

CHAPTER I.

EARLY VOYAGES. FRENCH SETTLEMENTS IN AMERICA.

THE enterprise of Columbus, the most memorable maritime enterprise in the history of the world, formed between Europe and America the communication which will never cease.

Nearly three centuries before the Christian era, Aristotle, following the lessons of the Pythagoreans, had taught that the earth is a sphere, and that the water which bounds Europe on the west washes the eastern shores of Asia. Instructed by him, the Spaniard Seneca believed that a ship, with a fair wind, could sail from Spain to the Indies in a few days. The opinion was revived in the middle ages by Averroes, the Arab commentator of Aristotle. Science and observation assisted to confirm it; and poets of ancient and of more recent times had foretold that empires beyond the ocean would one day be revealed to the daring navigator. The genial country of Dante and Buonarrotti gave birth to Christopher Columbus, by whom these lessons were so received and weighed that he gained the glory of fulfilling the prophecy. Accounts of the navigation from the eastern coast of Africa to Arabia had reached the western kingdoms of Europe; and adventurous Venetians, returning from travels beyond the Ganges, had filled the world with dazzling descriptions of the wealth of China as well as marvellous reports of the outlying island empire of Japan. It began to be believed that the continent of Asia stretched over far more than a hemisphere, and that the remaining distance round the globe was comparatively short. Yet from the early part of the fifteenth century the navigators of Portugal had directed their explorations to the coast of