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The Toad-Sister

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The Toad-Sister

Postscript to a Fairy Tale

One warm and weary noon I sat to rest
A moment on the well-curb by the road
Before I let the heavy bucket down
and bore the water home. I picked away
The moss and mortar from the crumbling rim
And dropped the pebbles, one by one, to break
The cold, dark silence of that watery world.
So silence shattered in our silent home
When, fretted by my mother's fretful will,
I spat my toads and vipers on the hearth.
We brushed them in the ashes, but they paired
And send their venomous spawn throughout the house,
Till every time we put away the food,
A soft and squashy shape jumped off the shelf,
And when we went to get the linen out,
Hot fangs burned our fingers. When we swept,
We banished wood-toads, hoptoads, tadpoles, frogs,
Scorpions and serpents, adders, stings and rays,
Until I spoke the next time. Nor had we
Our one-time joy of color and perfume,
For Sister, with her voice of gems and flowers,
Had found her prince and gone to her reward.
Long had I left behind the jealous ache
That overwhelmed me when each cast-off rose
I longer to treasure, withered at my breath
Before I caught its fragrance, or a pearl
Turned cloudy and opaque beneath my touch.
Perhaps it was well my weary sense
No longer bore this burden. Still I missed
The vision that came with it, like a flash
Of lightning, lighting paths to other worlds.
My mother called. I swung the straining sweep.
You took the dripping bucket from my grasp
and shared its weight. I smiled. I pressed your hand.
In spite of me, I could not choose but speak.
"Thanks, friend." The toad hopped out and sat,
Scornfully staring, on the sun-baked step.
I could not bear to see your eager glance
Quenched, as they always were. I turned away.
"Look here!" you said. I looked, and saw my toad
Quivering and blinking in your searching hands.
"See what a funny little friend you have!
His hands are no less delicate than yours.
His eyes have seen a much, and look, his mouth
Is wide enough to make him all one smile!"
I dared not speak again, but if you like toads
My tongue will quickly fill your world with them.

Alice P. Kenney