

CHAPTER THREE

REARING

THE burden of parental care is heavier for the naked ape than for any other living species. Parental duties may be performed as intensively elsewhere, but never so extensively. Before we consider the significance of this trend, we must assemble the basic facts.

Once the female has been fertilised and the embryo has started to grow in her uterus, she undergoes a number of changes. Her monthly menstrual flow ceases. She experiences early-morning nausea. Her blood pressure is lower. She may become slightly anaemic. As time passes, her breasts become swollen and tender. Her appetite increases. Typically she becomes more placid.

After a gestation period of approximately 266 days her uterus begins to contract powerfully and rhythmically. The amniotic membrane surrounding the foetus is ruptured and the fluid in which the baby has been floating escapes. Further violent contractions expel the infant from the womb, forcing it through the vaginal passage and into the outside world. Renewed contractions then dislodge and eject the placenta. The cord connecting the baby to the placenta is then severed. In other primates this breaking of the cord is achieved by the mother biting through it, and this was no doubt the method employed by our own ancestors, but today it is neatly tied and snipped through with a pair of scissors. The stump still attached to the infant's belly dries up and drops off a few days after birth.

It is a universal practice today for the female to be accompanied and aided by other adults while she is giving birth. This is probably an extremely ancient procedure. The demands of vertical locomotion have not been kind to the female of our species: the penalty for this progressive step is a sentence of several hours'