M. DA FONSECA
Fire and Ashes
Translated from the
Portuguese
by Karen Bennett

Master Poupa the fireman,

André Juliano and I were a trio of failures. Yes indeed. Three foolish old failures!

There are times when I can see this very clearly. But it's of no consequence. The pitiful events that ruined my life are tugging at me again. I am drawn further and further away from other people, isolated in an apathy I'm not strong enough to resist. Am I a coward, by any chance? Perhaps. The only thing I know with any certainty is that whenever Antoninha das Dores comes to mind, the image is excruciatingly vivid. She appears, not modest and serious as she always was, but in her nightgown. Yes Sir! In the middle of the street in only a nightgown! And what's more, lying in the arms of that great hulk, Chico Bilo! It was this that destroyed thirty years of my life.

The pain which consumed Master Poupa was not of an amorous nature. He was constantly lamenting the fact that the great devastating fires of past years had come to an end. Could this, by any chance, be the tragedy of a head-fireman? Yes, indeed that's what it was.

As for André Juliano, everyone in town knew the reasons for his grief. He was already fifty years old, yet his father, who was a rich man, would not let him control any of the inheritance that would be his one day. In fact, he only gave him a daily allowance of twenty-five pennies.

Twenty-five pennies!

So we were inseparable, us three, each one gnawing at his own anguish.

Today, I'm practically the only one left. Master Poupa died in a fire – a great inferno, the type he liked. And André Juliano lies in the bowels of a gaol, waiting for death.

Still, they are all so alive in my memory that it would seem natural to meet them at any moment, coming round a corner. And, without any effort at all, I can strike up a conversation. I know what their answers will be, I can hear them. I can see the peculiar ways they have of moving their lips, of smiling sadly, or of remaining silent for long periods. In this way, they still form such a part of my life that, every day, right after lunch, I leave home and go straight to the café where we used to meet.

Today, I was a little late, involved in reading the newspaper. When I realised and looked at the clock, I jumped up and came hurrying out into the street. Hurrying, as if they were waiting for me...

But, as always, my enthusiasm waned at the door of the cafe, and I went and sat down, distrustfully, at the table in the corner. As always, I wondered why there was such a hurry. Why do I do this every day?

"Coffee as usual, Mr Portela?"

Startled, I find I am staring into the face of the waiter. And I cry out without meaning to, my voice distorted, "Aargh!" Then the words return, submissively: "Oh yes...coffee as usual."

I used to spend all my afternoons here with André Juliano and Master Poupa the fireman. Now, all alone, I begin my usual tricks to pass the time. Maneta puts the steaming cup down onto the dirty marble and moves away. I linger over my coffee, sweetening it with granules of sugar, and drinking it in small gulps, a spoonful at a time. Out of the corner of my eye, I glance from table to table at the groups talking. My gaze falls onto the big mirror suspended on the wall, onto the flies that whirr about the disgusting 'cemeteries' curling down from the ceiling. "Right," I say to myself, "there goes a quarter of an hour..."

A cigarette comes next, although the doctor has advised me not to smoke. What do I care! I gain a few more minutes while I search in my pockets for my cigarette papers, tobacco and lighter.

These I place on the table in a certain order, the papers on the left, the ounce of tobacco in the middle, and, on the right, the lighter. I peel off a paper, fold it into a strip lengthways and tear it, as I like my cigarettes slender. Then I open the packet of tobacco slowly, and calculate on the palm of my hand the amount needed, picking out impurities from amongst the threads. Only when this is done do I begin to roll it up. I put away the papers and tobacco, pick up the lighter and rasp out a light. Another fifteen minutes gone.

This ritual, amongst other things, has given me the reputation of being a bit soft in the head. This I know. There are people who watch me and smile. But what do they want from me? I'm here, I've paid for my coffee, I can do what I like.

Sitting bolt upright, I blow the first puffs of smoke out in front of me defiantly. But no one takes any notice of this challenging posture. Gradually, my head sinks down between my hunched shoulders. My eyes grow misty and turn back into the past.

The past. From the depths of the time appear fragments of memories. They stay for a moment, aching gently, and multiply into a throng in my tired mind. I sink into a complex mesh of vague, unconnected things. And there I stay, drooped in drowsy dejection. Suddenly, I give a shudder. Here comes Antoninha das Dores, half-naked. Here she comes in the arms of Chico Bilo, in his fireman's uniform. Terrified, I raise my head and look around. No, no one can tell what I'm thinking. So, unrestrained, I savour greedily the image of my bride-to-be in her nightgown. My temples are beaded with cold sweat; I am crushed with rage at not being able to go back, change time, start my life over again. If only it were possible! What did it matter what had happened! ...Poltroon! Why hadn't I married Antoninha das Dores?

I roll another cigarette. But now, in my haste, little pieces of tobacco fall from my trembling fingers. I light it and suck in the smoke voraciously. The mirror in front reflects my greenish face, the face of an old man. I can see myself, with sagging chin, wringing my hands until the fingerbones crack. Coward. That's what I am, a poltroon. I always was, and only the presence of my

friends helped me to bear the image, so detested, yet so dear, of Antoninha das Dores.

I was always the first to arrive at the café. Then came Master Poupa. Hardly had our conversation got under way than we would see through the window the enormous body of André Juliano coming out of his house and beginning the slow painful climb up to the café. With feeling, I would say, "Here comes André!"

Just now, I could have sworn I saw him detaching himself languidly from the doorpost. But in reality, the only thing I can see through the glass is the burnt-out house at the bottom of the street. Everything just as it was after the fire; the blackened wall, no doors or windows.

It was there that Master Poupa the fireman died, fighting the flames. As for André Juliano, he's still alive, but in Lisbon, behind bars at the penitentiary.

I twist around in my chair, pushing my hat inside out. All in vain. Antoninha das Dores is still in front of me, lying in the arms of Chico Bilo. Her gown has uncovered her legs, belly, and a bit of breast. Around her, the people stare. I can see them all, face after face, as easily as if I were gazing at a photograph. How I hate them all!

"Quick, Maneta, another coffee!"

I wait, rubbing my hands together. And, as I empty the cup, my chin raised, I can see my face in the mirror, so distorted that it looks as if I've been drinking poison. I am covered in sweat. Gradually, I calm down.

André Juliano, my childhood friend, how we changed... Yes Sir, how we changed. In school, we were dreaded. We spent every afternoon in detention, and one day, caused a riot. We broke desks and the big blackboard, and left armed with trophies. We were expelled. We ended up learning our alphabet, numbers, and a fantastic history of Portugal with the old drinker, Jaime Ursulino, who almost caned us to death, and because of whom we eventually spurned society. Our parents considered the case maturely, and concluded that we had had enough culture. It was a relief.

The town square, and later, riotous country balls and

lawless nights in the streets, became our world. It was a scary world, but more reliable than Ursulino's arithmetic, or the squealing cry-babies at school.

Then came the day when we found ourselves obliged to change our ways. We wanted to get back into line and follow the rules; but then began the stumbling, slipping and sliding. In the biased and treacherous day-to-day world of the town, where many of the school cry-babies were earning good money and honest reputations, we fell from one disillusionment to another.

I don't know why this was. But years later, beaten, I would grow thin. I dried out, became gnarled and wrinkled, like the worm-eaten trunk of a cork-oak. André Juliano, on the other hand, got fat, very fat. Despite this, when I looked at him sometimes in that distracted way that suddenly seems to hit on the truth about men and things, I thought I was seeing myself in a concave mirror. Yes Sir, just like me; all the furies, the jealousy, the envy, the weaknesses – but puffed-up and swollen.

At these moments, hate contracts my features and an obscenity slips from me. I would stare at him, my eyes hard:

"We're done for, André, done for!"

I never knew if he guessed my thoughts; however he answered me through sagging lips, like an echo:

"Done for, mate, done for..."

I look at the clock. Four o' clock. Crazily, the flies weave tangled circles around the 'cemeteries'. I watch them and calculate which of the sticky molasses-covered papers would attract the first one. Eventually, tired, I sink into a torpor.

A distant murmur approaches slowly, grows, until it sounds clearly inside me. It's the authoritarian voice of Master Poupa the fireman. I can see him and hear him as if he were really at my table.

"Fire?!" exclaims the voice. And then, disillusioned, "There are no more fires..."

It was his favourite subject. Master Poupa had the knack of being able to turn any conversation quite naturally onto the subject of a fire.

"There are no fires any more..." he was saying. "You can see for yourselves. The church bell rings, the fire engine comes,

they turn on the hose, and, Pow! that's the fire out. Fire? ...What sort of fire is that if we don't even let it burn anything?"

As if from the cloud of tobacco smoke that filled the café, André Juliano appears from the other side of the table. He rolls a cigarette with his enormous fingers. His sunken eyes disappear under the fat of his eyelids. He shakes his head with a sigh:

"No more...it could make you ill, a life like this."

"You said a true thing there. This, nowadays, it could make you ill..."

Why had I made friends with Master Poupa? Every time I ask myself I come up with various reasons, each able to justify the fact. But I reject them all, and end up concluding that it was the work of chance.

At that time, the town was ablaze in discussions about the activities of the voluntary firemen. "Things just can't go on like this," the townsfolk complained, loudly and resonantly. The problem was, whenever there was a fire, the greatest damage was not done by the flames, but by the amateur firemen, who, in their haste to wet and save everything, would open up the way with axe strokes, breaking down partitions and smashing furniture and pottery without compassion or pity. The fire, on the other hand, would only destroy a chimney or a worm-eaten floor.

Finally, things reached crisis point. One day, a fire was announced in Elias Tarro's chimney, and, as someone was running to ring the bell of the old church, Elias Tarro positioned himself between the doorposts with his loaded rifle. "Enter and die!" he cried. And in this way, he prevented the firemen from assaulting his house, while with buckets of water from the garden, the family put out the flames.

Threats and insults rained down on all sides. Discredited, the firemen abandoned their booty. Less than a week later, Elias Tarro appeared with his head covered in plasters and bandages. Chico Bilo had punched him, after a brief argument.

As he was paying his bill at Duraes' chemist's, where he was being treated, Elias Tarro rejoiced at the relatively low cost of the fire. "There, you see! Is this not better than those rascals invading my house?"

But the town, appalled, changed the administration of the voluntary firemen. And, by correspondence with a technician from Lisbon, they agreed on a new head for the renowned corporation. It was Master Poupa who appeared.

Days later, I was already spending hours listening to him. It had been a fire which had ruined my life, and, for him, fires, which had filled him with glory, were now the cause of his bitterness. Modern techniques, he told us, and new materials, such as the multiple jets of water sprayed from the streets, meant that fires were put out much faster and more easily than had been possible previously.

"I just wish you had been there at the fire in Madalena Street, up in Lisbon. Now that's what I call a good fire," he recounted, animated and cheerful. "Dozens of people died. Women were throwing themselves out of top floor windows with children in their arms and got crushed against the pavement. And people, in the flames, burnt all over. The stairs broke up. There was no water – it was all done with axes and buckets of sand. I saw my colleagues with their uniforms alight. I saved women and children, and then I fell down, injured and exhausted. I went to hospital with a broken collar-bone and a burned arm. But we put it out, dammit! And I got a medal."

At this point, Master Poupa would begin to get despondent. He told us of other cases; people dying, he saved them, put out the fire, and was once again decorated – his chest was covered with medals. Then there would begin a melancholy silence, a large interval of years.

"And now? Now I'm no use for anything. The good fires are all over."

André Juliano's cigarette was going out without him noticing. I'm sure he hadn't heard a single word Master Poupa had been saying, although his usual phrase slipped out of him, slowly and painfully:

"We're done for..."

The solitary nostril in the middle of André's face wrinkled up, his lower lip sank down towards his double chin, and without waiting for the subject to change, he began:

"There I was...all morning, going over it all again with him.

I really don't know what I'm going to do with my life."

His breath came with difficulty, swelling out his flesh and making his eyes gleam in terror. His voice drained on, stickily:

"He's getting worse, my father..."

His father, a wretched miser, who recently, had not even given his son the usual miserable sum of twenty-five pennies a day. André Juliano couldn't go anywhere. From his house to the café, from the café to his house, that was all. This penury took its toll. Many fashions had passed since Jeronimo Alfaiate had rigged him out with the only suit he had (and a badly-made one at that). It was falling to bits, and he tried to hide the wretched thing by wearing over his shoulders, even in summer, his old sheepskin coat. A blistering sun, and André Juliano would be crossing the road in a pool of sweat beneath the coat. He would excuse himself, looking at the ground.

Of course, I was the one who paid for the coffees, and, on top of that, lent him money. Me, a poor shabby retired clerk, giving loans to a rich man's son! I thought about this a lot. It may not have seemed much, but ten pennies here, five escudos there, after a few years it added up to a shocking amount. By my count, it was already more than four thousand escudos. Almost five contos! It was infuriating!

"It's your own fault!" I shouted at him. "If you could make people respect you, you would already have made your father see that things can't go on like this. It's embarrassing for all of us. Especially for me, who's your friend, dammit!"

André Juliano would flush pink in terror.

"Oh boy, a day doesn't go by without me arguing with him! This morning we almost came to blows. He started bawling as usual, 'You'll have time to spend it all when I'm dead. Until then, not a penny more!'"

Desolately, he lowered his eyes towards the marble table-top.

"But when the hell will the old boy die? Who can tell me that?"

We shut up. For a few moments, I (and I'm sure Master Poupa too) also wished that when André Juliano got home, he would find his father in his death throes. Then, to get rid of this

unfortunate thought, I changed the subject, and stumbled onto an even more painful topic.

"Indeed," I murmured, looking at Master Poupa. "Fires, now, they're nothing like what they used to be."

And I felt myself growing pale.

It's nearly thirty years since it all happened. One afternoon, the firewood store in my godfather's house caught fire. Up on the first floor, Antoninha das Dores was lying on her bed in her nightgown having a siesta. The family forgot about her, and ran out into the street as the church bell sounded the alarm. The volunteers left their work, went home, put on their uniforms and yellow helmets. People gathered round. The fire-engine, pushed by four men, began the battle.

Under the terrified gaze of my godfather, the firemen broke the windows with their axes and started throwing furniture out into the street.

I ran up, just at the moment that Chico Bilo appeared in the doorway. In his arms, he was carrying my bride, who had fainted at the sudden smashing of glass and splintering of window-frames. Her gown had ridden up over her belly, and she was naked, beneath the glittering helmet and amidst the wrecked furniture.

Everyone moved closer to get a better look. I stayed where I was, stiff, drained, open-armed, like a scarecrow. And still today, still now, at this moment, it seems to me that I am watching the men, the women, the young boys in ecstasies, crowding round the thighs, belly and breast of Antoninha das Dores, my disgraced bride.

The town had seen everything, everything. No one speaks now about the fire, which didn't stand up to six bucketfuls of water. But they still remember the rest, and talk about it, even if it's not the subject in hand. I know.

Could I have married Antoninha das Dores after everyone had seen her naked belly exposed? Even now, I blush to think how near I came to doing so.

It's true, though, that on other occasions, I feel bitter about not having married. I change from one moment to the next. Stubborn old fool. I hated and adored the fire, just like Master

Poupa. Only André Juliano was tired of the subject.

"You two never talk about anything else," he grumbled. "You're always on about the same thing."

But there came a day when, having heard about it so much, he started to get interested. He asked questions like I did, restless questions, followed by long silences. And, between the two of us, Master Poupa pontificated: "A fire always begins when no one is looking. This is the first point to address. When it's noticed, it's already serious..."

There came examples, houses reduced to ashes, people dead, medals. And me, pale with the image of my bride before my eyes...

One particular afternoon, André Juliano suddenly raised his broad hand and begged us for all it was worth to change the subject. It came as a surprise.

"Oh boy," said Master Poupa in a vexed voice. "I thought you'd started liking it. Now you come out with this!"

Looking distressed, André Juliano raised up his round bulky body.

"Liking it? Me?"

And forlornly he sank back into his chair.

Taken aback, I started to question him. With his head resting on his double-chin, he only replied, "Nothing. It was nothing."

He didn't appear for two days. We assumed he was ill. We only found out that he hadn't been when he came back.

"I had a few things to see to," he said. And we moved onto our habitual topic.

A few nights later, I was woken by the old church bell sounding the alarm. I got dressed quickly. "A fire," I thought. And, hankering after that bitter pleasure, I ran out into the street, as I always do when there is a fire. "Where is it?" I inquired of everyone that appeared. And we went off running, me in front, because on these occasions, some strange force rejuvenates me and I feel young and agile. I cut down Rua Direita, crossed the square, and went down towards the glow.

It was André Juliano's house! Flames were coming out of the windows and roof, making great red shadows dance over

the other buildings. The beams were cracking. There was a dull thud, and from the corner of the gable, a whirlwind of sparks was released.

I looked for Master Poupa amongst the firemen. There he was. He seemed smaller and darker beneath his enormous yellow helmet.

"Good fire!" I shouted to him.

Then I noticed that he looked upset. He gave the signals listlessly, stammered orders, and avoided the flames. I crossed the street, so as not to see that small aged body trembling in fear.

So, Master Poupa the fireman was afraid of fire!

I arrived at the footpath on the other side, and spotted the wrinkled face of Chico Bilo in the middle of a group. We looked at each other, thinking the same thought.

"Yes Sir," he said to me. "Master Poupa is afraid of the fire... Poor thing. He's no use for this any more."

He moved forward a few steps, supported by crutches, as rheumatism and old age would not let him walk without them. Head held high, looking at the flames, he murmured:

"Ah, in my day, this would all have been put out by now!"

In his day! I moved away, with the image of Antoninha das Dores dancing before my watering eyes. Suddenly I saw the pallid face of André Juliano. An idea was coming to me. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Never mind," I said. "Some fires disgrace a man for ever, but there are others which save him."

He didn't even hear me. His jaws were trembling above his thick double chin, and he was gaping in amazement at the burning house. I recoiled. At that moment, Master Poupa passed in front of me, and stared severely at the terrified face. Slowly he pronounced,

"Mister André Juliano!"

For the first time, it occurred to me that the fire was breaking out of all sides of the house. Alarmed, I cried,

"André!"

André Juliano crouched down and hid his face in his swollen hands. I turned around.

"Master Poupa. Go and save the old man! Run! Listen, I

know you can do it if you want to."

Master Poupa looked straight at me, understanding that I was referring to all the heroic acts that I had heard him recount over the years. His expression grieved me. I watched him turn around, cross the street, and disappear through the door of the house into the smoke.

"Courage, André."

You could hear the jets of water crashing harshly against the fire. On the outside steps, firemen were struggling as hard as they could. Others were inside. From time to time, dark silhouettes appeared behind the windows. I had never seen a fire like this.

People flooded to the scene. Three firemen came out of the door, carrying an old narrow iron bed. The bedclothes had almost completely burned away, and lying along its length, you could see the charred body of André Juliano's father.

With difficulty, I drew closer. The old man had his wrists and legs tied to the bedposts. It was hideous. Cowed, I made to leave. But then, two more firemen appeared. They were bringing now the lifeless body of Master Poupa. Entwined in the fingers of one of his hands were pieces of the cord from the bedstead.

I spent the rest of the night wandering from street to street like a drunk.

Today, most of the impression that all this made on me has faded. However, I can no longer manage to go and see a fire, no matter how much I might want to.

But that's not important. I can still relive my disgrace, wherever I happen to be. I sit down somewhere – at home, or here, in the cafe – I swallow my drink, and roll a cigarette. Then I start to wring my hands until the joints crack. And Antoninha das Dores comes. She comes with her fresh brown youthful body scarcely covered by the whiteness of the nightgown. And she stays like this for hours before my watering eyes.

Recently, it has not been Chico Bilo who brings her in his arms. It is Master Poupa the fireman. And at his side comes André Juliano, my childhood friend.

This is all I have got out of life.