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PANAMA'S BIG DITCH.

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Panama, March 7, 1898.—For the past three years 3,000 men have been steadily working here on the Panama canal. There are 3,500 negroes at work here today, and a remarkable amount of cutting, dredging and building up of earth works has been accomplished. I have gone over the route of the canal and have taken a number of photographs of the work as it is in March, 1898. This morning I went on the cars out to the Culebra cut and watched 800 men working there, and was told that there were 2,200 employed within three miles of where I stood. The Culebra is, you know, the highest point on the canal route. The scene was a busy one. Long trains of iron cars loaded with rock and clay moved over the canal tracks, carrying the excavated materials and dumping them on the banks. Immense steel dredges, each as tall as a two-story house and ten times as big as the largest thrashing machine, gouged out rocks and gravel, and catching up loads of this heavy material in big iron buckets fastened to two endless chains, carried them high into the air and poured them out into cars. Here thirty Jamaica negroes were drilling holes in the rock for immense charges of dynamite, and from away over there at the right came the boom, boom, boom of the explosions of another gang a mile away. At the station of Emperador, a few miles further on, seven enormous dredges were scooping up rock and raising it in buckets each of which would hold more than a big barrel. Connected with each dredge were trolley lines, upon which the loaded buckets were carried in the air off to the points where the rock was needed. There were other trains of iron cars here drawn rapidly along by screeching locomotives, and a thousand negroes were digging down rock, loading cars and drilling for the blasting. I had letters from the chief officials of the canal here at Panama directing that everything was to be shown me, and I was able through these to get some idea of the condition of affairs today. There is no doubt but that the work now being done is honest, economical and effective, and also that if the present company had enough money they could complete the canal. As to just how much they need I have not been able to ascertain. I asked the chief of construction today what amount he thought was necessary. He shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands and his eyebrows as he replied: "A great sum! A great sum!" But before I further describe the work that is being done now, let me give you the story of the canal in a nutshell. The Isthmus of Panama is much like the neck of an hour glass, of which North America and South America are the two globes. It is a wonderfully slender and an exceedingly tough piece of land. It is about as long as the distance between Washington City and Boston via New York, and ranges

in width from one hundred and eighty miles to about thirty miles. Low mountains run irregularly through it. It has plateaus and plains, and near the coast swamps and morasses. Where the canal is being cut the distance from one coast to the other as the crow flies is probably not more than forty miles, but the railroad line is forty-seven miles long, and the route laid out for the Panama canal is still shorter. Some of the mountains of the isthmus are over 1,500 feet high. Along the line of the canal the highest elevation is at the Culebra ridge, the point that I visited today.

The canal begins at the port of Colon, or, as you may call it, Aspinwall, though Colon is the name used here. Colon is not far from the mouth of the Chagres river, on the little island of Manzanillo, and at the terminus of the Panama railroad. Starting here, the line of the canal runs through the valley of the Chagres, cutting the stream in many places, until at about fourteen miles or more the ground rises irregularly until it reaches the top at Culebra. There is all told about twelve miles of deep cutting to be done, and thence to the sea the excavation is comparatively easy. There is much worse rock on any of our railroad lines than that of the Culebra. One difficulty is in taking care of the waters of the Chagres river. This is now about three hundred feet wide and two feet deep. It looked little more than a creek when I passed it yesterday, but in the wet season it sometimes rises thirty feet in a night and bears along everything in its floods. This river and the big excavation are the engineering problems of the canal. De Lessep's idea was to hold back the Chagres by a big dam and let it out gradually. The Chicago engineers who made the Chicago drainage canal and who are now in Nicaragua, said while here the other day that the Chagres could be easily controlled, and also after looking over the entire route of the canal ventured the statement that the building of a sea level or a lock canal here was feasible.

Every one has heard of the Panama canal scandals. The truth is worse than anything that has been published. I will, further on, give some stories which I have heard here of the extravagances and frauds of the first companies, when champagne flowed like water and gold was almost as plenty as copper is in some parts of Montana. Within less than ten years they spent more than \$265,000,000, and millions of this were almost openly stolen by the contractors. At the same time the work that was done remains, and if the canal is sold to other parties or completed by the French it will not have to be done again. About twenty miles of the canal is practically completed. The fourteen miles at the eastern end have been somewhat filled up the Chagres river, but a slight dredging would make this part of the work clear. I visited it last week and saw that nothing had been done for years. Then there is about six or eight miles finished at the Pacific end of the

canal, and the dredges are now at work there deepening the harbor. This is new work and is of news interest. The present company have just completed a wharf a thousand feet long at this point, and it is stated by them that within a comparatively short time ships will be able to sail up this wharf and transfer their freight direct to the Panama railroad cars. This new wharf is really a very fine structure. It is made of steel, with a steel roof, which is supported by steel posts. Traveling cranes run by engines move along a track on the edge of the wharf, and the heaviest of articles can be lifted by them out of the steamers and swung down to the doors of the cars behind. At present all ships have to anchor far out in Panama bay, and goods and passengers are brought in by lighters. I am told that when this new harbor is dredged out reduced rates for through freight will be charged on the railroad, and that all attempts will be made to get ships to land here instead of sailing about Cape Horn or through the Straits of Magellan.

The French chief of construction, who showed me over the Culebra cutting today, told me he considered the canal more than half done. This is probably a rosy view of the work, and I am told by others that one-third would be nearer the proper figure. The old company worked eight years, and during much of this time had an average of 10,000 men in their employ. They spent a quarter of a billion dollars and excavated about sixty-five million cubic yards of earth and rock. Then the bubble burst, and this new company was formed. They have spent, I am told, only about \$5,000,000, and have made a big cut in the work for the money. At Culebra the cutting at the deepest point is now about 225 feet, and seventy-five feet of this was done by this company. The top of the ditch looks higher as you stand in the cut than a twenty-story New York flat, and the ravine shows the immensity of the work. The new company are now very nearly out of money. They are preparing for a canal commission from Paris, which will probably be here before this letter is published. Everything is being painted up for the occasion, as the future of the canal largely depends upon the report of the commissioners. If it should be favorable it is said by the French here that enough money will be raised to complete the work, but if not it will probably be given up or sold. The estimates of amount required to complete the work range all the way from \$75,000,000 upward, and it is probable that \$150,000,000 is somewhere near the proper figure.

From what I gather here from a variety of inside sources I believe that the French are tired and sick of the job and that within a short time they will either drop it or, what is more probable, take in some other nation or corporation outside of France to help them. The directors in charge, I am told, recently said that if the French chose to give it up he had parties in N. Y. and Chicago who were ready to put