CHAPTER IV.

THE WYSE CONCESSION.—THE PARIS CONGRESS OF 1879.

The terms of the Colombian concession for the Panama Canal.—The company gets 1,250,000 acres of land.—Stipulations as to war-vessels in the canal.—As Nicaragua is the best route, MM. Wyse and Lesseps pack a "congress" to endorse the Panama.—How the men of science were snubbed at the congress.—Unseemly haste in settling the point.—Some unpalatable truths told at the congress by M. de Lesseps' own friends.

During the whole time of these two expeditions of Commanders Wyse and Reclus, it was the general impression that the Americans generally favoured the Nicaragua route as the most feasible. Such was undoubtedly the result arrived at by all competent authorities who read the reports of the different expeditions sent to the isthmus between 1870 and 1876, and also by the committee of revision, under General Humphreys, which had already presented its report. It is evident that, once in Europe, and having got a concession from Colombia, Commander Wyse had to act promptly on it, and his first step would naturally be to have his route, as against Nicaragua, preferred to and endorsed by at least an appearance of scientific authority, so that it might not be claimed afterwards that the rival route was the best. But let us first examine the terms of the concession of M. Wyse, or rather of the Société Civile Internationale du Canal Interocéanique.

As we have already stated, the contract of the conces-
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sion with the Executive of the United States of Colombia was signed at Bogota on March 20, 1878, and was then submitted to the Legislature, who amended it in many ways. On May 17 M. Wyse signed a declaration accepting the contract with each and all the amendments, and the concession was then completed on May 18, when it was countersigned by the new President of Colombia.

By its terms the Colombian Government grants to M. Lucien N. B. Wyse, acting on behalf of the said Society, the privilege for ninety-nine years to construct and work a canal, the surveys for the route to be made by a commission to which two Colombian engineers were to be attached; the grantees to organize the "universal" company within two years, and the canal to be finished twelve years hence. All public lands required for the works to be ceded gratis to the Company, as well as a belt of land 200 metres wide on each side of the canal. Besides that, the grantees were to have, as an aid for the accomplishment of the work, 500,000 hectares (which is about 1,248,000 acres) of public lands in the localities which the Company may select. The ports at each end and the waters of the canal were declared neutral for all time. In case of foreign war the transit is not to be interrupted by such event, all vessels to pass freely without distinction, exclusion, or preference, on payment of the dues.

Art. VI. in the original concession said: "The entrance to the canal shall be rigorously prohibited to the war-vessels of those nations which are at war, and to those whose destination manifests their intention to take part in hostilities." As amended by Congress it reads thus: "The United States of Colombia reserve to themselves the right to pass their vessels, troops, ammunitions of war, at all times and without paying any dues whatever.
The passage of the canal is strictly closed to war-vessels of nations at war, and which may not have acquired, by public treaty with the Colombian Government, the right to pass by the canal at all times."

By way of compensation for the rights allowed to the grantees, Colombia is to receive a percentage on all the collections made by the Company, beginning with 5 per cent. on the first twenty-five years, and then 6 per cent. between the twenty-sixth and the fiftieth year, 7 per cent. until the seventy-fifth year, and 8 per cent. from the seventy-sixth year until the ninety-ninth and last year of the privilege. Four-fifths of such sums are to go to the Federal Government, and one-fifth to the Government of the State of Panama, the sum guaranteed by the Company to be never less than £50,000 a year.

Such are the main features of the Wyse concession of May 17, 1878. Commander Wyse at once started for Paris, there to organize his Company. But he met at the start with great difficulties. The Government of the United States, to begin with, could never look favourably upon this French enterprise, especially as the Government itself had treated for a concession for it a few years before. In fact, the Government, on March 13, 1872, had appointed a committee to study the different reports of all previous explorations, and on February 7, 1876, the committee had presented their report. The Government was evidently bound to take some decided step in the matter, when Commander Wyse went to the isthmus and began to treat for the first concession that he could find. But the greatest objection was that there were many different ideas as to which of the several canal routes was the best one, physically and financially speaking. The United States Government and private citizens had undertaken different explorations of the isthmus in
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Darrien, Tehuantepec, Panama, and Nicaragua, and the latter route, thoroughly explored by Colonel Childs in 1850–51, had been recommended by such eminent English engineers as Lieutenant-Colonel Aldrich of the Royal Engineers, and James Walker, who had been appointed by Her Majesty’s Government to examine Childs’ reports. That route had recently been explored again by the U.S. engineer Menocal, under the supervision of Admiral Ammen, and was attracting very favourable attention in the United States. In order, therefore, to command capital, M. Wyse found it necessary first to secure the services of M. Ferdinand de Lesseps and of the Suez Canal people; and, secondly, to try and show that the Panama Canal route was the best, not only in Colombia, but in any place in Central America. And French tact came to the assistance of these enterprising promoters. They conceived the idea of an “International Scientific Congress,” to be convened in Paris. If the Congress were really scientific and impartial, there would be great danger that they would select the Nicaragua route; therefore such a contingency was to be carefully avoided, for M. Wyse’s grant was not for Nicaragua. A congress was accordingly made up mainly of persons indicated by the promoters. Even in the case of foreign delegates M. de Lesseps took care, in issuing the invitations, to suggest to the Governments the appointment of certain persons who had shown sympathy with M. de Lesseps’ ideas; but in order to conceal his plan the great diplomatist, on the other hand, suggested the appointment of a few well-known friends of other schemes, or abstained from making suggestions.

The Congress met in Paris on May 15, 1879. It was composed of 135 delegates, of whom seventy-four were Frenchmen, and sixty-one foreigners; six from Great
Britain, eleven from the United States, six from Holland, four from Switzerland, only one from Germany; and so on. Among the eleven from the United States were Admiral Ammen, Mr. Menocal, and Commander Selfridge, perhaps the greatest living authorities respecting the isthmus, the first two having been delegated to appear by the United States Government; but to counteract their votes there were also such men as Mr. N. Appleton, of Boston, a personal friend of Lesseps, and two men from California, besides Mr. Cyrus W. Field, who were only there for ornament.

Among the French delegates, thirteen appear in the list as employés of the Suez Canal Company.

The Congress was called to order by the Comte de Lesseps, Admiral le Noury being honorary president, and then it organized itself into five grand committees, four of eighteen members each, and one, for the selection of the route, of fifty-four members, of which but two were Americans; so that the country under whose auspices several explorations for interoceanic communication had been made, and which was not yet satisfied as to which route was absolutely the best, was now to be overruled by men who had never been in America, nor ever studied the complicated problems connected with the proposed linking of the two oceans.

The Congress sat for just two weeks. Its purpose, its whole purpose, was to endorse the Wyse-Lesseps scheme, and we see not only all details of organization, but also all subsequent proceedings tending to that end. As there were honest differences of opinion among the French themselves as to a sea-level canal or to a canal with locks, Commander Wyse, equal to the occasion, had really two projects on hand, one for each.

In spite of the diplomacy of M. de Lesseps, the true
purpose of the Congress cropped out sufficiently in the meetings; and in the Compte Rendu, which we have before us, we find very suggestive remarks from some of the delegates.

M. Blanchet said that the Panama line was unhealthy. The whole place is a waste, where one cannot even get table vegetables, most of those consumed being preserves imported from Europe. The very maize eaten by the natives came from beyond the sea. (Compte Rendu des Sciences, p. 229.)

At the meeting of the technical committee held on May 19 the same gentleman, who warmly proposed a Nicaragua route, based on the explorations of the Americans Lull and Menocal and modified by himself, complained that M. Wyse had put aside all these surveys in order to occupy himself only with his own scheme. And then he adds:—

"His (M. Wyse's) personal studies about the proposed line of the Chagres cannot deserve much consideration, for they were conducted by M. Reclus in the period comprehended between the 2nd and the 16th of April of 1878; that is to say, fourteen days" (See Wyse-Reclus Memoir, page 127; Compte Rendu, page 231.) We have reckoned eighteen days, because we include the whole time of M. Reclus' return to Panama.

But M. Blanchet, proceeding with his remarks, says the line of M.M. Wyse and Lesseps had been explored personally in fourteen days; but even the map which was before the Congress was but the old map of the Panama Railway Company. Indeed, we have that map before us; it is dated 1857—twenty-two years before the Congress took place—and it is a reduction of the original surveys of the American Colonel, George M. Totten, who built the railway, and who died in New York in May 1884.
It would seem incredible that M. de Lesseps should have lent his name to such a scheme; but it was of the greatest consequence for him to push it through, for not only was it known that the Grant Administration in the United States was hastening the surveys of the different routes, but M. Blanchet himself had got a concession from the President of Nicaragua so recently as February 27, which fact, however, does not detract from the truth of his remarks. This concession, however, was never ratified by the Nicaraguan Senate.

In a communication, which was read at the meeting of May 26, M. du Puydt, the author of a plan for a canal between Puerto del Sur and the Gulf San Miguel, handled the Wyse-Lesseps scheme without gloves. He had then refused to present his plan, because, he said, "Le programme du Congrès est arrêté. . . . Il y a déjà longtemps que les organisateurs de ce congrès ont arrêté qu'il ne serait soumis à son examen que des projets de canaux appuyés ou revisés par M. Wyse." (The italics are not ours.) Furthermore, M. de Puydt complains of the unfairness of M. de Lesseps, who in his paper, "L'Isthme de Suez," spoke favourably of that scheme, and in 1875 complimented M. de Puydt for "realizing his (Lesseps') desiderata"; but later on said that he knew the scheme, but it was impracticable; and upon being written to about this opinion said, "Je ne connais ni votre projet ni les conditions des bouches de l'Atrato." In spite of that, M. de Puydt sent him his plans, accompanied by a report by Mr. James Brunlees, late President of the Institution of Civil Engineers of England; and then M. de Lesseps answered that he did not care to examine the scheme. In view of that, M. de Puydt concludes that the "Congrès n'était convoqué que pour le triomphe de M. Wyse, tout seul. . . . que
M. de Lesseps s'occupait tout particulièrement du succès et de l'avenir de la Société Civile," which, as we stated, was Commander Wyse's exploiting company. Here in England it would seem that a plan endorsed in any way by such an eminent authority as Mr. Brunlees ought to receive respectful consideration *per se*. But then the Congress was pledged to M. de Lesseps' ideas beforehand.

Mr. Menocal was hardly heard at all, notwithstanding the repeated protests of Admiral Ammon and his own immense experience in the isthmus. There was always the excuse that the time was very limited. Well said Sir John Stokes at the evening meeting of May 20:—

"The labours of this Congress should not be precipitated if they are to be of the value which the public is ready to attach to them."

M. de Lesseps had organized the technical committee to suit himself and his partners; what was wanted from the committee was that it should select the Panama-Aspinwall route as the best, as well as the sea-level plan. On May 27 M. de Lesseps said before the committee that the plenary congress was waiting that it should say *yes* or *no* to these questions. M. Ruelle thought it too much to ask the committee to do that, and gave his reasons for thinking so. M. de Lesseps answered: "Il importe que la commission technique fasse ce qu'on fait ou vont faire les autres commissions. Chacune est maîtresse de son vote. Si vous ne le faites pas, il y aura indécision dans le résultat des votes du Congrès, ce que le public en général ne peut pas admettre."

These last words show the daring of the brilliant diplomatist; yes, *the public* in general, but they, Lesseps and Wyse, in particular, could not hear of the Congress adjourning after being in session for two weeks without
endorsing their own scheme, for which they had a concession in their pockets.

As M. de Lesseps perceived that the committee thought he wanted it to swallow rather a large pill, he still added:—"J'insiste de nouveau, d'une manière toute particulière pour que la commission technique fasse son rapport."

M. Ruelle, however, was not overawed, and remarked that the committee was "incompetent to decide all technical questions; the most that it could do was to say that such and such scheme presented such and such advantages."

M. Voisin also asked how it was possible to make such a report for the next day, especially as the committee was to hold another meeting that very evening.

M. de Lesseps answered:—"Il vous faut peu de temps pour faire ce rapport."

On May 27 the technical commission decided the first question presented to it—viz., that of the estimates of the cost of the different proposed canals. That vote was remarkable, and showed how laughable was the farce that M. de Lesseps was causing the Congress to play. The estimates were approved by twenty out of the fifty-four members of the committee. One member voted in the negative, twelve abstained from voting, while twenty-one absented themselves from the committee-room. No English or American member voted at all, evidently thinking that it was due to their self-respect not to lend their names to the decision of the committee as they had unfortunately lent them to the Congress itself before knowing the real purposes of its promoters.

On May 28 the chairman submitted the following proposition to the committee:—"That in the opinion of the committee the canal should run between Colon
and Panama." Here we see also twenty votes in the affirmative, nine abstentions, and twenty-six absentees. The third and last proposition was that the canal should be a sea-level one, and the proposition was carried by only sixteen votes of a committee, we repeat, of more than thrice that number of members.

And it was thus that this special committee of the International Congress endorsed M. de Lesseps and his associates. In the name of all that is serious we should like to know what great work has been undertaken with such levity and by such unworthy and sordid means. Of course, if any one in France referred to the above facts, all of which we have quoted from the official stenographic report of the Congress, he would be stoned as a false prophet, and as envious of the French glory of M. de Lesseps. But we wish all fair-minded men to examine these facts, and to draw their own conclusions, and we are sure that all will say with us: "Here we have some bold operators who retained M. de Lesseps, in order to use his prestige to carry out the daring scheme of the Panama Company; and here we have M. de Lesseps employing his brilliant and daring diplomacy to force that scheme down on the public—a scheme which was never studied properly, and which had been condemned by the few who were competent to judge of it."