# For Whom the Chopper Chops

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(*Translated by Edward Peck*)

*Never send to know for whom the chopper chops*
*It chops for thee*
(with apologies to John Donne)

Happy memories flooded into Isabel's mind. Morning in the woods, with slanting shafts of light . . . paths carpeted with pine needles and criss-crossed with knotty roots. Clear torrents chattering down, sometimes gouging out deep pools where you could draw fresh water in your cupped hands. Sometimes the shade was so thick that no plants grew below the high stands of spruce. Sometimes you walked through green and sunny glades where ragwort, cow parsley and briar roses were bursting into flowers . . . And very far away, very high up, there was ice and snow glistening in the rays of the brightest of suns.

All these wonders were for tomorrow . . . Tomorrow! What a delight. Into the scattered luggage went trousers and light dresses, the tartan bathing suit and her thick grey sweater. Isabel smiled with pleasure as she found with her fingers the familiar little roughness on the right-hand lock of the big suitcase. Everything would be ready this evening when Luke came home. He would only have to tidy up a bit his odds and ends of ropes, slings, pegs, étriers and nuts stacked up in a corner of the room. And tomorrow at dawn, they'd be off.

One year earlier Isabel had been thinking rather gloomily about this kind of departure. Holidays far from the sea seemed to her a cruel kind of punishment. And the letter sent by her godmother had been like a cold shower.

'Although the operation has been successful,' it read, 'the doctors have not concealed the fact that I cannot expect to be fully myself this summer, and in any case I could not spend my holidays alone in my beloved Chamonix. If perchance Isabel could spare a little of her time for the poor invalid that I have temporarily become, she would be doing me a very great service. And perhaps she would find in our mountains some delights she has so far ignored . . .' Etc.

'No! No! Damn it!' Isabel had exclaimed. Nonetheless there she was, a few weeks later, sighing as she got ready to pack sweaters, boots, anoraks and above all some books intended to cheer up a bit this sacrificed holiday.

Her forebodings proved correct, and she was bored stiff for the first two weeks. It rained a lot, it was cold. She had no friends, and, in spite of her efforts to show a kindly face to the old lady, who for her part seemed to be returning to life, Isabel was forced to count the long summer days one by one.

The only person at all young who came to the house exasperated her to the highest degree. Devoted to climbing, Pascal had a morbid taste for stories of mountain accidents, with which he tried to capture her attention.

'A fall of 800 metres! . . . They were found in little bits . . .'

'You're worrying Isabel,' said the godmother. 'Tell us about the climbs that end all right!'

'But, Aunt Anna, that's part of mountaineering, too. Look, in this morning's *Dauphiné*, there's a report of another six dead.'

And then one day, Pascal arrived together with Luke and a new tale of woe, to which for the first time Isabel listened with a sympathetic ear.

'I've brought along a friend, Aunt Anna! A great bloke! Yes Luke, you are! A natural! . . . The poor chap has just broken an arm on the North face of the Mont Blanc de Cheilon! In a stone-fall! He was belaying his partner and went on holding him in spite of the rock that had just wounded him . . . Otherwise they'd have dropped some hundreds of metres and they would have been buggered. Sorry, Aunt Anna . . . There'd already been two killed on Mont Blanc de Cheilon the week before, and this would have made four. So that's buggered his climbing for the season . . . Oh, sorry, Aunt Anna . . .'

Luke had stayed to dinner. And then he came back often with Pascal, in whom Isabel began to take a new interest. The fine weather helped. They went for long walks together. Isabel soon got to know all the parts of a valley which now seemed splendid to her . . . They came home in the evenings with sacks full of mushrooms or baskets of blueberries, with bunches of marguerites or scabious, with stories and laughter that echoed through the old house.

The summer passed happily. The pink flowers of the willowherb turned into stems of purplish pods, then into tufts of down, with bits of fluff floating away in the light at the slightest breath of wind.

At last there came the day when, having escaped from Pascal, Luke and Isabel went up to the source of the Arveyron. All the details of that walk remained vivid in Isabel's memory. The woods where the shafts of sun came through the branches of the fir trees, making a pattern of clear patches on an emerald bank of thick moss . . . The track as smooth as any in a park . . . The golden insects dancing their weird ballet in the sunbeams . . . The flight of a jay . . . They had reached a remote and romantic spot, dominated by the Dru and the splendid rugged wall of the Flammes de Pierre. Far away over the valley there was a low-lying mist suggesting the onset of autumn. A light wind ruffled Isabel's hair. Luke explained that in the last century the glacier had at this point formed a great arch of ice, but that its retreat had revealed the series of narrow gorges down which the Arveyron plunged into basins of bluey-green water and foaming waterfalls. And then he had said nothing at all, except a bit later: 'We'll soon have to go our own ways . . . Unless . . .'

They were married that December. The year had been a whirlwind of preparations, purchases, presents, invitations. They had had to fit out a little

office, work desperately hard to prepare for long-neglected exams. Sometimes in the evenings they brought a few friends together and, inevitably, the conversation turned to the mountains. Isabel did not understand all this endless climbing talk, but it brought back to her happy memories of time spent between the Col de Voza and the Col de Balme, the interplay of clouds and sunshine, the tops powdered with snow, and she felt herself in harmony with this talk as she grew more and more familiar with it . . .

'A Grade V pitch, but bad as anything, a sloping chimney full of verglas. Not a hope of wedging up it with a sack. We sweated like pigs. All that with belaying and climbing through on one piton . . . well. You just had to *feel* safe, you couldn't afford to come off. Guy had called "Slack on the red!", and at that moment there was a stonefall. We were lucky, they fell a few feet away, if not . . .'

'And if not,' Pascal intervened, 'they would have found you at the foot of the slabs, in the bergschrund. Well I never, that makes me think of the accident Max had two years ago. But still, what fun we did have that day. Poor chap. I liked him so much!'

The start of the holidays was delightful. For the month of July, Luke and Isabel had been lent a chalet in the upper part of Les Frasses. They had to mow the lawn, weed the garden, clip the hedges and water the flowers . . . They went for walks again, waiting for James to arrive; he was Luke's usual climbing partner.

'You'll see,' Luke had said to his wife, 'we'll hardly be separated at all. Between climbs, we'll have a break. And then there are all those days of bad weather! I hope you'll get to love the mountains more and more.'

It was quite true. She became aware of her growing attachment to the alpine world and could no longer think of any other kind of holiday. Butterflies were collecting nectar in the meadow. Sparrows had made their nest under the eaves of a wooden barn and were flying about to feed their cheeping nestlings. The chalet was filling up with sheaves of lupins. Every evening they lit a wood fire and beside it they chatted and laughed as they ate their supper, recalling memories of many things they had already enjoyed together and making a mass of plans for the future . . . To be able one day to buy this chalet . . . To fill it with the laughter of children.

James arrived at the end of a week. Luke welcomed him eagerly, since a whole period of fine weather had just gone by and nothing had been done. That evening, with James dining in the chalet, the talk was all of climbing.

'We'll go up to the hut tomorrow,' said Luke decisively. 'My dear chap, let me get my breath,' James protested. 'You've been resting for a whole week, and you're well sun-tanned! Here am I, just arrived, pale as a ghost, shagged out. Let me have a day to get myself organized in the campsite, and enjoy the delights of doing nothing. The weather forecast is good. Don't panic! What would you say to a climb, the day after tomorrow, taking the first cable car up the Aiguille du Midi? That'll give us a good start without our having to get up too early! Then we can tackle something more serious . . . We might begin with the Seigneur route on the Peigne? I don't think you've done it and neither have I . . .'

Luke explained to Isabel, who was looking a bit worried, that they'd only be away a very short time.

'The Peigne, that's above the Plan de l'Aiguille which you know. A tiny little mountain. Not high, not long, not dangerous. We'll be home in the afternoon. You'll hardly have time to fix a dinner for two starving climbers before we're back! Go on . . . Smile!'

The day after next, Luke got up early and disappeared without a sound. For Isabel, the day was endless. She tried to read, tried to knit, tried to write postcards, went for a short walk, got bored stiff, went back to the chalet . . . At five o'clock she was still alone and at the end of her patience. She decided to go to wait for the two men at the cable car station: if James's car was not there, they would have passed each other on the way and she would come back to the chalet. But the car was still there. Isabel parked her own car alongside and waited. The situation was becoming more interesting. Each cable car disgorged a little group of noisy tourists and of climbers whose efforts showed in their faces. Isabel felt proud to be waiting for one of them.

From one car or another, rather like the winning ticket in a lottery, Luke would get out, surprised and happy to be welcomed like this . . . And then they'd laugh together . . .

Time wore on. Isabel went to the information desk to ask when the last car was due.

'It's on the way now, Miss!'

Luke was about to arrive and the wait was delightful. But the men were not in the group that came out of that car. Isabel went round the station, looked about and asked again.

'Don't get so fussed, dear!' was the answer she got. 'Your husband will have been delayed and missed the last car down. That happens every day! He'll come down on foot. It's not serious. Just go home. He'll be there sooner than you think!'

The chalet now seemed a gloomy place. Two hours went by. Isabel, finding the loneliness unbearable, began to think the worst. The only person in the valley she could think of to tell her anything was Pascal, with all the tales of accidents he brought with him . . . At nine o'clock, she couldn't stand it any longer; she grabbed the telephone and, her words broken with sobs, poured out her tale of her day of waiting and the inexplicable delay.

Pascal was very good, even optimistic. Indeed he boosted her morale. Like the cable car man, he too seemed to find it all quite normal.

'Happens all the time . . . Don't fret . . . Anything could have happened to him without it being at all serious . . . No reason to panic, I tell you . . . He could be here in five minutes . . . In any case, keep me posted . . . Don't hesitate to disturb me. Just call me as soon as he's back, or if you get too bored!'

Isabel set about waiting again. She called Pascal several times on the phone. At eleven o'clock, she was weeping copiously.

'All right!' said Pascal. 'I'm not worried yet. But all the same, we'll do something. I'll telephone the Mountain Rescue to make sure they haven't had any accident reported to them, and I'll ask them to make a helicopter recce tomorrow morning, always assuming James and Luke are still not back down.

Now it's dark and there's nothing else one can do. Go to bed, take a sleeping pill. I swear there's nothing so far really out of the usual.'

Luke arrived about midnight. Isabel threw herself into his arms, sobbing wildly.

'But what on earth's the matter? What's the matter?' he asked. 'Has anything happened to you?'

'No. It's you, Luke. I thought you were dead . . .'

'. . . That I was dead? What a ridiculous idea! Do I look dead? . . . No! So what? . . . But am I tired? . . . And I didn't expect to be welcomed home with a fit of hysterics!'

This remark unleashed another flood of tears from Isabel.

'But you said you would be back down by the afternoon! How was I to know? . . . With all these stories of accidents which Pascal has been telling us . . . And the newspapers . . . By the way, Pascal has asked for the helicopter, for tomorrow morning . . . I was so frightened . . .'

'Hell!' exclaimed Luke, grabbing the telephone . . .

Then he understood, from his wife's distressed face, that it was all his own fault, for not having explained things better to her. The poor girl simply didn't understand.

'It just happens, my dear little Isabel, that one gets held up . . . We had some unforeseen snags, and in particular we lost hours helping a rope of three youngsters to get down. Absolutely knackered, they were, and inexperienced, to have set off like that . . . If we hadn't looked after them, they would have had to bivouac . . . Here, take my hankie. Look out, it isn't very clean . . . In normal circumstances, we should have spent the night at the Plan, instead of pushing on down on foot in the dark . . . It's for your sake we came back now . . . But I didn't expect to find you in such a state . . . Don't cry any more . . . I'm here well and truly alive and kicking . . . I love you . . . It's all over . . .'

Three days of rest followed. Isabel remained slightly ashamed of her panic. The next time she would know how to behave as a real climber's wife should . . .

The next time was not long in coming, but Luke was wise enough to take the necessary precautions.

'This time, I'll put you in the picture. It's going to be a longer climb . . . We're going to do the north face of the Triolet. We'll be gone at least one night. I'll explain the route to you: we climb a rather steep ice face above the Argentière glacier, and we'll come down by the normal route, an easy one, towards the Couvercle hut and then by the Mer de Glace to the Montenvers. I shan't be able to telephone you from the Argentière hut the first night because there isn't any Argentière hut! It's being rebuilt this summer and we shall have to bivouac. But when we come down, I can call you from the Couvercle. Now you know all that's involved. It could go quite fast. But now you begin to understand what it's all about. Sometimes the unexpected happens or the face can be in bad condition. If we've got to belay each other, it'll take longer, you understand, and in that case we may be home late. Or we might even spend a second night at the Couvercle. Not very likely – but just so that you've been warned . . . And don't let your imagination dwell on these accident stories!

Pascal is a fine lad but he does pile it on a bit . . . And he ends by scaring himself so much that he hardly dares to go climbing himself . . . Just think of him spending his nights in huts, with all those catastrophes buzzing round in his brain . . . What a nightmare! There you are, you're laughing, that's right. I hope I'll find you still laughing when we get back.'

Putting up with this new departure was in fact much easier. Isabel dined alone and spent the evening at the cinema; on returning home under the stars she thought dreamily of Luke and fell fast asleep at once. Next morning was fine and all must be well on the mountain. She went for a swim in the pool. It wasn't so bad after all, waiting down below, and she was surprised at herself for getting used to it so quickly. She spent the rest of the afternoon making a peach tart which, if it was no use that evening, would do splendidly for the next day. Isabel had refused an invitation to dine with Aunt Anna, so as to be home if Luke turned up or if he phoned.

The evening was a bit dismal, with no news of any kind. Isabel ended by going up to bed, but it was some time before she fell asleep, thinking she heard noises on the ground floor, the click of the door-latch, the noise of a car engine, voices . . . But it wasn't Luke . . .

At nine o'clock in the morning, on the third day, there was still nothing. Isabel needed reassurance but hesitated to bother Pascal. She had made the acquaintance of the wife of a guide, who lived nearby. She went to ask her, as a neighbour, what could be the reasons for the delay. She was lucky enough to catch the husband, packing his sack for a Mont Blanc trip.

'They've certainly not been quick!' he reckoned, once he had been put in the picture. 'But if you're worried, it's easy, you've only got to telephone yourself to the Couvercle. Ask for the warden and tell him it's from me: we've known each other for ages! He'll certainly let you know if they've been seen passing by, or if they're on their way down. It's quite easy.'

It wasn't as easy as all that. Fear once more gripped Isabel's heart. What should she say to this warden at the hut? And Heaven knows what he might tell her?

Eventually she rang Pascal. He was more surprised than he had been last time.

'North wall of the Triolet? Well, in fact, they should have been here last night! Of course, all sorts of things can happen . . . But it's a good idea to ask the Couvercle . . . You daren't? Come on, don't get in a state; I can hear the sob in your throat. Good, just wait, I'll ring myself. I'll understand the answer better than you will . . .'

He rang back ten minutes later.

'That's it . . . Don't panic Isabel . . . There's something I don't understand, but above all don't panic! . . . They haven't seen them yet at the Couvercle . . . And they haven't spent the night there either.'

A wail was heard at the other end of the line.

'I told you not to get in a state! They've probably had to bivouac . . . But there's something that worries me a bit . . . A roped party did the normal route up the Triolet this morning, very early, and is already back. I caught one of them on the phone. It seems they didn't see anybody, nor any tracks coming off the north face. A bit funny, it seems to me.'

'But what if they've fallen off the other side,' moaned Isabel.

'Don't assume the worst, not just yet! They could have . . . well, I don't know . . . Gone very high up on the face and not been able to get over, and had to climb down again . . . I don't know . . . Or they might have had a slight accident which held them up . . . Just a tiny one . . . Nothing serious! Hang on, don't cry. I'll come round . . . It was silly of me to tell you that . . . They'll be here soon . . . There'll be some explanation. Or else you'll have a call . . . I'll come, I'll be round in a minute. Don't cry like that.'

Pascal was really more worried than the last time. The timing was long, very long and it all seemed to show that Luke and James could not have reached the top of the Triolet.

Isabel was a terrible sight. She was twisting her handkerchief between her fingers, and was shaking her head continuously from left to right, as if refusing to accept what he had said, while tears streamed down her face.

'I should never have let him go! I should not have!' she sobbed.

'But you didn't know!' retorted Pascal, his arguments exhausted. 'Oh, what can have happened? Don't cry like that, it doesn't help . . . What a business. No. I beg of you, don't look at me like that . . . Good! Are we agreed? I'll call the helicopter.'

And, a little later: 'They'll make a recce over the Argentière basin at two o'clock . . . Now, calm down.'

Luke arrived back at ten to two and sized up the situation at a glance.

'Oh no! Not again!' he sighed.

While Pascal phoned to cancel the flight, Luke tried to calm down Isabel, who was racked with sobs. Then he began explaining things. Yes, they had had some idiotic mishaps. And revolting conditions . . . A covering of loose snow on ice for hundreds of feet . . . The way through the seracs had been bad . . . They'd got out of them at nightfall and had had to bivouac a bit lower down, on the south side . . . A roped party on the normal route? No, they hadn't seen it . . . It had probably gone over the summit before they'd even woken up . . . Not surprising that the party hadn't seen any tracks, especially if they weren't on the look-out for them . . . The route out was all in sheer ice and anyway there were several ways out . . . As for themselves, they had got down as quickly as possible . . . They were worn out after the day before and simply hadn't had the heart to climb up to the Couvercle just for a telephone call . . . They'd sooner get down as fast as they could . . .

As Pascal had disappeared, Luke looked at Isabel and nodded his head.

'Well,' he said, 'you do make a fuss . . . Now, don't begin crying again. Smile instead . . . I'm still alive, once more . . . I'm delighted to know that you love me so much . . . It's very flattering, you know. I must be the most appreciated husband in the whole valley of Chamonix. But mountain time-tables, you must understand, aren't like railway timetables . . . Do you get it, now? . . . Well, there we are. Don't wipe your tears on my shoulder, please . . . You must take a grip on yourself . . . And I must have a good bath and the kip I've been dreaming about for the last two days. Tonight I'll take you to dine at the Monchu Restaurant, in honour of the north face of the Triolet . . . That'll be nice, won't it?'

Of course it was all right. And the affair was nothing more than a joke which went the round of climbing circles.

'Hallo, Isabel? Do you want me to call the Mountain Rescue?' Pascal said every time he rang up his friend.

It had begun to rain. They organized consolation dinner parties. And, when the fine weather returned, Isabel repeated to herself the little lesson she was not ready to forget . . .

Luke explained to her his next climb.

'This time, we'll do the Aiguille Verte by the Y couloir. I daren't promise that we'll be back in good time . . . And, above all, don't raise the blood pressure of those chopper pilots! You won't, will you, my dear Isabel?'

He left home, reassured. Isabel went down to Geneva to dine with a bunch of friends. This time she seemed completely at ease. And so she was . . . She certainly spent a better night than Luke, who got up at some unearthly hour when she wasn't even in bed, in order to tackle the wearisome trek up the glacier in the dark, and to manage the crossing of some particularly evil-looking bergschrunds.

Isabel woke late, lay lazing a bit, thinking that once more the weather was fine, despite the slightly threatening cirrus clouds of the day before. Luke was in luck. If only she could find time to do, before his return, all the things she had set out to do . . . First of all it was Saturday, the day of the entertaining market. With her basket on her arm, and joy in her heart, Isabel went from stall to stall . . . A smile came to her lips as she remembered the anxiety that had harrowed her throughout the day of the trip to the Peigne. How long ago that now seemed . . . She'd learnt a few things since . . . Hallo, there are already mirabel plums on sale . . .!

The accident happened very early on the climb, and unforeseeably. Even so, it was freezing hard. But the loose stones had suddenly zoomed down, sweeping straight down the centre-line of the couloir. It was impossible to avoid them. Luke and James had been moving together when they heard them. No time to find the least belay. They had both been carried away and their fall had been savage, punctuated with jerks by the rope. Luke didn't even know whether he had fallen into the bergschrund or into a crevasse lower down. It seemed narrow, where he was, for a bergschrund. But deep enough to fill him with horror. His sack had fortunately stopped him by hitching at his back on a blade of ice. He felt pain all over . . . Of James no sign at all . . . The rope must have been cut by the stones. James must have finished up, him too, in the bergschrund or in a crevasse. And in what sort of a state? . . . Luke had lost his ice axe and one of his crampons . . . It was the sheerest chance that he'd kept his sack, that the waist-strap had held and that the whole thing held him up miraculously suspended on this blade of ice . . . With his remaining crampon, he tried to get a foothold on the other side of the wall of the crevasse . . . The arm-strap of his sack began to crack . . . No! better not budge . . . not move at all . . . his balance was too precarious. The sack wouldn't hold for ever. Luke had blood in his mouth. He was frozen. Mustn't get too cold, but there was no means of moving . . . Mustn't move, that's all . . . Wait for help . . . But how long would Isabel take to panic, this time round? What had he said to her? . . . Surely

nothing very nasty . . . Oh yes, he had joked about the chopper pilots' blood pressure . . . God! If only they knew! . . . How long would it take Isabel to call the chopper? How long?