

Free Enterprise

Jim Sullivan

THE Veterans Administration had given me an unusually fast job. It had only taken them eleven days short of a year to get around to giving me the dental examination I had requested. I seated myself in a chair in the dentist's reception room and picked up a magazine.

This dentist must be a beginner. The magazine was only a week old. I thumbed through it, found an article on Finland—a country whose chamber of commerce does not ordinarily seem very publicity-minded—and was promptly interrupted by the nurse.

"Mr. Higgs?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Follow me, please."

I followed her. I would have followed her to the end of the world. She was terrific. But, at the same time, there was something vaguely familiar about her. She stepped aside at the door and motioned me into the inner office where a smiling figure awaited me.

I jumped, turned, and started to take off, but the nurse had been too fast for me. Before I could get in motion, she had stepped in front of me and my avenue of escape was closed.

"You're not afraid, are you?" she asked, laughingly.

"No," I replied. "I just remembered an important appointment."

I wasn't afraid. I was scared stiff. That was old "Yank" Clarke, the terror of the ETO, in there. Of all the dentists in town, the VA had chosen the roughest man discharged from the infamous Army

Dental Corps to work on me. And that nurse was Jane, his girl friend and adviser, who believed that teeth were made to be pulled and any one who took a local anaesthetic was a sissy and a kill-joy. No, I wasn't afraid. Not much.

A funny thing was happening to his face, now. He was smiling! Old Cap'n Yank, the sourest field grade officer in the Army, was smiling! Evidently, he didn't recognize me, as he had heard me take a solemn oath that, if ever we met in civilian life, he would never smile again. A little of my fear ebbed away. If he didn't recognize me, it wouldn't be too bad. After all, this was only an examination.

"My wife will take your hat and coat."

I drank in the ingratiating smile which accompanied this statement but I remained wary. It was all a trick—that I knew. So they were married now. That was a shame because married people sometimes have children and I blanched at the thought of the offspring of Cap'n Yank and Jane.

I sat down in the chair, tensed to jump up and fight if necessary. He couldn't court-martial me now if I refused to let him work on me.

"Open your mouth, please."

In France, it had been, "Open your mouth if ya want me to work on ya . . . Well, open it, anyway, or I'll court-martial ya." This was nice.

"Just a little bit wider."

My jaw dropped at the gentleness of his tone and he found this aperture satisfactory. He began to pry around inside my mouth and I quietly doubled my fist.

Here's where he would get rough.

I was wrong, though. He didn't get rough and I gradually began to see the reason. This was free enterprise, where you went to the dentist of your choice and he, with an eye on his fee, treated you as gently as possible. He **wanted** you to come back. I unclenched my fist.

"Now for the X-rays." He took a small square of something and poked it way to the rear of my mouth. This was my chance, but my nerve failed me. He got his hand back out.

"Did you have that tooth pulled in the Army?" he asked.

"Yeah, and the guy almost killed me when he pulled it."

"Was he rough?"

"Well, it would have been easier on me if he'd used a charge of dynamite."

He thought this one over and I thought for a moment that he had remembered pulling the tooth. If he did, it didn't show on his face, though.

"Yes," he said as he put his hand back into my mouth. "Some of the fellows did get a little rough. I never could see it, though. I felt it was my duty to treat the men as well as I would my patients back home."

That was too much. I choked and closed my mouth. He screamed with pain. I'll admit that it was partly intentional but then dentists shouldn't say such things while they have a hand in a veteran's

mouth.

I opened my mouth, allowing him to withdraw his hand and sprang to my feet, assuming a defensive posture. Now it would come. The terrible temper of Cap'n Yank would never stand having his fingers bitten. I'd be lucky to get out of there alive.

So it was with considerable amazement that I heard him say, with deep concern, "Did I make you choke? I'm awfully sorry."

"Don't mention it," I mumbled as I sank back into the chair.

As I was leaving, Jane smiled sweetly at me and Cap'n Yank told me that I would receive a notice from VA telling me when and where to report for the actual dental work. I could, he assured me, request any dentist I wanted. I didn't say anything. I merely resolved that he would be the last person on my request list.

But, as I stepped outside, I changed my mind. I caught a bus, went downtown, and headed straight for the local VA office. There I cornered one of the former majors who has seen fit to continue his service under General Bradley and demanded that, when my dental appointment came up, I be sent to Cap'n Yank Clarke.

Then I went home to memorize the symptoms of lockjaw. I want to have them perfect.