a moment, “did you find it?”

“No,” whispered Barbara, in return. “It wasn't there.”

Kit was so stunned by this news that he almost fell off his chair, and Kat muttered excitedly:

“We put it there—sure as sure, Barbara! We did! You just must believe us!”



Not half a foot away from the door frame was a little diamond-shaped brass plate with a keyhole in it and the figure 5 pasted alongside

“I do believe you,” declared Barbara. “I know you did

just what you said. But some one has been there since and taken it away. I don't understand it," and she described how she had found the hole dug by the twins.

"I don't know what to do," she ended. "It's very, very important to me to have that key. I just must or—"

She stopped, for a little sob in her throat had choked her and she didn't want the twins to see how badly she felt. They had both noticed her distress, but they had the good manners not to comment on it. Instead, Kit volunteered a brilliant suggestion.

"Tell you what!" he exploded. "Let's play we're detectives and try to find out about it. I've *always* wanted to be a detective, and I've never had a chance till now. This is the grandest chance!"

"What *is* a detective, anyhow? I don't want to be one," declared Kat, who was always more conservative than Kit and had been led into far too many disastrous experiments by her venturesome twin brother.

82

While Kit explained scornfully to the still doubtful Kat, Barbara considered his suggestion. Suddenly she was fired by the idea.

"Yes, let's try it!" she cried. "It will be like a story; and *maybe* it will help us find the key."

"Of course it will help!" Kit assured her. "We'll begin tomorrow. Will you let us go there, Barbara, and see what we all can do?" he asked, now so thrilled by the adventure that his recent illness was quite forgotten.

“Yes, we’ll all go,” agreed Barbara, and then a sudden thought struck her. “But, Kit and Kat,” she went on, “I can’t tell you all about that key . . . and . . . and what I’ve been doing with it . . . just yet. That’s my secret. Will you mind . . . very much?”

“No,” declared Kat, loyally, “we’ll not mind at all . . . just so we find the key!”

“Right!” agreed Kit. “Just so we find the key! And we’ll find it, too! You’ll see!”

CHAPTER VIII

DETECTIVES

All the next morning, while Barbara was helping her aunt in the kitchen, the twins were occupied with mysterious affairs that they would explain to no one. Barbara saw them coming and going, tiptoeing off as though trying to escape observation, and returning as secretly, with surreptitious and meaning glances in her direction. Late that afternoon she was able to join them and found them bursting with importance and news.

“We’ve found out something, Barbara!” Kit whispered excitedly.

“Sure as sure!” added Kat. “And you’ll never guess what it is.”

“No, I can’t guess,” declared Barbara, as they led her along the path through the woods, toward the old pine-tree that stood near the Fairfax mansion. Truth to tell, she was tired and discouraged, and in her heart she did not much believe that the twins could have discovered anything of importance. Their excitement now was probably merely part of their play. But in this she found she was mistaken, and presently she received a distinct thrill. For Kit began to whisper mysteriously:

“You know, we talked and talked and thought about this, last night after Mother put us to bed and left us to go to sleep. And we made up our minds that some one in this house must have seen us bury that key and gone and got it afterward. It couldn’t

be any one else, 'cause no one else ever goes near the woods around here, and sometimes these folks do.

“Well,” Kit continued, “we just decided we’d keep watch, this morning, and see where all the boarders went when they left the house after breakfast. So we sat on the veranda steps a long time and watched every one go off. Most of ’em went to the golf-links, and some went for a swim in the ocean, and one or two went fishing. At last only old Mr. Truscott was left and he sat writing letters a long time in the writing-room. We waited and waited, 'cause he was the only one left to detect and we weren’t going to let him get away without seeing what he did.”

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“At last he took his paper ’n started out for a walk. We let him get a good way off and then we set out to trail him. And, sure as sure, he rambled off through the woods on the path that leads to your grandfather’s house. And you can just guess we didn’t do a thing but follow him, keepin’ out o’ sight all the time, so’s he couldn’t see us. After a while, when he came to that old pine-tree, what did he do but sit right down underneath it and put on his glasses and unfold his paper and begin to read it. We stayed where we were, in the bushes where we’d hid, and watched and watched, as quiet as mice, and he never suspected we were anywhere about. And after a while we saw something awful queer, Barbara!”

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He stopped impressively and Barbara, really excited now in spite of herself, stammered:

“Oh! what *was* it?”

“He folded up his paper at last,” went on Kit, determined to keep her in suspense till the end, “and then he began to look around him and down on the ground, and all of a sudden he seemed to spy the hole you’d left, Barbara, when you dug down to find the key. You know you didn’t fill it up afterward. He stared and stared at it and then turned round and looked down into it and finally put his hand and arm down into it. And when he found there wasn’t anything there, he looked all around him again and said, ‘Great Scott!’ right out loud like that.

“And then, Barbara,” demanded Kit, “what do you think he did? He went and shoveled the sand into the hole again and covered it all up and patted it down. And then he said out loud, ‘Now we’ll see!’ And after a while he got up and walked away, back to the house. And I just know, Barbara Fairfax, you’ll say we’ve discovered who had something to do with it all!”

88

Kit paused in triumph, after this disclosure, waiting for Barbara to speak. He was filled with pride of his detective achievements, as he had ample reason to be.

Barbara was so stunned by the twins’ discovery that she actually had no comment to make. Old Mr. Truscott had taken the key; that was perfectly evident from his actions. But why? And what could he possibly have wanted with it? And why was he so surprised when he found that the hiding-place had been dug into and left as it was? Here was mystery indeed! Old Mr. Truscott was one of the best friends she had among the boarders, and she often sat and talked with him. He reminded her somehow of her well-loved grandfather. Surely he would never do anything to make her unhappy, such as taking and

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concealing her key!

“I don’t know what to think, Kit and Kat,” she said at last. “Certainly it looks as if old Mr. Truscott had that key—or knows where it is, anyhow. Why should he be so surprised when he found the hole open and empty? And why should he cover it up again so carefully? It all looks very strange.”

“But what are you going to do about it?” demanded Kit, who believed in immediate action and was impatient of the slightest delay. “You must go right straight off and ask him where it is and why he took it.”

Barbara, however, did not see the matter in quite that light. She could not bear to think of going to nice old Mr. Truscott and accusing him of having taken her key from its strange hiding-place. She felt it impossible to do so. And she said as much to the twins.

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“Gracious!” cried Kit, in immense disgust. “How can you talk that way? He’s got your key, hasn’t he? And he hasn’t any right to it. You go straight and ask him to give it back!”

“But Kit,” Barbara protested, “even if he *has* the key, I don’t see how he could possibly know it was mine. He never saw me with it or knew I had a key. I never told about it.”

“Then go and tell him right away that it is your key! How can you think of anything else?” demanded Kat, triumphantly.

“Don’t you see,” Barbara patiently explained, “that I can’t possibly go and ask him for that key without telling him how I knew he had it? And to do that, I’d have to tell him

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about how you watched him all one morning and . . . and . . . somehow that doesn't seem quite . . . quite right. Do you know what I mean?"

The twins did not. They were younger than Barbara and more thoughtless and less careful of other people's feelings. They had not yet that delicacy of understanding that made Barbara hesitate to tell old Mr. Truscott he had been deliberately watched and suspected of taking what he had no right to take.

"Anyhow," Kit offered, "it wasn't *you* who did the watching. We did it, and we don't care a speck if you tell that to him."

"Yes, but you did it for my benefit," went on Barbara, "and I'd have to tell him I allowed you to play detective for me, and why. I just can't."

"Well, what *are* you going to do, then?" cried Kat, desperately. "Just nothing?"

"I don't know what to do, yet," declared Barbara. "Let me think it over a while, Kit and Kat, and perhaps I'll have an idea. It's nearly supper-time, anyway, and I must go back and help Aunt Lucreech. Meanwhile, be sure you don't say a word about this to a living soul!"

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The twins promised solemnly that they would not breathe a word about it, but they accompanied Barbara back to the house in a rather disgruntled frame of mind. They could not understand her indecision concerning a matter that seemed so simple to them. And it made them feel as if their fine morning's work had gone for nothing.

But, as future events were to prove, Barbara's way was the wisest.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT MR. TRUSCOTT KNEW

Barbara saw no more of the twins that evening. Directly after supper, their mother took them off to the ocean till bedtime and Barbara was not around when they came back and were tucked into their cots. Every one usually strolled off somewhere soon after supper, so it was as a rule rather lonely and deserted on the boarding-house veranda. It was so this evening. Not a soul was about when Barbara went out after helping her aunt with the dishes, so she sat down rather forlornly in one of the big rocking-chairs and watched the sunset turning the sky and river to crimson, and tried to think out her problem.

She had watched Mr. Truscott during the evening meal and had found it simply impossible to suspect the kindly old gentleman of anything so unpleasant as deliberate intention to conceal from her what he knew she would like to know. No, the more she thought about it, the more certain she was that he could not possibly know of her interest in the key. If he had it, that fact could only mean that he did not suspect to whom it belonged.

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At that moment, strangely enough, old Mr. Truscott himself came up the veranda steps with a pleasant "Good evening" to Barbara, sat down in one of the rocking-chairs, and began to read the letters he had just brought from the village post-office. Barbara watched him furtively, wondering if he had not, perhaps, at this very minute, her old brass key in his pocket. Suddenly a wild idea flashed into her mind and she determined

to put it into execution at once. Accuse Mr. Truscott of having that key in his possession she simply could not, but there was something else she could do and she would do it now, while she had the opportunity.

“Mr. Truscott,” she began in a quavering voice, when she had seen him fold up and put away his last letter, “are you . . . er . . . are you . . . interested in *keys*?”

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And when she heard herself uttering this last, she felt frightened enough to sink through the floor. The old gentleman looked startled.

“Why . . . er . . . I don’t know that I am, exactly,” he hesitated, glancing at her keenly. “Why do you ask?”

“Because . . . that is . . . because my . . . my grandfather was,” stammered Barbara, floundering even worse than she had expected to, in this morass of explanation. “He . . . he was as interested in keys . . . and . . . and locks as King Louis the Sixteenth was. And he . . . he left me an old brass key when he died and . . . and told me to use it to find . . . some keyholes . . .”

Barbara stopped right there, out of sheer inability to carry the explanation any farther. She was telling her precious secret to a comparative stranger, the secret she would not share even with the twins, and he was watching her in open curiosity. It was too much to be borne!

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Mr. Truscott took off his glasses and polished them, mopped his head with his handkerchief and put the handkerchief away again before he said a word. And when he did speak, all he

said was, "Great Scott!" uttered explosively. Barbara, being now quite tongue-tied, answered not a word.

Presently Mr. Truscott recovered sufficiently to demand:

"And what became of the key, may I ask? This is all very interesting."

"That's . . . that's the terrible part of it," stammered Barbara. "I . . . I lost it. And I hadn't . . . found all of the keyholes yet, either." She sat very still after that, grimly waiting for the skies to fall. But nothing unusual happened. Instead, old Mr. Truscott rumped his hair with one hand and inquired:

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"How did you come to lose it, may I ask?"

Barbara explained that she had had it in her little sweater pocket when she was walking through the woods and must have dropped it. Farther than this she felt she could not go. To tell the rest of the story would be too much like accusing old Mr. Truscott of having had a hand in the disappearance of the key. But he was evidently looking for something more, for he suddenly and quite surprisingly demanded:

"Then how did the twins come to have it, may I ask?"

"They . . . they found it," Barbara went on, "and . . . and they went and hid it . . . buried it under the old pine-tree in the open space in the woods, near . . . near the Fairfax house . . . just to tease me. They knew it was my key. But . . . but they told me about it after they got sick . . . 'cause they were sorry they had done it; and . . . and when I went to look for it . . . it

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wasn't there!"

Barbara stopped at that point. Not if she had known she would be severely punished for not doing so, could she have told the sequel to that tale. But Mr. Truscott seemed to need no further explanation.

"Well!" he exploded again, sitting back in his chair. "That explains it all, then."

"Oh, what do you mean?" cried Barbara, involuntarily. "Won't you please tell me what it explains?"

"It explains the queer performance I saw the other day," Mr. Truscott continued. "I had come along that path through the woods,—a walk I have lately become very fond of taking,—and had almost emerged into the open before reaching that old pine-tree, when I saw the twins very busy over something beside the tree. I couldn't make out exactly what they were doing, but they seemed to have just finished covering up or burying something right at the foot of it." 99

"They didn't see me, for their backs were toward me and I was partially screened by the bushes. Partly out of idle curiosity and partly because of a desire not to spoil their fun, I made no sound, but continued to watch them unobserved. They had finished their task, whatever it was, and after surveying the result, they ran off, down to the river, and paddled back along the shore toward this house. But I continued to stand watching for a little while because another curious thing that was happening held my attention.

"Up in the branches of the old tree, above the spot where

Kit and Kat had been so busy, there was hopping and fluttering about a big black crow. I had seen the same bird in this region several times before and was rather interested in him. He had been up there while the twins were puttering about below, and had appeared to be watching them with the keenest interest. After they had departed, he began to hop down to lower and lower branches, till finally he reached the lowest, directly above the little mound of sand the children had left at the foot of the tree.

“On this he seemed to be concentrating his entire attention. And presently I was astonished to see him fly to the ground and begin scraping and scratching at the mound, almost as a chicken scratches for food. And in two or three minutes he had dug so deep that he had almost disappeared from sight. And then, to my amazement, he emerged from the hole with some sort of bright object in his bill and flew off with it, over the tree-tops and out of sight. I was too far away to see exactly what the article was, but it might very well have been a key. And after what you tell me, I am certain it was.

“I waited about a long while, standing just where I was and hoping the old fellow would come back. But he didn’t reappear. Then I went over and examined the hole, thinking possibly there might be other things in it. There was nothing else, and I filled the hole up again and left it as it had been before the crow touched it, just to see what he would do if he did return later. But nothing more happened that day. Today, however, I went again to the old pine-tree and, to my immense astonishment, that hole had been dug again, even deeper than before. I couldn’t puzzle it out—whether the twins had done this, or the crow had perhaps returned for another

treasure hunt. So again I filled it up, and thought that I might see something else happen in the course of the next few days.

“But now I know the explanation. You dug down into the hole, little Barbara, and hoped to find your key there, but were disappointed. I am truly sorry I can’t help you out any further than to tell you about old Mr. Crow and his marauding expedition!”

102

Barbara had listened to it all with breathless interest, her eyes shining, her hands clutching the arms of the rocking-chair.

“I know! I know!” she cried when he had finished. “That was Grandpa’s old pet crow. Sometimes Grandpa called him the ‘Jackdaw of Rheims’ and sometimes just ‘Jim Crow.’ He petted him and fed him, and Jim used to eat out of Grandpa’s hand, and even came into the house once in a while. But he was a terrible thief. He was always running off with anything he could carry in his bill or claws. And he liked small bright objects best. Once he flew off with Grandpa’s scissors, and he stole some spoons and other things. But when Grandpa caught Jim trying to steal his glasses, one day, that settled matters. He made up his mind not to let the old crow into the house any more, and he never did after that.

“We never knew where Jim’s nest was, nor where he hid all the things he stole,” Barbara concluded. “And oh!—” a sudden dreadful thought struck her—“now I’ll never, never know what he has done with my key!”

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The idea was overwhelming and Barbara sat back forlornly in her chair. It was dusk now, and Mr. Truscott could not see the

slow tears that were creeping down her cheeks, but he suspected that they were there and he tried to comfort her.

“Never mind, little Barbara,” he said reassuringly. “Things are never so bad as they seem.” Which sounded very much like Grandpa Fairfax’s philosophy.

“But what shall I do?” she murmured huskily. “It’s . . . it’s dreadfully important that I should have that key. There’s . . . there’s something Grandpa wanted me to do with it, and . . . and I haven’t finished yet. And I never can . . . now.”

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“Tell you what!” cried Mr. Truscott. “Let’s constitute ourselves into a society—you and the twins and I—to hunt down Jim Crow and discover the whereabouts of his nest or hiding-place. I pledge myself to devote this next week to that one task, and I am willing to wager that the twins will join us joyfully. Such an undertaking is just the kind of thing they like best. You can join us when you have a chance, Barbara, but I know your time is very much taken up at present, so we’ll report to you twice every day what progress we have made. Does that strike you as being of any help?”

“Oh, Mr. Truscott! how . . . how can I ever thank you?” stammered Barbara, the light of hope dawning in her eyes. “You are . . . too . . . too good to me!”

“Nonsense!” the old gentleman said explosively, blowing his nose loudly and mopping his head again. “We’ll track that Jackdaw of Rheims to his lair, just as the jackdaw in the poem was tracked. And I wager it won’t be in any ‘belfry tower,’ either! Cheer up, Barbara! The hunt begins

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to-morrow!”

And with a friendly “Good night,” old Mr. Truscott went indoors to read the evening paper.

CHAPTER X

THE HUNT

Just after breakfast the next day Kit and Kat rushed upon Barbara as she was peeling potatoes in the kitchen and begged her to come outside a moment while they communicated to her some secret news of vital importance. When she had washed her hands and joined the twins, out of ear-shot of any possible listener, they informed her that they had just had a long consultation with Mr. Truscott, at his request, and he had told them all about his talk with Barbara the night before and the plan to hunt down old Jim Crow.

They were almost bursting with delight at the turn affairs had taken, and were off even then with Mr. Truscott, to spend the morning in the woods, surveying the ground and laying plans for the locating of Jim Crow's secret lair. Barbara sighed with envy as she saw them start, and wished that she could join the party. But she turned indoors to her work again, thinking that at least they were making some progress toward finding her key. And the thought was very consoling. 107

They did not return till dinner-time. And Barbara noticed at the table that the manner of all three was much less buoyant and hopeful than it had been in the morning. From their crestfallen air she judged that they had not met with success. And, as it transpired, she was quite right.

“We didn't even *see* Jim Crow this morning,” complained Kit, when, later, the four conspirators had gathered on a deserted

corner of the veranda, for a conference.

“No, we didn’t even *see him*, much less find out where his nest is!” added Kat.

“I don’t think we’re good detectives at all!” Kit declared.

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“Wait a minute!” interrupted Mr. Truscott. “We have only made a beginning, Barbara, and *I* think we have done pretty well, considering everything. The twins didn’t tell you that we searched the whole woods through, this morning,—that part of them near the Fairfax house, at least,—and though we didn’t discover Jim Crow’s nest, we did hunt around every tree and bush, systematically, and found beyond a doubt that it is not there. And that is what is called arriving at a conclusion by the process of elimination. When you have learned all the places a thing *can’t* be, you may count them out of your reckoning and not bother with them any more.

“So we are done with that part of the woods. We even hunted in all the knot-holes of trees and other places of the sort. I am convinced that the old bird’s hiding-place is nowhere in those particular woods. This afternoon we are going over to the Fairfax house, to watch it, with your permission, and try to discover if Jim has his nest anywhere about. Can you join us?”

109

Barbara thought she could, as her aunt’s hand was now almost well and Mrs. Bentley had that very day arranged to have some extra help in the kitchen. In fact, Aunt Lucreech had virtually told the little girl that she would no longer be needed to help

out, after that day. And it proved to be so. Barbara joined the three detectives joyfully that afternoon, when old Mr. Truscott had had his usual after-dinner nap, and they all proceeded to the Fairfax place and concealed themselves behind a thick screen of lilac-bushes near the house, to watch for the little black marauder.

Mr. Truscott had had the forethought to take along a piece of cheese that had been on the plate with his pie that day at dinner. This cheese he placed in a very conspicuous spot out on the lawn in front of the house, where the bird would be sure to spy it, and where they could see him plainly if he took it and notice what he did with it.

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They waited a long while behind the bushes, but no Jim Crow appeared. In the meantime, Kit and Kat were kept very busy chasing away two robins, a catbird, a thrush, and a little chipmunk, each of whom was determined to have that tempting piece of cheese at any cost. The chipmunk had actually got it and was running off with it, when Mr. Truscott threw a stick at him and he dropped it and fled, chattering and scolding, from the scene.

“It’s no use!” wailed Kat, after two hours of cramped watching had passed. “Old Jim Crow isn’t coming to-day. I just know it, and—”

“Hush!” whispered Barbara, clutching her arm. “I think I see him now. Over there, flitting about behind that oak-tree.”

They all held their breath in suspense and—sure enough!—out from behind the oak-tree presently walked a large

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black crow with ruffled, unkempt feathers—a veritable ragamuffin of a crow! He turned his head from side to side as if scenting something unusual and rather tempting, and presently walked sedately over to the cheese reposing on a green leaf in the middle of the open space. It was a tense moment for the four in hiding behind the bushes. And when he shortly after seized the cheese in his beak and rose to soar away through the air, they could have shouted aloud in delight over the success of their scheme.

But when, the next moment, he alighted on the roof of the Fairfax mansion and proceeded calmly to *eat up* the tempting morsel, the twins almost howled with rage and disappointment and Barbara gave a little sigh of disgust. Even Mr. Truscott exclaimed:

“Great Scott! Drat that bird!” But afterward he consoled the children by saying: “Never mind! It’s too bad, but it’s our own fault. We ought to have known better than to furnish him with something to *eat*. Naturally, he would gobble it up at once. I don’t suppose crows ever bother to hide food, but just eat it as it comes to hand. It is the *uneatable* things they are after. We will try another scheme to-morrow. It is too late to do anything more this afternoon; it is almost supper-time. Let’s go back to the house now, and I will try to think up a different plan.”

112

That evening Barbara found Mr. Truscott sitting by himself on the veranda, watching the sunset, and she sat down by him and they began to discuss the happenings of the afternoon. The old gentleman did not question her on the subject of what she had been doing with the precious key before she lost it, nor why her

grandfather had left it to her. And his delicacy somehow made Barbara wish to confide the whole secret to him, in return for his interest in the search for her lost treasure.

So, almost before she realized what she was doing, she had begun to relate to him the strange little story, beginning with her visit to the lawyer, with her aunt. She told him of the queer clause in her grandfather's will and of his request that she use the key to find seven mysterious keyholes. And old Mr. Truscott listened with shining eyes and a continuous mopping of his head with his handkerchief—with him always a sign of keen excitement. When she had finished with the episode of the loss of the key and had told of finding two more keyholes later that she had not even had a chance to explore yet, he jumped up out of his chair, exclaiming:

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“Great Scott! But this is as exciting as any book I have ever read! Why . . . why! this is the most engaging mystery I have ever heard of! And I think you are a mighty clever little girl to have tracked the thing down as far as you have. I wish I had known that grandfather of yours! He was certainly a man worth knowing. If I had only come here last year, I might have had an opportunity, but I foolishly went to Saratoga instead, and had a very dull time of it indeed.

114

“Well, well!” he went on, “there is no use in bemoaning what can't be helped. Thank you again, little Barbara, for what you have told me. I will keep it a dead secret, even from the twins, but I have one great favor to ask. If we find the key, as I feel convinced that we shall sooner or later, and after you have finished the hunt and found that seventh keyhole and all it contains, I beg you to let me go through that house with you and

see all those keyholes your grandfather so cleverly arranged. It shall be my one reward, if I shall have been of any service to you.”

It was most gratifying to Barbara that any one could take so keen and sympathetic an interest in the affair, and not laugh and poke fun at poor old Grandpa Fairfax’s whimsical plan for her. Barbara could not have borne any ridicule of her dear and beloved grandfather, even if he had been the most peculiar of men. And this praise of him warmed her heart still more toward old Mr. Truscott.

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“Oh, I’ll take you, gladly!” she cried. “You may even help me find the rest of the keyholes if I ever get the key back.”

But Mr. Truscott said:

“No, little Barbara. Not for the world would I spoil your adventure by tagging along and being with you when you solve your final mystery. That you must do alone, as your grandfather wished. But I shall be glad to go over the ground afterward. And now, I have a scheme that I feel sure is going to fetch Jim Crow to-morrow. I have been thinking of it ever since supper.”

“Oh! what is it?” cried Barbara.

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“That I shall not tell you till we are ready to try it out on him in the morning!” replied the old gentleman, tantalizingly.

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CHAPTER XI

JIM CROW'S SECRET

It was an exceedingly cheerful quartet, boiling with suppressed excitement, that started out early next morning on a renewed hunt for the hidden lair of old Jim Crow. Mr. Truscott was armed with a small, mysterious package, the secret of whose contents he would reveal to no one till the time came for it to be opened. He advised that they go at once to the open space near the old pine-tree and wait to see if the crow were anywhere about the vicinity.

He led them to the spot and then proceeded to hide them all safely behind a screen of bushes and bid them watch what he was going to do. Barbara and the twins snuggled down on the warm, sandy, pine-needle-strewn ground and peeped out between the branches of the bushes, to behold Mr. Truscott unrolling the mysterious parcel. 118

“Whatever has he got there?” demanded Kat, in a stage whisper.

“I know!” cried Kit, under his breath. “It’s some *spoons*—three of them. I wonder if he took them off the table!”

“They look too bright and shiny,” commented Barbara, wonderingly. “Our spoons are so old now that they won’t take a good polish. I don’t think those came from our table.”

They watched in astonishment while Mr. Truscott laid the

spoons out in a tempting row, right where the sun shone on them and made them fairly sparkle. When he had done this, he came over to where they were hiding.

“Don’t think I’ve been robbing the silver-drawer at the house!” he chuckled. “I went out and bought these, early this morning, at the village store—ten cents apiece. They are bright enough to attract Jim Crow’s notice if he is anywhere within half a mile of this spot.”

119

Then it was that his scheme dawned at last upon Barbara. He intended Jim Crow to be attracted by the shining tin spoons, come down and pick them up, and fly away to his nest or hiding-place with them, while the four “detectives” watched and so discovered where he hid the things he stole. It was all so simple! Why had they not thought of it before? And with a little contented sigh, she settled down to wait for the disreputable old crow’s appearance.

For what seemed a very long time nothing at all happened. Birds a plenty flew about, and one curious and venturesome blue jay even hopped over and investigated the spoons. But though he appeared sorely tempted, he did not, apparently, dare to make way with the fascinating objects and he finally flew off. At last, after a wait that to the children was an interminable age, there was a flutter of black wings in a near-by oak-tree and Jim Crow himself, more disreputable and frowzy-looking than ever, presently fluttered upon the scene.

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Kit and Kat pinched each other and both nudged Barbara. Mr. Truscott made no sign, but his eyes glistened and he mopped his head with his handkerchief. Jim Crow wandered about

aimlessly for a while, all the time keeping an off eye on the glistening objects in the center of the open space. Plainly, he wanted to see if the coast were clear before he made any definite move toward them. Finally, convinced that all was as it should be, he flew up to a branch, to get a better view of things, sat there for a moment, and then fluttered down right to the spoons, seized one firmly in his beak, and rose with a prodigious flapping of wings and soared skyward.

It was at this crucial moment that Mr. Truscott jumped up and shouted:

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“Now, do exactly as I tell you, everybody, or we’ll lose track of him!—Kit, you run after him and keep him in sight as long as you can. And when he disappears, stand right where you are and don’t move till I find you.—Kat, you go over to the old house and see if he comes there. And don’t *you* move till I come to you.—Barbara, you stay right here by the spoons and watch to see if he comes back. And I’ll scout around and keep an eye on you all!”

A frenzied scene ensued. The children rushed to obey Mr. Truscott’s commands, and no one knew or cared what the other was doing, and Mr. Truscott hurried about like an excited hen looking after her chickens. Barbara stayed right under the old pine-tree, to guard the spoons. She saw Kit, Kat, and Mr. Truscott disappear in various directions and was left to wonder how it would all come out, a great many times over, before they reappeared.

It was Mr. Truscott who came back first, very hot and excited.

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“That wretched crow flew clean out of sight somewhere!” he groaned, mopping his head more wildly than ever. “I found Kit standing ’way off in a field, and he said Jim had risen higher and higher, till at last he was quite out of sight. And Kit had remained where he was when the bird disappeared. That doesn’t give us the slightest clue. I told him to stay there and watch, and I told Kat to watch also, where she is, and you and I will hide behind the bushes again and see if Jim reappears. Surely he will; there are still two spoons left!”

So they rearranged the spoons temptingly in the sun and crept behind the bushes again to wait for further developments. And true to Mr. Truscott’s prediction, not many minutes later, with fluttering and flapping of wings, Jim Crow again lit beside the spoons, his beak empty and obviously ready for more plunder. After the usual manoeuvres, he was just about to grasp another spoon in his beak, when Kat rushed wild-eyed upon the scene and frightened the crow so that he flew indignantly away with much cawing and scolding.

123

“Oh, Kat! Why did you come?” wailed Barbara. “You scared him off and he probably will never come back now!” But Kat seemed bursting with important information and, heedless of Barbara’s reproaches, she panted:

“Oh, come! come quick! I . . . I saw where . . . he went! He came back. I saw . . .”

She was quite incoherent, but Mr. Truscott seemed to understand and exclaimed:

“Just show us where it was, Kat! Did he have the spoon when

you saw him?”

Kat nodded emphatically, being too out of breath for words, and pointed toward the old house.

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“Come on! I’ll . . . I’ll show you!” she cried and tore off, fairly dragging Barbara along in her wake.

Mr. Truscott hurried after the two girls, shouting, as he ran, to Kit to join them. Kat led them straight to the old Fairfax house and pointed to a little window high up and directly under the roof, a window which had a broken pane in its frame.

“He flew in there!” she panted. “I saw him . . . just a minute ago. He had the spoon in his mouth when he went in . . . and when he came out he didn’t!”

“Good for you, Kat!” cried Mr. Truscott. “You certainly did the trick. We’ve found that old scoundrel’s lair at last; or one of them, anyway. Sometimes those birds have half a dozen different hiding-places. Now, Barbara, is there any way of getting up to where that window opens?—inside the house, I mean.”

“Oh, yes!” declared Barbara. “That’s the attic up there. I’ve never gone up into it ’cause there wasn’t anything much there, Grandpa always said, and only a ladder to get up there by. But I’m sure we can get up that way.”

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“Do you mind if we go into the house with you and try?” asked Mr. Truscott. “I rather hate to have you go alone. I can climb a ladder—if I am an old man!—and if I can’t manage this, probably Kit can; he’s as spry as a young chipmunk.”

“Yes, please come!” cried Barbara, a-tiptoe with excitement. “We’ll all go and see if Jim Crow has hidden anything else there.”

So they all trooped into the house through the front door, and Barbara led the rest up the rickety wide old staircase to the floor above. At one end of the long hall that ran through the second story from front to back, a ladder, one or two rungs of which were missing, led to the attic. Mr. Truscott tried it, by shaking and thumping, and found it reasonably secure, so he mounted it and pushed up the trap-door at the top, while Barbara and the Carroll twins stood below, watching with bated breath. In another moment, with surprising agility for one of his age, he had climbed through the trap-door and disappeared into the space above. 126

They heard him walking about, rattling the creaky old boards and moving something heavy once in a while. But there was no indication that he had found anything interesting, till suddenly they heard him call:

“Come up here—all of you! The ladder is perfectly safe. I want you all to see something.”

They scrambled up, one by one, and found Mr. Truscott standing over at the other end of a long, dim, dusty space, pointing down at something at his feet.

“Look here!” was all he said, but it was all that was necessary. For when they had reached his side, there on the floor they beheld the hiding-place of old Jim Crow—a mass of sticks and straws and accumulated rubbish. And in the 127

midst of the litter many strange and diversified articles, such as scissors, thimbles, bright pieces of metal, one or two small glass bottles, and, most noticeable of all, Mr. Truscott's new ten-cent spoon.

Suddenly Barbara uttered a little stifled cry and, plunging her hand into the medley, dragged out her precious lost key and hugged it to her in wordless delight.

Mr. Truscott quoted:

“The first thing they saw,
'Mid the sticks and the straw,
Was the *key* in the nest of that wretched jackdaw!”

While the twins pranced around in such exuberant delight that there was serious danger of their plunging through the shaky old boards of the attic into one of the rooms below. And in the midst of it all, who should flutter up to the window and roost there but old Jim Crow himself, with another shining spoon in his bill. But when he heard the bedlam within and perceived what was going on, he dropped his treasure and flew away with renewed and indignant squawking.

128

It was old Mr. Truscott who presently made the following suggestion:

“Now, little Barbara, you have your key back. The twins and I are going out right now, down to the village to get some ice-cream and celebrate in that way. We will leave you to yourself, to do what you please with the key. And when you have leisure, later on, your own ice-cream celebration will be awaiting

you.”

He helped all the children down the ladder and they returned to the lower front hall. And here Barbara could only stammer:

“Thank you all . . . a thousand times! You . . . you have been so kind!”

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But Mr. Truscott shooed the twins out into the open as speedily as possible and left Barbara standing there, indescribably happy, the recovered key in her hand.

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CHAPTER XII

THE SIXTH KEYHOLE

When she was left alone at length, Barbara was so bewildered by all that had happened that she could hardly collect her wits. She had her key, it was true, but her mind was so full of the curious circumstances of its restoration that she found it almost impossible to think of anything else. At last, however, she began to realize that there were two keyholes to be unlocked and investigated, and two more yet to be found. And so, with a little chuckle of anticipation, she hurried to the old bookcase in the living-room and sank down on the floor to investigate the mystery of the fourth keyhole.

But it was with a feeling of chagrin that she sat down and surveyed the contents of the shallow little drawer that her Grandpa Fairfax had evidently fashioned to conceal the fourth mystery. There it lay, before her. But instead of being something new and strange and deeply interesting, it was none other than a rather tattered old copy of Dickens's "David Copperfield" that she and her grandfather had been accustomed to read aloud together. When she had last seen it, the covers were half falling off and a number of the pages torn and rumpled. But the book had been neatly repaired, the covers pasted on, the pages mended, and the pictures replaced firmly in the places where they belonged. Evidently he had spent not a little time in restoring the poor old volume to something like a presentable condition.

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"But what," exclaimed Barbara, aloud, "did he hide this

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away for and use it as one of the secrets? I can't understand it." Then she rummaged about in the drawer to see if he had left the usual explanatory letter. But he hadn't; nor was there any concealed between the pages of the book. Barbara was deeply mystified.

"What *could* he have meant by this?" she thought. "He must have meant *something*; he wouldn't have put it there without *any* meaning. That would have been too silly. I'll just leave it and go to explore the other keyhole. Perhaps I'll find something that tells about it there."

She left the book where it was and hurried to the little kitchen, losing no time in unlocking the keyhole labeled "5." The little brass key this time opened a long and narrow doorway in the dark woodwork, revealing the tiniest and narrowest closet that Barbara had ever seen. It was not more than four feet high and only about six inches in width and depth. A most singular little affair. Grandpa had plainly hewed it out, himself, fashioning the closet in the little space between the door of the kitchen and that of the larger closet. And here again Barbara experienced a pang of disappointment. For, standing in the narrow space, was only Grandpa's cane, the one with a hooked handle, that he used when he took his infrequent walks abroad. Nor was there a note or a single word of explanation with it.

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Barbara took it out and examined it dejectedly. Yes, it was just the cane he had always used, nothing new or strange about it. She thought perhaps there might be some secret trick about it, some spring she could press or well-hidden opening down its length, so she examined every inch of it critically. But nothing

of that sort could be found. And the only new thing she discovered about it was the letters “H. C.” dimly engraved on a little silver band that encircled it a short way below the handle. They had probably always been there, but she had never happened to see them before. They were not her grandfather’s initials. That was the only thing of which she was certain.

Here, indeed, was a mystery. Two perfectly familiar articles concealed in this curious manner must have some significance—some unusual and interesting meaning, if she only could discover what it was. She knew her grandfather too well to suppose he would hide these articles without having some definite object in view. And the very fact that he had left no note with them must point to the supposition that he intended to clear up the mystery later. Evidently she must wait.

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But what of the last two keyholes? Where were they to be found and how was she to obtain a clue to their possible hiding-places? The first four had been in the living-room, or what was really Grandpa’s work-room—there or near it. This last one had been in the kitchen, another room closely connected with his life. Why wasn’t it possible that the other might be in here too?



Right in the drawer of the kitchen table was the figure 6

She sat down at the little kitchen table where he had taken his meals, to think it over. And as she sat staring at it, just as if it had popped out and tapped her between the eyes

to demand attention, she suddenly realized that a little familiar diamond-shaped brass plate was staring her in the face, right in the drawer of the kitchen table, and that beside it was the figure 6.

From that moment Barbara never stopped till she had run to earth the last of her secret. The drawer in the kitchen table opened as all such drawers do, when she had turned the little brass key in the lock. And somehow Barbara was not surprised to find in it only the old tarnished metal tobacco-jar that her grandfather had used to keep his tobacco and pipes in all the days she had ever known him. Neither was she at all disappointed, for she was beginning to realize that Grandpa Fairfax was a wizard when it came to extracting an interesting story from the most commonplace of objects.

The metal jar was of a curious shape, being low and squat and elliptical, with horses' heads at the ends for handles. It had a cover with another horse-head on it, and was so dim and tarnished for want of polishing that there was really no telling of what metal it was fashioned. Grandpa had always used it and it had always looked just like this. He had kept it full of odorous tobacco for his pipe. There was no tobacco in it now, however; nor was there any note of explanation with it. Barbara placed it beside the cane, content to wait till her discovery of the last keyhole for all explanations, as she was confident that they would come with that discovery.

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All around the little kitchen she searched, in her eager hunt for the last keyhole, the one her grandfather had said would be the most important. She felt that it would be quite impossible to go home that day without having discovered it.

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But it was obviously not in the kitchen. No nook or cranny, drawer or cupboard had escaped her attention. Even the floor and the walls had been scrutinized with the utmost care. No, the possibilities of the kitchen were exhausted. Where, then, ought she to look next?

It was well that in the beginning Grandpa Fairfax had complimented Barbara on her good mind and reasoning powers, for his belief in her was helping her now to learn to use them in a remarkable way. Grandpa had arranged all these keyholes in some close association with himself, she thought (though she didn't put it in just those words!), so probably the last one had been similarly placed. Where would it naturally be? Well, his bedroom was the only remaining place in the house that had been closely connected with him, so it was not impossible that it would be the location of the last mysterious keyhole.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEVENTH KEYHOLE

So to the little bedroom Barbara went. It seemed no different than it was when he had occupied it, except that the big wooden bedstead was bare of anything except the mattress. This bed had always fascinated Barbara, especially the great towering headboard with the angels' heads carved in wood around the top. When she was very little Grandpa Fairfax had pointed to them and taught her the lines:

Four corners to my bed,
Four angels round my head,
Two to watch and one to pray
And one to drive all fears away.

She had always imagined that with such guardians Grandpa must feel very safe in that bed and she had sometimes wished that she had one like it. Once she had said so to him, but he had only smiled and answered that she had the angels always near her, anyway, whether she had wooden ones to remind her of it or not, so she could feel just as safe.

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Now she looked up long and earnestly at the angels' heads. There was just a suggestion of pretty wings carved behind them, and, underneath, a long, straight polished piece of wood without any ornamentation on it. And when her eye lit on this, she gave a little gasp and cried:

“Oh, I knew it! I knew it! Grandpa would be sure to put it

here!”

For right in the middle of this piece of wood was the last diamond-shaped keyhole with the figure 7 beside it.

Quick as a flash she had climbed up and unlocked the little compartment behind the plain panel. The polished piece of wood opened downward, revealing a shallow space behind, and in this space was the long-looked-for letter—nothing else. But that was enough! With the letter clasped in her hands, she flew outside to sit in the fresh air and sunshine, where she could read it to greater advantage. For this, she now knew, was the key to all the rest of the secret.

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“DEAR LITTLE BARBARA” (she read):

“By the time you have discovered this last keyhole, you will have realized something about what my little scheme for you was. I wanted you to use that clever mind of yours in the hunt, and I felt so sure you would be able to do so that I gave you no hints whatever in the latter part. You had gotten enough of my idea in the former part to enable you to continue without further assistance.

“Now, you are of course wondering what I could have meant by hiding away those old and quite familiar articles in such careful hiding-places. But you have probably learned to know me well enough to realize that they meant something more than just what they appeared to be, at a casual glance. They certainly do, and now I am going to explain all about them.

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“To begin with the book: Many and many a day have we spent over ‘David Copperfield,’ you and I, and, though we enjoyed the story, we gave very little if any thought to the volume out of which we were reading it. It was very old and somewhat dilapidated, so why indeed should we? I picked up this particular old copy one day in New York, in a second-hand book shop downtown, and I think I gave twenty cents for it. The reason I bought it was because I rather liked the looks of the queer old illustrations made by a man named Cruikshank. You, too, always liked them, I remember.

“Well, one day, a year or so ago, I saw in the paper that they were having an exhibition in New York of things associated with Charles Dickens, and especially some of his books that were first published, and these were considered very rare treasures. So I got out our old copy and looked it over and at last realized that right there in my hand I held probably one of the first editions of the famous author’s perhaps best-known work.

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“So I put the volume into as good condition as possible, as you see, and took it to New York, where they told me that it was indeed a first edition and that if I cared to part with it they would give me a considerable sum of money for it. But I did not want to part with it, little Barbara, because it was associated with so many of our good times together. So I brought it back home and decided to leave it to you, because I feel sure that some day, if not now, you will value it highly. Keep it carefully and when you grow up you may add it to your museum of antiques, if you like.

“Now we come to the cane which you found concealed

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behind keyhole Number Five. You may not think it a very extraordinary cane, and indeed it is not, as canes go. I have used it myself for many years, not so much because I needed a cane as because it belonged at one time to a very remarkable person and I liked to think that I had in my hand what he had once carried. You have of course studied United States history in school and have learned something about Henry Clay, the wonderful ‘silver-tongued orator of the South,’ as he was called. We do not associate him much with the North; yet he visited here at one time, right in New Jersey, at Bordentown, and on that visit happened to leave his cane behind him. And as it was either inconvenient or impossible to get the cane back to him after he left, it remained here and became the property of others. Somehow it came into my father’s hands and he passed it on to me, telling me the history of it. This, too, you may keep in your museum, my Barbara, for if I know you as I think I do, these things are going to mean a great deal to you some day.

“My old tobacco-jar,—behind keyhole Number Six,—as you probably have already guessed, also has a history. It once belonged to the great English author William Makepeace Thackeray and came into my hands in the following way. You may not know it, but Thackeray spent several months in Savannah, many years ago, and some even say that he finished his great novel ‘The Virginians’ in the old mansion on Lafayette Square in that city. However that may be, I do know that he left this quaint old jar in that house and some one afterward gave it to my father, who passed it on to me. It is of old English silver, as you will see if you take the trouble to polish it up. I did not polish it, because I wanted you to have the fun of doing so. And when you get older and have read his books, you will appreciate all the more having a souvenir of him in your

possession.

“So we have come to the end of our fairy story, the hunt for the seven keyholes. It sounds like a fairy story, doesn’t it? And I hope that you have enjoyed the little surprises I planned for you. But, as happens in the fairy stories, I have one more task for you and then you will find that I have kept the best to the last. 146

“Go home now, Barbara, and get your Aunt Lucreech and ask her to take you straight down to my lawyer, for he has something very important to tell you. And what he has for you there is the gift of the seventh and last keyhole.

“ Lovingly your

“GRANDPA FAIRFAX.”

To say that Barbara hurried back to the house would be putting it mildly. She flew so fast that her toes scarcely touched the ground and breathless, disheveled, and almost if not quite incoherent, she burst in upon her aunt, who was superintending in the kitchen. It was fully ten minutes before she could make the bewildered Mrs. Bentley understand that all because of the quaint little old brass key, they must set out immediately and make another visit to the lawyer in the village. But with the aid of the letter and a much jumbled account of old desks and first editions of Dickens and canes and tobacco-jars, Barbara convinced the puzzled lady, who finally consented to get out the Ford and take the three-mile drive. 147

But when they arrived at his office the lawyer did not seem very much surprised. On the contrary, he was smiling a

gratified smile as he produced an envelop from his safe.

“Yes,” he said, handing it to Barbara, “I have been 148
expecting this, though I confess I did not think the little girl would finish her search so soon. She is brighter even than her grandfather imagined. And now I will tell you what he has for her here. It is a gift in trust for her, not included in his will and quite independent of it. I am the custodian of a fund of ten thousand dollars that is to be used for her education, chiefly in sending her to college when she has finished her school and high-school courses. He wished her to take up any special lines of study that appealed to her when she came to be of an age to decide about them. But in addition to these, he also wished her to specialize, for his sake, in ancient and modern history and literature, because he felt that perhaps they would be of more than usual interest to her.

“He instructed me to hold this fund in secret for two 149
years, thus giving Barbara ample time to make her search for the seven keyholes. If she had not discovered them by the end of that time, I was to tell her about the fund anyway and apply it to the same purpose. But I think the old gentleman felt sure that she would succeed in working out the scheme in the way he wished. You have a very bright little niece, Mrs. Bentley, and I congratulate you upon the fact. She will make an interesting woman some day.”

All of which speech Barbara heard, but only partially 150
comprehended. She had vaguely examined the contents of the envelop, finding it to contain another note from Grandpa Fairfax, to the same effect as the lawyer’s information. Not till later, when she could think of it all at her leisure, would she be

able to realize to the full the wonderful thing that her grandfather had done for her. Just now she was a little bewildered by what had happened. She felt she ought to say something appropriate, yet for the life of her she could think of no words in which to express her appreciation of Grandpa's gift. But her aunt was quite capable of expressing everything that was necessary, in one characteristic speech.

“Land sakes!” Mrs. Bentley exclaimed. “Ain't that just like Pa? Ain't it *just* like him?”

Transcriber's Notes

- Retained publication information from the printed edition: this eBook is public-domain in the country of publication.
- Corrected a few palpable typos.
- In the text versions only, text in italics is delimited by underscores.

[The end of *The Adventure of the Seven Keyholes* by Augusta Huiell Seaman]