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1/3 & 3/4

WE BUILD AN AIR-RAID SHELTER

SIX weeks ago we decided that we must really begin to dig our trench. It was a momentous decision, because I still feel that the last thing I want to do in an air-raid is to get into a hole in the ground with my feet in a puddle. However, we felt

that we must have somewhere we could take the children, and so we started some very serious thinking about the problem. The forethought and planning, if not the most important part of the proceedings, was so important that it took at least three weeks, though it could not altogether exclude the actual digging, we realised at last.

To begin with, of course, we had to have our shelter in a suitable place. Somewhere where the whole of the rest of the hillside would not fall on us, and where we would be at least 10 feet away from any wooden building. We decided to get someone along to advise us. But after explaining to us some very clever mathematical tricks (for example, take Hitler's birthday, add five and subtract two) to show that we might have known this war was coming, our friend advised us not to dig a trench at all but simply to go down the bank if anything happened.

A Neighbour's Example

That was not what we wanted. Having made up our minds to have a trench we were going to have one, come what might. So we went round and had a look next door, at least I did, and was deeply impressed, particularly when I learnt that the daughter of the house had dug the trench all by herself. This of course I did not tell my husband. It was an L-shaped trench, all set about with sand-bags and looking most professional. I took my husband along, and he irritatingly prophesied collapse with the first rains—a prophesy which has since been dismally fulfilled.

Very well then, as well as being dug in the perfect place, our shelter had to have its walls properly supported. It had to have a roof, and it had to be properly drained. It was going to be an elaborate business, and we warmed to the thought of this most superior of trenches. But we needed materials. Here we were lucky. Some neighbours were leaving an old home. "Come and take anything you want," they said generously. So we spent half a day carrying from one house to another fragments of tin and spouting, pieces of wood of all description, including some old bed-ends, sundry pipes and several butter boxes. We spread our booty round us on the lawn. To the casual eye it might have appeared a mess, but to the eye of faith this array of rubbish was a stout bulwark and a waterproof ceiling. Then it rained.

At last Saturday came fair and windy, and in the afternoon we rolled up our sleeves and got out pick and spade. Here was the place, on top of the bank. Ruthlessly we uprooted rosemary and daisies, Christmas lilies, and a young lilac bush. War means sacrifices, I told myself sadly. When I did allow myself a faint remonstrance I was told shortly that Japanese admirals do not care to wait while people replant their gardens. However, when I saw healthy young rhubarb



plants joining the sacrificial pile, and mint that had taken a whole year to establish itself, being trodden heavily underfoot and then buried, I rebelled. When the refugees had at last found homes in various unsuitable places elsewhere in the garden (where they subsequently perished through lack of water) the real digging began.

Withdrawal to New Position

"You know," said my husband carelessly after a few minutes, "the trench will take up the whole of this bed, and I shall need this," indicating the spinach bed, "to put the earth on. It will come as far as this." He smothered half a row of parsley. "Oh, no!" I cried. "You can't possibly do that. That's my source of vitamin C." A mild argument followed (of which no more than half was heard by the neighbours) as to which is preferable, a slow death by starvation or a quick death by bombs.

In the end we agreed to abandon this position altogether and retire to our second choice. This meant digging into our sloping lawn which would look hideous but spare the vegetables. We built a mighty barricade of wood to support the excavated earth and set to work. Hard at it we went, at least my husband did, because the beautiful thing about trench digging from the onlooker's point of view, is that it can be done by only one person at a time. Suddenly I heard an unrepeatable exclamation. The pick had struck something even harder than the usual face of hard yellow clay. Gingerly my husband removed the earth and the family crowded round to look. Right across our magnificently growing trench was a thick rusty pipe. Gas, of course, and gas, we decided, is not the healthiest thing to have near an air-raid shelter.

We survey the fruits of our labour. Besides the pieces of wood and tin, the pipes and the boxes, there were now several tons of earth and clay, and a large gash, quite useless. On top of the bank was a pile of wilting plants, a ruined spinach bed, another unsightly gash, and more tons of earth. It is simply astonishing the amount of earth that comes out of a hole six inches deep.

It was half-past five. Sadly we leant pick and spade against a heap of junk, went inside and put the kettle on. There might be another fine week-end before the Japs came.

—JAY



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