

An Eighteenth-Century Tale

A Fragment

By Mary Shelley

In the summer of the year 17—, a lady who resided in a delightful house in Buckinghamshire assembled together a party whose sole object was to amuse themselves and to enjoy the short season of heat as pleasantly as they could. The house of this lady was situated on the river Thames, half way between Marlow and Henley. The country surrounding it was delightful: the river glided among grassy slopes, and its banks were sometimes shaded by beech woods and sometimes open to the full glare of the sun whose heat is seldom felt intolerable in England. Near her house, several beautiful islands were formed in the river, covered with willows, poplars, and elms. The trees of these islands united their branches with those of the firm land and formed a green archway which numerous birds delighted to frequent. The visitors found a thousand delightful ways of passing their time; they walked or rowed about the river; their conversation seldom languished. Many of them had been travellers, and they compared the scenes of their native country to those which they had visited; and if the latter did not gain in the comparison, it ought at least to have been satisfied by the preference it always obtained over all others when the merits of each came to be discussed as a perpetual residence.

One day, after passing the morning on the water and after having refreshed themselves under the shade of a great oak which grew on the banks of the river, the conversation fell on the strange events that had occurred in the life of a lady, one of their company; and they all entreated her—if the remembrance would not distress her—to relate those events which, although a part of them was known to almost all the company, none were fully and distinctly acquainted with. “I consent to what you ask,” replied the lady, “if in return you will each relate what has passed particularly worthy of notice in each of your lives.” “Indeed,” replied another, “your proposition is a fair one, but it requires consideration. Let each individual examine for a moment his past life and determine how he chooses to make us all his confessors.”—“You misunderstand me,” replied the first lady; “I do not demand that you should make any confessions, but merely relate those events which have taken place that have reference to yourselves—not telling all the truth if you have any thing you wish to conceal (and who has not), but promising not to falsify any thing.”—“And what are those to do who have nothing to tell?”—“Their history may be short, but every one can say something; and many who may at first think that they have nothing to relate will find, when they have once begun, that the subject is a richer one than they expected.” The party soon consented and begged the lady who was to speak first to take upon herself the arrangement of her plan. She said—“I will commence that I may set a good example, and then you may each follow in order as you sit—and if today is not long enough, which I believe it will not be for us all to speak, we can choose a grassy spot like this tomorrow and the next day, and I think that you will find that my plan will give a zest to our little excursions. I will begin: so sit round me in a half circle, and give me your attention until I weary you; and then bid me break off, and another shall speak who will try to have better success.

“That my story may have a suitable commencement, I will inform you, what perhaps you know already, that my name is Maria Graham. My maiden name was Langley. My father and mother died before I was ten years old, so that I only remember the latter and that I wept when I lost her. I was left to the care of an aunt who had a tender affection for me—she had never been married,

and as she has passed her thirtieth year it appeared unlikely that she ever would. I was brought up by her with the greatest care—we lived in the country, but she had herself been very well educated, and she spared no pains in teaching me the rudiments of all the fashionable. . .”