

Mercantile Agencies.

To the Editors of *The New-York Daily Times*.

I beg, through your columns, to call public attention to the system of "Mercantile Agencies," as they are termed, which have been started among us within the last ten years.

As some of your readers may be ignorant of the subject, I shall give a brief sketch of their organization and operation. The business of the agent is to keep a list of all the merchants in a given number of States. Appended to the name of each dealer, is a report of his standing and movements. These reports are renewed periodically, from information communicated by hired local agents. Subscribers to these Agencies have the privilege of receiving information about any party whose name may be on the books, in consideration of an annual payment proportioned to the magnitude of their sales. These Agencies are now so numerous and so generally patronized that I may venture to say there is not a village in the Union from which a report does not arrive at least semi-annually. This system is patronized by so many respectable and honorable houses that it may be fairly assumed that the *moral-ity* of such organizations has scarcely been mooted.

My attention has of late been particularly called to the injurious results growing out of this system, and believing that a very great deal of evil is produced thereby, I think that a few facts and considerations on this subject, may prove useful at the present time.

I think that the *immorality* of this system is so obvious, as almost to render argument unnecessary. Let us look at the source of all the information collected. The sub-agent, generally a village lawyer, makes it his business to pry into the affairs of every dealer in the vicinity, all which he duly reports, together with all the current scandal of the place. And all this for gain. We shall not stop to discuss the effect produced by this, on the old established dealer, or those who are already in bad repute. But that large class between the two, is most seriously affected. There is no class exempt from the prying eyes of these "Mercantile Agents." I know it to be a fact that the jobbers of this, and neighboring cities are all duly "posted up" on the Books of the "Mercantile Agents."

The question now before us is, whether evil speaking for the sake of gain be justifiable? Whether a self-constituted band of spies over the entire mercantile community, be compatible with Christian morality or good citizenship.

We will now inquire whether it be possible, in this way, to obtain correct information: there can, of course, be no difficulty in pronouncing who are undoubtedly safe risks, and who are undoubtedly unsafe. But I maintain, that with regard to the smaller dealers, such as young men recently commenced—quiet, unambitious traders, known to but few, and the like, there can be no correct judgment formed, without an actual knowledge of their affairs. The reports of such dealers frequently consist of vague surmisings, and those often of the most unfounded and ill-natured character. I have been repeatedly solicited to patronize these Agencies, but have declined, as well from conscientious motives, as a conviction of the worthlessness of these reports.

Within the last few months, three cases of gross misrepresentation have come under my observation. One of these was that of a jobber, whose capital, prompt payments, and high sense of honor, have always deservedly entitled him to the first credit. In his case the foul slander was entirely harmless. The other two cases were those of small dealers in the interior. Notwithstanding a most unfavorable report of each, certain houses to which they applied for credit, after a careful scrutiny, tendered them the usual credit, feeling convinced that the reports of the sub-agents proceeded either from ignorance or malice.

Thus, through these Mercantile Agencies, are honest, industrious and responsible men made to suffer from these assassins of character. To destroy a merchant's credit is to destroy his prosperity.

Unquestionably there are numbers of deserving and responsible country merchants, like those cited above, who suddenly find their credit impaired, and perhaps never find out the cause.

A recent case of a far less aggravated character came recently before one of our courts. A Mr. C. had for years traveled through the Southern States, to make inquiries and reports of the credit of merchants. He was employed by a private association of houses in this city, each of which paid him an annual amount. To save time, these lists were printed for the use of the members of said association, a limited number of copies being struck off. A firm in Columbus, Miss., in some way obtained a clue of Mr. C.'s report of themselves, which was of a highly unfavorable nature, upon which they sued him for libel and obtained very heavy damages.

Many of our "mercantile agents" have of late years grown fat on their slanderous professions, and we trust that some efforts will ere long be made to relieve them of their illgotten gains.

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