



The Last  
**Great**  
**Mountain**

The First Ascent of  
**Kangchenjunga**

MICK CONEFREY

Sample Chapter

# The Last Great Mountain

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Mick Conefrey



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## Part I

The First Attempts

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Himalayan Beast

On the morning of April 29<sup>th</sup> 1905, a strange procession set out from Boleskine Manor near Loch Ness in Scotland. In the lead was Hugh Gillies, the aptly named housekeeper and hunting ghillie, followed by Jules Jacot-Guillarmod, a bearded Swiss doctor, armed with a very large elephant gun. He was followed by Rose Crowley and last but not least, her husband Aleister, the owner of Boleskine for the last six years.

Even in the murky weather, Aleister Crowley cut a striking figure: thin but athletically built, he had piercing greenish brown eyes, a mop of lank hair and strangely feminine, heavily bejewelled hands. Although he was born in Leamington Spa to solidly English parents, he claimed Irish ancestry and liked to dress like a Scottish laird.

His visitor, Jules Jacot-Guillarmod, was a doctor from Neuchâtel. This was his first visit to Scotland and he was very keen to return home with two things: a hunting trophy and, more importantly, a commitment from Aleister Crowley to join him on an expedition to Kangchenjunga.

In the six years since Douglas Freshfield's grand Himalayan tour, his book had published to great acclaim but no-one had taken up the challenge to actually climb Kangchenjunga. There were very few climbers who had his private resources or his passion. If there was any hope that the mountain would be ascended anytime soon then, strange as it might have sounded, the two men out hunting that day represented the best bet.

In temperament and style, they were utterly different. Aged thirty seven, Jacot-Guillarmod was a solid member of the Swiss bourgeoisie. The son of a successful landscape painter, he had spent most of his twenties studying medicine, first in Lausanne, then Paris. He was a calm, measured individual who was as regular and reliable in his habits as a Swiss watch. Six days after his eighteenth birthday he had begun a daily journal which he steadfastly maintained for the next thirty nine years, barely missing an entry.

Aleister Crowley came from a wealthier but far more unorthodox background. His father inherited a huge fortune built on brewing but had spent much of his time as an itinerant preacher, spreading the word for the Plymouth Bretheren, a fundamentalist Christian sect. He died young, leaving his 11-year-old son, Edward Alexander, to be brought up by his equally religious wife Emily, and her brother Thomas, an uncle Edward Alexander quickly came to hate. The death of his beloved father upended Crowley's life. He never bonded with his mother, who nicknamed him 'The Beast' because he was so hard to handle. She sent him to a series of boarding schools but he couldn't settle. It was a boyhood, Crowley later wrote, "that was so horrible that its result was that my will was wholly summed up in hatred of all restraint".

Aged 20, Edward Alexander went to Cambridge to study Moral Science, emerging three years later without a degree but with a new name, 'Aleister' (the Gaelic version of Alexander), and the fervent conviction that one day he would be recognised as a great poet. Throughout his life, Crowley never held down a regular job but, for a few decades at least, his father's money enabled him to live the life of a wealthy Bohemian and to indulge his passions and vices, which ranged from chess to travel to sex, both paid for and free. Most recently he had developed an interest in esoteric religion and had been initiated into the Golden Dawn, Europe's best-known occult society whose members included WB Yeats and Arthur Conan Doyle.



Aleister Crowley

Though so different in background and outlook, Crowley and Jacot-Guillarmod were united by one thing: the shared love of mountaineering. For Crowley it was the only sport that

he had ever really liked or excelled in, for Jacot-Guillarmod it represented an escape from his much more controlled professional life. Jacot-Guillarmod had followed a very conventional path into the sport, starting with small expeditions to the Alps with student friends and then going on to join both the Swiss and French Alpine Clubs. He loved to attend lectures and was particularly proud to have recently begun corresponding with Vittorio Sella, the famous mountaineering photographer who had accompanied Douglas Freshfield on his circuit of Kangchenjunga.

Crowley by contrast had begun as teenager and had done much of his early mountaineering solo. He learned to climb in the Lake District but his favourite stomping grounds were the dangerous chalk cliffs of Beachy Head. Though he once wrote that his climbing style “could hardly be described as human”, in his early twenties he had been proposed for membership of London’s Alpine Club, the world’s oldest and most prestigious mountaineering society. Though he was not formally blackballed, Crowley’s unconventional reputation preceded him. His nomination was withdrawn before a vote took place, engendering within him a life-long and vocal hatred of Britain’s climbing establishment.

In the 1890s Crowley had joined forces with Oscar Eckenstein, a Jewish engineer and fellow maverick, for expeditions to the Alps and the volcanoes of Mexico and then, in 1902, for a pioneering expedition to K2 in the Karakoram range. It was an audacious attempt to climb the world’s second highest mountain, by a team of climbers from Britain, Austria and Switzerland which included Jacot-Guillarmod as expedition doctor. Ultimately it was not a happy experience for anyone.

Crowley suffered repeated attacks of malaria, which left him so delirious that at one stage he had threatened a fellow team member with a pistol. Eckenstein was ill throughout and Jacot-Guillarmod spent much of his time ministering to his sick comrades. Though they had spent several weeks on the glacier in front of K2, they barely set foot on the mountain that would not be climbed for another fifty two years.

Back in Switzerland, Jacot-Guillarmod had been amazed to find himself in demand as a lecturer. It didn’t matter that the K2 expedition had achieved so little, everyone wanted to hear about his trip to one of the most remote regions of the world. He went back to work as a doctor but was soon dreaming of a return to high altitude. Jacot-Guillarmod didn’t want to revisit K2 though; instead he fancied a crack at Kangchenjunga, after being impressed by the photographs that Vittorio Sella had taken on Freshfield’s expedition. Who though would go with him?

Jacot-Guillarmod had a few Swiss friends who he thought might be interested but taking on Kangchenjunga would mean a significant commitment of time and money so only the keenest climbers were worth approaching. Oscar Eckenstein declined his offer; the ill health that had plagued him on K2 had not gone away and the other British member of the 1902 team, Guy Knowles, had never really been that keen a climber anyway. That left Aleister Crowley as his only hope. But would he agree to come?

Crowley certainly had the money and the inclination, but he was recently married and his first child had just been born. The walls of Boleskine Manor were decorated with erotic prints and Crowley’s most recent publication, *Snowdrops from a Curate’s Garden*, was a volume of pornographic poetry

dedicated to his beautiful wife. Would the author of *Juggling with Joy Jelly* and *A Family Fuck* want to swap his wine cellar and sumptuous bed for a freezing cold tent in the Himalayas?

There was no way of telling but for the moment at least, Jacot-Guillarmod had his mind fixed on a different target: a mysterious local creature called a haggis. Jacot-Guillarmod had never heard of such a thing and his grasp of English was not good enough to get the joke, but Aleister Crowley had told him that a wild haggis was much prized among hunters. Why everyone else was smiling, Jacot-Guillarmod couldn't quite understand.

Then suddenly Hugh Gillies, pointed towards a dark shape in the mist. Jacot-Guillarmod cocked his gun, fired both barrels and down went the haggis – or to be more precise, a local farmer's prize sheep. Amongst much general merriment, they decapitated the unfortunate creature and returned home carrying its head as a trophy.

As to the more important matter of Kangchenjunga, Jacot-Guillarmod eventually got a commitment from Crowley that he would indeed join him. Though many saw him as the archetypal outsider, Crowley craved fame and recognition and wanted desperately to prove his detractors in the mountaineering establishment wrong. He had one caveat though: he would only go if he could be the climbing leader. Jacot-Guillarmod could select the rest of the team and be in overall charge of the expedition, but Crowley insisted that he should be responsible for all of the route finding and all of the climbing decisions once they reached the mountain. It was a hard bargain but Jacot-Guillarmod needed Crowley's experience as well as 5000 Francs to invest in expedition funds.

Unlike K2, where the expedition leader Oscar Eckenstein spent months planning every detail, there was no time for complicated pre-organisation. Jacot-Guillarmod would procure equipment and confirm the remaining team members, while Crowley would head out to Darjeeling to hire porters and purchase supplies. It was not ideal, they both acknowledged, to embark without any formal permission from either the Sikkimese or the Nepali governments, but Jacot-Guillarmod was confident that everything would work out.

After their meeting in Scotland, everything moved swiftly. Jacot-Guillarmod returned to Switzerland and Crowley left Boleskine on May 6<sup>th</sup>, after arranging for Rose and his daughter Lillith to come out and meet him in India at the end of the expedition. He was looking forward to the challenge and typically confident of success but he did take the precaution of recording a will and entrusting his friend and fellow occultist, George Cecil Jones, with the responsibility, should there be an accident, of embalming his corpse and burying it with a cache of magical jewels in a secret vault, along with hermetically sealed editions of his literary works.

In London, Crowley reluctantly consulted *Round Kangchenjunga* by "some man called Freshfield". Even though it contained the only detailed account of the mountain's topography, he was never going to pay it much respect. As an Alpine Club stalwart and pillar of the establishment, Douglas Freshfield was the kind of person Crowley loved to hate. In spite of its 300 odd pages, six appendices and numerous illustrations and maps, Crowley summarily dismissed *Round Kangchenjunga* as a book, which "omits with wonderful ingenuity any practical detail likely to be of service to a subsequent party".



He was much more respectful of Freshfield's collaborator, Vittorio Sella and studied the Italian's photographs in detail. Freshfield had thought the best possible route up Kangchenjunga was probably from the north west but having studied Sella's work and all the photographs he could lay his hands on, Crowley decided that it could be climbed via the South-West Face, the side of the mountain visible from Darjeeling. It looked easier to him and anyway the idea that he might succeed by ignoring the great Douglas Freshfield would make his inevitable triumph even sweeter. Kangchenjunga, Crowley reckoned, would be harder than K2, but it had the significant advantage of lying just twelve to fifteen day-marches from the nearest town, so there would not be the same logistical challenges – or so he thought.

On May 12<sup>th</sup>, Crowley embarked for the Middle East on the *SS Marmora*. While later mountaineers would use their voyages out as opportunities to get fit, Crowley took a different approach. As he wrote in his memoirs, "I fed up and lounged about, and told stories until the ship arrived in Cairo on the 23<sup>rd</sup>".

After another two weeks of travelling by ship and train he finally pitched up at the Woodlands Hotel in Darjeeling. He was not impressed. When twenty-five years later, Crowley wrote his memoir, or self-styled 'auto-hagiography', he reserved some of his most scathing prose for Darjeeling:

...being the last hope of the unmarried shabby-genteel, Darjeeling is lousy with young ladies whose only idea of getting a husband is to practice the piano. In such a climate it is of course impossible to keep a piano in tune for five minutes, even if one could get it into that condition. The food itself is a mildewed as the maidens..... Do I like Darjeeling? I do not.

Crowley's main task was to buy provisions and hire porters to "carry civilisation to the snows". He and Jacot-Guillarmod would be away for several months and though there were a number of villages en route to the mountain, there was no guarantee that their inhabitants would be able to supply food or manpower. The government of India had agreed to provide them with 130 porters who would set off in advance of the main party with four tonnes of food but Crowley hired a further 80 men and bought another 4000 lbs of lentils and rice.

In 1905 there weren't the trained high-altitude porters that exist today. Local labourers, or 'coolies', were used to carrying heavy loads but very few of them, if any, had any climbing experience and even fewer had been to high altitude. Crowley and Jacot-Guillarmod took the precaution of engaging three Kashmiris who had served them well on the K2 expedition, Salama, Ramzana and Subhana, but the other men they hired were all local, mainly from Sikkim's Lepcha community.

In addition to the porters, Crowley enlisted a quartermaster and interpreter: a young Italian called Alceste Rigo de Righi. Boyish looking and handsome, De Righi was well known in Darjeeling as the manager of the Drum Druid Hotel and was fluent in Tibetan and Hindi as well as English. For the moment Crowley was very glad to have De Righi on board, calling him in a letter to Jacot-Guillarmod "a prince in disguise" who would be "very useful for getting the coolies to march and keeping their price down, even if he never does any heroic exploits". They were words he would come to regret.

In theory Kangchenjunga was close enough to Darjeeling to be visible on the horizon but initially Crowley saw nothing of the mountain, just endless banks of cloud and mist. The weather proved so bad that it took twenty-six days before it

cleared sufficiently for Crowley to get out his binoculars to have a closer look. It was a great moment though. Crowley was pleased to see that there appeared to be very little new snow on the South West Face and that the route he had plotted back in London using Vittorio Sella's photographs seemed to be feasible.

His pleasure at the state of the mountain contrasted with his annoyance at Jacot-Guillarmod's late appearance. Eventually Crowley grew so bored of waiting that to pass the time and make a little money, he wrote several newspaper articles for the *Daily Mail* and the Indian newspaper, the *Pioneer*. His first dispatch nobly informed readers of the miseries of the local climate, which varied from "hard and persistent rain" to "heavier and more persistent rain" and "rain so heavy and so persistent that I prefer to leave the necessary epithets to the imagination of my readers".

As ever Crowley took the opportunity to pour further insult on his pet hates: the climbers of the Alpine Club and Swiss guides, who he derided as lazy and incompetent. This prompted a rebuttal in the *Pioneer* from an anonymous correspondent who denounced Crowley as "a disappointed candidate for membership of the Alpine Club, to which I add I have not the privilege of belonging. The sport of mountaineering," the writer continued, "will suffer no loss if *Kinchinjunga* (*sic*) permanently effaces this polished individual".

Crowley would not be cowed. In further articles he continued to insult Alpine Club members, describing them as the "pusillanimous braggarts of Saville Row" while continuing to complain about the tedium and toil of his organisational duties. Eventually however he became so depressed and

ground down by Darjeeling's incessant rain that he retreated to Calcutta for a fortnight.

Jacot-Guillarmod, meanwhile was enduring a much slower and more difficult voyage to India than Crowley, his ship at one stage running aground in the Red Sea. He was able to telegraph some good news though, announcing that their climbing party had two new members: Charles Adolphe Reymond, a former mountain guide and soldier then working for the Swiss telegraph agency and Alexis Pache, a dashing 31-year-old cavalry officer with a thirst for adventure. Pache had fought with the Boers against the British in the recent war in the Transvaal and though he had not done any mountaineering, he joined the team confident that he would get very high.

The Swiss climbers finally reached Darjeeling at the end of July and spent a week with Crowley, unpacking and re-ordering the equipment brought from Switzerland and hiring yet more porters for the long march to Kangchenjunga. Jacot-Guillarmod was no more impressed by Darjeeling than Crowley, repeatedly complaining about its expensive hotels and miserable weather. After enduring such a difficult journey, he was not quite so excited at the prospect of his second major expedition, but had no desire to stay any longer than was absolutely necessary at the Woodlands.

At 10.16 on Tuesday August 8<sup>th</sup> 1905, as he precisely recorded in his diary, barely three months after the two men had met in Scotland, Crowley and Jacot-Guillarmod set off for Kangchenjunga, after an official goodbye from the local deputy commissioner. They still lacked formal permission to enter Nepal but had been told that they would meet a court official at the border. Before they left Darjeeling, Crowley

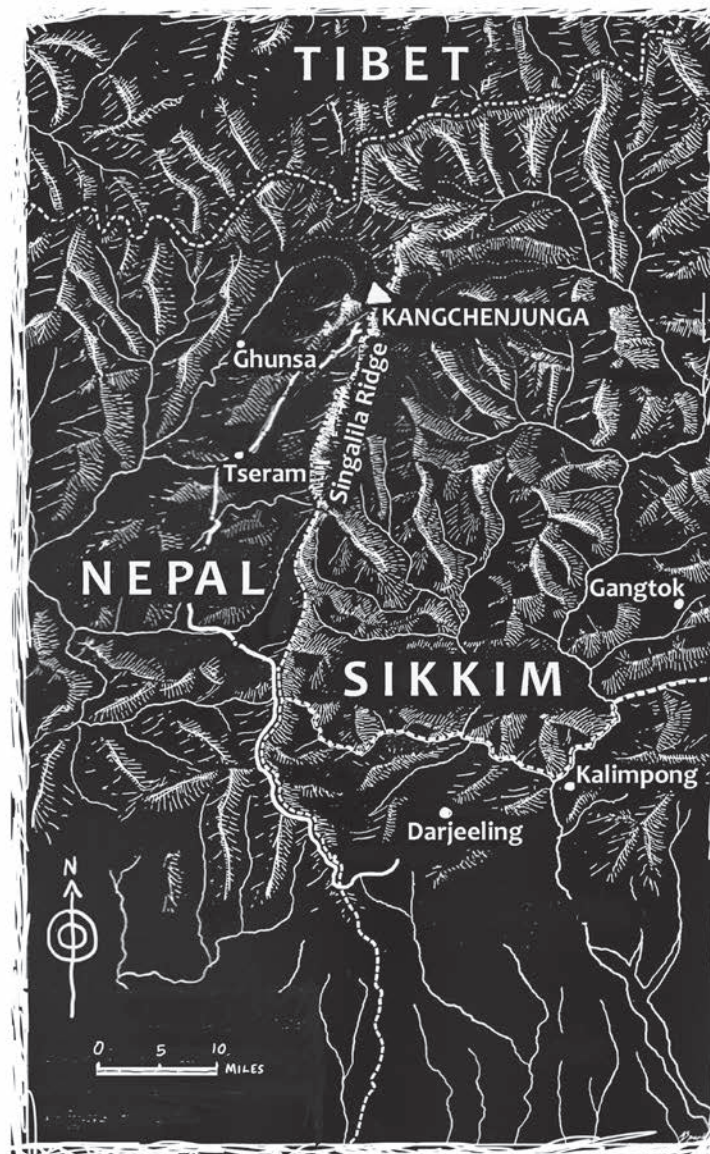


took the precaution of getting Pache and Reymond to sign the expedition contract that he and Jacot-Guillarmod had drafted, in which they acknowledged that Crowley would be the “only and supreme judge on all matters to do with climbing” and in case they were ever tempted, required them to avoid all contact with women, native or foreign.

The rain continued to torment them, and to add to their discomfort, they were beset by legions of leeches, some “big enough to kill a pony” as Crowley noted. Their first four nights were spent in Dak bungalows, the government controlled rest-houses used by postmen and travelling officials, but after that they slept in tents and improvised shelters, vainly battling the continuing rain. In an article for the *Journal de Lausanne*, published months later, Jacot-Guillarmod gave a vivid description of the miseries of life on the trail:

In the Himalayas, once you’ve left Darjeeling and its sumptuous, uncomfortable and expensive hotels, once you’ve gone past the four Dak bungalows that mark the frontier ridge between Sikkim and Nepal, once you’ve got the 200 coolies going who you have to feed and pay 1.5 fr. per day, there’s nothing more to do than go up, do down, wade through puddles, without a dry thread on your body, singing or yodelling just to keep you going when your soul is dead and your joints are all rheumatic.

Unlike the unworldly terrain they experienced on the approach march to K2 three years earlier, the endless forests of Sikkim and Nepal felt strangely familiar, reminding Crowley of Wales and Jacot-Guillarmod of Switzerland. The woodlands were, however, considerably more difficult to cross than anything found in Europe: dense labyrinths of ferns, lianas, and endless twisted rhododendron bushes, which yielded only to their porters’ razor-sharp kukris.



Kangchenjunga lies on the border of Nepal and Sikkim

In between the forests there were roaring glacial rivers, ice-cold and foamy white, and rickety bridges, which needed a strong stomach to negotiate. Just after they crossed the border into Nepal, Jacot-Guillarmod slipped while attempting to ford one particularly turbulent river. He would have been carried away if it had not been for the prompt intervention of his Kashmiri man-servant.

Their Lepcha porters were not quite so helpful. Just two days in, Jacot-Guillarmod had to send one man back because he was permanently drunk. A few mornings later the Darjeeling police arrived to arrest another porter for an unspecified misdemeanour. The remaining men grumbled and complained, and frequently threatened to leave.

Jacot-Guillarmod was shocked by their behaviour, comparing them unfavourably with the tough Balti porters they had hired in 1902 for the K2 expedition. The Lepchas, Jacot-Guillarmod wrote, with no trace of sympathy, needed rice, lentils, butter and spice whereas the hardy Baltis had survived on “little more than bread and water”. De Righi, the expedition’s transport manager, was given the task of keeping the supply train moving, but in spite of his language skills, he couldn’t cope with the daily desertions and repeated bouts of drunkenness.

Crowley stepped in, trying to bring the porters on side by offering bonuses to the fastest carriers and higher wages to anyone who consistently came in ahead of the main body. In his auto-hagiography, he claimed that by instinct he was the porters’ friend, declaring, with no hint of irony, that they were best treated like dogs and women – that is to say with “absolute respect and affection while ....being unconscious of my superiority”. As for the 130 men provided by the

government and supposedly sent out in advance, they were even less disciplined and more elusive than the porters hired by Crowley and frequently had to be chased down by the hapless De Righi.

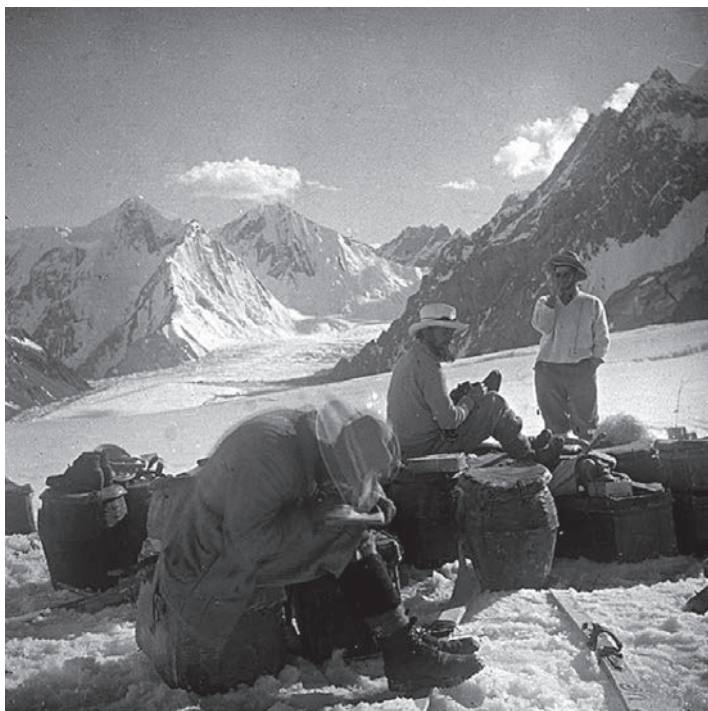
Twelve distinctly damp and testing days after leaving Darjeeling, they finally arrived at Tseram in Nepal on August 20<sup>th</sup>. It was the last settlement before Kangchenjunga, a small collection of Yak-herders’ huts and rough shelters. They set up Base Camp just beyond the huts and were gifted with a brief glimpse of the summit of Kangchenjunga when the curtain of clouds, which had hidden the mountain for the last fortnight, parted briefly.

“It is covered in fresh snow and looks very hard to get up, at the moment at least,” confided Jacot-Guillarmod to his journal gloomily. A day later their first mail runner arrived from Darjeeling, carrying letters from friends in Switzerland and a telegram from the Maharajah of Nepal informing them that they would shortly be given official permission to enter his territory, but after the gruelling approach march Jacot-Guillarmod’s dark mood refused to lift.

Crowley, by contrast, felt so optimistic that he could see “not a single dark speck on the horizon”. He had spotted a couloir, or narrow channel, which began at what he called a snow basin high up the South West Face and led up to a col to the west of the main summit. “Jacob’s Rake”, as he christened it, would provide a feasible route to the top. The only question in his mind was whether the snow basin itself was attainable.

Most of the Lepchas were paid off but Jacot-Guillarmod retained roughly 80 men to act as high-altitude porters. As agreed in Darjeeling, Crowley would go ahead with an advance contingent to scout and set up camps. Then Jacot-Guillarmod

and the others would move up gradually, carrying all the equipment and supplies needed to conquer the mountain. It seemed like a sensible strategy, but already tensions were beginning to show.



Aleister Crowley, centre, with Panama hat

On K2, Oscar Eckenstein had kept Aleister Crowley's racing instincts in check, insisting that he wait at Base Camp until the whole team had assembled, but this time Crowley was climbing leader and was in no mood to hang around. He'd arrived in Darjeeling over a month ahead of the others

and had always been at the front during the approach march. Jacot-Guillarmod was clearly nervous and increasingly wary of the mountain, but Crowley felt in top physical shape and was full of confidence. So he forged ahead, leaving the others to follow in his wake and paying no regard to acclimatisation or the need to reorganise their supplies.

Crowley set up the second camp on the edge of the vast Yalung glacier and then crossed over to the other side to establish Advance Base at around 18,000 ft. It was a good site, a small but flat plateau with a huge rock in the middle, large enough to pitch several tents and improvised shelters. A day later, Jacot-Guillarmod tried to follow with a team of porters but got lost in a maze of dangerous crevasses and eventually pitched camp in the middle of the glacier. Crowley watched in disbelief before descending to angrily demand that he carry on to the higher site. Jacot-Guillarmod refused. It was too late in the day, he claimed, and his men were tired and breathless and besides, it was Crowley's fault for not having put up enough route markers.

The next day both the climbers and the porter team moved on up to Advance Base, but the arguments resumed on the following morning. Crowley wanted to get away early while the snow was still frozen so they could cut any steps before the sun came up fully. Once the snow began to melt, he insisted, it would increase the avalanche risk significantly. But Jacot-Guillarmod disagreed. He wanted to wait until late morning to give the porters a chance to warm up. He'd noticed how poorly they were clothed and shod, and complained that Crowley had not purchased enough equipment for them. Ultimately, Crowley won the day but the delayed



start and the onset of bad weather meant that the next camp, Camp 4, was set lower than originally envisaged.

It was nevertheless according to Jacot-Guillarmod ‘the most grandiose site you could imagine’, a thin rocky ridge which had to be cleared of snow before they could create platforms for their tents. Up above towered the west ridge of Kangchenjunga, occasionally visible when the clouds parted. Jacot-Guillarmod was thrilled to be able to see the summit more clearly but staring at the steep precipices above he became even more pessimistic about their chances and was increasingly unnerved by the avalanches that endlessly tore down the mountain. Declaring himself exhausted by the climb up to Camp 4, he spent the next two days resolutely ensconced in his tent.

Crowley had no choice but to play the reluctant nursemaid, tending to Jacot-Guillarmod and his compatriot Reymond, who was also suffering with altitude sickness. It was just a few days into their attempt but Crowley was already frustrated by what he saw as the slow progress of the expedition. According to his philosophy, the only way to succeed on a big mountain was to rush the summit, so any delay was a torment.

To add to Crowley’s exasperation, the porters continued to desert on a regular basis. When he spoke to Jacot-Guillarmod and the other two Swiss climbers about this, they were unwilling to take the strong disciplinary measures he advocated. Instead they sympathised with the Lepcha porters agreeing with them that Crowley’s choice of route was frequently just too dangerous.

When Charles Reymond wrote an article about the expedition six months later, he recalled a confrontation with Crowley

over a particularly steep section. When he had complained to Crowley, the Englishman’s retort had been unequivocal:

I can see well the avalanche danger, but this is not Switzerland. The obstacles and the dangers are three times greater. Therefore you need to be three times as audacious.

It was a sentiment that would be echoed several decades later by the New Zealander Ed Hillary on the 1953 Everest expedition. He too recognised that any climber who wanted to succeed in the Himalayas had to up their game – and accept a greatly increased level of risk. As he wrote in his diary on the day he reached the summit:

Whenever I felt feelings of fear regarding it, I’d say to myself: Forget it! This is Everest and you’ve got to take a few risks.

There was one crucial difference though: whereas in 1953 the British team was able to draw upon a cadre of battle-tested Sherpas, in 1905 there was no such thing as an experienced high-altitude porter. The same men who had carried their supplies from Darjeeling to the foot of Kangchenjunga were now carrying those loads up one of the most dangerous mountains in the world. Many of them were barefoot and those who had shoes sported not tough leather boots but thin cloth bindings and improvised footwear. None of them had crampons. The only way up the steep frozen slopes above them was for the Europeans to laboriously chop steps in the ice and hope they would be good enough for the porters to follow safely.

It didn’t take long for the expedition to incur its first casualty when on August 28<sup>th</sup>, a week into the climb, one of the Lepcha porters fell to his death. When Jacot-Guillarmod descended to find out more, he discovered that the man had

slipped at a point where Crowley had been responsible for the step cutting. He was even more convinced that Crowley was moving too quickly, taking too many risks.

Jacot-Guillarmod was equally struck by the stoical reaction of the other Lepcha porters: they said prayers over the dead man's body but seemed strangely unaffected by his passing. Further down the mountain, Jacot-Guillarmod met another group of Lepchas who claimed to be suffering from headaches and snow-blindness but this time even he was not convinced and dismissed them as malingerers.



(left to right) Jacot-Guillarmod, Reymond, De Righi

While Jacot-Guillarmod stayed low for a few days, Crowley had established Camp 5 at around 20,500 ft and was

getting ready to move higher up the mountain. Reymond had remained with him and they had been joined by Alexis Pache, the Swiss cavalryman, but Crowley was not happy. The expedition's head porter or sirdar, Nanga, was no-where to be seen and the supply train up the mountain was irregular and ineffective.

Crowley sent a note down to Jacot-Guillarmod, criticising De Righi, the expedition quartermaster, and demanding that he send up more food and fuel. The climbing was going well and they were now making good progress up the mountain but they would not be able to mount a proper attack on the summit unless the logistics improved. "The next three days will be the crisis of the expedition," he warned.

Crowley didn't wait for an answer. Instead, next day he pressed on at full speed. Reymond and Pache were sent ahead with one of their Kashmiri servants, Salama, while Crowley stayed at the back to escort a group of six carefully roped up porters whose job was to enlarge the steps cut by the advance party. For the first few hundred feet, they climbed slowly and steadily. Then Crowley heard a gentle hissing sound – the men above had started a small avalanche.

Almost immediately, the lead porter, Gali, threw himself down in panic. He was helped to his feet by Crowley and the other Lepchas but was so shaken that he tried to untie from the rope and rush back down. This was exactly the wrong thing to do. Crowley ordered him to stay put but Gali just wouldn't listen so Crowley hit him with his ice axe in order, as he later wrote, "to make him more afraid of me, than he was of the mountain".

This rough medicine worked but the terrain in front became steeper and more dangerous, so after climbing a few

hundred feet they were forced to retreat back to Camp 5. The incident with Gali was a the final straw for the porters. None of them had any mountaineering experience yet they were being asked to climb higher and higher with nothing but a rope to protect them. If that wasn't enough, the lead climber, "Crowley Sahib", was showing himself to be just as cruel as the Demon of Kangchenjunga. That night several fled down the mountain only to meet Jacot-Guillarmod at Advance Base. They told him they had been maltreated and abused and warned that Crowley's route was ever more dangerous.

The young Italian transport manager, Rigo De Righi was equally disenchanted with Crowley's behaviour. Back in Darjeeling, he had been very excited at the prospect of the expedition but Crowley's continual criticisms had made him feel unappreciated and unfairly treated. As De Righi later wrote, "Crowley might have been a good climber but he was not a good general". Jacot-Guillarmod agreed. It was time, he decided, to stage a coup.

Though De Righi had never been high on any mountain and had had no alpine training, he agreed to accompany Jacot-Guillarmod to Camp 5 to confront Crowley with the porters' complaints. After all the humiliations of the last few weeks, the contract that Crowley had demanded he sign and the arguments over where to place camps, Jacot-Guillarmod was going to take back control of the expedition that he had initiated. He would call a vote to remove Crowley as expedition leader and if necessary call a halt to their attempt.

At 10.00 a.m. Jacot-Guillarmod and De Righi broke camp accompanied by fourteen Lepcha porters. It was a big challenge to get all the way up to Camp 5 in a single day but fuelled by righteous indignation they moved quickly and

reached their goal in mid-afternoon – only to find the top camp deserted.

Then through the clouds they spotted Crowley about 300 ft above them surrounded by porters. When Jacot-Guillarmod called up he discovered that his two Swiss comrades, Pache and Reymond, had gone ahead leaving Crowley's party marooned in the middle of a tricky slope without even a rope. This was not what he expected to find, but Jacot-Guillarmod climbed up to help Crowley and his porters down.

Half an hour later Pache and Reymond also descended, very proud to have got about 1000ft higher and to have found a site for their next camp. However, their sterling progress was not enough to deter Jacot-Guillarmod from confronting Crowley. In the argument that followed he called for a vote on Crowley's competence as climbing leader but unsurprisingly his co-leader refused to countenance it. Instead Crowley reminded them of the contract that they had signed and denied mistreating anyone. The porters had to be dealt with firmly for their own safety, Crowley insisted; without discipline the expedition would get nowhere.

Jacot-Guillarmod and De Righi disagreed. They countered that the porters should be treated with "persuasion and kindness", and denounced Crowley as "le Petit Rajah" who too frequently employed "the business end of his ice-axe or the toe of his well shod boot". Crowley steadfastly refused to accept their criticism. For him the whole thing was really about "the feeling of foreigners against being bossed by an Englishman".

Whoever was in the right, it certainly was a crisis moment for the expedition, though not the exciting prelude to a first ascent that Crowley had hoped for a few days earlier. Ultimately, however, Jacot-Guillarmod's High Noon moment



fizzled out inconclusively. The more experienced climber, Charles Reymond, elected to stay high with Crowley and two of their Kashmiri servants, while Alexis Pache chose to descend with Jacot-Guillarmod. He had no particular argument with his climbing leader but having reached 21,500 ft on his first ever expedition, just 1300 ft short of the world altitude record, Pache was more than pleased with his performance and ready to call it quits.

Even if they had wanted to stay, there was no room at Camp 5 for all the porters who had come up with Jacot-Guillarmod, so most went down leaving him and Pache to rope up the remaining men. They said their frosty goodbyes and prepared to depart. Jacot-Guillarmod was in the lead followed by De Righi, then two Lepcha porters and finally Alexis Pache and Ramzana, the third of their Kashmiri servants. He was equipped with crampons and an ice-axe.

It was 5.00 p.m., just enough time to reach Camp 4 before the sun set. The Lepcha porters were nervous but Jacot-Guillarmod arranged everyone carefully and though they lost their footing a few times, Pache and Ramzana were able to hold them. The main group of porters seemed to have made their own way down without any assistance so there was no reason why anyone on the second rope should be unduly worried.

Then suddenly, after Jacot-Guillarmod and De Righi had safely descended a particularly steep section, the first porter slipped, dragging down the man behind him. This time Pache couldn't hold their combined weight. He too was pulled off, followed seconds later by Ramzana and then De Righi. Realising the danger, Jacot-Guillarmod tried to take a firm stance but the falling men had set off an avalanche that was

growing rapidly. In a confused mass of arms and legs, they hurtled past him, losing their ice axes as they fell towards a large crevasse below. In less than five seconds, the descent had gone from steady progress into utter chaos.

Up at Camp 5, the others couldn't see the disaster taking place below. Crowley had not eaten all day and was feeling very aggrieved at what he saw as Jacot-Guillarmod's mutinous behaviour. He took off his climbing boots and retired to his tent.

Jacot-Guillarmod meanwhile, was battling for his life, desperately trying to stay afloat on top of the huge avalanche of snow. For a split second, time stood still as he was thrown violently on to his back, before his manic descent recommenced. Then just as suddenly as it had all started, Jacot-Guillarmod found himself stopped in his tracks, lying on his back breathless, still tangled up in the rope.

After a few seconds, he followed the rope down to De Righi, who was lying on the snow, seemingly unable to move. The young Italian was alive but so winded that he could barely get up. Jacot-Guillarmod frantically hauled on the rope that connected him to Pache and the porters who had fallen into the crevasse but though he succeeded in digging a funnel into the snow with his bare hands, he reached no-one.

The two survivors desperately called for help but Crowley could not make out what they were saying and had no inclination to find out. Reymond still had his boots on so he descended, gathering the scattered ice axes as he went. For the next hour he helped Jacot-Guillarmod and De Righi dig into the snow but they were unable to rescue any of their comrades.

With night falling and Jacot-Guillarmod's fingers feeling more and more frost-bitten, they reluctantly left the accident site and headed down to the camp below. In the morning they would return but they held out no hope that anyone had survived. De Righi slipped several times on the descent, but Reymond and Jacot-Guillarmod managed to hold him. When they arrived at the tents below, tragically the first person to greet them was the son of one of the porters who had disappeared in the avalanche.

Back at Camp 5, Crowley was still unsure what exactly had happened. He opened his tent flap and marvelled at the view. It was, he later wrote in the *Pioneer*, "the finest and loveliest sunset I had ever seen in these parts.... the clouds lying over the low highlands of Nepal while the mighty masses of ice and rock behind me, lit by the last reflection of the day, stood up reproachfully, like lovers detached, as if they knew that I could do no more."

Next day Crowley descended, leaving his Kashmiri servants and his climbing gear to follow. He passed the accident site and saw the disturbed snow but could not tell exactly what had happened. Then at Camp 4 he met the others and heard their terrible news. None of the subsequent accounts precisely state what was said, but there doesn't seem to have been a second confrontation. As far as Crowley was concerned, responsibility for the accident lay with Jacot-Guillarmod for trying to usurp his role as climbing leader. Once Crowley's belongings had been brought down, he set off for Darjeeling on the following morning, leaving the others to retrieve and bury the corpses of the men caught up in the accident.

It took three long days to complete the grim work of digging them out. They found Alexis Pache upside down, buried

under ten feet of snow. Jacot-Guillarmod photographed the porters, lowering his body down the mountain to Camp 3, wrapped in a tarpaulin. As for their comrades, the Lepchas elected to return their corpses to the crevasse where they had died, crossing their arms and saying prayers above them. "The God of Kangchenjunga has taken them," they told Jacot-Guillarmod, "They will be close to him for eternity." Once again Jacot-Guillarmod marvelled at what he called their "Buddhist fatalism".



Porters bringing down Alexis Pache's body

There was no question of taking Alexis Pache's body back to Europe, so they buried him at Camp 3, under a large pile of rocks. Reymond carved his name on a piece of granite along

with the date of his death. A pair of crossed skis marked the site of his grave.

Remarkably, as Jacot-Guillarmod later admitted, they briefly considered returning to the fray. Reymond after all had found a site for their sixth camp and with Crowley no longer in charge, the porters said they were willing to climb back up. It didn't take long though to decide against another attempt. Instead, they returned to Base Camp at Tseram only to meet a representative of the Maharajah of Nepal, who had finally arrived to give their expedition official permission.

After a few days to regroup, Jacot-Guillarmod and the others began the march back to Darjeeling. They took a much longer route than Crowley had, in order to visit a number of monasteries and as Jacot-Guillarmod later wrote, turn their sporting expedition into a scientific and ethnographic one. Reymond collected beetles and plants, Jacot-Guillarmod took photographs and De Righi made notes on the different ethnic groups they met along the trail.

After all the strains of the previous two weeks, the return trip was relaxed and light-hearted. The porters celebrated by procuring as much home-made beer as they could find while the Europeans collected flora and fauna and local artefacts. At the Pemionchi monastery, De Righi bought what he thought was an ancient prayer wheel, only to discover that it was made from a worn-out umbrella, labelled "made in Germany". Three weeks later they arrived back at the Woodlands hotel, looking forward to a comfortable bed and a warm bath. But it was not to be. Instead, they found themselves embroiled in a bitter controversy.

Aleister Crowley had reached Darjeeling on September 8 and got his retaliation in first, giving interviews and writing

reports for British and Indian newspapers in which he laid the blame for the accident directly at the foot of Jacot-Guillarmod. In the final instalment of a series of articles for the *Pioneer* newspaper, Crowley referred to the deaths on Kangchenjunga as the result of "stupidity, obstinacy and ignorance". He criticised Jacot-Guillarmod for not leaving him with enough men at Camp 5 to render effective help when the accident occurred and lambasted De Righi as an incompetent transport manager, before finishing up by asserting "mountain accidents are always the result of incompetence".

In a rather garbled version of events published in the *Daily Mail* on September 11<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that four men had been killed on Kangchenjunga after ignoring Aleister Crowley's warning not to go down over "avalanchy" snow. Echoing the sensational reporting of the famous Matterhorn accident of 1865, the article insinuated that either Jacot-Guillarmod or De Righi had cut the rope connecting them to others, in order to save their own skin. The article finished with a supposed quotation from Crowley:

I am not altogether disappointed with the present results. I know enough to make certain of success another year with a properly equipped and disciplined expedition.

When Jacot-Guillarmod and De Righi read the reports, they were livid. De Righi immediately wrote a rebuttal for the *Pioneer*, denying that there had been any logistical problems and utterly refuting the accusations of incompetence and cowardice. He portrayed Crowley as a tyrant who had alienated the porters, lost the support of the team and made completely unreasonable demands. "If gentlemen are of his stamp," De Righi wrote, "I am glad I am not one."

With no possibility of a reconciliation, Crowley and Jacot-Guillarmod began to argue about expedition funds. The two men had joint charge of the team bank account, but from the moment Jacot-Guillarmod arrived in Darjeeling back in July, they had been divided over how to spend the money. Their disagreements now grew so heated that in order to get back some 300 rupees owed by Crowley to Reymond, Jacot-Guillarmod threatened to show the authorities one of Crowley's pornographic poems from *Snowdrops in a Curate's Garden*.

Crowley consulted a Darjeeling lawyer and only settled after a few more rounds of haggling. Not to be outdone by De Righi's rebuttal, he hit back with an even longer and more critical article in the *Pioneer*, in which he claimed that after the accident he had not gone to their rescue because he was so exhausted after twelve hours with no food. And besides, he added, Jacot-Guillarmod "is old enough to rescue himself and nobody would want to rescue De Righi".

The press controversy continued for months with more articles in Swiss newspapers by Reymond and Jacot-Guillarmod in which they rounded on Crowley. Years later, when they came to write longer accounts of the expedition, Crowley and Jacot-Guillarmod were slightly less harsh in their mutual recriminations, but neither man ever forgave the other.

It was an unseemly end to what had started off as a great adventure but in hindsight, perhaps it was not really surprising. Though Jacot-Guillarmod and Crowley were two of the only Europeans with any high-altitude experience, neither seemed to have learned anything from their previous expedition to K2. They consistently underestimated Kangchenjunga,

behaving as if it would be a relatively easy climb for a small team and paying no regard to acclimatisation.

Ultimately the controversy backfired on Crowley. Future historians either underplayed his role on "Jacot-Guillarmod's expedition" or denounced him as a charlatan. Even if he had been undermined by the Swiss climbers and even if the accident was not strictly speaking his fault, Crowley had behaved thoughtlessly at best, callously at worst. If he had gone down to help with the rescue attempt or even just stayed behind to help the others dig out the corpses, then history might have recorded the first Kangchenjunga expedition as a serious but flawed attempt on a very difficult mountain. Instead it was dismissed as a model of poor leadership and selfish behaviour.

It would be a mistake though to think that Crowley didn't take climbing and this expedition seriously. When years later he was compiling his archives, he tried to sum up his life and career in a series of roles:

Aleister Crowley: Magus, poet, mountaineer, explorer, big game hunter, chess master, cook.

Climbing was a crucial part of Crowley's identity and if he had been less egocentric and a little less selfish, he might have been remembered as one of the great Himalayan pioneers.

Even though the 1905 Kangchenjunga expedition had ended in disaster, it had arguably been far more successful than the 1902 attempt on K2, where Eckenstein's team barely left the glacier. Under Crowley's leadership they had put up four high camps and reached some 21,500 ft, a significant achievement for 1905, on what would later be dubbed the hardest mountain in the Himalayas.

As for the Lepchas, like all the porters and Sherpas of the period, they were mountaineering's hidden footmen, who played a vital role but lacked the means to tell their own story. Nowhere in any account of the 1905 expedition are the names of the dead Lepchas recorded. The death of four men on the expedition made it the deadliest of any Himalayan expedition so far and sent out a clear signal of the extreme dangers of climbing at high altitude. It wasn't, however, the only lethal incident associated with the 1905 expedition.

In a strange postscript, later that year a Calcutta newspaper included a report on the "Alleged assault on a European". According to the article, half a dozen "badmashes", local villains, had attempted to rob an unidentified traveller. He in turn had shot and seriously wounded two of them before they fled.

That mysterious European was Aleister Crowley. Like that later anti-establishment hero Hunter S. Thompson, Crowley was very keen on guns. He had a case full of rifles and shot-guns back at Boleskine and when travelling usually carried a Webley .38 for self-protection. The attack in Calcutta, Crowley later wrote, was only the latest in a series of "outrages against Europeans, but I was the only outragee who came out on top".

Crowley never went on any further expeditions but even in the late 1920s when at the height of his decadence and drug-taking he was running a commune on the island of Sicily, he still regularly took his guests climbing in the local hills. When seven porters were killed on the 1922 Everest expedition, he wrote a highly critical letter to the British press, complaining that it was a re-run of Kangchenjunga and that as in 1905, the real mistake was to have roped everyone up.

Three years later Crowley came up with his own plan to climb Everest accompanied by the notorious American journalist, alcoholic and certified madman, William Seabrook. Crowley envisaged hiring a pilot to drop them off on Everest's south east glacier with all the necessary tents and supplies. Having built up their health to the utmost, they would then attempt to "rush the mountain".

Nothing came of it and Crowley never returned to the Himalayas, but in 1929, a full twenty-four years after the 1905 expedition, he was contacted by a German climber who was equally bent on climbing "the five treasuries of the snow". His name was Paul Bauer, and his attempt on Kangchenjunga in 1929 would be described by the *Alpine Journal* "a feat without parallel, perhaps, in all the annals of mountaineering."