

The Last of the Mohicans

By

James Fenimore Cooper

Chapter 25

Snug.--Have you the lion's part written? Pray you, if it be, give it to me, for I am slow of study.

Quince.--You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring.

—Midsummer Night's Dream

There was a strange blending of the ridiculous with that which was solemn in this scene. The beast still continued its rolling, and apparently untiring movements, though its ludicrous attempt to imitate the melody of David ceased the instant the latter abandoned the field. The words of Gamut were, as has been seen, in his native tongue; and to Duncan they seem pregnant with some hidden meaning, though nothing present assisted him in discovering the object of their allusion. A speedy end was, however, put to every conjecture on the subject, by the manner of the chief, who advanced to the bedside of the invalid, and beckoned away the whole group of female attendants that had clustered there to witness the skill of the stranger. He was implicitly, though reluctantly, obeyed; and when the low echo which rang along the hollow, natural gallery, from the distant closing door, had ceased, pointing toward his insensible daughter, he said:

“Now let my brother show his power.”

Thus unequivocally called on to exercise the functions of his assumed character, Heyward was apprehensive that the smallest delay might prove dangerous. Endeavoring, then, to collect his ideas, he prepared to perform that species of incantation, and those uncouth rites, under which the Indian conjurers are accustomed to conceal their ignorance and impotency. It is more than probable that, in the disordered state of his thoughts, he would soon have fallen into some suspicious, if not fatal, error had not his incipient attempts been interrupted by a fierce growl from the quadruped. Three several times did he renew his efforts to proceed, and as often was he met by the same unaccountable opposition, each interruption seeming more savage and threatening than the preceding.

“The cunning ones are jealous,” said the Huron; “I go Brother, the woman is the wife of one of my bravest young men; deal justly by her. Peace!” he added, beckoning to the discontented beast to be quiet; “I go.”

The chief was as good as his word, and Duncan now found himself alone in that wild and desolate abode with the helpless invalid and the fierce and dangerous brute. The latter listened to the movements of the Indian with that air of sagacity that a bear is known to possess, until another echo announced that he had also left the cavern, when it turned and came waddling up to Duncan before whom it seated itself in its natural attitude, erect like a man. The youth looked anxiously about him for some weapon, with which he might make a resistance against the attack he now seriously expected.

It seemed, however, as if the humor of the animal had suddenly changed. Instead of continuing its discontented growls, or manifesting any further signs of anger, the whole of its shaggy body shook violently, as if agitated by some strange internal convulsion. The huge and unwieldy talons pawed stupidly about the grinning muzzle, and while Heyward kept his eyes riveted on its movements with jealous watchfulness, the

grim head fell on one side and in its place appeared the honest sturdy countenance of the scout, who was indulging from the bottom of his soul in his own peculiar expression of merriment.

“Hist!” said the wary woodsman, interrupting Heyward’s exclamation of surprise; “the varlets are about the place, and any sounds that are not natural to witchcraft would bring them back upon us in a body.”

“Tell me the meaning of this masquerade; and why you have attempted so desperate an adventure?”

“Ah, reason and calculation are often outdone by accident,” returned the scout. “But, as a story should always commence at the beginning, I will tell you the whole in order. After we parted I placed the commandant and the Sagamore in an old beaver lodge, where they are safer from the Hurons than they would be in the garrison of Edward for your high north-west Indians, not having as yet got the traders among them, continued to venerate the beaver. After which Uncas and I pushed for the other encampment as was agreed. Have you seen the lad?”

“To my great grief! He is captive, and condemned to die at the rising of the sun.”

“I had misgivings that such would be his fate,” resumed the scout, in a less confident and joyous tone. But soon regaining his naturally firm voice, he continued: “His bad fortune is the true reason of my being here, for it would never do to abandon such a boy to the Hurons. A rare time the knaves would have of it, could they tie ‘The Bounding Elk’ and ‘The Long Carabine’, as they call me, to the same stake! Though why they have given me such a name I never knew, there being as little likeness between the gifts of ‘killdeer’ and the performance of one of your real Canada carabynes, as there is between the natur’ of a pipe-stone and a flint.”

“Keep to your tale,” said the impatient Heyward; “we know not at what moment the Hurons may return.”

“No fear of them. A conjurer must have his time, like a straggling priest in the settlements. We are as safe from interruption as a missionary would be at the beginning of a two hours’ discourse. Well, Uncas and I fell in with a return party of the varlets; the lad was much too forward for a scout; nay, for that matter, being of hot blood, he was not so much to blame; and, after all, one of the Hurons proved a coward, and in fleeing led him into an ambushment.”

“And dearly has he paid for the weakness.”

The scout significantly passed his hand across his own throat, and nodded, as if he said, “I comprehend your meaning.” After which he continued, in a more audible though scarcely more intelligible language:

“After the loss of the boy I turned upon the Hurons, as you may judge. There have been scimmages atween one or two of their outlyers and myself; but that is neither here nor there. So, after I had shot the imps, I got in pretty nigh to the lodges without further commotion. Then what should luck do in my favor but lead me to the very spot where one of the most famous conjurers of the tribe was dressing himself, as I well knew, for some great battle with Satan— though why should I call that luck, which it now seems was an especial ordering of Providence. So a judgmatical rap over the head stiffened the lying impostor for a time, and leaving him a bit of walnut for his supper, to prevent an uproar, and stringing him up atween two saplings, I made free with his finery, and took the part of the bear on myself, in order that the operations might proceed.”

“And admirably did you enact the character; the animal itself might have been shamed by the representation.”

“Lord, major,” returned the flattered woodsman, “I should be but a poor scholar for one who has studied so long in the wilderness, did I not know how to set forth the movements of natur’ of such a beast. Had it been now a catamount, or even a full–size panther, I would have embellished a performance for you worth regarding. But it is no such marvelous feat to exhibit the feats of so dull a beast; though, for that matter, too, a bear may be overacted. Yes, yes; it is not every imitator that knows natur’ may be outdone easier than she is equaled. But all our work is yet before us. Where is the gentle one?”

“Heaven knows. I have examined every lodge in the village, without discovering the slightest trace of her presence in the tribe.”

“You heard what the singer said, as he left us: ‘She is at hand, and expects you’?”

“I have been compelled to believe he alluded to this unhappy woman.”

“The simpleton was frightened, and blundered through his message; but he had a deeper meaning. Here are walls enough to separate the hole settlement. A bear ought to climb; therefore will I take a look above them. There may be honey–pots hid in these rocks, and I am a beast, you know, that has a hankering for the sweets.”

The scout looked behind him, laughing at his own conceit, while he clambered up the partition, imitating, as he went, the clumsy motions of the beast he represented; but the instant the summit was gained he made a gesture for silence, and slid down with the utmost precipitation.

“She is here,” he whispered, “and by that door you will find her. I would have spoken a word of comfort to the afflicted soul; but the sight of such a monster might upset her reason. Though for that matter, major, you are none of the most inviting yourself in your paint.”

Duncan, who had already swung eagerly forward, drew instantly back on hearing these discouraging words.

“Am I, then, so very revolting?” he demanded, with an air of chagrin.

“You might not startle a wolf, or turn the Royal Americans from a discharge; but I have seen the time when you had a better favored look; your streaked countenances are not ill– judged of by the squaws, but young women of white blood give the preference to their own color. See,” he added, pointing to a place where the water trickled from a rock, forming a little crystal spring, before it found an issue through the adjacent crevices; “you may easily get rid of the Sagamore’s daub, and when you come back I will try my hand at a new embellishment. It’s as common for a conjurer to alter his paint as for a buck in the settlements to change his finery.”

The deliberate woodsman had little occasion to hunt for arguments to enforce his advice. He was yet speaking when Duncan availed himself of the water. In a moment every frightful or offensive mark was obliterated, and the youth appeared again in the lineaments with which he had been gifted by nature. Thus prepared for an interview with his mistress, he took a hasty leave of his companion, and disappeared through the indicated passage. The scout witnessed his departure with complacency, nodding his head after him, and muttering his good wishes; after which he very coolly set about an examination of the state of the larder, among the Hurons, the cavern, among other purposes, being used as a receptacle for the fruits of their hunts.

Duncan had no other guide than a distant glimmering light, which served, however, the office of a polar star to the lover. By its aid he was enabled to enter the haven of his hopes, which was merely another apartment of the cavern, that had been solely appropriated to the safekeeping of so important a prisoner as a daughter of the commandant of William Henry. It was profusely strewn with the plunder of that

unlucky fortress. In the midst of this confusion he found her he sought, pale, anxious and terrified, but lovely. David had prepared her for such a visit.

“Duncan!” she exclaimed, in a voice that seemed to tremble at the sounds created by itself.

“Alice!” he answered, leaping carelessly among trunks, boxes, arms, and furniture, until he stood at her side.

“I knew that you would never desert me,” she said, looking up with a momentary glow on her otherwise dejected countenance. “But you are alone! Grateful as it is to be thus remembered, I could wish to think you are not entirely alone.”

Duncan, observing that she trembled in a manner which betrayed her inability to stand, gently induced her to be seated, while he recounted those leading incidents which it has been our task to accord. Alice listened with breathless interest; and though the young man touched lightly on the sorrows of the stricken father; taking care, however, not to wound the self-love of his auditor, the tears ran as freely down the cheeks of the daughter as though she had never wept before. The soothing tenderness of Duncan, however, soon quieted the first burst of her emotions, and she then heard him to the close with undivided attention, if not with composure.

“And now, Alice,” he added, “you will see how much is still expected of you. By the assistance of our experienced and invaluable friend, the scout, we may find our way from this savage people, but you will have to exert your utmost fortitude. Remember that you fly to the arms of your venerable parent, and how much his happiness, as well as your own, depends on those exertions.”

“Can I do otherwise for a father who has done so much for me?”

“And for me, too,” continued the youth, gently pressing the hand he held in both his own.

The look of innocence and surprise which he received in return convinced Duncan of the necessity of being more explicit.

“This is neither the place nor the occasion to detain you with selfish wishes,” he added; “but what heart loaded like mine would not wish to cast its burden? They say misery is the closest of all ties; our common suffering in your behalf left but little to be explained between your father and myself.”

“And, dearest Cora, Duncan; surely Cora was not forgotten?”

“Not forgotten! no; regretted, as woman was seldom mourned before. Your venerable father knew no difference between his children; but I— Alice, you will not be offended when I say, that to me her worth was in a degree obscured—”

“Then you knew not the merit of my sister,” said Alice, withdrawing her hand; “of you she ever speaks as of one who is her dearest friend.”

“I would gladly believe her such,” returned Duncan, hastily; “I could wish her to be even more; but with you, Alice, I have the permission of your father to aspire to a still nearer and dearer tie.”

Alice trembled violently, and there was an instant during which she bent her face aside, yielding to the emotions common to her sex; but they quickly passed away, leaving her mistress of her deportment, if not of her affections.

“Heyward,” she said, looking him full in the face with a touching expression of innocence and dependency, “give me the sacred presence and the holy sanction of that parent before you urge me further.”

“Though more I should not, less I could not say,” the youth was about to answer, when he was interrupted by a light tap on his shoulder. Starting to his feet, he turned, and, confronting the intruder, his looks fell on the dark form and malignant visage of Magua. The deep guttural laugh of the savage sounded, at such a moment, to Duncan, like the hellish taunt of a demon. Had he pursued the sudden and fierce impulse of the instant, he would have cast himself on the Huron, and committed their fortunes to the issue of a deadly struggle. But, without arms of any description, ignorant of what succor his subtle enemy could command, and charged with the safety of one who was just then dearer than ever to his heart, he no sooner entertained than he abandoned the desperate intention.

“What is your purpose?” said Alice, meekly folding her arms on her bosom, and struggling to conceal an agony of apprehension in behalf of Heyward, in the usual cold and distant manner with which she received the visits of her captor.

The exulting Indian had resumed his austere countenance, though he drew warily back before the menacing glance of the young man’s fiery eye. He regarded both his captives for a moment with a steady look, and then, stepping aside, he dropped a log of wood across a door different from that by which Duncan had entered. The latter now comprehended the manner of his surprise, and, believing himself irretrievably lost, he drew Alice to his bosom, and stood prepared to meet a fate which he hardly regretted, since it was to be suffered in such company. But Magua meditated no immediate violence. His first measures were very evidently taken to secure his new captive; nor did he even bestow a second glance at the motionless forms in the center of the cavern, until he had completely cut off every hope of retreat through the private outlet he had himself used. He was watched in all his movements by Heyward, who,

however, remained firm, still folding the fragile form of Alice to his heart, at once too proud and too hopeless to ask favor of an enemy so often foiled. When Magua had effected his object he approached his prisoners, and said in English:

“The pale faces trap the cunning beavers; but the red–skins know how to take the Yengeese.”

“Huron, do your worst!” exclaimed the excited Heyward, forgetful that a double stake was involved in his life; “you and your vengeance are alike despised.”

“Will the white man speak these words at the stake?” asked Magua; manifesting, at the same time, how little faith he had in the other’s resolution by the sneer that accompanied his words.

“Here; singly to your face, or in the presence of your nation.”

“Le Renard Subtil is a great chief!” returned the Indian; “he will go and bring his young men, to see how bravely a pale face can laugh at tortures.”

He turned away while speaking, and was about to leave the place through the avenue by which Duncan had approached, when a growl caught his ear, and caused him to hesitate. The figure of the bear appeared in the door, where it sat, rolling from side to side in its customary restlessness. Magua, like the father of the sick woman, eyed it keenly for a moment, as if to ascertain its character. He was far above the more vulgar superstitions of his tribe, and so soon as he recognized the well–known attire of the conjurer, he prepared to pass it in cool contempt. But a louder and more threatening growl caused him again to pause. Then he seemed as if suddenly resolved to trifle no longer, and moved resolutely forward.

The mimic animal, which had advanced a little, retired slowly in his front, until it arrived again at the pass, when, rearing on his hinder legs, it beat the air with its paws, in the manner practised by its brutal prototype.

“Fool!” exclaimed the chief, in Huron, “go play with the children and squaws; leave men to their wisdom.”

He once more endeavored to pass the supposed empiric, scorning even the parade of threatening to use the knife, or tomahawk, that was pendent from his belt. Suddenly the beast extended its arms, or rather legs, and inclosed him in a grasp that might have vied with the far-famed power of the “bear’s hug” itself. Heyward had watched the whole procedure, on the part of Hawkeye, with breathless interest. At first he relinquished his hold of Alice; then he caught up a thong of buckskin, which had been used around some bundle, and when he beheld his enemy with his two arms pinned to his side by the iron muscles of the scout, he rushed upon him, and effectually secured them there. Arms, legs, and feet were encircled in twenty folds of the thong, in less time than we have taken to record the circumstance. When the formidable Huron was completely pinioned, the scout released his hold, and Duncan laid his enemy on his back, utterly helpless.

Throughout the whole of this sudden and extraordinary operation, Magua, though he had struggled violently, until assured he was in the hands of one whose nerves were far better strung than his own, had not uttered the slightest exclamation. But when Hawkeye, by way of making a summary explanation of his conduct, removed the shaggy jaws of the beast, and exposed his own rugged and earnest countenance to the gaze of the Huron, the philosophy of the latter was so far mastered as to permit him to utter the never failing:

“Hugh!”

“Ay, you’ve found your tongue,” said his undisturbed conqueror; “now, in order that you shall not use it to our ruin, I must make free to stop your mouth.”

As there was no time to be lost, the scout immediately set about effecting so necessary a precaution; and when he had gagged the Indian, his enemy might safely have been considered as “hors de combat.”

“By what place did the imp enter?” asked the industrious scout, when his work was ended. “Not a soul has passed my way since you left me.”

Duncan pointed out the door by which Magua had come, and which now presented too many obstacles to a quick retreat.

“Bring on the gentle one, then,” continued his friend; “we must make a push for the woods by the other outlet.”

”’Tis impossible!” said Duncan; “fear has overcome her, and she is helpless. Alice! my sweet, my own Alice, arouse yourself; now is the moment to fly. ‘Tis in vain! she hears, but is unable to follow. Go, noble and worthy friend; save yourself, and leave me to my fate.”

“Every trail has its end, and every calamity brings its lesson!” returned the scout. “There, wrap her in them Indian cloths. Conceal all of her little form. Nay, that foot has no fellow in the wilderness; it will betray her. All, every part. Now take her in your arms, and follow. Leave the rest to me.”

Duncan, as may be gathered from the words of his companion, was eagerly obeying; and, as the other finished speaking, he took the light person of Alice in his arms, and followed in the footsteps of the scout. They found the sick woman as they had left her, still alone, and passed swiftly on, by the natural gallery, to the place of entrance. As they approached the little door of bark, a murmur of voices without

announced that the friends and relatives of the invalid were gathered about the place, patiently awaiting a summons to re-enter.

“If I open my lips to speak,” Hawkeye whispered, “my English, which is the genuine tongue of a white-skin, will tell the varlets that an enemy is among them. You must give ‘em your jargon, major; and say that we have shut the evil spirit in the cave, and are taking the woman to the woods in order to find strengthening roots. Practise all your cunning, for it is a lawful undertaking.”

The door opened a little, as if one without was listening to the proceedings within, and compelled the scout to cease his directions. A fierce growl repelled the eavesdropper, and then the scout boldly threw open the covering of bark, and left the place, enacting the character of a bear as he proceeded. Duncan kept close at his heels, and soon found himself in the center of a cluster of twenty anxious relatives and friends.

The crowd fell back a little, and permitted the father, and one who appeared to be the husband of the woman, to approach.

“Has my brother driven away the evil spirit?” demanded the former.
“What has he in his arms?”

“Thy child,” returned Duncan, gravely; “the disease has gone out of her; it is shut up in the rocks. I take the woman to a distance, where I will strengthen her against any further attacks. She will be in the wigwam of the young man when the sun comes again.”

When the father had translated the meaning of the stranger’s words into the Huron language, a suppressed murmur announced the satisfaction with which this intelligence was received. The chief himself waved his hand for Duncan to proceed, saying aloud, in a firm voice, and with a lofty manner:

“Go; I am a man, and I will enter the rock and fight the wicked one.”

Heyward had gladly obeyed, and was already past the little group, when these startling words arrested him.

“Is my brother mad?” he exclaimed; “is he cruel? He will meet the disease, and it will enter him; or he will drive out the disease, and it will chase his daughter into the woods. No; let my children wait without, and if the spirit appears beat him down with clubs. He is cunning, and will bury himself in the mountain, when he sees how many are ready to fight him.”

This singular warning had the desired effect. Instead of entering the cavern, the father and husband drew their tomahawks, and posted themselves in readiness to deal their vengeance on the imaginary tormentor of their sick relative, while the women and children broke branches from the bushes, or seized fragments of the rock, with a similar intention. At this favorable moment the counterfeit conjurers disappeared.

Hawkeye, at the same time that he had presumed so far on the nature of the Indian superstitions, was not ignorant that they were rather tolerated than relied on by the wisest of the chiefs. He well knew the value of time in the present emergency. Whatever might be the extent of the self-delusion of his enemies, and however it had tended to assist his schemes, the slightest cause of suspicion, acting on the subtle nature of an Indian, would be likely to prove fatal. Taking the path, therefore, that was most likely to avoid observation, he rather skirted than entered the village. The warriors were still to be seen in the distance, by the fading light of the fires, stalking from lodge to lodge. But the children had abandoned their sports for their beds of skins, and the quiet of night was already beginning to prevail over the turbulence and excitement of so busy and important an evening.

Alice revived under the renovating influence of the open air, and, as her physical rather than her mental powers had been the subject of weakness, she stood in no need of any explanation of that which had occurred.

“Now let me make an effort to walk,” she said, when they had entered the forest, blushing, though unseen, that she had not been sooner able to quit the arms of Duncan; “I am indeed restored.”

“Nay, Alice, you are yet too weak.”

The maiden struggled gently to release herself, and Heyward was compelled to part with his precious burden. The representative of the bear had certainly been an entire stranger to the delicious emotions of the lover while his arms encircled his mistress; and he was, perhaps, a stranger also to the nature of that feeling of ingenuous shame that oppressed the trembling Alice. But when he found himself at a suitable distance from the lodges he made a halt, and spoke on a subject of which he was thoroughly the master.

“This path will lead you to the brook,” he said; “follow its northern bank until you come to a fall; mount the hill on your right, and you will see the fires of the other people. There you must go and demand protection; if they are true Delawares you will be safe. A distant flight with that gentle one, just now, is impossible. The Hurons would follow up our trail, and master our scalps before we had got a dozen miles. Go, and Providence be with you.”

“And you!” demanded Heyward, in surprise; “surely we part not here?”

“The Hurons hold the pride of the Delawares; the last of the high blood of the Mohicans is in their power,” returned the scout; “I go to see what can be done in his favor. Had they mastered your scalp, major, a knave should have fallen for every hair it held, as I promised; but if the young

Sagamore is to be led to the stake, the Indians shall see also how a man without a cross can die.”

Not in the least offended with the decided preference that the sturdy woodsman gave to one who might, in some degree, be called the child of his adoption, Duncan still continued to urge such reasons against so desperate an effort as presented themselves. He was aided by Alice, who mingled her entreaties with those of Heyward that he would abandon a resolution that promised so much danger, with so little hope of success. Their eloquence and ingenuity were expended in vain. The scout heard them attentively, but impatiently, and finally closed the discussion, by answering, in a tone that instantly silenced Alice, while it told Heyward how fruitless any further remonstrances would be.

“I have heard,” he said, “that there is a feeling in youth which binds man to woman closer than the father is tied to the son. It may be so. I have seldom been where women of my color dwell; but such may be the gifts of nature in the settlements. You have risked life, and all that is dear to you, to bring off this gentle one, and I suppose that some such disposition is at the bottom of it all. As for me, I taught the lad the real character of a rifle; and well has he paid me for it. I have fou’ t at his side in many a bloody scrimmage; and so long as I could hear the crack of his piece in one ear, and that of the Sagamore in the other, I knew no enemy was on my back. Winters and summer, nights and days, have we roved the wilderness in company, eating of the same dish, one sleeping while the other watched; and afore it shall be said that Uncas was taken to the torment, and I at hand—There is but a single Ruler of us all, whatever may the color of the skin; and Him I call to witness, that before the Mohican boy shall perish for the want of a friend, good faith shall depart the ‘arth, and ‘killdeer’ become as harmless as the tooting we’ pon of the singer!”

Duncan released his hold on the arm of the scout, who turned, and steadily retraced his steps toward the lodges. After pausing a moment to

gaze at his retiring form, the successful and yet sorrowful Heyward and Alice took their way together toward the distant village of the Delawares.