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The Suez Canal, an Achievement of Enthusiasm and Diplomacy

PERHAPS the fullest collection of material on the Suez Canal in the United States has been given to the Business School Library and the Society by the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez, through the agency of Mr. George Edgar Bonnet, Directeur General Adjoint of the Company. The bulk of the collection consists of annual reports of the Company, from 1860 to 1870, and from 1872 to 1928; the reports of the Engineer in Chief to the *Commission Consultative Internationale des Travaux*; and the documentary record of the canal, with M. de Lesseps' personal comments, in the *Lettres, Journal et Documents*, covering the period between 1854 and 1869, the dates of the first step toward the enterprise and the opening of the canal, and the reports of the International Commission, the Dutch Commission, and the English Meetings, and other papers published under the title *Percement de L'Isthme de Suez*.

In addition there are works on the financial, political and engineering aspects of the building of the canal, statistical documents relating to the traffic, receipts and expenditures and the like since the canal was built, biographies, and pamphlets reflecting public opinion at the time when the project was being agitated.

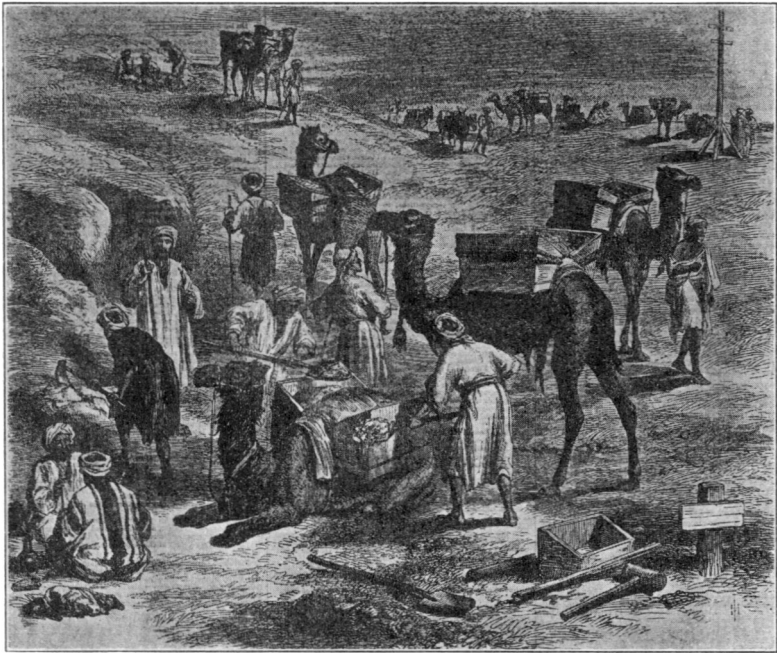
In this aggregation of documents, correspondence and comment, historical and contemporary, is told one of the most highly dramatic stories of modern times. It owes this element of the dramatic

and the picturesque more, perhaps, to the character of its central figure, Ferdinand de Lesseps, than to the inherent difficulties of the engineering feat accomplished. The latter were far more serious at Panama, where the tragic sequel to de Lesseps' great achievement was enacted. His triumph at Suez was over the ignorance, conservatism and diplomatic tangles which had kept the narrow isthmus uncut for centuries, while ships took months to reach the Orient by way of the Cape of Good Hope. De Lesseps had vision, determination, tact, and above all a contagious enthusiasm which made the piercing of the Isthmus of Suez into a crusade, and won for him the untiring support alike of the Empress Eugenie, of the Viceroy of Egypt, and of the convicts and desperadoes to whom he gave a new lease of life for the service of France.

For this task de Lesseps was the man. His early and honorable diplomatic career terminated with an unfortunate mission to Rome, in the Spring of 1849, when Rome still held out, under the Triumphs headed by Mazzini, against the ruin of the Italian movement for liberty and nationalism, and the return of the old reactionary rulers. The French clericals formed one of the principal elements of the strength of Louis Napoleon, at that time Prince-President, and preparing for the coup d'état. The liberal party, on the other hand, protested against having the French troops, which had been sent to the scene of action, used to restore old abuses. The situation which M. de Lesseps was sent to straighten out, had arisen because Oudinot, the General in command of the troops, had attacked Civita Vecchia, a port near Rome. While the French emissary was trying to effect an amicable settlement with the Italians, by which the French troops would help to keep order and prevent Austrian or Neapolitan interference, at the same time not recognizing the government which had driven the Pope from his temporal possessions, the policy of the home government swung toward reaction, and de Lesseps found himself being secretly thwarted in his negotiations through General Oudinot. The result was that the straightforward de Lesseps resigned his post, leaving it under the displeasure of his superiors, and retired to private life.

It was during this retirement, at a model farm in Berry, which he was conducting for his mother-in-law, that the subject of the canal claimed his serious interest. He was well acquainted with Egypt through his earlier diplomatic work, and now he set himself to study the attempts to cut the isthmus which had been made from

time to time ever since the reign of Rameses II. In 1798 Napoleon had commissioned the engineer Lepere to examine and report to him as to the practicability of the idea. The plan was abandoned because of Lepere's erroneous opinion that the level of the Red Sea was nearly thirty feet higher than that of the Mediterranean.



WORKMEN LOADING DROMEDARIES

A picture of operations at the Suez Canal, taken from a series of articles published in *The Illustrated London News* a few months before the Canal was opened.

De Lesseps, however, convinced that there was no difference between the two seas and that the project could be carried out, bided his time, for he could hope for no support from the dissolute Viceroy of Egypt, Abbas Pasha; and the authorities at Constantinople felt that the solution of such a problem in no wise concerned them. One day in September, 1854, however, while de Lesseps was busy superintending some masons and carpenters at the estate in Berry, he was handed a letter telling of the death of Abbas Pasha, and of

the accession of Säid, son of the famous Mehemet Ali, to whose elevation to power in Egypt de Lesseps' father had contributed materially.

In his youth Säid had been a pupil of the engineer. De Lesseps, of course, seized the psychological moment, and wrote to congratulate the new Viceroy. The latter replied most cordially, inviting his old tutor to come and see him at once, fixing a date for a meeting at Alexandria, whence he was to accompany the new ruler to Cairo. There, the Frenchman's tact, quickness of mind and understanding of the oriental carried the Pasha into the project on a wave of enthusiasm and admiration. When Säid voiced an ambition to make his reign remembered by some notable work for the glory of Egypt, de Lesseps did not at once suggest the project concerning which he had come to the country, for he had heard that the former shared the common notion that the work was impracticable. Instead, he set himself to gain his confidence and good will and that of his advisers.

In his *Recollections of Forty Years* de Lesseps recounts a number of incidents, calculated to appeal to the barbaric love of display of his audience, in characteristically graphic style. Telling of his first interview with Säid Pasha after his accession to power he says:

"I thought that from the very fact of my having known the Prince when he was in a very different position it was all the more incumbent upon me to treat him with the respectful deference which is always so acceptable to the human heart. So I fastened on to my dress coat all my stars and orders. The Viceroy received me with great affection."

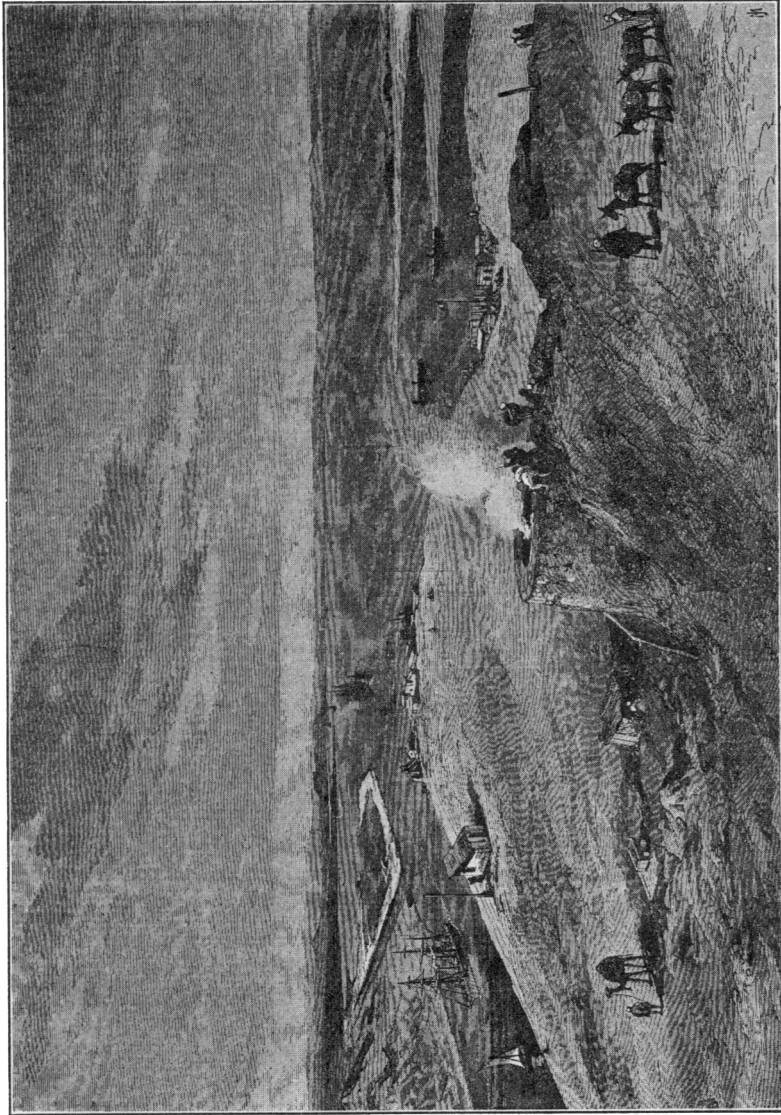
At another time, de Lesseps was accompanying his friend on a military expedition in the desert. The soldiers having built a parapet of stones taken from an old ruin, around the encampment, the Frenchman, on leaving the Viceroy's tent, put his horse, a present from the latter, over the parapet instead of going through the opening. That night, he broached his scheme to Säid. Säid accepted the idea enthusiastically, and called in his generals to give their opinions on it. These men, says de Lesseps, were "better suited to give an opinion as to a cavalry manoeuvre than a gigantic enterprise, the significance of which they were incapable of understanding. They stared at me and looked as if they thought that their master's friend, whom they had just seen put his horse over a wall, could not be otherwise than right, they raised their hands to their heads, as their master spoke, in sign of assent."

Säid now threw himself whole-heartedly into his friend's plans, offering to finance the whole undertaking. But the firman of the Sultan at Constantinople was still to be obtained. And it was on this rock that the enterprise was almost shipwrecked. The influence of England dominated Constantinople, in the person of her ambassador, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe. And embodied in the same man were the conservatism and anti-Gallic feeling of a certain English element. The English government under Lord Palmerston, and represented by the ambassador, were suspicious of French intentions toward Egypt and eventually of French designs on British possessions in India. Without the sanction of England the Sultan dared not give his consent to the building of the Canal, although the representatives of the other European countries signified that their governments approved of the enterprise. And it was over the fearful, the unbelieving and the obstinate that the real triumph was won, beside which the creation of a town and harbor at Port Said, the Mediterranean terminus of the canal, on a narrow sandy strip without the sign of a natural haven, and the digging and protecting of a canal through the shifting sand of the Sahara sink into relative insignificance.

English journalists refused to admit that time or expense would be saved by the new route, proclaimed the impossibility of making a canal which would not be continually drifted up with sand, and denounced the whole proposition as a wildcat scheme. De Lesseps countered with an international commission of engineers of the highest repute, including several Englishmen, who examined the ground and the project, giving their services free, and reported favorably. The indomitable projector then exhausted his resources in trying to negotiate with both the home government and the ambassador, and finally decided to carry the war into Africa. He made a tour of England, holding meetings at all the principal cities and towns, and found the commercial classes overwhelmingly in favor of his plan. He was received with open arms, and in one city the mayor volunteered to preside over the meeting.

If de Lesseps' enthusiasm carried the English commercial classes by storm, it swept France unresistingly along with it.

"By the advice of the Viceroy," says the projector, "I had reserved for foreign powers a portion of the shares. But France alone took on the whole amount 220,000, the equivalent of one hundred and ten millions.



ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION FROM THE SAME SERIES OF ARTICLES

This shows Lake Timsah, one of the "Bitter Lakes," dry inland basins which the canal engineers flooded with the waters of the Mediterranean.

I witnessed in the course of the subscription some curious facts full of patriotism.

Two persons wished to subscribe. One was an old bald-headed priest, doubtless an old soldier, who said to me —

‘Oh, those English! — I am glad to be able to be revenged on them by taking shares in the Suez Canal.’

The other who came to my office was a well-dressed man, I know not of what profession.

‘I wish’ said he, ‘to subscribe for the Railway of the Island of Sweden’ (*le chemin de fer de l’île de Suède*).

‘But,’ it was remarked to him, ‘it is not a railway, it is a canal; it is not an island, it is an isthmus; it is not in Sweden, it is at Suez.’

‘That’s all the same to me,’ he replied; ‘provided it be against the English, I subscribe.’ ”

Over half the capital was raised in Europe, chiefly in France, while the Viceroy controlled the remainder.

The Company was now organized, the surveys made, and the project waited only for the consent of the Sultan. Finally, taking advantage of expressions of personal encouragement on the part of the Sultan, it was decided to begin work on the canal itself, trusting that the demonstration of work accomplished would become a factor in obtaining the desired firman. All sorts of obstacles were thrown in the way. Local officials were encouraged to refuse to furnish supplies. The unhappy Viceroy was so beset that for a time he dared not see de Lesseps officially. Finally, owing to a sudden wave of humanitarian feeling on the part of the English, the forced labor of the Egyptian fellahs was withdrawn from the enterprise. De Lesseps, however, imported elaborate labor-saving machinery, and very much more efficient French employees, filled with enthusiasm for a work which was to redound to the glory of their native country.

In 1863, Saïd Pasha died quite suddenly. He was succeeded, however, by Ismail Pasha, his brother, who was favorably disposed toward the carrying out of the enterprise sanctioned by his predecessor. Finally the desired firman was obtained. The question of terms on which it was to be granted was submitted to the arbitration of Napoleon III, who had hitherto withheld himself from any definite connection with the enterprise, although it had his sympathy. In the terms were embodied the withdrawal of the forced labor, the Viceroy paying an indemnity; and the turning over to him of lands bordering on the canal which had been granted

the company by his predecessor, and likewise of the Fresh water canal constructed in connection with the work, the company reserving the right to use it. For these also he was to pay an indemnity.

The opening of the canal took place on November 17, 1869. It was a complete triumph for its builder. De Lesseps was loaded with honors, and attained the pinnacle of ambition for a Frenchman—he was elected to the French Academy. Throughout France he was hailed as a great engineer and a great patriot.

Few men, indeed, have enjoyed the fruits of their achievements as satisfactorily as did de Lesseps, for a time. But the end of his life was destined to be overshadowed by tragedy, in the form of his disastrous attempt to build the Panama Canal by the same methods as he used at the Isthmus of Suez. And therein lies, in great measure, the reason for his failure. In the latter case, the natural obstacles to be overcome presented no overwhelming problems, whereas at Panama the appalling sanitary conditions and the treacherous formation at the site of the Culebra Cut were not to be vanquished by diplomacy or enthusiasm. It is probable that if de Lesseps had had the youth and health to superintend personally the work at the American canal as he did at the Egyptian one, the attempt would not have ended in a financial scandal. But gifted as he was, he lacked the unemotional scientific patience with which Goethals attacked his problem. And whether or not, even in the prime of life, he would have brought the Panama enterprise to a successful conclusion is a matter for doubt.

A White Oak Plaque of the *Flying Cloud* made by a Steamship Officer

AN officer of the Society has presented the organization with an unusual gift, a white oak bas-relief of the famous clipper ship *Flying Cloud*. It was brought into the office of the *Boston Globe* by the artist, Robert Blight, chief officer of the steamship *Maryland*, and thence came to the Society. The plaque, done from two or three prints and an oil painting, is considered one of the finest examples of marine carving. Mr. Blight is a genuine deep-sea sailor, who has spent forty-one of his fifty-six years in ships. For twelve