

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1876.

No. 196, New Series.

THE EDITOR cannot undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscript.

It is particularly requested that all business letters regarding the supply of the paper, &c., may be addressed to the PUBLISHER, and not to the EDITOR.

LITERATURE.

THE SUEZ CANAL.

Lettres, Journal, et Documents pour servir à l'histoire du Canal de Suez. Par Ferdinand de Lesseps. Première Série (1854, 1855, 1856), and Deuxième Série (1857-1858.) (Paris: Didier et C^{ie}, 1875).

(First Notice.)

It is no easy task to review the contents of these two stout octavos numbering 880 pages; beginning with 1852 (not 1854 as on the title-page) and ending in 1858; in other words, the annals of an undertaking *effrayante par la grandeur même de la conception*, from the dawn of the idea, to the perfect day which saw the International Company formed to convert, or rather to re-convert, a continent into an island. And the reviewer's difficulties are not a little enhanced by nearly a quarter of a century's persistent study of a subject between the hour when he met Linant-Bey returning to Suez after the first flying survey (1853); the evening which saw M. de Lesseps speaking French before the Royal Geographical Society of London (May, 1856); and the year when a Liberal Secretary refused him leave to assist at the opening of the Suez Canal (November, 1869). The *damnabilis imprimendi licentia* of the nineteenth century, again, has surrounded the subject with a haze of literature light and heavy; the printed stuff would form a large library; not only causing an *embarras de choix*, but also leaving upon the brain vague impressions of a huge mass of details which can serve only to confuse.

The difficulty of reviewing these volumes is, indeed, generally acknowledged by French critics, who, very naturally, have preferred the easy work of reviewing the author. Nothing if not personal, they have described the "characteristic and intelligent figure of this general of modern industry" as a "short, lively, and active man, tanned by simûm and scirocco, with unthinned white hair, black beard, and the general aspect of a *sergent aux Gardes Françaises*." These "contemporaries of his glory" tell the tales of his personal influence; they dwell upon his marvellous personal activity and agility; his persistent adolescence, a young man at seventy; and they love to describe his town house (9 Rue Richempanse) and his château (La Chénaie, Indre), stocked with a large family of small children. We remember much of the same thing in the case of Victor Hugo and his island-home; perhaps Frenchmen and Frenchified

Englishmen like these domestic personalities.

Nor is M. de Lesseps a whit more reticent than his reviewers. From the pages before us we learn that his father, Count Mathieu de Lesseps, political agent of France in Egypt, when directed by the First Consul to choose an energetic and intelligent man for the pashalik of Cairo, had the wit to pick out Mohammed Ali, then an officer commanding a thousand Bashi Buzuks. Half a century afterwards his son was justly looked upon as a friend of the family; especially when he proposed to carry out a project which had occupied in 1835 the fruitful brain of the "regenerator of Egypt." His mother was a Spaniard, thereby securing for him the sympathies of the Empress, who lost no time in declaring *l'affaire se fera*; not to speak of the Emperor, who had already, in 1842, pierced, on paper, Nicaragua for an inter-oceanic *Canale Napoleone*; thus the junction of the two seas entered into the category of "Napoleonic ideas." The great Bonaparte, when the report of the commission of engineers, headed by M. Lepère, established the feasibility of the "Egyptian Bosphorus," said in that prophetic strain which belongs to man's highest intellect, *La chose est grande; ce ne sera pas moi qui, maintenant, pourra l'accomplir, mais le gouvernement turc trouvera peut-être un jour sa gloire dans l'exécution de ce projet.* And the nephew of his uncle was equally persuaded that *la guerre et le commerce ont civilisé le monde.* M. de Lesseps' cousin, Count Théodore, was *Directeur aux Affaires Étrangères*, and he had other relatives distinguished in the diplomatic service. Born in 1805, he first visited Alexandria in 1832, and there the young *Élève-Consul* applied himself, he assures us, to the study of a movement which has occupied a score of years and more of his riper life. In 1835 he became Acting Consul-General for Alexandria, and was French Minister at Rome in 1852; but abandoned the diplomatic service the better to work out his gigantic project. Under these circumstances it is not to be wondered at that he received the direct, as well as the indirect, influence of a host of powerful friends; such as Drouyn de Lhuys, Walewski, and Fiolin (de Persigny); Thiers, Guizot, and Fould; Thouvenel, Benedetti, Sabatier, and Clot-Bey, Jomard, Mocquard, Emile de Girardin, and Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire; Mohammed-Sâ'id Pasha and his family, Rashid Pasha, Aali Pasha, Kienig-Bey, and Zulfikar Pasha.

Assuming, as should be done, that these letters, journals, and papers have not been "doctored"—and their incessant repetitions and iterations seem to vouch that they are genuine—the general reader will find them most valuable *documents pour servir*; he has, in fact, a single work containing the whole history of the gigantic undertaking from the hand of the man who made the history. The dry course of events is relieved by the journals, most of which are accounts of short trips, addressed to the author's mother-in-law, Mdme. Delamalle; and they are charming for *naïveté* and clever picturesque description. The engineering reports also are full of valuable matter. The effect of the whole is a most intelligible in-

tellectual portrait of the Franco-Spaniard who, like Napoleon the Great, a Franco-Italian if one ever was, evidently belongs, racially and by nature, not to the French but to the Latins. By nurture he is ultra-Gallic, a Français of the old school; hating England, and touchingly showing how thin is the varnish of friendly union which common interests have spread over the patched-up "solidarity" between ourselves and our "natural enemies."

M. de Lesseps provés himself a many-sided man, possessed of, or rather subject to, a dominant idea. He has Suez Canal on the brain. He holds the golden keys of the Orient. It is the manifest destiny of this pontiff of progress to marry the two seas, *aperire terram gentibus*. Whatever happens, a Crimean war, an Indian mutiny, a massacre at Jeddah, all turns to the profit of the be-all and end-all of his life. He is a good hater. Words cannot express his contempt for his opponents, especially the Government of England and the few sensible English who saw further into the future than he did. He thoroughly believes himself when he talks of the *vieille politique égoïste*, and of the *antagonisme incurable de la grande Bretagne*. His keen and trenchant intellect is so blinded by bile as to exclaim, very undiplomatically, *tout cela est très perfide*; to talk of "absurd subterfuges"—"absurd" is a favourite word; to declaim against *une opposition aussi brutale que ténébreuse*. His adversaries are *têtes de bois*, and *visages de bois*. One of his telegrams runs as follows:—*M. Disraeli parle de sanction Anglaise. C'est une prétention absurde. Personne n'attend une pareille sanction.* He vents his wrath, in letter after letter, page after page, upon *nos fidèles alliés d'outre manche*, with their *orgueil inné* and their *ignorance insulaire*, as if any public, save that of Central Africa, could be more generally ignorant than the mass of uneducated Frenchmen.

England is openly and falsely charged with robbing Turkey of evacuated Aden and Perim; and with a mean and selfish desire to make the Viceroy of Egypt a kind of Indian Rajah. Lord Palmerston talks more like a maniac than a statesman; something of the same kind was said of a Liberal Premier by Jules Favre, and, probably, for the same reason. Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, besides being the most tyrannical of ambassadors, is an incarnation of the diabolical Englishman, with the brain of a Macchiavelli and the heart of a Borgia, once so firmly believed in by the vulgar European continental. Lord Dalling is little better; he begins well and ends badly. Alison and Green are simply despicable. Poor Robert Stephenson is the "Aunt Sally" of the work; he is perpetually being set up to be knocked down, and Letter xx. (vol. ii. p. 109) is simply a cartel, a challenge to fight. A man so true, so full of devotion to his idea as M. de Lesseps must become a mass of contradictions, partly because he looks to *l'unité des résultats plutôt que celle des moyens*. He boasts of his complete frankness; *je joue cartes sur table*, and so forth. Yet he can "dodge"; he abuses the aristocracy to Mr. Cobden, and he plays with his public. *Sans refuser, sans décourager personne, j'ajourne.* We have also, at times, an uneasy sensation

that certain of the letters addressed to him were not intended for the public eye. The *Times* is quoted to show that we are the first of Mussulman powers: Lord Ellenborough to advocate our planting one foot in India and the other in Egypt; in fact every loose statement is pressed into the indictment against England. He can bully and still appear subservient; after well defining the timidity of that miserable, crooked-minded bigot, the late Aali Pasha, he addresses his *esprit droit et éclairé*. He has a warm heart, but he pitilessly throws overboard a friend who dares to tamper with the Suez, and would rather call it the Lesseps, Canal; witness the case of M. Arlès-Dufour of the Société d'Études (Letter liii.). He has exquisite tact in dealing with Orientals; yet he smites them on the hip when requisite, quoting their own proverb, "an ounce of fear weighs more than a ton of friendship." And he has the acumen to observe, *on est toujours satisfait des Turcs lorsqu'ils vous parlent, mais y il a souvent le revers de la médaille*; to speak of debt-paying or concession-granting with an Osmanli is the touch of Ithuriel's spear.

This indomitable energy has the patience of strength. The man lays down his plan of action from the first, and he never deviates an iota from it. We cannot but fear, instinctively, that the whole is a mistake; that a fresh-water canal, with sluice-gates, like that of Ptolemy Philadelphus, would have created another Nile-valley; but we should find it difficult to work out the idea. In these days of *agiotage* and *surprises*, he will have nothing to do with the princes of finance and the *gros bonnets* of commerce; his principle is that the shareholders shall be the middle-class public of Europe. He adheres to his estimate, 200,000,000 of francs, pooh-poohing the suggestion that the canal would cost, as it has done, not eight, but nineteen millions of pounds sterling. He hates England rabidly; but he generously aids Englishmen; for instance, Gisborn, in obtaining a concession for his telegraph-line, and Chesney for his Euphrates Valley railway. The *Président-fondateur* of the *Compagnie universelle* sometimes nearly loses patience and talks of appealing, as a *Français lésé dans ses droits*, to his sovereign and his ambassador: but presently his habitual calmness returns; he remembers his resolution that the canal shall be a concession to a free company of limited liability, directly granted for ninety-nine years by the Viceroy of Egypt, and by him only. He wisely avoids creating political questions and "diplomatic pronouncing," foreseeing that any complication might lead to a war which would hinder his canal. Finally, after five years wasted in trying to secure the official ratification of the Porte, he boldly cuts the Gordian knot by assuming the "officious" adhesion of the Sultan and his ministry, who were completely opposed to it.

These few details are taken from the book itself, and the result is the portraiture of a very remarkable man. An analysis of the two volumes would be, methinks, the fittest form of reviewing them; and their mass of heterogeneous matter falls readily into three several periods. The first is that of incuba-

tion, which ends with January 15, 1855 (vol. i. p. 97); the second is that of struggling into life, which embraces the rest of the first series, and the greater part of the second, till July 23, 1858 (vol. ii. p. 309); in the third the author sings to the end a song of triumph over his bantling, or to use his own words, *je viens de lever le rideau de notre dernier acte*.

There is a *naïveté* in the short first act of the drama, which disappears as the business of the play begins. The year 1852 has only two letters, addressed to M. Ruyssenaers, Consul-General for the Netherlands, and future provisional agent of the Company. The project was then *dans les nuages*, and the Viceroy, Abbas Pasha, was not the man to bring it down to earth—evidently the soundest wisdom was to wait. The next year is ignored; in September, 1854, hearing that the friend of his youth, "the intelligent and sympathetic Mohammed Sa'id," had succeeded to the vacant dignity, M. de Lesseps hastens to Alexandria, and is received *en intime* by the new ruler. Fortune is now in his favour. Invited to attend a military promenade against the Bedawin, he embraces the opportunity of "preparing" the vice-regal mind; and November 15 becomes a day to be remembered. Superstitious, like most men engaged in great or perilous enterprises, he is comforted by an omen, a brilliant rainbow seen, in the dim light of dawn, to connect East and West. A reader of the Bible, he recognises the "sign of an alliance spoken of in Holy Writ." At 10.30 a.m., mounting an Anezeh Arab given to him by the Viceroy, he leaps a dwarf stone parapet, to which a French reviewer assigns the moderate height of two mètres. Under the auspices of the rainbow and the jump, he sends in his memoir and receives the following reply: *Je suis convaincu, j'accepte votre plan; nous nous occuperons, dans le reste du voyage, des moyens d'exécution; c'est une affaire entendue; vous pouvez compter sur moi*. And the words were not lightly spoken; Mohammed Sa'id remained true as steel to his promise, although the incessant intrigues, the diplomatic and consular worrying, must at times have driven his nervous, sanguine, and irritable temperament to the verge of madness. "Such," says the projector, "is a faithful recital of the most important negotiation which I have ever made and which I shall ever make."

The promenade continues, and adds to the author's prestige, which, in France, is not held a synonym with "humbug." He shows the Chasseurs how to shoot, and with the viceregal gun he twice hits the mark at 500 mètres, candidly owning, *Je ne recommence pas, de peur de compromettre la réputation de bon tireur que je viens d'acquérir*. But on another occasion, as an eagle is hovering over the struck tents, he takes Zulfikar Pasha's piece and brings it to the ground. His comment is, *Si je cite ce fait, insignifiant par lui-même, c'est qu'il doit avoir de l'influence sur l'opinion publique en Egypte pour le succès de mon entreprise*. The augur might have drawn a very different omen from the death of the imperial bird; the downfall of Caesarism and the success of the Suez Canal have well-nigh an-

nihilated French influence in the old land of the Pharaohs, the Ptolemies, and the Khediv.*

After the return of the expedition to Cairo, the Consuls-General are diplomatically sounded, and they all yield good results except him of England. Consequently "M. Bruce" has the honour of an especial letter (No. 5) insisting upon, what no one ever doubted, the especial advantages of the *Canal des deux Mers* to naval and commercial England; and dwelling upon a much more ambiguous point, the "frank and complete alliance of the two peoples placed at the head of civilisation"—an alliance in which, be it remarked, M. de Lesseps was the last to believe. The Hon. Frederick Bruce, however, who is afterwards honoured as *le loyal M. Bruce*, allows himself to be led into *menées*, probably by a telegram from Downing Street; and a beginning of such opposition is attributed to the passage of M. Murray (Sir Charles Murray), "who has practised, only too long, the old [English] politic of antagonism and of jealous rivalry." Many of our readers doubtless know that the diplomat in question incurred the displeasure of his chief at Constantinople by his urgent and constant regard for the rights of Egypt; and if he was a *persona ingrata* to Mohammed Sa'id Pasha, who exclaimed, after granting him an interview, *Je ne comprends pas que le M. Murray ait eu le "toupet" de demander à me voir*, the reasons were purely private.

At length, on November 30, '54, a second memorable day, the projector can announce to his partisan, M. Ruyssenaers, that His Highness the Viceroy had granted a firman conceding the piercing of the Suez Isthmus to a free company, composed of capitalists of all nations, M. de Lesseps himself being the *cessionnaire*. The document is duly circulated, and action at once begins. An exploratory committee is put in order; it consists of Linant-Bey, Director of Public Works, and his assistant M. Aivas; of Mougat-Bey, chief engineer of *ponts et chaussées*, and of our author: four whites, of course accompanied by a crowd of non-whites. They leave Cairo on December 23, they reach Suez on "le 25 Décembre," they survey the line, breakfasting in presence of Sesostris and similar personages; they discover that Lake Timsah will make a future Alexandria, a splendid interior harbour, six times larger than Marseilles, and they return to Cairo on January 15, 1855. The tale of the trip is told with *verve* and animation, but the views of old Egyptian history are now quite obsolete. All came back in high good-humour, ready to do battle against anybody and everybody that dare question the feasibility of the Suez Canal.

Here ends the first act of the drama. It is decided that a line should be opened clean across the Isthmus, measuring sixty-five

* A modern writer on Egypt actually degrades this ill-treated word to "Kedivé" with the ridiculous French acute accent thrown, as usual, upon the last syllable. The word is simply Persian, meaning a prince: the Viceroy wanted to be made "Aziz el Misr," the Koranic title given to Joseph of the Josephiad; but the Sultan was not prepared to go so far as that

direct geographical miles, between N. Lat. $29^{\circ} 58' 37''$, and $31^{\circ} 3' 37''$, from Suez to Pelusium, or Tineh, "the place of mud," afterwards changed for Port Sa'id, further west. The breadth was to be 100 metres, and the depth six, seven, and eight, both measured from low water in the Mediterranean; the latter figure was afterwards increased to ten. For the alimentation of the labourers, and the irrigation of the extensive lands three miles on each side of the line, mostly a black mud and tawny sea-sand, and tenantless, a subsidiary canal of communication would be derived from the Nile between Cairo and the passage; thence it would flow down the Wady Tomilat, the heart of ancient Goshen, and a natural back-water of the high Nile, finally to abut upon the Timsah Lake. Again this part of the plan was modified by making the *rigole*, as it was popularly called, divide into two falls near L. Timsah: the northern would flow to the Mediterranean and the southern to Suez. I need hardly say that the latter was never done, and that at the present moment (January, 1876) M. de Lesseps is trying for permission to derive a sweet-water canal from Mansurah, whilst Ismail Pasha hesitates. From this subsidiary work, down which it is now proposed to send all the native craft which ply between the Nile and the sea, the reader may form a proportionate idea of *le grand, le sublime projet d'utilité universelle*, namely, the main canal.

In fact, the instructions issued by the *concessionnaire* to the two engineers (Cairo, January 15, 1855) show the whole project issuing, like a panoplied Minerva, from the fertile brain of the Franco-Spanish Jupiter. M. de Lesseps will bear correction; but he will brook no change. After having once determined, upon the soundest grounds, his line of march, he adheres to it with characteristic tenacity, and with a rare devotion to his *beau idéal*.

For there were two counter-projects in the field. The first, which we may call the French, represented by M. Talabot, proposed to make the Suez Canal an indirect line, crossing the Nile and ending at Alexandria, a distance of seventy leagues. The second was the English, a dream worthy of Laputaland. This "hanging canal," with its vast array of flood-gates, was to flow upon a sandy surface between two huge lines of *berges*, or spoil-banks, which any miserable tribe of Bedawin could have cut through in a week. *C'est impossible mais c'est vrai*, is our mental ejaculation when reading this mad scheme of our engineering fellow-countrymen.

RICHARD F. BURTON.

King Erik. By Edmund W. Gosse. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1876.)

NOBODY, we suppose, will deny that there is hardly a more critical point in a poet's career than the publication of his first tragedy. Space would fail anyone who should attempt to catalogue the names of those who have checked a growing reputation or defaced one already assured by their first venture on this most perilous of poetical paths, and it may safely be assumed that Job, had he lived a few thousand years later,

would have refined upon even the subtle malice of his famous wish, and have substituted "O that mine enemy had written a tragedy!" for the more general malediction. It is not, perhaps, very easy to decide on the causes which make tragedy so dangerous, unless it be that in this species of poetry alone are we generally convinced of the unapproachable excellence of the famous men our fathers who have gone before us. Lyrics we can write with the best singer that ever touched a harp; epics we are mostly content to "confess and avoid." But there appears to be a certain vague excellence in the tragic drama which is all the more desperate of attainment because it is at once so excellent and so vague. It might be possible to catch for a moment and express the charm of song or of tale in something like a satisfactory manner of adumbration. But such a possibility is not to be dreamt of as we contemplate the *Agamemnon* or *King Lear*, *Tamburlaine* or *Vittoria Corombona*, and we are content to sit and have our emotions purified by pity and terror, without having the least understanding of the process, in some cases without the least faith in the existence of any such process at all. Most people have a confused idea that tragedy is something very great, the secret of which was lost at or about the year 1660 after Christ, and that is all.

We were therefore in some pain for Mr. Gosse when we first took up *King Erik*. The author's former book, *On Viol and Flute*, though not free from blemish, displayed such a remarkable ear for music, such a singular poetic interpretation of flowers and trees, and such like children of Flora, and above all, such a distinct and individual poetic savour, that it would have been a pity indeed had these good gifts been wasted in any wrong direction. In this case there is happily no cause for such pity. We have seldom seen such a marked advance in a second book beyond a first, and this not at all inasmuch as a tragedy is a big thing and a volume of occasional poems is only a collection of little things (for we hold a sonnet to be potentially equal to an epic), but simply because the work is better done and the ideal more fully attained.

The story of Mr. Gosse's play is as follows. Erik, King of Denmark, has succeeded to a kingdom assailed by enemies at home and abroad, and has given it peace and safety. The play opens with his expected return from a voyage against the pirates of the Baltic. We are introduced to the Queen Botilda with her maidens, and soon after to a certain skald, Grimur by name, Danish (at least Icelandic) by birth, but in nature and ways smacking rather of the Greece and Italy where he has loved best to abide. It is evident to all but the Queen that he has conceived for her something between a fancy and a passion, and the Queen-mother Adalbjörg, assisted by one of her daughter-in-law's maidens (who has a secret love for Erik), is not slow to take advantage of this to stir the King's jealousy. This is skilfully done by hints and half-words, which seem to be assisted by a combination of cross accidents which takes the Queen on a pilgrimage to the very place whither Grimur

is known to have gone, and brings him back to an apparently preconcerted moonlight tryst when her pilgrimage is abruptly stopped. Botilda meets her lover (now at last known by her to be so), and tells him how utterly her love is reserved for her husband. Erik comes in and, stung by a gesture of Grimur, stabs and slays him. Now it so happens that the King has but a little before solemnly denounced private bloodshedding, and proclaimed penalties on murderers. Therefore the Archbishop of Lund refuses him the entrance of his church and urges the crime he has committed in slaying an innocent man. Erik repents, and being convinced of his wife's purity is reconciled to her, but not before he has vowed a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in expiation of his sin, a vow which he insists on carrying out notwithstanding the dismay of his subjects at his departure. Botilda accompanies him and they journey by Constantinople, where Grimur's sworn brother, a Varangian, hears of the murder and swears to avenge it. He accomplishes his oath in Cyprus, and the play ends.

This is a good fable, and it is well and worthily carried out. It will be seen at once that the interest of the whole turns on Botilda's unconsciousness of the passion she has excited. In setting this forth it must have been no easy matter to avoid giving the idea of thoughtless coquetry on the one hand or of stupid impassiveness on the other. But Mr. Gosse has achieved his task. The central scene—the moonlight meeting—is really a gem of character as well as of language, and Botilda's part throughout is nearly faultless. The author's success with his feminine characters is indeed remarkable. Svanhilda, the treacherous (and yet only half-treacherous) handmaiden, is admirable, and so is Adalbjörg, with her dull malevolence, while even the slight parts of Thora (the other maid of honour) and the Princess Anna Comnena, show equal thought and skill. The men are perhaps not quite so good. Erik talks too much and loses his temper too readily. He would hardly, we think, have been quite so inquisitive or quite so voluble in his colloquy with Svanhilda, and with due deference to Mr. Gosse's infinitely superior knowledge of matters Scandinavian, we can hardly think that a Danish king in 1103 would have given his mother such a very minute description of his interview with his wife. Marcus, another skald, who reminds us rather of Claud Halcro, infuses a sub-comic air into some of his scenes which, despite high precedent, we do not altogether like. But Grimur and the Archbishop are very good. The light nature of the former—a Provençal strayed—is given with equal force and with no exaggeration. Indeed the play—and it could possess no rarer merit—is actually and really a play, and not merely a dramatic poem of more or less excellence. The merely poetical merits of the book are, however, such as would suffice to place it high. The blank verse in which it is written is of good quality, reminding us now and then a little of the Laureate's later measure, but by no means an imitation. What there is of lyric work is excellent especially the snatches of song performe