

Magical journals, both past and present, title her as the youngest daughter of Charles de Vere. Her career as an illusionist is said to have ended against the historical backdrop of the Russian Revolution. Although this is a great story on which to build a legend, it's not true.

# IONIA

~The Queen of Mystery~



### BY CHARLES GREENE III

Ionia was the fourth daughter and the eighth child of Charles and Julia de Vere. Her birth name was Clementine de Vere. She was born in Brussels on December 20, 1888. Her seven siblings were, in descending birth order: Caroline, Claude, Camille, Charles Jr., Constance, Cyril and Claire. Most of the children were born on the Continent, yet all were British by birthright as Charles and Julia were British subjects.

At the time of Clementine's birth, Charles de Vere (Herbert Shakespeare Gardiner Williams) and his wife, Julia Ferrett, had been living in Brussels for at least 11 years. Charles had set up a theater in the town and, according to P.T. Selbit writing in *The Wizard* in 1909, Julia began performing at the theater with her own Japanese illusion act under the stage name of Okita.

The de Vere family moved to Paris in 1892, where Charles, with the assistance of his son Cyril, opened a business of magic manufacturing and theatrical supplies. This business, which settled on the same block as the Folies Bergere, brought the family in close contact with top-level performers, actors and agents. The elder de Vere was known to be a close confidant of Harry Kellar, Servais Le Roy and The Herrmanns.

In early 1904, the Bostock circus came to Paris and opened at the Hippodrome, Place Clichy. The de Vere family attended this event for both personal and professional reasons. A highlight of the evening would have been the wild animals tamed by a handsome American. This daring man caught the eye of young Clementine de Vere and won her heart. His name was Herman Armond Wirtheim, professionally known as Herman Weedon, "King of the Lion Tamers."

After a brief courtship, Herman and Clementine were married on May 5, 1904. After being married by the French State, the British Embassy Church in Paris blessed their union. In attendance at both ceremonies were Charles, Julia and Cyril de Vere. On the church registry, Herman's profession is listed as artist. Clementine's condition is listed as spinster. She was 15. He was 27.

In June of the same year, the newlyweds traveled to America aboard the SS Deutschland and headed to New York City for their honeymoon. The trip was both for business as well as pleasure. Herman was performing in Bostock's Arena at Coney Island, New

York, at the opening of Dreamland Amusement Park. Herman's performing schedule left Clementine with plenty of free time. She probably spent most of her days visiting with her sister Constance, who was staying in New York City.

Constance Elise de Vere, Clementine's older sister, was a New York celebrity in 1904. Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. had seen Elise perform in Paris in 1903 at La Scala and brought her to New York for a starring role in his new comic opera, *Red Feather*. The audiences of the day must not have found it too comical as *Red Feather* ran only 60 per-



formances at the Lyric Theatre, from November 9, 1903 to January 2, 1904. Elise continued an extensive performing schedule in Europe and managed to return to perform in New York in various productions over the next several years. Her performing career ended when she married Frank J. Godsol, an early film magnate, in 1917.

Most articles about Ionia have mistakenly named her Elsie. The confusion probably stems from an early presumption that Elise might have been Ionia, compounded with a subsequent and repeated typo. The

situation can be found in the French magic journal, *l'Escamateur*, where a reference to *Elsie de Vere* performing in Dresden is a typo. It was *Elise*, Clementine's sister, who was in Dresden; there never was an "Elsie."

From the time that Clementine and Herman met, he kept an extensive international itinerary with Bostock's circus. He traveled to Paris and New York (1904), France (1905), Italy and Egypt (1906), New York City (1907), and the Belgian Congo (1908). Clementine may have traveled with him on those trips. One can only imagine the trials of a 12-year age difference between the stunning beauty and the handsome performer tied to an international circus production schedule. Their first and only child, Frank H. Wirtheim, was born in France on December 7, 1907. Clementine and Herman eventually drifted apart and formally divorced on June 23, 1917. Herman traveled internationally with the circus until 1914 and then settled in as Menagerie Head at the Selig Zoo in Los Angeles from 1915 to 1920.

By 1909, Clementine's father, Charles de Vere, and her brother, Camille de Vere, were running the Paris shop together. That same year Camille died of diabetes and Charles sold the shop. Charles de Vere retired to a country estate, Rosny sous Bois, ten miles out of Paris where, according to P.T. Selbit, "He is devoting his untiring energies to the exploitation of a big magical show that will be presented by one of his lovely daughters. They expect to commence operations in September." It's in Rosny sous Bois that "Ionia" was born. Charles de Vere, with his talents and connections, created the act that would eventually feature six tons of equipment, 22 lithographs and require the support of nine people.

In February 1911, the first sightings of Ionia appeared in the magical journals. By that time she had performed in Vienna, Berlin, Copenhagen and, of course, Paris. On Monday, January 30, 1911, Ionia made her first appearance in Britain at the Birmingham Hippodrome. Max Sterling's *The Magical World* of February 8, 1911 carried a full review of the well-received show:

*Ionia is of charming presence and handsomely costumed in a mixed Egyptian-Oriental style. Her act is nicely staged in spectacular fashion and neatly performed. She is assisted by a troupe of seven or eight attendants.*

[Above] One of the few known photographs of Clementine "Ionia" de Vere, circa 1912, already at the end of her career in her early 20s.



Her opening effect introduces two decanters, one on either side of the stage. A handkerchief placed in one finds an invisible way to its opposite neighbor at a pistol shot. A raised platform is then introduced, with a contrivance resembling an umbrella supported in the center. The apparatus is brought forward and displayed empty. A curtain of draperies masks the vacant space for a moment — another shot — and curtains fall to disclose a lady wearing a gigantic “Merry Widow” hat, with which she walks off. The umbrella has disappeared.

The production of a fish bowl forms the next effect, and living goldfish are secured from the atmosphere by aid of a net similar in design to that used to “produce” pigeons.

An Egyptian mummy case, supported in an upright position on steps, is next displayed. A lady assistant is secured within and raised to mid-air and the steps removed. The coffin cabinet is spun around, and while still suspended, the lid is opened to apparently display the lady still within. The revolver shot signals her disappearance, the cabinet is thrown open — empty and the lady reappears from the auditorium. A version of the Parasol Trick was the next effect. In this, handkerchiefs placed in a paper bag vanish at a revolver shot, and the skeleton parasol unwrapped from the matting shows the handkerchiefs properly attached to the ribs, forming the conventional parti-colored covering.

For the final effect a large platform is placed in the center of the stage. Uprights at each corner carry draperies to allow of enclosing. It is presented as empty; top, flooring, sides, etc., are thoroughly exhibited. The curtains are then drawn, and the revolver again brought into play. On the reopening of the cabinet the “chamber” is discovered containing two fair maids in picturesque attitude.

After reading his description, it is easy to see why it was such a crowd-pleaser.

In March of 1911, Clementine graced the cover of *The Sphinx* with her lithe stance and famous Egyptian-Oriental style of costume. That same month, she appeared in Manchester, England. *The Sphinx* reported:

*The act is very prettily staged, having special scenery and all effects and assistants made up a la Egyptian. Ionia is described as a Goddess of Mystery, and what title could be more apt, for possessing a fine presence, a bountiful supply of good looks and a pleasing manner, as she flits hither and thither working wonder*

*upon wonder, she might well be described as a Queen of Goddesses. True, she presents nothing new; in fact, all her illusions have been seen before, but as she has only been playing in this country for the last few weeks, no doubt this state of things will soon be remedied, as Ionia is a lady of great determination, with big ideas which she is not afraid to put into execution regardless of cost. Being a daughter of the Great De Vere will be a criterion of what we must expect from this clever lady and as she possesses qualities above the average lady magician we shall no doubt within a short time see her holding the proud position of the leading lady illusionist. That she may attain that position is the sincere wish of your correspondent.*

Charles de Vere came over from Paris to see his daughter work in Manchester. It may have been the last time he saw Ionia on stage. After 1911, there are few references to Ionia’s large illusion act. The act, the costumes, the posters and even Ionia seem to simply vanish into thin air.

The most famous reference to Ionia after 1911 comes from her father; it places her in Moscow in 1919 during the Revolution that toppled the Russian Monarchy and brought Vladimir Lenin to power. Charles de Vere wrote a letter to Edmund Springer, a British magic dealer. The letter, which now resides in the collection of Eddie Dawes, includes a vertically placed two-line postscript that states: “My daughter who was Ionia was at Moscow when the Revolution commenced. All her material pillaged and she was in cellar of hotel three months.” Charles de Vere wrote that letter and postscript in 1924, five years after the 1919 October Revolution.

This seismic historical backdrop would have been a fitting place to end the career of one of magic’s most beautiful and elusive performers, Ionia “The Enchantress.” However, recently released information from the de Vere family reveals that Ionia was not in Moscow at the time of the Revolution.

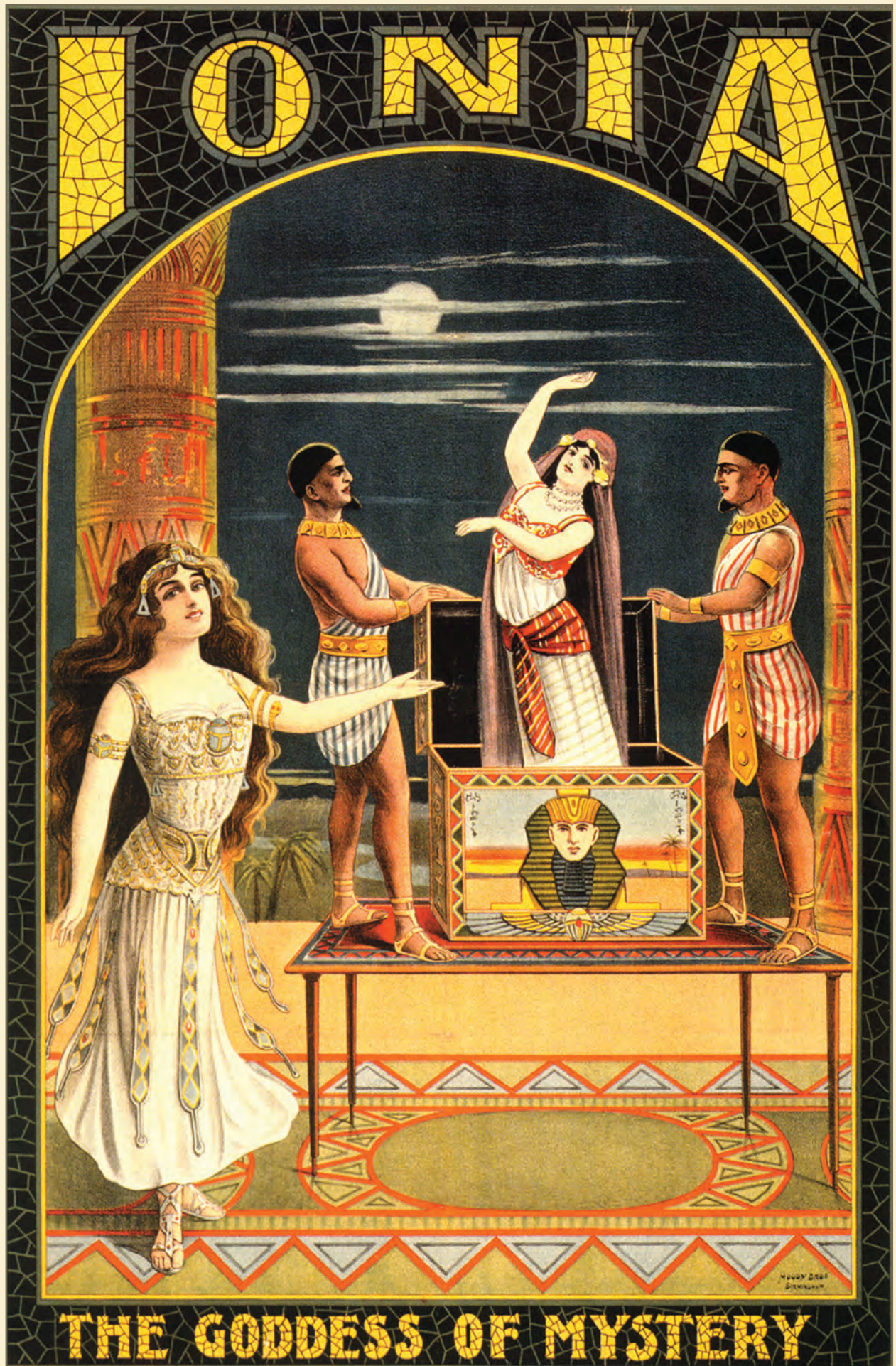
Significantly, there are few references to Ionia after 1911. One of these comes from Abel Blanche in *l’Escomateur*. He writes: “Ionia married, left her act, and abandoned her material, to the grand despair of her father. He spent a lot of money on the act, and was looking to sell the tricks and the superb color lithographs.” Charles de Vere was trying to recoup some of the investment that he made in his daughter’s act.

In the same article there is a report from the March 16, 1918 *Libre Parole*, stating



[From top] Clementine’s mother, Julia Ferrett de Vere, in her guise as the faux-Oriental magicienne, Okita. Charles de Vere, “Conjuror & Humourist” and father of Ionia. Herman Wirtheim, a.k.a. Herman Weedon, Clementine’s first husband. The man who made Clementine a princess, Prince Vladimir Eristavi Tchitcherine.





that Clementine “was very well known in Vienna as Ionia l’Enchantress. She played in a fairy pantomime and lived there at the start of the war, prancing around the ring, dressed as a red Hussar [a flamboyant cavalryman].” This places Clementine in Vienna in 1914. It seems that Ionia and her large illusion act vanished from the stage by the end of 1911. The next time that she’s sighted is in Vienna in 1914 performing a dramatically different act, solo and in mime. Gone are the six tons of props and the nine assistants.

Ionia’s vanishing may have been caused by the sudden disappearance of a theater. The Folies Bergere of New York, a Parisian-style cabaret and dinner theater, opened April 27, 1911 and closed in October that same year due to low attendance and high-priced tickets. An advert in the collection of Peter Scarlett reads: “Owing [to] the closing of the Folies Bergere, of New York, Mdle. Ionia, The Queen of all Illusionists, is at liberty for immediate work.”

Ionia may have been contracted to perform in New York in 1912 following her successful performances in Great Britain the previous year. The advert reveals that Ionia had eight novel illusions, including her new Oriental Fantasy, entitled “As thou treateth, thou shalt be treated.” This was a large-scale production, supported by nine people, that was deemed, “The most magnificent stage effects ever presented.” The closing of the New York theater would have changed those plans. The harsh reality of being left without a place to perform a large illusion show may have made Clementine rethink her life as a globe-trotting performer.

Ionia was gone, but what happened to Clementine de Vere? Better than being “Queen of all Illusionists” in New York, she became a Princess in Europe. Sometime around 1913 Clementine met Prince Vladimir Eristavi Tchitcherine in Austria. When they married on June 21, 1919 in Paris, she became Princess Clementine Eristavi Tchitcherine. Her son later took the name Frank Wirtheim Tchitcherine. The details of the meeting between the magicienne and the Prince may be lost to time. However, from records unearthed in the holdings of the National Archives of France and the United States, and from information provided to the author by de Vere family relatives, a clearer picture of Clementine’s life after Ionia emerges. Some of what can be surmised

about her is drawn from interviews of those closest to her.

Clementine and Vladimir divorced on October 26, 1928. By 1942, the Prince was living on Biscayne Island, Florida and married to his third wife, Lucy Magraw Thomas Cotton. Prince Eristavi Tchitcherine was a person of interest to the F.B.I. in 1942 because of alleged pro-Nazi statements made by him. In declassified F.B.I. files from the J. Edgar Hoover we learn that Clementine’s son, Frank Tchitcherine, was interviewed by the agency about his stepfather. The files



state: “Before the start of World War I, the Prince took Clementine and Frank from Vienna to Paris, then onto Germany and finally onto Russia. According to Frank Tchitcherine, they were in Russia before WWI started.” The reasons that the trio went to Russia are a bit murky, but the Prince, in his autobiography, relates that he was a cousin of George Tchitcherine, Secretary of State in the Bolshevik government. He also wrote that he worked for the Russian government in Moscow from 1916 until 1918.

So where was Clementine during the Revolution? Not in Moscow. It was far too


dangerous for her to have stayed there. She held a foreign passport and she was closely associated with the Prince, who was working for the government. According to a de Vere family relation, Clementine was in France during the Russian Revolution.

After the Revolution, Prince Vladimir Eristavi Tchitcherine left Moscow for Paris and worked for the Russian government in exile. In 1920, he worked in Washington, D.C. at the Russian Embassy. Clementine came with him. Frank, aged 12, remained in boarding school in Europe.

By 1921, according to French census records and personal accounts, the Prince, Clementine and Frank were back in Paris and living at 26 Ave. de Neuilly.

Eventually the Prince and the Princess divorced. Clementine retained the title and continued to lead a regal life in the strata of high society as Princess Clementine Eristavi Tchitcherine. In February 1937, *The New York Times* reported that the retiring French Ambassador and an entourage were departing for France. Among those traveling with the ambassador were barons, baronesses, governors, and one princess — Clementine.

In 1955 Clementine left her Paris residence and moved to Saint Jean Cap Ferrat, just west of Monaco. She lived out the rest of her days in Saint Laurent du Var, near Cap Ferrat, passing away at the age of 85 on March 31, 1973. She is buried in Paris alongside her father and mother. ♦

*Early on in Charles Greene’s magical life, he was fascinated by the colorful images of magic posters in Milbourne Christopher’s The Illustrated History of Magic. Today, a corporate magician, Charles resides in Washington, D.C. in a house with magic posters on every wall, and maintains an online poster gallery.* 

*Most of the images that remain of Ionia are posters. It’s recorded that she had more than 20 different poster images, of which only nine are known today.*

*“Ionia: The Queen of Mystery” was originally presented as a talk at the Magic Collectors Weekend last spring. Charles would like to give special thanks to the relatives of Charles de Vere and Herman Weedon, who selflessly gave family information, and to Michael Sibir, a man of mystery.*

*Of the Ionia posters in existence today, only one [left] depicts her during a performance of magic; most simply focus on her beauty [above].*