

The Last of the Mohicans

By

James Fenimore Cooper

Chapter 16

EDG.—Before you fight the battle ope this letter.”

—Lear

Major Heyward found Munro attended only by his daughters. Alice sat upon his knee, parting the gray hairs on the forehead of the old man with her delicate fingers; and whenever he affected to frown on her trifling, appeasing his assumed anger by pressing her ruby lips fondly on his wrinkled brow. Cora was seated nigh them, a calm and amused looker-on; regarding the wayward movements of her more youthful sister with that species of maternal fondness which characterized her love for Alice. Not only the dangers through which they had passed, but those which still impended above them, appeared to be momentarily forgotten, in the soothing indulgence of such a family meeting. It seemed as if they had profited by the short truce, to devote an instant to the purest and best affection; the daughters forgetting their fears, and the veteran his cares, in the security of the moment. Of this scene, Duncan, who, in his eagerness to report his arrival, had entered unannounced, stood many moments an unobserved and a delighted spectator. But the quick and dancing eyes of Alice soon caught a glimpse of his figure reflected from a glass, and she sprang blushing from her father's knee, exclaiming aloud:

“Major Heyward!”

“What of the lad?” demanded her father; “I have sent him to crack a little with the Frenchman. Ha, sir, you are young, and you’re nimble! Away with you, ye baggage; as if there were not troubles enough for a soldier, without having his camp filled with such prattling hussies as yourself!”

Alice laughingly followed her sister, who instantly led the way from an apartment where she perceived their presence was no longer desirable. Munro, instead of demanding the result of the young man’s mission, paced the room for a few moments, with his hands behind his back, and his head inclined toward the floor, like a man lost in thought. At length he raised his eyes, glistening with a father’s fondness, and exclaimed:

“They are a pair of excellent girls, Heyward, and such as any one may boast of.”

“You are not now to learn my opinion of your daughters, Colonel Munro.”

“True, lad, true,” interrupted the impatient old man; “you were about opening your mind more fully on that matter the day you got in, but I did not think it becoming in an old soldier to be talking of nuptial blessings and wedding jokes when the enemies of his king were likely to be unbidden guests at the feast. But I was wrong, Duncan, boy, I was wrong there; and I am now ready to hear what you have to say.”

“Notwithstanding the pleasure your assurance gives me, dear sir, I have just now, a message from Montcalm—”

“Let the Frenchman and all his host go to the devil, sir!” exclaimed the hasty veteran. “He is not yet master of William Henry, nor shall he ever be, provided Webb proves himself the man he should. No, sir, thank Heaven we are not yet in such a strait that it can be said Munro is too much pressed to discharge the little domestic duties of his own family.

Your mother was the only child of my bosom friend, Duncan; and I'll just give you a hearing, though all the knights of St. Louis were in a body at the sally-port, with the French saint at their head, crying to speak a word under favor. A pretty degree of knighthood, sir, is that which can be bought with sugar hogsheads! and then your twopenny marquises. The thistle is the order for dignity and antiquity; the veritable 'nemo me impune lacessit' of chivalry. Ye had ancestors in that degree, Duncan, and they were an ornament to the nobles of Scotland."

Heyward, who perceived that his superior took a malicious pleasure in exhibiting his contempt for the message of the French general, was fain to humor a spleen that he knew would be short-lived; he therefore, replied with as much indifference as he could assume on such a subject:

"My request, as you know, sir, went so far as to presume to the honor of being your son."

"Ay, boy, you found words to make yourself very plainly comprehended. But, let me ask ye, sir, have you been as intelligible to the girl?"

"On my honor, no," exclaimed Duncan, warmly; "there would have been an abuse of a confided trust, had I taken advantage of my situation for such a purpose."

"Your notions are those of a gentleman, Major Heyward, and well enough in their place. But Cora Munro is a maiden too discreet, and of a mind too elevated and improved, to need the guardianship even of a father."

"Cora!"

"Ay—Cora! we are talking of your pretensions to Miss Munro, are we not, sir?"

“I—I—I was not conscious of having mentioned her name,” said Duncan, stammering.

“And to marry whom, then, did you wish my consent, Major Heyward?” demanded the old soldier, erecting himself in the dignity of offended feeling.

“You have another, and not less lovely child.”

“Alice!” exclaimed the father, in an astonishment equal to that with which Duncan had just repeated the name of her sister.

“Such was the direction of my wishes, sir.”

The young man awaited in silence the result of the extraordinary effect produced by a communication, which, as it now appeared, was so unexpected. For several minutes Munro paced the chamber with long and rapid strides, his rigid features working convulsively, and every faculty seemingly absorbed in the musings of his own mind. At length, he paused directly in front of Heyward, and riveting his eyes upon those of the other, he said, with a lip that quivered violently:

“Duncan Heyward, I have loved you for the sake of him whose blood is in your veins; I have loved you for your own good qualities; and I have loved you, because I thought you would contribute to the happiness of my child. But all this love would turn to hatred, were I assured that what I so much apprehend is true.”

“God forbid that any act or thought of mine should lead to such a change!” exclaimed the young man, whose eye never quailed under the penetrating look it encountered. Without adverting to the impossibility of the other’s comprehending those feelings which were hid in his own bosom, Munro suffered himself to be appeased by the unaltered countenance he met, and with a voice sensibly softened, he continued:

“You would be my son, Duncan, and you’re ignorant of the history of the man you wish to call your father. Sit ye down, young man, and I will open to you the wounds of a seared heart, in as few words as may be suitable.”

By this time, the message of Montcalm was as much forgotten by him who bore it as by the man for whose ears it was intended. Each drew a chair, and while the veteran communed a few moments with his own thoughts, apparently in sadness, the youth suppressed his impatience in a look and attitude of respectful attention. At length, the former spoke:

“You’ll know, already, Major Heyward, that my family was both ancient and honorable,” commenced the Scotsman; “though it might not altogether be endowed with that amount of wealth that should correspond with its degree. I was, maybe, such an one as yourself when I plighted my faith to Alice Graham, the only child of a neighboring laird of some estate. But the connection was disagreeable to her father, on more accounts than my poverty. I did, therefore, what an honest man should—restored the maiden her troth, and departed the country in the service of my king. I had seen many regions, and had shed much blood in different lands, before duty called me to the islands of the West Indies. There it was my lot to form a connection with one who in time became my wife, and the mother of Cora. She was the daughter of a gentleman of those isles, by a lady whose misfortune it was, if you will,” said the old man, proudly, “to be descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people. Ay, sir, that is a curse, entailed on Scotland by her unnatural union with a foreign and trading people. But could I find a man among them who would dare to reflect on my child, he should feel the weight of a father’s anger! Ha! Major Heyward, you are yourself born at the south, where these unfortunate beings are considered of a race inferior to your own.”

”’Tis most unfortunately true, sir,” said Duncan, unable any longer to prevent his eyes from sinking to the floor in embarrassment.

“And you cast it on my child as a reproach! You scorn to mingle the blood of the Heywards with one so degraded—lovely and virtuous though she be?” fiercely demanded the jealous parent.

“Heaven protect me from a prejudice so unworthy of my reason!” returned Duncan, at the same time conscious of such a feeling, and that as deeply rooted as if it had been ingrafted in his nature. “The sweetness, the beauty, the witchery of your younger daughter, Colonel Munro, might explain my motives without imputing to me this injustice.”

“Ye are right, sir,” returned the old man, again changing his tones to those of gentleness, or rather softness; “the girl is the image of what her mother was at her years, and before she had become acquainted with grief. When death deprived me of my wife I returned to Scotland, enriched by the marriage; and, would you think it, Duncan! the suffering angel had remained in the heartless state of celibacy twenty long years, and that for the sake of a man who could forget her! She did more, sir; she overlooked my want of faith, and, all difficulties being now removed, she took me for her husband.”

“And became the mother of Alice?” exclaimed Duncan, with an eagerness that might have proved dangerous at a moment when the thoughts of Munro were less occupied than at present.

“She did, indeed,” said the old man, “and dearly did she pay for the blessing she bestowed. But she is a saint in heaven, sir; and it ill becomes one whose foot rests on the grave to mourn a lot so blessed. I had her but a single year, though; a short term of happiness for one who had seen her youth fade in hopeless pining.”

There was something so commanding in the distress of the old man, that Heyward did not dare to venture a syllable of consolation. Munro sat utterly unconscious of the other's presence, his features exposed and working with the anguish of his regrets, while heavy tears fell from his eyes, and rolled unheeded from his cheeks to the floor. At length he moved, and as if suddenly recovering his recollection; when he arose, and taking a single turn across the room, he approached his companion with an air of military grandeur, and demanded:

“Have you not, Major Heyward, some communication that I should hear from the marquis de Montcalm?”

Duncan started in his turn, and immediately commenced in an embarrassed voice, the half-forgotten message. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the evasive though polite manner with which the French general had eluded every attempt of Heyward to worm from him the purport of the communication he had proposed making, or on the decided, though still polished message, by which he now gave his enemy to understand, that, unless he chose to receive it in person, he should not receive it at all. As Munro listened to the detail of Duncan, the excited feelings of the father gradually gave way before the obligations of his station, and when the other was done, he saw before him nothing but the veteran, swelling with the wounded feelings of a soldier.

“You have said enough, Major Heyward,” exclaimed the angry old man; “enough to make a volume of commentary on French civility. Here has this gentleman invited me to a conference, and when I send him a capable substitute, for ye're all that, Duncan, though your years are but few, he answers me with a riddle.”

“He may have thought less favorably of the substitute, my dear sir; and you will remember that the invitation, which he now repeats, was to the commandant of the works, and not to his second.”

“Well, sir, is not a substitute clothed with all the power and dignity of him who grants the commission? He wishes to confer with Munro! Faith, sir, I have much inclination to indulge the man, if it should only be to let him behold the firm countenance we maintain in spite of his numbers and his summons. There might be not bad policy in such a stroke, young man.”

Duncan, who believed it of the last importance that they should speedily come to the contents of the letter borne by the scout, gladly encouraged this idea.

“Without doubt, he could gather no confidence by witnessing our indifference,” he said.

“You never said truer word. I could wish, sir, that he would visit the works in open day, and in the form of a storming party; that is the least failing method of proving the countenance of an enemy, and would be far preferable to the battering system he has chosen. The beauty and manliness of warfare has been much deformed, Major Heyward, by the arts of your Monsieur Vauban. Our ancestors were far above such scientific cowardice!”

“It may be very true, sir; but we are now obliged to repel art by art. What is your pleasure in the matter of the interview?”

“I will meet the Frenchman, and that without fear or delay; promptly, sir, as becomes a servant of my royal master. Go, Major Heyward, and give them a flourish of the music; and send out a messenger to let them know who is coming. We will follow with a small guard, for such respect is due to one who holds the honor of his king in keeping; and hark’ee, Duncan,” he added, in a half whisper, though they were alone, “it may be prudent to have some aid at hand, in case there should be treachery at the bottom of it all.”

The young man availed himself of this order to quit the apartment; and, as the day was fast coming to a close, he hastened without delay, to make the necessary arrangements. A very few minutes only were necessary to parade a few files, and to dispatch an orderly with a flag to announce the approach of the commandant of the fort. When Duncan had done both these, he led the guard to the sally-port, near which he found his superior ready, waiting his appearance. As soon as the usual ceremonials of a military departure were observed, the veteran and his more youthful companion left the fortress, attended by the escort.

They had proceeded only a hundred yards from the works, when the little array which attended the French general to the conference was seen issuing from the hollow way which formed the bed of a brook that ran between the batteries of the besiegers and the fort. From the moment that Munro left his own works to appear in front of his enemy's, his air had been grand, and his step and countenance highly military. The instant he caught a glimpse of the white plume that waved in the hat of Montcalm, his eye lighted, and age no longer appeared to possess any influence over his vast and still muscular person.

“Speak to the boys to be watchful, sir,” he said, in an undertone, to Duncan; “and to look well to their flints and steel, for one is never safe with a servant of these Louis's; at the same time, we shall show them the front of men in deep security. Ye'll understand me, Major Heyward!”

He was interrupted by the clamor of a drum from the approaching Frenchmen, which was immediately answered, when each party pushed an orderly in advance, bearing a white flag, and the wary Scotsman halted with his guard close at his back. As soon as this slight salutation had passed, Montcalm moved toward them with a quick but graceful step, baring his head to the veteran, and dropping his spotless plume nearly to the earth in courtesy. If the air of Munro was more commanding and manly, it wanted both the ease and insinuating polish of that of the Frenchman. Neither spoke for a few moments, each

regarding the other with curious and interested eyes. Then, as became his superior rank and the nature of the interview, Montcalm broke the silence. After uttering the usual words of greeting, he turned to Duncan, and continued, with a smile of recognition, speaking always in French:

“I am rejoiced, monsieur, that you have given us the pleasure of your company on this occasion. There will be no necessity to employ an ordinary interpreter; for, in your hands, I feel the same security as if I spoke your language myself.”

Duncan acknowledged the compliment, when Montcalm, turning to his guard, which in imitation of that of their enemies, pressed close upon him, continued:

“En arriere, mes enfants—il fait chaud—retirez-vous un peu.”

Before Major Heyward would imitate this proof of confidence, he glanced his eyes around the plain, and beheld with uneasiness the numerous dusky groups of savages, who looked out from the margin of the surrounding woods, curious spectators of the interview.

“Monsieur de Montcalm will readily acknowledge the difference in our situation,” he said, with some embarrassment, pointing at the same time toward those dangerous foes, who were to be seen in almost every direction. “Were we to dismiss our guard, we should stand here at the mercy of our enemies.”

“Monsieur, you have the plighted faith of ‘un gentilhomme Francais’, for your safety,” returned Montcalm, laying his hand impressively on his heart; “it should suffice.”

“It shall. Fall back,” Duncan added to the officer who led the escort; “fall back, sir, beyond hearing, and wait for orders.”

Munro witnessed this movement with manifest uneasiness; nor did he fail to demand an instant explanation.

“Is it not our interest, sir, to betray distrust?” retorted Duncan.

“Monsieur de Montcalm pledges his word for our safety, and I have ordered the men to withdraw a little, in order to prove how much we depend on his assurance.”

“It may be all right, sir, but I have no overweening reliance on the faith of these marquesses, or marquis, as they call themselves. Their patents of nobility are too common to be certain that they bear the seal of true honor.”

“You forget, dear sir, that we confer with an officer, distinguished alike in Europe and America for his deeds. From a soldier of his reputation we can have nothing to apprehend.”

The old man made a gesture of resignation, though his rigid features still betrayed his obstinate adherence to a distrust, which he derived from a sort of hereditary contempt of his enemy, rather than from any present signs which might warrant so uncharitable a feeling. Montcalm waited patiently until this little dialogue in demi-voice was ended, when he drew nigher, and opened the subject of their conference.

“I have solicited this interview from your superior, monsieur,” he said, “because I believe he will allow himself to be persuaded that he has already done everything which is necessary for the honor of his prince, and will now listen to the admonitions of humanity. I will forever bear testimony that his resistance has been gallant, and was continued as long as there was hope.”

When this opening was translated to Munro, he answered with dignity, but with sufficient courtesy:

“However I may prize such testimony from Monsieur Montcalm, it will be more valuable when it shall be better merited.”

The French general smiled, as Duncan gave him the purport of this reply, and observed:

“What is now so freely accorded to approved courage, may be refused to useless obstinacy. Monsieur would wish to see my camp, and witness for himself our numbers, and the impossibility of his resisting them with success?”

“I know that the king of France is well served,” returned the unmoved Scotsman, as soon as Duncan ended his translation; “but my own royal master has as many and as faithful troops.”

“Though not at hand, fortunately for us,” said Montcalm, without waiting, in his ardor, for the interpreter. “There is a destiny in war, to which a brave man knows how to submit with the same courage that he faces his foes.”

“Had I been conscious that Monsieur Montcalm was master of the English, I should have spared myself the trouble of so awkward a translation,” said the vexed Duncan, dryly; remembering instantly his recent by-play with Munro.

“Your pardon, monsieur,” rejoined the Frenchman, suffering a slight color to appear on his dark cheek. “There is a vast difference between understanding and speaking a foreign tongue; you will, therefore, please to assist me still.” Then, after a short pause, he added: “These hills afford us every opportunity of reconnoitering your works, messieurs, and I am possibly as well acquainted with their weak condition as you can be yourselves.”

“Ask the French general if his glasses can reach to the Hudson,” said Munro, proudly; “and if he knows when and where to expect the army of Webb.”

“Let General Webb be his own interpreter,” returned the politic Montcalm, suddenly extending an open letter toward Munro as he spoke; “you will there learn, monsieur, that his movements are not likely to prove embarrassing to my army.”

The veteran seized the offered paper, without waiting for Duncan to translate the speech, and with an eagerness that betrayed how important he deemed its contents. As his eye passed hastily over the words, his countenance changed from its look of military pride to one of deep chagrin; his lip began to quiver; and suffering the paper to fall from his hand, his head dropped upon his chest, like that of a man whose hopes were withered at a single blow. Duncan caught the letter from the ground, and without apology for the liberty he took, he read at a glance its cruel purport. Their common superior, so far from encouraging them to resist, advised a speedy surrender, urging in the plainest language, as a reason, the utter impossibility of his sending a single man to their rescue.

“Here is no deception!” exclaimed Duncan, examining the billet both inside and out; “this is the signature of Webb, and must be the captured letter.”

“The man has betrayed me!” Munro at length bitterly exclaimed; “he has brought dishonor to the door of one where disgrace was never before known to dwell, and shame has he heaped heavily on my gray hairs.”

“Say not so,” cried Duncan; “we are yet masters of the fort, and of our honor. Let us, then, sell our lives at such a rate as shall make our enemies believe the purchase too dear.”

“Boy, I thank thee,” exclaimed the old man, rousing himself from his stupor; “you have, for once, reminded Munro of his duty. We will go back, and dig our graves behind those ramparts.”

“Messieurs,” said Montcalm, advancing toward them a step, in generous interest, “you little know Louis de St. Veran if you believe him capable of profiting by this letter to humble brave men, or to build up a dishonest reputation for himself. Listen to my terms before you leave me.”

“What says the Frenchman?” demanded the veteran, sternly; “does he make a merit of having captured a scout, with a note from headquarters? Sir, he had better raise this siege, to go and sit down before Edward if he wishes to frighten his enemy with words.”

Duncan explained the other’s meaning.

“Monsieur de Montcalm, we will hear you,” the veteran added, more calmly, as Duncan ended.

“To retain the fort is now impossible,” said his liberal enemy; “it is necessary to the interests of my master that it should be destroyed; but as for yourselves and your brave comrades, there is no privilege dear to a soldier that shall be denied.”

“Our colors?” demanded Heyward.

“Carry them to England, and show them to your king.”

“Our arms?”

“Keep them; none can use them better.”

“Our march; the surrender of the place?”

“Shall all be done in a way most honorable to yourselves.”

Duncan now turned to explain these proposals to his commander, who heard him with amazement, and a sensibility that was deeply touched by so unusual and unexpected generosity.

“Go you, Duncan,” he said; “go with this marquess, as, indeed, marquess he should be; go to his marquee and arrange it all. I have lived to see two things in my old age that never did I expect to behold. An Englishman afraid to support a friend, and a Frenchman too honest to profit by his advantage.”

So saying, the veteran again dropped his head to his chest, and returned slowly toward the fort, exhibiting, by the dejection of his air, to the anxious garrison, a harbinger of evil tidings.

From the shock of this unexpected blow the haughty feelings of Munro never recovered; but from that moment there commenced a change in his determined character, which accompanied him to a speedy grave. Duncan remained to settle the terms of the capitulation. He was seen to re-enter the works during the first watches of the night, and immediately after a private conference with the commandant, to leave them again. It was then openly announced that hostilities must cease—Munro having signed a treaty by which the place was to be yielded to the enemy, with the morning; the garrison to retain their arms, the colors and their baggage, and, consequently, according to military opinion, their honor.