CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Call of the Wild

Jack London · *1903 · original English text*

Buck, a great dog from a California valley, is stolen into the Klondike and must learn a new law: kill or be killed, eat or be eaten. London writes of club and fang, of a master's love that is almost enough, and of a last answering howl when that master is gone. The book is an adventure and a fable of nature, loyalty, and the deeps of a creature's own being.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When a civilized creature is flung into a primordial life, what law must he learn—and what does loyalty still require of him before he answers the last call?

"Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this mandate, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed."

Narrator · Chapter VI (near the pull of the wild, after Thornton)

Buck learns the law of club and fang, and he does not remain the dog of Judge Miller's place. John Thornton's love holds him to the human world as long as Thornton lives. When Thornton is killed, Buck takes a just vengeance and then goes to the wolves. The last image is not mere ferocity: it is a creature sounding the deeps of his nature, and then singing a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack.

KEY CHARACTERS

Buck
A St. Bernard–shepherd dog, stolen into the North, who learns a new law and answers an old call

John Thornton
The one master whose love can hold Buck to the human world

Spitz
The lead dog, Buck's rival, who dies when the lead is taken from him

François and Perrault
Competent government drivers, hard and fair by the standard of the trail

Hal, Charles, and Mercedes
Foolish, cruel newcomers, who perish by their own ignorance

The man in the red sweater
Buck's first teacher of the club

A LAW, A LOVE, AND A LAST SONG

> *"Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this mandate, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed."*
>
> **Narrator** · Chapter VII

> *"He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being"*
>
> **Narrator** · Chapter III

Grades 6–8
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Into the Primitive
CHAPTERS I–II
A theft, a club, and the first lessons of the North.

- Buck is stolen from Judge Miller's place in the Santa Clara Valley and shipped north in the gold rush
- The man in the red sweater teaches him, with a club, that a man with a weapon must be obeyed
- In the Yukon he is sold as a sled dog and learns the law of club and fang from the team
- Curly's death is his first sight of what the pack will do to the fallen

02
The Dominant Primordial Beast
CHAPTERS III–IV
A rivalry for the lead, and a dog who will not be second.

- Spitz, the lead dog, and Buck come into a long quarrel
- Buck is mastered by the sheer surging of life in the traces and in the hunt
- He defeats Spitz in the end, and will not run unless he is given the lead
- François and Perrault, fair enough as drivers, must yield to the dog they have made

03
The Toil of Trace and Trail
CHAPTER V
A bad master, a good dog's pride, and a limit even Buck will not cross.

- The team passes to Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, who are ignorant, cruel, and over-laden
- Pride of trace and trail is still Buck's, even when he is sick unto death
- He is beaten nearly to death rather than rise and take the rotten ice
- John Thornton stops the beating, cuts Buck free, and the rest of the team go down with the sled

04
For the Love of a Man
CHAPTER VI
A master who is worth the last devotion of a dog's heart.

- Thornton's camp is the first place of kindness Buck has known since the valley
- Buck loves this man as he has loved no other; he wins a great wager by breaking a frozen sled
- Even so, the call from the forest begins to sound in him
- He goes and returns, still held by Thornton's love

> *"He was mastered by the sheer surging of life, the tidal wave of being"*
>
> **Narrator** · Chapter III

05
The Song of the Pack
CHAPTER VII
A murdered camp, a last fight, and a howl among the wolves.

- While Buck is away, following the call, Yeehat Indians kill Thornton and the camp
- Buck returns, kills as he has never killed, and stands over his dead master
- Nothing human now holds him; he answers the wolves, fights, and is accepted
- In the winters that follow, a great ghost dog is said to run at the head of the pack, singing a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack

> *"Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law; and this mandate, down out of the depths of Time, he obeyed."*
>
> **Narrator** · Chapter VII

Nature and Law | Loyalty | Mastery and Mercy | Pride of Work | Vengeance and Justice | The Deep Past

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–8

1. The title phrase "the call of the wild" is the book's name more than a repeated sentence in the hosted text. The close speaks of a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack.
2. Thornton's love is the book's picture of a just mastery. It does not cancel the wild law; it holds Buck until that love is taken away.
3. The killing of the Yeehats is Buck's vengeance for Thornton, not a general rule of life. London is writing a fable, not a license.
4. "Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law" is the North's mandate as Buck learns it. Judge Miller's valley had another law; the book measures both.
5. The hosted text is London's original English (Project Gutenberg #215), in seven chapters.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #215, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-call-of-the-wild/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.