

# *The Last of the Mohicans*

By

James Fenimore Cooper

Chapter 18

Why, anything;  
An honorable murderer, if you will;  
For naught I did in hate, but all in honor.”  
—Othello

The bloody and inhuman scene rather incidentally mentioned than described in the preceding chapter, is conspicuous in the pages of colonial history by the merited title of “The Massacre of William Henry.” It so far deepened the stain which a previous and very similar event had left upon the reputation of the French commander that it was not entirely erased by his early and glorious death. It is now becoming obscured by time; and thousands, who know that Montcalm died like a hero on the plains of Abraham, have yet to learn how much he was deficient in that moral courage without which no man can be truly great. Pages might yet be written to prove, from this illustrious example, the defects of human excellence; to show how easy it is for generous sentiments, high courtesy, and chivalrous courage to lose their influence beneath the chilling blight of selfishness, and to exhibit to the world a man who was great in all the minor attributes of character, but who was found wanting when it became necessary to prove how much principle is superior to policy. But the task would exceed our prerogatives; and, as history, like love, is so apt to surround her heroes with an atmosphere of imaginary brightness, it is probable that Louis de Saint Veran will be

viewed by posterity only as the gallant defender of his country, while his cruel apathy on the shores of the Oswego and of the Horican will be forgotten. Deeply regretting this weakness on the part of a sister muse, we shall at once retire from her sacred precincts, within the proper limits of our own humble vocation.

The third day from the capture of the fort was drawing to a close, but the business of the narrative must still detain the reader on the shores of the “holy lake.” When last seen, the environs of the works were filled with violence and uproar. They were now possessed by stillness and death. The blood–stained conquerors had departed; and their camp, which had so lately rung with the merry rejoicings of a victorious army, lay a silent and deserted city of huts. The fortress was a smoldering ruin; charred rafters, fragments of exploded artillery, and rent mason–work covering its earthen mounds in confused disorder.

A frightful change had also occurred in the season. The sun had hid its warmth behind an impenetrable mass of vapor, and hundreds of human forms, which had blackened beneath the fierce heats of August, were stiffening in their deformity before the blasts of a premature November. The curling and spotless mists, which had been seen sailing above the hills toward the north, were now returning in an interminable dusky sheet, that was urged along by the fury of a tempest. The crowded mirror of the Horican was gone; and, in its place, the green and angry waters lashed the shores, as if indignantly casting back its impurities to the polluted strand. Still the clear fountain retained a portion of its charmed influence, but it reflected only the somber gloom that fell from the impending heavens. That humid and congenial atmosphere which commonly adorned the view, veiling its harshness, and softening its asperities, had disappeared, the northern air poured across the waste of water so harsh and unmingled, that nothing was left to be conjectured by the eye, or fashioned by the fancy.

The fiercer element had cropped the verdure of the plain, which looked as though it were scathed by the consuming lightning. But, here and there, a dark green tuft rose in the midst of the desolation; the earliest fruits of a soil that had been fattened with human blood. The whole landscape, which, seen by a favoring light, and in a genial temperature, had been found so lovely, appeared now like some pictured allegory of life, in which objects were arrayed in their harshest but truest colors, and without the relief of any shadowing.

The solitary and arid blades of grass arose from the passing gusts fearfully perceptible; the bold and rocky mountains were too distinct in their barrenness, and the eye even sought relief, in vain, by attempting to pierce the illimitable void of heaven, which was shut to its gaze by the dusky sheet of ragged and driving vapor.

The wind blew unequally; sometimes sweeping heavily along the ground, seeming to whisper its moanings in the cold ears of the dead, then rising in a shrill and mournful whistling, it entered the forest with a rush that filled the air with the leaves and branches it scattered in its path. Amid the unnatural shower, a few hungry ravens struggled with the gale; but no sooner was the green ocean of woods which stretched beneath them, passed, than they gladly stopped, at random, to their hideous banquet.

In short, it was a scene of wildness and desolation; and it appeared as if all who had profanely entered it had been stricken, at a blow, by the relentless arm of death. But the prohibition had ceased; and for the first time since the perpetrators of those foul deeds which had assisted to disfigure the scene were gone, living human beings had now presumed to approach the place.

About an hour before the setting of the sun, on the day already mentioned, the forms of five men might have been seen issuing from the narrow vista of trees, where the path to the Hudson entered the forest,

and advancing in the direction of the ruined works. At first their progress was slow and guarded, as though they entered with reluctance amid the horrors of the post, or dreaded the renewal of its frightful incidents. A light figure preceded the rest of the party, with the caution and activity of a native; ascending every hillock to reconnoiter, and indicating by gestures, to his companions, the route he deemed it most prudent to pursue. Nor were those in the rear wanting in every caution and foresight known to forest warfare. One among them, he also was an Indian, moved a little on one flank, and watched the margin of the woods, with eyes long accustomed to read the smallest sign of danger. The remaining three were white, though clad in vestments adapted, both in quality and color, to their present hazardous pursuit—that of hanging on the skirts of a retiring army in the wilderness.

The effects produced by the appalling sights that constantly arose in their path to the lake shore, were as different as the characters of the respective individuals who composed the party. The youth in front threw serious but furtive glances at the mangled victims, as he stepped lightly across the plain, afraid to exhibit his feelings, and yet too inexperienced to quell entirely their sudden and powerful influence. His red associate, however, was superior to such a weakness. He passed the groups of dead with a steadiness of purpose, and an eye so calm, that nothing but long and inveterate practise could enable him to maintain. The sensations produced in the minds of even the white men were different, though uniformly sorrowful. One, whose gray locks and furrowed lineaments, blending with a martial air and tread, betrayed, in spite of the disguise of a woodsman's dress, a man long experienced in scenes of war, was not ashamed to groan aloud, whenever a spectacle of more than usual horror came under his view. The young man at his elbow shuddered, but seemed to suppress his feelings in tenderness to his companion. Of them all, the straggler who brought up the rear appeared alone to betray his real thoughts, without fear of observation or dread of consequences. He gazed at the most appalling sight with eyes and muscles that knew not

how to waver, but with execrations so bitter and deep as to denote how much he denounced the crime of his enemies.

The reader will perceive at once, in these respective characters, the Mohicans, and their white friend, the scout; together with Munro and Heyward. It was, in truth, the father in quest of his children, attended by the youth who felt so deep a stake in their happiness, and those brave and trusty foresters, who had already proved their skill and fidelity through the trying scenes related.

When Uncas, who moved in front, had reached the center of the plain, he raised a cry that drew his companions in a body to the spot. The young warrior had halted over a group of females who lay in a cluster, a confused mass of dead. Notwithstanding the revolting horror of the exhibition, Munro and Heyward flew toward the festering heap, endeavoring, with a love that no unseemliness could extinguish, to discover whether any vestiges of those they sought were to be seen among the tattered and many-colored garments. The father and the lover found instant relief in the search; though each was condemned again to experience the misery of an uncertainty that was hardly less insupportable than the most revolting truth. They were standing, silent and thoughtful, around the melancholy pile, when the scout approached. Eyeing the sad spectacle with an angry countenance, the sturdy woodsman, for the first time since his entering the plain, spoke intelligibly and aloud:

“I have been on many a shocking field, and have followed a trail of blood for weary miles,” he said, “but never have I found the hand of the devil so plain as it is here to be seen! Revenge is an Indian feeling, and all who know me know that there is no cross in my veins; but this much will I say—here, in the face of heaven, and with the power of the Lord so manifest in this howling wilderness—that should these Frenchers ever trust themselves again within the range of a ragged bullet, there is one rifle which shall play its part so long as flint will fire or powder burn! I

leave the tomahawk and knife to such as have a natural gift to use them. What say you, Chingachgook,” he added, in Delaware; “shall the Hurons boast of this to their women when the deep snows come?”

A gleam of resentment flashed across the dark lineaments of the Mohican chief; he loosened his knife in his sheath; and then turning calmly from the sight, his countenance settled into a repose as deep as if he knew the instigation of passion.

“Montcalm! Montcalm!” continued the deeply resentful and less self-restrained scout; “they say a time must come when all the deeds done in the flesh will be seen at a single look; and that by eyes cleared from mortal infirmities. Woe betide the wretch who is born to behold this plain, with the judgment hanging about his soul! Ha—as I am a man of white blood, yonder lies a red-skin, without the hair of his head where nature rooted it! Look to him, Delaware; it may be one of your missing people; and he should have burial like a stout warrior. I see it in your eye, Sagamore; a Huron pays for this, afore the fall winds have blown away the scent of the blood!”

Chingachgook approached the mutilated form, and, turning it over, he found the distinguishing marks of one of those six allied tribes, or nations, as they were called, who, while they fought in the English ranks, were so deadly hostile to his own people. Spurning the loathsome object with his foot, he turned from it with the same indifference he would have quitted a brute carcass. The scout comprehended the action, and very deliberately pursued his own way, continuing, however, his denunciations against the French commander in the same resentful strain.

“Nothing but vast wisdom and unlimited power should dare to sweep off men in multitudes,” he added; “for it is only the one that can know the necessity of the judgment; and what is there, short of the other, that can replace the creatures of the Lord? I hold it a sin to kill the second buck

afore the first is eaten, unless a march in front, or an ambushment, be contemplated. It is a different matter with a few warriors in open and rugged fight, for 'tis their gift to die with the rifle or the tomahawk in hand; according as their natures may happen to be, white or red. Uncas, come this way, lad, and let the ravens settle upon the Mingo. I know, from often seeing it, that they have a craving for the flesh of an Oneida; and it is as well to let the bird follow the gift of its natural appetite."

"Hugh!" exclaimed the young Mohican, rising on the extremities of his feet, and gazing intently in his front, frightening the ravens to some other prey by the sound and the action.

"What is it, boy?" whispered the scout, lowering his tall form into a crouching attitude, like a panther about to take his leap; "God send it be a tardy Frencher, skulking for plunder. I do believe 'killdeer' would take an uncommon range today!"

Uncas, without making any reply, bounded away from the spot, and in the next instant he was seen tearing from a bush, and waving in triumph, a fragment of the green riding-veil of Cora. The movement, the exhibition, and the cry which again burst from the lips of the young Mohican, instantly drew the whole party about him.

"My child!" said Munro, speaking quickly and wildly; "give me my child!"

"Uncas will try," was the short and touching answer.

The simple but meaning assurance was lost on the father, who seized the piece of gauze, and crushed it in his hand, while his eyes roamed fearfully among the bushes, as if he equally dreaded and hoped for the secrets they might reveal.

“Here are no dead,” said Heyward; “the storm seems not to have passed this way.”

“That’s manifest; and clearer than the heavens above our heads,” returned the undisturbed scout; “but either she, or they that have robbed her, have passed the bush; for I remember the rag she wore to hide a face that all did love to look upon. Uncas, you are right; the dark–hair has been here, and she has fled like a frightened fawn, to the wood; none who could fly would remain to be murdered. Let us search for the marks she left; for, to Indian eyes, I sometimes think a humming–bird leaves his trail in the air.”

The young Mohican darted away at the suggestion, and the scout had hardly done speaking, before the former raised a cry of success from the margin of the forest. On reaching the spot, the anxious party perceived another portion of the veil fluttering on the lower branch of a beech.

“Softly, softly,” said the scout, extending his long rifle in front of the eager Heyward; “we now know our work, but the beauty of the trail must not be deformed. A step too soon may give us hours of trouble. We have them, though; that much is beyond denial.”

“Bless ye, bless ye, worthy man!” exclaimed Munro; “whither then, have they fled, and where are my babes?”

“The path they have taken depends on many chances. If they have gone alone, they are quite as likely to move in a circle as straight, and they may be within a dozen miles of us; but if the Hurons, or any of the French Indians, have laid hands on them, ‘tis probably they are now near the borders of the Canadas. But what matters that?” continued the deliberate scout, observing the powerful anxiety and disappointment the listeners exhibited; “here are the Mohicans and I on one end of the trail, and, rely on it, we find the other, though they should be a hundred

leagues asunder! Gently, gently, Uncas, you are as impatient as a man in the settlements; you forget that light feet leave but faint marks!”

“Hugh!” exclaimed Chingachgook, who had been occupied in examining an opening that had been evidently made through the low underbrush which skirted the forest; and who now stood erect, as he pointed downward, in the attitude and with the air of a man who beheld a disgusting serpent.

“Here is the palpable impression of the footstep of a man,” cried Heyward, bending over the indicated spot; “he has trod in the margin of this pool, and the mark cannot be mistaken. They are captives.”

“Better so than left to starve in the wilderness,” returned the scout; “and they will leave a wider trail. I would wager fifty beaver skins against as many flints, that the Mohicans and I enter their wigwams within the month! Stoop to it, Uncas, and try what you can make of the moccasin; for moccasin it plainly is, and no shoe.”

The young Mohican bent over the track, and removing the scattered leaves from around the place, he examined it with much of that sort of scrutiny that a money dealer, in these days of pecuniary doubts, would bestow on a suspected due-bill. At length he arose from his knees, satisfied with the result of the examination.

“Well, boy,” demanded the attentive scout; “what does it say? Can you make anything of the tell-tale?”

“Le Renard Subtil!”

“Ha! that rampaging devil again! there will never be an end of his loping till ‘killdeer’ has said a friendly word to him.”

Heyward reluctantly admitted the truth of this intelligence, and now expressed rather his hopes than his doubts by saying:

“One moccasin is so much like another, it is probable there is some mistake.”

“One moccasin like another! you may as well say that one foot is like another; though we all know that some are long, and others short; some broad and others narrow; some with high, and some with low insteps; some intoed, and some out. One moccasin is no more like another than one book is like another: though they who can read in one are seldom able to tell the marks of the other. Which is all ordered for the best, giving to every man his natural advantages. Let me get down to it, Uncas; neither book nor moccasin is the worse for having two opinions, instead of one.” The scout stooped to the task, and instantly added:

“You are right, boy; here is the patch we saw so often in the other chase. And the fellow will drink when he can get an opportunity; your drinking Indian always learns to walk with a wider toe than the natural savage, it being the gift of a drunkard to straddle, whether of white or red skin. ‘Tis just the length and breadth, too! look at it, Sagamore; you measured the prints more than once, when we hunted the varmints from Glenn’s to the health springs.”

Chingachgook complied; and after finishing his short examination, he arose, and with a quiet demeanor, he merely pronounced the word:

“Magua!”

“Ay, ‘tis a settled thing; here, then, have passed the dark-hair and Magua.”

“And not Alice?” demanded Heyward.

“Of her we have not yet seen the signs,” returned the scout, looking closely around at the trees, the bushes and the ground. “What have we

there? Uncas, bring hither the thing you see dangling from yonder thorn-bush.”

When the Indian had complied, the scout received the prize, and holding it on high, he laughed in his silent but heartfelt manner.

”’Tis the tooting we’pon of the singer! now we shall have a trail a priest might travel,” he said. “Uncas, look for the marks of a shoe that is long enough to uphold six feet two of tottering human flesh. I begin to have some hopes of the fellow, since he has given up squalling to follow some better trade.”

“At least he has been faithful to his trust,” said Heyward. “And Cora and Alice are not without a friend.”

“Yes,” said Hawkeye, dropping his rifle, and leaning on it with an air of visible contempt, “he will do their singing. Can he slay a buck for their dinner; journey by the moss on the beeches, or cut the throat of a Huron? If not, the first catbird<sup>1</sup> he meets is the cleverer of the two. Well, boy, any signs of such a foundation?”

“Here is something like the footstep of one who has worn a shoe; can it be that of our friend?”

“Touch the leaves lightly or you’ll disconcert the formation. That! that is the print of a foot, but ‘tis the dark-hair’s; and small it is, too, for one of such a noble height and grand appearance. The singer would cover it with his heel.”

“Where! let me look on the footsteps of my child,” said Munro, shoving the bushes aside, and bending fondly over the nearly obliterated impression. Though the tread which had left the mark had been light and rapid, it was still plainly visible. The aged soldier examined it with eyes that grew dim as he gazed; nor did he rise from this stooping posture

until Heyward saw that he had watered the trace of his daughter's passage with a scalding tear. Willing to divert a distress which threatened each moment to break through the restraint of appearances, by giving the veteran something to do, the young man said to the scout:

“As we now possess these infallible signs, let us commence our march. A moment, at such a time, will appear an age to the captives.”

“It is not the swiftest leaping deer that gives the longest chase,” returned Hawkeye, without moving his eyes from the different marks that had come under his view; “we know that the rampaging Huron has passed, and the dark-hair, and the singer, but where is she of the yellow locks and blue eyes? Though little, and far from being as bold as her sister, she is fair to the view, and pleasant in discourse. Has she no friend, that none care for her?”

“God forbid she should ever want hundreds! Are we not now in her pursuit? For one, I will never cease the search till she be found.”

“In that case we may have to journey by different paths; for here she has not passed, light and little as her footsteps would be.”

Heyward drew back, all his ardor to proceed seeming to vanish on the instant. Without attending to this sudden change in the other's humor, the scout after musing a moment continued:

“There is no woman in this wilderness could leave such a print as that, but the dark-hair or her sister. We know that the first has been here, but where are the signs of the other? Let us push deeper on the trail, and if nothing offers, we must go back to the plain and strike another scent. Move on, Uncas, and keep your eyes on the dried leaves. I will watch the bushes, while your father shall run with a low nose to the ground. Move on, friends; the sun is getting behind the hills.”

“Is there nothing that I can do?” demanded the anxious Heyward.

“You?” repeated the scout, who, with his red friends, was already advancing in the order he had prescribed; “yes, you can keep in our rear and be careful not to cross the trail.”

Before they had proceeded many rods, the Indians stopped, and appeared to gaze at some signs on the earth with more than their usual keenness. Both father and son spoke quick and loud, now looking at the object of their mutual admiration, and now regarding each other with the most unequivocal pleasure.

“They have found the little foot!” exclaimed the scout, moving forward, without attending further to his own portion of the duty. “What have we here? An ambushment has been planted in the spot! No, by the truest rifle on the frontiers, here have been them one-sided horses again! Now the whole secret is out, and all is plain as the north star at midnight. Yes, here they have mounted. There the beasts have been bound to a sapling, in waiting; and yonder runs the broad path away to the north, in full sweep for the Canadas.”

“But still there are no signs of Alice, of the younger Miss Munro,” said Duncan.

“Unless the shining bauble Uncas has just lifted from the ground should prove one. Pass it this way, lad, that we may look at it.”

Heyward instantly knew it for a trinket that Alice was fond of wearing, and which he recollected, with the tenacious memory of a lover, to have seen, on the fatal morning of the massacre, dangling from the fair neck of his mistress. He seized the highly prized jewel; and as he proclaimed the fact, it vanished from the eyes of the wondering scout, who in vain looked for it on the ground, long after it was warmly pressed against the beating heart of Duncan.

“Pshaw!” said the disappointed Hawkeye, ceasing to rake the leaves with the breech of his rifle; ’tis a certain sign of age, when the sight begins to weaken. Such a glittering gewgaw, and not to be seen! Well, well, I can squint along a clouded barrel yet, and that is enough to settle all disputes between me and the Mingoes. I should like to find the thing, too, if it were only to carry it to the right owner, and that would be bringing the two ends of what I call a long trail together, for by this time the broad St. Lawrence, or perhaps, the Great Lakes themselves, are between us.”

“So much the more reason why we should not delay our march,” returned Heyward; “let us proceed.”

“Young blood and hot blood, they say, are much the same thing. We are not about to start on a squirrel hunt, or to drive a deer into the Horican, but to outlie for days and nights, and to stretch across a wilderness where the feet of men seldom go, and where no bookish knowledge would carry you through harmless. An Indian never starts on such an expedition without smoking over his council–fire; and, though a man of white blood, I honor their customs in this particular, seeing that they are deliberate and wise. We will, therefore, go back, and light our fire to–night in the ruins of the old fort, and in the morning we shall be fresh, and ready to undertake our work like men, and not like babbling women or eager boys.”

Heyward saw, by the manner of the scout, that altercation would be useless. Munro had again sunk into that sort of apathy which had beset him since his late overwhelming misfortunes, and from which he was apparently to be roused only by some new and powerful excitement. Making a merit of necessity, the young man took the veteran by the arm, and followed in the footsteps of the Indians and the scout, who had already begun to retrace the path which conducted them to the plain.