

The Sorcerer Pharesm

Jack Vance

Like Dunsany and Clark Ashton Smith, Jack Vance (b. 1916) delights in exotic language. His work is firmly in the tradition of both writers, most notably in the stories that he has set in the earth's last years. These first appeared in The Dying Earth (1950) and were continued in The Eyes of the Over-world (1966), Cugel's Saga (1983) and Rhialto the Marvellous (1984). The following is one of the Cugel stones, which form part of a connected series. Cugel is a crafty but at times naive thief who is caught while trying to burgle the manse of the wizard Iucounu. Iucounu despatches Cugel to the far side of the earth on a quest, after inserting into him the monitor, Firx, which ensures that Cugel will return. The stories follow Cugel's attempts to complete the wizard's quest and get back home.

THE MOUNTAINS WERE BEHIND: THE DARK DEFILES, the tarns, the echoing stone heights - all now a sooty bulk to the north. For a time Cugel wandered a region of low rounded hills the colour and texture of old wood, with groves of blue-black trees dense along the ridges, then came upon a faint trail which took him south by long swings and slants, and at last broke out over a vast dim plain. A half-mile to the right rose a line of tall cliffs, which instantly attracted his attention, bringing him a haunting pang of *deja-vu*. He stared mystified. At some time in the past he had known these cliffs: how? when? His memory provided no response. He settled himself upon a low lichen-covered rock to rest, but now Firx, the monitor which Iucounu the Laughing Magician had implanted in Cugel's viscera, became impatient and inflicted a stimulating pang. Cugel leaped to his feet, groaning with weariness and shaking his fist to the south-west, the presumable direction of Alмеры. "Iucounu, Iucounu! If I could repay a tenth of your offences, the world would think me harsh!"

He set off down the trail, under the cliffs which had affected him with such poignant but impossible recollections. Far below spread the plain, filling three-quarters of the horizon with colours much like those of the lichened rock Cugel had just departed: black patches of woodland; a grey crumble where ruins filled an entire valley; nondescript streaks of grey-green, lavender, grey-brown; the leaden glint of two great rivers disappearing into the haze of distance.

Cugel's brief rest had only served to stiffen his joints; he limped, and the pouch chafed his hip. Even more distressing was the hunger gripping his belly. Another tally against Iucounu who had sent Cugel to the northern wastes on a mission of wanton frivolity! Iucounu, it must be allowed, had furnished an amulet converting such normally inedible substances as grass, wood, horn, hair, humus and the like into a nutritious paste. Unfortunately - and this was a measure of Iucounu's mordant humour -the paste retained the flavour of the native substance, and during his passage of the mountain Cugel had tasted little better than spurge, cullion, blackwort, oak twigs and galls, and on one occasion, when all else failed, certain refuse discovered in the cave of a bearded thawn. Cugel had eaten only minimally; his long spare frame had become gaunt; his cheekbones protruded like sponsons; the black eyebrows which once had crooked so jauntily now lay flat and dispirited. Truly, truly, Iucounu had much to answer for! And Cugel, as he proceeded, debated the exact quality of revenge he would take if ever he found his way back to Alмеры.

The trail swung down upon a wide stony flat where the wind had carved a thousand grotesque figures. Surveying the area Cugel thought to perceive regularity among the eroded shapes, and halted to rub his long chin in appraisal. The pattern displayed an extreme subtlety - so subtle indeed, that Cugel wondered if it had not been projected by his own mind. Moving closer, he discerned further complexities, and elaborations upon complexities: twists, spires, volutes; discs, saddles, wrenched spheres; torsions and flexions; spindles, cardioids, lanciform pinnacles: the most laborious, painstaking and intricate rock-carving conceivable, manifestly no random effort of the elements. Cugel frowned in

perplexity, unable to imagine a motive for so complex an undertaking.

He went on and a moment later heard voices, together with the clank of tools. He stopped short, listened cautiously, then proceeded, to come upon a gang of about fifty men ranging in stature from 3 inches to well over 12 feet. Cugel approached on tentative feet, but after a glance the workers paid him no heed, continuing to chisel, grind, scrape, probe and polish with dedicated zeal.

Cugel watched for several minutes, then approached the overseer, a man 3 feet in height who stood at a lectern consulting the plans spread before him, comparing them to the work in progress by means of an ingenious optical device. He appeared to note everything at once, calling instructions, chiding, exhorting against error, instructing the least deft in the use of their tools. To exemplify his remarks he used a wonderfully extensible forefinger, which reached forth 30 feet to tap at a section of rock, to scratch a quick diagram, then as swiftly retract.

The foreman drew back a pace or two, temporarily satisfied with the work in progress, and Cugel came forward. "What intricate effort is this and what is its object?"

"The work is as you see," replied the foreman in a voice of penetrating compass, "From natural rock we produce specified shapes, at the behest of the sorcerer Pharesm. . . Now then! Now then!" The cry was addressed to a man 3 feet taller than Cugel, who had been striking the stone with a pointed maul. "I detect over-confidence!" The forefinger shot forth. "Use great care at this juncture; note how the rock tends to cleave? Strike here a blow of the sixth intensity at the vertical, using a semi-clenched grip; at this point a fourth-intensity blow groin-wise; then employ a quartergauge bant-iron to remove the swange."

With the work once more going correctly, he fell to studying his plans, shaking his head with a frown of dissatisfaction. "Much too slow! The craftsmen toil as if in a drugged torpor, or else display a mulish stupidity. Only yesterday Dadio Fessadil, he of 3 ells with the green kerchief yonder, used a 19-gauge freezing-bar to groove the bead of a small inverted quatrefoil."

Cugel shook his head in surprise, as if never had he heard of so egregious a blunder. And he asked: "What prompts this inordinate rock-hewing?"

"I cannot say," replied the foreman. "The work has been in progress 318 years, but during this time Pharesm has never clarified his motives. They must be pointed and definite, for he makes a daily inspection and is quick to indicate errors." Here he turned aside to consult with a man as tall as Cugel's knee, who voiced uncertainty as to the pitch of a certain volute. The foreman, consulting an index, resolved the matter; then he turned back to Cugel, this time with an air of frank appraisal. "You appear both astute and deft; would you care to take employment? We lack several craftsmen of the half-ell category, or, if you prefer more forceful manifestations, we can nicely use an apprentice stone-breaker of 16 ells. Your stature is adjusted in either direction, there is identical scope for advancement. As you see I am a man of 4 ells. I reached the position of Striker in one year, Moulder of Forms in three, Assistant Chade in ten, and I have now served as Chief Chade for nineteen years. My predecessor was of 2 ells, and the Chief Chade before him was a 10-ell man." He went on to enumerate advantages of the work, which included sustenance, shelter, narcotics of choice, nympharium privileges, a stipend starting at ten terces a day, various other benefits including Pharesm's services as diviner and exorcizer. "Additionally, Pharesm maintains a conservatory where all may enrich their intellects. I myself take instruction in Insect Identification, the Heraldry of the Kings of Old Gomaz, Unison Chanting, Practical Catalepsy and Orthodox Doctrine. You will never find a master more generous than Pharesm the Sorcerer!"

Cugel restrained a smile for the Chief Chade's enthusiasm; still, his stomach was roiling with hunger and he did not reject the proffer out of hand. "I had never before considered such a career," he said. "You cite advantages of which I was unaware."

"True; they are not generally known."

"I cannot immediately say yes or no. It is a decision of consequence which I feel I should consider in all its aspects."

The Chief Chade gave a nod of profound agreement. "We encourage deliberation in our craftsmen, when every stroke must achieve the desired effect. To repair an inaccuracy of as much as a fingernail's

width the entire block must be removed, a new block fitted into the socket of the old, whereupon all begins anew. Until the work has reached its previous stage nympharium privileges are denied to all. Hence, we wish no opportunistic or impulsive newcomers to the group."

Firx, suddenly apprehending that Cugel proposed a delay, made representations of a most agonizing nature. Clapping his abdomen, Cugel took himself aside and, while the Chief Chade watched in perplexity, argued heatedly with Firx. "How may I proceed without sustenance?" Firx's response was an incisive motion of the barbs. "Impossible!" exclaimed Cugel. "The amulet of Iucounu theoretically suffices, but I can stomach no more spurge; remember, if I fall dead in the trail, you will never rejoin your comrade in Iucounu's vats!"

Firx saw the justice of the argument and reluctantly became quiet. Cugel returned to the lectern, where the Chief Chade had been distracted by the discovery of a large tourmaline opposing the flow of a certain complicated helix. Finally Cugel was able to engage his attention. "While I weigh the proffer of employment and the conflicting advantages of diminution versus elongation, I will need a couch on which to recline. I also wish to test the perquisites you describe, perhaps for the period of a day or more."

"Your prudence is commendable," declared the Chief Chade. "The folk of today tend to commit themselves rashly to courses they later regret. It was not so in my youth, when sobriety and discretion prevailed. I will arrange for your admission into the compound, where you may verify each of my assertions. You will find Pharesm stern but just, and only the man who hacks the rock willy-nilly has cause to complain. But observe! Here is Pharesm the Sorcerer on his daily inspection!"

Up the trail came a man of imposing stature wearing a voluminous white robe. His countenance was benign; his hair was like yellow down; his eyes were turned upwards as if rapt in the contemplation of an ineffable sublimity. His arms were sedately folded, and he moved without motion of his legs. The workers, doffing their caps and bowing in unison, chanted a respectful salute, to which Pharesm returned an inclination of the head. Spying Cugel, he paused, made a swift survey of the work so far accomplished, then glided without haste to the lectern.

"All appears reasonably exact," he told the Chief Chade. "I believe the polish on the underside of Epi-projection 56-16 is uneven and I detect a minute chip on the secondary cincter of the nineteenth spire. Neither circumstance seems of major import and I recommend no disciplinary action."

"The deficiencies shall be repaired and the careless artisans reprimanded: this at the very least!" exclaimed the Chief Chade in an angry passion. "Now I wish to introduce a possible recruit to our workforce. He claims no experience at the trade, and will deliberate before deciding to join our group. If he so elects, I envision the usual period as rubble-gatherer, before he is entrusted with tool-sharpening and preliminary excavation."

"Yes; this would accord with our usual practice. However..." Pharesm glided effortlessly forward, took Cugel's left hand and performed a swift divination upon the fingernails. His bland countenance became sober. "I see contradictions of four varieties. Still it is clear that your optimum bent lies elsewhere than in the hewing and shaping of rock. I advise that you seek another and more compatible employment."

"Well spoken!" cried the Chief Chade. "Pharesm the Sorcerer demonstrates his infallible altruism! In order that I do not fall short of the mark I hereby withdraw my proffer of employment! Since no purpose can now be served by reclining upon a couch or testing the perquisites, you need waste no more irreplaceable time."

Cugel made a sour face. "So casual a divination might well be inaccurate."

The Chief Chade extended his forefinger 30 feet vertically in outraged remonstrance, but Pharesm gave a placid nod. "This is quite correct, and I will gladly perform a more comprehensive divination, though the process requires six to eight hours."

"So long?" asked Cugel in astonishment.

"This is the barest minimum. First you are swathed head to foot in the intestines of fresh-killed owls, then immersed in a warm bath containing a number of secret organic substances. I must, of course, char

the small toe of your left foot, and dilate your nose sufficiently to admit an explorer beetle, that he may study the conduits leading to and from your sensorium. But let us return to my divination, that we may commence the process in good time."

Cugel pulled at his chin, torn this way and that. Finally he said, "I am a cautious man, and must ponder even the advisability of undertaking such a divination; hence, I will require several days of calm and meditative somnolence. Your compound and the adjacent nympharium appear to afford the conditions requisite to such a state; hence—"

Pharesm indulgently shook his head. "Caution, like any other virtue, can be carried to an extreme. The divination must proceed at once."

Cugel attempted to argue further but Pharesm was adamant, and presently glided off down the trail.

Cugel disconsolately went to the side, considering first this stratagem, then that. The sun neared the zenith, and the workmen began to speculate as to the nature of the viands to be served for their midday meal. At last the Chief Chade signalled; all put down their tools and gathered about the cart which contained the repast.

Cugel jocularly called out that he might be persuaded to share the meal, but the Chief Chade would not hear of it. "As in all of Pharesm's activities, an exactitude of consequence must prevail. It is an unthinkable discrepancy that fifty-four men should consume the food intended for fifty-three."

Cugel could contrive no apposite reply, and sat in silence while the rock-hewers munched at meat pies, cheeses and salt fish. All ignored him save for one, a quarter-ell man whose generosity far exceeded his stature, and who undertook to reserve for Cugel a certain portion of his food. Cugel replied that he was not at all hungry, and rising to his feet wandered off through the project, hoping to discover some forgotten cache of food. He prowled here and there, but the rubble-gatherers had removed every trace of substance extraneous to the pattern. With appetite unassuaged Cugel arrived at the centre of the work, where sprawled on a carved disc he spied a most peculiar creature: essentially a gelatinous globe swimming with luminous particles from which a number of transparent tubes or tentacles dwindled away to nothing. Cugel bent to examine the creature, which pulsed with a slow internal rhythm. He prodded it with his finger, and bright little flickers rippled away from the point of contact. Interesting: a creature of unique capabilities! Removing a pin from his garments he prodded a tentacle, which emitted a peevish pulse of light, while the golden flecks in its substance surged back and forth. More intrigued than ever, Cugel hitched himself close, and gave himself to experimentation, probing here and there, watching the angry flickers and sparkles with great amusement.

A new thought occurred to Cugel. The creature displayed qualities reminiscent of both coelenterate and echinoderm. A terrene nudibranch? A mollusc deprived of its shell? More importantly, was the creature edible?

Cugel brought forth his amulet, applied it to the central globe and to each of the tentacles. He heard neither chime nor buzz: the creature was non-poisonous. He unsheathed his knife, sought to excise one of the tentacles, but found the substance too resilient and tough to be cut. There was a brazier nearby, kept aglow for forging and sharpening the workers' tools. He lifted the creature by two of its tentacles, carried it to the brazier and arranged it over the fire. He toasted it carefully and when he deemed it sufficiently cooked, sought to eat it. Finally, after various undignified efforts, he crammed the creature down his throat, finding it without taste or sensible nutritive volume.

The stone-carvers were returning to their work. With a significant glance for the foreman Cugel set off down the trail.

Not far distant was the dwelling of Pharesm the Sorcerer: a long low building of melted rock surmounted by eight oddly shaped domes of copper, mica and bright blue glass. Pharesm himself sat at leisure before the dwelling, surveying the valley with a serene and all-inclusive magnanimity. He held up a hand in calm salute. "I wish you pleasant travels and success in all future endeavours."

"The sentiment is naturally valued," said Cugel with some bitterness. "You might however have rendered a more meaningful service by extending a share of your noon meal."

Pharesm's placid benevolence was as before. "This would have been an act of mistaken altruism. Too fulsome a generosity corrupts the recipient and stultifies his resource."

Cugel gave a bitter laugh. "I am a man of iron principle, and I will not complain, even though, lacking any better fare, I was forced to devour a great transparent insect which I found at the heart of your rock-carving."

Pharesm swung about with a suddenly intent expression. "A great transparent insect, you say?"

"Insect, epiphyte; mollusc - who knows? It resembled no creature I have yet seen, and its flavour, even after carefully grilling at the brazier, was not distinctive."

Pharesm floated 7 feet into the air, to turn the full power of his gaze down at Cugel. He spoke in a low harsh voice: "Describe this creature in detail!"

Wondering at Pharesm's severity, Cugel obeyed. "It was thus and thus as to dimension." He indicated with his hands. "In colour it was a gelatinous transparency shot with numberless golden specks. These flickered and pulsed when the creature was disturbed. The tentacles seemed to grow flimsy and disappear rather than terminate. The creature evinced a certain sullen determination, and ingestion proved difficult."

Pharesm clutched at his head, hooking his fingers into the yellow down of his hair. He rolled his eyes upwards and uttered a tragic cry. "Ah! Five hundred years I have toiled to entice this creature, despairing, doubting, brooding by night, yet never abandoning hope that my calculations were accurate and my great talisman cogent. Then, when finally it appears, you fall upon it for no other reason than to sate your repulsive gluttony!"

Cugel, somewhat daunted by Pharesm's wrath, asserted his absence of malicious intent. Pharesm would not be mollified. He pointed out that Cugel had committed trespass and hence had forfeited the option of pleading innocence. "Your very existence is a mischief compounded by bringing the unpleasant fact to my notice. Benevolence prompted me to forbearance, which now I perceive for a grave mistake."

"In this case," stated Cugel with dignity, "I will depart your presence at once. I wish you good fortune for the balance of the day, and now, farewell."

"Not so fast," said Pharesm in the coldest of voices. "Exactitude has been disturbed; the wrong which has been committed demands a counteract to validate the Law of Equipose. I can define the gravity of your act in this manner: should I explode you on this instant into the most minute of your parts the atonement would measure one ten-millionth of your offence. A more stringent retribution becomes necessary."

Cugel spoke in great distress. "I understand that an act of consequence was performed, but remember! my participation was basically casual. I categorically declare first my absolute innocence, second my lack of criminal intent, and third my effusive apologies. And now, since I have many leagues to travel, I will—"

Pharesm made a peremptory gesture. Cugel fell silent. Pharesm drew a deep breath. "You fail to understand the calamity you have visited upon me. I will explain, so that you may not be astounded by the rigours which await you. As I have adumbrated, the arrival of the creature was the culmination of my great effort. I determined its nature through a perusal of 42,000 librams, all written in cryptic language: a task requiring a hundred years. During a second hundred years I evolved a pattern to draw it in upon itself and prepared exact specification. Next I assembled stone-cutters, and across a period of 300 years gave solid form to my pattern. Since like subsumes like, the variates and intercongeles create a suprapullulation of all areas, qualities and internals into a crystorrhoid whorl, eventually exciting the ponentiation of a proubietal chute. Today occurred the concatenation; the 'creature', as you call it, pervolved upon itself; in your idiotic malice you devoured it."

Cugel, with a trace of haughtiness, pointed out that the "idiotic malice" to which the distraught sorcerer referred was in actuality simple hunger. "In any event, what is so extraordinary about the 'creature'? Others equally ugly may be found in the net of any fisherman."

Pharesm drew himself to his full height, glared down at Cugel. "The 'creature'," he said in a grating

voice, 'is TOTALITY. The central globe is all of space, viewed from the inverse. The tubes are vortices into various eras, and what terrible acts you have accomplished with your prodding and poking, your boiling and chewing, are impossible to imagine!"

"What of the effects of digestion?" enquired Cugel delicately. "Will the various components of space, time and existence retain their identity after passing the length of my inner tract?"

"Bah. The concept is jejune. Enough to say that you have wreaked damage and created a serious tension in the ontological fabric. Inexorably you are required to restore equilibrium."

Cugel held out his hands. "Is it not possible a mistake has been made? That the 'creature' was no more than pseudo-TOTALITY? Or is it conceivable that the 'creature' may by some means be lured forth once more?"

"The first two theories are untenable. As to the last, I must confess that certain frantic expedients have been forming in my mind." Pharesm made a sign, and Cugel's feet became attached to the soil. "I must go to my divinary and learn the full significance of the distressing events. In due course I will return."

"At which time I will be feeble with hunger," said Cugel fretfully. "Indeed, a crust of bread and a bite of cheese would have averted all the events for which I am now reproached."

"Silence!" thundered Pharesm. "Do not forget that your penalty remains to be fixed; it is the height of impudent recklessness to hector a person already struggling to maintain his judicious calm!"

"Allow me to say this much," replied Cugel. "If you return from your divining to find me dead and dessicated here on the path, you will have wasted much time fixing upon a penalty."

"The restoration of vitality is a small task," said Pharesm. "A variety of deaths by contrasting processes may well enter into your judgment." He started towards his divinary, then turned back and made an impatient gesture. "Come; it is easier to feed you than return to the road."

Cugel's feet were once more free and he followed Pharesm through a wide arch into the divinary. In a broad room with splayed grey walls, illuminated by three-coloured polyhedra, Cugel devoured the food Pharesm caused to appear. Meanwhile Pharesm secluded himself in his workroom, where he occupied himself with his divinations. As time passed Cugel grew restless, and on three occasions approached the arched entrance. On each occasion a Presentment came to deter him, first in the shape of a leaping ghoul, next as a zigzag blaze of energy, and finally as a score of glittering purple wasps.

Discouraged, Cugel went to a bench, and sat waiting with elbows on long legs, hands under his chin.

Pharesm at last reappeared, his robe wrinkled, the fine yellow down of his hair disordered into a multitude of small spikes. Cugel slowly rose to his feet.

"I have learned the whereabouts of TOTALITY," said Pharesm, in a voice like the strokes of a great gong. "In indignation, removing itself from your stomach, it has recoiled a million years into the past."

Cugel gave his head a solemn shake. "Allow me to offer my sympathy, and my counsel, which is: never despair! Perhaps the 'creature' will choose to pass this way again."

"An end to your chatter! TOTALITY must be recovered. Come."

Cugel reluctantly followed Pharesm into a small room walled with blue tile, roofed with a tall cupola of blue and orange glass.

Pharesm pointed to a black disc at the centre of the floor. "Stand there."

Cugel glumly obeyed. "In a certain sense, I feel that—"

"Silence!" Pharesm came forward. "Notice this object!" He displayed an ivory sphere the size of two fists, carved in exceedingly fine detail. "Here you see the pattern from which my great work is derived. It expresses the symbolic significance of NULLITY to which TOTALITY must necessarily attach itself, by Kratinjae's Second Law of Cryptorrhoid Affinites, with which you are possibly familiar."

"Not in every aspect," said Cugel. "But may I ask your intentions?"

Pharesm's mouth moved in a cool smile. "I am about to attempt one of the most cogent spells ever evolved: a spell so fractious, harsh, and coactive, that Phandaal, Ranking Sorcerer of Grand Motholam, barred its use. If I am able to control it, you will be propelled one million years into the past. There you will reside until you have accomplished your mission, when you may return."

Cugel stepped quickly from the black disc. "I am not the man for this mission, whatever it may be, I fervently urge the use of someone else!"

Pharesm ignored the expostulation. "The mission, of course, is to bring the symbol into contact with TOTALITY." He brought forth a wad of tangled grey tissue. "In order to facilitate your search, I endow you with this instrument which relates all possible vocables to every conceivable system of meaning." He thrust the net into Cugel's ear, where it swiftly engaged itself with the nerve of consonant expression. "Now," said Pharesm, "you need listen to a strange language for but three minutes when you become proficient in its use. And now, another article to enhance the prospect of success: this ring. Notice the jewel: should you approach to within a league of TOTALITY, darting lights within the gem will guide you. Is all clear?"

Cugel gave a reluctant nod. "There is another matter to be considered. Assume that your calculations are incorrect and that TOTALITY has returned only 900,000 years into the past: what then? Must I dwell out all my life in this possibly barbarous era?"

Pharesm frowned in displeasure. "Such a situation involves an error of 10 per cent. My system of reckoning seldom admits of deviation greater than 1 per cent."

Cugel began to make calculations, but now Pharesm signalled to the black disc. "Back! And do not again move hence!"

Sweat oozing from his glands, knees quivering and sagging, Cugel returned to his place.

Pharesm retreated to the far end of the room, where he stepped into a coil of gold tubing, which sprang spiralling up to clasp his body. From a desk he took four black discs, which he began to shuffle and juggle with such fantastic dexterity that they blurred in Cugel's sight. Pharesm at last flung the discs away; spinning and wheeling they hung in the air, gradually drifting towards Cugel.

Pharesm next took up a white tube, pressed it tight against his lips and spoke an incantation. The tube swelled and bulged into a great globe. Pharesm twisted the end shut and shouting a thunderous spell, hurled the globe at the spinning discs, and all exploded. Cugel was surrounded, seized, jerked in all directions outward, compressed with equal vehemence: the net result, a thrust in a direction contrary to all, with an impetus equivalent to the tide of a million years. Among dazzling lights and distorted visions, Cugel was transported beyond his consciousness.

Cugel awoke in a glare of orange-gold sunlight, of a radiance he had never known before. He lay on his back looking up into a sky of warm blue, of lighter tone and softer texture than the indigo sky of his own time.

He tested arms and legs and, finding no damage, sat upright, then slowly rose to his feet, blinking in the unfamiliar radiance.

The topography had changed only slightly. The mountains to the north were taller and of harsher texture, and Cugel could not identify the way he had come, or - more properly - the way he would come. The site of Pharesm's project was now a low forest of feathery-light green trees, on which hung clusters of red berries. The valley was as before, though the rivers flowed by different courses and three great cities were visible at varying distances. The air drifting up from the valley carried a strange tart fragrance mingled with an antique exhalation of moulder and must, and it seemed to Cugel that a peculiar melancholy hung in the air; in fact, he thought to hear music: a slow plaintive melody, so sad as to bring tears to his eyes. He searched for the source of the music, but it faded and disappeared even as he sought it, and only when he ceased to listen did it return.

For the first time Cugel looked towards the cliffs which rose to the west, and now the sense of *deja-vu* was stronger than ever. Cugel pulled his chin in puzzlement. The time was a million years

previous to that other occasion on which he had seen the cliffs, and hence, by definition, must be the first. But it was also the second time, for he well remembered his initial experience of the cliffs. On the other hand, the logic of time could not be contravened, and by such reckoning this view preceded the other. A paradox, thought Cugel: a puzzle indeed! Which experience had provided the background to the poignant sense of familiarity he had felt on both occasions?... Cugel dismissed the subject as unprofitable and started to turn away when movement caught his eye. He looked back up the face of the cliffs, and the air was suddenly full and rich with the music he had heard before, music of anguish and exalted despair... Cugel stared in wonder. A great winged creature wearing white robes flapped on high along the face of the cliff. The wings were long, ribbed with black chitin, sheathed with grey membrane. Cugel watched in awe as it swooped into a cave high up in the face of the cliff.

A gong tolled, from a direction Cugel could not determine. Overtones shuddered across the air and when they died, the unheard music became almost audible. From far over the valley came one of the Winged Beings, carrying a human form, of what age and sex Cugel could not determine. It hovered beside the cliff and dropped its burden. Cugel thought to hear a faint cry and the music was sad, stately, sonorous. The body seemed to fall slowly down the great height and struck at last at the base of the cliff. The Winged Being, after dropping the body, glided to a high ledge, where it folded its wings and stood like a man, staring over the valley. Cugel shrank back behind a rock. Had he been seen?

He could not be sure. He heaved a deep sigh. This sad golden world of the past was not to his liking; the sooner he could leave the better. He examined the ring which Pharesm had furnished, but the gem shone like dull glass, with none of the darting glitters which would point the direction to TOTALITY. It was as Cugel feared. Pharesm had erred in his calculations and Cugel could never return to his own time.

The sound of flapping wings caused him to look into the sky. He shrank back into such concealment as the rock offered. The music of woe swelled and sighed away, as in the light of the setting sun the winged creature hovered beside the cliff and dropped its victim. Then it landed on a ledge with a great flapping of wings and entered a cave.

Cugel rose to his feet and ran crouching down the path through the amber dusk.

The path presently entered a grove of trees and here Cugel paused to catch his breath, after which he proceeded more circumspectly. He crossed a patch of cultivated ground on which stood a vacant hut. Cugel considered it as shelter for the night, but thought to see a dark shape watching from the interior and passed it by.

The trail led away from the cliffs, across rolling downs, and just before the twilight gave way to night Cugel came to a village standing on the banks of a pond.

Cugel approached warily, but was encouraged by the signs of tidiness and good husbandry. In a park beside the pond stood a pavilion possibly intended for music, miming or declamation; surrounding the park were small narrow houses with high gables, the ridges of which were raised in decorative scallops. Opposite the pond was a larger building, with an ornate front of woven wood and enamelled plaques of red, blue and yellow. Three tall gables served as its roof, the central ridge supporting an intricate carved panel, while those to either side bore a series of small spherical blue lamps. At the front was a wide pergola sheltering benches, tables and an open space, all illuminated by red and green fire-fans. Here townsfolk took their ease, inhaling incense and drinking wine, while youths and maidens cavorted in an eccentric high-kicking dance, to the music of pipes and a concertina.

Emboldened by the placidity of the scene, Cugel approached. The villagers were of a type he had never before encountered, of no great stature, with generally large heads and long restless arms. Their skin was a rich pumpkin orange; their eyes and teeth were black; their hair, likewise black, hung smoothly down beside the faces of the men to terminate in a fringe of blue beads, while the women wound their hair around white rings and pegs, to arrive at a coiffure of no small complexity. The features were heavy at jaw and cheekbone; the long wide-spaced eyes drooped in a droll manner at the outer corners. The noses and ears were long and were under considerable muscular control, endowing the faces with great vivacity. The men wore flounced black kirtles, brown surcoats, headgear consisting of a

wide black disc, a black cylinder, another lesser disc, surmounted by a gilded ball. The women wore black trousers, brown jackets with enamelled discs at the navel, and at each buttock a simulated tail of green or red plumes, possibly an indication as to marital status.

Cugel stepped into the light of the fire-fans; instantly all talk ceased. Noses became rigid, eyes stared, ears twisted about in curiosity. Cugel smiled to left and right, waved his hand in a debonair all-inclusive greeting, and took a seat at an empty table.

There were mutters of astonishment at the various tables, too quiet to reach Cugel's ears. Presently one of the elders arose and approaching Cugel's table spoke a sentence, which Cugel found unintelligible, for with insufficient scope, Pharesm's mesh as yet failed to yield meaning. Cugel smiled politely, held wide his hands in a gesture of well-meaning helplessness. The elder spoke once more, in a rather sharper voice, and again Cugel indicated his inability to understand. The elder gave his ears a sharp disapproving jerk and turned away. Cugel signalled to the proprietor, pointed to the bread and wine on a table and signified his desire that the same be brought to him.

The proprietor voiced a query which, for all its unintelligibility, Cugel was able to interpret. He brought forth a gold coin, and, satisfied, the proprietor turned away.

Conversation recommenced at the various tables and before long the vocables conveyed meaning to Cugel. When he had eaten and drunk, he rose to his feet and walked to the table of the elder who had first spoken to him, where he bowed respectfully. "Do I have permission to join you at your table?"

"Certainly; if you are so inclined. Sit." The elder indicated a seat. "From your behaviour I assumed that you were not only deaf and dumb, but also guilty of mental retardation. It is now clear, at least, that you hear and speak."

"I profess rationality as well," said Cugel. "As a traveller from afar, ignorant of your customs, I thought it best to watch quietly a few moments, lest in error I commit a solecism."

"Ingenious but peculiar," was the elder's comment. "Still, your conduct offers no explicit contradiction to orthodoxy. May I inquire the urgency which brings you to Farwan?"

Cugel glanced at his ring; the crystal was dull and lifeless; TOTALITY was clearly elsewhere. "My homeland is uncultured; I travel that I may learn the modes and styles of more civilized folk."

"Indeed!" The elder mulled the matter over for a moment, and nodded in qualified approval. "Your garments and physiognomy are of a type unfamiliar to me; where is this homeland of yours?"

"It lies in a region so remote," said Cugel, "that never till this instant had I knowledge of the land of Farwan!"

The elder flattened his ears in surprise. "What? Glorious Farwan, unknown? The great cities Impergos, Tharuwe, Rhaverjand - all unheard of? What of the illustrious Sembers? Surely the fame of the Sembers has reached you. They expelled the star-pirates; they brought the sea to the Land of Platforms; the splendour of Padara Palace is beyond description!"

Cugel sadly shook his head. "No rumour of this extraordinary magnificence has come to my ears."

The elder gave his nose a saturnine twitch. He said shortly: "Matters are as I state."

"I doubt nothing," said Cugel. "In fact I admit to ignorance. But tell me more, for I must be forced to abide long in this region. For instance, what of the Winged Beings that reside in the cliff? What manner of creature are they?"

The elder pointed towards the sky. "If you had the eyes of a nocturnal titvit you might note a dark moon which reels around the earth, and which cannot be seen except when it casts its shadow upon the sun. The Winged Beings are denizens of this dark world and their ultimate nature is unknown. They serve the Great God Yelisea in this fashion: whenever comes the time for man or woman to die, the Winged Beings are informed by a despairing signal from the dying person's norn. They thereupon descend upon the unfortunate and convey him to their caves, which in actuality constitute a magic opening into the blessed land Byssom."

Cugel leaned back, black eyebrows raised in a somewhat quizzical arch. "Indeed, indeed," he said, in a voice which the elder found insufficiently earnest.

"There can be no doubt as to the truth of the facts as I have stated them. Orthodoxy derives from this axiomatic foundation, and the two systems are mutually reinforcing: hence each is doubly validated."

Cugel frowned. "The matter undoubtedly goes as you aver -but are the Winged Beings always accurate in their choice of victims?"

The elder rapped the table in annoyance. "The doctrine is irrefutable, for those whom the Winged Beings take never survive, even when they appear in the best of health. Admittedly the fall upon the rocks conduces towards death, but it is the mercy of Yelisea which sees fit to grant a speedy extinction, rather than the duration of a possibly agonizing canker. The system is wholly beneficent. The Winged Beings summon only the moribund, which are then thrust through the cliff into the blessed land Byssom. Occasionally a heretic argues otherwise and in this case -but I am sure that you share the orthodox view?"

"Wholeheartedly," Cugel asserted. "The tenets of your belief are demonstrably accurate." And he drank deep of his wine. Even as he set down the goblet a murmur of music whispered through the air: a concord infinitely sweet, infinitely melancholy. All sitting under the pergola became silent - though Cugel was unsure that he in fact had heard music.

The elder huddled forward a trifle, and drank. Only then did he glance up. "The Winged Beings are passing over even now."

Cugel pulled thoughtfully at his chin. "How does one protect himself from the Winged Beings?"

The question was ill-put; the elder glared, an act which included the curling forward of his ears. "If a person is about to die, the Winged Beings appear. If not, he need have no fear."

Cugel nodded several times. "You have clarified my perplexity. Tomorrow - since you and I are manifestly in the best of health - let us walk up the hill and saunter back and forth near the cliff."

"No," said the elder, "and for this reason: the atmosphere at such an elevation is insalubrious; a person is likely to inhale a noxious fume, which entails damage to the health."

"I comprehend perfectly," said Cugel. "Shall we abandon this dismal topic? For the nonce we are alive and concealed to some extent by the vines which shroud the pergola. Let us eat and drink and watch the merrymaking. The youths of the village dance with great agility."

The elder drained his goblet and rose to his feet. "You may do as you please; as for me, it is time for my Ritual Abasement, this act being an integral part of our belief."

"I will perform something of a like nature by and by," said Cugel. "I wish you the enjoyment of your rite."

The elder departed the pergola and Cugel was left by himself. Presently certain youths, attracted by curiosity, joined him, and Cugel explained his presence once again, though with less emphasis upon the barbaric crudity of his native land, for several girls had joined the group, and Cugel was stimulated by their exotic colouring and the vivacity of their attitudes. Much wine was served and Cugel was persuaded to attempt the kicking, jumping local dance, which he performed without discredit. The exercise brought him into close proximity with an especially beguiling girl, who announced her name to be Zhiaml Vraz. At the conclusion of the dance, she put her arm around his waist, conducted him back to the table, and settled herself upon his lap. This act of familiarity excited no apparent disapproval among the others of the group, and Cugel was emboldened further. "I have not yet arranged for a bedchamber; perhaps I should do so before the hour grows late."

The girl signalled the innkeeper. "Perhaps you have reserved a chamber for this chisel-faced stranger?"

"Indeed, I will display it for his approval."

He took Cugel to a pleasant chamber on the ground floor, furnished with couch, commode, rug and lamp. On one wall hung a tapestry woven in purple and black, on another was a representation of a peculiarly ugly baby which seemed trapped or compressed in a transparent globe. The room suited Cugel; he announced as much to the innkeeper and returned to the pergola, where now the merrymakers were commencing to disperse. The girl Zhiaml Vraz yet remained, and she welcomed Cugel with a

warmth which undid the last vestige of his caution. After another goblet of wine, he leaned close to her ear. "Perhaps I am over-prompt; perhaps I over-indulge my vanity; perhaps I contravene the normal decorum of the village - but is there reason why we should not repair to my chamber, and there amuse ourselves?"

"None whatever," said the girl. "I am unwed and until this time may conduct myself as I wish, for this is our custom."

"Excellent," said Cugel. "Do you care to precede me, or walk discreetly to the rear?"

"We shall go together; there is no need for furtiveness!"

Together they went to the chamber and performed a number of erotic exercises, after which Cugel collapsed into a sleep of utter exhaustion, for his day had been taxing.

During the middle hours he awoke to find Zhiaml Vraz departed from the chamber, a fact which in his drowsiness caused him no distress and he once more returned to sleep.

The sound of the door angrily flung ajar aroused him; he sat up to find the sun not yet arisen, and a deputation led by the elder regarding him with horror and disgust.

The elder pointed a long quivering finger through the gloom. "I thought to detect heretical opinion; now the fact is known! Notice: he sleeps with neither head-covering nor devotional salve on his chin. The girl Zhiaml Vraz reports that at no time in their congress did the villain call out for the approval of Yelisea!"

"Heresy beyond a doubt!" declared the others of the deputation.

"What else could be expected of an outlander?" asked the elder contemptuously. "Look! Even now he refuses to make the sacred sign."

"I do not know the sacred sign!" Cugel expostulated. "I know nothing of your rites! This is not heresy, it is simple ignorance!"

"I cannot believe this," said the elder. "Only last night I outlined the nature of orthodoxy."

"The situation is grievous," said another in a voice of portentous melancholy. "Heresy exists only through putrefaction of the Lobe of Correctitude."

"This is an incurable and fatal mortification," stated another, no less dolefully.

"True! Alas, too true!" sighed one who stood by the door. "Unfortunate man!"

"Come!" called the elder. "We must deal with the matter at once."

"Do not trouble yourself," said Cugel. "Allow me to dress myself and I will depart the village never to return."

"To spread your detestable doctrine elsewhere? By no means!"

And now Cugel was seized and hauled naked from the chamber. Out across the park he was marched, and to the pavilion at the centre. Several of the group erected an enclosure formed of wooden posts on the platform of the pavilion and into this enclosure Cugel was thrust. "What do you do?" he cried out. "I wish no part of your rites!"

He was ignored, and stood peering between the interstices of the enclosure while certain of the villagers sent aloft a large balloon of green paper buoyed by hot air, carrying three green fire-fans below.

Dawn showed fallow in the west. The villagers, with all arranged to their satisfaction, withdrew to the edge of the park. Cugel attempted to climb from the enclosure, but the wooden rods were of such dimension and spacing as to allow him no grip.

The sky lightened; high above burned the green fire-fans. Cugel, hunched and in goose-flesh from the morning chill, walked back and forth the length of the enclosure. He stopped short, as from afar came the haunting music. It grew louder, seeming to reach the very threshold of audibility. High in the sky appeared a Winged Being, white robes trailing and flapping. Down it settled and Cugel's joints became limp and loose. The Winged Being hovered over the enclosure, dropped, enfolded Cugel in its white robe, endeavoured to bear him aloft. But Cugel had seized a bar of the enclosure and the Winged Being flapped in vain. The bar creaked, groaned, cracked. Cugel fought free of the stifling cloak, tore at the bar

with hysterical strength; it snapped and splintered. Cugel seized a fragment, stabbed at the Winged Being. The sharp stick punctured the white cloak, and the Winged Being buffeted Cugel with a wing. Cugel seized one of the chitin ribs and with a mighty effort twisted it around backwards, so that the substance cracked and broke and the wing hung torn. The Winged Being, aghast, gave a great bound which carried both it and Cugel out upon the pavilion, and now it hopped through the village trailing its broken wing.

Cugel ran behind belabouring it with a cudgel he had seized up. He glimpsed the villagers staring in awe; their mouths were wide and wet, and they might have been screaming but he heard nothing. The Winged Being hopped faster, up the trail towards the cliff, with Cugel wielding the cudgel with all his strength. The golden sun rose over the far mountains; the Winged Being suddenly turned to face Cugel, and Cugel felt the glare of its eyes, though the visage, if such there were, was concealed beneath the hood of the cloak. Abashed and panting, Cugel stood back, and now it occurred to him that he stood almost defenceless should others drop on him from on high. So now he shouted an imprecation at the creature and turned back to the village. All had fled. The village was deserted. Cugel laughed aloud. He went to the inn, dressed himself in his garments, buckled on his sword. He went out into the taproom, and looking into the till, found a number of coins which he transferred to his pouch, alongside the ivory representation of NULLITY. He returned outdoors: best to depart while none was on hand to detain him. A flicker of light attracted his attention: the ring on his finger glinted with dozens of streaming sparks, and all pointed up the trail, towards the cliffs.

Cugel shook his head wearily, checked the darting lights once again. Without ambiguity they directed him back the way he had come. Pharesm's calculations, after all, had been accurate. He had best act with decision, lest TOTALITY once more drift beyond his reach.

He delayed only long enough to find an axe, and hastened up the trail, following the glittering sparks of the ring.

Not far from where he had left it, he came upon the maimed Winged Being, now sitting on a rock beside the road, the hood drawn over its head. Cugel picked up a stone, heaved it at the creature, which collapsed into sudden dust, leaving only a tumble of white cloth to signal the fact of its existence.

Cugel continued up the road, keeping to such cover as offered itself, but to no avail. Overhead hovered Winged Beings, flapping and swooping. Cugel made play with the axe, striking at the wings, and the creatures flew high, circling above.

Cugel consulted the ring and was led on up the trail, with the Winged Beings hovering just above. The ring coruscated with the intensity of its message: there was TOTALITY, resting blandly on a rock!

Cugel restrained the cry of exultation which rose in his throat. He brought forth the ivory symbol of NULLITY, ran forward and applied it to the gelatinous central globe.

As Pharesm had asserted, adherence was instant. With the contact Cugel could feel the spell which bound him to the olden time dissolving.

A swoop, a buffet of great wings! Cugel was knocked to the ground. White cloth enveloped him, and with one hand holding NULLITY he was unable to swing his axe. This was now wrenched from his grasp. He released NULLITY, gripped a rock, kicked, somehow freed himself, and sprang for his axe. The Winged Being seized NULLITY and with TOTALITY attached, bore it aloft towards a cave high in the cliffs.

Great forces were pulling at Cugel, whirling in all directions at once. There was a roaring in his ears, a flutter of violet lights, and Cugel fell a million years into the future.

He recovered consciousness in the blue-tiled room with the sting of an aromatic liquor at his lips. Pharesm, bending over him, patted his face, poured more of the liquor into his mouth. "Awake! Where is TOTALITY! How are you returned?"

Cugel pushed him aside, and sat up on the couch.

"TOTALITY!" roared Pharesm. "Where is it? Where is my talisman?"

"I will explain," said Cugel in a thick voice. "I had it in my grasp, and it was wrenched away by winged creatures in the service of Great God Yelisea."

"Tell me, tell me!"

Cugel recounted the circumstances which had led first to gaining and then losing that which Pharesm sought. As he talked, Pharesm's face became damp with grief and his shoulders sagged. At last he marched Cugel outside, into the dim red light of late afternoon. Together they scrutinized the cliffs which now towered desolate and lifeless above them. "To which cave did the creature fly?" asked Pharesm. "Point it out, if you are able!"

Cugel pointed. "There, or so it would seem. All was confusion, all a tumble of wings..."

"Remain here." Pharesm went inside the workroom and presently returned. "I give you light," and he handed Cugel a cold white flame tied into a silver chain. "Prepare yourself."

At Cugel's feet he cast a pellet which broke into a vortex, and Cugel was carried dizzily aloft to that crumbling ledge which he had indicated to Pharesm. Nearby was the dark opening into a cave. Cugel turned the flame within. He saw a dusty passage, three strides wide and higher than he could reach. It led back into the cliff, twisting slightly to the side. It seemed barren of all life.

Holding the lamp before him, Cugel slowly moved along the passage, heart thumping for dread of something he could not define. He stopped short: music? The memory of music? He listened and could hear nothing but when he tried to step forward fear clamped his legs. He held high the lantern and peered down the dusty passage. Where did it lead? What lay beyond? Dusty cave? Demonland? The blessed land Byssom? Cugel slowly proceeded, every sense alert. On a ledge he spied a shrivelled brown spheroid: the talisman he had carried into the past. TOTALITY had long since disengaged itself and departed.

Cugel carefully lifted the object, which was brittle with the age of a million years and returned to the ledge. The vortex, at a command from Pharesm, conveyed Cugel back to the ground.

Dreading the wrath of Pharesm, Cugel tendered the withered talisman.

Pharesm took it, held it between thumb and forefinger. "This was all?"

"There was nothing more."

Pharesm let the object fall. It struck and instantly became dust. Pharesm looked at Cugel, took a deep breath, then turned with a gesture of unspeakable frustration and marched back to his divinary.

Cugel gratefully moved off down the trail, past the workmen standing in an anxious group waiting for orders. They eyed Cugel sullenly and a 2-ell man hurled a rock. Cugel shrugged and continued south along the trail. Presently he passed the site of the village, now a waste overgrown with gnarled old trees. The pond had disappeared and the ground was hard and dry. In the valley below were ruins, but none marked the sites of the ancient cities Impergos, Tharuwe and Rhaverjand, now gone beyond memory.

Cugel walked south. Behind him the cliffs merged with haze and presently were lost to view.