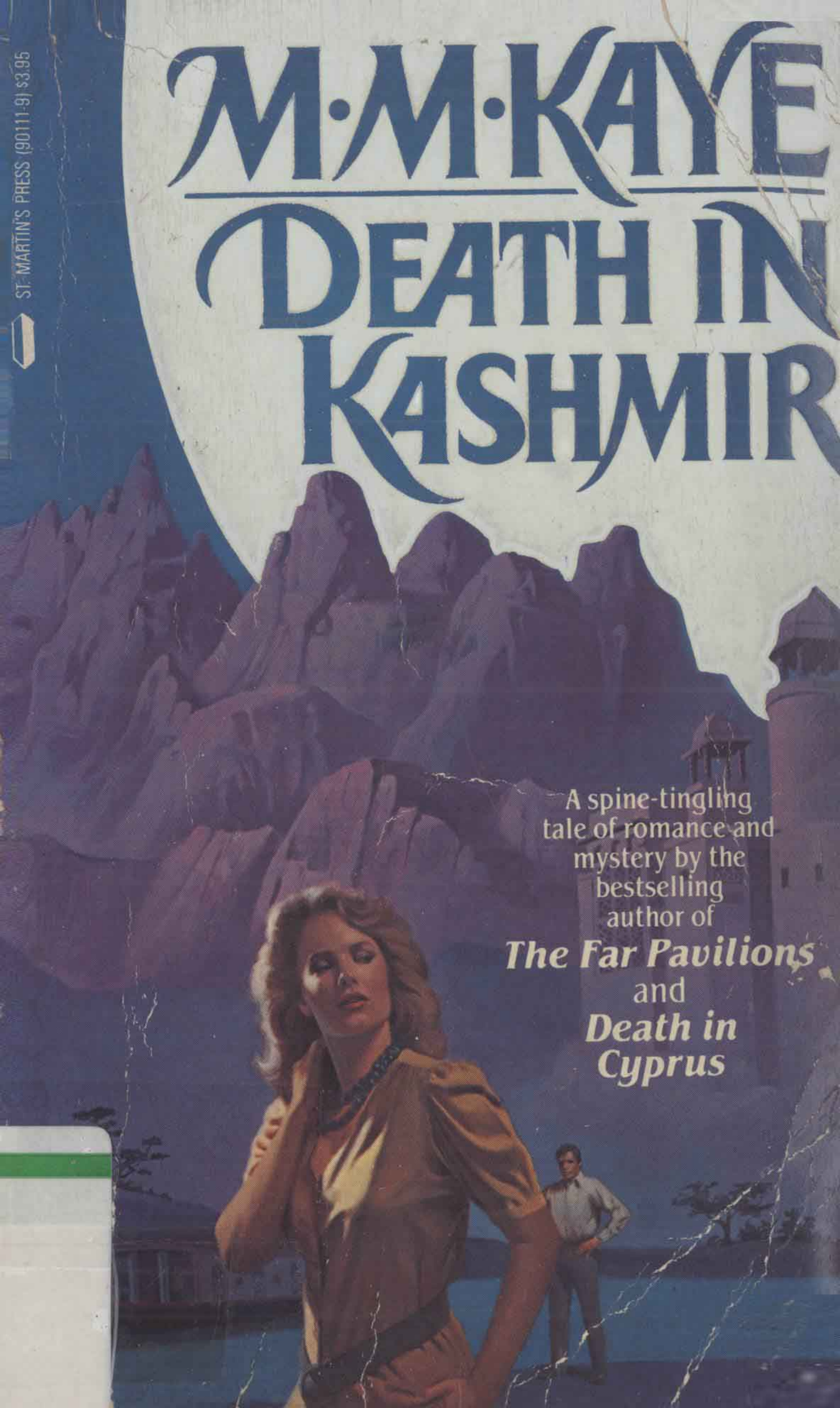
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS (90111-9) $3.95

M·M·KAYE

DEATH IN KASHMIR



A spine-tingling tale of romance and mystery by the bestselling author of

The Far Pavilions

and

Death in Cyprus

Death in Kashmir

M. M. Kaye

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

For
GOFF
and the delectable valley.

With all my love

'Who has not heard of the
vale of Cashmere . . .?'

Thomas Moore, *Lalla-Rookh*

Map of Kashmir drawn by
Reginald Piggot

ISBN 0-312-90111-9

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I first began to write murder mysteries—'whodunits'—I would try to write at least two thousand words every day: Sundays excepted. If I managed to exceed that, I would credit the extra number to a day on which I knew that some unavoidable official duty or social engagement would prevent me writing at all. It was my way of keeping track of the length of each chapter and controlling the overall length of the book, and at the end of each day I would make a note against the date of the number of words I had written and considered worth keeping. Which is why I have on record the exact day and date on which I met my future husband, Goff Hamilton, then a Lieutenant in that famous Frontier Force Regiment, the Corps of Guides.

It was on a Monday morning and the date was 2 June 1941, and I happened at that time to be living in Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir, which is one of the loveliest countries in the world. Goff, who was up on short leave, fishing, had called in to give me a letter that he had promised a mutual friend to deliver by hand. I presume I wrote something that day, since I was actually at work on my daily quota when he arrived. But there is no entry against that date—or against a long string of dates that followed.

The manuscript stopped there, halfway through a chapter. Because what with getting married, having two children, working for the WVS and also for a propaganda magazine, and living in a state of perpetual panic for fear that Goff would not get back alive from Burma, there was no time to spare for writing novels.

It was not until the war was over and the British had quit India, the Raj become no more than a memory and Goff and I and the children were in Scotland, living in an army quarter in Glasgow and finding it difficult to make ends meet, that I remembered that I could write, and decided that it was high time I gave the family budget a helping hand.

I therefore dug out that dog-eared and dilapidated student's pad in which I had begun a book that I had tentatively entitled *There's a Moon Tonight,* and read the two and a half chapters I had written during that long-ago springtime in Kashmir.

It didn't read too badly, so I updated it to the last months of the Raj instead of the first year of the war, and when I had finished it, posted it in some trepidation to a well-known firm of literary agents in London, who fortunately for me, liked it. I was summoned to London, where I was handed over to one of their staff, a Mr Scott, who was considered the most suitable person to deal with my work on the grounds that he himself 'knew a bit about India'. He turned out to be the Paul Scott who had already written three books with an Indian setting, and would one day write *The Raj Quartet* and *Staying On,* and as he became a great friend of mine, my luck was clearly in that day. I hope that it stays in, so that readers will enjoy this story of a world that is gone and of a country that remains beautiful beyond words, despite mankind's compulsive and indefatigable efforts to destroy what is beautiful!

I would also like to mention here that having recently seen the TV versions of Paul's *Jewel in the Crown* and my own *Far Pavilions,* and been constantly irritated by hearing almost every Indian word mispronounced (some even in several different ways!), I have decided to let any readers who may be interested learn, by way of a guide which follows, the pronunciation that my characters would have used in *their* day. In some cases no syllable is accented, in others the syllable on which

the accent falls will be in italic type, and the rest in roman. The spelling will be strictly phonetic because too many words were not pronounced as they were spelt, e.g. *marg* (meadow), though spelt with an 'a', was pronounced *murg!* And so on . . . Thus leading to considerable confusion!

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

The right-hand column shows how each word should be pronounced: the stress is on the italicized syllable(s).

Apharwat	Apper-waat
Banihal	Bunny-harl
Baramulla	Bara-*mooler*
Bulaki	Bull-*ar*-ki
bunnia	bun-nia
chaprassi	ch'*prassi*
chenar	ch'*nar*
Chota Nagim	*Choter* N'geem
chowkidar	*chowk*-e-dar
Dāl	Darl
feringhi	fer-*ung*-ghi
ghat	gaut
Gulmarg	Gul-*murg* (Gul rhymes with pull)
Hari Parbat	Hurry *Purr*-but
Hazratbal	*Huz*-raatbaal
Jhelum	*Gee*-lum
khansamah	khan-*sah*-ma
khidmatgar	kit-ma-gar
Khilanmarg	Killan-murg
maidan	*my*-darn
mānji	*maan*-jee
marg	murg
memsahib	*mem*-sarb
Nagim Bagh	N'geem Barg
Nedou	*Nee*-doo
pashmina	*push*-mina
Peshawar	P'shower

Rawalpindi	R'l'*pindi*
sahib	sarb
shikara	shic-*karra*
Srinagar	Sr'in-*nugger*
Takht-i-Suliman	Tucked-e-*Sul*-eman
Tanmarg	Tun-*murg*
tonga	*tong*-ah

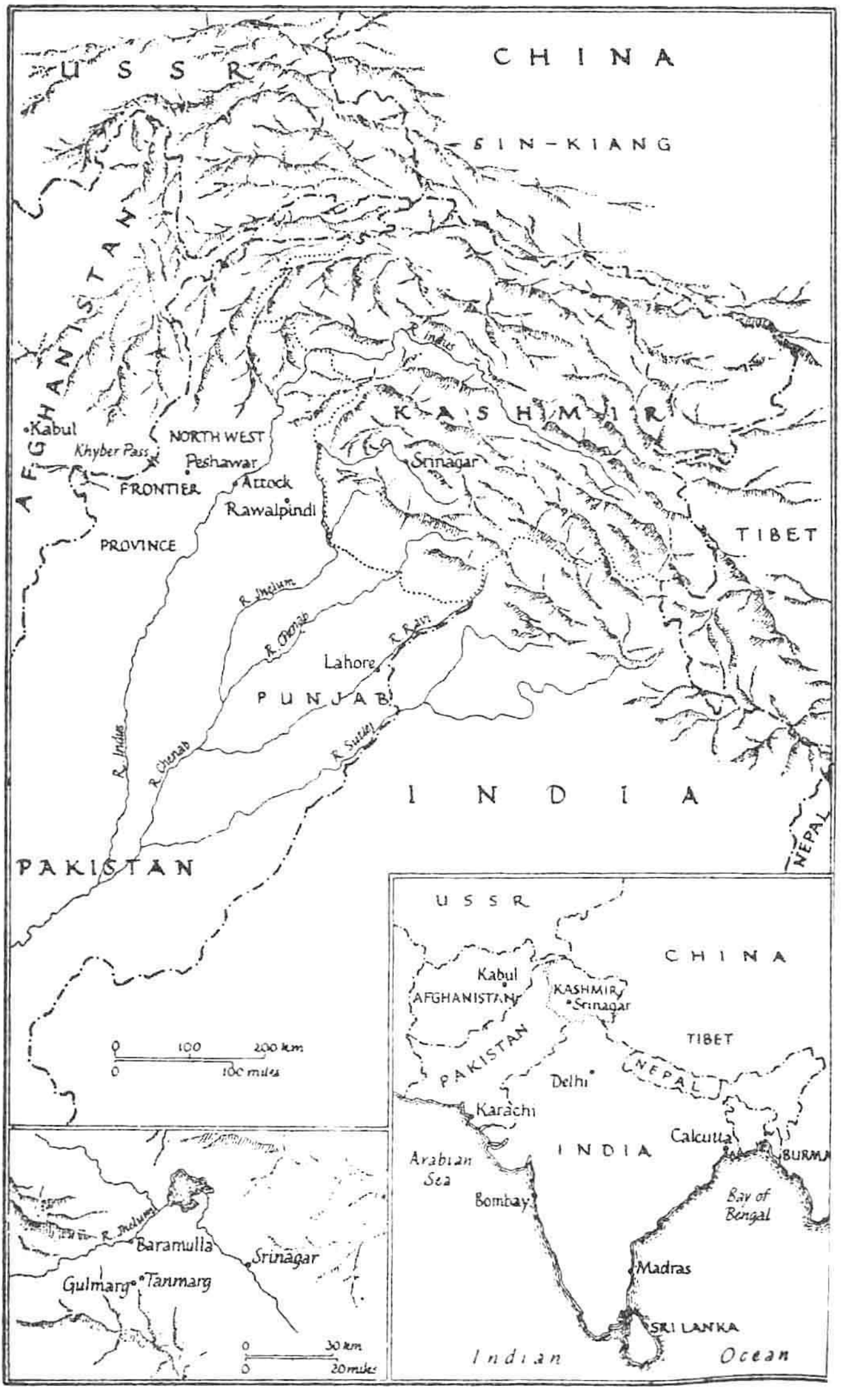
CONTENTS

Part I

GULMARG

'The white peaks ward the passes, as of yore,
The wind sweeps o'er the wastes of Khorasan;—
But thou and I go thitherward no more.'

Laurence Hope, *Yasin Khan*



1

Afterwards Sarah could never be quite sure whether it was the moonlight or that soft, furtive sound that had awakened her. The room that except for the dim and comforting flicker of a dying fire had been dark when she fell asleep was now full of a cold, gleaming light. And suddenly she was awake . . . and listening.

It was scarcely more than a breath of sound, coming from somewhere outside the rough pinewood walls that divided that isolated wing of the rambling hotel into separate suites. A faint, irregular rasping, made audible only by the intense, frozen silence of the moonlit night.

A rat, thought Sarah, relaxing with a small sigh of relief. It was absurd that so small a thing should have jerked her out of sleep and into such tense and total wakefulness. Her nerves must be getting out of hand. Or perhaps the height had something to do with it? The hotel stood over eight thousand feet above sea-level, and Mrs Matthews had said——

Mrs Matthews! Sarah's wandering thoughts checked with a sickening jar as though she had walked into a stone wall in the dark.

How was it that awakening in that cold night she had been able, even for a few minutes, to forget about Mrs Matthews?

Less than a week ago, in the first days of January, Sarah Parrish and some thirty-odd skiing enthusiasts from all parts of India had arrived up in Gulmarg, that cluster of log cabins that lies in a green cup among the mountains of the Pir Panjal, more than three thousand

feet above the fabled 'Vale of Kashmir'. They had come to attend what was, for most of them, their last meeting of the Ski Club of India. For this was 1947, and the date for India's independence—the end of the Raj and the departure of the British—had been set for the following year.

Beautiful mountain-locked Kashmir was one of India's many semi-independent princely states which, by treaty, were in effect 'protectorates' of the Government of India, ruled over by hereditary Maharajahs, Nawabs, Rajas or Ranas who were 'advised' by a British Resident. And though access to this particular State was not easy, since it is walled in on every side by high mountains, it has been regarded for centuries as an ideal hot-weather retreat from the burning plains—the Great Moguls, in their day, making the journey on elephants, horses or in palanquins.

The British had followed where the Moguls led, and made it one of their favourite playgrounds. But because the State would not permit them to buy or own land in Kashmir, they had taken to spending their holidays there in houseboats on its lovely lakes, in tents among the pines and deodars, or in rented log cabins in Gulmarg, which is little more than a grassy bowl among the mountains that overlook the main valley. A bowl that some homesick Briton (presumably a Scotsman?) converted into a series of admirable golf-courses, and which during the winter and early spring is blanketed deep in snow.

Every year, during this latter period, the Ski Club of India would hold one or more of its meetings in Gulmarg. And on these occasions the rambling, snow-bound, summer hotel would be opened to accommodate members and their friends. This year had been no exception, and anyone and everyone who could possibly manage to get there had done so. The weather had been perfect and the party a gay one: until, with shocking suddenness, tragedy had struck.

Mrs Matthews—grey-haired, sociable, delightful—had been picked up dead from among the snow-covered boulders near the foot of the Blue Run.

She had not been missed until late afternoon on the previous day, as dusk was falling and the skiers converging on the welcoming lights of the hotel—straggling up from the nursery slopes, or down from the snowfields of Khilanmarg that lie high above Gulmarg, where the pine forests end. Even then it had been supposed that she was in her room.

She was there now. They had brought her back to it and laid her on the bed, and Sarah wondered, with a little prickling of the scalp, if the comparative warmth of the narrow, pineboard room had been sufficient to thaw the dreadful stiffness from those frozen, contorted limbs.

A terrified coolie, bringing firewood to the hotel, had stumbled upon that sprawling figure in the dusk, and Sarah had seen her carried in: a grotesque jumble of widespread arms and legs that could not be bent or decently straightened.

Sarah had liked Mrs Matthews—everyone liked Mrs Matthews—and the unexpected sight of that rigid corpse had filled her with such shuddering nausea that, unable to face the prospect of food, she had retired early and supperless to bed and had taken a long time to fall asleep. Now all at once she was wide awake; and with little prospect of dropping off again while her room remained bright with moonlight, and that faint rasping sound frayed at her nerves.

Strange that there should be rats up here in winter, with the snow lying deep for so many months and the huts shuttered and deserted. Hadn't she once read somewhere that they could not stand extreme cold? Perhaps Kashmiri rats were different . . . Sarah tossed and turned restlessly, and wondered irritably what had possessed her to draw back the curtains? At the time, it had seemed pleasant to lie and look out at the snow

and the night sky, but she should have realized that sooner or later the moon would shine into the verandah and reach the window of her room.

Earlier in the evening, because the atmosphere of her small bedroom had seemed close and stuffy after the crisp night air outside, she had half opened her bathroom window and left wide the communicating door between the two rooms. But the logs that had blazed in the fireplace a few hours ago were now only a handful of grey ash, and the room was very cold.

The prospect of getting out of bed in order to draw the curtains and close the bathroom window was not a pleasant one and Sarah shivered at the thought. Yet now, in addition to feeling cold, she was also beginning to feel hungry and regret foregoing her supper, and there was a tin of biscuits on the bathroom shelf. She could fetch a handful and close the window and the bedroom curtains at the same time. Reaching out a reluctant hand for the fur coat that was doing duty as an extra blanket, she huddled it about her shoulders and slid out of bed. Her soft, sheep-skin slippers were ice-cold to her shrinking toes, but they made no sound as she crossed the room and went through the open doorway into the bathroom.

The small, wooden-walled suites in this wing of the hotel were all alike, each consisting of a bed-sitting room, plus a narrow, primitive bathroom, the back door of which opened onto two or three shallow wooden steps that led down to a path used only by those hotel servants whose duty it was to clean the bathrooms or to carry up hot water for the small tin bathtubs.

Sarah did not bother to switch on the light, for the open window allowed the cold glimmer of moonlight on snow to fill the unlit bathroom with a pale glow that was more than enough to see by. But she had taken no more than two steps when she stopped short, listening to that barely audible sound that she had supposed to

be the gnawing of a rat. It was clearer now—and it could not possibly be a rat, because rats did not gnaw metal. Sarah stood quite still, holding her breath and straining to hear. There it was again! So soft a sound that had it not been for her opened door and window she would never have heard it. The stealthy rasp of a file on metal.

This time it was followed by the faint rattle of a window-frame; though there was no breath of wind. And suddenly she realized what it meant. Someone outside was trying, with infinite caution, to file through the fastening of a window. Not her own, for that stood open. Whose, then?

The room to her left was unoccupied, and since the one immediately beyond it belonged to Major McKay of the Indian Medical Service, who held strong views on the value of fresh air and boasted of sleeping with every window wide in all weathers, it could not be either of those. The room on her right was occupied by a Miss Rushton, a girl in her mid-twenties, while in the one beyond it, between Miss Rushton's room and one occupied by a Colonel Gidney, lay the body of Mrs Matthews.

Sarah shivered at the thought of that locked room and its silent occupant, and clenching her teeth to stop them chattering, moved cautiously forward until, standing flat against the wall, she could peer out obliquely from her half-opened window. A wide bar of shadow lay across the slope and the path below, but beyond it the snow sparkled brilliantly in the moonlight, thinning the shadows with reflected light so that she could see quite clearly the rickety wooden steps that led up to Janet Rushton's bathroom door.

There was someone standing just beyond those steps: a shapeless figure whose hands, showing dark against the weather-bleached woodwork, were busy at the level of Miss Rushton's window. There was also a metal object lying on the window-sill—she could see it gleam in

the reflected moonlight. A jemmy, perhaps? or some improvised crowbar?

Sarah's immediate reaction was one of pure rage. Mrs Matthews not twelve hours dead, and already some ghoulish coolie from the village, or a dishonest hotel servant, was breaking in to steal the dead woman's belongings! Because of course it must be that, and the would-be thief had merely mistaken the window, since Janet Rushton, the girl in the next room, wore no jewellery and appeared to have brought little more than a change of skiing clothes and slacks with her. Which made it highly unlikely that anyone bent on random theft would take the trouble to file through the catch of her window. Particularly when she, Sarah—an obviously more profitable victim!—had obligingly left hers wide open!

She decided to shout and bang upon the window, confident that this would be more than enough to scare any thief away. But even as she opened her mouth to carry out this laudable intention, the figure turned its head and her shout died unuttered: for it had no face . . .

For a moment it seemed to Sarah that her heart stopped beating. Then in the next second she realized that she was looking at someone who was wearing a mask: a hood of some drab material that completely covered the wearer's head and neck, and had holes cut in it for eyes. In almost the same instant she realized that the object lying upon the window-sill, so near to those purposeful hands, was a gun. And all at once she was afraid. Afraid as she had never been before in her short twenty-two years of life.

This was no ordinary thief. No pilfering Kashmiri would wear a mask or carry firearms. Besides, of what use were such precautions against a dead woman? Then it *must* be Miss Rushton's room that was his objective——

Sarah backed away from the window inch by inch