

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 14

“Guard.--Qui est la?

Puc. --Paisans, pauvres gens de France.”

—King Henry VI

During the rapid movement from the blockhouse, and until the party was deeply buried in the forest, each individual was too much interested in the escape to hazard a word even in whispers. The scout resumed his post in advance, though his steps, after he had thrown a safe distance between himself and his enemies, were more deliberate than in their previous march, in consequence of his utter ignorance of the localities of the surrounding woods. More than once he halted to consult with his confederates, the Mohicans, pointing upward at the moon, and examining the barks of the trees with care. In these brief pauses, Heyward and the sisters listened, with senses rendered doubly acute by the danger, to detect any symptoms which might announce the proximity of their foes. At such moments, it seemed as if a vast range of country lay buried in eternal sleep; not the least sound arising from the forest, unless it was the distant and scarcely audible rippling of a water-course. Birds, beasts, and man, appeared to slumber alike, if, indeed, any of the latter were to be found in that wide tract of wilderness. But the sounds of the rivulet, feeble and murmuring as they were, relieved the guides at once from no trifling embarrassment, and toward it they immediately held their way.

When the banks of the little stream were gained, Hawkeye made another halt; and taking the moccasins from his feet, he invited Heyward and Gamut to follow his example. He then entered the water, and for near an hour they traveled in the bed of the brook, leaving no trail. The moon had already sunk into an immense pile of black clouds, which lay impending above the western horizon, when they issued from the low and devious water-course to rise again to the light and level of the sandy but wooded plain. Here the scout seemed to be once more at home, for he held on this way with the certainty and diligence of a man who moved in the security of his own knowledge. The path soon became more uneven, and the travelers could plainly perceive that the mountains drew nigher to them on each hand, and that they were, in truth, about entering one of their gorges. Suddenly, Hawkeye made a pause, and, waiting until he was joined by the whole party, he spoke, though in tones so low and cautious, that they added to the solemnity of his words, in the quiet and darkness of the place.

“It is easy to know the pathways, and to find the licks and water-courses of the wilderness,” he said; “but who that saw this spot could venture to say, that a mighty army was at rest among yonder silent trees and barren mountains?”

“We are, then, at no great distance from William Henry?” said Heyward, advancing nigher to the scout.

“It is yet a long and weary path, and when and where to strike it is now our greatest difficulty. See,” he said, pointing through the trees toward a spot where a little basin of water reflected the stars from its placid bosom, “here is the ‘bloody pond’; and I am on ground that I have not only often traveled, but over which I have fou’t the enemy, from the rising to the setting sun.”

“Ha! that sheet of dull and dreary water, then, is the sepulcher of the brave men who fell in the contest. I have heard it named, but never have I stood on its banks before.”

“Three battles did we make with the Dutch–Frenchman in a day,” continued Hawkeye, pursuing the train of his own thoughts, rather than replying to the remark of Duncan. “He met us hard by, in our outward march to ambush his advance, and scattered us, like driven deer, through the defile, to the shores of Horican. Then we rallied behind our fallen trees, and made head against him, under Sir William—who was made Sir William for that very deed; and well did we pay him for the disgrace of the morning! Hundreds of Frenchmen saw the sun that day for the last time; and even their leader, Dieskau himself, fell into our hands, so cut and torn with the lead, that he has gone back to his own country, unfit for further acts in war.”

Baron Dieskau, a German, in the service of France. A few years previously to the period of the tale, this officer was defeated by Sir William Johnson, of Johnstown, New York, on the shores of Lake George.

”’Twas a noble repulse!” exclaimed Heyward, in the heat of his youthful ardor; “the fame of it reached us early, in our southern army.”

“Ay! but it did not end there. I was sent by Major Effingham, at Sir William’s own bidding, to outflank the French, and carry the tidings of their disaster across the portage, to the fort on the Hudson. Just hereaway, where you see the trees rise into a mountain swell, I met a party coming down to our aid, and I led them where the enemy were taking their meal, little dreaming that they had not finished the bloody work of the day.”

“And you surprised them?”

“If death can be a surprise to men who are thinking only of the cravings of their appetites. We gave them but little breathing time, for they had borne hard upon us in the fight of the morning, and there were few in our party who had not lost friend or relative by their hands.”

“When all was over, the dead, and some say the dying, were cast into that little pond. These eyes have seen its waters colored with blood, as natural water never yet flowed from the bowels of the ‘arth.”

“It was a convenient, and, I trust, will prove a peaceful grave for a soldier. You have then seen much service on this frontier?”

“Ay!” said the scout, erecting his tall person with an air of military pride; “there are not many echoes among these hills that haven’t rung with the crack of my rifle, nor is there the space of a square mile atwixt Horican and the river, that ‘killdeer’ hasn’t dropped a living body on, be it an enemy or be it a brute beast. As for the grave there being as quiet as you mention, it is another matter. There are them in the camp who say and think, man, to lie still, should not be buried while the breath is in the body; and certain it is that in the hurry of that evening, the doctors had but little time to say who was living and who was dead. Hist! see you nothing walking on the shore of the pond?”

”’Tis not probable that any are as houseless as ourselves in this dreary forest.”

“Such as he may care but little for house or shelter, and night dew can never wet a body that passes its days in the water,” returned the scout, grasping the shoulder of Heyward with such convulsive strength as to make the young soldier painfully sensible how much superstitious terror had got the mastery of a man usually so dauntless.

“By heaven, there is a human form, and it approaches! Stand to your arms, my friends; for we know not whom we encounter.”

“Qui vive?” demanded a stern, quick voice, which sounded like a challenge from another world, issuing out of that solitary and solemn place.

“What says it?” whispered the scout; “it speaks neither Indian nor English.”

“Qui vive?” repeated the same voice, which was quickly followed by the rattling of arms, and a menacing attitude.

“France!” cried Heyward, advancing from the shadow of the trees to the shore of the pond, within a few yards of the sentinel.

“D’ou venez-vous—ou allez-vous, d’aussi bonne heure?” demanded the grenadier, in the language and with the accent of a man from old France.

“Je viens de la decouverte, et je vais me coucher.”

“Etes-vous officier du roi?”

“Sans doute, mon camarade; me prends-tu pour un provincial! Je suis capitaine de chasseurs (Heyward well knew that the other was of a regiment in the line); j’ai ici, avec moi, les filles du commandant de la fortification. Aha! tu en as entendu parler! je les ai fait prisonnières pres de l’autre fort, et je les conduis au general.”

“Ma foi! mesdames; j’en suis fâche pour vous,” exclaimed the young soldier, touching his cap with grace; “mais—fortune de guerre! vous trouverez notre general un brave homme, et bien poli avec les dames.”

“C’est le caractere des gens de guerre,” said Cora, with admirable self-possession. “Adieu, mon ami; je vous souhaiterais un devoir plus agreable a remplir.”

The soldier made a low and humble acknowledgment for her civility; and Heyward adding a “Bonne nuit, mon camarade,” they moved deliberately forward, leaving the sentinel pacing the banks of the silent pond, little suspecting an enemy of so much effrontery, and humming to himself those words which were recalled to his mind by the sight of women, and, perhaps, by recollections of his own distant and beautiful France: “Vive le vin, vive l’amour,” etc., etc.

”’Tis well you understood the knave!” whispered the scout, when they had gained a little distance from the place, and letting his rifle fall into the hollow of his arm again; “I soon saw that he was one of them uneasy Frenchers; and well for him it was that his speech was friendly and his wishes kind, or a place might have been found for his bones among those of his countrymen.”

He was interrupted by a long and heavy groan which arose from the little basin, as though, in truth, the spirits of the departed lingered about their watery sepulcher.

“Surely it was of flesh,” continued the scout; “no spirit could handle its arms so steadily.”

“It was of flesh; but whether the poor fellow still belongs to this world may well be doubted,” said Heyward, glancing his eyes around him, and missing Chingachgook from their little band. Another groan more faint than the former was succeeded by a heavy and sullen plunge into the water, and all was still again as if the borders of the dreary pool had never been awakened from the silence of creation. While they yet hesitated in uncertainty, the form of the Indian was seen gliding out of the thicket. As the chief rejoined them, with one hand he attached the reeking scalp of the unfortunate young Frenchman to his girdle, and with the other he replaced the knife and tomahawk that had drunk his blood.

He then took his wonted station, with the air of a man who believed he had done a deed of merit.

The scout dropped one end of his rifle to the earth, and leaning his hands on the other, he stood musing in profound silence. Then, shaking his head in a mournful manner, he muttered:

”’Twould have been a cruel and an unhuman act for a white–skin; but ‘tis the gift and natur’ of an Indian, and I suppose it should not be denied. I could wish, though, it had befallen an accursed Mingo, rather than that gay young boy from the old countries.”

“Enough!” said Heyward, apprehensive the unconscious sisters might comprehend the nature of the detention, and conquering his disgust by a train of reflections very much like that of the hunter; ”’tis done; and though better it were left undone, cannot be amended. You see, we are, too obviously within the sentinels of the enemy; what course do you propose to follow?”

“Yes,” said Hawkeye, rousing himself again; ”’tis as you say, too late to harbor further thoughts about it. Ay, the French have gathered around the fort in good earnest and we have a delicate needle to thread in passing them.”

“And but little time to do it in,” added Heyward, glancing his eyes upwards, toward the bank of vapor that concealed the setting moon. “And little time to do it in!” repeated the scout. “The thing may be done in two fashions, by the help of Providence, without which it may not be done at all.”

“Name them quickly for time presses.”

“One would be to dismount the gentle ones, and let their beasts range the plain, by sending the Mohicans in front, we might then cut a lane through their sentries, and enter the fort over the dead bodies.”

“It will not do—it will not do!” interrupted the generous Heyward; “a soldier might force his way in this manner, but never with such a convoy.”

””Twould be, indeed, a bloody path for such tender feet to wade in,” returned the equally reluctant scout; “but I thought it befitting my manhood to name it. We must, then, turn in our trail and get without the line of their lookouts, when we will bend short to the west, and enter the mountains; where I can hide you, so that all the devil’s hounds in Montcalm’s pay would be thrown off the scent for months to come.”

“Let it be done, and that instantly.”

Further words were unnecessary; for Hawkeye, merely uttering the mandate to “follow,” moved along the route by which they had just entered their present critical and even dangerous situation. Their progress, like their late dialogue, was guarded, and without noise; for none knew at what moment a passing patrol, or a crouching picket of the enemy, might rise upon their path. As they held their silent way along the margin of the pond, again Heyward and the scout stole furtive glances at its appalling dreariness. They looked in vain for the form they had so recently seen stalking along in silent shores, while a low and regular wash of the little waves, by announcing that the waters were not yet subsided, furnished a frightful memorial of the deed of blood they had just witnessed. Like all that passing and gloomy scene, the low basin, however, quickly melted in the darkness, and became blended with the mass of black objects in the rear of the travelers.

Hawkeye soon deviated from the line of their retreat, and striking off towards the mountains which form the western boundary of the narrow

plain, he led his followers, with swift steps, deep within the shadows that were cast from their high and broken summits. The route was now painful; lying over ground ragged with rocks, and intersected with ravines, and their progress proportionately slow. Bleak and black hills lay on every side of them, compensating in some degree for the additional toil of the march by the sense of security they imparted. At length the party began slowly to rise a steep and rugged ascent, by a path that curiously wound among rocks and trees, avoiding the one and supported by the other, in a manner that showed it had been devised by men long practised in the arts of the wilderness. As they gradually rose from the level of the valleys, the thick darkness which usually precedes the approach of day began to disperse, and objects were seen in the plain and palpable colors with which they had been gifted by nature. When they issued from the stunted woods which clung to the barren sides of the mountain, upon a flat and mossy rock that formed its summit, they met the morning, as it came blushing above the green pines of a hill that lay on the opposite side of the valley of the Horican.

The scout now told the sisters to dismount; and taking the bridles from the mouths, and the saddles off the backs of the jaded beasts, he turned them loose, to glean a scanty subsistence among the shrubs and meager herbage of that elevated region.

“Go,” he said, “and seek your food where natur’ gives it to you; and beware that you become not food to ravenous wolves yourselves, among these hills.”

“Have we no further need of them?” demanded Heyward.

“See, and judge with your own eyes,” said the scout, advancing toward the eastern brow of the mountain, whither he beckoned for the whole party to follow; “if it was as easy to look into the heart of man as it is to spy out the nakedness of Montcalm’s camp from this spot, hypocrites

would grow scarce, and the cunning of a Mingo might prove a losing game, compared to the honesty of a Delaware.”

When the travelers reached the verge of the precipices they saw, at a glance, the truth of the scout’s declaration, and the admirable foresight with which he had led them to their commanding station.

The mountain on which they stood, elevated perhaps a thousand feet in the air, was a high cone that rose a little in advance of that range which stretches for miles along the western shores of the lake, until meeting its sisters miles beyond the water, it ran off toward the Canadas, in confused and broken masses of rock, thinly sprinkled with evergreens. Immediately at the feet of the party, the southern shore of the Horican swept in a broad semicircle from mountain to mountain, marking a wide strand, that soon rose into an uneven and somewhat elevated plain. To the north stretched the limpid, and, as it appeared from that dizzy height, the narrow sheet of the “holy lake,” indented with numberless bays, embellished by fantastic headlands, and dotted with countless islands. At the distance of a few leagues, the bed of the water became lost among mountains, or was wrapped in the masses of vapor that came slowly rolling along their bosom, before a light morning air. But a narrow opening between the crests of the hills pointed out the passage by which they found their way still further north, to spread their pure and ample sheets again, before pouring out their tribute into the distant Champlain. To the south stretched the defile, or rather broken plain, so often mentioned. For several miles in this direction, the mountains appeared reluctant to yield their dominion, but within reach of the eye they diverged, and finally melted into the level and sandy lands, across which we have accompanied our adventurers in their double journey. Along both ranges of hills, which bounded the opposite sides of the lake and valley, clouds of light vapor were rising in spiral wreaths from the uninhabited woods, looking like the smoke of hidden cottages; or rolled lazily down the declivities, to mingle with the fogs of the lower land. A

single, solitary, snow–white cloud floated above the valley, and marked the spot beneath which lay the silent pool of the “bloody pond.”

Directly on the shore of the lake, and nearer to its western than to its eastern margin, lay the extensive earthen ramparts and low buildings of William Henry. Two of the sweeping bastions appeared to rest on the water which washed their bases, while a deep ditch and extensive morasses guarded its other sides and angles. The land had been cleared of wood for a reasonable distance around the work, but every other part of the scene lay in the green livery of nature, except where the limpid water mellowed the view, or the bold rocks thrust their black and naked heads above the undulating outline of the mountain ranges. In its front might be seen the scattered sentinels, who held a weary watch against their numerous foes; and within the walls themselves, the travelers looked down upon men still drowsy with a night of vigilance. Toward the southeast, but in immediate contact with the fort, was an entrenched camp, posted on a rocky eminence, that would have been far more eligible for the work itself, in which Hawkeye pointed out the presence of those auxiliary regiments that had so recently left the Hudson in their company. From the woods, a little further to the south, rose numerous dark and lurid smokes, that were easily to be distinguished from the purer exhalations of the springs, and which the scout also showed to Heyward, as evidences that the enemy lay in force in that direction.

But the spectacle which most concerned the young soldier was on the western bank of the lake, though quite near to its southern termination. On a strip of land, which appeared from his stand too narrow to contain such an army, but which, in truth, extended many hundreds of yards from the shores of the Horican to the base of the mountain, were to be seen the white tents and military engines of an encampment of ten thousand men. Batteries were already thrown up in their front, and even while the spectators above them were looking down, with such different emotions, on a scene which lay like a map beneath their feet, the roar of

artillery rose from the valley, and passed off in thundering echoes along the eastern hills.

“Morning is just touching them below,” said the deliberate and musing scout, “and the watchers have a mind to wake up the sleepers by the sound of cannon. We are a few hours too late! Montcalm has already filled the woods with his accursed Iroquois.”

“The place is, indeed, invested,” returned Duncan; “but is there no expedient by which we may enter? capture in the works would be far preferable to falling again into the hands of roving Indians.”

“See!” exclaimed the scout, unconsciously directing the attention of Cora to the quarters of her own father, “how that shot has made the stones fly from the side of the commandant’s house! Ay! these Frenchers will pull it to pieces faster than it was put together, solid and thick though it be!”

“Heyward, I sicken at the sight of danger that I cannot share,” said the undaunted but anxious daughter. “Let us go to Montcalm, and demand admission: he dare not deny a child the boon.”

“You would scarce find the tent of the Frenchman with the hair on your head”; said the blunt scout. “If I had but one of the thousand boats which lie empty along that shore, it might be done! Ha! here will soon be an end of the firing, for yonder comes a fog that will turn day to night, and make an Indian arrow more dangerous than a molded cannon. Now, if you are equal to the work, and will follow, I will make a push; for I long to get down into that camp, if it be only to scatter some Mingo dogs that I see lurking in the skirts of yonder thicket of birch.”

“We are equal,” said Cora, firmly; “on such an errand we will follow to any danger.”

The scout turned to her with a smile of honest and cordial approbation, as he answered:

“I would I had a thousand men, of brawny limbs and quick eyes, that feared death as little as you! I’d send them jabbering Frenchers back into their den again, afore the week was ended, howling like so many fettered hounds or hungry wolves. But, sir,” he added, turning from her to the rest of the party, “the fog comes rolling down so fast, we shall have but just the time to meet it on the plain, and use it as a cover. Remember, if any accident should befall me, to keep the air blowing on your left cheeks—or, rather, follow the Mohicans; they’d scent their way, be it in day or be it at night.”

He then waved his hand for them to follow, and threw himself down the steep declivity, with free, but careful footsteps. Heyward assisted the sisters to descend, and in a few minutes they were all far down a mountain whose sides they had climbed with so much toil and pain.

The direction taken by Hawkeye soon brought the travelers to the level of the plain, nearly opposite to a sally-port in the western curtain of the fort, which lay itself at the distance of about half a mile from the point where he halted to allow Duncan to come up with his charge. In their eagerness, and favored by the nature of the ground, they had anticipated the fog, which was rolling heavily down the lake, and it became necessary to pause, until the mists had wrapped the camp of the enemy in their fleecy mantle. The Mohicans profited by the delay, to steal out of the woods, and to make a survey of surrounding objects. They were followed at a little distance by the scout, with a view to profit early by their report, and to obtain some faint knowledge for himself of the more immediate localities.

In a very few moments he returned, his face reddened with vexation, while he muttered his disappointment in words of no very gentle import.

“Here has the cunning Frenchman been posting a picket directly in our path,” he said; “red-skins and whites; and we shall be as likely to fall into their midst as to pass them in the fog!”

“Cannot we make a circuit to avoid the danger,” asked Heyward, “and come into our path again when it is passed?”

“Who that once bends from the line of his march in a fog can tell when or how to find it again! The mists of Horican are not like the curls from a peace-pipe, or the smoke which settles above a mosquito fire.”

He was yet speaking, when a crashing sound was heard, and a cannon-ball entered the thicket, striking the body of a sapling, and rebounding to the earth, its force being much expended by previous resistance. The Indians followed instantly like busy attendants on the terrible messenger, and Uncas commenced speaking earnestly and with much action, in the Delaware tongue.

“It may be so, lad,” muttered the scout, when he had ended; “for desperate fevers are not to be treated like a toothache. Come, then, the fog is shutting in.”

“Stop!” cried Heyward; “first explain your expectations.”

”’Tis soon done, and a small hope it is; but it is better than nothing. This shot that you see,” added the scout, kicking the harmless iron with his foot, “has plowed the ‘arth in its road from the fort, and we shall hunt for the furrow it has made, when all other signs may fail. No more words, but follow, or the fog may leave us in the middle of our path, a mark for both armies to shoot at.”

Heyward perceiving that, in fact, a crisis had arrived, when acts were more required than words, placed himself between the sisters, and drew them swiftly forward, keeping the dim figure of their leader in his eye. It

was soon apparent that Hawkeye had not magnified the power of the fog, for before they had proceeded twenty yards, it was difficult for the different individuals of the party to distinguish each other in the vapor.

They had made their little circuit to the left, and were already inclining again toward the right, having, as Heyward thought, got over nearly half the distance to the friendly works, when his ears were saluted with the fierce summons, apparently within twenty feet of them, of:

“Qui va la?”

“Push on!” whispered the scout, once more bending to the left.

“Push on!” repeated Heyward; when the summons was renewed by a dozen voices, each of which seemed charged with menace.

“C’est moi,” cried Duncan, dragging rather than leading those he supported swiftly onward.

“Bete“

“Ami de la France.”

“Tu m’as plus l’air d’un ennemi de la France; arrete ou pardieu je te ferai ami du diable. Non! feu, camarades, feu!”

The order was instantly obeyed, and the fog was stirred by the explosion of fifty muskets. Happily, the aim was bad, and the bullets cut the air in a direction a little different from that taken by the fugitives; though still so nigh them, that to the unpractised ears of David and the two females, it appeared as if they whistled within a few inches of the organs. The outcry was renewed, and the order, not only to fire again, but to pursue, was too plainly audible. When Heyward briefly explained the meaning

of the words they heard, Hawkeye halted and spoke with quick decision and great firmness.

“Let us deliver our fire,” he said; “they will believe it a sortie, and give way, or they will wait for reinforcements.”

The scheme was well conceived, but failed in its effects. The instant the French heard the pieces, it seemed as if the plain was alive with men, muskets rattling along its whole extent, from the shores of the lake to the furthest boundary of the woods.

“We shall draw their entire army upon us, and bring on a general assault,” said Duncan: “lead on, my friend, for your own life and ours.”

The scout seemed willing to comply; but, in the hurry of the moment, and in the change of position, he had lost the direction. In vain he turned either cheek toward the light air; they felt equally cool. In this dilemma, Uncas lighted on the furrow of the cannon ball, where it had cut the ground in three adjacent ant-hills.

“Give me the range!” said Hawkeye, bending to catch a glimpse of the direction, and then instantly moving onward.

Cries, oaths, voices calling to each other, and the reports of muskets, were now quick and incessant, and, apparently, on every side of them. Suddenly a strong glare of light flashed across the scene, the fog rolled upward in thick wreaths, and several cannons belched across the plain, and the roar was thrown heavily back from the bellowing echoes of the mountain.

”’Tis from the fort!” exclaimed Hawkeye, turning short on his tracks; “and we, like stricken fools, were rushing to the woods, under the very knives of the Maquas.”

The instant their mistake was rectified, the whole party retraced the error with the utmost diligence. Duncan willingly relinquished the support of Cora to the arm of Uncas and Cora as readily accepted the welcome assistance. Men, hot and angry in pursuit, were evidently on their footsteps, and each instant threatened their capture, if not their destruction.

“Point de quartier aux coquins!” cried an eager pursuer, who seemed to direct the operations of the enemy.

“Stand firm, and be ready, my gallant Sixtieths!” suddenly exclaimed a voice above them; “wait to see the enemy, fire low and sweep the glacis.”

“Father! father!” exclaimed a piercing cry from out the mist: “it is I! Alice! thy own Elsie! Spare, oh! save your daughters!”

“Hold!” shouted the former speaker, in the awful tones of parental agony, the sound reaching even to the woods, and rolling back in solemn echo. ”’Tis she! God has restored me to my children! Throw open the sally-port; to the field, Sixtieths, to the field; pull not a trigger, lest ye kill my lambs! Drive off these dogs of France with your steel.”

Duncan heard the grating of the rusty hinges, and darting to the spot, directed by the sound, he met a long line of dark red warriors, passing swiftly toward the glacis. He knew them for his own battalion of the Royal Americans, and flying to their head, soon swept every trace of his pursuers from before the works.

For an instant, Cora and Alice had stood trembling and bewildered by this unexpected desertion; but before either had leisure for speech, or even thought, an officer of gigantic frame, whose locks were bleached with years and service, but whose air of military grandeur had been rather softened than destroyed by time, rushed out of the body of mist,

and folded them to his bosom, while large scalding tears rolled down his pale and wrinkled cheeks, and he exclaimed, in the peculiar accent of Scotland:

“For this I thank thee, Lord! Let danger come as it will, thy servant is now prepared!”