

---

will have gone out to a distance 238 times the earth's distance from the sun, or nearly 80 times the distance of the planet Neptune. But this is still hardly the thousandth part of the distance to the very nearest fixed star—and supposing the elliptical orbit of a comet should be so long as to carry it out only half-way to the nearest star—its return to the sun would require upwards of 11 millions of years from its last appearance. Few of those who saw the last-mentioned comet pass over Arcturus, had any idea of the enormous distance at which the star really was behind the comet: and Arcturus is by no means the nearest star.

(53.) I think, from what I have said, you will perceive that there is in the history of comets matter enough both to encourage inquiry and to check presumption. Looking to the amount of our positive knowledge of them—knowledge acquired by centuries of observation, and by the conspiring efforts within the last two centuries of the profoundest thought and the most persevering labour of which man is capable, we may reasonably enough congratulate ourselves on what has been done, and while we can afford to look back with an indulgent smile on the unfledged and somewhat puerile attempts of the ancient mind to penetrate their secret, we may as reasonably look forward to the revelations they will afford, as time rolls on, of facts and laws of which at present we have no idea. This may, and ought to inspire confidence of the powers of man to penetrate always deeper and deeper into the secrets of nature. But, on the other hand, here, as on every other occasion, we find that the last and