

Text Two



To build a fire

The man, travelling across snow-covered country, has
fallen through the ice. His feet are now wet and this
is very dangerous. He needs to dry his feet and shoes before
he can go on. Although he has managed to light a fire under
a pine tree, all the time he is getting colder and colder.

There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his shoes. They were coated with ice; the thick socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to the knees; and the shoe laces were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration. For a moment he tugged with his numb fingers, then, realising the folly of it, he drew his sheath-knife to cut them.

But before he could cut the laces, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the tree. He should have built it in the open.

Now, the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its branches. No wind had blown for weeks, and each branch was fully loaded with snow. High up in the tree one branch capsized its load of snow. This fell on the branches 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!

For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. 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 through frostbite. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and it would be some time before the second fire was ready.

He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs. He could not bring his frozen fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss.

He gathered a bunch of matches and scratched them along his leg. They flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He held the blazing bunch to the birch bark. As he so held it, he became aware of a sensation in his frozen hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark.

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 began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel between the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. 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 grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke - and went out.