

The Loop
Mark P. Henderson

Everyone had heard of La Boucle. Climbers travelled to those mountains and were reported missing. There were appeals for help, search and rescue bids, helicopters, interviews and official statements, and sometimes there were rumours of abandoned camps; but in the end it was accepted that the mountaineers had vanished among the peaks, and over the following days or weeks their stories dwindled from the news and were forgotten.

Franklin and Irvine relished danger. They loved exertion and craved the adrenaline rush. They were fishermen, fell-runners, bungee jumpers and mountaineers, and they were young. They'd known climbers who'd disappeared while visiting La Boucle. How could they resist its allure?

They carried their personal effects and gear – ropes, ice-axes, crampons, sleeping bags, tents - into the rented chalet, which shimmered with winter light and drowsed amidst odours of freshly-cut pine and sealant. The other five chalets were untenanted. The two men planned to return to the town for dinner, but despite Irvine's ministrations the Volvo wouldn't re-start. The clang of his frustrated boot against the bonnet reverberated across fields of snow and faded over the frozen lake. Dark conifers and the evening sky drank the echoes. The white faces of La Boucle stared from the middle distance. No birds sang. The air smelled deserted.

Franklin shook his head.

'Well, Irv, in the absence of mobile phone signal, neighbours and functioning vehicle, either we walk twenty miles –'

'Stuff that, Frank, it'll be dark in an hour and we don't know -'

' – or we beg use of that hotel's landline to call a garage.'

Franklin assessed the huge stone edifice brooding over the lake: a nineteenth century mock-Gothic mansion built around twelfth-century castle ruins, disparate strands of history juxtaposed. He lit a cigar.

'Hotel?' Irvine gave a short laugh. 'Google said "Castle". Not open to visitors. No other info. Still, I suppose...'

Their boots crunched over the frozen snow. The castle ruins - monuments of triumph and sorrow, home now to lichens and nesting crows - constituted less than a fifth of the structure. They couldn't be seen from the main entrance. The steps leading to the studded oak door had been cleared of snow, though not of shadow.

'Pretentious. Pseudo-mediaeval.' Franklin slapped the worn rope dangling beside the doorpost and then pulled it. Deep within the building a bell tolled. Twenty seconds passed. Then the door glided open. Irvine strode forward, frowning, and sniffed.

'Pseudo-mediaeval furniture polish, Frank?' He stared into the depths of the hall. 'Can't see a phone.' He tilted back his head and called, 'Hello?'

The dark panelled walls vouchsafed no reply. The portraits, hunting trophies, vacant side-table and empty umbrella stand gazed blankly at the intruders. The marble staircase was silent. Franklin cleared his throat, took off his boots and tiptoed into the first room on the left, a library. He pointed to a long red hair on a black leather wingback seat. Irvine, following his lead, shook his head and blinked.

'Remembering Leonie,' thought Franklin; 'but Leonie's no longer in his life.' Aloud, he said: 'She can't be far away. Chair's warm.'

They took off their gloves and jackets and began to search the ground floor corridors and rooms. Their meticulous exploration unearthed no occupant.

'On a scale of weirdness from one to ten,' muttered Irvine, 'this is a seven.'

The Loop
Mark P. Henderson

Franklin demurred. 'Five, Irv. It's warm; carpets and soft lighting; spotlessly clean. Nothing weird, except there's no sign of the scores of staff needed for upkeep. Or the red-haired lady.'

'What do you need for a seven, Frank? Dust and cobwebs, rotting floors, gibbering skeletons? Anyway, I'm hungry. Since there's no one here to welcome us and no visible phone and the car won't start, we'd better go back to the chalet and cook something.'

After a couple of wrong turnings they found their way back to the main door, but it was locked. The casements were high and sealed. They climbed on chairs to stare through a library window towards their chalet and the moribund Volvo. The twilight was deepening. Franklin licked his dry lips. Black stubble surrounded them. He felt he should have shaved.

'All right, Irv, seven. Six, anyway.'

'Eight, going on nine.' Irvine genuflected. His voice was unsteady. 'What now?'

'We continue searching. Someone's here, somewhere. And there must be other exits.'

They recovered their boots and outer garments and resumed their search. They could sense the cold of the outside world through three other doors. Two were immovable. The third opened under the ruined castle walls on to a frozen rugged path. They slid and stumbled among trees and undergrowth to a dilapidated boathouse. Night had fallen and the cold was menacing. Franklin pulled up his hood. A half moon cast bitter light on the ice-bound lake and the peaks of La Boucle. The shadows under the trees and the crumbling twelfth-century towers were black. In the boathouse was a decrepit rowing boat, timbers rotten but name freshly painted: *VADO MORI*. Franklin gave a hollow laugh.

'What's it mean, Frank?'

'That it would be unwise to launch it. It would disintegrate before we were halfway across the lake.'

They both loved fishing – selecting the bait, casting the line, playing with the prize - but not this lake, this boat, this night.

'All that in two words? Economical bloody language, eh?'

'Melanie's more of a Latin scholar than I am, but I know the phrase. It means, "prepare for death".'

'Well, that's cheered me up. So, no way across the lake. And we'd never get through that undergrowth.'

Franklin stared up at the arrow-slits in the mediaeval towers, grinning in the moonlight.

'Agreed. Back into the hotel, if it *is* a hotel. At least it's warm.' He sniffed. 'And I smell cooking.'

They followed their noses to the dining-room. It boasted a long polished oak table surrounded by thirteen chairs under a gleaming chandelier, carved cupboards and sideboards, and a covered hotplate exhaling appetising aromas. Irvine marched to the hotplate and lifted lids. Franklin surveyed the table. It was laid for two. He licked his lips again.

'Garlic mushrooms, creamy wine sauce.' Irvine sounded mesmerised. 'And a sir- ...' He whispered an obscenity. 'Frank, if you'd ordered a main, what would you have chosen?'

'Veggie lasagne, probably.'

'Yeah. Guess what? And the sirloin steak and trimmings are mine, right?'

The food was freshly cooked. Franklin poured wine, a vintage St Emilion for Irvine and a cool Sancerre for himself, and extolled the high-end catering and professionalism of the invisible chef and serving staff. He grinned. Irvine snarled, 'Shut up, Frank', but swallowed his wine and poured

The Loop
Mark P. Henderson

another glass. Both men did justice to the meal. Dessert awaited them atop the sideboard: crème brûlée. Coffee percolated beside the hotplate.

‘Feeling better?’ Franklin sipped more coffee and lit another cigar. Melanie would have disapproved, but there was an ashtray on the table. It was decorated with two verses from *The Hunting of the Snark*.

‘No longer hungry,’ said Irvine. ‘Tired, though. But Frank, this is *seriously* weird.’

‘Odd, but hardly threatening. Our hosts and their staff choose to remain invisible but their hospitality’s beyond reproach. We must recommend this place on TripAdvisor.’

‘Like Google says, the Castle isn’t open to visitors. And if the owners let us in, why won’t they let us out again? Lovely place, great meal, but -’

‘It’s a prank, Irv. It’s annoying not to have our stuff from the chalet, but this is just a practical joke. We’ll laugh about it later. Relax. Have more coffee.’

Irvine drank more coffee. He wondered whether the alleged prankster – or the red-haired lady, or the staff – might be hiding on one of the upper floors, or perhaps in one of the towers. The nineteenth century towers, he elaborated, not the twelfth century ones, which no longer had upper floors. Or, he added with a nervous laugh, in a cellar.

‘Irv, I’ve seen you tackle rock faces and overhanging ice ridges that I’d never have attempted without you on the rope. And you’re letting a baroque prank in a comfortable hotel unsettle you? But I agree, we should check upstairs.’ Franklin chuckled. ‘I’m sure unseen hands will clear the dishes once we’ve left the dining room.’

Most of the upstairs furniture lay shrouded under white sheets, though here too everything was immaculate. However, two en-suite bedrooms were ready for guests. Irvine stared and gripped his crucifix, lips moving. The blond hairs on his neck and forearms rose. Franklin shut his eyes and cleared his throat.

‘All right, Irv. Eight on your weirdness scale.’

‘It’s *off* the scale.’ Irvine’s voice was rough.

Their toothbrushes, hairbrushes and razors were arranged just as they’d left them in the chalet, Franklin’s in one prepared room, Irvine’s in the other. White fluffy towels invited them into the en-suites. Three vintage issues of the *Alpine Journal* lay on Irvine’s bedside table. On Franklin’s sat a copy of Hume’s *Inquiry into Human Understanding*.

‘How...?’ Irvine waved an uncomprehending hand.

‘With impeccable skill and subtlety.’ Franklin’s smile was tight. ‘Quite a feat, bringing all our stuff up here without our noticing.’

He waited until Irvine’s torrent of invective subsided and then reasoned that their only sensible option was to accept this further display of hospitality gracefully. In the end, Irvine conceded: no alternative.

During the night, Franklin dreamed of mountaineers who over the years had vanished while visiting La Boucle, some he’d known personally, others by reputation. They reached out, calling to him, but he couldn’t hear their words or interpret their gestures. He awoke to a flawless sunrise reflecting from the ice-clad peaks into his bedroom window. He was annoyed. He despised dreams for their irrationality and he despised himself for remembering them. Hauling himself out of bed he shaved, showered, dressed and went downstairs to the dining room. Breakfast sizzled on the hotplate. Coffee percolated.

The table was set for one.

The Loop
Mark P. Henderson

Franklin felt his fists clench. His fingernails bit the flesh of his hands. With studied calm he turned and mounted the stairs again to Irvine's room. There was no response to his knock. He opened the door.

Irvine wasn't there. Nor were his belongings. The room had been cleared. The bed was made and the towels in the en-suite were fresh and dry. Franklin forced his mind to stop churning.

'What I need,' he decided, 'is to sit with a cigar, and think.'

He went down to the library, stood on a chair and looked again through a window. The early sun gleamed on the chalets. No sign of occupancy. The Volvo had gone.

'Right.' Franklin spoke aloud. 'Irv woke early, found the front door unlocked, went out, managed to start the car, and set off.'

But the front door wasn't unlocked. Franklin returned to the library, sat in the wingback chair and lit his cigar. The *Hunting of the Snark* ashtray was beside him. He acknowledged difficulties with his explanation. Surely if Irv had found the door no longer secured he'd have woken him first, not set off alone. Or he'd have left a note. And how had he moved his stuff from the bedroom without being heard? And *why*? Franklin drew on the cigar and frowned, struggling to rationalise.

Deep within the building, the bell tolled. After twenty seconds the door glided open. Two young women entered, cautious and curious.

'Don't see a phone, Lee,' said the first. 'Look, we can't just walk into -'

'If it were your house, Mel, and two strangers asked for help because their car had broken down, would you refuse?' Leonie tossed her head. Her long Titian hair gleamed in the alluring light of the hall. 'Wow, some place! Come on, someone's around, else how did the door get opened?'

She turned left and entered the library. Melanie followed, sniffing the air.

'There *is* someone here,' she agreed. 'Can't you smell cigar smoke?' She stroked the wingback chair. 'Not far away, either. Seat's warm.'
