

A WILFUL MAIDEN.

Baltimore News: "Why, Freya, I was just coming in to look for you. I am caught! Rolle steps in at the window with an air of satisfaction—a tall, straight, blue-eyed fellow in a brown shooting suit—unconsciously blotches poor Caro, and sits down upon the cushion at my side. "Why do you disturb the cat?" I say crossly. "Wouldn't the arm-chair have done as well, or better?" "No—it wasn't so near you!" "He is looking at me sentimentally; I know it without glancing up. I used to like Rolle very much before he took to being sentimental, though he was always spoiled by his mother. I used to do everything for him, and he always looked to me for help out of all his scrapes, and that, I suppose, made his friend of him. I never thought he would behave like this!" "I pick up my neglected knitting and click my needles industriously. He sits silent awhile. "I say," he begins presently, "has my mother been saying anything to you?" "A great many things," I reply. "She was telling me not an hour ago that the preserves wanted looking at."

"The thing was done before any one in the house was allowed to hear of it. Aunt Ellen was always so kind to Rolle in his infancy; but when it came to actual fighting she would have liked to strip it off and put him in his baby frocks again. Rolle was very quiet through all the excitement, but very firm. "Aunt Ellen was a miserable old soul, losing him to be very angry with him; but all her fury was expended upon my luckless head. I was packed off here in disgrace, without having the chance of wishing him good-by, for which, however, I was lavishly sorry, as a parting between us would have been somewhat awkward. "We are all so glad to have you back!" exclaimed Lumley. "The house has not been the same without you!" "It is so quiet and rather awkward here," he said, "but I am glad to be home, for whom there is considered good enough. He is to look for his start in life to his uncle, George Stewart, who long ago offered to take one of his brothers into his London business. Lumley is to leave for his own home in a few more months. I shall miss him very much; he has never teased me like Godard and Rolle have, but has always been quietly affectionate, the kindest of boys. "Mother missed you as much as any of us," he adds. "She was more glad to see me than I expected she would be," I allow hesitatingly. "She has got you under her hexation now!" Lumley speaks rather loudly, and his face flushes a little. "She has made some fresh friends—the people who have taken Oak Hall—and she has got news of Rolle, and so I dare say it will all be over now."

"What news is there of Rolle? No one has mentioned his name to me." "They haven't? Well, I suppose—They didn't mean to keep it a secret," he falters. I look at him in some surprise, because of his nervous, hesitating manner. "Rolle has got to his usual solitariness," he goes on. "Yes, he's Lieutenant Stewart"—smiling at my surprise. "He has been wounded, too—only a scratch on the temple in the skirmish, but mother was very upset about it, until a letter came in from her husband, saying that the wound had laid him up for only twenty-four hours; and that he had been in action ever since. That quite cheered her up. "So she sent me home in the fullness of her heart," I suggest. "Not exactly because of that," he answers awkwardly. "Of course she knew you could not—could not love to order—and—and it would have been a good deal worse if I had," I interpose hastily. "Well, perhaps it would," he agrees. "But let us forget it all now, and be happy again as we used to be. Rolle writes bravely; the stirring life out there seems to have cured him." "I hope it has," I declare heartily, but nevertheless I am slightly piqued at Lumley's calm assurance. He is too simple-minded to imagine that such an announcement could be received with anything but unmixed gratification by the author of the mischief, and he really wasn't much hurt. "I inquire, "No—the most scrupulous; but the newspapers exaggerated it." "Cherry never told anything about it in his letters," I say half resentfully. "It is so quiet here that I was no use to alarm you for nothing, or perhaps she considered it best to leave the subject alone altogether," he observes. "I feel scared and dazed after Lumley has gone away and left me alone with my householding accounts to cast up, as if I had passed through some great danger with a hair-breadth escape. Certainly, if Rolle had been killed, they would have laid his death at my door. That would have been dreadful; and yet all this time I have never occurred to me that he is in daily danger, and that any newspaper I take up may contain the tidings of his death! Oh, how thoughtless I have been! Oh, I should not like to have that burden laid upon my mind at this time. I watch the newspapers feverishly, dreading that any day I may be pronounced Rolle's destroyer. Every night, too, I offer up a prayer for his safety—a selfish prayer, having more to do with my own ease of mind than with his welfare—but still in my sternest moods of self-accusation cannot find it in my heart to leave that prayer unsaid. Nobody knows of it, so no false conclusions can be drawn. "The time seems to pass but slowly, for all in the house are anxious suspense, though we affect much gaiety. Aunt Ellen talks with apparent certainty of the time when our soldier shall return covered with glory. Miss Venna, the only child of the wealthy barrister's widow, who has just come to live at Oak Hall, about a mile from Woodland, is a constant visitor. Aunt Ellen treats her like a daughter, and fills her ears with stories and praises of her absent darling till I should think the girl is tired of the sound of his name; but, if so, she does not show it, for she asks questions about him and listens unwearingly to the most trifling details. "It is very easy to see aunt's drift. Alice Venna will have a considerable fortune, and it is wise policy to interest her in Rolle beforehand, until he is on the spot to speak for himself. We do not like Alice—Cherry and I. It may be only prejudice—very likely it is on Cherry's part; for I know she is rather nervous about Godard and Miss Venna; but there can be no feeling on my side beyond growing certainty that the pretty young girl who is placed over my head in everything now is utterly unworthy of a good-bye, earnest man, such as Rolle is turning out to be. We are all his doings in the newspapers, though he says little about himself in the letters he writes home. "We have got Rolle home—that is our own comfort—and, when the time comes, he will pass away with the fact that he knows and loves around about him. There is no hope—the doctors have never given us any—but he may be with us longer than was thought at first. Our sister—Captain Stewart now—has indeed come home covered with glory, but what are honors and wealth compared with the precious life of the one we love? And yet all my afterdays—if Rolle is gone—I shall glorify in the memory of our hero and dwell on his noble deeds with the heart filled with pride and grief! When I looked upon the terrible scar on his arm, when I saw the empty sleeve, and thought of the way that cruel bullet in the left side had worked that vigorous young frame, I see also the true bravery, the manly endurance, which I would not believe in before, because nothing had happened then to bring out his high qualities, and because, forsooth, Rolle was my mother's darling! I called Aunt Ellen hard and unfeeling in those days; but what was I myself that the honest passion of this noble heart could leave me untouched? Well, it is all over now, and I know my own mind just too late. "Freya, have you got the jelly?" "It is Aunt Ellen who breaks in upon my sad and bitter train of thought—no longer in the sharp accusing tone of old; the imperious tone has quite broken down under the blow which her love and pride have received. "I am just going to the kitchen to get it," I tell her, putting my arm around her with a few stammering words of

comfort. I should not have dared to do it if you were not here, but Aunt Ellen and I have got on better since our troubles began. She kisses me and puts on the usual cheerful-poor aunt is often crying out—and I go and take the jelly to Rolle. He is lying on a couch in a room adjoining his bed room which has been hastily fixed up as a sitting-room for him, the doctor having advised us to get him up every day as long as his strength will allow of it. He is so quiet and pale and wasted that it is somewhat difficult to believe that he was the vigorous, laughing stripling who kept the house amused but a few months ago. His eyes are as blue as ever, but so sunken and they have a mournful expression in them that Aunt Ellen and old Barbara say is the sign of approaching death. I almost wish that he loved me still, and I might comfort him while yet there is time; but I do not know how to grief away and give every moment to cheering him, if he cared to have it so. But he has quite forgotten his boyish passion; he is exactly the same to me as he is to every other person. Those sad eyes never light up at my approach, and what little he says in his low weak voice shows by the manner in which it is said how completely indifferent he is. Well, I was not worth remembering. "You will like a little jelly now, won't you, Rolle?" I say, going up to his room. Barbara is in the room, busy with some needlework. "No, thank you," he answered listlessly. "I try to take a little—it is freshly prepared, and I urge, speaking so kindly, for I feel so very ill at ease with Rolle now in his altered condition. I know I should be of much more use if I could overcome the wretched feeling, and I have struggled against it, but hitherto with no success. "It is so much trouble," he objects; "and I don't want anything." "Then I bring forward the most powerful plea I can think of. "Aunt Ellen is coming in a few minutes. It was she who asked me to bring you this, and she will be disappointed if she finds you haven't had any." He yields, and I administer some half-dozen spoonfuls, when he stops my hand, declaring that he can take no more. "I think you are a little better today," I observe, experimentally. "For my poor mother's sake, I could almost wish I were," he replies. "At this moment Aunt Ellen comes in with a great assumption of cheerfulness. "You are looking a little better today," she begins, and stoops down to kiss him. I look on, thinking wistfully how easy it is to coax the patient when one may soothe and coax the patient with endearing words and caresses. My service must seem so cold and unbecomingly formal attentiveness. Even old Barbara addresses him as "Master Rolle, dear." I am the only one who may not show the warmest love and tenderness to the invalid; I forfeited my right to do that seven months ago. "The days pass on, bringing no great change, either favorable or unfavorable. The patient lies in an apathetic state, from which it is difficult to rouse him for more than a minute or two at a time. He is considered to be in a coma, and his heart is ready to break. Oh, if only I might tell him I have long since repented my selfish cruelty and beseech his forgiveness. But he is passing beyond the woman's love that is his hope, and not to be spared a life-time. My approach would risk disturbing that quiet slumber hovering thus between earth and heaven. All the household is subdued, as if Rolle were already dead. We have very few callers, the neighborhood being sparsely populated. Mrs. Muldon and Cherry come or send every day, besides having Godard's frequent reports of his brother's condition. The Vennas have gone away, Alice having first consoled with Aunt Ellen and assured her how glad she would have been to stay and help her, but she was never of any use in sickness, being so very sensitive. Aunt Ellen looks ten years older, and the white hairs are coming thickly in poor uncle's brown locks. I do not know how long an altered—I have not had time to think about myself for a long while now—until one day Rolle says to me, as I am bending over him, moving his pillows very carefully: "How thin you have grown, Freya! And where is all your pretty color?" He speaks in the listless tone which has become usual with him now; but his remark shows that he has been more alive to people and things about him than we have supposed—sometimes, at any rate. "We can't always keep young and pretty," I reply, with a great effort at cheerfulness. He smiles very faintly. "How old are you now, Freya? I forget how the time passes. I am nineteen in two months from today," I tell him. "I shouldn't be here to help you to keep your birthday," he says gravely. "I must give you my good wishes now. I do not answer, I can only say, for a lump seems to have risen in my throat and to be nearly suffocating me. "Freya," he continues presently, "there is one thing you could do to please me before I go—that is, if you didn't mind; if you did, I would rather not." "I will do anything for you, Rolle," I manage to say, all my strength being concentrated in one supreme effort not to break down and agitate him. "Kiss me, then, Freya. It will comfort me till I die." At this my tears burst forth, and, terrified at possible consequences and overcome by opposing feelings at this unlooked-for request, I sink upon my knees at the side of the couch and hide my face among the rugs and shawls that cover him. "What's the matter?" he inquires quite calmly, to my great relief. "What are you crying for?" "O, Rolle, do you care for me to kiss you?" "Care!" I feel his hand laid weakly upon my "lily-white cheeks," as he used to call them. "It would make me happy for the rest of my life!" "Dear Rolle, then why didn't you ask me long ago?" "Oh, I thought you wouldn't like it, and I didn't mean to ask you at all! But today I felt as if—as if I should not be here much longer, and that perhaps he would love me, and I meant, before I asked that, to have begged your forgiveness for giving you so much trouble, you know?" He sinks back exhausted. It is the longest speech he has made since he came home. His voice is as weak and listless as ever, but a faint color has tinted his wasted cheeks while speaking. It dies away now, leaving him so faintly pale that I rise to my feet in sudden terror and despair. Can this be the end? Is he going without knowing that all my life and love are his—dedicated to his memory for evermore, since they may not be spent on himself? I stoop over and press the longest-for kiss upon his lips—the lips that I would gladly have kissed twenty times in an hour had I known that he would care for it. "Dearest Rolle!" I say in wild agitation and fear. "I have longed to ask forgiveness of you. I was so false to you, as well as to you! There was no one else there never was; I spoke only of uncle and Cherry; and, when I saw how you took it, I—I—I was wicked enough

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