

To Build a Fire

by Jack London, 1908

Day has dawned cold and gray when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail. He climbed the high earth-bank where a little-traveled trail led east through the pine forest. It was a high bank, and he paused to breathe at the top. He excused the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock in the morning. There was no sun or promise of sun, although there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day. However, there seemed to be an indescribable darkness over the face of things. That was because the sun was absent from the sky. This fact did not worry the man. He was not alarmed by the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun.

The man looked 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. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white. The one thing that relieved the whiteness was a thin dark line that curved from the pine-covered island to the south. It curved into the north, where it disappeared behind another pine-covered island. This dark line was the trail—the main trail. It led south 500 miles to the Chilcoot Pass, and salt water. It led north 75 miles to Dawson, and still farther 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 distant trail, no sun in the sky, the great cold, and the strangeness of it all—had no effect on the man. It was not because he was long familiar with it. He was a newcomer in the land, and this was his first winter.

The trouble with him was that he was not able to imagine. He was quick and ready in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in their meanings. Fifty degrees below zero meant 80 degrees of frost. Such facts told him that it was cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to consider his weaknesses as a creature affected by temperature. Nor did he think about man's general weakness, able to live only within narrow limits of heat and cold. From there, it did not lead him to thoughts of heaven and the meaning of a man's life. 50 degrees below zero meant a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear coverings, warm moccasins, and thick socks. 50 degrees below zero was to him nothing more than 50 degrees below zero. That it should be more important than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go, he forced some water from his mouth as an experiment. There was a sudden noise that surprised him. He tried it again. And again, in the air, before they could fall to the snow, the drops of water became ice that broke with a noise. He knew that at 50 below zero water from the mouth made a noise when it hit the snow. But this had done that in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than 50 below. But exactly how much colder he did not know. But the temperature did not matter.

He was headed for the old camp on Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come across the mountain from the Indian Creek country. He had taken the long trail to look at the possibility of floating logs from the islands in the Yukon down the river when the ice melted. He would be in camp by six o'clock that evening. It would be a little after dark, but the boys would be there, a fire would be burning, and a hot supper would be ready. As he thought of lunch, he pressed his hand against the package under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped in a handkerchief, and lying for warmth against the naked skin. Otherwise, the bread would freeze. He smiled contentedly to himself as he thought of those pieces of bread, each of which enclosed a generous portion of cooked meat.

He plunged among the big pine trees. The trail was not well marked here. Several inches of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed. He was glad he was without a sled. Actually, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he decided, as he rubbed his nose and face with his mittened hand. He had a good growth of hair on his face, but that did not protect his nose or the upper part of his face from the frosty air.



Following at the man's heels was a big native dog. It was a wolf dog, gray-coated and not noticeably different from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was worried by the great cold. It knew that this was no time for traveling. Its own feeling was closer to the truth than the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than 50 below zero; it was colder than 60 below, than 70 below. It was 75 below zero.

Because the freezing point is 32 above zero, it meant that there were 107 degrees of frost.

The dog did not know anything about temperatures. Possibly in its brain there was no understanding of a condition of very cold, such as was in the man's brain. But the animal sensed the danger. Its fear made it question eagerly every movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned about fire, and it wanted fire. Otherwise, it would dig itself into the snow and find shelter from the cold air.

The frozen moistness of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost. The hair on the man's face was similarly frosted, but more solidly. It took the form of ice and increased with every warm, moist breath from his mouth. Also, the man had tobacco in his mouth. The ice held his lips so tightly together that he could not empty the juice from his mouth. The result was a long piece of yellow ice hanging from his lips. If he fell down it would break, like glass, into many pieces. He expected the ice formed by the tobacco juice, having been out twice before when it was very cold. But it had not been as cold as this, he knew.

He continued through the level forest for several miles. Then he went down a bank to the frozen path of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek and he knew he was ten miles from where the stream divided. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was traveling at the rate of four miles an hour. Thus, he figured that he would arrive where the stream divided at half-past twelve. He decided he would eat his lunch when he arrived there.

The dog followed again at his heels, with its tail hanging low, as the man started to walk along the frozen stream. The old sled trail could be seen, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last sleds. In a month no man had traveled up or down that silent creek. The man went steadily ahead. He was not much of a thinker. At that moment he had nothing to think about except that he would eat lunch at the stream's divide and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would not have been possible because of the ice around his mouth.

Once in a while the thought repeated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his face and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this without thinking, frequently changing hands. But, with all his rubbing, the instant he stopped, his face and nose became numb. His face would surely be frozen. He knew that and he was sorry that he had not worn the sort of nose guard Bud wore when it was cold. Such a guard passed across the nose and covered the entire face. But it did not matter much, he decided. What was a little frost? A bit painful, that was all. It was never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was most observant. He noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and the bends. And always he noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he moved suddenly to the side, like a frightened horse. He curved away from the place where he had been walking and retraced his steps several feet along the trail. He knew the creek was frozen to the bottom. No creek could contain water in that winter. But he knew also that there were streams of water that came out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top of the ice of the creek. He knew that even in the coldest weather these streams were never frozen, and he also knew their danger. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there was both water and thin ice, and when a man broke through he could get very wet.

That was why he had jumped away so suddenly. He had felt the ice move under his feet. He had also heard the noise of the snow-covered ice skin breaking. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, because he would be forced to stop and build a fire. Only under its protection could he bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek bottom and its banks. He decided that the flowing stream of water came from the right side. He thought a while, rubbing his nose and face. Then he walked to the left. He stepped carefully and tested the ice at each step. Once away from the danger, he continued at his four-mile pace. During the next two hours he came to several similar dangers.

Usually the snow above the pools had a sunken appearance. However, once again he came near to falling through the ice. Once, sensing danger, he made the dog go ahead. The dog did not want to go. It hesitated until the man pushed it

forward. Then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it fell through the ice, but climbed out on the other side, which was firm. It had wet its feet and legs. Almost immediately the water on them turned to ice. The dog made quick efforts to get the ice off its legs. Then it lay down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. The animal knew enough to do this. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the commands that arose from the deepest part of its being.

But the man knew these things, having learned them from experience. He removed the mitten from his right hand and helped the dog tear out the pieces of ice. He did not bare his fingers more than a minute, and was surprised to find that they were numb. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten quickly and beat the hand across his breast.

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun did not appear in the sky. At half-past twelve, on the minute, he arrived at the divide of the creek. He was pleased at his rate of speed. If he continued, he would certainly be with the boys by six o'clock that evening.

He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and pulled forth his lunch. The action took no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness touched his bare fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but instead, struck the fingers against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The pain that followed the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was frightened. He had not had time to take a bite of his lunch. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten. Then he bared the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice around his mouth prevented him.

Then he knew what was wrong. He had forgotten to build a fire and warm himself. He laughed at his own foolishness. As he laughed, he noted the numbness in his bare fingers. Also, he noted that the feeling which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or whether they were numb. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numb.

He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was somewhat frightened. He stamped forcefully until the feeling returned to his feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in this country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it was cold. He walked a few steps, stamping his feet and waving his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he took some matches and proceeded to make a fire. In the bushes, the high water had left a supply of sticks. From here he got wood for his fire. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire.

Bending over the fire, he first melted the ice from his face. With the protection of the fire's warmth he ate his lunch. For the moment, the cold had been forced away. The dog took comfort in the fire, lying at full length close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being burned. When the man had finished eating, he filled his pipe with tobacco and had a comfortable time with a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled his cap firmly about his ears, and started along the creek trail toward the left.

The dog was sorry to leave and looked toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly none of his ancestors had known cold, real cold. But the dog knew and all of its family knew. And it knew that it was not good to walk outside in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie in a hole in the snow and to wait for this awful cold to stop. There was no real bond between the dog and the man. The one was the slave of the other. The dog made no effort to indicate its fears to the man. It was not concerned with the well-being of the man. It was for its own sake that it looked toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of the whip in his voice. So the dog started walking close to the man's heels and followed him along the trail.

The man put more tobacco in his mouth and started a new growth of yellow ice on his face. Again his moist breath quickly powdered the hair on his face with white. He looked around him. There did not seem to be so many pools of water under the snow on the left side of Henderson Creek, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any.

And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, the man broke through. It was not deep. He was wet to the knees before he got out of the water to the firm snow. He was angry and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o'clock, and this would delay him an hour. Now he would have to build a fire and dry his moccasins and socks. This was most important at that low temperature. He knew that much. So he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, under several small pine trees, he found some firewood which had been carried there by the high water of last year. There were some sticks, but also larger branches, and some dry grasses.

He threw several large branches on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from dying in the wet snow. He made a flame by touching a match to a small piece of tree bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even better than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with pieces of dry grass and with the smallest dry sticks.

He worked slowly and carefully, realizing his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the sticks with which he fed it. He sat in the snow, pulling the sticks from the bushes under the trees and feeding them directly to the flame. He knew he must not fail. When it is 75 below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire. This is especially true if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile to keep his blood moving. But the blood in wet and freezing feet cannot be kept moving by running when it is 75 degrees below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze even harder.

All this the man knew. The old man on Sulphur Creek had told him about it, and now he was grateful for the advice. Already all feeling had gone from his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly become numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pushing the blood to all parts of his body. But the instant he stopped, the action of the heart slowed down. He now received the full force of the cold. The blood of his body drew back from it. The blood was alive, like the dog. Like the dog, it wanted to hide and seek cover, away from the fearful cold. As long as he walked four miles an hour, the blood rose to the surface. But now it sank down into the lowest depths of his body. His feet and hands were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze first. His bare fingers were numb, although they had not yet begun to freeze. Nose and face were already freezing, while the skin of all his body became cold as it lost its blood.

But he was safe. Toes and nose and face would be only touched by the frost, because the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with sticks the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with larger branches. Then he could remove his wet moccasins and socks. While they dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them first with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe.

He remembered the advice of the old man on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The man had been very serious when he said that no man should travel alone in that country after 50 below zero. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old men were rather womanish, he thought. All a man must do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his face and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could lose their feeling in so short a time. Without feeling they were, because he found it very difficult to make them move together to grasp a stick. They seemed far from his body and from him. When he touched a stick, he had to look to see whether or not he was holding it. All of which mattered little. There was the fire, promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice. The thick socks were like iron almost to the knees. The moccasin's strings were like ropes of steel. For a moment he pulled them with his unfeeling fingers. Then, realizing the foolishness of it, he grasped his knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault, or instead, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the pine tree. He should have built it in an open space. But it had been easier to pull the sticks from the bushes and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its branches. No wind had been blowing for weeks and each branch was heavy with snow. Each time he pulled a stick he shook the tree slightly. There had been just enough movement to cause the awful thing to happen. High up in the tree one branch dropped its load of snow. This fell on the branches beneath. This process continued, spreading through the whole tree. The snow fell without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was dead. Where it had burned was a pile of fresh snow.

The man was shocked. It was like hearing his own judgment of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old man on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had a companion on the trail he would be in no danger now. The companion could have built the fire. Now, he must build the fire again, and this second time he must not fail. Even if he succeeded, he would be likely to lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind. He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open space, where no tree would be above it. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny sticks. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out of the ground, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he also got many pieces that were undesirable, but it was the best he

could do. He worked carefully, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him. There was an anxious look in its eyes, because it depended upon him as the fire provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for the second piece of tree bark. He knew the bark was there, although he could not feel it with his fingers. He tried again and again, but he could not grasp it. And all the time, in his mind, he knew that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought alarmed him, but he fought against it and kept calm.

He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and began swinging his arms. Then he beat his hands with all his strength against his sides. He did this while he was sitting down. Then he stood up to do it. All the while the dog sat in the snow, its tail curled warmly over its feet and its sharp wolf ears bent forward as it looked at the man. And the man, as he waved his arms and hands, looked with longing at the creature that was warm and secure in the covering provided by nature.

After a time, he began to notice some feeling in his beaten fingers. The feeling grew stronger until it became very painful, but the man welcomed the pain. He pulled the mitten from his right hand and grasped the tree bark from his pocket. The bare fingers were quickly numb again. Next, he brought out his pack of matches. But the awful cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole pack fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor hold.

Now he was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and face, from his mind. He devoted his whole soul to picking up the matches. He followed the movement of his fingers with his eyes, using his sense of sight instead of that of touch. When he saw his fingers on each side of the pack, he closed them. That is, he willed to close them, because the fingers did not obey. He put the mitten on the right hand again, and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he lifted up the pack of matches, along with much snow, to the front of his jacket. But he had gained nothing.

After some struggling he managed to get the pack between his mittened hands. In this manner he carried it to his mouth. The ice broke as he opened his mouth with a fierce effort. He used his upper teeth to rub across the pack in order to separate a single match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his jacket. His condition was no better. He could not pick up the match. Then he thought how he might do it. He picked up the match in his teeth and drew it across his leg.

Twenty times he did this before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the tree bark. But the burning smell went up his nose, causing him to cough. The match fell into the snow and the flame died.

The old man on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that followed. After 50 below zero, a man should travel with a companion. He beat his hands, but failed to produce any feeling in them. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole pack of matches between his hands. His arm muscles were not frozen and he was able to press the hands tightly against the matches. Then he drew the whole pack along his leg. It burst into flame, 70 matches at once!

There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the burning smell, and held the flaming pack to the tree bark. As he so held it, he noticed some feeling in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. The feeling developed into pain. He continued to endure it. He held the flame of the matches to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were taking most of the flame.

Finally, when he could endure no more, he pulled his hands apart. The flaming matches fell into the snow, but the tree bark was burning. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest sticks on the flame. He could not choose carefully because they must be pieces that could be lifted between his hands. Small pieces of green grass stayed on the sticks, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He treated the flame carefully. It meant life, and it must not cease.

The blood had left the surface of his body and he now began to shake from the cold. A large piece of a wet plant fell on the little fire. He tried to push it out with his fingers. His shaking body made him push it too far and he scattered the little fire over a wide space. He tried to push the burning grasses and sticks together again. Even with the strong effort that he made, his trembling fingers would not obey and the sticks were hopelessly scattered. Each stick smoked

a little and died. The fire provider had failed. As he looked about him, his eyes noticed the dog sitting across the ruins of the fire from him. It was making uneasy movements, slightly lifting one foot and then the other. The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the story of the man, caught in a storm, who killed an animal and sheltered himself inside the dead body and thus was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until feeling returned to them. Then he could build another fire.

He spoke to the dog, calling it to him. But in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal. It had never known the man to speak in such a tone before. Something was wrong and it sensed danger. It knew not what danger, but somewhere in its brain arose a fear of the man. It flattened its ears at the sound of the man's voice; its uneasy movements and the lifting's of its feet became more noticeable. But it would not come to the man. He got down on his hands and knees and went toward the dog. But this unusual position again excited fear and the animal moved away.

The man sat in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, using his teeth, and then stood on his feet. He glanced down to assure himself that he was really standing, because lack of feeling in his feet gave him no relation to the earth. His position, however, removed the fear from the dog's mind. When he commanded the dog with his usual voice, the dog obeyed and came to him. As it came within his reach, the man lost control. His arms stretched out to hold the dog and he experienced real surprise when he discovered that his hands could not grasp. There was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and more. All this happened quickly and before the animal could escape, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it barked and struggled.

But it was all he could do: hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his frozen hands he could neither draw nor hold his knife. Nor could he grasp the dog around the throat. He freed it and it dashed wildly away, still barking. It stopped 40 feet away and observed him curiously, with ears sharply bent forward.

The man looked down at his hands to locate them and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. He thought it curious that it was necessary to use his eyes to discover where his hands were. He began waving his arms, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes. His heart produced enough blood to stop his shaking. But no feeling was created in his hands.

A certain fear of death came upon him. He realized that it was no longer a mere problem of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet. Now it was a problem of life and death with the circumstances against him. The fear made him lose control of himself and he turned and ran along the creek bed on the old trail. The dog joined him and followed closely behind. The man ran blindly in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he struggled through the snow, he began to see things again—the banks of the creek, the bare trees, and the sky.

The running made him feel better. He did not shake any more. Maybe, if he continued to run, his feet would stop freezing. Maybe if he ran far enough, he would find the camp and the boys. Without doubt, he would lose some fingers and toes and some of his face. But the boys would take care of him and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time, there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys. It told him that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start and that he would soon be dead. He pushed this thought to the back of his mind and refused to consider it. Sometimes it came forward and demanded to be heard. But he pushed it away and tried to think of other things. It seemed strange to him that he could run on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to be flying along above the surface and to have no connection with the earth.

His idea of running until he arrived at the camp and the boys presented one problem: he lacked the endurance. Several times he caught himself as he was falling. Finally, he dropped to the ground, unable to stop his fall. When he tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided. Next time he would merely walk and keep going.

As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling warm and comfortable. He was not shaking, and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his body. And yet, when he touched his nose or face, there was no feeling. Running would not bring life to them. Nor would it help his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be increasing. He tried to keep this thought out of his mind and to forget it. He knew that such thoughts caused a feeling of fright in him and he was afraid of such feelings. But the thought

returned and continued, until he could picture his body totally frozen. This was too much, and again he ran wildly along the trail. Once he slowed to a walk, but the thought that the freezing of his body was increasing made him run again.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell a second time, the dog curled its tail over its feet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager. The warmth and security of the animal angered him. He cursed it until it flattened its ears. This time the shaking because of the cold began more quickly. He was losing his battle with the frost. It was moving into his body from all sides. This thought drove him forward. But he ran no more than 100 feet, when he fell head first.

It was his last moment of fear. When he had recovered his breath and his control, he sat and thought about meeting death with dignity. However, the idea did not come to him in exactly this manner. His idea was that he had been acting like a fool. He had been running around like a chicken with its head cut off. He was certain to freeze in his present circumstances, and he should accept it calmly. With this newfound peace of mind came the first sleepiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep his way to death. Freezing was not as bad as people thought. There were many worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body the next day. Suddenly he saw himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself.

And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more. Even then he was outside of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he returned to the United States he could tell the folks what real cold was.

His mind went from this to the thought of the old man of Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe. "You were right, old fellow. You were right," he murmured to the old man of Sulphur Creek.

Then the man dropped into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day ended in a long evening. There were no signs of a fire to be made. Never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the evening grew darker, its eager longing for the fire mastered it. With much lifting of its feet, it cried softly. Then it flattened its ears, expecting the man's curse. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog howled loudly. And still later it moved close to the man and caught the smell of death. This made the animal back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky.

Then it turned and ran along the trail toward the camp it knew, where there were the other food providers and fire providers.

Name: _____

Period: ___ Date: _____

Debrief questions – To Build a Fire

- What is the psychology applicable to this story? Please list as many psychological themes/traits/behaviors which are relevant to this story.
- Here we have a man facing his own mortality. (A) At what points does he realize he is in trouble...like, not just inconvenienced but really worried? (B) At what point does he realize he is at significant risk of death?
- There is a 1902 version of this story and a 1908 version (you read the 1908 version). Similarities and significant differences between the two are as follows:
 - 1902 –the man is named Tom Vincent; we know more about him: he is young and proud of his strength. There is no “old timer” to offer advice. There is no dog. His second fire is successful. The man survived, albeit with frostbite.
 - 1908 – the man is unnamed. There is a dog. His second fire fails. The man dies of hypothermia.
 - In both versions, the fire is extinguished by falling snow, forcing him to attempt a second fire.
 - The stories are different in their tones as well as their plots. The 1902 version is more invigorating in its tone, sharing Tom's resolve in getting back on his feet after his failures. This optimism in the face of defeat is what allows Tom to survive the cold. Contrast that to the 1908 version, which is much more bleak in its depiction of the man's journey.

How do the changes made in the 1908 enhance the psychological drama of the story (for the characters *and* the reader)?

- ‘The man’s behavior is largely governed by logic, while the dog’s behavior is influenced by instinct. This scientific understanding (dresses for cold, know how to make a fire, follow maps) gives the man confidence but distances him from nature and his survival instincts.’ Offer an example from the story to bring truth to this statement.
- Some literary critics try to advance the perspective that the man was obsessed with proving his masculinity, and the pursuit of that goal made him vulnerable to the fate which befell him. To what extent to you agree (or not) with this view? Explain your answer.
- The narrator says: “The trouble with him [the man] 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.” What does this mean? How would you describe his personality? Is it a problem?
- Consider the following groups of questions relating to the man’s motives and purpose
 - What moves the man to act as he does?
 - Trace his changing attitude toward the old-timer from Sulphur Creek. Why does he resist the old man’s advice? Is it hubris? Overconfidence? Why does he devalue the old man? Does he ever acknowledge that the old man was right?
 - Had he lived, given the opportunity to make this journey again, under similar circumstances, do you think he would take it? What did you learn from his experience?
- Do you regard the man as an admirable hero (independent, resourceful, rugged, and resilient) or do you regard him as reckless (proud, overconfident, unimaginative, and blind to risk), or perhaps as somewhere in between? Explain. Had he successfully made it back to camp and lived, would your judgment of him differ?
- Are there limits to our efforts to tame nature? If so, what are they?
Does our reliance on science blind us to certain deeper truths about nature and our relation to it? (Consider, in this regard, the strengths and weaknesses of living in the world guided by – as in the story – watches and thermometers.)
- What is, and what should be, our attitude toward the natural world, especially if nature is indifferent to human beings and often hostile to our purposes?
- What does the story teach us about death? The man realizes that he wants to “meet death with dignity” (as opposed to “running around like a chicken with its head cut off”). What do we mean when we talk of meeting death with dignity? How might personality type affect this approach to death?