Herr Adalbert Frikell
(The only son of Wiljalba Frikell)
His life and times in England
1862 to 1889

presented by

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1862 was a year when much was happening around the world. America was in the throes of a bloody civil war. In France, Victor Hugo published his novel *Les Misérables*, and in England Thomas Cook organized the very first package holiday with one ticket to cover travel, meals and accommodation.

In the same year, a young man said goodbye to his family and friends in Germany and travelled to England to further his career as a stage magician.

His name was Adalbert Frikell.

The story of his 27 year career as a popular magician in England is an interesting one, and has exceptionally strong links with the North Yorkshire town of Scarborough.

He was just 23 years old when he came to England and soon became a popular performer, entertaining Victorian audiences with his magic act in which his sleight-of-hand routines with cards, coins and balls were highly praised.

In 1889, while fulfilling a summer engagement in Scarborough, he died under circumstances which, at the time, created a mystery as intriguing as any stage illusion.

When the readers of *The Scarborough Evening News and Daily Mercury* opened their papers on the 27th August, 1889, they would have seen the following headline:

**SUDDEN DEATH OF ENTERTAINER IN SCARBOROUGH**
**AN EXTRAORDINARY AFFAIR**
In a later edition under the heading:

**SUDDEN DEATH IN SCARBOROUGH OF HERR FRIKELL
THE CONJURER**

the curious would read a report setting out the strange circumstances surrounding his death the day before on the 26th August, 1889.

Adalbert Frikell was popular with Victorian audiences but his 27 year career in England was not without its ups and downs. In fact on the day he died he was found to be penniless.

So who was Adalbert Frikell?

Hermann Adalbert Frikell was born on the 18th October, 1839 in Bernstadt, Prussia. His father, Wiljalba Frikell, was a much respected and influential German magician of the 19th century.

Wiljalba Frikell had also travelled to England - he arrived in 1857, and on Christmas Day 1858 he entertained Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle.

So it would seem only natural then for the young Adalbert, influenced by his father's skills and reputation, to follow in his footsteps and become a professional magician.

And because he was his father's son, Adalbert held the strong belief, a belief that never left him the whole of his life, that stage magic was an art form to be respected, and when correctly performed could be a thing of beauty.

He might have had this quotation from Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* in mind:

*If this be magic - let it be art.*
Adalbert Frikell started his professional career at the age of 19, and in 1862 when he arrived in England from Germany, he was already an experienced performer.

By now he had dropped his first name Hermann and was known professionally as Herr Adalbert Frikell.

Between 1862 and 1889 (the year he died) he had a successful career as a stage magician performing in theatres both in London and throughout the provinces.

Of all the London venues where he appeared, the most prestigious, from a magician’s point of view, was the Egyptian Hall located at No. 171 Piccadilly in central London which had become known as England’s Home of Mystery. Today, of course, this building with its unique Egyptian facade has long since gone and has been replaced by a modern block of offices. On a wall just inside the entrance is a plaque, a present from The Magic Circle, commemorating the fact that the site of the present building was once the Egyptian Hall - England's Home of Mystery. It is nice to know that the association continues as the block of offices is called Egyptian House.

Amongst the many famous magicians who appeared at the Egyptian Hall, were Hermann The Great and Rubini. Another outstanding magician of the day to appear at the Egyptian Hall was Colonel Stodare who stunned London audiences with his now legendary illusion "The Sphinx" which showed a living and talking head displayed in a small box held by the magician.
Following the death of Colonel Stodare in 1866, his widow, Elizabeth, asked Adalbert Frikell to present "The Sphinx" and other items from her late husband’s show - which Adalbert did with great success. So we can assume from this that as well as being able to present smaller items of magic and sleight-of-hand routines, he had the ability, combined with confidence and showbiz pizzazz to present large illusions, which no doubt was influential in developing his stage persona.

Adalbert Frikell was quite clever at promoting himself through the media of the national press. When he was engaged to appear at the Egyptian Hall for Elizabeth Stodare, he placed the following notice in one of the major newspapers:

Herr Adalbert Frikell, the only Son of Wiljalba Frikell, begs to inform his friends that he has the honour of being engaged at Madam Stodare’s Theatre of Mystery.

The newspaper in question could have been *The Times*, as in the 1800s an advertisement in this paper was a sign of prestige and "arrival" on London's entertainment scene.

His arrival and reputation as a fine magical entertainer was now being recognized in America, as this item published in *The New York Daily Tribune* on Wednesday 30th February, 1867 shows:

A new magician, Herr Adalbert Frikell, has made his appearance in London. He is the son of a bygone illusionist of repute, and the adroitness of his tricks is said to be astounding.
Between 1867 and 1881, Adalbert Frikell performed in London, not only at the Egyptian Hall, but also at the Piccadilly Hall, Alexandra Palace, Crystal Palace, and Royal Aquarium, Westminster, all popular venues at the time.

During his 1881 season at the Piccadilly Hall, he had a great personal success and proved a hit with the public - and with one in particular, because he received a rather unusual gift from The Graphic, 12 June 1880.

The Royal Aquarium, Westminster.

A theatre programme containing details of Frikell’s performance.
this admirer in the form of a poem. The poem is entitled Herr Frikell and this is it:

The King of conjurers than whom there’s none
Can cause a company more constant fun
Will perform at Piccadilly Hall as a magic sprite
Each afternoon at three and eight every night.
His wondrous actions all the world astounds
The while his vocals utter humorous sounds
There’s none more greatly can your senses tickle
Then go and see and hear
The famous Frikell.

On the 11th April, 1878, he was appearing at the Royal Canterbury Theatre of Varieties in Lambeth, which at that time was the most well-known London music hall catering to the middle classes in providing family entertainment of a very high order.

The British Library in London has in its archives a poster advertising Adalbert Frikell’s appearance on the 18th May, 1881 at the Royal Victoria Hall, Waterloo Road, London, announcing he will be presenting an evening of children’s entertainment. So you can see he was quite a versatile performer.

In a letter to his brother Carl, dated 28th May (no year given, but it could have been 1878) Adalbert Frikell writes that following a four
week season in Glasgow, he has engagements in Scarborough followed by Birmingham in August and Newcastle in September.

In a later letter dated 19th August, 1879, he again writes to Carl saying:

I should have answered your letter, but I have travelled for some weeks and am now about 100 miles from my home in London. I have taken my wife, child and my two assistants to this famous Spa town of Scarborough.

He added that he would not be back in London until November, and enclosed a photograph of his daughter.

In Scarborough, Adalbert Frikell had been engaged to appear at The People’s Palace and Aquarium for one week from 6th August, 1879. Adalbert Frikell also appeared in theatres in Leamington Spa in the south of England as well as Harrogate and Bolton in the north.

![The People’s Palace and Aquarium, Scarborough.](image-url)
A local magician who attended a performance he gave in Liverpool was greatly impressed by what he saw and commented in a magic journal on the fact that although Adalbert Frikell had short stubby fingers his sleight-of-hand routines using eggs, balls and coins were brilliantly executed and had obviously been cleverly adapted to suit his hands.

In 1874 when he appeared in Bolton, the local evening paper published on 2nd October the following announcement:

Tomorrow and Monday Evenings
Herr Adalbert Frikell, the only son of Wiljalba Frikell will appear at the Temperance Hall.
The performance of this celebrated performer includes mid-air extravagances, marvellous metamorphosis, strange manifestations, spiritual calculations, atmospheric mint and inexplicable treasury of the air.
Herr Adalbert Frikell has received the highest encomiums from the press for the skills he exhibits in the manipulations of his clever and amazing feats.
Let me digress for a moment because I want to draw your attention to two indisputable facts I have given you about Adalbert Frikell that are in complete contradiction with each other. They are:

1. On all his posters and publicity material he always stated that he was "The only son of Wiljalba Frikell".

2. He corresponded frequently with his brother Carl with whom he had a fond relationship.

And this is where the contradiction comes in - you cannot claim to be the only son of your father (Wiljalba Frikell) and at the same time have a brother who was also the son of Wiljalba Frikell. But perhaps there is an explanation for this?

This lecture was given at the European Magic History Conference held in Berlin in 2007, and shortly afterward I was contacted by David Frikell who was seeking information about his great, great, great grandfather Wiljalba Frikell. David is a graphic designer and his company is called Wiljalba Design. As a result of our exchange of correspondence, David was able to provide me with a family tree dating from 1747 which clearly shows that
Wiljalba Frikell had two sons - Hermann Adalbert born in 1839 and Carl Louis born in 1840. To complete the family, there was a daughter Bertha born in 1844. David Frikell also provided me with copies of letters written by Adalbert to Carl, which I quoted from earlier.

So it is quite possible that Adalbert used the expression ‘the only son of Wiljalba’ on his advertising to take advantage of his father’s reputation and to warn off competitors who otherwise would claim that they were ‘the son of Wiljalba’. We shall never know.

Note the words ‘only son and successor of Wiljalba Frikell’.
In 1870, when he was 30 years old, Adalbert took an important step in his life. It was while he was living at 84 Whitfield Street, Fitzroy Square, London, that he applied on the 17th January to the Home Office for British citizenship. His application in the name of Hermann Adalbert Frikell, a native of Bernstadt in the Kingdom of Prussia, states that he has resided in the United Kingdom for the past eight years. The application further states that he is married and puts his profession as artist.

His application was supported by Joseph Frederick Harris (music seller), William Inglis (baker), James William Short (greengrocer) and Richard Madley (printer), all attesting
that he was a person of respectability and loyalty. The Home Secretary of the day, The Rt. Hon. Henry Austin Bruce, J.P., granted the application on the 24th January, 1870.

Adalbert Frikel was now a British citizen.

Everyone who chooses to work in the world of theatre will be aware that professional success with its attendant financial rewards can vanish as quickly as they came. Fame can be a fickle mistress.

In 1884 it was known that Adalbert Frikel had financial problems and was finding it difficult to obtain work. On one occasion when writing to his brother, he tells Carl he had worked in London as a pastry cook to help him over a lean time. But it was not in his nature to wait for agents and managements to contact him with offers of work. As he told Carl in a letter dated August 1878: "I have to write hundreds of letters each week to keep up my business". A good example of the letters he wrote is this one, dated 28th December, 1881,
addressed to the General Manager of the Brighton Aquarium:

Dear Sir - I have everything new and startling and successful in my entertainment. Should you favour me with an engagement during February or onwards you will indeed be pleased with my efforts, and that I can guarantee. Yours faithfully, Adalbert Frikell.

Three years later on the 16th and 17th May, 1884, two benefit performances were given on his behalf at The Goat and Star tavern in Swallow Street, London. This street connects Regent Street with Piccadilly in central London.

It is impossible to know what Adalbert Frikell must have been thinking when he attended these benefit performances at The Goat and Star tavern, as it was just a stone’s throw away from both the Piccadilly Hall and the Egyptian Hall where in the past his performances had brought him fame and fortune.

Perhaps, when reflecting on his good times, he might have cast his mind back to 1877, when on the 8th January, he was invited to appear before their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales (later to become King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra) at their royal residence, Sandringham House, Norfolk. The occasion was to celebrate the 13th birthday of Prince

Prince Albert Victor

Sandringham House, Norfolk
Albert Victor, their first child. A note in the personal engagement diary of The Prince of Wales for that day, recorded Herr Frikell's performance started at 10.30 pm. The young prince must have been delighted with the magic show, because the following year Adalbert Frikell was invited again to Sandringham House to entertain on the occasion of his 14th birthday.

In 1887 there were rumours circulating that a "conjurer named Herr Frikell had committed suicide in London". But obviously these rumours were ill-founded, because two years later, in August 1889, Adalbert Frikell came to Scarborough to fulfill a two-week engagement.

When he arrived in Scarborough after travelling from the seaside town of Cleethorpes, he was suffering from what all performers who use patter must dread - a severe cold and sore throat.
As Adalbert had been booked to appear in the mornings and afternoons in the Grand Pavilion located at the end of the North Pier, he took lodgings on the north side of Scarborough at No. 4 Sandringham Street, which was but a short walking distance from the North Pier.

Advertisements placed in the *Scarborough Evening News and Daily Mercury* by the management of the North Pier for entertainment taking place in the Grand Pavilion the following week, billed Adalbert Frikell as follows:

Herr Adalbert Frikell, the celebrated German Prestidigitateur and Royal Entertainer in England, in his famous entertainment entitled novelty illusions and capital fun.

It is interesting to note that although he became a naturalised British citizen in 1870, 19 years later he was still advertising himself as a German magician.

In 1889 Scarborough's north Pier was not an ideal venue for attracting holiday audiences due to its isolation from town centre hotels and boarding houses. Adalbert Frikell would have been aware of this fact as he had, on
previous occasions, appeared at The People’s Palace and Aquarium which occupied a prime entertainment site on the town’s foreshore. The fact that he was now only able to obtain work in Scarborough at a location on the edge of this fashionable Victorian seaside resort, away from the mainstream entertainment venues, would not have helped his now frequent moods of depression.

On the Monday morning (26th August) before he left No. 4 Sandringham Street for his morning performance on the North Pier, he told his landlord (Mr. Thomas Rowntree) that if the weather continued to be fine, he would stay on in Scarborough for at least a month - perhaps in the hope of obtaining more work.

A report in the local paper the following day (Tuesday) informed its readers that at the two performances given by Herr Frikell on the previous Monday morning and afternoon, it had been difficult to hear him because of his hoarseness. Obviously the cold he had caught in Cleethorpes the previous week had not got any better.

After his 4.30 pm. performance in the Grand Pavilion on the 26th August, it is not possible to know what Adalbert Frikell was thinking as he walked back down the length of the North Pier on his way to his lodgings in Sandringham Street. He was probably concerned about his cold that had affected both his performances that day. Maybe, he was just looking forward to his evening meal. But one thing is certain - he could not have known that he would never walk on that pier again.
At about 7.30 pm. he sat down to enjoy his evening meal. After a short while he started to cough violently, and excusing himself he left the table and went out into the backyard. Mr. Rowntree (his landlord) on hearing a loud moan went outside and found Adalbert kneeling with his head on the ground, in a pool of blood. Mr. Rowntree called out to Adalbert asking if he needed any help. On receiving no reply he went across to where he was kneeling and discovered Adalbert Frikell dead.

On recovering from the shock, Mr. Rowntree hastily summoned the police and a doctor. Police Constable George Normanton was first on the scene when he immediately took charge of the body, and under his supervision it was removed from the backyard and laid on the kitchen floor to await the arrival of the doctor.

Just before 8.30 pm. Dr. Everley Taylor arrived. On examining the body Dr. Taylor found a grazed bruise over the right eyebrow (probably caused when his head hit the ground), and the mouth and nostrils filled with blood. This initial examination failed to identify the cause of death, and a post mortem was arranged.

Meanwhile, Police Constable Normanton had taken charge of the few personal possessions found in Adalbert Frikell's room. These included the sum of three shillings and a few pence, and ten copies of an extraordinary hand-written document which later gave rise to speculation that Herr Frikell had taken his own life. This document (which was signed by Adalbert Frikell) was dated "the first week of February" but omitted to state what year.

The opening lines of this document stated that if he was found dead it would be by self-administered poison. Is it possible that the contents of this letter were known to others in 1887 when rumours were circulating that a conjurer named Herr Frikell had committed suicide?

This document also revealed how he had fought against adversity and of his struggles to obtain engagements, but that all his efforts were crowned with failure. It went on to mention that an unnamed person who had engaged him to perform in London had not paid him his agreed fee in full. The small amount he did receive was soon swallowed up in settling his debts. He added that he had been relying on the payment of his fee in full to provide him with the necessities of life.

Adalbert Frikell was indeed experiencing a difficult time, which would not have been helped by the fact that he was now separated from his wife Wilhamina.
It was known that he was extremely fond of his daughter, Albertina, who was living in the London area. Also among Herr Frikell’s possessions found in his room was a letter from Albertina (10th July) in which she acknowledged an unspecified sum of money sent to her by her father, and requesting further remittances, which in view of his financial problems at that time would have been very difficult for him to do.

Had he, on the evening of 26th August, 1889 committed suicide?

Following the post mortem, a Coroner’s Inquest was held in Scarborough on the evening of the 28th August conducted by the Deputy Coroner Mr. George Taylor.

Among the witnesses who gave evidence were William Morgan, Manager of the People’s Palace and Aquarium who had identified the body as that of Adalbert Frikell whom he had known for some considerable time.

Also giving evidence were S.C. Platt, Secretary of the North Pier Company, Thomas Rowntree and Dr. Everley Taylor. A report of the inquest published in the Scarborough Evening News on the 29th August made no mention of Police Constable Normanton being called as a witness.

Mr. Platt confirmed that as Secretary of the North Pier Company he had engaged Herr Frikell to appear at the Grand Pavilion on the North Pier. Mr. Rowntree told how during the evening meal Herr Frikell had been taken ill and that later he had found him dead in the backyard of No. 4 Sandringham Street.

The inquest established without any doubt that the cause of death had not been by poisoning, as had been rumoured, but by haemorrhage into the lung caused by the bursting of an aneurism of the aorta.

A verdict of "Death by natural causes" was given and subsequently recorded on his death certificate.

The death certificate gives his age at the time of death as 46, but he was, in fact, 50. Family records show that he was born in October 1839. On his application for British Citizenship made on the 17th January, 1870 he states he is 30 years old. Had he in the last years of his life publicly claimed to be younger than he was, hence the anomaly on the death certificate?
The local authorities of Scarborough at the time did not try to contact his widow Wilhamina who was now reportedly living in Germany, or his daughter Albertina who was living in London.

Adalbert Frikell, being classified as “penniless” was buried, as was the custom in the 1800s, in a pauper’s grave. Today they are known as public graves.

Whilst researching Herr Frikell’s story, I was asked by The Magic Circle in London if I could possibly locate his grave in Scarborough as it might be one that could be adopted under a scheme it operates to restore and maintain the graves of past magicians that, for one reason or another and the passage of time, had fallen into neglect.

At first, the task of finding an unmarked pauper’s grave over 100 years old, in any one of Scarborough’s cemeteries, appeared to be an almost impossible task. However, with the help of the staff of the Cemeteries Office of the Scarborough Borough Council, the grave was located.
The public grave of Adalbert Frikell was soon identified as site E.12.4 and could be found in the old Victorian cemetery in Dean Road, not far from where he had been lodging at the time of his death.

The Superintendent and Registrar of the Cemeteries Office kindly met me at the Dean Road Cemetery to locate the grave. And so it was, that on a cold, wet January morning, I stood gazing at an area of grass, the final resting place of Herr Adalbert Frikell, “Celebrated Prestidigitateur and Royal Entertainer of England”. Providing further proof that Adalbert Frikell had not committed suicide, he was buried in consecrated ground on the 31st August, 1889. The service of committal was conducted by The Rev. S. Fletcher Williams.

Whilst I was with the Superintendent I took the opportunity of mentioning the possibility of The Magic Circle wanting to mark the grave in some way to honour a magician from the past. He told me that this would not be allowed as it was a public grave and it was the Council's policy that they always remain unmarked.

Finally, I am sure it will not have escaped your notice that there is a touch of irony in the fact that Adalbert Frikell, at the height of his career as a magician in England, entertained its future King and Queen at their country home - Sandringham - but at about 8.00 pm. on the evening of Monday, 26th August, 1889 - took his final bow - not on a great stage with the sound of cheers and applause ringing in his ears - but alone at night, in great pain, in the backyard of his Scarborough lodging - No. 4 Sandringham Street.
I do believe that if fate had been kinder to Adalbert Frikell in the final years of his life, and he had not been dogged by ill-health, family and financial problems, he might have achieved his cherished dream of presenting a magic act that would rank him amongst the top of his profession - and then his story would have had a different and happier ending.

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