A School Story

It happened at my private school thirty odd years ago, and I still can't explain it. I came to that school in September and among the boys who arrived on the same day was one whom I took to. I will call him McLeod. The school was a large one: there must have been from 120 to 130 boys there as a rule, and so a considerable staff of masters was required. One term a new master made his appearance. His name was Sampson. He was a tall, well-built, pale, black-bearded man. I think we liked him. He had travelled a good deal, and had stories which amused us on our school walks, so that there was some competition among us to get a chance to listen to him.

Well, the first odd thing that happened was this. Sampson was doing Latin grammar with us. One of his favourite methods was to make us construct sentences out of our own heads to illustrate the rules he was trying to teach us. Now, on this occasion he ordered us each to make a sentence bringing in the verb memlnij "I remember." Well, most of us made up some ordinary sentence such as "I remember my father," but the boy I mentioned — McLeod — was evidently thinking of something more interesting than that. Finally, very quickly he wrote a couple of lines on his paper, and showed it up with the rest. The phrase was "Remember the lake among the four oaks." Later McLeod told me that it had just come into his head. When Sampson read it he got up and went to the mantelpiece and stopped quite a long time without saying anything looking really embarrassed. Then he wanted to know why McLeod had put it down, and where his family lived, and if there was such a lake there, and things like that.

There was one other incident of the same kind. We were told to make a conditional sentence, expressing a future consequence. We did it and showed up our bits of paper, and Sampson began looking through them. All at once he got up, made some odd sort of noise in his throat, and rushed out. I noticed that he hadn't taken any of the papers with him, so we went to look at them on his desk. The top paper on the desk was written in red ink — which no one used — and it wasn't in anyone's handwriting who was in the class. I questioned everyone myself! Then I thought of counting the bits of paper: there were seventeen of them on the desk, and sixteen boys in the form. I put the extra paper in my bag and kept it. The phrase on it was simple and harmless enough: "If you don't come to me, I'll come to you." That same afternoon I took it out of my bag — I know for certain it was the same bit of paper, for I made a fingermark on it — and there was no single piece of writing on it!

The next day Sampson was in school again, much as usual. That night the third and last incident in my story happened. We — McLeod and I — slept in a bedroom the windows of which looked out at the main building of the school. Sampson slept in the main building on the first floor. At an hour which I can't remember exactly, but some time between one and two, I was woken up by somebody shaking me. I saw McLeod in the light of the moon which was looking right into our windows. "Come," he said, — "come, there's someone getting in through Sampson's window. About five minutes before I woke you, I found myself looking out of this window here, and there was a man sitting on Sampson's window-sill, and looking in." "What sort of man? Is anyone from the senior class going to play a trick on him? Or was it a burglar?!" McLeod seemed unwilling to answer. "I don't know," he said, "but I can tell you one thing — he was as thin as a rail, and water was running down his hair and clothing and," he said, looking round and whispering as if he hardly liked to hear himself, "I'm not at all sure that he was alive." Naturally I came and looked, and naturally there was no one there.

And next day Mr. Sampson was gone: not to be found, and I believe no trace of him has ever come to light since. Neither McLeod nor I ever mentioned what we had seen to anyone. We seemed unable to speak about it. We both felt strange horror which neither could explain.

Why did schoolchildren like the new teacher, Mr. Sampson?

1. They liked his appearance.
2. He often went for a walk with them.
3. He organized competitions for them.
4. They enjoyed listening to his stories.