

O' Henry -The Ransom of Red Chief

Summary

"The Ransom of Red Chief" begins with Sam, the story's first-person narrator, recounting how he and his partner in crime, Bill, were in Alabama when they had the idea to kidnap a wealthy man's son and hold him for ransom. The men have six hundred dollars and need two thousand more to pull off another scheme in Illinois. In a town called Summit, the men target a mortgage lender named Ebenezer Dorset, kidnapping his ten-year-old son Johnny. In a rented horse and buggy, the men abduct Johnny from his front yard and take him to their cave hideout on a nearby mountain. The boy isn't afraid of the men. Instead, he plays make-believe with them, pretending to be a Native American warrior named Red Chief who has taken Bill and Sam captive.

The boy's hyperactive behavior and incessant questions keep the men awake most of the night, but they do not worry that Johnny will escape because Johnny says he hates being home and going to school. Johnny wakes the men up at dawn by trying to remove Bill's scalp with a knife. Sam intervenes, and can't go back to sleep because he worries Johnny will try to burn him at the stake, as he has threatened to do while in character as Red Chief. Bill is terrorized by the boy's sadistic commitment to make-believe, and worries that no one would pay two thousand dollars to have a child like him returned. Sam leaves the cave to get a view of the countryside.

He hopes to see the entire town out with pitchforks and scythes, desperately searching for Johnny, but instead sees no commotion. Back at the cave, he finds Bill and Johnny in conflict again. This time, the boy put a hot potato down Bill's back and Bill hit him on the side of the head. Sam calms Bill down while Johnny walks off, unraveling some string and leather from his pocket. As the men discuss their plans for the ransom, Johnny uses his sling to throw a rock at Bill's head. Bill falls into the burning fire and a pan of simmering water. Sam pours cold water on his head for an hour and then threatens Johnny that he will send him home if he doesn't behave and be kinder to Bill.

After composing a ransom letter that asks for only \$1,500, Sam leaves Bill and the boy at the cave, walking three miles to Poplar Cove. In the town, he talks to people until he learns that news of the boy's disappearance has spread. He then posts the ransom letter and returns to the cave to discover Bill and the boy are gone. Eventually Bill emerges from the bushes exhausted and explains that he got rid of the boy on the road to Summit. Bill apologizes to Sam, saying he couldn't put up with pretending to be the boy's horse. Meanwhile, Johnny stands eight feet behind Bill, having followed Bill back to the cave. Sam leaves the cave that night to hide in a tree and wait for a response to the ransom note.

A teenage boy rides up on a bike and slips a return note in a box by the tree. Once Sam is confident no police are around, he leaves the tree, collects the note, and returns to the cave. By

lantern light, Sam reads the note to Bill. In it, Dorset, the boy's father, suggests that they have set the ransom too high. As a counteroffer, Dorset proposes that the kidnapers pay him \$250 to take Johnny back off their hands. Bill convinces Sam that Dorset's offer is generous, considering what a nightmare Johnny has been. At midnight, the men trick Johnny into going back to Dorset's house with them. Bill and Sam pay Dorset the money. Johnny clings to Bill's leg when he realizes they are leaving him, and Dorset peels him away, saying he can only hold his son for about ten minutes. Sam and Bill run out of town, Bill running much faster despite being less athletic than Sam.

Introduction/Analysis

The Ransom of Red Chief is a short story written by O. Henry in 1907. The story is a comedy and was first published in the Saturday Evening Post. Though written in 1907, the story transcends time and is still one of O. Henry's most famous writings.

In The Ransom of Red Chief, Bill and Sam kidnap a child out of Summit, Alabama, to fund their fraudulent town-lot scheme in Illinois. They decide to kidnap Johnny Dorset because his father is wealthy, and they live in a semi-rural area with no police force or newspaper. From the beginning, Johnny puts up a fight, injuring Bill in the process when he throws a piece of brick at his eye. This scene begins the conflict between Johnny and Bill, which will continue throughout the story.

Bill and Sam take the boy to a cave in the mountains. While there, he sticks two buzzard tail feathers in his hair and coins himself Red Chief. He tells Bill that he will scalp him at dawn. He tells Sam that he will broil him on the stake. During supper, the men realize that the boy will give them problems. Johnny is having so much fun that he does not want to go home. At daybreak, Sam wakes to Bill's screams. Johnny is on sitting on Bill's chest, attempting to scalp him. Sam claims that from this moment on, Bill's spirit is broken.

Sam leaves Bill and Johnny in the cave and goes down to the little mountain town to see any news about Johnny's kidnapping. There is none. When Sam returns to the camp, Johnny threatens to smash Bill with a large rock. It seems that when Sam was away, Johnny put a hot boiled potato down Bill's back and smashed it with his foot. In retaliation, Bill boxed Johnny in the ears. Johnny is so upset with Bill that he takes a slingshot and launches a rock at him the size of an egg. The stone hits Bill behind the left ear, causing him to fall in the fire across a frying pan of hot water. Sam tells Johnny that they will take him home if he doesn't behave.

Sam and Bill write the ransom note to Johnny's father, Ebenezer. They agreed to ask for 1,500 dollars instead of the 2,000 they initially agreed to because Johnny was such a handful. However,

the men could not be confident that the father would pay the whole 2,000 dollars. Sam once again leaves Johnny with Bill while he goes down to Popular Cove to see if there has been any news of the boys kidnapping. As there is news of the kidnapping, Sam mails the letter, which he is assured will reach Summit that day. When Sam returns to the cave, he finds Bill walking dejectedly and Johnny following sneakily behind him. Bill tells Sam that he let Johnny go because he could no longer take Johnny's abuse anymore. Johnny rode him like a horse, fed him sand, and bit him on his hands. Sam asks Bill if he has any heart conditions in his family, then tells him that Johnny is behind him.

The men receive a return letter from Ebenezer stating that they would take Johnny off his hands if they brought him home and paid him 250 dollars. At midnight, the men knock on Ebenezer's door to return the boy and pay the "ransom". Johnny does not want to leave Bill and Sam, so they run away from the house while Ebenezer holds back his son.

Analysis of Themes

Taking the Easy Way Out

The overall message in *The Ransom of Red Chief* is to avoid taking the easy way out. The men kidnapped are career criminals who try to make quick money by kidnapping the young son of a wealthy man. However, the joke is on them when the boy ends up being much more than they bargained for. Not only does Johnny abuse the men relentlessly, but they also end up paying the boy's father to return him. Taking the easy way out ended up in punishment.

The Ransom of Red Chief has many overarching themes. A theme is a central message or topic of a story. For example, the theme of justice is present throughout the story. Though the kidnappers are never charged with the kidnapping of Johnny, there is justice in that Johnny tormented them throughout the story. The theme of hubris is also present throughout. The kidnappers are overconfident with their ability to kidnap Johnny and receive ransom for him. This hubris will lead to their downfall. Finally, there is a theme of violence present throughout the story which directly relates to the conflict between Johnny and Bill.

Criminality

Sam and Bill have decided that a kidnapping is an excellent way to turn a quick profit, but they don't stop to take into account the challenges they will face with a child. The first sight of Johnny involves the boy throwing rocks at a kitten. Clearly, he is not the gentle lamb they are planning for. When Johnny hits Bill square in the eye with a piece of brick, it might have been a good time to adjust the plan, but you know, hindsight is always 20/20.

Justice and Judgment

This is a story about goofy and incompetent criminals making a plan that is bound to fail due to their fundamental misunderstanding of the situation they are crafting for themselves. We return again to the word "schadenfreude" and our love of watching those who rebel against societal order getting what they deserve. That's the fundamental attraction to poetic justice. Criminals threaten the social order, but when victim isn't what they were expecting, said criminals end up humiliated and defeated. This concept ties very closely into the aforementioned concept of the folly of a plan.

Dreams, Hopes and Plans

So many errors in life can be attributed to the human folly of assumption—our ability to postulate outcomes that have not occurred in situations we have not experienced. This remarkable ability is the driving force behind complete human failure in this story. Sam and Bill fail so completely because their grasp of how the world works just doesn't hold true. The realities of their situation quickly become unmanageable, and their failure to adapt to reality ultimately costs them a bit of Bill's sanity and two hundred and fifty dollars cash.

Violence

In a story about what happens after a kidnapping, one might expect at least some level of violence. The beautiful thing about our story is that the violence concerned is not at all what one might expect. Sam and Bill are criminals, but clearly not hardened, as they can't really seem to believe the violence being inflicted upon them at the hands of their victim. The violence in this story leads to emotional turmoil—the emotional turmoil of the kidnapers, not that of their so called victim.