

THE IMPROBABLES

What is true is what is experienced.

CHAPTER I

The reception room of the first rector was empty and silent when the visitor entered. He was a small man, very narrow-shouldered, but his ease and unusual agility gave pause for thought.

Varold stepped in without showing the least impatience. His attitude did not reflect that nervous shyness of common people pent up in a majestic place awaiting the appointed time for a meeting. Watching him, you could think he was dallying in an old, familiar house.

He walked over to the permanent 3D projection of the first rector in a corner of the room, a statue that made only a few, slow, repeated movements. It was obviously a loop from a film. Varold smiled at the effigy and thumbed his nose at it.

“A secret ritual, a forbidden gesture,” a humorless voice said behind him.

Varold turned around. The first rector was standing on the other side of the room, a mirror image across from the central column. The look he gave Varold was ambiguous, a little patronizing but strict and with something more elusive.

The visitor bowed slightly without losing his smile, “I apologize. The gesture you refer to belongs to no ritual. In truth, it belongs to a distant past when it meant something a little irreverent but was readily forgiven. It was childish.”

The first rector walked slowly, his face was blank, closed like a door, showing no hint of emotion. “Would you please explain to me why you are here,” he spoke politely, with a gentle voice.

Varold took his time. He glanced amusedly at his host’s black robe and went over to a dish-shaped chair where he sat down without being invited. Shortly he announced, “I have some information that your special service has no knowledge of and I’m prepared to give it to you... in exchange for a nomination to the executive committee of said service.”

The first rector sat down as well. “If your information deserves such a reward, we shall see that you are satisfied. What’s it about?”

Varold admired the man’s control: the most important magistrate of Kaltarborog was probably not used to encountering informality and insolence.

“See how I trust you. I’ll give it to you solely on your word.”

He paused, watched for the first rector’s reaction. But the challenge slid past like water off stone.

“From my personal observations,” he went on, “I know that the archons of Babelia are preparing an expedition to the past. Oh, I’m aware that you, too, have had many such expeditions, but the one I’m talking about is different from yours because of the probability of success. This time Babelia is seeking out a particular person and it looks like he’s hit on something big. If you don’t act now, our enemies might soon have use of a totally new weapon. I don’t have to remind you that Kaltarborog and Babelia have long been equal in power and that all our weapons are useless against the range of the other. These expeditions to the past, to some old scientist or another whose genius will guide us in one direction or another—these expeditions didn’t start yesterday and Babelia, too, is constantly sending emissaries. But as I just explained, this new one has a good chance of success.”

The first rector stared coldly at Varold, “By what means,” he asked softly, “have you arrived at such conclusions?”

Varold smiled, “Let’s just say that I’m a kind of maverick working for Kaltarborog.” He leaned forward. “The person on whom the Babelians are focusing is studying genes. I suspect the archons are considering site-specific mutation that will get them what neither of us have managed to perfect: a species capable of travelling in time like in space without the need for any device—the ‘chronanthrope.’ Then they’d get through all the barriers that we’ve put up against any temporal intrusion. That’s the

ultimate weapon that will destroy us. If we let Babelia act alone, we'll be bringing about our own demise."

The first rector straightened up, "And what if you were a Babelian infiltrating this city?"

"Put me through the tests," Varold offered simply.

The magistrate nodded, "We shall submit you to them. In the meantime, you'll wait in the penitent's cell where you'll have time to repent the imprudence you've shown since the start of this conversation. Now, give me the details..."

Either Varold had help from the outside or else he had perfected some special means, either way there was no trace of him when they came to give him the tests. And yet, it was no mean feat to get out of the penitent's cell...

His disappearance seemed to be an admission of guilt, of treason. So, the rectors took the news into consideration—they would have to protect themselves against all traps, but Kaltarborog was vulnerable. Nevertheless, following this line of thought, they could wonder why a Babelian spy would sabotage his mission by tacitly revealing his identity by escaping. There were too many uncertainties here for the rectors to take it lightly.

They summoned an agent named Anton Borg whom they would send back, just in case, to the time coordinates given by that strange Varold and his goal was the same man whom, according to Varold, Babelia was targeting.

As for Varold, no Kaltarian ever had contact with him again, except for Anton Borg.

For their time travel the Kaltarians used a highly perfected derivative of an old device invented in New Vancouver in the 21st century: the time transfer, whose principle was based on the negative duration of certain particles which were themselves discovered a century earlier. But time transfer could only move inanimate objects, excluding all biological organisms, and only for a very short time. Contrary to this, the Kaltarian mechanism allowed virtually all kinds of possible voyages. All, except for the famous 30th century barrier that had always been impassable. But, travelling from the 24th to the 30th century was of little interest since the whole period in between was in a state of latent war that marked the relations between Kaltarborog and Babelia.

They had, therefore, focused their research on the past and each side was striving to use the work of an ancient scientist, trying to get the most out of what had not been published. There were enough men of science over the past centuries that the field of research would never run dry. Both sides were sure that this method was the only one that would decide the winner because nothing of what they discovered remained secret for long. In fact, Kaltarian commandoes, by dematerializing, could pass through the Babelian energy shields and vice versa. Each camp was teeming with spies from the other side and anything considered ultra-secret was immediately targeted by the unstoppable agents.

The two giant cities represented the final elements ferociously devoted and attached to the mother planet. For two centuries they had evolved side by side, fighting for supremacy while the rest of humanity had emigrated to other worlds in the solar system like Alpha Centauri. These colonies maintained no relations with the metropolis that they considered populated by a bunch of madmen—which was not exactly true. The cities on the Moon, being so close, were keeping a suspicious eye on the people who lived only for war but they never sent a ship to Babelia or Kaltarborog.

For their part, the two rival cities were completely uninterested in extra-terrestrial affairs. Both considered the emigrants as despicable foreigners because of their desertion. But they did not have a space fleet at their disposal and were limited in the field of robot ships, all of which were considered diabolically clever but simply ineffective.

It was this ineffectiveness of the most cleverly designed weapons—and the deadliest—that enraged the two opponents so violently and fed their mutual fury. With the perfection of a new destructive machine in the shadows of the past being impossible since they could not transport the necessary technology out of it, their last hope of victory was spying on the ancient geniuses followed up with work that was so different from the current trends that the enemy would not understand the impact. However, as this mindset was held on both sides, it was inevitable that their emissaries would meet and the war, far from ending, was simply carried into the past.

Jorik was floating in non-time. At the bottom of an air sac in the main palace of Babelia lay his inert body, but the microwaves emitted by his mind were all passing through the delicate receptors of the bluish sphere that the archons had cast outside of duration. The thing was keeping vigil, beaten by the waves of eternity, those swells that are invisible to the human eye, whatever their country or epoch. The chronons struck it in their constant eddying, but it had been programmed not to react except to a specific frequency. Thus, through the intermediary of the searching sphere, Jorik was floating in non-time.

No thoughts, no dreams, no feelings could produce an array of images as rich as what Jorik was experiencing on his motionless and instant voyage. In the hazy fog of hundreds of mixed-up epochs he grazed stars being created and worlds being destroyed, multi-colored suns whose planets had been stolen away, dark universes where races perished, the dust of humanities and billions of births. All of a sudden, he changed scales and saw himself surrounded by the weirdest micro-organisms, pass like subtle steam through all kinds of sharp-edged crystals, witness the exchange of electrons that was the life of giant seaweed. Then he entered the core of a human thought, followed the frozen twists and turns, tried to figure out under what reign it would vanish. Another showed up, trained on incomprehensible problems. The sphere moved away from it and returned to the void.

Jorik paid scant attention to these visions. He had a mission to accomplish and was waiting, in his personal time span, until the thing floating where his mind was focused gave him the signal of arrival. The goal of his mission was fitting for his dry, somber soul, his cold, joyless heart. He belonged to the classified brigade of the time emissaries and nothing except death would stop his hand when the instant came.

Something happened inside the sphere, a click that echoed in the hibernating man's brain: the cortical emission that Jorik also used as a channel, guiding the waves of the thing on the lookout. The signal-carriers travelled against the current. Through this mechanism the emissary had already received a bunch of useless information. Now something new was coming.

On his bed in the 20th century, in the old city of Paris, a man sat up. He had just been startled awake by a noise, the noise of a metal object falling on the wood floor. Automatically, his sleepy eyes drifted to the luminous hands of the alarm clock on the bedside table. They showed three o'clock. Sitting on his bed, Manuel did not move for a second. It was not easy to tell the difference between sounds coming from outside and what might have banged inside the bedroom because a hard rain was hammering the windows and the wind was raging around the roofs. Somewhere in the night an impatient horn was honked. A long silence, then the three strikes of a clock came through the storm. Manuel searched the shadows. No noise could have come from the room. There was no real doubt about it. And then he heard it again, the same sound—he remembered the exact, faintly metallic tone. A sound that seemed to come out of a dream.

"I wasn't dreaming," he said in a low voice.

He reached out toward the lamp. A yellow light flooded the room. Manuel Esteban blinked, briefly blinded. When his eyes adjusted to the light he examined the floor, but to see it all he had to get up, which he did reluctantly.

And he jumped back. At the foot of the bed there was an object that should not have been there. Grippled by fear Manuel began a slow retreat toward the door. At any moment he was expecting an attack of some kind from the bluish sphere whose presence was unexplainable.

Then he stopped with his hand on the doorknob. If anything happened, he would have time to escape... but the ball was just lying there, once in a while throwing out some wild lights against the bluish glow. A kind of weak vibration, barely noticeable, also seemed to be emanating from it. Esteban felt possessed. He watched it with a kind of terror, a detached terror that he faced with uncommon courage by staying in the room. He would have been long gone if this weird paralysis was not nailing him to the spot.

By reflex he threw open the door. No, he was not at all paralyzed... and maybe that was something to worry about even more. Where did this thing come from and how did it get through the closed windows? Manuel dodged these questions.

Okay, a sphere at least 20 inches in diameter, made of some material that reminded him of nothing he had ever seen before except maybe soapy film with fewer colors. Little inclined to mysticism he sensed superior technology—was one of the superpowers that rule the world working on some new

experiment? If so, Manuel was going to find himself on the front-page news very soon... unless they wanted to keep it a secret, which would put the primary witness of this success in great danger.

The attack was lightning fast. Esteban staggered under the blow of the psychic battering ram like being hit in the face by a shockwave. He tripped and held onto the doorframe to keep from falling. His mind started reeling under the wave of strange thoughts, all brutal and insistent, a tumultuous current that unfurled before him the scattered fragments of the personality attacking him.

However, Manuel soon pulled himself together and used the full force of his will against the unseen enemy. He managed to take three steps back, three slow, heavy steps like he was walking in an old diving suit.

Slowly, silently, the sphere rose up and floated in mid-air. Once again in possession of his consciousness and reason, Esteban felt chilled to the bone. The fright he had not yet fully felt was now rising up in him like a tide. He knew that a formless, terrifying danger was threatening him, that the object out of nowhere was something deeply evil, nothing to do with the petty quarrels in the news or with the level of science he knew about. He took another step and fell backward onto the floor with a thud.

Like being carried on soft waves the sphere floated towards the man lying still. It stopped in front of him and started vibrating while the weird lights got brighter inside. Outside the rain beat down even harder.

Manuel had not passed out. Stripped of all energy and initiative, reduced to an object, his dilated eyes watched the movements of the assailant. The first mental attack had, in the end, targeted his body, not his mind. A second attack was in the works, which scared him even more. On the surface of his brain, countless hypotheses, each one crazier than the last, were running wild, trying to explain the situation he was in. For a split second he even considered what truly reflected reality. But he did not stop there, judging it less acceptable than the others...

The sphere drifted slowly down to his chest. The wind and the rain in the city raged on more fiercely than ever, as if the elements were partner to the aggression that Manuel was suffering. Surrendering, defenseless, conscious of little, he ended up confounding the fury of the skies with his present danger.

The second attack came. The ball was spinning faster and faster while new colors appeared inside—unusual, constantly changing, flashing and glowing colors that Manuel stared at in awe. Like this he went through a period of apathy about himself, feeling like a spectator at his own demise.

The real defeat came next. A strange mind, cold and determined, hastily insinuated itself in his brain, taking control of his innermost circuits, settling into the language zones, invading the strongholds of voluntary movement, blocking the reflex arcs, poisoning the peripheral conditioning. It captured the cerebellum, rushed down into the lower centers, polluted the emotions and dammed up the instincts.

The victim's personality grew smaller and weaker. Manuel was still aware of his body, a huge thing around a shrunken mind. He felt like his limbs stretched to the ends of the world, that his feet lay over the horizon. And at the same time, his ideas were gradually reduced to childish notions, his will to fight turned into a temper tantrum. What clarity remained in him knew that he had to cut his losses to save his individuality. He took refuge in the most primitive core of his being, the most elementary part of his self. He felt like he was rolling into a ball, another sphere mirroring the attacker. Back to this intact center he dragged the wreckage of who he had been, the aching debris of his thoughts and sentiments, the remains of his exhausted will.

Jorik launched a devastating flux of maximum power against this mental ball and the sphere turned pitch black as it spun dizzily. The waves bounced back and put in danger the internal mechanisms of the transmitter, causing Jorik's mind to burn with pain.

"Doesn't matter," the emissary judged, "we'll use it like it is..."

In the final moments of consciousness, what remained of Manuel started repeating frantically, "This being is called Jorik and he comes from another time... This being is called Jorik and he comes from another time..."

Manuel Esteban scrambled to his feet. Behind his drooping eyelids a flame was shining that did not belong to him. A thin smile, another's smile, was on his lips. He sprang toward the bathroom. No hesitation—the memory and habits of Esteban were at Jorik's service. Being commanded from another place and another time, Manuel's organism obeyed like a remote-controlled device, better certainly because of the involuntary help given to the attacker by the amount of his knowledge and by the traces

of his past. Of course, there was still this resistant kernel stuck like a tumor in the middle of the conquered terrain... but what could it do now against the occupant?

The blue sphere shrank. Soon it was the size of a rugby ball, then an orange. When it reached the diameter of a marble, Jorik picked it up with two fingers and dropped it into the pocket of a coat that Manuel had left on the back of a chair the night before. A moment later the sound of the shower could be heard and in it Jorik's hearty whistle.