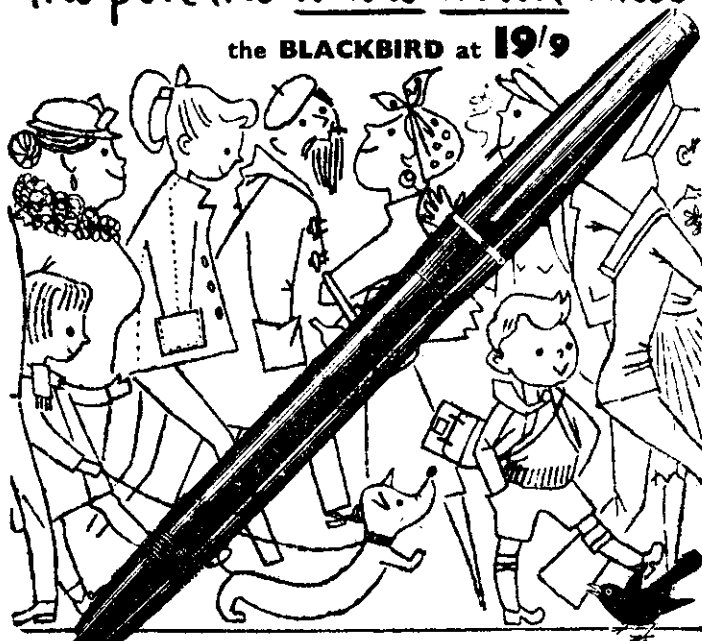


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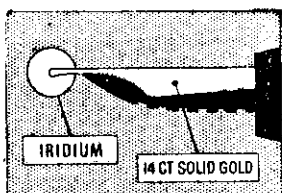
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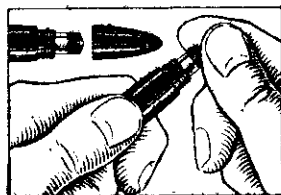
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# The Sunbaby by PETER N. TEMM

**E**VEN when Charlie coughed loudly into his crumpled hanky, the young fellow didn't stir. Charlie sat down, glowering, on the end of the seat. This part of the bench was shaded by the sign hanging outside Jack's barber shop: at this early hour of the morning, sitting there was a comfortless business. The other end of the bench, Charlie's accustomed and unquestioned right, was occupied. Tugging at his brown-stained whiskers, Charlie brooded. Perhaps the fellow was waiting for a bus; there would be one along soon, perhaps he'd go then. Charlie coughed again, hoarsely, and nearly strained his eye muscles in an effort to peer, unnoticed, at the intruder. With something of a shock Charlie realised that the fellow was asleep.

"Blast!" he exploded, pounding savagely at the cracked asphalt footpath with his stick. He couldn't be entirely rude, go and shake the bloke, and order him out of it; much as he'd like to. But when the bus came along, that would be an opportunity; then he could wake him and tell him that the bus was there.

The young fellow sat slumped in the seat, his head lolling back and almost touching the tangled mess of fennel, tecoma and bamboo that reared up in an oddly mixed jungle from behind the stone wall, the playground of little brown lizards, sparrows, and rats. The intruder lay partly against the brick wall of Jack's shop, which was at right-angles to the seat. In and out of the cracked mortar of the wall busied countless ants, pausing briefly in their frantic scurrying to touch feelers, then hurry on. Charlie liked to sit there, where the bleak sunshine was stronger, and watch them. He'd read that the feeler-touching was a kind of communication. They fascinated him, those little black devils; some mornings he would watch them for hours. Now there was that fellow sitting there, and so there was nothing for him to do, to pass the time. Nobody was about, yet. It was too early for the women to be shopping, Jack was busy inside the shop, and the other old men wouldn't arrive at the seat for another hour, when the sun would be stronger. Time was wasting.

Charlie looked again at the young man; a rather battered individual, he decided. Stained, grey suit, no tie, grubby shirt; and, in an attempt to disguise the general dirty effect, a shapeless tweed overcoat that draped itself copiously over the fellow's knees, and cascaded untidily to the ground. The shoes were cracked, the blue socks a mass of darns; Charlie scrutinised him from head to toe for several minutes, feeding his resentment on the things he saw that confirmed his opinion that the fellow was a waster.

"Pfoof," he muttered at last, in disgust. Then he struck the asphalt with his stick again, even more violently than before, and added, "Blast!"

It was with some relief that Charlie watched a woman come around the cor-

ner and waddle up towards him, a wooden trundler creaking on tired wheels behind her. Here, at least, was something to distract him; then he recognised her, with dismay, as Mrs. Breen. Charlie hissed angrily through his teeth. Obviously, it was not his lucky day.

Mrs. Breen trundled up close and peered short-sightedly at him. Charlie stared fixedly across the road.

"Well, Mr. Keith. You are bright and early today, aren't you? But not very warm, is it, eh?" She grinned amiably. Charlie didn't bother to reply.

Mrs. Breen glanced along the seat.



"Here," said Charlie, "let me help you on"

"I see you have a friend," she said maliciously. "Isn't that your favourite seat, Mr. Keith?"

"Mrs. Breen," Charlie said heavily, tearing his eyes away from infinity. "I would thank you to mind your own business. Haven't you some shopping to occupy yourself with, instead of standing there twittering?"

Insults were meaningless to Mrs. Breen. Preoccupied with malice herself, it was inconceivable to her that anyone else should even attempt to outdo her. Calumny lapped expectantly in the curl of her tongue, like stale spittle. Gossip was her life-blood. Still, she sensed the currents of restlessness that clung about the person of Mr. Keith; therefore, she continued vigorously:

"Really, you old men make me sick, the way you just sit in this same seat in the sun every day, day after day, doing nothing but talk, talk, talk. You just let yourself drift into old age. Now, if you did something useful, like getting an active club together, indoor bowls, or something . . ."

On she went. Charlie closed his ears, and sighed. He looked with misery at her dumpy, black-coated figure, her three chins, her generous, heaving bosom. He wondered idly, for the hundredth time, how her husband, a fine decent man he was, too, managed to put up with her. It was a shame.

"Eh?" said Charlie. "What was that?" "Sunbabies," said Mrs. Breen sternly. "A lot of sunbabies, sitting here, day after day, doing nothing useful."

"Mrs. Breen; I beg you, in the interests of your own safety, to remove your

(continued on next page)

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 27, 1954.