

CHAPTER IV.



CRABSLEY is a small straggling seaside place, with narrow streets and high cliffs. It has bracing air and a nestretch of sea, and is reputed marvellously healthy.

Of late years it has become popular, and two excellent hotels have been built. It is expensive and fashionable and has no attractions for the "lower classes." A select coterie of rich people who own land in the neighbourhood have used all their influence to prevent its degradation. There are no niggers on the beach, no vendors of sweets, no shows of any sort. A band plays on the pier twice a week, but there is no other sort of entertainment there. The bathing is conducted without any of the "abandon" that distinguishes some watering places. There is very little shrieking or laughing, and the bathing dresses are far removed in style from the blue serge garment usually dealt out by the owners of bathing machines. In the morning children paddle and dig on the sands, but in the afternoon the latter are almost deserted. Nurses walk up and down the front with their well-dressed charges and ladies and gentlemen sit on the benches with their books or work. There is a golf club and a tennis club and a library. The post comes in twice a day. There is a large church, the rector of which has a hard time during the brief season, for the views of the visitors are apt to be widely different in the matter of ritual from that of his parishioners, and the visitors having little to interest them are apt to air their criticisms pretty freely. If he accommodated the wishes of the majority of the visitors the parish would be up in arms in no time, and unfortunately he cannot have one set of practices for three months and another for the remaining nine. He is a good earnest man, and he does his best for the spiritual welfare of the stylish ladies and irreproachably-attired gentlemen who fill the pews before him; and who idly discuss his sermon presently over lobster mayonnaise and cold fowl.

Energetic people bicycle and take long walks. The country round is singularly beautiful, and there are one or two show places within a few miles. The kodak is much in evidence, and there is a dark room in the place for the accommodation of earnest photographers.

Crabsley is an ideal place for resting. Those who are jaded by the London season are content to do nothing there for a week or two, but gradually the tonic air does its work and they begin to bestir themselves. When they are thoroughly recruited they are glad to

go away. There is not much vent for their powers in Crabsley. It is pre-eminently a place for Saturday to Monday visitors.

Mrs. Swannington, who had few resources, would never have selected Crabsley but for her devotion to her health. Mr. Swannington was an enthusiastic golfer, and the Crabsley links are perfection, so that he cheerfully fell in with her choice, and Beattie was at an age when enjoyment was found in any change. Aunt Ella was tired of it first. She had no taste for natural scenery, the beauties of the sunset palled, nor did she get any pleasure from watching the changing sea. She bathed, gossiped with her hotel acquaintances (but the people who go to Crabsley are somewhat exclusive and not in haste to make friends), criticised their costumes, and did her regulation walk so many times up and down the pier, the exact dimensions of which she had been careful to ascertain. But she was beginning to get bored, and was ready to welcome any diversion.

One afternoon when Beattie had come into the hall of the hotel to see if any letters were awaiting her uncle, whom she had left promenading with his wife, she was aware of a tall young man who had risen from an arm-chair and was regarding her rather wistfully. She did not take any notice of him. She was accustomed to being stared at. But as she was about to leave with the letters he made a step in her direction, and then she looked at him. For a minute she had a feeling that she had seen his face before, then suddenly her own brightened, and she bowed. He came forward and shook hands with her. It was Mr. Anstruther.

"Are you staying here?" said Beattie. "I am glad."

"Yes. I came down this morning for a few days. What a beautiful little place it is; the air is like champagne."

"Better," said Beattie, who had not much appreciation of the exhilarating wine. "It will do you good after London. Is your sprain better?"

He looked pleased at her remembering it.

"Yes, thank you. I scarcely limp at all now. This place will soon set me up. You are staying at this hotel, I suppose?"

He had consulted the visitors' list and knew the fact perfectly well, but his remark was scarcely in the form of a question.

"Yes—and you too? That is nice! We don't know anybody, though Uncle Arthur has made some friends at the golf club. Do you play?"

"Rather," said Michael expressively. "But I mustn't keep you now. I see you are wanting to read your letters."

"They are not mine," said Beattie. "But Uncle Arthur will be impatient. Good-bye now; I shall see you again presently, and then I will introduce you to him."

She nodded brightly and tripped away. Michael followed her with his eyes. In her fresh white cotton blouse and serge skirt, with her skin a little tanned by the sea breezes, and her look of youth

and health and happiness, his second impression of her was no less delightful than the first. If he had not fallen in love with her already he would have done so now, he told himself. His own heart was singing with joy. A very little feeds the flame of love, and he remembered with delight that she had inquired after his injury and expressed her pleasure at seeing him. Both natural enough, the second especially, for the barest acquaintance who would be scarcely noticed in London is eagerly welcomed in the monotony of the country; but he was glad notwithstanding.

Beattie went back to her aunt and uncle.

"There is a friend of Mrs. Gilman's staying at the hotel," she said. "I met him the evening I spent there, and I have just seen him again."

"Oh," said Mrs. Swannington, with interest. "Did he know you again?"

"Yes," said Beattie innocently, suspecting as little as Aunt Ella herself that he had come to Crabsley on purpose to see her. "And I told him I would introduce him to uncle."

Mr. Swannington grunted. He was not eager for new acquaintances, but Mrs. Swannington was pleased. She liked society, especially that of young men. When she found that he was a person with whom one would not be ashamed to be seen walking on the parade, she was more than willing to be introduced to him. "He has an air of distinction," she said, with approval.

Mr. Anstruther was glad, when Beattie had conducted him to the fashionable little lady, that she was not her mother. He was by no means so attracted to Mrs. Swannington as she was to him. He thought she looked vulgar, and she was not at all his ideal of the lady who should be the companion of her whom he had already placed upon a pedestal. Still, he had the sense to see it would never do to begin by offending Beattie's relations, and if he did not exert himself to be amiable he was scrupulously polite, and accepted Mrs. Swannington's offer that he should accompany them on their after-dinner stroll.

Aunt Ella monopolised him. Beattie and Mr. Swannington walked in front, and the only satisfaction he had was that he could at any rate keep the former in his sight. But he was not badly entertained. If he had not the consciousness that he was being defrauded of something better he might have been flattered by Mrs. Swannington's graciousness. He was not a young man who had had much experience of women. Since he had grown up his work had been the chief object of his thoughts. The only women he had known intimately were his mother and Norah Gilman, and a little invalid lady for whom he had an almost reverential respect—his godmother. None of these had taught him much that would help him to understand Mrs. Swannington. That his society could gratify her he did not imagine.

But it did, under the circumstances. She thought him rather heavy and inexperienced and not particularly amusing,