

Helen Allam

CANVAS CHAIRS

They couldn't say now that she didn't have a boy. They, with their notes proudly passed in class — A.B. loves C.D. with a perforated heart — E.F. please meet G.H. after school — or, even more prestigious, I.J. will you sit with me at the pictures on Saturday, K.L.

Well there'd been no notes for her. And she'd felt it badly. So badly indeed that one officious girl had taken it upon herself to allocate M.N. to her, totally unbeknownst to him. For M.N., rejected as he was by all the other girls, would certainly have rejected her.

Was it because she was so small and weedy? Or because she was just a kid, by far the youngest in the Scholarship class of 1926? She knew better. Her big sister, a honeysuckle to the bees if ever there was one, had explained her boylessness to her once and for all. She just didn't have "it". And in a day when Clara Bow had spectacularly defined "it" for the whole world, her sister was its greatest living local exponent. And authority.

Well she just wished they could all see her now. Especially the kids in the class, or at least those of them who'd come to this Saturday matinee at the "Princess". But she was rather afraid they wouldn't. For one thing, in spite of the blinding sunlight outside, inside the building all was darkness and gloom, thanks to the black curtains drawn across the exits and the closure of the pushout windows in the corrugated iron walls. And for another, they were sitting, he and she (you could almost say lying) in low canvas chairs; so they were lost to the view of everyone, except perhaps those vague figures in the same row on their right. On their left was the hot iron wall, beating in the February heat like a pulse.

Of course she didn't really know him. Had never seen him in her life before until the moment when, after interval and with the main picture started, he'd suddenly moved up one seat into the other half of the double canvas chair. Where before interval her sister had been sitting. Where by rights she ought to be sitting now.

But "madame", as her mother sometimes called her sister, was a law unto herself. She'd gone up the back to sit with a boy, that's what madame had done. Deliberately disobeying her mother's strict injunction: sit with your sister *all the time*, mind, and don't leave her side once. Who was chaperoning whom was perfectly clear to all three of them as her mother added, "I'll hear about it if you play up, don't you

worry. Little Miss Blabbermouth here will soon see to that. And if you do, this will be the last time, the very last time . . . ” Etc.

“I’ll tell Mother” she’d threatened brutally when her sister had made moves to go, at interval. These moves had included a bribe — half a packet of Columbine caramels — and “Look,” her sister had sworn on her honour, “I’m just going up the back to sit with Madeline.” But “Madeline” had become a codeword used to cover a multitude of sins and “It’s not Madeline at all. It’s that boy!” she’d fumed, near to tears. “If you go I’ll tell.” Her sister’d tossed her bobbed redhair. “Jealous cat! What do you know about boys!” And she’d fled on the instant, hopping lightly over all the legs in the row to vanish into the gloom. For the house lights went out . . .

She was left alone with her own inadequacy. It seemed as though the whole world, except her, had boys. What the good of them was was still a mystery to her, a mystery which so far not a single soul would help her to unravel. You weren’t supposed to listen to adults’ talk at home, and at school the other girls would stifle their whispers and giggles as “the kid” approached. As for asking her mother! You might as well go right out and ask a policeman how best to rob a bank!

And yet it seemed that, without boys, you were as nothing.

She’d wondered why this boy (man?) in the next seat had moved up into her sister’s place. Perhaps a lady in front of him had had a big hat? She herself could see the screen only by stretching and craning her neck, so tended at times to get tired. She would fall back then and simply chew her caramels, or the cud of her grudge against “madame”. All she felt about the man was that he was a nuisance insofar as he claimed more than his fair share of space. On such a hot day. Bored by Ronald Colman and Vilma Banky, she almost fell asleep

About the time of the moonlit love scene, when the flickering black and white of the screen melted to soft blue and the thumper at the piano lingered cloyingly on her notes, an arm came from the man (boy?) and casually laid itself across the back of the chair. He himself did not take his eyes off the screen, but moved perhaps a fraction closer. Now a smell of sweat mingled with the sweet aroma of caramels and she shrank a little into herself. In doing so she slumped further into the canvas hammock. For her now all but the heads of the screen lovers and the treetops in the garden disappeared and when they spoke, she could read only the first line of their printed dialogue.

Sure of her own shortcomings, she was the last one to put any interpretation on the man’s nearness other than perhaps another big hat in front. She was pitifully free of illusions. She saw herself as others must see her, a stick of a kid in black and white check, short socks and

black shoes. So, politely, with the deference she'd been taught to accord to adults, she yielded further room on her side and finished up practically on the woodwork frame. The man took no notice. And so they sat. She watched what she could see of the picture.

After a while the man's arm, which seemed to live a life of its own for he didn't appear to direct it, dropped until it slipped behind her head and lay along her thin shoulders. And stayed there. She was staggered. She didn't know what to do. She certainly couldn't move any further and she couldn't, in a way, protest; for he never once looked at her, never took the slightest notice of her and apparently assumed no responsibility whatsoever for the behaviour of his arm. She hesitated about making herself ridiculous by action of any kind — adults had always had a way of putting her in the wrong. She just sat there, hunched and uncomfortable.

The one good thing might be that now she could claim *something* to the girls in the class. "At the pictures on Saturday a boy put his arm round me . . ." "Who?" "Never you mind," she would say. But it was very, very strange . . . to her anyway.

After a while, the arm withdrew itself and the man took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He put the handkerchief back into his pocket. And stared at the screen. But the arm came back to its former place, stayed a few minutes then, like a snake, slipped to coil itself around her waist.

Here she did become panicky. For well she knew that truly she had no waist, as such. Or was, as her mother had often said when she sewed for her, "all waist". Just one long skinny waist, nothing above, nothing below. Feelings of inferiority, rather than of outrage, led her to push his arm away. Then, much shaken, she sat very still.

As for him, he took the rebuff, or his arm took the rebuff, quite casually. For a while he sat perfectly absorbed in the screen — he certainly ignored her. So detached was his attitude that she felt any complaint, however timidly couched, would meet with an angry "What on earth are you talking about?" And anyone sitting behind could have vouched for his decent and proper attention to the picture. She crouched further inside herself and would have if she could have, become invisible.

Suddenly he yawned, stretched himself, and re-settled. Apparently absentmindedly (for it did seem to have a mind of its own) his arm came to life again and coiled again round her waist. She froze. She was afraid now, afraid of making a "blithering idiot" of herself, a thing she was very prone to do. Instead of taking some step — but what? — she sat still and tried to work it all out.

Obviously there was some mistake. He'd mistaken her for someone else. This explanation was strongly reinforced by the fact of his never once, as it seemed, looking at her. Who then, she wondered, did he think she was? Did he perhaps think it was her big sister he had his arm around? Had he perhaps not been in his seat when "madame" had left to sit up the back? Could he possibly be one of her sister's legendary legion of ex-boyfriends? In any case what was she to do? How was she to act so as to least make a fool of herself or incur his righteous wrath?

Do nothing, something prompted her. Take the goods the gods provide, summed up her thoughts — in your case, a chance to claim having sat with a boy at the pictures. Now you too can whisper and giggle in corners with the girls, or draw a heart in your exercise book, putting in an arrow and initials. But what initials? She had no idea of his name and she dared not break the spell by asking.

After what seemed a long time, during which she sat, exquisitely uncomfortable, pincered by the wilful arm and the hard woodwork frame of the chair, something different happened. Very deliberately, very boldly, the man swivelled his eyes from the screen and turned them directly on her. A thrill of horror ran through her. This was the moment of truth. Now he would really see who she was, not her sparky sister but her insignificant self. Like everyone else he would find her sadly wanting, would detect in a moment her total lack of "it". Perhaps he would be very angry with her. For hadn't she been guilty of false pretences? Should a person in her position have allowed him to go on making such a dreadful mistake? What could she have said? How could she possibly hope to have explained that it had been less embarrassing to her to sit there and put up with it than to presume to remonstrate with an adult? How easy it might be for him to put her in the wrong with his fellow adults! For she knew only too well that she had partly colluded — that was what, in a way, her inactivity amounted to. Her desperate need to hold her head up with the girls at school had betrayed her; but who would believe such a weak excuse? Her face was a study in guilt and shame.

The thing she dreaded most was that he would make a public scene. The very best she could hope for was that he would get up in disgust and go away. His — or anybody's — scorn would be hard to bear but God, God, let it be just his and not the whole theatre's, including her ever-scornful sister . . .

But there was no scorn, no anger, no disgust in the inscrutable eyes that looked into hers. After a long moment he gave a sort of sigh, one might almost have said of satisfaction, then calmly turned his gaze

back to the screen. That was that. He seemed to wash his hands of her.

Metaphorically, that was. But not literally. For it wasn't long at all before his left arm again rose into life and re-coiled around her waist, while his right hand, which up to now hadn't been involved at all, fastened upon her bare thigh. The tattoo on the back of this hand trembled in the flickering light. She too trembled.