

Chevalier Ernest Thorn

“King of Illusionists”

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Chevalier Ernest Thorn “King of Illusionists”



Chevalier Thorn is not a name that readily springs to mind when looking back to the Golden Age of magic, but Thorn deserves to be remembered, not only as a performer but as the creator of many fine illusions.

The certificate of membership of The Magic Circle in the UK has, as an integral part of its design, the names of famous magicians printed around its edges, such as T. Nelson Downs, Carl Hertz, David Devant, Karl Germain, Chung Ling Soo, P.T. Selbit and Servais Le Roy. On the bottom line of the certificate, next to P.T. Selbit, you will see the name Chevalier Thorn. This is recognition by The Magic Circle that he was one of the great magicians from the past.

So, who was Chevalier Thorn?

Thorn was born on the 23rd September 1853 in Jaroslaw in the province of Galicia, Poland and, like so many magicians today, he was bitten by the magic bug at an early age. He was just ten years old when he saw a performance by the magician Simonelli. This turned out to be a defining moment in Ernest’s young life, because he was so impressed by the magic of Simonelli he decided that when he grew up *he* would become a magician.

Six years later, at the age of sixteen, he said goodbye to his family and friends, and travelled all over Austria performing magic and taking advantage of being apprenticed to various magicians.

Later he had the good fortune to become an assistant to Bellachini who was one of the most popular German magicians of the 19th century. No doubt this is where he learned the skills and techniques of being a stage magician, which in time would earn him the title of *King of Illusionists*. Jean Robert Houdin, the father of modern magic, regarded Bellachini as one of the magicians that made the 19th century the golden age of magic.



Research of Thorn’s later life revealed a man of many talents and interests. Ernest Thorn was fluent in eight languages and an extremely keen collector of antiques and rare coins. He was also a member of both the German and British Magic Circles.

As a young man, he teamed up with his brother “Heinrich” (or Henry as he later became known) and began travelling the world performing magic together. Their act was called *Thorn and Darwin*. After touring Austria

and Germany, they travelled to Turkey where they spent two years in Istanbul, before continuing on to India, the Far East, China, Japan and Australia.

During their time in the Far East they gave a performance for the King of Cambodia, King Norodom, who was so impressed by their magic that he bestowed upon them a most prestigious French honour, entitling them to use the title of *Chevalier*.

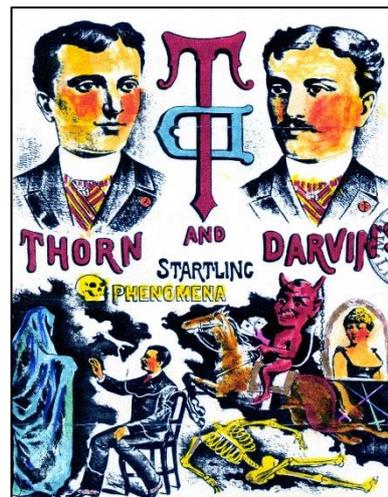
You may be wondering how the monarch of a foreign country, thousands of miles from France, had the authority to honour the brothers this way. International politics is the answer. In 1863, in order to save the country from being swallowed up by his two powerful neighbours - Vietnam and Siam - King Norodom accepted the Government of France's offer and made Cambodia a protectorate of France, which no doubt gave him the authority to bestow French honours.

Ernest Thorn now used the title *Chevalier* on all his publicity material, and the brothers, now billing themselves as *The Royal Illusionists*, continued their globe trotting until 1885 when they arrived in America.

When touring America they must have found themselves in a town where it was not possible to have a poster printed advertising their show, so they had one painted on a large wooden board to be displayed outside the hall or theatre where they were appearing. On the poster they proudly inform their audience that they gave 200 consecutive performances in both Vienna and Berlin. Immediately underneath are the words *The Chevalier E Thorn and his partner Darvin - the Royal Illusionists and Legitimate Exposers of Spiritualism*.

When Ernest wanted to continue the world tour in 1885, Henry decided to stay in America. Chevalier Thorn, assisted by his wife Julia, his principal assistant who also acted as his manager, toured his illusion show *An Hour in Dreamland* in America and Europe. His visits to England were rare. Records show that in 1904 he appeared in London at the Britannia Theatre and the Empire Theatre the same year. In 1912 Thorn was mystifying London audiences with his illusion show at the Alhambra Theatre.

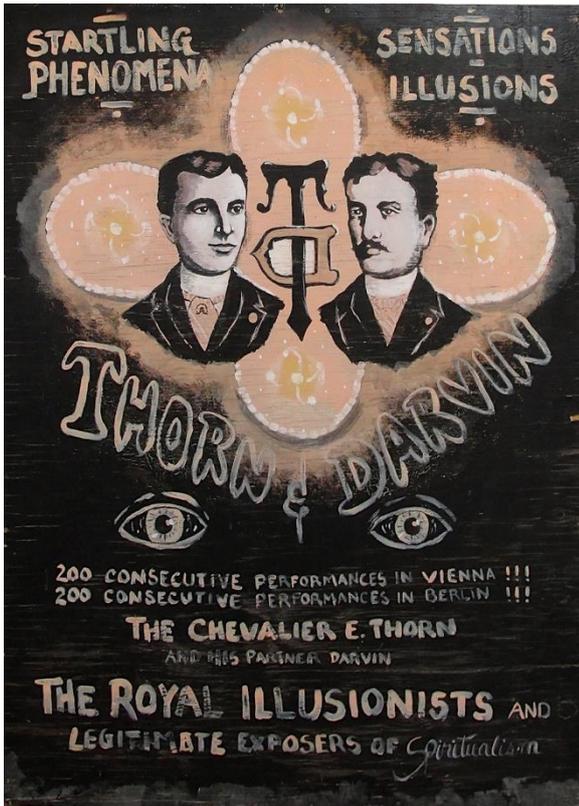
Chevalier Thorn was one of the earliest 'Great Magicians' to tour the world, as travel by road and rail had improved, making such tours practical for large magic shows. His magic show *An Hour in Dreamland* included many fine illusions he had invented, such as the *Noah's Ark* and *The Dream of the Chalif*.



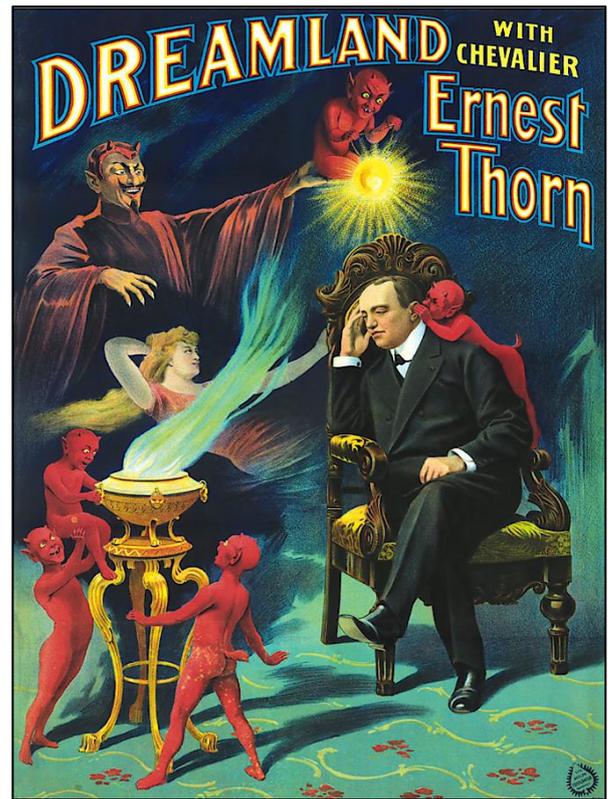
Norodom in 1863



Here Ernest Thorn is seen wearing what appears to be the insignia of the French decoration.



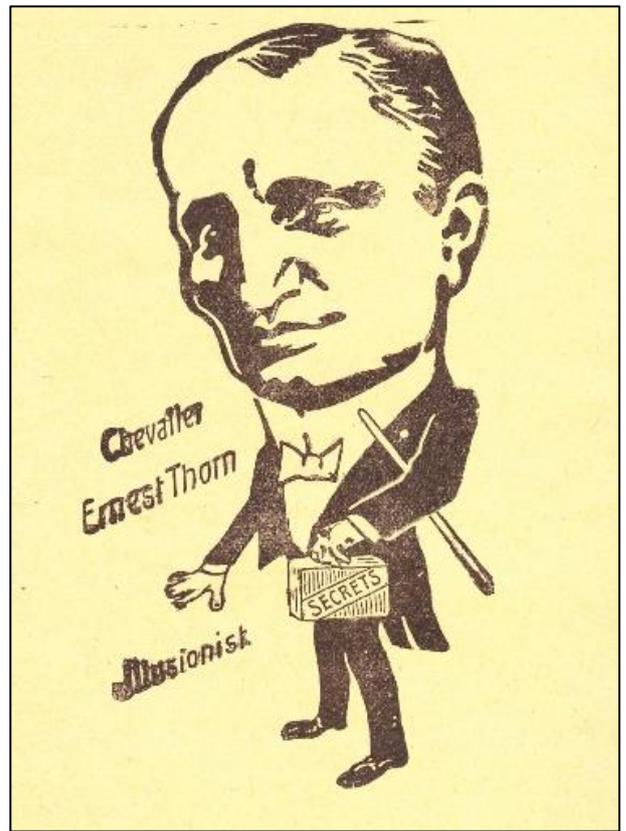
The poster painted on wood from the Thorn and Darwin American tour. Courtesy the Marco Pusterla collection.



A poster used by Ernest Thorn to publicise his Dreamland show.



Chevalier Thorn was at the Empire Theatre, London in 1904.



A cartoon of Thorn with his bag of tricks.

On occasions during his professional career as a stage magician, he would take a break from performing and worked on the other side of the footlights managing several important European theatres, notably in Hungary and Ukraine. In 1896 the Hungarian Government staged its National Millenium Exhibition in Budapest celebrating its one thousand years of statehood. Ernest Thorn became responsible for the management of all its theatres and places of entertainment. However this arrangement did not go well and as a consequence he lost most of his fortune.



Stamps celebrating the Budapest Exhibition.

A year later in Lviv, an important Ukrainian town, Ernest Thorn invested in a new theatre, The Colosseum, which soon became known to the locals as Thorn’s Colosseum. T Nelson Downs, the brilliant coin manipulator, performed at the Lviv Colosseum when it was under Thorn’s management. While he was there, Downs wrote:

“Here, Thorn is a prince as far as I am concerned.
He has all kinds of illusions, about 40 big boxes in all.”

In 1905, when Downs wanted to expand his stage act, he developed several illusions with Thorn. But his new illusion show was not a success and he quickly returned to performing his popular coin manipulations.

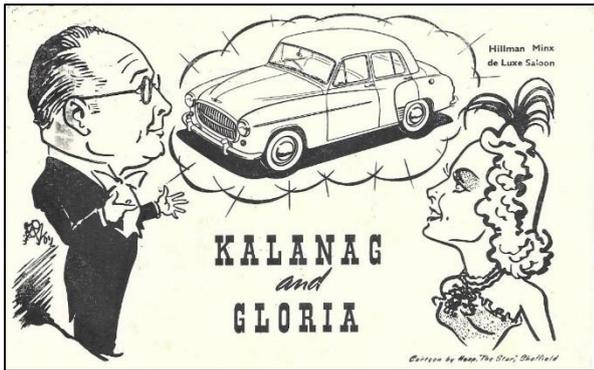
Unfortunately Thorn’s three year management of the Lviv Colosseum was not a success and again he lost money. So he was forced to take his illusion show back on the international tour circuit visiting England, France, Sweden, Norway, Holland, Germany and Austria.



Lviv in Ukraine, where Thorn invested in the Colosseum theatre.



The Colosseum theatre in Lviv.



Cartoon by Heap, "The Star", Sheffield.

Going back in time to the turn of the century, in fact to 1901, the parents of a young boy invited Chevalier Thorn to their home to talk to their son, who had become so obsessed with magic, it was affecting his school studies. Thorn persuaded the young boy whose name was Helmut, to apply himself to his studies but to keep magic as a great hobby. In 1909, sponsored by Thorn he became a member of the German Magic Circle. In 1918 Helmut Schrieber changed his professional name to Kalanag.

From time to time when researching a subject, a particular source will produce an item so unusual that it just has to be included in the final presentation, like this photograph retrieved from the archives of the UK Magic Circle of a shirt cuff that was posted to Chevalier Thorn care of the Circus Bekelow in Budapest where he is given the title of *König der Illusionisten* (King of Illusionists). The Circus Bekelow was in Budapest for a season in 1905, so perhaps Chevalier Thorn was performing with them at that time.



This photograph raises several interesting questions, such as "Who posted the shirt cuff - why just the cuff and not the whole garment - what was the meaning behind posting the cuff to Thorn?" These are mysteries waiting to be solved.

The title *King of Illusionists* used by Chevalier Thorn was rightly his. He would advertise the fact that audiences attending his show would see six new illusions, all his own invention, never seen before. Actually Thorn is credited with inventing twelve illusions, of which the *Noah's Ark* and *The Dream of the Chalif* were outstanding and which soon began appearing in other illusionists' programmes.

Unfortunately the names he gave to the others, such as *Attavar - The Sarcophagus - Toiza Wonda - Mystery of Lahore - Casket of Cagliostro - Karma Sutra vs Benares - Rapid Transit - Koti Honi - Floating Yoga - Transformation* do not convey what an audience could expect to see. However, when they saw his poster advertising his *Noah's Ark* illusion it would have been very obvious what might happen.

Thorn's model of the ark stood on four feet well above any trapdoor in the stage. After it had been shown empty, various animals were produced. Finally an assistant appeared from the ark dressed as Mrs Noah. Amongst the



many performers who included their versions of Thorn's illusion in their act was The Great Raymond. The photograph shows him producing from the empty ark rabbits, turkeys, birds, chickens, a goat and three lady assistants. As the production progressed, audiences were often amused by the antics of the untrained livestock left to wander about the stage.

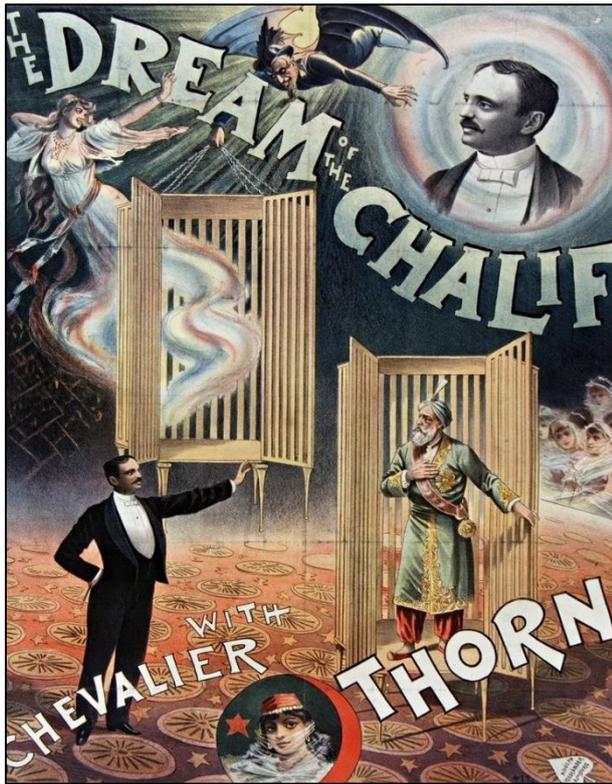


The Great Raymond with his version of the Noah's Ark illusion.

Here's another beautifully decorated Noah's Ark which was once used in the wonderful shows of the now much missed *Le Grand David Company* in America.

In *The Dream of the Chalif* an assistant is transported 'invisibly' from one cabinet to another suspended above the stage. As with Thorn's *Noah's Ark* illusion, *The Dream of the Chalif* also found its way into other illusionists' programmes. For instance, the English magician Charles Morritt adapted it for the American illusionist Harry Kellar





Chevalier Thorn with his 'Dream of the Chalif' on the left. On the right, Kellar presenting the same illusion under the name of 'Fly To'.

who renamed it *Fly To*. This was a rather ordinary name for such a clever illusion but, as Kellar would say: "He made an assistant fly to a cage suspended above the stage". *Fly To* proved so popular with his audiences that Kellar used it as his closing illusion for many years.

As mentioned earlier, in August 1912 Chevalier Thorn and Company appeared at London's Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square. This was to be the last time he would be seen in England. Storm clouds were gathering over Europe presaging the outbreak of the First World War. His show at the Alhambra was brilliantly captured in Elcock's pen and ink drawing, shown on the next page, in which several of his illusions and tricks are illustrated.



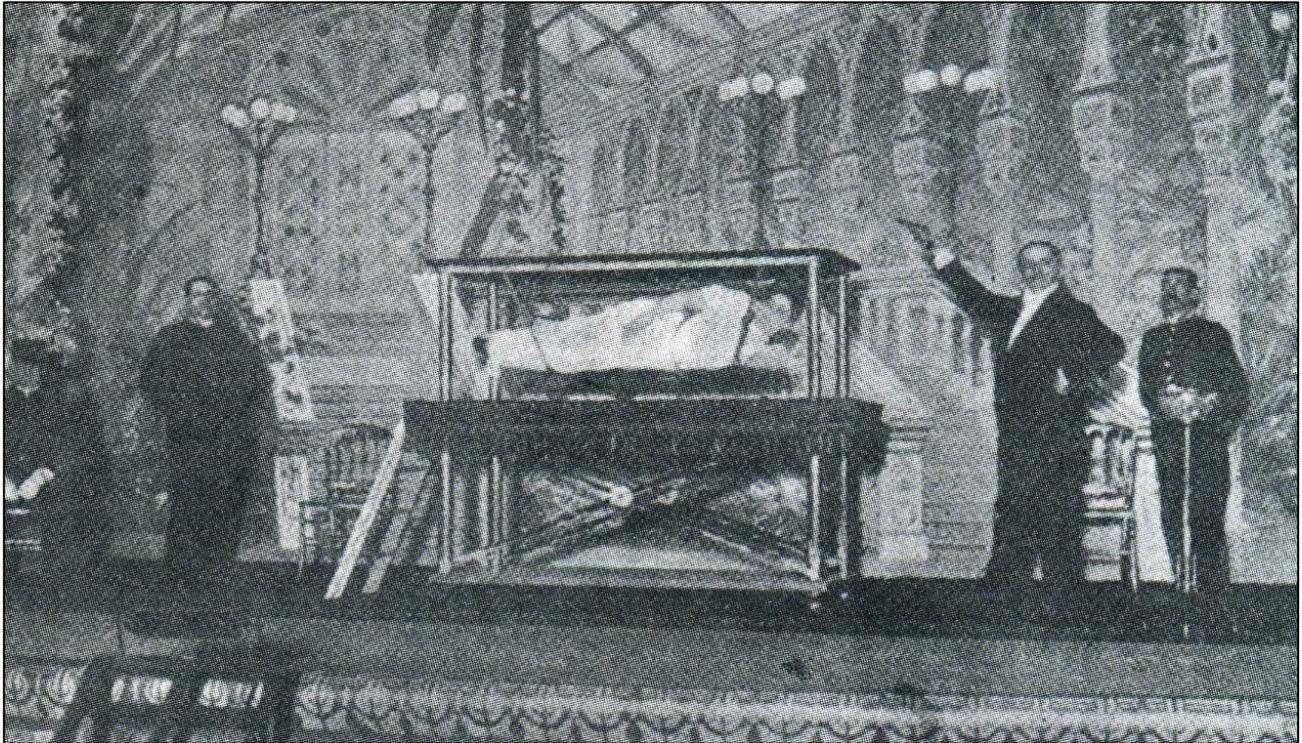
The Alhambra theatre in London.



Here, at the top left, we see him performing two of his small signature tricks - handkerchiefs that pass from one bottle to another, and pouring vintage wine from a bottle of water. At the top right there are two cabinet illusions where Thorn and assistants change places.

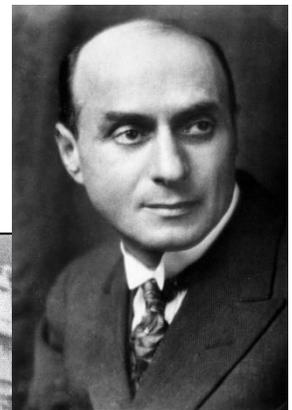
On the left, towards the bottom, is the production of an old man from a wine cask, and below that the *Attavar* illusion - another of Chevalier Thorn's original creations.

In a magic magazine published in November 1904, the *Attavar* illusion was described as follows; A lady assistant lies in a hammock suspended between two tables. On command the top table, hammock and assistant instantly vanish from view in full light and without the aid of trap doors, mirrors or curtains.

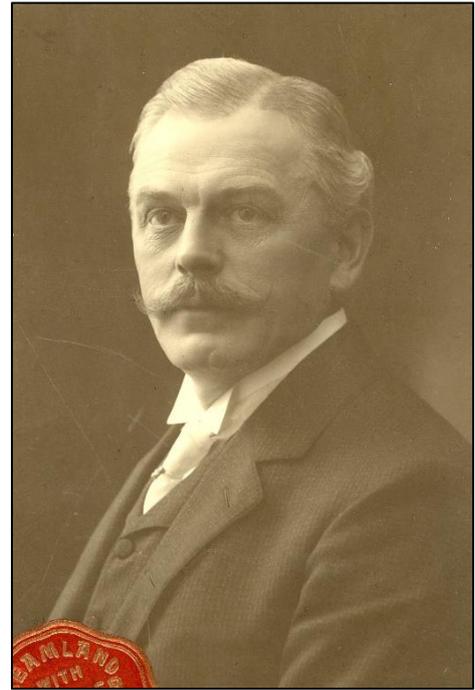


The 'Attavar' Illusion, The Rembrandt Theatre, Amsterdam, April 1904.

On Thorn's visits to England, he became friends with Will Goldston when he was the manager of the magic department of the famous London store, Gamages. Later Goldston opened his own magic store in London and founded The Magicians' Club, of which no doubt Thorn became a member. In 1921 Chevalier Thorn entered into a business arrangement with Goldston to buy mainly books and copies of The Magicians' Club magazines. This arrangement only lasted a few years. Will Goldston was known to complain that Thorn was often late in settling his account, and considered him to be a bit of a scrounger. Despite this, Goldston still referred to Thorn as a close friend - but this was not strictly true. Goldston put up with him as he was inclined to curry favour with all the important magicians of the day, which of course included Chevalier Thorn.

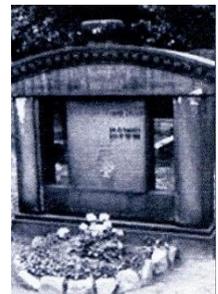


Ernest Thorn's wife Julia, his long-time chief assistant and manager, died at the age of 50 on the 28th July 1919. Her death affected him greatly. Four years later in 1923 Chevalier Thorn retired from performing and sold most of his illusions to Kassner, a leading German illusionist at the time. Chevalier Thorn spent his remaining days in retirement in Leipzig, Germany, but his health was not good. He had suffered from diabetes for many years.



Julia and Ernest Thorn

Over the years of travelling around the world, Ernest Thorn had acquired many fine antiques. The crash of the German Mark, in the 1920s, which had a disastrous effect on the German economy, forced Thorn to sell his cherished antiques, one by one, in order to support him in his retirement. Sadly his last days were spent in poverty and he died penniless. *Die Magie*, the official magazine of the German Magic Circle, informed its readers that Chevalier Ernest Thorn died at the age of 75 at 4:00 am on Monday 21st May 1928. He was buried beside his wife Julia in the old Jewish Cemetery in Leipzig. On his grave are the words "Rest here in Dreamland" - a poignant reminder of his wonderful illusion show.



It was reported that, after his death, his wife's jewels were found hidden in a cushion. If he had sold them he would have been able to enjoy the remaining years of his life in relative comfort. But they were the last reminder of his much-loved Julia and he had stubbornly refused to sell them.

Finally, I leave you with this quotation from Chevalier Ernest Thorn - King of Illusionists:

"All life is illusion. The most pleasant illusion, however, is magic."

I would like to acknowledge the following for their assistance.

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