

Chapter 1

It was a good school, one of the best in London.

Miss Banks and her sister Emily believed that girls should be taught as thoroughly and as carefully as boys. They had bought three houses in a quiet square, a pleasant place with plane trees and well-behaved pigeons, and put up a brass plate saying: THE MAYFAIR ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES – and they had prospered.

For while the sisters prized proper learning, they also prized good manners, thoughtfulness and care for others, and the girls learnt both algebra and needlework. Moreover, they took in children whose parents were abroad and needed somewhere to spend the holidays. Now, some thirty years later, in the autumn of 1910, the school had a waiting list, and those girls who went there knew how lucky they were.

All the same, there were times when they were very bored.

Miss Carlisle was giving a Geography lesson in the big classroom which faced the street. She was a good teacher, but even the best teachers have trouble trying to make the Rivers of Southern England seem unusual and exciting.

“Now can anyone tell me the exact source of the River Thames?” she asked.

She passed her eyes along the rows of desks, missed the plump Hermione, the worried-looking Daisy – and stopped by a girl in the front row.

“Don’t chew the end of your pigtail,” she was about to say, but she did not say it. For it was a day when this particular girl had a right to chew the curved ends of her single heavy plait of hair. Maia had seen the motor stop outside the door, had seen old Mr Murray in his velvet-collared coat go into the house. Mr Murray was Maia’s guardian and today, as everybody knew, he was bringing news about her future.

Maia raised her eyes to Miss Carlisle and struggled to concentrate. In the room full of fair and light brown heads, she stood out, with her pale triangular face, her widely spaced dark eyes. Her ears, laid bare by the heavy rope of black hair, gave her an unprotected look.

“The Thames rises in the Cotswold hills,” she began in her low, clear voice. “In a small hamlet. “ Only what small hamlet? She had no idea.

The door opened. Twenty heads turned.

“Would Maia Fielding come to Miss Banks’ room, please?” said the maid.

Maia rose to her feet. *Fear is the cause of all evil*, she told herself but she was afraid. Afraid of the future...afraid of the unknown. Afraid in the way someone who is alone in the world.

Questions:

1. What was the name of the school in the story?
2. Other than learning, what did the sisters believe was important for young ladies to learn?
3. How old was the school?
4. What were the names of the two sisters that were teachers in the school?
5. What is the name of the girl who is the main character in the story and why was she so concerned about the news Mr. Murray was going to deliver?
6. Describe what the girl looked like.

7. Who was Mr. Murray?
8. What was Maia afraid of?

Extension:

How do you think Maia is feeling? Write a short paragraph explaining how you think Maia is feeling and why. Remember to use a range of adjectives to describe how she might be feeling.