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The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Anne Brontë · *1848 · original English text*

A mysterious widow takes the derelict Hall, paints for her bread, and keeps her little son close. Gilbert Markham falls in love with her, and only her diary can tell him why she fled a charming, drunken husband. Anne Brontë writes, without softening, of a Christian wife's duty when duty is being used to destroy her child.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is virtue—the luck of having no temptations, or the strength to resist them—and what may a wife do when remaining would train her son in vice?

"What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?"
Gilbert Markham · Chapter 3

Helen's diary answers Gilbert's early riddle. She tried to save Arthur Huntingdon by patience, prayer, and example; he would not be saved, and he began to make their son a companion in his cups. She leaves—not from lightness, but after hard work and a settled judgment that her first duty is now the child's soul. Virtue here is not sheltered innocence. It is costly fidelity to the good.

KEY CHARACTERS

Helen Huntingdon (Mrs. Graham)
Painter, mother, and Christian wife, who leaves in order not to lose her son

Gilbert Markham
The farmer-narrator, hot-headed, who must learn patience and belief in her

Arthur Huntingdon
Helen's husband: charming, dissipated, and ruinous to a child's upbringing

Little Arthur
The son, the reason she stays as long as she does, and the reason she goes

Frederick Lawrence
Helen's brother, owner of Wildfell, wrongly suspected by Gilbert

Aunt Maxwell
The aunt who warned her, and who later helps the flight

Rachel
The faithful servant who shares the escape

VIRTUE TRIED, AND A CHILD'S SOUL

> *"What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?"*
> **Gilbert Markham** · Chapter 3

> *"I would rather have your friendship than the love of any other woman in the world!"*
> **Gilbert Markham** · Chapter 15

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Widow at the Hall
CHAPTERS I–IX (GILBERT'S NARRATIVE)

A Yorkshire neighbourhood meets a reserved tenant, and Gilbert is drawn to her.

- Gilbert Markham, a young farmer, hears that Wildfell Hall has a new tenant: Mrs. Graham and her little boy, Arthur
- The neighbourhood gossips; she will not return calls in the usual way, and paints to live
- Gilbert defends her, then loves her, and is jealous of her friend Mr. Lawrence
- She gives him her journal, so that he may understand why she cannot be his

> *"What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?"*
> **Gilbert Markham** · Chapter 3

02
The Choice of a Husband
DIARY: HELEN'S YOUTH AND MARRIAGE

A girl prefers a brilliant, careless man to a steady one, and will not be warned in time.

- Helen Lawrence, pious and spirited, is courted by Arthur Huntingdon
- Aunt Maxwell warns her; Helen believes she can reform him after marriage
- The early months still have tenderness; then Huntingdon's true habits return
- She has a son, and begins to see the marriage as a trial that love alone will not lift

03
Grassdale
DIARY: THE DECLINE OF THE HOUSE

A circle of drinking companions, an unfaithful husband, and a child at risk.

- Huntingdon brings Hattersley, Grimsby, and others into the house; their amusements grow coarser
- He is unfaithful; Helen's duty and her faith are both tried
- He begins to teach little Arthur to drink and to mock his mother's prayers
- Helen resolves that she must take the child away, though the law and custom are against her

> *"to take my child and leave them now, without an hour's delay!"*
> **Helen Huntingdon** · Chapter 39 (A Scheme of Escape)

04
Flight and Concealment
DIARY: THE ESCAPE; RETURN TO GILBERT'S TALE

She flees to Wildfell Hall, her brother's property, under her mother's name.

- With Rachel's help she escapes to Wildfell, and lives by her brush
- Lawrence is her brother; Gilbert's jealousy has mistaken a brother's care for a lover's
- Huntingdon's old companion finds her; the hiding-place is no longer safe
- Gilbert, reading the diary, is humbled, and offers a love that can wait

> *"I would rather have your friendship than the love of any other woman in the world!"*
> **Gilbert Markham** · Chapter 15 (An Explanation)

05
A Last Duty
THE CLOSE

She returns to nurse the husband who ruined their peace, and is free only when he is gone.

- Huntingdon is badly hurt in a fall; Helen goes back to Grassdale to nurse him
- She tells him the truth about his soul as plainly as she tends his body; he dies in fear, with little sign of a changed heart
- Helen is free; Gilbert waits through a long discretion, then is accepted
- The book will not pretend that her return was wasted, or that it saved him

Virtue under Trial | Motherhood | Faithfulness | Temperance | Truth-telling | Repentance refused

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Gilbert's question about virtue in Chapter 3 is the book's theme in little. Helen's life is the answer: virtue is tested, not sheltered.
2. Anne Brontë does not treat leaving a husband lightly. Helen goes only when the child's soul is in danger, and she returns to nurse the dying man.
3. Huntingdon's deathbed is not a tidy conversion. The book is honest about a hard heart at the end of a long wasted life.
4. The framed diary matters. Gilbert must read her life before he is fit to love her; the reader is put in the same position.
5. The hosted text is Anne Brontë's original English (Project Gutenberg #969).

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #969, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-tenant-of-wildfell-hall/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.