

A NIGHT IN THE BIG BEDROOM

By Bob Richardson

WHEN THE EVENING twilight lies across the north it is no time to be under a roof. So I drove up to the North Face car park and walked up to the CIC in the sunshine of a June afternoon. The air was fresh and warm, my pack was light and I could take my time and enjoy the scenery. None of the slight tension that precedes a climbing trip; this time I was going to enjoy just being in the glen below those familiar cliffs.

Later, after a leisurely meal, I took a chair and a glass of wine outside and watched the changing light of evening play across the ridges and buttresses. I was waiting for the double sunset as the sun disappears behind Càrn Dearg, only to reappear and send another shaft of warmth up the glen before continuing its track towards the Rough Bounds. A sight that only the summer devotees of the CIC are privy to.

Then, packing my sack only with bivvy bag, mat and sleeping bag and with a bottle of water and some biscuits, I crossed the burn and walked up the glen in the evening air. The top of the Orion Face was glowing pink. (A poor imitation of the Chamonix Aiguilles – but our own.) The glen was slowly darkening and the lower rocks becoming grey and then black as I followed the grass until it died out below the slabs running down from Coire Leis. Here there is a small alp of sheep-grazed grass with the tower of North-East Buttress on one side and the sweep of the Càrn Mòr Dearg Arête skyline on the other. The grass is short and fairly level, the infant Allt drains out of Coire Leis and murmurs down the slabs. Long ago I had picked out this spot as ideal for a summer bivouac – a place to lie snug and feel the mountain air flow over my face as I watched the gradual changes of light and colour in the sky. I found a place to roll out my mat and bivvy bag, got into my sleeping bag and lay facing the Ben; relaxed and comfortable in my own little corner of what Johnny Cunningham called ‘the big bedroom’.

The rocks were familiar, scene of many days of tension, occasional fear and joy in success. But, over there just a couple of hundred metres away at the foot of the buttress, was the place where one February evening, after a day of delight in good ice and a fine route, we found a friend dying. And, further down where the boulder field spilled out of Observatory Gully, I had seen the blood-spattered snow after two climbers fell from the top of Slav Route. But I was not here to remember the good times or the bad, only to absorb the peace of the mountain on a summer night.

Our emotional response to landscape is complex. How is it that inanimate geology and a thin skin of vegetation can arouse a feeling which makes you so conscious of your own existence? The mountain is

only rock but from within ourselves we project meaning and character on to it – what Neil Gunn called ‘this psychic stuff’. All my remembered life I have been conscious of what you might call an empathy with mountain landscapes: but how can you empathise with the inanimate? It is more than an appreciation of form and colour, there seems to be a deep atavistic response which makes time spent among the high hills (especially solitary time) so emotionally satisfying. And there is no better way of experiencing it than a bivouac on a fine summer night.

The colours of a clear simmer-dim sky are almost impossible to describe – faint pinks shading into delicate blues and greys before the clear pale blue of the pre-dawn. I lay there feeling the cool katabatic breeze drifting over my face, warm in my down bag, no sound or trace of any other living being. It was not my intention to sleep, a night like this was too precious, but I must have dozed because the unmistakable sharp crack of a high-velocity rifle round startled me awake to a clear blue sky. I looked at my watch – three o’clock. Someone else was out on the mountain taking advantage of the pre-dawn light.

Soon the sunlight was beginning to come over the Arête, casting a pink glow on the upper part of Tower Ridge. After an hour or two watching the changing play of light across the higher rocks, I packed up and wandered slowly downwards. I stopped opposite Observatory Gully to see it as few people ever see it, with the morning light flooding in from the left. Rocks which rarely felt the sun were being thrown into relief. Observatory Ridge, normally so shy and retiring against the sweep of the cliffs, was standing out like a stone knife held against the throat of the mountain, Rubicon Wall was half in sunlight and the left flank of Tower Ridge was bathed in light. After a while I continued on down to the Hut in the silence and warmth. The frying pan was waiting.