

TO BUILD A FIRE

Based on the short story by Jack London

A HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

The description in lines 1–2 makes me nervous. It is very cold, and the man is taking a trail that not many people use. I think this decision may **cause** some dangerous effects.

B YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

According to the narrator, the man's problem is that he "lacked imagination." How might this lack of imagination **cause** problems for the man?



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Day had broken gray and very cold when the man turned off the Yukon trail onto a little-traveled trail. **A** He climbed the high earth bank, and at the top he stopped to catch his breath and look at his watch. It was nine in the morning on a clear day, but he could not see the sun. He had not seen the sun in several days.

The man looked back the way he had come. The Yukon River lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. North and south, as far as his eye could see, was unbroken white, except for a dark line that was the trail.

10 The absence of the sun, the tremendous cold, the strangeness of it all had no effect on the man. He was a newcomer to this land, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he lacked imagination. **B** He noticed things without understanding their significance.¹ He knew that 50 degrees below zero was very cold, but that fact did not lead him to think about man's frailty² or his place in the universe. In such weather a man must dress

1. **Significance** (SIHG NIH FIH KUHNS) means "importance."

2. **Frailty** (FRAY UHL TEE) is weakness.

warmly, but that there should be more to it than that did not enter his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat and was startled by a sharp, explosive crackle. He spat again, and the spittle crackled in the air. **C** Undoubtedly it was colder than 50 below, but that did not matter. He was headed to a camp where he knew his friends were waiting. He would be there by six, a bit after dark, but they would have a fire going and supper would be ready. Under his shirt he had biscuits and bacon for his lunch.

The trail he followed was faint because a foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over the trail. A dog, a big native husky, trotted at the man's side. Although it knew nothing about temperatures, its instinct³ told the dog how cold it really was—not 50, or even 60 below zero, but 75. The cold depressed the dog. It wanted the man to stop and make camp or build a fire. **D**

Frozen moisture from their breathing settled on the man's beard and the dog's muzzle. Once in a while the man thought about how very cold it was. He had never experienced such cold.

The man held on through several miles of woods. He crossed a wide, flat area and dropped down to a small stream, Henderson Creek. He saw by his watch that it was ten o'clock, and he knew that he was ten miles from the forks.⁴ **E** He was making four miles an hour, and he figured that he would arrive at the forks at half-past noon.

He kept rubbing his cheeks and his nose with his mittens, and as soon as he stopped rubbing, they were numb⁵ again. He knew frosted cheeks were a bit painful, but never serious.

The man was still very observant.⁶ He knew that in some places springs bubbled up from the ground and, under the snow, there would be icy water where a man could sink up to his waist. He came across several such traps, which had a sunken appearance. Once he had a very close call. Suspecting danger, he

- 3. Instinct** (IHN STIHNGT) means "natural ability; inherited, not learned behavior."
- 4. A Fork** is the place where a road, path, or river divides or branches.
- 5. Numb** (NUHM) means "without any physical feeling."
- 6. Observant** (UHB ZUHR VUHNT) means "noticing."

C HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

In lines 19–21, I think **nature** is warning this guy to be careful. His spit freezes in midair!

D YOUR TURN

Literary Focus

In lines 26–31, underline the words that show that the dog understands nature's message better than the man does. Then, explain how this description fits in with what you know about **naturalism**.

E HERE'S HOW

Language Coach

I know that the word *watch* can have different **parts of speech**. As a noun, it is a device for telling time, but as a verb, it means "look at." Here, I think *watch* is being used as noun.

A HERE'S HOW

Literary Focus

I am going to pay attention to the dog. Its instincts are closer to **nature** than the man's. Lines 50–55 show that the dog knows the natural world better than the man does.

B HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

In lines 60–61, forgetting to build a fire **causes** the man's hands and feet to become very cold.

C HERE'S HOW

Vocabulary

The word *outwitted* in line 67 is made up of two smaller words, *out* and *wit*. Still, I am not sure know what *outwitted* means. My dictionary says it means "tricked cleverly." I think a synonym, or word with the same meaning, as *outwitted* is *outsmarted*.

D QUICK CHECK

Why does the dog want to stay at the fire?



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ordered the dog to go in front, but the dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the unbroken, white surface. Suddenly it broke through, struggled to one side, and escaped to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs, and almost immediately the water that clung to the dog turned to ice. Acting on instinct, the dog bit the ice away from between his toes. **A** The man took off a mitten and helped the dog free his paws of the ice. In less than a minute the man's exposed fingers grew numb.

At half past twelve the man arrived at the forks in the creek. He took his lunch from under his shirt and sat on a log to eat. Immediately he felt the numbness creeping into his hands and feet. He had forgotten to build a fire. **B** A bit frightened, he stood and stamped his feet until the feeling returned. It certainly was cold, he thought.

To warm himself, he walked up and down, stamping his feet and swinging his arms. Then he got out his matches and started to make a fire, finding twigs and firewood, and soon he had a roaring blaze. He ate his biscuits. For the moment he had outwitted the cold. **C** The dog stretched out in front of the fire, close enough to enjoy the warmth but far enough away not to burn his fur.

After eating, the man started walking again up the trail. The dog wanted desperately to go back to the fire. It knew about cold in a way the man did not, and it understood that it was not good to walk in such fearful cold. It was best to lie snug in a hole in the snow. But the man whistled, and the dog swung in at the man's heels and followed after. **D**

And then it happened. Suddenly the man crashed through a crust of snow into icy water halfway to his knees. He cursed his luck, for he would have to stop again and build a fire to dry his feet and his shoes and socks.

80 He found dry twigs and sticks and some dry grass, and he worked slowly and carefully. Gradually the fire grew as he put larger pieces of wood onto it. He knew there must be no failure. When it is 75 below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire, especially when his feet are wet. The old-timer on Sulfur Creek had warned him, and now he appreciated the advice. **E** His hands were numb, and his face and his feet were numb also. Now that he was not walking, he felt cold all over.

But he was safe, for the fire was a success. Remembering the old-timer's advice, never to travel alone on a day this cold, he
90 smiled. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Any man who was a man could travel alone. As long as he kept his head, he would be all right. The fire snapped and crackled, but before he could take off his shoes to dry them, it happened. He had built his roaring fire under a tree and now, from the branches above, an avalanche⁷ of heavy snow fell. The fire was no more. The man was shocked. **F** He feared he had just heard his own death sentence. For a moment he stared at the spot where the fire had been, and then he grew very calm. He would make a new fire, but he realized that even if he
100 succeeded he would most likely lose some toes.

He gathered more dry grass and twigs, but his fingers could not grip them, and he had to grab whole handfuls. He grabbed some rotten twigs and green moss along with the dry twigs. All the while the dog watched, yearning for a new fire.

When the twigs and grass were ready, the man reached into his pocket, but now his fingers were completely numb. He fought back panic as he beat his hands on his body to try to get back some feeling. He got his matches from his pocket, but he dropped them all in the snow. He tried to pick them up, but he

E YOUR TURN

Vocabulary

The term *old-timer* in line 84 is made up of two smaller words. Without the hyphen, an *old timer* might mean an "old clock." Add the hyphen, and the words together have another meaning. Write that meaning on the lines below. Use context clues or a dictionary for help.

F YOUR TURN

Reading Focus

What **causes** the man's fire to go out?

7. An **avalanche** (A VUH LANCH) is a moving mass; a sudden great rush.

A HERE'S HOW

Reading Focus

Every time the man does anything, he messes it up. Dropping the matches is going to **cause** big problems.

B LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why does the man continue holding the matches, even when they are burning his hands? How does this relate to his current predicament?

C YOUR TURN

Literary Focus

In lines 125–131, the dog shows again that its instincts are closer to **nature** than man's. What does the dog do that proves this?

110 couldn't. He scooped some matches, along with a large quantity of snow, into his lap. **A** He could not pick them up with his useless hands, but he managed to take one match between his teeth and, after trying twenty times to strike it against his pant leg, he succeeded, but the match fell into the snow and went out. In a moment of despair, he knew that the old-timer was right; after fifty below a man should travel with a partner.

He took a whole bunch of matches between the heels of both hands and managed to light them all at once, seventy wooden matches all at once! He held the blaze to a piece of birch
120 bark, but he could smell the flesh of his hands burning. In spite of the pain, he did not drop the matches. **B** He was shivering now, as he awkwardly put pieces of twig onto the flames. A piece of green moss fell on the feeble⁸ fire, and when he awkwardly tried to poke it away, the flames died.

He looked over at the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, and a wild idea came into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass⁹ to stay warm. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body. Then he could build another fire. He
130 spoke to the dog, calling it towards him, but something in his voice frightened the animal, and it stayed where it was. **C**

Struggling to stay calm, he got up onto his feet and looked down to be sure he was standing, for he could not feel his feet. He lunged¹⁰ for the dog and caught hold of it. He wanted to kill the animal, but his numb hands could not strangle it, nor could he draw his knife. He let it go, and it ran off snarling with its tail between its legs, to watch him from forty feet away. The man beat his hands against his body but had no feeling in them.

He quickly realized that this was no longer a matter of
140 freezing his fingers and toes; it was a matter of life and death, with the chances against him. He panicked, and he began to run up the trail, but he soon grew weak and stumbled. He tried to get up, but

8. **Feeble** (FEE buhl) means "weak."

9. A **carcass** (KAHR kuhs) is a dead body.

10. **Lunged** (LUHNJD) means "moved forward suddenly."

he failed. He decided to sit and rest before he tried to walk some more. As he sat and got his breath back, he noticed that he had stopped shivering. He now felt warm and comfortable. Before long, however, he thought of freezing totally, and so he got up to run again, with the dog at his heels. It angered him that the dog seemed so warm and safe in this frozen world.

150 He was losing this battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. He ran another hundred feet and then fell face down in the snow. It was his last panic. He finally sat up and now thought only of meeting death with dignity. He felt drowsy, and sleep seemed a good idea; he could die in his sleep. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body the next day. It certainly was cold, he thought. When he got back to the States, he could tell the folks what real cold was. He thought of the old man at Sulfur Creek and said, "You were right, old-timer." **D**

160 Then the man drifted off into the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. **E** The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. The dog whined, but the man remained silent. Later, the dog whined loudly. Still later, it crept close to the man and caught the smell of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. It waited a little longer, howling under a cold sky full of bright stars. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where it would find the other food providers and fire providers.

D LITERARY ANALYSIS

How does the man's acceptance of death affect his behavior?

E YOUR TURN

Vocabulary

By examining its context, write a definition for the word *satisfying*. Use a dictionary to check your answer.