

Chapter 33

'Mischief, thou art afoot.' - Julius Caesar.

FELIX could not go home again immediately after quitting Esther. He got out of the town, skirted it a little while, looking across the December stillness of the fields, and then re-entered it by the main road into the market-place, thinking that, after all, it would be better for him to look at the busy doings of men than to listen in solitude to the voices within him; and he wished to know how things were going on.

It was now nearly half-past one, and Felix perceived that the street was filling with more than the previous crowd. By the time he got in front of the booths, he was himself so surrounded by men who were being thrust hither and thither that retreat would have been impossible; and he went where he was obliged to go, although his height and strength were above the average even in a crowd where there were so many heavy-armed workmen used to the pick-axe. Almost all shabby-coated Trebians must have been there, but the entries and back-streets of the town did not supply the mass of the crowd; and besides the rural incomers, both of the more decent and the rougher sort, Felix, as he was pushed along, thought he discerned here and there men of that keener aspect which is only common in manufacturing towns.

But at present there was no evidence of any distinctly mischievous design. There was only evidence that the majority of the crowd were excited with drink, and that their action could hardly be calculated on more than those of oxen and pigs congregated amidst hootings and pushings. The confused deafening shouts, the incidental fighting, the knocking over, pulling and scuffling, seemed to increase every moment. Such of the constables as were mixed with the crowd were quite helpless; and if an official staff was seen above the heads, it moved about fitfully, showing as little sign of a guiding hand as the summit of a buoy on the waves. Doubtless many hurts and bruises had been received but no one could know the amount of injuries that were wildly scattered.

It was clear that no more voting could be done, and the poll had been adjourned. The probabilities of serious mischief had grown strong enough to prevail over the rector's objection to getting military aid within reach; and when Felix re-entered the town, a galloping messenger had already been despatched to Duffield. The rector wished to ride out again, and read the Riot Act from a point where he could be better heard than from the window of the Marquis; but Mr Crow, the high constable, who had returned from closer observation, insisted that the risk would be too great. New special constables had

been sworn in, but Mr Crow said prophetically that if once mischief began, the mob was past caring for constables.

But the rector's voice was ringing and penetrating, and when he appeared on the narrow balcony and read the formula, commanding all men to go to their homes or about their lawful business, there was a strong transient effect. Every one within hearing listened, and for a few moments after the final words, 'God save the King!' the comparative silence continued. Then the people began to move, the buzz rose again, and grew, and grew, till it turned to shouts and roaring as before. The movement was that of a flood hemmed in; it carried nobody away. Whether the crowd would obey the order to disperse themselves within an hour, was a doubt that approached nearer and nearer to a negative certainty.

Presently Mr Crow, who held himself a tactician, took a well-intentioned step, which went far to fulfill his own prophecy. He had arrived with the magistrates by a back way at the Seven Stars, and here again the Riot Act was read from a window, with much the same result as before. The rector had returned by the same way to the Marquis, as the headquarters most suited for administration, but Mr Crow remained at the other extremity of King Street, where some awe-striking presence was certainly needed. Seeing that the time was passing, and all effect from the voice of law had disappeared, he showed himself at an upper window, and addressed the crowd, telling them that the soldiers had been sent for, and that if they did not disperse they would have cavalry upon them instead of constables.

Mr Crow, like some other high constables more celebrated in history, 'enjoyed a bad reputation'; that is to say, he enjoyed many things which caused his reputation to be bad, and he was anything but popular in Treby. It is probable that a pleasant message would have lost something from his lips, and what he actually said was so unpleasant, that, instead of persuading the crowd, it appeared to enrage them. Some one, snatching a raw potato from a sack in the greengrocer's shop behind him, threw it at the constable, and hit him on the mouth. Straightway raw potatoes and turnips were flying by twenties at the windows of the Seven Stars, and the panes were smashed. Felix, who was half-way up the street, heard the voices turning to a savage roar, and saw a rush towards the hardware shop, which furnished more effective weapons and missiles than turnips and potatoes. Then a cry ran along that the Tories had sent for the soldiers, and if those among the mob who called themselves Tories as willingly as anything else were disposed to take whatever called itself the Tory side, they only helped the main result of reckless disorder.

But there were proofs that the predominant will of the crowd was against 'Debarry's men,' and in favour of Transome. Several shops

were invaded, and they were all of them 'Tory shops'. The tradesmen who could do so, now locked their doors and barricaded their windows within. There was a panic among the householders of this hitherto peaceful town, and a general anxiety for the military to arrive. The rector was in painful anxiety on this head: he had sent out two messengers as secretly as he could towards Hathercote, to order the soldiers to ride straight to the town; but he feared that these messengers had been somehow intercepted.

It was three o'clock: more than an hour had elapsed since the reading of the Riot Act. The rector of Treby Magna wrote an indignant message and sent it to the Ram, to Mr Lingon, the rector of Little Treby, saying that there was evidently a Radical animus in the mob, and that Mr Transome's party should hold themselves peculiarly responsible. Where was Mr Jermyn?

Mr Lingon replied that he was going himself out towards Duffield to see after the soldiers. As for Jermyn, he was not that attorney's sponsor: he believed that Jermyn was gone away somewhere on business - to fetch voters.

A serious effort was now being made by all the civil force at command. The December day would soon be passing into evening, and all disorder would be aggravated by obscurity. The horrors of fire were as likely to happen as any minor evil. The constables, as many of them as could do so, armed themselves with carbines and sabres; all the respectable inhabitants who had any courage prepared themselves to struggle for order; and many felt with Mr Wace and Mr Tiliot that the nearest duty was to defend the breweries and the spirit and wine vaults, where the property was of a sort at once most likely to be threatened and most dangerous in its effects. The rector, with fine determination, got on horseback again, as the best mode of leading the constables, who could only act efficiently in a close body. By his direction the column of armed men avoided the main street, and made their way along a back road, that they might occupy the two chief lanes leading to the wine-vaults and the brewery, and bear down on the crowd from these openings, which it was especially desirable to guard.

Meanwhile Felix Holt had been hotly occupied in King Street. After the first window-smashing at the Seven Stars, there was a sufficient reason for damaging that inn to the utmost. The destructive spirit tends towards completeness; and any object once maimed or otherwise injured, is as readily doomed by unreasoning men as by unreasoning boys. Also the Seven Stars sheltered Spratt; and to some Sproxtton men in front of that inn it was exasperating that Spratt should be safe and sound on a day when blows were going, and

justice might be rendered. And again, there was the general desirableness of being inside a public-house.

Felix had at last been willingly urged on to this spot. Hitherto swayed by the crowd, he had been able to do nothing but defend himself and keep on his legs; but he foresaw that the people would burst into the inn; he heard cries of 'Spratt!' 'Fetch him out!' 'We'll pitch him out!' 'Pummel him ! ' It was not unlikely that lives might be sacrificed; and it was intolerable to Felix to be witnessing the blind outrages of this mad crowd, and yet be doing nothing to counteract them. Even some vain effort would satisfy him better than mere gazing. Within the walls of the inn he might save some one. He went in with a miscellaneous set, who dispersed themselves with different objects - some to the taproom, and to search for the cellar; some upstairs to search in all rooms for Spratt, or any one else perhaps, as a temporary scapegoat for Spratt. Guided by the screams of women, Felix at last got to a high up-stairs passage, where the landlady and some of her servants were running away in helpless terror from two or three half-tipsy men, who had been emptying a spirit-decanter in the bar. Assuming the tone of a mob-leader, he cried out, 'Here, boys, here's better fun this way - come with me ! ' and drew the men back with him along the passage. They reached the lower staircase in time to see the unhappy Spratt being dragged, coatless and screaming, down the steps. No one at present was striking or kicking him; it seemed as if he were being reserved for punishment on some wider area, where the satisfaction might be more generally shared. Felix followed close, determined, if he could, to rescue both assailers and assaulted from the worst consequences. His mind was busy with possible devices.

Down the stairs, out along the stones through the gateway, Spratt was dragged as a mere heap of linen and cloth rags. When he was got outside the gateway, there was an immense hooting and roaring, though many there had no grudge against him, and only guessed that others had the grudge. But this was the narrower part of the street; it widened as it went onwards, and Spratt was dragged on, his enemies crying, 'We'll make a ring - we'll see how frightened he looks ! '

'Kick him, and have done with him,' Felix heard another say. 'Let's go to Tiliot's vaults - there's more gin there!'

Here were two hideous threats. In dragging Spratt onward the people were getting very near to the lane leading up to Tiliot's. Felix kept as close as he could to the threatened victim. He had thrown away his own stick, and carried a bludgeon which had escaped from the hands of an invader at the Seven Stars! his head was bare; he looked, to undiscerning eyes, like a leading spirit of the mob. In this condition he was observed by several persons looking anxiously from their upper

windows, and finally observed to push himself, by violent efforts, close behind the dragged man.

Meanwhile the foremost among the constables, who, coming by the back way, had now reached the opening of Tiliot's Lane, discerned that the crowd had a victim amongst them. One spirited fellow, named Tucker, who was a regular constable, feeling that no time was to be lost in meditation, called on his neighbour to follow him, and with the sabre that happened to be his weapon got a way for himself where he was not expected, by dint of quick resolution. At this moment Spratt had been let go - had been dropped, in fact, almost lifeless with terror, on the street stones, and the men round him had retreated for a little space, as if to amuse themselves with looking at him. Felix had taken his opportunity; and seeing the first step towards a plan he was bent on, he sprang forward close to the cowering Spratt. As he did this, Tucker had cut his way to the spot, and imagining Felix to be the destined executioner of Spratt - for any discrimination of Tucker's lay in his muscles rather than his eyes - he rushed up to Felix, meaning to collar him and throw him down. But Felix had rapid senses and quick thoughts; he discerned the situation; he chose between two evils. Quick as lightning he frustrated the constable, fell upon him, and tried to master his weapon. In the struggle, which was watched without interference, the constable fell undermost, and Felix got his weapon. He started up with the bare sabre in his hand. The crowd round him cried 'Hurray ! ' with a sense that he was on their side against the constable. Tucker did not rise immediately; but Felix did not imagine that he was much hurt.

'Don't touch him!' said Felix. 'Let him go. Here, bring Spratt, and follow me.'

Felix was perfectly conscious that he was in the midst of a tangled business. But he had chiefly before his imagination the horrors that might come if the mass of wild chaotic desires and impulses around him were not diverted from any further attack on places where they would get in the midst of intoxicating and inflammable materials. It was not a moment in which a spirit like his could calculate the effect of misunderstanding as to himself: nature never makes men who are at once energetically sympathetic and minutely calculating. He believed he had the power, and he was resolved to try, to carry the dangerous mass out of mischief till the military came to awe them - which he supposed, from Mr Crow's announcement long ago, must be a near event.

He was followed the more willingly, because Tiliot's Lane was seen by the hindmost to be now defended by constables, some of whom had fire-arms; and where there is no strong counter-movement, any proposition to do something unspecified stimulates stupid curiosity.

To many of the Sproxtton men who were within sight of him, Felix was known personally, and vaguely believed to be a man who meant many queer things, not at all of an every-day kind.

Pressing along like a leader, with the sabre in his hand, and inviting them to bring on Spratt, there seemed a better reason for following him than for doing anything else. A man with a definite will and an energetic personality acts as a sort of flag to draw and bind together the foolish units of a mob. It was on this sort of influence over men whose mental state was a mere medley of appetites and confused impressions, that Felix had dared to count. He hurried them along with words of invitation, telling them to hold up Spratt and not drag him; and those behind followed him, with a growing belief that he had some design worth knowing, while those in front were urged along partly by the same notion, partly by the sense that there was a motive in those behind them, not knowing what the motive was. It was that mixture of pushing forward and being pushed forward, which is a brief history of most human things.

What Felix really intended to do, was to get the crowd by the nearest way out of the town, and induce them to skirt it on the north side with him, keeping up in them the idea that he was leading them to execute some strategem by which they would surprise something worth attacking, and circumvent the constables who were defending the lanes. In the meantime he trusted that the soldiers would have arrived, and with this sort of mob, which was animated by no real political passion or fury against social distinctions it was in the highest degree unlikely that there would be any resistance to a military force. The presence of fifty soldiers would probably be enough to scatter the rioting hundreds. How numerous the mob was, no one ever knew: many inhabitants afterwards were ready to swear that there must have been at least two thousand rioters. Felix knew he was incurring great risks; but 'his blood was up:' we hardly allow enough in common life for the results of that enkindled passionate enthusiasm which, under other conditions, makes world-famous deeds.

He was making for a point where the street branched off on one side towards a speedy opening between hedgerows, on the other towards the shabby wideness of Pollard's End. At this forking of the street there was a large space, in the centre of which there was a small stone platform, mounting by three steps, with an old green finger-post upon it. Felix went straight to this platform and stepped upon it, crying 'Halt !' in a loud voice to the men behind and before him, and calling to those who held Spratt to bring him there. All came to a stand with faces towards the finger-post, and perhaps for the first time the extremities of the crowd got a definite idea that a man with a sabre in his hand was taking the command.

'Now!' said Felix, when Spratt had been brought on to the stone platform, faint and trembling, 'has anybody got cord? if not, handkerchiefs knotted fast; give them to me.'

He drew out his own handkerchief, and two or three others were mustered and handed to him. He ordered them to be knotted together, while curious eyes were fixed on him. Was he going to have Spratt hanged? Felix kept fast hold of his weapon, and ordered others to act.

'Now, put it round his waist, wind his arms in, draw them a little backward - so I and tie it fast on the other side of the post.'

When that was done, Felix said, imperatively -

'Leave him there - we shall come back to him; let us make haste; march along, lads! Up Park Street and down Hobb's Lane.'

It was the best chance he could think of for saving Spratt's life. And he succeeded. The pleasure of seeing the helpless man tied up sufficed for the moment, if there were any who had ferocity enough to count much on coming back to him. Nobody's imagination represented the certainty that some one out of the houses at hand would soon come and untie him when he was left alone.

And the rioters pushed up Park Street, a noisy stream, with Felix still in the midst of them, though he was labouring hard to get his way to the front. He wished to determine the course of the crowd along a by-road called Hobb's Lane, which would have taken them to the other - the Duffield end of the town. He urged several of the men round him, one of whom was no less a person than the big Dredge, our old Sproxton acquaintance, to get forward, and be sure that all the fellows would go down the lane, else they would spoil sport. Hitherto Felix had been successful, and he had gone along with an unbroken impulse. But soon something occurred which brought with a terrible shock the sense that his plan might turn out to be as mad as all bold projects are seen to be when they have failed.

Mingled with the more headlong and half-drunken crowd there were some sharp-visaged men who loved the irrationality of riots for something else than its own sake, and who at present were not so much the richer as they desired to be, for the pains they had taken in coming to the Treby election, induced by certain prognostics gathered at Duffield on the nomination-day that there might be the conditions favourable to that confusion which was always a harvest-time. It was known to some of these sharp men that Park Street led out towards the grand house of Treby Manor, which was as good - nay, better for their purpose than the bank. While Felix was entertaining his ardent purpose, these other sons of Adam were entertaining another ardent

purpose of their peculiar sort, and the moment was come when they were to have their triumph

From the front ranks backward towards Felix there ran a new summons - a new invitation.

'Let us go to Treby Manor!'

From that moment Felix was powerless; a new definite suggestion overrode his vaguer influence. There was a determined rush past Hobb's Lane, and not down it. Felix was carried along too. He did not know whether to wish the contrary. Once on the road, out of the town, with openings into fields and with the wide park at hand, it would have been easy for him to liberate himself from the crowd. At first it seemed to him the better part to do this, and to get back to the town as fast as he could, in the hope of finding the military and getting a detachment to come and save the Manor. But he reflected that the course of the mob had been sufficiently seen, and that there were plenty of people in Park Street to carry the information faster than he could. It seemed more necessary that he should secure the presence of some help for the family at the Manor by going there himself. The Debarrys were not of the class he was wont to be anxious about; but Felix Holt's conscience was alive to the accusation that any danger they might be in now was brought on by a deed of his. In these moments of bitter vexation and disappointment, it did occur to him that very unpleasant consequences might be hanging over him of a kind quite different from inward dissatisfaction; but it was useless now to think of averting such consequences. As he was pressed along with the multitude into Treby Park, his very movement seemed to him only an image of the day's fatalities, in which the multitudinous small wickednesses of small selfish ends, really undirected towards any larger result, had issued in widely-shared mischief that might yet be hideous.

The light was declining; already the candles shone through many windows of the Manor. Already the foremost part of the crowd had burst into the offices, and adroit men were busy in the right places to find plate, after setting others to force the butler into unlocking the cellars; and Felix had only just been able to force his way on to the front terrace, with the hope of getting to the rooms where he would find the ladies of the household and comfort them with the assurance that rescue must soon come, when the sound of horses' feet convinced him that the rescue was nearer than he had expected. Just as he heard the horses, he had approached the large window of a room, where a brilliant light suspended from the ceiling showed him a group of women clinging together in terror. Others of the crowd were pushing their way up the terrace-steps and gravel-slopes at various points. Hearing the horses, he kept his post in front of the window,

and, motioning with his sabre, cried out to the oncomers, 'Keep back! I hear the soldiers coming.' Some scrambled back, some paused automatically.

The louder and louder sound of the hoofs changed its pace and distribution. 'Halt! Fire!' Bang! bang! bang! - came deafening the ears of the men on the terrace.

Before they had time or nerve to move, there was a rushing sound closer to them - again 'Fire!' a bullet whizzed, and passed through Felix Holt's shoulder - the shoulder of the arm that held the naked weapon which shone in the light from the window.

Felix fell. The rioters ran confusedly, like terrified sheep. Some of the soldiers, turning, drove them along with the flat of their swords. The greater difficulty was to clear the invaded offices.

The rector, who with another magistrate and several other gentlemen on horseback had accompanied the soldiers, now jumped on to the terrace, and hurried to the ladies of the family.

Presently, there was a group round Felix, who had fainted and, reviving, had fainted again. He had had little food during the day, and had been overwrought. Two of the group were civilians, but only one of them knew Felix, the other being a magistrate not resident in Treby. The one who knew Felix was Mr John Johnson, whose zeal for the public peace had brought him from Duffield when he heard that the soldiers were summoned.

'I know this man very well,' said Mr Johnson. 'He is a dangerous character - quite revolutionary.'

It was a weary night; and the next day, Felix, whose wound was declared trivial, was lodged in Loamford Jail. He was committed on three counts - for having assaulted a constable, for having committed manslaughter (Tucker was dead from spinal concussion), and for having led a riotous onslaught on a dwelling-house.

Four other men were committed: one of them for possessing himself of a gold cup with the Debarry arms on it; the three others, one of whom was the collier Dredge, for riot and assault.

That morning Treby town was no longer in terror; but it was in much sadness. Other men, more innocent than the hated Spratt, were groaning under severe bodily injuries. And poor Tucker's corpse was not the only one that had been lifted from the pavement. It is true that none grieved much for the other dead man, unless it be grief to say, 'Poor old fellow!' He had been trampled upon, doubtless where he fell

drunkenly, near the entrance of the Seven Stars. This second corpse was old Tommy Trounsem, the bill-sticker - otherwise Thomas Transome, the last of a very old family-line.