

Hernando Téllez

Ashes for the Wind

Translated by Harriet D. Onis

The man had a cordially sinister air. He had been trying unsuccessfully for at least half an hour to say what he had to say. He was seated on a thick log by the door of the house. He had not taken off his greasy hat, a cheap brown felt, and he kept his eyes on the ground, while he talked. Juan knew him well. He was the son of Simón Arévalo and his wife, Laura. Even as a boy he had had a bad name, but nobody would have dreamed that he would do what they now said he was doing to old friends of his parents in the vicinity. Juan had not believed it, but now. . . . "It would be best for you to clear out," the man repeated without lifting his eyes from the ground. Juan made no answer. The day had dawned lowering, and the leaden clouds threatened heavy rain. The air was sultry. Juan looked beyond the visitor's hat, out over the fields, green, yellow, yellow-ripe, green again, a brighter green, and then paler. There was a good view of the valley from where he was standing. It was a good spot from which to see the green heads of the grain rippling in the wind.

"Who's there?" came the clear high-pitched voice of his wife from the kitchen. He did not answer. The visitor sat on, his head lowered. With one of his dusty shoes, he kept scuffing a little mound of fine dust against the other shoe and then carefully pressing it flat with the sole. "You'd better clear out," he said again, this time lifting his face. Juan looked at him and thought to himself how much he looked like his father except for his eyes, which were the colour of tobacco-leaf, like his mother's.

"Who's there?" This time his wife's voice sounded nearer. And then Carmen was standing in the door that opened on the front porch, holding the baby in her arms. The man got up from the log and mechanically

rubbed one of his hands on the seat of his pants. Then he took off his hat. Thick, black, matted hair sprang up as though released from confinement. It looked as though it had not seen a comb for a long time. "Good morning, Señora Carmen," said the visitor. The baby was playing with his mother's throat, trying to bury his fingers in its softness. He was only a few months old, and he reeked of mother's milk and soiled diapers.

Juan said nothing. The man was visibly disconcerted. For a few seconds there was no sound but the silence of the countryside, and in the midst of this silence, the ever-merged, ever-latent noises of nature. The valley throbbed intact under the sullen morning. "But the sun is going to come out," Juan thought.

"Well. I'll be going," the visitor said, and the men said goodbye. Carmen was silent, her eyes on her husband. The man put on his hat again, turned his back on them, and walked slowly to the fence gate, some ten or fifteen yards from the house, and opened it carefully, the unoiled hinges giving their customary creak despite his care. Ordinary hinges made by the local blacksmith.

"They'd better clear out." Why? The son of Simón Arévalo and his dead wife, Laura, had tried to explain the reasons for nearly half an hour. But he had been so rattled. All this business of the authorities and politics was always complicated. And Simón Arévalo's son was not too clear about it in his own mind in spite of the fact that he was now hand in glove with the authorities, doing their dirty work for them. "The scoundrel," thought Juan. "He said if we weren't gone by the end of the week they'd come and put us out." "They'll have to kill us," Carmen answered. "That's what I told him," Juan replied, his face a mask of gloom. They said no more. Carmen went to the kitchen with the child

clasped in her arms, and Juan remained alone, standing like a tree before his house.

The neighbourhood was a poor one, and there seemed to be no good reason why the authorities should concern themselves with Juan's house and the fields around it. It was of no use to them—a few patches of corn, some hills of potatoes, a vegetable garden with a little stream of water flowing through it, thanks be to God, as Carmen said, from the really fine, big place of the Hurtados. As for the house, it was half cabin, half house. Juan was thinking that, if the authorities took it from him, they would have to pay the balance of the money he had borrowed some years back to build the kitchen and put in the septic tank. But could it be true that they would have to clear out, as Simón Arévalo's son had told him? Sure, he had voted in the last election. So what? Who hadn't, some for one side, some for the other? And no hard feelings. There always had to be a winner and a loser. Juan let out a laugh. "He was trying to scare me." But no, that wasn't it. He recalled that when he had been in town a week before, there had been something queer. Some of the police, in addition to a gun, had carried a whip. The gun, all right, but why the whip? It puzzled him. The law with a whip in its hand frightened him. Besides, he had noticed something strange in the people. At Don Rómulo Linares' store, they had refused to sell him oil. They told him they were out of it. But the oil was there, thick and shiny, dripping from the black drum into the funnel, and from the funnel into a bottle behind the counter. He did not say anything because of the way Don Rómulo scowled at him, and he didn't like to have words with anybody. Four policemen were walking around the market place, but there were not many

people. He bought a few things—a clay cooking-pot, a bar of soap, a pair of sandals. Then he went into the drugstore for a jar of perfumed vaseline and a roll of cotton. Benavides, the proprietor, asked him pleasantly but with a mysterious air: “Nothing happened out your way yet?” And as Juan was opening his mouth to answer, Benavides made him a sign to keep quiet. A policeman was walking in, and following him came Simón Arévalo's son. The policeman rapped on the wooden counter with his whip. Benavides lost color and quickly wrapped up Juan's purchases. “What's going on here?” asked the policeman. Arévalo recognized Juan, but he looked at him as though he had never seen Juan before. The policeman did not give Benavides time to answer. Turning to Juan, and switching the whip against his own pants, he said to him: “So you, too, are one of those who are resisting?” Juan must have gone pale like Benavides, for he felt his heart begin to thud. He would have liked to slap the policeman's face. Just because he was a policeman he had no right to talk like that to a peaceable man buying a jar of vaseline and a roll of cotton in the drugstore and bothering nobody. Arévalo spoke up “Yes, he's one of the Reds, he lives near here, over Tres Espigas way.” Juan stood as though rooted to the floor, his eyes riveted on the short wooden whipstock with a hole at one end through which the leather thongs were strung. The knotty wood looked like a long finger whose joints were swollen with rheumatism. And the whip went on swishing against the coarse, khaki-coloured cloth of the uniform. “M-hm, m-hm,” growled the policeman meaningfully. “But he's one of the quiet ones, I know him,” put in Arévalo. The beat of the whip against the cloth stopped, “We'll see, we'll see” and a sardonic smile creased the policeman's face “There'll be no more haw-hawing around here, you hear, Benavides. And that goes for you, too....” They left.

Juan's mouth felt dry. He picked up the package from the counter, fished in his pocket for the forty-five centavos he owed and said goodbye to Benavides,

whose hands were still shaking and who was as pale as a person with a sudden attack of cramps.

Now the threat had taken form in the person of the son of Simón Arévalo. Juan recalled that Simón Arévalo had been his friend, and that this boy had not seemed really bad. It was just that he liked to go around shooting off his mouth about this business of politics. But what was he up to now? If he had joined the force, that would be clear. But he wasn't wearing a uniform. Ever since things had become hot, Arévalo had been hand in glove with the authorities. People in town said that he was always in the Mayor's office or drinking with the police. An informer—that's what he was, and an informer who had the advantage of knowing everybody for five, maybe ten leagues around. Why wouldn't he? He had been born right here, like Simón, his father, and like his grandfather. Why wouldn't he, when he had gone to the village school, barefooted like Juan, and like him had run all over, knowing the names of all the owners and renters and tenants and hired hands, working here and there till he was grown up, had put on shoes and a felt hat, and had settled down in the neighbourhood?

The shots awakened Carmen first, then Juan; then the baby began to cry. It was getting light, and the objects in the room were clearly visible. As he jumped out of bed, Juan calculated what time it would be: about five. The shots were repeated, this time closer. He finished pulling on his pants, buckled his belt, and rushed to the door. He had been right about the time; the sky was shedding a milky light over the fields. “Yes, it's five. It's going to be a nice day,” he thought without realizing it. The hinges of the fence gate announced that someone was coming in. Two men walked through. Juan recognized them at once; one was Arévalo, the other the policeman with the whip he had seen at Benavides' drugstore. Then Arévalo's warning had come true? It was twelve days since his visit. Everything had worked out just as he said: “A week, be out of here in a week. That's the best thing you can do.

Otherwise....” Now here was Arévalo again, but this time with the law.

The policeman fired another shot into the air as he approached Juan. “Sounds good, doesn't it?” he said, “and you'll hear a lot more tomorrow at this same time if you're not away from here. You understand?” He cocked his pistol again, taking aim at the slender cornstalks, just for the fun of it. Arévalo stood there with hanging head. He did not look at Juan or Carmen, who had come running to see what was happening. “You've had fair warning. Clear out, and clear out fast.” The policeman had put the pistol in his holster, took Arévalo by the arm, and walked away. It was only then that Juan realized the policeman's breath reeked of brandy.

Everyone did his duty, Arévalo and the law, Juan and Carmen and the baby. The house burned easily, with a gay crackle of dry thatch, seasoned wood, and old furniture. For two hours, or maybe three. And as a fresh breeze was blowing from the north, whipping the flames, it looked like fair-time in the village square. A huge Roman candle. The whip-carrying policeman was having the time of his life, enjoying it much more than his four companions and Arévalo, who had come along to bear witness as to whether Juan Martinez had cleared out or put up a resistance.

When they got back to town, they stopped at Linares' store. The Mayor was there, leaning lazily against the sacks of corn.

“How did things go?” “All right, your Honour,” Arévalo answered briefly. “Had Martinez left?” “No,” said the policeman. “The damn fool locked the doors and stayed in the house. You understand, I didn't have time to waste....”

The oil went drip-drip from the drum to the funnel and from the funnel to the bottle.