



Read Rhyme Repeat

To Build a Fire

Theater Adaptation
by Jill Craddock

To Build A Fire
Rhyming Reader's Theater Adaptation by Jill Craddock

Characters

MAN

NATURE

DOG

DOG

Man, why are we out here, today of all days?
It's too cold. For warmth, we should curl into the snow,
Not walk freezing beneath this sky-span of gray.

MAN

Dog! Heel! I'm headed for those hills, all that gold.
You will not turn away.

NATURE

Hills? This isn't California's gold rush in 1849.
That's Canada's highest mountain you aim for, in the Yukon.
Be very careful, sir. Let the height of this mountain be a sign.
The Klondike Gold Rush is a frightful phenomenon.

MAN

Ha! That's Canada's highest mountain?
Surely it's an ant-mound compared to the heights reached in the United States.

NATURE

Its peak is at 20,000 feet. How do you think that rates?

MAN

Without a doubt, the U.S. holds many a mountain higher.

NATURE

There's just one, in Alaska, which your government has not yet acquired.

MAN

Huh. Well, every time you turn 'round these days, a new transaction transpires.

NATURE

Son, you're hiking the Klondike region in the Yukon, now.
Be forewarned: to make your goal, you'll need to use all your know-how.
Welcome, nonetheless, to this seldom-traveled trail.
May you and your four-legged companion prevail.

MAN

Thank you, sir. I do appreciate all you have to say.
But if you don't mind, we'll be on our way.

NATURE

Sir? You have me confused with Father Time.
I am Mother Nature, and you're meeting me in my prime.

MAN

Ma'am, my apologies.

DOG

Can we please pause? Burrow in? I think I might actually freeze.
There's been no sun for days. It's three feet of ice and three feet of snow below.
Even with all my fur, I sense—I smell—it's simply too cold to go.
Man? Isn't your instinct telling you what I already know?

MAN

No. We are cold and uncomfortable. That is a fact.
To overcome it, we move quick, and we don't look back.
One mile we'll cover each and every fifteen minutes.
Like Greeks going for the gold, we are in it to win it.

(He spits.)

DOG

Your spit freezes before it hits the ground.
I'm apprehensive. Your plan is just unsound.
Get a thermometer. It's seventy-five below.
In this weather, if our feet get wet, we'll lose at least a toe.
But my job is to serve you.
Let our sure-to-be perilous journey continue.

MAN

I've got food for us both, and we're traveling light.
Sure, the weather is shivery and brisk.
Yes, for great reward, we are taking some risk.
But you'll see—the voyage will turn out all right.
At our pace, we can even take a moment, now, to eat,
And still make it to the forks by twelve-thirty.

DOG

Fine. But your beard, Master, is awfully dirty.

MAN

That's the risk you take spitting tobacco in this freeze.

(Touches his beard)

Look at that; the juice didn't even make it to my knees.
But you, you're like a bloodhound; your disposition's positively droopy.
Whine, whine, whine. Buck up, would ya, Snoopy?
We'll be with the boys by six o'clock.

DOG

Snoopy?! Come on! I'm sharp as a hawk!
I'm at least as smart as Scooby Doo.

NATURE

Hello? No one has heard of either of them, yet, you two.
It's only 1908. Get your story straight.
Get back, Man, to saying what you would do for a Klondike bar,
As, clearly, you'll traverse a subarctic landscape tremendously far.

MAN

Aside from my nose and cheeks going just a touch numb,
I've suffered only when hearing this dumb dog complain.
You're right, Ms. Nature: for a fat gold Klondike bar, I'll happily endure some pain.
Only problem? These white sheets of ice look solid, you know.
But there are bubbling springs of ice water beneath half this snow.
And the water's just deep enough to lose a few toes.
The mongrel's quite slight, compared to my weight.
So if there's a problem, he's going to be safe.
At the first crack of ice, it will be me who goes.
Luckily, I can avoid this type of trouble.
So, Dog, let's pick up the pace. C'mon! On the double.
I can almost always tell the holes by the look of the snow.
If you look real close, you see it sinks down wet and low.
That's where you come in—to test for solid land.

(Pushes dog toward trouble area)

DOG

Hey! Don't push me into the freezing quicksand.

MAN

Go on. You're man's best friend. Give me a hand.

DOG

(DOG goes forward and breaks through surface, flounders, steps to one side.)

There. I've given you two legs and two paws.

You've given me nothing but pause.

(Starts to bite ice from between toes)

MAN

I'm sorry. Let me help you with that. I didn't mean to cause you pain.

DOG

You didn't mean to cause yourself pain.

MAN

That's not true. I'm—

DOG

Inhumane.

MAN

I'm trying to help you. Look. My mittens are off. Come here.

(Beats hands savagely across his chest to avoid numbing)

DOG

Nice try. But you're flesh, not steel. Put on your mittens. You need that gear.

MAN

In just fifteen seconds my fingers are completely numb.

You're absolutely right, I fear.

I can't tell if my toes are cold or frozen or warm.

NATURE

Build a fire. Recall the counsel you received about weathering this cold?

Remember the man you spoke to when you were in Sulphur Creek?

MAN

That doddering chap was ancient, a hundred years old.

NATURE

Arctic wisdom lives in that hundred-year-old physique.

MAN

(Builds a fire)

A fire I can handle.

NATURE

Fire is no joke.

MAN

This single match starts our fire and my smoke.

(Leans back and puffs on pipe)

DOG

I wish that smoke would make you choke
Then in this cold, I could be snug in a hole.
Why won't Nature take its toll?

NATURE

Her toll.

DOG

Ma'am, my apologies.

MAN

The dog thinks he's going to freeze.

NATURE

Left to follow his instinct, he'd be tucked warm in the snow in a blink.
He know what he needs for survival; doesn't see me as his rival.

MAN

(Puts fire out and walks away. Speaking to DOG)

There? Feel better?

(Whips DOG and whistles)

Let's go!

(MAN breaks through snow and is wet halfway to knees.)

Noooooooooo!

(To DOG)

That man, that man at Sulphur Creek, what was it he said?
Run on dry feet, restore circulation.
Walk on wet feet, a bad, bad situation!
I've got to build another fire, right away: I cannot fail.
I can't keep on with these feet. Any stick, any twig is my Holy Grail.

(Takes off mittens to build fire)

Fingers, I beg you, don't fail me now.
Mother Nature, throw me a bone here. Throw me a bough.

DOG

I'll take a bone.

MAN *(Sharply)*

Shut up! Unless you want a headstone.

(MAN starts another fire and feeds it with twigs from a tree branch.)

I can barely feel my feet to stand.
I can't feel these blasted twigs in my hand.
Please, start, Fire, just a spark.
My socks are like steel, they're frozen so hard.

(Fire ignites.)

Ah. That's all I need; just this fire, a bit of heat.
I can make it to the forks, but not if I lose these feet.

(MAN tries to take off socks, but since they are frozen, he takes out knife and prepares to cut socks. Before he can cut, the snow-covered branch of the tree above the fire dumps its load and covers the MAN and fire in snow.)

Aaagghh! Mother Nature, why?

NATURE

You ignored both instinct and common sense,
With your mad-dashing, gold-rushing perseverance.

MAN

Why didn't I listen to that old timer all along?
He told me not to go alone.
But first things first—I must stay calm.
I've built two fires. Surely I can build three.
I'll just light the next one well away from the trees.
Yes, I'll lose a digit or two, but who needs ten toes
When there's gold to behold?
I'll collect every branch I see.

(MAN readies pile of sticks.)

Time may not be on my side,
But I've got the bark here to light.
I can't do it, though. With hands like bricks,
I can't light these sticks.
How can I separate one match from the pack?

DOG

Light them all. There's no turning back.

(MAN clumsily gets matches out and puts them on his lap. He tries to separate them, and they all fall in the snow. He is near tears and puts the snow and matches back on his lap.)

Master, if you would, take a cue from me,
When I want something badly, I use my teeth.

MAN

(Picking up matches with teeth, MAN tries nearly twenty times to light a match before succeeding. The smoke so close to his nose causes him to choke. The match drops into the snow.)

DOG

Don't give up without a fight.

MAN

It's seventy-five below. The old man was right.

DOG

Not all your nerves are frozen in your arm muscles.
There's still a chance, if you can hustle.

MAN

I'll have to light seventy matches simultaneously.

(MAN lights all matches together using forearms and lights a piece of birch bark to throw into the fire.)

I've never seen anything I so truly cherish.
This golden glow means I will not perish.

DOG

Your flesh is sizzling with the light of the flame.

MAN

Aaaaaahhhhhh!! I didn't even feel any pain.

(In his surprise, he drops the still burning birch into the snow, removed from the kindling pile).

Keep burning, Birch. Fire, stay alive.
I'll feed you a few more twigs so you can thrive, and I, survive.
Anything, anywhere, please: even a slim bit of wood like a shim.
Any bramble or brier—or a limb for a limb!

(The MAN desperately tries to feed the flame of the birch and fails. The fire goes out. He is beginning to lose his mind. He turns to DOG.)

MAN

You! Your blood churns warm,
Beneath all that fur and bone.
You're a creature of such devotion,
That your presence gives me a notion.
Give up your skin. Come.
Your empty body will keep me from all harm.

DOG *(Suspicious)*

You've come undone.

MAN

Come!

DOG

(Comes to the MAN. MAN holds DOG, while he snarls, whines, and struggles)

You can't do it. You can't take my life.

MAN

I would. But I can't.
My hands are frozen. I can't feel my knife.

(MAN lets DOG go and stumbles up the creek. DOG follows.)

I'm afraid. I don't want to die.
I'll run until I reach the camp. I'll never accept defeat.

NATURE

Run as you will, but you've ice blocks for feet.
You've remained calm so far. Try not to panic.
It won't help now to let yourself get frantic.

MAN

I'm just supposed to lie down in this snow?

NATURE

There are many ways you could choose to go.

MAN

There are worse ways to do it, I suppose. It's not so bad as people think.
I can't help but notice, though, you are tremendously unsympathetic.

NATURE

My gift to you is a quiet death, no worse than an anesthetic.

(DOG howls)

MAN

Why don't you take the dog, too?

NATURE

Because he abides by my rules.

MAN

As a force majeure, you're terribly cruel.

(DOG leaves)

Where's he going, when things are so dire?

NATURE

To find men who can build a fire.