

INTRODUCTION BY
MELVIN BURGESS

'First friend', the poet Rudyard Kipling called the dog. But I wonder just how friendly those dogs, fresh from the wild, really were? Thousands of years later, they've become pets. If you have a dog these days, you never need be alone, and you're always the boss. But have you ever wondered what it would be like if your faithful, four-legged Fido came back at the head of the pack, with his lips curled back and a growl in his throat, and fresh meat on his mind? Would he sit and beg on command then?

No dog was ever so stern, loyal and obedient as Buck, and yet none so fierce and independent either. He starts off as a soft pet and then goes back in time, through being a working dog until, finally, he really is a guest in from the wilderness. There never was a dog like him, and probably never will be, either. None of mine would ever even do as they were told, let alone risk their lives for me. If I hadn't known how to operate the tin opener, they'd have been off. In the end, I think John Thornton, Buck's

Copyrighted Material

last owner, was simply lucky to have come across such a glorious beast. They were more a partnership than owner and dog, and in fact it's Buck who is the stronger of the two. Thornton is just one more master keeping him from his true destiny, as pack leader of wild wolves, running with his wild brothers. It's only really when the last man is gone that Buck can truly become himself.

This is a romance about the wild places. In one sense, it's the wilderness that is the true hero of the book. I think it's that side of it that appeals to me – the idea of a beautiful world with no people in it, unspoilt and perfect, where only the truly glorious can survive. It seems only right that Thornton was destroyed by the place he was trying to plunder, while Buck rises to the occasion by returning to the source of his strength and becoming a part of it.

These days we want to make our mark in the wilderness in a different way – by managing it and making it suitable for wildlife, rather than just leaving it to be claimed by whatever and whoever can survive there. But for anyone, like myself, who loves nature, there is something magnetic in the idea that nature will come back to claim its own – covering the towns with creepers and breaking up the roads and pavements with trees, pulling the houses back into the soil, while the animals we call pets knock down their fences and start to roam free again. The beautiful, dangerous wilderness! *The Call of the Wild* is a reminder of an age before mass extinctions, before climate change,

when man had not yet become such a force of nature himself and there was a real sense that one day you might wake up and find that the roads have crumbled under the roots of trees, there would be wild beasts closing in on your garden, and 'first friend', sitting by the hearth, would turn and bare his teeth at you, just as his ancestors once used to do.

Copyrighted Material

Contents

1	Into the Primitive	1
2	The Law of Club and Fang	17
3	The Dominant Primordial Beast	31
4	Who Has Won to Mastership	52
5	The Toil of Trace and Trail	66
6	For the Love of a Man	89
7	The Sounding of the Call	109

Copyrighted Material

Into the Primitive

*Old longings nomadic leap
Chafing at custom's chain;
Again from its brumal sleep
Wakens the ferine strain.*

Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming 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 toil 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 verandah that ran around its four sides. The house was approached by gravelled driveways which wound about through wide-spreading lawns and under the interlacing boughs of tall poplars. At the rear things were on even a more spacious scale than at the front. There were great stables, where a dozen grooms and boys held forth, rows of vine-clad servants' cottages, an endless and orderly array of outhouses, long grape arbours, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches. Then there was the pumping plant for the artesian 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 demesne 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 populous kennels, or lived obscurely in the recesses of the house after the fashion of 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 score 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 paddocks were, and the berry patches. Among the terriers he stalked imperiously, and Toots and Ysabel he utterly ignored, for he was king – king over all the creeping, crawling, flying things of Judge Miller's place, humans included.

His father, Elmo, a huge St Bernard, had been the Judge's inseparable companion and Buck did fair 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 of 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 sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was ever a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation. But he had saved himself by not becoming a mere pampered house-dog. Hunting and kindred outdoor delights had kept

down the fat and hardened his muscles; and to him, as to the cold-tubbing races, the love of water had been a tonic and a health preserver.

And this was the manner of dog Buck in the fall of 1897, when the Klondike strike 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 an undesirable acquaintance. Manuel had one besetting sin. He loved to play Chinese lottery. Also, in his gambling, he had one besetting weakness – faith in a system; and this made his damnation certain. For to play a system requires money, while the wages of a gardener's helper do not lap over the needs of a wife and numerous progeny.

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 flag station known as College Park. This man talked with Manuel, and money clinked between them.

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

'Twist it, an' you'll choke 'm plentee,' said Manuel, and the stranger grunted a ready affirmative.

Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unwonted performance: but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for a wisdom that outreached his own. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, he growled menacingly. He had merely intimated his displeasure, in his pride believing that to intimate was to command. 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 lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting futilely. 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 ebbed, his eyes glazed, and he knew nothing when the train was flagged and the two men threw him into the baggage car.

The next he knew, he was dimly aware that his tongue was hurting and that he was being jolted along in some kind of conveyance. The hoarse 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 unbridled anger of a kidnapped king. The man sprang for his throat, but Buck was too quick for him. His jaws closed on the hand; nor