

A Box of Matches

February 26, 1924

There are people who have no money, and others who have no faith in the human soul, and others who manage to get through their entire lives with no political convictions. But it is stranger still that there are people who have no matches in their pockets. I know smokers who never have a box of matches in their trousers. These are men who somehow manage without the moral and encouraging presence of matches.

It is not my intention to extol the practical importance of matches; but there are things, such as a pocketknife, matches, a pencil stub and a little notepad, without which I am simply unable to imagine a man's belonging to the male species. These are things which are basic and indispensable to man, not because they are utterly and completely practical, but because they are utterly and completely poetic and smack of adventure. From the time when a boy begins to grasp the epic of life, he finds he cannot manage without certain essential male objects. These are matches, a knife, a pencil stub and a notepad. And a piece of twine. We adults, instead of twine, carry handkerchiefs, the deeper purpose of which is not to blow one's nose, but to tie things up. For a real boy, clothes are only a casing for these five prize possessions. Clothes are only a collection of pockets which serve to hold the four or five chief items of life.

I don't have to tell you all that a pocketknife is: a weapon, an artist's tool, a saw, a crowbar, a lancet, and even a drill; everything that has to do with man as artisan, sculptor, warrior and technician; a handy all-purpose tool, a whole arsenal, and even a workshop consisting of three blades. A pencil serves artistic and scientific functions; it is ^{suitable} ~~used~~ for covering freshly-whitened walls with inscriptions and frescoes; it is witness that the invention and device of writing accompany man everywhere. Truly, the pencil stub in a boy's pocket defines man as a writing animal. The seductiveness of the notepad arises not from its actual contents — with boys, notepads ordinarily are characterized by

non-epic dirt stains and chemically unanalyzable vestiges of personal experience — but from the intriguing and boundless possibilities of all that might be written, scrawled and drawn in it. A notepad is the most wonderful book in the world, for it is a chronicle in which nothing is or ever will be written; it is a portable wall which a boy keeps in his pocket, but it is not to be scribbled on absent-mindedly. It is merely the sheer possibility that something terribly important and historic could be written there which gives a notepad a mysterious and indispensable value. The relevance of the twine is obvious: with it one can bind one's enemies or lash a sail to a sinking ship; if necessary it can also become a whip, a musical instrument, and ^{an all-around} useful ~~device~~ *device* in general. Insofar as music is concerned, a real boy can whistle with his lips or between his fingers (you will observe that men who can't whistle at all can't do much else, either, and are somehow unnatural); and so a boy doesn't need to keep a bugle in his pocket along with the other chief items of life.

And lastly, matches, the most wonderful and important of all objects. I could refer to Prometheus, the fire of the Vestal Virgins, the Eternal Flame and the religious fire cults; I think these ritualistic motives influence the contents of boys' and men's pockets. Do you remember Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett's greatest treasure when their balloon landed on Mysterious Island? A box of matches. A box of matches is to this day a treasure on the Mysterious Island on which a boy lives. A box of matches means the possibility of roasting wild boar on a spit, of lighting a peacepipe, of repelling predatory beasts, of kindling a fire on desolate sandbars and a thousand other romantic possibilities. If I don't have a box of matches in my pocket, I feel dreadfully unsure of myself; I am unable to oppose, with light and fire, the terrible dangers that lie in wait for me. In a foreign land, a full box of matches gives me the same moral support as a watch that runs. I think many people smoke only because matches are such a joy and encouragement to them.

No, for those who don't carry matches, things are somewhat out of

order; these people betray the ideals of their youth; they are people without either the hunting instinct or the spirit of adventure. Something of this sort is pardonable in women; but a man who doesn't carry matches surely has an astonishing lack of fantasy and tradition. He is a thousand times more disgusting than if he didn't carry a handkerchief. And the next time somebody on the street asks me for a light, I'm going to say something awful to him; even if they put me in jail.