

THE GARDEN IN THE FOREST

by Robert F. Young

FROM: Administrator of Alien Cultures
Stellar Headquarters
Sosterich III
To: Ghan, Supreme Arbiter
Parapsychology Center
Sosterich IV

GENERAL: The Office of Perimeter Research reports that tile culture in Star Group 206 has entered Phase Nine.

Phase Nine cultures have a fear base, are unstable, and are usually immune to regenerative stimulus. (Ref.: THEORETICAL EVOLUTIONARY PATTERNS, Official Version, I. S. Library.)

SPECIFIC: It is the carefully considered decision of the Office of Perimeter Research that the culture in question constitutes a menace to Galactic Security. Therefore, the only logical recourse is immediate extirpation. However, since no culture beyond Phase Eight has ever been known to exist, such procedure will be unprecedented and will require the authorization of the Supreme Arbiter.

REQUEST: That the Supreme Arbiter personally check the culture in question and forward his report to this headquarters, with authorization appended if his decision coincides with the decision reached by the Office of Perimeter Research, or with recommendation as to alternate course of action if it does not.

QUADRI-DIMENSIONAL SPATIAL WARPS involve neither subjective nor objective temporal distortion. Ghan's transition not only seemed instantaneous; it was instantaneous.

Since the type of investigation he intended to make usually obtained the most relevant results when conducted along unpremeditated lines, he had chosen his base at random. He was neither surprised nor chagrined, then, when he materialized in a snow covered field. If anything, he was mildly pleased to have struck a zone with a climate that was reminiscent of summer on Sosterich IV.

A small group of buildings showed against a blue backdrop of afternoon sky, and he set off across the fields toward them. The terrain presented little of interest: a few isolated stands of timber, an eroded hill, or two. Presently he came to a winding road and since it afforded a more comfortable base for ambulation he chose it in preference to the more direct route. He could have teleported of course, but on a mission of this sort it was better to be circumspect, at least until initial orientation had been completed.

The group of buildings resolved into a dominant red structure, a much smaller white structure, and several odd nondescript structures. Ghan identified them tentatively with their word equivalents, drawing from one of the languages he had assimilated just before his departure: a barn, a house, a coop or sty of some sort, a—

He had no word for the small skeletal structure in the immediate foreground. It was an elaborate framework of some kind and it was overrun with tangled thorny vines. It stood in an area of small oval hummocks and geometric pathways. It appealed to him instantly as a practical base for his operations. The fact that it would afford him no protection from the weather was immaterial.

He stepped inside and found a bench and a small table. He placed his portable transmitter on the table and he sat down on the bench. His headquarters was complete.

Before intensifying his 'pathic field he made a cursory probe of the adjacent buildings. All contained sentient life but the house contained the only type he was concerned with. He did not pause to examine it, however. It was more important, first, to ascertain whether he was centralized in an area that contained

sufficient specimens to make a cross-section analysis valid.

He began intensifying.

The process was not enervating. A 'path of Ghan's ability could intensify for almost unlimited periods of time without harmful aftereffects. But in order to attain the degree of concentration required, external physical awareness had to be sacrificed.

His field expanded in concentric waves. At first he touched sentient life only in scattered sequence, then in progressively heavier sequence, finally *en masse*. He focused.

A city. Complex, tiered, overcrowded. A plethoric jungle of thought patterns confronted him and he selected one at random for an experimental trans-probe.

In the Sosterich home system, and to a lesser degree in the scattered Sosterich satrapies, telepathy was a highly specialized art. It was thought-reading *combined* with analysis *plus* symbolical interpretation. The process was instantaneous. When Ghan probed a subject he participated in a dramatic representation of that subject's character.

His first subject was a man. The dominant symbol was a forest. It was a melancholic forest, overgrown, tangled, gloomy. The man was walking along a vaguely defined trail, pausing often to glance back over his shoulder. All he ever saw was an impassive arabesque of vines and foliage, yet he knew without doubt that he was being followed.

The trail led somewhere, but the man did not know where. The man hated the forest. He hated the scabrous trees with their hungry leaves that devoured the sunlight, leaving him only a pale pittance to illumine his way along the trail. He wanted to turn and retrace his steps, but he was afraid. He was sure that way back on the trail there had been a clearing, a clearing filled with warm sunlight. All he wanted was to find it again, but he knew he could never find it unless he went back. All he could do was to keep stumbling ahead, hoping that the trail did not follow a relentless straight line, hoping that it curved in a wide circle back to the clearing, and if it did, if he found the warm safe place where the sun reached, he promised himself he would stay there forever—

Ghan disconnected. A moment ago he had been of the opinion that the Office of Perimeter Research had been precipitate in its judgment. It had been difficult to accept a Phase Nine culture as being anything more than theoretical.

It was difficult no longer.

Grimly, he sought another subject. But for some reason he had trouble concentrating. A discordant thought kept intruding, disturbing his focus. It was a strange wondering thought and it emanated from a source that was distant and yet close by. Annoyed, he decreased the intensity of his field to minimum. The thought came through clearly then: *Who are you?*

A small female of the species was standing just outside the entrance of his headquarters. Ghan became aware of two enormous blue eyes. For some time he was aware of nothing else. Eyes in Sosterich society were usually taken for granted; they were efficient organs that performed their intended function and that was all they were. They were of various colors, of course: often they were green, sometimes they were yellow, and once in a while they were brown.

But they were never blue.

Presently he saw that these eyes were part of a round white face framed with pale yellow hair. The thought came again and this time he saw the movement of the lips and heard the sound that accompanied it.

"Who are you?"

I am Ghan, he 'pathed.

"Ghan? What a funny name! But what are you doing in my mother's summerhouse?"

It was an unanticipated question arising from an unanticipated situation. Ghan was angry with himself. He prided himself on his efficiency almost as much as he did on his objectivity, but for once he had forgotten something.

But "overlooked" would have been a kinder word. After all, he was investigating a Phase Nine culture, and the idea of a Ptsor Shield malfunctioning in a Phase Nine culture was on first thought fantastic.

But not on second thought. The Shield broadcast a constant series of negative waves; an endless repetition of the idea of *not being*. All that it needed in order to function was a geocentric culture, the individuals of which *wanted* to believe precisely what the Shield repeatedly told them: that the alien life form registered upon their retinas was not real.

Geocentricism was an integral part of a Phase Nine culture. However, geocentricism is a mature immaturity, and even in a Phase Nine culture there exist certain individuals who have not yet acquired that facility in the manipulation of transcendental logic that enables them to regard unpleasant phenomena and either replace them with pleasanter things or reject them altogether.

"You can't stay here, you know," the little girl standing at the entrance said.

Do you think your mother would mind?

"I think she might. I don't think she'd like you, anyway. Your clothes are so funny. And your hair! It's so long! And what makes it grow on the side of your head instead of on top?"

Ghan considered for a moment. While the small creature standing before him did not present a very serious obstacle to his investigation, she did create a problem just the same. If he wanted to carry on his work with maximum efficiency, he would have to find some way to keep her from intruding upon his 'pathic field.

One way would be to tell her the truth. That could serve a double purpose: if she believed him, her curiosity would be satisfied, and if she repeated what he told her to an adult, her story would be instantly discredited.

"I am different from you in many ways," he said, speaking aloud for better effect. "I come from another star."

The little girl regarded him calmly with her blue, wide-open eyes. "Which star?" she asked.

"It is so far you cannot see it from this world—" He paused, watching her face, waiting for it to betray the surprise she must be experiencing. But her face remained serene and her eyes continued to regard him quietly out of the blue depths of her mind.

"But you can't really be so different," she said after a while. "Even if you do come from another star and even if you do have crazy hair and talk funny, you must be like other people inside."

"Not quite like them," Ghan said.

"I mean, you must have a heart, and there must be a place in your head where you think, and—"

"I do not have a heart. You see, we function differently on the world where I live. We—" His words trailed away. The little girl's eyes, which he had assumed were opened to their maximum circumference, had opened even wider.

"But you *must* have a heart."

"But I do not have. On my world—"

"Everybody has a heart."

"No—" He paused. The blue eyes had exhibited another unexpected phase. Mist obscured them now, and miniscule drops had begun coalescing in their corners. Then, for the first time in his life, Ghan was bewildered.

The little girl turned and ran away.

He watched until a corner of the barn hid her from view, and for a while he considered probing her. He decided against it. His original purpose had been merely to get rid of her. It did not matter whether that purpose had been accomplished by design or accident. What did matter was the fact that he was now free to continue his investigation without interruption.

And besides, idle curiosity was unbecoming in a Supreme Arbiter.

The snow around the summerhouse had taken on the bluish tinge of twilight. The temperature had dropped perceptibly, and Ghan was reminded of cool summer nights on Sosterich IV. For an unconventional moment he wished he were back there, reclining on the patio of his river villa, watching the frosty stars and fondling abstruse philosophies.

Nostalgia did not become a Supreme Arbiter any more than idle curiosity did. Annoyed with himself, he discarded it and began intensifying his field. This time he dispensed with trans-probes. As soon as his focus was established, he teleported.

The chaotic canyon in which he materialized dismayed him at first, but he was a veteran of the mad milieus of many civilizations and he adjusted himself without trouble. He withdrew into a dark entrance, out of physical contact with the churning mass of humans and vehicles that filled the floor of the canyon, and prepared for his first probe.

A middle-aged man came down the street. There was a noticeable confidence in his walk, a corresponding confidence in his handsome, well-preserved face. As he passed the entrance, Ghan slipped into his mind.

The man was climbing a precipitous mountain. He was sure-footed and agile and he found hand- and foot-holds in impossible places. He climbed higher and higher, staring resolutely at the sheer wall before him. Presently he paused to rest. He looked down then, and on the slope far below he saw another man. Uncontrollable hatred suffused him. He looked wildly about him for a weapon—a rock, a stone, even a stick—anything at all to hurl down on the man below him. But the face of the mountain was utterly bleak and offered him nothing.

Before resuming his climb the man glanced upward. The mountain spired into the sky. The sun glittered coldly on its smooth polished surface. It had no ledges where a man could pause to rest; it was an endless obelisk, a perpendicular eternity.

The man began climbing again. Frantically, desperately—

An old man with a decayed face shuffled past the entrance. Ghan probed again.

He was descending a rotting stairway into a noisome pit. (Total identification with the subject was possible after one or two probes.) There was a scurrying of furry creatures about his legs and a constant obscene squeaking. He didn't want to descend the stairway; the thought of what awaited him below filled him with unspeakable terror; and yet he continued to descend, down, down, ever downward, and there were cold, slimy creatures intertwining about his legs now, and abruptly there was a cracking sound as one of the steps gave way, and he staggered and he almost fell into the loathsome Stygian depths—

A woman passed. After the stairway the warm spacious room seemed tranquil and secure. But not for long. Presently he noticed a twisted scar disfiguring one of the rose walls, and fleeing from the scar toward a vague doorway he nearly stepped into a ragged crevice that yawned without warning in the blood-red rug. He managed somehow to avoid the crevice, but when he looked for the doorway again it was gone

A young man walked briskly by. Another mountain, a gentle mountain this time. The lower slopes were green with grass and the forested upper slopes slanted leisurely into a blue and cloudless sky. It was morning and a summer sun warmed his back.

There were three women following him. Occasionally he paused in his ascent and glanced back at them. The first one had dark disheveled hair, and long graceful legs. But she had no face. The second one was half chimera, half reality. Most of the time she was a gray silhouette, but sometimes the silhouette resolved into a voluptuous body and a trite, pretty face.

The third one was a tenuous shadow—

It was dawn when Ghan returned to the summerhouse. He sat on the bench for a long time, staring through the interstices of the latticed roof at the sky. The sky was gray at first, but after a while the grayness softened subtly to pink, and then to a washed blue. Finally the first pale rays of the sun brimmed over a scalloped rim of hills and streamed across the fields.

He heard voices then, and caught vague thought patterns. Presently three figures came round the corner of the barn and approached the summerhouse. One of them was the little girl who had run away the preceding day. The other two were adults: a thin, pale woman, and a tall man carrying a double-barreled shotgun.

"There, you see!" the little girl said, as they stopped before the doorway. "Now you've got to believe me!"

The man and the woman stared into the interior. They looked at the bench, the table, the transmitter (the transmitter was a tesseract, as invisible to three-dimensional beings as a cube would be to two-dimensional creatures). They looked at Ghan.

"Why, Alicia," the woman said, "there's no one here at all."

"But there is, Mother! Can't you see him? You're looking right at him! He's come all the way from a star and he doesn't have a heart and sometimes you can hardly hear him he talks so soft, and—"

"Alicia! That's enough. You're imagining all this."

"But I'm not!" The little girl was crying.

There was a puzzled expression on the woman's pinched face. Ghan slipped briefly into her mind—There was a forest, dark and tangled, and he was stumbling along an overgrown path. He did not know where the path led, but it had to take him out of the forest if he followed it long enough. The forest could not be forever. Somewhere in the forest there had been a clearing a long time ago—or was it a garden?—he could not remember. Once he had found it, he was sure, and now, more than anything in the world, he wanted to find it again. For he hated the forest, with its pale sickly foliage and its loathsome ophidian vines; he hated the forest by day, but he hated it more by night when you could not see, when you could not find paths, not even overgrown travesties of paths that led nowhere, and you had to crouch there in the misshapen shadows, in the abysmal darkness, in the lonely night—

The little girl was still crying, and the woman took her hand and led her away. The man stood by impassively, the gun slung under his arm. He had a thin, windburned face and watery gray eyes. Ghan probed him as he stood there, not expecting to find, and not finding, any appreciable deviation from the general pattern his previous probes had established.

The symbol itself was a little more bleak, perhaps, than the others. Essentially, it was a featureless dreary plain. There were no mountains, there weren't even any hills. He was standing immobile in the midst of endless empty acres beneath an endless empty sky. There was a slight wind blowing; a cold wind. He had nebulous memories of another wind, a much warmer one; but that one had blown so long ago that he had forgotten how it had felt, and the cold wind wasn't so bad anyway, once you were used to it—

After a while the man turned and followed the woman and the little girl. The corner of the barn hid him from view and Ghan returned his attention to the sky.

It was such a magnificent sky that it was difficult to understand how anything ignoble could occur beneath it. The object of living—Ghan remembered the simple Sosterich credo—is to die gracefully. Under such a sky even the most uncultured savage should have been able to attain that ideal.

But not a semicultured savage. Not a Phase Nine barbarian.

Never a civilization honeycombed with fear. Never a race of people dominated by fear: fear-of-each-other, fear-of-themselves, fear-of-the-unfamiliar. For fear destroys compassion and nurtures hatred and misery. Fear is the accomplice of violence, the assassin of peace.

In a planetary sense, the danger of such a civilization was frightening; in a galactic sense, it was appalling.

There was little object in continuing the investigation. Ghan reached for the transmitter. His tentacular fingers sought its minuscule activator.

There was little object, but still—

He had never seen a civilization destroyed. All civilizations previously analyzed had evinced at least one redeeming feature, presented at least one area of healthy tissue into which the curative philosophy could be injected.

He had never seen a civilization destroyed and he realized with sudden clarity that he never wanted to see one destroyed, and that above all he did not want to be instrumental in the destruction of this one.

Perhaps, somewhere, there was healthy tissue. Perhaps, if he looked long enough, he could find it.

His fingers fell away from the transmitter. He began expanding his field.

Another chaotic canyon. It was much like the other, though there seemed to be more confusion. But that was probably due to the time of day. He had difficulty finding a practical station but finally established himself in an unfrequented alleyway.

His first two subjects were mountain climbers. The fear motive in each case was typically predominant. His third subject represented a curiously recurrent pattern—the forest symbol, with the vague remembrance of a clearing that, in some cases, had the aspects of a garden and in others a grassy

meadow.

The next three subjects were mountain climbers again. In despair, Ghan tried another section of the city.

And another—

Mountains and forests and dimly remembered gardens, and fear and hatred and bewilderment—

A tall man of noble mien passed Ghan's station. There was a great plain covered with monolithic statues. He was traveling across the plain, through the maze of statues, bowing before almost all of them, kissing the stone feet of others. In the distance a great obelisk pointed into the sky, its peak half obscured by fleecy clouds. It was white and shining and beautiful.

Here at least, Ghan thought, was a possibility.

Presently the man realized that he was not alone on the plain. There was furtive movement all around him, and once he came upon another man paying homage. Quickly he slipped behind another statue, swiftly kissed its feet, then hurried in a wide detour, bowing and kneeling and kissing, around the other man. He breathed more easily when he was sure he was ahead, but when he looked at the obelisk again it was just as distant as before—just as remote.

Ghan's own mind had become an arctic steppe. For a moment the symbol had misled him, but only for a moment. The symbol was just another mountain; a two-dimensional mountain. The obstacle was not height, but ceremony; the goal was still dominance, but it was disguised as apotheosis.

And the motivating factor was the same. *Fear*. He returned to the summerhouse.

It was afternoon and a slight wind was coming over the white fields. The sky was still clear and blue. He reached for the transmitter and his fingers again sought the tiny activator. And then he paused.

Beside the transmitter there was a folded sheet of tablet paper weighted down with a stone. Wonderingly, he picked it up. On its outer surface, laboriously printed, were the words, "Mr. Gan."

He unfolded the paper.

Around its border a series of curious designs had been painstakingly penciled. At first glance they appeared to be little more than misshapen circles, indented at the top and elongated at the bottom. But each was crayoned an intense red and each was labeled—so that there could be no room for doubt—with the word, "hart." In the center of the paper there was a much larger, though unmistakably similar design. That one was not colored, but within its outline were several lines of carefully printed words:

I am sorry you dont have a hart. My mother says your my magination but I no your real and I think your nice. Will you be my valentine?

For a long time Ghan sat motionless in the summerhouse. The February wind coming over the winter fields rattled the rose vines and ruffled his cilia. The sheet of paper in his hand fluttered every now and then, and each time he heard the sound he looked down at the incarnadine hearts and the sprawling simple words.

Finally he got up and moved over the dead mounds of last summer's garden toward the buildings. He went around the corner of the barn and he approached the small white dwelling behind the barn.

The little girl was standing on the porch steps talking earnestly to a disheveled doll which she had propped upon the railing. She did not notice his approach and he stopped some distance from her, standing quietly in the snow.

He waited until she turned and saw him, and then he slipped into the blue depths of her eyes—

The clearing *was* a garden. There were quaint multicolored parterres and green pathways. There were alabaster fountains and the laughing sound of water. There was sunlight and warm summer air.

He walked through the garden, gently. He came to a stream of blue water with a delicate bridge arching over it. He stepped onto the bridge and looked down into the clear untroubled water. A bluebird flew down from a white cloud and perched upon his shoulder.

From the bridge he could see the forest. It was a dark forbidding forest and it grew riotously all around the garden. Even as he watched it seemed to move in closer, and abruptly the bluebird on his

shoulder flew away

The little girl was regarding him solemnly. "I came to thank you for your valentine," Ghan said. "It was very beautiful."

"You were gone away and I didn't know if you'd be back," the little girl said. "But I left it just in case. Will you be going away again?"

"No," Ghan said. "Not for a long time."

FROM: Ghan, Supreme Arbiter
Field Base 1
Sol III
To: Administrator of Alien Cultures
Stellar Headquarters
Sosterich III

GENERAL: Any governing body, in order to attain objective judgment and in order to have the right to eliminate whole civilizations, or fractions thereof, as a consequence of that judgment, must possess two prerequisite qualities: (1) Divinity; (2) Omniscience. It is the considered opinion of the Supreme Arbiter that the present Sosterich governing body possesses neither quality (1) nor quality (2).

It is the further considered opinion of the Supreme Arbiter that the branch of the present Sosterich governing body, known as the Administration of Alien Cultures, is opinionated, impetuous, and unreliable; and that the subdivision of the Administration of Alien Cultures, known as the Office of Perimeter Research, is incapable of seeing one micromillimeter beyond the collective probosises on its collective countenances.

SPECIFIC: The Sosterich Federation is the oldest known civilization in the galaxy, yet in the very heyday of its intellectual maturity it is apparently immune to the basic truth that the future of any race should not be extrapolated from the minds of those who are its administrators today, but from the minds of those who will be its administrators tomorrow.

The potential future of Sol III has nothing whatever to do with the appalling present of Sol III. Its administrators-to-be await our guidance.

REQUEST: (1) That the present Supreme Arbiter be transferred to the Office of Alien Guidance and,

(2) That he be assigned to duty on Sol III immediately.

To: Ghan, Director of Alien Guidance (Temp.)
Guidance Center I
Sol III

FROM: Administrator of Alien Cultures
Stellar Headquarters
Sosterich III

GENERAL: SPECIFIC: Request granted.