

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 22

Bot.—Abibl we all met?

Qui.—Pat—pat; and here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal.

—Midsummer Night's Dream

The reader may better imagine, that we describe the surprise of Heyward. His lurking Indians were suddenly converted into four-footed beasts; his lake into a beaver pond; his cataract into a dam, constructed by those industrious and ingenious quadrupeds; and a suspected enemy into his tried friend, David Gamut, the master of psalmody. The presence of the latter created so many unexpected hopes relative to the sisters that, without a moment's hesitation, the young man broke out of his ambush, and sprang forward to join the two principal actors in the scene.

The merriment of Hawkeye was not easily appeased. Without ceremony, and with a rough hand, he twirled the supple Gamut around on his heel, and more than once affirmed that the Hurons had done themselves great credit in the fashion of his costume. Then, seizing the hand of the other, he squeezed it with a grip that brought tears into the eyes of the placid David, and wished him joy of his new condition.

“You were about opening your throat—practisings among the beavers, were ye?” he said. “The cunning devils know half the trade already, for

they beat the time with their tails, as you heard just now; and in good time it was, too, or 'killdeer' might have sounded the first note among them. I have known greater fools, who could read and write, than an experienced old beaver; but as for squalling, the animals are born dumb! What think you of such a song as this?"

David shut his sensitive ears, and even Heyward apprised as he was of the nature of the cry, looked upward in quest of the bird, as the cawing of a crow rang in the air about them.

"See!" continued the laughing scout, as he pointed toward the remainder of the party, who, in obedience to the signal, were already approaching; "this is music which has its natural virtues; it brings two good rifles to my elbow, to say nothing of the knives and tomahawks. But we see that you are safe; now tell us what has become of the maidens."

"They are captives to the heathen," said David; "and, though greatly troubled in spirit, enjoying comfort and safety in the body."

"Both!" demanded the breathless Heyward.

"Even so. Though our wayfaring has been sore and our sustenance scanty, we have had little other cause for complaint, except the violence done our feelings, by being thus led in captivity into a far land."

"Bless ye for these very words!" exclaimed the trembling Munro; "I shall then receive my babes, spotless and angel-like, as I lost them!"

"I know not that their delivery is at hand," returned the doubting David; "the leader of these savages is possessed of an evil spirit that no power short of Omnipotence can tame. I have tried him sleeping and waking, but neither sounds nor language seem to touch his soul."

"Where is the knave?" bluntly interrupted the scout.

“He hunts the moose to-day, with his young men; and tomorrow, as I hear, they pass further into the forests, and nigher to the borders of Canada. The elder maiden is conveyed to a neighboring people, whose lodges are situate beyond yonder black pinnacle of rock; while the younger is detained among the women of the Hurons, whose dwellings are but two short miles hence, on a table-land, where the fire had done the office of the axe, and prepared the place for their reception.”

“Alice, my gentle Alice!” murmured Heyward; “she has lost the consolation of her sister’s presence!”

“Even so. But so far as praise and thanksgiving in psalmody can temper the spirit in affliction, she has not suffered.”

“Has she then a heart for music?”

“Of the graver and more solemn character; though it must be acknowledged that, in spite of all my endeavors, the maiden weeps oftener than she smiles. At such moments I forbear to press the holy songs; but there are many sweet and comfortable periods of satisfactory communication, when the ears of the savages are astounded with the upliftings of our voices.”

“And why are you permitted to go at large, unwatched?”

David composed his features into what he intended should express an air of modest humility, before he meekly replied:

“Little be the praise to such a worm as I. But, though the power of psalmody was suspended in the terrible business of that field of blood through which we have passed, it has recovered its influence even over the souls of the heathen, and I am suffered to go and come at will.”

The scout laughed, and, tapping his own forehead significantly, he perhaps explained the singular indulgence more satisfactorily when he said:

“The Indians never harm a non-composer. But why, when the path lay open before your eyes, did you not strike back on your own trail (it is not so blind as that which a squirrel would make), and bring in the tidings to Edward?”

The scout, remembering only his own sturdy and iron nature, had probably exacted a task that David, under no circumstances, could have performed. But, without entirely losing the meekness of his air, the latter was content to answer:

“Though my soul would rejoice to visit the habitations of Christendom once more, my feet would rather follow the tender spirits intrusted to my keeping, even into the idolatrous province of the Jesuits, than take one step backward, while they pined in captivity and sorrow.”

Though the figurative language of David was not very intelligible, the sincere and steady expression of his eye, and the glow of his honest countenance, were not easily mistaken. Uncas pressed closer to his side, and regarded the speaker with a look of commendation, while his father expressed his satisfaction by the ordinary pithy exclamation of approbation. The scout shook his head as he rejoined:

“The Lord never intended that the man should place all his endeavors in his throat, to the neglect of other and better gifts! But he has fallen into the hands of some silly woman, when he should have been gathering his education under a blue sky, among the beauties of the forest. Here, friend; I did intend to kindle a fire with this tooting-whistle of thine; but, as you value the thing, take it, and blow your best on it.”

Gamut received his pitch-pipe with as strong an expression of pleasure as he believed compatible with the grave functions he exercised. After essaying its virtues repeatedly, in contrast with his own voice, and, satisfying himself that none of its melody was lost, he made a very serious demonstration toward achieving a few stanzas of one of the longest effusions in the little volume so often mentioned.

Heyward, however, hastily interrupted his pious purpose by continuing questions concerning the past and present condition of his fellow captives, and in a manner more methodical than had been permitted by his feelings in the opening of their interview. David, though he regarded his treasure with longing eyes, was constrained to answer, especially as the venerable father took a part in the interrogatories, with an interest too imposing to be denied. Nor did the scout fail to throw in a pertinent inquiry, whenever a fitting occasion presented. In this manner, though with frequent interruptions which were filled with certain threatening sounds from the recovered instrument, the pursuers were put in possession of such leading circumstances as were likely to prove useful in accomplishing their great and engrossing object—the recovery of the sisters. The narrative of David was simple, and the facts but few.

Magua had waited on the mountain until a safe moment to retire presented itself, when he had descended, and taken the route along the western side of the Horican in direction of the Canadas. As the subtle Huron was familiar with the paths, and well knew there was no immediate danger of pursuit, their progress had been moderate, and far from fatiguing. It appeared from the unembellished statement of David, that his own presence had been rather endured than desired; though even Magua had not been entirely exempt from that veneration with which the Indians regard those whom the Great Spirit had visited in their intellects. At night, the utmost care had been taken of the captives, both to prevent injury from the damps of the woods and to guard against an escape. At the spring, the horses were turned loose, as has been seen; and, notwithstanding the remoteness and length of their trail, the artifices

already named were resorted to, in order to cut off every clue to their place of retreat. On their arrival at the encampment of his people, Magua, in obedience to a policy seldom departed from, separated his prisoners. Cora had been sent to a tribe that temporarily occupied an adjacent valley, though David was far too ignorant of the customs and history of the natives, to be able to declare anything satisfactory concerning their name or character. He only knew that they had not engaged in the late expedition against William Henry; that, like the Hurons themselves they were allies of Montcalm; and that they maintained an amicable, though a watchful intercourse with the warlike and savage people whom chance had, for a time, brought in such close and disagreeable contact with themselves.

The Mohicans and the scout listened to his interrupted and imperfect narrative, with an interest that obviously increased as he proceeded; and it was while attempting to explain the pursuits of the community in which Cora was detained, that the latter abruptly demanded:

“Did you see the fashion of their knives? wee they of English or French formation?”

“My thoughts were bent on no such vanities, but rather mingled in consolation with those of the maidens.”

“The time may come when you will not consider the knife of a savage such a despicable vanity,” returned the scout, with a strong expression of contempt for the other’s dullness. “Had they held their corn feast—or can you say anything of the totems of the tribe?”

“Of corn, we had many and plentiful feasts; for the grain, being in the milk is both sweet to the mouth and comfortable to the stomach. Of totem, I know not the meaning; but if it appertaineth in any wise to the art of Indian music, it need not be inquired after at their hands. They

never join their voices in praise, and it would seem that they are among the profanest of the idolatrous.”

“Therein you belie the natur’ of an Indian. Even the Mingo adores but the true and loving God. ‘Tis wicked fabrication of the whites, and I say it to the shame of my color that would make the warrior bow down before images of his own creation. It is true, they endeavor to make truces to the wicked one—as who would not with an enemy he cannot conquer! but they look up for favor and assistance to the Great and Good Spirit only.”

“It may be so,” said David; “but I have seen strange and fantastic images drawn in their paint, of which their admiration and care savored of spiritual pride; especially one, and that, too, a foul and loathsome object.”

“Was it a sarpent?” quickly demanded the scout.

“Much the same. It was in the likeness of an abject and creeping tortoise.”

“Hugh!” exclaimed both the attentive Mohicans in a breath; while the scout shook his head with the air of one who had made an important but by no means a pleasing discovery. Then the father spoke, in the language of the Delawares, and with a calmness and dignity that instantly arrested the attention even of those to whom his words were unintelligible. His gestures were impressive, and at times energetic. Once he lifted his arm on high; and, as it descended, the action threw aside the folds of his light mantle, a finger resting on his breast, as if he would enforce his meaning by the attitude. Duncan’s eyes followed the movement, and he perceived that the animal just mentioned was beautifully, though faintly, worked in blue tint, on the swarthy breast of the chief. All that he had ever heard of the violent separation of the vast tribes of the Delawares rushed across his mind, and he awaited the proper moment to speak, with a suspense

that was rendered nearly intolerable by his interest in the stake. His wish, however, was anticipated by the scout who turned from his red friend, saying:

“We have found that which may be good or evil to us, as heaven disposes. The Sagamore is of the high blood of the Delawares, and is the great chief of their Tortoises! That some of this stock are among the people of whom the singer tells us, is plain by his words; and, had he but spent half the breath in prudent questions that he has blown away in making a trumpet of his throat, we might have known how many warriors they numbered. It is, altogether, a dangerous path we move in; for a friend whose face is turned from you often bears a bloodier mind than the enemy who seeks your scalp.”

“Explain,” said Duncan.

”’Tis a long and melancholy tradition, and one I little like to think of; for it is not to be denied that the evil has been mainly done by men with white skins. But it has ended in turning the tomahawk of brother against brother, and brought the Mingo and the Delaware to travel in the same path.”

“You, then, suspect it is a portion of that people among whom Cora resides?”

The scout nodded his head in assent, though he seemed anxious to waive the further discussion of a subject that appeared painful. The impatient Duncan now made several hasty and desperate propositions to attempt the release of the sisters. Munro seemed to shake off his apathy, and listened to the wild schemes of the young man with a deference that his gray hairs and reverend years should have denied. But the scout, after suffering the ardor of the lover to expend itself a little, found means to convince him of the folly of precipitation, in a manner that would require their coolest judgment and utmost fortitude.

“It would be well,” he added, “to let this man go in again, as usual, and for him to tarry in the lodges, giving notice to the gentle ones of our approach, until we call him out, by signal, to consult. You know the cry of a crow, friend, from the whistle of the whip-poor-will?”

”’Tis a pleasing bird,” returned David, “and has a soft and melancholy note! though the time is rather quick and ill-measured.”

“He speaks of the wish-ton-wish,” said the scout; “well, since you like his whistle, it shall be your signal. Remember, then, when you hear the whip-poor-will’s call three times repeated, you are to come into the bushes where the bird might be supposed—”

“Stop,” interrupted Heyward; “I will accompany him.”

“You!” exclaimed the astonished Hawkeye; “are you tired of seeing the sun rise and set?”

“David is a living proof that the Hurons can be merciful.”

“Ay, but David can use his throat, as no man in his senses would pervert the gift.”

“I too can play the madman, the fool, the hero; in short, any or everything to rescue her I love. Name your objections no longer: I am resolved.”

Hawkeye regarded the young man a moment in speechless amazement. But Duncan, who, in deference to the other’s skill and services, had hitherto submitted somewhat implicitly to his dictation, now assumed the superior, with a manner that was not easily resisted. He waved his hand, in sign of his dislike to all remonstrance, and then, in more tempered language, he continued:

“You have the means of disguise; change me; paint me, too, if you will; in short, alter me to anything—a fool.”

“It is not for one like me to say that he who is already formed by so powerful a hand as Providence, stands in need of a change,” muttered the discontented scout. “When you send your parties abroad in war, you find it prudent, at least, to arrange the marks and places of encampment, in order that they who fight on your side may know when and where to expect a friend.”

“Listen,” interrupted Duncan; “you have heard from this faithful follower of the captives, that the Indians are of two tribes, if not of different nations. With one, whom you think to be a branch of the Delawares, is she you call the ‘dark-hair’; the other, and younger, of the ladies, is undeniably with our declared enemies, the Hurons. It becomes my youth and rank to attempt the latter adventure. While you, therefore, are negotiating with your friends for the release of one of the sisters, I will effect that of the other, or die.”

The awakened spirit of the young soldier gleamed in his eyes, and his form became imposing under its influence. Hawkeye, though too much accustomed to Indian artifices not to foresee the danger of the experiment, knew not well how to combat this sudden resolution.

Perhaps there was something in the proposal that suited his own hardy nature, and that secret love of desperate adventure, which had increased with his experience, until hazard and danger had become, in some measure, necessary to the enjoyment of his existence. Instead of continuing to oppose the scheme of Duncan, his humor suddenly altered, and he lent himself to its execution.

“Come,” he said, with a good-humored smile; “the buck that will take to the water must be headed, and not followed. Chingachgook has as many

different paints as the engineer officer's wife, who takes down natur' on scraps of paper, making the mountains look like cocks of rusty hay, and placing the blue sky in reach of your hand. The Sagamore can use them, too. Seat yourself on the log; and my life on it, he can soon make a natural fool of you, and that well to your liking."

Duncan complied; and the Mohican, who had been an attentive listener to the discourse, readily undertook the office. Long practised in all the subtle arts of his race, he drew, with great dexterity and quickness, the fantastic shadow that the natives were accustomed to consider as the evidence of a friendly and jocular disposition. Every line that could possibly be interpreted into a secret inclination for war, was carefully avoided; while, on the other hand, he studied those conceits that might be construed into amity.

In short, he entirely sacrificed every appearance of the warrior to the masquerade of a buffoon. Such exhibitions were not uncommon among the Indians, and as Duncan was already sufficiently disguised in his dress, there certainly did exist some reason for believing that, with his knowledge of French, he might pass for a juggler from Ticonderoga, straggling among the allied and friendly tribes.

When he was thought to be sufficiently painted, the scout gave him much friendly advice; concerted signals, and appointed the place where they should meet, in the event of mutual success. The parting between Munro and his young friend was more melancholy; still, the former submitted to the separation with an indifference that his warm and honest nature would never have permitted in a more healthful state of mind. The scout led Heyward aside, and acquainted him with his intention to leave the veteran in some safe encampment, in charge of Chingachgook, while he and Uncas pursued their inquiries among the people they had reason to believe were Delawares. Then, renewing his cautions and advice, he concluded by saying, with a solemnity and warmth of feeling, with which Duncan was deeply touched:

“And, now, God bless you! You have shown a spirit that I like; for it is the gift of youth, more especially one of warm blood and a stout heart. But believe the warning of a man who has reason to know all he says to be true. You will have occasion for your best manhood, and for a sharper wit than what is to be gathered in books, afore you outdo the cunning or get the better of the courage of a Mingo. God bless you! if the Hurons master your scalp, rely on the promise of one who has two stout warriors to back him. They shall pay for their victory, with a life for every hair it holds. I say, young gentleman, may Providence bless your undertaking, which is altogether for good; and, remember, that to outwit the knaves it is lawful to practise things that may not be naturally the gift of a white-skin.”

Duncan shook his worthy and reluctant associate warmly by the hand, once more recommended his aged friend to his care, and returning his good wishes, he motioned to David to proceed. Hawkeye gazed after the high-spirited and adventurous young man for several moments, in open admiration; then, shaking his head doubtingly, he turned, and led his own division of the party into the concealment of the forest.

The route taken by Duncan and David lay directly across the clearing of the beavers, and along the margin of their pond.

When the former found himself alone with one so simple, and so little qualified to render any assistance in desperate emergencies, he first began to be sensible of the difficulties of the task he had undertaken. The fading light increased the gloominess of the bleak and savage wilderness that stretched so far on every side of him, and there was even a fearful character in the stillness of those little huts, that he knew were so abundantly peopled. It struck him, as he gazed at the admirable structures and the wonderful precautions of their sagacious inmates, that even the brutes of these vast wilds were possessed of an instinct nearly commensurate with his own reason; and he could not reflect, without

anxiety, on the unequal contest that he had so rashly courted. Then came the glowing image of Alice; her distress; her actual danger; and all the peril of his situation was forgotten. Cheering David, he moved on with the light and vigorous step of youth and enterprise.

After making nearly a semicircle around the pond, they diverged from the water-course, and began to ascend to the level of a slight elevation in that bottom land, over which they journeyed. Within half an hour they gained the margin of another opening that bore all the signs of having been also made by the beavers, and which those sagacious animals had probably been induced, by some accident, to abandon, for the more eligible position they now occupied. A very natural sensation caused Duncan to hesitate a moment, unwilling to leave the cover of their bushy path, as a man pauses to collect his energies before he essays any hazardous experiment, in which he is secretly conscious they will all be needed. He profited by the halt, to gather such information as might be obtained from his short and hasty glances.

On the opposite side of the clearing, and near the point where the brook tumbled over some rocks, from a still higher level, some fifty or sixty lodges, rudely fabricated of logs brush, and earth intermingled, were to be discovered. They were arranged without any order, and seemed to be constructed with very little attention to neatness or beauty. Indeed, so very inferior were they in the two latter particulars to the village Duncan had just seen, that he began to expect a second surprise, no less astonishing than the former. This expectation was in no degree diminished, when, by the doubtful twilight, he beheld twenty or thirty forms rising alternately from the cover of the tall, coarse grass, in front of the lodges, and then sinking again from the sight, as it were to burrow in the earth. By the sudden and hasty glimpses that he caught of these figures, they seemed more like dark, glancing specters, or some other unearthly beings, than creatures fashioned with the ordinary and vulgar materials of flesh and blood. A gaunt, naked form was seen, for a single instant, tossing its arms wildly in the air, and then the spot it had filled

was vacant; the figure appearing suddenly in some other and distant place, or being succeeded by another, possessing the same mysterious character. David, observing that his companion lingered, pursued the direction of his gaze, and in some measure recalled the recollection of Heyward, by speaking.

“There is much fruitful soil uncultivated here,” he said; “and, I may add, without the sinful leaven of self–commendation, that, since my short sojourn in these heathenish abodes, much good seed has been scattered by the wayside.”

“The tribes are fonder of the chase than of the arts of men of labor,” returned the unconscious Duncan, still gazing at the objects of his wonder.

“It is rather joy than labor to the spirit, to lift up the voice in praise; but sadly do these boys abuse their gifts. Rarely have I found any of their age, on whom nature has so freely bestowed the elements of psalmody; and surely, surely, there are none who neglect them more. Three nights have I now tarried here, and three several times have I assembled the urchins to join in sacred song; and as often have they responded to my efforts with whoopings and howlings that have chilled my soul!”

“Of whom speak you?”

“Of those children of the devil, who waste the precious moments in yonder idle antics. Ah! the wholesome restraint of discipline is but little known among this self–abandoned people. In a country of birches, a rod is never seen, and it ought not to appear a marvel in my eyes, that the choicest blessings of Providence are wasted in such cries as these.”

David closed his ears against the juvenile pack, whose yell just then rang shrilly through the forest; and Duncan, suffering his lip to curl, as in mockery of his own superstition, said firmly:

“We will proceed.”

Without removing the safeguards from his ears, the master of song complied, and together they pursued their way toward what David was sometimes wont to call the “tents of the Philistines.”