

Walter M Miller
Conditionally Human

HE KNEW there was no use hanging around after breakfast, but he could not bear leaving her like this. He put on his coat in the kitchen, stood uncertainly in the doorway, and twisted his hat in his hands. His wife still sat at the table, fingered the handle of an empty cup, stared fixedly out the window at the kennels behind the house, and pointedly ignored his small coughings and scrapings. He watched the set of her jaw for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Anne?"

"What?"

"I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Then go away."

"Can't I do anything—?"

"I told you what to do."

Her voice was a monotone, full of hurt. He could neither endure the hurt nor remove it. He gingerly crossed the room to stand behind her, hoping she'd look up at him and let her face go soft, maybe even cry a little. But she kept gazing at the window in accusing silence. He chuckled suddenly and touched her silk-clad shoulder. The shoulder shivered away. Her dark hair quivered as she shuddered, and her arms were suddenly locked tightly about her breasts as if she were cold. He pulled his hand back, and his big pliant face went slack. He gulped forlornly.

"Honeymoon's over, huh?"

"Ha!"

He backed a step away, paused again. "Hey, Baby, you knew before you married me," he reminded her gently.

"I did not."

"You knew I was a District Inspector for the F.B.A. You knew I had charge of a pound."

"I didn't know *you killed* them!" she snapped, whirling. "I don't have to kill many," he offered.

"That's like saying you don't kill them very dead."

"Look, honey, they're only animals."

"*Intelligent* animals!"

"Intelligent as a human imbecile, maybe."

"A baby is an imbecile. Would you kill a baby?— Of course you would! You do! That's what they are: babies. I hate you." He withered, groped desperately for a new approach, tried a

semantic tack. "Look, 'intelligence' is a word applicable only

to humans. It's the name of a human function, and . . . " "And that makes *them* human!" she finished. "Murderer!" "Baby—!"

"Don't call *me* baby! Call *them* baby!"

He made a miserable noise in his throat, backed a few steps toward the door, and beat down his better judgment to speak again: "Anne, honey, look! Think of the *good* things about the job. Sure—everything has its ugly angles. But just think: we get this house rent-free; I've got my own district with no local bosses to hound me; I make my own hours; you'll meet lots of people that stop in at the pound. It's *a fine* job, honey!"

Her face was a mask again. She sipped her coffee and seemed to be listening. He blundered hopefully on.

"And what can I do about it? I can't help my aptitudes. Placement Division checked them, sent me to Bio-Authority. Period. Okay, so I don't *have* to work where they send me. I could ignore the aptitudes and pick common labor, but that's all the law allows, and common laborers don't have families. So I go where they need my aptitudes."

"You've got aptitudes for killing kids?" she asked sweetly. He groaned, clenched his eyes closed, shook his head fiercely as if to clear it of a sudden ache. His voice went desperately patient. "They assigned me to the job because I *like* babies. And because I have a degree in biology and an aptitude for dealing with people. Understand? Destroying unclaimed units is the smallest part of it. Honey, before the evolvotron, before any-body ever heard of Anthropos Incorporated, people used to elect animal catchers. Dogcatchers, they called them. Didn't have mutant dogs, of course. But just think of it that way—I'm a dog-catcher."

Ice-green eyes turned slowly to meet his gaze. Her face was delicately cut from cold marble. One corner of her mouth twitched contempt at him. Her head turned casually away again to stare out the window toward the kennels again.

He backed to the door, plucked nervously at a splinter on the woodwork, watched her hopefully for a moment.

"Well, gotta go. Work to do."

She looked at him again as if he were a specimen. "Do you need to be kissed?"

He ripped the splinter loose, gulped, "See you tonight," and stumbled toward the front of the house. The honeymoon in-deed was done for District Inspector Norris of the Federal Biological Authority.

Anne heard his footsteps on the porch, heard the sudden grumble of the kennel-truck's turbines, choked on a sob and darted for the door, but the truck had backed into the street, lurched suddenly away with angry acceleration toward the high-way that lay to the east. She stood blinking into the red morning sunlight, shoulders slumped. Things were wrong with the world, she decided.

A bell rang somewhere, rang again. She started slightly, shook herself, went to answer the telephone. A carefully enunciated voice that sounded chubby and professional called for Inspector Norris. She told it disconsolately that he was gone.

"Gone? Oh, you mean to work. Heh heh. Can this be the new Mrs. Norris?" The voice was too hearty and greasy, she thought, muttered affirmatively.

"Ah, yes. Norris spoke of you, my dear. This is Doctor Georges. I have a very urgent

problem to discuss with your husband. But perhaps I can talk to you."

"You can probably get him on the highway. There's a phone in the truck." What sort of urgent problems could doctors discuss with dogcatchers, she wondered.

"Afraid not, my dear. The inspector doesn't switch on his phone until office hours. I know him well, you see."

"Can't you wait?"

"It's really an emergency, Mrs. Norris. I need an animal from the pound—a Chimp-K-48-3, preferably a five year old."

"I know nothing about my husband's business," she said stiffly. "You'll have to talk to him."

"Now see here, Mrs. Norris, this is an emergency, and I have to have ...

"What would you do if I hadn't answered the phone?" she interrupted.

"Why I—I would have—"

"Then do it," she snapped, dropped the phone in its cradle, marched angrily away. The phone began ringing again. She paused to glance back at it with a twinge of guilt. Emergency, the fat voice had said. But what sort of emergency would involve a chimp K-48, and what would Georges do with the animal? Butchery, she suspected, was somehow implied. She let the phone ring. If Norris ever, ever, ever asked her to share his work in any way, she'd leave him, she told herself.

The truck whirred slowly along the suburban street that wound among nestled groups of pastel plasticoid cottages set approximately two to an acre on the lightly wooded land. With its population legally fixed at three hundred million, most of the country had become one gigantic suburb, dotted with community centers and lined with narrow belts of industrial development. There was no open country now, nor had there been since

the days of his grand-parents. There was nowhere that one could feel alone.

He approached an intersection. A small animal sat on the curb, wrapped in its own bushy tail. The crown of its oversized head was bald, but its body was covered with blue-gray fur. A pink tongue licked daintily at small forepaws equipped with prehensile thumbs. It eyed the truck morosely as Norris drew to a halt and smiled down out of the window at it.

"Hi, kitten," he called. "What's *your* name?"

The Cat-Q-5 stared at him indifferently for a moment, uttered a stuttering high-pitched wail, then cried: "Kiyi Rorry."

"Kitty Rorry. That's a nice name. Where do you live, Rorry?"

The Cat-Q-5 ignored him.

"Whose child are you, Rorry? Can you tell me that?"

Rorry regarded him disgustedly. Norris glanced quickly around. There were no houses near the intersection, and he feared that the animal might be lost. It blinked at him, sleepily bored, then resumed its paw-bath. He repeated the questions.

"Mama kiyi, kiyi Mama," it finally reported.

"That's right, Mama's kitty. But where's Mama? Do you sup-pose she ran away?"

The Cat-Q-5 looked startled. It stuttered for a moment. Its fur crept slowly erect. It glanced both ways along the street, shot suddenly away at a fast scamper along the sidewalk. Norris followed it in the truck for two blocks, where it darted onto a porch and began wailing through the screen: "Mama no run ray! Mama no run ray!"

He chuckled and drove on. A couple who failed the genetic requirements, who could have no children of their own, could get quite attached to a Cat-Q-5, but the cats were emotionally safer than any of the quasi-human chimp-K models called "neutroids." The death of a neutroid could strike a family as hard as the death of a child, while most couples could endure the loss of a cat-Q or a dog-F. A couple with a genetic "C" rating were permitted to own one neutroid, or two non-humanized models of

daily food intake less than four hundred calories each. Most psychologists regarded the neutroids as emotional dynamite, and advised attaching affections to some tail-wagger with a lower love-demand potential.

Norris suddenly lost his vestigial smile. What about Anne? What outlet would she choose for her maternal needs?—for his own Social Security card was stamped "Genetic-C"—and Anne loved kids. He had been thinking in terms of the kennel animals, how she might direct her energies toward helping him take care of them, but now that her hostility was evident . . . well . . . suppose she wanted a pseudoparty and a neutroid of her own? Of this, he disapproved.

He shuddered slightly, fumbled in his pocket, and brought out a slightly battered invitation card that had come in yesterday's mail:

You are cordially invited
to attend the pseudoparturition
and ensuing cocktail hour
to celebrate the arrival of
HONEY BLOSSOM
Blessed event to occur on
Twelveweek's Sixday of 2063
at 19:30 hours
Reception Room, Rockabye Hours Clinic
R.s.v.p. Mr. & Mrs. John Hanley Slade

The invitation had come late, the party would be tonight. He had meant to call Slade today and say that he and Anne would probably drop in for cocktails, but would be unable to get there in time for the delivery. But now that she had reacted so hostilely to the nastier aspects of his job, perhaps he had better keep her away from sentimental occasions involving neutroids.

The battered card reminded him to stop in Sherman III Community Center for his mail. He turned onto the shopping street that paralleled the great highway and drove past several blocks of commercial buildings that served the surrounding suburbs. At the down-ramp he gave the attendant a four-bit bill and sent the truck down to be parked under the street, then went to the message office. When he dropped his code-disk in the slot, the feedway under his box number chattered out a yard of paper tape at him. He scanned it slowly from end to end—note from Aunt Maye, bill from SynZhamilk Products, letter from Anne's mother. The only thing of importance was the memo from the chief, a troublesome tidbit that he had been expecting for days:

Attention All District Inspectors: Subject: Deviant Neutroid.

You will immediately begin a systematic and thorough survey of all animals whose serial numbers fall in the Bermuda-K-99 series for birth dates during weeks 26 to 32 of year 2062. This is in connection with the Delmont Negligency case. Seize all animals in this category, impound, and run applicable sections of normalcy tests. Watch for signs of endocrinal deviation and non-standard response patterns. Delmont has confessed to passing only one non-standard model, but there may have been others. He disclaims memory of deviant's serial number. This could be a ruse to bring a stop to investigation when one animal is found. Be thorough.

If allowed to reach age-set or adulthood, such a deviant could be dangerous to its owner or to others. Hold all seized K-99s who exhibit the slightest departure from standard in the normalcy tests. Forward these to Central Lab. Return standard models to their owners. Accomplish entire survey project within seven days.

C. Franklin

"Seven days!" he hissed irritably, wadded the tape in his pocket, stalked out to get the truck.

His district covered two hundred square miles. With a re-placement quota of seventy-five neutroids a week, the district would have probably picked up about forty K-99s from the Bermuda factory influx during the six-week period last year. Could he round them up in a week? Doubtful. And there were only eleven empty cages in the kennel. The other forty-nine were occupied by the previous inspector's "unclaimed" inventory—awaiting destruction. The crematorium behind the kennels would have a busy week. Anne would love that.

He was halfway to Wylo City when the radiophone buzzed on the dashboard. He pulled into the slow lane and answered quickly, hoping for Anne's voice. A polite professional purr came instead.

"Inspector Norris? Doctor Georges."

Norris made a sour mouth, managed a jovial greeting.

"Are you extremely busy at the moment?" Georges asked. He paused. Georges usually wanted a favor for some wealthy

patient, or for some wealthy patient's tail-wagger.

"Extremely," he grunted.

"Eh? Oh well, this won't take long. One of my patients—a Mrs. Sarah Glubbes—called a while ago and said her baby was sick."

"So?"

"No baby. I must be getting absent minded, because I forgot she's class C until I got there."

"I'll guess," Norris muttered. "Turned out to be a neutroid." "Of course, of course."

"Why tell me?"

"It's dying. Eighteenth order virus. Naturally, I can't get it admitted to a hospital."

"Ever hear of vets?"

"You don't understand. She insists it's her baby, believes it's her own. How can I send it to a vet?"

"That's your worry. Is this an old patient of yours?"

"Why, yes, I've known Sarah since—"

"Since you presided at her pseudopart?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess. If you put her through pseudopart, then you deserve all the trouble you get."

"I take it you're a prohibitionist."

"Skip it. What did you want from me?"

"A replacement neutroid. From the kennel."

"Baloney. You couldn't fool her. If she's blind, she'd still know the difference."

"I'll have to take the chance. Listen, Norris, it's pathetic. She knows the disease *can* be cured—in humans—with hospitalization and expensive treatment that I can't *get* for a neutroid. No vet could get the drug either. Scarce. It's pathetic."

"I'm crying all over the steering wheel."

The doctor hesitated. "Sorry, Norris, I thought you were human."

"Not to the extent of doing quasi-legal favors that won't be appreciated for some rich neurotic dame and a doe who practices pseudopart."

"One correction," Georges said stiffly. "Sarah's not rich. She's a middle-aged widow and couldn't pay for treatment if she could get it."

"Oh—"

"Thanks anyway, Norris."

"Hold it," he grunted. "What's the chimp's series?" "It's a K-48, a five-year-old with a three-year age set." Norris thought for a moment. It was a dirty deal, and it wouldn't work.

"I think I've got one in the kennel that's fairly close," he offered doubtfully.

"Good, good, I'll have Fred go over and—"

"Wait, now. This one'll be spooky, won't know her, and the serial number will be different."

"I know, I know," Georges sighed. "But it seems worth a try. An attack of V-i8 can cause mild amnesia in humans; that might explain why it won't know her. About the serial number—"

"Don't try changing it," Norris growled.

"How about obliterating—"

"Don't, and I'll check on it a couple of weeks from now to make damn sure you didn't. That's a felony, Georges."

"All right, all right, I'll just have to take the chance that she won't notice it. When can I pick it up?"

"Call my wife in fifteen minutes. I'll speak to her first."

"Uh, yes . . . Mrs. Norris. Uh, very well, thanks, Inspector." Georges hung up quickly.

Norris lit a cigaret, steeled himself, called Anne. Her voice was dull, depressed, but no longer angry.

"All right, Terry," she said tonelessly. "I'll go out to the kennel and get the one in cage thirty-one, and give it to Georges when he comes."

"Thanks, babe."

He heard her mutter, "And then I'll go take a bath," just before the circuit clicked off.

He flipped off the auto-driver, took control of the truck, slipped into the fast lane and drove furiously toward Wylo City and the district wholesale offices of Anthropos Incorporated to begin tracing down the suspected Bermuda K-99s in accordance with Franklin's memo. He would have to check through all incoming model files for the six week period, go over the present inventory, then run down the Bermuda serial numbers in a mountain of invoices covering a thirty-week period, find the pet shops and retail dealers that had taken the doubtful models, and finally survey the retail dealers to trace the models to their present owners. With cooperation from wholesaler and dealers, he might get it down to the retail level by mid-afternoon, but getting the models away from their owners would be the nasty part of the job. He was feeling pretty nasty himself, he decided. The spat with Anne, the distasteful thoughts associated with Slade's pseudoparty, the gnawing remorse about collaborating with Dr. Georges in a doubtful maneuver to pacify one Sarah Glubbes, a grim week's work ahead, plus his usual charge of suppressed resentment toward Chief Franklin—it all added up to a mood that could turn either black or vicious, depending on circumstance.

If some doting Mama gave him trouble about impounding her darling tail-wagger, he was, he decided, in the right kind of mood to get a warrant and turn the job over to the sheriff.

The gasping neutroid lay on the examining table under the glaring light. The torso quivered and twitched as muscles contracted spasmodically, but the short legs were already limp and paralyzed, allowing the chubby man in the white coat to lift them easily by the ankles and retrieve the rectal thermometer. The neutroid wheezed and chattered plaintively as the nurse drew the blanket across its small body again.

"A hundred and nine," grunted the chubby man, his voice muffled by the gauze mask. His eyes probed the nurse's eyes for a moment. He jerked his head toward the door. "She still out there?"

The nurse nodded.

The doctor stared absently at the thermometer stem for a moment, looked up again, spoke quietly. "Get a hypo—necrofine." She turned toward the sterilizer, paused briefly. "Three c.c.s?" she asked.

"Twelve," he corrected.

Their eyes locked with his for several seconds; then she nodded and went to the sterilizer.

"May I leave first?" she asked tonelessly while filling the syringe.

"Certainly."

"What'll I say to Mrs. Glubbes?" She crossed to the table again and handed him the hypo.

"Nothing. Use the back way. Go tell Fred to run over to the kennels and pick up the substitute. I've called Mrs. Norris. Oh yeah, and tell Fred to stop in here first. I'll have something for him to take out."

The nurse glanced down at the squirming, whimpering newt, shivered slightly, and left the room. When the door closed, Georges bent over the table with the hypo. When the door opened again, Georges looked up to see his son looking in.

"Take this along," he grunted, and handed Fred the bundle wrapped in newspapers.

"What'll I do with it?" the youth asked.

"Chuck it in Norris's incinerator."

Fred glanced at the empty examining table and nodded In-differently. "Can Miss Laskell come back now?" he asked in going.

"Tell her yeah. And hurry with that other neut."

"Sure, Pop. See you later."

The nurse looked in uncertainly before entering.

"Get cleaned up," he told her. "And go sit with Mrs. Glubbes." "What'll I say?"

"The 'baby' will recover. She can take it home late this after-noon if she gets some rest first."

"What're you going to do?—about the substitute."

"Give it a shot to put it to sleep, give her some codeine to feed it."

"Why?"

"So it'll be too groggy for a few days to even notice her, so it'll get addicted and attached to her because she gives it the coedine."

"The serial number?"

"I'll put the tattooed foot in a cast. V-18 paralysis—you know."

"Smart," she muttered, but there was no approval in her voice.

When she had changed clothes in the anteroom, she unlocked the door to the office, but paused before passing on into the reception room. The door was ajar, and she gazed through the crack at the woman who sat on the sofa.

Sarah Glubbes was gray and gaunt and rigid as stone. She sat with her hands clenched in her lap, her wide empty eyes—dull blue spots on yellowed marble orbs—staring ceilingward while the colorless lips of a knife-slash mouth moved tautly in earnest prayer. The nurse's throat felt tight. She rubbed it for a moment. After all, the thing was only an animal.

She straightened her shoulders, put on a cheerful smile, and marched on into the reception room. The yellowed orbs snapped demandingly toward her.

"Everything's *all* right, Mrs. Glubbes," she began. "Finished," Norris grunted at three o'clock that afternoon.

"Thirty-six K-99s," murmured the Anthropos file-clerk, gazing over Norris's shoulder at the clip-board with the list of doubtful neuts and the dealers to whom they had been sent. "Lots of owners may be hard to locate."

"Yeah. Thanks, Andy, and you too, Mabel."

The girl smiled and handed him a slip of paper. "Here's a list of owners for thirteen of them. I called the two local shops for you. Most of them live here close."

He glanced at the names, felt tension gathering in his stomach. It wasn't going to be easy. What could he say to them?

Howdy, Ma'am, excuse me, but I've come to take your little boy away to jail . . . Oh, yes ma'am, he'll have a place to stay—in a little steel cage with a forkful of straw, and he'll get vitaminized mush every day. What's that? His sleepy-time stories and his pink honey-crumbles? Sorry, ma'am, your little boy is only a mutated chimpanzee, you know, and not really human at all.

"That'll go over great," he grumbled, staring absently at the window.

"Beg pardon, sir?" answered the clerk.

"Nothing, Andy, nothing." He thanked them again and strode out into the late afternoon sunlight. Still a couple of hours working time left, and plenty of things to do. Checking with the other retail dealers would be the least unpleasant task, but there was no use saving the worst until last. He glanced at the list Mabel had given him, checked it for the nearest address, then squared his shoulders and headed for the kennel truck.

Anne met him at the door when he came home at six. He stood on the porch for a moment, smiling at her weakly. The smile was not returned.

"Doctor Georges' boy came," she told him. "He signed for the—"

She stopped to stare at him, then opened the screen, reached up quickly to brush light fingertips over his cheek.

"*Terry!* Those welts! What happened—get scratched by a cat-Q?"

"No, by a human-F," he grumbled, and stepped past her into the hall; Anne followed, eyeing him curiously while he reached for the phone and dialed.

"Who're you calling?" she asked.

"Society's Watchdog," he answered as the receiver buzzed in his ear.

"Your eye, Terry—it's all puffy. Will it turn black?"

"Maybe."

"Did the human-F do that too?"

"Uh-uh. Human-M—name of Pete Klusky ...

The phone croaked at him suddenly. *"This is the record-voice of Sheriff Yates. I'll be out from five to seven. If it's urgent, call your constable."*

He hung up briefly, then irritably dialed the locator service. *"Mnemonic register, trail calls, and official locations,"* grated a mechanical voice. *"Your business, please."*

"This is T. Norris, Sherman-9-4566-78B, Official rating B, Priority B, code XT-88-U-Bio. Get Sheriff Yates for me." *"Nature of the call?"*

"Offish biz."

"I shall record the call."

He waited. The robot found Yates on the first probability-trial attempt—in the local pool-hall.

"I'm getting to hate that infernal gadget," Yates snapped. "Acts like it's got me psyched. Whattaya want, Norris?"

"Cooperation. I'm mailing you three letters charging three Wylo citizens with resisting a federal official—namely me—and charging one of them with assault. I tried to pick up their neutroids for a pound inspection, and—"

Yates bellowed lusty laughter in his ear.

"Not funny," he growled. "I've got to get those neutroids. It's connected with the Delmont case."

Yates stopped laughing. "Oh? Well . . . I'll take care of it."

"Rush order, Sheriff. Can you get the warrants tonight and pick up the animals in the morning?"

"Easy on those warrants, boy. Judge Charleman can't be bothered just any time. I can get the newts to you by noon, I guess, provided we don't have to get a helicopter posse to chase down the mothers."

"Well, okay—but listen—I want the charges dropped if they cooperate with you. And don't shake the warrants at them unless you have to. Just get those newts, that's all I want."

"Okay, boy. Give me the dope."

Norris read him the names and addresses of the three unwilling owners, and a precise account of what happened in each case. As soon as he hung up, Anne muttered "Sit still," perched on his knees, and began stroking chilly ointment across his burning cheek. He watched her cool eyes flicker from his cheek to his own eyes and down again. She was no longer angry, but only gloomy and withdrawn from him. He touched her arm. She seemed not to notice it.

"Hard day, Terry?"

"Slightly. I picked up nine newts out of thirteen, anyhow. They're in the truck now."

"Good thing you didn't get them all. There are only twelve empty cages."

"Twelve?—oh, Georges picked one up, didn't he?" "And sent a package," she said,

eyeing him soberly. "Package? Where is it?"

"In the crematorium. The boy took it back there." He swallowed a tight spot in his throat, said nothing.

"Oh, and darling—Mrs. Slade called. Why didn't you tell me we're going out tonight?"

"Going—out?" It sounded a little weak.

"Well, she said she hadn't heard from you. I couldn't very well say no, so I told her *I'd* be there, at least."

"You—?"

"Oh, I didn't say about you, Terry. I said you'd like to go, but you might have to work. I'll go alone if you don't want to."

He stared at her with a puzzled frown. "You want to go to the psuedoparty?"

"Not particularly. But I've never been to one. I'm just curious."

He nodded slowly, felt grim inside. She finished with the ointment, patted his cheek, managed a cheerful smile.

"Come on, Terry. Let's go unload your nine neutroids." He stared at her dumbly.

"Let's forget about this morning, Terry."

He nodded. She averted her face suddenly, and her lip quivered. "I—I know you've got a job that's got to be—" She swallowed hard and turned away. "See you out in the kennels," she choked gaily, then hurried down the hall toward the door. Norris scratched his chin unhappily as he watched her go.

After a moment, he dialed the mnemonic register again. "Keep a line on this number," he ordered after identifying himself. "If Yates or Franklin calls, ring continuously until I can get in to answer. Otherwise, just memorize the call."

"Instructions acknowledged," answered the circuitry.

He went out to the kennels to help Anne unload the neutroids.

A sprawling concrete barn housed the cages, and the barn was sectioned into three large rooms, one housing the fragile, humanoid chimpanzee-mutants, and another for the lesser breeds such as cat-Qs, dog-Fs, dwarf bears, and foot-high lambs that never matured into sheep. The third room contained a small gas chamber, with a conveyor belt leading from it to the crematorium. He usually kept the third room locked, but he noticed in passing that it was open. Evidently Anne had found the keys in order to let Fred Georges dump his package.

A Noah's Ark Chorus greeted him as he passed through the animal room, to be replaced by the mindless chatter of the doll-like neutroids as soon as he entered the air conditioned neutroidsection. Dozens of blazing blond heads began dancing about their cages. Their bodies thwacked against the wire mesh as they leaped about their compartments with monkey-grace, in recognition of their feeder and keeper.

Their human appearance was broken only by two distinct features: short beaverlike tails decorated with fluffy curls of fur, and an erect thatch of scalp hair that grew up into a bright

candle-flame. Otherwise, they appeared completely human, with baby-pink skin, quick little smiles, and cherubic faces. They were sexually neuter and never grew beyond a predetermined age-set which varied for each series. Age-sets were available from one to ten years, human equivalent. Once a neutroid reached its age-set, it remained at this stage of retarded development until death.

"They must be getting to know you pretty well," Anne said as she came from behind a section of cages. "A big loud welcome for Pappa, huh?"

He frowned slightly as he glanced around the gloomy room and sniffed the animal odors. "That's funny. They don't usually get this excited."

She grinned. "Big confession: it started when I came in."

He shot her a quick suspicious glance, then walked slowly along a row of cages, peering inside. He stopped suddenly be-side a three year old K-76 to stare.

"Apple cores!"

He turned slowly to face his wife, trying to swallow a sudden spurt of anger.

"Well?" he demanded.

Anne reddened. "I felt sorry for them, eating that goo from the mechanical feeders. So I drove down to Sherman III and bought six dozen cooking apples."

"That was a mistake."

She frowned irritably. "We can afford it."

"That's not the point. There's a reason for mechanical feedings."

"Oh? What is it?"

He hesitated, knowing she wouldn't like the answer. But she was already stiffening.

"Let me guess," she said coldly. "If you feed them yourself they get to love you. Right?"

"Uh, yeah. They even attach some affection to me because they know that right after I come in, the feeders get turned on."

"I see. And if they love you, you might get queasy about running them through Room 3's production line, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," he admitted.

"Okay, Terry, I feed them apples, you run your production line," she announced firmly. "I can't see anything contradictory about that, can you?"

Her eyes told him that he had damn well better see something contradictory about it, whether he admitted it or not.

"Planning to get real chummy with them, are you?" he inquired stiffly.

"Planning to dispose of any soon?" she countered. "Honeymoon's off again, eh?"

She shook her head slowly, came toward him a little. "I hope not, Terry—I hope not." She stopped again. They watched each other doubtfully amid the chatter of the neutroids.

After a time, he turned and walked to the truck, pulled out the snare-pole and began fishing for the squealing, squeaking doll-things that bounded about like frightened monkeys in the truck's wire mesh cage. They were one-family pets, always frightened of strangers, and these in the truck remembered him only as the villain who had dragged them away from

Mamma into a terrifying world of whirling scenery and roaring traffic.

They worked for a time without talking; then Anne asked casually: "What's the Delmont case, Terry?"

"Huh? What makes you ask?"

"I heard you mention it on the phone. Anything to do with a black eye and a scratched face?"

He nodded sourly. "Indirectly. It's a long story. Well—you know about the evolvotron."

"Only that Anthropos Incorporated uses it to induce mutations."

"It's sort of a sub-atomic surgical instrument—for doing 'plastic surgery' to reproductive cells—Here! Grab this chimp! Got him by the leg."

"Oop! Got him. . . . Go ahead, Terry."

"Using an evolvotron on the gene-structure of an ovum is likeplaying microscopic billiards—with protons and deuterons and alpha particles for cue-balls. The operator takes the living ovum, mounts it in the device, gets a tremendously magnified image of it with the slow-neutrino shadowscope, compares the image with a gene-map, starts gouging out sub-molecular tidbits with single-particle shots. He juggles them around, hammers chunks in where nothing was before, plugs up gaps, makes new gaps. Catch?"

She looked thoughtful, nodded. "Catch. And the Lord Man made neutroid from the slime of an ape," she murmured.

"Heh? Here, catch this critter! Snare's choking him!"

"Okay—come to Mamma . . . Well, go on—tell me about Delmont."

"Delmont was a green evolvotron operator. Takes years of training, months of practice."

"Practice?"

"It's an art more than a science. Speed's the thing. You've got to perform the whole operation from start to finish in a few seconds. Ovum dies if you take too long."

"About Delmont—"

"Got through training and practice tryouts okay. Good rating, in fact. But he was just one of those people that blow up when rehearsals stop and the act begins. He spoiled over a hundred ova the first week. That's to be expected. One success out of ten tries is a good average. But he didn't get any successes."

"Why didn't they fire him?"

"Threatened to. Guess he got hysterical. Anyhow, he reported one success the next day. It was faked. The ovum had a couple of flaws—something wrong in the nervous system's determinants, and in the endocrinal setup. Not a standard neutroid ovum. He passed it on to the incubators to get a credit, knowing it wouldn't be caught until after birth."

"It wasn't caught at all?"

"Heh. He was afraid it might *not* be caught. So he suppressed the testosterone flow to its incubator so that it *would* be—later on."

"Why that?"

"All the neutroids are potential females, you know. But male hormone is pumped to the

foetus as it develops. Keeps female sexuality from developing, results in a neuter. He decided that the inspectors would surely catch a female, and that would be blamed on a malfunction of the incubator, not on him."

"So?"

Norris shrugged. "So inspectors are human. So maybe a guy came on the job with a hangover and missed a trick or two. Be-sides, they all *look* female. Anyhow, she didn't get caught."

"How did they ever find out Delmont did it?"

"He got caught last month—trying it again. Confessed to doing it once before. No telling how many times he *really* did it."

Norris held up the final kicking, squealing, tassel-haired doll from the back of the kennel-truck. He grinned down at Anne.

"Now take this little yeeep, for instance. Might be a potential she. Might also be a potential murderer. *All* these kiddos from the truck came from the machines in the section where Delmont worked last year when he passed that fake. Can't have non-standard models on the loose. Can't have sexed models either—then they'd breed, get out of hand. The evolvotron could be shut down any time it became necessary, and when that generation of mutants died off . . ." He shrugged.

Anne caught the struggling baby-creature in her arms. It struggled and tried to bite, but subsided a little when she disentangled it from the snare.

"Kkr-r-reeee!" it cooed nervously. "Kree Kkr-r-reeee!"

"You tell him you're no murderer," she purred to it.

He watched disapprovingly while she fondled it. One code he had accepted: steer clear of emotional attachments. It was eight months old and looked like a child of two years—a year short of its age-set. And it was designed to be as affectionate as a human child.

"Put it in the cage, Anne," he said quietly.

She looked up and shook her head.

"It belongs to somebody else. Suppose it transfers its fixation to you? You'd be robbing its owners. They can't love many people at once."

She snorted, but installed the thing in its cage.

"Anne—" Norris hesitated, knowing that it was a bad time to approach the subject, but thinking about Slade's pseudoparty tonight, and wondering why she had accepted.

"What, Terry?"

He leaned on the snare pole and watched her. "Do you want one of them for yourself? I can sign an unclaimed one over to you. Wouldn't cost anything."

She stared at him evenly for a moment, glanced down at her feet, paced slowly to the window to stand hugging her arms and looking out into the twilight.

"With a pseudoparty, Terry?"

He swallowed a lump of anxiety, found his voice. "Whatever you want."

"I hear the phone ringing in the house."

He waited.

"It stopped," she said after a moment.

"Well, babe?"

"Whatever I want, Terry?" She turned slowly to lean back against a patch of gray light and look at him.

He nodded. "Whatever you want."

"I want your child."

He stiffened with hurt, stared at her open-mouthed. "I want your child."

He thrust his hand slowly in his hip pocket.

"Oh, don't reach for your social security card. I don't care if it's got 'Genetic triple-Z' on it. I want your child."

"Uncle Federal says 'no,' babe."

"To hell with Uncle Federal! They can't send a human through your Room 3! Not yet, anyhow! If it's born, the world's stuck with it!"

"And the parents are forcibly separated, reduced to common-labor status. Remember?"

She stamped her foot and whirled to the window again. "Damn the whole hellish world!" she snarled.

Norris sighed heavily. He was sorry she felt that way. She was probably right in feeling that way, but he was still sorry. Righteous anger, frustrated, was no less searing a psychic acid than the unrighteous sort, nor did a stomach pause to weigh the moral worth of the wrath that drenched it before giving birth to an ulcer.

"Hey, babe, if we're going to the Slade affair—"

She nodded grimly and turned to walk with him toward the house. At least it was better having her direct her anger at the world rather than at him, he thought.

The expectant mother played three games of badminton before sundown, then went inside to shower and dress before the guests arrived. Her face was wreathed in a merry smile as she trotted downstairs in a fresh smock, her neck still pink from the hot water, her wake fragrant with faint perfume. There was no apparent need for the smock, nor was there any pregnant caution in the way she threw her arms around John's neck and kicked her heels up behind.

"Darling!" she chirped. "There'll be plenty of milk. I never believed in bottle-feeding. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Great. The injections are working, I guess."

She looked around. "It's a lovely resort-hospital. I'm glad you didn't pick Angel's Haven."

"So am I," he grunted. "We'll have the reception room all to ourselves tonight."

"What time is it?"

"Seven ten. Oh, the doc called to say he'd be a few minutes late. He was busy all day with a sick baby."

She licked her lips and glanced aside uneasily. "Class A couple?"

"No, doll. Class C—and a widow."

"Oh." She brightened again, watched his face teasingly. "Will you pace and chain-smoke while I'm in delivery?"

He snorted amusement. "Hey, it's not as if you were really . . ." He stopped amid a fit of coughing.

"Not as if I really what?"

His mouth opened and closed. He stammered helplessly. "*Not as if I were really what?*" she demanded, eyes beginning to brim.

"Listen, darling, I didn't mean . . ."

A nurse came clicking across the floor. "Mrs. Slade, it's time for your first injection. Doctor Georges just called. Will you come with me please?"

"Not as if I what, John?" she insisted, ignoring the nurse. "Nothing, doll, nothing—"

"Mrs. Slade—"

"All right, nurse, I'm coming." She tossed her husband a hurt glance, walked away dabbing at her eyes.

"Expectant dames is always cranky," sympathized an attendant who sat on a bench nearby. "Take it easy. She won't be so touchy after it comes."

John Hanley Slade shot an irritable glare at the eavesdropper, saw a friendly comedian-face grinning at him, returned the grin uneasily, and went over to sit down.

"Your first?"

John Hanley nodded, stroked nervously at his thin hair. "I see 'em come, I see 'em go. It's always the same." "Whattaya mean?" John grunted.

"Same expressions, same worries, same attitudes, same conversation, same questions. The guy always makes some remark about how it' not *really* having a baby, and the dame always gets sore. Happens every time."

"It's all pretty routine for you, eh?" he muttered stiffly.

The attendant nodded. He watched the expectant father for several seconds, then grunted: "Go ahead, ask me." "Ask you what?"

"If I think all this is silly. They always do."

John stared at the attendant irritably. "Well—?"

"Do I think it's silly? No, I don't."

"Fine. That's settled, then."

"No, I don't think it's silly, because for a dame ain't satisfied if she plunks down the dough, buys a newt, and lets it go at that. There's something missing between bedroom and baby."

"That so?"

John's sarcastic tone was apparently lost on the man. "It's so," he announced. "Physiological change—that's what's missing. For a newt to really take the place of a baby, the mother's got to go through the whole build-up. Doc gives her injections, she craves pickles and mangoes. More injections for morning sickness. More injections, she gets

chubby. And finally the shots to bring milk, labor, and false delivery. So then she gets the newt, and everything's right with the world."

"Mmmph."

"Ask me something else," the attendant offered.

John looked around helplessly, spied an elderly woman near the entrance. She had just entered, and stood looking around as if lost or confused. He did not recognize her, but he got up quickly.

"Excuse me, chum. Probably one of my guests."

"Sure, sure. I gotta get on the job anyhow."

The woman turned to stare at him as he crossed the floor to meet her. Perhaps one of Mary's friends, he thought. There were at least a dozen people coming that he hadn't met. But his welcoming smile faded slightly as he approached her. She wore a shabby dress, her hair was disheveled in a gray tangle, her matchstick legs were without make-up, and there were fierce red lines around her eyelids. She stared at him with wide wild eyes—dull orbs of dirty marble with tiny blue patches for pupils. And her mouth was a thin slash between gaunt leathery cheeks.

"Are—are you here for the party?" he asked doubtfully.

She seemed not to hear him, but continued to stare at or through him. Her mouth made words out of a quivering hiss of a voice. "I'm looking for *him*."

"Who?"

"The doctor."

He decided from her voice that she had laryngitis. "Doctor Georges? He'll be here soon, but he'll be busy tonight. Couldn't you consult another physician?"

The woman fumbled in her bag and brought out a small parcel to display. "I want to give him this," she hissed.

"I could—"

"I want to give it to him myself," she interrupted.

Two guests that he recognized came through the entrance. He glanced toward them nervously, returned their grins, glanced indecisively back at the haggard woman.

"I'll wait," she croaked, turned her back, and marched to the nearest chair where she perched like a sick crow, eyes glued to the door.

John Hanley Slade felt suddenly chilly. He shrugged it off and went to greet the Willinghams, who were the first arrivals.

Anne Norris, with her husband in tow, zig-zagged her way through a throng of chattering guests toward the hostess, who now occupied a wheel-chair near the entrance to the delivery room. They were a few minutes late, but the party had not yet actually begun.

"Why don't you go join the father's sweating circle?" Anne called over her shoulder. "The men are all over with John."

Norris glanced at the group that had gathered under a cloud of cigar smoke over by the

portable bar. John Slade stood at the focus of it and looked persecuted.

"Job's counselors," Terry grunted.

A hand reached out from a nearby conversation-group and caught his arm. "Norris," coughed a gruff voice.

He glanced around. "Oh—Chief Franklin. Hello!"

Anne released his hand and said "See you later," then wound her way out of sight in the milling herd.

Franklin separated himself from the small congregation and glanced down coolly at his district inspector. He was a tall man, with shoulders hunched up close to his head, long spindly legs, a face that was exceedingly wide across the cheekbones but narrow at the jaw. Black eyes gazed from under heavy brows, and his unruly black hair was badly cut. His family tree had a few Cherokee Indians among its branches, Norris had heard, and they were frequently on the warpath.

Franklin gulped his drink casually and handed the glass to a passing attendant. "Thought you'd be working tonight, Norris," he said.

"I got trapped into coming, Chief," he replied amiably. "How're you doing with the Delmont pickup?"

"Nearly finished with record-tracing. I took a break today and picked up nine of them."

"Mmmph. *I wondered* why you plastipainted that right eye." Franklin rolled back his head and laughed loudly toward the ceiling. "Newt's mamma tossed the crockery at you, did she?"

"Her husband," he corrected a little stiffly.

"Well—get them in a hurry, Norris. If the newt's owner knows it's a deviant, he might hear we're after something and hide it somewhere. I want them rounded up quickly."

"Expect to find the one?"

Franklin nodded grimly. "It's somewhere in this part of the country—or was. It narrows down to about six or eight districts. Yours has a good chance of being it. If I had my way, we'd destroy every Bermuda *K-99* that came out during that period. That way, we'd be sure—in case Delmont faked more than one."

"Be pretty tough on dames like Mary," Norris reminded him, glancing toward Mrs. Slade.

"Yeah, yeah, five hundred Rachels blubbering for their children, and all on my neck. I'd almost rather let the deviant get away than have to put up with the screaming mommies."

"The burdens of office, Chief. Bear up under the brickbats. Herod did."

Franklin glowered at him suspiciously, noticed Norris's bland expression, muttered "eh heh heh," and glanced around the room.

"Who's presiding over the whelping tonight?" Norris asked. "Local doctor. Georges. You ought to know him."

Terry's eyebrows went up. He nodded.

"He's already here. Saw him come in the doctor's entrance a few minutes ago. He's

probably getting ready. Well, Norris . . . if you'll excuse me . . ."

Norris wandered toward the bar. He had been to several pseudoparties before. There was nothing to it, really. After the guests had gathered, the medics rolled the mother into delivery, and everyone paced restlessly and talked in hushed voices while she reenacted the age-old drama of Birth—in a way that was only mildly uncomfortable and did nothing to aggravate the population problem. Then, when they rolled her out again—fatigued and emotionally spent—the nurse brought out a newly purchased neutroid, only a few days out of the incubator, and presented it to the mother. When the oohs and awws were finished, the mother went home with her child to rest, and the father whooped it up with the guests. Norris hoped to get away early. He had things to do before dawn.

"Who's that hag by the door?" a guest grunted in his ear.

Norris glanced incuriously at the thin-lipped woman who sat stiffly with her hands in her lap, not gazing at the guests but looking through and beyond them. He shook his head and moved on to shake hands with his host.

"Glad you came, Norris!" Slade said with a grin, then leaned closer. "Your presence could be embarrassing at a time like this, though."

"How's that?"

"You should have brought your net and snare-pole, Norris," said a man at Slade's elbow. "Then when they bring the baby out, go charging across the room yelling 'That's it! That's the one I'm after!' "

The men laughed heartily. Norris grinned weakly and started away.

"Hey, Slade," a voice called. "They're coming after Mary." Norris stood aside to let John hurry toward his wife. Most of the crowd stopped milling about to watch Dr. Georges, a nurse, and an attendant coming from a rear door to take charge of Mary.

"Stop! Stop *right there!*"

The voice came from near the front entrance. It was a choked and hoarse gasp of sound, not loud, but somehow penetrating enough to command the room. Norris glanced aside during the sudden lull to see the thin-lipped woman threading her way through the crowd, and the crowd folded back to clear a way. The farther she walked, the quieter the room, and Norris suddenly realized that somehow the center of the room was almost clear of people so that he could see Mary and John and the medics standing near the delivery room door. They had turned to stare at the intruder. Georges' mouth fell open slightly. He spoke in a low voice, but the room was suddenly silent enough so that Norris could hear.

"Why, Sarah—what're you doing here?"

The woman stopped six feet away from him. She pulled out a small parcel and reached it toward him. "This is for you," she croaked.

When Georges did not advance to take it, she threw it at his feet. "Open it!" she commanded.

Norris expected him to snort and tell the attendants to toss the nutty old dame out. Instead, he stooped, very slowly, keeping his eyes on the woman, and picked up the bundle.

"Unwrap it!" she hissed when he paused.

His hands fumbled with it, but his eyes never left her face. The package came open. Georges glanced down. He dropped it quickly to the floor.

"An amputated—"

Chubby mouth gaping, he stared at the gaunt woman. "My Primrose had a black cowlick in her tail!"

The doctor swallowed and continued to stare.

"Where is my Primrose?"

The woman had her hand in her purse. The doctor retreated a step.

"Where is my baby?"

"Really, Sarah, there was nothing to do but—"

Her hand brought a heavy automatic out of the purse. It wavered and moved uncertainly, too weighty for her scrawny wrist and arm. The room was suddenly a scramble and a babble.

"You killed my baby!"

"The first shot ricocheted from the ceiling and shattered a window," said the television announcer. "The second shot went into the wall. The third shot struck Doctor Georges in the back of the head as he ran toward the delivery room door. He died instantly. Mrs. Glubbes fled from the room before any of the guests could stop her, and a dragnet is now combing . . ."

Norris shuddered and looked away from the television screen that revealed the present state of the reception room where they had been not more than two hours ago. He turned off the set, nervously lit a cigaret, and glanced at Anne who sat staring at nothing on the other end of the sofa.

"How do you feel?" he murmured.

She looked at him dumbly, shook her head. Norris got up, paced to the magazine rack, thumbed idly through its contents, glanced back at her nervously, walked to the window, stood smoking and staring toward the street for a time, moved to the piano, glanced back at her nervously again, tried to play a few bars of *Beethoven's Fifth* with one finger, hit a foul note after the opening ta-ta-ta-taaaahh, grunted a curse, banged a crashing discord with his fist, and leaned forward with a sigh to press his forehead against the music rack and close his eyes.

"Don't blame yourself, Terry," she said softly.

"If I hadn't let him have that impounded newt, it wouldn't have happened."

She thought that over briefly. "And if my maternal grandfather hadn't lied to his wife back in 2013, I would never have been born."

"Why not?"

"Because if he'd told her the truth, she'd have up and left him, and Mother wouldn't have been born."

"Oh. Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless nothing!" She shook herself out of the blue mood. "You come here, Terry Norris!"

He came, and there was comfort in holding her. She was prepared to blame the world all right, but he was in the world, and a part of it, and so was she. And there was no sharing of guilt, but only the whole weight of it on the shoulders of each of them. He thought of the Delmont case, and the way Franklin talked casually of slaughtering five hundred K-99s just to be sure, and how he continued to hate Franklin's guts for no apparent reason. Franklin was not a pleasant fellow, to be sure, but he had done nothing to Norris personally. He wondered if he hated what Franklin represented, but directed the hate at Franklin's person because he, Norris, represented it too. Franklin, however, liked the world as he found it, and was glad to help keep it that way.

If I think something's wrong with the set-up, but keep on being a part of it, then the wrongness is not part mine, he thought, it's *all* mine, because I bought it.

"It's hard to decide," he murmured.

"What's that, Terry?"

"Whether it's all wrong, dead wrong—or whether it's the best that can be done under the circumstances."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

He shook himself and yawned. "About going to bed," he grunted.

They went to bed at midnight. At one o'clock, he became certain she was asleep. He lay in darkness for a time, listening to her even breathing. Then he sat up and eased himself out of bed. There was work to be done. He tiptoed quietly out of the bedroom, carrying his shoes and his trousers. He dressed in the kitchen by the glow of a cigaret ember and stole quietly out into the chilly night. A half-moon hung low in a misty sky, and the wind was sharp out of the north. He walked quietly toward the kennels. There were only three empty cages. He needed twenty-seven to accommodate the doubtful K-99s that were to be picked up during the next few days. There was work to be done.

He went into the neutroid room and flicked a switch. A few sleepy chatters greeted the light.

One at a time he awoke twenty-four of the older creatures and carried them to a large glass-walled compartment. These were the long-time residents; they knew him well, and they came willingly, snuggling sleepily against his chest. He whistled tunelessly while he worked, began carrying them by the tails, two in each hand, to speed the chore.

'When he had gotten them in the glass chamber, he sealed the door and turned on the gas. Then he switched off the lights, locked up for the night again, and walked back toward the house through the crisp grass. The conveyor belt from the chamber to the crematorium would finish the job unaided.

Norris felt suddenly ill. He sank down on the back steps and laid his head on his arms across his knees. His eyes burned, but thought of tears made him sicker. When the low *chug*

of the crematorium's igniter coughed quietly from the kennels, he staggered hurriedly away from the steps to retch.

She was waiting for him in the bedroom. She sat on the window-seat, her small figure silhouetted against the paleness of the moonlit yard.

She was staring silently out at the dull red tongue of exhaust gas from the crematorium chimney when he tiptoed down the hall and paused in the doorway. She looked around. Dead silence between them, then:

"Out for a walk, eh, Terry?"

A resumption of the dead silence. He backed quietly away with-out speaking. He went to the parlor and lay down on the couch.

After a time, he heard her pattering around in the kitchen, and saw a light. A little later, he opened his eyes to see her dark shadow over him, surrounded by an aura of negligee. She sat down on the edge of the couch and offered him a glass.

"Drink it. Make your stomach rest easy."

"Alcoholic?"

"Yeah."

He tasted it: milk, egg yolk, honey, and rum.

"No arsenic?"

She shook her head. He drank it quickly, lay back with a grunt, took her hand. They were silent for a time.

"I—I guess every new wife thinks her husband's flawless—for a while," she murmured absently. "Silly—how it's such a shock to find out the obvious: that he's no different from the other bull humans of the tribe."

Norris stiffened, rolled his face quickly away from her. After a moment, her hand crept out to touch his cheek lightly. Her cool fingertips traced a soft line up and along his temple.

"It's all right, Terry," she whispered.

He kept his face averted. Her fingers stroked for a moment more, as if she were feeling something new and different in the familiar texture of his hair. Then she arose and padded quietly back to the bedroom.

Norris lay awake until dawn, knowing that it would never be all right Terry, nor all right World—never, as long as the prohibiting, the creating, the killing, the mockery, the falsification of birth, death, and life continued.

Dawn inherited the night mist, gathered it into clouds, and made a gloomy gray morning of it.

Anne was still asleep when he left for work. He backed out the kennel-truck, meaning to get the rest of the Bermuda K-99s as quickly as possible so that he could begin running the normalcy tests and get the whole thing over with. The night's guilt was still with him as he drove away, a sticky dew that refused to depart with morning. Why should *he* have to kill the things? Why couldn't Franklin arrange for a central slaughter house for destroying neutroids that had been deserted, or whose owners could not be located, or that found

themselves unclaimed for any other reason? But Franklin would purple at the notion. It was only a routine part of the job. Why shouldn't it be routine? Why were neutroids manufactured anyhow? Obviously, because they were disposable—an important feature which human babies unfortunately lacked. When the market became glutted with humans, the merchandise could not be dumped in the sea.

Anthropos' mutant pets fulfilled a basic biological need of Man—of all life, for that matter—the need to have young, or a reasonable facsimile, and care for them. Neutroids kept humanity satisfied with the restricted birth rate, and if it were not satisfied, it would breed itself into famine, epidemic, and possibly extinction. With the population held constant at five billions, the Federation could insure a decent living-standard for everyone. And as long as birth must be restricted, why not restrict it logically and limit it to genetic desirables?

Why not? Norris felt no answer, but he was acutely aware of the "genetic C" on his social security card.

The world was a better place, wasn't it? Great strides since the last century. Science had made life easier to live and harder to lose. The populace thoughtlessly responded by pouring forth a flood of babies and doddering old codgers to clutter the earth and make things tougher again by eating and not producing; but again science increased the individual's chances to survive and augmented his motives for doing so—and again the populace responded with fecundity and long white beards, making more trouble for science again. So it had continued until it became obvious that progress wasn't headed toward "the Good Life" but toward more lives to continue the same old meager life as always. What could be done? Impede science? Unthinkable! Chuck the old codgers into the sea? Advance the retirement age to ninety and work them to death? The old codgers still had the suffrage, and plenty of time to go to the polls.

The unborn, however, were not permitted to vote.

Man's technology had created little for the individual. Man used his technology to lengthen his life and sweeten it, but some-thing had to be subtracted somewhere. The lives of the unborn were added unto the years of the aged. A son of Terry Norris might easily live till i ro, but he would have damn little chance of being born to do it.

Neutroids filled the cradles. Neutroids never ate much, nor grew up to eat more or be on the unemployment roles. Neutroids could be bashed with a shovel and buried in the back yard when hard times came. Neutroids could satisfy a woman's longing for something small and lovable, but they never got in the economic way.

It was no good thinking about it, he decided. It was a Way Of Doing Things, and most people accepted it, and if it sometimes yielded heartache and horrors such as had occurred at Slade's pseudoparty, it was still an Accepted Way, and he couldn't change it, even if he knew what to do about it. He was already adjusted to the world-as-it-was, a world that loved the artificial mutants as children, looked the other way when crematorium flames licked in the night. He had been brought up in such a world, and it was only when emotion conflicted

with the grim necessity of his job that he thought to question the world. And Anne? Eventually, he supposed, she would have her pseudo-party, cuddle a neutroid, forget about romantic notions like having a kid of her own.

At noon he brought home another dozen K-99s and installed them in the cages. Two reluctant mothers had put up a howl, but he departed without protest and left seizure of the animals to the local authorities. Yates had already delivered the three from yesterday.

"What, no more scratches, bruises, broken bones?" Anne asked at lunch.

He smiled mechanically. "If Mamma puts up a squawk, I go. Quietly."

"Learned your lesson yesterday?"

"Mmm! One dame pulled a fast one on me though. I think. Told her what I wanted. She started moaning, but she let me in. I got her newt, started out with it. She wanted a receipt. So, I took the newt's serial number off the check list, made out the receipt. She took one look and squealed 'That's not Chichi's number!' and grabbed for her tail-wagger. I looked at its foot-tattoo.

Sure enough—wrong number. Had to leave it. A K-99 all right, but not even from Bermuda Plant."

"I thought they were all registered."

"They are, babe. Wires get crossed sometimes. I told her she had the wrong newt, and she started boiling. Got the sales receipt and showed it to me. Number checked with the newt's. Something's fouled up somewhere."

"Where'd she get it?"

"O'Reilly's pet shop—over in Sherman II. Right place, wrong serial number."

"Anything to worry about, Terry?"

"Well, I've got to track down that doubtful Bermuda model." "Oh."

"And—well--" He frowned out the window at the kennels. "Ever think what'd happen if somebody started a black market in neutroids?"

They finished the meal in silence. Apparently there was going to be no further mention of last-night's mass-disposal, nor any rehash of the nightmare at Slade's party. He was thankful.

The afternoon's work yielded seven more Bermuda neutroids for the pound. Except for the missing newt that was involved in the confusion of serial numbers, the rest of them would have to be collected by Yates or his deputies, armed with warrants. The groans and the tears of the owners left him in a gloomy mood, but the pick-up phase of the operation was nearly finished. The normalcy tests, however, would consume the rest of the week and leave little time for sleeping and eating. If Delmont's falsification proved extensive, it might be necessary to deliver several of the animals to central lab for dissection and complete analysis, thus bringing the murderous wrath of the owners upon his head. He had a hunch about why bio-inspectors were frequently shifted from one territory to another.

On the way home, he stopped in Sherman II to check with the dealer about the confusion of serial numbers. Sherman II was the largest of the Sherman communities, covering fifty

blocks of

commercial buildings. He parked in the outskirts and took a side-walk escalator toward O'Reilley's address. He had spoken to O'Reilley on the phone, but had not yet visited the dealer's shop.

It lay on a dingy sidestreet that was reminiscent of centuries past, a street of small bars and bowling alleys and cigar stores. There was even a shop with three gold balls above the entrance, but the place was now an antique store. A light mist was falling when he stepped off the escalator and stood in front of the pet shop. A sign hung out over the sidewalk, announcing:

J. "DOGGY" O'REILLEY
PETS FOR SALE
DUMB BLONDES AND GOLDFISH
MUTANTS FOR THE CHILDLESS
BUY A BUNDLE OF JOY

He frowned at the sign for a moment, then wandered through the entrance into a warm and gloomy shop, wrinkling his nose at the strong musk of animal odors. O'Reilley's was no shining ex-ample of cleanliness.

Somewhere a puppy was yapping, and a parrot croaked the lyrics of *A Chimp To Call My Own*—theme song of a soap opera about a lady evolvotron operator, Norris recalled.

He paused briefly by a tank of silk-draped goldfish. The shop had a customer. An elderly lady haggled with the wizened manager over the price of a half-grown second-hand dog-F. She shook her last dog's death certificate under his nose and demanded a guarantee of the dog's alleged F-5 intelligence. The old man offered to swear on a Bible that the dog was more knowledgeable than some humans, but he demurred when asked to swear by his ledger.

The dog was lamenting, "Don' sell me, Dadda, don' sell me," and punctuating the pleas with mournful train-whistle howls.

Norris smiled quietly. The non-human pets were brighter than the neutroids. A K-io8 could speak a dozen words, but a K-99 never got farther than "mamma," "pappa," and "cookie." Anthropos feared making quasi-humans too intelligent, lest sentimentalists proclaim them really human.

He wandered on toward the rear of the building, pausing briefly by the cash register to inspect O'Reilley's license which hung in a dusty frame on the wall behind the counter: "James Fallon O'Reilley . . . authorized dealer in mutant animals . . . all non-predatory mammals including chimpanzee-K series . . . license expires 15W 3d 2o63Y . . ."

Expiration date approaching, he noticed, but otherwise okay. He headed for a bank of neutroid cages along the opposite wall, but O'Reilley minced across the floor to meet him. The elderly lady was leaving. O'Reilley's face wore a v-shaped smirk on a loose-skinned

face, and his bald head bobbed professionally.

"And a good afternoon to ye, sir. What'll it be this foine drizzlin' afternoon? A dwarf kangaroo perhaps, or a—" He paused to adjust his spectacles as Norris flashed a badge and presented his card. O'Reilley's smile waned. "Inspector Norris it is," he muttered at the card, then looked up. "What'd they do with the last 'un, flay him alive?"

"My predecessor was transferred to the Montreal area." "And I thought that I spoke to him only yesterday!"

"On the phone? That was me, O'Reilley. About the rundown on the K-99 sales."

"I gave it to you properly, did I not?" the oldster demanded. "You gave it to me. Maybe properly."

O'Reilley seemed to puff up slightly and glower. "Meaning?" "There's a mix-up in serial numbers on one of them. May not be your mistake."

"No mistakes, no mistakes."

"Okay, we'll see." Norris glanced at his list. "Let's check this number again—K-99-LJZ-35i."

"It's nearly closing time," the oldster protested. "Come back some other day, Norris."

"Sorry, this one's rush. It'll only take a minute. Where's your book?"

The oldster began to quiver angrily. "Are you suggestin', sir, that I falsely—"

"No," he growled, "I'm suggesting that there was a mistake."

Maybe my mistake, maybe yours, maybe Anthropos, maybe the owners. I've got to find out, that's all. Let's have the book."

"What kind of a mistake? I gave you the owner's name!"

"She has a different newt."

"Can I help it if she traded with somebody?"

"She didn't. She bought it here. I saw the receipt." Norris was beginning to become impatient, tried to suppress it.

"Then she traded with one of my other customers!" O'Reilley insisted.

Norris snorted irritably. "You got two customers named Adelia Schultz?—Come on, pop, let's look at the duplicate receipt. Now."

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley grumbled, refusing to budge.

Norris suddenly erupted. He turned away angrily and began pacing briskly around the shop, looking under cages, inspecting fixtures, probing into feeding troughs with a pencil, looking into feed bags, examining a dog-F's wiry coat.

"Here there! What do you think you're doing?" the owner demanded.

Norris began barking off check-points in a loud voice. "Dirty cat-cage . . . inadequate ventilation . . . food trough not clean . . . no water in the newt cages ..."

"I water them twice a day!" O'Reilley raged.

". . . mouldy rabbit-meal . . . no signs of disinfectant . . . What kind of a disease-trap are you running here?"

He came back to face O'Reilley who stood trembling with rage and cursing him with his

eyes.

"Not to mention that sign outside," Norris added casually. " 'Dumb blondes' they outlawed that one the year Kleyton got sent up for using hormones on K-io8s, trying to grow himself a harem. Well?"

"Doubt if it's still around," O'Reilley repeated.

"Look, pop!" Norris snapped. "You're required to keep sales receipts until they're microfilmed. There hasn't been a micro-filming for over a year." "Get out of my shop!"

"If I go, you won't *have a shop* after tomorrow."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yeah."

For a moment, Norris thought the old man would attack him. But O'Reilley spat a sudden curse, scurried toward the counter, grabbed a fat book from beneath the cash register, then hurried away toward the stairs at the rear of the shop.

"Hey, pop! Where you going?"

"Get me glasses!"

"You're wearing your glasses!" Norris started after him. "New ones. Can't see through them." O'Reilley bounded up-stairs.

"Leave the book *here* and *I'll* check it!"

Norris stopped with his foot on the bottom step. O'Reilley slammed the door at the head of the stairs, locked it behind him. Grumbling suspiciously, the inspector went back to the counter to wait.

Five minutes passed. The door opened. O'Reilley came down-stairs, looking less angry but decidedly nervous. He slammed the book on the counter, riffled its pages, found a place, muttered "Here it is, see for yourself," and held it at a difficult angle.

"Give it here."

O'Reilley reluctantly released it, began babbling about bureaucracy and tin-horn inspectors who acted like dictators and inspection codes that prescribed and circumscribed and prohibited. Norris ignored him and stared at the duplicate receipt.

"Adelia Schultz . . . received Chimpanzee-K-99-LJZ-35i on..."

It was the number on the list from Anthropos. It was the number of the animal he wanted for normalcy tests. But it was not the number of Mrs. Schultz's neutroid, nor was it the number written on Mrs. Schultz's copy of *this very same invoice*.

O'Reilley was still babbling at him. Norris held the book up to his eye, took aim at the bright doorway across the surface of the page. O'Reilley stopped babbling.

"Rub marks," the inspector grunted. "Scrape marks on the paper."

O'Reilley's breathing sounded asthmatic. Norris lowered the book.

"Nice erasure job—for a carbon copy. Do it while you were upstairs?"

O'Reilley said nothing. Norris took a scrap of paper, folded his handkerchief over the point of his pocketknife blade, used the point to clean out the eraser dust from between the receipts, emptied the dust on the paper, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Evidence."

O'Reilley said nothing.

Norris tore out the erased receipt, pocketed it, put on his hat and started for the door.

"See you in court, O'Reilley."

"Wait!"

He turned. "Okay—I'm waiting."

"Let's go sit down first," the deflated oldster muttered weakly. "Sure."

They walked up the flight of stairs and entered a dingy parlor. He glanced around, sniffed at the smell of cabbage boiling and sweaty bedclothing. An orange-haired neutroid lay sleeping on a dirty rug in the corner. Norris stared down at it curiously. O'Reilley made a whining sound and slumped into a chair, his breath coming in little whiffs that suggested inward sobbing. Norris gazed at him expressionlessly for a moment, then went to kneel beside the newt.

"K-99-LJZ-35i," he read aloud, peering at the sole of the tattooed foot. The newt stirred in its sleep at the sound of a strange voice. When Norris looked at O'Reilley again, the old man was staring at his feet, his forehead supported by a leathery old hand that shielded his eyes.

"Lots of good explanations, O'Reilley?"

"Ye've seen what ye've seen; now do what ye must. I'll say nothing to ye."

"Look, O'Reilley, the newt is what I'm after. So I found it. I don't know what else I've found, but juggling serial numbers is a serious offense. If you've got a story, you better tell it. Other-wise, you'll be telling it behind bars. I'm willing to listen here and now. You'd better grab the chance."

O'Reilley sighed, looked at the sleeping newt in the corner. "What'll ye do with her?"

"The newt? Take her in."

O'Reilley sat in gloomy silence while he thought things over. "We were class-B, me and the missus," he mumbled suddenly, "allowed a child of our own if we could have 'un. Fancy that, eh? Ugly old coot like me—class-B."

"So?"

"The government said we could have a child, but Nature said we couldn't."

"Tough."

"But since we were class B, we weren't entitled to own a newt. See?"

"Yeah. Where's your wife?"

"With the saints, let's hope."

Norris wondered what sort of sob-story this was getting to be. The oldster went on quietly, all the while staring at the sleeping figure in the corner.

"Couldn't have a kid, couldn't own a newt either—so we opened the pet shop. It wasn't like havin' yer own, though. Missus always blubbered when I sold a newt she'd got to feeling like a mother to. Never swiped one, though—not till Peony came along. Last year this Bermuda shipment come in, and I sold most of 'em pretty quick, but Peony here was

puny. People afraid she'd not last long. Couldn't sell her. Kept her around so long that we both loved her. Missus died last year. 'Don't let anybody take Peony,' she kept saying afore she passed on. I promised I wouldn't. So I switched 'em around and moved her up here."

"That all?"

O'Reilley hesitated, then nodded.

"Ever done this before?"

O'Reilley shook his head.

There was a long silence while Norris stared at the child-thing. "Your license could be revoked," he said absently.

"I know."

He ground his fist thoughtfully in his palm, thought it over some more. If O'Reilley told the truth, he couldn't live with him-self if he reported the old man . . . unless it wasn't the whole truth.

"I want to take your books home with me tonight."

"Help yourself."

"I'm going to make a complete check, investigate you from stem to stern."

He watched O'Reilley closely. The oldster was unaffected. He seemed concerned—grief-stricken—only by the thought of losing the neutroid.

"If plucking a newt out of stock to keep you company was the only thing you did, O'Reilley, I won't report you."

O'Reilley was not consoled. He continued to gaze hungrily at the little being on the rug.

"And if the newt turns out not to be a deviant," he added gently, "I'll send it back. We'll have to attach a correction to that invoice, of course, and you'll just have to take your chances about somebody wanting to buy it, but . . ." He paused. O'Reilley was staring at him strangely.

"And if she is a deviant, Mr. Norris?"

He started to reply, hesitated.

"Is she, O'Reilley?"

The oldster said nothing. His face tightened slowly. His shoulders shook slightly, and his squinted eyes were brimming. He choked.

"I see."

O'Reilley shook himself, produced a red bandana, dabbed at his eyes, blew his nose loudly, regathered his composure. "How do you know she's deviant?"

O'Reilley gave him a bitter glance, chuckled hoarsely, shuffled across the room and sat on the floor beside the sleeping newt. He patted a small bare shoulder.

"Peony? . . . Peony-girl . . . Wake up, me child, wake up."

Its fluffy tail twitched for a moment. It sat up, rubbed its eyes, and yawned. There was a lazy casualness about its movements that caused Norris to lean closer to stare. Neutroids usually moved in bounces and jerks and scrambles. This one stretched, arched its back, and smiled—like a two year old with soft brown eyes. It glanced at Norris. The eyes went wider

for a moment, then it studiously ignored him.

"Shall I play bouncey, Daddy?" it piped.

Norris sucked in a long slow breath and sat frozen.

"No need to, Peony." O'Reilley glanced at the inspector. "Bouncey's a game we play for visitors," he explained. "Making believe we're a neutroid."

The inspector could find nothing to say.

Peony licked her lips. "Wanna glass of water, Daddy."

O'Reilley nodded and hobbled away to the kitchen, leaving the man and the neutroid to stare at each other in silence. She was quite a deviant. Even a fully age-set K-108 could not have spoken the two sentences that he had heard, and Peony was still a long way from age-set, and a K-99 at that.

O'Reilley came back with the water. She drank it greedily, holding the glass herself while she peered up at the old man. "Daddy's eyes all wet," she observed.

O'Reilley began trembling again. "Never mind, child. You go get your coat."

"Whyyyy?"

"You're going for a ride with Mr. Norris."

She whirled to stare hostilely at the stunned visitor. "I don't *want* to!"

The old man choked out a sob and flung himself down to seize her in his arms and hug her against his chest. He tearfully uttered a spasmodic babble of reassurances that would have frightened even a human child.

The deviant neutroid began to cry. Standard neutroids never cried; they whimpered and yeped. Norris felt weak inside. Slowly, the old man lifted his head to peer at the inspector, blinking away tears. He began loosening Peony from the embrace. Suddenly he put her down and stood up.

"Take her quickly," he hissed, and strode away to the kitchen. He slammed the door behind him. The latch clicked.

Peony scampered to the door and began beating on it with tiny fists. "Daddy . . . *Daddy!!!* Open 'a door!" she wailed.

Norris licked his lips and swallowed a dry place. Still he did not budge from the sofa, his gaze fastened on the child-thing. Disjointed phrases tumbled through his mind . . . what Man hath wrought . . . out of the slime of an ape . . . fat legs and baby fists and a brain to know . . . and the State spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, saying . . .

"Take her!" came a roaring bellow from the kitchen. *"Take her before I lose me wits and kill ye!"*

Norris got unsteadily to his feet and advanced toward the frightened child-thing. He carried her, kicking and squealing, out into the early evening. By the time he turned into his own driveway, she had subsided a little, but she was still crying.

He saw Anne coming down from the porch to meet him. She was staring at the neutroid who sat on the front seat beside him, while seven of its siblings chattered from their cages in the rear of the truck. She said nothing, only stared through the window at the small tear-

stained face.

"Home . . . I want to go home!" it whined.

Norris lifted the newt and handed it to his wife. "Take it in-side. Keep your mouth shut about it. I'll be in as soon as I chuck the others in their cages."

She seemed not to notice his curtness as she cradled the being in her arms and walked away. The truck lurched on to the kennels.

He thought the whole thing over while he worked. When he was finished, he went back in the house and stopped in the hall to call Chief Franklin. It was the only thing to do: get it over with as quickly as possible. The operator said, "His office fails to answer. No taped readback. Shall I give you the locator?"

Anne came into the hall and stood glaring at him, her arms clenched across her bosom, one foot tapping the floor angrily. Peony stood behind her, no longer crying, and peering at him curiously around Anne's skirt.

"Are you doing what I think you're doing, Terry?"

He gulped. "Cancel the call," he told the operator. "It'll wait till tomorrow." He dropped the phone hard and sank down in the straight chair. It was the only thing to do: delay it as long as he could.

"We'd better have a little talk," she said.

"Maybe we'd better," he admitted.

They went into the living room. Peony's world had evidently been restricted to the pet shop, and she seemed awed by the clean, neat house, no longer frightened, and curious enough about her surroundings to forget to cry for O'Reilley. She sat in the center of the rug, occasionally twitching her tail as she blinked around at the furniture and the two humans who sat in it.

"The deviant?"

"A deviant."

"Just what are you going to do?"

He squirmed. "You know what I'm supposed to do." "What you were going to do in the hall?"

"Franklin's bound to find out anyway."

"How?"

"Do you imagine that Franklin would trust *anybody*?" "So?"

"So, he's probably already got a list of all serial numbers from the District Anthropos Wholesalers. As a double check on us. And we'd better deliver."

"I see. That leaves you in a pinch, doesn't it?"

"Not if I do what I'm supposed to."

"By whose law?"

He tugged nervously at his collar, stared at the child-thing who was gazing at him

fixedly. "Heh heh," he said weakly, waggled a finger at it, held out his hands invitingly. The child-thing inched away nervously.

"Don't evade, Terry."

"I wanna go home . . . I want Dadda."

"I gotta think. Gotta have time to think."

"Listen, Terry, you know what calling Franklin would be? It would be M, U, R, D, E, R."

"She's just a newt."

"*She?*"

"Probably. Have to examine her to make sure."

"Great. Intelligent, capable of reproduction. Just great." "Well, what they do with her after I'm finished with the normalcy tests is none of my affair."

"It's not? *Look* at me, Terry . . . No, not with that patiently suffering. . . . *Terry!*"

He stopped doing it and sat with his head in his hands, staring at the patterns in the rug, working his toes anxiously. "Think—gotta think."

"While you're thinking, I'll feed the child," she said crisply. "Come on, Peony."

"How'd you know her name?"

"*She* told me, naturally."

"Oh." He sat trying grimly to concentrate, but the house was infused with Anne-ness, and it influenced him. After a while, he got up and went out to the kennels where he could think objectively. But that was wrong too. The kennels were full of Franklin and the system he represented. Finally he went out into the back yard and lay on the cool grass to stare up at the twilight sky. The problem shaped up quite formidably. Either he turned her over to Franklin to be studied and ultimately destroyed, or he didn't. If he didn't, he was guilty of Delmont's crime. Either he lost Anne and maybe something of himself, or his job and maybe his freedom.

A big silence filled the house during dinner. Only Peony spoke, demanding at irregular intervals to be taken home. Each time the child-thing spoke, Anne looked at him, and each time she looked at him, her eyes said "See?"—until finally he slammed down his fork and marched out to the porch to sulk in the gloom. He heard their voices faintly from the kitchen.

"You've got a good appetite, Peony."

"I like Dadda's cooking better."

"Well, maybe mine'll do for awhile."

"I wanna go home."

"I know—but I think your dadda wants you to stay with us for awhile."

"I don't want to."

"Why don't you like it here?"

"I want Dadda."

"Well maybe we can call him on the phone, eh?"

"Phone?"

"After you get some sleep."

The child-thing whimpered, began to cry. He heard Anne walking with it, murmuring softly. When he had heard as much as he could take, he trotted down the steps and went for a long walk in the night, stalking slowly along cracked sidewalks beneath overhanging trees, past houses and scattered lights of the suburbs. Suburbs hadn't changed much in a century, only grown more extensive. Some things underwent drastic revision with the passing years, other things—like walking sticks and garden hoes and carving knives and telephones and bicycles—stayed pretty much as they were. Why change something that worked well as it was? Why bother the established system?

He eyed the lighted windows through the hedges as he wandered past. Fluorescent lights, not much different than those of a century ago. But once they had been campfires, the fires of shivering hunters in the forest, when man was young and the world was sparsely planted with his seed. Now the world was choked with his riotous growth, glittering with his lights and his flashing signs, full of the sound of his engines and the roar of his rockets. He had inherited it and filled it—filled it too full, perhaps.

There was no escaping from the past. The last century had glutted the Earth with its children and grandchildren, had strained the Earth's capacity to feed, and the limit had been reached. It had to be guarded. There was no escape into space, either. Man's rockets had touched two planets, but they were sorry worlds, and even if he made them better, Earth could beget children—if allowed—faster than ships could haul them away. The only choice: increase the death rate, or decrease the birth rate—or, as a dismal third possibility—do nothing, and let Nature wield the scythe as she had once done in India and China. But letting-Nature-do-it was not in the nature of Man, for he could always do it better. If his choice robbed his wife of a biological need, then he would build her a disposable baby to pacify her. He would give it a tail and only half a mind, so that she would not confuse it with her own occasional children.

Peony, however, was a grim mistake. The mistake had to be quickly corrected before anyone noticed.

What was he, Norris, going to do about it, if anything? Defy the world? Outwit the world? The world was made in the shape of Franklin, and it snickered at him out of the shadows. He turned and walked back home.

Anne was rocking on the porch with Peony in her arms when he came up the sidewalk. The small creature dozed fitfully, muttered in its sleep.

"How old is she, Terry?" Anne asked.

"About nine months, or about two years, depending on what you mean."

"Born nine months ago?"

"Mmmh. But two years by the development scale, human equivalent. Newts would be fully mature at nine or ten, if they didn't stop at an age-set. Fast maturation."

"But she's brighter than most two year olds."

"Maybe."

"You've heard her talk."

"You can't make degree-comparisons between two species, Anne. Not easily anyhow. 'Bright'?—signifying I.Q.?—by what yardstick."

"Bright—signifying on-the-ball—by my yardstick. And if you turn her over to Franklin, I'll leave you."

"Car coming," he grunted tonelessly. "Get in the house. It's slowing down."

Anne slipped out of her chair and hurried inside. Norris lingered only a moment, then followed. The headlights paused in front of a house down the block, then inched ahead. He watched from deep in the hall.

"Shall I take her out to the kennels right quick?" Anne called tensely.

"Stick where you are," he muttered, and a moment later regretted it. The headlights stopped in front. The beam of a powerful flashlight played over the porch, found the house-number, winked out. The driver cut the engine. Norris strode to the living room.

"Play bouncey!" he growled at Peony.

"Don't want to," she grumbled back.

"There's a man coming, and you'd better play bouncey if you ever want to see your Dadda again!" he hissed.

Peony yipped and backed away from him, whimpering. "Terry! What're you talking about? You should be ashamed!" "Shut up. . . . Peony, play bouncey."

Peony chattered and leaped to the back of the sofa with monkey-like grace.

"She's frightened! She's acting like a common newt!" "That's bouncey," he grunted. "That's good."

The car door slammed. Norris went to put on the porch light and watch the visitor come up the steps—a husky, bald gentle-man in a black suit and Roman collar. He blinked and shook his head. Clergyman? The fellow must have the wrong house.

"Good evening."

"Uh—yeah."

"I'm Father Mulreany. Norris residence?" The priest had a slight brogue; it stirred a vague hunch in Norris' mind, but failed to clear it.

"I'm Norris. What's up?"

"Uh, well, one of my parishioners—I think you've met him—"

"Countryman of yours?"

"Mmm."

"O'Reilley?"

"Yes."

"What'd he do, hang himself?"

"Nothing that bad. May I come in?"

"I doubt it. What do you want?"

"Information."

"Personal or official?"

The priest paused, studied Norris's silhouette through the screen. He seemed not taken aback by the inspector's brusqueness, perhaps accepting it as normal in an era that had little regard for the cloth.

"O'Reilley's in bad shape, Inspector," Mulreany said quietly. "I don't know whether to call a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a cop." Norris stiffened. "A cop?"

"May I come in?"

Norris hesitated, feeling a vague hostility, and a less vague suspicion. He opened the screen, let the priest in, led him to the living room. Anne muttered half-politely, excused herself, snatched Peony, and headed for the rear of the house. The priest's eyes followed the neutroid intently.

"So O'Reilley did something?"

"Mmm."

"What's it to you?"

Mulreany frowned. "In addition to things you wouldn't understand—he was my sister's husband."

Norris waved him into a chair. "Okay, so—?"

"He called me tonight. He was loaded. Just a senseless babble, but I knew something was wrong. So I went over to the shop." Mulreany stopped to light a cigaret and frown at the floor. He looked up suddenly. "You see him today?"

Norris could think of no reason not to admit it. He nodded irritably.

Mulreany leaned forward curiously. "Was he sober?" "Yeah."

"Sane?"

"How should I know?"

"Did he impress you as the sort of man who would suddenly decide to take a joint of pipe and a meat cleaver and mass-slaughter about sixty helpless animals?"

Norris felt slightly dazed. He sank back, shaking his head and blinking. There was a long silence. Mulreany was watching him carefully.

"I can't help you," Norris muttered. "I've got nothing to say." "Look, Inspector, forget this, will you?" He touched his collar. Norris shook his head, managed a sour smile. "I can't help you."

"All right," Mulreany sighed, starting to his feet. "I'm just trying to find out if what he says . . ."

"Men talking about Dadda?" came a piping voice from the kitchen.

Mulreany shot a quick glance toward it. ". . . is true," he finished softly.

There was a sudden hush. He could hear Anne whispering in the kitchen, saw her steal a glance through the door. "So it is true," Mulreany murmured.

Face frozen, Norris came to his feet. "Anne," he called in a bitter voice. "Bouncey's off."

She came in carrying Peony and looking murderous. "Why did you ask him in?" she demanded in a hiss.

Mulreany stared at the small creature. Anne stared at the priest.

"It's poison to you, isn't it!" she snapped, then held Peony up toward him. "Here! Look at your enemy. Offends your humanocentrism, doesn't she?"

"Not at all," he said rather wistfully.

"You condemn them."

He shook his head. "Not *them*. Only what they're used for by society." He looked at Norris, a bit puzzled. "I'd better leave." "Maybe not. Better spill it. What do you want?"

"I told you. O'Reilley went berserk, made a butcher shop out of his place. When I got there, he was babbling about a talking neutroid—'his baby'—said you took it to the pound to destroy it. Threatened to kill you. I got a friend to stay with him, came over to see if I could find out what it's all about."

"The newt's a deviant. You've heard of the Delmont case?" "Rumors."

"She's it."

"I see." Mulreany looked glum, grim, gloomy. "Nothing more I need to know I guess. Well—"

Norris grabbed his arm as he turned. "Sit a spell," he grunted ominously.

The priest looked puzzled, let himself be guided back to the chair. Norris stood looking down at him.

"What's the matter with Dadda?" Peony chirped. "I wanna go see Dadda."

"Well?" Norris growled. "What about her?"

"I don't understand."

"You people are down on Anthropos, aren't you?"

Mulreany kept patience with an effort. "To make nitroglycerin for curing heart trouble is good, to make it for blowing open safes is bad. The stuff itself is morally neutral. The same goes for mutant animals. As pets, okay; as replacements for humans, no."

"Yeah, but you'd just as soon see them dead, eh?"

Mulreany hesitated. "I admit a personal dislike for them." "This one?"

"What about her?"

"Better dead, eh?"

"You couldn't admit she might be human?"

"Don't know her that well. Human? How do you mean—biologically? Obviously not. Theologically? Why should you care?"

"I'm interested in your particular attitude, buster."

Mulreany gazed at him, gathering a glower. "I'm a little doubtful about my status here," he growled. "I came for information; the roles got switched somewhere. Okay, Norris, but I'm sick of neo-pagan innocents like you. Now sit down, or show me the door."

Norris sat down slowly.

The priest watched the small neutroid for a moment before speaking. "She's alive, performs the function of living, is evidently aware. Life—a kind of functioning. A specific life—an in-variant kind of functioning—with sameness-of-self about it. In-variance of

functioning—a principle. Self, soul, call it what you like. Whatever's alive has it." He paused to watch Norris doubtfully.

Norris nodded curtly. "Go on."

"Doesn't have to be anything immortal about it. Not unless she were known to be human. Or intelligent."

"You heard her," Anne snapped.

"I've heard metal boxes speak with great wisdom," Mulreany said sourly. "And if I were a Hottentot, a vocalizing computer would . . ."

"Skip the analogies. Go on."

"What's intelligence? A function of Man, immortal. What's Man? An intelligent immortal creature, capable of choice." "Quit talking in circles."

"That's the point. I can't—not where Peony's concerned. What do you want to know? If I think she's equal to Man? Give me all the intelligence test results, and all the data you can get—I still couldn't decide."

"Whattaya need? Mystic writings in the sky?"

"Precisely."

"I feel a bush being beat about," Anne said suddenly. "Is this guy going to make things tough, or isn't he?"

Mulreany looked puzzled again.

"To the point, then," Norris said. "Would you applaud if she gets the gasser?"

"Hardly."

"If you had it to decide for yourself—"

"What? Whether to destroy her or not?" Mulreany snorted irritably. "Not if there was the least doubt in my mind about her.

She's a shadow in the brush. Maybe it's ten to one that the shadow's a bear and not a man—but on the one chance, don't shoot, son, don't shoot."

"You think the authorities have a right to kill her, maybe?" Anne asked.

"Who, him?" Mulreany jerked his head toward Norris. "Well, say him."

"I'd have to think about it. But I don't think so."

"Why? The government made her. Why can't it un-make her?"

"Made her? *Did* it now?"

"Delmont did," Norris corrected.

"*Did* he now?" said Mulreany.

"Why not?" Anne snorted.

"I, the State, am Big Fertility," Norris said sourly; then baiting

Mulreany: "Thou shalt accept no phallus but the evolvotron." Mulreany reddened, slapped his knee, and chortled. The Norrises exchanged puzzled glances.

"I feel an affinity," Anne murmured suspiciously.

Norris came slowly to his feet. "If you talk to anybody about Peony, you may be responsible for her death."

"I don't quite see—"

"You don't need to."

Mulreany shrugged.

"Tell O'Reilley the same."

Mulreany nodded. "You've got my word."

"Your which?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Ancient usage. I won't mention Peony. I'll see that O'Reilley doesn't."

Norris led him to the door. The priest was obviously suppressing large quantities of curiosity, but contained it well. On the steps, he paused to look back, wearing a curious smirk.

"It just occurred to me—if the child is `human' in the broad sense, she's rather superior to you and I."

"Why?"

"Hasn't picked an apple yet." Norris shrugged slightly.

"And Inspector—if Delmonte made her—ask yourself: Just what was it that he `made'?" He nodded quickly. "Goodnight." "What do you make of him?" Anne hissed nervously. "Backworldsman. Can't say."

"Fool, why'd you bring him in?"

"I'm no good at conspiracies."

"Then you *will* do it?"

"What?"

"Hide her, or something."

He stared at her doubtfully. "The only thing I can hope to do is falsify the test reports and send her back to O'Reilley as a standard model."

"That's better than nothing."

"And then spend the rest of our days waiting for it to be uncovered," he added grimly.

"You've got to, Terry."

Maybe, he thought, maybe.

If he gave her back to O'Reilley, there was a good chance she'd be discovered when the auditor came to microfilm the records and check inventory. He certainly couldn't keep her himself—not with other Bio-agents wandering in and out every few days. She could not be hidden.

He sat down for a smoke and watched Anne tiptoe to the sofa with the sleeping Peony. It would be easy to obey the law, turn her over to Franklin, and tell Anne that he had done something else with her, something like . . .

He shuddered and chopped the thought off short. She glanced at him curiously.

"I don't like the way you're looking at me," she muttered. "You imagine things."

"Uh-uh. Listen to me, Terry, if you let that baby . . ."

"I'm sick of your ifs!" he barked. "If I hear another goddam threat of your leaving *if*, then to hell with it, you can leave any time!"

"Terry!"

She puzzled in his direction for a moment, then slowly wandered out, still puzzling. He sank lower in the chair, brooding. Then it hit him. It wasn't Anne that worried him; it was a piece of himself. It was a piece of himself that threatened to go, and if he let Peony be packed off to Central Lab, it *would* go, and there-after he would not be able to stomach anything, even himself.

The morning news from the Scriber was carefully folded be-side his plate when he came to the table for breakfast. It was so deliberately folded that he bothered to notice the advertisement in the center of the displayed portion.

"You lay this out for my benefit?" he asked.

"Not particularly," she said casually.

He read it with a suspicious frown:

BIOLOGISTS WANTED
by
ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED
for
Evolvotron Operators
Incubator Tenders
Nursery Supervisors
Laboratory Personnel
in
NEW ATLANTA PLANT
Call or write:
Personnel Manager
ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED
Atlanta, Georgia

Note: Secure Labor Department release from present job before applying.

"What's this supposed to mean to me?" he demanded. "Nothing in particular. Why? Does it mean something to you?"

He brushed the paper aside and decided to ignore the subtlety, if any. She picked it up, glanced at it as if she had not seen it before. "New jobs, new places to live," she murmured.

After breakfast, he went down to police headquarters to sign a statement concerning the motive in Doctor Georges' murder. Sarah Glubbes had been stashed away in a psychopathic ward, according to Chief Miler, and would probably stay awhile.

"Funny thing, Norris," the cop said. "What people won't do over a newt! You know, it's a wonder you don't get your head blown off. I don't covet your job."

"Good." He signed the paper and glanced at Miler coolly. "Must take an iron gut, huh,

Norris?"

"Sure. Just a matter of adaptation."

"Guess so." Miler patted his paunch and yawned. "How you coming on this Delmont business? Picked up any deviants yet?"

Norris pitched the fountain pen on the desk, splattering ink. "What made you ask that?" he said stiffly.

"Nothing *made* me. I did it myself. Touchy today?" "Maybe."

Miler shrugged. "Something made you jump when I said 'deviants.' "

"Nothing made me. I—"

"Ya, ya, sure, but—"

"Save it for a suspect, Fat." He stalked out of the office, leaving Miler tapping his pencil and gazing curiously after him. A phone rang somewhere behind him. He hurried on—angry with himself for jumpiness and for indecisiveness. He had to make a choice, and make it soon. It was the lack of a choice that left him jumpy, susceptible to a jolt from either side.

"Norris . . . Hey, Norris . . ."

Miler's voice. He whirled to see the cop trotting down the steps behind him, his pudgy face glistening in the morning sun. "Your wife's on the phone, Norris. Says it's urgent."

When he got back to the office, he heard the faint, "Hello, *hello!*" coming from the receiver on the desk, caught it up quickly.

"Anne? What's wrong?"

Her voice was low and strained beneath a cheerful overnote. "Nothing's wrong, darling. We have a visitor. Come right home. Chief Franklin's here."

It knocked the breath out of him. He felt himself going white. He glanced at Chief Miler, sitting calmly nearby.

"Can you tell me about it now?" he asked her.

"Not very well. Please hurry home. He wants to talk to you about the K-99s."

"Have the two of them met?"

"Yes, they have." She paused, as if waiting for him to speak, then said, "Oh, *that!* Bouncey, honey—remember bouncey?"

"Good, I'll be right home." He hung up and started out.

"Troubles?" the chief called after him.

"Just a sick newt, if it's any of your business," he called back.

Franklin's helicopter was parked in the empty lot next door when Norris drove up in front of the house. The departmental chief heard the truck and came out on the porch to watch his agent walk up the path. His bulky body was loosely draped in gray tweeds, and his hawk face was a dark solemn mask. He greeted Norris with a slow, almost sarcastic nod.

"I see you don't read your mail. If you'd looked at it, you'd have known I was coming. I wrote you yesterday. "

"Sorry, Chief, I didn't have a chance to stop by the message office this morning."

Franklin grunted. "Then you don't know why I'm here?" "No, sir."

"Let's sit out on the porch," Franklin said, and perched his bony frame on the railing. "We've got to get busy on these Ber• muda-K-99s, Norris. How many have you got?"

"Thirty-four, I think."

"I counted thirty-five."

"Maybe you're right. I—I'm not sure."

"Found any deviants yet?"

"Uh—I haven't run any tests yet, sir."

Franklin's voice went sharp. "Do you need a test to know when a neutroid is talking a blue streak?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. We've found at least a dozen of Delmont's units that have mental ages that correspond to their physical age. What's more, they're functioning females, and they have normal pituitaries. Know what that means?"

"They won't take an age-set then," Norris said. "They'll grow to adulthood."

"And have children."

Norris frowned. "How can they have children? There aren't any males."

"No? Guess what we found in one of Delmont's incubators." "Not a—"

"Yeah. And it's probably not the first. This business about padding his quota is baloney! Hell, man, he was going to start his own black market! He finally admitted it, after twenty-hours' questioning without a letup. He was going to raise them, Norris. He was stealing them right out of the incubators before an inspector ever saw them. The K-99s—the numbered ones—are just the ones he couldn't get back. Lord knows how many males he's got hidden away someplace!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Do! What do you *think* we'll do? Smash the whole scheme, that's what! Find the deviants and kill them. We've got enough now for lab work."

Norris felt sick. He looked away. "I suppose you'll want me to handle the destruction, then."

Franklin gave him a suspicious glance. "Yes, but why do you ask? You *have* found one, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

A moan came from the doorway. Norris looked up to see his wife's white face staring at him in horror, just before she turned and fled into the house. Franklin's bony head lifted.

"I see," he said. "We have a fixation on our deviant. Very well, Norris, I'll take care of it myself. Where is it?"

"In the house, sir. My wife's bedroom."

"Get it."

Norris went glumly in the house. The bedroom door was locked.

"Honey," he called softly. There was no answer. He knocked gently.

A key turned in the lock, and his wife stood facing him. Her eyes were weeping ice.

"Stay back!" she said. He could see Peony behind her, sitting in the center of the floor and looking mystified.

Then he saw his own service revolver in her trembling hand. "Look, honey—it's *me*."

She shook her head. "No, it's not you. It's a man that wants to kill a little girl. Stay back."

"You'd shoot, wouldn't you?" he asked softly.

"Try to come in and find out," she invited.

"Let me have Peony."

She laughed, her eyes bright with hate. "I wonder where Terry went. I guess he died. Or adapted. I guess I'm a widow now. Stay back, Mister, or I'll kill you."

Norris smiled. "Okay, I'll stay back. But the gun isn't loaded."

She tried to slam the door; he caught it with his foot. She struck at him with the pistol, but he dragged it out of her hand. He pushed her aside and held her against the wall while she clawed at his arm.

"Stop it!" he said. "Nothing will happen to Peony, I promise you!" He glanced back at the child-thing, who had begun to cry. Anne subsided a little, staring at him angrily.

"There's no other way out, honey. Just trust me. She'll be all right."

Breathing quickly, Anne stood aside and watched him. "Okay, Terry. But if you're lying—tell me, is it murder to kill a man to protect a child?"

Norris lifted Peony in his arms. Her wailing ceased, but her tail switched nervously.

"In whose law book?" he asked his wife. "I was wondering the same thing." Norris started toward the door. "By the way—find my instruments while I'm outside, will you?"

"The dissecting instruments?" she gasped. "If you intend—"

"Let's call them surgical instruments, shall we? And get them sterilized."

He went on outside, carrying the child. Franklin was waiting for him in the kennel doorway.

"Was that Mrs. Norris I heard screaming?"

Norris nodded. "Let's get this over with. I don't stomach it so well." He let his eyes rest unhappily on the top of Peony's head.

Franklin grinned at her and took a bit of candy out of his pocket. She refused it and snuggled closer to Norris.

"When can I go home?" she piped. "I want Daddy."

Franklin straightened, watching her with amusement. "You're going home in a few minutes, little newt. Just a few minutes."

They went into the kennels together, and Franklin headed straight for the third room. He seemed to be enjoying the situation. Norris hating him silently, stopped at a workbench and pulled on a pair of gloves. Then he called after Franklin.

"Chief, since you're in there, check the outlet pressure while I turn on the main line, will you?"

Franklin nodded assent. He stood outside the gas-chamber, watching the dials on the door. Norris could see his back while he twisted the main-line valve.

"Pressure's up!" Franklin called.

"Okay. Leave the hatch ajar so it won't lock, and crack the intake valves. Read it again."

"Got a mask for me?"

Norris laughed. "If you're scared, there's one on the shelf. But just open the hatch, take a reading, and close it. There's no danger."

Franklin frowned at him and cracked the intakes. Norris quietly closed the main valve again.

"Drops to zero!" Franklin called.

"Leave it open, then. Smell anything?"

"No. I'm turning it off, Norris." He twisted the intakes. Simultaneously, Norris opened the main line.

"Pressure's up again!"

Norris dropped his wrench and walked back to the chamber, leaving Peony perched on the workbench.

"Trouble with the intakes," he said gruffly. "It's happened before. Mind getting your hands dirty with me, Chief?"

Franklin frowned irritably. "Let's hurry this up, Norris. I've got five territories to visit."

"Okay, but we'd better put on our masks." He climbed a metal ladder to the top of the chamber, leaned over to inspect the in-takes. On his way down, he shouldered a light-bulb over the door, shattering it. Franklin cursed and stepped back, brushing glass fragments from his head and shoulders.

"Good thing the light was off," he snapped.

Norris handed him the gasmask and put on his own. "The main switch is off," he said. He opened the intakes again. This time the dials fell to normal open-line pressure. "Well, look—it's okay," he called through the mask. "You sure it was zero before?"

"Of course I'm sure!" came the muffled reply.

"Leave it on for a minute. We'll see. I'll go get the newt. Don't let the door close, sir. It'll start the automatics and we can't get it open for half an hour."

"I know, Norris. Hurry up."

Norris left him standing just outside the chamber, propping the door open with his foot. A faint wind was coming through the opening. It should reach an explosive mixture quickly with the hatch ajar.

He stepped into the next room, waited a moment, and jerked the switch. The roar was deafening as the exposed tungsten filament flared and detonated the escaping anesthetic vapor. Norris went to cut off the main line. Peony was crying plaintively. He moved to the door and glanced at the smouldering remains of Franklin.

Feeling no emotion whatever, Norris left the kennels, carrying the sobbing child under one arm. His wife stared at him without understanding.

"Here, hold Peony while I call the police," he said.

"Police? What's happened?"

He dialed quickly. "Chief Miler? This is Norris. Get over here quick. My gas chamber exploded—killed Chief Agent Franklin. Man, it's awful! Hurry."

He hung up and went back to the kennels. He selected a normal Bermuda-K-99 and coldly killed it with a wrench. "You'll serve for a deviant," he said, and left it lying in the middle of the floor.

Then he went back to the house, mixed a sleeping capsule in a glass of water, and forced Peony to drink it.

"So she'll be out when the cops come," he explained to Anne. She stamped her foot. "Will you tell me what's happened?" "You heard me on the phone. Franklin accidentally died.

That's all you have to know."

He carried Peony out and locked her in a cage. She was too sleepy to protest, and she was dozing when the police came.

Chief Miler strode about the three rooms like a man looking for a burglar at midnight. He nudged the body of the neutroid with his foot. "What's this, Norris?"

"The deviant we were about to destroy. I finished her with a wrench."

"I thought you said there weren't any deviants."

"As far as the public's concerned, there aren't. I couldn't see that it was any of your business. It still isn't."

"I see. It may become my business, though. How'd the blast happen?"

Norris told him the story up to the point of the detonation. "The light over the door was loose. Kept flickering on and off. Franklin reached up to tighten it. Must have been a little gas in the socket. Soon as he touched it—wham!"

"Why was the door open with the gas on?"

"I told you—we were checking the intakes. If you close the door, it starts the automatics. Then you can't get it open till the cycle's finished."

"Where were you?"

"I'd gone to cut off the gas again."

"Okay, stay in the house until we're finished out here." When Norris went back in the house, his wife's white face turned slowly toward him.

She sat stiffly by the living room window, looking sick. Her voice was quietly frightened.

"Terry, I'm sorry about everything."

"Skip it."

"What did you do?"

He grinned sourly. "I adapted to an era. Did you find the instruments?"

She nodded. "What are they for?"

"To cut off a tail and skin a tattooed foot. Go to the store and buy some brown hair-dye and a pair of boy's trousers, age two.

Peony's going to get a crewcut. From now on, she's Mike." "We're class-C, Terry! We can't pass her off as our own." "We're class-A, honey. I'm going to forge a heredity certificate."

Anne put her face in her hands and rocked slowly to and fro. "Don't feel bad, baby. It was Franklin or a little girl. And from now on, it's society or the Norrises."

"What'll we do?"

"Go to Atlanta and work for Anthropos. I'll take up where Delmont left off."

"Terry!"

"Peony will need a husband. They may find all of Delmont's males. I'll *make* her one. Then we'll see if a pair of chimp-Ks can do better than their makers."

Wearily, he stretched out on the sofa.

"What about that priest? Suppose he tells about Peony. Sup-pose he guesses about Franklin and tells the police?"

"The police," he said, "would then smell a motive. They'd figure it out and I'd be finished. We'll wait and see. Let's don't talk; I'm tired. We'll just wait for Miler to come in."

She began rubbing his temples gently, and he smiled.

"So we wait," she said. "Shall I read to you, Terry?" "That would be pleasant," he murmured, closing his eyes.

She slipped away, but returned quickly. He heard the rustle of dry pages and smelled musty leather. Then her voice came, speaking old words softly. And he thought of the small child-thing lying peacefully in her cage while angry men stalked about her. A small life with a mind; she came into the world as quietly as a thief, a burglar in the crowded house of Man.

"I will send my fear before thee, and I will destroy the peoples before whom thou shalt come, sending hornets to drive out the Hevite and the Canaanite and the Hethite before thou enterest the land. Little by little I will drive them out before thee, till thou be increased, and dost possess the land. Then shalt thou be to me a new people, and I to thee a God . . ."

And on the quiet afternoon in May, while he waited for the police to finish puzzling in the kennels, it seemed to Terrell Norris that an end to scheming and pushing and arrogance was not too far ahead. It should be a pretty good world then.

He hoped Man could fit into it somehow.