

THE AGE OF HUMBAG.

IS it not a humiliating admission, that humbug and success go very often hand in hand? That in this age of wisdom and learning, this day of books and newspapers, of railways and telegraphs, of schools and colleges,—this “sum of all the ages,”—men are just as easily gulled, just as easily hoodwinked and cheated as of yore? Yet the fact remains, a patent every-day fact. In vain does the experience of the past preach the need of a close examination of all new projects, new schemes, new ideas; in vain are unflinching tests afforded by which to judge and try the claims of everything that seeks to invade the pocket or begot the aid of influence; somehow or other the charlatan and the humbug seem, too often, to float as gaily down the stream as honest merit and undoubted worth. Of course the current at length becomes troubled, and the breakers test the relative merit of both: to wreck and expose the utter hollowness of the one because it is a humbug, and to test and make perfect the other because it is legitimate. But at the start, when the project is launched, amid the flying of colours and the *eclat* of novelty, how many who are reputable and deemed wise; how many whose wealth and influence serve only too well to delude the mass, are caught by the fair promises and sanguine misrepresentations of its promoters.

But this is not the worst. It is singular that in view of all the light and knowledge which is poured in upon the present day like a flood of sunlight, that men—clever and shrewd business men—should be frequently taken in and fleeced; but it is more surprising that the same class of schemes—humbugs repeated of identically the same character—should every now and then appear, and for a time succeed. Projects that ten or fifteen years ago were tried and abandoned, come up again revived and revamped with some new and high-sounding name, ushered in with an influential Board of Directors, and floated along till enough money is gulled out of the unsuspecting public to satisfy the schemers behind the scenes. And to make the matter still more surprising the very men who were known to be at the bottom of previous operations, and out of which they made largely, these very identical men are the wire-pullers in the new attack on the gullibility of the people; probably keeping in the background, knowing that their prominent appearance would bring too vividly to mind the former disastrous experience; but none the less the genuine organizers and promoters of the scheme.

Our reflections have taken this direction from some knowledge that has recently come to us in relation to the new telegraphic enterprise, the claims of which are now being put before the people of this country, under the high sounding title of “The New Dominion Telegraph Company.” While we honestly believe in the encouragement of anything that will tend to cheapen and increase telegraphic facilities, and think that a competition with the existing company, who have a monopoly of these facilities, would be desirable, this should not lead us to forget our duty to the public, to warn them against what may be a disastrous failure, if not a huge swindle. And the necessity for this warning, seems the more imperative, from the fact, that this new scheme appeals not only on strong grounds—the need of competition and the destruction of monopoly—but appeals very generally to the public throughout the country, in the shape of an army of canvassers, who are offering stock in every town and hamlet in the Provinces, and to people, whose information on the subject is mainly confined to what they may hear from these canvassers, and to the knowledge of some very respectable names that have been “roped in” as Directors.

We think we can best illustrate the point we wish to convey, by giving a slight sketch of a former telegraphic enterprise that fourteen or sixteen years ago made a very successful appeal to the people of Canada, but which resulted most disastrously. Inasmuch, as the individual who most profited by that disaster, is really at the bottom of the new scheme—The Dominion Company,—the history may not be uninteresting to the parties who have subscribed to the stock. For the sake of convenience we will call this

NUMBER ONE.

We suppose our readers know what a “promoter” means,—the name being of recent origin in its present connection in London, where, in the last few years, a marvellous number of joint stock schemes have gone up like a rocket and down like a stick,—the “pro-

motor” being the party who generally got the stock afloat and the rocket into the air, but who was always careful to “keep from under” when the stick fell. Well, Mr. Josiah T. Snow, of Brooklyn, N. Y., may be called a “promoter.” Some sixteen years ago—we think it was in 1852—he came into Canada a poor man, and within a year or so went out of it a rich one. He “promoted” what was then known as the “Grand Trunk Telegraph Company.” It had no connection with the Grand Trunk Railway, but as that undertaking was then being floated, and unlooked for blessings were to result from its completion, the name was happily chosen. Mr. Snow went the right way to work to popularize the new telegraph line; he travelled the country from end to end, and by public addresses and private solicitations, he got for his enterprise a very general support. Then, as now, the people were groaning under a great monopoly. Then, as now, the facilities were inadequate for the largely increasing volume of telegraphic business, and the profits being realized were set down as simply enormous. We well remember in our younger days, in a country village, as a youth, attending one of Mr. Snow’s meetings, where he held forth on the great advantages that would result from the establishment of the “Grand Trunk Telegraph” Line with a wire from that humble place, connecting it “with all the world beside;” how it would spring into importance, and take rank with places of more pretentious claims; how large the dividends would be; how slight the payments required—only a few dollars per month—and how immediate the return in the shape of fat dividends; how the stock would go at once to premium, be easy of sale at a profit, or descend to children’s children as an heir-loom, yielding income and comfort. We well remember the remarkable success that attended these efforts: almost every merchant in the country towns became a stockholder,—not a few people, too, who could ill afford to spare the money; and how generally widespread were the proprietors of the new line. Indeed, it really became a favor to obtain the new stock,—for Mr. Snow would say, with such an appearance of candor and disinterestedness, that he could only allot a certain limited amount to this or that place; that, in order to begot an extensive patronage, the proprietary should be spread over as large a space as possible, and diffused among all classes. If we remember rightly, he had a most respectable board of directors—indeed we think he had, as in the present case, several boards of irreproachable and highly respectable directors, who knew as much about Mr. Snow’s antecedents, and as much about telegraphing, as the present board know, or will know, till they get through with this article. Well, by the aid of these good names, and a plausible, energetic, and rather reverend appearance, Mr. Snow had not the slightest difficulty in placing the whole of the stock necessary to carry out the scheme. He next became the contractor for the line, and in company with a Mr. Dwight (not Mr. H. P. Dwight, the present Western Superintendent of the Montreal Line at Toronto, and no relative of his), a firm was formed for the purpose of building the line. The names of “Snow & Dwight” became as familiar as household words in many quarters, where poles and supplies were bought. The line was built very rapidly,—rather too rapidly, as the result will show,—and before very long was ready for acceptance by the Company. In the mean time Mr. W. D. Snow, a son of the original Josiah was appointed engineer of the Company, and it became his duty to inspect the line, and if all right to accept it. Of course he found it “all right”—his father had built it, and had floated the stock to get money to build it,—it was his scheme and his bantling, of course it was “all right,” no matter whether the poles were like whip stocks, the wire of the cheapest and most wretched kind—old wire discarded by other companies, and the instruments of a like character. The line on inspection was found satisfactory as a matter of course; the Company accepted it; Mr. Snow received the balance of the large amount that had been subscribed, and he and his son left the country, never more to return in *propria persona*.

Things went on swimmingly for a while, but about the time the promised dividends should make their appearance matters became mixed; the machines would not work, the poles wouldn’t stand alone, and the wire began to show evidence of default. From these and other causes, perhaps as much too from bad management, or rather lack of management, the Company did not prosper—never

prospered—got behind in a variety of ways, lacked the promised facilities; did not, could not, from its faulty construction, keep up with the times, and got from bad to worse. The calls had all been made on the stock, and for new supplies and repairs badly wanted, the managers got into debt; floundered therein a good while, and eventually ended up by having the whole thing pass into the hands of trustees, of whom the late F. A. Whitney, of Toronto, was secretary. These galvanized a little new life into the project, and the name was changed to the “International Telegraph Co.” But it was no go; somehow the concern wouldn’t work, and the long promised dividends, were not only never heard of, but the entire capital was sunk; the trustees, individually, more or less losers, and the end was a sheriff’s sale. The whole line was sold out for a song to Mr. Weller, of Cobourg—he of stager notoriety, who was then in easy circumstances. With all his well-known energy and extensive experience, it was thought he would make it go. But alas, no! Mr. Snow had bled it too freely at the start, and after a year or two of unsuccessful effort, and heavy loss, Mr. Weller was forced to abandon it. He eventually sold it to the Montreal line for *old wire*. That company pulled most of it down, and sold the wire in many cases to the farmers along the road for fences and clothes lines. Thus melted from view the brightly tinted pictures created by Snow; two or three hundred thousand dollars—a large sum in those days,—were squandered, lost or sunk, and nothing remained. Mr. Snow, however, was careful, to enjoy his easily gotten wealth in a neighboring country.

NUMBER TWO.

It seems hardly credible that a project of precisely the same character would ever again be attempted,—and even more incredible that the same identical Snow would have the hardihood to attempt it, and yet such is the case. The prospectus of the “Dominion Telegraph Company,” is not graced by the name of Josiah T. Snow,—no, that would be too palpable, but the facts which we have to relate will speedily convince the reader that he is the prime mover of the new company its originator and *sub roan* is enacting still the well known part of “promoter.” In the first place Mr. Snow seeks an interview nearly a year ago with an officer of the Montreal line while in New York, which not being convenient, results in a message, that a new line is about to be built in Canada, and that if the Montreal line will agree to it, there shall be no reduction of rates,—showing that Snow intended to control things at the start any way. The next development is the appearance of Mr. H. B. Reeve from New York “Secretary” of the Dominion Telegraph Company,—with his uncle Mr. Seela Reeve, whose name cannot appear owing to proceedings in bankruptcy in the United States. The Messrs. Reeve are relatives of Mr. Josiah T. Snow. They have been in business in New York and have not been successful. They need something to do and suit Mr. Snow’s purpose admirably. They know nothing about telegraphing, but both have the Yankee gift of gab, and that will suit present purposes. Still it will be necessary to have some one who understand telegraphing and Mr. Snow luckily meets a Mr. Martin Ryan in Chicago, on his way from Guelph to some place in the West where he is less known,—and engages him to return to Canada to aid in working the oracle. Thus so far as Mr. Snow is concerned, we see his hand throughout. If any further proof of his connection were needed, it is found in the fact that Snow and his son,—“the Engineer,”—were among the early applicants to the Government for the Incorporation of the Dominion Line, which application was for some time refused, probably on account of the Snows’ connection therewith. At any rate his name and that of his son was withdrawn, those of the two Reeves and Ryan substituted, and by a liberal use of stock, the necessary legal authorization was at length procured.

Mr. H. B. Reeve and Mr. Martin Ryan, accompanied by the elder Reeve, who keeps a little shady,—relatives and employees of Josiah T. Snow,—commence operations. Their first move is to fetch in a few miles of wire which they store in Hamilton in order to give a slightly tangible appearance to things, and then they commence to work in earnest. Their efforts are first directed toward getting some respectable names to father the enterprise, and the elder Reeve and his nephew approach nearly every leading man in Toronto. But some how, notwithstanding the most