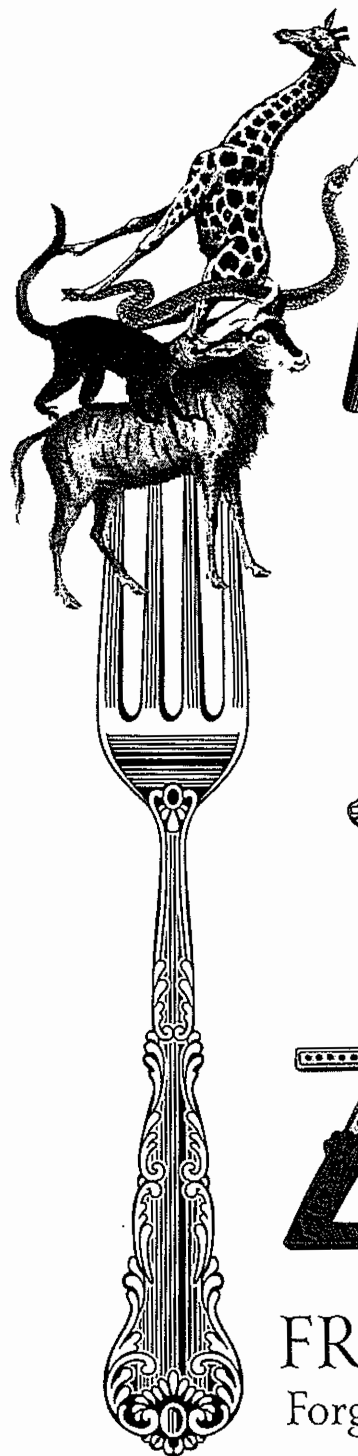
THE MAN WHO ATE THE ZOO

RICHARD GIRLING



THE MAN WHO ATE THE ZOO

FRANK BUCKLAND

Forgotten Hero of Natural History

the marriage until his parents were dead strengthens the suspicion that they were never made aware of her, or of the birth and death of Little Physie. And it was only after the marriage that Bompas acknowledged, or perhaps realised the existence of, the woman he carelessly called 'Henrietta Papes'. We might wonder, too, why there were no more children. Was Hannah for some reason unable to have a second child? Or did they never again share a bed? There is no evidence that their lives together were unharmonious – quite the contrary – but there is no escaping the impression of a man driven more by honour than by love.

CHAPTER NINE

Robinson Crusoe

No one who had the slightest acquaintance with Frank would have expected his marital home to resemble anything from the pages of Mrs Beeton. He recorded very little about his wife, but there are frequent references to the torments visited upon his cook. Mrs Beeton would have been of little help to this valiant woman in her struggles with elephant-trunk soup, roasted giraffe-neck or any of the other body parts that Frank brought home after post-mortems at the zoo. Few cooks then or at any other time would have had to put up with their employer honking at them with the voicebox of a goose while slaving over fried viper. Blissful were the days when he offered nothing more challenging than fish.

Fish increasingly were on his mind. Britain was surrounded by salt water and veined with fresh, and in those waters swam fish. It was what the world now calls a no-brainer. Never mind what the Acclimatisation Society might achieve with African antelopes, Syrian pigs or Australian marsupials. A dependable supply of affordable fish would transform the lives of ordinary families. In early 1861 Frank began seriously to think about how he could make it happen. Once again he looked to France. Like the Germans and Chinese, the French had long ago developed artificial hatching techniques to maximise the supply of

freshwater fish. Frank felt that England should do the same. The method was almost childishly simple: an arrangement of fish eggs, gravel and running water, hardly less natural than nature itself. A box would be filled with fine gravel which had been sterilised by boiling. Fish eggs would be dropped into the gravel and a slow dribble of running water – enough to keep the eggs alive but not to wash them away – would be released from a cistern. This model stream bed could be enlarged with boxes placed one below another like the steps of a waterfall. Bompas described how the miracle then unfolded:

> In the eggs, which resemble small whitish semi-opaque beads, presently two black specks appear, which develop into eyes, and in due time the egg bursts and the embryo fish uncurls, half an inch to one inch in length, with large eyes, closed mouth, and a transparent pouch of nutriment hanging underneath the throat, to be gradually absorbed in about six to eight weeks, when the mouth opens, and feeding by that organ begins.

Frank began his experiments in May 1861, using perch eggs from 'Surley Hall' (an inn by the Thames, since demolished) which he hatched at home. His hatchery drew swarms of fascinated visitors, a must-see for anyone interested in freshwater fish, and he soon found himself catapulted onto the council of the British Fisheries Preservation Society and the committee of the Thames Angling Preservation Society. He did not disappoint. Like a magician he caused a sensation at a meeting of the Thames group by theatrically revealing, *hey presto!*, the baby perch he had just hatched. But perch were never going to be enough for him. Though they were valued by Victorian cooks (Mrs Beeton served them poached with parsley and melted

butter), he quite literally had bigger fish to fry. On Christmas Day 1861, he planted his first salmon ova in hatching boxes at the home of a friend, Stephen Ponder,* by the Thames at Hampton. This was clearly a moment of some importance (why else would he give up Christmas Day?), but just *how* important would not become evident for another year or two. It was in 1863, after returning to civilian life, that Frank (in Bompas's words) 'threw himself with renewed ardour into the work he had now chosen for life'. For renewed ardour read 'manic energy'. The hatchery at Albany Street was only one small part of a burgeoning enterprise. The calls on Frank's time were endless. His advice was urgently sought by the many who were following his example, and who now needed ova for their hatcheries. Collecting fish eggs is hard work which has to be done during the spawning season. For trout, this meant wading in the near-freezing rivers of January and February. The hair oil with which Frank smothered his skin was an imaginative but probably useless attempt to ward off the cold (he later would advise the Channel swimmer Captain Matthew Webb to try porpoise grease).

He also corresponded regularly with the French government's Etablissement de Pisciculture at Huningue in Alsace, which sent him large numbers of salmon and trout ova. In January 1863 he built a hatchery in the window of *The Field*'s office in the Strand. It was a stroke of genius, a crowd-puller and a powerfully effective advertisement for his scheme. Victorians liked to see things for themselves. In the pre-filmic, pre-electronic age there was no other way for them to witness the wonders of the world. Hence the fortunes earned by showmen like Phineas T. Barnum

* Ponder was one of the most committed members of the Thames Angling Preservation Society, a fierce campaigner for the opening of weirs to allow free movement of fish.

and itinerant zookeepers like George Wombwell, and the flakier livings made by hustlers and freak merchants.

Frank's diary for February that year shows the fullness of his commitment. On the 7th he travelled to Gerrards Cross, where he gathered 'several thousand' trout eggs for *The Field*. On the 9th a batch of Rhine salmon hatched out in his bath. On the 12th he collected 'about 3000' salmon ova from Carshalton. On the 17th 3,000 salmon trout and 2,000 Great Lakes trout were delivered from Huningue. Salmon ova arrived from Galway on the 20th, and on the 21st Abraham Dee Bartlett and the angling writer H. Cholmondeley Pennell helped him harvest 'between three and four thousand' ova at St Mary Cray. On the 24th he gave a lecture on fish-hatching at the zoo ('a great success'), and on the 25th dissected salmon at the British Museum. The 26th brought a delivery of 3,000 Great Lakes trout eggs, 1,500 'Ombre Chevalier'* and 2,000 salmon trout. These were followed on the 28th by another 2,500 Great Lakes trout. But none of these things would have the enduring resonance of the entry for 3 March: *With Mr Youl by appointment, and examined the salmon ova he had packed in ice, which had been there forty-five days.* The ripples this caused would run all the way from Albany Street to the far side of the world.

Among those who admired the hatchery at *The Field* were Thomas Henry Huxley and William Henry Flower, conservator of the Hunterian Museum, who in 1884 would succeed Richard Owen at the Natural History Museum. Frank lectured at the Royal Society and the Royal Institution, and (odd as it may now seem) in July 1863 exhibited his hatching apparatus at the Islington Dog Show, where the Prince of Wales was among those who came to seek him out. Further demonstrations

* Probably a misspelling of *omble chevalier* – French for Arctic charr.

followed at the South Kensington Museum and at the Crystal Palace. According to Bompas, the 'grave members' of the Royal Institution were moved to 'laugh heartily at the racy humour' with which Frank made his points. This encouraged him to expand the lectures into a book, *Fish Hatching*, which he dedicated 'in the name of English progress' to M. J. Coumes, chief engineer of the Etablissement de Pisciculture. I must say the racy humour is elusive to this particular reader's eye – the tone might better be described as chummy – but if you want a step-by-step guide to hatching fish, then look no further. The book is a masterpiece of simplicity. There was no great mystery to solve. The basic principle of a fish hatchery, Frank explained, was to replicate as closely as possible the natural environment

Drawing from *The Field* of the Islington Dog Show, 1863, at which Frank's fish hatching apparatus was inspected by the Prince of Wales. Frank himself is depicted, second right

in which a species had established itself. It gave him yet another opportunity to delight in the perfection of design (a Darwinian would say *adaptation*) that fitted an animal to its environment. By 'design' he meant not just physical form but also the workings of the brain. To those still sceptical of animal 'intelligence' he gave a gentle chiding in a book of essays* edited by H. Cholmondeley Pennell. It was never wise, Frank thought, for a human to believe himself superior to another species in its element.

> If we listen to a lecture from a learned professor upon the brains of animals, he will point out the human brain as being at the highest end of the scale, the brain of the fish at the lowest. Holding up the brain of a fish, beautifully prepared in spirits of wine, he will say: 'There, gentlemen, is an example of a badly-developed brain. The creature to which it belonged is proverbially dull and stupid.' Yet the next day, if we look over Richmond-bridge, we may behold the same learned but sportless professor puzzling his well-developed brain to catch the creature which but yesterday he was asserting had so little brains. The brain of the fish is quite sufficient to keep him off the professor's hook, angle he never so wisely.

While all this was going on, Frank and Hannah were settling into their new home. For Frank there could have been no more desirable an address in the whole of London than Albany Street. Whether proximity to his old billet at Regent's

* *Fishing Gossip; or Stray Leaves from the Note-books of Several Anglers*, edited by Pennell and dedicated to the late MP for Sunderland, Henry Fenwick, who had been an energetic campaigner for fishery reform.

Park Barracks mattered to him, I rather doubt. The important thing was that Albany Street ran parallel to the Outer Circle along the eastern edge of Regent's Park, within a lion's roar of the zoo. If a camel sneezed, or a rhinoceros complained of toothache, then he could be there in minutes. Bompas's word 'unconventional' to describe the household falls well short of the mark. The most complete account of this unique ménage appeared several years later in *The World* newspaper's 'Celebrities at Home' series. On arriving at the house, the columnist reported, the visitor would be ushered into what the previous owner, George Hogarth, would have called his drawing room. For Frank and Hannah it was at first the 'Master's room', and later the 'monkey room'. 'Darwin going backwards' was how Frank explained it to the man from *The World* as the monkeys tormented a young jaguar. This 'jolly little brute' had arrived at no. 156 as the sickliest of babies from the zoo. Its forelegs were paralysed and it was not expected to live. What makes this story worth telling is that it was not Frank who nursed it back to health and made a pet of it, but Hannah. The writer described it nestling like a puppy in the folds of her dress. It is one of the best indications we have that Hannah was an active participant in her husband's work, and an important part of the small-animals clinic which the house had effectively become. Frank's concession to domesticity was limited to the rule – rarely observed – that living animals should be barred from the dining room. 'It is held,' said the writer, 'so to speak, at the sword's point, against the incursions of animals from the neighbouring jungle.' Dead ones were a different matter. 'It is regarded as Poets' Corner for the great, while the bodies of the less distinguished are consigned to honourable burial in the back garden.' That Frank was not conventionally house-proud is a truth hardly worth stating. 'Mr Buckland's chief

domestic grievance', observed *The World*, 'is the duster, which he regards as a mischievous invention of women.'

Each day the parcels van dropped off a supply of malodorous corpses for Frank to dissect. One day Hannah arrived home to find a cask with a gorilla* inside it. And the excitements were not confined to the house. According to *The World*, Frank kept a laughing jackass (or kookaburra, *Dacelo novaeguineae*) whose favourite trick was hailing taxis. Frank was proud of this bird – 'as fine a jackass as could be found within a hundred miles of St Paul's' – but frustrated by its refusal to live up to its name. He thought he detected a 'slight titter' when he gave it a live mouse, but that was as merry as it got. Inevitably one day it escaped and flew off into Regent's Park. 'One parting farewell only he gave me; the rascal actually stopped in his flight, and for the first and last time I heard his hearty laugh.' The bird was eventually caught by a man in Stanhope Street who found it asleep at the foot of his bed, and Frank then clipped its wings. Confined to barracks, it took to terrorising Frank's 'big Turkish wolf dog', Arslan†. Amid the exotica of 156 Albany Street, cats and dogs seem hardly worth mentioning. Arslan, however, was an exception, a notorious terrorist whose pleasure was slaughtering the neighbourhood lapdogs. His career ended when he sneaked through a window and snatched a pet from the arms of its terrified mistress. To restore calm, Frank exiled him to the guard ship on the Herne Bay oyster beds.

* This was not a unique occurrence. The first gorilla to reach London Zoo, in 1858, arrived in a barrel of spirits. A photograph of Abraham Dee Bartlett posing with it appeared in my previous book, *The Hunt for the Golden Mole*.

† Presumably an Anatolian Shepherd dog. Frank may have named Arslan for the 11th-century Turkish sultan and warlord Alp Arslan, whose name in Turkish means 'heroic Lion'. Or he might just have meant 'lion'. C S Lewis's Aslan, representing Jesus in the Narnia stories, derives from the same root.

All the more extraordinary, then, that such a monster could be frightened of a jackass. Frank plainly loved animals, and loved them unconditionally, but his pets were not just for amusement. They were for *observation*, and contributed much to his writing. He wanted to know: was the dog justified in its fear of a mere bird? Exactly how dangerous *was* the jackass? How did it tackle its prey? This was of particular interest to Frank, as in Australia the bird was known to kill snakes. For his experiment he had to make do with a frog, which he released onto the floor. Sensing danger, the frog hopped away as fast as it could, but the jackass was faster.

> He caught him with his big bill, and made a motion as though he was going to swallow him forthwith, but, changing his mind, suddenly he hit the frog a most tremendous blow on the floor, and, in a minute or two, repeated the blow, knocking the frog about, as one sees Punch knock about the constable with his wooden staff. This was most interesting to observe, inasmuch as it proves the way in which this bird, in his native country, is enabled to kill a venomous snake without its being able to bite or kill him, for, being so shaken and knocked about, the snake has not time to turn round and bite.

This unshakeable faith in experiment, the reluctance to accept as fact something he had not seen for himself, was the explanation for much of Frank's supposed eccentricity. A friend who found him one day cooking a slice of kelt (an emaciated female salmon after spawning) tried to dissuade him from eating something so obviously disgusting. 'No doubt', said Frank, 'it is nasty enough, but how can I say so unless I have tried it?' Yet there were times when even Frank had to admit defeat. The same

friend described him throwing in the towel against a peculiarly gross oyster, 'the size of a cheese-plate', though he was unwilling to abandon the experiment entirely. A dustman was offered a shilling to swallow the thing, but even this hardened connoisseur of filth couldn't get it down. Frank added a pot of porter to the bargain, which encouraged the dustman to swallow half the oyster before he too retired in disarray. The precise flavour of this oddly indelicate delicacy was 'locked unrecorded in the dustman's breast'.

The stream of humans through the house was no less exalted, spectacular or exotic than the wildlife. The *exalted* included a continuing procession of Britain's finest scientific minds. The *spectacular* included some of the most extreme variations that nature ever imposed upon the human frame – giants, dwarfs, conjoined twins. The *exotic* included anthropological headliners from across the globe. Among these was a band of New Zealand Maori chiefs led by Tomati Hapiromani Wharinaki. After a convivial dinner, Frank invited his guests to take a pipe or two with him in the monkey room. As was his custom, he sought to amuse them with a display of his most recent acquisitions. *Look here!* He flipped open a box and spilled three dozen slow-worms onto the floor. Bompas described what happened next:

> Instantaneously the guests were transformed; the garb of civilisation slipped off, and they returned to the wild untutored savage. With one frantic glance at the slow-worms on the floor, they uttered wild yells and straightaway fled. Downstairs the dining-room window was open, through this helter-skelter into the garden, like hounds breaking cover, and filling the air with a *tapage d'enfer*. Thence they spread over the neighbouring gardens, taking fences like deer. Two of them seeing another open window, and at it a peaceable old lady at work, headed for it, dashed in, and with their tattooed faces and awful cries nearly were her death. By this time the whole parish was up, a hue and cry organised, recruits joined from the railings, and the fugitives were run safely to ground.

It turned out that the Maoris had a superstitious horror of the slow-worm, which they believed was *ngarara* – the incarnation of the power of evil. Another fact duly noted. Frank also took the New Zealanders to the zoo, where they were terrified by the elephant, delighted by a zebra (which they seemed to think was a tattooed horse), and offered to repay Frank's kindness by tattooing his face.

It was in the summer of 1863 that Frank first met George Butler, an elderly one-handed fisherman who worked out of Portsmouth. Butler might have been his name, but his weather-beaten appearance and makeshift vessel – 'the smallest boat that could contain a human frame' – meant he was known to all as 'Robinson Crusoe'. He had lost a hand thirty years earlier while serving on the frigate *Hind* off Cape Horn. 'I got him jammed between two water casks,' he told Frank, 'and the doctor took the slack of him off.' (Admirers of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey–Maturin novels will notice the echo.) Crusoe's souvenir of the accident was a severed finger preserved in a bottle of rum. He could still feel the wart on the thumb of the missing hand, which he reckoned was the perfect thermometer.

Hungry for sea-lore, Frank bought Crusoe's entire catch of pout (it didn't amount to much) and examined the small miracle of his boat. In shape and size it was more like a sawn-off water butt than a boat, the planks so rotten that a good

kick would have gone straight through. There were holes in the side which Crusoe had patched with bits of canvas, leather and tin. With only this thin membrane of hope between himself and the ocean floor, in storm or fog the old man rowed out every night, taking his chance with the tide and the steamers that might run him down without even noticing he was there. He told Frank he had once taught a kitten to swim and catch dogfish in its teeth. Its sudden disappearance one day was blamed on cat-nappers bound for the West Indies, or perhaps on some fur trader who fancied its fine black pelt. Cat-rustling by seamen was not uncommon. As Frank explained in the magazine *Once a Week*, there were two reasons for this. Marine insurance did not cover cargo damaged by rats; but if an aggrieved merchant could prove the vessel had sailed without a cat, then he would have a case for damages against the owner. 'Again,' wrote Frank, 'a ship found at sea with no living creature on board is considered a derelict, and is forfeited to the Admiralty, the finders, or the queen. It has often happened that . . . some domestic animal, a dog or canary bird, or most frequently a cat, has saved the vessel from being condemned as a derelict.' The old man yarned away about the water, of which he knew every ripple, the wrecks over which he fished,* the baits he used (boiled cabbage and onions were favourite) and the size of the catch (varying from zero to brimming boatfuls). A couple of days later, after a storm, Frank hired a boat and rowed out behind Crusoe in his tub. He was rewarded with enough fishermen's tales to fill an entire chapter (Frank did exactly that in *Curiosities of Natural History, Third Series*). It is striking how much tastes in fish have changed. For Crusoe, the

* These included HMS *Boyne*, flagship of Vice Admiral John Jervis, which caught fire and burned at Spithead on 1 May 1795.

best use for a sea bream was to bait his lines for pout when he had run out of lugworm. Bream is now a premium fish, comparable to the even pricier sea bass, while pout is often used to bait lobster pots or as cheap 'filler' to bulk out fish fingers, pies and other lowlifes from the supermarket freezer cabinet. Frank himself, despite his appetite for novelty, seems to have shared the conservatism of his contemporaries. He damned monkfish as 'not good eating', though the rough skin might be useful for sword handles and instrument cases. How things change! On the day I checked, monkfish fillet was offered online at £14.30 for 230g. Cod on the bone was £22.20 for 600g and wild turbot £23 for 280g. One century's crab bait is another century's gourmet treat.

Crusoe claimed never to sleep while at sea, though in the hour after midnight it would have made little difference if he did. That was when the fish slept, and no fisherman would get a bite until the clock struck one. This inspired a lively correspondence when Frank mentioned it in *The Field*. Do fish sleep? Well, *do*

Robinson Crusoe

they? Two aquarium owners were sure they did, though not all species were alike. One of Frank's correspondents, M.M., said his carp, tench and minnows all slept at various times but the goldfish were always awake. Another, F.Z.S., identified wrasse as the champions of somnolence. '[A]fter playing up and down for an hour or so, picking up their dinner of infusoria, they quietly retire to their corner, and, lying down on their sides, go (I think) comfortably off to sleep.' Writing later in Frank's own magazine, *Land and Water*, the writer-traveller Henry Hoare Methuen described bonito and tuna following his ship on a fast run to the Cape of Good Hope, day and night for hundreds of miles. 'All this time they could not have slept, and must, beside constant muscular exertion, have fixed their attention on the ship to keep her company.' It is a question that causes confusion even now. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is careful to use quotation marks when it describes fish 'sleep' as an area of active research. Fish, it says, do not sleep in the way that mammals do, though most of them take a rest. They become still, and slow their metabolisms, but remain alive to danger. Some float while they rest; others wedge their bodies in mud or coral. Having no eyelids, they cannot close their eyes. These periods of suspended animation, says the NOAA, 'may perform the same restorative function as sleep does in people'. Even so, not every species seems to do this. Some swim continuously and show no sign of resting at all. Were Frank ever to be reincarnated as a fish, one feels he would be one of these.

There were few aspects of life in which he did not have an opinion, and sleep was no exception. He was not a man for bedtime cocoa. His preferred sleeping draught was raw onions. 'In my own case,' he wrote, 'it never fails. If I am much pressed with work, and feel that I am not disposed to sleep, I eat two or three small Onions, and the effect is magical.' He was not alone. Hilda Leyel,

founder of the Society of Herbalists in 1927, attributed 'decided soporific power' to onions and prescribed onion gruel as 'a very helpful and safe remedy to take at night to induce sleep'. Those seeking confirmation on the Internet will find that the most commonly quoted authority for it is Frank himself. 'Because Buckland says so' was the clincher in many an argument of the 1860s and 70s, but it seems a strange context in which to find it now.

Frank had a profound respect for 'ordinary' men like Crusoe. He loved listening to him and wrote down hours of their conversation: on the mortal risk of hooking big congers from small boats; on convicts fished out of the harbour; on the Irish steamer which Crusoe once hallooed to warn it off Lump Rocks in a fog, and which rewarded him with stark ingratitude; on the perversity of 'foreign ladies' who defaced themselves with 'paint, putty and glue'; on the quality of soft-shelled lobsters, which, 'though the gentlefolks don't like 'em', were as good to eat as hard-shelled ones; on the power of lobsters' claws. Crusoe hooked a lobster, a valuable 'berried hen', as they were speaking. 'Spiteful as a mad dog', it sliced a pout clean in half. But lobsters in Crusoe's opinion were nowhere near as dangerous as crabs. He told Frank about a man on the Isle of Wight whose hand was clamped by a crab he had been trying to extricate from a hole, and which drowned him when the tide came in. Another old sailor, George Brewer, still fishing at the age of eighty-six, remembered fighting in 'the glorious 1st of June 1794', or the third Battle of Ushant. His yarns ranged from the hideous bloodbath of an eighteenth-century sea battle (more proof of the veracity of Patrick O'Brian) to the taste of fishermen's bait. When Frank saw 'Uncle', as Brewer was most often called, sluice out his 'lug-pot' with seawater before filling it with grog, he asked him if he had ever eaten a lugworm. 'Lord, ay, my son, to be sure I have. They are as bitter as soot, if you eats 'em raw, but they are as sweet as sugar if you cooks 'em.'

The best thing about this story is its ending. Frank revisited Crusoe with a friend and found him considerably spruced up: hair cut, beard shaved and wearing a most un-Crusoe-like clean shirt. The old sailor told them what had happened. One fine morning he had been hailed by a woman on a yacht who had read Frank's article about him in *The Field*. She invited him on board, gave him dinner and then presented him with a gleaming new boat. Crusoe was proud of his new craft, but only in the way a collector might be proud of an artwork. It stayed on the beach, and he refused to put to sea in anything but the leaking old tub that was certain soon to drown him. Frank realised the time had come for *force majeure*.

> After a deal of trouble, [my friend and I] got Robinson Crusoe to accept a price for [the old boat], about ten times her value. The bargain concluded, we hauled her up on the beach, and taking a run, my friend and I simultaneously gave her sides a good kick. This was quite enough: she fell to bits like an orange box; and with a big stone or two, we soon broke her into pieces so small that even Robinson Crusoe could not put her together again.

*

Frank himself was now sailing into rough water. The problem was the salmon hatchery he had established with Stephen Ponder at Hampton. He had expected this to be supported by the Acclimatisation Society, but it did not happen like that. The opponent (Frank himself would have said *enemy*) who blocked him was another of *The Field*'s regular contributors, Francis Francis, a Devonian sea captain's son who edited the paper's angling pages. Francis fancied himself as an expert on pisciculture and was determined to repel Frank's trespass

on what he regarded as his home turf. In July 1863 he wrote to the Acclimatisation Society offering to set up a hatchery on their behalf at his home in Twickenham. Caught off guard, Frank protested in favour of his own scheme at Hampton. But it was in vain. He succeeded only in having the decision deferred for a week, and had to suffer the rare frustration of losing an argument. It irked him that *The Field*'s editor in chief, John Henry Walsh, claimed that Frank himself had 'highly approved' Francis's proposal. The magazine now appeared to be at war with itself. Another of its writers, the disputatious fox-hunting enthusiast Grantley Berkeley, who was one of the Acclimatisation Society's vice presidents, now decided to get involved. In fact he had already resigned from the magazine after falling out with Walsh. The hatchery controversy was all the incitement he needed to wade back in, and he wrote an incendiary letter to the *Dorset County Chronicle*. 'It has become evident to me,' he said, 'by the late substitution of the *sub-editor of The Field*, a Mr Francis Francis, to the paid position of manager of the fish-culture to the Society, instead of that really clever gentleman Mr F. Buckland, that a clique having a majority in and around *The Field* office has a great deal too much to do with the Society ever to let its interests stand on their own merits.' For this reason he was no longer willing to serve as the society's vice president. But he hadn't finished yet. The 'egregious absurdities' published in *The Field*, he said, meant that it could no longer be taken seriously. His profound wish was that 'the sportsmen of England' would come together and start a new, 'well-conditioned sporting paper, with a gentleman at its head', that would sweep *The Field* from its pedestal. We can't know whether or not the editor he had in mind was the same 'really clever gentleman' he thought should run the Acclimatisation Society's

fish-hatching operation but in the light of what followed it seems likely that it was.

None of this served to narrow Frank's range of interests. He was a habitual (and one has to say somewhat prolix) writer of letters to *The Times*. On 20 December 1863, he had become strangely exercised by the dangers of poorly designed millinery. Looking into shop windows he had noticed a trend towards forward-pointing spun-glass 'peacocks' tails' attached like ships' figureheads to the prows of fashionable women's hats. This was to be deplored.

> These plumes are highly ornamental and graceful to look at; but I would beg the gentlemen to warn the ladies of their families against wearing them, for these threads of glass are as thin as cobwebs, and, though apparently solid as a mass, break and snap off, falling into almost impalpable powder with the greatest ease.
>
> Now, imagine the consequence; these *spiculae* are very likely to find their way *into the eyes* of the fair wearers; and I need not tell them what pain and discomfort they would necessarily cause. It would, moreover, be a difficult matter for the surgeon to see them, and when he had discovered them it would be delicate work to remove them from the sensitive membranes which line the eyelids.

On more familiar ground, Frank decided to give diplomacy a chance. He made peace with Francis and the society by apologising for Berkeley's outburst and by promising to support the society's efforts. But there was more to his strategy than just handing the palm to Francis Francis. On 1 January 1864, he wrote another, much longer letter to *The Times*. This one was headed 'Fish Culture in England' and was a masterpiece of doublespeak.

At 1,045 words, and with a 48-word postscript, it was somewhat longer than most page leads in modern broadsheet newspapers. Ostensibly it was written in reply to a piece on 'Fish Culture in France' which had appeared in the edition of 29 December, to correct the misapprehension that England still lagged behind other countries. In fact he was subtly reasserting himself as Britain's foremost authority on matters piscicultural. In his opening paragraph he made a list of English fish-hatching sites, placing Hampton first and Twickenham second. There were eighteen more (including one near Dublin), in all of which he asserted an interest. He followed this with a detailed, and not overly modest, account of his work with Stephen Ponder at Hampton. As a result of their enterprise in the previous year, he wrote:

> We let loose in the shallows in the neighbourhood of Hampton, Sunbury, Walton &c., 22,000 English trout, 6,000 Rhine salmon, 2,000 French trout, 3,000 ombre chevalier [charr], and 2,000 grayling, in all 35,000 fish, being when let loose about the size of minnows. Should there be any doubt as to whether these fish are doing well in the Thames, let me beg the reader to take a boat some warm morning next spring and paddle gently along the shallows above Hampton, and I shall be much mistaken if he does not see a considerable number of little silver-scaled beauties darting away like water swallows from the bank side.

The message to Francis Francis – 'put that in your pipe and smoke it' – was unuttered but clear. The trout eggs hatched at Hampton, Frank wrote, were all obtained 'by our own hands' from various parts of England, and he and Ponder had already begun to stock up for the new season. He invited 'all those who are interested in the beautiful process of hatching fish by artificial

means' to visit Ponder's hatchery and see for themselves. The Acclimatisation Society, he then revealed, had also erected 'a large apparatus' at Twickenham. 'This apparatus is under the entire charge and management of Mr. Francis Francis.' (Code: 'Don't bother.') In case anyone had missed the point, he offered his own 'gratuitous services' – not only at Hampton but also at the zoo, the South Kensington Museum, the Crystal Palace and the *Field* office, 'for I am determined that the public shall know all that my experience enables me to teach them upon the matter'. The implied question – who needs Francis Francis? – had received its answer. Thus was revealed a new side to Frank's character. Amiable, kind and full of fun he might be, but people should think twice before crossing him. In his postscript he promised very soon to submit his observations on the breeding of oysters. He signed himself with full qualifications, MA, FRS,* &c., Late 2nd Life Guards, and gave his address as the Athenaeum Club, Pall Mall.

His relationship with the Acclimatisation Society otherwise continued amiably enough. Specimens received by the society's treasurer, J. Bush, and enthusiastically welcomed by Frank himself during 1863 included a pair of emus and a wombat.† But it was fish that would make the big news of 1864. A new character now enters the story. James Arndell Youl, an Australian-born agriculturist, had settled in England in 1854 and become a

* This must be either a mistake by the editor or an untypical conceit by Frank. It was a great disappointment to him that he was never made a Fellow of the Royal Society.

† Emu is now farmed and available online in America, for use in recipes including roast emu, oriental emu (with soy sauce, lime juice and ginger), emu kebabs and spicy roasted emu (with cardamom, juniper, coriander and garlic), emu chilli, emu meatloaf, chicken fried emu, emu tenderloin, emu spaghetti sauce and emu tacos. The meat is described as red, low fat, and perfect for absorbing marinades. Wombat is best served stewed.

leading light of the Australia Society.* Youl's greatest ambition was to introduce salmon and trout to his homeland. He had already made two attempts to transport live ova from England, in 1860 and 1862, but both had failed. The turning point came in 1864, and – who could be surprised? – at the hub of it was Frank Buckland. The official account of what happened was given by the British government's Inspector of Salmon Fisheries, William Joshua Ffennell, in his annual report. Ffennell, an Irishman and long-time campaigner for the improvement of salmon rivers, explained why Youl had failed. The eggs had been shipped in water troughs which, though cooled with ice, 'could not be kept in a state to enable the tiny creatures to live through the voyage, although they were hatched'. Then came the eureka moment. 'An experiment was then tried by embedding some ova in ice, at the Wenham Lake Company's Stores† in London, under the direction of Mr. Frank Buckland.' This had led to what Ffennell, restrained perhaps by the sober conventions of governmental language, described as 'a most valuable discovery'. It was found, he went on, that ova packed in ice could be held in suspended animation for more than a hundred days. When placed in running water, the fish then 'came into the world strong and healthy'. The opportunity was swiftly seized. A vessel was chartered, a plentiful supply of Wenham Lake ice laid in, and Australia got its salmon and trout. Ffennell in the end threw off all restraint:

> Those who have carried out this very important undertaking so far, deserve the highest praise for their enterprising zeal,

* Re-formed in 1971 as the Britain-Australia Society.

† The Wenham Lake Ice Company imported and sold ice from Wenham Lake in Massachusetts.

> perseverance, and scientific skill in this effort to introduce salmon into the waters of a far-off country, where they were before unknown; and with the name of Mr. Frank Buckland, before mentioned, who superintended the scientific department, the names of Mr. Youl and Mr. Wilson, of the Australian Acclimatisation Society, should be recorded as taking a foremost part, undaunted by every difficulty that arose, in the accomplishment of so interesting and important an object.

The inspector's enthusiasm was not shared by everyone. There were some for whom praise for Frank was bitter gall. Noses were out of joint. Jealousies flared. Francis Francis seethed like a cuckolded husband at the bedroom door. There would be consequences.