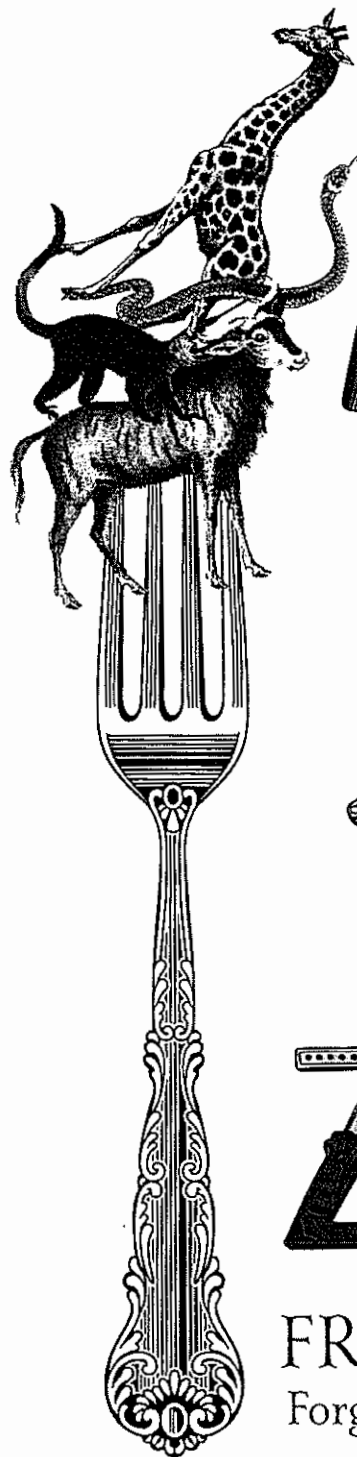


RICHARD GIRLING

THE MAN WHO ATE THE ZOO



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FRANK BUCKLAND
Forgotten Hero of Natural History



CHAPTER TEN

A Band of Players

Showmanship was central to Frank's character. From fairground hucksters to stars of the London stage, he empathised with all those like himself who felt driven to perform. High culture or low, it made no difference, and his respect for such people could lead to astonishing acts of generosity. A perfect example occurred while he was pike fishing with H. Cholmondeley Pennell on the Avon. The trip had begun with a dash by express train to Salisbury, followed by an ugly coaching accident which he was lucky to survive. But Frank thrived on drama. The memento mori did not keep him long from the riverbank, where he soon hooked and landed a powerful fish. Most fishermen in those circumstances would have rebaited and ridden their luck. But Frank was not most fishermen. He chose instead to lay down his rod, dissect the pike and think about how it might have experienced the world. Its predominant sense, he concluded, was sight. 'The fish I caught must have seen my bait at least ten or twelve yards off, for I saw him start from his lair in the weeds, and he came at it like a rocket . . . He could not have smelt it, though he has nostrils.'*

* This is particularly interesting when considered against his later thoughts about migrating salmon.

All this would have left most men at dusk with little on their minds but a hot meal, a glass of brandy and an early bed. Not Frank. While dressing for dinner at the Star Hotel in Fordingbridge, he was startled by a sudden, desperate cry for help. *Murder! To the rescue! Help, help!* He ran down the corridor, flung open a door and burst into a large room which the hotel's proprietor, a Mr Bill, hired out for sittings of the county court, lectures and, as on this occasion, theatrical performances. After dinner, Frank and Pennell hurried to join the audience (reserved seats sixpence, unreserved threepence), taking their seats during a love scene in which a lady was complaining about her gentleman's infidelities, which apparently had been revealed to her by her mother's overtalkative magpie. Frank was fascinated and appalled by the 'out-at-elbows' appearance of the production: the crude and flimsy sets (a living room, a forest and the actual room in which the performance took place) that had to serve for every play, and the way the actors coped in such straitened circumstances.

A piano, much out of tune, was played by a woman who once had been pretty, but whose face showed the rude lines of care and misery; though so poor and evidently an invalid, she was an excellent performer . . . The whole company consisted of six persons, and most extraordinary and clever shifts were adopted by them to carry out their acting. There was, however, such a peculiar careworn and poverty-struck looking appearance about all these poor creatures, that I was determined to learn more about them and their sad story.

It was a story fit for Dickens. The company's manager had once been a successful impresario but had lost his fortune by

overreaching himself. His wife, the woman at the piano, had once been a star of the London theatre blessed with a magnificent singing voice. This had broken down one day, leaving her unable to speak above a whisper. She had borne ten children, of whom seven had survived, including a baby which lay in a corner while she played. Others in the company had endured similar downward trajectories, from early success to a perpetual struggle against homelessness and hunger. That very morning they had walked twelve miles with their props and scenery in a cart, then had spent more than they could afford on advertising themselves across the town. Their reward was an audience of fifteen, most of whom (in Frank's description) were 'the average specimens of thick-booted, grinning village boys, who were all clustered together . . . sitting upon the witness-box, used on county court occasions, like a lot of sparrows on a hedge top'. Bravely the actors struggled through a performance of *The Lottery Ticket*, then began a concert. When Frank arrived there were just two people in the reserved seats (actually a sofa and a few armchairs), and no one brave enough to applaud – an omission Frank immediately put right. He did more. While the performance was proceeding, he and Pennell went outside and bought tickets for everyone they could find – twenty-four in all – in the hope that the theatre might then look a bit less dispiriting. It was, nevertheless, a disaster for the company, the night's profit countable in pence. The actors tried to console themselves by believing the poor attendance was a seasonal blip: rural Hampshire was too occupied with the harvest to have time for the theatre. But it was cold comfort. The reality was that a family of five – husband, wife and three children – had ten shillings to keep themselves alive for a week, and single actors just three shillings and threepence. An actress told Frank she

had not tasted meat for seventeen days and struggled even to afford bread and tea.

The Saturday audience was no better than Friday's. The house was nearly empty, yet the cast still played their hearts out, giving full value to the sparse few who had paid their threepence (the sixpennies were all empty). At the end, Frank and Cholmondeley Pennell invited the entire company to supper. This struggling band of players clearly affected Frank. In their doomed travails they perfectly exemplified hard-pressed and under-rewarded working people of every kind. It only strengthened his determination to improve the quality of their lives. Even more than the Acclimatisation Society, pisciculture gave him a chance to put food on the tables of the poor – a kind of democratisation unknown since cave-dwellers hunted as equals. For the rest of his life it would dominate his thinking.

His concerns were not all about diet. He worried about people's spiritual welfare, too, and about what they breathed as well as what they ate. More than thirty years before the founders of the National Trust fulfilled their promise to provide 'open air sitting rooms for the poor',* Frank believed urban people needed to see more of the countryside. Fresh air and a change of scene, he thought, were 'always grateful to the brain-worker, whether he lived a thousand years ago in Rome or this very week in London . . . Folks talk about hot and cold water baths, vapour baths, hot-air baths, Turkish baths, and other kinds of baths innumerable, but of all health-giving, invigorating baths, give me the good, pure, *fresh air* bath.' Frank himself liked to take the air in hard bursts, and nowhere better than on the footplate

* The words are Olivia Hill's. With her co-founders, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, she established the National Trust in January 1895.

of the Great Western express to Didcot, on which he somehow wangled himself a ride. Ordinary passengers were advised to throw open the carriage windows 'and take your fresh-air bath as it pours thousands of cubic feet of oxygen and ozone into the "gas-pipe" of your lungs'. While Frank's published prose could sometimes slide into flippancy, his notebook was filled with sombre reflection.

I really cannot help thinking, that the Almighty God has given me great powers, both of thought and of expressing these thoughts. Thanks to Him, but I must cultivate my mind by diligent study, careful reflection in private, and intense and quick observation of facts out of doors, combined with quick appreciation of ideas of others. In fact, strive to become master mind, and thus able to influence others of weaker minds, whose shortcomings I must forgive.

I am like a ship at sea; my instructions are to do good and earn a livelihood. I must carry on board a cargo of information, with a sound ballast of truth, so that when a sudden breeze strikes the sail, and throws the ship on her side, the ballast will right her. There are so many waves – stormy, cold, white-faced waves of opposition – unkindness, and unconcern to encounter, that one need have good timbers.

This perfectly expressed what Bompas described as his 'simple-hearted, quaint, yet earnest' view of life and responsibility. 'Soapy Sam' Wilberforce, now Bishop of Oxford, thought the same. He found Frank 'very good fun . . . full of his natural history, and so simple and unaffected as to make him very charming indeed'. Well, yes . . . Unaffected Frank

most certainly was but the simplicity was illusory. The ability to make complex ideas accessible is the hallmark of a good writer, and Frank at his best was very good indeed. He thought very hard about what he heard and saw, and never passed up an opportunity to learn. One day, for no better reason than that he had never been there before, he set off to visit Loughton, near Epping Forest in Essex. He didn't much like the look of it – 'a very sober, slow, stupid, cockney tea-and-hot-water place it seemed to be' – but he trusted himself to find something of interest. His educators on this occasion were three men whom he met carrying birdcages, and a boy bearing a stuffed chaffinch. They were bird-catchers from Whitechapel, whose secrets Frank swiftly unlocked with his 'usual key' of beer and cigars. Songbirds in the nineteenth century were a highly profitable commodity for the men who caught them, and Frank wanted to learn how they did it. Nothing to it, said his new friends. They would just stroll along until they heard a nightingale in a tree or a hedge, then they would trap it. First they planted a stuffed bird – they called it a 'stale' – as a lure. This would be wired to a piece of wood with a nail at one end which they stuck into the bark of a tree. Around the stale went whale-bone 'twigs' smeared with bird-lime, a sticky substance made from boiled holly bark which the Whitechapel men valued at 'a guinea a pound'. The finishing touch was a live 'call-bird' singing in a cage. The wild bird would think the singing was coming from the stale. Down he would swoop to drive the intruder off, and the bird-lime would do the rest. Unfortunately the trick worked only too well, so an unnatural silence had fallen over Loughton. 'The birds about here, sir, is pretty nigh all caught up,' said Frank's informant. Frank noted the perverse effects of supply and demand that would be so important in his thinking about fish. It was a vicious cycle. Heavy demand shortened the

supply. Shortened supply heightened the demand. The rarer nightingales became, the more they would fetch and the harder the hunters would work to catch them.

On his way home Frank was saddened to see 'a foolish-looking cockney boy' with a nest of baby birds. All of them would be dead by morning. Pondering this, Frank made a direct appeal to his female readers: 'Ladies, pray forbid the idle boys from bird-nesting, and send your husbands and brothers after them *with the stick*; if you see them looking for nests, and you will be doing much good; for not only do the birds do the garden great benefit by eating insects innumerable, but consider how *you* would like *your* nest taken away.' Typical Frank: serious message, jocular style.

In common with his more thoughtful contemporaries (and many countrymen now), Frank was ambivalent about hunting and shooting. He enjoyed both, but felt people should spend more time watching and less with guns in their hands. 'We are too much in the habit of hunting, shooting, destroying, or otherwise tormenting the living representatives of the fauns and satyrs of our woods, lanes and hedges. How much greater would be the pleasure if we watched them a little more, and observed their instincts and their habits!'

In July 1864 the RSPCA invited him to judge a design competition for a more humane kind of vermin trap, one that would kill without torturing. Frank felt a particular concern for foxes, which he believed would gnaw off their own legs to escape from a trap. His evidence was gruesomely compelling.

It is not uncommon to hear of three-legged foxes being killed. The cause of loss of the third foot [*sic*] is generally a trap, and I am convinced that the story of foxes gnawing off their foot is true. It may be urged that the pain of

the self-amputation would prevent the fox from doing this; but it must be recollected that the trap, having cut off all circulation from the lower part of the foot, the latter would become dead, and numb to all feeling . . .

My friend Mr Bartlett . . . once had a fox consigned to him for stuffing which had only three legs . . . When he sent the animal home, the gentleman . . . was much surprised that the fox had four legs . . . Mr Bartlett [explained that] when he came to dissect the fox he examined the contents of his stomach, and found in it the missing foot, much gnawed by teeth, but still perfect enough to enable him to prepare it and restore it to its proper position. It was quite evident that the fox had bitten his foot off, and, in his agony, had swallowed it.

Frank despaired of taxidermists who failed to set up foxes correctly. 'In nine stuffed foxes' heads out of ten, the pupils of the eyes are made round like a dog's, and not elliptical like a cat's. The fact is, that a fox being a nocturnal animal, has a cat's eye, and not a dog's.' He observed nevertheless that a fox would wag its tail like a dog if it was pleased,* and he liked the fact that so many inns were named after what he now thought should replace the lion as England's national animal.

In the same year, 1864, Frank presented a paper to the Zoological Society on his experiments with cross-bred salmon and trout, wrote another paper identifying whitebait as (mainly) the young of herring and sprat, swapped notes on pisciculture

* His only evidence for this was a single incidence he had witnessed of a fox 'wagging his brush' at Edinburgh Zoological Gardens. He acknowledged that the fox was 'not often on terms of friendship enough with mankind to show his pleasure'.

with experts in Paris, and visited a salmon fishery in Galway where the owner, Thomas Ashworth, wanted him to explain the wholesale disappearance of newly hatched fry. Frank soon saw what had happened. The rearing pond was swarming with carnivorous water beetles. He did not just explain this to Thomas Ashworth, he *showed* him. Into a bottle of water went one beetle and two baby salmon. There was but a single survivor. This was typical of the Frank we know: plain-spoken, direct, unsentimental. But there was another side to him, less often revealed, which suggests the inner boy once in a while had to move aside for the inner poet. His first sight of mature salmon swimming in a Galway river roused him to an almost Wordsworthian lyricism.

Oh! You shining lovely creatures! At last, then, I see you free and at liberty in your native element. Mysterious water fairies, whence come ye? Whither are ye going? Why do ye hide your lustrous and beautiful figures in the unseen and unknown caverns of the deep blue sea? Why do ye shun the eye of mortal man? Hitherto I have seen only your lifeless, battered, and disfigured carcasses mummied in ice and lying in marble state on fishmongers' slabs. Who could believe that in life you are so wondrously beautiful, so mysterious, so incomprehensible?

At the Galway fish ladder,* boy and poet became one. The boy wanted to know what it might feel like to be a migrating salmon. The poet wanted to describe it ('Oh! That I had scales and fins for five minutes, thought I . . .'). Frank stepped onto

* A fish ladder was, and is, a stepped structure enabling migrating fish to leap over obstructions such as weirs or dams.

the ladder, slowly lowered himself into the seething water and imagined himself to be a fish. '[I] congratulated myself on narrow escapes from the nets and the crevices below, and thought how very desirable it would be to get up to autumn quarters in Lough Corrib above.' But his inner salmon was going nowhere. He couldn't move. If he did, 'the water knocked me about like a wood-chip in a street-gutter after a thunderstorm'. All he could do was hold tight and hope a salmon would leap up the ladder past him. Instead he was assailed by a bailiff surprised to find this 'curious white-skinned creature' floundering half submerged on the salmon ladder. The bailiff – humorously, one must hope – offered Frank an alternative insight into the realities of life as a fish. 'Bedad, your honour . . . if I had got a gaff in my hand, I'd just strike it into your scales and see how you would like it.'

When regaled to readers of *The Field*, all this might have seemed innocent enough. For Francis Francis, however, it was a goad too far. He ridiculed Frank's findings in Galway, provoking a tart exchange of letters which culminated in a diatribe from Francis that blew away all pretence of civility. Enraged by what he saw as Frank's presumption, and angered by the Acclimatisation Society's suspension of his Twickenham fish hatchery, there was nothing left for him but to lash out. *What experience has Mr Buckland to offer that will bear comparison with mine?* In a letter to *The Field* he accused Frank of 'vague capriciousness', of doing more harm than good, of spoiling things for better men than himself, and of lacking professional etiquette.

[When] a fellow labourer is known to be engaged upon a subject . . . one ought not to descend upon it and take it out of his hands. But Mr Buckland's mode of procedure in *The*

Field has been to spread himself over every department, wandering hither and thither like a bee from flower to flower, or a Bedouin of the desert from richly-laden caravan to caravan. The moment a subject has been worked up by another person into notice, down pounces Mr Buckland, and like a blowfly, lays his eggs on the subject, and forthwith pervades it, often to the exclusion of the original proprietor.

There was little need for Frank to mount his high horse. Francis's abuse launched him into the saddle, willy-nilly. No gentleman, said Frank, could respond to a letter couched in such ungentlemanly terms, and no editor should have published it. His resignation from *The Field* was emphatic and irreversible. He had written presciently in his notebook: *There are so many waves – stormy, cold, white-faced waves of opposition – unkindness, and unconcern to encounter, that one need have good timbers.* His timbers having proved more than equal to the task, he was now ready to move on. In fact he had already done so.

His new passion was oyster breeding, but his *modus operandi* was the same as ever. First came observation. He studied the oyster beds and experimented with spatting (seeding the beds) and breeding. Then came education. He presented a report to the British Association, lectured at the Society of Arts, the London Institution and places as far apart as Clapham, Liverpool and Ireland. Less happily, he had a stab at commercial oyster farming. The vehicle for this was the Herne Bay, Hampton & Reculver Oyster Fishery Company, incorporated in July 1864 under Frank's own chairmanship. Fellow directors included Cholmondeley Pennell, a couple of knights (Sir Henry James Leeke, Sir Edwin Pearson), plus a local landowner, Reynolds Collard, and other men of substance.

The full story of this debacle is well told in an excellent little booklet, *Adventures in Oysterville: the Failed Oyster and Seaside Development of Hampton-on-Sea, Herne Bay*, written by Martin Easdown and published by Michael's Bookshop in Ramsgate (one of many books on local issues). The Herne Bay Oyster Company looked a certain winner. The nearby fishery at Whitstable was already hugely successful: Easdown records that in 1862–3 it sold 60 million oysters for a total of £91,000. Though the Whitstable company opposed it, Frank's reputation ensured the Herne Bay scheme got parliamentary approval. There were to be five breeding ponds, five oyster dredgers, a pier, storehouses, homes for the workers and a three-quarter-mile tramway connecting to the London railway. The company's territory extended to twenty-one square miles – seven miles along the coast from Swalecliffe to Reculver, and three miles out to sea. How could it lose? For a while it did seem to be fulfilling its promise. As well as farming its own stock, it imported oysters from France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Essex, and sent twice-weekly boatloads to Billingsgate. The pier was opened in 1866 by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Benjamin Phillips, and celebratory glasses were raised at the newly opened Hampton Oyster Inn.* But the bubble was about to burst. The company had overreached itself and infrastructure costs left it badly underfunded. Frank scented danger and in 1868 he resigned. The company wobbled on for a few more years, paying next to no dividends while falling out with fishermen and squabbling with its more powerful neighbour. A succession of severe winters and a declining market did the rest. The Herne Bay, Hampton & Reculver Oyster Fishery Company

* Now the Hampton Inn. It is one of the last vestiges of the village of Hampton-on-Sea, which surrendered to the sea and was abandoned at the turn of the twentieth century.

went into liquidation and was finally wound up in 1884. All this is glossed over by Bompas in two brief sentences. Frank 'took part in the formation of a Company for the culture of oysters . . . from which he afterwards withdrew [and which] was not, for various reasons, successful'. Bompas was a loyal brother-in-law who had a blind eye for anything unpleasant. At least the oyster company, unlike poor illegitimate Physie, got a mention of sorts, but the curtain came down again over the nastiness with Francis Francis. On that, Bompas ventured not a word.

One can only imagine the rage with which Francis received the news in March 1865 that Frank had set up a fish hatchery for the Queen at Windsor and had been rewarded with the title Fish Culturist to Her Majesty. The endorsements piled up like Herne Bay flotsam. In April the Prince of Wales agreed to become the Acclimatisation Society's president, and Frank's old friend Bishop Wilberforce joined the council. Frank's, not Francis Francis's, was the voice everyone wanted to hear. He gave evidence to the Royal Commission on sea fisheries, and to parliamentary committees on the Thames fishery and the oyster beds of the River Roach. The Home Office listened to his advice on the effects of pollution on freshwater fisheries, and in May he agreed to become Scientific Referee for Fish Culture at the South Kensington Museum, where a couple of years earlier he had exhibited his fish hatchery. It would pay him fifty pounds a year. Thus would begin yet another chapter in this most overcrowded of lives.

While all this was going on Frank had been putting together the third volume (known as the Third Series) of *Curiosities of Natural History*, for publication in January 1866. Like its predecessors, this was an improbable compendium of stories, reflections and ruminations, the trivial and the profound all tumbling one over another. You could never know whether the next page would make you gasp, laugh or pause to think. What

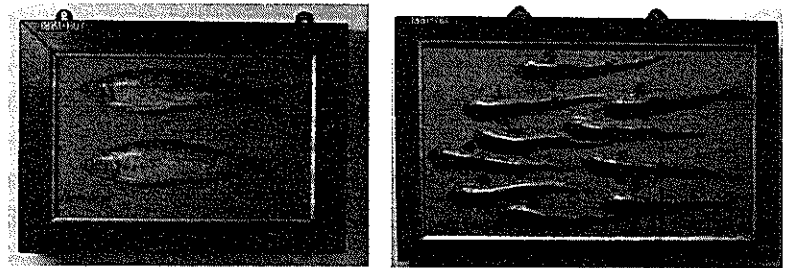
people *did* know was that no page could be skipped. He ranged from a Roman racecourse to a Yorkshire fishing match, church bells, fire precautions at the zoo, toothache in a hippopotamus, the pleasures of duck-hunting, the Uffington white horse (he calculated that the line from the lower jaw to the end of the tail was as long as the pavement in Trafalgar Square opposite the National Gallery), the pike's powers of sight and the whale's sense of smell. He explained how to open the jaws of an angry dog, catch a monkey, judge the weight of a tiger . . . There was even a bit of first aid. While trout fishing with Pennell, he had gashed a finger on a broken reed, causing profuse bleeding. He staunched the flow with the head of a bulrush ('in a few seconds the blood made a clot round the seed') and made a bandage with skin stripped from the back of a landed pike. Well, you would, wouldn't you?

Among those he visited in 1865 were the Dukes of Northumberland and Marlborough, the Lords Dorchester and Burleigh, and 'the Chinese giant', for whom Frank also held a dinner party (menu not recorded). Another visitor to Albany Street was the French giant Jean-Joseph Brice, nicknamed le Géant des Vosges, who advertised himself as Anak the King of Giants. Brice was rumoured to stand 245cm tall in his socks, though his actual height was a rather more modest 229.78cm, a fraction over 7ft 6in, and half an inch shorter than Charles Byrne. Not everyone thought Frank's fondness for freakery sat comfortably with his serious work on fisheries.

As it happened, the serious work had taken another turn. Frank had begun making plaster casts of fish. The idea apparently came to him during a visit to the Royal Society in Dublin, whose museum contained a number of extremely realistic casts. Frank straight away saw the potential. Though he was a great admirer of the taxidermist's art, he was also keenly aware of its

limitations. Whereas a skilfully stuffed bird or animal could be made to look much like the living creature,* fish would lose their colour and look like their own ghosts. A carefully made cast, on the other hand, if accurately painted, would preserve all the physical detail of the fish *and* its living colours. Museum visitors would then have a very much better idea of exactly what it was that lurked beyond sight in lakes, rivers and oceans. They could see, too, how fish appeared at different stages in their growth cycle. His ambition, said Bompas, was 'to make the facts of pisciculture available to everyone'. In his usual fashion, Frank went at it wholeheartedly and learned from his mistakes. His journal entry for 28 November 1864: 'All day in the kitchen casting fish; the eel and the salmon; made some awful failures, but did not knock anything to pieces.'

His well-travelled fisheries display, including casts, now found a permanent home among the Animal Products and Food collections at the South Kensington Museum. Here was another good way to educate the public, and another good way to stir up trouble. The keeper of these collections, W. Matchwick, declared



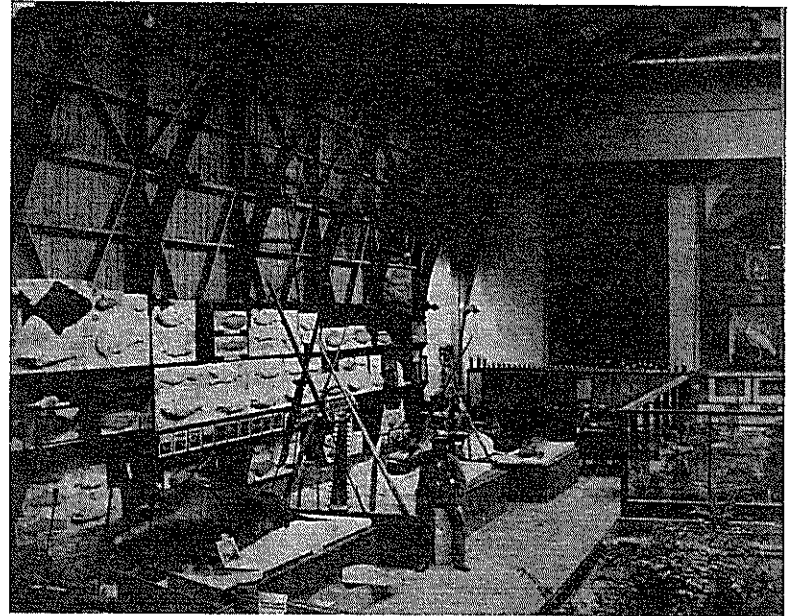
Frank's casts of herring and baby sharks, now in the Scottish Fisheries Museum

* The Natural History Museum in London still rather apologetically displays some of its early collection of stuffed specimens, but the best display I know about is in the Specola, the natural history museum in Florence.

in 1865 that the fish collection and hatchery were gratifyingly popular. But this wasn't enough to satisfy Frank. The museum's official report revealed that he had imported an entirely separate collection dedicated exclusively to 'the economy of fish culture and preservation'.

It consists of hatching and rearing apparatus on a considerable scale, models of breeding ponds, weirs, fish ladders, apparatus for the transport of fertile fish ova to distant countries . . . diagrams and models of nets and apparatus used in the illegal destruction of salmon, illustrations of the natural enemies of salmon and trout, a series showing the growth of the salmon from the egg to the full-grown fish; a series of whitebait at various stages of growth, and of fish sold and eaten as whitebait, and an extensive series illustrating the growth and artificial cultivation of oysters from various parts of Europe and other countries; all of which is the private property of Mr Buckland.

Where in his hectic life had Frank found time to do all this? He certainly couldn't have done it entirely in the hours of daylight. One wonders at what time of night in Albany Street the lamps were dimmed and the candles snuffed, if indeed they ever were. But it might be thought – indeed, it *was* thought – that inserting a private collection into a public museum was a mite presumptuous. A representative of the museum's staff complained to the director that Frank had overstepped the mark. 'I think it inadvisable that an officer of the Department should be allowed to form and exhibit as his own property such a collection of objects as it is his duty to advise and assist the Department in collecting for itself, the prestige of the Department being used in procuring examples for what is



Frank in his Museum of Economic Fish Culture

in reality a private collection.' Everything in the display, he argued, should belong to the museum. This got short shrift from Frank, who pointed out that the exhibits were entirely his own, collected or built by himself in his own time and at his own expense. His meaning was plain. The museum should be grateful to him for having provided such a popular crowd-puller, not conspiring to rob him of his property. Both sides had a point (it is impossible to imagine a modern museum allowing its staff to own the exhibits), but it was Frank who won. We can't now know whether it was the strength of his argument or the power of his influential supporters that tipped the balance. Either way, the improbably named Museum of Economic Fish Culture was established at South Kensington under the curatorship and sole ownership of Francis Trevelyan Buckland. Bompas characteristically shrank from the unpleasantness

like a snail with salt on its tail, gliding over it in one anodyne sentence. 'On receiving this appointment [Scientific Referee to the South Kensington Museum], he commenced at once transferring to the Museum his collection illustrative of fish and oyster culture.' Easy as that.

Frank's enthusiasm for casting famously would reach its apogee two years later with the Sturgeon in the Night – an episode so unlikely that it was still causing laughter in 1886, when the American magazine *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* remembered it with a cartoon. No cartoon, however, could match the hilarity of Frank's own account. 'I would advise my readers never to attempt to have a sturgeon stuffed,' he once wrote. 'Stuffed sturgeons are hideous monstrosities.' But he did acknowledge their versatility in the kitchen. 'It is said that a good cook can obtain beef or mutton, pork or poultry out of a sturgeon; in other words, fish, flesh, and fowl.' Nor was this the sturgeon's only virtue. If readers had a chance, he said, they should get hold of some of the large, knobby bones that stud the fish's back.*

They should be soaked for three or four days in water, and then boiled till all the flesh comes off. It will be found that the stud-like bones are most beautiful objects, being as hard or harder than ivory, with the outer surface indented and marked as though they had been carved by a Japanese artist . . . When set in silver, selected samples of these shackles form very beautiful ornaments for ladies' dresses . . . and I certainly would advise my lady readers who are always looking out for something new and pretty to try the effects of sturgeons' "shackles" when worn as ornaments.

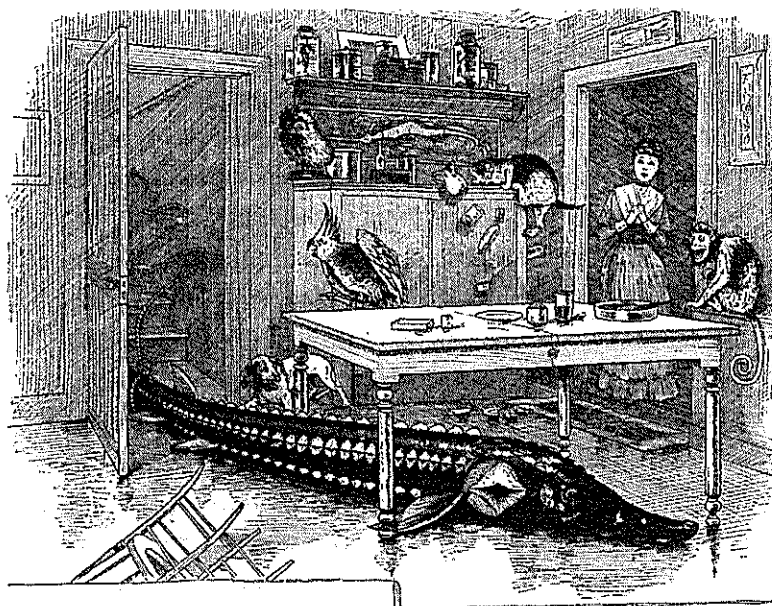
* Frank's word for these was 'shackles', but they are more commonly known as scutes.

One Tuesday evening in April 1867, Frank received news from a friendly fishmonger, Messrs Grove of Bond Street, that they had a nine-foot, fifteen-stone sturgeon on their slab and were willing to lend it to him for casting overnight. It would have to be back in the shop by ten next morning. The first problem was how to get the monster to Albany Street. Frank tried and failed to manhandle it into a cab, then borrowed the fishmonger's cart. The next problem was how to get the fifteen-stone fish out of the cart and into the house. Frank's first thought was to shove it over the railings and down into the little front kitchen where he did his casting. This was not a good idea: 'his back was so slippery and his scales so sharp to the hands, that Master Sturgeon beat us again'. Slapstick was a popular feature of the mid-century Victorian music halls, but none can ever have imagined anything to beat this. *However*, Frank wrote,

I was determined to get him down into the kitchen somehow; so, tying a rope to his tail, I let him slide down the stone stairs by his own weight. He started all right, but, 'getting way' on him, I could hold the rope no more, and away he went sliding headlong down the stairs, like an avalanche from Mont Blanc. At the bottom of the stairs is the kitchen door; the sturgeon came against it 'nose on' like an iron battering ram; he smashed the door open . . . and slid right into the kitchen, gliding easily along the oil-cloth till at last he brought himself to an anchor under the kitchen table. This sudden and unexpected appearance of the armour-clad sea monster . . . instantly created a sensational scene, and great and dire was the commotion. The cook screamed, the housemaid nearly fainted; the cat jumped on the dresser, upsetting the best crockery; the little dog Danny . . . made a precipitate retreat

under the copper and barked furiously; the monkeys went mad with fright and screamed 'Murder' in monkey language; the sedate parrot's nerves were terribly shaken, and it has never spoken a word since; and all this bother because a poor harmless dead sturgeon burst open the kitchen door, and took up his position under the kitchen table.

One of Frank's most valuable assets was his secretary, Mr. Searle. He it was who had the responsibility of actually casting the fish (hoisted onto the table with 'ropes and improvised mechanical contrivances') while his master kept a dinner engagement. With Frank out of the house, and the staff and menagerie calmed, the implacable Searle had the cast finished by two in the morning, and the sturgeon was back on Grove's slab by the



FRANK DUCKLAND'S STURGEON ALARMING HIS HOUSEHOLD.

Just another day at no. 37: a cartoon from *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*

appointed hour of ten. The remaining unforeseen snag (which was evidently overcome, though Frank did not say how) was to extract from the kitchen a rigid plaster cast too long and too wide to pass through either the door or the heavily barred window. This disruption to the domestic affairs of no. 37 (as it had now been renumbered) would soon be eclipsed, however, if not actually forgotten.

A few days later the whale arrived.