

The Atlas & Vulcana Group of Society Athletes

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All photos courtesy David P. Webster

Atlas was a small strongman with a very big ego who claimed to have exceeded Louis Cyr's record lift with 242 pounds. In the view of many, including the writer, to seriously consider this man with the massive Cyr would be ludicrous. For a start Atlas, or to give him his proper name, William Hedley Roberts, weighed only 56.5 kilograms (126 pounds). There is absolutely nothing in the way of genuine records to show he was in any way exceptional, apart from having a well presented act.

His claims to weightlifting records would have put Baron Munchausen to shame and leave the Baron amongst the also-rans in far-fetched stories. Atlas's exaggerated claims lost him credibility and popularity.

The lovely ladies accompanying Atlas were welcomed by audiences even although the ring weights used in the act were supposed to each weigh 112 pounds. The girls finished their turn by holding these in the crucifix position and the principals of the act would juggle



disdainfully with these same weights. Few, if any, believed the stated weights but few cared, for it was a good, entertaining act. Few cared, that is, until they appeared in Camberwell, where the little British champion W.A. Pullum reigned supreme.

There in south London a riot at the theatre was precipitated by the boastful arrogance of the 126-pound Atlas, who claimed to lift 190 pounds with one hand, twice nightly. He enhanced this lurid lie by placing the bar on the palm of his hand and while thus balanced military pressing it without any hint of difficulty. This he followed by announcing that in Australia he had lifted 320 pounds in a one hand clean, challenging Arthur Saxon who had supposedly fled England to escape exposure. So said Atlas, spoofer supreme.

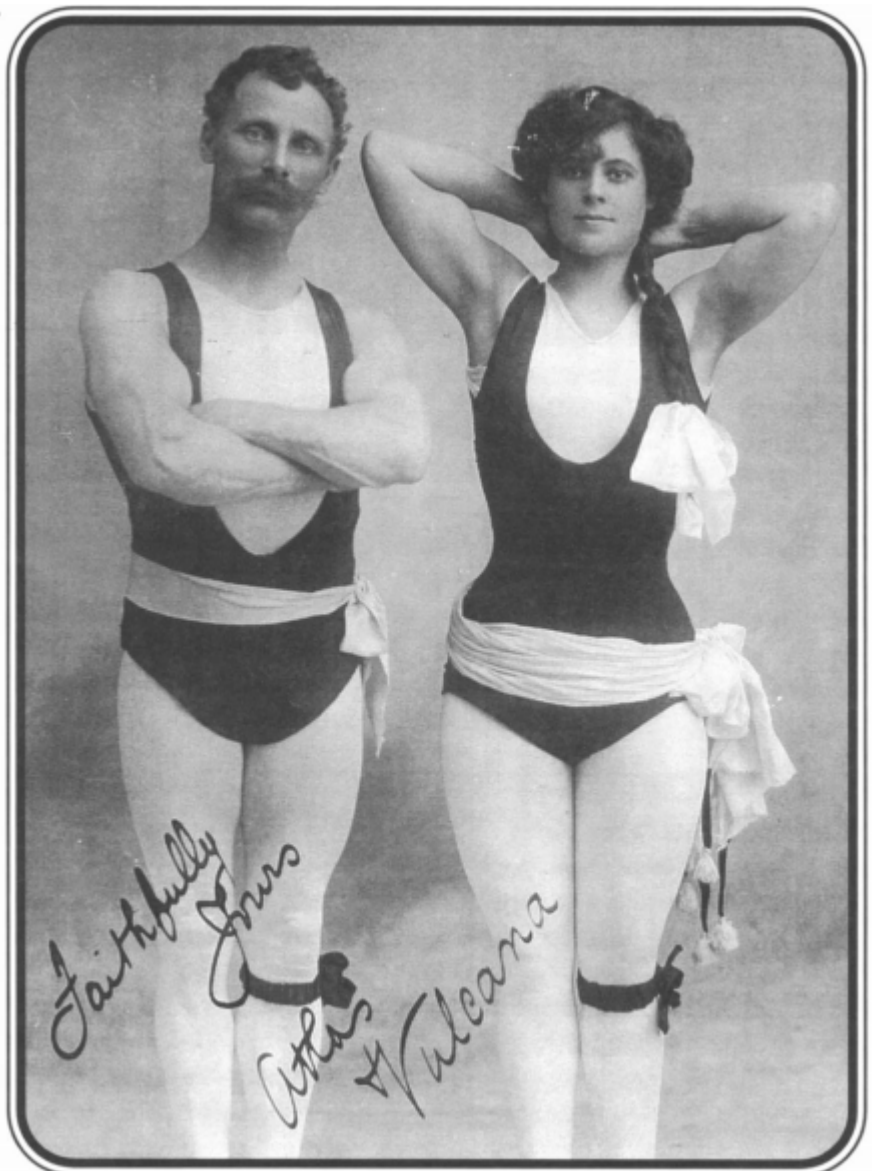
W.A. Pullum, who categorically denied that Vulcana could really lift 224 pounds overhead with one hand, demanded to test the weights. He was refused but

later in the week, when stagehands confirmed that the weight was specially increased, Pullum lifted this challenge barbell. Instead of being the claimed 224 pounds, Pullum estimated the weight at between 175 to 180 pounds. No member of the troupe would attempt it that evening. The lovely Vulcana had a few words with Bill Pullum and he aborted his plans to expose them. However his club members were not swayed and the following night there was a scene, which became the talk of Camberwell at the time. Representatives of London weightlifting clubs were there in force, including a member of the C.W./L.C. with a voice like a foghorn, protesting that the weights were faked. So vociferous were they that Atlas went berserk, rushing up and down the stage like one demented. He invited the hecklers up to the stage and no second bidding was necessary. They immediately rushed to the front only to find the way blocked by numerous attendants ready for such a demonstration. Their blood up, the invaders stormed the orchestra pit and young Stanley Pullum's foot went through the big drum as he and A.G. Davis led the way. The greatly perturbed manager called in the police who gradually restored order but not before Atlas was completely discredited.

This act largely depended on Vulcana, reported by many magazines and newspapers as being Atlas's sister. Although known as Kate Roberts her maiden name was Kate Williams. She was certainly strong for a woman and was given a medal by Prof. Desbonnet of France after he witnessed her lifts and checked the weights in a record-breaking session at l'Halterophile Club de France. She was very popular with French strength enthusiasts and I have an excellent cabinet photograph by Vulcana to Leon See. The Frenchman, Leon, won the British twelve stone championships of 1904 and is also well-known as the man-

ager who set Primo Camera on the road to World Championship boxing.

Vulcana is said to have bent pressed 124 1/2 pounds with her right hand and she also did an overhead lift with a 56-pound weight in each hand. Several authorities have also accepted another report, of a bent press with 145 pounds. Atlas claimed numerous other records for Vulcana but these have not been substantiated. This is a great pity as her performances in France and her frequently witnessed right arm bent press, with



an adult male as the weight, shows without doubt that she was an unusually strong woman. The male assistant was said to be 12-stone (168 pounds.), but was most likely somewhat less.

Vulcana's publicity said she was born in 1883, although her great granddaughters, Sue and Jane, query this, based on the ages of her children. She was a fine young Welsh woman of medium height (she was 5'4" tall) and with a shapely figure. A reporter of the period noted that she had a good complexion, was very supple and of charming disposition. She came from an athletic family and her father was a popular preacher in Wales. He encouraged her into athletics at an early age, having noted her interest in strenuous physical activities, swinging on trees and showing her strength at school by shifting pianos and lifting heavy objects.

Fifteen year old Kate turned professional by a stroke of fate when Atlas organized a fete at Pontypool. One variety act failed to turn up so at the last minute Kate was deputized and was very well received. She enjoyed the experience and Atlas knew right away that he had a winner. His protege had already shown she was a most unusual young lady.

At thirteen years of age she demonstrated tremendous courage and more than a little strength and speed by stopping a runaway horse in Egerton Street,



Bristol, and in July 1901 at Abergavenay she dived into a river and saved a boy from drowning. According to one report this incident happened on the River Usk when two boys larking on a bridge fell into the water. The award she received was very much treasured by her at that time. She won well over one hundred medals, mainly for her strength feats, and one of her most prized awards was a medal from the Queen of Holland. This showed a cluster of barbells inset of a figure lifting a barbell. This was surrounded with a Royal crown.

In October 1901 Vulcana seized the opportunity to get some good publicity when a wagon got stuck in Maiden Lane, Strand, London. The wheels locked and she greatly surprised the wagoner, onlookers and a policeman standing by when she lifted one end of the wagon and allowed them to free the wheel that was causing the problem. They had not recognized her as Vulcana but she soon let them know and of course the story spread rapidly.

In contrast to this on 3 December 1909, there was a disturbance at the Kings Music Hall in Edinburg when there were protests about the fake weights used by the group. Atlas invited the rioters to come on stage and lift in competition against Vulcana, but after some ten

minutes encouragement there were still not any takers. At this time there were two other ladies, the Atlas Sisters, in the act along with Atlas and Vulcana. At least one of these is likely to have been related to Vulcana as in my collection I have photographs of Maude Atlas. Although this is obviously a stage name she wears an identical stage costume to and bears a decided facial resemblance to Kate. Since Mona, Kate's daughter, would only be nine years old at this time, it could well be a Vulcana's sister or cousin,

On 29 May 1913, at Haggard's Theatre, Llanelly, Wales, the well-known professional strongwoman Athelda attempted to lift Vulcana's challenge bell. According to the *Llanelly Mercury* Athelda tried for fully twenty-five minutes without success. This is a very significant victory, and places Vulcana high in the estimation of strength historians. In a poll I conducted many years ago the top places were as follows.

Rank	Stage Name	Real Name	Native Country
1st	Sandwina	Katie Brumbach	Germany
2nd	Athleta	Mme. Van Huffelen	Belgium
3rd	Vulcana	Kate Williams	Wales
4th	Louista Leers	Frau L. Kluges	Germany
5th	Athelda	Frances Rheinlander	England

In her act Kate began with posing in what was called an "electric cabinet." The lights showed her physique to advantage, inspiring artists and would-be poets. After this followed the weightlifting part of her act. Judging by reports she was strongest around 1910.

Health and Strength magazine in 1904 said that Vulcana was "a veritable Venus in form." Soon to depart for Australia, Kate, the feature enthused, was as strong as she was beautiful but with none of that aggressive assertion of muscular development which leads many to believe that strength and maidenly modesty are an impossible combination. It may have been out of character that while shopping in London, Vulcana's strength was utilized to foil a thief. Looking in a shop window she saw in the reflection a pickpocket about to rob her. Whirling around instantly, she caught his arm with one hand and smashed him in the face with the other.

Vulcana and company appeared on stage until 4 June 1921 when they appeared at the Garrick Theater on Grove Street in Edinburgh. There was a fire at the theatre that night and Vulcana saved some terrified horses that were appearing in another act. She was badly burnt when her hair caught fire but she did not let that deter her and her bravery won her commendations and, I understand, an award. The troupe lost almost everything in the blaze. Their props and costumes were destroyed and without these they could not perform. I cannot find any reports of subsequent performances.

We do know that later in life they lived for some time at Gosforth Lodge in Fulham, London-and mention of a Lodge reminds me that Atlas became an enthusiastic Free Mason.

On 4 Nov. 1999 I had the pleasure of meeting two great granddaughters of Vulcana. Sue and Jane came to my very old home with a TV camera crew filming a program for the BBC. I am happy to say I was able to supply the ladies with numerous articles about their ancestors and they were delighted to see many photographs they had not seen before. They confirmed that Atlas and Vulcana were not brother and sister but were partners in life as well as in their stage act. Atlas and Vulcana's children included their eldest son Arthur who went to Australia, and Nora who may have been in the act as one of the Society Athletes. Neither Arthur nor Nora married so those parts of the line died out. The third child, Mona was brought into the act as soon as she had reached a suitable age and her stage name was Eve Atlas. Atlas became the middle name of her offspring. It was good to receive such information first hand. The recent visit by Vulcana's granddaughters and all my earlier investigations and inquiries lead me to believe that Vulcana, Kate Williams, was a very charming, spirited and liberated lady who lost nothing of her womanliness in pursuit of her profession.

References:

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