

NATURE RAMBLINGS

By Frank Thone



The Tastes of an Octopus

That "there is no accounting for tastes" is one of the most ancient of proverbs. If tastes are difficult to account for in the familiar human sphere, they are simply beyond comprehension in the weird world of the waters. There tastes and smells come to the inhabitants through the same medium, and are indistinguishable one from the other.

So, at least, a noted German naturalist found some time ago, when he was experimenting with the taste-smell sense of the octopus. The creature showed no differentiation between the two senses, and reacted in only two ways, according to whether it liked or disliked the "taste-odor" which the scientist introduced into its tank. It tried to capture the agreeable ones, like fish juice, and it tried to get away from the ones it did not like or could not understand.

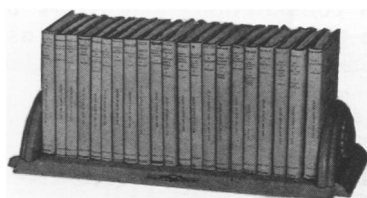
Curiously enough, the octopus seems to taste (or smell) with its arms. The experimenter killed an octopus, cut off its arms, and dropped fish-juice into the water. Instantly the severed limbs writhed toward the attractive taste-odor.

The chemical sense of the octopus is very acute, the experiments showed, especially toward strange or disagreeable taste-odors. Musk seems to be a particular aversion of the octopus (is one of its enemies musk-scented?), for it tries to escape from traces so minute that they cannot be measured by the methods of chemical analysis. It will endure a measurable concentration of quinine, about five thousandths of one per cent. Acetic acid, the essential part of vinegar, will make it move at a concentration about five times that great, but the much stronger hydrochloric acid does not affect the many-armed mollusc at any strength under one hundredth of a per cent.

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