

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

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[CLAIRE HELIOT](#)

One of the most thrilling lion tamers in history? A young German woman named Claire Heliot, who alone in the ring in a white satin gown, commanded the attention of a dozen big cats, and even sat down with them to dinner.

THE STORY

In 1905, the [New York Hippodrome](#) opened its doors with [A Yankee Circus on Mars](#), a freewheeling half-circus, half-opera in which the King of Mars, acting as an intergalactic talent scout of sorts, comes to Earth to save a failing New England circus. The grand show featured an ensemble of hundreds of actors wearing grand robes and frolicking amidst fifty-foot dragon sculptures, live elephants and decadent garden sets. Its star was a lion tamer named Claire Heliot, making her major American debut.

Heliot would lie down across the bodies of four reclining lions, pose for portraits in her boudoir cuddling the mane of a massive male, and play with the lions as though they were happy kittens. She typically finished her act by slinging a 350-pound male over her shoulders like an overgrown scarf and triumphantly striding from the ring. Heliot was far from being, as one publication suggested, the sort of petite lady who would be better off carrying a tiny dog with pink ribbons tied to its collar. She gamely showed her many scars to reporters; and did not hesitate to flash a famously stern and commanding stare. She trained her lions not with feminine magic, as reporters loved to say, but years of consistent, hard work conducted in multiple languages (Heliot spoke German, English and French, and preferred the latter with her animals).

Heliot suffered a bite injury in 1907 that compelled her to retire from performing, and for a time she bred horses and lived on a farm. She was financially ruined in the 1920s, and her apartment was bombed in World War II in 1944. She died in 1953 and is [buried in Stuttgart](#).

Read on at [the blog](#) for more fun facts and resources.

DISCUSS:

What's your mental impression of a circus performer?

Animal performances in circuses have come under legal and social scrutiny in recent years. Should animals perform in shows?

Heliot was a female star in a very male industry. Why were journalists so keen to downplay her ability?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

Primary source: "[Claire Heliot — Most Daring of Lion Tamers](#)," *NY Times*, October 29, 1905

Primary source: "[Critical Moments With Wild Animals](#)," McClure's 1911 "[A Short History of the Circus](#)," Circopedia

"[15 Phenomenal Female Circus Performers](#)," Mental Floss