

Climate and Resources of the Eastern Hemisphere

Literature

“To Build a Fire”

by Jack London



ABOUT THE READING The harsh arctic regions of the northland were a favorite setting for American writer Jack London. In “To Build a Fire,” a man named Tom Vincent travels alone on a brutally cold day. He starts out full of confidence. As he walks on, he experiences the power of the arctic environment.

VOCABULARY

congealed changed from fluid to solid

formidable causing dread

precept a rule or principle



As you read the passage below, pay attention to the description of the environment and how well the man is adapted to the environment.

He spat upon the snow, a favorite northland trick, and the sharp crackle of the instantly **congealed** spittle startled him. The spirit thermometer at Calumet had registered sixty below when he left, but he was certain it had grown much colder, how much colder he could not imagine . . .

After an hour he rounded a bend, where the creek ran close to the mountainside, and came upon one of the most insignificant-appearing but most **formidable** dangers in northern travel.

The creek itself was frozen solid to its rocky bottom, but from the mountain came the outflow of several springs. These springs never froze, and the only effect of the severest cold snaps was to lessen their discharge. Protected from the frost by the blanket of snow, the water of these springs seeped down into the creek and, on top of the creek ice, formed shallow pools.

The surface of these pools, in turn, took on a skin of ice which grew thicker and thicker, until the

Circle the phrases that show how cold it is.

Source: London, Jack. “To Build a Fire,” from *Lost Face*. New York: Macmillan, 1910.

water overran, and so formed a second ice-skinned pool above the first.

Thus at the bottom was the solid creek ice, then probably six to eight inches of water, then the thin ice-skin, then another six inches of water and another ice-skin. And on top of this last skin was about an inch of recent snow to make the trap complete.

To Tom Vincent's eye the unbroken snow surface gave no warning of the lurking danger. As the crust was thicker at the edge, he was well toward the middle before he broke through.

In itself it was a very insignificant mishap—a man does not drown in twelve inches of water—but in its consequences as serious an accident as could possibly befall him.

At the instant he broke through he felt the cold water strike his feet and ankles, and with half a dozen lunges he made the bank. He was quite cool and collected. The thing to do, and the only thing to do, was to build a fire. For another **precept** of the north runs: *Travel with wet socks down to twenty below zero; after that build a fire.* And it was three times twenty below and colder, and he knew it.

Underline what Tom had to do to save his life.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Idea What accident does Tom have? Why does this put him in danger?

2. Critical Thinking: Making Predictions Do you think Tom will survive? Explain.

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are an adventure travel leader. On a separate sheet of paper, design a brochure for a trip to an arctic region. Include pictures and details that will convince people to sign up for your trip.