

Bright Phoenix

(Published 1963, Written 1948)

Ray Bradbury

One day in April 2022 the great library door slammed flat shut. Thunder.

Hullo, I thought.

At the bottom step glowering up at my desk, in a United Legion uniform which no longer hung as neatly upon him as it had twenty years before, stood Jonathan Barnes.

Seeing his bravado momentarily in pause, I recalled ten thousand Veterans' speeches sprayed from his mouth, the endless wind-whipped flag parades he had hustled, panted through, the grease-cold chicken and green-pea patriot banquets he had practically cooked himself; the civic drives stillborn in his hat.

Now Jonathan Barnes stomped up the creaking main library steps, giving each the full downthrust of his power, weight, and new authority. His echoes, rushed back from the vast ceilings, must have shocked even him into better manners, for when he reached my desk, I felt his warmly liquored breath stir mere whispers on my face.

"I'm here for the books, Tom."

I turned casually to check some index cards. "When they're ready, we'll call you."

"Hold on," he said. "Wait—"

"You're here to pick up the Veterans' Salvage books for hospital distribution?"

"No, no," he cried. "I'm here for all the books."

I gazed at him.

"Well," he said, "most of them."

"Most?" I blinked once, then bent to riffle the files. "Only ten volumes to a person at a time. Let's see. Here! Why, you let your card expire when you were twenty years old, thirty years ago. See?" I held it up.

Barnes put both hands on the desk and leaned his great bulk upon them. "I see that you are interfering." His face began to color, his breath to husk and rattle. "I don't need a card for my work!"

So loud was his whisper that a myriad of white pages stopped butterflying under far green lamps in the big stone rooms. Faintly, a few books thudded shut.

Reading people lifted their serene faces. Their eyes, made antelope by the time and weather of this place, pleaded for silence to return, as it always must when a tiger has come and gone from a special fresh-water spring, as this surely was. Looking at these upturned, gentle

faces I thought of my forty years of living, working, even sleeping here among hidden lives and vellumed, silent, and imaginary people. Now, as always, I considered my library as a cool cavern or fresh, ever growing forest into which men passed from the heat of the day and the fever of motion to refresh their limbs and bathe their minds an hour in the grass-shade illumination, in the sound of small breezes wandered out from the turning and turning of the pale soft book pages. Then, better focused, their ideas rehung upon their frames, their flesh made easy on their bones, men might walk forth into the blast furnace of reality, noon, mob-traffic, improbably senescence, inescapable death. I had seen thousands careen into my library starved, and leave well-fed. I had watched lost people find themselves. I had known realists to dream and dreamers to come awake in this marble sanctuary where silence was a marker in each book.

“Yes,” I said at last. “But it will only take a moment to re-register you. Fill in this new card. Give two reliable references-“

“I don’t need references,” said Jonathan Barnes, “to burn books!”

“Contrarily,” said I. “You’ll need even more, to do that.”

“My men are my references. They’re waiting outside for the books. They’re dangerous.”

“Men like that always are.”

“No no, I mean the books, idiot. The books are dangerous. Good God, no two agree. All the damn double-talk. All the lousy babel and slaver and spit. So, we’re out to simplify, clarify, hew to the line. We need-“

“To talk this over,” said I, taking up a copy of Demosthenes, tucking it under my arm. “It’s time for my dinner. Join me, please-“

I was halfway to the door when Barnes, wide-eyed, suddenly remembered the silver whistle hung from his blouse, jammed it to his wet lips, and gave it a piercing blast.

The library doors burst wide. A flood of black charcoal-burned uniformed men collided boisterously upstairs.

I called, softly.

They stopped, surprised.

“Quietly,” I said.

Barnes seized my arm. “Are you opposing due process?”

“No,” I said. “I won’t even ask to see your property invasion permit. I wish only silence as you work.”

The readers at the tables had leaped up at the storm of feet. I patted the air. They sat back down and did not glance up again at these men crammed into their tight dark char-smear suits who stared at my mouth now as if they disbelieved my cautions. Barnes nodded. The

men moved swiftly, on tiptoe, through the big library rooms. With extra care, with proper stealth, they raised the windows. Soundlessly, whispering, they collected books from the shelves to toss down toward the evening yard below. Now and again they scowled at the readers who calmly went on leafing through their books, but made no move to seize these volumes, and continued emptying the shelves.

“Good,” said I.

“Good?” asked Barnes.

“Your men can work without you. Take five.”

And I was out in the twilight so quickly he could only follow, bursting with unvoiced questions. We crossed the green lawn where a huge portable Hell was drawn up hungrily, a fat black tar-daubed own from which shot red-orange and gaseous blue flames into which men were shoveling the wild birds, the literary doves which soared crazily down to flop broken-winged, the precious flights poured from every window to thump the earth, to be kerosene-soaked and chucked in the gulping furnace. As we passed this destructive if colorful industry, Barnes mused.

“Funny. Should be crowds, a thing like this. But... no crowd. How do you figure?”

I left him. He had to run to catch up.

In the small café across the street we took a table and Barnes, irritable for no reason he could say, called out, “Service! I’ve got to get back to work!”

Walter, the proprietor, strolled over, with some dog-eared menus. Walter looked at me. I winked.

Walter looked at Jonathan Barnes.

Walter said, “Come live with me and by my love; and we will all the pleasures prove.”

“What?” Jonathan Barnes blinked.

“Call me Ishmael,” said Walter.

“Ishmael,” I said. “We’ll have coffee to start.”

Walter came back with the coffee.

“Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright,” he said. “In the forest of the night.”

Barnes stared after the man who walked away casually. “What’s eating him? Is he nuts?”

“No,” I said. “But go on with what you were saying back at the library. Explain.”

“Explain?” said Barnes. “My God, you’re all sweet reason. All right, I will explain. This is a tremendous experiment. A test town. If the burning works here, it’ll work anywhere. We don’t burn everything, no no. You noticed, my men cleaned only certain shelves and categories?”

We'll eviscerate about forty-nine point two percent. Then we'll report our success to the overall government committee-

"Excellent," I said.

Barnes eyed me. "How can you be so cheerful?"

"Any library's problem," I said. "is where to put the books. You've helped me solve it."

"I thought you'd be... afraid."

"I've been around Trash Men all my life."

"I beg pardon?"

"Burning is burning. Whoever does it is a Trash Man."

"Chief Censor, Green Town, Illinois, damn it!"

A new man, a waiter, came with the coffee pot steaming.

"Hullo, Keats," I said.

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," said the waiter.

"Keats?" said the Chief Censor. "His name isn't Keats."

"Silly of me," I said. "This is a Greek restaurant. Right, Plato?"

The waiter refilled my cup. "The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness... This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears he is a protector."

Barnes leaned forward to squint at the waiter, who did not move. Then Barnes busied himself blowing on his coffee: "As I see it, our plan is simple as one and one make two..."

The waiter said, "I have hardly ever known a mathematician who was capable of reasoning."

"Damn it!" Barnes slammed his cup down. "Peace! Get away while we eat, you, Keats, Plato, Holdridge, that's your name. I remember now, Holdridge! What's all this other junk?"

"Just fancy," said I. "Conceit."

"Damn fancy, and to hell with conceit, you can eat alone, I'm getting out of this madhouse." And Barnes gulped his coffee as the waiter and proprietor watched and I watched him gulping and across the street the bright bonfire in the gut of the monster device burned fiercely. Our silent watching caused Barnes to freeze at last with the cup in his hand and the coffee dripping off his chin. "Why? Why aren't you yelling? Why aren't you fighting me?"

"But I am fighting," I said, taking the book from under my arm. I tore a page from

Demosthenes, let Barnes see the name, rolled it into a fine Havana cigar shape, lit it, puffed it, and said, "Though a man escape every other danger, he can never wholly escape those who do not want such a person as he is to exist."

Barnes was on his feet, yelling, the "cigar" was torn from my mouth, stomped on, and the Chief Censor was out of the door, almost in one motion.

I could only follow.

On the sidewalk, Barnes collided with an old man who was entering the café. The old man almost fell. I grabbed his arm.

"Professor Einstein," I said.

"Mr. Shakespeare," he said.

Barnes fled.

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I found him on the lawn by the old and beautiful library where the dark men, who wafted of kerosene perfume from their every motion, still dumped vast harvestings of gun-shot dead pigeon, dying pheasant books, all autumn gold and silver from the high windows. But...softly. And while this still, almost serene, pantomime continued, Barnes stood screaming silently, the scream clenched in his teeth, tongue, lips, cheeks, gagged back so none could hear. But the scream flew out of his wild eyes in flashes and was held for discharge in his knotted fists, and shuttled in colors about his face, now pale, now red as he glared at me, at the café, at the damned proprietor, at the terrible waiter who now waved amiably back at him. The Baal incinerator rumbled its appetite, spark-burned the lawn. Barnes stared full at the blind yellow-red sun in its raving stomach.

"You," I called up easily at the men who paused. "City Ordinance. Closing time is nine sharp. Please be done by then. Wouldn't want to break the law-Good Evening, Mr. Lincoln."

"Four Score," said a man, passing, "and seven years-"

"Lincoln?" The Chief Censor turned slowly. "That's Bowman. Charlie Bowman. I know you, Charlie, come back here, Charlie, Chuck!"

But the man was gone, and cars drove by, and now and again as the burning progressed men called to me and I called back, and whether it was, "Mr. Poe!" or hullo to some small bleak stranger with a name like Freud, each time I called in good humor and they replied, Mr. Barnes twitched as if another arrow had pierced, sunk deep in his quivering bulk and he were dying slowly of a hidden seepage of fire and raging life. And still no crowd gathered to watch the commotion.

Suddenly, for no discernable reason, Mr. Barnes shut his eyes, opened his mouth wide, gathered air, and shouted, "Stop!"

The men ceased shoveling the books out of the window above.

“But,” I said, “it’s not closing time...”

“Closing time! Everybody out!” Deep holes had eaten away the center of Jonathan Barnes’ eyes. Within, there was no bottom. He seized the air. He pushed down. Obediently, all the windows crashed like guillotines, chiming their panes.

The dark men, bewildered, came out and down the steps.

“Chief Censor.” I handed him a key which he would not take, so I forced his fist shut on it. “Come back tomorrow, observe silence, finish up.”

The Chief Censor let his bullet-hole gaze, his emptiness, search without finding me.

“How...how long has this gone on...?”

“This?”

“This...and...that...and them.”

He tried but could not nod at the café, the passing cars, the quiet readers descending from the warm library now, nodding as they passed into cold dark, friends, one and all. His blind man’s rectal gaze ate holes where my face was. His tongue, anesthetized, stirred. “Do you think you can all fool me, me, me?”

I did not answer.

“How can you be sure,” he said. “I won’t burn people, as well as books?”

I did not answer.

I left him standing in the complete night.

Inside, I checked out the last volumes of those leaving the library now with night come on and shadows everywhere and the great Baal machinery churning smoke, its fire dying in the spring grass where the Chief Censor stood like a poured cement statue, not seeing his men drive off. His fist suddenly flew high. Something swift and bright flew up to crack the front-door glass. Then Barnes turned and walked after the incinerator as it trundled off, a fat black funeral urn unraveling long tissues and scarves of black bunting smoke and fast-vanishing crepe.

I sat listening.

In the far rooms, filled with soft jungle illumination, there was a lovely autumnal turning of leaves, faint sifts of breathing, infinitesimal quirks, the gesture of a hand, the glint of a ring, the intelligent squirrel blink of an eye. Some nocturnal voyager sailed between the half-empty stacks. In porcelain serenity, the restroom waters flowed down to a still and distant sea. My people, my friends, one by one, passed from the cool marble, the green glades, out into a night better than we could ever have hoped for.

At nine, I went out to pick up the thrown front-door key. I let the last reader, an old man, out with me, and as I was locking up, he took a deep breath of cool air, looked at the town, the

spark-burned lawn, and said, "Will they come back again, ever?"

"Let them. We're ready for them, aren't we?"

The old man took my hand. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together."

We moved down the steps.

"Good evening, Isaiah," I said.

"Mr. Socrates," he said. "Good night."

And each walked his own way, in the dark.