

THE
OCTOPUS CYCLE

Fletcher Pratt
Irvin Lester

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The OCTOPUS CYCLE

By Irvin Lester and Fletcher Pratt

Here, again, is a different story, a thriller that you will remember for many years to come. And that you may not shout at once "impossible," we are printing in this issue an actual photograph of one of these sea creatures, which comes pretty close to what our authors have in mind, except that they do not roam on land, but keep strictly to the sea. As Curator Dr. Ditmars, of the Bronx Zoological Gardens, pointed out recently, nature is always far more surprising than fiction. For instance, there are really fish that climb trees, impossible as this sounds, and they do exist now in India; also there are snakes that can fly from one tree to another. These things may sound impossible and fictional, but they are facts.

There was a long, uneasy swell on the surface of the Indian Ocean as though someone were gently rocking the floor beneath it, and a hot, moist wind blew against the face

of Walter Weyl, A.B., A.M., B.Sc., as he stood against the rail of the pudgy little Messagères Maritimes steamer, wondering whether he would dare to chance a spell of seasickness by lighting a well-cured pipe for the fourth time that afternoon.

It was hot—and off to the west, Tamatave's houses gleamed white and blistering against the green background of the Madagascar jungle, blued by the distance. Away to the north the coastline stretched illimitable. It would be another day at least before the steamer arrived at Andovorata, and Walter Weyl, A.B., A.M., B.Sc., would be able to get at the heart of the mysterious occurrences that had brought him there.

His mind traveled back to the letter from his friend of college days, Raoul Duperret, now on French government service in that mysterious land—Madagascar. He saw it again before him, the characteristic French handwriting, the precise French phrasing:

"... alas, we cannot pursue these investigations, through lack of money. To you, then, my friend, I appeal. To you belongs, permit me to say; that combination so rare of the talent for and the means to pursue it. To you also will appertain the credit for any discovery.

"Let me, in detail, tell you of what we know. Diouma-Mbobo is a chieftain of the blacks in the southern part of the island who have never been rescued from cannibal practices. He is, as far as we know, a man who rules by law and is of a truthfulness. Thus, when he accused the Tanósy, who are the

next tribe to him, of stealing people and eating them, took measures and did not too much believe the denials of the Tanósy. But Diouma-Mbobob's people continue to disappear, and when the commandant sent a whole company of Senegalese to preserve order, they still disappeared. What is still more distressing, is that some of the Senegalese also disappeared, and save but a solitary rifle or two found in the jungle, no trace of them remains.

"There is some fear in the island and we are in danger of losing our grip on the natives, for we cannot at all explain these disappearances nor prevent them. The commandant says, 'Send a battalion of chasseurs,' but it is my belief that a battalion of chasseurs would likewise fail, and I send for you, for I believe the agency that destroys men thus is not human. No human would neglect the rifles.

"As you know, Madagascar is a country apart. We have here the giant spiders, large as bats; the lizards, large as sheep, and no, not a single snake. All our animals are *outré*, impossible even, and what if one more impossible than all...? And thus it is to you, my rich American friend, I appeal for myself and my country."

It had offered precious little real information, that letter, but enough to have caused Walter Weyl to drop a learned monograph on the ammonites of the Upper Cretaceous and hurry across ten thousand miles of ocean with microscopes, rifles and all the equipment of the modern scientist, to the aid of his friend.

The sun went down suddenly, as it does in the tropics, and the sea was purple darkness all at once. The lights of Tamatave twinkled away behind and were blotted out; off to the west was only the menacing blot of the huge island, forbidding and dangerous in the gloom. Weyl sat musing by the rail, listening to the hushed voices of a couple of men in the bows.

Forgetting his dinner below, he fell into a half-doze, from which he was suddenly awakened by a sense of approaching evil, definite, yet which could not be located. He looked about lazily. The Southern Cross hung brilliant in the sky; there was no other light but the flare of portholes on the water, and no sound but the slap of waves against the bows. Yet the night had suddenly become dreadful. He struggled lazily to put a name to the sense of impending doom, and as he struggled there was a sudden and terrible scream from the bow—the cry of a man in mortal anguish and fear.

"Oh—o—o—u—" it went, running off into a strangled sob, and through it cut the shout of the other sailor, "Secours! Secours! Ferent..." and the sound of a blow on soft flesh.

Weyl leaped to his feet and ran forward; there was the sound of a slamming door, and a quick patter of feet behind him. In front was the blackness of the bows, out of which emerged a panic-stricken man who charged against him, babbling incoherent French, and bore him to the deck. As he went down he caught a glimpse of two waving prehensile arms, like lengths of fire-hose, silhouetted against the sky.

Somebody ran past him, the deck leaped into illumination as lights were switched on, and he picked himself up to see—nothing. The bows were empty. There was a babble of conversation:

"Where is Ferentini?"

"What is the trouble?"

"Who is there?"

There was confusion, stifled by the appearance of the captain, a eupeptic little man in a blue coat and a tremendous moustache which swept his shoulders. "This uproar—what does it mean?" he said. "Let the sailor Dugasse come forward."

A big Basque, obviously panic-stricken and with rolling eyes, was shoved into the light. "Tell us the reason for this," demanded the captain.

"Ferentini and I," he gasped, "we were talking, so, in the bow. One, two big arms, like a gorilla, seize him by the neck, the chest, and zut! he is gone. I strike at them, but he is gone."

"Assassin!" said the captain briefly. "Confess that you quarreled and you threw him over."

"No, no. He was taken. I swear it. By the Holy Virgin, I swear it."

"Put this man in the lazarette, you Marulaz, and you Noyon. There will be an investigation. Take his knife away from him."

"His knife is gone, monsieur," said one of the sea-men who had stepped forward to take charge of the sailor Dugasse.

"Without doubt, he stabbed the other. Put him in irons," was the captain's succinct reply, as he turned toward the cabin and his interrupted dinner.

Walter Weyl stepped forward. "I think the man's story is true," he offered. "I think I saw something myself."

"Permit me to inform you, monsieur, that I am the commandant of the vessel," remarked the eupeptic captain, with the utmost courtesy. "There will be an investigation. If the man is innocent it will do him no harm to spend a night in the lazarette." And again he turned away.

Dissatisfied, but realizing that he could do nothing, Weyl walked toward the bows, to see if he could find any trace of the strange encounter. There was nothing, but as he was about to return and go below, his foot struck something, which on investigation with a flashlight, proved to be the knife of the sailor Dugasse.

The blade was wet, and as he picked the weapon up there dripped slowly from it a pale, greenish oleaginous liquid, totally unlike human blood. With this bit of evidence in his hand, he started thoughtfully for his cabin.

CHAPTER II

Two days later the friends sat under the giant mimosa, in whose shade Raoul Duperret had built a little cottage on the height overlooking Andananarivo. A table had been dragged outdoors and was now piled with a miscellaneous collection of instruments, papers and microscope slides.

Weyl leaned back in his chair with a sigh and lit his pipe.

"Let us see what we have, after all this study," he said. "Check me if I go wrong. Diouma-Mbobbo's people and about a dozen of the Senegalese have disappeared mysteriously. So did the sailor Ferentini on the boat that brought me here. In no case was any trace found of the man after he disappeared, and in the cases on the island when anything was found it was always a knife or a rifle.

"This report," he ruffled the papers, "from one of the Senegalese, says that he saw his companion jerked up into a tree by a huge black rope, but when he rushed to the tree he could see nothing. It was late in the evening. Now this account agrees singularly with that of the sailor Dugasse—and moreover, if natives were responsible for the disappearances, they would at least have taken the knives, if not the guns.

"Therefore, I consider that the disappearance of Ferentini, the Senegalese and the natives was due to the same agency, and that the agency was not human; and, therefore, I think the Tanósy and the sailor Dugasse, although he is still in jail, should be acquitted."

Duperret nodded a grave assent.

"But I am sure it was nothing supernatural. I saw something on that boat, Duperret, and the Senegalese saw something. Moreover, there is Dugasse's knife. I have analyzed that liquid which dripped from it; it is blood, indubitably, but blood different from any I have ever seen. It contains a tremendous number of corpuscles of a new character, not red, but greenish yellow, and the liquid in which they float is similar to that of all other bloods. More than anything, it resembles the blood of an oyster, which is impossible, as oysters do not lift men into trees. Therefore, I accuse some hitherto unknown animal of these deaths.

"But what kind of an animal are we dealing with?" Weyl went on without paying any attention to an interruption from Duperret. "Evidently a very swift and formidable one. It killed Ferentini in a few seconds. It dragged a powerful Senegalese, who was provided with a rifle, off with equal swiftness," and the stabs of Dugasse were as futile against it as the rifle of the other black boy.

"In both cases, the attack came from above, and I am inclined to think, since we were attacked some distance off the coast and the natives some distance inland, that the animal possesses extraordinary mobility—probably wings.

This would make a bird of it; which is impossible because of the blood; therefore, making the whole thing absurd... But in any case, the hunt for this animal, or animals, for there may be more than one, will be a dangerous business."

"All is decided then?" asked Duperret. "Very well, let us depart. I am eager for action, my friend." And he stood up, stretching his muscular frame toward the towering tree.

"Done," said Weyl.

He rose. "You have some influence with the military authorities, you of the civil arm? If the matter were put to the commandant in the proper way, do you suppose we could get an escort? I need not conceal from you that this big-game hunt is likely to be a serious business. Any animal that devours live men..."

"The commandant and I were at St. Cyr together," replied Duperret. "He will doubtless appoint a lieutenant and a demi-company of African chasseurs to assist us."

CHAPTER III

A week later found them with a dapper French lieutenant, Dubosc by name, making the best of insufficient pup tents and canned French sausage by a dank, slow stream a few miles out of Fort Dauphin. Around them lay or squatted a

perspiring group of black soldiers in the uniform of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, while round them again, further from the sun of the white men's presence, were as many natives, equally sable of hue, and with no uniforms at all. These were the guides lent by Diouma-Mbobbo, silent and somewhat scared men, for that portion of the jungle had earned a bad reputation from the repeated disappearances.

Weyl was annoyed. "If we only knew what we were looking for and where to find it," he said to Duperret that evening, "but here we are three days out, with our labor for our pains. Hunting for one animal in this jungle is like the old needle and haystack saying."

"Yes, and I'm afraid for the guides," the Frenchman had answered. "They'll desert unless they are given something to do."

Night found them as restless as the guides. Weyl woke to a sense of something impending, looked out and saw only the calm sentries speaking in low tones as they encountered each other at the end of their rounds. He felt reassured, and dropped off into another hour or two of slumber punctuated by fierce dreams, woke again and saw a moonlit shadow on the flap of his tent. "Raoul!" he called softly.

The Frenchman bent and entered.

He was fully dressed.

"Nerves keep you awake, too?" said Weyl. "I've been awake before, but everything's quiet. But why are you

dressed?"

"I have a premonition. Also, I hear something unusual. You hear that strange whistling? No, you would not. You are not used to jungle noises. To me it is very much to notice. Something..." and he looked at his friend, who, though in a strictly unofficial manner, was recognized as commander of the expedition. "Shall we rouse the soldiers?" he questioned.

"They'll need sleep if we're to march all day," Weyl answered.

"But I am thinking we will not need to march. However —" Raoul was about to dismiss his feeling as a fancy and threw another glance over his shoulder through the open tent flap.

In an instant he was on his feet, almost tearing the tent from its pegs, a half cry escaping his lips that caused Weyl to leap up beside him, seizing the revolver that lay by his hand.

Three, four, half a dozen snakelike arms, mysterious in the moonlight, hovered for an instant, over the heads of two sentries who had met at the edge of the trees, and before they had comprehended their danger, before they could be warned, they were gripped, lifted from their feet and their cries stifled before they reached the gloom of the branches fully ten feet above.

Weyl, with a horror such as he had never felt before, seemed to clutch at his throat, fired rapidly into the tree. Something dropped with a crash of leaves; a veritable chorus

of whistlings and swishings rose around the camp, and in the tents and along the sentry line there were sudden lights and activity, shouts of "*Qui vive?*" "*Aux armes!*" and the thick note of a hastily blown bugle as its owner was roused from sleep.

Men ran from their tents to stand gazing. "Raoul!" shouted the American. "It's here! The machine gun!" and, pistol in hand, in his sleeping garments, he dashed for the tree.

He glanced up. A subdued rustling gave no clue to its source, nothing to shoot at, but out of the tail of his eye he caught a glimpse of motion among the giant ferns, and the peculiar whistling again became audible.

He turned, and was suddenly conscious of an insane disbelief in his senses. What he saw resembled nothing so much as an enormous umbrella, standing ten feet high on stiltlike, but prehensile arms, while at the point where they gathered, a huge, bulbous head rose and fell rhythmically as the thing emitted that singular, high-pitched whistle. There was something unspeakably loathsome, some touch reminiscent of putrefaction and decay about it.

An arm, like a huge snake, lifted from the ground and swung aimlessly about under the leaves. Abruptly, another animal, the duplicate of the first in all respects, came from behind a tree to join it, and the two, despite their clumsy form and lurching uneven movement, began to advance toward him with a rapidity that was astonishing.

Weyl awoke to the necessity of flight. He raced back toward the camp, where Lieutenant Dubosc, aroused by the shots and cries, and aware that something was impending, had formed the Senegalese in a rough, slanting angle of a line, the men facing the jungle, while behind them Diouma-Mbobo's natives crouched in frightened curiosity.

The American turned as he reached the line. Behind him, into the clearing, with an odd semblance of order, came a half-dozen, a dozen, twenty of those terrible umbrella-like shapes, moving deliberately, but covering the ground as fast as a man runs.

A shot was followed by an order, a bugle note, and the irritating crash of the volley, which shaded into the rattling drum of the machine guns. When his eyes again became used to the dark after the flame of the rifles, Weyl saw that the giant, shapeless beasts were moving forward as swiftly and imperturbably as before. Had all the shots missed?

Another volley collapsed into a frantic and spasmodic burst of firing, as no effect was visible on the hideous shapes that came on swiftly.

Weyl aimed his revolver carefully at one bobbing head, and the shot was drowned in a crashing chorus of fire; the beast came right on. He was dimly conscious of shooting again and again in a kind of frenzy at those horrible bulby umbrellas that kept coming closer, dim figures of horror in the green moonlight, huge and impregnable, towering over the little group of humans who shouted and cursed and fired impotently.

One man, half maddened, even ran forward, waving his bayonet, and was gathered gently up by two of those big arms as a child might be picked up by its parent.

A thrill of wavering ran down the line; one or two men threw away their rifles, when suddenly, right at their feet, one of the monsters collapsed. There was a chorus—of whistling and they moved backward, apparently without turning, as rapidly and silently as they had come...

A feeble cheer rose from the Senegalese, a cheer that was silenced instantly, for a glance revealed that half the hastily formed line was missing, the men gone as completely as though they had never been.

Weyl was aware that he had been clicking an empty pistol, that his throat was dry, that Duperret sat at his feet, his face in his hands, seemingly without power of motion. Senegalese and natives, frightened to the verge of madness, babbled like children all around him. The iron voice of Dubosc rose:

"Silence, my children!"

Out in the clearing before them was no sign that men had battled for their lives, save one ugly, loathsome shape, that sprawled on the ground and twitched feebly in the gloom.

CHAPTER IV

The survivors of that unbelievable, one-sided battle dragged themselves back into Fort Dauphin five days later. One man was violently insane, tightly bound, and as for the rest, it seemed that only remnants of sanity remained. The emotional blacks had almost collapsed under the strain, and nothing but incoherent gibberings could be extracted from them by the soldiers who cared for the exhausted, weaponless, starving and almost naked remainder of the trim company of Chasseurs who marched out with drum and bugle only a fortnight before.

Weyl begged off from an immediate report to the commandant, and went to bed, where he slept the sleep of exhaustion for twenty hours on end, and Duperret did likewise.

Weyl woke vastly refreshed, and with the horror that had been dragging at his mind relieved, though with such a feeling of weariness as he had not known since college football days. The black boy at the door obligingly brought him the latest newspapers, now not quite a month old, and he re-established his touch with the world of men by reading them over the tiny breakfast of coffee and rolls which was all the fort physician would allow him.

An item in one of them caught his eye, and caused him to sit up in his chair with a whoop of joy, that brought a scandalized glance from Major Larivet, the white-moustached old Alsatian who was in command of the fort, and a grin from Duperret, the first since that dreadful night of the attack.

The item, in bad French, was a translation from the bad English of a New York newspaper telling of Weyl's departure for Madagascar. It was filled with the exalted pseudo-science of which newspapers are fond and contained much ingeniously sketchy biographical and geographical data, but its appeal was obvious.

The American leaned forward over the cups.

"Does your fort boast a typist?" he asked. "Lieutenant Dubosc has probably already told you of the terrible experience we have had. I am anxious to make my report on it through the newspapers."

"Monsieur," said Major Larivet, gravely, "he died an hour ago by my side. I know nothing but that I have lost many men from my command."

"So..." said Weyl, "All the more reason I should make my report in writing. I need not conceal from you the fact that we are facing a danger which threatens not merely Fort Dauphin and Madagascar, but the entire world."

There was incredulity on the major's face, but he replied courteously, "My means are entirely at your service, gentlemen."

Beginning his report with scientific exactitude, Weyl included Duperré's letter, noted the sudden midnight attack on the steamer and went on to the details of the expedition:

"... For hours after the attack," he wrote, "we were unable to get anything like control out of the chaos in the camp. I

think another attack of these unspeakably loathsome 'Umbrella Beasts' would have brought complete panic; certainly hardly any rifles but Duperret's and my own would have met them.

"We could not hope to escape by an immediate dash for the fort, though it was less than thirty hours' march away. The beasts seemed, to be on every side, and they would have every advantage in that jungle, where we would have been instantly swept into the trees by their swinging tentacles.

"Fortunately, these hideous monsters appeared to have gathered their fill of human food for the time being, and meanwhile the idea of fire occurred to us. All the wood we could gather without too closely approaching the trees was collected and heaped in piles about five feet apart in a complete circle. These were set alight, and we huddled in the center of the blazing ring, almost roasted by the heat, but feeling infinitely safer. With the coming of day, the heat was almost intolerable, but we gained confidence as it became apparent that the beasts would not dare the fire, though we could hear them whistling in the trees.

"Our situation was bad. The supply of wood was not inexhaustible, and that of water was already used up. I am convinced that these beasts are possessed of a comparatively high intelligence. The manner of their attack, the character of the one killed in the battle, led to this conclusion; and they were evidently deliberately laying siege to us with the intention of starving us out of our refuge.

"Our rifles were useless, and to make a sudden dash through the lines would certainly involve the sacrifice of most of those present—perhaps all. So we sat down to plan a way out. Obviously, we had to find a means to make ourselves immune to their attacks.

"I thought I had it when I remembered that no barbarian, beast or insect, would tolerate castor oil. Desperate as was our situation, the idea of escaping a deadly and horrible death by means of that homely remedy made me want to laugh hysterically. I remember Duperret watching me trying to smother the urge, looking queerly at me, quite obviously doubtful of my mental balance. His speculative and startled glance added to the absurdity of the thing, and I almost lost my self-control. I realized we were all on the edge of madness.

"The idea had, of course, to be discarded. We had castor oil among our medical supplies, but barely enough to discourage the insects of the tropical jungle; certainly not enough to smear ourselves from head to foot to keep off those giant monstrosities menacing us from all sides.

"The solution we hit upon finally may not have been the best, but it was simple, and like many another, did not occur to us till we were ready to give up in despair. Duperret, Dubosc and I had spent the entire first day of our siege discussing and rejecting ways and means, and we had just about decided that the only thing to do was to make a concerted dash into the jungle, firing into the trees, and trusting to luck and mobility to carry us through, when the

lieutenant startled us with a sudden leap, and shouted something wild, something we did not understand.

"We feared for his sanity as mutely we watched him dashing about furiously from spot to spot in the clearing, tearing up handful after handful of liana grass and throwing them on the fire.

"When, however, a dense cloud of thick, choking, black smoke rolled up, and when Dubosc turned to us with a triumphant light in his face, we understood dimly what his idea was, and in a frenzy of relief several of us danced foolishly in a circle about the fire and its column of smoke.

"In a council that followed, we decided that our attempt to escape had better be made during the day, since we had all noticed that there was less activity among our besiegers during the hours when the heat was most intense. We kept our fires burning, then, throughout the night until dawn. Nobody slept; we were too apprehensive, and too busy improvising torches for our protection during the march. The beasts, evidently fearful of the fire, remained in their trees all that night, and though they continued to whistle about us (this seems their sole mode of communication) there seemed to be less whistling from the side to which our smoke drifted. This assured us that our lieutenant's plan would work.

"At dawn, bearing our smoking flambeaux, we set out. Arms and equipment were useless; they were discarded. To prevent the panic that appeared imminent among the men, Dubosc threatened to shoot down any man who left the

formation, and to insure obedience, only Duperret, he and myself were allowed to retain revolvers.

"As we neared the trees, there was crowding among the men, but a few sharp words brought them to their senses. We halted just at the edge of the clearing, and Duperret and I leading the shivering company, threw our branches down under the trees and piled more wood on to make a little blaze. There was a discernible commotion in the foliage above us, but we could see nothing. When the noises subsided, we ventured in a hundred yards or so, and built another fire.

"This scheme was resorted to at intervals all along our march. Progress was necessarily slow. At some dark spots, where the jungle was thick, it was necessary to proceed in narrow files, and these were the most dangerous, not only because of the 'Umbrella Beasts' but also because of the fright and impatience of the men.

"It was in one of these places that a casualty occurred. One of the chasseurs suddenly broke from the line and ran, shouting madly, to wave his torch at a vinous growth hanging from a tree, which he must have taken for a tentacle of one of the beasts. He stumbled, his torch flying from his hand as he fell. His danger then evidently deprived him of what senses he had remaining, for, regaining his feet, he ran, not back into the line but deeper into the jungle. We heard a strangled cry in a few moments. That was all. None of us dared to leave the company to bring him back.

"Another time, a man went raving mad, and made a violent attack on Dubosc. Before he could be caught, he stabbed that brave man twice in the breast.

"Now, as to the animals which attacked us. I had one before me for some sixty hours, though with little opportunity to examine and none at all to dissect it. My observations, though somewhat scanty, lead me to the conclusion that we are dealing with a hitherto unknown member of the great mollusk family. The family includes the octopus and oyster, neither with red blood, and it was the nearly colorless fluid that puzzled me about the blood of the beast that attacked the ship.

"The beast that was killed at the camp had a larger body than any known member of the family, and tentacles at least fifteen feet in length and correspondingly powerful. A protective covering of chitin appears to have been developed, and due to the lack of any internal skeleton and the fact that the muscles must base on it, this protective covering to its body is of a thickness and strength sufficient to be quite impervious to rifle bullets. The one we killed had received a bullet full in the eye, which passed through into its brain.

"It is this brain that offers the most remarkable feature of these creatures. A brief investigation shows me that their brains are certainly larger than those of any animals except the big apes, and probably as large as those of the lower races of man. This argues an intelligence extremely high, and makes them more than ever dangerous, since they can evidently plan acts and execute them in concert.

"They have eight tentacular arms, covered on the lower side with the usual cephalopod type of suckers, the center of each sucker being occupied, as in some species of octopus, by a small, sharp claw. The thickness, and therefore the muscular strength of these arms, is enormous. It is no wonder men proved utterly powerless against them.

"I am unable to say anything about either their method of breeding or what device they have arrived at for breathing air; probably some protective covering keeps the gill-plumes moist, as in the crayfish, making access to water at times necessary.

"In the face are two very large eyes, capable of seeing well in the dark and located directly in front of the large brain. The mouth consists of a huge beak, razor-edged. There are no teeth. Add this formidable beak to their extraordinary powers of swimming, their swift progress on land, their giant strength and their great intelligence, and it becomes evident that the human race is faced with a great peril.

"There is nothing whatever to prevent these animals from swimming the ocean or attacking the greatest city. One of these beasts could kill a hundred people in an hour and hardly any weapon we possess would be of the slightest use..."

As he wrote, Weyl's mind was again filled with the terror of that mad march through the jungle with the "Umbrella Beasts" whistling on every side, and his imagination shuddered at the picture of London or New York under an invasion from those grim Madagascar jungles; all business

stopped, every door barred, the octopuses triumphantly parading the streets, breaking in here and there and strangling the last resistance of families cowering in corners, powerless against the invulnerable and irresistible animals. Here and there some squad armed with dynamite or some other weapon more powerful than rifles, would offer a brief resistance, but they too would go down in time. Civilization throttled, and in its place a ghastly reign of animalism....

CHAPTER V

Major Larivet was inclined to skepticism over Weyl's report. In a brusque, but kindly way, he had suggested that it be delayed, "... till you have had time to think it over. Perhaps, when the effect of your experience has—ah—worn off—"

Weyl gazed at him in astonishment at this suggestion, but he was to remember it forty days later.

Meanwhile, there was nothing to do but wait till the report reached the outer world, and some echo of it in the form of men, aeroplanes, scientists with their instruments and death dealing concoctions arrived to wipe out that terrible blot. And during the waiting, even Major Larivet's skepticism vanished under the pressure of events.

The octopuses, as Weyl called them, had confined their raids to isolated districts up to the time of his expedition, but now, acting apparently upon a well-formed plan, they became bolder and began a systematic extermination of every native in this part of the island.

Three days after the return of the expedition, a native runner dashed in half-crazed with fright to report a twilight raid on a whole village, from which hardly a soul escaped. As the days drew on, this ominous news was followed by such demonstrations of the power and intelligence of the octopuses as confirmed Weyl's darkest fears.

A village on the coast was attacked, and the natives, taking to their clumsy boats to escape the terror by land, found themselves no less helpless on the water, the only news of the dreadful event coming from some native who had gone there and found only a circle of empty huts.

Alarm of panic proportions spread like wildfire among the Malagasy, and in a stream that became a torrent they poured into Fort Dauphin for protection.

Daily the reports of depredations showed that the octopus terror was spreading and coming nearer, and Major Larivet found himself faced with the problem of feeding several hundred hungry and frightened natives with means wholly inadequate.

The climax came with the arrival of four men, or rather, shadows of men, who babbled that they were the last of the great tribe of the Tanósy. Fighters to the core, instead of

flying, they had stood out in battle array against their antagonists. The result had been unspeakably horrible—they had seen their comrades torn to pieces before their eyes, and the women and children hunted down.

It was while things were in this state that the little tin-pot mail boat arrived with its cargo of supplies and European newspapers.

Weyl's heart rose as he marched off to his quarters eagerly with the papers under his arm, but it sank like lead when he and Duperret opened journal after journal, in quick, disappointed perusals.

Not one, they perceived, took the matter seriously. Weyl's phrase, "Umbrella Beasts," had been seized upon by humorous commentators with gusto, rolled on their tongues and spun off their pens to tickle the ribs of readers. Of serious acceptance there was not a sign. The general tone of the papers was one of howling derision. It was suggested that Weyl had gone crazy. that he was a publicity-mad mountebank. But the more usual spirit of the papers was that of the French wit who blared: "Weyl's Umbrella Beasts; Inseparable companions for that rainy-day walk. No one acquainted with the dictates of fashion can afford to dispense with this novel combination of household pet and Protective Implement!"

And the cartoons...!

Weyl looked up from the papers to meet Duperret's glance. There were actual tears in the Frenchman's eyes.

"It seems to be up to us," said Weyl, after a moment. "Well—I am not a rich man, as it is reckoned in America, but I can command a considerable amount of money, and can borrow more. I will write a cablegram to be sent off immediately, and have every cent spent for materials to fight this thing."

Together they composed the carefully worded message to Weyl's assistant in the laboratory in New York, and together they took it to the dock and delivered it to the captain of the boat with the most urgent instructions to send it the moment he arrived at Andovorambo.

CHAPTER VI

Not long after daybreak the American was roused from his sleep by a confused shouting under the window. Hurrying into his clothes, he dashed out to see the little mail boat wallowing crazily off the jagged rocks that guarded the entrance to the harbor, her funnels silent and smokeless. Within ten minutes she was right among the breakers, pounding in the surf, but there was no sign of officers, crew, or lifeboats.

It was late in the afternoon before he could secure a native dhow to get out to the wreck. When he stepped on the slanting deck of the wrecked boat, Weyl found what he had feared. There was no one on board—only a blood-stain here and there.

Every man in the settlement was quite capable of visualizing what had happened. Writhing, black-grey tentacles reaching up out of the midnight sea, the swarming of hideous bodies over the ship, relentless groping arms searching out the screaming seamen, the fatally prehensive embrace of repulsive flesh...

That very night Fort Dauphin received notice that it was under close siege. A mile out on the northeast beach two natives were taken by an octopus that came unexpectedly out of the water on them, and on the opposite side of town a soldier was pursued along the sand right up to the walls of the fort. Later the report ran in that one of the sentinels on the west side had disappeared.

But neither Weyl nor Major Larivet was quite prepared for the bold attack on the fort two days later.

Twilight was just blueing the edges of the jungle a quarter mile from the bastions of the fort, and the three white men were smoking gloomily over their coffee, when a shot and a shout from the sentry brought them to their feet.

They hastened to the bastion. Out of the jungle in the same regular, military order they had preserved on that fatal night of the first attack, came the octopuses, huge ugly heads bobbing above, undulating tentacles below.

Larivet, with a gleam in his eyes at being at last able to come to grips with the enemy, snapped sharp orders as the artillerymen swung the two "seventy-fives" into position. Duperret and Weyl watched breathlessly, heedless of the wild

cries of alarm that issued from the natives who had seen the octopuses.

The mouth of the gun swung down slowly. An order. Brief motions, the crash of the discharge, and right in the center of the advancing line a terrific burst of flame and dust.

An octopus staggered, stumbled with wildly flailing arms and flopped inertly to the ground.

Crash! The bright flames from the two guns mingled, and in the flare of the explosions three more of the monsters went to oblivion. They were not invulnerable, then! There was a ray of hope!

Weyl found himself cheering frantically. He felt a pressure at his shoulder and saw a couple of natives beside him, their courage revived. The black artillerymen worked like mad. They could not miss at that point-blank range.

All down the octopus line were gaps, and the wounded beasts strove to right themselves. They wavered, broke, and in disorderly flight headed back into the jungle, pursued by the avenging shells of the seventy-fives till they had passed from sight.

The natives were crowding about, shouting with emotion and hurling epithets after the retreating monsters. They were saved—at least for the time being.

But the conference of the three white men that night was grave.

"We have not really accomplished very much," said Weyl, "except to show them that we have weapons against which they are not invulnerable. I don't think they will attempt to rush the fort again, but they are terribly intelligent. They may try a surprise attack at night or from the sea, or may even give us a regular starvation siege."

"No, they will not soon approach your guns again," agreed Duperret, "but what are we to do if they attack the town from the other side. The fort surely cannot hold all the people you have here."

"Gentlemen," said Larivet gravely, "in that case we can only do our duty. I shall have one of the guns moved to the other side of town. Meanwhile we can do nothing but wait till someone comes to help us."

"Or until we go to them," from Weyl.

Duperret paled slightly, and stood up. "I offer myself as a messenger," he said. "I will take a dhow out. If I am attacked, well, I know where to shoot them—in the eyes. I—"

"No, Raoul, no," said Weyl, "let me try it. It would be simply—"

He was interrupted. A native servant entered excitedly.

"Him one piece boat in town," said the black. "White man comes."

"Boat? White man?" queried Larivet, puzzled. A cheery voice in the doorway answered him, "I say, is anybody

here?" it said, and in marched an extraordinary figure of a man.

A large sign saying "Englishman" could not have stamped his race more effectively than his expression of cheerful vapidness. His clothes were white, scrupulously clean, and meticulously pressed, and in one hand he bore what looked like a small fire-extinguisher. He extended the other toward Weyl.

"You're Weyl, aren't you?" he said. "Mulgrave's my name; Henry Seaton Mulgrave. Earl of Mulgrave and Pembroke, and all that rot. At your service."

"Of course I remember," said Weyl cordially. "You gave that extraordinary paper on the Myxinidae before the British Association. Ah, that paper! Allow me," he said, and translated into rapid French for the benefit of Larivet, "to present the Earl of Mulgrave, one of the most distinguished of living scientists."

There were bows, a drink offered and accepted, and the visitor, carefully placing his fire-extinguisher in the corner, curled his lanky frame up in a chair.

CHAPTER VII

"Seriously, though, y'know," Mulgrave said after finishing his whisky and soda, "if it hadn't been that I was a bit in the doldrums at the time your report came out, I believe I would have joined the rest of the world in thinking you somewhat—er—balmy, despite your excellent reputation. But I needed a cruise anyway, and came on the chance there was something in it; sort of a sporting venture, d'y'see? It did seem quite a bally cooked-up sort of mess, the way those journals played it up, y'know."

Weyl's nod of understanding was followed by an inquiring look at the queer contrivance the Englishman had placed in the corner.

"Flammenwerfer," Mulgrave answered the silent query. "Germans used 'em in the war. Superior bit of frightfulness. Shoots out fire. And really quite effective, even against your bally octopuses, I assure you."

"But," Weyl exclaimed, "you can't possibly—"

"Oh, yes, I have." Mulgrave smiled. "The ruddy animals hadn't the decency to wait for a proper introduction, and paid us a visit on the Morgana—my yacht, y'know—just outside the harbor. I fancy when we got through with them they were rather scorched. Morgana was war-built, and has steel decks, so we didn't mind putting the Flammenwerfer to work against them. We've got what's left of one stretched out on the deck. Others got away."

Weyl breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness that this casual Englishman had come prepared. How easily the mail

boat disaster might have been duplicated! He shuddered.

"Well then, part of our horrible problem seems to be solved, thanks to your foresight, Mulgrave. At least we have a means of wiping them out. But here's the difficulty. It will take years, killing them off one by one, as we'll have to do with your pump gun. I tell you, they infest the whole island, thousands of 'em. They're increasing and multiplying faster than we could possibly kill them off. That's the only way I can explain this recent outbreak. They were few enough in number, before this, to remain in obscurity except in isolated districts, and known only to ignorant and superstitious natives." Weyl's forehead creased in perplexity and worry. "If they keep on—well, they'll need the whole globe. And that means only one thing; man will have to get off it to make room for them. They're powerful enough, and intelligent enough, to have their own way about it, too. Don't doubt it. Unless—"

Mulgrave evidently did not share Weyl's anxiety, though he did not seem to underestimate the danger. "I'll finish that last sentence of yours, Weyl, although I'll admit things are a bit worse than I had thought. But meanwhile, let's look over our resources, and try to find out a bit more about the nature of the beast we're up against. The post-mortem of that lamentably deceased visitor on the Morgana's deck ought to tell us something of his weak points. Do you want to go out there now?"

With chairs tilted back against the cabin of the Morgana, the three men regarded the sundown sky in a moody and depressed silence. Their dissection of the octopus killed by

Mulgrave's pump-gun had added little to their knowledge of the anatomy of the menacing brutes, save a confirmation of Weyl's hypothesis that their breathing, while on land, was conducted by means of the same gills which supplied them with oxygen in the water, protected, like the lobster's, by a covering of chitin.

Mulgrave's chair scraped on the deck. "Well, let's get back ashore," he said. "Can't do any more now I fancy, unless they decide to stage a party for us this evening."

"It comes down to this, then," said Weyl, continuing the conversation which had been abandoned with the end of their anatomical researches. "Fire, or some kind of guns heavier than the ordinary service rifle, are the only things that will do any particular good."

"Have you thought of gas, my friend?" asked Duperret.

"Huh," answered Weyl shortly. "Airplanes? Chemicals? And what about all the men on the island—for we should have to cover it all with gas to be of any use."

"The time is rather short, too, I fancy," chirped Mulgrave. "How long will provisions last?"

"Not long," agreed Duperret, moodily. "A week, or perhaps a little more."

"Then, within seven days, or at the most ten, we must concoct a plan and put it into force—a plan that will wipe out God knows how many of these unearthly enemies of the earth. It must be extermination, too, for if one pair were left

to breed... I'm more than half convinced that the thing is hopeless. Yet I don't like to show the white flag. These are, after all, only beasts. Super-beasts, it is true, but the equals and heirs of man? I hate to believe it."

"But, my friend, you forget the force of mere numbers," said Duperret. "So many rats could easily overpower us, guns and all, from mere lack of time to kill them as fast as they came on. Comparative values, as of man and beast, are insignificant."

Weyl nodded a pessimistic agreement.

"There's only one chance," he said. "If we could find some way to attack them in the water—they must go there to breed at least, and I fancy they must make periodic visits to the water to wet their gill plumes in addition."

CHAPTER VIII

It was three days later.

Another octopus attack on the little fort had met with a bloody repulse, and a score of the great bodies lay at the edge of the jungle in varying stages of decomposition, where they had been blown to extinction by the swift shells of the seventy-fives. A conference was in progress on Major Larivet's verandah; a conference of beaten men.

"As a last resort," Duperret was saying, "there is the open sea and Mulgrave's yacht."

"Why, as for that," Weyl answered, "it wouldn't hold a tenth of us, even crowded to the rails. Besides, leave those natives behind? Damn it, they trust us."

"It would hardly be cricket," said Mulgrave. "What of the mail steamer? Aren't they apt to send someone to look us up when she does not appear?"

"Not even yet is the boat due at Andovoranto," said Major Larivet, "and there is the time for the news to reach Andananarivo... The lack of news to them will be but a token that we have pacified the Tanósy and are in need of nothing."

"Yes," Duperret agreed, "I know these officials. They are aware of something unusual only when they have seventeen dossiers, each neatly tied in red tape and endorsed by the proper department head. My friends, we are alone."

"Which means," Weyl continued, "that we have about a week more to live before the food runs out or they overwhelm us. And then—good-by world of men!"

There was a little silence, broken only by the sound of Mulgrave puffing at his pipe. It was ended by a shot and a shout from one of the sentries at the western side of the fort: the signal of another attack.

During that night the great octopuses twice fought their way down to the fort, and twice were repulsed, though the second effort, longer and more violently sustained than the

first, only ended when Mulgrave, called in the crew of his yacht and their flammenwerfer.

As the following day drew on, the unrest in the jungle about the army post became more pronounced. Major Larivet, Duperret, and Weyl, worn with lack of sleep, kept vigil by the little counterscarp, listening to the innumerable whistlings and rustlings so near to them, while the soldiers and natives, visibly shaken, were difficult to keep in line.

When evening came, it seemed as though the octopuses had concentrated their forces for a great drive. The whistlings had increased to such a volume that sleep was nearly impossible, and as soon as the sun went down, the movements of dark forms could be observed where the animals were silhouetted against the sky along the beach.

The first attack came half an hour later. It was a sporadic outburst, apparently, consisting of only three or four individuals, and these were quickly dispersed or slain by a few bursts from the seventy-fives. But it was followed by another, and another, the numbers of the attackers ranging all the way from three to fifteen or twenty. Unlike the previous attempts on the fort they were frenzied and unorganized as though the directing intelligence behind them had suddenly failed. Immune to fear, the living octopuses came right on, through the hail of fire and died at the foot of the rampart, or dashed over it even, to be wounded to death by bayonets fixed on long poles with which the black soldiers reached and stabbed frenziedly at eyes and softer parts.

Once, during a lull in the combat, the commandant and Weyl were called to witness a monstrous duel, at the very edge of the fort between two of the hideous beasts. The ungainly creatures locked in each others' tentacles, rolled hideously together, tearing at each other with their great beaks, till a Senegalese reached over with one of those improvised bayonet pikes and dealt first one and then the other mortal stabs. Weyl felt a singular sensation of nausea.

Toward dawn it became evident to the exhausted artillerymen and their wearied leaders that the octopuses were now aiming not so much at conquest, as at escape. They no longer blundered into the fires that had been built about the fort and village; no longer hurled themselves upon Mulgrave's crew of flame-throwers and the shells of the seventy-fives. They seemed to be heading for the beach, to be striving to reach the water.

And when dawn broke, the men in the enclosure saw a few stragglers from the hideous army at the edge of the jungle, making their way, like the others, with ungainly flappings and swishings, always toward the beach. It was impossible to watch them without feeling an almost physical sensation of illness, of sinking. But what did it mean? No one among the harassed defenders of Fort Dauphin was prepared to say.

CHAPTER IX

Mulgrave's wearied crew had gone aboard their ship, and the white men, refreshed by a few hours' sleep and a bath, were discussing the question. "I am of the opinion," Weyl was declaring, "that they have certain periods when they must wet their gill-plumes again, and last night's disturbance represents one of those periods. If we could only attack them at such a time—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of an excited Senagalese, who addressed Major Larivet:

"The boat she is smoke. She go."

"How?" "What?" cried the four, leaping to their feet and starting down the road in the direction of the pier.

It was too true. The Morgana, out beyond the reef line, was marked by a tiny plume of smoke from her funnel, and as they gazed, she seemed to move a bit.

"Quick!" shouted Weyl, "let's push off a dhow."

Followed by the Englishman, and at a longer distance by Duperret, he raced for the pier and leaped into the little craft. "Grab a sweep," he called to Larivet.

Propelled by sail and oar, the little craft began to swing out from the pier, and then catching the land breeze in its full strength, heeled over. Duperret drew in his sweep, useless at that speed. He shaded his eyes and looked toward the Morgana. Suddenly he turned with a short bitter laugh.

"Look," he said, pointing. A few hundred yards ahead of the dhow, Weyl and Mulgrave saw a globular grey shape among the waves. From it, lying flush with the water, radiated—tentacles. Weyl put the tiller over to avoid it, and as the craft swung saw another, and then another. It was the end.

But even as he prepared to wear the little ship round and run back for the pier, if indeed they could make that temporary safety, they saw out beyond the loathsome globular head and spreading arms a triangular fin-shape that cut the water with hardly a ripple.

It was charging straight at the octopus, and as they watched, there was a swift turmoil in the water, the flash of a sleek, wet, black body, a vision of dazzling teeth, and the globular head of the octopus disappeared into a boil of water from which rose two tentacles, waving vainly. Off to the right, another of those knife-like fins was coming, followed by more—a half-dozen, a dozen, a score; and suddenly around each of them there gathered the whirl and flush of a combat.

The dhow drew ahead, right toward the center of one of those tumultuous whirlpools. Out of it dissolved an octopus that was only half an octopus, its tentacles torn and a huge gash across that inhuman parody of a face—an octopus that was striving vainly to escape from a flashing fate that ran behind it.

Weyl shouted—Duperret began to weep; the unaffected tears of joy of the emotional Frenchman and Mulgrave,

stirred from his imperturbability, was shouting, "Killer whales!" to an audience that had eyes and ears only for the savage battles all about them.

Everywhere, they could see through the clear tropical water that the killers, stronger and swifter, if less intelligent, were the victors. The octopuses, routed, were trying to get away—as vainly as the natives had tried to escape from them.

"Let the bally yacht go," shouted Mulgrave to Weyl. "I want to enjoy this."

For fifteen, twenty minutes, they watched, until they saw the vanishing fin of a killer moving off to northward, signal that that part of the battle was over, and that the killers were departing for new fields of triumph. Three men, with hearts lighter than they had known them for weeks, manoeuvred the boat back to the pier.

CHAPTER X

"They seem to be gone, sure enough," said Weyl, tossing down on the table a brace of the native pheasants. It was only two days later, but he had returned from a four hours' trip into the jungle.

"I didn't even come across the traces of a single one of them—unless you can call a trace the fact that they seem to have cleaned out about all the animals in this district. Even the monkeys are gone."

"Do you think they will come back?" asked Major Larivet.

"I am sure they will not," said Weyl. "There seem to be perfect shoals of killer whales off the coast, attracted no doubt by the octopuses, which are their favorite food. You may be sure they would hunt down every one, as the killers are very voracious."

"But what made them appear in the first place?"

"God knows. It is, or was, since they are now gone, some phenomenon allied to that which produces the lemming migration every twenty-eight years. You, Mulgrave, are a biologist. You know how, once in twenty-eight years, these little rat-like animals breed in such numbers that they overrun whole districts, and then migrate into the ocean where they are drowned by the thousand.

"These octopuses would have plenty of opportunity to develop their extraordinary size and intelligence, as well as their quality of breathing air by life in the shallow, deserted lagoons all around Madagascar, and if they were actuated by a life-cycle similar to that of the lemmings, they would breed in the vast numbers which we saw. It seems the only logical hypothesis.

"In any case, there is nothing for the rest of the world to fear. A sort of wireless telegraphy seems to exist among animals with regard to neighborhoods where food can be obtained in quantities, and just as you will see the condors of the Andes flock to where food is, the killer whales gathered around this visitation of giant cuttle fish.

"It is one of Nature's numerous provisions to right the balance of things on the earth when they threaten to get out of joint in any direction. If any other enemy of man were to multiply as these octopuses did, you may be sure he would find an animal ally.

"We were merely panic-stricken and foolish to think we could accomplish anything. We should have waited."

"And now, my friend," said Duperret, "I suppose I must bid you farewell."

"Yes. I am anxious to get back to my monograph on the Ammonites of the Upper Cretaceous. It will astonish the scientific world, I think."

THE END

[The end of *The Octopus Cycle* by Fletcher Pratt]