

1. The Ransom of Red Chief

It looked like a good thing; but wait till I tell you. We were in Alabama—Bill Driscoll and myself—when this kidnapping idea struck us. There was a town down there called Summit. Bill and I had a joint **capital** of about six hundred dollars, and we needed just two thousand dollars more to pull off a **fraudulent** scheme.

We selected for our victim the only child of a prominent citizen named Ebenezer Dorset who was a respectable mortgage fancier. The kid was a boy of ten, with **freckles**. Bill and I figured that Ebenezer would melt down for a **ransom** of two thousand dollars.

About two miles from Summit was a little mountain with a cave. There we stored provisions. One evening, we drove in a buggy past old Dorset's house. The kid was in the street, throwing rocks at a kitten on the opposite fence.

He put up a great fight, but we got him down in the bottom of the buggy and drove away. We took him up to the cave. After dark, I drove the buggy to the little village, three miles away, where we had hired it, and walked back to the mountain. When I returned, there was a fire burning at the entrance of the cave, and the boy was watching a pot of boiling coffee, with two buzzard tailfeathers stuck in his red hair. He pointed a stick at me when I came up, and said, 'Ha! Do you dare

to enter the camp of Red Chief, the terror of the plains?' 'We're playing **Red Indians**. I'm Old Hank, the Trapper, Red Chief's captive. By **geronimo!** That kid can kick hard,' said Bill, rolling up his trousers and examining some bruises on his shins.

Yes, sir, that boy seemed to be having the time of his life. The fun of camping out in a cave had made him forget that he was a captive himself. He immediately **christened** me Snake-eye, the Spy, and announced that when his braves returned from the warpath, I was to be **broiled** at the **stake** at the rising of the sun.

Then we had supper; and he filled his mouth full of bread and gravy, and began to talk. He made a during-dinner speech something like this:

'I like this fine. I never camped out before. I was nine last birthday. I hate to go to school. Are there any Red Indians in these woods? I want some more gravy. Does the trees moving make the wind blow? We had five puppies. What makes your nose so red, Hank? My father has lots of money. Have you got beds to sleep on in this cave?'

Every few minutes he would remember that he was a **pesky redskin**, pick up his stick rifle and let out a **war-whoop** that made Old Hank the Trapper shiver. That boy had Bill terrorised from the start.

'Red Chief,' said I to the kid, 'would you like to go home?'

'Aw, what for?' said he. 'I don't have any fun at home. I like to camp out. You won't take me back home again, Snake-eye, will you?'

'Not right away,' said I. 'We'll stay here in the cave a while.'

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

We went to bed about eleven o'clock. We spread down some wide blankets and quilts and put Red Chief between us. We weren't afraid he'd run away. He kept us awake for three hours, jumping up and reaching for his rifle and screeching: 'Hist! pard,' in mine and Bill's ears. At last, I fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamed that I had been kidnapped and chained to a tree by a ferocious pirate with red hair.

Just at daybreak, I was awakened by a series of awful screams from Bill. They weren't yells, or howls, or shouts, but they were simply indecent, terrifying, humiliating screams.

I jumped up to see what the matter was. Red Chief was sitting on Bill's chest, with one hand twined in his hair.

I made the kid lie down again. But, from that moment, Bill's spirit was broken. He laid down on his side of the bed, but he never closed an eye again in sleep as long as that boy was with us. I dozed off for a while, but along towards sun-up I remembered that Red Chief had said I was to be burned at the stake at the rising of the sun. I wasn't nervous or afraid; but I sat up and leaned against a rock.



'What you getting up so soon for, Sam?' asked Bill.

'Me?' said I. 'Oh, I got a kind of a pain in my shoulder. I thought sitting up would rest it.'

'You're a liar!' said Bill. 'You're afraid. You were to be burned at sunrise, and you are afraid he'd do it. And he would, too, if he could find a match. Ain't it awful, Sam? Do you think anybody will pay out money to get a little **imp** like that back home?'

'Sure,' said I. 'A **rowdy** kid like that is just the kind that parents **dote on**. But we've got to fix up some plan about the ransom. Tonight we must get a message to his father demanding fifteen hundred dollars for his return.'



Bill and I got paper and pencil and worked on the letter while Red Chief, with a blanket wrapped around him, **strutted** up and down, guarding the mouth of the cave.

Ebenezer Dorset, **Esq.**:

We have your boy concealed in a place far from Summit. It is useless for you or the most skilful detectives to attempt to find him. The only terms on which you can have him restored to you are these: We demand fifteen hundred dollars in large bills for his return; the money to be left at midnight tonight at the same spot and in the same box as hereinafter described. If you agree to these terms, send your answer in writing by a solitary messenger tonight at eight o'clock. The messenger will place the answer in a pasteboard box kept at the bottom of the fence-post on the road to Poplar Cave and return immediately to Summit.

If you attempt any **treachery** or fail to **comply** with our demand as stated, 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. These terms are final.

Two Desperate Men



I addressed this letter to Dorset, and put it in my pocket. As I was about to start, the kid came up to me and said: 'Aw, Snake-eye, I want to play the Black Scout.'

'Mr Bill will play with you. What kind of a game is it?' said I.

'I'm the Black Scout,' said Red Chief, 'and I have to ride to the stockade to warn the settlers that the Red Indians are coming. I'm tired of playing Red Indian myself. I want to be the Black Scout.'

'All right,' said I. 'It sounds harmless to me. I guess Mr Bill will help you foil the pesky savages.'

'What am I to do?' asked Bill, looking at the kid suspiciously.

'You are the **hoss**,' said Black Scout. 'Get down on your hands and knees. How can I ride to the stockade without a hoss?'

Bill got down on his all fours, and a look came in his eyes like a rabbit's when you catch it in a trap.

I walked over to Poplar Cove and sat around the post office. I heard one whiskerando say that Summit was all upset on account of Ebenezer Dorset's boy having been lost or stolen. That was all I wanted to know. I posted my letter **surreptitiously** and came away.

When I got back to the cave, Bill and the boy were not to be found. I explored the vicinity of the cave, but there was no response.

In about half an hour I heard the bushes rustle, and Bill **wobbled** out into the little glade in front of the cave.

Behind him was the kid, stepping softly like a scout, with a broad grin on his face. Bill stopped, took off his hat and wiped his face with a red handkerchief. The kid stopped about eight feet behind him.

'Sam,' said Bill, 'I suppose you'll think I'm a **renegade**, but I couldn't help it. The boy is gone. I have sent him home. All is off.'

'What's the trouble, Bill?' I asked him.

'I was rode,' said Bill, 'the ninety miles to the stockade, not barring an inch. And then, for an hour I had to try to explain to him how a road can run both ways and what makes the grass green. I tell you, Sam, a human can only stand so much. I took him by the neck of his clothes and dragged him down the mountain. On the way, he kicked my legs black-and-blue from the knees down. But he's gone home. I showed him the road to Summit. I'm sorry we lose the ransom; but it was either that or Bill Driscoll to the madhouse.'

Bill was puffing and blowing, but there was a look of **ineffable** peace and growing content on his face.

'Bill,' said I, 'there isn't any heart disease in your family, is there?'

'No,' said Bill, 'nothing **chronic** except malaria and accidents. Why?'

'Then you might turn around,' said I, 'and have a look behind you.'

Bill turned and saw the boy, and lost his complexion

and sat down plump on the ground and began to pluck aimlessly at grass and little sticks. For an hour I was afraid for his mind. And then I told him that my scheme was to put the whole job through immediately and that we would get the ransom and be off with it by midnight if Dorset fell in with our proposition.

At eight o'clock, I was up in a tree as well hidden as a tree toad, waiting for the messenger to arrive. Exactly on time, a half-grown boy rode up the road on a bicycle, located the pasteboard box at the foot of the fence-post, slipped a folded piece of paper into it and pedaled away again back toward Summit.

I waited an hour and then slid down the tree, got the note, slipped along the fence and was back at the cave in another half an hour. I opened the note and read it to Bill.

Two Desperate Men,

Gentlemen: I received your letter today by post, in regard to the ransom you ask for the return of my son. I think you are a little high in your demands, and I hereby make you a counter-proposition. You bring Johnny home and pay me two hundred and fifty dollars in cash, and I agree to take him off your hands.

You had better come at night, for the neighbours believe he is lost, and I couldn't be responsible for what they would do to anybody they saw bringing him back.

Very respectfully,

Ebenezer Dorset

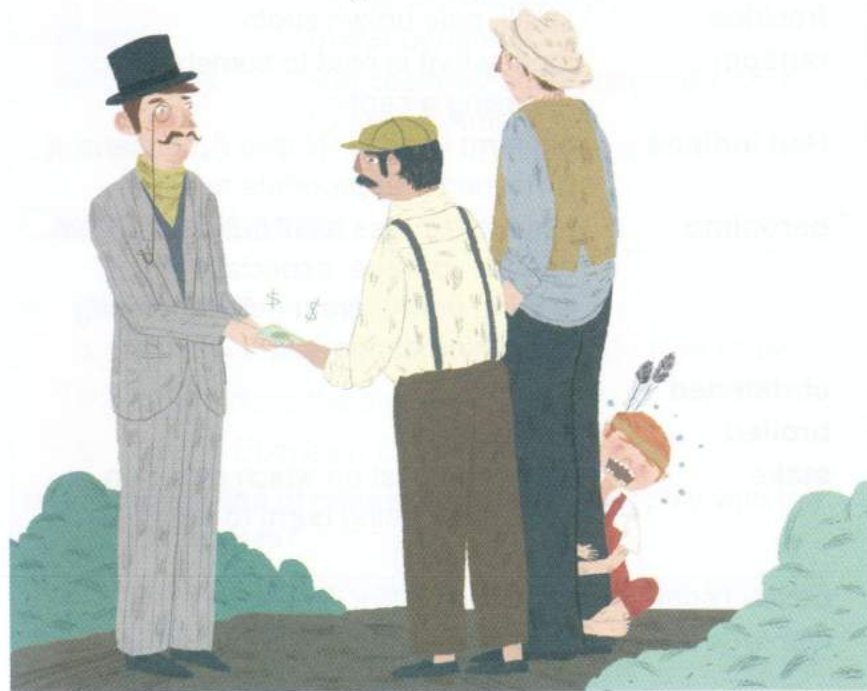


'Great pirates of Penzance!' said I; 'of all the impudent—'

But I glanced at Bill, and hesitated. He had the most appealing look in his eyes I ever saw on the face of a dumb or a talking brute.

'Sam,' said he, 'what's two hundred and fifty dollars, after all? We've got the money. One more night of this kid will send me to a bed in Bedlam. Besides being a thorough gentleman, I think Mr Dorset is a **spendthrift** for making us such a **liberal** offer. You ain't going to let the chance go, are you?'

'Tell you the truth, Bill,' said I, 'this boy has somewhat 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 a pair of **moccasins** for him.

It was just twelve o'clock when we knocked at Ebenezer's front door. Just at the moment when I should have been abstracting the fifteen hundred dollars from the box under the tree, according to the original proposition, Bill was counting out two hundred and fifty dollars into Dorset's hand.

O Henry

New Words

capital	money
fraudulent	illegal
freckles	small, pale brown spots
ransom	money that is paid to somebody for releasing a captive
Red Indians	old term used for Native Americans; it is no longer appropriate to use it
geronimo	used to express exhilaration and give oneself courage, especially when leaping from a great height or doing something dangerous
christened	named
broiled	cooked
stake	a wooden post on which a person is tied before being burnt to death (<i>in former times</i>)
pesky redskin	annoying Native American
war-whoop	howl uttered especially by Native Americans while making an attack

imp	a mischievous child
rowdy	noisy
dote on	extremely fond of
strutted	to walk proudly
Esq.	used as a polite title after a man's name
treachery	betrayal
comply	obey
hoss	horse
surreptitiously	in a quick and secret way
wobbled	to move unsteadily
renegade	traitor
ineffable	beyond description
chronic	long-term
spendthrift	a person who spends too much money or wastes money
liberal	(<i>here</i>) generous
moccasins	soft, leathery shoes originally worn by Native Americans

Comprehension

A. Answer these questions.

1. What is the narrator's name? Who is Red Chief?
2. Where does the story take place?
3. Who is Ebenezer Dorset?
4. What kind of games does Red Chief play with the kidnappers?
5. When do the two kidnappers realise that their plan may backfire?
6. How does Bill react when he returns to the cave?



B. Answer these questions with reference to the context.

- I'm tired of playing Red Indian myself. I want to be the Black Scout.*
 - Who is the speaker?
 - What is he playing? Whom is he playing with?
- He had the most appealing look in his eyes I ever saw on the face of a dumb or a talking brute.*
 - Who is the speaker? Who is he talking about?
 - Why does the person being spoken about has such a look on his face?

C. Think and answer.

- Why do Sam and Bill decide to commit the crime? Why do they choose the town of Summit?
- Why do the two men sign the letter as 'Two Desperate Men'?

Activity

A. Look at these pictures and identify the objects.



B. Native Americans are the indigenous people of North America. Find a Native American legend and share the story with the class.

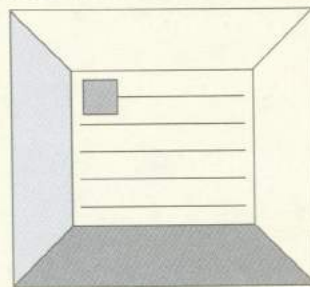
Skill Drill Reading

This project focuses on reading and analytical skills.

- Read about these famous personalities from the Internet. Note down five points each you like the most about these personalities.

Mother Teresa	Elvis Presley	Bill Gates
Oprah Winfrey	Christopher Columbus	Pelé

- Make an informative cube using a cardboard large enough to read through. On each side of that cube, paste one picture of each personality mentioned above. Now, write down those five points about each that you have already made a note of.



(Suggestion: Decorate the cube with different frames designs/ stickers/coloured ribbons/colours, etc.)

