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The Call of the Wild
& White Fang
JACK LONDON



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE CALL OF
THE WILD
&
WHITE FANG

◆

Jack London

With Notes and an Introduction by

LIONEL KELLY

University of Reading



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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THE CALL OF THE WILD
&
WHITE FANG

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

General Advisor

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INTRODUCTION

The Call of the Wild

Buck's first day on the Dyea beach was like a nightmare. Every hour was filled with shock and surprise. He had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilisation and flung into the heart of things primordial. No lazy, sun-kissed life was this, with nothing to do but loaf and be bored. Here was neither peace, nor rest, nor a moment's safety. All was confusion and action, and every moment life and limb were in peril. There was imperative need to be constantly alert; for these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages, all of them, who knew no law but the law of club and fang. [p. 10-11]

The opening of the second chapter of *The Call of the Wild* presents Buck's consciousness of his beginnings in a new world, in the 'heart of things primordial', in a chapter appropriately called 'The Law of Club and Fang'. It marks Buck's rite of passage from the southern comforts of his Californian home to the harsh realities of life in the Klondike

regions. Buck has already learned that the 'law of club' is enforced by men. In these regions the distinction between men and dogs is erased, for they are in a pitiless world where the principle of the survival of the fittest applies equally to the human and the animal. This perception is London's 'primordial vision', a distinctive feature of his imagination strengthened by his year long experiences in the Klondike from the summer of 1897 to that of 1898. Like thousands of other hopeful prospectors he had gone to the Klondike in search of gold. He borrowed money to finance his trip but was wholly unsuccessful, and returned home almost penniless and ill from the after effects of scurvy. Yet he found treasure of a kind, for this epic journey provided the materials for his Northland dog stories which brought him universal fame. He developed a style for voicing the consciousness of animals splendidly evident both in *The Call of the Wild* and its companion piece, *White Fang*, a style that renders the immediacy of sensory experience as it determines action in the animal world. The drama of animal life is signalled by their response to the stimulus of sight, sound, touch, hearing and smell, and this is shown in London's grasp of the concrete particulars of animal behaviour. What he also offers is a more contentious representation of the inner life of animals, where issues such as trust, fidelity and other affective emotions are brought into play, as though they have a rational and emotional life comparable to the human. To write about animals as though they are human carries the danger of anthropomorphism. By and large, London escapes this charge, and he was quick to deride the comments of those who challenged the authority of his representation of dogs. In a letter to George P. Brett, his publisher at Macmillan, about two later dog stories, he writes 'I am making fresh, vivid, new stuff, and dog psychology that will warm the hearts of dog lovers and the heads of psychologists, who usually are severe critics on dog psychology. I think you will like these two books and there may be a chance for them to make a good impression on the reading public.'¹ In the passage I have quoted above we can see the effortless propriety of his language as he tells of Buck's circumstances on Dyea Beach. For example, note the opposition between the active voice of the verbs 'jerked' and 'flung' and the passive voice of 'loaf' and 'bored'. These simple yet appropriate contrasts are carried in short vivid sentences picturing a scene of bustling confusion in which every creature must watch out for itself. The pace of the narration driven by short sentences and chapters is a

1 *Letters from Jack London*, ed. King Hendricks and Irving Shepard, 1966, pps. 449-50.

stylistic feature of both stories and contributes significantly to their appeal. London's Klondike year also nurtured his visual imagination in the descriptive power he brings to the settings of his stories. The effect is to make unfamiliar landscapes and the people and creatures who inhabit them vivid to his readers.

As the opening chapter introduces Buck to the infamy of corrupt and brutal men, 'The Law of Club and Fang' rapidly illustrates the comparable savagery of the dog world Buck has now entered with the scene of the killing of the 'good natured' Newfoundland, Curly, ripped to death by a pack of huskies at their first day's camp on Dyea beach. This scene of Curly's death 'often came back to Buck to trouble him in his sleep. So that was the way. No fair play. Once down, that was the end of you. Well, he would see to it that he never went down.' (p. 11) There is a psychological authenticity about this incident and its impact on Buck, a correspondence between the severity of the experience and the effect it has on teaching him one of the lessons of survival. The early chapters involve Buck in various survival techniques he must absorb in his new situation. Banished from the tent of his masters at night, he learns to follow the example of the huskies and bury himself in a snow cocoon to take his rest. He learns to guard his own portion of food while other dogs may be robbed of theirs and others left alone. In the team he learns each dog's individual nature: the morose Dave, the good natured Billie, the introspective Joe, of Sol-leks (the Angry One) who must not be approached on his blind side, Pike the thief, and Dub the blunderer. His primary antagonist is the vengeful Spitzer whom he eventually overcomes in the dramatic pursuit of the snowshoe rabbit. Buck rapidly adapts to his role in the sled team though his pride is wounded by his position in it at the start of their journey north, and he determines to displace Spitzer. Throughout these early chapters Buck is in the care of Perrault and François, and then the Scotch half-breed who takes over the team at Skaguay as they join the 'mail train' of men and dogs en route back to Dawson. Over these arduous journeys Buck develops a sense of purpose and satisfaction in his work as his learning curve is completed. However, central to the powerful spell of this story is the intrusion on Buck's consciousness of another call, a mystery he cannot fathom but is compelled to answer, first intimated at the end of this second chapter, a call that grows in specificity and significance as the story develops:

And when, on the still cold nights, he pointed his nose at a star and howled long and wolflike, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling down through the centuries and

through him. And his cadences were their cadences, the cadences which voiced their woe and what to them was the meaning of the stillness, and the cold, and dark. [p. 17]

This is, of course, 'the call of the wild', a racial memory of primeval origins to which Buck instinctively responds. To George P. Brett, London wrote of the subject of his story as the 'devolution or decivilization of a dog', in a letter worth citing here for what it demonstrates of the relationship between *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*:

I have the idea for the next book I shall write – along the first part of next year. Not a sequel to *Call of the Wild*. But a companion to [it]. I'm going to reverse the process. Instead of the devolution or decivilization of a dog, I'm going to give the evolution, the civilization of a dog – development of domesticity, faithfulness, love, morality, and all the amenities and virtues. And it will be a proper companion-book – in the same style, grasp, concrete way. Have already mapped part of it out. A complete antithesis to the *Call of the Wild*.²

Devolution is an antonym of 'evolution', a word significant in London's vocabulary because of his interest in Charles Darwin's theory in *The Origin of Species* (1859). I am as much interested in what London says about the texture of the story he has as yet only mapped out when he writes of it as being 'in the same style, grasp, concrete way' for these terms are just as important as London's statement of his programme, bearing as they do on issues of language and style, of ways of telling his stories.

The Call of the Wild has a generic likeness to other famous animal stories such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894–5). Intentionally or not, it also partakes of a particular expression in American writing whose subject is a retreat from the confines of the civic life so as to realise the full potential of personal consciousness, a version of individualism to be found in such contrasting works as Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In formal terms *The Call of the Wild* belongs to the genre of the fable, familiar to us from the ancient Greek writer Aesop whose stories use animal characters to illustrate moral precepts, so that for example foxes are cunning, hawks predatory, and sheep silly. In this sense the fable tells us what we already know, and affirms ancient

² *ibid.*, p. 166

wisdom, and the fable works by the exhibition of these characteristics in animals as a lesson in human behaviour. A good example of a more recent fable is George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), in which the concept that 'all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others' is both a description and indictment of twentieth century totalitarian politics. Allied to the fable is the parable, a form in which human agents are used to illustrate a lesson or moral, as in Christ's parables of 'The Good Samaritan' and 'The Prodigal Son'. In an essay on the formal properties of Jack London's work, Donald Pizer argues that London was drawn to a blending of the fable with the parable, something he had learned from Kipling whose *The Jungle Book* exemplifies the 'worldliness of the beast fable and the more programmatic moralism of the parable . . . in clear allegories containing both animal and human characters.'³ Kipling was an important exemplar for London who wrote to a friend in 1900 that 'There is no end of Kipling in my work . . . I have even quoted him. I would never possibly have written anywhere near the way I did had Kipling never been'.⁴ London admired Kipling's representation of 'the romance of the nineteenth century man' in 'far journeying and adventuring' but also defines Kipling as the writer who 'has sung the hymn of the dominant bourgeoisie, the war march of the white man round the world, the triumphant paean of commercialism and imperialism. For that will he be remembered'.⁵

The value of the parable as an element in the formal properties of *The Call of the Wild* is that it provides a way of reading London's representation of the human figures in the story who do not have the psychological complexity of most fictional characters. In this story and *White Fang*, London's characters tend to fall very simply into the categories of the good or the bad, an allegorical mode of representation inherent to the parable. This is most evident in chapter five in the opposition between John Thornton and Hal, Charles, and Mercedes. Hal and Charles are embodiments of folly, whose ignorance of the real dangers of their enterprise leads to their deaths, whilst Mercedes is little more than a risible protrait of feminine selfishness and hysteria. In contrast Thornton exemplifies the virtues of patience and love. As a name 'John Thornton' is significant, implying someone of Anglo-Saxon origins, whose moral superiority is an expression of London's

3 Donald Pizer, 'Jack London: The Problem of Form', in *Studies in The Literary Imagination*, 16 (Fall, 1983), p. 108

4 Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London*, 1978, p. 73

5 *No Mentor But Myself: Jack London on Writing and Writers*, Dale L. Walker and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, 2000, p. 72

racist belief in the superiority of the white man. In his letters London wrote of his beliefs that 'An Evolutionist, believing in Natural Selection, half believing in Malthus' "Law of Population", and a myriad of other factors thrown in I cannot but hail as unavoidable the Black and the Brown going down before the White' and later that ' . . . the race with the highest altruism will endure – the highest altruism considered from the standpoint of merciless natural law, which never concedés nor alters. The lesser breeds cannot endure . . . '6 Few characters beside John Thornton are given their full names. His partners are merely known as Hans and Pete. Even when full names are given they indicate moral qualities as with 'Black' Burton, a man 'evil tempered and malicious', or the gold rich prospectors Matthewson and Jim O'Brien familiarly known as the Bonanza King and the Mastodon King. And whilst the language these characters speak sounds appropriate to their racial identity, as in the simple patois of Perrault and François, and O'Brien's Irish syntax, discourse is generally pared down to the communication of essentials. If London's ear for idiomatic speech carries conviction, there are occasions when his narrative style seems archaic or forced as when he writes of Thornton that 'He sat down very slowly and painstakingly what of his great stiffness'. (p. 43) Indeed, this 'what of' construction appears several times in *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, and may be a rhetorical residue of London's earlier attempts to write poetry. It is at odds with his customary lucid style in the description of scenes and incidents, as for example in this account of Dave's suffering:

Also, they held it a mercy, since Dave was to die anyway, that he should die in the traces, heart-easy, and content. So he was harnessed in again, and proudly he pulled as of old, though more than once he cried out involuntarily from the bite of his inward hurt. Several times he fell down and was dragged in the traces, and once the sled ran upon him so that he limped thereafter in one of his hind legs. [p. 33]

Here the dog's pain and his effort to continue in the traces is simply told, though the compound 'heart-easy' and 'inward hurt' seem called out from some knowledge of ancient ways of telling of heroic struggle in the language of epic. It is the fusion of these styles, the prosaic and the poetic, the concrete grasp and representation of particulars along with the invocation of the mysterious and ineffable that marks the narrative idiom of these stories.

6 *Letters*, op.cit., p. 27, and p. 44.

Long after the success of *The Call of the Wild* London said that he wrote it without any sense of its allegorical significance. 'I was unconscious of it at the time. I did not mean to do it'.⁷ This is to say that Buck's triumph is an allegory of the truth that in a brutal world the strong and the cunning dominate, a conviction borne out for London through his reading in social history, the poverty of his early years, and his desperate struggle for economic survival, experiences which nurtured his socialist political sympathies. Yet he was a self-conscious writer, alert to the formal demands of fiction as his letters show. He learned about writing from 'studying the writers who succeeded in order to find out how they succeeded', and he was always willing to pass on advice to aspiring writers. His correspondence with Cloudesley Johns, a fellow socialist and novice writer illustrates his understanding of the crucial difference between telling and showing: 'Don't you tell the reader the philosophy of the road . . . Don't. Don't. Don't. But have your characters tell it by their deeds, actions, talk, etc. Then, and not until then, are you writing fiction and not a sociological paper upon a certain sub-stratum of society'.⁸ He writes to Johns about 'atmosphere', the rendering of context and detail that gives a story the sense of a lived reality: 'Atmosphere stands always for the elimination of the artist, that is to say, the atmosphere is the artist; and when there is no atmosphere and the artist is yet there, it simply means that the machinery is creaking and that the reader hears it'.⁹ Through long practice he developed a technical mastery of the short story form, and a modernist sense of creative impersonality. As he learned from the example of others such as Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson in the short story, his debt to American writing is also apparent in passages in *The Call of the Wild* informed by his reading of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a novel he is known to have read repeatedly. There is a famous chapter in *Moby Dick* called 'The Whiteness of the Whale', where the narrator Ishmael discourses on the colour white and arrives at these considerations:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the

7 Joan London, *Jack London and his Times*, 1939, p. 252

8 *Letters*, op. cit., p. 108

9 *Letters*, op. cit., p. 108

concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?¹⁰

Such a passage seems in London's mind when he tells of the pursuit of the snowshoe rabbit and Buck's final encounter with Spitzer. In the hectic chase the rabbit and Spitzer are both seen as a 'frost wraith', and the prey's end comes as 'the white teeth broke its back' and 'it shrieked as loudly as a stricken man . . . the cry of Life plunging down from Life's apex in the grip of Death' (p. 26). The moment provokes Buck's fight to the death with Spitzer in which Buck has an intuitive sense of familiarity with the scene before him:

He seemed to remember it all, – the white woods, and earth, and moonlight, and the thrill of battle. Over the whiteness and silence brooded a ghostly calm. There was not the faintest whisper of air – nothing moved, not a leaf quivered, the visible breaths of the dogs rising slowly and lingering on the frosty air. They had made short work of the snowshoe rabbit, these dogs that were ill-tamed wolves; and they were now drawn up in an expectant circle. They, too, were silent, their eyes only gleaming and their breaths drifting slowly upward. To Buck it was nothing new or strange, this scene of old time. It was as though it had always been, the wonted way of things. [p. 26]

Critics have read this scene of Buck's triumph over Spitzer as a rite of sacrifice and succession found in anthropological accounts of tribal peoples. A particular inflection of this view sees a link between these social rituals and Freud's concept of the Oedipal conflict where the son kills the father and takes over leadership of the tribe. Such ways of reading are clearly tenable, enlarging the interpretive potential of the story. At the same time if the conjunction of whiteness with death is an appropriate realism in this snow-bound scene, written in London's manner of 'impassioned realism', the influence of Melville is equally marked. Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) is also an influence, and in 1903 London published an article on 'The Terrible and Tragic in Fiction' on Poe's horror stories where he suggested that Poe appeals to the stirrings of the primeval savage in us, a notion which fits well with London concerns in his dog stories.

Within the framework of the fable structure there are other struc-

¹⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, introduction and commentary by Harold Beaver, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 295–6

tural and thematic devices used by London. The simplest of these is in the way Buck's condition in the story moves between subordination and dominance. The most obvious example of this is in his position in the sled team which changes from follower to leader, but it is also reflected in Buck's changing relationship with men which follows a similar pattern. In his time under Perrault and François' control the intimations of an hereditary past are quickened into life and provoke that remarkable vision of a primitive man, the hairy crouching ancestor of the human whose animal-like agility and alertness suggests 'one who lived in perpetual fear of things seen and unseen'. (p. 31) Buck responds instinctively to the agency of the hairy man's fear, the imagined sight and sounds of great beasts of prey as they crash through the undergrowth, so that his hair rises along his back and he 'whimpered low and suppressedly, or growled softly'. This is a powerful vision of human and animal origins, one that recurs to Buck, and when he has little work to do he wanders with the hairy man 'in that other world which he remembered'. (p. 57) In the posture of the man before his fire Buck apprehends that the 'salient thing of this other world seemed fear'. Fear is more clearly associated here with the primitive human than with Buck. There is a fine synthesis in these passages of dream and reality. When he literally answers the mysterious call and races through the forest aisles and the open spaces, Buck's response is that of joy in the natural wilderness: 'He loved to run down dry watercourses, and to creep and spy upon the bird life in the woods. For a day at a time he would lie in the underbrush where he could watch the partridges drumming and strutting up and down'. (p. 58) When he registers something like anxiety, his mane instantly bristles as he is woken from sleep by the long-drawn howl of the timber wolf. I dwell on these moments because they are central to the subject of Buck's 'decivilization' and the representation of deep racial memories in the human directly associated here with fear of the unknown and the wild. Between Buck and Thornton, the issue of subordination and dominance becomes transformed into one of mutual dependency, exemplified in saving each other's life, and in Buck's victory in the weighted sled contest which serves to fund Thornton's further explorations. If Thornton is the 'ideal master', the intensity of their relationship is signalled in tactile expressions of love in Thornton's way of 'taking Buck's head roughly between his hands, and resting his own head upon Buck's, of shaking him back and forth, the while calling him ill names that to Buck were love names' (p. 46), whilst Buck's reciprocal gesture is 'a trick of love expression that was akin to hurt' with his 'feigned bite' of the hand Thornton understands as a caress.

When Thornton heads out with his companions in search of a fabled lost mine in the East, a journey on an unknown trail, what is insisted upon is his fearlessness. Quite simply, we are told 'He was unafraid of the wild'. This will seem to most readers true to Thornton's character as we have seen it in action, but it may also be read as further affirmation of London's view of the superiority of the white man whose long evolution from the hairy man is perfected in Thornton. Along with the sense of mutuality between Thornton and Buck, they complement each other in their ways of dealing with life in the wild:

With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased. Being in no haste, Indian fashion, he hunted his dinner in the course of the day's travel; and if he failed to find it, like the Indian, he kept on travelling, secure in the knowledge that sooner or later he would come to it. So, on this great journey into the East, straight meat was the bill of fare, ammunition and tools principally made up the load on the sled, and the time-card was drawn upon the limitless future'. [p. 56]

There is an irony here in that Thornton's limitless future will soon be curtailed precisely by the Indian whose hunting practice he follows. After months in the uncharted wilderness with Thornton, Hans, and Pete, Buck forays from their camp for days at a time 'killing his meat as he travelled and travelling with the long, easy lope that seems never to tire' (p. 60). The equation here between Buck and Thornton is explicit in the manner of their encounter with the wilderness, yet within Buck there is that brute instinct, what London calls a 'blood-longing' that grows stronger in him and he becomes 'a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment where only the strong survived'. (p. 60) This principle of the survival of the fittest is exemplified in the long pursuit and kill of the bull moose. Buck also demonstrates a playful charity in that he kills 'not from wantonness' but because 'he preferred to eat what he killed himself. So a lurking humour ran through his deeds, and it was his delight to steal upon the squirrels, and, when he all but had them, to let them go, chattering in mortal fear to the tree-tops' (p. 61). As he grows in knowledge of the wilderness he returns to Thornton 'through strange country with a certitude of direction that put man and his magnetic needle to shame' (p. 63). The culminating expression of Buck's dominance is his defeat of the Yeehats when he comes upon them and the scene of Thornton's death. If his love for Thornton drives his orgy of revenge what he

learns from it eases the pain of the death of his master, a pride in himself greater than any yet experienced because 'He had killed man, the noblest game of all, and he had killed in the face of the law of club and fang . . . It was harder to kill a husky dog than them' (p. 65). Now in his sovereign power as a creature of the wild he becomes the unchallenged leader of the timber wolves, breeding with their dams and running at the head of the pack, transformed in the tale of the Yeehats into the 'Ghost Dog', of whom they are afraid, and whose women speak of him as the Evil Spirit. The sense of an elemental natural force now embodied in Buck relates back to the crouching figure of the hairy man, fearful as it were of Buck's coming. London ends his story not with this sense of Buck as a terrifying monster of primordial savagery, but through a return to the brilliantly expressive phrase of the title as Buck and his wolves sing 'a song of the younger world', answering the call of the wild.

White Fang

Because this later story is a reversal of the trajectory of Buck's journey from the domestic to the wild, then it is natural that *White Fang's* dawning consciousness of life in the wild should be the primary focus of much of the opening movement of the story. And because that world is unfamiliar to us, it is fitting that London treats us to an expansive account of *White Fang's* birth and growth into a mature wolf. In its way this is an extraordinary feat of imagination, and one that works through the accumulation of detail in its telling. At the same time London was quick to defend the realism and authority of his presentation though he admitted on one occasion that in *White Fang* 'I confess that my field observations, so far as the text of my own book is concerned, are rotten.'¹¹ But he challenges a contemporary critic's charge of faking details in his Northland stories and writes that "You criticize me for speaking of a birch-bark sled . . . In *White Fang* I show the method of driving the dogs, and describe the sleds that the dogs haul, so that no man acquainted with the locality would dream for an instant that I meant anything else than a birch-bark toboggan sled.' And in response to the same critic's objection to his use of the dog-driver's command of 'mush on', he writes 'My Northland stories are practically all confined to the Klondike and to Alaska, and there the only phrase used as a command for the dogs to get up, to go on, to

11 *Letters*, op. cit., p. 275

move, is "mush on." . . . There is no man who has been in Klondike or Alaska but who will affirm this statement of mine.¹² London kept a journal on his journey back from the Klondike full of observations about the landscapes he journeyed through, with detailed accounts of bird and animal life, of trees, rivers and their flora and fauna. He had a painter's eye for these things and this is reflected in the fusion of observed detail and imaginative invention in both stories.

White Fang opens with London's call upon the long tradition of our human fear of the wolf as a predator on our species through the drama of Bill and Henry's pursuit by a starving wolf pack. A sense of the macabre is inherent in their journey as they make their way to Fort M'Gurry with the body of Lord Alfred in a coffin on their sled, their appearance like that of 'ghostly masques, undertakers in a spectral world at the funeral of some ghost' (p. 72). The behaviour of the she-wolf as a sexual decoy, tempting Bill and Henry's dogs into the forest where they become prey to the wolf pack is evidence of her instinctive skills in isolating her prey from its companions. In these openings scenes the wolves exemplify those qualities commonly attributed to them. Our dictionaries define them as 'noted for their ferocity and rapaciousness'. There is however a counter-image of the she-wolf in ancient writing, the creature who suckled the twins Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of ancient Rome. What we know of wolves is more in keeping with this famous image of nurturing, for in their natural habitat they live in social communities with a strict hierarchical order, and they hunt for their common good. Something of the familial bonding natural to them is appropriately presented in the chapters detailing the relationship of Kiche and One-Eye and the birth of White Fang. Before we come to that London sets a scene of desperation affecting men and animals equally, a passage remarkable for its expression of a kind of theological scorn for the whole enterprise of survival:

A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness – a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild – the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild. [p. 71]

12 *Letters*, op.cit., p. 283

This notion of a cosmic hysterical laughter is so powerful because it is yoked to a Calvinistic view of the human as 'specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little wisdom amidst the play and interplay of the great blind elements and forces' (p. 72). At such moments London anticipates a modernist way of writing about the human predicament, one we have become more accustomed to in twentieth century writing in the work of Samuel Beckett and others. From this bravura opening the tone of the first chapter modulates as we move to Bill and Henry's concern with the inadequacy of their provisions and their shortage of ammunition to hunt and defend themselves. In this context London's chapter titles should be noted: whilst they are frequently indicative such as 'The She Wolf' and 'The Hunger Cry', in the first chapter called 'The Trail of the Meat', there is an implicit irony as the men become the 'meat', the prey pursued by the wolves. The colouring of Kiche plays its part here in the depiction of nature as 'red in tooth and claw', for to her customary grey there is about her 'hints and glints of a vague redness of colour not classifiable in terms of ordinary experience'. When Henry is rescued he tells of a 'Red she-wolf', and the eyes of the pack gleam like coals around their prey, colours in sharp contrast to the 'sun's futile effort to appear'. If all this serves to demonize the wolves the opening chapter of Part II gives a naturalistic account of One-Eye's emergence as the dominant male who defeats the other two suitors for Kiche's sexual favours, and becomes what is conventionally known as the Alpha male. Throughout this fight for supremacy among the three males 'the she-wolf sat on her haunches and smiled'. London's fond of attribution of this human expression to animals provoked Theodore Roosevelt's famous criticism of him. Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, who had a ranch in Dakota, knew of life in the wild and wrote of his big game hunts in Africa, called London a 'nature faker' and dismissed his 'make-believe' realism. Roosevelt was particularly scornful of the scene in which Kiche fights with a lynx, holding that 'Nobody who really knew anything about either a lynx or a wolf would write such nonsense'.¹³ There are answers to this criticism. Earle Labor, for example, argues that both these stories are beast fables using the myth of the hero whose valour and strength ensures survival, a myth that appeals to our collective unconscious,¹⁴ whilst Donald Pizer believes that both stories endorse the ancient wisdom that only the strong

13 Theodore Roosevelt, 'Men Who Misinterpret Nature', in *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, New York, 1926, Vol. 5, pp. 368-9

14 Earle Labor, *Jack London*, New York, 1973, pp. 69-81