

# The Ransom of Red Chief

O. Henry

*To listen to the Audio of this story, please visit <http://www.manythings.org/voa/stories/> webpage and select this story. Slow to Fast Audio speeds are available.*

It looked like a good thing. But wait till I tell you. We were down south, in Alabama – Bill Driscoll and myself – when this kidnapping idea struck us. There was a town down there, as flat as a pancake, and called Summit. Bill and I had about six hundred dollars. We needed just two thousand dollars more for an illegal land deal in Illinois.

We chose for our victim -- the only child of an influential citizen named Ebenezer Dorset. He was a boy of ten, with red hair. Bill and I thought that Ebenezer would pay a ransom of two thousand dollars to get his boy back. But wait till I tell you.

About two miles from Summit was a little mountain, covered with cedar trees. There was an opening on the back of the mountain. We stored our supplies in that cave.

One night, we drove a horse and carriage past old Dorset's house. The boy was in the street, throwing rocks at a cat on the opposite fence.

"Hey little boy!" says Bill, "would you like to have a bag of candy and a nice ride?"

The boy hits Bill directly in the eye with a piece of rock.

That boy put up a fight like a wild animal. But, at last, we got him down in the bottom of the carriage and drove away.

We took him up to the cave. The boy had two large bird feathers stuck in his hair. He points a stick at me and says:

"Ha! Paleface, do you dare to enter the camp of Red Chief, the terror of the plains?"

"He's all right now," says Bill, rolling up his pants and examining wounds on his legs. "We're playing Indian. I'm Old Hank, the trapper, Red Chiefs captive. I'm going to be scalped at daybreak. By Geronimo! That kid can kick hard."

"Red Chief," says I to the boy, "would you like to go home?"

"Aw, what for?" says he. "I don't have any fun at home. I hate to go to school. I like to camp out. You won't take me back home again, will you?"

"Not right away," says I. "Well stay here in the cave a while."

"All right!" says he. "That'll be fine. I never had such fun in all my life."

We went to bed about eleven o'clock. Just at daybreak, I was awakened by a series of terrible screams from Bill. Red Chief was sitting on Bills chest, with one hand holding his hair. In the other, he had a sharp knife. He was attempting to cut off the top of Bills head, based on what he had declared the night before.

I got the knife away from the boy. But, after that event, Bill's spirit was broken. He lay down, but he never closed an eye again in sleep as long as that boy was with us.

[http://www.manythings.org/voa/stories/The\\_Ransom\\_of\\_Red\\_Chief\\_-\\_By\\_O.\\_Henry.html](http://www.manythings.org/voa/stories/The_Ransom_of_Red_Chief_-_By_O._Henry.html)

"Do you think anybody will pay out money to get a little imp like that back home?" Bill asked.

"Sure," I said. "A boy like that is just the kind that parents love. Now, you and the Chief get up and make something to eat, while I go up on the top of this mountain and look around."

I climbed to the top of the mountain. Over toward Summit, I expected to see the men of the village searching the countryside. But all was peaceful.

"Perhaps," says I to myself, "it has not yet been discovered that the wolves have taken the lamb from the fold." I went back down the mountain.

When I got to the cave, I found Bill backed up against the side of it. He was breathing hard, with the boy threatening to strike him with a rock.

"He put a red-hot potato down my back," explained Bill, "and then crushed it with his foot. I hit his ears. Have you got a gun with you, Sam?"

I took the rock away from the boy and ended the argument.

"I'll fix you," says the boy to Bill. "No man ever yet struck the Red Chief but what he got paid for it. You better be careful!"

After eating, the boy takes a leather object with strings tied around it from his clothes and goes outside the cave unwinding it. Then we heard a kind of shout. It was Red Chief holding a sling in one hand. He moved it faster and faster around his head.

Just then I heard a heavy sound and a deep breath from Bill. A rock the size of an egg had hit him just behind his left ear. Bill fell in the fire across the frying pan of hot water for washing the dishes. I pulled him out and poured cold water on his head for half an hour.

Then I went out and caught that boy and shook him.

"If your behavior doesn't improve," says I, "I'll take you straight home. Now, are you going to be good, or not?"

"I was only funning," says he. "I didn't mean to hurt Old Hank. But what did he hit me for? I'll behave if you don't send me home."

I thought it best to send a letter to old man Dorset that day, demanding the ransom and telling how it should be paid. The letter said:

"We have your boy hidden in a place far from Summit. We demand fifteen hundred dollars for his return; the money to be left at midnight tonight at the same place and in the same box as your answer.

If you agree to these terms, send the answer in writing by a messenger tonight at half past eight o'clock. After crossing Owl Creek, on the road to Poplar Cove, there are three large trees. At the bottom of the fence, opposite the third tree, will be a small box. The messenger will place the answer in this box and return immediately to Summit. If you fail to agree to our demand, you will never see your boy again. If you pay the money as demanded, he will be returned to you safe and well within three hours."

I took the letter and walked over to Poplar Cove. I then sat around the post office and store. An old man there says he hears Summit is all worried because of Ebenezer Dorset's boy having been lost or stolen. That was all I wanted to know. I mailed my letter and left. The postmaster said the mail carrier would come by in an hour to take the mail on to Summit.

At half past eight, I was up in the third tree, waiting for the messenger to arrive. Exactly on time, a half-grown boy rides up the road on a bicycle. He finds the box at the foot of the fence. He puts a folded piece of paper into it and leaves, turning back toward Summit.

I slid down the tree, got the note and was back at the cave in a half hour. I opened the note and read it to Bill. This is what it said:

"Gentlemen: I received your letter about the ransom you ask for the return of my son. I think you are a little high in your demands. I hereby make you a counter-proposal, which I believe you will accept. You bring Johnny home and pay me two hundred and fifty dollars, and I agree to take him off your hands. You had better come at night because the neighbors believe he is lost. And, I could not be responsible for what they would do to anybody they saw bringing him back. Very respectfully, Ebenezer Dorset."

"Great pirates of Penzance!" says I, "of all the nerve..." But I looked at Bill and stopped. He had the most appealing look in his eyes I ever saw on the face of a dumb or talking animal.

"Sam," says he, "what's two hundred and fifty dollars, after all? We've got the money. One more night of this boy will drive me crazy. I think Mr. Dorset is making us a good offer. You aren't going to let the chance go, are you?"

"Tell you the truth, Bill," says I, "this little lamb has got on my nerves, too. We'll take him home, pay the ransom and make our get-away."

We took him home that night. We got him to go by telling him that his father had bought him a gun and we were going to hunt bears the next day.

It was twelve o'clock when we knocked on Ebenezer's front door. Bill counted out two hundred and fifty dollars into Dorset's hand.

When the boy learned we were planning to leave him at home, he started to cry loudly and held himself as tight as he could to Bill's leg. His father pulled him away slowly.

"How long can you hold him?" asks Bill.

"I'm not as strong as I used to be," says old Dorset, "but I think I can promise you ten minutes."

"Enough," says Bill. "In ten minutes, I shall cross the Central, Southern and Middle Western states, and be running for the Canadian border."

And, as dark as it was, and as fat as Bill was, and as good a runner as I am, he was a good mile and a half out of Summit before I could catch up with him.