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adversary or opponent, often described in terms of 'man versus<sup>1</sup>...', where 'man' means 'mankind' or 'human beings'. In this collection, broadly speaking, we can describe the stories as: man versus nature (London); man versus machine/monster (Hugo); man versus the unknown (Lessing); man versus injustice (Stevenson); man versus a common enemy in war (Bates).

## Other forms

Today, adventure stories are often made popular in action films – 90 minutes is a perfect amount of time to set up and deliver an adventure. Neither the characters nor the theme need to be too complex – the focus is on the adventure. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Treasure Island* have been produced many times on screen, for cinema and television. The French author, Jules Verne, wrote many stories that have been made into popular films, including *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. The *Lara Croft* films are an example of a modern adventure story, originally told through a computer game, being turned into a film. Adventure stories also tend to work well in comic books, which capture the action and pace of the story in colourful, dynamic pictures.

<sup>1</sup> used to compare two things or to show that they are competing against each other

# To Build a Fire

by Jack London

## About the author

Jack London is a 20<sup>th</sup> century American author, whose adventurous life was as well known as his adventure stories.

Born John Griffith London in San Francisco in 1876, his mother, Flora Wellman, was a music teacher with a wealthy background. She was not married to the man who was probably Jack's father – the journalist, lawyer and astrologer, William Chaney – so the young writer took the name of his stepfather, John London. In his teens, the young John London became known as Jack.

Flora and John London were poor, and Jack's childhood was hard. For much of his childhood, his mother was ill, and Jack was looked after by his nanny<sup>2</sup>, Virginia Prentiss. He had little formal education, and started work when he was very young to bring in extra money – by the age of 14 Jack was working 16-hour shifts at a local factory. But he dreamt of adventure, and at 17 he borrowed enough money from Virginia to buy an old long boat called the *Razzle-Dazzle*, which he used to steal oysters<sup>3</sup> in Oakland Bay. His career as an oyster thief did not last long though, and for several years the young writer went from job to job and place to place taking any work he could, including deep sea fishing, shovelling coal and doing manual work in factories. In between, he travelled – his journey on a freight train across America provided much of the material for his partly autobiographical book, *The Road* (1907).

Returning to San Francisco when his stepfather died, Jack took a job in a laundry to earn enough money to support his mother. Still writing, but as yet unpublished, he studied at the same time, gaining a place at the University of Berkeley in California, though he did not complete his degree. In 1897, London headed north to join the Klondike Gold Rush in Yukon, Canada. He returned empty-handed, but had gained experiences which would be the basis of many of his most successful stories.

<sup>2</sup> a woman whose job is to look after someone else's children

<sup>3</sup> types of shellfish that have a rough shell and are eaten as food, often raw. Some types of oyster contain pearls

At the age of just 25, London's first short story was published. It was an immediate success, and after years of hard work and poverty, London went on to become one of the highest-paid and most celebrated writers of his generation.

London was a dynamic public figure, giving lectures about economics and politics, and taking part in debates – his experiences had left him with strong socialist beliefs. He also continued to write. By the time he was 30, London had produced three of his most famous novels – *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) and *White Fang* (1906), all of which examined the power of nature and instinct. London had two daughters with his first wife, Bessie Maddern. They divorced in 1904, and London married again – this time to Charmian Kittredge, with whom he travelled more widely. As famous for his adventures as his writing, London was charismatic and good-looking, telling stories based on his experiences. In addition to his writing, he also worked as a war correspondent, rode horses at his ranch in the Sonoma Valley in California, hosted extravagant parties, and sailed across the South Pacific.

London had learnt the value of hard work early on in his life, and his commitment to writing a thousand words per day meant that he produced a great deal of work, his main subjects and themes being adventure and hardship<sup>4</sup>. He continued to work hard and play hard until his death in 1916, at the age of just 40, from kidney failure related to his heavy drinking. He left 18 volumes of short stories, 19 novels, seven non-fiction books, and hundreds of published articles, essays and reviews.

Details about the life and character of Jack London are controversial, but what is certain is that he led a full life packed with travel and adventure, experiencing and writing about what he called 'big moments of living'.

## About the story

The first version of *To Build a Fire* appeared in 1902 in *The Youth's Companion*, an American magazine which published stories for children. However, the version of the story in this collection was first published in the popular monthly literary publication, *The Century Magazine*, in 1908 and is the most well known. The two versions of the story have different endings.

<sup>4</sup> mostly literary: a situation in which life is very difficult for you, usually because you do not have enough money

## Background information

### The Canadian wilderness and the 'gold rush'

The story is set in Yukon, the furthest west of Canada's three federal<sup>5</sup> territories, which was created in 1898. The extreme north-west of North America was often described as the 'Last Frontier', a place for adventurers looking to tackle the difficult conditions and landscape and make money from it. Jack London went to the Yukon region as a young man, at the start of what became known as the 'Klondike Gold Rush', as thousands of hopeful men like him travelled to Canada and Alaska looking for gold.

Newcomers, or *chechaquo*, would arrive by ship at Dyea, a coastal port, and then travel up the Yukon River, the longest river in the north-west of North America. Over half of it is in the US state of Alaska and most of the rest is in the Yukon territory. The river was the main means of transport during the gold rush. One of the things which travels on the river is timber – spruce trees cut to provide wood to build ships and houses.

New arrivals carried supplies along the Chilcoot Trail, which until then had been used by native Americans as a trade route. The trail is 53 kilometres long and passes over the terrifying Chilcoot Pass in the Coast Mountains. There are many camps along its course.

There were many dangers in this wild and unexplored country – from wolves and other men, to hunger and sickness. The weather conditions were extreme. Exposure to the sun could lead to severe sunburn and blisters on the skin; it was also essential to drink a lot of water to prevent dehydration. During the winter, temperatures could be extremely cold – people who were not properly protected could get frostbite, a medical condition that could lead to the loss of toes, fingers, ears, nose or even feet and hands. The ultimate risk of cold was death. So it was essential to keep warm and dry, and to keep moving.

Recommended supplies included heavy underwear, thick cotton shirts and a heavy woollen sweater. For the head, scarves called 'bandanas' were encouraged, to protect the face from the cold, as well as a cowboy hat, and woollen flaps to cover the ears. For the lower body, recommendations included special boots, soft leather shoes called moccasins, hip-length rubber boots, and heavy, waterproof trousers.

<sup>5</sup> a federal country or system is one in which individual states make their own laws, but a national government is responsible for areas such as defence and foreign policy

## Main themes

Before you read the story, you may want to think about some of its main themes. The questions will help you think about the story as you are reading it for the first time. There is more discussion of the main themes in the *Literary analysis* section after the story.

### The power of nature

The story focuses on one man's fight to stay alive in the intense cold. Without a human companion or special clothing and equipment, the man is extremely vulnerable to the elements. The author refers to the man's 'frailty as a creature of temperature...able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold'.

### 7 As you read the story, ask yourself:

- As the story develops, how do the man's feelings about the old man's advice change?
- At what point(s) does the man realize how vulnerable he is?

### Instinct versus rationality

*To Build a Fire* is often described as a 'naturalist' story, which examines the struggle between man and nature. The only companion the man has in the story is his dog. London often uses the dog and the man to highlight the difference between instinctive and rational behaviour.

### 8 As you read the story, think about these questions:

- What differences are there between the dog and the man – how suited is each one to the landscape and climate? What is the dog's focus at the beginning and how does it change? And the man's?
- Why does the dog stay with the man?
- What signs are there of the man using his natural instincts? In what ways does he rationalize his decisions to ignore the advice of the old-timer?



# To Build a Fire

by Jack London

Day had broken cold and grey, exceedingly cold and grey, 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<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup>, 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<sup>9</sup> where the ice-jams<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>7</sup> something such as smoke, dust or cloud that covers an area and makes it darker

<sup>8</sup> literary: an object that has a perfectly round shape; the sun or the moon

<sup>9</sup> mainly literary: if something is undulating, it moves gently up and down in the shape of waves on the sea

<sup>10</sup> (like traffic-jams) a build up of ice which blocks the land or river. See also 'timber-jams' on page 27

miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on the Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this – the mysterious, far-reaching hairline 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<sup>11</sup> 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<sup>12</sup> 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<sup>13</sup> 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;

11 *here*: being vulnerable, physically weak and at risk from the surroundings

12 *formal*: theoretical, guessed based on information that is not complete

13 *old-fashioned*: saliva

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.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled<sup>14</sup> had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled, travelling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numbed nose and cheek-bones with his mittenened hand. He was a warm-whiskered<sup>15</sup> man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones and the eager nose that **thrust** itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf-dog, grey-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing-point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained<sup>16</sup>. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp **consciousness** of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted<sup>17</sup> movement of the man as if

14 commonly 'sledge': a vehicle that you sit on to travel over snow. It has long pieces of wood fitted to the bottom, instead of wheels

15 *old-fashioned*, *here*: with hair on the bottom part of the face which keeps it warm

16 *formal*: if something such as a rule or condition obtains, it exists, is used or is accepted

17 *literary, unusual*: not usual for a particular person or thing and therefore unexpected

expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystallised breath. The man's red beard and moustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled<sup>18</sup> the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the colour and solidity of amber<sup>19</sup> was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage<sup>20</sup>. It was the penalty all tobacco-chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat of nigger-heads<sup>21</sup>, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek-bed. The furrow of the old sled-trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held

18 *formal*: from the verb 'expel' – to force something out of a container or someone's body  
19 a hard yellow-brown substance used for making jewellery

20 *formal*: something that is joined to something larger or more important, for example a small part of your body such as a hand or foot

21 *out of use, offensive connotations*: rocks or boulders

steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks 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 have been impossible because of the ice-muzzle on his mouth. So he continued monotonously to chew tobacco and to increase the length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheek-bones and nose with the back of his mittenend hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheek-bones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose-strap of the sort Bud<sup>22</sup> wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

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<sup>23</sup>. 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

22 not clear who this refers to; probably a friend of the man

23 *here*: hidden dangers