

Mack And The Veteran

A Touching Tale —The Poetry And Pathos Of Bare Feet

THE following, taken from the New York Dispatch of October 16, 1870, is not only to the point as illustrating the noble traits of Officer McWatters' character, but is too well told not to be preserved here. We think best to make no substitution of "McWatters" in the place of the familiar *sobriquet* by which the genial writer was pleased to designate him.

"In one of the big public institutions set apart for a branch of the Municipal Government of this big, overgrown city of ours, there is one, among the many departments of this, that, and the other thing, presided over by our friend Mr. Mack.

Mr. Mack is a gentleman, who, though old in years, is not old in infirmity, and he walks about with a vim and spirit that might be profitably imitated by many listless young men of the period.

Besides devoting his time and talents to his official position, he takes an active interest in everything of a philanthropic nature. We are ignorant of the number of societies which have these objects to attain, of which Mr. Mack is a member; but in all of them he is among the most active.

Among the charitable societies, is one composed of ladies, who attend the wants of disabled soldiers, their widows and orphans. The ladies have selected our friend Mr. Mack as their almoner, and his office is visited every day by scores of poor people.

On a late visit to the good man, we found a poor veteran just approaching his desk.

"Mr. Mack, sir," said the man.

"That's my name sir. Take a seat."

The man stepped forward briskly, but with a limp. He was sixty years of age, with gray hair, shabbily attired, lame in the leg and arm, and, as it afterwards appeared, one half of his right foot gone; a wreck of the human form divine, but with much manliness left about him.

"What is your business, friend?"

"That's it, sir; and I'll thank you if you can do it," he replied cheerily, as he handed a letter.

"You want to go to New London?" said Mr. Mack, after reading the missive.

"That's it, sir; my darter lives there. I've walked all the way from Philadelphia, and my legs have kinder give out. One of them ain't of much account anyway, but I've got to make the best of it."

Mr. Mack. “Were you a soldier? You know my business is principally with soldiers, although I should be glad to assist you if it is in my power.”

Veteran. “Well, I guess so, sir. I got knocked up in this kind of shape doing service for Uncle Sam.”

He raised his arm with difficulty, and pointed to his leg.

Mr. Mack. “Have you your discharge papers?”

Veteran. “I’m sorry to say that I haven’t got them with me. I had them framed, and after the old woman died (tearfully), I sent them to Mollie for safe-keeping. But they’re honorable, sir—they are, indeed.”

Mr. Mack. “I might give you a letter that would insure you an entrance to the Soldiers’ Home. Would you like to go there?”

Veteran. “O, dear! no, sir; although it may be a good enough sort of a place. I’ve got a home with my darter Mollie, who is well married, and settled in the place that I am making for; and I know that she will never go back on the old man, for she used to think too much of me, and be too delighted to see me when I came home from a long voyage in happier days. O, no, sir! (brushing the tears from his eyes with his coat sleeve), Mollie will make room for me.”

During the colloquy, Mr. Mack was busily engaged in writing a note, and after finishing it, went into an adjoining room to obtain a necessary signature. He returned without getting it, and was obliged to delay the veteran until the official, whose name to the letter was wanted, came in.

Mr. Mack. “You will have to wait a little while until I can get this note signed.”

Veteran. “All right, sir; never mind me—I’m used to waiting. I learned that some time ago, when I waited through the long watch at sea, till my turn came to climb into my bunk, and when I was on post in the army, till the relief guard came around; and when I’ve been away home, —in times past, you know, I had a home of my own once, sir, —I’ve waited for the day to roll around when I would see my wife and Mollie (who was a little bit of a thing then) again. And all I’m waiting for now is the time when my shattered old hulk shall be laid aside as used-up timber; and all I hope for, when that time comes, is, that my darter Mollie may be alongside, and I shan’t mind it much.”

Mr. Mack. “Are you a native of Connecticut?”

Veteran. “No, sir; I’m a Baltimorean. I was born opposite the old Independent engine-house, in Gay Street, and my father and mother before me were born in the city, too, for that matter.”

Mr. Mack. “A great many from your State fought in the Southern army.”

Veteran. “That’s so, sir; they did. But how do you think it was possible for me to do so, after having followed the old Stars and Stripes through the Mexican war, and having sailed under its protection for going on thirty years? O, no, sir! I had too much love for it. Why, sir, every port I ever entered respected that flag. They couldn’t help it; besides, they knew they had to!”
(Drawing himself up proudly.)

Mr. Mack. “Did you enlist in a Maryland regiment?”

Veteran. “No, sir. I’ll tell you all about it. You see when the Massachusetts regiments passed through Baltimore, the brig that I sailed on had just returned from a voyage to Rio, and we were unloading in Smith’s dock, near Centre Market. The soldiers had disembarked from the cars at the Philadelphia depot, and were marching along Pratt Street, towards the Washington station, when the attack was made on them. As I looked from the deck of the brig I saw the old flag pushing and dodging along the street, with a shower of stones and bricks flying around it, and I heard the sound of pistol-shots and the hissing and hooting of the mob. I happened to turn around, and I saw the same colors proudly flapping in the wind from the mast head, and I tell you it was too much for me—I couldn’t stand it. I went to the captain, almost choking, and I told him I wanted an order for my pay; I was going home. I was the second mate of the brig; and the captain was a little wrathful at the idea, for he wanted me to stay and help him superintend the unloading of that part of the cargo that was to be left on the dock, before dropping down to Fell’s Point the next day. I told him I must leave; and as he had no further hold on me, he had to give me the order. The owners were surprised, too; but after some talk they paid me, and I went home to the old woman. She said, ‘You look excited; what’s the matter with you?’ ‘Well,’ said I, ‘I am going to enlist in the Union army, and try and help to pay these fellows that fired on the American colors in Pratt Street to-day, back in their own coin.’ ‘That’s right,’ said she; ‘I wish they’d let me carry a gun, and I’d go with you.’ And I wished for once in my life that Mollie was a boy; for I might have made a drummer out of her, anyway, for she was too small for anything else. Well, you know; —but I hope I’m not tiring you with my long yarn, sir?”

Mr. Mack. “No; go on with it.”

Veteran. “They were not raising any regiments in Maryland; and I fell in with a Hoosier, who was going home to Madison to enlist, and I promised him ten dollars if he would get me past the surgeons. I’m sixty-six years old; and you know I was too old for them, because they were more particular in the early part of the war than they were later. Well, when we got to Madison, to make matters sure, I went and got my hair dyed; and as luck would have it, the recruiting officers were a little drunk, and I passed without any difficulty, though one of them asked me how old I was, and I told them a lie, God forgive me, that I was thirty-nine years old! I went into the Army of the Cumberland, and at Chickamauga a shell burst near me, and I was knocked up in the way you see.”

Mr. Mack. “You have served with General Howard?”

Veteran. “Yes, sir; and a good, noble-hearted man he was, too, sir. There was no airs about him. He was just like one of the boys, —moving around among the men in a blue army blouse and the

regulation cap, with a kind word for everybody; and when there was a battle, wherever there was the most danger you were sure to find him.”

Mr. Mack stepped out, and returned with the letter, which he handed to the old veteran, with some money, which he took with some hesitation, saying, that all he wanted was to get a passage to New London, and Mollie would attend to his wants.

“When I get there,” said he, “Mollie will find me some clothes to wear, for these are getting rather soiled; and I’m kind of ashamed to be seen in them, for I’ve been used to wearing a little better.”

Mr. Mack told him that he only gave him the money to buy some food on the way, and keep him strong enough to look for his Mollie when he arrived at his destination.

“That’s so, sir,” said he; “I ain’t got as much as will buy me a good supper. When I left Philadelphia, I didn’t have enough to pay my passage, and I have made many a longer march. I didn’t think it was much to walk a hundred miles, so, sooner than beg my passage, I thought I’d walk it. My lame leg made it rather harder than I expected, and I made slow work of it. I soon spent what money I had for meals, and I was obliged to part with a bull’s-eye watch, that cost me twelve dollars a good many years ago. It was pretty old, and I only got a dollar and a half for it. Bull’s-eye watches ain’t worth as much as they used to be. I sold my old pocket-book, too; but as it didn’t have anything in it, it was no good to me. I got my breakfast this morning, and have a small balance in my pocket, off of my spectacles, that I sold to an old fellow that they suited exactly; and I tell you I missed them this morning when I tried to read a newspaper with an account of the war in Europe. I think that war is going to do our people some good. They’ll want some of our corn and wheat, and I tell you the crops did look amazing fine in the country that I passed through. I’m getting interested in the way things are going on on the other side of the water, and I think I’ll buy a pair of specs with some of this money you gave me, and read to-day’s news about it.”

“Do you know,” said Mr. Mack, “that you are entitled to seventy-five dollars for the loss of your foot, under the law to supply soldiers with cork legs, when they have sustained the injury in the line of duty?”

“Well, sir,” said he, “I didn’t know it, but you can see whether I am entitled to it;” and he pulled off his boot, and showed the stump of his foot, with the same pride that we remember to have seen a general officer display the stump of his arm lost in action.

The exposure showed that he was without socks, his foot being wrapped up in a handkerchief.

While he was exhibiting his stump, we observed Mr. Mack pulling his shoes off, and we expected to see him display a wounded foot also, when he hastily pulled off his socks; but instead of so surprising us, he handed the socks, which he had evidently but just put on that day, to the veteran, and against that individual’s earnest protestations, forced him to take them to wear.

We are certain that the same angel who dropped a tear on the record of Uncle Toby's oath, will enter those socks to the credit side of Mr. Mack's account, at a large increase on their market value.

Shaking hands with the battered old veteran, and wishing him good speed on his journey to Mollie, we left Mr. Mack in his office in a meditative mood.”

McWatters, George. *Knots Untied: Or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives*. Hartford: Burr and Hyde, 1871.