

A MARSH-MARIGOLD.

Catharine Tynan in Catholic World.

Sheila was not spoiled for her own life by all this. She had grown into a tall, handsome girl with a clear skin and a profusion of silky yellow hair, which she wore coiled into ropes at the back of her head; she had a sweet, red-lipped mouth, and a mouthful of small, milky teeth which gave her an innocent, babyish look when she smiled; her eyes had never lost their convolvulus blue, and were as candid as a child's eyes. Altogether she was as fresh and sweet as May, and her sunny temper suited her looks. Perhaps it was the strong vein of common sense inherited from her mother which kept her from growing above the level of her everyday life. Because she read Shakespeare and Tennyson was no reason why she should not milk a cow, and she superintended the morning and evening milking, and looked after the churning and made the butter. If she were the voriest coquette she could not have chosen to look to better advantage than she did when sometimes Lance Armstrong came in to beg for a drink of fresh buttermilk, to find her in her lilac print, fresh and fair as the morning, lifting with her beautiful, bare young arms the golden butter from the foamy milk. But she had no coquetries and no consciousness. When the weeks of Mr. Armstrong's summer visit were over she felt a little lonely and out of sorts, but scarcely more than her father did; they all missed him, even to Trusty, who would run barking a joyous welcome to the door when a footstep sounded far off, only to be disappointed. And it was a real disappointment to them all that summer. Mr. Armstrong suddenly made up his mind to a walking tour in Germany instead of his annual visit to Raheen; only he dropped in on them one golden August day, and made up by staying till the days were getting cold. But at all times Sheila made the sunshine of the house, as Tom said in tender compliment. The flowers were not gone, nor the summer sun, and the lark had not ceased to sing, while there was her bright head and face flashing from room to room, and her high young voice ringing as she sang at her work.

This year it was "the sweet o' the year" when their friend came with delightful unexpectedness, for he had not written for some time. It was early June, and the hawthorn hedges were white with bloom and the fields all golden and white with buttercups and daisies. The birds were singing as he emerged from the bog-land into a leafy lane, and the air was full of that penetrating fragrance which comes for just the halcyon time when spring and summer meet. The farm-house was bathed in a golden quiet when he reached it, with Trusty at the house door asleep in the sun, and the pigeons strutting about, and the sleepy fowl uttering that querulous cry which seems to me to suggest summer afternoon, as the corn crane's croak suggests summer night, more intimately than any other sound. The red-tiled kitchen had its glowing fire despite warm weather, for Mrs. Donovan was ironing, with something less than her usual alacrity be it confessed. She put down the iron and raised her hands at sight of the welcome visitor.

"Glory be to God! Mr. Lance," she said, "and is it yourself? Sure it's Tom will be delighted. He's away at the fair with a couple of spr'ngers, but sure he'll be back in time to see you."

In all her excitement the good woman did not fail to notice a certain harrassed look which was new to Lance's face, but with the innate Irish good-breeding she did not comment upon it.

"Sheila's out in the orchard," she went on; "'tis she'll be rejoiced out and out. Wait a minute till I send young Ned for her."

But Lance would not hear of a messenger, he would go himself, and the good woman was not altogether sorry, for there was the tea to be got ready, with the addition of such dainties as the presence of so welcome a guest suggested.

Sheila in the orchard, amid light and shadow from the apple-boughs, sprang up joyously when she saw him coming, with a little happy cry, and the fires of gladness coming and going in her pure cheeks. She caught at his two hands in frank delight, and stood facing him, too pleased to speak.

He was as glad as she was, and the troubled look had fled from his face before the sunshine of her smile. They sat down on the little stone seat ringing the apple-tree, amid the debris of household linen Sheila had been mending, or dreaming over, as that knowing-eyed blackbird on the apple-bough could have told. For a little while question and answer followed each other swiftly; then there came a pause, and Armstrong spoke.

"I have been troubled, little one," he said, "and am still troubled. My uncle has been staying at Cheltenham, and has found a wife for me; so he says. She is an English lady, an heiress, and a fashionable belle. I have not seen her, but I have no doubt she would suit me as ill as I should suit her. Of course she knows nothing of this, and I have no reason to suppose I should be an acceptable suitor, but the old man has had her invited to stay at my aunt's house, where she comes shortly, and insists that I shall try my luck. We have had hot words about it, and he even threatens me with disinheritance if I refuse to obey. I do not know what to do, for in his way he has been good to me."

Sheila had gone a little white and the sparkle had died out of her face. She tried to answer him, but somehow the words would not come. Looking at her a new light came to him, a light for both their lives, as it seemed.

"Dear," he said again, as wistfully and tenderly as if he were speaking to a child—to him, despite her strong, fair young womanhood, she was like a child—"dear, what if you and I were to care for each other and defy the world? I am young and strong, and well able to fight the world for myself and my wife. Dear, will you give yourself to me?"

The desire for her seemed to come with his words, words he never thought to have uttered. Till she lifted her eyes and he saw love in them he had never dreamed of loving her, but perhaps it had lain in both hearts unsuspected all the time. Certainly he felt as ardent as any lover might. She did not answer him, but with one swift, glad, incredulous look hid her face against his arm, and kept it there. He waited patiently till she should look up; once he would have put his arm about her, but she clung to her old position, as if she were frightened. At last she looked at him, and her wide eyes under their innocent lids had pain and courage in their gaze. She spoke almost in a whisper.

"You are very good to love me," she said, "and if it will not hurt you I am very glad. But oh! you put too much upon me. I am an ignorant, untried girl, and you ask me to accept this sacrifice for my sake. Oh! I could not do it. How do I know that afterwards I should satisfy you? I am not of your world, and some day you might think I had cost you too much. You must go away and forget that you said wild things, and Sheila Donovan will never remind you of them."

He laughed a pleasant laugh of gladness and incredulity.

"Why, my love," he said, "this is folly. The only answer of yours which could send me away would be if you were to say, 'Mr. Armstrong, I do not love you,' but you will not say that; you will say instead, 'I love you, Lance,' will you not my dear one? And you will trust your life to me?"

He had his strong arms around her, but she drew back from his embrace and pushed him away from her with her two hands against his breast.

"I cannot say it," she said; "how do I know? It is all far too sudden. You must go away from me, and leave me free as I leave you free. I think you will marry this lady your uncle has chosen for you. It would be far better."

All his protestations could not move her from this. If he was strong, she was stronger, and she forced him to her will. In the end he was almost angry, but he could do nothing only accept his sentence of banishment. Then Tom arrived on the scene inopportunistly, and Lance had the last word.

"Very well, then," he said, "but this is not final. I will leave this to-morrow morning, but I will come at Christmas for my answer. Till then I will not try to communicate with you; six months' silence and absence will test both of us sufficiently. May I come at Christmas?"

"You may come," she said, "but remember I shall not look for you."

It was only when he had gone that Sheila realized her full loneliness. There were the endless months of the summer