

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 30

If you deny me, fie upon your law! There is no force in the decrees of Venice: I stand for judgment: answer, shall I have it?

—Merchant of Venice

The silence continued unbroken by human sounds for many anxious minutes. Then the waving multitude opened and shut again, and Uncas stood in the living circle. All those eyes, which had been curiously studying the lineaments of the sage, as the source of their own intelligence, turned on the instant, and were now bent in secret admiration on the erect, agile, and faultless person of the captive. But neither the presence in which he found himself, nor the exclusive attention that he attracted, in any manner disturbed the self-possession of the young Mohican. He cast a deliberate and observing look on every side of him, meeting the settled expression of hostility that lowered in the visages of the chiefs with the same calmness as the curious gaze of the attentive children. But when, last in this haughty scrutiny, the person of Tamenund came under his glance, his eye became fixed, as though all other objects were already forgotten. Then, advancing with a slow and noiseless step up the area, he placed himself immediately before the footstool of the sage. Here he stood unnoted, though keenly observant himself, until one of the chiefs apprised the latter of his presence.

“With what tongue does the prisoner speak to the Manitou?” demanded the patriarch, without unclosing his eyes.

“Like his fathers,” Uncas replied; “with the tongue of a Delaware.”

At this sudden and unexpected annunciation, a low, fierce yell ran through the multitude, that might not inaptly be compared to the growl of the lion, as his choler is first awakened—a fearful omen of the weight of his future anger. The effect was equally strong on the sage, though differently exhibited. He passed a hand before his eyes, as if to exclude the least evidence of so shameful a spectacle, while he repeated, in his low, guttural tones, the words he had just heard.

“A Delaware! I have lived to see the tribes of the Lenape driven from their council-fires, and scattered, like broken herds of deer, among the hills of the Iroquois! I have seen the hatchets of a strong people sweep woods from the valleys, that the winds of heaven have spared! The beasts that run on the mountains, and the birds that fly above the trees, have I seen living in the wigwams of men; but never before have I found a Delaware so base as to creep, like a poisonous serpent, into the camps of his nation.”

“The singing-birds have opened their bills,” returned Uncas, in the softest notes of his own musical voice; “and Tamenund has heard their song.”

The sage started, and bent his head aside, as if to catch the fleeting sounds of some passing melody.

“Does Tamenund dream!” he exclaimed. “What voice is at his ear! Have the winters gone backward! Will summer come again to the children of the Lenape!”

A solemn and respectful silence succeeded this incoherent burst from the lips of the Delaware prophet. His people readily constructed his unintelligible language into one of those mysterious conferences he was

believed to hold so frequently with a superior intelligence and they awaited the issue of the revelation in awe. After a patient pause, however, one of the aged men, perceiving that the sage had lost the recollection of the subject before them, ventured to remind him again of the presence of the prisoner.

“The false Delaware trembles lest he should hear the words of Tamenund,” he said. ”’Tis a hound that howls, when the Yengeese show him a trail.”

“And ye,” returned Uncas, looking sternly around him, “are dogs that whine, when the Frenchman casts ye the offals of his deer!”

Twenty knives gleamed in the air, and as many warriors sprang to their feet, at this biting, and perhaps merited retort; but a motion from one of the chiefs suppressed the outbreaking of their tempers, and restored the appearance of quiet. The task might probably have been more difficult, had not a movement made by Tamenund indicated that he was again about to speak.

“Delaware!” resumed the sage, “little art thou worthy of thy name. My people have not seen a bright sun in many winters; and the warrior who deserts his tribe when hid in clouds is doubly a traitor. The law of the Manitou is just. It is so; while the rivers run and the mountains stand, while the blossoms come and go on the trees, it must be so. He is thine, my children; deal justly by him.”

Not a limb was moved, nor was a breath drawn louder and longer than common, until the closing syllable of this final decree had passed the lips of Tamenund. Then a cry of vengeance burst at once, as it might be, from the united lips of the nation; a frightful augury of their ruthless intentions. In the midst of these prolonged and savage yells, a chief proclaimed, in a high voice, that the captive was condemned to endure the dreadful trial of torture by fire. The circle broke its order, and

screams of delight mingled with the bustle and tumult of preparation. Heyward struggled madly with his captors; the anxious eye of Hawkeye began to look around him, with an expression of peculiar earnestness; and Cora again threw herself at the feet of the patriarch, once more a suppliant for mercy.

Throughout the whole of these trying moments, Uncas had alone preserved his serenity. He looked on the preparations with a steady eye, and when the tormentors came to seize him, he met them with a firm and upright attitude. One among them, if possible more fierce and savage than his fellows, seized the hunting-shirt of the young warrior, and at a single effort tore it from his body. Then, with a yell of frantic pleasure, he leaped toward his unresisting victim and prepared to lead him to the stake. But, at that moment, when he appeared most a stranger to the feelings of humanity, the purpose of the savage was arrested as suddenly as if a supernatural agency had interposed in the behalf of Uncas. The eyeballs of the Delaware seemed to start from their sockets; his mouth opened and his whole form became frozen in an attitude of amazement. Raising his hand with a slow and regulated motion, he pointed with a finger to the bosom of the captive. His companions crowded about him in wonder and every eye was like his own, fastened intently on the figure of a small tortoise, beautifully tattooed on the breast of the prisoner, in a bright blue tint.

For a single instant Uncas enjoyed his triumph, smiling calmly on the scene. Then motioning the crowd away with a high and haughty sweep of his arm, he advanced in front of the nation with the air of a king, and spoke in a voice louder than the murmur of admiration that ran through the multitude.

“Men of the Lenni Lenape!” he said, “my race upholds the earth! Your feeble tribe stands on my shell! What fire that a Delaware can light would burn the child of my fathers,” he added, pointing proudly to the

simple blazonry on his skin; “the blood that came from such a stock would smother your flames! My race is the grandfather of nations!”

“Who art thou?” demanded Tamenund, rising at the startling tones he heard, more than at any meaning conveyed by the language of the prisoner.

“Uncas, the son of Chingachgook,” answered the captive modestly, turning from the nation, and bending his head in reverence to the other’s character and years; “a son of the great Unamis.”

Turtle.

“The hour of Tamenund is nigh!” exclaimed the sage; “the day is come, at last, to the night! I thank the Manitou, that one is here to fill my place at the council–fire. Uncas, the child of Uncas, is found! Let the eyes of a dying eagle gaze on the rising sun.”

The youth stepped lightly, but proudly on the platform, where he became visible to the whole agitated and wondering multitude. Tamenund held him long at the length of his arm and read every turn in the fine lineaments of his countenance, with the untiring gaze of one who recalled days of happiness.

“Is Tamenund a boy?” at length the bewildered prophet exclaimed. “Have I dreamed of so many snows—that my people were scattered like floating sands—of Yengeese, more plenty than the leaves on the trees! The arrow of Tamenund would not frighten the fawn; his arm if withered like the branch of a dead oak; the snail would be swifter in the race; yet is Uncas before him as they went to battle against the pale faces! Uncas, the panther of his tribe, the eldest son of the Lenape, the wisest Sagamore of the Mohicans! Tell me, ye Delawares has Tamenund been a sleeper for a hundred winters?”

The calm and deep silence which succeeded these words sufficiently announced the awful reverence with which his people received the communication of the patriarch. None dared to answer, though all listened in breathless expectation of what might follow. Uncas, however, looking in his face with the fondness and veneration of a favored child, presumed on his own high and acknowledged rank, to reply.

“Four warriors of his race have lived and died,” he said, “since the friend of Tamenund led his people in battle. The blood of the turtle has been in many chiefs, but all have gone back into the earth from whence they came, except Chingachgook and his son.”

“It is true—it is true,” returned the sage, a flash of recollection destroying all his pleasing fancies, and restoring him at once to a consciousness of the true history of his nation. “Our wise men have often said that two warriors of the unchanged race were in the hills of the Yengeese; why have their seats at the council-fires of the Delawares been so long empty?”

At these words the young man raised his head, which he had still kept bowed a little, in reverence; and lifting his voice so as to be heard by the multitude, as if to explain at once and forever the policy of his family, he said aloud:

“Once we slept where we could hear the salt lake speak in its anger. Then we were rulers and Sagamores over the land. But when a pale face was seen on every brook, we followed the deer back to the river of our nation. The Delawares were gone. Few warriors of them all stayed to drink of the stream they loved. Then said my fathers, ‘Here will we hunt. The waters of the river go into the salt lake. If we go toward the setting sun, we shall find streams that run into the great lakes of sweet water; there would a Mohican die, like fishes of the sea, in the clear springs. When the Manitou is ready and shall say “Come,” we will follow the river to the sea, and take our own again’ Such, Delawares, is the belief of

the children of the Turtle. Our eyes are on the rising and not toward the setting sun. We know whence he comes, but we know not whither he goes. It is enough.”

The men of the Lenape listened to his words with all the respect that superstition could lend, finding a secret charm even in the figurative language with which the young Sagamore imparted his ideas. Uncas himself watched the effect of his brief explanation with intelligent eyes, and gradually dropped the air of authority he had assumed, as he perceived that his auditors were content. Then, permitting his looks to wander over the silent throng that crowded around the elevated seat of Tamenund, he first perceived Hawkeye in his bonds. Stepping eagerly from his stand, he made way for himself to the side of his friend; and cutting his thongs with a quick and angry stroke of his own knife, he motioned to the crowd to divide. The Indians silently obeyed, and once more they stood ranged in their circle, as before his appearance among them. Uncas took the scout by the hand, and led him to the feet of the patriarch.

“Father,” he said, “look at this pale face; a just man, and the friend of the Delawares.”

“Is he a son of Minquon?”

“Not so; a warrior known to the Yengeese, and feared by the Maquas.”

“What name has he gained by his deeds?”

“We call him Hawkeye,” Uncas replied, using the Delaware phrase; “for his sight never fails. The Mingoes know him better by the death he gives their warriors; with them he is ‘The Long Rifle’.”

“La Longue Carabine!” exclaimed Tamenund, opening his eyes, and regarding the scout sternly. “My son has not done well to call him friend.”

“I call him so who proves himself such,” returned the young chief, with great calmness, but with a steady mien. “If Uncas is welcome among the Delawares, then is Hawkeye with his friends.”

“The pale face has slain my young men; his name is great for the blows he has struck the Lenape.”

“If a Mingo has whispered that much in the ear of the Delaware, he has only shown that he is a singing-bird,” said the scout, who now believed that it was time to vindicate himself from such offensive charges, and who spoke as the man he addressed, modifying his Indian figures, however, with his own peculiar notions. “That I have slain the Maquas I am not the man to deny, even at their own council-fires; but that, knowingly, my hand has never harmed a Delaware, is opposed to the reason of my gifts, which is friendly to them, and all that belongs to their nation.”

A low exclamation of applause passed among the warriors who exchanged looks with each other like men that first began to perceive their error.

“Where is the Huron?” demanded Tamenund. “Has he stopped my ears?”

Magua, whose feelings during that scene in which Uncas had triumphed may be much better imagined than described, answered to the call by stepping boldly in front of the patriarch.

“The just Tamenund,” he said, “will not keep what a Huron has lent.”

“Tell me, son of my brother,” returned the sage, avoiding the dark countenance of Le Subtil, and turning gladly to the more ingenuous features of Uncas, “has the stranger a conqueror’s right over you?”

“He has none. The panther may get into snares set by the women; but he is strong, and knows how to leap through them.”

“La Longue Carabine?”

“Laughs at the Mingoes. Go, Huron, ask your squaws the color of a bear.”

“The stranger and white maiden that come into my camp together?”

“Should journey on an open path.”

“And the woman that Huron left with my warriors?”

Uncas made no reply.

“And the woman that the Mingo has brought into my camp?” repeated Tamenund, gravely.

“She is mine,” cried Magua, shaking his hand in triumph at Uncas.

“Mohican, you know that she is mine.”

“My son is silent,” said Tamenund, endeavoring to read the expression of the face that the youth turned from him in sorrow.

“It is so,” was the low answer.

A short and impressive pause succeeded, during which it was very apparent with what reluctance the multitude admitted the justice of the

Mingo's claim. At length the sage, on whom alone the decision depended, said, in a firm voice:

“Huron, depart.”

“As he came, just Tamenund,” demanded the wily Magua, “or with hands filled with the faith of the Delawares? The wigwam of Le Renard Subtil is empty. Make him strong with his own.”

The aged man mused with himself for a time; and then, bending his head toward one of his venerable companions, he asked:

“Are my ears open?”

“It is true.”

“Is this Mingo a chief?”

“The first in his nation.”

“Girl, what wouldst thou? A great warrior takes thee to wife. Go! thy race will not end.”

“Better, a thousand times, it should,” exclaimed the horror-struck Cora, “than meet with such a degradation!”

“Huron, her mind is in the tents of her fathers. An unwilling maiden makes an unhappy wigwam.”

“She speaks with the tongue of her people,” returned Magua, regarding his victim with a look of bitter irony.

“She is of a race of traders, and will bargain for a bright look. Let Tamenund speak the words.”

“Take you the wampum, and our love.”

“Nothing hence but what Magua brought hither.”

“Then depart with thine own. The Great Manitou forbids that a Delaware should be unjust.”

Magua advanced, and seized his captive strongly by the arm; the Delawares fell back, in silence; and Cora, as if conscious that remonstrance would be useless, prepared to submit to her fate without resistance.

“Hold, hold!” cried Duncan, springing forward; “Huron, have mercy! her ransom shall make thee richer than any of thy people were ever yet known to be.”

“Magua is a red-skin; he wants not the beads of the pale faces.”

“Gold, silver, powder, lead—all that a warrior needs shall be in thy wigwam; all that becomes the greatest chief.”

“Le Subtil is very strong,” cried Magua, violently shaking the hand which grasped the unresisting arm of Cora; “he has his revenge!”

“Mighty ruler of Providence!” exclaimed Heyward, clasping his hands together in agony, “can this be suffered! To you, just Tamenund, I appeal for mercy.”

“The words of the Delaware are said,” returned the sage, closing his eyes, and dropping back into his seat, alike wearied with his mental and his bodily exertion. “Men speak not twice.”

“That a chief should not misspend his time in unsaying what has once been spoken is wise and reasonable,” said Hawkeye, motioning to Duncan to be silent; “but it is also prudent in every warrior to consider well before he strikes his tomahawk into the head of his prisoner. Huron, I love you not; nor can I say that any Mingo has ever received much favor at my hands. It is fair to conclude that, if this war does not soon end, many more of your warriors will meet me in the woods. Put it to your judgment, then, whether you would prefer taking such a prisoner as that into your encampment, or one like myself, who am a man that it would greatly rejoice your nation to see with naked hands.”

“Will ‘The Long Rifle’ give his life for the woman?” demanded Magua, hesitatingly; for he had already made a motion toward quitting the place with his victim.

“No, no; I have not said so much as that,” returned Hawkeye, drawing back with suitable discretion, when he noted the eagerness with which Magua listened to his proposal. “It would be an unequal exchange, to give a warrior, in the prime of his age and usefulness, for the best woman on the frontiers. I might consent to go into winter quarters, now — at least six weeks afore the leaves will turn — on condition you will release the maiden.”

Magua shook his head, and made an impatient sign for the crowd to open.

“Well, then,” added the scout, with the musing air of a man who had not half made up his mind; “I will throw ‘killdeer’ into the bargain. Take the word of an experienced hunter, the piece has not its equal atween the provinces.”

Magua still disdained to reply, continuing his efforts to disperse the crowd.

“Perhaps,” added the scout, losing his dissembled coolness exactly in proportion as the other manifested an indifference to the exchange, “if I should condition to teach your young men the real virtue of the we’pon, it would smoothe the little differences in our judgments.”

Le Renard fiercely ordered the Delawares, who still lingered in an impenetrable belt around him, in hopes he would listen to the amicable proposal, to open his path, threatening, by the glance of his eye, another appeal to the infallible justice of their “prophet.”

“What is ordered must sooner or later arrive,” continued Hawkeye, turning with a sad and humbled look to Uncas. “The varlet knows his advantage and will keep it! God bless you, boy; you have found friends among your natural kin, and I hope they will prove as true as some you have met who had no Indian cross. As for me, sooner or later, I must die; it is, therefore, fortunate there are but few to make my death— howl. After all, it is likely the imps would have managed to master my scalp, so a day or two will make no great difference in the everlasting reckoning of time. God bless you,” added the rugged woodsman, bending his head aside, and then instantly changing its direction again, with a wistful look toward the youth; “I loved both you and your father, Uncas, though our skins are not altogether of a color, and our gifts are somewhat difficult. Tell the Sagamore I never lost sight of him in my greatest trouble; and, as for you, think of me sometimes when on a lucky trail, and depend on it, boy, whether there be one heaven or two, there is a path in the other world by which honest men may come together again. You’ll find the rifle in the place we hid it; take it, and keep it for my sake; and, harkee, lad, as your natural gifts don’t deny you the use of vengeance, use it a little freely on the Mingoes; it may unburden griefs at my loss, and ease your mind. Huron, I accept your offer; release the woman. I am your prisoner!”

A suppressed, but still distinct murmur of approbation ran through the crowd at this generous proposition; even the fiercest among the

Delaware warriors manifesting pleasure at the manliness of the intended sacrifice. Magua paused, and for an anxious moment, it might be said, he doubted; then, casting his eyes on Cora, with an expression in which ferocity and admiration were strangely mingled, his purpose became fixed forever.

He intimated his contempt of the offer with a backward motion of his head, and said, in a steady and settled voice:

“Le Renard Subtil is a great chief; he has but one mind. Come,” he added, laying his hand too familiarly on the shoulder of his captive to urge her onward; “a Huron is no tattler; we will go.”

The maiden drew back in lofty womanly reserve, and her dark eye kindled, while the rich blood shot, like the passing brightness of the sun, into her very temples, at the indignity.

“I am your prisoner, and, at a fitting time shall be ready to follow, even to my death. But violence is unnecessary,” she coldly said; and immediately turning to Hawkeye, added: “Generous hunter! from my soul I thank you. Your offer is vain, neither could it be accepted; but still you may serve me, even more than in your own noble intention. Look at that drooping humbled child! Abandon her not until you leave her in the habitations of civilized men. I will not say,” wringing the hard hand of the scout, “that her father will reward you—for such as you are above the rewards of men—but he will thank you and bless you. And, believe me, the blessing of a just and aged man has virtue in the sight of Heaven. Would to God I could hear one word from his lips at this awful moment!” Her voice became choked, and, for an instant, she was silent; then, advancing a step nigher to Duncan, who was supporting her unconscious sister, she continued, in more subdued tones, but in which feeling and the habits of her sex maintained a fearful struggle: “I need not tell you to cherish the treasure you will possess. You love her, Heyward; that would conceal a thousand faults, though she had them.

She is kind, gentle, sweet, good, as mortal may be. There is not a blemish in mind or person at which the proudest of you all would sicken. She is fair— oh! how surpassingly fair!” laying her own beautiful, but less brilliant, hand in melancholy affection on the alabaster forehead of Alice, and parting the golden hair which clustered about her brows; “and yet her soul is pure and spotless as her skin! I could say much— more, perhaps, than cooler reason would approve; but I will spare you and myself—” Her voice became inaudible, and her face was bent over the form of her sister. After a long and burning kiss, she arose, and with features of the hue of death, but without even a tear in her feverish eye, she turned away, and added, to the savage, with all her former elevation of manner: “Now, sir, if it be your pleasure, I will follow.”

“Ay, go,” cried Duncan, placing Alice in the arms of an Indian girl; “go, Magua, go. these Delawares have their laws, which forbid them to detain you; but I—I have no such obligation. Go, malignant monster— why do you delay?”

It would be difficult to describe the expression with which Magua listened to this threat to follow. There was at first a fierce and manifest display of joy, and then it was instantly subdued in a look of cunning coldness.

“The words are open,” he was content with answering, ””The Open Hand’ can come.”

“Hold,” cried Hawkeye, seizing Duncan by the arm, and detaining him by violence; “you know not the craft of the imp. He would lead you to an ambushment, and your death— “

“Huron,” interrupted Uncas, who submissive to the stern customs of his people, had been an attentive and grave listener to all that passed; “Huron, the justice of the Delawares comes from the Manitou. Look at the sun. He is now in the upper branches of the hemlock. Your path is

short and open. When he is seen above the trees, there will be men on your trail.”

“I hear a crow!” exclaimed Magua, with a taunting laugh. “Go!” he added, shaking his hand at the crowd, which had slowly opened to admit his passage. “Where are the petticoats of the Delawares! Let them send their arrows and their guns to the Wyandots; they shall have venison to eat, and corn to hoe. Dogs, rabbits, thieves—I spit on you!”

His parting gibes were listened to in a dead, boding silence, and, with these biting words in his mouth, the triumphant Magua passed unmolested into the forest, followed by his passive captive, and protected by the inviolable laws of Indian hospitality.