

Chapter I

Into the Primitive

Buck the dog didn't read the newspapers. If he had, he would have known that trouble was coming. Not just for him. It was trouble for every strong, long-haired



dog. Men had discovered gold, and thousands were rushing into the North to search for it. These men wanted dogs. Dogs with strong muscles and furry coats to protect them from the cold.

Buck was born at Judge Miller's place in Santa Clara Valley, California. He lived there for four years.

He was king over all living things at the house and surrounding area, including the humans. He had complete freedom to go where he wanted. It was true that there were other dogs, but they didn't count. Dogs like Toots or Ysabel rarely went outside. They were spoiled by dozens of servants. There were also the Fox Terriers who lived outside in kennels.

But Buck wasn't a house dog, and he wasn't a kennel dog. The whole house and surrounding area were his. He jumped into the swimming pool or went hunting with the Judge's sons. Buck's father, Elmo, was a huge St. Bernard who was the Judge's best friend. Buck wanted to be like his father, but he weighed only one hundred forty pounds because his mother was a Scotch shepherd dog.

And this was the kind of dog Buck was in the fall of 1897. This was the year of the gold rush.

One day, the Judge was at a meeting. His sons were also away. So no one saw Buck and Manuel, one of the garden-er's helpers, go off through the orchard. Buck thought he was going for a walk. They met a strange man in the park. This man talked with Manuel, and then the man gave Manuel money. Buck had no idea that Manuel needed money



from gambling too much.

"You should have wrapped up the goods before you delivered them. How am I supposed to control this dog?" the stranger said rudely. Manuel tied a piece of strong rope around Buck's neck under the collar.

"Twist it, and you'll choke him plenty," said Manuel. The stranger grunted in agreement.

Buck accepted the rope with no worries. He didn't like it, but he had learned to trust men that he knew personally.



But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger's hands, Buck growled angrily. To Buck's surprise, the rope tightened around his neck, shutting off his breath. In a rage, he sprang at the man, who easily threw Buck onto his back. Then the rope tightened harder. Never in all his life had Buck been treated so badly. Never in all his life had he been so angry. But his strength faded. The two men threw him into the baggage car of a train.

The next thing he knew, Buck was aware that his tongue was hurting and that he was in a vehicle. He had traveled lots of times with the Judge. He knew the sensation of riding in a baggage car. He was angry. He was a king who had been kidnapped. A man entered the baggage car and tried to grab Buck by his throat, but Buck was too quick for him. His jaws closed on the man's hand. He didn't let go until he was choked again.

"This dog has been real aggressive," the man said, hiding his mangled hand from the baggage man. "His owner asked me to take him up to San Francisco. A really good dog doctor there thinks that he can cure him."

When the man finally reached the port city, he took Buck to a shed in the back of a saloon on the San Francisco waterfront.

"You're only going to pay me fifty dollars? Look what happened to me," he grumbled to the saloonkeeper. He showed him his bandaged hand. "I wouldn't do it again for a thousand dollars, cold cash."

"Stop complaining," the saloonkeeper said. "You got



the money I promised you. You won't ever have to see this dog again."

"For that, I'm thankful," the man said.

Buck was exhausted, but he still tried to fight. He was thrown down by a group of men and choked repeatedly. The men were finally able to remove the brass collar and rope from around his neck. Then he was thrown into a cage-like crate.

He laid there for the rest of the night. He couldn't understand what it all meant. What did these strange men want with him? Why were they keeping him imprisoned in this narrow crate? He didn't know why, but he felt something bad was coming. In the morning, four men entered and picked up the crate. More men who meant to hurt him. They were evil-looking creatures, ragged and dirty. He tried to attack them from behind the bars. They only laughed and poked sticks at him, which he attacked. Then he realized that was what they wanted. So, he laid down sadly and allowed the crate to be lifted into a wagon. Then he and the crate were passed several times from one person to another. Finally, he ended up on a train.

For two days and nights on the train, Buck didn't eat or drink. The men teased him. They barked like dogs, meowed like cats, and flapped their arms at him. They even crowed like roosters. He knew it was all silly, but he grew angrier. He didn't mind being hungry, but he was growing more angry because of how thirsty he was.

He was glad for one thing: the rope was off his neck.



That had given the men an unfair advantage. Now that it was off, he would show them. He would not let them get another rope around his neck. His bloodshot eyes were blazing red. He was transformed into a raging devil. He changed so much at that moment that even the Judge himself would not have recognized him. The men working on the train were relieved to see him taken off the train in Seattle.

Four men carefully carried the crate from the wagon into a small, high-walled backyard. A stout man in a red sweater came out and signed for the crate. A letter from the saloonkeeper in San Francisco was also given to the man. He read it carefully. Buck hurled himself angrily against the bars. The man smiled and brought out a hatchet and a club.

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

“Sure,” the man replied. He began to calmly drive the hatchet into the crate.

The four men who had carried the crate in quickly climbed to the top of a wall. From that safe spot, they watched what happened next.

When Buck heard the crate being opened, he rushed at the splintering wood, sinking his teeth into it. Buck was anxious to get out of the crate, and the man in the red sweater was just as anxious to get Buck out of the crate.

“Now, you red-eyed devil,” he said. He had made a large enough opening for Buck to get out of the crate. He dropped the hatchet and shifted the club to his right hand.



Buck really was a red-eyed devil. He was ready to attack. He looked insane with his bloodshot eyes. He launched himself at the man. In midair, just as his jaws were about to close on the man, he received a hard smack that stopped him cold. He had never been struck by a club in his life and didn’t understand. With a snarl that was part bark and part scream, he was back on his feet. He launched himself into the air, and again the smack came. Buck



dropped to the ground. A dozen times he charged. A dozen times the club smashed him down.

After a particularly strong smack, he crawled to his feet. He was too dazed to rush at the man again. He staggered, the blood flowing from his nose, mouth, and ears. His beautiful coat was sprayed and flecked with bloody slobber. Then the man moved toward him and struck him savagely on the nose. All the pain he had endured so far was nothing compared to this. With a ferocious roar like a lion, Buck hurled himself at the man. But the man shifted the club from his right to his left hand and calmly hit Buck on the jaw. Buck spun around and crashed to the ground on his head and chest. He was knocked out completely.

Buck laid on the ground. He was dizzy and watched the man in the red sweater.

“So, I understand your name’s Buck. That’s what the letter from the saloonkeeper said. Well, Buck, my boy,” he went on in a friendly voice, “we’ve had our little fight. The best thing we can do now is to move on. You’ve learned your place. I know mine. Be a good dog, and we won’t have any problems. Be a bad dog, and I’ll beat the stuffing out of you. Understand?” He patted Buck’s injured head.

Although Buck’s neck hair stood up at the touch of the man’s hand, he didn’t fight it. When the man brought him water, he drank quickly. He later ate a big 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 that he stood no chance against a man with a club.



He had learned that lesson and never forgot it. As the days went by, other dogs came. They were in crates and at the ends of ropes. Some came without complaining, and some acted like Buck. He watched the man in the red sweater defeat every dog. Buck realized that a man with a club should be obeyed but not loved. He had seen beaten dogs wag their tails and lick the man’s hand, but Buck had no affection for the man in the red sweater. He also saw one dog who refused to give up. He was finally killed by the man in the red sweater.

Now and again men came who talked excitedly to the man in the red sweater. The strangers paid the man money and took one or more of the dogs away with them. Buck wondered where they went, for they never came back. Then one day a little man named Perrault came in. He worked for the Canadian government. His job was to deliver mail to the North. He needed strong dogs to help him do the job.

“My god!” he cried when he saw Buck. “Now that’s the kind of dog I’m looking for! How much?”

“Three hundred dollars. It’s a good deal,” replied the man in the red sweater.

Perrault grinned. He knew dogs. When he looked at Buck, he knew that he was one in a thousand, maybe one in ten thousand.

Buck noticed money passing between them. Then he and Curly, a friendly Newfoundland, were taken away onto a boat.

That was the last he saw of the man in the red sweater.



He and Curly sailed away from Seattle on a boat called the *Narwhal*. Perrault took them below decks. He turned them over to a giant man named François. Buck was introduced to a new breed of men. He quickly learned that Perrault and François were fair men. They were too smart to be fooled by dogs.

While on the *Narwhal*, Buck and Curly joined two other dogs. One of them was a big, snow-white male dog from Spitzbergen. He was friendly, but sneaky. He would smile while he planned some sneaky trick. For example, he stole from Buck's food during the first meal. As Buck sprang to punish him, the lash of François's whip flew through the



air. The dog from Spitzbergen was whipped first. Buck simply took back his bone. He decided that was fair of François. Buck's respect for him grew.

The other dog didn't mess with anyone, and no one messed with him. He was a gloomy, sad fellow. He showed everyone that he only wished to be left alone, or else. Dave was his name. He ate, slept, and showed no interest in anything. He didn't even stir when the boat was tossed around in a storm. Buck and Curly were afraid, but Dave raised his head as if annoyed. He looked at them, yawned, and went back to sleep.

The boat sped forward day and night. Slowly, Buck noticed the weather growing colder. At last, one morning, the propeller was quiet. Excitement grew in the air. He felt it, and so did the other dogs. He knew something was about to change. François placed the dogs on a leash. He brought them on deck. Buck's feet sank into something white and mushy, something 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 he licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant it was gone. This confused him. He tried it again with the same result. The onlookers laughed loudly. It was his first snow.

