Only A....

Each afternoon, when the final bell rang at three o'clock, a group of children gathered outside the school gate to tease the "man-woman"....

Little Kathy Lawrence had been the first to see her. She had been travelling on a bus with her mother when, all of a sudden, there had been a commotion of laughter and curses on the platform, and a strange looking woman with short wiry hair, dressed in a crumpled black skirt and a yellow and brown striped jumper, had elbowed her way between the seats, bumping the shoulders of seated passengers, muttering words for the use of which Kathy would have had her mouth washed out with soap and water by her mother.

For Kathy there had been something immediately interesting about the woman, something different: no sooner had she seated herself than she began to rummage about in a battered cardboard suitcase; wildly scratching amongst its contents until she had appeared to find whatever it was that she was searching for. Then she had closed and locked it. Only a few seconds passed before she again unlocked it and recommenced her furious search, all the while making strange sounds with her tongue, and occasionally turning about in her seat to shout abuse at an unspecified enemy....

Kathy had already counted five repetitions of this fascinating process when her mother slapped her for staring.

It was primarily because of this slap that, at school the following day, Kathy remembered the incident. She told Rowena Bester, who was her best friend at that time, about it.

On her way home from school that same afternoon Kathy, in the company of Rowena, had again seen the woman in the crumpled black skirt and yellow and brown striped jumper. She was in the middle of the road hopping backwards and forwards in front of the traffic, first on the one side, then on the other.... Rowena also thought it great fun.

Soon they discovered that she was to be found at the same place every afternoon.... Within a week they were joined by Janet Smith, Betty Stuart, Maureen Harrison and Sybil Swart; and within a fortnight teasing the "mad woman", as they then called her, had become a regular afternoon sport.

At first they were content merely to stand and watch her antics; but then they found that she was often too docile to be any fun. This they soon realised, was because no one had done anything to provoke her. So they began to tease her. They began to plan their strategy beforehand: what they would do to her; what they would shout; all so that they might enjoy the wine-like pleasure of being pursued by her, oaths long enough to knit a string bag streaming from her mouth.

It was Sybil who first noticed that the woman's violent actions were not her only peculiarity; that something more fundamental was amiss; that beneath a rather forced feminity there flowed a powerful masculine current. At times her mannerisms were without doubt those of a man, and then suddenly she would seem to compose herself and enforce those of a woman. This truth Sybil felt rather than understood; nonetheless it was compelling and she began to refer to the woman as, "the man-woman". The new title was readily understood and accepted by the other children.

Once they missed her for three days; but then they found that she had changed her route, and they exacted sufficient fun from her to compensate for the three days that they had missed. Thereafter she never disappeared for more than a day at a stretch before they traced her movement.

On the last day of term the final bell rang at midday, and dozens of little girls dressed in blue gyms and white blouses, suitcases bulging with dull books, passed over the intricate patterns cast by the oak-trees in the playground, out through the gate, out into the holiday street.

> "Cheer girls cheer,
> the holidays are here.
> No more Latin, no more French,
> no more sitting on a hard old bench . . ."

sang Kathy, Rowena, Janet, Betty, Maureen and Sybil, although none of them knew anything about Latin and French other than that they were languages. But they sang because they had learnt the words from the older children who had inherited them from the previous generation of older children, and it made them feel very grown-up to sing them. But they sang; chiefly, because they were happy; each had formed in her own mind her own little picture of the weeks that lay ahead — sandy, sunbathed, wave-swept little pictures.

Down past the gaol they trooped, swinging their satchels, singing their song; round the corner, past the dry-cleaners, past the Central Police Station. And then, outside the magistrate's court, they saw her. . . .

She was sitting on the kerb, her suitcase between her knees, eating a thick slice of brown bread.

Her sudden appearance intruded upon their exuberance; their song died; they paused . . . .

"Let's go chaff her," said Rowena.

"Ag no man, let's give her a holiday," said Janet, who was anxious to get home.

"But she's gonna have a holiday," said Betty.

"Yes, six weeks holiday," added Maureen, who loved fun and had failed her tests.

Sybil crept up to the woman. The others followed a few paces behind. She went round and stood in front of her while the other children crowded around the woman from behind.

"Why do you eat like a horse?" asked Sybil . . . . The woman continued to munch her bread . . . . "Are you a horse or a cow? I think you look like a monkey," said Sybil. The children began to laugh; they screamed; they imitated the motion of her jaws; they rubbed their stomachs.

The woman lunged at Sybil, dropping her bread. Sybil skipped away and jumped up onto the retaining wall of the court. The woman changed direction and ran after Kathy, jumping and swinging her arms wildly as she ran. Kathy darted around the corner and also climbed up onto the wall. "There!" she shouted, "she told you that you looked like a monkey. You run like a monkey — you are a monkey!"

It was lunch hour. Hundreds of office workers were roaming the streets with nothing to do — a crowd quickly formed. Typists, bank clerks, cashiers; they stopped. Some stopped only for a minute, and then they walked away. Many of them stopped and stayed, and laughed.

The children drew additional pleasure from the fact that they were playing to an audience. On the end of her ruler Maureen Harrison picked up the piece of bread which the woman had dropped, and she ran around her in circles shouting: "Here's your feed-bag, horsey."

Suddenly the woman stopped trying to catch them. She stopped swearing. She returned to the kerb and sat down, her suitcase between her knees.

The crowd moved gingerly forward — who knows, she might become violent again. There was pressure from behind and those in front were edged closer, ever closer, until they stood in a tight circle about her.

From her suitcase she removed a small mirror and a tube of lipstick. She placed the mirror on her knees, and then bending over it she applied the lipstick, with trembling fingers to her lips. The crowd was silent; it was a heavy, expectant sort of hush. The woman replaced the mirror and lipstick in her suitcase. Then she drew from it a sheet of paper and the stub of a pencil.

The children forced their way between the legs of the crowd. Maureen still had the piece of bread spiked on the end of her ruler and she waved it under the woman's nose. "Have some oats, horsey," she jeered.

The woman began to write — she wrote feverishly: *Calling Dr . . . . Calling Dr . . . .* Each time the sentence ended in an illegible scrawl. Then she turned the paper over and continued writing: *Calling Dr . . . .* She scribbled over what she had written. *Calling Dr . . . .* Again she scribbled over what she had written.

"What is she writing?" asked a court stenographer.

"Same thing over and over again . . . Must be mad!" replied a bank clerk in a black alpaca jacket, who had managed to push his way to the front.

Suddenly the piece of bread fell from the end of Maureen's ruler on to the paper on which the woman

was writing. The woman jumped up with a scream — the crowd scattered. She ran off, sobbing, her suitcase banging against her knees as she ran.

The children did not follow. Never before had they had as much fun, and they remained to plan what they would do to tease the "mad woman" after the holidays.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, young ladies!" said someone.

"Why?" asked Maureen.

"What would your parents have done if they had seen you mocking that poor woman?"

"Nothing," said Sybil. *"She's only an old coloured girl!"*