



BOOK VI.

THE WORLD'S SEAS.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEAS :—THEIR EXTENT—COLOUR OF THE SEA—ITS PHOSPHORESCENCE—COMPOSITION OF SEA-WATER—THE ATOLLS, OR CORAL ISLANDS—GEOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF THE SALTNESS OF THE OCEAN.

OCEAN, that immense sheet of water which covers nearly three-fourths of the surface of the globe, and whose name awakens in the brain so many memories of joy and sorrow, of hope and fear, plays a very important part in the grand economy of nature. Swept by the incessant winds, its vast surface continually inspires the injurious gases which load the atmosphere ; in its enormous mass it engulfs the débris carried down to it by the rivers and streams which have washed the continents and islands, and restores to the atmosphere, in the form of vapour, those purified waters which descend upon the earth in the shape of rain, or snow, or dew. These waters again flow back into the ocean through the streams, the brooks, and the rivers ; and thus an eternal circle is established, an unending voyage, which makes the same waters serve for the support and renewal of the world's organic life.

The ocean, says Malte-Brun, by its exhalations which refresh and moisten the air, nourishes vegetable life, and furnishes the necessary aliment for those admirable channels of running water that are ever flowing, and yet never empty. But for the beneficent influence of