

## Excerpt from “To Build a Fire”

by Jack London

A man is walking across a frozen wilderness to join some friends several miles away.

1 Empty as the man’s mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber-jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. 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 were alternate layers of water and ice-skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

2 That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice-skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek-bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came from the right. He reflected awhile, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. . . .

3 In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to it turned to ice. It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down in the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice-particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely across his chest.

4 At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled, he had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice-muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numbed. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numbed.

5 He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the 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 the 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 strode up and down, stamping his feet and thrashing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold of space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

6 When the man had finished, . . . he pulled on his mittens, settled the ear-flaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing-point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold.

1. Here is the first sentence of a summary of the passage.

**A man and a dog are traveling on a frozen creek bed in extremely cold weather.**

Choose **three** statements that **best** complete the summary of the passage.

- A. The man takes care to avoid wet traps and sends the dog ahead to test a suspicious area.
  - B. The traps are hidden pools of water that might be several inches or feet deep.
  - C. When the dog gets wet, it knows to lick the ice off its legs quickly.
  - D. The man eats his lunch after remembering to build a fire to keep warm.
  - E. The dog gets close enough to the fire to feel warm but not close enough to singe his fur.
  - F. Instead of staying by the fire, the man continues his journey into the severe cold.
2. In paragraph 3, the narrator uses the phrase “the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being.” Which concept in paragraph 3 is defined by this phrase?
- A. “quick efforts”
  - B. “instinct”
  - C. “judgment”
  - D. “swift numbness”
3. According to the information the author provides in paragraph 4, which of the man's reactions in this paragraph is **least** appropriate to his situation?

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half-past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. **(A) He was pleased at the speed he had made.** If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. **(B) He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch.** The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers. **(C) He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg.** Then **(D) he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat.** The sting that followed upon the striking of his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that **(E) he was startled,** he had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice-muzzle prevented. **(F) He chuckled at his foolishness,** and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. **(G) He wondered whether the toes were warm or numbed.** He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numbed.

4. The following item has two parts. Answer Part A and then answer Part B.

**Part A**

Which sentence best expresses a theme of the passage?

- A. Things that look innocent can actually be dangerous.
- B. Forgetfulness can have unexpected consequences.
- C. Humans owe animals protection and comfort.
- D. Nature can be more powerful than humans realize.

**Part B**

Which quotation from paragraph 5 best supports the correct answer to Part A?

- A. "That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time!"
- B. "He strode up and down, stamping his feet and threshing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth."
- C. "From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood."
- D. "Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits."

5. In paragraph 6, why does the narrator tell events mostly from the dog's point of view?

- A. to show that the dog will survive the cold even if the man does not
- B. to show that the man has more energy and willpower than the dog has
- C. to show that the dog's understanding of the cold is better than the man's
- D. to show that the man is not held back by illogical fears, even if the dog is

6. Which statement best expresses a central idea of the passage?

- A. A man fails to realize the real danger he is in from the cold weather conditions.
- B. A man discovers that intuition is more important than knowledge in dealing with weather.
- C. A man mistreats his dog out of ignorance of the weather conditions.
- D. A man learns that he and his dog can withstand more weather hardships than he thought.

7. Read these sentences from paragraph 5.

“He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought.”

How do these sentences help the reader understand the plot of the story?

- A. They show that the cold is more threatening than the man knows.
- B. They show that the man should start building his fire.
- C. They show that the man may soon lose the trail.
- D. They show that the man is not dressed warmly enough for the cold.

8. Read the sentence from paragraph 4.

The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, . . .

What does the word **intervened** mean as it is used in this sentence?

- A. was disregarded
- B. was indicated
- C. was scattered
- D. was positioned