

The Call of the Wild

By Jack London

Note: I have made minor edits to the vocabulary and sentence structure of the original text to facilitate clarity and understanding (generally for middle school audiences, but I believe anyone can enjoy this outstanding novel). These changes are minor, do not alter the plot, and should not negatively affect enjoyment of the work. You can find audio recordings of each chapter on my YouTube channel by searching Justin Franco.

If you find any glaring errors, broken links, or other issues, please email me, justinfranco75@gmail.com.

Thanks for reading/listening!

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CHAPTER I. INTO THE PRIMITIVE

Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not just for himself, but for every strong dog with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal¹, and because steamship and transportation companies were promoting the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, and the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to work, and furry coats to protect them from the frost.

Buck lived at a big house in the sun-kissed [Santa Clara Valley](#). Judge Miller's place, it was called. It stood back from the road, half hidden among the trees, through which glimpses could be caught of the wide cool **veranda** that ran around its four sides. The house was approached by graveled driveways which wound about through wide-spreading lawns and under the branches of tall poplar trees. At the rear things were on even a more **spacious** scale than at the front. There were great stables, where a dozen grooms and boys² worked, rows of vine-clad servants' cottages, an endless and orderly array of outhouses, long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches. Then there was the pumping plant for the well, and the big cement tank where Judge Miller's boys took their morning plunge and kept cool in the hot afternoon.

And over this great kingdom Buck ruled. Here he was born, and here he had lived the four years of his life. It was true, there were other dogs. There could not but be other dogs on so **vast** a place, but they did not count. They came and went, resided in the **kennels**, or lived in the rooms of the house like Toots, the Japanese pug, or Ysabel, the Mexican hairless,—strange creatures that rarely put nose out of doors or set foot to ground. On the other hand, there were the fox terriers, a score³ of them at least, who yelped fearful promises at Toots and Ysabel looking out of the windows at them and protected by a **legion** of housemaids armed with brooms and mops.

But Buck was neither house-dog nor kennel-dog. The whole **realm** was his. He plunged into the swimming tank or went hunting with the Judge's sons; he escorted Mollie and Alice, the Judge's daughters, on long twilight or early morning rambles; on wintry nights he lay at the Judge's feet before the roaring library fire; he carried the Judge's grandsons on his back, or rolled them in the grass, and guarded their footsteps through wild adventures down to the fountain in the stable yard, and even beyond, where the fields were, and the berry patches. Among the terriers he walked arrogantly, and Toots and Ysabel he utterly ignored, for he was king,—king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included.

¹ Gold

² Grooms and boys are the people who take care of the horses

³ 20

Veranda: a roofed porch

Spacious: Large and open, with lots of space

Vast: very large, expansive
Kennels: shelter for dogs

Legion: a large number

Realm: kingdom

His father, Elmo, a huge St. Bernard⁴, had been the Judge's inseparable companion, and Buck was likely to follow in the way of his father. He was not so large,—he weighed only one hundred and forty pounds,—for his mother, Shep, had been a Scotch shepherd dog. Nevertheless, one hundred and forty pounds, to which was added the dignity that comes with good living and universal respect, enabled him to carry himself in right royal fashion. During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a king; he had a fine pride in himself, was even a little **egotistical**, but he was not a **pampered** house-dog. Hunting and other outdoor delights had kept down the fat and hardened his muscles.

And this was the manner of dog Buck was in the fall of 1897, when the Klondike strike⁵ dragged men from all the world into the frozen North. But Buck did not read the newspapers, and he did not know that Manuel, one of the gardener's helpers, was not to be trusted. Manuel had one major flaw. He loved to gamble, which required money, but the **wages** of a gardener's helper barely covered the needs of his family.

The Judge was at a meeting of the Raisin Growers' Association, and the boys were busy organizing an athletic club, on the memorable night of Manuel's **treachery**. No one saw him and Buck go off through the orchard on what Buck imagined was merely a stroll. And with the exception of a solitary man, no one saw them arrive at the little train station known as College Park. This man talked with Manuel, and money was exchanged between them.

"You might wanna wrap up the goods before you deliver 'm," the stranger said gruffly, and Manuel doubled a piece of rope around Buck's neck under the collar.

"Twist it, an' you'll choke 'm good," said Manuel, and the stranger grunted in agreement.

Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unusual situation, but he had learned to trust in men he knew. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, Buck growled **menacingly**, but to his surprise, the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath. In quick rage he sprang at the man, who met him halfway, **grappled** him close by the throat, and with a **deft** twist threw him over on his back. Then the rope tightened mercilessly, while Buck struggled in a fury, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his great chest panting. Never in all his life had he been so vilely treated, and never in all his life had he been so angry. But his strength was lost, his eyes glazed, and he knew nothing when the train stopped and the two men threw him into the baggage car.

When he woke up, Buck was aware that his tongue was hurting and that he was being **jolted** along in some kind of vehicle. The **shriek** of a **locomotive** whistling a crossing told him where he was. He had travelled too often with the Judge not to know the sensation of riding in a baggage car. He opened his eyes, and into them came the anger of a kidnapped king. The man went for his throat, but Buck was too

Egotistical: arrogant, overconfident
Pampered: given too much comfort

Wages: payment

Treachery: breaking trust

Menacingly: threateningly

Grappled: grabbed

Deft: skillful

Jolted: violently bumped

Shriek: high-pitched scream or sound

Locomotive: train

⁴ A large dog breed

⁵ The [Klondike Gold Rush](#) between 1896 and 1899

quick for him. His jaws closed on the hand, and he did not relax his bite until his senses were choked out of him once more.

“Yep, has fits,” the man said, hiding his **mangled** hand from the baggageman, who had been attracted by the sounds of struggle. “I’m takin’ ’m up to the boss to ’Frisco⁶. A dog doctor there thinks that he can cure ’m.”

In the back of a **saloon** on the San Francisco water front, the man spoke to the saloon-keeper.

“All I get is fifty for it,” he grumbled; “an’ I wouldn’t do it over for a thousand, cold cash.”

His hand was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief, and his right trouser leg was ripped from knee to ankle.

“How much did the other mug get?” the saloon-keeper demanded.

“A hundred,” was the reply. “Wouldn’t take a penny less, so help me.”

“That makes a hundred and fifty,” the saloon-keeper calculated; “and he’s worth it.”

The kidnapper undid the bloody wrappings and looked at his **lacerated** hand. “If I don’t get rabies—”

Dazed, suffering intolerable pain from throat and tongue, with the life half choked out of him, Buck attempted to face his **tormentors**. But he was thrown down and choked repeatedly, till they succeeded in filing the heavy brass collar from off his neck. Then the rope was removed, and he was flung into a cage-like crate.

There he lay for the remainder of the night, nursing his **wrath** and wounded pride. He could not understand what it all meant. What did they want with him, these strange men? Why were they keeping him locked up in this narrow crate? He did not know why, but he felt oppressed by a sense of **impending** danger. Several times during the night he sprang to his feet when the shed door rattled open, expecting to see the Judge, or the boys at least. But each time it was the face of the saloon-keeper that **peered** in at him by the sickly light of a candle. And each time the joyful bark that trembled in Buck’s throat was twisted into a savage growl.

But the saloon-keeper left him alone, and in the morning four men entered and picked up the crate. More tormentors, Buck decided, for they were evil-looking creatures, ragged and **unkempt**; and he stormed and raged at them through the bars. They only laughed and poked sticks at him, which he bit with his teeth until he realized that that was what they wanted. He lay down **sullenly** and allowed the crate to be lifted into a wagon. Then he, and the crate in which he was imprisoned, began a passage through many hands. Clerks in the post office took him; he was

Mangled: badly damaged

Saloon: bar or tavern

Lacerated: cut

Tormentor: a person who forces someone else to suffer

Wrath: extreme anger

Impending: happening soon

Peered: looked

Unkempt: looking dirty

Sullenly: angry and annoyed

⁶ San Francisco

carted about in another wagon; a truck carried him, with an assortment of boxes and **parcels**, upon a ferry steamer; he was trucked off the steamer into a great railway station, and finally he was put in a mail car.

For two days and nights this mail car was dragged along at the tail of shrieking trains; and for two days and nights Buck neither ate nor drank. In his anger he growled at the men who came to him, and they teased him. When he flung himself against the bars, quivering and foaming at the mouth, they laughed at him and **taunted** him. They growled and barked like dogs, flapped their arms and yelled. It was all very silly, he knew; but his outrage and anger grew. He did not mind the hunger so much, but the lack of water caused him severe suffering and increased his wrath to **fever-pitch**.

He was glad for one thing: the rope was off his neck. That had given them an unfair advantage; but now that it was off, he would show them. They would never get another rope around his neck. Upon that he was **resolved**. For two days and nights he neither ate nor drank, and during those two days and nights of torment, he built up an anger that would erupt on the first person he could reach. His eyes turned blood-shot, and he was transformed into a raging **fiend**. So changed was he that the Judge himself would not have recognized him; and the men handling him breathed with relief when they bundled him off the train in [Seattle](#).

Four men **gingerly** carried the crate from the wagon into a small, high-walled back yard. A **stout** man with a red sweater came out and signed the book for the driver. That was the man, Buck thought, the next tormentor, and he threw himself savagely against the bars. The man smiled, and brought out a hatchet and a club.

“You ain’t going to take him out now, are you?” the driver asked.

“Sure,” the man replied, driving the hatchet into the crate to pry it open.

There was an **instantaneous** scattering of the four men who had carried it in, and from safe perches on top the wall they prepared to watch the performance.

Buck rushed at the splintering wood, sinking his teeth into it, surging and wrestling with it. Wherever the hatchet fell on the outside, he was there on the inside, snarling and growling, as furiously anxious to get out as the man in the red sweater was calmly intent on getting him out.

“Now, you red-eyed devil,” he said, when he had made an opening big enough for the passage of Buck’s body. At the same time he dropped the hatchet and shifted the club to his right hand.

And Buck was truly a red-eyed devil, as he drew himself together for the spring, hair bristling, mouth foaming, a mad glitter in his blood-shot eyes. Straight at the man he launched his one hundred and forty pounds of fury, charged-up with the anger of two days and nights. In mid air, just as his jaws were about to close on the man, he received a shock that rocked his body and brought his teeth together with an **agonizing** crunch. He flipped over, landing on the ground on his back and side.

Parcels: packages

Taunt: insult someone to get them angry

Fever-pitch: a very high level

Resolved: decided

Fiend: evil spirit, demon

Gingerly: cautiously or carefully

Stout: large and strong

Instantaneous: instant

Agonizing: extremely painful

He had never been struck by a club in his life, and he did not understand. With a snarl that was part bark and more scream he was again on his feet and launched into the air. And again the shock came and he was brought crushingly to the ground. This time he was aware that it was the club, but his madness knew no caution. A dozen times he charged, and each time the club broke the charge and smashed him down.

After a particularly **fierce** blow, he crawled to his feet, too **dazed** to rush. He staggered about, the blood flowing from nose and mouth and ears, his beautiful coat sprayed and flecked with blood. Then the man walked to him and deliberately dealt him a frightful blow on the nose. All the pain he had endured was as nothing compared with the agony of this. With a roar that was almost lionlike in its ferocity, he again hurled himself at the man. But the man, shifting the club from right to left, caught Buck by the under jaw, at the same time twisting downward and backward. Buck flipped in the air, then crashed to the ground on his head and chest.

For the last time he rushed. The man struck the blow he had purposely withheld for so long, and Buck crumpled up and went down, knocked completely senseless.

“He’s no **slouch** at dog-breakin’, that’s wot I say,” one of the men on the wall cried enthusiastically.

Buck’s senses came back to him, but not his strength. He lay where he had fallen, and from there he watched the man in the red sweater.

“Answers to the name of Buck,” the man said aloud, quoting from the saloon-keeper’s letter which had come with the crate. “Well, Buck, my boy,” he went on in a **genial** voice, “we’ve had our little fight, and the best thing we can do is to let it go at that. You’ve learned your place, and I know mine. Be a good dog and all will go well. Be a bad dog, and I’ll whack the stuffin’ outa you. Understand?”

As he spoke he fearlessly patted the head he had so viciously pounded, and though Buck’s hair involuntarily bristled at the touch of the hand, he accepted it without reacting. When the man brought him water he drank eagerly, and later ate a generous meal of raw meat, chunk by chunk, from the man’s hand.

He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw, once for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned his lesson, and he never forgot it. That club was a revelation. It was his introduction to primitive law, and Buck began to understand. As the days went by, other dogs came, in crates and at the ends of ropes, some calmly, and some raging and roaring as he had come; and, one and all, he watched them pass under the club of the man in the red sweater. Again and again, as he looked at each brutal performance, the lesson was driven home to Buck: a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily loved. Of this last feeling Buck was never guilty, though he did see beaten dogs that **fawned** upon the man, and wagged their tails, and licked his hand. Also he saw one dog that would neither be calmed nor obey killed in the struggle for mastery.

Fierce: powerful or intense

Dazed: unable to think

Slouch: someone with no skill

Genial: friendly

Fawned: showing exaggerated affection

Now and again men came, strangers, who talked excitedly to the man in the red sweater. And at such times that money passed between them the strangers took one or more of the dogs away with them. Buck wondered where they went, for they never came back; but Buck was afraid of what the future might hold, and he was glad each time when he was not selected.

Yet his time came, in the end, in the form of a little man who spat broken English and many strange sayings that Buck could not understand.

“Sacredam!” he cried, when his eyes lit upon Buck. “Dat one dam bully dog! Eh? How moch?”⁷

“Three hundred, and a steal at that,” was the quick reply of the man in the red sweater. “And seem’ it’s government money⁸, you ain’t got no kick back, eh, Perrault?”

Perrault grinned. Considering that the price of dogs had skyrocketed because of the demand, it was not an unfair price for such a fine animal. Perrault knew dogs, and when he looked at Buck he knew that he was one in a thousand—“One in ten t’ousand,” he commented mentally.

Buck saw money pass between them, and was not surprised when Curly, a good-natured Newfoundland, and he were led away by the man. That was the last he saw of the man in the red sweater, and as Curly and he watched Seattle grow smaller from the deck of the Narwhal⁹, it was the last he saw of the warm Southland. Curly and he were taken below by Perrault and turned over to a man called François. Perrault and François were a new kind of men to Buck, and while he developed no affection for them, he none the less grew honestly to respect them. He speedily learned that Perrault and François were fair men, calm and **impartial** in administering justice, and too wise in the way of dogs to be fooled by dogs.

On the Narwhal, Buck and Curly joined two other dogs. One of them was a big, snow-white dog named Spitz. He was friendly, in a treacherous sort of way, smiling into one’s face while he planned some underhand trick. For instance, Spitz stole from Buck’s food at the first meal, but as Buck sprang to punish him, the lash of François’s whip sang through the air, reaching the **culprit** first; and nothing remained to Buck but to recover the bone. That was fair of François, Buck decided, and the half-breed¹⁰ began to rise in Buck’s mind.

The other dog named Dave kept to himself and avoided the others. He was a gloomy, sad fellow, and he showed Curly plainly that all he desired was to be left alone, and further, that there would be trouble if he were not left alone. Dave ate and slept, or yawned between times, and took interest in nothing, not even when the Narwhal crossed Queen Charlotte Sound and rolled and pitched and bucked in

Impartial: treating everyone equally

Culprit: a person who commits a crime

⁷ Basically, “Wow! What a strong dog! How much is he?”

⁸ Perrault works for the Canadian mail service, so he’s not spending his own money to buy dogs

⁹ The boat taking Buck to Canada

¹⁰ A way of describing François’ nationality

the waves. When Buck and Curly grew excited, half wild with fear, he raised his head as though annoyed, glanced at them, yawned, and went to sleep again.

Day and night the ship throbbed to the tireless pulse of the propeller, and though one day was very like another, it was apparent to Buck that the weather was steadily growing colder. At last, one morning, the propeller was quiet, and the Narwhal was filled with an atmosphere of excitement. He felt it, as did the other dogs, and knew that a change was at hand. François leashed them and brought them on deck. At the first step upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into a white mushy something very like mud. He sprang back with a snort. More of this white stuff was falling through the air. He shook himself, but more of it fell upon him. He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone. This puzzled him. He tried it again, with the same result. The onlookers laughed, and he felt ashamed, he knew not why, for it was his first snow.

CHAPTER II. THE LAW OF CLUB AND FANG

Buck's first day on the Dyea¹¹ beach was like a nightmare. Every hour was filled with shock and surprise. He had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things **primordial**. No lazy, sun-kissed life was this, with nothing to do but lay around and be bored. Here was neither peace, nor rest, nor a moment's safety. All was confusion and action, and every moment life and limb were in **peril**. There was need to be constantly alert; for these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages, all of them, who knew no law but the law of club and fang.

He had never seen dogs fight as these wolfish creatures fought, and his first experience taught him an unforgettable lesson. Curly was the victim. She, in her friendly way, walked up to a husky dog the size of a full-grown wolf. There was no warning, only a leap in like a flash, a metallic clip of teeth, a leap out equally swift, and Curly's face was ripped open from eye to jaw.

It was the wolf manner of fighting, to strike and leap away; but there was more to it than this. Thirty or forty huskies ran to the spot and surrounded the **combatants** in a silent circle. Buck did not understand the silence, nor the eager way with which they were licking their chops. Curly rushed her **antagonist**, who struck again and leaped aside. He met her next rush with his chest, in a way that tumbled her off her feet. She never regained them. This was what the onlooking huskies had waited for. They closed in upon her, snarling and yelping, and she was buried, screaming with agony, beneath the bristling mass of bodies.

It was so sudden, and so unexpected, that Buck was **taken aback**. He saw Spitz run out his scarlet tongue in a way he had of laughing; and he saw François, swinging an axe, spring into the mess of dogs. Three men with clubs were helping him to scatter them. It did not take long. Two minutes from the time Curly went down, the last of her **assailants** were clubbed off. But she lay there limp and lifeless in the bloody, trampled snow, almost literally torn to pieces, the half-breed standing over her and

Primordial: from the beginning of time, wild and uncivilized

Peril: danger

Combatants: fighters

Antagonist: enemy

Taken aback: shocked

Assailant: someone who attacks someone else

¹¹ [Dyea](#) is a town in Alaska that was a common entry port for Americans heading to the Klondike

cursing horribly. The scene often came back to Buck to trouble him in his sleep. So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. Well, he would see to it that he never went down. Spitz ran out his tongue and laughed again, and from that moment Buck hated him with a bitter and unending hatred.

Before he had recovered from the shock caused by the tragic passing of Curly, he received another shock. François fastened upon him an arrangement of straps and buckles. It was a harness, such as he had seen the grooms put on the horses at home. And as he had seen horses work, so he was set to work, hauling François on a sled to the forest that **fringed** the valley, and returning with a load of firewood. Though his dignity was sorely hurt by being made into a work animal, he was too wise to **rebel**. He buckled down with a will and did his best, though it was all new and strange. François was stern, demanding instant obedience with his whip, while Dave, who was an experienced wheeler¹², nipped Buck's hind quarters whenever he was in error. Spitz was the leader, likewise experienced, and while he could not always get at Buck, he growled sharp **reproof** now and then, or threw his weight in the traces¹³ to jerk Buck into the way he should go. Buck learned easily, and with the help of his two mates and François made remarkable progress. Before they returned to camp he knew enough to stop at "ho," to go ahead at "mush," to swing wide on the bends, and to keep clear of the wheeler when the loaded sled shot downhill at their heels.

"T'ree vair' good dogs," François told Perrault. "Dat Buck, heem pool lak hell. I tich heem queek as anyt'ing."

By afternoon, Perrault, who was in a hurry to be on the trail with his dispatches¹⁴, returned with two more dogs. "Billee" and "Joe" he called them, two brothers, and both true huskies. Sons of one mother though they were, they were as different as day and night. Billee's one fault was his excessive good nature, while Joe was the very opposite, sour and mean, with a **perpetual** snarl and an angry eye. Buck received them in friendly fashion, Dave ignored them, while Spitz proceeded to fight first one and then the other. Billee wagged his tail **appeasingly**, turned to run when he saw that appeasement was of no use, and cried when Spitz's sharp teeth bit his flank. But no matter how Spitz circled, Joe whirled around on his heels to face him, mane bristling, ears laid back, lips **writhing** and snarling, jaws clipping together as fast as he could snap, and eyes gleaming. So terrible was his appearance that Spitz was forced to **forgo** disciplining him; and instead he returned back upon the wailing Billee and drove him to the edges of the camp.

By evening Perrault secured another dog, an old husky, long and lean and **gaunt**, with a battle-scarred face and a single eye which flashed a warning that commanded respect. He was called Sol-leks, which means the Angry One. Like Dave, he asked nothing, gave nothing, expected nothing; and when he marched slowly and confidently into their midst, even Spitz left him alone. He had one peculiarity which Buck was unlucky enough to discover. He did not like to be approached on his blind side. Buck was **unwittingly** guilty of this offense, and Sol-

Fringed: made a border around

Rebel: fight against

Reproof: disapproval

Perpetual: continuous

Appeasing: attempting to calm a threat

Writhing: twisting or squirming

Forgo: go without something

Gaunt: sickly thin

Unwittingly: unknowingly

¹² The sled dog closest to the sled and its driver

¹³ The lines that connect the dogs' harnesses

¹⁴ Mail Perrault is delivering

leks whirled upon him and slashed his shoulder to the bone. Forever after Buck avoided his blind side, and to the last of their friendship had no more trouble. Solleks' only apparent desire, like Dave's, was to be left alone.

That night Buck faced the great problem of sleeping. The tent, illuminated by a candle, glowed warmly in the midst of the white plain, but when Buck entered it, both Perrault and François **bombarded** him with curses and cooking utensils, until he fled back out into the cold. A chill wind was blowing that nipped him sharply and bit especially painfully into his wounded shoulder. He lay down on the snow and attempted to sleep, but the frost soon drove him shivering to his feet. Miserable and without comfort, he wandered about among the many tents, only to find that one place was as cold as another. Here and there savage dogs rushed upon him, but he bristled his neck-hair and snarled (for he was learning fast), and they let him go his way unbothered.

Finally an idea came to him. He would return and see how his own team-mates were sleeping. To his astonishment, they had disappeared. Again he wandered about through the great camp, looking for them, and again he returned. Were they in the tent? No, that could not be, or he would not have been driven out. Then where could they possibly be? With drooping tail and shivering body, very **forlorn** indeed, he aimlessly circled the tent. Suddenly the snow gave way beneath his fore legs and he sank down. Something wriggled under his feet. He sprang back, bristling and snarling, fearful of the unseen and unknown. But a friendly little yelp reassured him, and he went back to investigate. A whiff of warm air **ascended** to his nostrils, and there, curled up under the snow in a snug ball, lay Billee. He whined, squirmed and wriggled to show his good will and intentions, and even, as a show of peace, licked Buck's face with his warm wet tongue.

Another lesson. So that was the way they did it, eh? Buck confidently selected a spot, and with much fuss and wasted effort proceeded to dig a hole for himself. In a few moments the heat from his body filled the confined space and he was asleep. The day had been long and **arduous**, and he slept soundly and comfortably, though he growled and barked and wrestled with bad dreams.

He did not open his eyes until he was **roused** by the noises of the waking camp. At first he did not know where he was. It had snowed during the night and he was completely buried. The snow walls pressed him on every side, and a great surge of fear swept through him—the fear of the wild thing for the trap. It was a sign that he was going back through his own life to the lives of his **forebears**; for he was a civilized dog, a civilized dog who had never experienced being trapped, and so, did not understand this new fear. The muscles of his whole body contracted, and with a ferocious snarl he bounded straight up into the blinding day, the snow flying about him in a flashing cloud. When he landed on his feet, he saw the white camp spread out before him and knew where he was and remembered all that had passed from the time he went for a stroll with Manuel to the hole he had dug for himself the night before.

A shout from François accompanied his appearance. "Wot I say?" the dog-driver cried to Perrault. "Dat Buck for sure learn queek as anyt'ing."

Bombarded: attacked

Forlorn: sad, lonely, hopeless

Ascended: rose

Arduous: difficult and tiring

Roused: woken up

Forebears: ancestors

Perrault nodded **gravely**. As courier for the Canadian Government, bearing important dispatches, he was anxious to secure the best dogs, and he was particularly gladdened by the possession of Buck.

Three more huskies were added to the team inside an hour, making a total of nine, and before another quarter of an hour had passed they were in harness and swinging up the trail toward the Dyea Canyon. Buck was glad to be gone, and though the work was hard he found he did not particularly **despise** it. He was surprised at the eagerness which animated the whole team and which was communicated to him; but still more surprising was the change in Dave and Sol-leks. They were new dogs, **utterly** transformed by the harness. All passiveness had dropped from them. They were alert and active, anxious that the work should go well, and angry with whatever, by delay or confusion, slowed that work. The **toil** of the traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only thing in which they took delight.

Dave was wheeler or sled dog, pulling in front of him was Buck, then came Sol-leks; the rest of the team was strung out ahead, single file, to the leader, which position was filled by Spitz.

Buck had been purposely placed between Dave and Sol-leks so that he might receive instruction. Fast learner that he was, they were equally **apt** teachers, never allowing him to linger long in error, and enforcing their teaching with their sharp teeth. Dave was fair and very wise. He never nipped Buck without cause, and he never failed to nip him when he stood need of it. As François's whip backed him up, Buck found it to be cheaper to mend his ways than to retaliate. Once, during a brief halt, when he got tangled in the traces and delayed the start, both Dave and Sol-leks flew at him and administered a sound **trouncing**. The resulting tangle was even worse, but Buck took good care to keep the traces clear after that; and before the day was done, he had mastered his work so well that his mates **ceased** nagging him. François's whip snapped less frequently, and Perrault even honored Buck by lifting up his feet and carefully examining them.

It was a hard day's run, up the Canyon, through Sheep Camp, past the Scales and the timber line, across glaciers and snowdrifts hundreds of feet deep, and over the great Chilcoot Divide, which stands between the salt water and the fresh and guards the sad and lonely North. They made good time down the chain of lakes which fills the craters of extinct volcanoes, and late that night pulled into a huge camp at the head of Lake Bennett, where thousands of goldseekers were building boats against the break-up of the ice in the spring. Buck made his hole in the snow and slept the sleep of the exhausted, but was awoken all too early out in the cold darkness and harnessed with his mates to the sled.

That day they made forty miles, the trail being packed¹⁵; but the next day, and for many days to follow, they broke their own trail, worked harder, and made poorer time. As a rule, Perrault travelled ahead of the team, packing the snow with

Gravely: seriously

Despise: hate

Utterly: completely

Toil: work

Apt: skillful

Trouncing: beating

Ceased: stopped

¹⁵ The snow was hard, making it easier for the sled to travel over

webbed shoes to make it easier for them. François, guiding the sled at the gee-pole¹⁶, sometimes exchanged places with him, but not often. Perrault was in a hurry, and he prided himself on his knowledge of ice, for the fall ice was very thin, and where there was swift water, there was no ice at all.

Day after day, for days unending, Buck toiled in the traces. Always, they broke camp in the dark, and the first gray light of dawn found them hitting the trail with fresh miles reeled off behind them. And always they pitched camp after dark, eating their bit of fish, and crawling to sleep in the snow. Buck was **ravenous**. The pound and a half of sun-dried salmon, which was his **ration** for each day, seemed to go nowhere. He never had enough, and suffered from perpetual hunger. Yet the other dogs, because they weighed less and were born to the life, received only a pound of the fish and managed to keep in good condition.

He swiftly lost the **fastidiousness** which had characterized his old life. Buck was a slow and careful eater, but he found that his mates would finish their meals first and steal his ration from him. There was no defending it. While he was fighting off two or three, it was disappearing down the throats of the others. To **remedy** this, he ate as fast as he could, and because he was so hungry, Buck was not above taking what did not belong to him. He watched and learned. When he saw Pike, one of the new dogs and a clever thief, **slyly** steal a slice of bacon when Perrault's back was turned, Buck **duplicated** the performance the following day, getting away with the whole chunk. A great uproar was raised, but he was unsuspected; while Dub, an awkward dog who was always getting caught, was punished for Buck's **misdeed**.

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death. It marked, further, the **decay** of his moral nature, which was a **hindrance** in the struggle for survival. It was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and fellowship, to respect private property and personal feelings; but in the Northland, under the law of club and fang, whoever relied on morals was a fool, and would fail to **prosper**.

Not that Buck thought too much about it. He was fit, that was important, and he adjusted to the new mode of life. All his days, no matter what the odds, he had never run from a fight. But the club of the man in the red sweater had beaten into him a more fundamental and primitive code. Civilized, he would have died doing the right thing, but now he was becoming uncivilized and refused to consider morals when the alternative meant death. He did not steal for joy of it, but because of his hunger. He did not rob openly, but stole secretly and **cunningly**, out of respect for club and fang. In short, the things he did were done because it was easier to do them than not to do them.

His development (or **retrogression**) was rapid. His muscles became hard as iron, and he grew **callous** to all ordinary pain. He could eat anything, no matter how **loathsome** or indigestible; and, once eaten, the juices of his stomach extracted the

Ravenous: starving
Ration: portion of food

Fastidiousness: being delicate and careful

Remedy: fix

Slyly: deceptively
Duplicated: copied

Misdeed: crime

Decay: breaking down
Hindrance: an obstacle holding something back

Prosper: grow strong and healthy

Cunning: skill through deception

Retrogression: returning to an earlier state

Callous: unfeeling
Loathsome: disgusting

¹⁶ A [sturdy pole attached to the side of the sled to aid in steering and support](#)

last least particle of nutrition; and his blood carried it to the farthest reaches of his body, building it into the toughest of tissues. Sight and scent became remarkably **keen**, while his hearing developed such **acuteness** that in his sleep he heard the faintest sound and knew whether it meant peace or **peril**. He learned to bite the ice out with his teeth when it collected between his toes; and when he was thirsty and there was a thick scum of ice over the water hole, he would break it by jumping and striking it with stiff fore legs. He had an ability to scent the wind and forecast it a night in advance. No matter how breathless the air when he dug his nest by tree or bank, the wind that later blew found him sheltered and snug.

And not only did he learn by experience, but instincts long dead became alive again. The **domesticated** generations fell from him. In vague ways he remembered back to the youth of the breed, to the time the wild dogs ranged in packs through the forest and killed their meat as they ran it down. It was no problem for him to learn to fight with cut and slash and the quick wolf snap. In this manner his forgotten ancestors had fought. These instincts came to him without effort or discovery, as though he had always had them. And when, on the still cold nights, he pointed his nose at a star and howled long and wolf-like, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling down through the centuries and through him.

CHAPTER III. THE DOMINANT PRIMORDIAL BEAST

The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck, and under the fierce conditions of trail life it grew and grew. Yet it was a secret growth. His newborn cunning gave him **poise** and control, though he was too busy adjusting himself to the new life to feel completely at ease, so he did not pick fights, and actually avoided them whenever possible. A certain carefulness characterized his attitude. He was not prone to **rashness** or action without thought; and though he bitterly hated Spitz, Buck held back from confronting him directly.

On the other hand, possibly because he saw a dangerous **rival** in Buck, Spitz never lost an opportunity of showing his teeth. He even went out of his way to bully Buck, striving constantly to start the fight which could only end in the death of one or the other. Early in the trip this might have taken place had it not been for an unusual incident. At the end of this day they made a **bleak** and miserable camp on the shore of Lake Le Barge¹⁷. Driving snow, a wind that cut like a white-hot knife, and darkness had forced them to look for a camping place. It could hardly have turned out worse. At their backs rose a wall of rock, and because they had left their tent at Dyea in order to lighten their load, Perrault and François had to make their fire and spread their sleeping bags on the ice of the lake itself. A few sticks of driftwood provided them with a fire that thawed down through the ice and left them to eat supper in the dark.

Close in under the sheltering rock Buck made his nest. It was so snug and warm that he was **loath** to leave it when François distributed the fish he had thawed over the fire. But when Buck finished his ration and returned, he found his nest

Keen: highly developed

Acuteness: sharp skill

Peril: danger

Domesticated: trained, like a house pet

Poise: gracefulness

Rashness: not thinking carefully

Rival: opponent, enemy

Bleak: cold and hopeless

Loath: unwilling

¹⁷ Technically "[Lake Laberge](#)," this was a common landmark for sled drivers heading to Dawson

occupied. A warning snarl told him that the **trespasser** was Spitz. Until now Buck had avoided trouble with his enemy, but this was too much. The beast in him roared. He sprang upon Spitz with a fury which surprised them both, and Spitz particularly, for his whole experience with Buck had taught him that Buck was an unusually **timid** dog, who managed to hold his own only because of his great weight and size.

François was surprised, too, when they shot out in a tangle from the disrupted nest and he saw the cause of the trouble. “A-a-ah!” he cried to Buck. “Gif it to heem, by Gar! Gif it to heem, the dirty t’eef!”

Spitz was equally willing. He was crying with rage and eagerness as he circled back and forth for a chance to spring in. Buck was no less eager, and no less cautious, as he likewise circled back and forth for the advantage. But it was then that the unexpected happened, the thing which **postponed** their struggle for supremacy far into the future.

The camp was suddenly discovered to be alive with **skulking** furry forms,—starving huskies, four or five score of them, who had scented the camp from some native village. They had crept in while Buck and Spitz were fighting, and when the two men sprang upon the intruders with clubs, they showed their teeth and fought back. They were crazed by the smell of the food. Perrault found one with its head buried in the grub-box¹⁸. His club landed heavily on the gaunt ribs, and the grub-box was **capsized** on the ground. Instantly a score of the **famished** creatures were scrambling for the bread and bacon. The clubs fell upon them with little effect. They yelped and howled under the rain of blows, but struggled madly until the last crumb had been **devoured**.

In the meantime, the surprised team-dogs had burst out of their nests only to be set upon by the fierce invaders. Never had Buck seen such dogs. It seemed as though their bones would burst through their skins. They looked like skeletons draped loosely in **dragged** fur, with blazing eyes and fangs dripping with saliva. But the hunger-madness made them terrifying. There was no stopping them. The team-dogs were swept back against the cliff during the struggle. Buck was attacked by three huskies, and his head and shoulders were ripped and slashed. The **din** was frightful. Billee was crying as usual. Dave and Sol-leks, dripping blood from a score of wounds, were fighting bravely side by side. Joe was snapping like a demon. Once, his teeth closed on the foreleg of a husky, and he crunched down through the bone. Pike leaped upon the crippled animal, breaking its neck with a quick flash of teeth and a jerk. Buck got an **adversary** by the throat and was sprayed with blood when his teeth sank through the **jugular**. The warm taste of blood in his mouth inspired him to greater fierceness. He flung himself upon another, and at the same time felt teeth sink into his own throat. It was Spitz, treacherously attacking from the side.

Perrault and François, having cleaned out their part of the camp, hurried to save their sled-dogs. The wild wave of famished beasts rolled back before them, and

Trespasser: Someone in a place without permission

Timid: showing a lack of courage or confidence

Postponed: put off until a later time

Skulking: moving quietly and stealthily

Capsized: turned over
Famished: starving

Devoured: eaten quickly

Dragged: dirty and wet

Din: a loud, unpleasant noise

Adversary: enemy
Jugular: throat

¹⁸ Food storage

Buck shook himself free. But it was only for a moment. The two men tried to run back to save the grub, but then the huskies returned to attack on the team dogs once again. Billee, terrified into bravery, sprang through the savage circle and fled away over the ice. Pike and Dub followed on his heels, with the rest of the team behind. As Buck drew himself together to spring after them, out of the corner of his eye he saw Spitz rush upon him with the intention of knocking him down. Once off his feet and under that mass of huskies, Buck knew there would be no hope for him, but he braced himself to the shock of Spitz's charge, then joined the flight out on the lake.

Later, the nine team-dogs gathered together and looked for shelter in the forest. Though **unpursued**, they were in a sorry state. There was not one who was not wounded in four or five places, while some were wounded **grievously**. Dub was badly injured in a hind leg; Dolly, the last husky added to the team at Dyea, had a badly torn throat; Joe had lost an eye; while Billee, the good-natured, with an ear chewed to ribbons, cried and whimpered throughout the night. At daybreak they limped warily back to camp, to find the **marauders** gone and the two men in bad tempers. Fully half their grub supply was gone. The huskies had chewed through the sled lashings and canvas coverings. In fact, nothing, no matter how remotely **edible**, had escaped them. They had eaten a pair of Perrault's moose-hide moccasins, chunks out of the leather traces, and even two feet of lash from the end of François's whip. He broke from a mournful contemplation of it to look over his wounded dogs.

"Ah, my frien's," he said softly, "mebbe it mek you mad dog¹⁹, dose many bites. Mebbe all mad dog, sacredam! Wot you t'ink, eh, Perrault?"

The courier shook his head. With four hundred miles of trail still between him and Dawson, he could not afford to have rabies break out among his dogs. Two hours of cursing and work got the harnesses into shape, and the wounded team was under way, struggling painfully over the hardest part of the trail they had yet encountered, and for that matter, the hardest between them and Dawson.

The Thirty Mile River was wide open. Six days of exhausting toil were required to cover those thirty terrible miles. And terrible they were, for every foot of travel came with the risk of death to dog and man. Perrault, feeling the way ahead of the team, broke through the ice bridges and fell more than a dozen times, being saved only by the long pole he carried. But a cold snap was on, the thermometer registering fifty below zero, and each time he broke through, they needed to stop to build a fire and dry his **garments**.

Nothing **daunted** Perrault, and it was because nothing daunted him that he had been chosen for government **courier**. He took many risks, confidently thrusting his face into the frost and struggling on from dim dawn to dark. He traveled the shores on ice that bent and crackled under foot and upon which they dared not **halt**. Once, the sled broke through, and Dave and Buck fell in the icy waters. They were half-frozen and all but drowned by the time they were dragged out. The usual fire was

Unpursued: not followed
Grievously: very seriously

Marauders: invaders

Edible: able to be eaten

Garments: clothes

Daunted: intimidated
Courier: Someone who transports packages
Halt: stop

¹⁹ François is worried that the sled dogs have gotten [rabies](#)—a deadly disease—from their bites

necessary to save them. They were coated solidly with ice, and the two men kept them on the run around the fire, sweating and thawing, so close that they were **singed** by the flames.

At another time Spitz went through, dragging the whole team after him up to Buck, who strained backward with all his strength, his paws on the slippery edge and the ice quivering and snapping all around. Behind him was Dave, likewise straining backward, and behind the sled was François, pulling till his muscles ached.

Again, the rim ice broke away before and behind, and there was no escape except up a cliff. Perrault scaled it by a miracle, while François prayed for just that miracle; and with every line and sled lashing and the last bit of harness woven into a long rope, the dogs were **hoisted**, one by one, to the top of the cliff. François came up last, after the sled and load. Then came the search for a place to **descend**, which was made by the aid of the rope, and night found them back on the river with a quarter of a mile to the day's credit.

By the time they made the Hootalinqua²⁰ and good ice, Buck was wiped out. The rest of the dogs were in a similar condition, but Perrault pushed them late and early to make up lost time. The first day they covered thirty-five miles to the Big Salmon; the next day thirty-five more to the Little Salmon; the third day forty miles, which brought them well up toward the Five Fingers²¹.

Buck's feet were not as hard as the feet of the huskies. All day long he limped in agony, and as soon as camp was made, he lay down like a dead dog. Hungry as he was, he could not move to receive his ration of fish, which François had to bring to him. The dog-driver rubbed Buck's feet for half an hour each night after supper, and used the tops of his own moccasins²² to make four moccasins for Buck. This was a great relief, and Buck caused Perrault to grin one morning, when François forgot the moccasins and Buck lay on his back, his four feet waving in the air, refusing to budge without them. Later his feet grew hard to the trail, and the worn-out foot-gear was thrown away.

One morning as they were harnessing up, Dolly, who had never given any problems, went suddenly mad²³. She announced her condition by a long, heartbreaking wolf howl that sent every dog bristling with fear. Then she sprang straight for Buck. He had never seen a dog go mad, nor did he have any reason to fear madness, yet he understood the danger, and fled away from it in a panic. Straight away he raced, with Dolly, panting and frothing, one leap behind. Buck's fear was so strong that it kept him just out of Dolly's reach, and yet, Dolly's madness was so severe that she would not stop chasing him. Buck plunged through the wooded middle of the island, flew down to the lower end, crossed a back channel filled with rough ice to another island, then a third island, curved back to the main river, and in desperation started to cross it. And all the time, though he did not look back, he could hear Dolly snarling just one leap behind. François called

Singed: burned slightly

Hoisted: lifted

Descend: go down

²⁰ A [region near the Yukon River](#) that was overrun with gold seekers during the rush

²¹ Big Salmon, Little Salmon, and Five Fingers are rivers and waterways in the Yukon

²² Soft leather shoes - [moccasins](#)

²³ Showed signs of advanced rabies

to him a quarter of a mile away and he doubled back, still one leap ahead, gasping painfully for air and putting all his faith in François to save him. The dog-driver held the axe poised in his hand, and as Buck shot past him the axe crashed down upon Dolly's head.

Buck staggered over against the sled, exhausted, gasping for breath, helpless. This was Spitz's opportunity. He sprang upon Buck, and twice his teeth sank into his unresisting foe and ripped and tore the flesh to the bone. Then François's lash descended, and Buck had the satisfaction of watching Spitz receive the worst whipping as yet given to any of the team dogs.

"One devil, dat Spitz," remarked Perrault. "Some dam day heem keel dat Buck."

"Dat Buck two devils," was François's response. "All de tam I watch dat Buck I know for sure. Lissen: some day heem get mad lak hell an' den heem chew dat Spitz all up an' spit heem out on de snow. Sure. I know."

From then on it was war between them. Spitz, as lead-dog and master of the team, felt his **supremacy** threatened by this strange Southland dog. Buck was not like the other Southland dogs he had known, who had never shown strength or skill on the trail. They were all too soft, dying under the toil, the frost, and starvation. Buck was the exception. He alone endured and prospered, matching the husky in strength, savagery, and cunning. Then he was a masterful dog, and what made him dangerous was the fact that the club of the man in the red sweater had knocked all rashness out of his desire for mastery. He was cunning and could bide his time²⁴ with a patience that was nothing less than primitive.

It was **inevitable** that the fight for leadership should come. Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by the pride of the trail and trace—that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp, which **lures** them to die joyfully in the harness, and breaks their hearts if they are cut out of the harness. This was the pride of Dave as wheel-dog, of Sol-leks as he pulled with all his strength; the pride that laid hold of them at break of camp, transforming them from sour and sullen brutes into straining, eager, ambitious creatures; the pride that **spurred** them on all day and dropped them at the pitch of camp at night, letting them fall back into gloomy unrest and unhappiness. This was the pride that welled up in Spitz and made him thrash the sled-dogs who **blundered** and whined in the traces or hid away at harness-up time in the morning. Likewise it was this pride that made him fear Buck as a possible lead-dog. And this was Buck's pride, too.

Buck openly threatened Spitz's leadership. He came between Spitz and the dogs he tried to punish, and he did it **deliberately**. One night there was a heavy snowfall, and in the morning Pike did not appear. He was securely hidden in his nest under a foot of snow. François called him and looked for him. Spitz was wild with wrath. He raged through the camp, smelling and digging in every likely place, snarling so frightfully that Pike heard and shivered in his hiding-place.

Supremacy: leadership and authority

Inevitable: certain to happen; unavoidable

Lure: tempt or attract

Spurred: encouraged

Blundered: made mistakes

Deliberately: intentionally

²⁴ "bide his time" - wait

But when he was at last uncovered, and Spitz flew at him to punish him, Buck flew, with equal rage, in between. It was so unexpected that Spitz was hurled backward and off his feet. Pike, who had been trembling with fear, took advantage of this open **mutiny**, and sprang upon his overthrown leader. Buck, to whom fair play was a forgotten code, likewise sprang upon Spitz. But François, chuckling at the incident while still administering justice, brought his lash down upon Buck with all his might. This failed to drive Buck from his rival, and the butt²⁵ of the whip was brought into play. Half-stunned by the blow, Buck was knocked backward and the lash laid upon him again and again, while Spitz **soundly** punished Pike.

In the days that followed, as Dawson grew closer and closer, Buck continued to interfere between Spitz and the other dogs; but he did it **craftily**, when François was not around. With the secret mutiny of Buck, **insubordination** grew among the dogs. Dave and Sol-leks were unaffected, but the rest of the team went from bad to worse. Things no longer went right. There was continual fighting between the dogs. Trouble was always occurring, and behind it all was Buck. He kept François worried, for the dog-driver knew that the death struggle between Buck and Spitz was bound to take place sooner or later.

But the opportunity did not present itself, and they pulled into Dawson one **dreary** afternoon with the great fight still to come. Here were many men, and countless dogs, and Buck found them all at work. It seemed natural that dogs should work. All day they swung up and down the main street in long teams, and in the night their jingling bells still went by. Every night, regularly, at nine, at twelve, at three, they lifted a **nocturnal** song, a weird and eerie howl, in which it was Buck's delight to join.

With the aurora borealis²⁶ flaming coldly overhead, or the stars leaping in the frost dance, and the land numb and frozen under its blanket of snow, this song of the huskies expressed a desire for something they had lost over many generations. It was an old song, old as the breed itself—one of the first songs of the ancient world, and Buck was strangely stirred by it. When he moaned and howled, it was with the pain of his wild fathers, and this stirring in Buck marked his transformation back through the ages to the raw beginnings of primitive life.

Seven days from the time they pulled into Dawson, they dropped down the steep bank to the Yukon Trail and headed for Dyea. Perrault was carrying more important dispatches, and because pride had gripped him, he set out to make the trip in record time. Several things favored him in this. The week's rest had **recuperated** the dogs and put them in excellent health, and he was traveling light. The trail they had come in on was packed hard by later travelers, making the return easier. And further, the police had arranged deposits of food for dog and man on two or three places along the way.

They made a fifty-mile run on the first day, and the second day saw them booming up the Yukon well on their way. But even though they were making great time,

Mutiny: an uprising against an authority

Soundly: thoroughly

Craftily: skillfully
Insubordination: defiance of authority

Dreary: dull and depressing

Nocturnal: occurring at night

Recuperated: recovered

²⁵ The hard handle of the whip

²⁶ [Aurora borealis](#)—lights that appear in the sky in the North, caused by the ionization of particles in the atmosphere

François was frustrated. The **revolt** led by Buck had destroyed the unity of the team. It no longer was as one dog leaping in the traces. The encouragement Buck gave the rebels led them into all kinds of **petty** problems. Spitz was no longer a leader to be feared, and all the dogs began challenging his authority. Pike robbed him of half a fish one night and gulped it down under the protection of Buck. Another night Dub and Joe fought Spitz and prevented him from giving them the punishment they deserved. Even Billee, the good-natured dog, was less good-natured and no longer tried to appease the leader. Buck never came near Spitz without snarling and bristling menacingly. In fact, he became sort of a bully, and he was given to **swaggering** up and down right before Spitz's very nose.

The breaking down of discipline likewise affected the dogs in their relations with one another. They fought and **bickered** more than ever among themselves, until at times the camp was a howling **bedlam**. Dave and Sol-leks alone were unaffected, though they were irritated by the unending fighting. François swore, stamped the snow in rage, and tore at his hair. His lash was always striking among the dogs, but it was of little use. As soon as his back was turned, they were at it again. François knew Buck was behind all the trouble, and Buck knew he knew; but Buck was too clever to be caught red-handed. He worked faithfully in the harness, for the work of pulling had become a delight to him; yet it was a greater delight to slyly start fights among his mates and tangle the traces.

At the mouth of the Takhini²⁷ one night after supper, Dub found a [snowshoe rabbit](#), attempted to catch it, and missed. In a second the whole team noticed and rose up in full cry. A hundred yards away was a camp of the Northwest Police with fifty huskies, who all joined the chase when they heard the commotion. The rabbit sped down the river and turned off into a small creek. It ran lightly on the surface of the snow, while the dogs **ploughed** through it by raw strength. Buck led the pack, sixty strong, around bend after bend, but he could not catch the creature. He ran low, whining eagerly, his splendid body flashing forward, leap by leap, in the **wan** white moonlight. And leap by leap, the snowshoe rabbit flashed on ahead.

All that stirring of old instincts, the blood lust, the joy to kill—all this was Buck's, only it was more **intimate**. He was at the head of the pack, running the wild thing down, the living meat, to kill with his own teeth and wash his muzzle²⁸ in warm blood.

There is an **ecstasy** which comes when one is most alive, and it comes as a complete forgetfulness that one is alive. This ecstasy, this forgetfulness of living, comes to the artist, caught up the passion of creation; it comes to the soldier, war-mad on a battlefield; and it came to Buck, leading the pack, sounding the old wolf-cry, straining after the food that was alive and that fled swiftly before him through the moonlight. He was feeling the depth of his nature, and of the parts of his nature that were deeper than he, going back into the beginning of Time. He was surging with life, the tidal wave of being, the perfect joy of each separate muscle and joint expressing itself in movement, flying under the stars.

Revolt: rebellion, uprising

Petty: unimportant

Swaggering: walking in an arrogant, aggressive way

Bickered: argued

Bedlam: scene of confusion

Ploughed: traveled through

Wan: pale or weak

Intimate: personal

Ecstasy: overwhelming happiness or excitement

²⁷ A river in the Yukon

²⁸ Nose and mouth

But Spitz, always cold and calculating, left the pack and cut across a narrow neck of land where the creek made a long bend around. Buck did not know of this, and as he rounded the bend, the rabbit still racing before him, he saw another, larger creature leap from the overhanging bank into the immediate path of the rabbit. It was Spitz. The rabbit could not turn, and as the white teeth broke its back in midair, it shrieked loudly. At the sound of this, the cry of life leaving the rabbit, the pack at Buck's heels cried out in a chorus of delight.

But Buck did not cry out. He did not pause. He drove in upon Spitz, shoulder to shoulder, so hard that he missed the throat. They rolled over and over in the powdery snow. Spitz gained his feet almost as though he had not been overthrown, slashing Buck down the shoulder and leaping clear. Twice his teeth clipped together, like the steel jaws of a trap, as he backed away for better footing, with lean and lifting lips that writhed and snarled.

In a flash Buck knew it. The time had come. It was to the death. As they circled about, snarling, ears laid back, watchful for the advantage, the scene came to Buck with a sense of familiarity. He seemed to remember it all,—the white woods, and earth, and moonlight, and the thrill of battle. Over the whiteness and silence hung a ghostly calm. There was not the faintest whisper of air—nothing moved, not a leaf quivered, the visible breaths of the dogs rising slowly and lingering in the frosty air. They had made short work of the snowshoe rabbit, these dogs that were wild as wolves; and they were now drawn up in an **expectant** circle. They, too, were silent, their eyes gleaming and their breaths drifting slowly upward. To Buck it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time. It was as though it had always been, the natural way of things.

Spitz was an experienced fighter. Through the Arctic and across Canada and the Barrens, he had held his own with all manner of dogs and achieved mastery over them. Bitter rage was his, but never blind rage. In his passion to destroy, he never forgot that his enemy was in like passion to destroy. He never rushed till he was prepared to receive a rush; never attacked till he had first defended that attack.

In **vain** Buck strove to sink his teeth in the neck of the big white dog. Wherever his fangs struck for the softer flesh, they were countered by the fangs of Spitz. Fang clashed fang, and lips were cut and bleeding, but Buck could not get through his enemy's guard. Then he warmed up and approached Spitz in a whirlwind of rushes. Time and time again he tried for the snow-white throat, where life bubbled near to the surface, and each and every time Spitz slashed him and got away. Then Buck took to rushing, as though for the throat, but then suddenly drawing back his head and curving in from the side, he would drive his shoulder at the shoulder of Spitz, like a ram by which to overthrow him. But instead, Buck's shoulder was slashed down each time as Spitz leaped lightly away.

Spitz was untouched while Buck was streaming with blood and panting hard. The fight was growing **desperate**. And all the while the silent and wolfish circle waited to finish off whichever dog went down. As Buck grew tired, Spitz took to rushing, and he kept him staggering for footing. Once Buck went over, and the whole circle

Expectant: excited for something about to happen

Vain: useless, with no result

Desperate: hopeless

of sixty dogs started up; but he recovered himself, almost in mid air, and the circle sank down again and waited.

But Buck possessed a quality that made for greatness—imagination. He fought by instinct, but he could fight by reason as well. He rushed, as though attempting the old shoulder trick, but at the last instant swept low to the snow and in. His teeth closed on Spitz’s left foreleg. There was a crunch of breaking bone, and the white dog faced him on three legs. Three times Buck tried to knock him over, then repeated the trick and broke the right foreleg. Despite the pain and helplessness, Spitz struggled madly to keep up. He saw the silent circle, with gleaming eyes, lolling tongues, and silvery breaths drifting upward, closing in upon him as he had seen similar circles close in upon beaten antagonists in the past. Only this time he was the one who was beaten.

There was no hope for him. Buck was **inexorable**. Mercy was a thing reserved for the Southland. He moved in for the final rush. The circle had tightened so much he could feel the breaths of the huskies on his flanks²⁹. He could see them, beyond Spitz and to either side, half crouching to pounce, their eyes fixed upon him. A pause seemed to fall. Every animal was motionless as though turned to stone. Only Spitz quivered and bristled as he staggered back and forth, snarling with horrible menace, as though to frighten off impending death. Then Buck sprang in and out; but while he was in, shoulder had at last squarely met shoulder. The dark circle became a dot on the moon-flooded snow as Spitz disappeared from view. Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill.

CHAPTER IV. WHO HAS WON TO MASTERSHIP

“Eh? Wot I say? I spik true w’en I say dat Buck two devils.” This was François’s speech the next morning when he discovered Spitz missing and Buck covered with wounds. He drew Buck to the fire and pointed them out.

“Dat Spitz fight lak hell,” said Perrault, as he surveyed the gaping rips and cuts.

“An’ dat Buck fight lak two hells,” was François’s answer. “An’ now we make good time. No more Spitz, no more trouble, sure.”

While Perrault packed the camp outfit and loaded the sled, the dog-driver proceeded to harness the dogs. Buck trotted up to the place Spitz would have occupied as leader, but François, not noticing him, brought Sol-leks to the **coveted** position. In his judgment, Sol-leks was the best lead-dog left. Buck sprang upon Sol-leks in a fury, driving him back and standing in his place.

“Eh? eh?” François cried, slapping his thighs gleefully. “Look at dat Buck. Heem keel dat Spitz, heem t’ink to take de job.”

“Go ’way, Chook³⁰!” he cried, but Buck refused to budge.

²⁹ Sides

³⁰ Slang for ‘chicken,’ used as a lighthearted insult

Inexorable: unstoppable

Coveted: desired

He took Buck by the scruff of the neck, and though the dog growled threateningly, dragged him to one side and replaced Sol-leks. The old dog did not like it, and showed plainly that he was afraid of Buck. François was stubborn, but when he turned his back, Buck again replaced Sol-leks, who was quite willing to go.

François was angry. “Now, by Gar, I feex you!” he cried, coming back with a heavy club in his hand.

Buck remembered the man in the red sweater and retreated slowly. This time, he did not attempt to charge in when Sol-leks was put in the lead spot once more, but instead, he circled just beyond the range of the club, snarling with bitterness and rage. While he circled, he watched the club so as to dodge it if thrown by François, for he understood the dangers of a man with a club. The driver went about his work, and he called to Buck when he was ready to put him in his old place in front of Dave. Buck retreated two or three steps. François followed him up, and again, Buck backed away. After some time of this, François threw down the club, thinking that Buck feared a thrashing. But Buck was in open revolt. He wanted, not to escape a clubbing, but to have the leadership. It was his by right. He had earned it, and he would not be **content** with less.

Perrault lent a hand. Between them they ran him about for the better part of an hour. They threw clubs at him. He dodged. They cursed him, and he answered their curses with snarls and kept out of their reach. He did not try to run away, but retreated around and around the camp, showing clearly that when his desire to be lead-dog was met, he would come in and be good.

François sat down and scratched his head. Perrault looked at his watch and swore. Time was flying, and they should have been on the trail an hour ago. François scratched his head again. He shook it and grinned **sheepishly** at Perrault, who shrugged his shoulders to show that they were beaten. Then François went up to where Sol-leks stood and called to Buck. Buck laughed, as dogs laugh, yet kept his distance. François unfastened Sol-leks’s traces and put him back in his old place. The team stood harnessed to the sled in an unbroken line, ready for the trail. There was no place for Buck but at the front. Once more François called, and once more Buck laughed and kept away.

“T’row down de club,” Perrault commanded.

François **complied**, and Buck trotted in, laughing **triumphantly**, and swung around into position at the head of the team. His traces were fastened, the sled broken out³¹, and with both men running they **dashed** out on to the river trail.

François had always valued Buck highly, but now he realized that he had underestimated how well Buck would do as lead-dog. Immediately Buck took up the duties of leadership, and where judgment, quick thinking, or quick acting were

Content: happy

Sheepishly: with embarrassment

Complied: did as he was told

Triumphantly: having won

Dashed: moved in a hurry

³¹ “Breaking out” is breaking the sled runners from the ice after they freeze to the ground

required, he showed himself better than Spitz, and François had never seen an equal to Spitz.

But Buck truly excelled at giving the law and enforcing it among the dogs. Dave and Sol-leks did not mind the change in leadership. It was none of their business. Their business was to toil, and toil mightily, in the traces. So long as that were not interfered with, they did not care what happened. Billee, the good-natured, could lead for all they cared, so long as he kept order. The rest of the team, however, had grown **unruly** during the last days of Spitz, and they were surprised now that Buck proceeded to get them into shape.

Pike, who pulled at Buck's heels, and who never put an ounce more of his weight against the harness than he was forced to do, was swiftly and repeatedly punished for **loafing**; and before the first day was done, he was pulling more than ever before in his life. The first night in camp, Joe, the sour one, was punished—a thing that Spitz had never succeeded in doing. Buck simply **smothered** him by virtue of superior weight and cut him up till he ceased snapping and began to whine for mercy.

The general tone of the team picked up immediately. It recovered its old-time **solidarity**, and once more the dogs leaped as one dog in the traces. At the Rink Rapids, two native huskies, Teek and Koonah, were added; and the quickness with which Buck broke them in took away François's breath.

"Nevaire such a dog as dat Buck!" he cried. "No, nevaire! Heem worth a t'ousan' dollair, by Gar! Eh? Wot you say, Perrault?"

And Perrault nodded. He was ahead of the record then, and gaining day by day. The trail was in excellent condition, well packed and hard. It was not too cold. The temperature dropped to fifty below and remained there the whole trip. The men rode and ran³² by turn, and the dogs were kept on with **infrequent** stops.

The Thirty Mile River was comparatively coated with ice, and they covered in one day returning what had taken them ten days coming in. In one run they made a sixty-mile dash from the foot of Lake Le Barge to the White Horse Rapids. Across Marsh, Tagish, and Bennett (seventy miles of lakes), they flew so fast that the man whose turn it was to run towed behind the sled at the end of a rope. And on the last night of the second week they topped White Pass and dropped down the sea slope with the lights of Skaguay in their sights.

It was a record run. Each day for fourteen days they had averaged forty miles. For three days Perrault and François bragged up and down the main street of Skaguay and were invited to drink in congratulations for their **feat**, while the team was the constant center of a worshipful crowd of dog-trainers and mushers. After a few days, the attention died down. Next came official orders³³. François called Buck to him, threw his arms around the dog, and wept over him. And that was the last of François and Perrault. Like other men, they passed out of Buck's life for good.

Unruly: disorderly and undisciplined

Loafing: being lazy

Smothered: held down and covered

Solidarity: unity

Infrequent: few

Feat: an impressive accomplishment

³² Only one person rides on the sled at a time to lessen the weight

³³ Perrault and François have been reassigned to a new job

A Scotch half-breed³⁴ took charge of him and his mates, and in company with a dozen other dog-teams he started back over the long trail to Dawson. It was no light running now, nor record time, but heavy toil each day, with a heavy load behind, for this was the mail train, carrying word from the world to the men who **sought** gold under the shadow of the Pole³⁵.

Buck did not like it, but he put up with the work well, taking pride in it like Dave and Sol-leks, and seeing that his mates, whether they prided in it or not, did their fair share. It was a **monotonous** life, operating with machine-like regularity. One day was very like another. At a certain time each morning the cooks turned out, fires were built, and breakfast was eaten. Then, while some broke camp, others harnessed the dogs, and they were under way an hour or so before the darkness fell which gave warning of dawn. At night, camp was made and the dogs were fed. There were nearly a hundred other dogs, and it was nice to laze around with them for an hour or so after the fish was eaten. There were fierce fighters among them, but three battles with the fiercest brought Buck to mastery, so that when he bristled and showed his teeth, they got out of his way.

Most of all, perhaps, he loved to lie near the fire, hindlegs crouched under him, forelegs stretched out in front, head raised, and eyes blinking dreamily at the flames. Sometimes he thought of Judge Miller's big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley, and of the cement swimming-tank, and Ysabel, the Mexican hairless, and Toots, the Japanese pug. But more often he remembered the man in the red sweater, the death of Curly, the great fight with Spitz, and the good things he had eaten or would like to eat. He was not homesick. The Sunland was very dim and distant, and such memories had no power over him. Far more **potent** were the memories of his **heredity** that gave things he had never seen before a seeming familiarity and the lost instincts which were becoming alive again in him.

Sometimes as he crouched there, blinking dreamily at the flames, it seemed that the flames were of another fire, and that a different man stood near him. This other man had shorter legs and longer arms, with muscles that were stringy and knotty rather than rounded and swelling. The hair of this man was long and **matted**. He uttered strange sounds, and seemed very much afraid of the darkness, into which he peered continually, clutching a stick with a heavy stone attached to the end. He was all but naked, a ragged and fire-scorched skin hanging part way down his back, but on his body there was much hair. In some places, across the chest and shoulders and down the outside of the arms and thighs, it was matted into almost a thick fur. He did not stand straight, but leaned forward from the hips, on legs that bent at the knees. There was a particular springiness in his body. A resiliency, almost catlike, and a quick alertness as of one who lived in perpetual fear of things seen and unseen.

And beyond that fire, in the circling darkness, Buck could see many gleaming coals, two by two, always two by two, which he knew to be the eyes of great beasts of

Sought: searched for

Monotonous: dull and repetitive

Potent: strong
Heredity: ancestral heritage

Matted: tangled into a thick mass

³⁴ Term used to describe people from multi-cultural backgrounds, one being Scottish in this case

³⁵ The North Pole

prey³⁶. And he could hear the crashing of their bodies through the undergrowth, and the noises they made in the night. And dreaming there by the Yukon bank, with lazy eyes blinking at the fire, these sounds and sights of another world would make the hair rise along his back and stand on end across his shoulders and up his neck, until he whimpered or growled softly, and the half-breed cook shouted at him, “Hey, you Buck, wake up!” and the other world would vanish and the real world would come into his eyes, and he would get up and yawn and stretch as though he had been asleep.

It was a hard trip, with the mail behind them, and the heavy work wore them down. The dogs were thin and in poor condition when they reached Dawson, and should have had a ten days’ or a week’s rest at least. But in two days’ time they dropped down the Yukon bank, loaded with letters for the outside. The dogs were tired, their drivers **grumbling**, and to make matters worse, it snowed every day. This meant a soft trail, greater friction on the runners³⁷, and heavier pulling for the dogs; yet the drivers were fair through it all and did their best for the animals.

Each night the dogs were looked after first. They ate before the drivers ate, and no man went to bed until he had seen to the feet of the dogs he drove. Still, their strength went down. Since the beginning of the winter, they had travelled eighteen hundred miles, dragging sleds the whole distance; and eighteen hundred miles will take its toll on even the toughest dogs. Buck stood it, keeping his mates up to their work and maintaining discipline, though he, too, was very tired. Billee cried and whimpered regularly in his sleep each night. Joe was angrier than ever, and Sol-leks was unapproachable, blind side or other side.

But it was Dave who suffered most of all. Something had gone wrong with him. He became more depressed and irritable, and when camp was pitched, he immediately dug his nest, where his driver fed him. Once out of the harness and down, he did not get on his feet again till harness-up time in the morning. Sometimes, in the traces, when jerked by a sudden stop of the sled, or by straining to start it, he would cry out with pain. The driver examined him but could find nothing. All the drivers became interested in his case. They talked it over at meal-time and before going to bed, and one night they held a meeting. Dave was brought from his nest to the fire and was pressed and **prodded** till he cried out many times. Something was wrong inside, but they could locate no broken bones or any other signs of a problem.

After a few more days, Dave was so weak that he was falling repeatedly in the traces. The Scotch half-breed called a halt and took him out of the harness, putting Sol-leks in his place. His intention was to rest Dave, letting him run free behind the sled. Sick as he was, Dave **resented** being taken out, grunting and growling while the traces were unfastened, and whimpering broken-heartedly when he saw Sol-leks in the position he had held and served so long. For the pride of trace and trail was his, and, sick unto death, he could not bear that another dog should do his work.

³⁶ Lions, tigers, wolves, etc.

³⁷ The part of the sled that slides on the ice

Grumbling: complaining

Prodded: poked

Resented: angry about something unfair

When the sled started, he **floundered** in the soft snow alongside the beaten trail, attacking Sol-leks with his teeth, rushing against him and trying to thrust him off into the soft snow on the other side, striving to leap inside his traces and get between him and the sled, and all the while whining and yelping and crying with **grief** and pain. The half-breed tried to drive him away with his whip; but Dave was not affected by the stinging lash, and the man did not have the heart to strike him harder. Dave refused to run quietly on the trail behind the sled, where the going was easy, but continued to flounder alongside in the soft snow, where the going was most difficult, until he was exhausted. Then Dave fell, and lay where he fell, howling sadly as the long train of sleds went by.

With the last **remnant** of his strength, Dave managed to stagger along behind till the train made another stop, when he limped past the sleds to his own, where he stood alongside Sol-leks. His driver paused for a moment to get a light for his pipe from the man behind him. Then he returned and started the dogs. They swung out on the trail with remarkable lack of effort, turned their heads confused, and stopped in surprise. The driver was surprised, too. The sled had not moved. He called the other men to witness the sight. Dave had bitten through both of Sol-leks's traces, and was standing directly in front of the sled in his proper place.

He **pleaded** with his eyes to remain there. The driver was **perplexed**. The other men talked of how a dog could break its heart through being denied the work that killed it, and recalled instances they had known, where dogs, too old for the toil, or injured, had died because they were taken out of their harnesses. Also, they decided, since Dave was to die anyway, that he should die in the traces, heart-easy and content. So he was harnessed in again, and proudly he pulled as of old, though more than once he cried out involuntarily from the pain. Several times he fell down and was dragged in the traces, and once the sled ran upon him so that he limped the rest of the way.

But he held out till camp was reached, when his driver made a place for him by the fire. Morning found him too weak to travel. At harness-up time he tried to crawl to his driver. Through a significant effort, he got on his feet, staggered, and fell. Then he wormed his way forward slowly toward where the harnesses were being put on his mates. He would advance his forelegs and drag up his body, then he would advance his forelegs and drag again for a few more inches. His strength left him, and the last his mates saw of him he lay **gasping** in the snow and watching them with sadness. But they could hear him **mournfully** howling till they passed out of sight behind a belt of trees.

Here the train was halted. The Scotch half-breed slowly retraced his steps to the camp they had left. The men ceased talking. A revolver-shot rang out. The man came back hurriedly. The whips snapped, the bells tinkled merrily, and the sleds continued along the trail. But Buck knew, and every dog knew, what had taken place behind the belt of river trees.

Floundered: struggled

Grief: deep sorrow, sadness

Remnant: small remaining bit

Pleaded: begged

Perplexed: confused

Gasping: straining to breathe

Mournfully: with deep sadness

Thirty days from the time they left Dawson, Buck and his mates arrived at Skaguay. They were in a **wretched** state, worn out and worn down. Buck's one hundred and forty pounds had **dwindled** to one hundred and fifteen. Pike, who often faked injuries to get out of working hard, was now limping in **earnest**. Sol-leks was limping, and Dub was suffering from a twisted shoulder-blade.

Their feet ached and fell heavily on the trail, jarring their bodies and doubling the **fatigue** of a day's travel. There was nothing wrong with them except that they were dead tired. It was not the dead-tiredness that comes through brief and excessive effort and only requires a few hours of rest. It was the dead-tiredness that comes through the slow and **prolonged** draining of strength from months of toil. There was no power of recuperation left, no leftover strength to call upon. It had been all used, the last least bit of it. Every muscle, every fiber, every cell, was tired, dead tired. And there was reason for it. In less than five months they had travelled twenty-five hundred miles, during the last eighteen hundred of which they had had just five days' rest. When they arrived at Skaguay, they were on their last legs. They could barely keep the traces **taut**, and on the downward hills, they barely managed to keep out of the way of the sled.

"Mush on, poor sore feets," the driver encouraged them as they **tottered** down the main street of Skaguay. "Dis is de las'. Den we get one long res'. Eh? For sure. One bully long res'."

The drivers expected a long **stopover**. They had covered twelve hundred miles with two days' rest themselves, and they believed they deserved a long rest. But so many men had rushed into the Klondike—men who had sweethearts, wives, and family back at home—that the mail was piling up to huge proportions. Also, there were official orders³⁸. Fresh batches of Hudson Bay dogs were to take the places of those worthless for the trail. The worthless ones were to be sold.

Three days passed, by which time Buck and his mates discovered how really tired and weak they were. On the morning of the fourth day, two men from the United States came along and bought them, harness and all, for a song³⁹. The men addressed each other as "Hal" and "Charles." Charles was a middle-aged man, with weak and watery eyes and a mustache that twisted up. Hal was a youngster of nineteen or twenty, with a big Colt revolver and a hunting-knife strapped about him on a belt full of cartridges⁴⁰. This belt was the most noticeable thing about him, and it advertised his inexperience. Both men were definitely out of place, and no one could understand why they had decided to travel to the North.

Buck heard the discussion, saw the money pass between the man and the Government agent, and knew that the Scotch half-breed and the mail-train drivers were passing out of his life just like Perrault and François and the others who had gone before. When driven with his mates to the new owners' camp, Buck saw a

Wretched: Unfortunate
Dwindle: shrink, reduce
Earnest: for real, more intensely than before

Fatigue: extreme tiredness

Prolonged: drawn out, lengthened

Taut: stretched tight

Tottered: move unsteadily

Stopover: break in a journey

³⁸ From the Canadian government

³⁹ "For a song" – for very little money

⁴⁰ Bullets

slovenly sight, tent half stretched, dishes unwashed, everything in disorder. He also saw a woman. “Mercedes” the men called her. She was Charles’s wife and Hal’s sister.

Buck watched them **apprehensively** as they proceeded to take down the tent and load the sled. There was a great deal of effort in what they were doing, but very little organization. The tent was rolled into an awkward bundle three times as large as it should have been. The dishes were packed away unwashed. Mercedes continually got in the way and wouldn’t stop trying to talk to the men and give them advice on the packing. When they put a sack of clothes on the front of the sled, she suggested it should go on the back. When they moved it to the back and covered it over with a couple of other bags, she discovered more items that needed to go in that very sack, and they unloaded again.

Three men from a neighboring tent came out and looked on, grinning and winking at one another⁴¹.

“You’ve got a right smart load as it is,” said one of them; “and it’s not me should tell you your business, but I wouldn’t **tote** that tent along if I was you.”

“Undreamed of!” cried Mercedes, throwing up her hands in **dismay**. “However in the world could I manage without a tent?”

“It’s springtime; you won’t get any more cold weather,” the man replied.

She shook her head, and Charles and Hal put the last odds and ends on top the mountainous load.

“Think it’ll ride?” one of the men asked.

“Why shouldn’t it?” Charles demanded rather shortly.

“Oh, that’s all right, that’s all right,” the man quickly added. “I was just a-wonderin’, that is all. It seemed a bit top-heavy.”

Charles turned his back and pulled the straps down on the load as well as he could, which was not well at all.

“An’ of course the dogs can hike along all day with that **contraption** behind them,” added another of the men.

“Certainly,” said Hal, with freezing politeness, taking hold of the gee-pole with one hand and swinging his whip with the other. “Mush!” he shouted. “Mush on there!”

The dogs sprang against the harnesses, strained hard for a few moments, then relaxed. They were unable to move the sled.

Slovenly: messy and dirty

Apprehensively: anxiously or fearfully

Tote: carry

Dismay: distress

Contraption: a complicated machine that looks unsafe

⁴¹ The experienced sled drivers mock Hal, Charles, and Mercedes for loading the sled incorrectly

“The lazy brutes, I’ll show them,” he cried, preparing to lash out at them with the whip.

But Mercedes **interfered**, crying, “Oh, Hal, you mustn’t,” as she caught hold of the whip and wrenched it from him. “The poor dears! Now you must promise you won’t be harsh with them for the rest of the trip, or I won’t go a step.”

“Precious lot you know about dogs,” her brother sneered; “and I wish you’d leave me alone. They’re lazy, I tell you, and you’ve got to whip them to get anything out of them. That’s their way. You ask anyone. Ask one of those men.”

Mercedes looked at the men **imploringly**. She couldn’t stand the sight of pain in the dogs.

“They’re weak as water, if you want to know,” came the reply from one of the men. “Plum tuckered out⁴², that’s what’s the matter. They need a rest.”

“Rest? They don’t need rest,” said Hal. Mercedes rushed to the defense of her brother. “Never mind that man,” she said. “You’re driving our dogs, and you do what you think best with them.”

Again Hal’s whip fell upon the dogs. They threw themselves against the harnesses, dug their feet into the packed snow, got down low to it, and put forth all their strength. The sled held as though it were an anchor. After two efforts, they stood still, panting. The whip was whistling savagely, when once more Mercedes interfered. She dropped on her knees before Buck, with tears in her eyes, and put her arms around his neck.

“You poor, poor dears,” she cried **sympathetically**, “why don’t you pull hard?—then you wouldn’t be whipped.” Buck did not like her, but he was feeling too exhausted to resist her, taking it as part of the day’s miserable work.

One of the onlookers, who had stayed silent to prevent saying something mean, now spoke up:

“It’s not that I care a whoop what becomes of you, but for the dogs’ sakes I just want to tell you, you can help them a lot by breaking out that sled. The runners are froze fast. Throw your weight against the gee-pole, right and left, and break it out.”

A third time the attempt was made, but this time, following the advice, Hal broke out the runners which had been frozen to the snow. The overloaded and **unwieldy** sled inched ahead, Buck and his mates struggling under blows from the whip. A hundred yards ahead the path turned and sloped steeply into the main street. It would have required an experienced man to keep the top-heavy sled upright, and Hal was not such a man. As they swung on the turn the sled went over, spilling half its load into the street. The dogs never stopped. The lightened sled bounced on its side behind them. They were angry because of the poor treatment they had

Interfered: interrupted

Imploringly: begging

Sympathetically: feeling pity or sorrow at someone else’s suffering

Unwieldy: difficult to carry because of its size or shape

⁴² “Plum tuckered out” – completely exhausted

received. Buck was raging. He broke into a run, the team following his lead. Hal cried “Whoa! whoa!” but they paid no attention. He tripped and was pulled off his feet. The capsized sled rolled over him, and the dogs dashed up the main street of Skaguay, scattering the remainder of the load along the way.

Kind-hearted citizens caught the dogs and gathered up the scattered belongings. They also gave Hal, Charles, and Mercedes advice: if they ever wanted to reach Dawson, they needed to remove half the load on the sled and double the number of dogs to pull it. Hal and his sister and brother-in-law listened unwillingly, but they tried to lighten the load. Onlookers laughed as canned goods were removed from the sled. Canned goods on the trail were like a luxury. “Blankets for a hotel!” said one of the men who laughed and helped. “Half as many is too much; get rid of them. Throw away that tent, and all those dishes,—who’s going to wash them, anyway? Good Lord, do you think you’re travelling on a Pullman⁴³?”

And so it went, the elimination of **superfluous** equipment. Mercedes cried when her clothes-bags were dumped on the ground and article after article was thrown out. She sat, wrapping her hands around her knees, rocking back and forth brokenheartedly. She stated she would not go an inch, not for anyone. She appealed to everybody and everything, but finally wiped her eyes and started to throw out everything, even clothing that was necessary. And in her **zeal**, when she had finished with her own, she attacked the belongings of her men and went through them like a tornado.

Even with the sled load cut in half, it was still a **formidable** size. Charles and Hal went out in the evening and bought six Outside⁴⁴ dogs. These, added to the six of the original team, and Teek and Koon, the huskies obtained on the record trip back from Dawson, brought the team up to fourteen. But the Outside dogs, though practically broken in since their landing, did not amount to much. Three were short-haired pointers, one was a Newfoundland, and the other two were mongrels⁴⁵ of **indeterminate** breed. They did not seem to know anything, these newcomers. Buck and his mates looked upon them with disgust, and though he speedily taught them their places and what not to do, he could not teach them what to do. They did not take kindly to trace and trail. With the exception of the two mongrels, they were **bewildered** and spirit-broken by the strange savage environment they found themselves in and by the poor treatment they had received. The two mongrels had no spirit at all.

With the newcomers hopeless and forlorn, and the old team worn out by twenty-five hundred miles of continuous trail, the **outlook** was anything but bright. The two men, however, were quite cheerful. And they were proud, too. They were travelling in style, with fourteen dogs. They had seen other sleds leave for Dawson, or returning, but never had they seen a sled with fourteen dogs. And there was a reason why fourteen dogs should not drag one sled, and that was that one sled could not carry the food for fourteen dogs. But Charles and Hal did not know this. They believed they had worked the trip details out on paper, figuring out how many

Superfluous: unnecessary

Zeal: enthusiasm

Formidable: impressively large

Indeterminate: not known

Bewildered: confused

Outlook: view of the future

⁴³ A [fancy train car](#)

⁴⁴ Inexperienced dogs that were only recently brought to the North

⁴⁵ Mixed-breed dogs

dogs they had and how much food each dog would need. Mercedes looked over their shoulders and nodded. It was all so very simple, or so they thought.

Late the next morning Buck led the long team up the street. There was nothing lively about it, no snap or spirit in him and his fellows. They were starting dead **weary**. Four times he had covered the distance between Skaguay and Dawson, and the knowledge that he was facing the same tiring trail once more made him **bitter**. His heart was not in the work, nor was the heart of any dog. The Outside dogs were timid and frightened, and the Inside dogs had no confidence in their masters.

Buck knew he could not depend on these two men and the woman. They did not know how to do anything, and as the days went by it became apparent that they could not learn. They were lazy about things, without order or discipline. It took them half the night to pitch a slovenly camp, and half the morning to break that camp and get the sled loaded so sloppily that for the rest of the day they were forced to keep stopping to rearrange the load. Some days they did not make ten miles. On other days they were unable to get started at all. And on no day did they succeed in making more than half the distance used by the men as a basis in their calculations for the dogs' food.

It was inevitable that they would run out of dog food. But they **hastened** it by overfeeding the dogs early in the trip. The Outside dogs, whose digestions had not been trained to get the most out of little food, had **voracious** appetites. And when the worn-out huskies pulled weakly, Hal decided to double their ration. And to make things worse, Mercedes, feeling sorry for the state of the dogs, stole from the fish-sacks and fed them secretly even more food. But it was not food that Buck and the huskies needed; it was rest. And in addition to making poor time, the heavy load they dragged **sapped** their strength severely.

Then came the underfeeding. Hal awoke one day to the fact that his dog-food was half gone and the distance only a quarter covered. Worse than that, there was no way to get any more food along the way. So he cut down all the rations and tried to increase the day's travel. His sister and brother-in-law supported him; but they were frustrated by their heavy load and their own **incompetence**. It was a simple matter to give the dogs less food; but it was impossible to make the dogs travel faster, and their own inability to get started earlier in the morning prevented them from travelling longer hours. Not only did they not know how to work dogs, but they did not know how to work themselves.

The first to die was Dub. Poor blundering thief that he was, always getting caught and punished, he had still been a faithful worker. His twisted shoulder-blade, untreated and unrested, went from bad to worse, until finally Hal shot him with the big Colt revolver. It was obvious that the Outside dogs could not survive on the food ration of an experienced husky, so giving the Outside dogs half the ration of a husky, as Hal decided to do, would guarantee their deaths. The Newfoundland went first, followed by the three short-haired pointers, the two mongrels hanging more **grittily** on to life, but going in the end.

Weary: tired

Bitter: angry because of bad past experiences

Hastened: sped up

Voracious: wanting a lot of food

Sapped: drained

Incompetence: inability to do things correctly

Grittily: courageously

By this time all the **amenities** of the Southland had fallen away from the three people. Originally believing Arctic travel would be **glamorous** and romantic⁴⁶, the travelers soon became aware of the harsh reality of the situation. Mercedes stopped weeping over the dogs, being too occupied with weeping over herself and with quarrelling with her husband and brother. Fighting was one thing they were never too tired to do. Their irritability arose out of their misery and increased with it. The wonderful patience of the trail which comes to men who love the toil and the travel did not come to these three. They had no **inkling** of such a patience. They were stiff and in pain; their muscles ached, their bones ached, their very hearts ached; and because of this they became angry, and harsh words were first on their lips in the morning and last on their lips at night.

Charles and Hal fought whenever Mercedes gave them a chance. Each of the men believed that he did more than his fair share of the work, and would say so at every opportunity. Sometimes Mercedes sided with her husband, sometimes with her brother. The result was an unending family quarrel. Starting from a **dispute** about who should chop a few sticks for the fire (a dispute which concerned only Charles and Hal), suddenly would include references to the rest of the family: fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins, people thousands of miles away, and some of them dead. Why the actions or thoughts of any of these people mattered to chopping sticks is beyond understanding; still, the fights between the three always dragged on and turned into arguments about other **irrelevant** topics. In the meantime, the fire remained unbuilt, the camp half pitched, and the dogs unfed.

Mercedes nursed a special **grievance**—the grievance of being a lady. She was pretty and soft, and had been treated **chivalrously** all her days. But the present treatment by her husband and brother was anything but chivalrous. It was her habit to act helpless, but the men complained and would not give her the special treatment she expected. Because of this, she made their lives unbearable. She no longer thought about the dogs, and because she was sore and tired, she demanded to ride on the sled. She was pretty and soft, but she weighed one hundred and twenty pounds—a heavy last straw to the load dragged by the weak and starving animals. She rode for days, until the dogs fell in the traces and the sled stood still. Charles and Hal begged her to get off and walk, pleaded with her, but she wept and called them brutal and cruel.

On one occasion they took her off the sled by force. They never did it again. She let her legs go limp like a spoiled child and sat down on the trail. They went on their way, but she did not move. After they had travelled three miles, they unloaded the sled, came back for her, lifted her, and put her on the sled again.

They were so occupied with their own misery that they ignored the suffering of their animals. Hal's theory was that one must get hardened, and he hammered it into the dogs with a club. At the Five Fingers the dog food ran out, and a native there offered to trade them a few pounds of frozen horse hide⁴⁷ for the Colt revolver on Hal's hip. The horse hide was a poor substitute for food. In its frozen

Amenities: nice things
Glamorous: exciting and attractive

Inkling: hint

Dispute: disagreement

Irrelevant: not important

Grievance: problem or complaint

Chivalrously: with courtesy and kindness

⁴⁶ Not "love" romantic, but thinking the trip would be perfect and better than reality (see [Romanticism](#))

⁴⁷ Horse skin

state it was more like strips of iron, and when a dog wrestled it into his stomach it thawed into thin leathery strings, irritating and **indigestible**, and lacking any nutrition.

And through it all Buck staggered along at the head of the team as if in a nightmare. He pulled when he could; when he could no longer pull, he fell down and remained down until blows from the whip or club drove him to his feet again. All the stiffness and gloss had gone out of his beautiful furry coat. The hair hung down, limp and draggled, or matted with dried blood where Hal's club had bruised him. His muscles had wasted away to knotty strings, and each rib and every bone in his frame were outlined cleanly through the loose hide that was wrinkled in folds of emptiness. It was heartbreaking, but Buck's heart was unbreakable. The man in the red sweater had proved that.

It was the same way with the other dogs. They were walking skeletons. There were seven left all together, including him. In their misery they had become **indifferent** to the bite of the lash or the bruise of the club. The pain of the beating was dull and distant, just as the things their eyes saw and their ears heard seemed dull and distant. They were barely alive bags of bones in which sparks of life fluttered faintly. When a halt was made, they dropped down in the traces like dead dogs, and the spark dimmed and paled and seemed to go out. And when the club or whip fell upon them, the spark fluttered **feebly** up, and they struggled to their feet and staggered on.

There came a day when Billee, the good-natured, fell and could not rise. Hal had traded off his revolver, so he took the axe and knocked Billee on the head as he lay in the traces, then cut the **carcass** out of the harness and dragged it to one side. Buck saw, and his mates saw, and they knew that this was very close to happening to them. On the next day Koonah died, and only five of them remained: Joe, too close to death to be angry; Pike, crippled and limping, only half **conscious**; Sol-leks, the one-eyed, still faithful to the toil of trace and trail, and sad that he had so little strength with which to pull; Teek, who had not travelled so far that winter and who was now beaten more than the others because he was fresher; and Buck, still at the head of the team, but no longer enforcing discipline or striving to enforce it, blind with weakness half the time and keeping the trail by the dim feel of his feet.

It was beautiful spring weather, but neither dogs nor humans were aware of it. Each day the sun rose earlier and set later. It was dawn by three in the morning, and twilight⁴⁸ **lingered** until nine at night. The whole long day was a blaze of sunshine. The ghostly winter silence had given way to the great spring **murmur** of awakening life. This murmur arose from all the land, filled with the joy of living. It came from the things that lived and moved again, things which had been dead and had not moved during the long months of frost. The sap was rising in the pines. The willow and aspen trees were bursting out in young buds. Shrubs and vines were putting on fresh shades of green. Crickets sang in the nights, and in the days all manner of creeping, crawling things rustled forth into the sun. Partridges and

Indigestible: unable to be digested

Indifferent: not caring, having no concern

Feebly: without strength

Carcass: body (usually of a dead animal)

Conscious: aware of his surroundings

Lingered: stayed longer
Murmur: soft sound

⁴⁸ The time just after the sun sets, when the sky glows

woodpeckers were booming and knocking in the forest. Squirrels were chattering, birds singing, and overhead honked the wild birds flying up from the South.

From every hill slope came the trickle of running water, the music of unseen fountains. All things were thawing, bending, snapping. The Yukon was straining to break loose from the ice that bound it down. It ate away from beneath; the sun ate from above. Air-holes formed in ice, **fissures** sprang and spread apart, while thin sections of ice fell through into the river. And through all this bursting and throbbing of awakening life, under the blazing sun and through the soft-sighing breezes, staggered the two men, the woman, and the huskies, like travelers heading toward death.

With the dogs falling, Mercedes weeping and riding, Hal swearing, and Charles's eyes watering, they staggered into John Thornton's camp at the mouth of the White River. When they halted, the dogs dropped down as though they had all been struck dead. Mercedes dried her eyes and looked at John Thornton. Charles sat down on a log to rest. He sat down very slowly and painstakingly because of stiffness and soreness. Hal did the talking. John Thornton was whittling⁴⁹ the last touches on an axe-handle he had made from a stick of birch. He whittled and listened, gave **monosyllabic** replies, and, when it was asked, **terse** advice. He knew the kind of people the men were, and he gave his advice knowing that it would not be followed.

"They told us earlier that the bottom was dropping out⁵⁰ of the trail and that the best thing for us to do was to wait," Hal said after John Thornton warned him not to take any more chances on the thawing ice. "They told us we couldn't make White River, and here we are." This last statement was made with a **sneering** sound of triumph in it.

"And they told you true," John Thornton answered. "The bottom's likely to drop out at any moment. Only fools, with the blind luck of fools, could have made it. I tell you straight, I wouldn't risk my carcass on that ice for all the gold in Alaska."

"That's because you're no fool, I suppose," said Hal. "All the same, we'll go on to Dawson." He **uncoiled** his whip. "Get up there, Buck! Hi! Get up there! Mush on!"

Thornton went on whittling. It was useless, he knew, to get between a fool and his **folly**.

But the team did not get up at the command. The whip flashed out mercilessly here and there. John Thornton tightened his lips. Sol-leks was the first to crawl to his feet. Teek followed. Joe came next, yelping with pain. Pike made painful efforts. Twice he fell over, and on the third attempt managed to rise. Buck made no effort. He lay quietly where he had fallen. The lash bit into him again and again, but he neither whined nor struggled. Several times Thornton started, as though to speak, but changed his mind. A moisture came into his eyes, and, as the whipping continued, he arose and paced back and forth.

Fissures: cracks

Monosyllabic: one syllable words (like 'yes' and 'no')

Terse: short, with few words

Sneering: mocking

Uncoiled: straightened, unraveled

Folly: foolish behavior

⁴⁹ Carving wood by cutting small slices from it

⁵⁰ The ice was thawing too much to be able to travel on it

This was the first time Buck had failed, and it drove Hal into a rage. He exchanged the whip for a club. Buck refused to move under the rain of heavier blows which now fell upon him. Like his mates, he was barely able to get up, but, unlike them, he had made up his mind not to get up. He had a feeling of impending doom. He had felt this way from the moment they had left the bank of the river, and he could not get rid of this feeling. He had felt the thin and rotten ice under his feet all day, and he sensed disaster close at hand, out there on the ice where his master was trying to drive him. He refused to get up. He had suffered so greatly, and he was so exhausted, that the blows did not hurt much. And as they continued to fall upon him, the spark of life within Buck flickered and dimmed. It was nearly out. He felt strangely numb. As though from a great distance, he was aware that he was being beaten. The last sensations of pain left him. He no longer felt anything, though very faintly he could hear the impact of the club upon his body. But it was no longer his body, it seemed so far away.

And then, suddenly, without warning, uttering a cry that was like the cry of an animal, John Thornton sprang upon the man with the club. Hal was hurled backward, as though struck by a falling tree. Mercedes screamed. Charles watched and wiped his watery eyes, but he could not get up because of his pain.

John Thornton stood over Buck, struggling to control himself, too filled with rage to speak.

“If you strike that dog again, I’ll kill you,” he at last managed to say in a choking voice.

“It’s my dog,” Hal replied, wiping the blood from his mouth as he came back. “Get out of my way, or I’ll fix you. I’m going to Dawson.”

Thornton stood between him and Buck, and showed no intention of getting out of the way. Hal drew his long hunting-knife. Mercedes screamed, cried, laughed, and seemed **hysterical**. Thornton hit Hal’s knuckles with the axe-handle, knocking the knife to the ground. He hit hal’s knuckles again as he tried to pick it up. Then he stooped, picked the knife up himself, and with two strokes cut Buck’s traces.

Hal had no fight left in him. Besides, his hands were full with his sister and Buck was too near dead to be of further use in hauling the sled. A few minutes later the three pulled out from the bank and down the river. Buck heard them go and raised his head to see, Pike was leading, Sol-leks was at the wheel, and between were Joe and Teek. They were limping and staggering. Mercedes was riding the loaded sled. Hal guided at the gee-pole, and Charles stumbled along in the rear.

As Buck watched them, Thornton knelt beside him and with rough, kindly hands searched for broken bones. By the time his search had disclosed nothing more than many bruises and a state of terrible starvation, the sled was a quarter of a mile away. Dog and man watched it crawling along over the ice. Suddenly, they saw its back end drop down, and the gee-pole, with Hal clinging to it, jerk into the air. Mercedes’s scream came to their ears. They saw Charles turn and make one step to

Hysterical: having uncontrolled emotions

run back, and then a whole section of ice fell through and the dogs and humans disappeared. A yawning hole was all that was to be seen. The bottom had dropped out of the trail and taken the sled, the two men, the woman, and the dogs with it.

John Thornton and Buck looked at each other.

“You poor devil,” said John Thornton, and Buck licked his hand.

CHAPTER VI. FOR THE LOVE OF A MAN

John Thornton had gotten frostbite in his feet the previous December, so his partners had made him comfortable and left him at the camp to get well, while they went up the river to get out a raft of saw-logs⁵¹ for Dawson. He was still limping slightly at the time he rescued Buck, but in the warm weather even the slight limp left him. And here, lying by the riverbank through the long spring days, watching the running water, listening lazily to the songs of birds and the hum of nature, Buck slowly won back his strength.

After travelling three thousand miles, Buck allowed himself to be a bit lazy as his wounds healed, his muscles swelled out, and the flesh came back to cover his bones. In fact, everyone at the camp was taking it easy—Buck, John Thornton, and Thornton’s two other dogs, Skeet and Nig—while they waited for the raft that would take them to Dawson. Skeet was a little Irish setter who quickly made friends with Buck, who, in a dying condition, was unable to stop her friendly advances. She was a nurturing dog; and as a mother cat washes her kittens, Skeet washed and cleansed Buck’s wounds. Regularly, each morning after Buck had finished his breakfast, she performed this task, until he eventually came to appreciate and even look forward to her care. Nig, equally friendly, though he did not show it as much, was a huge black dog, half bloodhound and half deerhound, with eyes that laughed and an endless good nature.

To Buck’s surprise these dogs showed no jealousy toward him. They seemed to share the kindness of John Thornton. As Buck grew stronger they **enticed** him into all sorts of ridiculous games, which even John Thornton himself would join; and in this fashion Buck **romped** through his recovery and into a new existence. Love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time. He had never experienced this at Judge Miller’s down in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley. With the Judge’s sons, hunting and tramping, it had been a working partnership; with the Judge’s grandsons, a sort of guardianship; and with the Judge himself, a **dignified** friendship. But love that was burning, that was adoration, that was madness, it had taken John Thornton to **arouse**.

This man had saved his life, which would have been enough; but, further, he was the **ideal** master. Other men saw to the **welfare** of their dogs from a sense of duty and business; John Thornton saw to the welfare of his as if they were his own children, because he could not help it. He never forgot a kindly greeting or a cheering word, and to sit down for a long talk with them was as much his delight as

Enticed: attracted or tempted

Romped: played

Dignified: serious and respectful

Arouse: awaken

Welfare: health and happiness

⁵¹ Tying logs together to make rafts (called ‘[timber rafting](#)’) is a way to travel and transport trees

the dogs'. He had a way of taking Buck's head roughly between his hands, and resting his own head upon Buck's, of shaking him back and forth, the while calling him names that to Buck were love names. Buck knew no greater joy than that rough embrace and the sound of the man's voice, and at each jerk back and forth it seemed that his heart would be shaken out of his body so great was its ecstasy. And when, released, he sprang to his feet, his mouth laughing, his eyes wide and knowing, his throat vibrant with **unuttered** sound, John Thornton would exclaim, "God! you can all but speak!"

Buck had a love expression that would return to the man. He would often **seize** Thornton's hand in his mouth and close so fiercely that he would leave impressions of his teeth on the man's flesh for some time afterward. And as Buck understood Thornton's actions to be out of love, the man understood Buck's friendly bite to be a sign of affection.

For the most part, however, Buck's love was expressed in adoration. While he went wild with happiness when Thornton touched him or spoke to him, he did not seek out this attention. Unlike Skeet, who would often shove her nose under Thornton's hand and nudge and nudge until she was petted, or Nig, who would walk up and rest his great head on Thornton's knee, Buck was content to adore at a distance. He would lie by the hour, eager, alert, at Thornton's feet, looking up into his face, dwelling upon it, studying it, watching each expression with intense interest. At other times, he would lie farther away, to the side or behind, watching the outlines of the man and the occasional movements of his body. And often, the strength of Buck's gaze would draw John Thornton's head around, and he would return the gaze, without speech, but with intense love shining out their eyes at one another.

For a long time after his rescue, Buck did not like Thornton to get out of his sight. From the moment he left the tent to when he entered it again, Buck would follow at his heels. His **transient** masters since he had come into the Northland made him fear that no master could be permanent. He was afraid that Thornton would pass out of his life as Perrault and François and the Scotch half-breed had passed out. Even in the night, in his dreams, he was haunted by this fear. At such times he would shake off sleep and creep through the night air to the flap of the tent, where he would stand and listen to the sound of his master's breathing.

But in spite of this great love for John Thornton, which seemed to be an influence drawing him back to civilized life, the strain of the primitive beast, which the Northland had aroused in him, remained alive and active. Buck was faithful and devoted; yet he retained his wildness and cunning. He was a thing of the wild, come in from the wild to sit by John Thornton's fire, rather than a dog of the tame Southland, softened by the marks of generations of civilization. Because of his very great love, he could not steal from John Thornton, but from any other man, in any other camp, he did not hesitate an instant, and the cunning with which he stole allowed him to escape **detection**.

His face and body were **scored** by the teeth of many dogs, and he fought as fiercely as ever. Skeet and Nig were too good-natured for quarrelling,—besides, they belonged to John Thornton; but any strange dog Buck encountered, no matter

Unuttered: unspoken

Seize: take hold of

Transient: lasting only for a short time

Detection: notice

Scored: cut or scratched

what the breed or how brave or strong it may be, swiftly acknowledged Buck's supremacy. And Buck was merciless. He had learned the law of club and fang well, and he never lost an advantage in a fight or held back from finishing off a foe. He had learned this lesson from Spitz, and from the chief fighting dogs of the police and mail teams, and knew there was no middle ground. He must master or be mastered, and showing mercy was seen as a weakness. Mercy did not exist in the primordial life. It was misunderstood for fear, and such misunderstandings could lead to death. Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this **mandate**, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed.

He was older than the days he had seen and the breaths he had drawn. He felt a deep connection to some eternal past that throbbed through him in a mighty rhythm to which he moved as the tides and seasons moved. He sat by John Thornton's fire, a broad-chested dog, white-fanged and long-furred; but behind him were the influences of all kinds of dogs, half-wolves and wild wolves, savoring the meat he ate, thirsting for the water he drank, scenting the wind with him, listening with him and telling him the sounds made by the wild life in the forest, directing his moods and actions, lying down to sleep with him when he lay down, and dreaming with him and beyond him and becoming his dreams.

These influences were so intense in him, that each day mankind and the world of mankind slipped farther from him. Deep in the forest a call was sounding, and as often as he heard this call, mysteriously thrilling and luring, he felt **compelled** to turn his back upon the fire, and to plunge into the forest, and on and on, he knew not where or why; and did not wonder where or why, the call commanding him, from deep in the forest. But every time he left the camp and reached the soft unbroken earth and green shade of the forest, the love for John Thornton drew him back to the fire again.

Thornton alone had this effect on him. The rest of mankind was nothing. Occasional travelers might praise or pet him; but he did not care for them. When Thornton's partners, Hans and Pete, arrived on the long-expected raft, Buck refused to notice them until he learned they were close to Thornton; after that he tolerated them in a passive sort of way, feeling as though he was doing them a favor by even acknowledging them. They were of the same large type as Thornton, down to earth, thinking simply and seeing clearly; and soon after they swung the raft into the big eddy⁵² by the saw-mill at Dawson, they understood Buck and his ways, and did not expect the same affection from Buck that they received from Skeet and Nig.

For Thornton, however, his love seemed to grow and grow. He, alone among men, could put a pack upon Buck's back in the summer travelling. Nothing was too difficult for Buck to do when Thornton commanded. One day the men and dogs were sitting on the crest of a cliff which fell away, straight down, to bare rocks three hundred feet below. John Thornton was sitting near the edge, Buck at his shoulder. A thought came to Thornton, and he drew the attention of Hans and Pete to the experiment he had in mind. "Jump, Buck!" he commanded, sweeping his arm

Mandate: official order, law

Compelled: forced

⁵² A place where water gets caught and swirls in a circular movement (see [Eddy](#))

out and over the **chasm**. The next instant he was grappling with Buck on the extreme edge, while Hans and Pete were dragging them back into safety.

“It’s **uncanny**,” Pete said, after it was all over and they had caught their speech.

Thornton shook his head. “No, it is amazing, but it is terrible, too. Do you know, his devotion sometimes makes me afraid.”

“I’m not **hankering** to be the man that lays hands on you while he’s around,” Pete announced conclusively, nodding his head toward Buck.

“Py Jingo!⁵³” was Hans’s contribution. “Not mineself either.”

It was at Circle City, before the end of the year, that Pete’s **apprehensions** were realized. “Black” Burton, a man evil-tempered and malicious, had been picking a quarrel with a tenderfoot⁵⁴ at the bar, when Thornton stepped good-naturedly between. Buck, as was his custom, was lying in a corner, head on paws, watching his master’s every action. Burton struck out with a punch, without warning, straight from the shoulder. Thornton was sent spinning, and saved himself from falling only by clutching the rail of the bar.

Those who were looking on heard what was neither bark nor yelp, but a something which is best described as a roar, and they saw Buck’s body rise up in the air as he left the floor for Burton’s throat. The man saved his own life by instinctively throwing out his arm, but he was hurled backward to the floor with Buck on top of him. Buck loosed his teeth from the flesh of the arm and drove in again for the throat. This time the man succeeded only in partly blocking, and his throat was torn open. Then the crowd was upon Buck, and he was driven off; but even while a surgeon checked the bleeding of the man, Buck prowled up and down, growling furiously, attempting to rush in, and being forced back by hostile clubs. A “miners’ meeting⁵⁵,” called on the spot, decided that the dog had sufficient **provocation**, and Buck was released. But his reputation was made, and from that day his name spread through every camp in Alaska.

Later on, in the fall of the year, he saved John Thornton’s life again. The three partners were navigating down a bad stretch of rapids on the Forty-Mile Creek. Hans and Pete moved along the bank, going from tree to tree with a rope, while Thornton remained in the boat, steering with a pole, and shouting directions to the shore. Buck, on the bank, worried and anxious, kept up with the boat, his eyes never off his master.

At a particularly bad spot, where a ledge of rocks **jutted** out into the river, Hans ran down the bank with the end of the rope in his hand to guide the boat. But the raft was travelling too swiftly, and Hans pulled the rope too suddenly. The boat flipped and Thornton was flung out of it and carried down-stream toward the worst part of the rapids, a stretch of wild water which no swimmer could survive.

Chasm: deep crack or canyon
Uncanny: strange in an unsettling way

Hankering: desiring

Apprehensions: feeling of something bad happening

Provocation: deliberate action to make someone angry

Jutted: extended

⁵³ An exclamation similar to “by God” or “good Lord”

⁵⁴ A rookie, someone new to the work of mining

⁵⁵ A [miner’s meeting](#) was used as a “court” to resolve problems in isolated places where there was no real law enforcement

Buck sprung in the water in an instant; and at the end of three hundred yards, amid a mad swirl of water, he passed Thornton. When Buck felt Thornton grasp his tail, Buck headed for the bank, swimming with all his splendid strength. But the progress to the shore was slow; the progress down-stream amazingly rapid. From behind he could hear the fatal roaring where the wild water current was ripped in shreds and spray by the rocks which thrust through the surface like the teeth of an enormous comb. The noise of the water was frightful, and Thornton knew that reaching the shore was impossible. He scraped furiously over one rock, bruised across a second, and struck a third with crushing force. He clutched its slippery top with both hands, releasing Buck, and above the roar of the churning water shouted: "Go, Buck! Go!"

Buck could not hold his own, and was swept down-stream, struggling desperately, but unable to win back. When he heard Thornton's command repeated, he partly reared out of the water, throwing his head high, as though for a last look, then turned **obediently** toward the bank. He swam powerfully and was dragged ashore by Pete and Hans just before the point where he might have been lost for good.

They knew that Thornton could only cling to a slippery rock in that harsh current for a few minutes, and they ran as fast as they could up the bank to a point far upstream from where Thornton was hanging on. They took the line they had been using to guide the boat and attached it to Buck's neck and shoulders, being careful that it would not strangle him or **impede** his swimming, and launched him into the water. He struck out boldly, but not straight enough into the stream. He discovered the mistake too late, when he was being carried helplessly past John Thornton just out of reach.

Hans promptly pulled the rope, as though Buck were a boat. The rope tightened on him in the sweep of the current and he was jerked under the surface until his body struck against the bank and he was hauled out. He was half drowned, and Hans and Pete threw themselves upon him, pounding the breath into him and the water out of him. He staggered to his feet and fell down. The faint sound of Thornton's voice came to them, and though they could not make out the words of it, they knew that he could not hold on much longer. His master's voice acted on Buck like an electric shock. He sprang to his feet and ran up the bank ahead of the men back to the place he previously jumped in.

Again the rope was attached and he was launched, and again he struck out, but this time straight into the stream. He had miscalculated once, but he would not do it a second time. Hans let out the rope slowly, permitting no slack, while Pete kept it clear of coils. Buck held on till he was on a line straight above Thornton; then he turned, and with the speed of an express train headed down upon him. Thornton saw him coming, and, as Buck struck him like a ram, with the whole force of the current behind him, Thornton reached up and closed both arms around the shaggy neck. Hans pulled the rope around a tree, and Buck and Thornton were jerked under the water. Strangling, suffocating, dragging over the jagged bottom, smashing against rocks and snags, they were pulled onto the bank.

Obediently: following an order or request

Impede: prevent

Thornton came to⁵⁶, and his first glance was for Buck, over whose limp and apparently lifeless body Nig was howling, while Skeet was licking the wet face and closed eyes. Thornton was himself bruised and battered, but he went carefully over Buck's body, finding three broken ribs.

"That settles it," he announced. "We camp right here." And camp they did, till Buck's ribs healed and he was able to travel.

That winter, at Dawson, Buck performed another **exploit**, not so heroic, perhaps, but one that made his name even more famous in Alaska. This exploit was particularly gratifying to the three men; for they were in need of money and equipment to make a long-desired trip to find gold in the East, where miners had not yet appeared. It was brought about by a conversation in the Eldorado Saloon, where men were bragging about their favorite dogs. Buck, because of his fame, was the target for these men, and Thornton was stoutly defending him. At the end of half an hour one man stated that his dog could start⁵⁷ a sled with five hundred pounds and walk off with it; a second bragged six hundred for his dog; and a third, seven hundred.

"Bah!" said John Thornton; "Buck can start a thousand pounds."

"And break it out? and walk off with it for a hundred yards?" demanded Matthewson, the man who claimed his dog could pull seven hundred pounds.

"And break it out, and walk off with it for a hundred yards," John Thornton said coolly.

"Well," Matthewson said, slowly and deliberately, so that all could hear, "I've got a thousand dollars that says he can't. And there it is." With that, he slammed a huge sack of gold dust down upon the bar.

Nobody spoke. Thornton's **bluff**, if bluff it was, had been called⁵⁸. He could feel a flush of warm blood creeping up his face. His tongue had tricked him. He did not know whether Buck could start a thousand pounds. Half a ton! The enormous reality of it struck him. He had great faith in Buck's strength and had often thought him capable of starting such a load; but never, as now, had he faced the possibility of it. The eyes of a dozen men fixed upon him, silent and waiting. Further, he had no thousand dollars; nor had Hans or Pete.

"I've got a sled standing outside now, with twenty fifty-pound sacks of flour on it," Matthewson added, "so don't let that hinder you."

Thornton did not reply. He did not know what to say. He glanced from face to face not knowing what to think. The face of Jim O'Brien, a rich old friend of his, caught his eyes. Seeing him, John Thornton did something he would normally never have dreamed of doing.

Exploit: a bold action or feat

Bluff: an attempt to make someone believe something

⁵⁶ Woke, regained consciousness

⁵⁷ Pull from a stop

⁵⁸ "Calling a bluff" is when someone challenges another person to do something they claimed (or lied) they could do.

“Can you lend me a thousand?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“Sure,” answered O’Brien, thumping down a large sack by the side of Matthewson’s. “Though it’s little faith I’m having, John, that the beast can do the trick.”

The Eldorado emptied its occupants into the street to see the test. The tables were deserted, and the dealers and gamekeepers came forth to see the outcome of the wager and to lay odds⁵⁹. Several hundred men, furred and mittened, stood around the sled. Matthewson’s sled, loaded with a thousand pounds of flour, had been standing for a couple of hours, and in the intense cold (it was sixty below zero) the runners had frozen to the hard-packed snow. Men offered odds of two to one that Buck could not budge the sled. An argument arose concerning the phrase “break out.” O’Brien said Thornton should be allowed to knock the runners loose, leaving Buck to “break it out” from a dead standstill. Matthewson insisted that the phrase meant breaking the runners from the frozen grip of the snow. A majority of the men who had witnessed the making of the bet decided in Matthewson’s favor, that Buck should have to break the sled out from the ice, and the odds went up to three to one against Buck.

There were no takers. Not a man believed Buck capable of the feat. Thornton had been hurried into the wager, heavy with doubt; and now that he looked at the sled itself, with the regular team of ten dogs curled up in the snow before it, the more impossible the task appeared. Matthewson seemed **jubilant**.

“Three to one!” Matthewson shouted. “I’ll lay you another thousand at that figure, Thornton. What d’ye say?”

Thornton’s doubt was strong in his face, but his fighting spirit was aroused—the fighting spirit that soars above odds and fails to recognize the impossible. He called Hans and Pete to him. Their sacks were slim⁶⁰, and with his own the three partners could only get two hundred dollars together. This was everything they had, yet they laid it without hesitation against Matthewson’s six hundred.

The team of ten dogs was unhitched, and Buck, with his own harness, was put into the sled. He had noticed all the excitement, and he felt that in some way he must do a great thing for John Thornton. People murmured admiration at his splendid appearance. He was in perfect condition, without an ounce of **superfluous** flesh, and the one hundred and fifty pounds that he weighed were so many pounds of grit and **virility**. His furry coat shined like silk. Down the neck and across the shoulders, his mane half bristled and seemed to lift with every movement, as though his **vigor** made each individual hair alive and active. The great chest and heavy fore legs were in proportion with the rest of the body, where the muscles showed in tight rolls underneath the skin. Men felt these muscles and proclaimed them hard as iron, and the odds went down to two to one.

Jubilant: feeling great happiness

Superfluous: unnecessary

Virility: strength and energy

Vigor: physical strength and health

⁵⁹ Take bets

⁶⁰ They did not have much money/gold

“Gad⁶¹, sir! Gad, sir!” stuttered a member of the crowd. “I offer you eight hundred for him, sir, before the test, sir; eight hundred just as he stands.”

Thornton shook his head and stepped to Buck’s side.

“You must stand away from him,” Matthewson protested. “Give him plenty of room.”

The crowd fell silent; only the voices of the gamblers could be heard, offering two to one. Everybody acknowledged that Buck was a magnificent animal, but twenty fifty-pound sacks of flour seemed too large for them to place bets in Buck’s favor.

Thornton knelt down by Buck’s side. He took Buck’s head in his two hands and rested cheek on cheek. He did not playfully shake him like usual, or call him soft love names; but he whispered in his ear. “As you love me, Buck. As you love me.” Buck whined with **suppressed** enthusiasm.

The crowd was watching curiously. As Thornton got to his feet, Buck bit his mittened hand between his jaws, pressing in with his teeth and releasing slowly. It was the answer, in terms, not of speech, but of love. Thornton stepped back.

“Now, Buck,” he said.

Buck tightened the traces, then slacked them for a matter of several inches. It was the way he had learned.

“Gee!” Thornton’s voice rang out, sharp in the tense silence.

Buck swung to the right, ending the movement in a lunge that took up the slack, and with a sudden jerk stopped his one hundred and fifty pounds. The load quivered, and from under the runners arose a crisp crackling.

“Haw!” Thornton commanded.

Buck duplicated the move, this time to the left. The crackling turned into a snapping, the sled pivoting and the runners slipping and grating several inches to the side. The sled was broken out. Men were holding their breaths without realizing it.

“Now, MUSH!”

Thornton’s command cracked out like a pistol-shot. Buck threw himself forward, tightening the traces with a jarring lunge. His whole body was gathered compactly together in the tremendous effort, the muscles writhing and knotting like live things under the silky fur. His great chest was low to the ground, his head forward and down, while his feet were flying like mad, the claws scarring the hard-packed snow in parallel grooves. The sled swayed and trembled, half-started forward. One

Suppressed: prevented, held in

⁶¹ An exclamation like “good Lord” or “God”

of his feet slipped, and one man groaned aloud. Then the sled **lurched** ahead in what appeared a rapid succession of jerks, though it never really came to a dead stop again...half an inch...an inch... two inches... The jerks became a smooth motion as the sled gained momentum. Buck kept up until it was moving steadily along.

Men gasped and began to breathe again, unaware that they had been holding their breath. Thornton was running behind, encouraging Buck with short, cheery words. The distance had been measured off, and as he neared the pile of firewood which marked the end of the hundred yards, a cheer began to grow, and it burst into a roar as he passed the firewood and halted at command. Every man was wild with excitement, even Matthewson. Hats and mittens were flying in the air. Men were shaking hands, it did not matter with whom, and bubbling over in celebration.

But Thornton fell on his knees beside Buck. Head was against head, and he was shaking him back and forth. Those who were near heard him cursing Buck⁶², and he cursed him long and **fervently**, and softly and lovingly.

“Gad, sir! Gad, sir!” yelled a man. “I’ll give you a thousand for him, sir, a thousand, sir—twelve hundred, sir.”

Thornton rose to his feet. His eyes were wet. The tears were streaming down his cheeks. “Sir,” he said to the man, “no, sir. You can go to hell, sir. It’s the best I can do for you, sir.”

Buck seized Thornton’s hand in his teeth. Thornton shook him back and forth. As though animated by a common impulse, the onlookers drew back to a respectful distance; they dared not interrupt this moment between John Thornton and Buck.

CHAPTER VII. THE SOUNDING OF THE CALL

Buck’s feat earned John Thornton sixteen hundred dollars⁶³ in five minutes and made it possible for his master to pay off debts and journey with his partners into the East after a **fabled** lost mine, the history of which was as old as the history of the country. Many men had sought it; few had found it; and more than a few had never returned from the quest. This lost mine was **steeped** in tragedy and **shrouded** in mystery. No one knew of the first man to discover it. The oldest story stopped before it got back to him. From the beginning there had been an ancient and **ramshackle** cabin. Dying men had sworn to have seen the cabin and to the mine site it marked, clinching their testimony with nuggets that were unlike any known grade⁶⁴ of gold in the Northland.

But no living man had found this treasure house, and the dead were dead, so John Thornton and Pete and Hans, with Buck and half a dozen other dogs, faced into the East on an unknown trail to achieve where men and dogs as good as themselves had failed. They sledded seventy miles up the Yukon, swung to the left into the

Lurched: moved abruptly, staggered

Fervently: passionately

Fabled: mythical, legendary

Steeped: surrounded by

Shrouded: hidden

Ramshackle: falling apart

⁶² Cursing in a playful way to show love

⁶³ Worth almost \$50,000 today

⁶⁴ Measure of purity

Stewart River, passed the Mayo and the McQuestion⁶⁵, and held on until the Stewart itself became a streamlet, threading the upstanding peaks which marked the backbone of the continent.

John Thornton was unafraid of the wild. With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and survive wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased. Being in no hurry, he hunted his dinner in the course of the day's travel; and if he failed to find it, he kept on travelling, secure in the knowledge that sooner or later he would find something to eat. So, on this great journey into the East, straight meat was their diet, ammunition and tools took up the majority of the load on the sled, and they all looked forward to the limitless future.

To Buck it was boundless delight, this hunting, fishing, and wandering through strange places. For weeks at a time they would hold on steadily, day after day; and for weeks upon end they would camp, here and there, the dogs loafing and the men burning holes through frozen muck and gravel and washing countless pans of dirt⁶⁶ by the heat of the fire. Sometimes they went hungry, sometimes they **feasted** wildly, all depending on the availability of **game** and the fortune of hunting. Summer arrived, and dogs and men packed on their backs, rafted across blue mountain lakes, and traveled unknown rivers in slender boats sawed from the forest.

The months came and went, and back and forth they twisted through the uncharted wilderness, where no men lived, and yet, where men must have traveled if the Lost Cabin were true. They went across divides in summer blizzards, shivered under the midnight sun⁶⁷ on naked mountains between the timber line and the eternal snows, dropped into summer valleys amid swarming gnats and flies, and in the shadows of glaciers picked strawberries and flowers as ripe and fair as any seen in the Southland. In the fall of the year they reached a strange lake country, sad and silent, where birds and animals had once been, but where there was now no life nor sign of life—only the blowing of chill winds, the forming of ice in sheltered places, and the **melancholy** rippling of waves on lonely beaches.

And through another winter they wandered on the **obliterated** trails of men who had gone before. Once, they came upon a path **blazed** through the forest, an ancient path, and the Lost Cabin seemed very near. But the path began nowhere and ended nowhere, and it remained mystery, as the man who made it and the reason he made it remained mystery. Another time they came upon the old wreckage of a hunting lodge, and amid the shreds of rotted blankets John Thornton found a long-barreled flint-lock⁶⁸ but nothing else—no hint as to the man who had built the lodge and left the gun among the blankets.

Spring came on once more, and at the end of all their wandering they found, not the Lost Cabin, but a shallow placer⁶⁹ in a broad valley where the gold showed like

⁶⁵ Mayo and McQuestion – rivers named for early pioneers

⁶⁶ [Panning for gold](#)

⁶⁷ That far North, [the sun does not set on certain days in the summer](#)

⁶⁸ A [type of rifle](#) from the 17th and 18th centuries

⁶⁹ An area of sand or dirt where gold can be seen on the surface

Feasted: ate well

Game: animals

Melancholy: sad

Obliterated: destroyed

Blazed: made (a path)

yellow butter across the bottom of the washing-pan. They sought no farther. Each day they worked earned them thousands of dollars in clean dust and nuggets, and they worked every day. The gold was sacked in moose-hide bags, fifty pounds to the bag, and piled like firewood outside the lodge. Like giants they toiled, days flashing on the heels of days like dreams as they heaped the treasure up.

There was nothing for the dogs to do except hauling in the meat that Thornton killed now and again, and Buck spent long hours **musings** by the fire. The vision of the short-legged hairy man came to him more frequently, now that there was little work to be done; and often, blinking by the fire, Buck wandered with him in that other world which he remembered.

The most **prominent** thing in this other world was fear. When he watched the hairy man sleeping by the fire, head between his knees and hands clasped above, Buck saw that he slept restlessly, with many starts and awakenings, at which times he would peer fearfully into the darkness and fling more wood upon the fire. They walked by the beach of a sea, where the hairy man gathered shellfish and ate them as he gathered, all the while his eyes **roved** everywhere for hidden danger and his legs prepared to run like the wind at its first appearance. Through the forest they crept noiselessly, Buck at the hairy man's heels; and they were alert and **vigilant**, the pair of them, ears twitching and moving and nostrils quivering, for the man heard and smelled as keenly as Buck. The hairy man could spring up into the trees and travel ahead as fast as on the ground, swinging by the arms from limb to limb, sometimes a dozen feet apart, letting go and catching, never falling, never missing his grip. In fact, he seemed as much at home among the trees as on the ground; and Buck had memories of nights of vigil spent beneath trees wherein the hairy man lay, holding on tightly as he slept.

And accompanying the visions of the hairy man was the call still sounding in the depths of the forest. It filled him with a great unrest and strange desires. It caused him to feel a vague, sweet gladness, and he was aware of wild **yearnings** and stirrings for he knew not what. Sometimes he pursued the call into the forest, looking for it as though it were a **tangible** thing, barking softly or defiantly, depending on his mood. He would thrust his nose into the cool wood moss, or into the black soil where long grasses grew, and snort with joy at the fat earth smells; or he would crouch for hours, as if in **concealment**, behind fungus-covered trunks of fallen trees, wide-eyed and wide-eared to all that moved and sounded around him. But he did not know why he did these various things. He was compelled to do them, and did not question them at all.

Irresistible impulses seized him. He would be lying in camp, dozing lazily in the heat of the day, when suddenly his head would lift and his ears perk up, intent and listening, and he would spring to his feet and dash away, and on and on, for hours, through the forest aisles and across the open spaces where the long grasses grew. He loved to run down dry riverbeds, and to creep and spy upon the bird life in the woods. For a day at a time he would lie in the underbrush where he could watch the partridges strutting up and down. But especially he loved to run in the dim twilight of the summer midnights, listening to the sleepy murmurs of the forest,

Musing: reflecting, thinking

Prominent: noticeable

Roved: traveled

Vigilant: watchful

Yearnings: desires

Tangible: physical, touchable

Concealment: hiding

reading signs and sounds as man may read a book, and seeking for the mysterious something that called—called, waking or sleeping, at all times, for him to come.

One night he sprang from sleep with a start, eager-eyed, nostrils quivering and scenting, his mane bristling in waves. From the forest came the call, distinct and definite as never before,—a long-drawn howl, like, yet unlike, any noise made by husky dog. And he knew it, in the old familiar way, as a sound heard before. He sprang through the sleeping camp and in swift silence dashed through the woods. As he drew closer to the cry he went more slowly, with caution in every movement, till he came to an open place among the trees, and looking out saw, sitting on his **haunches**, with nose pointed to the sky, a long, lean, timber wolf.

He had made no noise, yet it stopped its howling and tried to sense his presence. Buck stalked into the open, half crouching, body gathered compactly together, tail straight and stiff, feet falling with great care. But the wolf fled at sight of him. He followed, with wild leapings, in a frenzy to catch him. Buck ran him into a blind channel, in the bed of the creek where a log barred the way. The wolf whirled about, **pivoting** on his hind legs like a cornered husky dog, snarling and bristling, clipping his teeth together in a continuous and rapid succession of snaps.

Buck did not attack, but circled around him and closed in on him with friendly advances. The wolf was suspicious and afraid; for Buck was much larger than he. At the first chance, the wolf darted away, and the chase was resumed. Time and again he was cornered, and Buck repeated his friendly advances. He would run till Buck's head was even with his flank, when he would whirl around to face Buck, only to dash away again at the first opportunity.

But in the end Buck's **persistence** was rewarded; for the wolf, finding that no harm was intended, finally sniffed noses with him. Then they became friendly, and played about in twilight of the forest. After some time of this the wolf started off at an easy **lope** in a manner that plainly showed he was going somewhere. He made it clear to Buck that he was to come, and they ran side by side, through the creek bed and into a gorge.

On the opposite slope they came down into a level country where there were great stretches of forest and many streams, and through these great stretches they ran steadily, hour after hour, the sun rising higher and the day growing warmer. Buck was wildly glad. He knew he was at last answering the call, running by the side of his wild brother toward the place from where the call surely came. Old memories were coming back to him fast. He had done this thing before, somewhere in that other and dimly remembered world, and he was doing it again, now, running free in the open, the unpacked earth underfoot, the wide sky overhead.

They stopped by a running stream to drink, and, stopping, Buck remembered John Thornton. He sat down. The wolf started on toward the place from where the call surely came, then returned to him, sniffing noses and making actions as though to encourage Buck to follow. But Buck turned around and started slowly back the way they'd come. For the better part of an hour the wild brother ran by his side,

Haunches: thighs

Pivoting: turning

Persistence: continuing to do something difficult

Lope: run with long strides

whining softly. Then he sat down, pointed his nose upward, and howled. It was a mournful howl, and as Buck ran steadily on his way he heard it grow quieter until it was lost in the distance.

John Thornton was eating dinner when Buck dashed into camp and sprang upon him in a frenzy of affection, overturning him, scrambling upon him, licking his face, and biting his hand. Thornton in return shook Buck back and forth and cursed him lovingly.

For two days and nights Buck never left camp, never let Thornton out of his sight. He followed him about at his work, watched him while he ate, saw him into his blankets at night and out of them in the morning. But after two days the call in the forest began to sound more urgently than ever. Buck's restlessness came back on him, and he was haunted by memories of the wild brother, and of the land beyond the divide and the run side by side through the wide forest stretches. Once again he took to wandering in the woods, but the wild brother came no more; and though he listened through long vigils, the mournful howl was never raised.

He began to sleep out at night, staying away from camp for days at a time; and once he crossed the divide at the head of the creek and went down into the land of timber and streams. There he wandered for a week, looking for a fresh sign of the wild brother, killing his meat as he travelled and travelling with a long, easy lope that seemed never to tire. He fished for salmon in a broad stream that emptied somewhere into the sea, and by this stream he killed a large black bear. It was a hard fight, and it aroused the last remnants of Buck's ferocity.

The drive for blood became stronger than ever before. He was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and **proWess**, surviving in a hostile environment where only the strong survived. Because of all this he had a great pride in himself. It showed in all his movements, was apparent in the play of every muscle, and made his glorious furry coat even more glorious. If not for the brown fur on his muzzle and above his eyes, and the splash of white hair that ran down his chest, he might have been mistaken for a gigantic wolf, larger than the largest of the breed.

His cunning was wolf cunning, and wild cunning; his intelligence, shepherd intelligence and St. Bernard intelligence; and all this, plus an experience gained in the fiercest of schools, made him as formidable a creature as any that roamed the wild. A carnivorous animal living on a straight meat diet, he was at the high tide of his life, filled with vigor and virility. Every part, brain and body, nerve tissue and fiber, was tuned; and between all the parts there was a perfect balance. He responded with lightning-like quickness to sights and sounds which required action. He could leap twice as quickly as any husky dog to attack or defend. He perceived and determined and responded in the same instant. Life streamed through him in a splendid flood, until it seemed that it would burst through him and into the wild.

"Never was there such a dog," said John Thornton one day, as the partners watched Buck marching out of camp.

Prowess: skill, expertise

“When he was made, the mold was broke⁷⁰,” said Pete.

“Py jingo! I t’ink so mineself,” Hans affirmed.

They saw him marching out of camp, but they did not see the instant and terrible transformation which took place as soon as he was within the secrecy of the forest. He no longer marched. At once he became a thing of the wild, creeping along softly, cat-footed, a passing shadow that appeared and disappeared among the shadows. He knew how to take advantage of every cover, to crawl on his belly like a snake, and like a snake to leap and strike. He could take a bird from its nest, kill a rabbit as it slept, and snap in mid-air the little chipmunks fleeing for the trees. He killed to eat, not for sport; but he preferred to eat what he killed himself. It was his delight to sneak up on the squirrels, and, when he all but had them, to let them go, chattering in fear to the treetops.

As the fall of the year came on, the moose appeared in greater **abundance**, moving slowly down to meet the winter in the lower valleys. Buck had already dragged down a stray calf⁷¹; but he wished strongly for larger and more formidable **quarry**, and he came upon it one day on the divide at the head of the creek. A band of twenty moose had crossed over from the land of streams and timber, and chief among them was a great bull⁷². He was in a savage temper, and, standing over six feet from the ground, was as formidable an antagonist as even Buck could desire. Back and forth the bull tossed his great antlers, branching to fourteen points and nearly seven feet wide. His small eyes burned with a vicious and bitter light, while he roared with fury at sight of Buck.

The feather-end of an arrow **protruded** from the bull’s side, which explained his anger and savageness. Guided by that instinct from the primordial world, Buck proceeded to cut the bull out from the herd. It was no easy task. He would bark and dance about in front of the bull, just out of reach of the great antlers and of the terrible hoofs which could have stamped his life out with a single blow. Unable to turn his back on the fanged danger and go on, the bull would be driven into a rage. At such moments he charged Buck, who retreated craftily, luring him on. But when the bull was separated from his herd, two or three of the younger bulls would charge back upon Buck and allow the wounded bull to rejoin the group.

There is a patience of the wild—**dogged** and persistent—that holds the spider motionless for endless hours in its web, the snake in its coils, the panther waiting to pounce. This patience was apparent in Buck as he stuck close to the herd, slowing its march, irritating the young bulls, worrying the cow⁷³s with their half-grown calves, and driving the wounded bull mad with helpless rage. For half a day this continued. Buck attacked from all sides, **enveloping** the herd in a whirlwind, cutting out his victim as fast as it could rejoin its mates, wearing out the patience of the creatures.

⁷⁰ “The mold was broke” – He’s one of a kind

⁷¹ Baby moose

⁷² Male moose

⁷³ Female moose

Abundance: a large quantity

Quarry: hunted animal

Protruded: stuck out

Dogged: determined

Enveloping: surrounding

As the day wore along and the sun dropped to its bed in the northwest, the young bulls became **reluctant** to aid their leader. The coming winter was hurrying them on to the southern forests, and it seemed they could never shake off this tireless creature that held them back. Besides, it was not the life of the herd, or of the young bulls, that was threatened. Only the bull was at risk, and in the end, the rest of the herd was willing to go on without him.

As twilight fell the old bull stood with lowered head, watching his mates—the cows he had known, the calves he had fathered, the bulls he had mastered—as they continued on at a rapid pace through the fading light. He could not follow, for in front of him leaped the merciless fanged terror that would not let him go. He weighed more than half a ton; he had lived a long, strong life, full of fight and struggle, and at the end he faced death at the teeth of a creature whose head did not reach beyond his great knuckled knees.

From then on, night and day, Buck never left his prey, never gave it a moment's rest, never **permitted** it to eat the leaves of trees or the opportunity to quench his burning thirst in the slender trickling streams they crossed. Often, in desperation, the bull burst into long stretches of flight. At such times Buck did not attempt to stop him, but loped easily at his heels, satisfied with the way the game was played, lying down when the moose stood still, attacking him fiercely when he strove to eat or drink.

The great head drooped more and more under its tree of horns, and the shambling trot grew weak and weaker. The bull took to standing for long periods, with nose to the ground and **dejected** ears dropping limply; and Buck found more time in which to get water for himself and in which to rest. At such moments, it appeared to Buck that a change was coming. He could feel a new stir in the land. As the moose were coming into the land, other kinds of life were coming in. Forest and stream and air seemed filled with their presence. The news of it came to him, not by sight, or sound, or smell, but by some other and **subtler** sense. He heard nothing, saw nothing, yet knew that the land was somehow different; that through it strange things were happening; and he resolved to investigate after he had finished the business in hand.

At last, at the end of the fourth day, he pulled the great moose down. For a day and a night he remained by the kill, eating and sleeping. Then, rested, refreshed and strong, he turned his face toward camp and John Thornton. He broke into the long easy lope, and went on, hour after hour, knowing the precise way, heading straight home through strange country with a sense of direction that put man and his compass to shame.

As he continued, he became more and more conscious of the new stir in the land. There was different life there now that had not been there throughout the summer. No longer was this a subtle, mysterious feeling. The birds talked of it, the squirrels chattered about it, the very breeze whispered of it. Several times he stopped and drew in the fresh morning air in great sniffs, reading a message which made him leap on with greater speed. He was filled with a sense of **calamity**

Reluctant: hesitant

Permitted: allowed

Dejected: sad and depressed

Subtler: difficult to notice

Calamity: disaster

happening, if it had not already happened; and as he crossed the last watershed and dropped down into the valley toward camp, he proceeded with greater caution.

Three miles away he came upon a fresh trail that sent his neck hair rippling and bristling. It led straight toward camp and John Thornton. Buck hurried on, swiftly and stealthily, every nerve straining and tense, alert to the **multitudinous** details which told a story—all but the end. His nose gave him a varying description of the passage of the life on the heels of which he was travelling. He noticed the silence of the forest. The bird life had left. The squirrels were in hiding.

As Buck slid along with the **obscureness** of a gliding shadow, his nose was jerked suddenly to the side as though a force had gripped and pulled it. He followed the new scent into a **thicket** and found Nig. He was lying on his side, dead where he had dragged himself, an arrow protruding, head and feathers, from either side of his body.

A hundred yards farther on, Buck came upon one of the sled-dogs Thornton had bought in Dawson. This dog was thrashing about in a death-struggle, directly on the trail, and Buck passed around him without stopping. From the camp came the faint sound of many voices, rising and falling in a sing-song chant. Crawling forward to the edge of the clearing, he found Hans, lying on his face, feathered with arrows like a porcupine. At the same instant Buck peered out where the lodge had been and saw what made his hair leap straight up on his neck and shoulders. A gust of overpowering rage swept over him. He did not know that he growled, but he growled aloud with a terrible ferocity. For the last time in his life he allowed passion to **usurp** cunning and reason, and it was because of his great love for John Thornton that he lost his head.

The Yeehats⁷⁴ were dancing about the wreckage of the lodge when they heard a fearful roaring and saw rushing upon them an animal the like of which they had never seen before. It was Buck, a live hurricane of fury, hurling himself upon them in a **frenzy** to destroy. He sprang at the closest man (it was the chief of the Yeehats), ripping the throat wide open till the jugular spouted a fountain of blood. He did not pause after this victim, but ripped in passing, with the next bound tearing wide the throat of a second man. There was no stopping him. He plunged about in the middle of them, tearing, **rending**, destroying, in constant and terrific motion which **defied** the arrows they shot at him. In fact, so rapid were his movements, and so closely were the Yeehats tangled together, that they shot one another with the arrows; and one young hunter, hurling a spear at Buck in mid air, drove it through the chest of another hunter with such force that the point broke through the skin of the back. Then a panic seized the Yeehats, and they fled in terror to the woods, **proclaiming** as they fled the arrival of the Evil Spirit.

And truly Buck was a vicious fiend, raging at their heels and dragging them down like deer as they raced through the trees. It was a fateful day for the Yeehats. They scattered far and wide over the country, and it was not till a week later that the last

Multitudinous: many

Obscureness: inability to be seen

Thicket: dense group of bushes or tress

Usurp: take over by force

Frenzy: uncontrollable, wild behavior

Rending: tearing
Defied: resisted

Proclaiming: declaring, announcing

⁷⁴ A fictional Native American tribe

of the survivors gathered together in a lower valley and counted their losses. As for Buck, tiring of the pursuit, he returned to the **desolated** camp. He found Pete where he had been killed in his blankets in the first moment of surprise. Thornton's desperate struggle was fresh-written on the earth, and Buck scented every detail of it down to the edge of a deep pool. By the edge, head and fore feet in the water, lay Skeet, faithful to the last. The pool itself, muddy and discolored from the sluice boxes⁷⁵, hid what it contained, and it contained John Thornton; for Buck followed his trace into the water, from which no trace led away.

All day Buck **brooded** by the pool or roamed restlessly about the camp. Death, as a **cessation** of movement, as a passing out and away from the lives of the living, he knew, and he knew John Thornton was dead. It left a great void in him, somewhat like hunger, but a void which ached and ached, and which food could not fill. At times, when he paused to contemplate the carcasses of the Yeehats, he forgot the pain of it; and at such times he was aware of a great pride in himself,—a pride greater than any he had yet experienced. He had killed man, the noblest game of all, and he had killed in the face of the law of club and fang. He sniffed the bodies curiously. They had died so easily. It was harder to kill a husky dog than them. They were no match at all, were it not for their arrows and spears and clubs. From then on, he would be unafraid of them except when they had their arrows, spears, and clubs in their hands.

Night came on, and a full moon rose high over the trees into the sky, lighting the land till it lay bathed in ghostly day. And with the coming of the night, brooding and mourning by the pool, Buck became alive to a stirring of the new life in the forest other than that which the Yeehats had made. He stood up, listening and scenting. From far away drifted a faint, sharp yelp, followed by a chorus of similar sharp yelps. As the moments passed the yelps grew closer and louder. Again Buck knew them as things heard in that other world which existed in his memory. He walked to the center of the open space and listened. It was the call, the many-noted call, sounding more compellingly than ever before. And as never before, he was ready to obey. John Thornton was dead. The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him.

Hunting their living meat, as the Yeehats were hunting it, on the flanks of the migrating moose, the wolf pack had at last crossed over from the land of streams and timber and invaded Buck's valley. Into the clearing where the moonlight streamed, they poured in a silvery flood; and in the center of the clearing stood Buck, motionless as a statue, waiting their coming. They were **awed**, so still and large he stood, and a moment's pause fell, till the boldest one leaped straight for him. Like a flash Buck struck, breaking the neck. Then he stood, without movement, as before, the stricken wolf rolling in agony behind him. Three others tried it in sharp succession; and one after the other they drew back, streaming blood from slashed throats or shoulders.

This was **sufficient** to fling the whole pack forward, crowded together, blocked and confused by its eagerness to pull down the prey. Buck's marvelous quickness and

Desolated: empty, bare

Brooded: Thought deeply about something sad

Cessation: stopping

Awed: filled with wonder

Sufficient: enough

⁷⁵ [Long, narrow boxes used for passing water through when mining for gold](#)

agility made him fit for the fight. Pivoting on his hind legs, and snapping and gashing, he was everywhere at once, presenting a front which was apparently unbroken, so swiftly did he whirl and guard from side to side. But to prevent them from getting behind him, he was forced back, down past the pool and into the creek bed, until he was up against a high gravel bank. He worked along to a right angle in the bank, and in this angle he was protected on three sides and with nothing to do but face the front.

And so well did he face it, that at the end of half an hour the wolves drew back, exhausted. The tongues of all were out and lolling, the white fangs showing cruelly white in the moonlight. Some were lying down with heads raised and ears pricked forward; others stood on their feet, watching him; and still others were lapping water from the pool. One wolf, long and lean and gray, advanced cautiously, in a friendly manner, and Buck recognized the wild brother with whom he had run for a night and a day. He was whining softly, and, as Buck whined, they touched noses.

Then an old wolf, gaunt and battle-scarred, came forward. Buck writhed his lips into a snarl, but sniffed noses with him. Then the old wolf sat down, pointed nose at the moon, and broke out the long wolf howl. The others sat down and howled. And now the call came to Buck in unmistakable accents. He, too, sat down and howled. This over, he came out of his angle and the pack crowded around him, sniffing in half-friendly, half-savage manner. The leaders lifted the yelp of the pack and sprang away into the woods. The wolves swung in behind, yelping in chorus. And Buck ran with them, side by side with the wild brother, yelping as he ran.

And here may well end the story of Buck. Within a few years, the Yeehats noted a change in the breed of timber wolves. Some were seen with splashes of brown on head and muzzle, and with a line of white down the center of the chest. But more remarkable than this, the Yeehats tell of a Ghost Dog that runs at the head of the pack. They are afraid of this Ghost Dog, for it has cunning greater than man, stealing from their camps in fierce winters, robbing their traps, slaying their dogs, and defying their bravest hunters.

And, the tale grows worse. There are hunters who fail to return to the camp, some found with throats slashed cruelly open and with wolf prints around them in the snow larger than the prints of any wolf. Each fall, when the Yeehats follow the movement of the moose, there is a certain valley which they never enter. And word goes over the fire of how the Evil Spirit came to select that valley for its home.

In the summers there is one visitor, however, to that valley. It is a great, gloriously coated wolf, like, and yet unlike, all other wolves. He crosses alone from the timber land and comes down into an open space among the trees. Here a yellow stream flows from rotted moose-hide sacks and sinks into the ground, with long grasses growing through it and vegetable mold overrunning it and hiding its yellow from the sun; and here he muses for a time, howling once, long and mournfully, before he departs.

But he is not always alone. When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat howling as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack.

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