

BIG BEN

Written for "The Listener"

by FRANK SARGESON



HE was a tremendous big man, the name all us relief workers used to call him by suited him fine. He had good features too. But his wife, besides being just a little thing, was about as plain-looking as a woman can be without being actually disfigured in some way.

I never knew exactly when they arrived out here, but it must have been a good few years before the slump. They had three children, all boys, and I remember Ben said his kids were all Pig Islanders. When I first got to know him the oldest boy was about ten, so it must have been early in the 'twenties. One time on the way home from work he came into my back to crack a bottle of homebrew, and after that I began going along to his place sometimes of an evening.

THEY'D managed to buy their own house but it wasn't anything to write home about, just a big wooden box with trimmings, and badly in need of a coat of paint. Though maybe it was better than what they'd been used to back in the Old Country. It was right at the end of the street, where the street took a quick slope to a creek that ran into the sea. The sea came up the creek at high tide and then you didn't see the mud, though even at high tide the water didn't cover all the tins and rubbish that everybody seemed to come along the street to dump there.

On the slope alongside the house there was room enough for a fair-sized garden, and that's where Ben put in a lot of his time. He didn't know a thing about growing vegetables, you could tell that at a glance. But he was keen

so I showed him a thing or two, though in a hundred years he'd never have got the knack of getting things to grow. But as I say he was keen, and there were times when the pair of us would put in whole days in his garden, yarning about this and that while we worked, and leaving off occasionally for a bite and a cup of tea. It was easy to talk to Ben, not that he talked much, but I did, and he was good at listening, and his missis would be at the kitchen door nursing the youngest kid while she listened as well.

BUT if Ben was a quiet sort of joker I don't know what you'd call his wife. She never said a thing, and if she did she had such a Cockney way of talking you had to think twice before you knew what she meant. I can't stand people who don't talk, so I'd never have been able to get on with her on her own, but with Ben there it was all right. Sometimes I'd strike her down the street going shopping and we'd walk along together, but with her having nothing to say I'd feel awkward, though usually she'd be pushing a go-cart with the youngest on board, who'd be someone to talk to. I mean someone that you didn't expect to talk back anyhow. All the same she wasn't dumb, you could tell that. It was just that you felt she couldn't make head or tail out of colonial ways or people. She was a fish out of water, so to speak. She usually wore a kid's cotton hat which somehow didn't seem to improve things either. And sometimes I'd think she must be about as lonely as it's possible for anyone to be without actually being on a desert island or something equally drastic.

If it comes to that, Ben was lonely too, though you couldn't get the hang of his feelings as easily as you could of his wife's. One trouble was they were living in the fag end part of a posh suburb, there weren't so many people more or less of their own sort living around, and they somehow didn't seem to cotton on to the few that were. At times it'd make me feel real blue thinking about it all—though that was usually when I'd been recovering from a bout of homebrew.

But if it wasn't so good for Ben and his missis it was O.K. for the kids. The eldest one, young Ben, was quite a

bright lad, a regular New Zealand kid with just a touch of Cockney talk that he'd got from his mother. He and his next brother fitted in all right with other kids, and they'd be off down to the beach every opportunity they got, and I think they had quite a good time even if the tucker would be sometimes a bit too short to fill their bellies to the limit.

WELL, it must have been about the middle of the slump when I got to know Ben, but he didn't seem to be worrying particularly about the slump. He was a fitter by trade, and having a trade he thought he'd get a job all right when things began to improve. Though it turned out they were a long time improving, and I gathered he was slipping back more and more with his payments on the house, which must have worried him quite a lot, particularly when it was a question of deciding on mutton flap for dinner or a few pence saved to keep the roof over your head.

BUT often of an evening we'd forget all about that. I'd take along some of my homebrew, and with a few in even Ben's wife would have something to say. And if it hadn't been for the homebrew I don't think I'd ever have discovered much about what their lives had been like in the Old Country. Ben'd sit there smoking his pipe and talking mainly about Douglas Credit, and it'd be his missis who'd tell me such things as how he'd been an Old Contemptible in the last war. One night she brought out his medals to show me. Once Ben got talking about the old days though, he'd open out. He hadn't liked the war, he said, but he'd had four years of it. Afterwards he'd travelled about a bit and found jobs in his line weren't so easy to get. And he'd a notion that the way things were going there'd be trouble in Europe again before long. He was married then, and he thought if he had any kids he didn't want them to go through all he'd been through, and that was the main reason why he'd decided to try his luck in New Zealand. And his luck had been pretty good until like so many others he'd got hit slap-bang by the slump.

I'M not altogether sure what it was that happened eventually (perhaps their house was going to be taken off them, I don't know), but as things began to improve a bit Ben didn't seem to be happy at all. Not even when he got a job. And even that turned out bad, because he'd hardly got into his stride when his boss went broke, and Ben never got some of his wages. But maybe it was something deeper than that. Maybe Ben began to feel that living in New Zealand he'd always be sort of living on a desert island. Per-

haps even his experience of gardening had told him he'd never really get the hang of colonial life. It was O.K. for the kids, he certainly knew that, but what about his wife? He certainly must have had a pretty good idea what it was like for her. After all, he could go out working alongside his mates but his wife hadn't a friend. She hardly ever spoke to anyone outside the house, except when she was buying the mutton flap and suchlike. You'd hardly believe it, but it just happened to be that way. Somehow her looks, the way she talked, everything, was against her. And I'd noticed right from the start that Ben thought the world of his missis. You sort of felt like telling yourself it was against all reason, yet it was pretty plain for anyone to see.

ANYHOW, I certainly got a shock when I went along one evening and found Ben and his missis packing up. There were candles stuck in saucers all over the house, and even young Ben and his brother were being kept busy. Ben himself was hammering away making boxes and he wasn't short of material because years ago he'd made a lot of their furniture out of packing cases. All he said was he'd decided to try his luck in Australia, and he asked me to come round the next morning and help to get the boxes on the carrier's lorry.

And next morning I knew, because there were Orient Line labels on the boxes. But Ben never said anything more about where they were going, and I knew he couldn't stomach telling me he was going back to the Old Country. It would have been too much like telling a man you'd been licked in a fight. And where he got the money from I don't know, but it must have been sent out by his people because I'll swear he never had any nest-egg of his own.

It wasn't so good later on saying goodbye along where they got on the bus. It just happened to be a great day, and you could hear the sea breaking on the shore. And young Ben began to cry at the thought of what he was leaving, though we cheered him up telling him the fun he'd have going over the sea in a big boat.

FOR months and months I didn't hear, then Ben wrote a letter that I've always meant to answer but never have yet. They were back in London, living off the Mile End Road where he and his missis had lived when they were first married. He'd got a job during the first week, he said, and things were booming properly. The missis was well, and happy to be back among her own people. Young Ben wasn't taking to the place too kindly, though he'd soon get used to it. The other kids were doing fine, and there was another on the way. About the only thing that can worry me now is another war, he wound up.