

CHAPTER 4

Summary

The next morning, Francois discovers Spitz missing and Buck covered with wounds. The dog-driver harnesses the dogs. Buck trots over to the space Spitz used to occupy, but Francois does not notice him and harnesses Sol-leks to the lead position. Buck lunges at Sol-leks, but Francois drags him away by the scruff of the neck. Sol-leks shows that he is afraid of Buck and does not mind giving up the position, but Francois comes back with the club. Buck retreats but then refuses to take his old position—he is making it clear, Francois realizes, that he thinks that he has earned the lead position and will be satisfied with nothing less.

Perrault tells Francois to throw down his club, and Buck trots to the lead position and is harnessed in. He takes up the job easily and shows himself to be superior even to Spitz. He is a born leader and excels at making the others live up to his expectations. Two native huskies are added to the team, and Buck breaks them in quickly. The team, at this point, is ahead of their record, and they cover the Thirty Mile River in one day, even though it took them ten days to cross before. Averaging forty miles a day, they reach Skaguay in record time, a remarkable journey that makes them extremely popular for a short while.

However, Perrault and Francois soon receive official orders that take them elsewhere, and they exit from Buck's life. The team then travels back to Dawson under the command of a Scotsman, carrying a heavy load of mail to the gold miners in the North. With such a load, their speed slows, and life becomes monotonous and laborious for Buck. Occasionally, he thinks about his life in California, but he is not homesick. His inherited instincts are growing stronger within him, and everything he encounters in the wild seems strangely familiar. The men he is with remind him of men from another, more primitive time, and sometimes at night he has visions that seem to come from an earlier era, when men wore animal skins and lived in caves.

The dogs are tired when they reach Dawson, but they are allowed little rest and are soon on their way out with another load. They are treated well, attended to even before the men. However, one of the dogs, Dave, is suffering from a strange illness that no one can diagnose. The men decide he is too weak to pull the sled and try to pull him out of his position, but he protests until they put him back into his rightful place. They realize that he wants to die working and harness him into his usual position. The next day, he is too weak to travel. He tries to crawl into his position but collapses on the ground and howls mournfully as the team moves away. The Scotsman retraces his steps, the dogs hear a shot ring out, and

London writes that “Buck knew, and every dog knew, what had taken place behind the belt of river trees.”

Analysis

Buck’s victory over Spitz marks his ascendancy within the team of dogs, but the team is not independent—it is subordinate to the orders of human beings, in this case Francois and Perrault. It is not enough for Buck to have killed Spitz; his human masters must ratify his triumph. But having “won to mastery” over Spitz, Buck is not content to passively accept his masters’ orders, even when they are accompanied by the use of the club. He has learned from his previous encounters with weapons, and he stays out of range until Francois and Perrault give in and accept what Buck has already proved in slaying Spitz—that he deserves to be the lead dog. Once they do accept this fact, Buck rewards them by raising the team’s performance to new heights. The significance of the speed record that they set on the road to Skaguay is clear: not only is Buck the strongest and fiercest dog, but he is also a born leader. Of course, Buck was actually raised as a pet, and, therefore, the irony of his natural capacity for leadership supports the novel’s idea that beings innately possess such ancestral traits.

Little transpires in terms of plot development in this chapter: the team travels to Skaguay, then back to Dawson, and then onward almost without incident—

except for the change in drivers and the increasing heaviness of the load. The touching death of Dave is both a reminder of the harshness of life in the Klondike and an expression of canine resolution. Even when he is on the brink of death, Dave demands his rightful place in the team and refuses to be unharnessed. He clearly wants to die on his feet, and, while he may not be as mighty and masterful as Buck, he shares the sense of pride that drives Buck to excel and, thus, hangs on for dear life. Dave's exhibition of pride even when all of his bodily strength is gone exemplifies how London has endowed the sled dogs with human emotions.

Meanwhile, London continues to develop the idea of the existence of a kind of species memory, which allows Buck to tap into the experiences of his wild ancestors. This species memory shows itself not only in the instincts that life in the wild has awakened in Buck but also in the visions that Buck begins to have. London makes Buck something of a mystic, able to look into the ancient past, before civilization appeared on the earth. There, he has visions of primeval man, "all but naked . . . afraid of the darkness . . . [with] a quick alertness as of one who lived in perpetual fear of things seen and unseen." With such visions, London suggests that while Buck's life as a pet, in sunny California, may have been soft and overcivilized, the relationship between man and canine stretches back into the primitive world, when

humans needed dogs to protect them from the terrors of the night. This idea of an ancient, natural relationship between men and dogs is developed further when Buck acquires the ultimate good master in John Thornton.