

JO—THE FLOWER KILLER



BIG MAC found the boy wandering about the lodges of a deserted camp in the Cree country. An epidemic of diphtheria had broken out among the Indians some time before, and Big Mac was returning to the fort after two months of heroic service. So he brought the young Indian back with

him, and they called him "Jo." By the time the pneumonia struck Big Mac's name off the roll-call that long, severe winter, Jo was the particular pride of Division "E."

For in all the Great Lone Land, even from the Sweet Grass Hills to the far country of Sleeping Waters; in the lodges of the plain-tribes and the great hill-land towards the setting sun, were not many scouts like Jo. The boy was born to it. The wild blood of his warlike ancestors ran in his veins, and from the broad, free sweep of the prairies voices talked to him and silenced his moccasins. And to them he listened always as they crouched in the wild plain-grasses where the spirits of the cloud-children raced in the yellow sunshine.

More than that, had his mother not been the proudest in all the lodges of the Blackfeet because of his skill with bow and arrow? Had not that skill earned him a place among the braves in the big war-party that had gone away on the foray into the country of the hostile Crees? Only twelve summers he could tell when he had fallen into the hands of the victorious Crees, and he could sever the prairie flowers from their stems with unerring accuracy; since then he had learned to use the white man's gun with equal skill.

They thought a lot of Jo at the fort. More than once had the superintendent's report to the commissioner made mention of the young Indian-tracker; for on more than one occasion he had lent valuable service to the force, and such service counted for much in those days, when the Royal North-West Mounted Police were fewer in numbers, and the mighty respect for the intrepidity of these men who wore the Big White Woman's red coats was in the making, and not all the Indian chiefs had signed the Great Treaty.

And Jo? He had plenty of tobacco always and hot brown tea-liquor to drink, and what these men said they would do or would not do, that they did or did not do—always was it so. Their medicine was good medicine. They were not like the other white men who sold the fire-water; these white men helped the red men if the red men obeyed the laws of the Big White Mother. That was all they asked. And the Big White Mother's laws were good laws—always was it so.

Thus Jo smoked good tobacco and Jo drank good tea and Jo's muscles played like wires beneath the dark of his skin as he grew. And if, as he grew, strange new voices began to call to him faintly from the broad, free sweep of the prairies, and if at times the spirits of the dead, that ever whisper at night-time beneath the quiet stars, began to speak vague mysteries from out of the illimitable, it, too, was only a part of his growing, though it was a part which was hard to understand. He became restless; for as long as two moons there had been nothing to call him away to the far trails.

Then one day a distant patrol sent word to the fort that "Running Wolf," a notoriously bad Indian even for a Blackfoot, had escaped from the custody of the Mounted Police at Nine-Mile-Lake, and had shot three times at an officer, wounding him in the arm. He had been arrested in the first place for horse-stealing, and was known to the police as one of the worst characters with whom they had to deal.

"The ould divil!" growled Sergeant O'Leary, familiarly known as "Irish." "The ould divil!" Sergeant O'Leary had pursued and tracked his man for nearly a week before he got him the last time, and had by no means forgotten the chase. "The ould divil!" He yanked at his boots and went out to saddle his horse.

Jo's wiry little cayuse was already standing just outside the barracks, patiently waiting where the braided horse-hair halter-rein hung to the ground in front of his nose. Jo himself was squatting not far away, smoking stolidly and gazing off westward where the long twilight was waning in the sky behind the swell of the plain. If he was eager to be off there was nothing to indicate it; he was ready if he were wanted, that was all.

"Arrah! Joey, darlint, but it's the foine Injun ye be!" chuckled Sergeant O'Leary as he swung by on his way to the stables, "If they was on'y all loike

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you, Joey, faith there'd be more o' hivin an' less o' hell on the perairies, beloike. The ould divil!"

They rode away from the fort, a little later, into the gathering dusk, with the chuk-will-widows calling and a nighthawk crying overhead and the darkness settling silently down on the reaches of the plain.

On the morning of the second day they struck the trail of Running Wolf. It was at least forty-eight hours old, and they rode hard for a day and a half before the signs began to freshen. It was evident the fugitive had a companion, a young squaw he had probably persuaded to elope with him, O'Leary concluded. They pressed on without delay till a few hours before sundown. The chase had led them into a broken country and they were following cautiously along a wooded river-bottom when a gun went off unexpectedly not a hundred yards away.

Putting spurs to his horse, O'Leary dashed off in the direction from which the shot came with Jo close at his heels. Up the bank on the right and swish into the bushes, and they drew rein sharply at the edge of a little glade. Running Wolf was standing in the centre of it, rifle in one hand, a newly-killed prairie chicken in the other. Behind him a few paces a young squaw crouched in fear.

For just an instant the four stood there eyeing each other. The fugitive's evil features were twisted with anger and hate. He raised one hand threateningly and waved them away. O'Leary laughed.

"The ould divil!" he chuckled. "Faith, Joey, just be after tellin' him he moight as well be comin' along without wan worrud, back to the Nine-Mile."

The young scout had scarcely got the words out of his mouth before the outlaw replied:

"Tell him if he moves one step I will kill him."

Instantly the younger Indian's gun was at his shoulder.

Sergeant O'Leary laughed again, and motioned to Jo to lower the weapon; they were there to arrest their man, not to kill him. O'Leary was still sitting there jauntily on his horse at the edge of the bushes; he had not so much as undone the holster of his revolver. It was the bold way of the Mounted Police in the face of danger such as this; the very rashness of their daring in executing their duty had often been the means of bringing them out of many a tight hole.

The sergeant's command followed sharp, with a new note of sternness.

"Tell him to lay down his rifle," he said.

Even as he spoke, he rode deliberately forward upon the aimed muzzle of the Blackfoot's weapon. For no Mounted Policeman had ever yet desisted from the execution of his duty at the bidding of an armed Indian—or any other man, and O'Leary, the three-barred chevron on his sleeve, had no intention of breaking that splendid tradition of the force.

Really bad Indian as he was, Running Wolf hesitated for an instant to take the life of such a fearless man. The officer was within three paces of him before he mustered the courage to fire. But the aim was deadly.

While the sergeant was yet rolling from his horse the outlaw whirled like lightning, throwing the lever of his repeater, the gun still at his shoulder. Then he slowly lowered it.

"Gy-yah!" he grunted.

Most inexplicable was the thing that had happened. The young Indian, Jo, had vanished.

The moon was late on the rise that night. The whip-poor-will that haunted the edge of the water-course had long been crying before the lop-sided bit of silver was high enough to filter through the leafage of the lonesome glade into broken patches of white light. They lay in mottles along the sward, and in the place of deepest shadow a single ray gleamed brightly against something in the grass. Now and then the leaves stirred uneasily in the vagrant airs that penetrated there, and the ghostly shadows moved to and fro along the grass. And always far away somewhere, clear though faint, the whip-poor-will was calling—calling mournfully.

It was thus when the bushes parted cautiously and wary eyes looked into the little glade. It was some time before the dark shadow behind them slunk into the open and the moonlight played upon the sinewy limbs of a young Indian. His crouching body lent itself to the movements of an unspeakable fear, and in his eyes was the glitter of it. This haunted, shrinking creature looked not like he in whose veins ran the wild blood of warlike ancestors, and who

listened to the voices that crouched in the wild plain-grasses—the young scout that was called Jo. Yet it was Jo.

Once in the open space, he lost no time in what he was about, but glided over to the place of deepest shadow where the single ray gleamed brightly against the object in the grass. The Indian paused for one brief instant; the next he was moving swiftly into the cover of the leaves, and behind him dragged the long, dark thing he sought. The moonlight followed after, glinting on its spurs. Then they were gone, and only the white patches mottled the little glade where the ghostly shadows moved so restlessly to and fro along the grass.

Jo's horse was down in the river-bottom. He lifted the body of Sergeant O'Leary across the pony's back and set out swiftly into the night. A night and a day, and yet another night he travelled, pushing on without a halt till the first level rays of the second day's sun shone white on the buildings of the fort, clustering in the distance. Thus they came back.

Silently, swiftly, without explanation, he led his horse through the gate, hitched him outside the bunk-house, and sought the superintendent. Behind closed doors he told him, and the superintendent listened, his weather-browned face drawn, his jaw set tight. He was very close to his men, this officer with the indomitable chin and the steel in his eye, and things like this always hurt him. It was the hazard to which they were all exposed; the men accepted it as such, and knew their duty without reckoning costs. But it came hard to lose a man like Sergeant O'Leary by the hand of a renegade Redskin, and there was small satisfaction even in the knowledge that the outlaw had immediately paid the forfeit of his life for the crime—What!

"The heap big afraid, heem jump into Jo's feet," explained the young Indian, simply. "Jo go get heem now."

He turned and glided to the door.

"Eh? What's that? The—the—"

"Jo go get heem now."

"Jo!" thundered the superintendent.

But the room was empty.

Outside, Jo made swift preparations for departure. The news had spread like wildfire through the fort, and the men crowded together in angry groups and swore deep and long. Hither and thither Jo moved quietly. He had no word to say.

"Hey, men!" called Corporal Haines, waving a hand high over his head. "What d'you think! Jo, here, let the beggar git clean away! Darn your red hide —"

"Shut up, Haines!" growled the gruff voice of old Jerry Davis.

He had seen the quick flash that had leapt for a brief instant into the Indian's eyes where he stood by the cayuse. Davis had been trapper and scout for many years, and he knew many things. He went over and spoke to Jo.

Not half an hour elapsed from the time the Indian had ridden into the fort until he was riding away from it with face turned resolutely to the never-ending stretch of plain. And even as the wiry little pony was dipping out of sight beyond the nearest swell, the bugler of E Division back at the fort was sounding "boots-and-saddles."

Three weeks went by—three weeks in which O'Leary's comrades, disregarding sleepless nights and inclement weather, thoroughly patrolled the country. But the renegade, Running Wolf, was still at large. The affair had happened at a very bad season, as the Indians on the reserves in the vicinity had just scattered out for their autumn hunt over a large extent of broken country. Besides that, many of the Indians were more or less related to the outlaw, and their sympathies rendered any information they might give of a very doubtful character.

Two detachments, outfitted for several months, were placed out on either side of the hunting-grounds, and throughout the length and breadth of the great North-West the red-coated comrades of Sergeant O'Leary rode and drove and watched untiringly. Officers, non-commissioned officers, and men alike were determined not to be balked in their efforts; but the weeks began to lengthen into months and still did the fugitive roam at liberty.

But there was no talk of abandoning the hunt. Not only had the law been flagrantly outraged, but the prestige of the force was at stake; and though neither Indians nor half-breeds seemed to know anything of Running Wolf or his whereabouts, the men who sought him continued to seek him, their muscles tense beneath the tan of their cheeks, and a light in their eyes that boded ill.

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