

SETTING: *Various locations in the brutal Alaskan frontier of the late 1890's, as well as a prosperous farm in the Santa Clara Valley at the same time period. This is not a "realistic" piece; place and time will be represented by a shift in lights and sound and movement. A piece of white fabric might represent snow and ice, a long length of gold fabric might represent a river running rich with gold nuggets, red fabric might represent blood. Set pieces, if any, are minimal.*

AT RISE: *A wolf howl, then the sound of a running river. KEISH, a gold prospector, enters carrying a miner's pan. He looks around, selects a good spot on the river's bank, kneels down and begins panning for gold. After a moment, CARMACK, another prospector, enters, looking for him.*

CARMACK

Keish! Where are you...?

(KEISH ignores him and keeps panning. CARMACK finally sees him.)

Come on, Keish – it's getting dark. We got to head back to camp...

(CARMACK turns to leave. KEISH lifts his pan, shakes it and looks inside. He stares.)

KEISH

Gold.

(CARMACK turns back.)

CARMACK

What...?

(CARMACK hurries over and peers into the pan.)

Is it real?

(CARMACK pulls out the nugget and bites down on it. He removes it from his mouth and holds it up.)

CARMACK (cont.)

Gold.

KEISH

(Pointing)

Look at it all, shimmering just beneath the water...

CARMACK

Gold! There's gold in the Klondike River!

KEISH/CARMACK

There's gold in the Klondike! There's gold in the Klondike!

(KEISH and CARMACK exit one way, yelling the news as a NEWSBOY enters opposite, peddling papers with the headline "Gold Found in the Klondike.")

NEWSBOY

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Gold found in the Klondike River! Men pouring into Alaska by the thousands! Dogs needed to pull sleds!

(MANUEL enters.)

Gold rush in Alaska! Extra! Extra! Gold rush in Alaska!

MANUEL

Boy.

(NEWSBOY turns. MANUEL gives him some coins in exchange for the paper and begins to read it. NEWSBOY pulls out another paper and hawks it.)

Extra! Extra! Read all about it!

(NEWSBOY exits. HUGO enters behind MANUEL.)

HUGO

Manuel.

(MANUEL turns and sees him.)

Where's my money?

MANUEL

Please. A little more time...

(HUGO starts slowly advancing on him.)

My daughter is sick. The doctor, he is expensive...

(HUGO grabs him by the shirtfront.)

I will get the money – I promise! Look!

(In desperation, he thrusts the newspaper at HUGO.)

They have found gold in Alaska! And the newspaper, it says...

HUGO

Gold in Alaska won't help you here in California, amigo.

(He pulls MANUEL in close again.)

You work for Judge Miller, yes? The richest man in the valley...

(JUDGE MILLER enters downstage, dressed for hunting, carrying a shotgun. He checks his gun, scans the sky for birds, etc.)

Ask him for the money.

MANUEL

I can not...

HUGO

You better. Because if I don't have my money by midnight...

(He shoves MANUEL away, pulls out a knife and draws it across his throat in a threatening gesture.)

Comprende?

(MANUEL nods. HUGO puts away the knife and exits. MANUEL turns and watches MILLER.)

MILLER

(Calling off)

Buck! Where's my big dog? Come up, boy! Come up!

(BUCK enters, obviously looking for something. It should be apparent from the first that BUCK is a dog – a dog living in civilization, a dog that has a rich master and a good life. His movements should be stylized, not realistic; there is no need for the actor to crawl about on his hands and knees. When BUCK or any of the animals speak, they are not addressing anyone in particular. Instead they are giving voice to their Instinct. MILLER hugs BUCK and pats his head.)

That's my boy! Who's the best dog, eh, Buck? Who's the best dog? Find the bird, Buck. Find him, boy.

BUCK

The bird is here. The bird is hiding.

(BUCK begins to pace back and forth, searching.)

MILLER

That's it, Buck. Find him, now...

BUCK

The scent is strong. The bird is close.

MILLER

That's a boy...

(BUCK stops suddenly. He crouches and points.)

BUCK

Bird.

MILLER

Hold up, Buck.

(BUCK remains frozen in position.)

BUCK

Bird.

(MILLER brings the gun up and takes aim.)

MILLER

Get him.

(BUCK leaps forward.)

BUCK

Birdbirdbirdbirdbirdbirdbird!

(We hear a bird squawk then take flight. MILLER follows it in flight with his gun then pulls the trigger. Both BUCK and MILLER watch the bird fall to the ground.)

MILLER

Fetch.

(BUCK runs off. MANUEL steps forward.)

MANUEL

Judge Miller?

(MILLER turns around, surprised.)

MILLER

What are you doing here, Manuel? You are supposed to be tending the grapes.

MANUEL

Si, I know...

MILLER

You leave a grape untended and it won't be fit for wine or raisin.

(BUCK enters with the dead bird.)

BUCK

Buck has found the dead bird.

MILLER

Good boy!

(MILLER takes the bird from BUCK. BUCK crouches.)

Tell me, Manuel – have you ever seen a finer dog than my Buck?

MANUEL

No, senor.

MILLER

He's the finest dog in the state, I'd wager. And the strongest, too – aren't you, fella?

(MANUEL steals a glance at the newspaper, getting an idea.)

BUCK

The bird is dead. The sun is warm. The air is cool.

(MILLER glances at his watch.)

MILLER

Good heavens. I have a meeting in town in half an hour. Come up now, Buck...

MANUEL

I will take him for you, senor. I pass the barn on my way to the vineyards. I will make sure he is fed and watered...

MILLER

Very well. Take good care of him, Manuel. He's earned it.

(MILLER exits. BUCK starts to follow.)

MANUEL

Hold up, Buck.

(BUCK stops but continues to look after MILLER.)

BUCK

The Man with the Gun is leaving.

MANUEL

Whoa, now.

(BUCK turns to face MANUEL, who reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a rope. The scene slowly shifts to night.)

BUCK

The scent of wood smoke. The Man Who Tends the Grapes has a rope...

MANUEL

We're going for a walk now, me and you.

(MANUEL puts the rope through Buck's collar.)

BUCK

The sun is gone...

MANUEL

They found gold in Alaska, Buck – and the newspapers, they say dogs are needed to pull the sleds. A big strong dog like you will bring a lot of money. Money I need.

BUCK

The rope is unfamiliar...

MANUEL

I'm sorry, Buck – but it's you or me, amigo. Come up, now.

(MANUEL leads BUCK across the stage. STRANGER enters.)

BUCK

A strange place. A strange sound. Buck does not like the rope...

STRANGER

You here to sell a dog?

MANUEL

Si. His name is Buck.

(STRANGER says nothing as he circles BUCK slowly, inspecting him. He touches Buck's arm. BUCK pulls away.)

BUCK

A strange man. Buck does not like the rope...

STRANGER

How am I s'posed to transport this mutt without a crate?

STRANGER

Here.

(He hands MANUEL money. MANUEL hands him the rope. BUCK pulls back.)

BUCK

Buck does not like the rope!

MANUEL

Adios.

(MANUEL *runs off*. STRANGER *tugs on the rope*.)

STRANGER

Come, Buck.

(BUCK *pulls away*.)

BUCK

Buck does not like the rope! Buck does not like the rope!

STRANGER

I said come!

(STRANGER *hits* BUCK *with the loose end of the rope*.)

BUCK

Buck is whipped! Fury! Rage! Attack!

(BUCK *lunges for the* STRANGER. STRANGER *deftly dodges and wraps the rope around Buck's neck*. BUCK *struggles for air*.)

Attack...! Attack...! Attack...!

(BUCK *collapses to the ground*. SEA CAPTAIN *enters*.)

SEA CAPTAIN

All aboard! All aboard!

STRANGER

Hello there! Is this the boat to Alaska?

SEA CAPTAIN

That it is. I'm the Captain.

STRANGER

Help me load this dog inside.

SEA CAPTAIN

Is he dead?

STRANGER

Nah. He ain't dead.

(*He helps a dazed* BUCK *up to his feet*.)

You got a crate...? It's along way to Alaska.

(SEA CAPTAIN *indicates a place offstage.*)

SEA CAPTAIN

Put him in here, that'll keep him.

(STRANGER *pushes* BUCK *off*. *The scene shifts to the port of Dyea, Alaska.* SEA CAPTAIN *calls off.*)

Port of Alaska! All hands on deck. Port of Alaska!

RED SWEATER *enters carrying a club.*)

RED SWEATER

Oy! You the captain of the *Narwhal*?

SEA CAPTAIN

I am.

RED SWEATER

I'm waiting on a shipment.

SEA CAPTAIN

What kind of shipment?

RED SWEATER

A dog.

(SEA CAPTAIN *takes a step back.*)

You know what I'm talking about?

SEA CAPTAIN

I know what you're talking about. There it is...

(*He points off to where BUCK is being held.*)

Heaven help you.

(SEA CAPTAIN *exits.* RED SWEATER *looks off.*)

RED SWEATER

Is that the dog?

STRANGER

No dog, that... He's the devil! For three days now this brute has refused to eat or drink. He's worked himself into a ferocious temper. If it wasn't for that crate we'd all be dead.

(RED SWEATER takes a step back, tapping the cub into the palm of his hand.)

RED SWEATER

Open it.

STRANGER

Are you mad?! I just told you...

RED SWEATER

I said open it.

(STRANGER crosses cautiously to where BUCK is being held off. We hear a sound of a door being opened and BUCK rushes onstage, heading straight for RED SWEATER. STRANGER follows him on and watches.)

BUCK

ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK!

(RED SWEATER sidesteps him neatly and clubs him on the head. BUCK falls to the ground. He shakes his head, dazed.)

Buck is hit. Buck is hit...

(BUCK slowly gets back on his feet. RED SWEATER slaps the cub into the palm of his hand)

The Man in the Red Sweater has a club...

RED SWEATER

Come on, you red-eyed devil. Show me what you're made of...

(BUCK lunges again.)

BUCK

ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK!

(Again, RED SWEATER sidesteps and clubs him over the head, dropping him to the ground. BUCK shakes his head.)