



MOTH & THE FLAME
THE VELVET STEEL

3 2

O' Cupbearer, even your rebuke
has infinitely more beauty
Than all the dimpled smiles
of this world—or the next.

When a lump of iron is forged into a sword, the Smithy applies intense heat from his forge until the metal glows white-hot and softens. Skillfully and painstakingly he hammers the pliant mass over and over, folding and pounding it into shape upon the anvil. Many a time will he heat the forming blade to incandescence, only to repeatedly plunge it into cold water. The Smithy is not afraid of the violent and noisy steam, nor the sparks, clamor, and heat that rise up around him. He does not shirk the danger of his profession, for he has forged countless blades, in myriad shapes and sizes. By layering, tempering, purifying, and strengthening the steel, he produces a sword that can cut through other steel and withstand many a battle-blow.

In the interests of the student, there are times when the great Teachers apply similar disciplinings, temperings, and trials. The reprimand or displeasure of a fully conscious being is no less than an expression of corrective love. A lover is sustained as much by a frown as a kindly look; while everyone feeds on the latter, not everyone can withstand the former. Even the passing of a test is in itself a gift, a grace upon the student, a merit that cannot be claimed.

Within my own limits, I was dimly aware of my Smithy's workings, and more than once entered the fire of transformation and became uncomfortably familiar with the heat, the hammering, and the tempering. There were times when, out of foolishness and pride, I displeased the God in him. There could be no worse punishment than the turning of his back or the drawing of a veil over the inner vision. The outer Master didn't have to say a word! As he once casually remarked: 'Outwardly my hand is soft and gentle, but beneath the glove is a hand of steel...' He was compassion's essence, but a great disciplinarian nonetheless. I was to earn his displeasure, discover the steel, and eventually be brought closer.

An important meeting was called at Sawan Ashram, attended by many distinguished and learned Indian initiates, including the ashram's managing committee. The Master invited presentations of

original ideas on how to best further the spiritual mission. During their learned dissertations, I was mentally criticizing: ‘Oh, he doesn’t meditate... This one doesn’t keep a diary... That one doesn’t even see the Light... How can they hope to further the great cause?’ Towards the end I was unable to restrain my impetuosity and asked to speak a few words, blind to my own pride. When Master nodded, observing, I stood, heart pounding, and announced, “All these fine talks and lectures are very well and good, but unless we practice what we preach, unless we go within and experience the divine Light and Sound ourselves on a regular basis, up to and including meeting the Radiant Form, I doubt we can effectively further the Master’s Cause.”

While there may have been a grain of truth in that, my delivery smacked of ego and intolerance, little taking into consideration the fact that divine Power works through many people for noble ends, regardless of inner access. *So what* if one were blessed with a taste of a vision, if pride stole away its sweetness? And if the tongue became harsh with others? Such a person could not measure up to those who were noble, kind, humble, and good, but perhaps somewhat deficient in meditation. (Sometimes inner experience is withheld from the initiate, for the Masters best know the time, the place, the measure and the readiness of the student.) Regardless of who *we* think we are and our relative positions in the world of time and space, we were all once denizens of the highest realms as atoms of the great and perfect Sun. My insensitive pronouncement had the effect of dropping a bomb on the august assembly. I had blundered in the mine-field of hearts and was about to pay dearly.

Master stood. He said, “It appears our Western friend is not in the full know of things.” That was the understatement of my life!

He was not pleased. After speaking briefly in Hindi, the meeting abruptly adjourned.

What had I done? Under which rock could I hide?

*When I fell from grace
I left the dream of eternity;
Tho’ waking to this world
Your fragrance lingered on.*

*O revive the splendor of the night;
Let me be its willing sacrifice!*

*A moth of little zeal fluttered
before the Flame of Beauty;
felt its heat, singed her wings,
and timorously withdrew.*

*Immolation, or union is not
permitted in moth-dom, so
long as self and fear remain.*

*Some other sweet night
she will pine, and try again.*

*And, so, the rebuke of the Beloved
was a shame that, unseen by
others, became a wondrous benevolence.*

*When the Beloved says, 'Nothing for you,'
please tell me what is left?*

*The grape, the olive and the seed
Only yield their valued essence
Under the press and the screw;
Coal cannot become diamond
Content on a soft and comfortable bed.
How many lifetimes does it take?
Who can say it is this, or that?*