



To Build a Fire

Jack London

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To Build a Fire is one of Jack London's most beloved short stories. A heartbreaking tale set in the vast wintry landscape of the North, it endures as one of the greatest adventures ever written.

To Build a Fire Details

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Author : Jack London

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From Reader Review To Build a Fire for online ebook

Kenchiin says

This is somehow a short version of The Call of the Wild, but it was really enjoyable.

Farith says

2 stars.

"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."

I wanted to like this book. I almost DNFed it, but didn't because it was just a short story.

The story is good, and I liked a bit the writing. My problem with the book is that I felt it too dense, too complex. To Build a Fire is a classic and classics and I don't really get along anymore. I used to like them but stopped reading them quite long ago. So reading this book was just not for me. Not my cup of tea, tho I recognize it was a great story and maybe you can try and like it!

Khush says

How can one not give this story full 5 stars. When I read this story I did not know who the writer was. I have never ever read such a powerful story.

On the surface it is the story of a man who fails to reach the camp and as a consequence freezes to death. Though he is strapping and able-bodied, he is not familiar with the power of cold and what it can do to the frail human body. Too much caution against snow and extremely low temperatures does not pose any real challenge to a masculine man like him. This is how things go. In some naiveté, he sets out for the camp, and calculates that he would join the boys at camp for supper. He undercuts what -50 degrees can do to the human body. His dog knows what the man does not. "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."

The man, along with his big native dog, walks toward the camp. It takes him a while to know that some of his limbs are already numb. He has to see his hands, his legs to know that they are still attached to his body. As the cold becomes unbearable, he decides to build a fire. The story carries a beautiful description of how he goes about this. Once he successfully builds a fire, but the second time the fire dies out because a big load of snow falls from the tree under which he, unthinkingly, builds the fire.

The story is written in such a way that one walks with the man and his dog through the chilling snowscape. The wintry air, the unbroken white of the landscape and the vulnerability of the man are shown with such skill that one feels the 'chill', and the danger this poses to man's life, in one's gut. In fact, man, animal and nature interact in fascinating ways. One can really reflect on these themes. At the end, the overconfident

man, the adventurer, fails for the choices he makes.

Just before he becomes supremely exhausted, just before when all his attempts to save himself go in vain; he looks at the dog and wants to kill the dog to save himself from dying. But the dog senses this, the sudden change in the man's voice, his gesture, the danger of it all. However, the man could not move his limbs to carry out the 'animalistic' deed.

At the end, the man seems sitting in an upright position, not moving, not doing anything, not attempting to build a fire. "Never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire." The dog intuitively senses the death. This is how Jack London writes about the dog's response:

"... 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."

It is such a remarkable story because it tells us things about life, about beauty, about the other beings, other worlds that are not ours—at least not in a way we think they are. The man, for instance, except for his too refined ideas about his own superiority, is admirable. He fights to the end. I really hoped for his survival, that he would make it to the camp. We like happy endings both in real life and in fiction. Jack London does not disappoint in this because at least one of the two, at last, makes it to the camp.

Mohsin Maqbool says

A most imaginative cover of Jack London's book.

WHEN the going gets rough, the tough get going. Man can prove himself to be real tough when the odds are stacked against him. But can man really fight against nature, especially extreme weather?

I had read Jack London's "The Call of the Wild" last year and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Today I read his short story "To Build A Fire" and enjoyed myself as much.

In the story the protagonist is shown walking across the frozen Yukon towards the old camp at Henderson Creek. He thinks about reaching the camp around 6 on the same evening. He is accompanied by a big native dog or rather a gray wolf-dog. There is no sun in the sky. In fact, it has been days since he has last seen the sun. He would be floating logs from the islands in the Yukon down the river when the ice melted. Most men who came here did that for a living. In short, they were lumberjacks.

Jack London: Author, journalist, socialist and adventurer. Maybe the muscular writer was a boxer too!

Mr London writes: "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."

Jack London sitting on a bench carved out of a giant tree.

Reading the above-mentioned extract reminded me of my visit to Chicago -- also known as the "Windy City" -- in December 1980 and January 1981. One day the temperature went down to minus 16 degrees Centigrade. I was wearing a two piece Long Johns thermal underwear beneath my warm clothes, including a flight jacket, so as not to feel the biting cold. I had pulled my woolen cap down my ears to keep them safe from the cold and, of course, my head. However, my ears and nose had still turned red due to the freezing weather. Anyway, getting back to the story, the protagonist walks on the frozen river. At one place the ice is thin, it gives way and the man falls knee deep into the river. He now has to build a fire so that he does not suffer from frostbite. It is at this moment that he realises that building a fire is not as easy as it seems. And once done it is all the more difficult to keep it burning. Animals are more adept at facing the vagaries of weather. Even though there are just two characters -- the man and his dog -- in this story, it is full of suspense and excitement. Besides, you are also bound to learn things about the natural environment you might have not known before. I did not and picked up several things from reading Jack London's melancholic tale. Mr London spent quite some time in this rugged region of the world and is writing out of experience. And nobody writes better than one who has experienced things himself.

Even as a very young boy, fishing with his stepfather in small boats, Jack London's head would fill with visions of tropical islands and faraway places.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

In "The Trial" Franz Kafka says men die like dogs.

Here, Jack London shows how a man can die worse than a dog.

In a snow-covered wilderness such a man trudges alone with his dog, hoping to reach a safe place with the boys somewhere. Quick and alert, they both are, but Mr. London is careful to point out that this man can only repeat to himself that "it is certainly cold" and no further. He has no awareness of his frailty, nor is he capable of leading himself "to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe."

He marches on, believing that it to be just a tolerable fifty degrees below zero. His dog does not have any belief on anything. Its instinct however gives it "a vague but menacing apprehension" that they should not be out there in that weather. In reality it was colder than seventy-five degrees below zero.

How cold is that? The man spits, and almost before his saliva is expelled from his mouth, it turns to ice. Blood itself freezes, fingers, toes, hands and feet grow numb. Sensations are lost, until he doesn't know anymore where his hands and feet are. He fights to survive, you cheer for him, Mr. London makes you cheer for him, as he brings him closer and closer to the end.

Like his dog, you watch him die. After waiting for a while, you watch the dog creeps close to the man until it catches the smell of death in him. Then it leaves for the camp where the boys are.

and I always talk about how 'you'd think", after sooooo many seasons of the show, it's the 'first' thing each player would master before going on live TV.

So....Jack London's story was about surviving too...from one pillage to another on the Yukon, near Alaska in the middle of winter.

Chilly-- cold to the bones, hands and feet raw freezing... 50 degrees below, then 75 degrees below, --my heart was racing while Jack, another traveler, and a dog confront extreme obstacles.

Choices needed to be made on the spot. Not always the right choice.

There are lessons learned.....we can't take safety for granted.

REALLY, we can't take safety for granted!!!

One of the finest America Authors ---Jack London was in a class of his own! Master storyteller! Terrific short story!!!!

Tweety says

What?!

Tell me he didn't just stop the story like that. I really can't take books about idiots, I really can't. I do not like it when people think they know better than people who already have experienced what they are going through. If you are planning a trip north in the winter I wouldn't read this first, it's enough to make anyone paranoid.

We have a very foolish man who thinks he knows all about the cold, and he is so sure of his own capabilities that he doesn't take a partner with him on a trek in Yukon, because he is invincible and is a real man so he of course, doesn't need anyone. It's 1947 and 81.40° below F. He has a dog, matches and his own wits, who could need more?

(view spoiler)

If I rated this for the writing it would be five, if I rated it for its warning it would be four but, rating it on enjoyment it is a one. This is rather depressing, and I don't like being left by an author depressed. Do whatever you want during the story but don't leave it all in doom and gloom at the end.

PG for the thematic events. I won't hand this tale to anyone. Boys would probably love a Life vs Death tale, though.

Sarah says

“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.”

quickly changed to where I was quite concerned. Then there's the sucker punch ending. It stayed with me. If a great short story is supposed to be about one powerful moment, then this story definitely fits the bill.

Brad says

To Build a Fire is one of the stories that made me want to be a writer.

I remember hearing a radio version of this when I was young, long before I ever read it. My Dad and I were on a camping trip in one of the provincial parks, and he'd brought along a little transistor radio. In the dark of our tent we picked up a radio station that played old radio shows, and that night the story was To Build a Fire. It was wonderful to listen to it in that setting. The old crackly radio hummed, the static mixed with the Yukon wind sound effects, the dog barked, the man talked to himself while he tried to get his fire lit, and all the while our canvas tent creaked in the warm night. It was a full immersion into London's story of Nature humbling man.

A while later, in school, I had to read To Build a Fire in a reading period; I was thrilled to be remembering the story as the words unfolded in front of me. I wanted to go to the Yukon (which I am finally doing this summer). I wanted to face Nature in a way that was smart. I wanted to do what the man failed to do. I wanted to avoid arrogance, swallow my natural hubris, and experience the cold and danger of a Yukon winter just so that I could show the man that he should have listened to the old man's advice and paid attention to his dog's uneasiness.

Now that I teach, I bring out To Build a Fire in any class that calls for short stories. It is one of the greatest short stories ever written, and it always leads to a lively discussion, especially today when so many students are concerned with the environment.

Some students find themselves cheering for the Yukon, some find themselves cheering for the dog, and a few find themselves cheering for the way the man never gives up. Then there are those who scoff at the man for his stupidity, for his lack of imagination, for his arrogance in the face of such raw, frigid power.

I find that, these days, my reaction to To Build a Fire depends on my mood. I can see every side; I can empathize with every perspective, which I am sure has everything to do with the brilliance of London's craftsmanship. This last time I found myself connecting most with the story of the dog. When I reach the Yukon this summer (boy am I glad that it won't be winter), I'm going to read it again. I think it's a pretty good bet who I'll side with in that reading. But one never knows.

Elaine says

We read a lot of short classics in 7th grade and this was one of them. I still remember my teacher making us memorize the 3 types of conflict: man v man, man v nature, and man v himself. Obviously we didn't study Fantasy or SF, hence the omissions of man v monster and man v alien.

I remember not liking this book as a 12-year-old, but it's a story that has certainly stuck with me. I associate feelings of desperation with it, which of course is exactly the point. I've said it before: Jack London didn't know how to write a happy book.

Amber says

This was a pretty good heart-wrenching tragic short story by Jack London about a man trying to survive the harsh Alaskan wilderness in the Yukon during a dangerous cold snap. If you like these adventure type stories, definitely look for this short story to read online and wherever books are sold.

Lori says

Wow! I haven't read this since I was in middle school. It was the next step from Jim Kjelgaard's dog stories. It's an overcast 79 degrees F outside, and I'm cold just reading the story.

<https://americanenglish.state.gov/fil...>

<https://www.artofmanliness.com/2017/0...Jim Kjelgaard>
