

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Buck understands that he has been taken from civilization into a wild, primitive place, and his first day in the North is extremely unpleasant. Both the dogs and the men around him are cruel and violent, and Buck is shocked to see the way the wolfish dogs fight. Buck's traveling companion, a female dog named Curly, approaches a husky in a friendly way, but the husky attacks her immediately, ripping her face open. Thirty or forty other huskies approach, and Curly lunges at her assailant. She tumbles off her feet, and the other dogs rush in, trampling her. The men come and fight off the dogs with clubs and an ax. Only two minutes have passed, but Curly is lying dead and bloody on the ground. Buck realizes that to survive in this world, he will have to make sure that he never goes down in a fight. He also decides that he hates Spitz, who seems to be laughing at Curly's fate.

Francois fastens Buck into a harness and sets him to work hauling a sled. Buck finds it to be a humbling experience, as he has seen horses performing such labor before.

Nevertheless, he tries his best, responding to Francois's whip and the nips of Dave and the growls of Spitz, deferring to the more experienced sled dogs. Spitz is the team's lead dog, carving a path through the snow. Buck learns quickly and makes good progress. He learns to stop

at “ho,” to move at “mush,” and how to turn and move downhill.

In the afternoon, Perrault brings back two more dogs, Billee and Joe. They are both huskies and are brothers, but they are very different from one another. Billee is excessively good-natured, while Joe is sour. Each of them is confronted by the belligerent Spitz, but while the friendly Billee is easily cowed, Joe snaps back until Spitz leaves him alone. Another dog, Sol-leks, joins them by the evening. He is an old husky with one eye, and he does not like to be approached from his blind side. Buck accidentally approaches him from that side once and gets his shoulder slashed. He avoids making the same mistake again, and the two dogs become friends.

That night, Buck has trouble finding a place to sleep. He tries to enter the men’s tent but is chased away. He tries to sleep in the snow but finds it intolerably cold. He wanders among the tents, but every place is as cold as the last. He feels something wriggling beneath his feet and finds Billee lying in a snug ball, buried warmly under a layer of snow. He digs a hole for himself and sleeps comfortably.

The next day, three more dogs are added to the team, making a total of nine. Buck does not mind the work, but he is surprised that the other dogs seem to enjoy it so wholeheartedly. He is placed between Dave and Sol-leks to receive instruction from them. Francois and Perrault,

who are mail carriers for the Canadian government, leave the coast and set out for the town of Dawson. The team makes good time, traveling forty miles in a day. Past the already packed trail, the team moves more slowly for many days, and the men are always setting up camp after dark. Buck is always hungry and learns to eat faster in order to keep his food from disappearing into the mouths of the other dogs. By watching the other dogs, he also learns to steal; his old morals, learned in Judge Miller's sunny home, gradually slip away. Old urges and instincts, which belonged to his wild ancestors, begin to assert themselves.

Analysis

The death of Curly is an important symbolic moment in the novel. In the previous chapter, the man with the club stood for the savage relationship between humans and their dogs; Curly's fate here shows that this savagery also exists among the dogs themselves in the wild North. Cruelty and violence replace friendliness and peaceful coexistence, and any animal that cannot stand up for itself will be killed mercilessly. "So that was the way," Buck realizes. "No fair play." Fair play is the law of civilization; in the wilderness, the only law is the "law of club and fang." Curly's death symbolizes the transition to this new, harsher law of life.

Throughout this chapter, Buck begins to adjust to the new ethic, which requires intense self-reliance. The old Buck is a creature of civilization, one who would die “for a moral consideration”; the new Buck is more than willing to steal food from his masters. His transformation reflects the influence of Darwinian natural science and philosophy on Jack London’s novel. Charles Darwin, whose 1859 book *The Origin of Species* proposed the theory of evolution to explain the development of life on Earth, envisioned a natural world defined by fierce competition for scarce resources—“the survival of the fittest” was the law of life and the engine that drove the evolutionary process. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck must adjust to this bleak, cruel vision of animal existence as he realizes that the moral concerns of human civilization have no place in the kill-or-be-killed world of the wild. What order does exist in this world is instead the order of the pack, which we observe in the way the other members of the team help train Buck as a sled dog. Even within the pack rivalry surfaces, however, as the emerging antagonism between Spitz and Buck demonstrates. But London emphasizes that Buck does not merely learn these Darwinian lessons; they are already part of his deep animal memory. Buck may be a creature reared in the comfort of the sunny Santa Clara Valley, a domestic pet and a descendant of domestic pets, but his species roamed wild long before men tamed it. As the novel progresses, Buck taps into this ancestral memory and uncovers hidden

primal instincts for competition and survival. The term for this process is *atavism*—the reappearance in an animal of the traits that defined its remote ancestors. Atavism is the key to Buck’s success in the wild—he is able to access “in vague ways . . . the youth of the breed . . . the time the wild dogs ranged in packs through the primeval forest, and killed their meat as they ran it down.” London suggests that primitive instincts do not die in the civilized world; rather, they go into a kind of hibernation. Such a reawakening of instincts certainly occurs in dogs, but the novel suggests that it also occurs in men. Given the right circumstances, any being can return, like Buck, to the primitive, instinctual life of his ancestors.