

From the earliest ages of human society, earthquakes have justly been a subject of dread and horror. A mere spasm of the terrestrial crust, which, so far as concerns the natural history of our globe, is but an insignificant accident, proves to be a source of frightful misfortunes for civilized man ; who, in an interval of a few seconds, may witness the spread of utter desolation over an immense extent of country—opulent cities and blooming fields converted into a mass of unsightly ruin—villas, churches, palaces, orchards, gardens, all overthrown and destroyed—and hundreds of his fellow-creatures either buried beneath their own shattered roof-trees and sanctuaries, or swallowed up in the abysses of the yawning death !

[The truth is, that there is something peculiarly appalling to our humanity—something which confounds, as it were, the very evidence of our senses, and cuts away from beneath us the support on which we have been glad to lean—in the occurrence of these phenomena. We feel no astonishment at the perils of the ocean. There is an instability in water, and a want of fixity, which appears consistent with violent and premature changes. We hear of shipwrecks, not without pity, but without astonishment ; if men go down to the deep in ships, we reason with ourselves that such catastrophes are but the natural consequences of their hazard, just as a man who dashes into the tumult of battle must naturally count upon wounds, capture, or death ; but earth to the untutored eye seems so firm, so solid, so impregnable, that we are not wont to associate with it any ideas of sudden panic or overwhelming disaster. This round world, we say, cannot be moved. If caught in a storm on the breast of ocean, we long for “land ;” we yearn after the safety of the quiet valley, the security offered by the deep forest shades. We speak in loving and confident tones of our dear mother earth—our unshaken *terra firma*—where, if we can but plant our feet, we feel ourselves delivered from every danger. And yet, alas ! no ocean calamity can equal in extent the ruin inflicted by a single shock of earthquake !]

Before presenting an historical narrative of some of the more remarkable of these awful events, of some which have impressed the minds of men with the saddest memories, we think it will be useful for us to trace the general features of an earthquake from a scientific view-point. We proceed, therefore, to examine in succession :—

- 1st, The signs and precursors of an earthquake ;
- 2nd, Its superficial extent ;
- 3rd, The duration and direction of its shocks ;
- 4th, Its effects on the configuration of the soil ;
- 5th, The nature of the disasters which it produces ; and,
- 6th, The moral impression which it exercises upon man.