CHAPTER V.

Winterborne sped on his way to Sherton Abbas without elation and without discomposure. Had he regarded his inner self spectacularly, as lovers are now daily more wont to do, he might have felt pride in the discernment of a somewhat rare power in him--that of keeping not only judgment but emotion suspended in difficult cases. But he noted it not. Neither did he observe what was also the fact, that though he cherished a true and warm feeling towards Grace Melbury, he was not altogether her fool just now. It must be remembered that he had not seen her for a year.

Arrived at the entrance to a long flat lane, which had taken the spirit out of many a pedestrian in times when, with the majority, to travel meant to walk, he saw before him the trim figure of a young woman in pattens, journeying with that steadfast concentration which means purpose and not pleasure. He was soon near enough to see that she was Marty South. Click, click, click went the pattens; and she did not turn her head.

She had, however, become aware before this that the driver of the approaching gig was Giles. She had shrunk from being overtaken by him thus; but as it was inevitable, she had braced herself up for his inspection by closing her lips so as to make her mouth quite unemotional, and by throwing an additional firmness into her tread.

"Why do you wear pattens, Marty? The turnpike is clean enough, although the lanes are muddy."

"They save my boots."

"But twelve miles in pattens--'twill twist your feet off. Come, get up and ride with me."

She hesitated, removed her pattens, knocked the gravel out of them against the wheel, and mounted in front of the nodding specimen apple-tree. She had so arranged her bonnet with a full border and trimmings that her lack of long hair did not much injure her appearance; though Giles, of course, saw that it was gone, and may have guessed her motive in parting with it, such sales, though infrequent, being not unheard of in that locality.

But nature's adornment was still hard by--in fact, within two feet of him, though he did not know it. In Marty's basket was a brown paper packet, and in the packet the chestnut locks, which, by reason of the barber's request for secrecy, she had not ventured to intrust to other hands.

Giles asked, with some hesitation, how her father was getting on.

He was better, she said; he would be able to work in a day or two; he would be quite well but for his craze about the tree falling on him.

"You know why I don't ask for him so often as I might, I suppose?" said Winterborne. "Or don't you know?"

"I think I do."

"Because of the houses?"

She nodded.

"Yes. I am afraid it may seem that my anxiety is about those houses, which I should lose by his death, more than about him. Marty, I do feel anxious about the houses, since half my income depends upon them; but I do likewise care for him; and it almost seems wrong that houses should be leased for lives, so as to lead to such mixed feelings."

"After father's death they will be Mrs. Charmond's?"

"They'll be hers."

"They are going to keep company with my hair," she thought.

Thus talking, they reached the town. By no pressure would she ride up the street with him. "That's the right of another woman," she said, with playful malice, as she put on her pattens. "I wonder what you are thinking of! Thank you for the lift in that handsome gig. Good-by."

He blushed a little, shook his head at her, and drove on ahead into the streets--the churches, the abbey, and other buildings on this clear bright morning having the liny distinctness of architectural drawings, as if the original dream and vision of the conceiving master-mason, some mediaeval Vilars or other unknown to fame, were for a few minutes flashed down through the centuries to an unappreciative age. Giles saw their eloquent look on this day of transparency, but could not construe it. He turned into the inn-yard.

Marty, following the same track, marched promptly to the hair-dresser's, Mr. Percombe's. Percombe was the chief of his trade in Sherton Abbas. He had the patronage of such county offshoots as had been obliged to seek the shelter of small houses in that ancient town, of the local clergy, and so on, for some of whom he had made wigs, while others among them had compensated for neglecting him in their lifetime by patronizing him when they were dead, and letting him shave their corpses. On the strength of all this he had taken down his pole, and called himself "Perruquier to the aristocracy."

Nevertheless, this sort of support did not quite fill his children's mouths, and they had to be filled. So, behind his house there was a little yard, reached by a passage from the back street, and in that yard was a pole, and under the pole a shop of quite another description than the ornamental one in the front street. Here on Saturday nights from seven till ten he took an almost innumerable succession of

twopences from the farm laborers who flocked thither in crowds from the country. And thus he lived.

Marty, of course, went to the front shop, and handed her packet to him silently. "Thank you," said the barber, quite joyfully. "I hardly expected it after what you said last night."

She turned aside, while a tear welled up and stood in each eye at this reminder.

"Nothing of what I told you," he whispered, there being others in the shop. "But I can trust you, I see."

She had now reached the end of this distressing business, and went listlessly along the street to attend to other errands. These occupied her till four o'clock, at which time she recrossed the market-place. It was impossible to avoid rediscovering Winterborne every time she passed that way, for standing, as he always did at this season of the year, with his specimen apple-tree in the midst, the boughs rose above the heads of the crowd, and brought a delightful suggestion of orchards among the crowded buildings there. When her eye fell upon him for the last time he was standing somewhat apart, holding the tree like an ensign, and looking on the ground instead of pushing his produce as he ought to have been doing. He was, in fact, not a very successful seller either of his trees or of his cider, his habit of speaking his mind, when he spoke at all, militating against this branch of his

business.

While she regarded him he suddenly lifted his eyes in a direction away from Marty, his face simultaneously kindling with recognition and surprise. She followed his gaze, and saw walking across to him a flexible young creature in whom she perceived the features of her she had known as Miss Grace Melbury, but now looking glorified and refined above her former level. Winterborne, being fixed to the spot by his apple-tree, could not advance to meet her; he held out his spare hand with his hat in it, and with some embarrassment beheld her coming on tiptoe through the mud to the middle of the square where he stood.

Miss Melbury's arrival so early was, as Marty could see, unexpected by Giles, which accounted for his not being ready to receive her. Indeed, her father had named five o'clock as her probable time, for which reason that hour had been looming out all the day in his forward perspective, like an important edifice on a plain. Now here she was come, he knew not how, and his arranged welcome stultified.

His face became gloomy at her necessity for stepping into the road, and more still at the little look of embarrassment which appeared on hers at having to perform the meeting with him under an apple-tree ten feet high in the middle of the market-place. Having had occasion to take off the new gloves she had bought to come home in, she held out to him a hand graduating from pink at the tips of the fingers to white at the palm; and the reception formed a scene, with the tree over their heads,

which was not by any means an ordinary one in Sherton Abbas streets.

Nevertheless, the greeting on her looks and lips was of a restrained type, which perhaps was not unnatural. For true it was that Giles Winterborne, well-attired and well-mannered as he was for a yeoman, looked rough beside her. It had sometimes dimly occurred to him, in his ruminating silence at Little Hintock, that external phenomena--such as the lowness or height or color of a hat, the fold of a coat, the make of a boot, or the chance attitude or occupation of a limb at the instant of view--may have a great influence upon feminine opinion of a man's worth--so frequently founded on non-essentials; but a certain causticity of mental tone towards himself and the world in general had prevented to-day, as always, any enthusiastic action on the strength of that reflection; and her momentary instinct of reserve at first sight of him was the penalty he paid for his laxness.

He gave away the tree to a by-stander, as soon as he could find one who would accept the cumbersome gift, and the twain moved on towards the inn at which he had put up. Marty made as if to step forward for the pleasure of being recognized by Miss Melbury; but abruptly checking herself, she glided behind a carrier's van, saying, dryly, "No; I baint wanted there," and critically regarded Winterborne's companion.

It would have been very difficult to describe Grace Melbury with precision, either now or at any time. Nay, from the highest point of view, to precisely describe a human being, the focus of a universe--how

impossible! But, apart from transcendentalism, there never probably lived a person who was in herself more completely a reductio ad absurdum of attempts to appraise a woman, even externally, by items of face and figure. Speaking generally, it may be said that she was sometimes beautiful, at other times not beautiful, according to the state of her health and spirits.

In simple corporeal presentment she was of a fair and clear complexion, rather pale than pink, slim in build and elastic in movement. Her look expressed a tendency to wait for others' thoughts before uttering her own; possibly also to wait for others' deeds before her own doing. In her small, delicate mouth, which had perhaps hardly settled down to its matured curves, there was a gentleness that might hinder sufficient self-assertion for her own good. She had well-formed eyebrows which, had her portrait been painted, would probably have been done in Prout's or Vandyke brown.

There was nothing remarkable in her dress just now, beyond a natural fitness and a style that was recent for the streets of Sherton. But, indeed, had it been the reverse, and quite striking, it would have meant just as little. For there can be hardly anything less connected with a woman's personality than drapery which she has neither designed, manufactured, cut, sewed, or even seen, except by a glance of approval when told that such and such a shape and color must be had because it has been decided by others as imperative at that particular time.

What people, therefore, saw of her in a cursory view was very little; in truth, mainly something that was not she. The woman herself was a shadowy, conjectural creature who had little to do with the outlines presented to Sherton eyes; a shape in the gloom, whose true description could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient and long-continued attentiveness which nothing but watchful loving-kindness ever troubles to give.

There was a little delay in their setting out from the town, and Marty South took advantage of it to hasten forward, with the view of escaping them on the way, lest they should feel compelled to spoil their tete-a-tete by asking her to ride. She walked fast, and one-third of the journey was done, and the evening rapidly darkening, before she perceived any sign of them behind her. Then, while ascending a hill, she dimly saw their vehicle drawing near the lowest part of the incline, their heads slightly bent towards each other; drawn together, no doubt, by their souls, as the heads of a pair of horses well in hand are drawn in by the rein. She walked still faster.

But between these and herself there was a carriage, apparently a brougham, coming in the same direction, with lighted lamps. When it overtook her--which was not soon, on account of her pace--the scene was much darker, and the lights glared in her eyes sufficiently to hide the details of the equipage.

It occurred to Marty that she might take hold behind this carriage and so keep along with it, to save herself the mortification of being overtaken and picked up for pity's sake by the coming pair. Accordingly, as the carriage drew abreast of her in climbing the long ascent, she walked close to the wheels, the rays of the nearest lamp penetrating her very pores. She had only just dropped behind when the carriage stopped, and to her surprise the coachman asked her, over his shoulder, if she would ride. What made the question more surprising was that it came in obedience to an order from the interior of the vehicle.

Marty gladly assented, for she was weary, very weary, after working all night and keeping afoot all day. She mounted beside the coachman, wondering why this good-fortune had happened to her. He was rather a great man in aspect, and she did not like to inquire of him for some time.

At last she said, "Who has been so kind as to ask me to ride?"

"Mrs. Charmond," replied her statuesque companion.

Marty was stirred at the name, so closely connected with her last night's experiences. "Is this her carriage?" she whispered.

"Yes; she's inside."

Marty reflected, and perceived that Mrs. Charmond must have recognized her plodding up the hill under the blaze of the lamp; recognized, probably, her stubbly poll (since she had kept away her face), and thought that those stubbles were the result of her own desire.

Marty South was not so very far wrong. Inside the carriage a pair of bright eyes looked from a ripely handsome face, and though behind those bright eyes was a mind of unfathomed mysteries, beneath them there beat a heart capable of quick extempore warmth--a heart which could, indeed, be passionately and imprudently warm on certain occasions. At present, after recognizing the girl, she had acted on a mere impulse, possibly feeling gratified at the denuded appearance which signified the success of her agent in obtaining what she had required.

"'Tis wonderful that she should ask ye," observed the magisterial coachman, presently. "I have never known her do it before, for as a rule she takes no interest in the village folk at all."

Marty said no more, but occasionally turned her head to see if she could get a glimpse of the Olympian creature who as the coachman had truly observed, hardly ever descended from her clouds into the Tempe of the parishioners. But she could discern nothing of the lady. She also looked for Miss Melbury and Winterborne. The nose of their horse sometimes came quite near the back of Mrs. Charmond's carriage. But they never attempted to pass it till the latter conveyance turned towards the park gate, when they sped by. Here the carriage drew up

that the gate might be opened, and in the momentary silence Marty heard a gentle oral sound, soft as a breeze.

"What's that?" she whispered.

"Mis'ess yawning."

"Why should she yawn?"

"Oh, because she's been used to such wonderfully good life, and finds it dull here. She'll soon be off again on account of it."

"So rich and so powerful, and yet to yawn!" the girl murmured. "Then things don't fay with she any more than with we!"

Marty now alighted; the lamp again shone upon her, and as the carriage rolled on, a soft voice said to her from the interior, "Good-night."

"Good-night, ma'am," said Marty. But she had not been able to see the woman who began so greatly to interest her--the second person of her own sex who had operated strongly on her mind that day.