

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 26

Bot.—Let me play the lion too.

—Midsummer Night's Dream

Notwithstanding the high resolution of Hawkeye he fully comprehended all the difficulties and danger he was about to incur. In his return to the camp, his acute and practised intellects were intently engaged in devising means to counteract a watchfulness and suspicion on the part of his enemies, that he knew were, in no degree, inferior to his own. Nothing but the color of his skin had saved the lives of Magua and the conjurer, who would have been the first victims sacrificed to his own security, had not the scout believed such an act, however congenial it might be to the nature of an Indian, utterly unworthy of one who boasted a descent from men that knew no cross of blood. Accordingly, he trusted to the withes and ligaments with which he had bound his captives, and pursued his way directly toward the center of the lodges. As he approached the buildings, his steps become more deliberate, and his vigilant eye suffered no sign, whether friendly or hostile, to escape him. A neglected hut was a little in advance of the others, and appeared as if it had been deserted when half completed— most probably on account of failing in some of the more important requisites; such as wood or water. A faint light glimmered through its cracks, however, and announced that, notwithstanding its imperfect structure, it was not without a tenant. Thither, then, the scout proceeded, like a prudent general, who was

about to feel the advanced positions of his enemy, before he hazarded the main attack.

Throwing himself into a suitable posture for the beast he represented, Hawkeye crawled to a little opening, where he might command a view of the interior. It proved to be the abiding place of David Gamut. Hither the faithful singing-master had now brought himself, together with all his sorrows, his apprehensions, and his meek dependence on the protection of Providence. At the precise moment when his ungainly person came under the observation of the scout, in the manner just mentioned, the woodsman himself, though in his assumed character, was the subject of the solitary being's profounded reflections.

However implicit the faith of David was in the performance of ancient miracles, he eschewed the belief of any direct supernatural agency in the management of modern morality. In other words, while he had implicit faith in the ability of Balaam's ass to speak, he was somewhat skeptical on the subject of a bear's singing; and yet he had been assured of the latter, on the testimony of his own exquisite organs. There was something in his air and manner that betrayed to the scout the utter confusion of the state of his mind. He was seated on a pile of brush, a few twigs from which occasionally fed his low fire, with his head leaning on his arm, in a posture of melancholy musing. The costume of the votary of music had undergone no other alteration from that so lately described, except that he had covered his bald head with the triangular beaver, which had not proved sufficiently alluring to excite the cupidity of any of his captors.

The ingenious Hawkeye, who recalled the hasty manner in which the other had abandoned his post at the bedside of the sick woman, was not without his suspicions concerning the subject of so much solemn deliberation. First making the circuit of the hut, and ascertaining that it stood quite alone, and that the character of its inmate was likely to protect it from visitors, he ventured through its low door, into the very

presence of Gamut. The position of the latter brought the fire between them; and when Hawkeye had seated himself on end, near a minute elapsed, during which the two remained regarding each other without speaking. The suddenness and the nature of the surprise had nearly proved too much for—we will not say the philosophy—but for the pitch and resolution of David. He fumbled for his pitch-pipe, and arose with a confused intention of attempting a musical exorcism.

“Dark and mysterious monster!” he exclaimed, while with trembling hands he disposed of his auxiliary eyes, and sought his never-failing resource in trouble, the gifted version of the psalms; “I know not your nature nor intents; but if aught you meditate against the person and rights of one of the humblest servants of the temple, listen to the inspired language of the youth of Israel, and repent.”

The bear shook his shaggy sides, and then a well-known voice replied:

“Put up the tooting we’pon, and teach your throat modesty. Five words of plain and comprehensible English are worth just now an hour of squalling.”

“What art thou?” demanded David, utterly disqualified to pursue his original intention, and nearly gasping for breath.

“A man like yourself; and one whose blood is as little tainted by the cross of a bear, or an Indian, as your own. Have you so soon forgotten from whom you received the foolish instrument you hold in your hand?”

“Can these things be?” returned David, breathing more freely, as the truth began to dawn upon him. “I have found many marvels during my sojourn with the heathen, but surely nothing to excel this.”

“Come, come,” returned Hawkeye, uncasing his honest countenance, the better to assure the wavering confidence of his companion; “you may see

a skin, which, if it be not as white as one of the gentle ones, has no tinge of red to it that the winds of the heaven and the sun have not bestowed. Now let us to business.”

“First tell me of the maiden, and of the youth who so bravely sought her,” interrupted David.

“Ay, they are happily freed from the tomahawks of these varlets. But can you put me on the scent of Uncas?”

“The young man is in bondage, and much I fear his death is decreed. I greatly mourn that one so well disposed should die in his ignorance, and I have sought a goodly hymn—”

“Can you lead me to him?”

“The task will not be difficult,” returned David, hesitating; “though I greatly fear your presence would rather increase than mitigate his unhappy fortunes.”

“No more words, but lead on,” returned Hawkeye, concealing his face again, and setting the example in his own person, by instantly quitting the lodge.

As they proceeded, the scout ascertained that his companion found access to Uncas, under privilege of his imaginary infirmity, aided by the favor he had acquired with one of the guards, who, in consequence of speaking a little English, had been selected by David as the subject of a religious conversion. How far the Huron comprehended the intentions of his new friend may well be doubted; but as exclusive attention is as flattering to a savage as to a more civilized individual, it had produced the effect we have mentioned. It is unnecessary to repeat the shrewd manner with which the scout extracted these particulars from the simple David; neither shall we dwell in this place on the nature of the

instruction he delivered, when completely master of all the necessary facts; as the whole will be sufficiently explained to the reader in the course of the narrative.

The lodge in which Uncas was confined was in the very center of the village, and in a situation, perhaps, more difficult than any other to approach, or leave, without observation. But it was not the policy of Hawkeye to affect the least concealment. Presuming on his disguise, and his ability to sustain the character he had assumed, he took the most plain and direct route to the place. The hour, however, afforded him some little of that protection which he appeared so much to despise. The boys were already buried in sleep, and all the women, and most of the warriors, had retired to their lodges for the night. Four or five of the latter only lingered about the door of the prison of Uncas, wary by close observers of the manner of their captive.

At the sight of Gamut, accompanied by one in the well-known masquerade of their most distinguished conjurer, they readily made way for them both. Still they betrayed no intention to depart. On the other hand, they were evidently disposed to remain bound to the place by an additional interest in the mysterious mummeries that they of course expected from such a visit.

From the total inability of the scout to address the Hurons in their own language, he was compelled to trust the conversation entirely to David. Notwithstanding the simplicity of the latter, he did ample justice to the instructions he had received, more than fulfilling the strongest hopes of his teacher.

“The Delawares are women!” he exclaimed, addressing himself to the savage who had a slight understanding of the language in which he spoke; “the Yengeese, my foolish countrymen, have told them to take up the tomahawk, and strike their fathers in the Canadas, and they have

forgotten their sex. Does my brother wish to hear ‘Le Cerf Agile’ ask for his petticoats, and see him weep before the Hurons, at the stake?”

The exclamation “Hugh!” delivered in a strong tone of assent, announced the gratification the savage would receive in witnessing such an exhibition of weakness in an enemy so long hated and so much feared.

“Then let him step aside, and the cunning man will blow upon the dog. Tell it to my brothers.”

The Huron explained the meaning of David to his fellows, who, in their turn, listened to the project with that sort of satisfaction that their untamed spirits might be expected to find in such a refinement in cruelty. They drew back a little from the entrance and motioned to the supposed conjurer to enter. But the bear, instead of obeying, maintained the seat it had taken, and growled:

“The cunning man is afraid that his breath will blow upon his brothers, and take away their courage too,” continued David, improving the hint he received; “they must stand further off.”

The Hurons, who would have deemed such a misfortune the heaviest calamity that could befall them, fell back in a body, taking a position where they were out of earshot, though at the same time they could command a view of the entrance to the lodge. Then, as if satisfied of their safety, the scout left his position, and slowly entered the place. It was silent and gloomy, being tenanted solely by the captive, and lighted by the dying embers of a fire, which had been used for the purposed of cookery.

Uncas occupied a distant corner, in a reclining attitude, being rigidly bound, both hands and feet, by strong and painful withes. When the frightful object first presented itself to the young Mohican, he did not

deign to bestow a single glance on the animal. The scout, who had left David at the door, to ascertain they were not observed, thought it prudent to preserve his disguise until assured of their privacy. Instead of speaking, therefore, he exerted himself to enact one of the antics of the animal he represented. The young Mohican, who at first believed his enemies had sent in a real beast to torment him, and try his nerves, detected in those performances that to Heyward had appeared so accurate, certain blemishes, that at once betrayed the counterfeit. Had Hawkeye been aware of the low estimation in which the skillful Uncas held his representations, he would probably have prolonged the entertainment a little in pique. But the scornful expression of the young man's eye admitted of so many constructions, that the worthy scout was spared the mortification of such a discovery. As soon, therefore, as David gave the preconcerted signal, a low hissing sound was heard in the lodge in place of the fierce growlings of the bear.

Uncas had cast his body back against the wall of the hut and closed his eyes, as if willing to exclude so contemptible and disagreeable an object from his sight. But the moment the noise of the serpent was heard, he arose, and cast his looks on each side of him, bending his head low, and turning it inquiringly in every direction, until his keen eye rested on the shaggy monster, where it remained riveted, as though fixed by the power of a charm. Again the same sounds were repeated, evidently proceeding from the mouth of the beast. Once more the eyes of the youth roamed over the interior of the lodge, and returning to the former resting place, he uttered, in a deep, suppressed voice:

“Hawkeye!”

“Cut his bands,” said Hawkeye to David, who just then approached them.

The singer did as he was ordered, and Uncas found his limbs released. At the same moment the dried skin of the animal rattled, and presently

the scout arose to his feet, in proper person. The Mohican appeared to comprehend the nature of the attempt his friend had made, intuitively, neither tongue nor feature betraying another symptom of surprise. When Hawkeye had cast his shaggy vestment, which was done by simply loosing certain thongs of skin, he drew a long, glittering knife, and put it in the hands of Uncas.

“The red Hurons are without,” he said; “let us be ready.” At the same time he laid his finger significantly on another similar weapon, both being the fruits of his prowess among their enemies during the evening.

“We will go,” said Uncas.

“Whither?”

“To the Tortoises; they are the children of my grandfathers.”

“Ay, lad,” said the scout in English—a language he was apt to use when a little abstracted in mind; “the same blood runs in your veins, I believe; but time and distance has a little changed its color. What shall we do with the Mingoes at the door? They count six, and this singer is as good as nothing.”

“The Hurons are boasters,” said Uncas, scornfully; “their ‘totem’ is a moose, and they run like snails. The Delawares are children of the tortoise, and they outstrip the deer.”

“Ay, lad, there is truth in what you say; and I doubt not, on a rush, you would pass the whole nation; and, in a straight race of two miles, would be in, and get your breath again, afore a knave of them all was within hearing of the other village. But the gift of a white man lies more in his arms than in his legs. As for myself, I can brain a Huron as well as a better man; but when it comes to a race the knaves would prove too much for me.”

Uncas, who had already approached the door, in readiness to lead the way, now recoiled, and placed himself, once more, in the bottom of the lodge. But Hawkeye, who was too much occupied with his own thoughts to note the movement, continued speaking more to himself than to his companion.

“After all,” he said, “it is unreasonable to keep one man in bondage to the gifts of another. So, Uncas, you had better take the lead, while I will put on the skin again, and trust to cunning for want of speed.”

The young Mohican made no reply, but quietly folded his arms, and leaned his body against one of the upright posts that supported the wall of the hut.

“Well,” said the scout looking up at him, “why do you tarry? There will be time enough for me, as the knaves will give chase to you at first.”

“Uncas will stay,” was the calm reply.

“For what?”

“To fight with his father’s brother, and die with the friend of the Delawares.”

“Ay, lad,” returned Hawkeye, squeezing the hand of Uncas between his own iron fingers; ”’twould have been more like a Mingo than a Mohican had you left me. But I thought I would make the offer, seeing that youth commonly loves life. Well, what can’t be done by main courage, in war, must be done by circumvention. Put on the skin; I doubt not you can play the bear nearly as well as myself.”

Whatever might have been the private opinion of Uncas of their respective abilities in this particular, his grave countenance manifested

no opinion of his superiority. He silently and expeditiously encased himself in the covering of the beast, and then awaited such other movements as his more aged companion saw fit to dictate.

“Now, friend,” said Hawkeye, addressing David, “an exchange of garments will be a great convenience to you, inasmuch as you are but little accustomed to the make-shifts of the wilderness. Here, take my hunting shirt and cap, and give me your blanket and hat. You must trust me with the book and spectacles, as well as the tooter, too; if we ever meet again, in better times, you shall have all back again, with many thanks into the bargain.”

David parted with the several articles named with a readiness that would have done great credit to his liberality, had he not certainly profited, in many particulars, by the exchange. Hawkeye was not long in assuming his borrowed garments; and when his restless eyes were hid behind the glasses, and his head was surmounted by the triangular beaver, as their statures were not dissimilar, he might readily have passed for the singer, by starlight. As soon as these dispositions were made, the scout turned to David, and gave him his parting instructions.

“Are you much given to cowardice?” he bluntly asked, by way of obtaining a suitable understanding of the whole case before he ventured a prescription.

“My pursuits are peaceful, and my temper, I humbly trust, is greatly given to mercy and love,” returned David, a little nettled at so direct an attack on his manhood; “but there are none who can say that I have ever forgotten my faith in the Lord, even in the greatest straits.”

“Your chiefest danger will be at the moment when the savages find out that they have been deceived. If you are not then knocked on the head, your being a non-composer will protect you; and you’ll then have a good reason to expect to die in your bed. If you stay, it must be to sit

down here in the shadow, and take the part of Uncas, until such times as the cunning of the Indians discover the cheat, when, as I have already said, your times of trial will come. So choose for yourself—to make a rush or tarry here.”

“Even so,” said David, firmly; “I will abide in the place of the Delaware. Bravely and generously has he battled in my behalf, and this, and more, will I dare in his service.”

“You have spoken as a man, and like one who, under wiser schooling, would have been brought to better things. Hold your head down, and draw in your legs; their formation might tell the truth too early. Keep silent as long as may be; and it would be wise, when you do speak, to break out suddenly in one of your shoutings, which will serve to remind the Indians that you are not altogether as responsible as men should be. If however, they take your scalp, as I trust and believe they will not, depend on it, Uncas and I will not forget the deed, but revenge it as becomes true warriors and trusty friends.”

“Hold!” said David, perceiving that with this assurance they were about to leave him; “I am an unworthy and humble follower of one who taught not the damnable principle of revenge. Should I fall, therefore, seek no victims to my manes, but rather forgive my destroyers; and if you remember them at all, let it be in prayers for the enlightening of their minds, and for their eternal welfare.”

The scout hesitated, and appeared to muse.

“There is a principle in that,” he said, “different from the law of the woods; and yet it is fair and noble to reflect upon.” Then heaving a heavy sigh, probably among the last he ever drew in pining for a condition he had so long abandoned, he added: “it is what I would wish to practise myself, as one without a cross of blood, though it is not always easy to deal with an Indian as you would with a fellow Christian.

God bless you, friend; I do believe your scent is not greatly wrong, when the matter is duly considered, and keeping eternity before the eyes, though much depends on the natural gifts, and the force of temptation.”

So saying, the scout returned and shook David cordially by the hand; after which act of friendship he immediately left the lodge, attended by the new representative of the beast.

The instant Hawkeye found himself under the observation of the Hurons, he drew up his tall form in the rigid manner of David, threw out his arm in the act of keeping time, and commenced what he intended for an imitation of his psalmody. Happily for the success of this delicate adventure, he had to deal with ears but little practised in the concord of sweet sounds, or the miserable effort would infallibly have been detected. It was necessary to pass within a dangerous proximity of the dark group of the savages, and the voice of the scout grew louder as they drew nigher. When at the nearest point the Huron who spoke the English thrust out an arm, and stopped the supposed singing-master.

“The Delaware dog!” he said, leaning forward, and peering through the dim light to catch the expression of the other’s features; “is he afraid? Will the Hurons hear his groans?”

A growl, so exceedingly fierce and natural, proceeded from the beast, that the young Indian released his hold and started aside, as if to assure himself that it was not a veritable bear, and no counterfeit, that was rolling before him. Hawkeye, who feared his voice would betray him to his subtle enemies, gladly profited by the interruption, to break out anew in such a burst of musical expression as would, probably, in a more refined state of society have been termed “a grand crash.” Among his actual auditors, however, it merely gave him an additional claim to that respect which they never withhold from such as are believed to be the subjects of mental alienation. The little knot on Indians drew back in a

body, and suffered, as they thought, the conjurer and his inspired assistant to proceed.

It required no common exercise of fortitude in Uncas and the scout to continue the dignified and deliberate pace they had assumed in passing the lodge; especially as they immediately perceived that curiosity had so far mastered fear, as to induce the watchers to approach the hut, in order to witness the effect of the incantations. The least injudicious or impatient movement on the part of David might betray them, and time was absolutely necessary to insure the safety of the scout. The loud noise the latter conceived it politic to continue, drew many curious gazers to the doors of the different huts as they passed; and once or twice a dark-looking warrior stepped across their path, led to the act by superstition and watchfulness. They were not, however, interrupted, the darkness of the hour, and the boldness of the attempt, proving their principal friends.

The adventurers had got clear of the village, and were now swiftly approaching the shelter of the woods, when a loud and long cry arose from the lodge where Uncas had been confined. The Mohican started on his feet, and shook his shaggy covering, as though the animal he counterfeited was about to make some desperate effort.

“Hold!” said the scout, grasping his friend by the shoulder, “let them yell again! ‘Twas nothing but wonderment.”

He had no occasion to delay, for at the next instant a burst of cries filled the outer air, and ran along the whole extent of the village. Uncas cast his skin, and stepped forth in his own beautiful proportions. Hawkeye tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and glided ahead.

“Now let the devils strike our scent!” said the scout, tearing two rifles, with all their attendant accouterments, from beneath a bush, and flourishing “killdeer” as he handed Uncas his weapon; “two, at least, will find it to their deaths.”

Then, throwing their pieces to a low trail, like sportsmen in readiness for their game, they dashed forward, and were soon buried in the somber darkness of the forest.