

# Mdlle Scherazade and Her Performing Elephants

By

Shaun Everett

One of the most popular uses that the Victorians made of the new photography technology was the Carte de Visite. Millions of them were produced throughout the world. They are though, rare in the Menageries and Circus world, but Edmunds, the proprietor of one of Wombwell's Travelling Menageries after 'Mrs' Wombwell retired (1876), made use of them for his acts it seems. One such act was Mdlle Scherazade (Mademoiselle, these days abbreviated to Mme or M<sup>lle</sup>) and her elephants. Billed as *the only Lady Elephant Trainer in Europe (sometimes The World)*, she came, probably from Brussels around 1884. Although records are yet to be discovered, the newspaper reports enlighten our knowledge of Scherazade and her exploits in the showman's establishment.

The first report shows her being in England in 1884, appearing at *Canterbury Theatre of Varieties*<sup>1</sup>. The billing states *the only Lady Elephant trainer in the world* and she appears alongside *Colonel Boon and his five performing lions*. The next year *Edmunds (late Wombwell's Menagerie)*, is advertising for a trombone player, but the advertisement continues,

*Mr Edmunds will have for disposal, without a doubt, the Handsomest Indian Elephant in Europe (Female)...the sole reason for parting...is to make room for...Abdella and Jemona introduced by Mdlle Scherazade..and have been so successful for so many years on the continent*<sup>23</sup>.

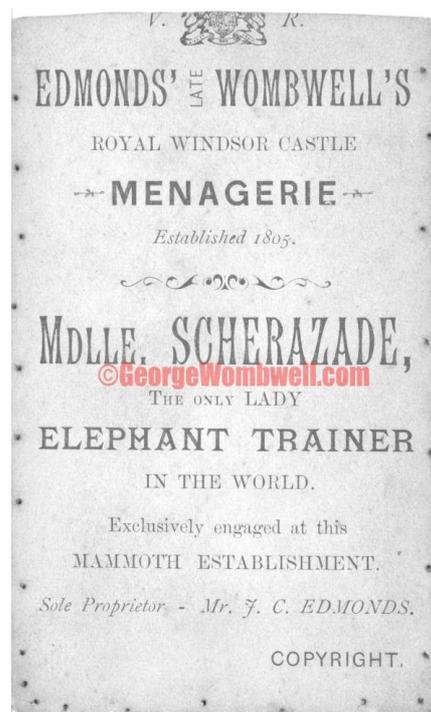
Both reports clearly indicate that Edmunds snapped up Scherazade for his travelling outfit in the summer of 1885. The carte de visite is probably from around that year. Which elephant is *Jemona* and *Abdella* is anyone's guess though.

---

1 *The Era* (London, England), Saturday, December 27, 1884; Issue 2414 This theatre was established by Charles Morton in central London adjacent to The Canterbury Tavern 143 Westminster Bridge Road.

2 *The Era* (London, England), Saturday, May 16, 1885; Issue 2434

3 Interesting note for genealogists: the advert for the *Second Slide Trombone* states that the Bandmaster at the time was John Parker.



The next report of her is from *The Era* during 1890 in which it claims that Scherazade is now the lion trainer and *now travelling with Bostock and Wombwell's Menagerie through Cornwall* and that she had been married to the *English* lion trainer in the outfit (unnamed). The marriage took place at Redruth and was conducted by the Rev. J. W. Lane<sup>4</sup>. In another report a month earlier, it states that the Menagerie had two other animal training acts: Sargano, the African Lion King and Captain Rowley with his *educated leopards and elephants*. I assume it is Rowley that she married since the

4 *The Era* (London, England), Saturday, June 14, 1890; Issue 2699

term *English* from the later marriage report is probably a code for white, Sargano being of African extraction. The latter may of course, also have been English<sup>5</sup>!

Again during 1890, *The Bristol Mercury* announces that Scherazade as part of the B&W outfit was training lions and that she had been presented with, on behalf of *Mr Harry Smith of The Stag and Hounds*, a handsome silver medal as a token of their appreciation of her courageous feats. If you look closely at the carte de visite, you can see she is wearing medals. About four? The report continues:

*the lady had been presented with three medals in Brussels besides similar tokens of appreciation in Rome, Leeds, Dewsbury, Frankfurt and Dusseldorf and that she had been the recipient of a beautiful gold watch while appearing at the Canterbury Theatre of Varieties (see above), Westminster Bridge Road, London...[and that]...Sargano was presented with a silver medal... [from]...Mr Lewis of the Haymarket tavern<sup>6</sup>.*

Scherazade introduced an *Equestrian Lion Prince* during May 1890, according to the *The Royal Cornwall Gazette Falmouth Packet, Cornish Weekly News, & General Advertiser*<sup>7</sup>. The accompanying description claims that the lion *will ride around the arena on horseback*.

1890 was a busy and productive time for Scherazade including her marriage. She does not appear as Mdlle Scherazade again in newspapers after this date. Maybe her marriage had been the catalyst for a well deserved retirement from animal training. However a report on the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1893 announces that Mdlle Scherazade the lion trainer appearing in Carrington would perform as part of Fillis's Circus<sup>8</sup>. Fillis was a British circus showman, but he worked out of South Africa<sup>9</sup>.

The discovery that show people were awarded medals from local people as they travelled around is interesting. It may have been one way of motivating them to continue in their dangerous profession. Scherazade was obviously proud of the medals she received as she clearly displayed some of them in the carte de visite photograph. Another point to note is Edmunds advert on the rear of the carte. Normally cartes would carry the photographer's name and address. Edmunds though, used the available space to promote the Menagerie and its association with Scherazade. This particular carte seems to have also been sewed into something in its past judging by the holes around the perimeter. At the moment I cannot imagine what it was, but any information is gratefully received.

---

5 *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* (Bristol, England), Monday, March 17, 1890; Issue 13055

6 *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* (Bristol, England), Monday, March 31, 1890; Issue 13067

7 *The Royal Cornwall Gazette Falmouth Packet, Cornish Weekly News, & General Advertiser* (Truro, England), Thursday, May 22, 1890

8 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, January 7, 1893

9 Frank E Fillis