

Britain, Colonial India and Gothic Fiction

City of Ghosts, Extract: The Massacre

'We are going to *crush* this rebellion, this act of defiance. Stopping them in the alleyways and lanes would have been a problem, but out there in the open – well, out there we can *get* them.'

'It looks peaceful, sir,' said Rehill, worried now.

Dyer snorted at him. 'Those who have peaceful intentions will leave when we arrive, Superintendent. The ones who stay choose their own fate. We will send the rest of India a message today. Now, is everybody absolutely certain they know what their orders are?'

All three men nodded, Rehill with deep reluctance.

'Right then, men – no time like the present!' said Dyer.

Rehill couldn't work out exactly what it was that he heard in Dyer's voice. It was either anxiety or resolve, or perhaps both. Whatever the case, he could sense what was coming and it worried him deeply.

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The scene that greeted them sent Rehill's stomach into spasm. There were thousands of people – the vast majority of them men, but women and children too, many of them wearing brightly coloured clothes – pink, red, blue and orange. To Rehill's left was a wooden platform that was being used as a stage. A man whom Rehill didn't recognize stood at the microphone, addressing the crowd. His hands moved in all directions and his face was contorted with emotion. He mentioned the Rowlett Act, and sections of the crowd jeered.

'Good God!' exclaimed Colonel Morgan. 'These people are angry.'

Behind the troops, General Dyer appeared, his face set like stone. He looked at the crowds and then at the stage. Within seconds he gave the order: 'Troops ready!'

... Some of the people in the crowd saw the troops and began to panic. The speaker shouted for them to remain calm, insisting that the troops would not shoot. But no one listened, and people began to run in all directions. Dyer, with the cold calculating calmness of a snake, pounced:

'*FIRE!*'

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Gurdial heard the screams getting louder as he stumbled through the smoke; unsure of where he was – or where he wanted to go. Beneath his feet were bodies; young and old, male and female. He clambered over them as the fog around him grew denser, and the stench of blood, guts and death made him want to retch. There was another smell – scorched metal and gunpowder – that stung his eyes and prevented him from seeing exactly what was going on. After two or three paces he fell to his knees, the sound of gunshots still ringing in his ears. He slipped again and fell forwards into a soft wet mass. He reached down and felt something slippery. Looking closely, he realized that it was the stomach of a woman; or more precisely the area where her stomach had once been. Her insides were open and lying on the dusty ground all about him.