

THE GREAT SNAZELLE – SOME FURTHER INSIGHTS

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The life story, travels and performances of George Harry Snazelle (1848–1912) were described in the last edition of *The Magic Lantern* (No. 6, page 6). To glean just a little flavour of Snazelle's skill for yarn-spinning, here is part of an interview which appeared in the schoolboy magazine *Chums* in March 1899 and then more background to his most famous creation – Bill Adams, the hero of Waterloo.

FUN-MAKING IN MANY LANDS

'Well, now let us have some of your adventures. Where have you been?'

'I've been nearly everywhere – Madagascar, Samoa, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Mauritius, Zululand – almost every country you can name, in fact. What is more, I never visited a place which didn't yield me a dividend.'

'But surely your visit to the savages wasn't a professional one?'

'Most certainly it was, but I didn't give them a wholly humorous entertainment. I showed them dissolving views and sang sacred songs. I have sung "Nazareth" in at least thirty-five languages. When I am out amongst the black folks, I get a friendly missionary to translate the words of my songs into the native tongue and then learn them more or less after the fashion of a parrot.'

'What did you do about entrance money?'

'There wasn't any – except sucking-pigs and things.'

'Sucking-pigs!'

'Yes, the audience paid for their admission in kind. One man would come along with a sucking-pig under his arm, another would be laden with cocoanuts. They brought all manner of articles. Just listen to this incomplete list of things which were handed in at the door one night – 4 sucking-pigs, 600 cocoanuts, 200 yards native cloth, 7 grog bowls, 400 sharks' teeth, 3 whales' teeth, 2 cart-loads of coral. To this catalogue you can add a promise of two whales' jaws, weighing a couple of tons. One man I recollect deposited a live snake in the till – the till was a gigantic sheet. I put him on the free list for taking it away. As a matter of fact, we never refused admission to anybody. But the natives were expected to give what they could spare. On one occasion a number of children were very anxious to witness the performance. They had nothing to offer, however, and stood outside the building wondering what they should do. Suddenly they hit on a brilliant idea. As quick as lightning they stripped themselves of their scanty clothing, and, walking up to the door, proudly presented it to my manager, and passed through.'

'What on earth did you do with your sucking-pigs?'

'I sold everything to traders, and at an excellent price too. In one island, not more than a mile and a half in circumference, I disposed of my receipts for £126. I've made money in more ways than you can imagine. I remember at Melbourne playing in an opera towards the end of which I was supposed to have come down in the world. By way of showing how badly off I was, I used to stoop down and exhibit my bald head on which I had made a few paint marks, and say, I am even reduced to letting my bald head as a hoarding for advertisements. Now what I am telling you is the sober-honest truth. One night an advertisement agent came round and asked me if I would really let out my head as a hoarding. I replied that I might possibly do so, and the next evening, to my intense astonishment, he called on me and said that he had hired out my cranium to a firm of whisky merchants for £12 a week. It was a staggering piece of news and a stab to my pride, considering that my weekly salary as a principal member of the opera was only £525; nevertheless, I accepted the conditions and appeared at every performance with these words on my head "Drink – Whisky".'

'Let's get back to the savages now, Mr Snazelle.'

'Well, I had a magnificent time of it in Fiji, especially on the king's island. Here they have what is called a guest-house – a building which is set apart for the visitors from the adjacent islands. It was in the guest-house that I gave my entertainment. Having informed

the king what I was going to do, he ordered, the lalli to be beaten. The lalli is a great hollow trunk of a tree and is beaten by an enormous wooden mallet, and it is so toned that, when the wind is favourable, it can be heard six miles away. Immediately the sound reaches the nearest island the inhabitants beat their own lalli with a view to warning their neighbours who, in their turn, repeat the process, and in this way the king's command, which in our case was a summons to the populace to come and see the show, was sent from one island to the other.'

'You gave the king a free seat, of course?'

'No – he paid a whale's tooth. By the bye, I had a chance of becoming father-in-law to King Cocahan. Before he ascended the throne, he called on me and proposed to marry my daughter, who, together with my wife, accompanied me on my travels. He was just like a great child, and for the life of him couldn't understand why I laughed at him. No, he didn't die; he married somebody else.'

(The reader will observe the photograph of Mr Snazelle and his manager dressed in the costumes they wore in Fiji.)

'We enjoyed enormous success in the South Pacific Islands,' my host remarked presently. 'We never had to pay a cent for lodgings, and lived in a hut consisting of only one room, which we shared with the owner and his family. I stuck up a rug, however, and thus made the chamber into two.'

'We went all over the South Pacific, voyaging from one island to another in a small boat. All I had to pay each rower was fourpence a day and a yam. A yam is a kind of glorified potato, weighing anything up to seventy pounds. The yam is the principal article of diet in Fiji. Even the king scarcely ate anything else, though he was fond of his bit of sucking-pig. Out in Fiji there are spiders as big as sparrows, and lizards as long as your arm. The centipedes make you shudder, I can tell you – great flesh-coloured things. They come and stare at you with the most extraordinary curiosity. The natives of the South Pacific Islands are all splendid fellows, and I never saw a man or woman, who wasn't good-looking.'

'By the bye, it is often asked why specimens of this race are not brought over to England for exhibition purposes. Now this is the reason – if you take an islander away from his home, the British Government compels you to deposit £50. If you don't bring him back safe in twelve months, or cannot offer some satisfactory explanation for not doing so, you forfeit your money. The islanders need protection. They are exactly like monster children. The most ferocious-visaged man in the place will almost jump out of his skin with fright if you suddenly tap him on the back. You are also liable to a fine of £50 if you tempt a Fijian to partake of intoxicating liquor.'

'Have you ever performed before cannibals?'

'Yes, both in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. They paid for admission in skulls and polished thigh-bones. I penetrated right into the interior of the Solomon Islands with the object of tracing a man who, according to my black servant, a

George Snazelle and Uncle Bob



truthful fellow, rejoiced in three heads. I knew that if I got him he would be worth a million of money to me, but unfortunately he was not to be found. I feel tolerably certain that he was not a myth. Probably the natives worship him and keep him out of sight.' 'But really,' Mr Snazelle added, 'I could go on spinning reminiscences for you 'till midnight. You see, I'm perpetually on the move, and when I'm not performing I'm either cycling or playing cricket. My batting average last season was thirty-seven. We're a cricketing family, you know. Four generations of us figured in one match a little time back – my father, who is eighty two, myself, my son, and my grandson.'

'Don't you find it rather wearisome travelling hither and thither like this?' 'Not a bit. I love travel. One thing I do grow tired of, however, and that is the splendid way they feed you on board some of the big mail boats. There's absolutely nothing they don't set before you. It's magnificent, but there's too much of it. On one voyage I asked the steward who it was that invented the system of beginning dinner with soup and ending with dessert. He couldn't answer the question. "Well," I said, "let's commence at the end, anything for variety." And we did – nuts first – and were none the worse for it. I like change. If it wasn't for this interview for Chums I should be cycling from Dieppe to Paris at this moment – I've got a week off.'

'HOW BILL ADAMS WON THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO'

Bill Adams Version 1



Title slide



Nelson in the battle



In the NAAFI

Bill Adams Version 2



The man himself



In the heat of the battle



Bill Adams Ordered South – The narrator



Arthur Roberts as Bill Adams

George Snazelle introduced the celebrated braggart and liar Bill Adams to the general public in the early 1880s in his comical yarn, *How Bill Adams Won the Battle of Waterloo*. According to Snazelle his character was based on an old soldier he'd once met and observed in a pub at Edenbridge in Kent, regaling a group of fellow drinkers with unbelievable accounts of his acts of heroism in battle. Snazelle turned this unknown soldier into a comic turn, gave him a name, and proposed an account of his heroism at Waterloo, when he – with just a handful of troops – vanquished Napoleon's vast armies and so became the true unsung hero of the famous conflict. The story also reveals his close friendship with Wellington, whom he referred to on the friendliest terms as Old Nosey, and the part which Nelson also played in the battle.

By the 1890s the tale had become so popular with Snazelle's audiences that it was reproduced in print and in the form of commercially-available lantern slide sets. At least two lantern versions were produced by different artists. The most picturesque version was released by the well-known firm of W.C. Hughes (Version 1). Hughes had been something of a public entertainer himself before turning to slide manufacture.

It is worth mentioning the existence of a third set of slides – *Bill Adams Ordered South*. This was produced as a supposed sequel to the original Waterloo story at around the time of the Boer War, but both the recitation and accompanying images probably have nothing to do with Snazelle. The illustrations are very poor quality, Snazelle never mentions it, neither have I ever found any reference to it in

newspaper accounts and promotional material. It also lacks humour on any level.

In 1903 the character of Bill Adams won even greater celebrity when the comedian Arthur Roberts, known as 'The Apostle of the Absurd' and 'The Prophet of the Preposterous', decided to turn the old rogue into the subject of a stage musical. This was successfully staged in Britain and simultaneously, by another company, in Australia.

Somewhat bizarrely while Snazelle was stopping over in Perth in 1910, on his way home from his third visit to Australia, someone suggested they had proof that Bill Adams had actually existed and that his actual grave could be found in Fremantle Cemetery. Snazelle seems to have gone along with this idea and in subsequent interviews says that he would have visited the grave but that it had unfortunately 'recently burnt down'. On the surface this seems to be a contrivance worthy of Bill Adams himself. But, the fact is, there is indeed a burial plot in Fremantle cemetery with a gravestone commemorating Bill Adams – 'the hero of Waterloo'. Recent research confirms that this was indeed the last resting place of someone called Bill Adams. But, it appears that this Bill Adams was another Bill Adams who had emigrated to Perth with his wife – eighteen years before Snazelle was born.

Space forbids us from printing the entire monologue here. But you might care to go to the Society's Slide Reading Library and download the entire script. It is item 90663 and the direct link is: <http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/readings/reading.php?id=4003874>.