

I DUG FOR VICTORY

I AM by nature the type of person inveighed against (and with justification) by speakers on the public platform and writers to daily papers—the type of citizen who squats on the side line and sneers while other citizens wield pick and shovel in the cause. But when I read that, because of a certain lack of response among the men, Wellington's women were proposing to turn out en masse and dig shelter trenches for bombarded townsmen, a spark of enthusiasm grew within me. The women would shame the men into doing their bit, the article recorded, and hundreds of eager young women were already straining unused muscles to make trenches safe for democracy.

I went along, somewhat late in the day, but then I had heard that several fresh teams of girls from city offices were to start directly after work. It was raining. I found the location, a steep bank of earth covering what had been a refuse tip and leading down to a bush-and-can-filled gully. Against the fence at the top of the slope leant row upon row up brand-new shovels and brand-new picks, and the man in charge of them all. At the bottom of the slope two women slashed without conviction at festoons of wandering jew and periwinkle.

Then Came The Rain

"What are they doing?" I asked. "Surely they're not going to dig shelter trenches down there?"

"Building a zigzag," the man contributed, "so that people can take shelter in the gully."

I, too, leant on the fence and watched. The two women went on working, patiently but not progressively. I wondered when the rest were arriving. Then came the rain.

I took shelter in the nearest garage. No hope of any further activity that night, I concluded, watching the water streaking past in the gutters. A pity, for I had arranged for a cameraman and I had hoped to get a good story about female trench digging. Well, I could come again another day.

On my way home, twenty minutes later, I again passed the top of the embryo zigzag. The two women were still digging, coats over their shoulders. The shining new picks and slashers were still leaning against the fence though the man in charge of them had gone. I leant against the fence.

The minutes passed. Two other men came and leant, discussing the digging. Men, whirling past in their closed cars, slowed up for a minute to glimpse the progress of the zigzag. There were amused smiles.

"Somebody Must Do It"

I could stand it no longer. I seized a pick and with a regretful glance at my most unsuitable shoes and stockings began to slide down the path from puddle to puddle—I did not see my shoes till two days later.

I landed, pick-anchored, in a clump of blackberry thickly sown with old saucepans. My companions nodded and smiled at me without stopping their work. The younger was perhaps thirty-five or forty, and well-built, the older was stooped and slight and might have been sixty.

"How long have you been digging?" I asked.

"We have been here since ten o'clock," said the younger. "There were about forty women here this morning, but they had to stop because of the rain."

"But why didn't you stop too?" I wanted to know.

"Well, the work's got to be done and somebody's got to do it. We don't mind the rain."

A thrush came out of the undergrowth. We paused to watch it, and my informant drew her companion's attention to it in French.

"How long have you been in New Zealand?" I asked.

"Twenty years" was her reply.

Like Bears In a Pit

We went on with our digging, pausing now and then to draw each other's attention to our discoveries. The bank we were excavating consisted of loose soil decently cloaking a municipal rubbish tip. We held up for mutual edification now a rusty bed-spring, now a piece of car upholstery, or a mouldering pair of football shorts. In the case of less obvious articles we had guessing competitions.

So the time passed quickly, and if the zigzag didn't grow much our little stock of trophies did. The rain stopped, the sun came out, and with the sun appeared a little crowd of fence-leaners. From the bottom of our pit we could see them on the horizon, and from their position of vantage they threw down encouraging remarks much as visitors to the bear-pit throw down breadcrumbs and peanuts. And we felt towards them much as the bears must feel.

My first exhilaration when after ten minutes of experimenting I discovered how to hold my pick and realised that I had actually excavated several feet of pathway had long since worn off. I was hungry and bored, and my feet were wet. I wanted to go home, but I couldn't wander off when the two veterans showed no sign of flagging. Oughtn't they to be getting the tea on? I suggested, but they had only themselves to feed and weren't hungry. Mightn't they have a long way to go home and shouldn't they start before it got dark? But no, they lived just across the street. At last I gave up the indirect approach. "I think we've done enough," I said firmly. "We'd better not do any more till some responsible person tells us what to do." I hustled them into coats and led the little party back up the dangerous and slippery ascent. As all three had picks, there was no need for ropes. Halfway up a newly arrived official took our picks and autographs. At the top we greeted a young boy coming down.

The show was over. The sightseers melted away. I eyed the retreating forms suspiciously, but the trim rows of shining black shovels and picks and slashers appeared undisturbed. I hoped some responsible person would come and put them away for the night, so that when they paraded the next morning they might still present their unblemished faces and unbroken ranks.

—M.B.

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