Brutality is not an unfamiliar ingredient in science fiction, no more so than in many other types of fiction. Indeed many crime novels and “popular” novels are so heavily laced with brutality that the reader often skips over violent passages, muttering, “All right, all right—so what happened after her teeth were kicked out?”—the violence becoming an unreal plot gimmick with which the reader is not personally involved. Such is not the case in this shockingly persuasive comment on the cruelty man finds it possible to inflict on man.

WHO DREAMS OF IVY

by Will Worthington

It was the Week of Blindness. While Mr. Oakes bent over his power-mower and hummed to himself, the Mayor and six of his bully boys exercised their bloody prerogatives in the house across the street.

Stare hard at that little carburetor—not at the big, ragged star of blood on the face of Morgan’s house. Not at the headless carcass of Morgan’s terrier there on the grass. Barked at one of the uniforms, poor ignorant beast. Dropped her with his glorified cleaver and flung her against the house like a tomato. Big laughs all around. Dogs can’t know about the Week of Blindness. Be deaf also to Joanne Morgan screaming upstairs. The bedroom.

Oakes was a wishbone between Morgan’s house and his own. He had warned Al Morgan about the risk of civil disobedience, dammit, and he had told him and he had told him. Then his own wife had berated him for meddling. Made him feel like a spanked kid. To vindicate himself he had reopened the old argument about taking the kids to the May Festival. They would go, dammit. He had the Law on his side, that time, at least. Still . . . why did he feel like a dog with drawn teeth? The whole issue of the May Festival had been a red herring and he was
left with a gut-gripping sense of denial. Was a man not to be taken seriously in his own home? Could no one see how right he was? A wife should respect her husband—his authority. She—all of the ladies, in fact—seemed oblivious to the whole import of the Week of Blindness. To the whole grownup world, when it came to that.

A new crescendo of violent sounds from Morgan’s place. Could his old friend ever be helped again? On one hand was the horror which would not be denied; on the other, though, that sense of vindication—or rightness.

He could hear his wife and her friend Ethel Suggs, invisible but all too audible behind the front-door screen. They were having one of their endless, snarly, land-sakes type conversations, the theme of which seemed to be the manifest untrustworthiness of men whose lives are supposed to be dedicated to the repair and maintenance of automatic laundry equipment and dishwasher-garbage-disposal units, for heaven’s sakes. Mr. Oakes made the silent observation that the voices of women tended to become more aggressively nasal as Spring wore on into Summer.

The women whinier and the kids shriller. Kids!

Jerry, the boy, could not have selected a worse time to come home from school if he’d worked it out on a chart. It was not bad enough that he was scuffing the finish off his shoes and kicking an empty beer can; he had to sing. And of all the songs to be singing at this time, in this place! “Welcome May”!

Welcome May, indeed. The trick was to live through the last week of April. Children didn’t quite grasp the idea of the Week of Blindness either. Now the boy would notice the mess across the street—the gory splash on the front of the Morgans’ house, the dead dog on the lawn, the squad car parked at the crazy angle, its right front wheel up on the curb, the shards of broken glass everywhere. If those things didn’t excite his damnable boyish curiosity—delight, even—the drunken cursing and laughter would, not to mention the spasmodic screams.

But the boy didn’t seem to notice anything. Mr. Oakes watched his son and didn’t know whether to be relieved at this unexpected indifference or to begin worrying about some new, overriding complication. Twelve was a certain age, and would that it could be skipped or somehow circumvented.

“Hi, Dad.” Yes, he looked guilty. He had an envelope in his hand too. That picky, moralistic Harper. Where would a boy get an envelope but from the principal’s office?

Then the Mayor and his men came out. It was not enough that a citizen spent his life suspended over an abyss of anxiety; he was
put to the task of selecting over which pit to hang. Mr. Oakes decided to appear to concern himself with his probably erring son but to dedicate that somehow more incisive peripheral vision to the latent menace across the street.

“Well, son?”

The boy did a good job on his shoes, scraping them methodically from the outer periphery forward to the toe and turning his ankle unnaturally so that the sidewalk would get the full benefit of the abrading process. How much were boys’ shoes now—twelve dollars? Fifteen? One had to think of something.

The cops permitted themselves to stagger somewhat more wildly than the Mayor, who seemed to have achieved that stately form of drunkenness in which he moved like a balance climber on a treacherous hogsback, and even his belching and hiccupping had a pontifical quality. All their faces were swollen with edema and laughter—reddish with highlights of lavender—and if they came too close you would flinch a little waiting for them to burst.

The cops began to argue about where next to indulge their official prerogatives, and one of them kept repeating something like “Lesh go’t th’ Big Or’nge Drive-in ... Dames.” But the Mayor just stood there, swaying very slightly, his paunch thrust out importantly.

Mr. Oakes hoped that he wasn’t looking at him (Not my house! Not my family!), but without looking up he knew his hope was forlorn. The awful whimsy of the brutally drunk always seems to find its way to that person who is trying hardest not to exist at the moment. Some sort of psychic vacuum must be generated, which directs the homing process of the aggressor.

And of course it was at that moment, too, that his youngest, Linda, aged three and a half, had to begin whooping and laughing about “The funny Santa Claus” from her vantage point behind the screen. Why the hell couldn’t her mother make her be quiet? Mr. Oakes made another mental note to the effect that psychokinesis did not either work; not the tightest or most intense beam of concentrated thought from off his aching mind would reduce the child’s voice a single decibel, nor all his anguish hone down the edge of it. And so the Mayor came over.

“What’s your name, m’boy?” he asked Jerry.

“Jerry,” said Jerry.

“Your Honor,” said Mr. Oakes in a whisper with enough force behind it to rupture his larynx. The Mayor just looked at him slowly and with contempt needling its way out through the film of blear.

“Let the lad speak for himself, citizen,” snapped the Mayor.

“Of course, your Honor.”
The Mayor put a meaty hand on the boy’s shoulder, staggering slightly and causing the boy to buckle for a moment.

“Are you going to the May Festival, boy?”

Oakes wanted to be sick. He did not know how he would answer that question. What a blundering kid would do with such a diplomatic booby trap turned back thought. Civic duty on one hand, and on the other . . . Oh Lord!

“Yes sir!” said Jerry, grinning happily while his father listened to kettledrums somewhere deep in his ears. Couldn’t the fool kid be a little less gleeful? Cotton candy at a funeral. Nevertheless the Mayor beamed down upon the boy and said, “See that you do, son. See that you do.” Oakes was fascinated by the man’s face—Santa Claus with a killer’s eyes.

“See that he does,” said the Mayor, addressing Oakes. “You know your duties as a citizen, I hope.”

“Oh yes indeed, your Honor . . . Sir. We always . . . I mean, I never . . . that is . . .”

“Well see that he does, citizen. See that he does.”

Oakes hoped that the Mayor and his bully-boys would not hear his brain screaming in there by itself: Go now! Please, please just GO and let us alone! He could see the swaying cops across the street, caps askew, neckties loosened, clothes disordered in strangely disturbing ways. And then—was it possible?—the Mayor turned, snarled something at his men and they squeezed their hefty bodies into the squad car and with violent noises from engine and tires, incredibly, were gone.

Oakes was too relieved to realize that he had been humiliated. It did not occur to him for some time. He started to make a show of candor by tinkering with his power-mower again, but Jerry continued to stand there honing his shoes on the pavement, and then Oakes remembered the letter.

“Mr. Harper called me into his office, Dad. This note . . .”

“Well then, what have you done now?” said Oakes.

“Oh, no one special, particular thing,” said Jerry.

“Well go to my den and wait for me. We’ll talk about it.”

The truth was that Mr. Oakes did not feel overly stern at that moment. He did not feel that he had had time to recharge his fund of parental authority. It was not—he told himself—that he had too recently emerged from a frightening schoolboy dilemma of his own. What he felt, as his mind cleared, was a slow upsurge of certitude and a spreading glow of general rightness, which wanted some more profound—even saintly expression than a mere exercise in parental iron could afford. The latter would be too limiting, scarcely a worthy dramatic vehicle,
The week had begun badly and had seemed to degenerate steadily with the anxieties, tension and domestic unpleasantries which were to be expected during any Week of Blindness, but as Mr. Oakes felt himself being drawn towards the ravaged house across the street the downward journey took on the exhilarating pace and the exciting irreversibility of a long, steep schuss on a ski-slope. There was that intoxicating sense of rightness . . .

The door of Morgan's house was ajar, and he could see the boot-marks, frozen violence, on its panels as he walked in. He did not ring the bell or use the knocker. That would have been like saying "May I?" when you tried the door of an overturned automobile. Privacy is a sort of virginity which, once violated, even unjustly, is never again much regarded. Victims are victims.

The livingroom was a mass of broken furniture and glassware. What had not been broken was merely overturned, or had been thrown from one of the windows, from which not merely the glass but the sashes had been broken. Morgan was not in sight, but he could hear Morgan's wife sobbing upstairs. Finally he heard feeble groans from a closet. He raised his leg to smash the door with his heel but was arrested in mid-kick by a flat female voice behind his back. This unnerved him badly in spite of the familiarity of the voice, and he was shocked at the fragility of his own new confidence.

"Don't creep up on me that way!" he shouted, still standing on one foot like some sort of unwieldy wading bird.

"Land sakes," said Mrs. Oakes. "There is a key in the closet door, you know. Can't you be any better than they were?"

Ethel Suggs came in too, but she went upstairs to Morgan's wife immediately, with hardly a glance at the demolished parlor.

Damn women, anyway!

"Why don't you see to Joanne upstairs?"

It wasn't at all clear to Oakes what "seeing to" a woman in such circumstances could involve, but he felt an overpowering need now to say something in the imperative mood. His wife turned and left without replying.

He felt the need to act in a brusque, imperious way too, and he realized dimly that he was acting overzealously when he dragged Morgan from the closet—even before the battered man screamed. His shoulder was visibly out of joint or broken. In another place he might not have recognized his face. When Morgan finally spoke it was as unlikely as hearing a song come from a handful of feathers and carrion in a ditch.

"Leave me be, for God sake! Doctor . . . Joanne . . ."

"The women are looking out for
her, old man. Just relax now. Just relax . . .

The brutal part of it was that he knew how fatuous it sounded.

"Just relax," said Morgan, and then he laughed. Oakes wished he hadn't. He was sure that he'd never heard such an awful sound from a man. "Just lie back and enjoy it, eh? It's all over now, and nothing matters. We're all safe . . . is that what you mean? Safe for oh lordy such a long, long time."

Oakes heard one of the women come downstairs and begin dialing the phone. Then he heard himself talking to Morgan, and it was like a dream he'd had earlier in the week. In this dream he saw himself being dragged into a mare's nest of broken bones and gobbets of red flesh by long tendrils of what must have been dark green ivy. He wanted to help himself—this other helpless man who just submitted to the green tentacles—but his feet were as nerveless as the clay that held them fast. All he could do was talk, talk, talk. He sounded like a judge or like a sanctimonious gymnasium instructor he'd had back in school.

"But that's how things are, old man. It's a shame it had to be you and Joanne, but that's the way it is . . . the system . . ."

He heard himself utter every platitude about civic duty and Our Debt to the Community and the Tradition of Sacrifice that he him-

self had ever heard from loudspeakers and lecture platforms in his whole life.

And this too was irreversible. It was like the dream.

"Why don't you let him alone?" said his wife, who bent over Morgan and began swabbing his face delicately with a moist washcloth, "Hasn't there been enough meddling for one day?"

"It's all right. Quite all right," said Morgan weakly. The man on the floor permitted himself a somewhat damaged smile. "Old Oakesy is entirely right, Mrs. Oakes."

Back in his own house, Oakes poured himself a bit more than four fingers of brandy and drained it without tasting it particularly. It was good brandy, and at any other time he would have treated it as such. He was pouring another when his wife came through the door.

"Jerry has a note from his principal."

"I know that," said Oakes, unable to keep from sounding a little like an angry school principal himself.

"Well you are going to talk to him, aren't you?"

"I am, when I'm ready, going to talk to him. Yes." He drained off the second dollop of brandy and when it had settled inside, eased forth a tentative belch.

"Well drinking, I mean. . . ." suggested Mrs. Oakes, now a bit
anxiously. "Is it quite the thing when you're..."

"The thing," roared Oakes, now suddenly freed from some constricting inner shell, "...is that I've had it up to the earlobes with being told what-for in my own house. I just may get thoroughly bagged before I talk to anybody about anything...ever! Have I made myself completely clear?"

Mrs. Oakes actually shrank and whimpered some sort of apology. Oakes was mildly surprised at this reaction, inasmuch as it was the first time in his memory that such a thing had happened, but his surprise did not sap his momentum. Like many men who rarely permit themselves the luxury of anger, he wanted to ride his to the end of the line.

"And furthermore, we are not going to argue about the May Festival any more. We're going and the kids are going, just like any other good citizens. That's that, and there's nothing more to discuss. Hear me?"

Mrs. Oakes was fighting tears now, but in a small, strange voice she managed to answer, and she even managed to hang a shred of opinion on her answer.

"Of course, dear. Of course. But you know what I meant. I meant...do we have to stay to the end? The whole thing is what I mean. Linda is just a little girl. There are just a few years when they don't have to..."

Oakes saw that his wife was going to blubber if he let the conversation go any further and that, he knew, would be the intolerable extra thing that would overbalance that rare feeling of utter rightness, which had come to him, it seemed, only after endless strife. The glow was too hard-won and precious to lose; he felt as though all his forty-odd years were invested in it. He withdrew then to his study where the boy waited with his nasty little token from Mr. Harper.

Jerry looked guilty and scared, and this only inflamed Mr. Oakes and fed his rectitude. It was as though he sat on a see-saw of righteousness and the growing weight of any guilt not clearly his own raised him by that much, inversely.

"Well, let's see Harper's letter."

The boy handed him the letter. It was in an envelope but was not sealed.

"You read it, I suppose."

"No, Dad. No, I didn't. I wanted to though."

Oakes found himself wishing that the envelope had been sealed so that he could have ripped it open with a fine savage gesture of impatience and contempt. The letter was lengthy:

Dear Mr. Oakes,

It is sometimes difficult for an educator to draw the line between responsibility properly his own
and that which belongs to the par-
ent . . .

How mealy-mouthed could you get?

. . . Gerald is an apt student and shows much promise. My concern is that, in one important sense, he displays too much promise. I regret to say that the boy has demonstrated certain tendencies, in the classroom but more particularly in the schoolyard during play-periods, which concern me as a teacher and should, I feel, receive corrective attention by you as a parent.

I feel that it is not too late to rectify these minor flaws of character, and I feel especially that this fortunate juncture not only in the boy's life but in the life of the community, offers the best and quite possibly the only opportunity to correct these unfortunate tendencies before they become irrevocable and possibly tragic.

Because of the nature of these difficulties, I would prefer to discuss Gerald's problems with you or with Mrs. Oakes in the privacy of my office, at your convenience, of course.

Greetings of the season to you and your family.

Very sincerely,
Wallace P. Harper

"He feels! He would prefer!" said Oakes, beginning a climb to the summit of rage, then becoming conscious of his large-eyed son and checking himself. It was one thing to rage at Harper's chalky verbosity and his cowardly avoidance of the point of all this solicitude, but it would not do to let the boy see how it enraged him.

"I'll have a talk with that old-maid schoolteacher right now," he shouted nevertheless, and he gathered up his coat, his hat and a large cigar and left the screen-door twanging behind him. It did not occur to him to ask Jerry what it was all about.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" said Mrs. Oakes as she stood in the doorway wringing her thin hands and watching Oakes stride down the street.

But she didn't try to stop him.

Wallace Harper was a frail, gray man who had grown a resilient armor of soft speech and manners about himself. He'd had to. He was a man who had coped with things, or, as it usually happened, with people who presented themselves to him when their grievances were most active and, consequently, their manners at their worst. He coped with city and state officials, with recalcitrant students, with teachers on the point of joining foreign armies, and with parents who knew—just as Mr. Harper well knew—that their children were unique and special. They were all, of course—
grownups and children alike, the arrogant, demanding, anguished, rebellious, or despairing—all unique and special, and each requiring his custom blend of patience and toughness. An English teacher who had been trying to tell her literature students about imagery once compared Mr. Harper to a chewed-out bit of gristle. Mr. Oakes was not the first person who had raged at him that day. One did not expect the Week of Blindness to be a serene and tolerant time.

"Just what the hell do you mean by 'tendencies'?” Mr. Oakes had begun, even before Harper had offered him a chair in his office. "You leave me with the idea that the boy has committed some kind of perversion or something. Just what do you mean by 'unfortunate tendencies'?"

Mr. Oakes knew that his breath, by this time, would kill low-flying hawks, but far from being shy about this, he took a certain pride in it. He was, after all, an adult—a citizen. He leaned unnecessarily close to Harper as he shouted. Harper neither flinched nor frowned, and his voice, though quiet, had no quaver in it.

"I'll come to the point, now that you're here, Mr. Oakes. The tendencies of which I spoke are not perversions in the sense of . . . say, the sordid things one hears about. Certainly not. But I am concerned with something not entirely removed from these other things—something at least potentially graver, Mr. Oakes.”

Oakes shrank a little. The protest he'd been on the point of hurling bomblike into Harper's precise phraseology suddenly hung fire. "Graver? Wha . . ."

"I am talking about leadership tendencies, Mr. Oakes.”

Oakes heard himself protesting, denying and rejecting even before the full enormity of the suggestion had penetrated. It was the kind of thing that was too large to attack with the weapons of civilization. He rose to his feet and shook both fists at Harper, who still did not flinch.

"Just what the hell do you mean. What leadership tendencies? How do you know? Where do you get off saying a thing like that about a kid. You damned civil service intellectuals are a danger with your unfounded charges! A danger, Harper. Just what the hell do you mean?"

"I mean,” said Harper, scarcely raising his voice at all, “that Gerald frequently behaves just as you are behaving right now. Overassertive, overaggressive, over . . ."

“A positive danger!” Mr. Oakes was still saying. But he had a choice: he could clobber Harper and make matters worse, or he could hear him out and take his anger and embarrassment outdoors. Something beyond mere petulance had him now, some-
thing foreign, something not new but connected with the Week of Blindness, or with the bad dream about the ivy and the mare’s nest. It was that immovable sense of ultimate rightness again. It—not mere timidity, which he did not feel—governed. He listened. Harper went on as though never interrupted.

"I would suggest, Mr. Oakes, that you be very sure that Gerald attends the May Festival tomorrow. Not just TV, you understand. The real thing with all the sights, sounds and... well atmosphere of the occasion. It will not do for children to see only half of reality, Mr. Oakes. The rewards, the privileges, the prerogatives. They must also see..."

Oakes had regained it by now—the rightness that made anger unnecessary. He rose, and when he found his voice, it sounded different too—the voice and something about the language.

"We do not need to be advised of our civic responsibilities, Harper. We require no instruction from you."

Mr. Harper, still not put out, merely nodded slowly as Oakes left his office.

Mr. Oakes felt a little raw inside but oddly steady when the alarm went off the next morning. He had slept less than an hour, having been unable to drop off even after the town bells had rung out the tidings that the Seven Years and the Week of Blindness were over at last. Most fathers in the town would have gone to bed much relieved after that, and a younger Oakes would have gone out to join in the revelry, but not this Oakes. He had done a little more drinking, the better to enjoy or to control this unreal feeling left over from the dream, or from the incident in the Morgans’ house, or the quarrels with his wife or with Wallace Harper. It was all of these things, he supposed, but it would not be explained away. His face felt tight, his eyes were a little puffy and he got unpleasant repeats of brandy from time to time but with it all there was this peculiar feeling of steadiness, and it was part of the Rightness too.

His wife had on her bleak, long-suffering expression, but he found that this did not concern him as it might have at another time. He was more interested in the excitement shown by Jerry and little Linda. Linda was gleeful because it was going to be a Festival—that was enough. You could hear the bands playing already. Jerry was excited too, but in a more solemn twelve-year-old way. He could remember another such day. It had been a long time ago and he hadn’t been much older than his baby sister now was, but in the meantime he had learned, through kid channels mostly, what was implied. Jerry walked with his moth-
er, who had a tendency to drag, but little Linda heard the bands and the fire-crackers and kept running ahead, laughing and squealing her impatience with the old folks.

Most of the townspeople were already in the square and the adjoining streets. Ed Feister had set up an extra bar—planks on beer-kegs—in front of his tavern, and he was already serving the free beer, mostly to people who were still at it from the night before. A crude sign read, “Bring your own glasses,” and one man lurched joyously by with a small fishbowl brimming with the brew. Old Pop Pappadakis had moved his soft-drink and hot-dog wagon right into the square and was enjoying the hectic prosperity that falls to such men on festive occasions.

There was the traditional rivalry of the brass bands. The Grange was blatting away at one end of the square while the volunteer firemen were meeting their challenge with the largest Glockenspiel section in the state. The total effect was not music, but it was something stirring and contagious which quickened the feet.

It was also a day for people to proclaim their membership in things. Lodge members fell out in full regalia as did the veteran’s organizations, and some men clearly had the problem of representing both affiliations. Oakes bumped into one citizen who wore the garb of an oriental potentate except for the cap, which was of the overseas variety and had the name of an old soldiers’ club embroidered on it. In fact the only citizens consistently and austerely costumed, except for the police, were the Knight-Protectors of the Wood with their tall, pointed penitents’ hoods and their dark red robes. Little Linda remarked that they looked like pencils, but something about them chilled Oakes so that the excitement which had been a warmth within him seemed to constrict and cool until nothing was left but that joyless feeling of rightness and inevitable forward motion.

The Grange band sounded a long, sepulchral fanfare and the crowd fell suddenly silent. There was the sound of a siren down one of the side streets, and the Knight-Protectors began urging the people back to clear the center of the square.

Then Oakes noticed and identified the smell of creosote, stronger and more pervading than surrounding sweat and beer-steam.

Then he saw the Stake with its surrounding bundles of kindling and small logs. It had been there all the time; he simply hadn’t looked that way. The feeling of rightness was now a distinct physical thing like the touch of something cold in the small of the back, but still the feeling informed him only of itself and not of its meaning.
When the Mayor's squad-car stopped at the edge of the square the crowd was so quiet that you could hear the driver pull up the emergency brake, and when the Mayor squeezed himself from the door of the car you could hear his joints pop and the fibers of his trousers strain against his body.

"This is the Mayor," Oakes heard himself say to Jerry, who stood very silently by. He could not have explained why he chose to make this unnecessary observation, but the need to instruct and point things out was upon him. That he should be talking when the rest of the town was so silent was also part of the Rightness.

"Notice his chain of office," Oakes observed, and Jerry looked very pained because several people had now turned around to look—not at the Mayor, nor even thegrim Stake—but at his father. Still Oakes went on. One could only go on.

"The cylindrical object hanging from the chain of office is a steel capsule filled with explosive. Heat will detonate a cap set in the end of it."

Now all past anxiety, humiliation, deprivation and pain were apportioned ingredients, purposefully and not carelessly thrown into a huge bubbling cauldron, and within the cauldron something recognizable was taking form as the lines and masses of a picture emerge from a print in a bath of developer—recognizable and cohesive even if not meaningful: The Rightness, now pressing like a spear-point into the small of his back. No retreat now. No abdication.

The Mayor had lost some but not all of his flush of the day before. He staggered visibly, but it was merely a weakness of the knees; he held grimly to the invisible line between the car and the Stake. Four Knight-Proectors moved forward to assist him. A tall, gaunt man in a white robe also came forward and spoke to the Mayor. He was Marsh Griffith, an undertaker on ordinary days, today the Mayor's Chaplain. Griffith wore the gold tiara of his office, and above this metal band his bald head shone in a way that was more emphatic than ordinary baldness should have been. From the folds of his robe he drew an ivy wreath, and when he placed it on the Mayor's head there was a murmur from the crowd, low and heavy like the groaning of huge trees in a rising wind. The wreath settled over one of the Mayor's ears, but no one moved to straighten it. The Mayor shook his head and waved Griffith away with a limp gesture of his hand.

Little girls wearing starched white dresses so short as to be little more than embellished bloomers, emerged from the crowd with baskets of flowers. They went about the work of strewing the flowers
before the Mayor’s feet and along the line of march with the prim efficiency of their kind, and while some were a little awkward, none showed any sign of timidity.

“This steel capsule,” continued Oakes, paying no attention to his son, “is actually a powerful grenade. If the chain of office were left in place, the grenade would go off as the flames rose. It would cave in the victim’s rib-cage like a berry basket and stop his heart instantly.”

Jerry moved away from his father, but if Oakes saw him he did not care. He kept talking, and he knew that he sounded like an officious teacher whose memory he still despised. Mrs. Oakes clutched little Linda to her thigh and extended her arm towards Jerry, and Oakes ignored that too.

“The Mayor would die quite painlessly if someone prevented someone else from removing the chain of office before the torch was thrown.”

Young Jerry now stood beside his mother, but he watched his father steadily and with troubled eyes.

“But no one ever has.”

Oakes then saw that people were watching him and shrinking from him. As though ushered by invisible sentries, they cleared a corridor in front of him, and there was no question in his mind but that he should pursue this corridor wherever it led. Ignoring the white faces on either side, he walked straight towards the Stake, against which the Mayor already stood with a paunch thrust out as importantly as ever. A Knight-Pro- tector with a length of rope was pondering whether to pass the rope over, under or around the spherical mass. He finally wrapped the ropes over and then under the paunch, and the Mayor stood alone, legs buckling somewhat but held upright by his bonds.

Oakes could not have said whether the distance from the periphery of the square to the Stake itself was several paces or several miles. The Rightness was now in full charge and considerations of distance belonged to another time. One’s hearing changed too. Oakes could hear birds singing at a great distance and the sound of a faint wind in the trees around the square, but he did not hear any sound from the people. They had become statues. It did not seem likely that they had ever been more than statues.

A Knight-Protector holding a blazing kerosene torch turned and looked at Oakes as he approached, then halted, then stood back respectfully.

When he stood before the fat man against the Stake he saw that tears ran down his cheeks, but the old contempt still needled through the tears and rheum. The Mayor looked smaller than he had before, but the contempt was sharper.
Oakes felt it impinge against the Rightness like a stream of some cold fluid against a hot coal, but it was not enough to turn him back or even make him flinch.

"Take it Oakes," growled the Mayor through the phlegm in his throat. "You were born for it. Take it and to hell with you!"

Gently Oakes removed the chain of office from the neck of the fat man, and then he turned towards the assembled people and hung it around his own neck. It was remarkably heavy.

"The torch," said Oakes to the waiting executioner, and one of the bands struck up the May Song, which sounded like a blend of "The Old Oaken Bucket" and "Men of Harlech" with long, anguished embellishments from the brass section.

Oakes did not look back at the swiftly rising flames, but walked steadily through the corridor of silent citizens and Knight-Protectors towards the waiting police car. There was no screaming behind him, only a sound of gugug-gug-gug, like the protests of a man in a dentist's chair.

"Have a good Seven Years" said someone in the crowd as he neared the waiting car. It was Al Morgan, his arm in a sling and his face half obscured with adhesive.

The little knot of people waiting around the car included his wife, Ethel and George Suggs from next door, his son Jerry, and Mr. Harper. They were all smiling weakly as he approached and their eyes were tired and unsurprised. There were quiet, diffident murmurs from a few people close to him—perfunctory congratulations and wishes for a good Seven Years, all addressed to "Your Honor", but most of the people were silent. The only sounds of real gaiety, in fact, came from little Linda, who was paying no attention to her father at all. She was jumping up and down in an effort to see the rising column of black smoke beyond the barrier of tall adult figures.

"Smells just like meat," she squealed, and then giggled wildly as children do at such times.

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