

STORIES

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ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor

By **ROBERT
STEPHENS**



HAWK **in the sunlight**

IT WAS still dark when Billy Young heard Doc Cummings' Ford go by out on the road, heading for the Clayton ranch and going fast. Billy lay rigid in his bed, feeling a sick dread rise in his throat. It had finally come. They had been saying for days that old Jim Clayton was going to die,

but Billy hadn't really believed it till now, hearing the doctor's car race through the dawn stillness. Jim Clayton would die, and Billy would be alone.

He got up and pulled on his jeans, shivering at the cold touch of the rivets against his bare flesh, and went downstairs in his

He was about to lose the best friend he'd

ever had, and find a new one: self respect

stocking feet so as not to wake Cal Durham. Cal would be mad when he found Billy had gone without doing the milking. Billy could imagine him saying to Emma, "It's the Indian in him. We oughtn't to have taken him in. Should have known you can't depend on a halfbreed."

Billy went out by the kitchen door, letting it close softly behind him. He stood for a moment on the steps, watching the hard, bright stars of the high country, and breathing the still air veined with the smells of grass and pines and distant snow. Then he caught up a horse and took the short-cut across Two Sleep Creek to the Clayton ranch. He let the horse pick the familiar trail, and after a few minutes he could hear the creek, like a party of people talking in soft, excited voices. At the ford he stopped to let the horse drink, and listening to the noise of the creek he remembered that it was just here, a year ago, that he had told Jim Clayton about his trouble.

Clayton had been showing him how to shoot the old muzzle-loading Hawken rifle, and talking about maybe going up to Windy Knob some day to shoot the grizzly that lived there. It was the last grizzly in this part of the country, and the old man had wanted to hunt him before the city people came and ganged up on him with their shiny automatic rifles.

Billy hadn't cared about the grizzly. All that morning they had been calling him "Injun" at school. He had finally blurted it all out to the old man, sobbing.

"I wish I wasn't a halfbreed," he had shouted, his eyes stinging with angry tears. "Cal Durham says breeds are shiftless and mean—and yellow!" He stopped then, shaking and ashamed, and covered his face with his hands.

JIM CLAYTON'S voice came quiet and gentle as leaves drifting on the smoky winds of autumn. "Folks mean you no harm," Jim said. "If a halfbreed's a man, he's as good as anybody else and people know it. But he's got to grow up quicker than other boys, seems like."

Billy said, "What do I do to be a man?"
"Why, it'll come sure enough," Clayton

said, smiling. "There's been others in your fix that've made out fine."

Since then Billy had thought a lot about what it meant to be a man, and he had hoped somehow to learn it from Jim Clayton. But now Jim was dying, and Billy was alone.

He shook his head violently and urged the horse into the creek, and when it scrambled up the farther bank he saw the peaks of the Tetons dark against the violet sky and then the yellow lamplight in the windows of the log ranch house. In front of the dark mass of the house he could see cars with a light rime of frost on their tops. The old man's relatives, come to wait for him to die.

Billy slid down from the horse and went to the door. He opened it and shivered a little in the sudden warmth, not looking at the faces that turned toward him.

Across the room near the stone fireplace the old man lay in his heavy oak bed, his sunken eyes shadowed by the heavy brows. Doc Cummings sat hunched forward on a straight chair by the bed, his hands hanging between his knees, seeming to doze. Billy was glad Cummings was there. Everybody said he was a fine doctor, and how lucky it was that he'd come back to the mountains. He walked to the foot of the bed, hearing the low hum of voices murmuring that it must be a blow to the boy . . . like a father to him . . . poor, halfbreed orphan . . .

The doctor looked up at Billy and nodded. He was a broad-shouldered, powerful man with a hooked nose and a dark, brooding face. "It may be he won't know you," the doctor said.

Billy nodded and leaned forward over the foot of the bed. "Jim!" he called softly.

The old man turned his head slightly. The sunken eyes glowed in the yellow face made yellower by the lamplight. He began to speak, and Billy strained to catch the indistinct words. The old man was living the past, talking of beaver streams and forgotten caches along the Snake and the Siskadou. The dark suited men and women in the room coughed and shifted uncomfortably as the old man talked of the tumbling green and white water of the high country streams, and the buffalo that had been a mighty thun-

der over the land, and of the great bear, Old Ephraim, the terrible grizzly.

Clayton broke off suddenly, and Billy's hands tightened on the polished oak of the bed. Doc Cummings put his fingers lightly on the almost fleshless wrist.

The dying man roused and sighed deeply. He said, "If I had me some grizzly fat, now. . . ." His voice was clear and strong and he glanced around the room, seeming to recognize faces. "With bear fat I might make me some medicine and maybe so get well." Billy felt his heart beating slow and heavy. The old man was looking directly into his eyes.

Billy said, "Jim!" but the old eyes veiled over and Clayton was still except for the faint rising and falling of his chest under the blankets.

Billy looked at the doctor and whispered, "How long?"

"Can't tell," Cummings said. "Maybe a day. Maybe an hour."

OUTSIDE the sky had lightened, paling the glow of the lamps. A pan clanged in the kitchen and Billy could smell bacon frying. He left the bed and went outside.

Against the blue and silver of the east the mountains stood out sharply, hung with the mists of morning. Billy stared at the mountains, thinking. The old man had recognized him, if only for an instant. And he'd asked for grizzly fat. The old man's mind must have been wandering when he said that, for if Doc Cummings' medicines wouldn't help, bear fat wasn't likely to. But Jim had asked, and Jim was the only friend he'd ever had. The grizzly was waiting up there on Windy Knob and Billy knew what he had to do.

He thought first of going home to get Cal's thirty-thirty rifle, but he knew there'd be no use trying that. He went around the house to the barn and tried the door to Clayton's gear shed. It was unlocked, and Billy walked in.

The Hawken rifle stood in its place in the corner, in an oiled leather scabbard, and near it hung the old man's possible sack with bullets and powder and patches.

Billy took the sack and the gun and went

back around the house, ducking whenever he passed a window. He tied the rifle in its scabbard to his saddle and slung the sack over his shoulder. It would be nice to have a repeater, he thought, but anyway, maybe the old muzzle loader would be better for this job. Its long, heavy, fifty caliber slug hit pretty hard. He squinted against the first misty slantings of the sun and swung into the saddle.

The sun was out strong, glowing in the red and gold of the cottonwoods and aspens as Billy started up the steep part of the trail. The climbing was hard and steady, and every few minutes he stopped to let the horse blow. After an hour's climb the trail levelled off and Billy came out on a sage-dotted plain, swept by a cold, steady wind. In the distance he could see the silhouette of Windy Knob.

He got down from the horse and took the rifle from its scabbard. He squatted with his back against a juniper and rummaged through the buckskin sack. He measured black powder from the flask, adding a little for good measure; the old man always said this rifle would stand a right smart of powder. He felt in the bag and found a heavy slug, greasy to the touch. He fitted the patch and stood up to ram the bullet home against the charge. A cloud drifted across the sun and Billy felt the chill of the wind cut through his jacket. He looked out over the plain to the eroded butte that was Windy Knob, where the great bear lived.

"Old Ephraim," he said aloud. He thought of the tales of grizzlies that the old man had told him, and felt fear sudden and heavy, like a cold stone in his stomach. He wet his lips with his tongue. This was a crazy thing to do. Shooting a bear wouldn't help Jim Clayton, and it was crazy to hunt grizzly with an old iron-barrelled muzzle loader. The round dome of Windy Knob took on a sudden menace, and Billy swallowed against the salt-and-metal taste in his mouth. He looked at the Knob for a long time and finally turned his back on it.

He turned to face Doc Cummings. The doctor stood beside one of the Clayton saddle horses, solid and massive, watching Billy.

"Figured I'd catch you about here," Doc said.

Billy said, "You'd ought to be with Jim. What do you want here?"

Cummings said, "I've come to take you back. All bears are dangerous, and grizzlies are just plain poison. Let's be moving."

Billy looked at Windy Knob in the distance and back at Doc. "No," he said. "Jim said he wanted bear fat. I aim to get him some."

"It won't help," Doc said. "You know that. He's dying and bear fat won't help."

"I've got to do it," Billy said. "Jim wants it." He looked at the ground and said, "I'll tell you something. Jim says I'm as good as any other man, even if I am a halfbreed. Nobody but Jim ever told me that."

Doc Cummings' face went cold and harsh. "You get on your horse," he said. "We're going back." He came toward Billy.

Billy half swung the Hawken's muzzle toward Cummings.

He said, "Get back, Doc."

The doctor stood motionless, with the wind ruffling his black hair, watching Billy. "I've got to do it," Billy said.

DOC CUMMINGS walked back to his horse and rested his hand on a saddle-bag. "Maybe I figured that," he said. "Maybe I figured you wouldn't come back. So. . . ." He opened the bag and took out a long knife. He held it out to Billy, handle forward. "Take it. It's the best steel."

Billy took the knife and saw that the handle was worked in beads, Indian design. The figure of an Indian god was outlined in pieces of turquoise.

"Thanks," Billy said.

Cummings got on his horse and glanced out toward Windy Knob. Then he rode to the edge of the plain and disappeared with the slant of the trail. Billy put the knife in his belt and slid the loaded Hawken back into the scabbard. He mounted and rode toward Windy Knob.

Out on the plain the traveling was easy until the trail began to thread through rough country broken by ravines and ridges. The trail took all Billy's attention and he did not

notice how close he was to the Knob until he came over the last ridge and found himself almost in the shadow of the butte. Here the air was still, and after the constant rush of the wind the silence pressed against his eardrums.

Beyond the shoulder of the butte, a hundred yards away, he saw the mouth of a box canyon. It was choked with brush, but a trail of sorts led into it.

He tied his horse securely a few yards from the entrance to the canyon and took the Hawken rifle from its scabbard. A cloud of tiny flies whined in his ears and he brushed at them impatiently. He pushed forward into the canyon, parting the brush with the rifle barrel. He had gone only a few steps when his foot struck something hard. He looked down and saw a bone, the sun-whitened leg bone of some large animal. Sweat dropped from his armpits and ran cold down his sides. He struck at the flies that whined in his ears and went on, coming suddenly into a small clearing.

Then he saw the den, a black slash in the rock wall of the canyon. There were many bones scattered around the opening, in a rough semicircle, some old and bleached, others with hide and sinew still clinging to them.

Billy began to back away, licking his lips, and all the old man had ever told him about grizzlies tumbled together in his mind, stories of men disembowelled by one careless sweep of a massive paw. *Quick they are, as cats, in spite of being so big . . . once you've heard that growl you won't never forget it—Wagh! . . . and scared of nothin', nothin' at all.*

Billy stared at the black entrance of the den and felt terror grip him, terror like nothing he had ever known.

He turned and ran, letting the brush whip his face and tear at his jacket. He reached the mouth of the canyon and stopped, sobbing for breath and clutching the rifle so hard his hand ached.

AS HIS breath returned the panic ebbed away, and he knew he would have to go back into the canyon. He knew surely and clearly that it was the only thing that mat-

tered. He had to go back. His fingers touched the beaded handle of the knife at his belt. Even Doc had realized he had to kill that bear. It didn't matter now whether it was crazy or not, or whether it would help Jim, or even if he himself got killed trying. He had to go back.

He clenched his teeth hard and started back for the black cave and the circle of bleached bones. He had gone only part of the way when the sound came from behind him, a thin, high, animal scream of terror, and after it a snarl like nothing he had ever imagined. Billy whirled around and began to run toward the sound, holding the rifle in front of him. When he rounded the corner of the butte he stopped, his stomach shrinking and the blood flowing away from his arms, leaving them numb. He looked at the grizzly and began to tremble, unable to move.

The bear had risen on its haunches over the carcass of a horse, the horse Doc had been riding. It was gray, almost white. Foamy blood dripped from the enormous jaws. The great head swung slowly from side to side, testing the wind.

The Hawken rifle had become almost too heavy to hold. Billy tried to lift it, forcing his muscles to obey. He saw Doc Cummings come around a big rock, on the run. The bear dropped on all fours and Doc began to back away.

It flashed through Billy's mind that Doc had no gun, not even a knife now.

The grizzly sprang over the carcass of the horse, lightly, with immense and terrible ease, and moved toward Cummings.

"Bear!" Billy screamed. "Old Grizzly Bear! Here!"

He watched, as in a dream, as the great bear slowed and swung heavily toward him. It came in a lumbering rush, huge beyond belief, fangs glistening in the bloody mouth.

Billy held the rifle against his shoulder and swung it level with the grizzly's chest. Through the roaring in his ears he could hear Doc Cummings' hoarse shouts. Then, as he tried to steady the gun he could hear his own voice, screaming. Snarling, the grizzly rose on its hind legs and reached out. Billy jerked the rifle upward and pulled

the trigger. The Hawken slammed back hard against his shoulder. The bear twisted and seemed to hang for an instant in the billowing white smoke, immense against the peaks and the sky.

Billy stumbled back, raising the gun above his head with both hands. He threw it at the blood-smeared jaws, but the bear caught it with a sweep of its paw and smashed it against a rock. Billy tried to turn and run, conscious of Doc Cummings somewhere near him. A hammer blow knocked him sideways and threw him against the ground. He kicked out and threw his arms over his face as claws ripped at him. Automatically his hand moved to the knife at his belt. He saw Doc Cummings come at the bear from the side, striking with a rock clenched in his hand. He got to his feet as Doc stumbled and fell backward. The bear sank on its haunches, bellowing and reaching out for Doc.

Billy moved forward, his feet feeling light, propelled by something beyond himself, deafened by the rasping continuous roar of the bear.

Blood streamed down over his face, half blinding him as he yelled and raised the long knife. He plunged the knife into the shaggy neck and the rank smell of the grizzly came strong in his nostrils. The bear moved convulsively, knocking Billy back and wrenching the knife from his hand. It sank slowly forward, coughing, and rolled on its side.

Billy crawled to it and jerked the knife loose, his own blood spilling from his face to mingle with the great bear's blood.

"Old Grizzly Bear," Billy said, "Old Grandfather Bear."

DOC CUMMINGS was beside him now, gripping his shoulder and lifting him to his feet. He began to retch violently and Doc led him away from the rank, sickening smell of the bear and made him lie down.

"Doc," Billy said. "You trailed me." He raised the long knife and tried to get up. "Got to cut off some fat for Jim. Jim wants that fat."

"Jim's dead," Cummings said, his voice hard. "Died just after you left." He pushed

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HAWK IN THE SUNLIGHT

(Concluded from page 88)

Billy down, gently, and went to get bandages from the bag that was still strapped to the mangled carcass of his horse.

Old Jim. Billy closed his eyes. He felt Doc press a bandage against his forehead and said, "Old Jim. Jim told me it's no matter if you're a breed, just so you're a man. Half-breed's as good as anybody then."

"I know," Cummings said. "I know all about halfbreeds."

Billy opened his eyes and saw the harsh, stern face of the doctor against the open sky. He saw Cummings' face as though for the first time and said, "You?"

Billy saw the straight, dark hair, and the strong, clean angles of the cheekbones and

the hawklike nose over the hard, drawn-down mouth. He raised the knife that he still held and looked at the beaded handle with its figure of the Indian god.

"All that about breeds," Doc said, "Jim Clayton told me the same thing. Thirty years ago." He began to strip tape from a roll.

Billy Young breathed deeply and looked up past Doc's face at the sky. He watched a hawk wheel and stagger against the wind, high up, and saw its white under-wing flash in the high sunlight, and he knew now that he had done it, what the old man had wanted of him, and that what he had wanted of Jim Clayton he had already learned.