

We must not, then, be surprised to hear it said that the man who has once been witness of an earthquake is he who most dreads its return. In such a fear there is nothing imaginary ; one feels one's-self in the hands of an Almighty Power. The first shock is frequently the most terrible ; and in two or three seconds those busy hives which men call towns are crumbled into indistinguishable ruin. And nothing prognosticates the imminence of the peril : the tranquillity of night, the calm of day, cannot reassure you against this horrible eventuality ; no human precaution can ward it off. When once the shock has occurred, neither prudence, nor courage, nor skill can save a single life. Men rush into the tottering streets, or fly towards the country or into the open places, to avoid the falling ruins, and lo, the earth gapes apart, and swallows them up in its unfathomable abysses !* Mistrusting the earth, they take refuge upon the waters ; they crowd the boats or ships ; and the depths of the sea may suddenly disappear in a yawning gulf, or the tumult of the waves hurl and dash their frail asylum, a wreck, upon the shore !

Thus, in an earthquake, a just and insurmountable sentiment of fear is added to all the other fatal causes, swelling the terrible list of victims. In this circumstance may be found the justification of the Oriental apologue. A dervish in the neighbourhood of Cairo saw a phantom stalking towards the city.

“ Who art thou ? ” said he to the phantom.

“ The plague. ”

“ Whither goest thou ? ”

“ To Cairo, to slay there 15,000 men. ”

“ Is there no means of staying thy progress ? ”

“ No ; is it not written ? ”

“ Go then, but do not thou kill a single man above thy number. ”

A few days afterwards, the dervish encountered the same phantom on his way back from the stricken city.

* [Here again we must remind the reader that there is no authentic proof of any such catastrophe having occurred. The loss of life in earthquakes is due to the falling of houses and churches, and to the desolation caused by the sudden inroads of the sea-wave.]