

II

SEVERAL outbreaks of fire, encouraged, though insufficiently accounted for, by the prevailing drought, occurred in the European quarter of Bhutpur at this period. This, while supplying an agreeable fillip of excitement to those whose private property was neither endangered nor consumed, proved eminently disquieting to the more responsible and experienced members of the community. For they could not but remember that the spring of 1857—year of ill-omen to the English Raj—had been marked, far and wide, by kindred outbreaks. Nor could they forget that the men accused of the murder of Clatworthy, the young Kankarpur Deputy Assistant Commissioner, were now undergoing trial; or that other persons, among them, native gentlemen of considerable local position, lay in gaol, charged with treasonable practices and attempted inciting to sedition and revolt. Might there not, only too probably, be a connection between these facts of very sinister import?

But even such frivolous persons as Kitty Hobday and Mrs. Hermon Helder, who had most cordially welcomed the enlivenment of hot-weather monotony by bonfires fed with the goods of their unhappy neighbours and friends, sobered abruptly when the news circulated, one Sunday towards midnight, that not only were the Government yards and stables, at the northern end of the Cantonments, ablaze; but that the Mackinders' pleasant bungalow and its numerous outbuildings, in the heart