



## CHAPTER 1

### **Into the Primitive**

Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not for himself alone, but for every dog from Puget Sound to San Diego who possessed strong muscles and warm, long hair. Men groping in the Arctic darkness had found a yellow metal, and steamship and transportation companies were booming with business. Thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted work dogs—heavy dogs with strong muscles and furry coats to protect them from the frost.

Buck lived in a big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley. It was called Judge Miller's

place. It stood back from the road, half-hidden among the trees, through which one could see the wide, cool veranda that ran around its four sides. The house was approached by graveled driveways that wound about through wide-spreading lawns and under the interlacing boughs of tall poplars. At the rear, things were on an even more spacious scale than at the front. There were great stables, where a dozen grooms and boys gathered; rows of vine-clad servants' cottages; an endless and orderly array of outhouses; long grape arbors, green pastures, orchards, and berry patches.

Buck ruled over this great domain. He had been born here four years ago, and had lived here all his life. There were other dogs, but they did not count. They came and went, resided in the crowded kennels, or lived unnoticed in the recesses of the house.

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 the Judge's daughters on long twilight or early morning walks. 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 in the stable yard. He

dominantly stalked among the terriers and utterly ignored the others, for he was king—king over all 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 was to follow in the way of his father. He was not as large—he weighed only one hundred and forty pounds—because his mother, Shep, had been a smaller 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 royal fashion. He had a fine pride in himself. He was even a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become. But he was not a pampered house dog. Hunting and other outdoor delights had kept down the fat and hardened his muscles; his love of water had been a tonic and a health preserver.

This was Buck's life in the fall of 1897, when the Klondike gold rush dragged men from all the world into the frozen North. But Buck did not read the newspapers, and he did not know that Manuel, one of the gardener's helpers, was not to be trusted. Manuel had one overriding sin. He loved to gamble. But gambling requires money, and the wages of a

gardener's helper did not even cover the needs of his wife and many children.

The Judge was at a meeting on the memorable night of Manuel's betrayal. No one saw him and Buck go off through the orchard on what Buck imagined was merely a stroll. And with the exception of a solitary man, no one saw them arrive at the little train station. This man talked with Manuel, and money changed hands between them.

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

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

Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. It was surely a new experience, but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for wisdom beyond his own. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, he growled threateningly, making his displeasure clear. But to his surprise the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath. In a rage he sprang at the man, who met him halfway, grabbed him by the throat, and with a twist threw him over on his back. Then he tightened the rope without

mercy, while Buck struggled in a fury, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting in vain. Never in all his life had he been so vilely treated, and never had he been so angry. But his strength decreased, his eyes glazed, and he knew nothing when the train stopped and the two men threw him into the baggage car.

The next he knew, he was dimly aware that his tongue was hurting and he was being jolted along in some kind of vehicle. The shriek of a locomotive whistling at a crossing told him where he was. He had traveled 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 and did not relax till the man choked his senses out of him once more.

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

Later that night, Buck was taken to a shed in back of a saloon on the San Francisco waterfront.

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

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

“How much did the other one get?” the saloonkeeper demanded.

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

“That makes a hundred and fifty,” the saloonkeeper calculated; “and I’d say he’s worth it.”

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

There he lay for the remainder of the weary night, nursing his rage and wounded pride. He could not understand what it all meant. What did these strange men want with him? Why were they keeping him pent up in this narrow crate? He did not know why, but he felt the vague sense of impending disaster. Several times during the night he sprang to his

feet when the shed door rattled open, expecting to see the Judge, but each time it was the bulging face of the saloonkeeper that peered in at him. And each time the joyful bark that trembled in Buck's throat was twisted into a savage growl.

But he was left alone, and in the morning four men entered and picked up the crate. More tormentors, Buck decided, for they were evil-looking creatures, ragged and unkempt. He stormed and raged at them through the bars. They only laughed and poked sticks at him, which he promptly attacked with his teeth till he realized that was what they wanted. So he lay down sullenly and allowed the crate to be lifted into a wagon. Then he, and the crate in which he was imprisoned, began a passage through many hands. Finally he was deposited in the express car of the long, loud train.

For two days locomotives shrieked, and for two days and nights Buck neither ate nor drank. In his anger he had met the first advances of the train men with growls, and they retaliated by teasing him. When he flung himself against the bars, quivering and frothing, they laughed at him and taunted him. They growled and barked like wild dogs, and flapped their arms and crowed. He knew it was

all very silly, but still it was an outrage to his dignity. His anger grew and grew. He did not mind the hunger so much, but the lack of water caused him severe suffering, and his wrath grew to fever pitch.

He was glad for one thing: the rope was off his neck. That had given them an unfair advantage; but now that it was off, he would show them. They would never get another rope around his neck. Upon that he was resolved. For two days and nights he neither ate nor drank, and during those days and nights of torment, his rage was building. His eyes turned bloodshot, and he evolved into a raging fiend. He was so changed that the Judge himself would not have recognized him; and the train men breathed with relief when they bundled him off the train and into a wagon at Seattle.

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

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

“Sure,” the man replied, driving the hatchet into the crate.

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

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

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

And Buck was truly a red-eyed devil, ready to spring, hair bristling, mouth foaming, a mad glitter in his bloodshot eyes. He launched his one hundred and forty pounds of fury straight at the man, surcharged with the pent-up passion of two days and nights. In mid-air, just as his jaws were about to close on the man, he received a shock to his body and brought his teeth together with an agonizing clip. He whirled over, hitting the ground on his back and side. He had never been struck by a club

in his life, and he did not understand. With a snarl that was part bark and more scream, he was again on his feet and launched into the air. And again the shock came, and he was brought crushingly to the ground. This time he was aware that it was the club, but his madness knew no caution. A dozen times he charged, and as often the club broke the charge and smashed him down.

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

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

“He’s no slouch at dog-breakin’, that’s

wot I say," one of the men on the wall cried out enthusiastically.

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

" 'Answers to the name of Buck,' " the man read from the saloon-keeper's letter, which had announced the crate and contents. "Well, Buck, my boy," he went on in a friendly voice, "we've had our little quarrel, and the best thing we can do is to let it go at that. You've learned your place, and I know mine. Be a good dog and all will go well. Be a bad dog, and I'll whale the stuffin' outa you. Understand?"

As he spoke, he fearlessly patted the head he had so mercilessly pounded, and though Buck's hair involuntarily bristled at the touch of his hand, he endured it without protest. When the man brought him water, he drank eagerly, and later bolted down a generous meal of raw meat, chunk by chunk, from the man's hand.

He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw, once and for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned this lesson, and he never forgot it. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law. The facts of life took on a fiercer aspect,

and while he faced it unintimidated, he faced it with all the hidden cunning of his natural instincts aroused. As the days went by, other dogs came, in crates and at the ends of ropes, some quietly, and some raging and roaring as he had come. One after the other, he watched them pass under the domination of the man in the red sweater. Again and again, as he watched each brutal performance, the lesson was driven home to Buck: a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed, though not necessarily accepted. Of this Buck was never guilty, though he did see beaten dogs that fawned upon the man, and wagged their tails, and licked his hand. Also he saw one dog that would neither appease nor obey finally killed in the struggle for mastery.

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

Yet his time came, in the form of a little shriveled man who spoke broken English and had many strange expressions that Buck could not understand.

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

“Three hundred, and a present at that, eh, Perrault?” was the prompt reply of the man in the red sweater.

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

Buck saw money pass between them and was not surprised when Curly, a good-natured Newfoundland, and he were led away by the little man. That was the last he saw of the man in the red sweater, and as he and Curly looked at receding Seattle from the deck of the Narwhal, it was the last he saw of the warm Southland. Curly and he were taken below by Perrault and turned over to a black-faced giant called Francois. They were a new kind of men to Buck, and while he developed no affection for them, he nonetheless grew to honestly respect them. He speedily learned that Perrault and Francois were fair men, calm and impartial in administering justice, and wise in the way of dogs.

On the deck of the Narwhal, Buck and Curly joined two other dogs. One of them was a big snow-white fellow named Spitz. He was friendly, in a treacherous sort of way, smiling into one's face while he planned some underhanded trick. For instance, he stole from Buck's food at the first meal. As Buck sprang to punish him, the lash of Francois's whip sang through the air, reaching the culprit first; and nothing remained for Buck but to recover the bone. That was fair of Francois, he decided, and Francois began his rise in Buck's estimation.

The other dog made no advances nor received any. He did not attempt to steal from the newcomers. He was a gloomy fellow, and he showed Curly plainly that all he desired was to be left alone. His name was Dave, and he ate and slept and took interest in nothing, not even when the ship crossed Queen Charlotte Sound and rolled and pitched and bucked like a thing possessed. When Buck and Curly grew excited, half wild with fear, he raised his head as though annoyed, favored them with a glance, yawned, and went to sleep again.

Day and night the ship throbbed to the tireless pulse of the propeller, and though one day was very like another, it was apparent to Buck that the weather was steadily growing colder. At last, one morning, the propeller was

quiet, and the Narwhal was filled with an atmosphere of excitement. He felt it, as did the other dogs, and knew that a change was at hand. Francois leashed them and brought them on deck. At the first step upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into something white and mushy—very much like mud. He sprang back with a snort. More of this white stuff was falling through the air. He shook himself, but more of it fell upon him. He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant it was gone. This puzzled him. He tried it again with the same result. The onlookers laughed uproariously. He didn't know why, and he felt ashamed. This was his first snow.