

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 4

“Well go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove
Till I torment thee for this injury.”

—Midsummer Night’s Dream.

The words were still in the mouth of the scout, when the leader of the party, whose approaching footsteps had caught the vigilant ear of the Indian, came openly into view. A beaten path, such as those made by the periodical passage of the deer, wound through a little glen at no great distance, and struck the river at the point where the white man and his red companions had posted themselves. Along this track the travelers, who had produced a surprise so unusual in the depths of the forest, advanced slowly toward the hunter, who was in front of his associates, in readiness to receive them.

“Who comes?” demanded the scout, throwing his rifle carelessly across his left arm, and keeping the forefinger of his right hand on the trigger, though he avoided all appearance of menace in the act. “Who comes hither, among the beasts and dangers of the wilderness?”

“Believers in religion, and friends to the law and to the king,” returned he who rode foremost. “Men who have journeyed since the rising sun, in the shades of this forest, without nourishment, and are sadly tired of their wayfaring.”

“You are, then, lost,” interrupted the hunter, “and have found how helpless ‘tis not to know whether to take the right hand or the left?”
“Even so; sucking babes are not more dependent on those who guide them than we who are of larger growth, and who may now be said to possess the stature without the knowledge of men. Know you the distance to a post of the crown called William Henry?”

“Hoot!” shouted the scout, who did not spare his open laughter, though instantly checking the dangerous sounds he indulged his merriment at less risk of being overheard by any lurking enemies. “You are as much off the scent as a hound would be, with Horican atwixt him and the deer! William Henry, man! if you are friends to the king and have business with the army, your way would be to follow the river down to Edward, and lay the matter before Webb, who tarries there, instead of pushing into the defiles, and driving this saucy Frenchman back across Champlain, into his den again.”

Before the stranger could make any reply to this unexpected proposition, another horseman dashed the bushes aside, and leaped his charger into the pathway, in front of his companion.

“What, then, may be our distance from Fort Edward?” demanded a new speaker; “the place you advise us to seek we left this morning, and our destination is the head of the lake.”

“Then you must have lost your eyesight afore losing your way, for the road across the portage is cut to a good two rods, and is as grand a path, I calculate, as any that runs into London, or even before the palace of the king himself.”

“We will not dispute concerning the excellence of the passage,” returned Heyward, smiling; for, as the reader has anticipated, it was he. “It is enough, for the present, that we trusted to an Indian guide to take us by a

nearer, though blinder path, and that we are deceived in his knowledge. In plain words, we know not where we are.”

“An Indian lost in the woods!” said the scout, shaking his head doubtfully; “When the sun is scorching the tree tops, and the water courses are full; when the moss on every beech he sees will tell him in what quarter the north star will shine at night. The woods are full of deer-paths which run to the streams and licks, places well known to everybody; nor have the geese done their flight to the Canada waters altogether! ‘Tis strange that an Indian should be lost atwixt Horican and the bend in the river! Is he a Mohawk?”

“Not by birth, though adopted in that tribe; I think his birthplace was farther north, and he is one of those you call a Huron.”

“Hugh!” exclaimed the two companions of the scout, who had continued until this part of the dialogue, seated immovable, and apparently indifferent to what passed, but who now sprang to their feet with an activity and interest that had evidently got the better of their reserve by surprise.

“A Huron!” repeated the sturdy scout, once more shaking his head in open distrust; “they are a thievish race, nor do I care by whom they are adopted; you can never make anything of them but skulls and vagabonds. Since you trusted yourself to the care of one of that nation, I only wonder that you have not fallen in with more.”

“Of that there is little danger, since William Henry is so many miles in our front. You forget that I have told you our guide is now a Mohawk, and that he serves with our forces as a friend.”

“And I tell you that he who is born a Mingo will die a Mingo,” returned the other positively. “A Mohawk! No, give me a Delaware or a Mohican for honesty; and when they will fight, which they won’t all do, having

suffered their cunning enemies, the Maquas, to make them women—but when they will fight at all, look to a Delaware, or a Mohican, for a warrior!”

“Enough of this,” said Heyward, impatiently; “I wish not to inquire into the character of a man that I know, and to whom you must be a stranger. You have not yet answered my question; what is our distance from the main army at Edward?”

“It seems that may depend on who is your guide. One would think such a horse as that might get over a good deal of ground atwixt sun-up and sun-down.”

“I wish no contention of idle words with you, friend,” said Heyward, curbing his dissatisfied manner, and speaking in a more gentle voice; “if you will tell me the distance to Fort Edward, and conduct me thither, your labor shall not go without its reward.”

“And in so doing, how know I that I don’t guide an enemy and a spy of Montcalm, to the works of the army? It is not every man who can speak the English tongue that is an honest subject.”

“If you serve with the troops, of whom I judge you to be a scout, you should know of such a regiment of the king as the Sixtieth.”

“The Sixtieth! you can tell me little of the Royal Americans that I don’t know, though I do wear a hunting-shirt instead of a scarlet jacket.”

“Well, then, among other things, you may know the name of its major?”

“Its major!” interrupted the hunter, elevating his body like one who was proud of his trust. “If there is a man in the country who knows Major Effingham, he stands before you.”

“It is a corps which has many majors; the gentleman you name is the senior, but I speak of the junior of them all; he who commands the companies in garrison at William Henry.”

“Yes, yes, I have heard that a young gentleman of vast riches, from one of the provinces far south, has got the place. He is over young, too, to hold such rank, and to be put above men whose heads are beginning to bleach; and yet they say he is a soldier in his knowledge, and a gallant gentleman!”

“Whatever he may be, or however he may be qualified for his rank, he now speaks to you and, of course, can be no enemy to dread.”

The scout regarded Heyward in surprise, and then lifting his cap, he answered, in a tone less confident than before—though still expressing doubt.

“I have heard a party was to leave the encampment this morning for the lake shore?”

“You have heard the truth; but I preferred a nearer route, trusting to the knowledge of the Indian I mentioned.”

“And he deceived you, and then deserted?”

“Neither, as I believe; certainly not the latter, for he is to be found in the rear.”

“I should like to look at the creature; if it is a true Iroquois I can tell him by his knavish look, and by his paint,” said the scout; stepping past the charger of Heyward, and entering the path behind the mare of the singing master, whose foal had taken advantage of the halt to exact the maternal contribution. After shoving aside the bushes, and proceeding a few paces, he encountered the females, who awaited the result of the

conference with anxiety, and not entirely without apprehension. Behind these, the runner leaned against a tree, where he stood the close examination of the scout with an air unmoved, though with a look so dark and savage, that it might in itself excite fear. Satisfied with his scrutiny, the hunter soon left him. As he repassed the females, he paused a moment to gaze upon their beauty, answering to the smile and nod of Alice with a look of open pleasure. Thence he went to the side of the motherly animal, and spending a minute in a fruitless inquiry into the character of her rider, he shook his head and returned to Heyward.

“A Mingo is a Mingo, and God having made him so, neither the Mohawks nor any other tribe can alter him,” he said, when he had regained his former position. “If we were alone, and you would leave that noble horse at the mercy of the wolves to-night, I could show you the way to Edward myself, within an hour, for it lies only about an hour’s journey hence; but with such ladies in your company ‘tis impossible!”

“And why? They are fatigued, but they are quite equal to a ride of a few more miles.”

”’Tis a natural impossibility!” repeated the scout; “I wouldn’t walk a mile in these woods after night gets into them, in company with that runner, for the best rifle in the colonies. They are full of outlying Iroquois, and your mongrel Mohawk knows where to find them too well to be my companion.”

“Think you so?” said Heyward, leaning forward in the saddle, and dropping his voice nearly to a whisper; “I confess I have not been without my own suspicions, though I have endeavored to conceal them, and affected a confidence I have not always felt, on account of my companions. It was because I suspected him that I would follow no longer; making him, as you see, follow me.”

“I knew he was one of the cheats as soon as I laid eyes on him!” returned the scout, placing a finger on his nose, in sign of caution. “The thief is leaning against the foot of the sugar sapling, that you can see over them bushes; his right leg is in a line with the bark of the tree, and,” tapping his rifle, “I can take him from where I stand, between the angle and the knee, with a single shot, putting an end to his tramping through the woods, for at least a month to come. If I should go back to him, the cunning varmint would suspect something, and be dodging through the trees like a frightened deer.”

“It will not do. He may be innocent, and I dislike the act. Though, if I felt confident of his treachery—”

”’Tis a safe thing to calculate on the knavery of an Iroquois,” said the scout, throwing his rifle forward, by a sort of instinctive movement.

“Hold!” interrupted Heyward, “it will not do—we must think of some other scheme—and yet, I have much reason to believe the rascal has deceived me.”

The hunter, who had already abandoned his intention of maiming the runner, mused a moment, and then made a gesture, which instantly brought his two red companions to his side. They spoke together earnestly in the Delaware language, though in an undertone; and by the gestures of the white man, which were frequently directed towards the top of the sapling, it was evident he pointed out the situation of their hidden enemy. His companions were not long in comprehending his wishes, and laying aside their firearms, they parted, taking opposite sides of the path, and burying themselves in the thicket, with such cautious movements, that their steps were inaudible.

“Now, go you back,” said the hunter, speaking again to Heyward, “and hold the imp in talk; these Mohicans here will take him without breaking his paint.”

“Nay,” said Heyward, proudly, “I will seize him myself.”

“Hist! what could you do, mounted, against an Indian in the bushes!”

“I will dismount.”

“And, think you, when he saw one of your feet out of the stirrup, he would wait for the other to be free? Whoever comes into the woods to deal with the natives, must use Indian fashions, if he would wish to prosper in his undertakings. Go, then; talk openly to the miscreant, and seem to believe him the truest friend you have on ‘arth.”

Heyward prepared to comply, though with strong disgust at the nature of the office he was compelled to execute. Each moment, however, pressed upon him a conviction of the critical situation in which he had suffered his invaluable trust to be involved through his own confidence. The sun had already disappeared, and the woods, suddenly deprived of his light, were assuming a dusky hue, which keenly reminded him that the hour the savage usually chose for his most barbarous and remorseless acts of vengeance or hostility, was speedily drawing near. Stimulated by apprehension, he left the scout, who immediately entered into a loud conversation with the stranger that had so unceremoniously enlisted himself in the party of travelers that morning. In passing his gentler companions Heyward uttered a few words of encouragement, and was pleased to find that, though fatigued with the exercise of the day, they appeared to entertain no suspicion that their present embarrassment was other than the result of accident. Giving them reason to believe he was merely employed in a consultation concerning the future route, he spurred his charger, and drew the reins again when the animal had carried him within a few yards of the place where the sullen runner still stood, leaning against the tree.

The scene of this tale was in the 42d degree of latitude, where the twilight is never of long continuation.

“You may see, Magua,” he said, endeavoring to assume an air of freedom and confidence, “that the night is closing around us, and yet we are no nearer to William Henry than when we left the encampment of Webb with the rising sun.

“You have missed the way, nor have I been more fortunate. But, happily, we have fallen in with a hunter, he whom you hear talking to the singer, that is acquainted with the deerpaths and by-ways of the woods, and who promises to lead us to a place where we may rest securely till the morning.”

The Indian riveted his glowing eyes on Heyward as he asked, in his imperfect English, “Is he alone?”

“Alone!” hesitatingly answered Heyward, to whom deception was too new to be assumed without embarrassment. “Oh! not alone, surely, Magua, for you know that we are with him.”

“Then Le Renard Subtil will go,” returned the runner, coolly raising his little wallet from the place where it had lain at his feet; “and the pale faces will see none but their own color.”

“Go! Whom call you Le Renard?”

”’Tis the name his Canada fathers have given to Magua,” returned the runner, with an air that manifested his pride at the distinction. “Night is the same as day to Le Subtil, when Munro waits for him.” “And what account will Le Renard give the chief of William Henry concerning his daughters? Will he dare to tell the hot-blooded Scotsman that his children are left without a guide, though Magua promised to be one?”

“Though the gray head has a loud voice, and a long arm, Le Renard will not hear him, nor feel him, in the woods.”

“But what will the Mohawks say? They will make him petticoats, and bid him stay in the wigwam with the women, for he is no longer to be trusted with the business of a man.”

“Le Subtil knows the path to the great lakes, and he can find the bones of his fathers,” was the answer of the unmoved runner.

“Enough, Magua,” said Heyward; “are we not friends? Why should there be bitter words between us? Munro has promised you a gift for your services when performed, and I shall be your debtor for another. Rest your weary limbs, then, and open your wallet to eat. We have a few moments to spare; let us not waste them in talk like wrangling women. When the ladies are refreshed we will proceed.”

“The pale faces make themselves dogs to their women,” muttered the Indian, in his native language, “and when they want to eat, their warriors must lay aside the tomahawk to feed their laziness.”

“What say you, Renard?”

“Le Subtil says it is good.”

The Indian then fastened his eyes keenly on the open countenance of Heyward, but meeting his glance, he turned them quickly away, and seating himself deliberately on the ground, he drew forth the remnant of some former repast, and began to eat, though not without first bending his looks slowly and cautiously around him.

“This is well,” continued Heyward; “and Le Renard will have strength and sight to find the path in the morning”; he paused, for sounds like the snapping of a dried stick, and the rustling of leaves, rose from the

adjacent bushes, but recollecting himself instantly, he continued, “we must be moving before the sun is seen, or Montcalm may lie in our path, and shut us out from the fortress.”

The hand of Magua dropped from his mouth to his side, and though his eyes were fastened on the ground, his head was turned aside, his nostrils expanded, and his ears seemed even to stand more erect than usual, giving to him the appearance of a statue that was made to represent intense attention.

Heyward, who watched his movements with a vigilant eye, carelessly extricated one of his feet from the stirrup, while he passed a hand toward the bear-skin covering of his holsters.

Every effort to detect the point most regarded by the runner was completely frustrated by the tremulous glances of his organs, which seemed not to rest a single instant on any particular object, and which, at the same time, could be hardly said to move. While he hesitated how to proceed, Le Subtil cautiously raised himself to his feet, though with a motion so slow and guarded, that not the slightest noise was produced by the change. Heyward felt it had now become incumbent on him to act. Throwing his leg over the saddle, he dismounted, with a determination to advance and seize his treacherous companion, trusting the result to his own manhood. In order, however, to prevent unnecessary alarm, he still preserved an air of calmness and friendship.

“Le Renard Subtil does not eat,” he said, using the appellation he had found most flattering to the vanity of the Indian. “His corn is not well parched, and it seems dry. Let me examine; perhaps something may be found among my own provisions that will help his appetite.”

Magua held out the wallet to the proffer of the other. He even suffered their hands to meet, without betraying the least emotion, or varying his riveted attitude of attention. But when he felt the fingers of Heyward moving gently along his own naked arm, he struck up the limb of the young man, and, uttering a piercing cry, he darted beneath it, and plunged, at a single bound, into the opposite thicket. At the next instant the form of Chingachgook appeared from the bushes, looking like a specter in its paint, and glided across the path in swift pursuit. Next followed the shout of Uncas, when the woods were lighted by a sudden flash, that was accompanied by the sharp report of the hunter's rifle.