

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 19

Salar.—Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh; what's that good for?

Shy.—To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.

—Merchant of Venice

The shades of evening had come to increase the dreariness of the place, when the party entered the ruins of William Henry. The scout and his companions immediately made their preparations to pass the night there; but with an earnestness and sobriety of demeanor that betrayed how much the unusual horrors they had just witnessed worked on even their practised feelings. A few fragments of rafters were reared against a blackened wall; and when Uncas had covered them slightly with brush, the temporary accommodations were deemed sufficient. The young Indian pointed toward his rude hut when his labor was ended; and Heyward, who understood the meaning of the silent gestures, gently urged Munro to enter. Leaving the bereaved old man alone with his sorrows, Duncan immediately returned into the open air, too much excited himself to seek the repose he had recommended to his veteran friend.

While Hawkeye and the Indians lighted their fire and took their evening's repast, a frugal meal of dried bear's meat, the young man paid

a visit to that curtain of the dilapidated fort which looked out on the sheet of the Horican. The wind had fallen, and the waves were already rolling on the sandy beach beneath him, in a more regular and tempered succession. The clouds, as if tired of their furious chase, were breaking asunder; the heavier volumes, gathering in black masses about the horizon, while the lighter scud still hurried above the water, or eddied among the tops of the mountains, like broken flights of birds, hovering around their roosts. Here and there, a red and fiery star struggled through the drifting vapor, furnishing a lurid gleam of brightness to the dull aspect of the heavens. Within the bosom of the encircling hills, an impenetrable darkness had already settled; and the plain lay like a vast and deserted charnel-house, without omen or whisper to disturb the slumbers of its numerous and hapless tenants.

Of this scene, so chillingly in accordance with the past, Duncan stood for many minutes a rapt observer. His eyes wandered from the bosom of the mound, where the foresters were seated around their glimmering fire, to the fainter light which still lingered in the skies, and then rested long and anxiously on the embodied gloom, which lay like a dreary void on that side of him where the dead reposed. He soon fancied that inexplicable sounds arose from the place, though so indistinct and stolen, as to render not only their nature but even their existence uncertain. Ashamed of his apprehensions, the young man turned toward the water, and strove to divert his attention to the mimic stars that dimly glimmered on its moving surface. Still, his too-conscious ears performed their ungrateful duty, as if to warn him of some lurking danger. At length, a swift trampling seemed, quite audibly, to rush athwart the darkness. Unable any longer to quiet his uneasiness, Duncan spoke in a low voice to the scout, requesting him to ascend the mound to the place where he stood. Hawkeye threw his rifle across an arm and complied, but with an air so unmoved and calm, as to prove how much he counted on the security of their position.

“Listen!” said Duncan, when the other placed himself deliberately at his elbow; “there are suppressed noises on the plain which may show Montcalm has not yet entirely deserted his conquest.”

“Then ears are better than eyes,” said the undisturbed scout, who, having just deposited a portion of a bear between his grinders, spoke thick and slow, like one whose mouth was doubly occupied. “I myself saw him caged in Ty, with all his host; for your Frenchers, when they have done a clever thing, like to get back, and have a dance, or a merry-making, with the women over their success.”

“I know not. An Indian seldom sleeps in war, and plunder may keep a Huron here after his tribe has departed. It would be well to extinguish the fire, and have a watch— listen! you hear the noise I mean!”

“An Indian more rarely lurks about the graves. Though ready to slay, and not over regardful of the means, he is commonly content with the scalp, unless when blood is hot, and temper up; but after spirit is once fairly gone, he forgets his enmity, and is willing to let the dead find their natural rest. Speaking of spirits, major, are you of opinion that the heaven of a red-skin and of us whites will be of one and the same?”

“No doubt—no doubt. I thought I heard it again! or was it the rustling of the leaves in the top of the beech?”

“For my own part,” continued Hawkeye, turning his face for a moment in the direction indicated by Heyward, but with a vacant and careless manner, “I believe that paradise is ordained for happiness; and that men will be indulged in it according to their dispositions and gifts. I, therefore, judge that a red-skin is not far from the truth when he believes he is to find them glorious hunting grounds of which his traditions tell; nor, for that matter, do I think it would be any disparagement to a man without a cross to pass his time—”

“You hear it again?” interrupted Duncan.

“Ay, ay; when food is scarce, and when food is plenty, a wolf grows bold,” said the unmoved scout. “There would be picking, too, among the skins of the devils, if there was light and time for the sport. But, concerning the life that is to come, major; I have heard preachers say, in the settlements, that heaven was a place of rest. Now, men’s minds differ as to their ideas of enjoyment. For myself, and I say it with reverence to the ordering of Providence, it would be no great indulgence to be kept shut up in those mansions of which they preach, having a natural longing for motion and the chase.”

Duncan, who was now made to understand the nature of the noise he had heard, answered, with more attention to the subject which the humor of the scout had chosen for discussion, by saying:

“It is difficult to account for the feelings that may attend the last great change.”

“It would be a change, indeed, for a man who has passed his days in the open air,” returned the single-minded scout; “and who has so often broken his fast on the head waters of the Hudson, to sleep within sound of the roaring Mohawk. But it is a comfort to know we serve a merciful Master, though we do it each after his fashion, and with great tracts of wilderness atween us — what goes there?”

“Is it not the rushing of the wolves you have mentioned?”

Hawkeye slowly shook his head, and beckoned for Duncan to follow him to a spot to which the glare from the fire did not extend. When he had taken this precaution, the scout placed himself in an attitude of intense attention and listened long and keenly for a repetition of the low sound that had so unexpectedly startled him. His vigilance, however,

seemed exercised in vain; for after a fruitless pause, he whispered to Duncan:

“We must give a call to Uncas. The boy has Indian senses, and he may hear what is hid from us; for, being a white– skin, I will not deny my nature.”

The young Mohican, who was conversing in a low voice with his father, started as he heard the moaning of an owl, and, springing on his feet, he looked toward the black mounds, as if seeking the place whence the sounds proceeded. The scout repeated the call, and in a few moments, Duncan saw the figure of Uncas stealing cautiously along the rampart, to the spot where they stood.

Hawkeye explained his wishes in a very few words, which were spoken in the Delaware tongue. So soon as Uncas was in possession of the reason why he was summoned, he threw himself flat on the turf; where, to the eyes of Duncan, he appeared to lie quiet and motionless. Surprised at the immovable attitude of the young warrior, and curious to observe the manner in which he employed his faculties to obtain the desired information, Heyward advanced a few steps, and bent over the dark object on which he had kept his eye riveted. Then it was he discovered that the form of Uncas vanished, and that he beheld only the dark outline of an inequality in the embankment.

“What has become of the Mohican?” he demanded of the scout, stepping back in amazement; “it was here that I saw him fall, and could have sworn that here he yet remained.”

“Hist! speak lower; for we know not what ears are open, and the Mingoes are a quick–witted breed. As for Uncas, he is out on the plain, and the Maquas, if any such are about us, will find their equal.”

“You think that Montcalm has not called off all his Indians? Let us give the alarm to our companions, that we may stand to our arms. Here are five of us, who are not unused to meet an enemy.”

“Not a word to either, as you value your life. Look at the Sagamore, how like a grand Indian chief he sits by the fire. If there are any skulkers out in the darkness, they will never discover, by his countenance, that we suspect danger at hand.”

“But they may discover him, and it will prove his death. His person can be too plainly seen by the light of that fire, and he will become the first and most certain victim.”

“It is undeniable that now you speak the truth,” returned the scout, betraying more anxiety than was usual; “yet what can be done? A single suspicious look might bring on an attack before we are ready to receive it. He knows, by the call I gave to Uncas, that we have struck a scent; I will tell him that we are on the trail of the Mingoes; his Indian nature will teach him how to act.”

The scout applied his fingers to his mouth, and raised a low hissing sound, that caused Duncan at first to start aside, believing that he heard a serpent. The head of Chingachgook was resting on a hand, as he sat musing by himself but the moment he had heard the warning of the animal whose name he bore, he arose to an upright position, and his dark eyes glanced swiftly and keenly on every side of him. With his sudden and, perhaps, involuntary movement, every appearance of surprise or alarm ended. His rifle lay untouched, and apparently unnoticed, within reach of his hand. The tomahawk that he had loosened in his belt for the sake of ease, was even suffered to fall from its usual situation to the ground, and his form seemed to sink, like that of a man whose nerves and sinews were suffered to relax for the purpose of rest. Cunningly resuming his former position, though with a change of hands, as if the movement had been made merely to relieve the limb, the native awaited

the result with a calmness and fortitude that none but an Indian warrior would have known how to exercise.

But Heyward saw that while to a less instructed eye the Mohican chief appeared to slumber, his nostrils were expanded, his head was turned a little to one side, as if to assist the organs of hearing, and that his quick and rapid glances ran incessantly over every object within the power of his vision.

“See the noble fellow!” whispered Hawkeye, pressing the arm of Heyward; “he knows that a look or a motion might disconcert our schemes, and put us at the mercy of them imps —”

He was interrupted by the flash and report of a rifle. The air was filled with sparks of fire, around that spot where the eyes of Heyward were still fastened, with admiration and wonder. A second look told him that Chingachgook had disappeared in the confusion. In the meantime, the scout had thrown forward his rifle, like one prepared for service, and awaited impatiently the moment when an enemy might rise to view. But with the solitary and fruitless attempt made on the life of Chingachgook, the attack appeared to have terminated. Once or twice the listeners thought they could distinguish the distant rustling of bushes, as bodies of some unknown description rushed through them; nor was it long before Hawkeye pointed out the “scampering of the wolves,” as they fled precipitately before the passage of some intruder on their proper domains. After an impatient and breathless pause, a plunge was heard in the water, and it was immediately followed by the report of another rifle.

“There goes Uncas!” said the scout; “the boy bears a smart piece! I know its crack, as well as a father knows the language of his child, for I carried the gun myself until a better offered.”

“What can this mean?” demanded Duncan’ “we are watched, and, as it would seem, marked for destruction.”

“Yonder scattered brand can witness that no good was intended, and this Indian will testify that no harm has been done,” returned the scout, dropping his rifle across his arm again, and following Chingachgook, who just then reappeared within the circle of light, into the bosom of the work. “How is it, Sagamore? Are the Mingoës upon us in earnest, or is it only one of those reptiles who hang upon the skirts of a war-party, to scalp the dead, go in, and make their boast among the squaws of the valiant deeds done on the pale faces?”

Chingachgook very quietly resumed his seat; nor did he make any reply, until after he had examined the firebrand which had been struck by the bullet that had nearly proved fatal to himself. After which he was content to reply, holding a single finger up to view, with the English monosyllable:

“One.”

“I thought as much,” returned Hawkeye, seating himself; “and as he had got the cover of the lake afore Uncas pulled upon him, it is more than probable the knave will sing his lies about some great ambushment, in which he was outlying on the trail of two Mohicans and a white hunter—for the officers can be considered as little better than idlers in such a scrimmage. Well, let him—let him. There are always some honest men in every nation, though heaven knows, too, that they are scarce among the Maquas, to look down an upstart when he brags ag’in the face of reason. The varlet sent his lead within whistle of your ears, Sagamore.”

Chingachgook turned a calm and incurious eye toward the place where the ball had struck, and then resumed his former attitude, with a composure that could not be disturbed by so trifling an incident. Just then Uncas glided into the circle, and seated himself at the fire, with the same appearance of indifference as was maintained by his father.

Of these several moments Heyward was a deeply interested and wondering observer. It appeared to him as though the foresters had some secret means of intelligence, which had escaped the vigilance of his own faculties. In place of that eager and garrulous narration with which a white youth would have endeavored to communicate, and perhaps exaggerate, that which had passed out in the darkness of the plain, the young warrior was seemingly content to let his deeds speak for themselves. It was, in fact, neither the moment nor the occasion for an Indian to boast of his exploits; and it is probably that, had Heyward neglected to inquire, not another syllable would, just then, have been uttered on the subject.

“What has become of our enemy, Uncas?” demanded Duncan; “we heard your rifle, and hoped you had not fired in vain.”

The young chief removed a fold of his hunting skirt, and quietly exposed the fatal tuft of hair, which he bore as the symbol of victory. Chingachgook laid his hand on the scalp, and considered it for a moment with deep attention. Then dropping it, with disgust depicted in his strong features, he ejaculated:

“Oneida!”

“Oneida!” repeated the scout, who was fast losing his interest in the scene, in an apathy nearly assimilated to that of his red associates, but who now advanced in uncommon earnestness to regard the bloody badge. “By the Lord, if the Oneidas are outlying upon the trail, we shall be flanked by devils on every side of us! Now, to white eyes there is no difference between this bit of skin and that of any other Indian, and yet the Sagamore declares it came from the poll of a Mingo; nay, he even names the tribe of the poor devil, with as much ease as if the scalp was the leaf of a book, and each hair a letter. What right have Christian whites to boast of their learning, when a savage can read a language that

would prove too much for the wisest of them all! What say you, lad, of what people was the knave?"

Uncas raised his eyes to the face of the scout, and answered, in his soft voice:

"Oneida."

"Oneida, again! when one Indian makes a declaration it is commonly true; but when he is supported by his people, set it down as gospel!"

"The poor fellow has mistaken us for French," said Heyward; "or he would not have attempted the life of a friend."

"He mistake a Mohican in his paint for a Huron! You would be as likely to mistake the white-coated grenadiers of Montcalm for the scarlet jackets of the Royal Americans," returned the scout. "No, no, the serpent knew his errand; nor was there any great mistake in the matter, for there is but little love atween a Delaware and a Mingo, let their tribes go out to fight for whom they may, in a white quarrel. For that matter, though the Oneidas do serve his sacred majesty, who is my sovereign lord and master, I should not have deliberated long about letting off 'killdeer' at the imp myself, had luck thrown him in my way."

"That would have been an abuse of our treaties, and unworthy of your character."

"When a man consort much with a people," continued Hawkeye, "if they were honest and he no knave, love will grow up atwixt them. It is true that white cunning has managed to throw the tribes into great confusion, as respects friends and enemies; so that the Hurons and the Oneidas, who speak the same tongue, or what may be called the same, take each other's scalps, and the Delawares are divided among themselves; a few hanging about their great council-fire on their own river, and fighting on

the same side with the Mingoes while the greater part are in the Canadas, out of natural enmity to the Maquas—thus throwing everything into disorder, and destroying all the harmony of warfare. Yet a red natur' is not likely to alter with every shift of policy; so that the love atwixt a Mohican and a Mingo is much like the regard between a white man and a serpent."

"I regret to hear it; for I had believed those natives who dwelt within our boundaries had found us too just and liberal, not to identify themselves fully with our quarrels."

"Why, I believe it is natur' to give a preference to one's own quarrels before those of strangers. Now, for myself, I do love justice; and, therefore, I will not say I hate a Mingo, for that may be unsuitable to my color and my religion, though I will just repeat, it may have been owing to the night that 'killdeer' had no hand in the death of this skulking Oneida."

Then, as if satisfied with the force of his own reasons, whatever might be their effect on the opinions of the other disputant, the honest but implacable woodsman turned from the fire, content to let the controversy slumber. Heyward withdrew to the rampart, too uneasy and too little accustomed to the warfare of the woods to remain at ease under the possibility of such insidious attacks. Not so, however, with the scout and the Mohicans. Those acute and long-practised senses, whose powers so often exceed the limits of all ordinary credulity, after having detected the danger, had enabled them to ascertain its magnitude and duration. Not one of the three appeared in the least to doubt their perfect security, as was indicated by the preparations that were soon made to sit in council over their future proceedings.

The confusion of nations, and even of tribes, to which Hawkeye alluded, existed at that period in the fullest force. The great tie of language, and, of course, of a common origin, was severed in many places; and it was

one of its consequences, that the Delaware and the Mingo (as the people of the Six Nations were called) were found fighting in the same ranks, while the latter sought the scalp of the Huron, though believed to be the root of his own stock. The Delawares were even divided among themselves. Though love for the soil which had belonged to his ancestors kept the Sagamore of the Mohicans with a small band of followers who were serving at Edward, under the banners of the English king, by far the largest portion of his nation were known to be in the field as allies of Montcalm. The reader probably knows, if enough has not already been gleaned from this narrative, that the Delaware, or Lenape, claimed to be the progenitors of that numerous people, who once were masters of most of the eastern and northern states of America, of whom the community of the Mohicans was an ancient and highly honored member.

It was, of course, with a perfect understanding of the minute and intricate interests which had armed friend against friend, and brought natural enemies to combat by each other's side, that the scout and his companions now disposed themselves to deliberate on the measures that were to govern their future movements, amid so many jarring and savage races of men. Duncan knew enough of Indian customs to understand the reason that the fire was replenished, and why the warriors, not excepting Hawkeye, took their seats within the curl of its smoke with so much gravity and decorum. Placing himself at an angle of the works, where he might be a spectator of the scene without, he awaited the result with as much patience as he could summon.

After a short and impressive pause, Chingachgook lighted a pipe whose bowl was curiously carved in one of the soft stones of the country, and whose stem was a tube of wood, and commenced smoking. When he had inhaled enough of the fragrance of the soothing weed, he passed the instrument into the hands of the scout. In this manner the pipe had made its rounds three several times, amid the most profound silence, before either of the party opened his lips. Then the Sagamore, as the oldest and

highest in rank, in a few calm and dignified words, proposed the subject for deliberation. He was answered by the scout; and Chingachgook rejoined, when the other objected to his opinions. But the youthful Uncas continued a silent and respectful listener, until Hawkeye, in complaisance, demanded his opinion. Heyward gathered from the manners of the different speakers, that the father and son espoused one side of a disputed question, while the white man maintained the other. The contest gradually grew warmer, until it was quite evident the feelings of the speakers began to be somewhat enlisted in the debate.

Notwithstanding the increasing warmth of the amicable contest, the most decorous Christian assembly, not even excepting those in which its reverend ministers are collected, might have learned a wholesome lesson of moderation from the forbearance and courtesy of the disputants. The words of Uncas were received with the same deep attention as those which fell from the maturer wisdom of his father; and so far from manifesting any impatience, neither spoke in reply, until a few moments of silent meditation were, seemingly, bestowed in deliberating on what had already been said.

The language of the Mohicans was accompanied by gestures so direct and natural that Heyward had but little difficulty in following the thread of their argument. On the other hand, the scout was obscure; because from the lingering pride of color, he rather affected the cold and artificial manner which characterizes all classes of Anglo-Americans when unexcited. By the frequency with which the Indians described the marks of a forest trail, it was evident they urged a pursuit by land, while the repeated sweep of Hawkeye's arm toward the Horican denoted that he was for a passage across its waters.

The latter was to every appearance fast losing ground, and the point was about to be decided against him, when he arose to his feet, and shaking off his apathy, he suddenly assumed the manner of an Indian, and adopted all the arts of native eloquence. Elevating an arm, he pointed out

the track of the sun, repeating the gesture for every day that was necessary to accomplish their objects. Then he delineated a long and painful path, amid rocks and water-courses. The age and weakness of the slumbering and unconscious Munro were indicated by signs too palpable to be mistaken. Duncan perceived that even his own powers were spoken lightly of, as the scout extended his palm, and mentioned him by the appellation of the "Open Hand"—a name his liberality had purchased of all the friendly tribes. Then came a representation of the light and graceful movements of a canoe, set in forcible contrast to the tottering steps of one enfeebled and tired. He concluded by pointing to the scalp of the Oneida, and apparently urging the necessity of their departing speedily, and in a manner that should leave no trail.

The Mohicans listened gravely, and with countenances that reflected the sentiments of the speaker. Conviction gradually wrought its influence, and toward the close of Hawkeye's speech, his sentences were accompanied by the customary exclamation of commendation. In short, Uncas and his father became converts to his way of thinking, abandoning their own previously expressed opinions with a liberality and candor that, had they been the representatives of some great and civilized people, would have infallibly worked their political ruin, by destroying forever their reputation for consistency.

The instant the matter in discussion was decided, the debate, and everything connected with it, except the result appeared to be forgotten. Hawkeye, without looking round to read his triumph in applauding eyes, very composedly stretched his tall frame before the dying embers, and closed his own organs in sleep.

Left now in a measure to themselves, the Mohicans, whose time had been so much devoted to the interests of others, seized the moment to devote some attention to themselves. Casting off at once the grave and austere demeanor of an Indian chief, Chingachgook commenced speaking to his son in the soft and playful tones of affection. Uncas

gladly met the familiar air of his father; and before the hard breathing of the scout announced that he slept, a complete change was effected in the manner of his two associates.

It is impossible to describe the music of their language, while thus engaged in laughter and endearments, in such a way as to render it intelligible to those whose ears have never listened to its melody. The compass of their voices, particularly that of the youth, was wonderful—extending from the deepest bass to tones that were even feminine in softness. The eyes of the father followed the plastic and ingenious movements of the son with open delight, and he never failed to smile in reply to the other's contagious but low laughter. While under the influence of these gentle and natural feelings, no trace of ferocity was to be seen in the softened features of the Sagamore. His figured panoply of death looked more like a disguise assumed in mockery than a fierce annunciation of a desire to carry destruction in his footsteps.

After an hour had passed in the indulgence of their better feelings, Chingachgook abruptly announced his desire to sleep, by wrapping his head in his blanket and stretching his form on the naked earth. The merriment of Uncas instantly ceased; and carefully raking the coals in such a manner that they should impart their warmth to his father's feet, the youth sought his own pillow among the ruins of the place.

Imbibing renewed confidence from the security of these experienced foresters, Heyward soon imitated their example; and long before the night had turned, they who lay in the bosom of the ruined work, seemed to slumber as heavily as the unconscious multitude whose bones were already beginning to bleach on the surrounding plain.