

At last, at the end of the fourth day, he pulled the great moose down. For a day and a night he remained by the kill, eating and sleeping, turn and turn about. Then, rested, refreshed and strong, he turned his face toward camp and John Thornton. He broke into the long easy lope, and went on, hour after hour, never at loss for the tangled way, heading straight home through strange country with a certitude of direction that put man and his magnetic needle to shame.

"The Call of the Wild"- Jack London

The Second Calling

The dense summer morning fog hung in the air. Smelling the air, sage smoke reached Buck's nose first, followed by the metallic scent of blood. Buck's shoulders rolled in a steady rhythm as he ran, breath cutting through the cold air in sharp bursts. His pace had quickened. The woods parted before him as if they feared him. Dry branches snapped beneath the force of his stride.

Approaching the cabin, Buck saw unfamiliar shadows dancing in the smoke. Not fretting over them now, Buck followed John Thornton's scent to behind the cabin. Fallen, face turned toward the Earth, as though listening to something in the ground, was Thornton. Arrows in his back held him there, their handcrafted feathered shafts rising straight. Buck dashed over, nosing at his master's shoulder, the flesh already cool. Buck pushed harder, whimpering low in his throat, waiting for John to say, "You poor devil," while brushing his head.

A piece of Buck died in that moment. This was not some small or forgettable piece; it was the tether that had bound Buck to gentleness, the hand that had steadied the storm within him, the voice that had filled him with warmth. He would have killed a hundred men to see the rise and fall of that chest. Buck would have torn the sky open if it brought life back into John Thornton's heart.

Buck's ears twitched backward, hearing thin, rhythmic chanting. He lifted his head and moved toward the chants without hesitation. Through the smoke, Buck spotted a tall man wearing a crown of feathers. The Yeehat chief. Just as the chief turned, he caught sight of a flash of fur and fury leaping straight at him. Buck struck his throat with such sudden violence that his chanting ended in a choked gasp. The chief fell backward; his voice forever crushed into silence.

Moving like a phantom, Buck collided with a wall of bodies, the sickening crunch of breaking bones echoing beneath his weight. Buck's muscles, hard as iron, powered his sharp canines to rip through skin. Spears were thrust toward him blindly, but he was already gone, already striking from another angle. The Yeehat warriors retreated, but there was no escaping him. He had torn through them with a precision that felt almost mechanical, as though some cold engine had replaced the broken piece of his heart. He did not feel grief. He only felt a need for vengeance.

The warriors fell first, but when they were no more, others stood in their place. Their hands lifted in surrender, but it did not matter. The people before him were only enemies now. Buck's mind had narrowed to a single command: end them. He struck where life was. He followed the sound of breath and cut it short. All of Buck's senses were swallowed by the blinding heat, the desperate motion, and the overpowering smell of fear. Women ran, defenseless. Buck did not see them as blameless. In his mind, anyone present was responsible for killing his friends and destroying the one true loving relationship he had.

Buck had once been beaten into obedience by a man in a red sweater. He had learned then what power meant. Now he wielded it without restraint. Again he struck, until no one remained.

The force that had turned his heart cold drained from him slowly, like water seeping from a cracked vessel. The woods grew still. The fog lifted, drifting upward in thin gray strands. Buck stood trembling. His chest heaved. Dark stains marked his brown muzzle. He turned once in a slow circle, expecting another shape to lunge from the trees. Nothing came.

Then, faint and untouched by the violence that had passed, a sound reached him. A laugh. Soft and as sunny as a warm midday summer. He remained still. He had heard laughter like that before at Judge Miller's place long ago, where children ran across green fields.

The sound came from the bushes near the edge of camp. Buck approached slowly, each step deliberate. Buffaloberries left a sticky crimson trail beneath his paws as he got closer. Lowering his head, he parted the bushes with his nose, Buck saw a child staring back at him. The child was too young to understand the new silence that had fallen over the camp. The child's face was streaked with dirt, eyes wide but not yet afraid. He blinked at Buck, as though the great beast before him was simply a new friend of the forest.

Buck stared at the child, aware that the child's parents laid among the dead behind him.

He did not move. Something moved within him. Buck saw again the warm sun of California, the wide vineyard, and the easy life of the Southland. All that had been taken from him without warning. He felt again the tight rope around his neck, the club on his back. The world had changed for him in a single violent hour. He had not been asked. He had not understood.

Looking at the child, he saw not an enemy, but a new beginning. A life that had not yet chosen its path. The child wiggled, letting out a small sound, not of fear, but confusion.

Buck's breathing slowed. He looked back at the ruined camp, toward the bodies, toward John Thornton lain still behind the cabin. The fury that once filled Buck, now felt distant like thunder fading across mountains.

The Yeehats' attack was the same brutal force Buck had come to know before of man. They had killed John Thornton, just as men had once beaten Buck into submission. The cycle of violence called again, crushing everything in its path. And this time, Buck answered it.

He lowered himself onto his forelimbs. For the first time since he had smelled death, he felt something break that was not bone or flesh. Buck had gone further than survival. This excessive taking of Life had not been for hunger. It had not been for defense. It had been for revenge.

Buck rose. He turned away from the last body at his feet and left it untouched. The child began to cry though not in terror, but in hunger. The child's sound was small and urgent, fragile in a way nothing else had been that day. Buck hesitated.

Running away into the wilderness would be easy. That was Buck's instinct when things were not easy. When beaten, he adapted. When starved, he hunted. When grief came, he outran it. Instinct had carried him forward every time. He took a step toward the trees. The crying sharpened. Buck stopped. He did not understand the child's words, but he understood need. He understood what it meant to be helpless in a world that had turned violent without warning. Slowly, he carefully gripped the child's garments with his teeth. The child wriggled but no longer cried.

Buck moved through the trees, away from the slaughtered camp, with the child. He used his keen sense of smell to follow the Yeehats' trail back.

The forest swallowed them. At the boundary of the tribe's land, Buck laid the child down in a patch of soft grass near a trail worn by many feet. He stepped back. The child's cries rose again into the air, small but strong. Buck stood for a long moment fixated upon the child.

Buck did not wait to see who would come. Buck did not seek gratitude or forgiveness. Buck only ensured that the child's sound would be heard. Then he turned, feeling conflicted, and crept back into the woods. The wilderness stretched out before him, vast and alive. He felt its pull, deep and steady. Something inside Buck had shifted within him. The fury that had once controlled him no longer held the leash.

For the first time, freedom alone did not satisfy him. Yet he was free to answer the endless call of the wild. Not knowing what to do, Buck raised his voice in a deafening howl into the evening sky. Later that hour his call was answered.

Although Buck was much larger than the other wolves, they were not scared of him. They circled once, cautious but curious, their yellow-amber eyes reflected the moonlight rising just above the mountains. The wolves slowly parted, and through them stepped the gray elder with the long, lean timber wolf who had accepted Buck long ago. She came to him quietly, matching Buck's stride, as they moved through the forest. The elder approached last, lifting his muzzle to the air, drawing in the lingering scent that clung to Buck's coat.

Buck stood tall, expecting a challenge, expecting teeth. Neither came. The elder dipped his head. The rest of the pack followed suit. Buck was accepted.

Then the wind shifted. From far behind him, a faint sound carried thinly across miles of dark forest that did not belong to wolves. A long, wavering cry. Not the sharp bark of a fox nor the yip of a coyote. It was human. Small. Desperate. It was that poor orphaned child.

The wolves' ears twitched, but they did not understand it. The sound threaded through Buck, tugging at something deeper than his primal instinct. The wild's summon quieted once again, although this time, the summon never rose again. In lieu, another call fragile and urgent, swelled inside Buck, calling him to something he had never answered before.

Not to the hunt. Not to the moon. Not to the law of club and fang.

The call to love this child.

Buck's head turned slowly, ears pricked toward the distant cry. The pack shifted, uncertain, their bodies angled toward the deeper wild, waiting for Buck to move, to choose.

The gray elder watched Buck. The female wolf stood close at his side, her flank warm against Buck's own. They were offering him a place without challenge, without blood. A place he had once longed for when the call of the wild had first stirred in his bones.

The cry came again.

Buck took a step.

Not toward the pack.

Back the way he had come.

Buck returned to the tall soft grasses. He laid down beside the child, curling his body around it, a wall of fur and warmth against the creeping cold of the summer's night. The child's cries softened, then faded into quiet breaths. One small hand tangling itself into the thick fur of Buck's neck.