



HEY READ THE LONG AFTERNOON THROUGH, while the cold November rain fell from the sky upon the quiet house. They sat in the hall because the parlor was so empty and gray-looking without its wall lit with orange and yellow confetti and skyrockets and women in gold-mesh dresses and men in black velvet pulling one-hundred-pound rabbits from silver hats. The parlor was dead and Mildred kept peering in at it with a blank expression as Montag paced the floor and came back and squatted down and read a page as many as ten times, aloud.

"We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a drop which makes it run over; so in a series of kindnesses there is at last one which makes the heart run over."

Montag sat listening to the rain.

"Is that what it was in the girl next door? I've tried so hard to figure."

"She's dead. Let's talk about someone alive, for goodness' sake."

Montag did not look back at his wife as he went trembling along the hall to the kitchen, where he stood a long time watching the rain hit the windows before he came back down the hall in the gray light, waiting for the tremble to subside.

He opened another book.

"That favourite subject, Myself."

He squinted at the wall. "That favourite subject Myself."

"I understand *that* one," said Mildred.

"But Clarisse's favorite subject wasn't herself. It was everyone else, and me. She was the first person in a good many years I've really liked. She was the first person I can remember who looked straight at me as if I counted." He lifted the two books. "These men have been dead a long time, but I know their words point, one way or another, to Clarisse."

Outside the front door, in the rain, a faint scratching.

Montag froze. He saw Mildred thrust herself back to the wall and gasp.

"Someone—the door—why doesn't the door-voice tell us—"

"I shut it off."

Under the doorsill, a slow, probing sniff, an exhalation of electric steam.

Mildred laughed. "It's only a dog, that's what! You want me to shoo him away?"

"Stay where you are!"

Silence. The cold rain falling. And the smell of blue electricity blowing under the locked door.

"Let's get back to work," said Montag, quietly.

Mildred kicked at a book. "Books aren't people. You read and I look all around, but there isn't *anybody!*"

He stared at the parlor that was dead and gray as the waters of an ocean that might teem with life if they switched on the electronic sun.

"Now," said Mildred, "My 'family' is people. They tell me things: *I* laugh, *they* laugh! And the colors!"

"Yes, I know."

"And besides, if Captain Beatty knew about those books—" She thought about it. Her face grew amazed and then horrified. "He might come and burn the house and the 'family.' That's awful! Think of our investment. Why should I read? What *for?*"

"What for! Why!" said Montag. "I saw the damnedest snake in the world the other night. It was dead but it was alive. It could see but it couldn't see. You want to *see* that snake? It's at Emergency Hospital where they filed a report on all the junk the snake got out of you! Would you like to go and check their file? Maybe you'd look under Guy Montag or maybe under Fear or War. Would you like to go to that house that burnt last night? And rake ashes for the bones of the woman who set fire to her own house! What about Clarisse McClellan, where do we look for her? The morgue! Listen!"

The bombers crossed the sky and crossed the sky over the house, gasping, murmuring, whistling like an immense, invisible fan, circling in emptiness.

"Jesus God," said Montag. "Every hour so many damn things in the sky! How in hell did those bombers get up there every single second of our lives! Why doesn't someone want to talk about it! We've started and won two atomic wars since 1990! Is it because we're having so much fun at home we've forgotten the world? Is it because we're so rich and the rest of the world's so poor and we just don't care if they are? I've heard rumors; the world is starving, but we're well fed."

Is it true, the world works hard and we play? Is that why we're hated so much? I've heard the rumors about hate, too, once in a long while, over the years. Do you know why? I don't, that's *sure!* Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave. They just *might* stop us from making the same damn insane mistakes! I don't hear those idiot bastards in your parlor talking about it. God, Millie, don't you *see?* An hour a day, two hours, with these books, and maybe..."

The telephone rang. Mildred snatched the phone.

"Ann!" She laughed. "Yes, the White Clown's on tonight!"

Montag walked to the kitchen and threw the book down. "Montag," he said, "you're really stupid. Where do we go from here? Do we turn the books in, forget it?" He opened the book to read over Mildred's laughter.

Poor Millie, he thought. Poor Montag, it's mud to you, too. But where do you get help, where do you find a teacher this late?

Hold on. He shut his eyes. Yes, of course, Again he found himself thinking of the green park a year ago. The thought had been with him many times recently but now he remembered how it was that day in the city park when he had seen that old man in the black suit hide something, quickly, in his coat.

... The old man leapt up as if to run. And Montag said, "Wait!"

"I haven't done anything!" cried the old man, trembling.

"No one said you did."

They had sat in the green soft light without saying a word for a moment and then Montag talked about the weather and then the old man responded with a pale voice. It was a strange quiet meeting. The old man admitted to being a retired English Professor

who had been thrown out upon the world forty years ago when the last liberal arts college shut for lack of students and patronage. His name was Faber, and when he finally lost his fear of Montag, he talked in a cadenced voice, looking at the sky and the trees and the green park, and when an hour had passed he said something to Montag and Montag sensed it was a rhymeless poem. Then the old man grew even more courageous and said something else and that was a poem, too. Faber held his hand over his left coat pocket and spoke these words gently, and Montag knew if he reached out, he might pull a book of poetry from the man's coat. But he did not reach out. His hands stayed on his knees, numbed and useless. "I don't talk *things*, sir," said Faber. "I talk the *meaning* of things. I sit here and *know* I'm alive."

That was all there was to it, really. An hour of monologue, a poem, a comment, and then without either acknowledging the fact that Montag was a fireman, Faber, with a certain trembling, wrote his address on a slip of paper. "For your file," he said, "in case you decide to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," Montag said, surprised.

Mildred shrieked with laughter in the hall.

Montag went to his bedroom closet and flipped through his file-wallet to the heading: FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS (?). Faber's name was there. He hadn't turned it in and he hadn't erased it.

He dialed the call on a secondary phone. The phone on the far end of the line called Faber's name a dozen times before the professor answered in a faint voice. Montag identified himself and was met with a lengthy silence. "Yes, Mr. Montag?"

"Professor Faber, I have a rather odd question to

ask. How many copies of the Bible are left in this country?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I want to know if there are *any* copies left at all."

"This is some sort of trap! I can't talk to just *any* one on the phone!"

"How many copies of Shakespeare and Plato?"

"None! You know as well as I do. None!"

Faber hung up.

Montag put down the phone. None. A thing he knew of course from the firehouse listings. But somehow he had wanted to hear it from Faber himself.

In the hall Mildred's face was suffused with excitement. "Well, the ladies are coming over!"

Montag showed her a book. "This is the Old and New Testament, and..."

"Don't start that again!"

"It might be the last copy in this part of the world."

"You've got to hand it back tonight, don't you? Captain Beatty *knows* you got it, doesn't he?"

"I don't think he knows *which* book I stole. But how do I choose a substitute? Do I turn in Mr. Jefferson? Mr. Thoreau? Which is least valuable? If I pick a substitute and Beatty does know which book I stole, he'll guess we've an entire library here!"

Mildred's mouth twitched. "See what you're *doing*? You'll ruin us! Who's more important, me or that Bible?" She was beginning to shriek now, sitting there like a wax doll melting in its own heat.

He could hear Beatty's voice. "Sit down, Montag. Watch. Delicately, like the petals of a flower. Light the first page, light the second page. Each becomes a black butterfly. Beautiful, eh? Light the third page from the second and so on, chain smoking, chapter by chapter, all the silly things the words mean, all the false promises, all the second-hand notions and time-

worn philosophies." There sat Beatty, perspiring gently, the floor littered with swarms of black moths that had died in a single storm.

Mildred stopped screaming as quickly as she started. Montag was not listening. "There's only one thing to do," he said. "Sometime before tonight when I give the book to Beatty, I've got to have a duplicate made."

"You'll be here for the White Clown tonight, and the ladies coming over?" cried Mildred.

Montag stopped at the door, with his back turned. "Millie?"

A silence. "What?"

"Millie? Does the White Clown love you?"

No answer.

"Millie, does—" He licked his lips. "Does your 'family' love you, love you *very* much, love you with all their heart and soul, Millie?"

He felt her blinking slowly at the back of his neck. "Why'd you ask a silly question like that?"

He felt he wanted to cry, but nothing would happen to his eyes or his mouth.

"If you see that dog outside," said Mildred, "give him a kick for me."

He hesitated, listening at the door. He opened it and stepped out.

The rain had stopped and the sun was setting in the clear sky. The street and the lawn and the porch were empty. He let his breath go in a great sigh.

He slammed the door.

He was on the subway.

I'm numb, he thought. When did the numbness really begin in my face? In my body? The night I kicked the pill bottle in the dark, like kicking a buried mine.

The numbness will go away, he thought. It'll take time, but I'll do it, or Faber will do it for me. Someone somewhere will give me back the old face and the old hands the way they were. Even the smile, he thought, the old burnt-in smile, that's gone. I'm lost without it.

The subway fled past him, cream tile, jet-black, cream tile, jet-black, numerals and darkness, more darkness and the total adding itself.

Once as a child he had sat upon a yellow dune by the sea in the middle of the blue and hot summer day, trying to fill a sieve with sand, because some cruel cousin had said, "Fill this sieve and you'll get a dime!" And the faster he poured, the faster it sifted through with a hot whispering. His hands were tired, the sand was boiling, the sieve was empty. Seated there in the midst of July, without a sound, he felt the tears move down his cheeks.

Now as the vacuum-underground rushed him through the dead cellars of town, jolting him, he remembered the terrible logic of that sieve, and he looked down and saw that he was carrying the Bible open. There were people in the suction train but he held the book in his hands and the silly thought came to him, if you read fast and read all, maybe some of the sand will stay in the sieve. But he read and the words fell through, and he thought, in a few hours, there will be Beatty, and here will be me handing this over, so no phrase must escape me, each line must be memorized. I will myself to do it.

He clenched the book in his fists.

Trumpets blared.

"Denham's Dentifrice."

Shut up, thought Montag. Consider the lilies of the field.

"Denham's Dentifrice."

They toil not—

"Denham's—"

Consider the lilies of the field, shut up, shut up.

"Dentifrice!"

He tore the book open and flicked the pages and felt of them as if he were blind, he picked at the shape of the individual letters, not blinking.

"Denham's. Spelled: D-E-N—"

They toil not, neither do they. . ."

A fierce whisper of hot sand through empty sieve.

"Denham's does it!"

Consider the lilies, the lilies, the lilies . . .

"Denham's dental detergent."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" It was a plea, a cry so terrible that Montag found himself on his feet, the shocked inhabitants of the loud car staring, moving back from this man with the insane, gorged face, the gibbering, dry mouth, the flapping book in his fist. The people who had been sitting a moment before, tapping their feet to the rhythm of Denham's Dentifrice, Denham's Dandy Dental Detergent, Denham's Dentifrice Dentifrice Dentifrice, one two, one two three, one two, one two three. The people whose mouths had been faintly twitching the words Dentifrice Dentifrice Dentifrice. The train radio vomited upon Montag, in retaliation, a great tonload of music made of tin, copper, silver, chromium, and brass. The people were pounded into submission; they did not run, there was no place to run; the great air train fell down its shaft in the earth.

"Lilies of the field."

"Denham's."

"Lilies, I said!"

The people stared.

"Call the guard."

"The man's off—"

"Knoll View!"

The train hissed to its stop.

"Knoll View!" A cry.

"Denham's." A whisper.

Montag's mouth barely moved. "Lilies..."

The train door whistled open. Montag stood. The door gasped, started shut. Only then did he leap past the other passengers, screaming in his mind, plunge through the slicing door only in time. He ran on the white tiles up through the tunnels, ignoring the escalators, because he wanted to feel his feet move, arms swing, lungs clench, unclench, feel his throat go raw with air. A voice drifted after him, "Denham's Denham's Denham's," the train hissed like a snake. The train vanished in its hole.

"Who is it?"

"Montag out here."

"What do you want?"

"Let me in."

"I haven't done anything!"

"I'm alone, dammit!"

"You swear it?"

"I swear!"

The front door opened slowly. Faber peered out, looking very old in the light and very fragile and very much afraid. The old man looked as if he had not been out of the house in years. He and the white plaster walls inside were much the same. There was white in the flesh of his mouth and his cheeks and his hair was white and his eyes had faded, with white in the vague blueness there. Then his eyes touched on the book under Montag's arm and he did not look so old any more and not quite as fragile. Slowly, his fear went.

"I'm sorry. One has to be careful."

He looked at the book under Montag's arm and could not stop. "So it's true."

Montag stepped inside. The door shut.

"Sit down." Faber backed up, as if he feared the book might vanish if he took his eyes from it. Behind him, the door to a bedroom stood open, and in that room a litter of machinery and steel tools were strewn upon a desktop. Montag had only a glimpse, before Faber, seeing Montag's attention diverted, turned quickly and shut the bedroom door and stood holding the knob with a trembling hand. His gaze returned unsteadily to Montag, who was now seated with the book in his lap. "The book—where did you—?"

"I stole it."

Faber, for the first time, raised his eyes and looked directly into Montag's face. "You're brave."

"No," said Montag. "My wife's dying. A friend of mine's already dead. Someone who may have been a friend was burnt less than twenty-four hours ago. You're the only one I knew might help me. To see. To see..."

Faber's hands itched on his knees. "May I?"

"Sorry." Montag gave him the book.

"It's been a long time. I'm not a religious man. But it's been a long time." Faber turned the pages, stopping here and there to read. "It's as good as I remember. Lord, how they've changed it in our 'parlors' these days. Christ is one of the 'family' now. I often wonder if God recognizes His own son the way we've dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He's a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine when he isn't making veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshiper *absolutely* needs." Faber sniffed the book. "Do you know that books smell like nutmeg or some spice from a foreign land? I loved to smell them when I was a boy. Lord, there were a lot of lovely books once, before we let them go." Faber turned the pages. "Mr.

Montag, you are looking at a coward. I saw the way things were going, a long time back. I said nothing. I'm one of the innocents who could have spoken up and out when no one would listen to the 'guilty,' but I did not speak and thus became guilty myself. And when finally they set the structure to burn the books, using the firemen, I grunted a few times and subsided, for there were no others grunting or yelling with me, by then. Now it's too late." Faber closed the Bible. "Well—suppose you tell me why you came here?"

"Nobody listens any more. I can't talk to the walls because they're yelling a *me*. I can't talk to my wife; she listens to the *walls*. I just want someone to hear what I have to say. And maybe if I talk long enough, it'll make sense. And I want you to teach me to understand what I read."

Faber examined Montag's thin, blue-jowled face. "How did you get shaken up? What knocked the torch out of your hands?"

"I don't know. We have everything we need to be happy, but we aren't happy. Something's missing. I looked around. The only thing I positively *knew* was gone was the books I'd burned in ten or twelve years. So I thought books might help."

"You're a hopeless romantic," said Faber. "It would be funny if it were not serious. It's not books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books. The same things *could* be in the 'parlor families' today. The same infinite detail and awareness could be projected through the radios and televisions, but are not. No, no, it's not books at all you're looking for! Take it where you can find it, in old phonograph records, old motion pictures, and in old friends; look for it in nature and look for it in yourself. Books were only one type of receptacle where we stored a lot of

things we were afraid we might forget. There is nothing magical in them at all. The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us. Of course you couldn't know this, of course you still can't understand what I mean when I say all this. You are intuitively right, that's what counts. Three things are missing.

"Number one: Do you know why books such as this are so important? Because they have quality. And what does the word quality mean? To me it means texture. This book has *pores*. It has features. This book can go under the microscope. You'd find life under the glass, streaming past in infinite profusion. The more pores, the more truthfully recorded details of life per square inch you can get on a sheet of paper, the more 'literary' you are. That's *my* definition, anyway. *Telling detail*. *Fresh detail*. The good writers touch life often. The mediocre ones run a quick hand over her. The bad ones rape her and leave her for the flies.

"So now do you see why books are hated and feared? They show the pores in the face of life. The comfortable people want only wax moon faces, poreless, hairless, expressionless. We are living in a time when flowers are trying to live on flowers, instead of growing on good rain and black loam. Even fireworks, for all their prettiness, come from the chemistry of the earth. Yet somehow we think we can grow, feeding on flowers and fireworks, without completing the cycle back to reality. Do you know the legend of Hercules and Antaeus, the giant wrestler, whose strength was incredible so long as he stood firmly on the earth? But when he was held, rootless, in midair, by Hercules, he perished easily. If there isn't something in that legend for us today, in this city, in our time, then I am completely insane. Well,

there we have the first thing I said we need. Quality, texture of information."

"And the second?"

"Leisure."

"Oh, but we've plenty of off-hours."

"Off-hours, yes. But time to think? If you're not driving a hundred miles an hour, at a clip where you can't think of anything else but the danger, then you're playing some game or sitting in some room where you can't argue with the four-wall televisor. Why? The televisor is 'real.' It is immediate, it has dimension. It tells you what to think and blasts it in. It *must* be right. It *seems* so right. It rushes you on so quickly to its own conclusions your mind hasn't time to protest. 'What nonsense!'"

"Only the 'family' is 'people.'"

"I beg pardon?"

"My wife says books aren't 'real.'"

"Thank God for that. You can shut them, say, 'Hold on a moment.' You play God to it. But who has ever torn himself from the claw that encloses you when you drop a seed in a TV parlor? It grows you any shape it wishes! It is an environment as real as the world. It *becomes* and *is* the truth. Books can be beaten down with reason. But with all my knowledge and skepticism, I have never been able to argue with a one-hundred-piece symphony orchestra, full color, three dimensions, and being in and part of those incredible parlors. As you see, my parlor is nothing but four plaster walls. And here." He held out two small rubber plugs. "For my ears when I ride the subway jets."

"Denham's Dentifrice; they toil not, neither do they spin," said Montag, eyes shut. "Where do we go from here? Would books help us?"

"Only if the third necessary thing could be given us. Number one, as I said: quality of information.

Number two: leisure to digest it. And number three: the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two. And I hardly think a very old man and a fireman turned sour could *do* much this late in the game..."

"I can *get* books."

"You're running a risk."

"That's the good part of dying; when you've nothing to lose, you run any risk you want."

"There, you've said an interesting thing," laughed Faber, "without having read it!"

"Are things like *that* in books? But it came off the top of my mind!"

"All the better. You didn't fancy it up for me or anyone, even yourself."

Montag leaned forward. "This afternoon I thought that if it turned out that books *were* worthwhile, we might get a press and print some extra copies—"

"We?"

"You and I."

"Oh, no!" Faber sat up.

"But let me tell you my plan—"

"If you insist on telling me, I must ask you to leave."

"But aren't *you* interested?"

"Not if you start talking the sort of talk that might get me burnt for my trouble. The only way I could *possibly* listen to you would be if somehow the fireman structure itself could be burnt. Now, if you suggest that we print extra books and arrange to have them hidden in firemen's houses all over the country, so that seeds of suspicion would be sown among these arsonists, bravo, I'd say!"

"Plant the books, turn in an alarm, and see the firemen's houses burn, is that what you mean?"

Faber raised his brows and looked at Montag as if he were seeing a new man. "I was joking."

"If you thought it would be a plan worth trying, I'd have to take your word it would help."

"You can't guarantee things like that! After all, when we *had* all the books we needed, we still insisted on finding the highest cliff to jump off. But we *do* need a breather. We *do* need knowledge. And perhaps in a thousand years we might pick smaller cliffs to jump off. The books are to remind us what asses and fools we are. They're Caesar's praetorian guard, whispering as the parade roars down the avenue, 'Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal.' Most of us can't rush around, talk to everyone, know all the cities of the world, we haven't time, money or that many friends. The things you're looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-nine per cent of them is in a book. Don't ask for guarantees. And don't look to be saved in any *one* thing, person, machine, or library. Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore."

Faber got up and began to pace the room.

"Well?" asked Montag.

"You're absolutely serious?"

"Absolutely."

"It's an insidious plan, if I do say so myself." Faber glanced nervously at his bedroom door. "To see the firehouses burn across the land, destroyed as hotbeds of treason. The salamander devours his tail! Ho, God!"

"I've a list of firemen's residences everywhere. With some sort of underground—"

"Can't trust people, that's the dirty part. You and I and who else will set the fires?"

"Aren't there professors like yourself, former writers, historians, linguists?..."

"Dead or ancient."

"The older the better; they'll go unnoticed. You know dozens, admit it!"

"Oh, there are many actors alone who haven't acted Pirandello or Shaw or Shakespeare for years because their plays are too *aware* of the world. We could use their anger. And we could use the honest rage of those historians who haven't written a line for forty years. True, we might form classes in thinking and reading."

"Yes!"

"But that would just nibble the edges. The whole culture's shot through. The skeleton needs melting and reshaping. Good God, it isn't as simple as just picking up a book you laid down half a century ago. Remember, the firemen are rarely necessary. The public itself stopped reading of its own accord. You firemen provide a circus now and then at which buildings are set off and crowds gather for the pretty blaze, but it's a small sideshow indeed, and hardly necessary to keep things in line. So few want to be rebels any more. And out of those few, most, like myself, scare easily. Can you dance faster than the White Clown, shout louder than 'Mr. Gimmick' and the parlor 'families'? If you can, you'll win your way, Montag. In any event, you're a fool. People are having *fun*."

"Committing suicide! Murdering!"

A bomber flight had been moving east all the time they talked, and only now did the two men stop and listen, feeling the great jet sound tremble inside themselves.

"Patience, Montag. Let the war turn off the 'families.' Our civilization is flinging itself to pieces. Stand back from the centrifuge."

"There has to be someone ready when it blows up."

"What? Men quoting Milton? Saying, I remember Sophocles? Reminding the survivors that man has his good side, too? They will only gather up their stones

to him at each other. Montag, go home. Go to bed. Why waste your final hours racing about your cage denying you're a squirrel?"

"Then you don't care any more?"

"I care so much I'm sick."

"And you won't help me?"

"Good night, good night."

Montag's hands picked up the Bible. He saw what his hands had done and he looked surprised.

"Would you like to own this?"

Faber said, "I'd give my right arm."

Montag stood there and waited for the next thing to happen. His hands, by themselves, like two men working together, began to rip the pages from the book. The hands tore the fly-leaf and then the first and then the second page.

"Idiot, what're you doing!" Faber sprang up, as if he had been struck. He fell against Montag. Montag warded him off and let his hands continue. Six more pages fell to the floor. He picked them up and wadded the paper under Faber's gaze.

"Don't, oh, don't!" said the old man.

"Who can stop me? I'm a fireman. I can burn you!"

The old man stood looking at him. "You wouldn't."

"I could!"

"The book. Don't tear it any more." Faber sank into a chair, his face very white, his mouth trembling. "Don't make me feel any more tired. What do you want?"

"I need you to teach me."

"All right, all right."

Montag put the book down. He began to unwind the crumpled paper and flatten it out as the old man watched tiredly.

Faber shook his head as if he were waking up.

"Montag, have you any money?"

"Some. Four, five hundred dollars. Why?"

"Bring it. I know a man who printed our college paper half a century ago. That was the year I came to class at the start of the new semester and found only one student to sign up for Drama from Aeschylus to O'Neill. You see? How like a beautiful statue of ice it was, melting in the sun. I remember the newspapers dying like huge moths. No one *wanted* them back. No one missed them. And then the Government, seeing how advantageous it was to have people reading only about passionate lips and the fist in the stomach, circled the situation with your fire-eaters. So, Montag, there's this unemployed printer. We might start a few books, and wait on the war to break the pattern and give us the push we need. A few bombs and the 'families' in the walls of all the houses, like harlequin rats, will shut up! In the silence, our stage whisper might carry."

They both stood looking at the book on the table.

"I've tried to remember," said Montag. "But, hell, it's gone when I turn my head. God, how I want something to say to the Captain. He's read enough so he has all the answers, or seems to have. His voice is like butter. I'm afraid he'll talk me back the way I was. Only a week ago, pumping a kerosene hose, I thought: God, what fun!"

The old man nodded. "Those who don't build must burn. It's as old as history and juvenile delinquents."

"So that's what I am."

"There's some of it in all of us."

Montag moved toward the front door. "Can you help me in any way tonight, with the Fire Captain? I need an umbrella to keep off the rain. I'm so damned afraid I'll drown if he gets me again."

The old man said nothing, but glanced once more, nervously, at his bedroom. Montag caught the glance. "Well?"

The old man took a deep breath, held it, and let it out. He took another, eyes closed, his mouth tight, and at last exhaled. "Montag . . ."

The old man turned at last and said, "Come along. I would actually have let you walk right out of my house. I *am* a cowardly old fool."

Faber opened the bedroom door and let Montag into a small chamber where stood a table upon which a number of metal tools lay among a welter of microscopic wire-hairs, tiny coils, bobbins, and crystals.

"What's this?" asked Montag.

"Proof of my terrible cowardice. I've lived alone so many years, throwing images on walls with my imagination. Fiddling with electronics, radio transmission, has been my hobby. My cowardice is of such a passion, complementing the revolutionary spirit that lives in its shadow, I was forced to design *this*."

He picked up a small green metal object no larger than a .22 bullet.

"I paid for all this—how? Playing the stock market, of course, the last refuge in the world for the dangerous intellectual out of a job. Well, I played the market and built all this and I've waited. I've waited, trembling, half a lifetime for someone to speak to me. I dared speak to no one. That day in the park when we sat together, I knew that someday you might drop by, with fire or friendship, it was hard to guess. I've had this little item ready for months. But I almost let you go, I'm *that* afraid!"

"It looks like a Seashell Radio."

"And something more! It *listens*! If you put it in your ear, Montag, I can sit comfortably home, warming my frightened bones, and hear and analyze the firemen's world, find its weaknesses, without danger. I'm the Queen Bee, safe in the hive. You will be the drone, the traveling ear. Eventually, I could put out

ears into all parts of the city, with various men, listening and evaluating. If the drones die, I'm still safe at home, tending my fright with a maximum of comfort and a minimum of chance. See how safe I play it, how contemptible I am?"

Montag placed the green bullet in his ear. The old man inserted a similar object in his own ear and moved his lips.

"Montag!"

The voice was in Montag's head.

"I hear you!"

The old man laughed. "You're coming over fine, too!" Faber whispered, but the voice in Montag's head was clear. "Go to the firehouse when it's time. I'll be with you. Let's listen to this Captain Beatty together. He could be one of us. God knows. I'll give you things to say. We'll give him a good show. Do you hate me for this electronic cowardice of mine? Here I am sending you out into the night, while I stay behind the lines with my damned ears listening for you to get your head chopped off."

"We all do what we do," said Montag. He put the Bible in the old man's hands. "Here. I'll chance turning in a substitute. Tomorrow—"

"I'll see the unemployed printer, yes: *that* much I can do."

"Good night, Professor."

"Not good night. I'll be with you the rest of the night, a vinegar gnat tickling your ear when you need me. But good night and good luck, anyway."

The door opened and shut. Montag was in the dark street again, looking at the world.

You could feel the war getting ready in the sky that night. The way the clouds moved aside and came back, and the way the stars looked, a million of them

swimming between the clouds, like the enemy discs, and the feeling that the sky might fall upon the city and turn it to chalk dust, and the moon go up in red fire; that was how the night felt.

Montag walked from the subway with the money in his pocket (he had visited the bank, which was open all night every night with robot tellers in attendance) and as he walked he was listening to the Seashell Radio in one ear . . . "We have mobilized a million men. Quick victory is ours if the war comes . . ." Music flooded over the voice quickly and it was gone.

"Ten million men mobilized," Faber's voice whispered in his other ear. "But *say* one million. It's happier."

"Faber?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not thinking. I'm just doing like I'm told, like always. You said get the money and I got it. I didn't really think of it myself. When do I start working things out on my own?"

"You've started already, by saying what you just said. You'll have to take me on faith."

"I took the others on faith!"

"Yes, and look where we're headed. You'll have to travel blind for a while. Here's my arm to hold onto."

"I don't want to change sides and just be *told* what to do. There's no reason to change if I do that."

"You're wise already!"

Montag felt his feet moving him on the sidewalk toward his house. "Keep talking."

"Would you like me to read? I'll read so you can remember. I go to bed only five hours a night. Nothing to do. So if you like, I'll read you to sleep nights. They say you retain knowledge even when you're sleeping, if someone whispers it in your ear."

"Yes."

"Here." Far away across town in the night, the faintest whisper of a turned page. "The Book of Job."

The moon rose in the sky as Montag walked, his lips moving just a trifle.

He was eating a light supper at nine in the evening when the front door cried out in the hall and Mildred ran from the parlor like a native fleeing an eruption of Vesuvius. Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Bowles came through the front door and vanished into the volcano's mouth with martinis in their hands. Montag stopped eating. They were like a monstrous crystal chandelier tinkling in a thousand chimes, he saw their Cheshire Cat smiles burning through the walls of the house, and now they were screaming at each other above the din.

Montag found himself at the parlor door with his food still in his mouth.

"Doesn't everyone look nice!"

"Nice."

"You look fine, Millie!"

"Fine."

"Everyone looks swell."

"Swell!"

Montag stood watching them.

"Patience," whispered Faber.

"I shouldn't be here," whispered Montag, almost to himself. "I should be on my way back to you with the money!"

"Tomorrow's time enough. Careful!"

"Isn't this show *wonderful*?" cried Mildred.

"Wonderful!"

On one wall a woman smiled and drank orange juice simultaneously. How does she do both at once? thought Montag, insanely. In the other walls an x-ray of the same woman revealed the contracting journey of the refreshing beverage on its way to her delighted

stomach! Abruptly the room took off on a rocket flight into the clouds, it plunged into a lime-green sea where blue fish ate red and yellow fish. A minute later, Three White Cartoon Clowns chopped off each other's limbs to the accompaniment of immense incoming tides of laughter. Two minutes more and the room whipped out of town to the jet cars wildly circling an arena, bashing and backing up and bashing each other again. Montag saw a number of bodies fly in the air.

"Millie, did you see that!"

"I saw it, I saw it!"

Montag reached inside the parlor wall and pulled the main switch. The images drained away, as if the water had been let from a gigantic crystal bowl of hysterical fish.

The three women turned slowly and looked with unconcealed irritation and then dislike at Montag.

"When do you suppose the war will start?" he said.

"I notice your husbands aren't here tonight?"

"Oh they come and go, come and go," said Mrs. Phelps. "In again out again Finnegan, the Army called Pete yesterday. He'll be back next week. The Army said so. Quick war. Forty-eight hours, they said, and everyone home. That's what the Army said. Quick war. Pete was called yesterday and they said he'd be back next week. Quick..."

The three women fidgeted and looked nervously at the empty mud-colored walls.

"I'm not worried," said Mrs. Phelps. "I'll let Pete do all the worrying." She giggled. "I'll let old Pete do all the worrying. Not me. I'm not worried."

"Yes," said Millie. "Let old Pete do the worrying."

"It's always someone else's husband dies, they say."

"I've heard that, too. I've never known any dead man killed in a war. Killed jumping off buildings, yes, like Gloria's husband last week, but from wars? No."

"Not from wars," said Mrs. Phelps. "Anyway, Pete and I always said, no tears, nothing like that. It's our third marriage each and we're independent. Be independent, we always said. He said, if I get killed off, you just go right ahead and don't cry, but get married again, and don't think of me."

"That reminds me," said Mildred. "Did you see that Clara Dove five-minute romance last night in your wall? Well, it was all about this woman who—"

Montag said nothing but stood looking at the women's faces as he had once looked at the faces of saints in a strange church he had entered when he was a child. The faces of those enameled creatures meant nothing to him, though he talked to them and stood in that church for a long time, trying to be of that religion, trying to know what that religion was, trying to get enough of the raw incense and special dust of the place into his lungs and thus into his blood to feel touched and concerned by the meaning of the colorful men and women with the porcelain eyes and the blood-ruby lips. But there was nothing, nothing; it was a stroll through another store, and his currency strange and unusable there, and his passion cold, even when he touched the wood and plaster and clay. So it was now, in his own parlor, with these women twisting in their chairs under his gaze, lighting cigarettes, blowing smoke, touching their sun-fired hair and examining their blazing fingernails as if they had caught fire from his look. Their faces grew haunted with silence. They leaned forward at the sound of Montag's swallowing his final bite of food. They listened to his feverish breathing. The three empty walls of the room were like the pale brows of sleeping giants now, empty of dreams. Montag felt that if you touched these three staring brows you would feel a fine salt sweat on your fingertips. The perspiration gathered with the silence and the subaudible trem-

bling around and about and in the women who were burning with tension. Any moment they might hiss a long sputtering hiss and explode.

Montag moved his lips.

"Let's talk."

The women jerked and stared.

"How're your children, Mrs. Phelps?" he asked.

"You know I haven't any! No one in his right mind, the good Lord knows, would have children!" said Mrs. Phelps, not quite sure why she was angry with this man.

"I wouldn't say that," said Mrs. Bowles. "I've had two children by Caesarian section. No use going through all that agony for a baby. The world must reproduce, you know, the race must go on. Besides, they sometimes look just like you, and that's nice. Two Caesarians turned the trick, yes, sir. Oh, my doctor said, Caesarians aren't necessary; you've got the hips for it, everything's normal, but I insisted."

"Caesarians or not, children are ruinous; you're out of your mind," said Mrs. Phelps.

"I plunk the children in school nine days out of ten. I put up with them when they come home three days a month; it's not bad at all. You heave them into the 'parlor' and turn the switch. It's like washing clothes: stuff laundry in and slam the lid." Mrs. Bowles tittered. "They'd just as soon kick as kiss me. Thank God, I can kick back!"

The women showed their tongues, laughing.

Mildred sat a moment and then, seeing that Montag was still in the doorway, clapped her hands. "Let's talk politics, to please Guy!"

"Sounds fine," said Mrs. Bowles. "I voted last election, same as everyone, and I laid it on the line for President Noble. I think he's one of the nicest-looking men ever became president."

"Oh, but the man they ran against him!"

"He wasn't much, was he? Kind of small and homely and he didn't shave too close or comb his hair very well."

"What possessed the 'Outs' to run him? You just don't go running a little short man like that against a tall man. Besides—he mumbled. Half the time I couldn't hear a word he said. And the words I did hear I didn't understand!"

"Fat, too, and didn't dress to hide it. No wonder the landslide was for Winston Noble. Even their names helped. Compare Winston Noble to Hubert Hoag for ten seconds and you can almost figure the results."

"Damn it!" cried Montag. "What do you know about Hoag and Noble!"

"Why, they were right in that parlor wall, not six months ago. One was always picking his nose; it drove me wild."

"Well, Mr. Montag," said Mrs. Phelps, "do you want us to vote for a man like that?"

Mildred beamed. "You just run away from the door, Guy, and don't make us nervous."

But Montag was gone and back in a moment with a book in his hand.

"Guy!"

"Damn it all, damn it all, damn it!"

"What've you got there; isn't that a book? I thought that all special training these days was done by film." Mrs. Phelps blinked. "You reading up on fireman theory?"

"Theory, hell," said Montag. "It's poetry."

"Montag." A whisper.

"Leave me alone!" Montag felt himself turning in a great circling roar and buzz and hum.

"Montag, hold on, don't..."

"Did you hear them, did you hear these monsters

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talking about monsters? Oh God, the way they jabber about people and their own children and themselves and the way they talk about their husbands and the way they talk about war, dammit, I stand here and I can't believe it!"

"I didn't say a single word about any war, I'll have you know," said Mrs. Phelps.

"As for poetry, I hate it," said Mrs. Bowles.

"Have you ever heard any?"

"Montag," Faber's voice scraped away at him. "You'll ruin everything. Shut up, you fool!"

All three women were on their feet.

"Sit down!"

They sat.

"I'm going home," quavered Mrs. Bowles.

"Montag, Montag, please, in the name of God, what're you up to?" pleaded Faber.

"Why don't you just read us one of those poems from your little book," Mrs. Phelps nodded. "I think that'd be very interesting."

"That's not right," wailed Mrs. Bowles. "We can't do that!"

"Well, look at Mr. Montag, he wants to, I know he does. And if we listen nice, Mr. Montag will be happy and then maybe we can go on and do something else." She glanced nervously at the long emptiness of the walls enclosing them.

"Montag, go through with this and I'll cut off, I'll leave." The beetle jabbed his ear. "What good is this, what'll you prove!"

"Scare hell out of them, that's what, scare the living daylight out!"

Mildred looked at the empty air. "Now, Guy, just who are you talking to?"

A silver needle pierced his brain. "Montag, listen,

only one way out, play it as a joke, cover up, pretend you aren't mad at all. Then—walk to your wall incinerator, and throw the book in!"

Mildred had already anticipated this in a quavery voice. "Ladies, once a year, every fireman's allowed to bring one book home, from the old days, to show his family how silly it all was, how nervous that sort of thing can make you, how crazy. Guy's surprise tonight is to read you one sample to show how mixed-up things were, so none of us will ever have to bother our little old heads about that junk again, isn't that right, darling?"

He crushed the book in his fists.

"Say 'yes.'"

His mouth moved like Faber's:

"Yes."

Mildred snatched the book with a laugh. "Here! Read this one. No, I take it back, Here's that real funny one you read out loud today. Ladies, you won't understand a word. It goes umpty-tumpty-ump. Go ahead, Guy, that page, dear."

He looked at the opened page.

A fly stirred its wings softly in his ear. "Read."

"What's the title, dear?"

"Dover Beach." His mouth was numb.

"Now read in a nice clear voice and go slow."

The room was blazing hot, he was all fire, he was all coldness; they sat in the middle of an empty desert with three chairs and him standing, swaying, and him waiting for Mrs. Phelps to stop straightening her dress hem and Mrs. Bowles to take her fingers away from her hair. Then he began to read in a low, stumbling voice that grew firmer as he progressed from line to line, and his voice went out across the desert, into the whiteness, and around the three sitting women there in the great hot emptiness.

"The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's
shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world."

The chairs creaked under the three women,
Montag finished it out;

"Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and

flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night."

Mrs. Phelps was crying.

The others in the middle of the desert watched her crying grow very loud as her face squeezed itself out of shape. They sat, not touching her, bewildered with her display. She sobbed uncontrollably. Montag himself was stunned and shaken.

"Sh, sh," said Mildred. "You're all right, Clara, now, Clara, snap out of it! Clara, what's *wrong*?"

"I—I," sobbed Mrs. Phelps, "don't know, don't know, I just don't know, oh, oh..."

Mrs. Bowles stood up and glared at Montag. "You see? I knew it, that's what I wanted to prove! I knew it

would happen! I've always said poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings, poetry and sickness; *all* that mush! Now I've had it proved to me. You're nasty, Mr. Montag, you're *nasty*!"

Faber said, "Now..."

Montag felt himself turn and walk to the wall slot and drop the book in through the brass notch to the waiting flames.

"Silly words, silly words, silly awful hurting words," said Mrs. Bowles. "Why *do* people want to hurt people? Not enough hurt in the world, you got to tease people with stuff like that!"

"Clara, now, Clara," begged Mildred, pulling her arm. "Come on, let's be cheery, you turn the 'family' on now. Go ahead. Let's laugh and be happy now, stop crying, we'll have a party!"

"No," said Mrs. Bowles. "I'm trotting right straight home. You want to visit my house and my 'family,' well and good. But I won't come in this fireman's crazy house again in my lifetime!"

"Go home." Montag fixed his eyes upon her, quietly. "Go home and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of the dozen abortions you've had, go home and think of that and your damn Caesarian sections, too, and your children who hate your guts! Go home and think how it all happened and what did you ever do to stop it? Go home, go home!" he yelled. "Before I knock you down and kick you out the door!"

Doors slammed and the house was empty. Montag stood alone in the winter weather, with the parlor walls the color of dirty snow.

In the bathroom, water ran. He heard Mildred shake the sleeping tablets into her hand.

"Fool, Montag, fool, fool, oh God you silly fool..."

"Shut up!" He pulled the green bullet from his ear and jammed it into his pocket.

It sizzled faintly. "... fool... fool..."

He searched the house and found the books where Mildred had stacked them behind the refrigerator. Some were missing and he knew that she had started on her own slow process of dispersing the dynamite in her house, stick by stick. But he was not angry now, only exhausted and bewildered with himself. He carried the books into the backyard and hid them in the bushes near the alley fence. For tonight only, he thought, in case she decides to do any more burning.

He went back through the house. "Mildred?" He called at the door of the darkened bedroom. There was no sound.

Outside, crossing the lawn, on his way to work, he tried not to see how completely dark and deserted Clarisse McClellan's house was...

On the way downtown he was so completely alone with his terrible error that he felt the necessity for the strange warmth and goodness that came from a familiar and gentle voice speaking in the night. Already, in a few short hours, it seemed that he had known Faber a lifetime. Now he knew that he was two people, that he was, above all, Montag who knew nothing, who did not even know himself a fool, but only suspected it. And he knew that he was also the old man who talked to him and talked to him as the train was sucked from one end of the night city to the other on one long sickening gasp of motion. In the days to follow, and in the nights when there was no moon and in the nights when there was a very bright moon shining on the earth, the old man would go on with this talking and this talking, drop by drop, stone by stone, flake by flake. His mind would well over at last and he would not be Montag any more, this the

old man told him, assured him, promised him. He would be Montag-plus-Faber, fire plus water, and then, one day, after everything had mixed and simmered and worked away in silence, there would be neither fire nor water, but wine. Out of two separate and opposite things, a third. And one day he would look back upon the fool and know the fool. Even now he could feel the start of the long journey, the leaving, the going-away from the self he had been.

It was good listening to the beetle hum, the sleepy mosquito buzz and delicate filigree murmur of the old man's voice at first scolding him and then consoling him in the late hour of night as he emerged from the steaming subway toward the firehouse world.

"Pity, Montag, pity. Don't haggle and nag them; you were so recently of them yourself. They are so confident that they will run on forever. But they won't run on. They don't know that this is all one huge big blazing meteor that makes a pretty fire in space, but that someday it'll have to *hit*. They see only the blaze, the pretty fire, as you saw it.

"Montag, old men who stay at home, afraid, tending their peanut-brittle bones, have no right to criticize. Yet you almost killed things at the start. Watch it! I'm with you, remember that. I understand how it happened. I must admit that your blind raging invigorated me. God, how young I felt! But now—I want you to feel old, I want a little of my cowardice to be distilled in you tonight. The next few hours, when you see Captain Beatty, tiptoe 'round him, let *me* hear him for you, let *me* feel the situation out. Survival is our ticket. Forget the poor, silly women..."

"I made them unhappier than they have been in years, I think," said Montag. "It shocked me to see Mrs. Phelps cry. Maybe they're right, maybe it's best

not to face things, to run have fun. I don't know. I feel guilty—"

"No, you mustn't! If there were no war, if there was peace in the world, I'd say fine, *have* fun! But, Montag, you mustn't go back to being just a fireman. All *isn't* well with the world."

Montag perspired.

"Montag, you listening?"

"My feet," said Montag. "I can't move them. I feel so damn silly. My feet won't move!"

"Listen. Easy now," said the old man gently. "I know, I know. You're afraid of making mistakes. *Don't* be. Mistakes can be profited by. Man, when I was younger I *shoved* my ignorance in people's faces. They beat me with sticks. By the time I was forty my blunt instrument had been honed to a fine cutting point for me. If you hide your ignorance, no one will hit you and you'll never learn. Now, pick up your feet, into the firehouse with you! We're twins, we're not alone any more, we're not separated out in different parlors, with no contact between. If you need help when Beatty pries at you, I'll be sitting right here in your eardrum making notes!"

Montag felt his right foot, then his left foot, move.

"Old man," he said, "stay *with* me."

The Mechanical Hound was gone. Its kennel was empty and the firehouse stood all about in plaster silence and the orange Salamander slept with its kerosene in its belly and the fire throwers crossed upon its flanks and Montag came in through the silence and touched the brass pole and slid up in the dark air, looking back at the deserted kennel, his heart beating, pausing, beating. Faber was a gray moth asleep in his ear, for the moment.

Beatty stood near the drophole waiting, but with his back turned as if he were not waiting.

"Well," he said to the men playing cards, "here

comes a very strange beast which in all tongues is called a fool."

He put his hand to one side, palm up, for a gift. Montag put the book in it. Without even glancing at the title, Beatty tossed the book in the trash basket and lit a cigarette. "Who are a little wise, the best fools be. Welcome back, Montag. I hope you'll be staying with us, now that your fever is done and your sickness over. Sit in for a hand of poker?"

They sat and the cards were dealt. In Beatty's sight, Montag felt the guilt of his hands. His fingers were like ferrets that had done some evil and now never rested, always stirred and picked and hid in pockets, moving from under Beatty's alcohol-flame stare. If Beatty so much as breathed on them, Montag felt that his hands might wither, turn over on their sides, and never be shocked to life again; they would be buried the rest of his life in his coat sleeves, forgotten. For these were the hands that had acted on their own, no part of him, here was where the conscience first manifested itself to snatch books, dart off with Job and Ruth and Willie Shakespeare, and now, in the firehouse, these hands seemed gloved with blood.

Twice in half an hour, Montag had to rise from the game and go to the latrine to wash his hands. When he came back he hid his hands under the table.

Beatty laughed. "Let's have your hands in sight, Montag. Not that we don't trust you, understand, but—"

They all laughed.

"Well," said Beatty, "the crisis is past and all is well, the sheep returns to the fold. We're all sheep who have strayed at times. Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning, we've cried. They are never alone that are accompanied with noble thoughts, we've shouted to ourselves. 'Sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge,'

Sir Philip Sidney said. But on the other hand: 'Words are like leaves and where they most abound, Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found.' Alexander Pope. What do you think of that, Montag?"

"I don't know."

"Careful," whispered Faber, living in another world, far away.

"Or this? 'A little learning is a dangerous thing. Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring; There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again.' Pope. Same Essay. Where does that put you?"

Montag bit his lip.

"I'll tell you," said Beatty, smiling at his cards. "That made you for a little while a drunkard. Read a few lines and off you go over the cliff. Bang, you're ready to blow up the world, chop off heads, knock down women and children, destroy authority. I know, I've been through it all."

"I'm all right," said Montag, nervously.

"Stop blushing. I'm not needling, really I'm not. Do you know, I had a dream an hour ago. I lay down for a catnap and in this dream you and I, Montag, got into a furious debate on books. You towered with rage, yelled quotes at me. I calmly parried every thrust. *Power*, I said. And you, quoting Dr. Johnson, said 'Knowledge is more than equivalent to force!' and I said, "Well, Dr. Johnson also said, dear boy, that 'He is no wise man that will quit a certainty for an uncertainty.'" Stick with the firemen, Montag. All else is dreary chaos!"

"Don't listen," whispered Faber. "He's trying to confuse. He's slippery. Watch out!"

Beatty chuckled. "And you said quoting, 'Truth will come to light, murder will not be hid long!' And I cried in good humor, 'Oh God, he speaks only of his horse!' And 'The Devil can cite scripture for his purpose.' And

you yelled, 'This age thinks better of a gilded fool than of a threadbare saint in wisdom's school!' and I whispered gently, 'The dignity of truth is lost with much protesting.' And you screamed, 'Carcasses bleed at the sight of the murderer!' And I said, patting your hand, 'What, do I give you trench mouth?' And you shrieked, 'Knowledge is power!' and 'A dwarf on a giant's shoulders sees the farthest of the two!' and I summed my side up with rare serenity in, 'The folly of mistaking a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths, and oneself as an oracle, is inborn in us, Mr. Valery once said.'"

Montag's head whirled sickeningly. He felt beaten unmercifully on brow, eyes, nose, lips, chin, on shoulders, on upflailing arms. He wanted to yell, "No! Shut up, you're confusing things, stop it!" Beatty's graceful fingers thrust out to seize his wrist.

"God, what a pulse! I've got you going, have I, Montag? Jesus God, your pulse sounds like the day after the war. Everything but sirens and bells! Shall I talk some more? I like your look of panic. Swahili, Indian, English Lit., I speak them all. A kind of excellent dumb discourse, Willie!"

"Montag, hold on!" The moth brushed Montag's ear. "He's muddying the waters!"

"Oh, you were scared silly," said Beatty, "for I was doing a terrible thing in using the very books you clung to, to rebut you on every hand, on every point! What traitors books can be! You think they're backing you up, and they turn on you. Others can use them, too, and there you are, lost in the middle of the moor, in a great welter of nouns and verbs and adjectives. And at the very end of my dream, along I came with the Salamander and said, 'Going my way?' And you got in and we drove back to the firehouse in beatific silence, all dwindled away to peace." Beatty let Mon-

tag's wrist go, let the hand slump limply on the table. "All's well that is well in the end."

Silence. Montag sat like a carved white stone. The echo of the final hammer on his skull died slowly away into the black cavern where Faber waited for the echoes to subside. And then when the startled dust had settled down about Montag's mind, Faber began, softly, "All right, he's had his say. You must take it in. I'll say my say, too, in the next few hours. And you'll take it in. And you'll try to judge them and make your decisions as to which way to jump, or fall. But I want it to be your decision, not mine, and not the Captain's. But remember that the Captain belongs to the most dangerous enemy to truth and freedom, the solid unmoving cattle of the majority. Oh God, the terrible tyranny of the majority. We all have our harps to play. And it's up to you now to know with which ear you'll listen."

Montag opened his mouth to answer Faber and was saved this error in the presence of others when the station bell rang. The alarm-voice in the ceiling chanted. There was a tacking-tacking sound as the alarm-report telephone typed out the address across the room. Captain Beatty, his poker cards in one pink hand, walked with exaggerated slowness to the phone and ripped out the address when the report was finished. He glanced perfunctorily at it and shoved it in his pocket. He came back and sat down. The others looked at him.

"It can wait exactly forty seconds while I take all the money away from you," said Beatty, happily.

Montag put his cards down.

"Tired, Montag? Going out of this game?"

"Yes."

"Hold on. Well, come to think of it, we can finish this hand later. Just leave your cards face down and

hustle the equipment. On the double now." And Beatty rose up again. "Montag, you don't look well. I'd hate to think you were coming down with another fever..."

"I'll be all right."

"You'll be fine. This is a special case. Come on, jump for it!"

They leapt into the air and clutched the brass pole as if it were the last vantage point above a tidal wave passing below, and then the brass pole, to their dismay, slid them down into darkness, into the blast and cough and suction of the gaseous dragon roaring to life!

"Hey!"

They rounded a corner in thunder and siren, with concussion of tires, with scream of rubber, with a shift of kerosene bulk in the glittery brass tank, like the food in the stomach of a giant, with Montag's fingers jolting off the silver rail, swinging into cold space, with the wind tearing his hair back from his head, with the wind whistling in his teeth, and him all the while thinking of the women, the chaff women in his parlor tonight, with the kernels blown out from under them by a neon wind, and his silly damned reading of a book to them. How like trying to put out fires with waterpistols, how senseless and insane. One rage turned in for another. One anger displacing another. When would he stop being entirely mad and be quiet, be very quiet indeed?

"Here we go!"

Montag looked up. Beatty never drove, but he was driving tonight, slamming the Salamander around corners, leaning forward high on the driver's throne, his massive black slicker flapping out behind so that he seemed a great black bat flying above the engine, over the brass numbers, taking the full wind.

"Here we go to keep the world happy, Montag!"

Beatty's pink, phosphorescent cheeks glimmered in the high darkness, and he was smiling furiously.

"Here we are!"

The Salamander boomed to a halt, throwing men off in slips and clumsy hops. Montag stood fixing his raw eyes to the cold bright rail under his clenched fingers.

I can't do it, he thought. How can I go at this new assignment, how can I go on burning things? I can't go in this place.

Beatty, smelling of the wind through which he had rushed, was at Montag's elbow. "All right, Montag."

The men ran like cripples in their clumsy boots, as quietly as spiders.

At last Montag raised his eyes and turned.

Beatty was watching his face.

"Something the matter, Montag?"

"Why," said Montag slowly, "we've stopped in front of my house."

PART THREE

Burning Bright