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A School Story – Part 1

Two men, John and Edgar, were having dinner together one night when a conversation started on the subject of school-days. One of them, John, told the following strange story:

'When I went to the school in September of 1870, I immediately became friendly with a Scottish boy called McLeod. It was a large school and the teachers changed quite often. One term a new teacher named Sampson came to teach at the school. He taught us Latin.

He was tall and pale with a black beard and he was popular with the boys because he used to tell us all about his travels to different countries. He always carried an old gold coin in his pocket, which he found on a trip to Turkey, and one day he let us look at this coin closely.

On one side of it was the head of a king - I don't know which one - and on the other side of it were the letters G.W.S. (for Sampsons name) and the date 24 July 1865.

We enjoyed Sampsons classes because he often asked us to invent sentences of our own, instead of always doing the boring exercises in the grammar book. One day, he asked us for sentences using the word 'remember' in Latin.

We all wrote our sentences in the usual way, and Sampson came round to correct each of us. My friend McLeod seemed to be having some difficulty in thinking of a sentence and when the bell went for break. I saw him write something very quickly, just before Sampson reached him.

So McLeod's sentence was the last one that Sampson corrected that day; I waited outside the classroom for what seemed a long time before my friend at last came out. I guessed that he was in trouble for making a mistake. When he did come out, he was looking thoughtful.

'What happened? Was old Sampson angry?' I asked. 'No. My sentence was all right. I think. I wrote "Memento putei inter quattuor taxos",' said McLeod. 'Well, what does all that mean?' I asked.

'That's the funny thing,' he explained. 'I don't really know, you see. I couldn't think of anything to write until just before Sampson got to me. Then those words just came into my head from nowhere and - it was very strange - I could see a sort of picture of it in my head. I think it means "Remember the well among the four trees".

When Sampson read it he went quiet for a long time, then he started to ask me questions about my family and where I came from. Then he let me go.' We soon forgot about the lesson and McLeod's strange sentence because the next day McLeod became ill with a cold and he didn't come to school for a week.

Nothing happened for about a month, until one day when we were, again, writing Latin sentences for Sampson. This time we had to write them on pieces of paper and give them to him for correction. He started looking through them, but when he got to one piece of paper he turned white and cried out, looking very frightened.

He got up and hurried out of the classroom and we sat there for a long time, wondering what to do. Finally, I got up to have a look at the papers and the first thing I noticed was that the top one was in red ink. Our school never allowed us to use red ink; it was against the rules.

The sentence on the paper said 'Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te', which means 'If you don't come to me, I will come to you'. All the boys looked at it and they all promised that the sentence was not theirs. To check, I counted the pieces of paper - there were seventeen of them . . . but there were only sixteen boys in the class.

Where this paper came from, no one could say. I put it in my pocket and it wasn't until that afternoon that I took it out again: it was completely white, with no sign of the red writing on it anywhere!