

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 15

“Then go we in, to know his embassy;
Which I could, with ready guess, declare,
Before the Frenchmen speak a word of it.”

—King Henry V

A few succeeding days were passed amid the privations, the uproar, and the dangers of the siege, which was vigorously pressed by a power, against whose approaches Munro possessed no competent means of resistance. It appeared as if Webb, with his army, which lay slumbering on the banks of the Hudson, had utterly forgotten the strait to which his countrymen were reduced. Montcalm had filled the woods of the portage with his savages, every yell and whoop from whom rang through the British encampment, chilling the hearts of men who were already but too much disposed to magnify the danger.

Not so, however, with the besieged. Animated by the words, and stimulated by the examples of their leaders, they had found their courage, and maintained their ancient reputation, with a zeal that did justice to the stern character of their commander. As if satisfied with the toil of marching through the wilderness to encounter his enemy, the French general, though of approved skill, had neglected to seize the adjacent mountains; whence the besieged might have been exterminated with impunity, and which, in the more modern warfare of the country,

would not have been neglected for a single hour. This sort of contempt for eminences, or rather dread of the labor of ascending them, might have been termed the besetting weakness of the warfare of the period. It originated in the simplicity of the Indian contests, in which, from the nature of the combats, and the density of the forests, fortresses were rare, and artillery next to useless. The carelessness engendered by these usages descended even to the war of the Revolution and lost the States the important fortress of Ticonderoga opening a way for the army of Burgoyne into what was then the bosom of the country. We look back at this ignorance, or infatuation, whichever it may be called, with wonder, knowing that the neglect of an eminence, whose difficulties, like those of Mount Defiance, have been so greatly exaggerated, would, at the present time, prove fatal to the reputation of the engineer who had planned the works at their base, or to that of the general whose lot it was to defend them.

The tourist, the valetudinarian, or the amateur of the beauties of nature, who, in the train of his four-in-hand, now rolls through the scenes we have attempted to describe, in quest of information, health, or pleasure, or floats steadily toward his object on those artificial waters which have sprung up under the administration of a statesman* who has dared to stake his political character on the hazardous issue, is not to suppose that his ancestors traversed those hills, or struggled with the same currents with equal facility. The transportation of a single heavy gun was often considered equal to a victory gained; if happily, the difficulties of the passage had not so far separated it from its necessary concomitant, the ammunition, as to render it no more than a useless tube of unwieldy iron.

(Note: Evidently the late De Witt Clinton, who died governor of New York in 1828.)

The evils of this state of things pressed heavily on the fortunes of the resolute Scotsman who now defended William Henry. Though his adversary neglected the hills, he had planted his batteries with judgment

on the plain, and caused them to be served with vigor and skill. Against this assault, the besieged could only oppose the imperfect and hasty preparations of a fortress in the wilderness.

It was in the afternoon of the fifth day of the siege, and the fourth of his own service in it, that Major Heyward profited by a parley that had just been beaten, by repairing to the ramparts of one of the water bastions, to breathe the cool air from the lake, and to take a survey of the progress of the siege. He was alone, if the solitary sentinel who paced the mound be excepted; for the artillerists had hastened also to profit by the temporary suspension of their arduous duties. The evening was delightfully calm, and the light air from the limpid water fresh and soothing. It seemed as if, with the termination of the roar of artillery and the plunging of shot, nature had also seized the moment to assume her mildest and most captivating form. The sun poured down his parting glory on the scene, without the oppression of those fierce rays that belong to the climate and the season. The mountains looked green, and fresh, and lovely, tempered with the milder light, or softened in shadow, as thin vapors floated between them and the sun. The numerous islands rested on the bosom of the Horican, some low and sunken, as if embedded in the waters, and others appearing to hover about the element, in little hillocks of green velvet; among which the fishermen of the beleaguering army peacefully rowed their skiffs, or floated at rest on the glassy mirror in quiet pursuit of their employment.

The scene was at once animated and still. All that pertained to nature was sweet, or simply grand; while those parts which depended on the temper and movements of man were lively and playful.

Two little spotless flags were abroad, the one on a salient angle of the fort, and the other on the advanced battery of the besiegers; emblems of the truth which existed, not only to the acts, but it would seem, also, to the enmity of the combatants.

Behind these again swung, heavily opening and closing in silken folds, the rival standards of England and France.

A hundred gay and thoughtless young Frenchmen were drawing a net to the pebbly beach, within dangerous proximity to the sullen but silent cannon of the fort, while the eastern mountain was sending back the loud shouts and gay merriment that attended their sport. Some were rushing eagerly to enjoy the aquatic games of the lake, and others were already toiling their way up the neighboring hills, with the restless curiosity of their nation. To all these sports and pursuits, those of the enemy who watched the besieged, and the besieged themselves, were, however, merely the idle though sympathizing spectators. Here and there a picket had, indeed, raised a song, or mingled in a dance, which had drawn the dusky savages around them, from their lairs in the forest. In short, everything wore rather the appearance of a day of pleasure, than of an hour stolen from the dangers and toil of a bloody and vindictive warfare.

Duncan had stood in a musing attitude, contemplating this scene a few minutes, when his eyes were directed to the glacis in front of the sally-port already mentioned, by the sounds of approaching footsteps. He walked to an angle of the bastion, and beheld the scout advancing, under the custody of a French officer, to the body of the fort. The countenance of Hawkeye was haggard and careworn, and his air dejected, as though he felt the deepest degradation at having fallen into the power of his enemies. He was without his favorite weapon, and his arms were even bound behind him with thongs, made of the skin of a deer. The arrival of flags to cover the messengers of summons, had occurred so often of late, that when Heyward first threw his careless glance on this group, he expected to see another of the officers of the enemy, charged with a similar office but the instant he recognized the tall person and still sturdy though downcast features of his friend, the woodsman, he started with surprise, and turned to descend from the bastion into the bosom of the work.

The sounds of other voices, however, caught his attention, and for a moment caused him to forget his purpose. At the inner angle of the mound he met the sisters, walking along the parapet, in search, like himself, of air and relief from confinement. They had not met from that painful moment when he deserted them on the plain, only to assure their safety. He had parted from them worn with care, and jaded with fatigue; he now saw them refreshed and blooming, though timid and anxious. Under such an inducement it will cause no surprise that the young man lost sight for a time, of other objects in order to address them. He was, however, anticipated by the voice of the ingenuous and youthful Alice.

“Ah! thou tyrant! thou recreant knight! he who abandons his damsels in the very lists,” she cried; “here have we been days, nay, ages, expecting you at our feet, imploring mercy and forgetfulness of your craven backsliding, or I should rather say, backrunning—for verily you fled in the manner that no stricken deer, as our worthy friend the scout would say, could equal!”

“You know that Alice means our thanks and our blessings,” added the graver and more thoughtful Cora. “In truth, we have a little wonder why you should so rigidly absent yourself from a place where the gratitude of the daughters might receive the support of a parent’s thanks.”

“Your father himself could tell you, that, though absent from your presence, I have not been altogether forgetful of your safety,” returned the young man; “the mastery of yonder village of huts,” pointing to the neighboring entrenched camp, “has been keenly disputed; and he who holds it is sure to be possessed of this fort, and that which it contains. My days and nights have all been passed there since we separated, because I thought that duty called me thither. But,” he added, with an air of chagrin, which he endeavored, though unsuccessfully, to conceal, “had I been aware that what I then believed a soldier’s conduct could be so construed, shame would have been added to the list of reasons.”

“Heyward! Duncan!” exclaimed Alice, bending forward to read his half-averted countenance, until a lock of her golden hair rested on her flushed cheek, and nearly concealed the tear that had started to her eye; “did I think this idle tongue of mine had pained you, I would silence it forever. Cora can say, if Cora would, how justly we have prized your services, and how deep—I had almost said, how fervent—is our gratitude.”

“And will Cora attest the truth of this?” cried Duncan, suffering the cloud to be chased from his countenance by a smile of open pleasure. “What says our graver sister? Will she find an excuse for the neglect of the knight in the duty of a soldier?”

Cora made no immediate answer, but turned her face toward the water, as if looking on the sheet of the Horican. When she did bend her dark eyes on the young man, they were yet filled with an expression of anguish that at once drove every thought but that of kind solicitude from his mind.

“You are not well, dearest Miss Munro!” he exclaimed; “we have trifled while you are in suffering!”

”’Tis nothing,” she answered, refusing his support with feminine reserve. “That I cannot see the sunny side of the picture of life, like this artless but ardent enthusiast,” she added, laying her hand lightly, but affectionately, on the arm of her sister, “is the penalty of experience, and, perhaps, the misfortune of my nature. See,” she continued, as if determined to shake off infirmity, in a sense of duty; “look around you, Major Heyward, and tell me what a prospect is this for the daughter of a soldier whose greatest happiness is his honor and his military renown.”

“Neither ought nor shall be tarnished by circumstances over which he has had no control,” Duncan warmly replied. “But your words recall me to my own duty. I go now to your gallant father, to hear his determination in matters of the last moment to the defense. God bless

you in every fortune, noble—Cora—I may and must call you.” She frankly gave him her hand, though her lip quivered, and her cheeks gradually became of ashly paleness. “In every fortune, I know you will be an ornament and honor to your sex. Alice, adieu”—his voice changed from admiration to tenderness—”adieu, Alice; we shall soon meet again; as conquerors, I trust, and amid rejoicings!”

Without waiting for an answer from either, the young man threw himself down the grassy steps of the bastion, and moving rapidly across the parade, he was quickly in the presence of their father. Munro was pacing his narrow apartment with a disturbed air and gigantic strides as Duncan entered.

“You have anticipated my wishes, Major Heyward,” he said; “I was about to request this favor.”

“I am sorry to see, sir, that the messenger I so warmly recommended has returned in custody of the French! I hope there is no reason to distrust his fidelity?”

“The fidelity of ‘The Long Rifle’ is well known to me,” returned Munro, “and is above suspicion; though his usual good fortune seems, at last, to have failed. Montcalm has got him, and with the accursed politeness of his nation, he has sent him in with a doleful tale, of ‘knowing how I valued the fellow, he could not think of retaining him.’ A Jesuitical way that, Major Duncan Heyward, of telling a man of his misfortunes!”

“But the general and his succor?”

“Did ye look to the south as ye entered, and could ye not see them?” said the old soldier, laughing bitterly.

“Hoot! hoot! you’re an impatient boy, sir, and cannot give the gentlemen leisure for their march!”

“They are coming, then? The scout has said as much?”

“When? and by what path? for the dunce has omitted to tell me this. There is a letter, it would seem, too; and that is the only agreeable part of the matter. For the customary attentions of your Marquis of Montcalm—I warrant me, Duncan, that he of Lothian would buy a dozen such marquises—but if the news of the letter were bad, the gentility of this French monsieur would certainly compel him to let us know it.”

“He keeps the letter, then, while he releases the messenger?”

“Ay, that does he, and all for the sake of what you call your ‘bonhommie’ I would venture, if the truth was known, the fellow’s grandfather taught the noble science of dancing.”

“But what says the scout? he has eyes and ears, and a tongue. What verbal report does he make?”

“Oh! sir, he is not wanting in natural organs, and he is free to tell all that he has seen and heard. The whole amount is this; there is a fort of his majesty’s on the banks of the Hudson, called Edward, in honor of his gracious highness of York, you’ll know; and it is well filled with armed men, as such a work should be.”

“But was there no movement, no signs of any intention to advance to our relief?”

“There were the morning and evening parades; and when one of the provincial loons—you’ll know, Duncan, you’re half a Scotsman yourself—when one of them dropped his powder over his porretch, if it touched the coals, it just burned!” Then, suddenly changing his bitter, ironical manner, to one more grave and thoughtful, he continued: “and yet there

might, and must be, something in that letter which it would be well to know!”

“Our decision should be speedy,” said Duncan, gladly availing himself of this change of humor, to press the more important objects of their interview; “I cannot conceal from you, sir, that the camp will not be much longer tenable; and I am sorry to add, that things appear no better in the fort; more than half the guns are bursted.”

“And how should it be otherwise? Some were fished from the bottom of the lake; some have been rusting in woods since the discovery of the country; and some were never guns at all—mere privateersmen’s playthings! Do you think, sir, you can have Woolwich Warren in the midst of a wilderness, three thousand miles from Great Britain?”

“The walls are crumbling about our ears, and provisions begin to fail us,” continued Heyward, without regarding the new burst of indignation; “even the men show signs of discontent and alarm.”

“Major Heyward,” said Munro, turning to his youthful associate with the dignity of his years and superior rank; “I should have served his majesty for half a century, and earned these gray hairs in vain, were I ignorant of all you say, and of the pressing nature of our circumstances; still, there is everything due to the honor of the king’s arms, and something to ourselves. While there is hope of succor, this fortress will I defend, though it be to be done with pebbles gathered on the lake shore. It is a sight of the letter, therefore, that we want, that we may know the intentions of the man the earl of Loudon has left among us as his substitute.”

“And can I be of service in the matter?”

“Sir, you can; the marquis of Montcalm has, in addition to his other civilities, invited me to a personal interview between the works and his

own camp; in order, as he says, to impart some additional information. Now, I think it would not be wise to show any undue solicitude to meet him, and I would employ you, an officer of rank, as my substitute; for it would but ill comport with the honor of Scotland to let it be said one of her gentlemen was outdone in civility by a native of any other country on earth.”

Without assuming the supererogatory task of entering into a discussion of the comparative merits of national courtesy, Duncan cheerfully assented to supply the place of the veteran in the approaching interview. A long and confidential communication now succeeded, during which the young man received some additional insight into his duty, from the experience and native acuteness of his commander, and then the former took his leave.

As Duncan could only act as the representative of the commandant of the fort, the ceremonies which should have accompanied a meeting between the heads of the adverse forces were, of course, dispensed with. The truce still existed, and with a roll and beat of the drum, and covered by a little white flag, Duncan left the sally-port, within ten minutes after his instructions were ended. He was received by the French officer in advance with the usual formalities, and immediately accompanied to a distant marquee of the renowned soldier who led the forces of France.

The general of the enemy received the youthful messenger, surrounded by his principal officers, and by a swarthy band of the native chiefs, who had followed him to the field, with the warriors of their several tribes. Heyward paused short, when, in glancing his eyes rapidly over the dark group of the latter, he beheld the malignant countenance of Magua, regarding him with the calm but sullen attention which marked the expression of that subtle savage. A slight exclamation of surprise even burst from the lips of the young man, but instantly, recollecting his errand, and the presence in which he stood, he suppressed every

appearance of emotion, and turned to the hostile leader, who had already advanced a step to receive him.

The marquis of Montcalm was, at the period of which we write, in the flower of his age, and, it may be added, in the zenith of his fortunes. But even in that enviable situation, he was affable, and distinguished as much for his attention to the forms of courtesy, as for that chivalrous courage which, only two short years afterward, induced him to throw away his life on the plains of Abraham. Duncan, in turning his eyes from the malign expression of Magua, suffered them to rest with pleasure on the smiling and polished features, and the noble military air, of the French general.

“Monsieur,” said the latter, “j’ai beaucoup de plaisir a—bah!—ou est cet interprete?”

“Je crois, monsieur, qu’il ne sear pas necessaire,” Heyward modestly replied; “je parle un peu francais.”

“Ah! j’en suis bien aise,” said Montcalm, taking Duncan familiarly by the arm, and leading him deep into the marquee, a little out of earshot; “je deteste ces fripons—la; on ne sait jamais sur quel pie on est avec eux. Eh, bien! monsieur,” he continued still speaking in French; “though I should have been proud of receiving your commandant, I am very happy that he has seen proper to employ an officer so distinguished, and who, I am sure, is so amiable, as yourself.”

Duncan bowed low, pleased with the compliment, in spite of a most heroic determination to suffer no artifice to allure him into forgetfulness of the interest of his prince; and Montcalm, after a pause of a moment, as if to collect his thoughts, proceeded:

“Your commandant is a brave man, and well qualified to repel my assault. Mais, monsieur, is it not time to begin to take more counsel of

humanity, and less of your courage? The one as strongly characterizes the hero as the other.”

“We consider the qualities as inseparable,” returned Duncan, smiling; “but while we find in the vigor of your excellency every motive to stimulate the one, we can, as yet, see no particular call for the exercise of the other.”

Montcalm, in his turn, slightly bowed, but it was with the air of a man too practised to remember the language of flattery. After musing a moment, he added:

“It is possible my glasses have deceived me, and that your works resist our cannon better than I had supposed. You know our force?”

“Our accounts vary,” said Duncan, carelessly; “the highest, however, has not exceeded twenty thousand men.”

The Frenchman bit his lip, and fastened his eyes keenly on the other as if to read his thoughts; then, with a readiness peculiar to himself, he continued, as if assenting to the truth of an enumeration which quite doubled his army:

“It is a poor compliment to the vigilance of us soldiers, monsieur, that, do what we will, we never can conceal our numbers. If it were to be done at all, one would believe it might succeed in these woods. Though you think it too soon to listen to the calls of humanity,” he added, smiling archly, “I may be permitted to believe that gallantry is not forgotten by one so young as yourself. The daughters of the commandant, I learn, have passed into the fort since it was invested?”

“It is true, monsieur; but, so far from weakening our efforts, they set us an example of courage in their own fortitude. Were nothing but resolution necessary to repel so accomplished a soldier as M. de

Montcalm, I would gladly trust the defense of William Henry to the elder of those ladies.”

“We have a wise ordinance in our Salique laws, which says, ‘The crown of France shall never degrade the lance to the distaff’,” said Montcalm, dryly, and with a little hauteur; but instantly adding, with his former frank and easy air: “as all the nobler qualities are hereditary, I can easily credit you; though, as I said before, courage has its limits, and humanity must not be forgotten. I trust, monsieur, you come authorized to treat for the surrender of the place?”

“Has your excellency found our defense so feeble as to believe the measure necessary?”

“I should be sorry to have the defense protracted in such a manner as to irritate my red friends there,” continued Montcalm, glancing his eyes at the group of grave and attentive Indians, without attending to the other’s questions; “I find it difficult, even now, to limit them to the usages of war.”

Heyward was silent; for a painful recollection of the dangers he had so recently escaped came over his mind, and recalled the images of those defenseless beings who had shared in all his sufferings.

“Ces messieurs—la,” said Montcalm, following up the advantage which he conceived he had gained, “are most formidable when baffled; and it is unnecessary to tell you with what difficulty they are restrained in their anger. Eh bien, monsieur! shall we speak of the terms?”

“I fear your excellency has been deceived as to the strength of William Henry, and the resources of its garrison!”

“I have not sat down before Quebec, but an earthen work, that is defended by twenty—three hundred gallant men,” was the laconic reply.

“Our mounds are earthen, certainly—nor are they seated on the rocks of Cape Diamond; but they stand on that shore which proved so destructive to Dieskau and his army. There is also a powerful force within a few hours’ march of us, which we account upon as a part of our means.”

“Some six or eight thousand men,” returned Montcalm, with much apparent indifference, “whom their leader wisely judges to be safer in their works than in the field.”

It was now Heyward’s turn to bite his lip with vexation as the other so coolly alluded to a force which the young man knew to be overrated. Both mused a little while in silence, when Montcalm renewed the conversation, in a way that showed he believed the visit of his guest was solely to propose terms of capitulation. On the other hand, Heyward began to throw sundry inducements in the way of the French general, to betray the discoveries he had made through the intercepted letter. The artifice of neither, however, succeeded; and after a protracted and fruitless interview, Duncan took his leave, favorably impressed with an opinion of the courtesy and talents of the enemy’s captain, but as ignorant of what he came to learn as when he arrived. Montcalm followed him as far as the entrance of the marquee, renewing his invitations to the commandant of the fort to give him an immediate meeting in the open ground between the two armies.

There they separated, and Duncan returned to the advanced post of the French, accompanied as before; whence he instantly proceeded to the fort, and to the quarters of his own commander.