

COMETS.

Notwithstanding the accumulation of knowledge respecting Comets, from the first dawn of science to the present hour, it can be regarded only as a department which still requires all the skill and vigilance of modern astronomers to complete; and in this state not only the remarks of the profound, but the conjectures of the ingenious, merit attention. Under this impression the subject is again resumed in the present Almanack, though in a more miscellaneous form than formerly.

During the past year a comet, the most interesting to astronomers, viz :—that known as Halley's, will have returned its perihelion, or to that point in its orbit least distant from the sun, and also to its perigee or to the point nearest the earth. On its return from its perihelion about the last of January and first of February, it may perhaps be visible early in the morning in the south east, but it will soon after be so far from the earth that it will cease to be visible to the sight, and will not again be seen until the year 1912.

By virtue of first causes, whose natures are unknown to us, and which have given rise to many theories of the creation more or less plausible, the planets of our system perform their revolutions round the sun in orbits almost circular. The comets, on the contrary, travel in paths of extremely elongated ellipses; and they move in all imaginable directions. In returning from their points of aphelion, they constantly traverse our solar system; they penetrate within the interior of the planetary orbits, often they even pass between Mercury and the Sun. *It is not then impossible that a comet may come in contact with the earth.*

After having acknowledged the possibility of a shock, we hasten to say that the probability of such an event is extremely small. This will appear evident at the first glance, if we compare the immense space in which our globe and the comets move with the small capacities of those bodies. A very general fear prevails that the near approach of a comet would break our planet in pieces, or at least produce a great accession of heat, sufficient perhaps to destroy animal and vegetable life, if not to burn the world altogether. The argument seems to have originated in a notion that because heat produces expansion, therefore very highly expanded bodies must needs be very hot. It would be as good an argument to say, that because expansion by any