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THE EMPRESS'S RING

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I WORRY ABOUT IT STILL, even today, thirty odd years later. I close my eyes to go to sleep at night, sometimes, and I am back at the old, disintegrated sand pile where I lost it, digging in the dirt-mixed sand with my fingernails to find my little ring.

It was tiny, a little girl's ring that was said to have belonged to the Empress of Austria. I suppose that would have been Elisabeth, the beautiful one who climbed mountains. It was given to me, I think on my eighth birthday, by a family friend whom I called Aunt and who was herself so erect, so blond, so high-voiced that I thought of her privately as a princess. I was told that she had bought the ring in an auction room in Vienna and brought it home—all for me.

The ring was gold, with a curly banner across the top which was set with five little turquoises. The gold setting of the stones was etched or engraved; it gave a delicate and lacy effect. I thought it was the most beautiful ring, the most royal ring.

"Far too good for a child to wear," my nurse said firmly. I can see her entwining her fat red fingers as she said it. "You won't be wearing it out to play, that's one thing."

But the thing was that I did. I was compelled to after her saying that. For nobody—certainly not she—could understand the love I had for that ring, and the absolute impossibility of my ever losing anything so precious. I wore it when I went out to play in the shed that adjoined the old barn and connected it with the abandoned milkhouse that was now called my playhouse.

Getting a playhouse, even a makeshift one, had been a sort of

victory a little while back. Our only neighbors, the Wilkinsons, had a daughter named Mimi, who had a real playhouse, one built for the purpose: a tiny model of a cottage, with little green shutters at the windows, a shingled roof, a door with a shiny brass knocker engraved "Mimi," and, inside, miniature chairs and a table upon which Mimi, a girl with natural ringlets, set out tea parties with real Dresden china made for children's use, china with pink rosebuds which were unendurably thrilling—pink rosebuds and gold rims.

Ours was not the place for that kind of thing at all. We had nothing that was modern, nothing that was fascinating like rosebuds on little new china teacups. Our big white house seemed to settle down deeper into the ground with every spring freshet. The barn was red. The place had once been a working farm, but all that was left of that now was the stanchions in the lower barn; the horse stalls in the upper barn, where one could stand and look out of the little horse windows over the swamp at the melancholy woods beyond and imagine that one was a horse; the market garden of rhubarb that came up doggedly year after year, no matter how many boxes of furnace ashes were dumped upon it (the rhubarb ended by coming up out of the ground at least six feet higher than the original garden had been); and the little house at the end of the woodshed, which had once been used to prepare the milk for marketing. There was a sort of slot at the front of this milkhouse, and the cans had been shoved out through it into a big box with a lid, where they could be picked up by the men who took them away. But of this I had only been told. Now there was no activity on our place. The pines in front of the house sighed and whistled in winter, the dandelions came up like little suns all over the lawns in springtime, the swamp turned from gold to crimson to purple as the summer passed sadly by, and in autumn the pumpkins lay rotting on the ground down below the lower barn.

I had to have a playhouse. I wept. And so the abandoned milkhouse was swept out, some of my nursery furniture was moved into

it, and an ornate Victorian knocker was screwed on to the weathered board door that would not quite close, and it was officially referred to as my playhouse.

What was it that was wrong? It was not really a playhouse, to begin with—but I had imagined far wilder excursions than this required. I made the effort; I imagined that the too high shelves inside, where cans had been stacked, were really shelves for my own needs, to put books and toys and tea-party china on. I imagined that the bulkhead which contained the slot for pushing out the cans was really a window seat.

My mother gave me some china to use for my own efforts at tea parties. Rosebuds were what I yearned for, rosebuds were what I dreamed about at night. Small, neat rosebuds on a field of glistening milk-white china—*little* china, made for children. What I got was probably much nicer. It was the odds and ends of an old broken-up adult tea set—orange-and-white china with gold arabesques. I set it on the too high shelves—the plates on edge against the wall, the teacups in a row, the saucers in a pile, the teapot turned so that the broken spout did not show. It was probably very beautiful. But there was nothing, there could have been nothing, that would take the place of pink rosebuds.

Then I was given my little blue ring. It was a ring meant for a little girl to wear. It was real gold, and real turquoises. It was beautiful, and it had belonged to an empress.

It belonged to my hand. It was just the right size. In the morning sun, when I went out to play, its five turquoises shone in a curly row. Even all these years later, I can remember looking at it and feeling satisfied, complete, and happy.

It was probably not the first day I wore it that I lost it, but I did not have it very long. I went to play in the old sand pile that moldered away in the inner corner of the shed nearest to the barn. The sand pile was the remains of several cartloads of sand that had

been dumped there, but since there was no frame to hold the sand (such as Mimi's sand pile had) it had sifted, filtered away, become mixed with the dirt of the woodshed, disintegrated, spread out; it was another of the things I had that had something the matter with them.

I don't know why I went to play in the sand pile at all. I was too old, and this was my playhouse stage. But sometimes I did go and play in it, in the scattered remains of my babyhood, just as sometimes I went and slid into the hole under the foundations of the barn that I had discovered when I was four—not to hide any more, not for any game, just to be in there and feel it around me again.

I went to the sand pile again, at the wrong age, and, whether the first time or a later one, I lost my little ring playing in it. The loss did not strike me all at once.

I came in to lunch, and my nurse said, "There. Will you look? You've lost your beautiful gold ring with the stones in it, just as I told you you would."

I said nothing. I looked at my horribly bare hand and looked back at her, not showing anything. I didn't want her to see anything. Because I was convinced it was because she had told me I would lose my precious possession if I wore it out to play that I had lost it. I didn't want her to know this.

"I know *exactly* where it is," I said. "It's not lost at all."

And in a way I did know exactly where it was. It was in the sand pile somewhere, and the sand pile was not more than ten feet wide, even in its disintegrated condition. It had to be there. I looked and looked—that day and other days, too—with a hollow, painful feeling inside me because I had lost my precious possession. At some point, I must have given up.

But I never completely gave up, because years later, in my teens, I would suddenly remember my ring, the one I had lost, and would go out to the sand pile, by now almost obliterated but still a definite

area to me, and dig and dig. It had to be there. I never found it, but it was there just the same, somewhere in the mingled sand and dirt, within a definite space about ten feet square.

Once, I dreamed that I had found it. It was when I was a young girl going to dances, and the dream was about the most irrelevant to my life that could be imagined. But when I woke, with the clear memory of finding the ring and seeing it lie in my palm with its banner of five little blue stones, my excitement and the verisimilitude were so great that I went out to the woodshed—in a beige crêpe-de-Chine dress, I remember, that reached my knees; high heels, and my hair shingled—and began to dig once again. Then the telephone rang for me, or someone drove up in a car. But after the dream it was not finding it that seemed unbelievable.

Even now, in another part of the country, I sometimes remember my ring and wonder why I could never find it. Today, for example, I took a walk in this Southern springtime, filled with the sound of the persistent mourning dove and the occasional thrill of the wood thrush. I passed the brook, which is called a run, and the thicket of bamboos that grows beside it, and mounted the gentle rise that leads on past the Lambeths' house. The Lambeths have a lovely house—old, built of pink brick, but all made fresh, all charming and inviting; inside, their floors gleam, their chintzes are trimly fitted to the chairs, and they drink their whiskey out of silver tumblers with gadroon edges. I would love tumblers like that, but they must cost a fortune. As I rounded the curve just before the entrance to the Lambeths' house, I thought I would stop and pay them a call. It would be fun to sit before their crackling fire and drink their whiskey from one of those enchanting tumblers, and perhaps come to know them better. But as I came abreast of the drive, I saw that two cars were parked near the door. The Lambeths already had callers. I felt a little hollow, and passed on.

When I made the circuit that brought me home, I felt thirsty

and got myself a drink of water. My glasses are a sorry collection, the odds and ends of a number of broken sets. I went upstairs then and into my room, where I tidied up a little before lying down to take a nap. I don't know why it is that Mrs. Hildreth, who makes my slipcovers, can never make the arms fit properly; the cording lies unevenly upon the frame of the chair and gives a sloppy appearance.

I lay down, and as soon as I closed my eyes, there I was again, years and years later, back in the old woodshed of the place where I grew up, scratching and clawing at the sand pile, trying to find my little blue ring. I'm sure there is not as much sand, nearly, left there any more as I see when I close my eyes. There may not be any sand at all; the place is sold, and the new owners may have fixed everything up, torn down the shed, perhaps even put up a new, properly fenced-in sand pile somewhere for their growing children. I don't know.

Perhaps if the old sand pile *is* still there, one of the new owner's children will one day really find my ring, for it is there somewhere. Perhaps the child—a little girl—will be poking about with a tin shovel and will turn up that scrap of gold with its five little blue stones. I wonder what she will make of it.

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