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Stairway to the Stars

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Yes, Earth may be a sort of fenced-off area,
so far as other intelligent races of the
galaxy are concerned. But not for the
grandiose reasons that some have imagined....

[Illustration]

STAIRWAY TO THE STARS

By Larry Shaw

It was a stairway leading down, but it also led out into
space—indirectly. And the situation had the aspects of a
burlesque on Grand Hotel, but....

John Andrew Farmer scowled at the octopus that sprawled on his living-room couch, rubbed his stubbly jaw with a stubby fist, and said, "I love you."

Farmer was uncomfortable. He was almost always uncomfortable, for various reasons; though it rarely if ever occurred to him, as he considered each individual irritant, that this was his normal state of existence. Right now he was acutely conscious of how ridiculous it must look for him to be making love to an octopus, but he was even more conscious of the very real pains of unrequited love.

It wasn't even a respectable, ordinary-looking octopus. To be accurate, it would have to be called a nonapus; each of the nine tentacles had a lobsterish claw at its tip, and there were various other

unusual appendages. It would be hard enough to explain an earthly octopus in his living-room if the necessity arose, Farmer reflected for the teenteenth time—but how in the name of Neptune could he ever explain *this*?

It had all started with Judge Ray. Ray had not been a real judge, obviously, but had used the title in lieu of any other first name. That was the first of the inexplicable things; Farmer would have expected the odd little old man to call himself a professor of something or other. But Ray insisted on Judge.

Ray had come to the office of the *Stein, Fine, Bryans Publishing Co.*, where Farmer was working as an assistant editor, and announced that he was about to write the greatest book of the age. And yes, he wanted an advance against royalties—it didn't have to be large; Ray lived simply—to tide him over while doing the actual writing, which shouldn't take more than a very few weeks.

Now, Farmer wasn't much of an editor, even as editors go. The one useful quality he had was a homespun, ingratiating air which put nervous young geniuses at their ease, so that they could give a reasonably coherent verbal picture of what their books were about. This often saved Stein, Fine & Bryans a lot of reading of unpublishable manuscripts. At least, that had been the theory when they gave Farmer the job; as it worked out, John Andrew was a person who found it virtually impossible to say “no”; he generally took the manuscripts in hand and, when he couldn't stick some other member of the firm with the task, read them himself until the wee hours.

Farmer was not able to say no to Ray, but even he looked dubious at the small gray fellow's voluble outpouring of pseudo-scientific jargon. Ray, made sensitive by years of open skepticism on the part of many listeners, caught the look and insisted on a demonstration of his fabulous invention.

So the oddly assorted pair—quick, foxlike little Ray and big, awkward, uncomfortable Farmer—sputtered out into Long Island Sound in an indescribable old motor launch, and the adventure was on.

* * * * *

Finally Ray shut off the racketing engine and let out the rusty anchor. He opened a large wooden case, which showed evidence of some really good cabinet-work, and took out a peculiar machine, which showed evidence of unarguably excellent machining. These details were the first things that made Farmer think Ray might not be a complete crackpot, after all. If he hadn't been feeling just the slightest touch of seasickness, John Andrew would have breathed a sigh of relief.

Ray polished off the somewhat rabbit-from-hatty routine by bringing out a portable television set, connecting it to the boat's electrical generator, and stringing an assortment of wires between it and his invention. He would not allow Farmer very close to the latter, but to the editor's untechnical eye it looked like a fairly ordinary radio set, with more than enough dials and switches added to it to furnish the dashboards of several Rolls Royces.

Ray held up a hand—purely for drama, since there was silence already. “This is a great moment in the course of human history,” he said. “You are about to witness the first demonstration of Ray's Ray, the work of genius which will allow mankind his first really close contact with the last remaining frontier on his home planet—the bottom of the sea!”

Farmer looked impressed, then began to realize what some of this meant. He caught himself, straightened out his face, and licked his lips. “You mean you've never tried the thing before?” he protested. “How do you know it will work?”

Ray's glance took on a touch of icy fury. The launch rocked gently in the swell for a long, silent minute, and Farmer began to feel slightly afraid. Was he alone, in a spot like this, with a madman? The salty breeze turned colder.

Then Ray smiled—a smile that was surprisingly soft and sweet. John Andrew reached two

decisions: that he was safe, and that he liked the "Judge." (One of Farmer's weaknesses, in fact, was that—though thoroughly masculine himself—he completely distrusted women, and was too trusting with men.)

"I could go into theories and scientific details," Ray said; "I could explain principles of operation and the construction of the machine for hours. But you would be bored, and wouldn't understand anyway. It is sufficient to say that the Ray will work because—I invented it!"

Farmer caught himself nodding, and blamed the boat's motion. He shifted uneasily on the built-in seat, and got a splinter in a vital spot. He frowned.

Ray was bending over his machine, making motions designed to impress as well as to make it work. "In very simple terms," he was saying, "this is a combination of color television and super-radar. It will bring in a perfect color picture of the ocean at whatever depth I set it for, or will set itself automatically to present a view of the ocean floor. It will...."

His voice trailed off. The machine hissed, snapped, and crackled. The television set flickered, hummed, gave out a flashing dance of surrealistic doodles, and abruptly presented a picture. It was a picture of Milton Berle.

Ray looked mad, started to aim a kick at the screen but thought better of it. A small wave almost made him sit down on the deck before he got both feet planted again. He swore and started to check the wiring.

"Maybe there's something wrong inside the dingus itself," John Andrew suggested tentatively.

Ray turned on him with a look that would have seared the Sphinx. "There's *nothing* wrong with the machine!" he said, almost-but-not-quite shouting. "There's *nothing* wrong with the television! There's *nothing* wrong with the wiring! There *must* be something wrong at the other end—where the Ray is focussed! And I intend to find out!"

Farmer pondered the idea of a transmitter that worked under water like a ball-point pen, broadcasting weary vaudeville routines. He scratched his head and looked wistfully at the New England shoreline—or was that Long Island? He wasn't sure any more....

* * * * *

A clank and clatter brought his attention to the launch. He gawked; Ray had thrown back a deck hatch and produced a diving suit which looked as un-shipshape as the rest of the boat's equipment.

Ray looked it over hastily, then turned a speculative glance on Farmer. He shook his head. "Too small for you," he murmured. "You wouldn't know what to look for anyway; I'll have to go down myself."

Farmer changed his mind again about Ray's being cracked. "Listen." He said the first thing that came to mind. "Didn't you say you rented this boat for the first time today? How do you know that thing doesn't leak?"

Ray smiled again, as he climbed briskly into the suit. "I'll be all right," he said serenely. "You just keep an eye on things here—but don't touch anything. I'll be right back...." He settled the helmet on his head, motioned for Farmer to help him check the connections of the suit's self-contained oxygen supply.

John Andrew was straightening up from doing this when he saw the nonapus for the first time. It was climbing over the rail at the stern, and already beginning to make a puddle on the deck. Farmer froze, and gulped wordlessly.

Behind the barred faceplate, Ray looked puzzled, then annoyed. From the corner of his eye, Farmer could see Milton Berle still cavorting silently on the television screen, and this seemed to add the final touch of insanity to the scene. Farmer finally succeeded in pointing, and Ray clumped slowly

in a half-circle, just as the nonapus dropped to the deck with a plank-shivering thump.

The scene assumed some of the aspects of a bad movie comedy. The background was an out-of-focus blur, although Farmer was dimly conscious of motion in it somewhere—something else breaking the surface of the water as it emerged. In the foreground, the boat and its occupants were sharply etched, but seemed to have gone into slow motion.

The nonapus crept forward ponderously, and Farmer searched dazedly for a weapon. It was Ray who first started stumbling in the direction of the boathook, but John Andrew, in a sudden fit of bravery, shoved past him and grabbed the fragile-looking thing from its cleats.

He swung to face the monster with a sick feeling in his stomach, and got another surprise. The thing had stopped moving. Straddling the rail behind it, and similarly dripping, was a—*migawd!*

It—he—looked almost like a man, but that only made the difference worse. The details resolved as Farmer stared at him. The oddness about head and shoulders became finny crests; what had looked at first like a red skin-tight costume became a scaly hide. Farmer realized with a shock that the creature wasn't wearing anything.

Farmer crouched. The point of the boathook wavered, aimed first at the nonapus, then at the fishman. To the editor, both were alien—but he couldn't decide which one was more dangerous. For a long moment, neither of them advanced, and he wondered if they could really be frightened of his puny weapon.

He doubted it. He was beginning to notice, among other things, that the nonapus was more fearsome than it had seemed at first—in addition to nine tentacles, claws, fangs and antenna became apparent. So did the big glassy-red disks of the eyes—and Farmer aimed the point of the hook at one of them, started to thrust.

It was wrenched from his hands and forced downward to stick quivering in the deck. The development took Farmer completely unawares. Neither of the aliens had moved; it was Judge Ray who had disarmed him.

* * * * *

Judge Ray was now frantically trying to remove his diving helmet again. Excitement made his motions ineffective, and he signaled for Farmer to help him, then continued to fumble with the fastenings himself. John Andrew turned, feeling completely doomed, to aid the man, and they started getting in each other's way and slowing down the operation even more.

They finally succeeded, though; the helmet swung back, and Ray promptly shoved Farmer aside. Some of Farmer's fear gave way to amazement at the little inventor's audacity and what seemed to Farmer at least to be foolishly optimistic scientific detachment.

Ray said: "My name is Ray. It is indeed fortunate that you have met me immediately upon your arrival here, since I am the world's greatest genius, and thoroughly equipped to tell you anything you wish to know about my people and civilization. I take it you come from Atlantis?"

Amazingly, his tongue only got tangled once in the middle of this speech, and he regained control of it quickly then. John Andrew felt a touch of jealousy at the little man's capability in assuming control of the situation. That, and a sudden idea of his own, forced him to speak for himself.

It was a sad attempt. "Venus.... Spaceship...." he managed to croak, before giving it up.

The launch rocked gently. The nonapus crouched motionless; the fishman stood firmly, as if untouched by anything around him, his arms folded and a faint smile upon his damp lips.

Finally he spoke too. What he said was: "Venus. Spaceship. My name is Ray. It is indeed fortunate that you have met me immediately upon your arrival here, since I am the world's greatest genius...."

He broke off. Apparently he interpreted the looks of consternation on the faces of his audience correctly, for his smile became more friendly and he continued in a casual tone.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I didn't speak your language before I arrived here, and I had to learn it and become accustomed to its use through analyzing what you just said. I really didn't mean to puzzle you or make you feel inferior by mimicking you.”

Farmer's mind worked chaotically. This was puzzling, he decided, and *did* make him feel inferior—that is, it did if the man in the red scales had really picked up English so quickly. And if not, why lie?

* * * * *

The fishman came forward. His step was bouncy, as if he were used to a higher gravity or greater pressure (*that*, Farmer complimented himself on his cleverness, made sense at least), but he extended his hand and said “Put 'er there!” like any ladies' wear buyer at an annual convention. Ray and Farmer shook with him in turn. His hand was damp and webbed, but felt fairly human for all that.

“My name is Garf,” he said cheerfully. John Andrew tried not to stare at him too noticeably, but Ray made no bones about it; apparently the fishman thought nothing at all of his state of nudity. Farmer shivered.

It was Ray who brought the conversation back to earth—or sea—again. He asked Garf, directly, exactly where he did come from.

Garf looked hesitant, then waved the two to the rail with him. “See those?” he asked. They looked, and saw what seemed to be a flight of steps, carved from stone, old, and worn, starting abruptly just below the water level and leading downward. There was nothing on either side of the steps, or underneath them as far as could be seen, but ordinary ocean. “I came up those,” Garf said.

Farmer stared, and Ray stared. The stairway shouldn't be there—it certainly hadn't been there before. Garf's explanations, it seemed, only compounded the confusion caused by his presence.

Farmer, muddled, looked again at the nonapus, which had apparently gone to sleep. Even so, it looked deadly.

Something bit him on the arm. He discovered Ray's fingers, in the diving glove, digging into his flesh in an amazingly powerful grip. Farmer hunched his shoulders, trying to break loose, and then he saw what Ray was staring at.

Garf had left them, and was strolling around the launch as if he had just bought it—looking down his nose at it; at the same time, acting as if he could afford not to give a damn how badly he'd been stung. But the startling thing was that he had picked up the boathook and was twirling it unconcernedly. He had not only picked it up, however—he had also tied it in a knot.

It should have splintered in his hands, assuming he was strong enough to bend it at all. It hadn't; it was in perfect shape, except for the knot. Or so it seemed, at least, for even as Ray started forward with outstretched hand, obviously hoping to examine the thing, Garf gave it a final twirl and scaled it carelessly overboard.

John Andrew began to feel quick-frozen again. Being alone at sea in a rickety craft with a possible madman had been bad enough. To have a weird creature with superhuman powers, and an impossible pet monster, added to the crew was a little too much.

* * * * *

Garf turned his attention to the television set, which was still presenting its hysterical vaudeville. “Great-uncle's gills!” he exclaimed, and lapsed into a fascinated silence. He studied the proceedings carefully, holding the arms-crossed pose again. Finally he turned to Ray.

“Weren't you saying something about civilization a while ago, finless?” he asked. His voice was

sneering.

Ray frowned, and said something about mass-appeal. “Pay no attention to *that*,” he continued. “Just listen to *me*. I'll tell you about our civilization, and our science, and....”

His voice broke off as if he had been struck in the face. In a way, he had; Garf had deliberately turned his back on the old fellow. The Judge's bloodshot little eyes darted about as if he wanted to pick up something heavy and hit Garf on the crest with it.

John Andrew's brain had finally resumed normal operations; he was thinking slowly, but clearly. He examined the evidence with care. He decided that Garf's superior attitude and powers boded no good; that if the fishman once became slightly irritated he would sic the nonapus on Ray and himself. (Probably, in fact, Garf would try to conquer the world anyway; that was how it went in stories as corny as this situation.) Farmer further decided that Ray was too egocentrically eccentric to be trusted to get them out of this fix; he decided he'd have to do something himself.

Having decided all this, Farmer went back over the territory to see if he could find any flaws in it—or any other way out. It still made sense, and he added a decision to get the boat back to shore as fast as possible. He approached the engine.

As he did so, the engine melted into a solid, irregular lump of metal. John Andrew gulped, and put out a tentative hand toward the fused mess. It was not particularly warm—but it had melted.

Farmer looked at Garf again with fear and awe, and the fishman looked back with cold amusement. But not for long. Garf turned to the Judge's invention—and started to show some genuine interest for the first time since he had showed up.

He stood over the thing, webbed hands on scaly hips, peering at it intently. After a long silence, he knelt, and started feeling over the machine with his webbed hands. Finally he placed his fingers on the largest of the control switches—then changed his mind and gestured imperatively to Judge Ray.

“You—the 'intelligent' one,” he said. The quotes around 'intelligent' were clear in his intonation. “Explain this to me. It's obviously what reactivated the gate—but whoever made it did a screwball job. There are all sorts of things that don't seem to belong, and even the parts that should be there seem wrong, somehow....”

He paused. “Of course,” he added, smugly, “I'm not a transportation expert. If I were, I'd have made my own activator long ago, and done some visiting on the closed worlds before this. Not that they'd have kept me from getting bored for long, but yours looks as if it's going to be slightly amusing, at least.”

A struggle showed in Ray's face. Farmer saw insulted anger, hurt pride, a desire to brag about his gadgetry, a question about Garf's last words, and a caution that was not too far from fear. John Andrew had stopped trying to hide his own fear, and though he had plenty of questions of his own, he was mainly concerned with looking for a means of escape.

Garf was rising again, looking impatient. Ray reached a decision, said “Go to hell!”, and turned his back on the fishman. Garf looked astonished, then angry, and raised a hand. Ray jumped, not very far because of the heavy diving suit, stumbled on oddly twisted legs, and collapsed on the deck, writhing, moaning, and turning red in the face. The diving helmet clattered on the planks.

Farmer got mad. He started to charge across the deck at Garf, but his own feet went out from under him and he landed flat on his nose. There were waves of fire chasing each other around his body, and his stomach was trying to turn itself inside out.

* * * * *

As instantaneously as it had come, the pain left him. It left him weak and quivering, and John Andrew Farmer lay on his back waiting for his strength to seep back. As the red haze drifted from

before his eyes, he realized that the launch had acquired another occupant.

In appearance, she could easily have been Garf's sister—or his wife. Her figure was lithe and nicely curved. Her scales stopped in eye-catching points just above her distinctly mammalian bosom; from there on up she looked almost completely human. She wasn't wearing anything either. The overall effect was oddly beautiful. Farmer blushed hotly, and tried to keep his eyes on her face.

Not that it made any difference to her. She ignored everyone and everything but the fishman. Glaring at him angrily, she snapped out his name in an icy voice. "Garf!"

"Dor!"

Garf was a changed fishman; he looked faintly frightened, moderately worried, and definitely embarrassed. This passed, and he started to smile in a placating manner.

"Garf!" Dor snapped again. She followed it up, this time, with a string of intricate, foreign-sounding words that even Farmer could tell were hot and stinging.

The fishman backed away. He seemed to be growing angry himself now under the whiplashing woman's tongue. Finally he spoke, in English. He called Dor a puddle-snake. That wasn't all of what he said, by any means; the name was preceded by several adjectives and followed by an obscene command. Dor blanched slightly.

"Oh, yes?" she said, her voice dripping danger. "I can speak this language too, you know—I learned it years ago, before the gate to this world was closed! And let me tell you something else...."

She told him something else. John Andrew blushed furiously again, and covered his ears with his hands.

Little Ray was on his feet, trying to get a word in edgewise, but not succeeding at all. He too started to get angry. Farmer hauled himself upright, hoping to approach Ray, calm him, and get him to figure a way out of this madhouse.

Garf yelled an expletive and gestured with his hand. A wave of pure heat swept over the boat, blistering what paint it still boasted. The blow had been directed at Dor, and she showed that she had absorbed most of it by wilting visibly—but Farmer felt as much of it as he wanted. It was as if a blast furnace had suddenly opened beside him; sweat popped out on his brow and filmed his eyes. He wondered how uncomfortable he could get.

A deadly silence descended.

* * * * *

John Andrew was wishing that he could swim when Dor smiled, and he began to be interested in living again in spite of himself. The girl, he thought, was somehow radiant—really lovely, in spite of her scales and fins. It was peculiar; he'd never liked women at all, and had certainly never thought he'd like a mermaid, but....

Anyway, he decided, he wasn't going to take sides if the two aliens were going to fight it out. His first interest was in saving his own hide; his second, in getting back to shore to give warning of the invasion. As for Dor—John Andrew had lived this long without going to the aid of a damsel in distress—without, in fact, ever seeing one that he could remember, who wasn't obviously more capable of helping herself than he was. He wasn't going to start rescuing fair maidens now—even if she needed rescuing. Still, there was something awfully attractive.... Damn, but he was confused!

Dor's smile didn't really last that long; Farmer's thoughts were going fast now, somehow. He had finished those just described before Dor said, "All right, Garf. Fun's fun; now let's kiss and make up. After all, it's illegal for us to be here—not only our own cops, but the Galactic Federation, would be on our necks if they knew. Let's see if we can close up the gate ourselves or if this needs to be reported. And then let's go home."

Garf grinned. "Whatever you say, my dear." He dipped an eyebrow in a wink. Behind Dor, the nonapus stirred sluggishly, extended a tentacle, opened a claw, and nipped Dor neatly on the behind. She screeched.

There was an explosion in Farmer's brain. This was too much—Garf had gone too far! The burly editor plunged across the deck, swinging a fist. To his surprise, Garf did nothing to stop him; probably, John Andrew figured later, the fishman expected no further trouble from the humans after the treatment they'd had.

Farmer's haymaker connected.

Garf staggered across the deck until he brought up against the rail, holding his jaw and shaking his head muzzily. Farmer braced himself for retaliation, hoping it would be something less than a bolt of barbed lightning. But Garf remained unpredictable. He mumbled something that wasn't "Oh the hell with it" but sounded like it, and softly and silently slid overboard. He disappeared under water with scarcely a ripple.

"Good!" Dor said, briskly. "Now, I'll just... Ah!" She strode directly to Ray's invention, and Farmer wondered why both the aliens were so interested in a gadget that didn't work.

* * * * *

Dor wasted no time. She bent over, picked up the machine, yanking wiring loose carelessly, straightened up, turned a beaming smile on Farmer and Ray, said "Goodbye," and headed for the rail.

Ray yelped. He started after her, but his progress in the diving suit was waddling and slow. She reached the rail first and went over. Ray was not too far behind, and he slammed his helmet down angrily as he reached the rail. Farmer, galvanized belatedly, gave chase as well.

Dor was picking her way slowly down the stone steps, the machine cradled under her arm. Ray climbed up on the rail, poised there a second, then attempted a swan dive. John Andrew yelled at him as he arced forward, but it was too late. The old man dropped like a stone, flapping his arms, bounced slightly on the top step, then slid forward down several more steps on his faceplate.

Dor hesitated, her head just above water. She looked at the limp, diving-suited body beside her, then back at the launch and Farmer. Again, she came to a decision quickly.

Bending, leaving a trail of bubbles as her head went under, she set the Judge's invention down on a lower step and picked up the Judge instead. Cradling him in her arms, she started back up again, calling to Farmer to be ready to take her burden aboard.

They got him on the boat with little difficulty, and John Andrew laid him on the deck as Dor sprang lithely over the rail again, showing interest in the little fellow's condition. The diving helmet came off easily, not having been properly fastened down at all. Farmer bent anxiously over the Judge, looking for signs of life.

The diving suit had shipped some water, and the Judge had gotten a nasty crack on the head—but he was a tough bozo. There was no blood, his breathing seemed almost normal, and he already showed signs of returning consciousness.

John Andrew turned to Dor. "Well, I should thank you for bringing him back, I guess," he muttered. "But now that you're with us again"—he shot out a big paw and grabbed her by the wrist—"how about explaining some of this?"

He was very gentle with the wrist. He didn't want to hurt her; he was wondering already, in fact, what had made him get so rough at all. But she didn't seem to mind.

"I've got to go quickly," she told him. "I think Garf will be all right now, but he may take a notion to come back. And I have to see that the gate is closed before ..."

"What gate? Get back where?" Farmer managed to put more curiosity than impatience into his

tone.

“Back to my own planet—Tamdivar, sun Nogore, member of the Galactic Federation,” she said patiently. “The gate is a matter-transmitter between my world and yours. It was once in constant use, but my government closed it when you people got to the point where you were running around in submarines, using depth bombs, and just noticing our aircraft too much.”

* * * * *

Somehow, what popped into Farmer's head was the chorus of an old song he had sung in boy's camp when very young. “*There's a hole in the bottom of the sea! There's a log in the hole....*”

“Your machine reactivated the gate from this side, even if that isn't what you designed it to do,” Dor went on. “It's a good thing I noticed the gate was open. Of course, the area affected isn't large—it includes those steps and a lot of water around them.

“The gate'll stay open now until it's closed from our side—but I'll have to take your outfit back and destroy it, anyway. Our cops would be tough with you if they found you operating the thing, and Federation Securitymen would be even tougher. Take it as a warning: don't do it again.”

She turned to go, but Farmer held on. “What's this about a Galactic Federation? And if they've banned all communication with Earth, why haven't they just blasted the planet out of existence and gotten rid of it? Of course, I know we're thoroughly uncivilized and too warlike for any other race to trust, and all that. I can see how Earth might be considered the plague spot of the universe....”

Dor gawked, and saw that he was very serious. Then she threw back her head and laughed a merry laugh. “Listen, friend,” she said at last. “The only real trouble with you Earth people is that you have a tremendous inferiority complex, collectively and individually—as you've just illustrated. Get over that and you'll eliminate most of your trouble. As for the Federation, they let *us* in, and most member-races have wars occasionally; they'll undoubtedly accept you, once you develop space travel.

“Just at the moment, of course, you're at a crossroads. You could jump in either direction, blowing yourself up or taking the big step into space. I think you'll turn out okay, but not everybody agrees—and the Federation can't take even small chances. So you can't be allowed to set off your atom bombs, or worse, where they might get through to another planet. We can't actually interfere with you, so we've closed the gates; that's all.”

John Andrew, thinking it over, said “Oh,” and let go of her wrist. She turned and went back to the rail again, after flashing him the most de luxe smile so far. Farmer came out of a philosophic haze to notice she was leaving. He said, “Hey!”

She looked over her shoulder. Farmer didn't know what to say, but he wanted to delay her. Finally, he pointed to the nonapus, and said, “What about that monster? You're not going to leave it here?”

She laughed again. “Oh, the robot? It'll follow me. It's designed to.... Oh damn!”

The damn was for something she saw in the water as she looked back over the rail again. John Andrew rushed to her side and looked as she got set for a dive. Garf, he saw immediately, had returned, and was picking up the Judge's invention.

“Put that down!” Dor's yell was high-pitched. Garf faced them, and Farmer could just make out his lazy, contemptuous smile through the murky water. The fishman raised his arm in one of the now-familiar gestures.

The boat heaved, wallowed, and sank.

Farmer thought desperately again that he couldn't swim, and then he thought wildly of the Judge, who hadn't regained full consciousness. He went under once, and came up choking and sputtering. He

decided his end had come—and he didn't even know the identity of the enemy who had done him in. It was ironic. He should have asked Dor to tell him more about Garf—was he a traitor, or a Tamdivarian gangster, or what? John Andrew gasped and started sinking again...

To find himself hauled out of the water unceremoniously by the scruff of his neck. As he rose, ropy tentacles twined about him, and he saw what had saved him. He was being cradled, gently but firmly, by the nonapus, which had Judge Ray in another set of tentacles. And the nonapus, it became apparent, was not only a water-creature.

It could also fly.

* * * * *

Garf paddled idly around Dor's apartment, pretending interest in the shell-paintings that decorated the walls. He had presented her a bouquet in which rare blossoms hid slimy, smelly weeds, and she was sore at him—again. As she finished her conversation and switched off the two-way radio, he turned to her. “Dor,” he said softly.

She looked at him haughtily. “Don't speak to me!” she said. “I told you you'd have to stop your irresponsible practical joking and settle down. Some hard work wouldn't hurt you even if you did inherit a fortune. I don't mind so much when you pull these stunts on me, but when I think of how you practically drowned those poor, defenseless Earth-creatures...”

His mouth twisted. “Poor, defenseless Earth-creatures! How was I to know they couldn't swim? Just imagine—beings that live on a world with almost as much water as ours, who can't use their natural abilities any more than that! It's ridiculous. I never saw such morons—the big, ugly one especially!”

He had intended that to sting, and it did. Dor raised her nose another notch. “I think he's cute, and I'm learning he's pretty intelligent, too. He catches on fast to everything I tell him. He and his little friend will have their spaceship finished soon now, and....”

“That's another thing!” Garf snapped, keeping her on the defensive. “Maybe I violated Security by going to Earth when they accidentally opened the gate, but what are you doing? What would the Fed say if they knew you were giving out information the Earthmen hadn't acquired by themselves—helping them get into space? What about that?”

Dor shrugged. “I'm not telling them anything, really. Just dropping a few hints of the most elementary sort. Things they'd have figured out soon anyway—and things they still have to work hard to make practicable. Even if some of the inventions they've worked out so far have enabled them to make enough money to live on nicely—after all, those things are the merest toys to us—what could it possibly matter?”

Garf considered. This bickering was, as usual, getting them exactly nowhere. He gave up. “All right, dear,” he said. “You win; you're right, of course, and I'm wrong. I only hope you won't bother so much with talking to that Earth-slug on the radio after we're married.”

Dor laughed a tinkly laugh and came into his waiting arms. “Darling,” she cooed. “What a thing to say. I actually believe you're jealous—and you know I only love you.”

Which wasn't strictly true. The big Earthman *was* cute, she thought, and it was quaint of him to be in love with her, and to tell her so every day over the radio built into the robot-nonapus. Of course, he was inferior to her in every way, and she wouldn't think of marrying him or anything like that. But even his inferiority was interesting, in a way.

Yes, it was nice to know he loved her.

And she loved him, too—like an amusing baby brother.