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***THE ADVENTURE
OF THE SEVEN
KEYHOLES***

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The Adventure of the Seven Keyholes

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CHAPTER I

THE KEY

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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."

"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 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! . . .

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:

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?*

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.

"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!"

And Barbara knew that her secret was safe. She thought the long midday boarding-house dinner would never end,