

THE UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT

by M.B.

JIMMY rushes in from school. "Mum, Mum, can I chop down a tree?" "No," I say automatically.

"Just a little tree." "No," I say, less automatically. "Haven't you heard of erosion?"

"Who?" "Never mind." "Just a teeny tree up in the bush." "Oh, very well." "And can Peter?" "Oh, I suppose so!" "Just some teeny trees. To make a fort."

He dashes out. Five minutes later I see four of them climbing the hill with axes. I shrug it off. After all, ever since the steps up were levelled into a toboggan run I haven't been in a position to take much interest in what goes on at the top of the section.

An hour or so later George bursts in, in a glow of virtuous indignation.

"Mum, Mum, do you know what those kids are doing?"

"Yes," I say. His sails flap. "They want to make a fort," I explain.

"All they can make is a lot of mess." He brightens. "I'll show them how to make a decent fort. Where's the mattock?" He disappears uphill.

Well, I smirk, as I turn back to the ironing, such good healthy exercise. And it certainly keeps them out of the house.

Next day reinforcements arrive, Harry and Bill, and a couple I haven't seen before. But with quite nice manners. They always compliment me on my baking before requisitioning things like buckets and clothesline and quite recherché items like fish-hooks and a spring-balance. The days pass, I find myself actually looking forward to the steady shuffle of feet along the path, the scrape of tools, the outstretched hands as I, Lady Bountiful, dispense the needful, and the resumed clank and tramp as the gang gets under way. I feel myself a vital cog in some vast and urgent enterprise. I might almost be living at Kawerau.

"Well, how's it going?" I ask at dinner.

"So so," says George, guardedly. He toys with his sausage. Come to think of it, neither he nor Jimmy is eating as well as they ought, considering all that strenuous activity.

"Is it a big fort?" I pursue.

"It's a tremendous fort and a tunnel," pipes Jimmy.

George gives him a warning look.

"Where's the tunnel going?" I enquire.

"Oh, under the wire," says George, nonchalant.

"Gee, Mum, it's grouse," says Jimmy. "It's got everything! A cook-house and storerooms, and—"

"Shut up," says George.

"Shut up yourself," says Jimmy.

George aims a well-placed kick. Jimmy yells. I take a swipe at George's trouser-seat.

Dust rises in clouds and settles heavily.

More vacuuming. You just can't win, can you?

And I'm daily expecting a deputation of neighbourhood mothers with a demand for hot showers at the pit-head.

"HAS anyone seen the spade?" asks my husband on the weekend.

We all look at one another. Actually I've seen it going past the window several times, but perhaps not just lately. We look at the view, and at our nails.

"From now on," thunders my husband, "that basement is going to be kept locked!"

"Yes, dear," I acquiesce. Nice to think there are still some horses left.

"Cripes, Mum," beefs George on Monday, "the basement's locked."

"Yes, dear," I concur. "Well, what about our tools?"

"Whose tools, dear?" Too subtle, I guess.

"Our tools for our tunnel, of course. Gee, hurry up, Mum, the fellers are waiting."

I have my moment of hesitation. The moment that probably came to all those co-operative goons in P.O.W. camps when they spared a second for a nostalgic tribute to old loyalties before taking the realistic view and throwing in their lot with the winning side. For Youth's bound to win in the end, of course.

"On the nail beside the wash-house, dear. But for heaven's sake put everything back!" I hiss.

"Gee, Mum, thanks," he breathes.

The odour of complicity is a little stifling. But there can be no looking back now. I'm a gone goon.

"WHERE'S my shovel?" I shout desperately next morning. (Have you ever tried to clean a fireplace without a shovel?) Nobody answers—they're all at school. A bit poor, pinching from an Ally. Well, there's nothing for it—I shall have to make the ascent.

Yes, there's certainly something in this erosion business. Every step I take up what used to be the track releases a little avalanche of soil and rubble. Three steps up, glide two steps back, chassée to avoid that hurtling lump of clay. It might almost be a samba in a crowded ballroom, getting nowhere fast. But an idea! I pause, losing ground a little. Now, if I were to erect a fence at the bottom of the cliff I'd have an extra terrace in no time—

But I've paused a little too long—I'm launched into an involuntary glissade—faster and faster—Ouch!

Help! And maintain an ambulance.

But even as I struggle out of the rubble at the bottom of the slope I vow, Macarthurish, to return. With crampons and ice-axe, if I can find them.

"WELL," I address them coldly at the tea-table, "I finally got up to your wretched fort—"

I pause for effect, but they are unaffected.

"—and what do I find?"

Another ominous pause. They sit like the Tar Baby and wait for me to get really stuck in.

"Everything but the kitchen sink!"

"Gee, Mum," says Jimmy, "can we—"

"Silence!" I thunder. They blink. But really, I haven't the heart to keep up the attitude of stern disapproval, they look so happy and normal sitting there, and there's a kind of bloom of health upon them. (I pinch a cheek, playfully Clay-dust, of course.) And I must take some of the credit—lots of mothers wouldn't have sacrificed themselves as



... as the gang gets under way

I've done to connive at all this healthy outdoor activity.

"What've you got that plaster on your elbow for, Mum?" pipes Jimmy.

"Never you mind," I squelch. I feel my sense of injury reviving.

"My best frying-pan, and you knew I was hunting for it yesterday! And all that tinned stuff, and my mincer, and the good blankets! You might as well live there permanently!"

"Gee, Mum," says Jimmy, "can we—"

"No," says George.

"What an idea!" I say. Still, from the parental viewpoint, what an attractive idea.

"Well, can we have the sink, then?"

I take a swipe at him, and miss. As well, perhaps, as part of the vacuum cleaner is missing. I pretend I wasn't trying, and address George, the more responsible party.

"I can understand the frying-pan, I can understand the food, but why, why did you have to take my good dress-making scissors?"

"We were cutting an old tyre—"

"An old tyre!" I bleat.

"We were cutting up an old tyre to make some bellows for our ventilating system," explains George with weary patience.

"Ventilating system?" I quaver.

"Gets a bit foul down there when you've been working at the face for half an hour or so, doesn't it, kid? He almost conked out, didn't you, Stinker?"

"I was sick," says Jimmy with relish.

"Don't worry, Mum," says George kindly. "The old bellows works quite well now."

Oh, dear. Other dreadful possibilities occur.

"Dear," I suggest, "hadn't you better put some sort of framework inside or something—we don't want it to collapse

—I could let you have these old boxes—"

George looks at me with the contempt earned by a mother who attempts to teach her children to suck eggs. "The Shoring-up, you mean? Naturally, I've done that, with those four-by-twos from the basement. It'd be positively dangerous to use old timber—"

"Oh, quite right," I hurry to agree. Time enough for a double-take when father finds out.

"WHEN do you intend to Break Out?"

I ask with bated breath. (If we hadn't struck that tree root we'd have been through by now.)

"Should be some time this week," says George wearily. I suppose the strain of leadership is beginning to tell.

"How about a nice early night?" I murmur with rare maternal solicitude. "You'll be fresher for work tomorrow."

"Think I will," says George gratefully.

"WE don't want the Weather, do we?"

I ask my husband in the sitting-room after dinner. I move to switch off the radio and my eye is caught by a flicker of movement outside. I gaze in fascinated horror—a procession of steeped figures with blackened faces slinking past the window.

Oh, dear.

I must create a diversion.

Flurried, I direct my husband's attention to an overdue library print, glowing as unashamedly above the fireplace as if we owned it.

(Watch the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen go by.)

We threw ourselves into a brisk give-and-take on finance (most diversionary) and then peace descends again. An unusually complete silence.

"Well," says my husband, gratified, "the boys must have gone right off as soon as I turned their light out."

"Soon after," I agree.

AND then we all forget about the tunnel until one night my husband answers the phone to Mr. Griffiths from up the hill, who complains that part of his garden has fallen in and taken the rhubarb with it.

"Drat those kids! I've told them time and time again that they're to fill in their wretched holes. See that they get cracking after school tomorrow."

"Yes, dear."

But next day's football practice, and after that it rains, and then I, too, forget about the tunnel except in moments of nostalgia for my vegetable knife or the only tin-opener that really worked. We don't hear from Mr. Griffiths again—perhaps rhubarb likes a sheltered situation.

And then one afternoon I hear the old familiar thump and scrape along the path and there they are again, dragging their tools behind them. Quite like old times, I smile. And what's this, a mattock? Haven't seen a mattock in months.

"Did we find it?" I ask George. But it's merely borrowed from the Mitchells.

It just shows it doesn't pay to nag at them. Leave them alone and they'll come home—

But they're not going up the track at all—they're going down the other way—

"George!" I call. "George and Jimmy! You are remembering about the tunnel?"

"Yes, 'M." But they're going quite the other way, and I hear Jimmy yelping something about making it much bigger this time.

Oh, dear. Should I drive them up the hill at crowbar's point? But they're got both the crowbars.

Better, I decide, to Save Face.

After all, after raising six children on the Permissive System it's about the only thing I've got left.