



THE STAR OF THE PANTO

A Splendid Story of 'A Boy Acrobat

BY
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With Illustrations

... By ...

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THE FIRST CHAPTER

Charlie Applies for a Job

EVERYBODY who knew Charlie Chickweed declared he ought to be on the stage. But as everybody knows, the people who ought to be there as a rule don't get there, and those who get there in many cases ought not to be there.

So Charlie had to be content with being funny in places, and at times when his funniments were, so he was told, out of place and out of season.

He would get roars of laughter by standing on his head on the teacher's desk, and sparring with his feet—till the teacher suddenly came in; then Charlie would get a whacking that made him want to stand all the time, right or wrong side up didn't matter, so long as he hadn't to sit down.

If a piano-organ came down to Stibble Street, Charlie would start dancing to it, and crowds would get round and forget all about the errands they were going on till the man came round with the collecting pannikin. But generally a policeman would come round first and "scruff" Charlie by the neck for holding up the traffic.

On one occasion a burly constable brought him up before the local magistrate, and, swelling with indignation till he was burlier still, said:

"Patrolling my beat on Friday, the 13th

instant, your washup, I saw a tremendous crowd screechin' with laughter. Makin' my way through, I see the prisoner chuckin' 'and-springs an' doin' the splits, then doublin' hisself backwards till he was grinnin' at the crowd from between his knees till they was so 'ighly delighted that I took him into custody for obstructin' of the traffic."

"Have you any questions to ask the witness?" growled the magistrate.

"Half a tick," replied Charlie; and, clutching at the top of the partition of the dock, he did a slow pull up, then threw his legs over the rail and sat on it. And, before the usher had left off gasping enough to tell him to get down, he chirped:

"Being a Friday and the thirteenth, you expected something unlucky to happen, didn't you, old sport?"

"Yes, and it did. Somebody stole my watch while I was taking your name and address," blurted out the guardian of law and order.

"Now—on your oath," Charlie went on, shaking a finger at the witness, "you never moved a hand to stop that show till the collector came round?"

"What has that to do with it?" roared Robert.

"Why, it makes you out a deadhead, doesn't it? And I'm cross-examining as to character. And I want to know where you expect to go when you die?"

His worship began to blow his nose in a big bandana handkerchief, and he said at last, after doing a bit of choking: "Have you anything to say in your defence?"

"Yes, my lord duke," Charlie chortled. "But I want you to say something first. I want you to say if this little stunt of mine, which was all that happened, can be called disorderly conduct?"

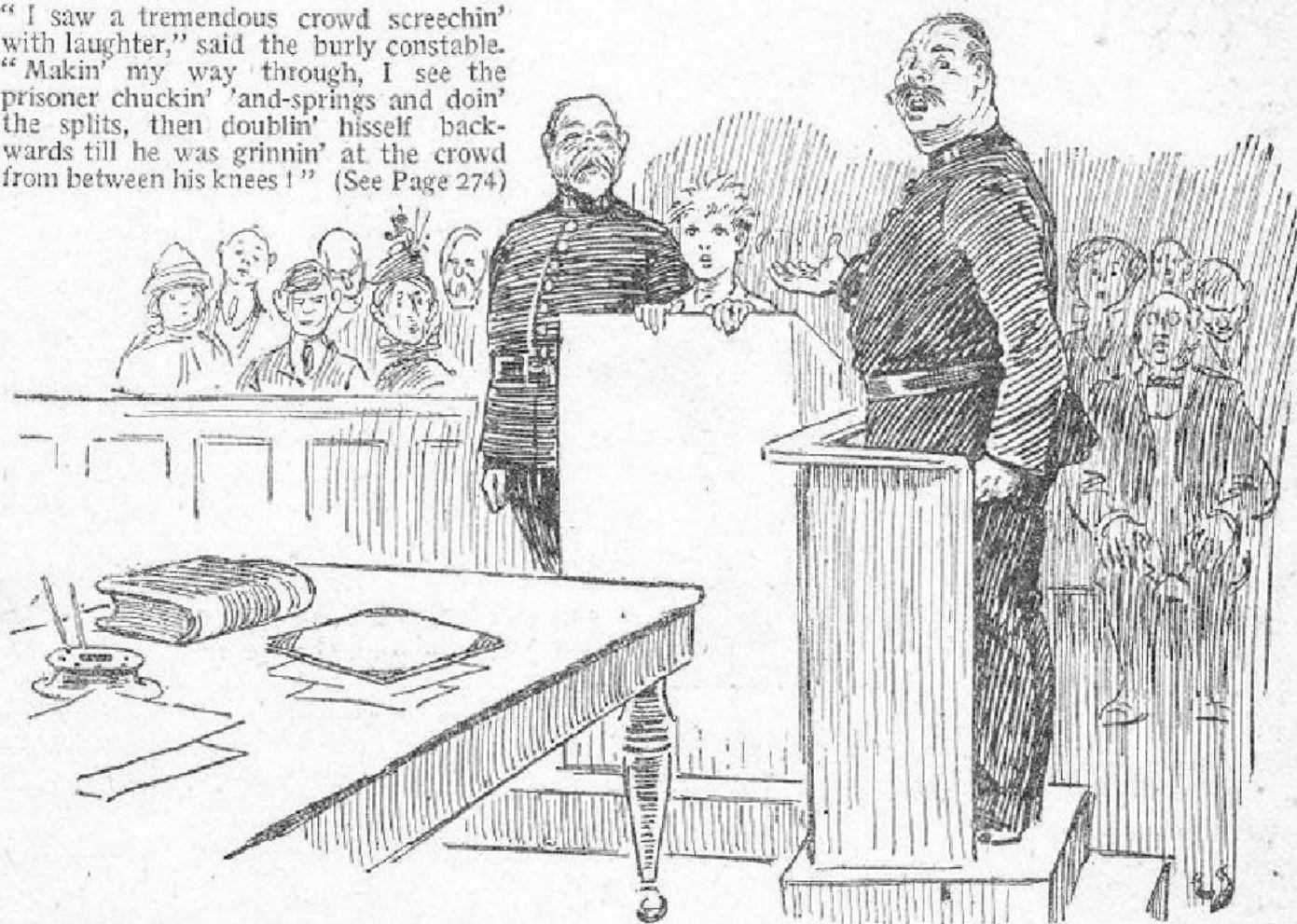
Then, springing up on his hands on the dock-rail, he threw a somersault on to the lawyer's table, and began whirling over and over in a series of handsprings, scattering not only books and papers, but lawyers and their clerks, till the magistrate roared out "Stop! Stop! This is a court of justice, not a circus."

"Just so, your royal highness," squeaked Charlie. "And in the interests of justice, I ask you is my little show disorderly?"

"It's certainly out of place here. You

ruler, the other end resting on his forehead; but it would have worked better if the manager hadn't bustled in through the swing-door and upset the equilibrium. It upset him, too, especially when people asked him where he got the black eye and how the other man was. So the next time he happened on Charlie spinning a leaden inkstand with the handle of a feather duster, Charlie got the order of the old boot exit, besides having the cost of taking the inkmarks out of his em-

"I saw a tremendous crowd screechin' with laughter," said the burly constable. "Makin' my way through, I see the prisoner chuckin' 'and-springs and doin' the splits, then doublin' hisself backwards till he was grinnin' at the crowd from between his knees!" (See Page 274)



ought to be on the stage," said the magistrate, holding his sides and catching his breath. "You—ought—to be—on the stage! And here, boy, here's a shilling for you for bringing a bit of sunshine into this dreary old court."

Just after that they took Charlie Chickweed away from school, and the class-rooms began to get on with their work. But the office he went into began to get a bit out of gear.

Charlie's idea of "balancing" ledgers was raising half a dozen of them on one end of a

player's white waistcoat docked off his week's salary.

Off his office stool and on his uppers he began to feel fed up with a world that objected to being amused. Wherever he went looking for work in the neighbourhood he found his reputation had arrived in front of him. People told him they had no use for juvenile knockabouts in their warehouses, and that he ought to go on the stage.

So he called at quite a lot of theatres and explained his object to various managers.

They told him usually to run away and play.

He replied to one that he couldn't imagine anything except a mouse running away from him, and another that that was what he was there for, seeing their posters said they were putting up a comedy; he proposed playing in it. Then the leading comedian, who had just blown in, told him not to be funny.

"Can't help it," said Charlie. "Don't be too hard on me; you might be struck that way yourself some day." Then that comedian got cross; he wasn't used to being laughed at.

All this would have been very discouraging to an ordinary youngster, but Charlie's spirit was like his body, the heavier the tumble the higher it seemed to bounce. The pantomime season came along, and he determined that one of the "crowds" would, at any rate, have to find a place for him.

He learned that at the Corinthian Theatre they were in need of boy and girl "supers" to carry banners, come on in troops of elves or fairies, take part in harlequinade "rallies," and so forth. Promptly Charlie Chickweed made a bee-line for the Corinthian stage door.

Luckily it happened to be one where he was unknown by sight to the stage door-keeper, but the discouraging circumstance was that he found on arrival a long queue of juveniles waiting to offer their services, and the attitude of these was far from promising.

"What do you want here?" one hulking boy inquired angrily of each newcomer. "Think there's a job going? Well, that's where you're making a mistake. All the places have been taken hours ago."

"Then what are you waiting for?" asked Charlie pleasantly; and the bully snarled at him:

"What's that to do with you? Want a thick ear?"

"No; nor yet such a long pair as yours," replied the unruffled Charlie. "If I were a donkey they might be of some use to me."

A titter arose from the rest of the queue, whereupon Charlie's mis-informant growled that if it wasn't for losing his turn he'd drop out and break Charlie's neck, to which Master Chickweed replied by butting him suddenly and

violently in that region known as the "bread-basket," to the huge delight of the rest of the queue.

"Let me alone! I'll put the policeman on to you!" blubbered the youth who had threatened to break necks and bestow thick ears, and just then a gaunt man with a blue-shaven chin interposed and commanded them to "chuck" their "nannikin," or else he would clear the whole crowd of them away, adding that they did not require any "rallies" off the boards there.

Then, nodding to Charlie and one or two others, he directed them to follow him to a side door, which he opened with a pass-key.

They followed the blue-chinned one along a dark passage reeking with the smell of gas to a step-ladder, ascending which they found themselves on—a stage.

A real live stage. At least it was alive with a crowd of ladies and gentlemen in walking costume, while another gentleman with an untidy type-written book and a blue pencil was shouting a lot of things at them all, to which they appeared to be paying not the slightest attention.

"Super-master," shouted the blue-chinned one to a weary-looking individual munching sandwiches, "I've picked these kiddies out of the crowd. You might just see what you think of them; they seem the least unlikely of the lot."

The super-master, having taken their names and addresses, herded the youngsters apart like so many sheep, and they watched the "stage-damager," as everybody styled the gentleman with the "book," distribute a lot of other books among the rest of the company, with a lot of instructions about calls for lines and being letter-perfect by Wednesday, and a lot more. Meanwhile, Charlie was in a sort of rapturous dream.

He was on a stage. A real stage. But how strange it all seemed; the stalls, pit, boxes, and balconies all covered with sort of holland pinafores in a dusty, dusky gloom; a crowd all chattering at once inside the row of foot-lights, or "floats," as they called them.

In the centre was a piano, and a lot of the people clustered round a stout gentleman who sat at it, and who now and then played

over a bar or two of the music jabbed at him by them.

Another gentleman, the weariest and saddest-looking of the lot, was making notes in another brown-backed book at the demand of the others, who kept asking him where their "novelties" came in.

Charlie couldn't make out who or what he was till he heard one of the seal-skin ladies telling the blue-chinned gentleman that that weariest and saddest gentleman had said that certain lines had to go in at a certain place, whereupon Blue-chin bawled back:

"Nothing of the kind. What's he to do with it? He's only the author!"

It was all a jumble, a din, a hurly-burly.

Suddenly Blue-chin shouted at Charlie:

"Call to-morrow at eleven sharp for all supers, mind. You're a goblin!"

"Beg pardon, sir," protested Charlie politely, "I haven't touched a morsel since breakfast. Then I

only had two slices of bread and marg."

"Are you dotty—or just pulling my leg?" demanded Blue-chin. For a lot of those round about were giggling.

"Far be it from me, sir," replied Charlie.

"Well, let's understand. What do you think you're here for?" demanded Blue-chin; and Charlie replied briskly:

"I'm here to play in the panto—to dance, to

sing, to chuck myself about and set the house off into roars of laughter, to whistle like everything from a canary to a steam-engine, to throw back somersaults till I look like a revolving disc, to back-talk, cross-talk, and patter till all the fat old gents' collar buttons fly off and all the kiddies have to have their backs slapped hard to stop them laughing

themselves into convulsions—I'm here to pack this house and empty every other one within a mile, I'm here to be a money-magnet, to make a record boom, to——"

"Here—half a motor-car!" interrupted Blue-chin. "If you want to stop in this show you'll get this into the place where your brain ought to be—and you'll do it instanter. You're here to keep your head shut and your eyes open; to do just what you're told and nothing else; and if you come any of your hank you'll get the bird and find the most adjacent window doing duty for your emergency exit. Now,

young man, do you tumble?"

"Do I tumble, sir? Why, yes, certainly. It's my stunt," replied Charlie, rolling up his eyes like a cherub. "Watch this!"

And then and there he threw a standing back somersault that made all the gentlemen jump, and the ladies squeal out "Oh, my!" Then he whirled round the stage in a series of catherine-wheels and finished up by doing a



Charlie's idea of "balancing" ledgers would have worked better if the office manager hadn't bustled in through the swing-door! (See page 275)

back bend that brought his face up between his knees. And he inquired cheerfully of Blue-chin :

"What do you think of that?"

There was a shout from all the company, "Bravo, kiddie!" But then there was a sudden silence.

They were all stage-folk, depending on their work for their bread-and-butter. If this wonderful nipper were given a show to himself in that panto it might mean the cutting down, or cutting out altogether perhaps, of one of their novelties, and the cutting down of their figure on the salary list—perhaps the cutting it out altogether.

But the girl who, strangely enough, had been pointed out to Charlie as the "principal boy," and another who was referred to as "principal girl," and a lean, middle-aged gentleman who was spoken of as the "dame," and whose parts were secure, all chattered at once to Mr. Blue Chin that the nipper was "the goods," and that it would be "ridic" to let him run loose.

And he, after mumbling a few words with the "stage damager," scratched that chin of his, and remarked slowly :

"I'm just for the moment undecided, my lad, whether to fit you with a small part. I'll think it over, and let you know this time to-morrow, when you turn up at the call."

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Rehearsal

A SMALL part! Charlie could scarcely believe his ears. He was ready to do another handspring for joy. But he didn't. He had noticed how grown-ups did their bargaining in all sorts of businesses.

So he said in a very thoughtful tone :

"Thank you, sir. That's all, Sir Garnet. Because, seeing the chances of getting a small part or no part at all here are fifty-fifty, it leaves me free to take a bigger part if one should come along in any other of the quarters that I have a chance in."

The gentleman who was to play the Bold Bad Baron in the panto chuckled to the lady who was cast for "second principal boy."

"Good egg! That kid's as cute as he's clever. No flies on him."

And the young gentleman who played the Old Witch in the panto and the Pantaloon in the harlequinade, said :

"Dear heart alive! I thought old Nat was the champion bluffer of the wide, but this cherub carries too many guns for him. Youth wins the world."

The gentleman with the blue chin glared at Charlie as though he were about to eat him, then, seeming to be struggling with his feelings, he replied :

"Now, none of your hank, laddie. Don't you go forgetting you're engaged for a small part here for the run of this panto. Pound a week salary, half a crown each rehearsal; and if you go scooting off to any other show you'll be looking for trouble. 'Nuff said."

Charlie went home that day in a whirl of delight. He was on the stage. In a part. He wouldn't have changed places with the Prime Minister. What his part was to be he hadn't the vaguest notion. All he knew was, whatever that part might be, he felt capable of playing it. That was what he called his self-confidence, and other people his "cheek and impudence."

Next day he turned up in good time for the "call." He was informed that the sad-looking gentleman called the author, and whose job was to do as he was told, had written what was called a "carpenter's scene" round him.

This, he learned, was a special turn that had nothing to do with the story of the pantomime.

He was rather disappointed at that, till he reflected that in that respect it didn't differ from any of the other parts. Indeed, he was not long in learning that "carpenter's scenes" very often got more "biscuit," which was the stage name for applause, than any others.

It was to be played in front of a backcloth, while the stage hands were setting the great scene of the show, "The Valley of Diamond Dews."

Charlie's turn was not to be a singing one. And he was for the moment staggered by the news that the part he had to play was that of a monkey dweller in the grove of trees shown on one side of that backcloth flat.

Many a time he had been called a young

monkey off the stage, now he was called upon to be one upon it; and in that character he was to turn somersaults, handsprings, and that wild, wonderful dance of his own in addition to those handswings on the trapeze bars he had picked up at the gymnasium in Stibble Street, and which had been the delight and marvel of all his chums.

Here was the chance of a lifetime—and Charlie was quick to grasp it.

But not too quick. The same shrewdness that had made him stick out for a part prompted him to remark coolly:

"Of course, my name will be in the bills!"

And, instead of "rounding" on him for his cheek, they seemed to admire him for it.

"You've got a nerve, sonny," said the blue-chinned gentleman. "No, we can't put a name like 'Charles Chickweed' in our 'printing.' The British public has a strange preference for un-British names on bills of fare and bills of the play. Though we may not always agree with the B.P., we've got to give it what it wants. You will appear in our bills as 'Carlo Chiquido.'"

That was good enough for Charlie, especially as he had had a hint that, if he were found worth anything, that one pound a week would be raised to five.

So he was given a "script" of his part,

setting out all his "business," and he at once settled down to the work of the rehearsals.

No game that he had ever played gave him such delight. He enjoyed watching the building up of that panto from the stage side of the footlights a thousand times more than anyone he had ever seen from any pit or gallery. For hours he would sit watching Mr. Nat, book in hand, shouting himself red in the face at the troops of performers, fairies, elves, imps, sprites, and goblins.

"Now then! Six paces down the stage, wave your hands. Turn inwards. 'Hail, pretty princess!' No, no! That won't do! Pick up your feet. and when I say, 'Wave your hands,' I don't want you to bring 'em up like semaphores, nor yet whirl 'em round like windmills. All over again!"

And all over again they would go through it, and Mr. Nat would howl:

"Not 'Ale!' You're not fetching the dinner beer this time. 'Hail!' Get it off your

chest! Ain't any of you never been to school? Now once more. I'm going to get this scene perfect if we stop here for a month of Sundays! Now, put a bit of life into it. That's better. Come along, Fairies of the Grove! Where's the ballet mistress? Now, madame, remember we've got to knock 'em with this movement. No talking, my dears!



"Oh, Charlie, my boy," said Mrs. Wimple, "you'd never let want of money tempt you to touch any that didn't belong to you, would you?"

"Not if I were starving, mother!" replied Charlie, bravely. (See page 281)

I can do all the chin-wag that's wanted in this business. Up stage, elves and sprites; get a move on!"

Wardrobe mistress, property master, lime men, chorus master, each and all had allotted tasks and places. Charlie was amazed to find what a lot there was in a pantomime that never met the eye of the audience.

Then he had to betake himself to the costumiers to be fitted with the wonderful skin that made him look just like a real monkey.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Christmas Surprise

CHARLIE was an orphan, and he lived with a widowed aunt, who resembled the old woman who lived in a shoe, in that she had so many children she didn't know what to do, especially in the matter of feeding and clothing them.

People who were harder-hearted and better off used to say it was no wonder the Widow Wimple was so poor, seeing that she added to the burden of her own children that of bringing up another boy who had no claim on her. But it is often the poor who are kindest to the poor, and Mrs. Wimple could never bring herself to letting little Charlie go to the workhouse, though he was more of a handful than all her own little ones put together.

And when Charlie was in work he always brought home his wages to her, and whatever she allowed him for pocket money he spent mostly in buying toys and toffee for his little cousins, Jacky, Jimmy and Joey, and Billy and Milly, the twins.

All the money he got for rehearsals, too, he took home to her; but he kept his new

occupation a secret from them all. In the first place he hadn't had the heart to tell Mother—for that was what he called her, same as the rest, and she had been a real second mother to him—about his getting the "sack" from his billet as office boy.

Secondly, everybody had drummed into him that it was all nonsense when he used to tell them his ambition to go on the stage. And thirdly, his new good fortune seemed too good to be true, or to last.

So for the time he kept his secret, and accounted for getting home late after rehearsal by saying that he had been kept at work, which was quite true. And Mrs.

Wimple, being mostly kept late at her own duties, didn't notice anything, especially as Charlie was such a little rascal.

Then there came still more rehearsals—rehearsals with lines, costume rehearsals, rehearsals with "props," with "limes," with full orchestra. The thing began to shape itself into a right down regular royal panto.

"Chiquido" threw himself into his part in every sense of the word. He threw

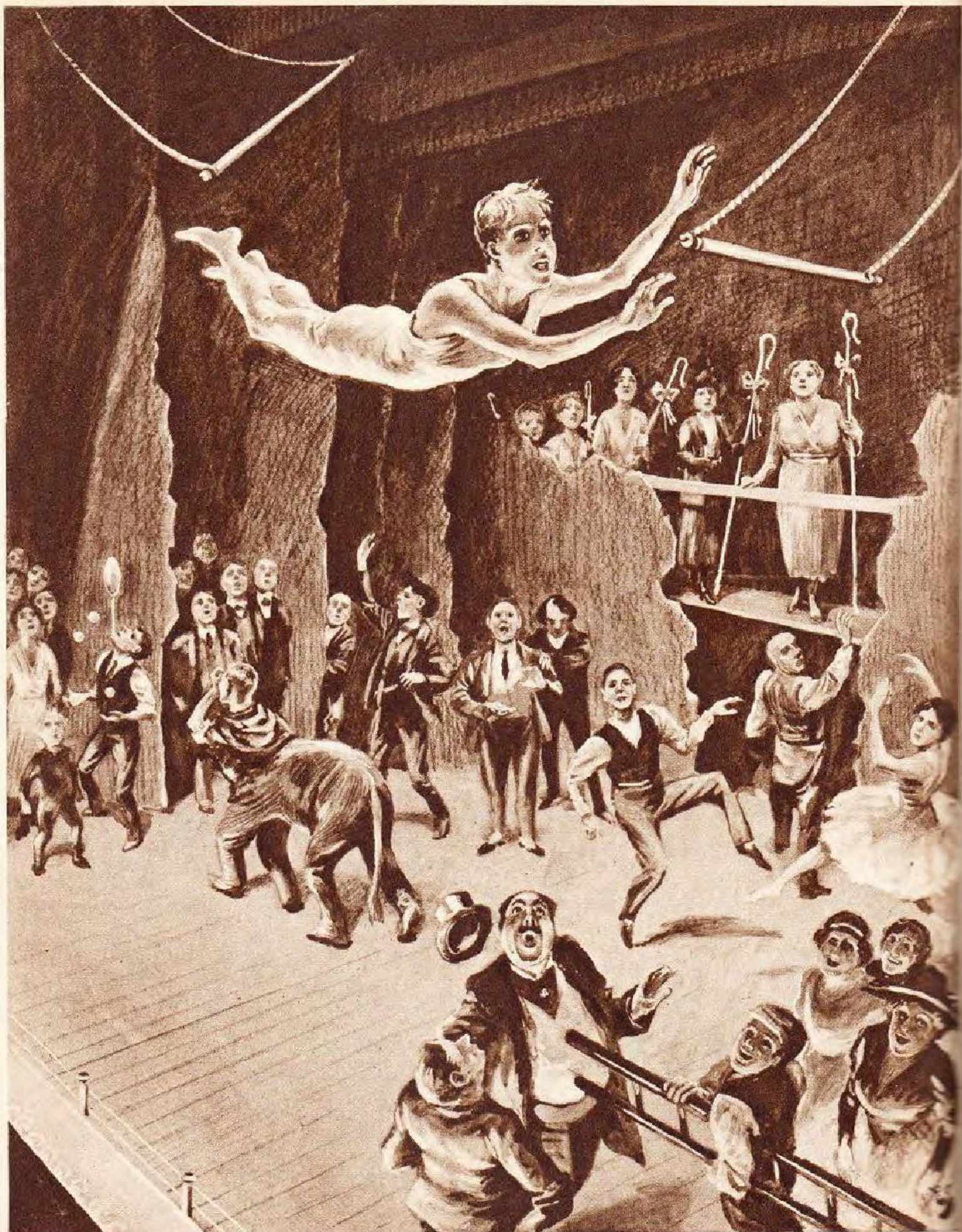
himself from one trapeze to another, from one side of the stage to another, in hand swings, catherine wheels, back somersaults; at the rehearsal they gave him the honour of a "clear stage," and the rest of the company, and some visitors from the stalls and boxes, and prompt and opposite prompt wings clapped him, and said that he was "It."

The music got into his head, his feet, his heart. He had never been so happy in his life.

And the dear stage people! If they had seemed wonderful in their walking clothes,



Then and there Charlie threw a standing back-somersault that made the company jump in alarm. (See page 277.)



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CHARLIE REHEARSES HIS "TURN" FOR THE CHRISTMAS PANTOMIME

their astrachan collared overcoats, their seal-skins, and their smart blouses and skirts, they were still more so with their faces white and bright red with grease paint, their eyes black-ringed, and their funny wigs.

The rehearsal that followed was the only one in which Blue-chin had to tell Charlie to "Put a bit more go in it, laddie!"

As Christmas Day drew near Charlie found it harder than ever to keep his secret from Mrs. Wimple and the little Wimples. Although he had been giving the widow more money for his keep, he dared not give her as much as he would have liked to in case of raising wrong suspicions.

Indeed, on Saturday she said to him, with an unhappy look in her face:

"Charlie, dear, where is all your money coming from? You're giving me more than usual, and you've been buying all sorts of choes and sweeties for the little ones. Have you had a rise?"

"Yes, mother," he answered quickly. "That's it. Good-night!"

"And you're out so late, too. And you've been buying a watch and chain. Of course, you're wise to, if you can afford it. Only, Charlie"—then she blurted out what he guessed was coming—"you'd never let want of money tempt you to touch any that didn't belong to you, would you?"

"Not if I were starving, mother!" he answered, and the tears came to her eyes as she said:

"I'm sure of that, dear boy. I'm sure my dear sister's boy would never do that, often as he may get into other sorts of mischief. I ought not to have talked of such a thing, only you know how anxious I am that you should never come to harm."

"I know that, dear old mother," he answered, throwing his arms round her neck and giving her a good hug. "And I love you all the more for being anxious about me. But it's all right; I earn every penny I get—and honestly. Soon I'll be earning more; I'm getting on so at my work."

After that it was harder than ever to keep his secret, but Christmas was now quite close, and he didn't want any of them to know he was on the stage until he had made good.

Strangely enough, Mrs. Wimple went on to say:

"I'm not often discontented, but I was thinking to-day I should like for once to be rich enough to take all you children to the pantomime. Jacky and Jimmy were saying there's a lovely one coming on at the Corinthian Theatre, called 'Humpty-Dumpty, or Harlequin Goosey Gander and the Fair One with the Golden Locks.' They nearly made the twins cry telling them how beautiful it was going to be, and me having to tell the duckies I couldn't afford to take them."

"Can't you?" repeated Charlie. "We'll see about that!" And he looked so mysterious that the widow was going to ask him what he meant, but he added: "Good-night, mother! Don't you worry!" And the next moment had run upstairs to bed.

Then came the full rehearsal on Christmas Eve, and for once the Widow and the little Wimples thought their Charlie a little unkind in not spending it with them for the first time on record, besides coming home later than ever.

Even the heap of sweets and toys he left in a big parcel didn't quite make up for the fun he used to make for them all on former Christmas Eves.

But on Christmas morning they forgot all that when—though nobody heard the postman—Joey picked off the doormat a letter addressed to Mrs. Wimple, and the widow, opening it, drew out six tickets for Boxing Night at the Corinthian Theatre.

Amphitheatre, too. None of your gallery, or even pit, though the little Wimples would have been overjoyed with these. But numbered tickets—front row! Oh, it was too good to be true. Mrs. Wimple said they'd better give it back to the postman; it must have come to the wrong number.

Then Charlie up and said:

"Rats! It's the right name and the right number. Don't you see the idea? All the theatres like to be full on a first night. The only shows people want to go to are those there's no room for them in. So the 'first robber,' that is the box office manager, what he calls "papers the house," sending out free tickets to people."

He was careful not to mention that every reserved seat at the Corinthian had been booked for weeks, and those tickets had only been got by worrying the "first robber's" life out of him. There was no need for him to say any more. All the little Wimples chimed in with loud cheers.

So Mrs. Wimpole said what a lot Charlie seemed to know about it, and that she hoped he'd take care of the twins when they went.

"Sha'n't be with them," said Charlie. "There's only six tickets!"

"Well, that's five of them and yourself," said the Widow.

But he answered quite shortly:

"No fear! It's five of them and you, mother. Don't argue. I've got another engagement!"

Mrs. Wimple looked at him more astonished than ever. Then she said, in an awe-stricken voice:

"You aren't walking out with—a girl—at your time of life, Charlie?"

"No fear!" he laughed.

But when Boxing Day came, and Charlie disappeared, she put on her best alpaca gown and bonnet, and went off with the kiddies to the panto, feeling very uneasy at poor Charlie not being in the treat.

What a crowd there was to be sure, and what a mercy they had those lovely seats waiting for them, though the Widow was haunted by the dread of somebody sailing along and bundling them out of them. But she soon forgot everything in the delight of watching the delight of her children—which is the mother's heaven all over the earth.

Oh, that panto! The Editor hasn't half room enough for me to tell you half about it.

To the little Wimples it was all a real fairyland, a

realm of glitter, music, colour, song and laughter. All the rest of the world was a forgotten blank.

At last came the scene of the Golden Grove, discovering the Gorilla Goblin, Carlo Chiquida—his first appearance in England—seated on a palm-branch, hugging a property coker-nut, which he flung from him. Then he began his turn.

And if the little Wimples had clapped and laughed before, now they shrieked and squealed and crowed till the tears of merriment rolled down their chubby cheeks. Indeed, they helped to set the house alight and rocking, as the stage-folk call it.

And as the Gorilla Goblin swung and somersaulted, and whirled and danced all over the stage, the little Wimples, between their shrieks of joy, kept shouting to each other:

"Our Charlie does that!" "Charlie does this!" "Charlie doubles himself backwards, just like that!"

In fact the children's excited remarks helped to convulse the people sitting in the row behind, and all helped towards the success of Charlie's turn.

And when, after five minutes of the Gorilla Goblin turn that roused the entire house to a frenzy of boiling hilarity and cheers, and made the success of the pantomime, the curtain fell, and the Goblin, in response to the biggest "call" of the evening, appeared, and taking off his "property" gorilla head, bowed and bowed and bowed, and above the shouts of applause that shook the roof, arose the chorus of Jacky, Jimmy, Joey, and the twins:

"Why, mother, it is our Charlie!"

And there were no hard times with the Wimples after that.



THE END.