

CHAPTER II.

GROTTOES AND CAVERNS.



IN succession to the subterranean waters, we have to notice the Grottoes and Caverns of our earth. Subterranean water-courses play, in truth, an important part, not in the primitive formation of these cavities, but in their enlargement, which results from the erosion of their sides by the action of underground streams.

Caverns are usually composed of several compartments, which are frequently of almost incredible extent. The tortuous ramifications which they form are not always parallel to the soil. Some of them gradually descend, as it were, by steps; others sink vertically, like wells.

To caverns of inferior magnitude is given the name of *Grottoes*.

Frequently we meet in caverns with vast reservoirs of water, and even with rivers, which traverse them for a portion of their extent. The sides of caverns are occasionally smooth and uniform; occasionally hollowed out, broken up, rugged—according to the nature of the rock which composes them.

The death-silence which reigns in these vast and tenebrous solitudes; their fantastic architecture; their walls glittering with quartzose crystals, which coruscate bewilderingly when lit up by the flickering torch-light; the immense columns which rise at intervals like pillars destined for the support of these remarkable edifices; their spacious corridors, which reverberate and intensify every sound; the oppressive and difficult air which circulates slowly through their labyrinthine recesses;—all the conditions and characteristics of these sombre regions form a cause of superstitious terror. Many legends of evil omen are, therefore, associated with their mysterious depths. Of old, it was in such places that the Pagan priests celebrated their sanguinary rites, as