

and leaves of plants. Another source is the passage into a gaseous form of even the hardest parts of animals and plants which die and putrefy in the air, where they are soon resolved into the elements of which they are composed: and while a portion of these constituents is volatilized, the rest is taken up by rain-water, and sinks into the earth, or flows towards the sea; so that they enter again and again into the composition of different organic beings.

The principal elements found in plants are hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen; so that water and the atmosphere contain all of them, either in their own composition or in solution.* The constant supply of these elements is maintained not only by the putrefaction of animal and vegetable substances, and the decay of rocks, but also by the copious evolution of carbonic acid and other gases from volcanos and mineral springs, and by the effects of ordinary evaporation, whereby aqueous vapours are made to rise from the ocean, and to circulate round the globe.

It is well known that, when two gases of different specific gravity are brought into contact, even though the heavier be the lowermost, they soon become uniformly diffused by mutual absorption through the whole space which they occupy. By virtue of this law, the heavy carbonic acid finds its way upwards through the lighter air of the atmosphere, and conveys nourishment to the lichen which covers the mountain top.

If the quantity of food consumed by terrestrial animals, and the elements imbibed by the roots and leaves of plants, were derived entirely from that supply of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and other elements, given out into the atmosphere and the waters by the putrescence of organic substances, then we might imagine that the vegetable mould would, after a series of years, neither gain nor lose a single particle by the action of organic beings; and this conclusion is not far from the truth; but the operation which renovates the vegetable and animal mould is by no means so simple as that here supposed. Thousands of carcasses of terrestrial animals are floated down, every century, into the sea; and, together with forests of drift-timber, are imbedded in subaqueous deposits, where their elements are imprisoned in solid strata, and may there remain locked up throughout whole geological epochs before they again become subservient to the purposes of life.

On the other hand, fresh supplies are derived by the atmosphere and by running water, as before stated, from the disintegration of rocks and their organic contents, and through the agency of mineral springs from the interior of the earth, from whence all the elements before mentioned, which enter principally into the composition of animals and vegetables, are continually evolved. Even nitrogen has been recently found, by Dr. Daubeny, to be contained very generally in the waters of mineral springs.

Vegetation not an antagonist power counterbalancing the action of

* See some good remarks on the Formation of Soils, Bakewell's Geology, chap. xviii.