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TO BUILD A FIRE

BY JACK LONDON.

FOR land travel or seafaring the world over a companion is usually considered desirable. In the Klondike, as Tom Vincent found out, such a companion is absolutely essential. But he found it out, not by precept, but through bitter experience.

"Never travel alone," is a precept of the north. He had heard it many times and laughed, for he was a strapping young fellow, big boned and big muscled, with faith in himself and in the strength of his head and hands.

It was on a bleak January day when the experience came that taught him respect for the frost and for the wisdom of the men who had battled with it.

He had left Calumet Camp on the Yukon with a light pack on his back, to go up Paul Creek to the divide between it and Cherry Creek, where his party was prospecting and hunting moose.

The frost was sixty degrees below zero, and he had thirty miles of lonely trail to cover, but he did not mind. In fact he enjoyed it, swinging along through the silence, his blood pounding warmly through his veins and his mind care free and happy. For he and his comrades were certain they had struck "pay" up there on the Cherry Creek Divide, and, further, he was returning to them from Dawson with cheery home letters from the States.

At 7 o'clock, when he turned the heels of his moccasins toward Calumet Camp it was still black night. And when day broke at 9.30 he had made the four-mile cut-off across the flats and was six miles up Paul Creek. The trail, which had seen little travel, followed the bed of the creek, and there was no possibility of his getting lost. He had gone to Dawson by way of Cherry Creek and Indian River, so Paul Creek was new and strange. By 11.30 he was at the forks, which had been described to him, and he knew he had covered fifteen miles, half the distance.

He knew that in the nature of things the trail was bound to grow worse from there on, and thought that, considering the good time he had made he merited lunch. Casting off his pack and taking a seat on a fallen tree he unmittened his right hand, reached inside his shirt next to the skin and fished out a couple of biscuits sandwiched with sliced bacon and wrapped in a handkerchief—the only way they could be carried without freezing cold.

He had barely chewed his first mouthful when his numbing fingers warned him to put his mitten on again. This he did, not without surprise at the bitter swiftness with which the frost bit in. Undoubtedly it was the coldest snap he had ever experienced, he thought.

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.

Half of the first biscuit was yet untouched, but he could feel himself beginning to chill—a thing most unusual for him. This would never do, he decided, and slipping the pack straps across his shoulders he leaped to his feet and ran briskly up the trail.

A few minutes of this made him warm again, and he settled down to a steady stride, munching the biscuits as he went along. The moisture that exhaled with his breath crusted his lips and mustache with pendant ice and formed a miniature glacier on his chin. Now and again sensation forsook his nose and cheeks, and he rubbed them till they burned with the returning blood.

Most men wore nose straps; his partners did, but he scorned such "feminine contraptions," and till now he had never felt the need of them. Now he did feel the need, for he was rubbing constantly.

Nevertheless he was aware of a thrill of joy, of exultation. He was doing something, achieving something, mastering the elements. Once he laughed aloud in sheer strength of life, and with his clenched fist defied the frost. He was its master. What he did he did in spite of it. It could not stop him. He was going to the Cherry Creek Divide.

Strong as were the elements, he was stronger. At such times animals crawled away into their holes and remained in hiding. But he did not hide. He was out in it, facing it, fighting it. He was a man, a master of things.

In such fashion, rejoicing proudly, he tramped on. After half 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 rock 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 water overran, and so formed a second ice-skimmed pool above the first.

Thus at the bottom was the solid creek ice, then probably six to eight inches of water, then a thin ice skim, then another six inches of water and another ice skim. 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.

He knew, further, that great care must be exercised; that with failure at the first attempt the chance was made greater for failure at the second attempt. In short, he knew that there must be no failure. The moment before a strong, exulting man, boastful of his mastery of the elements, he was now fighting for his life against those same elements—such was the difference caused by the injection of a quart of water into a northland traveler's calculations.

In a clump of pines on the rim of the bank the spring high water had lodged many twigs and small branches. Thoroughly dried by the summer sun they now waited the match.

It is impossible to build a fire with heavy Alaskan mittens on one's hands, so Vincent bared his, gathered a sufficient number of twigs, and knocking the snow from them knelt down to kindle his fire. From an inside pocket he drew out his matches and a strip of thin birch bark. The matches were of the Klondike kind, sulphur matches, 100 in a bunch.

He noticed how quickly his fingers had chilled as he separated one match from the bunch and scratched it on his trousers. The birch bark, like the dryest of paper, burst into bright flame. This he carefully fed with the smallest twigs and finest debris, cherishing the flame with the utmost care. It did not do to hurry things, as he well knew, and although his fingers were now quite stiff he did not hurry.

After the first quick, biting sensation of cold his feet had ached with a heavy, dull ache and were rapidly growing numb. But the fire, although a very young one, was now a success, and he knew that a little snow, briskly rubbed, would speedily cure his feet.

But at the moment he was adding the first thick twigs to the fire a grievous thing happened. The pine boughs above his head were burdened with a four months' snowfall, and so finely adjusted were the burdens that his slight movements in collecting the twigs had been sufficient to disturb the balance.

The snow from the topmost bough was the first to fall, striking and dislodging the snow on the boughs beneath. And all this snow, accumulating as it fell, smote Tom Vincent's head and shoulders and blotted out his fire.

He still kept his presence of mind, for he knew how great his danger was. He started at once to rebuild the fire, but his fingers were now so cold that he could not bend them, and he was forced to pick up each twig and splinter between the tips of the fingers of either hand.

When he came to the match he encountered great difficulty in separating one from the bunch. This he succeeded in managing, however, and also, by a great effort, in clutching the match between his thumb and forefinger. But in scratching it he dropped it in the snow and could not pick it up again.

He stood up, desperate. He could not feel even his weight on his feet, although the ankles were aching painfully. Putting on his mittens, he stepped to one side so that the snow would not fall upon the new fire he was to build, and beat his hands violently against a tree trunk.

This enabled him to separate and strike a second match and to set fire to the remaining fragment of birch bark. But his body had now begun to chill, and he was shivering, so that when he tried to add the first twigs his hand shook and the tiny flame was quenched.

The frost had beaten him. His hands were worthless. But he had the foresight to drop the bunch of matches into his wide mouthed outside pocket before he slipped on his mittens in despair, and started to run up the trail. One cannot run the frost out of wet feet at sixty below and colder, however, as he quickly discovered.

He came round a sharp turn of the creek to where he could look ahead for a mile. But there was no help, no sign of help, only the white trees and the white hills, the quiet cold and the brazen silence! If only he had a comrade whose feet were not freezing, he thought, only such a comrade to start the fire that could save him!

Then his eyes chanced upon another high-water lodgment of twigs and leaves and branches. If he could strike a match all might yet be well. With stiff fingers which he could not bend he got out a bunch of matches, but found it impossible to separate them.

He sat down and awkwardly shuffled the bunch about on his knees until he got it resting on his palm with the sulphur ends projecting, somewhat in the manner the blade of a hunting knife would project when clutched in the fist.

But his fingers stood straight out. They could not clutch. This he overcame by pressing the wrist of the other hand against them, and so forcing them down upon the bunch. Time and again, holding thus by both hands, he scratched the bunch on his leg and finally ignited it. But the flame burned into the flesh of his hand, and he involuntarily relaxed his hold. The bunch fell into the snow, and while he tried vainly to pick it up, sizzled and went out.

Again he ran, by this time badly frightened. His feet were utterly devoid of sensation. He stubbed his toes once on a buried log, but beyond pitching him into the snow and wrenching his back, it gave him no feelings.

His fingers were helpless and his wrists were beginning to grow numb. His nose and cheeks he knew were freezing, but they did not count. It was his feet and hands that were to save him if he was to be saved.

He recollected being told of a camp of moose hunters somewhere above the forks of Paul Creek. He must be somewhere near it, he thought, and if he could find it he yet might be saved. Five minutes later he came upon it, lone and deserted, with drifted snow sprinkled inside the pine bough shelter in which the hunters had slept. He sank down, sobbing. All was over. In an hour at best, in that terrific temperature, he would be an icy corpse.

But the love of life was strong in him, and he sprang to his feet. He was thinking quickly. What if the matches did burn his hands? Burned hands were better than dead hands. No hands at all were better than death. He floundered along the trail until he came upon another high-water lodgment. There were twigs and branches, leaves and grasses, all dry and waiting the fire.

Again he sat down and shuffled the bunch of matches on his knees, got it into a place on his palm, with the wrist of his other hand forced the nerveless fingers down against the bunch, and with the wrist kept them there. At the second scratch the bunch caught fire, and he knew that if he could st[illegible] pain he was saved. He choked with the sulphur fumes, and the blue flame licked the flesh of his hands.

At first he could not feel it, but it burned quickly in through the frosted surface. The odor of the burning flesh—his flesh—was strong in his nostrils. He writhed about in his torment, yet held on. He set his teeth and swayed back and forth until the clear white flame of the burning match shot up, and he had applied that flame to the leaves and grasses.

An anxious five minutes followed, but the fire gained steadily. Then he set to work to save himself. Heroic measures were necessary, such was his extremity, and he took them.

Alternately rubbing his hands with snow and thrusting them into the flames, and now and again beating them against the hard trees, he restored their circulation sufficiently for them to be of use to him. With his hunting knife he slashed the straps from his pack, unrolled his blanket and got out dry socks and footgear.

Then he cut away his moccasins and bared his feet. But while he had taken liberties with his hands he kept his feet fairly away from the fire and rubbed them with snow. He rubbed till his hands grew numb, when he would cover his feet with the blanket, warm his hands by the fire and return to the rubbing.

For three hours he worked till the worst effects of the freezing had been counteracted. All that night he stayed by the fire, and it was late the next day when he limped pitifully into the camp on the Cherry Creek Divide.

In a month's time he was able to be about on his feet, although the toes were destined always after that to be very sensitive to frost. But the scars on his hands he knows he will carry to the grave. And — "Never travel alone!" he now lays down the precept of the north.—Youth's Companion.

"Johnny Bull" is Slow.

A striking example of the conservatism that still obtains in certain lines of business in London, says the correspondent of the New York Herald, was brought to my notice the other day.

A young American came to London on his way to the Argentine Republic for his health. He noticed how far behind advertising methods were compared to those in vogue in America, and on inquiry learned that the cards in omnibuses and cars are never changed during an entire year. He called on several of the largest advertising agents, submitted the idea of frequent change and offered to develop it for a percentage. The manager of one concern looked bored and said: "We were asked by a certain company in the United States to change their advertisement at least quarterly. But when we submitted the proposition to our directors they agreed that it was too much trouble."

Sponges of Rubber.

Novelty is shown in a sponge that has made its appearance. It is of Russian manufacture and resembles closely a dark brown sponge, but while it consists chiefly of holes, whatever solid material there is of it is rubber. These sponges come in two sizes, oblong, with rounded corners. Whether, being made of rubber, they are less likely to form germ repositories than the genuine articles remains to be seen.

The Genesis of Fogs.

Mr. Rollo Russell has for many years studied the formation of fogs, and now prints his principal conclusions. Mist and fog are ordinarily caused by the mixture of currents of air of different temperatures. Fogs that do not depend on the meeting of such currents are rare, but there are many cases of meeting currents where no fogs are produced.

Early Agricultural Exhibitions.

The first agricultural exhibition held within the limits of the United States is said to have been organized and carried to a successful conclusion at Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, in 1810. The claim is disputed, various towns and counties in New England asserting that agricultural fairs or expositions were held in them at an earlier date.

Many thousands of dollars are spent throughout the year in the purchase of new packs of cards [illegible] replace those soiled by frequent [illegible] Now a German inventor [illegible] a machine to [illegible] of 7000 [illegible] the cards and [illegible] march [illegible] ways.

WHEN SIZE DOESN'T COUNT.

My little boy came running in
Our house one recent day;
His pretty nose was minus skin,
I much regret to say.
On leaving home his two bright eyes
With laughter had been stirred;
Now he had three, to my surprise
(A black one was the third).

Out poured his tale: how Jimmy Jones
Had caught him unaware,
And mopped the pavement with his bones
While pulling out his hair.
But, then, oh, triumph of the tale!
That youth went on to say
He'd tackled Jimmy, tooth and nail,
And "licked him every way."

Seeking to hide my sinful pride
From that small urchin's view,
I said, "How could you lick him good?
Jim's bigger far than you."
Whereat with scorn that sturdy elf
Looked fixedly at me,
And straighaway he rid himself
Of this philosophy:

"He's bigger'n me? Why, Papa Jack
Bigness don't count, I say.
My pony's swifter on a track
Than a cart horse any day;
My pouter pigeon has a throat
Beats any living thing,
But not one single little note
I've heard that pouter sing.

"The el'phant's big as any house,
And weighs about ten ton;
But could an el'phant catch a mouse
If mousie tried to run?"
Some more comparisons as pat
That small boy with a grin
Shot forth at me; and while I sat
My little wife came in.

She only weighs a hundred pounds,
But when she saw my pride
In Willie's pugilistic rounds
Her voice rang high and wide.
Such scorn! such fire! I quickly fled,
Defeated, from the din,
And as I went that small boy said,
"Say, pa, does bigness win?"
—John O'Keefe.

Helen—"So your sister Julia is married?" Herbert—"Yes." Helen—"Which one of those men she used to make fun of did she marry?"—Puck.

"Does Billy Billions get much fun out of his automobile?" 'I don't believe he does. I never hear of his being arrested."—Washington Star.

To mask as things of sentiment
Our ailments oft make bold;
We think we're melancholy when
We're merely taking cold.
—Washington Star.

He—"College graduates do not always marry." She—"Well, when a girl has had a lot of money spent on her education it makes her awfully particular."—Detroit Free Press.

Kwoter—"There's no doubt about that old saying about driving a horse to water." Kidder—"Yes, and although a man may drive a pen, a pencil must be lead."—Philadelphia Press.

Nurse—"You dreadful children, where have you been?" Young Hopeful—"Oh, nursie, we've been trying to drown those dear little ducks, but they will come to the top."—Punch.

"Will I hav' a harp when I die an' go to hevvun?" asked little Bobbie. "I hope so," replied his mother. "Aw," said Bobbie, impatiently, "I'd ruther hav' a drum."—Ohio State Journal.

A woman's crowning glory,
In ancient song and story,
Was woman's wealth of hair; but that
Was long ago. 'Tis now her hat.
—Philadelphia Record.

"Did I understand you to say that she lowered herself when she married him?" "Yes. She slid down from a third-story window, using a rope made of bedclothes."—Chicago Record-Herald.

He—"It isn't always safe to judge by appearances, you know." She—"Quite true. I once knew a young man who wore a yachting cap and who really owned a boat."—Chicago News.

"Can you make me a set of teeth that will look natural?" asked the patient. "My dear sir," replied the tooth-carpenter, "the teeth I make are so natural they fairly ache."—Chicago News.

"Amy feels terribly about her new dress. She knows it isn't a bit becoming." "What makes her think so?" "Why, several of her girl friends have told her it looks perfectly sweet."—Philadelphia Bulletin.

"Harold, I must have your hair shingled," observed the fond mother, as she curled the little fellow's golden tresses. "Ain't my sailor hat a good enuf roof?" asked the youngster innocently.—Ohio State Journal.