

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE SOLAR SYSTEM IN A BLAZE.

HAVING made a *reconnoissance* of the vast field which lies before the geological observer, let us ascertain what degree of interest may be derived from a more attentive survey. The ordeal by fire stands first in the order of time. We go back, then, to the molten period of the earth. We plunge into the depths of the past eternity, and behold the terrestrial globe glowing with a fervent heat. What a history to trace from that point of time to this! Continents clothed with verdure, and diversified with mountain, hill, and dale—continents spread out upon a thousand courses of solid masonry—are to be derived from this germinal, incandescent mass. It requires an unusual effort of the imagination to leap from the scenes of a modern landscape to an adequate conception of a naked, tenantless, and molten orb, enveloped in an atmosphere of deadly elements, and totally unlike the present earth save in its spherical form and its yearly journey round the sun. To the eye of imagination, the forests must vanish in smoke; the “cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces” of man must crumble to clay, and sand, and loam; man and all living things must desert the earth, and leave it in the motionless and stagnant silence of death; the rivers must dry up in their channels; the ocean must change to vapor, and flee to the upper limits of the air; the rock-ribbed mountains must yield to the melting touch of fire; and the rigid crust of the earth must dissolve into a yielding and obedient fluid.