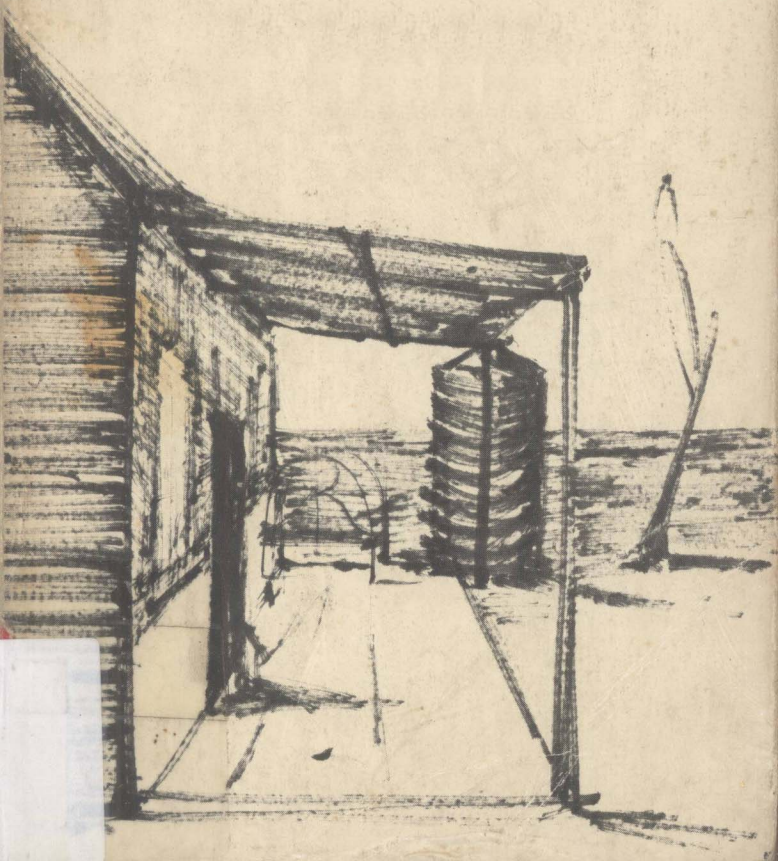
Penguin Modern Classics

Patrick White

The Tree of Man



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

THE TREE OF MAN

The author was born in England in 1912, when his parents were in Europe for two years; at six months he was taken back to Australia where his father owned a sheep station. When he was thirteen Patrick White was sent to school in England, to Cheltenham, 'where, it was understood, the climate would be temperate and a colonial acceptable'. Neither proved true, and after four rather miserable years there he went to King's College, Cambridge, where he specialized in languages. After leaving the university he settled in London, determined to become a writer. His novel *Happy Valley* was published in 1939; *The Living and the Dead* in 1941. Then during the war he was an R.A.F. Intelligence Officer in the Middle East and Greece.

His other novels are *The Aunt's Story* (1946), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), *The Eye of the Storm* (1973) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). In addition he has written *The Burnt Ones* (1964; a book of stories) and *The Cockatoos* (1974; a book of stories and short novels). In 1973 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

PATRICK WHITE

THE TREE OF MAN

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To Manoly

PART ONE

Chapter 1

A CART drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped. These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur. So the cart stopped, grazing the hairy side of a tree, and the horse, shaggy and stolid as the tree, sighed and took root.

The man who sat in the cart got down. He rubbed his hands together, because already it was cold, a curdle of cold cloud in a pale sky, and copper in the west. On the air you could smell the frost. As the man rubbed his hands, the friction of cold skin intensified the coldness of the air and the solitude of that place. Birds looked from twigs, and the eyes of animals were drawn to what was happening. The man lifting a bundle from a cart. A dog lifting his leg on an anthill. The lip drooping on the sweaty horse.

Then the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck, till several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.

More quickly then, as if deliberately breaking with a dream, he took the harness from the horse, leaving a black pattern of sweat. He hobbled the strong fetlocks of the cobby little horse and stuck the nosebag on his bald face. The man made a lean-to with bags and a few saplings. He built a fire. He sighed at last, because the lighting of his small fire had kindled in him the first warmth of content. Of being somewhere. That particular part of the bush had been made his by the entwining fire. It licked at and swallowed the loneliness.

By this time also the red dog had come and sat at the fire, near, though not beside the man, who was not intimate with his animals. He did not touch or address them. It was enough for them to be there, at a decent distance. So the dog sat. His face had grown sharp with attention, and with a longing for food, for the tucker box that had not yet been lifted from the cart. So the sharp dog looked. Hunger had caused him to place his paws delicately. His yellow eyes consumed the man in the interval before meat.

The man was a young man. Life had not yet operated on his face. He was good to look at; also, it would seem, good. Because he had

nothing to hide, he did perhaps appear to have forfeited a little of his strength. But that is the irony of honesty.

All around, the bush was disappearing. In that light of late evening, under the white sky, the black limbs of trees, the black and brooding scrub, were being folded into one. Only the fire held out. And inside the circle of its light the man's face was unconcerned as he rubbed tobacco in the palms of his hard hands, a square of tinkling paper stuck to his lower lip.

The dog whistled through his pointed nose. In the light of the fire the bristles of his muzzle glistened. As he watched for an end to this interminable act.

Still there it was, with the smoke coming out.

The man got up. He dusted his hands. He began to take down the tucker box.

How the dog trembled then.

There was the sound of tin plate, tea on tin, the dead thump of flour. Somewhere water ran. Birds babbled, settling themselves on a roost. The young horse, bright amongst his forelock, and the young and hungry dog were there, watching the young man. There was a unity of eyes and firelight.

The gilded man was cutting from a lump of meat. It made the dog cavort like a mad, reddish horse. The man was throwing to the dog, while pretending, according to his nature, not to do so. The dog gulped at the chunks of fatty meat, the collar working forward on his neck, the eyes popping in his head. The man ate, swallowing with some ugliness, swallowing to get it down, he was alone, and afterwards swilling the hot, metallic tea, almost to get it finished with. But warmth came. Now he felt good. He smelled the long, slow scent of chaff slavered in the nosebag by the munching horse. He smelled the smell of green wood burning. He propped his head against the damp collar discarded by the horse. And the cavern of fire was enormous, labyrinthine, that received the man. He branched and flamed, glowed and increased, and was suddenly extinguished in the little puffs of smoke and tired thoughts.

The name of this man was Stan Parker.

While he was still unborn his mother had thought she would like to call him Ebenezer, but he was spared this because his father, an obscene man, with hair on his stomach, had laughed. So the mother thought no more about it. She was a humourless and rather frightened woman. When the time came she called her boy Stanley, which was, after all, a respectable sort of a name. She remembered also the explorer, of whom she had read.

The boy's mother had read a lot, through frail gold-rimmed spectacles, which did not so much frame her watery blue eyes as give them an unprotected look. She had begun to read in the beginning as a protection from the frightening and unpleasant things. She continued because, apart from the story, literature brought with it a kind of gentility for which she craved. Then she became a teacher. All this before she married. The woman's name was Noakes. And she remembered hearing her own mother, talking of things that had happened at Home, tell of a Noakes who had married the chaplain to a lord.

The woman herself did no such thing. By some mistake or fascination, she had married Ned Parker, the blacksmith at Willow Creek, who got drunk regular, and once had answered a question in a sermon, and who could twist a piece of iron into a true lover's knot. This was not genteel, but at least she was protected by a presence of brawn. So Miss Noakes had become Mrs Parker, became also, in a way, more frightened than before.

'Stan,' said his mother once, 'you must promise to love God, and never to touch a drop.'

'Yes,' said the boy, for he had had experience of neither, and the sun was in his eyes.

In the drowsy bosom of the fire that he had made the young man remembered his parents and his mother's God, who was a pale-blue gentleness. He had tried to see her God, in actual feature, but he had not. Now, Lord, he had said, lying with his eyes open in the dark. Sometimes he would hear his father, swearing and belching, the other side of the door.

His father did not deny God. On the contrary. He was the blacksmith, and had looked into the fire. He smote the anvil, and the sparks flew. All fiery in his own strength, deaf with the music of metal, and superior to the stench of burned hoof, there was no question. Once, from the bottom of a ditch, on his way home, after rum, he had even spoken to God, and caught at the wing of a protesting angel, before passing out.

The God of Parker the father, the boy saw, was essentially a fiery God, a gusty God, who appeared between belches, accusing with a horny finger. He was a God of the Prophets. And, if anything, this was the God that the boy himself suspected and feared rather than his mother's gentleness. Anyway, in the beginning. At Willow Creek, God bent the trees till they streamed in the wind like beards, He rained upon the tin roofs till even elders grew thoughtful, and smaller, and yellower, by the light of smoking lamps, and He cut the throat of

old Joe Skinner, who was nothing to deserve it, not that anyone knew of, he was a decent old cuss, who liked to feed birds with crusts of bread.

This was one of the things, the young man remembered, his mother had not attempted to explain. 'It is one of those things that happen,' she said.

So the mother looked upset and turned away. There were many things to which she did not have the answers. For this reason she did not go much with the other women, who knew, most of them, most things, and if they didn't, it wasn't worth knowing. So the mother of Stan Parker was alone. She continued to read, the Tennyson with brass hasps and the violets pressed inside, the spotted Shakespeare that had been in a flood, and the collection of catalogues, annuals, recipe books, and a cyclopaedia and gazetteer that composed her distinguished and protective reading. She read, and she practised neatness, as if she might tidy things up that way; only time and moth destroyed her efforts, and the souls of human beings, which will burst out of any box they are put inside.

There was the young man her son, for instance, who now lay with his head on a horse's collar, beside his bit of a fire, the son had thrown off the lid. He had sprung out, without unpleasantness, he was what you would call a good lad, good to his mother and all that, but somehow a separate being. Ah, she had said, he will be a teacher, or a preacher, he will teach the words of the poets and God. With her respect for these, she suspected, in all twilight and good faith, that they might be interpreted. But to the son, who had read the play of *Hamlet* in his mother's Shakespeare, and of the Old Testament those passages in which men emerged from words, reading by day to the buzz of fly or at night while puddle cracked, there seemed no question of interpretation. Anyway, not yet.

He was no interpreter. He shifted beside his fire at the suggestion that he might have been. He was nothing much. He was a man. So far he had succeeded in filling his belly. So far, mystery was not his personal concern, doubts were still faint echoes. Certainly he had seen the sea, and the hurly-burly of it did hollow out of him a cave of wonderment and discontent. So also the words of songs floating in the dust and pepper trees of a country town at dusk do become personal. And once some woman, some whore, neither young nor pretty, had pressed her face against a windowpane and stared out, and Stan Parker had remembered her face because he shared the distance from which her eyes had looked.

But the fire was dying, he saw, with such cold thoughts. He shiv-

ered, and leaned forward, and raked at the fragments of red fire, so that they shot up into the night on a fresh lease. His place in the present was warm enough. On the fringe of firelight stood the young horse, his knees bent, trailing from his head the nosebag, now empty and forgotten. The red dog, who had been lying with his nose on his paws, crawled forward on his belly and nuzzled and licked at the wrist of the man, who pushed him away on principle. The dog sighed at the touch. And the man too was reassured of his own presence.

Night had settled on the small cocoon of light, threatening to crush it. The cold air flowing sluiced the branches of trees, surged through the standing trunks, and lay coldly mounting in the gully. Rocks groaned with cold. In the saucers that pocked the face of stone, water tightened and cracked.

A frosty, bloody hole, complained the man, from out of the half-sleep in which he had become involved, and twitched the bags tighter round his body.

But he knew also there was nothing to be done. He knew that where his cart had stopped, he would stop. There was nothing to be done. He would make the best of this cell in which he had been locked. How much of will, how much of fate, entered into this it was difficult to say. Or perhaps fate is will. Anyway, Stan Parker was pretty stubborn.

He was neither a preacher nor a teacher, as his mother had hoped he might still become, almost up to the moment when they put her under the yellow grass at the bend in Willow Creek. He had tried his hand at this and that. He had driven a mob of skeleton sheep, and a mob of chafing, satin cattle; he had sunk a well in solid rock, and built a house, and killed a pig; he had weighed out the sugar in a country store, and cobbled shoes, and ground knives. But he had not continued to do any of these things for long, because he knew that it was not intended.

'There goes young Stan,' people said, pulling down their mouths and blowing the air through their noses, because, they felt, here was somebody assailable.

Because they had looked through the doorway and seen him, as a little boy, blowing the bellows for his father, there, they felt, he shall stay put.

To stay put was, in fact, just what the young man Stanley Parker himself desired; but where, and how? In the streets of towns the open windows, on the dusty roads the rooted trees, filled him with the melancholy longing for permanence. But not yet. It was a struggle between two desires. As the little boy, holding the musical horseshoes

for his father, blowing the bellows, or scraping up the grey parings of hoof and the shapely yellow mounds of manure, he had already experienced the unhappiness of these desires. Ah, here, the sun said, and the persistent flies, is the peace of permanence; all these shapes are known, act opens out of act, the days are continuous. It was hard certainly in the light of that steady fire not to interpret all fire. Besides, he had an affection for his belching and hairy father, and quite sincerely cried when the blacksmith finally died of the rum bottle and a stroke.

Then, more than at any time, the nostalgia of permanence and the fiend of motion fought inside the boy, right there at the moment when his life was ending and beginning.

'At least you will be a comfort to your mother, Stan,' said Mrs Parker, her nose grown thin and pink, not so much from grief as from remembering many of those incidents which had pained her in a world that is not nice.

The boy looked at her in horror, not understanding altogether what she implied, but knowing for certain he could not be what she expected.

Already the walls of their wooden house were being folded back. The pepper tree invaded his pillow, and the dust of the road was at his feet. One morning early, while the dew was still cold outside his boots, he got up and left, in search, if he had known it, of permanence. And so he went and came for several years, getting nothing much beyond his muscles, scabs on his hands, and on his face the first lines.

'Why, Stan, you are a man now,' said his mother once, when he walked in across the creaking board in the doorway of their house at Willow Creek and caught her going through the things in a drawer.

It was as if she had come out of herself for the first time in years, to take surprised notice.

And he was surprised too, for his manhood did not feel exactly different.

They were both awkward for a while.

Then Stan Parker knew by his mother's shoulders and the gristle in her neck that she would die soon. There was, too, a smell of old letters in the room.

She began to talk of money in the bank. 'And there's that land that was your father's, in the hills back from here, I don't just know the name, I don't think it ever had one, people always called it Parker's when they spoke. Well, there is this land. Your father did

not think much of it. The land was always uncleared. Scrubby, he said. Though the soil is good in patches. When the country opens up it will perhaps be worth a little. The railway is a wonderful invention, and, of course, assistance to the landowner. So keep this property, Stan,' she said, 'it's safe.'

Mrs Parker's voice had been scrubbed clean of the emotions. It was bare and very dull.

But the young man's breath thickened, his heart tolled against his ribs – was it for a liberation or imprisonment? He did not know. Only that this scrubby, anonymous land was about to become his, and that his life was taking shape for the first time.

'Yes, Mother,' he said. As always when she spoke of matters of importance. And turned away to hide his certainty.

Not long after that she died, and he touched her cold hands, and buried her, and went away.

Some people said that young Stan Parker had no feelings, but it was just that he had not known her very well.

Nobody took much notice when the young man left for good, in a cart that he had bought from Alby Veitch, with a shaggy sort of a brumby horse. As the wheels of the cart moved over the melting ruts and screaming fowls made way, only a face or two, released from the beating of a mat or kneading of dough, remarked that young Stan was on the move. Soon there would be no reason to remember Parkers in that place. Because the present prevails.

Stan Parker drove on, through mud and over stones, towards those hills in which his land lay. All that day they rattled and bumped, the sides of the sturdy horse grown sleeker in sweat. Under the cart a red dog lolloped loosely along. His pink tongue, enormous with distance, swept the ground.

So they reached their destination, and ate, and slept, and in the morning of frost, beside the ashes of a fire, were faced with the prospect of leading some kind of life. Of making that life purposeful. Of opposing silence and rock and tree. It does not seem possible in a world of frost.

That world was still imprisoned, just as the intentions were, coldly, sulkily. Grass that is sometimes flesh beneath the teeth would have splintered now, sharp as glass. Rocks that might have contracted physically had grown in hostility during the night. The air drank at the warm bodies of birds to swallow them in flight.

But no bird fell.

Instead, they continued to chafe the silence. And the young man, after sighing a good deal, and turning in his bags, in which the crumbs

of chaff still tickled and a flea or two kept him company, flung himself into the morning. There was no other way.

But to scrape the ash, but to hew with the whole body as well as axe the grey hunks of fallen wood, but to stamp the blood to life, and the ground thawing took life too, the long ribbons of grass bending and moving as the sun released, the rocks settling into peace of recovered sun, the glug and tumble of water slowly at first, heard again somewhere, the sun climbing ever, with towards it smoke thin but certain that the man made.

A little bird with straight-up tail flickered and took the crumb that lay at the man's feet.

The man's jaws took shape upon the crusts of stale bread. His jaws that were well shaped, strong, with a bristling of sun about the chin. This was gold.

Down through him wound the long ribbon of warm tea. He felt glad.

As the day increased, Stan Parker emerged and, after going here and there, simply looking at what was his, began to tear the bush apart. His first tree fell through the white silence with a volley of leaves. This was clean enough. But there was also the meaner warfare of the scrub, deadly in technique and omnipresence, that would come up from behind and leave warning on the flesh in messages of blood. For the man had stripped down to his dark and wrinkled pants. Above this indecency his golden body writhed, not in pain, but with a fury of impatience. Anaesthetized by the future, he felt neither whips nor actual wounds. He worked on, and the sun dried his blood.

Many days passed in this way, the man clearing his land. The muscular horse, shaking his untouched forelock, tautened the chain traces and made logs move. The man hewed and burned. Sometimes, possessed by his daemon of purpose, the ribs seemed to flow beneath his skin. Sometimes his ordinarily moist and thoughtful mouth grew rigid, fixed in the white scales of thirst. But he burned and hewed. At night he lay on the heap of sacks and leaves, on the now soft and tranquil earth, and abandoned the bones of his body. The logs of sleep lay dead heavy.

There in the scarred bush, that had not yet accepted its changed face, the man soon began to build a house, or shack. He brought the slabs he had shaped for logs. Slowly. He piled his matchsticks. So the days were piled too. Seasons were closing and opening on the clearing in which the man was at work. If days fanned the fury in him, months soothed, so that time, as it passed, was both shaping and dissolving, in one.