

of the Civil Lines, was suffering a like visitation. It the conflagration spread, which seemed far from improbable under existing weather conditions, the whole Station risked being burned out.

For the last twenty-four hours the sky had been portentous with cloud and murk. Evil winds, suddenly upspringing, raised storms of stinging suffocating dust; and sent pillars of blown sand whirling, Dervish-like, across the Maidan in intricate and fearful dance. At intervals thunder shattered and volleyed overhead. All nature seemed convulsed, struggling to free itself, stricken with insanity by the heat; but no rain fell as yet.

At the Sultan-i-bagh, standing solitary, midway between the Civil and Military Lines, night brought no sense of security or repose. For, when the thunder ceased to shudder through the solid fabric of the house, or the scorching wind failed for a while to cry through shutters and every aperture and crack of casement and of door, the unexpected silence speedily found voice, muttering and whispering furtively, watchful and malevolent. Everywhere dust had penetrated, too, blurring all polished surfaces, rendering every object harsh and gritty to the touch.

Then, as time drew on, on a sudden the whole place sprang loudly awake. Urgent messengers passed in and out, orders were given sharply, horses called for, Lugard sent off to the Mackinders', Hockless to the Government stables. The blank darkness to north and south was torn by leaping flame, while the universal oppression and uncertainty obtaining were rendered more distractingly acute by distant shoutings, the lowing of cattle, screaming of terrified horses, trumpeting of elephants.

Charles Verity went upstairs into the nursery. He crossed the room to the sofa on which Damaris lay. As Sarah Watson, who sat fanning the child, rose, he reached out his hand for the fan and silently took her place.

For a minute or so he remained looking at the little