

(41.) Another great comet which has assumed a sort of historical and political importance is that which appeared in A.D. 1556. According to the account of Gemma, it would not seem to have been a very large one, as he assigns to it a tail of only four degrees long. Its head, however, equalled Jupiter in brightness, and in size was estimated at about one-third or one-half of the diameter of the moon. It appeared about the end of February, and on the 16th of March is described by Ripamonte as a really terrific object. Terrific indeed it might well have been to the mind of a prince prepared by the most abject superstition to receive its appearance as a warning of approaching death, and as specially sent, whether in anger or in mercy, to detach his thoughts from earthly things, and fix them on his eternal interests. Such was its effect on the Emperor Charles V., whose abdication of the imperial throne is distinctly ascribed by many historians to this cause, and whose words on the occasion of his first beholding it have even been recorded—

*“ His ergo indiciiis me mea fata vocant ! ”*

the language and the metrical form of which exclamation afford no ground for disputing its authenticity, when the habits and education of those times are fairly considered. This comet has been supposed to be periodical, and to return in 291 years, on the ground of the prior appearance of great comets in the years 975 and 1264 (at intervals, that is, of 289 and 292 years respectively), and the general agreement of their orbits, so far as could be