

This story, written by Jack London in 1902, is a classic tale of man and nature. Some of the most powerful fiction through the years has dealt with this theme; as a service to our readers FIELD & STREAM will present other classic tales of this type from time to time.

DAY HAD BROKEN COLD AND GRAY, EXCEEDINGLY cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth band, where a dim and little-traveled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timber land. It was 9 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 was a subtle gloom that made the day dark.

The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under 3 feet of ice. North and south, as far as the eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted away into the north. This dark hairline was the main trail that led south 500 miles to the Chilkoot Pass, and that led 70 miles north to Dawson.

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. 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 significance. Fifty degrees below zero was to him precisely 50 degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that never entered his head.

He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. He would be into camp by 6 o'clock, a bit after dark.

At the man's heels trotted a big native husky, the proper wolf dog. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for traveling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was 75 below zero. The dog did not know anything about thermometers, but the brute had its instinct. It experienced a menacing apprehension that made it slink along at the man's heels.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was

keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, and always he noted where he placed his feet. The creek he knew was frozen, clear to the bottom, but there were springs that ran out from the hillsides, and that the coldest snaps never froze them. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be 3 inches deep or 3 feet. 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 while he dried his socks and moccasins.

There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke through. It was not deep. He wet himself halfway to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

He was angry, and cursed his luck aloud. He would have to build a fire and dry out his footgear. He turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush, was a high-water deposit of dry firewood. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it would otherwise melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young

flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed 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. All a man had to do was keep his head, and he was all right. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time.

All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to his knees; and the moccasins'

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At seventy-five degrees below zero, nature may forgive a single small mistake. But the price for making more than one is the highest price that anyone can pay.

BY JACK LONDON

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strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted. For a moment he tugged with his numb fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own mistake. He should not have built the fire under a spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out!

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. It was up

to him to build the fire again, and this time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes.

He made a new foundation for a fire, this time out in the open. Next he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water flotsam. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. He worked methodically, and all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could

hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and threshed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides.

After a time he was aware of the first faraway signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulfur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In the effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell into the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches.

After some manipulation he managed to get the whole bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice on his face crackled and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped in his lap. He could not pick it up.

Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched it before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch bark. But the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough. The match fell into the snow and went out.

Suddenly he bared both hands, removing his mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch of matches between the heels of his hands. His arm muscles not being frozen enabled him to press the hand heels tightly against the matches. Then he scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulfur matches at once! He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes, and held the blazing bunch to the birch bark. As he held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in

the way, absorbing most of the flame.

At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch bark was alight. He fed the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. Then, a large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grass and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered.



The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that he should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began threshing his arms back and forth, beating the mittened hands against his sides. He did this for 5 minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in his hands.

A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became more poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. The running made him feel better. Maybe, if he ran on, he would reach camp and the boys. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, and that the freezing had too great a start on him, and that he would soon be stiff and dead.

It struck him as curious that he could run at all 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 himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth.

His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he tried to rise, he failed. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable, and yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Then it came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. The thought persisted, until it (*Continued on page 101*)

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produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than 100 feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. He was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

Then the man drowsed off 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 drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its yearning for a fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet, it whined softly, then flattened its ears in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later the dog whined loudly, and still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and 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 trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers.

