

LESSON

from **To Build a Fire** (fiction)
by Jack London

The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. 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. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, and they seemed **remote** from his body and from him. When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger-ends.

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 the knees; and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as if by fire. 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 **fault** or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the

spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them **directly** on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully **freighted**. Each time he had pulled a twig he had given a slight **agitation** to the tree—an agitation scarcely noticeable, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough **capsized** its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. 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. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. No man should travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. If he had only had a trail mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail mate could have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

• • Exercise 1: Context Clues

Read the passage above, paying special attention to the words in dark type. These are the Master Words you will study in this lesson. As you read, look for context clues in the sentences and paragraphs around each Master Word. Circle any words and phrases that give clues to the meaning of the Master Words.

Master Words

Place a check by words you feel you know; underline words you don't know.

agitation

capsize

fault

freighted

remote

avalanche

directly

folly

numb

sheath