

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### The Sea On Fire

The night following our abandonment of the Parki, was made memorable by a remarkable spectacle.

Slumbering in the bottom of the boat, Jarl and I were suddenly awakened by Samoa. Starting, we beheld the ocean of a pallid white color, corruscating all over with tiny golden sparkles. But the pervading hue of the water cast a cadaverous gleam upon the boat, so that we looked to each other like ghosts. For many rods astern our wake was revealed in a line of rushing illuminated foam; while here and there beneath the surface, the tracks of sharks were denoted by vivid, greenish trails, crossing and recrossing each other in every direction. Farther away, and distributed in clusters, floated on the sea, like constellations in the heavens, innumerable Medusae, a species of small, round, refulgent fish, only to be met with in the South Seas and the Indian Ocean.

Suddenly, as we gazed, there shot high into the air a bushy jet of flashes, accompanied by the unmistakable deep breathing sound of a sperm whale. Soon, the sea all round us spouted in fountains of fire; and vast forms, emitting a glare from their flanks, and ever and anon raising their heads above water, and shaking off the sparkles, showed where an immense shoal of Cachalots had risen from below to sport in

these phosphorescent billows.

The vapor jetted forth was far more radiant than any portion of the sea; ascribable perhaps to the originally luminous fluid contracting still more brilliancy from its passage through the spouting canal of the whales.

We were in great fear, lest without any vicious intention the Leviathans might destroy us, by coming into close contact with our boat. We would have shunned them; but they were all round and round us. Nevertheless we were safe; for as we parted the pallid brine, the peculiar irradiation which shot from about our keel seemed to deter them. Apparently discovering us of a sudden, many of them plunged headlong down into the water, tossing their fiery tails high into the air, and leaving the sea still more sparkling from the violent surging of their descent.

Their general course seemed the same as our own; to the westward. To remove from them, we at last out oars, and pulled toward the north. So doing, we were steadily pursued by a solitary whale, that must have taken our Chamois for a kindred fish. Spite of all our efforts, he drew nearer and nearer; at length rubbing his fiery flank against the Chamois' gunwale, here and there leaving long strips of the glossy transparent substance which thin as gossamer invests the body of the Cachalot.

In terror at a sight so new, Samoa shrank. But Jarl and I, more used to the intimate companionship of the whales, pushed the boat away from it with our oars: a thing often done in the fishery.

The close vicinity of the whale revived in the so long astute Skyeman all the enthusiasm of his daring vocation. However quiet by nature, a thorough-bred whaleman betrays no little excitement in sight of his game. And it required some persuasion to prevent Jarl from darting his harpoon: insanity under present circumstances; and of course without object. But "Oh! for a dart," cried my Viking. And "Where's now our old ship?" he added reminiscently.

But to my great joy the monster at last departed; rejoining the shoal, whose lofty spoutings of flame were still visible upon the distant line of the horizon; showing there, like the fitful starts of the Aurora Borealis.

The sea retained its luminosity for about three hours; at the expiration of half that period beginning to fade; and excepting occasional faint illuminations consequent upon the rapid darting of fish under water, the phenomenon at last wholly disappeared.

Heretofore, I had beheld several exhibitions of marine phosphorescence, both in the Atlantic and Pacific. But nothing in comparison with what was seen that night. In the Atlantic, there is very seldom any portion of the ocean luminous, except the crests of

the waves; and these mostly appear so during wet, murky weather. Whereas, in the Pacific, all instances of the sort, previously coming under my notice, had been marked by patches of greenish light, unattended with any pallidness of sea. Save twice on the coast of Peru, where I was summoned from my hammock to the alarming midnight cry of "All hands ahoy! tack ship!" And rushing on deck, beheld the sea white as a shroud; for which reason it was feared we were on soundings.

Now, sailors love marvels, and love to repeat them. And from many an old shipmate I have heard various sage opinings, concerning the phenomenon in question. Dismissing, as destitute of sound philosophic probability, the extravagant notion of one of my nautical friends--no less a philosopher than my Viking himself--namely: that the phosphorescence of the sea is caused by a commotion among the mermaids, whose golden locks, all torn and disheveled, do irradiate the waters at such times; I proceed to record more reliable theories.

Faraday might, perhaps, impute the phenomenon to a peculiarly electrical condition of the atmosphere; and to that solely. But herein, my scientific friend would be stoutly contradicted by many intelligent seamen, who, in part, impute it to the presence of large quantities of putrescent animal matter; with which the sea is well known to abound.

And it would seem not unreasonable to suppose, that it is by

this means that the fluid itself becomes charged with the luminous principle. Draw a bucket of water from the phosphorescent ocean, and it still retains traces of fire; but, standing awhile, this soon subsides. Now pour it along the deck, and it is a stream of flame; caused by its renewed agitation. Empty the bucket, and for a space sparkles cling to it tenaciously; and every stave seems ignited.

But after all, this seeming ignition of the sea can not be wholly produced by dead matter therein. There are many living fish, phosphorescent; and, under certain conditions, by a rapid throwing off of luminous particles must largely contribute to the result. Not to particularize this circumstance as true of divers species of sharks, cuttle-fish, and many others of the larger varieties of the finny tribes; the myriads of microscopic mollusca, well known to swarm off soundings, might alone be deemed almost sufficient to kindle a fire in the brine.

But these are only surmises; likely, but uncertain.

After science comes sentiment.

A French naturalist maintains, that the nocturnal radiance of the fire-fly is purposely intended as an attraction to the opposite sex; that the artful insect illuminates its body for a beacon to love.

Thus: perched upon the edge of a leaf, and waiting the approach of her Leander, who comes buffeting with his wings the aroma of the

flowers, some insect Hero may show a torch to her gossamer gallant.

But alas, thrice alas, for the poor little fire-fish of the sea,  
whose radiance but reveals them to their foes, and lights the way to  
their destruction.