

Noctiluca

By Lafcadio Hearn

The moon had not yet risen; but the vast of the night was all seething with stars, and bridged by a Milky Way of extraordinary brightness. There was no wind; but the sea, far as sight could reach, was running in ripples of fire,—a vision of infernal beauty. Only the rippings were radiant (between them was blackness absolute);—and the luminosity was amazing. Most of the undulations were yellow like candle-flame; but there were crimson lampings also,—and azure, and orange, and emerald. And the sinuous flickering of all seemed, not a pulsing of many waters, but a laboring of many wills,—a fleeting conscious and monstrous, a writhing and a swarming incalculable, as of dragon-life in some depth of Erebus.

And life indeed was making the sinister splendor of that spectacle—but life infinitesimal, and of ghostliest delicacy,—life illimitable, yet ephemeral, flaming and fading in ceaseless alternation over the whole round of waters even to the sky-line, above which, in the vaster abyss, other countless lights were throbbing with other spectral colors.

Watching, I wondered and I dreamed. I thought of the Ultimate Ghost revealed in that scintillation tremendous of Night and Sea;—quickenings above me, in systems aglow with awful fusion of the past dissolved, with vapor of the life again to be;—quickenings also beneath me, in meteor-gushings and constellations and nebulosities of colder fire,—till I found myself doubting whether the million ages of the sun-star could really signify, in the flux of perpetual dissolution, anything more than the momentary sparkle of one expiring noctiluca.

Even with the doubt, the vision changed. I saw no longer the sea of the ancient East, with its shuddering of fire, but that Flood whose width and depth and altitude are one with the Night of Eternity,—the shoreless and timeless Sea of Death and Birth. And the luminous haze of a hundred millions of suns,—the Arch of the Milky Way,—was a single smouldering surge in the flow of the Infinite Tides.

Yet again there came a change. I saw no more that vapory surge of suns; but the living darkness streamed and thrilled about me with infinite sparkling; and every sparkle was beating like a heart,—beating out colors like the tints of the sea-fires. And the lampings of all continually flowed away, as shivering threads of radiance, into illimitable Mystery. . . .

Then I knew myself also a phosphor-point,—one fugitive floating sparkle of the measureless current;—and I saw that the light which was mine shifted tint with each changing of thought. Ruby it sometimes shone, and sometimes sapphire: now it was flame of topaz; again, it was fire of emerald. And the meaning of the changes I could not fully know. But thoughts of the earthly life seemed to make the light burn red; while thoughts of supernal being,—of ghostly beauty and of ghostly bliss,—seemed to kindle ineffable rhythms of azure and of violet.

But of white lights there were none in all the Visible. And I marvelled.

Then a Voice said to me:—“The White are of the Altitudes. By the blending of the billions they are made. Thy part is to help to their kindling. Even as the color of thy burning, so is the worth of thee. For a moment only is thy quickening; yet the light of thy pulsing lives on: by thy thought, in that shining moment, thou becomest a Maker of Gods.”