

To Build a Fire

—Jack London

Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hair-line was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hair-line trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a *chechaquo*, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying

against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

PROSE - TO BUILD A FIRE - By Jack London

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Griffith Chaney aka Jack London was a prolific American Novelist, Journalist and social activist. He was the pioneer in the world of commercial magazine fiction. He was also a part of the radical literary group "The Crowd" in San Francisco and supported socialism and the rights of the workers. He remains one of the most translated American authors during the 20th century.

He entered the University of California in 1895. However, he quit it after a year to join the Klondike Gold Rush. His works The Call of the Wild and White Fang were set in this area. His first book, The Son of the Wolf: Tales of the Far North (1900) was a collection of short stories that he had published previously in magazines. The book gave him immense success. During his whole life, he wrote and published some 50 books of fiction and non-fiction. Among his well-known novels are The Call of the White, White Fang and Burning Daylight. All his novels portray the essential human struggle for survival, braving the hardships of nature.

ABOUT THE STORY - A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Jack London's short story To Build a Fire has two versions - the earlier one was published in 1902 in The Youth's Companion and 1908 version was published in Century Magazine. The 1902 version differs from the 1908 version though both the stories depict a similar plot.

The story is about a solitary hiker who remains unnamed throughout the story. He ventures out with his dog from the main Yukon trail and is destined for a camp in Henderson

crack, where the boys are waiting. Yukon trail is a 33-mile long passage through the Coast Mountains from Bennett, British Columbia in the North to Dyea, Alaska in the South. It is a rugged trail in the wilderness along the border during between Alaska and the mountains of Western Canada.

The story depicts a man's futile efforts to overcome the hostile nature. It portrays the conflict between man and nature. Though the man in the story is adventurous and does not accept defeat easily, he succumbs to his unfortunate fate. He is confident and determined to reach his destination despite the harsh weather and rugged landscape.

The setting of the story is uninhabited Yukon. The day is extremely 'cold and grey'. The setting establishes the role of nature in the story. Nature is cold and stark and indifferent to the needs of an individual. Ignoring the power of nature can bring devastating consequences but he fails to understand this. At dawn, the man starts his journey from the main of Yukon trail. At the end of the day, the man will reach the camp near Henderson Creek where he wishes to be reunited with the 'boys', his travelling companions. There is no sun in the clear sky. There prevails a certain 'subtle gloom' that has made the day dark. This place has not seen daylight for several days. The 'unbroken' white land is broken by the main trail which leads southwards five hundred miles to the ~~Chilcoat~~ Chilcoat Pass, Dyea.

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and salt water and one thousand five hundred miles to north, all the way to St. Michael on the Bering Sea. The rugged landscape does not affect the man. The 'mysterious, far-reaching hair-line trail', 'the absence of sun from the sky' fail to make an impression on him. He is a newcomer in this area and lacks ^{power} of imagination to understand a situation. He is competent and resourceful but does not comprehend the significances behind things. He is 'quick and alert' but 'without imagination'. The temperature is not merely colder than fifty below zero. His lack of knowledge and limited imagination make him underestimate the power of nature. The cold weather discomforts him but does not frighten him. He fails to imagine his own weakness and that ^{he} can never win against the hostilities of nature. The harsh weather does not cause him to reflect on the risks and his own impending death. He is determined to reach his destination and nothing can thwart his mission.

Hence the man thinks little and continues to walk thinking of the camp. Henderson snook when the boys are waiting for him. He spits and hears 'sharp, explosive crackle' that startles him. He discovers the liquid from his mouth freezes in the air before it can fall on snow. He assumes that the temperature is colder than below fifty though he has no exact idea about it. He plans to reach the camp by six o'clock, a bit after dark. He anticipates getting 'fire' to warm himself and 'hot supper' to feed his hungry ~~hot~~ stomach once he reaches the camp. The man's freezing spit reinforces the danger lurking in the trail but he ignores it. He overlooks the risks ~~of~~ involved in such a journey and thinks little about the grave consequences of the foolish risks undertaken by him. He carries his lunch, biscuits, wrapped up in handkerchief, lying against naked skin to prevent that from freezing.