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Have You An Air-Raid Shelter?

PITS—AND SOME PITFALLS

I SET out primarily to get a cross-section of opinion from housewives on Mrs. Fraser's recent speech, with her appeal to all women to join up with some branch of the Women's War Service Auxiliary. I had intended to go from house to house asking housewives whether they were members of the Auxiliary, whether they held official positions in organisations such as the E.P.S., if they intended joining up with either organisation, and, if not, their reasons for non-participation. I happened to have business in what in my opinion had claims to be considered a typical New Zealand town, situated a mile or so from the sea, and containing several major factories, several railway stations, and twenty thousand or so citizens all sufficiently cognisant of their city's importance to recognise in it a vital target for a Japanese bomber.

Going from house to house asking people if they have joined the W.W.S.A. and if not why not makes you feel like a rather misbegotten cross between a recruiting sergeant and a vacuum-cleaner saleswoman. I found myself skipping a house here and there, and finally walking down a whole street without accosting one of the inhabitants. As I walked I noticed the houses and gardens, the back gardens particularly with their neat rows of potatoes and cabbages. And in many of those back gardens were curious little mounds of flung-up earth. Celery trenches? Foundations for the chicken house? I decided to inquire.

Two Opinions

"That's our air raid shelter," replied the proud owner. "My husband did the whole lot just last Saturday afternoon. Of course it isn't finished yet." I followed her into the garden.

It was perhaps a yard deep, a narrow pit with sloping sides of bare clay. Steps led down to it. The bottom was awash with clayey water.

"That's the trouble here," said the owner "You can't dig more than three feet without striking water."

"What will you do if there's an air raid," I asked, "come out here or stay inside?"

"Come out to the shelter," was the unhesitating reply, "and even if it's raining, I'd rather be drowned than bombed."

The next door neighbour had no air-raid shelter. "Silly idea," was her comment. "If anybody starts dropping bombs I'm going to stay right inside. You're just as safe in your house as you are in your shelter and it's a great deal more comfortable. In the event of a direct hit you'd be nowhere in any case."

"But the shelter would give some protection against splinters or machine-gun fire."

"I'd rather dig something constructive like potatoes and not waste my time digging a so-called air-raid shelter. I'd rather be machine-gunned than drowned."

A matter of opinion, I reflected, to those who have experienced neither.

An Ambitious Effort

Next door but one had an impressive little shelter in the front lawn, neat and unobtrusive. It had a roof of corrugated iron covered with turf, and at the side four steps leading down. "It's large enough for the five of us," explained the householder. The soil was loam, not clay, and there was no water. Slat ran along the bottom and there was a low form for sitting, though it was impossible to stand. I was moved to admiration. The owner shivered. "I don't suppose we'll use it, but it's nice to feel it's there."

During the next hour I walked from street to street, from shelter to shelter. On the average every third house appeared to have its dugout in the garden. Some were merely coffin-sized pits, some were roofed and had wooden

supports inside. In many cases the water level difficulty had been partly overcome by building up with sandbags above the level of the ground. As I approached the west end of the town I found that several housewives, after showing me their own shelters, concluded by saying, "But you simply must see Mrs. Robertson's shelter. It's marvellous!"

Prize Exhibit

I saw Mrs. Robertson's shelter. "I was lucky," she said, "discovering a layer of sand after I'd dug down a yard or two. That means it's beautifully dry. But I also discovered the sewer. It rather spoilt the appearance, but if you've dug for five feet you don't feel like starting again somewhere else."

"Did you dig it all yourself?"

"My niece and I dug the actual hole. Then an Air Force boy came and helped us get the roof on."

We walked down seven steps. It was a deep shelter, deep enough to stand up in comfort. A lamp hung from the ceiling, there was a long tin trunk filled with blankets. The walls were lined with split bamboo. Pipes for ventilation led outside the shelter.

"I wouldn't have bothered if it had been merely for myself," said Mrs. Robertson, "but I have two nieces so I thought I'd better rig up something."

On my way back I spoke to a number of housewives who had no shelters in their back garden. "It has to be twenty feet from everything," said one, "and I can't get twenty feet away from everything in my garden. If it's twenty feet from the house it's slap up against the glass house." "It's a good idea having a shelter if you're near the factory," said one, "but they're not likely to bomb us here." "If the Japanese bombing's anything like the German," said one housewife living next door to a motor assembly works, "they're not likely to hit us or the factory." Most of the shelterless, when asked what they would do in the case of an air-raid, intended to sit quietly and get on with their work. All thought it a good idea to get away from windows, some favoured getting under the bed, some under the table. None seemed unduly perturbed.

"As Good as the Beach"

As I walked back to the station I noticed two small girls working in a roadside trench, baling out the water with saucepans and dippers. "I don't know what we'd have done without it," said the mother.

I looked startled. Surely there had not been a raid already? "Yes, what with not being able to get away for Christmas I'd have been at my wits' end trying to keep the children amused. But Jack and Eric have had a wonderful time digging half the day and coming home covered with mud—just as good as the beach, they say. And it's keeping the girls amused too. Mrs. Smith up the road has such a nice shelter and Eileen says it's wonderful for playing house in."

—M.I.

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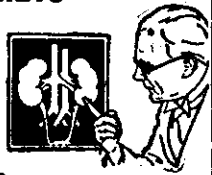
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