Of Mountains and Men

An Extraordinary Journey to Explore why Some People Feel the Irresistible Urge to Climb Mountains

Mateo Cabello

Oxford Alpine Club

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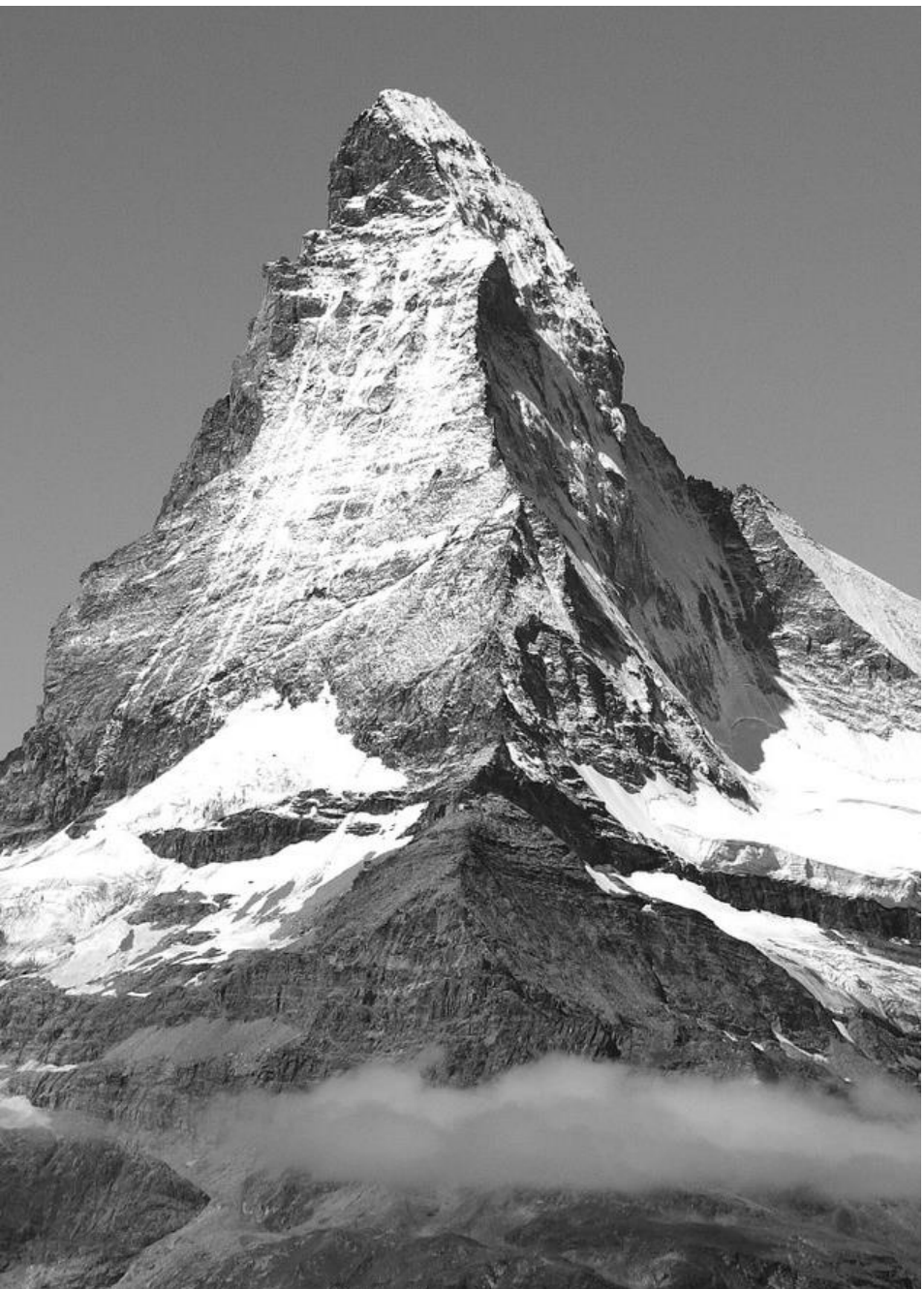
To Donald, David and Brigid



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Foreword

by Stephen Venables

I was just twenty-four when I first saw the bronze plaque in Zermatt's churchyard marking the grave of William Bell, Ian McKean and James Ogilvie – 'friends from Oxford who died together on the Matterhorn'. I was alone in Zermatt, waiting for a spell of settled weather to attempt a solo ascent of the Matterhorn's north face. Eking out my dwindling fund of Swiss francs at the Bahnhof dormitory, watching the weather forecast each day, going for walks to kill time, brooding over my inner turmoil, torn between ambition and foreboding, I was in an impressionable state which made the memorial inscription almost unbearably poignant. However, it wasn't just the stark reminder that I too could end up buried in this graveyard, which struck me: there were other, deeper, resonances.

It was only three years since I too had graduated from Oxford. During my final summer, three contemporaries from the Oxford University Mountaineering Club had also been killed in an alpine accident. They had died on Mont Blanc, but one of them had been my partner two years before that, in 1973, when I first climbed the Matterhorn by the Hörnli Ridge – the same ridge where Bell, McKean and Ogilvie died in 1948. So there was a sad familiarity with youthful optimism snuffed out, lives unlived, families damaged. There was also a particular personal connection, because James Ogilvie was my father's first cousin.

Their grandfather – my great-grandfather, William Ogilvie – did several climbs around Zermatt in 1872, including what must have been one of the very first ascents of the Weisshorn. He wanted to climb the Matterhorn too but it was only seven

years since the first ascent had been marred by a fatal accident, so his mother refused to allow him on the mountain. How prescient, you might conclude. And how ironic that the grandson should die on the very same mountain. However, the reality is that for all its hyped melodrama, the Matterhorn by its normal Hörnli Ridge is not a particularly hard or dangerous climb: the Weisshorn is actually a harder peak. A careless slip or momentary loss of concentration – or sheer bad luck – can happen anywhere. All we can do is mourn with that other mother – James's mother – the loss of her son.

A few days after that melancholic afternoon in the graveyard in May 1978, I did finally set foot on the North Face but after getting about a thousand feet up the still wintry wall, terrified by the vicious winds blasting the peak, I retreated, suitably chastened. About a year later I returned briefly to Oxford and ended up sharing a house with James Ogilvie's nephew. (He is also called James and recently climbed Mount Vinson in Antarctica, keeping the Ogilvie mountain tradition alive). By chance we were living next door to his grandmother, my great Aunt Mary, mother of the James who died in 1948. Now an old lady, retired after a lifetime as a distinguished champion of women's education, she was a wonderful person, always interested in what we were up to and generous in sharing memories of her own life and family, including her lost son. No-one ever 'gets over' the loss of a child. The sadness was still there to see. But so was the pride and joy, as she brought out the four-decades-old letters and diaries.

I wish I had paid closer attention at the time. As the years passed, all I could recall were vague memories of words written by a young officer serving in India that seemed remarkably mature yet full of youthful idealism. So I was delighted when I heard recently that Mateo Cabello was researching a book, not just about James Ogilvie, but about all three of the young men who died on that July day now almost

seven decades ago. Like me, Mateo came across the grave just after completing the Haute Route from Chamonix to Zermatt (he on foot; I on ski). He too was moved by the simple inscription – so moved that, as he relates, it inspired in him a determination to find out more about these three young men. What followed was a remarkable detective story, enhanced by the kind of serendipitous connections the Internet has made possible, as he built up a picture of the three Oxford friends.

Right from the start, Mateo Cabello was clear that he was not trying to find exactly what happened on 25th July 1948: he was not in the ghoulish business of trying to reconstruct an accident. How or why they fell was irrelevant. Far more important to him was the realisation that all three had been at Oxford immediately after serving in the Second World War. They belonged to a generation which had made sacrifices and which was now building what many hoped would be a better world. Each, in his different way, was an idealist. Already by their early twenties they had achieved a lot, and, but for that unlucky accident, they might have gone on to do great things. How that accident happened – and whether it happened on the way up or on the way back from the summit – is not important.

I can't help being reminded of Ruth Mallory, whose husband died on Everest in 1924, writing to their mutual friend Geoffrey Winthrop Young, "I don't think I do feel that his death makes me the least more proud of him; it is his life that I loved and love. I know so absolutely that he could not have failed in courage or self- sacrifice. Whether he got to the top of the mountain or did not, whether he lived or died, makes no difference to my admiration for him". So too with these three men who perished on an equally famous, if easier, mountain. This book is a celebration of the lives they lived.

Stephen Venables is a former president of the Alpine Club, and the first Briton to climb Everest without supplementary oxygen.

Preface

Mountains are cathedrals: grand and pure,
the houses of my religion.
Anatoli Boukreev

I have a very deep love of mountains, but the idea of climbing one never crossed my mind. In essence, I am just a rambler: a hill-walker who is particularly fond of wandering in the Alps every summer, when my wife and I get the boots out of the wardrobe and head for Switzerland, Italy or France. We usually spend a fortnight there, walking eight to ten hours per day, away from smart phones, the Internet and the other burdens of modern life. During these trips, all we need is a light rucksack with a few essentials (food, water and a change of clothes), a hot shower at the end of the day, and basic accommodation for the night. The circular Tour of Mont Blanc, the Haute Route (which links Chamonix and Zermatt) and the Alpine Pass Route in the Bernese Oberland make up some of our favourite treks.

Despite such slim mountaineering credentials, I have spent the last three years on a quest to find out why some people feel the irresistible urge to climb mountains, sometimes even at the expense of their lives.

This question is neither new nor original, I admit. In fact, it has often been asked since climbing became popular around the mid- nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the Matterhorn disaster in 1865, when four climbers died after reaching its summit for the first time, *The Times* proclaimed its bewilderment: "Is it life? Is it duty? Is it common sense? Is it

allowable? Is it wrong?" Derisive expressions such as 'acts of mock-heroism' or 'self-justification of the maladjusted' have been used to describe what pushes climbers to the heights. In 1937, the Swiss newspaper *Sport* went further when writing about those camping at the foot of the north face of the Eiger, waiting for a window of good weather to attempt climbing it, by calling them 'ludicrous earthworms'.

Even today the most seasoned climbers find it difficult to explain the attraction that mountains hold for them. This is especially remarkable considering that, as the mountaineer and author Joe Simpson describes, "What you stand to lose far outweighs whatever you could possibly win." In fact, dozens of people die every year in mountain-related accidents all over the world. Most of these are weekend aficionados. However, death makes no distinction and among those who die there are star climbers too, such as Alexey Bolotov, who was killed in May 2013 while trying an alternative approach to the Western Cwm, not far from the Lhotse face of Everest. Despite being well aware of the risks that climbing entails, those gripped by the 'climbing virus' cannot help but dream about their next adventure, their next expedition beyond the frontiers of the possible. Why? After all, as Robert Macfarlane explains in *Mountains of the Mind*, "Mountaineering isn't destiny – it doesn't have to happen to a person."

Finding an answer to that question without any personal climbing experience was a huge challenge. I have no idea what it is like to be hanging from a rope on an ice pillar as an avalanche hisses past me; neither have I gone through the agony of spending days tent- bound, high on a mountain, waiting for a storm to clear in order to descend it safely. I have never been in a situation where I have had to put my life in the hands of fellow climbers. What goes through your mind when passing below a big, trembling column of ice, as high as a ten-storey building, or trekking on a ridge cloaked with rotten snow where a single misstep could result in a fall of hundreds of feet onto a glacier? I honestly don't know.

In an attempt to fill this void, I have read as much as possible about other people's experiences in the mountains, including classic accounts about the first ascents in the Alps, such as Sir Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe*, and Edward Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*, as well as more recent tales of astonishing resilience against all the odds: books such as *K2, The Savage Mountain* by Charles Houston and Robert Bates, or *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog. There have been books about death and hardship on distant peaks, such as Joe Simpson's *Dark Shadows Falling* and *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer. However, there have also been inspirational stories about the triumph of the human spirit, some of the best being *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*, by Felice Benuzzi and *Freedom Climbers* by Bernadette McDonald. I enjoyed enormously reading what the protagonists of the most incredible climbing feats remembered about their exploits – recollections such as those of Walter Bonatti in *The Mountains of my Life* or Sir Edmund Hillary in *High Adventure*. In addition, I have read what those spouses who were left behind say about the long absences and, unfortunately, at times, the deaths of their loved ones, as in *Where the Mountain Casts its Shadow* by Maria Coffey. I have also watched documentaries such as *The Eiger: Wall of Death*, *Beyond Gravity* and *Pure Life*. Above all, I have had in-depth, inspiring conversations with climbers and mountaineers about their deeds, fears and motivation.

In hindsight, perhaps the lack of climbing experience has played in my favour as it is often said that in order to gain an objective, dispassionate perspective on a complex issue the best strategy is to distance yourself from the subject of your study. As a non-climber, I hope that I will be able to explain, in a manner that resonates with other non-climbers, why some people are so compelled to climb mountains. This was my purpose in writing this book. With enormous passion for the mountains, but also with the unbiased vision of an outsider, I started a personal journey to discover why for some people climbing is not just the embodiment of everything that is good

and desirable in life, but can also become an ill-fated craving.

Three young students from Oxford – William Bell, Ian McKean and James Ogilvie – accompanied me throughout this adventure. I met them in a fortuitous way in a graveyard at the foot of the Matterhorn, where they had been buried after being killed in a climbing accident in 1948. I didn't know anything about them except what was written on the tombstone. Yet, without exactly knowing why, I felt compelled to learn more about their lives, dreams and aspirations. Back home I gradually unravelled their stories, and in doing so I found what I was looking for – the reason why for some people climbing mountains is a search for their own soul.

1. The Mountaineers' Cemetery in Zermatt

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.
Robert Laurence Binyon

The view from Twära, in the Swiss Valais, is one of my favourite in the Alps. Located almost 4,000 feet above the village of St Niklaus, on a clear day there is a breath-taking 360-degree vista that includes some of the most stunning mountains in the world. In the north are the formidable walls of the Bernese Alps; to the east the Ticino Alps glimmer in the distance; to the south-west, the summits of the Weisshorn, the Zinalrothorn and the Dent Blanche surface like sea-foam amid a blue, stormy ocean of mountains. Right in front of you, the Dom (14,911 feet) rises majestically above the Hohberg glacier, so close that you could almost reach out and touch it.

The Dom is the highest peak in the Mischabel: the massif that forms the divide between the Saas and the Matter valleys. The former takes the trekker to Saas-Fee, 'the most beautiful village in the Alps' according to Sir Alfred Wills, one of those intrepid Britons who first dared to venture into the unexplored and mysterious terrain of the Alps. A High Court judge, Wills was also one of the original members of the world's first mountaineering association, the Alpine Club, in 1857. On the other side of the Mischabel, the Mattertal leads to Zermatt, the famous ski resort, which is surrounded by the most spectacular range of 13,000-foot peaks in Europe, including Monte Rosa, Lyskamm (nicknamed the *Menschenfresser* or the 'man-eater') and Breithorn. The indisputable king, however, is the Matterhorn – at 14,690 feet, its black pyramidal silhouette casts a spell over the entire region.

During the nineteenth century these mountains – 'the cathedrals of the earth, with their gates of rock, pavements of cloud, choirs of stream and stone, altars of snow, and vaults of purple traversed by the continual stars', as the art critic and philanthropist John Ruskin described them in 1856 – were the Holy Grail for British climbers. Leslie Stephen, a prominent climber and father of Virginia Woolf, coined the expression 'playground of Europe' to illustrate the allure that the enigmatic glaciers, the yawning crevasses and the awe-inspiring snowy peaks exerted on the increasingly affluent British middle classes. All this happened during the Victorian period, when secluded, impoverished mountain hamlets such as Grindelwald and Zermatt became favourite destinations for wealthy tourists.

In the case of Zermatt, the history books usually mention two men as the driving force behind its prosperity. One is Alexander Seiler, an ambitious Swiss soap-maker with the vision to recognise the importance of comfortable accommodation in attracting British travellers. In 1854, Seiler bought the Hotel Mont Cervin and, after renaming it Hotel Monte Rosa, transformed it into one of the most luxurious establishments in the Alps, a status shared with the Bear Hotel in Grindelwald and the Hotel de Londres et d'Angleterre in Chamonix. In the following years, Seiler's new hotels established the foundations that transformed Zermatt into a thriving tourism location.

Zermatt is also largely indebted for its prominence to the London- born climber Edward Whymper. After eight failed attempts to climb the Matterhorn – 'there seemed to be a cordon drawn around it, up to which one might go, but no further' – on 14 July 1865, Whymper finally became the first person to stand on the summit. His achievement is usually considered to mark the end of the Golden Age of Alpinism, a period that stretched from 1854 to 1865 during which thirty-six summits above 12,000 feet were climbed for the first time, thirty-one of them by British parties. Whymper's feat, however, was marred by the death of four of his companions

during the descent: a French guide, Michel Croz, and three Englishmen, Lord Francis Douglas, the Reverend Charles Hudson and Douglas Robert Hadow, a student from Cambridge with little climbing experience. During the descent, Hadow slipped and pulled the other three over the edge of a 4,000-foot precipice. In the aftermath of the accident many questions were raised regarding the circumstances, and in particular the strength of the rope that had snapped between the survivors and those who fell. It was even suggested that it had been deliberately cut, a claim that was subsequently proven to be untrue.

The Matterhorn Disaster, and the ensuing public interest in the motivations of climbers, put Zermatt and mountain climbing on the front page of every newspaper in the United Kingdom. Charles Dickens was one of the most prominent public figures to show incomprehension of the motives of climbers. The celebrated author expressed his disdain for the scientific arguments commonly used at that time to justify mountain climbing by noting that "the scaling of such heights contributes as much to the advancement of science as would a club of young gentlemen who should undertake to bestride all the weathercocks of all the cathedral spires of the United Kingdom". In any case, the controversy was a tremendous boost for Zermatt, proof of the observation that all publicity is good publicity.

★

The Alps are no longer the centre of the climbing universe. By the beginning of the twentieth century every peak in the range had been climbed. Only a few north faces remained unchallenged, the most notorious being that of the Eiger which was not successfully climbed until 1938. As a result, elite climbers started to turn their attention to mountain ranges elsewhere – the Caucasus, the Andes, and following the steps of the British expeditions to Mount Everest in the 1920s, the Himalayas and Karakoram.

Nonetheless, the popularisation of skiing and other winter sports in the inter-war period helped to maintain a steady flow of visitors to the Alpine resorts. This tendency intensified after World War II, and today Zermatt is a magnet for mass tourism from all over the world. During the summer season, when the slopes are depleted of snow, skiers and snowboarders are replaced by hordes of sightseers. After trekking in the mountains for a couple of weeks with hardly anyone in sight, the overcrowded streets of Zermatt always come as a shock – they are certainly not the ideal surrounding for those who, like me, relish the quietness and solitude of mountains. Yet, the view of the Matterhorn, majestic over the town, makes a visit to Zermatt an unforgettable experience.

The Matterhorn is probably the most recognisable mountain in the world. In fact, its name and image are used by a myriad of different commercial companies, from Swiss chocolate makers and Italian fashionable shoe designers to London-based literary agents and American equity fund firms. Even Disneyland has an attraction called *The Matterhorn Bobsleds* which faithfully replicates, although on a lesser scale, the shape of the mountain – the surrounding palm-trees being the only discord. Alas, nothing is perfect, not even in Disneyland.

As an international icon, much has been said and written about the Matterhorn over time. However, no one has captured its spirit and uniqueness better than Gaston Rébuffat, a French climber who in 1950 was part of the first team to climb a peak exceeding 26,000 feet – Annapurna, in the Himalayas. Maurice Herzog, the expedition leader once commented humorously that Rébuffat 'had a scandalous origin for a mountaineer, and even worse for a guide. He was born at the seaside! It would take the Company of Guides many years to live this down.' Regardless of his birthplace, Rébuffat was not only an outstanding mountaineer but also an extremely talented writer of more than twenty books. Written in a lyrical style that captures the imagination, *Men and the Matterhorn* is still, almost fifty years after its publication, a

masterpiece of mountaineering and Alpine literature. One of the most poignant passages of the book describes how the mountain affected him:

> *Up to the age of twelve I had never been outside my native Provence; and yet, without being aware of it, I knew the Matterhorn. I did not know it by name, but I knew it. When, by chance, someone in my family uttered the word 'peak', and my small child's imagination created the corresponding picture, I saw a pyramid, beautiful as an arrow of stone, pointing towards the sky. Later in life, I have been up countless valleys to discover mountains of all shapes and heights, but have never come across any like the Matterhorn. I have also questioned climbers of all countries who have visited even more of the world's mountains than I have. They have never seen a mountain to compare with the Matterhorn either. Moreover, on reflection, no one arriving at Zermatt or coming up from Châtillon to Breuil has ever exclaimed on seeing the Matterhorn for the first time, 'it looks like such and such a mountain'. Conversely, on approaching other peaks, how many times have we said, spontaneously and with a peculiar joy, 'Seen from here it looks like the Matterhorn.' No, the Matterhorn can resemble no other peak – it is the model; similarly, no other peak really resembles the Matterhorn; the mould has been broken, there are not even any copies. The Matterhorn is unique.*

My wife, Marian, and I saw the Matterhorn for the first time after crossing the Col de Riedmatten during the eighth stage of the Haute Route, one of the most beautiful and demanding mountain treks in Europe. The Matterhorn was still more than fifteen miles away as the crow flies, yet its magnificent, gleaming triangular shape overshadowed all other mountains in sight around us. We stayed for only a few moments in that exposed, wind-battered pass, but during that time I was unable to take my eyes away from it.

The Haute Route, so named because it traverses mountain trails mostly above 6,000 feet, links Chamonix, on the French side of the Mont Blanc massif, and Zermatt, in the Swiss Valais. During ten days in the summer of 2012 we covered its 130 miles, weaving from one valley to the next, moving on a west-to-east course. It was an exhilarating journey; a daily succession of wonders during which we crossed fourteen mountain passes, six of them above 10,000 feet. In addition to the grandeur of the sky-scraping peaks that accompanied us along the entire route, every stage of the trek revealed new delights, from secluded emerald lakes, to the gravity- defying acrobatics of a herd of chamois, or the awe-inspiring desolation of the glaciers.

However, the trip was also a reminder that mountains have a dark and more sinister side. We experienced one such moment when the warm breeze of a cloudless afternoon turned into a freezing gale in a matter of minutes. The temperature dropped sharply, and, defying all forecasts of good weather, an ugly mass of black thunderheads raced towards us like a roaring monster. Soon the brightness of the day had turned to twilight, and the violent deluge that followed, dense and cold as a metal curtain, obliterated our view of the path in front of us. To speed up our pace, which would have increased the danger of slipping and falling over the precipice on our left, was out of the question. As we were above the tree line, being hit by lightning was also a very real possibility. There was nothing we could do but to stay calm and look for shelter. Thus, huddled together under our ponchos behind some rocks, we waited for the storm to pass. The prospect that the downpour could continue for hours was distressing as Marian, soaked from head to toe, was already shivering uncontrollably, and the nearest hut was more than a four-hour trek away.

Luckily, forty-five minutes later, and as suddenly as it had arrived, the tempest abated, with a return of the sunny skies that had accompanied us earlier. We resumed our journey and soon we were completely dry, as if the storm had only been a

bad dream. That night, in the refuge, and sitting at a table next to ours, a couple of climbers in their early twenties were discussing the best route to ascend Mont Collon. Overhearing their conversation, I couldn't help but think of what could have happened if we had been on a sharp, snowy ridge when the storm hit, instead of the relative safety of a well-trodden mountain path.

On arriving in Zermatt, we decided to stay for a few days to relax and treat ourselves. We had no plans other than to sleep late, enjoy a good book on a sunny terrace and, finally freed of our heavy rucksacks, to walk around at leisure. On one of those lazy afternoons we visited the Mountaineers' Cemetery.

The night before we had been chatting with the couple who owned the hotel we were staying at – Leni and Thomas Müller-Julen – and at some point the conversation gravitated towards an accident that had taken place on Mont Maudit (in English, 'cursed mountain') several days earlier, in which nine climbers had perished in an avalanche. All were experienced alpinists, including Roger Payne, one of the most respected climbers in Europe, who was guiding some of the unfortunate climbers. When they set off early from the mountain hut, weather conditions were optimal. Apparently no technical mistakes had been made but a falling serac (a column of glacial ice), predictable in its unpredictability, had broken free and caused the accident.

I recall discussing with Leni and Thomas how difficult it was for me to grasp why people were so willing to risk their lives just to stand for a few minutes on the top of a mountain. My comment, however, didn't seem to make any sense to them, and they stared at me as if I were questioning why the sun rises every morning or why swallows fly. Born and bred in Zermatt, climbing mountains or exploring glaciers was for Leni and Thomas as natural as walking or breathing. In fact, Leni's father had been a famous guide in the fifties and she, in her youth, had also climbed the Matterhorn several times.

"You should visit the Mountaineers' Cemetery," she suggested, before adding, "Perhaps you will find answers for some of your questions there."

The Mountaineers' Cemetery is the resting place for the many of the climbers who, since the early nineteenth century, have perished while climbing in the Zermatt vicinity. It is also a powerful reminder of the perils of the mountain… of any mountain in the world. Situated behind the Catholic church of St Peter's, the graveyard is only a few yards away from the Monte Rosa Hotel and the hustle and bustle of Bahnhofstrasse, Zermatt's main street. Yet, it is a surprisingly quiet place. At least this is how Marian and I remember it – perhaps we simply didn't pay attention to the hubbub outside because we were so absorbed in reading the headstones. Some were extremely moving and I particularly recall the shivers down my spine when we came across the inscription of Herbert Braum and Anni Marschner, a German couple who fell to their deaths from the Hörnli ridge during their honeymoon in July 1924.

On the gravestone of Jonathan Conville, who died in 1979 on the north face of the Matterhorn, we read verses by Wilfrid Noyce, a member of the 1953 British expedition that made the first ascent of Mount Everest, who was himself killed some years later, on Mount Garmo, in what today is Tajikistan, Central Asia:

Let me go climb these virgin snows,

Leave the dark stain of man behind, Let

me adventure and heaven knows,

Grateful shall be my quiet mind.

I also vividly recall the grave of Donald Williams, a New Yorker who died on the Matterhorn in 1975. His epitaph was very short - just four words. Yet, it made a strong declaration of principles, as if he was continuously responding to by-

passers who, like us, were left wondering about the futility of his death. In a defiant manner, it read: "I chose to climb." He was 17 years old.

Then, another memorial attracted our attention. At first sight it was no different to many others in the cemetery, bearing a simple rectangular bronze plaque with two blazons on it. One of them depicted a crowned, rampant lion. The inscription read:

> *To the memory of William Bell, Ian McKean, and James Ogilvie, friends from Oxford killed together on the Matterhorn July 25th, 1948.*

Below, in Latin, was added *Non enim accessistis ad tractabilem montem* - 'For you are not come to a mountain that might be touched.'

Looking at their dates of birth, I made a rapid calculation of their ages: at 24, William was the oldest of the trio, while Ian was 22 and James - "They were almost kids," said Marian. I read the inscription twice - 'friends from Oxford killed together in 1948' – as if I were unable to comprehend the meaning or the magnitude of what I had before my eyes. There was something profoundly heart-rending for me in those words, an intense sense of closeness that even today is difficult to explain. Whatever it was, I was deeply moved by it.

We stood in silence in front of the inscription for a few seconds. Over the previous months, I had lived and breathed the Haute Route. I had studied countless times the various stages of the trek, the accommodation options, and the travelling plan and so on. Although I didn't know anything about the three young men in their final resting place in front of me, it was not difficult to envisage them more than sixty years earlier, talking passionately about the grandeur of the mountains, analysing together the technical difficulties that awaited them on their way to the Matterhorn summit,

preparing their climbing equipment or simply sitting in a pub, discussing animatedly the logistics of the trip to Switzerland. That was easy to imagine. The difficult part, however, was reconciling that vision of them, filled with youthful enthusiasm, with what the cold bronze plaque so mercilessly proclaimed – that none of them had returned from the mountain alive that day.

At that moment, it also occurred to me that, despite their youth, it was possible that they had fought for their King and country during World War II, which had ended barely three years earlier. If that was the case, it meant that they had survived the immense collective catastrophe of the war only to die together when peace had been restored, with their lives stretched out before them. I recall saying to Marian that life sometimes could be infinitely cruel.

I don't know why, but at that moment I felt the urge to find out more about William, Ian and James – about their short lives, about their dreams and aspirations, but also their love of the mountains and the invisible bond that brought them together to the Matterhorn, and which had finally sealed their fate. In hindsight, I guess I was so moved by the death of these hitherto strangers because somehow I saw my own passion and craving for life reflected in theirs. The fact that they came from Oxford, where I live, definitely contributed to my motivation. However, these are just *a posteriori* attempts to rationalise the emotions that washed over me that afternoon in Zermatt's Mountaineers' Cemetery. The truth is that I am unable to describe why I was so deeply moved. There I was, surrounded by scores of headstones, each of them describing a personal tragedy, and yet one in particular, with three names I had never heard of before in my life, touched me in a way that is impossible to explain.

Three unknown names on a bronze plaque in a foreign cemetery – that is how this story starts.