

How Not To Pay Pensions

By GEN. FRED L. ROBERTSON

The Deserving Confederate Soldier in Need of State Aid is Classed With Deserters on Pension Roll—About One-Half of Each—The Remedy, a State Pension Commissioner

The question of State questions is one of absorbing interest to the taxpayer, to the pensioners and to the Confederate Veterans who are not pensioners and never expect to be. The pittance that the people willingly hand out quarterly to the men who made Florida glorious even in defeat, is but a small reward for the service rendered, but it is all that the people can afford under the existing conditions. Perhaps with the careful weeding out of unworthy beneficiaries IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO INCREASE THE PRESENT PENSION FIFTY PER CENT; on such a sum the pensioner, by economy, might manage to exist, but how are these unworthy beneficiaries to be gotten off, and kept off the rolls?

At every State encampment of the Florida Division, U. C. V., for several years past, the pension question and its abuse, has been under discussion and changes in the law have been suggested for the protection of the funds and the worthy Confederate soldier, but none of the changes made remedied the evil. In process of time opinions crystallized, until the two last encampments unanimously recommended the creation of the office of the Pension Commissioner. It was urged in the interest of the State and of worthy pensioners. Such an officer would relieve the State of its present list of unworthy pensioners and protect it against fraud in the future. The Commissioner should be a Confederate soldier, a man of highest integrity, fearless and just. Such a man would guard the fund and help the needy applicant by prompt attention to the application, something that is now impossible, because the gentlemen that compose the Pension Board are all department officers and every hour of each day is full of department duties. It is a fact—known only to a few outside of the capitol—that for nearly three years the Pension Board has held its sittings at night, because there was no time during the day in which to attend to pension matters. This is an injustice to these officers. They should be allowed at least the night for rest and recreation.

In considering applications for pension, the Board uses its best judgment, but it matters not how carefully they examine the documents before them, frauds will slip in just so long as the present system continues in vogue. The Board has before it only documentary evidence, and this has in a number of instances been made to show anything but the truth. The Board must take the evidence that is submitted, and they do, except in rare cases where a member happens to have some personal knowledge of the applicant. The difficulties that confront the Board, would disappear before a Commissioner, because such an officer would be vested with full power to investigate every claim presented, and the prospect of personal contact would exert a mighty influence for the suppression of fraud. The fact that the Com-

missioner would personally investigate every case that he had the slightest reason to suspect, and that condign punishment would promptly follow every attempt to defraud the State would deter improper application.

It has been asked, "Why, if the Veterans know certain parties are now improperly on the roll, do they not report the matter to the Board?" The answer is easy. To make such report would put them in the attitude of the complainant and a voluntary witness, which would subject them at once to the covert attack of the fraudulent pensioner. The man who would swear falsely to secure a pension for himself or for his neighbor, would have no hesitancy in setting fire in the dead hours of the night to the home of the informer, and not only burning the house, but all the inmates; nor would he hesitate to commit murder from the bushes or fence-corner; besides that, no true man likes to assume the roll of the informer. "Tell tale" is a stigma that even children dread. It may be argued that it is a duty, and that is true, but has the State any right to ask or expect a good citizen to put his life, the lives of his family and his property in jeopardy to save the State a few dollars? Not when it is in the power of the State to protect itself without in any way endangering its good citizens.

In some sections of the State there are nests of deserters and these fellows are constantly making assaults on the Pension Board. They swear for one another; the record shows them in groups, often of three, swearing for each other and sooner or later all get on the pension roll, provided death does not intervene to prevent. This, however, is a somewhat remote contingency, because men of that stamp are long-lived both on and off the pension roll. They were never exposed during the war to any condition that would tend to break down their vitality; whereas, the good soldier met wounds and disease, waded freezing rivers, marched for days in snow and ice, almost, if not quite, barefooted and in the thinnest of well-worn rags, slept night after night on the wet and freezing ground with only an apology for a blanket, or stood on picket in the pouring rain or kept vigilance in rifle pits half filled with mud and water, and lived for months on the meagerest of rations, rations so short and so poor that one of these hungry pension grabbers would have thrown them away as even unfit food for his dogs. Placed alongside of the good soldier, it is little wonder that these men are hale and strong and long of years.

There is a peculiar feature noticeable in the pension application of good soldiers. The men who did their whole duty, more often than not, find considerable difficulty in satisfactorily establishing their claim. This is owing to the fact that they never apply until the wolf is clawing at their doors, then

they find that the comrades that knew them best have died or in the changes that have occurred they have lost all trace of them. Memory has failed and they cannot recall at will material facts, dates, names and consolidation of commands, changes in officers, letters of companies and numbers of regiments have to a considerable extent caused a loss of identity. When the records are at their command, the applications are almost invariably brief to curtness. They set down the bare fact of service, injury and dates, and the comrades or commissioned officers are equally as brief. The spaces in the applications allowed for answers are more than ample for all their purposes, but the other fellow—he is never at a loss, he and his colleagues know exactly where they were—on paper—and every particle of available space on the application is used for telling the story of faithful (?) service and inexpressible suffering, and of his afflictions, which are many, and all the direct result of "exposure and disease" contracted during the war (they rarely ever complain of wounds, when they are hurt it is from falling off from a wagon). As one reads the record, this mental comment is unavoidable, "what a splendid specimen of manhood, if it could have only escaped the blighting hand of war."

It is asking rather much of the Boards of County Commissioners and of county officers, familiar with the parties, to discourage applicants or turn down applications for pension. They want to keep their offices or to get better ones, and in every instance the man who applies has not only his own vote, but controls several others, all of which will be used against the unfriendly official. Again, this feature of the matter presents itself: The applicant is a pauper, or will be; he will be on the county if he does not get on the pension roll, and many of these officials think the State better able to bear the burden than is the county.

Repeal all existing pension laws and enact a new one providing for a Pension Commissioner, endowed with full powers for investigation; do away with the Pension Board as now constituted, but leave all the operating machinery where it is—with the Comptroller—and the grounds for complaint as to delay in action and the danger of getting improper parties on the pension roll of the State will be minimized.

The objection will be raised in some quarters that this is creating a new office. It is true, but the tenure of the Pension Commissioner cannot, in the nature of things, be for very many years, because with very, very few exceptions, the soldiers of the South have all passed their sixtieth year, and the large majority of widows are equally as old; none are under forty years of age. This condition of necessity puts a period to the existence of the office of Pension Commissioner.

I've Been Thinking

By CHARLES BATTEL LOOMIS

The Reader of Novels was wont to judge of a man's character by a few sharply defined actions set forth by the novelist, and the woman who scolded her children in the first, fifth, and seventh chapters was, of course, a vixen. So also the man who spoke ungrammatically each time he made his appearance in the book was a man of low social position, and the fellow who refused to make Christmas presents was an incurably mean man.

Having become used to these snap judgments of his fellows by a constant reading of novels, the Reader flattered himself that he could judge of a man's character by the first thing he said or by the first thing that was said of him by his neighbor.

And so it happened that the Reader of Novels found himself in a strange place that did not seem to be on this earth at all, and a man with a noble brow and a weak chin and a strong mouth and near-set and lustrous eyes and a large nose and generous ears and large feet and small hands and a bull neck stood near by, and one who looked like a judge was talking about him and naming his characteristics.

"He was often cross to his wife," said the judge.

"Ah, a male scold," said the Reader of Novels, readily.

"He was very fond of children."

"What's that?" said the Reader of Novels, scenting something incongruous.

"One time his heart was set to murder his brother, and only his brother's flight prevented his death."

"A thug," said the Reader of Novels, always to himself.

"He denied himself all that makes life worth living in order to make the last days of his mother comfortable, and moved by a good impulse he divided the estate with his brother although it had all been left to him."

"The same man?" said the Reader of Novels, dumbfounded.

"He did a despicably mean act in business and was never sorry for it."

"Ah, I thought so," said the Reader of Novels. "His true character is coming out."

"He told a vulgar story to a friend and both laughed at the undoubted humor of it."

"Ah, ha!" said the Reader of Novels. "He is being drawn a little truer to life."

"He was deeply moved by a spiritual poem and appreciated it so sincerely that he wrote it out and carried it with him, and finally learned it by heart and tried to govern his life according to its precepts."

"The deuce he did!" said the Reader of Novels, incredulously.

"He told another vulgar story."

"He'd better have given up shamming," said the Reader of Novels.

"He drank more than was good for him, and was seen in a condition of inebriety by young people who had respected him as a governor of the church."

"Of course," said the Reader of Novels. "He is getting truer and truer to his character."

"He established a club to which young men were welcome and at which no intoxicating liquors were sold, and said in all sincerity that he believed immoderate drinking to be a curse."

"The hypocrite," said the Reader of Novels.

"He voted the Republican ticket."

"Good," said the Reader of Novels, who was a Vermonter.

"He voted the Democratic ticket."

"Turncoat," said the Reader of Novels.

"He gave generously of his means to help a poor man who had been buffeted by the world, and spoke well of him when to do so exposed him to contumely."

"Who was this, anyhow?" said the Reader of Novels, more and more puzzled.

"He said malignant things behind a man's back, things that worked the man's downfall, although he never knew that."

"Pity he didn't. He would have exulted," said the Reader of Novels.

"He reproached a man in all sincerity for saying like things of another behind his back, and had a poor opinion of that backbiter from that time on."

"This is beyond me," said the Reader of Novels.

"He refused night after night to give up his seat

(Continued on Eleventh Page)