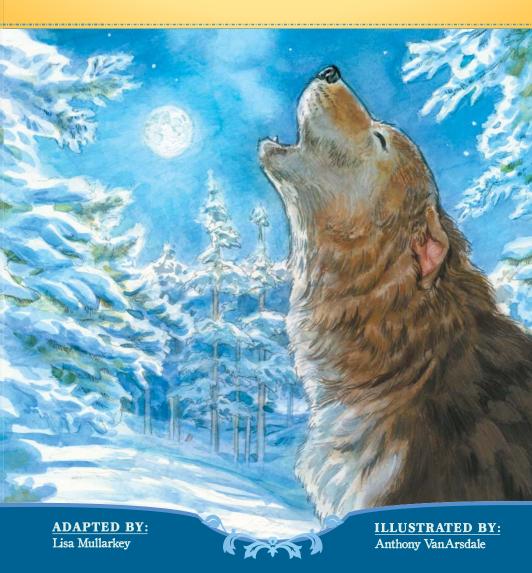


The Call of the Wild





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Adapted by: Lisa Mullarkey Illustrated by: Anthony Van Arsdale



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Kidnapped



Buck did not read the newspapers. If he did, he would have known that trouble was brewing from Puget Sound to San Diego. Not only for himself, but for every dog that was strong of muscle with warm, long hair.

Men in the Arctic had found a yellow metal that was worth a lot of money. They had found gold. Steamships rushed thousands of men into the Northland.

These men wanted dogs—heavy dogs with strong muscles to work. They needed dogs with furry coats to protect them from the frost.

Buck lived at a big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley in California. Judge Miller's place, as it was called, stood back from the road.

It was half hidden among the trees. If you looked closely, you could catch a glimpse of the porch that ran around its four sides. It sat upon wide-spreading lawns adorned with tall trees. The back of the property was even bigger than the front.

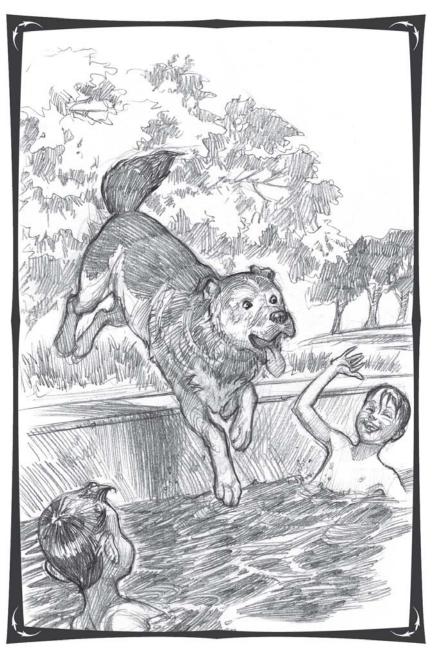
There were great stables, rows of vine-covered servants' cottages, and an array of outhouses. Long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches dotted the land. There was a pumping plant for the well and a big cement tank. It was in this tank that the Miller boys took their morning plunge and kept cool in the hot afternoon.

Buck ruled over all of it. He had been born here, and he had lived here for all four years of his life. There were other dogs, of course. But they didn't count. They came and went. Some lived in the kennels and others, like Toots, the Japanese pug, and Ysabel, the Mexican hairless, stayed indoors. They rarely put a paw down on the ground.

On the other hand, there were scores of fox terriers who yelped at Toots and Ysabel whenever they poked their eyes up at the window. The house dogs were protected by the housemaids, who were armed with brooms and mops.

But Buck was neither a house dog nor a kennel dog. The whole land was his. He plunged into the swimming tank with the Judge's sons. He escorted Mollie and Alice, the Judge's daughters, on walks. On wintry days, he'd lay at the Judge's feet before the roaring fire. He'd carry the Judge's grandsons on his back or roll them in the grass. He guarded their footsteps through wild adventures down to the fountain and berry patches.

Among the terriers, Buck talked in a bossy manner. He ignored Toots and Ysabel, for he was king over all creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place. Humans included



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His father, Elmo, was a St. Bernard and had been the Judge's constant companion. Buck planned to follow in his footsteps. He wasn't as large as his father. He only weighed 140 pounds thanks to his mother. She had been a Scotch Shepherd dog. Nevertheless, his size was great enough.

Buck lived the life of a noble beast and felt, perhaps, too much pride in himself. But he saved himself by not becoming a mere pampered house dog. Hunting and outdoor life had kept him trim with hardened muscles.

This was the way in which Buck lived in 1897, when the Klondike strike dragged men from all over the world into the frozen North. But Buck did not read the newspapers.

Buck also did not know that Manuel, one of the gardener's helpers, was a bad man. Manuel had a love for gambling. But gambling requires money. Money is not something Manuel had a lot of. After supporting his wife and children, there was none left for him. One night, the Judge was at a meeting of the Raisin Growers' Association. On this same evening, the boys were busy with their sporting games. As luck would have it, this also happened to be the night of Manuel's betrayal.

No one saw Manuel and Buck go off through the orchard on what Buck thought was just a stroll. With the exception of a man, no one saw them arrive at the little train station known as College Park. This man talked with Manuel and money exchanged hands.

"You may want to wrap up the goods before you deliver him," said the stranger.

Manuel doubled a piece of rope around Buck's neck under his collar. "Twist it and you'll choke him plenty."

Buck accepted the rope with dignity. He didn't want it around his neck but he had learned to trust men that he knew. But when the rope was placed in the stranger's hand, he growled. To his surprise, the rope tightened around his neck and shut off his breath.

In a quick rage, Buck ran at the man. The man grabbed him and threw him over on his back. The rope tightened mercilessly and Buck struggled to breathe. His chest heaved with each breath. He had never been treated so poorly! He had never felt such anger. But his strength dimmed as the two men threw him into the baggage car.

Buck had traveled enough with the Judge to know he was on a moving train. He opened his eyes and saw a fury of anger as he stared at his kidnapper. The man sprang for his throat but Buck was too quick for him. His jaws closed on the man's hand, and he didn't release it until his breath was choked out of him once again.

"He has fits," said the man, hiding his mangled hand from the baggage man who came to see about the noise. "I'm taking him to San Francisco. A doctor there thinks he can cure him."

When the train stopped, the man took Buck off the train. They went to a little shed in the

back of a saloon on the San Francisco waterfront.

"All I get is fifty for it," he grumbled. "I wouldn't do it again for a thousand cash." His hand was mangled and his left pant leg was ripped from knee to ankle.

"How much did the other guy get?" the saloon keeper asked.

"A hundred," was the reply. "Wouldn't take a penny less to help me."

"That makes \$150," said the saloon keeper. "He's worth it."

Buck listened to all this while suffering. He attempted to face them but was thrown down and choked repeatedly until they filed the heavy brass collar off his neck.

After the rope was removed, Buck was flung into a crate that looked like a cage. He lay there for the rest of the night nursing his anger and wounded pride. Why did these strange men want him?



Lesson Learned



Several times throughout the night Buck sprang to his feet when the door rattled open. He expected to see the Judge or the boys. But each time it was the bulging face of the saloon keeper that peered in over the light of a candle. And each time, the joyful bark that filled Buck's throat was twisted into a savage growl.

In the morning, four men entered and picked up the crate. Buck decided they were evil creatures. He growled and snarled at them through the crate's bars.

The men laughed at him and poked him with sticks. He clamped down on those sticks until he realized that was exactly what they wanted. He lay down and started on a long passage between many hands. He ventured by wagon, truck, ferry steamer, and railway car.

For two days and nights, the car was dragged along by other locomotives. Buck was given no food or water. He didn't mind the hunger so much, but the lack of water made his anger reach a frenzy. The bad treatment was only made worse by his thirst.

The men didn't care. They teased him. They barked and growled at him, which caused him to react.

He was glad for one thing. The rope was off his neck. Now that it was off, he would show them! They would never get another rope around his neck. Ever. He was certain.

Buck spent those two days of torment preparing for the first body that approached him. His eyes turned bloodshot and he turned into a raging beast. He was so changed that the Judge himself would not have recognized him.

The train messengers breathed a sigh of relief when they unloaded Buck from the train in Seattle. Then, four men carefully carried the crate from the wagon into a small yard. A short man wearing a red sweater came out and signed the receipt book for the driver.

That was the man, Buck decided, that would be his next tormentor. He hurled himself savagely against the bars. The man smiled grimly. Then he fetched a hatchet and a club.

"You ain't going to take him out now?" the driver asked.

"Sure," the man replied. He drove the hatchet into the crate.

The four men scattered and jumped up on a wall. They prepared to watch the performance from safety.

Buck rushed at the splintering wood, sinking his teeth into it. He surged and wrestled with it. Wherever the hatchet fell on the outside, he was there inside, snarling and growling. He was just as anxious to get out as the man in the red sweater was to get him out. "You red-eyed devil," said the man when he made an opening big enough for Buck to get out. He quickly dropped the hatchet and shifted the club to his right hand.

Buck truly was a red-eyed devil. He drew himself together, mouth foaming, hair bristling. He had a mad glitter in his eyes. All 140 pounds of him with the memories of the last few nights surged ahead as he launched at the man.

In midair, just as his jaws were about to close on the man, Buck received a shock. It brought his teeth together in an agonizing clip. He whirled to the ground. He had never been struck by a club in his life and didn't understand what had happened.

With a snarl, Buck was again on his feet. He launched once more into the air. Again, shock came to his body as he was brought crushingly to the ground. He was aware it was the club, but his madness knew no caution. A dozen times he charged and a dozen times the club smashed him down.

After one particularly bad blow, Buck crawled to his feet. He was too dazed to lunge again. Blood flowed from his nose, mouth, and ears. His beautiful coat was flecked with blood.

Once steady on his feet, the man came toward him and hit him with all his force upon the nose. The agony was greater than any pain Buck had endured up until now.

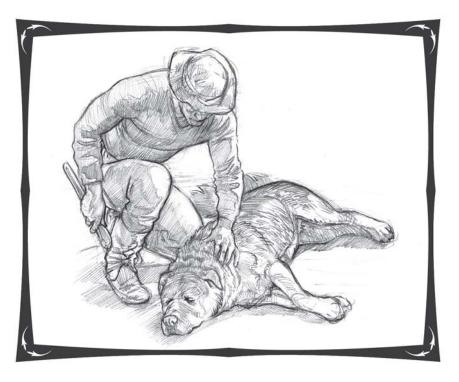
With a roar, Buck hurled himself at the man once more. But the man, shifting the club from right to left, coolly caught him under the jaw and jammed him to the floor.

The man's last blow was the worst of all. With it, Buck crumpled and was knocked out.

"He's a hard dog to break," said one of the men on the wall.

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

The man looked over the saloon keeper's letter. "He answers to the name of Buck. Well, Buck, my boy, we've had our little fight. Best



we can do is let it go. You learned your place and I know mine. Be a good dog and we'll get along well. Be a bad dog and I'll whale the stuffin' out of you."

As he spoke, he fearlessly patted the head he had just pounded. Buck didn't protest.

When the man brought water, Buck drank it eagerly. Later, he ate a slab of meat, chunk by chunk, from the man's hand.

Buck was beaten but not broken. He knew he had no chance against this man with the club. He would never forget the lesson.

Days passed and other dogs came. He watched as the man repeated the brutal fight with each one. All dogs eventually knew their place except one dog. That dog was killed in the struggle for power.

Many men came and left after passing money to the man in the red sweater. Each time money was exchanged, the strangers took a dog or two away with them. They never came back and Buck feared for his future. He was glad each time the strangers passed him over.

Yet, his time came. A small man with broken English bought him. For \$300, the man called Perrault got Buck and Curly, a good-natured Newfoundland. That was the last Buck saw of the man in the red sweater.

Buck and Curly were taken on a ship and turned over to a giant named Francois. Although Buck developed no affection toward Perrault and Francois, he grew to respect them.

On the decks of the ship, Buck and Curly joined two other dogs, Dave and Spitz. Dave simply ate and slept and didn't bother much with anyone. Spitz, on the other hand, was always up to something. The first time he met Buck, he smiled in a friendly manner while stealing the food from Buck's bowl.

Each day was like the one before except each day grew colder. At last, the propeller grew quiet. The *Narwhal* was filled with chatter and excitement. Buck knew change was coming. Francois leashed the dogs and brought them on deck.

At the first step upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into a white, mushy something. He sprang back with a snort.

More of the white stuff was falling through the air. He sniffed it curiously. He licked some. It bit like fire and was gone in an instant. This puzzled him. He tried it again with the same result. The men laughed and Buck felt ashamed. This was his first snow and he had no idea what it was.



The Law of Club and Fang



Buck's first day in the North was like a nightmare. Every second was filled with shock and surprise. He had been jerked from civilization and thrust into the wild. It was a confusing and busy place to be.

Buck felt his life was at risk. He needed to be alert at all times. For these men and dogs were not proper men and dogs. They were savages. All of them. They knew no law except the law of club and fang.

Soon, Buck learned a lesson on how these wolfish creatures fought. Curly, in her friendly way, approached a husky dog the size of a wolf. Without warning, the dog leaped up and sank her teeth into Curly's face.

This was the wolf's way of fighting. Strike and leap away. But there was more to it than that. Thirty to forty huskies ran to them and surrounded them in a silent circle. Buck made nothing of the eager way they licked their chops.

Curly rushed toward her attacker, who struck again and leaped aside. Curly tumbled off her feet and never again stood. This was what the other huskies waited for. They closed in around her as they snarled and yelped. She was soon buried while screaming in agony beneath their bodies.

It was so sudden. Buck stood in shock. In a moment, Spitz ran out and looked as though he had been laughing. Francois, carrying an ax, approached the dogs. Two minutes from the time Curly went down to the time the last dog was clubbed off, she lay there dead, her body torn to pieces. This scene often came back to haunt Buck in his sleep.

So that is the way, thought Buck. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. Buck would see to it that he never went down. Spitz ran by, mocking him with his tongue out. From that moment on, Buck despised Spitz and felt nothing but hatred for him.

Before Buck could recover from Curly's brutal killing, he received another shock. Francois fastened a harness on him. Buck had seen harnesses fastened to horses at Judge Miller's. He knew what would happen next. He was to work.

Buck set out to drive Francois on the sled through the forest and returned hauling a load of firewood. His dignity was hurt, but he was too wise to rebel. He did his best and made remarkable progress in a short time. By the time he returned to camp, he knew to stop at "ho" and rush ahead at "mush."

"That Buck learned quick. He pulled hard and is quick as anything," said Francois to Perrault.



By evening, Perrault had returned with three more dogs. Billee was a dog of good nature. His brother, Joe, just wanted to be left alone, much like the third dog brought in, Sol-leks.

Buck was happy to go to sleep that night. When he entered the glowing tent for rest, Perrault and Francois cursed and threw cooking utensils at him. He fled to the outside once again. Although he attempted to lie down and

sleep, the snow-covered ground drove him shivering to his feet.

Miserable, he wandered among the tents. It was no use. One place was as cold as the next. He decided to see where the others had settled down and circled the tent looking for them.

Suddenly, the snow gave way and something wiggled beneath his feet. He jumped back frightened at the unknown. But a friendly yelp reassured him, so Buck went to investigate. It was Billie curled up like a ball under the snow.

Another lesson. So this is how they do it? Buck selected a spot, dug a hole, and soon the space was heated by his body. He fell asleep quickly, though he wrestled with bad dreams.

The next day, three more huskies were added to the team. It wasn't long before they were harnessed and set out swinging up the trail toward Dyea Canyon.

Buck was glad to be gone from the camp. Although the work was hard, he didn't hate it at all. He was surprised at how all the dogs came to life once the harness was on them. This was true especially of Dave and Sol-leks.

Dave was the wheeler. He was the dog nearest the sled. Buck pulled in front of him and then came Sol-leks. The rest of the team was strung out ahead, single file, to the leader, which was Spitz.

Buck had been placed between Dave and Sol-leks for good reason. They were fair teachers and helped Buck learn the ropes. If Buck made a mistake, they saw to it that he didn't make the same mistake again. By the end of the day, Francois's whip snapped less as the dogs stayed on course and remained tangle free.

It had been a hard day's run. They went up the canyon, through Sheep Camp, and across glaciers and snowdrifts hundreds of feet deep. Then, they passed over the great Chilcoot Divide, which separates the salt water from the fresh and guards the North. By nightfall, they had made forty miles. When it was time to rest for the evening, the team pulled into a huge camp at the head of Lake Bennett. Thousands of gold seekers were building boats and preparing for the breakup of the ice in the spring.

The team made poorer time from that day on. It was hard work, and Buck was exhausted at the end of each day. Perrault and Francois would pitch camp after dark and eat their bits of fish. Then the dogs would crawl into snowy holes.

Buck was starving, and the salmon he got each night didn't fill him. At first, he was a dainty eater. But his mates would rob him of his food before he had the chance to finish it. He couldn't defend it. While he'd try to fend off one or two dogs, more would be waiting to have his fish disappear down their throats.

He learned yet another lesson. He must eat as fast as his peers. He also learned to take what didn't belong to him. After seeing Pike, one of the new dogs, steal bacon from Perrault's plate, Buck learned to do the same.

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland environment. He was able to adapt and change to the conditions around him. If he didn't adjust his ways, he knew it would mean certain death. His high morals were compromised.

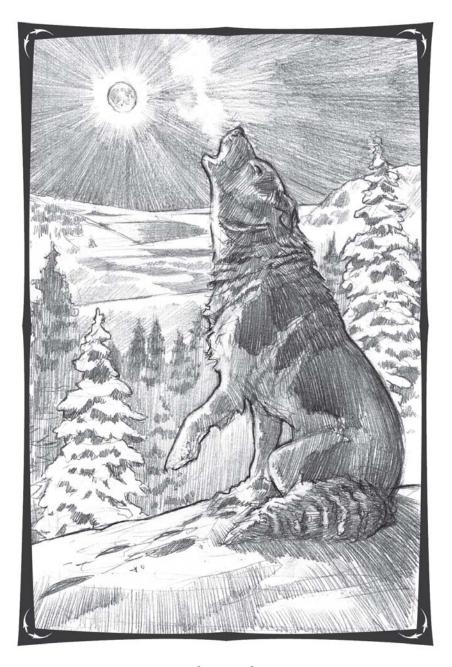
In the Southland, Buck was taught to respect private property and personal feelings under the laws of love. But under the law of club and fang, those who attempted to follow those laws would likely die. The man in the red sweater had taught him that.

Buck had reasoned that this was what he now must do to survive. He never again ran from a fight. He didn't steal for the joy in it but because his stomach told him to. He didn't rob openly. Instead, he was sly about it out of respect for club and fang. In short, the way he acted was because it was easier to do these things than to not do them.

The change in Buck happened quickly. His muscles became hard as iron. He didn't feel ordinary pain. He could eat anything no matter how loathsome it appeared. His senses of sight and smell became keen. His hearing developed so that he could hear the faintest sound in his sleep and know if his life was at risk.

When ice collected between his toes, he learned to bite it out with his teeth. When thirsty, he broke the ice over the water hole by first standing on his hind legs. Then, with all his strength, he smashed down on the ice with his front legs.

Buck's instincts, long dead, were awakened once again. The domesticated generations fell from him. It was easy for him to learn to fight with the quick wolf snap. His ancestors had fought this way and now it was time for him to do the same. These ways came back to him as if they had never been completely lost. They stirred the old life within him.



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On cold nights, Buck pointed his nose at a star and howled like a wolf. Those nights it was as if his ancestors were pointing their noses at a star and howling down through the centuries through him.

Buck returned to the way nature meant him to be. All because a man had found yellow metal in the North and Manuel was a gardener's helper whose wages did not meet his gambling needs.



The Invaders

de Combo

Although Buck gained confidence, he didn't want the others to know. Not only did he not pick fights with other dogs, but he avoided them whenever possible. He was a patient, smart dog. Although he didn't like Spitz, he worked hard to keep that a secret from Spitz.

On the other hand, Spitz never backed away. His teeth were always ready to bite Buck. He went out of his way to bully Buck and start a fight with him. Both knew the fight would end only in death of one or the other.

At the end of a certain day, they made camp on the shore of Lake LeBarge. Driving snow and darkness forced them to grope for their campsite. The back of their camp was a wall, which forced them to make campfire on the edge of the lake itself. The fire soon thawed down through the ice itself, leaving them in complete darkness to eat.

Buck made his nest under the sheltering rock. It was so snug and warm that he hated to leave it to fetch the food from Francois's hand. After eating, Buck returned to his sleeping spot only to find Spitz had settled there.

Until now, Buck had avoided trouble with his enemy. But this was too much. The beast in Buck roared. He sprang upon Spitz with a fury that surprised them both.

Francois was surprised, too. He went to settle the dogs down as they both circled each other, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Then the unexpected happened. Out of the darkness came a cry from Perrault. The sound of a club pounding an animal could be heard. The camp came alive with the shadows of sulking forms.

Starving huskies were attacking! There were four or five in all. Lured by the smell of food, they had crept in while Spitz and Buck fought. The two men sprang into action.

But the dogs, showing their teeth, were overcome with hunger and crazed. Perrault attacked the one with his head buried in the grub box. The box overturned and it was clear the animal was hurt, but he didn't stop scrambling for the bacon and bread on the ground.

Clubs fell on the wild dogs. They yelped and howled under the blows but struggled madly until every crumb had been found and eaten.

Never had Buck seen such dogs! It seemed as though their bones would burst through what skin was left. They were mere skeletons. Although smaller than Buck, their crazed hunger and blazing eyes made them terrifying. There was no opposing them.

The sled dogs were swept back against the cliff. Three huskies went for Buck and his head

and shoulders were ripped and slashed. Buck fell back as the others did.

Pike overcame a husky and Dave and Solleks fought bravely by his side. Buck managed to sink his teeth into his enemy's throat. Blood sprayed Buck and it caused greater fierceness in him. As he flung himself against another invader, he felt teeth sinking into his own neck. It was Spitz attacking from the side.

Perrault and Francois hurried to save their sled dogs. The wild beasts rolled back a bit allowing Buck to run away. Pike and Dave followed as did the rest of the team.

Later the nine-dog team gathered together and sought shelter in the forest. They were a sorry bunch. All were wounded in four or five places. Dolly, the last dog to join the team, had a severe throat injury. Joe had lost an eye. Billie's ear was chewed and shredded. Despite their injuries, they managed to limp back to camp the next day.

The invaders were nowhere to be seen. Only Perrault and Francois were left. Both men were miserable. Every last bit of food was stolen from them. Nothing had escaped the wild beasts. They had even eaten a pair of Perrault's moose-hide moccasins and two feet from the end of Francois's whip.

Francois looked the dogs up and down. "Maybe some of those bites will make mad dogs out of ours."

Perrault shook his head. "They'll be fine. They have to be fine."

With 400 miles still ahead, they couldn't afford to have madness break out among the dogs.

Two hours later, the harness was fixed and the wounded dogs took their places. Once again, they were under way. The hardest part of the trail was before them.



A Fight to the End



The Thirty Mile River was wide open. Its wild water defied the frost. Six days were required to cover the thirty terrible miles. Each foot traveled risked the life of man and dog.

Perrault broke through the ice at least a dozen times only to be saved by the long pole he carried. Each time he fell through, they'd have to stop to dry his clothes by a fire. Doing all this at nearly fifty below zero was an almost impossible task.

Nothing scared Perrault, which is why he was chosen by the government as a courier. He took great risks each time he led the team over the thin parts of the ice. If a dog fell through, he wouldn't hesitate to rescue it.

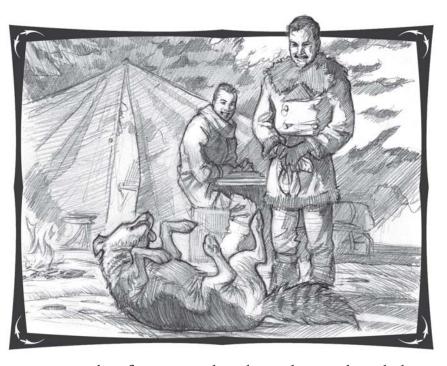
Another time, Spitz broke through and dragged the whole team up to Buck in with him. Buck strained backward with all his might. Behind Buck, Dave did the same. The rim ice broke behind Francois and there was no way to escape but up a cliff.

Perrault scaled the cliff and, by some miracle, all dogs were hoisted one by one to the crest. By nightfall, they had found a spot to go back down to the river's edge. The whole day only saw a quarter mile gain.

By the time they made it to good ice, Buck was exhausted. His feet were not as hard as the huskies' feet. They had softened in time from the previous generations.

Buck limped about each day. Once camp was made, he lay down like a dead dog. It was too painful to move. Francois had to bring food to Buck. Buck couldn't walk to get it.

Francois took to rubbing Buck's feet for a half hour each evening after supper. He sacrificed his own moccasins to make four moccasins for Buck. Perrault had a good laugh one evening when Francois forgot the moccasins. Buck lay on his back, four feet waving in the air. He refused to budge without them.



Later his feet grew hard on the trail and the worn-out shoes were tossed aside.



At the river one morning, Dolly suddenly went mad. She let out a long, heartbreaking wolf howl that spread fear in all the dogs. She sprang straight for Buck.

Although Buck had never seen a mad dog, it was quite clear he needed to run away from this horror. He fled as Dolly, frothing and panting, chased him. He ran what seemed like a great distance.

Finally, he heard Francois calling him and ran toward him. Francois was ready with ax in hand. As Buck ran past, so did Dolly. As Dolly did, the ax came down upon her head. Francois had no other choice.

Buck staggered over to Francois's sled. Panting and exhausted, he sobbed for breath. This was the opportunity Spitz had longed for. He sprang on Buck and tore into his skin. Francois came to Buck's rescue once more. His lash whipped about and Buck had the satisfaction of seeing Spitz get his worst whipping yet.

From then on, it was war between Spitz and Buck. Spitz felt his leadership threatened by Buck. All the other Southland dogs Spitz had known were too weak for the trail. Yet Buck was different. Spitz knew Buck matched him in strength, savagery, and sneaky ways.

The clash for leadership couldn't be avoided. All the dogs knew that there would be a fight to see who would lead the team. Buck wanted it. His pride was strong and he knew he had worked hard on the trail.

Indeed, Spitz was in charge of the dogs and he felt he worked just as hard. As leader, it was his job to punish those that couldn't keep up. This is why he feared Buck. Buck was strong, and now he challenged Spitz's leadership at every turn. The two began to fight every chance they got.

Buck started to cause fights between Spitz and the others only so he could come in and get between them. Buck was smart about it. He would only do it when Francois wasn't around. One day, when chasing a rabbit through the snow, Buck and Spitz came to blows once again. In a flash, Buck knew that the time had come. It would be a fight to the death.

As they circled about, they snarled with their ears back, each watched for an advantage. Buck sensed a feeling of familiarity. It was in the white woods, the moonlight, and the thrill of battle. Buck felt this scene had happened before. It was the way it was and the way it should be.

Spitz was a practiced fighter. Bitter, but not blind, rage was his. He never rushed until he was prepared to receive a rush. He never attacked until he first defended an attack.

In vain, Buck tried to sink his teeth into Spitz's neck. His fangs were met with Spitz's fangs. Lips were cut and blood sprayed. Buck took to rushing, but it didn't work. Each time, Spitz would leap away.

Spitz wasn't hurt, yet Buck was bleeding and panting. As Buck panted, Spitz took to rushing. The fight was growing desperate and a wolfish circle had gathered to attack whoever fell first.

Buck had something that Spitz didn't—imagination. He fought by instinct but could also outsmart his enemy. He rushed Spitz but at the last second, swept low to the snow.

Buck's teeth closed on Spitz's left front leg. There was a crunch of breaking bone. Buck repeated his trick, this time breaking the bones of the right front leg. Despite the pain, Spitz struggled madly to keep up.

Then he noticed the silent circle, the gleaming eyes, and dangling tongues. He had been a part of these circles many times. However, this time, he was the one the others waited for to fall.

There was no hope for Spitz. Buck was unstoppable. He would show no mercy. One

last move from Buck was all it took. The circle moved in and Spitz disappeared from view.

Buck stood and looked on. He defeated his enemy and proved to be the strongest among them. It felt good.



A New Leader



The next day, Francois saw Buck's wounds and noticed Spitz was missing. "Look here, Perrault. That Spitz is tough. Look at Buck's neck."

Perrault looked at the cuts. "Buck is stronger. That's why Spitz isn't here."

Francois nodded. "We'll make good time now. No more Spitz means no more trouble."

Francois got up to harness the dogs. Buck trotted to the front where Spitz would have been. Francois, not noticing him, had brought Sol-leks up to the front. Buck sprang on Solleks in a fury, driving him back.

"Go away, Buck," said Francois. "Sol-leks is the lead dog now." Francois took Buck by the scruff of his neck and dragged him to the side. When he turned his back, Buck once again went to the front of the line and nudged Sol-leks out of position.

Francois was angry. "I'll fix you, Buck!" He moved forward holding a club.

Buck remembered the man in the red sweater. He slowly backed away as he snarled with rage. He never took his eyes off the club. This time, he knew better.

When at last they called Buck to take his usual place, Buck refused to come forward. He wanted the leadership. He had earned it and he wouldn't be happy until he got it.

Buck darted about the camp, always careful to stay far from the club. For an hour, Perrault and Francois chased Buck. He didn't try to run away. He was letting them know that he would settle for nothing but the position he'd earned.

Perrault looked at his watch. "We're losing time. We should have been on the trail an hour ago."

Francois snorted and walked over to Sol-leks. He unfastened the harness and put him back in his old place. Then, he called to Buck. Buck trotted over and swung around into position at the head of the team. His harness was fastened, the sled broke out, and with both men running, they dashed out on to the river trail.

In no time, Buck proved to be superior to Spitz. This surprised François and Perrault. He



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immediately worked the dogs who had become lazy under Spitz. Dave and Sol-leks didn't mind the change of leadership. They just cared about the work. Buck had to lick the rest of them into shape.

The general tone of the team shaped up immediately. Once again, the dogs worked as one. Soon, two more dogs, Teek and Koona, were added. Buck broke them in with great speed. Perrault and Francois had never witnessed such speed before.

"He's worth every penny we paid for him," said François.

Perrault disagreed. "Nah, he's worth more than that. Much, much more."

Perrault was especially pleased with the gains his team made each day. The Thirty Mile River, which had taken them ten days to cross on the way in, now took just one day. Amazing! They ran with record speed.

Each day for forty days they averaged forty miles. When they finally stopped to rest and brag about their team, the men got orders that would send them on without the dogs.

Francois threw his arms around Buck and wept over him. That was the last Buck ever saw of Francois and Perrault. Like other men, they left Buck's life for good.

A Scottish man took charge of Buck and his teammates. With a dozen other dog teams by his side, they started back over the trail to Dawson.

There was no light running now. Record times would be impossible, for now each day had a heavy load in the sled. This sled was filled with letter upon letter that carried news from the world to the men who searched for gold.

Although Buck did not like it, he did his work well. The work was boring. Each day was the same. There was never any change. Buck would wake up as the fires were being built, eat breakfast, and then a man would harness him. All this happened quickly and they'd be on their way before dawn.

At night, they would make camp again. While some pitched tents and others started fires, the dogs were fed. The dogs loved this part of the day. They'd all gather, eat, and then lie around together.

During this time, there was lots of fighting. After winning several fights, Buck proved to be the strongest of them all. He was so feared that when he showed his teeth, the others got out of his way. That was the way he liked it.

But most of all, Buck loved to lie near the fire and dream of the past. Sometimes he thought of his days at Judge Miller's house. He thought fondly of the swimming tank and Ysabel and Toots.

But more often, Buck thought about the man in the red sweater, the death of Curly, and his great fight with Spitz. He was not homesick though. Such memories had no power of him.

What did have a strange power over him were the instincts he felt in the wild. They

were growing stronger as each day passed. They made him feel alive again.

It was a hard trip. The heavy work wore the dogs down. They were weak and thin when they arrived in Dawson. Due to the difficult journey, they should have rested a week. Maybe even ten days.

However, just two days later, they were off down the Yukon River loaded with letters again. The drivers grumbled. The dogs were exhausted. To make matters worse, it snowed every day. The soft snow meant the dogs had to work harder to pull the sled.

As hard as the trip was, the drivers were fair and did their best for the animals. Each night, the dogs were looked after first. They ate before the drivers ate. No man was allowed to sleep until he had looked after the feet of the dogs he drove. Still, the dogs grew weaker.

Since the beginning of winter, they had traveled 1,800 miles, dragging sleds the whole

distance. Eighteen hundred miles is tough for even the strongest of dogs. Billie cried and whimpered in his sleep each night. Joe was meaner than ever.

But it was Dave who suffered most of all. He became angrier and sadder. Once he was fed each night, he didn't get back on his feet until he was harnessed the next morning. He would cry out in pain while running. The driver examined him but couldn't find anything wrong.

By the time they reached their next stop, Dave was so weak that he fell repeatedly in the harness. The Scot had no choice but to take him out of the team. Sol-leks would now move to his spot.

The Scottish man wanted to let Dave rest and have him run free behind the sled. Sick as he was, Dave resented this. He whimpered, grunted, and growled as his harness was unfastened. Seeing Sol-leks in the position he had held and served in for so long broke his heart. He couldn't bear that another dog would be doing his work.

When the sled started up again, Dave ran in the snow barking at Sol-leks. He tried pushing him out of the way. The driver tried to keep Dave away from Sol-leks but couldn't. Dave insisted on running in the soft snow where the going was more difficult. He fought hard but finally collapsed. He lay there and howled as the other sleds sped past them.

The driver paused for a moment to get a light for his pipe from the man behind them. When he came back and started the dogs, the dogs ran ahead and then stopped suddenly. Each one looked surprised and confused. The driver was confused and surprised, too. The sled had not moved.

The driver called the other men over to see what had happened. Dave had bitten through the harness that connected Sol-leks to the other dogs and the sled. He stood right in front of the sled.

Dave pleaded with his eyes to stay there. The driver didn't know what to do. His friends warned him that a dog's heart could break if denied work. They spoke of dogs they knew who had been unharnessed due to age or injury and had died soon after.

It was decided that Dave should return to the harness. The men knew he didn't have much time left. They wanted his last days to be spent harnessed and happy.

When Dave was put back in with the dogs, he pulled hard though the snow. Yet, he continued to cry out in pain. Several times he fell down and the sled rode over him. He held out until the camp was reached. His driver made a place for him by the fire.

When morning came, Dave was too weak to travel. At harness time, he tried to crawl to his driver but couldn't. His strength had left him.

The last Buck saw of Dave was as he lay gasping in the snow. But the team could hear his sad howling until it passed beyond the river.



New Masters

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Thirty days after they left Dawson, the team arrived in Skaguay. They carried the Salt Water mail. The dogs were in horrible shape. They were worn out and worn down.

Buck's weight had gone from 140 to 115 pounds. There wasn't a dog that wasn't footsore and limping. There was no spring or bounce in any of them. Every muscle and every cell was tired.

In less than five months they had traveled 2,500 miles. With only five days rest over the last 1,800 miles, they could barely move. When they arrived in Skaguay, they were on their last legs. They could barely pull the sled.

The drivers were certain they'd get a long rest. They were wrong. The mail was overflowing and couldn't wait. While many men rushed to search for gold in the Klondike, many wives and children were left behind. That meant mail. Lots of it.

The men received their orders: continue on with the mail. They received new dogs to take the place of their tired team. Orders came down that the old team should be sold.

The dogs rested for three days. On the fourth, two men bought them, harness and all. The men called each other Charles and Hal.

Charles was a middle-aged man and had weak, watery eyes. His black mustache twisted up at the ends. Hal was about nineteen or twenty and carried a gun and a hunting knife strapped to his belt. Both men looked out of place here and many wondered why they had come.

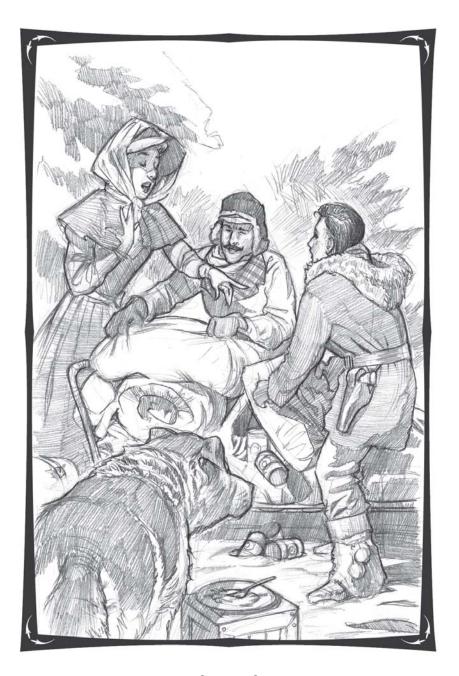
Buck saw the men talking and noticed money pass between them. He knew that the Scottish man and the drivers were passing out of his life, just like Perrault and Francois and the others had done before.

When the team arrived at their camp, Buck saw dirty dishes everywhere. The tent was only half stretched. It was a mess. He also saw a woman named Mercedes. She was Charles's wife and Hal's sister.

Buck watched them as the men took down the tent and loaded the sled. It was a chaotic scene. They rolled the tent into a bundle three times as large as it should have been. They packed the tin dishes as they were—dirty.

The three talked and argued constantly. Mercedes would direct them to put a load on the back of the sled. Once done, she'd change her mind and have the men move it to the front. She'd often have them rearrange the load a third time.

Three men from a nearby tent came over. They grinned and smirked.



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"I wouldn't bring that tent along," said a man.

Mercedes screeched. "How would I manage without it?"

"It's springtime. The cold weather is behind us," said the man.

Mercedes ignored him and directed Hal and Charles to load it on top.

"Think it will ride?" asked another man.

"Why shouldn't it?" demanded Charles.

"It seems a little top heavy, that's all," said the man.

"Of course," said the first man, "the dogs can't hike all day with that load behind them."

Charles grew angry. To prove them wrong, he yelled out, "Mush!"

The dogs rushed forward, strained for a few minutes, and then relaxed. They couldn't move the sled.

"The lazy dogs!" Hal shouted. He raised his whip. "I'll show them!"

Mercedes cried out, "Hal! You mustn't!" She grabbed hold of the whip.

"You don't know anything about these dogs," said Hal. "I need to whip them to get anything out of them. That's their way."

"They're weak for water," said one of the men. "Tuckered out. They need a rest."

Again Hal's whip fell on the dogs. Still, after much effort, the sled wouldn't move.

Mercedes dropped down on her knees next to Buck. "You poor, poor dears. Why don't you pull harder? Then you wouldn't be whipped."

Buck didn't like her at all.

One of the men who had been clenching his teeth spoke up. "It's not that I care what happens to you, but for the sake of those dogs, help them by breaking out the sled. The runners are frozen. Throw your weight against the gee pole, right and left, and break it out."

Following this advice, Hal broke out the runners. The overloaded sled forged ahead. Buck and the dogs struggled under Hal's mean treatment. A hundred yards ahead, the path turned and sloped toward the main street. Hal

didn't know how to keep the top-heavy sled from tipping over. As the dogs ran around the bend, the sled spilled over.

Hal cried out for them to stop, but they were filled with rage and continued running. Hal tumbled out of the sled and landed on his shoulder. The dogs dashed up the street, scattering the rest of the load along the way.

Some friendly villagers caught the dogs and gathered the scattered belongings. They also advised Hal and Charles, "If you expect to reach Dawson, you need half the load and twice the number of dogs you have now."

Although the grumpy men didn't want to, they pitched the tent and went through their belongings. Canned goods were thrown away first.

"Canned foods on a trail?" said one man. "No wonder you're so top heavy." The men laughed.

Blankets were thrown on the ground next.

The men chuckled again. "Blankets are for hotels!"

The men urged Charles, Hal, and Mercedes to do away with tents and dishes. "Who's going to wash those dishes anyway?" they asked. "Do you think you're traveling on a fancy train?"

Mercedes cried when her clothes were dumped. She cried when the men dumped their clothes, too. She pleaded with the men. It didn't help. Finally, she wiped her tears and, in spite, started to throw away what little clothes they actually needed!

Although lessened, it was still an incredible load. Charles and Hal bought six dogs that evening. They now had fourteen in all. But not all dogs are made for pulling sleds. These newcomers were weak on the trail even though they had been trained.

Buck and the rest of the dogs did not like the new dogs. Buck quickly taught the dogs what they should not do, but he couldn't teach them what they should do. These dogs were frightened of the strange environment and the treatment they received.

With fourteen worn-out dogs and lots of trail to cover, the outlook was grim. The two men, however, were cheerful. They were quite proud that they had fourteen dogs. They took great satisfaction in themselves when they noticed that they had more dogs than any other sled on the trail!

There was a reason the others did not have fourteen dogs dragging their sleds. A sled could not carry the food fourteen dogs needed. But Charles and Hal did not know this. They had figured everything out on paper. They planned the amount of food they thought they'd need. It all seemed so simple to them.

Late the next morning, Buck led the long team up the street. There was nothing lively about them. They were starting out dead tired. Buck had covered this trail four times already. He knew what was ahead and felt bitter and angry. His heart was no longer in his work. None of the dogs' hearts was. The new dogs

were shy and scared, and the old team had no confidence in their drivers.

Buck knew that they could not depend on these three people. They could not do anything and it was obvious that they could not learn. They were lazy and disorganized. It took them half the night to set up camp and half the morning to take it down.

Charles and Hal rushed to load the sled so much that they'd often have to stop and rearrange the load. Some days, they never made it out of camp. On most days, they never made ten miles. They were behind schedule. The dog food was running low.

When the dogs slowed down, Hal and Charles fed them more. Hal felt they weren't eating enough and didn't pay attention to how much food was left for the long journey. Even Mercedes stole fish and fed them when no one was looking.



It wasn't food that the dogs needed. They needed rest, for the load sapped every last bit of their energy and strength.

When Hal finally realized that the dog food was already half gone so early into the trip, he cut down the rations. At the same time, he tried to increase the miles each day. It was easy to give them less food. However, no one could make them travel faster.

Charles, Hal, and Mercedes fought, which often delayed their travels each day. Not only did these people not know how to work dogs, they didn't know how to work themselves.

Since the new dogs needed more food than the huskies, Hal and Charles got rid of them one by one. The realities of Arctic travel became too harsh for them.

Mercedes no longer cared for any dog. She cared only for herself. No matter how tired she was, she was never too tired to argue.

The men lost all patience with Mercedes and with each other. They were sore and stiff. The more their bodies ached, the harsher they treated one another.



John Thornton

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Mercedes insisted on riding in the sled at all times. She weighed 120 pounds, and the weight added to the struggles of the dogs. Finally, the dogs fell down and couldn't move another inch.

"Get off that sled," said Hal.

Mercedes wouldn't budge.

"The dogs can't carry your load," complained Charles.

Again, Mercedes wouldn't budge.

Hal and Charles picked Mercedes up and put her down on the trail. Still, she didn't budge.

They decided to teach her a lesson and left her there. Still, she refused to move. Finally, after the men traveled three miles, they turned around, found her, and placed her back on the sled.

From this point on, they did nothing but treat each other badly. They treated the dogs even worse. Hal and Charles took to clubbing the dogs and whipping them more frequently. When the food ran out, Hal traded his knife for some frozen meat. It was a poor substitute for food and felt like lead in the dog's stomachs.

Through it all, Buck staggered along at the head of the team. He felt as if he were in a nightmare. He pulled when he could. When he couldn't, he fell down and remained there until blows from the whip or club forced him to his feet again.

The gloss had gone out of Buck's beautiful coat. His hair was tangled and covered with dried blood. He was so skinny that each rib and bone of his body was outlined through his skin. It was heartbreaking, but Buck's heart was unbreakable.

The six other remaining dogs were skeletons like Buck. And like Buck, none had any strength or spark left. The pain of their beatings were dull and distant. It was if they weren't even alive. They were simply bags of bones.

When the sled stopped, the dogs dropped down in their harnesses like dead dogs. Only when the club fell upon them repeatedly, would they stagger to their feet and move forward.

One day, Billie fell and couldn't rise. Koona fell the next day. Both were cut out of their harnesses and left to die. Only five dogs remained to pull the heavy load.

Buck still led the team, but he no longer enforced discipline. He was too blind with weakness and only managed to stay on the trail by the dim feel of his feet.

Although beautiful spring weather was upon them, the dogs and humans didn't notice. Each day, the sun rose earlier and set later. It was dawn by three in the morning and stayed light until nine at night. The whole day long was a blaze of sunshine.

The ghost of winter was awakened. The sap was rising in the pines. The willows were bursting out in young buds. Crickets sang in the night. Creepy, crawling things rustled forth during the day. Squirrels chattered. Bird sang. From every hill came the trickle of running water. All things were thawing, bending, and snapping.

The Yukon was straining to break the ice loose. Air holes formed in the frozen ground and thin sections of ice on the rivers fell through.

With Mercedes crying, Hal and Charles fighting, and the dogs falling, they staggered into John Thornton's camp.

Thornton's camp was located at the mouth of White River. When they stopped, every dog fell down as if dead. Mercedes dried her eyes and looked at Thornton. Charles sat on a log to rest. Hal did all of the talking. Thornton was whittling the last touches on an ax handle he had made from a stick of birch. He whittled and listened. When asked for advice, he gave it knowing none of them would listen.

"At the last camp, they told us that the ice was breaking in the trail here. The bottom was dropping out of the river and the best thing for us to do would have been to wait," Hal said. "But look at us. We made it here to the White River." He sneered.

"They were right," said Thornton. "The bottom's likely to drop out at any moment. Only fools could have made it. You were lucky. I'll tell you the truth. I wouldn't risk my life on that ice for all the gold in Alaska."

"That's because you're not a fool, I suppose," said Hal. "All the same, we're going on to Dawson." He uncoiled his whip. "Get up there, Buck. Mush on!"

Thornton went on whittling. He knew that getting through to one fool was hard enough. But these three fools? Impossible!

But Buck and the dogs did not get up. The whip snapped again and finally Sol-leks was the first to crawl to his feet. Teek followed. Joe came next, yelping with pain. Pike made the effort but fell over twice. It wasn't until his third attempt that he stood.

Buck made no effort. He lay quietly where he had fallen. The whip bit into his skin over and over again. He didn't whine or struggle.

Thornton's eyes moistened.

This was the first time Buck had failed. This alone was enough to drive Hal into a rage. He put down his whip and picked up his club. Although Hal pounded the club into him, Buck refused to move. He had the feeling of doom.

John Thornton rose and knocked Hal to the ground. Mercedes screamed. Charles looked on but stayed on the log. He was too sore and too lazy to move.



Thornton stood over Buck too enraged to speak. Finally, he choked out, "If you strike that dog again, I'll kill you."

"It's my dog," Hal replied as he wiped the blood from his mouth. "Get out of my way or I'll fix you. We're going to Dawson."

Thornton stood between Hal and Buck. He had no intentions of backing away. "Back away,"

warned Thornton. "I said I'd kill you and I meant it. Leave the dog alone."

Hal took out his hunting knife. Mercedes screamed when Thornton knocked it out of his hand with his ax handle. The knife flew to the ground. Thornton picked up the knife and with two strokes, cut Buck out of his harness.

Hal had no fight left in him. Besides, he had enough problems with his sister and Charles. He figured that Buck was too close to dying to be of much help anyway. A few minutes later, Hal, Charles, Mercedes, and the dogs pulled out of camp and down the river.

Buck heard them go and raised his head. Pike was leading. Sol-leks was at the wheel and Joe and Teek were between. They were limping and staggering. Mercedes was in the sled as usual. Hal guided with the gee pole while Charles stumbled along the rear.

As Buck watched them, Thornton knelt beside him and rubbed his hands over his body.

"No broken bones," said Thornton. "There's many bruises and a terrible state of starvation, but no broken bones."

Thornton looked in Buck's direction. The two watched as the sled crawled along over the ice. Suddenly, they saw its back end drop down. Mercedes screamed. They saw Charles turn and make one last attempt to run back, but the ice gave way. The bottom dropped out of the trail. All of them disappeared in a gaping hole.

Thornton and Buck looked at each other. Buck licked Thornton's hand to show how grateful he was.



Devoted Friends



When Thornton's feet froze the December before, his partners had made him comfortable and left him to get well. They traveled up the river to find a raft headed for Dawson. He was still limping a little at the time he rescued Buck. But the limp soon left him as the weather grew warmer.

Like Thornton, Buck also did his healing in the warm, sunny weather. After 3,000 miles, a long rest was what Buck needed. He slowly won back his strength. His muscles swelled out and the flesh came back to cover his bones.

Two dogs had joined them on these lazy days. Skeet was a little Irish Setter who found Buck at his lowest point. Like a cat who washes her kittens, she cleaned Buck's wounds each day. She always kept one eye on Buck. Nig was a huge, black dog. He was half bloodhound and half deerhound. Both dogs were good-natured.

To Buck's surprise, neither dog felt any jealousy toward him. They seemed to share the kindness and gentleness of Thornton. Thornton clearly loved all of these dogs. As Buck grew stronger, he romped and played with Skeet and Nig.

Buck felt a genuine love for the first time. He had never experienced it at Judge Miller's down in the Santa Clara Valley. When he hunted with the Judge's sons, it felt more like a partnership. With the grandsons, he felt like a guardian. With the Judge, he felt friendship. But with Thornton, Buck felt love.

This man not only saved his life but was an ideal master. Other men took care of their dogs due to a sense of duty. It was something they had to do. Some did it for a business venture.

Thornton was different. He did it because he wanted to. He did it because he looked at the dogs as if they were his children. He treated them as such. Their days were filled with long talks and lots of play.

Thornton had a way of taking Buck's head between his hands and resting his own head on Buck's. He'd shake Buck back and forth as he spoke lovingly to him. Buck knew no greater joy than this rough embrace. With each shake back and forth, Buck's heart would shake with sheer love for his master.

In turn, Buck would clamp his teeth down on Thornton's hand. He would bite hard enough to leave teeth marks behind. This was how Buck showed his love for Thornton and that's exactly how Thornton saw it.

Although Buck went wild with happiness whenever Thornton touched him, he didn't go looking for it. Skeet was different. She would shove her nose under Thornton's hand and

nudge until petted. Nig would rest his head on Thornton's knee until a scratch landed upon it.

Buck, however, was just happy to admire Thornton at a distance. He could spend hours staring at Thornton. Thornton would always sense Buck's loving gaze and return it.

For a long time after his rescue, Buck never wanted to let Thornton out of his sight. Buck followed at his heels wherever he went. Buck was afraid that he would disappear just like all the others who had come before him.

Even when he slept, Buck would often have nightmares of Thornton leaving him. When this happened, Buck would creep through the chill of the night to the flap of the tent. He'd stand over his master and listen to the sound of his breathing. It was only then could Buck be sure his master was still with him.

Despite his love for Thornton, Buck's wild side continued to call him. He was faithful and loyal to Thornton, yet he longed to run free. Buck was getting older and becoming more like a wild dog. It was as if he came in from the wild to sit around Thornton's fire. He appeared before Thornton as a broad-breasted dog, white fanged and long furred. But always his ways of half wolves and wild wolves lay near the surface.

After a while, Buck felt an urge to run into the forest. He didn't know where he ran to or why he felt such a need to run. But he knew he had to do it. Then, after a time, he would remember how much he loved John Thornton and he'd run like the wind back to camp.

His love for Thornton grew each day. He didn't care at all for any other man. Travelers would pet him, but he felt cold under their touch. He would often just get up and walk away from those who praised him. Unless the kind words came from Thornton, Buck paid no attention.

When Thornton's partners, Hans and Pete, arrived on the raft, Buck ignored them. He

refused to acknowledge them until he learned they were friends of Thornton's. After that, he simply felt as though he had to put up with them. His only concern was for his master.

It didn't take Hans and Pete long to know where they stood with Buck. They kept their distance and played with Skeet and Nig instead.

Buck's love for Thornton grew stronger as each season passed. He was the only man that Buck would ever allow to put a pack on his back when they traveled. Nothing was too great for Buck to do as long as the command came from Thornton.

One day, the men and dogs were resting on a steep cliff. The cliff fell away straight down to a bedrock at least 300 feet below. Thornton sat at the edge with Buck at his shoulders.

"How devoted do you think Buck is to me?" asked Thornton.

"I've never seen a dog so loyal. So taken with his master," said Hans. Pete nodded in agreement. "I agree. Buck is yours and yours alone."

Buck's eyes never left Thornton. Thornton swept his arm out over the cliff. "Jump, Buck!"

As Buck started to jump, the three men pulled him back in.

"It's scary how he listens to you," said Pete, catching his breath.

Thornton looked at Buck. "It is scary and splendid and terrible all at the same time."

"I sure wouldn't want to be the man who lays a hand on you," said Pete, nodding his head toward Buck.

"By jingo!" Hans shouted. "The man who messes with you is indeed a sorry man."



An Amazing Feat



By the year's end, Pete and Hans's worries came true. During their travels, they met an evil man named Black Burton. He had been picking a fight with a newcomer at the hotel bar.

As Buck rested in the corner with his eyes fixed on his master, Thornton stepped in to break up the fight. Burton struck out without warning, and he knocked Thornton to the ground.

In a flash, Buck was on all fours. No one heard any barking or yelping. It was a sound that could only be described as a roar. They saw Buck rise up in the air and grab Burton's throat. Buck tore open Burton's throat and soon the crowd was upon Buck beating him down. He was driven off Burton and brought outside where he prowled up and down. He attempted to rush in and finish Burton off for good but was forced down.

A meeting was held. Since all agreed that Burton started the fight, Buck was allowed to remain free. From that day on, his name spread across every camp in Alaska.

In the fall, Buck saved Thornton's life once again in a different way. The three partners were moving a small, narrow boat down a rough stretch of rapids on the Forty-Mile Creek.

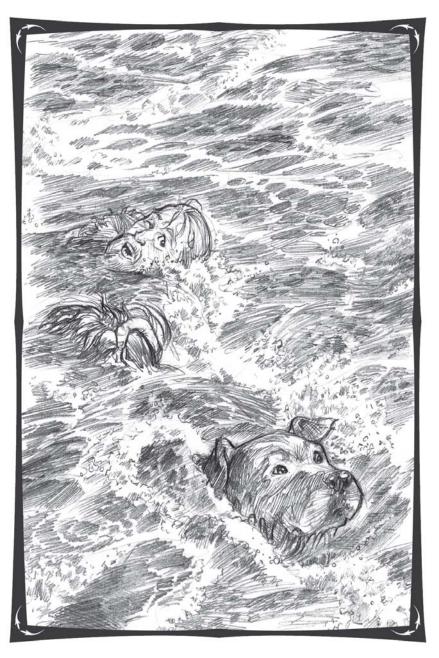
Hans and Pete moved about the bank holding a rope that was attached to the boat. Thornton remained in the boat steering and shouting directions at the men. Buck was on the bank, and he never took his eyes off of Thornton. He feared something terrible could happen at any moment.

There was a rough spot where rocks jutted out into the river. The ropes got caught up in these rocks and the boat tipped over. Thornton was thrown into the water and headed downstream to the worst part of the rapids. It was in this stretch of rapids that no man could survive.

Buck sprang into action. He jumped into the water and managed to catch up with Thornton some 300 yards away. When he felt Thornton grasp his tail, Buck started swimming back to shore. The progress forward was slow because the rapids were too strong.

Thornton knew the battle that was ahead of them. He knew he couldn't make it to shore so he reached out and caught hold of the slippery rocks that he had slammed into.

Buck continued downstream. Due to the strong currents, he was unable to swim back to his master. He struggled desperately but couldn't find his way back. In a few minutes, he



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could hear Thornton's voice rise above the roar of the river.

"Swim, Buck. Swim!"

Thornton's voice gave him the strength he needed to continue on. He swam toward the voice but it was too far away. When he looked to the left, he saw Pete and Hans motioning him toward them. Buck slowly made his way over the gushing water. Eventually, Pete and Hans pulled him ashore.

Pete and Hans knew that Thornton couldn't hold on to the slippery rocks much longer. They ran up to the part of the bank where Thornton was clinging to the rock. They attached a rope to Buck.

Buck jumped in and was determined to succeed in his rescue this time. He swam until the current pulled him toward Thornton. It was hard work and more than once, Buck was pulled under. He questioned his own survival.

But then he heard Thornton's voice once again, which acted like an electric shock. Buck

swam full force striking Thornton like a battering ram. Thornton clasped his hands around the shaggy neck as Pete and Hans pulled the rope closer to them.

Minutes later, both Buck and Thornton were upon the dry land. Thornton was bruised and battered and Buck had three broken ribs.

"That settles it," said Thornton once he caught his breath. "We'll camp right here."

And camp they did until Buck's ribs healed and he was able to travel.

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That winter in Dawson, Buck did something amazing. Perhaps it wasn't as heroic as saving his master's life, but it was something that would put his name yet higher on the totem pole of Alaskan fame.

It happened when the men made a trip to the East where miners had not yet appeared. The conversation took place in the Eldorado Saloon. It was here that all men bragged about their dogs. Many directed their boasting toward John Thornton after hearing never-ending tales about Buck. These men didn't see anything special in Buck and started arguing with Thornton.

"My dog can start a sled with 500 pounds and walk off with it," said one man.

"That's nothing," said another man. "My dog can carry 600 pounds and walk off with it."

"Big deal," said Thornton. He looked over at Buck. "My Buck can pull a sled with 1,000 pounds on it."

"And break out of the ice and walk with it for 100 yards?" asked the first man.

Thornton acted coolly. "And break it out and walk off with it for 100 yards."

"Well, well," said a man named Matthewson for all to hear. "I've got \$1,000 that says he can't." He slammed a sack of gold dust on the bar. "Here it is."

Nobody spoke. Thornton's bluff had been called. He felt a flush creeping up his face. His

tongue had tricked him. He spoke too fast. Could Buck walk off with 1,000 pounds? That was half a ton! He had no idea, but he did have great faith in Buck's strength. Still, what he didn't have was \$1,000. Nor did Hans or Pete.

"I've got a sled outside with twenty fifty-pound sacks of flour on it," said Matthewson. "That's 1,000 pounds." He glanced around the room and pointed to Thornton. "What's he waiting for? Let's get started!"

Thornton didn't answer. He didn't know what to say. He glanced from face to face and stopped when he saw Jim O'Brien, an old friend. "Can you lend me \$1,000?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"Sure," answered O'Brien as he plunked down a sack next to Matthewson's. "But I don't know if I have the faith in your dog."

The Eldorado emptied out onto the street. Several hundred men gathered around the sled in the sixty below zero weather. Matthewson's sled had been standing for several hours in the cold and its runners had frozen to the hard-packed snow.

Men placed bets on whether Buck could achieve what was promised. Not one man believed him capable of the feat.

Thornton saw the team of ten dogs curled up in the snow before the sled. It was then that Thornton knew just how impossible this task would be. Although worried, his fighting spirit was alive.

The team of ten dogs were unhitched and Buck, in his own harness, was put into the sled. Buck could feel excitement in the air and knew he must do something great for Thornton.

The crowd admired the fine shape Buck was in. He was back up to his 140 pounds and his coat was furry and shone like silk.

A voice cried out, "I'll give you \$800 for him right now."

Thornton shook his head.

Matthewson spoke up. "How about we raise our bet? I got 600 more dollars."

Thornton got caught up in the excitement. He, Pete, and Hans got the money.

Thornton stepped to Buck's side.

"You can't be near him when he pulls," said Matthewson. "Give him plenty of room."

Thornton knelt down next to Buck. He took Buck's head in his hands and rested his cheek on Buck. He did not playfully shake him. Instead, he whispered, "As you love me, Buck. As you love me."

The crowd noticed a change in Buck. They saw the commitment in his eyes. Buck grabbed Thornton's hand between his jaws and bit down, leaving teeth marks. It was Buck showing his love.

Thornton stepped back. "Now, Buck!"

Buck tightened the harness and let it go loose for several inches. This was the way he had learned.

"Gee!" Thornton's voice yelled out.

Buck swung to the right and plunged forward. The load shook and a crackling from under the runners could be heard.

"Haw!" Thornton commanded.

This time, Buck leaned toward the left. The crackling turned into snapping. The sled was broken out! The gathered men held their breath.

"Mush!"

Thornton's command cracked like a gunshot. Buck threw himself forward tightening the harness straps. His chest was low to the ground. His head reached forward and hung down while his feet flew like mad.

The sled lurched forward. One inch. Two inches. Three inches. The sled gained speed and soon moved steadily along.

The men gasped as Buck reached 100 yards. Cheers and chants rose to a steady roar. Buck stopped at Thornton's command. Men threw their hats and mittens into the air as they rushed toward Buck.

"I'll give you \$1,000 for him," came a distant shout. "Make that \$1,400."

Thornton took Buck's head in his hands and shook him back and forth. Buck never felt so happy and full of love. He clamped down on Thornton's hand leaving teeth marks.



Thornton looked at the men who had gathered. "I wouldn't trade Buck for all the gold in Alaska."



A Wolf Brother

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By winning the bet, Buck made it possible for his master to pay off debts and travel with his partners into the East. Thornton was lured by a fabled lost mine. Many men sought it. Few found it. Of those few who did, more than a few never returned from the journey.

Thornton, Hans, Pete, Buck, and half a dozen other dogs sledded seventy miles up the Yukon. They swung to the left into the Stewart River and continued on until the river was nothing but a stream.

Thornton didn't need much to survive. As long as he had a handful of salt and a rifle, he wasn't worried about the wild. He wasn't in any hurry. Time was on his side. He'd search

for his food much like the natives did. If he failed to find food, he kept looking knowing that sooner or later it would come to him.

Buck loved the journey. The hunting, fishing, and wandering about through new places pleased him. For weeks at a time they would travel, day after day. Then, for weeks on end, they would set up camp. The men would pan for gold while the dogs would laze about. It was a good life.

Sometimes, they went hungry and other times, they feasted. Summer came and went and with fall, they entered a strange lake country. It was sad and silent. There was no life at all. Instead, chilly winds greeted them.

Fall turned to winter and they continued through wondrous trails. Once they were certain they were close to the lost mine when they came upon an ancient path. But the path, they soon found out, began nowhere and ended nowhere. It remained a mystery.

Spring came once again and with it, not the lost mine but a broad valley where gold glimmered at the bottom of their washing pans. The rocks were full of gold! The men looked no farther and settled on the rich land.

Each day they found thousands of dollars worth of gold. Each nugget and speckle of dust went into moose-hide sacks. The men piled these bags like stacks of firewood outside of the small cabin they had made.

There was nothing for the dogs to do except fetch the game that Thornton killed. Besides that, Buck spent long hours by the roaring fire. Buck dreamed that he heard something calling to him from the forest. Although he didn't know why, it made him happy.

Sometimes Buck pursued the call from the forest. He would stick his nose into moss or into the soil where the grasses grew. At times, he would crouch for hours behind the trunks of fallen trees. He didn't know why he did these things. He just felt he had to do them.

One night, he sprang from his sleep and looked toward the forest. He was certain that he heard a call. It was distinct and certain as never before. He knew in an odd way that it was a sound that he had heard before.

While everyone slept, he rushed into the woods and moved cautiously through the forest. Finally, he came to an open space among the trees. Looking out, he saw an animal on its hind legs. Its nose was pointed to the sky. It was a long, lean timber wolf.

Buck made no noise but the wolf stopped howling and looked around. He sensed Buck's presence. Buck walked into the open and when the wolf saw him, he fled. Buck followed, hoping to overtake him. He chased him into a creek, where the wolf whirled about and showed his teeth.

Buck did not attack. Instead, he circled him and tried to engage him in a friendly way. The wolf was afraid. After all, Buck weighed three times more. The wolf barely reached Buck's shoulder. The first chance he got, the wolf bolted. The chase resumed.

This happened many times that evening but finally, Buck was rewarded. The wolf came to understand that no harm would come his way. He sniffed noses with Buck. They became friendly and played.

After a while, the wolf started off in a way that made it clear that Buck was to follow. So they ran side by side through the twilight, straight up the creek bed, and into the gorge.

Buck felt wildly happy. He knew he was answering the call. He was running with his wood brother toward the place from where the call surely came. It wasn't until they stopped to drink that Buck remembered John Thornton.

Buck sat down while the wolf continued on. When the wolf didn't see Buck by his side, he came back to Buck and urged him forward. But Buck turned about and started slowly back to camp.

For an hour, the wild brother ran by his side, whining softly. Then he sat down, pointed his nose upward, and howled. As Buck continued on his way, he heard the howl grow fainter until it could be heard no more.

Thornton was eating dinner when Buck dashed into camp. Buck jumped on Thornton with a frenzy of affection. He licked his face and bit his hand. For two days and two nights, Buck wouldn't let Thornton out of his sight. He refused to leave camp or go anywhere without Thornton. Buck followed him about while he worked. He watched him when he ate and slept.

But at the end of the two days, the call from the forest called out to him once again. Buck's restlessness came back and he thought about his wild brother. He longed to see him again. Although he searched, he never found his brother or heard his mournful howl.

Buck started to sleep away from the camp each evening. Then, he ventured farther from camp, staying away for a week at a time. He searched in vain for his wild brother as he moved from one area to the next. He fished for salmon, killed a large black bear, and blinded by mosquitoes, raged through the forest.

It wasn't long before Buck felt as if he was the best hunter in the world. Except for the stray brown on his muzzle and above his eyes and the splash of white hair that ran down his chest, he looked like a giant wolf. He acted like a wolf.



Buck Answers the Call of the Wild

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

"When he was made, the mold was broke," said Pete.

"By jingo! I agree," said Hans.

The men watched Buck march out of camp. But they didn't see the instant and terrible change that took place the second he entered the forest. He no longer marched. Instead, he became a thing of the wild. He crawled on his belly like a snake and like a snake, he lurched forward to strike.

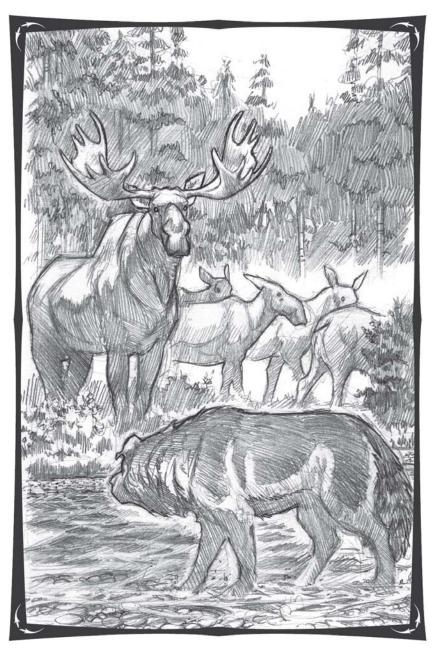
Buck could take a bird from its nest, kill a rabbit as it slept, and snap chipmunks in midair as they fled into nearby trees. Buck didn't kill for the sake of killing. No, Buck killed to eat.

As fall approached, Buck noticed an increase of moose in the area. Buck had already killed a small one but now yearned to take down a bigger one.

Buck spied a band of twenty moose drinking from the creek. The one in charge was mean and had a savage temper. He stood six feet from the ground. His antlers had fourteen points and reached seven feet within the tips. He roared with fury at the sight of Buck.

It took four days, but Buck brought him down. He first separated the old bull from his herd. Then, he took him down and had his fill. After a few days, refreshed and full, Buck headed back to the camp.

As he traveled, he became aware of a certain stirring in the air. There was life but what life it was, Buck didn't know. The birds talked of it.



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The squirrels chattered about it. The breeze whispered of it. The closer he got to camp, the greater sense of danger he felt.

Three miles from camp, he came upon a fresh trail that sent his neck hair rippling. It led straight toward camp and Thornton. Buck hurried on and the dead silence worried him.

As Buck ran, his head jerked at a new smell off to the side of the road. When Buck investigated, he found Nig. An arrow had pierced his body.

A hundred yards farther in, Buck came upon one of the sled dogs Thornton had brought to Dawson. The dog thrashed about in a death struggle. Buck passed around him without stopping. From the camp straight ahead came many voices.

At the edge of camp, Buck found Hans lying on his face. An arrow had pierced him as well. Buck peered out at where the lodge had been and saw a sight that enraged him. Because of his great love for Thornton, Buck went wild and lost his head.

The Yeehats were dancing about the wreckage when they heard the roar. Buck hurled himself upon them in a frenzy to destroy.

Buck sprang at the nearest man, who was the chief. With his fangs, he ripped his neck open and a fountain of blood sprayed about. He didn't pause to worry about the man. Instead, he pounded on the next Yeehat and got the same results. Buck plunged about thrashing and killing until an arrow sailed by him and into the back of another hunter.

When that Yeehat fell, a panic seized the rest of the natives. They fled in terror into the woods proclaiming that they fled an Evil Spirit. Buck chased after them dragging many to their death. When the last one was killed, Buck returned to an empty camp.

Buck found Pete where he had been killed in his blankets. Thornton's desperate struggle was fresh on the earth. Buck followed the scent down to the edge of a deep pool. By the edge, head and front feet in the water, was Skeet. Faithful to the end.

The pool itself, muddied and bloodied, hid what it contained. For it contained Thornton. Buck had followed his scent to the water. There was no trace that led away.

Buck felt a sadness he had never known. When he passed the dead Yeehats, he forgot his pain for a minute and took great pride in himself. He learned how easily he had killed man. They were much easier to bring down than he expected. As long as they had no spears or arrows, they were no match for him.

When night fell, Buck noticed a new stirring in the woods. He stood up and heard a faint, sharp yelp from far away. It was quickly followed by a chorus of similar sharp yelps. As the minutes passed, the yelps drew closer.

Again, Buck knew them as things he had heard in another world that persisted in his memory. He walked to the center of the open space and listened.

It was the call. The call was stronger than it had ever been. He was finally ready to obey. John Thornton was dead. The last tie was broken. Man had no more claims on him and never would again.

Hunting their living meat, the wolf pack had at last crossed over from the land of streams and timber and invaded Buck's valley. A silvery flood streamed into the clearing. At the center of the clearing, Buck stood motionless. He was waiting for them.

The pack was awed by the sight of him. Within a minute, the boldest leaped straight for Buck. Like a flash, Buck struck and broke its neck. Three others tried attacking before they realized that Buck was stronger than they were.

The wolves drew back. In the moonlight, Buck could see their white fangs. Some were lying down with heads raised. Still, others were lapping water from the pool.

One long, lean gray wolf advanced cautiously. Buck recognized him instantly. It was his wild brother with whom he had run and played. They both whined softly and touched noses.

Then an old wolf stepped forward. Buck rubbed noses with him as well. After that, the older wolf sat down, pointed his nose toward the moon, and broke out the long wolf howl.

All the others sat down and howled with him. Buck, too, sat down and howled. The others yelped in chorus as they sprang away into the woods. Buck ran with them, side by side with his wild brother, yelping as he ran.

And here may end the story of Buck. The years were not many when the Yeehats noted a

change in the breed of timber wolves. Some were seen with splashes of brown on their heads and muzzles. Others had a patch of white hair running down the chest.

But more remarkable than this, the Yeehats tell the story of a Ghost Dog that runs at the head of the pack. They are afraid of this Ghost Dog. For it steals from their camps, robs their traps, slays their dogs, and defies their brave hunters.

Now the tale grows worse. Many Yeehats who failed to return to camp were found. They had their throats slashed and there were wolf prints around them in the snow. These were greater than the prints of any wolf.

Each fall, when the Yeehats follow the movement of the moose, there is one valley they refuse to enter. They tell stories about how an evil spirit came one year and decided to live in that valley.

In the summers, there is one animal that travels out of that valley. It is a great wolf unlike any others. It crosses alone from the timberland and comes down to an open space among the trees. Here, a yellow stream flows from rotted moose-hide sacks and sinks into the ground. Long grasses grow through them and overrun the ground. This wolf stays for a time dreaming and howling one long, mournful howl before leaving.