

Also in this Issue:

“The Scapegrace of the Regiment,” and “The Rivals of St. Wode’s,” By Charles Hamilton.



THE POPULAR NEW STORY BOOK

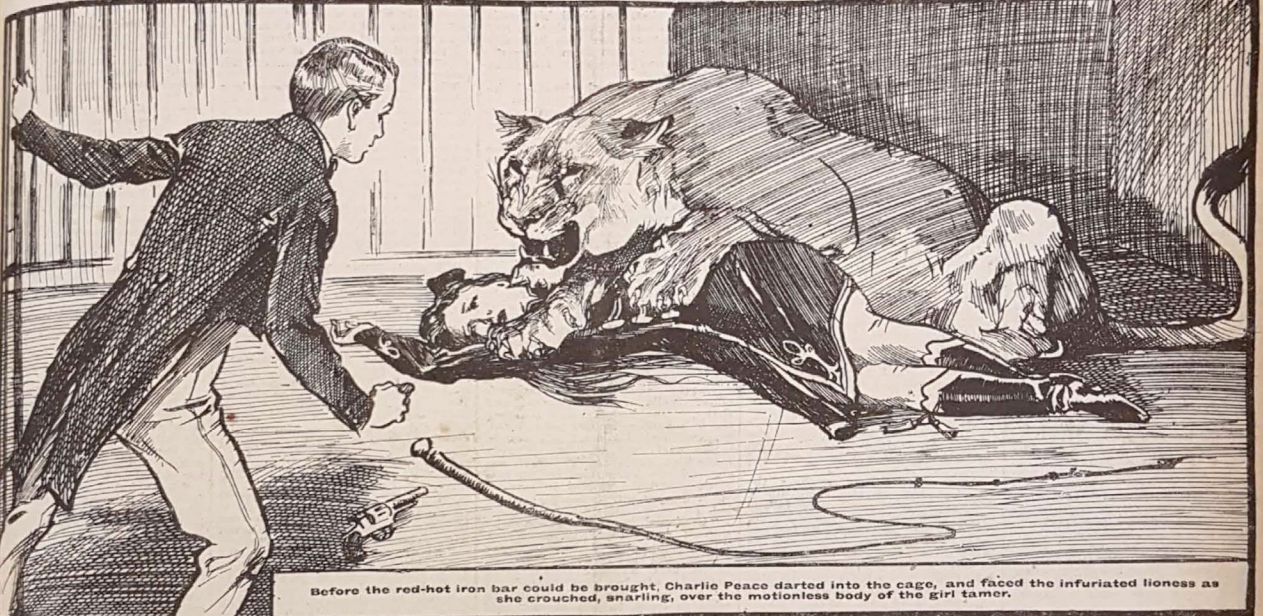
# THE EMPIRE

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## THE DARK LANTERN. A SPLENDID TALE OF THE BOYHOOD OF CHARLES PEACE.



Before the red-hot iron bar could be brought, Charlie Peace darted into the cage, and faced the infuriated lioness as she crouched, snarling, over the motionless body of the girl tamer.

Readers are informed that the characters in the following Serial Story are purely imaginary, and no reference whatever is made to any living persons. Actual names may be unintentionally mentioned, but the Editor wishes it to be distinctly understood that no adverse personal reflection is intended.

Charlie to the Rescue.  
“O I’m crafty, am I?” cried Charlie Peace, with a kind of snoring laugh. “That’s something to know, anyway. I shall see. What are the ‘amazing developments’ the boys talk about? Does that mean I have a clue to the cave of the child? I don’t care if they do. I’ve done with Squeezer, and I’ll keep my eye on the cave. The ‘tees haven’t a clue to that remarkable individual. I’ll throw dust in the eyes of the worthy Flice. I don’t know what you’re up to, but I’ll be there, sharp-sharp-sharp. Shouldn’t wonder if you’ve made a ‘tee.’”  
Charlie laughed his snort-contemptuous laugh, and went on to relate himself on how the boys of the last two or three hours worked in his favour. He was thoroughly disgusted so far as Squeezer was concerned, he had a way in his pocket, and he was on his way to make a name as a show artist. He wasn’t going to be made out of a cigar-box. There was a dozen other things he could do.  
“The church clock struck a quarter to nine, and he

quickered his pace. At nine Mrs. Burnett, the old woman who looked after the wardrobe and mended the costumes, sent Willie Worboise, one of the stable lads, out for her supper—generally a baked sheep’s head and potatoes. Charlie’s mouth watered as he thought of it. If he could reach Jagger’s a little before nine, he would get the boy to buy two sheep’s heads instead of one.  
As luck would have it, he ran against Willie coming out of the door at the back of the circus, and Willie he gave the lad his orders. Willie stared. He did not recognise the Marvellous Boy Violinist.  
“Not know me, you silly kid? I’m Posmo. My turn’s coming on, and don’t you forget it. Look sharp, and I’ll give you twopence for yourself—if you promise not to spend it all on fags.”  
The boy grinned and darted away, and Charlie slipped into the darkness behind the circus door. The band was playing its loudest, and the tune was that which betokened Milo’s appearance. Una and her lions would follow.  
He groped his way to Mrs. Burnett’s snuggery. The old lady, surrounded by tawdry, finisled finery, was sharpening a knife ready for her sheep’s head. Charlie’s sudden appearance quite startled her.  
“Oh, bless me, Mr. Posmo, what a turn you gave me! Where ‘ave you been? The gov’nor’s been in a rare to do about you.”  
“He hadn’t worry. I’m all right, as you can see for yourself. It’ll only mean my turn coming a little later than usual. I suppose a fellow may go and see his mother.”

“Ah, to be sure! But I didn’t know as you’d got a mother.”  
“Of course I have, but she lives a long way from here,” said Charlie carelessly. “But just now I’m thinking about something else—supper. I’ve been walking miles and miles. I do believe I could eat a donkey’s hind leg. Hallo, here’s Willie! There’s your twopence, my lad!”  
For the next ten minutes Charlie was silent, but his jaws were moving merrily. The toothsome “jenny,” as baked sheep’s head is called in the “profession,” was fast disappearing. The band changed its tune. Milo had finished, and the creaking of wheels told that the trolley bearing the lions’ cage was approaching the stage.  
Charlie, feeling after the meal like a giant refreshed, went out of Mrs. Burnett’s snuggery into a passage leading to the stage. On this stage the variety show artists performed. He wanted to see the lions and Una nearer than it was possible from the front of the house. The cage was drawn parallel with and close to the stage.  
Charlie met no one, and he stationed himself in the wings. Presently Stella, to call her by her own name, came on to the stage, and, after bowing in acknowledgment of the applause, entered the cage.  
At that moment Charlie caught sight of someone creeping among the scenery at the back. It was so dark he could not see precisely who it was, but the outline suggested Milo’s bulky form. The figure presented itself, but for a second, and then glided away.  
Charlie did not trouble himself

about the thing; he was far too interested in Stella, who was putting the animals through their performance with wonderful coolness.  
The lioness she reserved for the last. The sleek, tawny creature seemed to-night to be in a tractable mood. She obeyed every order readily, her final feat being to spring from one side of the cage to the other, while Stella fired a pistol, and then to lie down as though she had been shot.  
“Everything went well until this point was reached. The pistol was fired, and the lioness flung herself down with great naturalness; but instead of remaining quiet as she had been taught, she gave a sudden snarl of rage, and in an instant was on her feet, her back arched, her tail lashing her sides.  
The audience thought it was part of the show, and even when the creature bounded through the air upon the girl, knocked her down and pinned her right arm to the floor with one paw, while another was pressed heavily on her chest, they did not imagine anything was wrong. But on the brute sending up a hideous roar, and Jagger was heard shouting, “The hot bar! Quick, for Heaven’s sake!” they rose in their seats, and the women began screaming.  
Before the hot iron bar, always kept in readiness for such emergencies, could be brought, Charlie rushed across the stage, and lifting the fastening of the cage door, darted in and faced the infuriated lioness.  
Meanwhile, Stella was lying still and motionless, her face white as chalk. She had fainted.

Milo, the “Strong Man,” Mystified.  
OR a second the uproar, the shouts of the men, the screams of the frightened women ceased. Breathlessly the horrified spectators watched the boy crouch opposite the lioness, bringing his head on a level with that of the savage brute. Without showing the slightest sign of fear, Charlie Peace fixed his eyes on the yellow orbs dilated with rage.  
“Come here—you!” said he, in low, deliberate, grating tones.  
The effect was magical. Whether due to the tone of command, or to the magnetism in his eyes, it is hard to say. The lioness relaxed her muscles, and slowly removed her heavy paw from Stella’s chest, poising it hesitatingly. Had Charlie Peace withdrawn his gaze, but for an instant down it would have gone again, and woe for the poor victim!  
“Come, you!”  
The accents were more grating, more determined, more masterful than ever. The creature seemed to shrink with fear. It left Stella, and crept slowly towards Charlie, its tail hanging limply, as though conscious it had done wrong.  
“Over there—down!”  
By this time Charlie was standing, and pointing threateningly to the other three lions, which were cowering in a corner of the cage. It was clear that they also felt the mysterious power of the boy. The lioness

Continued on the next page.

