

Matches

by

Marjorie L. C. Pickthall

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M A T C H E S

One brought her a gold chain—the other brought her his life

By M. L. C. PICKTHALL



“You at home, Edda?” said Cheaven, opening the door. A moment his great stature filled the doorway, then he entered the room.

Edda Lefroy, sitting at the table, slowly lifted her face to him; she did not otherwise move. Jensen, who had been leaning eagerly over the table, unfolding a small parcel, remained so, the string in his fingers. Only from the warm corner by the stove gran’pa piped suddenly, “Why, ma, it’s Willy Cheaven come home!”

Cheaven went and shook hands with gran’pa. Gran’ma made little chirping noises, catching at his great hands. He bent gravely and kissed her. Then he turned and went to the table.

Behind him gran’pa repeated impatiently, “Eddy, it’s Willy Cheaven come back. Ain’t you goin’ to speak to him?”

The color rosed Edda’s clear face until it seemed luminous. She said steadily, “Will, I’m glad to see you back. You’ve been away a long while. There are—changes——”

“I know,” said Cheaven. “You and Jensen been keepin’ company.”

He drew out a chair and sat down, facing Jensen, with the girl between. Jensen laid down the little parcel he had been holding. He said, looking straight at Cheaven, “I hope she’ll marry me, Will. We’ve been together a lot since you left. It’s all square, ain’t it?”

“It’s all square. There was no promise between us. She just wasn’t sure.”

“Don’t know her own mind,” put in gran’pa unexpectedly.

Edda said gently over her shoulder: “Go on readin’ the paper to gran’ma, dear.”

“*She* don’t know her own mind,” complained gran’pa. “First she wants the shoppin’. Then the fashi’ns. Now she’s asleep.”

Jensen was looking simply and kindly at Cheaven. “Then there’s nothin’ wrong,” he said, “and we can all be friends.”

“Sure,” returned Cheaven directly. They shook hands across Edda, as if for the moment they had forgotten her. In both men was apparent a physical strength so great it involved a certain largeness of soul.

Jensen took up the little parcel again. Suddenly he began to laugh. “Guess what this is, Willy!” he roared. “You just come in time to see. There’s two months’ savin’s right here in this little box. It’s my first gift to my girl!”

Jensen took from the little white box a gold chain with a pretty amethyst pendant. He dangled it in front of Edda on one huge finger. “What you think of this, hey?” he asked proudly.

“It’s real nice,” said the girl slowly. Cheaven agreed, smiling at both.

“She ain’t taken it yet,” chuckled Jensen. “She lets on she don’t care for gifts. Say, Will, what did you bring her?”

Then he blushed and could have struck himself for saying such a thing to Will, who loved Edda too.

But Will only smiled. “I ain’t brought her a thing,” he said at once. “I landed at Port Parry cleaned right out. I got about eighty cents in my pocket—borrowed. Even my clo’es are borrowed,” he explained. “I lost every last thing but myself. And that,” he finished after a pause, looking now at Edda alone, “I’d have lost too, only for thinkin’ you might want it.”

“But the launch?” they said, staring.

“Piled her up near Calumet six weeks back. Lost all my outfit—everythin’ but this.” He laughed and thumped his chest.

Jensen was slowly folding the paper round the jeweler’s box. His fingers worked while his troubled blue eyes were fixed on Cheaven. “Why, Will—” he said. “Why, Will—Why, that’s too bad!”

Edda had been watching Cheaven intently. Now she asked him, “How did you get back from Calumet?”

They saw a change in Cheaven’s familiar face. They were bewildered. For a moment he looked worn, feeble, old. Then they understood—he was remembering suffering.

Edda drew in her breath sharply. That queer, new, vacant gaze of Cheaven’s turned to her, then went back to Jensen.

It was Edda who had questioned him. He replied to Jensen, as if the other man alone would understand. “Why,” he said, “I walked back along the north shore. I had to do it in four days and nights.”

“Why that?” asked Jensen quickly.

“I’d three matches left,” explained Cheaven.

Jensen leaned back in his seat. With a curious stern movement he swept the trivial little jeweler’s box into his pocket.

“I piled the launch up on the tail of a blizzard,” said Will Cheaven. “It was my own fault—I’d no kind of business stoppin’ along there so late. But I’d a get-rich-quick fancy on me, and the whole place is drippin’ copper. Well, I was liftin’ her through the smother. The sun was comin’ out behind. The snow was all gold. I thought I was clear. Then I felt her hit. The waves just took her an’ pitched her like she was a ball. Next thing, I felt the beach hit me.

“For a while I didn’t know much. Then I woke and stood up. I was all over stones and gravel which had froze on to me while I lay.

“The lake was roarin’ for miles, dark blue. There was nothin’ left of the blizzard but a bar of gold mist, and the hard dry little balls of snow rustlin’ all over. Then I saw there was floe-ice smashin’ all along.

“It seemed to come from nowhere in the blizzard. Broke loose from a river, I guess. The sun had come out. It looked fine. And I reckoned up I was sixty miles from a town.

“I beat some life into my hands—beat ’em on the sand till I could feel it. Then I searched my pockets.

“I found an empty pipe, a knife, some string, and three matches. That was all I had left.

“I told you the sun had come out. I fixed them three matches between two stones to dry. I began to see that a considerable lot depended on them.

My match-box must have been in my oilskin coat that I’d just had time to slip clear of when the launch struck on the ledge. I could see a half mile out. There wasn’t a thing to be seen of the launch. She’d just dropped off the ledge into maybe fourteen fathoms. All my food had gone with her—all my outfit. I’d just my frozen clo’es and three wet matches, and sixty miles to go.

“I went and looked at them matches. Seemed to me they was dryin’ some. I took off my clo’es and pegged them out on the rocks that felt a little warm in the sun. There was a few scrub spruces back of the beach. I cut some branches, and while I was waiting I licked myself up and down the beach with branches of spruce. It kept me warm, runnin’ up and down, but it made me ter’ble hungry.

“All the while, I thought things over.

“The question was, would I stop and try to raise some grub off the land, so to say—fish or somethin’—or would I go right on without it while my stren’th held?

“I fixed on the last.

“My gun and lines was gone. Suppose I spent hours gettin’ a crow or a whitefish, would it make up for the lost time? No, I reckoned my best chance was to walk east till I dropped.

“My clo’es dried a little. I put ’em on. I ripped three bits of linin’ outer my coat and wrapped a match in each after paddin’ it with dry moss, and buttoned them up in my shirt. Then I set right out to walk home.

“My stren’th was in me yet, though I was cold and hungry. My idea was to make good time the first two days while I’d be strong. I walked along the beach under the cliffs. The painted cliffs were full of caves—nothin’ in ’em but empty swallows’ nests. I thought maybe I’d pass the night in a cave, but at sunset the beach stopped and the waves run right into them, thunderin’ with the early floe. I had to climb up and walk along the top.

“It was ter’ble cold, the temp’rature droppin’ after the blizzard, and dead still. The ice-blink was all mixed up with the stars. One minute everythin’d be gray, then green. I went on for hours. I seen one snowy owl. Then I slipped and fell on the rock.

“It was no wonder, hittin’ that pace in the dark; what surprised me was that I couldn’t get up. Then I realized that for the first time in my life I was beat out. It gave me a queer kind of scare. I got up at last and looked for a place to rest.

“There didn’t seem any place on the cliffs. Soon’s I quit walkin’, the cold shut round me like a suit of clo’es, I listened over the edge, and by the sound the lake was breakin’ on a beach again. I found a ravine and went down it, feelin’ for loose wood.

There, in the dark, I gathered what fuel I could. I come out on the beach. I found a little holler in the cliff—hardly a cave. In the sand floorin’ of it I scooped a hole. I went and found stones and made kind of a fireplace. I lined it with bunch-grass for fear it’d be damp. Then I took out one of the little bundles that held a match. It seemed funny to take all that trouble for a match.

“You’ll remember my match-box was lost. I had a flat bit o’ sandstone all ready to strike the match on. Then a queer sick feelin’ come over me all in a minute. I shook so I nearly quit hold on the match.

“The scare come before the thought. Then the thought come.

“I couldn’t remember what kind of a match it was.

“Was it one of them strike-only-on-the-box kind? If so, would it strike on sandstone?

“And if it wouldn’t, hadn’t I better quit—let go right there?”

He smiled slowly at Jensen. “For a while,” he said, “I was scared even to *try* and strike that match.

“Then I took up the sandstone and struck it.

“The head give a little fizz and flew off. I couldn’t see where it went. I looked all over. I thought it was no good. Then, while I was crawlin’ round my little cave, feelin’ after it in the sand, a little flame sprung up from the dry grass in the fireplace. The head had fallen there. There must have been a spark. I nursed that spark with chips and twigs and shreds of bark. I thought it was the loveliest thing I ever seen. I went out and found drift-wood on the beach. I brought it back to the little holler, all rosy with the light like a house door. I made a big fire. Then I lay down and slep’ almost before I hit the sand.

“That was a good night.

“I woke up with the fire dead out and sunlight shinin’ into the holler. I hadn’t meant to sleep so long. The fire’d been out a long while. I was stiff with cold. When I went to move, it was like movin’ wood. I knew I mustn’t stop. I left the holler and turned east, walking for all I was worth.

“There was beach ahead of me, far as I could see. I was glad. Mile after mile there was just the shush—shush—shush of the short lake waves on the beach and an echo from the cliffs. Mile after mile. And I was hungry—*hungry*.

“Well. I guessed I could stand it. I walked right on.

“I reckon I’d done about six miles when I looked back.

“Clear in sight behind me was the point of cliffs where I’d had my fire in the night. They was all striped red and pink. I knew ’em.

“I stood and stared back at them. Again that queer, sick kind of scare come over me. I thought I’d done six miles. And there was them cliffs not two miles away.

“I’d put in the effort for six miles. And made two.

“I was ter’ble surprised. I’d no notion meals’d make that differ.

“I walked right on.

“All day I walked on. The country never changed. Seemed as if it was the same bit of beach under the same painted cliffs. I was scared to look back, for fear I hadn’t moved. All day my stren’th held. It only quit at sunset.

“I was crossin’ a vein of rock. Beyond it was a pool. I stood on the rock and said aloud, as if I was crazy, ‘I’m goin’ to fall in that pool!’ And I did. Pitched in and fainted, with only sense enough to twist as I fell so the matches wouldn’t get wet. My luck was clear out that time.”

Luck?” repeated gran’pa shrilly. “Luck? Pshaw, you don’t need to care about luck if you know yore own mind.”

“When I come to,” Cheaven went on in his quiet way, “I couldn’t feel I had a body to hurt. That come later. It was all over. It was—peace.” He made a slow gesture to try to express the quality of that deadly peace. “I was just alive enough to know that if I stopped I’d die. And I didn’t care. I—wanted to stop.”

Involuntarily, as it seemed, Edda spoke. “What made you care?”

“You,” said Cheaven gently. “But you’re not to feel bad. It’s all square. I only thought, ‘Maybe, after all, she’ll want me. I’d best go on, in case——’

“By and by, I got out of the pool. Ice come with me, great plates of it. I rolled in the sand, tryin’ to get life into me. It was pain when it come. *Pain*. In an hour I could use my hands. Then I went about and gathered sticks and dry grass for my fire. I’d forgotten food and sleep and everythin’ else, only the fire—to be warm.

“I fixed it all under a rock. I took out one of the matches and struck it on a stone. Nothin’ come.

“I struck it again and again. I struck it till the head was all wore off. It was no good.

“I’d just one match left.

“I took that out and felt of it. I ached for that fire like I’d never ached for anythin’. But I put it away.”

He looked now at Jensen. With perfect simplicity, he explained: “Only for her, I must have lighted the third match. But I knew I might live through the second night. I’d never live through the third.

“There was only one thing to do. I must keep on—go on all night, and sleep when the sun come out.

“I went on all night.”

He was silent. After a moment Jensen heaved himself in his chair with a long breath, and the paper of the wedding-gift crackled in his pocket.

“Just like that,” Cheaven went on suddenly. “The sand was all ice, and it crackled just like that as I went over it. Sometimes I walked into the cliff. Sometimes into the surf. I guess it was that night I got my feet froze. It was my feet kep’ me at Port Parry two weeks. Sometimes I lay down on the sand. But by that time I didn’t want to sleep. It was gone. I seemed to be miles away from myself. Light and queer. Once or twice I heard myself say, ‘Can you give me a match? Say, can you fellers give me a match?’ And of course there wasn’t any fellers, nor any matches but the one buttoned into my shirt.

“The third dawn come. I was layin’ on the sand under a rock. Maybe I’d fainted again. I don’t know. I seen first the rock cast a shadow. Then that the shadow drew toward me.

“The sun reached me. Then I slept.

“I don’t know how long. The sun was high when I went on. There was no heat in it. I was weak.

“My head wasn’t just right. I’d find myself wastin’ time, pokin’ in pools and creeks. I didn’t rightly know what for. First it’d seem to be matches, then mudfish. I didn’t find neither. But under the rope of stale weed on an old high-water mark I found some little fish, rotten and frozen. I ate ’em, walkin’ along.

“Then I’d dropped again. And it was night. Time to light my last fire.

“I had to do it. But then even the longin’ for fire had gone. I was so used up I didn’t know if I was warm or cold, nor care if I lived or died, except for Edda here.

“I crawled about the beach on my hands and knees, fixin’ the spot for my fire, gatherin’ wood. It took me a long while. I had to carry the wood bit by bit, I was that weak.

I took out the last match and lit the fire. I watched the little flames creep along the bits of dry grass and lay hold on the twigs. It seemed like my life was risin’ in me as the flames rose. I hugged the fire so close my clo’es was scorched. I was burned, and never knew.

“Then I heard somethin’ hiss into the heat. I lifted my face.

“It was rainin’, a cold fine rain that froze as it fell.

“I sat there and watched the rain put my last fire out.

“I still sat there when there was nothin’ but embers and charred sticks with the thin dark ice coatin’ them. The night was all round me, and the bitter rain. There seemed nothin’ left to do but lie down by the ashes and let go. I knew the freezin’ wet would put *me* out quick as it had the fire. It seemed to me that just to quit *tryin’* to live would be like heaven—I was all used up. I just wanted to stop there and feel the rain on my face till I didn’t feel it no more.”

Again, after a moment, Jensen stirred in his chair with that long deep breath. “You went on, Willy,” he said, as if it were a question. “You went on?”

“Yes,” answered Cheaven, and his eyes rested on Edda. “I got up and went on. I went on all night.”

He turned his hands palms upward on the table. They saw that the flesh was scored with half-healed wounds. “My knees is like that too, so I guess I must have crawled. But I don’t remember one thing of that last night. Not one thing.”

He laughed softly. “Queer to go on that way and not remember a thing about it! Well, well!”

“What do you remember?” asked Jensen, with strange gentleness.

“A fire! Yes. A fire in a rainy morning, and a little tent, and a lot o’ wild ducks hung up on a line, and a feller in a gray sweater starin’ at me over the fire. His name’s Williams. He’s a white man. And I crawled right up to him, and I ses, ‘Say, have you got a match?’ ”

Cheaven looked from Edda to Jensen as if he expected them to smile as he was smiling. “I was just crazy,” he explained. “It was only two miles away. Yes. I’d done sixty-three. He was real good to me, and fixed me up at the hospital while I was sick, and loaned me these clo’es and ten dollars. I come right on here to see how Edda was. I ain’t got a dollar left. I got to get to work right away.” He looked at Edda. “So you see how it is,” he said apologetically, “I ain’t brought you a thing.”

The girl’s deep slate-gray eyes rested on him strangely.

“Yes,” she said, “I see.”

Cheaven looked relieved. “Not a thing,” he repeated—“unless—why, yes, unless you’d like these here!”

He felt in his pockets and smilingly laid before her on the table three little objects.

There were the small stubs of two burnt matches and one complete match with the head worn away.

“There’s what’s left of them three matches,” chuckled Will.

No one spoke or moved. After a minute the silence troubled him. He said quickly, “*Why*, Edda!”

The girl did not lift her head, which was bent over the matches on the table. But she was weeping—weeping so passionately that her tears splashed on the cloth about the three dead matches. Cheaven stared at her helplessly. It was Jensen at last who spoke, not to him, but to Edda.

“Sixty-three miles along the north shore in November with nothin’ to eat but dead fish,” he said softly. “Because you might want him.”

“Yes.”

“I could have died,” said Jensen, “but I couldn’t have lived to do that for any one.”

Both talked in the strangest still way, the grave man and the weeping girl, as if Cheaven was not there.

The girl closed her hands like a little fence round the three bits of matches. "It's his life," she said, "he's brought me here."

"Yes," agreed Jensen. "I brought you a gold chain. He's brought you his life."

"Jensen," said Cheaven roughly, "what do you mean?"

"I mean we got to get square about this keepin' company business." Jensen still addressed Edda. "You—you wasn't *sure* when he went away. Then you thought you liked *me*. I guess you do, some. But this is a business in which we *got* to—to know our own minds."

"Yes." She was touching the matches softly with her fingers and weeping all the while.

"Well, then," said Jensen, "well, we'll start afresh. Him and me'll be on just the same footin' for a month. At the end of it we'll come and see which—which you'll take: My gold chain or his dead matches."

"Jensen!" cried Cheaven again. "Jensen!"

But Jensen got up quickly and went out. In a minute Cheaven sprang up and followed him. They could be heard talking outside.

Edda sat still, her hands enclosing the matches. She had not stirred at all when they went out. Only her eyes had followed the man who had brought her nothing but himself.

From the warm shadow gran'pa spoke, his hand on gran'ma's. "It's a good thing to know your own mind while you're young."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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