CHAPTER III.

THE WYSE-RECLUS SURVEYS.—M. DE LESSEPS BECOMES INTERESTED IN PANAMA.

Commander L. N. B. Wyse and General Türr organize a company to exploit a Colombian concession.—The French pronounce the isthmus a *terra incognita*.—Wyse and Reclus set about to settle the Unknown.—Their first expedition examines Gogorza’s line.—Unsatisfactory results of the “expedition.”—A second expedition is fitted out by the company.—Wyse goes to Bogota, and obtains a revised concession from Colombia, while Reclus surveys the line of the Panama Canal in eighteen days, and makes “elaborate” plans for several canals.—Concession in hand, Wyse goes on his travels, and comes to Paris to prepare a “congress” to approve of the Panama route.—M. de Lesseps lends his name to the scheme.

We have shown in the two preceding chapters that a great many efforts have been made to unravel the secret of the isthmus, principally by explorations organized with great care by the United States Government, who entrusted them to officers specially qualified for the work. There is no doubt that the Government was in earnest, and gave fair and careful consideration to the projects submitted to it.

While the American authorities were still conducting their investigations, M. Lucien Napoléon Bonaparte Wyse, then a *lieutenant de Vaisseau* in the French Navy, obtained a concession from the United States of Colombia, and with his brother-in-law, General Etienne Türr (Hungarian), and others, proposed to make arrangements...
for selling it. The first step towards the formation of the Panama Canal Company is related at length in the first one of the official publications of M. de Lesseps, and we will let it tell its own story.

In the "Historical Sketch" preceding the Compte Rendu of the meeting of the Paris Congress of 1879 it is stated that in 1875 the Committee of Commercial Geography of the Paris Geographical Society thought that, while it waited for the intervention of the Powers in connection with this canal matter, something ought to be done by the Society itself to solve the problem of the isthmus according to the explorations, the records of which were at its disposal. But we are told the Society soon found out that, "in spite of the great number of explorers, there was no topographical knowledge complete enough on many points of the Darien, and on many of the southern valleys of the Cordillera; and while such gaps existed in that knowledge it would be premature to pronounce conclusively on the choice of a route."

Very few persons will be willing to deny the soundness of that judgment.

"But," continues the sketch, "how were such costly explorations to be made? The committee could not even try and meet the expenses. . . . It was then that, on March 24, 1876, a comité français for the study of the piercing of an interoceanic canal was completed. . . . As soon as it was organized, General Türr and M. L. N. B. Wyse formed a société civile, which took upon itself to defray the expenses for the necessary explorations." At the end of the year an "expedition" was started.

This official account only corroborates what was already too well known. Here is an editorial note preceding an article which appeared in the North American Review as early as August 1879:—
"It was rumoured in Paris during the late Canal Congress that the concession for the Darien Canal, which was held by a little company of which General Türr is president, was divided into 100 shares of 500f. each, and it seemed to be understood that a company of 400,000,000f. capital would be formed to purchase the concession from the Türr Company, and would pay the stockholders of this association 25,000,000f. for their privileges. Thus each share of 500f. would become worth 250,000f. With the fall of Sédan and the fortunes of the Second Empire a large number of the most prominent Bonapartists lost their means of subsistence, and found themselves in a condition bordering on beggary. There were few men of private resources among them. Some had been placentmen or stock speculators, while others had been the recipients of constant and liberal gifts from the Emperor's privy purse. These gentlemen soon began to look to M. de Lesseps, a connection of the Empress Eugénie, for help and guidance. He alone of this helpless and hungry crowd could command the credit and confidence of capitalists. To pierce the isthmus of Central America had been the cherished wish of Louis Napoléon, and this project was not long in recurring to his dejected followers. Thus the scheme was revived and matured under the sponsorship and direction of M. de Lesseps, the executive duties of the undertaking devolving upon Lieutenant Bonaparte Wyse, whose sister is married to General Türr. A careful examination of the names of the French delegates to the Canal Congress shows how entirely it was packed with subservient friends of the fallen dynasty; nor is it well to overlook the fact that the shares of the Türr Company were largely held by them."

Before commenting on the explorations of M. Wyse
and his companion, Lieutenant Armand Reclus, according to their own records, we ask the indulgence of our readers while we note what M. de Lesseps, M. Wyse, and their friends were reported to think about them. We will continue to translate from the “Historical Sketch.”

The labours of M. Wyse and his engineers “were hard, but they were conducted with great energy. Sr. Gogoza’s route did not offer particular advantages; Messrs. Wyse and Reclus, going on further west, thought to open a more favourable way between Tuyra and the Bay of Acanti; but their operations were interrupted by the rainy season. Three members of the expedition died of fatigue in that laborious campaign.

“Messrs. Wyse and Reclus next year resumed their work, with the aid of Messrs. Verbrugghe, Sosa, and Lacarme. While M. Reclus finished the exploration of the Tuyra-Acanti, M. Wyse made that of the Isthmus of San Blas. The expedition was thus carried to the Isthmus of Panama, which was equally well studied. Since then the gaps were filled. Messrs. Wyse and Reclus had nothing else to do but to put their documents in order, and draw the lines of the several projects of sea-level canals which they proposed to open across the whole of these regions so valiantly explored.”

This is French “brazen trumpet’s bluster,” and nothing else. It was the first act of the huge farce of the Panama Canal which some ambitious men imposed upon this credulous world, with no other purpose but that of making money out of M. de Lesseps’ name.

In 1875 the Paris Geographical Society had resolved that it had not knowledge enough of the topography of the isthmus to conscientiously recommend a route for interoceanic communication; and Messrs. Wyse and
Reclus were sent out to "fill the gaps" in that knowledge. Let us see how they did it.

About the middle of December of 1876 M. Wyse and fifteen other persons, including guides, interpreters, naturalists, etc., began their explorations on the Pacific side of the isthmus. His instructions from the Society were to examine the route between gulfs Ubará (Darion) and San Miguel, by way of the Atrato and Paya rivers, which is known as the Cogorza route. Should it have proved impracticable, he was then to find out the best route "to the south and east of the line joining capes Tiburon and Garachiné." The reason of this limitation is that the Panama Railway Company had by its concession the right of way in the region north and west of that supposed line. Let the reader remark that the expedition was not to study the most feasible line absolutely, but the best one for which the Society had got a concession.

A party of engineers, under M. Cellier, reconnoitred as far as Loma de Cacarica, and followed up several lines. He frankly admits that he made no special surveys, and yet he would propose a lock-canal from Tuyra to Pirri, thence to the Cupé River, thence again to the Tuyra between Puerto and Pasa, from which point it would descend by the Tulegua and Cacarica valley to the Atrato, in the Atlantic. The total length would be 230 kilometres; five locks; one tunnel, measuring 700 metres; dams 40 metres in height across the Paya; summit level, about 50 metres above low tide on the Pacific side. M. Wyse reconnoitred a route by the valleys of Tupisa, Tiati, and Acanti-Tolo, as far as Tiati, the rest being left unexplored. He proposed the absurd plan of grilling or grating the Chucunaque in order to arrest the debris brought down by the freshests. Although M. Wyse did not go beyond Tiati, that did not prevent him from drawing the line of
the canal up to the Atlantic, the coast of which he placed at five nautical miles too far to the west. But then these are "small matters." He returned from the Tiati to Europe.

There is no use in giving the details of a scheme which was not studied upon the ground, and into which so many ludicrous errors have crept. Those, however, who wish to ascertain for themselves how the "gap" in science was filled by this first expedition should consult the report published by A. Chaix and Co., of Paris, in August 1877. It is enough to say that the Société Türr-Wyse was not satisfied.

A second expedition was made up of Commander Wyse, Commander Reclus, and Messrs. Sosa, Verbrugghe (engineer), and M. Ponyderseau. Most of them started from Paris on November 7, and on December 6 they left Panama for the Bayano and Mamoní rivers, in order to study the San Blas. In less than one week M. Wyse returned to the Chepo, from whence he wanted to reach the Bayano and examine the Icanti River. As, however, he reached the salto of Chararé, he had to return on account of the lack of pirogas, or canoes. This was on December 15, only nine days after the expedition had left Panama.

Commander Wyse then sent Commander Reclus to make a planimetric study of the Terrable River, one of the tributaries of the Bayano, while he himself, with M. Verbrugghe, went to the quebrada, or falls of Gaspar Sabana, near Chararé. By wading the river he reached the end of the Bayano. M. Reclus found the Terrable impracticable. The whole party then returned to Panama. This first excursion lasted a little over two weeks, including the time spent from and to Panama.

On Dec. 29 the commission, started again, this time
to Yavisa (Southern Darien), which they reached on January 2, 1878. On the 3rd M. Wyse went to Pino-

gana to obtain men to aid the party. On the 8th they entered the Tiati River. On the 11th M. Wyse,
accompanied by M. Verbrugghe, returned to Panama, after having spent just nine days on the field, and three

days after he had struck the river that he had gone to study. So far, M. Wyse had not spent on the field more

than two weeks altogether in this second expedition.

On February 4 he and M. Verbrugghe left Aspinwall on board of a French man-of-war, Le Dupetit-Thouars, for

Acanti, in order to make a hydrographic survey of that bay. He then ascended the Acanti for a little way.

On the other hand, M. Reclus, having separated from the others, started for the Atlantic to join M. Wyse, and

Sr. Sosa was to return to Yavisa. Reclus ascended with a few men the head-waters of the Tupisa, and

reached the Atlantic, but having missed Wyse, returned to Yavisa, whence, on the 19th, all started for Panama,

which they reached on the 25th. This excursion really came to an end on February 6, or thirty-five days after

the party's arrival at Yavisa. The actual work of M. Reclus lasted between January 14 and February 6.

Commander Wyse left for Bogota, the capital of the United States of Colombia, on February 25, and as the

Magdalen River was quite dry, he started on horseback by way of Buenaventura. He thus reached Bogota on

March 12, after a trip of fifteen days. The trip was made with such rapidity, he says, that "the inhabitants of

the capital, accustomed to long ridings, were astounded.

... It is true that I rode sometimes twenty-two hours in a day. But," he continues, "at any rate I arrived in

time to treat with the Administration of President Parra, who, well aware of our efforts, had shown himself
favourably disposed to discuss the modifications which I was commissioned to ask in the concession of May 28, 1876, granted according to Colombian law No. 33 of same year." (See "Rapport sur les Etudes de la Commission Internationale," &c., Paris, Lahore, Imprimerie Générale, 1879, page 21.)

In view of the haste of M. Wyse it is not too much to conjecture that this trip to Bogota and an amended concession were the principal purposes of his expedition. President Parra's term of office expired on the last day of March, and its nineteen days of remaining life were turned to good account by the clever French promoter. On the 14th it was decided that M. Wyse should submit a new contract of concession, which he did on the following day. The details were then discussed for several days, the Government was made to give the company controlled by M. Wyse the right of way in all the territory of the United States of Colombia, having regard to the rights of the Panama Railway, and the grant of lands was for double the area of the previous concession. On March 28—in less than a week—the Colombian Government signed this most important contract. Such haste is unparalleled in any country, and almost justifies the belief that M. Wyse must have employed extraordinary persuasion to win over the unbounded confidence of the Executive of that distracted country in the last days of a dying administration. On March 23 the President signed the grant, and submitted it to Congress, who discussed the subject up to May 17, when the last amendments were disposed of. On the next day the new President signed the Bill. Twenty-four hours later on, M. Wyse was on his way back to Panama, which he reached in seventeen days—on June 4. The Société civile had at last got a concession to its
own satisfaction, embracing the whole isthmus connecting the two Americas, except Nicaragua and Tehuantepec. That was the point. As to the explorations to fill the gaps, they were only undertaken for the sake of decency and of appearances. M. Wyse had now to go to the United States and arrange with the Panama Railway Company, whose rights were still in his way, for it seems his views had been for some time fixed upon the line of that road as a fit one for the proposed canal. When he left for Bogota he directed Commander Reclus (who, as we know, had reached Panama on February 25) to survey the valley of the Chagres, and on the Pacific slope that of the Rio Grande or of the Caimito. M. Reclus fell ill, and it was not until March 11 that he was able to start for Bernardino. On the 13th he ascended the Caimito and the Bernardino. On the 14th he reached the Copé, and then passed over the Aguacate and the Congo, returning to Panama on the 28th. On April 2 M. Reclus commenced a reconnaissance of the valleys of the Obispo, Chagres, and Rio Grande, which is the line of the present canal. He writes in his diary ("Rapports" already quoted, page 126) that "that was not an exploration in the true sense of the word;" it was indeed a walk, if not a ride, over the Panama Railway line. He was accompanied by Sr. Sosa, who, however, left him a week later on, too ill to proceed, and when, after four days, he recovered, M. Reclus had an attack of earache, which caused him to return to Panama on April 20, and ten days later he left for Europe.

And that exploration, which was "no exploration," and lasted eighteen days, was the one on which the much-spoken-of Wyse-Reclus project for an interoceanic canal in Panama was based. The fifteen printed pages of M. Reclus' diary 'are' silent 'witnesses' of the 'shameful'
manner in which these daring speculators, without any attempt at a serious study of the line, came boldly forward, proposing, not one alone, but several schemes for such a tremendous work as a canal. M. Wyse had already the concession, dated 1876, from Colombia; now he had a fresh one, altered to suit himself. The French savants had declared that too little as yet was known of the isthmus to enable them to make an intelligent choice of a route. It was necessary to play the comedy of science, and M. Wyse played it, we must admit, in a most grotesque manner. Eighteen days in Panama were enough for such wonderful geniuses as Commander Reclus and a fifth-rate Colombian engineer to clear up the scientific mysteries of the isthmus. In eighteen days, in spite of illness, these two men pretended to have finally decided the question that, as we have been showing, had perplexed many conscientious explorers. The canal between the Atlantic and the Pacific must be in Panama, if only the Panama Railway Company would let it be. Surely any man who wants to build a house for himself employs more than eighteen days in fixing upon a proper locality, for there are many conditions that must be weighed with care. But these men knew all about the Panama route, which is upwards of 47 miles in length in a direct line, crossing a torrent that rises 50 feet in twenty-four hours, and teeming with the most difficult problems of engineering: yes, they learned all about it in eighteen days' travel over it! In truth no work of average importance has ever been undertaken with such flimsy preparation. The whole transaction, from commencement to end, was suggestive of an attempt to grossly impose on the enthusiastic and patriotic people who believe in the name of M. de Lessseps; and, what is especially sad in this whole affair is,
that M. de Lesseps himself, to whom unstinted praise is due for his glorious feat in the Isthmus of Suez, was now a partner—a particularly interested party—in this questionable business, in which he had staked his good name.

As we have said, M. Wyse's task was ended except for the matter of arranging with the Panama Railway. Before he left for the United States he made a visit to Nicaragua, not to try if he could supply an independent geographical society with the requisite gaps in science, but really to condemn it, as he does; for, it must be repeated, his concession was for Colombia and not for Nicaragua. On July 1 he sailed to San Francisco, and crossed the continent to Washington and New York, leaving the latter port on the last day of the month, and reaching Paris on the following August 11, bringing with him his Colombian concession. Here we drop the curtain on the first act of this play.