

## Enigma

By Simon Richardson

The Tombstone loomed above. Dark and menacing, the crag was silhouetted against the star studded sky. Early January days are all too short, and yesterday we'd managed only three pitches before we ran out of time. Could Chris and I put it all together today? Was there enough daylight to regain our highpoint and climb the remaining six pitches to the top?

For many years I'd dreamed about making a winter ascent of Mainreachan Buttress. I was under no illusions however, for I knew only too well that long sought-after Scottish winter ambitions can be dangerous affairs. The likelihood of disappointment is high, and the crucial combination of conditions, weather, fitness and a willing partner rarely coincide, especially on big cliffs in the North-West. But we'd been on the cliff the day before. We knew it was in superb winter condition, draped white with fresh powder and hoar. Was this the moment? Fear of the unknown threatened indecision. Get a grip - it was now or never.

In the dull glow of the reflected starlight I could just make out the first groove, picked out by snow on its left wall. That pitch wasn't too hard. Surely we could climb it in the dark? We'd timed it pretty well. Another hour or so and it would be light enough to re-climb the steep corner on the second pitch. A few more minutes up the slope and we'd be at the gearing-up spot...

"Hey, Simon!"

I looked down to Chris several steps below.

"Simon, have you seen those lights?" Chris pointed his headtorch away to the West. Sure enough, there was a distinct flash on the horizon.

"Try flashing your torch?"

Chris took off his headlamp and gave three flashes. There was a pause, and then six clear flashes came back in reply. He tried once more. And again in return, came six more flashes.

"Simon, that's the distress signal. There must be someone on the col below Sgorr Ruadh!"

"But surely no-one could be in trouble there? There's no steep ground, no crags, nothing."

Chris's reply was stalled by another six flashes. Still completely focused on Mainreachan, I took my chance and followed through.

"They're probably OK you know. I expect they've seen our lights and are flashing to say Hello."

Chris looked at me sternly. His reply was quiet and measured.

"We'll have to go over you know. We have no choice."

He was right. Of course he was. Deep down I felt a little ashamed.

Decision made, we turned on our tracks and galloped down the slope. As we dropped into the coire, the col slipped below a false horizon and we lost sight of the lights.

Impatiently we ploughed through deep powder until we picked up tracks from the day before leading towards Sgorr Ruadh. Panting heavily we pulled up to the skyline and looked across to the col. Chris flashed his torch three times again, and sure enough six flashes were returned. They were fainter than before, but six flashes all the same. "Their battery must be fading by now," conjectured Chris. "It's a good job they saw us when they did. There'll be no-one else around for hours."

Heads down we continued through the snow and pulled up to the col. All was quiet. Eyes straining and ears alert, we stood around bemused and confused. There was nobody there - no torch, no

person, no sight or sound of anyone. We searched the col, and then looked up and across to the West. From a second col about half a mile distant, came six weak flashes.

"Look Simon, they must be over there!"

We shouldered our packs and set off through the unbroken snow. Twenty minutes later we were at the second col, but again there was no sign of anyone at all. The snow was trackless. We stared across to the West again, and through the half-light of dawn came six wavering flashes. Slowly the penny dropped.

"Er, Chris. D'you know what I think?"

"No?"

"That's no torch. It's a lighthouse! It must be on Skye. It's so clear, we're seeing it from miles away!"

We stood in silence, and then looked sheepishly at each other. Slowly we turned our heads and looked back at the way we had come. In the early morning light we could make out our tracks heading back across Coire Lair and up to Mainreachan Buttress. High up on the crag, the upper grooves of Enigma were tinged red with dawn. Without a word we turned around, and set off back up the hill.